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NIGHTS OF TERROR



CLASSICS *Illustrated*

Featuring Stories by the
World's Greatest Authors

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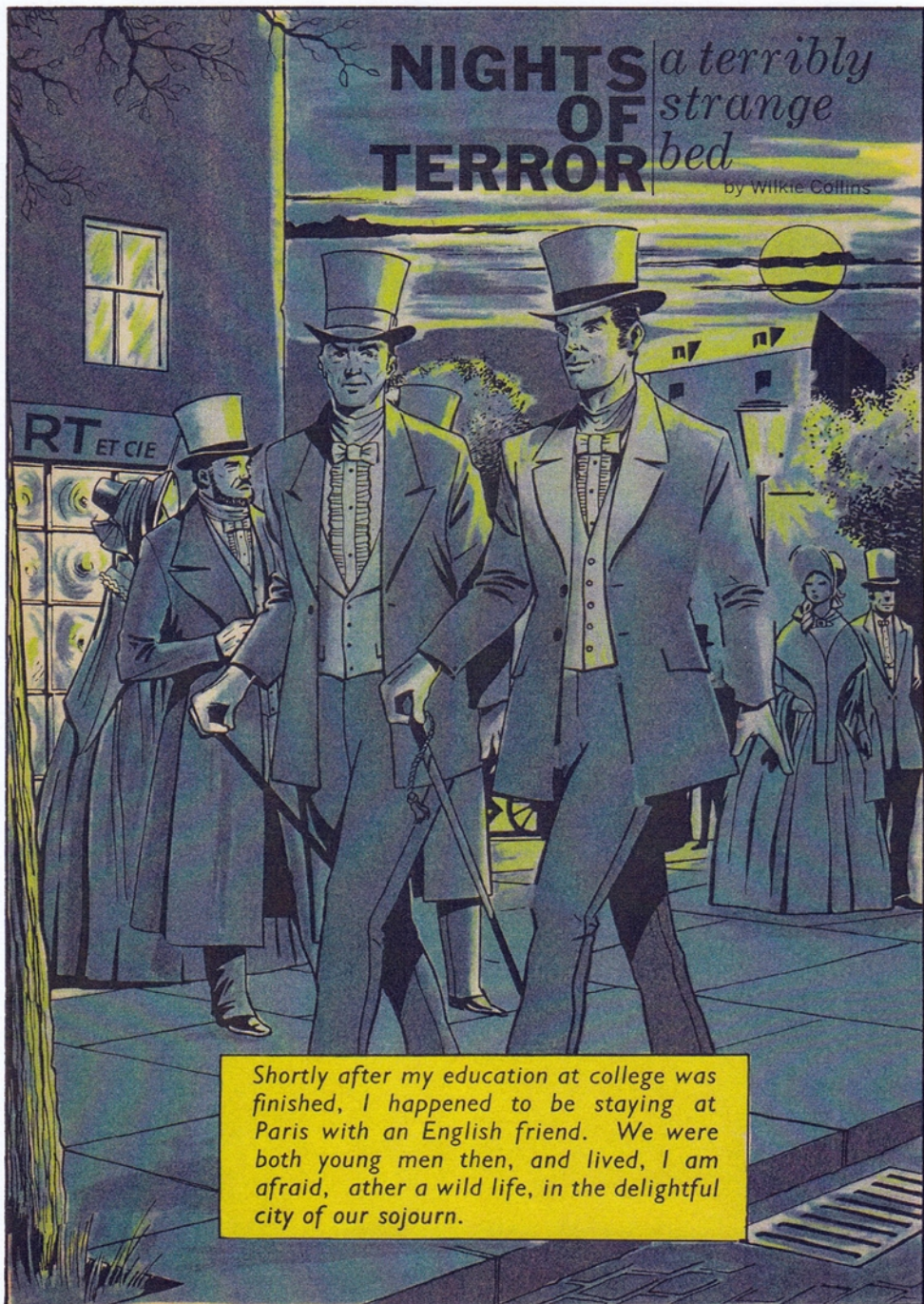
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NIGHTS OF TERROR

*a terribly
strange
bed*

by Wilkie Collins



Shortly after my education at college was finished, I happened to be staying at Paris with an English friend. We were both young men then, and lived, I am afraid, rather a wild life, in the delightful city of our sojourn.

One night we were idling about the neighbourhood of the Palais Royal, doubtful to what amusement we should next betake ourselves.

Perhaps a visit to Frascati's?

Not to my taste. I know that place by heart. It is amusement no longer.



I was thoroughly tired of all the ghastly respectabilities of a respectable gambling-house.

For Heaven's sake, let us go somewhere with no false gingerbread glitter thrown over it all. Let us get away to a house where they don't mind letting in a man with a ragged coat.



My friend motioned with his stick.

Very well. We needn't go far to find the sort of company you want. There's such a place just before us, as blackguard a place as you could wish to see.



In another minute we arrived at the door and entered the house.



When we got upstairs, we were admitted into the chief gambling-room.



We had come to see blackguards, but these men were something worse. Here there was nothing but tragedy—mute, weird tragedy.

The quiet in this room is horrible.



The thin, haggard, long-haired young man, whose sunken eyes fiercely watched the turning up of the cards, never spoke.



The flabby, fat-faced player, who pricked his piece of pasteboard to register how often black won and how often red, never spoke.



The dirty, wrinkled old man, with the vulture eyes and the darned greatcoat, who had lost his last sou, and still looked on desperately, after he could play no longer—never spoke.



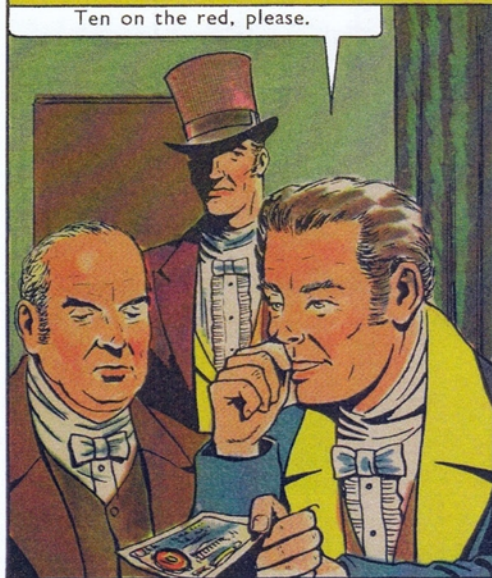
Even the voice of the croupier sounded as if it were strangely dulled and thickened in the atmosphere of the room.

Gentlemen, place your bets.



I soon found it necessary to take refuge in excitement from the depression of spirits which was fast stealing on me. I sought the nearest excitement by beginning to play.

Ten on the red, please.



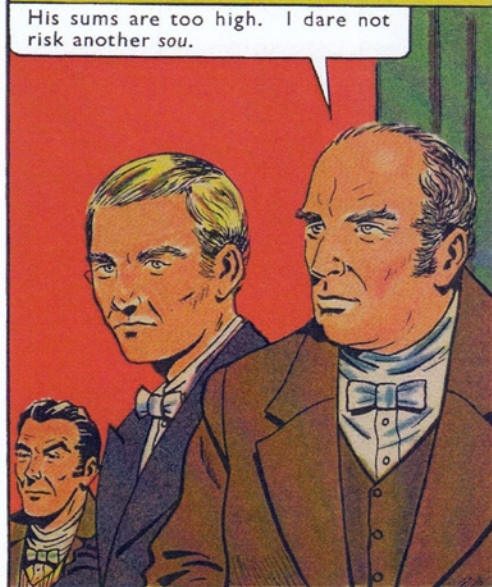
I won—won at such a rate that the regular players crowded round me. Staring at my stakes with hungry, superstitious eyes, they whispered to one another.

The English stranger is going to break the bank.



My success intoxicated me. At first, some of the men ventured their money safely enough on my colour. But I increased my stakes.

His sums are too high. I dare not risk another sou.



I staked higher and higher, and still won. The excitement in the room rose to fever pitch. Even the croupier dashed his rake on the floor in a fury of astonishment at my success.

Incredible!



One man present preserved his self-possession — my friend. He came to my side.

Leave this place, now. Be satisfied with what you have already gained.



He left me and went away. Shortly after he had gone, a hoarse voice cried behind me.

Wonderful luck, sir! I never saw such luck as yours! Go on, sir—go on boldly, and break the bank!



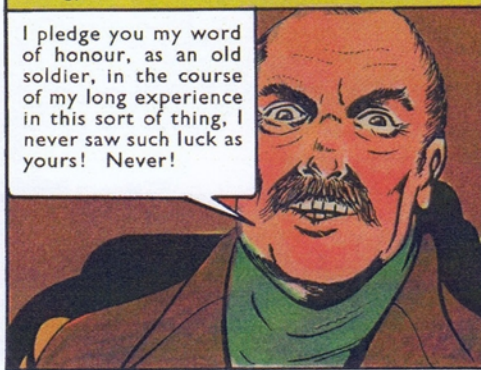
He repeated his warnings and entreaties several times. But I rejected his advice.

Never. There is still more to be won. I will break the bank!



I turned round and saw, nodding and smiling at me, a tall man with goggling bloodshot eyes, mangy moustachios, and a broken nose.

I pledge you my word of honour, as an old soldier, in the course of my long experience in this sort of thing, I never saw such luck as yours! Never!



If I had been in my senses, I should have considered him as being rather a suspicious specimen of an old soldier. But in the mad excitement, I was ready to fraternise with anybody.

You are the most honest person in the world! You are the most glorious relic of the Grand Army I have ever met!

Go on! Play! Win! Break the bank, my gallant English comrade, break the bank!



I did go on—went on at such a rate, that in another quarter of an hour the croupier called out.

Gentlemen! The bank has discontinued for tonight!



All the notes and all the gold now lay in a heap under my hands.

Tie up the money in your pocket-handkerchief, my worthy sir. Tie it up, as we used to tie up a bit of dinner in the Grand Army.



I began to do so.

That's it! Shovel them in, notes and all! What luck!



Now, as an ex-brave of the French Army, what remains for me to do? Simply this: to entreat my valued English friend to drink champagne with me, and toast the goddess Fortune.



The champagne was brought.

Behold it! Toast away! The French Army! The great Napoleon! The present company! The croupier! Everybody in the world!



By the time a second bottle was emptied, I felt as if I had been drinking liquid fire—my brain seemed all aflame.

Ex-brave of the French Army! I am on fire! How are you? Let us have a third bottle to put the flame out!



The old soldier wagged his head, rolled his goggle eyes, then placed his dirty forefinger by the side of his broken nose.

No more. Coffee!



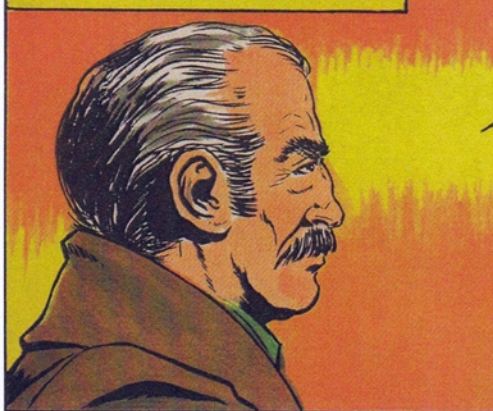
The word seemed to have a magical effect on the rest of the company present. With one accord, they went away in a body.



The old soldier sat down opposite to me. We had the room to ourselves. The silence was now deeper than ever.



A sudden change, too, had come over the ex-brave. He assumed a solemn look.



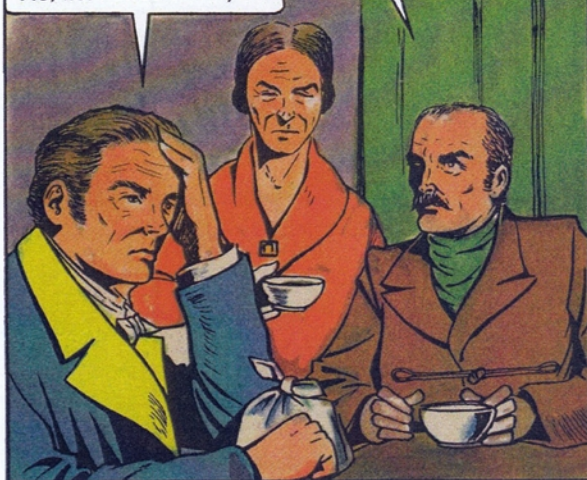
Listen, my dear sir. You must drink some coffee in order to get rid of your little amiable exaltation of spirits before you think of going home. It is a sacred duty to yourself to have your wits about you.



The mistress of the house brought the coffee in, ready poured out in two cups. In mysterious tones, the old soldier talked on.

You are known to be a winner by several gentlemen present tonight, who have their amiable weaknesses. Need I say more?

No, no. I understand you.



Good. Now, this is what you must do—send for a cabriolet when you feel quite well again—draw up all the windows when you get into it—and tell the driver to take you home only through the well-lighted thoroughfares.



My attentive friend handed me one of the cups.

Do what I say, and you and your money will be safe. Tomorrow you will thank an old soldier for giving you a word of honest advice.



I was parched with thirst, and drank the coffee off at a draught. Almost instantly afterwards, I was seized with a fit of giddiness. The room whirled round and round. I rose from my chair.

I feel dreadfully unwell—so unwell I don't know how I am to get home.



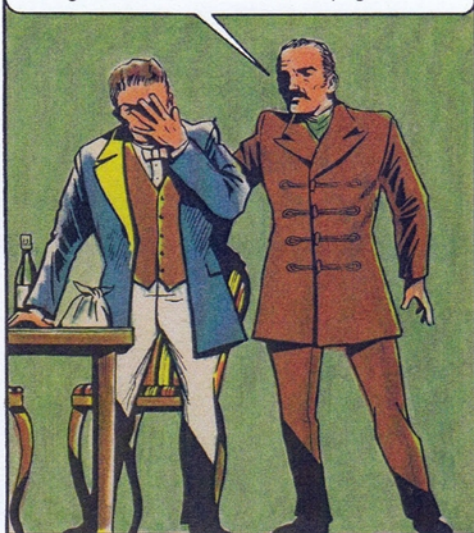
The old soldier seemed to be regularly bobbing up and down before me like the piston of a steam-engine.

My dear friend, it would be madness to go home in your state. You would be sure to lose your money. You might be robbed and murdered with the greatest ease.



The old soldier came beside me.

I am going to sleep here: do you sleep here, too. Sleep off the effects of the wine, and go home safely with your winnings tomorrow in broad daylight.



I agreed to the proposal, and took the offered arm of the soldier, carrying my money with my disengaged hand. Preceded by the croupier, we passed along some passages and up a flight of stairs.



We entered the bedroom which I was to occupy. The ex-brave shook me warmly by the hand.

Have a safe night's rest, and in the morning we shall have breakfast together.



The soldier, followed by the croupier, left me for the night. I ran to the wash-hand stand, drank some of the water in my jug, poured the rest out, and plunged my face into it.



Then I sat down in a chair and tried to compose myself.

Should I risk sleeping all night in a gambling-house, or going home with a large sum of money?



The giddiness left me. I began to feel like a reasonable being again. I had slept in worse places, so I determined to lock, bolt, and barricade my door.



I secured myself against all intrusion, looked under the bed, into the cupboard, and tried the fastening of the window.



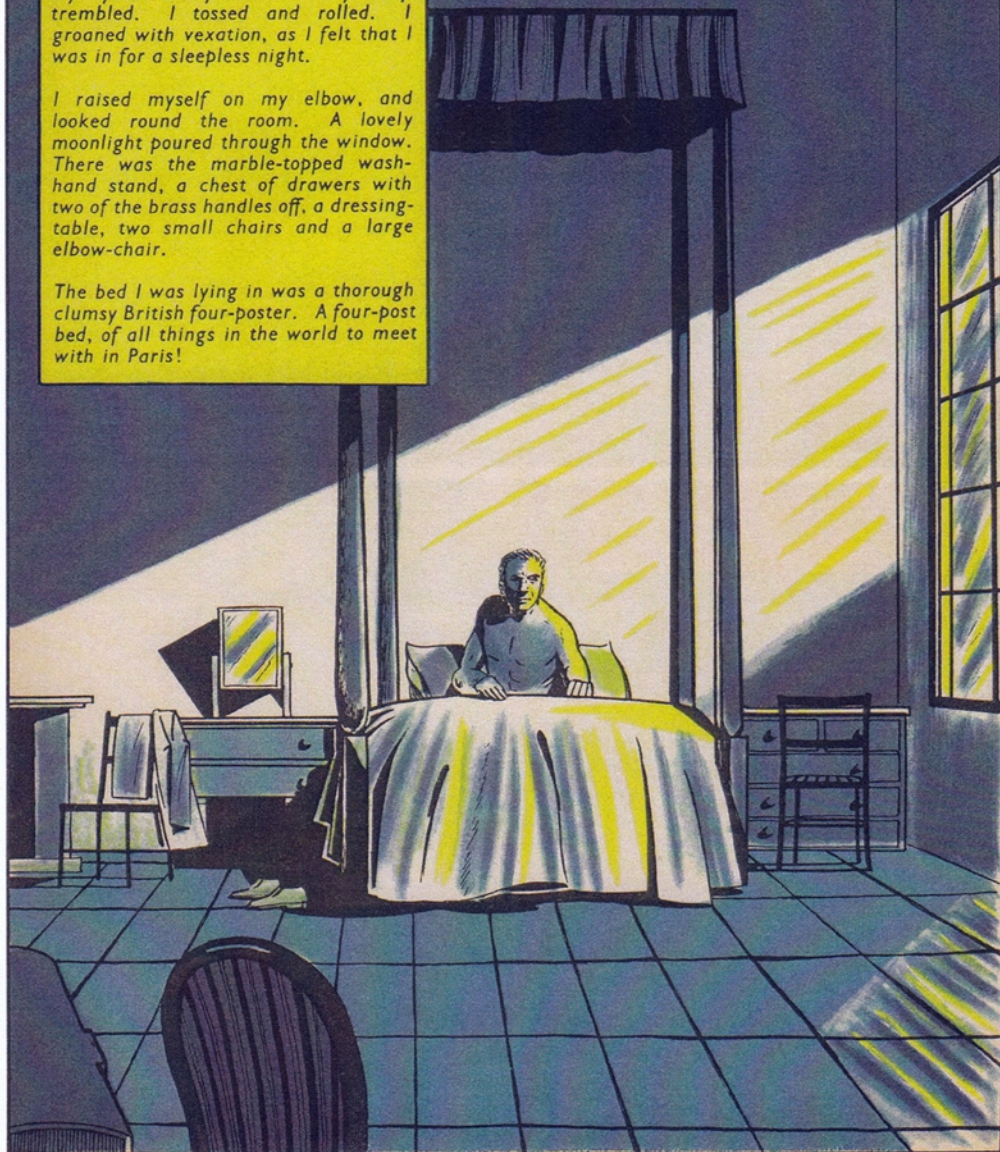
Satisfied that I had taken every precaution, I pulled off my clothing and got into bed, with the handkerchief full of money under my pillow.



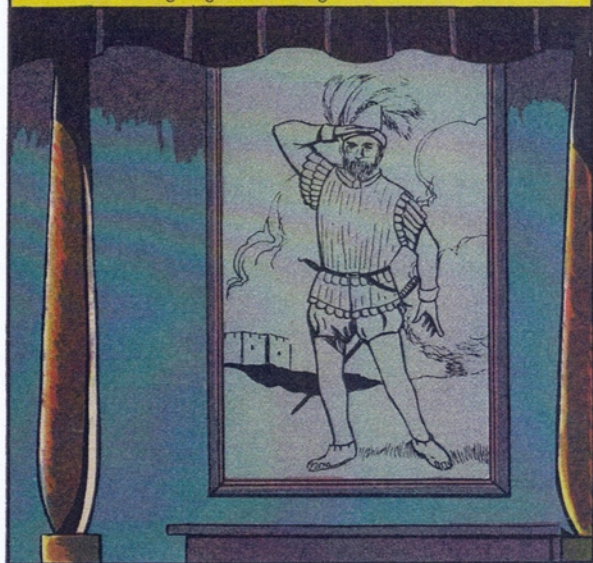
I soon felt not only that I could not go to sleep, but that I could not even close my eyes. Every nerve in my body trembled. I tossed and rolled. I groaned with vexation, as I felt that I was in for a sleepless night.

I raised myself on my elbow, and looked round the room. A lovely moonlight poured through the window. There was the marble-topped wash-hand stand, a chest of drawers with two of the brass handles off, a dressing-table, two small chairs and a large elbow-chair.

The bed I was lying in was a thorough clumsy British four-poster. A four-post bed, of all things in the world to meet with in Paris!



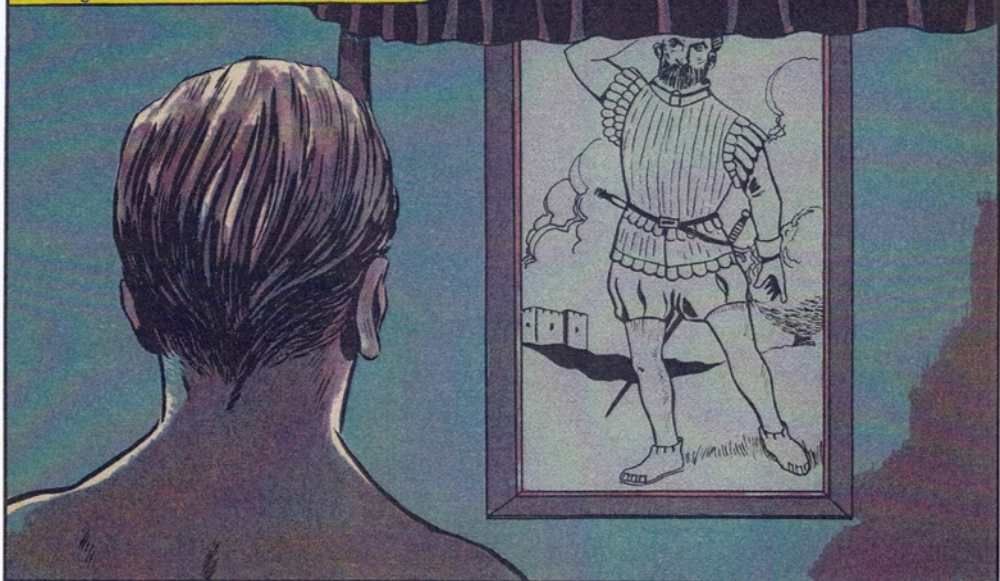
On the wall across from me was a dark old picture, the picture of a fellow in a high Spanish hat, crowned with a plume of towering feathers—a swarthy sinister ruffian looking intently upwards, it might be at some tall gallows at which he was going to be hanged.



My thoughts insensibly began to wander. The moonlight reminded me of a certain moonlight night in England—the night after a picnic party in a Welsh valley.



In an instant, I found myself looking hard at the picture again. Good God! The hat was gone! Not there! Was the bed moving?



I turned on my back and looked up. Was I mad? Dreaming? Giddy again? Or was the top of the bed sinking slowly, silently, horribly, right down upon me, as I lay underneath?



My blood seemed to stand still. A deadly coldness stole all over me. I turned my head to look again at the man in the picture. The dull black outline of the valance was within an inch of being parallel with his waist.



Steadily, and slowly—very slowly—I saw the figure, and the line of frame below the figure, vanish, as the valance moved down before it.



I looked up, motionless, speechless, breathless. The bed-top was steadily and continuously sinking down upon me, advancing closer and closer to suffocate me where I lay.



The candle, fully spent, went out. But the moonlight still brightened the room. Down and down came the bed-top. My panic-terror seemed to bind me faster to the mattress on which I lay.



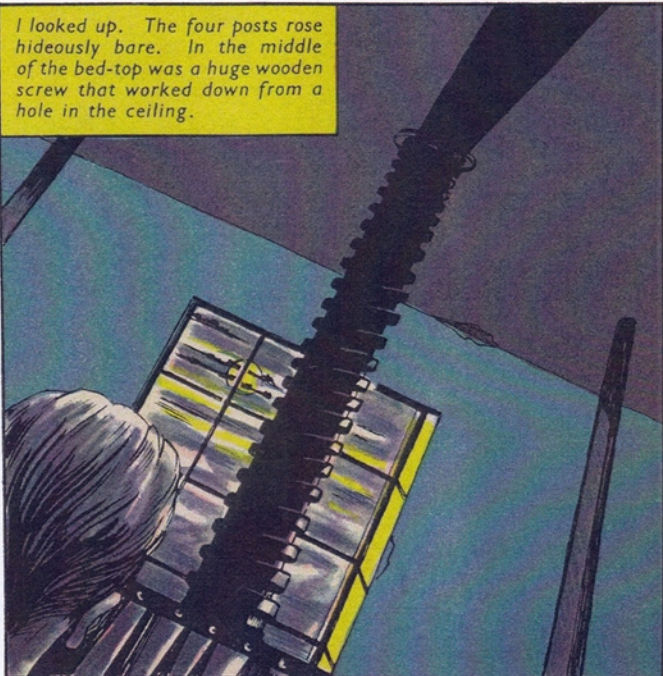
The dusty odour from the canopy came stealing into my nostrils. At that final moment, I moved at last. There was just room for me to roll myself sideways off the bed.



I rose instantly on my knees to watch the bed-top. The whole canopy, with the fringe round it, came down so close that there was not room now to squeeze my finger between the bed-top and the bed.



I looked up. The four posts rose hideously bare. In the middle of the bed-top was a huge wooden screw that worked down from a hole in the ceiling.

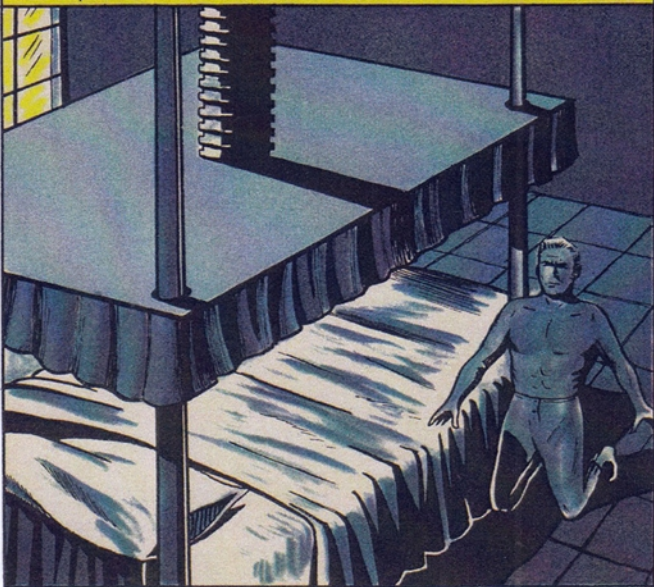


Amid a dead and awful silence I beheld a machine for secret murder. I could hardly breathe, but I began to recover the power of thinking.

The coffee was drugged, but drugged too strongly. I've been saved by having taken an overdose of some narcotic.

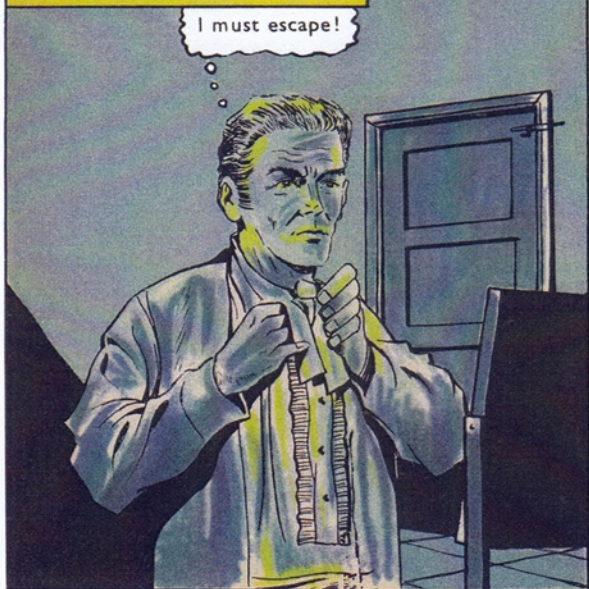


But all thought was again suspended by the sight of the murderous canopy moving once more to its former place. The villains who worked it from above evidently believed their purpose was now accomplished.



For the first time, I was able to rise from my knees and dress myself.

I must escape!



To think of escaping through the house was sheer insanity. Only one chance was left me—the window. I stole to it on tiptoe.



I opened the window and looked down into the street. To leap the distance beneath me would be almost certain destruction!



But passing close to the window was a thick water-pipe.



I remembered the handkerchief filled with money under my pillow. I went back to the bed and tied the heavy handkerchief at my back by my cravat.



The next moment I was on the window-sill and the next I had a firm grip on the pipe with my hands and knees.



I slid down into the street and set off at the top of my speed to a branch Prefecture of Police that I knew was in the neighbourhood.



At the Prefecture I began my story in a breathless hurry. Before I had anything like concluded, the Sub-prefect shoved all the papers before him into a drawer.

We will go at once. Leave your money here.



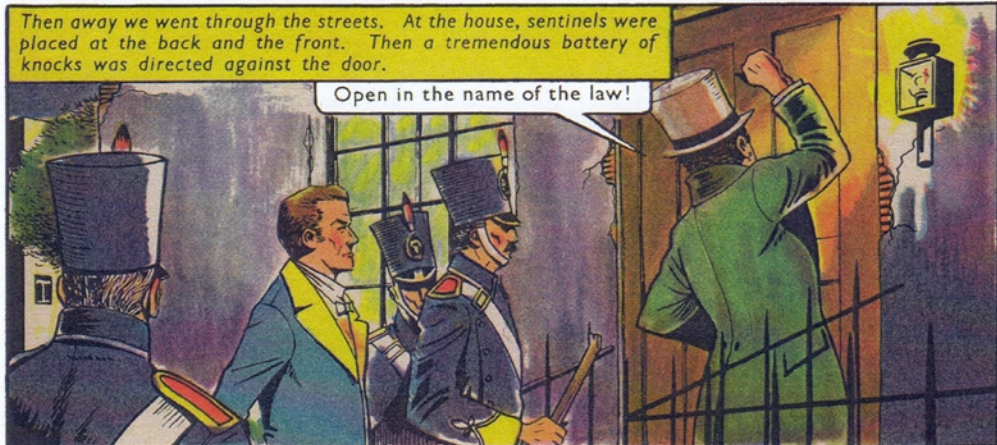
The Sub-prefect ordered a file of soldiers.

Get ready any tools we have for breaking open doors and ripping up brick-flooring.



Then away we went through the streets. At the house, sentinels were placed at the back and the front. Then a tremendous battery of knocks was directed against the door.

Open in the name of the law!



The moment after, the Sub-prefect was in the passage, confronting the ghastly pale waiter.

We want to see the English man who is sleeping in this house.

He left hours ago.



He did no such thing. His friend went away. He remained. Show us to his bedroom!



Everyone in the house was secured—the old soldier the first. Then I identified the bed in which I had slept.

That is the one, sir. The bed-top moved down.



Then we went into the room above. No object that was at all extraordinary appeared in any part of it. The Sub-prefect looked round.

Everybody be silent.



He stamped twice on the floor, then looked attentively at the spot he had stamped on.

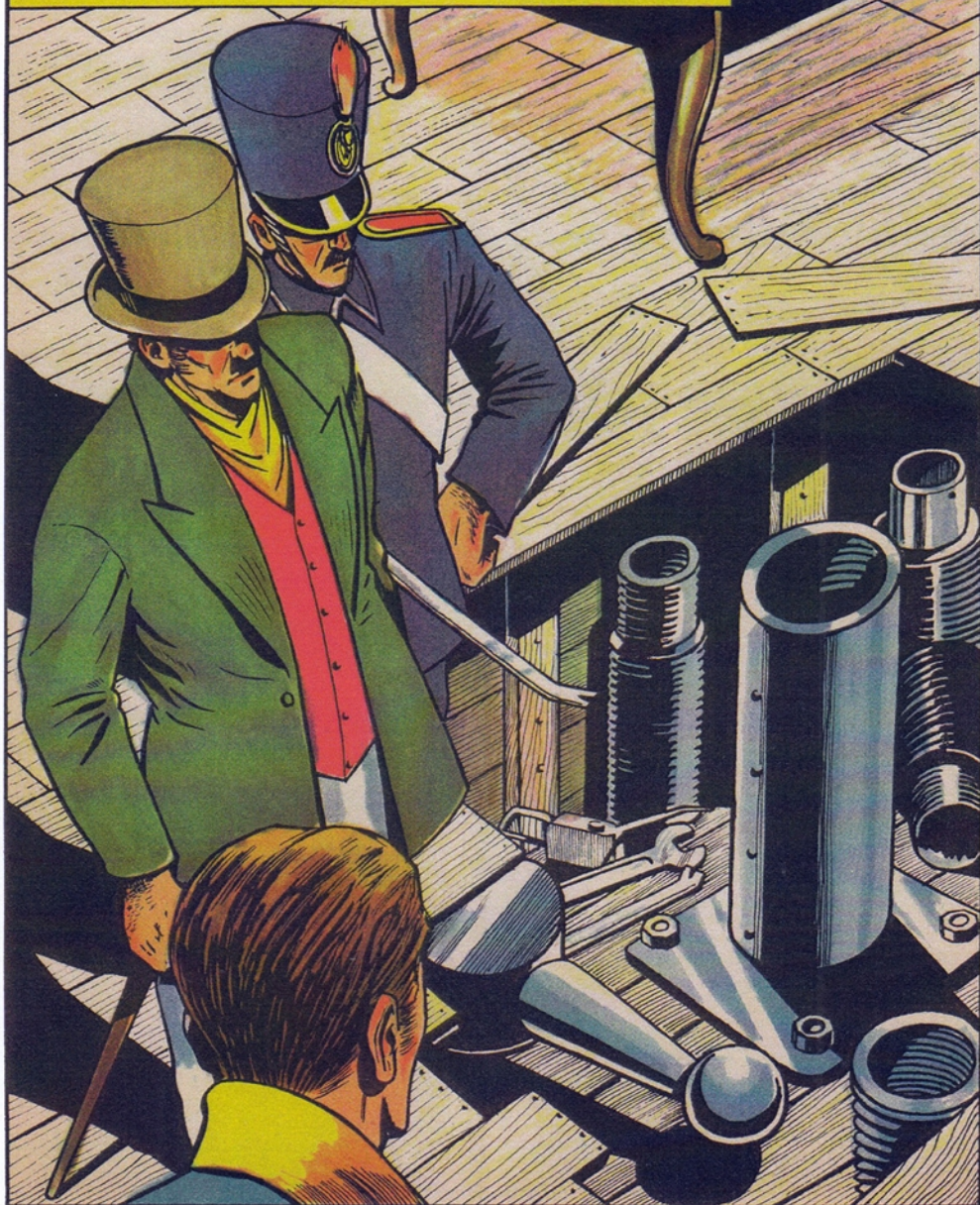
Rip up the flooring here.



This was done in no time.



We saw a deep rafted cavity between the floor and the ceiling of the room beneath. Through this cavity there ran a sort of case of iron thickly greased. Inside the case appeared the screw, which communicated with the bed-top below. Extra lengths of screw, freshly oiled—levers covered with felt—all the complete upper works of a heavy press lay beside the case.



After some difficulty, the police succeeded in putting the machinery together.

Begin working it. I will go into the bedroom below and watch.



I descended with the Sub-prefect. The smothering canopy was then lowered, but not so noiselessly as I had seen it lowered.

It came down as silently as a feather dropping.



The Sub-prefect's answer, simple as it was, had a terrible significance.

My men are working down the bed-top for the first time—the men whose money you won were in better practice.



Every one of the inmates of the house were removed to prison on the spot. The Sub-prefect returned with me to my hotel.

Do you think that any men have really been smothered in that bed, as they tried to smother me?



No man can say how many or how few have suffered the fate from which you have escaped. The people of the gambling-house kept their bedstead machinery a secret from us. The dead kept the rest of the secret for them.



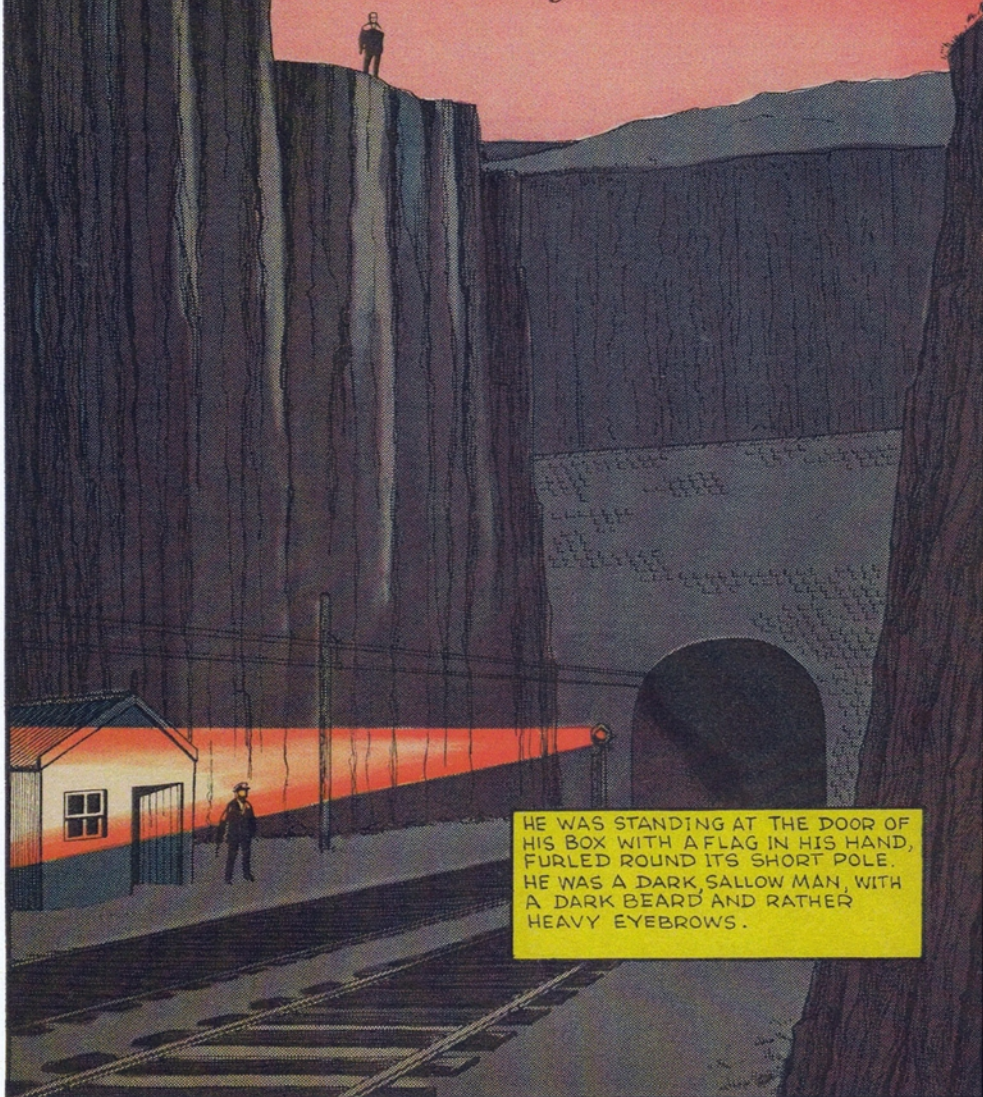
The rest of my story is soon told. The Old Soldier was master of the gambling-house. He had been drummed out of the army as a vagabond years ago. He, the croupier, the waiter, and the woman who had drugged my coffee, were all in the secret of the bedstead. The Old Soldier and his two head ruffians went to galleys. The woman was imprisoned for I forget how many years. And my adventure cured me of ever again gambling. The sight of a green cloth, with packs of cards and heaps of money on it, are forever associated in my mind with the sight of a bed-canopy descending to suffocate me in the silence and darkness of the night.



THE END

The Signalman

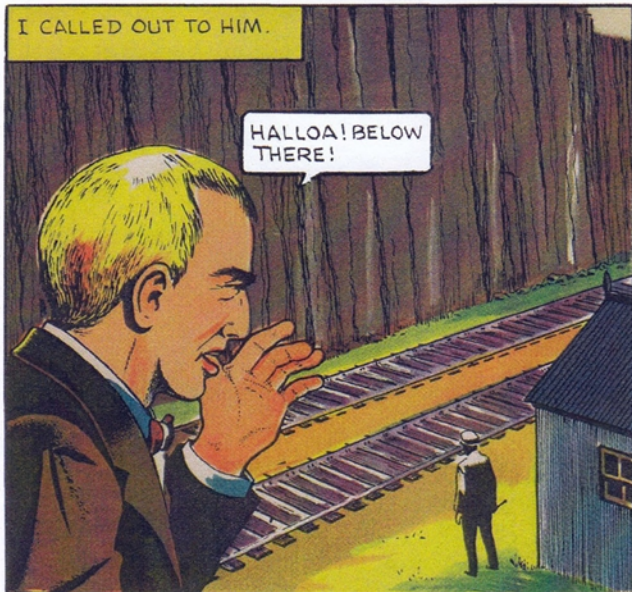
by Charles Dickens



HE WAS STANDING AT THE DOOR OF HIS BOX WITH A FLAG IN HIS HAND, FURLED ROUND ITS SHORT POLE. HE WAS A DARK SALLOW MAN, WITH A DARK BEARD AND RATHER HEAVY EYEBROWS.

I CALLED OUT TO HIM.

HALLOA! BELOW THERE!

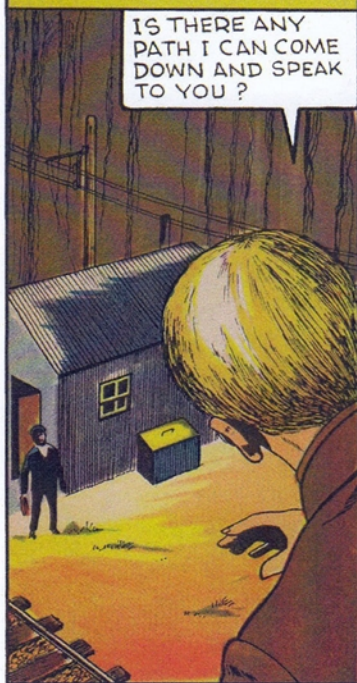


ONE WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THAT HE COULD NOT HAVE DOUBTED FROM WHAT QUARTER THE VOICE CAME. INSTEAD, HE TURNED HIMSELF ABOUT AND LOOKED DOWN THE LINE.



I CALLED AGAIN. RAISING HIS EYES, HE SAW MY FIGURE HIGH ABOVE HIM.

IS THERE ANY PATH I CAN COME DOWN AND SPEAK TO YOU?



HE LOOKED UP AT ME WITHOUT REPLYING. HE MOTIONED WITH HIS FLAG TOWARDS A POINT TWO OR THREE HUNDRED YARDS DISTANT



I FOUND A ROUGH ZIGZAG DESCENDING PATH. WHEN I CAME DOWN LOW ENOUGH, HE WAS STANDING BETWEEN THE RAILS, HIS LEFT HAND AT HIS CHIN.



AT LAST I DREW NEAR TO HIM. SO LITTLE SUNLIGHT EVER FOUND ITS WAY TO THIS SPOT, THAT IT HAD A DEADLY SMELL.

THIS IS A LONESOME POST TO OCCUPY, SIR. THE SIGNAL LIGHT IS PART OF YOUR CHARGE, IS IT NOT?

I DETECTED IN HIS EYES SOME LATENT FEAR OF ME. HE ANSWERED IN A LOW VOICE.

DON'T YOU KNOW IT IS?

I FORCED A SMILE.

YOU LOOK AT ME AS IF YOU HAD A DREAD OF ME.

I WAS DOUBTFUL WHETHER I HAD SEEN YOU

HE POINTED TO THE RED LIGHT.

THERE.

MY GOOD FELLOW, WHAT SHOULD I DO THERE? I NEVER WAS THERE,

HIS MANNER CLEARED. HE TOOK ME INTO HIS BOX. THERE WAS A FIRE, A DESK, AND A TELEGRAPHIC INSTRUMENT, AND A LITTLE ELECTRIC BELL.

HAVE YOU MUCH TO DO HERE?

THERE'S ENOUGH RESPONSIBILITY, SIR. AND AS FOR MY LONG, LONELY HOURS—WELL, I'VE MADE MY BED, AND I LIE UPON IT. IT'S TOO LATE TO MAKE ANOTHER.

TWICE WHILE HE WAS SPEAKING TO ME, HE BROKE OFF WITH A FALLEN COLOUR, TURNED HIS FACE TOWARDS THE LITTLE BELL WHEN IT DID NOT RING.



AT LAST I ROSE TO LEAVE HIM.

YOU ALMOST MAKE ME THINK I HAVE MET WITH A CONTENTED MAN.

I BELIEVE I USED TO BE SO. BUT I AM TROUBLED, SIR, I AM TROUBLED.



IT IS VERY, VERY DIFFICULT TO SPEAK OF. IF YOU EVER MAKE ME ANOTHER VISIT, I WILL TRY TO TELL YOU.

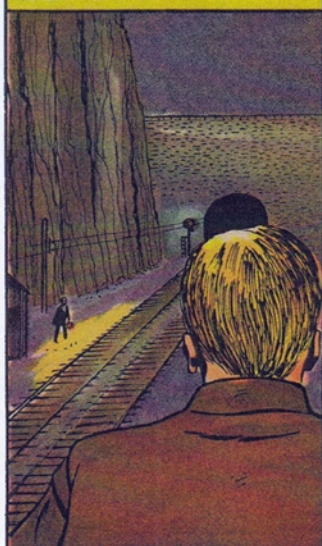
I WILL COME AT ELEVEN TOMORROW NIGHT.



I'LL SHOW YOU MY WHITE LIGHT, SIR, TILL YOU HAVE FOUND THE WAY UP AND WHEN YOU ARE AT THE TOP, DON'T CALL OUT.



HIS MANNER SEEMED TO MAKE THE PLACE STRIKE COLDER TO ME. I FOUND THE PATH, AND ASCENDED. LOOKING BACK, I SAW HIM STANDING BY THE LINE, HOLDING HIS LIGHT.



THE NEXT NIGHT HE WAS WAITING FOR ME AT THE BOTTOM. WE ENTERED HIS BOX, AND SAT DOWN BY THE FIRE.

I HAVE MADE UP MY MIND, SIR, THAT YOU SHALL NOT HAVE TO ASK ME TWICE WHAT TROUBLES ME. I TOOK YOU FOR SOMEONE ELSE YESTERDAY.

WHO?

I DON'T KNOW. I NEVER SAW THE FACE. THE LEFT ARM IS ACROSS THE FACE, AND THE RIGHT ARM IS WAVED. VIOLENTLY WAVED.

ONE MOONLIT NIGHT I HEARD A VOICE CRY "HALLO "HALLOAH! BELOW THERE!" I SAW THIS SOMEONE STANDING BY THE RED LIGHT, JUST OUTSIDE THE TUNNEL.

I CAUGHT UP MY LAMP AND RAN TOWARDS THE FIGURE."

"I RAN RIGHT UP AT IT, WHEN IT WAS GONE. I RAN ON INTO THE TUNNEL. THERE WAS NO ONE."



I RAN BACK HERE AND TELEGRAPHED BOTH WAYS THAT AN ALARM HAD BEEN GIVEN. THE ANSWER CAME BACK, BOTH WAYS, THAT ALL WAS WELL.

THIS FIGURE, THEN, MUST BE A DECEPTION OF SIGHT AND THE CRY YOU HEARD, ONLY THE WIND MAKING A WILD HARP OF THE TELEGRAPH WIRES.



HE REACHED OUT AND TOUCHED MY ARM.

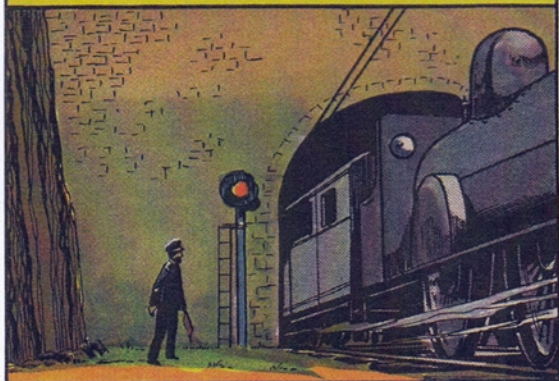
SIX HOURS LATER, THERE WAS A TRAIN WRECK ON THIS LINE. THE DEAD AND WOUNDED WERE BROUGHT ALONG THE TUNNEL OVER THE SPOT WHERE THE FIGURE HAD STOOD.



THIS WAS JUST A YEAR AGO. THEN SIX MONTHS LATER, AS THE DAY WAS BREAKING, I LOOKED TOWARDS THE RED LIGHT AND SAW THE SPECTRE AGAIN.



THAT VERY DAY, AS A TRAIN CAME OUT OF THE TUNNEL, I NOTICED AT A CARRIAGE WINDOW WHAT LOOKED LIKE A CONFUSION OF HANDS AND HEADS, AND SOMETHING WAVED



"I SIGNALLED THE DRIVER. HE PUT HIS BRAKE ON. I RAN AFTER IT. I HEARD TERRIBLE SCREAMS AND CRIES. A BEAUTIFUL YOUNG LADY HAD DIED IN ONE OF THE COMPARTMENTS. SHE WAS BROUGHT IN HERE.



I COULD THINK OF NOTHING TO SAY. MY MOUTH WAS DRY. THE WIND AND THE WIRES TOOK UP THE STORY WITH A LONG LAMENTING WAIL.

THE SPECTRE CAME BACK A WEEK AGO. IT STANDS WAVING TO ME. IT RINGS MY LITTLE BELL.



HIS EYES WERE ON FIRE. HE PULLED OUT HIS HANDKERCHIEF AND WIPED HIS HEATED FOREHEAD.

WHAT IS ITS WARNING AGAINST? WHAT IS THE DANGER? WHERE IS THE DANGER? WHAT CAN I DO?



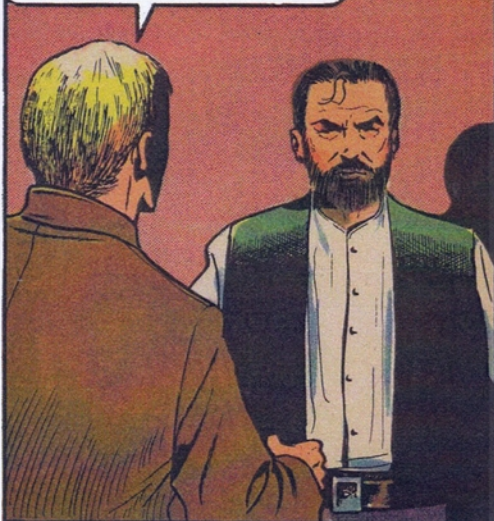
DID IT RING YOUR BELL YESTERDAY WHEN I WAS HERE?

TWICE.



I SAW THAT FOR THE POOR MAN'S SAKE, I HAD TO COMPOSE HIS MIND.

IT IS YOUR COMFORT, MY GOOD MAN, THAT YOU UNDERSTAND YOUR DUTY, EVEN THOUGH YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND THIS CONFOUNDING SPECTRE.



HE BECAME CALM. I LEFT HIM AT TWO IN THE MORNING. I LOOKED BACK AT THE RED LIGHT. I SHOULD HAVE SLEPT POORLY IF MY BED HAD BEEN UNDER IT.



NEXT EVENING WAS A LOVELY EVENING. THE SUN WAS NOT YET QUITE DOWN WHEN I TRAVERSED THE FIELD-PATH NEAR THE TOP OF THE DEEP CUTTING.



I STEPPED TO THE BRINK AND LOOKED DOWN. I CANNOT DESCRIBE THE THRILL THAT SEIZED UPON ME. CLOSE AT THE MOUTH OF THE TUNNEL, I SAW A MAN WITH HIS LEFT SLEEVE ACROSS HIS EYES, PASSIONATELY WAVING HIS RIGHT ARM.



THE NAMELESS HORROR THAT OPPRESSED ME PASSED IN A MOMENT. I SAW THAT THIS SPECTRE OF A MAN WAS A MAN INDEED. THERE WAS A LITTLE GROUP OF OTHER MEN STANDING AT A SHORT DISTANCE.



I DESCENDED THE NOTCHED PATH WITH ALL THE SPEED I COULD MAKE.

WHAT IS THE MATTER?

SIGNALMAN KILLED THIS MORNING, SIR.



THE DANGER-LIGHT WAS NOT YET LIGHTED. AGAINST ITS SHAFT A LITTLE LOW HUT, NEW TO ME, HAD BEEN MADE OF SOME WOODEN SUPPORTS AND TARPAULIN. IT LOOKED NO BIGGER THAN A BED.

YOU WILL RECOGNISE HIM, SIR, IF YOU KNEW HIM, FOR HIS FACE IS QUITE COMPOSED.



THE MAN WHO SPOKE RAISED AN END OF THE TARPAULIN.

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?

HE WAS CUT DOWN BY AN ENGINE, SIR. HIS BACK WAS TOWARDS HER, AND SHE CUT HIM DOWN.



THE MAN STEPPED BACK TO HIS FORMER PLACE AT THE MOUTH OF THE TUNNEL.

COMING ROUND THE CURVE IN THE TUNNEL, SIR, I SAW HIM AT THE END.



"I SHUT THE WHISTLE OFF, AND CALLED TO HIM."

BELOW THERE! LOOK OUT! FOR GOD'S SAKE CLEAR THE WAY!



"THERE WAS NO TIME TO CHECK SPEED, AND HE DIDN'T SEEM TO TAKE HEED OF THE WHISTLE."



IT WAS A DREADFUL TIME, SIR. I PUT THIS ARM BEFORE MY EYES, NOT TO SEE, AND I WAVED THIS ARM TO THE LAST, BUT IT WAS NO USE.



THE END

