

A Bank-Note in Two Halves

WET and dreary. It is midwinter: the scene is Kirkington, on the London & Northwestern; the time, a quarter to eleven, just after the night ail had flashed through without stopping—bound for Liverpool and the north. The railway officials—pointsmen, signalmen, porters, platelayers—are collecting preparatory to going off duty for the night.

“Where’s Dan?” asks one of the crowd upon the platform.

“I saw him in the hut just after the quarter to eleven went through. Can’t have come to any harm, surely.”

“No; he said he’d seen something drop from the train, and he went down the line to pick it up.”

And Dan had picked up something. It was a basket, a common white, wicker basket, with a lid fastened down with a string. What did it contain? Refreshments? Dirty clothes? What?

A baby—a child half a dozen weeks old, no more. A pink and white piece of human china as fragile as Dresden, and as delicately fashioned and tinted as biscuit or Rose Pompadour.

“Where did you come across it?” asked one.

“Lying on the line just where it fell. Perhaps it didn’t fall, perhaps it was chucked out. What matter? I’ve got it, and got to look after it, that’s enough for me. Some day Maybe I’ll come across them as owns it, and then they shall pay me and take it back.”

“Is there nothing about him? Turn him over.”

The little mite’s linen was white and of fine material, but he lay upon an old shawl and a few bits of dirty flannel. All they found was a dilapidated purse, a common snaplock bag purse of faded brown leather. Inside was a brass thimble, a pawn ticket and the half of a Bank of England note for one hundred pounds.

“What good’s half a bank note to you?”

“Half a loaf is better than no bread.”

“Yes, but you can eat one, but you can’t pass the other. Won’t you catch it from your wife? How’ll you face her, Dan? What’ll she say?”

“She’ll say I done quite right,” replied Dan stoutly. “She’s a good sort, God bless her.”

“So are you, Dan, that’s a fact. God bless you, too.” Said more than one rough voice in softened accents. “Perhaps the brat’ll bring you luck after all.”

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Winter-tide again six years later, but this season is wet and slushy. Once more we are at Kirkington, a long straggling village, which might have slumbered on in its obscurity forever, had not the Northwestern line been carried close by it to give it a place in Bradshaw and a certain importance as a junction and center for goods traffic. But the activity was all about the station. All the permanent officials had houses and cottages there; in the village lived only the field laborers who worked at the neighboring estate, or sometimes lent their hand for a job of navvying on the line. These poor folk had a gruesome life of it, a hand-to-mouth struggle for bare existence against perpetual privation, accompanied by unremitting toil.

A new parson—Harold Treffry—had come lately to Kirkington. He was an earnest, energetic young man, who had won his spurs in an East End parish, and had now accepted this country living because it seemed to open up a new field of usefulness. He had plunged bravely into the midst of his work: he was forever going up and down among his parishioners, solacing and comforting, preaching manful endurance and trustfulness to all.

He is now paying a round of parochial visits, accompanied by his old college chum, who is spending Christmas with him.

“Yonder,” said Treffry, pointing to a thin thread of smoke which rose from some gaunt trees into the sullen, wintry air, “yonder is the house—if, indeed, it deserves so grand a name—the hovel, rather, of one whose case is the hardest of all the hard ones in my unhappy cure. This man is a mere hedger and ditcher, one who works for any master, most often for the railway, but who is never certain of a job all the year round. He has a swarm of young children, and he has just lost his wife. He is absolutely prostrated—aghast probably at the future before him, and his utter incapacity to do his duty by his motherless little ones. Jack!” said the parson, stopping short and suddenly, and looking straight into his companion’s face, “I wonder whether you could rouse him? If you could get him to make a sign; to cry or laugh, or take the smallest interest in common affairs. Jack, I believe you’re the very man. You might get at him through the children—that marvelous hanky-panky of yours—those surprising tricks—a child takes to you naturally at once. Try and make friends with these. Perhaps when the father sees them interested and amused he may warm a little, speak perhaps, approve, perhaps smile, and in the end give in. Jack, will you try?”

Jack Newbiggin was by profession a conveyancer, but nature had intended him for a new Houdin or a Wizard of the North. He was more than half a professional by the time he was full grown. In addition to the quick eyes and the facile wrist, he had the rarer gift of the suave manner and the face of brass. He had even studied mesmerism and clairvoyance, and could upon occasion surprise his audience considerably by his power.

They entered the miserable dwelling together. The children—eight of them—were skirmishing all over the floor. They were unmanageable and beyond the control of the eldest sister, who was busied in setting out the table for the mid-day meal; one other child, of six or seven, a bright-eyed, exceedingly beautiful boy, the least—were not nature's vagaries not well known—likely to be born among and belong to such surroundings, stood between the legs of the man himself, who had his back to the visitors and was crouching low over the scanty fire.

The man turned his head for a moment, gave a blank stare, then an imperceptible nod, and once more he glowered down upon the fire.

“Here, little ones, do you see this gentleman? [H]e's a conjurer. Know what a conjurer is Tommy?” cried the parson, catching up a mite of four or five from the floor. “No, not you: nor you, Sarah, nor you, Jacky”—and he ran through all their names.

They had now ceased their gambols and were staring hard at their visitors—the moment was propitious: Jack Newbiggin began. He had fortunately filled his pockets with nuts, oranges and cakes before leaving the parsonage, so he had half his apparatus ready to hand.

The pretty boy had very soon left the father at the fire, and had come over to join in the fun, going back, however, to exhibit his share of the spoil and describe voluminously what had occurred. This, and the repeated sounds of laughter, seemed to produce some impression on his. Presently he looked over his shoulder and said—but without animation—

“It be very good of you, sir, surely; very good for you to take so kindly to the little chicks. It does them good to laugh a bit, and it ain't much as they've had to make 'em lately.”

“It's good for all of us, now and again, I take it,” said Jack, desisting, and going toward him—the children gradually collecting in a far-off corner and comparing notes.

“You can't laugh, sir, if your heart's heavy; if you do, it can only be a sham.”

While he was speaking he took the Bible from the shelf, and resuming his seat, began to turn the leaves slowly over.

“I'm an untaught, rough countryman, sir, but I have heard tell that these strange things you do are only tricks; ain't it so?”

Here was, indeed, a hopeful symptom! He was roused, then, to take some interest in what had occurred.

“All trick, of course; it all comes of long practice,” said Jack, as he proceeded to explain some of the simple processes, hoping to enchain the man’s attention.

“That’s what I thought, sir, or I’d have given you a job to do. I’ve been in want of a real conjurer many a long day, and nothing less ’ll do. See here, sir,” he said, as he took a small, carefully folded paper from between the leaves of the Bible; “do you see this?”

It was half a Bank of England note for one hundred pounds.

“Now, sir, could any conjurer help me to the other half?”

“How came you by it?” Jack asked at once.

“I’ll tell you, sir, short as I can make it. Conjurer or no conjurer, you’ve got a kindly heart, and I’m am sure that you’ll help me if you can.”

Dan then described how he had picked up the basket fro the quarter-to-eleven Liverpool express.

“There was the lin[e]n; I’ve kept it. See here; all marked quite pretty and proper, with lace round the edges, as tough its mother loved to make the little one smart.”

Jack examined the linen; it bore a monogram and crest. The first he made out to mean H.L.M., and the crest was plainly two hammers crossed and the motto, “I strike”—not a common crest—and he never remembered to have seen it before.

“And this was all?”

“’Cept the bank-note. That was in a poor old purse with a pawn-ticket and a thimble. I kept them all.”

Like a true detective, Jack examined every article minutely. The purse bore the name Hester Gorrigan in rude letters inside, and the pawn ticket made out in the same name.

“I cannot give you much hope that I shall succeed, but I will do my best. Will you trust me with the note for a time?”

“Surely, sir, with the greatest of pleasure. If you could but find the other half it would give Harry—that’s what we call him—such a grand start in life; schooling and the price of binding him to some honest trade.”

Jack shook the man’s hand, promised to do his best and left the cottage.

When Jack Newbiggin got back to the parsonage he found that his host had accepted an invitation for them both to dine at “Big House,” as it was called, the country-seat of the Squire of the Parish.

They were cordially received at the “Big House.” Jack was handed over forthwith to his old friends, who, figuratively, rushed into his arms. They were London acquaintances no more; of the sort we meet here and there and everywhere during the season, who care for us and we for them, as much as for South Sea Islanders, but whom we greet with rapturous effusion when we meet them in a strange place. Jack knew the lady whom he escorted into the dinner as a gossip dame, who, when his back was turned, made as much sport of him as of her other friends.

“I have been sighting your battles all day,” began Mrs. Sitwell.

“Was it necessary? I should have thought myself too insignificant.”

“They were talking at lunch of your wonderful knack in conjuring, and some one said that the skill might prove inconvenient—when you played cards, for instance.”

“A charitable imputation! With whom did it originate?”

“Sir Lewis Mallaby.”

“Please point him out to me.”

He was shown a grave, scowling face upon the right of the hostess—a face like a mask, its surface rough and wrinkled, through which the eyes shone out with baleful light, like corpse candles in a sepulcher.

“Pleasant creature! I’d rather not meet him alone on a dark night.”

“He has a terrible character, certainly. Turned his wife out of doors because of the want of an heir. It is this want of children to inherit his title and estates which preys upon his mind, they say, and makes him so morose and melancholy.”

Jack let his companion chatter on. It was his habit to get all the information possible about any company in which he found himself for his own purposes as a clairvoyant, and when Mrs. Sitwell dragged, he plied her with artless questions, and led her on from one person to another, making mental notes to serve him hereafter. It is thus, by careful and laborious preparation, that many of the strange and mysterious feats of the clairvoyant conjurer are performed.

When the whole party was assembled in the drawing-room after dinner a chorus of voices, headed by that of the hostess, summoned Jack to his work. There appeared to be only one dissentient—Sir Lewis Mallaby—who not only did not trouble himself to back up the invitation, but when the performance was actually begun was at no pains to conceal his contempt and disgust.

The conjurer made the conventional plum pudding in a hat, fired wedding rings into quartern loaves, did all manner of card tricks, knife tricks, pistol tricks, and juggled on conscientiously through his repertoire. There was never a smile on Sir Lewis' face; he sneered unmistakably. Finally, with an ostentation that savored of rudeness, he took out his watch, a gold repeater, looked at it, and unmistakably yawned.

Jack hungered for that watch directly after he saw it. Perhaps through it he might make its owner uncomfortable, if only for a moment. But how to get it into his hands. He asked for a watch, a dozen were offered. No, none of these would do. It must be a gold watch, a repeater. Sir Lewis Mallaby's was the only one in the room, and he at first distinctly refused to lend it. But so many earnest entreaties were addressed to him, the hostess leading the attack, that he could not in common courtesy continue to refuse. With something like a growl he took his watch off the chain and handed it to Jack Newbiggin.

A curious, old-fashioned watch it was, which would have gladdened the heart of a watch collector—all jeweled and enameled, adorned with crest and inscription—an heir-loom, which had probably been in the Mallaby family for years. Jack looked it over curiously, meditatively, then suddenly raising his eyes he stared intently into Sir Lewis Mallaby's face, and almost as quickly dropped them again.

"This is far too valuable," he said courteously, "too much of a treasure to be risked in any conjuring trick; an ordinary modern watch I might replace, but not a work of art like this."

And he handed it back to Sir Lewis, who received it with ill-concealed satisfaction. He was as much pleased, probably, at Jack's expression of possible failure in the proposed trick as at the recovery of his property.

Another watch, however, was pounded up into a jelly, and brought out whole from a cabinet in an adjoining room; and this trick successfully accomplished, Jack Newbiggin, who was now completely on his mettle, passed on to higher flights. He had spent the vacation of the year previous in France as the pupil of a wizard of European fame, and had mastered many of the strange feats which are usually associated with clairvoyance. There is something especially uncanny about these tricks, and Jack's reputation rapidly increased with his new exhibition of his powers. Thanks to his cross-examination of Mrs. Sitwell at dinner, he was in possession of many facts connected with the company, although mostly strangers to him; and some of his hits were so palpably happy that he raised shouts of surprise, followed by that terrified hush which not uncommonly succeeds the display of seemingly supernatural powers.

"Oh, but this is too preposterous," Sir Lewis Mallaby was heard to say, quite angrily. The continued applause profoundly disgusted him. "This is the merest charlatanism. It must be put an end to. It is the commonest imposture. These are things he had coached up in advance. Let him be tried with something which upon the face of it he cannot have learned beforehand by artificial means."

“Try him, Sir. Lewis, try him yourself,” cried several voices.

“I scarcely like to lend myself to such folly, to encourage so pitiful an exhibition.”

But he seemed to be conscious that further protest would tell in Jack’s favor.

“I will admit that you have considerable power in this strange branch of necromancy if you will answer a few questions of mine.”

“Proceed,” said Jack, gravely meeting his eyes firmly and without flinching.

“Tell me what is most on my mind at this present moment.”

“The want of a male heir,” Jack replied promptly, and thanked Mrs. Sitwell in his heart.

“Pshaw! You have learned from Burke that I have no children,” said Sir Lewis, boldly, but he was a little taken aback. “Anything else?”

“The memory of a harsh deed that you now strive in vain to redeem.”

“This borders on impertinence,” said Sir Lewis, with a hot flush on his cheek and passion in his eyes. “But let us leave abstractions and try tangible realities. Can you tell me what I have in this pocket?” He touched the left breast of his tail coat.

“A pocketbook”

“Bah! Everyone carries a pocketbook in his pocket.”

“But, do you?” asked several of the bystanders, all of whom were growing deeply interested in this strange duel.

Sir Lewis Mallaby confessed that he did, and produced it—an ordinary morocco leather purse and pocketbook all in one.

“Are you prepared to go on?” said the Baronet, haughtily to Jack.

“Certainly.”

“What does this pocketbook contain?”

“Evidence.”

The contest between them was now *a l’outrance*.

“Evidence of what?”

“Of the facts that must sooner or later come to light. You have in that pocketbook links in a long chain of circumstances which, however carefully concealed or anxiously dreaded, time in its inexorable course must bring eventually to light. There is no bond, says the Spanish proverb, which is not some day fulfilled, no debt that in the long run is not paid.”

“What ridiculous nonsense! I give you my word, this pocketbook contains nothing—absolutely nothing—but a Bank of England note for £100.”

“Stay!” cried Jack Newbiggin, facing him abruptly and speaking in a voice of thunder. “It isn’t so—you know it—it is only the half!”

And as he spoke he took the crumpled paper from the hands of the really stupefied Baronet. It was exhibited for inspection—the half of a Bank of England note for £100.

There was much applause at this harmless and successful *denouement* of what threatened at one stage to lead to altercation, perhaps to a quarrel. But Jack Newbiggin was not satisfied.

“As you have dared me to do my worst,” said Jack, “listen now to what I have to say. Not only did I know that was only the half of a note, but I know where the other half is to be found.”

So much the better for me,” said the Baronet, with an effort to appear humorous.

“That other half was given to—shall I say, Sir Lewis?”

Sir Lewis nodded indifferently.

“It was given to one Hester Gorrigan, an Irish nurse, six years ago. It was the price of a deed of which you—”

“Silence! Say no more,” cried Sir Lewis in horror. “I see you know all. I swear I have had no peace since I was tempted so sorely, and so weakly fell. But I am prepared to make all the restitution and reparation in my power—unless, unhappily, unless it be already too late.”

Even while he was speaking his face turned ghastly white, his lips were covered with a fine white foam, he made one or two convulsive attempts to steady himself, then, with a wild, terrified look around, he fell heavily to the floor.

It was a paralytic seizure. They took him up-stairs and tended to him; but the case was desperate from the first. Only just before the end did he so far recover the power of speech as to be able to make full confession of what had occurred.

Sir Lewis had been a younger son; the eldest had inherited the family title, but died early, leaving his widow to give him a posthumous heir, the title remaining in abeyance until

time showed whether the infant was a boy or a girl. It proved to be a boy, whereupon Lewis Mallaby, who had the earliest intimation of the fact put into execution a nefarious project which he had carefully concocted in advance. A girl was obtained from a foundling hospital and substituted by Lady Mallaby's nurse, who was in Lewis' pay, for the newly born son and heir. This son and heir was handed over to another accomplice, Hester Gorrigan, who was bribed with £100, half down in the shape of a half note, the other half to be paid when she announced her safe arrival in Texas with the stolen child. Mrs. Gorrigan had an unquenchable thirst, and in her transit between London and Liverpool allowed her precious charge to slip out of her hands, with the consequences we know.

It was the watch borrowed from Sir Lewis Mallaby which first aroused Jack's suspicions. It bore the motto, "I strike"—which was marked upon the linen of the child that Dan Blockit picked up at Kirklington station. The initial of the name Mallaby coincided with the monogram H.L.M. Jack rapidly drew his conclusions, and made a bold shot, which hit the mark as we have seen.

Lewis Mallaby's confession soon reinstated the rightful heir, and Dan Blockit in after years had no reason to regret the generosity which had prompted him to give the little foundling the shelter of his rude home.—*Cassell's Magazine*.

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