

## A Deadly Dilemma.

BY GRANT ALLEN.



WHEN Netta Mayne came to think it over afterward in her own room by herself, she couldn't imagine what had made her silly enough to quarrel that evening with

Ughtred Carnegie. She could only say, in a penitent mood, it was always the way like that with lovers. Till once they've quarrelled a good round quarrel, and afterwards solemnly kissed and made it all up again, things never stand on a really firm and settled basis between them. It's a move in the game. You must thrust in tierce before you thrust in quarte. The Roman playwright spoke the truth, after all: a lovers' quarrel begins a fresh chapter in the history of their love-making.

It was a summer evening, calm, and clear, and balmy, and Netta and Ughtred had strolled out together, not without a suspicion at times of hand locked in hand, on the high chalk down that rises steep behind Holmbury. How or why they fell out she hardly knew. But they had been engaged already some months, without a single disagreement, which of course gave Netta a natural right to quarrel with Ughtred by this time, if she thought fit: and as they returned down the

hanging path through the combe where the wild orchids grow, she used that right at last, out of pure unadulterated feminine perversity. The ways of women are wonderful; no mere man can fathom them. Something that Ughtred said gave her the chance to make a half petulant answer. Ughtred very naturally defended himself from the imputation of rudeness, and Netta retorted. At the end of ten minutes the

trifle had grown apace into as pretty a lovers' quarrel as any lady novelist could wish to describe in five chapters.

Netta had burst into perfectly orthodox tears, refused to be comforted, in the most approved fashion, declined to accept Ughtred's escort home, and bidden farewell to him excitedly for ever and ever.

It was all about nothing, to be sure, and if two older or wiser heads had only stood by unseen, to view the little comedy, they would sagely have remarked to one another, with a shake, that before twenty-four hours were out the pair would be rushing into one another's arms with mutual apologies and mutual forgiveness. But Netta Mayne and Ughtred Carnegie were still at the



"NETTA AND UGHTRED HAD STROLLED OUT TOGETHER.

age when one takes love seriously—one does before thirty—and so they turned away



along different paths at the bottom of the combe, in the firm belief that love's young dream was shattered, and that henceforth they two were nothing more than the merest acquaintances to one another.

"Good-bye, Mr. Carnegie," Netta faltered out, as in obedience to her wishes, though much against his own will, Ughtred turned slowly and remorsefully down the footpath to the right, in the direction of the railway.

"Good-bye, Netta," Ughtred answered, half choking. Even at that moment of parting (for ever—or a day), he couldn't find it in his heart to call her "Miss Mayne" who had so long been "Netta" to him.

He waved his hand and turned along the foot-path, looking back many times to see Netta still sitting inconsolable where he had left her, on the stile that led from the combe into the Four-acre meadow. Both paths, to right and left, led back to Holmbury over the open field, but they diverged rapidly, and crossed the railway track by separate gates, and five hundred yards from each other. A turn in the path, at which Ughtred lingered long, hid Netta at last from his sight. He paused and hesitated. It was growing late, though an hour of summer twilight still remained. He couldn't bear to leave Netta thus alone in the field. She wouldn't allow him to see her home, to be sure, and that being so, he was too much a gentleman to force himself upon her. But he was too much a man, too, to let her find her way back so late entirely by herself. Unseen himself, he must still watch over her. Against her will, he must still protect her. He would go on to the railway, and there sit by the side of the line, under cover of the hedge, till Netta crossed by the other path. Then he'd walk quietly along the six-foot way to the gate she had passed through, and follow her, unperceived, at a distance along the lane, till he saw her back to Holmbury. Whether she wished it or not he could never leave her.

He looked about for a seat. One lay most handy. By the side of the line the Government engineers had been at work that day, repairing the telegraph system. They had taken down half a dozen mouldering old posts, and set up new ones in their place—tall, clean, and shiny. One of the old posts still lay at full length on the ground by the gate, just as the men had left it at the end of their day's work. At the point where the footpath cut the line,

was a level crossing, and there Ughtred sat down on the fallen post by the side, half-concealed from view by a tall clump of willow-herb, waiting patiently for Netta's coming. How he listened for that light footfall. His heart was full, indeed, of gall and bitterness. He loved her so dearly, and she had treated him so ill. Who would ever have believed that Netta, his Netta, would have thrown him over like that for



"NETTA WAS STILL SITTING INCONSOLABLE."

such a ridiculous trifle? Who, indeed? and least of all Netta herself, sitting alone on the stile with her pretty face bowed deep in her hands, and her poor heart wondering how Ughtred, her Ughtred, could so easily desert her. In such strange ways is the feminine variety of the human heart constructed. To be sure, she had of course dismissed him in the most peremptory fashion, declaring with all the vows propriety permits to the British maiden, that she needed no escort of any sort home, and



that she would ten thousand times rather go alone than have him accompany her. But, of course, also, she didn't mean it. What woman does? She counted upon a prompt and unconditional surrender. Ughtred would go to the corner, as in duty bound, and then come back to her, with profuse expressions of penitence for the wrong he had never done, to make it all up again in the orthodox fashion. She never intended the real tragedy that was so soon to follow. She was only playing with her victim—only trying, woman-like, her power over Ughtred.

So she sat there still, and cried and cried on, minute after minute, in an ecstasy of misery, till the sunset began to glow deeper red in the western sky, and the bell to ring the curfew in Holmbury Tower. Then it dawned upon her slowly, with a shock of surprise, that after all—incredible! impossible!—Ughtred had positively taken her at her word, and wasn't coming back at all to-night to her.

At that, the usual womanly terror seized upon her soul. Her heart turned faint. This was too terrible. Great heavens, what had she done? Had she tried Ughtred too far, and had he really gone? Was he never going to return to her at all? Had he said good-bye in earnest to her for ever and ever?

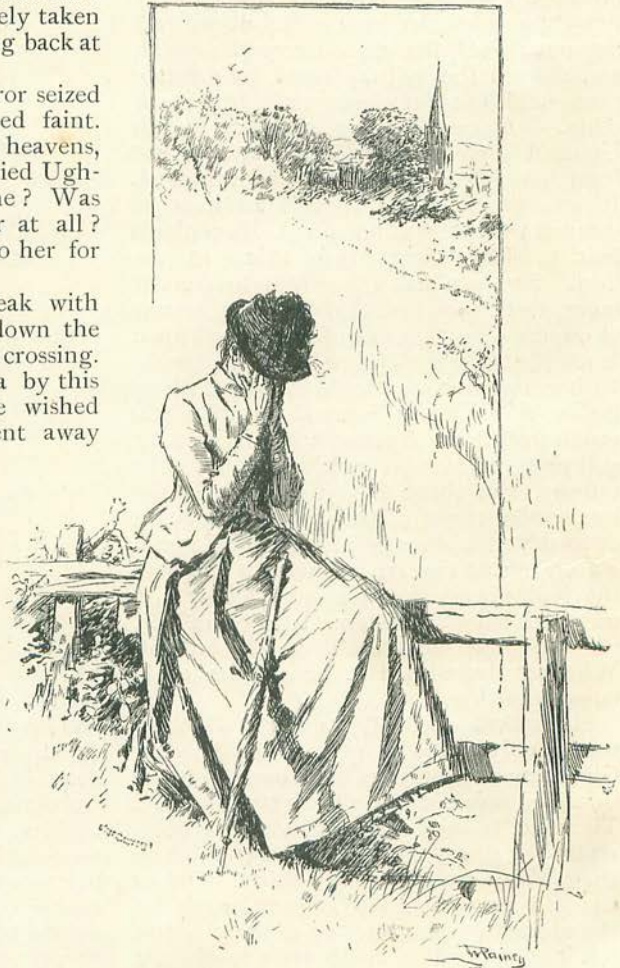
Terrified at the thought, and weak with crying, she rose and straggled down the narrow footpath toward the further crossing. It was getting late now, and Netta by this time was really frightened. She wished with all her heart she hadn't sent away Ughtred—if it were only for the tramps: a man is such a comfort. And then there was that dreadful dog at Milton Court to pass. And Ughtred was gone, and all the world was desolate.

Thinking these things in a tumult of fear to herself, she staggered along the path, feeling tired at heart, and positively ill with remorse and terror. The colour had faded now out of her pretty red cheeks. Her eyes were dim and swollen with crying. She was almost half glad Ughtred couldn't see her just then, she was such a fright with her long spell of brooding. Even her bright print dress and her straw hat with the poppies in it, couldn't redeem, she felt sure,

her pallor and her wretchedness. But Ughtred was gone, and the world was a wilderness. And he would never come back, and the dog at Milton Court was so vicious.

As she walked, or rather groped her way (for she couldn't see for crying) down the path by the hedge, at every step she grew fainter and fainter. Ughtred was gone; and the world was a blank; and there were tramps and dogs; and it was getting dark; and she loved him so much; and Mamma would be so angry.

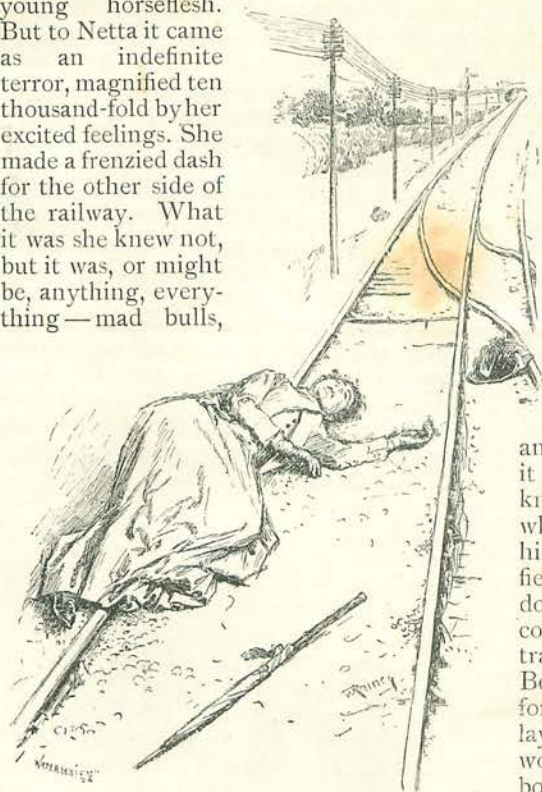
Turning over which thoughts with a whirling brain, for she was but a girl after all, she reached the little swing-gate that led to the railway, and pushed it aside with vague-numbered hands, and stood gazing vacantly at the long curved line in front of her.



"SHE CRIED AND CRIED."



Suddenly, a noise rose sharp in the field behind her. It was only a colt, to be sure, disturbed by her approach, dashing wildly across his paddock, as is the way with young horseflesh. But to Netta it came as an indefinite terror, magnified ten thousand-fold by her excited feelings. She made a frenzied dash for the other side of the railway. What it was she knew not, but it was, or might be, anything, everything—mad bulls,



"IT WAS A TERRIBLE POSITION."

drunken men, footpads, vagabonds, murderers.

Oh, how could Ughtred ever have taken her at her word, and left her like this, alone, and in the evening? It was cruel, it was wicked of him; she hated to be disloyal, and yet she felt in her heart it was almost unmanly.

As she rushed along wildly, at the top of her speed, her little foot caught on the first rail. Before she knew what had happened, she had fallen with her body right across the line. Faint and terrified already, with a thousand vague alarms, the sudden shock stunned and disabled her. Mad bull or drunken man, they might do as they liked now. She was bruised and shaken. She had no thought left to rise or recover herself. Her eyes closed heavily. She lost consciousness at once. It was a terrible position. She had fainted on the line, with the force of the situation.

As for Ughtred, from his seat on the telegraph post on the side of the line five hundred yards farther up, he saw her pause by the gate, then dash across the road, then stumble and trip, then fall heavily forward. His heart came up into his mouth at once at the sight. Oh, thank heaven he had waited. Thank heaven he was near. She had fallen across the line, and a train might come along before she could rise up again. She seemed hurt, too. In a frenzy of suspense he darted forward to save her.

It took but a second for him to realise that she had fallen, and was seriously hurt, but in the course of that second, even as he realised it all, another and more pressing terror seized him.

Hark! what was that? He listened and thrilled. Oh no, too terrible. Yes, yes, it must be—the railway, the railway! He knew it. He felt it. Along the up line, on which Netta was lying, he heard behind him—oh, unmistakable, unthinkable, the fierce whirr of the express dashing madly down upon him. Great heavens, what could he do? The train was coming, the train was almost this moment upon them. Before he could have time to rush wildly forward and snatch Netta from where she lay, full in its path, a helpless weight, it would have swept past him resistlessly, and borne down upon her like lightning.

The express was coming—to crush Netta to pieces.

In these awful moments men don't think; they don't reason; they don't even realise what their action means; they simply act, and act instinctively. Ughtred felt in a second, without even consciously feeling it, so to speak, that any attempt to reach Netta now before that devouring engine had burst upon her at full speed would be absolutely hopeless.

His one chance lay in stopping the train somehow. How, or where, or with what, he cared not. His own body would do it if nothing else came. Only stop it, stop it. He didn't think of it at all that moment as a set of carriages containing a precious freight of human lives. He thought of it only as a horrible, cruel, devouring creature, rushing headway on at full speed to Netta's destruction. It was a senseless wild beast, to be combated at all hazards. It was a hideous, ruthless, relentless thing, to be checked in its mad career in no matter



what fashion. All he knew, indeed, was that Netta, his Netta, lay helpless on the track, and that the engine, like some madman, puffing and snorting with wild glee and savage exultation, was hastening forward with fierce strides to crush and mangle her.

At any risk he must stop it—with anything—anyhow.

As he gazed around him, horror-struck, with blank inquiring stare, and with this one fixed idea possessing his whole soul, Ughtred's eye happened to fall upon the dismantled telegraph post, on which but one minute before he had been sitting. The sight inspired him. Ha, ha! a glorious chance. He could lift it on the line. He could lay it across the rails. He could turn it round into place. He could upset the train! He could place it in the way of that murderous engine.

No sooner thought than done. With the wild energy of despair, the young man lifted the small end of the ponderous post bodily up in his arms, and twisting it on the big base as on an earth-fast pivot, managed, by main force and with a violent effort, to lay it at last full in front of the advancing locomotive. How he did it he never rightly knew himself, for the weight of the great balk was simply enormous. But horror and love, and the awful idea that Netta's life was at stake, seemed to supply him at once with unwonted energy. He lifted it in his arms as he would have lifted a child, and straining in every limb stretched it at last full across both rails, a formidable obstacle before the approaching engine.

Hurrah! hurrah! he had succeeded now. It would throw the train off the line—and Netta would be saved for him.

To think and do all this under the spur of the circumstances took Ughtred something less than twenty seconds. In a great crisis men live rapidly. It was quick as thought. And at the end of it all, he saw the big log laid right across the line with infinite satisfaction. Such a splendid obstacle that—so round and heavy! It must throw the train clean off the metals! It must produce a fine first-class catastrophe.

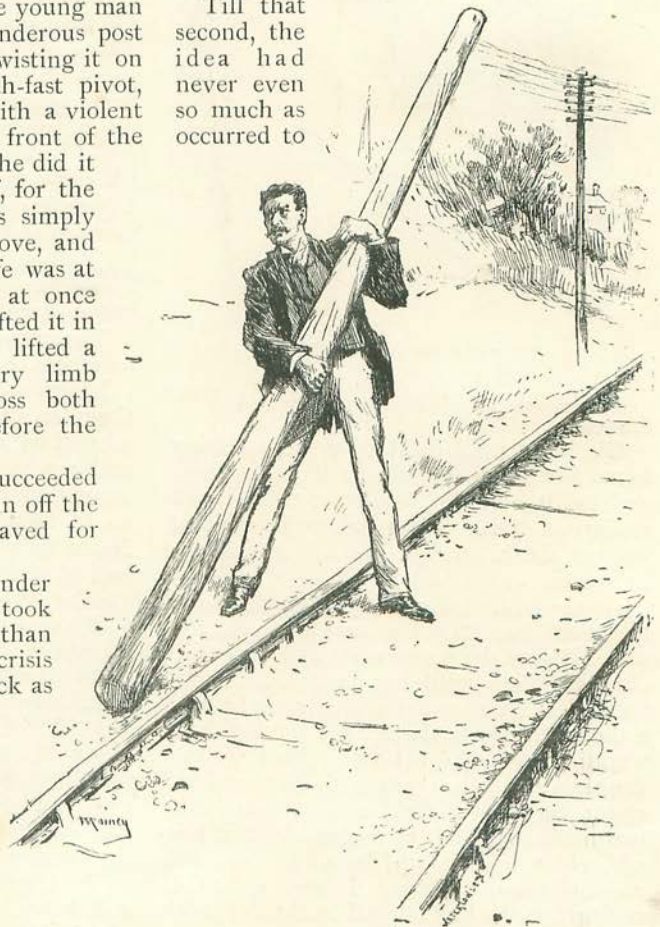
As he thought it, half

aloud, a sharp curve brought the train round the corner close to where he stood, great drops of sweat now oozing clammy from every pore with his exertion. He looked at it languidly, with some vague, dim sense of a duty accomplished, and a great work well done for Netta and humanity. There would be a real live accident in a moment now—a splendid accident—a first-rate catastrophe!

Great heavens! An accident!

And then, with a sudden burst of inspiration, the other side of the transaction flashed in one electric spark upon Ughtred's brain. Why—this—was murder! There were people in that train—innocent human beings, men and women like himself, who would next minute be wrecked and mangled corpses, or writhing forms, on the track before him! He was guilty of a crime—an awful crime. He was trying to produce a terrible, ghastly, bloody railway accident!

Till that second, the idea had never even so much as occurred to



"IT WOULD THROW THE TRAIN OFF THE LINE."



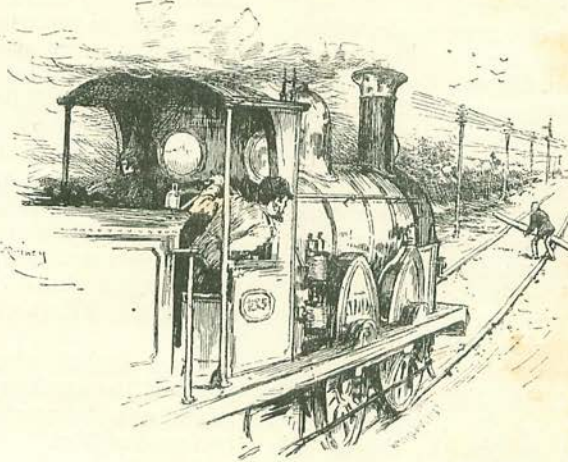
him. In the first wild flush of horror at Netta's situation, he had thought of nothing except how best to save her. He had regarded the engine only as a hateful, cruel, destructive living being. He had forgotten the passengers, the stoker, the officials. He had been conscious only of Netta and of that awful thing, breathing flame and steam, that was rushing on to destroy her. For another indivisible second of time Ughtred Carnegie's soul was the theatre of a terrible and appalling struggle.

What on earth was he to do? Which of the two was he to sacrifice? Should it be murder or treachery? Must he wreck the train or let it mangle Netta? The sweat stood upon his brow in great clammy drops, at that dread dilemma. It was an awful question for any man to solve. He shrank aghast before that deadly decision.

They were innocent, to be sure, the people in that train. They were unknown men, women, and children. They had the same right to their lives as Netta herself. It was crime, sheer crime, thus to seek to destroy them. But still—what would you have? Netta lay there all helpless on the line—his own dear Netta. And she had parted from him in anger but half an hour since. Could he leave her to be destroyed by that hideous, snorting, puffing thing? Has not any man the right to try and save the lives he loves best, no matter at what risk or peril to others? He asked himself this question, too, vaguely, instinctively, with the rapid haste of a life-and-death struggle, asked himself with horror, for he had no strength left now to do one thing or the other—to remove the obstacle from the place where he had laid it or to warn the driver. One second alone remained and then all would be over. On it came, roaring, flaring, glaring, with its great bulls' eyes now peering red round the corner—a terrible, fiery dragon, resistless, unconscious, bearing

down in mad glee upon the pole—or Netta. Which of the two should it be—the pole or Netta?

And still he waited; and still he temporised. What, what could he do? Oh heaven! be merciful. Even as the engine swept, snorting and puffing steam round the corner, he doubted yet—he doubted and temporised. He reasoned with his own conscience in the quick short-hand of thought. So far as intent was concerned he was guiltless. It wouldn't be



"THE DRIVER'S HEART STOOD STILL WITH TERROR."

a murder of malice prepense. When he laid that log there in the way of the train, he never believed—nay, never even knew—it was a train with a living freight of men and women he was trying to imperil. He felt to it merely as a mad engine unattached. He realised only Netta's pressing danger. Was he bound now to undo what he had innocently done—and leave Netta to perish? Must he take away the post and be Netta's murderer?

It was a cruel dilemma for any man to have to face. If he had half an hour to debate and decide, now, he might perhaps have seen his way a little clearer. But with that hideous thing actually rushing red and wrathful on his sight—why—he clapped his hands to his ears. It was too much for him—too much for him.

And yet he must face it, and act, or remain passive, one way or the other. With a desperate effort he made up his mind at last just as the train burst upon him, and all was over.

He made up his mind and acted accordingly.

As the engine turned the corner, the driver, looking ahead in the clear evening light, saw something in front that made him start with sudden horror and alarm. A telegraph pole lay stretched at full length, and a man, unknown, stood agonised by its side, stooping down as he thought to catch and move it. There was no time left



to stop her now; no time to avert the threatened catastrophe. All the driver could do in his haste was to put the brake on hard and endeavour to lessen the force of the inevitable concussion. But even as he looked and wondered at the sight, putting on the brake, meanwhile, with all his might and main, he saw the man in front perform, to his surprise, a heroic action. Rushing full upon the line, straight before the very lights of the advancing train, the man unknown lifted up the pole by main force, and brandishing its end, as it were, wildly in the driver's face, hurled the huge balk back with a terrible effort to the side of the railway. It fell with a crash, and the man fell with it. There was a second's pause, while the driver's heart stood still with terror. Then a jar—a thud—a deep scratch into the soil. A wheel was off the line; they had met with an accident.

For a moment or two the driver only knew that he was shaken and hurt, but not severely. The engine had left the track, and the carriages lay behind slightly shattered. He could see how it happened. Part of the pole in falling had rebounded on to the line. The base of the great timber had struck the near-side wheel, and sent it off the track in a vain effort to surmount it. But the brake had already slackened the pace and broken the force of the shock, so the visible damage was very inconsiderable. They must look along the carriages and find out who was hurt. And above all things, what had become of the man who had so nobly rescued them? For the very last thing the engine-driver had seen of Ughtred as the train stopped short was that the man who flung the pole from the track before the advancing engine was knocked down by its approach, while the train to all appearance passed bodily over him. For good or evil, Ughtred had made his decision at last at the risk of his own life. As the train

dashed on, with its living freight aboard, his native instinct of preserving life got the better of him in spite of himself. He couldn't let those innocent souls die by his own act—though if he removed the pole, and Netta was killed, he didn't know himself how he could ever outlive it.

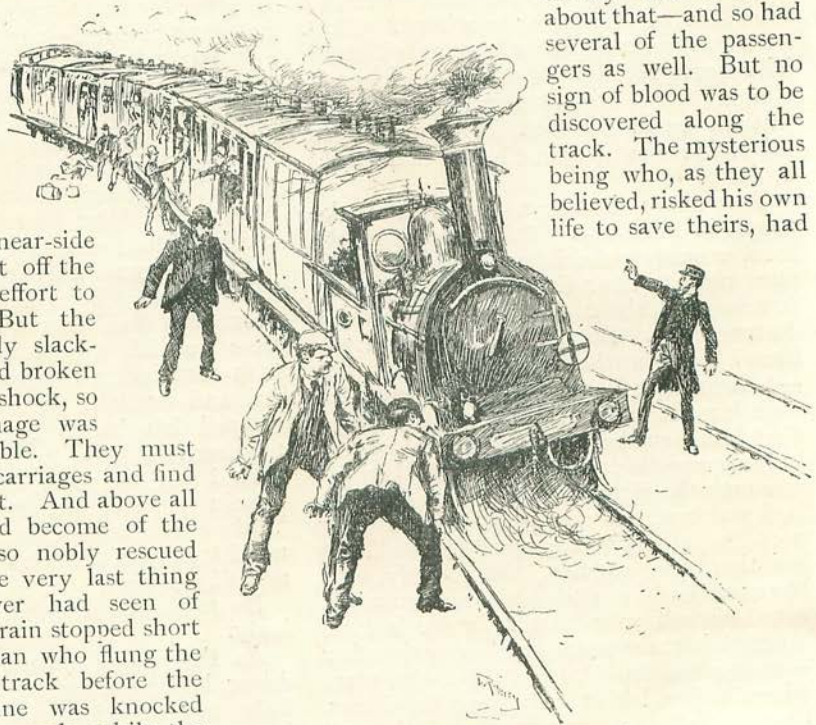
He prayed with all his heart that the train might kill him.

The guard and the driver ran hastily along the train. Nobody was hurt, though many were shaken or slightly bruised. Even the carriages had escaped with a few small cracks. The Holmbury smash was nothing very serious.

But the man with the pole? Their preserver, their friend. Where was *he* all this time? What on earth had become of him?

They looked along the line. They searched the track in vain. He had disappeared as if by magic. Not a trace could be found of him.

After looking long and uselessly, again and again, the guard and the driver both gave it up. They had seen the man distinctly—not a doubt about that—and so had several of the passengers as well. But no sign of blood was to be discovered along the track. The mysterious being who, as they all believed, risked his own life to save theirs, had



"THE HOLMBURY SMASH."

vanished as he had come, one might almost say by a miracle.

And indeed, as a matter of fact, when



Ughtred Carnegie fell on the track before the advancing engine, he thought for a moment it was all up with him. He was glad of that, too; for he had murdered Netta. He had saved the train; but he had murdered Netta. It would dash on, now, unresisted, and crush his darling to death. It was better he should die, having murdered Netta. So he closed his eyes tight and waited for it to kill him.

But the train passed on, jarring and scraping, partly with the action of the brake, though partly, too, with the wheel digging into the ground at the side; it passed on and went over him altogether, coming, as it did so, to a sudden standstill. As it stopped, a fierce joy rose uppermost in Ughtred's soul. Thank heaven, all was well. He breathed once more easily. He had fallen on his back across the sleepers in the middle of the track. It was not really the train that had knocked him down at all, but the recoil of the telegraph post. The engine and carriages had gone over him safely. He wasn't seriously hurt. He was only bruised, and sprained, and jarred, and shaken.

Rising up behind the train as it slackened, he ran hastily along on the off side, towards where Netta lay still unconscious on the line in front of it. Nobody saw him run past; and no wonder either, for every eye was turned toward the near side and the obstruction. A person running fast by the opposite windows was very little likely to attract attention at such a moment. Every step pained him, to be sure, for he was bruised and stiff; but he ran on none the less till he came up at last to where Netta lay. There, he bent over her eagerly. Netta raised her head, opened her eyes, and looked. In a moment the vague sense of a terrible catastrophe averted came somehow over her. She

flung her arms round his neck. "Oh, Ughtred, you've come back!" she cried in a torrent of emotion.

"Yes, darling," Ughtred answered, his voice half choked with tears. "I've come back to you now, for ever and ever."

He lifted her in his arms, and carried her some little way off up the left-hand path. His heart was very full. 'Twas a terrible moment. For as yet he hardly knew what harm he might have done by his fatal act. He only knew he had tried his best to undo the wrong he had half unconsciously wrought; and if the worst came, he would give himself up now like a man to offended justice.

But the worst did not come. Blind fate had been merciful: Next day the papers were full of the accident to the Great Southern Express; equally divided between denunciation of the miscreant who had placed the obstruction in the way of the train, and admiration for the heroic, but unrecognisable stranger who had rescued from death so many helpless passengers at so imminent a risk to his own life or safety. Only Ughtred knew that the two were one and the same person. And when Ughtred found out how little harm had been done by his infatuated act—an act he felt he could never possibly explain in its true light to any other person—he thought it wisest on the whole to lay no claim to either the praise or the censure. The world could never be made to understand the terrible dilemma in which he was placed—the one-sided way in which the problem at first presented

itself to him—the deadly struggle through which he had passed before he could make up his mind, at the risk of Netta's life, to remove the obstacle. Only Netta understood; and even Netta herself knew no more than this, that Ughtred had risked his own life to save her.

