

IN THE BALANCE.

The only adventure I ever had worth relating (said my friend Philip Holman) occurred one night during a journey from New York to a point a few miles north.

The cars were just comfortably full, the coach I entered having a single vacant seat as well as a few containing only one occupant each. I established myself comfortably in the vacant seat, close by the window, and, as the train moved slowly through the depot, watched the vanishing lights and passengers waiting for other trains. While thus engaged my attention was arrested by a man rushing hastily from a little crowd near the ticket office. He ran toward the car I had taken, and in another moment entered. His appearance was striking. He was of large, commanding stature, with a full black beard. His face was expressive and intelligent, and would have been noble but for a peculiar look about the eyes, which moved about restlessly and with a nervous alertness. Having closed the car door he hesitated, looked back as if in anxiety, and then peered intently out of the window for a moment. Finally he walked forward as if some mental question had been decided, and stopped by my side.

"Is this seat occupied, sir?" he inquired courteously.

"No, sir," I replied, and made room for him.

"I came near missing the train," he said, after being seated. "You haven't noticed a small man with iron-gray whiskers and dark clothes aboard, have you?"

"No," I answered. "Were you looking for a friend?"

"A friend?" he echoed absently; and then with animation, "Oh, no—by no means—not at all." He wound up his emphatic denial with a short laugh. "It's all right!" he finally explained.

"Rather an eccentric character," I thought.

For some moments our journey was pursued in silence, when my companion abruptly turned to me, and said in a tone of confidence:

"For years I have been studying one of the most gigantic problems that has ever occupied the human mind."

"Ah!" I said, not knowing what else to say.

"They say the British Government has a standing offer of ten thousand pounds as a reward for its solution. Do you believe it?"

"To what problem do you refer?" I inquired.

"Oh, pardon me? Perpetual motion—that grand desideratum of all inventors, scholars, and thinkers."

"I have heard something of such an offer, but scarcely credit the story."

"And why?" he demanded.

"Because it is a generally accepted conclusion among intelligent people that there can be no such thing as perpetual motion. An effect without a cause is an anomaly which no amount of inventive genius can overcome."

"My dear sir," he said earnestly, "you have been imposed upon by the old sophism. How singular are the delusions that logic creates! Reason, that great attribute of man, can prove lies to be true, and cause people to deny facts and cling to error. It can and does deceive, delude, and degrade, when it ought to enlighten and elevate. And, sir, it's all owing to the hopeless imbecility of its recognized exponents!"

"You are rather sweeping in your denunciation," I suggested, with a smile and a curious look at him.

"I know I am," he responded loftily. "But if I am a century in advance of the age, I am not to blame for it. My theories will in time be accepted as immutable laws. But benefactors of the race seldom live to see the fruits of their work. I am content; I can endure the persecutions I have been subjected to. I do not murmur. 'Whatever is, is right.'"

"And on the other hand," I said, lightly, scarcely knowing whether he meant to be facetious or not, "whatever is not, is wrong," I suppose."

"Certainly; you have hit it," he replied, gravely.

I began to suspect that my fellow-traveller was not exactly what is termed "round in the upper story." A searching glance into his face showed that he was in earnest, and his eyes began to glitter with excitement. If he was a monomaniac I thought it best not to do anything to arouse him on his particular hobby, and so I endeavoured to let the subject of perpetual motion drop, but he was bent on pursuing it.

"This perpetual-motion problem," he resumed, "has, I know, received ridicule at the hands of many; but it is, nevertheless, a fact—an existence—that has as yet been undeveloped. And, sir,"—he spoke in a low, mysterious tone—"it has been reserved for me to astound the world by making the principle apparent and useful."

"Possible!"

"Not only possible, but true. I see you are incredulous, but I do not blame you. You look like a man of intelligence—in fact, there is something in your eye that leads me to believe you are the person I have been looking for so long."

"Oh, no—" I began.

"Don't be modest about it, sir. If it is an unlooked-for honour, it is also destiny, and destiny cannot be resisted. The conviction grows upon me every moment that you are the man."

"But I know nothing of the subject. I have never looked into it. I could not even give you the name of a single one of the many who have failed, after years of labour and lives of study, to discover the secret."

"So much the better for that, sir. You are not burdened with prejudices nor laden with arguments against it. You are open to conviction, and are not so steeped in bigotry that you would deny what might be plainly proven to you. Am I not right?"

"I don't know but you are," I laughed.

"Of course I am."

"I wish," he added, lowering his voice almost to a whisper, "that I could prevail on you to accompany me to-night to my workshop, where I have, after arduous toil and intense mental labour, accomplished the long-looked-for result. Accomplished it, I say: it is true there is one thing lacking, but only one, and when this single want is supplied the consummation will be shown to the world as the grandest achievement of the age."

"You may be assured," I replied, "that I feel deeply interested in your invention."

"Yes," he interrupted, with a nod of approbation.

"But I cannot go with you to-night. Some other time perhaps—"

"We may never meet again, and your chance for a share in the honour of the thing may be lost."

"Oh, I claim no share of the honour. Wait until the one thing lacking is supplied, and then take all the credit and profit to yourself."

"Aye, the one thing lacking: there's the rub. It is something very difficult to secure."

"May I ask what it is?"

"I would be a fool to tell you, and thus reveal a secret that would enable others to supplant me. But I might do it if you would manifest confidence and interest enough to go with me and witness the invention. Then you would comprehend my want and perhaps be willing to supply it."

"No, no," I rejoined hastily; "I credit myself with no such capability. You must seek assistance elsewhere. I have no attention to spare from my business now."

I was growing somewhat uneasy at my companion's strange talk and pertinacity, and wished to rid myself of him. To have a monomaniac tackle himself to you is by no means a comfortable situation, and I determined to repel, if possible, any further advances from him.

He sighed at my last words, and said resignedly: "Well, I will not press you. You are cruelly indifferent, though, in regard to a matter of such vital importance. It is so with them all!"

After this he relapsed into silence, but seemed ill at ease, looking hither and thither, and frequently half rising in his seat.

Finally, as an excuse to leave his presence, I said I believed I would take a little fresh air, and stepped out on the platform of the car. This proved to be an unfortunate move. The train was moving rapidly, and, yielding to the fascination of gazing at the swiftly shifting scenery, illumined by the pale beams of the moon, I lit a cigar and remained in my position for some time.

Suddenly I became aware that somebody was standing behind me. I turned and beheld, with some consternation, my perpetual-motion friend. He must have opened and closed the car-door very silently, for I had not heard his approach.

"I thought I would take the fresh air, too," he said with a peculiar smile. "I can circumvent anybody who stands in my way; yes, anybody—no matter who!" This was said with considerable vehemence. Then, with an air of suavity, he remarked: "There is something very exhilarating in standing here in the breeze, in listening to the rumbling of the noisy wheels, almost under one's feet, and gazing at the flying landscape and moving lights in distant houses. Do you not think so?"

I replied that I did. He came closer and bent over me, his strange black eyes glittering in the moonlight. My position was anything but a comfortable one. I was on one of the steps, and he immediately above me, so that I could not ascend to the car door without requesting him to move. This I did not wish to do abruptly, for if he was of unsound mind any appearance of uneasiness or distrust on my part might cause him to indulge in some violent freak. I therefore feigned to welcome his presence, though in fact I heartily wished myself back in the car.

He drew closer to me, and said:

"I have concluded to give you a description of my perpetual-motion machine, for somehow I have taken a singular fancy to you, and believe I can trust you."

"Don't be too sure of that," I rejoined, jocosely; "I may prove a wolf in sheep's clothing, and betray your confidence."

"I am not afraid," he replied; "I am too good a physiognomist to be thus imposed upon. But we trifle. To come at once to the point, my workshop is not a great distance from here. A road just on the outskirts of the next station leads to it. As soon as the train arrives within a mile of its stopping place I shall jump off and repair directly to the spot. I have already lost much time by an unavoidable absence and must make all haste to resume my task."

"You would not jump off while the train is in motion?"

"Yes; there is no danger."

"Pardon me; the practice is a very dangerous one, and has frequently resulted in loss of life."

"Do not contradict me! I shall jump off and so must you!"

"I shall not," I replied, "and I beg of you not to risk your own life."

"Bah! It's no risk at all, I tell you. I'd willingly try it now, fast as we're going!"

I did not reply to his last remark, but started to rise, saying:

"I believe I will go in the car again."

But a hand was laid heavily on my shoulder with a nervous strength, against which resistance would have been futile. My strange acquaintance said:

"No you don't—I'm not through with you yet."

"Let me pass!" I exclaimed angrily.

"I shall not! you are the man—"

"I shall call on the brakeman the next time he steps out. You are taking an unwarrantable liberty."

"If you say a word to the brakeman I will push you off."

"Come—this is no time or place for jesting. I wish to enter the car."

"And I wish you to remain here. As for jesting, nothing was ever further from my thought."

I was now fairly alarmed. The man was undoubtedly a lunatic. And he had me at an advantage, for, in our relative positions, he could easily launch me into eternity by an energetic push. I saw that the assumption of defiance was of no avail, and abandoned it at once for fear of provoking him to an immediate fulfilment of his threat. He still retained his hold on my shoulder with unrelaxed vigour.

"Oh, well," I said, "I'm not particular. But please finish your business with me, and then allow me to return."

"My business with you cannot be finished here," he said, gravely. "I was about to repeat that you are the man destined to assist me in the great consummation of my life-work. And I must not lose sight of you, nor permit you to escape."

I remarked, as you will recollect, that only one thing was needed to complete my invention. I will now tell you what it is. To begin with. My perpetual-motion machine is apparently nothing more or less than an ordinary looking wheel. But the hub and other portions of it are hollow, and herein lies the secret. The wheel is filled with a fluid so closely resembling blood that nothing but the most skilful and exhaustive chemical tests can descry any difference. This fluid circulates through the wheel in such a manner as to keep it revolving for a long time, through the agencies of momentum and gravity; but at the end of a certain period the revolutions slacken, and finally stop altogether.

"Now all that is necessary to keep it going perpetually is a warm, living human heart within the hollow hub."

"Horrible!" I exclaimed with a shudder, for he hissed his

words out sharply and eagerly. "But in what way can I supply such a want?"

"Is it difficult to imagine?" He stared down upon me with deadly purpose gleaming from his eyes.

A frightful suspicion dawned upon me. "Can it be possible—"

"Yes, yes!" he interrupted. "You divine my purpose readily. I want to cut your heart out, and, while it is still throbbing, seize it and thrust it in the hollow hub of the wheel?"

"But that would be murder," I exclaimed—"cold-blooded, premeditated murder."

"There, again, is where you jump at conclusions," he said, with an air of bland superiority. "There would be no murder about it. I should replace your heart instantly with one taken from a living sheep, and so quickly and skilfully would I perform the operation that you would lose less than a pint of blood."

"But you would not do this without my consent?"

"With your consent if possible; without it if necessary."

I offer no apology for being alarmed—for arguing with him seriously. I was in his power. He eyed me vigilantly, and levity or defiance on my part would probably have exasperated his poor disorderly brain. I made a suggestion:

"Why not place the sheep's heart in the hub? Would not that do as well?"

"No; it must be a human heart. Brutes have instinct, as you know, but human beings only have reason and creative desires. The motive principle which we call mind permeates the blood and endues the human heart with a certain propelling energy that is necessary for my purpose. Do you know?"—he lowered his voice to a solemn whisper—"that I sometimes think my machine will possess conscience and will? Does it not look reasonable? But of course that is only a matter of conjecture as yet. There will be time enough to consider it when the first object is accomplished."

There was no disguising the fact that some desperate resort—some stroke of strategy—was necessary to defeat my demented companion. His whole manner proclaimed that he was terribly in earnest, and the gleam of his eyes revealed unmistakably that he would execute immediate vengeance should I attempt to force my way into the car or summon assistance. Of course he was incapable of considering the consequences to himself. I endeavoured in vain to hit upon some plan to outwit him or divert his mind from its purpose. We were both silent for a short time, when suddenly an idea struck me. Said I:

"Why not have your own heart cut out instead of mine and placed in the wheel? Its supply of nerve power must be much greater, and all its energies tend in the desired direction. Surely it would be much more effective for your purpose than mine."

"Yes, you are right," he conceded; "but there are difficulties in the way. First, it would be almost impossible to find a skilled surgeon willing to perform the operation. And again, I was once betrayed by one who made the same proposition that you have. I lay down with my breast bared, ready for him to remove my heart, when he suddenly slipped a pair of handcuffs on my wrists and bound my legs together. He then carried me off, and from him and his hirelings I suffered various indignities. However, that is neither here nor there. I am out of his clutches now, and am not to be imposed upon again in the same way. Pardon me for doubting your sincerity, but I have learned to be on my guard. No; you must be the victim this time, and I the operator. Ah! we are almost there. I think it best that we jump off about a mile this side of the station, as it is necessary that our operations be carried on secretly. About sixty rods further on you see a large haystack close by the side of the road. Just this side of it we will make the leap, and then we will have a walk of three or four miles across the country."

"I tell you I do not wish to jump off. Wait till we get to the station, and I will walk back with you."

"No; there are spies there whom I wish to avoid. Get ready."

"Wait! You jump off, and I will ride on and walk back to join you."

"No; that would be wasting time, and we've none to lose. Are you ready? We are almost there!"

I made no reply, but turned suddenly and endeavoured to grasp one of his legs and throw him down. But he was too quick for me. He seized me by the collar, lifted me up with apparent ease, and then clasped me around the body, firmly holding both of my arms to my sides. His strength was prodigious.

The engine whistled before the train began to slacken its speed. A brakeman came out of the car. I shouted for help.

But my captor made the leap, carrying me with him. There was a violent concussion—a fearful rebound, and then unutterable confusion. Was I hurt? Was I killed? Was the awful tumult in my brain caused by the flight of the spirit from the body? How long would the struggle last? What would I see next?

These and a flood of other wild questionings darted through my brain with inconceivable rapidity, then a swift numbness settled upon me, and all became blank.

I awoke and heard low-spoken words. After an instant's effort I recollected everything. Two men were seated near me. I was lying on a couch, and could see faces peering in at a window and hear the hum of voices outside.

As I opened my eyes two men arose and regarded me intently. I concluded that they were physicians.

"Any bones broken?" I asked.

"No," one of them replied.

"Any other injuries?"

"A few bruises."

"Shall I try to arise?"

"Not just yet."

"Here, take this," said the other doctor, extending a glass of wine.

I drank it and sat up. Beyond a slight dizziness I experienced no uncomfortable feeling. I expressed the opinion that I was all right, in which the doctors were disposed to concur.

"How about the other one?" I asked.

"Was he a friend of yours?"

"No, not even an acquaintance."

"How did you happen to be with him?"

I related the matter briefly, and then repeated my inquiry.

"Well, he's dead."