

The Black Bag

By Louis Joseph Vance
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The elder man turned and hurried toward the main entrance. Kirkwood took the chair he had vacated. To his disgust, he found himself temporarily dumb. No flicker of thought illuminated the darkness of his confusion. How was he to open a diverting conversation with a young



"Permit me to introduce an old friend."

woman whom he had met under auspices so extraordinary? Any attempt to glaze the situation, he felt, would be futile. And somehow he did not care to render himself ridiculous in her eyes, little as he knew her. Inevitably dumb, he sat watching her, smiling fatuously, until it was borne in on him that he was staring like a boor and grinning like an idiot. Convinced, he blushed for himself, something which served to make him more tongue-tied than ever. As for his involuntary protegee, she exhibited such sweet composure that he caught himself wondering if she really appreciated the seriousness of her parent's predicament—if, for that matter, its true nature were known to her at all. Calendar, he believed, was capable of prevarication, polite and impolite. Had he lied to his daughter or to Kirkwood? To both probably, to the former alone not improbably. That the adventurer had told him the desperate truth Kirkwood was quite convinced, but he now began to believe that the girl had been put off with some fictitious explanation. Her tranquillity and self control were remarkable otherwise. She seemed very young to possess those qualities in such eminent degree.

She was looking wearily past him, her gaze probing some unguessed abyss of thought. Kirkwood felt himself privileged to stare in wonder. Her naive aloofness of pose gripped his imagination powerfully—the more so perhaps since it seemed eloquent of her intention to remain enigmatic—but by no means more powerfully than the unaided appeal of her loveliness. Presently the girl herself relieved the tension of the situation, fairly startling the young man by going straight to the heart of things. Without preface or warning, lifting her gaze to his, "My name is really Dorothy Calendar," she observed. And then, noting his astonishment, "You would be privileged to doubt under the circumstances," she added. "Please let us be frank."

"Since it is to be confidences" (this she questioned with an all but imperceptible lifting of the eyebrows, "I don't mind telling you my own name is really Philip Kirkwood.") "And you are an old friend of my father's?"

He opened his lips, but only to close them without speaking. The girl moved her shoulders with a shiver of disdain.

"I knew it wasn't so." "You know it would be hard for a young man like myself to be a very old friend," he countered lamely.

"How long, then, have you known each other?" "Must I answer?" "Please."

"Between three and four hours." "I thought as much." She stared past him, troubled. Abruptly she said, "Please smoke."

"Shall I? If you wish it, of course?" She repeated, "Please."

"We were to wait ten minutes or so," she continued.

He produced his cigarette case. "If you care to smoke it will seem an excuse." He lighted his cigarette. "And then you may talk to me," she concluded calmly.

"I would gladly if I could guess what would interest you."

"Yourself. Tell me about yourself." she commanded.

"It would bore you," he responded tritely, confused.

"No. You interest me very much." She made the statement quietly, contemptuous of coquetry.

"Very well, then. I am Philip Kirkwood, an American."

"Nothing more?" "Little worth retelling."

"I'm sorry." "Why?" he demanded, piqued.

"Because you have merely indicated that you are a wealthy American."

"Why wealthy?" "If not you would have some aim in life, a calling or profession."

"And you think I have none?" "Unless you consider it your vocation to be a wealthy American."

"I don't. Besides, I'm not wealthy. In point of fact, I'm—He pulled up short on the verge of declaring himself a pauper. "I am a painter."

Her eyes lightened with interest. "An artist?" "I hope so. I don't paint signs—or houses," he remarked.

Amused, she laughed softly. "I suspected it," she declared.

"Not really?" "It was your way of looking at things that made me guess it—the painter's way. I have often noticed it."

"As if mentally blending colors all the time?" "Yes; that and—seeing flaws."

"I have discovered none," he told her brazenly.

But again her secret cares were claiming her thoughts, and the gay, inconsequential banter died upon her scarlet lips as a second time her glance ranged away, sounding mysterious depths of anxiety.

Provoked, he would have continued the chatter. "I have confessed," he persisted. "You know everything of material interest about me. And your self?"

"I am merely Dorothy Calendar," she answered.

"Nothing more?" He laughed.

"That is all, if you please, for the present."

"I am to content myself with the promise of the future?"

"The future," she told him seriously, "is tomorrow, and tomorrow." She moved restlessly in her chair, eyes and lips pathetic in their distress.

"Please, we will go now, if you are ready."

"I am quite ready, Miss Calendar."

He rose. A waiter brought the girl's cloak and put it in Kirkwood's hands. He held it until, smoothing the wrists of her long white gloves, she stood up, then placed the garment upon her white young shoulders, troubled by the indefinable sense of intimacy imparted by the privilege. She permitted him this personal service. He felt that she trusted him; that out of her gratitude had grown a simple and almost childish faith in his generosity and consideration.

As she turned to go her eyes thanked him with an unfathomable glance. He was again conscious of that esoteric disturbance in his temples. Puzzled, hazily analyzing the sensation, he followed her to the lobby.

A page brought him his topcoat, hat and stick. Tipping the child from sheer force of habit, he desired a gigantic porter, impressively ornate in hotel livery, to call a hansom. Together they passed out into the night, he and the girl.

Beneath a permanent awning of steel and glass she waited patiently, slender, erect, heedless of the attention she attracted from wayfarers.

A cab drew in at the block. The porter clapped an arc of wickerwork over its wheel to protect the girl's skirts. She ascended to the seat.

Kirkwood, dropping sixpence in the porter's palm, prepared to follow. But a hand fell upon his arm, peremptory, inexorable. He faced about, frowning, to confront a slight, hatched faced man, somewhat under medium height, dressed in a sack suit and wearing a derby well forward over his eyes, that were hard and bright.

"Mr. Calendar?" said the man tensely. "I presume I needn't name my business. I'm from the Yard."

"My name is not Calendar."

The detective smiled wearily. "Don't be a fool, Calendar," he began. But the porter's hand fell upon his shoulder, and the giant bent low to bring his mouth close to the other's ear. Kirkwood heard indistinctly his own name, followed by Calendar's, and the words: "Never fear. I'll point him out."

"But the woman?" argued the detective, unconvinced, staring into the cab.

"Am I not at liberty to have a lady dine with me in a public restaurant?" interposed Kirkwood without raising his voice.

The hard eyes looked him up and down without favor. Then: "Beg pardon, sir. I see my mistake," said the detective brusquely.

"I am glad you do," returned Kirkwood grimly. "I fancy it will bear investigation."

He mounted the step. "Imperial theater," he told the driver, giving the first address that occurred to him. It could be changed. For the moment the main issue was to get the girl out of the range of the detective's interest.

He slipped into his place as the hansom wheeled into the turbid tide of westbound traffic.

So Calendar had escaped, after all! Moreover, he had told the truth to Kirkwood.

By his side the girl moved uneasily. "Who was that man?" she inquired.

Kirkwood sought her eyes and found them wholly ingenuous. It seemed that Calendar had not taken her into his confidence, after all. She was therefore in no way implicated in her father's affairs. Inexplicably the young man's heart felt lighter. "A mistake. The fellow took me for some one he knew," he told her carelessly.

The assurance satisfied her. She rested quietly, wrapped up in personal concerns. Suddenly Kirkwood was recalled to a sense of duty by a glimpse of Hyde Park Corner. He turned to the girl. "I didn't know where you wished to go."

She seemed to realize his meaning with surprise, as one whose thoughts have strayed afar recalled to an imperative world.

"Oh, did I forget? Tell him, please, to drive to No. 9 Froggall street, Bloomsbury."

Constraint hung like a curtain between the two, a silence which the young man forbore to moderate, finding more delight than he had cared (or dared) confess to in contemplation of the pure girlish profile so close to him.

She seemed quite unaware of him, lost in thought, large eyes sober, lips serious that were fashioned for laughter, round little chin firm with some occult resolution. It was not hard to fancy her nerves keyed to a high pitch of courage and determination nor easy to guess for what reason. Watching always, keenly sensitive to the beauty of each salient line betrayed by the flying lights, Kirkwood's own consciousness lost itself in a profligate, even a perilous, labyrinth of conjecture.

The cab stopped. Both occupants came to their senses with a little start. The girl leaned out over the apron, recognized the house she sought in one swift glance, testified to the recognition with a hushed exclamation and began to arrange her skirts. Kirkwood, unheeding her faint hearted protests, jumped out, interposing his cane between her skirts and the wheel. Simultaneously he received a vivid mental photograph of the locality.

Froggall street proved to be one of those byways a short block in length which, hemmed in on all sides by a meaner purlieu, have (even in Bloomsbury) escaped the sordid commercial eye of the keeper of furnished lodgings, retaining jealously something of the old time dignity and reserve that were their pride in the days before society swarmed upon Mayfair and Belgrave.

Its houses loomed tall, with many windows, mostly lightless, materially aggravating that air of isolate, cold dignity which distinguishes the Englishman's castle. Here and there stood one less bedragged than its neighbors, though all, without exception, spoke assertively of respectability down to the heel, but fighting tenaciously for existence. Some, vanguards of that imminent day when the boarding house should reign supreme, wore with shamefaced air placards of estate agents advertising their susceptibility to sale or lease. In the company of the latter was No. 9.

The American noted the circumstance subconsciously at a moment when Miss Calendar's hand, small as a child's, warm and compact in its white glove, lay in his own. And then she was on the sidewalk, her face, upturned to his, vivacious with excitement.

"You have been so kind," she told him warmly, "that one hardly knows how to thank you, Mr. Kirkwood."

"I have done nothing—nothing at all," he mumbled, disturbed by a sudden unreasoning alarm for her.

She passed quickly to the shelter of the pillared portico. He followed clumsily. On the doorstep she turned, offering her hand. He took and retained it.

"Good night," she said.

"I'm to understand that I'm dismissed, then?" he stammered ruefully. She evaded his eyes. "I—thank you. I have no further need."

"You are quite sure? Won't you believe me at your service?" She laughed uneasily. "I'm all right now."

"I can do nothing more—sure?" "Nothing. But you—you make me almost sorry I can't impose still further upon your good nature."

"Please don't hesitate."

"Aren't you very persistent, Mr. Kirkwood?" Her fingers moved in his. Burning with the reproach, he released



"Good night," she said.

them and turned to her so woebegone a countenance that she repented of her severity. "Don't worry about me, please. I am truly safe now. Some day I hope to be able to thank you adequately. Good night."

Her pass key grated in the lock. Opening the door disclosed a dark and uninviting entry hall, through which there breathed an air heavy with the dank and dusty odor of untenanted rooms. Hesitating on the threshold, over her shoulder the girl smiled kindly upon her commandeered esquire and stepped within.

He lifted his hat automatically. The door closed with an echoing slam. He turned to the waiting cab, fumbling for change.

"I'll walk," he told the cabby, paying him off.

The hansom swept away to a tune of hammering hoofs, and quiet rested upon the street as Kirkwood turned the nearest corner in an unpleasant temper, puzzled and discontented. It seemed hardly fair that he should have been dragged into so promising an adventure by his ears (so to put it) only to be thus summarily called upon to write "Finis" beneath the incident.

He rounded the corner and walked halfway to the next street, coming to an abrupt and rebellious pause by the entrance to a covered alleyway, of two minds as to his proper course of action.

In the background of his thoughts No. 9 Froggall street reared its five story facade, sinister and forbidding. He reminded himself of its unlighted windows, of its sign "To Be Let," of the effluvia of desolation that had saluted him when the door swung wide. A deserted house, and the girl alone in it—was it right for him to leave her so?

CHAPTER IV.

THE covered alleyway gave upon Quadrant mews, or so declared a notice painted on the dead wall of the passage.

Overhead, complaining as it swayed in the wind, hung the smirched and weather worn signboard of the Hog-in-the-Pound public house, wherefrom escaped sounds of such revelry by night as is indulged in by the British workman in hours of ease. At the curb in front of the house of entertainment, dejected animals drooping between their shafts, two hansom stood in waiting until such time as the lords of their destinies should see fit to salify forth and inflict themselves upon a cab hungry populace. As Kirkwood turned a third vehicle rumbled up out of the mews.

For between his curiosity about and his conceit for the girl he was being led back to No. 9 by the nose, as it were, hardly willingly at best. Profoundly stupefied by the contemplation of his own temerity, he yet returned unflinching. He who had for so long plumed himself upon his strict supervision of his personal affairs and equally steadfast unconsciousness of his neighbor's business now found himself in the very act of pushing in where he was not wanted, as he had been advised in well nigh as many words.

He turned up Froggall street with the manner of one out for a leisurely evening stroll. Simultaneously from the farther corner another pedestrian

debouched into the thoroughfare—a mere moving shadow at that distance, brother to blacker shadows that skulked in the fenced areas and unlively entries of that poorly lighted block. The hush was something beyond belief when one remembered the nearness of blatant Tottenham Court road.

Kirkwood conceived a wholly senseless curiosity about the other wayfarer. The man was walking rapidly, heels ringing with uncouth loudness, cane tapping the flagging at brief intervals. Both sounds ceased abruptly as their cause turned in beneath one of the porticoes. In the emphatic and unnatural quiet that followed Kirkwood, stepping more lightly, fancied that another shadow followed the first, noiselessly and with furtive stealth.

Could it be No. 9 into which they had passed? The American's heart beat a livelier tempo at the suggestion. If it had not been No. 9—he was still too far away to tell—it was certainly one of the dwellings adjacent thereto. The improbable possibility (but why improbable?) that the girl was being joined by her father or by friends annoyed him with illogical intensity.

Approaching No. 9 with laggard feet, he manufactured a desire to light a cigarette as a cover for his design were he spied upon by unsuspected eyes. Came under arm, hands cupped to shield a vesta's flame, he stopped directly before the portico, turning his eyes askance to the shadowed doorway, and made a discovery sufficiently startling to hold him spellbound and incidentally to scorch his gloves before he thought to drop the match.

The door of No. 9 stood ajar, a black interval an inch or so in width showing between its edge and the jamb.

Suspicion and alarm set his wits a-tingle. More distinctly he recalled the jarring bang, accompanied by the metallic click of the latch, when the girl had shut herself in—and him out. Now, some person or persons had followed her, neglecting the most obvious precaution of a householder. And why? Why but because the intruders did not wish the sound of closing to be audible to her—or those—within?

He reminded himself that it was all none of his affair, decided to pass on and go his way in peace and, impulsively swinging about, marched straight away for the unclosed door.

"Old ard, gunner?"

Kirkwood halted on the cry, faltering in indecision. Should he take the plunge or withdraw? Synchronously he was conscious that a man's figure had detached itself from the shadows beneath the nearest portico and was drawing nearer, with every indication of haste to intercept him.

"Ere now, gunner, yer mykin' a mistyke. You don't live 'ere."

"How do you know?" demanded Kirkwood crisply, tightening his grip on his stick.

Was this the second shadow he had seemed to see—the confederate of him who had entered No. 9, a sentry to forestall interruption? If so, the fellow lacked discretion, though his determination that the American should not interfere was undeniable. It was with an ugly and truculent manner, if more warily, that the man closed in.

"I knows. You clear hout or—"

He flung out a hand with the plausible design of grasping Kirkwood by the collar. The latter lifted his stick, deflecting the arm, and incontinently landed his other fist forcibly on the fellow's chest. The man reeled back, cursing. Before he could recover Kirkwood calmly crossed the threshold, closed the door and put his shoulder to it. In another instant, fumbling in the darkness, he found the bolts and drove them home.

And it was done, the transformation accomplished. His inability to refrain from interfering had encompassed his downfall, had changed a peaceable and law abiding alien within British shores into a busybody, a trespasser, a misdemeanant, a—yes, for all he knew to the contrary, in the estimation of the law, a burglar, prime candidate for a convict's stripes.

"The devil!" he whispered. "What an ass, what an utter ass, I am!"

Behind him the knob was rattled urgently to an accompaniment of feet shuffling on the stone, and immediately, if he were to make a logical deduction from the rasping and scraping sound within the door casing, the bell pull was violently agitated, without, however, eliciting any response from the bell itself, wherever that might be situated, after which, as if in despair, the outsider again rattled and jerked the knob.

Be his status what it might, whether servant of the household, its caretaker or a night watchman, the man was palpably determined both to get himself in and Kirkwood out and yet, curious to consider, determined to gain his end without attracting undue attention. Kirkwood had expected to hear the knocker's thunder as soon as the bell failed to give tongue, but it did not sound, although there was a knocker. Kirkwood himself had remarked that antiquated and rusty bit of ironmongery affixed to the middle panel of the door. And it made him feel sure that something surreptitious and lawless was, in process within those walls; that the confederate without, having failed to prevent a stranger from entering, left unemployed a means so certain sure to rouse the occupants.

But his inferential analysis of this phase of the proceedings was summarily interrupted by that identical alarm. In a trice the house was filled with

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Using clubs, awakened to sonorous riot by the crash and clamor of the knocker, and Kirkwood stood fully two yards away, his heart hammering wildly, his nerves a-jingle, much as if the resounding blows had landed upon his own person rather than on stout oaken plank.

Ere he had time to wonder the racket ceased, and from the street filtered voices in altercation. Listening, Kirkwood's pulses quickened, and he laughed uncertainly for pure relief, retreating to the door and putting an ear to a crack.

The accents of one speaker were new in his hearing, stern, crisp, quick with the spirit of authority which animates that most austere and dignified limb of the law to be encountered the world over, a London bobby.

"Now, then, my man, what do you want there? Come, now; speak up and step out into the light where I can see you."

The response came in the sniffling snarl of the London ne'er-do-well, the unemployable rogue whose chief occupation seems to be to march in the ranks of the unemployed on the occasion of its annual demonstrations.

"Le' me alone, carntcher? Ah'm d'inn' no 'arm, officer."

"Didn't you hear me? Step out here. Ah, that's better. No harm, eh? Perhaps you'll explain how there's no harm breakin' into unoccupied 'ouses?"

"Gorblimy, 'ow was I to know! 'Ere's a toff 'ands me sixpence fer hopenin' 'is cab door to-day, an', sezee, 'My man,' 'e sez, 'ye've got a 'onest fyee. W'y doncher work?' sezee. 'Ow can I? sez I. 'Ere 'm 'i bout of a job these six months, lookin' fer work every dye an' carn't find it. Sezee, 'Come an' see me this hevenin' at me 'ome, noine, Froggall stryete,' 'e sez, an'—"

"That'll do for now. You borrow a pencil and paper and write it down, and I'll read it when I've got more time. I never heard the like of it. This 'ouse hasn't been lived in these two years. Move on, and don't let me find you round 'ere again. March, I say!"

There was more of it—more whining explanations artfully tintured with abuse, more terse commands to depart, the whole concluding with scraping footsteps, diminuendo, and another perfunctory rattle of the knob as the bobby, having shooped the putative evildoer off, assured himself that no damage had actually been done. Then he, too, departed, satisfied and self righteous, leaving a badly frightened but very grateful amateur criminal to pursue his self appointed career of crime.

He had no choice other than to continue. In point of fact, it had been insanity just then to back out and run the risk of apprehension at the hands of that ubiquitous bobby, who, for as he knew, might be lurking not a dozen yards distant, watchful for just such a sequel. Still, Kirkwood hesitated with the best of excuses. Reassuring as he had found the sentinel's extemporized yarn, proof positive that the fellow had had no more right to prohibit a trespass than Kirkwood to commit one, at the same time he found himself pardonably a prey to emotions of the utmost consternation and alarm. If he feared to leave the house he had no warrant whatever to assume that he would be permitted to regain ransy

To be continued.

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