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Chapter 3 - An Incident And An Accident

Smoothly the huge engine came gliding into the station--a dumb, silent creature now, drawing slowly to a standstill as though exhausted after its great effort. Through the windows of the saloon the station-master could see the train attendant bending over this mysterious passenger, who did not seem, as yet, to have made any preparations for leaving his place. Mr. Hamilton Fynes was seated at a table covered with papers, but he was leaning back as though he had been or was still asleep. The station-master stepped forward, and as he did so the attendant came hurrying out to the platform, and, pushing back the porters, called to him by name.

"Mr. Rice," he said, "If you please, sir, will you come this way?"

The station-master acceded at once to the man's request and entered the saloon. The attendant clutched at his arm nervously. He was a pale, anaemic-looking little person at any time, but his face just now was positively ghastly.

"What on earth is the matter with you?" the station-master asked brusquely.

"There's something wrong with my passenger, sir," the man declared in a shaking voice. "I can't make him answer me. He won't look up, and I don't--I don't think he's asleep. An hour ago I took him some whiskey. He told me not to disturb him again--he had some papers to go through."

The station-master leaned over the table. The eyes of the man who sat there were perfectly wide-open, but there was something unnatural in their fixed stare,--something unnatural, too, in the drawn grayness of his face.

"This is Euston, sir," the station-master began,--"the terminus--"

Then he broke off in the middle of his sentence. A cold shiver was creeping through his veins. He, too, began to stare; he felt the color leaving his own cheeks. With an effort he turned to the attendant.

"Pull down the blinds," he ordered, in a voice which he should never have recognized as his own. "Quick! Now turn out those porters, and tell the inspector to stop anyone from coming into the car."

The attendant, who was shaking like a leaf, obeyed. The station-master turned away and drew a long breath. He himself was conscious of a sense of nausea, a giddiness which was almost overmastering. This was a terrible thing to face without a second's warning. He had not the slightest doubt but that the man who was seated at the table was dead!

At such an hour there were only a few people upon the platform, and two stalwart station policemen easily kept back the loiterers whose curiosity had been excited by the arrival of the special. A third took up his position with his back to the entrance of the saloon, and allowed no one to enter it till the return of the station-master, who had gone for a doctor. The little crowd was completely mystified. No one had the slightest idea of what had happened. The attendant was besieged by questions, but he was sitting on the step of the car, in the shadow of a policeman, with his head buried in his hands, and he did not once look up. Some of the more adventurous tried to peer through the windows at the lower end of the saloon. Others rushed off to interview the guard. In a very few minutes, however, the station-master reappeared upon the scene, accompanied by the doctor. The little crowd stood on one side and the two men stepped into the car.

The doctor proceeded at once with his examination. Mr. Hamilton Fynes, this mysterious person who had succeeded, indeed, in making a record journey, was leaning back in the corner of his seat, his arms folded, his head drooping a little, but his eyes still fixed in that unseeing stare. His body yielded itself unnaturally to the touch. For the main truth the doctor needed scarcely a glance at him.

"Is he dead?" the station-master asked.

"Stone-dead!" was the brief answer.

"Good God!" the station-master muttered. "Good God!"

The doctor had thrown his handkerchief over the dead man's face. He was standing now looking at him thoughtfully.

"Did he die in his sleep, I wonder?" the station-master asked. "It must have been horribly sudden! Was it heart disease?"

The doctor did not reply for a moment. He seemed to be thinking out some problem.

"The body had better be removed to the station mortuary," he said at last. "Then, if I were you, I should have the saloon shunted on to a siding and left absolutely untouched. You had better place two of your station police in charge while you telephone to Scotland Yard."

"To Scotland Yard?" the station-master exclaimed.

The doctor nodded. He looked around as though to be sure that none of that anxious crowd outside could overhear.

"There's no question of heart disease here," he explained. "The man has been murdered!"

The station-master was horrified,--horrified and blankly incredulous.

"Murdered!" he repeated. "Why, it's impossible! There is no one else on the train except the station-master. All my acquaintances are passengers only."

The doctor touched the man's coat with his finger, and the station-master saw what he had not seen before,--saw what made him turn away, a little sick. He was a strong man, but he was not used to this sort of thing, and he had barely recovered yet from the first shock of finding himself face to face with a dead man. Outside, the crowd upon the platform was growing larger. White faces were being pressed against the windows at the lower end of the saloon.

"There is no question about the man having been murdered," the doctor said, and even his voice shook a little. "His own hand could never have driven that knife home. I can tell you, even, how it was done. The man who stabbed him was in the compartment behind there, leaned over, and drove this thing down, just missing the shoulder. There was no struggle or fight of any sort. It was a diabolical deed!"

"Diabolical indeed!" the station-master echoed hoarsely.

"You had better give orders for us to be shunted down on to a siding just as we are," the doctor continued, "and send one of your men to telephone to Scotland Yard. Perhaps it would be as well, too, not to touch those papers until some one comes. See that the attendant does not go home, or the guard. They will probably be wanted to answer questions."

The station-master stepped out to the platform, summoned an inspector, and gave a few brief orders. Slowly the saloon was backed out of the station again on to a neglected siding, a sort of backwater for spare carriages and empty trucks,--an ignominious resting place, indeed, after its splendid journey through the night. The doors at both ends were closed and two policemen placed on duty to guard them. The doctor and the station-master seated themselves out of sight of their gruesome companion, and the station-master told all that he knew about the despatch of the special and the man who had ordered it. The attendant, who still moved about like a man in a dream, brought them some brandy and soda and served them with shaking hand. They all three talked together in whispers, the attendant telling them the few incidents of the journey down, which, except for the dead man's nervous desire for solitude, seemed to possess very little significance. Then at last there was a sharp tap at the window. A tall, quietly dressed man, with reddish skin and clear gray eyes, was helped up into the car. He saluted the doctor mechanically. His eyes were already travelling around the saloon.

"Inspector Jacks from Scotland Yard, sir," he announced. "I have another man outside. If you don't mind, we'll have him in."

"By all means," the station-master answered. "I am afraid that you will find this rather a serious affair. We have left everything untouched so far as we could."

The second detective was assisted to clamber up into the car. It seemed, however, as though the whole force of Scotland Yard could scarcely do much towards elucidating an affair which, with every question which was asked and answered, grew more mysterious. The papers upon the table before the dead man were simply circulars and prospectuses of no possible importance. His suitcase contained merely a few toilet necessaries and some clean linen. There was not a scrap of paper or even an envelope of any sort in his pockets. In a small leather case they found a thousand dollars in American notes, five ten-pound Bank of England notes, and a single visiting card on which was engraved the name of Mr. Hamilton Fynes. In his trousers pocket was a handful of gold. He had no other personal belongings of any sort. The space between the lining of his coat and the material itself was duly noticed, but it was empty. His watch was a cheap one, his linen unmarked, and his clothes bore only the name of a great New York retail establishment. He had certainly entered the train alone, and both the guard and attendant were ready to declare positively that no person could have been concealed in it. The engine-driver, on his part, was equally ready to swear that not once from the moment when they had steamed out of Liverpool Station until they had arrived within twenty miles of London, had they travelled at less than forty miles an hour. At Willington he had found a signal against him which had brought him nearly to a standstill, and under the regulations he had passed through the station at ten miles an hour. These were the only occasions, however, on which he had slackened speed at all. The train attendant, who was a nervous man, began to shiver again and imagine unmentionable things. The guard, who had never left his own brake, went home and dreamed that his effigy had been added to the collection of Madame Tussaud. The reporters were the only people who were really happy, with the exception, perhaps, of Inspector Jacks, who had a weakness for a difficult case.

Fifteen miles north of London, a man lay by the roadside in the shadow of a plantation of pine trees, through which he had staggered only a few minutes ago. His clothes were covered with dust, he had lost his cap, and his trousers were cut about the knee as though from a fall. He was of somewhat less than medium height, dark, slender, with delicate features, and hair almost coal black. His face, as he moved slowly from side to side upon the grass, was livid with pain. Every now and then he raised himself and listened. The long belt of main road, which passed within a few feet of him, seemed almost deserted. Once a cart came lumbering by, and the man who lay there, watching, drew closely back into the shadows. A youth on a bicycle passed, singing to himself. A boy and girl strolled by, arm in arm, happy, apparently, in their profound silence. Only a couple of fields away shone the red and green lights of the railway track. Every few minutes the goods-trains went rumbling over the metals. The man on the ground heard them with a shiver. Resolutely he kept his face turned in the opposite direction. The night mail went thundering northward, and he clutched even at the nettles which grew amongst the grass where he was crouching, as though filled with a sudden terror. Then there was silence once more--silence which became deeper as the hour approached midnight. Passers-by were fewer; the birds and animals came out from their hiding places. A rabbit scurried across the road; a rat darted down the tiny stream. Now and then birds moved in the undergrowth, and the man, who was struggling all the time with a deadly faintness, felt the silence grow more and more oppressive. He began even to wonder where he was. He closed his eyes. Was that really the tinkling of a guitar, the perfume of almond and cherry blossom, floating to him down the warm wind? He began to lose himself in dreams until he realized that actual unconsciousness was close upon him. Then he set his teeth tight and clenched his hands. Away in the distance a faint, long-expected sound came travelling to his ears. At last, then, his long wait was over. Two fiery eyes were stealing along the lonely road. The throb of an engine was plainly audible. He staggered up, swaying a little on his feet, and holding out his hands. The motor car came to a standstill before him, and the man who was driving it sprang to the ground. Words passed between them rapidly,--questions and answers,--the questions of an affectionate servant, and the answers of a man fighting a grim battle for consciousness. But these two spoke in a language of their own, a language which no one who passed along that road was likely to understand.

With a groan of relief the man who had been picked up sank back amongst the cushioned seats, carefully almost tenderly, aided by the chauffeur. Eagerly he thrust his hand into one of the leather pockets and drew out a flask of brandy. The rush of cold air, as the car swung round and started off, was like new life to him. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they had come to a standstill underneath a red lamp.

"The doctor's!" he muttered to himself, and, staggering out, rang the bell.

Dr. Spencer Whiles had had a somewhat dreary day, and was thoroughly enjoying a late rubber of bridge with three of his most agreeable neighbors. A summons into the consulting room, however, was so unexpected a thing that he did not hesitate for a moment to obey it, without even waiting to complete a deal. When he entered the apartment, he saw a slim but determined-looking young man, whose clothes were covered with dust, and who, although he sat with folded arms and grim face, was very nearly in a state of collapse.

"You seem to have met with an accident," the doctor remarked. "How did it happen?"

"I have been run over by a motor car," his patient said, speaking slowly and with something singularly agreeable in his voice notwithstanding its slight accent of pain. "Can you patch me up till I get to London?"

The doctor looked him over.

"What were you doing in the road?" he asked.

"I was riding a bicycle," the other answered. "I dare say it was my own fault; I was certainly on the wrong side of the road. You can see what has happened to me. I am bruised and cut; my side is painful, and also my knee. A car is waiting outside now to take me to my home, but I thought that I had better stop and see you."

The doctor was a humane man, with a miserable practice, and he forgot all about his bridge party. For half an hour he worked over his patient. At the end of that time he gave him a brandy and soda and placed a box of cigarettes before him.

"You'll do all right now," he said. "That's a nasty cut on your leg, but you've no broken bones."

"I feel absolutely well again, thank you very much," the young man said. "I will smoke a cigarette, if I may. The brandy, I thank you, no!"

"Just as you like," the doctor answered. "I won't say that you are not better without it. Help yourself to the cigarettes. Are you going back to London in the motor car, then?"

"Yes!" the patient answered. "It is waiting outside for me now, and I must not keep the man any longer. Will you let me know, if you please, how much I owe you?"

The doctor hesitated. Fees were a rare thing with him, and the evidences of his patient's means were somewhat doubtful. The young man put his hand into his pocket.

"I am afraid," he said, "that I am not a very presentable-looking object, but I am glad to assure you that I am not a poor man. I am able to pay your charges and to still feel that the obligation is very much on my side."

The doctor summoned up his courage.

"We will say a guinea, then," he remarked with studied indifference.

"You must allow me to make it a little more than that," the patient answered. "Your treatment was worth it. I feel perfectly recovered already. Good night, sir!"

The doctor's eyes sparkled as he glanced at the gold which his visitor had laid upon the table.

"You are very good, I'm sure," he murmured. "I hope you will have a comfortable journey. With a nerve like yours, you'll be all right in a day or so."

He let his patient out and watched him depart with some curiosity, watched until the great motor-car had swung round the corner of the street and started on its journey to London.

"No bicycle there," he remarked to himself, as he closed the door. "I wonder what they did with it."