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Editor and Publisher ROBERT C. SPROUL

Art Director WILLIAM CLARK

Editorial Consultant DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

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THE NIGHT EXPRESS

Time-tables were taboo on that streamlined special.



by Damon Knight

DUVEEN halted beside a railroad coach that looked newer than the rest. Its grooved sides were of aluminum, mirror-polished. Like a big house trailer, it hung low over the platform, promising stability and comfort. A steady hum came from the idling motors. The

platform was empty and silent.

His luggage had been checked ahead. He carried only the dark leather briefcase. There was no one waiting to see him off; Duveen had said all his good-bys a long time ago. He stepped up into the vestibule.

Inside, the coach was even roomier than it had seemed. Broad, disk-shaped ceiling lights illumined a row of tables and divans in the center of the car. Here and there, smaller, yellower seat lights glowed beneath green shades. The curved windows, which had seemed opaque from outside, were now perfectly transparent and without reflections. The seats were of ample size and well spaced. Duveen was not tired, but he noted with approval that by adjusting the foot-rests one could relax or even sleep in comfort.

He had barely settled himself with his briefcase and overcoat covering the other half of the seat when the coach began to fill. First came two soldiers in heavy-looking winter uniforms; they were fox-faced and slim, and carried barracks bags under their arms. Then a gray, haggard man, without a necktie but with his shirt collar turned up high around his throat. Then a studious-looking man with steel-rimmed glasses. He carried a huge, oblong case, covered with leatheroid or plastic, which was awkward to handle although it seemed light. Then a slovenly woman just out of her youth; the incongruous glint of a blue eye as she passed

made Duveen aware that only a year ago she might have been pretty. Then three round, brown, bald men, as stout and hard as handballs, each with a briefcase, each with a scowl and a cigar. They appropriated one of the center tables at once; took off their hats and overcoats, loosened their ties, and began to play cards.

The lights dimmed for an instant. Duveen heard the whine of compressors up ahead, then the faint throb of idling motors. The doors sighed shut. There was a slight jolt, then another as the car picked up speed; then they were rolling smoothly, faster and faster under the platform lights, then the tunnel lights, into darkness. Duveen looked at his watch: 11:21. Not bad.

The windows were set higher than in an ordinary railway coach, and on the wall beneath each window there was a magazine rack, an ashtray and a second small rack containing sample packs of cigarettes, a timetable and a new deck of cards. Duveen thumbed up the magazines and let them drop again— *Time*, *Fortune*, the *Geographic*. He had seen them all, or, if not, magazines just like them. Besides, they re-

minded him too much of a doctor's waiting room.

The coach rushed on, with a steady and irresistible motion. It was a cloudy night; Duveen couldn't see much through the high windows. Once or twice some distant lights came into view, strung in mysterious beauty across the dark (but Duveen knew what tawdry streets and defeated people he would find there), and later they roared past the blank, ruddy-lighted wall of a factory into darkness again.

Inside, all the ceiling lights had gone out except that over the cardplayers' table. The soldiers across the aisle were talking in low voices. From the opposite corner the woman's pale eyes gleamed, fixed on the soldiers with a resentful appeal: an expression that seemed to say, *Talk to me so that I can put you in your place.*

The sounds of the car's motion had muffled themselves into a kind of throbbing silence. Duveen heard the sharp *tac* of cards being rapped on the tabletop, then the slithering sounds as they were dealt, and an occasional short word from one of the players.

He extended his footrest, stretched out, and closed his eyes. He was not sleepy.

Through his head in an endless dull procession passed the gray figures from the stiff white papers in his briefcase. He had been studying them so long, beyond any interest or feeling, that now when he closed his eyes he was unable to stop their slow march across the field of his vision; it was as if he had lost the ability to distinguish the times when he was looking at the figures from the times when he was not. Then he realized that the columns of type had turned into nonsense, and he sat up again, pulling his cuffs tight around his wrists.

HE HAD the feeling that a long time had passed; he must have been dozing, after all. The soldiers were still sitting and talking together, the faded woman opposite was still eyeing them with a resentful, malevolent hunger; the card game was still going on. Up toward the front of the car, the man in the steel spectacles was doing something complex to the oblong box he held in his lap. The gray man was staring out the window. The coach was now mounting a long, gentle slope, steadily and swiftly ascending. The darkness was unbroken.

Feeling a little restless, Du-

veen rose and walked to the water cooler at the other end of the car. Only one clear drop came out. It hung from the tap without falling. Duveen was faintly annoyed, but, after all, he had not really been thirsty.

As he turned, the spectacled man looked up. He was about forty, neatly barbered but unkempt, with a desperately intelligent gleam in his eye. "Look here," he said, lifting the box from his lap, "have you ever seen anything like this?"

Duveen noticed for the first time that the box was scored with innumerable hair-thin lines which curved and broke in every direction, as if the box were assembled of many odd-shaped pieces, like a Chinese puzzle. "Wait, now, wait," said the spectacled man, and stared at the box, with both hands poised. He was like a nervous chess player, working out some intricate mental calculation. All at once his hands plunged, and the rigid thumbs pressed hard. Two curved sections of the box swung free. He laughed with triumph, and pushed the two sections back into place. "Now you do it," he said, offering the box to Duveen.

Politely, Duveen sat down and took the box on his lap.

He pressed with his thumbs as he had seen the spectacled man do, but nothing happened.

"No, no," said the spectacled man impatiently, "different spots each time. You have to get them right, or it changes. Try again."

Duveen pressed again, at random, and again and again, but without success. He handed the box back. The spectacled man took it with his dry laugh, and poised his hands as before. Abruptly he pressed, and swung out two opposite corners of the box. "It takes practice," he said with satisfaction. "I can tell you're not an engineer, though."

"No," said Duveen. He got up and went back to his seat, past the fixed glare of the gray man.

The card-players looked up as he passed. The nearest of the three was shuffling the pack. "You play bridge?" he asked around his cigar.

"No," said Duveen. The card-player turned away glumly and slapped the pack down before the man on his right. "Deal," he said.

Duveen sat down in his place again. Once more the gray figures began their march, swaying, grotesquely altered. When was it that he had stopped caring whether this deal went

through or not? He remembered a moment in his office when he stood behind his desk, stuffing papers into the briefcase, and the two men looked at him silently in the gray afternoon light. Yes, that must have been it. He could not say why, but nothing had felt quite the same since, although his mind still went through the motions.

He adjusted his cuffs and picked up a newspaper that had dropped from the opposite seat. He leafed through it, but none of the stories he expected to find were there, and turning to the first page, he read the date, *September 11*. It was a mistake, evidently. Someone had got hold of tomorrow's newspaper. He looked at his watch. It was only 3:10.

A few drops of rain drove against the windows. Frost crystals formed, glittering like mica under the lights. After a few moments they began to melt away again, and shortly the windows were clear. The darkness was still intense, broken only by a few stars. The coach, still mounting the same interminable slope, hurtled smoothly on.

The newspaper bothered Duveen. Yesterday had been the ninth; late evening editions

would be dated the tenth. He looked at his watch again, impelled by an uneasiness he could not define.

One of the soldiers leaned over and called, "Listen, you know what time we get into Pittsburgh?"

"No," said Duveen.

"We got jobs waiting for us in Pittsburgh," the boy said sadly. "We just got out of the Infantry." He turned away again, avoiding the woman's hungry gaze.

DUVEEN noticed the timetable in its rack. He picked it out and opened it, but could not find a table for trains west-bound from New York. The paper on which the timetable was printed was oddly gray and brittle, uncomfortable to touch. He turned back to the cover and read: *Great Northern Railway, Schedule of Trains, Effective November 1, 1887.*

The paper was flaking away in his hands. He thrust it back with distaste, and wiped his hands on his breast-pocket handkerchief. The incident was meaningless, of course, but he found it curiously upsetting.

Now that he thought of it, Duveen remembered that no conductor had come to punch

their tickets. They had seen no porters, either, and no passengers had come through on their way to other cars. It was just as if this coach had been cut off from the rest of the train.

Duveen did not smoke, but he picked out one of the sample packages of cigarettes and opened it. The paper tubes inside were not filled with tobacco, but with some dark-gray, powdery substance that spilled dryly over his fingers.

Wincing with disgust, he got up and went to the rear of the car. He followed the dogleg passage around to the vestibule. There he stopped; there was no way of going further. The only exit from the vestibule, except the one he had just come through, was the outside door to his left. Straight ahead, the wall was blank.

The corrugated floor trembled slightly, incessantly under the soles of his shoes. The car swayed; a little cold air seeped in from outdoors. There was no car beyond this one; or if there were, there was no way to reach it.

Impossible! The coach had been one of a long row; he remembered that clearly. Duveen pressed his nose to the glass of the outer door. He could see nothing but a vast sweep of

cloudy darkness hanging below the coach, as if the car were ascending some huge trestle over a darkened plain. Above, only the stars.

Duveen shivered. As he turned to go back, a figure came toward him from the passageway. It was the gray man, gaunt and crooked, with his collar turned up high around his neck. His eyes gleamed disturbingly from their shadowed sockets, and his teeth showed in a dry grin.

Duveen involuntarily stepped back. The gray man bobbed and postured at him. He pointed to his own chest and made a sign which Duveen did not understand; then he flung up one bony hand and drew it across his throat. He pulled his collar aside, craning his neck at Duveen. Across the corded throat, as if the man's bare hand had been a knife, a bloodless wound gaped. It was an old wound. The tendons showed yellow-white in it; the skin at the lips of the wound was pale and dead; there was no blood at all.

While Duveen stared, the gray man made a final despairing gesture and turned to the outside door. He wrenched it open, admitting a blast of icy

air, and was gone. Duveen saw him drop as the door slammed behind him. After a paralyzed moment he went to the window and stared out; there was nothing but the distant, darkened plain and the stars.

Duveen felt empty and ill. He went back into the coach and sat down. Everything was just as before; the woman staring at the soldiers, the three men playing cards, the spectacled man playing with his puzzle box. In its steady, swift, onward rush through the night, the coach did not even vibrate any longer, but only rocked gently from side to side.

A DOOR slammed. A figure appeared in the passage-way at the far end of the car, and Duveen thought, *At last, the conductor!*

It was the gray man.

His hands and his clothes were stained with a brown thick substance, like the mixture of dust and grease that covers the under parts of railway cars. He stood swaying in the doorway for a moment, his face drawn into lines of hopelessness, then sat down in his place. The spectacled man did not look up from his puzzled box. The card-players went on playing.

Duveen stood up. At the entrance to the passage he hesitated, for fear the gray man might follow him again, but the latter only sat with elbows on knees, hunched and silent, staring out the window as before. Duveen looked long at him, and at the other passengers, sitting in the pale light like mannikins propped erect. He knew that the gray man, at least, was dead. Was it possible that death took a long time to happen—perhaps forever?

He turned and followed the passage to the empty vestibule. He swung the door back and put his head out.

The air was freezing cold, with a brittle fur of ice crystals in it. There was no wind and no feeling of movement. The enormous plain of darkness was very far below, now. Here and there, Duveen thought he could make out tiny patterns of light, almost too distant to be seen.

There was nothing else under the wheels: nothing before, nothing behind. Leaning out, Duveen saw that the coach was hurtling all by itself through vacancy, like a great silver rocket. The sky was black. Directly ahead, there was one intensely bright, yel-

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THE NIGHT EXPRESS

(Continued)

lowishwhite star which Duveen thought he recognized; the evening star, sometimes called Lucifer.

Duveen knew, from the example of the gray man, that there was no use trying to throw himself into that void: the coach was a closed universe, and seemingly had its

own system of gravity. He had already ceased to hope, a long time before. There was no room in his dry body for disappointment or despair; he could only think, *How did we get so far off our course? And how long will we be a-traveling?*

THE END