

THE ATLANTIC AVENUE TUNNEL.

A ROMANCE.

I.

"The Atlantic Avenue tunnel!" exclaimed Bilderhouse, looking up from his writing table.

"That's what I said," replied Furbish. "Don't you know there's an old, unused tunnel there, under the middle of the street, extending from the ferry almost to Flatbush Avenue?"

"Don't believe it! Never heard of it before," said Bilderhouse, leisurely resuming his work.

"All the same it's there. Everybody in Brooklyn knows it but a fellow like you, whose trade it is to keep the people well informed. You writing fellows don't know anything except what you read in other writing fellows' books."

"I'm surprised," rejoined the man of letters, "that a scientific student should permit himself to heed the ravings of an ignoramus, a poor brute carried into the surgical ward of a charity hospital out of the streets. Come, take off your wet things and mix the punch!"

Furbish stood his umbrella, handle downward, on the hearth, and, still wearing his dripping rubber coat and storm cap, brought out the black bottle and the lemon squeezer.

"You're raving," he went on, "but the man talked intelligibly in the few moments of calm that preceded his death. He was not a beggar. His body was well-nourished or he would not have lived long enough after the accident to have his wounds fixed up on the operating table. He was badly dressed and unkempt looking, but there was a deal of character in his face. If you knew more than you do about human nature, you would know that the surgeon in a case of this kind exerts an irresistible spell on the mind of his subject. When he came out of the ether and knew he was dying I was the only one near. As it was a hopeless case, the others had gone about other business. He knew I had tried to save his life. No one, probably, had ever treated him so well before. He had a valuable secret. He gave it to me. Then he died. With a lie on his lips, you say? Bosh! Drink your punch, and be quick about it. You're going out with me to-night!"

Bilderhouse looked up calmly at the young medical student, emptied his glass with a single gulp, and, holding it out to be refilled, remarked: "My experience has taught me that deathbed confessions are the least trustworthy of human utterances."

"Your experience," exclaimed Furbish, hotly, "has been confined to the little editorial office of a little newspaper, wherein you've settled the affairs of foreign nations. Your remark was made years ago by some one else, and he lied. Deathbed confessions may be the result of hallucination, a phase of delirium. But otherwise they form the best kind of evidence. This man had entirely recovered from the effects of the ether. His mind was perfectly clear. Come, we're going out!"

"In all this rain?"

"What better night than this for treasure trove?"

"I've got this article on Keats, for *Briggs's Magazine*, to finish—The True Meaning of 'Endymion.' I've read that juvenile but wonderful poem all through again to-night. There's strange power in it. The critics have never done it justice. Swinburne is all wrong."

"Keats be blowed! You'll not need to write any more stuff like that if we get this treasure."

"You really believe it's there?"

"Millions!"

"How did the thieves get in the tunnel?"

"Through a smaller tunnel connecting with the cellar of a beer shop. The keeper of the shop, one of the gang, died suddenly. The present tenant is a simple, honest German who knows nothing of the secret passage to the tunnel. I have the street number and his name. Come, get on your coat and goshes. The man who died in the hospital an hour ago was the last of the gang!"

"But the simple, honest German?"

"He'll have to be let into the secret."

"If he's as honest as you say—"

"Bosh! Honesty is purely relative. We're honest—but what we find we'll keep!"

"This would make a capital newspaper story."

"It will never be written. Come! Harry!"

"I have a slight cold, and the rain—"

"Bilder, if I asked you to go out with me on a wholly mysterious journey—to Canarsie, for instance—in a blizzard, without offering a word of explanation, you'd go without a murmur."

"That's true enough," said Bilderhouse, "but when you do give explanations you reveal your folly and impel me to stay at home."

Nevertheless, the two young men departed from their lodging in Pineapple Street eastward through the blinding rain to Colohie.

II.

Mr. Vaunterhausen of Atlantic Avenue is not abreast with the times. His is not a modern drinking place. The paint was worn off his door many years ago, his window is dirty, and the cheap fly-specked lithograph of an actress displayed therein was an advertisement of an engagement she filled in Brooklyn ten years ago. Mr. Vaunterhausen, assisted by Schnautzy, a queer-looking fellow, believed by frequenters of the place to be a nobleman expelled from Hungary for political reasons, serves very good beer drawn from the keg, that is hidden by no polished and nickel-trimmed screen, over a plain and battered wooden counter.

There are tables and chairs, a file of a German newspaper, one of the local evening journals, and some soiled packs of cards for pinochle. Mr. Vaunterhausen's customers are few, mostly musicians of his own nationality—Vaunterhausen says he was an organist in a church once, but nobody believes him—and they stay late. Cheese sandwiches are served to favored ones free of charge and almost free of cheese, and hot Frankfurters, on Wednesdays and Saturdays, are plentiful and cheap. The olives cost nothing and look it.

Schnautzy is alert, reticent, with one available rolling eye, a shock of iron-gray hair, and a scrubby gray beard. He does not look like a nobleman, but he carries with him an air of mystery. Vaunterhausen is large, red, and affable.

Beer, after the hot punch, is a mistake. Bilderhouse knows that. But there is nothing else to drink, for the black bottles arranged in an uninviting row behind the host could contain only poison for a delicate young man. There are too many drinkers and pinochle players present to begin operations at once. They must wait for a chance to talk to the beaming landlord. * * * But why not Schnautzy?

Furbish has thought of that. He is already scraping a pleasant acquaintance with Schnautzy. He has purposely spilled some beer on Schnautzy's trousers, and profusely apologized for his carelessness, and Schnautzy has said: "Es hat nichts auf sich"—like Mr. Toots. Furbish has thus begun a conversation with the mysterious one who so rarely talks, and some of the pinochle players are looking on in amazement.

Beer always makes Bilderhouse drowsy. He has often said he would never drink the stuff again, and in these German places it is beer, beer, beer! One does not care to take a shingle from the roof of the house.

Beer enlivens Furbish, but anything enlivens him. He is full of energy and enthusiasm, and he has no end of "magnetism." Schnautzy sits by him now, and they are talking quickly, earnestly, in low tones. Vaunterhausen, pleased to have a new customer put at his ease, is serving beer at the tables himself. The room is full of smoke, and near the low ceiling it hangs in a cloud. The few gas jets give but feeble light. Bilderhouse is impatient. Though he pretended to scoff at the "subject's" confession, he is deeply interested. Probably the tale of treasure trove made a deeper impression on his sensitive, imaginative mind than on Furbish's, who is adventurous but practical, who takes to anything new with great zest, but is not generally credulous.

There is a grimy little door in a side wall that Bilderhouse knows must lead to the cellar. He pictures what a place that cellar must be under the dismal, dirty little shop—moist, dark, nasty, cluttered up, infested by rats. Yet he longs to be down in that cellar. Schnautzy's face, as he watches it, seems to grow stronger and more cunning. There is force in that man, and shrewdness. If there's a secret passage from the tunnel to the cellar he knows of it.

Bilderhouse cannot hear a word Furbish is saying, yet he infers, from the expression of Schnautzy's face, that the object of their visit has been explained to him. His face seems to say "How much for me?" Furbish ought to be careful. What if Schnautzy should be one of the gang placed there to guard the treasure? He might get them into the tunnel and kill them. They are unarmed, unless Furbish thought to bring his revolver, which he does not generally carry. It would be another case of mysterious disappearance, with no clue.

The lights burn more dimly, the tobacco smoke is thicker, some of the loungers have gone home, others are going, and the landlord extinguishes the two lights in the window. It is time to close. Vaunterhausen yawns expansively, as a hint, perhaps. Schnautzy and Furbish are still talking earnestly. Bilderhouse is very drowsy, he is even falling asleep—he does doze lightly for a few seconds. Then he rouses himself. The room is darker. All the drinkers have gone, and Vaunterhausen and Furbish have disappeared. By the grimy little door stands Schnautzy, a lantern in his hand, a leer on his face, beckoning to Bilderhouse, who, wide awake now, rises and goes to him.

III.

A nasty place indeed that cellar is, and a risky descent to it by that battered, broken, rickety ladder. Bilderhouse feels his way cautiously, Schnautzy going ahead spryly with the lantern. It is all dark save where the feeble ray of the little oil lamp in the lantern faintly illumines the stone wall and floor. There is a light beyond, however, for the secret passage is open and Furbish has probably passed through it.

Bilderhouse remembers his fears—he ought to have warned Furbish—but it is too late now, and he hastens, stumblingly, forward to be with his friend. The passage is short; he cannot see

what sort of an opening it has to the cellar, whether a door or merely a rough hole in the wall. He is ahead of Schnautzy now, who follows slowly with the lantern.

In the tunnel beyond the blackness that surrounds him there is a light. That way Furbish has gone. He follows the light quickly, but it recedes as rapidly as he walks. He is surprised that the floor is so smooth, that the air is so clear, that there are no rails or ties to impede his progress, but his anxiety for Furbish is stronger than any other feeling. He hurries on, quite forgetting the man with the lantern, on through the black mystery that is all about him toward the flickering light that still recedes. Tired and discouraged he pauses, and, looking around, he sees no lantern, no Schnautzy!

He has been abandoned without a light in the tunnel. Shall he try to retrace his steps? It would be impossible in the darkness to discover the secret passage. If Furbish is ahead he ought to join him. He will press forward.

As he turns again he sees that the light has become brighter, is growing still brighter, and seems to be nearing him. Joy! Furbish is returning.

No, that cannot be, for he can see clearly far ahead of him now and Furbish is not in sight. The darkness has gone, he is in a vast chamber brightly illuminated, from some unseen source, and around him throbs a bewildering phantasmagoria of color and the radiance of silver and gold, the brilliance of precious stones. There is a faint sound of music from afar off and a noise as of rushing waters.

This is no railroad tunnel, but the cave of Endymion. A spicy perfume fills the air, the white marble pillars of Grecian porticoes glisten in the distance. His path leads upward now, up, up, up! He runs eagerly and is impelled to call again and again for his lost friend, but his voice is not heard above the roar of the invisible waters.

He is at the end of his path, the brink of a precipice with straight walls descending into darkness, before him dazzling light, behind now, the blackness of night for the path he followed has been obscured. Through the light something approaches, a flying monster! The eagle! The eagle of Endymion! Jove's eagle coming to bear him over! He springs forward and falls into the abyss! * * *

IV.

"Your hat fell off, old man," says Furbish, as he awakens Bilderhouse from his slumber and hands to him the derby that was rolling in the sawdust. "You've had quite a little nap. Let's go home, I've got to be up early in the morning for a clinic!"

He helps his sleepy friend to arise, and bids farewell to the shop with a familiar "S'long," which is responded to pleasantly by Vaunterhausen, smoking his big meerschaum behind the bar, and smiling at Bilderhouse's mishap, and by the two remaining pinochle players. Schnautzy, who is counting the left-over Frankfurters, does not look up from his task.

Out of doors the rain had ceased and the stars are twinkling.

"Vaunterhausen's shop is built right on the ground. There's no cellar at all. Schnautzy says the tunnel was all filled in years ago. The fellow who died to-day lied!" Furbish makes this explanation as he takes his sleepy friend's arm and they start homeward.

"What did I tell you?" said Bilderhouse.

V.

Nevertheless, Schnautzy was mistaken about the tunnel.