

THE MAN WHO GOT IN AT BRUGES.



R PORTMAN BROWN was a prosperous elderly gentleman, of quiet ways and fixed habits. A small circle of familiar friends supplied all his social needs, he concerned himself little with the rest of humanity, belonging to the class who can live side by side in the same street with a fellow-creature all their lives without so much as knowing him by sight.

Amongst Mr Brown's fixed habits was a yearly tour. But he did not take it, like most people, in the summer months, but in the early spring. Regularly, as the first week in March came round, he went abroad. A common-place tour in beaten tracks, following the usual routine of travel in steamers and trains, and lodging at palatial hotels. No adventure had ever broken the uneventful record of these tours for over a quarter of a century; no more exciting incident than an unusual over-charge at some hotel had come within Portman Brown's personal experience.

In 18—, when March came round, he made the usual preparations for his yearly tour in his usual way. On the evening before his departure, an old City friend, Mr Goldsmith, dined with him at his house in Harley-street. When about to leave, Goldsmith drew a small case from his pocket.

'I brought this with me, on the chance that you were going to Lucerne. You will do me a great favour by giving it into my brother's hands there. It contains a brilliant of such rare value that I could entrust it to few. It will give you no trouble being so small—there is no risk, as no one will know you have such a thing with you.'

'Anything to oblige a friend,' said Brown, lightly. 'I would take the Koh-i-noor as a travelling-companion under the same circumstances.'

The two men were standing at the study window, the blind of which happened to be up. Whilst in the act of placing the case in his pocket, Brown's eyes wandered to the street. At the moment the light from a lamp in front of the door struck on the face of a man who was passing—or had he been standing there—a peculiar dark face, with straight black whiskers.

The man moved on; Brown drew back hastily.

'None of your people knew that you were giving me this commission?' he inquired of Goldsmith.

'Not a soul, my dear fellow; the matter is entirely between you and me. My head clerk alone knows of the existence of the brilliant.'

'What is he like?'

'Like you, like me. Respectability itself! What are you thinking of?'

'Has he black whiskers?'

'Grey as a badger's—white even! But, bless my soul, what is the matter? What do you mean? Have you seen any one?'

'A man was standing there by the lamp post as you handed me the jewel-case. He was apparently looking at us, and might have heard what we said.'

'Then he must be in the street still,' said Goldsmith, throwing up the window and putting his head out; Brown did the same. The night was bright. Not a soul was to be seen anywhere—nor the street was quite deserted.

'A neighbour or neighbour's butler. He has gone into some house,' Goldsmith withdrew from the window. 'In any case, no one could have heard, nor, I should think, have seen us. As for my clerk, Travers, I boast myself an honest man, but I don't hesitate to acknowledge that he is the honestest of the two. Your imagination is playing you tricks. I didn't know you were given that way. Perhaps you would rather not take charge of the brilliant?'

But Brown would not hear of this. Already shamed over his hasty and somewhat ridiculous suspicions, he dismissed them abruptly.

'Not for worlds would I give up the charge,' he said. 'I'm not such a fool as I seem. The man probably is one of the new neighbours; there are a good many new-comers in the street.'

Portman Brown set out next morning for Lucerne via Brussels and the Rhine, staying a few days at Ostend on the way. He took his place in the undeniable comfort of a first-class carriage in the express to Brussels with a mind as free from care and uneasiness as elderly gentleman ever possessed. A life of plain undiluted prose had up to this kept his imaginative faculties in complete abeyance; lunatics, hypnotists, murderers, etc., as possible fellow-travellers had never entered his mind. As a rule, indeed, his fellow-travellers no more excited his interest or notice than his near neighbours at home. On this occasion he was just conscious, in leaving the station at Ostend, that an elderly couple were the other occupants of the carriage; he merely gave a passing glance from his newspaper at the man, a stranger, who got in at Bruges and sat down on the opposite seat.

Nearly an hour had passed before Brown laid down his paper and glanced round the carriage. He was thinking of the Parliamentary debate he had been reading, and of the lost tradition of good breeding in the House of Commons, and not at all of his fellow-travellers, when, on a sudden, his eye caught that of the man opposite curiously fixed on him. Each becoming aware of the other's glance, withdrew his at once, not, however, before Brown's attention had been engaged. Was the man a complete stranger as he had supposed? Had he not seen the face before? And when? Where? Or was it merely a case of chance likeness to some acquaintance? Parliamentary shortcomings passed from his mind whilst he racked his brain on this subject. The face was peculiar, with straight black whiskers. During Brown's furtive study of him from behind the *Times* the stranger turned his head sharply, the light from the window struck full on his face. With the suddenness of a flash Brown's memory was illumined. The man opposite was the same who had stood in the twilight outside the window in Harley street. There was no doubt of it, no mistaking the unusual face of the 'shadower' in the station. Brown remained on the platform until the last moment, then, with a fervent sigh of relief, he entered the railway carriage. The train was just moving off, when the door was suddenly opened, a breathless porter dashed in a hand-bag and parcel of rugs, followed

by a still more breathless traveller. The door was shut, the engine shrieked the last departing signal, the train moved from Bile station. In one corner of the carriage sat Brown; in another—the farthest on the opposite side—at the man with the black whiskers.

How often—in fancy—we place ourselves in heroic situations, and there—in fancy—act with invariable heroism. It is quite different, however, when the heroic situation is a reality; our consequent actions are liable to be quite different, too. The position in which Brown now found himself might well have appalled the bravest. He was alone in a railway carriage, with a scoundrel who had followed him from London; Brown had utterly abandoned surmise since last night, and accepted each idea as an absolute certainty—the object in this scoundrel's view was the capture of the valuable diamond, which was at that very moment on Brown's person. A long journey lay before them and Brown was unarmed. At this review of the situation his heart sank; he drew back instinctively into the corner. His eyes suddenly met those of the other man; a deep flush suffused his face, which seemed to find a reflection in the other's. Brown hastily took up *Bedecker* and affected to read, the man opposite simultaneously did the same. A transparent unreality on both sides. Brown's furtive glances invariably caught—quickly withdrawn though they were—those of the other man levelled on him. Whilst this went on, the

His movements must have been heard, there was a stir at the other end of the carriage. The fatal moment had come, the assassin was advancing to the attack! In the extremity of his terror Brown sank swiftly on the floor and crawled under the seat.

For what length of time he crouched there half-stiffed and scarcely daring to breathe, Brown knew not. Agony cannot measure time. A sudden and extraordinary rush of air made his heart first stand still, and then sent the blood coursing wildly through his veins. The far door was swinging open. Something had happened! And what!

His straining ears detected no sound but the outside rattle and roar of the train through the tunnel; within all was silence. He remained listening in intense excitement and amazement until the hope which had hardly dared to stir in his breast grew into vigorous life. He was alone in the carriage! He was saved! Deliverance had come miraculously—why and how, he knew not.

The tunnel was coming to an end; light began to stream into the carriage. Cautiously and slowly Brown peeped from under the seat. He was quite alone. The man had disappeared.

The fact of his escape was, at the time, enough for Brown. Afterwards, in thinking over the adventure, he surmised that the man, deceived by his (Brown's) attempt to turn the handle of the door, had followed in supposed pursuit.

At the station, just outside the tunnel, Brown—alighting almost before the train had stopped—changed his place for one in a crowded second-class compartment. A few hours later the brilliant was safely transferred from his charge into that of Goldsmith's brother at Lucerne.

The rest of his tour was uneventful; he neither heard of nor saw his persecutor again.

Brown's adventure made quite a sensation on his return to London. He was the hero of the hour in his circle. Whether or not he related the circumstances exactly, as here set forth, need not be mentioned. His friend Jones, amongst others, gave a dinner-party in his honour. Brown, with his usual punctuality, was the first of the guests to arrive.

'By the way,' Jones said chaffingly to him, as the two stood chatting together on the hearth-rug. 'You must look to your laurels to-night, Brown. Do you know Leroy, your neighbour in Harley-street?'

'Never saw the man in my life. What's the joke?'

'A rival adventure! In Switzerland, too, and culminating in a tunnel—not sure that it wasn't the Olten one also!'

'Dear me! What an extraordinary coincidence!'

'In his case it was a lunatic, not a robber. He was shadowed at hotels and in trains. You must hear the story from his own lips; he's dining here to-night. The climax is terrific. Shut into a railway carriage alone with a lunatic, aforesaid lunatic armed with a revolver. A long tunnel, an extinguished lamp, the lunatic crawling in the darkness to the attack, an escape by the skin of the teeth. Leroy had sufficient presence of mind to open the door, and pretend to get out, in reality crawling under the seat instead. The ruse saved his life. He supposes that he fainted in the stifling air, for when he was next conscious the train had left Olten and he was alone in the carriage, from which all traces of the lunatic had disappeared.'

Jones was so engrossed in telling the story, he did not remark its curious and startling effect on Brown.

Just then the door was thrown open, and the footman announced 'Mr Leroy.'

Jones, springing forward with effusion to greet the new-comer, led him gushing up to Brown.

'You two must know each other,' he said. And they did. The recognition was instantaneous on both sides. With a gasp, Brown stared in speechless wonder on the man with the black whiskers, whilst Leroy started back aghast on encountering the gaze of the lunatic!

THE CUSTOMS OFFICER OUTWITTED.

The famous Hungarian, Count Zichy, who lived on a princely income in Vienna, was, in his younger days, well known all over Europe on account of the bets he made and generally won. Once, when there was a heavy duty imposed on every head of cattle entering the Austrian capital, he made a bet that he would carry a lamb duty free through the gate of Vienna, and that the gate keeper, who acts as imperial officer, adjusting and receiving the duty would be glad to let him pass.

Next morning, the Count, disguised in the clothes of a butcher, his butcher knife in his hand, his shirt-sleeves rolled up, and carrying a heavy sack on his shoulder, made his way to one of the fashionable gates of Vienna. But the watchful officer soon espied him.

'What have you on that sack, fellow?'

'A dog, sir.'

'A dog? Dog yourself. Down with that sack. I know fellows like you sometimes carry dogs in sacks through the gates, and sell them for mutton in the town. Down with your sack.'

'But it is nothing but a dog, and a bad dog too. I will—'

'Never mind what you will. Down with your sack.' The officer pulled the sack from the supposed butcher's shoulder, cut the string, and sure enough out jumped one of the biggest dogs in Vienna. The dog rushed against the faithful Government servant, landed him several steps away in the gutter, and then left for parts unknown. After him went the young butcher shaking his big knife before the eyes of the frightened officer, and exclaiming,

'I'll settle you after I catch that dog.'

About two hours afterwards the face of the butcher again appeared before the raised window of the gate officer.

'I have just caught that dog again. Would you like to look at him?'

'Get away. Get out, you and your horrid dog.' And with a crash the window went down, and the snuffling butcher entered Vienna.

But no dog was that time in his sack, but the fattest lamb that could be found in the suburbs of the capital.

'ORB' CORRUGATED IRON is the best and cheapest in this or any other market.—ADVT.



'ROB ROY,' AT WELLINGTON OPERA HOUSE.

slightest change of position, the least movement in the opposite corner made Brown start. Might it not herald the approach of danger? A spring, a rush, the attack!

The tension was terrible; to remain inactive almost impossible. Brown had an inspiration, as a man in extremity sometimes has. Though he was not armed, he would pretend to be. That might do something; produce hesitation or delay, at least. Accordingly, he deliberately assumed a bold, even threatening demeanour. Casting a truculent glance across the carriage, he plunged his hand into his pocket, affecting to grasp an imaginary revolver. To his intense delight the ruse took immediate effect. The man opposite gave an unmistakable start, and shrank back into his corner. So far, so good. But how to keep up the pretence? What to do next? At this crisis the whistling of the engine suddenly distracted Brown. Good Heavens! He had forgotten the long tunnel! They were coming to it now! His eyes, with a quick, involuntary movement, sought the lamp. It was not lighted!

Entrapped! Doomed! The wildest thoughts rushed confusedly to his brain. With a shriek the train plunged noisily into the tunnel, into darkness. The din and rattle outside contrasted sharply with the silence within the carriage. Crouched in his corner, Brown, his hearing sharpened to agonising acuteness, listened for a stir, a rustle, the sound of human breathing drawing nearer to him. Every moment fancy detected a step, a stealthy, cat-like movement. His imagination after the neglect of a life-time, was now taking ample revenge. Uncontrolled and uncontrollable were its wild flights. Every railway murder of which he had ever read flashed before him with all the ghastly details. The spring upon the victim, the struggle, the death-stroke the body thrown out on the rails. How did he had read of these things happening to other men! But now to realize himself as the victim; his, the body! Absolute panic seized upon him; hardly knowing what he was doing, he tried softly to open the door. It was locked, however.