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W. T.—1

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The Man on the Platform

By THEODORE TINSLEY

A brief weird tale about a dream that foretold death

ELLA WINSLOW stared at her husband's terrified eyes and tried to smile reassuringly. This can't be happening to Arthur, she thought helplessly; he's too sensible, too matter-of-fact. . . . She said, unevenly, "Eat your toast, dear."

He nodded mechanically, ran a shaky hand through his thick gray hair. His voice frightened her more than his eyes: it was so high-pitched, so utterly convinced.

"But, Ella, the dreams are so real! They always start the same way. Pitch-dark. I can't see a thing. All I know is

that I'm standing on a railroad track, cold with fear. I can hear the hum and click of steel rails and I know there's an invisible train rushing toward me at express speed. No bell, no whistle, not a sound. . . . And then, with an ear-splitting shriek of wind, the train rushes right through my body. And instantly, the darkness is gone—I can see clearly. I'm standing in the center of the track, watching myself on the rear platform of that train as it roars away from me. . . ."

"Drink a little more coffee, dear," his wife said gently.

"There are green bushes along the

track," Winslow muttered. "I can see an upright semaphore to indicate that all's clear ahead. I keep waiting for the semaphore to drop, but it never does. I—I thought at first the semaphore was what I was so afraid of. But it isn't that; it's the door—the platform door."

"Try not to think about it, Arthur."

His shrill voice dropped to a barely audible whisper. "Each time I've dreamed it, I've seen that rear platform door opening stealthily, inch by inch, behind me. I've known that something was trying to come out, something small and persistent. Last night the—the thing came out. . . . It—it was so small, Ella! Its head barely reached to the knob of the door. It stood there on the platform behind that figure of me. . . . Ella, it—it wants to kill me!"

"You've worked too hard lately, that's all. It's not like you. One of the biggest cotton-goods manufacturers in New York; a tall, good-looking son at Yale; our lovely daughter married to a perfectly grand son-in-law; not a single worry in the whole wide world. . . . And you have to invent a silly dwarf in a conductor's uniform to ruin your digestion and—and"—her calm voice quavered—"and frighten me half to death."

"I'm sorry, Ella." He swung her face to his and kissed her, tremulously.

Watching his shaking fingers as they turned the pages of his morning newspaper, Ella thought: "How thin he has become, how horribly nervous!" She had suspected that something was wrong with him ever since that night six weeks before when Arthur had leaped from bed, wide awake, cringing with terror, fumbling for the light button.

"Nightmare," he had muttered with a strained smile, and had pretended to go back to sleep. Ella knew now that it had been only pretense; he must have lain awake for hours in a cold sweat of fear.

He threw his crumpled newspaper on the table. "It's a warning," he said stonily. "Someone is planning to kill me. A—a dwarf conductor with a chalk-white face and round, staring eyes. There was—blood on his face. . . ."

"It's nine-thirty, Arthur," his wife reminded him unsteadily.

Winslow nodded vacantly. She touched his arm finally, and he shrugged, rose stiffly from the breakfast table and walked into the high-ceilinged living-room. He was placing a thin sheaf of typewritten papers in a leather brief-case when the telephone bell rang. The maid who answered it announced that Philip was waiting downstairs with the car. Winslow relaxed. The maid looked at him queerly; it was not like the master to bark at her so gruffly. She came hesitantly toward him and helped him with his coat.

"Wait!" Winslow said suddenly. "Stop a minute!"

The telephone bell was ringing again. "I'll answer it," Mrs. Winslow said. . . . "Why, yes; he's still here. . . . Certainly."

She handed the instrument to her husband. "A long-distance call. From Philadelphia."

Winslow talked for a minute or so and hung up. "It was Harrison Crane, reminding me about that plant merger. The details have been ironed out sooner than Crane expected." He stared at his wife, his face suddenly white. "Crane wants me to—to take the train for Philadelphia immediately."

Mrs. Winslow dropped the last pathetic shred of pretense.

"Don't!" she cried anxiously. "Arthur, don't take that train! The car is downstairs. Let Philip drive you."

"Damned queer, isn't it?" He smiled haggardly. "Last night, the dream. This morning, the train. I have no intention

of taking the train, Ella." His voice hardened. "I'm going to drive to Philadelphia—and I'm *not* going to take Philip. I want to know who's behind the wheel of my car."

He kissed his wife stolidly. When his jaw was set in that fashion she knew better than to talk further.

"I'll remind him casually about my poor health when he returns," she thought. "I'll suggest to him that we're both tired and need a short sea cruise."

WINSLOW drove with a steady hand. He felt newly released, at peace, grimly exhilarated by the cool rush of the wind. He was at the wheel of his own car—not a helpless atom on a speeding train. He was stronger than the puppet in the dream. A man, with the guiding power to make his own choice. . . . He watched the white concrete ribbon of the Jersey road unrolling endlessly beside him. His car rounded a curve and he straightened it with an easy flick of his wrist.

Suddenly his smiling mouth gaped in frozen horror. Straight ahead of him was the face he had seen in the dream.

He screamed hoarsely, threw a terrified arm upward. The car swerved, crashed through a whitewashed fence, rolled over and over through a screen of bushes and smashed upside down on a railroad track.

The shining rails were humming faintly. A train had just roared past. The vanishing rear platform was barely fifty yards away. In the clear sunlight a semaphore signal dropped creakingly from vertical to horizontal. . . .

After a while footsteps came stumbling toward the wrecked automobile. Faces peered underneath at the dead man. A voice said thickly: "One minute sooner, and he'd have run smack into the train. He must have been cock-eyed drunk. I saw the whole thing; the kid on the bicycle was on the right side of the road."

The boy's eyes were round, staring. There was blood on his face. His blue messenger's uniform was soiled and torn. "He didn't hurt me much, but—but he broke my bicycle."

The boy began to whimper.

"He broke my bicycle and it's—it's brand-new. I—I bought it only six weeks ago."

