

THE WRONG BLACK BAG

ANGELO LEWIS

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It was the eve of Good Friday. Within the modest parlour of No. 13 Primrose Terrace a little man, wearing a gray felt hat and a red neck-tie, stood admiring himself in the looking-glass over the mantelpiece. Such a state of things anywhere else would have had no significance whatever; but circumstances proverbially alter cases. At 13 Primrose Terrace it approached the dimensions of a portent.

Not to keep the reader in suspense, the little man was Benjamin Quelch, clerk in the office of Messrs. Cobble Clink, coal merchants, and he was about to carry out a desperate resolution. Most men have some secret ambition; Benjamin's was twofold. For years he had yearned to wear a soft felt hat and to make a trip to Paris, and for years Fate, in the person of Mrs. Quelch, had stood in the way and prevented the indulgence of his longing. Quelch being, as we have hinted, exceptionally small of stature, had, in accordance with mysterious law of opposites, selected the largest lady of his acquaintance as the partner of his joys. He himself was of a meek and retiring disposition. Mrs. Quelch, on the other hand, was a woman of stern and decided temperament, with strong views upon most subjects. She administered Benjamin's finances, regulated his diet, and prescribed for him when his health was out order. Though fond of him in her own way, she ruled him with a rod of iron, and on three points she was inflexible. To make up for his insignificance of stature, she insisted on his wearing the tallest hat that money could procure, to the exclusion of all other head-gear; secondly, on the ground that it looked more professional, she would allow him none but black silk neckties; and lastly, she would not let him smoke. She had further an intense repugnance to all things foreign, holding as an article of faith that no good thing, whether in art, cookery, or morals, was to be found on other than English soil. When Benjamin once, in a rash moment, suggested a trip to Boulogne by way of summer holiday, the suggestion was received in a manner that took away his appetite for a week afterward.

The prohibition of smoking Quelch did not much mind; for, having in his salad days made trial of a cheap cigar, the result somehow satisfies him that tobacco was not in his line, and he ceased to yearn for it accordingly. But the tall hat and the black necktie were constant sources of irritation. He had an idea, based on his having once won a drawing prize at school, that nature had intended him for an artist, and he secretly lamented the untoward fate which had thrown him away upon coals. Now the few artists Benjamin had chanced to meet affected a soft and slouchy style of head-gear, and a considerable amount of freedom, generally with a touch of colour, in the region of the neck. Such, therefore, in the fitness of things, should have been the hat and such the neck-gear of Benjamin Quelch, and the veto of his wife only made him yearn for them the more intensely.

In later years he had been seized with a longing to see Paris. It chanced that a clerk in the same office, one Peter Flipp, had made one of a personally conducted party on a visit to the gay city.

The cost of the trip had been but five guineas; but never, surely, were five guineas so magnificently invested. There was a good deal of romance about Flipp, and it may be that his accounts were not entirely trustworthy; but they so fired the imagination of our friend Benjamin that he had at once begun to hoard up surreptitious sixpences, with the hope that some day he too might, by some unforeseen combination of circumstances, be enabled to visit the enchanted city.

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And at last that day had come. Mrs. Quelch, her three children and her one domestic, had gone to Lowestoft for an Easter outing, Benjamin and a deaf charwoman, Mrs. Widger, being left in charge of the family belongings. Benjamin's Easter holidays were limited to Good Friday and Easter Monday, and, as it seemed hardly worth while that he should travel so far as Lowestoft for such short periods, Mrs. Quelch had thoughtfully arranged that he should spend the former day at the British Museum and the latter at the Zoological Gardens. Two days after her departure, however, Mr. Cobble called Quelch into his private office and told him that if he liked he might for once take holiday from the Friday to the Tuesday inclusive, and join his wife at the seaside.

Quelch accepted the boon with an honest intention of employing it as suggested. Indeed, he had even begun a letter to his wife announcing the pleasing intelligence, and had got as far as *My dear Penelope*, when a wild and wicked thought struck him: why should he not spend his unexpected holiday in Paris?

Laying down his pen, he opened his desk: and counted his secret hoard. It amounted to five pounds seventeen, twelve shillings more than Flipp's outlay. There was no difficulty in that direction, and nobody would be any the wiser. His wife would imagine that he was in London, while his employers would believe him to be at Lowestoft. There was a brief struggle in his mind, but the tempter prevailed, and, with a courage worthy of a better cause, he determined to risk it and *go*.

And thus it came to pass that, on the evening of our story, Benjamin Quelch, having completed his packing, which merely comprised what he was accustomed to call his *night things*, neatly bestowed in a small black hand-bag belonging to Mrs. Quelch, stood before the looking-glass and contemplated his guilty splendour, the red necktie and the soft gray felt hat, purchased out of surplus funds. He had expended a couple of guineas in a second-class return ticket, and another two pounds in coupons, entitling him to bed, breakfast, and dinner for five days at certain specified hotels in Paris. This outlay, with half a crown for a pair of gloves, and a bribe of five shillings to secure the silence of Mrs. Widger, left him with little more than a pound in hand, but this small surplus would no doubt amply suffice for his modest needs.

His only regret, as he gazed at himself in the glass was that he had not had time to grow a moustache, the one thing needed to complete his artistic appearance. But time was fleeting, and he dared not linger over the enticing picture. He stole along the passage, and softly opened the street door. As he did so a sudden panic came over him, and he felt half inclined to abandon his rash design. But as he wavered he caught sight of the detested tall hat hanging up in the passage, and he hesitated no longer. He passed out, and, closing the door behind him, started at a brisk pace for Victoria station.

His plans had been laid with much ingenuity, though at a terrible sacrifice of his usual straight-forwardness. He had written a couple of letters to Mrs. Quelch, to be posted by Mrs. Widger on appropriate days, giving imaginary accounts of his visits to the British Museum and Zoological Gardens, with pointed allusions to the behavior of the elephant, and other circumstantial particulars. To insure the posting of these in proper order, he had marked the dates in pencil on the envelopes in the corner usually occupied by the postage-stamp, so that when the latter was affixed the figures would be concealed. He explained the arrangement to Mrs. Widger, who promised that his instructions should be faithfully carried out.

After a sharp walk he reached the railway-station, and in due course found himself steaming across the Channel to Dieppe. The passage was not especially rough, but to poor Quelch, unaccustomed as he was to the sea, it seemed as if the boat must go to the bottom every moment. To the bodily pains of seasickness were added the mental pains of remorse, and between the two he reached Dieppe more dead than alive; indeed, he would almost have welcomed death as a release from his sufferings.

Even when the boat had arrived at the pier he still remained in the berth he had occupied all night, and would probably have continued to lie there had not the steward lifted him by main force to his feet. He seized his black bag with a groan, and staggered on deck. Here he felt a little better, but new terrors seized him at the sight of the

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gold-laced officials and blue-bloused porters, who lined each side of the gangway, all talking at the top of their voices, and in tones which seemed, to his unaccustomed ear, to convey a thirst for British blood. No sooner had he landed than he was accosted by a ferocious-looking personage (in truth, a harmless custom-house officer), who asked him in French whether he had anything to declare, and made a movement to take his bag in order to mark it as passed. Quelch jumped to the conclusion that the stranger was a brigand bent on depriving him of his property, and he held on to the bag with such tenacity that the douanier naturally inferred there was something specially contraband about it. He proceeded to open it, and produced, among sundry other feminine belongings, a lady's frilled and furbelowed night-dress, from which, as he unrolled it, fell a couple of bundles of cigars!

Benjamin's look of astonishment as he saw these unexpected articles produced from his hand-bag was interpreted by the officials as a look of guilt. As a matter of fact, half stupefied by the agonies of the night, he had forgotten the precise spot where he had left his own bag, and had picked up in its stead one belonging to the wife of a sporting gentleman on his way to some races at Longchamps. Desiring to smuggle a few weeds, and deeming that the presence of such articles would be less likely to be suspected among a lady's belongings, the sporting gentleman had committed them to his companion's keeping. Hand-bags, as a rule, are passed unopened, and such would probably have been the case in the present instance had not Quelch's look of panic excited suspicion. The real owners of the bag had picked up Quelch's which it precisely resembled, and were close behind him on the gangway. The lady uttered an exclamation of dismay as she saw the contents of her bag spread abroad by the customs officer, but was promptly silenced by her husband. Keep your blessed tongue quiet, he whispered, If a bloomin' idiot chooses to sneak our bag, and then to give himself away to the first man that looks at him, he must stand the racket. Whereupon the sporting gentleman and lady, first taking a quiet peep into Benjamin's bag to make sure that it contained nothing compromising, passed the examiner with a smile of conscious innocence, and, after an interval for refreshment at the buffet, took their seats in the train for Paris.

Meanwhile poor Quelch was taken before a pompous individual with an extra large moustache and a double allowance of gold lace on his cap and charged not only with defrauding the revenue, but with forcibly resisting an officer in the execution of his duty. The accusation being in French, Quelch did not understand a word of it, and in his ignorance took it for granted that he was accused of stealing the strange bag and its contents. Visions of imprisonment, penal servitude nay, even capital punishment, floated before his bewildered brain. Finally the official with the large moustache made a speech to him in French, setting forth that for his dishonest attempt to smuggle he must pay a fine of a hundred francs. With regard to the assault on the official, as said official was not much hurt, he graciously agreed to throw that in and make no charge for it. When he had fully explained matters to his own satisfaction he waited to receive the answer of the prisoner; but none was forthcoming, for the best of reasons. It finally dawned on the official that Quelch might not understand French, and he therefore proceeded to address him in what he considered to be his native tongue.

You smoggle smoggle seegar. Zen it must zat you pay amende, hundred francs. You me understand? Hundred francs pay! pay! pay! At each repetition of the last word he brought down a dirty fist into the palm of the opposite hand immediately under Quelch's nose. Hundred francs Engleesh money, four pound.

Quelch caught the last words, and was relieved to find that it was merely a money payment that was demanded of him. But he was little better off, for, having but a few shillings in his pocket, to pay four pounds was as much out of his power as if it had been four hundred. He determined to appeal to the mercy of his captors. Not got, he said, apologetically, with a vague idea that by speaking very elementary English he came somehow nearer to French, That all, he continued, producing his little store and holding it out beseechingly to the official. *Pas assez, not enouf*, growled the latter. Quelch tried again in all his pockets, but only succeeded in finding another threepenny piece. The officer shook his head, and, after a brief discussion with his fellows, said, *Comment—vous appelez—vous, monsieur?* How do you call yourself?

With a vague idea of keeping his disgrace from his friends, Quelch rashly determined to give a false name. If he had had a few minutes to think it over he would have invented one for the occasion, but his imagination was not

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accustomed to such sudden calls, and, on the question being repeated, he desperately gave the name of his next-door neighbour, Mr. Henry Fladgate. Henri Flodgett, repeated the officer as he wrote it down.

Et vous demeurez? You live where? And Quelch proceeded to give the address of Mr. Fladgate, 11 Primrose Terrace. *Tres bien. I send teleg-r-r-amme. Au violon!* And poor Benjamin was ignominiously marched to the local police station.

Meanwhile Quelch's arrangements at home were scarcely working as he had intended. The estimable Mrs. Widger, partly by reason of her deafness and partly of native stupidity, had only half understood his instructions about the letters. She knew she was to stamp them and she knew she was to post them, but the dates in the corners might have been runic inscriptions for any idea they conveyed to her obfuscated intellect. Accordingly, the first time she visited her usual house of call, which was early on the morning of Good Friday, she proceeded, in her own language, to get the dratted things off her mind by dropping them both into the nearest pillar-box.

On the following day, therefore, Mrs. Quelch at Lawestoft was surprised to find on the breakfast-table *two* letters in her Benjamin's handwriting. Her surprise was still greater when, on opening them, she found one to be a graphic account of a visit to the Zoological Gardens on the following Monday. The conclusion was obvious: either Benjamin had turned prophet, and had somehow got ahead of the almanac, or he was carrying on in some very underhand manner. Mrs. Quelch decided for the latter alternative, and determined to get to the bottom of the matter at once. She cut a sandwich, put on her bonnet, and, grasping her umbrella in a manner which boded no good to any one who stayed her progress, started by the next train for Liverpool Street.

On reaching home she extracted from the weeping Widger, who had just been spending the last of Benjamin's five shillings, and was far gone in depression and gin and water, that her good gentleman had not been home since Thursday night. This was bad enough, but there was still more conclusive evidence that he was up to no good, in the shape of his tall hat, which hung, silent accuser, on the last peg in the passage.

Having pumped Mrs. Widger till there was no more (save tears) to be pumped out of her, Mrs. Quelch, still firmly grasping her umbrella, proceeded next door, on the chance that her neighbour, Mrs. Fladgate, might be able to give her some information. She found Mrs. Fladgate weeping in the parlour with an open telegram before her. Being a woman who did not stand upon ceremony, she read the telegram, which was dated from Dieppe and ran as follows: Monsieur Fladgate here detained for to have smuggle cigars. Fine to pay, one hundred franc. Send money and he will be release.

Oh, the men, the men! ejaculated Mrs. Quelch, as she dropped into an arm-chair. They're all alike. First Benjamin, and now Fladgate! I shouldn't wonder if they had gone off together.

You don't mean to say Mr. Quelch has gone too? sobbed Mrs. Fladgate.

He has taken a shameful advantage of my absence. He has not been home since Thursday evening, and his hat is hanging up in the hall.

You don't think he has been m-m-murdered?

I'm not afraid of *that*, replied Mrs. Quelch, it wouldn't be worth anybody's while. But what has he got on his head? that's what I want to know. Of course, if he's with Mr. Fladgate in some foreign den of iniquity, that accounts for it.

Don't foreigners wear hats? inquired Mrs. Fladgate, innocently.

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Not the respectable English sort, I'll bet bound, replied Mrs. Quelch; some outlandish rubbish, I dare say. But I thought Mr. Fladgate on his Scotch journey. (Mr. Fladgate, it should be stated, was a traveller in the oil and colour line.)

So he is. I mean, so he ought to be. In fact I expected him home to-day. But now he's in p-p-prison, and I may never see him any m-mo-more. And Mrs. Fladgate wept afresh.

Stuff and nonsense! retorted Mrs. Quelch.

You've only to send the money they ask for, and they'll be glad enough to get rid of him. But I wouldn't hurry; I'd let him wait a bit you'll see him soon enough, never fear.

The prophecy was fulfilled sooner than the prophet expected. Scarcely were the words out of her mouth when a cab was heard to draw up at the door, and a moment later Fladgate himself, a big, jovial man, wearing a white hat very much on one side, entered the room and threw a bundle of rugs on the sofa.

Home again, old girl, and glad of it! Mornin', Mrs. Quelch, said the new-comer.

Mrs. Fladgate gazed at him doubtfully for a mooment, and then flung her arms round his neck, ejaculating, Saved, saved!

Martha, said Mrs. Quelch, reprovingly, have you no self-respect? Is *this* the way you deal to so shameful a deception? Then, turning the supposed offender, So, Mr. Fladgate, you have escaped from your foreign prison.

Foreign, how much? Have you both gone dotty, ladies? I've just escaped from a third-class carriage on the London and Northwestern. The space is limited, but I never heard it called a foreign prison.

It is useless to endeavour to deceive us, said Mrs. Quelch, sternly. Look at that telegram, Mr. Fladgate, and deny it if you can. You have been gadding about in some vile foreign place with my misguided husband.

Oh, Quelch is in it too, is he? Then it *must* be a bad case. But let's see what we have been up to, for, 'pon my word, I'm quite in the dark at present.

He held out his hand for the telegram, and read it carefully. Somebody's been having a lark with you, old lady, he said to his wife. You know well enough where I've been my regular northern journey, and nowhere else.

I don't believe a word of it, said Mrs. Quelch, you men are all alike deceivers, every one of you.

Much obliged for your good opinion, Mrs. Quelch. I had no idea Quelch was such a bad lot. But, so far as I am concerned, the thing's easily tested. Here is the bill for my bed last night at Carlisle. Now if I was in Carlisle and larking about at Dieppe at the same time, perhaps you'll kindly explain how I managed it.

Mrs. Quelch was staggered, but not convinced. But if if you were at Carlisle, where is Benjamin, and what does this telegram mean?

Not being a wizard, I really can't say; but concerning Quelch, we shall find him, never fear. When did he disappear?

Mrs. Quelch told her story, not forgetting the mysterious letter.

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I think I see daylight, said Fladgate. The party who has got into that mess is Quelch, and, being frightened out of his wits, he has given my name instead of his own. That's about the size of it!

But Benjamin doesn't smoke; and how should he come to be at Dieppe?

Went for a holiday, I suppose. As for smoking, I shouldn't have thought he was up to it; but with that sat-upon sort of man begging your pardon, Mrs. Quelch you never know where he may break out. Worms will turn, you know, and sometimes they take a wrong turning.

But Benjamin would never dare

That's just it. He daren't do anything when you've got your eye on him. When you haven't perhaps he may, and perhaps he mayn't. The fact is, you hold up his head too tight, and if he jibs now and then you can't wonder at it.

You have a very coarse way of putting things, Mr. Fladgate. Mr. Quelch is not a horse, that I am aware of.

We won't quarrel about the animal, my dear madam, but you may depend upon it, my solution's right. A hardened villain, like myself, say, would never have got into such a scrape, but Quelch don't know enough of the world to keep himself out of mischief. They've got him in quod, that's clear, and the best thing you can do is to send the coin and get him out again.

Send money to those swindling Frenchmen? Never! If Benjamin is in prison I will fetch him out myself.

You would never risk that dreadful sea passage! exclaimed Mrs. Fladgate. And how will you manage the language? You don't understand French.

Oh, I shall do very well, said the heroic woman. They won't talk French to *me*!

That same night a female passenger crossed by the boat from Newhaven to Dieppe. The passage was rough, and the passenger was very seasick; but she still sat grimly upright, never for one moment relaxing her grasp on the handle of her silk umbrella. What she went through on landing, how she finally obtained her husband's release, and what explanations passed between the reunited pair, must be left to the reader's imagination, for Mrs. Quelch never told the story. Twenty-four hours later a four-wheeled cab drew up at the Quelchs' door, and from it descended, first a stately female, and then a woe-begone little man, in a soft felt hat and a red necktie, both sorely crushed and soiled, with a black bag in his hand. Is there a fire in the kitchen? asked Mrs. Quelch the moment she set foot in the house. Being assured that there was, she proceeded down the kitchen stairs, Quelch meekly following her. Now, she said, pointing to the black bag, those things! Benjamin opened the bag, and tremblingly took out the frilled night-dress and the cigars. His wife pointed to the fire, and he meekly laid them on it. Now that necktie. The necktie followed the cigars. And that thing; and the hat crowned the funeral pile.

The smell was peculiar, and to the ordinary nose disagreeable, but to Mrs. Quelch it was as the odour of burnt incense. She watched the heap as it smouldered away, and finally dispersed the embers by a vigorous application of the poker.

Now, Benjamin, she said to her trembling spouse, I forgive you. But if ever again

The warning was left unspoken, but it was not needed. Benjamin's one experience has more than satisfied his yearning for soft raiment and foreign travel, and his hats are taller than ever.