



The BLACK BAG

By Louis Joseph Vance

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CHAPTER VII.—Continued.

Hair dazed, to all seeming, she moved toward the boat. With clumsy and assertive gallantry her father stepped before her, offering his hand—his hand which she did not touch, for in the act of descending she remembered and swung impulsively back to Kirkwood.

"Good night, Mr. Kirkwood. Good night. I shan't forget."

He took her hand and bowed above it, but when his head was lifted he still retained her fingers in a lingering clasp.

"Good night," he said reluctantly. In a sudden flush of daring he turned and nodded coolly to Calendar. "With



The boat dropped away, the oars lifting and falling.

"your permission," he said negligently and drew the girl aside to the angle of the stairway.

"Miss Calendar"—he began, but was interrupted.

"Here—I say!"

Calendar had started toward him angrily.

Kirkwood calmly waved him back. "I want a word in private with your daughter, Mr. Calendar," he announced, with quiet dignity. "I don't think you'll deny me. I've saved you some slight trouble tonight."

Disgruntled, the adventurer paused. "Oh, all right," he grumbled. He returned to the boat.

"Forgive me, Miss Calendar," continued Kirkwood nervously. "I know I've no right to interfere, but—"

"Yes, Mr. Kirkwood?"

"But hasn't this gone far enough?" he blundered unhappily. "I can't like the look of things. Are you sure that it's all right—with you, I mean?"

She did not answer at once, but her eyes were kind and sympathetic. He plucked her heart of their tolerance.

"It isn't too late yet," he argued. "Let me take you to your friends—you must have friends in the city. But this—this midnight flight down the Thames, this atmosphere of stealth and suspicion, this—"

"But my place is with my father, Mr. Kirkwood," she interposed. "I shan't doubt him, dare I?"

"I suppose not."

"So I must go with him. I'm glad—thank you for caring, dear Mr. Kirkwood. And again good night."

"Good luck attend you," he muttered, following her to the boat.

Calendar helped her to and turned back to Kirkwood with a look of arch triumph. Kirkwood wondered if he had overheard. Whether or no, he could afford to be magnanimous. Seizing Kirkwood's hand, he pumped it vigorously.

"My dear boy, you've been an angel in disguise. And I guess you think me the devil in masquerade." He chuckled, in high conceit with himself over the turn of affairs. "Good night and—and fare thee well!" He dropped into the boat, sending himself to face the recalcitrant Mulready. "Cast off, there!"

The boat dropped away, the oars lifting and falling. With a weariful sense of loneliness and disappointment Kirkwood hung over the rail to watch them out of sight.

Somewhat wearily the young man released the railing and ascended the stairs. "And that is the end!" he told himself, struggling with an acute sense of personal injury. He had been hardly used. For a few hours his life had been lightened by the ineffable glamour of romance. Mystery and adventure had engaged him. He had served a girl woman and been associated with men whose ways, however questionable, were the ways of courage, hedged thickly about with perils.

Disappointed and aggrieved, he gained the street. He was miles from St. Pancras, foot weary, to all intents and purposes lost.

In this extremely chance strolled upon

him. The cabby who at his initial instance had traveled this weary way from Quadrant mews, after the manner of his kind, ere turning back had sought succor of fatigue at the nearest public. From afar Kirkwood saw the four wheeler at the curb and made all haste toward it.

Entering the gin mill, he found the cabby, soothed him with bitter and, instructing him for St. Pancras with all speed, dropped, limp and listless with fatigue, into the conveyance.

CHAPTER IX.

FROM the commanding elevation of the box "Three 'n' six" enunciated the cabby, his tone that of a man prepared for trouble, inclined to give trouble a welcome. His bloodshot eyes blinked truculently at his averted fare. "Three 'n' six," he iterated aggressively.

An adjacent but theretofore abstracted policeman pricked up his ears and assumed an intelligent expression.

"Hermondsey Ol' Stairs to Sain' Pancras," argued the cabby assertively, "seven mile by th' radius—three 'n' six!"

Kirkwood stood on the outer station platform, near the entrance to third class waiting rooms. Continuing to fumble through his pockets for an elusive sovereign purse, he looked up mildly at the man.

"All right, cabby," he said, with pacific purpose; "you'll get your fare in half a shake."

"Three 'n' six" croaked the cabby, like a blowsy and vindictive parrot. The bobby strolled nearer.

"Yes?" said Kirkwood, mildly diverted. "Why not sing it, cabby?"

"Lor' lumme!" The cabby exploded with indignation, continuing to give a likelike imitation of a rumped parrot. "I 'ad trouble enough wif you at Hermondsey Ol' Stairs hover that quid you promised, didn't I? Sing it! My hey!"

"Quid, cabby?" And then, remembering that he had promised the fellow a sovereign for fast driving from Quadrant mews, Kirkwood grinned broadly, eyes twinkling, for Mulready must have taken heir to that covenant. "But you got the sovereign? You got it, didn't you, cabby?"

"The driver affirmed the fact with unnecessary heat and profanity and an amendment to the effect that he would have spoiled his fare's sanguinary coin had the outcome been less satisfactory.

The information proved so amusing that Kirkwood, chuckling, forbore to resent the manner of its delivery and, abandoning until a more favorable time the chase of the coy sovereign purse, extracted from one trousers pocket half a handful of large English small change.

"Three shillings and sixpence." He counted the coins into the cabby's grimy and bloated paw and added quietly: "The exact distance is rather less than four miles, my man—your fare, precisely 2 shillings. You may keep the extra 18 pence for being such a conscientious blackguard—or talk it over with the officer here. Please yourself."

He nodded to the bobby, who, favorably impressed by Kirkwood, smiled at the cabby a cold, hard smile, whereupon the latter, smirking in unabashed triumph, spat on the pavement at Kirkwood's feet, gathered up the reins and wheeled out.

Restoring 2 shillings and a few fat copper pennies to his pocket, he entered the vast and echoing train shed. In the act his attention was attracted and immediately riveted by the spectacle of a burly luggage navvy in a blue jumper in the act of making off with a large folding signboard, of which the surface was lettered expansively with the advice, in red against a white background, "Boat Train Leaves on Track 3."

Excitedly Kirkwood touched the man's arm with a detaining hand. "Boat train?" he gasped, pointing at the board.

"Left ten minutes ago, thank you, sir."

"Well, but—Of course I can get another train at Tibury?"

"For yer boat? No, sir, thank you, sir. Won't be another tryne till mornin', sir."

"Oh-h?"

Almlessly Kirkwood drifted away his mind a blank.

Some time later he found himself on the steps outside the station, trying to stare out of countenance a glaring electric mineral water advertisement on the farther side of the Euston road. He was stranded.

Distracted, he searched pocket after pocket, locating his watch, cigar case and cigarette case, matchbox, pen-knife, all the minutiae of pocket hardware affected by civilized man, with old letters, a card-case, a square envelope containing his steamer ticket, but no sovereign purse. His small change pocket held less than 3 shillings and eight, to be exact—and a brass key, which he failed to recognize as one of his belongings.

And that was all. At some time during the night he had lost or been cunningly bereft of that little purse of charms skin containing the three gold

sovereigns which he had been busied to pay his steamer expenses and which, if only he had them now, would stand between him and starvation and a night in the streets. If Brentwick were only in town! But he wasn't and wouldn't be within the week.

"No good waiting here," he concluded. Composing his face, he re-entered the station. There were his trunks, of course. He couldn't leave them standing on the station platform forever.

He found the luggage room and interviewed a mechanically courteous attendant, who, as the result of profound deliberation, advised him to try his luck at the lost luggage room across the station. He accepted the advice. It was a foregone conclusion that his effects had not been conveyed to the Tibury dock. They could not have been loaded into the luggage van without his personal supervision. Still, anything was liable to happen when his unlucky star was in the ascendant.

He found them in the lost luggage room.

A clerk helped him identify the articles and ultimately clucked with a perfunctory note, "Sixpence each, please."

"I—ah—pardon?"

"Sixpence each, the fixed charge, sir. For every twenty-four hours or fraction thereof, sixpence per parcel."

"Oh, thank you so much," said Kirkwood sweetly. "I will call tomorrow."

"Very good, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Five times sixpence is two and six," Kirkwood computed, making his way hastily out of the station lest a worse thing befall him. "No, bless your heart—not while two and eight represents the sum total of my fortune."

He wandered out into the night. He could not linger round the station till dawn, and what profit to him if he did? Even were he to ransom his trunks one can scarcely change one's clothing in a public waiting room.

Somewhere in the distance a great clock chimed a single stroke freighted over with melancholy. It knelled the passing of the half hour after midnight, a witching hour when every public shuts up tight and gentlemen in top hats and evening dress are doomed to pace the pave till day (barring they have lamps or visible means of support)—till day, when pawnshops open and such personal effects as watches and hammered silver cigar cases may be hypotheated. What was he to do? An hour passed. Through this long hour Kirkwood walked without a pause.

Another clock somewhere changed resonantly twice. The world was very still. And so, wandering foot loose in a wilderness of ways, turning aimlessly, now right, now left, he found himself in Froggall street.

Kirkwood identified it with a start and a guilty tremor. He stopped stock still in an unreasoning state of semi-panic, arrested by a silly impulse to turn and fly, as if the bobby whom he described approaching him with measured stride, pausing now and again to try a door or flash his bullseye down an arched way, were to be expected to identify the man responsible for that racket raised ere midnight in vacant No. 9.

At the corner he swerved and crossed, still possessed of his devil of inspiration. It would be unfair to him to say that he did not struggle to resist it, for he did, because it was fairly and egregiously asinine; yet, struggling, his feet trod the path to which it tempted him.

"Why," he expostulated feebly, "might as well turn back and beat that bobby over the head with my cane!"

But at the moment his hand was in his change pocket, feeling over that same brass door key which earlier he had been unable to account for, and he was informing himself how very easy it would have been for the sovereign purse to have dropped from his waistcoat pocket while he was sliding on his ear down the dark staircase. To recover it meant, at the least, shelter for the night, followed by a decent, comfortable and sustaining morning meal. Fortified by both he could redeem his luggage, change to clothing more suitable for daylight traveling, pawn his valuables and enter into negotiations with the steamship company for permission to exchange his passage, with a sum to boot, for transportation on another liner—a most feasible project, a temptation all but irresistible!

But then—the risk. Supposing, for the sake of argument, the customary night watchman to have taken up a transient residence in No. 9, supposing the police to have entered with him and found the stunned man on the second floor, would the watchman not be vigilant for another nocturnal marauder—would not the police now, more than ever, be keeping a wary eye on that house of suspicious happenings?

Decidedly to re-enter it would be to incur a deadly risk. And yet undoubtedly, beyond question, his sovereign purse was waiting for him somewhere on the second flight of stairs, while his means of clandestine entry lay warm in his fingers—the key to the dark entry, which he had by force of habit pocketed after locking the door on leaving the house with Dorothy. He came to the Reg-in-the-Pound

its windows were dim with low turned gaslights. Down the covered alleyway Quadrant mews slept in a dusk, but fitfully relieved by a lamp or two round which the splendid mist clung close and thick.

There would be none to see.

Skulking, throat swollen with fear, heart beating like a snare drum, Kirkwood took his chance. Buttoning his overcoat collar up to his chin and cursing the fact that his hat must stand out like a chimney pot on a detached house, he sped on tiptoe down the cobble way and close beneath the house walls of Quadrant mews; but, halfway in, he stopped, confounded by an unforeseen difficulty. How was he to identify the narrow entry of No. 9, whose counterparts doubtless communicated with the mews from every residence on four sides of the city block?

He almost lost his head when he realized that escape was already cut off by the way he had come. Some one or, rather, some two men were entering the alley. He could hear the tramping and shuffle of clumsy feet and voices that muttered indistinctly. One seemed to trip over something and cursed. The other laughed. The voices grew more loud. They were coming his way. He dared no longer vacillate. He dived into the nearest black hole of a passageway and in sheer desperation flung himself, key in hand, against the door at the end. Mark how his luck served him who had forsown her! He found a keyhole and inserted the key. It turned. So did the knob. The door gave inward. He fell in with it, slammed it, shot the bolts and, panting, leaned against its panels, in a pit of everlasting night, but saved—for the time being, at all events.

CHAPTER X.

INDOORS Kirkwood faced unhappily the enigma of fortune, wondering if this by any possibility were No. 9.

The key had fitted, the bolts had been drawn on the inside, and, while the key had been one of ordinary pattern and would no doubt have proved effectual with any one of a hundred common locks, the finger of probability seemed to indicate that his luck had brought him back to No. 9.

In spite of all this, he was sensible of little confidence. Though this were truly No. 9, his freedom still lay on the knees of the gods; his very life, be like, was poised, tottering on a pinnacle of chance.

In the end, taking heart of desperation, he stooped and removed his shoes, a precaution which later appeared to his sense of the ridiculous in view of the racket he had raised in entering, but which at the moment seemed most natural and in accordance with common sense. Then, rising, he held his breath, staring and listening. About him the pitch darkness was punctuated with fading points of fire, and in his ears was a noise of strange whisperings.

He went forward gingerly, feeling his way like a blind man on strange ground. Ere long he stumbled over a door sill and found that the walls of the passage had fallen away. He had entered a room, a black cavern of indeterminate dimensions. Thence, progressing over complaining floors through what may have been the servants' hall, a large room with a table in the middle and a number of provisioned chairs (witness his tortured shins), he finally blundered into the basement hallway.

By now a little calmer, he felt assured that this was really No. 9. Froggall street and a little happier about it all, though not even momentarily forgetful of the potential police and night watchman. However, he mounted the steps to the ground floor without adventure and found himself at last in the same dim and ghostly hall which he had entered some six hours before. The mockery of dusk admitted by the faint light was just strong enough to enable him to identify the general lay of the land and arrangement of furniture.

More confidently with each uncontented step he continued his quest. Elation was stirring his spirit when he gained the first floor and moved toward the foot of the second flight, approaching the spot whereat he was to begin the search for the missing purse. The knowledge that he lacked means of obtaining illumination deterred him nothing. He had some hope of finding matches in one of the adjacent rooms, but, failing that, was prepared to ascend the stairs on all fours, feeling every inch of their surface if it took hours.

And thus it fell out that, at the instant he was thinking it time to begin to crawl and hunt, his stroking feet came into contact with something heavy, yielding, warm—something that moved, moaned and caused his hair to bristle and his flesh to creep.

We will make allowances for him. All along he had gone on the assumption that his antagonist of the dark stairway would have recovered and made off with all expedition in the course of ten or twenty minutes at most from the time of his accident. To find him still there was something entirely outside of Kirkwood's reckoning. He would as soon have thought to encounter, say, Calendar—would have preferred the latter, indeed.

"Poor devil!" murmured the young man. "He must be in a pretty bad way for sure!" He knelt, compassion gentling his heart, and put one hand to the inert face. A warm sweat moistened his fingers. His palm was fanned by steady respiration.

Immensably perplexed, the American rose, slipped on his shoes and buttoned them, thinking hard the while. "I ought he to do? Obvious light suggested itself—impossible light, amplifying the man's recovery. On the other hand, indubitably the latter had

sustained such injury that consciousness, when it came to him, would hardly be re-enforced by much aggressive power. Moreover, it was to be remembered that the one was in that



Feeling his way like a blind man on strange ground.

house with quite as much warrant as the other unless Kirkwood had drawn a rash inference from the incident of the ragged sentry. The two of them were mutual if antagonistic trespassers. Neither would dare bring about the arrest of the other. And then—and this was not the least consideration to influence Kirkwood—perhaps the fellow would die if he got no attention.

Light upon the subject, actual as well as figurative, seemed to be the first essential. His mind composed, Kirkwood set himself in search of it. The floor he was on, however, afforded him no assistance.

After some momentary hesitation he went upstairs, his ascent marked by a single and grateful incident. Halfway to the top he trod on an object that clinked underfoot and, stopping, retrieved the lost purse.

The rooms on the second floor were bedchambers, broad, deep, stately, inhabited by seven devils of loneliness. In one, on a dresser, Kirkwood found a stump of candle in a china candlestick. The two charred ends of matches at its base were only an irritating discovery, however—evidence that real matches had been the mode in No. 9 at some remote date. Disgusted and oppressed by cumulative inquisitiveness, he took the candle end back to the hall. He would have given much for the time and means to make a more detailed investigation into the secret of the house.

Since his latest entrance his vision had adjusted itself to cope with the obscurity to some extent, and the street lights, meagerly reflected through the windows from the bosom of a sullen pall of cloud low swung above the city, had helped him to piece together many a detail of decoration and furnishing, alike somber and richly dignified. Kirkwood told himself that the owner, whoever he might be, was a man of wealth and taste inherited from another age. He had found little of meretricious today in the dwelling, much that was solid and sedate and homely and—Victorian. He could have wished for more. A box of early Victorian vestas had been highly acceptable.

Making his way downstairs to the stricken man, who was quite as he had been, Kirkwood bent over and thrust rifling fingers into his pockets regardless of the wretched sense of guilt and sneakishness imparted by the action, stubbornly heedless of the possibility of the man's awakening to find himself being searched and robbed.

In the last place he sought, which should, he realized, have been the first—to wit, the fob pocket of the white waistcoat—he found a small gold matchbox packed tight with wax vestas and, bearing himself for crass stupidity—he had saved a deal of time and trouble by thinking of this before—lighted the candle.

(Continued next Saturday.)

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