A Railroad Journey

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Chapter I

"WILL you mind having the window up, old follow?" said I to Charley Howard, one foggy afternoon as we were travelling down to Scotland together, "it is a precious raw day this same twenty-ninth of February."

"Twenty-ninth of February!" repeated Charley, like a parrot, pawing with the window half up in his hand, "is it possible!"

"Possible, albeit improbable, I admit, seeing it comes but once in four years. But what on earth is the matter with you, Charley? It is Leap-year certainly, but what of that, unless you have been trifling with the affections of some fair damsel who will pursue you to make you an offer, which she is entitled to do this year! Is she after you? By Jove! I believe you are afraid she will come after you here."

"Fred," said Charley, in a subdued, quiet way very unlike himself, for he is a noisy fellow is Charley, six foot high, and always in the open air. I believe he thinks a house need only consist of a bed-room and dining-hall, with perhaps a lean-to for a billiard-table on a wet day. "You know I am not a fellow to take nervous fancies into my head; don't laugh now, if I tell you a very strange thing that happened to me on this very line, four years ago this very day."

"You nervous! well I should not have thought it certainly, although I wish my best ties were ever as white as your blessed face is at this very moment. Go ahead, Charley! But let me light my cigar to keep my spirits up; nothing like a story for sending a man to sleep—particularly yours"—which last utterance was sotto voce.

"Four years ago, to-day," began Charley, in such a solemn tone. Upon my life! I felt rather inclined to kick the fellow for making me feel drowsy before my time. "Four years ago, I was travelling on this very line—"

"You told me that before," said I: "get on—do!"

"—and, as I wanted to have a quiet smoke—"

"No harm in that," said I, approvingly; "a thing I am not averse to myself."

"—I bribed the guard to lock me in a carriage by myself—"

"Your foresight was good," said I again, "though tampering with the company's servants is forbidden."

"I had performed about half the journey in much comfort," resumed Charley, "when the train stopped at a junction station about five o'clock in the afternoon. There was a good deal of crowd on the platform, and, secure in the purchase I had made of the guard's promise, I amused myself by watching the people elbowing and pushing each other about. There was one figure, however, which attracted my attention by the contrast it formed to the rest. It was a lady, wrapped in a long white bournous, which looked cold and chilly that foggy afternoon."

"Possibly her dressing-gown," said I; "an ill-judged costume, certainly."

"She was apparently young, for the tall figure was very slender; but she had so thick a veil on her face I could not distinguish tho features. She alone seemed to know neither bustle nor hurry; she moved slowly along, with a sort of undulating motion, and with the utmost unconcern walked up and down until the bell had rung, and the train was just starting, when, to my surprise, she stopped opposite my carriage, gently opened the door, and placed herself on the opposite side to me.

'Hang the fellow!' I said I to myself, 'I thought he told me the door was locked.' But there was no time for remonstrance then, for the train had started. She sat quite still with her veil down, and I began to wish very much to see her face."

"Very pardonable, as you thought she was young," muttered I.

"There was a long bright curl hanging from beneath the veil which took my fancy very much—"

"I should have taken the curl, I think," said I.

"—So, to begin a conversation, I said I was afraid she might find the carriage smell of smoke. As I spoke, she turned her head towards me. 'I am afraid, then, sir,' she said, 'that I am a moat unwelcome intruder in your carriage, for I must have interfered with your smoking,' As she spoke, she lifted the thick veil, and—upon my life, Fred, I never saw so beautiful a face. It was a perfect oval, with beautiful soft brown eyes, very delicately traced eyebrows above them, and long lashes that rested on her cheek when she looked down."

"How they must have tickled," I once more interpolated.

"The only fault of her face was perhaps a want of colour."

"Result probably of dissipation—hot rooms," interrupted I, but Charley got impatient.

"Positively, Fred, I will tell you no more, if you won't attend."

"Attend, my dear fellow! My little remarks are all to show the unflagging attention with which I am listening. But go on, Charley, I won't say much more if I can help it."

"What more I have to say will soon be said," continued Charley, speaking more to himself than to me—which was rude, but I forgave him.

"I have seldom had a more witty and intellectual companion. She could talk of every subject below the stars and some beyond them. I can't talk to women generally; for I can't pay compliments, and never go to the opera. But this woman was as reasonable as a man, while she was as quick as a woman."

"Ah, intellectual women—wisdom and water; I know," suggested I, but this time so low that he did not hear me, and went on.

"It had meanwhile got dark, but there was a young moon, and by the uncertain light of the lamp, I could only see the soft outline of her figure and the dazzling whiteness of her face, supported by her hand on which I, for the first time, noticed a wedding-ring; but, to my surprise, the hand was streaked with blood. 'Good gracious I madam, I am afraid you have hurt your hand,' I said, starting forward.

"'I have not hurt it,' she replied faintly, 'it is stained.'

"She did not attempt to move it or to change her position, and I sat looking at it and at the wedding-ring, and wondering what her history was, i.e., thinking it must be a mournful one, for she never once smiled—not even the shadow of a smile—all the time we were talking, though we were witty enough, as I have told you—"

"I heard you say *she* was," I replied, "and don't deny the possibility of that; but from what I know of you, can scarcely credit it of you *both*."

"—when a sudden gust of wind coming whistling down the cutting, extinguished the lamp—" ("What a disagreeable smell it must have made," said I.)—"and left us in perfect darkness. 'How very unfortunate,' said I to the lady, 'just as we are coming to a tunnel, too.' I thought I heard a faint sigh and her dress rustling. I

remember thinking how cold it was in that tunnel. There was such a rush of cold damp air over us; then we began to emerge and I wondered with a kind of childish speculation how soon, by the feeble moonlight, I should be able to trace her outline on the opposite seat. I sat with my eyes fixed on it, but could see nothing. It is too dark, thought I to myself, though I could distinguish the divisions of the seats and my cloak and rug on one of them. 'We must get the lamp re-lighted,' said I, aloud, but there was no answer, and I shivered at the sound of my own voice. I bent forward and felt over the seats. I could feel nothing there. I spoilt match after match of my cigar lights, as I endeavoured to make one burn. I thought we should never stop again; at last, however, we came to a station, and I hallo'ed to the guard to light the lamp. 'The door is not locked after all your promises,' said I to him, 'take it out that way.'

"'I beg your pardon, sir,' said a porter, 'the door is locked;' and he lighted the lamp from the top.

"I was *alone* in the carriage. 'Good heavens!' said I, 'where is the lady?'

"The men stared at me. 'I tell you there was a lady here,' I repeated, 'she must have got out in the tunnel.'

"'There was no lady, sir,' said the guard; but the porter, with a mysterious face, shook his bead, and said, 'Ah, you've seen her, too, sir, have you?'

"The train, however, went on at that moment, and I had no time to investigate the subject further. Well, Fred, what do you think? Don't think me mad, for it is true."

"Mad! certainly not, my dear fellow, only a little sleepy, as indeed your most interesting story has made *me*."

"I was not asleep, Fred," replied Charley; "I was broad awake as I am now. Besides, the porter evidently knew there was a mystery."

"Oh, if you are going to make the whole thing turn upon the porter's shaking his head, I have done with you," said I, incredulously. "I could make as good a romance, and call it 'The Porter's Wink,' if that is all that is necessary. Seriously, Charley, how can you be such an old fool! You had been dreaming, or else eating cat-pie at the last station."

Charley shook his head, and began murmuring something about never eating cat-pies at stations.

"Well, at any rate," said I, " *I* did, the very last time we stopped, and I think it must have been an old Tom; the remembrance of it makes me so uncomfortable I must go to sleep at once." Thus speaking, I wrapped myself well in my rug, as I naturally did not believe a word of the narrative with which my friend Charley had favoured me.

Chapter II

I MIGHT have been asleep half an hour and more when I suddenly woke up, feeling thoroughly chilled and uneasy, and, looking up, saw Charley, who was sitting opposite me, with such a look of terror and amazement on his pale face that I immediately put down my uneasy slumbers to his account.

"Good heavens! Charley," said I, "how the dickens do you expect a fellow to sleep if you sit pulling such long faces opposite him. No wonder I couldn't keep quiet. What is the matter now? Still thinking of your mysterious fiddlesticks?"

"Hush!" said Charley, "there she is!"

I jumped round—sure enough next to the other window on my side sat a lady, wrapped, as Charley had described, in a white bournous, the curl of which he had spoken escaping from under the thick veil which concealed her face from us. I'm not such a fool as I look in general, but I must say I was a little staggered for a moment: my next impulse was to enter into conversation with her.

"I beg your pardon, madam," said I, raising my hat, "I am afraid you must have thought I used strong language just now, but I felt myself aggrieved by my friend, as I am a very light sleeper, and I considered he had disturbed me by the very disagreeable face he was making."

"I should not have thought you so light a sleeper, either, sir," replied a sweet low voice, as the lady bowed in return, "for you did not seem to heed the bustle of the Junction on my getting in."

So saying she raised her veil, and the identical soft brown eyes Charley had spoken of gazed sadly at me from her astonishingly white brow.

"Take some sherry. Charley," said I, handing him the flask, for I saw his whole frame quivering. "And may I offer you some, madam?"

"None, thank you," she replied.

Charley's hand shook so he dropped the stopper, and it rolled towards her. She picked it up, and restored it to me. Her glove was off.

"Heavens, madam! Is it broken? It has cut your hand!" I exclaimed; "it is bleeding."

"I have not hurt it, it is stained," was the quiet answer.

I was getting very uncomfortable; how was this? I know one often has a feeling when a thing takes place. I have done this before. I know exactly what is going to happen next: but it was something more than that now. Was I dreaming? Surely not, for I heard the train go whizzing on through the evening air, the occasional whistle, the flash of a light as we passed a station, stopping sometimes, and hearing feet crushing the wet gravel; while all the time Charley sat opposite, pale and strange-looking, and I could see his lip tremble when the light shone on him.

Beside me sat our silent companion, still and motionless, her face resting as Charley had described it, on the stained hand. I tried to shake off the feelings of dread that were creeping over me, and turning to her began a conversation with her. I found that Charley had indeed not exaggerated her powers of mind, and we were still talking (she and I), when I became aware of a singular movement of the carriage in which we were, which increased till we were swung violently backwards and forwards.

Then there was a tremendous crash, the carriage upset, and all seemed going to pieces. An immense spar struck the lady violently on the head. I heard a crunching of delicate bones, saw Charley sinking under another. I myself was stunned by the concussion.

When I recovered, there seemed nothing round me but a mass of broken timbers; but after a time I distinguished Charley, lying bleeding and insensible under the débris. The greater mass, however, seemed on the lady's side. I groped

my way to her, and shuddering to think what I should find there, with no expectation of there being any answer to my question, remembering what I bad heard and seen against that small head, I asked how much she was hurt?

"Not at all, I thank you," replied the sweet low voice I never thought to hear again. "How is your friend?"

"He is insensible; I cannot, I fear, extricate him. Can I assist you?"

"Do not mind me," she answered; "go at once for assistance for your friend."

"But I cannot leave you so." I was trying to remove the spars that lay over her; how she could breathe under such a weight astonished me, for I could not move one, and they lay right on her chest.

"Only assist me to extricate my hand, and then hasten away," she answered; "you cannot help me otherwise."

With the greatest exertion I managed to effect an opening, through which she passed her hand. I started, for the blood seemed fresh on it. The next moment I remembered the singular stain. I took hold of it to pull it through; it was deadly, heavy, cold, and sent a shiver to my very soul.

"Now go," she said, "yon can do no more for me, and your friend's life may be at stake. Oh go!"

I had indeed been neglecting poor Charley. I now freed his head and chest as much as I could, and then crept out to see if I could get help. It was a frightful scene as I made my way out: there were a few glaring torches, brought from the next station, which we were near, and people running madly up and down; whilst among the broken timbers you saw mangled, bleeding bodies, helplessly, hopelessly entangled. Another train running into ours seemed to have caused the accident by throwing us down an embankment. I was fortunate enough to fall in with the guard of our train (who happened to be an old servant of our family, and knew me well), directing some fellows with spades to dig for the passengers, and prevailed upon him to begin with our carriage.

I set them to work on poor Charley, who was still insensible, and climbed over to the other side to encourage the lady. I found her as I had left her.

"Make haste, my lads," said I, "the lady is still conscious."

"What lady, sir!" said the guard, coming towards me. "There was no one in the carriage yon recollect, Mr. Frederick, but you and the poor gentleman. You told me to lock you in."

"But there *was* a lady, I tell you, got in afterwards—there is a lady—here under our feet; help me to move these timbers, man."

The man stared at me, as if he thought me insane; but helped to remove one or two spars, and she raised herself on her arm.

"Gently, gently, man," said I. "You will let that fall on the lady's head again. Can you rise now, madam!" and I held out my hand.

"My good sir—my dear sir—there is no one there," said the guard, catching my outstretched arm. "By Heavens, I think he is gone mad! Mr. Frederick!"

"No one there—what do you mean!" said I, shaking him off. "*You* must be mad. Come, madam;" and as I touched her cold hand she rose to her feet, as if she cast the timber off her like water.

"You will set her cloak on fire, man!" I exclaimed, rushing on the guard, who was waving his torch so close to us, I thought the light garment of my companion must catch the flame.

"Now do'ee come away, sir!—there's nothing there—nothing but the broken timbers," replied the man, soothingly. "I believe the poor gentleman's head is turned," he added to one of the other men.

A fearful sensation overpowered me—was she then invisible? By this time Charley was extricated, and with the assistance of one of the men, whom I retained to help me, we carried him to the station-house. The lady walked noiselessly by our side. I do not know if the other man was aware of her presence. I almost thought that Charley felt it, unconscious as he appeared, for the expression of his face changed as she came to his side. It was a mournful walk; but we reached the station-house at last, and placed him on one of the sofas in the waiting-room. The lady stood by his side, like a tall statue, still wrapped in her white cloak. She was still standing there when I came back from inquiring for the nearest doctor; one had been sent for, and was expected to arrive immediately.

"A doctor is coming," I said; "perhaps we can do something meanwhile. Can you chafe his hands?"

"Is *this* likely to warm them?" she replied, softly, laying her icy hand for one moment on mine; the touch almost paralysed it.

"You are ill yourself!" I exclaimed. "What can I do? Rest yourself."

"Rest. Oh, Heavens!" she answered, waving me away. "Do not think of me. I *cannot* rest; attend to your friend."

The advice was good. I knelt down by Charley, loosened his cravat, and endeavoured to staunch the blood that flowed from the wound in his head. *She* stood at a little distance from us, her arms folded on her breast, and an expression of intense agony on her pale face. I was still busy with my friend, when I heard the clatter of horses' hoofs outside. The door opened, and at the same moment a dreadful shriek rang through the air, and turning, I saw the lady had disappeared, and a stout, middle-aged man standing in the doorway. That dreadful shriek had penetrated even to Charley's slumbering brain; he opened his eyes, and faintly asked where he was.

Meanwhile, the newcomer, who proved to be the doctor, advanced hastily towards me, and in agitated tones inquired in the name of Heaven who the lady was.

"I know nothing of her," said I, "except that she travelled with us part of the way. Where can she be gone now?"

"Do not go. Do not go after her," exclaimed Charley, faintly detaining me, as I was rushing from the room. "Is she gone? It must be about the time she disappeared before."

In spite of his remonstrances, I, however, went out, and inquired of the people in the outer room which way the lady in the white cloak bad gone? They all denied having seen any such lady either enter or go out, and even the man who had helped me to carry Charley, evidently thought I was delirious in talking of the lady who had walked by our side.

I returned to the waiting-room, where the doctor was binding up Charley's wounds, and told him of my fruitless researches, and asked what he knew of her?

He replied that he did not know her, but was struck by her likeness to a lady whom he had attended in that neighbourhood some years before, whose husband had been killed in a railway accident, not far from this very station.

"What became of the lady?" I asked.

"She *died*," was the short answer.

I fancied I heard a moan run through the building as he spoke, but it might have been merely my excited fancy.

He was not at first disposed to communication on the subject; but Charley's hurts were severe; for some time he was under Dr. Healall's treatment, and from him we at last gained the history of the lady whose mysterious likeness had disappeared so suddenly on his arrival with us. She bad confided it to him on her death-bed.

It appeared she had married a rich cotton-spinner, many years older than herself, and in order to save her favourite brother from disgrace and ruin, she had forged her husband's name to cheques for an amount which freed her brother. The husband, however, had discovered the fraud: he put the police on the track of the brother, and carried her off with him, intending to take her to Glasgow, to confront her with the manager of the bank there on which the forgeries had been drawn. They seemed to have had a frightful quarrel in the railway carriage, he reproaching her with her dishonesty, and she fiercely upbraiding him with wishing to deliver her brother to justice.

"Sooner than you should succeed," she cried in her passion, "may we never reach our journey's end—may I rather see yon dead at my feet!"

He started up, saying he would travel no longer in the same carriage with her, and thrust his head through the window to call to the guard that he wished to change his seat at the next station.

As he stood with his head and part of his body out of the window, she saw they were coming to a tunnel. They were on the line next the wall; she saw it coming—and coming; but she would not speak.

The next moment there was a blow—a crunch, and her husband's corpse fell heavily across her lap with the skull fractured by concussion against the wall.

How she travelled miles in the darkening afternoon of that awful twenty-ninth of February, with that dead body on her knee, her fair hand stained by his blood, how when they found her at last, she was almost paralysed to idiotcy; how she lingered but a few weeks after him, and then faded away a prey to the deepest remorse, time and space fail me to tell here; but Dr. Healall's narrative was as solemn as it was thrilling, and both Charley and I left M___ sobered and saddened men.