

The Car Acquaintance

— or —

The Two Bits of Paper

by Mrs. Caroline Orne

Several years ago, I entered a car at one of the New York stations, and took my place on the back seat. I looked at my watch, and found that it lacked fifteen or twenty minutes of the time to start. No one else was in the car, and unfolding a daily paper which I had just purchased of a newsboy, I commenced running my eye over its columns. The first thing that fixed my attention was the following paragraph:

“We understand that yesterday a young man employed as a clerk by Kendon & Browne in their extensive dry goods establishment, while on his way from Bank, where he had been to get a check for \$2000 cashed, was knocked down and robbed of the whole amount. He was spoken to by a man when about midway of a dark alley, who inquired the way to Wall Street, and that is the last he remembers. The roan was of middling size, rather muscular, of grave demeanor, and well but plainly clad. The police are on the alert, and will, without doubt, succeed in capturing him.”

I had barely finished reading it, when a man entered the car and took a seat by an open window, directly forward of where I was sitting. He came in at the front part of the car, which gave me a good opportunity to observe him. At the moment of his entrance, I saw that he regarded me with a quick, furtive look, yet, at the same time, so keen and searching, that the thought flashed into my mind that he might belong to the detective police, and that the inquisitorial glance with which he honored me had something to do with the robbery, an account of which I had been reading. He was rather small, and his features were of a type which is commonly called handsome. At times, however, there was a certain curve or rather twist of his upper lip, which to me was absolutely repulsive. He bowed, as he was about to take his seat, and bade me good morning in a voice which, though not exactly unpleasant, had something in it to be remembered.

“Any news?” said he, after a minute's silence, turning half way round in his seat, and glancing at the paper I held in my hand.

“I haven't had much chance to ascertain yet,” I replied. “I have only had time to read an account of a daring robbery which took place yesterday.”

I said this, so that if he was really one of the police on the look-out for the perpetrator of the crime, or his accomplices, he might see that I didn't shrink from the subject. It seemed to me that he gave a nervous start at the mention of the robbery, but the movement was very slight, and possibly might, as I thought, have been owing to some other cause.

“Was it in this section of the country?” he asked.

“Yes, in this city. Would you like to read the account?” And I handed him the paper.

“Thank you,” said he, with a smile.

But it was not a genuine smile, and as he commenced reading the account, it gave place to a look of ill-concealed anxiety. This passed away, by the time he had got through.

“They are cunning rogues, some of these thieves and pickpockets,” said he. “He undoubtedly thought that a plain dress and sanctimonious air would put the youngster off his guard.”

As he spoke, he scanned my dark, kerseymere waistcoat and plain brown coat with an air of great deliberation. I did not quail under the examination, though I became more confirmed in the opinion that he was a detective.

“Should this species of cunning,” said I, in answer to his remark, “become pretty generally diffused among the light-fingered gentry, it may become necessary to sport diamond rings and gold chains, as badges of honesty.”

“Or, in default of these, a little bogus jewelry,” he replied, laughing.

In the meantime, most of the seats had been taken up. Not a person had entered, I am certain, who had escaped the vigilance of my colloquist. He had returned the newspaper to me, after which, being probably, as I thought, one of that class who are ill at ease unless they have something to employ their fingers about, he had busied himself with tearing into small bits a sheet of note paper, on which were written a few lines.

By the time the sheet of paper was reduced to fragments more or less small, few of which could have measured more than an inch in any direction, and were, as I observed, carefully retained in his left hand, it lacked only about two minutes of the time the train was to start.

He now began to fidget, moving backwards and forwards on his seat uneasily, and watched with increased eagerness every one who entered the cars. A few seconds more, and the train would be off. He now leaned back in a manner which seemed to me to say as plainly as words could have said: “The person I have been expecting wont come. It is of no use to look any longer.”

The last moment had arrived, when the door of the car was once more thrown open to give entrance to a woman. The listless attitude into which he had suffered himself to sink was instantly abandoned, while the eyes of her who had last entered, after quickly scanning the tier of seats at her right, rested on the man who was sitting in front of me. At the same moment she raised her hand and pressed her forefinger to her lips. I was aware that this telegraphic sign was answered by my neighbor, though my attention being drawn towards her, I could not tell the exact manner.

She took the first vacant seat that presented itself, which was near the front part of the car, and without appearing to do so, I watched her pretty closely. I never saw her look round, or betray in any manner whatever that he was not an utter stranger to her between whom and herself the little pantomime had passed at the time of her entrance. , Previous to her seating herself, I had noticed that she was tall, and that her figure was good. I now saw that she wore a gray travelling-dress, and, without pretending to be much of a judge in such matters, it appeared to me that her apparel throughout, not forgetting the more minute details, was in good taste. But the view I had obtained of her face, impressed me less favorably. Without a single ill-shaped feature, as a whole, it struck me as peculiarly disagreeable; and except that there was a quick sparkle of her eyes at the moment she pressed her finger to her lips, it was utterly impassive. About a mile from the station whence we started, the railway crossed a sheet of water, and when we had arrived about midway, the man in front of me put his hand out of the window, and threw away the bits of paper he had so carefully held, which, with the exception of two pieces, were scattered to the wind. These, without his being sensible of it, were wafted back into the car and fell on the unoccupied seat by my side. They were narrow, in some places not more than half an inch wide, and what was a little singular, an end of each matched the other, so that when placed together, they made a strip which, as I could tell by the outer edges, reached across the sheet of paper from which they had been torn.

One whole line of the writing was easily enough deciphered, though the upper edge of the paper was so deeply notched that there was not a single word from which one or more of the letters was not missing. Two or three of the closing words of the preceding sentence were at the beginning of the line of which nothing could be made. What came next, was better. "Do not," it said, " fail to be at — station by the morning train." Then came the next line, which was very imperfect. Those of the words which remained so nearly entire as to be guessed at, were as follows, a dash filling the places of such as were torn off: "If all right—roll brown paper—red twine."

My curiosity was more excited than ever, since the telegraphic signs had passed between my neighbor and the woman whose appearance he had looked for with such ill-concealed anxiety. At the same time, the opinion I had entertained that he might belong to the detective police had undergone a change, and I found myself forming conjectures as to whether he was not in some way connected with the grave looking personage who had committed the recent robbery. I therefore slipped the scraps of paper into my waistcoat pocket, lest, by a sudden turn of his head, he might catch sight of them.

I then busied myself with thinking the matter over, and came to the determination to keep a sharp look-out, when we arrived at station, for some one with a roll of brown paper tied with red twine, which, according as I had construed the broken sentence, was to be the means of conveying to my neighbor in the car the intelligence that, as far as he was concerned, all was right.

My thoughts had been so busy, that we arrived at the station referred to in what to me appeared to be a much shorter time than usual. Here we should be obliged to wait from twenty to thirty minutes for the arrival of another train.

The man in the seat before me rose, the instant the cars stopped, and had reached the place where the woman still remained seated unimpeded by the crowd, which, by the time I had taken my carpet-bag from the hook where I had hung it, filled the passage. I kept my eye on him, and saw that he lingered a little when arrived at the place in question, in expectation, as I concluded, of some further communication from the woman, who had now risen, either by word or sign. He then made what haste he could to leave the car, while she appeared to be in no hurry to do so, suffering several persons to pass her, myself among the rest. I pushed forward as fast as possible, for I was in danger of losing sight of him who had so excited my curiosity, and was in season to see him step upon the platform. There were a number of loungers, among whom one, whose air was peculiarly careless and negligent, carried in his hand a roll of brown paper tied with red twine.

“How are you, Harker?” said he, with the heedless air of one who addresses another he cares little for, as my late neighbor stepped from the car.

Harker responded in the same careless way, calling him by the name of Scrimmons, and passed on in the opposite direction.

Just at this time, the woman who had been referred to left the cars, and, without any appearance of noticing either Harker or Scrimmons, entered a hack which drove to a hotel at no great distance.

Notwithstanding the little interest the two men appeared to take in each other, I continued to watch the movements of each. After loitering round a few minutes, seemingly with no object in view, except to kill time, the two, as if by chance, approached each other.

“Going in the down train?” asked Scrimmons.

“Yes,” replied Harker; “are you?”

“I’ve not yet decided. It will depend—”

Here he lowered his voice, and then walked away, so that I lost the remainder of the sentence. During this time, I had opportunity to observe the personal appearance of Scrimmons, which, in some respects, corresponded with the description given in the paper of him who had committed the robbery. But he was not plainly dressed, nor was his demeanor grave. On the contrary, his appearance was careless and gay.

I had come to the conclusion to make known my suspicions to some one worthy of confidence, when I saw a man making directly for the spot where I stood. He nodded, when he had arrived near me, and I answered the unceremonious salutation in the same manner.

“I believe,” said he, “that I saw you in the cars?”

“Very likely,” I replied.

“Do you know the man who sat directly in front of you?”

“I do not.”

“So I thought. You have two bits of paper in your possession,” he said, after a pause of a few moments, “which were blown back by the wind when, with a handful of others, he made an attempt to throw them from the window of the car?”

“Pardon me, sir,” said I, “but it appears to me that I am entitled to know who the person is who questions me so closely, before going any further.”

“It is nothing more than reasonable, I grant. Perhaps you think I'm a friend of him alluded to?”

“You may be,” I replied, “for aught I know to the contrary.”

He smiled.

“I knew that you were not his friend, although you appeared to be on such friendly terms. The truth is, I have reason to suspect that he had something to do with yesterday's robbery.”

“Then you are—”

“One of the police,” he said, anticipating what I was going to say.

“Exactly the person I most wish to see. Here are the bits of paper.” And I put them into his hand.

“Ah, 'twas a right move, my coming to this station!” said he, when he had read what little they contained. I hoped it would prove so, from a few scraps of information I picked up last evening. Yet, after all, it might have been of no use, if you, sir—what shall I call your name?”

“Grafton.”

“If you, Mr. Grafton,” he resumed, “had not preserved what most persons would have considered two worthless pieces of paper. I saw you put them into your pocket, and it occurred to me at once that as you thought them worth saving, they might serve as a clue to ferret out the real perpetrator of the crime; for I was satisfied, from the description the young man gave of him who robbed him, that this one was only an accomplice.”

I mentioned to him the woman who had aroused my suspicion, and found that the signs interchanged between her and Harker had not escaped his attention.

We now parted, and in an hour afterward, Harker, Scrimmons, and the woman, who proved to be the wife of the former, were safely lodged in the county jail. Scrimmons, notwithstanding the great change he had effected in his personal appearance, was proved, when brought to trial, to be the man who had committed the robbery. Harker, it was found, had been his aider and abettor, not only as regarded the crime for which they were arrested, but in a series of burglaries which had been committed within the last six months; while his wife had afforded invaluable assistance by the ingenuity and adroitness with which she had secreted the stolen goods. The two thousand dollars—the fruits of the street robbery—were, with the exception of one hundred, found concealed in different parts of her clothing.

As to the two bits of paper which were wafted to me on the wings of the wind, they proved to be Sibylline leaves, in which was concealed, though there was no oracle to declare their mysterious meaning, my future fortune and the greatest happiness of my life. To prove this, it is only necessary for me to say that they were the means of introducing me to the notice of Kendon & Browne, who not long afterward gave me a share of their thriving and lucrative business.

Thus, as was very natural, I became acquainted with Miss Oliva Kendon, the only daughter of the senior partner of the firm, who, in due time, consented to be my partner as long as we both should live.

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