

THE LAST TRAIN

by

David J. Griffin

There were few pedestrians along the black-shadowed streets of the city. Michael turned up the collar of his suit jacket when spots of rain began to fall, highlighted by the glare of the street lamps. He hurried, swinging his briefcase as he went towards the railway station.

He had not intended to be so late after visiting a client, but the man had insisted they celebrate their new business arrangement at a local wine bar.

Michael walked swiftly under the marble arch, through the short tunnel and into the expansive train station. An eerie silence greeted him as he strode across the concourse usually bustling with passengers departing and returning. His steps echoed as he walked past the shuttered kiosks up to the barriers; he looked up at the timetable display screen. Only one train listing showed, leaving at midnight, Middleton being the first stop.

Lucky, he thought, and held his train card onto the scanner glass. The blue barrier opened, and he went along the platform towards the stationary train.

When he reached one of the doors, he was startled by a voice from behind him. He wheeled around. A tall, thin man wearing overalls stood holding a broom, scratching at his locks of greying hair.

‘You want to catch this train?’ the man asked slowly.

Michael was puzzled. ‘Yes, of course I do. It’s the only train here, isn’t it?’

The strange man smiled, such a disconcerting smile, showing untidy rows of yellowing teeth and a livery tongue. The corners of his mouth

almost reached level with his flared nostrils. He backed away, sweeping the platform with the broom, and whistled. Although pleasant, the tune vaguely familiar to Michael, it sent a shiver down his spine. The whistled notes echoed more than they should, fading into the vast expanse of the station roof high above.

Michael pressed the door button of the carriage and the doors slid open with a hiss. He entered, walked the length of it, then along the next, and then the one after that, his temperament disturbed. And even more so when he realised there were no other passengers.

After choosing a seat, he put his briefcase beside him, unlocked it and took out a newspaper.

A few minutes later, the train set off. The carriages trundled out of the station into the night before picking up speed. Michael occupied his time by reading his newspaper. It would not take long to reach Middleton town, only a quarter of an hour down the line.

Being so engrossed with reading, he was startled for a second time—a shadow fell across him and a low, syrupy voice said, ‘Ticket, please.’

Michael lowered the newspaper and looked up. A ticket inspector stood close to him in the carriage aisle holding out a bony hand. The thin man had a mass of greying hair and flared nostrils. He wore a black jacket and trousers.

‘Haven’t we just met?’ Michael said, creasing his brow.

The man smiled, and that strange smile showing tombstone teeth became an open-mouthed, guttural laugh as though clearing phlegm from his throat.

‘We often meet,’ he answered.

‘It seems so,’ Michael said, ‘unless you have a twin brother.’ He retrieved the ticket from his jacket pocket and handed it to the ticket inspector.

He stared at the ticket as if angry. His dull eyes widened to a glare, and he said abruptly, ‘That’ll do.’

‘I’m sure it will,’ was all Michael could think of in reply. He picked up his newspaper again. Glancing back up, he saw that the man had vanished. Michael stood and looked down the length of the swaying carriage, but it was still as empty as it had always been.

After reading an article in the newspaper’s business section, he looked absent-mindedly out of the carriage window at the purple sky and the

dark townhouses.

Then, Middleton station with its platforms, buildings, and signs rushed past.

Michael leapt up from the seat, panic engrained upon his already tired face. Middleton station was left behind. He slumped back down.

He could not relax—five more minutes passed, then ten, then twenty. He stood again to pace up and down the carriage aisle like a trapped animal.

The train engine was slowing. Michael put a cheek to the window and saw, further ahead, the dull lights of another station.

After a few more tense minutes, the train coasted to a standstill. The signs hanging from the station building eaves displayed the words “The Shades”. Michael puffed with annoyance. Other than the creaking from the carriage, an unsettling silence. He gathered up his newspaper and briefcase before going to the carriage doors. They opened automatically.

He stepped onto the platform, empty of people, lamps sending out a depressing blue colour, soulless, lifeless. Shrivelled and dry twigs of dead shrubs in their pots stood haphazardly placed along the deeply gouged platform; dark, forbidding corners; a waste bin filled with umbrellas.

A figure leapt out from the shadows; Michael yelped in surprise.

‘Welcome to The Shades,’ the thin man with rough, greying hair, flared nostrils and boulder teeth said. He wore an army uniform.

‘Whoa, don’t do that,’ Michael said, clutching his chest to stop his heart hammering. ‘You again; you gave me quite a start. Anyway, I’m not staying, this isn’t my stop; I need a taxi to take me to Middleton.’

‘No taxis here.’

‘But I’ve got to get home.’

The man gave his disturbing smile and gripped Michael’s arm before whispering, ‘This is your home now.’