

# ON AND OFF THE LINE.

I am only junior clerk in a provincial bank, and there is nothing remarkable about me, but most men, I suppose, could tell one story in which they have borne a part.

It was part of my duty to go once a week to open a branch bank at Merrie; so every Thursday, which was the market day there, I took some thousands of pounds from our parent bank in Littleborough, in my black bag, and in the same way brought back the deposits at night.

At first I used to be very nervous and anxious on my journey, especially on dark winter evenings; but I had grown at last so accustomed to the line, so familiar with every station, and even every official, between Littleborough and Merrie, that I had, as it were, outgrown my timidity; and though cautious as ever, and still perpetually on the watch, I managed to enjoy my day, and make the most of any little pleasure and diversion that came in my way, for there is always some little amusement to be found between Dan and Beersheba to those who are not determined to pronounce all barren.

It was a bitter February evening, and I was wrapped in the cars in coats and comfortable, as I hurried into the Merrie station with nine thousand pounds (chiefly in gold) safe in my black bag; my bag safe in my hand, and the key of it safe in my pocket. I entered the refreshment room, and in a pleasant tone of patronage requested a golden-haired young lady to pre-

pare me a fortification against the inner cold. She was standing opposite me, smiling and joking, while I drank it, when a light young voice beside me said suddenly:

"I will take just such another glass, if you please. I have to go on to Littleborough by the next train, and there is every prospect of my being found frozen without some preventative of this kind."

I do not know how it came about—perhaps the hot refreshment mellowed us; perhaps the smiles of the purveyor—but when the empty glasses were deposited on the counter and the comforters readjusted, we were chatting as easily together as old acquaintances, and we naturally turned out of the room together. He had a little valise with him, which I noticed he had never put out of his hand, and of which he seemed to take especial care; so it may have been a fellow-feeling which made us friendly.

As the train came in he looked down at his valise, and said to me, with pleasant frankness, "I must be particular in choosing my seat, for I have property here which I dare not lose sight of."

I smiled, but my old caution was too deeply-rooted for me to return his confidence.

"I would rather choose an empty carriage, I think," he went on; "it is generally safest when one carries valuable luggage. I have notes and papers here, do you know, my dear fellow, worth many thousands. Since I left Glasgow with them, a week ago, I have kept them under my eye night and day, and shall do so until I deposit them with the firm tomorrow. One is obliged to be so very suspicious when one travels for such a firm as ours. Do you know Glasgow at all?"

"Not at all. The train has stopped down there. Let us go at once."

"You go, if you will," said he, raising his eyebrows as he expressively touched his valise; "but I am unwilling—in fact, my

confidence, where, I am sure, it can safely be displayed."

I should have blushed with shame to do otherwise, when she bowed so graciously. I smiled and said a few commonplace words, not very suitable to the occasion, I dare say, and followed Fraser not over-willingly until he whispered, confidentially, as he took my arm, "You see, my dear fellow, she is a lady, and a trustworthy lady; but I am so cautious that even that will not satisfy me alone. Don't you see, we can keep the carriage in sight while we walk a little life into our limbs. No one is about, and it is all as clear as daylight."

So, laughing and talking, we walked up and down the long platform, each taking a light and enjoying a quiet pull. No one was about, as he had said, for those few minutes; and as the express dashed past we simultaneously made a rush at my carriage. I felt that I had kept it in my eye all the time, so I went to it, as I thought, and jumped in. Fraser closely followed me as the engine shrieked. The porter ran along after us, as we were off.

"Good heavens!" I ejaculated, looking round in blank bewilderment; "the wrong carriage!" Fraser was wringing his hands opposite me. "What shall we do?" was all he could say—"What shall we do?" Even then, in all my anxiety, I was rather ashamed of the dismay in our faces, and the helplessness of our position, before the gentleman who was in the carriage; a small, dark-haired clergyman, in a suit of glossy black, with a small, spotless white tie.

"You will think we are mad, sir," said Fraser, changing his tone, as his thoughts apparently followed mine; "but the fact is—" and he told him the fact, not too concisely.

"It is awkward, certainly," said the gentleman, looking at us both with quiet interest; "but you will pardon me if I say I think it is more awkward for the lady than for yourselves. How troubled she will be with the charge of so much valuable property! She may think her life is hardly safe. Do you think any one got into her carriage at Wynn?"

"Certainly not; I could swear it," I answered, impetuously.

"Then, so far as we are concerned," he said, gently, to us both, "it is all right; for we do not stop again, and so no one can appropriate your possessions."

Hardly did this clear, natural view of the case satisfy us, though it had more weight with me than with Fraser.

"Let me advise one of you," continued our sympathetic little fellow-passenger, "to watch the carriages as we stop at Littleborough, and jump out at once, one going to the carriage in front, and the other to that behind. Your old seats must surely have been no farther away than that."

"Surely," said I; "and what a blunderer I was to mistake them!"

"A rather usual and natural mistake," he answered, kindly. "I could not well do it today, though, for I have this hamper with me; and it would soon identify my carriage, would it not? Is it in your way at all? If so, pray push it under the seat. It ought properly to be in the van; but I was late, and brought it in with me, as being the quicker plan."

I grew almost cheerful on the way, and laid aside the remembrance of our missing luggage; but Fraser seemed unable to do so.

We had given up our tickets at Wynn, and as the train slackened speed for Littleborough Fraser took out his key, and before the train had well stopped we were both out. To the right I went, to the left Fraser; and two minutes afterward we met, with a grave, blank look into each

other's faces. Without speaking, I passed him and took up my position at the door of exit. No one had passed out of the station. I saw the whole yard of it in the gas-light, bare and empty. But what a fool I was to imagine such a thing, when we had seen every carriage before an occupant had left it!

"What on earth does it mean?" I gasped, clutching Fraser by the arm as he joined me, and still gazing into every face that passed me, as if my search in the glare of light were a vague dream. "Where is she?"

"Then you have not seen her?" he whispered, breathlessly. "I believe I am going mad!" And then he fell back to his old wail of "What shall we do?"

I made inquiries of the guard as calmly as I could. Yes, he had taken a ticket from a lady in black at Wynn.

Had she not been in the same carriage with myself? He had not noticed whether she left the train there or here. The little clergyman came up as I spoke, a porter behind carrying the hamper.

"This is most unaccountable, sir," he said, offering me his hand. "Had you not better telegraph to Wynn and all along the line? I am so very sorry for this sad termination to your journey, and especially for your friend, who seems quite bowed down."

I shook his hand without answering. "You will telegraph?" he questioned.

"We shall do all that can be done. Good-night," I said; and when he had called a cab and taken himself and his hamper off, I missed his sympathy and encouragement.

Fraser and I left no stone unturned. We telegraphed to every station, but the answers were all unsatisfactory; no widow lady had left that train at any station; and so we came to a standstill. The porters

valise belonging to this gentleman in her hand, and yet no one have seen her? It is the wildest and most improbable story I ever heard."

"I know it is," I answered; "more wild and improbable to myself, gentlemen, than even to you."

"I don't see that," interrupted another partner, coldly; "but farther questioning seems useless."

"Did the train stop or slacken speed at all on the line between Wynn station and Littleborough?" asked the senior partner once more.

"Not once, sir."

"Your property was not in gold, I believe?" he asked, turning suddenly upon Fraser.

"The papers were the most valuable part of mine," he answered, dejectedly. "They were notes to a considerable amount, and gold, and—my own purse."

"May I ask to what house you belong?" he was next asked. Politely and readily Fraser named a well known Glasgow firm.

"And now," said he, with his old candor, "that every wheel is in motion for recovery, I shall go back at once to confess what a blind idiot I have been."

"Everything is done that can be done, I believe," said the head of the firm, in his most austere tone. "The detectives are at work, and there is notice of the robbery everywhere by this time. You (to me) will be excused today, as you have been up all night. Good morning." And I felt most emphatically that his back was turned upon me.

"I shall be off by the next train," said Fraser, as we walked together from the bank. "Good-bye. I hope we shall meet again when this black mystery is cleared."

"If it ever is cleared," I answered, not

"I thought I was late, sir, and I have hurried and tired myself."

I remember the question, and the astonished look with which it was accompanied; I remember my answer as I held my head in my hands over the desk, but I remember little of the weary weeks that followed, except their ceaseless pain, until one day I sat up again, looking out upon the dusty streets, and talking, in faint, broken sentences, to our senior clerk. Ours! The word was a mockery even then.

"I have thought it over, sir, quietly, before my illness, when the illness was coming, and I would rather resign my situation; I know it is better."

"Then, as I say," he answered, slowly, "if you really yourself feel it is better, I do not mind owning that I think so too. You will, in fact, be more comfortable elsewhere; the gentlemen are all sorry, and will do what they can to get you another appointment—better, if possible; but they, too, think it will perhaps be better for you to leave the bank. Not that I was to tell you—they did not wish me to mention it, unless you did so first yourself. You are tired now, are you not?"

"Rather; I am but a poor, weak fellow yet. Will you thank the gentlemen for their kindness during my illness, and take them—with my thanks—my resignation?"

He left me then, and, looking down at the dusty street again, I seemed to see myself, a footsore, lonely figure, toiling on, avoided tacitly by other busy passengers, chilled and tired, though so short a distance lay behind me. And looking on him so, the heavy tears came and blotted out kindly the hot and dusty road that lay before me. After my decision was once made, I tried to lay aside all gloomy thoughts, knowing they would but delay my recovery, which was a very slow one, perhaps because the only companions I had were these harassing and anxious thoughts.

When I was able to walk again I called, by appointment, on the senior partner of the Littleborough bank. He was generous and cordial to me, and told me, as if he were glad to tell me, that he was able to obtain for me, if I wished it, a good appointment on the line. I did wish it, as you may be sure, when I found I was considered competent to fill it.

"I am glad you accept it," he said heartily; "and I hope you will be successful. Now, take another glass of wine; you look as if you might drink it by the bottle. Let me hear how you get on."

We parted, without a word of the robbery having been spoken between us; and in a few days I bade good-bye to Littleborough, and turned to my new life. It was a very pleasant one; and for years I have been thankful to think how soon I learned to enjoy my work. That fellow-feeling with poor Fraser, which had lain dormant so long, prompted me now to write to him, and tell him how things had turned out for me, sending my address. This letter I enclosed with one to the firm in Glasgow, begging them, if he were not with them then, and they knew where he was, to forward it. The reply astonished me. They had never known a Mr. Donald Fraser; certainly they had never had a clerk in their employ bearing that name, nor were they connected in any way with the robbery I had mentioned. From that moment the circumstances of that February night seemed only more inexplicable than ever.

That Fraser was connected with them I then felt no doubt. But how? That question baffled me at every turn; for had he not been with me all the time, and even through the night and part of the day following? Yet that he was connected with the robbery I had now no doubt. Should I ever solve the strange problem? I had been a long time in my new situation, when one day I found myself at the Euston station when they were holding the auction of unclaimed luggage, and I stood to watch the sale until my train should start. Lazily and unconcernedly I watched the different articles put up, until one suddenly excited my curiosity.

A black bag, so like my own old one that involuntarily I put my hand into my pocket to feel if the key were on my bunch. Yes, there it was, and I could soon prove it if it were mine, by looking inside. There was an ink-stain in the corner, to which I could swear. I bid for it desperately, though it was so like hundreds of other bags that it was but a chance after all. It was knocked down to me, and with trembling hands I seized it, took my seat in the train, and caught myself travelling with something like my old anxiety vested in the bag beside me. I carried it into my room, and took out the key. It slipped easily and naturally into the lock, and the bag opened with a queer familiarity. No, not mine, of course; it was full of a lady's things. I tossed them out, and looked down into the corner. Yes; there was the ink-blot, the old black saturation, on the lining, and I could swear to the bag before any court in Europe. What were these things? Would they give me any clue to the puzzle over which I was perpetually striving? I took them up one by one—they were but three in all; but they told a story which needed no further evidence. First a widow's bonnet, flattened and damaged, certainly, but recognizable; then a long skirt of heavy black stuff; and lastly a pair of what seemed the same. There they were, and I recognized them all as having been worn by my fellow-traveller between Merrie and Wynn on the night of the robbery. I spread them out and sat down to think and make it as clear as possible. That this was a disguise there could be no doubt. She had dropped it, of course, and so escaped us; but how had she known we should miss her at Wynn, and so give her the opportunity? That must have been Fraser's doing. And now I remembered—it did not come rapidly into my mind. I had sat there for some hours in the gloomy firelight before I felt that at last the truth had broken upon me. I went back that journey again and again. Each time it grew more clear to me that I had been duped from beginning to end; duped by two of the very cleverest rogues I had ever heard of. I saw it all at last, and a hot flash burned on my face. If I had had Fraser in my power then his life would scarcely have been worth an hour's purchase. He had taken me to that carriage on purpose—idiot that I was!—with his lying story of his own valuable property; and there his confederate sat in this disguise. No luggage? Of course not. He had made me linger with him on the platform while the change was being made; and I laughed fiercely as I remembered Fraser's feeble horror when he found himself in the wrong carriage. But had it been the wrong carriage? When the



HIS LAST LETTER.

understood how he could guess it—he turned with gentle courtesy to our fellow-traveller.

"A bitter night, ma'am, is it not? You are going on to Littleborough, I hope as we are; and I hope, too, that no one will disturb us between now and then."

While he spoke I had time to notice her, though a thick widow's veil hid her features and complexion so entirely that all I could discover was that she was young, and had a quantity of short, fair hair low upon her forehead. She seemed tall, too; but was so silent and sad that whether she was agreeable or otherwise I had no chance of judging. It did not signify much, for my new acquaintance—whose name as he candidly showed me on the address of his valise, was Donald Fraser—talked enough for us all; and, though it is often tiresome for long together, it was very amusing on that cold night, and shortened the way so much that I was astonished when the train stopped at Wynn, the last station at which it would stop before Littleborough. Fraser looked out and hailed the guard.

"How long do we wait here?" he asked.

"About five minutes. The up express passes us here," Fraser looked in again; at me, at his luggage, at the lady beside us, at his valise again; then rose and hesitated.

"I must have a brisk walk up and down for these few minutes," he said, "or I shall be petrified here. There's not a soul getting out or in. Will you come, sir?" I waved. "I know," he said, bowing politely to the widow lady, "that I may leave my luggage in your care for three minutes. It is almost as if I left my life in your hands—which, indeed, I could hardly hesitate to do. You have no luggage of your own, I remark, to encumber you. Will you be so very kind as to take charge of mine? This gentleman, perhaps, will display a similar

templeman, looking at us both with quiet interest; "but you will pardon me if I say I think it is more awkward for the lady than for yourselves. How troubled she will be with the charge of so much valuable property! She may think her life is hardly safe. Do you think any one got into her carriage at Wynn?"

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"My situation is as good as gone," Fraser said. "and I am already penniless and characterless."

Poor fellow! I could hardly bear to look into his miserable face. I made him take the half of what I had in my own pocket; and then I went slowly to my solitary lodging, feeling that I, too, should soon find my situation gone and feel myself penniless and characterless.

The next few days passed in restless excitement. Not the faintest possible clew appeared to be obtainable. Our money and poor Fraser's papers were gone beyond recall, as it seemed; and the widow lady, in whose charge they had been left, had vanished so strangely that, indeed, it was but natural that my story should be looked upon as a lie. The chilling reserve of my employers, the half-hidden suspicion of the senior clerks, and, worst of all, the pitying friendliness of my subordinates, crushed me utterly. I lost all my spirit, and my nights were restless and unrefreshing; but I kept up as manfully as I could, thinking each day that perhaps it would be cleared, as such things often were. Time went on and brought not even a glimmer of light upon the subject, until at last, one spring evening, I crept home from the bank through the sunny streets, wondering why my troubles should throb so strangely, and my hands be hot.

"I am too tired to care for my dinner," I said, as it was taken away untasted; and I went to bed, that I might rest and be ready for work in the morning. I have a vague remembrance of getting up with a fear that I might be late; of dressing with hands that felt like some one else's and tottering to the bank.

"What on earth is the matter?" asked the senior clerk.

"To the best of my remembrance, no," I said, turning to Fraser.

"No," he answered, feeling himself appealed to; "none at all." He had noticed it, he said, and, if I recollected, remarked upon it to her when he had left his own with her.

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