

A Maniac

By Maurice Level

He was neither malicious nor bloodthirsty. It was only that he had conceived a very special idea of the pleasures of existence. Perhaps it was that, having tried them all, he no longer found the thrill of the unexpected in any of them.

He went to the theater, not to follow the piece, or to look through his opera-glasses at the spectators, but because he hoped that some day a fire might break out. At the fair of Neuilly he visited the various menageries in anticipation of a catastrophe: the tamer attacked by the beasts. He had tried bullfights, but soon tired of them; the slaughter appeared too well-regulated, too natural, and it disgusted him to watch suffering.

What he was always looking for was the quick and keen anguish caused by some unexpected disaster, some new kind of accident; so much so that, having been at the Opera Comique on the night of the great fire, from which he escaped unhurt; that, having been a couple of steps from the cage the day the celebrated Fred was devoured by his lions, he lost almost all interest in theaters and menageries. To those who were astonished at this apparent change in his tastes, he replied:

“But there’s nothing more to see there. They don’t give me the slightest sensation. All that I care for is the effect produced on others and on me.”

When he was deprived of these two favorite pleasures—it had taken him ten years to get what he wanted from them—he fell into a state of mental and physical depression, and for some months rarely left his house.

Then came a morning when the walls of Paris were covered with multi-colored posters that showed, on an azure background, a curious inclined track which came down, wound round, and fell like a ribbon. Up at the top, little bigger than a dot, a cyclist seemed to be waiting for a signal to rush down the giddy descent. At the same time the newspapers gave accounts of an extraordinary feat that explained the meaning of this weird picture.

It seemed that the cyclist dashed down the narrow path at full speed, went up round the loop, then down to the bottom. For a second during this fantastic performance he was head downwards, his feet up in the air.

The acrobat invited the press to come and examine the track and the machine so that they might see there was no trickery about it, and he explained that his ability to perform the feat was due to calculations of extreme precision, and that so long as he kept his nerve nothing could prevent its accomplishment.

Now it is certain that when the life of a man hangs on keeping his nerve, it hangs on a very insecure peg!

Since the appearance of the advertisement, our maniac had recovered some of his good humor. He went to the private demonstration, and becoming convinced that a new sensation awaited him, was in a seat on the first night to watch closely this looping the loop.

He had taken a box that faced the end of the track, and he sat there alone, not wishing to have near him any one who might distract his close attention.

The whole thing was over in a few minutes. He had just time to see the black speck appear on the end of the track, a formidable spurt, a plunge, a gigantic bound, and that was all. It gave him a thrill, swift and vivid as lightning.

But as he went out with the crowd, he reflected that though he might feel this sensation twice or thrice, it must eventually fail, as all the others had done. He had not found what he was looking for. Then came the thought that a man's nerve has limitations, that the strength of a bicycle is, after all, only relative, and that there is no track of the kind, however secure it may seem, that may not some time give way. And he arrived at the conclusion that it was inevitable that some day an accident must occur.

From this to deciding to watch for that accident was a very small step.

"I will go to see this looping of the loop every night," he decided. "I will go till I see that man break his head. If it doesn't happen during this three months in Paris, I will follow him elsewhere till it does."

For two months, every evening at the same time, he went to the same box and in the same seat. The management had grown to know him, he had taken the box for the whole period of the turn, and they wondered vainly what could account for this costly whim.

One evening when the acrobat had gone through his performance earlier than usual, he saw him in a corridor and went up to him. There was no need for an introduction.

"I know you already," said the bicyclist. "You are always at the hall. You come every night."

Surprised, he asked:

"It is true I am deeply interested in your performance. But who has told you so?"

The man smiled:

"No one. I see you."

"That is very surprising. At such a height . . . at such a moment . . . your mind is sufficiently free to pick out the spectators down below?"

"Certainly not. I don't see the spectators down below. It would be extremely dangerous for me to pay any attention to a crowd that moves and chatters. In all matters connected with my profession, in addition to the turn itself, its theory and practice, there is something else, a kind of trick . . ."

He started.

"A trick?"

"Don't misunderstand me. I don't mean trickery. I mean something of which the public has no suspicion, something that is perhaps the most delicate part of the whole performance. Shall I explain? Well, I accept it as a fact that it is not possible to empty the brain till it contains but one idea, impossible to keep the mind fixed on any one thought. As complete concentration is necessary, I choose in the hall some one object on which I fix my eyes. I see nothing but that object. From the second I have my gaze on it, nothing else exists. I get on the saddle. My hands gripping the bars, I think of nothing; neither of my balance, nor my direction. I am sure of my muscles; they are as firm as steel. There is only one part of me I am afraid of: my eyes. . . But once I have fixed them on something, I am sure of them as well. Now, the first night I performed here, it happened that my eyes fell on your box. I saw you. I saw nothing but you. Without knowing it, you caught and held my eyes

You became the point, the object of which I have told you. The second day I looked for you at the same place. The following days it was the same. And so it happens that now, as soon as I appear, by instinct my eyes turn to you. You help me; you are the precious aid indispensable to my performance. Now do you understand why I know you?"

Next day the maniac was in his usual seat. In the hall there were the usual movements and murmurs of keen anticipation. Suddenly a dense silence fell; that profound silence when you feel that an audience is holding its breath. The acrobat was on his machine, which was held by two

men, waiting for the signal to set off. He was balanced to perfection, his hands grasping the bar, his head up, his gaze fixed straight ahead.

He cried "Hop!" and the men pushed him off.

Just at that moment, in the most natural way possible, the maniac rose, pushed back his seat, and went to one at the other side of the box. Then a terrible thing happened. The cyclist was thrown violently up in the air. His machine rushed forwards, flew up, and lurching out into the midst of the shrieks of terror that filled the hall, fell among the crowd.

With a methodical gesture the maniac put on his overcoat, smoothed his hat on the cuff of his sleeve, and went out.