

COMPLETE SHORT STORY.

OFF TO BUSINESS.

The Adventures of a Demobilised Soldier, a Lady, and a Gold Watch.

George Terrell awoke with a start, rubbed his eyes, and wondered in a hazy sort of fashion why it was that he felt so disinclined to face a waking world. Then he opened his eyes, and they fell upon—a watch.

It was a handsome 18-carat gold time-piece, and the outer case was open, showing the time. George Terrell whistled, and got out of bed.

As he splashed in his bath, he shivered and reflected that it was a pity that late and enjoyable evenings should have to be followed by uncomfortable, chilly mornings. But as he rubbed himself into a glow of youth and health with the big bath towel, he hummed a tune, which told of restored cheerfulness.

After all, it had been a great evening, and one he could remember till the end of his days.

For George had not been demobilised so very long, and his friends and acquaintances of the district, where he had passed the twenty-five years of his life, had thought fit to mark their appreciation of the distinction he had gained while serving, by holding in his honour, on the previous evening, a dinner, followed by a presentation.

And the presentation had taken the form of a huge hunter-cased watch. Flattering things had been said to him by old Sir Thomas Tattersall, the Chairman of the local bench, when he had handed him the watch, but more than all, George appreciated the loud and ringing cheers which his friends had roared forth in his honour.

"Yes," he reflected as he tied his necktie before the looking glass, "it was a white night. Don't suppose I shall ever see another like it. Topping watch too. Something to be proud of."

Breakfast was a sketchy meal, a glance at the clock showed him that he had not time to waste.

"Mustn't be late this morning," he muttered, as he stepped forth into the cool crisp morning air, "the old man will want to go pretty closely into things to-day."

At once, the triumph of the previous evening was forgotten, and his thoughts turned to business. For George Terrell was a practical young man with no illusions. He had gained the D.C.M. and the Military Medal; he had left the army with the rank of sergeant-major, and his military record was good. But now the war was over and the battle of life had to be resumed. He could not expect, nor did he desire, to live upon his laurels. Now that fighting was done with, thank Heaven, work must be taken up again.

And here he knew that he was already in troubled waters.

When he had returned to the office, which he had left to do his bit, old Mr Peter Franklin, the head of the firm, had welcomed him with both hands, and had drawn him into the inner office.

"I am glad to see you, Terrell, my boy," the old man had said, "the business has missed you, and those of your young colleagues who went with you, things have been far from right—far from right."

"Sorry to hear you talk like this, sir," George had said, "I had no idea that affairs had been going wrong with the old firm. You've had Hardy with you all the time, haven't you?"

"Oh, yes, Hardy stuck to me. It was very difficult towards the last, for the tribunals began to get very nasty. Still, I managed to keep him. But, come, I must not depress you. You will find your old place all ready for you on Monday, my boy. All ready, and I shall be glad to see you. God bless you."

That had been over a month ago, and since then things had happened.

George's face clouded, as he walked along, thinking of the sleek, smooth-voiced, silent-footed Hardy. There had been something cat-like about the fellow, from his fat, well-trimmed paws to his rubber-padded heels.

But what had Hardy been doing?

Some of the books seemed to be in rather a peculiar state too. George had noticed a few strange things himself, and then, one day, young Dixon had come to him with his ledger.

"This entry here, George," he had said, "I wish you'd put me wise as to how it stands? Hanged if I can make head or tail of it. I've been to Hardy, and he says being away such a time has made me rusty—that I'd better go to evening classes again, and get up to date with book-keeping. I dare say he's right; but you might help me out—there's a good chap."

Good naturedly, George Terrell tackled the matter of the complicated entries; but they led him into such a maze of figures that he and young Dixon were still puzzling over them long after the rest of the staff had gone.

At a late hour, however, George Terrell had discovered the solution to the problem of the tangled entries.

And, told in a few words, that solution was simply that Septimus Hardy had been faking the books.

It seemed incredible at first, Hardy, the Methodist parson's son, the stickler for exactitude and nicety in balancing accounts—the man who had never been known to be guilty of a single one of the foolish peccadilloes to which nearly all young men fall victim; it did not seem possible.

But there it was plainly enough. The faking had been artfully done; but once the figures were examined with the suspicion that they had been faked, why, the thing was as clear as a pike-staff.

George had bound young Dixon to secrecy.

"It's too late to do anything to-night, old chap," he had said, "but as soon as Mr Peter comes in the morning, I am going to take those books to him, and Hardy will have to explain things—if he can."

But when the morrow dawned, there was no Hardy. He had noticed that those puzzling books, which he had kept while his juniors had been in the army, were being subjected to examination, and he had decided that discretion was the better part of valour. In brief he had bolted.

His roguery, however, had, all the way through, been of a crafty and calculating nature.

Septimus Hardy had not been of the ordinary type of weak-minded embezzling clerk. He had not backed horses, nor had he fallen a victim to the wiles of jewellery-loving Jezebels. Nor, beyond the matter of a few very mild ventures had he enriched the stock-brokers.

No, Septimus Hardy had not altered his severe method of living in any way whatever. He had determined that he had an opportunity which should not be missed, and he had carefully stowed away the money which he had been able to accumulate. As a fact, it was packed away in a big leather bag, in the form of easily negotiated securities, ready for transportation at a moment's notice.

And when the skilled men of figures had gone carefully into affairs, they discovered that Septimus Hardy had managed to abstract very nearly all the money there was in the firm.

And that, briefly meant sheer, stark ruin to the old firm of Peter Franklin and Co.

The old widower, bereft of his sons, and at a time of life when further building up of his shattered fortunes was impossible, was face to face with penury; and the happy, contented staff, who had come back from the war to settle down—as they thought, in peace—would have to go out into the world and pick up new jobs where they could.

It was not a pleasant prospect, and there was but one single visionary chance of averting the impending ruin. If Hardy could be caught, he would be made to disgorge the money he had stolen, and the firm would be saved.

But Hardy was a downy customer. His plans had evidently been long and carefully laid, and he had disappeared as completely as if the earth had swallowed him up.

"Well," said George to himself as the station hove in sight, "I mustn't lose hope. Hullo, there's the 8.29 just coming in, and there is young Merrick and Tom Stevens. Hullo, boys!"

The three friends got into the train together and travelled up to town, talking over the jolly times they had had the previous evening for the best part of the way.

As the train rolled into the station they jumped out, and with cherry "ta-ta's" went their various ways.

There had been a fog on the line, and a glance at the big station clock showed George Terrell that he was late.

"Shall have to take a motor-bus," was George's decision. It'll save a good ten minutes."

He joined a waiting knot of people who were anxiously looking out for one of the big vehicles which would enable them to complete their journey. One was just in sight, and the group surged forward as it came up.

"Now then! Passengers off the car first please!" said the conductor, as the crowd pressed forward to mount the bus.

"Oh!" said the girl. "I'm so glad you've come, collector. This man is insulting me!"

The collector fixed George with a steely gaze, and somehow he began to feel exceedingly awkward.

"Some minutes ago," he said, "I helped this girl out of a crowd that was waiting around a motor-bus, and immediately afterwards I missed my watch. When I looked round I saw her running away at her hardest."

"I ran to catch the train," said the girl coldly. "It was of the utmost importance that I should catch it. If I had not run my hardest, I should have missed it."

"But that watch was a presentation one," said George, conscious that he was speaking lamely. "It was only given to me last night, and I wouldn't lose it for anything."

"I haven't the faintest interest in you or your watch either," said the girl. "You have made a great mistake."

The collector looked from one to the other in perplexity.

"Don't see as I can do anything," he said.

"It's not a company matter. You'd better settle it when we get to Portlepool. Tickets please!"

"Portlepool?" said George conscious of a sinking feeling in his breast. "Don't you stop before we get there?"

"No sir. This is the 'Flying Irishman'—first stop Portlepool. We've got royalty aboard, too. The train's not to be stopped on any account. If you haven't got a ticket, I must trouble you for sixteen and eight."

The girl opposite produced her own ticket, and looked at George with a twinkle in her eye. The poor fellow was now in the depths of despair. He could see that he had made a ghastly error; he ought to have known that a girl with eyes like hers could not have been guilty of the mean trick of picking his pocket. What an idiot he was! However, there was nothing for it but to pay the fare, and to get back as soon as he could from Portlepool.

The collector made out a receipt for the money, which George handed him, and then, with a still puzzled look, left them.

George was feeling pretty miserable, and he looked it. He had lost his watch, and now probably old Mr Franklin was thinking that another of his clerks had bolted.

But there was a kindlier light in the eye of the girl, opposite.

"Of course," she said as George started to apologise again, "really I am most sorry for you, and in a way I can understand you thinking what you did. What was the presentation for?"

"Oh," said George, "some friends of mine were rather pleased with me for getting one of two decorations out in France, and so they gave me a dinner and the watch. And now I've lost it!"

"Oh, don't worry," she said. "Perhaps it will turn up after all. At any rate, I hope so."

Although George was very chagrined at the plight in which he found himself, it was astonishing how from that moment his spirits rose again.

Miss Clydesdale was now most sympathetic and chatty, and the time simply flew. She was, she told him, going to Portlepool on business for her chief, and was returning that night.

"Ours has been a most awkward introduction," said George contritely; "but since you are engaged in London, I should like to have the pleasure of seeing you again, and trying to convince you how really sorry I am."

"On Wednesdays," she replied, with a little flush of colour, "I always lunch at Magani's in Graecurh Street. Oh, here we are at Portlepool!"

The train drew up at the platform, and George and Miss Clydesdale alighted.

"Well," he said, "I shall certainly be at Magani's."

Suddenly his eye had fallen on a man in front of who was wearing smoked glasses, and who carried a big Gladstone bag.

With a bound George rushed forward, and gripped him by the collar.

"Hardy!" he cried. "Caught you, by the living Jingo!"

Then George fought his way to the girl, and somehow forced a path for her.

Then the waiting mob crowded on to the vehicle.

George had elbowed the big man out of his way when he had been making a passage for the pretty girl, and the burly one was evidently sore about it.

"There doesn't seem to be any improvement in manners in these days," he said sourly, looking at George as they stood just inside the bus. "You very nearly broke one of my ribs in your anxiety to help that young lady, and—Hel-lo—"

He broke off and tapped George on the chest.

"Look down here, young man," he said, with a tinge of joyous malice. "The young woman doesn't seem to have been unduly grateful, does she?"

George's gaze followed the direction indicated, and with a pang, he saw that the swivel of his watch-chain was hanging down on his breast. His hand went to his watch pocket. It was empty.

The watch which had been given to him only about twelve hours before had disappeared.

The bus had started.

"Look, there she goes!" cried the big man. "Runnin' like the wind. You'll have some job to catch her, young man!"

George looked, and already more than half way up the street, he could see the running figure of the girl.

"She's not going to get away with my watch like that," said George, every atom of chivalry ebbing out of his boots. "I'll have her!"

He swung off the bus, and rushed in the direction where he had seen the flying form of the girl.

There was no longer any sign of her. George put on an extra spurt. Yes, there she was a good many hundred yards ahead, and making for the station. It was a clever trick. She hoped to get lost among the myriads of people who were always on the platform.

She was making for a train, the guard of which was blowing his whistle.

George as close behind her now, but she managed to open the door of one of the carriages, and stumble in.

The train started, but the carriage door was still open, and George scrambled in after her.

The chase had been a long and trying one, and both of them were well-nigh exhausted.

For a few moments they sat and panted, George began to wonder in a misty sort of way whither the train was bound.

The girl actually smiled at him.

"That—was—a—near—thing!" she said, labouring for her breath.

George waited until he had command of his breathing apparatus. The impudent baggage! She should not bounce him even if she was pretty.

At last he felt he had command of his voice.

"I'll trouble you," he said, "to give me back my watch!"

"Hey?" said the girl, as if she had not heard aright.

"I'll trouble you to give me back my watch!" he said, more distinctly this time.

"Your watch?" she said with frozen hauteur. "I'm afraid I don't understand you. Do you mean to insinuate that I am a pickpocket?"

"I don't insinuate anything," said George, steeling his heart, for she was a very pretty girl indeed, and that touch of temper made her more good to look upon than ever. "You took my watch out of my pocket just now when you were struggling with the crowd round that motor-bus. I missed it immediately you'd gone, and you ran like a rabbit. I—"

"Tickets, please!"

A man in the uniform of the railway stood in the aperture which led into the corridor.

Like to have the pleasure of seeing you again, and trying to convince you how really sorry I am."

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"Hardy!" he cried. "Caught you, by the living Jingo!"

The man turned a livid face towards George, and struggled madly to loosen his grip. A station policeman was standing near, and George called out to him.

"Hi!" he cried. "This man is Septimus Hardy, a fraudulent cashier. There's a warrant out for him."

(Continued on page 3.)

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