

Diabolique Magazine presents

THE EXHUMATION COLLECTION

VOLUME 6

The Wandering Train

By Stefan Grabinski

Translated by Miroslaw Lipinski

Feverish activity reigned at the Horsk train station. It was right before the holidays, an eagerly anticipated time when people could take off from work for a few days. The platform swarmed with those arriving and departing. Women's excited faces flashed by, colorful hat ribbons flapped around, frantic rushing marked every scene. Here, the slender cylinder of an elegant gentleman's top hat pushed through the crowds; there, a priest's black cassock could be seen; elsewhere, under arcades, soldiers in blue squeezed through the crush; nearby, workers in their grey shirts tried to make their way in the press. Exuberant life seethed, and strained against the confines of the station, it overflowed noisily beyond its area. The chaotic bustle of the passengers, the exhortations of the porters, the sound of whistles, the noise of released steam all merged into a giddy symphony in which one became lost, surrendering the diminished, deafened self onto the waves of a mighty element to be carried, rocked, dazed. . . .

The railway employees were working at an intense pace. Traffic officials, conspicuous in their red caps, appeared everywhere—giving orders, clearing the absent-minded from the tracks, and passing a swift, vigilant eye on the trains at their moment of departure. Conductors were in a constant rush, walking with speedy steps through the lengthy coaches. Master signalmen, the pilots of the station, executed concise and efficient instructions—commands for departure. Everything went along at a brisk tempo, marked off to the minute, to the second—everyone's eyes were involuntarily checking the time on the white double-dial clock above.

Yet a quiet spectator standing to the side would, after a brief observation, have received impressions incompatible with the ostensible order of things.

Something had slipped into the standard regulations and traditional course of activities; some type of undefined, though weighty, obstacle opposed the sacred smoothness of rail travel.

One could tell this from the nervous, exaggerated gestures of the railwaymen and their restless glances and anticipating faces. Something had broken down in the previously exemplary

system. Some unhealthy, terrible current circulated along its hundredfold-branched arteries, and it permeated the surface in half-conscious flashes.

The zeal of the railwaymen reflected their obvious willingness to overcome whatever had stealthily wormed its way into a perfect structure. Everyone was in two or three places at once to suppress forcefully this irritating nightmare, to subordinate it to the regular demands of work, to the wearisome but safe equilibrium of routine chores.

This was, after all, their area, their “region,” exercised through many years of diligent application, a terrain, it seemed, that they knew through and through. They were, after all, exponents of that work ethic, that sphere of practical activity, where to them, the initiated, nothing should be unclear, where they, the representatives and sole interpreters of the entire complicated train system, could not, and should not, be caught unawares by any type of enigma. Why, for a long time everything had been calculated, weighed, measured—everything, though complex, had not passed human understanding—and everywhere there was a precise moderation without surprises, a regularity of repeated occurrences foreseen from the start!

They felt, then, a collective responsibility towards the dense mass of the travelling public to whom was owed complete peace and safety.

Meanwhile their inner perplexity, flowing in vexatious waves over the passengers, was sensed by the public.

If the problem had concerned a so-called “accident,” which, admittedly, one could not foresee but for which an explanation could be provided afterwards, then they, the professionals, were vulnerable but certainly not desperate. But something totally different was at issue here.

Something incalculable like a chimera, capricious like madness had arrived, and it shattered with one blow the traditional arrangement of things.

Therefore, they were ashamed of themselves and humiliated before the public.

At present it was most important that the problem should not spread, that “the general public” should not find out anything about it. It was appropriate to conceal any counter-measures, so that this strange affair would not come to light in the newspapers and create a public uproar.

Thus far the matter had been miraculously confined to the circle of railwaymen connected with it. A truly amazing solidarity united these people: they were silent. They communicated with each other by telling glances, specific gestures, and a play on well-chosen words. Thus far the public did not know anything about any problem.

Yet the restlessness of the railway employees and the nervousness of the officials had been gradually transmitted, creating a receptive soil for the sowing of secret conspiracies.

And “the problem” was indeed strange and puzzling.

For a certain time there had appeared on the nation’s railways a train not included in any generally known register, not entered in the count of circulating locomotives—in a word, an intruder without patent or sanction. One could not even state what category it belonged to or from what factory it had originated, as the momentary brief length of time it allowed itself to be seen made any determination in this respect impossible. In any event, judging by the incredible speed with which it moved before the dumbfounded eyes of onlookers, it had to occupy a very high standing among trains: at the very least it was an express.

Yet most distressing was its unpredictability. The intruder turned up everywhere, suddenly appearing from some railway line to fly by with a devilish roar along the tracks before disappearing in the distance. One day it had been seen near the station at M.; the following day it

appeared in an open field beyond the town of W.; a couple of days later it flew by with petrifying impudence near a lineman's booth in the district of G.

At first it was thought that the insane train belonged to an existing line and that only tardiness, or a mistake by the officials concerned, had failed to ascertain its identity. Therefore, inquiries began, endless signaling and communications between stations—all to no avail: the intruder simply sneered at the endeavors of the officials, usually appearing where it was least expected.

Particularly disheartening was the circumstance that nowhere could one catch, overtake, or stop it. Several planned pursuits to this end on one of the most technologically advanced engines created a horrible fiasco: the terrible train immediately took the lead.

Then the railway personnel began to be seized by a superstitious fear and a stifled rage. An unheard of thing! For quite a few years the coaches and cars had run according to an established plan that had been worked out at headquarters and approved by government officials—for years everything had been calculated, more or less foreseen, and when some “mistake” or “oversight” occurred, it could be logically explained and corrected. Then suddenly an uninvited guest slips onto the tracks, spoiling the order of things, turning regulations upside down, and bringing confusion and disarray to a well-regulated organization!

Thank goodness the interloper had not brought about any disaster. This was something that generally puzzled them from the very beginning. The train always appeared on a track that was free at the time; so far the crazy train had not caused a collision. Yet one could occur any day. Indeed, that was where things seemed to be heading. With mounting dread, a tendency in its movements was discovered which indicated that the train was entering into closer contact with its normal comrades. Though initially it seemed to steer clear of such close contact, appearing considerable distances beyond or before other trains, these days it sprang up at the backs of its predecessors after the passage of ever-shorter intervals of time. Already it had shot by an express on its way to O.; a week ago it barely avoided a passenger train between S. and F.; the other day only by a miracle did it not crash into the express from W.

Stationmasters trembled at the news of these near misses. Only double tracks and the quick judgment of engine drivers had prevented a collision. These amazing escapes had recently begun to occur with more frequency, so that the chances of a happy way out of a collision seemed to diminish daily.

From its role as the hunted, the intruder went into an active, magnetic-like impulse towards what was running smoothly and generally understood. The insane train began directly to menace the old order of things. The affair could end tragically any day now.

For a month the stationmaster at Horsk had been leading an unpleasant existence. In constant anxiety over an unexpected visit of the mysterious train, he was almost continually vigilant, not deserting day or night the signal-box that had been entrusted to him nearly a year ago as a token of recognition for “his energy and uncommon efficiency.” And the post was important, for at the Horsk station several principal railway lines intersected and the traffic of the entire country was concentrated.

Today, faced with a greatly increased number of passengers, his work was particularly difficult.

Evening was slowly falling. Electric lights flashed up, reflectors threw off their powerful projections. By the green fires of the junction-signals, rails started to glitter with a gloomy metallic glaze that curved along with the cold iron serpents. Here and there, in the shadowy twilight, a conductor's lamp flickered faintly, a lineman's signal blinked. In the distance, far

beyond the station, where the emerald eyes of lanterns were being extinguished, a semaphore was making night signals.

Here, leaving its horizontal position, the arm of the semaphore rose to an angle of forty-five degrees: the passenger train from Brzesk was approaching.

One could already hear the panting respiration of the locomotive, the rhythmic clatter of the wheels; one could already see the bright-yellow glass at its front. The train is heading into the station. . . .

From its open windows lean out the golden locks of children, the curious faces of women; welcoming kerchiefs are waved.

The throngs waiting on the platform push violently towards the coaches, outstretched hands on both sides tend towards a meeting. . . .

What kind of commotion is that to the right? Strident whistles rend the air. The stationmaster is shouting something in a hoarse, wild voice.

“Away! Get back, run! Reverse steam! Backwards! Backwards! . . . Collision!”

The masses throw themselves in a dense onrush towards the banisters, breaking them. Frenzied eyes instinctively look to the right—where the railway employees have gathered—and see the spasmodic, aimlessly frantic vibrations of lanterns endeavoring to turn back a train, which, with its entire momentum, is coming from the opposite side of the track occupied by the Brzesk passenger train. Shrill whistles cut the desperate responses of bugles and the hellish tumult of people. In vain! The unexpected locomotive is getting closer, with terrifying velocity; the enormous green lights of the engine weirdly push aside the darkness, the powerful pistons move with fabulous, possessed efficiency.

From a thousand breasts a horrible alarm bursts out, a cry swelled by a fathomless panic:

“It’s the insane train! The madman! On the ground! Help! On the ground! We’re lost! Help! We’re lost!”

Some type of gigantic, grey mass passes by—an ashen, misty mass with cut-out windows from end to end. One can feel the gust of a satanic draught from these open holes, hear the flapping, maddeningly blown-about shutters; one can almost see the spectral faces of the passengers. . . .

Suddenly something strange occurs. The insane, rapacious train, instead of shattering its comrade, passes through it like a mist; for a moment one can see the fronts of the two trains go through each other, one can see the noiseless grazing of the coach walls, the paradoxical osmosis of gears and axles; one more second, and the intruder permeates with lightning fury through the train’s solid body and disappears somewhere in the field on the other side. Everything quiets down. . . .

On the track, before the station, the intact Brzesk passenger train stands peacefully. About it, a great bottomless silence. Only from the meadows, there in the distance, comes the low chirp of crickets, only along the wires above flows the gruff chat of the telegraph. . . .

The people on the platform, the railwaymen, the clerks rub their eyes and look about in amazement.

Had what they seen really happened or was it just a strange hallucination?

Slowly, all eyes, united in the same impulse, turn towards the Brzesk train—it continues to stand silent and still. From inside, lamps burn with a steady, quiet light; at the open windows the breeze plays gently on the curtains.

A grave silence inhabits the cars; no one is disembarking, no one is leaning out from within. Through the illuminated quadrangle windows one can see the passengers: men, women,

and children; everyone whole, uninjured—no one has received even the most minor contusion. Yet their state is strangely puzzling.

Everyone is in a standing position, facing the direction of the vanished phantom locomotive. Some terrible force has bewitched these people, holding them in dumb amazement; some strong current has polarized this assembly of souls to one side. Their outstretched hands indicate some unknown goal, an aim surely distant; their inclined bodies lean to the distance, to a stunning, misty land far away; and their eyes, glazed by wild alarm and enchantment, are lost in boundless space.

So they stand and are silent; no muscle will twitch, no eyelid will fall. So they stand and are silent. . . .

Because through them has passed a most strange breath, because they have been touched by a great awakening, because they are already . . . insane. . . .

Suddenly strong and familiar sounds were heard, wrapped in the security of familiarity—strokes as firm as a heart when it beats against a healthy chest—steady sounds of habit, for years proclaiming the same thing.

“Ding-dong”—and a pause—“ding-dong . . . ding-dong . . .” The signals were operating.
. . .