The Mail-Guard's Story[1]

Reader, have you ever been obliged to wait at a small country railway station for an early train? If you have not, you have not experienced the *ne plus ultra* of human misery. But when, as was my case last year, you have left a jolly party, driven five miles to catch the mail at 2 a.m., and found on your arrival at the station, not that the train had gone, for that would be a relief, but that you had mistaken the time, and had got three quarters of an hour to wait, your lot is not an enviable one. So thought I as I stamped up and down the ill-lit platform, and gazed into the darkness beyond, which was only broken by the dim and misty light of the "distance" signal, some hundred yards down the line. The occasional barking of a house dog alone broke the stillness, except when the autumn breeze played in a wailing tone on the telegraphic wires over my head. As I paced up and down to warm my feet, I felt regularly "savage" that the well meant solicitation of the company assembled at the Beeches had induced me to forego that last waltz with Minnie Cameron, and hurry to the station.

I had been staying for the past fortnight at the house of a relative, and what with shooting, fishing, and (must I confess it?) occasionally flirting with the blue-eyed Minnie, the days had passed rapidly; and when recalled to London by my father's business-like letter, which hinted at some impending calamity connected with our firm, I could hardly believe that my leave had so nearly expired. There was no help for it, and go I must. My relatives appeared as sorry as I was when I announced my intended departure, and I fancy I could discern traces of tears in Minnie's sunny eyes as I bade her farewell in the hall that evening, bearing with me a shining tress of her flaxen hair, and a hasty kiss, as *souvenirs* of my visit. Oh, Minnie, Minnie! what would that excellent man, the incumbent, think, could he have seen the shining token of what I fancied was your affection for me, lying on my table prior to its being committed to the flames, with a bundle of old letters, when last month I heard you were "engaged?"

Under such circumstances as I have described the reader will easily imagine I was not in a particularly cheerful frame of mind on the night, or rather the morning, in question. I sauntered into the dreary waiting-room, and, lighting a cigar, seated myself in front of the expiring fire, which I was even denied the amusement of stirring, the authorities having carried away the fire-irons. Placing my feet upon the fender, I lay back in my chair, and, as most men would have done, began to ruminate upon the events of the past fortnight, and—Minnie! After a time I roused myself, and attempted the reperusal of my father's letter, and then—I fell fast asleep. How long I slept I cannot say, probably about five minutes, but it seemed an age, when I was aroused by the creaking of the "[brakes]" of a train. I started up, and rushed blindly to the door, fancying that the mail had come up, when I came in violent contact with a guard, who was entering at the same moment as I was making a hurried exit.

"Beg your pardon, sir," said the polite official; "what's the matter?"

"My train is going, I think," said I. "Let me see."

[1] "From the advance sheets of the London Society for November 1867"

“It’s only a down goods and cattle, sir,” replied my companion, “which shunts here. The up-mail ain’t due for nearly twenty minutes yet.”

“Confound it!” I muttered; “why did it awake me, then?” and I returned to the fireplace.

“Cold night, sir,” remarked the guard as he came towards me.

“Yes,” said I, “and a wretched fire, too.”

“I think we can mend that, at any rate,” he replied; and, leaving the room, he returned in a few minutes, accompanied by an individual whom I rightly conjectured to be the stoker of the “goods train,” carrying a large shovelful of live coals, which, placed upon the cinders, soon improved our fire, and gave quite a cheerful aspect to the dingy apartment.

“Thank ye, Jim,” said the guard as the stoker departed. “Now, sir, that’s an improvement, ain’t it?” he added, cheerfully.

“It is, indeed,” I replied; “and I am much obliged to you for procuring the coals.”

“Don’t name it, sir,” was the reply. “One must do something when one has to wait, you know.”

“How long do you remain here, then?” I asked.

“Till 3:40, sir. I take up the mail,” was the reply.

“O, indeed,” said I.

“Yes, sir. I’m on this job all this month.” And as he spoke the guard drew a pipe from his pocket, and having filled and lit it, he began to smoke in silence.

“Have you been long on this line?” I asked, after a pause.

“Well, sir, about three years, and on the mail duty, on and off about one. I’m a reg’lar man of letters,” he added, with a grin.

I laughed, and he continued.

“I was nearly choked with a capital letter when I was a baby. I had letters on my collar when I was in the police. I was made a guard all along of a bit of a letter. And now I am a guard, I looks after the letters.” Having made these remarks in a jocular tone, my companion gave me a knowing nod, and puffed away at his pipe with greater vigor than before. I was much amused at his rejoinder, and asked him what he meant by having been made a guard “all along of a bit of a letter.”

“I wasn’t always a guard, sir,” he said. “I was once in the police, and it was through being a detective as I got to be employed on this line.

“I suppose you didn’t like the police, then?” said I.

“Well, sir, not much, though at times it was pretty good, and we had some jolly business. Ay,” he continued, “with a good scent it’s almost as excitin’ as fox huntin’, is thief catchin’; for some of those fellows is as cunnin’ as foxes, every bit.

“It was through a robbery and a bit of paper that I was made a guard, as I said just now.”

“How was that?” said I, catching at the idea of a story to beguile the time. “I should like to hear a bit of your experiences as a detective.”

“It ain’t much of a story, sir, but I’ll tell it you with pleasure;” and taking a few rapid puffs at his pipe, the guard commenced.

“It was about two years ago, and there had been a great plate robbery in the city, and the thieves had got clear away, so we was all obliged to keep our eyes open and our wits about us, for, though we had some suspicions, there was no real clues to go upon; it was mostly guess work. Two or three men was arrested, but nothing was ever proved against them, so they was let go, in course. Nothing ever transpired respecting the robbery, and it was almost forgotten, except by some of us detectives, for a reward of £100 had been offered, and we was, in course, anxious to catch the men, as well for the credit of the force as for the money, which, sir, was not by no means to be despised. Well, sir, I wasn’t half satisfied about one of the men who had been arrested, and whose name was Dover. He and another was always together, and we in the force nicknamed them ‘Chatham and Dover,’ in consequence. We had ‘Chatham’ (whose real name was Byles) up too, but nothing turned up. However, one night after the business had blown over a bit, I thought I’d have a look after Dover; so I goes to where I was sure to find him or his ‘pal,’ in an out-of-the-way place near Field Lane. When the door was opened, I saw as the woman was a new hand, and didn’t know me. So I asked if Dover was in. ‘No,’ says she, ‘he’s gone out of town.’ ‘In which direction?’ says I. She pointed upwards, which meant north. ‘Indeed,’ says I. ‘Well, tell him as Mr. Moss wants to see him as soon as he returns’—makin’ a shot, sir. I was at a man as I suspected was a ‘fence,’ and who I had my eye on. ‘All right,’ she says, and shut the door.

“Thinks I, I’ve not done a bad stroke of business this evening. Mr. Moss and I will settle our little account now; so I went quietly home. Next afternoon, just after dinner, a message comes from the —Bank for Mr. T—, our inspector. Telling me to be ready in case of bein’ wanted, off he goes, and in about an hour he came back and said, ‘We’ve got a job tonight,’ he says, ‘for a party has wrote another gentleman’s name by mistake, and bolted with a large sum of money and his young woman, as is supposed, to America.’ We had to start that evening by the nine o’clock train for Liverpool, which we did, and arrived there about four the next morning. We immediately put ourselves in communication with the local authorities and searched several outgoing ships, but without any success. Just as we were leaving one of the vessels, the captain said to me, ‘It’s a pity you didn’t know a little sooner for an American barque sailed yesterday’s tide for New York.’‘The devil it did,” says Mr. T.—.

“‘Yes,’ says the captain; ‘and you may depend upon it your man was off in that vessel.’

“‘We’re done then,’ says Mr. T—, ‘and will have to go back with our tails atween our legs.’

“‘Well,’ says I, ‘I don’t see that, by no means. When does the mail go?’ I asked the captain.

“‘It’s gone,’ says he; ‘went last night.’

“‘That’s no good than,’ says Mr. T—. And he was very angry at bein’ done.

“‘I think, Mr. T—,’ I says, as we walked away, ‘I think we can catch him yet.’

“‘How?’ says Mr. T—.

“‘Why,’ said I, ‘let us take the mail steamer to Dublin this afternoon, and go by the mail train to Queenstown; we can catch the steamer there, and pin your man in New York.’

“‘By Jingo! we will,’ says Mr. T—;‘That’s a good idea; only I’m afraid I shall have to go alone, for you will be wanted in London, you know, next week.’

“I had forgotten that, and was very much disappointed at not being able to accompany Mr. T— to New York.

“‘However,’ says he, ‘I’ll not forget you when I come back.’

“And in order to arrange our plans and have some breakfast, we returned to the railway station. Well, I saw Mr. T— off for Holyhead, and felt very much annoyed at not being able to go with him, though, had I know it was the best thing that ever happened to me, I shouldn’t have felt so sulky, you may depend. As the boat left the landing stage, I turned into — Street and walked about a bit until I saw a great crowd opposite a jeweler’s shop. ‘What’s up?’ thinks I; ‘anything in my way?’ So I asks a bystander, and he told me that an immense amount of jewelry had been stolen the previous night, and there was no trace of the robber. ‘Ho, ho!’ I thought. And I asked to see the owner of the shop; and telling him who I was, I requested to see some traces of the thief’s work, for, sir, some men work in exactly the same way at all their ‘cracks,’ and you can tell their ‘handwriting’ after a bit of practice. I therefore examined the place, and, as I suspected, found that this robbery had been done in a similar way to the one in London. For it had occurred to me that Mr. Dover had not left London for nothing, and now I was pretty sure that he and his ‘pals’ had done this job as well. After making my inspection, and asking the proprietor to say nothing about my visit, I returned to Lime Street station. I then found that I could return to London by a slow train at 1 o’clock, which, as I had nothing to do in Liverpool, I preferred to take rather than wait for the 3:45 express. I was in much better spirits now than I had been, and as I entered the train I made up my mind to look after Dover in London, whither I never doubted he had returned, for of all hiding places, sir, London is the best. So I made myself as comfortable as possible. Nothing happened till, as we were nearing Stafford, a bit of paper was blown into my face, and as I, out of mere curiosity, stooped to pick it up from the seat where it had fallen, two other and larger pieces came in and fell on the floor.

“There was no one else in the compartment, so I put the scraps together, just to see what I could make out of them, and to my astonishment I read,—

“‘I will be at 2 o’clock
you do it.

I. Dover—

—Good time.’

“That was all. The last words, on the smallest bit of paper, I didn’t care for, but the other parts made my heart jump when I read them, for I made sure that I should now catch Mr. Dover for the robbery at Liverpool. The instant the train stopped, out I jumped, and began looking into the carriages as I passed, pretending I had lost something.

“At last I came to a carriage near the engine (a second class), on the flooring of which I could see several bits of paper, and upon going on I found (for the carriage was empty) an envelope, addressed to some place in Camden Town, in the same handwriting as was on the bits I had.

“While I was examining the envelope, I saw three men coming from the refreshment room in the direction of the carriage, so I seated myself in the corner next the door and shut my eyes. I was more than ever convinced that I had now got a clue to the Liverpool job, and I determined to keep my eye on the former occupants of the carriage, who now returned to their seats.

“The smell of rum which pervaded the compartment convinced me that they had been indulging pretty freely, and while they were in earnest conversation I opened my eyes, and sitting nearly opposite to me was Dover himself; the other men I did not know. Before the train got to Rugby they were all fast asleep; and as soon as we stopped, out I jumped, and left them still snoring.”

“You went for assistance, I suppose,” said I.

“No sir,” replied the guard, with a knowing wink, “I wanted them in London, not Rugby; for, ye see, by keeping the train I might have excited suspicion, and my birds might have flown. No, sir, London was their destination, and I could catch them on their arrival.”
“Well,” said I, “but you left the train, you say.”

“I did, sir, for it occurred to me that the 3:45 up express from Liverpool was due, and I knew that it left Rugby a few minutes before the train in which Dover and his friends were. Just as I got out and shut the door, I had the satisfaction of seeing the train shunted, to make room for the express, which came up a few minutes after. I was soon on my road to London, where I arrived about nine o’clock.

“I had just an hour and a half to make my arrangements, and while my men were quietly ‘jogging along’ near Tring in the slow train, I was on my way to Bow Street. Notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, I was soon in the possession of the necessary authority, and taking two of our men with me, I returned to Euston Square.

“We had to wait some little time, but the train at last arrived, and I led the way to the carriage in which I had left Dover and his associates. They were just getting out as we reached them, and a gentle grasp on collar, and a word in their ear, soon reduced them to a terrified silence. Their baggage was also seized, and in a portmanteau was found a quantity of the jewelry which had been stolen in Liverpool.

“We had them up next day, and they were fully committed. At the trial, one of them turned evidence, and by those means the City burglary was proved against them. The rewards were paid over to me after the trial, and I was very much complimented by the judges on the manner in which I had managed the capture.”

“I think you quite deserved the rewards,” said I; “but what became of the inspector?”

“Oh, Mr. T—, sir. He went across, as I told him, by the mail from Queenstown, and got to America the day before the ship in which the forger was.

“He boarded every ship, and from the description he had received he caught him afore he went on shore. There was no doubt about him, for some of the identical notes which had been issued in London were found upon him.

“Mr. T— didn’t bring him back, sir, he only took possession of the money, for he thought it would cost more to bring him home and prosecute him than to leave him where he was. The bank gentlemen said he was quite right, and gave him £50 for his trouble. When he returned to England, one of the directors of the bank, who is our chairman, sir, was complimenting Mr. T— upon going to Ireland; and then Mr. T—spoke up for me; and knowin’ as I didn’t care about the force, he told the gentleman so, and he, after a time, offered me the place I have now, with a prospect of ‘a rise,’ if I behaves myself. So you see, sir, it was, as I said, all though a bit of a letter as I got to be a mail guard.”

“I am very much obliged to you,” said I, “for your narrative; it has amused me very much indeed.”

“I am very glad to hear it, sir,” replied the ex-detective, “and (you’ll excuse me, sir)—but I think as I’ve seen you afore.”

“Very likely,” said I, laughing, “your experience has doubtless led you across my path.”

“Ay, I thought as much, sir,” said the guard; “I see you when Mr.— offered me the post I have. I remember you was a comin’ in as I left the bank.”

“I dare say I did, for my father sees a great many people at the bank,” said I.

“Is your father Mr. George Somerville, as lives near H—when he’s at home, sir?”

"Yes," said I; "I have just been at my uncle's house, now, and I am on my way to London, where my father is at present."

"Well, that is curious, sir," said the guard, touching his cap, "as I should see you here this evening, and I'm proud to have met you, sir."

I replied, and the guard running to the door, exclaimed, "Here's the mail, sir; if you'll show me your things I'll see that they are all right." And once more touching his cap, he withdrew. The mail soon drew up, and having been comfortably bestowed by the guard, as we "spun" over the distance that lay between S—and the metropolis, I pondered on the singular story I had heard until I fell into a doze, from which I was not thoroughly awakened until the train stopped "to take tickets."

We were soon afterward run into the station, and as I stepped out of the carriage I found the guard ready to assist me. He soon extricated my portmanteau from the heap at the end of the platform, and insisted upon carrying it to the entrance of the station, for,strange as it may appear, there were no cabs in attendance that morning. As we emerged into the street a Hansom drew up close to the "departure entrance," and the guard hailing Jehu, we waited until the fare had alighted. What was my astonishment to find the gentleman who was about to take his leave thus early from London was none other than my father's confidential clerk, respecting whom my father had already communicated his suspicions in the letter I had received the morning before. I started involuntarily at the sudden appearance of the very person whose affairs I had come to London to investigate, and followed his retreating figure with so earnest a gaze that the guard, who had been observing me closely, said,—

"Beg pardon, sir; do you know that gentleman?"

"Certainly I do," I replied; "I've come up on his account; Mr. Barton is my father's confidential clerk; but I'm afraid all is not quite right," I added, thoughtfully, and in an undertone.

"I suspect there's a 'little game,'" said the guard; "the man as is gone in there was called Byles three year ago."

I was struck with astonishment at this remark, and asked my companion if he were certain that the *soi-disant* Barton was in reality Byles, *alias* Chatham.

"As certain as I stand here," replied the guard; "and take my word for it, sir, he's after no good. If you don't think me presumin', I should like to hear what's up."

"Well," said I, "the matter is a confidential one; but I may tell you that we have reason to suspect that Mr. Byles' accounts are in a most unsatisfactory state. Can we not intercept him, for I think he intends to 'bolt?'"

"We shall soon see that, sir," replied the guard, his detective nature showing for a moment; "he will be easily caught, I reckon;" and as he spoke the ex-policeman led the way to the departure platform.

Here, amid the crowd of people who had taken their tickets and were struggling to enter the different carriages, it was no easy matter to recognize Mr. Barton, who had doubtless his own reasons for eluding observation; and it was not until five minutes prior to the departure of the train that I observed him ensconced in a corner of a third-class carriage.

"Good morning, Mr. Barton," I said; "you are off early today."

The person addressed changed color as he recognized me; but immediately recovering his self-possession, replied,—

"Yes, sir, Mr. Somerville wished me to see C— and Co. respecting those bills we hold, as soon as possible, and I am on my way down."

"But they are all right," I said, "for my father told me so last week."

"Yes, sir," said the clerk; "but my mother's very ill,—dying, I fear, and Mr. Somerville kindly told me to go down to F—, I said I'd do the bills too." And having given vent to this contradictory speech, the clerk blew his nose violently.

The cool way in which this was said, and the curious looks of the other occupants of the compartment at any other time would have quieted my suspicions, but a gentle touch on the arm reminded me of the presence of the guard, and I therefore said loudly, "O, you are going to F—."

As I spoke, the guard said suddenly, and touching his cap respectfully, "Beg your pardon, sir; did you say you was going to F—?"

"No," I replied, "but this gentleman is," indicating Mr. Barton as I spoke.

"Very sorry," continued the guard, "but he can't go by this train; he must wait for the parliamentary at 8:05. Tickets, please," he added, suddenly opening the door. All the tickets with the exception of the clerk's were immediately produced. "Now, sir, your ticket, please," said the guard. Thus brought to bay, Byles *alias* Barton had no alternative; so he handed the guard his ticket, and suddenly rising attempted to leave the carriage, but the detective was too quick for him. Before the clerk's foot touched the platform, a grasp was laid upon his collar, and the carriage door closed. "I thought as much," said the guard, as he looked at the ticket, holding unhappy Barton the while; "I thought so; going abroad was you, sir, but *I* want you for a moment."

He then, asking me to open the door, again descended from the carriage, forcing Barton to follow him, when having gained the platform, he whispered a few words in his ear. The man grew as pale as death, exclaiming, "I never did! I swear I never did!"

At that moment the whistle sounded, and with a hiss and a scream the train moved away. Life, liberty, hope,—all seemed to fade from the unhappy wretch as the carriages passed him, and with an almost superhuman effort he wrenched himself free from the guard's grasp, and attempted to

open one of the doors of the departing train. Cries of "Stop him!" were raised by the spectators, while the guard hurried in pursuit, but his efforts were of no avail.

Before anyone could seize the fugitive his foot had slipped, and still clinging to the handle, he was carried along for a few yards, and then dashed between the platform and the now rapidly moving train. A despairing cry and a deep groan were heard even above the rattle of the wheels, and the train passed on, leaving the mangled yet still breathing form of the unfortunate clerk stretched across the rails.

Assistance was immediately procured, but it was of no use; death soon put an end to his sufferings; but before he died the unhappy man confessed his guilt to me and asked my pardon. It appeared he had been induced to embezzle sums of money to repay losses at play with his old associates, and he had thus been led to return to a path of life which he had intended to have quitted forever when he entered my father's business. He had contrived to possess himself in all of about £6,000 in bills and notes, some of which, to the value of £2,000, were found upon him. The remainder had been made away with, and was never recovered.

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Having made such arrangements as were necessary, I left the station, and proceeded home to communicate to my father the tragical termination of my journey, when I found he had already taken steps for arresting Barton on his appearance in the city, circumstances having arisen which placed his guilt beyond question.

My father was much moved and interested by the details of the death of his unhappy clerk, and by my recital of the circumstances of my meeting with the guard, who had fully repaid the interest my parent had formerly taken in him.

The fortunes of our house soon recovered from the blow which the misguided Barton had managed to inflict upon our credit, and I consider the prosperity of the firm of Somerville and Co. is due to my accidental meeting with, and the story told me by, the mail guard.

Every Saturday, November 30, 1867

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