

A LOST FORTUNE.

Me and Bob was down on our luck just a bit, I can tell you. Everything we had planned went as crooked as a dog's hind leg just at the last minute. We had worked for near a month on a daringly-planned scheme to relieve Lord Tallport of his plate, and just when all was ready I'm bleet if the sheriff didn't walk in and collar the whole blooming lot 'st to pay a few of his lordship's beastly debts.

"Well," says I "we're broke."

"Just a bit, Bill Jack," says Bob. He always called me Bill Jack 'cos I was christened William John.

I hands him the paper, and for a few minutes the rest was silence. Then suddenly he says, "Listen to this!"

WANTED, a man to wait at table and assist butler. Only those with good references need apply.—Sandilands Hall, Egham.

"The very thing," says he. "I used to know something of Sandilands Hall, when old John Errol was the boss of it, but the old chap died about six months ago, and I don't know who lives there now. But if the Errol family still live there, the plate is worth a small fortune. What you've got to do is to go to Egham, get this job as waiter, learn all you can, and send the news to me."

"Good enough," I says. "And what about my references?"

"Love you, I'll write you half-a-dozen, each more flattering than the other, and no two in the same handwriting."

Well, after a long talk I parted with Bob, and after dossing myself up I set out for Egham.

Acting on Bob's instructions I made my way to the side-entrance of Sandilands Hall and asked for the butler.

Twenty minutes later I was seated in the private sanctum of the head butler, whose name was Bloxam, and that worthy gentleman was busily perusing my beautiful testimonials.

"Your testimonials look all right," says he, "and I like the look of you, so I'll just see Miss Curzon and get her opinion. She's the lady of the Hall until Mr. Rupert comes home. Adopted daughter of the late John Errol, Esq. Help yourself out of this while I go and see her."

He pushed a decanter of port and a glass towards me, and left me to my own sweet thoughts.

Mr. Bloxam returned in a few minutes with the message that he was to take me to Miss Curzon at once.

Pretty? I should think she was. A perfect peach, dainty as a fairy, with a voice like a silver bell.

"And so this is the man?" says she. "What did you say his name was?"

"Higgins, miss," I answers, "William John Higgins; very much at your service."

She put me through a rare rough-and-tumble of questions, but I was pretty well primed and scraped through rather neatly.

"You may come a month on trial," she says at last.

"Thank you, miss," I answers, and I backs out with Bloxam.

We went back to Bloxam's den, and he, being a sociable old chap, produced a fresh bottle of port and cigars just to celebrate, as he put it. Then I thought I would do a little pumping.

"Much company here?" I asks.

"Company! Bless you, the place is a sinecure. There's nobody but Miss Curzon. But things will change when Mr. Rupert comes home. Quite a romance it is. Let's see—it's about eight years ago since Mr. Rupert quarrelled with his father, and, strange to say, it was all about Miss Curzon. She was the daughter of the curate then, and Mr. Rupert wanted to marry her; but old Squire Errol would have none of it, and packed him off to foreign parts. Mr. Rupert swore that he would not return until his father gave his consent.

"For three years we had occasional news of him, and then came the silence which has lasted five years. When Squire Errol could learn no news of Mr. Rupert he grew remorseful, and when Miss Curzon's father died he adopted her and brought her to live here until Rupert should turn up to claim her.

"But this Mr. Rupert may be dead."

"She is confident that he is alive, and that is why you are engaged. She keeps up the full staff of servants so as to have everything ready when he returns."

Soon after this interesting conversation I took my departure, ostensibly to get my traps, but really to report progress to Beautiful Bob.

He was hugely delighted with my success, and listened attentively to all the news I had gathered.

"So now," I concluded, "just give me a week, and I will arrange that everyone shall mysteriously fall asleep and we can loot the place at our leisure."

"No, Bill Jack, I'm going to make this something special, so you must leave it to me."

"Why, what's the game if it ain't loot?"

"It's loot, Bill Jack, but not a jimmy and dark-lantern job. We are going to pull

enough this journey to last a lifetime. Now, listen; first I want a photograph of Rupert Errol, if it is to be had."

"I'll see if I can manage that," I says.

"Then I must have a fiver to pay my fare to Southampton and back. I suppose I must do a little sleight-of-hand in a crowd to get that."

"And then?"

"You go back to Sandilands Hall. Today is Wednesday. On Saturday Miss Nelly Curzon will receive a wire from Southampton to say that Rupert Errol has arrived."

"Well?"

"A few hours later he will arrive. All the servants will assemble to greet the young master, William John Higgins amongst them. Your business is this: don't attempt any private conversation with Rupert Errol until he asks you for information; and a week after Rupert Errol disappears from Sandilands Hall Beautiful Bob will be awaiting you here with your share of a fortune."

"You—you can never do it," I gasped.

"Pooh! there is not much risk. You know my skill in disguises, and Rupert Errol, just come from abroad, will be sure to have a beard, and I know we are pretty much of a height."

"But, Miss Curzon?"

"She will never suspect; she was only seventeen when Errol went away, and eight years makes some difference in a man; besides, I have got to know enough of her young days to convince her that I am her beloved Rupert."

That night I went to my new situation at Egham, and by the first post in the morning a photograph of Rupert Errol was on its way to Beautiful Bob. Errol was not a bit like Bob except for the nose, and they were almost as similar as two peas, but I knew my chum's skill in make-up and felt no fear.

At eleven o'clock on Saturday morning I saw a telegraph boy enter the grounds, and then I prepared for some excitement, and I was not disappointed. The news flew over the place like wildfire, and all I could hear for the next hour was "Mr. Rupert is coming this afternoon." And I smiled all by my lonesome.

At five o'clock Miss Curzon grouped us all on each side of the porch, while she herself stood on the steps to give him a royal welcome.

Almost to the minute the carriage and the pair of greys which had been sent to the station swung up the drive and, amid our cheers of welcome, a handsome, brown-bearded man stepped to the ground.

With hardly a look at the servants he dashed up the steps, and in another instant, before us all, he had Miss Nelly in his arms, kissing her and—well, I didn't think Beautiful Bob had it in him.

"Rupert, Rupert! come back at last," she said.

"At last," he says, "my happiness is complete."

Then he kisses her again. Oh! he was having a real good time, was Bob.

Then he makes a speech to the servants and thanks them all for their welcome.

That evening I waited on them at dinner. I always knew Bob was a bit of an artist in the way of romancing, but his conversation at this meal was an eye-opener. He told her of his travels all over the world; his luck at the gold-diggings in California; the tremendous estates he had purchased out there; and the beautiful palace he had built. A wonderful place it seemed to be, complete in every particular save one.

"And what is this one thing that is missing, Rupert?" she asks—innocent like.

"A queen, my darling," he answers, "and as soon as my palace was ready I set out for England in the hope that I could bring you back with me to share my throne."

"Oh! Rupert, do you—do you mean us to leave England?"

"Why not, my darling? We two are alone in the world, and with you by my side the place in California will be a Paradise. I propose to sell Sandilands and get away as soon as we can."

Well, I was so flabbergasted that I dropped a bottle of fizz. I was always under the impression that Bob would come to me some fine night, and we would loot the place comfortably; but when I heard him talking of selling the place so audaciously, well, my

breath seemed a bit tight on my chest.

Dinner was over and they strolled into the drawing-room, and I didn't see Bob again that night, but just after breakfast next morning Miss Curzon tells me to send a man over to Richmond to ask Mr. Woodrow to come to Sandilands at once.

"Who's Woodrow?" I asked Bloxam.

"Woodrow? He's the family lawyer."

I thought Bob was playing a very risby game, and I began to get nervous. The lawyer turned up about midday, and after the three had had a long conversation they started on lunch.

I was waiting, of course, and the lawyer did most of the talking.

"Couldn't have happened more convenient," he said. Lord Sandpipe came to me yesterday and asked me if Sandiland was in the market. I said, 'No, not that I was aware of'; he replied that if it was he would buy it as it stands, lock, stock, and barrel, all except the horses."

"Well, he can have it, and the horses can be sent to Tattersall's."

"And you will send my jewels out tomorrow? Rupert is so anxious to see me decked in the family diamonds."

"I shall bring them over myself."

I had heard a lot about those diamonds, and I smiled broadly as I thought of Bob's smartness.

I tried to have a word or two with Bob, but he always seemed to frown when I approached him, and I remembered his instructions not to speak to him until I was spoken to.

But to tell the truth I began to get a bit troubled about Miss Nelly. I thought Bob was going a bit too far. It is all very well to make up to a servant when you want a bit of information, but to make love to a beautiful girl like Miss Nelly and even fix up the wedding day was, to my mind, only complicating things.

The next day the lawyer turned up in time for dinner, bringing with him a heavy brass bound box, which was sent straight up to Miss Nelly's room.

Bob was ready to receive Mr. Woodrow, and as they discussed a preliminary sherry and bitters I tell you my chum did look a regular dork, with his evening togs and his diamond stud. Goodness knows where he got them from, I don't.

(Concluded on sixth page)

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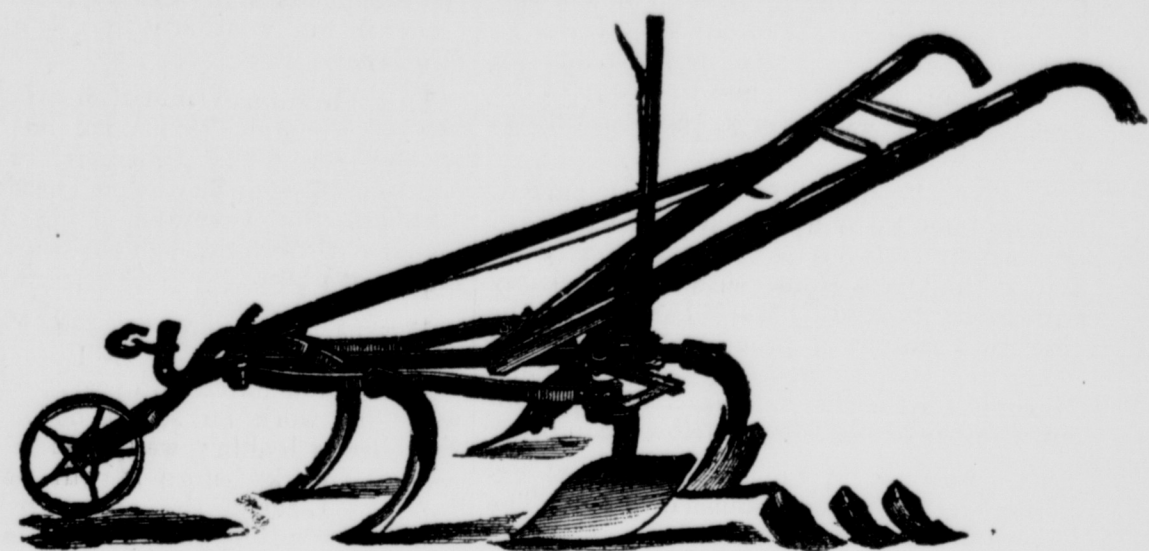
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