

ONE HUNDRED IN THE DARK

by Owen Johnson

They were discussing languidly, as such groups do, seeking from each topic a peg on which to hang a few epigrams that might be retold in the lip currency of the club—Steingall, the painter, florid of gesture and effete, foreign in type, with black-rimmed glasses and trailing ribbon of black silk that cut across his cropped beard and cavalry mustaches; De Gollyer, a critic, who preferred to be known as a man about town, short, feverish, incisive, who slew platitudes with one adjective and tagged a reputation with three; Rankin, the architect, always in a defensive explanatory attitude, who held his elbows on the table, his hands before his long sliding nose, and gestured with his fingers; Quinny, the illustrator, long and gaunt, with a predatory eloquence that charged irresistibly down on any subject, cut it off, surrounded it, and raked it with enfilading wit and satire; and Peters, whose methods of existence were a mystery, a young man of fifty, who had done nothing and who knew every one by his first name, the club postman, who carried the tittle-tattle, the bon mots and the news of the day, who drew up a petition a week and pursued the house committee with a daily grievance.

About the latticed porch, which ran around the sanded yard with its feeble fountain and futile evergreens, other groups were eying one another, or engaging in desultory conversation, oppressed with the heaviness of the night.

At the round table, Quinny alone, absorbing energy as he devoured the conversation, having routed Steingall on the Germans and archæology and Rankin on the origins of the Lord's Prayer, had seized a chance remark of De Gollyer's to say:

"There are only half a dozen stories in the world. Like everything that's true it isn't true." He waved his long, gouty fingers in the direction of Steingall, who, having been silenced, was regarding him with a look of sleepy indifference. "What is more to the point, is the small number of human relations that are so simple and yet so fundamental that they can be eternally played upon, redressed, and reinterpreted in every language, in every age, and yet remain inexhaustible in the possibility of variations."

"By George, that is so," said Steingall, waking up. "Every art does go back to three or four notes. In composition it is the same thing. Nothing new—nothing new since a thousand years. By George, that is true! We invent nothing, nothing!"

"Take the eternal triangle," said Quinny hurriedly, not to surrender his advantage, while Rankin and De Gollyer in a bored way continued to gaze dreamily at a vagrant star or two. "Two men and a woman, or two women and a man. Obviously it should be classified as the first of the great original parent themes. Its variations extend into the thousands. By the way, Rankin, excellent opportunity, eh, for some of our modern, painstaking, unemployed jackasses to analyze and classify."

"Quite right," said Rankin without perceiving the satirical note. "Now there's De Maupassant's *Fort comma la Mort*—quite the most interesting variation—shows the turn a genius can give. There the triangle is the man of middle age, the mother he has loved in his youth and the daughter he comes to love. It forms, you might say, the head of a whole subdivision of modern continental literature."

"Quite wrong, Rankin, quite wrong," said Quinny, who would have stated the other side quite as imperiously. "What you cite is a variation of quite another theme, the Faust theme—old age longing for youth, the man who has loved longing for the love of his youth, which is youth itself. The triangle is the theme of jealousy, the most destructive and, therefore, the most dramatic of human passions. The Faust theme is the most fundamental and inevitable of all human experiences, the tragedy of life itself. Quite a different thing."

Rankin, who never agreed with Quinny unless Quinny maliciously took advantage of his prior announcement to agree with him, continued to combat this idea.

"You believe then," said De Gollyer after a certain moment had been consumed in hair splitting, "that the origin of all dramatic themes is simply the expression of some human emotion. In other words, there can exist no more parent themes than there are human emotions."

"I thank you, sir, very well put," said Quinny with a generous wave of his hand. "Why is the Three Musketeers a basic theme? Simply the interpretation of comradeship, the emotion one man feels for another, vital because it is the one peculiarly masculine emotion. Look at Du Maurier and *Trilby*, Kipling in *Soldiers Three*—simply the Three Musketeers."

"The *Vie de Bohème*?" suggested Steingall.

"In the real *Vie de Bohème*, yes," said Quinny viciously. "Not in the concocted sentimentalities that we now have served up to us by athletic tenors and consumptive elephants!"

Rankin, who had been silently deliberating on what had been left behind, now said cunningly and with evident purpose:

"All the same, I don't agree with you men at all. I believe there are situations, original situations, that are independent of your human emotions, that exist just because they are situations, accidental and nothing else."

"As for instance?" said Quinny, preparing to attack.

"Well, I'll just cite an ordinary one that happens to come to my mind," said Rankin, who had carefully selected his test. "In a group of seven or eight, such as we are here, a theft takes place; one man is the thief—which one? I'd like to know what emotion that interprets, and yet it certainly is an original theme, at the bottom of a whole literature."

This challenge was like a bomb.

"Not the same thing."

"Detective stories, bah!"

"Oh, I say, Rankin, that's literary melodrama."

Rankin, satisfied, smiled and winked victoriously over to Tommers, who was listening from an adjacent table.

"Of course your suggestion is out of order, my dear man, to this extent," said Quinny, who never surrendered, "in that I am talking of fundamentals and you are citing details. Nevertheless, I could answer that the situation you give, as well as the whole school it belongs to, can be traced back to the commonest of human emotions, curiosity; and that the story of Bluebeard and the Moonstone are to all purposes identically the same."

At this Steingall, who had waited hopefully, gasped and made as though to leave the table.

"I shall take up your contention," said Quinny without pause for breath, "first, because you have opened up one of my pet topics, and, second, because it gives me a chance to talk." He gave a sidelong glance at Steingall and winked at De Gollyer. "What is the peculiar fascination that the detective problem exercises over the human mind? You will say curiosity. Yes and no. Admit at once that the whole art of a detective story consists in the statement of the problem. Any one can do it. I can do it. Steingall even can do it. The solution doesn't count. It is usually banal; it should be prohibited. What interests us is, can we guess it? Just as an able-minded man will sit down for hours and fiddle over the puzzle column in a Sunday balderdash. Same idea. There you have it, the problem—the detective story. Now why the fascination? I'll tell you. It appeals to our curiosity, yes—but deeper to a sort of intellectual vanity. Here are six matches, arrange them to make four squares; five men present, a theft takes place—who's the thief? Who will guess it first? Whose brain will show its superior cleverness—see? That's all—that's all there is to it."

"Out of all of which," said De Gollyer, "the interesting thing is that Rankin has supplied the reason why the supply of detective fiction is inexhaustible. It does all come down to the simplest terms. Seven possibilities, one answer. It is a formula, ludicrously simple, mechanical, and yet we will always pursue it to the end. The marvel is that writers should seek for any other formula when here is one so safe, that can never fail. By George, I could start up a factory on it."

"The reason is," said Rankin, "that the situation does constantly occur. It's a situation that any of us might get into any time. As a matter of fact, now, I personally know two such occasions when I was of the party; and devilish uncomfortable it was too."

"What happened?" said Steingall.

"Why, there is no story to it particularly. Once a mistake had been made and the other time the real thief was detected by accident a year later. In both cases only one or two of us knew what had happened."

De Gollyer had a similar incident to recall. Steingall, after reflection, related another that had happened to a friend.

"Of course, of course, my dear gentlemen," said Quinny impatiently, for he had been silent too long, "you are glorifying commonplaces. Every crime, I tell you, expresses itself in the terms of the picture puzzle that you feed to your six-year-old. It's only the variation that is interesting. Now quite the most remarkable turn of the complexities that can be developed is, of course, the well-known instance of the visitor at a club and the rare coin. Of course every one knows that? What?"

Rankin smiled in a bored, superior way, but the others protested their ignorance.

"Why, it's very well known," said Quinny lightly.

"A distinguished visitor is brought into a club—dozen men, say, present, at dinner, long table. Conversation finally veers around to curiosities and relics. One of the members present then takes from his pocket what he announces as one of the rarest coins in existence—passes it around the table. Coin travels back and forth, every one examining it, and the conversation goes to another topic, say the influence of the automobile on domestic infelicity, or some other such asininely intellectual club topic—you know? All at once the owner calls for his coin.

"The coin is nowhere to be found. Every one looks at every one else. First they suspect a joke. Then it becomes serious—the coin is immensely valuable. Who has taken it?"

"The owner is a gentleman—does the gentlemanly idiotic thing of course, laughs, says he knows some one is playing a practical joke on him and that the coin will be returned to-morrow. The others refuse to leave the situation so. One man proposes that they all submit to a search. Every one gives his assent until it comes to the stranger. He refuses, curtly, roughly, without giving any reason. Uncomfortable silence—the man is a guest. No one knows him particularly well—but still he is a guest. One member tries to make him understand that no offense is offered, that the suggestion was simply to clear the atmosphere, and all that sort of bally rot, you know.

"'I refuse to allow my person to be searched,' says the stranger, very firm, very proud, very English, you know, 'and I refuse to give my reason for my action.'"

"Another silence. The men eye him and then glance at one another. What's to be done? Nothing. There is etiquette—that magnificent inflated balloon. The visitor evidently has the coin—but he is their guest and etiquette protects him. Nice situation, eh?"

"The table is cleared. A waiter removes a dish of fruit and there under the ledge of the plate where it had been pushed—is the coin. Banal explanation, eh? Of course. Solutions always should be. At once every one in profuse apologies! Whereupon the visitor rises and says:

"Now I can give you the reason for my refusal to be searched. There are only two known specimens of the coin in existence, and the second happens to be here in my waistcoat pocket."

"Of course," said Quinny with a shrug of his shoulders, "the story is well invented, but the turn to it is very nice—very nice indeed."

"I did know the story," said Steingall, to be disagreeable; "the ending, though, is too obvious to be invented. The visitor should have had on him not another coin, but something absolutely different, something destructive, say, of a woman's reputation, and a great tragedy should have been threatened by the casual misplacing of the coin."

"I have heard the same story told in a dozen different ways," said Rankin.

"It has happened a hundred times. It must be continually happening," said Steingall.

"I know one extraordinary instance," said Peters, who up to the present, secure in his climax, had waited with a professional smile until the big guns had been silenced. "In fact, the most extraordinary instance of this sort I have ever heard."

"Peters, you little rascal," said Quinny with a sidelong glance, "I perceive you have quietly been letting us dress the stage for you."

"It is not a story that will please every one," said Peters, to whet their appetite.

"Why not?"

"Because you will want to know what no one can ever know."

"It has no conclusion then?"

"Yes and no. As far as it concerns a woman, quite the most remarkable woman I have ever met, the story is complete. As for the rest, it is what it is, because it is one example where literature can do nothing better than record."

"Do I know the woman?" asked De Gollyer, who flattered himself on passing through every class of society.

"Possibly, but no more than any one else."

"An actress?"

"What she has been in the past I don't know—a promoter would better describe her. Undoubtedly she has been behind the scenes in many an untold intrigue of the business world. A very feminine woman, and yet, as you shall see, with an unusual instantaneous masculine power of decision."

"Peters," said Quinny, waving a warning finger, "you are destroying your story. Your preface will bring an anticlimax."

"You shall judge," said Peters, who waited until his audience was in strained attention before opening his story. "The names are, of course, disguises."

Mrs. Rita Kildair inhabited a charming bachelor-girl studio, very elegant, of the duplex pattern, in one of the buildings just off Central Park West. She knew pretty nearly every one in that indescribable society in New York that is drawn from all levels, and that imposes but one condition for membership—to be amusing. She knew every one and no one knew her. No one knew beyond the vaguest rumors her history or her means. No one had ever heard of a Mr. Kildair. There was always about her a certain defensive reserve the moment the limits of acquaintanceship had been reached. She had a certain amount of money, she knew a certain number of men in Wall Street affairs and her studio was furnished with taste and even distinction. She was of any age. She might have suffered everything or nothing at all. In this mingled society her invitations were eagerly sought, her dinners were spontaneous, and the discussions, though gay and usually daring, were invariably under the control of wit and good taste.

On the Sunday night of this adventure she had, according to her invariable custom, sent away her Japanese butler and invited to an informal chafing-dish supper seven of her more congenial friends, all of whom, as much as could be said of any one, were habitués of the studio.

At seven o'clock, having finished dressing, she put in order her bedroom, which formed a sort of free passage between the studio and a small dining room to the kitchen beyond. Then, going into the studio, she lit a wax taper and was in the act of touching off the brass candlesticks that lighted the room when three knocks sounded on the door and a Mr. Flanders, a broker, compact, nervously alive, well groomed, entered with the informality of assured acquaintance.

"You are early," said Mrs. Kildair, in surprise.

"On the contrary, you are late," said the broker, glancing at his watch.

"Then be a good boy and help me with the candles," she said, giving him a smile and a quick pressure of her fingers.

He obeyed, asking nonchalantly:

"I say, dear lady, who's to be here to-night?"

"The Enos Jacksons."

"I thought they were separated."

"Not yet."

"Very interesting! Only you, dear lady, would have thought of serving us a couple on the verge."

"It's interesting, isn't it?"

"Assuredly. Where did you know Jackson?"

"Through the Warings. Jackson's a rather doubtful person, isn't he?"

"Let's call him a very sharp lawyer," said Flanders defensively. "They tell me, though, he is on the wrong side of the market—in deep."

"And you?"

"Oh, I? I'm a bachelor," he said with a shrug of his shoulders, "and if I come a cropper it makes no difference."

"Is that possible?" she said, looking at him quickly.

"Probable even. And who else is coming?"

"Maude Lille—you know her?"

"I think not."

"You met her here—a journalist."

"Quite so, a strange career."

"Mr. Harris, a clubman, is coming, and the Stanley Cheevers."

"The Stanley Cheevers!" said Flanders with some surprise. "Are we going to gamble?"

"You believe in that scandal about bridge?"

"Certainly not," said Flanders, smiling. "You see I was present. The Cheevers play a good game, a well united game, and have an unusual system of makes. By-the-way, it's Jackson who is very attentive to Mrs. Cheever, isn't it?"

"Quite right."

"What a charming party," said Flanders flippantly. "And where does Maude Lille come in?"

"Don't joke. She is in a desperate way," said Mrs. Kildair, with a little sadness in her eyes.

"And Harris?"

"Oh, he is to make the salad and cream the chicken."

"Ah, I see the whole party. I, of course, am to add the element of respectability."

"Of what?"

She looked at him steadily until he turned away, dropping his glance.

"Don't be an ass with me, my dear Flanders."

"By George, if this were Europe I'd wager you were in the secret service, Mrs. Kildair."

"Thank you."

She smiled appreciatively and moved about the studio, giving the finishing touches. The Stanley Cheevers entered, a short fat man with a vacant fat face and a slow-moving eye, and his wife, voluble, nervous, overdressed and pretty. Mr. Harris came with Maude Lille, a woman, straight, dark, Indian, with great masses of somber hair held in a little too loosely for neatness, with thick, quick lips and eyes that rolled away from the person who was talking to her. The Enos Jacksons were late and still agitated as they entered. His forehead had not quite banished the scowl, nor her eyes the scorn. He was of the type that never lost his temper, but caused others to lose theirs, immovable in his opinions, with a prowling walk, a studied antagonism in his manner, and an impudent look that fastened itself unerringly on the weakness in the person to whom he spoke. Mrs. Jackson, who seemed fastened to her husband by an invisible leash, had a hunted, resisting quality back of a certain desperate dash, which she assumed rather than felt in her attitude toward life. One looked at her curiously and wondered what such a nature would do in a crisis, with a lurking sense of a woman who carried with her her own impending tragedy.

As soon as the company had been completed and the incongruity of the selection had been perceived, a smile of malicious anticipation ran the rounds, which the hostess cut short by saying:

"Well, now that every one is here, this is the order of the night: You can quarrel all you want, you can whisper all the gossip you can think of about one another, but every one is to be amusing! Also every one is to help with the dinner—nothing formal and nothing serious. We may all be bankrupt to-morrow, divorced or dead, but to-night we will be gay—that is the invariable rule of the house!"

Immediately a nervous laughter broke out and the company chattering began to scatter through the rooms.

Mrs. Kildair, stopping in her bedroom, donned a Watteau-like cooking apron, and slipping her rings from her fingers fixed the three on her pincushion with a hatpin.

"Your rings are beautiful, dear, beautiful," said the low voice of Maude Lille, who with Harris and Mrs. Cheever were in the room.

"There's only one that is very valuable," said Mrs. Kildair, touching with her thin fingers the ring that lay uppermost, two large diamonds, flanking a magnificent sapphire.

"It is beautiful—very beautiful," said the journalist, her eyes fastened to it with an uncontrollable fascination. She put out her fingers and let them rest caressingly on the sapphire, withdrawing them quickly as though the contact had burned them.

"It must be very valuable," she said, her breath catching a little. Mrs. Cheever, moving forward, suddenly looked at the ring.

"It cost five thousand six years ago," said Mrs. Kildair, glancing down at it. "It has been my talisman ever since. For the moment, however, I am cook; Maude Lille, you are scullery maid; Harris is the chef, and we are under his orders. Mrs. Cheever, did you ever peel onions?"

"Good Heavens, no!" said Mrs. Cheever, recoiling.

"Well, there are no onions to peel," said Mrs. Kildair, laughing. "All you'll have to do is to help set the table. On to the kitchen!"

Under their hostess's gay guidance the seven guests began to circulate busily through the rooms, laying the table, grouping the chairs, opening bottles, and preparing the material for the chafing dishes. Mrs. Kildair in the kitchen ransacked the ice box, and with her own hands chopped the fines herbes, shredded the chicken and measured the cream.

"Flanders, carry this in carefully," she said, her hands in a towel. "Cheever, stop watching your wife and put the salad bowl on the table. Everything ready, Harris? All right. Every one sit down. I'll be right in."

She went into her bedroom, and divesting herself of her apron hung it in the closet. Then going to her dressing table she drew the hatpin from the pincushion and carelessly slipped the rings on her fingers. All at once she frowned and looked quickly at her hand. Only two rings were there, the third ring, the one with the sapphire and the two diamonds, was missing.

"Stupid," she said to herself, and returned to her dressing table. All at once she stopped. She remembered quite clearly putting the pin through the three rings.

She made no attempt to search further, but remained without moving, her fingers drumming slowly on the table, her head to one side, her lip drawn in a little between her teeth, listening with a frown to the babble from the outer room. Who had taken the ring? Each of her guests had had a dozen opportunities in the course of the time she had been busy in the kitchen.

"Too much time before the mirror, dear lady," called out Flanders gaily, who from where he was seated could see her.

"It is not he," she said quickly. Then she reconsidered. "Why not? He is clever—who knows? Let me think."

To gain time she walked back slowly into the kitchen, her head bowed, her thumb between her teeth.

"Who has taken it?"

She ran over the character of her guests and their situations as she knew them. Strangely enough, at each her mind stopped upon some reason that might explain a sudden temptation.

"I shall find out nothing this way," she said to herself after a moment's deliberation; "that is not the important thing to me just now. The important thing is to get the ring back."

And slowly, deliberately, she began to walk back and forth, her clenched hand beating the deliberate rhythmic measure of her journey.

Five minutes later, as Harris, installed en maître over the chafing dish, was giving directions, spoon in the air, Mrs. Kildair came into the room like a lengthening shadow. Her entrance had been made with scarcely a perceptible sound, and yet each guest was aware of it at the same moment, with a little nervous start.

"Heavens, dear lady," exclaimed Flanders, "you come in on us like a Greek tragedy! What is it you have for us, a surprise?"

As he spoke she turned her swift glance on him, drawing her forehead together until the eyebrows ran in a straight line.

"I have something to say to you," she said in a sharp, businesslike manner, watching the company with penetrating eagerness.

There was no mistaking the seriousness of her voice. Mr. Harris extinguished the oil lamp, covering the chafing dish clumsily with a discordant, disagreeable sound. Mrs. Cheever and Mrs. Enos Jackson swung about abruptly, Maude Lille rose a little from her seat, while the men imitated these movements of expectancy with a clumsy shuffling of the feet.

"Mr. Enos Jackson?"

"Yes, Mrs. Kildair."

"Kindly do as I ask you."

"Certainly."

She had spoken his name with a peremptory positiveness that was almost an accusation. He rose calmly, raising his eyebrows a little in surprise.

"Go to the door," she continued, shifting her glance from him to the others. "Are you there? Lock it. Bring me the key."

He executed the order without bungling, and returning stood before her, tendering the key.

"You've locked it?" she said, making the words an excuse to bury her glance in his.

"As you wished me to."

"Thanks."

She took from him the key and, shifting slightly, likewise locked the door into her bedroom through which she had come.

Then transferring the keys to her left hand, seemingly unaware of Jackson, who still awaited her further commands, her eyes studied a moment the possibilities of the apartment.

"Mr. Cheever?" she said in a low voice.

"Yes, Mrs. Kildair."

"Blow out all the candles except the candelabrum on the table."

"Put out the lights, Mrs. Kildair?"

"At once."

Mr. Cheever, in rising, met the glance of his wife, and the look of questioning and wonder that passed did not escape the hostess.

"But, my dear Mrs. Kildair," said Mrs. Jackson with a little nervous catch of her breath, "what is it? I'm getting terribly worked up! My nerves—"

"Miss Lille?" said the voice of command.

"Yes."

The journalist, calmer than the rest, had watched the proceedings without surprise, as though forewarned by professional instinct that something of importance was about to take place. Now she rose quietly with an almost stealthy motion.

"Put the candelabrum on this table—here," said Mrs. Kildair, indicating a large round table on which a few books were grouped. "No, wait. Mr. Jackson, first clear off the table. I want nothing on it."

"But, Mrs. Kildair—" began Mrs. Jackson's shrill voice again.

"That's it. Now put down the candelabrum."

In a moment, as Mr. Cheever proceeded methodically on his errand, the brilliant crossfire of lights dropped in the studio, only a few smoldering wicks winking on the walls, while the high room seemed to grow more distant as it came under the sole dominion of the three candles bracketed in silver at the head of the bare mahogany table.

"Now listen!" said Mrs. Kildair, and her voice had in it a cold note. "My sapphire ring has just been stolen."

She said it suddenly, hurling the news among them and waiting ferret-like for some indications in the chorus that broke out.

"Stolen!"

"Oh, my dear Mrs. Kildair!"

"Stolen—by Jove!"

"You don't mean it!"

"What! Stolen here—to-night?"

"The ring has been taken within the last twenty minutes," continued Mrs. Kildair in the same determined, chiseled tone. "I am not going to mince words. The ring has been taken and the thief is among you."

For a moment nothing was heard but an indescribable gasp and a sudden turning and searching, then suddenly Cheever's deep bass broke out:

"Stolen! But, Mrs. Kildair, is it possible?"

"Exactly. There is not the slightest doubt," said Mrs. Kildair. "Three of you were in my bedroom when I placed my rings on the pincushion. Each of you has passed through there a dozen times since. My sapphire ring is gone, and one of you has taken it."

Mrs. Jackson gave a little scream, and reached heavily for a glass of water. Mrs. Cheever said something inarticulate in the outburst of masculine exclamation. Only Maude Lille's calm voice could be heard saying:

"Quite true. I was in the room when you took them off. The sapphire ring was on top."

"Now listen!" said Mrs. Kildair, her eyes on Maude Lille's eyes. "I am not going to mince words. I am not going to stand on ceremony. I'm going to have that ring back. Listen to me carefully. I'm going to have that ring back, and until I do, not a soul shall leave this room." She tapped on the table with her nervous knuckles. "Who has taken it I do not care to know. All I want is my ring. Now I'm going to make it possible for whoever took it to restore it without possibility of detection. The doors are locked and will stay locked. I am going to put out the lights, and I am going to count one hundred slowly. You will be in absolute darkness; no one will know or see what is done. But if at the end of that time the ring is not here on this table I shall telephone the police and have every one in this room searched. Am I quite clear?"

Suddenly she cut short the nervous outbreak of suggestions and in the same firm voice continued:

"Every one take his place about the table. That's it. That will do."

The women, with the exception of the inscrutable Maude Lille, gazed hysterically from face to face while the men, compressing their fingers, locking them or grasping their chins, looked straight ahead fixedly at their hostess.

Mrs. Kildair, having calmly assured herself that all were ranged as she wished, blew out two of the three candles.

"I shall count one hundred, no more, no less," she said. "Either I get back that ring or every one in this room is to be searched, remember."

Leaning over, she blew out the remaining candle and snuffed it.

"One, two, three, four, five—"

She began to count with the inexorable regularity of a clock's ticking.

In the room every sound was distinct, the rustle of a dress, the grinding of a shoe, the deep, slightly asthmatic breathing of a man.

"Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three—"

She continued to count, while in the methodic unvarying note of her voice there was a rasping reiteration that began to affect the company. A slight gasping breath, uncontrollable, almost on the verge of hysterics, was heard, and a man nervously clearing his throat.

"Forty-five, forty-six, forty-seven—"

Still nothing had happened. Mrs. Kildair did not vary her measure the slightest, only the sound became more metallic.

"Sixty-six, sixty-seven, sixty-eight, sixty-nine and seventy—"

Some one had sighed.

"Seventy-three, seventy-four, seventy-five, seventy-six, seventy-seven—"

All at once, clear, unmistakable, on the resounding plane of the table was heard a slight metallic note.

"The ring!"

It was Maude Lille's quick voice that had spoken. Mrs. Kildair continued to count.

"Eighty-nine, ninety, ninety-one—"

The tension became unbearable. Two or three voices protested against the needless prolonging of the torture.

"Ninety-six, ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine and one hundred."

A match sputtered in Mrs. Kildair's hand and on the instant the company craned forward. In the center of the table was the sparkling sapphire and diamond ring. Candles were lit, flaring up like searchlights on the white accusing faces.

"Mr. Cheever, you may give it to me," said Mrs. Kildair. She held out her hand without trembling, a smile of triumph on her face, which had in it for a moment an expression of positive cruelty.

Immediately she changed, contemplating with amusement the horror of her guests, staring blindly from one to another, seeing the indefinable glance of interrogation that passed from Cheever to Mrs. Cheever, from Mrs. Jackson to her husband, and then without emotion she said:

"Now that that is over we can have a very gay little supper."

When Peters had pushed back his chair, satisfied as only a trained raconteur can be by the silence of a difficult audience, and had busied himself with a cigar, there was an instant outcry.

"I say, Peters, old boy, that is not all!"

"Absolutely."

"The story ends there?"

"That ends the story."

"But who took the ring?"

Peters extended his hands in an empty gesture.

"What! It was never found out?"

"Never."

"No clue?"

"None."

"I don't like the story," said De Gollyer.

"It's no story at all," said Steingall.

"Permit me," said Quinny in a didactic way; "it is a story, and it is complete. In fact, I consider it unique because it has none of the banalities of a solution and leaves the problem even more

confused than at the start."

"I don't see—" began Rankin.

"Of course you don't, my dear man," said Quinny crushingly. "You do not see that any solution would be commonplace, whereas no solution leaves an extraordinary intellectual problem."

"How so?"

"In the first place," said Quinny, preparing to annex the topic, "whether the situation actually happened or not, which is in itself a mere triviality, Peters has constructed it in a masterly way, the proof of which is that he has made me listen. Observe, each person present might have taken the ring—Flanders, a broker, just come a cropper; Maude Lille, a woman on the ragged side of life in desperate means; either Mr. and Mrs. Cheever, suspected of being card sharps—very good touch that, Peters, when the husband and wife glanced involuntarily at each other at the end—Mr. Enos Jackson, a sharp lawyer, or his wife about to be divorced; even Harris, concerning whom, very cleverly, Peters has said nothing at all to make him quite the most suspicious of all. There are, therefore, seven solutions, all possible and all logical. But beyond this is left a great intellectual problem."

"How so?"

"Was it a feminine or a masculine action to restore the ring when threatened with a search, knowing that Mrs. Kildair's clever expedient of throwing the room in the dark made detection impossible? Was it a woman who lacked the necessary courage to continue, or was it a man who repented his first impulse? Is a man or is a woman the greater natural criminal?"

"A woman took it, of course," said Rankin.

"On the contrary, it was a man," said Steingall, "for the second action was more difficult than the first."

"A man, certainly," said De Gollyer. "The restoration of the ring was a logical decision."

"You see," said Quinny triumphantly, "personally I incline to a woman for the reason that a weaker feminine nature is peculiarly susceptible to the domination of her own sex. There you are. We could meet and debate the subject year in and year out and never agree."

"I recognize most of the characters," said De Gollyer with a little confidential smile toward Peters. "Mrs. Kildair, of course, is all you say of her—an extraordinary woman. The story is quite characteristic of her. Flanders, I am not sure of, but I think I know him."

"Did it really happen?" asked Rankin, who always took the commonplace point of view.

"Exactly as I have told it," said Peters.

"The only one I don't recognize is Harris," said De Gollyer pensively.

"Your humble servant," said Peters, smiling.

The four looked up suddenly with a little start.

"What!" said Quinny, abruptly confused. "You—you were there?"

"I was there."

The four continued to look at him without speaking, each absorbed in his own thoughts, with a sudden ill ease.

A club attendant with a telephone slip on a tray stopped by Peters' side. He excused himself and went along the porch, nodding from table to table.

"Curious chap," said De Gollyer musingly.

"Extraordinary."

The word was like a murmur in the group of four, who continued watching Peters' trim disappearing figure in silence, without looking at one another—with a certain ill ease.