

A Warning in Red

A Railway Mystery

by Victor Lorenzo Whitechurch, 1868-1933

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„YES,“ said the Colonel, as he lit another cheroot, „many a man when he is in action is simply mad for the time being, and fights like a demon because he sees red.“

„Sees red?“ I asked, with a start.

„Don't you know what I mean?“

„No.“

„Ah, it's a curious psychological problem that I've experienced myself. I was leading a cavalry charge at Joonpore, and suddenly the enemy, the country,

everything seemed to fade away into a blood-red mist that blinded me with colour—I could see nothing else. And then the mad desire came upon me to slash and slay. They told me afterwards that I behaved like a fury, and I can believe it, for I've seen many a man in the same condition. It only comes in battle, I believe. That's the only time you can *see red*."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. But what's the matter, Forbes? You look completely startled."

"Oh, it's nothing," I replied, "only a fanciful presentiment I had when I arrived this evening, and you put me in mind of it."

"What! you don't mean to say you saw red," asked the Colonel, with a laugh.

"Not in your sense of the word, Colonel; and you'll only laugh at me if I tell you. It's a mere fancy, that's all."

"Well, drown your fancies in a whisky and soda, and then get a good night's rest after your journey. That's the best thing for you, Forbes. But if you like to tell me what's upset you I won't laugh at you."

So in the end I told him about the strange effect I had experienced in alighting at the station. I had come down from town to spend a couple of days with Colonel Ward at Manningford. Although I had known him for many years, and had often seen him at his club, it was the first time I had ever been to stay at his country house. He expected me by a late train, but judgment being given in a case in which I was professionally engaged as solicitor rather earlier than I had expected, I was able to get away from town in the afternoon, and reached Manningford station about six o'clock. I had not thought it worth while to wire, as I had determined to take a trap if it was far to walk, and surprise him.

Manningford was a tiny little country station, I was the only passenger who alighted, and one solitary official, who seemed to combine the offices of station-master, porter, and ticket-collector, met me on the platform.

"Tickets, please," he said, gruffly.

I gave him my ticket. As I did so, the train in which I had been travelling glided off the platform, and I caught a glimpse of the red tail-light showing in the fading day.

Grasping my Gladstone bag, I was about to depart, when the idea struck me that I would ask the stationmaster about a conveyance. He had retired to his office and was standing at the ticket-issuing window, which was open. He had lit the lamp inside, as the office was rather dark.

"Can I get a cab anywhere?" I asked.

He looked up. He was a red-faced man with red hair, and the strong light showed his colour vividly. In accordance with the rules of the railway company he served, he was wearing a red tie.

"No," he said, rather shortly. Perhaps I was staring a little rudely at his illuminated countenance.

"But," I persisted, "surely there is some conveyance to be had near, isn't there?"

"You can hire a dog-cart at the Star," he said.

"Where is that?"

"Cross the line and go out on the other side of the station. Turn to the right, and it's about five minutes' walk."

And he slammed down the window.

I went on to the platform once more, and slowly crossed the line. I say slowly, because the red colour of my surroundings began to grow upon me. The station itself was painted a chocolate colour of a reddish tinge. The tiles bordering the flower beds were of a deep red colour, enclosing for the most part scarlet geraniums. Looking down the line I caught the crimson rays of the setting sun reflected upon the rails, and glancing in the opposite direction noticed that the red light on the up starting signal was burning brightly. It was a strange, indescribable sensation that attacked me, this predominance of blood-red colouring; and I gave a little shiver as I walked to the inn, which was a good quarter of a mile from the station, though apparently the nearest house. A two-mile drive brought me to the Colonel's, and after dinner his mention of „seeing red“ recalled what had happened.

„Well,“ said Colonel Ward, as he bid me good-night, „I won't laugh at you, because I'll admit that we're none of us accountable for peculiar brain sensations at times. Monk, the stationmaster, isn't exactly a beauty to look at, is he? But he's a capital official. You've been overworking yourself lately, Forbes, and you must take things easy. Good-night, old chap. Pleasant dreams. I hope your red sensation is not the preliminary to a nightmare.“

The next morning, as we were sitting at breakfast, a servant burst into the room with a very frightened expression, and told the Colonel that a man wanted to see him at once. He was absent for about a quarter of an hour, when he returned in great agitation.

„Great heavens!“ he exclaimed, „my poor friend Geoffrey Anstruthers has been murdered—killed on the line when coming down from town last night. Your blood-red impression had something in it, perhaps, Forbes.“

„Tell me about it, Colonel.“

„I will. It's upset me dreadfully. Poor Anstruthers was my nearest neighbour, living about a mile off in that big white house you noticed between the station and my place. We were the greatest of friends, for although he was a very peculiar man we got on thoroughly. The poor fellow was to have met you at dinner here to-night.“

„How did it happen?“

„Well, they tell me his body was discovered by the side of the line near Barton—about midway between London and Manningford. A platelayer found it early this morning. There were marks of a struggle and a couple of knife stabs, and he seems to have been attacked and killed in the train and then thrown out.“

„Have you any idea if there was a motive for the crime?“ I asked.

„Unfortunately, yes,“ said the Colonel. „Poor Anstruthers was a man of most eccentric habits, and one of his fads was that he would bank nowhere but at the Bank of England, and that he would pay nobody by cheque. He also settled all his accounts once a quarter only, and the tradesman who asked for an earlier settlement, or the servant or labourer who demanded monthly or weekly wages, was sure to be dismissed by him. Regularly every quarter he went up to London and drew several hundred pounds in gold out of the Bank of England, bringing it back in an ordinary brief bag. I often warned him that he was doing a very foolish thing, but he only laughed at me.“

„Yesterday he went up to town for this purpose. His servants thought that as he had not returned last evening by his usual train, which arrives at 10.15 p.m., he was staying the night in town. But evidently some blackguard got hold of his movements. Poor old Anstruthers!“

„Is anything being done yet?“ I asked.

„I hardly know,“ said the Colonel; „and I’m going to take the matter up. I shall go to Barton by the next train.“

„I’ll come with you,“ I said.

„That’s very kind of you, Forbes; your assistance will be most valuable, for I know your hobby—railways. It might help us.“

We finished our breakfast quickly and drove into the station. On my way I asked the Colonel a few particulars concerning the train by which Anstruthers had travelled the night before. It ran as follows :

London	(dep)	8.45 p.m.
Muggridge	(stop)	9.10 "
Barton	(stop)	9.37 "
Manningford	(stop)	10.15 "
Porthaven	(arrive)	10.30 "

So that the only stops between London and Manningford were Muggridge and Barton. The body, so the Colonel had heard, had been found about two miles on the London side of Barton.

The red-faced stationmaster was in his office when we arrived at the station.

„Sad job this, Mr. Monk,“ said the Colonel.

„Terrible, sir. It regularly upset me when the down train brought the news this morning. Poor Mr. Anstruthers! I knew him well, sir. I’d seen him go up in the morning, and wondered why he didn’t come back by the 10.15 as usual. Are you going by the up train?“

„Yes. We’re going to Barton to inquire into this awful affair. Two first returns, please.“

The stationmaster reached to his rack for the tickets. Now, as often happens in small country stations where the supply of tickets to various stations on the line is limited and becomes exhausted, he did a very common thing. Selecting two blank tickets he dipped the pen into ink and wrote on their respective halves, „Manningford to Barton“, „Barton to Manningford“, and the fare, 7s. 8d.

Then he passed them through the window and I took them up. He had written the names in red ink!

„I hope they’ll catch the wretches, sir,“ said the stationmaster a few minutes afterwards, as he opened our carriage door for us. Arrived at Barton, we took a trap and drove to the scene of the tragedy. The body, we were told, had been removed to an inn close by the railway, but at my request we went first to the line, as I was anxious to see the exact spot where Mr. Anstruthers had been thrown out of the train. We found a local policeman and two platelayers at the place, which was in a cutting. One of the latter told us that he was the man who had discovered the body.

„He was lyin‘ just here, gentlemen,“ he said, pointing to the six-foot way between the two lines of metals.

„Of course he was dead when you found him?“ I asked.

„Yes, sir, but it’s my opinion he wasn’t altogether dead when they threw him out.“

„Why?“

„‘Cause he seemed to have moved afterwards. One of his arms was just restin‘ on the down-rail.“

„Well?“

„Well, sir, he couldn’t ha‘ fallen like that in the first place, cause the wheels o’ the train would ha‘ cut his arm.“

„Stop a minute,“ I said. „What time did you find him here?“

„‘Tween three and four this mornin‘, sir.“

„And he was thrown out about 9.30 the night before?“

„Yes, sir.“

„Was that train the last down one?“

„The last passenger train, sir.“

„Was there a down goods train after that?“

„Yes, sir, between half—past one and two.“

„Ah, then, why didn’t that train crush his arm?“

The question staggered the platelayer and the policeman too. They evidently hadn’t thought of this.

„I s’pose ‘e must ha‘ bin alive when the goods train passed, and moved afterwards,“ said the platelayer presently, and the policeman entered a note to that effect in his pocket-book.

„What are you driving at?“ said the Colonel.

„Never mind yet,“ I answered. Then, turning to the platelayer again, I said, „He was stabbed, wasn’t he?“

„Yes, sir.“

„Where?“

„In the chest, sir.“

„Any blood-stains?“

„Yes, sir. He was wearin‘ a white weskit, and it was quite red when I turned him over.“

„He was lying on his back, then?“

„Yes, sir.“

„Well, where are the blood-marks on the stones here? Have you cleared them up?“

„There wasn’t none,“ said the man.

„Strangel!“ I murmured to myself, as we left the spot.

„You’d make a good detective, Forbes,“ said the Colonel.

„Not a bit of it,“ I replied. „It’s simply because there is a mystery connected with my hobby—railways. That’s what makes me a little extra sharp.“

„A mystery?“ said the Colonel.

„Yes,“ I replied, „more than you think. But now let’s see the poor fellow.“

Mr. Anstruthers was lying on a bed at the inn, just as they had found him. The neighbouring police inspector was there, very imposing and important. The Colonel gave his card, and we were allowed to see the body.

It was a gruesome sight, and my friend turned away to ask some questions of the inspector. I looked at the dead man carefully. There were signs of a struggle. His clothes were torn, and one of his hands was tightly clenched. Then I saw what, apparently, the wily country police had passed undiscovered—a shred of paper clasped in his hand. Without exciting the inspector's attention, I wrested the fingers open and drew from them a tiny scrap of torn paper, evidently clutched by a dying hand. It bore the following in writing: „ord-on.“ It was such a tiny scrap, such an insignificant thing to go upon, but I slipped it into my pocket-book nevertheless.

„Come,“ said the Colonel, „I can't stand this any longer. Well, inspector, I hope you'll get the villain.“

„Ah, we're on the track,“ said the officer, sagaciously. „They got out at Barton, that's about it; and we'll have 'em yet.“

„Do you want to see anything else, Forbes?“ asked the Colonel.

„Yes. I should like to see the doctor who examined the body.“

„It's Dr. Moore,“ said the policeman. „He lives at Barton.“

So we called on Dr. Moore on our way to the station. He declared that he had seen poor Anstruthers at six o'clock in the morning, and was positively certain that he must then have been dead seven or eight hours. The mystery was thickening. Passing on to the platform at Barton, we had to show our tickets. As I took mine back I gazed at it in a listless sort of way, when suddenly I gave a start. The last three letters of „Manningford“—where had I seen them? That peculiar elongated „o“ and the curiously tailed „d“—Ah! I remembered!

Hastily I drew the scrap of paper from my pocket-book, and compared it with the ticket. The „ord“ was in the same handwriting! It was part of the words „Manningford station.“

In a moment a clue flashed across my mind, and I searched for a porter.

„Is there any official about the station with whom I can have a word? It's about an urgent matter.“

„Yes, sir; Mr. Smart, the district superintendent is here; he came down about that murder. You'll find him in the station-master's office.“

„Come with me, Colonel,“ I cried, turning to the office.

Hastily I introduced myself to Mr. Smart, telling him my errand was connected with the murder.

„Tell me,“ I asked, „is there any train from Manningford to London after 10.15?“

„Only a goods,“ he said.

„Exactly. What time does it leave Manningford?“

„About midnight.“

„And Barton?“

„It stops here for shunting. Generally starts on about 1.45 a.m.“

„Mr. Smart, can you lay your hand on the men who worked that train last night?“

He consulted some return sheets.

„Driver Power and fireman Hussey,“ he murmured. „They’re on the Slinford branch to-day—they don’t often run on the main line—and brakesman Sutton. He works a goods back to Porthaven to-day. He’ll arrive there in half an hour.“

„Does he always work main line trains?“

„For several months past he has.“

„He’s the man then, Mr. Smart. It’s of the utmost importance that you should wire to Porthaven to have him closely watched. I’ll explain presently.“

The district superintendent hastily scribbled a line on an official telegraph form and rushed out with it. When he returned I said—„Have you any of the company’s detectives at hand?“

„Yes, two,“ he answered.

„Bring them then, and come along.“

„My dear fellow,“ said the Colonel, who had been patiently silent up to this point, „what does it all mean?“

„Yes,“ said the superintendent, „I’m in a fog.“

„I hear the down train coming in,“ I cried. „We must all return to Manningford—quick, sir—I’ll explain everything in the train.“

A few minutes, and the Colonel, the superintendent, and his two detectives and myself were in the train bound for Manningford.

„Now, sir?“ said Mr. Smart.

„Well,“ I replied, „we’re going to arrest the murderers, or one of them I think, at all events.“

„And who’s that?“

„Monk, the stationmaster at Manningford,“ I answered.

„Monk? Impossible. Why, the murder occurred forty miles away.“

„No,“ I replied, „it occurred at Manningford station last night shortly after 10.15. Listen. Poor Anstruthers came down from town, got out of the train, and was done to death by the stationmaster, who was alone on the station, for the sake of his money. In the struggle the murdered man clutched a letter that Monk had written and was probably carrying in his breast pocket. This scrap of it I found in his hand just now. It is in Monk’s handwriting. Look!“ and I compared it with the ticket. „But how about the body being found where it was?“ asked the Colonel.

„It was taken there afterwards, probably in Sutton’s brake van, and thrown out. This would account for two facts: first, that no blood was found on the permanent way, although Anstruthers had bled; and, secondly, that his arm was lying on the down rail. The down goods had passed before he was thrown from the up goods brake van. That’s my theory, gentlemen. Here we are at Manningford, and the least you can do is to arrest the stationmaster on suspicion.“

The latter was on the platform when we arrived. I noticed he gave a start as he saw so many of us get out of the train. The superintendent went up to him.

„Mr. Monk,“ he said, „a very painful duty brings us here. These two gentlemen are members of our police force, and they will have to detain you on suspicion.“

„Of what?“ gasped Monk, his red face growing paler.

„Of participation in the murder of Mr. Anstruthers last night.“

„But he was killed in the train,“ said the stationmaster.

„That remains to be proved. At all events we are going to detain you, and to search your house.“

„I won't submit to it," began the man but he subsided when a pair of handcuffs were slipped over his wrists. Then we all repaired to his little house, just across the road. Again he proved turbulent, but it was no use. With skeleton keys one of the detectives opened a box in his bedroom.

„Ah!" he exclaimed, as he drew out a brief bag, „this seems rather heavy. No wonder. It's full of money."

„That's Anstruthers' bag," exclaimed the Colonel.

The wretched man saw the game was up, but, wretch that he was, he exclaimed—„It's not me—it's Sutton—the brakesman of the up goods train. He had as much to do with it as I did. He took the body away; and he's got a lot of the gold."

„All right," said the superintendent, „we're seeing after him. You have to thank this gentleman," pointing to myself, „for unravelling the mystery."

„Curse you!" yelled the stationmaster at me.

Sutton turned against Monk, and between the two of them the whole story came out. Monk's accounts were short, and he owed money all round—the usual story—racing. He had half planned to murder Anstruthers several times, and at last the opportunity presented itself. He was the only passenger to alight that night, and Monk noticed that the guard had not observed him. So he asked him to step into his office for a moment under pretence of something, and then went for him. There was a struggle, but Monk was the stronger man. In this struggle Anstruthers had grasped the bit of paper, but without the other's knowledge.

Then came the disposal of the body. Sutton was a man of doubtful character, and Monk knew enough about him to ruin him if he disclosed certain cases of goods stealing. So, when the goods train came along, he gave Sutton twenty pounds, and promised him another thirty to take the body in his van and pitch it out so that people would think Anstruthers had been murdered in the train. It was the easiest thing possible on a dark night to halt the train with the brake van opposite Monk's office, and to slip the body in without driver or fireman knowing any thing about it.

The sequel was the gallows for Monk, and fifteen years at Dartmoor for Sutton.

„There was something uncanny after all, Forbes," said the Colonel, after dinner on that eventful day, „about your blood-red impression of Manningford station and its master!"

