

# Weird Tales



SEPTEMBER, 1952

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

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*... the engineer in very fact saw  
the hurtling fate of the train ahead.*

# The Phantom Express

*BY H. THOMPSON RICH*

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ONCE, twice, three times the station-clock's thin steel minute-hand had traced its monotonous circuit. Over in a corner of the big room several tired itinerants sat half asleep. From behind the barred ticket window a telegraph instrument talked fitfully. Elsewhere silence, save when the main door swung narrowly to admit an occasional overcoated, sleeted figure—and a squall of zero air. The Transcontinental was late.

Boom! Out of the dark came a dull epic of sound. Boom! It spread through the air like fog. Boom! Twelve times, till the night was saturated with muffled reverberations.

Hardly had the last lifeless echo faded, when a series of piercing shrieks announced the long-awaited Transcontinental. A moment later she rolled into the shed, steaming and sheathed in ice.

Engineer Hadden stepped wearily from the cab and swung off up the platform, chafing his chilled hands together. The

stationmaster ambled out to meet him, throwing shadowy circles from his swinging lantern.

"Open track ahead, Hadden. Orders to hit 'er up!"

Behind them the passengers were piling aboard. Hadden half turned.

"Dangerous business, hitting her up this sort of weather," he muttered, "but orders are orders!"

He climbed back into the cab. When the signal came, he opened the throttle.

Swiftly the Transcontinental slid out of the shed.

Then he looked at his watch. It read 12:05.

"A straight stretch for eighty miles!" he exclaimed, and let her out.

The locomotive rocked and leapt ahead—now forty, now fifty, now sixty miles an hour.

"Mike!" he yelled, and the wash of air whipped the words back into the fireman's

ear like pistol shots. "Mike, we make Mansford by 1."

"An hour?" screamed the latter. "An hour?" Eighty miles? Man, yer dreaming!"

"Maybe I am," said Hadden grimly, giving her another notch.

ON INTO the night they rushed, faster and faster, till it was all O'Connell could do to keep that dancing devil of a steam-gauge needle up to where it belonged. Stripped to his red flannel shirt, he stood in the lurid glow of the fire-box stoking like a madman, while the ground reeled and swayed beneath him and the sky hissed dizzily over his head.

Firm on the little cab seat sat the chief, gazing fixedly ahead. He was tired and cold, and he thought how comfortable his little home would be, at the end of the run. He pictured Mary, his wife, waiting for him at the door—then the steaming supper—then sleep.

He yawned. He nodded.

On and on they roared, up grades, down inclines, over trestles, leaving behind them a long unbroken ribbon of echoes.

Suddenly Hadden jumped and rubbed his eyes. Then he stiffened and peered into the dark ahead—and saw a long, straight line of racing lights.

"Another express, not a mile away!"

"Mike, for the love of God, look!"

"Look where?"

O'Connell looked.

"I see nothin'!" he shouted back.

"You see what?"

"I see nothin'!"

"Then look again!"

O'Connell looked again.

"I see nothin', I say—nothin' at all!"

"Michael O'Connell," muttered the engineer, "you're a liar!"

They pulled into Mansford on the stroke of 1. Hadden watched the other express disappear into the dark ahead, and climbed angrily from his cab. He had been assured an open track. He would see what they

meant by blocking the Transcontinental.

But the stationmaster knew of no train ahead.

"I tell you, your track is clear," he repeated, "open and clear to the end of the run!"

"You can tell me and be damned!" swore Hadden. "I tell you it's not!"

Suddenly he climbed back into his seat. It was 1:05.

"We'll make it by 2," he said, opening her up. "God, I'm tired!" Dark again—and suddenly the other express loomed up ahead, a ghostly vanguard.

O'Connell looked once more.

"I see nothin'—nothin'!" he exclaimed. "Forget it!"

"All right. Shut up!" sighed the chief, and was silent.

NOW they entered Cleft Forest Valley and went thundering down a steep incline, filling the precipitous places with their clamor. And all at once, following with haggard eye the phantom express, Hadden saw it dive over a dizzy trestle, saw it shudder—saw it leave the rails and hurtle down, down, into abysmal darkness and utter destruction.

Then, like a man suddenly roused from a trance, he awoke to the horror of the situation. In an instant he did a dozen things, and O'Connell clung desperately to a stanchion while the swaying locomotive steadied itself to a grinding, jolting stop—just twenty feet from the yawning brink of the bridgeless chasm.

"The trestle must have been swept away by the storm—we're right at the edge of the gulch—it's a miracle—the engineer is all that saved us," came from the breathless crowd that poured out of the cars and collected about the scene.

Later, when Hadden and O'Connell were brought before an investigating committee they had nothing to say, and took their reward in silence.

And there the matter rested.