

By the Night Express

A bitter December midnight, and the up-express panting through its ten minutes' rest at Rugby. What with passengers just arriving, and passengers just departing; what with the friends who came to see the last of the departing passengers, or to meet the arriving ones, the platform was full enough, I assure you; and I had some difficulty in making my way from carriage to carriage, even though I generally find that people (almost unconsciously perhaps) move aside for the guard when they see him walking up or down close to the carriage doors. This difficulty was increased, too, by the maneuvers of my companion, a London detective, who had joined me to give himself a better opportunity of examining the passengers. Keenly he did it, too, in that seemingly careless way of his; and, while he appeared to be only an idle, lounging acquaintance of my own, I knew that under his unsuspecting scrutiny it was next to impossible for the thieves he was seeking to escape—even in hampers. I didn't trouble myself to help him, for I knew it wasn't necessary; yet I was as anxious as hundreds of others were that those practiced thieves, whom the police had been hunting for the past two days, should be caught as they deserved.

Sometimes we came upon a group which my companion could not take in at a glance, and then he found himself unusually cold, and stopped to stamp a little life into his petrified feet. Of course, for me, this enforced stand was a signal for an attack of that persistent questioning with which railway guards are familiar; and, in attending to polite questioners who deserved answering, and unpolite ones who insisted on it, I had not much time for looking about me; but presently I did catch myself watching a girl who stood alone at some distance. A girl very pretty and pleasant to look upon, I thought, though her face and her dress, and her attitude were all sad. She stood just at the door of the booking office; a tall, slight girl, in deep mourning, with a quality of bright, fair hair plaited high upon her head, as well as hanging loosely on her shoulders; with a childishly innocent face, and pretty, bewildered eyes. I wished I could have gone straight to her, and put her into one—the most comfortable—of the line of carriages at which she gazed so timidly. Just as I hesitated, a very remarkable figure elbowed its way to me; a stout, grandly dressed old lady, panting painfully, and almost piercing me with a pair of restless, half-opened eyes, that looked out through the gold-rimmed spectacles perched on her sharp nose. Two porters followed her laden with bags, cloaks, umbrellas, and flowers—the only flowers in the station, I expect, that winter—and one of the men winked at me over her head, while the other guarded her treasures with a face of concentrated anxiety, and thoughts engrossed by possible fees.

“This is the London train, is it ga'ad?” she asked, peering sharply into my face with her half-closed eyes, as if she found it difficult to distinguish me, even through her spectacles.

From her whole attitude I guessed her to be deaf, but I never guessed how deaf until, after yelling my answer so loud that the engine driver must have heard it eighteen carriages off, she still remained stonily waiting for it.

“Deaf as a dozen posts,” said the detective, aloud, giving the old lady an expressive little nod in the direction of the train.

“Slow train?” she asked, in that plaintive tone which the very deaf often use.

“Mail!” I shouted, putting my mouth as close to her cheek as I fancied she would like.

“Ale!” she shrieked back at me, the spectacles shaking a little on her thin nose. “Why should you want ale for listening to civil questions that you are paid to answer? Ale indeed! I believe railway men think of nothing else.”

Then she shook her head angrily and waddled off, looking as acid an old party as I should ever try to avoid. In at every door she peered through the glittering glasses, the two porters following her, until she made a stop before an empty second-class carriage near my van, and with much labor and assistance got herself and her packages into it.

When I passed a few minutes afterward, she was standing in the doorway, effectively barring the door to any other passenger by her own unattractive appearance there, and prolonging with an evident relish the anxiety of the obsequious porters. I fancied that though the purse she fumbled in was large, the coin she wanted was but small, for I passed on, and left her still searching, and still asking questions of the men, but hearing nothing either of their replies or of the loud asides in which they indulged to each other. I had reached the other end of the train, and was just about making my way back to my own van, when the young lady I had before noticed went slowly in front of me toward the empty first class compartment near which I stood.

“Am I right for Euston?” she asked me gently, as she hesitated at the door.

“All right, Miss,” I said, taking the door from her and standing while she got in. “Any luggage?” For from that very moment, I took her in sort of a way in to my charge, because she was so thoroughly alone, you see, not having any friends there even to see her off.

“No luggage, thank you,” she answered, putting her new little leather satchel down beside her on the seat, and settling herself in the corner farthest from the open door. “Do we stop anywhere between here and London?”

“Don’t stop again, Miss, except for a few minutes to take tickets.” Then I looked at her as much as to say, “You’re all right, because I am the guard,” and shut the door.

I suppose that, without being exactly being made aware of it, I kept a sort of watch over this carriage, for I saw plainly enough a lazy young gentleman who persistently kept hovering about it and looking in. His inquisitive eyes had of course caught the sight of the pretty face in there alone, and I could see that he was making up his mind to join her; but he seemed doing it in a most careless and languid manner. He was no gentleman for that reason, I said to myself, yet his dress was handsome, and the hand that played with his long, dark beard was small and fashionably gloved. Glancing still into the far corner of that one first class compartment, he lingered until the last moment was come; quite leisurely he walked up to the door, opened it, entered the carriage, and in an instant the door was banged to behind him. Without the least hesitation I went up to the window, and stood near it while the lamp was fitted up in the compartment. The gentleman was standing up within, drawing on a dark overcoat; the young lady in the distant corner was looking from the window as if even the half darkness was better to

look at than this companion. Mortified a good deal at the failure of my scheme for her comfort I went on to my van, beside which the detective waited for me.

“No go, you see,” he muttered crossly, “and yet it seemed to me so likely that they’d take this train.”

“I don’t see how it should seem likely,” I answered, for I hadn’t gone with him in the idea. “It doesn’t seem to me very likely that three such skillful thieves as you are dodging, who did their work in this neighborhood so cleverly two nights ago, should leave the station any night by the very train the police watch with double suspicion.”

“Doesn’t it?” he echoes, with a most satirical knowingness. “Perhaps you haven’t yet got it quite clear in your mind how they will leave the town; for it’s sure enough that they haven’t left it up to now. That they’ll be in a hurry to leave it, is sure enough, too, for this isn’t the sort of place they’ll care to hide in longer than necessary. Well, what’s the hardest place for us to track them in?—London. And what’s the easiest place for them to get on sea from?—London. Then naturally enough to London they’ll want to go. Isn’t this a fast train, and shouldn’t you choose a fast train if you were running away from the police?”

I didn’t tell him what sort of a train I should choose, because I hadn’t quite made up my mind; and he was looking cross enough for anything in that last glimpse I caught of him.

Having nothing better to do, I wondered a good deal about how these thieves could arrange their getting away while the walls were covered with the description of them, and every official on the line was up in it. There was no doubt about their being three very dexterous knaves, but then our detective force was very dexterous, too, though they weren’t knaves, (and I do believe the greater dexterity is generally on the knavish side), and so it was odd that the description still was ineffective and the offered reward unclaimed. I read over again the bill in my pocket which described the robbers: “Edward Capon, alias Captain Winter, alias John Pearson, alias Dr. Crow; a thickset, active man, of middle height, and about fifty years of age; with thick iron-grey hair and whiskers, dark gray eyes, and an aquiline nose. Mary Capon, his wife, a tall woman of forty; with a handsome fair face, a quantity of very red hair, and a cut across her under lip. Edward Capon, their son, a slightly built youth of not more than fifteen or sixteen” (though, for the matter of that, I think he might have had cunning enough for twice his age), “with closely cut black hair, light gray eyes, and delicate features.”

We all knew this description well enough, and for two days, had kept our eyes open, hoping to identify them among the passengers. But our scrutiny had all been in vain; and as the train rushed on, I felt how disappointed the police at Euston would be when we arrived without even tidings of them.

I was soon tired of this subject, and went back to worrying myself about the sad-looking, yellow-haired girl, who had so evidently wished to travel alone, and had been so successfully foiled in the attempt by that intrusive fop with the handsome beard. Foolishly I kept on thinking of her, until, as we were dashing almost like lightening through the wind and darkness, only fifteen or twenty minutes from Chalk Farm, the bell in my van rang out with a sharp and sudden summons.

I never wondered for a moment who had pulled the cord. Instinctively I knew, and—it was the carriage farthest away from my van! I left my place almost breathlessly as the engine slackened speed, and, hastening along the footboard, hesitated at no window until I reached the one from which I felt quite sure that a frightened young face would be looking out. My heart literally beat in dread as I stopped and looked into the carriage. What did I see? Only the two passengers buried in their separate corners. The young lady raised her head from the book she held, and looked up at me astonished—childishly and wonderingly astonished.

“Has anything happened to the train?” she asked, timidly.

The gentleman roused himself leisurely from a seemingly snug nap. “What on earth has stopped us in this hole?” he said, rising; and pushing his handsome face and his long beard past me at the window.

It was only too evident that the alarm had not been given from this carriage; yet the feeling had been such a certainty to me that it was long before I felt convinced to the contrary; and I went on along the footboard to other carriages very much more slowly than I had gone first to that one. Utter darkness surrounded us outside, but from the lamplit compartments eager heads were thrust, searching for the reason of this unexpected stoppage. No one owned to having summoned me until I reached that second-class carriage near my own van (which I had hastened past before), where the fidgety, deaf, old lady who had amused me at Rugby sat alone. I had no need to look in and question her. Her head was quite out of the window; and, though she had her back to the light and I couldn't see her face, her voice was cool enough to show that she was not overpowered by fear.

“What a time you've been coming,” she said. “Where is it?”

“Where is what?”

But though I yelled the question with all my might and main, I believe I might just as hopefully have questioned the telegraph post which I could dimly see beside us, and have expected an answer along the wires.

“Where's the small luncheon basket?” she inquired, pulling out her long purse with great fussiness. “A small luncheon basket, my good man, and make haste.”

Shall I ever forget the sharp expectancy of the old lady's eyes as they looked into mine, first over, then under, then through her glittering, gold-rimmed spectacles? What surprised me most particularly was the fact of her decidedly not being, as anyone might suppose, a raving lunatic.

“Be quick with the small luncheon basket, please,” she said, resignedly sitting down, and pouring the contents of her purse out into her lap. “I am as hungry as I can be.”

I suppose that when she looked up at me from the silver she was counting she saw my utter bewilderment—I didn't try now to make her hear, for I knew it would be hopeless—for she

raised her voice suddenly to a shrill pitch of peevishness, and pointed with one shaking hand to the wall of the carriage.

“Look there! Doesn’t it say ‘Small luncheon baskets. Pull down the cord.’ I want a small luncheon basket, so I pulled down the cord. Make haste and get it me, or I’ll report you to the manager.”

Seeing now that she was almost as blind as she was deaf, I began to understand what she meant. On the spot to which she pointed above the seat opposite her two papers were posted in a line, one the advertisement of “Small Luncheon Baskets” supplied at Rugby, the other, the company’s directions for summoning the guard and stopping the train in case of danger. As they happened to be placed, the letters did read as she said:

“Small Luncheon Baskets. Pull down the Cord.”

While I was gazing from her to the bills, getting over a bit of my astonishment, and she was giving me every now and then a sharp touch on the shoulder to recall me to my duty, and hasten me with her refreshment, we were joined by one of the directors, who happened to be going up to town by the express. But his just and natural wrath—loud as it was—never moved the hungry old lady; no, not in the slightest degree. She never heard one word of it; and only mildly insisted, in the midst of it, that she was almost tired of waiting for her small luncheon basket.

With a fierce parting shot the director tried to make her understand that she had incurred a penalty of £5, but he couldn’t, though he bawled it at her until the poor old thing—perhaps mortified at having taken so much trouble for nothing; perhaps overcome by her hunger; perhaps frightened at the commotion she saw, though didn’t hear—sank back in her seat in a strong fit of hysterics, and let the shillings and sixpences roll out of her lap and settle under the seats.

It seemed to me a long time before we started on again, but I suppose it was only a six or seven minutes’ delay after all. I expect I should have waited to explain the stoppage to the pretty young girl of whom I consider myself a sort of protector; but, as I said, she was at the very opposite end of the train, and I was in haste now. There must have been a good laugh in several of the carriages where the cause of our stoppage got whispered about. As for me, when I got back into my van, solitary as it was, I chuckled over it until we stopped at Chalk Farm to take tickets.

It seemed to me that the train was taken into custody as soon as it stopped here.

“Of course you have the carriage doors all locked, and I’ll go down with you while you open them one by one. My men are in possession at the platform.”

This was said to me by Davis, a detective officer whom I knew pretty well by now, having had a good bit to do with him about this Warwickshire robbery.

“It is no use,” I said, before we started, “the train was searched, as you may say, at Rugby. Every passenger has undergone a close scrutiny, I can tell you. What causes such scientific preparation for us here?”

“A telegram received ten minutes ago,” he answered. “It seems that two of the thieves we are dodging are in this train in clever disguises. We have had pretty full particulars, though the discovery wasn’t made until after you left the junction. Have you noticed—he dropped his voice a little here—“a young lady and gentleman together in either carriage?”

I felt a bit of an odd catching in my breath as he spoke. “No young lady and gentleman belonging together; but there may be plenty in the train. What if there are, though? There was no young lady or gentleman among the robbers!”

“Among the robbers,” replied Davis, with suppressed enjoyment, “was a woman who’d make herself into anything; and you must own that a gentleman with a dark, long beard isn’t bad for a lady known to us pretty well by her thick red hair and a cut under her lip.”

“But the young lady?” I asked, cogitating this.

“Ah! the young lady. True enough; well, what would you say now, if I told you she grew out of that boy with the closely cut, dark hair that we’re after.”

I remembered the pretty plaits, and the loose falling hair. I remember the bewilderment in the eyes which entirely hid their natural expression, and I didn’t answer this at all.

“I wish I had as good a chance of catching the old fellow as I have of catching the woman and the boy,” continued Davis, as we moved slowly past the locked luggage van. “I know they’re here, and that I shall recognize them under any disguise; but we’ve no clue yet to the older rascal. It’s most aggravating that by some means we’ve lost sight of the biggest rogue of all. Come along.”

I did come along, feeling very stupidly glad that there was all the train to search before we could reach that carriage at the other end, where sat the girl, whom I had, in a way, taken under my protection.

“When are we to be allowed to leave this train, pray? Call me a cab,” cried the deaf old lady, plaintively, as we reached her carriage, and found her gazing out in most evident and utter ignorance of all that was going on around her. I am locked in, Ga’ad. Do you hear?”

I heard, ay, sharp enough. I only wished she could hear me as readily. Davis stood aside watching while I unlocked her door and helped her down. Then, seeing her helplessness and her countless packages, he beckoned a porter to her, winking expressively to call his attention to a probable shilling.

Carriage after carriage we examined; and though Davis detected no thief, he turned away only more and more hopefully from each. He was so sure they were there, and that escape was impossible. We reached the last carriage in the line, and now my heart beat in the oddest manner possible.

“Is this compartment empty, then?” asked Davis, while my fingers were shaking as I put the key in the door of the center one. “Empty and dark?”

“Even if it had been empty it wouldn’t have been dark,” I muttered looking in. “Hallo! What’s come to the lamp?”

I might well ask what was come to the lamp, for the compartment was as dark as if it had never been lighted; yet had not I myself stood and watched the lighted lamp put in at Rugby? And—the carriage was empty, too!

“Why was this?” asked the detective, turning sharply upon me. “Why was not the lamp lighted?”

But the lamp was lighted and burning now as sensibly as the others—if we could but have seen it. As we soon discovered, the glass was covered with a kind of tarpaulin, intensely black and strongly adhesive, and the carriage was so completely dark as if no lamp had been there at all. The perplexity in Davis’ face was as great as my own, when I told him who had traveled there.

“They couldn’t have left the train here, at any rate,” he said; and I knew that as well as he did.

But you have guessed the end. During those few minutes that we stopped on the line, the two thieves—darkening the lamp even after I had left them, and using their own key—had left their carriage under cover of darkness, managing their escape in their black dresses out into the blackness of the night as cleverly as they had managed their theft and subsequent concealment. But how could they have depended on this unusual delay—this exquisite opportunity given them in the utter darkness, close to the city, yet at no station? When I officially made my deposition, and explained the cause of our stoppage, something of the truth seemed to break upon us all; but it wasn’t for a good while that it settled into a certainty. Then it got clear to everybody that the older scoundrel had duped us more ingeniously than the younger ones. As the incapable old lady (deaf as a stone, and so blind that she had to peer through her glittering glasses, with eyes always half closed, and so hungry that I had to stop the train for the luncheon basket) he played upon us the neatest trick of all. Where on earth were the thick, iron gray hair and whiskers by which we were to have identified him? But, by the time the police saw the whole thing clearly it was too late to follow up any clue to him.

The cab which had taken the eccentric old lady and her parcels and flowers from Euston was lost in the city, and could not be tracked. A high reward was offered for information, but no one ever won it. My firm belief is that it was no legitimately licensed cab at all, but one belonging to the gang, and part of the finished fraud. I verily believe, too, that sometimes now—though perhaps on the other side of the channel—those three practiced knaves enjoy a hearty laugh over that December journey by night-express.

Davis still assures me with the most cheerful confidence, that he shall yet have the pleasure some day of trapping three of the most expert and skillful thieves in Britain. I wish I felt as sure of it.

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