

The Crystal Vampire

AN ADVENTURE OF JILL O' DIAMONDS, AN EXPERT IN A
PERILOUS AND QUESTIONABLE CALLING

By Florence M. Pettee

MME. DE VILLIERS needed a maid desperately. The urgency of her need was principally to blame for her unsuspecting and hasty employment of Jillette d' Iamant, *alias* Jill o' Diamonds, the cleverest thief out of knickers.

Madame appraised the girl through her platinum lorgnette, and found her not lacking. Jillette was exceedingly good to look upon; and even exalted platinum, abetted by polished glass, is not an infallible touchstone for revealing roguery, when that roguery is charmingly disguised under feminine loveliness and accompanied by just the proper deferential air.

Violet de Villiers need not have worried about her costly lorgnette, even had she dimly suspected the true calling of her new maid; for Jillette cared only for diamonds. No other gem could hope to tempt her—other valuables not at all. Indeed, even *madame's* diamonds were safe. Relieving an employer of the burden of worldly goods inspired no excitement, no mental gymnastics, no daring finesse. Easy, velvet-tipped adventure merely bored Jill o' Diamonds. Under her dusky and unruly bob she carried a *code d'honneur* of sorts—elusory, contradictory, feminine sorts. Real adventure was the playing of the game with all one's tempered skill. If luck stood behind the *croupier*, smiling on the spinning wheel—why, that was life!

The Crystal Vampire arrived shortly after Jill o' Diamonds entered the employ of Mme. de Villiers. A royal prince could not have been welcomed with greater homage; for the Crystal Vampire was the monarch of glittering stones. A guard on its sacred person, therefore, became both an obligation and a ritual.

It had been imported by Selig, the most exclusive jeweler off the Avenue. His emporium was an institution; his show windows were jewel cases for displaying the rare and the priceless. It was also whispered that the purple and silver marionettes, stationed outside, ostensibly to ease open limousine doors and to facilitate the disembarking of languid, lethargic ladies, were really, showily appareled guardians of the law—the outside plain-clothes men of the shop.

Selig's care for the safety of his treasures had become a trade byword. During all the years of his suzerainty he had not experienced a single loss. His establishment was a Gibraltar of the world of gems, a rogue-proof repository for safeguarding the rich, the rare, and the precious.

The Crystal Vampire, therefore, had been imported by a jeweler skilled in the knowledge and the appraisal of stones, together with their adequate protection. He would have laughed to scorn the whisper that a slip of a girl, in her early twenties, was to plot, lone-handed, the whisking away of that costly and alluring diamond, the Crystal Vampire.

Perhaps Selig would not have scoffed had he suspected Jill's true antecedents and the nature of her early apprenticeship. It was old Ruys van Grandin who had taught her the love and the intricate knowledge of gems. She little dreamed, then, how great a part they were to play in her subsequent precarious destiny, when she was to snap her pretty fingers at the statutes of mere men, to become a law unto herself in her collecting of first-water carbon. Fine jewels were as much a part of her early training as were the crooked, cobbled streets, the humpbacked houses, and old Ruys,

with his hawkish nose, and his hands beautiful as a woman's, delicate as a virtuoso's.

Old Ruys was the master lapidary. No one in the little dike country bettered him in the ancient art of cutting, polishing, and setting stones. Little Jillette d' Iamant grew up in a twentieth century stone age, living, breathing, loving diamonds. To her they symbolized the final, finite word in beauty.

Old Ruys taught her early that there was no crime like failure, no disgrace like inefficiency in one's chosen calling. A master at any profession was an artist, whether he scrubbed the crooked, cobbled streets, or took unto himself the property of others with distinction and finesse. Failure was the unpardonable sin, in old Ruys's debatable code.

II

FIVE days after the arrival of the Crystal Vampire, Mme. de Villiers summoned Jill o' Diamonds within her rose and gold boudoir.

"Bobbette," she addressed the girl, for so she had dubbed her, "this afternoon I'm leaving for the country home of Mrs. Tiverton. You'll accompany me. Mrs. Tiverton," she explained before the compelling, sympathetic gaze of the deft maid, "and I have a kindred hobby. We dote on diamonds."

Jillette made just the proper nod with her "*Oui, madame*"; but her slender fingers tightened the quivering fraction of an inch.

"Mrs. Tiverton is planning a *coup*," continued her new mistress; "and she knows my weakness."

Again Jill nodded. There was something signally flattering about the girl's breathless, intent interest. Somehow it invited confidences.

"I shall need, for the week-end, my wardrobe trunk, and"—Violet de Villiers gestured at her morning desk—"here's a list of my toilette requirements."

Jillette approached the spindle-legged desk speedily. As she stood at *madame's* plump elbow, she noted the heavily monogrammed note that carried Agatha Tiverton's bold, readable hand. During her mistress's precise and labored explanations, she read the letter twice. It ran thus:

DEAR VIOLET:

Selig told me privately of his recent importation of a wonderful diamond known as the Crystal

Vampire. He paid a king's ransom for the gem, and he calls it the stone of stones. It's reputed to wield a hypnotic influence over any one who sees it. Nonsense, of course; but I'm wild to buy the jewel and add it to my collection. Selig's price is prohibitive—ridiculous. Perhaps you and I can bring him to reason. I've already had a private view of it in his office. It's marvelous, beyond words—like a rainbow drop of dew. Its beauty catches in your throat. Wait until you see it!

I want you to come over for the week-end. I simply won't take no. Two heads are better than one, especially when driven by a mutual hobby. Send me word at once.

Accept my apologies for the lack of a personal maid. Marie has been called home by a serious illness in her family. I wish you would bring your "valet" along, and lend me her services until Monday. You see, you're doubly necessary.

Affectionately yours,

AGATHA TIVERTON.

The ghost of a dimple flickered about Jill's ripe red lips, to vanish on the instant.

"You're to maid me there, Bobbette," said Mme. de Villiers; "and—"

She hesitated for a second. Rueful experience had taught her the labyrinthian vagaries of servants' minds and their rock-ribbed rules of service.

"And would—would you—mind so ver-ry much—helping my friend, Mrs. Tiverton, over an awkward situation? Her own maid is away."

She gestured with a fluttering, fat hand, and looked timidly into the girl's charming face.

Jillette smiled back at her—a reassuring, rollicking, radiant smile.

"It would indeed be a great pleasure to serve *madame's* friend."

How was *madame* to guess that Jill's eagerness was inspired by a driving desire for Selig's perfect diamond? How was she to know that the reputed hypnotic power of the Crystal Vampire had already charmed another votary—and that a mere maid?

III

MME. DE VILLIERS sat *tête-à-tête* with Agatha Tiverton in the latter's morning boudoir. A little knock fluttered at the door. Jill o' Diamonds stood there. She addressed Mrs. Tiverton.

"Jeffrey states that a M. Selig is in the drawing-room. He asks *madame's* wishes concerning the gentleman."

"Ah, Selig!" the two women chorused, galvanized into instant interest.

"Make my excuses to Mr. Selig," hastened Agatha Tiverton. "Ask him, please,

if he'll be so good—so very good—as to permit me fifteen minutes. At the end of that time, have Jeffery show him up here into my sitting room.”

“At the end of fifteen minutes, *madame*,” smiled Jillette.

She shut the door noiselessly, like a deft shadow.

A quarter of an hour later Jeffrey knocked on Mrs. Tiverton's door. With him was a dapper little man, with keen dark eyes and a rosy face topped by bristling brows and an upstart mane of white hair. Heavy tortoise-rimmed glasses were perched on his masterful Roman nose. One noted the extraordinary beauty of his hands, fragile and white. Certainly they were admirably adapted to the gentle art of appraising jewels.

Within Selig's morning coat, under the protruding point of linen, reposed a satin case which held a gem that brought out with mesmeric sureness the good and the greed in men—that touched them into an insatiable desire for its possession. Selig had brought the Crystal Vampire concealed upon his own person, to be appraised by the dual wits of the two veterans in gem collecting who sat before him. To be sure, his personal secretary waited in the limousine outside. One little surmised that the secretary was heavily armed. Selig was taking no chances against an accident, although the arrangement for his present call on Mme. de Villiers and Mrs. Tiverton had been discretion itself.

Once the barrier was closed on Selig, Jillette dropped her servile demeanor like a cloak. She crept along the heavy velvet pile of the hall runner. She glanced back over her shoulder. The hall was clear, for Jeffrey had vanished downstairs.

She eased the door of Mrs. Tiverton's sleeping chamber open, noting with a glance that the hinges, which she had been careful to oil beforehand, had absorbed the unguent. The door opened absolutely soundlessly.

Agatha Tiverton doted on velvet portières and tapestry hangings. The bedroom was a symphony in rose and gray. Smoke-tinted curtains of shimmering velvet draped its doors and windows. The gray hangings between the sleeping chamber and the sitting room had been carefully drawn by Jill. She wore one of Marie's matching gray uniforms, at Mrs. Tiverton's special request. This temporary mistress was a

stickler for the consistent carrying out of her pet color schemes.

As Jillette slipped in, the pet Pomeranian, Pompom, languidly uncoiled himself from the satin cushion beside Mrs. Tiverton's canopied bed, with its damask satin valance. A teakwood taboret stood beyond the dog. On the little table was a hammered brass breakfast tray etched in gorgeous dragons. A dainty breakfast set lay in scattered neglect upon it. Jeffrey was not due to clear it away for another hour.

Near the edge of the tray stood a covered glass with a spoon across it. The Pomeranian's midget body was swathed in a padded pink silk blanket. He breathed noisily, despite his mistress's attentive administering of the veterinary's potions.

Pompom studied Jill suspiciously. Would she, too, wind his muzzle with twine, and poke and prod him, as the strange man with the black bag had done? But on observing the familiar gray uniform of a mere maid, the Pomeranian sniffed disdainfully, yawned impolitely twice, and closed his red-rimmed eyes in sleep.

In a flash Jillette was across the sound-proof pile of the oriental rug. Like a mouse-colored linnet, she clung to the woodwork behind the gray portières. A tinge of pink suffused her oval cheeks. Her eyes were dark now—jet black. Adventure charged her blood with fire—beguiling, diamond-shod adventure.

Selig's voice filtered through the drawn portières.

“It's a marvel!” he enthused.

Jill's keen ear detected the sincerity of his tone. This man also loved diamonds surpassingly. Instantly she liked the dapper little jeweler.

“It's a perfect brilliant in cutting,” Selig continued, as if giving the pedigree of some hallowed departed ancestor. “It weighs thirty-six carats exactly. It's flawless—not a cloud or a feather. Its fifty-eight facets have been fashioned to bring out its perfect beauty, irrespective of the sacrifice of weight in the cutting. I've never seen a more perfectly cut brilliant or a more beautifully proportioned gem. The pavilion is a flawless two-thirds, and the crown is an exact remaining third of the stone. There isn't a facet on it that isn't sharply cut. I understand it took eight months from the rough stone to the present incomparable beauty of its finish!”

Jillette sighed ecstatically. She had never dreamed that circumstance would play into her hands like this. She had hoped for a peep at the stone, with a better acquaintanceship of it when she could appraise it from the close confines of a shop window; but here was Selig himself supplying every detail of weight and cutting before he produced the gem!

Jillette almost hugged herself. Again she smiled. Assuredly good fortune was lurking behind the *croupier* and smiling on the spinning wheel. Ah, this was life!

"But the stone, the stone!" urged Agatha Tiverton, evidently irked by the technical details that made up the Crystal Vampire's incomparable genealogy.

"Your pardon," bowed the little man, but he glanced appraisingly at Violet de Villiers. "In my enthusiasm I was recalling Mme. de Villiers's technical knowledge of stones, and her insistence on perfection in color, cut, and finish."

"Quite right, Selig!" approved Mme. de Villiers. "Mrs. Tiverton has little patience for these details."

Selig fumbled, and brought out his fine linen handkerchief. He spread it on the top of the satinwood table. Again he dipped into that made-to-order pocket in his morning coat. This time his white fingers produced a crimson satin case, like the hue of a ripe pomegranate. His touch was that of a pilgrim making obeisance and burnt offering before a shrine.

His supple fingers pressed the snap. The lid flew back with a crimson flash.

Simultaneous feminine "Ahs!" crept forth into the silent room. They were like the applause of an enthusiastic crowd before the revered presence of a monarch.

Noiselessly Jill leaned forward. Her breath caught in her slender throat. Dare she—

Curiosity and eagerness prevailed. Cautiously she eased back the gray velvet portières till a slender thread of light shone through.

Opposite the slit, the three stooped forward over the table. Upon it, winking and blinking, with all the nonchalance of some enchanting siren of old, lay a diamond which flashed that blue-white tint which is both the lure and the despair of every true diamond enthusiast. Half a dozen rainbows might have been pilfered to make up the galaxy of colors blazing forth from its perfect facets.

Selig had spoken truly—it was a stone of stones.

As Jill's dark, intense gaze clung to the radiant drop, everything within her seemed to crystallize in an overwhelming desire to possess the Crystal Vampire at any and all costs. The girl leaned nearer, almost burying her face in the soft folds of the gray velvet portières.

Then fate laughed gleefully at the unbridled impudence of a mere maid who coveted a rare diamond worth a king's ransom; and luck turned perverse and impish on the moment—shaking down from the soft folds of the drapery a rift of dust which had remained there, unseen by Agatha Tiverton or a dilatory servant.

Jill's finely cut nostrils quivered. She drew back hastily. She pressed against her upper lip in a desperate effort to check what seemed to be imminent.

Luck grinned broadly behind her back, and Jill o' Diamonds, to her horror and disgust, sneezed—not once, but twice—not loudly and indelicately, but sufficiently.

Beyond the portières a chair slithered back, and Selig's voice ripped out:

"What was that noise? Did you hear it, ladies—in the next room? Some one is spying on us!"

IV

JILL'S fate flashed with kaleidoscopic fickleness from siren blue-white to the dun brown of failure. Selig's swift stride approached across the unresisting pile of the perfect Bokhara. Behind him trooped two startled feminine figures, with Agatha Tiverton in the lead.

Like a frozen automaton Jill stood, awaiting the almost inevitable discovery. They couldn't be ten feet from the portières. Her eyes raced around the room, seeking a loophole of escape.

The door was impossible, for the huge canopied bed stood between her and it. The windows? The hangings were pushed back to thin tubes of gray. Besides, Selig would make a thorough search, unless—unless—

Her eyes went to the breakfast tray.

She stooped over and retrieved a little cut-glass object. Her hand flashed out. She poked the unconscious Pom-pom. He opened his red-rimmed eyes. Again her hand moved vigorously.

Then she doubled up like a jackknife. Her slender body slipped under the satin

valance of the bed. If they should make a search—

Selig flung back the monkish gray hangings. The ivory rings clicked like high heels on a polished floor.

Then the indignant Pompom, his nostrils still smarting from the pepper that Jill had dusted upon them, shook himself and sneezed repeatedly, disgustedly.

Agatha Tiverton laughed in sheer relief.

"Poor little pinkem-pinkem Pompom!" she crooned. "Is hims naughty-naughty cold bozzering him?" She turned to Selig. "I quite forgot him. He's been sneezing off and on all the morning. My poor little Pompom is your startling spy, M. Selig," she laughed.

Selig's bright, black glance studied the tiny, sniffing dog. He merely bowed slightly, and held back the portières for Mme. de Villiers to return to the hastily deserted Crystal Vampire.

"With your permission, ladies," he said, "we will now continue our consideration of the gem."

There was an imperceptible shrug to his shoulders as he glanced back at the Pomeranian. There was impatience, too. One read that he wondered how any one pretending to admire rare diamonds could, at the same time, own the canine apology in the next room.

Agatha Tiverton opened Pompom's mouth and poured down a teaspoonful of medicine. Then she, too, went back to the Crystal Vampire.

Their voices continued in subdued tones. It was as if they feared even the canine intelligence of Pompom, or the very walls themselves. Two minutes ticked by—three. The medley of words rippled on.

Jill o' Diamonds crawled out from the fluted valance of the great bed. On all fours she crept across the room, and cautiously she opened the door. Then, after a satisfying scrutiny of the corridor, she disappeared. The hint of a smile curved the girl's vivid pomegranate lips.

Late that night a dark-clad figure slipped down a giant wistaria, which had reached its gnarled growth after many years of attentive coaxing. The vine clung leechlike to the brickwork of the house, spreading out sturdy arms with bulging, dependable wooden muscles.

Clad in knickers, Jill descended the natural ladder, the top of which was within

vaulting distance from the shallow ledge of her third-story window. A huge maple tree dropped dappling shadows, screening the window and the vine.

She stepped lightly upon the resilient, close-cropped grass. In the shadows she listened warily; but only night was abroad, brightened by the brilliance of blinking stars. An occasional night owl taxi whirred by with rubber-shrouded tread. Otherwise the world and the house of Agatha Tiverton slept, quite unconscious of the midnight peccadillos of a demure maid.

Through the friendly tubes of many back alleys Jill crept, a slender shadow of shadows in her dark garments—her "night wings," as she called them. Once the emphatic tramp of square-toed shoes pounded by with blind, martinet precision. The roundsman on the beat was keeping up his mechanical, treadmill pace. A dark, girlish face peeped out from the hood of the cape that cloaked her lurking shape. She could easily have touched the policeman as he clumped along, doggedly unmindful of the stars above him and the pulsing human shadow at his right.

Again Jill hastened on noiselessly through the darkness.

She paused in a crooked, cobbled alley. There were shops of sorts there—of the poorer sorts—moldy book stalls, pawn shops, all the fotsam of a poverty-ridden, secondhand section.

One little shop stood out, superior to its fellows. The casement windows carried an air of charm, hard to describe in the half lights of the deserted alley. The time-dipped panes were shot into vivid tints, like the flash of crude colors flung from fresh oil on a wet pavement. They were typical of the prismatic hues of more than one fine gem that had found its secret way into a little room there.

Jill entered the side alley. It was narrow and choked with boxes. She knocked twice, then once, at the sturdy rear door. It was the signal agreed upon.

Came a pause, as if the dusky shop held its ears and listened breathlessly. Then a heavy bolt was carefully slid back. Jill's quick ears caught the faint sound. She turned the knob. As the door yawned, she stepped inside.

A screen, hinged in three sections, stood across the entrance. The screen was of dark wood, covered with heavy black material. It was like a drop curtain to con-

ceal some superior act of legerdemain or stagecraft. It offered an opaque barrier to hide any tattling leak of light.

Jill shot the bolt behind her, and stepped beyond the black screen into the subdued light of the room. For a moment she paused. Her sudden dark entrances always affected her strangely. The mystery of the place gripped her with a magic lure. It was like the forgotten scent of some old-world sunken garden, like the peaceful splash of palm-shaded fountains, like a bit of fine old brocade woven in the bold relief of life.

A little old man stood watching her with softened, speculative gaze. He was clad in a worn velvet smoking jacket, but his linen was as immaculate as one would find in some fashionable uptown resort. His feet were incased in black satin slippers, splashed with crimson embroidery like fresh gouts of blood. His large head was covered with a crimson skullcap.

He held forth both his hands with a gesture revealing both grace and charm.

"Ah, my little Jill!"

The words carried an odd foreign intonation. One sensed that he spoke many languages.

"Ah, Papa Ruys!" the girl answered, putting her arms about him, and stroking the finely lined old face. She stood back to regard him. "You look tired. There are amethyst circles under your eyes."

She flung off her cape and seated herself in a dark, carved chair. Her slender feet sank into the heavy pile of the dull-tinted oriental rug. Its subdued tones were like the mellow strains of light sifting through the windows of some dim cathedral.

Ruys van Grandin had recently come to play accessory to the skill of Jill's deft fingers. Erect, he leaned against the blotched wall of the dingy old room. He removed the scarlet skullcap and displayed a shining expanse of cranium. He mopped his head with a large square of linen.

"I've been working all night for the past week, cutting up into sufficiently unrecognizable shapes the yellow diamond which I brought with me—the last prize of the Nichinoffs. Young Rondin passed it over to me. He was frightened purple, for the police were hard upon his heels; but they lost the scent before my little shop."

"I was quite alarmed when I received your letter telling me that you were going to travel abroad—meaning, in our code,

that you were taking quarters at No. 7 Cobblestone Way. Oh, Papa Ruys, the Crystal Vampire! It's here—in this city!"

"What?" exclaimed the little old man, coming close, his voice a husky whisper.

"Selig has it. He showed it to Mme. de Villiers and Mrs. Tiverton this very morning!"

She romped into a racing recital of the visit.

Ruys van Grandin went to a cupboard in a corner. He brought out a huge meerschau pipe and an enamel tobacco jar. He crowded the bowl full, and smoked slowly while Jill hurried along.

"And I have every detail of the size and the cutting!" she ended.

Like a bronze idol burning incense, old Ruys van Grandin exhaled the fragrant tobacco as he listened with closed eyes. With a slow gesture he put down the huge meerschau.

"It is necessary," he told her in his mel-low, precise way, "that we should lose no time. Come!"

From his trousers pocket he produced a bunch of small keys, one of which he applied to a slit in the mouth of a dragon on a huge carved chest that stood in the corner of the room. The cover came up. The dark chest was seemingly lined with double rows of rare, embossed books.

Van Grandin easily raised the books, which were cunningly fastened to the movable base of the chest. Narrow, curving steps disappeared down into the darkness.

By the flare of his electric torch they descended the steps. The old man extinguished the lights as they went down, and closed the chest after them. Dampness greeted Jill's nostrils—the dank, murky smell of earth. Van Grandin applied his keys to a sturdy wooden door at the foot of the steps. At the same time he pressed the switch.

This was Jill's first visit to the room in the cellar. She hesitated on the threshold. Then a little cry of delight fell from her parted lips. She clasped her hands together, with a childish gesture of pleasure.

"Oh, Papa Ruys!" she murmured. The mist of emotion blurred her gray eyes. "You've brought it back to me—my beloved Amsterdam! Here it is, in the wooden flesh, carried over the seas, into the hidden heart of the earth! It's your little workshop from Amsterdam—to the life!"

Excitedly she glanced about the room—a room which was to make and break the history of gems, under the very noses of the police!

V

It was a primitive little place, essentially an old-world spot from the dim pages of another era. It was monkishly plain, with a monastic severity that whispered of untiring skill unhindered by any desire for show. There were benches, with their tops polished smooth with the ointment of use, and with the spaces beneath them occupied by many shallow drawers. There were odd metal boxes, and in a corner stood horizontal wheels of various sizes, their edges worn smooth by the dust of diamonds anointed with the oil of the olive. There were odd instruments of knifelike cast, cleavers, and hooded, high-power bulbs, along with refractoscopes and powerful magnifying glasses. Tiny phials of rainbow colors drooped from bench racks.

Ruys van Grandin stepped to a little drawer under one of the benches. From its padded interior he delicately lifted a rhomboid, clear as the purest ice. He set the transparent crystal down upon the bench with a significant gesture.

"That's the finest piece of white sapphire I've ever seen, my little Jill," he told her. "It's flawless, and so amenable to coaxing!"

"Will it do?"

"Perfectly. There's nothing that so closely resembles the diamond as a perfectly cut and finely polished piece of white sapphire, when it has been subjected to intense heat, to draw out the last of its blue tints. With the exact measurements and the full description you've given me, I shall fashion from that flawless piece of blue-white sapphire a twin Crystal Vampire that Selig himself—*under the proper conditions and circumstances*—would not recognize. I won't risk even a fine doublet. The *cu-let*, reconstructed from slabs of diamond cemented to its glass base, is likely to show hazy under too strong a light. We must be prepared for any and all contingencies. The white sapphire will safely bridge them—given the proper circumstances and environment." He gestured about the little shop. "Night and day, I shall shape from that block of clear sapphire a stone that will be a work of art, second only to the genuine!"

"But you have none of the modern tools," she reminded him. "Yours take labor and time—"

"And the love of possessing diamonds," he finished. "Mine is the lost art of yesterday. I need none of the modern mechanical devices for the finishing of gems. Skill, to my manner of thinking, needs no artificial assistance or mechanical make-shifts. Though a man may sail the seven seas and thrice encircle the globe, what will it profit him, either to paint or to refashion the marvels he has witnessed, if he holds not a primary knowledge of the use of tools?"

The old man was lost in reverie.

"How soon," Jill's voice recalled him, "will our plan be ripe? How soon can you finish the double of the Crystal Vampire—the living, breathing double? My part needs only that."

Old Ruys considered. He consulted the wafer-thin platinum watch in his waistcoat.

"In a week," he told her. "In a week!"

He took off his shabby smoking jacket and removed his waistcoat. From a drawer he brought out heavy khaki overalls. He slipped into them—an odd, gnomelike figure with his crimson skullcap and his scarlet-splashed slippers.

Jill slipped up the stairs. She knew the old man's mood. He was enthralled with the new problem, one worthy even of the art of Ruys van Grandin and of the Crystal Vampire.

Daylight shot the netted casements into faint opal plaques. Above the shop a simple sign announced that "Jacob Vermeer—Curios" carried on a modest business within.

A week later, slightly before eleven o'clock in the morning, when the pulse of the day's business had assumed its normal beat, a correct little coupé stopped before the side entrance of Selig's exclusive establishment. Two liveried attendants sprang to the door of the little car. One turned the nickel handle, while the other assisted the occupant to alight.

A fair young girl stepped upon the pavement. Her bobbed hair was the hue of fresh-minted gold. She was signally pretty. The rare oval of her face seemed almost innocent of rouge and lip stick. Upon the left side of her chin a tiny dark brown mole intensified the purity of the skin, accenting the piquant charm of the face.

She was beautifully gowned—simply, but richly. Her golden brown morning dress and the velvet cape that hung from her shoulders whispered of much money and perfection of taste. Her golden and brown satin hat was pulled low over her bob, but not low enough to conceal the glint of her golden head. A gold-meshed veil fell from its snug brim with careless and accustomed grace. Tiny brown *suède* pumps flashed from her silken ankles. White gloves completed the costume.

To the man on the box she called back:

“Move just along, out of the ‘no parking’ area, Jerry, and wait near by. I shan’t be long.”

The chauffeur touched a gauntleted hand to the visor of his cap, and the shining coupé moved on.

The girl sauntered by the glinting plate glass cases with accustomed, easy nonchalance. Once she consulted her wrist watch, pushing back the long sleeve of the golden brown frock with its edging of fur. She disappeared behind a door which was marked “Private.”

Jill o’ Diamonds found no difficulty in gaining admission to Selig’s inner sanctum. Selig himself was not there—a fact which she very well knew, and on which she had counted. The little man’s keen glance might have seen through her make-up. M. Henri, his partner, was in command of the shop—and of the Crystal Vampire. Selig had left the city for twenty-four hours on urgent business.

Jill’s plan was simplicity itself. As she strolled to the rear of the main show case she merely tendered the polite attendant a note written on Agatha Tiverton’s familiar monogrammed stationery. She had made a tracing from the original sprawling invitation to Mme. de Villiers. She had made herself letter-perfect in the imitation of Agatha Tiverton’s bold, round, childish chirography. She and old Ruys had examined the result of her patient labor under many magnifying glasses, and the jewel master had found the imitation satisfying—suspicion-proof.

To the attentive clerk she gave her forged note of introduction from Agatha Tiverton. With just the proper touch of girlish hauteur she told him:

“A note for M. Selig, if you please.”

M. Henri emerged from the safelike confines of his office. He greeted her effusively. His dark eyes saw, without seeming

to note, that she was fair and beautifully gowned, this young and charming *demoiselle* whom Mrs. Tiverton had sent to look at the Crystal Vampire. Mme. de Villiers and her friend were still haggling over the price of the splendid gem, but Selig hoped that Mrs. Tiverton would ultimately buy it at his own figure. He could afford to wait.

“Ah, Mlle. Monteith,” said M. Henri, “will you do me *ze honneur* to step inside my private workshop—my *atelier, s’il vous plaît?* It will be a pleasure to grant a favor to a friend of Mme. Tiverton. Just *entaire* within, please!”

He held open the door of the inner office, and followed her in.

VI

WITHIN the office, a small room paneled with mahogany, the firm’s strong box was sunk behind triple plates of specially tempered and tested steel. The first plate proof against a drill, the second against an acetylene torch, and the third against either weapon. In this repository it was the partners’ custom to keep their rarest and most valuable gems. An automatic electric alarm connected the safe with the nearest police station. The vault was like a bank for security. Moreover, it did away with the danger of messenger service between a bank’s safe-deposit vault and the shop.

A heavy door opened under the urge of M. Henri’s skilled manipulating fingers. He fumbled among the steel partitions and brought out the familiar red satin case.

Upon the little glass-topped table in the office, used for private display purposes, M. Henri flung a square of crimson velvet, and on this he set the satin jewel case.

Jill o’ Diamonds sat on a plain, heavy mahogany chair on one side of the tiny table. The mahogany roll-topped desk was locked down. The walls of the office were plainly paneled, and the floor was without covering. The room contained only the big locked desk in the corner, with a swivel mahogany chair before it, and the glass-topped table, with Jill and M. Henri seated opposite each other. There were no other furnishings, no loopholes, no hiding places.

Once Jill o’ Diamonds seemed to gnaw nervously at her lip, but her jaws soon became quiet again.

M. Henri pushed the snap on the jewel case. The lid flew back, and the Crystal Vampire flashed once more, with all its

exotic beauty. Jill's eyes darkened with the stress of pent-up emotion.

M. Henri read the exalted look on her face.

"Ah, my dear, but you have a pretty eye for gems!"

Jill did not answer.

"Place it on the little velvet mat," she requested. "Let me see it freed from the shadow of its case."

All too gladly M. Henri complied. Not the ghost of a suspicion warned him that the Crystal Vampire was in peril of its life. How could he guess that the charming girl opposite him was the famous diamond collector whose exploits were known through the length and breadth of Europe, even though her identity had remained completely hidden?

The Crystal Vampire burst into sparks of prismatic glory. M. Henri pushed the satin case to the far edge of the glass-topped table. This was better than Jill had hoped, for she had planned to slip the case near the edge with her own hand. This was her cue, the moment for which she had planned with consummate care, as she had moved back and forth all the pawns of her cunningly devised scheme.

The girl calmly leaned forward, seemingly enthralled. Her slender hand went out to touch the stone, as if she doubted its actual reality. It was a familiar gesture with jewel zealots.

Simultaneously her left arm, covered with the velvet cape, crept along. A fold of the cape touched the satin jewel case ever so slightly, and the case fell to the polished floor.

Jill made a little move, as if to reach for the fallen case; but M. Henri courteously forestalled her—as she knew he would. He stooped and retrieved the satin box.

Jill leaned toward him, apparently watching his hand as he reached down to the floor. As they both straightened back, the Crystal Vampire flashed like a giant drop of dew on the velvet crimson mat.

With gentle fingers Jill disengaged her velvet wrap. With a graceful gesture, she dropped it down until it rested in glimmering folds on the mahogany seat of the chair. Her right hand paused among the folds for just a second longer than was necessary.

Freed of her wrap, she leaned forward. She placed her elbows on the glass-topped table, with her little chin sunk on her palms.

Slowly she bent downward toward the diamond. She put forward a slender hand and placed the gem on her palm, evidently for better examination of its beauty, unenhanced by the crimson background.

This also was a movement familiar to M. Henri. Prospective clients often insisted on handling a stone for close inspection. Besides, what was there to fear in that bare, steel-backed cage of a room from the slip of a girl before him?

Suddenly a startling change came over the charming face of Jill o' Diamonds. She placed the diamond back on the velvet mat, and bent toward it. The shadow on her face deepened.

"Your microscope, M. Henri!" she requested breathlessly.

Wonderingly he brought the instrument, in its chamois case, from his inner coat pocket. He watched the girl's face with surprise. She stooped low over the stone. The baffled, puzzled frown on her forehead darkened.

Hurriedly she set the diamond on the glass table top, flinging the velvet to one side. She straightened back. Disbelief, incredulity, and fear were stamped on her face. Her breath came hurriedly.

"Oh, M. Henri, M. Henri! That—that cannot be the Crystal Vampire! It is an imitation, a fake! It is no diamond, let alone the Crystal Vampire!"

Almost rudely he snatched the magnifying glass from her fingers. He bent forward. The seconds ticked by. With shaking fingers he picked up the stone. One terrifying touch was enough, aided by the glass.

"It's—it's slightly *warm*," Jill gasped. "Not the right feel for a diamond!"

He nodded wordlessly. From another pocket he produced a delicate jeweler's file. Doggedly he refused to believe his own sight and touch. He must resort to mechanical means to verify his terrible, unbelievable suspicion.

He dragged the little file across an edge of the gem. Weakly, limply, he leaned back.

"*Mon Dieu*, it scratches! It's a fake—a fake! Some one has stolen the Crystal Vampire!"

In white, clenched fist he held the stone and the file, as his bewildered gaze traveled back to the strong box in the wall, which he had so recently unlocked. Tampering with it was impossible. There were six

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sets of tumblers. In addition, it took two special keys from his own ring to get inside the triple sets of steel doors to the inmost compartment where the Crystal Vampire had been safeguarded. Access to such a vault was impossible. That meant—that meant—

M. Henri floundered before this accusing chasm, which widened momentarily. He knew, by his accustomed sense of sight and touch, that he had held the real Crystal Vampire in his fingers when he placed the gem on the table for the girl's inspection. Long years of expert association with diamonds had taught him, with barometric sureness, the familiar cold "feel" of a true diamond. It becomes second nature with an expert. A fake always reveals a slight feeling of warmth to the touch—unknown to the layman, but known to any adept.

"It didn't *feel* right," Jill was saying. "The moment I touched it, I thought it had the wrong temperature."

The girl spoke like a connoisseur; and yet—and yet—

In a flash, the incident of the fallen satin case returned to M. Henri's shaken, seeking mind. It had happened in the space of seconds. Could an exchange have been effected then? But who could have had such an intimate, marvelous knowledge of the weight, the size, and the cutting of the Crystal Vampire as to fashion this extraordinary duplicate, which had even fooled him for a brief time?

He straightened up. He pressed a button in the side of the desk. All the while his mind was in a turmoil to discover some possible explanation of the stone's disappearance; but his eyes never left Jill's distressed face.

She was the picture of innocence, dismay, and surprise, as she leaned back in the little mahogany chair, with the folds of her cape gripped tightly about her.

A junior partner opened the door, stepped in, and closed it. He read the perturbation in Henri's face and the forlorn, startled air of the girl.

"Desmond," rapped the jeweler, "get Miss Carmen down from the balcony. Tell her I need her here at once!"

Desmond left the room and closed the door, without comment.

"What—what can have become of it? How could it have happened?" begged Jill o' Diamonds.

A knock sounded. A young woman in

the sedate black garb affected by Selig's employees entered and closed the door.

"Miss Carmen," Henri's voice commanded crisply, "I regret the step I'm forced to take. I'll step outside and leave you with this young woman. I wish you to search her with the utmost care and thoroughness."

Dazedly Jill o' Diamonds stood up. A wave of scarlet flooded her face. It receded, to leave her very pale.

M. Henri went outside.

Some time later the matron opened the door.

"Come in," she invited in terse, businesslike tones.

"Well, well?" rasped M. Henri.

"There's not a thing on her, sir—not a thing the size of a pinhead. I can swear to it."

"You've missed nothing—not even her cape?"

"Not a thing, sir. There's nothing the size of a kernel of corn. I've been through everything three times. There's a little rip in the left sleeve hem, under the fur; but nothing suspicious—not a thing, sir."

Jill stood up pathetically. She was very pale. There was scorn in her fine eyes, and her little chin was uplifted defiantly.

"You've subjected me to a shameful indignity!" she burst out. "Quite unnecessarily, too. If I had been concealing the gem on my person, do you suppose for one instant that I'd have been foolish enough to call your attention to the stone's substitution? For it was I who first discovered the fake for you! Would a common thief have called your attention to that fact? You shall smart for this outrage!"

"I—I—" stammered M. Henri. "True, you *did* discover it!"

He leaned back helplessly against the walls, as if for support.

Like a young Diana she turned upon him. She had never looked more entrancing. Color flamed in her cheeks; but it was not the color of outraged modesty, as he erroneously concluded. It was the badge of triumph.

"If you've no further indignities to subject me to, I'll go!"

She turned from him, a slender, defiant figure, the personification of girlish dignity and pride. Quite unmolested, she threaded her way through the shop and back into the little coupé. It sped from sight.

M. Henri sagged in his chair. Perspira-

tion dotted his brow. He plucked at the satin box. Dazedly he examined the marvelous duplicate which had so successfully masqueraded in the place of the Crystal Vampire.

Then he took down the telephone receiver and rasped out a number.

VII

WITHOUT any mole on her chin, without her blondine accessories to the rôle of Lily Monteith, Jill knocked softly on old Ruys's rear door. It was midnight.

She danced into the room. Around and about she whirled. Her feet flashed and twinkled like the refracted rays from some beguiling diamond.

Breathlessly, laughingly, she sank into her chair, exhausted by her dance of triumph. With a quick gesture she held out a slender hand. On it the Crystal Vampire scintillated with all its seductive charm. The sheer beauty of the bauble brought a lump to Jill's throat. It was like the wonder and the hush of purple twilight, when a workaday world seems wrapped in the royal mantle of majesty and mystery.

Ruys van Grandin picked up the famous stone. Awe, approaching reverence, tinged his old face.

With a lilt in her voice, with happiness in her eyes for an adventure intriguingly run, Jill's vivid words raced on, like the flash of her twinkling, triumphant toes:

"When M. Henri stooped to recover the

fallen case that I had pushed to the floor, I ripped out the duplicate diamond from the hem under the fur of my left sleeve band, and placed it on the red mat. Then I palmed the real diamond, embedding it in the little wad of gum that I had just taken from the roof of my mouth. Quicker than scat, I stuck the real diamond into the gum and anchored it under the solid seat of the plain mahogany chair I was sitting upon. A wooden side strip hid the bottom of the seat from any stray glance. Besides, who would dream of turning over a plain, solid mahogany chair to search for a sizable diamond? Then, after I had convincingly simulated outraged dignity at the matron's futile search of me, I just sank limply into the folds of my cape, which lay against the chair. Screened by my cape, I removed the wad of gum and the Crystal Vampire from under the seat. Then I faded speedily from sight."

Throughout many nights the lapidary's secret room droned with the soporific whir of wheels edged with diamond dust. Old Ruys cut and polished the erstwhile Crystal Vampire into twin siren stones of alien shape and unrecognizable style. Subsequently it would reënter the marts of men, molded into twin drops of brilliance under his canny, masterly touch.

So mysteriously disappeared from the world of diamonds that bewitching, hypnotic gem, the Crystal Vampire.

COME BACK

COME back, my leafy one, with breasts abloom,
 Dogwood between thy dream-deep arms, and heavy gold
 Of tresses, with scarce room
 Within thy nut-shaped face for those wide eyes,
 For cleft pomegranate of thy mouth scarce room!
 Come back, come back, ere I grow sudden old
 And drearly wise,
 And fling thy beauty on me, and inclose
 Me fast within the wildness of thy rose!
 Hide not away—come back!
 For still thine own am I, thine own;
 Heap all thy blossom on me; deep in thy snows
 Drifted above me, deep and deep and deep,
 Shut me away from life, and lock me in
 With thy tranced mouth alone,
 Lost as two lost in an enchanted sleep.
 Come back, my leafy one, dear soulless child,
 Touched not by sorrow, and by thought of sin
 Undarkened, undefiled!

Orville Bennet