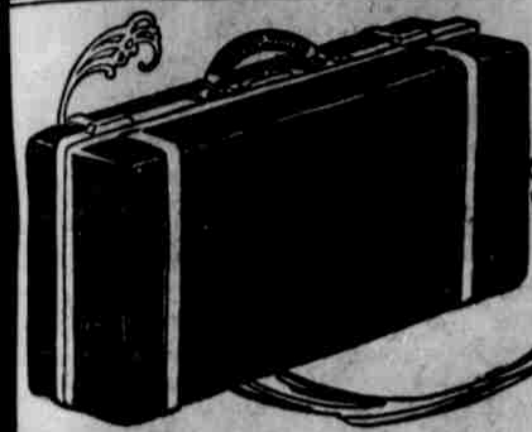


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The BLACK BAG

By Louis Joseph Vance

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My Lady Romance has many attendants. Mainly they are clad in hauberk and helm, or they carry rapiers at their sides and wear strange oaths. But sometimes we encounter in the pages of a novel a genuine knight in modern broadcloth or in tweed, who speaks the language of our own day and may be met on roadway or State street. Such a knight is Philip Kirkwood, artist painter, whose adventures in pursuit of the mysterious black bag and whose heroic deeds in the service of his beautiful lady are worth the staying up of a night to read. To descend to the idiom of the day, "The Black Bag" is "the real thing" in the story line, thrilling, mysterious—and most not too mysterious—and most interesting.

CHAPTER I.

UPON a certain dreary April afternoon in the year of grace 1906 the apprehensions of Philip Kirkwood, Esq., painter, were enlivened by the discovery that he was occupying that singularly distressing social position which may be summed up succinctly in a phrase of long usage grown proverbial, one in London. Inevitably an ex-artist because of his youth (he had turned twenty-five), he took no account of mitigating matters and would not have resented the suggestion of his case was anything but another deplorable and foretold. That he was not actually at the end of his resources went for nothing. He had the distinction a quibble, mockingly immaterial, like the store of means in his pocket, too insignificant a mention when contrasted with his needs. And his base of supplies, the American city of his nativity, whence he did not without a glow of pride in his breast, he was wont to register foreign hostilities, had been arbitrarily cut off from him by one of those accidents sardonically classified insurance and express corporations acts of God. Now, to one who has lived all his life serenely in accord with the dictates of his own sweet will, taking no thought for the morrow, such a situation naturally seems both appalling and intolerable, at the first blush. It was confessed that, to begin with, Kirkwood drew a long and disconsolate face over his fix. Then he resolutely shrugged it off and went in search of man's most useful dumb friend—to wit, his pipe, which, when found and filled, he held with a spill twisted from the slope of a cable message. "It's about time," he announced, lighting the paper blacken and burn the grate fire, "that I was doing nothing to prove my title to a living." And this was all his valetudinary vanished competence. "Anyway, a slight better off than those poor devils over there. I really have a deal to be thankful for now that attention's drawn to it." The ensuing few minutes he spent it all over, soberly, but with a heart, standing at a window of bedroom in the Hotel Pless, hands in trousers pockets, pipe fuming busily, his gaze wandering out at a blurred multitude of wet, shabby roofs and sooty chimney pots. There came a rapping at the door. Kirkwood removed the pipe from between his teeth long enough to say "Come in!" pleasantly. The knob was turned, and the door opened. Kirkwood, swinging on one heel, beheld, hesitant upon the threshold a diminutive figure in the livery of the Pless pages. "Mr. Kirkwood?" "Gentleman to see you, sir." Kirkwood nodded again, smiling. "Show him up, please," he said, but the words were fairly out of his mouth a man stepped into the room. "Mr. Brentwick!" Kirkwood almost started, jumping forward to seize his visitor's hand. "My dear boy!" replied the latter, delighted to see you. Got your coat an hour ago and came at once to see."

agement knows me," he offered explanation of his unceremonious appearance. "So I took the liberty of following on the heels of the bell hop, dear boy. And how are you? Why the anxious undertone I detected in your note?" He continued to stare curiously into Kirkwood's face. At a glance this Mr. Brentwick was a man of tallish figure and rather slender, with a countenance thin and flushed a sensitive pink, out of which his eyes shone, keen, alert, humorous and a trace wistful behind his glasses. His years were indeterminate, with the aspect of fifty, the spirit and the verve of thirty asserted oddly. But his hands were old, delicate, fine and fragile, and the lips beneath the drooping white mustache at times trembled, almost imperceptibly, with the generous sentiments that came with mellow age. He held his back straight and his head with an air—a air that was not a swagger, but the sign token of seasoned experience in the world. The most carping could have found no flaw in the quiet taste of his attire. To sum up, Kirkwood's very good friend, and his only one then in London, Mr. Brentwick, looked and was an English gentleman. "Why?" he persisted as the younger man hesitated. "I am here to find out. Tonight I leave for the continent. In the meantime—" "And at midnight I sail for the States," added Kirkwood. "That is mainly why I wished to see you—to say goodbye for the time." "You're going home?" A shadow clouded Brentwick's clear eyes. "To fight it out, shoulder to shoulder, with my brethren in adversity." "The cloud lifted. "That is the spirit!" declared the elder man. "For the moment I did you the injustice to believe that you were running away. But now I understand. Forgive me. Pardon, too, the stupidity which I must lay at the door of my advancing years. To me the thought of you as a Parisian fixture has become such a commonplace, Philip, that the news of the disaster hardly stirred me. Now I remember that you are a Californian." "I was born in San Francisco," affirmed Kirkwood, a bit sadly. "My father and mother were buried there." "And your fortune?" "I inherited my father's interest in the firm of Kirkwood & Vanderlip. When I came over to study painting I left everything in Vanderlip's hands. The business afforded me a handsome living." "You have heard from Mr. Vanderlip?" "Fifteen minutes ago," Kirkwood took a cablegram, still damp, from his pocket and handed it to his guest. Unfolding it, the latter read: "Stay where you are. No good coming back. Everything gone. No insurance. Letter follows. VANDERLIP." "When I got the news in Paris," Kirkwood volunteered, "I tried the banks. They refused to honor my drafts. I had a little money in hand, enough to see me home, so I closed the studio and came across. I'm booked on the Minneapolis, sailing from Tilbury at daybreak. The boat train leaves at 11:30. I had hoped you might be able to dine with me and see me off." In silence Brentwick returned the cable message. Then, with a thoughtful look, "You are sure this is wise?" he queried. "It's the only thing I can see." "But your partner says—" "Naturally he thinks that by this time I should have learned to paint well enough to support myself for a few months until he can get things running again. Perhaps I might." Brentwick supported the presumption with a decided gesture. "But have I a right to leave Vanderlip to fight it out alone? For Vanderlip has a wife and kiddies to support. I—" "Your genius!" "My ability, such as it is, and that only. It can wait. No; this means simply that I must come down from the clouds, plant my feet on solid earth and get to work." "The sentiment is sound," admitted Brentwick, "the practice of it folly. Have you stopped to think what part a rising young portrait painter can contribute toward the rebuilding of a devastated city?" "The painting can wait," reiterated Kirkwood. "I can work like other men." "You can do yourself and your genius grave injustice, and I fear me you will, dear boy. It's in keeping with your heritage of American obstinacy. Now, if it were a question of money—"



"Everything gone. No insurance."

"Mr. Brentwick," Kirkwood protested vehemently, "I've ample for my present needs," he added. "Of course," conceded Brentwick, with a sigh. "I didn't really hope you would avail yourself of our friendship. Now, there's my home in Aspen Villas. You have seen it?" "In your absence this afternoon your estimable butler, with commendable discretion, kept me without the doors," laughed the young man. "It's a comfortable home. You would not consent to share it with me until—" "You are more than good; but, honestly, I must sail tonight. I wanted only this chance to see you before I left. You'll dine with me, won't you?" "If you would stay in London, Philip, we would dine together not once, but many times. As it is, I myself am booked for Munich, to be gone a week, on business. I have many affairs needing attention between now and the 9:10 train from Victoria. If you will be my guest at Aspen Villas—" "Please!" begged Kirkwood, with a little laugh of pleasure because of the other's insistence. "I only wish I could. Another day—" "Oh, you will make your million in a year and return scandalously independent. It's in your American blood." Frail white fingers tapped an arm of the chair as their owner stared gravely into the fire. "I confess I envy you," he observed. "The opportunity to make a million in a year?" chuckled Kirkwood. "No, I envy you your romance. You have youth, unconquerable youth, and the world before you. I must go." He rose stiffly, as though suddenly made conscious of his age. The old eyes peered more than a trifle wistfully now into Kirkwood's. "You will not fail to call on me by cable, dear boy, if you need—anything? I ask it as a favor. I'm glad you wished to see me before going out of my life. One learns to value the friendship of youth, Philip. Goodby, and good luck attend you." Alone once more, Kirkwood returned to his window. The disappointment he felt at being robbed of his anticipated pleasure in Brentwick's company at dinner colored his mood unpleasantly. His musings merged into vacancy, into a dull gray mist of hopelessness comparable only to the dismal skies then lowering over London town. Brentwick was good, but Brentwick was mistaken. There was really nothing for Kirkwood to do but to go ahead. But one steamer trunk remained to be packed. The boat train would leave before midnight, the steamer with the morning tide. By the morning's noon he would be upon the high seas, within ten days in New York and among friends, and then— The problem of that afterward perplexed Kirkwood more than he cared to own. Brentwick had opened his eyes to the fact that he would be practically useless in San Francisco. He could not harbor the thought of going back only to become a charge upon Vanderlip. No; he was resolved that thenceforward he must rely upon himself, carve out his own destiny. But—would the art that he had cultivated with such assiduity yield him a livelihood if sincerely practiced with that end in view? Would the mental

and physical equipment of a painter, heretofore dilettante, enable him to become self supporting? There came a rapping at the door. The knob was turned by a diminutive figure in the livery of the Pless pages. "Mr. Kirkwood?" Kirkwood nodded. "Gentleman to see you, sir." Kirkwood nodded again, smiling. If somewhat perplexed. Encouraged, the child advanced, proffering a silver card tray at the end of an unnaturally rigid forearm. Kirkwood took the card dubiously between thumb and forefinger and inspected it without prejudice. "George B. Calendar," he read. "George B. Calendar! But I know no such person. Sure there's no mistake, young man?" The close cropped, bullet shaped British head was agitated in vigorous negation, and "Card for Mr. Kirkwood?" was mumbled in dispassionate accents appropriate to a recitation by rote. "Very well. But before you show him up ask this Mr. Calendar if he is quite sure he wants to see Philip Kirkwood." "Yessir." The child marched out, punctiliously closing the door. Kirkwood tamped down the tobacco in his pipe and puffed energetically, dismissing the interruption to his reverie as a matter of no consequence—an obvious mistake to be rectified by two words with this Mr. Calendar whom he did not know. At the knock he had almost hoped it might be Brentwick, returning with a changed mind about the bid to dinner. He regretted Brentwick sincerely. There was a curious sort of friendship, extraordinarily close in view of the meagerness of either's information about the other, to say nothing of the disparity between their ages. Concerning the elder man Kirkwood knew little more than that they had met on shipboard, "coming over," that Brentwick had spent some years in America; that he was an Englishman by birth, a cosmopolitan by habit, by profession a gentleman (employing that term in its most uncompromisingly British significance) and by inclination a collector of "articles of virtue and bigotry," in pursuit of which he made frequent excursions to the continent from his residence in a quaint, quiet street of Old Brompton. It had been during his not infrequent, but ordinarily abbreviated, sojourns in Paris that their steamer acquaintance had ripened into an affection almost filial on the one hand, almost paternal on the other. There came a rapping at the door. The knob was turned; the door opened. Kirkwood, swinging on one heel, beheld, hesitant upon the threshold, a rather rotund figure of medium height, clad in an expressionless gray lounge suit, with a brown "bowler" hat held tentatively in one hand, an umbrella weeping in the other. A voice, which was unctuous and insinuating, emanated from the figure. "Mr. Kirkwood?" Kirkwood nodded, with some effort recalling the name, so detached had been his thoughts since the disappearance of the page. "Yes, Mr. Calendar?" "Are you—ah—busy, Mr. Kirkwood?" "Are you, Mr. Calendar?" Kirkwood's smile robbed the retort of any favor of incivility. Encouraged, the man entered, promising that he would detain his host but a moment and readily surrendering hat and umbrella. Kirkwood, putting the latter aside, invited his caller to the easy chair which Brentwick had occupied by the fireplace. "It takes the edge off the dampness," Kirkwood explained in deference to the other's look of pleased surprise at the cheerful bed of coals. "I'm afraid I could never get acclimated to life in a cold, damp room—or a damp, cold room—such as you Britisher prefer." "It is grateful," Mr. Calendar agreed, spreading plump and well cared for hands to the warmth. "But you are mistaken, I am as much an American as yourself." "Yes?" Kirkwood looked the man over with more interest, less matter of course courtesy. He proved not unprepossessing, this unclassifiable Mr. Calendar. He was dressed with some care, his complexion was good, and the fullness of his girth, emphasized as it was by a notable lack of inches, bespoke a nature genial, easy going and sybaritic. His dark eyes, heavy lidded, were active, curiously at times with a subdued glitter, in a face large, round, pink, of which the other most remarkable features were a mustache, close trimmed and showing streaks of gray; a chubby nose and duplicate chin. Mr. Calendar was, furthermore, possessed of a polished bald spot, girdled with a tansure of silvered hair—circumstances which lent some factitious distinction to a personality otherwise commonplace. His manner might be best described as uneasy, with assurance, as though he frequently found it necessary to make up for his unimpressive stature by assuming an unnatural habit of authority. (Continued on second page.)

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