

A \$10,000 CHEQUE.
The hour grew late, and Mr. Brand passed his chamber in a moody silence. The train had come in, but his messenger had not returned, and the merchant was troubled. Troubled by a vague sort of doubt, which haunted him in spite of his faith in Lake. A merry, ebullient trader of long experience had said that Lake was too young to fill the important position which he held, but Mr. Brand had never found his trust in Tom misplaced.

Having heard rumors concerning a horse with which he had extensive dealings, the merchant had despatched Lake to London, telling him to make inquiries, and in any case to get the partners of the firm in question to settle their account.

So Lake had come from Liverpool to London. The time appointed for his return had passed, and still he did not come.

A lady entered, and a note to the merchant's side; her own sweet face was anxious, and there was a tremor in the music of her voice as she said:

"Do you think he will be here tonight, dear papa?"

"I hope so, Mary; but it is very late."

"Is there another train?"

"Only the night express, and that does not stop, except at the central station."

"Perhaps he will come, papa; he would not mind coming ten miles, even if he had to walk!"

"He should not have missed the train," said Mr. Brand, sternly; "especially in an imperative duty with one of business."

"But, papa, something may have occurred to detain him."

"Nothing should detain a man who has given his word."

The fair pleader was silenced—the father was angry, and knowing his sternness of principle, and how intricate was his dislike to any breach of discipline or duty, she did not venture to speak against the stern father.

The time dragged slowly on; Mr. Brand continued his restless walk, and Mary sat subdued and quiet, watching him. She saw that he was listening when the night express was whistling by; and when the depths of her heart there went a prayer that Lake would come safely home. The girl loved him, would have staked her life on his truth, and knew that he was not beyond his time through any weakness or wrong. Two long, weary hours passed. Mr. Brand was reading the commercial news, but for the first time in his life it did not interest him; he was thinking of the young clerk, and the heavy sum of money that would be in his possession should the London firm have paid him. And Mary, seeing her father's countenance, felt chilled and pained by the surer cast on her lover's honesty by his suspicions—her very thought was a denial of his doubts, and as the rapid clatter of a horse's feet rang out, she ran to the window.

"Look!" she said, dashing the curtains aside with eager hands; "look, papa, I said he would come—I know he would!"

The merchant's serene features relaxed with a smile of pleasure, but not emotional or demonstrative, but his daughter's gladness pleased him.

There were a few moments of expectancy, and then Tom Lake came in. He went straight to Mr. Brand, only nodding with a bow to the lady, whose glance thrilled his soul.

"They have paid," he said quietly, as he placed a thick pocket-book in the merchant's hand, "but I think we were only just in time."

"Indeed!"

"There was a consultation at the banker's before I could get cash for the cheque."

"Do you think they will break?"

"Hopelessly. They have given me an immense order, but it would not be wise to forward the goods."

"You did not hint that we had the slightest fear?"

"No, but I was glad to get the money; £12,000 would have been a heavy loss."

"And yet," said Tom, gravely, "this morning the odds were considerably against it ever reaching you."

"How?"

"Tom took two chairs, placed them side by side near the fire, led Mary to one and seated himself in the other. He had done his duty as the merchant's clerk, and now was Mr. Brand's prospective son-in-law and partner.

"I had an adventure," he said; "I was the hero of a strange story in a ride by express."

Mary bent forward to listen—Tom clasped her hand in his own. Mr. Brand sat opposite them, interested by the speaker's manner, as he began:

"When I got the cheque I had an idea that all might not be well, so to make sure I presented it at the banker's. There was, as I told you, a consultation before they cashed it, and while the consultation was going forward I noticed a stranger looking on me intently. I knew the man in my younger and wilder days. I had met him often at the race-course, in billiard-rooms, and in other places more or less respectable. Now he was changing a cheque for some petty amount, and was evidently attracted by the immensity of the order I had presented. I left the bank with my pocket-book full of notes, and the next would be the night express, so I strolled into a billiard-room. The man in my pocket was as fat as a turkey, and as safe with a fortune in his pocket as if he were a saint. There was some clever playing going on, and I stood watching the players till some one challenged me to have a game. If I have one special vanity it is my science with the cue. I accepted, and as I did so a strange feeling which had been growing upon me took a sudden turn which startled me.

My challenger was the man whom I had noticed at the banker's. There was nothing strange in the fact of his being in the room, one of his favorite resorts, but I was possessed by the vague shadow of a single idea. I had read somewhere of a man who had followed and plundered in a train, and somehow I associated the story with the man before me. It was the first time I had ever paid any particular attention to him, but I gave him full observation now. The more I looked at him the less I liked him. He was handsome, gentlemanly, with a fair form and elegant figure, full of self-possession and strength. His manner was singularly unassuming. His face was frank and genial, but by looking closely at him you could see something sinister-looking in the depth and softness of his eyes.

I never liked a stranger to be affable and possessing, and my friend was the very peak of affability and grace.

We played for an hour with alternating success; he was an amuse-

menting, companion, well informed, and had traveled, but I was shy of conversation. I left him, and still having some time to spare, went to see a friend in the Temple.

At the expiration of some thirty or forty minutes, I emerged into Fleet street, almost the first person on whom my gaze fell was my late antagonist at billiards.

I thought there was something more than mere coincidence in this second meeting since we stood together at the banker's. He was in a clear sobriety of mind.

Not a hundred yards from the Temple gate stood a man whom I recognized with a very welcome feeling. It was George Vixen, the detective.

He was fashionably dressed, and looked an aristocrat of the first water. I went up, and greeting him as I should an old familiar friend, held out my hand and said:

"Come and drink a glass of wine with me; I have something to say."

He shook hands in the most natural way possible. I took his arm, and we entered the public bar of an adjacent hotel.

"I told him my suspicion, told him of the sum in my possession, and of the journey I had to perform by rail."

"I saw that, watching through the glass of the door, he was taking a photograph of the two of us."

"They mean business," said Vixen, quietly, "but I shall be with you. We must part at the door, or they will see that we have seen each other."

"And you," I said, "how will you get?"

"I shall travel to Liverpool by the night express."

"He left me. I had no fear now—knowing him to be a clever and determined fellow."

Taking a casual glance across the road, I saw my mate with his companion. It was quite evident that they were tracking me, though I had sight of them before reaching St. Paul's.

The time dragged slowly on; Mr. Brand continued his restless walk, and Mary sat subdued and quiet, watching him. She saw that he was listening when the night express was whistling by; and when the depths of her heart there went a prayer that Lake would come safely home. The girl loved him, would have staked her life on his truth, and knew that he was not beyond his time through any weakness or wrong. Two long, weary hours passed. Mr. Brand was reading the commercial news, but for the first time in his life it did not interest him; he was thinking of the young clerk, and the heavy sum of money that would be in his possession should the London firm have paid him. And Mary, seeing her father's countenance, felt chilled and pained by the surer cast on her lover's honesty by his suspicions—her very thought was a denial of his doubts, and as the rapid clatter of a horse's feet rang out, she ran to the window.

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