

My Letter of Introduction

by Judge Clark

“I’m sorry I can’t go up to London with you,” said Mr. Bridgnorth, who had just crossed the Channel with me, as we stood chatting at the Dover railway station, whither he had come to see me off.

Our brief acquaintance, struck up the night before on the Calais packet, had been rendered so agreeable by Mr. Bridgnorth’s affability, that I was more than half prepared, if not to dispute the dogma that gruffness is the predominating feature of English manners, at least to admit that it is a rule not without exception.

“It would afford me pleasure,” he added, “to act the part of ‘guide, philosopher, and friend,’ on your first visit to the great metropolis; but since that cannot be,—business before pleasure, you know—I’ve written a letter to a chum of mine in town, which you would do well to present as soon as possible, for he’s a connoisseur in city life, and will see you suitably bestowed.”

I thanked my new friend for his kindness, put his letter in my pocket, and, bidding him many warm adieux, hurried, at the call of the guard, to take my place aboard the train.

I was followed up the steps by a thick-set and rather coarse-featured man, who, besides myself, was the sole occupant of the compartment. The door was locked, the bell rung, and the train set in motion.

The stout gentleman busied himself, for a time, with his newspaper, and then threw it down with a grunt. The next half hour he looked out of the window, his face betokening anything but pleasure at the prospect, the charms of which were not heightened by the effect of a dull autumn drizzle.

Turning about, with another grunt, his deep-set, gray eyes glanced over me keenly.

“Do you know the—the gentleman you were talking with just before the train started?” he asked, in a quick, sharp voice.

“I do,” I answered—mentally adding, “Inquisitiveness, I see, isn’t exclusively a Yankee trait.”

“Seems to me I’ve seen him before—what might his name be?” was the next question.

“Bridgnorth.”

“And your own?”

“Hanley.”

I was more amused than annoyed at this cross-examination.

“How long have you known Mr. Bridgnorth?” continued my inquisitor.

“Since we got on the Calais boat together last evening,” I replied.

“Humph!”

I thought it was now my turn.

“Do you reside in London?” I began.

“Yes.”

“May I inquire your name?”

“MacGrumlie.”

“Scotch extraction, I presume?”

“Can’t say—never saw the family tree.”

“Nor need you wish to, if it’s known by its fruit,” was the retort I had on the top of my tongue, but I left it there.

“By the way,” I said, after a pause, “Mr. Bridgnorth was kind enough to give me a letter of introduction to a friend of his; perhaps, on our arrival, you can direct me to the place mentioned in the address.”

“What is it?”

I showed him the superscription.

With another of his “humphs!” he handed the letter back.

“Do you want to go there at once?” he inquired.

“I might as well,” said I; “I have no acquaintances in London, and Mr. Bridgnorth has assured me of his friend’s kindly offices.”

“I’ll show you the way,” Mr. MacGrumlie was kind enough to say. “It’s on my road home. You

can leave your luggage at the station, and we'll take a cab together."

This agreed to, the conversation flagged, in spite of all efforts on my part to revive it. I couldn't help contrasting the hours so lately enlivened by Bridgnorth's wit and gayety, with those whose tedium had nothing to relieve it but MacGrumlie's ever-recurring soliloquies of "humphs!" and grunts.

It was dark when we reached the city. My companion hailed a cab, gave the driver the direction, and jumping in by my side, we were soon rattling down a shabby, ill-lighted street.

"Here you are!" said MacGrumlie, as we checked up in front of a somber-looking building.

Few words were spent in leave-taking. I got out, paid my share of the fare, and having, with difficulty, distinguished the number on the door, I rang the bell, while the cab turned the next corner.

Several minutes elapsed, and I was on the point of giving the knob another pull, when I heard steps inside. The door opened, and a not very prepossessing male servant growled:

"What do you want?"

"I have a letter for Mr. Fitz Quagg," I said; "is he in?"

"Gimmie it, an' I'll see," said the lackey, snatching rather than receiving the letter from my hand.

Without inviting me to enter, he slammed the door in my face, and I heard his heavy tramp retreating.

After another delay, and a sound of lighter footsteps, the door was again opened, and a youngish-looking man, in a garb, as revealed by the imperfect light, which appeared more flashy than genteel, stood before me.

"Sorry to 'av kept you waiting, Mr. Hanley," he said, seizing my hand, cordially. "Have read Bridg's letter—capital fellow, Bridg. Any friend of his always welcome. Just going to dine with a few friends. Must join us. Good way to introduce you. Come, Dick,"—turning to his surly servant—"run ahead, and tell them to put another name in the pot."

Cutting short my acknowledgements, Mr. Fitz Quagg took my arm, and we sauntered leisurely along. As we turned a corner to go down a street less inviting, if anything, than the one we had left, I caught a glimpse, I fancied, of a form, on the other side of the way, much resembling the burly figure of MacGrumlie.

We stopped, at length, before a door at which my companion knocked peculiarly. We were at

once admitted, and Mr. Fitz Quagg led the way to a room lighted by a dim lamp, where, half invisible in an atmosphere of smoke, sat three of his familiar spirits, each with a pipe in his mouth.

“I say, Dick,” said Fitz Quagg—the ceremony of introduction over—“fill us up the glasses while we’re waiting for the solids.”

Soon each man had a tumbler of punch before him.

“Here’s to our better acquaintance—no heeltaps, mind!” called the hilarious Fitz Quagg, rising and draining his joram in honor of the sentiment.

Out of sheer politeness I swallowed the abominable stuff, though the taste half sickened me. In a few seconds my head began to whirl. Fitz Quagg and his friends seemed to be spinning round the room. The clouds of smoke thickened. My temples throbbed. A dull heaviness settled on my brain, and, at last, came unconsciousness.

How long it was before my faculties returned I do not know; but when they did, my companions had disappeared. I felt for my watch to note the time. It was gone, and my pocketbook and money with it. The truth flashed upon me.

“Drugged and robbed!” I exclaimed.

“You’ve hit it exactly,” answered a voice which I had heard before; and turning about my eyes fell on the impassive face of the gruff MacGrumlie.

“Never mind,” he continued; “your property and the robbers are both safe at the station house. The fellow you parted with this morning is a noted thief, whose face having grown too familiar in London, he has been plying his trade on the Continent of late. Ascertaining, probably, that you had a large sum about you, he came across the Channel in your company, but finding no safe chance to pick your pocket by the way, and not daring to follow you further, he commended you to the kind offices of his city friends, trusting to their honor to remit him his share of the spoil.

“As an old detective, I had little difficulty in fathoming his scheme, as soon as I learned he had given you a letter. So I kept close watch on your movements from the moment you left the cab, which I dismissed immediately after. Then waiting till things had gone far enough to insure the rogues a good term of penal servitude, I summoned assistance and pounced upon them before they could make off with their plunder.”

The New York Ledger, January 25, 1879