

The Invisible Force

Fred M. White

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A Story of What Might Happen In the Days to Come, when Underground London is Tunnelled In all Directions for Electric Railways, If an Explosion Should Take Place In One of the Tubes.

I.

IT seemed as if London had solved one of her great problems at last. The communication difficulty was at an end. The first-class ticket-holders no longer struggled to and from business with fourteen fellow-sufferers in a third-class carriage. There were no longer any particularly favoured suburbs, nor were there isolated localities where it took as long getting to the City as an express train takes between London and Swindon. The pleasing paradox of a man living at Brighton because it was nearer to his business than Surbiton had ceased to exist. The tubes had done away with all that.

There were at least a dozen hollow cases running under London in all directions. They were cool and well ventilated, the carriages were brilliantly lighted, the various loops were properly equipped and managed.

All day long the shining funnels and bright platforms were filled with passengers. Towards midnight the traffic grew less, and by half-past one o'clock the last train had departed. The all-night service was not yet.

It was perfectly quiet now along the gleaming core that lay buried under Bond Street and St. James's Street, forming the loop running below the Thames close by Westminster Bridge Road and thence to the crowded Newington and Walworth districts. Here a portion of the roof was under repair.

The core was brilliantly lighted; there was no suggestion of fog or gloom. The general use of electricity had disposed of a good deal of London's murkiness; electric motors were applied now to most manufactories and workshops. There was just as much gas consumed as ever, but it was principally used for heating and culinary purposes. Electric radiators and cookers had not yet reached the multitude; that was a matter of time.

In the flare of the blue arc lights a dozen men were working on the dome of the core. Something had gone wrong with a water-main overhead, the concrete beyond the steel belt had cracked, and the moisture had corroded the steel plates, so that a long strip of the metal skin had been peeled away, and the friable concrete had fallen on the rails. It had brought part of the crown with it, so that a maze of large and small pipes was exposed to view.

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"They look like the reeds of an organ," a raw engineer's apprentice remarked to the foreman. "What are they?"

"Gas mains, water, electric light, telephone, goodness knows what," the foreman replied. "They branch off here, you see."

"Fun to cut them," the apprentice grinned. The foreman nodded absently. He had once been a mischievous boy, too. The job before him looked a bigger thing than he had expected. It would have to be patched up till a strong gang could be turned on to the work. The raw apprentice was still gazing at the knot of pipes. What fun it would be to cut that water-main and flood the tunnels!

In an hour the scaffolding was done and the debris cleared away. To-morrow night a gang of men would come and make the concrete good and restore the steel rim to the dome. The tube was deserted. It looked like a polished, hollow needle, lighted here and there by points of dazzling light.

It was so quiet and deserted that the falling of a big stone reverberated along the tube with a hollow sound. There was a crack, and a section of piping gave way slightly and pressed down upon one of the electric mains. A tangled skein of telephone wires followed. Under the strain the electric cable parted and snapped. There was a long, sliding, blue flame, and instantly the tube was in darkness. A short circuit had been established somewhere. Not that it mattered, for traffic was absolutely suspended now, and would not be resumed again before daylight. Of course, there were the workmen's very early trains, and the Covent Garden market trains, but they did not run over this section of the line. The whole darkness reeked with the whiff of burning indiarubber. The moments passed on drowsily.

Along one side of Bond Street the big lamps were out. All the lights on one main switch had gone. But it was past one o'clock now, and the thing mattered little. These accidents occurred sometimes in the best regulated districts, and the defect would be made good in the morning.

It was a little awkward, though, for a great State ball was in progress at Buckingham Palace. Supper was over, the magnificent apartments were brilliant with light dresses and gay uniforms. The shimmer and fret of diamonds flashed back to lights dimmer than themselves. There was a slide of feet over the polished floors. Then, as if some unseen force had cut the bottom of creation, light and gaiety ceased to be, and darkness fell like a curtain.

There were a few cries of alarm from the swift suddenness of it. To eyes accustomed to that brilliant glow the gloom was Egyptian. It seemed as if some great catastrophe had happened. But common-sense reasserted itself, and the brilliant gathering knew that the electric light had failed.

There were quick commands, and spots of yellow flame sprang out here and there in the great desert of the night. How faint and feeble, and yellow and flaring, the lights looked! The electrician down below was puzzled, for, so far as he could see, the fuses in the meters were intact. There was no short circuit so far as the Palace was concerned. In all probability there had been an accident at the generating stations; in a few minutes the mischief would be repaired.

But time passed, and there was no welcome return of the flood of crystal light.

"It is a case for all the candles," the Lord Chamberlain remarked; "fortunately the old chandeliers are all fitted. Light the candles."

It was a queer, grotesque scene, with all that wealth of diamonds and glitter of uniforms and gloss of satins, under the dim suggestion of the candles. And yet it was enjoyable from the very novelty of it. Nothing could be more appropriate for the minuet that was in progress.

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"I feel like one of my own ancestors," a noble lord remarked. "When they hit upon that class of candle I expect they imagined that the last possibility in the way of lighting had been accomplished. Is it the same outside, Sir George?"

Sir George Egerton laughed. He was fresh from the gardens.

"It's patchwork," he said. "So far as I can judge, London appears to be lighted in sections. I expect there is a pretty bad breakdown. My dear chap, do you mean to say that clock is right?"

"Half-past four, sure enough, and mild for the time of year. Did you notice a kind of rumbling under Merciful Heavens, what is that?"

II.

There was a sudden splitting crack as if a thousand rifles had been discharged in the ballroom. The floor rose on one side to a perilous angle, considering the slippery nature of its surface. Such a shower of white flakes fell from the ceiling that dark dresses and naval uniforms looked as if their wearers had been out in a snowstorm.

Cracks and fissures started in the walls with pantomimic effect, on all sides could be heard the rattle and splinter of falling glass. A voice suddenly uprose in a piercing scream, a yell proclaimed that one of the great crystal chandeliers was falling. There was a rush and a rustle of skirts, and a quick vision of white, beautiful faces, and with a crash the great pendant came to the floor.

The whole world seemed to be oscillating under frightened feet, the palace was humming and thrumming like a harpstring. The panic was so great, the whole mysterious tragedy so sudden, that the bravest there had to battle for their wits. Save for a few solitary branches of candles, the big room was in darkness.

There were fifteen hundred of England's bravest, and fairest, and best, huddled together in what might be a hideous deathchamber for all they knew to the contrary. Women were clinging in terror to the men, the fine lines of class distinction were broken down. All were poor humanity now in the presence of a common danger.

In a little time the earth ceased to sway and rock, the danger was passing. A little colour was creeping back to the white faces again. Men and women were conscious that they could hear the beating of their own hearts. Nobody broke the silence yet, for speech seemed to be out of place.

"An earthquake," somebody said at length. "An earthquake, beyond doubt, and a pretty bad one at that. That accounts for the failure of the electric light. There will be some bad accidents if the gas mains are disturbed."

The earth grew steady underfoot again, the white flakes ceased to fall. Amongst the men the spirit of adventure was rising; the idea of standing quietly there and doing nothing was out of the question.

Anyway, there could be no further thought of pleasure that night. There were many mothers there, and their uppermost thought was for home. Never, perhaps, in the history of royalty had there been so informal a breaking up of a great function. The King and Queen had retired some little time before a kindly and thoughtful act under the circumstances. The women were cloaking and shawling hurriedly; they crowded out in search of their carriages with no more order than would have been obtained outside a theatre.

But there were remarkably few carriages in waiting. An idiotic footman who had lost his head in the sudden calamity sobbed out the information that Oxford Street and Bond Street were impassable, and that houses were down in all directions. No vehicles could come that way; the road was destroyed. As to the rest, the man knew

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nothing; he was frightened out of his life.

There was nothing for it but to walk. It wanted two good hours yet before dawn, but thousands of people seemed to be abroad. For a space of a mile or more there was not a light to be seen. Round Buckingham Palace the atmosphere reeked with a fine irritating dust, and was rendered foul and poisonous by the fumes of coal gas. There must have been a fearful leakage somewhere.

Nobody seemed to know what was the matter, and everybody was asking everybody else. And in the darkness it was very hard to locate the disaster. Generally, it was admitted, that London had been visited by a dreadful earthquake. Never were the daylight hours awaited more eagerly.

"The crack of doom," Sir George Egerton remarked to his companion, Lord Barcombe.

They were feeling their way across the park in the direction of the Mall.

"It's like a shuddering romance that I read a little time since. But I must know something about it before I go to bed. Let's try St. James's Street if there's any St. James Street left."

"All right," Lord Barcombe agreed, "I hope the clubs are safe. Is it wise to strike a match with all this gas reeking in the air?"

"Anything's better than the gas," Sir George said tersely.

The vesta flared out in a narrow, purple circle. Beyond it was a glimpse of a seat with two or three people huddled on it. They were outcasts and companions in the grip of misfortune, but they were all awake now.

"Can any of you say what's happened?" Lord Barcombe asked.

"The world's come to an end, sir, I believe," was the broken reply. "You may say what you like, but it was a tremendous explosion. I saw a light like all the world ablaze over to the north, and then all the lights went out, and I've been waiting for the last trump to sound ever since."

"Then you didn't investigate?" Lord Barcombe asked.

"Not me, sir. I seem to have struck a bit of solid earth where I am. And then it rained stones and pieces of brick and vestiges of creation. There's the half of a boiler close to you that dropped out of the sky. You stay where you are, sir."

But the two young men pushed on. They reached what appeared to be St. James's Street at length, but only by stumbling and climbing over heaps of debris.

The roadway was one mass of broken masonry. The fronts of some of the clubs had been stripped off as if a titanic knife had sliced them. It was like looking into one of the upholsterers' smart shops, where they display rooms completely furnished. There were gaps here and there where houses had collapsed altogether. Seeing that the road had ceased to exist, it seemed impossible that an earthquake could have done this thing. A great light flickered and roared a little way down the road. At an angle a gas main was tilted up like the spout of a teapot, upheaved and snapped from its twin pipes. This had caught fire in some way, so that for a hundred yards or so each way the thoroughfare was illuminated by a huge flare lamp.

It was a thrilling sight focused in that blue glare. It looked as if London had been utterly destroyed by a siege as if thousands of well-aimed shells had exploded. Houses looked like tattered banners of brick and mortar. Heavy

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articles of furniture had been hurled into the street; on the other hand, little gimcrack ornaments still stood on tiny brackets.

A scared-looking policeman came staggering along.

"My man," Lord Barcombe cried, "what has happened?"

The officer pulled himself together and touched his helmet.

"It's dreadful, sir," he sobbed. "There has been an accident in the tubes; and they have been blown all to pieces."

III.

The constable, for the moment, had utterly lost his nerve. He stood there in the great flaring roar of the gas mains with a dazed expression that was pitiful.

"Can you tell us anything about it?" Lord Barcombe asked.

"I was in Piccadilly," was the reply. "Everything was perfectly quiet. and so far as I could see not a soul was in sight. Then I heard a funny rushing sound, just like the tear of an express train through a big, empty station. Yes, it was for all the world like a ghostly express train that you could hear and not see. It came nearer and nearer; the whole earth trembled just as if the train had gone mad in Piccadilly. It rushed past me down St. James's Street, and after that there was an awful smash and a bang, and I was lying on my back in the middle of the road. All the lights that remained went out, and for a minute or two I was in that railway collision. Then, when I got my senses back, I blundered down here because of that big flaring light there; and I can't tell you, gentlemen, any more, except that the tube has blown up."

Of that fact there was no question. There were piles of debris thrown high in one part and a long deep depression in another like a ruined dyke. A little further on the steel core of the tube lay bare with rugged holes ripped in it.

"Some ghastly electric catastrophe," Sir George Egerton murmured.

It was getting light by this time, and it was possible to form some idea of the magnitude of the disaster. Some of the clubs in St James's Street still appeared to be intact, but others had suffered terribly. The heaps of tumbled masonry were powdered and glittering with broken glass and a few walls hung perilously over the pavement. And still the gas main roared on until the flame grew from purple to violet, and to straw colour before the coming dawn. If this same thing had happened all along the network of tubes London would be more or less a hideous ruin.

For the better part of Piccadilly things were brighter. Evidently the explosion had had a straight run here, for the road had been raised like some mighty zigzag molehill for many yards. The wood pavement scattered all over the place suggested a gigantic box of child's bricks strewn over a nursery floor. The tube had been forced up, its outer envelope of concrete broken so that the now twisted steel core might have been a black snake crawling down Piccadilly. Doubtless the expanding air had met with some obstacle in the tube under St. James's Street, hence the terrible force of the explosion there.

There was quite a large crowd in Oxford Street. The whole roadway was wet; the gutters ran with the water from the broken pipes. The air was full of the odour of gas. All the clocks in the streets seemed to have gone mad. Lord Barcombe glanced at his own watch, to find that it was racing furiously.

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"By Jove!" he whispered excitedly, "we're in danger here. The air is full of electricity. I went over some works once and neglected to leave my watch behind me, and it played me the same prank. It affects the mainspring, you know."

There were great ropes and coils of electric wire of high voltage cropping out of the ground here and there; coils attached to huge accumulators, and discharging murderous current freely. A dog, picking his way across the sopping street, trod on one of the wires, and instantly all that remained of the dog was what looked like a twisted bit of burnt skin and bone. It appealed to Sir George Egerton's imagination strongly.

"Poor little brute!" he murmured. "It might have happened to you or me. Don't you know that a force that only gives a man a bad shock when he is standing on dry ground often kills him when the surface is wet? I wonder if we can get some indiarubber gloves and galoshes hereabouts. After that gruesome sight, I shall be afraid to put one foot before the other."

Indeed, the precaution was a necessary one. A horse attached to a cab came creeping over the blocked streets; the animal slipped on a grating connected with the ventilation of the drains, and a fraction of a second later there was no horse in existence. The driver sat on his perch, white and scared.

"The galoshes," Lord Barcombe said hoarsely. "Don't you move till we come back again, my man. And everybody keep out of the roadway."

The cry ran along that the roadway meant instant death. The cabman sat there gibbering with terror. A little way further down was a rubber warehouse, with a fine selection of waders' and electricians' gloves in the window. With a fragment of concrete Sir George smashed in the window, and took what he and Lord Barcombe required. They knew that they would be quite safe now.

More dead than alive the cabman climbed down from his seat and was carried to the pavement on Lord Barcombe's shoulder. The left side of his face was all drawn up and puckered, the left arm was useless.

"Apoplexy from the fright," Sir George suggested.

"Not a bit of it," Lord Barcombe exclaimed, "It's a severe electric shock. Hold up."

Gradually the man's face and arm ceased to twitch.

"If that's being struck by lightning," he said, "I don't want another dose. It was as if something had caught hold of me and frozen my heart in my body. I couldn't do a thing. And look at my coat."

All up the left side the coat was singed so that at a touch the whole cloth fell to pieces. It was a strange instance of the freakishness of the invisible force. A great fear fell on those who saw. This intangible, unseen danger, with its awful swiftness, was worse than the worst that could be seen.

"Let's get home," Lord Barcombe suggested. "It's getting on my nerves. It's dreadful when all the terror is left to the imagination."

IV.

Meanwhile no time was lost in getting to the root of the mischief.

The danger could not be averted by switching off the power altogether at the various electrical stations of the

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metropolis. At intervals along the tubes were immense accumulators which for the present could not be touched. It was these accumulators that rendered the streets such a ghastly peril.

It was the electrical expert to the County Council Alton Rossiter who first got on the track of the disaster. More than once before, the contact between gas and electricity had produced minor troubles of this kind. Gas that had escaped into man-holes and drains had been fired from the sparks caused by a short-circuit current wire. For some time, even as far back as 1895, instances of this kind had been recorded.

But how could the gas have leaked into the tube, seeing that it was a steel core with a solid bedding of concrete beyond? Unless an accident had happened when the tube was under repair, this seemed impossible.

The manager of the associated tubes was quite ready to afford every information to Mr. Rossiter. The core had corroded in Bond Street in consequence of a settling of the earth caused by a leaky water-main. The night before, this had been located and the steel skin stripped off for the necessary repairs.

Mr. Alton Rossiter cut the speaker short.

"Will you come to Bond Street with me, Mr. Fergusson?" he said; "we may be able to get into the tunnel there."

Fergusson was quite ready. The damage in Bond Street was not so great, though the lift shaft was filled with debris, and it became necessary to cut a way into the station before the funnel was reached.

For a couple of hundred yards the tube was intact; beyond that point the fumes of gas were overpowering. A long strip of steel hung from the roof. Just where it was, a round, clean hole in the roadway rendered it possible to work and breathe there in spite of the gas fumes.

"We shall have to manage as best we can," Rossiter muttered. "For a little time at any rate, the gas of London must be cut of entirely. With broken mains all over the place the supply is positively dangerous. Look here."

He pointed to the spot where the gas main had trended down and where a short-circuit wire had fused it. Here was the whole secret in a nutshell. A roaring gas main had poured a dense volume into the tube for hours; mixed with the air it had become one of the most powerful and deadly of explosives.

"What time does your first train start?" Rossiter asked.

"For the early markets, four o'clock," Fergusson replied. "In other words, we switch on the current from the accumulator stations at twenty minutes to four."

"And this is one of your generating stations?"

"Yes. Of course I see exactly what you are driving at. Practically the whole circuit of tubes was more or less charged with a fearful admixture of gas and air. As soon as the current was switched on a spark exploded the charge. I fear, I very much fear, that you are right. If we can only find the man in charge here! But that would be nothing else than a miracle."

All the same the operator in charge of the switches was close by. Fortunately for him the play of the current in the tube had carried the gases towards St. James's Street. The explosion had lifted him out of his box, and for a time he lay stunned. Dazed and confused, he had climbed to the street and staggered into the shop of a chemist who was just closing the door upon a customer who had rung him up for a prescription.

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But he could say very little. There had been an explosion directly he pulled down the first of the switches, and his memory was a blank after that.

Anyway, the cause of the disaster was found. To prevent further catastrophe notice was immediately given to the various gas companies to cut off the supplies at once. In a little time the whole disastrous length of the tube was free from that danger.

* * * * * By the afternoon a committee had gone over the whole route. At the first blush it looked as if London had been half ruined. It was impossible yet to estimate the full extent of the damage. In St. James's Street alone the loss was pretty certain to run into millions.

Down in Whitehall and Parliament Street, and by Westminster Bridge, the damage was terrible. Here sharp curves and angles had checked the rush of expanding air with the most dire results. Huge holes and ruts had been made in the earth, and houses had come down bodily.

Most of the people out in the streets by this time were properly equipped in indiarubber shoes and gloves. It touched the imagination strongly to know that between a man and hideous death was a thin sheet of rubber no thicker than a shilling. It was like walking over the crust of a slumbering volcano; like skating at top speed over very thin ice.

Towards the evening a thrilling whisper ran round. From Deptford two early specials had started to convey an annual excursion of five hundred men and their wives to Paddington, whence they were going to Windsor. It seemed impossible, incredible, that these could have been overlooked; but by five o'clock the dreadful truth was established. Those two specials had started; but what oblivion they had found how lingering, swift, or merciful, nobody could tell.

V.

There was a new horror. The story of those early special trains gave the final terror to the situation. Probably they had been blown to eternity. There was just one chance in a million that anybody had escaped. All the same something would have to be done to put the matter at rest.

Nobody knew what to do; everybody had lost their heads for the moment. It seemed hopeless from the very start. Naturally, the man that everybody looked to at the moment was Fergusson of the associated tubes. With him was Alton Rossiter, representing the County Council.

"But how to make a start?" the latter asked.

"We will start from Deptford," said Fergusson. "We must first ascertain the exact time that the train left Deptford, and the precise moment when the first explosion took place. Mind you, I believe there was a series of explosions. You see, there is always a fair amount of air in the tubes. When the inflowing gas met the cross currents of air, it would be diverted, or pocketed. so to speak. We should have a big pocket of the explosive, followed by a clear space.

"When the switches were turned on there would be sparks here and there all along the tubes. This means that practically simultaneously the mines would be fired; fired so quickly that the series of reports would sound like one big bang. That this must be so can be seen by the state of some of the streets. In some spots the tube has been wrenched bodily from the earth as easily as if it had been a gaspipe. And then, again, you have streets that do not show the slightest damage. You must agree with me that my theory is a correct one."

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"I do. But what are you driving at?"

"Well, I am afraid that my theory is a very forlorn one, but I give it for what it is worth. It's just possible, faintly possible, that those trains ran into a portion of the tube where there was no explosion at all. There were explosions behind them and in front of them, and of course the machinery would have been rendered useless instantly, so that the trains may be trapped with no ingress or outlet. I'm not in the least sanguine of finding anything, but the aftermath of a fearful tragedy. Anyway, our duty is pretty plainly before us—we must go to Deptford. Come along."

The journey to Deptford was no easy one. There were so many streets up that locomotion was a difficult matter. And where the streets were damaged there was danger. It was possible to use cycles, seeing that the rubber tires formed non-conductors, and indiarubber gloves and shoes allowed extra protection. But the mere suggestion of a spill was thrilling. It might mean the tearing of a glove or the loss of a shoe, and then—well, that did not bear thinking about.

"I never before properly appreciated the feelings of the man that Blondin used to carry on his back," Rossiter said as the pair pushed steadily through Bermondsey, "but I can understand his emotions now."

The roads, even where there was no danger, were empty. A man or woman would venture timidly out and look longingly to the other side of the road and then give up the idea of moving altogether. As a matter of fact there was more of it safe than otherwise, but the risks were too awful.

VI.

Meanwhile something like an organised attempt was being made to grapple with the evil: Days must, of necessity, elapse before a proper estimate of the damage could be made, to say nothing of the loss of life.

Nothing very great could be accomplished, however, until the huge accumulators had been cleared and the deadly current switched off. So far as the London area proper was concerned, Holborn Viaduct was the point to aim at. In big vaults there, underground, were some of the largest accumulators in the world. These would have to be rendered harmless at any cost.

But the work was none so easy, seeing that the tube here was crushed and twisted, and all about it was a knot of high-pressure cables deadly to the touch. There was enough power here running to waste to destroy a city. There were spaces that it was impossible to cross; and unfortunately the danger could not be seen. There was no warning, no chance of escape for the too hardy adventurer; he would just have stepped an inch beyond the region of safety, and there would have been an end of him. No wonder that the willing workers hesitated.

There was nothing for it but the blasting of the tube. True, this might be attended with danger to such surrounding buildings as had weathered the storm, but it was the desperate hour for desperate remedies. A big charge of dynamite rent a long slit in the exposed length of tube, and a workman taking his life in his hands entered the opening. There were few spectators watching. It was too gruesome and horrible to stand there with the feeling that a slip either way might mean sudden death.

The workman, swathed from head to foot in indiarubber, disappeared from sight. It seemed a long time before he returned, so long that his companions gave him up for lost. Those strong able men who were ready to face any ordinary danger looked at one another askance. Fire, or flood, or gas, they would have endured, for under those circumstances the danger was tangible. But here was something that appealed horribly to the imagination. And such a death! The instantaneous fusion of the body to a dry charcoal crumb!

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But presently a grimed head looked out of the funnel. The face was white behind the dust, but set and firm. The pioneer called for lights.

So far he had been successful. He had found the accumulators buried under a heap of refuse. They were built into solid concrete below the level of the tube so that they had not suffered to any appreciable extent.

There was no longer any holding back. The party swung along the tube with lanterns, and candles flaring, they reached the vault where the great accumulators were situated. Under the piled rails and fragments of splintered wood, the shining marble switchboard could be seen.

But to get to it was quite another matter.

Once this was accomplished, one of the greatest dangers and horrors that paralysed labour would be removed. It was too much to expect that the average labourer would toil willingly, or even toil at all when the moving of an inch might mean instant destruction. And it was such a little thing to do after all. A child could have accomplished it; the pressure of a finger or two, the tiny action that disconnects a wire from the live power, and the danger would be no more, and the automatic accumulators rendered harmless.

But here were a few men, at any rate, who did not mean to be defeated. They toiled on willingly, and yet with the utmost caution; for the knots of cable wire under their feet and over their heads were like brambles in the forest. If one of these had given way, all of them might be destroyed. It was the kind of work that causes the scalp to rise and the heart to beat and the body to perspire even on the coldest day. Now and then a cable upheld by some debris would slip; there would be a sudden cry, and the workmen would skip back, breathing heavily.

It was like working a mine filled with rattlesnakes asleep; but gradually the mass of matter was cleared away and the switchboard disclosed. A few light touches, and a large area of London was free from a terrible danger. It was possible now to handle the big cables with impunity, for they were perfectly harmless.

There was no word spoken for a long time. The men were trembling with the reaction. One of them produced a large flask of brandy and handed it round. Not till they had all drunk did the leader of the expedition speak.

"How many years since yesterday morning?" he asked.

"Makes one feel like an old man," another muttered.

They climbed presently into the street again, for there was nothing to be done here for the present. A few adventurous spectators heard the news that the streets were free from danger once more. The tidings spread in the marvellous way that such rumour carries, and in a little time the streets were packed with people.

VII.

When the two cyclists came to Deptford, they found that comparatively little damage had been done to the station there, beyond that the offices and platforms had been wrecked. A wounded man was found, who described how a mighty hurricane had roared down the tube ten minutes after the excursion trains had departed. Fergusson made a rapid calculation from the figures that the d at one another askance. Fire, or flood, or gas, they would have endured, for under those circumstances the danger was tangible. But here was something that appealed horribly to the imagination. And such a death! The instantaneous fusion of the body to a dry charcoal crumb!

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Once this was accomplished, one of the greatest dangers and horrors that paralysed labour would be removed. It was too much to expect that the average labourer would toil willingly, or even toil at all when the moving of an inch might mean instant destruction. And it was such a little thing to do after all. A child could have accomplished it; the pressure of a finger or two, the tiny action that disconnects a wire from the live power, and the danger would be no more, and the automatic accumulators rendered harmless.

But here were a few men, at any rate, who did not mean to be defeated. They toiled on willingly, and yet with the utmost caution; for the knots of cable wire under their feet and over their heads were like brambles in the forest. If one of these had given way, all of them might be destroyed. It was the kind of work that causes the scalp to rise and the heart to beat and the body to perspire even on the coldest day. Now and then a cable upheld by some debris would slip; there would be a sudden cry, and the workmen would skip back, breathing heavily.

It was like working a mine filled with rattlesnakes asleep; but gradually the mass of matter was cleared away and the switchboard disclosed. A few light touches, and a large area of London was free from a terrible danger. It was possible now to handle the big cables with impunity, for they were perfectly harmless.

There was no word spoken for a long time. The men were trembling with the reaction. One of them produced a large flask of brandy and handed it round. Not till they had all drunk did the leader of the expedition speak.

"How many years since yesterday morning?" he asked.

"Makes one feel like an old man," another muttered.

They climbed presently into the street again, for there was nothing to be done here for the present. A few adventurous spectators heard the news that the streets were free from danger once more. The tidings spread in the marvellous way that such rumour carries, and in a little time the streets were packed with people.

VII.

When the two cyclists came to Deptford, they found that comparatively little damage had been done to the station there, beyond that the offices and platforms had been wrecked. A wounded man was found, who described how a mighty hurricane had roared down the tube ten minutes after the excursion trains had departed. Fergusson made a rapid calculation from the figures that the man supplied.

"The trains must have been near to Park Road Station," he said, "when the explosion occurred. There is just a chance that they may have run into a space free from gas, and that the explosion passed them altogether. Let us make for Park Road Station without delay, and we must try to pick up some volunteers as we go along."

When they arrived at the scene they found that a big crowd had gathered. A rumour had spread that feeble voices had been heard down one of the ventilation gratings, calling for help. Fergusson and Rossiter reached the spot with difficulty.

"Get our fellows together," whispered Fergusson. "We can work now with impunity; and if any of those poor people down below are alive, we shall have them out in half-an-hour. If we only had some lights! Beg, borrow, or steal all the lanterns you can get."

The nearest police-station solved that problem fast enough. A small gang of special experts moved upon Park Road Station whilst the mob was still struggling about the ventilation shaft, and in a little time the entrance was forced.

The station was a veritable wreck; but for two hundred yards the tunnel was clear before them. Then came a jammed wall of timber, the end of a railway carriage standing on end. The timbers were twisted, huge baulks of wood were bent like a bow. A way was soon made through the debris, and Fergusson yelled aloud.

To his delight a hoarse voice answered him. He yelled again and waved his lantern. Out of the velvety darkness of the tube a man staggered into the lane of light made by the lantern. He was a typical, thick-set workman, in his best clothes.

"So you've found us at last," he said dully.

He appeared to be past all emotions. His eyes showed no gratitude, no delight. The horrors of the dark hours had numbed his senses.

"Is—is it very bad?" asked Rossiter.

"Many were killed," the new comer said in the same wooden voice. "But the others are sitting in the carriages waiting for the end to come. The lights in the carriages helped us a bit, but after the first hour they went out. Then one or two of us went up the line till it seemed to rise and twist as if it was going to climb into the sky, and by that we guessed that there had been a big explosion of some kind. So we tried the other way, and that was all blocked up with timber; and we knew then. The electricity was about, and — well, it wasn't a pretty sight, so we went back to the trains. When the lights went out we were all mad for a time, and — and —"

The speaker's lips quivered and shook — he burst into a torrent of tears. Rossiter patted him on the back approvingly. Those tears probably staved off stark insanity. The light of the lanterns went swinging on ahead now, and the trains began to pour out their freight of half-dead people. There were some with children, who huddled back fearfully in their corners and refused to face the destruction which they were sure lay before them. They were all white and trembling, with quivering lips and eyes that twitched strangely. Heaven only knows how long an eternity those hours of darkness had seemed.

They were all out at last, and were gently led to blessed light again. There were doctors on the spot by this time with nourishing food and stimulants. For the most part, the women sat down and cried, quietly hugging their children to their breasts. Some of the men were crying in the same dull way, but a few were violent. The dark horror of it had driven them mad for the time. But there was a darker side to it; of the pleasure-seekers the dead were numbered at more than half.

Rut there was one man here and there who had kept his head throughout the crisis. A cheerful-looking sailor gave the best account of the adventure.

"Not that there is much to say, he remarked. "We got on just as usual for the first ten minutes or so, the train running smoothly and plenty of light. Then all at once we came to a sudden stop that sent us flying across the carriage. We seemed to have gone headlong into the stiffest tempest I ever met. You could hear the wind go

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roaring past the carriages, and then it stopped as soon as it had begun.

"The rattle of broken glass was like musketry. The first thing I saw when I got out was the dead body of the engine-driver with the stoker close by. It was just the same with the train in front. Afterwards, I tried to find a way out. but couldn't. There was a man with me who trod on some of them cables as you call 'em, and the next instant there was no man—but I don't want to talk of that."

"It means months upon months," Fergusson said sadly.

"Not months — years," Rossiter replied. "Yet I dare say that in the long run we shall benefit by the calamity, great communities do. As to calculating the damage, my imagination only goes as far as fifty millions, and then stops. And yet if anybody had suggested this to me yesterday morning, I should have laughed."

"It would have seemed impossible."

"Absolutely impossible. And yet now that it has come about, how easy and natural it all seems! Come, let us get to work and try to forget."