



The Way Out

by E.R. Punshon

WHEN Stephen Mallory walked into Jim Brown's office that morning he received an especially warm welcome, for even an old chum gains in interest when he has lately and quite unexpectedly become the sole heir of a wealthy uncle, reputed to be the leading jewel-dealer of the world, with whom he was supposed to have been on thoroughly bad terms.

So Jim shook Steve's hand with the utmost warmth and beamed congratulations.

"My dear old boy," he said, "I can't tell you how delighted I was when I heard the news—surprised, too. I always thought you and the old boy were at daggers drawn."

"So we were," said Stephen grimly, and Jim began to perceive that his old friend showed few of those outer signs of exultation and prosperity that an unexpected access of great wealth might be expected to reduce.

"Nothing wrong, is there?" he asked anxiously.

"All depends," said Stephen, "on what you call wrong."

"Isn't it true your uncle has left you everything? No later will turned up, has

there?"

"Oh, no," answered Stephen at once; "that's all right, every cent he had comes to me."

"You mean," exclaimed Jim, thinking he understood, "that the old man wasn't as rich as we thought? But surely there's something?"

"I suppose," answered Stephen slowly, "that, so far as we can tell at present, the estate, which is all in the form of a number of exceedingly valuable pearls, will have to be valued for probate at about a couple of hundred thousand pounds."

"By Jove!" said Jim, whistling softly. "As much as that? I say, old man, that's some fortune. But what's the trouble, then? Is any one disputing the will?"

"No such luck," Stephen sighed.

"Well, then," demanded Jim, beginning to grow exasperated, "what in thunder are you looking so blue about? There's a first-class market for pearls just now, with so many war-millionaires about. You ought to be skipping round like a youthful lamb for joy and happiness."

"Yes," agreed Stephen; "only, you see, my uncle hated me like poison, and what he

was after when he drew up that will was to drive me clean crazy. And I about think he'll succeed. I hardly slept a wink all last night."

"Only wish," sighed Jim enviously, "some one would try to drive me crazy by leaving me a fortune that size. I dare say I shouldn't sleep a wink either for quite a while. But I would put up with that."

"Would you?" retorted Stephen. "If you can spare half an hour, put on your hat and come along to the old man's house and I'll show you something."

They traveled by tram, for Stephen said he could not afford a taxi, and Jim did not feel inclined to stand treat for a man who had just come into such a fortune. The late Mr. Mallory's house was in a quiet, out-of-the-way street, and when they arrived they were admitted by an aged housekeeper. Jim observed with satisfaction, as they entered the hall, the many signs of ease and comfort the substantial furnishing of the place showed.

"Even the stuff here by itself must be worth something," he remarked.

"The house was the old man's own property," answered Stephen, "and the house and furniture have been valued at about five thousand pounds."

Then he sighed heavily, and Jim sighed enviously and said: "Lucky beggar."

"You think so, do you?" asked Stephen grimly. "You don't know my late uncle yet. Come along."

He led the way down the cellar steps, and paused before a strong door, secured by heavy locks.

"This," he explained, "is the strong room my uncle had built to keep his stock of precious stones in. Recently he seems to have bought nothing but pearls. The pearls at present in this room have been valued for probate, as I told you before, at two hundred

thousand pounds, and as there are only forty-seven of them in all, you can tell the average is pretty high.

"They include the Resford Ope Pearl, the Ceylon Black Pearl, the Romanov, the unique Australian Blue, and several others that I am told are quite as well known and valuable."

He took a key from his pocket as he spoke, and then, before he fitted it to the lock, exclaimed with a sudden, passionate gesture: "Yes, decidedly, my uncle meant to drive me mad, and I believe he'll do it. too."

Indeed, for the moment. Jim almost thought his friend's reason was actually deserting him, so strange was his expression, so wild his gesture.

"You mean," he cried excitedly, "there's a clause in the will forbidding you to sell?"

"No," answered Stephen; "if it were only that, one would know what to do. It's the uncertainty that's the trouble. The pearls are my absolute property—but how am I to get at them?"

He opened the strong room door as he spoke, switched on an electric light, and showed a square apartment of considerable size, in the middle of which, on solid iron supports, stood a glass globe, between two and three feet in diameter. In the center of this globe hung, by almost invisible wires, a glass shelf whereon the pearls were arranged in a treble row, so that they seemed at first sight to hover unsupported in the middle of the great glass globe.

For a moment or two Jim forgot all else in the sheer wonder of the sight, for never, perhaps, has so splendid a collection of such beautiful and lustrous pearls been brought together. There they lay, the whole forty-seven of them, each one, as it seemed, more wonderful than all the rest, till from the midst of their shining perfection one gradually came to recognize the Resford

Ope, the Ceylon Black, the Romanov, and the Australian Blue.

It was for quite a long time that Jim remained absorbed, his nose pressed close to the glass of the great globe that held the treasure. Then, at last, with a deep-drawn sigh, he turned to Stephen and said in tones of intense conviction:

“You lucky—lucky—lucky—”

Stephen laughed bitterly.

“You don’t know my uncle,” he said. “He hated me worse than I ever knew. Lord, how he must have hated me! His idea was to drive me mad, and I almost think he’ll do it, too.”

“I should think he has done it already, the way you talk,” retorted Jim. “If those things were mine, I shouldn’t have left them there all this time.”

“What would you do?” asked Stephen.

“Can’t you open the globe?” asked Jim in return. “Is the glass continuous—no opening anywhere? Well, it isn’t so very thick, anyhow. One good blow with a hammer would smash it, wouldn’t it?”

“It would,” agreed Stephen. “You see, you don’t know my uncle; he had thought of that. Suppose you did smash the glass with a hammer? Well, do you notice what’s at the bottom of the glass globe?”

“I can see some handfuls of powdery, chemical looking stuff, arranged in compartments,” answered Jim. “What about it?”

“Only that they are chemicals,” retorted Stephen, “and that they form the constituents of a powerful explosive. The inside of that globe is a vacuum. If the air is admitted—if the equilibrium of those chemicals is disturbed in the tiniest degree, the effect will be to cause an instant explosion accompanied by tremendous heat, which will be intense enough to destroy the pearls.

“Pearls are delicate things at best, you know: and what might not affect diamonds or rubies much, will ruin pearls. Oh, it’s been very carefully thought out. So long as the glass globe remains intact and the vacuum perfect, nothing will happen, and the pearls are safe. Once break the glass, disturb the vacuum, upset the equilibrium of those chemicals, and there will be an instant explosion, with flame and heat enough to make it certain that the pearls will be utterly destroyed.”

“Good Lord!” said Jim.

“Quite so,” said Stephen.

“But surely there must be some—some way out?” cried Jim.

“I wish I could find it, then,” answered Stephen. “I’ve consulted the leading chemists and scientists in the country. None of them can suggest anything. I have consulted every one else I can think of. To get the pearls without disturbing the vacuum and upsetting the equilibrium of the chemicals, and so causing an explosion and heat that must destroy the pearls; seems an utter impossibility. It is like being asked to put a lighted match into a can of petrol without setting fire to it.”

“But there must be some way out,” persisted Jim stubbornly.

“That’s what I keep thinking,” answered Stephen. “That is what my uncle intended me to do—keep on thinking—till I go crazy.”

Jim wiped his forehead.

“The old villain,” he muttered. “Well, you mustn’t let it get on your nerves like that.”

“It’s getting on your mind already,” retorted Stephen, laughing unpleasantly. “I can think of nothing else by day or night, and I expect you’ll soon be the same.”

It was four hours before they left the strong room, and all the time they had been

talking, talking, talking, putting forward one idea after the other, rejecting each in turn, only to take it up again later on, and then dismiss it once more.

At last, utterly exhausted, they crawled away to a restaurant near by, ordered a meal, for which neither had the least appetite, and, when it came, instead of eating it, discussed once more how to get possession of the pearls.

"It can't be done," Stephen said several times. "The old man has made it clean impossible. I shall go crazy thinking about it instead—that's what he meant."

"There must be some way out," repeated Jim for the ten thousandth time.

"They are after me for the estate duty," Stephen remarked; "that's another thing. Unless I pay it I forfeit all claim to my uncle's estate. If I do pay it, it will take about every cent I possess or can raise in the wide world. I went to the probate people to see if I could arrange anything; but they say they have no authority to act, and I must pay or lose my title.

"Of course, that would be the simplest thing—to refuse the legacy and let the government take the lot and do what it likes with the pearls. But how can I give up those lovely pearls—the chance of getting them somehow—some time—a fortune? Well, there you are. What would you do?"

They wandered off again into another interminable discussion, and then, late as it was, went back to have one more look at the great glass globe and its exquisite, precious, unattainable contents. Once more they remained lost in wonder before the beauty of the softly shining treble row of great pearls. Once more they tried in vain to solve the problem of securing them, and then at last, in the small hours of the morning, they sought their beds, but found there no sleep.

For even there the problem pursued

them, so that neither of them slept, and it was two pale, red-eyed, haggard-looking young men who met at lunch the next day.

"It's working on, you, too," said Stephen grimly. "Uncle will score more than he expected—he'll bag two of us for the lunatic asylum instead of only one, if you don't look out."

"I can't get it out of my mind, and that's a fact," confessed Jim, sighing wearily. Glancing out of the window he saw the common enough spectacle of a little group of well-dressed women looking interestedly into a jeweler's window.

In that moment inspiration flashed through his mind.

He seized Stephen wildly by both shoulders.

"I have it," he cried. "Don't trouble any more. Leave the pearls where they are; don't try to touch them; put them on show instead!"

"What on earth do you mean?" asked Stephen.

"Put them on show," repeated Jim, laughing wildly. "That's it—admit the public at a shilling a head—greatest show of pearls on earth—half of them will be given to any one who can suggest a way of getting them out in safety. See?"

"By Jove!" gasped Stephen. "I believe—I do believe—that's it."

And it was.

Arrangements were quickly made. Announcements were issued, a turnstile put up, and on the opening day the police had to be called on to regulate the immense crowds that assembled.

The only difficulty was that those who first got in did not wish to go out again; they wanted to remain staring in rapturous wonder at the soft beauty of those lustrous pearls.

But Jim was a good business man, and

by his advice Stephen altered the charge to a shilling admission and a shilling extra for every quarter of an hour spent with the pearls after the first twenty minutes. Many women bought a pound's worth of tickets on the spot. An excellent band in the hall added to the attraction, and the profits on the lunches and teas served to those waiting their turn for admission were enormous.

After the affair had been in progress for about a week or so, and the manner of the manager of the local bank had advanced

from deference to obsequiousness, Stephen drew Jim aside one afternoon.

"Come along to the cemetery this afternoon," he said, "will you?"

"What on earth for?" asked Jim.

"The one where uncle's buried, I mean," Stephen explained.

"Well?" said Jim, still puzzled.

"I want," said Stephen dreamily, "to sit on his grave and hear him turn in his coffin."