

Amaranthia

THE ROME EXPRESS



Arthur Griffiths

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Chapter 1

The Rome Express, the *direttissimo*, or most direct, was approaching Paris one morning in March, when it became known to the occupants of the sleeping-car that there was something amiss, very much amiss, in the car.

The train was travelling the last stage, between Laroche and Paris, a run of a hundred miles without a stop. It had halted at Laroche for early breakfast, and many, if not all the passengers, had turned out. Of those in the sleeping-car, seven in number, six had been seen in the restaurant, or about the platform; the seventh, a lady, had not stirred. All had reëntered their berths to sleep or doze when the train went on, but several were on the move as it neared Paris, taking their turn at the lavatory, calling for water, towels, making the usual stir of preparation as the end of a journey was at hand.

There were many calls for the porter, yet no porter appeared. At last the attendant was found— lazy villain!— asleep, snoring loudly, stertorously, in his little bunk at the end of the car. He was roused with difficulty, and set about his work in a dull, unwilling, lethargic way, which promised badly for his tips from those he was supposed to serve.

By degrees all the passengers got dressed, all but two,— the lady in 9 and 10, who had made no sign as yet; and the man who occupied alone a double berth next her, numbered 7 and 8.

As it was the porter's duty to call every one, and as he was anxious, like the rest of his class, to get rid of his travellers as soon as possible after arrival, he rapped at each of the two closed doors behind which people presumably still slept.

The lady cried "All right," but there was no answer from No. 7 and 8.

Again and again the porter knocked and called loudly. Still meeting with no response, he opened the door of the compartment and went in.

It was now broad daylight. No blind was down; indeed, the one narrow window was open, wide; and the whole of the interior of the compartment was plainly visible, all and everything in it.

The occupant lay on his bed motionless. Sound asleep? No, not merely asleep—the twisted unnatural lie of the limbs, the contorted legs, the one arm drooping listlessly but stiffly over the side of the berth, told of a deeper, more eternal sleep.

The man was dead. Dead—and not from natural causes.

One glance at the blood-stained bedclothes, one look at the gaping wound in the breast, at the battered, mangled face, told the terrible story.

It was murder! murder most foul! The victim had been stabbed to the heart.

With a wild, affrighted, cry the porter rushed out of the compartment, and to the eager questioning of all who crowded round him, he could only mutter in confused and trembling accents:

"There! there! in there!"

Thus the fact of the murder became known to every one by personal inspection, for every one (even the lady had appeared for just a moment) had looked in where the body lay. The compartment was filled for some ten minutes or more by an excited, gesticulating, polyglot mob of half a dozen, all talking at once in French, English, and Italian.

The first attempt to restore order was made by a tall man, middle-aged, but erect in his bearing, with bright eyes and alert manner, who took the porter aside, and said sharply in good French, but with a strong English accent:

“Here! it’s your business to do something. No one has any right to be in that compartment now. There may be reasons — traces— things to remove; never mind what. But get them all out. Be sharp about it; and lock the door. Remember you will be held responsible to justice.”

The porter shuddered, so did many of the passengers who had overheard the Englishman’s last words.

Justice! It is not to be trifled with anywhere, least of all in France, where the uncomfortable superstition prevails that every one who can be reasonably suspected of a crime is held to be guilty of that crime until his innocence is clearly proved.

All those six passengers and the porter were now brought within the category of the accused. They were all open to suspicion; they, and they alone, for the murdered man had been seen alive at Laroche, and the fell deed must have been done since then, while the train was in transit, that is to say, going at express speed, when no one could leave it except at peril of his life.

“Deuced awkward for us!” said the tall English general, Sir Charles Collingham by name, to his brother the parson, when he had reëntered their compartment and shut the door.

“I can’t see it. In what way?” asked the Reverend Silas Collingham, a typical English cleric, with a rubicund face and square-cut white whiskers, dressed in a suit of black serge, and wearing the professional white tie.

“Why, we shall be detained, of course; arrested, probably— certainly detained. Examined, cross-examined, bully-ragged — I know something of the French police and their ways.”

“If they stop us, I shall write to the *Times*” cried his brother, by profession a man of peace, but with a choleric eye that told of an angry temperament.

“By all means, my dear Silas, when you get the chance. That won’t be just yet, for I tell you we’re in a tight place, and may expect a good deal of worry.” With that he took

out his cigarette-case, and his match-box, lighted his cigarette, and calmly watched the smoke rising with all the coolness of an old campaigner accustomed to encounter and face the ups and downs of life. "I only hope to goodness they'll run straight on to Paris," he added in a fervent tone, not unmixed with apprehension. "No! By jingo, we're slackening speed—."

"Why shouldn't we? It's right the conductor, or chief of the train, or whatever you call him, should know what has happened."

"Why, man, can't you see? While the train is travelling express, every one must stay on board it; if it slows, it is possible to leave it."

"Who would want to leave it?"

"Oh, I don't know," said the General, rather testily. "Any way, the thing's done now."

The train had pulled up in obedience to the signal of alarm given by some one in the sleeping-car, but by whom it was impossible to say. Not by the porter, for he seemed greatly surprised as the conductor came up to him.

"How did you know?" he asked.

"Know! Know what? You stopped me."

"I didn't."

"Who rang the bell, then?"

"I did not. But I'm glad you've come. There has been a crime— murder."

"Good Heavens!" cried the conductor, jumping up on to the car, and entering into the situation at once. His business was only to verify the fact, and take all necessary precautions. He was a burly, brusque, peremptory person, the despotic, self-important French official, who knew what to do— as he thought— and did it without hesitation or apology.

"No one must leave the car," he said in a tone not to be misunderstood. "Neither now, nor on arrival at the station."

There was a shout of protest and dismay, which he quickly cut short.

"You will have to arrange it with the authorities in Paris; they can alone decide. My duty is plain: to detain you, place you under surveillance till then. Afterwards, we will see. Enough, gentlemen and madame"—

He bowed with the instinctive gallantry of his nation to the female figure which now appeared at the door of her compartment. She stood for a moment listening, seemingly greatly agitated, and then, without a word, disappeared, retreating hastily into her own private room, where she shut herself in.

Almost immediately, at a signal from the conductor, the train resumed its journey. The distance remaining to be traversed was short; half an hour more, and the Lyons station, at Paris, was reached, where the bulk of the passengers— all, indeed, but the occupants of the sleeper— descended and passed through the barriers. The latter were again desired to keep their places, while a posse of officials came and mounted guard. Presently they were told to leave the car one by one, but to take nothing with them. All their hand-bags, rugs, and belongings were to remain in the berths, just as they lay. One by one they were marched under escort to a large and bare waiting-room, which had, no doubt, been prepared for their reception.

Here they took their seats on chairs placed at wide intervals apart, and were peremptorily forbidden to hold any communication with each other, by word or gesture. This order was enforced by a fierce-looking guard in blue and red uniform, who stood facing them with his arms folded, gnawing his moustache and frowning severely.

Last of all, the porter was brought in and treated like the passengers, but more distinctly as a prisoner. He had a guard all to himself; and it seemed as though he was the object of peculiar suspicion. It had no great effect upon him, for, while the rest of the party were very plainly sad,

and a prey to lively apprehension, the porter sat dull and unmoved, with the stolid, sluggish, unconcerned aspect of a man just roused from sound sleep and relapsing into slumber, who takes little notice of what is passing around. Meanwhile, the sleeping-car, with its contents, especially the corpse of the victim, was shunted into a siding, and sentries were placed on it at both ends. Seals had been affixed upon the entrance doors, so that the interior might be kept inviolate until it could be visited and examined by the Chef de la Sûreté, or Chief of the Detective Service. Every one and everything awaited the arrival of this all-important functionary.

Chapter 2

M. Floçon, the Chief, was an early man, and he paid a first visit to his office about 7 A.M.

He lived just round the corner in the Rue des Arcs, and had not far to go to the Prefecture. But even now, soon after daylight, he was correctly dressed, as became a responsible ministerial officer. He wore a tight frock coat and an immaculate white tie; under his arm he carried the regulation portfolio, or lawyer's bag, stuffed full of reports, dispositions, and documents dealing with cases in hand. He was altogether a very precise and natty little personage, quiet and unpretending in demeanour, with a mild, thoughtful face in which two small ferrety eyes blinked and twinkled behind gold-rimmed glasses. But when things went wrong, when he had to deal with fools, or when scent was keen, or the enemy near, he would become as fierce and eager as any terrier.

He had just taken his place at his table and begun to arrange his papers, which, being a man of method, he kept carefully sorted by lots each in an old copy of the *Figaro*, when he was called to the telephone. His services were greatly needed, as we know, at the Lyons station and the summons was to the following effect:

"Crime on train No. 45. A man murdered in the sleeper. All the passengers held. Please come at once. Most important."

A fiacre was called instantly, and M. Floçon, accompanied by Galipaud and Block, the two first inspectors for duty, was driven with all possible speed across Paris.

He was met outside the station, just under the wide verandah, by the officials, who gave him a brief outline of the facts, so far as they were known, and as they have already been put before the reader.

"The passengers have been detained?" asked M. Floçon at once.

"Those in the sleeping-car only— "

"Tut, tut! they should have been all kept— at least until you had taken their names and addresses. Who knows what they might not have been able to tell?"

It was suggested that as the crime was committed presumably while the train was in motion, only those in the one car could be implicated.

"We should never jump to conclusions," said the Chief snappishly. "Well, show me the train card— the list of the travellers in the sleeper."

"It cannot be found, sir."

"Impossible! Why, it is the porter's business to deliver it at the end of the journey to his superiors, and under the law— to us. Where is the porter? In custody?"

"Surely, sir, but there is something wrong with him."

"So I should think! Nothing of this kind could well occur without his knowledge. If he was doing his duty— unless, of course, he— but let us avoid hasty conjectures."

"He has also lost the passengers' tickets, which you know he retains till the end of the journey. After the catastrophe, however, he was unable to lay his hand upon his pocket-book. It contained all his papers."

"Worse and worse. There is something behind all this. Take me to him. Stay, can I have a private room close to the other— where the prisoners, those held on suspicion, are? It will be necessary to hold investigations, take their depositions. M. lé Juge will be here directly."

M. Floçon was soon installed in a room actually communicating with the waiting-room, and as a preliminary of the first importance, taking precedence even of the examination of the sleeping-car, he ordered the porter to be brought in to answer certain questions.

The man, Ludwig Groote, as he presently gave his name, thirty-two years of age, born at Amsterdam, looked such a

sluggish, slouching, blear-eyed creature that M. Floçon began by a sharp rebuke.

"Now. Sharp! Are you always like this?" cried the Chief.

The porter still stared straight before him with lack-lustre eyes, and made no immediate reply.

"Are you drunk? are you— Can it be possible?" he said, and in vague reply to a sudden strong suspicion, he went on:

"What were you doing between Laroche and Paris? Sleeping?"

The man roused himself a little. "I think I slept. I must have slept. I was very drowsy. I had been up two nights; but so it is always, and I am not like this generally. I do not understand."

"Hah!" The Chief thought he understood. "Did you feel this drowsiness before leaving Laroche?"

"No, monsieur, I did not. Certainly not. I was fresh till then — quite fresh."

"Hum; exactly; I see;" and the little Chief jumped to his feet and ran round to where the porter stood sheepishly, and sniffed and smelt at him.

"Yes, yes." Sniff, sniff, sniff, the little man danced round and round him, then took hold of the porter's head with one hand, and with the other turned down his lower eyelid so as to expose the eyeball, sniffed a little more, and then resumed his seat.

"Exactly. And now, where is your train card?"

"Pardon, monsieur, I cannot find it."

"That is absurd. Where do you keep it? Look again— search — I must have it."

The porter shook his head hopelessly.

"It is gone, monsieur, and my pocket-book."

"But your papers, the tickets— "

"Everything was in it, monsieur. I must have dropped it."

Strange, very strange. However— the fact was to be recorded, for the moment. He could of course return to it.

"You can give me the names of the passengers?"

"No, monsieur. Not exactly. I cannot remember, not enough to distinguish between them."

"*Fichtre!* But this is most devilishly irritating. To think that I have to do with a man so stupid— such an idiot, such an ass!"

"At least you know how the berths were occupied, how many in each, and which persons? Yes? You can tell me that? Well, go on. By and by we will have the passengers in, and you can fix their places, after I have ascertained their names. Now, please! For how many was the car?"

"Sixteen. There were two compartments of four berths each, and four of two berths each."

"Stay, let us make a plan. I will draw it. Here, now, is that right?" and the Chief held up the rough diagram, here shown—

[Illustration: Diagram of railroad car.]

"Here we have the six compartments. Now take *a*, with berths 1, 2, 3, and 4. Were they all occupied?"

"No; only two, by Englishmen. I know that they talked English, which I understand a little. One was a soldier; the other, I think, a clergyman, or priest."

"Good! we can verify that directly. Now, *b*, with berths 5 and 6. Who was there?"

"One gentleman. I don't remember his name. But I shall know him by appearance."

"Go on. In *c*, two berths, 7 and 8?"

"Also one gentleman. It was he who— I mean, that is where the crime occurred."

"Ah, indeed, in 7 and 8? Very well. And the next, 9 and 10?"

"A lady. Our only lady. She came from Rome."

"One moment. Where did the rest come from? Did any embark on the road?"

"No, monsieur; all the passengers travelled through from Rome."

"The dead man included? Was he Roman?"

"That I cannot say, but he came on board at Rome."