

A Terrible Night

It was four o'clock on an afternoon in the month of December 18--, and business for the day being over, the porter of the bank of W----- was closing the doors of that establishment. As I was accountant at the bank, I was busily engaged in verifying the posting of the ledgers, while the tellers were hard at work counting the cash in the tills, and the clerks were at the various books and letters. When I finished an abstract I was making from some of the ledgers, I took it into the manager's room. As I entered, the manager was just buttoning his coat to depart.

"I have done the abstract of profit and loss on bills for the last month," said I, placing the paper on his table, "and I find the result more satisfactory than you expected."

"I am glad of it; the directors are particularly anxious to improve this branch of the business. I will take this abstract with me, and look over it this evening," said he, putting it in his breast pocket. "If there is nothing very urgent to do in the office, I should like you to come up and dine with me this evening; in fact, I have some news for you, which you will find as acceptable as, I think it will be unexpected."

As I had no pressing reason for doing any more work that afternoon, I accepted the manager's invitation, the more so as he was a very genial man, and much of my advancement in the bank was due to his kindly exertions on my behalf. We both sallied forth into the main street. It was a miserable night, the rain and sleet came down at a sharp angle, borne on a piercing wind, and under foot was a half-frozen mixture of mud and snow, which struck a cold chill through one's feet. We soon found a cab, and a few minutes saw us in the porch of Mr. Wilmot's house, and once more in his cosy snugger.

As soon as we were seated, Mr. Wilmot commenced to communicate to me the news of which he had spoken. It is unnecessary for me to detail our conversation, the sum of which was, that he had very good reason to believe that I was on the point of being promoted to a managership. To make this comprehensible to the reader, it is necessary to explain something of the organization of the bank in which I held the post of accountant. The particular office in which I was employed was a branch bank, forming a part of a great joint stock bank, having its head office in London, and branches in various provincial towns. The manager of one of our branches was about to retire on a pension, and the Board had that day communicated to Mr. Wilmot their intention – on certain conditions – of appointing me to the post at their disposal. Of course this was jolly news to me, yet it seemed to rather spoil my appetite for my dinner than to improve it, and when we went into the dining room Mrs. Wilmot rallied me on my seeming rather absent.

"Oh!" said her husband, "I have just been telling him some news that may considerably affect his career at the bank, and I suppose he is ruminating over it."

"But I thought Mr. Danby was always in the good graces of the directors, I hope no change has taken place?" said Mrs. Wilmot.

“None whatever,” said Mr. Wilmot. “Come Danby, you ought to look more cheerful than ever, but I can well understand the prospect of attaining the goal of your ambition is too overpowering to induce sprightliness.”

“I can assure you,” said I, “that the prospect is very gratifying, and I cannot tell why I should look dull for I feel so joyful that I am in fact, quite confused. [Tomorrow] I shall feel all right, no doubt.”

“But,” said Mrs. Wilmot, “is there some great secret about Mr. Danby’s prospects?”

“Now, my dear,” said her husband, “you are aware that Mr. Kinnear, our manager at S---, is going to retire. Well, the directors have decided to appoint Mr. Danby to succeed him on certain conditions, and as these conditions are, to my knowledge, favorable, we may look upon the matter as settled.”

Mrs. Wilmot expressed her pleasure at improved prospects, and then came the commencement of the dinner interrupted our conversation for the time. When we began to converse again, an incidental remark of Mr. Wilmot’s led to the introduction of a topic which had repeatedly been mentioned in my presence on previous occasions, but which I had never properly fathomed. It referred to a very mysterious affair connected with the disappearance of a valuable jewel-case belonging to Mrs. Wilmot. Prompted by curiosity, I asked Mr. Wilmot if he would enlighten me as to the whole facts of this matter.

“Well, I will tell you all that I know about it, but that is not much, as the whole transaction was very mysterious, and it has never been cleared up. The robbery, for such undoubtedly it was, took place some three years and a half ago, and therefore about six months before you came to this branch. It happened in this way: We had a dinner party one evening, and my wife, when dressing, took some jewelry out of her case, which I brought from my private safe for that purpose. The case she left on her dressing-table, and when we went to our bedroom, after our guests were gone, it was nowhere to be found. We had a servant who was to leave the next day, the cause of her dismissal being her habit of going out [without] permission and keeping late hours. On inquiry, I found that this girl had been away from the house about two hours during the time we were with our guests. This circumstance, coupled with others, excited my suspicions so far that I sent for the superintendent of police; but after a long and tedious inquiry, it was impossible to obtain any tangible evidence against her. Among our guests on the evening aforesaid was a gentleman named Garstang, who filled the post of accountant in the bank here, but who was on the eve of his departure to take the managership at N---.”

“My wife was always firmly impressed with the idea that Garstang was connected with the disappearance of the jewels, but of course I looked upon such a suspicion as simply preposterous; in fact, her only grounds for it were her general dislike to him, and the fact that he departed before the rest of the company upon what she thought an insufficient plea.”

“Whether I am wrong or not I cannot tell or may never know,” said Mrs. Wilmot, “but I have always felt an irresistible conviction that my impression was right. “You know, Stephen, that I

expressed a dislike to him when first I saw him. There was something about the expression of his features that was very unpleasant.”

“That is my strongest reason for distrusting your conviction, my dear. I consider that it was the result of the bad impression he made upon you at first, indefinite at starting, but suddenly reduced to shape by the circumstances of the robbery. If, however, you will consider Mr. Garstang’s prospects at that very time, you must see that it would be absurd to suppose for a moment that he could be guilty of such an egregious act of folly – an act the discovery of which would have hurled him from a most enviable position to a felon’s cell. Such a suspicion is unjust and dangerous, and I should tremble if I thought [anyone] could get an inkling of it. I need not impress upon you the necessity of silence upon so delicate a subject; and of course, Danby,” he said, turning to me, “you fully understand that what you have heard is under the seal of friendship, and must never be even whispered to your own ears.”

I signified my firm intention of never breathing a word on this dangerous subject, and turned the conversation to more ordinary matters.

We had just commenced dessert, when a telegram was brought in by one of the servants, and handed it to Mr. Wilmot, who quickly read it, and, with a look of surprise, passed it to me. Now, in the course of our extensive banking business, it was continually necessary to communicate by wire from one branch to another, on important matters, and, for the sake of the needful secrecy, a cipher code was adopted. This code was only known to the chief official at each branch, and hence none of the telegraph clerks could understand our dispatches. The telegram was in this code, and was from M---, a town about forty miles off, where there were two banks – viz. our branch and a private bank. The telegram stated that this private bank had closed its doors finally that afternoon at 4; that Mr. Dane, our manager at M---, had just got this information, and that he expected a severe run on our bank in the morning. He urged us to send him immediate relief, and suggested that we should telegraph to our branch at O--- for gold for our own use, so as to send him as much as possible. The case was a most urgent one, and Mr. Wilmot and I quickly decided what to do. I started in a cab to fetch the cashier, who had one of the keys of the bank strong room, the others being in the receptive keeping of myself and the manager. While I went on this [errand], Mr. Wilmot sent off a telegram giving a copy of Mr. Dane’s, with some further hints to the manager at O---. Mr. Wilmot was in the bank when I returned with the cashier. We found the porter who, like myself, lived on the bank premises, at home, and we were not long packing up in suitable cases, a sum of seventeen thousand pounds in gold, and about two thousand in the Bank of England paper. For the conveyance of these to the railway station, we summoned two carts from an adjoining stand. As these carts drove up I ran somewhat quickly out of the bank, and, in so doing, I ran against a tall man who was passing along the footpath. He had a handkerchief muffled around his throat, and his coat buttoned up to his chin, in addition to which he had a red silk handkerchief to his nose and mouth. The inclemency of the night sufficiently accounted for these precautions, but as I jostled him, his hand was for an instant cast aside, and I saw his face. It was one not easily forgotten. —It was handsome, and yet repugnant. However, I was busy. He passed on, and I thought no more about it. The manager and myself got into one car, and the cashier and the porter occupied the other, and we drove as rapidly as we could thro’ the town to the railway station. When we arrived there the mail train for M--- was

just about to start. The station master was on the platform, and a few words from Mr. Wilmot explained what was required.

“I see, sir, Mr. Danby wants a compartment to himself. I think all the carriages are more or less occupied. I will put on another carriage; but we are already past time, and the mail guard will not allow delay, so that I cannot break the train. I shall be compelled to put on the carriage behind the guard’s van.”

To this we raised no objection, as the one important question was to get to M--- with the required relief. The extra carriage was quickly hooked on and duly screwed up and the tail lamps put upon it. The cases of gold were put in upon one of the seats, and I took my place opposite them, wishing my friends good night. The train began to move rather slowly, when I caught sight of two men of about equal height, who hurried from a dining-room across the platform toward the train.

“This way, gentlemen,” said the guard, opening the door of a compartment behind that which I occupied, but in the same carriage.

Where we were the station was somewhat dark, but just as they were getting in the light of the guard’s lamp fell upon them and I was struck with the fact that, not only were they of the same height and build, but they were dressed just in the same way, and that way was precisely that of the man against whom I jostled outside of the bank.

I could not tell why, but I felt very uneasy, and had it not been too late, as we were already out of the station and going rapidly through a tunnel, I should have got a porter to go with me to M---. I reasoned with myself that, after all, I was quite safe. I was locked in on each side, and the motion of the train would prevent any one from reaching me as it would hinder me from reaching the guard. Reason as I would, however, I felt more and more uncomfortable, and I determined that at the first stoppage, I would get some alterations made. I little knew where my first stoppage was to be; little did I think of the nature of those who rode behind me, or of the doom that hung over me. Suddenly I thought that the thunder of the train became fainter, and the motion of the carriages less rapid. While I was trying to solve this matter, the carriages seemed to stop, and then move again. I looked out. Good heavens! the train was a considerable distance ahead, and I was being rapidly carried back to W---. Faster and faster sped the carriage on its return, and more and more terrified did I become. The motion of the carriage became as swift as it had been when behind the mail – nay, even swifter – and my heart sank within me – my very knees shook under me, and my hair seemed to bristle with the terrible suspense of these moments, while big drops of cold sweat fell from my face. On, on we sped, and then the motion began to slacken. Good God! what should I do? The carriage stopped; a click as if a key in the door near which I stood, a moment, and the light of the carriage lamp fell upon the face I had seen outside the bank. The man or fiend pointed a pistol at me, I drew back a step, and was seized from behind; my assailant had entered from the opposite door. The one with the pistol advanced across the floor of the carriage; I made one frantic grasp at him, saw him raise the butt end of his weapon, and then felt dizzy, and in attempting to grasp his arm fainted away.

When I came to myself, I was lying on the floor of the carriage, too weak to move, the doors were open, and the bitter storm beat in upon me in all its winter fury. I could not quite realize my situation; all seemed confused and muddled. I only remembered that I had ought to have been at M---, but some terrible violence prostrated me. Presently I heard the whistle of an engine, as if coming from M----, and, confused as I was, I knew the fate that awaited me if in the storm the advancing train should be upon me ere the driver noticed my carriage. I made a desperate attempt to rise, but in vain. The whistle sounded again, still nearer, and this time was answered by one of deeper tone and from the opposite direction, and I caught, in lull of the storm, the sound of the wheels of the approaching engines. I became sick with horror, and I closed my eyes in dread. Then the advancing engines whistled again and again, and O joy! I could tell that they went slower and slower, and then stopped. Then I lost all consciousness once more. When I again became sensible, I felt myself sitting up, and someone holding me. I felt, too, that the carriage was in motion. I opened my eyes, and found myself with Mr. Wilmot and the cashier. The porter of the bank and the station master of W--- were also there. I tried to speak but could not. I made a motion with my hand, to try to make them comprehend that I could not speak.

“He wants something to drink,” said Mr. Wilmot. “Has [anyone] got some brandy?”

No one had, but in a few minutes more we were at W---, and I was taken into the refreshment room and placed under the care of a surgeon. Under the effects of warmth and stimulants I soon revived sufficiently to give an account of what had happened, so far as I understood it. The station master stated it as beyond doubt that the men who attacked me were prepared with a carefully concealed plan, which they had but too well succeeded in carrying out. They had evidently got along the footboard of the carriage, and, when ascending a steep incline, they had undone the couplings, so that the carriage ran back on the level. Their place had been very well chosen, as it was in a very lonely part of the country, and far from any station. The fact that the turnpike road approached the line at a point some three hundred yards from where the carriage stopped, and had possibly facilitated their escape. I was lost to account for the arrival of the two engines, which evidently came to search for the missing carriage. This was soon explained. As regarded the engine from M---, that was sent back as soon as ever the train reached the station, because the carriage was immediately missed. The engine from W---, with Mr. Wilmot and others, started on account of a discovery made by Mr. Wilmot, which caused the utmost consternation. The discovery was nothing less than that the telegram from M--- was a forgery. Mr. Wilmot had telegraphed to Mr. Dane to say that the relief he asked for had been sent. To this announcement, Mr. Dane replied that he could not understand it, that something was wrong, and that he should await Mr. Wilmot’s explanation at the station at M---. The false telegram had been carefully conceived, and unfortunately for me, was in the private code of our bank. When it was telegraphed from M --- that the train had arrived minus my carriage the case against me looked doubly strong, and the two men who entered at W--- were set down as confederates who were to help me carry off the booty. When, however, I was found in the carriage, a new light broke in upon the minds of my rescuers, and it was seen that I was the victim, and not the chief criminal.

It now remained to try to discover the daring scoundrels who had planned and executed this nefarious deed, and, if possible, retake the booty. This seemed a very hopeless task. Men of proved skill had been taken to the scene of the outrage from both W--- and M--- with the special engines that came to the rescue, but it was very doubtful whether they would find any clue. A

second time the special engine was sent from W---, and it ere long returned with one of the detectives. This man had found a gold watch on the ballast near where the carriage had stopped on the level. Now the watch did not belong to me – mine being in my pocket – nor indeed to any amongst our party. It was therefore evident that it had been dropped by one of the thieves in the scuffle or in getting the case off. The detective handed the watch to Mr. Wilmot and Mr. Dane but they could not make anything of it. By this time news of the robbery had spread into town and many people had come to the station to satisfy their curiosity.

Among others, a watch-maker who worked for Mr. Wilmot came on the platform. The detective at once suggested that Mr. Wilson, the watchmaker in question, should make an examination of the watch, and that a report of such examination should be drawn up.

Mr. Wilson was accordingly called into the room and the watch was handed to him. He opened it and took off the case while the detective prepared to note down the result.

No sooner had Mr. Wilson removed the case than an exclamation of surprise fell from him.

“Why, Mr. Wilmot!” said he, “this watch is one which used to belong to Mrs. Wilmot, and which was stolen some years ago.”

“What!” said Mr. Wilmot, “Mrs. Wilmot’s watch? Are you sure?”

“Yes, sir, quite sure. I remember peculiarities about it; and here I can identify some special repairs that I have made.”

“This is very strange,” said our manager. “The thieves who stole this watch must be closely connected with the present outrage.”

“Mr. Porter, can we have a special train to N--- at once?” said our manager addressing the stationmaster.

“I will order one immediately, sir; and also telegraph to see if the line is clear.”

While this was being done, Mr. Wilmot asked the doctor if I could safely be removed as he wished to take me to N--- to be ready to identify my assailants, should they be captured. The doctor gave his opinion that I might be taken; and he also expressed his willingness to accompany us, to be ready in case of need. We were soon on our way to N---, and early in the morning we arrived there. Mr. Wilmot and two detectives at once proceeded to the bank; and in about half hour Mr. Wilmot returned to the inn where I remained with the rest of the party. He said that Mr. Garstang was not there, he having gone away early the previous morning; but the detectives had been stationed where he could watch who approached the bank. Wilson, the watchmaker, had gone round to several of his fellow tradesmen in N---, and at last he found a person who recognized the watch as one he had cleaned on several occasions, and for Garstang! Thus, then, had we another link in the chain – one stronger than any of the others. Mr. Porter, the stationmaster, had ascertained that Garstang often drove out of N--- in a dog cart, and mostly in one direction. On arriving at this town, we succeeded in ascertaining where Garstang’s dog cart

invariably went. This was to a house in the suburbs, standing in grounds of its own, and inhabited by an old woman and her daughter. When we reached the house, part of our force approached it from the front and part by the back, the rest remaining with me in the carriage at the corner of the lane. While we waited in suspense for the result of the raid upon the house, we heard the sound of horses, and the doctor, on looking out, saw a carriage, the wheels; of which, he said, seemed hard driven, coming at a rapid pace down the lane leading toward the house. Where our carriage stood, it could not be seen by the driver of the other. To run in by back way of the house, was but the work of a moment with the now thoroughly excited doctor; and he succeeded in warning our party just in time for them to conceal themselves. As we expected, the carriage turned into the grounds of the house. It was immediately surrounded. The occupants, it is needless to say, were the two who had attacked and robbed me. They at first showed an inclination to use their firearms; but seeing the hopelessness of resistance, they desisted and gave themselves up. When they were confronted with me, I at once identified the man whose face I had seen; and though they had changed their dress, the stationmaster was convinced that they were the men who got into my carriage at W---. The one who passed the bank was Garstang, his object in so doing being to see how the plot was working. The whole mystery was clear. It was easy to see that Garstang, being acquainted with the code, had caused the forged telegram to be sent from M--- by some accomplice. Inquiries instituted among clerks at M--- telegraph office, elicited the fact that a female had sent the spurious dispatch, which the receiving clerk well remembered on account of its length and peculiarity. Finding this to be the case, the youngest of the two women was taken into custody on her return home. She proved to be no other than the female servant who was discharged from Mr. Wilmot's at the time of the jewelry robbery. This girl was admitted as a witness against Garstang, and also was the driver of the carriage in which he and his fellow-robber reached the house where they were captured.

The mystery about the jewel case was cleared up by the evidence of the servant girl. On the night of the robbery, she stated that she was in her mistress's room and seeing the open case, she looked into it and then determined to steal it. She alleged that she was attracted rather by the beauty of the jewels rather than the value, and that no idea of selling them ever entered her head; her only idea being to become possessed of such splendid finery. She took up the box, and was coming out of the room with it, when Garstang confronted her and threatened to give the alarm. She became very frightened, and attempted to put the case back. This Garstang would not let her do, but led her down the back stairs and out into the garden, and thence into the street. He then frightened her into going with him to a disreputable public house, where he robbed her of her jewelry, and threatened her with the consequences of divulging what had taken place; at the same time he told her that he would marry her if she kept all quiet. This he had never done; but he had taken the house in which he was captured, and here he placed his victim with an old hag, whom he made her designate as her mother. He had, she stated, always treated her with a sort of kindness; but he never relaxed his hold upon her, and she felt very much afraid of him. Thus, then, was the villain fairly netted, who with his fellow criminal – who turned out as we expected, to be his brother – committed for trial. While he lay awaiting his trial at the assizes, bills of his brother's were dishonored; and this led to that discovery of an extensive system of fraud which these two worthies carried on for many years. At the trial, the robbery in the train was clearly proved against the two Garstangs and justice was at last vindicated by their receiving a sentence of penal servitude for life, with the addition of an ample preliminary administration of the cat.

The wretched girl who had, in a wavering moment, when a word of good counsel might have saved her, unfortunately falling into the clutches of a heartless, calculating scoundrel, was sent to a distant part of the country; but she soon drooped and died of consumption, induced by exposure to the bitter weather when she went to M---, to send the telegram which so nearly led to such dire results. As for myself, I soon recovered and took my post at S--- as manager, and when Mr. Wilmot and I visit each other's houses – which we often do – we seldom fail to think of the forged telegram and my terrible escape.

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