

THE HOUSE OF PAIN.

BY FLORENCE EARLE COATES.

Unto the Prison House of Pain none willingly repair—

The bravest who an entrance gain—

Reluctant linger there—

For Pleasure, passing by that door, stays not to cheer the sight,

And Sympathy but mufles sound and banishes the light.

Yet in the Prison House of Pain things full of beauty blow—

Like Christmas roses, which attain

Perfection 'mid the snow—

Love, entering, in his mild warmth the darkest shadows melt,

And often, where the hush is deep, the wail of wings is felt.

Ah, me! the Prison House of Pain!—what lessons there are bought!

Lessons of a sublimer strain

Than any elsewhere taught—

Amid its loneliness and gloom, grave meanings grow more clear,

For to no earthly dwelling-place seems God so strangely near!

—From "Lyrics of Life."

The Commercial Traveler's Story.

Yes, we commercial travelers have our fair share of odd experiences, and we grow case-hardened in time. But there was one occasion when I unconsciously played a queer part in a big affair, and whenever I travel on this line the circumstances come vividly before my mind's eye, and I experience a strange feeling of nervousness which, try as I will, I cannot overcome.

It happened one night in December, a good many years ago, when I was young on the road. I was traveling by the evening train from Euston to catch the midnight boat at Liverpool for Belfast.

I arrived at the terminus on the stroke of the hour, and barely had time to get my ticket and fling myself and bag into a second smoker before the train moved off.

There were only two other passengers in the compartment, occupying the ends of the same seat; so, with a sigh of relief, I settled myself down in a corner and prepared to enjoy a cigar and the latest evening paper.

Before starting to read I took a look at my fellow passengers, for I have always been fond of a chat, and can generally spot a likely talker at once. However, there was little prospect of anything of the kind, for both were middle-aged men of reserved appearance, who would hardly deign to notice a youngster like myself. The one opposite to me, a clean-shaven man with a professional air, was buried in his paper; while the other was lying back in the far corner with his cap over his eyes, smoking a big cigar, and apparently half asleep.

We had got as far as Rugby without a word being spoken, when I suddenly felt my foot joggled in a peculiar way, and, looking up, I met the keen glance of my professional-looking neighbor.

"Excuse me, sir," said he, with an odd smile. "Would you mind exchanging papers? I see you have exhausted yours."

"Certainly," said I, slightly surprised, and we swapped accordingly, while he gave my toe another warning kick.

Imagine my astonishment when I saw pencilled on the margin of his paper these words:

"Keep calm. I'm a Scotland Yard man. Our fellow traveler is Burnside—you know who. Warrant for his arrest waits me at Liverpool; but may have to secure him before we reach there. Rely on your assistance if necessary. Speak to me in refreshment room, Stafford."

Of course I knew who Burnside was—everybody did then. You may remember he was Lord —'s secretary, who absconded with her ladyship's diamonds, and made a big stir at the time, though the affair was hushed up afterwards.

I was pretty cool in those days, and I read the words over again before I permitted myself to take a peep at the redoubtable Burnside himself. He was still smoking lazily, and was evidently unconscious of the proximity of danger. For a week he had eluded capture, and the last item of news was that the police were still working on a clue some days old. The very paper I held contained a paragraph to that effect carefully marked in pencil by my detective friend.

You may guess I was terribly excited by the time we reached Stafford, where a five minutes' stop was made; and no sooner had the train pulled up than I pocketed the paper containing the strange message, and hurried off to the refreshment room.

A minute later the detective joined me, lounging up in a careless style.

"Don't look round," he said; "he's over there at the coffee counter. If he suspects anything he'll bolt. He's expecting some one at Crewe, I fancy, for he sent a wire from the telegraph office at Euston to a party there, and I overheard the clerk asking him about some figures in the telegram—2964, they were."

"Why, that's the number of our compartment," I said.

"Exactly. It's sure to be a message telling some one to meet him, and, if so, the pair of them may give me trouble at Liverpool."

"What do you mean to do, then?"

"Collar him as soon as we start from here, strap him up, shove him under the seat, and when his precious accomplice arrives at Crewe I'll pitch a yarn to him about his friend being in another part of the train. Then he'll board the train, and at Liverpool the police can formally arrest my prisoner, while I follow the other chap to see what the game is. You see, I don't know which of them has the booty, and that's the main thing we're after."

"But supposing some other passengers have already entered our compartment?"

"They can't. I've made it all right with the guard. Time's nearly up; better get back. I must buy a couple of straws. You'll help, if necessary?"

"Of course," said I, for the affair was greatly to my liking.

We were just about to start when Burnside, who had settled down in his corner, suddenly rose and thrust his head out of the window beside us. "Guard!" he shouted. "What time do we reach Crewe?"

"Eight-forty-five, sir!"

"Good!" Burnside took his seat again, and the detective and I exchanged glances. My heart began to beat fast, and I braced myself up for the coming struggle; for Burnside was a powerful looking man, and the detective, though wiry and close-knit, was much slighter in build. We would evidently have a tough job of it, I thought.

Just as the train flew through the third station beyond Stafford the detective, who had been fidgeting behind his paper, suddenly began to wipe his lips with his handkerchief, and then rose as if to get something off the rack. With one bound he was on Burnside and had him pinned in the corner with his knee.

"Quick, get his wrists!" he said.

I jumped over and laid hold of Burnside's hands, just as he was struggling to reach his pocket. Then I saw that his face was covered by the detective's handkerchief, from which came a strong, sickly odor. He struggled frightfully for a moment or two and then seemed to collapse.

"It's all right now," said the detective, "but he very nearly had me plugged. Faugh! Open the windows."

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and, feeling easier in my mind, I jumped out, closed the door, and stood by it until my friend returned.

"Everything right?" said he. "Good! I've wired further instructions to Liverpool. I'll relieve you now if you want a drink."

I rushed off for some coffee, for I was feeling cold. But no sooner had I put the cup to my lips than the bell rang, and I had to swallow the stuff at one gulp, half scalding my mouth, and then make a bolt for my carriage. I was only just in time, for the train had begun to move. The guard held open the door and banged it to after me; and then, to my horror, instead of my friend whom I expected to find waiting for me, there was the black-bearded man in the far corner of the carriage, covering me with a revolver. "The game's up, my friend," he said.

I was too astonished to reply, and sank down helplessly on the cushions, forgetting my blistered mouth in sudden terror, for I knew I was completely at the ruffian's mercy.

"You're a deep one; but not deep enough," he went on. "Just fetch out my friend there, and undo him. Mind, no tricks."

I obeyed, in a kind of stupor, and presently Burnside was sitting up on the opposite seat, rubbing his brow in a dazed manner.

"Are you all right, Barker?" said the bearded man, still keeping the revolver pointed at me.

"Oh! you've come, Burt," said Burnside, recovering his senses. "Have they got clean away?"

"We've nabbed one of them; but not the one we want."

"Good!" said Burnside, turning to look at me. "How did the other manage to bolt?"

"Well, I was waiting for you at Crewe, according to your instructions, and I spotted our man immediately, though I was rather surprised at your absence. However, I thought you'd turn up presently, so I followed him when he left the carriage. The beggar went to the booking-office and took a ticket for Glasgow. Then I kept my eyes skinned, for I knew that something had gone wrong. He hurried back to the carriage, and our friend here then left him. I didn't bother about him, though, thinking he was an ordinary passenger; and as our man commenced to pace up and

down, I waited over at the bookstall to see what would happen. As you hadn't turned up, I knew he had managed to play some trick on you, and I determined not to let him out of my sight. Then the bell rang, and in he jumped, closing the door behind him. I waited half a second for the guard's 'Right away!' and then I made a rush and followed my man. But the beggar had gone!"

"Through the other door?"

"Yes. I was too late to follow him, and then, just as I spotted you under the seat, and tumbled to the whole plant, in comes our friend here and delivers himself up like a lamb."

By this time I had begun to see that there was a mistake somewhere, and that I was in a very awkward predicament. I turned hot all over and a funny feeling crept down my spine.

"Gentlemen," said I, "I'm afraid there's been a terrible mistake."

"Yes," growled the man named Burt, "and you'll jolly soon find out. Look here, what's your name?"

I told him, adding that I was traveling to Belfast on business.

"Drop it, and own up," said he. "Come, you may as well tell us where you've put the swag."

"Swag! What swag? I can assure you, gentlemen, I know nothing of this business."

"You know how to chloroform a chap," said the other.

"It was the detective, not I," I replied, in dismay.

"The detective! Who on earth are you talking about?"

"Who—my friend, who's gone. The detective!"

"Look here, young man, you're either very deep or a big fool. Do you know that we are detectives and that your precious friend whom you have assisted to escape was Burnside?"

"Burnside!" I repeated, horror-struck. Visions of prison cells and crowded courts and my name in the papers began to float before my eyes. I had been fooled utterly and completely.

"Yes, and you'll precious soon have to answer for it, too."

It was in vain that I explained; they wouldn't listen to me. Then I suddenly remembered the newspaper in my pocket.

"There," said I, "if you don't believe me, look at that!"

They took the paper and examined it, with evident surprise. Then Burt looked up.

"Look here, we'll want to see into this affair. If this yarn of yours is true, and you're a genuine traveler, show us your credentials. Open your bag there!"

I picked up what I thought was my bag, and then started back in dismay.

"Why, this isn't mine, it's the detective's—I mean Burnside's."

The detectives jumped to their feet and laid hold of the bag. It was locked, but in a trice they had forced it open, and from its depths drew a flat morocco leather case. Pressing the spring, Burt released the lid, and a blaze of dazzling light met our eyes.

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Burt. "He's gone off with the wrong bag. These are Lady A—'s diamonds!"

It was true enough. I remembered having moved my bag under the opposite seat, and Burnside in his haste, must have mistaken it for his own, to which it bore a strong resemblance.

The detectives fell back on the seat and began to laugh.

Of course, I had a bit of a job to prove my bona fides. I was detained at Liverpool that night, and released on bail next day. Luckily the affair was kept out of the papers, and I escaped with the only indignity of receiving a severe official censure for my imprudence.

Burnside got clean away, as you doubtless remember, and I heard no more of the affair until some six months afterward, when I received a check for fifty pounds from his lordship, who, it was rumored, was not sorry that Burnside had escaped, once the diamonds were recovered. But I don't think I should enter on a similar undertaking again, even with the prospect of a reward ten times as big.

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