

The Robbery at Forwood Chase.

CHAPTER I.

A broiling hot morning in August, with the thermometer ninety degrees in the shade—London intolerably stifling even in the wide streets and open squares of the West-end, and in the narrow courts and alleys of the Temple simply unbearable.

Archie Lorrimer's "den," as he called his chambers, was on the second floor in one of the wider thoroughfares. It was a good-sized room, and from the miscellaneous mass of odds and ends scattered about betokened that lighter studies than that of the law were carried on in its sacred precincts.

Archie himself, in dressing-gown and slippers, sat at breakfast, his pleasant, ugly face looking anything but cheerful, his bright dark eyes glancing listlessly over an elaborate "leader" in the Times.

"Uncommonly dull; I suppose the heat stupifies their intellect," he remarked, à propos of the "leader," and then, letting the paper slip through his fingers, he exclaimed, "Confound it, how hot it is! Should not mind hiring a tank at the Aquarium this weather. Think I shall run down to Frighton for a day, or—Come in!" he broke off in answer to a knock at the door.

"A letter for you, sir," said Crumbs—short for Crumbleworth—Archie's errand-boy and general factotum, showing himself half an inch at the opening door, and extending a grimy hand holding the missive in question.

"Come in, can't you?" cried Archie from his easy-chair.

"Can't, sir. I'm a-blacking of your boots," was the answer, as the accomplished youth unceremoniously threw the letter upon the table and vanished.

Archie laughed as he took it up and peered at it—at first with languid curiosity, which brightened considerably at sight of the handwriting and crest on the seal.

"Forwood's writing, by all that's glorious!" he exclaimed, opening the envelope. "I suppose he has got back from Tyrol. Uncommonly short. Wonder what it's about?"

He spread open the paper, and read as follows:—

"Forwood Chase, August 20th.
"My dear Archie,—If you have no better engagement, will you come down here for as long as you like? Start by the 11.20 train in the morning. The drag will be sent to the station to meet you; bring your gun. Nobody here but my lady and Edith.

"Yours ever,
"GEORGE FORWOOD."

Archie started up impetuously. The invitation was just what he had been longing for. Forwood Chase was a beautiful old place in the most charming part of Yorkshire, with unlimited shooting and fishing. Major Forwood, its owner, had been his guide, philosopher and friend since old Rugby days; Major Forwood's young wife—"my lady" her husband called her—was a most charming hostess; and, lastly, Mrs. Forwood's sister, Edith Tresham, was even more charming, in Archie's eyes, than Mrs. Forwood herself. He could not remember the time when they had not been "chums"—from the days when they had played, quarrelled, and made it up as small children, to the last London season, when she kept three "rounds" for him at every dance at which they met.

With a very satisfied face he got up from the breakfast table, and set about packing his portmanteau, first, however, summoning the redoubtable Crumbs from his black-lead brushes, and despatching him with a telegram to Major Forwood, telling him he should start at once. Then, having smoked a cigarette and consulted Bradshaw, he was ready for all emergencies.

The journey down to Kirk Weston, the station for Forwood, was as monotonous and disagreeable as stifling heat, clouds of dust, and intolerable stuffiness could make it. Time hung dreadfully heavy on Mr. Lorrimer's hands, and at last he fell fast asleep. He awoke with a start when the train drew up along the platform of Normanton Junction. In two or three minutes the door opened, and a quiet, rather gentlemanly-looking man got in. He had just settled himself, when a news-boy came in with his basket of papers, shouting, "Evening News, second edition, Globe, Standard, Leeds Mercury!" at the top of his shrill, piercing young voice. Archie hailed him, and bought the first newspaper that came to hand—a Leeds Mercury—and set himself to study the local politics of the West Riding.

With very little interest he waded through two or three unimportant items, and then an announcement headed in large letters "Extraordinary Robbery of Jewellery" attracted his attention. Before he had read two lines he sat up in blank astonishment. The notice, very short and very mysterious, was as follows:—

"A robbery of an extraordinary character took place last night at Forwood Chase, the residence of Major Forwood, in which jewellery to the amount of five thousand pounds was stolen. No particulars are known as yet, though strong suspicions entertained by the local police that robbery is no ordinary one, and that

the affair will probably be shrouded in mystery."

Archie read this doubtful announcement two or three times, staring at the words in bewilderment.

"Good heavens," he thought, "what can they have been about? Five thousand pounds' worth of jewellery! I had no idea Forwood's family heirlooms were so valuable. And what a piece of stupidity that last sentence is! I should think the robbery is no ordinary one with a vengeance; but why should it be shrouded in mystery?"

"Have you heard anything of this extraordinary robbery, sir?" he asked, turning to his quiet-looking fellow-traveller, and offering him the paper.

The stranger took it, and glanced quickly over the paragraph indicated.

"Yes," he said; "I heard something about it at Leeds."

"Well, has anything been found out?" asked Archie eagerly. "Have they discovered the thieves?"

"No, I believe not," said the other, with an indifference that acted like a wet blanket on Archie's eagerness.

"What does it mean by the affair being shrouded in mystery," pursued Archie.

"Some crotchet of the local police, I should imagine," said the other, raising his brows superciliously.

"I suppose the thieves have not walked quite straight into their hands, so they point their suspicions at some mystery in the background to account for it," said Archie hotly. "What idiots they must be!"

"Not more so than other people," the stranger replied, in a tone of quiet contempt for the world in general.

"I wonder how it happened," went on Archie. "Did you hear any particulars?"

"Nothing more than you see in the newspaper," was the reply.

"Then I must wait for a solution of the affair till I get to the Chase," said Archie, with some impatience—"and that will not be long now, for here we are at Kirk Weston."

As he spoke the train slackened speed, and the little roadside station came in view.

"Are you going to Major Fenwood's?" asked the stranger, a faint spark of interest appearing in his quite impassive face.

"Yes," said Archie coldly, as he let down the window and signed to a porter to open the door. He had not "taken" much to the quiet and uncommunicative stranger.

"Then we are fellow-travellers still" returned the other; "for the Chase is my destination also."

In another moment the train drew up, and the two passengers got out.

"Who the deuce are you, I wonder," thought Archie, eyeing the stranger with some suspicion as they walked together on the platform to the baggage-van. "You are not the doctor, and you are not the lawyer, as I know. I should not be much surprised if you turned out to be the parson. Anyhow, I don't envy Fenwood his task of entertaining you."

He picked out his luggage from the pile, told the porter to see to it, and, raising his hat with a ceremonious "Good-day" to his fellow-traveller, he walked out of the station.

A light drag with a superb pair of horses stood in the sunshine outside, with a manservant in attendance.

"How do you do, Dayton?" said Archie, with a cordial nod, as the man came forward touching his hat. "The porter will bring you my traps, and I shall walk up to the Chase. All well there, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, quite. There is another gentleman for the Chase expected by this train, sir. Did you see him?" asked the man.

"Yes; he is in the station, and will come out when he is ready. Tell Major Forwood I am walking." And, shouldering his stick, Archie Lorrimer marched away, leaving the drag and chestnuts to undisputed possession of his taciturn fellow-traveller.

Presently he struck off from the dusty main road into the fresh sweet fields, and, after an hour's leisurely walk, entirely up hill, found himself entering the Chase woods. The house—a low picturesque building of red sandstone—stood on the slope of a hill on the edge of the wild moorland; below it stretched a magnificent panorama of undulating hills and valleys; while, behind, the hill sloped up till it ended in the heather and bracken of the moors themselves.

Sauntering along, fully enjoying the fragrance and coolness of the green shade, Archie had got within about two hundred yards of the house, when the flutter of a white muslin dress was seen between the fir-trunks, and, at a sudden turn of the path, he came face to face with a young lady.

"Miss Tresham!" he exclaimed, his face brightening as he seized her hand. "How kind of you to come and meet me!"

"Then I must have come by the rule of contrary," she replied, with a charming smile; "for I should never have guessed that you would walk up from the station in this broiling sun. But I am very glad to see you, Mr. Lorrimer. It is just like old times to be here again, is it not?"

"No, not at all," he said significantly; "in old times you used to call me Archie."

"Ah, I have learned to see the error of

my ways since then!" she replied lightly. "Did you have a pleasant journey from town?"

"No, horribly disagreeable. The heat and dust were stifling; and, since I left Normanton, I have been in a complete state of bewilderment. What is all this mysterious tale about stolen jewellery in the Leeds paper? I cannot make head or tail of it."

She did not answer immediately. Surprised at her silence, he turned his eyes to her. A hot burning flush had covered her face, her lips were trembling, and tears seemed suspiciously near the clear dark-blue eyes—beautiful eyes they were, with sweeping black eyelashes lying softly against the soft creamy cheek.

"Why, Miss Tresham—Edith, what is the matter?" he exclaimed in surprise.

She dashed away the tears quickly, and then, with a laugh that ended suspiciously like a sob, said hastily,—

"Oh, it is nothing! I am only very foolish!"

"Yes, it is something," he persisted, stopping short and gazing at her fixedly; "for I never seen you cry in my life before. And you look worried too. What is the matter?"

"It is this horrible robbery," she said, her lips still trembling ominously. "I came out because I could not bear it any longer in the house."

"Bear what?" he asked, opening his eyes wide.

"The suspicion, and those dreadful men."

"What do you mean?" he interrupted.

"What suspicion. What dreadful men?"

"Were you not talking about the robbery?" she said, looking up with a surprised glance. "Have you not heard of it?"

"I read a paragraph in the newspaper as I came along," he answered, "which stated that five thousand pounds' worth of jewellery had been stolen from Major Forwood's; but the last part of the account was so ridiculously mysterious that I scarcely knew whether to believe the first or not."

"It is quite true, said Edith, her voice trembling again.

"Well, you need not be so distressed about it," he said reassuringly. "It is a great loss, of course, but nothing for you to trouble yourself about; no suspicion can touch you."

"But it does," she cried—"it does!" I saw the evening paper half an hour ago, and read the insinuations at the end, and—and—I could not bear it."

"Of all the stupid things," Archie began, and then inquired suddenly, "But you don't mean to say those mysterious hints are pointed at you?"

"Yes, I do," she cried, with renewed distress. "They are, indeed. Oh, Mr. Lorrimer, I cannot tell you how glad I am you have come! You are a lawyer, and perhaps find some way out of this dreadful business."

"Perhaps I may when I know something about it," he answered reassuringly; "but at present I am almost in the dark. As to suspicion touching you, that is simply absurd. Sit down on this seat and tell me all about it."

They had come to a rustic seat under a wide-spreading horse-chestnut. Miss Tresham sat down, and Archie took his place beside her, noting as he did so the pretty rose-red blush rising in the sweet face, and the half-shyly averted graceful head.

"Now," he said briskly, his pleasant ugly face taking on a keen business-like air, "perhaps I shall have the common-sense account of this mysterious affair. How did it all happen? And what in the world was the Major doing with five thousand pounds' worth of jewellery?"

"It was a case from Storr and Mortimer's," explained Edith. "George wanted to give Ida a set of pearls or diamonds on her birthday, and wrote up to them to send some for her to choose from. A confidential clerk came down with some yesterday. They were magnificent—such superb diamonds and emeralds, and the pearls like—"

"There—don't go into raptures over them, or we shall never get on," interrupted Archie promptly.

Edith laughed a little as she continued her tale.

"The clerk Simpson said they were worth five thousand pounds, though there only half a dozen sets and two or three lockets. Ida chose a splendid set of pearls; but, as some alterations were required, they were put back into the case with the rest of the jewellery, to be returned to London. Then George said he would put the case in the safe in his book-room for the night; he invited us all to go up-stairs, as he said he must have witnesses that such a valuable treasure was safely bestowed. So quite in fun Ida and I went up-stairs with him and the clerk."

"Well?" he queried, as she stopped for a moment.

"When George came to open the safe, he could not find the key. He usually keeps it on a small bunch of keys in a drawer of his dressing-case, but it was not there—though that is nothing out of the common, as he is always losing his keys."

"I remember," interposed Archie—"many a predicament we have been in for want of the Major's keys."

"Of course we hunted everywhere for them," went on Edith, "but they were not to be found; so, not imagining there

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