

CHEQUE NO. 9031.

A FASCINATING ROMANCE OF A LONDON SUBURB.

By the Author of "By Crooked Paths," "Sheathed in Velvet," Etc.

There was none on it—neither date nor any other particular. It was quite clean! With a feeling of horror and despair I turned back the next tally, and found it was, as I expected, the one I had filled in the night before and given to Levens just before I went up to dress!

Then where had the missing cheque gone? The cheque book had not been out of my possession since Horace had given it to me that morning. The inference was plain—the cheque corresponding to this blank tally had been abstracted during the time Horace had had the book in his possession.

CHAPTER IV.

Horace saw that there was something wrong the moment he entered. I noticed the blood rush to his face as his eyes glanced from our faces to the cheque book lying open on the table, and I was afraid at first that he would make some admission of his guilt before Cynthia.

For any one else to have got at the book. With this idea came the memory of Levens' remark that morning about the queer company Horace went into, and the chances of his pocket being picked. I went to the wretched boy and put my hand upon his shoulder.

"Horace, answer me one question truthfully," I said. "Where did you go while you had the book in your possession last night?" "Cynthia was here all the evening," he began, and then stopped himself abruptly.



"You shall not stand there insulting me," he said, and then, turning to look in the direction of his glance, I found Cynthia standing, white and motionless, in the doorway behind me, with her eyes fixed in horrified inquiry upon her brother's enraged face.

"Cynthia, go away, my dear!" I cried. But she did not attempt to move until I took her by the hand and gently forced her out of the room.

"Good morning" as I passed through, and I wondered whether it was sulky guilt or indignant virtue that kept him silent.

As soon as I had given the morning letters and given directions thereon, I wrote a line to the manager of the bank: "Dear Croley—Will you let me know directly my cheque No. 9031 is presented for payment? Yours faithfully, 'GERALD QUINTON.'"

I sent Richards off with this, bidding him hold his tongue outside; and in less than a quarter of an hour the answer came back. "Dear Quinton—9031 was presented yesterday and cashed between 12 and 1. Your inquiry has led to the discovery that the signature is a forgery. We have put the matter in the hands of our usual agent, who will call on you during the morning for any information you can give him on the subject. Yours faithfully, 'MASON CHAMBERLAIN.'"

This was quicker work than I had anticipated. The person who had presented the cheque had certainly lost no time; and this hurry looked to me like guilty knowledge—as if the presenter had known of the doubtful nature of the cheque he was offering, and was anxious to get it off his hands before its worthlessness was discovered. Then the time, too—between 12 and 1, when the first batch of clerks was out for dinner! The more I thought of it the blacker it looked against Horace, and the more decidedly I made up my mind that I should have to lose the amount of the cheque and the price of a good round bribe to the detective besides to hush the affair up with the bank people.

While I was still thinking ruefully of the loss of this unknown sum—for no man relishes the notion of sitting down quietly while another puts his hands into his money box and helps himself—one of the clerks knocked at the door and announced that a lady wished to see me.

"I won't waste any more of your time," she said. "I have done what I came to do, and I'll be off. One thing, though—I should like you to know that if anything in this world could have increased my pain and humiliation in this matter it would have been the sight of your suffering under the discovery of my infamy. Good-by!"

She was moving towards the door, and I was rising with the intention of stopping her, when we were both checked by a knock at the door and the entrance of the clerk again, this time with a card. I recognized the name at once—it was the detective from the bank! At all costs he must not see Cynthia! I was unnerved and almost incapable of clear argument, but I saw that much.

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"I shall have the chance again, Benson; but this time you can earn it more easily—by simply holding your tongue."

"Five hundred pounds!" he exclaimed, in a clear, penetrating whisper, which was torture to me, knowing how keen those poor listening ears would be. "Five hundred pounds only for holding my tongue! About this, of course, you must settle with your lawyer on the cheque."

"You must undertake not to try to find out even yourself," I murmured, nodding in assent; "and you must play with the bank people until it is too late to put any one else on the job."

"I shall not keep you five minutes, Mr. Quinton," he said, still with that same sullen defiance in his manner which had been so noticeable on our last interview; "what I have to say can be said in a few words. I wish to leave your employment, and the sooner you can arrange it the better pleased I shall be. Indeed, if it won't inconvenience you at all, I should prefer not to come to the office again."

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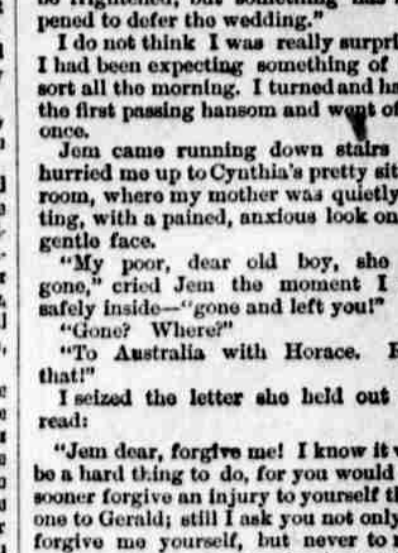
"I'll never put a shilling on a horse again as long as I live—I swear it!"

"When I got back to Clayhill that night I told my mother and Gem what I had done with regard to Horace, and they rejoiced openly over the plan.

"I had told them that Cynthia's past worry had been due to Horace's gambling debts, and Gem's indignation had known no bounds; but on the subject of the cheque I had been as silent as the grave.

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Continued next Saturday.