

A Lifetime of Crime

Hours passed in what seemed like minutes, as Granny told her grandson how she had stolen every one of the dazzling items spread out on the living-room floor.

The huge tiara had belonged to the wife of the President of the United States of America, the First Lady. Granny told Ben how, over fifty years earlier, she had sailed all the way to America on a cruise liner to steal it from the White House in Washington. And that whilst sailing back home she had robbed every rich lady on the ship of her jewels! How she was caught red-handed by



the captain of the ship and escaped by diving overboard and swimming the last few miles of the Atlantic Ocean back to England with all of the jewellery hidden in her knickers.



Granny told Ben that the sparkling emerald earrings that had been in her little bungalow for decades were worth over a million pounds each. They had once belonged to the wife of

an enormously wealthy Indian maharajah; a maharani. The old lady recounted how she enlisted the help of a herd of elephants to steal them. She had coaxed the elephants to stand on top of each other to form a giant ladder so she could scale the wall of the fort in India where the earrings were kept in the royal bedchamber.

The most amazing tale of all was of how she stole the enormous deep blue diamond and sapphire brooch that sat sparkling on her worn living-room carpet. She told Ben that it had once belonged to the last Empress of Russia, who ruled with her husband the Tsar before the communist revolution of 1917. It had for many years been under bulletproof glass at the Hermitage museum in St Petersburg, guarded twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year by a platoon of fearsome Russian soldiers.

This theft had required the most elaborate plan of all. Granny had hidden in an ancient suit of armour in the museum, which dated back hundreds of years to the time of Catherine the Great. Each time the soldiers looked the other way, she would edge forward in the metal suit a few millimetres, until she got close enough to the brooch. It took her a week.

"What, like Granny's Footsteps?" asked Ben. "Exactly, young man!" she replied. "Then I smashed the glass with the silver axe I was holding and grabbed the brooch."

"How did you escape, Granny?"

"That's a good question... now, how did I escape?" Granny looked flummoxed. "Sorry, it's my age, boy. I forget things."

Ben smiled supportively. "That's OK, Granny."

Soon the old lady's memory seemed to come

back into focus. "Oh yes, I remember," she continued. "I ran outside into the courtyard of the museum, leapt into the barrel of a huge cannon and then fired myself to safety!"

Ben pictured this for a moment: his granny, in deepest darkest Russia, flying through the air in an ancient suit of armour. It was hard to believe, but how else could this little old lady come to have such an astonishing collection of priceless gems?

Ben loved Granny's daring tales. At home, Ben had never had stories read or told to him. His parents always just switched on the television and slumped down on the sofa when they got home from work. Hearing the old lady talk was so exciting Ben wished he could move in with her. He could listen to Granny all day.

"There can't be a jewel in the world you haven't stolen!" said Ben.

"Oh yes there is, young man. Hang on, what's that?"

"What's what?" said Ben.

Granny was pointing behind Ben's head, an expression of horror on her face. "It's... It's..."

"*What?*" said Ben, not daring to turn around and see what she was pointing at. A shiver ran down his spine.

"Whatever you do," said Granny, "don't turn round..."