

Fred M. White



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I. — THE EDITOR'S BAG.

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FRIDAY is a busy night in Westbury, for upon that evening some thousands of hands draw their weekly wage; Jack and Joe don clean garments, and repair to their favourite hostels, with faces clean, and gleaming with the effects of a cold-water ordeal—some of the younger men even indulge in the luxury of a shave.

There are spinning-mills and iron-foundries in Westbury, to say nothing of a rising shipping trade—for the town aforesaid boasts of one of the finest waterways in the kingdom. All day long it lies under a smoky pall; startling fires blaze up at night, so that travellers on the great northern railways see the glow painted in the sky far away in the open country.

Westbury, even in the dullest of dull times, has a prosperous air; the click-click of wooden shoes never ceases day or night. Past eleven p.m. the editor of the *Westbury Chronicle*, seated in his office overlooking High Street, wearily correcting proofs and cutting down superabundant "copy," sighs for a little quiet to concentrate his thoughts.

The bell of St. Mark's booms twelve upon the heavy air; below there is a roar and clatter of rushing machinery; the *Chronicle* has gone to press some five minutes before—Westbury will expect to find that valuable sheet upon its breakfast-table when the good people come down in the morning—telegrams had been boiled down, the last line of the last leader written, and at length Roland Thornycroft is permitted to call his soul his own.

Bur for the patter of restless feet below, there is a holy calm in the editorial sanctum; the apartment, covered with a thick carpet, its walls lined with portraits of eminent journalists, lies in deep shadow; the whole light is concentrated upon the brass-bound table, literally deluged with printed slips covered with hieroglyphics like the eccentricities of an inky spider, telegrams, and cuttings from exchanges.

With a sigh of relief, Thornycroft swept the whole mass aside, and looked up, weary, but satisfied.

The pallid face, looking more ghastly in the concentrated glow, belonged to a man of some five-and-thirty years; a negatively handsome set of features, the upper lip hidden under a flowing black moustache; the eyes, sparkling with a certain restless fire, were fearless, yet not devoid of a crafty expression, which might equally have expressed determination or instability of character. There were lines round them, too, deeply-marked lamellae, denoting not only an undue consumption of midnight oil, but also of nervous and physical tissue in hours of relaxation. In short, Roland Thornycroft had the air of a dissipated man who carefully conceals his vices, and, truth to say, appearances were not far wide of the mark.

A locked post-bag lay before him, containing sundry letters of private interest, notes from London editors—for Thornycroft was a journalist in the best sense of the word—which bag he had left till a more convenient season.

As he was about to turn the contents out on the table, there came a tap at the door, and, without waiting for the conventional reply, the intruder entered.

"I have been expecting you," said Thornycroft, coldly. "So like you, so very like you, to worry me just now. You might have had the decency to wait till to-morrow morning."

"You said the first thing on Saturday," re-turned the new-comer, lightly. "It is the first thing on Saturday, being now twenty minutes past twelve. I suppose you have that money ready for me?"

"You suppose wrong, then. I haven't got a tenth part of it!"

The stranger whistled softly, and affected to examine one of the journalistic portraits with consuming interest.

He was little older than his companion, though in his case the ravages of dissipation were more strongly marked. His shabby dress was a ridiculous caricature of fashion; gold studs adorned a fancifully-striped shirt, a pair of dirty white gaiters stood out in vivid contrast to a pair of extremely attenuated boots; the broad nose was mantled with a fine healthy bloom—the bloom upon, or from, the rye. He might have been a travelling agent, a horse-watcher—not to use a harsher expression—inasmuch, like that fraternity, he was clean-shaved. Then you would have remarked a certain jaunty assurance, a bland, artificial self-consciousness, accompanied by much magnificent language, and at once have classed him as a fourth-rate travelling actor, in which you would have been correct.

"This is awkward," said the new-comer, still intent upon the photograph—"for you, that is. So far as I am concerned, now our term here has expired, I can flit, leaving a large and sorrowing circle of acquaintances to mourn my loss. Still, with all respect, Horatio, I must have this coin. Put money in

thy purse, says Will of Avon, and, by my halidame, I mean to do it."

"Possibly," Thornycroft returned. "But how, Mr. St. Clair?"

Algernon St. Clair, to give him his high-sounding pseudonym, nodded sagely.

"Thus, my friend. I could a tale unfold, but no matter. You have an employer, one Reuben Vivid, the proprietor of this valuable property. He has money, you have none; moreover, you are a trusted—shall I say trusty?—servant. I want a hundred and twelve pounds, nine shillings, and—But, again, why these sordid details? At present, as Mr. Swiveller remarked on a certain occasion, the watchword is 'fork.'"

"But supposing I decline to fork? What then?"

"Then I shall be under the painful necessity of seeking an interview with this Mr. Vivid, and giving him an insight into the private life of a certain editor who shall be nameless. It will be a dramatic scene, heightened by the uniforms, handcuffs, and other properties necessary to ensure the success of the modern melodrama. 'Mr. Vivid, you have an editor, you have a faithful servant! He is a forger!' How does that strike you?"

"It doesn't strike me at all," Thornycroft replied, striking his moustache with a shaking hand. "You will have to prove that."

"Naturally. Then I proceed to discover the document, a cheque drawn upon Bumfeld's Bank here, indorsed by you, and paid over to me. You remember? I was to hold that cheque for three days, which I did. At the end of that time you paid me in notes, and so the cheque was not presented. Still, I hold the cheque at this moment."

"You shall have your money to-day," Thornycroft replied, "though I might repudiate the whole transaction. Give me till the bank closes, at any rate. You know, confound you, how awkward it would be for me to fight the thing at present."

"You dare not," St. Clair returned, coolly, "much as you would like to. There was that little affair over at Sandport, to say nothing of—— But I won't say any more at present. Adieu, trusty comrade, adieu; and if," the speaker continued, more menacingly—"if you play me false, by all that's bad, I'll transport you!"

So saying, and kissing his blunt fingertips with easy grace, St. Clair left the room and the editor to his own painful thoughts.

He sat there with face buried in his hands, thinking, till the great bell of St. Mark's struck the hour of two. Still, think as he would, there was no way out of the difficulty. On all sides was this ghoulish cry for money; cash for this extravagance, threatening letters from irate tradesmen, and certain bills maturing, the ultimate issue of which Thornycroft dared not contemplate.

Supposing those acceptances, bearing Mr. Vivid's signature, found their way into his hands? What then? The contemplation was too horrible.

Fortunately, this employer, who was a rich man, lived at a considerable distance, where he devoted his time to high farming, and seldom troubled the office with his presence. Still it wanted but three days till the twenty-fifth of June, and the auditors who examined the *Mercury* books must discover the deficiency this time.

Only last Christmas, by sheer audacity, he emerged triumphantly from a slough of despond. But he could go through no such ordeal again, of that he felt convinced.

There was but one hope, and that a frail one.

There was in America a gentleman who sent money from time to time to be applied for the benefit of his wife and child, Mrs. and little Ethel Carr, the people with whom Thornycroft lodged.

It all came back to him as he sat thinking there; how, six years ago, Carr, the clever foreman of a great iron factory, had married Lucy Grey, the first singing chambermaid of St. Clair's travelling company, who visited Westbury for three months every winter. He remembered Carr's restless ambition, his inventions, and one more valuable than the rest, nothing short of an improvement in the process for converting the molten pig-iron into steel direct; how Carr had tried his invention one night alone at the foundry; how the manager had watched him to discover his secret, and how Carr, in a sudden spasm of rage, had struck down the wily spy with a hammer, and left him for dead.

It seemed but yesterday that the distracted murderer had crept into the *Mercury* office one publishing night, and confided his secret to Thornycroft; but yesterday that he had flown, like a thief in the night, never to be seen again, though presently letters and money for the forsaken wife came from time to time under cover, and directed to the editor of the *Westbury Mercury*.

Latterly, some of these remittances—now not only regular, but also of considerable amount—seemed to have fallen on the rank growth of Thornycroft's anxiety like dew of

Heaven in a dry place. By means of one of these welcome drafts, St. Clair had been repaid many a borrowed sovereign; by the same medium, more than one of these fearful bills had been honoured at maturity.

The process was easy enough. As the letters to Mrs. Carr always came to Thornycroft direct, he had only to open the private letter, alter certain figures therein, and substitute for the purloined draft dollar bills, easily obtainable from any Westbury money-changer, minus the amount deducted for the medium's private and urgent necessities.

Again, in forwarding communications to America, it was a simple matter to eradicate all incriminatory sentences, and thus give a genuine air to a dishonest transaction.

As a matter of fact, Roland Thornycroft was a born scoundrel; he had taken to criminal practices naturally. Intrigue and conspiracy were as the very air he breathed. A self-educated workhouse lad, he had lived all his life in Westbury, gradually working himself to his present responsible position from lowest rung of the ladder.

Mr. Vivid, his eccentric employer, an amiable old gentleman of sixty, who had a self-appointed mission to regenerate the mistaken tenets of agriculture, fully appreciated his editor's ability, and, in spite of many cranks, had sense enough to leave to more competent hands a property yielding him in itself a handsome income. He was a man to trust, and trust implicitly; but once deceived, as the editor knew, likely to vent his spleen to the bitter end. And the exposure could not be long delayed. Monday would bring the auditors, and another week would see a bill for nearly two hundred pounds at maturity. Oh, for five hundred