

A Perilous Journey

I was getting four hundred dollars a year for my services in Pinkey's Private Detective Bureau—and I suppose at the time, without much experience in the detective business, a mere student or apprentice as it were—it was all I was worth. But I had a sanguine disposition and was trusting to make my way eventually to fame and possible fortune. This accomplished I should be able to offer the fair Alice Morton my hand and a suitable home; my heart she already had, and I was treasuring the memory of Alice's last words at Christmas. "Wait and hope, Guy, dear; wait and hope. Certainly it's so easy to."

"Governor wants you, Westwood. He's sharp this morning, very sharp; so look out," said a fellow officer to me one day.

"You understand a little Italian, I think," said Mr. Pinkey.

"A little, sir."

"You will start to-morrow for Florence in the Asia. Get there as rapidly as possible, and find whether a Colonel Wilson is residing there, and what lady he is residing with. Learn all you can of his position and means, and the terms on which he lives with that lady. Write to me and wait there for further instructions. Mr. Williams will give you a check for \$1,000; you can get circular notes for \$500, and the rest cash. If you have anything to say, come in here at 5 o'clock; if not good morning. By-the-by, say nothing to the office."

I need not say that hope made me believe my opportunity was come.

I hurried to Florence, and discharged my mission; sent home a careful letter, full of facts without comment or opinion, and in three weeks' time was summoned to return. I had done little or nothing that could help me, and in a disappointed state of mind, I packed up and went to the railway station at St. Dominic. A little muss with a peasant as to his demand for carrying my baggage caused me to lose the last train that night, and so the steamer at Leghorn. The station-master seeing my vexation, endeavored to console me.

"There will be a special through train to Leghorn at 9 o'clock ordered for Count Spezzato; he is good natured, and will possibly let you go in that."

It was worth the chance, and I hung about the station till I was tired and then walked back toward the village. Passing a small wine shop I entered, and asked for wine in English. I don't know what whim possessed me when I did it, for they were unable to understand me without dumb motions. I at length got wine by these means, and sat down to while away the time over a railway volume.

I had been seated about half an hour, when a courier entered, accompanied by a railway guard. Two more different examples of the human race it would be difficult to describe.

The guard was a dark, savage-looking Italian, with “rascal” and “bully” written all over him; big, black, burly, with blood-shot eyes, and thick, heavy, sensual lips, the man was utterly repulsive. The courier was a little, neatly-dressed man of no age in particular; pale, blue-eyed, straight-tipped, his face was a compound of fox and rabbit that only a fool or a patriot would have trusted out of arm’s length.

This ill-matched pair called for brandy, and the host set it before them. I then heard them ask who and what I was. He replied I must be an Englishman, and did not understand the Italian for wine. He then left.

They evidently wanted to be alone, and my presence was decidedly disagreeable to them; and muttering that I was an Englishman, they proceeded to try my powers as a linguist.

The courier commenced in Italian, with a remark on the weather. I immediately handed the newspaper. I didn’t speak Italian—that was clear to them.

The guard now struck in with a remark in French as to the fineness of the neighboring country. I shrugged my shoulders and produced my cigar case. French was not very familiar to me evidently.

“Those beasts of English think their own tongue so fine that they are too proud to learn another,” said the guard.

I sat quietly sipping my wine and reading.

“Well, my dear Michael Pultuski,” began the guard.

“For the love of God call me not by that name. My name is Alexis—Alexis Dzentol now.”

“Oh! Oh!” laughed the guard, “you have changed your name, you fox; it’s like you. Now I am the same that you knew fifteen years ago, Conrad Ferrante—to-day, yesterday and for life, Conrad Farrante. Come, lad, tell us your story. How did you get out of that little affair at Warsaw? How they could have trusted you, with your face, with their secrets, I can’t for the life of me tell; you look so like a sly knave, don’t you, lad?”

The courier, so far from resenting this familiarity, smiled as if he had been pleased.

“My story is soon said. I found, after my betrayal to the police of the secrets of that little conspiracy which you and I joined, that Poland was too hot for me, and my name too well known. I went to France, who values her police, and for a few years was useful to them, But it was dull work; very dull; native talent was more esteemed. I was to be sent on a secret service to Warsaw; I declined for obvious reasons.”

“Good! Michael—Alexis; good Alexis. This fox is not to be trapped.” And he slapped the courier on the shoulder heartily.

“And,” resumed the other, “I resigned. Since then I have traveled as courier for noble families, and I trust I give good satisfaction.”

“Good! Alexis; good, Mich—good Alexis; to yourself you give satisfaction. You are a fine rascal—the prince of rascals! So decent, so quiet; so like a cure of a convent. Who would believe that you had sold the lives of thirty men for a hundred rubles?”

“And who,” interrupted the courier, “would believe that you, bluff, honest Conrad Ferrate, had run away with all the money those thirty men had collected during ten years of labor, for rescuing their country from the Russian?”

“This was good, Alexis, was it not? I never was so rich in my life as then—I loved, I gamed, I drank, on the patriots’ money.”

“For how long? Three years?”

“More—and now have none left. Ah! times change, Alexis; behold me.” And the guard touched his buttons and belt, the badges of his office. “Never mind—here’s my good friend the bottle—let us embrace—the only friend that is always true—if he does not gladden, he makes us to forget.”

“Tell me, my good Alexis, whom do you rob now? Who pays for the best and gets second best? Whose money do you invest, eh! my little fox? Why are you here? Come, tell me, while I drink to your success.

“I have the honor to serve his Excellency the Count Spezzato.”

“Ten thousand devils! My accursed cousin!” broke in the guard. “He who has robbed me from his birth, whose birth itself was a vile robbery of me—of me, his cousin, child of my father’s brother. May he be accursed forever!”

I took [the] most particular pains to appear only amused at this genuine outburst of passion, for I saw the watchful eye of the courier was on me all the time they were talking.

The guard drank a tumbler full of brandy.

“That master of yours is the man of whom I spoke to you years ago, as one who had ruined me; and you serve him? May he be strangled on his wedding night, and cursed forever!”

“Be calm, my dearest Conrad—calm yourself; that beast of an Englishman will think you are drunk, like one of his own swinish people, if you talk so loud as this.”

“How can I help it? I must talk. What he is that I ought to be; I was brought up to it till I was eighteen; was heir to all his vast estate; there was but one life between me and power—my uncle’s—and he at fifty married a girl and had this son, this son of perdition, my cousin. And after that, I, who had been the pride of my family, became no account; it was Julian, ‘sweet Julian!’”

“I heard,” said the courier, “that someone attempted to strangle the sweet child that was—?”

“Me—your fox—me. I wish I had done it; but for that watch dog that worried me I should have been Count Spezzato now. I killed that dog, killed him, no, not suddenly; may his master die like him!”

“And you left him after that little affair?”

“Oh, yes; I left and became what you know me.”

“A clever man, my dear Conrad. I know no man who is more clever with the ace than yourself, and, as to bullying to cover a mistake, you are an emperor at that. Is it not so, Conrad? Come drink good health to my master your cousin.”

“You miserable viper, I’ll crush you if you ask me to drink again. I’ll drink—here give me the glass.”

“Here’s to Count Spezzato: May he die like a dog! May his carcass bring the birds and wolves together! May his name be cursed and hated while the sun lasts! And may purgatory keep him till I pray for his release!”

The man’s passion was something frightful to see, and I was more than half inclined to leave the place, but something, perhaps a distant murmur of the rising tide, compelled me to stay. I pretended to sleep, allowing myself to sink down on the table.

He sat still for a moment and then commenced walking about the room and asked abruptly:

“What brought you here, Alexis?”

“My master’s horse, Signor Conrad.”

“Good, my little fox; but why did you come on your master’s horse?”

“Because my master wishes to reach Leghorn tonight, to meet his bride, Conrad.”

“Then his is a special train ordered at 9, that I am to go with?” exclaimed the guard eagerly.

“That is so, gentle Conrad; and now, having told you all, let me pay our hostess and go.”

“Pay! No one pays for me, little fox; no, no, go; I will pay.”

The courier took his departure, and the guard kept walking up and down the room muttering to himself:

“To-night—it might be to-night. If he goes to Leghorn, he meets his future wife; another life and p[e]rhaps a dozen. No, it must be tonight or never. Does his mother go? Fool that I am to ask! Yes, it shall be to-night;” and he left the room.

What should be to-night? Some foul play of which the count would be the victim, no doubt. But how? When? That must be solved. To follow him or to wait—which? To wait. It is always best to wait. I had learned this lesson already.

I waited. It was rather more than 8:30 o’clock, and I had risen to go to the door when I saw the guard returning to the wine shop with a man whose dress indicated the stoker.

“Come in, Guido; come in,” said the guard; “and drink with me.”

The man came in and again I was absorbed in my book.

They seated themselves at the same table as before, and drank silently for a while; presently the guard began a conversation in some patoise I could not understand; but I could see the stoker grew more and more interested as the name of Beatrix occurred more frequently.

As the talk went on, the stoker seemed pressing the guard on some part of the story with a most vindictive eagerness, repeatedly asking: “His name? The accursed! His name?”

At last the guard answered: “The Count Spezzato.”

“The Count Spezzato?” said the stoker, now leaving the table and speaking in Italian.

“Yes, good Guido, the man who will travel in the train we take tonight to Leghorn.”

“He shall die! The accursed! He shall die tonight!” said the stoker. “If I lose my life, the betrayer of my sister shall die!”

The guard returning to the unknown tongue, seemed to be endeavoring to calm him; I could only catch a repetition of the word “Empoli” at intervals. Presently the stoker took from the seat beside him two tin bottles, such as you may see in the hands of mechanics who dine out; and I could see that one of them had rudely scratched on it the name “William Atkinson.” I fancied that the guard produced from his pocket a vial, and poured the contents into that bottle; but the action was so rapid, and the corner so dark, that I

could not be positive; then rising, they stopped at the counter, had both bottles filled with brandy, and went out.

A little in front of me, by the light from a small window, I saw these two cross themselves, grip each others' hands across, right to right, left to left, and part.

The stoker had set down the bottles, and now taking them up followed the guard at a slower pace.

Arrived at the station, I found the count, his mother, a female servant, and the courier.

The count came up to me and said in broken English: "You are the English to go to Leghorn with me? Very well, there is room."

I explained that I was an American.

"Ah, good!" he exclaimed. "I like the American. Garibaldi he like the American. You shall pay nothing, because I do not sell tickets; you shall go free. Is that so?"

I thanked him in the best Italian I could muster.

"Do not speak your Italian to me; I speak the English as a native; I can know all you can say to me in your own tongue. See, here is the train special, as you call it. Enter as it shall please you."

The train drew up to the platform; and I saw that the stoker was at his post, and that the engine driver was an Englishman.

I endeavored in vain to draw his attention to warn him, and was compelled to take my seat, which I did in the compartment next the guard's beak—the train consisting only the car and another, in which were the count, his mother, and the servant.

The guard passed along the train, locked the doors, and entered his box.

"The Florence goods is behind you the Sienna goods is due at Empoli Junction four minutes before you; mind you don't run into it," said the station-master, with a laugh.

"No fear, we shall not run into it," said the guard, with a marked emphasis on "we" and "it" that I recalled afterward.

The whistle sounded, and we were off. It was a drizzling dark night; and I lay down full length on the seat to sleep.

As I lay down, a gleam of light shot across the carriage from a small clink in the woodwork of the partition between the compartment and the guard's box.

I was terribly anxious from the manner of the guard; and this seemed to be the means of hearing something more. I lay down and listened attentively.

“How much will you give for your life, my little fox?” said the guard.

“To-day very little; when I am 60, all I have, Conrad.”

“You might give something for it tonight, sweet Alexis, if you knew it was in danger?”

“I have no fear; Conrad Ferrate has too often conducted a train for me to fear to-night.”

“True, my good Alexis; but this is the last train he will ride with as guard, for to-morrow he will be the Count Spezzato.”

“How? To-morrow? You joke, Conrad. The brandy was strong; but you who have drunk so much could hardly feel that.”

“I neither joke, nor am I drunk; yet I shall be Count Spezzato to-morrow, good Alexis. Look you, my gentle fox, my sweet fox; if you do not buy your life of me, you shall die tonight. That is simple, sweet fox.”

“Ay; but Conrad, I am not in danger.”

“Nay, Alexis; see here is the door,” (I heard him turn the handle.) “If you lean against the door you will fall out and be killed. Is it not simple?”

“But, good Conrad, I shall not lean against the door.”

“Oh, my sweet fox, my cunning fox, my timid fox, but not my strong fox! You will lean against the door. I know you will, unless I prevent you; and I will not prevent you, unless you give me all you have in that bag.”

The mocking tone of the guard seemed well understood, for I heard the click of gold.

“Good, my Alexis; it is good; but it is very little for a life. Come, what is your life worth, that you buy it with your master’s money? It has cost you nothing. I see you will lean against that door which is so foolish.”

“What, in the name of all the saints will you have?” said the trembling voice of the courier.

“Only a little more; just that belt that is under your shirt, under everything, next to your skin, and dearer to you; only a little soft leather belt with pouches in it. Is not [your] life worth a leather belt?”

“Wretch, all the earnings of my life are in that belt, and you know it.”

“Is it possible, sweet fox, that I have found your nest? I shall give Marie a necklace of diamonds, then. Why do you wait? Why should you fall from a train, and make a piece of news for the papers? Why?”

“Take it; and be accursed in your life and death;” and I heard the belt flung on the floor of the car.

“Now, good Alexis, I am in funds; there are three pieces of gold for you; you will need them at Leghorn. Will you drink? No! Then I will tell you why without drink. Do you know where we are?”

“Yes; between St. Dommico and Sigua.”

“And do you know where we are going?”

“Yes, to Leghorn.”

“No, my sweet Alexis, we are not; we are going to Empoli; the train will go no further. Look you little fox; we shall arrive at the junction one minute before the Sienna goods train, and there the engine will break down just where the rails cross—for two blows of a hammer will convert the engine into a log; I shall get out to examine it; that will take a little time; I shall explain to the count the nature of the injury; that will take a little time; and then the goods train will have arrived; and as it does not stop there, this train will go no further than Empoli, and I shall be Count Spezzato tomorrow. How do you like my scheme, little fox? Is it not worthy of your pupil? Oh! it will be a nice accident; it will fill the papers. That beast of an English who begged his place into the train will be fortunate; he’ll cease to live, for goods trains are heavy. Eh! But it’s a grand scheme—the son, the mother, the servant, the stranger, the engine driver, all shall tell no tales!”

“And the stoker?” said the courier.

“Oh, you and he and I shall escape. We shall be pointed at in the streets as fortunate. It is good, is it not, my fox? I have told him that the count is the man who betrayed his sister. He believes it, and is my creature. But, my little fox, it was not my cousin, it was myself that took his Beatrix from her home. Is it not good, Alexis? Is it not genius? And Atkinson—he, the driver—is now stupid; he has drunk from his can the poppy juice that will make him sleep forever. I will be a politician. I am worthy of office. I will become a minister of a Bourbon, when I am count, my dear fox, and you shall be my comrade again as of old.”

I was, for a time, lost to every sensation save that of hearing. The fiendish garrulity of the man had all the fascination of the serpent’s rattle. I felt helplessly resigned to a certain fate.

I was aroused by something white slowly passing the closed window of the car. I waited a little, then gently opened it and looked out. The stoker was crawling along the footboard of the next car, and holding on by its handles, so as not to be seen by the occupants; and holding the signal lantern that I had noticed at the back of the last car in his hand. The meaning of it struck me in a moment; if, by any chance, we missed the goods train from Sienna we should be run into from behind by the train from Florence. The cold air that blew in at the open window refreshed me, and I could think what could be done. The train was increasing its pace rapidly. Evidently the stoker, in the sole charge, was striving to reach Empoli before the other train, which we should follow, was due; he had to make five minutes in a journey of forty-five, and at the rate we were going we should do it. We stopped nowhere, and the journey was more than half over. We were now between Segna and Monteinpo; another twenty minutes and I should be a bruised corpse. Something must be done.

I decided soon. Unfastening my bag, I took out my revolver, without which I never travel, and fastened it to my waist with a han[d]kerchief. I then cut with my knife the bar across the middle of the window and carefully looked out. I could see nothing; the rain was falling fast, and the night was dark as ever. I cautiously put out one leg and then the other, keeping my knees and toes close to the door, and lowered myself till I felt the step. I walked carefully along the foot-board by side-steps, holding on to the handles of the doors, till I came to the end of the cars and was next the tender. Here was a gulf that seemed impassable. The stoker must have passed over—why not I? Mounting from the foot-board on to the buffer, and holding on to the iron hook on which the lamps are hung, I stretched my legs to reach the flat part of the buffer on the tender. My legs swung about with the vibration, and touched nothing. I must spring. I had hold with both hands behind my back, and soon on the case of the buffer-spring, and, suddenly leaving go, leaped forward, struck violently against the edge of the tender and grasped some of the loose lumps of coal on the top. I stood up, and at that moment the stoker opened the door of the furnace, and turned toward me, shovel in hand, to put in the coals. The bright red light from the fire enabled him to see me, while it blinded me. He rushed at me, and then began a struggle that I shall remember until my dying day. He grasped me round the throat with one arm, dragging me close to his breast, and with the other kept shortening the shovel for an effective blow. My hands, numbed and bruised were almost useless to me, and for some seconds we reeled to and fro on the foot-plate in the blinding glare. At last he got me against the front of the engine, and with horrible ingenuity, pressed me against it till the lower part of my clothes were burnt to a cinder. The heat, however, restored my hands, and at last I managed to push him far enough from my body to loosen my pistol. I did not want to kill him, but I could not be very careful, and I fired at his shoulder from the back. He dropped the shovel, the arm that had nearly throttled me relaxed, and he fell. I pushed him into a corner of the tender, and sat down to recover myself.

My object was to get to Empoli before the Sienna goods train, for I knew nothing of what might be behind me. I was too late to stop, but I might, by shortening the journey seven minutes instead of five, get to Emopli three minutes before the goods train was due.

I had never been on an engine before in my life, but I knew there must be a valve somewhere that let the steam from the boiler into the cylinders and that, being important, it would be in a conspicuous position. I therefore turned the large handle in front of me, and had the satisfaction of finding the speed rapidly increased, and at the same time felt the guard putting on the brake to retard the train. Spite of this, in ten minutes I could see some dim lights; I could not tell where, and I still pressed on, faster and faster.

In vain, between the intervals of putting on the coals, did I try to arouse the sleeping driver. There I was, with two apparently dead bodies on the foot plate of an engine, going at the rate of forty miles an hour, or more, amidst a thundering noise and vibration that nearly maddened me.

At last we reached the lights, and I saw, as I dashed by, that we had passed the deadly point.

As I turned back, I could see the rapidly dropping cinders from the train which, had the guard's brake been sufficiently powerful to have made me thirty seconds later, would have utterly destroyed me.

I was still in a difficult position. There was a train half a minute behind us, which had we kept our time would have been four minutes in front of us. I came on to the same rails, and I could hear its dull rumble rushing on toward us fast. If I stopped there was no light to warn them. I must go on for the Sienna train did not stop at Empoli.

I put on more fuel, and after some slight scalding, from turning on the wrong taps, had the pleasure of seeing the water gauge fill up. Still, I could not go on long; the risk was awful. I tried in vain to write on a leaf of my notebook, and after searching in the tool box wrote on the iron lid of the tank with a piece of chalk: "Stop everything behind me. The train will not be stopped till three red lights are ranged in a line on the ground. Telegraph forward." And then, as we flew through the Empoli station, I threw it on the platform. On we went; the same dull thunder behind warning me that I dare not stop.

We passed through another station at full speed, and, at length I saw the white lights of another station in the distant. The sound behind had almost ceased, and in a few minutes more I saw the line of three red lamps low down on the ground. I pulled back the handle, and after an effectual effort to pull up at the station, brought up the train about one hundred yards from Pontedera.

The porters and police of the station came up and put the train back, and then came the explanation.

The guard had been found dead on the rails just beyond Empoli, and the telegraph set to work to stop the train. He must have found out the failure of the scheme, and in trying to reach the engine, have fallen on the rails.

The driver was only stupefied, and the stoker fortunately only dangerously, not fatally, wounded.

Another driver was found and the train was to go on.

The count had listened most attentively to my statements, and the, taking my grimed hand in his, led me to his mother.

“Madam, my mother, you have from this day one other son; this my mother, is my brother.”

The countess literally fell on my neck, and kissed me in the sight of them all; and, speaking in Italian, said:

“Julian, he is my son; he had saved my life, and more, he has saved your life. My son, I will not say much; what is your name?”

“Guy Westwood.”

“Guy, my child, my son, I am your mother; you shall love me.”

“Yes, my mother; he is my brother. I am his. He is American too. I like American. He has done well. Blanche shall be his sister.”

During the whole of this time both mother and son were embracing me and kissing my cheeks, after the impulsive manner of their passionate natures, the indulgence of which appears so strange to our cold blood.

The train was delayed for my wounds and bruises to be dressed, and I then entered their carriage and went to Leghorn with them.

Arrived there, I was about to say farewell.

“What is farewell now? No; you must see Blanche, your sister. You will sleep to my hotel; I shall not let you go. Who is she that your great book says: “Where you go I will go?” That is my spirit. You must not leave me till—till you are as happy as I am.”

He kept me, introduced me to Blanche, and persuaded me to write for leave to stay another two months when he would return to America with me. Little by little he made me talk about Alice till he knew my whole story.

“Ah! that is it; you shall be unhappy because you want three thousand dollars every year, and I have so much as that. I am a patriot to get rid of my money. So it is that you will not take money. You have saved my life and you will not take money; but I shall make you take money, my friend American Guy; you shall have as thus.”

And he handed me my appointment as secretary of one of the largest railways in Italy.

“Now you will take money; now you shall not go to your far-off land to work like a slave; you shall take the money. That is not all. I am one of the practice patriots—not the practical patriots—of Italy. They come to me with their conspiracies to join, their secret societies to adhere to, but I do not. I am director of railways many. I make fresh directions every day. I say to those who talk to me about politics: ‘How many shares will you take in this or that?’ I am printer of books; I am builder of museums; I have great share in dock, and I say to these: ‘It is this I am doing that is wanted.’ This is not conspiracy; it is not plot; it is not society with ribbons; but it is what Italy my country wants. I grow poor; I truly grows rich. I am not wise in these things; they cheat me because I am enthusiast. Now Guy, my brother, you are wise; you are deep—long in the head; in short you are American. You shall be my guardian in these things; you shall save me from the cheat and you shall work as hard as you like for all the money you shall take of me. Come, my Guy, is it so?”

Need I say it was so. The count and Blanche made the honeymoon tour through the northern states. They spent Christmas with Alice and myself at the Morton’s and when they left, Alice and I left with them for our new home in Florence.

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