The Black Bag

BY LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

(Chapter XXVII Continued.)

"Do you think so?" She shook her head in doubt. "I don't know. I know so little of such things. You are right. We must take him the jewels, but"—Her voice trailed off into a sigh of profound perturbation.

He dared not meet her look.

With a jar the train started and began to move more swiftly.

Kirkwood lifted the traveling bag to his knees.

"Don't forget," he said, with some difficulty, "you're to stick by me whatever happens. You mustn't desert me."

"You know," the girl reproved him.

"I know, but there must be no misunderstanding. Don't worry. We'll win out yet. I've a plan."

Glorious liar! He had not the glimmering of a plan.

The engine panting, the train drew in beneath the vast sounding dome of the station to an accompaniment of dull thunderings and stopped finally.

Hurried and jostled, the girl clinging tightly to his arm lest they be separated in the crush, they came to the ticket wicket. Beyond the barrier surged a sea of hats. Beneath any one of these might lurk the maleficent brain, the spying eyes, of Calendar or one of his creatures. Beneath all of them that he encountered Kirkwood peered in fearful inquiry.

Abruptly he caught the girl by the arm and unceremoniously hurried her toward a waiting hansom.

"Quick!" he begged her. "Jump right in—not an instant to spare!"

She nodded brightly, lips firm with courage, eyes shining.

"My father?"

"Yes." Kirkwood glanced back over his shoulder. "He hasn't seen us yet. They've just driven up. Stryker's with him. They're getting down." And to himself, "Oh, the devil!" cried the panic stricken young man.

He drew back to let the girl precede him into the cab. At the same time he kept an eye on Calendar, whose conveyance stood half the length of the station front away.

The fat adventurer had finished paying off the driver, standing on the deck of the hansom. Stryker was already out, towering above the mass of people and glaring about him with his hawk keen vision. Calendar had started to alight. His foot was leaving the step when Stryker's glance singled out their quarry. Instantly he turned and spoke to his confederate. Calendar wheeled like a flash, peering eagerly in the direction indicated by the captain's index finger, then, snapping instructions to his driver, threw himself heavily back on the seat. Stryker, awkward on his land legs, stumbled and fell in an ill calculated attempt to hoist himself hastily back into the vehicle.

To the delay thus occasioned alone Kirkwood and Dorothy owed a respite of freedom. Their hansom was already swinging down toward the great gates of the yard, the American standing to make the driver comprehend the necessity for using the utmost speed in reaching the Craven street address. The man proved both intelligent and obliging. Kirkwood had barely time to drop down beside the girl ere the cab was swinging out into the Strand, to the peril of the toes belonging to a number of righteously indignant pedestrians.

He turned in the seat, twisting his neck to peep through the small rear window. "I don't see their cab," he announced. "But of course they're after us. However, Craven street's just round the corner. If we get there first I don't fancy Freddie Hallam will have a cordial reception for our pursuers. They must have been on watch at Cannon street, and, finding we were not coming in that way—of course they were expecting us because of Hobbs' wire—they took cab for Charing Cross. Lucky for us—or is it lucky?" he added doubtfully to himself.

The hansom whipped round the corner into Craven street. Kirkwood sprang up, grasping the treasure bag, ready to jump the instant they pulled in toward Mrs. Hallam's dwelling. But as they drew near upon the address he drew back with an exclamation of amazement.

The house was closed, showing a blank face to the street—blinds drawn close down in the windows, area gate padlocked, an estate agent's board projecting from above the doorway advertising the property "to be let, furnished."

Kirkwood looked back, craning his neck round the side of the cab. At the moment another hansom was breaking through the rank of humanity on the Strand crossing. He saw one or two figures leap desperately from beneath the horse's hoofs. Then the cab shot out swiftly down the street.

The American stood up again, catching the cabby's eye.

"Drive on!" he cried excitedly. "Don't stop! Drive as fast as you dare!"

"W'ere to, sir?"

"See that cab behind? Don't let it catch us! Shake it off, lose it somehow, but for the love of heaven don't let it catch us! I'll make it worth your while. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." The driver looked briefly over his shoulder and lifted his whip. "Don't worry, sir," he cried, entering into the spirit of the game with gratifying zest. "Shan't let 'em ever'aul you, sir. Mind your 'ead!"

And as Kirkwood ducked the whiplash shot out over the roof with a crack like the report of a pistol. Startled, the horse leaped indignantly forward. Momentarily the cab seemed to leave the ground, then settled down to a pace that carried them round the Avenue theater and across Northumberland avenue into Whitehall place apparently on a single wheel.

"Good little horse!" he applauded.

A moment later he was indorsing without reserve the generalship of their cabby. The quick westward turn that took them into Whitehall, over across from the Horse Guards, likewise placed them in a pocket of traffic. A practically impregnable press of vehicles closed in behind them ere Calendar's conveyance could follow out of the side street.

That the same conditions, but slightly modified, hemmed them in ahead went for nothing in Kirkwood's estimation.

"Good driver!" he approved heartily. "He's got a head on his shoulders!"

The girl found her voice. "How," she demanded in a breath, face blank with consternation—"how did you dare?"

"Dare?" he echoed exultantly, and in his veins excitement was running like liquid fire. "What wouldn't I dare for you, Dorothy?"

"What have you not?" she amended softly, adding, with a shade of timidity, "Philip"—

The long lashes swept up from her cheeks, like clouds revealing stars, unmasking eyes radiant and brave to meet his own. Then they fell, even as her lips drooped with disappointment. And she sighed, for he was not looking. Manlike, hot with the ardor of the chase, he was deaf and blind to all else.

"I've got a scheme!" Kirkwood declared so explosively that she caught her breath with the surprise of it. "There's the Piess. They know me there, and my credit's good. When we shake them off we can have the cabby take us to the hotel. I'll register and borrow from the management enough to pay our way to Chiltern and the tolls for a cable to New York. I've a friend or two over home who wouldn't let me want for a few miserable pounds. So you see," he explained boyishly, "we're at the end of our troubles already!"

She said something inaudible, holding her face averted. He bent nearer to her, wondering. "I didn't understand," he suggested.

Still looking from him, "I said you were very good to me," she said in a quavering whisper.

"Dorothy!" Without his knowledge or intention before the fact, as instinctively as he made use of her given name intimately, his strong fingers dropped and closed upon the little hand that lay beside him. "What is the matter, dear?" He leaned still farther forward to peer into her face till glance met glance in the ending and his racing pulses tightened with sheer delight of the humid happiness in her glistening eyes. "Dorothy, child, don't worry so. No harm shall come to you. It's all working out—all working out right. Only have a little faith in me, and I'll make everything work out right, Dorothy."

Gently she freed her fingers. "I wasn't," she told him in a voice that quivered between laughter and tears—"I wasn't worrying. I was—you wouldn't understand. Don't be afraid I shall break down or—or anything."

"I shan't," he reassured her. "I know you're not that sort. Buckles, you'd have no excuse. We're moving along famously. That cabby knows his business."

Past the houses of parliament, through Old Palace yard, with the abbey on their left, they swung away into Abingdon street, whence suddenly they dived into the maze of back ways, great and mean, which lies to the south of Victoria. Doubling and twisting, now this way, now that, the driver tooled them through the intricate heart of this labyrinth, leading the pursuers a dance that Kirkwood thought calculated to dishearten and shake off the pursuit in the first five minutes. Yet always, peering back through the little peephole, he saw Calendar's cab pelting doggedly in their rear—a hundred yards behind, no more, no less—hanging on with indomitable grit and determination.

Children cheered them on, and policemen turned to stare, doubting whether they should interfere. Minutes rolled into tens, measuring out an hour, and still they hammered on, hunted and hunters playing their game of hare and hounds through the highways and byways of those staid and aged quarters.

The sun was very low behind the houses of the Surrey side when Kirkwood became aware that their horse was flagging, though, as comparison determined, no more so than the one behind.

In grave concern, the young man raised his hand, thrusting open the trap in the roof. Immediately the square of darkling sky was eclipsed by the cabby's face.

"Yessir?"

"You had better drive as directly as you can to the Hotel Piess," Kirkwood mind with this understanding that it was hard for him to adjust his perceptions to the truth.

"I was detained—by business," responded Brentwick briefly. His gaze, weary and wistful behind his glasses, rested on the face of the girl on the threshold of his home, and the faint, sensitive flush of her face deepened. He stopped and honored her with a bow that, for all his fantastical attire, would have graced a beau of an earlier decade. "Will you be pleased to enter?" he suggested punctiliously. "My house, such as it is, is quite at your disposal. And," he added, with a glance over his shoulder, "I fancy that a word or two may presently be passed which you would hardly care to hear."

Kirkwood lingered with his friend upon the door stoop. Calendar, recovered from his temporary consternation, was already at the gate, bending over it, fat fingers fumbling with the latch, his round red face lifted to the house, darkly working with chagrin.

From his threshold, watching him with a slight contraction of the eyes, Brentwick hailed him in tones of cloying courtesy:

"Do you wish to see me, sir?"

The fat adventurer faltered just within the gateway. Then, with truculent swagger, "I want my daughter!" he declared vociferously.

Brentwick peered mildly over his glasses, first at Calendar, then at Kirkwood. His glance lingered a moment

"I want my daughter!"

on the young man's honest eyes and swung back to Calendar.

"My good man," he said, with sublime tolerance, "will you be pleased to take yourself off—to the devil if you like? Or shall I take the trouble to interest the police?"

He removed one fine and fragile hand from a pocket of the flowered dressing gown long enough to jerk it significantly toward the nearer street corner.

Thunderstruck, Calendar glanced hastily in the indicated direction. A blue coated bobby was to be seen approaching with measured stride, diffusing upon the still evening air an impression of ineffably capable self contentment.

Calendar's fleshy lips parted and closed without a sound. He banged the gate behind him and waddled off to join the captain, who already, with praiseworthy native prudence, had fallen back upon their cab.

Sullenly extracting money from his pocket, he paid off his driver and in company with Stryker trudged in morose silence down the street.

Brentwick touched Kirkwood's arm and drew him into the house.

CHAPTER XXIX.

As the door closed Kirkwood swung impulsively to Brentwick with the brief, uneven laugh of fine drawn nerves.

"Good God, sir!" he cried. "You don't know"—

"I can surmise," interrupted the elder man shrewdly.

"You turned up in the nick of time, for all the world like"—

"Harlequin popping through a stage trap?"

"No—an incarnation of the providence that watches over children and fools."

Brentwick dropped a calming hand upon his shoulder. "Your simile seems singularly happy, Philip. Permit me to suggest that you join the child in my study." He laughed quietly, with a slight nod toward an open door at the end of the hallway. "For myself, I'll be with you in one moment."

A faint, indulgent smile lurking in the shadow of his white mustache, he watched the young man wheel and dart through the doorway. "Young hearts!" he commented audibly and a trace sadly. "Youth!"

Beyond the threshold of the study Kirkwood paused, eager eyes searching its somber shadows for a sign of Dorothy.

By the fireplace, a little to one side, she stood, one small foot resting on the brass fender, her figure merging into the dusky background, her delicate beauty gaining an effect of elusive and ethereal mystery in the waning and waxing ruddy glow flung from the bedded coals.

"Oh, Philip!" She turned swiftly to Kirkwood with extended hands and a low, broken cry. "I'm so glad."

A trace of hysteria in her manner warned him, and he checked himself upon the verge of a too dangerous tenderness. "There!" he said soothingly, letting her hands rest gently in his palms while he led her to a chair. "We can make ourselves easy now."

She sat down, and he released her hands with a reluctance less evident than actual. "If ever I say another word against my luck"—

"Who," inquired the girl, lowering her voice—"who is the gentleman in the flowered dressing down?"

"Brentwick—George Silvester Brentwick, an old friend. I've known him for years, ever since I came abroad. Curiously enough, however, this is the first time I've ever been here. I called once, but he wasn't in—a few days ago—the day we met. I thought the place looked familiar. Stupid of me!"

"Philip," said the girl, with a grave face, but a shaking voice, "it was"—she laughed provokingly—"it was so funny, Philip. I don't know why I ran when you told me to, but I did. And while I ran I was conscious of the front door here opening and this tall man in the flowered dressing gown coming down to the gate as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world for him to stroll out dressed that way in the evening. And he opened the gate and bowed and said, ever so pleasantly, 'Won't you come in, Miss Calendar?'"

"He did!" exclaimed Kirkwood. "But how"—

"How can I say?" she expostulated. "At all events, he seemed to know me, and when he added something about calling you in, too—he said 'Mr. Kirkwood'—I didn't hesitate."

"It's strange enough, surely, and fortunate. Bless his heart!" said Kirkwood.

And "Hum!" said Mr. Brentwick considerately, entering the study. He had discarded the dressing gown and was now in evening dress.

The girl rose. Kirkwood turned. "Mr. Brentwick"— he began.

But Brentwick begged his patience with an eloquent gesture and rang the bell.

A soft footed butler, impassive as Fate, materialized mysteriously in the doorway.

"You rang, sir?" he interrupted frigidly.

"If any one should ask for me I'm not at home."

"Very good, sir."

"And if you should see a pair of disreputable scoundrels skulking in the neighborhood, one short and stout, the other tall and evidently a seafaring man, let me know."

"Thank you, sir." A moment later the front door was heard to close.

Brentwick turned with a little bow to the girl. "My dear Miss Calendar," he said, rubbing his thin, fine hands—"I am old enough, I trust, to call you such without offense—please be seated."

"Would you mind telling us how you knew"— began Kirkwood anxiously.

"Not in the least, my dear Philip. It is simple enough. I possess an imagination. From my bedroom window, on the floor above, I happen to behold two cabs racing down the street, the one doggedly pursuing the other. The foremost stops, perforce of a fagged horse. There alights a young gentleman looking, if you'll pardon me, uncommonly seedy. He is followed by a young lady, if she will pardon me," with another little bow, "uncommonly pretty."

Brentwick removed his glasses, rubbed them and blinked thoughtfully at the girl. "My dear," he said suddenly, with a peculiar tremor in his voice, "you resemble your mother remarkably. Tut—I should know! Time was when I was one of her most ardent admirers."

"You—y-you knew my mother?" cried Dorothy, profoundly moved.

"Did I not know you at sight? My dear, you are your mother reincarnate for the good of an unworthy world. She was a very beautiful woman, my dear."

"But you will tell me"—

"A number of interesting things, Miss Calendar, if you'll be good enough to let me choose the time. I beg you to be patient with the idiosyncrasies of an old man who means no harm, who has a reputation as an eccentric to sustain before his servants. And now," said Brentwick—"now, my dear boy, for the adventure."

Kirkwood chuckled, infected by his host's genial humor. "How do you know"—

"How can it be otherwise?" countered Brentwick, with a trace of asperity. "Am I to be denied my adventure? Sir, I refuse without equivocation. Your very bearing breathes of romance. There must be an adventure forthcoming, Philip; otherwise my disappointment will be so acute that I shall be regretfully obliged seriously to consider my right as a householder to show you the door."

"But, Mr. Brentwick"—

"Sit down, sir!" commanded Brentwick, with such a peremptory note that the young man, who had risen, obeyed out of sheer surprise, upon which his host advanced, indicting him with a long white forefinger. "Would you, sir," he demanded, "again expose this little lady to the machinations of that corpulent scoundrel whom I have just had the pleasure of shooing off my premises because you choose to resent an old man's raillery?"

"I apologize," Kirkwood humored him.

"I accept the apology in the spirit in which it is offered. I repeat, now for the adventure, Philip. If the story is long, epitomize. We can consider details more at our leisure."

(Continued next Saturday.)

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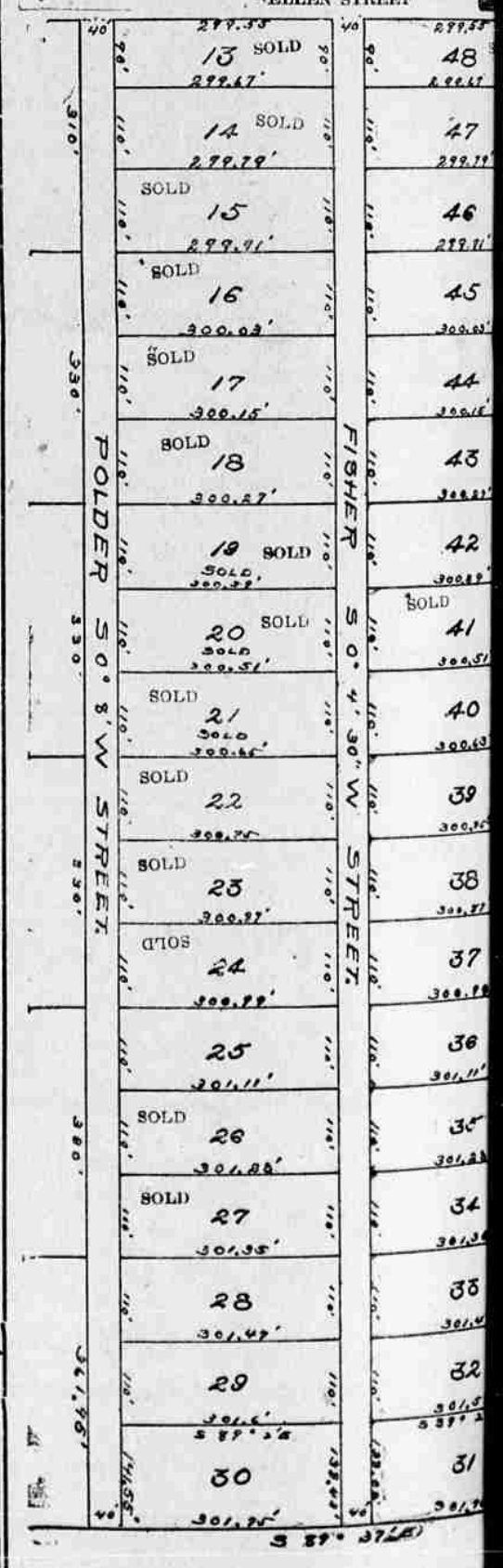

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