

A Mysterious Valise

The Story Told by an Ex-Life-Guardsman

“Sentry, will you kindly keep your eye on my bag for a few minutes? I am going to have a plunge in the Serpentine,” said a well-dressed, middle-aged gentleman to me, one warm summer morning a few years ago, as I was on duty at the park gate of Knightsbridge Cavalry Barracks.

“All right, sir,” I replied. “If I am relieved before your return, I shall hand it over to the next sentry.”

“Oh, I shan't be more than half an hour at the latest, as I must be in the city by nine. I prefer leaving my valise with you; there are so many vagabonds always swarming about Hyde Park, that it is quite possible that one of them might take a fancy to it while I am bathing. It doesn't contain very valuable property—only a suit of clothes and a few documents ‘of no use to any one but the owner,’ as the saying is. All the same, however, I have no desire to lose it.” So saying, the gentleman turned away, and walked briskly across the park in the direction of the Serpentine.

The request to look after his property did not in the least surprise me, as numerous robberies from the clothing of persons bathing had for some time before been reported to the police. I lifted the bag—upon which the letters W. N. were painted, and which was in the battered condition indicative of having been much tumbled about and placed it behind the low wall that lay between the barracks and the footpath.

The barracks clock struck eight. Fully half an hour had elapsed since the owner of the bag departed, and as yet there was no sign of him; the ‘quarter-past’ was chimed from the neighboring clocks, and still he did not turn up; and, as the minutes passed, I thought to myself that it was time he was looking sharp if he really wished to be in the city by nine.

About half-past eight I perceived a great commotion in the park. Men were rushing from all quarters in the direction of the Serpentine; and soon afterwards I ascertained from a passer-by that the excitement was caused by one of the numerous bathers having been drowned. An uneasy suspicion was at once excited within me that the person who had come to such a sad end was the gentleman who had left his valise in my charge, which suspicion was intensified when I was relieved at nine, with the article still unclaimed. I reflected, however, that its owner may have been chained to the scene of the disaster by that morbid curiosity which induces people to linger about the spot where any calamity of the kind has recently occurred, and then, finding that he was pressed for time, and knowing that his property would be perfectly safe, had gone direct to the city.

I handed over the bag to the sentry who relieved me without mentioning to him anything of the circumstances of the case; and when he returned from duty at eleven, I eagerly asked him if the valise had been called for.

“No,” he replied; “It is still lying behind the wall.”

I went on sentry again at one o’clock and no one had come for it. It was the height of the London season and Hyde Park presented its customary gay appearance; but the imposing array of splendidly-appointed equipages, dashing equestrians and fashionably-dressed ladies and gentlemen, which at other times was to me a most interesting spectacle, that afternoon passed by unheeded, as all my thoughts were centered on speculations regarding the fate of the owner of the bag. Before being relieved at three I had it conveyed to my room in barracks, and after coming off guard placed it for greater security in the troop store. That evening, before ‘stables,’ when the orderly corporal had read out the duties for the succeeding day, he said, addressing me: “Jones, you have to attend the orderly room tomorrow.”

“Why?” I inquired.

“You have been reported for neglecting to salute Captain Sir Carnaby Jenks as he passed you while on sentry this afternoon,” was the corporal's answer.

I said nothing by way of excuse. This heinous charge was in all probability true, I believe I might have omitted to ‘present’ to Her Majesty the Queen herself, if she had passed that afternoon in her state carriage, so distracted was I by the engrossing subject of this valise.

After stables, I left barracks for my customary walk, and purchasing a copy of the *Echo* from a juvenile news vender, I read the particulars of the fatality of the morning. Friends had identified the body, which was that of a gentleman named Nixon, who had resided at Bayswater.

“Nixon! That corresponds with the initial 'N' on the bag,” I thought to myself, now perfectly convinced that the deceased was the person I had seen in the morning. I also ascertained from the newspaper report that a man had been apprehended on suspicion of having attempted to rifle the pockets of the clothes of the drowned man, and who had been roughly handled by the crowd, before a policeman could be procured to take him into custody. After a moment’s reflection I decided to call at the address given in the paper, in order to arrange about the restoration of the bag to the relatives of the deceased.

Reaching the house I knocked softly at the door, and stated my business to the domestic who appeared, by whom I was shown into a room, and immediately afterward was waited upon by a young lady, the daughter of the deceased, who, naturally enough, was perfectly overcome with grief. I explained to her in a few words the object of my visit.

“I am uncertain whether poor papa had a valise of that description when he left this morning,” she said; “but possibly you may recognize him from the photograph,” submitting one she took from the table for my inspection.

I experience a strange sense of relief—the features in the photo were those of a person bearing no resemblance whatever to the individual who had left his bag in my charge.

The young lady thanked me heartily for the trouble I had taken in the matter; and I left the house of mourning and returned to the barracks in a very mystified state of mind.

“Could the owner of the bag be the thief who was caught in the act of plundering the dead man's clothes?” I asked myself, but immediately dismissed the idea from my mind, as being absurd and improbable.

Next day I attended the orderly room, and received a severe admonition from the commanding officer. Fortunately for me, as it happened, Sir Carnaby had been in plain clothes, so my offence in the eye of martial law was of a comparatively venial character. Immediately afterwards I considered it my duty to report the circumstances attending the valise to the adjutant, who in turn communicated with the police authorities at Scotland Yard; and that evening, pursuant to instructions received, I had the bag conveyed to that establishment. After I had explained how it was placed in my charge, it was opened in my presence by an official, and was found to contain just a suit of old clothes and a few newspapers, but no documents of any kind, as stated by its owner.

After this the bag ceased to interest me, as the valueless character of its contents caused me to speculate less on the unaccountable conduct of its possessor in never returning for it. I may mention that I read an account in the evening paper regarding the alleged thief who had been apprehended on the Serpentine Bank under the circumstances before alluded to. By the name of Judd he had been taken before a magistrate and remanded for a week, in order that inquiries might be made concerning him.

Some time afterwards I was on Queen's guard, Westminster. I had just mounted my horse and taken up position in one of the two boxes facing Parliament street, when a gentleman stopped opposite me and scanned me curiously. Addressing me, he said: “Don't you remember me?”

There was no mistaking the voice; it was that of the owner of the bag! Otherwise, he was greatly altered, as he had denuded himself of the luxuriant whiskers and mustache which he wore when I saw him previously.

“What has been wrong?” I asked.

“Oh, I was seized with a fit that morning when I came out of the water, and was taken home in an unconscious state. I have been very unwell ever since, and have left my house for the first time to-day. I made inquiries at the barracks about you; and as the soldier I spoke to seemed to know about the bag I left with you, he directed me here.”

“Well, sir,” I said, “I had quite made up my mind that you were the gentle man who was drowned that morning; and when I discovered my mistake, I am almost ashamed to own that I took you for the man who was apprehended on the charge of trying to plunder the drowned man's clothes.”

The gentleman smiled pleasantly and said: “Ah! I read about that. And now to business. I wish to get my bag at once. I presume you have it in safekeeping at the barracks?”

“It's much nearer at hand,” I replied,—“just across the street from here;” and then I told him that it was in the custody of the police authorities at Scotland Yard.

This information apparently disconcerted him.

“It is very awkward indeed,” he said. “I have to catch the six train for Liverpool, as I wish to sail by the steamer that leaves to-morrow morning for New York. Couldn't you come across with me to get it?”

“You forget that I am on sentry,” I replied. “I won't be relieved until four; and even then I daren't leave the guard; nor would I care to ask permission to do so. You should go at once to the Captain of the guard and represent the case to him; and perhaps, under the circumstances, he will permit me to accompany you.”

Acting on my advice, he proceeded at once to the officer in command, leaving me extremely amused at the fuss he was making about his bag, considering all that it was worth.

Soon afterwards he returned with a smiling face, and informed me that the Captain had acceded to his request. I expressed my gratification at this intelligence, and added: “Surely, sir, you have been shaving since I last saw you?”

“Yes, I was threatened with the recurrence of a nasty skin complaint to which I was formerly subject.”

During the interval that elapsed until my period of duty was ended the gentleman paced about in a most impatient manner, ever and anon seeming to relieve his feelings by stopping to pat my horse. At length I left my post, and, dismounting, led my charger to the stable and handed it over to a comrade; then, divesting myself of my cuirass, was ready to proceed to Scotland Yard. One of the corporals on guard received orders to accompany me; so, together with the gentleman, we started, and crossing the street reached the police headquarters in a minute or two, and on making inquiries were directed to the ‘Lost Property’ department. We stated our business; and an official, after receiving an assurance from me that the applicant was the right person, speedily produced the valise. “Why didn't you see about this before?” he asked, addressing the gentleman.

“Because I was too ill to see about anything,” was the reply.

The gentleman then signed a book, certifying that his property had been restored to him, giving as he did so the name of Nobbs.

Having thanked the official, Mr. Nobbs caught up his property, and we left the office. When we got to the door we found assembled a small crowd of men employed about the establishment; for the unusual spectacle of two helmeted, jack-booted guardsmen had caused a good deal of speculation as to our business there. Mr. Nobbs hurriedly brushed past them, and gaining the street hailed a passing cab, and the driver at once pulled up. “Here is something for your trouble,” he said, slipping a sovereign into my hand. I, of course, thanked him heartily for this

munificent douceur. Declining the offer of the driver to place his bag on the dicky, he put it inside the vehicle; then shaking hands with the corporal and myself, he said to the driver: "Euston, as fast as you can," and entered the cab.

The driver released the brake from the wheel, and was whipping up his scraggy horse with a view of starting, when the poor animal slipped and fell. The man belonging to the Scotland Yard who had followed us into the street at once rushed to the driver's assistance, unbuckled the traces, and after pushing back the cab, got the horse on its feet. All the while Mr. Nobbs was watching the operations from the window; and I noticed that one of the men was surveying him very attentively.

"Your name is Judd, isn't it?" the man at length remarked.

"No; it isn't.—What do you mean by addressing me, sir?" indignantly replied Mr. Nobbs.

"Well," said the man—whom I at once surmised was a member of the detective force—"that's the name you gave, anyhow, when you were had up on the charge of feeling the pockets of the gent's clothes who was drowned in the Serpentine a week ago. I know you, although you've had a clean shave."

I started on hearing this statement; my suspicions, ridiculous as they seemed at the time, had turned out to be correct, after all; while Mr. Judd, alias Nobbs, turned as pale as death.

"Come out of that cab," said the detective.

"You've no right to detain me," said Nobbs, "I was discharged this morning."

"Because nothing was known against you.—But look here, old man, what have you got in that bag?"

"Only some old clothes, I assure you," said the crest-fallen Nobbs.

"Come inside, and we'll see," said the detective, seizing the bag. "Out of the cab quick! and come with me to the office."

Mr. Nobbs complied with a very bad grace; while the corporal and I followed, wondering what was to happen next.

We entered a room in the interior, and the bag was opened; but it apparently contained nothing but the clothes.

"There is certainly no grounds for detaining this man," said an inspector, standing near.

Mr. Nobbs at once brightened up and cried: "You see I have told you the truth, and now be good enough to let me go."

“All right,” said the detective. “Pack up your traps and clear out!”

Mr. Nobbs this time complied with exceeding alacrity, and began to replace the articles of clothing, when the detective, seemingly acting on a sudden impulse, caught up the valise and gave it a vigorous shake. A slight rustling sound was distinctly audible.

“Hillo! what's this?” cried the officer. Emptying the clothes out of the bag, he produced a pocket-knife, and in a trice ripped open a false bottom and found—about two dozen valuable diamond rings and a magnificent emerald necklace carefully packed in wadding, besides a number of unset stones.

The jubilant detective at once compared them with a list which he took from a file, and pronounced them to be the entire proceeds of a daring robbery that had recently been committed in the shop of a West End Jeweler, and which amounted in value to fifteen hundred pounds!

Mr. Nobbs, alias Judd, now looking terribly confused and abashed at this premature frustration of his plan to clear out of the country with his booty, was formally charged with being in possession of the stolen valuables. He made no reply, and was led away in custody.

Before returning to the guard, I remarked to the inspector: “I thought sir, when he gave me a sovereign for looking after his bag that it was more than it was worth; but now I find that I have been mistaken.”

“A sovereign!” cried the inspector. “Let me see it.”

I took the coin from my cartouche-box, where I had placed it in the absence of an accessible pocket, and handed it to him.

He smilingly examined it, and threw it on the table. “I thought as much,” he remarked; “It's a bad one.”

Mr. Nobbs, alias Judd—these names were two of a formidable string of aliases—turned out to be an expert coiner, burglar and swindler who had long been ‘wanted’ by the police. He was convicted, and sentenced to a lengthened period of penal servitude.

A few weeks after Mr. Nobbs had received his well-earned punishment, I received a visit from a gentleman, who stated that he was cashier in the jeweler's establishment in which the robbery had been committed. He informed me that his employer, having taken into consideration the fact that I was to a certain extent instrumental in the recovery of the stolen jewelry, had sent me a present of thirty pounds. I gratefully accepted the money, which, as I had seen enough of soldiering, invested in the purchase of my discharge from the Household Cavalry. Such is my story of the Mysterious Valise.—*Chambers' Journal*.

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