

THE ROYAL RUBY BY ROBERT CARLTON BROWN

PARIS would pawn her soul for a rare jewel. Therefore, the following item, tucked away in a popular Parisian paper, proved good press work, though how the fact leaked out has never been learned:

"Miss Blondell, of New York, stopping at the Palais d'Orsay, will wear the Royal Ruby in her box at the Châtelet to-morrow at the opening night of the new spectacle.

"The celebrated gem was recently purchased for 400,000 francs from the Bey of Tunis, by her father, the American capitalist."

Scores of curiosity seekers, held in the meshes of glittering Paris, read the notice and appeared at the performance next night to witness the first public display of the jewel. They craned their necks and stared at the empty right-hand stage-box, for information had oozed out that this was the Blondell box, and the knowledge had spread rapidly through the anxious audience.

Would she come? That was the question on all sides. Would she wear the jewel after this advertisement; or come without it, or stay at home? Surely the Royal Ruby would not be seen that night.

When this state of mind had been reached, the heavy plush curtains at the rear of the watched box suddenly parted, and her father ushered Miss Blondell into the box, removed her low-cut sable cloak, threw it over the rail in sight of all, and handed her to the chair nearest the stage. Hundreds of eyes behind opera glasses noted the smallest detail and curiosity-seeking Paris held its breath as Miss Blondell removed the pin tightly securing the scarf over her bosom and threw the silk covering from her neck, revealing the Royal Ruby, scintillating in the striking setting of a white satin bodice, for an instant.

While the multitude of eyes was pinned on the wondrous pendant, sliding on a thin gold chain about her neck, Miss Blondell leaned slightly toward her father to speak. At that second one-half of the breathless audience was startled to see the slight chain slip from her right shoulder. A broken end dangled for a moment and then the Royal Ruby drop slid quickly down the severed chain and disappeared from sight below the brass rail surmounting the upholstered enclosure to the box.

A series of surprised gasps came from the audience, a low curious whistle of astonishment from a gentleman sitting alone at the far end of the box next to the Blondells, who had leaned forward to see with the rest, and at that moment Mr. Blondell noticed the dangling end of chain clinging to a gardenia in his daughter's bosom and turned as wax-white as the flower. All of which was duly registered by hundreds of eyes behind opera-glasses.

At that moment the girl missed the gem, snatched up the chain, and stooped quickly to the floor.

"It was on when I sat down," she said to her father in a low tone, which carried to the tense ear-instruments of those near by.

"It dropped to the floor!" cried several of the awed audience in French, giving vent to their excitement in an effort at relieving the situation.

Meanwhile Blondell and his daughter had been searching the hardwood floor at her feet. The head usher hurried down the passageway to the box and the single gentleman in the remote corner of the adjoining box rose as if to help. But Blondell pushed to the small door and warned back the usher, while his daughter upturned the chairs and shook out her skirts.

It was no small article to lose. A pigeon-blood ruby of fifty-eight and three-quarters carats, the size of a robin's egg, bigger than the ball to an ordinary black hat pin, and not quite so large as a cherry, with a ring imbedded at the top, through which the chain had slipped.

With his back to the curtain, preventing assistance, Blondell, his face still white, scanned the floor, which slanted down to the upholstered enclosure jutting over the pit.

Several of the audience, in their excitement, rushed to points of vantage along the aisles and scrutinized every movement of the pair in the box. One man in the main

body of the theatre, quite near the Blondells, rose in his seat and gave a quick sign which attracted the capitalist's attention.

A look of recognition lighted up his face and he cried in a tense tone:

"Poe! Poe!" A second later, "Come here! The man who had made the motion tucked his hat under his arm and sauntered up the aisle, turned into the passageway to the box and edged through those crowding for a look, with an air of quiet authority.

"This is Mr. Poe, Christopher Poe," her father introduced in a flurried tone. "You have heard me speak of him. He is the banker."

"Oh, yes; so glad to know you. You saw the stone drop just now?" the girl asked quickly, her eyes still searching.

"Yes; but, really, there is no use looking." Poe's tone possessed a strange finality. He bent to remove the light chain of fine gold which still clung to the gardenia, and made a casual examination of it.

"Nipped off with a pair of pliers," he smiled. "A common trick, easily executed by fifty men in Paris. Your tightly pinned scarf prevented it from dropping or being stolen in the crowd. You felt nothing, I suppose, on the way from the carriage to the entrance?" This last to Miss Blondell.

"I was a bit anxious," she admitted, turning up her flushed face. "I pressed the jewel tightly through the scarf. Now that you speak of it, I did feel something cold touch the back of my neck for an instant, but I felt quickly for the chain and found it safe, only protruding slightly above my scarf in the back."

"And already severed by a pair of pliers concealed in a clever hand," added Poe. "It has happened often, this nipping. You were pressing the stone with your hand on the scarf. The thief knew he could not get the gem in the crowd; he waited for you to unpin the scarf when you were safe in the box and off your guard. The stone slid down and dropped the moment you threw the wrap back and leaned forward; but naturally, you did not notice it at the exact instant of falling; several seconds passed before the discovery, and that was all the thief needed."

"Absurd!" laughed Miss Blondell. "You don't mean that the thing is stolen. It's surely here somewhere. It couldn't have disappeared from the box at that instant." "Certainly no person saw it disappear," replied Poe. "I was watching the curtain myself, it did not move. There was no one in the passageway behind the box and surely no thief inside it."

"Then how could the stone have disappeared?" cried the girl. "You can see at a glance there are no cracks or crevices it could have slipped through or lodged in."

"That's the only assurance I have that it is stolen," answered Poe, bending his short waist and picking a small splinter of wood, not a quarter of an inch long, from the leg of a chair near the doorway.

"But it's absurd to think that anyone could have stolen the jewel in the second it dropped to the floor before I stooped to find it."

"It couldn't have bounced up three feet and over onto the stage, it couldn't have been picked up by the gentieman in the adjoining box—" Poe stopped abruptly, his brows shot up on his forehead and the satirical wrinkles again appeared, joining the corners of his nostrils and lips. He had glanced toward the other box and found it empty. For a second he fingered the splinter of wood in his pocket, the wrinkles deepening and his eyes fixed.

Turning short he said in a low tone to Blondell, "Wait for me at Palais d'Orsay," then he bowed absently to the girl, diaeked through the plush curtains and hurried out an exit.

As he sat in a cab five minutes later, on his way to a music hall in Rue de Clichy, Christopher Poe looked and acted more like a bored Frenchman in search of pleasure than anything else. Had the Jehu who drove known the truth about his fare he would have been more particular in his work, and would never have dared to juggle with the little taximeter at his side. But only two men really knew Poe. His friends knew only that he had more money than he could spend; that he was one of the six vice-presidents of the Manhattan National Bank, and director in several others. Burns and Mitchell were the two who knew him well and they marvelled at the man. To them alone was it known that Poe gave practically his entire time to running down bank crooks. His position at the Manhattan was honorary, he was what they call a "stop-gap," drawing no salary and working with the bank rather than for it. This allowed him the leisure to indulge, often with Burns and Mitchell, in tracking down bank thieves. Poe's criminal knowledge was greater than any living man's. It was said of him by Burns and Mitchell and the few officials in the Bankers' Protective Association who guessed at Poe's quiet work that he was as familiar with the haunts of "peter" men and safe-blowers as he was with the art centers of Europe.

On this occasion Poe was merely enjoying a vacation in Paris and had stumbled onto an interesting crime, an attempt at the solution of which he could not resist.

The cab dropped him before a popular Clichy music hall, and he stepped into the manager's small office in front.

"I want the names of all the legerdemain performers on your circuit. Only those not working now; any act out of the ordinary, Monsieur Fleury," he said, having shaken hands cordially with the friendly little Frenchman at the desk, and having left a hundred-franc note in the man's palm.

head and bulging eyes, helping to support the flabby bridge of a bent nose, peered out. Seeing that the visitor was a gentleman, with an expression not unlike a concert hall man, Torche invited him in, with a bow, and the greeting in his native tongue.

"I am intruding, Torche? You are quite alone?" asked Poe, quickly scanning the man's face.

"Quite alone," answered Torche, with

opened the door. Torche had drawn strangely close, edging a little to one side, toward the knife which he had thrown back beside the bread.

"What is that?" cried Poe, pointing over Torche's shoulder to the closet door and assuming a look of horror.

Torche, thrown off his guard by the simple trick, turned on his heel with a hiss and stared at the closet door, his hand instinctively seeking the knife beside him.

The door had not moved, but the ruse allowed Poe to give a strange little whistle, almost unnoticed; a whistle curiously like that which had issued from the lips of the single man sitting at the far end of the box next to the Blondells at the Châtelet.

At that instant, while Torche's gaze was still fixed on the closet door, a pink nose and two glassy eyes peeped out from beneath the left leg of the performer's flapping trousers and Poe dropped one of the bright red cherries, from the bag he had purchased, within a foot or two of the animal.

With a swift swoop the sleek rat pounced upon the cherry, clutched it between its teeth and, like a flash, darted up the trousers leg again.

Christopher Poe stood with a cynical smile deeply grooved in his hard cheeks.

With a guttural snarl, Torche sprang to action, clutched the knife in a leap and dashed on Poe, only to find a steady revolver aimed between his eyes and the cool voice of Poe demanding:

"Give me the Royal Ruby!"

"Sa majesté diabolique! Le diable!" hissed Torche, backing from the gun, the whites of his eyes rolling and his hands quivering up like the rays of heat from a stove, with steady motion. "You have the secret. You saw me in the box to-night!"

His agony-strained fingers, still clutching the knife, had quivered up above his head and with a sudden twist he jerked the whole force of his body behind the blade and crashed it down upon his adversary. Before Poe could pull the trigger a large woman leaped on him from behind with a bestial snarl and bowled him to the floor, the knife hurtling into the closet from which the woman had burst forth unnoticed.

In the struggle that followed, the French pair fought like savages, Poe's revolver was kicked from his hand, and Torche suddenly leaped after it, giving Poe the chance to twist from beneath the woman with a wrestling trick and dash through the door to the head of the stairs, where Torche had stooped to pick up the revolver.

Before Poe could grasp Torche the woman hurled herself upon him again, and in the turmoil that followed the stooping Torche lost his balance and hurtled down the rickety flight of steps; near the bottom the body crashed through the rotten rail and Poe trembled at the sound of an agonizing scream, as the man slipped through the opening between the balustrades and dropped with a kicking clatter to the main floor, four stories below. The woman stiffened up and released her hold on Poe as she listened in awful silence, the muscles in her face stretched tense with horror.

In that instant Poe recognized her as an Apache, dyed in criminality, whom he had encountered before.

She returned to the fight like a lioness, but Poe managed to skillfully bind her ankles and wrists with the cord torn from her dressing gown.

He left her struggling on the door-sill, moaning, "L'idiote! Poe!" and snatching at the cord with her teeth.

She wriggled through the doorway into the room and struggled toward one corner, hissing vile oaths at Poe meantime, who stood with his arms folded, watching her direction intently.

Finding that she was surely edging toward a rickety desk in the corner, Poe anticipated her effort, stepped to the crazy piece of furniture and picked up several articles, one after another, the woman watching him with greedy, cat-like eyes.

Suddenly his hand encountered a long-stemmed, deep-bowled clay pipe, filled with fresh tobacco. A hiss of pent-up breath greeted his movement and he turned with a keen look at the woman. Her face had become as stone, and not a single feature betrayed her.

Christopher Poe smiled, dropped the pipe into a loose outside pocket with satisfaction in his manner, dusted his clothes, raised his hat to the woman who had suddenly slumped into a sobbing bundle, and remarked: "Good-night, Mignon; the police will call upon you soon."

Poe felt his way down the long, dark stairway. The whole house had been raised by Torche's plunge and Poe found three excited members of the *gendarmérie* administering first aid. They stopped long enough to seize him as a stranger, at the advice of the regular lodgers in the house; but Poe only smiled, turned back Torche's left trousers leg, showed the astonished police the big trick rat, still warm, but dead, in a cleverly-contrived pocket, its home, where it had remained until the end.

After a few significant sentences whispered to the policeman in command, Poe was allowed to depart and enter the waiting

cab, directing the astonished driver to take him to the Palais d'Orsay.

Fifteen minutes later he walked into the Blondell suite and was greeted by father and daughter with the eager question:

"Well! Have you got the Royal Ruby?" for something in his usually impenetrable face bore a trace of success.

"I'm not quite certain," he answered, stepping to the center table and taking the long-stemmed clay pipe from his pocket. Before the astonished eyes of the watchers he tapped the bowl of the pipe against his palm and some of the tobacco dropped out. At the second tap a glittering stone rolled from the big bowl. Poe picked it up and handed it to Miss Blondell.

"The Royal Ruby!" she cried.

"Quite intact!" he answered, "in spite of being carried in a rat's mouth, and hidden in a pipe bowl. An ingenious gentleman, your thief."

They pressed him for explanations.

"Well," said Christopher Poe, with some hesitation, running a slim hand through his tufty hair, in a characteristic movement, "I didn't have time to ask for the details. But here are a few rough suggestions. Your imagination will supply easily anything that may be missing. Torche, a concert performer, with a wonderful trained rat, she an exacting mistress of criminal records. She reads that the Royal Ruby is to be worn at the Châtelet. Together the pair evolve a scheme to secure the jewel for the vanity of Mignon, the mistress."

"Yes," the Blondells breathed eagerly.

"They have forty-eight hours in which to train the rat to pounce at once on any round, glittering, red thing. Torche has trained him to retrieve by smell and sight, before a rat's sense of smell is stronger than its sight, but this one has been taught to distinguish colors in performing."

"Torche goes to the Châtelet, easily learns which is the Blondells' box and secures the one next to it. To-night, the rat being letter-perfect, he takes him in the pocket, built in one baggy trousers leg, as he carries him continually, on and off the stage. He goes early to the performance, waits for the Blondell carriage, stumbles against Mr. Blondell and, with a slight-of-hand motion, cleverly clips the chain showing above your scarf. Knowing that you will have secured the scarf so the stone will not drop until you remove it, or seeing your hand over the stone and realizing the folly of getting away with it in the crowd, he hurries ahead of you into the opera-house and is just in time to drop the well-trained rat beside the curtain to your box, which joins that to his, and push the animal in with a dexterous shove of his foot, himself concealed from the audience by the plush curtain. The rat seeks the dark corner by the stage; Torche has practised the thing well by dropping the rat in the closet to his own room and throwing a cherry first, and then a paste ruby in to him, teaching the animal to seize the glittering bit of red at the signal of a low whistle which he uses on the stage. The rat grabs the jewel and runs for its home in Torche's trousers leg, guided by sense of smell."

"But that sounds impossible!" cried Miss Blondell.

"Not when one considers that the rat has been trained for years and was particularly instructed for this performance. Of course, Torche took a big chance at failure all around. His chances of success were about one in six, but there was slight danger of detection, and the game was worth the candle. The very boldness of the plan made it successful."

"How did you find out all this?" cried Blondell, his eyes bulging with interest.

"What was the clue you picked up from the floor in the box?"

"Only a splinter from a chair leg, with a few hairs clinging to it," smiled Poe. "When the rat made his hasty exit he bumped against the chair and several of his hairs were torn off and held by the splinter. I suspected they were the hairs of a small animal and on examining them felt certain, by the color and bristly texture, that they were the hairs of a rat or mouse. So I put two and two together, secured a list of concert performers from a theatrical friend, and found one who had trained mice and a rat. I took a chance and called on him, after asking the description of the performer and finding that it tallied exactly with the man in the box next to yours, whose strange whistle I had noticed and connected with the peculiar signals usually given by animal trainers to their pets."

"It was all quite too simple. I found the man Torche and used the bait of offering an engagement, knowing that he would be glad of work, to avert possible suspicion from himself. It was quite too easy, though a little out of the banking line. Even Torche felt that I had seen through the game and tried to knife me when I referred to his rat. Poor fellow, he'll probably get a life sentence for trying to satisfy Mignon's vanity. It was the folly of a lover. The stone would have been traced in time, anyway, unless they intended to cut it up and sell it. You can be quite sure, there is always a woman behind every jewel mystery."



THE RUSE ALLOWED POE TO GIVE A STRANGE LITTLE WHISTLE

"Monsieur Poe always pays so well," smiled the manager, pocketing the note, taking down a huge index and beginning to jot down names and addresses rapidly. "You want sword-swallowers, snake-charmers, card-fakers; all the curious ones in Paris?"

"Exactly, if they can do sleight-of-hand as well," answered Poe, idly toying with the splinter from the chair and removing several particles from it to examine in detail with the aid of a little pocket magnifier. A confidence gleamed in those strange eyes and his lips moved expressively.

In ten minutes' time the manager penetrated Poe's abstraction and they ran over the list together, Poe asking particularly concerning the act of each performer.

"This man Torche?" he exclaimed, his finger suddenly stopping at the name. "He has bulging eyes, a prominent forehead and can dress like a gentleman on the stage?" "Exactly!" cried the French manager. "You know him?"

"Not yet," smiled Christopher Poe, the satirical wrinkles from his lips deepening for the moment.

"You have seen him then, surely?" "I believe so. His act is clever, you say?"

"He is a very wizard at both of his specialties I told you of," replied the manager. "He is not well liked. He is too cunning."

Poe waited for no further particulars, but thanked the manager, stepped through the door, purchased a bag of luscious red cherries from a street vendor, got into the waiting cab and gave the driver Torche's address.

During the two-mile drive to an obscure street off Rue Saint Jacques, in the Latin quarter, Christopher Poe leaned back in the cab, consuming the cherries and holding telegraphic converse with himself.

The cab stopped at the out-of-the-way address shortly, and Poe, telling the cabby to wait, jumped down and selected the handle from a cord under the painted numeral IV on the door-step.

There was a noise inside. A match struck. The door swung open and a thin, hatchet face with a prominent fore-

evident relief, glancing toward the closet door.

Poe took a proffered chair and went to the point at once:

"I am an Englishman, as you perceive from my looks rather than my accent, for I have spent my life among the concert people here. Monsieur Fleury was so good as to suggest that you do clever work. I am opening a concert hall on the Clichy and he suggests that you do legerdemain for me."

"Legerdemain, ah!" the prominent eyes of the other brightened; he threw a slip of paper into the air, snatched up a keen-bladed knife that lay on a box beside a loaf of bread and cut the dropping paper into six clean pieces, while it was still in the air, so swiftly that Poe's eyes were deceived, and it seemed to be done in a single stroke.

"Bravo!" he cried. "You have other acts as well. The trained pigeons, the white mice, Monsieur Fleury suggested."

"I have given them up. They do not pay now. Too many people train mice. It is nothing!" answered the other, the conceited grin on his face giving way to the creep of a crafty gleam.

"I'll tell you! Did you ever think of training a rat?" cried Christopher Poe, as if with sudden inspiration, not failing to note the sudden change in Torche.

The defiant look in Torche's face broke down a little and he seemed nervous as there came a second warning creak from the closet door. Poe made no move, but held his breath, feeling the air of suspicion and ready for the slightest surprising twist in the scene.

"A rat! A capital idea!" laughed the concert performer. "I will try it." His tone had become disagreeable and harsh.

"If you make good with your training come to me through Monsieur Fleury and the two hundred francs a week are yours." Poe rose quickly as though the interview were ended and started toward the door.

Torche hesitated, seemed to waver between two desires, and finally advanced close to Poe and asked in a tone that appeared anxious:

"The sleight-of-hand alone will not do?" "No, I'm afraid not," Poe had half-way