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THE SAPPHIRE CIRCLET.

By ANNA KATHARINE GREEN.

I was in a quandary. I had been in a quandary for some time. I admired Miss Leslie and I admired Miss Hinckley, and I could not tell for which my heart beat the more truly; or rather—let me be honest—I could not tell which of these two beautiful women was the more admirable and the better fitted to retain the affection which the appearance of either was calculated to inspire.

We were all down at Newton's for the Christmas holidays, and at the risk of seeming egotistical I will acknowledge that I thought I had detected in the manner of both a naive and gentle interest in myself which made a choice on my part at once difficult and imperative.

Did they note the struggle going on in my mind? Nothing in their manner betrayed it, and yet Ada Leslie must have been conscious of the fact that I spent one whole morning coasting with her pretty rival, nor could Miss Hinckley have been ignorant that on Christmas eve Miss Leslie and I sat out three dances in the conservatory. But whatever they knew or however they felt, the calm smile of Ada Leslie remained undisturbed, nor could I detect in Miss Hinckley's more vivacious but scarcely less lovely regard, the shadow of any mistrust as she turned her mocking eye my way, or gave me, as she did at times, a shy, alluring smile which only needed a something—perhaps it was the withdrawal of Miss Leslie's presence—to make me her own forever.

Meanwhile I had not allowed myself a word of admiration to either. I felt that chance—or should I say Providence?—would interpose to help me. And it did; but not in the manner I expected.

Miss Leslie was an only child and her parents' means were moderate. Miss Hinckley was an orphan and an heiress; but this difference in the circumstances of the two did not in the least affect me. I am a wealthy man, and could afford to ignore all advantages on the part of my future wife but the possession of a noble character and keen sensibilities.

It was evening, and we were all seated in the parlor. We had been playing games and Miss Leslie's face was flushed, making her look extremely attractive. She was sitting opposite me, and I could not keep my eyes from her serenely poised head and exquisite features, though I was conscious that Miss Hinckley, for the first time since I had known her, seemed nervous and flitted about more uneasily than usual. Finally she came and sat down gayly close by Miss Leslie's side. In admirable contrast they looked at each other for an instant, and then both smiled. But I did not like Miss Leslie's smile, beautiful as her lips were; and troubled slightly I let my gaze wander to her companion, who never had looked more brilliant or more tenderly appreciative. The next instant she was a dozen steps away, but had noted the two faces in juxtaposition, and I had also noted another thing. Miss Hinckley wore a sapphire brooch in the lace at her throat. As she rose to flit away Miss Leslie's eye fell on it, and instantly I realized, either from the expression that passed over the latter's face or from the deprecatory smile with which the heiress turned away, that Miss Leslie's beauty owed nothing to adornment, and that the contrast between her severely plain attire and Miss Hinckley's careless elegance, was as marked as that between their two styles of beauty, and was possibly the more keenly felt.

Just then a waltz was struck upon the piano. We moved to engage our partners, and I was approaching—shall I say whom, or leave that small matter to your discernment?—when, without warning, and certainly without anyone's connivance the electric light gave out and we were left in total darkness.

An involuntary cry or two and the stopping of a dozen hurrying feet were followed by a momentary silence, during which a smothered cry arose which I was sure had escaped from Miss Hinckley; then a renewed blaze of light shot up which, whether welcome or not to everyone there, certainly served as a revelation to some of the most thoughtful persons present: for, taken unawares by the sudden flash of light as they had already been by the sudden darkness, certain countenances revealed thoughts and betrayed emotions usually kept hidden under a conventional aspect, among which shone conspicuously the two young ladies of whom I have been speaking.

They were, strange to say, again side by side, so that one glance sent in their direction included both. Miss Hinckley held her hand against her throat and looked frightened; while Miss Leslie, as pale now as she had been rosy a moment before, stood before her in an attitude utterly incomprehensible to me, till I noticed that Miss Hinckley's hand covered a throat devoid of the circlet of sapphires which had just sparkled there, and caught one fleeting glance of her eye, which sped, as if against her will, to Miss Leslie's right hand hanging closed at her side.

Though the pretty brunette did not know it, that glance and the suspicion it woke was like a barbed arrow in my breast. I reeled and might have betrayed myself if Miss Hinckley, flashing her gaze my way, had not given me an imploring look and burst into a merry laugh.

"Oh, what fun!" she cried. "A ghostly hand, thrust through the dark, has robbed me of my sapphires! I cannot imagine why," she went on naively, "except to give me an opportunity to guess the borrower. Was it you, Mr. Forsyth?" she inquired of a gentleman at her left, with a coquettish turn of her body away from Miss Leslie, which brought her skirts between our eyes and Miss Leslie's rigid right hand.

"No," was the rather chilling response from the startled Mr. Forsyth; "I do not appropriate my neighbor's property in that way." And his eye, followed by that of every other person in the room, flashed to her throat and the bits of torn lace that hung there.

Immediately, and with great tact, Miss Hinckley rose to the occasion. Stepping into the midst of the crowd, she cast her brightest glances hither and thither, crying with the most careless air imaginable, "Button! Button! Who has the button?" And making a merry game of the whole matter, she ran from one to the other, seeking in hand and pocket for the missing gem, till suddenly she cried out: "There! I heard it fall! Draw back, everyone of you, and let me find it on the floor."

We all drew back; but though she, and afterward the whole party, searched the floor with great care the missing trinket was not found, and the affair began to look serious, notwithstanding her evident desire to laugh it off as a joke. Some one, I forget who, cried out that the doors should be closed and everyone searched. But, with an indignant flush, she declared that she would rather lose fifty sapphires; and reaching out her hand to Miss Leslie, gave her such a smile that my heart bounded in my bosom, and I could hardly contain my admiration of the lovely spirit she showed.

"Let us forget all about it!" she cried; and, drawing a camellia from a bouquet nearby, she held it out to Miss Leslie.

"Please hide my torn laces this," she murmured, with a seeming confidence in that lady which, alas! could not deceive me. "I consider it a happy exchange; don't you?"

Her upturned face, so candid and yet so appealing, demanded an answer. I saw Miss Leslie hesitate, but she had the courage of despair, and smiling in a cold way that was evidently not knew to her, the pallid beauty replied, as she tucked in the flower at the other one's bidding:

"I always have preferred flowers to gems; but that is not the reason I never wear jewels. You, who can wear either, will be always admired, whether ornamented with the one or the other."

Many thought the sarcasm uncalled-for but I—well, what did I think? My mind was in such a whirl that I believe my only thought was this: Where has she hidden this circlet; in her pocket or in her bosom? From the movement of her hands, which every now and then stole unconsciously to her breast, I judged it to be in the latter place, and my heart turned cold as I watched her and marvelled at the cupid or—God help her!—the possible necessity which had driven her to so rash an act.

But whatever my thoughts, they were soon diverted by my interest in Miss Hinckley, who for the rest of the evening made every effort possible not only to suppress all evidence of her own suspicion, but to ward off every expression of such on the part of others. She even sought in an innocent way to deceive me as to the state of her feelings, and spoke with such warmth of Miss Leslie's character and lovely disposition that, had I not received an insight into her thoughts at the moment the lights went up, I should have found it difficult to believe that the woman she praised was not all she tried to paint her. The others, who, perhaps had not seen all that I had, were temporarily influenced by her, but when we came to break up and separate for the night I saw more than one eye flash toward Miss Leslie in a way she evidently found it hard to meet, notwithstanding her calm temperament and the self-possession of her manner.

It was a relief when she left the room, nor was I surprised when one of the boys whispered in my ear:

"Strange business this about the sapphires. Makes a fellow feel queer. Do you know, Brandt says he saw Miss Leslie's hand dropping from Miss Hinckley's throat when the lights went up? But I don't think it right to hint any such thing as that about a pretty girl, do you? Rather they'd think I did it myself."

At which I turned on him, but what I said I do not remember, for my own thoughts were in a whirl, and I was anxious to have it out with myself alone. But before I could leave the room another fellow came up to me. "Feel like a thief eh?" he cried. "Pleasant, isn't it? We ought to have insisted upon turning our pockets inside out before anybody stirred from his place."

"We can do it now," I suggested.

"No," said he, "for some of us have left the room."

Miss Leslie was the only one who had gone out.

Meanwhile Miss Hinckley was looking more and more distressed. She seemed to feel what was said around her, and, though she did not venture any remark, her looks were eloquent and full of entreaty. Finally she herself rose, and, taking advantage of the stir which immediately followed, I drew nearer to her side.

"Good night," I whispered, and held out my hand.

She let her own drop into it, and the color which at that moment dyed her cheeks was bewitching to behold.

"Do not let the loss of the sapphires distress you," I murmured. "There is—there must be some mistake. To-morrow you will find the brooch lying on your bureau."

She smiled, opened her lips, but immediately cut short any words she was on the point of uttering.

"Never speak of the sapphires again," she entreated. "If my presence of mind had been greater this scandal might have been averted. I am shocked at my own want of self-possession. I should never have acknowledged their loss. I should have said that I took them out myself. Do you think if I had another brooch made exactly like it I could induce people to believe it was all a play on my part to frighten them? I should be so glad to—"

"Hush!" I begged, for her lips were trembling and her eyes filling with tears. "No deceit should be used to cover up guilt. The matter, unpleasant as it is, cannot be bettered by any action on your part." And though the words were feeble she seemed to gather strength from them,

for her countenance brightened and the look she cast me was full of gratitude and love.

Yes, I can say that word now, for my own feelings had at last asserted themselves, and it was to my expression of affection in look and smile that her own responded so naively. I loved her and was brooding over the pleasure of knowing my own heart, when I suddenly found myself in the hall and in the presence of Ada Leslie.

She was standing at the foot of the stairs, and she turned slightly when she saw me advance; and never had I seen her look so winning. But her face hardened as I drew near her, and it was with a constrained air that she greeted me at last. Had she read my feelings in my countenance?

"I am going away," she said; "good-by, Mr. Outhwaite."

"Going away?" I could not refrain from repeating her words. "O, I hope not. That—that is—" I stammered, as I saw her pale face flush and brighten, "would it be wise for you to go just now—in a hurry—and without—" I could not proceed; I felt as if every word were an insult, in face of the chill surprise in her look and manner.

"Without what?" she asked, meeting my eyes with evident effort.

"Without adieu to all your friends," I responded feebly. I could not speak my thought; no, not if I had seen the sapphires glittering through her clenched fingers.

"I have made all the adieux I think proper," she said; and with a slight smile that was almost dreary in its sadness she bent her head and sped swiftly upstairs.

Agitated, unnerved and sadly at a loss as to whether or not I should inform Miss Hinckley of this sudden departure, I stood for a few minutes in debate with myself and then proceeded slowly to my room. After what I had seen I did not think Miss Hinckley would wish to hinder Miss Leslie from going.

Next morning gossip was rife. Miss Leslie had taken an early train, and rumor had it that she intended to proceed at once to Europe with some relatives who had lately taken passage in the *Etruria*. The sapphires were not forthcoming, and even Miss Hinckley looked a trifle pale as she met the eyes of her fellow-guests assembled at the breakfast table. But when, the meal over, we separated into groups, I had the pleasure of hearing her try to vindicate her friend again and in a way I never forgot. She was in the billiard room and I was in the small hall adjacent to it, and they had been annoying her with questions and uttering surmises which were evidently most painful to her. At last she spoke.

"Good people," said she, "I know what you mean, and I am going to answer you once and for all. I don't believe Miss Leslie took my sapphires; I lost them, or someone—it felt like a man's hand—took them away in joke and then was afraid to return them after all the fuss that was made. I won't have it that a woman—a friend of mine—could or would do such a thing, and anyone who presumes after this to mention Miss Leslie to me as having any connection with this matter must expect to make an enemy of me. As for the matter itself I shall never discuss it again with anybody."

That day Miss Hinckley and I became engaged.

We had been married three months. Barring a few caprices my wife was adorable, and I was reveling in my happiness, when one morning, in passing down Fifth Avenue, I met Brandt. The words with which he accosted me were peculiar.

"Look here, Outhwaite," said he, "how came your wife to order the electric lights put out at Newton's last Christmas? Was that part of the fun?"

"What fun?" I gasped, knowing Brandt to be a solid sort of fellow who would not venture on any such remark without good reason.

"Why, all that fun about the missing sapphires! Your wife has explained to you, of course."

"My wife?" I began. But the shock which his words had given me must have shown itself in my face, for his manner suddenly changed, and without waiting for me to proceed he hurriedly observed:

"It's of no consequence, of course. The sapphires were stolen from her, undoubtedly, but hearing from the man in charge there that Mrs. Outhwaite tipped him to suddenly lower the lights that night, I thought that she might have been at the bottom of the joke herself; and that Miss Leslie— But, no matter; I have not much curiosity, and it's all right, of course, since Mrs. Outhwaite has said nothing to you about it." And he had passed me and was far down the street before I could find a word in reply.

All right! Of course it was all right,

but I was greatly shaken up by this discovery (if discovery it was), and walked back in a sort of blind daze to the Waldorf, where my wife and I were then staying. Hester would certainly be able to explain herself, or I should find that the man down at Newton's had lied; but, for all that, the day was overshadowed for me, and I dreaded, as well as longed to meet my wife.

I found out at the office that she was not in her room, and thinking she might be in the parlors I strolled through them. In the Turkish room I paused. A lady was standing in one of the windows, looking out. As I glanced at her she turned and I met the eyes of Ada Leslie.

I must have flushed with the sudden dismay her presence caused me, for her countenance altered and she hesitated before advancing. But in a moment she was at my side, saying quickly but firmly:

"This is a happy chance, Mr. Outhwaite. It seems that I have a character to vindicate. Do you believe or does your wife believe that I am responsible for the loss of her sapphires?"

Startled, I looked at her in undisguised distress. Her eyes met me with such truth in their depths and her face looked so pure and candid.

"My wife," I emphasized, "has always declared that the very suspicion of such a thing was obnoxious to her. I—"

"You need not tell me what your opinion is," said she; "I saw that there was something amiss with you that night, though I was far from suspecting what, or I should not have left the house so abruptly. I never dreamed that anyone was associating me with the loss of Miss Hinckley's circlet. My thoughts were on another theme, and though any words of mine must fail to be convincing at this late day, I beg you to believe that I have too little liking for jewels to accept them, even as gifts. Convince your wife of that fact, and, if possible your friends. That I have but just heard of the suspicion attached to my name accounts for the fact that my denial comes at so late a day." And, with another of her sweet bows, she was gliding away, when with an irresistible movement I held out my hands, crying, "Miss Leslie! Miss Leslie!" in a tone, the force and fervor of which I was far from recognizing till I encountered my wife's eyes surveying me from an open doorway.

"You have met that woman again," she hoarsely whispered, advancing to my side as the other flitted into the hall. You came to this hotel on purpose."

"Be quiet," I muttered. "See! your face are attracting attention. Come to our room and we will talk about Ada Leslie. I have not thought of her in three months, but such language as this would compel me to think of her if I were as indifferent to her as I have hitherto been absorbed in you."

My wife's face grew scarlet, but she said no more till the door closed on us. Then she turned on me in a frenzy of passion.

"You love her!" she cried; you have always loved her. If it had not been for what you thought she did at Newton's you would have married her instead of me. Acknowledge it!" she shrieked, with an utter loss of self-control, as astonishing to me as it was painful.

"Hester," I urged, with a cold sinking of the heart, new to my experience and dreadful in its forewarning of future unhappiness, "what has there been in my conduct as a husband to warrant you in any such attack as this. I did admire Miss Leslie, but I also admired you, and when I saw such evidences at that time of a lovely generosity in you, I could not help my heart from making the choice which it did. Where is that generosity now, Hester? Why show such hatred for one so utterly removed from us as Miss Leslie is now?"

The lips which hitherto I had only seen wreathed with smiles, stiffened into a cruel line that was like poison to my heart.

"Do you call her removed when any moment she may start up between us as she did to-night, and leave you standing like a stone, with a look on your face such as you have never given to me even when you professed to love me most passionately."

"Miss Leslie had just asserted her innocence in connection with the loss of your sapphires, and naturally my face wore an expression of interest and surprise."

"Ah, that was it!" she sneered. "Well, Miss Leslie had a right to her words, no doubt; but she can't prove them while I keep the brooch that ruined her in my possession. In the world's

eyes she will always be a thief, and you—"

"Good Heavens!" I cried, seizing her by the hands in my sudden agony of doubt and fear. "You do not mean to say you have that brooch; that you never lost it; that you let an innocent girl—?"

"I let!" she interjected, allowing more and more of her real nature to escape into view as she felt her hold upon me slipping. "I did not let. You know that you yourself commended me for the persistence with which I tried to avert suspicion from this amiable lady."

"After you had given her one tell-tale glance," I retorted.

"Yes," she laughed, in a low but indescribable way, "after that."

I was so appalled by the position in which I found myself that I lost all instinct of consideration or mercy.

"Hester," I demanded, "how came the brooch to be torn from your neck?"

She neither blenched nor sought to evade me.

"I tore it out myself," she replied. "I loved you and took the only way I knew to make you mine."

"And Miss Leslie? How came her hand to be raised toward your throat?"

"Oh, that was simple. I whispered to her as soon as I could find her in the dark that I had a surprise in store for her, and taking her hand in mine I laid it on a little trinket which I had fastened to my neck by a string. Being a ring, she started perceptibly, and when I murmured in her ear 'His!' she let her hand fall as if it had been palsied. At that instant the light flashed up."

Aghast at a duplicity for the recognition of which her maddest caprices had been unable to prepare me, I stammered out: "So the whole thing was a plan!" and dropped her hands, feeling as if I could endure their contact no longer.

With a shiver she seemed to recover herself.

"Oh!" she moaned, "what have I done? I have lost your love by my frankness; and what have I gained? Not even revenge on the woman I hate. Henceforth you will always be contrasting her innocence with my guilt. But you can say nothing I am your wife, and—"

"Hester," I here broke in, "where is that brooch? Let me see it."

But she was in too much mental misery to heed me. Her eyes flash involuntarily toward a little casket standing on her bureau, but when they returned to my face there was no other expression in them than the pleading of a lost soul on the verge of utter misery.

"Oh, Arthur," she moaned, "my heaven is slipping from me and you do not seem to care. It was your love I wanted—your love. For that surely a woman might sin a little when she was prepared to reward a man as I have rewarded you. See, these are the hands you have kissed a hundred times; take them to your breast and say—"

But I was intent upon the brooch. Loosening her arms, which she had thrown about me in her despair, I stepped quickly to the casket, seized it, broke it open on a marble-topped table that stood nearby, and emptied out its contents.

There was a ring amongst them and there was a brooch, the latter encrusted with sapphires.

"Is this the one?" I asked holding it up before her.

She gasped, choked and tried to shake her head, but her eyes betrayed her.

"Come," said I, "we will take it ourselves to Miss Leslie. I am determined she shall know before she sleeps that it has never been out of your possession."

But at this the misery in my wife's eyes changed quickly to a living terror.

"You will tell her!" she gasped.

"You will tell her," I corrected. "And you will tell others," I added, determined to fix her duty plainly and inexorably before her, while my own courage lasted and the frenzy of the hour gave us both strength. "I will never, for the sake of your honor or my own, let the suspicion of theft cloud the life of one so pure and innocent as Miss Leslie. To-night she shall know, but to-morrow—"

I paused, startled. My wife had made a leap and snatched the jewel from my hand. In another moment it was lying amid the hot coals of the fireplace.

"There is my answer," said she. "I will never confess to her or to anyone. You are mine and I am yours, and what Ada Leslie could not do before our marriage she shall not do now. We are one; do you hear?—one!"

But I had already snatched the brooch from the fire. Seeing it fall on the edge

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