



Lady Sybil's Shoe-Buckles

By C. J. HAMILTON

Author of "A Flash of Youth," "The Disappearance of Lucy Donovan," etc.



"YES, they certainly are lovely," cried Lady Sybil, as she held up a pair of dainty green satin shoes, adorned with antique diamond buckles. "Aren't they?"

"They are rather fetching," said her elder sister, Lady Clare, holding up one of the shoes to the light, and examining the buckle through her pince-nez, "and if the diamonds are genuine—as I suppose they are—they must be most valuable."

"Of course the diamonds are genuine," cried Lady Sybil, pettishly, "do you imagine that Ernest Vandeleur would give me anything that was not?"

"Are you quite sure they came from him?"

"Perfectly sure—certain. He asked me the last time I saw him to give him a small piece of the satin from the frock I am going to wear at the Hadfield ball, as he wanted to see the exact shade of green."

"And you gave it to him?"

"Why not?" said Lady Sybil, coloring. "Why shouldn't I give it to him? I have known him so long, played with him as a small child in the vicarage garden, when he was making believe to be Robin Hood and I Maid Marian."

"Yes, I remember," said Lady Clare, thoughtfully. "That was when he was the fourth son of a poor vicar, and now—now he is an Australian magnate, though we never know when the magnates may suddenly collapse."

"Not much fear of his collapsing," said Lady Sybil, pouting, "he has thousands of acres, they say; but it doesn't so very much matter to me; he is an old friend, and, of course, he may give me a pair of diamond shoe-buckles if he chooses. I am charmed with these, they just match my Empire dress."

As Lady Sybil spoke, she stretched out one tiny foot, encased in an openwork black silk stocking. The beauty of Lady Sybil's feet was famed far and near. Rather narrow, with high, arched insteps; they had been modelled by a sculptor as the perfection of shape and form.

And when Lady Sybil had danced a saraband in short skirts with sandals laced up far above her beautifully-turned ankles, she had been the centre of admiration. Verses in praise of her beautiful feet had been inscribed to her by a rising minor poet of the day, and she had been called "The Atalanta of the moment."

"Men do talk such nonsense about Sybil's feet," said Lady Clare, who was three years older than her sister. "They certainly are very well shaped, but her face is not a bit prettier than mine, and her nose is inclined to turn up at the end, 'tip-tilted like a flower,' they may say, but other people are not quite so complimentary."

Lady Sybil was still examining her green satin shoes, and counting the diamonds on the buckles. "Twenty-seven in all," she said. "They must have cost a pretty penny; those diamonds with the yellow shade in them are always expensive. But Ernest Vandeleur was never one to count the cost of anything he gave away; he is absolutely lavish about presents."

"Well, here he comes," said Lady Clare, looking out of the window, "so you can lecture him as much as you like. I'm off to a bridge party at Lady Rylton's."

"As she went out, Ernest Vandeleur came in. He was a tall, sunburnt young man of twenty-nine, with bright blue eyes and a clean-shaven face."

Lady Sybil rushed up to him, holding the green satin shoes, with their glittering diamond buckles, high in the air.

"I must scold you," she said, with a blush, "you are too extravagant; but," in a lower tone, "I love you for it all the same."

He caught her in his arms, green satin shoes, buckles and all.

"As if anything in the world could be good enough for Lady Sybil. Your green satin dress ought to be strewn with diamonds; they ought to glitter in every hair of your beautiful head."

"Don't be ridiculous, Ernest. As a matter of fact, I have very few diamonds. You see, there were six of us girls, and father isn't at all a rich man—almost a pauper in comparison with others."

"But four of you are married, and you know quite well, Sybil, you have nothing to do but to name the glad day and Lady Sybil Scarsdale will become—"

"Lady Sybil Vandeleur," she exclaimed, clapping her hands. "Doesn't it sound awfully well? I love the name of Vandeleur. It is ever so much prettier than Scarsdale. But I want to have a little bit more fun before I am tied up for life. There is this fancy ball at Hadfield, when I shall come out in my green satin gown and my green satin shoes, with these lovely antique shoe-buckles," she said, looking down at them again. "I am to be the Empress Josephine, or Pauline Bonaparte, I forget which."

"Pauline Bonaparte, it must be; you are too

young for an Empress. 'My love she's but a lassie yet,' added Ernest, humming the old Scotch line.

"She's a lassie that knows her way about pretty well," said Lady Sybil demurely. Then, turning round, she said shyly: "Ernest, I haven't thanked you half enough for the shoe-buckles and the lovely shoes—for the thought you took as well as for the value of the things. It is only love that thinks, love that watches, love that waits!"

"You darling!" he cried, seizing her hands, but she escaped from him.

"I must go and get ready," she said shyly. "You must take me for a nice long drive in your new motor. I have to wrap up well, and that takes a little time."

He let her go, and waited behind, walking up and down the room, and looking out of the window.

"Will it last?" he thought. "Can any man have such a treasure as this, without something happening to snatch the cup of bliss from his lips?"

II.

The fancy ball at Hatfield was in full swing. Lady Sybil, in her short Empire frock, with her green satin shoes and diamond shoe-buckles, was the belle of the evening. Crowds were round her as she danced, and her feet came in for an unusual amount of attention. Ernest Vandeleur was not among the dancers; he had never learned dancing when he was a boy, and now he did not care to acquire the art, so he stood with his back against the wall, lazily watching the revolving figures as they flew along.

It was on Lady Sybil that his eyes were principally fixed, and as she met his glance, a smile, swift and full of meaning, passed between them. Two men came in at the door—business men they seemed, and they also were much attracted by Lady Sybil, and especially so by those twinkling feet of hers; these feet, which,

"... beneath her petticoat,

Like mice, stole in and out,

As if they feared the light."

"I said them buckles were the same, Bill," said one of the men. "Could be no mistake about it. Those were the very diamond buckles that were stole out of Mr. Mettheimer's case a week ago last Toosday."

"Quite sure?"

"Quite; the diamonds are the very same; worth a good bit, I can tell ye."

And how did they get on her ladyship's feet, eh?"

"Why, that 'ud be tellin,' but I can give a guess, Sam, my boy."

Bill, who was the shorter of the two men, and had eyes like a ferret's, looked in the direction of Ernest Vandeleur, who was now moving away to meet Lady Sybil.

"I knows him and his pal," he whispered. "The pal was among the lot that broke open the case at Portman Square. He hooked it pretty smart, and now we've got a clue. If them there shoe-buckles aren't the very ones we're searching for, you may call me a Dutchman."

"And whatever do ye mean to do?" asked the other man.

"Nab our man if we can git hold of 'im. There he is now, the tallest of the lot standin' agin the window. I've got the warrant all right."

So, as Ernest Vandeleur was strolling up to Lady Sybil, he was confronted by the two men. The one called Bill stopped him and said:

"Mr. Ernest Vandeleur, I b'lieve."

"Yes," was the languid response. "What do you want of me? Some begging application, I suppose. Be quick about it!"

"Tisn't that exactly, my lord—I mean, sir—but it's along of them there diamond shoe-buckles her ladyship over there's wearing. How did you come by them?"

Vandeleur reddened angrily. "How did I come by them? Why, I bought them, of course. How else should I come by them?"

"Well! you see there's a bit of trouble about it, 'cos they're stolen property, that's how it is."

"Stolen! Who stole them?"

"Ah, that 'ud be telling. Anyway, they were stole out of a glass case in Portman Square, No. 98. Know anything about that?"

"How should I know? Do you take me for a thief?"

"You'll have to come along to the police court to-morrow morning, that's all. There's bound to be some looking into this. Them shoe-buckles are stolen property, along with a lot of snuff boxes and loot of other valyble articles belonging to Marcus Mettheimer, Esquire, M.P."

"Go and hang yourself! I refuse to be questioned about the matter at all."

"I thought as much. You've got a pal, Mr. Crosbie—Loftus Crosbie."

"Well, and what if I have?"

"We expect he knows a bit about this here busi-

ness. We've got information from headquarters. You gave Lady Sybil them there shoe-buckles she's got on. There's no denying of that. Everyone knows it. Lady Sybil's spoke of it herself."

"Hush, don't mention her; don't speak of her, she is not to know about this."

"She's bound to know; it will be all in the papers to-morrow evening."

"Then she'll think I'm a thief."

Just so, unless you can prove the contrary."

Vandeleur, with a reluctant glance at Lady Sybil, left the ball-room. Her bright, brown eyes searched for him anxiously, but he did not return. A vague sense of apprehension—of alarm—of danger—crept over her. She danced no more that night.

* * *

"Why, what's this, Sybil?" cried Lady Clare, when the two sisters were alone in their room. "I am told Ernest Vandeleur is accused of stealing those shoe-buckles you have on!"

"Nonsense! Ridiculous! It's some enemy of his has spread the report. Fancy an Australian millionaire stealing a trumpery pair of shoe-buckles!"

"But they are not trumpery, they are most remarkable—most valuable. I told you they were."

"Yes, I know. He would not give me anything that was not valuable."

"You may say what you like, but I was told on the best authority that he is charged with theft. Those diamond buckles were part of Mr. Marcus Mettheimer's property that was stolen out of his house at Portman Square last week. They have been identified; there can be no mistake. You have been actually wearing stolen goods! You, an earl's daughter, it does sound funny. You are actually engaged to be married to a man suspected of theft!"

"It may sound funny, as you say, but I am convinced Ernest will find some way of clearing himself. I should think even you would hardly accuse him of breaking into Mr. Mettheimer's house and abstracting his property."

"One never knows," replied Lady Clare oracularly, as she left the room.

Lady Sybil sat for some time with her feet stretched out and her eyes fixed on the glittering diamond buckles.

"It couldn't be," she thought, "no, no, it couldn't be."

And yet there was something mysterious in the way Ernest had disappeared from the ball-room with the two common-looking men, who had been staring at the buckles on Lady Sybil's green satin shoes with such intense interest. Could the buckles have been stolen? And could Ernest Vandeleur have had anything to do with the theft? If so, he must be given up.

III.

The magisterial enquiry lasted long. Ernest Vandeleur underwent a searching examination. Where did he get the diamond buckles? He admitted having given them to Lady Sybil, but he absolutely refused to tell where they had come from, or how he had obtained them.

"I got them," was all he would say. "I got them for her. I paid for them."

The rooms he occupied in Albany Street had been reached, and underneath a fur rug two of the antique snuff boxes, valued at several hundreds of pounds, had been found. He professed to know nothing about them, to have been perfectly ignorant how they came there.

He was told that he would be committed for trial.

"Very well, commit me," was his answer. "I am innocent."

Released on bail, he went back to his rooms. He still held his head high, but he noticed that some of his friends whom he passed on his way through Piccadilly hurried by without even a glance in his direction. They cut him dead.

"Not pleasant to be taken for a thief," he thought; "quite a new experience for me. Poor, but honest, I once was considered, now the tables are turned, it seems that I am rich, but dishonest. Of course, I know the real culprit, but I was always loyal to my friends, and so I mean to be now." Turning around the corner he nearly fell into the arms of a slight, boyish-looking young man who was coming in the opposite direction.

"Why, Loftus, my boy," cried Vandeleur, "where are you going?"

"I—I don't know," stammered the other—"going to give myself up, or thinking of it. Did you peach on me?"

"Not I—I'm not one to betray a friend. But all the same it's deuced awkward for me; and Sybil"—his voice shook slightly—"Sybil may give me up. Not surprising if she did. Women fight shy of a thief, at least women in good society."

Loftus Crosbie flinched. "You must not lose her, old boy, you *shan't*. Wait till to-morrow, and I'll confess—I'll break away. It wasn't my fault that I joined with Roberts and the others. They said they only wanted me to climb through the ivy-

Continued on page 48