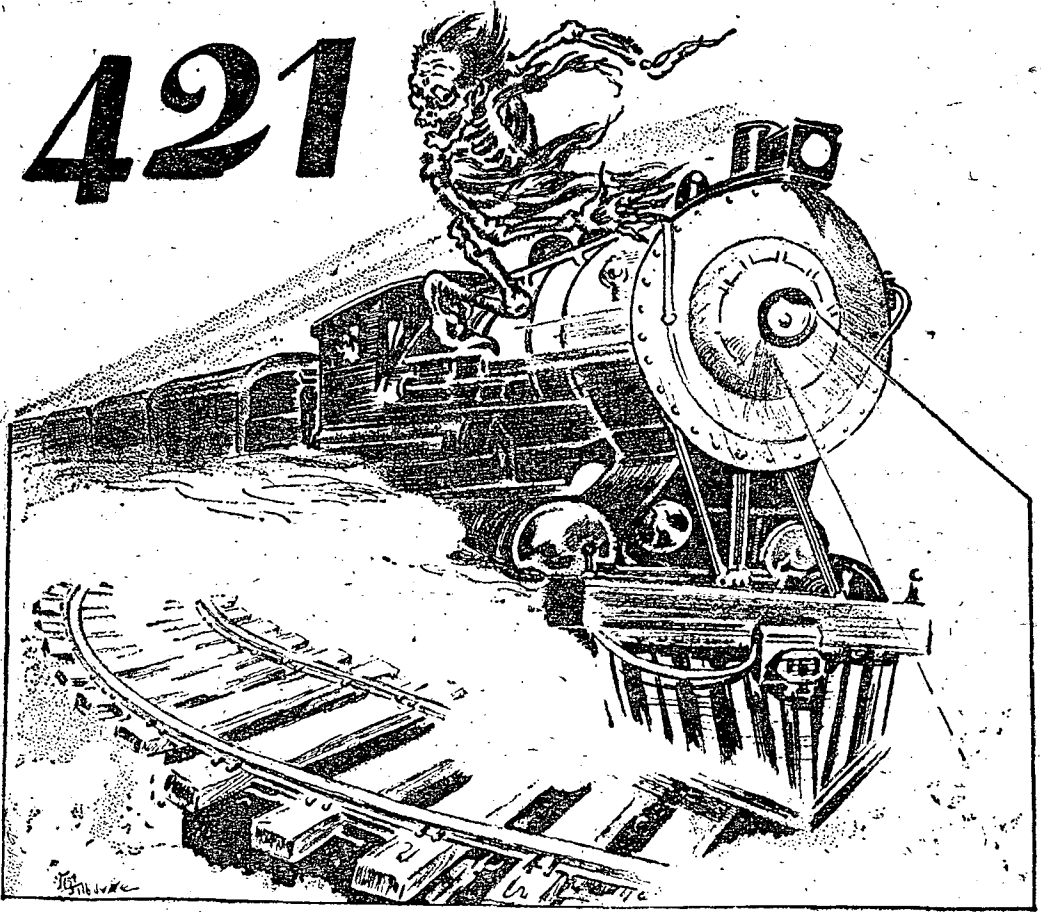


Pacific 421

By
AUGUST DERLETH



“JUST to be on the safe side, I wouldn’t spend too much time over the hill at the far end of your property,” said the agent with an apologetic smile.

Colley took the keys and pocketed them. “That’s an odd thing to say. Why not?”

“Around mid-evening especially,” continued the agent.

“Oh, come—why not?”

“That’s just what I’ve been told. Something strange there; I’d guess. Give yourself time to become used to the place first.”

Albert Colley had every intention of doing that. He had not bought a place in the country just out of a village on the Pacific line without the determination to become used to it before he invited his stepfather

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

*There was something more than strange about the end of his property—
especially around mid-evening*

down—if he could screw up courage enough to have the old curmudgeon around for a week or so. If it were not for the old man's money—well, if it were not for that, and the fact that Albert Colley was his only legal heir, he would have been free of the old man long before this. Even as it was, Philander Colley was a trial that made itself felt in the remotest atom of Albert's being.

Of course, the agent's off-hand reference had been a mistake. Few people, in any case, are qualified to judge just how any given man will act, especially on such short acquaintance as there had been between Colley and the agent for the Parth house two miles out of that Missouri town. Colley was a cool customer, cooler than the agent guessed him to be. Colley apprehended at once that there was something a little strange about the far end of the property he had bought—a good forty-acre piece, with the house right up next to the road in a little clump of trees there, and, as he understood it from that old map in the county surveyor's office, a portion of the Pacific line cutting across the far edge of his property, over a little gully there. From the road and the house, his property stretched through a garden, then through a dense belt of woods to an open place beyond which there was a little knoll, politely called "the hill," and past this, the railroad and the termination of Colley's newly acquired property at the foot of a steeper slope, likewise for the most part wooded.

And, being a cool customer, Colley went that first evening for a tour of exploration, half expecting some denizen beast to spring at him out of the woods, but not afraid, for all that. He walked down to the point where the railroad crossed the trestle over the gully and then turned to look down the tracks, this way and that; the railroad came around a curve, crossed the trestle and the edge of his property, and disappeared around a further curve to westward. He stood for a while on the trestle, smoking a cigar, and taking pleasure in the sound of night-hawks swooping and sky-coasting in the evening sky. He looked at his watch. Almost nine o'clock. Well, that was as close to mid-evening as a man would want, he thought.

He left the trestle and was beginning to walk leisurely back to the house when

he heard the whistle and rumble of an approaching locomotive. He turned there on the edge of his woods to look. Yes, it was coming, brightly lit; so he stood and watched the powerful, surging force of the train thunder across the trestle, eight passenger cars streaming speedily along behind the locomotive—*Pacific 421*—on the way to the west coast. Like most men, he had always had a kind of affinity for trains; he liked to see them, ride on them, hear them. He watched this one out of sight and turned.

But at that moment there fell upon his ears the most frightful explosion of sound—a screaming of steel on steel, a splintering of wood, a great rush of steam, the roar of flames crackling, and the shrill, horrible screaming of people in agony. For a moment he was paralyzed with shock; then he realized that the train must have leaped the tracks or crashed into an eastbound train, and, without stopping to think that he ought to telephone for help, he sped back to the tracks and raced down as fast as he could to round the curve of the hill there to westward.

It was just as well that he did not summon help first.

There was nothing, nothing at all on the tracks beyond the curve!

For a moment Colley thought that the train must be found farther along, over the horizon; but that was impossible, for the tracks stretched away under the stars to join a greater network of railroads beyond, and there was nothing whatever on them. The evening train had gone through, and he—well, he had undoubtedly suffered a kind of auditory hallucination. But it jarred him still; for an hallucination, the experience had been shakingly convincing, and it was a somewhat subdued Albert Colley who made his way back along the tracks and into his property once more.

He thought about it all night.

In the morning he might have forgotten it but for the fact that he took a look at the village weekly he had had delivered to his house by the rural postman and his eye caught sight of train schedules; trains leaving for the west on the Pacific line were scheduled at 6:07 and at 11:23. There numbers were different, too—there was no *Pacific 421* among them.

Colley was sharp. He had not been en-

gaged in dubious business practices for some years without becoming shrewd about little matters. It did not take much to figure out that something was very much wrong. He read the railroad schedule over carefully and deliberately, and then got up and took a quick walk down through the garden, through the woods, to the railroad tracks.

Their appearance under the sun was puzzling, to put it mildly. They were rusted and gave every evidence of deterioration under disuse. Wild roses, fox grass, evening primroses, weeds grew between the ties, and bushes climbed the embankment. The ties and the trestle were in good shape, but the fact remained that the railroad did not have the look of being in use. He crossed the trestle and walked for over a mile until he came to the double track which was certainly the main line. Then he walked back until he came to the tracks of the main line far around the slope of the hill on the other side. The cut-off spur across his property was not more than five miles in length, all told.

IT WAS well past noon when he returned to the house. He made himself a light lunch and sat down to think the matter over.

Very peculiar. Then there had been the agent's half-hearted warning. A faint prickling made itself felt at the roots of his scalp, but something turning over in his scheming mind was stronger.

It was Saturday afternoon, or he would have made it a point to drive into the village and call on the agent; but the agent would be out of his office; the trip would be futile. What he could and would do, however, was to walk down through the garden and the woods, over the hill to the railroad embankment in mid-evening and keep an eye out for the *Pacific 421*.

It was not without some trepidation that he made his way through the woods to the railroad that night. He was filled with a certain uneasy anticipation, but he would not yield to his inner promptings to return to the house and forget what he had seen. He took up his stand at the foot of an old cottonwood tree and lit a cigar, the aromatic smoke of which mingled with the pleasant, sweet foliage fragrance to make a pleasant cloud of perfume around him.

As nine o'clock drew near, he grew restive. He looked at his watch several times, but the time passed with execrable slowness. The train was manifestly late.

Nine-fifteen, nine-thirty, nine-forty-five—and at last ten. No train.

Colley was more mystified than ever, and he returned to the house that night determined to repeat his experiment on the morrow.

But on Sunday night he saw no more than he had seen the previous day. No locomotive whistled and roared across the trestle and away around the curve of the hill, drawing its passenger cars, brilliantly alight after it—nothing at all. Only the wind sighed and whispered at the trestle, and a persistent owl hooted from the hillside beyond the ravine bridged by the trestle. Colley was puzzled, and, yes, a little annoyed.

He went into the village on Monday and paid a call on the agent.

"Tell me," he said affably, "doesn't the old *Pacific 421* run out of here any more?"

The agent gave him an odd glance. "Not since the accident. I think even the number's been discontinued. Let me see—the accident took place about seven years ago, when that spur across your land was still part of the main line."

"Oh, it's no longer in use, then?"

"No, it hasn't been for years—ever since the accident." He coughed. "You haven't seen anything, have you?"

IT WAS at this point that Colley made his fatal mistake. He was too clever for his own good. Because his thoughts were several leaps and bounds ahead of the agent's, he said gravely, "No. Why?"

The agent sighed his relief. "Well, some people have laid claim to seeing a ghost there." He laughed. "A ghost train, if you can believe it!"

"Interesting," said Colley dryly, his skin at the back of his neck chilling.

"That wreck occurred on a Friday evening, and it's usually on Friday that the so-called apparition is seen. And then it seems to have its limitations; I've never seen it myself; nor have very many people. I did have the experience of being with someone who claimed to be seeing it. But I never heard of a ghost, man or train, which could be seen and heard by one person and not

by someone standing beside him, did you?"

"Never," agreed Colley gravely.

"Well, there you are. I was afraid you, too, might have seen something. I was just a little nervous about it."

"I suppose that's what you meant."

"Yes. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything."

"No harm done," said Colley, smiling good-naturedly.

HE WAS really not paying much attention to what the agent was saying, for he was busy with his own thoughts. His own thoughts would have been of considerable interest to his stepfather, for they concerned him very much indeed. Philander Colley had a weak heart, and it had occurred to Albert Colley that with a careful build-up and the sudden exposure of the old man to that ghost train some Friday night, the old man's heart might give out on him, and that would leave Albert, as the old man's only heir, in sound financial shape.

He had expected the agent to put the matter more or less as he did. Incredible as it seemed, the idea of a phantom train was not entirely beyond the bounds of possibility. Of course, curiously, Colley did not actually believe in the phantom train as anything supernatural—doubtless there was some kind of scientific explanation for it, he felt, thus betraying a juvenile faith in one kind of superstition as opposed to another. But as long as *something* came rushing along there and wrecked itself, repeating the catastrophe of that Friday evening seven years ago, it might as well be put to his own use. After all, that train, whatever its status, *did* cross his land, and he had a certain proprietary right in it.

Forthwith he wired his stepfather that he had got settled, and the old man might like to come down from his place in Wisconsin and take a look around Colley's place in the Missouri country.

The old man came, with dispatch.

If Albert Colley had his dark side, the old man was cantankerous enough to match his stepson any day, any time, any place. He was the sort of crotchety old devil who would argue about anything under the sun, at scarcely the shadow of a provocation. Small wonder Colley wanted to get rid of him!

Colley lost no time in setting the stage. He told the old man that it was his regular habit to walk down to the end of his property every evening, and would like the old man to accompany him.

Bitterly complaining, the old man went along.

As they approached the railroad tracks—it was Wednesday night, and nothing was likely to happen—Colley coughed unctuously and said that the stretch of abandoned tracks before them had the reputation of being haunted.

"Haunted?" repeated the old man, with a sarcastic laugh. "By what?"

"A train that was wrecked here about seven years ago. *Pacific 421*."

"Cock and bull story," snapped Philander.

"There *are* people who claim to have seen it."

"Out of their minds. Or drunk. You ought to know what you can see when you're drunk, Albert. I remember that time you saw alligators all over your room."

"Still, you know," said Albert, trying his best to be patient, "one ought not to dismiss such stories too casually. After all, things happen, and science cannot always explain them satisfactorily."

"Things! What things? Optical illusions, hallucinations—such like. No, my boy, you never were very bright in school, but I never thought it would come to this—a belief in ghosts. And what a ghost, to be specific!" He turned on him almost fiercely. "Have you seen it yourself?"

"N-no," faltered Albert.

"Well, then!" snorted the old man.

That ended the conversation about the phantom train for that evening. Albert was just a little disappointed, but not too badly; after all, he must go slowly; the groundwork for Friday night's hoped-for fatal apparition must be laid carefully. What he could not accomplish on Wednesday, he might well be able to do on the following evening. And then, on Friday. . . . Ah, but Friday was still two days away!

SO, ON Thursday evening they walked down to the tracks again. The old man wanted to go out on to the trestle, and there he stood, talking about trestles in Wisconsin from which he had fished as a boy—quite a long time before he had married

Albert's mother. Albert had a hard time bringing the conversation around to the phantom train, and he had hardly mentioned it before the old man cut him off with his customary rudeness.

"Still going on about that ghost train, eh?"

"The fact is, there seems to be some question about the story both ways."

"I should think there would be!" He snorted. "I can't figure out how a sane, normal, healthy young man would want to even think of such drivel, let alone go on about it the way you do."

"Keep an open mind, Philander," said Albert with ill-concealed asperity.

"My mind's been open all my life," retorted the old man. "But not to a lot of silly superstitions and womanish fears."

"I can't recall having expressed fear of any kind," said Albert frigidly.

"No, but you sound like it."

"I'm not in the habit of being afraid of something I've never seen," said Albert.

"Oh, most people are afraid of the dark." He strove to peer through the gloom into the gully. "Tell me—sand or rock on the sides down there?"

"Rock for the most part. The sand's been washed away."

"Look to be some trees growing down there."

"Young ones—just a few."

POOOR Albert! He lost ten minutes talking about rocks, trees, declivities, angles, degrees, and erosion of wind as against that of water, and by that time he was almost too exhausted to bring up the subject of the phantom train again. But he strove manfully and came up with a weak question.

"Tell me, Philander—what *would* you do if you saw that train coming at us?"

"That ghost train?"

"Yes, the one some people believe in."

"Why, close my eyes till she went past," said the old man promptly.

"Then you *would* be afraid of it," charged Albert.

"If there were any such thing, you're darn tootin' I would!"

That was something in the way of a hopeful sign, at least, thought Albert, walking slowly back at his stepfather's side. Well, tomorrow night would tell the story. And

if somehow it failed, there was always Friday night a week hence. Patience and fortitude, Albert, my boy! he told himself, meanwhile contemplating with pleasure his acquisition of his stepfather's material possessions. He resolved to time their visit with the utmost care tomorrow night.

All that day he went out of his way to be nice to the old man, on the theory that those who are about to die deserve such little pleasures as it is possible to give; and he was unnaturally ready to forgive the old man his cantankerousness and irritability—which startled Philander because it was an attitude for which Albert never won any medals. If the old man had not been so selfish himself, he might have thought about this change in his stepson; but he opined that perhaps Albert was in need of money and was about to make a touch, and took pleasure for hours thinking up ways in which to rebuff Albert.

As for Albert, he grew hourly more elated as that fateful Friday passed on its way. Time went heavy-footed, but Albert could be patient. After all, Philander's money drew closer moment by moment, and it was of proportions worth waiting for, even if the old man were not exactly what a man might call "rich."

For some reason, all the signs were auspicious. That is to say, along about mid-afternoon, the old man began to recall tales of hauntings he had heard in his youth, and waxed quite garrulous. Albert considered this virtually a sign from—well, not heaven, of course; heaven would hardly be giving him a green light. Anyway, it was a sign, a kind of portent that all was destined to happen as Albert planned it.

SO THAT evening he gave Philander one of his best cigars, lit it for him jovially, and set out with him for the railroad tracks. He had had a few moments of ghastly fear that the old man might not accompany him, but there was no stopping him. He had in fact taken over Albert's little walk, and called it his "constitutional."

"This is the night, you know, that ghost train is said to appear," said Albert cautiously.

"Friday, eh?"

"Yes, it was on Friday that the accident took place."

"Funny thing—how methodical ghosts and suchlike can be, eh?"

Albert agreed; and then very subtly, according to plan, discredited the entire narrative, from beginning to end. It would not do to appear too gullible, when the old man knew very well he was not.

He had hoped they might be able to take up a stand at the edge of the woods, so that Philander might get the best possible view and the maximum shock at sight of that speeding spectre, but the old man insisted upon walking further. Indeed, he ventured out upon the embankment, he walked along the tracks, he even crossed the trestle. This was not quite in accordance with Albert's plans, but he had to yield to it; he followed his stepfather across the trestle, observing in some dismay that the hour must be close to nine.

Even as he thought this, the sound of a thin, wailing whistle burst upon his ears, and almost immediately thereafter came the rumble of the approaching train. Ahead of them the light of the locomotive swung around and bore down on them; it was the ghost train, rushing at them with the speed of light, it seemed, with kind of demoniac violence wholly in keeping with the shattering end to which it was destined to come.

Even in the sudden paroxysm of fright that struck him, Albert did not forget to act natural; this was as he had planned it—to pretend he saw nothing; all he did was to step off the tracks to one side. Then he turned to look at his stepfather. What he saw filled him with complete dismay.

The old man stood in the middle of the right-of-way relighting his cigar. Not a hair of his head had turned, and his eyes were not closed. Yet he appeared to be gazing directly at the approaching train. Albert

remembered with sickening chagrin that the agent had said many people could not see the train.

But if Philander Colley could not see the spectral train, he was nevertheless not immune. For at the moment that the phantom locomotive came into contact with the material person of the old man, Philander was knocked up and catapulted into the gully with terrific force, while the agent of his disaster went on its destined way, its lighted coaches streaming by, vanishing around the hill, and ending up, as before in a horrific din of wreckage.

Albert had to take a minute or two to collect himself. Then he ran as best he could down the slope to where his stepfather lay.

Philander Colley was very thoroughly dead. He had been crushed and broken—just as if he had been struck by a locomotive! Albert did not give him a second thought; however it had been done, Philander's end had been accomplished. He set off at a rapid trot for the car to run into the village and summon help.

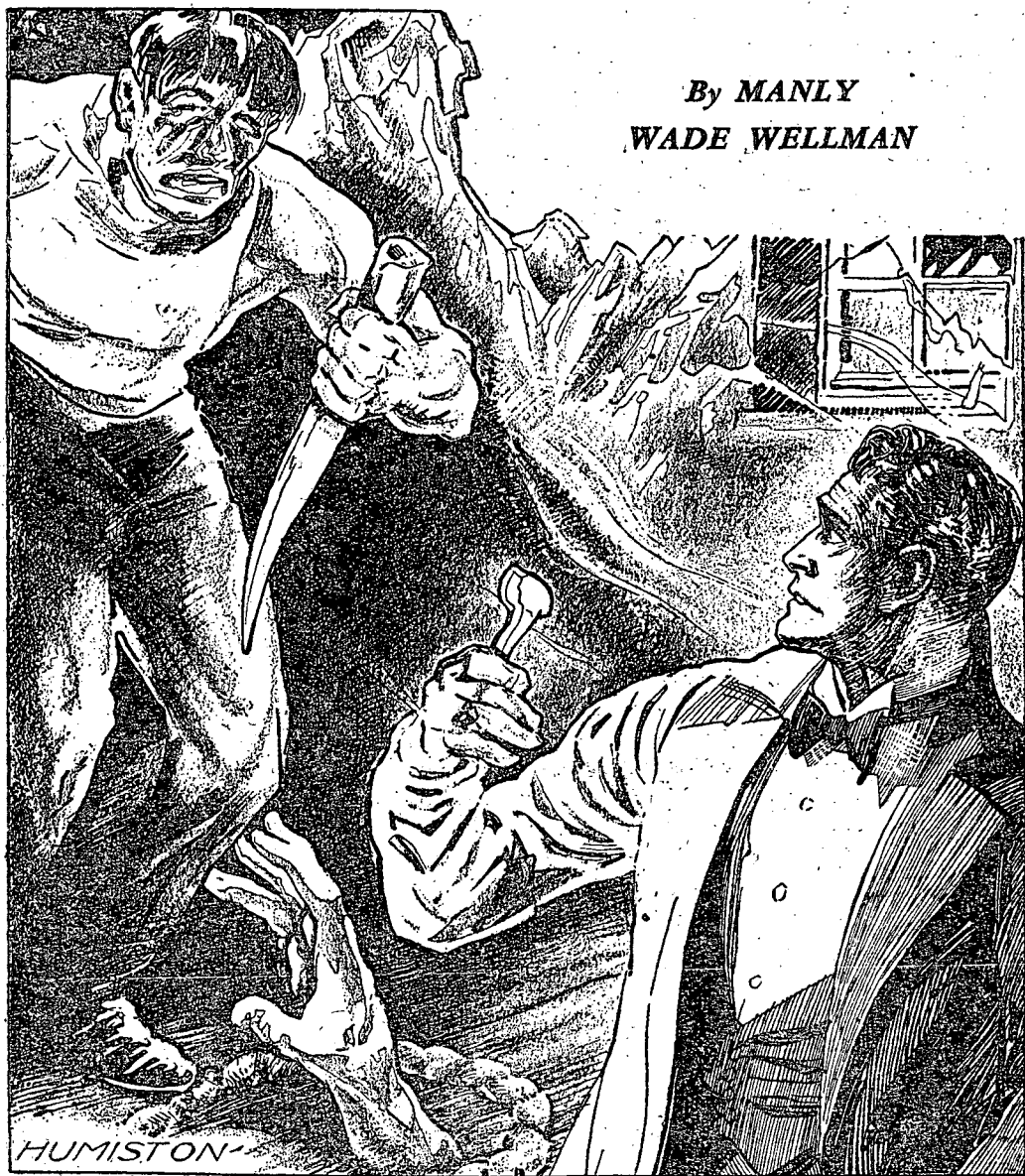
Unfortunately for Albert Colley, the villagers were wholly devoid of imagination. A ghost train, indeed! There was plenty of evidence from Wisconsin that Albert Colley and his stepfather had not got along at all well. And Albert was the old man's only heir, too! An open and shut matter, in the opinion of the officials.

If there were any such thing as a phantom train, why hadn't Albert Colley said something about it before? The agent could testify he had not. It was plain as a pikestaff that Albert had beaten up the old man and probably pushed him off the trestle. With commendable dispatch Albert Colley was arrested, tried, and hanged.



Sorcery from Thule

By **MANLY**
WADE WELLMAN



*Bad magic is the province of the issintoks—they who turn themselves
into animals and kill from a distance*

*Jon. You tremble—with Arctic cold?
Thorwald. With Arctic fear.*

—**POG ABRÖSTO**, *The Baresarks*.
(Trans. by Leon Minshall)

JOHN THUNSTONE'S dinner guest was not the most remarkable person he had ever entertained in public, but almost. John Thunstone introduced him to the

Heading by **FRED HUMISTON**