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THE BLACK BESS.

By HARRIET PRESCOTT SPOFFORD.

I lost no time on that next day in seeking Margaret. She was away from home, visiting at Brookford, a little town which was a watering station of all the trains along my own route.



She came down with a companion.

met me in the evening as I returned. I saw her sweet face shining under the lamps as we drew up, but so fearfully dimly lit that I did not know her until she had been out in the rain on the previous night, returning with a friend from a house where they had called, had stumbled and fallen across the railway, but had picked herself up and was safe and dry beneath the roof-tree long and long before either down train or up train passed that way.

I saw her standing there while we looked down to switch off again on the main track, gazing and sniffing after me, looking so securely with her light, rustling garments, airy and supple as some glad young white birch in the breeze; then we were thrashed by with our terrible tread, and I lost her! If there had been a score of faces on the track as we drove along I should have seen none of them that night for brooding over and caressing in my happy thought the pure and perfect face that I really saw beneath the flaring station lamps.

I had almost forgotten this incident of my nightingale—I mean, of course, the vision on the rails—when, some weeks afterward precisely the same thing occurred. It was a soft, starry night of the Indian summer this time. There was a crackling plimmer of harmless sheet lightning through the sky, the horizon lit every few moments with the innocent reflection of some deadly storm in the meadland beneath it.

I knew as well now that it must be an illusion as that I was a breathing being. I did not essay any motion by which it should be satisfied to impede our progress, but I stared at it with a fascinated gaze. The beautiful face!—its great gray eyes gleaming so softly up as the lecherly monster pointed down to dazzle them blind with its force and blazing headlight, to crush them from their sockets with its remorseless wheels.

In another instant the train was whizzing with the shock of its reverse. I was off again, and the place—on again, away, and the place—straightway about the track as it lit loose from a distance. I heard George Rowe muttering at me in amazement, but I made him no reply. At Brookford the conductor Lane, and the stormily, and Late George Rowe have a charge over me. He thought that I was a drunken man, and would be right, for I felt my face so hot, and my eyes so pained, that the light rays have played like flames in a bed of embers while my brain burned and bubbled, and bubbled, till it seemed like bursting. I was, indeed, well wadded with grief.

I wrote to Margaret of this second occurrence, and asked her what it meant. Was I really becoming out of my head? Was I even out of my head already? She replied in much the same strain as before, jutting and cheerful; but it was like a transparent mask, and I could clearly detect an anxiety and alarm on her part beneath the whole of her playful petition not to turn her into a grave light and will-o'-the-wisp, nor to connect her personality with such diabolical things as the flames of the St. Elmo's fire that every sailor sees on his topmast, and which I had doubtless a thousand times beheld running before me on the rails.

I determined then that unless my mind were really affected I would take no more notice of any renewal of this apparition than I would of the copper cents and brass pins which adventurous school-boys were in the habit of placing upon the track for the wheels to flatten out into nothingness. My resolutions, I need not say, were as worthless as the flattened pins, and quickly became paving-stones of that region where asphalt was primevally found in use.

For the face haunted me—haunted me so that I wonder at myself now, and believe that only the grace and goodness of heaven kept me from the endless perdition of hating the original. It never came twice in immediate succession, but at intervals of a few weeks, when it would seem to have accumulated power to expand, and, under circumstances of ingenious devilishness, it made its appearance. In many instances I was fortunate enough to have some ready excuse on hand for my delay, but sometimes the prodigy vanished before I slackened speed, and then no excuse was needed, but when that was not the case, as most frequently it happened, and I was abandoned to my own devices, and the bewilderment and consternation of the train, it began to be believed among the employes that I had become a hard fellow. Shortly following upon that I was summoned by the superintendent and reprimanded for my impudence—I who had never drunk a drop in my life—doggedly promised him better fashions, for had I explained things what director of them all, I asked myself, would have suffered a crazy man to take out the night express from Waterway?

Meanwhile, owing solely to these affairs, my marriage had been indefinitely postponed; for, of course, while liable to these hallucinations and visitations, I was no fit subject for the assumption of new bonds and duties. Margaret remained as she had ever been—an angel of mercy; she soothed me, soothed me, and we took counsel together how best to overcome my difficulties; but finally, when all our expedients seemed futile, she imperatively bade me resign my situation, for she felt that we were murderers, a thousand times multiplied, in continuing to hold so many lives in risk with the possibilities to which I might be driven by my mad fantasies.

This command and entreaty of hers was after a time when I had seen the face more vividly than before, more beautiful, more human, more piteous. We were coming along an inclined plane with the brakes down; at the foot of it the track ran curving over the mighty trestle work of the Windriver valley. It was impossible to stop the train, for it descended already without steam; and ahead of us lay the long, slow curve of the trestle work, as a sheer abutment of 200 feet, filled in with sliding sand—it rose above the low, broad fields that slept, all purple and peaceful, in the silver flood of moonlight at that hour of darkness.

There was but a single alternative: I could throw the Black Bess and her train from the tracks as we touched the curve, and we should be dust before the valley could feel us, or the river cover us; or, with the face before me, I must crash over and through that one dear thing of all my heart.

I knew in an intimate and under consideration, that I was deceived; but, go what I would, it came to me as if I were expiating it myself, all the annihilating terror that must overwhelm the sufferer as he advanced with the thundering train and shook her frame bodily and her soul with vast fear. I heard, in my faint, her shrill shrieks as she struggled vainly to rise, and escape, and flee, and knew that it was vainly. I felt—almost with positive and physical pain of my own—the breaking and grinding of the tie, and then—I should have done it—I had reached out my hand to do it—when, suddenly, the fair, pale face rose from the way like a dew cloud, the floating garments of the late prostrate form were gathered together, all had disappeared—and we slid gently upon the track-work, and wound our way over the high pine line, till Lindy woods beyond took us into safety and shelter.

I stood, then, powerless, and could not have lifted my hand to my face to wipe off the beads of cold sweat there. It seems, perhaps, in the rehearsal, a little thing to have endured; but I can tell you that it was the tortures of the damned. The men and women who had given their lives into my hand that night, never knew how, for one moment, that hand, loosening its grasp, hesitated, and held them over the precipice and gulf of death, while they gazed out and down, and admired the beauty of the world, and felt their life and enjoyed their breath.

It was then Margaret said I must leave the railroad; I had no right longer to play at fast and loose with the destinies of others; each time I stepped upon my platform was a sin. The wear and tear of travel, and night travel at that, she said, had broken up my nervous system, which, added to my previous shock already sustained, might produce irremediable misfortunes, if I did not leave everything, and come down and rest with her at her mother's.

This last was pleasant enough—rest in that happy house, the low-roofed old farmhouse, standing on its verdant knoll, that always shone like some broad carpet of greenest velvet embroidered with all the golden sunshine of summer, the house where everything was ordered to the music of peace and quietness—but then, by and by, there was a time for that.

Was it a devil driving me on to stay? or was it my natural maniness refusing to yield to a devil and begging for one more trial?—I declined to go; still said nothing, and let my train out of Waterway. I was so thoroughly myself on every other topic, that I could not believe in a monomania upon this one. I invented an apology to myself for every time that I yielded to my pursuer—the reflections of the moon in some ditch of still water, the lantern of a crossing in the woods, the round, white signboard of a switch, the signal lamp upon a draw-bridge—I affirmed that in similarly deceptive lights and shadows they would have affected every man in the same way as that in which I was affected.

But, at last, the tormenter, now insupportable; it followed me from station to station, as some great, winged, stinging thing pursues a racer, its play on my emotions being all the more forcible that I could never entertain any sentiment of anger toward it—for there it always lay, lovely, appealing and piteous, only the face of Margaret. It grew plain to me, and, reluctantly, I was forced to acknowledge either that my vision was distorted and ruined, or that some necessary spring in my mechanism had become loosened.

I determined then, at last, that I would consult a physician, to see if there were any balsam in Gilead for my healing. I shudder now at remembrance of my selfish criminality—for I reasoned that I could do this the more readily, as I knew that, by the laws of his profession, he would be obliged to keep my application secret, and could make no report to my employers. I needed not have feared, as it ended. Old Dr. Blanchard had no time for mischief, and had, moreover, such a professional curiosity and searching into things, that, if my symptoms had been at all anomalous, he would have suffered me to launch a loaded train of my fellow creatures into eternity, in order that he might study their development. However, he assured me that it was a very simple and frequent form of disease with which I was afflicted; one taking its variation according to the idiosyncrasies of the patient; and, being entirely upon the nerves, there was no medicine to reach it but my own will. This was cheerful after my experience. If my spiritual identity, he said, was weaker than that of my body, it must succumb into hopeless insanity; but, could I rouse its flagging courage and whip it into action, all was safe and sure. The one, the only thing, for me to do was, when the next time I saw the face before me, to run over it, boldly and without a remonstrance—remorselessly, if I could, but to run over it—and I should be well.

It was an easy thing to order—but, then, the face was Margaret's. Dr. Blanchard professed himself interested in the case which I had exhibited to him, and would not take any fee. I went out from his presence, half-comforted, somewhat strengthened, and resolved that I would do as he bade. To be continued.

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