

A 12,000 Pound Check

The hour grew late, and Mr. Brand paced his chamber in moody silence. The train had come in, but his messenger had not returned, and the merchant was troubled—troubled by a vague sort of doubt, which haunted him in spite of his faith in Lake. A merry, sober old trader of long experience had said that Lake was too young to fill the important position which he held, but Mr. Brand had never found his trust in Tom misplaced.

Having heard rumors concerning a house with which he had extensive dealings, the merchant had dispatched Lake to London, telling him to make inquiries, and in any case to get the partners of the firm in question to settle their account.

So Lake had gone from Liverpool to London. The time appointed for his return passed, and still he did not come.

A lady entered, and stole to the merchant's side. Her own sweet face was anxious, and there was a tremor in the music of her voice, as she said:

“Do you think he will be here to night, dear papa?”

“I hope so, Mary; but it is very late.”

“Is there no other train?”

“Only the night express, and that does not stop except at the central stations.”

“Perhaps he will come, papa; he would not mind coming ten miles, even if he had to walk.”

“He should not have missed the train,” said Mr. Brand, sternly; “punctuality is an imperative duty with men of business.”

“But, papa, something may have occurred to detain him.” “Nothing should detain a man who has given his word.”

The fair pleader was silenced; her father was angry, and, knowing his strictness of principle, and how inveterate was his dislike of any breach of discipline or duty, she did not venture to speak again.

The time dragged slowly on; Mr. Brand continued his restless walk, and Mary sat subdued and quiet, watching him. She saw that he was listening as the night express went whirling by, and from the depths of her heart there went a prayer that Lake would come safely home. The girl loved him, would have staked her life on his truth, and knew that he was not beyond his time through any weakness or wrong. Two slow weary hours passed. Mr. Brand was reading the commercial news; but for the first time in his life it did not interest him; he was thinking of the young clerk, and the heavy sum of money that would be in his possession should the London

firm have paid him. And Mary, reading her father's countenance, felt chilled and pained by the slur cast on her lover's honesty by his suspicions—her every thought was a denial to his doubts, and as the rapid clatter of a horse's feet rang out, she ran to the window.

“Look!” she said, dashing the curtains aside with eager hands; “look, papa, I said he would come—I knew he would.”

The merchant's stern face relaxed with a smile of pleasure; he was not emotional or demonstrative, but his daughter's gladness pleased him.

There were a few moments of expectancy, and then Tom Lake came in. He went straight to Mr. Brand, only noticing with a bow the lovely face whose glance thrilled his soul.

“They have paid,” he said, quietly, as he placed a thick pocket book in the merchant's hand, “but I think we were only just in time.”

“Indeed!”

“There was a consultation at the banker's before I could get the cash for the check.”

“Do you think they will break?”

“Hopelessly. They have given me an immense order, but it would not be wise to forward the goods.”

“You did not hint that we had the slightest fear?”

“No, but I was glad to get the money, £12,000 would have been a heavy loss.”

“And yet,” continued Tom, gravely, “this morning the odds were considerably against its ever reaching you.”

“How?”

Tom took two chairs, placed them side by side near the fire, led Mary to one and seated himself in the other. He had done his duty as the merchant's clerk, and now was Mr. Brand's prospective sin-in-law and partner.

“I had an adventure,” he said; “I was the hero of a strange story in a ride by express.”

Mary bent forward to listen—Tom clasped her hand in his own. Mr. Brand sat opposite them, interested by the speaker's manner, as he began:

When I got the check I had an idea that all might not be well, so as to make sure, I presented it at the banker's. There was, as I told you, a consultation before they cashed it, and while the consultation was going forward, I noticed a stranger looking at me intently. I knew the man in

my younger and wilder days. I had met him often at the race course, in billiard rooms, and in other places more or less respectable. Now he was changing a check for some petty amount, and was evidently astonished by the immensity of the order I had presented. I left the bank with my pocket-book full of notes, and found that I had lost the train. The next would be the night express, so I strolled into a billiard room. A man is just as safe with a fortune in his pocket as if he was penniless, so that he is wise enough to hold his tongue. There was some clever play going on, and I stood watching two players till some one challenged me to have a game. If I have one special vanity, it is my science with the cue. I accepted, and as I did so a strange feeling which had been growing upon me took a sudden turn and startled me.

My challenger was the man whom I had noticed at the banker's. There was nothing strange in the fact of his being in the room, one of his favorite resorts, but I was possessed by the vague shadow of a single idea. I had read somewhere of a man being followed and plundered in a train, and somehow I associated the story with the man before me. It was the first time I had ever paid him any particular attention, but I gave him full observation now. The more I looked at him the less I liked him. He was handsome, gentlemanly, with a fair form and elegant figure, full of suppleness and strength. His manner was singularly unassuming, his face frank and genial, but by looking closely at him, you could see something sinister looking in the depth and softness of his eyes.

I never liked a stranger to be affable and possessing, and my friend was the very pink of affability and grace.

We played an hour with alternating success; he was an amusing companion, well informed, and had traveled; but I was shy of conversation. I left him, and, still having some time to spare, went to the Temple.

When, at the expiration of thirty or forty minutes, I emerged into Fleet Street, almost the first person upon whom my gaze fell was my late antagonist at billiards.

I thought there was something more than a mere coincidence in this second meeting, since we stood together at the banker's. He was in a cigar-shop opposite.

Not a hundred yards from the Temple gate stood a man whom I recognized with a very welcome feeling. It was George Vixen, the detective.

He was fashionably dressed, and looked an aristocrat of the first water. I went up and greeted him as I should an old familiar friend, held out my hand and said:

'Come and drink a glass of wine with me; I have something to say.'

He shook hands in the most natural way possible. I took his arm and we entered the public bar of an adjacent hotel.

I told him my suspicion, told him of the sum in my possession, and of the journey I had to perform by rail.

I saw that, watching through the glass of the door, he was taking a mental photograph of the two men.

‘They mean business,’ said Vixen, quietly, ‘but I shall be with you. We must part at the door, or they will see that we have scented the game.’

‘And you,’ I said, ‘how will you act?’

‘I will travel to Liverpool by the night express.’

He left me. I had no fear now, knowing him to be a clever and determined fellow.

Taking a casual glance across the road, I saw my man with his companion. It was quite evident that they were tracking me, though I lost sight of them before reaching St. Paul’s.

I strolled along the churchyard, wandering nearly to Islington, then went through the city again before I made for the station; my acquaintance of the billiard room did not come in sight, though I kept well on the alert.

I took my ticket, lingering almost to the point of starting before I entered the carriage, but my man did not appear. Two men were in the compartment with me. I could not see the face of one, and the other was a stranger.

The bell rang. The guard had just time to put a bewildered old gentleman in by my side, and we were off.

The man whose face I had not seen turned toward me.

I could hardly express an exclamation. There was no mistaking that frank, genial countenance, nor the lurking devil in those eyes, whose softness was so sinister.

He had me then at last. Vixen had broken his promise, and I was left to travel that perilous journey alone, with the man who had followed me so skillfully—another who might be his confederate, and an old gentleman, who, after grumbling out his indignation against all railway servants and locomotive traveling in general, was fast asleep in the corner.

That the intentions of my billiard-player were bad, were manifested by the fact of his having assumed a false moustache and beard. They added to the beauty of his face, but left to his eyes that sleepy, cruel glitter that is characteristic of the Asiatic.

He spoke to me, remarked the oddity of our traveling companions, and grew unpleasantly familiar. I answered him, not wishing to appear churlish or afraid, knowing that I could trust something to my own strength, should the worst come.

We had made the last stoppage, and were rolling swiftly through the gloom, when among other

topics, our conversation touched on jewelry; He drew a showy ring from his finger, telling me it was a curious piece of workmanship, having a secret spring, which he said I could not discover.

I took it, searched in vain for the spring, then returned it to him. It dropped and rolled under my feet.

I stooped to pick it up, and so did he, but in a moment, while my hand was down, he had me tightly by the throat, and threw me to the carriage floor.

His confederate was upon me in an instant. I could scarcely breathe, and could not struggle, for a heavy knee was upon my chest, and two strong, brutal hands were crushing the life from my throat.

Though the horror of the situation did not last a minute, it seemed an eternity to me. I felt the ruffian's hand searching for the pocket-book, and I strained desperately for a chance of resistance.

Their work was nearly done. Cramped in that small space I was powerless, and the veins in my throat were swelling like sinuous bars, when the old gentleman in the corner awoke and came to my assistance. I heard a low whirr of some weapon in its descent, and my first assailant reeled from me stunned. Then the old gentleman, with a strength and rapidity of action wonderful to see in a person of his age, seized the scoundrel, lifted him away, and dashed him down on a seat.

There was a brief struggle, and then I heard a sharp click—scoundrel the second had a pair of handcuffs on his wrists.

'They were more prompt than I expected,' said the old gentleman, removing his woolen comforter, with which he fastened my first assailant's hands behind him, 'and a railway carriage does not afford much scope for a struggle.'

The pocket-book was safe. The ruffians were securely bound, and the gentleman who, without his spectacles and muffler, stood out in bold and pleasant relief as the detective, kept guard over them.

At the station they were handed over into the custody of the police. I was all right by that time. Vixen rode with me as far as the hotel nearest here, and tomorrow he will call to see me if I am any the worse for my ride by express."

The contents of the pocket book were Mary's bridal dowry.

The detective speaks of the senior partner in the firm of Brand & Lake as the most hospitable and generous man he ever met in the course of his professional career.

Lake was quite cured of his love for billiard playing. He had too narrow an escape, and he did not forget the lesson.

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