

A Puzzle of Pearls

By Everett Holbrook, Copyright, 1905, by Charles M. Rurie.

It was early in the day, and the fashionable establishment of the jeweler Roversi was almost bare of patrons. Dignified gentlemen, gray or bald, were standing behind the glass cases, waiting with waxy placidity for the opening of the day's business, and there was neither life nor color in the scene save by the door, where a golden haired young woman daintily gowned was talking with Paul Roversi, nephew of the proprietor.

Between them was a small, plain, inexpensive jewel case, open, and the lady was looking down into it, where lay a string of pearls, not large ones nor especially notable to the ordinary observer, but possessing recondit merits which commended them dearly to the connoisseur.

"I love them," said Mrs. Hasbrouck. "I could look at them all day. Aren't they beautiful?" And she pushed the box toward Roversi, who looked at the pearls for a few seconds and then closed the lid upon them. Mrs. Hasbrouck turned a tiny key in the lock.

Roversi escorted her to the carriage which waited before the door, and when she was seated he put down the little green casket beside her. He had brought it from the store, holding it before him in both hands as if it had been fragile, and when he had set it in the carriage he uttered some words of caution in a half jesting tone.

It mattered little what he said. He fascinated her always when he spoke, for his lips were delicate and wonderfully mobile, and his eyes brightened and changed with the current of his thought. Surely he was a remarkably handsome young man, and the lady was aware of his charm to the point of positive pain. Yet she could never understand why it should not be an un-mixed pleasure; surely it was one that no human being had a right to deny her. She was a widow whose married life had scarcely a semblance of reality in her memory. It was only a dream of a man's sudden and fatal illness, and, looking back upon it, she seemed to behold herself in bridal dress and mourning crape on the same day.

Three years had dimmed the picture. She was a girl in heart and in looks—in all things, indeed, except the independence of her station and the control of a great fortune. Roversi was her equal socially, and, though he had not a penny of his own, she had enough for two. If he had extravagant tastes, so that he must go to his indulgent uncle twice a year with a handful of debts, at least he was a gentlemanly spendthrift, and his follies had never brought him into condemnation under the easy code of modern society. It is not probable that Mrs. Hasbrouck analyzed the young man's character to any serious advantage. Her fears and hopes, her joy and pain, proceeded not from the workings of her mind, but was from the agitation of her heart.

Absorbed in meditations which were upon the whole agreeable, Mrs. Hasbrouck rode homeward with her pearls. The carriage stopped beside the curb, and the lady glanced out of the open window, expecting to see the familiar doorsteps and red masonry before the portal of her house. Instead she saw the face of a groom in her employ who was standing in an attitude of apology with cap in hand.

"Beg pardon, ma'am," said he. "I was on my way to Mr. Chandler's—a maker of saddlery—'about a saddle-



"No pardon, ma'am," said he. "I was on my way to Mr. Chandler's—a maker of saddlery—'about a saddle-

cloth, if you'll be so good as to remember, and was this the pattern that you wanted, ma'am?"

He took a bit of cloth from the inside of his cap and held it up.

"No," said Mrs. Hasbrouck. "It was the other."

After many futile efforts the man found the right sample and went off upon his errand. Two minutes later Mrs. Hasbrouck alighted at her residence, the jewel case in her hand. She carried it directly to a room on the second floor where there was a safe set into the wall. By a window of this room she sat down to enjoy a last glimpse of her favorite trinket before consigning it to the darkness of the

safe. She unlocked the casket with the key, which she had carried in her glove, and when the lid was up she stared, dumfounded, upon emptiness. The pearls were gone.

For some minutes Mrs. Hasbrouck's mind was the abode of utter confusion, but presently there began to appear in the midst of this chaos the semblance of solid facts and the outlines of a plan of action. She locked the jewel case and put it into the safe. Then she went downstairs to the telephone, but, after contemplating the instrument thoughtfully, she turned away. She had remembered that the Roversi establishment had a private exchange and that the girl in charge of it could overhear a conversation. The present affair seemed to demand an absolute discretion. It would be better to communicate with Paul Roversi by note. She wrote, therefore, as follows:

My Dear Mr. Roversi—Your warning was prophetic—my beloved pearls have vanished. I did not leave the carriage



SHE DISPATCHED THIS BY ONE OF HER DEPENDENTS.

until I came to my own door, and the locked jewel case was beside me all the time. I took it into the house and opened it, and it was empty.

This is a very black mystery, but I think that there must be a hitherto neglected talent within me—a talent for detective research. Already I seem to see the truth in this distressing affair, but my lack of experience constrains me to ask advice as to the best method of procedure. First, however, I must state my theory.

When I was near home my carriage stopped. I looked out of the window and saw a groom named Michael Saar, who very deferentially consulted me about an errand upon which I had sent him earlier in the day. Does it not seem possible that this was a feature of a clever plot and that while Michael engaged my attention upon one side a confederate came to the opposite window of the carriage, reached in, unlocked the box with a duplicate key, locked it again and faded away into the turmoil of the city?

It is true that when I had concluded my interview with Michael I happened to look out of the other window and saw a big blue policeman standing on the edge of the sidewalk across the way. I distinctly remember him, and it seems strange that he should have been unable to see this crime, committed under his very nose. Yet policemen are falling more and more into the grip of evil ways. Perhaps this one is even now dividing my pearls with Michael and his two accomplices. I say "two," for I feel sure that my coachman was in the plot and that the third thief was also one of my servants.

You will remember that I have very often used this green plush jewel case in carrying jewels back and forth between my house and the establishment of Mr. Henry Roversi, your esteemed uncle. I have left the case empty in my carriage dozens of times, and this must have been remarked by my servants. To procure a duplicate key—or perhaps another case precisely similar, to be used in a rapid and dexterous exchange—would have been perfectly easy. Still, of course, there's the policeman. But I must stick to my theory. It is not possible for me to entertain any other.

You know how dear this bauble was to me. I look to you for help in recovering it, and I have mentioned my loss to no one else. Please communicate with me as soon as you have come to a decision. Sincerely yours,

HELENA HASBROUCK.

She dispatched this by one of her dependents, a bright eyed youth of dwarfish stature, but of an excellent habit of reticence, and then she waited in many kinds of misery for Roversi's reply.

An hour passed. She sent again for the dwarf. He had returned from his errand and had gone out again upon another. She regretted the caution which had forbidden her to tell him to report to her immediately, but she had not wished to make him think too seriously of his mission. Another hour dragged away. Mrs. Hasbrouck could stand suspense no longer. She called Roversi's by telephone and learned that Paul had gone out, no one knew when or why.

"I would like to speak with Mr. Henry Roversi," she said upon a sudden resolve.

Only an exact quotation, not possible to the present chronicler, could properly reveal the sympathy which Mr. Roversi felt and expressed when he learned of Mrs. Hasbrouck's loss.

"Have you any suspicions?" he asked at last.

"None whatever," she replied.

Mr. Roversi admitted that the case was mysterious and deeply distressing and he begged that it might be laid before Mr. Newell, the astute detective who guarded the vast treasures of the

store. Mr. Newell listened without comment to Mrs. Hasbrouck's clear and concise statement of the facts. His questions, though their purport was skillfully veiled, were directed, as the lady easily perceived, toward the elucidation of a single element of the case—namely, when and under what circumstances was Mrs. Hasbrouck's note delivered to Mr. Paul Roversi. To this end Mr. Newell obtained a description of the messenger, and with that he seemed to be content.

"You will hear from me within a couple of hours," said he in conclusion. "and I hope for the best results."

The allotted time had almost expired and Mrs. Hasbrouck was upon the verge of some direfully catastrophic explosion of the feelings when the card of Mr. Paul Roversi was put into her hands, and presently the young man entered, a tragic figure, pale as paper. He paused at three yards distance and looked into her eyes, and slowly a wondrous and beautiful change came over him.

"I knew it wasn't true," he said simply as a child and with a sob of exquisite relief.

"True?" she echoed.

"My uncle said that you suspected me," he answered firmly. "I think his own mind was not clear of that injustice. He has his excuses; he knows that I have money difficulties. But you—"

Wrath blazed in Helena Hasbrouck with consuming heat—the unreasonable, pathetically comic wrath of woman; anger against that relentless, malicious demon, the Truth, a creature sent into this world to torture us.

"He dared say that!" she cried. "I will make him smart for it. And you—you believed him, though you have heard me give you very heartily the name of friend?"

"I knew it wasn't true," he repeated, scarcely less false than herself, yet with an honest striving for the facts. "It was the idea, the mere thought of it, that tortured me. It was like an evil dream that haunts one after waking. And yet," he continued, "I could have forgiven you. I could not have blamed you. What other explanation was possible or is possible at this instant? Such sleight of hand as a child is capable of would have sufficed to do it there in our store, and you would have locked an empty box."

"I never dreamed of it," said she. "You yourself are the sufficient answer to such an accusation. I hold you for a man of honor."

"And if I had taken them?" said he, drawing near to her, with a sudden mad question in his eyes.

"Paul," she answered, with white lips, "I should have been upon your side. We would have been thieves together."

At this inopportune moment Detective Newell was announced. He entered bearing a green jewel case in his hands, and when it was set upon the table he opened it and disclosed the pearls.

"You are a better detective than I am, Mrs. Hasbrouck," said he. "Your note to Mr. Roversi stated the case absolutely dead right, with one small exception—the third thief didn't reach through the window to change the boxes; he was hidden under the car-

riage seat. When your attention was drawn away he reached out quick as a snake and made the shift."

"Under the seat?" cried Mrs. Hasbrouck. "Surely there isn't room."

"Room enough for your dwarf," responded Newell, "the fellow whom you sent with the note to Mr. Roversi. He read it, of course, as soon as he was out of your sight, and the accuracy of your statement scared him blue. He and the coachman and Michael Saar skipped together. After my talk with you I notified the sleuths at the railroad stations, and we caught the men 'with the goods on them,' as you perceive."

"And my note?" she breathed, passing him as Roversi was bending over the jewel case.

"I'm sorry, but I lost it," he said and deftly put it into her hand.

She crushed the sheet of paper with nervous fingers and, turning, gave the detective such a look of gratitude that he blushed for the first time in some years.

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YOU ARE A BETTER DETECTIVE THAN I AM.

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