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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# On a Train With a Madman

By ROY TEMPLE HOUSE

*A tale of stark terror, adapted from the German  
of Pan-Appan*

"HALLUCINATIONS and illusions," said Judge Hochdoerfer thoughtfully, "in the sense of pure imaginings caused by a tight collar or an excited brain which manufactures something out of nothing, are much less frequent than most people suppose. A mirage is not something imagined, but something misplaced. No one can be certain that knowledge of the future is scientifically impossible. Even our scientists know very little as to what space and time really are. But it is certain that our faculties of apprehension are much less circumscribed than many of us suspect.

"I want to tell you of something that happened to me when I was still a young fellow in Germany. I must admit, as an item of legitimate evidence in the case, that I had been drinking, but I must testify, too, that in those days a moderate amount of liquor only sharpened my wits instead of dulling them.

"I was a recent graduate of one of the smaller German universities, and I had stopped off in the little college town for a moist and joyous reunion with old college mates. I had crawled sulkily into a third-class compartment of the train, and sat brooding listlessly at the window as the panting iron horse pulled us jerkily and noisily from the scene of my student frolics toward the scene of my dull daily labors.

"I was so absorbed in the painful business of contrasting the jovial past with the lack-luster present, that I scarcely rea-

lized that the train had stopped. Suddenly it dawned on me that I had company in my compartment, which I had thus far occupied all alone. The old fellow who had clambered with visible haste into the smallish box which is a European railway compartment, was so strange and almost uncanny in both looks and manner that he was not long in shaking me out of my meditative mood. In spite of the unusually warm weather, his coat collar was turned up around his ears, and he had pulled his broad-brimmed hat down over his face so that very little of it was visible but the tip of his nose, a long corkscrew affair which peeped out of his defensive armament like the muzzle of a cannon from a beleaguered fortress.

"Just as the train was leaving the station, I noticed that the crowd on the platform had grown agitated and excited. There were calls and cries, but as we had begun to move I could not catch a hint of what it was all about. There was fear and perplexity on many faces, as if some danger were imminent. As I leaned out of the window, I saw a row of protruding heads all along the train. Everybody was puzzled and alarmed. Back on the platform, we could see the station-master, the center of an excited group, waving his signal-flag wildly.

"Whatever it was all about, the train moved on with steadily increasing speed, and the frightened many-headed turtle drew in its heads one after another.

"At last I gave up trying to fathom the

mystery and pulled in my noodle with the others. Warm as it was, the air was pulling through the compartment uncomfortably, and I started to close the window a few inches. But the leather strap by which I was drawing it up slipped out of my hands, and the window dropped again with a bang.

"The sight of my new companion sent the cold shivers down my back. The old man had left his corner diagonally across from me and was sitting directly opposite me, his knees almost touching mine. His look and manner had changed completely. He had uncovered his face, and his head was no longer drawn down between his shoulders, but stood up like the head of a bird, on a long neck which was almost bare of flesh but was fuzzy with ragged long hairs. His face was nothing but skin, muscle and tendon, so that every change of expression, every diabolical distortion, came out in all its ghastly nakedness. The eyes were horrible. They lay so deep in their sockets that they were scarcely visible, but the savage glitter in them made me think of some beast of prey. They wandered over my person in a sort of cruel ecstasy and bored a path into my inmost being as if they were trying to penetrate every secret of my soul and set a-quiver every fiber of my nervous system.

**I** STARED at this frightful caricature of a man with a sort of fascinated helplessness, while he gazed back at me with a cynical smile in which I could read his consciousness of power and his determination to torture his victim to the full. But there was something else in his gaze, a mysterious something which was not merely curiosity, something like fanaticism, like a mission and a purpose.

"'Pardon me, sir——' as if from a great distance a squeaky eunuch-voice

reached my ear. The polite phrase, however, was not spoken in a tone of courteous caution, but with an air of command. 'Pardon me, sir, if I look at you a little harder than one stranger would usually be expected to look at another.'

"I did not answer his courteous phrase. I think I should have found it impossible to speak a word at that moment.

"I tried to rise from my seat. My mind was not clear; I was only half conscious. My body was dulled and stiff. But I was tormented with an agony of apprehension. My throat was burning. My tongue felt as if it were swelling bigger and bigger and filling my mouth so full that my jaw dropped wider and wider open. I knew dimly that I was sitting like an imbecile with gaping mouth and a vacant, fixed stare. Still I said nothing. I don't think the creature was waiting for an answer or expecting one. He was just taking his time, calmly, gorgeously.

"I suppose there was an expression of surprize even in my stupid eyes, and I think my head jerked, although every muscle in my body seemed paralyzed.

"'I am sure you have heard of me.'

"My brain was functioning after a fashion, and I was trying in vain to recall a modern bearer of the uncanny name my new acquaintance had just spoken. But the doctor went on calmly, in a moment:

"'Yes, you have heard of me, and you know of my phenomenal cures, which have put suffering humanity deeply in my debt.'

"All at once I *did* remember the whole story. My brain seemed suddenly to awaken to something like normal activity, and I recalled what I had read in the newspaper that very morning. It had even been mentioned in our alumni group at breakfast.

"The paper had told the story of a

small-town physician who had enjoyed an excellent reputation, especially for his surgical work, but who had lived and worked till he had passed middle life without becoming known to any degree beyond the narrow field of his labors.

"His opportunity had come when a foreign potentate who was traveling through the country was stopped at the doctor's little city by an attack of illness. It was the recurrence of a hereditary disease which famous physicians all over the world had diagnosed as incurable, so that its return in an acute form would no doubt prove fatal. The ailment had come back with dangerous intensity, and His Highness' suite had already, by code telegram, prepared the responsible authorities in his home country for the eventuality of his being brought home in a serious condition, if he came home at all. Someone reported that a physician in the town was an unusually skilful surgeon, and more as a matter of humanitarian form than because anyone expected anything of him, the local sawbones was sent for. He was confident and was allowed to try his hand. Behind closed and locked doors, with all curtains drawn, His Highness was treated. No one knew anything of the diagnosis or the treatment. But the outcome was that the country surgeon cured his patient. After a week of treatment—a week during which the doctor and the royal patient were alone together, for no physician of the suite, no minister, no confidential secretary, came near the bedside—His Highness was visibly out of danger; and the medical men of the royal retinue shook their heads in apprehension and hinted at dangerous charlatanry or even at black magic. These palace M. D.'s were for the time being in complete disgrace, and His Highness had no eyes for anyone but his savior. The village doctor

was made Physician in Ordinary to His Highness, with a salary beside which his modest income up to that date seemed a ridiculous pittance, and with such fame and fortune in prospect as turned his head completely.

"The fortunate outcome of his audacious experiment convinced the poor fellow that he had found the grand panacea for all human ills, the *remedium optimum* of the old alchemists, the infallible Philosopher's Stone. And it was not long till he left his brilliant court position for an insane asylum, where he planned the craziest cures for all types of human ailments, announcing proudly that there was no disease which he could not master and that he was on the way to the perfection of a treatment which would end the reign of the King of Terrors himself.

"This unfortunate maniac had escaped from his sanitarium two or three days before the day of my trip, and with the unbelievable ingenuity which frequently develops in the mentally unbalanced, he had thus far eluded his pursuers.

"And this old man shut up in the same box with me was that dangerous maniac! I had no doubt of it.

"MY MIND was working a little more freely now, and I began to plan how I might reach the bell-cord and stop the train. But I was still unable to move my limbs, and I was becoming conscious that a sweetish narcotic perfume was filling the air. I struggled against its effects, and I wondered, in my puzzled and strange condition, why I did not lose consciousness entirely. I saw everything about me, I heard every sound, I knew what was happening, even though dimly. But I could not move, I could not resist, I could not even protest by word or gesture.

"'There is no disease,' the ghastly creature went on proudly after a long pause, 'that I can't conquer. I can heal them, I can cure them, I can floor them, I can down them, I can send them about their business every time.'

"He was growing excited, he punctuated his phrases with strange titterings, and his long, sharp finger-nails cut the air like knives as he gesticulated more and more wildly. His skinny hands were like the claws of some unclean and enormous bird of prey.

"I calculated that it would be a good hour before we could reach the next station, and that long before that I should have fallen a prey to this terrible creature. But I sat idle and motionless, like a helpless bird which a beady-eyed reptile has fascinated and whose life-span depends entirely on the reptile's sovereign will.

"'Now, my dear friend,' the madman went on with a grin, but at the same time with an air of officious solicitude, 'I know that I shall be able to free you from your trouble.'

"There was a touch of irony in his manner, yet he spoke with intent, confident seriousness. I could feel my pupils grow larger. But I could not move. The man had opened a case of surgical instruments, and the light glittered on an array of knives, hooks, needles and strangely formed murderous contraptions such as I had never seen before.

"'Your trouble would soon have reached the chronic stage and would have been very difficult to handle.'

"He stopped, took out a terrible tiny scalpel and began to whet it on his thumb-nail, blinking impertinently at my trembling legs as he did so.

"'Lie down on the bench!'

"This rude command brought a red flush of indignation to my pale cheeks.

Yet I had no choice but to obey, not simply because I was afraid of the fellow—although I was never so deathly afraid of anything in my life—but because I no longer had any command over my own members. So I slipped down on my stomach on the bench. But he squealed at me indignantly—he seemed to take the position I was trying to assume as a deadly insult:

"'Not with your backside up like that! Face up, I tell you! I must get at your face!'

"And when I was slow and clumsy in carrying out his order, he seized me by the shoulder, threw my head back with a jerk, and gazed greedily into my eyes, which suddenly began to water and turn convulsively inward. It was a terrible moment.

"'A very interesting case!' he exclaimed with a grin. 'A spontaneous complex divergence of the ocular field. You should have come to me long ago. This dangerous strabismus——' And he held a little mirror in front of my eyes.

"It was true. I was cross-eyed. I was so impossibly and idiotically cross-eyed that it was incomprehensible to me that I had never noticed it before. I had never had the slightest suspicion that my eyes were not perfectly straight and parallel.

"'Don't be alarmed!' he said soothingly, but with that ghoulish sarcasm in his tone again. 'The operation will scarcely cause any pain at all.'

"At that moment I felt a very disagreeable pressure against the pit of my stomach, a pressure that drove the breath almost completely out of me. Some invisible power—for my cataleptic condition made it impossible for me to turn my eyes at the bidding of my will—held me in my uncomfortable and perilous position. I tried to realize that my last

moment had come. But though I had no power to move my frozen muscles, which had surrendered abjectly to the will of another, though my body lay there waiting supinely for my fate, my mind had not surrendered. Something began repeating inside me, with desperate insistence—"The train **MUST** stop—the train **MUST** stop——'

"My eyelids were propped open and I could no more have closed them than I could have lifted the car. I lay there gazing in agony at the shining blade which was approaching the corner of my eye.

"They will be working together in just a moment now. It is a case of double strabismus. Both eyes turn in. The operation is a little complicated. I shall have to cut the muscles and take both eyeballs out, but I will put them back in a moment just as they were, or rather, just as they ought to have been and weren't."

"Good heavens! He was going to blind me completely, and bleed me to death in the process!

"The awful imminence of my fate all at once gave me the strength to resist. With a fierce yell I leaped to my feet and pushed the creature back.

"The effect of my declaration of independence was astonishing. The old man seemed to shrink into himself, much as I had seen him first, and then—he melted into the air and disappeared. It seemed as if a kind of gray veil floated off out of the window.

"I looked about me in complete bewilderment. The cold sweat was dripping from my forehead.

"The compartment was empty. The train had stopped, out in the open country. I heard the confused sound of many voices arguing, crying, commanding, down on the track below me. Still in a daze, I leaned out of the window.

"A group of men were struggling with

an individual who seemed to be possessed with the desperate strength of a giant. His hat had fallen from his head. It was the long-nosed, skinny bird-head of my late companion. With a dozen hands gripping him firmly, the madman suddenly ceased struggling and squealing.

"I heard an agonizing groan. It came from the train, from the next compartment to mine. I opened my door, stepped out on the running-board which extended along the side of the car, and entered the next compartment.

"On one of the benches, a man lay on his back. His face was covered with a cloth. With a beating heart I drew the cloth away. Two suffering eyes stared up at me from a face which had been cruelly slashed with some sharp instrument—two eyes that turned inward toward the bleeding nose. The poor fellow had the worst case of cross-eyes I ever saw in my life!

"I HAVE never fully understood what had happened.

"The man in the next compartment was not seriously injured, but it seemed impossible to arouse him entirely from a sort of frightened lethargy. After his face had been dressed by a surgeon, he did, in my hearing, stammer a disjointed story about a man who had entered his compartment at the last station, remarked on the unfortunate condition of his eyes, produced a set of instruments, ordered him to lie down on the seat, enforcing his will by some strange hypnotic power—all of this strange and puzzling to the poor fellow's other hearers, but familiar and intelligible to me. Just at the moment when the madman was about to attack his victim's eyes with his deadly little knife (I think I understood from the frightened fellow's stammering and bewildered story), the old man staggered

back as if someone had pushed him violently, made a few vicious passes at the prostrate sufferer's face and nose with his weapon—then, the train having come to a stop, he flung his great handkerchief over the still petrified face, crying:

"There, you can wipe your bloody nose with that!"

"Then he had flung the compartment door open and jumped out.

"I learned more of the story from others.

"The engine-driver had obeyed a signal to stop the train. Train employees and passengers had seen a wild creature leap out of a compartment and storm up and down the parallel track, declaiming that he had been in the act of performing a difficult and helpful surgical operation on a suffering fellow-man, and that while so doing he had been feloniously and brutally assaulted by someone on that train. He was the greatest doctor in all the world, he announced in a piercing squeal, a doctor who could raise the dead if need be, and he was determined to have condign punishment visited on the miscreant who had interfered with his noble work, if he found it necessary to punish him himself with the resources of edged tools, poisons, and deadly gases

which his science placed at his disposal. This blood-curdling eloquence had frightened various old women and little children into hysterics, but the raving creature had been speedily tied up and silenced.

"That, gentlemen, is all I know.

"Who stopped the train, you ask? Well, I thought for a time that the mad doctor had pulled the cord himself, in his determination to secure the punishment of his wicked assailant—who must have been I myself, as far as I can figure the bewildering thing out. But as I put all the evidence together, I arrived at a different conclusion.

"I remembered that while I still lay on the bench on my back, and seemed to see the horrible glittering eyes boring into mine and the bright little knife coming relentlessly nearer and nearer my face, I was conscious that the train was slowing up. I remembered how earnestly, how determinedly, how *commandingly*, something inside me had insisted that the train must stop. And, gentlemen, as sure as I sit here, I believe that *I myself, lying stark and helpless on that seat, without the power to move a muscle, by the sheer force of my desperate, insistent desire, I stopped that train.*"

