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THE MISSING BILLS: AN UNSOLVED MYSTERY.

(From Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine.)

Well, the time when his payments would be due began to draw near. Neither money nor advice of it had arrived, but he felt that it could not be far distant. A packet was due even now. It was tiresome that on this important occasion she should happen to be late, but such contrivances were always happening. She would make her number in a day or two, and then all would be well. But a day or two and more time than that passed away, and still she did not appear. (It was the very packet which left Sydney the day after Zeke Burdon's conversation with his daughter in the office, and which never after that day was again seen.) Robert's anxiety of course increased as the hours rolled away; it became of an intensity such as he had not experienced before. He had not, however, learned to despond. He felt certain that it was only a question of time; but then the day of payment was drawing disagreeably near. When it was only three or four days off, he had to effect some arrangement to gain time; and this was not very easy to manage, as the amount was large in proportion to his business; but he did, by the aid of some friends, get an extension of three weeks, which would be ample, he did not doubt. This accommodation, however, greatly increased his anxiety, as if the payment were now to fail, his friends might suffer as well as himself. Nevertheless he would not suppose that everything would be right. In a day or two he read a notification that the expected packet was in sight, and his heart rejoiced at the thought that his difficulty must be passed.—The day after, the notice was contradicted; it was another packet which, on a foggy day, had been mistaken for the missing one. And still the time wore on, and still he got no advice.—In his extremity he wrote to Behrens, who was at Frankfurt, telling him of his case, and asking if he could assist him. The friends who were sureties for him had entire faith in him, and bade him be of good cheer, for they would pull him through somehow or other; but assurances of this kind did not relieve a mind like Robert Lathom's. His perplexity became most distressing. He determined that there should be no more suretyship or borrowing.—If his money did not arrive by the 10th of October (that was the day) he would be declared a bankrupt, give up everything in the present, sacrifice position and prospects, and trust that, at the least, he might, in a very short time, reimburse those who had so kindly come to his relief. He had not formed this resolution without a bitter struggle.

On the 8th October he received the following reply from Mr. Behrens:—

"Do not be sorrowful. I let myself be interested in you. The letters shall come to you in good time."

But this enigmatical epistle did not bring much comfort.

It was the 9th of October. Lathom had declined the invitation of his sureties to dine together—which they had kindly given in the hope of diverting him from his chagrin—and had gone home early, taking with him some books and other documents, in order that he might prepare letters and statements, which it was now only too certain that he would require to use on the morrow.

Lathom was surprised to find what a calm was lent him by despair. He worked away the whole of that evening vigorously, and, com-

pared with the state of mind from which he suffered while yet in doubt, cheerfully. He did not complete his labor till eleven o'clock, and when it was done he felt fatigued and drowsy, not watchful and excited as had been his wont for some nights past. When he withdrew to his bed-chamber, he locked away his books and papers, all except one large foolscap sheet containing a list or abstract, which, as he intended to put it in his note-case before going forth in the morning, he took with him, and placed on a table near the foot of his bed. He lay down with his mind cleared of figures and of much of the doubt and fear which had been oppressing it for days; and his thought turned sadly but fondly to poor Probity Burdon, and he wondered how the reverse of fortune which he had to encounter would affect the plans which they had cherished. Happen what might, he could rely on the faith of his betrothed. It was with this comfortable thought that he fell asleep.

In the night he was awaked by the noise of unusually heavy rain descending on the roof. It has been said that the house was one-storied, and it may be added that the rooms were rather low; so that the slates on which this downpour was coming were not much above the bed's head. Robert turned himself about, and began to think whether he had observed on the previous evening any signs of bad weather; but in truth he had been so occupied with his affairs that he had never looked at the sky.—Then he felt vexed that, as he had been lucky enough to go to sleep, he should have been thus early disturbed, for it was still pitch-dark. And after that he resolved to shut his eyes and ears, and to court sleep again. As he thus resolved, he saw a gleam of soft light in the direction of the door of his room. He looked attentively to see what this might be, and saw a female figure, much draped, and with the head veiled or shrouded. It carried in one hand a lamp, and with the other hand shaded the light so as to throw the rays back upon itself, rather than to allow them to disperse themselves in the room. As he stared at it, simply in wonder so far, it moved without noise across the chamber, not far from the bed's foot. It was near, as he judged, the opposite wall, when the thought suddenly struck him—"One of old Behren's ghosts, by jingo!" and thereupon he sprang out of the bed and rushed towards the figure, which, however, disappeared he knew not how, and he found himself groping about in the dark among the furniture, and was fain to feel his way back to bed. As he turned to do so his foot came in contact with, and pushed along the floor, a piece of paper, which he concluded to be the abstract which he had put on the table, and which he must have brushed off it when he rushed from the bed. That he remembered this paper was proof that he had not been in a dream. He got back to bed again, and was surprised at the calm way in which he was able to think over what he had seen. From what he knew of himself, an appearance such as this should have overcome him with horror; but here he lay, coolly thinking the matter over, and not caring if he should see the lady and her lamp reappear. She did not, however, trouble him again; and, strange to say, he was in a short time asleep once more, and when he awoke it was broad daylight.

As he rubbed his eyes and recalled the visitation of the night, it occurred to him that he had thrown down the folded paper containing the abstract, and he looked out to see where it was lying, that he might judge where he stood when the figure eluded him. But the paper had not fallen at all. There it lay on the table just where he had placed it; and now he felt perplexed, for although he had no doubt about what he had seen, he felt that to others it would appear simply a dream, when the paper which he had felt on the floor was admitted to have never been moved from the table. But then he would swear that his foot had come upon a paper, and he now arose to examine the room. Near the wall, and about where he thought he must have stood in the night, there lay a paper, sure enough. Nothing of the kind, so far as he could remember, was lying there when he went to bed. He picked it up, and did not find its presence explained when he saw that it was a sealed packet, and that it was addressed to himself. Turning it over in astonishment, after the manner of people so surprised, he recognised the well-known seal of Ezekiel Burdon, and in the superscription the handwriting of a clerk in the office. By favor of Esq., was written beside the address. There was no postmark. After vainly puzzling himself for a few seconds as to how it had come there, Lathom broke the seal and opened the packet. In it he found bills of exchange quite sufficient to meet his necessities, also letters of advice and a letter from Zeke Burdon to himself. One can understand how the surprise caused by the first discovery of the letter gave way to delight at its contents, and how the young man, dazzled by a crowd of

emotions, forgot all about his toilet, and sat rejoicing and wondering for long by his bedside. As he dressed he endeavored to put the whole occurrence into shape. The contents of the letter were certainly genuine, and certainly what he had been expecting. The bearer must have arrived by some indirect passage. He had called somewhere on his way home, and so had come in a ship not reported as from Sydney. But how the letter got into his room—well, it was a puzzle!

In answer to his questions, the servants assured him that neither the postman nor any one else had brought a packet that morning; and indeed the postman, bearing some letters of very secondary import, made his visit afterwards. Looking a little more leisurely over Mr. Burdon's letter while he sat at breakfast, Robert noticed that the first copies of the bills were to have been sent by the packet so long overdue, and that Mr. Waddington, who had been a passenger—or at any rate had intended to be a passenger—in the Kangaroo, was to take the second. He had never seen that ship's arrival announced, and he knew that she traded to London. Either, therefore, Mr. Waddington must at the last have proceeded by some other route, or else he had somehow been transhipped on the voyage. After all this had been put together, there remained the inexplicable problem,—How did the letter get into his chamber? Mr. Waddington not having himself written seemed also a rather strange thing, but of course it was possible that he might have despatched the packet while too busy to write himself; an early post might bring the expected advice from him.

It will readily be believed that Robert Lathom did not on that day give himself up to wonder or conjecture. He had work to do—work far more agreeable than that which he had believed to be awaiting him. His bills, received by private hand, were accepted at once; his difficulty was at an end. The congratulations of his friends were hearty and profuse. It was quite romantic, they said, to be thus relieved at the last minute; and so it was—they didn't half know how romantic.

Never doubting that the whole of this mystery would be cleared up—for he was a matter-of-fact, strong-minded fellow, as has been said—Lathom, when his first duties were performed, set himself to examine shipping lists, but no notice of the Kangaroo could he see.—He must wait now for Waddington's letter. He and his friends did dine together that day at the Mersy tavern, and a very pleasant evening they passed. But, now that his commercial trouble was off his mind, the young merchant was the more anxious to penetrate the mystery of the letter, and his first thought, when he got home, was to closely search the chamber again. He examined and tried the windows and door, and looked well at the low roof; then he moved the wardrobe and bed, and turned round one or two pictures, to assure himself that no secret entrance existed. Finally, he displaced, and then replaced, a cumbersome old clock which stood near to where he had found the letter. Looking up to some gilding which surmounted this piece of furniture, he saw, or fancied he saw, the very faint outline of a face, and the mild regard of blue eyes, which called up the dear recollection of his Probity. It faded into nothing as he gazed, but then in a moment came back the recollection of his mysterious visitant, whom the change in his fortune had quite made him forget. He questioned his servants again and more closely than before. No one had brought letters to the house on the preceding day after the morning's post; and no one had been there at all in the afternoon except a person from a German clockmaker's in the town, who came to fit a key to the old clock in Lathom's room. "I couldn't help remarking of him," said the servant, "he was such a queer-looking old man, with a white beard, and such a hooked nose." Robert could make nothing of it at all.

It may have been three weeks after all this that Lathom read in a newspaper the arrival of the Kangaroo, and the same evening received a letter from Mr. Waddington, dated London, Nov. 1, which ran as follows:—

DEAR SIR,—As I take for granted that you received advice by the last packet from Sydney, it will, I hope, have become a matter of secondary importance whether some duplicate despatches of which I was the bearer came immediately to hand or not.—I deeply regret to have to tell you that the packet entrusted to my charge has been unaccountably mislaid, and is not immediately forthcoming; and I request that you will be good enough to write at once saying whether you have received advice which ought to have reached you per mail-packet.—I remain, dear sir, faithfully yours,

F. WADDINGTON.

The mystery seemed only to grow deeper.—Lathom did not in reply to this enter into particulars, but said that he proposed to be in London as early as possible, and would wait on Mr. Waddington. In the meantime the latter gentleman need be under no anxiety as to the

packet of letters, as no inconvenience was caused by the want of it.

The next post, however, brought another letter from Mr. Waddington, who had been made miserable by the discovery that the mail-packet had not arrived. He wrote to say that the circumstances under which the despatch had been mislaid were strange and peculiar, and that he could not enter upon them until he could sit down leisurely and collectedly to write. In the mean time he entreated Lathom to consider him and his brother as in every way answerable for any difficulty that might have occurred about money. The letter then went on to give messages, and to speak of Probity (who had written by the mail-packet), and to give some Sydney news.

Lathom and Waddington had not been very intimately acquainted before, but this letter showed so much kind feeling, that Lathom, when he got to London, met the other as an old friend. He assured him that he was quite at his ease concerning money, but did not mention the circumstances under which he had been supplied. They agreed to dine together that evening, when Waddington would have the opportunity of mentioning some matters which he longed to confide to Lathom.

"We had a terrible voyage," said Waddington, when they were quietly seated together; "driven this way and that, and sometimes in great danger. We have been at Rio, and glad enough we were to get there; but our troubles did not end with reaching that port, for when we set sail again from thence, the Atlantic seemed in a more violent mood than the other oceans had been. We were knocked about for several weeks, being often in imminent danger, and had well nigh lost our reckoning through the thick weather, until one morning, after having had a violent thunderstorm in the night we were delighted by a calm day and a clear sky, with land looming in the distance. We made this land out to be Cape Finisterre, and the sight of it is inseparably connected with the loss of the letter which I was bringing to you. I noted the matter carefully: it was the 10th October that we made the land, and on the 9th I am certain that the letter was in my possession."

Lathom started at the mention of the date, but did not interrupt.

"You must know," went on Waddington, "that, before the thunderstorm, we had been much in doubt as to the ability of the ship to reach England, and there had been some talk of taking to the boats. To be prepared for such a contingency I went to my cabin, and separated from my baggage a few gold pieces which I secured in the waistband of my trousers, and some articles of value and importance, which I made up into a small package as well secured as might be from wet, and provided with straps to attach it to my person whenever it might be proposed to leave the ship. I can be on my oath that the letter for you was in this package; but though the package remained in my possession, apparently just in the condition in which I had put it, believe me that, the fair weather and the sight of land induced me to open it again, your letter had disappeared, and I have never seen it since!"

"Nay," put in Lathom, as calmly as he could, though he felt his heart galloping under his waistcoat, "you were, of course, a good deal agitated when you were making up your parcel, and the latter may easily have dropped out, and been, by the motion of the vessel, jerked into some of the innumerable crevices and corners of the ship."

"I have a particular recollection," answered Waddington, "of having put your letter with my valuables, and I know exactly where I put it. Nevertheless, as soon as I found it wanting I made search among my baggage, and all over the cabin without success. It was the only thing missing. Besides, there is another circumstance which I have not liked to mention, and which I mention now with some fear that you may think me a romancer, and distrust all that I have been telling you."

"Not at all; I shall not in the least distrust you," answered Robert, whose curiosity was now painfully aroused.

"Well, then, I must tell you that on the night of the storm—which night, you will remember, succeeded the day on which I made up my parcel—I had gone to my cabin much wearied, both in body and mind. I did not dare to undress, but threw myself into my sleeping-berth, where I lay tossed by the motion of the vessel, and watching the flashes of light, whose brilliancy and frequency exceeded anything in my experience. Between the flashes it was so dark as to create a feeling of great horror. I could keep no account of time, but fancy it may have been midnight or thereabout when the storm began to roll away. As the lightnings moderated, I felt my eyes—which had been watching them—sore and weary, and closed the lids from exhaustion, but not from drowsiness, which was very far from overcoming me—I was too much disturb-

ed, both bodily and mentally. But I lay, as I was saying, with my eyes shut, noting the increased and increasing distance of the thunder, and wondering what report the captain would make of our prospects in the morning. Chancing to open my eyes as I rolled from side to side, I was sensible of a soft light in the cabin, very different from the vivid lightning, but yet a very decided change from the extreme darkness. And, surveying the cabin by this light, I was conscious of a figure, of not very distinct outline, bending over the parcel of valuables which I had packed up. My idea was that somebody who had seen me at work in the afternoon, and guessed what I was about, had now come in the dead of night to appropriate my little bundle. In this thought I scrambled out of my berth and made for the intruder; but the light now disappeared. However, I soon got a lantern from the watch on deck, and examined my cabin; but nothing was amiss there. It proved to be between two and three o'clock, so I lay down again, and know of nothing remarkable till morning, when we heard that the land was in sight. East winds kept us from entering the Channel for a fortnight, but we got in at last, thank God!"

"Should you know the envelope again, do you think?" asked Lathom, somewhat tremulously.

"That should I," replied Waddington; "the appearance of it is stamped upon my brain. I don't know anything that ever gave me so much anxiety."

Then Robert took from his note-case the cover of the mysteriously found letter. Waddington turned as pale as death.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed: "this is the very thing. Where on earth did you get it?"

"I must in my turn ask your indulgent acceptance of what I have to say, for my story is no less marvellous than yours." And thereupon Lathom told how he had found the packet, how it had contained undeniable bills and other documents, and how he had seen a figure in his room on the night between the 9th and 10th of October, just before he felt a paper on the ground.

"Have mercy on us!" exclaimed the other; "I should have told you that the figure which I saw in my cabin on board the Kangaroo also held a lamp, and was habited exactly as you describe. Why, the same person—or being—that robbed me, must have taken the package straight to you."

"And pretty rapidly too. You remember that you were at the time off Cape Finisterre, and I in Liverpool. There is, however, one other point which perhaps you may be able to explain. My friend Mr. Burdon advised me that you would take a duplicate packet; now the papers which were within this mysterious cover were first copies."

"That is strange," said Waddington; "but no—not unaccountable after all. You know the way in which the clerk gets ready the two or three copies, as it may be, all at the one time. It is very likely that in his hurry on the day of the packet sailing he may have handed Muller—poor fellow, his was a sad fate—the duplicate; which would have left the original for me. I know he asked me to put my own name on the back of the envelope in the blank space which you still see, as he had omitted to do so before coming to see me off. Had I brought the letter to land, of course I should have filled in the hiatus before sending on the despatch."

"Yes, certainly," answered Lathom, "you must have brought the original by mistake.—Indeed I am truly grieved for poor Muller: the brothers were very kind to me when first I went out. They are relatives of Mr. Behrens, an old friend of my family, now at Frankfurt: Karl was going to visit the old man. It is a sad affair."

Waddington mused a long time: he was sorely astonished. At last he said—

"It is surely the strangest thing that ever was; but what could be the object of this—this miracle, for I can call it nothing less?—Only to perplex and astonish two unfortunate people, as far as I can see. The letter did but reach the person to whom it was addressed, and the same thing would have happened in due course if the documents had been left quietly in my possession. What possible difference could it have made?"

"Simply that I should have been a bankrupt on the 10th of October!"

"Good God!"

Before Robert returned to Liverpool, the two men agreed that it would be very unpleasant to have this story canvassed, to have their veracity—or perhaps their sanity—doubted by matter-of-fact prigs, or to attain to the kind of notoriety which the heroes of such adventures suffer. So they kept the circumstances very quiet.

Third copies of the triplicate bills arrived soon after the Kangaroo, and dissipated all doubt (if doubt anywhere existed) as to the