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A Short Ghost-Story

THE SLEEPERS

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

THAT story," began the man with the gold spectacles, crossing his legs, "reminds me of an odd incident that befell me just last year."

The other three men moved closer around the fireplace and looked over at him expectantly. The man with the gold spectacles repeated his statement. Unnoticed by them, a thin little man clad in a blue suit with brass buttons slid onto the fifth seat somewhat back in the shadows. The inquisitive flames in the fireplace leaped higher to light up the face of the newcomer, but the effort was too much for them, and they sank back exhausted. The four men did not see him.

"It was last summer. I was at the time in Hollywood working with the director of my latest book, which was being filmed, when my publisher in Chicago wired me to come to him at once. The matter was urgent, he stated. Somewhat testily I wired back that I would come immediately. The train I took was the Midnight

Express. When I called for my ticket every Pullman was filled to capacity. Certainly, thought I, I am not going to be cheated out of a night's rest merely because the Pullman cars are all filled to capacity. So I clamored loudly for a Pullman. I was not alone in my demand, for a pompous salesman, who had purchased his ticket after I had procured mine, added his voice to mine. At length another Pullman was added. Had it not been for the hullabaloo the salesman and I raised, the incident I am about to relate would never have happened.

"It being shortly after midnight I wanted to retire. I left the salesman smoking out on the rear platform of our car, and I went into the extra Pullman. My berth was lower seven, and I went directly over to that number and pulled the curtains aside. But I shut them again as quickly as I had opened them. For a man lay in my berth, sleeping peacefully. I was indignant that the officials should cause such an error.

I called for the porter, who came in as fast as his sleeping feet would carry him.

"Said I, when the negro had come abreast of me, 'Sam, there's a man in my berth.'

"He grinned foolishly and pulled the curtains slightly aside. 'Indeed, suh, indeed there is. Very unfortunate, suh, and tha's a fac'.'

"'Sam,' I answered, 'go and get me the Pullman conductor, and don't you dare to come back without him.'

"'Indeed I will, suh.'

"After what seemed a wholly unnecessary interval Sam returned with the Pullman conductor. When the conductor stepped into the car, he asked, 'Are you McCarthy?' 'Yes,' said I, 'I'm McCarthy.' 'H. P. McCarthy?' 'Yes,' said I again, 'H. P. McCarthy.' He came up to me. 'Sam tells me that you claim that your berth is occupied. Lower seven was assigned to H. P. McCarthy and to no one else. As a matter of fact there are only two people in this extra car: you and a salesman, C. E. Schweers.'

"'Is that right?' said I. It annoyed me that the conductor took so much for granted; he had never even peeped into the berth, and already he was turning to go. 'Just a minute! Mr. Schweers is out on the platform. Mr. McCarthy is right here, yours truly, and I say that there's a man in lower seven!' And I pulled aside the curtain and the conductor looked in and saw the man there. It wounded his pride to find that he was wrong, and so he called loudly to the sleeping man. But the man didn't move. So he went over to him and reached his hand in to shake the sleeper.

"Now I couldn't see what happened, but I was staring right into the conductor's face, and I saw his expression change so rapidly that I thought he was going to faint. His

face went white altogether. He pulled his hand out quickly, as if he had been touching a hot iron; and then he pushed the curtains wide apart to admit as much light as possible. Then he looked in again. All the time I could see the man lying there in the light admitted by the widely opened curtains. I said nothing. He turned to me and pointed at the sleeper. 'McCarthy, reach in there and touch him.'

"I thought it was an odd request, but I did it, and I'll wager any amount that my face went as white as his did. For I swear that I saw that man there with the coverlet turned back at his shoulders; I saw that, but my hand felt the undisturbed smoothness of the coverlet! And as I looked, my hand went straight through the man! Sam left by one door as Mr. Schweers came in by the other. The conductor and I stood in the aisle staring stupidly at the sleeper in my berth.

"A smothered exclamation from Schweers caused us to turn to him. He stood before berth three, the lower, staring at something. We knew what he would say before he said it. 'There's a man in my berth!'

"The conductor stared at him; I stared at him. He turned to the conductor. 'Well, what are you going to do about it? I'm not paying for a filled berth!' 'Feel him,' the conductor stammered. 'Yes,' said I, 'feel him.' He looked oddly at us, but obediently he reached in to feel him. And shortly there were three white-faced people in the aisle of the extra Pullman, all staring stupidly at a man sleeping in the berth of a Pullman car.

"'By God,' said the conductor with effort, 'there's some mystery in this,' a fact which had not escaped the notice of any of us. He moved resolutely to berth six and pulled aside the curtains. And there lay a

woman sleeping, and again, what we saw, we could not feel! And the three of us made the rounds, and every berth, upper and lower, was occupied by a man, woman, or child. And we came back to berth seven and stood there staring at the sleeper.

"And while we stood there, the door opened at the end of the car, and a thin little man who wore a conductor's blue suit with brass buttons walked in and looked nervously around. He had the attitude as of being summoned, and looking for whoever had summoned him."

"Not so, Mr. McCarthy. The conductor had a premonition that all was not well and he came into the Pullman to justify or destroy that premonition." It was the little man, the newcomer, who had spoken. But no one seemed to have heard him.

"But we didn't stare very much longer," continued the man with the gold spectacles. "For suddenly the thin little conductor that had entered, vanished in the side of the Pullman car, and when we turned back to look at the sleepers we saw only the unrumped spreads on our beds!

"Immediately the conductor rushed out onto the rear platform. Mr. Schweers and I followed him. We were going round the famous Horseshoe Curve. The country was all radiant in the bright moonlight.

"The conductor turned to us. 'Do either of you know what happened here at this spot one year ago today?' 'No,' said Schweers, 'I can't think of anything.' I, too, was forced to shake my head. 'What?' returned the con-

ductor; 'have both of you forgotten the famous Midnight Express wreck of last August 7?' Of course we hadn't. 'It happened on that spot just a little way back there in the moonlight, on a night just like this. Seventy-seven people died in that wreck. This car is one that was salvaged from the wreckage and was rebuilt. This is its first trip in its rebuilt form.' 'But the people in the berths?' interrupted Schweers. 'Yes, those people in the berths. You noticed they all disappeared on the spot of the accident. Didn't they? Well, figure it out for yourselves, gentlemen.' And with that he went back to his post.

"And that's what I say to you, gentlemen, figure it all out for yourselves. Were those sleepers, or weren't they? For my part I am convinced."

There was a meditative silence. Then the man with the gold spectacles spoke again.

"By the way, didn't one of you gentlemen say something about a premonition the phantom conductor had? I thought someone said something about it, but as I recollect the accident the conductor was killed at once, so you couldn't possibly know how he felt before the accident. Didn't anyone say something?"

And all of the men turned to the fifth chair upon which the thin, little man in the faded blue conductor's suit with brass buttons had been sitting. There was no answer.

And the firelight flickered on the bolt of the locked door.

