

LOST IN THE FOG

BY

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LONDON was smothered in fog, and I expected that my train would be tediously delayed before we escaped into the free air. I was oppressed by the burden of darkness and the misery of enclosure. All this winter I have longed for the sight of horizons, for the leap of clear spaces and the depth of an open sky. But while my anticipation of delay was proved false, my longings for release remained unsatisfied. The great plain of the Midlands was muffled in a thick white mist. I stared out desperately, but it was as if I tried to peer through a window of frosted glass.

When I alighted from the express at Barnwell Junction, a porter directed me to platform No. 5 for my branch line train to Felthorpe. We were a little late—a quarter of an hour, perhaps—and I felt hurried, impatient, and depressed. I probably took the train from No. 3. The mistake would not have been irreparable, so far as my day's excursion was concerned, if I had not gone to sleep. But I had waked early, and my eyes were strained and tired with the hopeless endeavour to search

that still, persistent mist. I woke with a quick sense of dismay as the train slowed into a station.

I let down the window, but I could distinguish nothing familiar in the dim grey masses that loomed like spectres through the cold, white smoke of fog. I opened the door and stood hesitating, afraid to get out, afraid to go on. And then I heard steps, and the sound of a dreary cough waxing invisibly towards me; and the figure of the guard showed suddenly close at hand.

"What station is this?" I asked.

"Burden," he said.

"Are we far from Felthorpe?" I hazarded, conscious, even then, that I was lost.

He came closer still, and peered at me with something in his face that was very like glee.

"You're on the wrong line," he said, gloating over my discomfiture. Little drops of moisture shone like milk on the blackness of his beard. "You'll 'ave to go back to Barnwell," he said, as one who delights in judgment.

"How long shall I have to wait?" I asked.

He looked at his watch. "Fifty minutes," he said, and immediately quenched my faint relief by adding, "Or should. But it's 'ardly likely she'll be punctual to-day. We're over an hour late now."

The thought seemed to rouse him. Reluctantly—for loth indeed he must have been to relinquish the single pleasure of his shrouded day—he blew

a fierce screech on his whistle, and, shouting hoarsely, slammed the door of my empty compartment.

I stood back and watched the blurred line of carriages slip groaning into the unknown. Then I turned and looked up at the board above me.

“Burden,” I muttered. “Where in God’s name may Burden be?”

I found something unutterably sad in the sound of that name.

I felt lonely and pitiable.

It was bitterly cold, and the mist was thicker than ever.

II

I could hear no one. There could be neither porter nor station-master here. Evidently this station was nothing more than a “Halt,” on what I presently discovered was only a single line. I was alone in the dreadful stillness. The world had ceased to exist for me. And then I stumbled upon the little box of a waiting-room, and in it was a man who crouched over a smouldering fire.

When I went in, he looked quickly over his shoulder with the tense alertness of one who fears an ambush. But when he saw me, his expression changed instantly to relief, and to something that was like appeal.

“What brings you here?” he asked with a weak smile.

I was thankful for any companionship, and poured out the tale of my bitter woes.

"Ah! you don't know how lucky you are," was my companion's single comment.

I scarcely heeded him. "I shall have to give up the idea of getting to Felthorpe to-day," I went on, seeking some consolation for my misery. "If I can only get back to town. . . ."

"That's nothing," he put in with a dreary sigh. "Nothing, nothing at all."

"And this infernal train back to Barnwell will probably be hours late," I continued.

He smiled weakly, and rubbed his hands together staring into the dull heart of the fire. "It sounds queer to me, hearing this old talk again," he said thoughtfully. "I'd almost come to believe that the whole world had changed; that it was impossible for life outside to be going on just the same as ever. But of course it is. . . ." He sighed immensely and shook his head. "Of course—in a way—it *is*," he repeated.

Something in his attitude and the tone of his voice began to pierce my obstinate preoccupation with the disaster of my day's excursion. I had a curious sense of touching some terrible reality

de which my little troubles were but a momentary irritation. I looked at him with a new curiosity, and noticed for the first time that his face was pinched and worn, and that on the further

side of his chair lay a pair of roughly fashioned crutches.

"Are you going by my train?" I asked. I felt a new desire to help him.

He shook his head. "Oh! no; I just come down here for a little rest," he said. "I shall have to go back presently—as soon as I'm strong enough. They'll find something for me to do." He looked up at me with his pitiful smile as he continued, "But of course you don't understand. You've probably never heard of our trouble in Burden, out there."

I followed the indication of his nod, and could see nothing but the pale sea of fog pressing against the dirty window.

"What's the trouble at Burden?" I asked.

He looked up at me with an expression that I could not interpret. It seemed as if he both appealed to me and warned me. "You live in another world," he said. "You'd better keep out of mine—it isn't a good place to live in."

I laughed, like the careless fool I was. "Oh! I'll promise to keep out of it," I said. "Pray God, I'll never come here again."

"Aye, pray God," he repeated, as though the words had some hidden intention. And then he began suddenly:

"It's over two years now since it began. They live right in the middle of the village, you know. It has given them an advantage in lots of ways.

We suspected 'em from the beginning—only we went on. We hoped it would be all right. Living on the other side of the street, we thought we were safe, I suppose."

I was about to interrupt him with a question, but his face unexpectedly grew stern and hard. "You see, they cut across Bates's garden," he said quickly, "and turned Bates and his family out of their house; and, as my father said, we couldn't stand that. If the Turtons were going to have a set-to with the Royces at the other end of the village, we might have stood by and seen fair play. The Royces are a big family, and they own all the land that side. . . ."

I inferred that the Turtons were the original aggressors, but he took so much for granted. And before I had time to question him he continued in a low, brooding voice:

"But their very first move was against the Franks—by way of Bates's garden, as I've said. And two of Bates's children got killed—and then . . ."

"What?" I interrupted him sharply. "Two of his children? *Killed*, did you say?"

"Murdered, practically," he said, and lifted his head and gave a queer, snickering laugh. "But we've almost forgotten that," he went on. "Why, half the village has been killed or disabled since then."

"But why don't the police interfere?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "We've always been our own police," he explained. "But there is a chap in the next village who has tried to interfere—sent messages and so on to both sides. However, he has kept his family out of it up to now."

My perplexity deepened. The man looked sane enough, and I could not believe that he was deliberately making a fool of me. "But do you honestly mean to tell me," I asked, "that the families in your village are actually fighting and—and killing each other?"

"I suppose it does seem damned impossible to you," he said. "We've got sort of used to it, of course. And we've always been having rows of this kind, more or less. Not so bad as this one, but still, pretty bad some of them. My father remembers . . ."

"But does it go on every day?" I insisted.

"Lord, yes," he said. "It has got down to a sort of siege now. The Turtons have got some of the Franks's land, and some of the Royces'; pretty near all little Bates's, and one or two cottagers' at the back as well—a roughish lot those cottagers have always been, fighting among themselves all the time pretty nearly; and some of 'em went in with the Turtons for what they could make out of it. However, the point is now that the Turtons are sticking to what they've got, and we're trying to get 'em off it. But it's a mighty tough job, and

we're all dead sick of it." He paused, and then repeated drearily, "Oh! dead sick of it all. Weary to death of it."

"But can't you come to any agreement between yourselves?" I protested.

"Well, the Turtons have sort of offered terms," he said. "We think they might give us back our neighbours' land and so on, but . . ."

"Well?" I prompted him.

"Well, you can't trust 'em," he explained. "They're land-robbers. They haven't quite brought it off this time, because the Royces and the Franks and us and one or two others joined hands against 'em. But if we call it quits over this, we shall have it all over again in a year or two's time. And then it won't be shot-guns; they'll buy rifles."

"Well, you can buy rifles, too," I suggested.

"Oh! what's the good of that?" he cried out impatiently. "We've got to till the land. We've got to work—harder now than ever. And how can you work with a rifle in your hand, and looking over your shoulder every minute?"

"But in that case . . ." I began.

"Oh! we've got to beat 'em," he said doggedly, and cast a regretful glance at the crutches by his chair. "We've got to teach 'em a lesson, and make our own terms. It won't be easy, I know. They've always wanted to boss the lot of us, and they've got their knife into my father for getting the best

of 'em over the allotments. However, that's an old story."

"But how?" I asked.

"Oh! we're sure to beat 'em—in time," he said, "and then we'll be able to make terms. My father says he doesn't want to be bitter about it. He isn't the sort to bear a grudge. But we've got to make it damned impossible that this sort of thing shall ever happen again."

For a few moments we lapsed into silence. Outside the fog seemed to have lifted a little. Through the window I could see the silhouette of a gaunt, bare tree, rough and stark against the milky whiteness that hid the awful distances of Burden. My imagination tried to pierce the shroud of vapour, and picture the horror of hate and murder beyond. Was the mist out there glowing with the horrid richness of blood? Was it possible that one might walk through the veil of cloud and stumble suddenly on something that lay dark and soft across the roadway, in a broad pool astoundingly red in this lost, white world? . . .

And then the vision leapt and vanished. I heard the thin sound of a whistle, and the remote drumming and throbbing of a distant train.

I jumped to my feet. "It's barely an hour late, after all," I said.

My companion took no notice. He was gazing with a fixed, cold stare into the dead heart of the fire.

" I suppose I can't help in any way ? " I stammered awkwardly.

" You're lucky to be out of it. You keep out of it," he said. " You've got your train to catch."

And yet I hesitated, even when, with a harsh shriek of impeded wheels, the train scuttered into the little station. Ought I to help ? I wondered feebly. But my every desire drew me towards the relief that would bear me back to the world I knew. . . .

III

And now I wonder if that man's story can possibly have been true ? Is it conceivable that out there in the little unknown village—for ever lost to me in a world of white mist—men are fighting and *killing* each other ?

Surely it cannot be true ?