



A DARK TRANSACTION.

BY MARIANNE KENT.

If I had described myself when I first started in life, it would simply have been as John Blount, commercial traveller. I was employed by a firm of merchants of very high standing, who only did business with large houses. My negotiations took me to all parts of the United Kingdom, and I enjoyed the life, which was full of change and activity. At least I enjoyed it in my early bachelor days, but while I was still quite young—not more than five-and-twenty—I fell in love and married; and then I found that my roving existence was certainly a drawback to domestic happiness. My wife, Mary, was a bright little creature, always ready to make the best of things, but even she would declare pathetically that she might as well have married a sailor as a landsman who was so seldom at home! Still, as I said, she was one to put a bright face on things, and she and my sister made their home together.

It was in the second year after my marriage, when I had been away on my travels for some weeks, that I heard from my sister that a fever had broken out in the neighborhood of our home, and that Mary was down with it. Kitty wrote hopefully, saying it was a mild attack, and she trusted by the time I was home her patient would be quite convalescent. I had unbounded faith in Kitty, so that I accepted her cheerful view of things. But a few evenings later, after a long, tiring day, I returned to the hotel where I was then staying, and found a telegram awaiting me. My heart stood still as I saw the ominous yellow envelope, for I knew my sister would not have sent for me without urgent need. The message was to say that, although Kitty still hoped for the best, a serious change had taken place, and I should return at once.

"Don't delay an hour; come off immediately," she said. "I was not likely to delay. I paid up my reckoning at the hotel, directed that my baggage should be sent on next day, and in less than half an hour from the time I had opened the telegram I rushed, heated and breathless, into the primitive little railway station—the only one which that part of the country boasted for miles around. I gained the platform in time to see the red light on the end of the departing train as it disappeared into the mouth of the tunnel a few hundred yards down the line. For a moment I was unable to realize my ill fortune. I stood gazing stupidly before me in a bewildered way. Then the station-master, who knew me by sight, came up, saying sympathetically:—

"Just missed her, sir, by two seconds!"

"Yes," I answered briefly, beginning to understand it all now, and chafing irritably at the enforced delay. "When is the next train?"

"Six five in the morning, sir. Nothing more to-night."

"Nothing more to-night!" I almost shouted. "There must be! At any rate, there is the evening express from the junction; I have been by it scores of times!"

"Very likely, sir; but that's a through train; it don't touch here—never stops till it reaches the junction."

The man's quiet tone carried conviction with it. I was silent for a moment, and then asked when the express left the junction.

"Nine fifteen," was the answer.

"How far is the junction from this by road; could I do it in time?"

"Out of the question, sir. It would take one who knew the road the best part of three hours to drive."

I looked away to my left, where the green hill-side rose up steep and clear against the evening sky. It was one of the most mountainous quarters of England, and the tunnel that pierced the hill was a triumph of engineering skill, even in these days when science sticks at nothing. Pointing to the brick archway, I said, musingly:—

"And yet, once through the tunnel, how close at hand the junction station seems."

"That's true enough, sir; the other side the tunnel it is not half a mile down the line."

"What length is it?"

"The tunnel, sir? Close upon three miles, and straight as a dart."

There was another pause, then I said, slowly:—

"Nothing more goes down the line until the express has passed?"

"Nothing more, sir."

"Anything on the up line?" was my next inquiry.

"No, sir, not for some hours, except, maybe, some trucks of goods, but I have had no notice of them yet."

As the station-master made this last answer he looked at me curiously, no doubt wondering what the object of all these questions could be; but he certainly had no notion of what was passing in my mind, or he would not have turned into his office as he did, and left me there alone upon the platform.

I was young and impulsive, and, in my intense anxiety to get back to my sick wife, the delay of so many hours seemed unendurable, and my whole desire was to catch the express at the junction; but how was that to be accomplished? One way alone presented itself to me, and that was through the tunnel. At another time I should have put the notion from me as a mad impossibility, but now I clung to it as a last resource, reasoning myself out of all my fears. Where was the danger, since nothing was to come up or down the line for hours? A good level road, too, of little more than three miles, and a full hour and a half to do it in. And what would the darkness matter? There was no fear of missing the way; nothing to be done but to walk briskly forward. Yes, it could be, and I was resolved that it should be done.

I gave myself no more time for reflection. I walked to the end of the platform and stepped down upon the line, not very far from the mouth of the tunnel. As I entered the gloomy archway I wished devoutly that I had a lantern to bear me company, but it was out of the question for me to get anything of the kind at the station; as it was, I was as fearful each moment that my intention would be discovered, when I knew for a certainty that my project would be knocked on the head, and, for this reason, I was glad to leave daylight behind me and to know that I was unseen.

I walked on, at a smart pace, for fully ten minutes, trying not to think, but feeling painfully conscious that my courage was ebbing fast. Then I paused for breath. Ugh! how foul the air smelt! I told myself that it was worse even than the impenetrable darkness, and that was bad enough. I recalled to mind how I had gone through tunnels—this very one among others—in a comfortable lighted carriage, and had drawn up the window, sharply and suddenly, to keep out the stale, poisonous air; and this was the atmosphere I was to breathe for the next hour! I shuddered at the prospect. But it was not long before I was forced to acknowledge that it was the darkness quite as much as the stifling air which was affecting me. I had never been fond of the dark in my earliest days, and now it seemed as if the strange, wild fancies of my childhood were forcing themselves upon me, and I felt that, if only for an instant, I must have light of some sort; so, standing still, I took from my pocket a box of vestas, and struck one. Holding the little match carefully, cherishing it with my hand, I gazed about me. How horrible it all looked! Worse, if possible, in reality than in imagination. The outline of the damp, midday wall was just visible in the feeble flickering light. On the brickwork close to me I could see a coarse kind of fungus growing, and there was the silver, slimy trace of

slugs in all directions; I could fancy, too, the hundred other creeping things that were about. As the match died out, a noise among the stones near the wall caused me hastily to strike another, just in time to see a large rat whisk into its hole.

A miner, a plate-layer—in fact, anyone whose avocations took them underground—would have laughed to scorn these child-like fears; but the situation was new to me, and also I must confess that I am naturally of a nervous, imaginative turn of mind. Still, I was vexed with myself for my cowardly feelings, and started on my walk again, trying not to think of these gloomy surroundings, but drew a picture of my home, wondering how Mary was, if she was well enough to be told of my coming, and was looking out for me. Then I dwelt upon the satisfaction with which I should enter the express, at the junction, feeling that the troubles of the evening had not been in vain. After a while, when these thoughts were somewhat exhausted, and I felt my mind returning to the horrors of the present moment, I tried to look at it all from a different point of view, telling myself that it was an adventure which I should live to pride myself upon. Then I recalled to mind things I had read of subterranean passages, and naturally stories of the Catacombs presented themselves to me, and I thought how the early Christians had guided themselves through these dim corridors by means of a line or string; the fantastic notion came to me that I was in a like predicament, and the line I was to follow was the steel rail at my feet. For a while this thought gave me courage, making me realize how straight the way was, and that I had only to go on and on until the goal was reached.

I walked for, perhaps, twenty minutes or half an hour, sometimes passing a small grating for ventilation; but they were so choked by weeds and rubbish that they gave little light and less air. Walking quickly through a dark place, one has the feeling that unseen objects are close at hand, and that at any moment you may come in sharp contact with them. It was this feeling, at least, which made me, as I went along, continually put out my hand as if to ward off a blow, and suddenly, while my right foot still rested on the smooth steel rail, my left hand struck against the wall of the tunnel. As my fingers grated on the rough brick a new terror took possession of me—or at least, if not a new terror, one of the fears which had haunted me at the outset rushed upon me with redoubled force.

I had faced the possibility of the station-master having been mistaken, and of a train passing through the tunnel while I was still there, but I told myself I had only to stand close to the wall, until the train had gone on its way. Now, however, I felt, with a sinking horror at my heart, that there was little room to spare. Again and again I tested it, standing with my foot well planted on the rail and my arm outstretched until my fingers touched the bricks. There was a fascination in it much as in the case of a timid swimmer who cannot bear to think he is out of depth and must keep putting down his foot to try for the bottom, knowing all the while he is only rendering himself more nervous. During the next ten minutes I know I worked myself into a perfect agony of mind, imagining the very worst that could happen. Suppose that the up and down trains should cross in the tunnel, what chance should I then have? The mere thought was appalling! Retreat was impossible, for I must have come more than half way by this time, and turning back would only be going to meet the express. But surely in the thickness of the wall there must be here and there recesses? I was sure I had seen one, some little back, when I had struck a light. The wall was gleam of hope. Out came the matches once more, but my hands were so shaky that I had scarcely opened the box when it slipped from my fingers and its precious contents were scattered on the ground. This was a new trouble. I was down upon my knees at once, groping about to find them. It was a hopeless task in the dark, and, after wasting much time, I was forced to light the first one I found to look for the others, and, when that died out, I had only four in my hand, and had to leave the rest and go on my way, for the time was getting short and my great desire was to find a recess which should afford me shelter in case of need. But, although I grudgingly lit one match after another, and walked for some distance with my hands rubbing against the wall, I could find nothing of the kind.

At length, I don't know what time it was, or how far I had walked, I saw before me, a long, low way off, dim speck of light. At first I thought, with a sudden rush of gladness, that it was daylight, and that the end of the tunnel was in sight; then I remembered that it was now evening and the sun had long set, so that it must be a lamp; and it was a lamp. I began to see it plainly, for it was coming nearer and nearer, and I knew that it was an approaching train. I stood still and looked at it, and it was at that instant that the whole ground beneath me seemed to be shaken. The rail upon which one of my feet was resting thrilled as if with an electric shock, sending a strange vibration through me, while a sudden rush of wind swept down the tunnel, and I knew that the express was upon me.

I shall never forget the feeling that took possession of me; it seemed as if, into that one moment, the experiences of years were crowded—recollections of my childhood—tender thoughts of my wife—dreams of the future, in which I had meant to do so much, all thronged in, thick and fast upon me. Could this be death? I gave a wild, despairing cry for help. I prayed aloud that God would not let me die. I had lost all presence of mind; no thought of standing back against the wall came to me. I rushed madly forward in a frenzy of despair. The sound of my voice, as it echoed through that dismal place, was drowned in an instant by the sharp, discordant scream of the express. On dashed, right in front of the goods train; the yellow light of the engine shone full upon me; death was at hand. It seemed that nothing short of a miracle could save me, and, to my thinking, it was a miracle that happened.

Only a few yards from the engine, and as I struggled blindly on, a strong hand seized me with a grasp of iron, and I was dragged on one side. Even in my bewilderment I knew that I was not against the wall, but in one of those very recesses I had searched for in vain. I sank upon the ground, only half conscious, yet I saw the indistinct blurr of light as the train swept by.

I am not given to swooning, so that, after the first moment, I was quite alive to my exact situation. I knew that I was crouching on the ground, and that that iron-like grasp was still on my collar. Presently the hand relaxed its hold and a gruff, but not unkindly voice said:—

"Well, mate, how are you?"

This inquiry unlocked my tongue, and I poured forth my gratitude. I hardly know what I said; I only know I was very much in earnest. I told him who I was and how I came to be there, and in return asked him his name.

"That does not signify," was the answer; "you can think of me as a friend."

"That I shall," I returned, gratefully; "for God knows you have been a friend in need to me!"

"Ah," he said, musingly, "your life must be very sweet, for you seem loath enough to part with it!"

I admitted the truth of this, indeed, I had felt it more than once during the last hour. I had been one of those who, in fits of depression, are wont to say that life is not worth living; that we shall be well out of it, and the rest, yet, when it seemed really slipping from my grasp, I had clung to it with a tenacity before me, in which so much seemed possible, I was filled with gratitude to God and to my unknown friend, by whose means I had been saved. There was a short silence; then I asked, rather doubtfully, if there were not some way in which I could prove my gratitude.

"You speak as if you were sincere," my strange companion said, in a gruff, downright way; "so I will tell you frankly that you can do me a good turn if you have a mind to. I don't want your money, understand; but I want you to do me a favor."

"What is it?" I asked, eagerly; "believe me, if it is in my power it shall be done!"

"I would rather you passed your word before I explain more," he said coolly. "Say my request shall be granted. I take it you are not a man to break your promise."

Here was a predicament! Asked to pledge my word for I knew not what! To be in the dark in more sense than one; for I could not even see my mysterious deliverer's face, to judge what manner of a man he was. And yet how could I refuse his request? At last I said slowly:—

"If what you ask is honest and above board, you have my word that it shall be done, no matter what it may cost me."

He gave a short laugh. "You are cautious," he said, "but you are right. No, there is nothing dishonest about my request; it will wrong no one, though it may cause you some personal inconvenience."

"That is enough," I said, hastily, ashamed of the half-hearted way in which I had given my promise. "The instant we are out of this place I will take steps to grant your request, whatever it may be."

"But that won't do," he put in, quickly; "what I want must be done here and now!"

I was bewildered, as well I might be, and remained silent while he went on:—

"There is no need to say much about myself; but this you must know. I am in great trouble. I am accused of that which makes me amenable to the law. I am innocent, but I cannot prove my innocence, and my only chance of safety is in flight. That is the reason of my being here. I am hiding from my pursuers."

The poor creature paused, with a deep drawn sigh, as if he at least had not found his life worth the struggle. I was greatly shocked by his story, and warmly expressed my sympathy; then, on his telling me he had been for two days and nights in the tunnel, with scarcely a bit of food, I remembered a package of sandwiches that had been provided for my journey, and offered them to him. It made me shudder to hear the ravenous manner in which they were consumed. When this was done there was another silence, broken by his saying, with evident hesitation, that the one hope he had was in disguising himself in some way, and thus eluding those who were watching for him. He concluded with:—

"The fact I have to ask is that you will help me in this by allowing me to have your clothes in exchange for mine!"

There was such an odd mixture of tragedy and comedy in the whole thing that for a moment I hardly knew how to answer him. The poor fellow must have taken my silence for anything but consent, for he said, bitterly:—

"On object! I felt you would, and it is my only chance!"

"On the contrary, I returned, "I am perfectly willing to do as you wish—indeed, how could I do otherwise when I have given you my word? I was only fearing that you built too much upon this exchange. Remember, it is no disguise—the dress of one man is much like that of another."

"That is true enough, as a general rule," was the answer, "but not in this case. I was last seen in a costume not common in these parts. A coarse, tweed shooting-dress, short coat, knee-breeches, and rough worsted stockings—so that an everyday suit is all I want."

After that there was nothing more to be said, and the change was effected without more ado.

It seemed to me that my invisible companion had the advantage over me as far as seeing went, for whereas I was sensible of nothing but touch and sound, his hands invariably met and aided mine whenever they were at fault. He confessed to this, saying that he had been so long in the dark that his eyes were growing accustomed to it.

I never felt anything like the coarseness of those stockings as I drew them on. The shoes, too, were of the clumsiest make; they were large for me, which perhaps accounted for their extreme heaviness. I was a bit of a dandy; always priding myself upon my spick and span get-up. No doubt this made me critical, but certainly the tweed of which the clothes were made was the roughest thing of its kind I had ever handled. I got into them, however, without any comment, only remarking, when my toilet was finished, that I could find no fault.

My companion gave another of those short laughs.

"No," he said, "that suit was made for use, not comfort!"

From his tone and manner of expressing himself, I had taken him to be a man fairly educated, and when he had declared that he did not require my money, I naturally fancied he was not in want of funds; but the style of his clothes made me think differently, and I decided that he should have my watch—the most valuable thing I had about me. It had no particular associations, and a few pounds would get me another. He seemed pleased, almost touched, by the proposal, and also by my suggesting that the money in my pockets should be divided between us. It was not a large sum, but half of it would take me to my journey's end, I knew. He seemed full of resource, for when I was wondering what to do with my loose change, in my pocketless costume, he spread out my handkerchief, and putting my money and the small things from my pockets into it, knotted it securely up and thrust it into my breast. Then, as we stood facing each other, he took my hand in farewell, and proposed our going on together, but this he would not hear of.

"No," he said, with his grim laugh, "the sooner I and that suit of clothes part company, the better!"

So we wished each other God-speed, and turned on our different ways—he going back through the tunnel, and I keeping on.

The experience of the last few hours had made a great impression on me, and, although I felt awed and somewhat shaken, my heart was light with the gladness of one who rejoices in a reprieve. The express that I had been so anxious to catch had long since gone on its way; still, in my present hopeful frame of mind, that did not trouble me. I felt a conviction that Mary was mending, that I should find her better, and comforted by this belief, I walked briskly on; at least, as briskly as my clumsy shoes would allow me; but even in spite of this hindrance, it was not long before I reached the end of the tunnel. The moonlight streaming down upon the rails was a pleasant sight, and showed me, some time before I reached it, that my goal was at hand. When I left the last shadow behind me, and stood out under the clear sky, I drew a sigh of intense thankfulness, drinking in the sweet fresh air.

I walked down the country road, thinking that I would rest for a few hours at the station hotel and be ready for the first train in the morning. But my adventures were not yet over. As I glanced at my clothes, thinking how unlike myself I looked and felt, something on the sleeve of my coat attracted my attention; it must be, I thought, for the former wearer of the clothes must have rubbed off in the tunnel. But, no, I looked again—my eyes seemed riveted to it—it was unmistakable. There, on the coarse grey material of the coat, was a large broad arrow.

In an instant the whole truth had flashed upon me. No need to examine those worsted stockings and heavy shoes—no need to take off the coat and find upon the collar the name of one of Her Majesty's prisons, and the poor convict's number. As my eyes rested on the broad arrow I understood it all.

At first I was very indignant at the position I was in. I felt that a trick had been practised upon me, and I naturally resented it. I sat down by the road side and tried to think. The cool air blew in my face and refreshed me. I had no hat; the convict I was beginning to think of him by that name—had given me none, saying he had lost his cap in the tunnel. After a while, when my anger had somewhat subsided, I thought more pitifully of the man whose clothes I wore. Poor wretch, without doubt he had had a hard time of it; what wonder that he had seized upon the first opportunity of escape! He had said that the favor he required would entail personal inconvenience on myself, and that was exactly what it did. I looked at the matter from all sides; I saw the dilemma I was in. It would do to be seen in this branded garb—the police would lay hands on me at once; nothing would persuade them that I was not the convict. Indeed, who was likely to believe the improbable story I had to tell? I felt that I could expect few to credit it on my mere word, and I had nothing to prove my identity, for I remembered now that my pocketbook and letters were in my coat; I had never given them a thought when making the exchange of clothes. So, as things were, it might take some days for me to establish my real personality.