

THE BULLFROG.

logised to me in a gruff whisper, "Couldn't help it, sir."

"Never mind," said I, smiling, and applied myself to obtaining the new-comer, who sat down, not opposite to me, but in the middle partition, full in the glare of the lamp. In a very short time I had, as I thought, taken the measure of this not very delightful fellow voyager. He was a young man, perhaps a year my senior, strongly built, and with rather a handsome face, sadly marred by very evident traces of dissipation. He wore a coat of sporting cut; a blue "birds-eye" scarf, with a horseshoe pin in it, and a great deal of dubious jewellery in the shape of rings, watch-chain, and dangling trinkets. The railway rag, that lay across the knees of his tight-fitting drab trousers, was of a gaudy, pattern, yellow and red. His eyes were bloodshot, his voice thick, and he smelt very strongly of bad tobacco and bad brandy. To all appearance he was a betting man, or sporting "gent" of the lower substratum of that uninviting class.

The bell rang for the last time. There was the customary final rush and scurry of belated passengers and porters, and the voices of the newspaper boys grew shriller and more excited. Then the guards sprang to the steps of their vans, and the station-master looked warily up and down the line, prepared to signal the engine driver. At that moment a man came darting across the platform, tore open the door, jumped in, and sat down opposite to me. A policeman ran up, and shut the door.

"All right, Saunderson!"

The train began to move. I looked at my opposite neighbour, and could hardly repress an exclamation of surprise and vexation. The Russian! Yes, there was no mistaking the man. I knew that red-brown beard, that flat tigerish face, those long crafty eyes, black and narrow as an American Indian's, perfectly well.

I had seen the man at the ticket-window, certainly, but that was more than ten minutes ago, and I had been confident that he had long since taken his seat in some other compartment of the train. Such, however, was not the case. I was fated, it seemed, always to be in contact with this person, for whom I had conceived an antipathy that was perhaps unjust, but was not the less decided. There was a look of stealthy fierceness and greasy, self-sufficiency about the man that would have been distasteful to most people. His was one of those faces that conveyed to those who looked upon it at once a threat and a warning. And, after all, was it a coincidence that had brought me so often face to face with this grim foreigner? Certainly it might have been pure accident which caused him to witness both my entry into and my exit from the jeweller's shop. It might have been mere hazard which made him my fellow traveller by the same train and carriage. And yet I could not help somehow connecting the four-wheeled cab that had been stationed near the club door, that had appeared in the street stoppage, with the sudden appearance of the Russian at the terminus of the railway. Had he dogged me all that evening, tracking me with a blood-hound's pertinacity from the jeweller's door to the railway carriage? It was possible, though not likely. But in vain I tried to dismiss the idea as silly and romantic. It recurred again and again. And yet why should he or any one dog my steps?

The answer to this self-question soon came. The jewels! the costly set of pearl and ruby ornaments I carried about me, and of which this man had probably overheard the garrulous old jeweller make mention! And yet the Russian had hardly the air of a pickpocket. There was something defiant and arrogant in his look, and an undefinable air of education clung to him in spite of his shabby exterior. And as for violence, I had a young man's confidence in my own power to cope with any single antagonist, and, besides, I was not alone with him. So far my thoughts had gone, while I gazed abstractedly from the window, as if marking the last light of the London suburbs as the dark hedges and dim meadows succeeded to houses and factories, but then I cast a glance around and saw a sight which caused me an involuntary thrill of alarm. The two passengers in the carriage were talking rapidly and secretly by means of signs!

There could be no doubt upon the point. The two men who were my sole companions in that rapid and lonely journey, ill-looking desperadoes, each in his separate style, were accomplices. Up to that moment I had not for an instant suspected any collusion between the two. They came at

different times, one was English, the other a foreigner, and between the shabby lecturer and the betting man, sodden with drink and attired in flashy finery, any previous acquaintance seemed improbable. Yet they were, rapidly communicating with one another by means of some thieves' alphabet of finger telegraphy, unaware as yet that I had observed them. So far as I could make out, the foreigner was urging the other to some course which the latter was reluctant to pursue.

I am not, I believe, one whit more disposed to timidity than most of my fellow countrymen, and yet I must confess that my blood ran cold and my heart almost ceased beating as the truth dawned upon me. I was the victim evidently of an artful and treacherous scheme. That cab—that sudden appearance of the Russian at the terminus—that persistency of his English confederate to occupy a seat in the carriage where I sat alone! All was clear to me now. Robbery, no doubt, was the object of the two villains in whose company I was shut up, and probably they would hesitate at no crime to obtain possession of the valuable jewels I so incautiously carried about my person. Both were strong men, probably armed too; and though I braced my nerves and set my teeth for a struggle, I had little hope of a successful resistance, none of rescue. The train was racing fast through the black stillness of a moonless night. There was to be no stoppage short of C—, and hours must elapse before that station was reached.

At the moment when my thoughts had travelled thus far, I made some slight movement; the Russian looked up, and our eyes met, and the villain saw that his bye-play had been observed, and instantly threw off the mask. Grinding out an oath between his set teeth, he rose from his seat. I rose, too; and as the Russian noticed the action he sprang like a tiger at my throat, grappling with me so closely that the blow I dealt him took but partial effect. Linked together, we wrestled furiously for a few seconds, rising and falling; but I was the younger and more agile of the two, and had nearly overpowered my enemy, when his confederate came to his aid, and dealt me a succession of crushing blows upon the head with some heavy weapon, beneath which I fell, stunned and helpless, with my face covered with blood, and my strength and senses left me. When I came to myself again, the ruffians were rifling my pockets as I lay on the floor of the carriage. The Russian had opened one of the morocco cases that held the ornaments, and he was examining the gems by the light of the lamp overhead. The other villain was searching for fresh plunder. He was livid with agitation, I noticed, and his face was blotched with crimson, and damp with heat-drops, while his hands trembled very much. He it was who first spoke, in a husky whisper.

"What shall we do with him?"

"*La belle affaire!* Toss him out! The fall won't hurt him!" sneered the Russian.

It was plain that they believed me to be dead. I lay still, resolved that no cry, no twitching of an eyelid, should betray that life was still not extinct. Too well I knew that mercy was hopeless, and that my chance would be far better if flung out, at the risk of being mangled and crushed beneath the whirling iron wheels, than if I remained in that luxurious first-class carriage, with those two wild beasts in human guise, ready to finish their work as the first sign that I yet lived. The Russian leaned out of the window, and cautiously opened the door. I felt the chill of the fresh night wind upon my cheek as I lay. Then I had to summon all my resolution to my help, to repress a shudder as the murderers stooped and lifted me up, one taking me by the head, and the other by the feet, as butchers carry a slaughtered calf. The Englishman breathed hard, and trembled perceptibly as he dragged me towards the gaping doorway.

"I don't half like the job," he growled out.

The Russian gave a scornful laugh.

"Pitch the carrion out, *Bianco*! that you are! One, two, three, and over with him."

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