

FORTY 5£ NOTES.

The beginning of the absurd adventure was at the Tottenham Court Road entrance to the Two-penny Tube a little before twelve midnight on Friday, the 22nd of February last year. I had just taken my ticket and was about to pass the barrier when I was arrested by a light touch on my coat-sleeve.

"Pardon me, sir, but—er—that is—may I have a word with you?"

The speaker was a man of about thirty-five, and well dressed. He was slightly foppish and wore an eye-glass, but he had the appearance and manners of a gentleman. I waited for him to go on, which he did with very little embarrassment, considering the situation.

"The fact is," he said, frankly, "that, owing to circumstances, with the details of which I need not trouble you, I am at the present moment without a penny in my pocket. I am unable even to pay my fare. In order that I may get home I must get twopence somehow. I see no way of earning it to-night. I am, therefore, reduced to beg. If you can lend me that sum for four-and-twenty hours, the favor—"

But I interrupted him.

"I shall be most happy," I said. "Accidents of the sort happen to us all at times."

He insisted upon having an address to which he might return the money. Therefore, when I gave him the twopence, we exchanged cards. He thanked me courteously, and that I supposed was the end of the incident. He went to get his ticket and I hurried past the barrier to catch the lift, which was about to descend.

When in the train I looked at the card. It bore simply the name "Willoughby Fenton," neatly engraved. I slipped the card in my pocket and thought no more of the matter.

On the following Tuesday I received a letter from Mr. Fenton, dated from a West-end club. The writer renewed his thanks and enclosed, together with two penny stamps, a stall ticket for the Haymarket Theatre which he hoped I would be able to use. The ticket was for the following evening, Wednesday, February 27th. I rarely go to the theatre alone, and I remember wondering—rather ungratefully, be it admitted—why Mr. Fenton had not sent me tickets for two while he was about it. However, it happened that I was disengaged on the Wednesday evening in question, and so I made use of the stall.

I arrived rather late, and my seat was about the only one vacant. On my right was a girl who, apart from her subsequent extraordinary behaviour, would have attracted my attention, for she was exceptionally pretty. On her right sat an elderly man, apparently her father. When I took my seat I noticed that the girl looked at me with a half-scared expression and seemed about to speak, but she checked the impulse, and stared fixedly in front of her at the stage.

All through the first act of Captain Marshall's over play I observed that the charming young lady at my side was in a state of suppressed excitement. At the close of Act I. the old gentleman said something to his daughter and then went out. He had barely left the theatre when the girl turned impulsively to me.

"Excuse me, sir," she said, excitedly, "the seat you are occupying is engaged!"

I looked at her in amazement. Then I examined the counterfoil of my ticket, and found its number corresponded with the number on the back of my stall.

"No, I think not," I said, gravely; "but if any mistake has been made and your friend should arrive I shall be very pleased to vacate my seat for him. No doubt they will be able to find me a corner somewhere in the house."

She seemed about to speak, but at that moment her companion returned and immediately she fixed her eyes on the stage. She did not again look in my direction until the curtain fell at the close of the play. Nevertheless, no one had come to claim my seat.

At the close of the play the old gentleman rose and walked out, leaving his daughter to follow him. Before doing so she turned to me and addressed me in an eager and agitated whisper.

"Are you here as a substitute for another?" she asked, and her eyes were fixed on me with an expression of the keenest anxiety.

"Well—er—yes, certainly, that is so," I replied, in utter bewilderment.

She sighed with evident relief.

"Then that is all right," she said, with a smile which haunted me for weeks afterwards. At the same moment she slipped an envelope into my hand.

I stood like a fool gazing after her with open mouth as she hastened out of the theatre. Then, recovering my senses, I slipped the envelope into my pocket and followed the graceful, girlish figure. But in the crush to get out I lost sight of her. I made my way at once to the nearest restaurant, called for a cup of coffee, and proceeded to examine the mysterious envelope. I turned it over in my hand before opening it. It bore no name or address and was very bulky.

I felt somewhat guilty as I opened it; but I confess curiosity was my most prominent feeling. Now, at any rate, I should find a clue to the mystery. In this I was deceived. The mystery became more impenetrable than ever. The envelope contained a woman's handsome and costly diamond ring and forty £5 Bank of England notes. I broke out in cold perspiration, and then observing one of the waiters eyeing me suspiciously, I hurriedly crammed the letter and its contents into my pocket and, paying the man, passed quickly out into the street.

I reached my home—in the neighbourhood of Holland Park—shortly after twelve o'clock. In those days I was living in a small house of my own. A woman called every morning to perform the few household duties and left long before I returned from the City, as I always dined in town. On this particular night I let myself in with my latchkey as usual, and then fell sprawling in the narrow passage. On rising and striking a match I found I had fallen over a heavy overcoat of mine which was lying on the floor instead of hanging in its proper place on the rack.

This in itself was remarkable, for Mrs. Roberts was most careful and orderly in her habits and looked after me like a mother. I lit the candle, which, as usual, was standing ready for me on the small table in the passage, and went at once to the room I called my study.

What I saw made me fairly gasp with bewilderment and dismay. My desk and drawers had been broken open, my papers were scattered about the room, and the whole contents of the apartment were in a frightful state of confusion. A rapid examination proved that nearly every other room in the house had been similarly treated.

That some very expert burglars had paid me a visit and that they had done their work thoroughly was evident. Their haul had not been a great one, however. I am not a rich man, and what money I have I prefer to spend on books and travel rather than on household property. About £8 in money, two watches together worth some £5, and a few other articles worth altogether less than £10 constituted my loss. What was really remarkable about the whole business, however, was a note left by the thieves. After the manner of their kind they could not resist a gibe at the expense of their victim.

In the kitchen they had apparently had some supper, and pinned to the kitchen table with a steel fork was the following note:—

"Dear Sir,—A man of your appearance and generosity should really keep up a better establishment. The absence of servants I overlook, but I cannot pardon the paucity of your plate or the emptiness of your larder and cellar.—Yours, more in sorrow than in anger, W. F."

W. F.—Willoughby Fenton—the thought rose to my mind at once. Was it possible that the robbery had any connection with my adventure at the theatre? Scarcely. No one surely would present me with £200 in notes and a valuable diamond ring in order to rob me of property worth less than £30. The whole business was inexplicable.

It might have remained so to the end had it not been for one of those curious accidents which happen so frequently in real life and yet seem so improbable when introduced into a narrative.

When I went to town the next morning I put the note in my pocket and slipped the ring on my little finger, not caring to leave any valuables in the ransacked house. In the afternoon I met Harry Sylvester, an old friend of mine, just returned from South Africa. We spent the rest of the day together, and in the evening dined at my club.

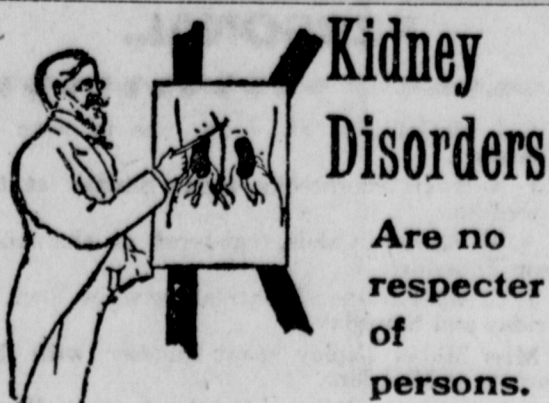
Sylvester was very interesting, relating incidents of the war which do not get into the papers, but I could see all the time that he had something on his mind. Over our coffee and cigars he opened his heart to me.

"The fact is, old fellow," he said, "I am bothered about my young brother Tom. You know him?"

"Oh, yes, of course I have met him, but not lately."

"Well, the young idiot has got himself into a beastly mess. You know he was engaged to Lucy Cartwright, the Colonel's daughter. Well that's all off. The old man was against it from the first, but that difficulty could have been overcome if Tom had only kept steady. But the young fool got into a bad set here in London. Not merely a fast set, you know, but a gang of absolute rogues. By means of cards they bled him 'white as a veil.' He got up to his ears in debt, and then in the hope of recovering himself he appropriated money belonging to the firm where he works. Of course he lost this, and ever since he has been trying desperately to borrow the money to put himself right. Even this does not exhaust the story of his folly. Colonel Cartwright, who had heard rumours, forbade his daughter to see or correspond with Tom; but the girl, by a subterfuge, arranged to meet him last night, Wednesday."

"But on the previous Monday Tom—the young idiot—must needs fall in with some of the gang who had fleeced him. They soon discovered that they had squeezed him pretty dry, and so decided to finish the business. They drugged him or made him drunk, emptied his pockets, and cleared off. When he



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came to his senses he was so ashamed that he has been moping ever since, and last night he did not keep his appointment with Miss Cartwright. And now he is in my rooms groaning and talking of suicide."

"A pretty mess, indeed. What is the amount of money he owes his firm?"

"Two hundred pounds."

"Can I see the boy?"

"I wish you would, old fellow. I am at my wit's end."

We found Tom Sylvester, a handsome, bright-eyed lad of two-and-twenty, in the lowest depths of despondence and as limp as a rag. I saw at a glance it was no good to moralize, and so I told him at once that he might help him if he would make a plain statement of his affairs. It was a sorry story of weakness and folly.

"Now, look here, my lad," I said, when he had finished, at the same time resting my hand lightly upon his arm, "if I lend you the money—"

I had no time to say more when he clutched my waist fiercely and, gazing with wide-open eyes at my hand, blurted out:—

"Where the dickens did you get that ring?"

I returned his look of amazement with interest, and then suddenly a light seemed to dawn upon my mind.

"A lady gave it to me," I said, smiling.

"It's a lie!"

"Steady, boy, steady," I said, quietly; "if you keep a civil tongue in your head and answer a few questions we may get to the bottom of this. You were to meet Miss Cartwright last night?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"What's that to you?"

"Was it at the Haymarket Theatre?"

The lad looked at me in astonishment.

"I see I am right," I said. "Now, among the men who fleeced you at the gambling club, and especially among these who were with you last Monday, was there one about thirty-five, very gentlemanly in his dress and manner, and wearing an eye-glass?"

"Yes, that's Walter Fennel—'Flash Wat' they call him. But I don't believe he had anything to do with robbing me. He is a very decent chap."

"Well, Tom, here is your ring and £200 in banknotes. They were sent you by a lady whom you know. If I may advise I would say, accept the money and put yourself right, and then try to be worthy of a lady who is evidently a great deal too good for you. Come, Harry, I want you to help me see the end of this business."

Harry Sylvester and I went at once to Scotland Yard. In a few hours "Flash Wat" was under arrest, and at the present time he is safely lodged in gaol undergoing a lengthy term of imprisonment.

There is little more to say. It appears that Miss Cartwright had been told that Tom had been asking everyone to lend him the £200, and many of his evil doings had been related to her by the usual kind friend. She somehow secured the money and intended to send it to her unworthy lover, and at the same time return her engagement ring. In order to place both in his hands she had persuaded an uncle—not her father—to take her to the theatre, and had then purchased the ticket for the stall next to her and had sent this to Tom. He lost the ticket in the manner we know, and was ashamed even to go near the theatre.

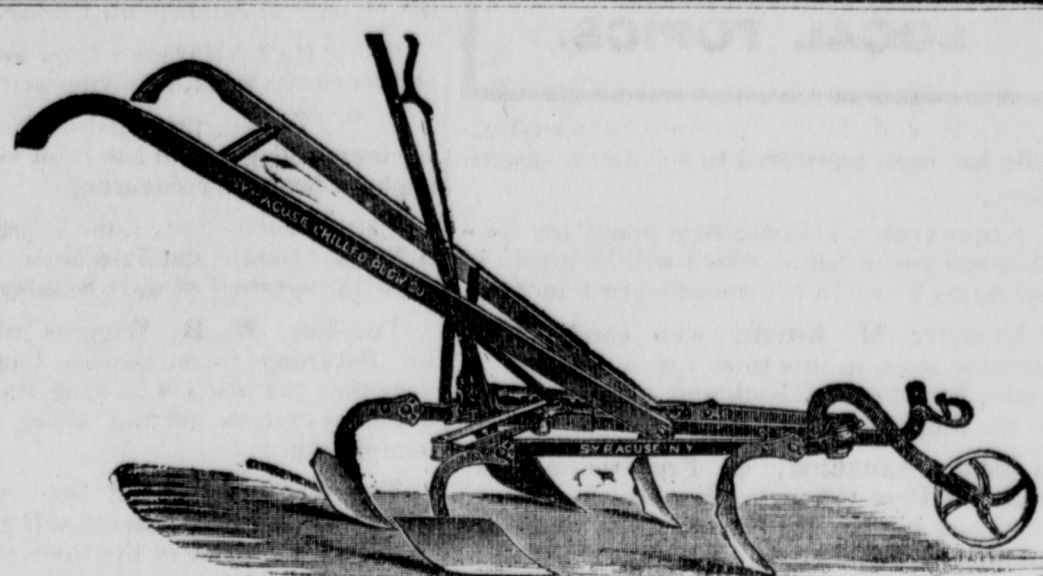
When "Flash Wat" borrowed the twopence from me it appears he was actually in need of that sum to get home, but having obtained my address he decided to put it to some use. In Tom's pocket-book—which was his share of the spoil obtained from the drugged boy on the Monday—he found the stall ticket for Wednesday evening. He sent this to keep me away from home while he ransacked the place.

I am glad to say that Tom's lesson did him good. He pulled himself together and is now going along famously. The last time I saw him he was driving in the park with Miss Cartwright, and the Colonel and the whole party seemed in the best of spirits. I caught Tom's eye, but the ungrateful young dog cut me dead.

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Miss Giddigosh: "Oh, uncle, have you seen the Williamses' baby? Do describe it to me."

Uncle Snark: "Description! Um!—ah! Very small features, clean shaven, red faced, and looks like a hard drinker!"

Friend: "Well, Ethel, how do you like married life?"

Ethel (enthusiastically): "It's simply delightful. We've been married a week and have had eight quarrels, and I got the best of it every time."