

# THE SPECTRE OF THE SEVERN TUNNEL.

AN EXCITING RAILWAY INCIDENT.

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Illustrated by H. H. Ffrench.

THE train was fast approaching the Severn Tunnel.

I settled myself more comfortably in the corner of the first-class smoking carriage, and glanced at the lamp, glad to find it was burning brightly. A journey is always a wearisome undertaking to me. I am a business man, and grudge the time one spends getting from place to place. On this occasion, however, I was contented. I had left Newport, in Monmouthshire, where I had just spent my yearly holiday, and was returning to my bachelor's quarters in town.

My celibate's life may have made me unsociable, but I confess to rejoicing at the thought that I had procured the apartment to myself for the 150 miles of my journey. I had plenty of papers to help me pass the time, and I was smoking an excellent cigar. What more could any man ask?

Gradually a feeling of drowsiness began to steal over me. The even pulsations of the engine soothed me, and in a few moments my hold on the papers loosened, and I slept profoundly. I was awakened by the prolonged shriek of the engine as we raced down the incline to the entrance of the Severn Tunnel. I jumped up to close the window,

and, as I reseated myself, looked casually at the other end of the carriage. What I saw there made me start and rub my eyes.

Sitting by the window, his shoulder turned towards me, was the dim figure of a man.

How on earth had he got there? Certainly I had the carriage to myself on

leaving Newport. The train had not stopped since. Could he have lain concealed under the seat? Reflection contradicted this idea. On entering the compartment, I had clumsily dropped my umbrella, and had gone down on my knees to pick it up. I could take my oath that there was nobody beneath either seat at the time.

My mind flew to lunatics and escaped convicts. He might have come from some other carriage, and, crawling along the footboard, have opened the door of my compartment, and entered while I slept. Recollection flashed across me that the guard had locked the door before leaving the station. The whole thing was mysterious. All these thoughts had whizzed through my head with the rapidity of lightning.

All the time I kept my eyes earnestly fixed on the figure of my companion. It



"SITTING BY THE WINDOW WAS THE DIM FIGURE OF A MAN."

was not easy to distinguish much about him. The lamp, with which I had been so satisfied a short time before, was now burning unaccountably badly, and the whole carriage seemed full of fog.

As I strained my eyes, the quiet figure began to edge towards me. I say edge, but the word does not in the least describe the almost imperceptible movement. It was very slow, very gliding, and he scarcely seemed to diminish the distance between us.

My eyes must have grown accustomed to the curious light, for I was able to note the peculiarities of my unwelcome fellow passenger.

He was a small, thin man, dressed in a long cloak, evidently a waterproof. He wore no hat, and his hair was nondescript in colour. Harmless as he looked, I began to experience an indescribable feeling of alarm. I am not an imaginative man; indeed, I had always prided myself on my eminently practical way of looking at things. My foolish terror seemed an insult to myself. The man, whoever he was, lunatic or convict, was so much smaller than I, that supposing, improbable as it was, he *did* attack me, I had nothing whatever to fear. My superior size would tell in my favour.

And all this while, reason as I would, I could not arrest the shuddering horror that overcame me as I watched him. I longed to speak, to ask him why and how he came there, but my tongue refused to utter, and break the oppressive silence. With a sinuous movement he still approached me, keeping his head steadily turned away.

From under the flapping sleeves of the waterproof his arms projected, and the sight of his hands, long and white, with square tips to the fingers, and nails bitten below the quick, arrested my attention. They were the most repulsive imaginable. They were never still. I have noticed plenty of people afflicted with St. Vitus's dance, but that is the helpless twitch of disease, and totally different. These long fingers seemed to be crawling, creeping, smoothly and with a fixed purpose. My imagination certainly played me some odd tricks, but it seemed to me as if those horrible hands were animated with a separate intelligence of their own. They were like ravenous animals, restlessly awaiting their prey.

And all the time the man edged nearer. My self-control was leaving me, and I sat

paralysed with fear. He had now reached the middle seat, and in a moment he would be touching me. With a desperate effort I seized the elbow rest which divided the seats one from the other, and pulled it down. That would stop him.

But no. He moved slowly on, and as his cloak brushed my barrier, without so much as his touching it with those dreadful hands, it flew back to its place in the cushions.

At that the little courage I had remaining, left me. I was unable to make any attempt to touch the communication cord, but sat huddled up in the corner, trying to squeeze myself farther away.

Nearer and nearer came the figure, nearer and nearer, and all the air around grew cold and damp.

Then, as he touched me, the head turned slowly, and I saw the face. A small white face, with pale eyes, and an expression in them which I dare not think of, lest I go mad.

Then swiftly the long hand shot out, and caught my throat, and beneath the clammy touch of those crawling fingers my flesh crept with repulsion. For it was not the touch of a living man.

The grasp of the hand tightened, the face came closer, scrutinising mine, the chill moisture enveloped me. I was suffocating.

Something awoke within me. By Heaven, that Evil Thing should not work its will unresisted! I struggled to thrust it from me. My strength was no more than a child's, and the hand at my throat remained as before. Only the head was thrown back, and the horrid features were convulsed with ghastly, silent laughter. As I realised the new horror of that soundless mirth, a shriek burst from my lips, and at the same moment the lamp flickered and went out.

Then my senses left me.

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Where was I? I asked myself, as I opened my eyes, and looked at the ceiling of the railway carriage and the extinguished lamp. The sun was shining brightly through the windows, giving quite a cheerful look to the dusty compartment. Sudden recollection flashed across me, and with a shuddering cry I sprang to my feet. There were no signs of my terrible travelling companion. Outside it was no longer country. We were flying through the suburbs of London. My faint had

lasted long. Could it have been a dream, some dreadful hallucination of the brain? As I stood wondering, my eyes fell on the cushion on which I had sat. In my fall to the floor it had been dislodged. What were those dark marks on the seat below? I turned the cushion, and saw the same marks repeated. Stains, of course, but caused by what?

As we approached Paddington I rose, and endeavoured to smooth my dress, and arrange my tie by aid of the glass under the parcel rack. My collar was torn. On my neck were five blue marks, finger marks I think.

Presently we steamed into the station, and I was forced to collect my wits sufficiently to take a hansom and drive to my rooms. For several days I was the victim of nervous prostration; then I wrote to my friend the managing-director of the railway, telling him the story, and begging him to come and see me. He complied at once, and made me repeat my adventure. As I finished I paused for the expressions of incredulity. None came.

"Are you sure you have the number of the carriage correct?" he asked.

I assured him that it was so.

"Your story," he said, gravely, "is most extraordinary, but I must tell you that there is a curious coincidence connected with it. Do you remember a murder that occurred in the train some months ago? No? Well, it happened in the Severn Tunnel. It was perpetrated by a small, pale man in a waterproof. I don't wonder you start. The victim was a wealthy old man, who had an unaccountable fancy for carrying his valuables loose in a bag. He was found murdered when the train reached Paddington. The small man had disappeared. After

some weeks he was traced. He had jumped from the train, bag in hand, and was careless in the way he disposed of the stolen property. The murder took place in the identical carriage in which you travelled.

"But now comes the remarkable part of the story. The day on which you travelled, the murderer paid the penalty



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of his crime. He was hanged that morning."

"Now," said my friend, after a pause, "are there any questions you wish to ask?"

"No, thank you," I said, slowly. I had heard enough for one day.