

A STRANGE CASE

Where a Pair of Lost Ear-Rings Were Found

During my twenty years' experience as a detective I have had a great many very complicated, mysterious and exciting cases; but when you ask me about a strange case, I can give you one that is not very old.

It was a cold day, and the ground was covered with snow, when a servant entered my office and handed me a letter written by a lady for whom I had done business. I will call her Mrs. Harris, for she is a prominent woman in New York society, and I don't care to give her true name. She is very wealthy, and lives on Fifth Avenue.

The letter informed me that her diamonds had been stolen, and asked me to accompany her servant to her house at once. I looked at the servant and fell to thinking, without being in any apparent hurry. It don't do for a detective to be in too much of a hurry. Something may be overlooked if he is. Of course, as yet I knew nothing of the particulars, but before me stood a man who might have had an opportunity to steal the missing jewels.

"Can't you come?" asked the man. "Were you told I was to go with you?" I said, quickly, and looked him straight in the face. "No, I only thought so," he answered. I knew that he was lying. I looked at the envelope that he had brought to me, and could see that it had apparently been opened with the point of a pencil and then sealed again. I thought that he was entirely too inquisitive.

I then bundled up and, going to the street, entered a carriage in waiting, and was soon in Mrs. Harris' drawing room.

When she entered I asked her to give me the full particulars, which she did by saying: "I knew it was very careless, but I left the diamond ear-rings on the table in the hall last night, wrapped in my handkerchief, and this morning the handkerchief was found on the floor, but the diamonds were gone."

"Are you sure that you left them there?" I asked.

"Yes, certain," she said.

"How did you happen to do so?" I inquired.

"It was just this way," she answered. "As I got from the carriage last night after the theater I caught one of the ear-rings in the lace of my sleeve, and couldn't unfasten it until I came into the light of the hall, and, to loosen it, I had to take it from my ear. When it was out I thought I would take out the other one, which I did. Then I wrapped them both in my handkerchief and laid it on the table beside my fan. When I retired I forgot about the diamonds, and now they are gone."

“Who saw you place them there?” I asked.

“No one.”

“Who was the first in the hall this morning?”

“Either William, the man I sent for you, or Mary, who sweeps on this floor. But, dear me! I never would suspect either of them,” she answered.

“Yet they may be able to give information that will aid me. Send up William,” I said.

I don’t believe that I had so much confidence in William as Mrs. Harris had.

When William came I allowed him to stand for a moment before I spoke, and he appeared to be very illly at ease. Then I asked: “Was Mary the first one in the front hall this morning?”

“I think she was,” he said, “for I saw her there sweeping when I came down. But, I tell you, she never stole anything.”

I was a little surprised at his answer, for I had about concluded that he would want me to think that Mary had taken the jewels.

“Have you searched for the diamonds?” I asked.

“Indeed, we all did, and poor Mary has been crying her eyes out because she might be suspected.”

“Send her here,” I said.

Mary came, and it was quite apparent that she had been crying; but I have had considerable experience with women’s tears. She said that when she went to sweep the hall she found the handkerchief on the floor, but saw nothing of the diamonds: and that she was still sweeping when William passed her on his way to clear the snow from the front walk.

I concluded that Mary knew nothing about the diamonds, but was not quite so sure of William.

“Did William go to the table?” I inquired.

“No,” she said. “He walked apast it on his way to the door.”

“Did he pick up the handkerchief for you?”

“No, he did not. I had picked it up before he came. He didn’t pick up anything. And if he had picked up the diamonds he would have said so.”

The girl was evidently shrewd enough to see the purpose of my questions. And her very shrewdness aroused my suspicions.

“Now Mary,” I said, “do you say that William passed through the hall without stopping?”

“No. I don’t,” she answered, and I noticed a little color come to her cheeks.

“What did he stop for?” I asked.

“Perhaps because he wanted to,” she answered, snappishly.

“Mary,” said Mrs. Harris, “you must answer the question. If William stopped in the hall this morning you must tell the gentleman what for.”

“Then, if you must know, he stopped to kiss me.” With this she ran out of the room.

I now understood the relationship between the two servants, and why each thought the other incapable of stealing. I also saw a motive for William wanting the money that the ear-rings might bring him, and felt that it would be difficult to either recover the diamonds or discover evidence enough to convict the thief.

The first thing was to put an assistant on the track of William and to pump the pawn shops. He might have visited one on his way to my office. I told Mrs. Harris that I would return by car, and that she might soon expect to see me again.

William showed me to the door. After he had closed it behind me I stood a moment on the step and glanced at the front of the house. As I did so I caught sight of a woman’s head at a window in the house next door. When she saw me looking toward her she sprung back and closed the blind. I must have frightened her.

I rang the bell at Mrs. Harris’ door, and surprised William by my sudden return. I asked for Mrs. Harris, and inquired of her how the door had been locked the night before.

“It was only on the night-latch,” she said. “Mr. Harris is out of the city, and I thought he might return, and I left the door so he could get in.”

At my request, Mrs. Harris gave me the night-latch key, and again I left the house. I looked at the windows of the next house, and saw no one. Then, stepping to the front door, I inserted Harris-house key, and was able to open the door with it. I knew that the key of that lock would open Mrs. Harris’ door. The key was put in my pocket, and I rang the door-bell. There was no immediate answer, and I rang again. Then I heard a slight noise inside, as though something had fallen to the floor. The door was opened by the same woman who had been at the window. I walked in. On the floor was a silver-plated card receiver and a number of cards. The girl had evidently thrown it from the table near by.

I inquired for the lady of the house and said I would take a seat in the hall until she came. The woman took my card and ascended the stairs. The mistress of the house appeared to be in no hurry. As my card showed me to be only a detective, I suppose she thought I could wait. I wanted her to know who I was.

The minutes began to pile, and I amused myself by reading the names on the cards scattered about on the floor and on a steel-wire mat that was just inside the front door. I did not read the names of any of the “four hundred” on them.

One card on the mat that seemed to bear a remarkably long name attracted my attention, and I picked it up. As I raised it I dropped to my knees, for near it, in the meshes of the mat, was one of Mrs. Harris’ diamond ear-rings. It was no sooner in my vest pocket than the lady of the house descended the stairs.

I told her of Mrs. Harris’ loss—the fact of which she had heard before through the servants—and said that I had called to learn if any of her employees could give me any information about the Harris’ servants. She proved to be quite talkative, and answered all of my questions, and, at my suggestion, she sent for the woman who had admitted me to the house. Her name was Margaret Newell.

Margaret was also ready with information, and, in the course of her remarks, she informed me that “the Harris help was a thieving set.” I made up my mind that I would learn something more of Margaret.

After expressing my thanks for the information I left the house, and, walking to Broadway, entered a south-bound car, which soon took me to my office. When I had removed my boots, which were wet from the snow, and placed them under the wash-stand, in the place of a dry pair, I sent for Walter Savage. Walter is the smartest young man that I ever had in my employ.

I soon acquainted him with all the facts that I knew, and also with my suspicions, and started him off to look up the pedigree of Margaret Newell, and to do any work that his fertile mind might suggest.

A week passed, and Walter said nothing to me about the case. I was a little surprised, for I knew he would come to me and report any new developments, and ask my advice before taking any action. In the meantime Mrs. Harris was kept in ignorance of the fact that I had one of her diamonds.

It was about eight days after my visit to the Harris house—and just such another day—when I jumped from a car in front of my office, landed in a pool of slush, and entered my room with wet feet, as Walter was about leaving. He turned back.

“There is nothing in it,” he said.

“In what?” I asked.

“In your theory about the Harris diamond case,” he said.

“Do you think I am wrong?” I inquired.

“Dead wrong. I have worked on your theory until there is nothing left of it. You are way off.”

“Do you know any more about it than I told you?” I asked.

“No,” he said, “there is no accounting for the diamond you found in the hall or for any thing else in the case. I am entirely beat.”

“Haven’t you struck any clew at all?” I asked him.

“Not the shadow of one. It beats any case that I ever touched. I can’t even find a smell of suspicion.”

“It won’t do to give it up,” I said. “Here, help me off with these wet boots and get me that pair under the washstand, and we will start new on this matter.”

He helped me off with the boots, and, as he got the other pair from under the washstand, he rolled upon the floor, laughing at the top of his voice.

“What’s the matter?” I asked in alarm.

“I see it! I see it! I see it!” He cried out.

“See what?”

“The Harris case. The diamonds. Oh, I will burst! I know the thief!” he cried.

“Who?” I asked.

“You!” he answered, and laughed again. “See,” he said, “here is the other diamond,” and he held it in his hand.

Sure enough. There it was, though the gold was battered about the stone.

“Where was it?” I asked. Before answering he rose from the floor, and with an effort calmed himself enough to say: “It was under your boot. You brought it here with the snow on your sole when you came from the Harris house. I see it well enough now. The handkerchief and the diamonds had fallen from the table, and Mary picked up the handkerchief, but swept the diamonds out of the door, and William shoveled them over the curb. You picked them up on your foot, and left one on the wire mat when you went to see Margaret, and brought the other one here.”

That was evidently the correct explanation. And I think the case was indeed a very strange one.
—H.C. Fulton, in *Chicago Daily News*

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The story was accompanied by three in-text illustrations.