

THE VERY SILENT TRAVELLER

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THE SQUAT FUNNEL of the engine gave a choking, gurgling sound. It spat myriads of fiery sparks into the pitch-coloured night. The comet's tail of the sparks was like a woman's mane, spreading along the length of the clattering train—a wavering, fading and recurrent magic carpet, broken and reunited as the rush of the coaches created an irregular slipstream, now narrowing at the curves, now spreading out again on the straight stretches. Behind the train the sparks settled on the black soil, blinked briefly and then died one by one as they touched the cool earth.

A row of lights appeared in the night. The train began to slow down, brakes bit on wheels, the roaring and panting became less strident. The three-toned whistle gave a long shriek as the glimmer of the second set of signals streaked by.

The engine pulled up, pulsating and burbling steam, at a small station on the edge of the vast Argentine plains. The station was marked by half-a-dozen apple-trees: the name of it, on a faded and battered piece of corrugated iron, was scarcely visible. The sheet of iron had been fastened with wire between two of the trees to secure it against the violent winter storms. There was no platform, no hut, no telegraphist's shack. Apart from the sign wired to the trees and a few forlorn oil-lamps there was nothing to signify a stop. The nearest station on the line with a permanent staff was at least thirty miles away.

The halt was brief; little more than three minutes. The engine spewed forth another column of fiery sparks, emitting a cloud of steam. Then the wheels began to turn again; the choking, gurgling, panting sounds were rep-

eated and the shrill whistle pierced the night.

In this brief interval one passenger boarded the train. Or rather, he was helped up the steep iron steps by three others who were evidently seeing him off. They supported him along the corridor and placed him in an empty compartment. Then, without any good-byes or last-minute talk, they jumped from the train. The wheels were already moving and they barely had time to regain the ground before the train pulled out. It would seem a case of bad manners—yet the three men had a good excuse for not lingering.

Transporting dead bodies in the Argentine used to be an extremely costly and difficult business. Red tape indeed made it almost impossible; it needed six different kinds of permits, a dozen declarations, a pile of documents. All this became even more difficult in districts where the simple ranches, the scattered *estancias*, were fifty or a hundred miles from the nearest town. Not even the fastest horse could carry the messengers to collect the necessary permits within the two or three days during which a corpse could be preserved. And if, by some lucky chance, the permits were forthcoming, the railway company charged ten times as much for a dead traveller as for a living one—not to mention the expense of the coffin and the ticket of the attendant, who under the company rules, had to accompany such a consignment. Many of the ranchers lived well without having more than a small fund of cash; more than one would have been ruined by such a heavy expenditure. Yet they were loath to bury their relatives on their own farms, especially if there was a family mausoleum in Buenos Aires.

But luckily there was still some ingenuity and enterprise left in these parts, and the traveller who boarded the train at the wayside halt was making his trip because of such ingenuity. He was very dead indeed; but his pious and grief-stricken relatives simply smuggled him onto the express. They wrapped him up well and pushed his sombrero over his forehead; by supporting him closely, they made any possible observer believe that he was an invalid or maybe a little drunk. One of them then settled

the price of the ticket with the conductor, tipping him well so that the 'poor invalid' should be left undisturbed and in sole possession of the compartment.

As soon as the train had pulled out, another of the three men jumped on a horse and rode off post-haste to the nearest telegraph office, twenty miles away. There he sent a telegram to the dead man's uncle in Buenos Aires, giving him the number of the coach and compartment in which the corpse was travelling. Uncle Felipe was to meet the train at the terminus and take care of the rest.

The other two men remained standing near the track, staring after the rapidly-disappearing red tail lights. They felt very solemn—but also considerably relieved.

At the next stop—a much bigger one—Captain Grodeck boarded the train.

The Captain had started life in the Imperial German Army but owing to some slight misunderstanding over cards (a fifth ace had unaccountably got into the pack) he was obliged to resign his commission. He had had some hard times after that, but later found his perfect niche in promoting revolutions. They needed little promoting in South and Central America—except that the captain was organising them strictly for the benefit of his employers, a large and prosperous armaments group.

Just now he was on his way back from Paraguay, after a very profitable stay. He had a lot of baggage which he had to lug down the corridor himself. By the time he had finished the chore he was bathed in sweat, his scarred face glistening with it; and he was in a vile temper. Cursing, panting and shouting, he expressed most unflattering opinions about the Argentinian railway system in general and the lack of porters in particular. He dwelt with venomous intensity on the high steps of the carriages and the time-table of the only southbound express train that made a night journey inevitable.

He continued his loud outburst outside each crowded compartment. He was forced to drag his suitcase, boxes and rugs along the swaying narrow corridors—there was nowhere an empty seat.

Finally he reached the compartment in which the silent traveller was ensconced in solitary splendour. He was sitting in the darkest corner, huddled up, limp. The broadbrimmed black sombrero had slipped down to the tip of his nose. The blue-shaded reading lamp threw a pale circle of light upon him. He seemed to be sleeping soundly, lost in a happier world of dreams.

'Do you mind señor?' asked Captain Grodeck.

There was no answer. He pushed his way into the compartment, distributing his luggage with considerable noise; then switched on the central light and, sitting down, inspected his fellow-traveller.

The huddled passenger sat modestly and quietly in his corner. There was little to be seen of his face—except that he had not shaved for some time. His cloak reached to the ground, enveloping his body; both hands were buried in the large patch pockets. The rhythmic shaking of the train made the body tremble and sway gently.

Captain Grodeck took the seat opposite. As he had become quite wrought-up with his passionate denunciations, he knew he couldn't sleep. So he decided to have some intelligent conversation—or just conversation.

Politely he asked a number of questions in his execrable Spanish. When he received no reply, he tried other languages—Portuguese, French, English, even his native German. But this linguistic effort proved all unavailing. His travelling companion sat there, stubbornly silent, clumsily immobile.

Captain Grodeck was a persistent man. He produced his pig-skin cigar-case, selected the finest, speckled Havana and held it out invitingly. He praised its quality, its aroma; he hoped that the señor would accept it as a token of friendship.

There was no answer.

The captain made two other attempts to make the silent traveller speak. But it was all in vain. Neither polite remarks, nor friendly questions nor offers of cigar and cigarette brought any response.

And now Captain Grodeck discovered that though he had a mass of luggage and was equipped with every

convenience for a long journey, he had failed to provide himself with the simplest necessity. He had no matches: his lighter was empty. A cigar between his thick lips, he felt himself all over, reaching into every pocket—but he did not find a single match.

He turned to his companion. 'Could I trouble you for a light?' he asked. But there was no reply.

This final discourtesy made Captain Grodeck see red. He jumped up, bent over the silent stranger and started to shake him with all his might. The lifeless head was knocked several times against the back of the seat, the captain shouting and cursing at him.

Under the powerful grip of the German's hands, the huddled man slid sideways. His sombrero slipped back until it was barely clinging to the back of his head. His hands emerged from the deep pockets; then his whole body suddenly jerked forward, and like a bag of sand it dropped heavily on to the floor of the compartment. The hat rolled away and Grodeck needed no second glance to tell him that the traveller was dead.

Startled and horrified, he stared at the body. He knew his own hot ungovernable temper and had cursed it a thousand times whenever it got him into a scrape. But he had not expected *this*. After all, he had just given the man a good shaking and knocked his silly head a few times against the wall. . . .

But his hesitation only lasted a few moments. With a sudden decision, he bent down and lifted the corpse from the floor. He dragged it to the window and propped it up while he opened the sliding glass. Then, with a mighty heave, he let it drop into the pitch-dark night.

The train rattled on, unconcerned, its wheels devouring the miles.

Early in the morning the express arrived in Buenos Aires.

Uncle Felipe had been waiting for the last hour. Excited and anxious, he elbowed his way through the large crowd until he found the carriage which had been indicated in the telegram.

His plan was all ready. He would board the train, enter

the compartment, 'discover' the dead man and shout for help. . . . But, of course, it would be too late; his poor, dear nephew had died somewhere on the way.

But he searched in vain: there was no trace of his relative in the compartment nor in the whole carriage. Thinking that he had made a mistake, he explored the other carriages. They were all empty now—except for one man with a scarred face and a military bearing who was still lugging some of his heavy suitcases down to the platform. He was just collecting the last piece—from the very compartment in which Uncle Felipe's nephew was supposed to have travelled.

'Excuse me, sir,' Uncle Felipe addressed him. 'Did you have a fellow-passenger in this compartment?'

'Oh yes,' replied Captain Grodeck with a completely expressionless face.

'And?' Uncle Felipe waited breathlessly.

'Oh, he got off about three stations back,' the captain answered and, picking up his last suitcase, descended from the carriage. He made his way along the platform, unconcerned and self-assured while Uncle Felipe crossed himself three times and collapsed in a dead faint.