

MAN V. MOTOR

THE STORY OF A MAN-HUNT.

By T. W. McKAIL.

YOU will make no effort to escape while I dictate the terms?" I looked steadily at the revolver muzzle and the tigerish face behind it. I noticed how lovingly the forefinger caressed the trigger, and felt how entirely I was in the power of this man.

"I will not."
"Very good,—Mr. Morse. Then you will have the kindness to sit on the bank opposite while I unfold you my plan of action."

I crossed the road and sat down at the point indicated by Malpas. He took a cigar out of a case and lit it deliberately, eyeing me the while as a cat eyes a mouse.

"We will be brief and business-like," he continued, producing a road map and laying it open on his knee. "The two main points of the whole concern are these: First, I have you entirely at my mercy. A touch of the trigger and Frederick Alvars Malpas is avenged. When I saw you in the Rue Grand Pont yesterday my first impulse was one of instant retaliation; but more prudent counsels prevailed. I determined to await a better opportunity and take a longer revenge."

"The second point, then, is the method of revenge. Ten years in Sing Sing cannot be wiped off the slate by the swift passage of a bullet. I have in my mind a scheme which will yield me a much more exquisite pleasure, and at the same time bring in an element of sport."

He took a few puffs at his cigar, and moistened his lips, as though in anticipation of a most choice bill of fare. He gazed over his coming revenge. To keep me in suspense was part of it; so he sat silent awhile, the very picture of malignity.

"Yes! Sport! Besides, I want to give you a chance. You gave me a chance years ago when you secured me a post in your bank. If shall, at least, he said that I can remember a benefit as well as an injury. But the element of chance must be reduced to a minimum. I have here—" he tapped the map on his knee—"an excellent plan of the roads round Rouen. With its help I shall be able to indicate the exact route to be taken in what may be termed a novel game of hare and hounds—you, of course, being the hare."

The Forest de Rouvray seemed deserted by both man and beast. Neither up nor down the road could I see any sign of approaching succour. My mind travelled rapidly over the events that had led up to the present position: the rifling of the safes by our trusted cashier; the trial; the damning evidence produced by me; the sentence; the look of hideous; cruel hatred which the condemned cast at me as the officers of the law hurried him from the dock. I read again in my mind the threatening anonymous notes sent from Sing Sing.

If anything was wanting to make Malpas hate me it was supplied by my bringing home to him the gold robbery of the savings bank. I felt that I might as well hope to squeeze water from a flint as expect mercy from him.

"The road we shall take is as follows: From here to Elboeuf, through Grand Esart. From Elboeuf toward Jourviere, turning sharply to the left before we enter that town. Then to Pont de l'Arche, where we cross the Seine and follow its right bank to Rouen. The total distance is about thirty-five miles. You will have three minutes start, and then it will be a mere struggle between human muscle and motor-car. The car is capable of only about eighteen miles an hour on the level, being, fortunately for you, not a modern type, but your full powers will be required to keep you ahead. If I catch you, as no doubt I

shall, two courses will be open to me. I may either shoot you, if the opportunity offers to do so without danger to myself, or, I can ride you down. The latter alternative will be the safer, for if it proves fatal to you I can say it was your fault; and if not fatal—well, the car weighs nearly a ton."

He spoke in a matter-of-fact tone as though he were announcing the details of an excursion to a party of trippers. Yet his words brought a little comfort.

"By the bye, there is one thing I must add," he said, slowly, blowing a ring of gray smoke; "the chances seem all in your favour. You doubtless think that the byways and hedges, to say nothing of the towns, will afford you hiding-places. But beware! You remember Boshier, who was mixed up in the gold-bag affair? Well, our release came on the same day. As soon as we were again masters of our own actions, our first thoughts turned to revenge. So, by an arrangement, of which I don't mean to tell you the details, we have jointly woven a web about you from which you can escape only at the expense of your family. Boshier is watching them at Shanklin."

He spoke with such cruel assurance that I could only feel my extreme helplessness. The complicity of Boshier in the scheme of revenge was quite outside my calculations. Malpas's devilish plans were indeed complete. How could I hope to escape this insensate thing of rubber and steel? How, on the other hand, could I refuse to make the attempt?

He tossed the map across, saying: "You had better study that for a few minutes while I overhaul my car and see that everything is in order. The sign-posts are so good that you can scarcely miss the way accidentally; but you must be careful not to take the short cut from Elboeuf to Pont de l'Arche by the river."

Then he took a small parcel out of his pocket and undid it, revealing six shining revolver cartridges. "Nothing like plenty of ammunition," he added, almost jocularly, with a sudden change of manner. "One never knows what may be needed to finish the job properly."

This was not comforting; but I picked up the map and pretended to study it. I knew the route well enough, having traversed it a few days before. The contrast between that pleasant ride and the present crisis was so great that I felt inclined to throw away the little shred of hope and dare Malpas to do his worst. But I thought of the dear ones at home. The instinct of life rose strong within me.

"It is time for you to start, Mr. Morse. But, before starting, one more thing must be told you. Supposing you reach Rouen in advance of me, I shall, for the time being, take no further steps to injure you. You had better not make any attempts on my liberty, however, because intention apart from action is nothing illegal. You can't prove anything against me until I have struck a blow. You can't bring home to me those anonymous notes. You can't even produce witnesses to my present actions. So I say again, beware!"

He drew out his watch and continued:

"In three minutes from the time when I say 'Off,' I shall start; so be ready. Perhaps you will pledge me your word as a gentleman to keep to the route we have agreed upon. An American's word goes for a good deal, even in France."

It seemed exceedingly strange Malpas should make such a request, with me entirely at his mercy. I did not then know that complicity of Boshier was a mere fiction, and that he was

trying to substitute for it my sense of honour. The impudence of the fellow stung me to retort.

"No, you scoundrel, I won't!" I shouted furiously, forgetful of prudence. "You might just as well ask a criminal to give his word as a gentleman to stand quite still while the drop-bolt is drawn. If you were more than half American you would never have made such a suggestion; but I promise you that I will do my best to prevent your being a murderer as well as a common thief."

I know that the taunt cut Malpas to the quick, for his swarthy face turned pale, and his dark eyes burned with hatred.

"So you call me a common thief, Mr. Morse," he said, "say, rather, embezzler; an embezzler is a much greater person than a thief, you know. As to the term murderer, it yet remains to be justified, though you have done your best to provoke me to murder. Only the pleasure of a hunt saved you. But the insult must not pass unnoticed; you will now have only two minutes' start."

He mounted the car—a yellow-wheeled Panhard—and seating himself behind the steering-wheel, said: "Now then, up you get. No shirking, and remember your family. One, two, three, off!"

As may be imagined, I lost no time; so much depended upon those first two minutes. I believe I rode the first mile as fast as any human being could have covered it. Talk about competition for bringing out a man's powers! it is nothing to the stimulus provided by the fear of death. My feet flew nimbly round, at a pace I had hitherto only dreamed of.

At Grand Esart I narrowly missed a collision with a small boy carrying two buckets. The fault was mine rather than his, being the result of confusing the French with the English rule of the road. I had not been long enough in France after my sojourn in England to take the right side instinctively as I should have done in America. The boy started open-mouthed at the "mad American," and dropping his buckets, he fled into the nearest cottage. This escape made me more careful. I glanced over my shoulder and got a momentary glimpse of the motor-car still in the distance. For the present I was making the running, and took comfort in thinking that I should out-distance him. If I could only keep up the pace!

Pines gave way to the welcome shade of maple and hornbeam. Blazing wildly, I dashed round corners at a break-neck speed, to the consternation of more than one brown-faced, wooden-clogged Norman. Before I could believe it I was on the slope descending into Elboeuf. Riding now became dangerous, owing to the sharp bends that characterise the French road-engineer's work on steep hills. I rode with my life in my hands, whirling round at acute angles to the ground, praying that what vehicles might be about would meet me in the intervals between corners. By good luck, only one market waggon met me, and in a few minutes I was tearing along under the railway bridge and up the outlying streets. An electric car fell behind as if it had been standing still. Soon cobble paving obliged me to slacken speed. Guiding my machine carefully among the traffic of the main street, I reached the open country again on level macadam.

The thought that Malpas would be even more hampered than I had been, caused a sudden thrill of exhilaration. I blessed my forethought in overhauling the machine now quivering between my legs; I blessed the art of the French road-maker. But my exaltation was premature. When within six feet of a cast horse shoe bristling with nails, I

suddenly noticed it, and the violent swerve made to avoid it threw me completely off my balance. Fortunately my shoulders bore the brunt of the collision with the ground. As soon as the first stage of pained bewilderment had passed, I rose to my feet. All hope seemed jarred out of me. The cycle lay on the other side of the road. I picked it up and shook it to ascertain the damage. I spun the wheels; the front was a good deal buckled, but could clear the forks. The right pedal brushed the crank at every revolution, but could turn. The bell was a wreck. No time this for lament or examination of bruises. Forward, at all cost! Yes; that cloud of dust did contain a car—so close too!

Up I tumbled again, and made off—painfully, but swiftly. "At the first corner I nearly ran into a gentleman."
"By George, it's Morse!" exclaimed a voice, which I recognised as that of my friend Alhusen, to whose house I was riding when Malpas overtook me. I could not stay to explain—time pressed. Onward, ever onward; so I left Mr. Alhusen to solve the mystery as best he might.

Oh, terrible are those moments when the body cries out, "Stop! Stop!" and the mind shouts, "Go on! Go on!" The pain of years seemed concentrated into that struggle with the French hill—pain, mental as well as physical, so great were the stakes. Nearer and nearer came the "kiss! kiss!" of the car. I felt that I was lost; to a feeling of utter exhaustion was joined a sensation of pleasure at the thought that all would soon be over—and a Bollee voiturette flashed by me up the hill. The intense mental relief at once spread to my limbs; and to the aid of my spent sinews the northwesterly wind came singing through the spokes, turning the ascent into level road. Then in imagination I pictured Malpas smiling at my struggles—perhaps even holding in his steel to prolong my agony. Could he have but realised my suffering, part, at least, of his vengeance would have been satisfied.

Doubt soon changed to despair; for some way in front lay a level crossing, and the gates were shut. The devil and the deep sea! There was no time for calculation. I dashed up to the gates, clapped on the brake so suddenly that part of the rubber stripped off the front cover, and in a moment stood on the permanent way, machine and all; then over the second obstacle, heedless of what the gatekeeper said.

That level crossing was my salvation. It checked Malpas for about two minutes. I made good use of the time, snapping my fingers at him and his stinking petroleum-pot in a fresh cause of hope. The front tyre, however, caused me some anxiety. The canvas beneath the rubber showed white at every revolution. Yet there was small fear of puncture if I kept my eyes well open.

I hurried on through the Forest du Pont de l'Arche in pursuit of the dust-clouds which the wind raised from the roads and blew into the trees, not daring to look behind me. The noise of the motor cylinder was wafted down to me so distinctly that I thought Malpas must be gaining ground rapidly. As a matter of fact a good quarter mile separated us when I reached the beginning of a long down-slope. Here, if anywhere, I must improve my position. A waggon was ascending the hill heavily laden with hurdles. The driver slept on his seat; but the horses kept to the middle of the road. I passed easily enough; not so Malpas, who was obliged to stop and curse the driver into wakefulness. The sounds of his oaths came as music to my ears.

In a few moments my front tyre began to jam mud against the brake, rubber causing considerable extra friction. The chain tightened by the wet—for it began to rain—gave out a rapid series of sharp cracks. I was drenched to the skin very soon, but my mind was too occupied with other matters to heed that.

How I cursed myself for allowing Malpas to get me into this straight, bare stretch of road where I had about as much chance of eluding pursuit as a rat has of escaping a ferret in a drain! If only I had slipped in to the woods and retraced my way to Rouen!

His! A bullet hummed past me and flung up a spurt of mud in front to the right. Malpas was firing under cover of the thunder. In such weather there would be nobody abroad to see or hear. I divined his little game at once; and when the next clap came swerved my bicycle sharply to the right. Another