

LOUIS VUITTON

Ross Carter was neither exceptional or anonymous. He was typical. A typical human being who, for a living, drove a London taxi.

Late thirties, married, two children, living in a south London suburb, some fifteen miles from the capital. And on this July working morning that began like most others, he drove across Blackheath towards town, sharing slow progress with the assorted rush hour stragglers.

Blackheath, a vast open space, from its famous village to the busy main road that dissected the common and its jumble of football pitches, duck ponds and a coffee stall that dispensed refreshments every hour of the day.

As Ross leaned across for his sunglasses, from the corner of his' eye he saw a man running from the direction of Blackheath village, across the heath, all the while waving at his taxi. But when he stopped for the fare, he immediately regretted doing so, for his professional experience and instinct told him it was as they say in cab trade parlance, "A wrong 'un"

A curt "London Bridge, mate", and the stranger climbed in the back of the cab, staring fixedly out of the side window.

Not a good sign when a driver is looking for some redeeming feature to dispute his own intuition. Nevertheless, they set off and continued their journey in stony silence.

The man was poorly dressed, unshaven and not particularly clean but, what was strange was the fact that he carried with him an expensive leather briefcase that bore the distinctive brown and gold that was "Louis Vuitton" luggage.

As they entered St. Thomas Street, some half a mile from London Bridge station, the passenger called out abruptly, "This'll do, here. Stop here will you?". And contrary to Ross's suspicions, the man did not run off, but paid his fare and walked off in the direction of Tower Bridge.

With a sigh of relief Ross set off for the garage to fill up with diesel but as he braked sharply at the traffic lights ahead he heard a clatter in the back of his cab. Turning round, he saw on the floor the brown and gold briefcase, and while the lights were red nipped out and transferred the case to his front compartment, noticing at the same time that there was no sign of the man who had left the case in his cab.

The Hackney Carriage Laws are quite clear with regard to articles left in a cab. The driver must go immediately to the nearest police station, deposit the property and give details, where possible, of when the item was left and where the journey was from and to. The driver is given a receipt and, if it is not claimed within three clear calendar months from the date of its deposit, the item becomes the property of the driver.

Calling at the police station and filling out the appropriate forms is a procedure usually honoured by cab drivers, but commonly regarded as a time consuming nuisance.

Ross set off for Southwark police station but, we acknowledge that curiosity often embarrasses integrity, and he proved no exception as he pulled in to a quiet side street to glimpse its contents before handing the briefcase in.

Assuming, that is, it wasn't locked.

As it happened, it wasn't locked and, following a luxurious "click", Ross raised the lid of the high quality luggage. Shocked, an almost immediate click followed as he swiftly closed the lid and set its fasteners.

The case was full of money!

Bundles of used fifty and twenty pound notes. Forty-seven thousand pounds worth of notes, to be precise.

Ross knew because he counted them. In sheer disbelief he had thumbed through forty-seven thousand pounds.

What to do?

Well, hand it in, of course. But not just yet. No, he would enjoy the warm glow it gave him, even though the money wasn't really his. It felt so good sitting next to all those notes. Like a particular friend or loved one, right there alongside him, keeping him company.

For an hour he felt wonderful, working the streets of London that were familiar to him but were lent a warm friendly air by the knowledge of his new financial status. After all, he fancied that until he handed the money in, it was his as surely as if he had earned it.

A further hour swiftly passed but he knew that soon he must obey the strict Hackney Carriage lawsTo account for the couple of hours delay he could say he had gone to lunch or late breakfast and hadn't noticed the briefcase until returning to his cab from the cafe. But surely now he must lodge it at the police station.

Most definitely he could delay no further, without arousing suspicion.

Ross opened the case again before parting with it, but was immediately seduced by the red and blue notes and what they could offer.

He supposed that the money was dishonestly come by in the first place.

He argued that financial security would benefit him and his family. In fact, as is often the case, desire banished resistance, to justify crime, and before too long Ross was convinced that keeping the money was for the good of all, and with that attitude he began to imagine wisely spending it. He took great pleasure in the mental arithmetic necessary to calculate the extent of his debts and desires.

Of course, sixty-two thousand pounds would be an absolutely perfect sum and with this in mind Ross checked for other compartments in the briefcase to ensure that the Louis Vuitton did not contain a false bottom or something similar, just per chance the precise amount could be achieved.

"Ah, well", he sighed, slightly disappointed, "Forty-seven thousand it is", and throughout the remainder of the day he mentally spent the money. First of all clearing all debts, followed by the outlay required for luxuries.

But try as he might, no amount of juggling would give him everything he wanted. He would just have to settle for less, and with this resignation, at about seven thirty he crossed Westminster Bridge, southbound, put his day's cab takings in the briefcase and headed home.

There was quite a lot of traffic on the busy Old Kent Road and when the lights went red at one of its major junctions, Ross was at least twelve vehicles back from the lights. He was in the middle lane, stationary, and quite unprepared for what happened next.

A young man, obviously experienced in this particular manoeuvre judging by the speed and expertise with which it was executed, rushed from the pavement to Ross's taxi, reached in through the open window, plucked the briefcase from the front of his cab and ran off into the main road opposite. Ross knew it would be unwise to abandon his cab and give chase on foot. At any rate, the youngster moved so quickly it would have been impossible to catch

him. No, he would try to get over to the offside lane to turn right and pursue him in the cab. Ross managed to do this but had missed two changes of lights in the meantime and when he eventually made his turn, he was frantic.

There were blocks of flats on either side of the road and the youth could have disappeared into any one of them.

There was an open industrial estate and a lorry park.

So many possibilities.

It was hopeless.

Just then he saw, up ahead, a blue light flashing. As he drew nearer there was the youth being questioned by a policeman, while another police officer was squatting beside the open briefcase. Ross Carter glimpsed his own money bag on top of the notes as, for obvious reasons, he drove on, unable to stop.

As the fading blue light blinked at him in his rear view mirror, Ross reckoned he had lost about a hundred and twenty pounds takings, but silently maintained that this loss was all that really troubled him.