

“Railhead” by Perceval Landon

A LITERARY GOTHIC etext

First published in Landon’s only story collection, *Raw Edges: Studies and Stories of These Days* (1908).

This story was told me in Rangoon¹ by a man whose name, I think, was Torrens, but I cannot remember very clearly, if indeed I ever knew. Really I hardly know anything about the man except that he was obviously convinced of its truth. He said that John Silbermeister told him the story himself, and I have no doubt that he did. So far as Torrens could recall the man, Silbermeister was an ordinary lanky man, of a singular directness of speech, and totally unable to see a joke. So, for that matter, was Torrens. He said that he had verified the story to this extent, that at the date that Silbermeister mentioned, the NP Railway would have reached Enderton; nor is it apparent what motive there could be for Silbermeister lying in the matter. Torrens hadn’t the imagination of a ‘rickshaw-wallah,² so it isn’t his lie either. At any-rate, I give it for what it is worth.

Torrens was a little man who had taken up Christian Science somewhat earnestly a little beyond middle life. He was really a person of some importance on the railway, and I believe one of the Company’s most efficient servants. To listen to him sometimes one would hardly believe that an accident could possibly occur on the railway, except as a mere delusion of the senses. I believe he died about two years after he told me the story, and for his own sake I hope that he was able to maintain his Christian Science doctrines to the end, for he had sore need of them. He died of cholera at Bhamo³ in 1904.

He had shown me round the curiosity-shops of Rangoon, and with his help I had disentangled one or two interesting pieces of work from the mass of modern substitutes—it is unfair to call them forgeries—which fill up the curio-shelves of Rangoon dealers. One of them was a little bronze serpent, which sat on its rounded tail and blinked at me with ruby eyes as he told the story in the billiard-room of the “Strand”; and I remember that the Calcutta boat was coming in from the Hastings shoal at the time, and from time to time wailed like a lost spirit up the river. The heat was intense. They have not in Rangoon the mosquito antidotes to which one is used in India. One buzzing electric fan supplied the entire room, but its sphere of influence was entirely monopolized by a pair of German diamond merchants and their jet-clad wives.

“Some years ago,” said Torrens, “a man called Silbermeister came to me with excellent references, and asked if there was any chance of his being employed on the new construction towards the Yunnan frontier. That was before Curzon had put a stopper on the whole project. I dare say Curzon was right. The railway to the North-East, both on this side and on the other side of the frontier, would have been extremely expensive and possibly impracticable. There are deep ravines, “canyons”, Silbermeister called them, across which our line had to be thrown. To zigzag down to the bottom by reversing stations and then up again seemed to be the only possible means of crossing them, and with such enormous initial expenditure it was doubtful whether the traffic would ever pay one per cent upon the capital. But we in Rangoon wanted to establish a definite connection with China for political reasons, and if the Indian Government had been willing to guarantee half the cost, the Burmah Railways would

¹ Rangoon, also known as Yangoo, is the capital of what would have been known as Burma when this story was published; Burma is currently known as Myanmar.

² A rickshaw puller, typically an uneducated, lower-class worker.

³ a city in northeastern Burma.

have gone on with the business.⁴ Silbermeister, who had had a good deal of pioneer railway experience, would have been just the man for the job. While the matter was being decided in Calcutta he remained here, and I saw a good deal of him. One evening Silbermeister told me this story, and, so far as I can judge the man at all, I should say that he was telling me the truth. ”

Some years ago, when the big New York Syndicate that employed Silbermeister, among thirty thousand others, was pushing forward the construction of the NP Railway in Nebraska, he was for about three months in charge of the railhead station at Enderton. This was merely a solidly built wooden hut by the side of the line. Trains ran up to it and nominally carried passengers, but as a matter of fact very few wanted to go further than Castleton, a raw pioneer dump of houses, which had already blossomed out into half a dozen stores, seven “hotels”, an electric generating shed, and thirty or forty pretentiously named wooden houses. Beyond Enderton the railway was at this time actually in course of construction. The navvies were chiefly Italian. It was a difficult piece of work, and about eight miles on matters had temporarily come to a standstill owing to a persistent subsidence along the edge of a small half-dry river. On one Thursday morning a piece of the embankment had given way, and an Italian workman had been killed. This was a matter of no great importance; all engineers know that their lives must be sacrificed to carry out any important work, and on the whole the loss of life on this section of the NP line had been less than might have been expected. There were the usual police guards in the navvies’ camp, which contained between three to four hundred workmen.

On a Friday evening, between six and seven o’clock, Silbermeister was sitting in his station-house at Enderton running over the week’s wages’ account, when a light engine ran up from Castleton. Silbermeister was expecting the money with which to pay the navvies’ weekly wages on the following day, and a sub-inspector got off the footplate carrying a canvas bag which contained the money that was needed. It was the usual weekend routine. At the same time, a couple of railwaymen took off the tender half a dozen large packing-cases containing materials that had been requisitioned for the work, and put them into the baggage-room, which composed one-half of the station-house. The inspector ran through Silbermeister’s accounts, initialled them as correct, and then took a receipt for the money which he brought with him. Silbermeister proceeded to lock the money up in the safe in his own room, and then checked the packing-cases which had just been stored in the baggage-room. Among these cases was a somewhat gruesome object, a coffin sent up by the Company from Castleton in order that the victim of the late accident might be decently buried on Sunday morning.

Another receipt was signed for the cases, and then the inspector told the engine-driver he was ready to return. Before doing so, however, he turned to Silbermeister and said:

“Do you feel quite safe here with all that money? Shall I leave you a man to spend the night here with you?”

Silbermeister shrugged his shoulders, and with a smile declined the offer. He said that the police looked after the navvies’ camp, that he and his negro servant had spent many nights together at the station, and that he had no fear of burglars. He had, he said, his revolver beside him, and the money would not remain with him more than that one night. The two men shook hands, and the inspector departed as he had come.

Silbermeister then rechecked the books, re-counted the money, saw that the doors were properly locked, sent away his negro servant for the night—the man had been getting the table ready for his supper while he was escorting the inspector back to the engine—and, after locking the door leading to the platform, occupied himself with some small duties now that his day’s work was done. There was no further possibility of being rung up from Castleton, so he took this opportunity of cleaning and

⁴ Torrens was scarcely accurate in this matter. [Landon’s note]

readjusting the telegraph instrument which stood on a table by the wall, and had not been working quite satisfactorily that morning. For this purpose he disconnected the instrument, and being a fairly skilled electrician—though of an old-fashioned school, Torrens said—he did nearly all that was needed in a few minutes. Leaving the instrument as it was, he lit a pipe and started to get ready his supper. By this time the night had begun to fall in earnest, and he lighted the kerosene lamp on the table. More from habit than from anything else, as he knew that he was not likely to need it, he also lighted the bull’s-eye lantern which, on most evenings in the week, he took with him on his final rounds.

Silbermeister then opened the cupboard and took down a loaf of bread, a tin of canned meat, and a pot of marmalade. His preparations for supper were simple. It was a cold night, and he meant to have some hot grog before turning in, so he lighted the spirit lamp and filled his kettle from a pitcher of water. While the water was boiling he opened the tin of meat, cut himself a German slice of bread, and arranged the table. By this time the sun had entirely set, and only the last reflections from the dull western horizon still found their way through the windows. For a moment he looked out through the windows across the platform and the wide level waste beyond. There was not a living thing in sight—not a tree, hardly a bush. Then he shut up the house for the night, and fastened the shutters. He sat down at the table for his meal, propped up a book underneath the lamp, and made himself as comfortable as he could. The bully-beef⁵ was not a very appetizing dish, and it occurred to him that he had a bottle of sauce put away in a box at the side of the room. He got up, opened the box, and, in order to find the sauce, turned out upon the floor with some noise most of the contents of the trunk. While doing so, he did not notice that the telegraph instrument on the further table ticked out a short and sharp message: at least, it was only the last few strokes that attracted his attention. He turned from the box, before which he was kneeling, to listen, but the message had already stopped. Leaving the sauce undiscovered, he rose to his feet and muttered:

“I’m sure the thing was talking,” and went across to the table, to ask for a repetition from Castleton, only to discover, as he might have remembered, that he had himself disconnected the instrument while cleaning it. Dismissing the matter as an illusion, he returned to the box where the sauce was, and after a moment or two found what he wanted. He then resumed his seat at the table without thinking again of the telegraph instrument. He began his reading, and was in the middle of an engrossing sentence when the telegraph instrument spoke again. This time there could be no mistake. Silbermeister, who knew that when he had left the machine three minutes before it was entirely disconnected, laid down his knife and fork and listened like a man in a dream. There was no doubt about it.

“E—N—T. ”

The signal for Enderton Station had been called up sharply, imperiously, unmistakably. He waited a moment, and then, in spite of the fact that he had not acknowledged the call, came the short message. He muttered the words as they were ticked out:

“Watch the box.”

For one full minute Silbermeister sat immovable. There was no question of the fact, yet the man’s common sense refused to believe in what his ears had heard. The room was dead silent except for the hissing of the spirit lamp which had just begun to boil. Silbermeister felt that he was the victim of some nightmare. He would not believe his own senses, and decided to test the thing once more. He rose from the table, went across to the instrument, and brought it bodily away from its position. He put it on the table in front of him next the corned beef, and then, blowing out the spirit lamp in order that the silence might be more intense, he resumed his seat and waited, hanging over it with every sense on the alert. The lamp lighted up his angular jaw and deep-set eyes staring at the little contrivance of brass and wood. He had not to wait long. The instrument, with its connecting wires and plugs hanging over the

⁵ beef pickled in brine; corned beef

side of his dinner-table, and still swinging to and fro beneath it, once again called out his station:

“E—N—T. ”

The sweat leapt to Silbermeister’s forehead, but he made no sign. It went on. It was the same message, short, clear, and beyond all doubt:

“Watch the box.”

Silbermeister passed a hand over his face and thought. Whatever the origin of this message was, the message itself was unmistakable. He reached for his bull’s-eye lantern, saw it was burning well, turned out the lamp on the table, and rose silently. He moved across to the door that separated his living-room from the luggage-room, very quietly opened the door, and waited. One minute dragged its slow length along,⁶ then two, then three, and still Silbermeister stood in the darkness as motionless as the jamb of the door. There was no sound inside or outside the station-house. So still was the silence that, as Silbermeister said, a man could hear his blood circulating round the drum of his own ear—rather a good expression, Torrens thought.

At last the tension was relieved. There was a sound, more like the sound of a gnawing mouse than anything else, and Silbermeister sank silently to his knee to listen more intently. A touch which, infinitesimal though it was, could only have been made by iron upon iron, betrayed the whole circumstance to him. There was a man in the coffin, and the man had so contrived the lid that he could get out of the coffin without attracting the notice of Silbermeister till it was too late. There was at the same moment the sound of a cautiously planted footstep on the platform outside. Silbermeister acted at once. Some of the cases of railway material that had been sent up that evening contained steel tools, and were as much as two men could carry into the room. Silbermeister was a strong man, but he hardly knew how he managed unaided to drag down one of the packing-cases and set it on the top of the coffin with a crash that almost crushed it in.

The moment he had done so, all pretence was at an end, and the man within it shouted to his accomplice outside. The answer was a blow on the door like a battering-ram. The packing-case might hold down the man for some time yet, so Silbermeister leapt back into his living-room to meet the new danger, only to find the door on to the platform being battered through just above the bolt. He picked up his revolver, and in order to make sure there should be no attack from behind, aimed at the coffin and pulled the trigger. There was no response. It was dear that treachery had been at work. His black servant had seized the opportunity while Silbermeister escorted the inspector to the engine, of opening and emptying it—an easy task, as it was lying on the table. There was no time to turn back to the baggage-room. Seizing a small crowbar, Silbermeister had only just time to dash to the door, through the hole in which his negro servant’s arm was now thrusting itself feeling for the bolt. He gripped the man’s hand and pulled it into the room until the negro’s arm-pit was forced up against the splintered hole in the door. He struck heavily with the crowbar, and the negro screamed in agony. He struck again, and again, and again. He hardly knows what happened during that awful minute. He went on striking blindly and mechanically at what had suddenly become a man’s sleeve. In the baggage-room he had just left the tremendous exertions of the imprisoned man were making the room resound, and the packing-case on the top of the coffin rocked to and fro. Silbermeister paid no attention. He lost his head. Both lamps were now out, and all he could do in the darkness was to go on hitting at what he held.

Suddenly there was the whistle of an approaching engine. No train was due until the following morning, but Silbermeister admitted that at the moment he hardly regarded anything as unusual. A couple of armed men and the inspector leapt down on to the platform, collared the negro servant, who by that time was hanging half-unconscious from the hole in the door, and burst in just in time to intercept

⁶ An allusion to Alexander Pope’s “Essay on Criticism” in which he criticizes poor poetic practice; one comment on bad metrical practice includes the observation that “A needless Alexandrine ends the song, / That, like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along.” “Essay on Criticism” was first published in 1711.

the man in the baggage-room who had at last overturned the packing-case above him and was crashing his way out through the lid of the coffin. It was an extraordinary scene.

The inspector pulled the negro servant, with his arm one pulp of splintered bone and blood, into the room and thrust him roughly aside. He fell without a moan into the corner. The two men then brought the burglar into the living-room between them. Silbermeister went back to the table, sat down, and put his head between his hands. The inspector looked at him for a moment in amazement as he raised his head and said: "Thank God!" After a pause he added: "Why did you come?"

The inspector answered:

"Your telegram caught us just before we left Castleton again. It was lucky, wasn't it?" he added grimly.

Silbermeister again raised his head from his hands, and as if he had heard nothing, said:

"But why did you come?"

The inspector, a trifle gravely, said:

"I told you, your telegram just reached us in time. "

There was another pause of ten seconds, and then Silbermeister pointed to the disconnected instrument, and said once more:

"Why did you come?" His eyes turned in his head: "I sent no message"; and then he fell on the floor in a dead faint.

That is all I know about it. That is the story that Torrens told me, and the story that undoubtedly Torrens believed.