

The Great Diamond Robbery

Mr. John Wylie was bitterly disappointed. He had been in the detective business for over fifteen years, and never before had he experienced such a reverse. It was an affair that had attracted the greatest public interest and attention. A success in it would have established his reputation as a detective forever. But he had failed utterly and ignominiously.

This is how the matter stood when he was called in by Sir Henry Heaviside to investigate it. On November 15 Sir Henry was away from home. On that night his wife, Lady Helena, assisted by her father, the Marquis of Doltshire, had given a little dinner, which was followed by a reception. Her ladyship had, as usual, been rather slow in dressing, and, when the dinner hour arrived, she was greatly pressed for time. In her haste, she had neglected to replace her jewels, which she intended to put on after dinner and previous to the reception, in the safe, and contented herself with locking the door of her boudoir and putting the key into a drawer in her bedroom. After dinner she found the key where she left it and reopened the door. On entering her boudoir she discovered, to her amazement, that the window was wide open. A moment's investigation showed her that all the jewels she had left upon her dressing table when she hurried down to dinner were stolen. Their value was close upon £7000.

This was, I repeat, how the matter stood when Mr. Wylie was called in, and practically it was in the same state when, after six weeks' laborious investigation, he gave up the inquiry in despair. He suspected much, but he had discovered nothing. It was clear to him that the robber, whoever he might be, was perfectly familiar with the house and with Lady Helena's careless ways. It was also clear to him that the window found open—which was twenty-five feet from the ground, and which showed no evidence of having been forced—was left open as a ruse to mislead the detectives. He felt quite sure that the robber had entered the boudoir by means of Lady Helena's key, and that, if he left the house at all, he went out by a side door, which was fastened only by a spring lock. He was inclined, however, to believe that the thief was one of the household and that the jewels were still in the house. Acting on this belief he searched the house from top to bottom, examined all the servants' boxes and cupboards, and watched diligently all their movements; but, after six weeks thus employed, he had found nothing to implicate, or even throw suspicion on anyone in particular. He confessed himself utterly baffled.

As, one day seated in his sanctum, he was mournfully turning over in his mind the question of his failure, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," he cried out.

The door opened and the office boy put in his head.

"Lady wants to see you, sir."

"Show her in."

The next moment a tall, stately, thickly veiled lady was ushered into the detective's private office. Mr. Wylie offered her a seat, which she silently accepted. As soon as the door was shut again she raised her veil and showed a handsome, refined face. Then without more ado she introduced herself.

"I am Lady Moodie," she said, "wife of the banker of that name."

The detective bowed.

"And I have come here," her ladyship continued, "in very great trouble, to see if you can assist me."

"You may rely upon it, madam," said the detective, in his politest manner, "that I shall use my utmost efforts to do so."

"I will tell you," Lady Moodie went on without noticing Mr. Wylie's remark, "the whole story as shortly as possible. Owing to my health, I had to winter last year in Florence. My husband's business and parliamentary duties would not permit him to join me. While living there by myself I met an Italian gentleman with whom I formed rather an intimate friendship. You should know," she added hastily, "that there was nothing improper in it, though much that was imprudent."

"I quite believe you," said Mr. Wylie.

Lady Moodie seemed rather irritated than gratified by this assurance.

"Thinking," she continued, after a pause, "that he was an honorable man, I frequently wrote to him, and some of my letters—one or two of them, at any rate—would, I am afraid, bear to a jealous mind a very different meaning from that intended. When I returned home, he followed me. By my influence he was received in society here—not only so, but I assisted him from time to time with money. At last his demands became too extortionate, and I refused them. Then the miserable scoundrel turned upon me, and threatened that if I did not comply with his requests he would give the letters I had written him to my husband. He has mistaken his woman," Lady Moodie concluded, passionately, "I would rather die than give a penny to the menaces of such a coward!"

"May I know the gentleman's name?"

"Count Ulrici."

Mr. Wylie, like everybody else, had heard of the Count. He was considered the best looking, best dressed and best mounted man to be seen in Rotten Row. He was reputed to be very rich, too, and it was this revelation as to the means by which he lived that astonished Mr. Wylie.

"I presume," said the detective after a pause, "you wish me to get possession of these letters in some way or other."

“Precisely,” answered Lady Moodie.

Mr. Wylie reflected for some moments in silence, then he said: “I really don’t see how I can get them without committing a burglary.”

“Couldn’t you be induced to risk that?” asked Lady Moodie, eagerly.

The detective started. Evidently her ladyship was not inclined to stick at trifles.

“Well, you see,” said Mr. Wylie, very deliberately, “burglary is rather a large order.”

“I’m willing to pay anything to balk the coward” replied Lady Moodie, fiercely.

“That’s all right,” answered Mr. Wylie, doggedly, “but money’s of little use to a man who’s doing his ten years.”

At his words Lady Moodie’s face became downcast. She was evidently disappointed. Mr. Wylie noticed this.

“At any rate,” he said to her, “let burglary be the last thing. We may be able to hit on some easier expedient. Let me see, now.” And he reflected a moment. “How many letters are there?”

“Some forty or fifty.”

Ah, so many? He couldn’t, then, carry them about with him. “Has he any servants?”

“Just one—a valet—an Italian, like himself.”

“Hum! I wonder whether he could be bribed? Most Italians can. If I had a week or two to gain his confidence—“

“Impossible. If £5000 be not given Ulrici within a week the letters will be in my husband’s hands.”

“Oh, is that the case?”

“Yes, Sir Charles and I leave for Darklingbourne—that’s our place in Doltshire—tomorrow, and the Count says that this day week he’ll follow us, and that if, on his arrival, I don’t give him that amount he will at once hand the letters to my husband.”

“By Jupiter!” exclaimed Mr. Wylie, jumping excitedly to his feet. “By Jupiter, I have him! Excuse me, my lady,” he added, more calmly, “I think I see a way out of the maze. Do as you intend. Let him follow you to Darklingbourne, and if he presents himself to you there, defy him. You may do so with impunity for by that time he’ll have no letters to produce.”

During the ensuing week Mr. Wylie kept a strict watch upon all the movements of the Count. He contrived, too, to discover a good deal regarding his past life and his future plans. He picked up an acquaintance with his valet, and from him learned that his master intended to carry out his threat of going to Darklingbourne. The valet had orders to have his portmanteau ready packed for everything necessary for a few days' stay from home.

On the evening preceding the day on which he was to see Lady Moodie at Darklingbourne, Count Ulrici drove to Euston. Mr. Wylie, who had ascertained beforehand the train by which he intended to travel, was there awaiting him. The detective was disguised. He was an adept in that business, and now his own mother would not have known him. He had provided himself with a first-class ticket to Rottenborough, the station nearest to Sir Charles Moodie's seat.

The Count came to the station unaccompanied by his servant. Mr. Wylie noticed that his luggage consisted of a large portmanteau only—no doubt the one the servant spoke of. It was marked on the side with the Count's initials, "R.U." As it was too big to be taken conveniently into the carriage, its owner directed it to be placed in the luggage van.

Having marked well the portmanteau and the van into which he was put, Mr. Wylie took his seat in the train in a compartment not far from the Count's. When the train reached Willesden he got out and went into the refreshment room. There he remained until the train had begun to move, when he rushed upon the platform just too late to get in.

"Confound it!" he exclaimed in affected vexation. "I am left behind."

"Very sorry, sir," said the porter. "Where are you for?"

"Rottenborough. When is the next train?"

"No other train tonight, sir. You'll have to wait 'till the 4 o'clock tomorrow morning."

"My gracious!" exclaimed the detective, apparently much put out by the information, "what on earth am I to do? My luggage is gone on!"

"Train stops at Harrow, sir. I'll telegraph there, and have it sent back by the next train."

"Thank you, I wish you would. If I am to stop in town over night I must have it."

"Very well, sir, What is your luggage like?"

"It's a large leather portmanteau and it was put into the through van for Rottenborough. They'll be able to distinguish it easily, as it has my initials upon it."

"And they are, sir?"

"R.U."

The porter went off to telegraph and the detective returned to the refreshment room. There he remained for some time apparently absorbed in the absorption of a glass of beer, but wondering what the result of his stratagem would be. He greatly feared lest the Count might notice his portmanteau being removed from the van, and instead of a message coming that the luggage would be sent at once, one would arrive directing his arrest. So great was his anxiety on this point that it seemed to him hours before the porter turned up. Then, to his relief, he learned that the portmanteau had been taken from the van at Harrow and would be sent back by the next train.

When the next train arrived at Willesden the porter pointed out to him the returned portmanteau. Sure enough, it was Count Ulrici's. Letting it remain where it was, Mr. Wylie jumped into a compartment and proceeded with it to Euston.

At Euston Mr. Wylie claimed the portmanteau and boldly putting it on top of a hansom cab drove to Kings-cross station on the underground railway and there he took a ticket to Charing-cross. Carefully choosing an empty compartment he contrived, during the course of his journey, to effect a change in his disguise, such that while no more like himself than ever he was, still a very different looking man from the one who had claimed the portmanteau at Willesden. It was quite dark when he arrived at Charing-cross, and there were few people about. Taking the heavy portmanteau in his hand he carried it himself from the station to his office in Duke street.

The moment he got safely into his private office he produced a bunch of skeleton keys and proceeded to pick the lock. Succeeding in this he eagerly searched through the articles in the bag for the letters he wanted. To his chagrin he could discover no trace of them. Over and over again he searched the contents, but each time with the same result. At length he paused in his work, almost fainting with anxiety and disappointment.

"Another failure," he said to himself, "and a worse one than before."

As he spoke he continued aimlessly turning over the contents of the portmanteau.

"What a fop the fellow is!" he exclaimed. "Why half of his luggage is brushes. And now that I notice it, what strange brushes they are! What heavy backs they have."

The backs of the brushes certainly looked very thick, and when Mr. Wylie examined them more closely, he found that they were even thicker than they looked, for the hair in the center was much shorter than at the sides, and the backs, therefore, must be deeper there. Indeed, they looked so suspicious that the detective at once began to try if they did not open in some way or other. He soon discovered that they did. The top scale of polished wood ran in a kind of groove, and was easily moveable. He pulled it back and there, in the middle, was a hollow space crushed full of letters. Trembling with excitement, he lifted them out and looked at them. To his delight they were the very ones he was in search of.

There were two cases, each containing two brushes. In the first brush he opened there were sixteen letters from Lady Moodie; in the second there were fifteen. These were all in English.

The brushes in the other case had also movable backs and contained letters, but a glance at the handwriting showed him that they were not Lady Moodie's.

He glanced rapidly over the letters. Their contents were of the most innocent character, mere commonplace congratulations, condolences and inquiries such as a friend would write to a friend.

"I don't see," said the detective to himself, "why she should be afraid of her husband getting these. But she said there were over forty of them, and there are only about thirty here. Let me see. By jove, I have it! She told me there were only a few of them that were of a doubtful character. It is just those few that are missing. He has them in his pocket and I've failed again!"

He sat silent and still for a moment, dazed by this discovery, but he quickly regained his habitual coolness and decision.

"Well," he said, "I may as well see what the other letters are about."

He began rapidly to read them. They were in various handwritings, but most of them in one which he somehow or other thought he had seen before. Those letters were signed simply with an "H.," and were couched in the most affectionate terms.

"I wonder who this 'H,' can be? She's evidently very much gone on the Count and no mistake, there's a 'love' or a 'darling' for every other word. Here's an invitation for the 15th; how sweet it is. But here is one in which she has gone farther than the 'H.' It's signed 'Helena.' Now I wonder who 'Helena' is? Hello, what's here? A letter from a man, and signed 'Svendeleri'—the old Jewish money lender and receiver of stolen goods. That, at all events looks suspicious.

He read the letter over carefully. When he had finished it he lay back in his chair and drew a long breath.

"Good heavens," he said, when he had recovered his composure, "that is a discovery! Was there ever anything so fortunate! I'm off by the morning train, and our friend will be safely in quod before he has a chance of seeing Sir Charles.

"But stay," he said to himself, "it isn't quite so simple as I thought. I must account for how I came by this paper, which will be difficult. Besides, I'm not sure it will be evidence against him unless found in his possession. Let me see!"

He paused and reflected. Then, after a few moments, with a cry of triumph, he set to work replacing the contents of the bag. When everything was in except the letter from Svendeleri and Lady Moodie's correspondence, he selected about ten of the most innocent of her letters, and, replacing the remainder in the backs of the brushes, locked up the portmanteau. Then he placed Svendeleri's letter in one of Lady Moodie's, put them in his pocket, restored his disguise to which it was when he claimed the count's luggage, and taking the portmanteau in his hand, left the office. When he reached the Strand, he called a hansom and drove to Euston. At Euston he asked of the station master. That official was duly forthcoming.

“This, I find,” said the detective to him, “is not my portmanteau after all. I thought it was at first, as it has my initials on the side and is about the same size, but I find that my key won’t go into the lock, so it can’t be mine.”

“No, sir, it isn’t yours,” replied the station master. “it is Count Ulrici’s. He’s been kicking up a deuce of a row about it. We’ve had half a dozen telegrams from Rottenborough already. I’m glad it’s recovered. What about your own, sir?”

“That’s the question. You had better telegraph down the line about it. It must have been put out at one of the stations the 5 o’clock train called at, I suppose. I’ll call and hear what news you have tomorrow. Good night.” And the detective walked off.

Before 4 o’clock the next morning Mr. John Wylie was at Euston, not disguised this time, but in his usual costume. He took a ticket by the first train for Rottenborough, where he arrived about 8. After swallowing a hasty breakfast at the hotel in that interesting town, he obtained a cab and drove to Darklingbourne. There he inquired of Sir Charles Moodie. Sir Charles at once saw him.

He explained to Sir Charles that he was a detective. He had long, he said, been shadowing a foreigner who was suspected of a great crime, and who, he learned lately, was about to try and levy blackmail upon Sir Charles by pretending to have letters from Lady Moodie which reflected on her reputation. He was anxious to have a talk with this gentleman in an unsuspected character in order to obtain some unguarded statements from him. He begged Sir Charles to allow him to represent himself as Sir Charles when the scoundrel came to the house. The Baronet seemed very averse so to such a course, but Lady Moodie who was called in for consultation, so strongly supported it, that at least he was induced to consent.

About mid-day Count Ulrici arrived. He sent up his card to Lady Moodie, but she refused to see him. Then he asked for Sir Charles. He was shown into the library where the detective was. The Count had never seen Sir Charles, who involved in business cares, seldom went into the gay company his wife so delighted in.

The count at once proceeded to business in the coolest and most impudent manner. He had no diffidence or hesitation about stating what sort of relations he wished Sir Charles to believe had existed between him and Lady Moodie. He said he had letters in her undeniable handwriting to prove the truth of his statements.

“Show me them,” said the detective.

The count handed over the letters. After fumbling them for a moment Mr. Wylie proceeded to read them one by one. When he had finished he paused and said rather coolly, “I see nothing incriminating in these as against Lady Moodie. They are all of the most innocent description. But what’s this?” And he held up Svendeleri’s letter.

The Count turned deadly pale.

“Can I have made a mistake?” he muttered.

“I am afraid you have,” said Mr. Wylie, and he touched a bell.

As he did so the Count sprang madly upon him. There was for a brief moment a fierce struggle, but before the Italian could overcome Mr. Wylie’s resistance, Sir Charles and a servant rushed into the room and seized him.

“Two late, my hearty,” said the detective to the Count. “Sir Charles, these are the letters he received from Lady Moodie; more innocent notes woman never penned. And see what I have discovered among them—a letter from the Jewish scoundrel Svendeleri, offering £2000 for the Heaviside diamonds which was stolen about two months ago. There stands the thief.”

“What,” exclaimed the Count, “you’re not Sir Charles Moodie?”

“No; I’m John Wylie, private detective, at your service.”

“What a fool I was,” exclaimed the Count, “not to see how it came about that my luggage went wrong.”—*The London Truth*.

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