

A Terrible Ride

If two persons, from the fact of having met before, might dispense with the ceremony of introduction, in nine cases out of ten, my readers would not need a word of preface from me, but would be content with my proceeding with my story at once. In fact, I shall do so, after a brief description of myself, not as I am, but as it is my wont to appear in public.

Are you living in the country? Then the chances are that at a not very remote hour you have seen prowling about the neighborhood a man who might have been a tramp, a bricklayer out of work, an ex-pugilist, a dog-stealer—any one or all of these, as his dress would present such a strange combination as to utterly confound your attempt to guess the particular grade to which the stranger belonged. That man was Detective Trace.

Are you a resident of the West End[,] who know by heart the faces of those whom you meet during your promenade in Regent Street and the parks? If so, you have perhaps seen a man who has puzzled you—a “swell,” faultlessly “got up” as to his dress, and with a profuse yet quiet display of jewelry. You may have noticed that, while he apparently participated in the pleasures of the gay crowd of idlers, his eye was restless, and failed not to scan the features of every masculine and feminine face that passed him, and this too without the slightest approach to rudeness, and your keen eye detected that his jewels were paste, and you could not, do what you would, “make him out.” He was Detective Trace.

Does your business ever carry you through the purlieus of St. Giles, or the foul courts and alleys of Whitechapel? If I may take it for granted that such is the case, you will perhaps remember noticing during your progress a man who apparently did not know what to do with himself—a downcast-looking fellow, hanging round the door of a public-house or gin-palace, with his hands deep in the pockets of a pair of greasy corduroys and his chin half hidden in a gaudy “Belcher” neckerchief, while he passed the time by puffing dense clouds of smoke from a short black pipe. He did not trouble you much however; you simply said to yourself, “Some poor fellow out of work.” But you were wrong. He was Detective Trace.

Whether you are of the town or country you have, I presume, travelled by railway, and have sometimes found your *nis a-vis* an affable loquacious old gentleman, with spectacles, who rested his palms on the handle of a stout stick or umbrella, while he quietly scrutinized and bandied an inoffensive joke with each passenger who entered on left the carriage at the different stations, and who, in spite of a troublesome asthmatic cough, so managed to ingratiate himself with his fellow-travellers as to almost draw from them the history of their travels for any past period[.]

Perhaps it has also been your lot to see this same agreeable old gentlemen condescend to a sudden fit of seriousness as he whispered in the ear of one of the occupants of the compartments who was going to alight. This may have surprised you; but what followed this strange movement gave you a clew to the mystery. You witnessed an altercation followed by the sharp click of handcuffs, and you knew that he was Detective Trace.

May be at times you have had a difficulty in killing a weary hour or so, and have amused yourself by listening to the “cases” at the nearest police court. If so, your eye has wandered to the

witness-box as the officer in charge of the culprit has entered it.

Whom did you see there? A man who no longer hoisted false colors, for there was no further need of disguise; he had thrown it aside, and stood revealed in his true character, wearing the uniform of a [sergeant] in the police force, as, having kissed the Sacred Book, he proceeded at once to tell “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” etc., and gave in his name as Sergeant Trace. But, although he has long been superannuated and the winter of time has somewhat thinned and silvered his hair, his evidence, while he reclines in his easy chair, shall be as true, the fact which he asserts shall be [as irrefragable] as when, years ago, he [xxxx] kissed the Sacred Book in the court over which the blind goddess presides. To begin then—Sergeant Trace and I are one and the same person.

Many years ago I was instructed to discover the whereabouts of a young lady who was “wanted”—why, it is unnecessary for me to tell; but it was in the execution of my duty that an incident occurred which nearly cost me my life.

I had tracked the fugitive to Brighton, where I made the discovery that she was just upon the point of returning to London. This suited me admirably, as I cou’d delay the disagreeable business of arrest till we arrived at the end of the journey; but, in order to be upon the safe side, I of course did not lose sight of her, and finally seated myself in the same compartment of the train as she herself occupied.

It was on the morning express, and our compartment contained by three passengers, a gentleman, a lady—the object of my pursuit—and myself. The guard locked the door; and then commenced the most terrible journey I ever made in my life. I scanned the features of the gentleman opposite to whom I sat, and saw that his eyes were intently fixed upon me.

The discovery was anything but pleasant, for there was a dark malicious look in his face that I did not at all relish; so, quietly drawing a paper from my pocket, I became apparently absorbed in its contents, while from under my lids I kept a sharp eye upon the stranger. When I again turned to meet his eye, I was more than ever convinced that he was bent upon mischief, though he had not spoken, for his hand was clutching nervously at something in the breast pocket of his coat, and his gaze was riveted upon me.

Was it a pistol he had in that pocket? I wondered. Such a thing was not at all unlikely, and, coupled with the fact that the man himself had every appearance of a maniac, my position was anything but agreeable, for we had a fifty minutes’ run before us without a stoppage.

However, to have let him know my suspicions would but have been to place myself at a disadvantage; so, settling myself down for a nap, I so arranged my hat that I could watch his hand without his knowing it. No sooner had I apparently fallen asleep than he jumped from his seat with the evident intention of springing upon me; but, quick as he was, I was quicker, and in an instant I had him by the throat and hurled him on his back. Before I could thoroughly master him he had turned the tables, and I was down upon the floor of the carriage, with a madman sitting upon my chest.

All this occurred in a moment, and the first sound that reached my ear was a piercing scream from the lady whom I was about to arrest; but she did not faint, or I might not have lived to tell my story. With admirable presence of mind, she stood watching for my opportunity to render me any aid she could.

Brave little woman! I wonder whether, if she had known I had a pair of “bracelets” in my pocket intended as temporary ornaments for her wrists, she would have acted as she did.

But I am digressing. No sooner had the superior strength of the maniac stretched me upon my back then, clutching my throat with one hand, he drew a dagger from his breast with the other.

“Wretch,” he hissed, rather than spoke, “do you suppose I am going to let a miserable scoundrel like you baffle me in a love affair? You’ve been following me long enough; but I’ll stop it now!”

“No,” I gasped, “you are really mistaken. It was nothing but chance that threw me in your road; and I don’t even know whom you are, while I do not seek to harm you.”

I said this with the object of mollifying, and at the same time humoring him, if, as it appeared, he thought that I had been following him, while I watched for any chance that might offer to free myself from his grasp.

“Liar!” he exclaimed. “Do you think I haven’t seen you? Why, you’ve been a veritable shadow to me, dogging my steps everywhere; for I’ve been following her, and you’ve been watching me all the time! [Presumptuous] wretch, do you suppose she cares a fig for you?”

[“]Look at her”—and, to my surprise he pointed to the third occupant of our compartment—“and say if a dog like you is worthy of such beauty as that! You, a mere commoner and ugly as sin, while I am a perfect Adonis and peer of the realm! But—bah—I am not going to argue with such as you. See—I will give you a through ticket for the next world!” And in an instant he raised the dagger and prepared to strike.

But an unexpected movement on the part of the fair passenger caused my assailant to turn his head.

“Stay,” she said—“I will help you! It will be such fun, you know. Listen! I’ll count twenty, and, while I am doing so, you hold the dagger suspended over him, and, when I come to nineteen, strike. But you must keep your eye fixed upon him, or he may struggle and balk you yet!”

Good heaven, I thought, was she going to assist him, or was it only a ruse to gain time for me?

“Wait!” he cried, in turn interrupting her[.] “You are a good little woman, and I’ll do as you say; but I must first get a firmer hold of him;” and, tightening his grasp round my throat, he thrust his knee deep into my chest and bade her commence to count.

“Ready!” he cried, and once more raised the dagger.

Then commenced what I thought was my death-knell. Slowly she began to count “One—two—three;” at the same time I cast an imploring glance at the woman who was thus assisting at my assassination, and who was standing behind my assailant, when, to my surprise, I noticed that she was stealthily removing her shawl and twisting it up rope-fashion.

“Nine—ten—eleven”—by this time she had crept a step nearer, and, before “fifteen” was reached, the neck of my would-be assassin was encircled by the twisted shawl, and he himself dragged backward, striking at the air.

The moment I was free I sprang to my feet, and, seizing the madman’s wrists, I was enabled, while my fair assistant tightened the shawl, to put on the handcuffs, but not till after a desperate struggle, accompanied by some nasty wounds from the dagger. Then I bound his ankles together with my neckerchief, which was a long one of the old-fashioned kind; but, as I had nothing with which to secure his elbows to his side, I deemed it imprudent to allow him to rise until such time as I had obtained further aid; so, sitting astride of him, I took charge of the shawl-ends, just holding them sufficiently tight, as occasion required to enable me to keep him down till the train rolled slowly into the terminus at London.

When the guard, by our cries for help, discovered our predicament, strong arms soon secured the madman and conveyed him to the waiting-room, where, upon being searched, we discovered, by means of his card case, his name and address; and on inquiry it turned out that he had been for some time the inmate of a private asylum, but had recently made his escape.

Of course no time was lost in reconveying him thither; but the strangest part of the affair was his meeting and falling in love with the lady who was then being sought for by myself. And it was while silently admiring at a distance that he conceived the idea that I, who had also an interest in keeping her in sight, was dogging his steps.

Certainly he evinced remarkably good taste and a keen eye for a pretty face, for the fair one was by no means devoid of personal attractions; though I think that had he known—. But I forget myself. It is not my intention to say more than I can possibly help concerning the lady in question.

Did the “bracelets” afterwards adorn her wrists, do you ask? Well, no. For, strange as it may seem, for some inexplicable reason I could never trace her after the dreadful affair in the train, and my earnest hope is that nothing more harsh than the trinkets sold at a jeweller’s has ever rested upon her arms since that terrible fifty minutes’ ride.

Warren [PA] Ledger, January 9, 1885