

The Murderer

By Richard Middleton

He walked down to the Embankment with the paving-stones like velvet under his feet and he swerved like one running. Yet, still, though he meant to end his life in a few minutes, he avoided the traffic with great care, so that paternal policemen judged him newly from the country. The August sun seemed pitiless in its strength and in his fear and wretchedness he cursed it. Better rain, mist, fog—anything but the reproachful blue of the sky and the dancing glitter of the dust. He wanted sympathy and, instead, Nature triumphed over him and emphasized his failure.

The river was a sparkling tumult of gems where he had pictured a secret immutable surface which should flow darkly over him and his wrongs. In place of a great unspeaking god he found a crowd of dancing, laughing children. Where should he seek peace and forgetfulness? He leaned on the parapet and groaned.

A train thundered by over Hungerford Bridge as if in answer. Of course, that was the way—safer, quicker.

He took a ticket at Charing Cross Station and passed to the end of the platform with a strange numbness in his mind and body as if he were already dead. Yet he walked to the extreme end because there was no-one there to interfere.

Presently the train appeared, making its way slowly across the bridge, and he leapt off the platform and laid his head on the rail. It blistered his cheek because the sun had made it so hot.

Then the earth heaved itself up and thrust and tore him between the wheels of the carriages. . . .

When the train had passed he rose to his feet unsteadily and stared stupidly at the mangled body lying at his feet.

There was a shrill singing in his ears which was shortly interrupted by the sound of human voices and he felt his arms caught roughly and imprisoned. Soon he made out the word “murder” angrily spoken and found that he was held by platelayers, who were gesticulating violently and pointing at the body; but he would not speak because though the head had become a crushed horror upon the rail he knew that the body was his. Dimly, he was aware that porters and policemen were crowding from the station and that they were lifting the body tenderly from the rails. Then he fainted.

He came to in the police-station and found that his face and hair were dabbled with water. Presently he was formally charged and warned not to say anything incriminating.

He said only, “It was me,” but this he repeated several times. He was trying to convince himself.

Then he was removed to the cells and found himself alone. He lay down and slept deeply and the sun had set and risen before he awoke.

At his trial, and after conviction, he did not speak, he seemed too dazed; but as they led him away he broke his silence. “Can a man die twice?” he inquired reflectively.

“Can a man die twice?”

There is no more to chronicle—they were his last recorded words.