

UNDER THE CLOAK

Rhoda Broughton

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IF there is a thing in the world that my soul hateth, it is a long night journey by rail. In the old coaching days I do not think that I should have minded it, passing swiftly through a summer night on the top of a speedy coach with the star arch black-blue above one's head, the sweet smell of earth and her numberless flowers and grasses in one's nostrils, and the pleasant trot, trot, trot, trot, of the four strong horses in one's ears. But by railway! in a little stuffy compartment, with nothing to amuse you if you keep awake; with a dim lamp hanging above you, tantalizing you with the idea that you can read by its light, and when you try, satisfactorily proving to you that you cannot; and, if you sleep, breaking your neck, or at least stiffening it, by the brutal arrangement of the hard cushions.

These thoughts pass sulkily and rebelliously through my head as I sit in my salon, in the Ecu at Geneva, on the afternoon of the fine autumn day on which, in an evil hour, I have settled to take my place in the night train for Paris. I have put off going as long as I can. I like Geneva, and am leaving some pleasant and congenial friends, but now go I must. My husband is to meet me at the station in Paris at six o'clock to-morrow morning. Six o'clock! what a barbarous hour at which to arrive! I am putting on my bonnet and cloak; I look at myself in the glass with an air of anticipative disgust. Yes, I look trim and spruce enough now — a not disagreeable object perhaps — with sleek hair, quick and alert eyes, and pink-tinted cheeks. Alas! at six o'clock tomorrow morning, what a different tale there will be to tell! dishevelled, dusty locks, half-open weary eyes, a disordered dress, and a green-colored countenance.

I turn away with a pettish gesture, and reflecting that at least there is no wisdom in living my miseries twice over, I go down-stairs, and get into the hired open carriage which awaits me. My maid and man follow with the luggage. I give stricter injunctions than ordinary to my maid never for one moment to lose her hold of the dressing-case, which contains, as it happens, a great many more valuable jewels than people are wont to travel in foreign parts with, nor of a certain costly and beautiful Dresden china and gold Louis Quatorze clock, which I am carrying home as a present to my people. We reach the station, and I straightway betake myself to the first-class *salle d'attente*, there to remain penned up till the officials undo the gates of purgatory and release us an arrangement whose wisdom I have yet to learn. There are ten minutes to spare, and the *salle* is filling fuller and fuller every moment. Chiefly my countrymen, countrywomen, and country children, beginning to troop home to their partridges. I look curiously round at them, speculating as to which of them will be my companion or companions through the night.

There are not very unusual types: girls in sailor hats and blond hair-fringes; strong-minded old maids in painstakingly ugly waterproofs; baldish fathers; fattish mothers; a German or two, with prominent pale eyes and spectacles. I have just decided on the companions I should prefer: a large young man, who belongs to nobody, and looks as if he spent most of his life in laughing — (alas! he is not likely! he is sure to want to smoke!) — and a handsome and prosperous-looking young couple. They are more likely, as very probably, in the man's case, the bride-love will overcome the cigar-love. The porter comes up. The key turns in the lock: the doors open. At first I am standing close to them, flattening my nose against the glass, and looking out on the pavement; but as the passengers become more numerous, I withdraw from my prominent position, anticipating a rush for carriages. I hate and dread exceedingly a crowd, and would much prefer at any time to miss my train rather than be squeezed and jostled by one. In consequence, my maid and I are almost the last people to emerge, and have the last and worst choice of seats. We run along the train looking in; the footman, my maid, and I — full — full everywhere!

"Dames seules?" asks the guard.

"Certainly not! neither 'Dames seules,' nor 'fumeurs,' but if it must be one or the other, certainly 'fumeurs.'"

I am growing nervous, when I see the footman, who is a little ahead of us, standing with an open carriage-door in his hand, and signing to us to make haste. Ah! it is all right! it always comes right when one does

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not fuss oneself.

"Plenty of room here, 'm; only two gentlemen!"

I put my foot on the high step and climb in. Rather uncivil of the two gentlemen! neither of them offers to help me, but they are not looking this way, I suppose. "Mind the dressing-case!" I cry nervously, as I stretch out my hand to help the maid Watson up. The man pushes her from behind; in she comes — dressing-case, clock and all; here we are for the night!

I am so busy and amused looking out of the window, seeing the different parties bidding their friends good-by, and watching with indignation the barbaric and malicious manner in which the porters hurl the luckless luggage about, that we have steamed out of the station, and are fairly off for Paris, before I have the curiosity to glance at my fellow-passengers. Well! when I do take a look at them, I do not make much of it. Watson and I occupy the two seats by one window, facing one another. Our fellow travellers have not taken the other two window-seats; they occupy the middle ones, next us. They are both reading behind newspapers. Well! we shall not get much amusement out of them. I give them up as a bad job. Ah! if I could have had my wish, and had the laughing young man, and the pretty young couple, for company, the night would not perhaps have seemed so long. However I should have been mortified for them to have seen how green I looked when the dawn came; and, as to these commis voyageurs, I do not care if I look as green as grass in their eyes. Thus, all no doubt is for the best; and at all events it is a good trite copy-book maxim to say so. So I forget all about them: fix my eyes on the landscape racing by, and fall into a variety of thoughts. "Will my husband really get up in time to come and meet me at the station to-morrow morning? He does so cordially hate getting up. My only chance is his not having gone to bed at all! How will he be looking? I have not seen him for four months. Will he have succeeded in curbing his tendency to fat, during his Norway fishing? Probably not. Fishing, on the contrary is rather a fat-making occupation; sluggish and sedentary. Shall we have a pleasant party at the house we are going to for shooting? To whom in Paris shall I go for my gown? Worth? No, Worth is beyond me." Then I leave the future and go back into past enjoyments; excursions to Lausanne, trips down the lake to Chillon; a hundred and one pleasantnesses. The time slips by: the afternoon is drawing towards evening; a beginning of dusk is coming over the landscape.

I look round. Good Heavens! what can those men find so interesting in the papers? I thought them hideously dull, when I looked over them this morning; and yet they are still persistently reading. What can they have got hold of? I cannot well see what the man beside me has; vis-à-vis is buried in an English Times. Just as I am thinking about him, he puts down his paper, and I see his face. Nothing very remarkable! a long black beard, and hat tilted somewhat low over his forehead. I turn away my eyes hastily, for fear of being caught inquisitively scanning him; but still, out of their corners I see that he has taken a little bottle out of his travelling bag, has poured some of its contents into a glass, and is putting it to his lips. It appears as if — and, at the time it happens, I have no manner of doubt that he is drinking. Then I feel that he is addressing me. I look up and towards him: he is holding out the phial to me, and saying:

"May I take the liberty of offering Madame some?"

"No, thank you, monsieur!" I answer, shaking my head hastily and speaking rather abruptly. There is nothing that I dislike more than being offered strange eatables or drinkables in a train, or a strange hymn-book in church.

He smiles politely, and then adds:

"Perhaps the other lady might be persuaded to take a little."

"No, thank you, sir, I'm much obliged to you," replies Watson briskly, in almost as ungrateful a tone as mine.

Again he smiles, bows, and re-buries himself in his newspaper. The thread of my thoughts is broken; I feel an odd curiosity as to the nature of the contents of that bottle. Certainly it is not sherry or spirit of any kind, for it has diffused no odor through the carriage. All this time the man beside me has said and done nothing. I wish he would move or speak, or do something. I peep covertly at him. Well! at all events, he is well defended against the night chill. What a voluminous cloak he is wrapped in; how entirely it shrouds his figure; trimmed with fur too! why, it might be January instead of September. I do not know why, but that cloak makes me feel rather uncomfortable. I wish they would both move to the window, instead of sitting next to us. Bah! am I setting up to be a timid dove? I, who rather pique myself on my bravery — on my indifference to tramps, bulls, ghosts? The clock has been deposited with the umbrellas, parasols, spare shawls, rugs, etc., in the netting above Watson's head. The dressing-case — a very large and heavy one — is sitting on her lap. I lean forwards and say to her:

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"That box must rest very heavily on your knee, and I want a footstool — I should be more comfortable if I had one — let me put my feet on it."

I have an idea that, somehow, that my sapphires will be safer if I have them where I can always feel that they are there. We make the desired change in our arrangements. Yes! both my feet are on it.

The landscape outside is darkening quickly now; our dim lamp is beginning to assert its importance. Still the men read. I feel a sensation of irritation. What can they mean by it? it is utterly impossible that they can decipher the small print of the Times by this feeble, shaky glimmer.

As I am so thinking, the one who had before spoken lays down his paper, folds it up and deposits it on the seat beside him. Then, drawing his little bottle out of his bag a second time, drinks, or seems to drink, from it. Then he again turns to me.

"Madame will pardon me, but if Madame could be induced to try a little of this; it is a cordial of a most refreshing and invigorating description; and if she will have the amiability to allow me to say so, madame looks faint."

(What can he mean by his urgency? Is it pure politeness? I wish it were not growing so dark.) These thoughts run through my head as I hesitate for an instant what answer to make. Then an idea occurs to me, and I manufacture a civil smile and say, "Thank you very much, monsieur! I am a little faint, as you observe. I think I will avail myself of your obliging offer." So saying, I take the glass, and touch it with my lips. I give you my word of honor that I do not think I did more; I did not mean to swallow a drop, but I suppose I must have done. He smiles with a gratified air.

"The other lady will now, perhaps, follow your example?"

By this time I am beginning to feel thoroughly uncomfortable. Why, I should be puzzled to explain. What is this cordial that he is so eager to urge upon us? Though determined not to subject myself to its influence, I must see its effect upon another person. Rather brutal of me, perhaps; rather in the spirit of the anatomist, who, in the interest of science, tortures live dogs and cats; but I am telling you facts — not what I ought to have done, but what I did. I make a sign to Watson to drink some. She obeys, nothing loath. She has been working hard all day; packing and getting under weigh, and she is tired. There is no feigning about her! She has emptied the glass. Now to see what comes of it — what happens to my live dog! The bottle is replaced in the bag; still we are racing, racing on, past the hills and fields and villages. How indistinct they are all growing! I turn back from the contemplation of the outside view to the inside one. Why, the woman is asleep already! her chin buried in her chest; her mouth half open; looking exceedingly imbecile and very plain, as most people, when asleep out of bed, do look. A nice invigorating potion, indeed! I wish to Heaven that I had gone in fumeurs, or even with that cavalcade of nursery—maids and unwholesome—looking babies in dames seules, next door. At all events, I am not at all sleepy myself: that is a blessing. I shall see what happens. Yes, by—the—by, I must see what he meant to happen: I must affect to fall asleep too. I close my eyes, and, gradually sinking my chin on my chest, try to droop my jaws and hang my cheeks, with a semblance of bona-fide slumber. Apparently I succeed pretty well. After the lapse of some minutes, I distinctly feel two hands very cautiously and carefully lifting and removing my feet from the dressing-box.

A cold chill creeps over me, and then the blood rushes to my head and ears. What am I to do? what am I to do? I have always thought the better of myself ever since for it; but, strange to say, I keep my presence of mind. Still affecting to sleep, I give a sort of kick, and instantly the hands are withdrawn, and all is perfectly quiet again. I now feign to wake gradually, with a yawn and a stretch; and, on moving about my feet a little, find that, despite my kick, they have been too clever for me, and have dexterously removed my box and substituted another. The way in which I make this pleasant discovery is that whereas mine was perfectly flat at the top, on the surface of the object that is now beneath my feet there is some sort of excrescence — a handle of some sort or other. There is no denying it — brave I may be — I may laugh at people for running from bulls; for disliking to sleep in a room by themselves, for fear of ghosts; for hurrying past tramps: but now I am most thoroughly frightened. I look cautiously, in a sideways manner, at the man beside me. How very still he is! Were they his hands, or the hands of the man opposite him? I take a fuller look than I have yet ventured to do; turning slightly round for the purpose. He is still reading, or at least still holding the paper, for the reading must be a farce. I look at his hands: they are in precisely the same position as they were when I affected to go to sleep, although the pose of the rest of his body is slightly altered. Suddenly, I turn extremely cold, for it has dawned on me that they are not real hands — they are

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certainly false ones. Yes, though the carriage is shaking very much with our rapid motion, and the light is shaking, too, yet there is no mistake. I look indeed more closely, so as to be quite sure. The one nearest me is ungloved; the other gloved. I look at the nearest one. Yes, it is of an opaque waxen whiteness. I can plainly see the rouge put under the finger-nails to represent the coloring of life. I try to give one glance at his face. The paper still partially hides it; and, as he is leaning his head back against the cushion, where the light hardly penetrates, I am completely baffled in my efforts.

Great Heavens! what is going to happen to me? what shall I do? how much of him is real? where are his real hands? what is going on under that awful cloak? The fur border touches me as I sit by him. I draw convulsively and shrinkingly away, and try to squeeze myself up as close as possible to the window. But alas! to what good? how absolutely and utterly powerless I am! how entirely at their mercy! And there is Watson still sleeping swinishly! breathing heavily opposite me. Shall I try to wake her? But to what end? She, being under the influence of that vile drug, my efforts will certainly be useless, and will probably arouse the man to employ violence against me. Sooner or later, in the course of the night, I suppose they are pretty sure to murder me, but I had rather that it should be later than sooner.

While I think these things, I am lying back quite still, for, as I philosophically reflect, not all the screaming in the world will help me: if I had twenty-lung power I could not drown the rush of an express-train. Oh, if my dear boy were but here — my husband I mean, — fat or lean, how thankful I should be to see him! Oh, that cloak, and those horrid waxy hands! Of course I see it now! They remained stuck out, while the man's real ones were fumbling about my feet. In the midst of my agony of fright, a thought of Madame Tussaud flashes ludicrously across me. Then they begin to talk of me. It is plain that they are not taken in by my feint of sleep: they speak in a clear, loud voice, evidently for my benefit. One of them begins by saying, "What a good-looking woman she is — evidently in her première jeunesse too" — (Reader, I struck thirty last May) — "and also there can be no doubt as to her being of exalted rank — a duchess probably." ("A dead duchess by morning," think I grimly). They go on to say how odd it is that people in my class of life never travel with their own jewels, but always with paste ones, the real ones being meanwhile deposited at the bankers. My poor, poor sapphires! good-by — a long good-by to you. But, indeed, I will willingly compound for the loss of you and the rest of my ornaments — will go bare-necked, and bare-armed, or clad in Salviati beads for the rest of my life, so that I do but attain the next stopping place alive.

As I am so thinking, one of the men looks, or I imagine that he looks, rather curiously towards me. In a paroxysm of fear lest they should read on my face the signs of the agony of terror I am enduring, I throw my pocket-handkerchief — a very fine cambric one — over my face.

And now, O reader, I am going to tell you something which I am sure you will not believe; I can hardly believe it myself, but, as I so lie, despite the tumult of my mind — despite the chilly terror which seems to be numbing my feelings — in the midst of it all a drowsiness keeps stealing over me. I am now convinced either that vile potion must have been of extraordinary strength, or that I, through the shaking of the carriage, or the unsteadiness of my hand, carried more to my mouth, and swallowed more — I did not mean to swallow any — than I intended, for — you will hardly credit it, but — I fell asleep!

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When I awake — awake with a bewildered mixed sense of having been a long time asleep — of not knowing where I am — and of having some great dread and horror on my mind — awake and look round, the dawn is breaking. I shiver, with the chilly sensation that the coming of even a warm day brings, and look round, still half-unconsciously, in a misty way. But what has happened? how empty the carriage is! the dressing-case is gone! the clock is gone! the man who sat nearly opposite me is gone. Watson is gone! but the man in the cloak and the wax hands still sits beside me! Still the hands are holding the paper; still the fur is touching me! Good God! I am tête-à-tête with him! A feeling of the most appalling desolation and despair comes over me — vanquishes me utterly. I clasp my hands together frantically, and, still looking at the dim form beside me, groan out — "Well! I did not think that Watson would have forsaken me!" Instantly, a sort of movement and shiver runs through the figure: the newspaper drops from the hands, which, however continue to be still held out in the same position as if still grasping it; and behind the newspaper, I see by the dim morning light and the dim lamp-gleams that there is no real face, but a mask. A sort of choked sound is coming from behind the mask. Shivers of cold fear are running over me. Never to this day shall I know what gave me the despairing courage to do it, but, before I

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know what I am doing, I find myself tearing at the cloak — tearing away the mask — tearing away the hands. It would be better to find any thing underneath — Satan himself — a horrible dead body — any thing — sooner than submit any longer to this hideous mystery. And I am rewarded. When the cloak lies at the bottom of the carriage — when the mask, and the false hands and false feet — (there are false feet too) — are also cast away in different directions, what do you think I find underneath?

Watson! Yes: it appears that while I slept — I feel sure that they must have rubbed some more of the drug on my lips while I was unconscious, or I never could have slept so heavily or so long — they dressed up Watson in the mask, feet, hands, and cloak, set the hat on her head, gagged her, and placed her beside me in the attitude occupied by the man. They had then, at the next station, got out, taking with them dressing-case and clock, and had made off in all security. When I arrive in Paris, you will not be surprised to hear that it does not once occur to me whether I am looking green or no.

And this is the true history of my night journey to Paris! You will be glad, I dare say, to learn that I ultimately recovered my sapphires, and a good many of my other ornaments. The police being promptly set on, the robbers were, after much trouble and time, at length secured; and it turned out that the man in the cloak was an ex-valet of my husband's who was acquainted with my bad habit of travelling in company with my trinkets — a bad habit which I have since seen fit to abandon.