

violence of the impetus throwing us to the ground. My assailant still held me in his iron grip, and one of my feet catching against a case was doubled sharply under me, every bone in the ankle seeming to break. The pain was so intense that for a moment I lost consciousness.

When my sense returned the rapid movement of the van had ceased. I kept my eyes closed, hoping to be thought still unconscious. The men had evidently risen to their feet.

"Have you got the handcuffs?" I heard the surly voice of the guard ask.

There was a pause; the other was doubtless hunting in his pockets.

"By Jove!" he muttered blankly; "I must have left them in the other compartment."

"Then the more fool you," was the savage rejoinder. "I made sure of your having them ready to clap on, and brought no rope, so there's nothing for it but to put an end to him, and as I said before, dead men tell no tales."

"Not so fast; leave the man to me," Jones returned decidedly. "Properly managed this job will be a credit to us, but I'll not risk the chance of swinging."

The van came to a standstill, and I heard the door open and one of the men jump out. He had evidently gone to reconnoitre, for in a few minutes he returned, and an angry altercation ensued.

"It's you that are the fool now," the voice of Jones said, wrathfully. "After all the weeks you have been up and down this line on purpose, to think you should have botched the business like this."

"What's the matter now?" growled the other.

"The way you have overshot the mark. We have passed the place where the horse and cart is waiting a full quarter of a mile."

"How could I tell the thing would shoot on as it did? Anyway, it's done now, and can't be helped, so you had better bring the cart on here."

"What! With a ploughed field like a quagmire to be crossed! You couldn't get the cart up empty, and once the ingots were inside it would not move an inch."

The guard asked, in his sulky tone, what was to be done.

"There's nothing for it but to carry the cases between us, and take them, one by one, to the cart."

"And what's to become of the chap there?"

All this time I had lain perfectly still, and, although my broken limb was torture, the bodily pain was nothing to my mental anguish.

When I heard myself referred to I thought it time to speak. I was about to raise myself with difficulty on my elbow when I reflected that it might serve my purpose better to be thought even more helpless than I was, so I remained still and called out to them for help.

"My foot is broken," I said, addressing myself to Jones.

He lifted it.

"That's true enough," he returned coolly; "and so far as we are concerned it's lucky, for never was horse more surely hobbled."

I requested that I might be raised a little, and this the big man did not ungrudgingly. Then, looking from one to the other, I said:

"You have a very cleverly laid plan for possessing yourself of this bullion, and, so far, have carried everything before you. I quite realise that I am in your power. I can do nothing; but this I will say, that in spite of your present success, I consider you a couple of fools."

"Look here, young man, we want none of your preaching, the guard said in a threatening tone.

Here the guard would have expressed his opinion of me in deeds, not words, but that his companion motioned him back. Jones was evidently paying attention to my remarks, so that I was encouraged to go on, and, addressing him, I laid my hand on one of the cases near me.

"If these boxes were filled with gold coins," I said, "you would be as great a thief for taking them, but I should not consider you as great a fool."

Then I proceeded to explain the difficulty that was always experienced in the disposal of metal in its raw state. The ingots might be hidden, and detection eluded, for weeks, but as soon as an attempt was made to realise their money value the whole truth would come to light, and I wound up by declaring my conviction that all the two men would gain by that night's work would be a term of penal servitude.

Perhaps the bold manner in which I had expressed myself met with Jones' approval, for as I finished speaking he nodded at me affably as he remarked:

"Maybe there's truth in what you say, but I'd have you know we are not the fools you take us for, as this business has been well thought out. In a market cart with a few vegetables on top, we shall soon get the cases safely up near Covent Garden, and once there everything is arranged; so that before your people have realised their loss we shall be off, leaving no trace of the ingots behind."

If they were prepared to dispose of the bullion in this manner it seemed impossible that Mr Ashburn would ever recover it, and I felt sick with pain and disappointment.

The men dragged one of the cases to the door, and then Jones turned and informed me that I need have no anxiety about myself. They intended taking me with them and leaving me with a friend upon the road, where I should receive hospitality for a couple of days until they had got a start.

Before leaving me the guard was anxious to secure my hands behind me with a handkerchief, and in other ways to add to the tortures of my position. But his companion, whose physical advantages, I fancied, made him master of the situation, declared that I could be left as I was.

When the sound of their footsteps and died away in the distance the place was very still. But after a while a faint rustling sound attracted my attention. Then I saw that the small wicker basket, which I had noticed when I first started on the journey, had fallen over and was lying near me. I lifted it up with a feeling of pity for my fellow prisoner.

At that instant, like a flash of light, came the thought that here was a way out of the difficulty! In a moment I was all excitement. I felt like a doomed man who had just received a reprieve when I fully realised the miraculous way in which help had come.

As I have said, I had some knowledge of pigeons, and I had great faith in the capabilities of a well-trained homer.

At first I was scared by the fear that I had no materials for writing, but, after some search, I found a small notebook with a pencil in it, which was just what I wanted.

I did not know exactly how far we were from London, but I imagined between thirty and forty miles. A full-grown pigeon could, I knew, manage that distance with ease, carrying a message weighing three-quarters of an ounce. I could make mine lighter.

I took one leaf of the notebook, and, although the writing was necessarily very small, I was careful to make it clear. This took me some time, but at last it was accomplished to my satisfaction, when I rolled it tightly into the smallest possible compass. The next thing needed was something with which to fasten it to the feathers in the pigeon's tail. A piece of silk was the proper thing, but that, of course, was not to be had. However, "necessity is the mother of invention," and, as I looked about for something that would serve my purpose, I noticed that the cloths around the child's mail-cart were sewn with strong packing thread. With much difficulty, I succeeded in getting to it, unpicking a few stitches, and drawing out a thread of sufficient length.

When all was in readiness, and nothing remained but to fasten on the message, I was assailed with the nervous fear that the men would return. My preparations had taken so long that at any moment they might be back. There was nothing for it but to wait until they had been for a second case, so I waited with what patience I could. At last I heard them approaching. Doubtless getting over the ground with their heavy load had taken them longer than they had expected, for they were in great haste now. Just glancing at me, and apparently satisfied that I was exactly as they had left me, they seized another case and were off. As soon as they were gone I opened the basket and drew forth the little creature upon whom so much depended.

The business of fastening on the tiny billet was soon accomplished.

It was not an easy task for me to reach the open door of the van, but the torture I endured as I made my way through the many obstacles, was scarcely thought of in my anxiety to start my messenger. I stood up, grasping with one hand the frame of the doorway, and, leaning out, I threw the bird up as well as I was able. Fortunately, the mists of the earlier part of the evening had gone, and the atmosphere was very clear. I saw the pigeon circling high above me, and then it disappeared.

The nervous excitement that had kept me up so far suddenly left me, and I fell into a state of collapse. The hours that followed were so hopelessly confused that I could not say what happened. I only know that I was moved from one place to another and that movement was torture, but that when left alone I sank into a drowsy stupor.

At length, coming suddenly out of a strange dream, I found an anxious face leaning over me, and recognised Mr Ashburn. As I saw his troubled look I feared that the worst had happened, but he hastened to assure me.

"It's all right, my dear fellow," he said, heartily, as he took my hand in his. "Both the thieves and their booty are in safe custody. You have acted splendidly. My only regret is that it has been at so much personal cost."

And so from what after all was sheer luck I found myself regarded in the light of a hero instead of a culprit.

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