



VOL. III.—No. 67.

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4D OR SEVEN CENTS.

TO OUR READERS.

We devote the whole of our space in the present issue to Dickens's new Christmas Story, "Mugby Junction;" and in order that our readers may have the several tales complete, we issue at the same time No. 68. Other matter had been prepared for our Christmas numbers, but we have decided to exclude it, and place before our readers, in preference, these charming stories, which have employed the pens of the most popular writers of the day.

DICKENS'S CHRISTMAS STORY.

MUGBY JUNCTION.

BARBOX BROTHERS.

I.

"GUARD! What place is this?"

"Mugby Junction, sir."

"A windy place!"

"Yes, it mostly is, sir"

"And looks comfortless indeed!"

"Yes, it generally does, sir."

"Is it a rainy night still?"

"Pours, sir."

"Open the door. I'll get out."

"You'll have, sir," said the guard, glistening with drops of wet, and looking at the tearful face of his watch by the light of his lantern as the traveller descended, "three minutes here."

"More, I think.—For I am not going on."

"Thought you had a through ticket, sir?"

"So I have, but I shall sacrifice the rest of it."

I want my luggage."

"Please to come to the van and point it out, sir. Be good enough to look very sharp, sir. Not a moment to spare."

The guard hurried to the luggage van, and the traveller hurried after him. The guard got into it, and the traveller looked into it.

"Those two large black portmanteaus in the corner where your light shines. These are mine."

"Name upon 'em, sir?"

"Barbox Brothers."

"Stand clear, sir, if you please. One. Two. Right!"

Lamp waved. Signal lights ahead already changing. Shriek from engine. Train gone.

"Mugby Junction!" said the traveller, pulling up the woollen muffler round his throat with both hands. "At past three o'clock of a tempestuous morning! So!"

He spoke to himself. There was no one else to speak to. Perhaps, though there had been any one else to speak to, he would have preferred to speak to himself. Speaking to himself, he spoke to a man within five years of fifty either way, who had turned gray too soon, like a neglected fire; a man of pondering habit, brooding carriage of the head, and suppressed internal voice; a man with many indications of him of having been much alone.

He stood unnoticed on the dreary platform,

except by the rain and by the wind. Those two vigilant assailants made a rush at him. "Very well," said he, yielding. "It signifies nothing to me to what quarter I turn my face."

Thus, at Mugby Junction, at past three o'clock of a tempestuous morning, the traveller went where the weather drove him.

Not but what he could make a stand when he was so minded, for, coming to the end of the roofed shelter (it is of considerable extent at Mugby Junction) and looking out upon the dark night, with a yet darker spirit-wing of storm beating its wild way through it, he faced about, and held his own as ruggedly in the difficult direction, as he had held it in the easier one. Thus, with a steady step, the traveller went up and down, up and down, up and down, seeking nothing, and finding it.

A place replete with shadowy shapes, this Mugby Junction in the black hours of the four-and-twenty. Mysterious goods trains, covered with palls and gliding on like vast weird funerals, conveying themselves guiltily away from the presence of the few lighted lamps, as if their freight had come to a secret and unlawful end. Half miles of coal pursuing in a Detective manner, following when they lead, stopping when they stop, backing when they back. Red hot embers showering out upon the ground, down this dark avenue and down the other, as if torturing fires were being raked clear; concurrently, shrieks and groans and grinds invading the ear, as if the tortured were at the height of their suffering. Iron-barred cages full of cattle jangling by midway, the drooping beasts with horns entangled, eyes frozen with terror, and mouths too: at least they have long icicles (or what seem so) hanging from their lips. Unknown languages in the air, conspiring in red, green, and white, characters. An earthquake accompanied with thunder and lightning, going up express to London. Now, all quiet, all rusty, wind and rain in possession, lamps extinguished, Mugby Junction dead and indistinct, with its robe drawn over its head, like Cæsar.

Now, too, as the belated traveller plodded up and down, a shadowy train went by him in the gloom which was no other than the train of a life. From whatsoever intangible deep cutting or dark tunnel it emerged, here it came, unsummoned and unannounced, stealing upon him and passing away into obscurity. Here, mournfully went by, a child who had never had a childhood or known a parent, inseparable from a youth with a bitter sense of his namelessness, coupled to a man the enforced business of whose best years had been distasteful and oppressive, linked to an ungrateful fiend, dragging after him a woman once beloved. Attendant, with many a clank and wrench, were lumbering cares, dark meditations, huge dim disappointments, monotonous years, a long jarring line of the discords of a solitary and unhappy existence.

"—Yours, sir?"

The traveller recalled his eyes from the waste into which they had been staring, and fell back a step or so under the abruptness, and perhaps the chance appropriateness, of the question.

"Oh! My thoughts were not here for the moment. Yes. Yes. Those two portmanteaus are mine. Are you a Porter?"

"On Porter's wages, sir. But I am Lamps." The traveller looked a little confused.

"Who did you say you are?"

"Lamps, sir," showing an oily cloth in his hand as further explanation.

"Surely, surely. Is there any hotel or tavern here?"

"Not exactly here, sir. There is a Refreshment Room here, but—" Lamps, with a mighty serious look, gave his head a warning roll that plainly added—"but it's a blessed circumstance for you that it is not open."

"You could not recommend it, I see, if it was available?"

"Ask your pardon, sir. If it was?"

"Open?"

"It ain't my place, as a paid servant of the company, to give my opinion on any of the company's toepicks," he pronounced it more like toothpicks, "beyond lamp-ile and cottons," returned Lamps, in a confidential tone; "but, speaking as a man, I wouldn't recommend my father (if he was to come to life again) to go and try how he'd be treated at the Refreshment Room. Not, speaking as a man, no, I would not."

The traveller nodded conviction. "I suppose I can put up in the town? There is a town here?" For the traveller (though a stay-at-home compared with most travellers) had been, like many others, carried on the steam winds and the iron tides through that Junction before, without having ever, as one might say, gone ashore there.

"O yes, there's a town, sir. Anyways there's a town enough to put up in. But," following the glance of the other to his luggage, "this is a very dead time of the night with us. The deadiest time. I might a'most call it our deadiest and buriediest time."

"No porters about?"

"Well, sir, you see," returned Lamps confidentially again, "they in general goes off with the gas. That's how it is. And they seem to have overlooked you, through your walking to the furdur end of the platform. But in about twelve minutes or so she may be up."

"Who may be up?"

"The three forty-two, sir. She goes off to a sidin' till the Up X passes, and then she," here an air of hopeful vagueness pervaded Lamps, "does all as lays in her power."

"I doubt if I comprehend the arrangement."

"I doubt if anybody do, sir. She's a Parliamentary, sir. And you see, a Parliamentary, or a Skirmishun—"

"Do you mean an Excursion?"

"That's it, sir. A Parliamentary or a Skirmishun, she mostly does go off into a sidin'. But when she can get a chance, she's whistled out of it, and she's whistled up into doin' all as," Lamps again wore the air of a highly sanguine man who hoped for the best, "all as lays in her power."

He then explained that porters on duty being required to be in attendance on the Parliamentary matron in question, would doubtless turn up with the gas. In the meantime, if the gentleman would not very much object to the smell of lamp-oil, and would accept the warmth of his little room. The gentleman being by this time very cold, instantly closed with the proposal.