

THE TILTING ISLAND

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THE historians, when all the mass of contradictory reports had been winnowed out, established the fact that it was Joe Angel, the White Wing, otherwise Giuseppe Angelotti, otherwise No. 964 of the Street Cleaning Department of New York, who first saw it.

It was two hours past midnight of a still, murky summer night. Heat and humidity had settled like a blanket over the city, and a ragged moon swam, melting, in a sullen sky. Joe was wiping his brow with his sleeve as he trundled his refuse pail across 125th Street, just east of Eighth Avenue. The motion, and the dullness born of the heat, prevented him from seeing the crack in the pavement until the wheels of his cart bumped into it. The street was well lighted; he had no difficulty in seeing the crack after his attention had been called to it by the jolt. He stopped and looked at it, puzzled. He had swept that section of the street but a quarter of an hour before, and he had noticed no rift in the asphalt then. It was quite a crack, too—six inches wide, and so long that it ran from a point opposite Kinsman's drug store as far east as Joe could see.

Inspector Rafferty strolled along just then. "Another av thim rotten asphalt jobs," he said. He was turning away, when a snapping, crackling noise proceeded from the break. And immediately it became a cleft. Joe and Rafferty jumped for their lives; the barrow went clanging down into the gap of a two-foot trench. With an uneven rattling like the discharge of a Gatling gun with a rusty cog, the trench widened and deepened. The handles of the barrow sank slowly out of sight.

"'Tis either the sewer or the water main that's gone!" cried Rafferty. But he was crossing himself with a trembling hand which gave the lie to his materialistic explanation. Something in the hot stillness of the night, in the regularity with which the crack widened

and deepened, gave the whole phenomenon a sinister portent. But he gathered himself together and rushed to notify Police Headquarters that 125th Street was falling in.

By the time Rafferty had hung up the telephone, he was aware that the crackling of the breaking asphalt had increased to a booming. There was a strange vibration underfoot, too—not the violent shaking of an earthquake, but a continued disturbance of the earth more haunting and terrible because more persistent. Rafferty hurried out of doors.

A group of men passed him on a stumbling run. Farther on, three street cars were piled up, end to tail. A fourth stopped with a jarring jolt as though it had struck something. And Rafferty saw that the crack had changed in aspect. Not only was it widening, but it had also affected the level of the pavement. The northern side was lower than the street level, or the southern higher—which, it was impossible then to determine. At the point where it neared the car tracks, the rails, lifted from their fastenings, had parted. A flash of electric light illuminated violently all the blockaded cars—and their lamps went out all together. The underground feed rails had snapped.

Among the sleepy, irritated passengers who tumbled out to find the cause for this stoppage of traffic was a stout, Teutonic gentleman—Heinrich Herman, Professor of Geology at Columbia. Though Americanized and a disciplinarian, he still felt at times the old Heidelberg call within, which only much beer and protracted penuchle could assuage. The call had been answered and he was returning to his bachelor quarters on Riverside Drive for a few hours of reparatory sleep.

With an air of ponderous irritation, then, he joined the gaping, pushing crowd which edged that irregular trench along 125th Street. As he stood, there came one of those

slight tremors which had been recurring at intervals ever since Joe the White Wing had first seen the crack. The professor heaved his great bulk against the crowd and pushed forward to the edge of the trench. As he looked, the gap shivered and widened again.

The mouth of the Herr Professor Herman dropped open like the mouth of the trench; then his whole frame stiffened. "Himmel!" he gasped under his breath, "can it be—that which I thought?"

And now a compact line of police was bearing down on the crowd, which, like all street gatherings in New York, seemed bent on thrusting itself obstinately into any danger that might threaten. Professor Herman found himself pushed back with the eddy, whirling away from the official night sticks. Suddenly a new vibration, no longer indefinite, shook the earth, and the whole north side of the street seemed to drop a foot. Only seemed to drop; in reality the south side had risen. The optical illusion (it was afterward explained) was like that of a passenger on a stationary car who thinks that he is moving backward because he sees a car on a parallel track moving forward.

The police line, on the edge of the crack, got the full force of the shock. Lieutenant Tiernan, in command, was thrown off his feet. He jumped up shouting: "It's an earthquake—get them back if you have to kill them!"

Then, as the police rallied and charged, a hissing, streaming sound ran the length of the crack. Immediately from the broken mains a geyser of water and gravel spouted thirty feet in the air and struck the line of police midway. Two more geysers sprang up to right and left; then they died down into gigantic springs which made the street a shallow, but turbulent river.

When the terrified crowd had recovered a little from the shock of this new catastrophe, that happened which drove in the chill. They moved in darkness. The gas and electric lights had gone out. The flying, dancing drops from the river which had been 125th Street flickered only in the faint light of the ragged old moon. And in this darkness they heard the roar of the three dying geysers change to the rush of a cataract. The water main had given way all along its length. The river became a Niagara which coursed through the cross-streets, tumbling and tossing those who had been slowest to run. The police line,

which had reformed and held again, was now quite broken and in the rush of the torrent many men were caught and dashed shrieking against the tottering houses and the iron pillars of the elevated.

Then, a new horror appeared. The electric wires, the telephone and telegraph conduits being snapped, their broken ends came into contact with the twisted street car rails. In a twinkling there was a series of great zigzag flashes. The rivers that had been streets blossomed suddenly with a thousand lambent flames, which no water could quench. As the waters dashed the wires here and there, these flames died and lived again; darted like the fires of St. Anthony. The horses of a milk wagon came floundering into the current of the main river. They struck one of these writhing, flaming spots, and tumbled over so suddenly that the wagon piled up on top of them.

It was by this intermittent glare from the wires that Jimmie Dalton, Harlem Department man for the *Chronicle*, made his spectacular appearance on the scene, as a recognized actor in the tragedy. The Harlem office of the *Chronicle* was on the north side of 125th Street and just about opposite the point of breakage from which the first and central geyser spouted, and Dalton had been trying to get into communication with the city editor. The great stream washed out the office as though ten fire department nozzles rolled into one had been directed against it; and in the washout, Dalton, who was a small man, went along with the ruins of the wooden counter.

He was clinging to this, raft-fashion, and paddling his way toward Eighth Avenue when the geysers turned into a cascade and, from paddling with some degree of individual action, Dalton was carried helplessly away in the rapids. These, as luck would have it, struck the south front of Kinsman's drug store and eddying there, bore him in a wild backwater down Eighth Avenue, and so on into the shelter of an Italian bootblack's stand which was built against the east wall of the Colonial Hotel. Also he dashed against a stout and elderly gentleman who was splashing through the flood.

Dalton's raft hit the stranger violently.

"Care, care! Have a care," said the stranger, "or you will impale me."

Dalton, reporter to the core, noticed that he spoke with a German accent.

A flicker of moonlight shone across the pro-

fessor's face. "Herman of Columbia!" said Dalton. "I reported your extension lectures last spring for the *Chronicle*."

He got to his feet and shoved his raft into the central eddy of the stream. "I guess I can get along without this now. Safe and sound, are you? My God! I wonder what's happened."

Professor Herman stood dripping in the moonlight, something more solemn than terror in his face. "Perhaps I alone know—I of all that see this—what it is that may happen!" His expression changed. "Where can we get a telephone that is working? The newspapers—the whole city—should be notified!"

This practical consideration woke the reporter again in Jimmie Dalton.

"Two-thirty!" he said, "and only five minutes to catch the last edition—it will be an extra if I don't! Wires all down on 125th Street—we'll have to see if the Adams Express Company wire is working."

They splashed down Eighth Avenue. The driven crowd had rallied on the edge of the torrent; Dalton perceived three men dragging a limp form out of the waters. On the edge of the gutter he stumbled against another.

"Two dead, anyway!" he cried. They were now in an outpost of light; for here, it seemed, gas and electricity were not yet affected. The affected district stood like an unlit vacant lot in the midst of an illuminated tenement area. It was Sergeant Farley of the 34th Precinct Reserves who saw the first slinking figures edging their way into the darkened doors. At once he called his men, battered out these undesirables, set up the fire lines back of which the crowd was held, and so, it was afterwards said, averted the looting of the Harlem business district.

The barricade did more than save property, it saved life; for barely had 125th Street been cleared when a sickening, wavelike motion seemed to run from east to west across the whole district south of that thoroughfare, and in that undulation a business house and a fashionable restaurant building on Seventh Avenue quavered and collapsed, while high over the rattle and boom of the falling buildings sounded the sharp alarm whistle of the elevated. Dalton threw a swift glance upward. The luminous mass of a train shone from the structure above them; then suddenly it was blotted out.

"Run!" he cried. "The L is toppling!"

It did not fall then, however. It only shook and buckled to some tremendous strain, and swayed like a rope ladder against the side of a tumbling ship. And then—panic. The crowd, bursting through the police lines broke into knots and scattered in twenty courses of flight. The babble of that fear sounded even from above; the passengers of the elevated, threading a course made dangerous by the twisted structure, were pressing their dreadful way along the tracks to the station stairs.

Save for the police, it seemed that only Dalton and the professor kept their ground. They stood for a time holding each to the other's shoulder and swaying as the crowd swayed about them. But German stability, together with that other mysterious thing which shone in his eyes, held the professor firm. As for Dalton the reporter, his soldier-like sense of duty was simplicity itself,—he must report to his office.

On Hancock Square, a watchman of the Adams Express Company was dragging shut the big door to keep out the panicky crowd. Dalton fought his way to the watchman, whom he knew, and begged for the use of the wire.

"What's the matter—an explosion?" asked the watchman.

"Yes," snapped Dalton, as the shortest way out of it. "Quick—I must get the *Chronicle*!"

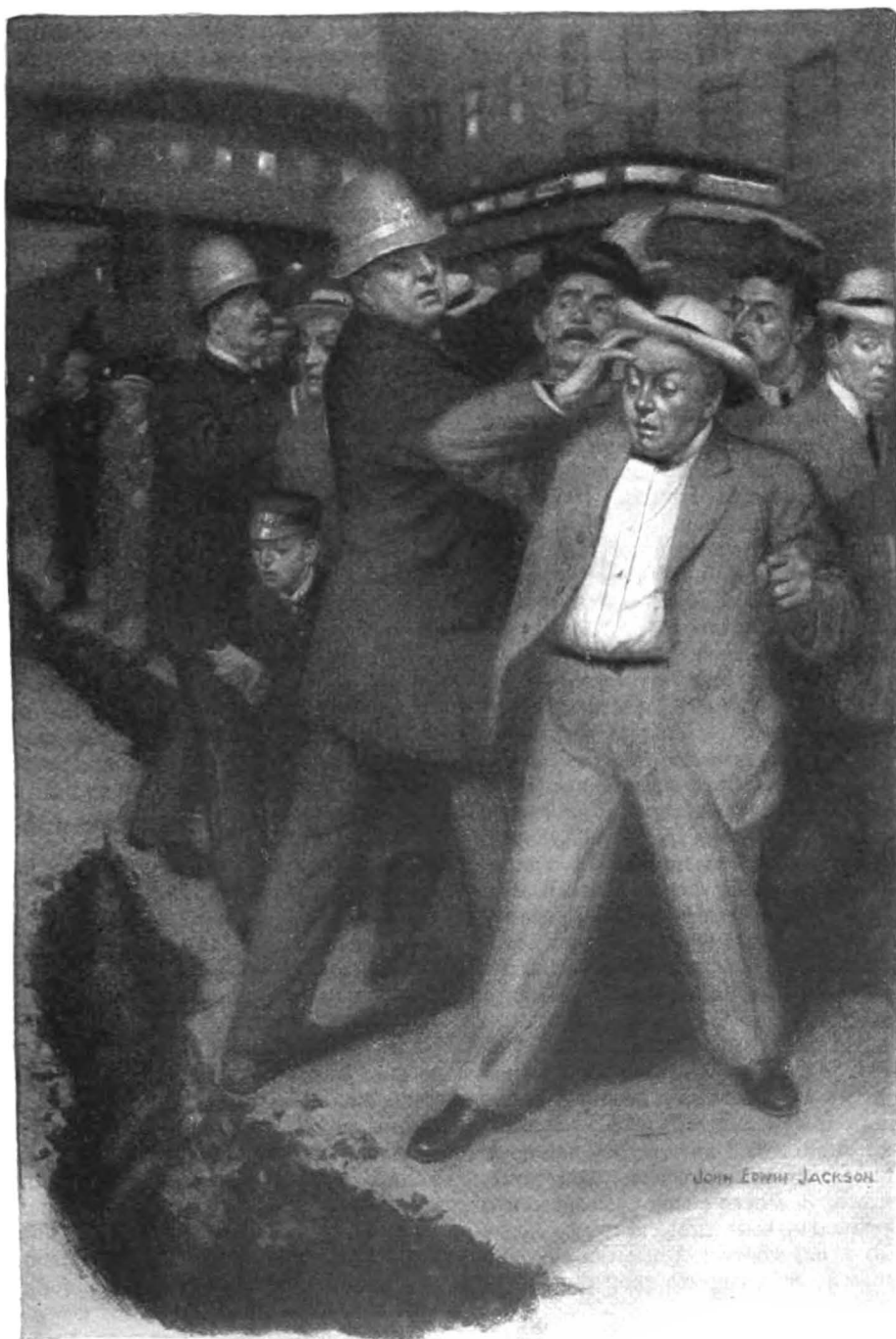
The transmitter, as he put it to his ear, still gave the buzzing which showed that the wire was alive. Yet he was an age getting the office. The watchman and the professor, standing close, each eager for news, heard both sides of the conversation.

"Hello—the city desk—quick—well, I don't care if there is a big story down there, this is a better one. Is this Wilson?"

"No, Perkins—is that Dalton?—For God's sake, get down to the Battery!"

"Wait! I've got a smasher up here. Earthquake or something in Harlem. Houses down, water mains running in the street, lights all off—Hello—must be a lot killed—I saw two—safe to play many dead for the extra—"

"That's a big story," came an agitated voice from the other end of the wire. "But there's a bigger one here. Subway tunnel has caved in or something, and the whole bay is pouring into the hole. Five trains in there—must be dead—Hello—never mind up there—Mr. Wilson wants you at the Battery—no, come to the office—" A dead silence and the



"IT'S AN EARTHQUAKE—GET THEM BACK IF YOU HAVE TO KILL THEM!"

stoppage of all sensation in the wire; and at the same instant the lights which illuminated the great warehouse went out.

Out of the darkness came the professor's voice, sharp, thrilling. "Where are you going now—where do you go now?"

Dalton's voice had a shiver in it. "To the office," he said.

The professor's speech was an explosion again. "You go to your duty—I go, too—to mine!"

"But what has happened?" asked Dalton, as the watchman had asked him five minutes before.

They were outside the warehouse now. From half a dozen quarters came hazes of rosy light, as though dawn were breaking all about the horizon. A fire engine clattered down the street, splashing through the water, bumping upon this obstruction or that.

"Fire!" whispered Dalton. "Why, it's San Francisco over again!"

"Yes," said the voice beside him. "San Francisco and more. Come—if we are to see. Come, let us go! It is too late to warn, but not, I hope, too late to see the end. But we must hasten ourselves."

All southbound lines of transportation seemed broken. The elevated structure down to 110th Street was so badly warped that a stalled train had been left deserted on the tracks just beyond the station, and below that the problem of effecting a shortened traffic by switching the cars had not yet been solved. The Eighth Avenue surface was disorganized as far along Central Park West as one could see; the Lenox Avenue subway was flooded and a man running wildly northward panted out the information that the Broadway tube was jammed, dark and out of running.

"Let us walk," said the Professor, "the further we walk down town the sooner it may be shall we come to some means of transportation. Anyway it will be a Forwards." But as fortune would have it they had not to walk far, for when they reached 110th Street, Dalton, who had been keeping his sharp eyes busy, pointed up Cathedral Parkway. Across its vista a flat-wheeled Amsterdam Avenue car could be seen clap-clapping downtownwards.

"Ah," said the Professor, "evidently the disturbance thus far is very much localized."

Evidently the Professor's ideas of "localization" were drawn on a generous scale, for as the two reached the Cathedral Close and

looked down over the valley of Morningside Park they could see the quick lighting up of the houses, could hear the rush of frightened families into the open slopes of the park as they ran from their quivering homes; while from the blackened area about 125th Street came the dull roaring of an excited multitude, punctuated here and there with the rattle of some explosion, the thud of some falling building, or the sudden leaping of a flame where one of the great fires that devastated so much of Harlem had started. And near at hand out of the darkness there came a dreadful monotone from some crazed man "Prepare ye, for the Day of the Lord is come!" When they reached Amsterdam Avenue eight crowded cars filled with turbulent, wild-eyed passengers, flew past them before they could find squeezing room in the ninth.

"Step lively if you want to get down town," said the conductor, "we're all gone plum crazy up here."

"Do you think," asked Dalton as the car bumped slowly southward "that we are really in for anything like the San Francisco shake-up?"

"No," said the Professor, "I think not. In the case of San Francisco there was a break and consequent subsidence in the earth's crust,—a slip, a displacement that extended downwards, perhaps for miles, and the tremor of which was felt all over the world. Here, there has been but a displacement in a local geological formation."

"You mean that the disturbance is limited to New York?" asked Dalton.

"I mean that I think it is confined to Manhattan Island," said the Professor. "I have made a study of this island for the past fifteen years and in my opinion it is one of the most wonderful geological formations in the world. When some millions of years ago the bottom of the Laurentian Lake rose and spilled out all its waters, the torrent that came rushing south formed the Hudson, carved the Palisades and scoured out the Hackensack Valley. What is now Manhattan Island was then the seaward spur of the range that goes up through Westchester; but in that flood the insecure base of these hills was washed out and the stable summit of the isolated ridge which we call Manhattan settled down like a plate on soft butter. It might have stayed so for as many ages as it had already stood, but for two causes. Through the soft foundation run ridges of rock—and on such a ridge rests the lower part of the island. And at 125th

Street is a fault—you know what that is—a weakness of rock. I knew always of that fault at 125th Street. I knew that if the strain came, and if the fault should break, the island would tip and tilt as though a man had laid his hand heavily upon one side of the plate."

Dalton spoke as a man in a nightmare, ready to believe in any strange fantasy: "But what has broken it—where is the strain?"

"Ah, they could not have believed it—our ancestors! Like Babel we have built. Who thought that we little things could have made an island, a whole island tilt? But we have massed on its end those buildings—twenty stories of steel, thirty stories, forty stories—that is the hand of man on the edge of the plate. Do you see now?"

"But when will the tilting stop? It can go only so far!"

"Ach, that is the question! When the island has slid from its base, it may slide on until the tallest tower we have is below the sea. And if it starts one tidal wave! But let that come, and we shall tip and slide to extinction." He paused here. "The richest tract of ground on the planet—gone, all gone—unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless I am right in my other surmise—and that is a dim hope. I have maintained always there is another fault across the lower island near Cortlandt Street. Salvation may lie in the weakness of that fault!"

At this moment there came one of the periodic shocks. It seemed heavier than the others, but more even. There was no vicious twisting and rasping in it, only a gentle, steady heave. The car stopped with a jerk that threw Dalton and the Professor in a heap on the floor. When they had scrambled to their feet they found that the conductor and motorman had deserted the car and that on the down-town track ahead was a long blockade of other deserted cars. On the other track cars raced up town, crowded with white faced passengers. On the streets were throngs trudging north. The panic march had shifted from southward to northward. And presently Dalton began to resolve the hurrying crowds into their elements, to observe this or that incongruity of dress and behavior, to take mental notes for the story which might never be written: A man wearing an ulster over his pajamas and carrying a French horn; a woman dragging a bureau; a child crying alone; three men carrying from the doorway of a wreck something covered with a sheet.

A figure sitting on a fire plug, his face buried in his hands, attracted him longer; for this one wore the official badge of the Fire Department. Dalton stopped to touch him on the shoulder and ask for news. The fireman lifted his face; he was weeping. "No water!" he gasped; and he buried his face again.

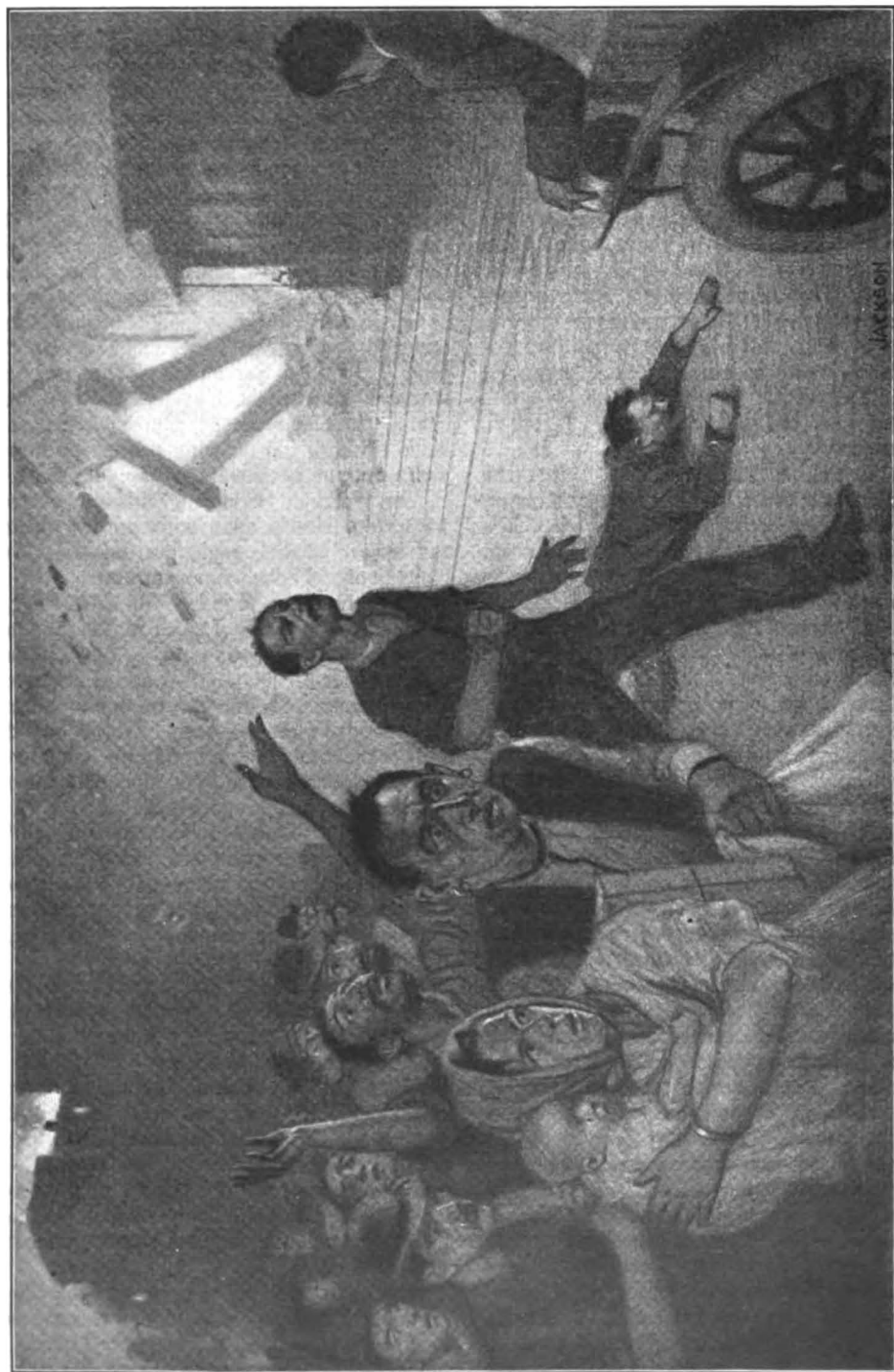
A little runabout had come up the street before them and slowed down to a stop. A popping noise came from its engines. The youthful, bareheaded driver, showing in all his motions the panic which had sent him fleeing away from the fall of a city toward the open fields, jumped down, seized the crank, and turned it violently. Leaping back into the seat, he pulled the clutch. The machine bounded forward a few feet and stopped again. At that moment, a great touring car came through the growing procession of vehicles making northward. The young driver of the runabout signaled with both arms; these were friends, apparently, for the touring car slowed down, took him aboard, and whirled off. Dalton shook himself.

"Gee! Here's a chance," he said, "What do we care for cars? I can run this machine—there's nothing wrong but a stopped feed pipe, I guess." Under the daze which overlaid his senses, Dalton felt his instincts running calm, matter-of-fact. Going to the stalled machine he cut off the tank, unscrewed a section of the feed pipe, blew into it, squinted through it against the bright side of the heavens. "That's all!" he exclaimed. "A clogged feed pipe and a bad case of rattles!" He set the feed pipe back in place, tickled the carburetor, and cranked up the machine. It reverberated full power. "Now to steal a ride!"

Professor Herman had squeezed himself into the left-hand seat before he lifted his eyebrows and inquired: "South?"

Dalton nodded solemnly: "To see it through!" The Professor patted his shoulder. And they two, the only human beings, it seemed, who, knowing that terror and peril lay that way, turned toward the point where the prow of Manhattan was dropping as though it would bury itself in the Bay. They drove south, recklessly, along Amsterdam Avenue.

Indeed, as they traveled on past blocks of damaged buildings, past blocks which stood a-tilt and intact, it occurred to Dalton to marvel at the instinct which drove the crowds northward. He and the Professor alone knew the meaning of this calamity—and he



PRESSING THEIR DREADFUL WAY ALONG THE TRACKS.

himself was only half convinced. Save for those who burrowed in their homes, or fought the sporadic fires, the drift was north, away from the seaward point of the island—always north. The procession, bizarre, outlandish, moved without seeming consciousness of danger or calamity. That was the fearful and chilling thing about it—or would have been had Dalton been susceptible to fear or chill. There was none of the whirl or burr of the accustomed city crowd. Sound itself seemed as dazed as mind. Twice he was aware, by the sudden acceleration of motion in the machine under him, by the rattle of buildings falling at a distance, by the sudden stoppage of movement among the people, that the slipping had continued. After the second of these shocks, the professor said:

"It is a gulf now—that crack at 125th Street. Will that lower fault hold—will it hold!" That was the only word spoken in their passage, except a sharp direction now and then as they turned east or west to avoid the blocks where the pile of fallen bricks and mortar barred the way.

At Fifty-ninth Street, indeed, they had to make a long detour westward to avoid a fire which stretched across Broadway east and west. At Tenth Avenue they found passage, turned toward Broadway again at Thirtieth Street, and struck another fire. So they zig-zagged toward the open space of Union Square, and came out suddenly upon a huddled crowd whose clamors had been reaching them indistinctly for blocks. It lay like a flock of uneasy blackbirds over the whole greenward. Presently, as Dalton slowed down and stopped the machine for very wonder of the sight, the crowd resolved itself into its elements—group on group of men and women and children sitting on bundles, pathetically clinging to their belongings till the last; an ambulance, centering a circle of prostrate figures and guarded by a squad of policemen; a fringe of buzzing, pushing, gesticulating men.

As Dalton looked, some commotion agitated the crowd on the side farthest from them; it manifested itself in a buzzing, sprinkled with shouts. Then two shots; and immediately the police who held the line at the corner nearest them closed up at a word of command and trotted wearily toward the disturbance.

And then the earth heaved again.

Dalton gripped the clutch in instinctive fear that he would be pitched out of the machine. A roar sounded in his ears; he saw the face of

a tall building on the Broadway side tilt, tilt,—and fall. All his senses went out in the crash as the mass met the pavement. He came to himself in a thick, white vapor. By instinct, he fumbled for the reverse to back away. The machine did not respond. All he felt for a moment was irritation that the machine should trick him. Memory returned with a flash—he had stopped the engine—he must get out and crank up. He set his feet on earth. They held firm.

And then the crowd struck. A great Hun, charging in the van, saw this vehicle of civilization. Russian and Pole and Italian tumbled after him toward it. Dalton wriggled away; he caught sight of the Professor scrambling from the other side. Without a word they fell in beside each other; without a word they trudged south. A policeman, his blue coat speckled white with mortar, stopped them. Dalton showed his reporter's card.

"You're a fool if you go on south," said the policeman. "The bridges are gone!" His voice broke. "The bridges are gone!"

Dalton pushed on past him. But this human speech opened his mind to a languid curiosity. "Why are we keeping on?" he asked the Professor.

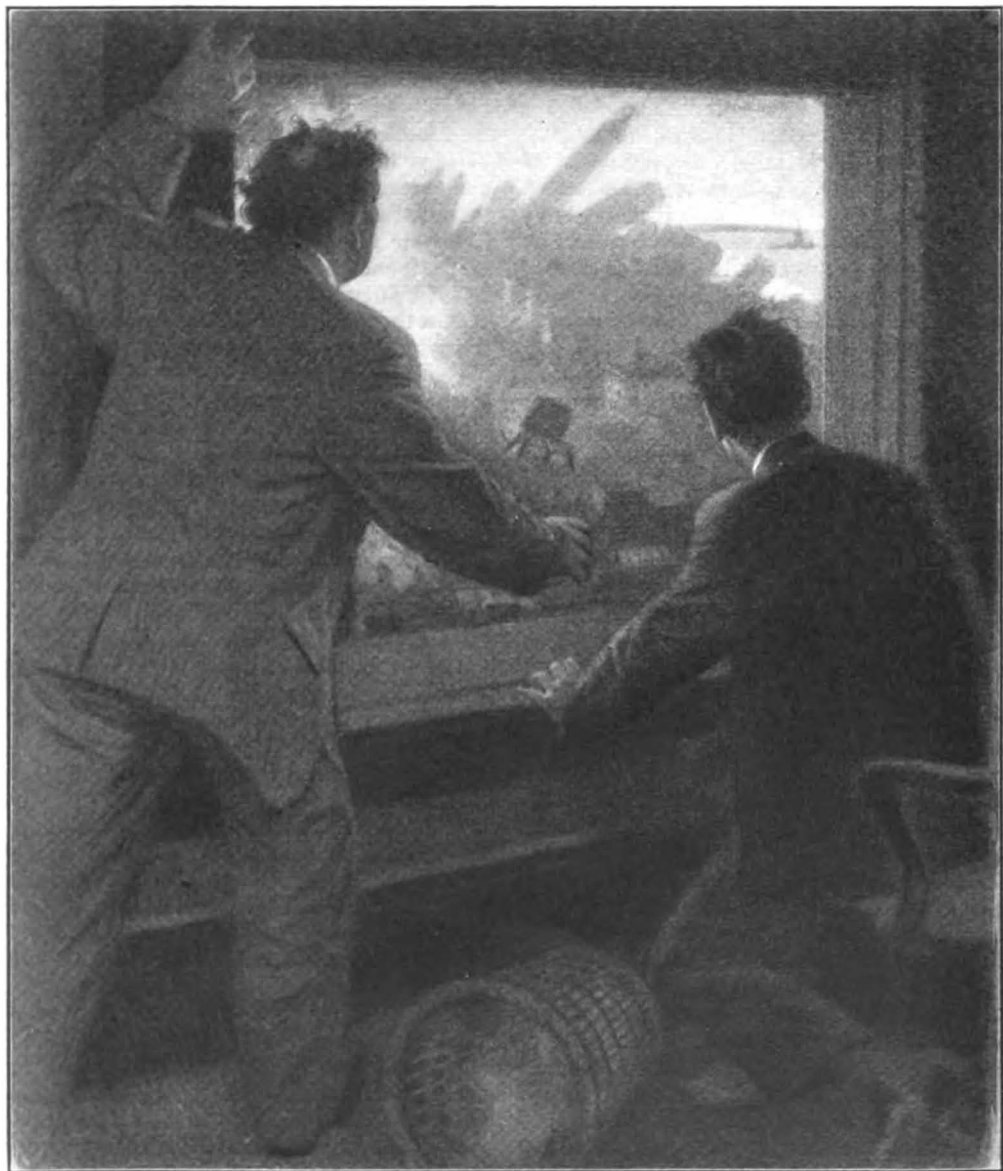
"Well, let them think so," he continued, "I'm on the job."

"That is true and good," said the Professor. "Moreover, when you have feared all, there is nothing more to fear! We know, we two." He threw a gesture back toward the huddled crowd in Union Square. "What if they die sooner or later? We keep on for duty—we see salvation or the destruction of all!"

And presently, out of their nightmare, their confusion of fires and barricades and falling walls avoided, their recurrent stupors when the earth heaved, they were before a great building on Broadway. Its shell remained intact; the work of an honest builder held it firm. Here the professor stopped, and out came one of his Germanic bursts.

"The end or salvation is near!" he said. "How can we see better than from up there?"

Dalton looked up along its fourteen stories. The submerged half of his mind, which had directed hands and limbs and speech, told him how foolish it was, this proposal. The other half, which seemed to govern now, was indifferent. And up the stairs they trudged and panted and trudged on. At the top story, Professor Herman smashed his great bulk against a door. It gave. The windows



"LOOK, MY BOY, LOOK! THE LOWER FAULT HAS BROKEN!"

looked south. Herman threw himself into an office chair and panted; but his eyes searched the horizon. The fires were mostly behind them. Still, a column of smoke which was becoming a cloud rose from the tenement quarter of the lower West Side. Before them lay the mighty skyscrapers, massed like Genii's palaces—great beyond the imagination of man. The Professor dragged Dalton to a window.

"Look!" he shouted, pointing southward

with a vibrating finger. "Look at that congregation of mighty skyscrapers that crowds the lower end of the island. That mountain range of masonry with its towering peaks of copper and its titantic ribs of steel; that mass of millions of tons that has been superimposed on the fragile extremity of the island; that gigantic, horrific mass has broken down one of the outpost foundations of Manhattan and the island is tilting to its destruction!"

"My God!" whimpered Dalton. "Do you

mean that the whole blamed thing will plunge down into the bay at that end and up into the air in Harlem, and then crack to pieces and we'll all go with it?"

"Yes," cried the Professor. "It is the end! It is the end—unless that further point breaks off at the Cortlandt Street fault and plunges to its own destruction. So watch the cataclysm, fill your eyes with the awful wonder of the spectacle. We are seeing that of which we shall never speak again. My young and so strangely met with friend, let us take hands and die like men."

"Will it all be over soon?" whispered Dalton, as he clutched the Professor's free hand. "Gee! but I would like to have said good-bye to mother and Lil."

"One more such vibration," shouted the Professor, as the roof crackled and leaped above them, and a high-pitched roar of dismay came from the streets below. "One more! Then perdition for us all! One more

—unless the saving something happens— And God of Mercy, that something is happening! Look! Look!" he cried, his voice running up into a high falsetto shriek. "Look, my boy, look! The lower fault has broken!"

And Dalton, following the quavery line of the Professor's pointing finger with his own staring eyes, saw that huge mass of skyscrapers with their cyclopean walls, their glistening summits and their deep canyons of shade, quiver and rock and slide and topple into the harbor! Up leaped a monster tidal wave that pared off the docks on both sides of the island, that swamped the huge transatlantic steamers and that swept in over the city to the base of the building on which Herman and Dalton stood and watched the horror below.

But as they watched the waters rolled back, carrying their dreadful burden of dead and debris, one huge tremor ran through the earth from north to south as the island settled back to its level. And Manhattan was saved!