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Black Bag By Louis Joseph Vance

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moughtfully Kirkwood fell back to his former point of observation, now the richer by another object of suspicion, the hostelry. Mrs. Hallam was waiting and watching for some one to enter or to leave that establishment. seemed a reasonable inference to iraw. Well, then, so was Kirkwood no less than the lady. He deemed it quite conceivable that their objects were identical.

He started to beguile the time by wondering what she would do ifof a sudden he abandoned this line of speculation and, catching his breath, held it, almost afraid to credit the truth that for once his anticipations e being realized under his very

Against the lighted doorway of the Hotel du Commerce the figures of two men were momentarily sketched as ther came hurriedly forth, and of the two one was short and stout and even et a distance seemed to bear himself with an accent of assertiyeness, while he other was tall and heavy of shoul-

side by side they marched in step cross the embankment to the head of he quay gangway, descending without panse to the landing stage. Kirkwood, all could hear their footfalls ringing bollow rhythm on the planks of the nclined way, could even discern Calmars unlovely profile in dim relief eneath one of the waterside lights, nd he recognized unmistakably Mulendy's deep voice, grumbling inartic-

At the outset he had set after them ith intent to accost Calendar, but their ace had been swift and his irresolute. e hung fire on the issue, dreading to eveal himself, unable to decide which ere the better course—to pursue the en or to wait and discover what rs. Hallam was about. In the eng walted and had his disappointment

For Mrs. Hallam did nothing intelliible. Had she driven over to the ho-



200d kept at a discreet distance. hard upon the departure of the he would have believed that she seeking Dorothy and would, furmore, have elected to crowd their view if she succeeded in obtaining with the girl. But she did nothing e sort. For a time the flacre reed as it had been ever since stopthen, evidently admonished by the driver straightened up, out his pipe, disentangled whip and wheeled the age back on the way it had come, pearing in a dark side street leadstward from the embankment. awood was, then, to believe that Hallam, having taken all that e and having waited for the two

thrers to appear, had been conwith sight of them. He could believe that of the woman. It

started across the driveway after acre, but it was lost in a tangle streets before he could make chasing or not, and, pondering man's singular action, he rehis steps to the promenade rail.

father's party. He had a suspicion that Mulready's attitude had made it seem advisable to Calendar either to leave the girl behind in England or to segregate her from his associates in Antwerp. If not lodged in another quarter of the city or left behind she was probably traveling on ahead to a destination which he could by no means guess. And Mrs. Hallam was looking for the girl. If there were really jewels in that gladstone bag Calendar would naturally have had no hesitation about intrusting them to his daughter's care, and Mrs. Hallam avowedly sought nothing else. How the woman had found out that such was the case Kirkwood did not stop to reckon unless he explained it on the proposition that she was a person of remarkable address. It made no

matter one way or the other. He had lost Mrs. Hallam, but Calendar and Mulready he could put his finger on. They had undoubtedly gone off to the Alethea to confer again with Stryker -that was, unless they proposed sailing on the brigantine, possibly at turn

Panic gripped his soul and shook it, as a terrier shakes a rat, when he conceived this frightful proposition.

of tide that night.

In his confusion of mind he evolved spontaneously an entirely new hypothesis-Dorothy had already been spirfted aboard the vessel; Calendar and his confederates, delaying to join her from enigmatic motives, were now aboard, and presently the word would be, Up anchor and away!

Were they again to elude him? Not, he swore, if he had to swim for it. And he had no wish to swim. The clothes he stood in, with what was left of his self respect, were all that he could call his own on that side of the North sea. Not a boatman on the Scheldt would so much as consider accepting three English pennies in exchange for boat hire. In brief, it began to look as if he were either to swim or to steal a boat.

Upon such slender threads of circumstance depends our boasted moral health. In one fleeting minute Kirkwood's conception of the law of mine and thine, its foundations already insidiously undermined by a series of cumulative misfortunes, toppled crashing to its fall and was not.

He was wholly unconscious of the change. Beneath him, in a space between the quays bridged by the gangway, a number of rowboats, a putative score, lay moored for the night and gently rubbing against each other with the soundless lift and fall of the river. For all that Kirkwood could determine to the contrary, the lot lay at the mercy of the public. Nowhere about was he able to discern a watchman.

Without a quiver of hesitation-moments were invaluable, if what he feared were true-he strode to the gangway, passed down and with absolute nonchalance dropped into the nearest boat, stepping from one to another until he had gained the outermost. To his joy he found a pair of oars stowed beneath the thwarts.

CHAPTER XX.

F Kirkwood had paused to moralize upon the discovery, he would have laid it all at the door of his lucky star and would have been wrong. We who have never stooped to petty larceny know that the oars had been placed there at the direction of his evil genius bent upon facilitating his descent into the avernus of crime.

Unhitching the painter, he set one oar against the gunwale of the boat and with a powerful thrust sent his own (let us so call it for convenience) stern first out upon the river, then sat him composedly down, fitted the oars to their locks and began to pull straight across stream, trusting to the current to carry him down to the Alethea. He had already marked down that vessel's riding light and that not without a glew of gratitude to see it still aloft and in proper juxtaposition to the river

bank, proof that it had not moved. He pulled a good oar, reckoned his distance prettily and, shipping the blades at just the right moment, brought the little boat in under the brigantine's counter with scarce a jar. An element of surprise he held essential to the success of his plan, whatever that might turn out to be.

Standing up, he caught the brigantine's after rail with both hands, one mind whether it was worth loined boat, and lifted his head above of which held the painter of the purthe deck line. A short survey of the deserted after deck gave him further Dorother be told himself he under- in sight. He may have been keeping assurance. The anchor watch was not Dorothy was no longer of her | well forward by Stryker's instructions. or he may have crept off for forty winks. Whatever the reason for his absence from the post of duty, Kirkwood was relieved not to have him todeal with and, drawing himself gently in over the rail, made the painter fast: and stepped noiselessly over toward the lighted oblong of the companionway. A murmur of voices from belowcomforted him with the knowledge that he had not miscalculated this time. At last he stood within striking distance of his quarry.

The syllables of his surname ringing clearly in his ears and followed by Stryker's fleering laugh brought him to a pause. He flushed hotly in the darkness. The captain was retailing: with relish some of his most successful witticisms at Kirkwood's expense.

Mulready laughed with him, if a little uncertainly. Calendar's chuckle was not audible, but he broke the

pause that followed.

"I don't know," he said with doubting emphasis. "You say you landed him without a penny in his pocket? I don't call that a good plan at all. Of course he ain't a factor, but-well, it might 've been as well to give him his fare home. He might make trouble for us somehow. I don't mind telling you, cap'n, that you're an ass. Personally I'm kind of sorry for the boy. He wasn't a bad sort, as his kind runs, and he was no fool, from what little I saw of him. I wonder what he want-

"Possibly," Mulready chimed in suavely, "you can explain what you wanted of him in the first place. How did you come to drag him into this

Calendar laughed so ly. "That was partly accident, partly inspiration. I happened to see his name on the Pless register. He'd put himself down as from Frisco. I figured it out that he would be next door to broke and getting desperate, ready to do anything to get home, and thought we might utilize him to smuggle some of the stuff into the States. Once before, if you'll remember-no, that was before we got together, Mulready-I picked up a fellow countryman on the Strand. He was down and out, jumped at the job, and we made a neat little wad on it."

"The more fool you to take outsiders into your confidence," grumbled Mulready.

"Ow!" interrogated Calendar, mimicking Stryker's accent inimitably. "Well, you've got a heap to learn about this game, Mul. About the first thing is that you must trust old man Know-itall, which is me. I've run more diamonds into the States in one way or another in my time than you ever pinched out of the shirt front of a toff on the Empire Prom. before they made the graft too hot for you and you came to take lessons from me in the gentle art of living easy." "Oh, cut that, cawn't you?"

"Delighted, dear boy. One of the first principles, next to profiting by the admirable example I set you, is to make the fellows in your own line trust you. Now, if this boy had taken on with me I could have got a bunch of the sparklers on my mere say-so from old Morganthau, up on Finsbury pavement. He does a steady business hoodwinking the customs for the benefit of his American clients-and himself. And I'd 've made a neat little profit besides, something to fall back on if this fell through. I don't mind having two strings to my bow."

"Yes," argued Mulready, "but suppose this Kirkwood had taken on with you and then peached."

"That's another secret. You've got. to know your man, be able to size him up. I called on this chap for that very purpose, but I saw at a glance he wasn't our man. He smelled a nigger in the wood pile and most politely told me to go to the devil. But if he had come in he'd have died before he squealed. I know the breed. There's honor among gentlemen that knocks the honor of thieves higher'n a kite, the old saw to the contrary-nothing doing. You understand me, I'm sure, Mulready," he concluded, with envenomed sweetness.

"I don't see yet how Kirkwood got

anything to do with Dorothy." "Miss Calendar to you, Mr. Mulready!" snapped Calendar. "There, there, now! Don't get excited. It was when the Hallam passed me word that a man from the Yard was waiting on the altar steps for me that Kirkwood came in. He was dining close by. I went over and worked on his feelings until he agreed to take Dorothy off my hands. If I had attempted to leave the place with her they'd have spotted me for sure. My compliments

to you, Dick Mulready." There came the noise of chair legs scraped harshly on the cabin deck. Apparently Mulready had leaped to his feet in a rage.

"I've told you"- he began in a voice thick with passion. "Oh, sit down!" Calendar cut in con-

temptuously. "Sit down! D'you hear? That's all over and done with. We understand each other now, and you won't try any more monkey shines. It's a square deal and a square divide so far's I'm concerned. If we stick together there'll be profit enough for all good blackmailing connection. If concerned. Sit down, Mul, and have another slug of the captain's bum

Although Mulready consented to be pacified, Kirkwood got the impression that the man was far gone in drink. A moment later he heard him growl "Chin-chin?" antiphonal to the captain's "Cheer-o!"

"Now, then," Calendar proposed, "Mr. Kirkwood aside-peace be with him-let's get down to cases."

"Wot's the row?" asked the captain. "The row, cap'n, is the Hallam female, who has unexpectedly shown up in Antwerp, we have reason to believe. with malicious intent and a private detective to add to the gayety of nations."

"Wot's the odds? She carn't 'urt us without lyin' up trouble for 'erself." "Mighty little consolation to us when we're working it out in jail." "Speak for yourself," grunted Mul-

ready surlily. "I do," returned Calendar easily. "We're both in the shadow of jail, Mul, my boy, since you choose to take the reference as personal. Sing Sing. however, yawns for me alone. It's going to keep on yawning, too, unless I

miss my guess. I love my native land most to death, but"-

eaptain irritably. "Let's 'ear about the 'Allam. Wot're you afryd of?" "'Fraid she'll set up a yell when she finds out we're planting the loot, cap'n. She's just that vindictive. You'd think she'd be satisfied with her end of the stick, but you don't know.

"Ow, blow that!" interrupted the

the Hallam. That milk and water of spring of hers is the apple of her eye, and Freddie's going to collar the whole shooting match or madam will kick over the traces." "Well?"

"Well, she's queered us here. We can't do anything if my lady is going to camp on our trail and tell everybody we're shady customers, can we? The question now before the board is. Where now-and how?"

"Amsterdam," Mulready chimed in. "I told you that in the beginning." "But how?" argued Calendar. "The Lord knows I'm willing, but we can't go by rail, thanks to the Hallam. We've got to lose her first of all."

"But wot I'm arskin' is wot's the matter with"-

"The Alethea, cap'n? Nothing, so far as Dick and I are concerned. But my dutiful daughter is prejudiced. She's been so long without proper paternal discipline," Calendar laughed. "that she's rather high spirited. Of course I might overcome her objections, but the girl's no fool, and every ounce of pressure I bring to bear just now only helps make her more restless and suspicious."

"You leave her to me." Mulready interposed, with a brutal laugh. "I'll guarantee to get her aboard or"-

"Drop it, Dick," Calendar advised quietly, "and go a bit easy with that bottle for five minutes, can't you?"

"Well, then," Stryker resumed, apparently concurring in Calendar's attitude, "w'y don't one of you tyke the stuff, go off quiet an' dispose of it to a proper fence an' come back to divide. I don't see w'y that'-

"Naturally you wouldn't," chuckled Calendar. "Few people besides the two of us understand the depth of affection existing between Dick, here, and me. We just can't bear to get out of sight of each other. We're sure inseparable-since night before last. Odd, isn't it?"

"You drop it!" snarled Mulready in accents so ugly that the listener was startled. "Enough's enough, and"-"There, there, Dick! All right. I'll

behave," Calendar soothed him. "We'll forget and say no more about it." "Well, see you don't."

"But 'as either of you a plan?" per-

sisted Stryker. "I have," replied Mulready, "and it's the simplest and best, if you could only make this long lost parent here see it."

"Wot is it?" Mulready seemed to ignore Calendar and address himself to the captain. He articulated with some difficulty, slurring his words to the point of in-

distinctness at times. "Simple enough," he propounded solemnly. "We've got the gladstone bag here. Miss Dolly's at the hotel. That's her papa's bright notion. He thinks she's to be trusted. Now, then, what's the matter with weighing anchor and slipping quietly out to sea?"

"Leavin' the dootiful darter?" "Cert'n'y. She's only a drag anyway. Better off without her. Then we can wait our time and get highest market prices"-

"You forget, Dick," Calendar put it, "that there's a thousand in it for each of us if she's kept out of England for six weeks. A thousand's five thousand in the land I hail from. I can use five thousand in my business."

"Why can't you be content with what you've got?" demanded Mulready wrathfully.

"Because I'm a seventh sou of a sev enth son. I can see an inch or two beyond my nose. If Dorothy ever finds her way back to England she'll spoil one of the finest fields of legitimate graft I ever licked my lips to look at The trouble with you, Mul, is you're too high toned. You want to play the swell mobsman from post to finish. A quick touch and a clean getaway for yours. Now, that's all right-that has its good points-but you don't want to underestimate the advantages of can keep Dorothy quiet long enough I look to the Hallam and precious Freddie to be a great comfort to me in my old age."

"Then, for heaven's sake," cried Mulready, "go to the hotel, get your brat by the scruff of her pretty neck and drag her aboard! Let's get out of this!"

"I won't," returned Calendar inflexibly.

The dispute continued, but the listener had heard enough. Stealthily he crept away to the rail, to stand grasping it and staring across the water with unseeing eyes at the gay old city eyes of light.

Over there, across the water, in the lingy and disreputable Hotel du Commerce, Dorothy waited in her room, loubtless the prey of unnumbered nameless terrors, while aboard the brigantine her fate was being-decided by a council of three unspeakable scoundrels, one of whom, professing nimself her father, openly declared his ntention of using her to further his selfish and criminal ends. His first and natural thought-to steal

tway to her and induce her to accompany him back to England-Kirkwood perforce discarded. He could have wept over the realization of his unmalified impotency. He had no money, the railway station. Something subler, more crafty, had to be contrived to meet the emergency. And there was one way, one only. He could see ione other. Temporarily he must nake himself one of the company of ier enemies, force himself upon them, ngratiate himself into their good graces, gain their confidence, then when opportunity offered betray them and the power to make them tolerate iim, if not receive him as a fellow, the tnowledge of them and their plans hat they had unwittingly given him, vas his.

And Dorothy was waiting.

He swung round and without atempting to muffle his footfalls strode oward the companionway. He must retend he had just come aboard.

Subconsciously he had been aware luring his time of pondering that the roices in the cabin had been steadily saining in volume, rising louder and ret more loud, Mulready's ominous, Irink blurred accents dominating the thers. There was a quarrel afoot. As soon as he gave it heed Kirkwood inderstood that Mulready in the madless of his inflamed brain was forcng the issue, while Calendar sought rainly to calm and soothe him.

The American arrived at the head of he companionway at a critical juncure. As he moved to descend some ow, cool toned retort of Calendar's

(To be Continued)

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