

Sneers Framed in Malice Suffice

by strannikov

In the annals of subway lore and legend, no single line ever fostered more mirth than the Grants' Tomb Express. (No cheap tricks like exploding cigars, either.)

It's not often that peals of unbridled laughter emerge from subway tunnels and corridors, platforms and staircases. Truth be told, it is altogether uncommon. Hardly anyone alighting from a subway is ever spotted in an abundantly jocular mood. (I have seen movies depicting scenes in and around subways: hardly a smile anywhere, never any laughter.) While subways do not seem much disposed to inducing snarls and complaints, neither do they seem inherently disposed to provoking laughter and frivolity—but surely never the latter. (I did smile a glimmer once at the passing thought of the third rail but failed to launch into spasms of knee slapping.)

But there once was a subway, the Grants' Tomb Express, that defied expectations concerning subway risibility. It ran off Broadway, even ran off Riverside. (Hell, what am I saying? It even ran off the Hudson Parkway!) The southern terminus was of course the tomb shared by President and Mrs. Grant: the only other stop was the northern terminus, for Nyack and Tarrytown, long before that latest bridge was installed crossing the Hudson. The north station was serviced by a diving bell operating from underneath the old Tappan Zee Bridge, which of course required reconfiguration once construction of the new Tappan Zee Bridge was completed. (The station itself, even the more recent iteration, is of course virtually immune to graffiti and urination from patrons.)

Being the only submerged express subway (down to about West 128th Street, at least) came at considerable cost, however. The risk for derailment naturally increased whenever the Hudson was swollen, but this seldom occurred in seasons when effluence from

Albany was well managed. On the other hand ridership on the Grants' Tomb Express line has never been high, and recriminations up and down the Hudson Valley raged as to why this should be the case.

President and Mrs. Grant, both chewing cigars in earnest, insisted that the fault was not at their station. Deferring to a former President and First Lady meant, quite obviously, that the trouble had to've come from somewhere up-river. Loyal riders from Nyack and Tarrytown pointed straight at Albany: the diving bell and the submerged station were never fully staffed, they complained.

"Express" naturally meant one thing when the subway was heading downriver, one good whoosh! and voilà! Traveling up-river, though, rush hour or not, was always a bit of a push: but still, the comparative lack of speed was more than made up for since there was not one local stop between the Grants' terminus and the one beneath the Tappan Zee Bridge.

Funding for the Grants' Tomb Express (the author insists on "Grants' Tomb Express" out of deference to Julia Grant) continued unabated, with both federal subsidies considerate of a former President and with state allocations in the service of local constituents. Disagreements over how to expend funds, of course, were inevitable. Installation of a runway for ultra-light planes, hang gliders, and gyroplanes atop the Cloisters began to change things appreciably. The Grants, mindful of public-private competition for commuter traffic, took to polishing their station's brass cuspidors afresh every day. (As intimated, these initial efforts to attract new riders were in vain, but at least the cuspidors gleamed, especially the ones Julia got to.)

In short order, though, it would be impossible to approach the Cloisters without seeing the adverts for the Grants' Tomb Express. Julia suggested the campaign and really ran with it. All the stairways and the landing strips themselves were soon strewn with holographic G.T.E. imagery with the latest in digital display technology (the digitized reproductions of the gleaming cuspidors

led to complaints of light interference from both pilots and pedestrians, to no one's surprise.)

Sixty-four passengers standing atop the Tappan Zee Bridge got a little woozy on the third night of the advertising campaign: the undulating holograms made the pavement seem to bulge in places, and compensating for this apparent convexity, all sixty-four passengers wound up splashing into the Hudson, yet not in the direct vicinity of the G.T.E. diving bell terminus. As he and she hit the cold surging waters of the Hudson, each one thought: "what is inside that sepulchre?" After only short swims, all sixty-four found themselves shivering on the east bank at Tarrytown. Rumors spread immediately that only sixty-three stood there, and in fact one had strayed to Nyack in search of a dentist., since in the fall an incisor had come loose (and we all know to our enduring stupefaction that not one single dentist's office is to be found along the entire length of the Tappan Zee Bridge, not even the new version). To compensate them for their troubles, a delegation from Albany arrived soon to toss the sixty-three passengers they could find two Morgan silver dollars each, without first warning the shiverers (my, it were cold!) not to handle their coins in any proximity to the Hudson itself (and so, to this day, scores of silver dollars clamor for the moonlight in waters due west of Tarrytown).

This one episode aside, Julia's holographic G.T.E. advertising campaign had to be deemed a stark success: in less than a week, and despite the meagre expense of the Morgan silver dollars, Albany was fully funding the Tappan Zee diving bell and the Nyack-Tarrytown station! This success heralded a larger dispute, of course, and soon the Grants were beset with news of meddling at the federal level: controversy had arisen over the route of a proposed Sub-Atlantic Connector set to run from Bordeaux to Boston. Well the Grants knew, this would hardly do! Fortified with her recent success, Julia attended Congressional hearings in D.C., and after strenuous negotiations and clouds of thick cigar smoke from Julia, the Bostonians and the French delegates conceded that the Sub-Atlantic Corridor would instead run from the Grants'

timeless abode to Le Père-Lachaise and back. Only after a jongleur intervened was French honor salvaged, and so signs in French would in fact be posted at least as far as Hendaye.

Perfect candor required all to concede that the Grants had pulled off quite a(nother) feat. President Grant himself negotiated the route for the final stretch of the Trans-Sub-Atlantic corridor: a tunnel carved from underneath Wards Island to the Hudson. Well before work on this tunnel could be completed, the Triborough was getting good and clogged with Renaults and Citroëns: half were racing for Montreal, a bit fewer than half were making for Toronto, and the rest were bound for the Grand Tetons. With the tunnel's completion, traffic congestion at least in Westchester County became a thing of the past. Limitless self-effacement, long a hallmark of the Grant household, was waived to permit wild frivolity and a parade from West 120th all the way to Battery Park. Thus were raucous celebration, abundant laughter, wild frivolity, and uninhibited jocularity unleashed throughout all of New York City's subway lines, at least for a few minutes. Eventually, the Grants' Tomb Express took its rightful place in history as the last N.Y.C. subway to permit, endorse, condone, provoke, or encourage laughter, regardless of transfers.

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