

My Cry for Help

I am not naturally of a vindictive nature, far from it, but if there is any one thing that I nourish a fierce hatred for it is a thorough race-course scoundrel; you may call him what you like, welsher, three-card man, roulette-table keeper, pickpocket, thief, for his vocation merely varies with opportunity.

Almost every created animal, I believe, man included, has a violent antipathy to some body or thing. It is a recognized fact that the most plethoric of bulls cannot calmly graze with a red object in view, no matter whether it be the sash of the matador or a petticoat; provided only it is of the obnoxious colour at it he goes half frenzied with rage.

The 'rough' has mortal dread and aversion to either a policeman or soap and water; the garrotter in loud outcries protests against the inhumanity of flogging; while the mamma of the period (if she will pardon me for introducing her in such company) shows by a cold manner, vulgarly styled as 'snubbing,' or by a sudden interest in nothing at all going on in an opposite direction, that the object of her peculiar detestation, the younger son, approaches. Well then, as I said before, I confess to an indomitable hatred for all sorts and conditions of race-course swindlers. I wage fierce war against the three-card man; having studied his craft for the purpose, I glory in taking an occasional half-crown or two from his ill-gotten gains; and if, as is very often the case, he is one too many for me, I deliberately set the police at him.

I draw the betting-ring for the welsher, and head him too if I can, as he steals away, and, stonyhearted, wonder, after he has been stripped, whether I could proceed against him under Lord Campbell's Act, his light and airy costume after a rough handling being often more suitable to a native race meeting at Magdala than to one in our less sunny clime; and my feelings towards him are of a similar character to what the sentiments of the late King Theodore might have been towards a native bookmaker, who might have rashly laid his majesty a thousand to fifteen a few times over against a 'dead one.' But the roulette-man is my especial enemy: I have broken up several unfair tables, and I am at this present moment, to inspire my pen, writing on a roulette cloth, one that I keep as a trophy. But how are the mighty fallen! this cloth, on which piles of gold and bank notes have once been, has now on it all that remains of the 'fiver' I went up to London with yesterday, a modest fourpenny piece, my ink is on zero, and a box of Partagas (nearly empty, I regret to say) occupies rouge.

But you will ask, Why should I cherish such a revengeful feeling towards the roulette-man, more than against any other ruffian? I will tell you. Charlie Egerton and I were in the same regiment; I was staying with him for a few weeks' hunting, during the 'long leave,' at his father's place in — shire. We were smoking our cigars one morning after breakfast when we saw an advertisement of the Betterton steeplechases in the local newspaper.

'We can easily get to Betterton from here by rail,' he said, 'or at least within three or four miles of it; there are two days' racing; we might sleep there one night; what do you say?'

I agreed to his proposition at once, so we wrote to secure beds at the Angel, the only respectable inn Betterton could boast of, also for a dog-cart or fly to meet us at the station.

It was a drizzling cold morning, as, enveloped in great-coats and wraps, and struggling with an obstinate portmanteau that positively refused to come out from under the seat of the railway carriage, we stepped out of the train, as, groaning, it reluctantly, as it were, stopped at the small station of Betterton Road—a bleak and shelterless station was Betterton Road—the railway company, as a sort of practical joke, having playfully painted on a wretched-looking, tumble-down shed the words WAITING ROOM.

Into this shed we shivered, while the porter collected the luggage. There was a strange dreariness about the sound of his footsteps on the damp gravel—a dismal kind of sound peculiar to small stations on a wet day, and particularly to be observed when there happens not to be a single vehicle to take us on to our journey's end. 'Has not a dog-cart or fly come to meet us, porter, from the Angel?' asked Charlie.

'No, sir, there ain't.'

We thought it very strange, and went to look up the road towards the town; nothing but cold sleet met our disappointed view.

'Well, what do you propose doing?' I asked of Charlie; 'we'd better get a trap.'

'Get a trap! I am afraid you might as well try to get a balloon. Here, porter, is it possible to get anything to take us to Betterton?'

'There an't anythink,' answered the porter, 'leastways, not as I know on; you see the excursion come in better nor an hour ago; the 'bus and every fly was filled by the gents, and then some on 'em had to walk; the course an't far from here, about two mile and a half; you'd better walk, and I'll send your portmanteau to the Angel by the 'bus.'

So acting on this advice we soon arrived at the stand, being just in time to pick out the winner of the first race.

We had a capital lunch at the drag of the —th Regiment, who were quartered in the neighbourhood, and after luncheon some of the officers proposed having a turn at roulette. Charlie and I accompanied them for a specific purpose. One young officer had lost a considerable sum of money. I watched the game carefully for some time: I had seen enough. I whispered a few words to the young officer; he gave me two five-pound notes. I bided my time: there was five pound on the black; I put five pound on the red, before the ball was started—when the ball had got full into play I quickly placed the other five pound on zero. No sooner had I done so than the man who turned the wheel by a sudden movement endeavoured to snatch up the ball; but I was prepared for this, and seizing his arm I held it forcibly back, while the ball revolving slower and slower finally rested in zero. By this maneuver I won back for the young officer almost all he had lost. We gave the scoundrel who kept the table ten minutes to be off the course, or the alternative of being given in charge for swindling. On arriving at the Angel we requested to be shown our rooms, and inquired of the landlord why he had not sent to meet us at the station as directed. Mine host opened his eyes so wide with astonishment, that I began to have serious

misgivings as to whether he would ever be able to shut them again; and when we informed him that we had written for rooms, he declared most solemnly he had never received our letter. (I may here mention that Charlie found it six weeks afterwards in his pocket).

The landlord was extremely civil, and appeared to be greatly vexed at the supposed loss of the letter, for every room in the inn was occupied. What was to be done? He feared we should not be able to obtain beds in the town, so great had been the influx of visitors that day. We could have dinner though in half an hour, that was one comfort; so we agreed to defer looking our difficulties in the face until after we had dined. With the cheese came the intelligence that an enterprising chambermaid had discovered that a bed might be made up in a diminutive room for one.

We tossed up for it and Charlie won. The landlord had sent all over the town to try and get me a bed, but every place was full; so as the rain had ceased and it was getting late, I determined upon sallying forth to see what I could do myself. As Charlie complained of cold and shivering, I insisted upon him remaining at the hotel. I tried one or two places suggested by the boots as likely, but in vain; not a bed was to be had, as, at one place I was told, for love or money. Partly reconciled to my hard lot, I had just made up my mind to pass the night in the arm-chair in the coffee-room of the Angel, when I passed a small public-house; I stopped, and having scrutinized its exterior, and found it promised to be clean inside, I entered. Making my way through the parlour, filled with suspicious-looking men and tobacco smoke, I entered the inner sanctum, where I found a woman serving out drink. On making known my difficulty she left, shortly returning with the landlord, her husband. He started visibly when he saw me; I knew his face; where had I seen him before? In vain I taxed my memory. On my inquiring whether he could give me a comfortable bed for the night, he took a good many pulls at the stump of a cigar he was smoking and then answered that he could. Could I see it? Oh yes, his wife would show it me, and he walked unconcernedly away, as she, taking up a candlestick, led the way up a narrow, winding, creaking staircase, emitting a peculiar 'micey,' stuffy smell, anything but exhilarating. The room though small appeared to be clean; I examined the bed carefully; the result being satisfactory, I engaged the room for the night.

I returned to the Angel in order to get such things as I wanted for the night out of our portmanteau, and it being late, and as both Charlie and I were tired, I wished him good night, promising to come to the Angel at nine o'clock for breakfast the next day.

I had no difficulty in finding my way back to the public-house where I was to sleep; on arriving there I found the door closed; it was opened cautiously on my knocking. On entering I found the rooms deserted, the landlord and his wife apparently having been sitting up for me. They wished to know whether I should like a cup of tea, as they had kept some water boiling for me, or a glass of hot brandy and water. As the latter would probably do away with any ill effects I might have received from my wetting on the race-course, I ordered some to be brought up to me in my bedroom. The landlady soon appeared, bearing a steaming glass of hot mahogany brandy and water; it struck me at the time as having a most peculiar and disagreeable taste; but as I dislike dark brandy, I thought nothing of it. I drank about half of it and opening the window threw the remainder into the street; then taking off my coat and waistcoat, I placed the latter, with my watch and money inside the pockets, under the bolster.

There was a door leading out of my room opposite the one I had entered by: I tried to open it, but found it locked. I heard a knock at the door I had entered by; it was the landlady. She wished to know whether I would take any more brandy, or if I wanted anything she could get for me before she retired for the night. On my pointing out to her that there was no key in my door, she regretted that it had been unfortunately lost, and taking up the tray with my empty glass, wished me good-night. When she had gone down stairs, I began to wonder where I had seen the landlord's face before. All of a sudden it struck me that he was in the roulette tent. I wondered whether he could have been playing, or whether he might have had any interest in the tables. I then began to consider by what means I could fasten the door. I remembered when a boy having many a time effectually done so by placing against the door a chair in a diagonal position with its back under the door handle. This plan I carried out at once, but on trial I found my scheme to be scarcely successful, for on employing some little force, the chair would give way, but with so much resistance, that I felt convinced that any attempt to force open the door must necessarily awaken me. Both tired and sleepy when I came up to my room, the brandy and water had made me strangely wakeful, and as I felt inclined for a pipe, having put on my coat again, I sat on the foot of the bed and began to smoke. I had been smoking for about ten minutes when I experienced a sudden giddiness: I have an indistinct idea that I laid down on my bed and fell asleep with my pipe in my mouth.

How long I had been asleep I have no idea, when I had the most horrible dream. I was in a forest that I knew well in Germany, fishing in a stream flowing at the bottom of a hill on which stands an old ruined castle. Suddenly I was beset by a band of robbers; I fled, but they being mounted were fast overtaking me. On, on they galloped, and on I sped, leaping over fallen trees, skimming over rivers, gliding as if on wings over huge obstacles, till I reached the old castle just in time to shut the doors in the face of my pursuers. Then they attempted to hammer in the door, firing muskets at the lock; I could see the flashes of fire, and remember how real and vivid they seemed to be. The door could not hold out much longer; in an agony of fear I awoke. Was I still dreaming! or was my door being violently forced open! Each time, as it partially opened, a gleam of light came in. It must be nightmare: I tried to awake—to speak—to scream—but my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth. I was in a trance, powerless to move hand or foot. Then I began to wonder whether the door would open. It was, it could be only a dream; so I watched the door with interest. The chair was slipping back: what was that? a man's arm? Yes, through the small space the door had been forced open an arm appeared and grasped the chair. In a moment it was removed and the door slowly opened. The man then entered followed by a woman bearing a candle, and shading its light from my eyes with her hand. I recognized them at a glance as the landlord and his wife. I knew now it was no dream. What could they want? again and again I strove to speak, to move, but my efforts were useless. I watched them with breathless interest. They approached the bed; I noticed the woman trembled violently, and her lips twitched in a peculiar way. The man then put his hand under the bolster and drew out my waistcoat, handing it to the woman; he then signed to her to shut the door; my heart stood still as I watched their every movement, unable as I was to stir. My head was not on the pillow: he took the pillow in his hands, and bent down over me. Great God! what was he about to do! still I could not cry out or stir. Then the woman seizing the pillow, in a hoarse whisper said, 'For God's sake don't!' He threw her roughly from him, and in wrenching the pillow from her it struck me full in the face.

Thank God! the spell that had bound me was broken: I was awake—I could move—I felt each nerve strengthened, every muscle braced and strong as steel, from the excitement I had undergone. I felt no fear now. With a yell of ‘MURDER! HELP!’ I leapt upon him and caught him by the throat: I should have borne him down, though he was a far more powerfully-built man than I, had not the woman seized me by the hair of my head, and with marvelous strength dragged me down. It was the man’s turn now; seizing the pillow, he attempted to place it over my face; I wrestled with the strength of despair, and succeeded partly in raising myself up again, but my strength was failing me fast. Seeing the window close to me, I dashed my fist through it, and with a loud cry of ‘MURDER!’ fell completely exhausted. It was all over now, I thought, as the man, savagely placing the pillow on my face and sitting on my chest, with his knees on my outstretched arms, pressed the pillow with all his force upon my face. ‘D— you,’ he hissed, ‘you broke my table up, and now I’ll have your — life!’

One agonized word for mercy was all I could breathe. I thought then how awful the struggle for life would be, but it could not last long: even when the blood seemed to be bursting every vein in my head, I wondered whether they would be hanged for my murder. I must then have become insensible. When I regained consciousness I found myself lying on the bed, a candle burning on the table by my side. Was it all a dream? No; there on the floor by the window was a dark pool, and the wall spattered red, and my shirt sleeve literally soaked with blood. I heard voices on the stairs; too terrified to reason calmly, I thought they were those of my assailants; I rushed to the window, thinking to escape by dropping into the street; on looking out I saw two policeman below. I implored them to come up and save me from being murdered. At that moment a policeman entered with a surgeon whom he had hastily summoned.

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The following morning I was summoned to attend the search that was being made at the public-house. Charlie accompanied me; when we arrived there the inspector of police was carefully examining a round stone in the back yard; having procured a crowbar they raised it: it concealed a dumb well. As it was not deep a ladder was procured and a policeman went down. How breathlessly we awaited his return. ‘Nothing there but broken delf and rubbish,’ he called out, as he ascended the ladder. I asked the inspector if he suspected the wall had ever been used for the concealment of murder. He shook his head as he answered, ‘This is the worst house in the place: the landlord is a great scoundrel: he has only been here a few months, but all the crime in the town is hatched here: he had a roulette table on the course yesterday, and I hear some gentlemen found it was a swindling business.’

I told him that I was the means of detecting him. ‘That accounts then for this,’ he said, pointing to the cement dust and mould round the stone. ‘This dust was here *before* we raised the stone just now, and this stone was raised last night for some cause or other, and after nine o’clock.’ ‘How do you know that?’ I asked in astonishment. He pointed again to the cement dust and said, ‘It rained up to nine o’clock last night: if this dust had been there before nine that last heavy shower would have laid it, or washed it away: *they did not raise that stone for nothing that time of night, you may depend upon that.*’ I looked down the well, and shuddering turned away.

The landlord and his wife were convicted of attempting to rob with violence, although the line of defense taken was extremely ingenious. It was proved that the only means of entering their own room was through mine: they stated I had been informed of this fact, which was, of course, untrue. They insisted that I was drunk when I went to bed; that they were walking quietly through my room, when I attacked them savagely, evidently under the impression that they were about to rob me, that the struggle on their part was undertaken purely in self-defense.

The man is now turning a wheel of a different kind to that of roulette, and one in which the feet are actively employed to give it a rotundary motion; his wife, or consort for the time being, as was elicited at the trial, has oakum substituted for pockets, to wile away her hours of capacity; and I have but little doubt that one or both would have been hanged, but for my having attracted the attention of a policeman who happened to be passing at the time I broke the window, and who fortunately heard my cry for help.

A. H. T.

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