

"That's very thoughtful of you," I said. "How often do you get caught?"

"Caught?" he cried, disgusted. "Me get caught! It's only pickpockets get caught. Fingersmiths never. Listen, I could take the false teeth out of your mouth if I wanted to and you wouldn't even catch me!"

"I don't have false teeth," I said.

"I know you don't," he answered. "Otherwise I'd 'ave 'ad 'em out long ago!"

I believed him. Those long slim fingers of his seemed able to do anything. We drove on for a while without talking.

"That policeman's going to check up on you pretty thoroughly," I said. "Doesn't that worry you a bit?"

"Nobody's checkin' up on me," he said.

"Of course they are. He's got your name and address written down most carefully in his black book."

The man gave me another of his sly ratty little smiles. "Ah" he said. "So 'ee 'as. But I'll bet 'ee ain't got it all written down in 'is memory as well. I've never known a copper yet with a decent memory. Some of 'em can't even remember their own names."

"What's memory got to do with it?" I asked. "It's written down in his book, isn't it?"

"Yes, guv'nor, it is. But the trouble is, 'ee's lost the book. 'Ee's lost both books, the one with my name on it and the one with yours."

In the long delicate fingers of his right hand, the man was holding up in triumph the two books he had taken from the policeman's pockets. "Easiest job I ever done," he announced proudly.

I nearly swerved the car into a milk truck, I was so excited.

"That copper's got nothin' on either of us now," he said.

"You're a genius!" I cried.

"'Ee's got no names, no addresses, no car number, no nothin'," he said.

"You're brilliant!"

"I think you'd better pull off this main road as soon as possible," he said.

"Then we'd better build a little bonfire and burn these books."

"You're a fantastic fellow!" I exclaimed.

"Thank you, guv'nor," he said. "It's always nice to be appreciated."

The Surgeon

"YOU have done extraordinarily well," Robert Sandy said, seating himself behind the desk. "It's altogether a splendid recovery. I don't think there's any need for you to come and see me any more."

The patient finished putting on his clothes and said to the surgeon, "May I speak to you, please, for another moment?"

"Of course you may," Robert Sandy said. "Take a seat."

The man sat down opposite the surgeon and leaned forward, placing his hands, palms downward, on the top of the desk. "I suppose you still refuse to take a fee?" he said.

"I've never taken one yet and I don't propose to change my ways at this time of life," Robert Sandy told him pleasantly. "I work entirely for the National Health Service and they pay me a very fair salary."

Robert Sandy MA, M. CHIR, FRCs, had been at The Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford for eighteen years and he was now fifty-two years old, with a wife and three grown-up children. Unlike many of his colleagues, he did not hanker after fame and riches. He was basically a simple man utterly devoted to his profession.

It was now seven weeks since his patient, a university undergraduate, had been rushed into Casualty by ambulance after a nasty car accident in the Banbury Road not far from the hospital. He was suffering from massive abdominal injuries and he had lost consciousness. When the call came through from Casualty for an emergency surgeon, Robert Sandy was up in his office having a cup of tea after a fairly arduous morning's work which had included a gall-bladder, a prostate and a total colostomy, but for some reason he happened to be the only general surgeon available at that moment. He took one more sip of his tea, then walked straight back into the operating theatre and started scrubbing up all over again.

After three and a half hours on the operating table, the patient was still alive and Robert Sandy had done everything he could to save his life. The next day, to the surgeon's considerable surprise, the man was showing signs that he was going to survive. In addition, his mind was lucid and he was speaking coherently. It was only then, on the morning after the operation, that Robert Sandy began to realize that he had an important person on his hands. Three dignified gentlemen from the Saudi Arabian Embassy, including the Ambassador himself, came into the hospital and the first thing they wanted was to call in all manner of celebrated surgeons from Harley Street to advise on the case. The patient, with bottles suspended all round his bed and tubes running into many parts of his body, shook his head and murmured something in Arabic to the Ambassador.

"He says he wants only you to look after him," the Ambassador said to Robert Sandy.

"You are very welcome to call in anyone else you choose for consultation," Robert Sandy said.

"Not if he doesn't want us to," the Ambassador said. "He says you have saved his life and he has absolute faith in you. We must respect his wishes."

The Ambassador then told Robert Sandy that his patient was none other than a prince of royal blood. In other words, he was one of the many sons of the present King of Saudi Arabia.

A few days later, when the Prince was off the danger list, the Embassy tried once again to persuade him to make a change. They wanted him to be moved to a far more luxurious hospital that catered only for private patients, but the Prince would have none of it. "I stay here," he said, "with the surgeon on who saved my life."

Robert Sandy was touched by the confidence his patient was putting in him, and throughout the long weeks of recovery, he did his best to ensure that this confidence was not misplaced.

And now, in the consulting-room, the Prince was saying, "I do wish you would allow me to pay you for all you have done, Mr Sandy." The young man had spent three years at Oxford and he knew very well that in England a surgeon was always addressed as 'Mister' and not 'Doctor'. "Please let me pay you, Mr Sandy," he said.

Robert Sandy shook his head. "I'm sorry," he answered, "but I still have to say no. It's just a personal rule of mine and I won't break it."

"But dash it all, you saved my life," the Prince said, tapping the palms of his hands on the desk.

"I did no more than any other competent surgeon would have done," Robert Sandy said.

The Prince took his hands off the desk and clasped them on his lap. "All right, Mr Sandy, even though you refuse a fee, there is surely no reason why my father should not give you a small present to show his gratitude."

Robert Sandy shrugged his shoulders. Grateful patients quite often gave him a case of whisky or a dozen bottles of wine and he accepted these things gracefully. He never expected them, but he was awfully pleased when they arrived. It was a nice way of saying thank you.

The Prince took from his jacket pocket a small pouch made of black velvet and he pushed it across the desk. "My father," he said, "has asked me to tell you how enormously indebted he is to you for what you have done. He told me that whether you took a fee or not, I was to make sure you accepted this little gift."

Robert Sandy looked suspiciously at the black pouch, but he made no move to take it.

"My father," the Prince went on, "said also to tell you that in his eyes my life is without price and that nothing on earth can repay you adequately for having saved it. This is simply a what shall we call it... a present for your next birthday. A small birthday present."

"He shouldn't give me anything," Robert Sandy said.

"Look at it, please," the Prince said.

Rather gingerly, the surgeon picked up the pouch and loosened the silk thread at the opening. When he tipped it upside down, there was a flash of brilliant light as something icewhite dropped on to the plain wooden desk-top. The stone was about the size of a cashew nut or a bit larger, perhaps three-quarters of an inch long from end to end, and it was pear shaped, with a very sharp point at the narrow end. Its many facets glimmered and sparkled in the most wonderful way.

"Good gracious me," Robert Sandy said, looking at it but not yet touching it. "What is it?"

"It's a diamond," the prince said. "Pure white. It's not especially large, but the colour is good."

"I really can't accept a present like this," Robert Sandy said. "No, it wouldn't be right. It must be quite valuable."

The Prince smiled at him. "I must tell you something, Mr Sandy," he said. "Nobody refuses a gift from the King. It would be a terrible insult. It has never been done."

Robert Sandy looked back at the Prince. "Oh dear," he said. "You are making it awkward for me, aren't you?"

"It is not awkward at all," the Prince said. "Just take it."

"You could give it to the hospital."

"We have already made a donation to the hospital," the Prince said. "Please take it, not just for my father, but for me as well."

"You are very kind," Robert Sandy said. "All right, then. But I feel quite embarrassed." He picked up the diamond and placed it in the palm of one hand. "There's never been a diamond in our family before," he said. "Gosh, it is beautiful, isn't it. You must please convey my thanks to His Majesty and tell him I shall always treasure it."

"You don't actually have to hang on to it," the Prince said. "My father would not be in the least offended if you were to sell it. Who knows, one day you might need a little pocket-money."

"I don't think I shall sell it," Robert Sandy said. "It is too lovely. Perhaps I shall have it made into a pendant for my wife."

"What a nice idea," the Prince said, getting up from his chair. "And please remember what I told you before. You and your wife are invited to my country at any time. My father would be happy to welcome you both."

"That's very good of him," Robert Sandy said. "I won't forget."

When the Prince had gone, Robert Sandy picked up the diamond again and examined it with total fascination. It was dazzling in its beauty, and as he moved it gently from side to side in his palm, one facet after the other caught the light from the window and flashed brilliantly with blue and pink and gold. He glanced at his watch. It was ten minutes past three. An idea had come to him. He picked up the telephone and asked his secretary if there was

anything else urgent for him to do that afternoon. If there wasn't, he told her, then he thought he might leave early.

"There's nothing that can't wait until Monday," the secretary said, sensing that for once this most hard-working of men had some special reason for wanting to go.

"I've got a few things of my own I'd very much like to do."

"Off you go, Mr Sandy," she said. "Try to get some rest over the weekend. I'll see you on Monday."

In the hospital car park, Robert Sandy unchained his bicycle, mounted and rode out on to the Woodstock Road. He still bicycled to work every day unless the weather was foul. It kept him in shape and it also meant his wife could have the car. There was nothing odd about that. Half the population of Oxford rode on bicycles. He turned into the Woodstock Road and headed for The High. The only good jeweller in town had his shop in The High, halfway up on the right and he was called H. F. Gold. It said so above the window, and most people knew that H stood for Harry. Harry Gold had been there a long time, but Robert had only been inside once, years ago, to buy a small bracelet for his daughter as a confirmation present.

He parked his bike against the curb outside the shop and went in. A woman behind the counter asked if she could help him.

"Is Mr Gold in?" Robert Sandy said.

"Yes, he is."

"I would like to see him privately for a few minutes, if I may. My name is Sandy."

"Just a minute, please." The woman disappeared through a door at the back, but in thirty seconds she returned and said, "Will you come this way, please."

Robert Sandy walked into a large untidy office in which a small, oldish man was seated behind a partner's desk. He wore a grey goatee beard and steel spectacles, and he stood up as Robert approached him.

"Mr Gold, my name is Robert Sandy. I am a surgeon at The Radcliffe. I wonder if you can help me."

"I'll do my best, Mr Sandy. Please sit down."

"Well, it's an odd story," Robert Sandy said. "I recently operated on one of the Saudi princes. He's in his third year at Magdalen and he'd been involved in a nasty car accident. And now he has given me, or rather his father has given me, a fairly wonderful-looking diamond."

"Good gracious me," Mr Gold said. "How very exciting."

"I didn't want to accept it, but I'm afraid it was more or less forced on me."

"And you would like me to look at it?"

"Yes, I would. You see, I haven't the faintest idea whether it's worth fi

ve hundred pounds or five thousand, and it's only sensible that I should know roughly what the value is."

"Of course you should," Harry Gold said. "I'll be glad to help you. Doctors at the Radcliffe have helped me a great deal over the years."

Robert Sandy took the black pouch out of his pocket and placed it on the desk. Harry Gold opened the pouch and tipped the diamond into his hand. As the stone fell into his palm, there was a moment when the old man appeared to freeze. His whole body became motionless as he sat there staring at the brilliant shining thing that lay before him. Slowly, he stood up. He walked over to the window and held the stone so that daylight fell upon it. He turned it over with one finger. He didn't say a word. His expression never changed. Still holding the diamond, he returned to his desk and from a drawer he took out a single sheet of clean white paper. He made a loose fold in the paper and placed the diamond in the fold. Then he returned to the window and stood there for a full minute studying the diamond that lay in the fold of paper.

"I am looking at the colour," he said at last. "That's the first thing to do. One always does that against a fold of white paper and preferably in a north light."

"Is that a north light?"

"Yes, it is. This stone is a wonderful colour, Mr Sandy. As fine a D colour as I've ever seen. In the trade, the very best quality white is called a D colour. In some places it's called a River. That's mostly in Scandinavia. A layman would call it a Blue White."

"It doesn't look very blue to me," Robert Sandy said.

"The purest whites always contain a trace of blue," Harry Gold said. "That's why in the old days they always put a blue-bag into the washing water. It made the clothes whiter."

"Ah yes, of course."

Harry Gold went back to his desk and took out from another drawer a sort of hooded magnifying glass. "This is a ten-times loupe," he said, holding it up. "What did you call it?"

"A loupe. It is simply a jeweller's magnifier. With this, I can examine the stone for imperfections."

Back once again at the window, Harry Gold began a minute examination of the diamond through the ten-times loupe, holding the paper with the stone on it in one hand and the loupe in the other. This process took maybe four minutes. Robert Sandy watched him and kept quiet.

"So far as I can see," Harry Gold said, "it is completely flawless. It really is a most lovely stone. The quality is superb and the cutting is very fine, though definitely not modern."

"Approximately how many facets would there be on a diamond like that?"

" Robert Sandy asked.

"Fifty-eight."

"You mean you know exactly?"

"Yes, I know exactly."

"Good Lord. And what roughly would you say it is worth?"

"A diamond like this," Harry Gold said, taking it from the paper and placing it in his palm, "a D colour stone of this size and clarity would command on enquiry a trade price of between twenty-five and thirty thousand dollars a carat. In the shops it would cost you double that. Up to sixty thousand dollars a carat in the retail market."

"Great Scott!" Robert Sandy cried, jumping up. The little jeweller's words seemed to have lifted him clean out of his seat. He stood there, stunned.

"And now," Harry Gold was saying, "we must find out precisely how many carats it weighs." He crossed over to a shelf on which there stood a small metal apparatus. "This is simply an electronic scale," he said. He slid back a glass door and placed the diamond inside. He twiddled a couple of knobs, then he read off the figures on a dial. "It weighs fifteen point two seven carats," he said. "And that, in case it interests you, makes it worth about half a million dollars in the trade and over one million dollars if you bought it in a shop."

"You are making me nervous," Robert Sandy said, laughing nervously.

"If I owned it," Harry Gold said, "it would make me nervous. Sit down again, Mr Sandy, so you don't faint."

Robert Sandy sat down.

Harry Gold took his time settling himself into his chair behind the big partner's desk. "This is quite an occasion, Mr Sandy," he said. "I don't often have the pleasure of giving someone quite such a startlingly wonderful shock as this. I think I'm enjoying it more than you are."

"I am too shocked to be really enjoying it yet," Robert Sandy said. "Give me a moment or two to recover."

"Mind you," Harry Gold said, "one wouldn't expect much less from the King of the Saudis. Did you save the young prince's life?"

"I suppose I did, yes."

"Then that explains it." Harry Gold had put the diamond back on to the fold of white paper on his desk, and he sat there looking at it with the eyes of a man who loved what he saw. "My guess is that this stone came from the treasure-chest of old King Ibn Saud of Arabia. If that is the case, then it will be totally unknown in the trade, which makes it even more desirable. Are you going to sell it?"

"Oh gosh, I don't know what I am going to do with it," Robert Sandy said.

"It's all so sudden and confusing."

"May I give you some advice."

"Please do."

"If you are going to sell it, you should take it to auction. An unseen stone like this would attract a lot of interest, and the wealthy private buyers would be sure to come in and bid against the trade. And if you were able to reveal its provenance as well, telling them that it came directly from the Saudi Royal Family, then the price would go through the roof."

"You have been more than kind to me," Robert Sandy said. "When I do decide to sell it, I shall come first of all to you for advice. But tell me, does a diamond really cost twice as much in the shops as it does in the trade?"

"I shouldn't be telling you this," Harry Gold said, "but I'm afraid it does."

"So if you buy one in Bond Street or anywhere else like that, you are actually paying twice its intrinsic worth?"

"That's more or less right. A lot of young ladies have received nasty shocks when they've tried to re-sell jewellery that has been given to them by gentlemen."

"So diamonds are not a girl's best friend?"

"They are still very friendly things to have," Harry Gold said, "as you have just found out. But they are not generally a good investment for the amateur."

Outside in The High, Robert Sandy mounted his bicycle and headed for home. He was feeling totally light headed. It was as though he had just finished a whole bottle of good wine all by himself. Here he was, solid old Robert Sandy, sedate and sensible cycling through the streets of Oxford with more than half a million dollars in the pocket of his old tweed jacket! It was madness. But it was true.

He arrived back at his house in Acacia Road at about half past four and parked his bike in the garage alongside the car. Suddenly he found himself running along the little concrete path that led to the front door. "Now stop that!" he said aloud, pulling up short. "Calm down. You've got to make this really good for Betty. Unfold it slowly." But oh, he simply could not wait to give the news to his lovely wife and watch her face as he told her the whole story of his afternoon. He found her in the kitchen packing some jars of home-made jam into a basket.

"Robert!" she cried, delighted as always to see him. "You're home early! How nice!"

He kissed her and said, "I am a bit early, aren't I?"

"You haven't forgotten we're going to the Renshaws for the weekend? We have to leave fairly soon."

"I had forgotten," he said. "Or maybe I hadn't. Perhaps that's why I'm home early."

"I thought I'd take Margaret some jam."

"Good," he said. "Very good. You take her some jam. That's a very good

idea to take Margaret some jam."

There was something in the way he was acting that made her swing round and stare at him. "Robert," she said, "what's happened? There's something the matter."

"Pour us each a drink," he said. "I've got a bit of news for you."

"Oh darling, it's not something awful, is it?"

"No," he said. "It's something funny. I think you'll like it."

"You've been made Head of Surgery!"

"It's funnier than that," he said. "Go on, make a good stiff drink for each of us and sit down and I'll tell you."

"It's a bit early for drinks," she said, but she got the ice-tray from the fridge and started making his whisky and soda. While she was doing this, she kept glancing up at him nervously. She said, "I don't think I've ever seen you quite like this before. You are wildly excited about something and you are pretending to be very calm. You're all red in the face. Are you sure it's good news?"

"I think it is," he said, "but I'll let you judge that for yourself." He sat down at the kitchen table and watched her as she put the glass of whisky in front of him. "All right," she said. "Come on. Let's have it."

"Get a drink for yourself first," he said.

"My goodness, what is this?" she said, but she poured some gin into a glass and was reaching for the ice-tray when he said, "More than that. Give yourself a good stiff one."

"Now I am worried," she said, but she did as she was told and then added ice and filled the glass up with tonic. "Now then," she said, sitting down beside him at the table, "get it off your chest."

Robert began telling his story. He started with the Prince in the consulting-room and he spun it out long and well so that it took a good ten minutes before he came to the diamond.

"It must be quite a whopper," she said, "to make you go all red in the face and funny-looking."

He reached into his pocket and took out the little black pouch and put it on the table. "There it is," he said. "What do you think?"

She loosened the silk cord and tipped the stone into her hand. "Oh, my God!" she cried. "It's absolutely stunning!"

"It is, isn't it."

"It's amazing."

"I haven't told you the whole story yet," he said, and while his wife rolled the diamond from the palm of one hand to the other, he went on to tell her about his visit to Harry Gold in The High. When he came to the point where the jeweller began to talk about value, he stopped and said, "So what do you think he said it was worth?"

"Something pretty big," she said. "It's bound to be. I mean just look at it!"

"Go on then, make a guess. How much?"

"Ten thousand pounds," she said. "I really don't have any idea."

"Try again."

"You mean, it's more?"

"Yes, it's quite a lot more."

"Twenty thousand pounds!"

"Would you be thrilled if it was worth as much as that?"

"Of course, I would, darling. Is it really worth twenty thousand pounds?"

"Yes," he said. "And the rest."

"Now don't be a beast, Robert. Just tell me what Mr Gold said."

"Take another drink of gin."

She did so, then put down the glass, looking at him and waiting.

"It is worth at least half a million dollars and very probably over a million

."

"You're joking!" Her words came out in a kind of gasp.

"It's known as a pear-shape," he said. "And where it comes to a point at this end, it's as sharp as a needle."

"I'm completely stunned," she said, still gasping.

"You wouldn't have thought half a million, would you?"

"I've never in my life had to think in those sort of figures," she said.

She stood up and went over to him and gave him a huge hug and a kiss. "You really are the most wonderful and stupendous man in the world!" she cried.

"I was totally bowled over," he said. "I still am."

"Oh Robert!" she cried, gazing at him with eyes bright as two stars. "Do you realize what this means? It means we can get Diana and her husband out of that horrid little flat and buy them a small house!"

"By golly, you're right!"

"And we can buy a decent flat for John and give him a better allowance all the way through his medical school! And Ben... Ben wouldn't have to go on a motor-bike to work all through the freezing winters. We could get him something better. And... and... and..

"And what?" he asked, smiling at her.

"And you and I can take a really good holiday for once and go wherever we please! We can go to Egypt and Turkey and you can visit Baalbek and all the other places you've been longing to go to for years and years!" She was quite breathless with the vista of small pleasures that were unfolding in her dreams. "And you can start collecting some really nice pieces for once in your life as well!"

Ever since he had been a student, Robert Sandy's passion had been the history of the Mediterranean countries, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Syria and E