

The BLACK BAG

By Louis Joseph Vance

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"I was looking for some one to serve me in a certain capacity."

"So you knew I was an American, Mr. Calendar?" suggested Kirkwood.

"Saw your name on the register. We both hall from the same neck of the woods, you know."

"I didn't know it, and"—

"Yes: I'm from Frisco too."

"And I'm sorry."

Mr. Calendar passed five fat fingers nervously over his mustache, glanced alertly up at Kirkwood, as if momentarily inclined to question his tone, then again stared glumly into the fire, for Kirkwood had maintained an attitude purposefully colorless. Not to put too fine a point upon it, he believed that his caller was lying. The man's appearance, his mannerisms, his voice and enunciation, while they might have been American, seemed all un-Californian. To one born and bred in that state, as Kirkwood had been, her sons are unmistakably hall marked.

Now, no man lies without motive. This one chose to reaffirm, with a show of deep feeling: "Yes, I'm from Frisco too. We're companions in misfortune."

"I hope not altogether," said Kirkwood politely.

Mr. Calendar drew his own inferences from the response and mustered up a show of cheerfulness. "Then you're not completely wiped out?"

"To the contrary, I was hoping you were less unhappy."

"Oh, then you are?"

Kirkwood lifted the cable message from the mantel. "I have just heard from my partner at home," he said, with a faint smile, and quoted: "Everything gone. No insurance."

Mr. Calendar pursed his plump lips, whistling inaudibly. "Too bad, too bad!" he murmured sympathetically. "We're all hard hit, more or less." He lapsed into dejected apathy, from which Kirkwood, growing at length impatient, found it necessary to rouse him.

"You wished to see me about something else, I'm sure."

Mr. Calendar started from his reverie. "Eh? I was dreaming, I beg pardon. It seems hard to realize, Mr. Kirkwood, that this awful catastrophe has overtaken our beloved metropolis."

The canting phrases wearied Kirkwood. Abruptly he cut in: "Would a sovereign help you out, Mr. Calendar? I don't mind telling you that's about the limit of my present resources."

"Pardon me," Mr. Calendar's moon-like countenance darkened. He assumed a transparent dignity. "You misconstrue my motive, sir."

"Then I'm sorry."

"I am not here to borrow. On the other hand, quite by accident I discovered your name upon the register downstairs, a good old Frisco name if you will permit me to say so. I thought to myself that here was a chance to help a fellow countryman?" Calendar paused interrogatively. Kirkwood remained interested, but silent. "If a passage across would help you, I—I think it might be arranged," stammered Calendar, ill at ease.

"It might," admitted Kirkwood speculatively.

"I could fix it so that you could go over—first class, of course—and pay your way, so to speak, by rendering us, me and my partner, a trifling service."

"Ah?"

"In fact," continued Calendar, warming up to his theme, "there might be something more in it for you than the passage—if you're the right man, the man I'm looking for."

"That, of course, is the question."

"Eh?" Calendar pulled up suddenly in a full winged flight of enthusiasm.

Kirkwood eyed him steadily. "I said that it is a question, Mr. Calendar, whether or not I am the man you're looking for. Between you and me and the firedogs, I don't believe I am. Now, if you wish to name your quid pro quo, this trifling service I'm to render in recognition of your benevolence, you may."

"Yes," slowly. But the speaker delayed his reply until he had surveyed his host from head to foot with a glance both critical and appreciative.

He saw a man in height rather less than the stock size six feet so much in demand by the manufacturers of modern heroes of fiction—a man a bit round shouldered, too, but otherwise sturdily built, self contained, well groomed.

Kirkwood wears a boy's honest face. No one has ever called him handsome. A few prejudiced persons have decided that he has an interesting countenance. The propounders of this verdict have been, for the most part, feminine. Kirkwood himself has been heard to declare that his features do not fit. In its essence the statement is true, but there is a very real, if undefinable, engaging quality in their very irregularity. His eyes are brown, pleasant, set wide apart, straightforward of expression.

Now, it appeared that, whatever his motive, Mr. Calendar had acted upon impulse in sending his card up to Kirkwood. At all events, this Calendar proved not lacking in penetration. Men of his stamp are commonly endowed with that quality to an eminent degree. Not slow to reckon the caliber of the man before him, the leaver

And he was renouncing her.

He was painfully conscious of what he had missed, had lost or had not yet found—the love of woman.

The sensation was curious, new, unique in his experience.

His cigarette burned down to his fingers as he sat pondering. Abstractedly he ground its fire out in an ash tray.

The waiter set before him a silver tureen, covered.

He sat up and began to consume his soup, scarce doing it justice. His dream troubled him—his dream of the love of woman.

From a little distance his waiter regarded him with an air of disappointment. In the course of an hour and a half he awoke to discover the attendant in the act of pouring very hot and black coffee from a bright silver pot into a demitasse of fragile porcelain. Kirkwood slipped a single lump of sugar into the cup, gave over his cigar case to be filled, then leaned back, deliberately lighting a long and slender panetela as a preliminary to a last lingering appreciation of the scene of which he was a part.

He reviewed it through narrowed eyelids lazily, yet with some slight surprise, seeming to see it with new vision, with eyes from which scales of ignorance had dropped.

This long and brilliant dining hall, with its quiet perfection of proportion and appointment, had always gratified his love of the beautiful. Tonight it pleased him to an unusual degree. Yet it was the same as ever. Its walls, tinted a deep rose, with their hangings of dull cloth of gold; its lights discriminately clustered and discreetly shaded, redoubled in half a hundred mirrors; its subdued shimmer of plate and glass, its soberly festive assemblage of circumspicuous men and women splendidly gowned, its decorously muted murmur of voices penetrated and interwoven by the strains of a hidden string orchestra, caressed his senses as always, yet with a difference. Tonight he saw it a room populous with lovers, lovers insensibly paired, man unto woman attentive, woman of man regardful.

He had never understood this before. This much he had missed in life.

It seemed hard to realize that one must forego it all forever.

Presently he found himself acutely self-conscious. The sensation puzzled him, and without appearing to do so he traced it from effect to cause and found the cause in a woman—a girl, rather—seated at a table the third removed from him, near the farther wall of the room.

Too considerate and too embarrassed to return her scrutiny openly, look for look, he yet felt sure that, however temporarily, he was become the object of her intent interest.

Idly employed with his cigar, he sipped his coffee. In time aware that she had turned her attention elsewhere, he looked up.

At first he was conscious of an effect of disappointment. She was nobody that he knew, even by reputation. She was simply a young girl, barely out of her teens—if as old as that phrase would signify. He wondered what she had found in him to make her think him worth so long a study and looked again, more keenly curious.

With this second glance appreciation stirred the artistic side of his nature, that was already grown impatient of his fretted mood. The slender and girlish figure, posed with such absolute lack of intrusion against a screen of rose and gilt, moved him to critical admiration. The tinted glow of shaded candles caught glistening on the spun gold of her fair hair enhanced the fine pallor of her young shoulders.

In the sheer youth of her (he realized) more than in aught else lay her chiefest charm. She could be little more than a child, indeed, if he were to judge her by the purity of her shadowed eyes and the absence of emotion in the calm and direct look which presently she turned upon him who sat wondering at the level, penciled darkness of her brows.

At length, aware that she had surprised his interest, Kirkwood glanced aside coolly deliberate lest she should detect in his attitude anything more than impersonal approval.

A slow color burned his cheeks. In his temples there rose a curious pulsing.

After awhile she drew his gaze again imperceptibly, herself all unaware of the havoc she was wreaking on his temperament.

"Eighteen," he hazarded—"eighteen or possibly nineteen dining at the Pless in a ravishing dinner gown and unhappy? Oh, hardly—not she!"

Yet the impression haunted him, and ere long he was fain to seek confirmation or denial of it in the manner of her escort.

The latter sat with back to Kirkwood, cutting a figure as negative as his snug evening clothes. One could surmise little from a fleshy thick neck, a round glazed bald spot, a fringe of grizzled hair and two bright red ears.

Calendar!

Somehow the fellow did suggest Kirkwood's caller of the afternoon. The young man could not have said precisely how, for he was unfamiliar with the aspect of that gentleman's back. None the less, the suggestion persisted.

By now a few of the guests, theater bound for the most part, were leaving. Here and there a table stood vacant that had been filled, cloth tarnished, chairs disarranged, in another moment to be transformed into its pristine brilliance under the deft attentions of the servants.

Down an aisle, past the table at which the girl was sitting, came two, making toward the lobby. The man, a slight and meager young personality, in the lead. Their party had attracted Kirkwood's notice as they entered—

why, he did not remember, but it was in his mind that then they had been three. Instinctively he looked at the table they had left, one placed at some distance from the girl and hidden from her by an angle in the wall. It appeared that the third member had chosen to dally a few moments over his tobacco and a liqueur brandy. Kirkwood could see him plainly lounging in his chair and fumbling the stem of a glass, a heavy man of somber habit, his black and sullen brows lowering and thoughtful above a face boldly handsome.

The woman of the trio was worthy of closer attention. Some paces in the wake of her lackluster escort she was making a leisurely progress, trailing the skirts of a gown magnificent beyond dispute, half concealed though it was by the opera cloak whose soft folds draped her shoulders. Slowly, carrying her head high, she approached. Insolent eyes reviewing the room from beneath their heavy lids, a metallic and mature type of dark beauty supremely self confident and self possessed.

Men turned involuntarily to look after her, not altogether in undiluted admiration.

In the act of passing behind the putative Calendar she paused momentarily, bending as if to gather up her train. Presumably the action disturbed her balance. She swayed a little and in the effort to recover rested the tips of her gloved fingers upon the edge of the table. Simultaneously (Kirkwood could have sworn) a single word left her lips, a word evidently pitched for the ear of the hypothetical Calendar alone. Then she swept on, imperturbable, assured.

To the perplexed observer it was indubitably evident that some communication had passed from the woman to the man. Kirkwood saw the fat shoulders of the girl's companion stiffen suddenly as the woman's hand rested at his elbow. As she moved away a little rippling shiver was plainly visible in the muscles of his back beneath his coat, mute token of relaxing tension. An instant later one plump and mottled hand was carelessly placed where the woman's had been and was at once removed with fingers closed.

To the girl, watching her face covertly, Kirkwood turned for a clw to the incident. He made no doubt that she had observed the passage. Proof of that one found in her sudden starting pallor (of indignation?) and in her eyes, briefly alight with some inscrutable emotion, though quickly veiled by lowered lashes. Slowly enough she regained color and composure, while her vis-a-vis sat motionless, head inclined, as if in thought.

Abruptly the man turned in his chair to summon a waiter and exposed his profile. Kirkwood was in nowise amazed to recognize Calendar—a badly frightened Calendar now, however and hardly to be identified with the sleek, glib fellow who had interviewed Kirkwood in the afternoon. His dabby cheeks were ashen and trembling and upon the back of his chair the fat white fingers were drumming incessantly an inaudible tattoo of shattered nerves.

"Scared silly!" commented Kirkwood. "Why?"

Having spoken to his waiter, Calendar for some seconds raked the room with quick glances, as if seeking an acquaintance. Presumably disappointed, he swung back to face the girl, bending forward to reach her ears with accents low pitched and confidential. She on her part fell at once attentive, grave and responsive. Perhaps a dozen sentences passed between them. At the outset her brows contracted, and she shook her head in gentle dissent, whereupon Calendar's manner became more imperative. Gradually, unwillingly, she seemed to yield consent. Once she caught her breath sharply and, infected by her companion's agitation, sat back, color fading again in the round young cheeks.

Kirkwood's waiter put in an inopportune appearance with the bill. The young man paid it. When he looked up again Calendar had swung squarely about in his chair. His eye encountered Kirkwood's. He nodded pleasantly. Temporarily confused, Kirkwood returned the nod.

In a twinkling he had repented. Calendar had left his chair and was wending his way through the tables toward Kirkwood's. Reaching it, he paused, offering the hand of genial fellowship. Kirkwood accepted it half heartedly (what else was he to do?), remarking at the same time that Calendar had recovered much of his composure. There was now a normal coloring in the heavily jowled countenance, with less glint of fear in the quick, dark eyes, and Calendar's hand, even if moist and cold, no longer trembled. Furthermore, it was immediately demonstrated that his impudence had not deserted him.

"Why, Kirkwood, my dear fellow!" he crowed, not so loudly as to attract attention, but in a tone assumed to divert suspicion, should he be overheard. "This is great luck, you know, to find you here."

"Is it?" returned Kirkwood coolly. He disengaged his fingers.

The pink plump face was contorted in a furtive grimace of deprecation. Without waiting for permission Calendar dropped into the vacant chair.

"My dear sir," he proceeded, unabashed, "I throw myself upon your mercy."

"The devil you do!"

"I must. I'm in the deuce of a hole, and there's no one I know here besides yourself, I—I"—

Kirkwood saw fit to lead him on, partly because out of the corner of his eye he was aware of the girl's unconcealed suspense. "Go on, please, Mr. Calendar. You throw yourself on a

total stranger's mercy because you're in the deuce of a hole, and"—

"It's this way. I'm called away on urgent business—imperative business. I must go at once. My daughter is with me—my daughter! Think of my embarrassment. I cannot leave her here—alone, nor can I permit her to go home unprotected."

Calendar paused in anxiety.

"That's easily remedied then," suggested Kirkwood.

"How?"

"Put her in a cab at the door."

"No. The devil! I couldn't think of it. You won't understand, I—I"—

"I do not understand," amended the younger man politely.

Calendar compressed his lips nervously. It was plain that the man was quivering with impatience and half mad with excitement. He held quiet only long enough to regain his self control and take counsel with his prudence.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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