

A Suspicious Gift

Algernon Blackwood

Blake had been in very low water for months—almost under water part of the time—due to circumstances he was fond of saying were no fault of his own; and as he sat writing in his room on “third floor back” of a New York boarding-house, part of his mind was busily occupied in wondering when his luck was going to turn again.

It was his room only in the sense that he paid the rent. Two friends, one a little Frenchman and the other a big Dane, shared it with him, both hoping eventually to contribute something towards expenses, but so far not having accomplished this result. They had two beds only, the third being a mattress they slept upon in turns, a week at a time. A good deal of their irregular “feeding” consisted of oatmeal, potatoes, and sometimes eggs, all of which they cooked on a strange utensil they had contrived to fix into the gas jet. Occasionally, when dinner failed them altogether, they swallowed a little raw rice and drank hot water from the bathroom on the top of it, and then made a wild race for bed so as to get to sleep while the sensation of false repletion was still there. For sleep and hunger are slight acquaintances as they well knew. Fortunately all New York houses are supplied with hot air, and they only had to open a grating in the wall to get a plentiful, if not a wholesome amount of heat.

Though loneliness in a big city is a real punishment, as they had severally learnt to their cost, their experiences, three in a small room for several months, had revealed to them horrors of quite another kind, and their nerves had suffered according to the temperament of each. But, on this particular evening, as Blake sat scribbling by the only window that was not cracked, the Dane and the Frenchman, his companions in adversity, were in wonderful luck. They had both been asked out to a restaurant to dine with a friend who also held out to one of them a chance of work and remuneration. They would not be back till late, and when they did come they were pretty sure to bring in supplies of one kind or another. For the Frenchman never could resist the offer of a glass of absinthe, and this meant that he would be able to help himself plentifully from the free-lunch counters, with which all New York bars are furnished, and to which any purchaser of a drink is entitled to help himself and devour on the spot or carry away casually in his hand for consumption elsewhere. Thousands of unfortunate men get their sole subsistence in this way in New York, and experience soon teaches where, for the price of a single drink, a man can take away almost a meal of chip potatoes, sausage, bits of bread, and even eggs. The Frenchman and the Dane knew their way about, and Blake looked forward to a supper more or less substantial before pulling his mattress out of the cupboard and turning in upon the floor for the night.

Meanwhile he could enjoy a quiet and lonely evening with the room all to himself.

In the daytime he was a reporter on an evening newspaper of sensational and lying habits. His work was chiefly in the police courts; and in his spare hours at night, when not too tired or too empty, he wrote sketches and stories for the magazines that very rarely saw the light of day on their printed and paid-for sentences. On this particular occasion he was deep in a most involved tale of a psychological character, and had just worked his way into a sentence, or set of sentences, that completely baffled and muddled him.

He was fairly out of his depth, and his brain was too poorly supplied with blood to invent a way out again. The story would have been interesting had he written it simply, keeping to facts and feelings, and not diving into difficult analysis of motive and character which was quite beyond him. For it was largely autobiographical, and was meant to describe the adventures of a young Englishman who had come to grief in the usual manner on a Canadian farm, had then subsequently become bar-keeper, sub-editor on a Methodist magazine, a teacher of French and German to clerks at twenty-five cents per hour, a model for artists, a super on the stage, and, finally, a wanderer to the goldfields.

Blake scratched his head, and dipped the pen in the inkpot, stared out through the blindless windows, and sighed deeply. His thoughts kept wandering to food, beefsteak and steaming vegetables. The smell of cooking that came from a lower floor through the broken windows was a constant torment to him. He pulled himself together and again attacked the problem.

“ . . . for with some people,” he wrote, “the imagination is so vivid as to be almost an extension of consciousness. . . .” But here he stuck absolutely. He was not quite sure what he meant by the words, and how to finish the sentence puzzled him into blank inaction. It was a difficult point to decide, for it seemed to come in appropriately at this point in his story, and he did not know whether to leave it as it stood, change it round a bit, or take it out altogether. It might just spoil its chances of being accepted: editors were such clever men. But, to rewrite the sentence was a grind, and he was so tired and sleepy. After all, what did it matter? People who were clever would force a meaning into it; people who were not clever would pretend—he knew of no other classes of readers. He would let it stay, and go on with the action of the story. He put his head in his hands and began to think hard.

His mind soon passed from thought to reverie. He fell to wondering when his friends would find work and relieve him of the burden—he acknowledged it as such—of keeping them, and of letting another man wear his best clothes on alternate Sundays. He wondered when his “luck” would turn. There were one or two influential people in New York whom he could go and see if he had a dress suit and the other conventional uniforms. His thoughts ran on far ahead, and at the same time, by a sort of double process, far behind as well. His home in the “old country” rose up before him; he saw the lawn and the cedars in sunshine; he looked through the familiar windows and saw the clean, swept rooms. His story began to suffer; the psychological masterpiece would not make much progress unless he pulled up and dragged

his thoughts back to the treadmill. But he no longer cared; once he had got as far as that cedar with the sunshine on it, he never could get back again. For all he cared, the troublesome sentence might run away and get into someone else's pages, or be snuffed out altogether.

There came a gentle knock at the door, and Blake started. The knock was repeated louder. Who in the world could it be at this late hour of the night? On the floor above, he remembered, there lived another Englishman, a foolish, second-rate creature, who sometimes came in and made himself objectionable with endless and silly chatter. But he was an Englishman for all that, and Blake always tried to treat him with politeness, realising that he was lonely in a strange land. But to-night, of all people in the world, he did not want to be bored with Perry's cackle, as he called it, and the "Come in" he gave in answer to the second knock had no very cordial sound of welcome in it.

However, the door opened in response, and the man came in. Blake did not turn round at once, and the other advanced to the centre of the room, but *without speaking*. Then Blake knew it was not his enemy, Perry, and turned round.

He saw a man of about forty standing in the middle of the carpet, but standing sideways so that he did not present a full face. He wore an overcoat buttoned up to the neck, and on the felt hat which he held in front of him fresh rain-drops glistened. In his other hand he carried a small black bag. Blake gave him a good look, and came to the conclusion that he might be a secretary, or a chief clerk, or a confidential man of sorts. He was a shabby-respectable-looking person. This was the sum-total of the first impression, gained the moment his eyes took in that it was *not* Perry; the second impression was less pleasant, and reported at once that something was wrong.

Though otherwise young and inexperienced, Blake—thanks, or curses, to the police court training—knew more about common criminal blackguardism than most men of fifty, and he recognised that there was somewhere a suggestion of this undesirable world about the man. But there was more than this. There was something singular about him, something far out of the common, though for the life of him Blake could not say wherein it lay. The fellow was out of the ordinary, and in some very undesirable manner.

All this, that takes so long to describe, Blake saw with the first and second glance. The man at once began to speak in a quiet and respectful voice.

"Are you Mr. Blake?" he asked.

"I am."

"Mr. Arthur Blake?"

“Yes.”

“Mr. Arthur *Herbert* Blake?” persisted the other, with emphasis on the middle name.

“That is my full name,” Blake answered simply, adding, as he remembered his manners; “but won’t you sit down, first, please?”

The man advanced with a curious sideways motion like a crab and took a seat on the edge of the sofa. He put his hat on the floor at his feet, but still kept the bag in his hand.

“I come to you from a well-wisher,” he went on in oily tones, without lifting his eyes. Blake, in his mind, ran quickly over all the people he knew in New York who might possibly have sent such a man, while waiting for him to supply the name. But the man had come to a full stop and was waiting too.

“A well-wisher of *mine*?” repeated Blake, not knowing quite what else to say.

“Just so,” replied the other, still with his eyes on the floor. “A well-wisher of yours.”

“A man or—” he felt himself blushing, “or a woman?”

“That,” said the man shortly, “I cannot tell you.”

“You can’t tell me!” exclaimed the other, wondering what was coming next, and who in the world this mysterious well-wisher could be who sent so discreet and mysterious a messenger.

“I cannot tell you the name,” replied the man firmly. “Those are my instructions. But I bring you something from this person, and I am to give it to you, to take a receipt for it, and then to go away without answering any questions.”

Blake stared very hard. The man, however, never raised his eyes above the level of the second china knob on the chest of drawers opposite. The giving of a receipt sounded like money. Could it be that some of his influential friends had heard of his plight? There were possibilities that made his heart beat. At length, however, he found his tongue, for this strange creature was determined apparently to say nothing more until he had heard from him.

“Then, what have you got for me, please?” he asked bluntly.

By way of answer the man proceeded to open the bag. He took out a parcel wrapped loosely

in brown paper, and about the size of a large book. It was tied with string, and the man seemed unnecessarily long untying the knot. When at last the string was off and the paper unfolded, there appeared a series of smaller packages inside. The man took them out very carefully, almost as if they had been alive, Blake thought, and set them in a row upon his knees. They were dollar bills. Blake, all in a flutter, craned his neck forward a little to try and make out their denomination. He read plainly the figures 100.

“There are ten thousand dollars here,” said the man quietly.

The other could not suppress a little cry.

“And they are for you.”

Blake simply gasped. “Ten thousand dollars!” he repeated, a queer feeling growing up in his throat. “*Ten thousand*. Are you sure? I mean—you mean they are for *me*?” he stammered. He felt quite silly with excitement, and grew more so with every minute, as the man maintained a perfect silence. Was it not a dream? Wouldn’t the man put them back in the bag presently and say it was a mistake, and they were meant for somebody else? He could not believe his eyes or his ears. Yet, in a sense, it was possible. He had read of such things in books, and even come across them in his experience of the courts—the erratic and generous philanthropist who is determined to do his good deed and to get no thanks or acknowledgment for it. Still, it seemed almost incredible. His troubles began to melt away like bubbles in the sun; he thought of the other fellows when they came in, and what he would have to tell them; he thought of the German landlady and the arrears of rent, of regular food and clean linen, and books and music, of the chance of getting into some respectable business, of—well, of as many things as it is possible to think of when excitement and surprise fling wide open the gates of the imagination.

The man, meanwhile, began quietly to count over the packages aloud from one to ten, and then to count the bills in each separate packet, also from one to ten. Yes, there were ten little heaps, each containing ten bills of a hundred-dollar denomination. That made ten thousand dollars. Blake had never seen so much money in a single lump in his life before; and for many months of privation and discomfort he had not known the “feel” of a twenty-dollar note, much less of a hundred-dollar one. He heard them crackle under the man’s fingers, and it was like crisp laughter in his ears. The bills were evidently new and unused.

But, side by side with the excitement caused by the shock of such an event, Blake’s caution, acquired by a year of vivid New York experience, was meanwhile beginning to assert itself. It all seemed just a little too much out of the likely order of things to be quite right. The police courts had taught him the amazing ingenuity of the criminal mind, as well as something of the plots and devices by which the unwary are beguiled into the dark places where blackmail may be levied with impunity. New York, as a matter of fact, just at that

time was literally undermined with the secret ways of the blackmailers, the green-goods men, and other police-protected abominations; and the only weak point in the supposition that this was part of some such proceeding was the selection of himself—a poor newspaper reporter—as a victim. It did seem absurd, but then the whole thing was so out of the ordinary, and the thought once having entered his mind, was not so easily got rid of. Blake resolved to be very cautious.

The man meanwhile, though he never appeared to raise his eyes from the carpet, had been watching him closely all the time.

“If you will give me a receipt I’ll leave the money at once,” he said, with just a vestige of impatience in his tone, as if he were anxious to bring the matter to a conclusion as soon as possible.

“But you say it is quite impossible for you to tell me the name of my well-wisher, or why *she* sends me such a large sum of money in this extraordinary way?”

“The money is sent to you because you are in need of it,” returned the other; “and it is a present without conditions of any sort attached. You have to give me a receipt only to satisfy the sender that it has reached your hands. The money will never be asked of you again.”

Blake noticed two things from this answer: first, that the man was not to be caught into betraying the sex of the well-wisher; and secondly, that he was in some hurry to complete the transaction. For he was now giving reasons, attractive reasons, why he should accept the money and make out the receipt.

Suddenly it flashed across his mind that if he took the money and gave the receipt *before a witness*, nothing very disastrous could come of the affair. It would protect him against blackmail, if this was, after all, a plot of some sort with blackmail in it; whereas, if the man were a madman, or a criminal who was getting rid of a portion of his ill-gotten gains to divert suspicion, or if any other improbable explanation turned out to be the true one, there was no great harm done, and he could hold the money till it was claimed, or advertised for in the newspapers. His mind rapidly ran over these possibilities, though, of course, under the stress of excitement, he was unable to weigh any of them properly; then he turned to his strange visitor again and said quietly—

“I will take the money, although I must say it seems to me a very unusual transaction, and I will give you for it such a receipt as I think proper under the circumstances.”

“A proper receipt is all I want,” was the answer.

“I mean by that a receipt before a proper witness—”

“Perfectly satisfactory,” interrupted the man, his eyes still on the carpet. “Only, it must be dated, and headed with your address here in the correct way.”

Blake could see no possible objection to this, and he at once proceeded to obtain his witness. The person he had in his mind was a Mr. Barclay, who occupied the room above his own; an old gentleman who had retired from business and who, the landlady always said, was a miser, and kept large sums secreted in his room. He was, at any rate, a perfectly respectable man and would make an admirable witness to a transaction of this sort. Blake made an apology and rose to fetch him, crossing the room in front of the sofa where the man sat, in order to reach the door. As he did so, he saw for the first time the *other side* of his visitor’s face, the side that had been always so carefully turned away from him.

There was a broad smear of blood down the skin from the ear to the neck. It glistened in the gaslight.

Blake never knew how he managed to smother the cry that sprang to his lips, but smother it he did. In a second he was at the door, his knees trembling, his mind in a sudden and dreadful turmoil.

His main object, so far as he could recollect afterwards, was to escape from the room as if he had noticed nothing, so as not to arouse the other’s suspicions. The man’s eyes were always on the carpet, and probably, Blake hoped, he had not noticed the consternation that must have been written plainly on his face. At any rate he had uttered no cry.

In another second he would have been in the passage, when suddenly he met a pair of wicked, staring eyes fixed intently and with a cunning smile upon his own. It was the other’s face in the mirror calmly watching his every movement.

Instantly, all his powers of reflection flew to the winds, and he thought only upon the desirability of getting help at once. He tore upstairs, his heart in his mouth. Barclay must come to his aid. This matter was serious—perhaps horribly serious. Taking the money, or giving a receipt, or having anything at all to do with it became an impossibility. Here was crime. He felt certain of it.

In three bounds he reached the next landing and began to hammer at the old miser’s door as if his very life depended on it. For a long time he could get no answer. His fists seemed to make no noise. He might have been knocking on cotton wool, and the thought dashed through his brain that it was all just like the terror of a nightmare.

Barclay, evidently, was still out, or else sound asleep. But the other simply could not wait a minute longer in suspense. He turned the handle and walked into the room. At first he saw

nothing for the darkness, and made sure the owner of the room was out; but the moment the light from the passage began a little to disperse the gloom, he saw the old man, to his immense relief, lying asleep on the bed.

Blake opened the door to its widest to get more light and then walked quickly up to the bed. He now saw the figure more plainly, and noted that it was dressed and lay only upon the outside of the bed. It struck him, too, that he was sleeping in a very odd, almost an unnatural, position.

Something clutched at his heart as he looked closer. He stumbled over a chair and found the matches. Calling upon Barclay the whole time to wake up and come downstairs with him, he blundered across the floor, a dreadful thought in his mind, and lit the gas over the table. It seemed strange that there was no movement or reply to his shouting. But it no longer seemed strange when at length he turned, in the full glare of the gas, and saw the old man lying huddled up into a ghastly heap on the bed, his throat cut across from ear to ear.

And all over the carpet lay new dollar bills, crisp and clean like those he had left downstairs, and strewn about in little heaps.

For a moment Blake stood stock-still, bereft of all power of movement. The next, his courage returned, and he fled from the room and dashed downstairs, taking five steps at a time. He reached the bottom and tore along the passage to his room, determined at any rate to seize the man and prevent his escape till help came.

But when he got to the end of the little landing he found that his door had been closed. He seized the handle, fumbling with it in his violence. It felt slippery and kept turning under his fingers without opening the door, and fully half a minute passed before it yielded and let him in headlong.

At the first glance he saw the room was empty, and the man gone!

Scattered upon the carpet lay a number of the bills, and beside them, half hidden under the sofa where the man had sat, he saw a pair of gloves—thick, leathern gloves—and a butcher's knife. Even from the distance where he stood the blood-stains on both were easily visible.

Dazed and confused by the terrible discoveries of the last few minutes, Blake stood in the middle of the room, overwhelmed and unable to think or move. Unconsciously he must have passed his hand over his forehead in the natural gesture of perplexity, for he noticed that the skin felt wet and sticky. His hand was covered with blood! And when he rushed in terror to the looking-glass, he saw that there was a broad red smear across his face and forehead. Then he remembered the slippery handle of the door and knew that it had been carefully moistened!

In an instant the whole plot became clear as daylight, and he was so spellbound with horror that a sort of numbness came over him and he came very near to fainting. He was in a condition of utter helplessness, and had anyone come into the room at that minute and called him by name he would simply have dropped to the floor in a heap.

“If the police were to come in now!” The thought crashed through his brain like thunder, and at the same moment, almost before he had time to appreciate a quarter of its significance, there came a loud knocking at the front door below. The bell rang with a dreadful clamour; men’s voices were heard talking excitedly, and presently heavy steps began to come up the stairs in the direction of his room.

It *was* the police!

And all Blake could do was to laugh foolishly to himself—and wait till they were upon him. He could not move nor speak. He stood face to face with the evidence of his horrid crime, his hands and face smeared with the blood of his victim, and there he was standing when the police burst open the door and came noisily into the room.

“Here it is!” cried a voice he knew. “Third floor back! And the fellow caught red-handed!”

It was the man with the bag leading in the two policemen.

Hardly knowing what he was doing in the fearful stress of conflicting emotions, he made a step forward. But before he had time to make a second one, he felt the heavy hand of the law descend upon both shoulders at once as the two policemen moved up to seize him. At the same moment a voice of thunder cried in his ear—

“Wake up, man! Wake up! Here’s the supper, and good news too!”

Blake turned with a start in his chair and saw the Dane, very red in the face, standing beside him, a hand on each shoulder, and a little further back he saw the Frenchman leering happily at him over the end of the bed, a bottle of beer in one hand and a paper package in the other.

He rubbed his eyes, glancing from one to the other, and then got up sleepily to fix the wire arrangement on the gas jet to boil water for cooking the eggs which the Frenchman was in momentary danger of letting drop upon the floor.

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