

At Close Quarters With Death

Charles John Cutcliffe Hyne



At Close Quarters With Death

A Story of the Rail

BY CUTCLIFFE HYNE

TAKEN FROM "THE HARMSWORTH MAGAZINE," VOLUME II,
FEBRUARY - JULY 1899

Although he did attempt most callously to slay me in my boots within half an hour of our ceasing the game, I will say that Quintal played dollar-limit poker like a gentleman. So also did the fat man; but as he rarely opened his lips except to raise or call, his agreeableness was more of a negative order.

Quintal, on the other hand, was as good a conversationalist as I've met--a trifle New Englandish, to be sure, but none the less entertaining. We were the only three passengers in the Pullman, and had fore-gathered in the smoking-room, where we doffed our coats in deference to the heat. Within three minutes from our meeting, Quintal had read a label on my grip-sack and proceeded to make himself known.

"My name's Hugh H. Quintal, sir. I see you are Mr. Calvert, and I guess from the Old Islands. Delighted to make your acquaintance. How do you like our country?"

The transition from this to draw-poker was natural and easy. We commenced with quarter-limit; sprang this to fifty cents for fear lest the game should get slow; and, on crossing the border out of North Carolina, raised the limit to a dollar, because South Carolina is a prohibition state, and we were saving money by being allowed no drinks.

I had luck, and rather more than held my own; but the fat man played by far the smartest game of the three, gave his whole attention to it, and won money. Quintal did the paying. He was useful enough with the cards, but he would let his attention wander. He talked on ten new subjects every quarter of an hour. His nerves seemed to be on springs.

We played in our shirt-sleeves because of the heat. Once when I had got up and turned to get a handkerchief from my jacket which was hanging from one of the brackets, he said, "It's plain to see you're not an Amurrican, Mr. Calvert."

I laughed, and placed a suggestive hand upon my hip. There was no sly-pocket there. "Oh, yes," said I, "that's been commented on before; but I prefer not to go heeled. You know we've an insular prejudice in

favour of our hands. And I'm pretty useful with them."

Mr. Quintal shook his head. "Gimme a gun, sir, and then I'm safe. I know your British theory of rushing a man before he's lined you on his bead. But I don't hold to them fancy touches. I'm no acrobat myself. I guess I'd feel very mean if a gentleman was to start pumping lead into my lot and I'd no show to see him better. You see, sir, where I was raised they told me this proverb: 'Whoso tarrieth on the draw, and landeth not his bullet on the correct button, that man shall be planted before he reacheth prime.' No, siree; it's the invariable custom amongst gentlemen in the South to carry a gun in the hip pocket, because they know it's as conducive to health as the habit of wearing shirts. You bet they don't tote a pistol round for the fun of the exercise. Now I must go and suck at the ice-water. I guess this temperature's making me lard some."

We played on another score of rounds, and then the conductor came in and affably informed us that Byronville was the next stoppage.

"Getting out?" inquired the fat man.

"No, I'm going through."

"So are we," said Quintal. "Eh, well, I'm loser over this gamble, so I can propose. What do you say to dropping the game after Byronville? We've a long run on to the next stop, and we shall have the Pullman all to ourselves. There'll be nobody getting on here, only an old nigger or so for the second class. We might peg out claims in this car and throw in an hour's siesta. I guess we're too hot ourselves to put much fever into poker just now."

The fat man stacked the cards by way of answer, and chucked them on the table. We settled for our out standing chips. I put up my feet on the seat and nodded wearily. Then the other two yawned, mopped

their faces, and passed through the alley-way to the other end of the car.

Forests passed by the window, cornfields and plantations of bumble-bee cotton, and then more forests; and then the cars passed through a red, rain-furrowed cutting, and rumbled out over a trestle. They were travelling fast, and swayed a good deal. The motion would have made some people sea-sick. Me it sent off into a doze, spite of the heat.

Of a sudden I was disturbed. My eyelids rose with a snap, and I sat up listening. Then the sound which had aroused me was repeated--a woman's shrill cry, a squeal brought out by arrant terror. I dropped to my feet, strode through the doorway of the smoking-room, and down the alley-way behind it. The Pullman was empty.

Above the clang and rattle of the train I could make out one, voice speaking in loud tones from the next car, to the blurred accompaniment of women's sobs. Had I been anything but a tender-foot then, I should have stopped in my tracks, thanked God for leaving me out of a mess, and done nothing more. As it was I opened the door at the end of the Pullman, crossed the swing gangway, and entered the next car--the ordinary first class.

There I saw a sight which filled me with amazement. All the passengers in the car, men and women alike, to the number of quite two dozen, were sitting with their hands forked out above their shoulders. They looked for all the world as though they were voting eagerly upon some pressing question. In truth they were doing this--they were voting against being shot; and the fat man of my recent acquaintance was standing in the further doorway of the car, with a heavy revolver in each fist, superintending their election.

His beady eye caught me on the moment of my entrance, and the

pistol muzzle swung up and covered me. Though the whole length of the car separated us, that tube of iron seemed to grow till its black depths were wide enough for a dog to crawl in.

"Up with your hands, you meddling fool; or you're a dead man!"

The hail put spirit into me again. I would not shame my manhood by joining in this tame surrender. I turned sharply and fled, and the fat man's bullet coming faster, snipped the lobe of my ear. Then I got on the steps of the platform, and the noise of the train drowned the sounds from within the car.

The sear of the pistol shot made me dizzy for the moment, and I hung on to the iron cleat at the angle of the car for a good minute without taking any action. I was adding up the situation.

The Pullman was empty: the folk in the first-class car were "held up" by the fat man with an obvious view to pillage. But forward of that there was the second-class car, where the coloured people travel, and which was certain to be tenanted by a small number of white men who wanted to smoke. Forward, again, were a brace of express cars with the usual complement of baggage men of both tints of complexion. It was obvious that the fat man could not hold these in awe, and equally obvious that someone else was preventing them from taking him in the rear. As the majority of the whites disregard that law of the United States anent the carrying of concealed weapons, so also do the coloured sections. A male nigger without a razor hidden somewhere about his person is a biped mighty hard to find.

"So," thought I, "there's bound to be another man in this, and if he doesn't coincide with friend Quintal, I'm Yankee. Now I can understand his nervous chatter in the smoking-room. I don't owe him any personal grudge, but on general principles I'm going to try and

damage this new game, if it's only to prove that fists may stand against pistols."

With that I set to and clambered on to the roof of the first-class car, a job which was by no means easy, because the eaves sloped, and the train was swinging and swaying most consumedly. But I landed at last, ran along, and jumping three gaps, reached the further end of the foremost express car.

The engineer stuck his head through a window of the cab, stared for a moment with blank amazement, and then covered me with a prompt revolver.

"Don't shoot!" I yelled, and then told him what was happening. "You'd better pull up," said I.

"What, and play their game? Not likely. I guess I'll steam 'em right up to the calabose at the next stop."

He had hardly got out the words through his teeth when a heavy grinding roar made itself heard down all the length of the train, and speed was perceptibly slackened.

"By gum," said the engineer, "they've more savvy than I gave 'em credit for. They've got at something--sliced through the linking pipe of the Westinghouse with a bowie, likely--and that's 'down brakes' all along. This blame' old kettle 'll never pull them cars up the next grade agin that drag."

"Then come along with me, and rush the scoundrels from this end of the train."

The engineer snorted. "I allow you are queer mister. No fancy shootin' for me. 'Sides, I've me engine to see after. She'll cough herself to a

standstill directly.

I considered the engineer a coward, but didn't say so, because of his pistol. However, I didn't choose to stay where I was like a stray rooster on the shingles, so I jumped to the coals on the tender, and clambered thence on to the platform of the foremost express car. I opened the door gingerly and peered in.

A man in shirt-sleeves was coming through the opposite entrance at a run. The quick snap of a pistol shot rang out from behind him, and the man stumbled. Then he gave an upward spiral leap like a dervish, and pitched heavily forward on to the floor. Not the ghost of a cry escaped him, and the thud of his fall was drowned by the hoarse grinding of the brakes. As he lay, I saw that the back of his skull was smashed in like an egg.

For thirty seconds I remained rooted in my tracks staring stupidly at the horror before me. The man was the express agent. These two foremost cars were his own territory. The thick of the turmoil, as I understood it, lay amongst the passengers' compartments behind; and yet this man had been murdered when to all seeming he was in full retreat. The matter was beyond my comprehension.

Gaining courage, I worked my way down between the stacks of trunks and boxes with which the car was crammed, and, stepping over the corpse, cautiously opened the door. The gangway was tenantless.

The door of the second express car swinging idly on its hinges, showed me that the car itself held nothing animate except a coop of game-fowls. The desertion of the place puzzled me: there should have been baggage-men in evidence.

Crossing the car to the further door, I opened it a couple of inches,

and reconnoitred through the cranny. Then I gathered what had taken place. Quintal had burst upon the express cars and driven the occupants before him towards the rear of the train. One of the whites had broken back, and fate had overtaken him in the manner I had seen. The rest, marching in grotesque procession with hands thrust up like masts above their heads, were, as I watched, forming rank down the centre alley-way of the second-class car; and, falling in with them, were coloured folk of both sexes and white passengers who had come there to smoke.

Quintal, revolver in hand, was marshalling the procession; his eye quick to note every movement, his big voice speaking clearly of life and death. He held that crowd of eight-and-twenty people cowed as broken-winged pigeons. Indeed, three or four of the men trembled so violently that they could barely keep their feet. The women were frightened naturally, but none were so bad as this: perhaps they had a lingering assurance that sex would preserve them from anything more deadly than wordy scare.

The procession closed up till the breast of each member lay on the shoulder-blades of his predecessor, and then with shuffling steps it moved down the car. The door was latched. The foremost man pressed it, and, slewing round his head between the framework of his arms, showed me a face of incarnate terror.

"I cayn't get through, boss. Lemme drop one of my fists to turn the handle? I ain't got no gun about me, boss, an' I swow I won't--"

"Keep your claws up," thundered Quintal. "If you're not past that door before I count ten, I'll blow you through it. One--two--three--"

The frightened face turned away and pressed against the woodwork, and the man's clenched hands beat frantically on the door above his head.

"Four--five--"

The procession rustled and shivered. It felt that murder was very near.

"Six--seven--eight."

The long file of people instinctively compressed itself. Each man thrust his hardest. A mulatto woman shrieked in pain. The door; yielding to the pressure, burst widely open, and the man against it shot out headlong. He clutched at the rail, and missed it, toppled down the steps, and fell on to the side of the track, rolling over and over like a half-filled bag. The others filed out along the gangway and entered the first-class car, joining the other passengers already held under the fat man's pistol.

I saw all these things clearly, and understood, then, how two men could stick up a train-load. The majority know quite well their potential strength, but what they lack is an initiative. Each man may want to fight, but no man dares to make the first burst, because he knows for a fact that, whatever happens to the rest, his own death is certain.

Now, I had far too great a respect for Quintal's marksmanship to advance upon him from the open; but when, after clearing the second-class car, he turned abruptly towards the express car, I fancied I'd a goodish chance of getting to hand-grips with him.

I waited in the angle behind the door, rigid as a box. With ears at their highest strain, I made out the sharp crunch of his footsteps advancing across the gangway between the cars.

Then his knuckles appeared on the edge of the door, and in an instant my right palm clapped down upon them. I swung myself round with all the pace I could muster, intending to let him have the left

squarely between the eyebrows; but--taken by surprise though he must have been--Quintal was too quick for me; indeed, the man's rapidity of action was something almost more than human. He had no time to raise a pistol higher than his hip, but as I came to his view round the angle of the door, he pulled on me from there, and the bullet raked the skin above my ribs like a hot iron, and the powder lit my clothing with a splash of flame.

The shock made me loosen my grip on his fingers and stumble back over the coop which held the game-fowls. Before I could recover my feet he was standing inside the car, covering me with a steady pistol muzzle.

"So you aren't killed, Mr. Calvert?" said he. "'Say, put up your hands quick--quick, siree, or you'll die in your boots yet; I never miss a man twice; and now march to the other end of the car, whilst I manipulate these two empty shells."

He brought another fully charged revolver out of a pocket, and, shifting it to his right hand, cast out the two spent cartridges from the other and refilled the chambers, holding the weapon in the grip of his knees whilst he managed the breech with his left hand.

"Nippy at it, aren't I, Mr. Calvert? That makes me a twelve-shot man once more; but now--as the train has come to a standstill on this grade, as I calculated it would--we must get to business. Oblige me by taking up the iron safe in the corner yonder and rolling it through the side door out on to the track."

"Do your dirty thieving yourself," said I, sullenly.

He didn't say anything he lifted up his right-hand pistol to a line with my face, steady as though it had been glued there. Then he began slowly to march up the floor of the car towards me, with his mouth

drawn up into a leathery grin of cruelty.

I did his bidding then to save my life. The iron chest rolled out with a dull thud on to the red earth outside, took a slow bound, and landed with a crash amongst bushes.

"Good," said Quintal. "Now jump down beside it."

I did so, and he followed me. Then he clapped a finger to his mouth and whistled. Presently the fat man appeared on the gangway of the first-class car, and descended by the steps.

"I've told them," said he, grimly, "and I fancy they understand."

"Quite so," said Quintal. "I'll explain to the others. Ho there, Mr. Engineer!"

No reply.

"In the cab, I say! You needn't be frightened. I won't shoot unless you provoke me."

A scared, dirty face appeared through one of the windows of the little iron penthouse. Quintal screwed his pistol muzzle into the back of my head, and continued, "You see my hostage, and how he's fixed. If you or anyone in this train makes the least attempt at annoying my pard or me, I'll blow this gentleman's backbone through his teeth. And now I'll trouble you to reverse that engine of yours and back the train a mile down the grade, and stay there for an hour."

I saw the link-motion traverse, and saw the man shove over his starting lever. Then the engine coughed again, and the train slid away from me. All along the cars windows shot up, and savage, insulted faces appeared, and nervous hands which grasped every kind of

weapon. A score of muzzles were concentrated on the train robbers. They, in their turn, made no counter demonstration against the train. Both their revolvers rested against my head. I shut my eyes and awaited death. It seemed impossible for me that those humiliated passengers, now that their prey was cast loose, could refrain from revenge. No one would blame them heavily if I fell: the country would applaud if the train robbers were killed. Hours seemed to pass. Then a voice spoke up, as it seemed, mistily, and from a great distance.

"All right, Mr. Calvert; it's been a mighty close call for you, but I guess they decided not to see our raise this round."

I opened my eyes and looked wildly down the track. The cow-catcher of the engine was just swaying out of sight round a curve.

Quintal's gaze was following mine. Then he turned sharply round and whistled shrilly.

A moment's pause, and then a return whistle came. Two minutes later and a buckboard came down a rough trail, drawn by two horses, driven furiously. Quintal and the fat man took up the safe and put it over the hind axle.

"Two hundred thousand-dollar greenbacks in that iron box," said Quintal, as he and his partner got on to the middle seat. "More profitable game than quarter-limit poker, I reckon, Mr. Calvert. So long!"

And away went the horses in a big turning circle, and spread out to a gallop in the straight, the buckboard (with the safe balanced across its back axle) leaping after them like a spring. The trail twisted and turned amongst the trees, and the buckboard and the robbers were soon out of sight behind the bank of forest. Well, that part of the show was apparently over for good, but it came to my mind that there was

still a final act to be played out. So I lit a cigar and sat down beside the track under the shade of a live oak to wait for the train.

It seemed an intolerable time in coming up. But I heard the engine clanking up the grade at last, and presently it came up level with me, and I jumped on to a tailboard as it lumbered heavily past.

My reception surprised me: practically there was no reception at all. In the Pullman, where I went, the passengers had apparently forgotten the event already. They were sitting about in the seats, listless with the heat, and for the most part reading, or sleeping, or fanning themselves. Only a small group of three, who were lazily talking, troubled to up when I entered.

"Say, here's the Englishman," said one. "Had a pleasant entertainment, sir, with your friends in the woods?"

"I'm satisfied with it," I said. "At least I can respect myself now."

The man delivered himself of a tired smile. "Meaning to say we can't. 'Say, are you a shareholder in this road?'"

"No."

"Oh, I thought you might be. You seemed to put such a lot of fuss into looking after the safe."

The man yawned, and settled himself back in his seat for sleep. It was the only comment anyone seemed wishful to make on my escapade.

They are a surprising people, the Americans, at times.
