

Tricked and Tracked

PART I. —TRICKED.

IT is now some years ago since an incident occurred in my life, which may possibly prove interesting to those who, like myself, are too easily imposed upon; and although by the recital, I hold myself open to the ridicule of the mind masculine, which, by its own showing, is never duped or deceived by imposters, yet, in order to warn those of my own sex who are more readily wrought upon, I will narrate, as nearly as I can, a strange adventure which befell me during the winter of 1869.

I am the wife of an English officer, and, at the time of which I write, was residing in Paris. Late in June, my husband had received orders to be in readiness to sail with his regiment for C. the following month; but, as his absence was not likely to be of long duration, I had decided not to accompany him, and had determined to make Paris my headquarters during the time of our enforced separation.

The preparations for his departure had to be pressed forward with all expedition, and, as is so often the case when time is valuable, every possible difficulty seemed to crop up to hinder the progress of our work.

The culminating point at last arrived, when my husband's body-servant fell suddenly ill, and sent in his resignation the very week they were expecting to start. We at once made inquiries on all sides for a man competent of filling the vacant post. In this instance, fortune smile upon us. Just as we were beginning to despair of success, a Frenchman, who spoke very tolerable English, applied for the situation; and his references being satisfactory, we hastily engaged him, heartily glad to have brought an unpleasant affair to so fortunate a conclusion.

Although I had many friends residing in Paris, I had no near relations I could ask to remain with me during my temporary exile: my husband's people all lived in Ireland, and, with the exception of a few scattered cousins, my only existing relative was one brother (some years younger than myself), to whom I was greatly attached, but who for years past had been a source of constant anxiety to me by reason of his wild and reckless manner of living. My husband had assisted him in numerous difficulties, but his patience had at last become exhausted; and he had had to tell my brother plainly and decisively, that only in case of extremity, such as an illness, which should really incapacitate him from work, or from some such urgent cause, would he supply him again with pecuniary help. Several letters passed between them at this period; then followed an interval of silence, which had remained unbroken up to the time of which I write. This naturally caused me much uneasiness at times; but I could only hope he had at length felt the necessity of putting his shoulder to the wheel, and was striving to regain the good name he had lost by his own foolish conduct.

Time passed slowly away. Many of my friends had returned to England for the winter, and I was more than ever alone; my husband had now been gone some months, and, although his letters began to breathe a vague hope of his return, I knew that some time must yet elapse before we should meet again. One evening (I remember it was the 22d of January), I was sitting by myself, vainly trying to get interested in the book I was reading, when a note was brought [to] me by one of the servants of the hotel, who said the bearer was waiting for my reply. The letter was neatly folded, and addressed in a woman's handwriting to "The Lady of Captain Ralph Branscombe," and was marked "Private." It was, however, rather a strange-looking document; and breaking the seal in a spirit of curiosity, I read the following:

"Madame — I write this to you on behalf of your brother, Monsieur Richard Willoughby, who lies at this house, dying. Would you [come to] see him alive, you must come at once — without hesitation. Madame, the gentleman is very sick — sick to death in mind and body; for he lies in fear of arrest, even in his dying state. He prays you ask your husband to assist him, as he promised, in this his last sire strait. No one but Captain Branscombe may accompany you, or know of your errand; you must bring with you fifty English pounds in gold, if possible. English money will do, but not notes. Your escort will only be a little child, but he knows every turn of the way you will have to traverse. Come on foot — to drive might excite suspicion. Monsieur repeats no one but 'Ralph' may come with you; he is too ill to write any thing more than his name, which I inclose."

Here followed a few directions about the way we were to take, and an injunction to bring the letter to guide myself with. Then the name "Maria Toisseau." Inclosed was a scrap of paper bearing my brother's signature, which I saw at once was genuine.

I turned cold as I finished the perusal of this letter, but, commanding my voice as well as I was able, I bade the servant send the bearer to me at once. I was not left long in suspense: the door of the salon was reopened, and a little figure appeared on the threshold. A fragile-looking boy, about eleven years of age, dressed in a dark blouse, which hung loosely about him, and wearing on his head a red knitted fisherman's cap, which was pulled down low on his forehead — a boy whose pale face was lighted up with large dark eyes, their long drooping lashes sweeping his delicate cheeks. He shut the door softly behind him, and gave a swift searching glance around the room; then, as though abashed by my presence, he stood with downcast eyes, his hands loosely folded before him, awaiting my questioning.

"My boy," I said, addressing him in French, "can you conduct me to this gentleman who is so ill?"

Again his dark eyes wandered about the room, as though to reassure himself that we were alone, and then he replied softly in English, though with a foreign accent,

"Surely, madame, I will; but it must be with all speed, or it will be a lost journey."

Telling him to wait for me where he was, I left the room, and hastened to prepare for my expedition. My heart sank within me at the idea of venturing out into the night with no other protector than the little child waiting below; but I nerved myself to perform the duty I felt had fallen across my path, and made up my mind to act as became a soldier's wife — fearlessly. I had about thirty sovereigns in my possession, as it happened; and making up the sum required as nearly as I could in French money, I placed it carefully in a small bag, which I hung on my arm. Dressing myself in a dark bonnet and traveling cloak, I descended quietly to my apartment, without giving intimation of my departure to any one. The child stood precisely as I had left him, with the light falling on his pale face, and his hands loosely locked in one another. I told him I was ready to start, and walked to the table by which I had been sitting to get the letter the woman had written, and which had caused me so much anxiety.

The boy then approached me, and, taking my hand in his cold ones, said, in a whisper, as his piteous eyes filled with tears:

“Madame, the gentleman bade me say to you, for the love of Heaven, and for the sake of your dead mother, bring the money.”

I showed him the little sack I carried under my cloak, and he was satisfied; we then left the hotel silently, scarcely noticed by the servants busied about the entrance-hall. Once out in the open air, I seemed to breathe more freely; but my heart was too heavy for speaking, and we pursued our way in silence.

The noise of the traffic, the light of the shops streaming across our path, and the number of foot-passengers passing and repassing us, bewildered me at first, all unaccustomed as I was to walking through the streets so late; but we pressed silently on through the ever changing crowd, and people seemed too intent on their own business to take much heed of two wayfarers like ourselves. After a time we turned into a less frequented part of the town, and the lights became less brilliant and the streets more deserted. Suddenly the boy stopped, and seemed uncertain as to which road he should take. He paused a moment; then, turning to me, said:

“Madame, I feel I have missed my way a little; but my mother told me she would give some directions in her letter; will madame give it me that I might right myself?”

Without thinking I handed him his mother's letter; and, standing beneath a neighboring lamp, he read over slowly the directions contained in the note; then, holding it still open in his hand, he resumed his walk, referring to it every now and then, as though still in doubt as to our whereabouts. There was a certain mysterious quiet about the neighborhood we were in that preyed upon my spirits — a certain silence I could not fathom; and my courage began to flag strangely as we continued our lonely road. I experienced a sensation of intense relief, therefore, when my young guide stopped suddenly before a tall, dark house in a quiet street, and I listened eagerly for an answer to his gentle tap at the closed door. A voice from within asked softly, in French: “How fares it, my son?” and in English, the boy answered: “Safely and fairly; open the door.” The

door was then unbarred and opened without the least noise, just wide enough to admit us; and we entered a hall lighted by a small lamp held by a tall woman poorly clad. The flickering flame of the lamp gave forth so dim a light that I could not distinguish her features, and she spoke in a voice scarcely above a whisper. I inquired eagerly for my brother, and begged her to conduct me to him at once. She shook her head sadly, and then said:

“Ah, Madame, your coming may do great things for him; you will be able to ease the poor mind that runs on nothing but money, money, day and night, without ceasing.”

She barred the door by which we had entered, and then preceded me up a broken staircase, the boy following us with the feeble oil-lamp. The house sounded hollow, and our footsteps echoed drearily as we went. Presently we stopped before the door of a room which I imagine to have been at the back of the house, and the woman entered first, beckoning me to follow her.

In one corner of a large, almost empty apartment was a bed, shrouded by thick, dark curtains; in the grate a low charcoal fire was burning. I made at once for the corner where the bed was, and was about to undraw the curtains which concealed from my view the poor boy I had come so mysteriously to visit. Suddenly from behind me a cloth was tied tightly over the whole of my face, a strange burning sense of suffocation overspread my senses, and I remember nothing more; all was silence, darkness, a hideous blank, until I awoke in my bedroom at the Hotel de L., with my head aching strangely and a benumbed sensation pervading my whole frame. My maid, an English doctor with whom I was slightly acquainted, and another doctor who was a stranger to me, were anxiously watching for my return to consciousness. It was quite light, and the sun was shining into the room. As one by one the events of the preceding night rose before my mind, I was utterly at a loss to imagine how I had been rescued from that horrible house and brought back to the hotel in safety.

The story was soon told. The night porter, coming on duty at one o'clock, had found me lying on the steps leading to the side door of the hotel, which opened into an unfrequented passage or street. Finding I was unconscious, he had summoned the day porter, who was waiting for him, to render assistance, and this man, knowing me by sight, identified me as a lady staying in the hotel. He at once roused the house. My maid (who was waiting up for me, wondering and alarmed at my prolonged absence) speedily procured the services of two medical men from the adjoining neighborhood, and they had since been using every method to restore me to consciousness, when I might perchance unfold the mystery of my strange return.

There was no trace of any violence having been used, nor any proof by which they could discover where I had been. The only thing they found upon me, which was not my own, was a handkerchief tightly clasped in my hand, on which were embroidered my brother Richard's initials, and which I at once recognized as having been worked by me some years previously for my unhappy brother. The money had, of course, all been taken; also

the rings, brooch, and locket I had worn. My wedding ring was left, and the bag in which I had put the money was still hanging from my arm.

As soon as I was able I told the doctors all I could remember of the past night's experiences, and, at the conclusion of the recital, they both advised me to put the matter in the hands of the police. I entreated that this might be done as privately as possible; my brother's name being so much mixed up in the affair that outsiders would most probably be led to believe that he was an accomplice in the robbery, though in my own mind I felt certain he was more sinned against than sinning.

The Sergeant of Police who waited on me showed great interest in my adventure; but I could plainly see that, notwithstanding all his civility, his suspicions pointed at once to my brother as chief agent in the case. I could swear to the signature being genuine; the handkerchief, too, I recognized. Alas, it really seemed only too certain that my brother had at all events been the companion of these people, and must have discussed our affairs freely with them, even if he were not criminally concerned in the dark transaction.

The Parisian police made every effort to trace the offenders, but in vain; house after house was searched in the quarter to which I believed myself to have been taken, but no trace of the woman or child could be found. And so for a time the matter dropped.

PART II. — TRACKED.

Two years passed, and the night of my strange adventure in Paris had become almost like a dream to me. We left France after my husband's return from abroad, and, on his quitting the army, we took up our residence in London. I had meanwhile received several letters from my brother, written from the Cape, and, in answer to one I wrote him in reference to the robbery, he replied with the most solemn assertions of his entire ignorance of the transaction. I believed him; my husband was silent on the subject, and I felt thankful the Cape was so far off. We seldom referred to the circumstances before recorded, for I could not bear to recall the horrors of that evening in the dark and desolate house.

One morning, however, I was startled by my husband saying suddenly, as he looked up from a letter he was reading:

“I say, Madge, they think they have a clew at last to your Parisian exploit; read that.”

He passed me over an official-looking letter, and I read what followed:

BUREAU DE POLICE, PARIS.

TO CAPTAIN BRANSCOMBE:

Monsieur — We believe we have in custody the boy who acted so prominent part in the robbery committed on Madame your wife, in January, 1869. He is concerned in an affair

which bears a close resemblance to the one in which your lady was the victim. Will she come herself, and if she can, identify him, and this help to clear up a matter which had long puzzled us all?"

(Signed) C

The thought of proceeding in this case was at first very distasteful to me; but so much might be brought to light by my making the effort that I resolved, by Ralph's advice, to face the disagreeable task; and, accordingly, we started for Paris that night.

I will not enter into the details of the case then under examination; suffice to say it was a robbery committed on the wife of Col. Styles, under circumstances closely resembling those of which I was the dupe. In this instance, however, a boy had been seized on suspicion, and it was this same boy I was called to identify. I had much difficulty in the matter; although he had altered in the time that had elapsed since that memorable evening, there were still those remarkable eyes, with their long, drooping lashes, and the pale, delicate face, to bear witness to this identity; and without the least hesitation I declared him to be the same boy who had guided me to the house where I had been robbed on the evening of July 22, 1869.

The boy did not seem at all disconcerted at my recognition, and even smiled in a slightly supercilious manner, as though he felt himself secure from any discovery resulting from my identification. The authorities had been unable, as yet, to elicit any information from him; he baffled all their attempts at questioning him with a skill and cunning almost incredible in so young an offender. All at once I was surprised at an exclamation from my husband who stood near me:

"Good Heavens!" he said, half audibly, "I believe I see through the whole plan; what a blockhead I was not to have thought of it before! But it was neatly planned and carried out, by Jove it was!"

He crossed the hall to where Colonel Styles was sitting, and, after speaking to him for a few minutes in a low, hurried manner, he asked leave to call a witness, who, he believed, might throw some light on the matter at hand. Permission having been granted, he said in a loud voice:

"The man calling himself Jules Fetier, body servant to Colonel Styles, and now present in this hall, is requested to stand forward."

For the first time since our entrance the boy's face fell, and he looked perplexed and rather dismayed. There was a movement in the crowd, as though some one were trying to effect a departure from the door; but the attempt being promptly frustrated, I saw them lead into the witness-box the French servant who had accompanied my husband abroad, but who had left his service upon his return to England. After some time passed in making inquiries, and eliciting very little from the cautious man before us, he was searched, and many letters of his present employer's were found upon him; and a pocket-book, which contained memoranda, proving a great deal against himself and his two

accomplices — his wife and the boy in the dock before us. No one else seemed concerned in his fraudulent transactions.

On further search the whole system of his roguery was unfolded, piece by piece. He would take service with gentlemen about to travel, imposing on their credulity with false references, and gaining their confidence by his well-trained demeanor and intelligent conversation. Once safely out of the country, he would commence his nefarious schemes, and, with the aid of this clever wife and child, carry them out successfully. Nothing was ever forgotten that could lead to the desired end. No fraud was started until the details had been thoroughly mastered by his accomplices, and the plan well matured. It is impossible to say how many people he had defrauded in different ways.

He had soon found out how matters stood between my husband and brother — partly from his own researches, and partly from a conversation he overheard between his master and a brother officer — and considering the situation a capital one for practicing his system upon, he had at once communicated with his wife, and unfolded his plans to her, sending her the signature abstracted from one of Richard's letters to act as a decoy; and also the handkerchief which Ralph happened to have taken among his own, to throw suspicion on my brother as being accessory to the robbery.

Before the examination concluded the Sergeant, who had been so long on the look-out for the perpetrators of the deed, asked my husband how he had recognized the boy as being the son of his former servant. Ralph laughed slightly as he replied:

“I believe I should have made the best detective of you all had I been on the spot. I thought I recalled the boy's features as being in some way familiar to me, but could not determine of whom he reminded me; however, as he stooped to speak to the warder, the mystery was revealed in a moment by a strange stroke of luck.”

Turning to the boy, who had lost his courageous air, and was looking crest-fallen and frightened, my husband bade him hold down his head. For the moment he refused; but on the order being peremptorily repeated, he obeyed reluctantly. From one side of his head to the other, contrasting strangely with his thick dark curls, was a streak of white hair, about half an inch wide, which shone like silver in the sunlight; then bidding the elder man remove the cap he wore, he bade him also stoop forward, which he did, with a muttered exclamation; and there again we saw the same strange white band shine out on his closely cropped head.

No link seemed wanting to complete the chain of evidence against the offenders, and the elder was at length forced to admit that the proofs were too strong for him to battle against. He begged that his wife — to whom he seemed really attached — might be treated leniently, as she was slowly but surely dying from cancer; the statement was afterwards proved to be correct, and the woman was removed to a hospital, where she lingered but a short time. The father and son were fully committed for trial, and duly found guilty. The sentences imposed upon them were of a severe nature, owing to the number of accusations brought against them.

I can only hope that when their term of imprisonment has expired, they may find people less easy to impose upon, and better able to resist their machinations than was “the lady of Captain Branscombe,” who fell so easy a prey to their duplicity and cunning that memorable evening of January 22, 1869. — *Time*.

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