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The Watchman-Warder

THURSDAY, MAY 11th, 1899.

THE CONVICT'S REVENGE

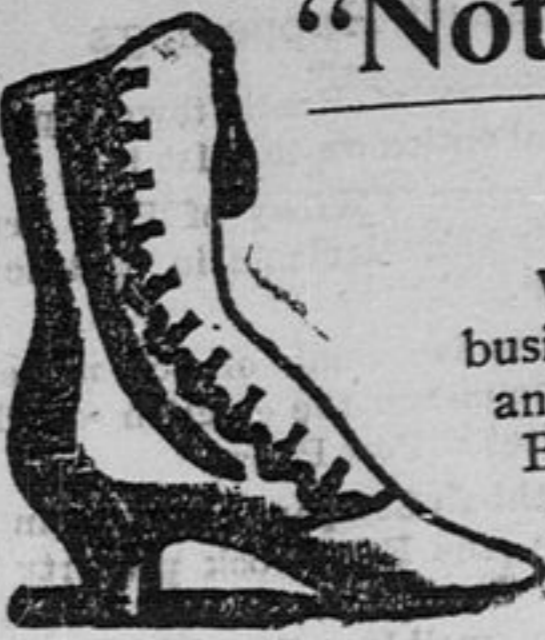
"Ugh!" said my companion to me, with a shiver and a little clutch at my arm, "that's a thing I hate!" We were standing by a level crossing as he spoke. We had almost started to cross the rails, when a rumble and a whistle and the bright glare of the headlights heralded the close approach of a train. So we stood back for a moment or two to let the iron steed and his load pass. The lights from the carriages flashed out upon us, then there was a swirl of wind as darkness came upon us once more, and the red tail-light vanished round the curve beyond.
"Why," I remarked with a laugh, as we went on again, "surely an old soldier and ex-prison warder like yourself isn't afraid of a passing train?"
"Ah, sir, every man has his weak ness, and I'm not ashamed to confess that I've got mine. And, perhaps, if you'd had an experience that happened to me some ten years ago, you'd flinch a bit when an express train rattled past you."
"Oh, there's a foundation for it, is there?"
"There is, sir, and if you care to step inside my place and rest for half an hour I'll tell you the yarn, such as it is."
I expressed myself only too delighted to pick up the proffered information. I must explain before I go further that until the evening in question my companion had been unknown to me. I had been staying for a few days at the little cathedral city of Dullminster, and had been on a day's fishing excursion in the neighborhood with no companion save my pipe. It was while pensively watching my float in the quiet little stream that a fine-looking old fellow appeared, bent on the same sport as myself, and took up his position close by. As bites were few and far between, we entered into conversation, and when dusk set in, by mutual consent we packed our traps and set off together over the pleasant fields that lay between us and Dullminster. He told me something of his past history as we trudged along, from which I gathered that he had begun life in the army, and afterwards he had been a warder in the well-known convict prison of Dartport, from which he had retired into private life some few years since, and had come to eke out a peaceful existence on savings and pension in Dullminster, the place of his birth.
A few hundred yards beyond the level crossing we stopped at the door of a little house on one of the streets in the out-skirts of the town.
"Come in, sir," said the old fellow.
"I'm all by myself—yes, an old bachelor, sir. And if you'll condescend to have a cup of tea, while I spin you the yarn, you're welcome to it."
It was a chilly autumn evening, and the bright fire and singing kettle in the little sitting-room looked very inviting, so I gladly accepted rine host's invitation.
"And now, sir," said he, when we were comfortably settled, "I'll tell

you why I don't like to be near an express train at night."
"Of course, as you can imagine, we used to have some queer customers at Dartport. Her Majesty's private hotels take all kind of folk, and we are not particular as to character. One of the worst goal-birds that I ever remember was a certain convict whom I will call by his old number—36. He was in for a long sentence—in fact, as far as I know, he's doing time yet; though if there'd been a little more evidence forthcoming at his trial his term would have been a short one, ending in the prison-yard on the scaffold; but as it was, though his list of crimes was a pretty black one, murder couldn't quite be proved, though there were few that doubted he hadn't stuck at that.
"From the moment I set eyes on him at Dartport I knew there'd be trouble with No. 36. It wasn't only the size and strength of the man, but a certain nasty look about his eyes that told me this. Nor was I mistaken, for he proved to me one of the unmanageable brutes we ever had. He soon took a particularly strong dislike to me, for as ill-luck would have it, I was the first to have to report him for misconduct, and it was through me that he had his first taste of the cat. When I went into his cell that night, he broke the strict rule of silence and hissed out,—
"You devil of a turnkey, I'll kill you before I've finished with you."
"It was a threat I had heard more than once before, and it didn't affect me very much at the time, though I had good reason to remember it afterwards.
"Two years passed, and No. 36 showed no signs of improving. He had a marvelous physique, and the prison diet seemed in no way to diminish his strength. He had to be most carefully watched in the quarries, and in fact, always, for he had a nasty knack of being dangerous in more ways than one. A length, towards the end of the summer of the year of which I am speaking, he suddenly turned over a new leaf, and became quiet and tractable.
"I felt less sure of him than ever, nevertheless, for I had seen something of this phase of character before, and I knew it generally meant mischief. Nor was I mistaken, for one afternoon when a fog had come on rather unexpectedly, the sharp crack of a rifle betokened the escape of No. 36. Taking advantage of the mist, he had suddenly struck the nearest warder to the ground, hurled a big bit of stone with deadly aim at one sentry, completely bowling him over, taking the chance of a bullet from another—and was off!
"A search party was, of course organized at once, but somehow or other he managed to show a clean pair of heels and escape over the moors. As darkness set in, a poor old man was found dazed and half naked, about a couple of miles from the prison, and after being revived, he told how No. 36 had met him and insisted upon having all of his upper garments, so that the runaway had an extra good chance of getting clear.
"It was between nine and ten o'clock at night, and I, in company with several other members of a search party, halted for a little consultation just by the embankment of the railway, the main West Southern line to London, that runs through the desolate bit of country five or six miles north of Dartport Prison.
"I wonder whether it's any use having a look at Westmoor Station," said our chief.
Westmoor station was about two miles up the line from where we were standing.
"Aye," I replied, 'It's just possible that he might be lying around there, looking out for a train; though it's my belief that he's making northward—at any rate, it's more likely.'
"Well, Davis," said the chief, after a moment or two's thought, 'suppose you go to Westwood. It may be worth trying. I think we ought to go to Hartwell, or that direction. What do you say?'
"I am willing to do as you suggest," I answered. 'It's just as well to see the station-master, I think.'
"All right. You slip away, then, Davis. You'd better keep along the line—it's the nearest way."
"So I started off along the line. It was a very dark night, though the fog had lifted, and it was some moments before I got used to the track. After a bit, however, I made pretty fair progress, walking between the down pair of rails on the right-hand side, so that I could see the head-lights of any train coming toward me. I hadn't gone far before I did a very foolish thing. I slung my rifle over my shoulder, so as to leave my hands free.
"I had gone about half a mile or more up the line when a great longing for a pipe came over me. I hadn't had a pipe all day, and as you're a smoker, sir, you know pretty well how I was feeling. As I walked along I took out my pouch, filled my pipe, and then felt in my pocket for a match. After nearly turning it inside out I found one solitary wax vesta. Now, there was a bit of wind blowing over the moor, and fearful lest I should waste my precious match, I refrained from striking it until I could get behind some shelter. The desired object presently appeared, looming through the darkness, in the shape of a plate-

layer's hut on the same side of the line as I was walking, the door facing towards the rails. Getting into the shelter of the doorway, I struck a match, and was just about to light my pipe, when, as I leaned against the door, to my astonishment it opened inwards with my weight, almost precipitating me to the ground, and before I could recover myself the light before the vesta revealed to me the hideous face of No. 36, who was hiding within.
"With a snarl, he was upon me, and had clutched me by the throat with his strong, bony hands. It was all done so suddenly that I had scarce time to think of what was happening, and hardly realized the situation, when I found myself sprawling on my back with an ugly brute on top of me. Of course, I made a mighty effort to defend myself, but I was quite powerless in his strong grip.
"Ah," he growled, with a curse, as he held me pinned to the ground, 'it's you, is it? Well, I've got a few old accounts to settle with you, and I don't think there could be a better opportunity.'
"You brute!" I ejaculated, trying to twist myself out of his grasp.
"Ah—would you? Not so fast, Warder Davis. The tables are turned now, and you're the prisoner."
"At this moment something flashing bright in the dim star-light fell out of my pocket and clanged on the gravel ballast of the railway track.
"Good," said No. 36, making a snatch at it; 'these bracelets were meant for me, I suppose. Perhaps they'll prove as good a fit for your wrists. At any rate, we'll try. And as we haven't a cell handy to fix you in, we'll fasten you down to something secure—do you hear?'
"And putting forth all his strength, in spite of all my desperate struggles, he half dragged, half rolled me on to the down track close beside us. Then kneeling on my chest, he forced my right hand beneath the outer rail between the sleepers, and my left arm over the rail, then there was a sharp click, as with a savage chuckle he snapped the handcuffs over both my wrists, and I realized my terrible position.
"I was handcuffed down to the rail! He jumped up in triumph, felt in my pocket, drew out the key of the handcuffs, and hurled it away.
"How now, you white livered skunk?" he snarled. 'I could kill you outright with a knock on the head, if I chose. But I'm not going to commit murder, oh, no! I'll leave that to the down express. Do you understand? If it runs at the same time as it used to, it ought to come by here about eleven o'clock, and I guess there'll be a little obstruction in its way to-night. Ah I've got to fix you a bit tighter, my friend, just to make sure, you know.'
"And he went into the hut, re-appearing in a few moments with a piece of rope, which he had, I suppose, previously noticed there.
"You'd feel a little bit more comfortable if I tie your feet down too, eh?" he sneered; and to my horror, he put a loop of rope around my right leg, drew it underneath the inner rail, and then made the end fast to my left ankle, above the rail. I was thus fixed right across the track, and escape from a hideous death seemed impossible. But the villain had not finished yet. "There's just a chance that you might call out," he said, 'so I'll tie your mouth up. You can say your prayers just as well with it shut as open, and the sooner you say them the better, for you never needed to more.'
"He stuffed part of my handkerchief into my mouth, and tied it round with another bit of rope. Then he proceeded to rifle my pockets.
"Got any loose cash about you? That's right. I'll take care of it, for it won't do you any good now, I reckon, and you'll have the dying satisfaction of having helped me to get off to London. And now, you skunk of a warder, good night! I told you I'd be the death of you one day, but, by Heaven, I never hoped for such a paying off of old scores as this. Remember, you'll see the head-lights of the engine coming towards you—you'll hear the roar of the train that's going to squash you. It's a good revenge, isn't it? I'd stay here and see the end of it if I could, only I've no time to spare, so now good night, Warder Davis, curse you!"
"And with a brutal kick at my defenceless body he started off in the direction of Westmoor. I could see his bulky form for a moment or two in the dim light, and could hear for several minutes the dim tread of his feet crunching the gravel on the permanent way. I had no doubt in my mind that he had been making for Westmoor previously, and had used the old platelayer's hut as a hiding place until it was about time to take a chance of getting on one of the up trains.
"My situation was a truly awful one. He was quite right about the down express; it was timed to run through Westmoor just about eleven o'clock. It was past ten now, so that there was not an hour between me and a hideous death. I lay still for some minutes, and tried to compose my mind to think a little. Was there anything I could do? Yes! With an effort I might manage to remove the gag. I pushed my head as far as it

would go over the metals, and to my joy was able to undo the knots with my chained hands and to get the handkerchief out of my mouth. This was a relief, certainly, but only a very small one, for it soon dawned upon me that if I yelled my loudest there would be no one in hearing on the lonely moor through which the track ran. To get my hands free was impossible, but there might be a chance for my feet. I began to kick them about, and discovered that the wretch had simply passed the rope between my ankles once around the rail, so that by alternately kicking and pulling with each foot I could draw it backward and forward against the rail, and so set my foot free.
"I must have kicked away for over half an hour—kicked and pulled till I was stiff in agony, and still the rope held, but I could feel it rubbing away and getting thinner, and I tried to work it so that the friction took place where the rail rested in the 'chair' on the sleeper, so as to have a sharp corner to cut. Fiercely I struggled to get free, but the rope was a strong one, and it seemed as if it would hold forever.
"A whistle! hardly discernable in the distance, but still I knew what it meant, the down express was through Westmoor Station. A fresh struggle—and still the rope held. Then came an ominous rumble in the distance, and there, half a mile away up the straight bit of track, I could see the glimmer of the engine's head-light. A desperate pull! I hung onto the outer rail with both hands, and pulled with arms and legs like a man on the rack of old—every muscle of the body was strained with the fearful tension. Snap! The rope broke, and my feet were free.
"There was not a moment to lose; the train was little over a quarter of a mile away, and in twenty seconds it would be on me. But a desperate man can do a lot in that time. With a quick movement I rolled over on the outside of the track, so that my left arm came under the rail. Then I threw myself at full length parallel to the track, feet toward the approaching train, and as far from the rail as possible. At the same moment I drew my hands on either side of the rail so that the short chain between the steel wristlets was on the top of the rail, the centre being on the inner top edge of the rail where the wheels would strike.
"With a roar, the train was on me, I expected to have one of my hands cut off, and there came a sharp thrill of pain to both wrists as the leading wheels of the engine struck the chain, while the thought flashed across me that I might not be far enough from the rail to escape being struck in my body.
"The passing of that awful train seemed to be an hour. Wheel after wheel ran close to my face with a hideous clatter—until the momentary red glare of the tail-light and a big rush of air told me that the danger had passed. For about five minutes I lay perfectly still, and not till then did I discover that my hands were falling apart.
"Scarcely daring to hope, I then drew them slowly toward me. Yes! I was free! The heavy train had snapped the swivel-link that joined the hand-cuffs, and with the exception of a severe bruising in my wrists, I was perfectly uninjured.
"Well, to make a long story short, sir, I toddled to my feet with the most profound feeling of gratitude to Providence that I had ever experienced. And then, weak and nerve-shattered as I was, there came upon me the intense desire to re-capture the brute who had condemned me to such an awful death. My rifle was still with me uninjured, and I set forth in the direction of Westmoor, starting in fright after I had gone a short distance, at the noise of a heavy freight train, that rumbled past me on the up track.
"When I got to the station, the platform and offices were closed, but this same freight train was being shunted, preparatory to making a fresh start on its journey towards London. Two or three trucks, covered with tarpaulins, were detached, and I fancy I caught the glimpse of a dark figure crouching beside one of them.
"I stopped and watched, smiling to myself as I saw No. 36 climb into the truck and disappear beneath the tarpaulin. Then I went quietly to the brakeman and explained matters. He, the driver of the engine, a couple of shunters and myself surrounded the truck, and in a few minutes No. 36 found himself brought to bay with the man whom he thought dead presenting his rifle within a foot of him. He saw the game was over and gave in, and that's the end of the yarn.
"Yes, of course, he was pretty severely punished, but that did not compensate me for my terrible experience; and now perhaps you don't wonder why I should give a bit of shudder when an express train passes me in the dark!"
—John Elliott of Beaverton, a brother to Edward Elliott who has been in gaol since November last, and who will be tried at the assizes this month, for the murder of one William Murray, was brought down to Whitby from Beaverton on Monday of last week by the chief of police there, on a charge of assault occasioning actual boys harm. He elected to be tried by the Judge and on Wednesday was sentenced by His Honor Judge McIntyre to six months in the Central prison at hard labor.

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