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THE BLUE DIAMOND

BY ALICE AND CLAUDE ASKEW,

Authors of "The Shulamite," "Eve—and the Law," "Gilded London," "The Premier's Daughter," "The House Next Door," Etc.

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(Continued.)

"Great Scott!" The exclamation broke from Spencer Stern, and he surveyed Patience with bewildered astonishment. "What are you driving at? I don't understand what you mean," he continued. "I never asked your sister to steal the Blue Diamond. I'd swear to that before any court or jury in the world." There was a ring of utter conviction in the man's voice. For once he appeared to be speaking the truth.

Patience stared at him with puzzled eyes, then the suspicion she had felt before returned to her, the suspicion that she had been on the wrong track all the time, and that Vivienne possibly had been referring to something else than the theft of Lady Erline's gem during that memorable conversation on the eve of her wedding.

"What was it you asked my sister to steal for you," she said, in low, unsteady tones, "if it wasn't the Blue Diamond? For I may as well tell you now," she went on, "that I know about your last letter to Vivienne. She told me about it the day before yesterday."

Spencer Stern turned livid, then raised his thin hand and tugged at his heavy moustache. "What an extremely indiscreet person your sister is," he remarked slowly. It was easy to see that he was furiously annoyed.

"And what a blackguard you are!" Patience sprang to her feet. The sensation of faintness and nausea had given away to a feeling of rage and, for all her gentle disposition, she would have liked to strike Spencer Stern across the face. 'You are nothing better than a blackmailer," she went on passionately, her bosom heaving wildly, her eyes sparkling with sudden fire "But come, tell me the truth?" she continued. "If Vivienne didn't steal the Blue Diamond, what did she steal?"

Patience asked the question authoritatively. She loathed the man so heartily that for once she had forgotten to be afraid of him.

"Papers," He said the words laconically, staring hard at her, his eyes shining with a curious lustre, admiring more than he had ev er done before. Her wrath made Patience look very splendid, and her sudden dash of courage pleased him; also he appreciated the crimson flush which now dyed her pale cheeks, and her passionate defiance.

"Papers?" Patience repeated the word blankly, then a helpless expression came into her eyes. She felt so vague, so utterly in the dark.

"But whom do these papers concern, and who did Vivienne steal them from?" she asked, slowly and miserably.

"Ah, that is my secret," he laughed softly.

He was feeling more at his ease now, confident that the game was in his own hands. Then a crafty look lit up his dark face, and he turned to Patience with a cruel smile.

"You are very fond of Jack Braithwaie?" he asked, "This boy whom I hate so. You would not like him to be hurt?"

"I love him." She said the words very simply.

"And you would do a great deal for him?" He came close as he asked the question.

"Yes," she replie 7890$.. voice

"Yes," she returned. "you know I would."

"Then I will tell you one thing," he said, quietly. "The papers your sister stole at my instigation—papers that are in my own possession now—contain that which would ruin him utterly if I chose to make use of them—ruin him and his father, and blast every chance of happiness they may now possess." He spoke with a cold and studied deliberation, keenly observant of the agonized expression that overspread Patience's face.

"Is this the truth?"

She spoke in low terms

She spoke in low tones, but she felt in her own heart that she need not ask the question. She was absolutely convinced that Spencer Stern was not lying to her. She only wished he had been.

"The solemn truth." He said the words with a grave earnestness, then began stroking his moustache again.

"What are you going to do?" Patience raised her eyes and glanced at him appealingly. "Give me back those papers," she asked, in timid tones, "if there is a spark of manliness left in your nature. I don't know what they are but why should you use them to ruin Jack?"

"I love you—and he loves you." He took Patience's hand in his own, and she dared not drag it away, repulsive as she felt his touch. "The possession of these papers means a lot to me," he added. "I can get what price I like for them, and also they will be of service to me in another way. They will help me to be revenged on a boy I have vowed to punish, for don't think I am going to forgive Jack Braithwaite for knocking me down as he did yesterday. No, don't think that; I never forgive an injury of that sort."

He smiled as he spoke, and shewed his white, cruel teeth. Patience made a step forward, feeling dazed and confused.

"Those papers," she muttered, hoarsely. "I can understand that you would sell them to someone who wishes to hurt Jack. Would nothing induce you to be merciful?"

"Yes, something would." He gripped her fingers so tightly that he hurt her. "I love you, little girl," he panted, "so intensely, so passionately, that I would give up pretty well a fortune for your sake, also the chance to be revenged upon a man I hate. Listen to my terms." He lowered his voice as he spoke. "Promise to marry me," he muttered, "and I will tell you what I will do. You shall have the stolen papers on our wedding day. Yes, directly my ring is on your finger, and you are my wife, I will hand them over to you, and you can give them back to Jack. There, isn't that a fair enough offer? And as to the Blue Diamond, Lady Erline will have to eat humble pie over that, and never dare to accuse you or Vivienne of its theft, for I know certain secrets about her ladyship that will make her precious nervous of making an enemy of me." He paused a moment, then gazed scrutinisingly at the girl. "Come, is it a bargain?" he asked.

An eager expression came into his eyes as he spoke, and he dropped Patience's hands to clench his own nervously. Beads of sweat shewed themselves upon his forehead, and his complexion was a livid grey. There was no doubt of the man's wild passion for the slender girl who faced him, nor of his absolute determination to win her for his wife.

Patience trembled pitifully. What was she to say? What was she to do? She felt like a bird snared in the net of the fowler. She was indeed in the toils.

She sank down in a chair and covered her face with her hands. She had sacrificed herself to save Vivienne. Now it was to save Jack that she was called upon for a new sacrifice. She felt herself the plaything of a strange destiny—strange and inexorable. What did her own happiness matter. Patience thought, compared to the happiness of the two beings whom she loved most upon earth? And if she could save them from trouble and misfortune by the sacrifice of herself, well—the sacrifice must be made.

She shivered a little and thought of Jack—Jack, whom she loved so deeply and so well, and who loved her. What would he think, she wondered, when he heard she was to marry Spencer Stern? And yet perhaps it was, after all, the best thing that could happen. She was no fit wife for Jack, sister of a girl like Vivienne, and the daughter of a gambler. She might only bring shame and reproach upon an honorable name, and hurt the being she would have died to save.

"Well?" Spencer Stern came close to her as he asked the question and leant over her chair. "Give me your answer," he said softly. "Don't be so frightened of me, Patience. I swear before Heaven, I love you better than the whole world and, once we are married, I will devote the whole of my life to trying to please you."

"Won't you spare me?" She raised her eyes appealingly. "If you love me as much as you say you do." she continued, in low, earnest tones, "won't you give me the papers, and not force me into marrying you? For I don't love you, and I shall never love you. My whole heart and soul is given to another man—to Jack Braithwaite." She raised her voice as she said the last words.

"Confound him!" A sullen expression came over Spencer Stern's face, and his eyes gleamed with fire. "Have done with all this nonsense, Patience," he exclaimed, roughly, "and stop appealing to my finer feelings. I am not the sort of man who is likely to play the part of a quixotic fool. Give you up the papers indeed! And for nothing! Thank you, I am not such an idiot. A bargain is a bargain all the world over. I give those papers up only to my wife."

Patience began to sob helplessly. A feeling of utter despair was creeping over her, of extreme helplessness. She had made what fight she could, but she realised that Spencer Stern had beaten her.

She made no effort to check her tears. In fact, they came as a relief to her overcharged heart, and whilst she sobbed softly to herself, and Spencer Stern watched her with a curious smile, the study door opened quietly, and Jack Braithwaite stood on the threshold.

CHAPTER XVII.

The young man looked pale and annoyed, and he glanced rather suspiciously at Patience. He was evidently upset by her prolonged interview with Spencer Stern, possibly a little jealous.

"Pardon me for disturbing you," he said, slowly, addressing himself to Patience and hardly condescending to look at the other man, "but I thought I ought to be getting back. Can you spare me a few moments alone before I go?"

He began his speech in cold, measured tones, but the sight of Patience's pale, tearful face moved him to a sudden compassion for her, and he crossed quickly over to her side, and frowned at Spencer Stern resentfully.

"What have you been saying to Miss Strangeway to upset her so?" he asked, furiously. 'I wonder that you dare shew your face in this house."

"Hush, Jack, hush!" interrupted Patience, fearfully. She was terrified of a violent scene between the two men. "It was silly of me to cry,' she went on quickly, "and it is not Mr. Stern's fault at all, only I feel so shaken up and upset today, so miserable. Oh! won't you both go away?" She rose from her chair and stood up pale and trembling, glancing irresolutely at one man and then at the other. "If you only knew how my head aches," she added, putting up her hand to her throbbing brow. "I can hardly talk sense or understand what anyone says to me. Please go and leave me to myself."

"There, you hear what Miss Strangeway says," Spencer Stern observed, with a sardonic smile. "We are both requested to take our immediate departure, so I don't think we can very well remain. But tomorrow——" He turned to Patience with a meaning look—a look that brought all the blood to Jack's face.

"You may go, Mr. Stern," the young man cried hotly, "and the sooner the better I should say. But for myself, I intend to remain here with Miss Strangeway until you have quitted Barrington Lodge. Patience, you will allow me to stay with you until this man has left the house." He spoke in very determined tones.

Patience flushed and hesitated. What was she to say to those two men who were confronting her so steadily? It seemed to her that the moment had come when she must choose between them definitely and for ever—the man she hated and the man she loved.

She glanced at Jack, taking in every detail of his appearance, appreciating his manly bearing, his clean-shaven, regular features, his crisp brown hair, and true, honest brown eyes. He looked what he was, every inch a gentleman, a man, in whom it would be easy to put full confidence and trust, and one whose handsome above his fellows.

Then she glanced at Spencer Stern. He was leaning up against the table, surveying her with rather a mocking expression in his dark eyes, and the look on his face was a cruel and an evil one. She noticed his thin lips and lean arms, also the flashing rings he wore upon his hands, and she knew that she lothed the man. He made her think of hot gambling dens and the shouts of the betting ring. He had the appearance of a man who lived by his wits, and who was utterly unscrupulous in his ways and thoughts.

(To be continued.)

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Daily Fashion Hint for Times Readers.



A DRESSY JUMPER FROCK OF BUFF-COLORED LINEN.

Linen, besides being used in some of the smartest summer tailor-mades this year, is finding much use in dressy jumper frocks, combined with handsome lace, beautifully embroidered or again elaborately braided. A combination of heavy and baby Irish crochet finds a most attractive use in this pictured jumper dress of linen in the old-fashioned buff shade. The skirt is gored to the knees, and finished with a tucked flounce. Between this and the skirt proper are set two rows of lace between a band of linen, ornamented with whorls of white braid. The jumper, worn over a guimpe of batiste and val. insertions, is made entirely of the lace in the most extreme form of the Japanese idea, and the surplice fronts and large, loose sleeves are banded with the linen, and the white cord ornaments hold the fronts in place. The hat is the popular cloche or bell shape in neapolitan, trimmed with white and yellow ostrich feathers and yellow tea roses. Loops of black velvet ribbon on the bandeau in the back give a French touch.

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A HITCH IN THE WEDDING PLANS

Archbishop Bruchesi Will Not Allow Skinner-Forget Wedding to Take Place Before Catholic Altar.

Montreal, June 9—There is a good deal of interest in the coming Skinner-Forget wedding, which is set for Thursday next. Mr. Skinner is a son of Recorder Skinner of St. John (N. B.), a law partner of Bole Smith, K. C., and a Protestant, while the prospective bride is the daughter of Hon. L. J. Forget, a Roman Catholic and both young people are very popular in society.

It was supposed that the ceremony would take place in Senator Forget's private chapel at Senneville where the millionaire's summer residence is located. They, however, had counted without Archbishop Bruchesi, who has now forbidden the ceremony from taking place before any Catholic altar and it looks as if the ceremony would take place in the residence of the parish priest of Ste. Anne.

FOUND BOY DEAD UNDER A FENCE

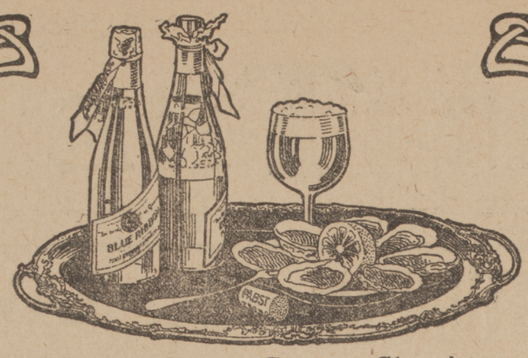
Halifax, N. S., June 9—Death under particularly sad circumstances visited the home of Lewis Strang, of Burton, lot 7. While Mr. Strang was working in a field some distance from his house, his little son, four years old, who had accompanied him, left him to visit his uncle, who was working in a field not very far off.

His father, thinking that the little fellow was enjoying himself, worked until tea time, and then, on starting for home, went to get the little boy to take him with him. On going to call him, he made the fearful discovery of his little body lying dead under a fence which he had climbed over but which had fallen upon him while he was doing so. One of the poles had fallen across the boy's neck and killed him.

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That's the sign of pleurisy. Rub well with Polson's Nerviline. It eases the suffering at once, cures the pain, makes you well. No liniment so penetrating. Large bottles for 25c.

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