PRETTY MRS. ST. CLAIR.

We made the acquaintance of that pretty, golden-haired little widow during our sojourn at a German health resort. My wife and I are not as a rule, given to picking up chance acquaintances during our travels, but Fanny had been very much fascinated by the sweet-looking little woman; and when, in course of a casual conversation—begun during a day of pitiless rain, which confined us, all three, to the hotel—I discovered that Mrs. St. Clair had been very intimate with my dear old friends, the St. Ledgers, of Blankshire, our acquaintance with the pretty widow rapidly ripened.

Fanny and I have been married many years now, and get on well enough together; but if sweet Helen St. Ledger had lived, instead of joining the angels some fifteen years ago — well, a different Lady Sefton might have reigned at the Grange. I can never forget "what might have been;" and, though Mrs. St. Clair's acquaintance with the St. Ledgers dated long after poor Helen's death, it was still interesting to me to chat with her about my old friends—of whom I had seen very little since they had practically taken up their residence in Italy. It was at Florence that Mrs. St. Clair had known them; "stayed with them for months at a time," she said; and, indeed, she must have been on very intimate terms with the family, to have noted so many of "dear old Sir George's" quaint crotchets and fancies —little peculiarities to which she playfully alluded, and at which I smiled, with the sly amusement which one feels for the foibles of one's best friends.

To make short a long story, before we left Fanny had invited Mrs. St. Clair to pay us a visit at the Grange, and the little widow joined us there a few weeks after our return home. A most accomplished and delightful guest she proved. She had "been alone nearly two years now," as she phrased it, and had laid aside all the heavy trappings of woe, only retaining those delicate mixtures of black and white, and gray, which were particularly becoming to her rose-leaf complexion and golden hair.

We had learned that her late husband—a banker—had been considerably her senior, and, to judge from appearances, had left her very comfortably off as regards worldly goods; her bereavement was confessedly no crushing sorrow, "and I like her all the better for not being a hypocrite in the matter, and pretending to be heart-broken, for the loss of an elderly man, when, from what she has told me—the poor child was an orphan and left to the grudging care of relatives— she was really forced into marrying him while but a girl just out of the school room," remarked my wife.

In addition to her undeniably good looks, Mrs. St. Clair was possessed of a number of small accomplishments, which made her a valuable addition to a country house-party. She was musical, an admirable tennis and billiard player, could make a creditable figure at the whist table, and was always charmingly dressed, in excellent spirits, and full of a pleasant ripple of society small-talk; bright and lively, with just that little suspicion of malice which gives zest to such gossip.

It was, indeed, most unfortunate that we could not invite our fascinating guest to remain with us for the great annual excitement of our neighborhood —our county ball; but every room in our house had been bespoken for this event long before we met Mrs. St. Clair. Fanny kissed the little widow affectionately when they parted; and as we ourselves were shortly coming to London for the winter, and Mrs. St. Clair had taken a flat in town, we expected to see much of each other while in the metropolis.

"And remember that I shall count upon you to assist me in arranging my tableaux," dear Mrs. St. Clair," said my wife, who was intending to organize a series of "living pictures," shortly after our arrival in London, in aid of some charity of which she was one of the patronesses.

"I will design some effective group in which you shall figure as a queen wearing your magnificent tiara of diamonds" laughed Mrs. St. Clair, as she waved her last adieu from the carriage window.

"Magnificent!" was certainly hardly an exaggerated epithet to apply to the beautiful ornament, in which were set some jewels which had descended to me from an ancestor who had been in India in the days when "shaking the pagoda-tree," was in vogue. The diamonds which now flashed amid my wife's dark braids had once been the property of an Indian Begum, and Eastern potentates have a pretty taste for jewelry.

"I should like to see you wearing those lovely diamonds, dear Lady Sefton," our guest had cried, when on a wet afternoon Fanny had held one of those private exhibitions of personal possessions to which women appear to be so fond of inviting their feminine friends. Men, by the way, never do the like. I should never dream of asking my dearest male associate to turn over my stock of studs and coats, but women will spend hours in the seclusion of one another's bedrooms scrutinizing frocks" and jewels.

"I should feel quite anxious if I kept such valuables in my room," added Mrs. St. Clair. as Fanny, after the show was over, had locked up the precious casket in one of the drawers of her wardrobe— "a very unsafe place for such treasures," as our guest warningly exclaimed. But we knew the honesty of all our servants—old family retainers most of them— and also, though the Blankshire folks always admired the lustre of the jewels which I had fetched from their usual resting place at our London banker's in order that Fanny might, as usual, wear the tiara at our local ball, probably not one of our rustic neighbors or domestics, guessed at the real value of those diamonds. Mrs. St. Clair, however, "who adored jewels," as she frankly admitted, was a better critic, and appraised the true value of the stones at a glance.

Our guest had left us and we went to the ball without her, Fanny resplendent in her diamonds. But a most annoying accident happened; just as we were leaving the ball-room, passing down one of the corridors, Fanny—who is of somewhat imposing height — caught her tiara in one of the garlands hanging above, the ornament fell from her hair to the ground, and her escort—a rather clumsy country squire —in hastily stooping to pick it up, trod upon it, crushing one of the corners, and forcing out one of the stones, happily—for we never found the missing gem—merely a tiny brilliant of comparatively trifling value. Several of these little stones had been added to the original gems when I had had the diamonds reset in their present form as a bridal gift to my wife.

The luckless perpetrator of the injury was so utterly dismayed and disconsolate at the accident that I was glad that I could, with a clear conscience, assure him that the damage could be repaired at no very alarming expense; and, having occasion to run up to town next day upon some business, I took with me the injured tiara with the intention of having it repaired by my London jeweler.

"I am anxious that you should carefully match the color and style of the larger stones in replacing this small missing brilliant," I remarked to the civil shopman, who was examining the ornament.

"Oh, there'll be no difficulty about that, Sir John," replied the man readily, "for it so happens that we have still several of those same stones left over from those we procured for her ladyship a week or so ago, when we took out the diamonds from the tiara, and set them in the buckles, you know"

"Took out the diamonds!" I exclaimed.

"Yes—these present stones are merely French imitations, you see, sir. I hope I am not betraying her ladyship's little secret too soon. She informed me that it was to be a birthday surprise for yourself; but a week ago we received a few lines from Lady Sefton requesting us to have ready some patterns of old-fashioned shoe-buckles for her to see, and stating that she would call upon us to inspect them and to give directions regarding some jewels she wished reset."

I must here mention that I am an old customer of Messrs. Carbuncles'; they know my country address, and I have often bought jewelry at their establishment for my wife, but Fanny herself had never visited the shop.

"Her ladyship looked in, according to appointment, on Monday— yes, it was last Monday week," went on the assistant, who knew me well, "and brought this tiara—which we had the honor of arranging for you some years ago, I well remember—and she stated that she wished to surprise you with a pair of handsome shoe-buckles to wear with your fancy dress at her forthcoming tableaux"—Fanny's charitable scheme had already been advertised in the papers—"and wished to know if we could take the stones out of the tiara and arrange them in these buckles, replacing the diamonds in the tiara with first-class paste imitations, 'for I scarcely ever wear the tiara, and I should like, on this special occasion, to see my husband using his own family jewels,' her ladyship remarked. Of course we could easily make this alteration. I did venture to point out to her ladyship that the paste imitations would do better for the buckles, but she only said, 'No, no, Sir John has given me so many pretty birthday gifts from your shop and now I am resolved to give him a surprise in turn,' and of course it wasn't for us to argue further with a customer," added the man, a little apprehensively, glancing at me.

If my countenance only expressed half what I felt!

I controlled myself, however, for if what I suspected was the case, it would in no wise mend matters to take the jeweler's assistant into my confidence.

"Did Lady Sefton call herself to fetch away the buckles?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, sir; she came again, by appointment, on the Saturday after, and took both the buckles and the tiara away, paying the bill at the same time, for it was all to be kept from you. And you won't let it out to her ladyship that I've told you her little secret, will you, sir—only, when you asked about the stones, you see——"

"Of course it was Lady Sefton who called?" I said with affected carelessness.

"Oh, yes, a little lady with blue eyes and golden hair," replied the shopman confidently, "and the letter we had was written on your own notepaper, sir, it's all right, isn't it?" with a sudden tone of anxiety in his voice.

"Oh, yes," I replied, as coolly as I could, "but—in the circumstances, I think I will just consult my wife before I have the tiara meddled with." And, somehow, I got out of the shop and into a hansom, and, after telling the man to drive to my club, began to deliberate what I had better do.

I understood it all now; and, oh, what an egregious fool I had been! That little minx of a Mrs. St. Clair! To think that Fanny and I, sensible folks as we had always considered ourselves, should have been so readily fooled by an adventuress! And yet she had seemed such a lady—and then her undoubted intimacy with the St. Ledgers! But there was no doubt that this lady, our late guest, had stolen my wife"s diamonds. I saw it all now. I well remembered that on both the dates mentioned by the jeweller Mrs. St. Clair had gone to London on the pretext of visits to her dentist; and had been duly petted and commiserated by Fanny upon her return. To a lady of Mrs. St. Clair's varied accomplishments, it had, doubtless, been easy enough to abstract the diamonds from my wife's wardrobe by means of a false key—no doubt the woman travelled with an assortment of such thieves' equipments—and to afterwards replace the ornament, which she was aware would not be required or sought for before the day of the ball. Indeed, but for the accidental injury to the tiara, the substitution of the mock for the real stones might have remained undetected until Fanny or I had died, and the "valuation for probate duty" revealed the fact to our disgusted heirs and executors. We should never have suspected the trick that had been played.

Messrs. Carbuncles' name and address were upon the case which held the tiara; Mrs. St. Clair had heard me mention the firm as old tradespeople of mine; and the whole story of the "surprise" of the shoebuckles was a very ingenious device for putting the jewellers off their guard. To have simply requested that false stones should be substituted for the real might have excited some suspicion. Well, I had been "surprised" with a vengeance, and the question now was how to recover my property.

By the time I had reached my club I had settled my plans. I knew Mrs. St. Clair's London address, a flat in Victoria Street, and bade my cabman drive me there. Yes, the lady was at home, and came forward with outstretched hands and a pretty cry of mingled surprise and pleasure to greet me as I entered. That surprise, became very genuine after a minute or two, but the pleasure—

Well, I will not recall one of the most painful scenes of my life. At first the lady attempted to brazen the matter out with a high hand; but when I spoke of the jeweller's description of "Lady Sefton," as "small golden-haired and blue-eyed"—Fanny stands five foot eight, and is as dark as a gipsy—well, then my hostess fairly gave in, and there was a huddled, tumbled heap of silk skirts and dishevelled golden locks —her hair really was all her own—at my feet; and such a piteous sobbing and wailing. Well, I had come to the flat furiously indignant, but a man cannot behave like an actual brute to a woman, and to such a pretty one, even if she has robbed him of some thousands of pounds' worth of jewelry.

"You shall have back your diamonds again—now, at once," wailed the culprit; "and, oh, if you know all, it was my husband. I only acted under his directions. Oh be merciful and pity me—"

"I thought you were a widow," I cried in amazement.

"He—James—made me say that I was; he said it would make it easier—"

"To get yourself into people's houses under false pretences," I said rather cruelly.

"Oh, you don't know," sobbed the lady—and how pretty she looked even now!—"you would pity me a little—kind, good man as you are—if you only knew all. I was a friendless orphan, governess in a family"—"the St. Ledgers', of course," I mentally ejaculated— "and I fell into the power of a bad man, and when, afterwards he married me, he made me—"

"Assist him in his thefts, apparently," I said trying to harden my heart. "Now, see here, Mrs. St. Clair, if I consent to keep this matter quiet, it is only upon two conditions: First, that you give me back my wife's jewels; then that you swear to leave England with your husband before another week is over."

The lady readily agreed to the first condition, assuring me that she had the jewels in the house, but hesitated a little about the last. The latter condition, however, I was extremely resolute in insisting upon. The woman had been seen at our house, and it would never do to allow her to trade upon this circumstance, and, perhaps gain admittance to other respectable abodes in consequence; I did not want to expose my friends to the same experience I had undergone.

However, under pressure, Mrs. St. Clair gave the required promise—which I assured her I should take measures to discover was kept—and I left the flat, bearing with me the buckles into which my diamonds were now set.

I may remark, that, from certain cautious inquiries which I set on foot later on, after I had ascertained that Mrs. St. Clair and her husband had sailed for New York, I convinced myself that the respectable elderly banker-husband deceased was a pure myth, that the lady had been for some years the wife of a very expert "jewel thief," about her own age; and that the pair had successfully "worked" more than one famous "jewel robbery." How far the woman had been the victim of the man I never ascertained, but I fancy —when we were honored by Mrs. St. Clair's acquaintance—that the husband and wife were pretty much upon a par as regards honesty and respectability.

I carried my rescued diamonds to Messrs. Carbuncles' and informed them that "Lady Sefton" had changed her mind regarding the arrangement of the stones; the tiara was duly returned—with the real stones in it this time —to its rightful owner, and, when my wife's famous tableaux came off, I appeared resplendent in a pair of gorgeous shoe-buckles, "but only made of paste," as I explained, when Fanny exclaimed at my "extravagance."

I kept the adventure to myself. It was a half-implied condition of the compromise that I should do so; and also, if Fanny had heard what a fool I had been, though she was as much gulled herself!—I am rather a believer in the maxim, "Silence is golden."

"Now, misfortunes never come alone," exclaimed my wife as she opened her letters the day after my journey to town; "you know, John, how I have been absolutely wearing myself out about these tableaux. Here is a letter from Alice Gordon, who was to have been the Sleeping Beauty, to say that her brother-in-law is dead, and that she and her mother are off at once to her sister, in Paris; and then, Mrs. St. Clair—just read her letter."

It only contained a few brief lines, expressing the enditer's deep regret that "some odious but important business"—"connected with her late husband's affairs of course," interjected Lady Sefton—obliged Mrs. St. Clair to start immediately for New York, leaving so suddenly that she could not even run down to take leave of her dear kind friends at the Grange. There was a P. S.:

"Please make my adieux to Sir John. As a man of business he will understand how impossible it is for me to put off my journey even to join in your sweet tableaux, as I had hoped to do. But, Sir John can quite understand the matter."

Yes, Sir John thought he could!

I often wonder if the little woman has "turned over a new leaf" in a new country; anyway, I have never seen or heard of her again.

THE SUN WAS LATE.

Failed To Set on Time, According to a Minister's Watch.

They were telling stories about watches, and the man who always waits until last had just concluded a wonderful story of how a watch of the same make as the one he carried had disclosed an error in the fall of the time ball at Greenwich, England, supposed to be the most accurate time recorder in the world—when a minister spoke up. "That is not so bad, but they tell a story equally good on Dr.——," naming a well-known divine. "What's the story?" he was asked. "Why, you see, Dr.—— owns a very accurate watch of which he is quite proud. It happened one winter evening that he was looking over an almanac, as the sun was about to set. According to the almanac the sun was due to set in a very few minutes, although it was still somewhere above the horizon. Pulling out his watch, the doctor, exclaimed 'You had better hurry up, old sun, or you won't get down on time.' Since the almanac and the watch could not be wrong, it follows that the sun was behind hand." The minister's story was voted the prize, and no more watch stories were told that evening.

FORTUNES BY SEA LOVERS.

"Tea leaves are not certain at all times as fortune tellers," remarks a well-known lady, "though I have known a verification from them in many cases, and even in more instances than from the numerous other signs which prevail with women folk. There should be no preparation or arrangement, and the leaves should be allowed to arrange themselves in the bottom or sides of the cup after the tea is drank. If they take the form of wavy or long lines, vexations and loss are liable to occur, the more numerous and distinct the lines, the greater the vexations and losses. On the other hand, straight lines tell of peace and long life. Should the leaves take the form of human figures, or approaching them in appearance, it should be regarded as a good omen to those concerned. To the unmarried, they indicate marriage, and if there are any circular forms near the figures they mean that wealth will come in connection with the marriage. Anything akin to a trefoil or clover is a specially good sign, and if it is near the top of the cup it means speedy marriage. An anchor denotes success in any business venture, while a serpent or any form like it is the sign of an enemy. A dog-like form if at the top is a pretty safe sign of having true friends, though if they are further down they should be carefully watched. A tree-like form means to a sick person restoration to health, and if clearly defined speedy and permanent health. Several trees separated widely mean that all wishes will come, and if there are dots about them, riches will come. All bird-like forms are indicative of good fortune and good friends, while a fish is pretty certain to mean news from across the water. The figure of a man means a speedy visitor and if his arm is outstretched, a present. A crown is likewise a good sign, as are flower forms, the latter denoting happiness. The sun, moon, and stars have a similar meaning. These, of course, are the mere outlines. The experiments afford amusement and are interesting, for it is wonderful what peculiar forms tea leaves will occasionally take."

TOBACCO SMOKING COMPARISONS.

Holland holds the first place in the world as a nation of smokers. Every Dutchman consumes on an average one hundred ounces a year. The Belgian comes a good second, with an annual consumption of eighty ounces, followed closely by Turkey with seventy ounces, and the United States with sixty ounces, Germany, France, Spain and Italy, tread closely on their heels, while the United Kingdom comes comparatively low on the list, with twenty-three ounces.

OLD ENGLISH GRAVES.

Strange Customs and Rites in Britain in the Olden Time - Methods of Interment.

From A.D. 934 to 1014, strange modes of burial were in vogue in the South of England. There existed a distinct form of interment for each sex. In the case of a man who died before attaining the age of fifty his body was subject to a curious examination immediately after death. Every portion of it was vigorously rubbed over with a solution of water and the juices of various plants, herbs and berries, which it was necessary should be picked within a radius of a mile of the deceased's abode. As soon as this was completed a newly-cut branch from the nearest tree was brought in and improvised as a sort of brush to sweep the body with, the idea being that by this means all earthly particles were removed from the corpse.

This sweeping completed the nearest relative made a minute examination of every inch of the body, with the object of discovering whether any blemishes or sores existed. In the event of any being found, prompt means were taken to remove them. Exactly at noon on the third day after death the funeral took place, the body wrapped in various cloths and grasses, and enclosed in a peculiarly constructed box, being carried to the grave on the back of a horse or other animal. Immediately the grave was reached the coffin was deposited therein with as much haste as possible and a retreat beaten by all who had accompanied the cortege, except the nearest relatives who were left behind to fill in the earth.

When a woman died the body was consigned to the earth just one hundred hours afterwards. A weird form of service was performed at the open grave. If she was a married woman, and died leaving a husband and children behind, these were assembled round the grave, and, each provided with a large posy of newly-gathered flowers, which they gesticulated with in a manner illustrative of the character of the deceased when alive. If she had any physical deformities or defects they were shown in the dumb acting of her relatives, who, after engaging in this sort of thing for an hour, began to exhibit the most poignant signs of grief, ending in wild lamentations and wailings.

VICTORIA'S CROWN.

The Heaviest and Most Uncomfortable Diadem in Europe.

The crown used at the coronation of Queen Victoria in 1838, which is said to be the heaviest and most unfortable diadem in Europe, contains 1,273 rose diamonds, 1,363 brilliants, 273 round pearls, 4 large pendant-shaped pearls, 1 immense ruby, 4 small rubies 1 large sapphire, 26 small sapphires and 11 emeralds. The large ruby is set in the center of a diamond Maltese cross at the front of the crown. This stone was given to Edward I. by Dom Pedro the Cruel, and was worn by Henry V. at the battle of Agincourt, when it was set in his steel casque.

It is peculiarly cut and its center is hollowed out to form a setting for a smaller ruby. Many of the stones were taken from old crowns now unused, and others were furnished by the queen herself. They are placed in settings of both gold and silver, and incase a crimson velvet cap with an ermine border. Four imperial arches spring from the four sides and support the mount, which is composed of 432 diamonds and the whole is surmounted by a diamond cross whose center is a single rose cut sapphire.

THE BOER'S DAUGHTER.

The Boer's daughter must not become a domestic servant, except on condition of having her meals with the family, says a Johannesburg correspondent of the London Telegraph. "If my child is not good enough for your table, she shall not live in your house," said a father. A poor woman withdrew her son from an office because he was learning some duty which she deemed menial, and, "thank God," said she, "my family never yet did any slavery of that kind." A gentleman whom I know secured employment on the railway for a young fellow as porter. On the very first request of a passenger to lend a hand with luggage he replied, indignantly: "What do you take me for? Do you think I am a Kaffir?" These poor folks cannot forget that they once had farms and were independent. For two centuries they compelled the services of a lower race, and now they would rather starve than work "like a Kaffir." For various reasons they have lost their lands, and it is a bitter cry that is being raised throughout South Africa that these lands are passing into the hands of strangers, and erstwhile landed gentry of the country are face to face with the dread alternative, "work or starve."

ROMAN CARTERS.

The carters who haul into the city of Rome the sand used in making mortar work 19 hours a day. They are always exposed to dangers, the greatest of which are the landslides in the country and the fines of the guards in the city. Their five hours' rest is taken in the stables with their mules as bed-fellows. All this for about 35 cents a day.