

IN THE TUNNEL.

BY T. W. HANSHEW.



CANNOT conceive what impelled me to do the thing, for I am not what might be called a "betting man" at any time, and, moreover, the habit of speaking my thoughts aloud is not one of my many failings. But, be the cause what it may, the fact remains that, just as the train pulled away from the dingy little station at Modane, and the fat man in the corner began to nod again, I said quite audibly: "I'll bet a fiver that fellow is asleep before we reach the tunnel, and will snore like a blessed pig the whole way through it!"

I did not address my remarks to any of the persons who shared the compartment with me; for one thing, I did not suppose any of them understood more than a word or two of English at most, and, for another, I was, as I have stated, merely speaking my thoughts aloud. There were four of us in all—a mummified Italian who kept his nose in a book, hour in and hour out; the fat German who had sat blinking like an owl every time I opened my eyes during the night, and had only had two waking intervals since the day broke; and a somewhat sallow-faced individual who looked like a Frenchman, and spent the time jotting things down on a pocket writing-block when he wasn't chewing the end of his lead-pencil and staring up at the roof of the carriage in a manner indicative of deep thoughtfulness.

A more engaging set of animated dead men it had never been my misfortune to travel with. We had left Paris—*en route* for Genoa—at nine o'clock the previous evening; we had tumbled out at Modane the next morning to pass the Customs on the Italian frontier (and, incidentally, to partake of a villainous breakfast at the *buffet*), and during the entire fourteen hours of our enforced association, not one solitary word had been spoken by any member of the party until I unthinkingly broke the silence

in the manner recorded. It came, therefore, as a somewhat startling surprise when the man whom I had long ago decided as a French commercial traveller making up his accounts *en route*, glanced round at me and said, with as fine an accent as ever came out of Cornwall: "No—o, I think not. He is pretty good at the game, I will admit; but I fancy he won't go as far as *that*," and forthwith shoved his writing-block into his pocket and edged along the seat until he was beside me.

I do not know which surprised me the more—this sudden spirit of sociability upon his part, or the fact of his being an Englishman, and I was just groping round in my mind for words to express my sentiments, when he flung another piece of intelligence at me.

"If you like to bet on losing hazards, that fellow will accommodate you," he said in a carefully lowered tone and with a nod in the direction of the somnolent German. "He understands English."

"How do you know that?" I inquired. "He hasn't spoken a syllable since he came in here last night."

"I am well aware that he hasn't. Think he would make it too agreeable for other people if he did. But he understands English well enough to read it, if you will take the trouble to notice that newspaper sticking out of his coat pocket. It's a copy of the Paris edition of the *Herald*."

"But that proves nothing. He may have bought it for a friend."

"Not he. If I know anything, I know the human mule when I see him; and if that fellow hadn't been too far gone when you offered to wager five pounds that he would snore the whole way through the tunnel, he would have defeated you on general principles. You can't trust a man with a mouth and chin like his to let you win *anything* if he can prevent it. Think he is sleeping because he enjoys that sort of thing? Not a bit of it! His wife, if he has one, or somebody else if he hasn't, told him to take especial note of the scenery of French Savoy, and to get out his watch and count the minutes it actually does take the train to pass through the Mont Cenis tunnel; and he kept awake all

last night so that he shouldn't be able to do it. He would have drugged himself if he couldn't manage to sleep any other way, the contrary beggar!"

I glanced over at the sleeping German and laughed. The man's face certainly did suggest those characteristics now that my attention was called to the fact, although I had not remarked it before.

"Are you a family connection of Sherlock Holmes's?" I asked.

"Not the slightest," he replied, with a curious smile that lifted one corner of his mouth half way up his cheek. "That is one of the few lines I have never tackled as yet. But one never knows what carls one may be called upon to play before the end of the game. *Je ne me doute de rien—et je ne parle jamais de ce que je fais.* I didn't throw that in for the mere purpose of letting you understand that I know more languages than my own," he added parenthetically. "I have lived so many years in Paris that the thing has become almost second nature to me: besides—pardon me a moment. We shall be entering the tunnel presently, and I never fail to take a look at this particular bit of landscape."

He rose as he spoke, and stood with his hand upon the strap which controlled the window, and his eyes fixed upon me with a curious sort of intentness.

"Ever been through the Cenis tunnel?" he asked.

"No, never. This is my first experience," I replied. "Is the sensation as uncanny as I have been told?"

"It would require a second Poe to do justice to it. As for me——" He lifted the strap of the window, and I could see that his hand shook nervously. "I always liken the passage through it to six-and-twenty minutes in hell, and I never fail to fill my eyes and my memory with the picture of green trees and bright sunlight before I am swung into the place. But then, mine was such an awful, such an unearthly experience——"

A sudden crash cut in upon his words. The window-strap had slipped from his hand, and the sash shot down with a bang that made the sleeping man beside it start up with an excited "*Ach! Lieber Gott!*" and the reading Italian turn for the first time from his book. And, at the same moment, light and air and landscape were licked up and swallowed, a swirl of darkness swooped down and struck our eyes, a sulphurous blast gripped our throats and stank in our nostrils,

and the whole world seemed to have plunged back suddenly into a roaring, reeking chaos.

We were in the tunnel.

"*Ich bitte um Entschuldigung; es sear sehr albern von mir,*" said the Cornishman, looking over his shoulder and addressing the scowling German as the tiny spark of light in the dish-shaped lamp in the ceiling began to make its existence manifest. "I suppose I am a fool," he added, dropping back into English and speaking to me this time, "but I am always more or less nervous and upset when we say 'Good-bye' to the world at large and swing into this hell-hole. It was here—whilst the train was whizzing along just as it is doing now, and the darkness was so thick you could cut it—that the man without a head got in and sat down opposite me—just as our German friend there is sitting opposite you."

"*Gott im Himmel!*"

I could hear the suppressed exclamation even through the steady, insistent roar of the train, and I instinctively glanced over at the German. He had drawn himself up into the smallest possible space, and sat, a thing all eyes, huddled as far back in the shadow of his corner as his size would permit. I knew the instant our eyes met that he shared my sudden suspicion of the Cornishman's sanity, if he did not, indeed, share the sensation of swiftly alternating flashes of heat and cold which were that moment zigzagging up and down my spinal column.

For half a minute, as we swayed on through the sulphurous blackness, the Cornishman struggled with the window-strap (for the impact had jammed the sash, and it was no easy matter to readjust it), and during that half-minute I think I must have recalled all the stories of encounters with madmen and all the "Hints on Self-Protection in Cases of Emergency" I had ever read, and I fancy that my face must have reflected my thoughts when the man finally got the sash in place and resumed his seat beside me, for the curious smile was again half way up his cheek.

"I hope you won't get to thinking that I have escaped from an asylum," he said: "although I am free to admit that what I said just now would be considered ample grounds for doing so. Nevertheless——" His voice sank, and the smile slid down his cheek and vanished—"it was the plain, unvarnished truth, and it happened as I told you—whilst we were scudding along through this *Inferno*-like darkness, just as the train is doing now."



"Ever been through the Cesis tunnel?" he asked.

"But a man without a head!" I ventured to expostulate, reassured by his demeanour. "And to enter a moving train—in a tunnel! The thing is impossible, you know, impossible!"

"So I should have thought, myself, if I had heard another fellow tell it," he replied, with a slight shudder. "But you can't dispute what you have seen for yourself; you can't say a thing is impossible when you have experienced it. Ever since that time I have had a deeper appreciation of those lines in 'Hamlet' regarding the mysteries of heaven and earth which are undreamt of in our philosophy."

He paused—as if undecided whether to go on or not—and I saw his gaze travel to the window as he sank back against the cushion and shaded his eyes with a shaking hand.

"I know I am a fool, and that such an experience is never likely to be duplicated," he said after a moment, "but I am always expecting that dead fellow to come back, and I never enter this horrible hole without looking for him."

He was shaking all over now. I reached for my pocket-flask, and pulling off the metal cup, slopped out a good, stiff peg of brandy and handed it to him.

"Here, take a drink of this; it will pull you together," I said. "And—I should like to hear—if you care to talk about it."

He drank the brandy at a gulp, and thanked me with a nod as he handed back the cup.

"I don't often speak of it," he replied. "I hate to be set down as a liar or a lunatic; but—well—I *will* tell *you*. It happened two years ago, and I was going then (as I am going now) to Luvinci, a small station just outside of this tunnel on the Italian side, where the train stops only on signal or by arrangement with the guard. At that time I was connected with a Franco-Italian firm of jewellers and dealers in precious stones, and as the samples I carried were extremely valuable, I made it a point when travelling by train to always engage an entire compartment and have the guard lock me in securely. I was, therefore, quite alone when the affair of which I am about to tell you occurred—a circumstance which I have always deeply regretted, since it leaves me absolutely without witnesses of any sort to corroborate my statement. I was, moreover, unusually careful on this particular occasion, and kept a loaded revolver lying upon the seat beside me. I did this for two very good reasons. The first

was that I was carrying upon my person jewels amounting in value to nearly three hundred thousand francs (our firm was executing a commission for the Royal house of Italy); and the second because, some four months previously, a fellow commercial traveller, who had the misfortune to resemble me very closely indeed, had been murdered in a compartment of the Lyons express, and his murderer, who was most fortunately captured, confessed before going to the guillotine that he had mistaken the man for me."

He paused as though overcome by some hideous recollection, and passed a shaking hand across his forehead.

"A narrow squeak for you," I said, feeling that I ought to say something.

"Very," he agreed. "And it did not tend to make me feel any the more comfortable to learn, as I did learn from the confession of the murderer—he was an Alsatian, by the way, and his name was Etienne Clochard—that I had long been shadowed by the members of the organised gang to which he had belonged, and that, in his own characteristic phraseology, 'they would have me yet.' On the morning prior to my starting upon the journey of which I am now telling you, this Etienne Clochard had been guillotined in Paris, and there was a full account of the execution in all the evening papers, *La Presse* in particular giving a very graphic description of it. Call it a morbid taste if you like, but that description fascinated while it appalled me. I think I read it quite a dozen times that night and a dozen more the next morning, and I was reading it again when the train whizzed suddenly into this tunnel, and all the world seemed to be blotted out in darkness and vapour. The lamp in the compartment was even less adequate than this one, and I laid the paper aside, unable to read more. The horrible droning of the wheels—(Listen! you can hear it now)—combined with the gloom and, perhaps, the gruesomeness of the thing I had been reading, got on my nerves and made them raw; the moisture, catching the sulphurous vapour, covered the windows as though they were smeared with milk, and the foggy atmosphere of the compartment made breathing a labour. The rocking train raced on, and, after a time, the green silk 'eyelids' over the ceiling lamp, disturbed by the vibration, winked and slid down. I got up and stood with a foot on either seat, trying to adjust them. They would not



“As I faced round, I saw standing before me the shape of a man.”

remain up, however, and I had just determined to take out my pocket-knife and cut them away altogether when I heard the door behind me—the locked door!—open and close with a bang. I don't know whether I fell or jumped down from my perch; I only know that I got down

somehow, and that, as I faced round, all my nerves pricking and twitching, and my heart hammering against my ribs as though it would beat its way out of me, I saw standing before me the shape of a man—a tall, slim man, with a great scoop cut out of his coat and shirt where the collar should

have been, a slim, red line running round his throat, and above that line a grey-white, dead face with shut eyes and hanging lips."

"Ach! Lieber Gott!"

I heard the words quaver out from the German's corner, but I could not see his face, for the thick vapour which the opened window had let in floated between us, humid, yellow, reeking of sulphur. I looked round at the Cornishman, every fibre of my being tingling, and something creeping up my neck. He was sitting bolt upright and looking straight before him, his forehead puckered up, and the second joint of his left forefinger held between his teeth.

"Go on," I said faintly. "You are sure it wasn't nerves?"

"As sure as I am that you are sitting here beside me this minute," he replied. "Nerves may often make a man fancy that he sees things, but they can't make those things talk."

"And he talked?"

"Yes. As I faced round and saw him, his dead lips said quite distinctly: 'Good evening, comrade. We travel far and fast. It may be morning to you, but it is evening to me—for ever!' And then, with a wave of the hand, inviting me to resume my seat, he sat down in the corner near the window and turned his dead face towards me, his eyelids never once lifting, and his head, jarred by the movement of the train, rocking unsteadily upon his shoulders. Once he put up his hand to steady it, and as his fingers touched that red line about his throat, 'The trade-mark of Monsieur de Paris,' he said, with a ghastly movement of the lips which, in a living man, would have been a smile. 'He guillotined me at dawn this morning.'"

The voice of the Cornishman dropped off suddenly into silence, and once again he took his knuckle between his teeth, his eyes looking straight before him as though he were lost in thought. As for me, I sat waiting for the next word as breathlessly as ever schoolboy hung over one of Poe's tales, my heart pumping like an engine, and the pores of my skin pricked up into little beads.

The train alone made sound now, for even the German's voice was still. For a time we reeled on through the blackness of the tunnel in this state of nervous tension, and then the Cornishman spoke again.

"I do not know whether I fainted or not when the Thing in the corner said that," he went on; "but some sort of suspension of the faculties must have occurred, for there

is a period of blankness in my memory from that precise moment until the time when I found myself half-sitting, half-lying upon the seat immediately in front of my awful companion, and my hand groping blindly for the spot where I had placed my revolver. I know that even then I was conscious of the uselessness of such a weapon—of any weapon—against such a visitant as he; but I groped for it all the same, yet groped in vain. In some strange way, by some malign agency, the thing had been spirited away, and I sat there helpless, hopeless, appalled, with that dead creature gibbering at me in the green dusk of the veiled lamp. The train rocked on, his doddering head keeping time to the swaying motion of it, and that awful parody of a smile distorting his loose-lipped mouth. I fought with myself—I tried to reason with myself; I struck my hands together and dug my nails into the flesh in the effort to wake myself from what I felt must surely be nightmare. It could not be, this thing—it simply could not be, I told myself. It was out of all reason—out of all possibility, and yet—there it was before me, and I was not sleeping—not dreaming; neither was the creature in the corner a shade, for it actually cast a shadow on the cushioned back of the seat!"

I admit it—to my everlasting shame I admit it: as the Cornishman made that statement I gave a little gulp, and twitched away from him as from some uncanny thing, and huddled up in my corner much as I had seen the German huddle up in his. I did not speak. I had reached a point where I simply could not. I merely held my breath and waited.

"I do not know how long it was before the Creature spoke again," the Cornishman went on; "but of a sudden I became aware that its voice was again sounding above the muttered thunder of the train, and that it was crooning to itself rather than talking to me. 'Ah! he is the prince of valets is Monsieur de Paris,' I distinctly heard it say. 'So softly he touches, so softly! It is like the brush of a bird's wing, that sweep of the shears round the shoulders that lays bare the neck and lets the morning air blow on it. It is like the touch of a feather, that snip! snip! behind the ears, and the gentle falling of the cropped hair on the warm, bare shoulders—the thick, matted hair that smells even yet of the pomatum Lanisparre the barber rubbed into it all those days ago. Ohé! Monsieur de Paris, I salute you. What a tender dog



"You had me nicely."

you are, with your sorrowful eyes and your red gloves—not to shock a man's sensibilities! But you smell of sawdust, *cher ami*, and the hinge of your basket creaks. Softly, softly! don't hurry a man when he is taking his last walk. Aha! my friend the tilting-board, you shine like glass; but we shall have a short acquaintance, you and I. *Vivat!* we are off! I see you open your hungry jaws, Monsieur the Lunette; I see you flash in the dawnlight, Madame Three-Corners, and I rush to meet you. It is touch and go; it is click and off. *Vive la France! vive la! vive la!*"

Again the voice of the Cornishman dropped off into silence. I sat breathless, quivering, waiting for him to speak the next word.

"I do not know," he said presently, "how my reason survived the shock of that moment; I do not know, I do not pretend to imagine, what would have been the end of the horrible experience had I not at that point made a discovery which gave the whole ghastly affair a different complexion, and made me shut my hands hard, and pull myself together for what I now felt would be a fight for life. It was no less a thing than the discovery of the whereabouts of my missing revolver. It was lying on the cushioned seat between the knees of the decapitated man! I sucked in my breath with a sort of gasp as I made that discovery, and a thought only less horrible than the one it had exercised hammered at the back of my brain. If the revolver had been useless to turn against it, why had the Creature been at the pains to deprive me of it? Was it a trick, then? Was my ghastly visitant merely some clever thief who had adopted this appalling disguise, and invented this daring plan, for the purpose of frightening me into complete helplessness before he summoned his confederates to rob and murder me? If that was his game——"

The Cornishman stopped short and left the sentence unfinished. I saw his eye travel to the window, and the curious smile glide up his cheek again. My own gaze followed the direction of his.

Along the vapour-smear'd surface of the glass a faint glow of light was creeping—a light which presently burst into the compartment with such a fierce and blinding glare that for an instant I could see nothing.

The Italian laid aside his book for the first time, and lowered the window nearest to him, the Cornishman got up and loosened the

strap of the one close to where I sat; and, as a current of fresh air swung through the compartment and dispelled the fog, I became conscious that we were out of the tunnel, and that the German was still sitting huddled up in his corner with gaping lips and wide-open eyes.

The Cornishman rose, lifted his portmanteau out of the rack, looked down at me and—winked.

"I reckon I've won that five-pound note hands down," he said, with a laugh. "Our friend from the Fatherland never slept a wink, nor snored a snore, the whole way through."

I looked at him aghast, dimly comprehending, but too far gone to speak, and then mechanically put my hand to my breast-pocket, for the train was slowing down, and I remembered what he had said with regard to his destination.

"Well, I'm dashed!" I managed to gasp at last, and pulled my purse into view.

"No, don't pay it to me," he said hastily. "I've won it, I know, but—send it as a donation to Dr. Barnardo's Home; it will do some good there. I am sure I can trust you to do it; you were so willing to pay up like a man. One last word—don't make rash bets in future; you will always find somebody ready to take you up. Good-bye."

The train had stopped, and the guard was at the door.

"Your station, signor," he said, and reached out his hand for the man's portmanteau.

And then, for the first time, the German spoke.

"*Ach!*" he blurted out, leaning forward as the Cornishman was getting out, and laying a twitching hand upon his sleeve. "You go like dis? Sir, you do not tell if it was really a teef or de ghost of dot Clochard mans, and I am exploding mit curiosities already. De end of de story, it is vat?"

"What you like to make of it, my good sir," the Cornishman replied. "It began under *my* hat, and there's no earthly reason why it shouldn't end under yours. Good-bye!" He turned and held out his hand to me. "Barnardo's kids will be the gainer, at all events."

"Good-bye," I answered, as I leant out and wrung the hand he extended. "It was ripping, and you had me nicely. I say, you know, *you* ought to write for the magazines."

He looked up at me and laughed.

"I do!" he said, and walked quietly away.