

# Bagged

Jeffery Farnol

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By Jeffery Farnol

George was cold, shivering with such deathly chill that only the famishing may know; he was worn out with his long day upon the streets and had nothing to show for his labor, for evening had fallen, shops and office buildings were closing, and soon he must tramp wearily home again, back to her who waited his return so hopefully.... The pale patient face of her! ... And she would be hungry!

His fists clenched passionately and he closed his eyes.... The man who let his woman perish was a failure, a very weakling! And yet what more could he do?

The great railway terminus was crowded with home-seeking humanity, and, crouched upon a deserted seat in this remote corner, he watched the busy scene with haggard eyes. Hurrying feet quick with eager purpose, faces glimpsed and gone; an ordinary enough, everyday crowd and yet to the

watcher's disordered fancy each and every individual in this bustling throng seemed to obtrude his well-being upon him.

Money! It was all about him now, it had jostled him on the busy streets all day long.... Money! And thrusting clenched hands into his empty pockets he cursed bitterly, for She, his woman, was starving.

Miserably he sat there, head bowed, vaguely conscious of the never-ending stir about him—the tramp of innumerable feet speeding by, feet that came and were gone, feet that hurried, that trod heavily, that sauntered; and of all these feet two that stopped suddenly in his immediate line of vision.

Large feet these, expensively shod and spatted beneath well-filled trouser legs, that pertained to an overnourished, plethoric person, who panted noisily, mopped rosy face with snowy handkerchief and grasped a cowhide bag as plump and prosperous looking as its owner. This rubicund person, panting, mopping and heavy-breathing, stared about him, uttered an inarticulate exclamation, set down his bag upon the seat beside George, and plunged into the crowd. George glanced swiftly about him, drew a deep breath, rose and taking up the bag turned to run, set his teeth, took six leisurely strides and was borne along by that human torrent. It was a heavy bag, yet it was not this that caused his breath to labor so painfully, his heart to throb so heavily—it was rather the terrible strain of listening—listening to discover, amid the din of these multitudinous footsteps pattering all about him, the sound of feet quick and loud in dogged pursuit. Five minutes and he would be in the Strand.

And now while hearkening to these feet George began to count his own. Ninety-one, ninety-two, ninety-three. Five minutes and he would reach the comparative safety of the Strand. Ninety-four, ninety-five— Hard by the nearest exit stood a burly policeman. Unhesitatingly George turned thither. Ninety-six, ninety-seven, ninety—a light touch upon his shoulder. George faltered.

A tall, immaculately clad young gentleman who beamed at him with one eye and glared through a monocle with the other.

"Off with your booty, eh—the spoil?" he inquired in soft, sleepy tones, tapping the bag with the handsome cane he carried.

George gulped and wiped clammy brow with tremulous hand.

"I happened to be watching you."

"Well, you ... you've got me," stammered George in choking voice. "And there's a policeman over there—"

"I see him. Keep on walking—slowly, so!"

"Sir," said George, licking dry lips, "is it any good telling you this is the first time—"

"Oh, quite!" sighed his captor wearily. "You're a sick man out of work with a wife and numerous offspring wailing for bread, I know, I know.... And don't stop, keep on walking ... a gentle amble."

"Sir, I swear to God—"

"When in a crowd always blaspheme softly. And don't attempt to bolt or I shall have to knock you down, which might make people stare, and I hate being gaped at."

"Are you ... are you going to ... give me in charge?" gasped George, glancing toward the burly policeman.

"Oh, quite," murmured his captor, hooking three fingers in George's trembling arm, "but not before this mob. There's Bow Street fairly adjacent, and Vine Street—you can plead your hard-luck story far better in the comparative seclusion of— Hi—taxi!"

A waiting vehicle purred up to them and while the young gentleman murmured to its driver, the burly policeman obligingly opened the door. So George got in, lugging the heavy bag with him, and leaning back closed his eyes, overcome by bitter remorse, a growing terror for ... She would be waiting, watching for him, his Mary. She would know him for a felon—a sordid sneak thief.

He heard the taxi door slam, felt it glide smoothly away and looking up found his captor regarding him with a certain keen intentness.

"So you'll tell me this is your first essay in crime?"

"Yes!" said George, faintly.

"Quite!" nodded the other. "And you annexed another man's property with such finished expertness, such cool dexterity that at first I mistook you for the Dasher himself. You know him of course—one of his gang, perhaps."

"No!" murmured George.

"Well, then, you'll know of him?"

"No!" answered George.

"Tut, tut!" quoth the young gentleman, lighting a cigarette. "Then to tell you a truth which you probably know better than I—The Dasher is the most accomplished and pestiferous baggage thief in the three kingdoms."

The taxi crawled from one traffic block to another while George, lying back in his corner, stared at the stolen bag with eyes that saw instead the vision of a woman's pale face bowed in an agony of shame—his Mary.

"And," said his companion suddenly, "you have the usual sick wife, of course—the wife of every felon caught in the act is always sick and—"

"Yes, I have.... I have!" cried George in a cracked strident voice. "She's so young ... only a kid and—delicate, needs good food ... pure air and I can't give them to her ... I can't. I

can't, though I've done my best. I've tried. God! how I've tried! And now ... I'm a thief! When she knows, it'll just finish her ... and so for her sake I ask you to have ... have mercy—on her. I don't care a damn for myself, sir, but if I go to prison—if she knows I'm not straight—" The hoarse, pleading voice broke and George bowed his face between clutching hands.

"Absolutely!" said his captor, flicking cigarette ash out of the window. "You do it so jolly well that it sounds almost convincing. Yes, you do it so much better than most of 'em that I almost think ... yes, upon my soul I almost fancy—"

"Let me go!" whispered George, his haggard eyes bright with sudden hope. "Let me go and I swear—"

"That you'll keep a brighter lookout next time, oh quite!"

The glowing eyes grew dull, the eager face twitched with sudden spasm, and, uttering a gasping sob, George shrank back in his corner as if from a blow.

"Damn you!" he groaned. "If I was half the man I used to be I'd lick you like the cur you are—"

"Quite!" nodded his captor. "As it is, luckily for me, you're ill and starving—eh?"

The taxi crawled to another halt and George stared out miserably at the throng of vehicles, seeing them through a

blur of anguished grief....

Then a strong vital hand grasped his and into his lax fingers was thrust something that crackled....

"God—!" exclaimed George brokenly, glancing from the money in his trembling fingers to the face of him who beamed at him with one eye and glared at him through a monocle with the other.

"No, friend, merely me, Sylvanias Host, at your service. And here," said Mr. Sylvanias Host, opening the taxi door, "is where you hop!"

So George stepped out, then paused, turned for a last word, was hooted and roared at by indignant drivers, and, dodging to the safety of the pavement, stood there like one utterly amazed.

And who shall say what fervent, what sacred oaths he took in regard to the future? Then lifting his head and squaring his shoulders, away he hastened to his Mary. Resolute to outface all that the tomorrows should bring.

Meanwhile a certain taxi wended its slow way westward and seated therein a certain Mr. Sylvanias Host—better known in certain circles as the Dasher—beamed at a certain plump and prosperous-looking bag.

"And now," quoth he, opening the blade of a gold-mounted penknife, "let us see what I have purchased from yon poor fish!"

[The end of *Bagged* by Jeffery Farnol]