

The Bead Necklace

By Alice Perrin

When it became known in the village of Hayfield that Adela Roscoe was engaged to be married, everyone inquired if the man had money; nobody thought of asking if he were nice till afterwards, because the Major had repeatedly shouted abroad the fact that he intended his daughter to marry a rich man or to be an old maid. Only a few months ago he had sworn himself voiceless and turned the colour of a beetroot for the reason that Chris Mortimer, who was merely the son of a poor clergyman in the next parish, had dared to propose to Adela.

“What! Marry my daughter to a beggarly puppy in the Merchant Service!” he roared at the culprit “What do you take me for? Let me tell you that the man who marries her must be able to keep a father-in-law in style as well as a wife. Do you hear? The girl’s an investment, and one that is going to pay me a thousand per cent too. You dear out of this, you young jackanapes, and if I catch you hanging round, or trying to speak to her, I’ll break every bone in your wretched body,” etc. etc.

And with such rigid precaution did the unpleasant old gentleman guard his treasure for the next fortnight, that young Mortimer was forced to join his ship and sail away to the South Sea Islands without the opportunity of a word or a look from Adela; and the farewell note he tried to smuggle in via the garden boy, was returned to him by post, torn to shreds, in an envelope (unstamped) which bore the Major’s crest. The note had contained a passionate assurance of his undying love, and entreaty that she would be true to him, a vow that he would come back with a fortune to claim her—a fortune so large that even her father would be satisfied.

“There is money to be made where I am going,” he wrote; “a pal of mine has let me into a secret—it’s a dead certainty. Only wait for me and love me, and never think that I shall not return.”

But, as we know, Adela did not receive her letter, and the garden boy, who had failed in his best endeavours to deliver it, would have summonsed the Major for knocking out his front teeth, only that Mortimer’s bribe had rendered him impervious to suffering.

Then one day, when the ineligible suitor had long been safely on the ocean, a tall, black-haired stranger suddenly appeared in company with the Major and his daughter, and the interested public subsequently discovered that he was a baronet, that he was staying with the Roscoes, and that he had been a friend of the Major’s before debt and discredit had driven the latter to a remote and cheap country district.

Adela detested their guest—the first they had entertained since her return from the inexpensive French boarding-school where she had been educated, and where she had spent all her holidays from the time of her mother’s death. Sir Bennet Falcon frightened and disgusted her, he would stare into her face with his heavy bloodshot eyes until her cheeks grew crimson, and then he would laugh and say it was so refreshing to see a blush. When he was not playing cards or drinking with her father, he would follow her about, talking to her in a way that she did not understand; or he would tease her as if she were a child—pull her bright hair, pinch her cheeks, and chuckle with evil satisfaction when she flew into a rage. He always smelt of whisky; his very clothes seemed to have been steeped in spirit, his face reminded her of a gargoyle; his husky voice rasped her nerves; his odious touch made her shiver. But his presence apparently had a soothing effect upon the Major, who now assumed a fatherly attitude towards his only child, sent

for a new hat and parasol for her from London, made a fuss about her health and comfort, and insisted that she should retire to bed early. This she was quite ready to do, for as the evening advanced Sir Bennet's attentions grew increasingly nauseating, and she was thankful to escape to her room, though the loud voices and coarse laughter below invariably kept her awake till long after midnight.

The girl was thoroughly miserable. She had given her love to Chris Mortimer, and her tender heart ached for a sight of the young sailor's frank face and direct grey eyes. The future without him seemed dark and hopeless, and she was also tormented with a fearful suspicion, which was justified one sunny morning, when her father called her into the dining-room and said that Sir Bennet wished to marry her.

"Oh! I couldn't," she cried, with horror in her brown eyes. "I couldn't—I couldn't!" She put out both her hands as though to ward off the revolting suggestion.

"Now, my good girl,"—the Major began to walk up and down the room blowing out his loose red cheeks, and flapping behind him the tail of his rough shooting coat—"I'm not going to have any nonsense. Sir Bennet is waiting for you at the bottom of the garden, and you'll just go straight and tell him you will be his wife, and say 'Thank you' as well. What the devil can a miserable chit like you want more? You'll be My Lady; he stinks of money; even *he* can't get through his income, and if you let him go on as he's doing now, you'll be a rich widow in n~time, and free to marry your fool of a cabin-boy, or whatever he may be."

But Adela only sank into a chair and cried despairingly. She was gentle and timid by nature, and utterly incapable of openly defying her father's orders.

"Get up and stop that noise," he continued, halting before her. "What do you suppose I asked the man down here for? Why have I let him drink me out of house and home? Why have I allowed him to dear me out at poker? Because I meant him to marry *you*, of course, and now he's hooked, you've got to keep him. Gad! To think what this marriage means —" the Major slapped his thigh, shut his eyes, and drew a long breath. "It means Life and the World once more! Do you think I'm going to stay and rot in this infernal hole, when there's an easy way out like this? No; I've made a damned good bargain, and you're not going to upset the apple-cart, my lady, I can tell you. Come along—"

He dragged her to her feet, giving her an impatient shake, and with a storm of bad language he drove her before him through the little hall and out of the front door, then he stood in the porch, his legs apart, and menace in his attitude, while with bowed head and faltering footsteps the girl went blindly towards the figure that waited in the distance.

There followed a week of misery for Adela. She felt as though she had committed some horrible crime; she had broken her promise to the man she loved; she was Sir Bennet's promised wife, and there was no chance of escape—for Chris was hundreds of miles away across the seas and could not help her. What would he think when he came back and found she was Lady Falcon? Would he ever understand and forgive? The wedding day was fixed; Sir Bennet wrote by every post for presents for his fiancée; he was even paying for her trousseau, a proceeding that gratified the father as much as it annoyed the daughter, the two men were boisterous and triumphant, and apparently quite unaffected by the white face, despairing eyes, and spiritless manner of their victim.

Then it became necessary for Sir Bennet to go to London that he might interview lawyers and tailors, arrange about settlements, and the opening of his town and country houses. He was away for three weeks, and Adela felt almost happy by contrast when relieved of his hateful company, though the thought of the future hung like a dark cloud over her mind. The days flew by, and the

end of her respite was at hand, this evening Sir Bennet would return with his evil face, his atmosphere of dissipation, and his noxious love-making. She sat at the open window of her little drawing-room, her hands lying limp in her lap, her wistful eyes gazing out at the wealth of summer flowers, the hovering butterflies, the happy birds; she was thinking of Chris as one thinks of a dear, dead friend, with a dumb regret, a finality of sorrow, an absence of hope.

The garden gate clicked and the village postman hurried up the drive. She took the letters from him through the window and nodded pleasantly as the man touched his cap and turned away. There were some bills for the Major, and a curious-looking packet for herself sewn up with red cotton in dirty wax-cloth. The address was blurred and indistinct, but the handwriting brought the colour flooding over her face and neck, and she put it to her lips with a gasp of pleasure. Then she tore it open with shaking fingers and searched desperately for the letter that she felt convinced would be inside, but only a barbaric-looking necklace of faded beads fell on to her lap, and apparently Chris had sent it to her without a word. It was a bitter disappointment, and the tears ran down her cheeks as she examined again and again the wrappings of her strange present. She held the necklace up, and wondered why Chris had wanted her to have it, the beads were common glass, and were strung on to something that looked like stiff brown thread, but they were arranged in squares with curious lines and patterns, and she had certainly never seen anything quite like it before. At any rate it had come from Chris, his dear fingers had held it, his hands had packed it up; she would treasure the wrapper on which he had written her name, and tonight she would wear the necklace, hideous though it might be, as a charm to give her strength for the ordeal of Sir Bennet's return.

She looked enchanting when she came down to the drawing-room that evening before dinner~ her cheeks were flushed with emotion; her eyes dreamy with memories of her lost lover; her white gown threw up the brilliance of her hair and added to the shapeliness of her slight figure; the quaint bead necklace lay round her delicate throat. Sir Rennet stood on the hearth-rug he had asked for a fire, though the summer night was warm to closeness, and he spread his shaking fingers over the flames; his eyes were dull, and his swollen lips twitched as he greeted the girl and kissed her unwilling face. He had evidently been drinking more heavily than usual during his absence.

"What's that ugly thing round your neck?" he asked, and as he peered at the beads a look came into his face as though some unpleasant recollection had been awakened. Adela murmured an incoherent reply. She wished now she had not worn the necklace, and she felt relieved that her father was not in the room to ask further questions. She could hear him in the dining-room drawing corks.

"Come and sit here," said Sir Rennet, flinging himself into a corner of the sofa. She tried to evade his clutch, but he pulled her down into the vacant place by his side,

"See what I've brought for my little white bird." He fumbled in his pocket and produced a long morocco case. "Open it! I'll bet you've never seen anything to equal what's inside."

She pressed the spring without any feeling of pleasurable curiosity, and beheld a diamond necklace that startled her with its brilliance—it seemed to be made of captive lightning.

"There!" croaked Sir Rennet. "What d'ye think of that? Take that dirty little bead thing off your pretty neck and put this on."

He dragged at the beads as though he would break the fastening, but it held firm.

"Oh! don't," cried Adela; "you'll break it."

"Well, and what then? Who gave it to you?" he asked with sudden fierceness.

Adela, fearful of being pressed on the subject, nervously undid the string and let him take her treasure from her, and again the look of uneasy recollection, almost fear, came into the man's eyes.

"I've seen these things before," he said shortly; "natives wear 'em in the South Sea Islands—" He put it in his pocket, then clasped the diamonds round her neck and regarded the effect with satisfied complacency. "There!" he added, "that's better."

"May I have my beads back?" she asked timidly, when she had thanked him for his gift with forced gratitude.

"No," he answered, and set his jaw. "I don't want to see a thing like that on your neck again; it's only fit for savages, and it reminds me of a deuced bad time I had once in my life which I prefer to forget There's the gong." He rose and offered her his arm.

During dinner he was inclined to be sullen and quarrelsome; he ate little, but drank freely of the Major's whisky; and when Adela left the room he got up with difficulty to open the door for her. She passed him swiftly, avoiding his gaze, and fled to her room, where she railed in helpless bitterness against the cruelty of her lot, cried over the loss of her necklace, and kissed the wrapping it had travelled in.

Later, she heard the two men leave the dining-room and come stumbling up the staircase. Her father was laughing, foolishly, and Sir Rennet was talking fast in a curious high-pitched tone.

"But didn't you see the fellow, Roscoe?" he was saying as they passed her room, and his voice reminded her of a day when she had visited a large hospital and the raving of a delirious patient had reached her ears through a half-closed door. "He looked into the dining-room twice, and then, when we came out, he was hiding behind the curtain in the hall—Lord! he's coming up the stairs now—keep him back, Roscoe, for the love of Heaven—stop him—give me time to lock my door—"

There was a rush of unsteady footsteps down the passage, a loud slam, a helpless giggling laugh from the Major as he blundered into his own room, and then all was quiet Adela shuddered and turned wearily to the open window she leaned out and inhaled the fragrance of the flowers beneath, the cool sweetness of the night air little white moths brushed past her face, and now and then a bird called from the trees at the end of the garden. A faint hint of the rising moon was stealing over the sky, and Adela sat motionless and inert while the weird light slowly increased and clove the darkness into blocks of shadow.

Suddenly the sound of a muffled cry within the house made her start and draw back her head. Again she heard it, and her heart beat quickly with apprehension. She opened the door and listened; in his room at the end of the passage Sir Rennet seemed to be running violently to and fro and calling hoarsely for help, but before she could dart across to rouse her father, a dishevelled figure with a white terrified face and wild eyes rushed past her and down the stairs. She heard the hall-door bang, and the thud of running feet over the lawn.

In a moment she was at her father's bedside. "Get up—get up!" she shouted, shaking him desperately, "Sir Rennet must have gone mad—he has rushed out of the house half dressed—Father! Father!"

But the Major snored on; she was powerless to rouse him from his heavy stupor, and she ran in bewilderment back to her open window. The moonlight was streaming over the smooth grass; and, in and out among the bushes, as though pursued by a relentless enemy, ran Sir Rennet, stooping, doubling, dodging. His heavy steps and panting breath throbbed on the night air, and once or twice he half fell, recovering himself with a low hunted cry.

It was a sickening sight, but the girl's courage rose unexpectedly, as sometimes happens with timid natures in a sudden crisis. She leant out of the window and called to him. At the sound of her voice he stopped, then hurried towards her and held up his hands. His face, in the moonlight, drawn with terror and delusion, was ghastly.

"Come down!" he called, "come down and help me drive him away—he is waiting there under the trees. If you are with me perhaps he will go, but alone I cannot escape from him, and he will hunt me to my death. After all these years he has come for his revenge—Adela! Adela!"

The fear and supplication in his voice were pitiable; she braced her nerves and prepared to go down. Perhaps her presence would soothe and influence him—even if he should kill her in his delirium it would be better than living to be his wife.

"Wait," she cried softly, "I am coming." And presently her hand was on his trembling arm, and she was firmly reassuring him that he was safe from his imaginary pursuer. She led him to a garden bench under the dining-room window, and he sat down a shaking, huddled heap.

"It was that cursed necklace you were wearing," he stammered; "it made me think of him—the natives on the island used to wear them—" He stopped and drew his hand across his wet forehead. "Of course I didn't really see him—he has been dead for years," he glanced about him fearfully, "and yet he looked into the dining-room, he followed me up the stairs—he was in my mom," his voice rose and he gripped her hands, "I am going to tell you all about it—the whole truth—perhaps that will keep him away and satisfy him?"

"Yes," said Adela soothingly, "yes—tell me."

His grasp tightened on her hands, and he began to speak in a harsh, monotonous key, staring intently all the while into the surrounding shadows.

"Years ago I had a friend—a friend who stuck to me when I was under a cloud and people were cutting me; we went away together yachting—he sacrificed a lot to go with me. We cruised about in warm climates and stopped at ports we had never heard of, and at last we got among the South Sea Islands. Then there was a storm—my God; what a storm!—it was like the end of the world—and the yacht went down. All night Horsley and I clung to the same piece of wreckage, and in the morning we were washed ashore, the only survivors. It was a long low island, and the natives were cannibals—we saw them at it one night, watched them through the cocoa-nut palms by the light of the fire they had made, and then we knew what they were keeping us for. We were guarded day and night, though they let us wander within certain limits, and gave us a hut to live in. We saw no ships, we had no chance to build a boat, or escape by swimming, and day by day we waited for our death. Then Horsley ran a poisonous thorn into his foot and had to stay in the hut, and one morning when I went down as usual to the shore in the hope of seeing a sail, there seemed to be no natives on the watch. All night they had been singing and tom-toming, and I suppose the guards had got careless and were asleep, for I saw none of them about. Just as I was thinking of going back through the palm grove to the hut to tell Horsley there might be a chance to take to the sea, a ship came round the corner of the island. She was only a small trading vessel that had got out of her course, but she meant rescue if the natives didn't spot her. I looked all round—there wasn't a soul in sight, the ship was only a few hundred yards off, the water was calm, and I could swim well. I thought if I went back for Horsley, who couldn't walk with his bad foot, the natives would have time to see the ship, and the chances were we should be intercepted and killed. The ship's captain would never send a boat ashore and risk the lives of his crew, I knew that—and I knew if I got away I should be leaving Horsley to a cruel death. I swear I fought the temptation, but all the same I took off my clothes and swam for my life. I reached the ship, I told them about Horsley, but they refused to do more than give me shelter, because the

natives of that island were known to be savagely hostile; and we steamed away into safety while Horsley was left there alone —”

He ceased abruptly, his mouth open, his breath coming in quick gasps; he pointed towards the trees:

“There! Don’t you see him? Over by the bushes—he hasn’t gone, I’ve done no good by telling the truth—he is coming out into the moonlight on the lawn— Ah! I can’t bear to see his face. Go back, Horsley!” he shouted; “I never meant to leave you, I meant to get the ship’s boat and fetch you—I swear I did”; he pushed past Adela’s restraining hand, and ran with superhuman swiftness down the path.

She heard him crash through the old wooden gate, and his rapid footsteps rang clear on the hard road; faster, faster they sped into the distance, until the echo died away on the still night air.

Extract from a local paper:

An inquest was held yesterday on the body of Sir Bennet Falcon, Baronet, who was found drowned in a pond two miles from the village of Hayfield, where he had been staying on a visit to his friends, Major and Miss Roscoe. The jury returned a verdict of suicide whilst temporarily insane; and much sympathy is felt in the neighbourhood for Miss Roscoe, to whom the deceased gentleman was engaged to be married. We regret to learn that the young lady is at present lying dangerously ill from the effects of the shock, and grave doubts are entertained as to her recovery.

But Adela was called back from the borders of death by news which gave her the promise of a happy future. The secret that had been imparted to Chris Mortimer by his obliging friend had lived up to its character of “a dead certainty”, and Chris would be arriving home in a few months’ time a comparatively rich man. The precious life-giving letter rested day and night beneath Adela’s pillow, but in it there was one paragraph which shocked and startled her, and which she never willingly re-read:

“I wonder if you ever received a rum kind of necklace I sent you? I know you didn’t get the letter I wrote at the same time, because the fellow who took it on shore confessed afterwards that he had lost the letter, though he swore he posted the little parcel. I saw an old native wearing the necklace, and it struck me as being rather curious, so I persuaded him to sell the thing, though he made an awful fuss about parting with it, and said it was a most powerful charm against ill-luck, so, being a superstitious sailor, I thought I’d send it to you!—but I’m sorry I did, because I heard later that it had a nasty history. The beads were supposed to be strung on the sinews of a white man who was killed some years ago on one of these islands before the savages were muted out and taught better manners, and though it’s probably only a yarn, you’d better throw it away to someone who has a taste for gruesome curiosities. You shall have pearls instead, my darling, and soon I shall be home to fasten them round your neck myself. . .”