

THE 4-15 EXPRESS.

BY AMELIA R. EDWARDS.

I was ushered to my room, not the blue-room, of which Mr. Dwerhouse had had disagreeable experience, but a pretty little bachelor's chamber, hung with a delicate chintz, and made cheerful by a blazing fire. I unlocked my portmanteau. I tried to be expeditious; but the memory of my railway adventure haunted me. I could not get free of it. I could not shake it off. It impeded me, it worried me,—it tripped me up,—it caused me to misplace my studs,—to misplace my cravat,—to wrench the buttons off my gloves. Worst of all, it made me so late that the party had all assembled before I reached the drawing-room. I had scarcely paid my respects to Mrs. Jelf when dinner was announced, and we waited for some eight or ten couples strong, into the dining-room.

I am not going to describe either the guests or the dinner. All provincial parties bear the strictest family resemblance, and I am not aware that an East Anglian banquet offers any exception to the rule. There was the usual country baronet and his wife; there were the usual country parsons and their wives; there was the semiprovoked turkey and haunch of venison. *Vanitas vanitatum*. There is nothing new under the sun.

I was placed about midway down the table. I had taken one rector's wife down to dinner, and I had another at my left hand. They talked across me, and their talk was about babies. It was dreadfully dull. At length there came a pause. The *entrées* had just been removed, and the turkey had come upon the scene. The conversation had all along been of the languidist, but at this moment it happened to have stagnated altogether. Jelf was carving the turkey. Mrs. Jelf looked as if she was trying to think of something to say. Everybody else was silent. Moved by an unlucky impulse, I thought I would relate my adventure.

By the way Jelf, I began. 'I came down part of the way today with a friend of yours.'

Indeed! said the master of the feast, looking significantly into the breast of the turkey. 'With whom, pray?'

With one who bade me tell you that he should, if possible, pay you a visit before Christmas.

I cannot think who that could be, said my friend, smiling.

It must be Major Thorp, suggested Mrs. Jelf.

I shook my head.

It was a near relation of your own, Mrs. Jelf.

Then I am more puzzled than ever, replied my hostess. 'Pray tell me who it was.'

It was no less a person than your cousin, Mr. John Dwerhouse.

Jonathan Jelf laid down his knife and fork. Mrs. Jelf looked at me in a strange, startled way, and said never a word.

And he desired me to tell you, dear madam, that you need not take the trouble to burn the Hall down in his honor this time; but only to have the chimney of the blue-room swept before his arrival.

Before I had reached the end of my sentence, I became aware of something ominous in the faces of the guests. I felt I had said something which I had better left unsaid, and that for some unexplained reason my words had evoked a general consternation. I sat confounded, not daring to utter another syllable, and for at least two whole minutes there was dead silence round the table. Then Captain Prendergast came to the rescue.

'You have been abroad for some months, have you not, Mr. Langford?'

he said, with the desperation of one who flings himself into the breach. 'I heard you had been to Russia. Surely you have something to tell us of the state and temper of the country after the war?'

I was heartily grateful to the gallant Skirmisher for this diversion in my favor. I answered him, I fear, somewhat lamely; but he kept the conversation up, and presently one or two others joined in, and so the difficulty, whatever it might have been, was bridged over. Bridged over, but not repaired. A something, an awkwardness, a visible constraint remained. The guests hitherto had been simply dull, but now they were evidently uncomfortable and embarrassed.

The dessert had scarcely been placed upon the table when the ladies left the room. I seized the opportunity to select a vacant chair next Captain Prendergast.

'In heaven's name,' I whispered, 'what was the matter just now? What had I said?'

'You mentioned the name of John Dwerhouse.'

'What of that? I had seen him not two hours before.'

'It is a most astounding circumstance that you should have seen him,' said

Captain Prendergast. 'Are you sure it was he?'

'As sure as of my own identity. We were talking all the way between London and Blackwater. But why does that surprise you?'

'Because,' replied Capt. Prendergast, dropping his voice to the lowest whisper,—'because John Dwerhouse absconded three months ago, with seventy-five thousand pounds of the Company's money, and has never been heard of since.'

II.

John Dwerhouse had absconded three months ago—and I had seen him only a few hours back. John Dwerhouse had embezzled seventy-five thousand pounds of the Company's money—yet told me that he carried that sum upon his person. Were ever facts so strangely incongruous, so difficult to reconcile? How should he have ventured again into the light of day? How dared he show himself along the line? Above all, what had he been doing throughout those mysterious three months of disappearance?

Perplexing questions, these. Questions which at once suggested themselves to the minds of all concerned, but which admitted of no easy solution. I could find no reply to them. Captain Prendergast had not even a suggestion to offer. Jonathan Jelf, who seized the first opportunity of drawing me aside and leaning all that I had to tell, was more amazed and bewildered than either of us. He came to my room that night, when all the guests were gone, and we talked the thing over from every point of view—without, it must be confessed, arriving at any kind of conclusion.

'I do not ask you,' he said, 'whether you can have mistaken the man? That is impossible.'

'As impossible as that I should mistake some stranger for yourself.'

'It is not a question of looks or voice, but of facts. That he should have absconded to the fire in the blue-room is proof enough of John Dwerhouse's identity. How did he look?'

'Older, I thought. Considerably older, paler, and more anxious.'

'He has had enough to make him look anxious, anyhow,' said my friend, gloomily, 'be he innocent or guilty.'

'I am inclined to believe that he is innocent,' I replied. 'He showed no embarrassment when I addressed him, and no uneasiness when the guard came round. His conversation was open, to a fault. I might almost say that he talked too freely of the business which he had on hand.'

'That again is strange; for I know no one more reticent on such subjects. He said daily told you that he had seventy-five thousand pounds in his pocket?'

'He did.'

'Humph! My wife has an idea about it, and she may be right.'

'What idea?'

'Well, she fancies,—women are so clever, you know, at putting themselves inside people's motives,—she fancies that he was tempted; that he did actually take the money; and that he has been concealing himself these three months in some wild part of the country—struggling possibly with his conscience all the time, daring neither to abscond with the booty nor to come back and restore it.'

'But now that he has come back?'

'That is the point. She conceives that he has probably thrown himself upon the Company's mercy; made restitution of the money; and, being forgiven, is permitted to carry the business through as if nothing whatever had happened.'

'The last, I replied, is an impossible case. Mr. Jelf thinks like a generous and delicate-minded woman, but not in the least like a board of railway directors. They would never carry forgiveness so far.'

'I fear not; and yet it is the only conjecture that bears a semblance of likelihood. However, we can run over to Clayborough tomorrow, and see if anything is to be learned. By the way, Prendergast tells me you picked up his cigar-case.'

'I did so, and here it is.'

Jelf took the cigar-case, examined it by the light of the lamp, and said at once that it was beyond doubt Mr. Dwerhouse's property, and that he remembered to have seen him use it.

'Here, too, is his monogram on the cap,' he added. 'A big J transfixing a small D. He used to carry the same on his note-paper.'

'It offers, at all events, a proof that I was not dreaming.'

'Ay; but it is time that you were asleep and dreaming now. I am ashamed to have kept you up so long. Good-night.'

'Good-night, and remember that I am more than ready to go with you to Clayborough, or Blackwater, or London, or anywhere, if I can be of the least service.'

'Thanks! I know you mean it, old friend, and it may be that I shall put you to the test. Once more, good-night.'

So we parted for that night, and met again in the breakfast-room at half-past eight next morning. It was a hurried, silent, uncomfortable meal. None of us

had slept well, and all were thinking of the same subject. 'Mr. Jelf had evidently been crying,' Jelf was impatient to be off; and both Captain Prendergast and myself felt ourselves to be in the painful position of outsiders who are involuntarily brought into a domestic trouble.

'Within twenty minutes after breakfast,' said the dog-cart was brought round; and my friend and I were on the road to Clayborough.

'Tell you what it is, Langford,' he said, as we sped along between the wintry hedges, 'I do not much fancy bringing up Dwerhouse's name at Clayborough. All the officials know that he is my wife's relation, and the subject is just now a hardly a pleasant one. If you don't much mind, we will take the 11.10 to Blackwater. It's an important station, and we shall stand a far better chance of picking up information there than at Clayborough.'

So we took the 11.10, which happened to be an express, and, arriving at Blackwater about a quarter before twelve, proceeded at once to prosecute our inquiry.

We began by asking for the station-master, a big, blunt, business-like person, who at once averred that he knew Mr. John Dwerhouse perfectly well, and that there was no director on the line whom he had seen and spoken to so frequently.

'He used to be down here two or three times a week, about three months ago, said he, "when the new line was first set afoot, but since then, you know, gentlemen—'

He paused significantly. Jelf flushed scarlet.

'Yes, yes,' he said, hurriedly, 'we know all about that. The point now to be ascertained is whether anything has been seen or heard of him lately.'

'Not to my knowledge,' replied the station-master.

'He is not known to have been down the line any time,—yesterday, for instance?'

'The station-master shook his head. 'The East Anglian, sir,' said he, 'is about the last place where he would dare to show himself. Why, there isn't a station-master there isn't a guard, there isn't a porter, who doesn't know Mr. Dwerhouse by sight as well as he knows his own face in the looking-glass; or who wouldn't telegraph for the police as soon as he had set eyes on him at any point along the line. Bless you, sir! there's been a standing order out against him ever since the Twenty-fifth of September last.'

'And yet,' pursued my friend, 'a gentleman who travelled down yesterday from London to Clayborough by the afternoon express testifies that he saw Mr. Dwerhouse alight at Blackwater station.'

'Quite impossible, sir,' replied the station-master, promptly.

'Why impossible?'

'Because there is no station along the line where he is so well known, or where he would run so great a risk. It would be just running his head into the lion's mouth. He would have been mad to come nigh Blackwater station; and if he had come, he would have been arrested before he left the platform.'

'Can you tell me who took the Blackwater tickets of that train?'

'I can, sir. It was the guard,—Benjamin Somers.'

'And where can I find him?'

'You can find him, sir, by staying here, if you please, till one o'clock. He will be coming through with the express from Crampton, which stays at Blackwater for ten minutes.'

By one o'clock we were back again upon the platform, and waiting for the train. It came punctually, and I at once recognized the ruddy-faced guard who had gone down with my train the evening before.

'The gentlemen want to ask you something about Mr. Dwerhouse, Somers, said the station-master, by way of introduction.

The guard flashed a keen glance from my face to Jelf's, and back again to mine.

'Mr. John Dwerhouse, the late director?' said he interrogatively.

'The same,' replied my friend.

'Should you know him if you saw him?'

'Anywhere, sir.'

'Do you know if he was in the 4.15 express yesterday afternoon?'

'He was not, sir.'

'How can you answer so positively?'

'Because I looked into every carriage and saw every face in the train, and I could take my oath that Mr. Dwerhouse was not in it. This gentleman, he added, turning sharply upon me, 'I don't know that; I ever saw him before in my life, but I remember his face perfectly. You nearly missed taking your seat in time at this station, sir, and you got out at Clayborough.'

'Quite true, guard,' I replied; 'but do you not also remember the face of the gentleman who travelled down in the same carriage with me as far as here?'

'It was my impression, sir, that you travelled down alone,' said Somers, with a look of surprise.

'By no means. I had a fellow-traveler as far as Blackwater, and it was in trying to restore him the cigar-case which he had dropped in the carriage,

that I so nearly let you go on without me.'

'I remember your saying something about a cigar-case, certainly,' replied the guard, 'but—'

'You asked for my ticket just before we entered the station.'

'I did, sir.'

'Then you must have seen him. He sat in the corner next the very door to which you came.'

'No, indeed, I saw no one.'

I looked at Jelf. I began to think the guard was in the ex-director's confidence.

'If I had seen another traveller I should have asked for his ticket,' added Somers. 'Did you see me ask for his ticket, sir?'

'I observed that you did not ask for it, but he explained that by saying—'

I hesitated. I feared that I might be telling too much, and so broke off abruptly. The guard and the station-master exchanged glances. The former looked impatiently at his watch.

'I am obliged to go on in four minutes more, sir,' he said.

'One last question, then,' interposed Jelf, with a sort of desperation. 'If this gentleman's fellow-traveller had been Mr. John Dwerhouse, and he had been sitting in the corner next the door by which you took the tickets, could you have failed to see and recognize him?'

'No, sir; it would have been quite impossible.'

'And you are certain you did not see him?'

'As I said before, sir, I could take my oath I did not see him. And if it weren't that I don't like to contradict a gentleman, I would say I could also take my oath that this gentleman was quite alone in the carriage the whole way from London to Clayborough. Why, sir, he added, dropping his voice so as to be inaudible to the station-master, 'you expressly asked me to give you a compartment to yourself and I did so. I looked you in, and you were so good as to give me something for myself.'

'Yes; but Mr. Dwerhouse had a key of his own.'

'I never saw him, sir; I saw no one in that compartment but yourself. Beg pardon, sir, my time's up.'

And with this the ruddy-faced guard touched his cap and was gone. In another minute the heavy panting of the engine began afresh, and the train glided slowly out of the station.

We looked at each other for some moments in silence. I was the first to speak.

'Mr. Benjamin Somers knows more than he chooses to tell,' I said.

'Humph! do you think so?'

'It must be. He could not have come to the door without seeing him. It's impossible.'

'There is one thing not impossible, my dear fellow.'

'What is that?'

'That you may have fallen asleep, and dreamt the whole thing.'

'Could I dream of a branch line that I had never heard of? Could I dream of a hundred and one business details that had no kind of interest for me? Could I dream of the seventy-five thousand pounds?'

'Perhaps you might have seen or heard some vague account of the affair while you were abroad. It might have made no impression upon you at the time, and might have come back to you in your dreams,—repeated, perhaps, by the mere names of the stations on the line.'

'What about that fire in the chimney of the blue-room,—should I have heard of that during my journey?'

'Well, no; I admit there is a difficulty about that point.'

'And what about the cigar case?'

'Ay, by Jove! there is the cigar-case. This is a stubborn fact. Well, it's a mysterious affair, and it will need a better detective than myself, I fancy, to clear it up. I suppose we may as well go home.'

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