

## FACE TO FACE WITH DEATH

## A CHRISTMAS EVE STORY.

In the early part of the same year as that in which I became an unwilling actor in the thrilling little drama, the particulars of which I am now about to relate, a series of extensive frauds had been perpetrated on several well known houses in London. It had been my duty to try and hunt the criminals down, and I got on the track of two men whom I watched for a little while, in order to make sure that I was justified in arresting them. They were both Americans. At any rate they came from America, and as they were not known to the police on this side or the other side of the "Herring Pond," some caution and judgment had to be exercised before pouncing on them for fear of committing an error. Ostensibly they were partners in a business which they termed an "English and American Agency," their object being to bring merchants of all kinds on both sides of the Atlantic into communication, as well as to sell goods on commission. This, however, as subsequently proved, was a mere blind, and both the gentlemen were engaged in transactions of a very different kind, which, if they could only have carried on uninterruptedly for a few years, would have enabled them to have retired with a fortune. I was destined, however, to spoil their little game, but as soon as I got unmistakable evidence of their crime one of the birds had flown. The other was arrested, and it soon became clear that the two men had worked out an extraordinary and systematic series of frauds, in which they must have had a considerable number of confederates. Every effort was made to secure the partner, but without avail, and the man in custody would reveal nothing. There was not a shadow of a doubt that they had possessed themselves of an exceedingly large sum of money, and it was very desirable that we should discover what they had done with it. But the man whom I had arrested absolutely declined to give the slightest information either about himself or those connected with him, and so we were baffled; and it was pretty evident the fugitive had carried off all the valuables as well as papers and books. At any rate nothing much was left behind that was likely to aid us. But I managed to prove one fraud against the prisoner, and he was sentenced to five years' imprisonment. Of course, I was very much annoyed that the other principal had slipped through my fingers, and I confess that I did not entertain much hope of capturing him. About a fortnight after the man I had brought to book had been sentenced, I received a letter bearing the London postmark, which was worded as follows:

"From this day forth you are a marked man, and your death warrant is signed. The knife or the bullet will stop your career before you are many weeks older, and you won't have another chance of getting any more fellows sentenced."

This letter did not affect me in the least. I had often been threatened before, and I knew that threatened men live long. I even considered it a waste of time to try and find out who the stupid writer was; and so the subject passed out of my mind. On the morning of the twenty-fourth of December the daily papers announced that the previous night a man had been arrested in Liverpool on suspicion of being the partner of the convict then undergoing penal servitude for the Great Frauds, and that Mr. Dick Donovan, "the well known detective," would start at once for Liverpool in order to identify the man and bring him to London should he prove to be the person wanted. Of course, we in the "Yard" were already in possession of this information, and equally of course I had received instructions to go down to Liverpool, so that the papers were correct.

I was not very pleased at having to leave town on Christmas Eve, which I always liked to spend with my friends; and I said some harsh things about the chance that rendered my going away on this particular day necessary. However, there was no help for it, and I arranged to leave by the night train, for duty was duty, and could not be shirked.

It was a terribly bitter night. It had snowed during the day, and as the evening came on, a severe black frost set in. When I reached the station I had about ten minutes to spare before the starting of the train and so sauntered leisurely down the platform, hopeful that I might be able to get a compartment to myself, but that did not seem probable, for, being Christmas Eve, there were a great many people travelling. I had walked the length of the train, and was proceeding back, when a gentlemanly looking man, wearing kid gloves and a fur-trimmed overcoat, stopped in front of me, and, politely raising his hat, said—

"Excuse me, but I believe you are Mr. Donovan?"

"That is my name," I answered; "but you have the advantage of me."

"Oh, well, my name is Richard Jack," he said, with a smile. "I am a solicitor in the city. I know you well by sight, though I have never any business with you. You are going to Liverpool, I believe, if the papers are correct."

"Yes. They are correct enough in this instance," I returned.

"Then, we'll travel together, if you don't mind," he replied. "I've secured the corner of a first class compartment, and tipped the guard."

He seemed a very pleasant, affable gentleman, and so I expressed my willingness to become his travelling companion, and we moved towards the carriage he indicated. As we came to the door we noted that another man was seated in one corner of the compartment. He had on a big fur cap, the flaps pulled down about his ears; he wore a heavy overcoat, and had a rug wrapped round his knees.

"Confound it!" exclaimed Mr. Jack, "I thought we should have had the carriage to ourselves. Suppose we look for another."

"On, no," I said, "it doesn't matter. Besides the train is pretty full."

At this moment the ticket collector came along, so we took our seats, displayed our tickets, and in another minute the train was steaming out of the station. The man in the fur cap seemed to be already asleep,

and was so muffled up that it was impossible to distinguish his features. Mr. Jack was a little man with a clean shaved face, and had he worn a white band round his neck he might have passed for a curate.

"So you are going down to Liverpool to see if you can identify the man who has been arrested on suspicion of having been concerned in the great frauds?" he remarked.

"Yes," I answered shortly, not caring to discuss the matter with an utter stranger.

"Well—I don't think you will identify him," he said. There was something in the way in which he uttered these words that caused me to look at him, and for the first time a suspicion flashed across my mind that my companion was not what he seemed to be. What that something was would be very difficult to define. Perhaps it was the emphasis he laid upon the word, or a fancied menace in his tone of speaking. But, whatever it was, my suspicions were aroused, and the heavy rug I had been in the act of wrapping about my person, I placed on the seat again, so as to have my limbs free. Then I glanced at the third man in the corner. He seemed to be sunk in profound sleep. Both windows were up, and were quite obscured with the condensed vapor. I tried to think that my suspicious were ill founded, but they would not be shaken off, and I resolved to keep my eye on Jack, who sat opposite me, and anticipate any movement of attack that he might display. The train had already attained a high rate of speed, and I knew there was a long run before the first stopping place would be reached.

Presently my vis a vis took a flask from his coat pocket and asked me if I would have a drink.

I declined. He pressed me; I declined more emphatically. He pressed me more resolutely, and the manner in which he did this increased my suspicions. My persistent refusal annoyed him, and he said sharply—

"You don't suppose, Mr. Donovan, I want to poison you, do you?"

"Well, I can't tell," I said with a laugh. "It's as well as to be on the safe side. Why don't you take a drink yourself?" I asked, as he returned the flask to his pocket.

"Because I don't want one," he growled. "We seem to be in accord, then, on one point," I remarked, "for I don't want one either."

He made no reply, but rove his arm through the arm rest at the side of the window, and opened and shut his fingers five different times in a manner that led me at once to the conclusion he was signalling his confederate in the corner, for by this time I had made up my mind that the other man was a confederate, and that I was trapped. In about five minutes more the train plunged into a tunnel, and at that moment Jack sprang at me. My suspicions and his signals with his fingers had quite put me on my guard, and I was prepared. I, too, was on my feet before he gained any advantage, and, throwing my body forward, I struck him a tremendous blow with my fist on the forehead, for I had raised my arm and brought it down like a hammer, as I was unable to strike from the shoulder, owing to my cramped position. But that blow dropped him like an ox, and he fell in a heap on the seat.

This little scene had been enacted literally in far less time than it has taken me to describe it, for it was all a matter of brief moments. But the other man had risen and seized me by the throat, and in a hoarse deep voice, prefacing his remark with a tremendous oath, he said—

"It was through you my brother got five years, and by God I'm going to have your blood for it."

I knew now that it was a struggle for life. During the trial I learned that the fellow who was convicted had a brother, but we could get no trace of him. And now this villain and his copartner in guilt had trapped me with a view to murdering me—firstly, probably, as an act of vengeance; and, secondly, to prevent my identifying the fellow who was in custody in Liverpool. But, thanks to the fact of my suspicions having been aroused so early, I was on my guard, and that had enabled me to stun one of my enemies. Naturally a powerful man, the desperation of the situation seemed to give me additional power, and swinging myself around with all my might, and against my antagonist, I caused him to stagger and almost lose his balance, which gave me a temporary advantage, but I saw that he was armed with a revolver, and I realised that he, too, was a powerful man. By a supreme effort he recovered himself. He had seized me by the throat with his left hand, and still retained his grip, digging his finger points into my throat. Putting the revolver right against my face, he pulled the trigger, but the weapon missed fire. With a deep curse, he pulled again, but with my elbow I managed to strike his arm, the barrel of the pistol was deflected and the bullet went through the roof of the carriage. Before he could fire a third time, I got my hand from my throat and closed with him, and we both went down on the seat, though unfortunately I was underneath, and he struck me on the head with the butt end of the revolver until the blood gushed over my face.

Putting forth all my strength, I managed to regain my feet, and tried to get my hands round his throat. He prevented my doing this, however, but he lost his hold of the pistol; it fell at my feet, and I kicked it under the seat. Then we reeled against the door of the carriage, and the glass of the window was shattered to atoms, and the blast of cold air that rushed in refreshed and strengthened me; and, getting my right arm free, I struck my antagonist full in the face. Then in our fierce struggle we went down on the seat again, but this time he was under, though he managed to seize my wrists, and he twisted his legs about me so that I was powerless. The same cold blast of air that revived me had also restored the man I had stunned, and he threw himself on me.

"Knife the cur," gasped the man I had down on the seat. "Knife him, Bill."

I was beginning to feel slightly faint from the effects of the blow with the pistol; while the blood had flowed down over my eyes to such an extent that I could hardly see. But I was determined to sell my life as dearly as possible, and releasing my hold of the prostrate man, I turned and struck Bill twice in the face, first with my right fist, then with my left. Throwing

my body against him I knocked him down, then I sprang at the opposite door, the right hand one facing the engine; quick as thought I let the window down and tried to reach the communication cord. But my enemies were too quick for me, though luckily for me, the limited space cramped their movements, but the little man, "Jack," as he had called himself, "Bill," as his companion had styled him, flung himself on me, and getting his arm round my throat, tried to garote me, but I hurled him with tremendous force against the back of the carriage. I realised then that the other man was on his knees on the floor, and I guessed in an instant he was trying to recover the revolver from under the seat. His head was towards me, and I dealt him a tremendous blow with my foot that seemed to stun him. But Bill had recovered himself by this time, and with a sort like that of a savage animal he once more threw himself on me, and we went down together on the top of the other man.

For some moments—they seemed minutes to me, and long minutes too—we writhed, groaned and started, twisted and wrenched, each with desperate endeavor to gain an advantage. The train was rushing along at tremendous speed, and the roar that it made, coupled with the fact that all the windows of the carriages were closed on account of the intense cold, prevented the people in the next compartment from hearing anything of the death struggle. I knew that these ruffians were bent on taking my life, and in self defence I should not hesitate to slay them. If I could but have recovered the revolver the odds would have been no longer against me, but it seemed impossible.

So far I had managed to hold my own against the diabolical ruffians who had deliberately planned my assassination, but that I had done so was due to my suspicions having been so early aroused, which had caused me to be on the alert; and, also, to the fact that "Bill," was a little weak, delicate man, who, single handed, would not have had a ghost of a chance against me, for Nature had endowed me with a big frame, and great muscular power. Then, again, the confined space of the compartment had told in my favor, while to the circumstance of the falling of the revolver, I owed my life, for the big rascal who tried to blow my brains out had not an opportunity of recovering the weapon.

For some moments the big ruffian was placed hors de combat, so that the struggle was between me and Bill, whom I was overpowering, but the big fellow recovered himself, and began to rise. With a mighty effort I hurled Bill prostrate on to the seat. Then springing to the door I turned the handle, opened the door and attempted to get out, but one of them caught me by the coat, and, shipping, I fell with my body half out the open doorway. The train was rushing along at a fearful pace, and I so far had my presence of mind as to grip the footboard; but I knew perfectly well that my life hung now by a rotten thread, for it seemed absolutely impossible that any human being could fall from a train flying along at that pace and not be smashed to pieces.

It seemed to me at this time as if I was dreaming all these things. I have a perfect and distinct recollection of asking myself if I was not suffering from a sort of night mare. How long this lasted I cannot tell, but my senses came back with a voice sounding in my ear, saying "Do you feel better now?"

That voice broke the spell, and from bliss I suddenly passed to a condition of pain. Without being able to determine why I was seized with an agony of strange anxiety, though in my mind there was no coherent thought save that I was falling, falling, and this had the effect of causing me to open my eyes. At first all before me was a blurred mass, but gradually out of this mass human beings were evolved, and the first one to become quite distinct to my gaze was a white capped, white aproned, woman, with, as I thought in that moment of transition from unconsciousness to consciousness, an angelic face. I am not sure what I had a kind of vague, hazy notion that this was a veritable angel, and that I was really dead. Gradually, however, the awakening faculties were enabled to give to the surroundings their proper place and value, and then I realized that the white capped woman was an hospital nurse; that a doctor was standing beside me with his fingers on my pulse, and that my head was enveloped in surgical bandages, and that the whole of my body was, as it were, a mass of pain. The doctor, who was feeling my pulse, said again, in a pleasant, kindly voice:

"Do you feel better now?"

I turned my eyes to him, and saw a genial face fringed with silver hair.

"Yes," I answered, and I was conscious that it cost me an effort even to utter that monosyllable. But singularly enough I had no recollection then of what had happened, and I asked:

"What is the matter?"

"You shall know in a little while. You had better drink this and then go to sleep."

A cup or a glass was placed to my lips, and then ensued a blank. When I awoke it was Christmas afternoon. The brain had regained its normal functions, and all that I had passed through came back, and I remembered every detail up to the moment that I hung out of the doorway of the railway carriage. From that point I must fill in the story by the narrative of others. The driver of an up goods train had observed me lying motionless in the six footway, for it appears my body was very conspicuous owing to the snow that covered the ground. At the next station he reported the circumstance, and as the spot where I was lying was not far off a party of men were sent down the line to look for me. I was picked up in a perfectly unconscious condition; in fact, they all believed then that I was dead. I was conveyed back to the station and seen by a local doctor, who pronounced my injuries serious, and as there was no hospital there he advised that I be sent on to Rugby by a goods train that passed in half an hour. This was done, and when I came to my senses it was in one of the wards of the Rugby Hospital. An analysis of the time proved that I must have been lying in the

six foot way fully an hour and a half before I was rescued, and had it not been for the snow the strong probabilities are that I should not have been seen at all until daylight, but by that time I should have been frozen to death. At first it was thought to be a case of suicide, although at the railway station where I was first taken to they ascertained immediately who I was by my letters, cards and papers.

Of course I soon told the story of the outrage, and described my assailants as well as I could. But it appears that when the train by which I had travelled drew up at Rugby the broken window of the compartment attracted attention. The compartment was empty, but its condition told a terrible story. There was a bullet hole in the roof; the cushions and linings were torn and rent; and there seemed to be blood everywhere. All these things were suggestive of robbery and murder, and whoever had been in that compartment had probably got out when the train slackened speed as it came to Rugby. And so Nemesis got on the track of my would-be murderers. Policemen were sent out to scour the country, and the telegraph flashed the news about, and the result was that before I recovered my senses the two ruffians had been captured. They were found concealed in a hut in a brick field not far from the town. The big man was seriously injured in jumping from the train; for, as was subsequently elicited, I had broken some of his ribs, and he was weak and faint when he leapt, the consequence being that he fell heavily, bracing one arm and dislocating the other shoulder. Bill was more fortunate, but I had mauled his face, and it was pulpy, bruised and swollen; and two of the fingers of his left hand were broken.

Both men were brought into Rugby in charge of the police and taken to the hospital; and Bill, as his hurts had been dressed, was transferred to the lock-up; but the big fellow, who turned out to be the brother of the rascal I had sent to penal servitude, was detained in the hospital, which he was destined never to leave alive, for three or four weeks later he was attacked with pneumonia, which had a fatal termination.

It was, as my well be imagined, a sad and bitter Christmas Day for me, and I felt verily as if I had come through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Although I had no bones broken, the wound in the neck gave some trouble, added to the shock and exhaustion, and it was a fortnight before I was able to get about. The man who had been in custody in Liverpool had been set at liberty in the absence of evidence against him. But he had been carefully shadowed, and when I was ready he was once more pounced upon, and I was able to swear that he was the man we had so long wanted. Bill, one of my assailants, turned out to be a notorious character, named William Straker, who had been twice convicted for felony. And being put on trial for the outrage on myself, he was sent into penal servitude for life.

We were enabled to prove that he and his companion had resolved to kill me, and when they saw it announced that I was going down to Liverpool they considered that no better opportunity could offer. The plot was an artfully contrived one, but Fate was against them, and in my favor. Their intention was to induce me to drink some drugged brandy, and then to haul me out on to the track: so that it might be thought it was a case of suicide, or that I had fallen out while in a state of intoxication. But my refusal to drink the brandy rather nonplussed them, and through Straker showing his hand too soon I was warned in time. Nevertheless, I went through a terrible ordeal on that, to me, ever memorable Christmas Eve, and I think it will be readily admitted that I am guilty of no exaggeration in saying that I came verily face to face with death.

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