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gling them in. Every one knew he had them. But a woman? Smuggling is second nature to a woman like Louise De Voe. The story of their theft was a mere blip. She smuggled them in for him," concluded Clare, with conviction, "and then began her long task of mothering them for her wealthy admirer."

Lawson was amazed at the rapidity of her reasoning. What had been inexplicable before was becoming simple and obvious.

"And then," he hazarded, "when she had restored them, perhaps they quarreled, and to get them back again he murdered—"

"Not too fast, Billy," she cautioned. "Think again before you use that word murder. If it had been murder that was intended in this case, how much more surely it might have been done by more brutal methods, or even by more scientific methods. No, it is my judgment that murder was never intended."

She stopped as if to reconstruct the scene in the new light. "Louise De Voe had probably retired for the night wearing the pearls," she went on, "for it was during the night that they were to get their most precious waruth and sustenance. Ethyl chloride was chosen because it was a quick and sure anesthetic. A few seconds at the most and she would surely be unconscious. A few seconds more and the now rejuvenated pearls could be slipped or cut off her neck. Another whiff of the ethyl chloride would insure anesthesia for enough minutes to escape. It also caused her death."

"The sale through Margot is another blind; the case is perfect," cried Lawson enthusiastically. "Clare, you are a witch. It is perfect."

"No," she answered cautiously, "not until I hear from Paris. I can make no move, accuse no one until then. Will you meet me at my office tonight after dinner? I shall certainly have some word by then."

THEY were sitting in her cozy little office when the door opened and a messenger of the French cable company entered with a cablegram.

"Sign for it, please," asked Clare as she tore it open and read it. She had decided instantly on her course of action, adding, "Will you call a cab while I telephone the Prince Henry?"

An hour later when they hurried into the hotel, Detective Callahan had provided a small private parlor for their use. Already Gaston Margot had been summoned. Wheaton had been found also and had reluctantly consented to make good on his promise to aid her, by bringing the replica of the Valdoireme pearls. As they waited, Miss Le Compte entered, having been released after an urgent request to the manager of her theater.

Clare greeted her frankly. Without mincing matters she plunged into the revelation she was about to make.

"I have asked you to be present, Miss Le Compte," she began, "because of a remark that you made the other day. You said that Miss De Voe had been foolish ever to wear the Valdoireme pearls."

"Why—yes," she admitted. "I saw her wearing them once on the boat coming over."

"Would you recognize them?"

"I think so."

The door opened and Margot stepped in. "Good evening," he said cuttingly. He seemed purposely to ignore every one in the room except Clare, to whom he evidently attributed the summons. "I am sorry you are not satisfied yet with what I told you of the replica."

"Oh," she smiled, "don't let that worry you! I shall not detain you long."

At length Wheaton arrived in a high dudgeon at being dragged away from a dinner party into an affair every connection with which he had been so anxious to avoid.

"Miss Kendall," he remarked, with difficulty concealing his annoyance,

"I thought you said that you were going to carry this thing through quietly." He shot a glance of surprise at Margot and of distrust at Miss Le Compte. "I am sure," he added, "I have done my best to keep it quiet and cover up the scandal."

Margot met his gaze defiantly. Were the two playing at hostility? Had Margot been simply a high class "fence" for the disposal and convenient reappearance of stolen goods? Apparently the whole thing was an enigma to Miss Le Compte who looked from one to the other with startled astonishment in her big brown eyes.

"Have you the pearls?" asked Clare quietly.

Wheaton sullenly laid them down on the table in their beautiful new jewel case. Clare opened the case and held up four loops of pearls, perfect in their beauty. From the smallest loop hung, pendant, two of the largest pearls any of those in the room had ever seen. There they were, the wonderful jewels which for generations had charmed and aroused the cupidty of two continents. They shone like things of life and purity, yet what black tragedy was it that they covered?

"Miss Le Compte," asked Clare incisively, "is this the necklace you saw Miss De Voe wearing?"

Clare looked at her keenly. The girl hesitated. "It looks very much like it," she admitted at last, "exactly like it in design. But those pearls were darker and a trifle shriveled, I thought."

Margot who had been glaring at her as if her very presence was an offense, smiled with an air of triumph. Wheaton moved in his chair nervously as if he wanted to terminate the scene at once, but said nothing.

"They were dark and shriveled," repeated Clare as if to herself. Then she added, addressing Violet but really including all in the room: "You have never heard that dark and shriveled pearls can be restored?"

Violet shook her head doubtfully as if she did not understand.

"That some people are 'pearl mothers,' so to speak, and by wearing them can bring them back to life and health?"

"**TUSH!**" interrupted Margot. "You refer to those fool stories that have made so much ink flow regarding the famous necklace of Madame Thiers in the Louvre. All bosh—bosh! A short time ago, I am informed, the French ministry ordered an examination made by some experts. They found that the pearls are all in perfect condition and have never been in better health. I believe it is all bosh about restoring pearls. Once they begin to go, it can't be done."

"No?" queried Clare. "You will excuse me, Monsieur Margot, but I shall ask your opinion later. Meanwhile, since Miss Le Compte seems to know nothing I wish to ask Mr. Wheaton when it was that he last called on Miss De Voe at the Prince Henry and under what circumstances—the last time," she repeated.

Wheaton was visibly confused. Apparently he did not relish even admitting having called on the girl.

"Miss Kendall," he remonstrated, "I must decline to involve myself further in this case than to say that for days before I saw her dead body in your presence I had neither seen nor heard from her."

"To whom were you indebted for the information that a replica," she laid special emphasis on the word, "of the Valdoireme pearls was on sale at Margot's?"

"That I can not answer," he said, avoiding a hasty glance of inquiry from Miss Le Compte. "I have said I must decline to have my name involved any further in this unfortunate case."

It was evident that his reluctance was creating a very unfavorable impression.

Margot smiled sardonically. "I am afraid you are mixing up three

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