

Rock in the Baltic

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A ROCK IN THE BALTIC * * * ROBERT BARR

* *A Rock in the Baltic*

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Chapter I - The Incident at the Bank *

IN the public room of the Sixth National Bank at Bar Harbor in Maine, Lieutenant Alan Drummond, H.M.S. "Consternation," stood aside to give precedence to a lady. The Lieutenant had visited the bank for the purpose of changing several crisp white Bank of England notes into the currency of the country he was then visiting. The lady did not appear to notice either his courtesy or his presence, and this was the more remarkable since Drummond was a young man sufficiently conspicuous even in a crowd, and he and she were, at that moment, the only customers in the bank. He was tall, well-knit and stalwart, blond as a Scandinavian, with dark blue eyes which he sometimes said jocularly were the colors of his university. He had been slowly approaching the cashier's window with the easy movement of a man never in a hurry, when the girl appeared at the door, and advanced rapidly to the bank counter with its brass wire screen surrounding the arched aperture behind which stood the cashier. Although very plainly attired, her gown nevertheless possessed a charm of simplicity that almost suggested complex Paris, and she wore it with that air of distinction the secret of which is supposed to be the exclusive property of French and American women.

The young man saw nothing of this, and although he appreciated the beauty of the girl, what struck him at that instant was the expression of anxiety on her face, whose apparently temporary pallor was accentuated by an abundance of dark hair. It seemed to him that she had resolutely set herself a task which she was most reluctant to perform. From the moment she entered the door her large, dark eyes were fixed almost appealingly on the cashier, and they beheld nothing else.

Drummond, mentally slow as he usually was, came to the quick conclusion that this was a supreme moment in her life, on which perhaps great issues depended. He saw her left hand grasp the corner of the ledge in front of the cashier with a grip of nervous tension, as if the support thus attained was necessary to her. Her right hand trembled slightly as she passed an oblong slip of paper through the aperture to the calm and indifferent official.

"Will you give me the money for this check?" she asked in a low voice.

The cashier scrutinized the document for some time in silence. The signature appeared unfamiliar to him.

"One moment, madam," he said quietly, and retired to a desk in the back part of the bank, where he opened a huge book, turned over some leaves rapidly, and ran his finger down a page. His dilatory action seemed to increase the young woman's panic. Her pallor increased, and she swayed slightly, as if in danger of falling, but brought her right hand to the assistance of the left, and so steadied herself against the ledge of the cashier's counter.

"By Jove!" said the Lieutenant to himself, "there's something wrong here. I wonder what it is. Such a pretty girl, too!"

The cashier behind his screen saw nothing of this play of the emotions. He returned nonchalantly to his station, and asked, in commonplace tones:

"How will you have the money, madam?"

"Gold, if you please," she replied almost in a whisper, a rosy flush chasing the whiteness from her face, while a deep sigh marked the passing of a crisis.

At this juncture an extraordinary thing happened. The cashier counted out some golden coins, and passed them through the aperture toward their new owner.

"Thank you," said the girl. Then, without touching the money, she turned like one hypnotized, her unseeing eyes still taking no heed of the big Lieutenant, and passed rapidly out of the bank. The cashier paid no regard to this abandonment of treasure. He was writing some hieroglyphics on the cashed check.

"By Jove!" gasped the Lieutenant aloud, springing forward as he spoke, sweeping the coins into his hand, and bolting for the door. This was an action which would have awakened the most negligent cashier had he been in a trance. Automatically he whisked out a revolver which lay in an open drawer under his hand.

"Stop, you scoundrel, or I fire!" he shouted, but the Lieutenant had already disappeared. Quick as thought the cashier darted into the passage, and without waiting to unfasten the low door which separated the public and private rooms of the bank, leaped over it, and, bareheaded, gave chase. A British naval officer in uniform, rapidly overtaking a young woman, quite unconscious of his approach, followed by an excited, bareheaded man with a revolver in his grasp, was a sight which would quickly have collected a crowd almost anywhere, but it happened to be the lunch hour, and the inhabitants of that famous summer resort were in-doors; thus, fortunately, the street was deserted. The naval officer was there because the hour of the midday meal on board the cruiser did not coincide with lunch time on shore. The girl was there because it happened to be the only portion of the day when she could withdraw unobserved from the house in which she lived, during banking hours, to try her little agitating financial experiment. The cashier was there because the bank had no lunch hour, and because he had just witnessed the most suspicious circumstance that

his constantly alert eye had ever beheld. Calm and imperturbable as a bank cashier may appear to the outside public, he is a man under constant strain during business hours. Each person with whom he is unacquainted that confronts him at his post is a possible robber who at any moment may attempt, either by violence or chicanery, to filch the treasure he guards. The happening of any event outside the usual routine at once arouses a cashier's distrust, and this sudden flight of a stranger with money which did not belong to him quite justified the perturbation of the cashier. From that point onward, innocence of conduct or explanation so explicit as to satisfy any ordinary man, becomes evidence of more subtle guilt to the mind of a bank official. The ordinary citizen, seeing the Lieutenant finally overtake and accost the hurrying girl, raise his cap, then pour into her outstretched hand the gold he had taken, would have known at once that here was an every-day exercise of natural politeness. Not so the cashier. The farther he got from the bank, the more poignantly did he realize that these two in front, both strangers to him, had, by their combined action, lured him, pistol and all, away from his post during the dulllest hour of the day. It was not the decamping with those few pieces of gold which now troubled him: it was fear of what might be going on behind him. He was positive that these two had acted in conjunction. The uniform worn by the man did not impose upon him. Any thief could easily come by a uniform, and, as his mind glanced rapidly backwards over the various points of the scheme, he saw how effectual the plan was: first, the incredible remissness of the woman in leaving her gold on the counter; second, the impetuous disappearance of the man with the money; and, third, his own heedless plunge into the street after them. He saw the whole plot in a flash: he had literally leaped into the trap, and during his five or ten minutes' absence, the accomplices of the pair might have overawed the unarmed clerks, and walked off with the treasure. His cash drawer was unlocked, and even the big safe stood wide open. Surprise had as effectually lured him away as if he had been a country bumpkin. Bitterly and breathlessly did he curse his own precipitancy. His duty was to guard the bank, yet it had not been the bank that was robbed, but, at best a careless woman who had failed to pick up her money. He held the check for it, and the loss, if any, was hers, not the bank's, yet here he was, running bareheaded down the street like a fool, and now those two stood quite calmly together, he handing her the money, and thus spreading a mantle of innocence over the vile trick. But whatever was happening in the bank, he would secure two of the culprits at least. The two, quite oblivious of the danger that threatened them, were somewhat startled by a panting man, trembling with rage, bareheaded, and flourishing a deadly weapon, sweeping down upon them.

"Come back to the bank instantly, you two!" he shouted.

"Why?" asked the Lieutenant in a quiet voice.

"Because I say so, for one thing."

"That reason is unanswerable," replied the Lieutenant with a slight laugh, which further exasperated his opponent. "I think you are exciting yourself unnecessarily. May I beg you to put that pistol in your pocket? On the cruiser we always cover up the guns when ladies honor us with their presence. You wish me to return because I had no authority for taking the money? Right: come along."

The cashier regarded this as bluff, and an attempt to give the woman opportunity to escape.

"You must come back also," he said to the girl.

"I'd rather not," she pleaded in a low voice, and it was hardly possible to have made a more injudicious remark if she had taken the whole afternoon to prepare.

Renewed determination shone from the face of the cashier.

"You must come back to the bank," he reiterated.

"Oh, I say," protested the Lieutenant, "you are now exceeding your authority. I alone am the culprit. The young lady is quite blameless, and you have no right to detain her for a moment."

The girl, who had been edging away and showing signs of flight, which the bareheaded man, visibly on the alert, leaned forward ready to intercept, seemed to make up her mind to bow to the inevitable. Ignoring the cashier, she looked up at the blond Lieutenant with a slight smile on her pretty lips.

"It was really all my fault at the beginning," she said, "and very stupid of me. I am slightly acquainted with the bank manager, and I am sure he will vouch for me, if he is there."

With that she turned and walked briskly toward the bank, at so rapid a pace as to indicate that she did not wish an escort. The bareheaded official found his anger unaccountably deserting him, while a great fear that he had put his foot in it took its place.

"Really," said the Lieutenant gently, as they strode along together, "an official in your position should be a good judge of human nature. How any sane person, especially a young man, can look at that beautiful girl and suspect her of evil, passes my comprehension. Do you know her?"

"No," said the cashier shortly. "Do you?"

The Lieutenant laughed genially.

"Still suspicious, eh?" he asked. "No, I don't know her, but to use a banking term, you may bet your bottom dollar I'm going to. Indeed, I am rather grateful to you for your stubbornness in forcing us to return. It's a quality I like, and you possess it in marvelous development, so I intend to stand by you when the managerial censure is due. I'm very certain I met your manager at the dinner they gave us last night. Mr. Morton, isn't he?"

"Yes," growled the cashier, in gruff despondency.

"Ah, that's awfully jolly. One of the finest fellows I've met in ten years. Now, the lady said she was acquainted with him, so if I don't wheedle an introduction out of him, it will show that a man at a dinner and a man in a bank are two different individuals. You were looking for plots; so there is mine laid bare to you. It's an introduction, not gold, I'm conspiring for."

The cashier had nothing further to say. When they entered the bank together he saw the clerks all busily at work, and knew that no startling event had happened during his absence. The girl had gone direct to the manager's room, and thither the young men followed her. The bank manager was standing at his desk, trying to preserve a severe financial cast of countenance, which the twinkle in his eyes belied. The girl, also standing, had evidently been giving him a rapid sketch of what had occurred, but now fell into silence when accuser and accomplice appeared.

The advent of the Englishman was a godsend to the manager. He was too courteous a gentleman to laugh in the face of a lady who very seriously was relating a set of incidents which appealed to his sense of humor, so the coming of the Lieutenant enabled him to switch off his mirth on another subject, and in reply to the officer's cordial "Good-morning, Mr. Morton," he replied:

"Why, Lieutenant, I'm delighted to see you. That was a very jolly song you sang for us last night: I'll never forget it. What do you call it? Whittington Fair?" And he laughed outright, as at a genial recollection.

The Lieutenant blushed red as a girl, and stammered:

"Really, Mr. Morton, you know, that's not according to the rules of evidence. When a fellow comes up for trial, previous convictions are never allowed to be mentioned till after the sentence. Whiddicomb Fair should not be held against me in the present crisis."

The manager chuckled gleefully. The cashier, when he saw how the land lay, had quietly withdrawn, closing the door behind him.

"Well, Lieutenant, I think I must have this incident cabled to Europe," said Morton, "so the effete nations of your continent may know that a plain bank cashier isn't afraid to tackle the British navy. Indeed, Mr. Drummond, if you read history, you will learn that this is a dangerous coast for your warships. It seems rather inhospitable that a guest of our town cannot pick all the gold he wants out of a bank, but a cashier has necessarily somewhat narrow views on the subject. I was just about to apologize to Miss Amhurst, who is a valued client of ours, when you came in, and I hope, Miss Amhurst"—he continued gravely, turning to the girl—"that you will excuse us for the inconvenience to which you have been put." *

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