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Missing From The 6.54 Express.

A RAILWAY INSPECTOR'S STORY.

By JOHN T. PARTINGTON.

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My spirits sank to zero. I was bitterly disappointed. I had felt absolutely certain of finding the boy at Mostyn, but it was evident that I was on the wrong scent.

"But the express did stop here last night, I suppose?" I said to the station master after a short pause.

"Yes, sure," was the reply. "I got a telegram to say that it would stop to set down Sir Philip Sandford and party. Sir Philip lives, as perhaps you know, at Rhydown Hall, a good eight miles in the country. He and all his family except his eldest son and daughter, went over to Sir Philip's brother's place near Beaumaris on a visit; but during yesterday Mr. Reginald—that's the son left at home—got thrown from his horse and very badly hurt, and they telegraphed to Sir Philip and he came home, with his lady and the children, by the Banger train and drove off at once."

"And you are quite sure that no little boy got out of the same train and was left on the platform?"

"Quite sure, Mr. Barnes. I couldn't have missed seeing him if he'd been there. There was only Sir Philip's own party."

"But if the boy didn't come to you or to your porter may you not have missed him and gone into the office, leaving him standing on the platform?"

"It's impossible, Mr. Barnes," and the old man shook his head decidedly.

"Were you in attendance on the train yourself?" I asked. "Just tell me everything that passed."

"Well, the porter and myself were both at the train. There was a goodish bit of luggage. It was in the cupboard of the carriage in which they had traveled, near the front of the train, and I helped the porter to get it out. Sir Philip and his lady and his children stood watching us, and then the porter put the luggage on the four-wheeled truck, and took it across the line to the down side, and out through the gate to the carriage which was waiting for them, and the party came across at the same time and got into the carriage."

"Sir Philip's own carriage, I suppose?" I said.

"Yes, sure. While the luggage was being loaded the party were getting into the carriage, but it was a rather tight squeeze, and one of the boys had to ride with the coachman. I lifted him on the seat myself and told the coachman there wasn't room for him inside, and I told Sir Philip what I had done, and he said 'All right,' and then they drove away."

"And you are absolutely certain that only the members of Sir Philip's own family alighted, and that there was no boy left standing about?"

"Quite certain, Mr. Barnes; yes, sure."

I next questioned the porter, who corroborated the station master's story in every particular. He was quite certain that the boy I was seeking had not alighted at Mostyn.

An up passenger train for Chester was now almost due, and I decided to go as far as might be necessary by it, and make inquiries on the way; I did not expect, however, to be able to obtain information bearing on the case until I reached Connah's Quay, as the train by which the boy traveled had certainly not called anywhere between Mostyn and Connah's Quay. The guard's journal which I had examined afforded absolute proof of that. Of course there was just the possibility that the boy might have fallen from the train, but I did not consider that at all likely, as he would have had to tamper with the door and unfasten it on the outside before such a thing could have happened, and surely the other passengers in the compartment would have prevented him from doing anything of the kind; and even if such a mishap had taken place, the other passengers would have been certain to have reported the occurrence at Connah's Quay when the train arrived there, which, clearly, from Mrs. Fairholme's statement, they had not done.

I was not surprised, therefore, to find on inquiry that the station masters at Holywell, Bagillt and Flint had neither seen nor heard anything of the boy. The station master at Connah's Quay, in reply to my hurried inquiries while the train stood at his station, confirmed in substance all that Mrs. Fairholme had told me as to what happened there on the arrival of the train. The boy had certainly not alighted there, neither had any of the three other passengers who left Holy in the same compartment. He was now strongly of the opinion that the boy was in the train while it stood at his station, but that he was prevented from alighting by the other passengers in the compartment.

I went on by the same train, and on arrival at Queensferry found that the station-master had been called away for an hour on urgent business, and I therefore went on to Sandycroft and alighted there. I was rather glad to be able to get to that station without delay, because the tickets of the 6.54 express were always collected there, it being the nearest station to Chester, and I thought it likely that the station-master or porter might be able to say whether or not the boy or the other three passengers were in the train on its arrival there. The station-master told me, on inquiry, that he had collected the tickets in the front part of the train, and that he was quite sure no persons of the description given were then in the train. Neither had the porter seen them. It seemed clear, there-

fore, that the passengers had alighted at Queensferry, and I proceeded to walk back to that station, a distance of about a mile and a half.

The station-master had returned by the time I got there, and I at once told him my errand. He had not seen anything of the boy, he said, but he distinctly remembered the other passengers alighting there. The man with a scar on his face he had seen once or twice before, but the women were strangers to him. The man's ticket was only to Flint, and he had to pay excess. He was hampered in finding



The Man with the Scar on His Face.

the money by a sack which he carried on his back, and which he did not seem to want to put down on the ground.

"Now I don't like suggesting such an idea," I said, "and I hope it will turn out to be a wrong one, but do you think it possible from the appearance of the sack that the boy was inside it?"

"That's a horrible thought," was the reply, "because if the lad was there he was quiet enough, and you know what that means. But it's quite possible. I wondered why the fellow was so mighty anxious to keep the sack in his own clutches."

"Of course," I said, "he may not have done the boy any serious harm, perhaps only rendered him unconscious in some way, so as to get him out of the train and away from the station. I expect the watch that the boy carried had been the temptation."

I arranged with the station master that he should make inquiries for the boy in the neighborhood, while I went on to Connah's Quay to compare notes with the police, and secure their active co-operation in following up the clue I had found.

The inspector of police was in the office when I arrived and I soon told him my story and made him acquainted with my suspicions in regard to the man with a scar across his cheek. The inspector heard me patiently until I had finished, making meanwhile one or two notes, and then he said quietly, "And you badly want to get hold of that man, I suppose? But you'll have to whistle for him. He's gone."

"Gone! What do you mean?" I asked in some excitement.

"Oh, he's cleared out, bag and baggage. We ought to catch him, though. We know the man very well. He's an old acquaintance of ours known as 'Dusky Joe.' I'm only surprised at a man with a face like that taking to bad ways at Flint, and is the biggest rascal in the district. He's already served one or two terms for various offenses, but if we can only catch him this time I fancy he'll be settled for a good long spell.

My men have been after him all the morning. They've found traces of his having called at home during the night, but for the present, at any rate, he's got clear away."

"I'm awfully sorry for that," I said; "but what has become of the boy, I should like to know. Have you met with any trace of him, either living or dead?"

"No news at all of the boy till you came," was the reply; "and we want Dusky Joe for quite another matter. I may as well tell you all about it. During the night there's been a bad poaching affray on the Hawarden estate. Three poachers and two keepers met in the wood, and there was a hot fight, and the keepers got the worst of it, and they're both badly hurt. One of them isn't likely to get over it. From what the other keeper says, Dusky Joe was one of the poachers, and what you tell me as to his traveling to Queensferry last night confirms it. That's why we've been after him. And if he's done anything to the lad all the more reason why we should catch him as soon as we can. We can't do more than we are doing to get hold of him, but I'll send a man to Queensferry at once to make inquiries for the lad round there, and if I hear anything I'll let you know."

It occurred to me that before leaving Connah's Quay it might be an advantage to have a conversation with Mrs. Edwards, and I got the station master, who was well acquainted with her, to go with me to her house and introduce me. I found her to be a very intelligent woman, apparently about 55 years of age, rather tall, and with a very pleasing face. An ideal nurse I thought she must have been.

"Have you found little Frank, Mr. Barnes?" she asked, eagerly, as soon as introductions were over, and the station master had left up.

"I am sorry to say that I have not," I replied.

"I am so sorry. I don't know what his mother will do if any harm has befallen him. She was in a dreadfully agitated state when she arrived here last night. She simply lives for her children. Young as she is, she has had a great deal of trouble, Mr. Barnes, and I do hope she may not have the loss of her boy added to what she has already gone through."

"Do you know whether her little girl is better?" I asked.

"Yes; she wired me an hour or so ago to say that Nellie was much better, and that it was not a case of scarlet fever after all. But do you mind telling me, Mr. Barnes, what you have done to trace the boy, and whether you have found any clue at all?"

I told Mrs. Edwards briefly what inquiries I had made, and how everything now seemed to point to Dusky Joe being responsible for the boy's disappearance.

"Although at first," I added, "I did not attach as much importance to the fact of the boy being placed in that compartment as Mrs. Fairholme seemed to do. I felt sure I should find him at Mostyn, and his not being there was a great disappointment to me. It seems quite certain, however, that nobody alighted there except Sir Philip Sandford and his family."

"Sir Philip Sandford?" exclaimed Mrs. Edwards, springing to her feet as if she had been galvanised. "Mr. Barnes, are you sure of the name?"

"Quite sure," I replied; "but—"

"And does he—does Sir Philip live near there?"

"He lives at Rhydown Hall, about eight miles inland. I remember his removing there a year or more ago. He

bought an estate there, I have heard."

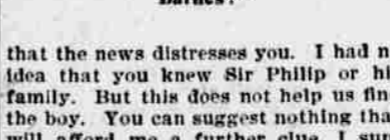
"Does his son—Mr. Reginald—live with him still?"

"Was he with the party?"

"No; he has met with an accident. He had stayed at home, and was out riding yesterday when he got thrown from his horse."

"He is not dead, Mr. Barnes, or—"

"The only information I received was that he was badly hurt. I am sorry



"Have You Found Little Frank, Mr. Barnes?"

that the news distresses you. I had no idea that you knew Sir Philip or his family. But this does not help us find the boy. You can suggest nothing that will afford me a further clue, I suppose?"

"No, nothing. But before you go let me tell you why the mention of Sir Philip and his son upset me so much just now. Under the circumstances I am sure Mrs. Fairholme would not mind my doing so, for I have an impression that in some way which I cannot understand it will help towards the recovery of her little boy."

[To Be Continued.]

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