MONSIEUR VIGOT'S DIAMONDS.

A CHRISTMAS STORY.

PART I.

THERE was wonderfully good weather for the approach of Christmas-tide in Paris. Not that any one minds bad weather in the French capital, where great things are done superficially to lighten the burdens of life. But December there is usually so very bitter and biting, so pervaded with a sensation of being pierced to the bone by a raw, wet cold (which is not visible to the naked eye, like the cold of a genuine white winter), that the clear, frosty atmosphere, tempered by a ray of thin sunshine, put us all in the most unreasonably exultant spirits.

Our pension was filled to overflowing with an amicable mixture of English and Americans, weighted by a German baroness with three or four preternaturally plain daughters, and a Russian countess, who was thought to be a socialist, because she never by any chance entered into a political discussion.

There was the usual desultory chit-chat at *table-d'hôte*, and an extra amount of tolerant sociability in the salon after dinner, as the guests were tempted to discuss their Christmas purchases, even going so far, upon occasions, as to display a holiday bargain or two.

The person who had most purchases to discuss was a Mrs. Thompson, wife of an American colonel—the handsomest woman in the house, as well as the cleverest and most entertaining. We never found out what the husband was colonel of, nor even what was his name, as he had registered "Colonel Thompson and wife," signing himself facetiously "Ever yours, etc., the Colonel," upon one or two occasions when courtesy demanded a social note from him. Nor did we know where the handsome couple had come from. They had a cosmopolitan air of having lived everywhere, and their not-in-the-least-reticent remarks and reminiscences savored equally of New York, Boston, and Washington. About Chicago they were also very enthusiastic, the colonel saying—but that is not a part of my story.

They seemed to be wealthy, with that carelessness of expenditure at which the Englishman stares, while the rest of the world pronounces Yankees to be "disgustingly rich." But they made no boasts and threw out no insinuations as to their income. In truth, they were exceedingly well-bred, particularly the wife, as is the way with Americans.

She was a charming woman, beautiful, sociable, good-tempered, with that spice of originality which makes the women of the United States the despair of their German and English sisters, the rivals of their more witty, if less amiable, French cousins.

Everybody liked Mrs. Thompson, whose only claim to be distinguished from hundreds of other Mrs. Thomsons was the "p" in the middle of her name. After it all happened—the incidents of my story, I mean—we wondered why some one had not thought of questioning her or her husband about their connections—their setting, as it were, in the large world from which they had come. Had there been the least particle of brag about them, or even, on the other hand, any suspicion of reticence, doubtless the lady from Boston, who kept our social books, would have taken the pains to be informed. She was the only one who did not like the colonel and his wife. I think she inferred that they came from below Mason and Dixon's line. However, that has nothing to do with the story.

They were a very devoted couple.

"Colonel," as his wife invariably called him ("as though he were a collie dog," said the English dowager), was always buying pretty things for "Hetty." He called her Hetty with a frankness which quite won the pension's heart. They went everywhere together, and we had a feeling that most of their time was spent in visiting the shops and selecting Hetty's pretty things. Often one or another of us had been invited to assist at these shopping expeditions, a choice *déjeuner-à-la-fourchette* being a feature of the occasion. It chanced to be my luck to accompany them one day, about two weeks before Christmas. After an exciting visit to the Grand Magasin du Louvre, where Hetty appeared to buy everything under the sun she had not already bought, we went to the Palais Royal for our *déjeuner*. Just as we were about to mount the steps into the choicest of those admirable restaurants *à prix fixe*, Mrs. Thompson stopped before the door of one of the wonderful jewellers' shops which seemed to display their entire stock of gems in the tiny window—gems so magnificent that one is perpetually tormented with a suspicion that they must be paste.

"Oh, *do* wait a minute, colonel!" she cried, in her bright, girlish way: "this is the place where we saw the exquisite diamond necklace. Miss Harper *must* see that necklace! Do come in for a moment, both of you."

In her pretty frank fashion she bustled towards the solitary counter behind which stood the solitary Frenchman (who does not know the solitary salesmen of the Palais Royal jewel shops?) who never seems to sell anything, and yet whose stock is always so surprisingly new and well-selected. A Parisian jeweller would rather retire from the trade than show you an old-fashioned brooch—unless he were certain you would not find it out to be old-fashioned.

Monsieur Vigot bowed his perfect French bow, and grinned his plausible French grin. He had just the precise amount of suavity and "complaisance"—that ultimatum of the Parisian code of good morals—and he handed Mrs. Thompson the diamond necklace even before she had breathed rapturously, "Ah, here it is!"

"*Le voilà*, madame. Is it not *magnifique?*" It certainly was magnificent; more fit for a duchess than for the wife of an American colonel. And I will do Mrs. Thompson the justice to say that she did not in the least appear to covet it for herself.

"Isn't it superb?" she cried, turning eagerly first to me, then to her husband, who stood contemplating her rather than the necklace, I thought. Certainly, she made a charming picture. Her eyes were as bright as the diamonds which she held up naïvely to her white throat with both hands. In her soft, round cheeks the color came and went with the excitement of her genuine admiration, and the curves of her laughing mouth were bewitching. The colonel seemed to think so, too. He took a quick step towards her and laid his hand over hers, diamonds and all. "Would you like them very much?" I heard him say.

The color ebbed altogether from her cheeks and then came back in a wave of vivid carnation; she was a sensitive creature, and the sudden question evidently startled her very much.

"I? Oh, I never thought of such a thing—never!"

"But this is the third time you have been in here to look at them, Hetty."

"To look at them—oh, yes—because they are so beautiful! But to buy such diamonds—we could never afford it."

"But if we could," he persisted, his hand still covering hers, his eyes looking adoringly into her own.

"Oh, Jack!"

It was the first and last time I ever heard her use the name, and I could see that she was sincerely moved. Then her good sense and better judgment asserted themselves, and after the murmured "Oh, Jack," she added, quite practically:

"But we cannot, and must not think of it. Why, M. Vigot wants eighty thousand francs for this necklace."

I had stood silently by while this rapid little drama was being enacted, the Frenchman having figured as pantomime chorus with his bows, his grins, his gesticulations, and an occasional word just in the right place. At the mention of eighty thousand francs he made a significant gesture which intimated that

the price was a matter about which he was not entirely inflexible. The colonel now turned to me. "Do you not think they are fine, Miss Harper? And do they not become my wife?" For an instant I hesitated. Then,

"Yes, certainly, Colonel Thompson. If your wife goes to grand dinners and great balls, they become her perfectly."

"Why, of course I go to dinners and balls—at home," said Mrs. Thompson, opening her eyes in surprise.

"Then, if my husband could afford the jewels, and I was willing to put all that money into diamonds, I should buy the necklace."

The Frenchman gave me an evil look. He had evidently jumped at the possible sale as at something quite unexpected, and he resented my air of cool consideration.

"Madame is very beautiful in diamonds," he remarked to the doting husband.

"I have always wanted to see you wear diamonds, Hetty," he said, softly.

"But these, no; they are far too costly."

She thrust them from her with her hands; with her sparkling eyes she held them and devoured their dazzling splendor.

Here the colonel stepped aside and entered into a whispered conversation with M. Vigot, doubtless in reference to the eighty thousand francs.

His wife watched them anxiously, consumed with desire for the gems, while far from satisfied that the purchase ought to be made.

"I see you think it would be wrong, Miss Harper," she murmured.

"I? Not in the least, my dear Mrs. Thompson. I have neither the right nor the opportunity to judge. You Americans are all rich, you know."

"But we are *not* rich—not in the way you mean. Only my husband is so—so fond of me, and so generous. He would have to make a sacrifice——"

"If it makes him happy——" I suggested.

"Ah, he is so good to me."

She sighed softly, and there was a mist like tears in her eyes. The cup of her gratitude was full to the brim.

Just then the colonel and the Frenchman approached, the former smiling but agitated, I thought, the latter rubbing his hands and bowing as only a Parisian who *fait des compliments* can bow. Evidently the first act of the drama was over. The purchase had been made.

"My dear, you shall have the necklace for your Christmas gift." He laid it once more to her throat caressingly. "Don't be overcome, Hetty" (as the mist gathered and one large tear stood on her dark lashes). "Monsieur is not going to be so hard on me as he threatened. It will not cost as much as eighty thousand francs."

I think, between her gratitude and her doubt as to the expediency of the purchase, the colonel's wife wanted to sit down and weep; but she controlled herself admirably, and began to lay the necklace carefully in its black velvet case.

"We will leave it to be sent up to-morrow," said the colonel. "There is to be a small plate with your name added to the under side of the largest cluster."

She looked at him quickly. Could they trust this M. Vigot to give them the necklace just as it was? was the unmistakable question asked by her eyes.

"I am to pay for it, in cash, when it is delivered," he remarked; adding, laughingly: "it will about finish my letter of credit. It is a good thing we are going to start day after to-morrow, Hetty." She turned away reluctantly.

"It seems a risk to leave it," she said half to herself. "One cannot trust these Frenchmen out of sight."

"Or in sight either," I supplemented; "they can cheat you under your very eyes."

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Colonel and Mrs. Thompson were very quiet as we sat at our luncheon. Whether it was the stress of her emotion, or the enormous price he had paid for the bauble, that oppressed them, I could not tell. Even the champagne which we all drank to celebrate the magnitude of "Hetty's Christmas gift" seemed flat and tasteless, and we drove home almost in silence.

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"Good-by, dear Miss Harper," said

Mrs. Thompson the next day but one, as they were leaving for Antwerp. She clung to me a little, and I whispered:

"Is it all right? Did the necklace come?"

"Oh, yes," she said, fairly bursting into tears. "It came this morning. It is magnificent, but somehow—I couldn't show it—here. I feel as though it is too splendid, as though we should regret it."

"Don't you think," I whispered hastily, "that your husband knows better than you what he can afford? Enjoy your necklace, dear, and be happy."

She gave me a grateful look as I kissed her again, and amid a storm of farewells and regrets they drove away.

PART II.

IT was a fortnight later, Christmas Eve, in fact, and a most dismal day, when all the *beau temps* which had so surprised us early in December had been forgotten in the icy mists of real Parisian winter weather.

I sat in my little private parlor, feeling somewhat depressed, when suddenly a volley of agitated raps fell upon the door. In answer to my weary *Entrez*, there burst into the room almost unceremoniously (only a Frenchman never quite forgets to affect ceremony) none other than Monsieur Vigot. I knew him instantly, in spite of a certain wildness of aspect which almost threatened to destroy his deportment.

"Ah, mademoiselle—*grâce à Dieu!* I have found you. And you—you at least can tell me——"

He broke off, and wiped his face with his pocket-handkerchief, as if to cover his agitation. I waited curiously to hear the rest.

"You can tell me where is Monsieur Tom-song, ze cor-nel?"

"I fancy," I replied, "that Colonel and Mrs. Thompson have just about reached home. They were due in New York yesterday."

"*Mon Dieu—oui!* But where, mademoiselle, is 'ome?"

"I really do not know, M. Vigot."

"Oh, *mon Dieu!* Impossible! Do not say zat, mademoiselle. You who were ze intimate one—ze frien' of madame! You do not know where she lif?"

"I certainly do not."

He sat down suddenly, a profuse perspiration breaking out upon his convulsed features.

"But you know ze name of ze cornel? Is it not so, *chère* mademoiselle?"

"I do not even know his name, monsieur."

The wretched little man jumped up and began pacing the room, wringing his hands in truly dramatic style.

"Oh, *mon Dieu! mon Dieu!*—my diamonds!" he cried, the tears running down his cheeks—a picture of irresistibly ludicrous despair. Consumed with curiosity as I was, I would not condescend to question the man, whose every look and gesture impressed me—Heaven forgive me!—as a bit of melodrama, now comic, now tragic, always to further some purpose of his own.

"Oh," he sobbed, turning his dishevelled countenance towards me, "if ze *bon Dieu* would only help me! Is zere not also Americaines in ze house, mademoiselle?"

I told him there were several; and he begged me, in the name of the good God, and the good devil, and half the saints in the calendar, to assemble them in my sitting-room, which I did with some difficulty.

When everybody had arrived (fortunately, the awful weather had kept us indoors for the moment) M. Vigot began to interrogate them, collectively and individually, about the colonel's whereabouts. As I had anticipated, no one knew anything of him or of his wife, and I could detect in the half-curious, half-I-told-you-so air of those present that they were not altogether unprepared to listen to something dubious in reference to their absent compatriot. ("I never did trust that man," the lady from Boston remarked under her breath.)

The Frenchman's demeanor could no longer conceal his state of mind. He capered about like one in physical torture; and it was only after many incoherencies, and much hysterical reiteration of appeals to the Almighty and the saints, that we got at bottom facts—

which it would take too long to tell in Monsieur's frenzied speech.

The story was this:

The colonel being seized with a passion to get for his wife jewels which he candidly admitted himself to be entirely unable to pay for, he—M. Vigot—had hit upon the admirable plan that from a magnificent assortment of imitation diamonds—transcendently beautiful imitation diamonds!—he could in two days make a necklace precisely like the coveted one.

"In two days! *Mon Dieu!* only to think of ze haste—ze skill—ze labor! And it was produced; a work of art so like ze eighty zousand francs article zat no one—not ze cor-nel, not madame—only an expert, could distinguish. And all for ze sum of one zousand francs!"

"And did he let you do it?" I queried indignantly, recalling the pretty wife's emotion.

"Did he let me do it? *Mais oui*, mademoiselle. Why not? Of course I do it. I slave day and night. I make it—it is superbe! Of paste, you understand, but such paste! Oh, *mon Dieu!*—and ze cor-nel, he is transported; he——"

Here the lady from Boston interrupted the Frenchman's flow of impassioned eloquence.

"He went away without paying you, I suppose."

"Pay me? Oh, yes; he pay me—one zousand francs—two hundred dollars, madame. It was ze bargain—ze cor-nel was allr-right, as you say. But mesdames, messieurs—only conceive, *I haf given him ze wrong necklace!*"

Had a bombshell been exploded in the pension, it could not have created greater consternation. Everybody stared at everybody else, and one or two, unable to resist the comical side of the situation, withdrew silently into the hall to smother their risibility. But it was genuine misery for the Frenchman, who sat weeping copiously. In the unlooked-for second act to his little drama, the tragedy was not all acting; and for once I beheld what an individual of the Parisian world is like when he is not doing anything for effect. He called upon his eighty thousand francs—"sixteen zousand dollars, mesdames," to witness that they were the honest price of his gems, and that in losing them he was eternally lost.

"And was the mistake entirely your own?" we asked.

"*Mon Dieu, oui*, mesdames! Zey were so *magnifiques*—ze jewels of paste, you perceive—zat I am myself deceived. I put zem togezzer to compare—zere is no appreciable difference. I haf myself selected ze wrong necklace. And ze cor-nel—he does not know—he will neffer know!"

We inquired how he had discovered the mistake. "It was ze English milord who wished to buy ze necklace for milady. *Naturellement*, he desires to obtain ze opinion of some ozzer connoisseur. An expert is consulted, and *voilà!* Even to myself it is proved ze diamonds are false."

I confess it flashed through my mind that the other diamonds also might be false, and that this scene was resorted to because "milord" had made it unpleasant for M. Vigot. However, I tried to believe in the Frenchman, and suggested that the colonel would be certain to find out sooner or later that the gems were genuine.

"How will he make ze discovery, mademoiselle? Is it likely he will suggest a doubt to madame, who *naturellement* believes her diamonds to be stones of ze first lustre?"

"Listen," I said, wishing to give him a grain of comfort. "I am sure that madame had some feeling of suspicion that—in fact, that the necklace might have been tampered with before it was sent to her. She will in all probability take it to a jeweller and have it appraised."

"And zen," cried M. Vigot, not at all hurt by the incidental aspersion upon his honesty; "ze jeweller, he will say it is of value seventy—eighty zousand francs! And she will be satisfied. She will not mention to monsieur ze cor-nel zat she haf suspected his gift."

"Perhaps," I hazarded, "the colonel will grow tired of her gratitude, or of her incessant care of the necklace, and will tell her the jewels are paste."

"Neffer!" he moaned. "Monsieur

ze cor-nel will neffer tell her. He likes too well what you call ze gratitude."

"Telegraph to all the banks of exchange," said some one.

"I haf already done so. I can find no single M. Tom-song who is ze cor-nel."

"You can telegraph to the ship's office in Antwerp," I suggested.

"Mesdemoiselles, it is done. He haf registered 'Cor-nel Tom-song, Paris.'"

"Then cable to New York."

"That also I haf achieved. It has cost me many francs. Zey haf disappeared from ze steamer's landing, wiz my necklace—my eighty zousand francs—and I haf—only zis!"

With the most tragic of all his gestures, the wretched little man flung open an elegant case, and there, upon its black velvet cushion, lay the necklace. It looked so magnificent, so precisely like the necklace I had seen in Monsieur's little shop in the Palais Royal, that I wondered once more if, in spite of his tears, maybe—maybe M. Vigot was playing us all a trick, and paste or no paste, the trinket was the same. Once, some years before, I had had occasion to select a piece of jewelry in Paris—but that is another story.

The lady from Boston regarded the dazzling clusters of diamonds in stern silence, and then remarked, before turning to leave the room,

"Well, Mister Vigot, I suppose you will have no difficulty in selling this necklace for eighty thousand francs to the next rich American fool who comes along. A Frenchman is hard to get ahead of, and you will doubtless find some way to come out even with Fate in this matter."

"Madame," said the Frenchman, brightening considerably, "*Je vous remercie.*"

L. CLARKSON.

CARMEN NUPTIALE.

SOFTLY breathe our invocation, praise with reverent adoration,
Human joy that follows peace and prayer;—
Slowly we, the altar nearing, now the cross with triumph bearing,
Seek the heavenly benediction there.
May to these be truly given, Father ours in earth and heaven,
Blessings that our songs petition now;
Thou whose kindly love paternal animates with hope eternal,
Seal the promise of their mutual vow.

Till by Death's cold hand they perish, let them living truly cherish,
Bear each other's woes, and hopes, and fears;
Gaining, in an equal measure, life's supremest boon and treasure,
Love that grows and deepens with the years.
So, with incense widely flinging, blossoms scattered, voices ringing,
Pomp of marriage glory spread around;
Like the heavenly dove descending, on this happy pair, low bending,
Grant thy holy peace and love profound.

ELEANOR WADDLE.