

# The 10.50 Express

By Maurice Level

“They say you are leaving us to-day, sir?” the cripple said to me.

“I must. I have to beat Marseilles on Monday morning. I shall go by the 10:50 express to-night from the Gare de Lyon. It’s a good train . . . but you ought to know it—you were employed by the P. L. M. before you fell ill, weren’t you?”

He shut his eyes, and his face became suddenly very pale as he replied:

“Yes . . . I know it . . . too well . . .”

There were tears under his eyelids as, after a moment’s silence, he added:

“No one knows it as well as I do! . . .”

Thinking he was moved by regret for the work he was no longer able to do, I said:

“It must have been an interesting job. Fine work needing plenty of intelligence.”

He shuddered; his paralyzed body strained violently, and there was a look of horror in his eyes as he protested:

“Don’t say that, sir! Fine work? You mean work of terror and death . . . of horror and nightmare . . . Sir, I am nothing to you, but I am going to ask you a favor—don’t go by that train. Take any other train you likes but don’t go by the 10:50. .

“Why?” I queried smiling. “Are you superstitious?”

“I’m not superstitious . . . but I was the driver in charge of the express the day of the disaster of 24th July, 1894. I will tell you about it and you will understand . . .

“We left the Gare de Lyon at the usual time, and had been running about two hours. The day had been suffocatingly hot. In spite of the speed we were going at, the breeze that came to me on the platform was stifling, the heavy, sultry air that goes before a storm . . .

“All at once, as if an electric light had been switched off, everything went out in the sky. Not a star left. The moon gone, and great flashes of lightning cutting the night with a light clear enough to make the darkness that followed black as ink.

“I said to my stoker:

“ ‘We’re in for it! There’ll be a mighty downpour.’

“ ‘Not before time. I couldn’t stand this furnace much longer. You’ll have to keep your eyes skinned for the signals.’

“ ‘No fear. I can see right enough.’

“The thunder was so loud I couldn’t hear the hammering of the wheels, nor the exhaust of the engine. The rain still kept off and the storm came nearer. We were running right into it. It seemed as if we were running after it.

“You needn’t be a coward to feel a bit queer when you find yourself being burlled into a great storm on a monster of steel that rushes on like a madman.

“In front of us, quite close, a flash of lightning pierced the ground, and at the same time a terrible thunderclap sounded, then another, so violent that I shut my eyes and sank on my knees.

“I remained like that for some seconds, all of a heap, stunned, feeling as if I’d had a heavy blow on the back of the neck.

“At last I came to myself. I was still on my knees, my back against the partition of the platform. It seemed as if I had come back from hundreds of miles away. I tried to get up. Impossible. My legs were doubled under me, useless. I thought I must have broken something in my fall, but I felt no

pain of any kind. I tried to help myself up with my hands . . . my arms were hanging powerless by my sides.

“There I was, stupefied, with the extraordinary feeling that my arms and legs didn’t belong to me; that I had no command over them . . . that they refused to obey me . . . that they were things with no more life in them than my clothes which the draught was blowing about . . . Some power I didn’t understand prevented my opening my eyes.

“We were running full speed. The storm was still raging, but not so violently, further away. It began to rain. I heard it hissing on the steel, and I felt the warm drops on my face.

“Suddenly something in me relaxed and I felt all right again, quite well, just a little tired. I remembered where I was and my work, and that brought me back to realities with a jerk, and not yet understanding what had happened, why I felt as if I were paralyzed, I called to my stoker to help me to get up.

“No reply.

“The noise is deafening on an engine going at full speed. I shouted louder:

“ ‘François! Hull there, François! Give me a hand.’

“Still no reply. Then an awful fear gripped me. Fear of what? I didn’t know, but the shock of it made me open my eyes and give a yell. It was a yell of terror, and there was every reason for it.

“The platform was empty. My stoker had disappeared.

“In one second I understood exactly what had happened.

“The flash of lightning had struck us; it had killed the stoker and he had fallen out on the line. I—I was paralyzed . . .

“No, sir, not even if I were a great scholar and searched and searched for words, could I give you an idea of the horror I felt. The mate who ought to have been beside me, able to help me, had disappeared as if by magic, and behind me two hundred passengers were sleeping or chatting peacefully in their carriages with no suspicion that they were being whirled onwards in a mad rush to certain death. For the man in charge of the train, their driver, was a helpless mass, unable to stretch out an arm, paralyzed . . . a cripple . . . Me! . . .

“My brain grew as active as my body was inert. First I saw clearly the line stretching before me. I saw the rails shining in the moonlight. We were rushing along . . . how we tore along! . . . I became aware of the sensation of speed that habit had made me lose. The train passed a little station like a flash of lightning, but not too quickly for me to see a signalman dozing in his box near a telegraphic apparatus. A jolt or two on the turn-table; a clanging of plates; the line marked by rails that crossed each other, suddenly large, then small . . . the deep cutting, and once more the dash into darkness.

“Then came the tunnel into which we plunged like a raging hurricane . . . Once again the open line. Now I knew where we were, and I told myself we were bound to derail, that in two minutes we should come to a sharp curve, and that at the rate we were going at we were certain to bound off .

“But the good God didn’t mean it to be that. The engine, the whole train, leaned over . . . the rails ground frantically against the wheels . . . and we passed . . .

“This curve had been my chief fear. I breathed again. The fire would go out for want of fuel . . . The engine would stop . . . The guard would hurry round to the front of the train . . . I would tell him what had happened . . . He would put fog-signals in front of and behind us . . . we should be saved! . . .

“But my relief did not last long. We had just dashed through a station when I saw something that made my hair stand on end: the signal was against us! The block I was entering wasn’t free . . .

“I don’t know why I didn’t go mad. Imagine what can go through a man’s mind when, tearing along on an engine going at seventy miles an hour, he is warned that an obstacle bars the road.

“I said to myself: ‘If you don’t stop, you, and with you the whole train, will be smashed to pieces . . . to stop this awful thing, you need only make a slight movement, the simple movement of taking hold of that lever two feet away from you . . . but you won’t make the movement . . . you can’t make it . . . and you will see the whole thing happen, will have the agony, a hundred times worse than death itself, of sighting the thing on which you will smash . . . of watching it grow larger . . . of rushing on to it . . .

“I tried to shut my eyes . . . I couldn’t . . . In spite of myself I kept watching, watching . . . and I saw it all, sir, I saw it all! I guessed what the obstacle was before it appeared, and soon there was no doubt about it . . . It was a train that had broken down that was blocking our way. I could see its shadow, its rear-lights. It came nearer . . . It came nearer! Why did I shriek? ‘Help! Stop!’ Who could hear? It came nearer. All of me was dead except my head. And that was alive with the terrible life of eyes that could see everything even in the blackness of the night, of ears that could hear everything even through the roaring of the wheels, of a frantic will that kept giving me orders like those an officer gives to routed soldiers he is trying to rally.

“It came nearer . . . Only five hundred yards away . . . only three hundred . . . shadowy forms ran about the line . . . only one hundred . . . one hundred yards . . . just a flash! . . . It was the end . . . the crash . . . the charnel heap . . . Annihilation!

“Sir, those who haven’t seen it . . .

“. . . I came to myself under a pile of wreckage. Agonized calls for help filled the air. I could see people running through the fields carrying lanterns, and others with the injured in their arms . . . and shrieks . . . and moans . . . and weeping . . .

“I saw, I heard all that, and I didn’t care. I was no longer thinking. I didn’t call for help . . .

“Between two beams that crossed over my head, so close that my lips touched them, I could see a little bit of sky, very soft, very pure; I just lay looking at a tiny star that trembled there, bright, pretty . . . it amused me . . .”