

Escaped from Justice

It was a bitter night in January—a night when homeless wanderers on the moors might have sunk down frozen to death, and the very marrow seemed to congeal in one's bones.

“There's one advantage of steam,” growled a fat old gentleman in the corner seat; “wind and weather don't affect it. No flesh and blood horse could stand a night like this, but the iron horse keeps straight ahead, whether the thermometer is at zero or at boiling water heat.”

Just then the conductor entered.

“Tickets, gentlemen, if you please.”

“It's a dreadful night, Conductor,” I said, feeling with stiffened fingers for my ticket in the breast pocket of my coat.

“Dreadful, sir,” feelingly responded the conductor. “Why the brakemen can't live outside, and so I look the other way when they creep in poor fellows, to get a breath of warm air at the stove. We haven't had such a night since a year ago, come the second of February, when Tom Blakeslee, the baggage-master, froze both his feet, and a woman who was coming on from Chicago got off at Blinn's Four Corners, with her baby in her arms a dead corpse.”

“Frozen to death?”

“Aye, frozen to death, and she never thought, poor thing, but that it was asleep. ‘My baby's cold,’ says she, ‘but we'll soon warm it when we get home.’ It was just such a night as this.”

And the conductor opened the door, and plunged across the coupling into the next car, crying out

“Hardwick!”

It was quite a considerable city—with a handsome iron depot, flaring gas lamps, and the usual crowd around the platform, with its hands in its pockets and its cigar ends flaming through the night.

Our car was nearly the last of the long train, and but one passenger entered it—a slender young girl, wrapped in a gray blanket shawl, and wearing a neat little traveling hat of gray straw, trimmed with stone colored velvet flowers. She seemed to hesitate like one unused to traveling and finally sat down near the door.

“Pardon me, young lady,” said I, “but you had better come nearer the stove.”

She started, hesitated an instant, and then obeyed.

“Does this train go to Bayswater?” she asked, in a voice so deliciously soft and sweet that it seemed to thrill through me.

“Yes. Can I be of any service to you?”

“Oh, no—at least not until we reach Bayswater. I would like a carriage then.”

“We shall not be there yet these three hours.”

“Do we stop again?”

“Only at Exmouth.”

She drew a deep sigh, seemingly of relief, and settled back in her corner. By the light of the lamp that hung in its brass fixture opposite, I could see her face, that of a lovely child. Apparently she was not more than sixteen, with large blue eyes, golden hair drawn straight away from her face, and a little rosy mouth like that of a baby.

“Do you expect friends to meet you at Bayswater, my child?” I asked incidentally.

“No sir—I am going to school there.”

“It will be an awkward hour for you to arrive by yourself—one in the morning.”

“Oh, I am not afraid,” she said with an artless little laugh; “I shall go straight to the Seminary.”

So the express train thundered on, with steady, ceaseless pulsing at its iron heart, and constant roar.

Suddenly the signal whistle sounded, the train began to slacken its speed.

“Surely we’re not at Exmouth yet,” I thought, “unless I have fallen unconsciously asleep and allowed the progress of time to escape me.”

I glanced at my watch; it was barely half past eleven, and I knew we were not due at Exmouth until a few minutes after twelve. I rubbed the frost from the window pane and looked out.

We had stopped at a lonely way station in the midst of dense pine woods.

“Is this Exmouth?”

It was the soft voice of the pretty traveler opposite.

“No—I don’t know what place it is; some way station.”

“Does this train stop at way stations?”

“Never generally; they must have been especially signaled here. You are cold, my child—your voice trembles.”

“It is cold,” she said in a scarcely audible tone, drawing her shawl around her. “Oh, I wish they would hurry on!”

“We are moving once more,” I said. “Conductor,” for the man of the tickets was passing through the car—“why did we stop at that backwoods place?”

“Out of water,” was the reply, as he hurriedly passed by.

Now I knew perfectly well that this answer was not the true solution of the matter. Our delay had not exceeded half a minute, altogether too short a time for replenishing the boilers: and where on earth was the water to come from in that desolate stretch of barren pine woods?

Five minutes afterwards the conductor reentered the car; I made room for him at my side.

“Sit down conductor – you’ve nothing to do just this minute.”

He obeyed.

“What did you mean by telling me such a lie just now?”

I spoke under my breath; he replied in the same tone.

“About what?”

“About the reason you stopped just now.” He smiled.

“To tell you the truth, I stopped to get on a single passenger—a gentleman who has come down from Bayswater.”

“For the pleasure of traveling once more over the same route?”

“Exactly so—for the pleasure of traveling in certain society. Don’t be alarmed for your own safety—it’s a detective policeman.”

“A—”

I was about to repeat the words in astonishment, when he motioned me to silence.

“And who is the offender?”

“I don’t know myself yet. He doesn’t want a scene until the moment of arrest: we are safe enough until we reach Bayswater.”

“Where is he?”

“The detective? He sits by the door yonder, with a ragged fur cap pulled over his eyes. Did you ever see a more perfect specimen of the dilapidated countryman?”

I smiled; I could hardly help it.

“What is the case?”

“A murder—a man and his wife and two little children—their throats cut, last night, and the house set fire to afterwards.”

“Great Heavens! What a monster!”

We had continued the conversation throughout in a whisper, scarcely above our breath; and now the conductor rose and left me to study the faces of my fellow passengers, with curious dread and horror.

Somehow, often as I revolved the matter in my mind, my fancy *would* settle on a coarse, gross looking man opposite, with a bushy beard and a coat of shaggy wool, with the collar turned up round his ears. I felt convinced that this man, with the brutal eyes, and the heavy, hanging jaws, was the Cain! And as I looked furtively across I caught the wide open blue orbs of the fair little girl.

Obedying the instantaneous impulse of my heart, I rose and went over to her.

“You heard what we were saying, my child?”

“Yes—a murder—oh, how horrible!”

“Do not be frightened—no one shall hurt you.”

She smiled up in my face with sweet confiding innocence.

Our stay at Exmouth was but brief; but during the delay I could see that the watchful detective had changed his seat to one nearer the brutish man in the shaggy overcoat.

“See,” faltered the young girl—“they—they locked the car doors at Exmouth: they are unlocking them now.”

She was right.

“Probably they were fearful that the criminal should escape,” I remarked in an undertone.

“Will you—may I trouble you to bring me a glass of water?”

I rose and made my way towards the ice cooler by the door, but with difficulty, for the train was again under rapid motion. To my disappointment the tin goblet was chained to the shelf.

“No matter,” said she, with a winning smile, “I will come myself.”

I drew the water, and held up the cup; but instead of taking it as she approached, she brushed suddenly past me, opened the door, and rushed out upon the platform.

“Stop her! Stop her!” shouted the detective, springing to his feet. “She will be killed; conductor – brakemen – hold up!”

There was a rush—a tumult—a bustle. I was first upon the platform; but it was empty and deserted, save by a half-frozen looking brake-man who seemed horrorstricken.

“She went past me like a shadow, and jumped off as we crossed Cairn Turnpike Road,” he stammered.

“Jumped off the express train! Well” said the conductor, shrugging his shoulders, “she must have been killed instantly. What mad folly!”

“It’s five hundred dollars out of *my* pocket,” said the detective, ruefully. “I didn’t want a row before we got to Bayswater, but I was a confounded fool. A woman cornered will do anything, *I* believe!”

“What!” I ejaculated; “you surely do not mean that that child—”

“I mean,” said the detective, calmly, “that that child, as you call her, is Attila Burton, a married woman of twenty-six years old, who last night murdered four persons in cold blood, and was trying to escape to Canada. That’s what I mean!”

The train stopped, and a party of us, headed by the conductor and detective, went back to search for any trace of the beautiful young creature, whose loveliness and apparent innocence had appealed to my sympathies so earnestly. Nor was it long before we found her, lying quite dead by the side of the track, frightfully mangled by the force of the fall, and mutilated almost beyond recognition!

“Well, she’s escaped justice in this world, if not the next,” said the detective, gloomily, as he stood looking down upon her remains.

“Do you suppose she expected to be able to spring off the moving train without injury?” I asked.

“Without *much* injury—yes; women are unreasoning creatures. But I never dreamed of such insane folly, or I should have taken prompt measures to prevent it.”

They lifted up the fair, dead thing, and carried her to the nearest place of refuge—a lonely farm house among the frozen hills, and we returned to the train, reaching Bayswater only a few minutes behind our regular time.

And when in the next morning's papers I read the account of the murder and the tragic end of the murderess, I thought of the slender creature's blue eyes, and rosebud mouth, with a strange pitying thrill at my heart.

The New York Ledger, January 5, 1867
The Wyandot Pioneer [Upper Sandusky, OH], January 10, 1867
The Tioga County Agitator [Wellsboro, PA], March 6, 1867
The Herald and Torch Light [Hagerstown, MD] March 20, 1867
Woodstock [IL] Sentinel, July 18, 1867
Bangor [ME] Daily Whig and Courier, August 10, 1867
Lafayette County Democrat [Darlington, WI], September 20, 1867
Bellows Falls [VT] Times, October 25, 1867
The Weekly Pantagraph [Bloomington, IL], November 20, 1867
The Summit County Beacon [Akron, OH], November 21, 1867
The Fayetteville [TN] Observer, March 12, 1868
Lancaster [PA] Intelligencer, June 5, 1868
Republican Banner [Nashville, TN], October 30, 1870
Xenia [OH] Gazette, November 15, 1870
Republican Journal [Belfast, ME], November 24, 1870
Chippewa Herald [Chippewa Falls, WI], November 26, 1870
Marshall County Republican [Plymouth, IN], December 15, 1870
Hartford [VT] Daily Courier, December 17, 1870
Weekly Trinity Journal [Weaverville, CA], January 28, 1871

Reprinted as
“Escape from Justice” in

Daily Dispatch [Richmond, VA]. December 23, 1871
New Orleans [LA] Republican, December 31, 1871
Burlington [VT] Daily Free Press and Times, January 6, 1872
The Daily Bee [Sacramento, CA], January 13, 1872
Rutland [VT] Weekly Herald, January 18, 1872
The North Star [Danville, VT], January 26, 1872
The Middlebury [VT] Register, March 5, 1872
Ottumwa [IO] Weekly Courier, June 20, 1872

as “A Memorable Night” in

Hazleton [PA] Sentinel, September 10, 1881—with the subtitle “Incident on a Railway Express Train—A Woman's Fatal Jump”