The Messenger's Story.

TRAVELLING by rail, with its inevitable accompaniment of soot and jar, is tedious enough at any time, but toward the close of a drizzly February day I found it grow insufferable. I had exhausted the time-killing capabilities of periodicals; scenery there was none, — nothing but a dreary gray blank. I turned from the window of the Pullman in something like despair, and began to scrutinize my fellow-sufferers. One of them, whose brisk, energetic way of doing things had at first attracted my attention, I had noticed hours ago on the depot platform, — a lean, wiry man of medium height, dressed in what certain Down-Easters would call a "dark-completed suit of clothes." Now his newspaper had fallen down, and his eyes were wandering about the car on much the same errand as my own. Our glances met, and something in them of the misery that loves company drew us together, and in a few moments we were engaged in familiar conversation.

He had been, it soon appeared, an express messenger on the Central Pacific in its early days, and then going to Frisco, had picked up a fortune after the easy fashion of the time. Afterward, with greater wisdom than most of his associates showed, he had come East when everything was "flush," and so escaped the crash which made the ephemeral riches of so many men take wings.

My new-found friend seemed in a talkative mood, and seemed, moreover, one of those restless spirits who, wherever placed, strike for adventure as a turtle strikes for water. To draw him out I said that his life as express messenger must have been one not wanting in exciting episodes. He smiled peculiarly at my remark. It was a smile of recollection, and one that awakened curiosity; and just as the porter came around to light the lamps he started on this story:

"Looking after express packages on the train in those days was hardly the easy berth it is now. The messenger's fitness for the position was largely decided by his ability to use a Derringer. We always carried more or less bullion; and robberies, in whose committal his newspaper had fallen down, and his eyes were wandering about the car on much the same errand as my own. Our glances met, and something in them of the misery that loves company drew us together, and in a few moments we were engaged in familiar conversation.

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"One night the darkness and a pelting rain had made us late, and as we rushed into Omaha twenty minutes behind time an unusual bustle greeted us. As they were hurrying the freight on board I heard the agent calling for somebody to 'give him a lift on the corpse.' He found his somebody in a big, bewhiskered fellow standing near, who immediately offered his services. When the long pine box containing the coffin was on the car the fellow with the whiskers looked at the plate on the lid, and suggested that, as the body was 'going through,' it would be less in the way and less likely to be disturbed if placed by my desk. So, after a few additional lifts and shoves, it was placed behind my chair.

"It was all over in a moment, and we were piling out of the depot and into the storm outside. I stood by the door of the car watching the lights of the town as they sank into the darkness. A long stretch of lonely country lay before us, mile after mile of emptiness, which, in the darkness, seemed interminable. The rain kept up a dreary tattoo on the roof of the car, and came beating down in my face as I stood by the door. We rumbled over a bridge, and I could hear the swollen river swashing along the abutments.

"I turned from the door, but tried in vain to bring myself to work. A nervousness inspired by the wildness of the night clung about me, and I could not shake it off. All the murders and robberies of which the road could boast passed before me in a mournful procession, like the ghosts of Banquo's kinsmen. Less than a month before, a messenger had been found dead,—murdered,—and his car robbed. The presence of the considerable bullion which I had in the car that night with several money packages did not tend to dispel the fears which I now tried to silence by ridicule. I had so far succeeded that I was about to sit down to my desk when my eye fell on the long pine box. There was nothing unusual about it. I had travelled alone with similar ones a hundred times before, and had scarcely given a thought to their ghostly occupants. That night, however, it was different. I thought of the silent figure behind my chair with a feeling of curiosity which amounted to apprehension, and I soon determined to make an investigation for the sake of my peace of mind. My worst suspicions were confirmed as I discovered with the help of my knife that the screws had been merely dropped into holes bored in them. I thought of the circumstances under which the box had been introduced,—the officious helper who had suggested that it be placed in my room so near my desk,—and the conviction flashed upon me that he could be no other than the pal of some villainous desperado now concealed in the box and only waiting his chance to make short of me. I whipped out my revolver, cocked it, and hastily raised the box cover—"

"Bigsville," shouted the conductor, "Bigsville," and my friend grabbed his hat-box and rushed for the platform. "Hold on," I cried, for my curiosity was greatly excited,—"hold on, my friend, tell me what was in that box." He had reached the door, but stopped an instant, turned toward me with a smile, and made a reply which was lost in the sudden shriek of the steam-whistle. The train started, and the express messenger hastily disappeared outside the car.

I have written to the Bigsville postmaster, I have consulted the police, but all in vain. My peace of mind has fled. Tell me, ah, my friends,

WHAT WAS IN THAT BOX?