

TWO "DESERTERS"

MIDNIGHT at Euston on a bitterly cold Saturday evening in December! There were fewer travellers than usual, and the Scotch express was nothing like "full up." For this circumstance I was devoutly thankful, as it gave me a "side" all to myself. Indeed, up till the stroke of the hour it looked as though I were to be alone in the compartment, but just as the guard's whistle blew a young man came running along the platform and jumped in beside me. In a few seconds the train was rushing through the northern suburbs of London.

My companion was a tall, handsome young fellow, with a face deep-tanned by the sun or exposure to all kinds of weather. A traveller of some kind, I was certain, probably a sailor! He wore a plain suit of tweed, a cap of the same material, and in place of collar and tie a soft black silk muffler was carelessly tied round his neck. He had no luggage, not even a handbag.

I was in no mood for conversation myself, having

just driven to Euston after a hard night's work at three of the leading London halls, but had I been so inclined my travelling companion's demeanour would have effectively prevented me. His face was solemn and drawn, and he kept staring out the window into the blackness of the night, a strange lacklustre gleam in his grey eyes. I tried to close mine and go to sleep, but found myself continually opening them and having another peep at my companion. For a full hour he remained motionless in his corner, and I might as well have been non-existent for all the notice he took of me. I began to feel distinctly uncomfortable; it was positively eery to look at the immobile figure in the corner, with the stern features and the keen eyes ever "glowering" into nothingness.

"Look here, young man!" I latterly blurted out in good plain Scotch, "I dinna ken wha ye are or whaur ye're gaun, but I maun speak to ye—or burst!"

He turned round swiftly, and a brighter expression robbed his face of its previous set melancholy. "Ah, you're Scotch, anyhow!" he exclaimed. "Perhaps I have been lacking in politeness. If so, I am sorry, but—I am troubled, and have much to think of. You will excuse me, I am sure."

He spoke like a gentleman, belying the muffler and the coarse tweed suit, and I at once felt curiously interested in him.

"Well," I kindly continued, "I have no desire to pry into your affairs, but you know the old saying about trouble shared losing half its weight. Maybe I could advise you; I'm much older than you are."

He shook his head, at the same time eyeing me up and down. "You don't look like a policeman or an army officer," he said as he finished his scrutiny.

"I'm neither," I replied, with a laugh, "although I've played both parts in my time."

"What do you mean?" he sharply asked, starting up in his corner. Then, with a smile, "Ah, I see," he added, "you're an actor. I would never have taken you for that, either! But you seem a decent sort of chap, and I don't mind telling you my story. I'm a deserter!"

It was now my turn to start. "A deserter!" I repeated. "Then you're a soldier, and have done something wrong. Why have you deserted?"

"To look into my mother's face before she dies!" he bitterly exclaimed, the tears welling in his eyes and his whole body quivering with sudden emotion.

"But surely that is not deserting?" I remarked.

"You could have got leave for such a journey and such a sad mission!"

"Yes," he responded quietly, "had I been on a home station, but I have come from India."

Gradually he told me his story as the express tore its way through the English Midlands. He was the son of well-to-do parents, who lived in a manufacturing town in the south of Scotland, but bad company had brought its customary reward in his case, and he ran away from home in disgrace, joining the army under an assumed name, and soon thereafter being drafted to India.

"My intention was to work hard and get my commission, if at all possible. That secured, I felt that I could then go back to D—— and let my father and mother see how I had expiated my youthful follies. Promotion came fairly rapidly, and I was soon colour-sergeant of my company, with every prospect of getting my commission on account of some rather hot work I happened to take part in during a hill tribe dispute. How I longed for the day to come when I could go proudly up to the old home in Scotland, kiss my darling mother, and show my officer's commission to my honest but stern-hearted father.


"My mind was just in such a groove as this one

afternoon at Rawal Pindi, when I came face to face with a young lady whom I had known from childhood in our native town. She recognised me at once. She had come out to India a few weeks previously to be married to a civilian, she told me, and was living with her husband at Rawal. Of course, my first inquiries were of my mother, father, brothers, and sisters. How were they all, and had my disappearance six years before affected any of them very greatly? The girl's replies sent the blood from my heart in great heavy beats. My youngest brother Frank was dead—killed in a railway accident—my father was still hale and hearty, but my mother had been an invalid for several years, and was not expected to recover. 'Jack, Jack,' entreated the girl, 'go home at any cost and any sacrifice, and let your poor mother know that you are at least alive. She is breaking her heart with grief and worry, and I think, yes, I am sure, it is because of your mysterious absence and silence.'

"I hurried away to the barracks, scarce knowing what I was doing, and went straight to the Commanding Officer with a request for three months' leave of absence. He was very sorry for me. I told him the whole story, but such a furlough was impossible in the existing state of unrest up-country.

We might be called north any day and any hour. There was no more to be said. That night I slunk like a thief out of the barracks, went to a native shop in the bazaar and bought an old suit of civilian clothes. An hour later I was in the train for Calcutta—a deserter from the colours! From there I worked my passage home in a tramp steamer, and I arrived in London this morning. That is my story. Every day, every hour, aye, every minute since I left the regimental quarters in India my mind has been torn between two emotions—a passionate desire to again behold my mother's face and a sense of burning shame for my unsoldierly action in taking French leave. Add to that the uncertainty of my reception at home—what will I find there?—and you can form some idea of the present state of my heart and my brain. If God is only good enough to let me see my mother alive, to clasp her in my arms once more, I think I can face anything that may afterwards happen.”

For some little time I said nothing to the youth opposite; his extraordinary story, told with the utmost candour, had powerfully affected me, and I felt a lump in my throat as I looked into his honest face and sorrowful grey eyes. When I did speak what could I say but that I sympathised with him



deeply in his terrible position, and I hoped he would bring gladness and health to his drooping mother, and that the military authorities would be willing to make allowances for his hasty action, impelled as it was by remorse and love?

I did my best to cheer him during the remainder of our journey together. He left the train at Carlisle, where he would get a slow connection for D——, but before we parted he promised to write me at Glasgow and let me know how he fared on arriving home. Two days later I received the following note from him :

“My mother died two days before I reached home. Thank God! I was able to be present at her funeral—that, at least, was a negative comfort. My father never spoke to me. To-night I go back to London to surrender myself to the military authorities as a deserter. What they will do with me I neither know nor care. For your kindly companionship in the train the other evening I thank you.

“John C——.”

I never heard of him again.

The other “deserter” of whom I wish to write was of quite a different stamp. For his crime,

alas! too common, there is no punishment save that of the conscience, and, after all, this is generally far greater than the punishment meted out by human laws.

I was performing in one of the Manchester halls some years ago when an attendant handed me a note which had been sent up from a young woman waiting at the stage door. The note was an urgent request that I should see the writer on important private business. Having a few minutes to spare, I asked that the visitor should be sent to my dressing-room.

Soon afterwards a girl of about eighteen timidly entered in response to my "Come in!" She was as pretty as a picture, with rosy cheeks, large blue eyes, and a mass of curly brown hair. But that there was something wrong I quickly discerned. She was flushed and nervous, and a closer look at her features revealed the fact that she had been weeping bitterly.

"Well, my lassie," I said in a kindly tone, "what can I do for you? I hope you're not in any trouble," I added, seeing that the tears were not far distant from her lovely eyes.

"Oh, yes, I am," she exclaimed feverishly. "Very great trouble. I cannot tell you what it is, but you

can assist me if you like. It is your—your cousin—will you please tell me where he has gone to—where I can find him? I must find him!” And she burst into a fit of sobbing.

I did my best to calm the poor child, and told her I had no cousin in England; all my relatives were far beyond the banks o’ Tweed. She jumped wildly from the chair into which she had fallen, and in her eyes there was a fearful light—the light of disillusionment and unspeakable dread.

“Then he must have told me lies, lies, lies!” she cried in agonised tones, when she had recovered from the shock of my statement. “My God! how could he do it? How could he do it? And I trusted him so!” Again she fell back into the chair, and cried as though her heart would rend itself in twain.

It was the most awkward and painful position in which I had ever found myself, the more so that my name had evidently been employed by the scoundrel who had betrayed the loving trust of this young and beautiful girl. As she was not in a condition to leave the building when it was time for me to go “on,” I sent for one of the lady dressers, and she remained with the young woman in my room until my work for the evening was over. Then I learned

the girl's story—the old sad tale of an unscrupulous, lying villain and a too-confiding maid. After making her his plaything for several months he had disappeared, leaving his motherless victim to face the wrath of a stern, unbending father, and the shame of the whole world. That very day she had been expelled for ever from her father's house, and when she came to my dressing-room she had nowhere to lay her head.

I made arrangements with the dresser, a kind-hearted, matronly woman, to give the unfortunate girl lodgings for the night, and next day I made it my business to call upon her father, whom I found to be a respectable foreman tradesman in the city. I explained how I had come to be interested in his daughter's position, and urged him to have pity for his girl, adding that she was more sinned against than sinning, and that, whatever her fate, it was a father's duty to stand by his child in the hour of trial. He listened quietly—too quietly—to all I had to say, then rose and dismissed me with the cold words: "The girl you mention is no longer a daughter of mine. She has brought disgrace upon a Godly house, and I must try to forget that she ever lived!"

"Then may God judge you as you have judged her!" I exclaimed as I made for the door.

A week or two later I was playing in another part of the country, when my eye caught a paragraph in a newspaper which I happened to pick up in a restaurant. It was headed "Suicide in Manchester," and (the cutting lies before me as I write), read as follows:

"Yesterday the body of a young and pretty girl named Edith N—— was found in the canal. She left her father's house some weeks ago, and nothing more was heard of her until yesterday, when a boatman discovered her body floating in the canal as stated. It is reported that the girl had had a quarrel with her lover."

I have often been in Manchester since then, and every time I visit the great Lancashire city my thoughts will persist in wandering back to that scene in the dressing-room. In my mind's eye I see the lovely but agonised features of a young girl, and in my ears there is the ring of her despairing, heart-broken cry: "I trusted him so! I trusted him so!"