

THE ENGLISH REVIEW

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The Coach

By Violet Hunt

It was a lonely part of the country, far away in the north, where the summer nights are pale and scant of shade. There was no moon and yet it was not dark. For hours the flat, deprecating earth had lain prone under a storm of wind and rain. Its patient surface was drenched, blanched, smitten into blindness. The tumbled waters of the Firth splashed on the edges of the plain, their mild commotion dwarfed by the noise of the wind-driven showers, whose gloomy drops tapped the waters into sullen acquiescence. Half a mile inland the great main Roman road was laid. Clear and straight it ran, with never a house or homestead to break it, viscous with clay here, shining with quartz there, uncompromising, exact, a pallid ribbon stretched from South to North. Its sides were bare, scantily garnished with grass—this was nearly a hedgeless country—but in places the undeviating line of it passed through a little nut coppice or clump of gnarled, ill-conditioned trees. They seemed to lean forward vindictively on either side, snapping their horny fingers at each other, waving their cantankerous branches as the gusts took them, broke them, and whirled the fragments of their ruin far away and out of ken, like a flapping unruly kite which a child has allowed to pass beyond his control. The broad white surface of the road beneath was not suffered to be blotted for a single moment. Nothing could rest for the play of the intriguing air currents, surging backwards and forwards, blind, stupid, unpacified. They had got completely out of hand and defied the archers of the middle sky. Staggering hither and thither like ineffectual giants, they buffeted all impartially; they instigated the hapless boughs at their mercy to savage lashings of each other, to useless accesses of self-destruction. Bending slavishly under the heady gusts, each shabby blade of grass by the roadside rose again and was on the *qui-vive* after the rustling tyrant had passed.

It was then, in the succeeding moments of comparative peace, when the directors of the passionate aerial revolt had

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managed to call their panting rabble off for the time, that great perpendicular sheets of rain, like stage films, descended, and began moving continuously sideways, like a wall of plate-glass, across the level track, as if slung evenly from heavenly tent-poles. A sheet of whole water, blotting out the stubbly borders of herbage that grew sparsely round the heaps of stones with which the margin was set at intervals, placed there ready for breaking! When the slab of rain had moved on again, the broad road, shining out sturdily with its embedded quartz and milky, kneaded clay, lay clear once more. Calm, ordered and tranquil in the midst of tumult and discord it pursued its appointed course, from its evenly bevelled sides, edging off the noisy moorland streams, that had come jostling each other in their haste to reach it, only to be relegated, noisily plaining, to the swollen unrecognisable gutter.

At a certain point on the line of way, a tall, spare, respectable-looking man in a well-fitting grey frock coat stood waiting. The rain ran down the back of his coat collar, and dripped off the rim of his tall hat. His attitude was that of some weary foredone clerk waiting at the corner of the city street for the omnibus that was to carry him home to slippers comfort and sober pipe of peace. He wore no muffler, but then it was summer—St. John's Eve. He leaned on an iron-headed ebony stick of which he seemed fond, and peered, not very eagerly, along the road, which now, during a lull, lay in dazzling rain-washed clarity, under the struggling moon. He had no luggage, no umbrella, yet his coat looked neat, and his hat shiny.

Far in the distance, southwards, a black clumsy object appeared, labouring along. A coach, of heavy and antique pattern. As soon as he had sighted it, the passenger's interest diminished. With a slightly bored air of fulfilment, he took his eyes off, and looked down at the clayey mud at his feet disapprovingly, although, indeed, the sticky substance did not appear to have marred the exquisite polish of his shoes. His palm settled composedly on the ivory knob of his trusty stick, as though it were the hand of an old friend.

With all the signs of difficult going, but no noises of straining or grinding, the coach at last drew up in front of the expectant passenger. He looked up quietly, and recognised it as the vehicle wherein it was appointed that he should travel, in this unsuitable weather, a stage or two, maybe. All was correct, the coachman, grave, businesslike, headless as of usage, the horses long-tailed, black, conventional . . .

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The door opened noiselessly, and the footboard was let down. He shook his head as he delicately stepped into it, and observed, for the benefit, doubtless, of the person or persons inside :

“ I see old Diggory on the box in his official trim ! Rather unnecessary, all this ceremony, I venture to think ! A few yokels and old women to impress, if indeed any one not positively obliged is abroad on a night like this ! For form’s sake, I suppose.”

He took his seat next the window. There were four occupants of the coach beside himself. They all nodded stiffly, but not unkindly. He returned their salutations with old-fashioned courtesy, though unacquainted seemingly with any of them.

Sitting next to him was a woman evidently of fashion. Her dark, rich, valuable furs were negligently cast on one side, to show a plastron covered with jewels. She wore at least two enamelled and encrusted watches pinned to her bosom as a mark for thieves to covet. So at least thought the man in the frock coat. Her yellow wig was much awry. Her eyes were weak, strained and fearful, and she aided their vision with a diamond beset *pince-nez*. Now and again, she glanced over her left shoulder as if in some alarm and at such times she always grasped her gold net reticule feverishly. She was obviously a rich woman in the world, a first-class, *train-de-luxe* passenger.

The woman opposite her belonged as unmistakably to the people. She was hard-featured, worn with a life of sordid toil and calculation, but withal stout and motherly, a figure to inspire the fullest confidence. She wore a black bonnet with strings and black silk gloves heavily darned. Round her sunken collar, a golden gleam of watch-chain was now and then discernible.

At the other end of the coach, squeezed up into the corner where the vacillating light of the lamp hanging from the roof least penetrated, a neat, sharp-featured man nestled and hid. His forehead retreated, and his bowler hat was set unnecessarily far back, lending him an air of folly and congenital weakness which his long, cold, clever nose could not dissipate. He was white as enamel.

But the man whom the man in the frock-coat most affected among his casual fellow travellers was the one sitting directly opposite him, a rough, hearty creature, who alone of all the taciturn coachful seemed disposed to enter into a casual conversation, which might go some way to enliven the dreariness

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entailed by this somewhat old-fashioned mode of travelling. Speech might help to drown the dashing of the rain against the windows and the ugly roar of the waters of the Firth lying close on the right hand of the section of road they were even now traversing. This—by comparison—cheerful fellow was dressed like a working man, in a shabby suit of corduroys, he wore no collar, but a twisted red cotton handkerchief wound tightly round his thick, squat neck. His little mean eyes, swinish, but twinkling good-humouredly, stared rather enviously at the neat gentleman's stiff collar and the delicate grey tones of his suiting. Crossing and uncrossing his creasy legs, in the unusual effort of an attempt at conviviality, the man in corduroys addressed the man in the frock coat at last, awkwardly enough, but still civilly.

"Well, mate! They've chosen a rare rough night to shift us on! Orders from headquarters, I suppose? I've been here nigh on a year and never set eyes on my boss!"

"We used to call him God the Father," said the elder man slowly. . . . "But whoever it is that orders our ways here, there is no unearthly sense in questioning his arrangements, one can only fall in with them. As you admit, you are fairly new, and perhaps you do not as yet conceive fully of the silent impelling force that sways us here. It is the same in the world we have left, only that there we were only concerned with the titles and standing of our 'boss,' as you call him, and obeyed His laws not a whit. Still, personally, I *must* say I consider this particular system of soul transference very unsettling and productive of restlessness among us. It's a mere survival of a tiresome superstition. It has a single merit; one sees something of the under-world, travelling about as we do, and meeting chance, perhaps kindred, spirits on the road. One realises, too, that Hades is not quite as grey, shall I say, as it is painted? But perhaps"—he added, with a slight touch of class hauteur, "you do not quite follow me?"

"Oh yes, master, I do," eagerly replied the fellow traveller to whom he chose to address his monologue. "Since I've been dead, I have learned the meaning of many things. I turn up my nose at nothing these days. I always neglected my schooling, but now I tell you I try to make up for lost time. From a rough sort of fellow that I was, with not an idea in my head beyond my beer and my prog, I have come to take my part in the whole of knowledge. It was all mine before, so to speak, but I didn't trouble to put my hand out for it. Didn't care, didn't listen to Miss that taught me, or to parson, either. He had some good ideas, too, as I've come to know, though vice isn't vice exactly

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with us here, now, in a manner of speaking. If God Almighty made us, why did He make us, even in parts, bad, that's what I want to know, and I'll know that when I've been dead a bit longer? Why did He give me rotten teeth so that I couldn't chew properly and didn't care for my food and liked drink better? It's digestion makes drinking, I say."

The smart woman interrupted him, with a kind of languid eagerness, exclaiming :

"I must say I agree with you. Since the pestle fell on my shoulder in that lonely villa at Monte, I have realised what the dreadful gambling fever may lead to. It had made those two inhuman. They were wild beasts. I entered their cage. I should never have accepted their treacherous invitation to luncheon, never tempted them with my outrageous display of jewels! And ah me! I was tarred with the same stick, I gambled, too"—she rummaged in her reticule and fished out a ticket for the rooms at Monte Carlo. "I always call that the ticket for my execution. Though, indeed, my executioners were a little brutal. They will attain unto this place easier than I did. The hand of the law is gentle, compared with the methods of Sir V——"

The man in the grey frock coat raised his finger warningly. "No names, I beg! One of our conventions! . . ."

"Have a drop?" said the calm motherly woman to the excited fine lady. "Your wound is recent, isn't it? Yours was a very severe case! A bloody murder, I call it, if ever there was one, and clumsy at that! And you only passive, which is always so much harder, they say! I can't tell, I was what you may call an active party. *They* don't seem to mind mixing, they that look after us here, they lump us all together, travelling, at any rate! Though when I think of what I was actually turned off for—well, the way I look at it, what I did was a positive benefit to society, and some sections of society knew it, too, and would have liked to preserve me. I have been told that there are people, clever people in the world, who are not ashamed to say so, and who gnashed their teeth with vexation when the verdict went against me. Now Mr. H. B.——"

"No names, again," the man in the frock coat again interposed suavely. "But what, madam, if I may ask, was your little difficulty?"

"It is called, I believe, baby-farming," she replied offhandedly, receiving her flask back from the smart woman and stowing it away in a capacious pocket. As she spoke a shudder, like a transitory ripple on a rain-swept stream, passed over her hearers,

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with the exception of the thin man in the far corner, who preserved his serenity, but raising his sunken chin, observed the last speaker with some slight show of interest.

The man in the grey frock-coat apologised.

"Excuse us, madam. A remnant of old-world squeamishness, uncontrollable by us for the moment. Though, perhaps, if you would, you might somewhat dissipate our preconceived notions of your profession, by explaining your point of view a little."

"Delighted, I'm sure," she answered. "Funny, though, how seriously you all take it, even here! The feeling against my profession is so very strong. I was hooted as I left the court, I recollect. It annoyed me then considerably. I thought that those that hooted had more need to be grateful to me if all was known and paid for. I saved their pockets for them and their lovely credit. They knew they owed that to me. For the rest they did not mind. They went on, carelessly raising up seed for me to mow down as soon as its head came above ground, and welcome! Sly dogs, no thanks from them! But those shivering shrinking women that came to me, some of them hardly out of their teens—some of them so delicate they had no right to have a baby at all! Ah, if only I hadn't let myself take their money it would have been a work of pure philanthropy. But I had to live, then. Now that that tax has been taken off, one has time to think it out all round. But Lord!—Society, to cry shame on me for doing its dirty work for it! They might as well hang any other useful public servant, like dustmen, rat-catchers, and such like ridders of pests. Good old Herod, that I used to hear about at school, knew what he was doing when he cleared off all those useless innocents! He was the first baby-farmer, I take it."

"You take large ground, madam," said the man in the frock-coat, a trifle huffily.

"And I have the right," said she, her large determined chin emerging boldly from its rolls of fat, in her eagerness. "You men ought to know it, and you do. I was only the 'scapegoat, and took on me the little sins of the race. It's an easy job enough, what I did, but there's few have the stomach for it even then. . . . You couldn't call it dirty work neither. You just stand by and leave 'em alone—to girn and bloat and die——"

"No blood, eh?" the man in the corner said suddenly. "I like blood!"

"What a fine night it has turned!" said the man in the grey

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frock-coat, raising the sash and putting his head out of the window. "Something rather uncanny, eh, about that man?" he remarked under his breath, half to himself, half to the man in brown corduroys.

"Take your head in," said the latter almost affectionately, "or you'll be catching cold, and you've got a nasty scar on your neck that I could see as you leaned forward, and that you oughtn't to go getting the cold into."

"Oh, that!" said the other complacently, sitting down again, but averting his gaze carefully from the man in the corner, for whom he seemed to feel a repulsion as marked as was his preference for his cheerful *vis-à-vis*. "That! That's actually the scar of the blow that killed me. A fearful gash! He was a powerful man that dealt it me. He got me, of course, from behind, I never even saw him. I was drafted off here at once, his hand had been so sure." He felt nervously in his pockets. "I have a foulard somewhere, but I am apt to mislay it."

"You should do like me, have a good strong handkerchief and knot it round your neck firm. I've got a mark of sorts on my neck, too, but it isn't an open wound—never was. It is sheer vanity with me, but I don't care to have it seen. It goes well all round—mine—done by a rope!" He paused and nodding slyly—"For killing a toff. Nice old gentleman he seemed, too, but I hadn't much time to look at him. Had to get to work——"

He was interrupted by the baby-farmer.

"Lord!" she said. "Do I see another conveyance coming on this lonely road? I'm one for seeing plenty of people. I always liked a crowd and this sort of thing was beginning to get fairly on my nerves."

They all jerked themselves round and peered through the glass pane behind each one of them. The taciturn man reserved his attention. Sure enough, a dark object, plainly outlined in the moonlight which now lit up the heavens, where clouds had obscured the earlier part of their journey, was distinctly visible. It blotted the ribbon of white that lay in front of them. . . . It was a high-hung dog-cart, of the most modern pattern, drawn by a smart little pony, and driven by one of two young girls—the one that wore noticeably white dog-skin gloves that looked immense in the pallid moonshine.

"What an excitement? I've never met any one on the road before!" exclaimed the stout woman.

"I hope—for I'm not a bloodthirsty man—that we're not a-going to give them a shock and send that pony all over the

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road?" the man in corduroys muttered anxiously. "We mostly do, you know, when we meet them plump like this! 'Orses can't abide the sight of Us, mostly, no more than they could motors at first. And we're worse than motors—they seem to smell us out at once for what we are!"

"If you think that pony likely to swerve," said the man in grey anxiously, "would it be of any use asking old Diggory to drive more slowly?"

"Couldn't go no slower than we are!" the man in corduroys replied. "Besides, it's not the pace that kills! I'll bet you that pony's all of a sweat already?"

The trap approached. The faces of the two young women were discernible. They were white—with fear—or was it merely an effect of the moonlight? They were disturbed evidently, and the one who was driving, fully realised the necessity of controlling the horse, whose nostrils were quivering. . . .

"It won't pass us!" said the man in the corner, speaking suddenly. "There will be blood!"

"Do stop gloating like that!" said the stout woman. "It turns my stomach to hear you. Wherever have you come from, I wonder? . . . I say, can't we hail them?" she inquired of the man in grey. "All give one big shout?"

"They wouldn't hear us," he replied, shaking his head sadly. "You must remember we're ghosts. We're not really there!"

"And that's what the beasteses know!" cried the man in corduroys. "That 'oss won't be able to stand it! She'll not be able to hold it in!"

"They're on us!" screamed the smart woman. "Oh, my God, do we have to sit still and see it?"

"Yes, missis, and what's more, run away after, like any motor-car that's killed his man. Old Diggory's got his orders. . . ."

The frantic snorting of the horse was now audible, the lather of foam dropping from its jaws distinctly visible, and the agonised tension of one girl's hands, and the scared white faces of both, visible by the light of the carriage lamp. . . .

Then the lamp flew downwards and was extinguished, there was a crash, and the road to the north lay clear again. The Coach of Death rolled on remorselessly, past a black heap that filled the ditch by the side, lying quite still, after one heave. . . .

The smart woman fainted, or appeared to do so.

"It's iniquitous!" exclaimed the man in grey. "To leave them behind like that when it's our conveyance has done the mischief!" He groaned.

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"We aren't to blame, sir," said the man in corduroys, consoling him. "As you said before—*We ain't really here!*"

"Small consolation!" The old man shook his head, and devoted himself to the smart woman, who revived under his ministrations.

"I shouldn't be surprised if those two girls joined us at the next stage," she observed cheerily, "and then we'll make them tell us all they felt, when they saw the coachful of ghosts coming down upon them. They were both in the ditch, I'm sure, with the cart on top of them. And now, I'm just thinking—suppose, to while away the time, we all told each other the story of how we came to be here? A lively tale might cheer us all up, after the accident."

"Agreed, madam, heartily," said the man in grey. "My own story is by no means a gruesome one, and I regarded the accident that ended me as particularly toward. But—ladies first! Will not you begin?"

"My story, perhaps," she replied modestly, "might not be very new to you. It was in the papers so very recently."

"That will not affect me," he answered. "For if, as I conjecture, it was a murder case, I never read them!"

"I read yours, missis, I expect," said the man in corduroys. "I generally get the missis to read the spicy things out to me."

"It filled the papers for nearly a week," she said eagerly. "And yet the people that did it are not hanged yet. If, indeed, poor souls, they ever are hanged? The French, you know, are lenient, and quite mild and kind in *cold* blood. I am quite anxious to see how it goes. If the pair really are sent here, I suppose I shall be running up against them some night or other, on one of these transference parties. It will be very interesting. But——" she leaned across to the baby-farmer, "could we not persuade you to give us some of your—nursery experiences, madam?"

"There's not much story about the drowning of a litter of squalling puppies or whining kittens," said that lady shortly, "we want something livelier—more personal, if I may say so. From a remark that gentleman in the corner let drop a while ago, I fancy his reminiscences would be quite worth hearing, as good as a shilling shocker."

"My story," the individual thus pointedly addressed replied in a low voice, "is impossible, frankly impossible."

"Indecent, do you mean?" The smart woman's eyes shone. "Oh, let us have it. You can veil it, can't you?"

"Have you ever heard of mental degenerates?" he asked

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her compassionately. "I was one. I was called mad—a simple way of expressing it. I was a chemist—a dissector—a bit of a butcher. They did right to exterminate me."

His head dropped. He seemed disinclined to say more. Still the smart woman persisted.

"But the details——?"

"Are purely medical, madam! Not without a psychologicomorbid interest! The——" (he named a daily paper much in vogue) "made a good deal of the implied sense of contrast—the artistic warp, as I might say, of the executant." His head sank again on his chest.

"I do believe," said the baby-farmer, nudging the smart woman, "he's the man who killed his sweetheart, and then tied her poor inside all into true-lovers' knots with sky-blue ribbon. Very common colours—blue and red!"

"Disgusting!" The delicate-minded lady turned away and joined in the petition of the other ghosts to the breezy man in corduroys to relate his experiences.

"Oh, I'll tell you how I came to join you and welcome!" he said, rolling his huge neck about in its setting of red cotton. "Well, to begin with, I was drunk. Equally, of course, I was hard up. My missus—she's married again, by the way, blast her!—was always nagging me to do something for her and the children. I did. Nation's taking care of them now, along of what I did. Work, she meant, but that was only by the way. I did take on a job, though, on a rich man's estate, building some kind of Folly, lots of glass and that, working away day and night by naphtha flares, you know. He was one of those men, you know the sort, that has more money than a man can properly spend, and feels quite sick about it, and says so, in interviews and so on in the papers a working man reads. That's the mischief. He was always giving away chunks of money to charities, libraries, and that sort of useless lumber, but none of it ever seemed to come the way of those that were in real need of it. They said the money had got on his nerves, and would not let him sleep o' nights, and that he was afraid by day and went about with a loaded stick and I don't know what all. And he was looked after by detectives, at one time, so the papers said—putting things in people's heads, as it's their way. So one blessed evening I was very low—funds and all—and my missus and the kids hollering and complaining as they always do when luck's bad. Lord bless them, they never thought as they were 'citing their man to murder. Women never do think. And going out with their snivelling in my ears I passed the station where he landed

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every evening after his day in town, and I happened to see him come out of the train and send away his motor that was awaiting for him all regular, and start out to walk 'ome alone by a short cut across a little plantation there was, very thick and dark, just the place for a murder. Well—I told you I was half drunk—I raced home and got something to do it with—a meat chopper, to be particular——”

The old man opposite put his hand up nervously to the back of his neck.

“ Ay, mister, it takes you just there, does it? You look a regular bundle of nerves, you do. Well, as I was saying, I went round by a short cut that I happened to know of, and got in front of him and hid in the hedge. Ten mortal minutes I waited for my man to come by. Lord, how my hand did tremble! I'd have knocked off for twopence. I was as nervous as a cat, but all the same, it didn't prevent me from striking out for wife and children with a will when my chance came. I caught him behind with my chopper and he fell like a log. Never lifted a hand to defend himself—hadn't got any grit. Ladies, I don't suppose I hurt him much, for he never even cried out when I struck, or groaned when it was done. Then I looked him over, turned out his pockets and collared his watch and season ticket and seals and money. Money—ha!—I had been fairly done over that! Would you believe it of a rich fellow like that, he hadn't got more than the change of a sovereign on him? ”

“ Shame! ” ejaculated the taciturn man in the corner.

“ I admit it was hard on you, ” the man in the grey frock-coat observed kindly. “ Very hard, for as I read, the retribution came all too quickly. You foolishly left your chopper about to identify you, and were apprehended at once, by our excellent rural police. Yet the law is so dilatory that you lay in gaol a whole year before you were free to join your victim here? ”

“ Right you are, mate. Yes, I swung for it, sure enough. Short and sweet it was, when once I stood on the drop, but it still makes my poor old throat ache to think of it. ” He wriggled and twisted his neck in its cincture. . . . “ Now, governor, I'm done, and if you've no objection we'd all like to hear how you came by that ugly gash of yours? It wasn't no rope did that. Common or garden murder, I'll be bound? ”

“ Certainly, my man, it was a murder—a murder most *à propos*. I suppose you will hardly believe that, but the circumstances were peculiar. I have often longed to get the ear of the jury who tried the man for relieving me of my light purse and

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my intolerably heavy life, and tell them—the whole labouring twelve of them, trying their best to bring in an honest verdict and avenge my wrongs—my own proper feelings, surely no negligible factor in the case! They could not guess—these ignorant living men, whose eyes had not yet been opened by death to a due sense of the proportions of things—that I bore the poor creature no malice, but was actually grateful for his skilful surgery, that had severed the cord of the life that bored me so neatly and completely.”

“It isn’t every one would take it like that!” remarked the smart woman. “Yet that is, more or less, how I feel about these things myself. Only in my case it is impossible to speak of skilful surgery! I was disgracefully cut up. I couldn’t possibly have worn a low dress again!”

“Have you ever heard,” said the man in the grey frock-coat thoughtfully, “of the Gold of Rhampsinitos and the inviolable cellar he built to store it in? There it stayed unchanged at least. According to the modern system, in the place where my gold was hoarded fat assets and sordid securities bred and bred all day long. The laws that govern money are hard. You must give it, devise it, you must not allow it to be taken. But for my part I would have welcomed the two sons of the master-builder who broke into the King’s Treasure-house. In the strong-room of my brain it was lodged. With one careless calculation, one stroke of a pen, I could make money breed money there to madden me. I was lonely, too. I had no wife to divide my responsibilities. She might have enjoyed them. But I dared approach no woman in the way of love—I would not be loved for my cheque-signing powers. I was not loved at all. I was hated. Unrighteous things were done in my name, by the greedy husbanders of my load of money. I was told that I went in danger of my life, and I condescended to take care of that, for a time—only for a time! One dark winter evening—I forget what had happened during the day, what fresh instance of turpitude or greed had come before me—I was so revolted that I kicked away all the puling safeguards by which my agents guarded their best asset of all, and gave the rein to my instinct. I violently disregarded precautions of every sort—with the exception of my faithful stick, and the carrying of that had come to be a mere matter of habit with me—and I walked home from the station, alone and unattended, up to my big house and good dinner which I hoped—nay, I almost knew—that I should not be alive to eat. And indeed as luck would have it, on that night of all nights the trap was set for me. The appointed death-dealer was waiting—

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he took me on at once. I got my desire—kind, speedy, merciful, violent death. I never even saw the face of my deliverer.”

“By George!” softly swore the man in corduroys. “This beats all. Are you sure you aren’t kidding us?”

“No, indeed, that is exactly how I felt about it, and if I had known of knowledge, as I knew of instinct, what was going to happen, I would have managed to realise some of my wealth before setting out to walk through that wood, and made it more worth the honest fellow’s while. But as you are aware, a millionaire does not carry portable gold about with him, and my cheque-book, which was on me, would, of course, be of no use to him. Alas, all the poor devil got for his pains was exactly nineteen shillings and elevenpence. I had changed a sovereign at the book-stall to buy a paper, and out of habit, had waited for the change.”

The man in corduroys was by this time in a considerable state of excitement. He had pulled the red handkerchief fiercely from his neck and now made as if to tear it across his knee. . . .

“Why, governor!” he exclaimed passionately, “do you mean to say it was through you that I got this here”—he put both hands behind his head and interlocked them—“in return for giving you that there nasty cut at the back of your neck? Yes, sure! Well how things do come about!”

“Gently, gently! my man,” the elder soothed him. “Don’t be so melodramatic about a very ordinary coincidence. See, the ladies are quite upset! It doesn’t do to allow oneself to get excited here—it’s not in the rules. If I had made the little discovery you have done, I don’t think—no, I really don’t think I would have made it public. This undue exhibition of emotion of yours strikes me as belonging to the vulgar world we have all left. But since you have allowed it to come out, and every one is now aware of the peculiar relation in which we stand to each other, you must let me tender you my best thanks, as to a most skilful and firm operator, and believe me to be truly grateful to you for your services in the past.”

“Quite the old school!” said the smart woman.

“I must say, sir, I consider you a real gentleman,” said the baby-farmer.

“I am a gentleman.”

“And a fairly accommodating one!” said the rough man, wiping his brow where, however, no sweat was. “It isn’t every man as would give thanks for being scragged!”

“Every man isn’t a millionaire,” said his victim calmly.

The smart woman, leaning forward, tapped the old gentleman amiably with her jewelled *pince-nez*.

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“But we belong to the same world, I perceive,” she said, “and so I am quite able to understand your refined feeling. It is as I said in my own case. Indeed, if those two good people, who shall be nameless, had only dealt with me a little more gently, I don’t know that I would not forgive them absolutely. I shall at any rate be perfectly civil when I do meet them—only perhaps a *leettle* distant. But that Monte Carlo existence I was leading when they interrupted it, was really becoming intolerable. No one who hasn’t done it thoroughly and from the rich inside can realise what it is. Glare, noise, glitter, fever—that heartless, blue, laughing sea—”

The baby-farmer, left behind in this elegant discussion, obviously took no pleasure in it, but, staring straight before her, muttered sulkily :

“Côte d’Azur and Pentonville ! There’s some little difference, isn’t there, between that life and mine ? Yet I enjoyed my life, I did, and as for gratitude, I can’t say as I see all those blessed infants a-coming up to me, and slobbering me for what I did for ’em ! It isn’t in human nature. Their mothers’ thanks was all I got and they thanked me beforehand, some of them, for what I was going to do. Lord, what’s a rickety baby more or less ? I say, we’re slowing up ! Going to stop perhaps, and a good thing, too !”

“Yes,” said the man in the grey frock-coat, speaking very clearly without observing whether he had listeners or not, “I cordially thank the man who rid me with one clean scientific blow of my wretched life and all its tedious accessories. A skilled workman is worthy of his hire ! . . .”

“Mercy !” muttered the baby-farmer. “Is he never going to stop ? If it was for nothing else, he ought to have got scragged for being a bore !”

But the man in the grey frock-coat continued, being fully wound up, though in the excitement of arrival at the *dépôt* no one was attending. “Suicide I had thought of, but abhorred, though on my soul I had nearly come to that, and then it was merely a question of courage. I had not the courage—you spoke truly, sir. Mine was a thin, pusillanimous nature, as you said. You came by, a kind Samaritan, and sacrificed your own good life freely to rid me of my wretched one. I think I told you that when you were being tried, I followed urgently all the details of the trial, and made interest with the authorities here to allow me to appear to the judge in his sleep, say, and instil into his mind some inkling of the true state of my feelings towards you. I do not know, however, if you would have thanked me,

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for life may have been no sweeter to you than it was to me—you spoke of an uncongenial helpmate, I think? Still, one never knows. I might have been the means of procuring you some good years yet, in the full exercise of your undeniable vigour and remarkable decision of character. But it was apparently not to be. You followed me here, after a tedious interval of waiting, and now we have met, face to face. The introduction on that dark night was worth nothing. I like your face. We shall probably never meet again—their ways are dark and devious here—I am the more glad of this gracious opportunity of opening my mind to you, on a delicate subject, perhaps, but one that has always been very near my heart. By the way”—he lifted his stick, with its shining ivory crown, into view—“did you notice this? You read the papers, you said, and they told you it was heavily weighted and that I carried it always as a precaution? Well, on that eventful night for both of us, perhaps you were too hurried to notice, but I never used it. Accept it, now, will you not, as a memento? . . . I think from sundry truly unearthly bumpings that we seem to have come at last to our journey’s end. . . . I am right, the coachman has got down from his perch and taken his head under his arm. . . . We part. Mesdames, I salute you. Again, sir”—he addressed himself more particularly to the shamefaced man in corduroys—“farewell. Very pleased to have met you!”

One by one, the passengers faded away. For a moment, the polite old man paused; a pale, proud woman’s face, tilted up by the coach step, had touched him. She was quite alone. She wore white dog-skin gloves, but no hat. Ah, but on looking closer, he saw that it hung disregarded over her shoulder by an elastic, and was much battered. He decided to speak to her.

“You are the lady we killed, I think?” he asked her gently.

She acknowledged, in a formal, off-hand manner, that it was so.

“We could none of us do anything,” said he, “or I hope you will believe—”

“Certainly, sir, it was no fault of yours, I am sure. The accident was quite inevitable,” she told him, smiling faintly. There *was* blood on the hair, he was able to assure himself. “Rory, my pony, never can pass things, at the best of times, and the look of your conveyance was certainly rather unusual. But at that time of night, we rarely meet anything on the Great North Road. We chose that time on purpose—my sister and I—we had been away a week, and we were going home. When we saw you coming, she said, half in jest—she is younger than me—

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suppose that lumbering thing in front were the Coach of Death the foolish country people here talk about. They say it travels in this way once a year, with its cargo of poor souls who have died by violence, on St. John's Eve. And this is St. John's Eve! I asked her not to be superstitious, but I confess I thought the vehicle looked odd, myself, and wondered how Rory would stand it? When it came nearer, I saw distinctly that the coachman was headless, and I told my sister so. She bade me not disturb her, for dead coach or live coach, she meant to do her best to get Rory past it! She failed——”

The man in grey looked round. He was alone with her. The headless coachman was preparing to ascend to the box-seat again. . . . “Where *is* your sister?” he asked.

“She lies at the bottom of the ditch. Rory has galloped home. She fell on her head, but she is alive still. When they find her in the morning she will be dead, I know that. She will join me. Now I know all. I am at peace—you must have no care for me. . . .”

“Let me at least put you into the coach!” he begged. “Will you not prefer the corner? I see you are going to have all the accommodation to yourself for this stage. I am sorry I cannot offer to accompany you, but I have my marching orders! . . .”

He raised his hat and disappeared, as the coach moved on and was lost in the mist. . . . The summer dawn was breaking.