

## *Atlantic Mail—First-Class*

As naturally as a steel needle flies to a magnet so have I felt always ready to hurry to the aid of a lady in distress. I do not say it vauntingly, nor put it forward as a virtue, for the act has generally been involuntary; and so it was one day last year, when, having seen my small quantity of personal luggage on board the great screw-liner lying at the wharf getting up her steam, ready for her race across the Atlantic, I was loafing about, watching with considerable amusement the arrival of passengers, for the most part excited, worried, and the prey of porters and cabmen, who seem to be troubled with no more perfections in Liverpool than in the metropolis. A lighted cigar was between my lips, and I was trying to enjoy it—for, judging from old experience of my sensations in a rough sea, I did not anticipate much comfort for the next two or three days at the least—when a very ordinary-looking man, evidently a commercial traveler for a cutting house, walked up and asked me for a light, staring at me the while in so offensive a manner that, as I handed my cigar, I glanced down at his left hand to see that it was not meddling with my watch-chain.

“Looks like a commercial, but may be a pick-pocket,” I said—mentally, of course—while he puffed at his cigar, putting mine out in the process.

“Going across?” he said, abruptly, and, to use what would probably have been his expression, taking stock of me the while.

“Sir?”

“Going across the pond—*Helvellyn*?” he said again, coolly, and nodding his head toward the great steaming and snorting vessel.

“My cigar—thanks!” I said, in a tone meant to be perfectly Belgravian in its hauteur, as I turned aside; for I had met the appeal of a pair of dark eyes—a lady was in distress, and, between porters and baggage, apparently perfectly bewildered.

“Are you going on board?” I asked.

“Yes, oh yes,” said the owner of the eyes, eagerly. “Are you connected with the steamer, Sir?”

“Er—no, not exactly,” I said, taken somewhat aback; and I felt disposed to say, “Do I look as if I was?”—“Allow me, though—these men!”

“Yes, yes,” said the lady; “they ask six shillings for bringing my luggage from the station. Is it correct?”

“Absurd! No,” I said; “half a crown is ample.” And, espousing the lady's cause, I dismissed the ravenous monsters who prey upon the unprotected, and then sent her luggage on board the *Helvellyn*, casting more than once a glance aside to see that my new acquaintance was tall, with handsome, well-marked features, very lady-like, and dressed in the first fashion.

“Seems odd,” I thought, “traveling quite alone. Strong-minded woman, perhaps.”

But this latter thought was set aside the next moment as I handed her along the gangway; for there was a quiet, earnest, trusting look in her dark eyes; and the answers she gave to my entreaties that she would not be alarmed at the rushing water, the uneasy motion of the steamer, and the pushing, excited crowd, were grateful in the extreme. I felt flattered, and not at all sorry that such a companion was to share my voyage.

“If you would lead me to the cabin where I could see the stewardess,” she said, and I immediately handed her to the saloon door, where she turned frankly to hold out a well-gloved though rather large hand. “I am indeed much obliged. I am obliged to travel alone; but my husband will meet me on landing at New York, and he will, I know, be extremely grateful for your kindness.”

The next moment I was standing alone, confounding her husband, and appealing to fate to know why another should have first seen and secured about the only woman who seemed likely to form an agreeable sharer of my pilgrimage through life.

“Nice to be a young, smart-looking fellow,” said a voice; and, turning, there stood the bag-man, puffing away at his cigar, and staring at me with all his might, though, probably from business habit, he was referring from time to time to a pocket-book he held in his hands. “Now, you know, I never make an impression like that on a lady. I never find the sex asking my protection, and all that sort of thing. Very nice, though, I should think, isn't it?”

He accompanied his last words with the slightest approach to a wink; and closing the book he poked me with it in the side; when I felt so annoyed that I angrily turned upon my heel and walked to the side, watching the arrival of late passengers; but to my great disgust he followed me, and, heedless of my frowning looks, continued his scrutiny.

I tried very hard to get rid of him, but snubbing was thrown away. Apparently he could not understand that his conduct was obtrusive; and at last, making a virtue of necessity, I suffered him, and he literally hooked himself on to me.

But all the same he seemed to have a shrewd business eye; and while carefully keeping close to me he scrutinized all who came on board till the time for starting had arrived. The cables were cast loose, the screw revolved slowly, then stopped, then revolved again, and the vessel began grandly to move forward, the passengers waving their adieus as they clustered by the side. Then once more the bagman stared me full in the face, looked undecided, walked through the throng on deck, got in the sailors' way, stared in face after face, as a dog would who sought his master, and then, in the same undecided manner, returned to me, and stopped by my side, as if about to speak; but directly after he checked himself, and drew out another cigar.

“How very soon the motion of the vessel begins to affect you!” he said, with a smile.

“Affects you, you mean,” I replied.

“Yes, exactly. Curious, though, ain't it? Seems as if Nature never meant us to leave the land of our fathers—the place of our birth, as the song says, eh? Ever been across before?”

“Yes, twice,” I said, sharply; and then I walked away, for now, closely veiled, I had seen the figure of my lady friend emerging from the saloon door; and upon my going up, and asking concerning her welfare, she made no demur about taking my arm and walking up and down the deck.

I must confess that I thought very little of the scene around, though I kept, on the strength of old recollections, pointing out the various familiar objects we were passing; for I had the idea in my head that the remark my companion had made was not the truth; in short, I did not believe that there would be any husband awaiting her upon the quay at New York, and that after all it was but a bold subterfuge by which a single and unprotected woman wished to shroud herself in the respect paid to the married of her sex.

That she was respectable was undoubted; but there was a timid, shrinking way about her, so different from the quiet, calm self-possession of a married lady; and I felt assured that no one whose husband awaited her upon the quay at New York would so readily lay herself open to remark by accepting my arm upon so short an acquaintance.

“Is—is that a—a friend of yours?” suddenly asked my companion.

“Friend?—friend of mine?” I said, in a puzzled way. “No; I have no friends on board—at least, only one, I hope,” I added, meaningly.

“I—I thank you,” was the hesitating reply, in the most gentle of tones. “Compelled as we are to rely upon the society of so few during a sea-voyage, friendships do soon spring up.”

“But to whom were you alluding?” I said.

“Oh, it is nothing. I—but I am very weak and foolish—I fancied that the man, the gentleman you were speaking to, was watching us rather particularly.”

“Yes, yes, I dare say. I think, though, it is his habit. He looked just as earnestly at me a short time ago, and he has been staring at every one in turn. You don't think he is looking after a runaway young lady, do you?” I added, laughing.

In an instant my arm was dropped, and though the veil was down, my companion's eyes seemed to flash fire as she half turned round toward me.

I never professed to be very penetrating, but I was keen enough to see that I had touched upon a chord which kept bent the two ends of a bow of mystery. I saw too that, but for careful management, the advance I had made in the good graces of an admirable woman would be destroyed in an instant.

“Pray excuse my impertinent remark,” I exclaimed, eagerly. “The words were meaningless, and

uttered without forethought.”

My companion, apparently reassured, took my arm once more, and uttered a little low laugh.

“Meaningless, indeed; but for a moment I thought—”

She did not finish her sentence; for at that moment my commercial acquaintance passed close by us, gave me a familiar nod and a smile, wafted a cloud of smoke into the lady's face, and walked on.

“Such consummate impertinence!” I said. “You would hardly think that I had never seen that man before to-day.”

“Acquaintanceships do spring up rather rapidly sometimes,” was the meaning reply; and I glanced down, but the speaker's head was slightly averted, and it seemed to me that she spoke in husky tones.

For the next three days the number of passengers who showed on deck was strictly limited, in consequence of the state of the weather, and really the offices of steward and stewardess could have been no sinecure. For my part, I can only own to being qualmish on the second day, and I paced the deck hopefully in anticipation of the advent of my lady friend. But go on deck when I would I was certain to encounter the cool, easy-assured nod of the bagman, whose consumption of cigars must have been something enormous. He was as free and obtrusive as ever; but one evening, just as it was turning dark, I had the pleasure of smoking my pipe in peace; for I saw him in deep conversation with a man I had hardly noticed before, from the fact of his being one of the second-class passengers.

To my great astonishment, though, after I had gone into the saloon, the bagman came strolling in, followed, a short time after, by the man to whom he had been speaking; and this latter seated himself on the opposite side of the table in an abstracted manner, sat thinking for a while, and then slowly walked past me and out of the saloon door, softly shaking his head.

The next two days passed pleasantly enough; for, though unwilling to come on deck, the lady passenger was nearly recovered, and many a pleasant *tête-à-tête* I enjoyed. I found her most lady-like, and thoroughly well informed; while, as our acquaintance warmed, if I may use the term, into something that was at least friendship, I was delighted to find that mine had indeed been a true surmise; for she confessed to having determined to travel as Mrs. Saville, there being no husband to meet her at New York, only a brother.

Perhaps I did plume myself upon my shrewdness; at all events, that night, after winning from her so singular an avowal, I was considerably elated. I listened that evening to the remarks of a passenger respecting the tedium of the trip with a sense of lofty contempt; for I began to feel that I was very far gone, and the Atlantic seemed to me the brightest of seas, overborne by the bluest of skies. I was, in fact, in such a state of ecstasy that I went on deck to look up at the stars for an hour before seeking my berth; for Miss Saville—Saville! What an old and aristocratic name!—Miss Saville had retired, or how glorious it would have been, in that clear, diamond-illuminated

night, to have watched the sparkling of the spray, and—

Was I mistaken? Had she not parted from me a quarter of an hour before to retire to rest? and now this veiled figure that glided by me in the darkness, was not this she?

Impossible! I laughed the next moment; for I knew that my mind was full of one form, and that in the hasty glimpse I had obtained I had invested another with the attributes of her I loved.

Yes; her I loved. I was ready to own it now; and I leaned thoughtfully over the bulwark, going over the incidents of the past day or so, and making up my mind as to my future proceedings; for I had not lost all feeling of prudence. I wanted to know something of the lady's antecedents and connections—matters that I concluded could easily be arrived at in conversation the next day.

I was standing quite in the shadow beneath one of the quarter-boats, and I had just turned, with the intention of descending, when some one passed me whom I recognized to be the second-class passenger; and then for a few moments I heard a low, murmured conversation at a short distance, when the man passed me again, going forward.

Five minutes after I was at the saloon door, when a hearty clap on the shoulder made me turn, to find that it was the bagman, who laughed softly at my angry face, and then added to his former obtrusiveness by thrusting his hand into my side, as he whispered to me,

“I say, my lad, I'm going to open your eyes for you to-morrow, so look out. There, don't be uppish; come and have a cigar up in the bows—just one before you turn in.”

“I am much obliged,” I said; “but I am going to my berth.”

“Just as you like,” was the nonchalant reply, and he turned away.

“Let me see,” said the captain, at breakfast next morning; “where's my friend who sits third down on the left—Mr. Lister? Steward, go and see if Mr. Lister is unwell again—no, not again, because he seemed to be an old sailor—see if he's in his cabin.”

The steward returned with a reply in the negative; when, supposing him to be on deck, the breakfast was brought to an end, and Mr. Lister, or, as I called him, the bagman, was forgotten.

The day passed and evening had arrived, when, as I was sitting in sweet intercourse with Miss Saville, Rumor's busy tongues began to announce that Mr. Lister was missing.

I immediately recalled his promise to open my eyes that day, and also that he had invited me to go forward with him to smoke a cigar; and, I knew not why, a strange feeling of interest made me leave my seat, apologize to Miss Saville, who bowed stiffly and went below, while I walked forward to a group, to find the subject in full discussion. Two of the watch had seen him go forward with a lighted cigar between his lips, and perch himself close to the bowsprit; but they could not recollect seeing him come back, though one man had some faint idea of something black coming close by him, but he was not sure.

More excited groups formed, and I soon found that search had been made through the steamer, and that the captain was in great trouble respecting the missing man; for all pointed to one fact—that the poor fellow had chosen a dangerous position, and had, without giving the alarm, slipped and fallen into the sea, to be borne under in an instant by the huge cut-water of the vessel.

I shuddered; for I thought that, had I accepted his invitation, I might have seen him fall, and, if powerless to stay him, still have given the alarm, perhaps in time for a boat to have been launched.

“Can any gentleman afford any information?” said the captain, addressing the group where I stood.

“I can only add,” I said, “the corroborative testimony that Mr. Lister invited me to go forward with him, but I declined.”

“You did not go forward with him?” said the captain.

“No,” I replied; “and I have no recollection of seeing him come back into the saloon. But stop,” I said, for I had suddenly encountered a close, searching gaze directed at me; “there is a gentleman here who was talking to Mr. Lister late last night.” And I pointed to the second-class passenger.

“How do you know?” he said, calmly, regardless of the many eyes fixed upon him.

“Because I stood by one of the quarter-boats when you came aft to speak to him, and I also saw you go back.”

“Quite right,” said the second-class passenger.

“Did you know Mr. Lister?” said the captain.

“Yes, I knew him,” said the other, calmly.

“There seems to be some mystery here,” said the captain. “Was he a friend of yours?”

“Yes,” was the almost abrupt reply; and then, after a moment's silence, the second-class passenger walked quietly up to the captain, took him by a button, led him apart, and whispered a few words in his ear.

I saw the captain give a slight start, stare hard at the man, and then apparently ask a question, when, whatever was the answer, he seemed satisfied, and gave orders for a farther search; which was, however, futile.

I was not alone in directing curious glances at the second-class passenger; but he was a quiet, dry-looking, close-shaven man, with an apparent power of shutting himself up within himself; and he paced the deck to and fro, with his hands behind him, in a furtive, thoughtful way, till all

searching was at an end, and the conclusion arrived at that our luckless fellow-passenger had met his fate.

I noticed that the quiet man's eyes were fixed on me as I went to the saloon; and on going to where Miss Saville was seated a strange feeling made me turn my head for an instant, to see that he was watching me from the door; but he disappeared on the instant.

Full of the event, I was about to tell all I knew to my companion; but with a show of real horror she held up her hands, begging me to forbear.

“It is too dreadful!” she exclaimed; “I can not bear it. I know all—I have heard all. Poor man! here and in health last night, and now—pray, pray say no more about it.”

She was excessively pale and agitated; so much so, indeed, that I summoned the steward to bring wine, for I was afraid the poor girl would faint; and she drank a glass with avidity, shuddering afterward, while the cold perspiration stood in beads upon her forehead.

I proposed a walk on deck, but it was declined; and, to my great sorrow, the shock had such an effect upon her that she was confined to the cabin to the end of our rather protracted voyage.

But the morning was bright as we came in sight of land; and as we slowly steamed in I found, to my great joy, that Miss Saville was once more visible, though I was not prepared for the constraint with which my advances were met.

I asked myself had I neglected any thing; had I fallen off in warmth. But no; lover could not have been more attentive or assiduous as to her welfare. I felt wounded; but I was determined not to show it, and, almost in opposition to her wishes, I saw to her luggage, and, brother or no brother waiting, determined to see her to her home.

I was ready to upbraid her with coquetry; but I refrained, feeling that it was possible she had taken my attentions as being merely intended to last the voyage; and at last, cold and constrained, we stood close together, for in another ten minutes we should be debarking.

Happening to gaze round, I suddenly became aware of the second-class passenger standing close at my elbow, and I could not avoid a start—one which made Miss Saville turn wonderingly to me, at the same time holding her veil closely to her face, for the breeze was rather brisk.

“It was nothing,” I said; “but pray, Miss Saville, allow me to carry that bag; it seems heavy.” And I pointed to the little black traveling-bag she carried in her hand.

“No, no, I thank you, no,” she said; “indeed, Sir, I can dispense with your offers of service.”

“As you please, madam,” I said, sharply; for there was a harshness in her voice that jarred bitterly, and I felt that it was undeserved.

“Let me carry it, Frank Smith,” said a grating voice, that had a saw-sharpening sound in its

cutting tones. And in a moment the bag was wrested from Miss Saville's hand and thrown heavily upon the deck. Then followed a sudden scuffle, and I saw her bounce back against the bulwark, and the same grating voice exclaimed, "Stay your hand, or, by God, Sir, I'll fire!"

There was a swaying about, a sharp struggle, and I was about to throw myself upon the second-class passenger—a ruffian who was committing an outrageous assault upon my fellow-passenger—when a strong hand dragged me back, just as there arose a sharp "click-click," and, dizzy with surprise, I saw the wretch drag a revolver from Miss Saville's fettered hand as she lay torn and disheveled upon the deck.

"Had not breath to speak before, my friend," said the second-class passenger, panting, as he rose from one knee; "but, for your information, Mr. Frank Smith, I hold a warrant for your apprehension. Bank robbery, gentlemen; cool twenty thousand; but I'm in hopes it is all here." And he took up the bag that lay upon the deck.

"Stand up, Sir," he said the next minute, as he assisted his prisoner to rise, and tore off the veil. "Very clever, very well done, indeed, this false hair; and the chignon is very becoming, Sir. I must do you the credit of saying that you took me in, while poor Matthews hadn't a suspicion, but was rather down on your friend."

"Take me out of this," said a hoarse voice. And I would have turned and fled, but I felt myself wedged in among the crowd; for it seemed impossible that the flushed face, veined and knotted with disappointment and rage, could have been that which had deluded me through the voyage.

"All right, Sir, as soon as we can get an officer from the shore. But there, you need not mind for a few minutes."

"Take me below, officer," was the husky, imploring petition next uttered; and the officer was about yielding, when a passenger exclaimed.

"But are you sure you are right, officer?"

"Right, Sir? Yes, I'm right enough, and I hope there's nothing blacker against him, for there is the death of my poor mate to clear up yet. It seems strange that he should disappear the very night that our friend here suspected that he was found out; and it seems stranger still that he should have settled down so quietly after, and never show at all when the officer who suspected him was gone, for he did not know I was on board."

I glanced once more at the deathly pale face as the detective led his prisoner below; and then, giddy with the rush of thought through my brain, I made my way back to my cabin to stay till the other passengers were ashore, when I hastened to an hotel, but not, as I had hoped, unseen, for I encountered the officer just returning from placing his prisoner in security.

He took me by the button, as he had seized the captain, and held me for a few moments.

"There, you need not be ashamed of it, young man," he said, with a dry smile; "he's got about as



womanish a face as ever I saw, and his disguise was as clever as it was possible to be. I was hard pushed, but I felt pretty sure, and at the last I got one look that settled it. There's a resemblance between you that, had he put on a good beard, would have made him look a deal like you, and it was that which made my poor mate have his suspicions of some one else; but, any how, fourteen years will make him rather different, and he won't come the petticoats again.”

“Fourteen years!” I said.

“Yes, perhaps more; for it's a bad case— confidential clerk.”

We parted, and I saw no more of the police-officer. From the report of the trial, though, I learned that the police had certain information that the culprit would sail from Liverpool in the *Helvellyn*, though his disguise had been *nearly* clever enough to throw dust in the keen eyes of every one. I was only twenty then—a fact which I plead as an excuse for my want of discernment; and no doubt I formed in the culprit's eyes a capital screen, and one which would make it almost impossible for his sex to be for an instant doubted.

The sergeant was right; the prisoner was brought back to the scene of his depredations, and fourteen years' penal servitude was his award. As to the work of that dark night—whether Sergeant Matthews, otherwise Mr. Lister, met with foul play, and was sent to his death by a push in the dark—the mystery, if mystery there was, lay a secret between Frank Smith, prisoner at the bar, and him who was forever dumb.

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