gypt, and he had made himself into something of an expert on the ancient w
orld of those various civilizations. He had done it by reading and studyin
g and by visiting, when he had the time, the British Museum and the Ashmol
ean. But with three children to educate and with a job that paid only a re
asonable salary, he had never been able to indulge this passion as he woul
d have liked. He wanted above all to visit some of the grand remote region
s of Asia Minor and also the now below-ground village of Babylon in Iraq a
nd he would love to see the Arch of Ctsephon and the Sphinx at Memphis and
 a hundred other things and places, but neither the time nor the money had
 ever been available. Even so, the long coffee-table in the living-room wa
s covered with small objects and fragments that he had managed to pick up
cheaply here and there through his life. There was a mysterious pale alaba
ster ushaptiu in the form of a mummy from Upper Egypt which he knew was Pr
e-Dynastic from about 7000 BC. There was a bronze bowl from Lydia with an
engraving on it of a horse, and an early Byzantine twisted silver necklace
, and a section of a wooden painted mask from an Egyptian sarcophagus, and
 a Roman red-ware bowl, and a small black Etruscan dish, and perhaps fifty
 other fragile and interesting little pieces. None was particularly valuab
le, but Robert Sandy loved them all.

"Wouldn't that be marvellous?" his wife was saying. "Where shall we go f
irst?"

"Turkey," he said.

"Listen," she said, pointing to the diamond that lay sparkling on the kit
chen table, "you'd better put your fortune away somewhere safe before you los
e it."

"Today is Friday," he said. "When do we get back from the Renshaws?"

"Sunday night."

"And what are we going to do with our million-pound rock in the meanwh
ile? Take it with us in my pocket?"

"No." she said, "that would be silly. You really cannot walk around with
 a million pounds in your pocket for a whole weekend. It's got to go into a
safe-deposit box at the bank. We should do it now."

"It's Friday night, my darling. All the banks are closed till next Monday."

"So they are," she said. "Well then, we'd better hide it somewhere in the
house."

"The house will be empty till we come back," he said. "I don't think that'
s a very good idea."

"It's better than carrying it around in your pocket or in my handbag."

"I'm not leaving it in the house. An empty house is always liable to be bu
rgled."

"Come on, darling," she said, "surely we can think of a place where no one
 could possibly find it."

"In the tea-pot," he said.

"Or bury it in the sugar-basin," she said.

"Or put it in the bowl of one of my pipes in the pipe-rack," he said. "Wit h some tobacco over it."

"Or under the soil of the azalea plant," she said.

"Hey, that's not bad, Betty. That's the best so far." They sat at the kit chen table with the shining stone lying there between them, wondering very se riously what to do with it for the next two days while they were away.

"I still think it's best if I take it with me," he said.

"I don't, Robert. You'll be feeling in your pocket every five minutes to m ake sure it's still there. You won't relax for one moment."

"I suppose you're right," he said. "Very well, then. Shall we bury it under the soil of the azalea plant in the sitting-room? No one's going to look there ."

"It's not one hundred percent safe," she said. "Someone could knock the p ot over and the soil would spill out on the floor and presto, there's a spark ling diamond lying there."

"It's a thousand to one against that," he said. "It's a thousand to one aga inst the house being broken into anyway."

"No, it's not," she said. "Houses are being burgled every day. It's not wo rth chancing it. But look, darling, I'm not going to let this thing become a n uisance to you, or a worry."

"I agree with that," he said.

They sipped their drinks for a while in silence.

"I've got it!" she cried, leaping up from her chair. "I've thought of a marv ellous place!"

"Where?"

"In here," she cried, picking up the ice-tray and pointing to one of the em pty compartments. "We'll just drop it in here and fill it with water and put it back in the fridge. In an hour or two it'll be hidden inside a solid block of ice and even if you looked, you wouldn't be able to see it."

Robert Sandy stared at the ice-tray. "It's fantastic!" he said. "You're a gen ius! Let's do it right away!"

"Shall we really do it?"

"Of course. It's a terrific idea."

She picked up the diamond and placed it into one of the little empty compa rtments. She went to the sink and carefully filled the whole tray with water. She opened the door of the freezer section of the fridge and slid the tray in. "It's the top tray on the left," she said. "We'd better remember that. And it 'll be in the block of ice furthest away on the right hand side of the tray."

"The top tray on the left," he said. "Got it. I feel better now that it's tuck ed safely away."

"Finish your drink, darling," she said. "Then we must be off. I've packe d your case for you. And we'll try not to think about our million pounds any more until we come back."

"Do we talk about it to other people?" he asked her. "Like the Renshaws or anyone else who might be there?"

"I wouldn't," she said. "It's such an incredible story that it would soon spread around all over the place. Next thing you know, it would be in the pape rs."

"I don't think the King of the Saudis would like that," he said.

"Nor do I. So let's say nothing at the moment."

"I agree," he said. "I would hate any kind of publicity."

"You'll be able to get yourself a new car," she said, laughing.

"So I will. I'll get one for you, too. What kind would you like, darling?"

"I'll think about it," she said.

***

Soon after that, the two of them drove off to the Renshaws for the week end. It wasn't far, just beyond Whitney, some thirty minutes from their own house. Charlie Renshaw was a consultant physician at the hospital and the families had known each other for many years.

The weekend was pleasant and uneventful, and on Sunday evening Robert and Betty Sandy drove home again, arriving at the, house in Acacia Road at about seven pm. Robert took the two small suitcases from the car and they walked up the path together. He unlocked the front door and held it open for his wife.

"I'll make some scrambled eggs," she said, "and crispy bacon. Would you l ike a drink first, darling?"

"Why not?" he said.

He closed the door and was about to carry the suitcases upstairs when h e heard a piercing scream from the sitting-room "Oh no!,, she was crying. " No! No! No!"

Robert dropped the suitcase and rushed in after her. She was standing th ere pressing her hands to her cheeks and already tears were streaming down h er face.

The scene in the sitting-room was one of utter desolation. The curtains were drawn and they seemed to be the only things that remained intact in t he room. Everything else had been smashed to smithereens. All Robert Sandy' s precious little objects from the coffee-table had been picked up and flun g against the walls and were lying in tiny pieces on the carpet. A glass ca binet had been tipped over. A chest-of-drawers had had its four drawers pul led out and the contents, photograph albums, games of Scrabble and Monopoly and a chessboard and chessmen and many other family things had been flung across the room. Every single book had been pulled out of the big floor-to-

ceiling bookshelves against the far wall and piles of them were now lying o pen and mutilated all over the place. The glass on each of the four waterco lours had been smashed and the oil painting of their three children painted when they were young had had its canvas slashed many times with a knife. T he armchairs and the sofa had also been slashed so that the stuffing was bu lging out. Virtually everything in the room except the curtains and the car pet had been destroyed.

"Oh, Robert," she said, collapsing into his arms, "I don't think I can stand this."

He didn't say anything. He felt physically sick.

"Stay here," he said. "I'm going to look upstairs." He ran out and took the stairs two at a time and went first to their bedroom. It was the same in there. The drawers had been pulled out and the shirts and blouses and un derclothes were now scattered everywhere. The bedclothes had been stripped from the double-bed and even the mattress had been tipped off the bed and s lashed many times with a knife. The cupboards were open and every dress and suit and every pair of trousers and every jacket and every skirt had been ripped from its hanger. He didn't look in the other bedrooms. He ran downst airs and put an arm around his wife's shoulders and together they picked th eir way through the debris of the sitting-room towards the kitchen. There t hey stopped.

The mess in the kitchen was indescribable. Almost every single container of any sort in the entire room had been emptied on to the floor and then sm ashed to pieces. The place was a waste-land of broken jars and bottles and f ood of every kind. All Betty's home-made jams and pickles and bottled fruits had been swept from the long shelf and lay shattered on the ground. The sam e had happened to the stuff in the store-cupboard, the mayonnaise, the ketch up, the vinegar, the olive oil, the vegetable oil and all the rest. There we re two other long shelves on the far wall and on these had stood about twent y lovely large glass jars with big groundglass stoppers in which were kept r ice and flour and brown sugar and bran and oatmeal and all sorts of other th ings. Every jar now lay on the floor in many pieces, with the contents spewe d around. The refrigerator door was open and the things that had been inside , the leftover foods, the milk, the eggs, the butter, the yoghurt, the tomat oes, the lettuce, all of them had been pulled out and splashed on to the pre tty tiled kitchen floor. The inner drawers of the fridge had been thrown int o the mass of slush and trampled on. The plastic ice-trays had been yanked o ut and each had been literally broken in two and thrown aside. Even the plas tic-coated shelves had been ripped out of the fridge and bent double and thr own down with the rest. All the bottles of drink, the whisky, gin, vodka, sh erry, vermouth, as well as half a dozen cans of beer, were standing on the t able, empty. The bottles of drink and the beer cans seemed to be the only th

ings in the entire house that had not been smashed. Practically the whole fl oor lay under a thick layer of mush and goo. It was as if a gang of mad chil dren had been told to see how much mess they could make and had succeeded br illiantly.

Robert and Betty Sandy stood on the edge of it all, speechless with horr or. At last Robert said, "I imagine our lovely diamond is somewhere undernea th all that."

"I don't give a damn about our diamond," Betty said. "I'd like to kill the people who did this."

"So would I," Robert said. "I've got to call the police." He went back in to the sitting-room and picked up the telephone. By some miracle it still wor ked.

The first squad car arrived in a few minutes. It was followed over the next half-hour by a Police Inspector, a couple of plain-clothes men, a fing er-print expert and a photographer. The Inspector had a black moustache and a short muscular body. "These are not professional thieves," he told Rober t Sandy after he had taken a look round. "They weren't even amateur thieves . They were simply hooligans off the street. Riff-raff. Yobbos. Probably th ree of them. People like this scout around looking for an empty house and w hen they find it they break in and the first thing they do is to hunt out t he booze. Did you have much alcohol on the premises?"

"The usual stuff," Robert said. "Whisky, gin, vodka, sherry and a few cans of beer."

"They'll have drunk the lot," the Inspector said. "Lads like these have only two things in mind, drink and destruction. They collect all the booze o n to a table and sit down and drink themselves raving mad. Then they go on t he rampage."

"You mean they didn't come in here to steal?" Robert asked.

"I doubt they've stolen anything at all," the Inspector said. "If they'd be en thieves they would at least have taken your TV set. Instead, they smashed it up."

"But why do they do this?"

"You'd better ask their parents," the Inspector said. "They're rubbish, tha t's all they are, just rubbish. People aren't brought up right any more these d ays."

Then Robert told the Inspector about the diamond. He gave him all the de tails from the beginning to end because he realized that from the police poi nt of view it was likely to be the most important part of the whole business.

"Half a million quid!" cried the Inspector. "Jesus Christ!"

"Probably double that," Robert said.

"Then that's the first thing we look for," the Inspector said.

"I personally do not propose to go down on my hands and knees grubbing ar

ound in that pile of slush," Robert said. "I don't feel like it at this momen t."

"Leave it to us," the Inspector said. "We'll find it. That was a clever place to hide it."

"My wife thought of it. But tell me, Inspector, if by some remote chance t hey had found it...

"Impossible," the Inspector said. "How could they?"

"They might have seen it lying on the floor after the ice had melted," Robe rt said. "I agree it's unlikely. But if they had spotted it, would they have ta ken it?"

"I think they would; the Inspector said." No one can resist a diamond. It h as a sort of magnetism about it. Yes, if one of them had seen it on the floor, I think he would have slipped it into his pocket. But don't worry about it, doc tor. It'll turn up."

"I'm not worrying about it," Robert said. "Right now, I'm worrying abou t my wife and about our house. My wife spent years trying to make this plac e into a good home."

"Now look, sir," the Inspector said, "the thing for you to do tonight is t o take your wife off to a hotel and get some rest. Come back tomorrow, both of you, and we'll start sorting things out. There'll be someone here all the tim e looking after the house."

"I have to operate at the hospital first thing in the morning," Robert said . "But I expect my wife will try to come along."

"Good," the Inspector said. "It's a nasty upsetting business having your ho use ripped apart like this. It's a big shock. I've seen it many times. It hits you very hard."

Robert and Betty Sandy stayed the night at Oxford's Randolph Hotel, and by eight o'clock the following morning Robert was in the Operating Theatre at the hospital, beginning to work his way through his morning list.

Shortly after noon, Robert had finished his last operation, a straightfo rward non-malignant prostate on an elderly male. He removed his rubber glove s and mask and went next door to the surgeons' small rest-room for a cup of coffee. But before he got his coffee, he picked up the telephone and called his wife.

"How are you, darling?" he said.

"Oh Robert, it's so awful," she said. "I just don't know where to begin."

"Have you called the insurance company?"

"Yes, they're coming any moment to help me make a list."

"Good," he said. "And have the police found our diamond?"

"I'm afraid not," she said. "They've been through every bit of that slush in the kitchen and they swear it's not there."

"Then where can it have gone? Do you think the vandals found it?"

"I suppose they must have," she said. "When they broke those ice-trays a ll the ice-cubes would have fallen out. They fall out when you just bend the tray. They're meant to."

"They still wouldn't have spotted it in the ice," Robert said.

"They would when the ice melted," she said. "Those men must have been in the house for hours. Plenty of time for it to melt."

"I suppose you're right."

"It would stick out a mile lying there on the floor," she said, "the way it s hines."

"Oh dear," Robert said.

"If we never get it back we won't miss it much anyway, darling," she said . "We only had it a few hours."

"I agree," he said. "Do the police have any leads on who the vandals were ?"

"Not a clue," she said. "They found lots of finger-prints, but they don't seem to belong to any known criminals."

"They wouldn't," he said, "not if they were hooligans off the street."

"That's what the Inspector said."

"Look, darling," he said, "I've just about finished here for the morning. I'm going to grab some coffee, then I'll come home to give you a hand."

"Good," she said. "I need you, Robert. I need you badly."

"Just give me five minutes to rest my feet," he said, "I feel exhausted." ** *

In Number Two Operating Theatre not ten yards away, another senior surg eon called Brian Goff was also nearly finished for the morning. He was on h is last patient, a young man who had a piece of bone lodged somewhere in hi s small intestine. Goff was being assisted by a rather jolly young Registra r named William Haddock, and between them they had opened the patient's abd omen and Goff was lifting out a section of the small intestine and feeling along it with his fingers. It was routine stuff and there was a good deal o f conversation going on in the room.

"Did I ever tell you about the man who had lots of little live fish in hi s bladder?" William Haddock was saying.

"I don't think you did," Goff said.

"When we were students at Barts," William Haddock said, "we were being taught by a particularly unpleasant Professor of Urology. One day, this twi t was going to demonstrate how to examine the bladder using a cystoscope. T he patient was an old man suspected of having stones. Well now, in one of t he hospital waiting-rooms, there was an aquarium that was full of those tin y little fish, neons they're called, brilliant colours, and one of the stud ents sucked up about twenty of them into a syringe and managed to inject th em into the patient's bladder when he was under his premed, before he was t

aken up to Theatre for his cystoscopy."

"That's disgusting!" the theatre sister cried. "You can stop right there, Mr Haddock!" Brian Goff smiled behind his mask and said, "What happened next ?" As he spoke, he had about three feet of the patient's small intestine lyin g on the green sterile sheet, and he was still feeling along it with his fing ers.

"When the Professor got the cystoscope into the bladder and put his eye to it," William Haddock said, "he started jumping up and down and shouting with excitement.

"What is it, sir?' the guilty student asked him. "What do you see?"

"It's fish!' cried the Professor. 'There's hundreds of little fish! They're swimming about!"

"You made it up," the theatre sister said. "It's not true."

"It most certainly is true," the Registrar said. "I looked down the cyst oscope myself and saw the fish. And they were actually swimming about."

"We might have expected a fishy story from a man with a name like Haddo ck," Goff said. "Here we are," he added. "Here's this poor chap's trouble. You want to feel it?"

William Haddock took the pale grey piece of intestine between his fingers and pressed. "Yes," he said. "Got it."

"And if you look just there," Goff said, instructing him, "you can see wh ere the bit of bone has punctured the mucosa. It's already inflamed."

Brian Goff held the section of intestine in the palm of his left hand. Th e sister handed him a scalpel and he made a small incision. The sister gave h im a pair of forceps and Goff probed down amongst all the slushy matter of th e intestine until he found the offending object. He brought it out, held firm ly in the forceps, and dropped it into the small stainless-steel bowl the sis ter was holding. The thing was covered in pale brown gunge.

"That's it," Goff said. "You can finish this one for me now, can't you, W illiam. I was meant to be at a meeting downstairs fifteen minutes ago."

"You go ahead," William Haddock said. "I'll close him up."

The senior surgeon hurried out of the Theatre and the Registrar proceeded to sew up, first the incision in the intestine, then the abdomen itself. The whole thing took no more than a few minutes.

"I'm finished," he said to the anaesthetist.

The man nodded and removed the mask from the patient's face.

"Thank you, sister," William Haddock said. "See you tomorrow." As he mov ed away, he picked up from the sister's tray the stainless-steel bowl that c ontained the gunge-covered brown object. "Ten to one it's a chicken bone," h e said and he carried it to the sink and began rinsing it under the tap.

"Good God, what's this?" he cried. "Come and look, sister!"

The sister came over to look. "It's a piece of costume jewellery," she s

aid. "Probably part of a necklace. Now how on earth did he come to swallow t hat?"

"He'd have passed it if it hadn't had such a sharp point," William Haddock s aid. "I think I'll give it to my girlfriend."

"You can't do that, Mr Haddock," the sister said. "It belongs to the pat ient. Hang on a sec. Let me look at it again." She took the stone from Willi am Haddock's gloved hand and carried it into the powerful light that hung ov er the operating table. The patient had now been lifted off the table and wa s being wheeled out into Recovery next door, accompanied by the anaesthetist.

"Come here, Mr Haddock," the sister said, and there was an edge of excit ement in her voice. William Haddock joined her under the light. "This is ama zing," she went on. "Just look at the way it sparkles and shines. A bit of g lass wouldn't do that."

"Maybe it's rock-crystal," William Haddock said, "or topaz, one of those semi-precious stones."

"You know what I think," the sister said. "I think it's a diamond."

"Don't be damn silly," William Haddock said.

A junior nurse was wheeling away the instrument trolley and a male thea tre assistant was helping to clear up. Neither of them took any notice of t he young surgeon and the sister. The sister was about twenty-eight years ol d, and now that she had removed her mask she appeared as an extremely attra ctive young lady.

"It's easy enough to test it," William Haddock said. "See if it cuts gla ss." Together they crossed over to the frosted-glass window of the operating -room. The sister held the stone between finger and thumb and pressed the sh arp pointed end against the glass and drew it downward. There was a fierce s craping crunch as the point bit into the glass and left a deep line two inch es long.

"Jesus Christ!" William Haddock said. "It is a diamond!"

"If it is, it belongs to the patient," the sister said firmly.

"Maybe it does," William Haddock said, "but he was mighty glad to get ri d of it. Hold on a moment. Where are his notes?" He hurried over to the side table and picked up a folder which said on it JOHN DIGGS. He opened the fol der. In it there was an Xray of the patient's intestine accompanied by the r adiologist's report. John Diggs, the report said. Age 17. Address 123 Mayfie ld Road, Oxford. There is clearly a large obstruction of some sort in the up per small intestine. The patient has no recollection of swallowing anything unusual, but says that he ate some fried chicken on Sunday evening. The obje ct clearly has a sharp point that has pierced the mucosa of the intestine, a nd it could be a piece of bone...

"How could he swallow a thing like that without knowing it?" William H addock said.

"It doesn't make sense," the sister said.

"There's no question it's a diamond after the way it cut the glass," Will iam Haddock said. "Do you agree?"

"Absolutely," the sister said.

"And a bloody big one at that," Haddock said. "The question is, how goo d a diamond is it? How much is it worth?"

"We'd better send it to the lab right away," the sister said.

"To hell with the lab," Haddock said. "Let's have a bit of fun and do it our selves."

"How?"

"We'll take it to Golds, the jewellers in The High. They'll know. The da mn thing must be worth a fortune. We're not going to steal it, but we're dam n well going to find out about it. Are you game?"

"Do you know anyone at Golds?" the sister said.

"No, but that doesn't matter. Do you have a car?"

"My Mini's in the car park."

"Right. Get changed. I'll meet you out there. It's about your lunch time an yway. I'll take the stone."

Twenty minutes later, at a quarter to one, the little Mini pulled up out side the jewellery shop of H. F. Gold and parked on the double-yellow lines. "Who cares," William Haddock said. "We won't be long." He and the sister we nt into the shop.

There were two customers inside, a young man and a girl. They were exa mining a tray of rings and were being served by the woman assistant. As so on as they came in, the assistant pressed a bell under the counter and Har ry Gold emerged through the door at the back. "Yes," he said to William Ha ddock and the sister. "Can I help you?"

"Would you mind telling us what this is worth?" William Haddock said, pl acing the stone on a piece of green cloth that lay on the counter.

Harry Gold stopped dead. He stared at the stone. Then he looked up at the young man and woman who stood before him. He was thinking very fast. S teady now, he told himself. Don't do anything silly. Act natural.

"Well well," he said as casually as he could. "That looks to me like a very fine diamond, a very fine diamond indeed. Would you mind waiting a mom ent while I weigh it and examine it carefully in my office. Then perhaps I' ll be able to give you an accurate valuation. Do sit down, both of you."

Harry Gold scuttled back into his office with the diamond in his hand. Immediately, he took it to the electronic scale and weighed it. Fifteen poi nt two seven carats. That was exactly the weight of Mr Robert Sandy's stone ! He had been certain it was the same one the moment he saw it. Who could m istake a diamond like that? And now the weight had proved it. His instinct was to call the police right away, but he was a cautious man who did not li