

# I.—THE VANISHING DIAMONDS

LILIAN RAY was to marry Sydney Harcourt in a week, and there was not a more popular couple in London. Her sweet face and winning ways had taken the heart of society by storm; and all the world knew that warm-headed Harcourt was about to go headlong to the altar when she was held in a perfect match; and for the last three weeks their wedding presents had been pouring into the drawing-room.

Lilian was excited because her lover was coming with the famous Harcourt diamonds, which had been the admiration and envy of fashionable London for half a century. The jewels had been removed from the bank, where they had lain in darkness and safety for a dozen years, to the glittering shop of Mr. Ophir, of Bond Street. The setting was of Ophir's and the vigilance of the tiny silver points that guarded the priceless morsels of bright stone had been looked upon as a brand-new case had been ordered to set the precious sparklers off to the best advantage.

There came a knock, and a foot on the stairs mounting four steps at a spring. Another moment and he was in her room. Her eyes welcomed him, though her lips pretended to pout.

"You are ten minutes before your time," she said, "and I am terribly busy. What have you there?"

"Oh, you know, you have been longing for me and the diamonds, especially the diamonds, for the last hour. I've a great mind to carry them off again."

The jewel case was wrapped in brown paper with strong cord and sealed with wax, and patches of red sealing wax. Quite suddenly she cut through the string, leaving the seals unbroken, and let paper and twine and wax go down in a heap on the carpet together.

There emerged from the inner wrapping of soft, white tissue paper the jewel case in its new coat of light brown morocco with the monogram L. H. in neat gold letters on it. She gave a little cry of pleasure as her eyes fell on the lettering which proclaimed the jewels her very own. Like a bat upon the water's rim, she paused for one tantalizing moment, drew a deep breath to make ready for the coming cry of rapture, and opened the case.

"It's empty!"

"What does it mean, Syd? Are you playing with me?" But even as she said his face told her he was quite serious.

"I cannot make it out, Lil," he said in an altered voice. "I cannot make it out at all. I brought the case direct from Mr. Ophir's. He told me he had put the diamonds in and sealed the box up with his own hands. See, you have not even broken the seals." And he mechanically picked up the litter of paper and twine from the floor. "No one touched it since except myself and you, and the diamonds are gone. Old Ophir would no more dream of playing such a trick than an archbishop. Why the old boy warned me as he gave me the precious parcel. 'We cannot be too careful, Mr. Harcourt,' he said. 'There are twenty thousand pounds in that little parcel; let no hand touch it except your own.' The first thing is to see Mr. Ophir."

"Oh, don't leave me, Syd."

"Well, to write to him, then. There must be some ridiculous mistake somewhere. Perhaps he gave me the wrong case. Perhaps some one substituted the empty case when he looked aside for a moment. It may be necessary to employ a detective. I'll tell him so at once. Can I write a note anywhere?"

"There's the writing table in the corner."

He growled a bit at the dainty feminine pen and paper and began:

Dear Mr. Ophir: A most extraordinary thing has happened. I took the case you gave me, as you gave it to me, straight to Miss Ray, Belgrave Street, and opened it without breaking the seals, by cutting the strings in her presence. The diamonds were gone. There must be some mistake somewhere. Perhaps you may be able to clear up the mystery. If you suspect dishonesty, engage a detective at once. The messenger will wait for a reply. Yours in haste,

SYDNEY HARCOURT.

He ran downstairs himself to hail a hansom to take the note. A smart hansom with an alert cab driver on the box was trawling up the street. Harcourt raised his hand, almost knocking over a sturdy mendicant who was standing in front of the door dangerously near the curbstone.

"Here, my man," he said to the cabman. "Take this to Mr. Ophir's, in Bond Street. The address is on the envelope. Wait for an answer; double fare if you make quick time."

The driver took the letter, touched his hat, and was off like a shot.

Harcourt threw the grumbling beggar a shilling and slammed the door. If he had seen just one second he would have seen the beggar go off almost as quickly as the hansom.

"Oh, Sydney," she cried, as the door closed behind him, "isn't it just thrilling! There never was such a mixed-up mystery. I do wonder which is the right Mr. Beck."

"Which! Of course they are both the same Mr. Beck."

Meanwhile Mr. Beck was being driven as fast as a hansom could carry him back to Mr. Ophir's, in Bond Street.

He found the eminent jeweler in his little glass citadel at the back of his glittering warehouse.

"Well?" he said, when Mr. Beck stepped into the little glass room, closing the door carefully behind him.

"Well," responded the detective, "I think I have a clue. I can make a fair guess who has the diamonds. Who made the new case for you?"

"Hem—ah—Mr. Smithson, one of the most competent and reliable men in the trade. He has done all our work for the last twenty years. It was a very finely finished case indeed."

"Who brought it here?"

"One of Mr. Smithson's workmen."

"I think you told me this man saw you put the diamonds into the case, and seal them up for Mr. Harcourt?"

"Yes. He was standing only a few yards off at the time. There were two of my own men also standing close by, if you would care to examine them."

"Thank you, Mr. Ophir. I don't want to see them just yet. But I will trouble you for Mr. Smithson's address, if you please. I have an idea his man would be useful, if we could lay our hands on him."

"I don't think so, Mr. Beck; I don't think so at all. He was quite a common person."

The detective looked at him curiously for a moment. The jeweler had grown quite flushed and excited. "Many thanks for your advice, Mr. Ophir," he said quietly, "but I think I will take my own way, if you please."

Twenty minutes afterward, the indefatigable Mr. Beck was at Mr. Smithson's workshop cross-examining the proprietor. But nothing came of it. The man who had carried the case to Mr. Ophir's establishment was the man who had made it. He was the best workman that Mr. Smithson ever had, though he had had him for only ten days. His name was Mulligan. He had seemed to Mr. Beck a good fellow, and he had been half an hour in the place he showed what he could do. So when the order came in for a case for the Harcourt diamonds, Mr. Smithson set him on the job. He worked all day, took the case home with him, and brought it back the next morning, finished.

"I had never seen a job done so well or so quickly," concluded Mr. Smithson. "But how did he manage at home? You surely did not let him take the diamonds home with him?"

"Bless you," cried Mr. Smithson briskly, "he never saw the diamonds, and never will."

"Then how did he make the case to fit them?"

"I have a model—the old case."

"Have you got it still?"

"Yes, I think it is somewhere about. Excuse me for a moment."

He returned with a rubbed and faded jewel-case covered with what once had been dark green morocco.

"That was our model, Mr. Beck. You see in the raised centre a place for the great star. The necklet ran round this slope."

"I see," said Mr. Beck. Then, after a pause: "You can let me have this old case, I suppose?"

"Certainly. Mr. Ophir's instructions are sufficient."

"By the way, Mr. Smithson," he said, "I thought Mr. Mulligan—I think you said that was his name—said anything about Mr. Ophir?"

"Well, now, Mr. Beck, now that you mention it, he did. When he first came he asked me if I did not do work for Mr. Ophir, and he seemed anxious about it, I thought. He was very strong in his praise of Mr. Ophir. He said he thought he could get a recommendation from him if I wanted it, but I didn't. His work was recommendation enough for me."

Mr. Beck put the case in his coat-tail pocket, and moved toward the door. He paused on the threshold.

"Good-day, Mr. Smithson," said Mr. Beck. "Mr. Mulligan did not turn up in the afternoon, I suppose?"

"Now, how did you guess that, Mr. Beck? He did not. I gave him something extra for the way the thing was done and I fear he may have been indulging. Irishmen do sometimes, you know, Mr. Beck. But he is coming back in the morning. I promised him double

## Introducing one Paul Beck, Who Confesses to Having "No More System Than the Hound that Gets on the Fox's Scent and Keeps on it." This Story is the First of a Series Dealing with the Adventures of "The Rule of Thumb Detective."

He will be here at eight o'clock to-morrow. I can give you his address if you want him meanwhile."

"Thanks. I fear it would not be of much use to me. I fancy I will find him when I want him, perhaps before you do. Good-day again, Mr. Smithson. By the way, I would not advise you to count too securely on Mr. Mulligan's return to-morrow morning."

Mr. Beck had dismissed his hansom when he entered Mr. Smithson's. He was only a few streets from the Strand, and he now walked very slowly in that direction.

"He's my man," he said to himself. "He must help whether he likes it or not. It won't be the first time he has given me a lift, though never before in such a big thing as this. By George, he is a clever one! What a success he would be if he had joined our profession, though I suppose he thinks he is better off as he is. If he helps me to unravel this business I'll take care he gets his share of the credit."

Mr. Beck laughed to himself as if he had made a good joke, and stopped abruptly as he glanced at a church clock.

"Four o'clock," he muttered. "How fast the day has gone by! Four is his hour, and I have no time to lose. I suppose I'll find him at the old spot; and he set off at a double-quick pace, five miles an hour at least, in the direction of Simpson's restaurant in the Strand.

There he was to meet M. Grabeau, at the time the cleverest and most popular drawing-room entertainer in London. He was a marvelous mimic and ventriloquist, a quick-change artist, but above all and beyond all, a conjurer. He could manoeuvre a pack of cards like a skilled gambler. In the construction and manufacture of mechanical tricks and toys



and interlarded his sentences with scraps of French.

Mr. Beck nodded, hung up his hat, and seated himself at the opposite side of the table.

"The fact is, monsieur," he went on when the waiter whisked away to execute his order, "I wanted to have a word with you."

"Ah-hah! I know," said the other, vivaciously. "It's the Harcourt diamonds that have come to you, is it not? The wonderful diamonds of which one talked all the evening at the Harcourt reception. They have disappeared, and his lordship M. Beck, the great detective, has come to me. I thought you would. It's all here," and he handed him across the table the *Westminster Gazette*, with his finger on a prominent paragraph headed in big black letters:

"THE VANISHING DIAMONDS"

Mr. Beck read it through carefully:

"Quite a sensation has been created in fashionable London by the sudden disappearance—it would, perhaps, be premature to say robbery—of the famous Harcourt Heirloom, perhaps, after the crown jewels, the most famous and valuable diamonds in London. Our representative learned from the eminent jeweler, Mr. Ophir, of Bond Street, that he had with his own hands this morning put the jewels into a case, sealed up the parcel and handed it to the Hon. Sydney Harcourt. Mr. Harcourt, on the other hand, states that when the case was opened in his presence by his fiancée, Miss Ray—for whom the jewels were meant as a wedding present—it was empty. If Mr. Ophir and the Hon. Sydney Harcourt both speak the truth—and we have no reason to doubt either—the diamonds must have vanished through the case and brown paper in the hansom cab. We need not say that, in position and respectability, Mr. Ophir stands at the very head of his business; and that the Hon. Sydney Harcourt, though he ran loose for a while on the race course contracted no serious pecuniary obligations of which the world knows. All these circumstances, of course, heighten the mystery. We understand that the famous detective, Mr. Beck, at the instance of Mr. Ophir, called subsequently at Upper Belgrave Street."

M. Grabeau watched Mr. Beck eagerly. "Well," he asked impatiently, when Mr.

He did not even put them in, my friend. Helas! My great detective, are you not a little—I will not say stupid—a little innocent to-day? You will not think harm of M. Ophir. *Tout bien*. Give me for a moment your watch and chain."

He leaned across the table, and as if by magic, Mr. Beck's watch and chain were in his hands. A heavy gold watch with a heavy gold curb chain that fitted to the waistcoat buttonhole with a gold bar.

"Now observe; this will be our case." With rapid, dexterous fingers he fashioned a copy of the *Westminster Gazette* into the semblance of a jewel-case with a closely fitting lid. He opened the box wide, put the watch and chain in, so that Mr. Beck could see it plainly inside, and closed the lid with two fingers only.

"There was no deception."

He pushed the box across the table, and Mr. Beck, who opened it found it empty.

"Behold, it is there," said M. Grabeau, tapping him on the capacious waistcoat. "I could have sworn I saw you put it into the case and leave it there."

"Eh bien! So could the men of this M. Ophir of whom you speak. I put it in your pocket, he put it in his own. Behold all the difference. His plan was, oh! so much easier."

"But, monsieur, M. Ophir has the name of a most decent and respectable man."

M. Grabeau snapped his fingers in contemptuous anger. "This man," he said, "I know him. I have had what you call shufflings—dealings with him. He is cold, but he is cunning. He called me—me, Alphonse Grabeau, one cheat. Now I, Alphonse Grabeau, call him, M. Ophir, one thief, and I will prove it. He has stolen the diamonds. I will help you, my friend, to run him up."

"I am obliged, monsieur, I rather thought from the first you could give me a lift in this case. Where can I see you to-morrow if I have anything to say to you?"

"I will be in my little establishment until two hours of the afternoon. At four I will be here at my dinner. In the evening I will be in the saloon of the Duke of Doubledeitch. At any time I will be glad to talk to you of this case—of this M. Ophir, the thief. But you must be punctual, for I am a man of the minute."

"Quite sure you are going to the Duke in the evening?"

"It is equally certain as a musket."

"Oh, very well, if I don't see you at the shop I will see you at dinner."

M. Grabeau drained the last drops of his glass of whisky and water cold, picked up his cane and hat and gloves, took a cigarette from his neat little silver case, and stuck it in his mouth unlit.

Mr. Beck rose at the same moment.

"Good evening, monsieur," he said admiringly, "I must shake hands with you if it were to be the last time. I always thought you were almighty clever, but I never rightly knew how clever you are until tonight. It is a thundering pity that—"

"What?" asked M. Grabeau sharply, for Mr. Beck paused in the very middle of his sentence.

"That, that you are not one of us; that your talents didn't get fair play and full scope in the right direction."

M. Grabeau beamed at the compliment, and went out beaming.

Mr. Beck called for a second helping of boiled mutton, and ate it slowly. His face and manner were more vacuous than ever.

Something of special importance plainly must have detained Mr. Beck, for it was a quarter past two next day when he walked with a quick swinging step up to the "leetc establishment" of M. Grabeau, in Wardour Street. He paused for one moment before the window where all sorts of ingenious and precious knick-knacks and trifles were temptingly arranged, then walked into the shop.

There was a young man of about nineteen years alone behind the counter.

"Oh! Oh!" he cried breathlessly. "How clever you were to find them, Mr. Beck! wasn't he, Syd? Do tell us his name and where you managed it!"

She so bubbled over with delight and admiration and gratitude that even the detective was captivated.

"Will you open the case again, Miss Ray? She raised the lid and we struck dumb with blank amazement.

"The case was empty."

"A trick case," said Harcourt, after a pause.

Just so, sir, that's the whole story—three words. About as neat a bit of work as ever came out of a hand. The closing of the case works the springs, you see, sir. That's the notion of it; not a bad notion either."

"And the diamonds are safe inside?" cried Lilian; "were they there all the time, and I have only to squeeze my thumbs and they will come out again. It's wonderful! wonderful! But how ever did you find it out? You must be most wonderfully clever. I suppose you have worked up some marvelous system that nobody can understand but yourself."

Mr. Beck actually blushed under the shower of compliments.

"A little common sense, Miss, that all I have no more system than the hound that gets on the fox's scent and keeps on it. I just go by the rule of thumb, and muddle and puzzle out cases as best I can."

"When did you guess the diamonds were in the case?" said Harcourt.

"I guessed it, sir, when I saw M. Ophir, and I was sure of it when I saw you. You see how it is, sir; if Mr. Ophir put the diamonds into the case and one took them out, it stood to reason they were still there, whatever might be the appearance to the contrary. Of course, when I found my double bar for the case, it made certain doubly certain."

"Your double! Then you were right, Lilian; there were two Mr. Becks."

"Might I ask, sir, which you are?"

"He's the second Mr. Beck, of course, Syd. But I want to know where is the first Mr. Beck?"

"The first Mr. Beck, Miss, otherwise Mulligan, otherwise Monsieur Grabeau, is in prison at present, awaiting his trial. He was arrested this afternoon by a pointman at Simpson's restaurant by a second Mr. Beck."

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side the shape was almost precisely the same. Then he walked to the door, closed it softly, and turned the key in the lock. Any one with an eye to the keyhole might have seen Mr. Beck drop into an easy-chair with one of the two cases in his hand, turning it slowly round and round with that look, puzzled and confident, which so many people wear when that delightful proverb "Figs in a Clover" was the rage.

A little later any one with an ear to the keyhole might have heard Mr. Beck draw a deep breath of relief, and the chuckle quietly to himself; then, if the tenor might have heard him lock something in his own pet patent safe which stood in a neat overcoat of mahogany in a corner of the room.

"Oh! how can people be so mean!" cried Lilian Ray, in a voice that quivered with indignation.

She was standing in the middle of her own drawing-room, and the tattered fragments of the "extra special" edition of the *Evening Telegrapher* fluttered round her like a pink snowstorm.

"Easy, Lil, easy!" cried Harcourt from the sofa where he sat. "Take it quietly, my pet. It's the nature of the beast. Besides, it's true enough—most of it have been, as they say, a wild yarn scam. No one knows the amount of my debts—because there aren't any. Mr. Ophir is a gentleman of unimpeachable respectability." This is a most unpleasant mystery for the Hon. Sydney Harcourt. There's no denying that, truly, any way."

"I understand at you, Syd—you, a great strong man, to sit there quietly and hear such things said! Why don't you go straight to their low den, wherever it is—and—oh, how I wish I were a man, for their sake!"

"Glad you're not, Lil, for my sake," he answered, in a tone that brought the quick blood to her cheek. "It's because you are a woman, and the dearest little woman in the world, that you flare up like this. But you must not think I'm not riled by the half-lies of those cases, though I try to grin and bear it. There are lots of people who will take the law for gospel truth. I'm so thankful that you—a young girl—can see through it."

A sharp knock came to the door.

"Mr. Beck, sir," said the footman. "Show him up. What does the fellow want now, I wonder?"

"I won't detain you a moment, Mr. Harcourt," said the imperturbable Mr. Beck, walking quietly into the room.

"You have a clue, then?"

"Well, yes, I think I may say I have a clue."

He took from his pocket the old jewel case which he had purchased for a sovereign, and set it on the table.

"You see this, Miss Ray. Is it a little like the case that came with the diamonds?"

"The case that came without the diamonds you mean, Mr. Beck," said Lilian smiling. "It is just like it in shape, but the other was quite new and shiny."

"That is a detail, miss. A clever hand could make that little change of new old in half an hour. Now will you kindly open it?"

As Lilian opened it she thrilled with the sudden unreasonable notion that the diamonds might be inside. But it was quite empty, faded and empty.

"The inside is just the same, too," she said, "only this is so faded. Anything else, Mr. Beck?"

"Would you oblige me by taking a case in your hands for one moment? I don't close it. Now will you kindly put your thumb here and your other thumb here on the opposite side?"

Mr. Beck guided the slender little thumbs to their places while Harcourt looked on in amazement.

"Now, kindly squeeze both together."

Lilian gave a quick, sharp gasp of light and surprise. For suddenly, as if by magic, there blazed on the slope of faded velvet a great circle of flashing diamonds with a star of surpassing splendor in the centre.

"Oh! Oh!" she cried breathlessly. "How clever you were to find them, Mr. Beck! wasn't he, Syd? Do tell us his name and where you managed it!"

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