

# A Horrible Fright

By L. T. Meade

I don't think I am at all nervous, and, therefore, when I say that am about to describe two hours of absolute agony, I hope my readers will believe that the circumstances were at the best exceptional, and will still give me credit for being at least as brave as most girls of my age.

I have always despised so-called nerves. When a child I quite loved to sleep in the dark. At school I was the prime mover of ghost stories, and I remember now that some of my practical jokes verged strangely upon the unkind and even dangerous. I have been educated quite up to modern ideas. It is only a year since I left Girton, and I am now comfortably established at home with my father and mother. I am the only daughter, and am between twenty-three and twenty-four years of age. We live in a large place about an hour's ride by rail from London. I have my own special horse, and a little pony carriage besides for my exclusive use. I also have my study or boudoir, and can order what books I please for my own benefit, not only from Mudie, but from the local booksellers. I am passionately fond of music, and can play two or three instruments. I think I can say, without any false pride, that my performances on the violin are rather better than those of most amateurs. I am also great at all kinds of outdoor sports and games. I am the champion player of the tennis club to which I belong, and I am at the present time successfully getting up a lady's golf club. In short, I think I may truly say of myself that I represent the average, up-to-date, well-educated, rather strong-minded, nineteenth-century girl.

Now, I must tell about my fright. You can imagine that it must have been something special to put me into such a state of terror that I cannot think of it even now without shuddering.

I received an invitation late last autumn to go to see my grandfather, who lives in Dublin. My mother did not particularly wish me to go. I really think mothers must have premonitions, for there was no apparent reason for my not taking such a simple and easily accomplished journey. I had been abroad a good deal, and had had adventures more than one; therefore, when my mother fretted herself about my going from London to Dublin via Holy-head, I could not help laughing at her.

'If you must go alone, Virginia,' she said, 'had you not better travel by day?'

'Oh, nonsense, nonsense,' I said. 'I hate travelling by day, particularly by a route which I already know. Besides, it is such a waste of time. At night, one can sleep and travel together. Oh, say no more about it dear, good mother. I'll take the night mail from Euston, this evening, and have breakfast with grandfather in the morning.'

My mother made no further remonstrances, but I heard her sighing in the most aggravating style, and I knew she was murmuring to herself about my headstrongness and how I never would listen to reason.

Nothing makes me so obstinate as those muttered remonstrances of my relatives. Are they afraid of me, that they don't speak out? I am always amenable to reason, but when people mutter over me, then I become simply mulish. I adore my dear mother, but even for her I cannot be expected to give up my own way when I hear her muttering that it is 'Just like Virginia.'

My things were packed, and I started off in good time to catch the night mail at Euston.

'You had better go in one of the ladies' carriages,' said my father.

I quite gasped in horror when he made this audacious proposal.

‘Now, *do* you suppose I am likely to do anything quite so old-maidish?’ I replied. ‘No, I have fixed on the exact corner where I shall snooze away from Euston to Holyhead.’ I led my father, as I spoke, to a carriage where two old gentlemen had already comfortably established themselves. They had spread out their rugs, and taken complete possession of the corners which were out of the draught. I was oblivious to draughts, and chose my corner opposite the old gentleman who was nearest to the entrance door. My father supplied me with three or four evening papers. I had an uncut novel in my bag, and a little reading-lamp, which I could fasten to the window ledge. Two or three moments later I had said farewell to my father, and the great express—the Wild Irish Girl—had steamed in grand style out of the station.

I like the feeling of being whirled through space in an express train going at the top of its speed. I looked at the evening papers. Their contents did not specially interest me. I then gazed at my opposite neighbour. He was very stout and very red. He tucked his travelling rug tightly about him, and before we had passed Willesden was fast asleep. He made a distressing noise with his loud snores, and I thought him decidedly irritating. For a moment or two I almost regretted that I had not gone in an empty ladies’ carriage. The other old gentleman was scarcely a more agreeable travelling companion. He had a noisy cough, and a bad cold. He blew his nose, and he coughed about every two minutes, and then he looked around him to see if there were any possible draughts. He not only shut his own window but the ventilator above as well, and then he glared at the ventilator which belonged to the snoring old gentleman and me. I made up my mind that that ventilator should only be shut over my fallen body.

The express went on its way without let or hindrance. Now and then it swayed from side to side, as if its own great speed were making it giddy; then again it steadied itself, and rushed on and on with a rhythmic sort of motion, which was infinitely soothing, and caused me to forget my two uninteresting companions, and to sink gradually into the land of dreams.

I was awakened presently from quite a sound nap by the slowing of the train. It was coming into a great station, which I found was Chester. We must have passed Crewe while I was asleep. My two companions were now all alive and brisk. They were fastening up their rugs and folding their papers, and I saw that they intended to leave the train.

‘If you are going on to Holyhead,’ said the snoring one to me, ‘you have ten minutes to wait here—quite time to get a cup of tea, if you want one.’

I thanked him, and thought that I would carry his suggestion into effect. A cup of tea would be perfect, and would set me up for the remainder of my journey. I accordingly stepped on to the platform, and went over the bridge to the great waiting-rooms, which presented at this time a gay scene of eager, hungry, fussy men and women sitting at tables, and standing at counters, each and all of them eating and drinking for bare life.

I ordered my tea, drank it standing at the counter, paid for it, and also for a bun, which I carried away with me in a paper bag, and returned to my carriage. I saw a heap of rugs and a large black bag deposited in the corner away from mine, and wondered with a faint passing curiosity who my new travelling companion was likely to be. The guard came up at this moment to see if I were comfortable. He said that we would not stop again until we reached Holyhead, and asked me if I wanted for anything.

I said ‘No.’

‘Perhaps you’d like me to lock the carriage door, miss?’ he said. ‘The train is not too full tonight, and I can manage it.’

I laughed and pointed to the rugs and bag in the opposite corner.

‘Someone has already taken possession,’ I said.

‘But if you wish, miss, I’ll put those things in another carriage,’ said the guard.

‘No, no,’ I replied, ‘I don’t mind company in the least.’

Just then my fellow-traveller put in an appearance. He was a big man, wrapped up in a great ulster and with a muffler round his throat and mouth. The guard looked at him, I thought, a little suspiciously. This made me angry. I have no patience with those squeamish girls who think every man who sees them must offer them either admiration or insult. I looked very cheerful, made way for the traveller to take his seat, and smiled and thanked the guard. A moment later the train started on its way.

We had just got well outside the station when the gentleman in the ulster and muffler carefully unwound the latter appendage from his mouth and throat. He folded it up neatly, and put it into his black bag. Afterwards he took off his ulster. I now saw that he was a fairly good-looking man of about eight and twenty. He wore a full moustache of raven hue, and a short beard. He had very black and piercing eyes. When I looked at him, I discovered that he also looked at me.

‘Now, are you getting nervous, Virginia, or are you not?’ I murmured to myself. ‘Why may not a man look at a girl if he pleases? There is an old proverb that a cat may look at a king. Let me suppose, therefore, that the man opposite is a well-grown and presentable cat, and that I am his Majesty the king. The cat may stare as long as he pleases. The king will not disturb himself.’

Accordingly, I prepared to light my reading-lamp, as I knew that I could not possibly fall asleep under the gaze of those watchful, dark eyes.

I had just settled myself comfortably, and had taken my uncut novel out of my bag, when the stranger spoke to me.

‘Do you object to my opening the window?’ he asked.

‘Certainly not,’ I replied. I gave him a distant little bow, which was meant to say that the cat must keep its distance, and lowered my eyes over the fascinating pages of my novel.

The train was now going at a rattling pace, and I found that the draught from the open window was rather more than I cared to be subjected to. I had just raised my head, and was about to ask my travelling companion if he would be kind enough to close it, when I met a sight which gave me the first premonition of that horror which this story is meant to describe. The man in the opposite corner had opened his black bag, and taken from it a pair of large, sharp-looking scissors, and also a razor. When I glanced at him he had opened the razor, and was gently and dextrously sharpening it on a leather strop which he had fastened to one of the buttons of the window. He met my eye as I met his, and smiled grimly.

I felt that a situation of some sort was imminent, and, closing my book, sat perfectly still with my hands tightly locked together and my heart beating loudly. The light from the reading-lamp fell full upon me, and I turned abruptly and put it out.

‘I will thank you to light that lamp again,’ said the stranger. ‘Do so at once—there is no time to lose.’

‘I don’t understand you,’ I said.

I tried to make my voice imperious and haughty, but I was terribly conscious that it came out of my throat in little gasps and jerks.

‘Now, look here,’ said the man. ‘I know you are frightened, and I am not in the least surprised. I should be frightened if I were in your position. You are alone in a railway carriage with a man who could strangle you and throw your dead body on the line if he felt the least inclined to do so. No no—you don’t get to the alarm bell. I am keeping guard over that. Now, I may as well tell you frankly that I have come into this railway carriage on purpose to have the pleasure of your society. I saw you get into the carriage at Euston, and I knew that you would be alone when you

got to Chester. From Chester to Holyhead is a long run. The train is now comfortably on its way, and will not stop for nearly two hours. You see, therefore, that you are completely at my mercy. Your only chance of safety is in doing exactly what I tell you. Now, have the goodness to light that reading-lamp immediately.'

The stranger's voice was imperious—he had now changed his seat to one opposite mine. His restless, brilliant eyes were fixed full on my face.

'Light the lamp,' he said.

I obeyed him without a moment's hesitation.

When I had lit it he took it from my shaking fingers and fastened it to the cushion of the seat in the centre of the carriage.

'That is better,' he said, 'that is more cheerful. Now, see, I am going to kneel down. Look at my face. Can you see it well?'

'Yes,' I answered.

'I have a good deal of hair, haven't I?'

'You have,' I replied.

'Do you see this pair of scissors?'

'Yes.'

'And this razor?'

'Yes.'

'They're deadly weapons, are they not?'

'They could do mischief,' I answered, in a faltering voice.

'Aye, aye, they could—and they will, too, unless a certain young lady does exactly what she is told. Now, come—the moment for action has arrived—take your gloves off.'

I hesitated.

'Take them off,' thundered the man.

They were off in a twinkling.

'Come up close, and begin.'

'Begin what?'

'Don't be a fool. You have plenty of intelligence if you choose to exercise it. Cut off my moustache.'

I drew back.

'I don't know how,' I faltered.

'I'll soon teach you.

'How, pray?' I asked.

'By sharpening that razor a little more. Now, are you going to try? Take the scissors in your hand.'

He knelt so that the light of the lamp should fall full on him, and gave me the scissors. I took it at once and began my task.

'Hold my chin,' he said. 'You can't do your work properly in that shaky way. Cut, I say—cut.'

I did cut—God alone knows how I managed it, but I got the man's thick and sweeping moustache off. As I worked he gave me imperious directions.

'Cut clean,' he said, 'cut close and clean. You will have to shave me presently.'

'That will be very dangerous for you,' I ventured to retort.

'Fudge,' he replied. 'You will be cool enough by that time. Now, is the moustache all gone?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Cut the whiskers off.'

‘No,’ I answered.

‘Yes,’ he replied.

He fixed his eyes on me, and I obeyed him. The whiskers were followed by the beard—the beard, by the hair on the man’s head.

How my fingers ached! how my heart thumped! how those basilisk eyes seemed to pierce through me, and fill me with sick loathing and abject horror!

When I had finished the cutting process, he took from the depths of his bag some shaving apparatus, poured water into a little flask, made the soap lather, and desired me to shave him. I was now completely meek and subdued, and obeyed his least direction without a word. Fortunately for the man’s life, I had on one or two occasions performed this operation on my brother, who taught me how to manage the razor, and complimented me on my skill. It came to my aid now. Notwithstanding the shaking train, and the agitated state of my nerves, I performed my task well. I even became, in the queerest way, proud of my successful shaving. The man’s cheeks and upper lip looked as innocent of hair as a baby’s before I had done with him.

At last my task was done, and a shaven, uncouth object took the place of the handsome stranger who had come into the train an hour ago.

When my work was over he stooped, collected every scrap of hair, and flung it out of the window. Then he shut the window and told me to put out the reading-lamp.

I obeyed, and crouched back in my corner, trembling in every limb.

‘You have only one more thing to do for me,’ he said.

‘Oh, is there any more?’ I panted. ‘I don’t think my strength will hold out.’

‘Yes, it will,’ he replied. ‘This part of your task is easy. Turn your head and look out of the window. Don’t look back again under any circumstances, until I give you leave. If you do, you are a dead woman.’

I turned my head.

I looked out into the black night. My eyes were swimming—my throat was dry, my heart continued to thump horribly. I felt that I had already lived through a lifetime. I had a kind of sensation that I should never have courage and buoyancy of heart again. The train went on its way, thumping and bounding. I heard the rustle of my companion’s movements. Was he a madman? Yes, of course he must be mad. Was he stealing stealthily up now to murder me with that sharp and shining razor? Would the train ever reach its destination? Would the dreadful night ever go?

At last—at last, thank Heaven, I felt the motion of the great express perceptibly slackening. At the same instant my fellow-traveller spoke to me.

‘You can look round now,’ he said. ‘Your task is over. All you have to do is to give me five minutes’ grace, and you are safe.’

I looked round eagerly. What I saw forced a loud exclamation from my lips. The metamorphosis in my companion was now fully accomplished. An elderly clergyman, in complete and most correct clerical costume, was seated at the other end of the carriage. The hair which was seen below his hat was silvery white. He had white eyebrows. The rest of his face was clean shaven.

The train drew into the station.

The moment it did so, the clergyman flung open the door of the carriage. He took off his hat to me with a gracious movement.

‘Bénédicté,’ he said, in a full and reverent voice.

I saw him no more.

A moment later two detectives came up to the door. They askedeagerly if I were travelling alone, or if I had had a companion with a black moustache and beard.

I was positively too much stunned to reply to them. I don't think, to this day, my elderly clergyman was ever discovered.