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Nina Vanderdecken rose.

"In that case, I'll go."

She looked sentimentally at him as she laid her beringed hand upon his arm. Armer pressed it tenderly, and returned the glance with interest. "All was going well!"

They passed into the conservatory together. The shaded lights, the warm, enervating atmosphere, delighted Nina.

After duly admiring the orchids, she sauk into one of the cane lounges which were placed about beneath the exotic plants and shrubs.

The seat selected by Mrs Vanderdecken had its back to the windows. She did not see that one of them was slightly open. Armer sat in a low chair opposite her, commanding a view of the window.

Presently, he raised his hand slowly, and smoothed his hair. The dark figure of a man crept silently in, and dropped behind a huge orange tree.

"I suppose," sighed Mrs Vanderdecken, "we ought to go back. Won't people talk?"

"Let them talk," Armer said tenderly. "We are very happy here, you and I?"

He took her hand in his, and pressed it.

"Yes," she murmured.

"Nina, there's something I want to say to you—"

But what Armer intended to say, Nina Vanderdecken never heard. The lights went suddenly out, plunging the winter garden into darkness.

Mrs Vanderdecken uttered a scream, and clung to Armer. He held her closely, and then, with gentle force, he put her from him.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "Something has gone wrong with the electric current. I'll go to find out what it is. Sit still—you may fall over something. I won't be a minute."

But Nina was really frightened. She uttered a shrill scream, and clung still tighter to him.

"Oh—oh! Don't go! I can't be left, Mr Armer! You mustn't go!"

Armer could willingly have choked her. Her cries had reached the party in the drawing-room. He could see Farr's bulky form approaching.

Quick as light, a hand shot out from the darkness and gently removed the necklace which Armer had unfasted.

The owner of the eager hand crawled through the foliage, reached the open door passed through it, closed it silently behind him, and then, keeping well in the shadow, disappeared into the copse.

In less than it takes to tell the story, Henry Barlow was speeding towards London with Mrs Nina Vanderdecken's priceless rope of pearls in his pocket.

"Whatever's the matter?" Mr Farr asked.

"Oh, the light has failed! Don't be alarmed, Mrs Vanderdecken. It isn't the first time this has happened. I shall have to send for the electrician. It may be on again any time."

His hand touched the switch. Once more the garden was flooded rosy pink.

"There, you see it was but momentary," He smiled at Nina reassuringly. "Come into the dining-room, and let me give you a glass of wine. Or would you care to go upstairs? Helena's nurse is there. If you feel faint, Nurse Angela will know what to do. There's Weston, too."

"No, no; I don't need a doctor or nurse. I—I know you'll laugh at me, but I experienced such an uncanny sensation! As if I wasn't—alone."

Armer laughed.

"You weren't; I was with you." And then he added gravely: "Do you know, I, too, had the feeling that some third person was present."

Farr peered about.

"Impossible! No one could have got in unless they passed through the drawing-room. The doors on the terrace are always securely locked at night."

Farr offered his arm, and led the still trembling Nina through a side door into the drawing-room. Armer, full of solicitude, followed.

She put her hand to her throat, gave a faint, gurgling cry, and sank helplessly into a chair.

Farr and Armer gazed at her in dismay. It was true! The thick rope of flawless gems was no longer decorating Nina Vanderdecken's plump, white neck.

"You must have dropped them in the winter garden," Morton Farr said. "Go, like a good chap, Armer, and hunt for them. Don't upset yourself, dear Mrs Vanderdecken. Armer'll find them, and bring them back in a moment. Now drink this. That's better!"

Nina swallowed the wine, and her colour returned. But her nerve seemed gone.

"I shall never see them again!" She moaned. "They are stolen! There was someone else in the garden, someone beside Mr Armer and I. Whoever it was, stole my pearls."

She staggered towards the door. "I'll help Mr Armer look."

They entered the conservatory, to find Roger Armer and one of the footmen searching among the plants.

"I can't find them." Armer rose from his knees. "It's most extraordinary! I never left Mrs Vanderdecken. In fact"—he hesitated, and glanced at the distracted woman apologetically—"my arm was very close to her. It's incredible that anyone could steal the necklace off Mrs Vanderdecken's neck without my knowledge."

"The window was unlatched, sir."

Charles came forward.

Morton Farr turned angrily.

"And whose fault is that but yours?" In vain the footman declared that he had locked and fastened the window.

Roger Armer's face was a study. Sympathy mingled with shrewdness.

"I'm afraid," he said quietly, "that Mrs Vanderdecken is right. She has been robbed. The gang who robbed me—and you, Farr—has been here again. There is no time to lose. If you will allow me, I will go at once to the police-station."

"Thanks, old man! In the meantime, I will ring up Scotland Yard—" He paused. He had only just remembered that he had a detective in the house. He beckoned Armer on one side.

"Armer, I'm going to let you into a secret. You saw my secretary at dinner—Mr Smith?"

Armer nodded.

"Well, he is the celebrated Mark Lewis, one of the keenest 'tocs of the day."

"I employed Jeffrey Smart," said Armer. "He is no use! I'd best be off."

He turned abruptly away.

He, like Henry Barlow, made straight for the woods. A bicycle lay among the brushwood. He mounted it, and in half an hour had caught the last up-train.

Safe in the solitude of a first-class compartment, Armer wiped his brow.

"A narrow shave that! What a scare that Doris gave me! She's a plucky one. But all's well that ends well. In a few hours' time the fair Nina's pearls will be well out of the country. And after that I really will retire from the profession. England will be too hot to hold us!"

His face wore a look of regret. The "profession," as he called it, was too interesting to be relinquished without a pang.

Meanwhile, the commotion at Fairwell Manor had somewhat subsided.

"Armer's gone to tell the police," Farr told Lewis.

The detective looked annoyed.

"Excuse me, Mr Farr," he said, "but you should not have allowed anyone to leave the house without telling me."

"But Armer—surely Mr Armer is above suspicion."

Mark Lewis shrugged his shoulders.

"No one is above suspicion until the guilty part is discovered. I think my disguise has served its purpose. I will now assume once more the personality of Mark Lewis, detective."

To this Morton Farr agreed at once.

"It's most extraordinary," he said. "Someone inside the house must have opened the conservatory door. Mustn't they?"

The detective smiled.

"Looks like it. And now, with your permission, I will search your guests—and the servants."

In vain did Mr Farr protest. Mrs Vanderdecken backed up Lewis.

"Of course, the guests are a matter of form. But the servants—ah, they are quite another matter!"

"I will ring up the police-station, and ask them to send along an officer to help me."

"But," protested Mr Farr, "Mr Armer has gone."

"All the same it will be more satisfactory if I myself ring 'em up."

Morton Farr accompanied Lewis to the telephone-room.

"Hullo! There's something the matter with your telephone. It won't act! It's been tampered with! It doesn't work!"

Closer inspection proved this to be the case. Inquiries also showed that since Roger Armer had used the instrument no one else had done so.

Lewis made a mental note of this, but he said nothing—only asked Mr Farr to send a special messenger to the police-station, as the telephone was useless.

As soon as the inspector arrived, accompanied by a female detective, he proceeded with the disagreeable duty of searching guests and servants.

The former took it philosophically—make jokes about it—but it was evident that the servants resented what they termed "the insult." Lewis took the female searcher on one side.

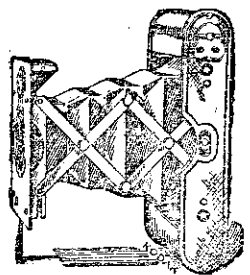
"I want you to be very particular about searching Nurse Angela."

"You think—?" Mrs Shale began.

"Not that she's the thief; but that she's shielding the thief. Bring me any letters—or anything else you may find—privately."

But when they sought for Nurse Angela she was not to be found. Her room was empty.

(Continued on page 4.)



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