

The Final Draft: A Rail Tale

by Laurie Bradley

Slowly, the train pulled out of Bournemouth station and clattered out of the town into the English countryside.

The wooden table rattled with the rocking of the train. Wind whistled against the window, and it shuddered in its frame. Through it the sprawling green landscape rushed past.

Intently alert, Robert looked over the passengers sitting in the seats around him. The train rumbled on for a while before a man in a trench coat across from him, who had been looking out of the window, cleared his throat and as the train screeched Robert clearly heard above the commotion,

"Fancy seeing you here!"

Robert eyed the stranger in a confused way, trying to suppress the sense of danger mounting inside him. He picked up his brown velvet hat and stood up. Stretching, Robert lifted his briefcase down from the webbed netting.

Hurrying down the jolting aisle, he approached a varnished panel door, light glaring on its glass pane. Despite firmly pressing down on the handle, it would not open. Fearing it was locked, he turned back just as a distinguished gentleman appeared from the other side. Robert stepped through the aperture and out onto the open platform, grasping the ornate wrought iron railing. His shoulders swung as he stepped gingerly down to the bottom step, the summer gust pulling on his velvet hat and light frock coat. The brightness of the day stunned him.

Treading across to the next carriage, he found there were many more people inside and just one seat free, which Robert promptly occupied. He thought about the man who had spoken to him; he did not know anyone on this train. He shook his head, crossed and uncrossed his legs, and rested his eyes with his hand massaging his brow.

The train progressed at speed down the line past bridges and houses, hedges and ditches, charging along like troops in a battle.

Suddenly, a dark forest swelled into view. The many leaves cast a strange green glow into the carriage. In its gloom, Robert perceived figures twisting and snaking among the great shafts, but they were gone in a moment. White fungus crept over the trunks, coiling tendrils over the scarred bark. Robert shivered, his skin crawling as he focused his attention elsewhere.

Presently, Robert looked either side of him, noticing a woman holding a copy of *The Times* below her nose, her eyes flicking between him and the paper. The hubbub of the train rose and fell, and Robert breathed in time with it, steadying himself. His chest felt tight and crackled as he wheezed. He pulled his hat off once more and dabbed his hot brow with his handkerchief. The train lurched round a corner of the track and rising to his feet, Robert was thrust forward by its momentum, throwing him towards the door further along the coach separating a second seating section.

He found it to be empty, and let out a long breath. Robert sat down at a table and lay his briefcase under the window, slumping back into the velour seat, just as another person came in, and out of all the seats available seated himself in the one across from Robert.

This newcomer lay down a bundle of newspaper clippings before him and began to pick through them, lifting each from the table so that light penetrated through it. Robert let out a small gasp when he saw among them his own face. His breathing became rapid. His ears burned uncomfortably, and new droplets of perspiration formed on his forehead.

A hand came down on his shoulder and Robert inhaled rapidly.

"Mind if I sit here, do you?" a woman asked.

Robert closed his eyes tight as she sat beside him. He pulled his coat collar up higher and pushed his hat further over his face.

Still the train pursued its destination down the line.

Robert watched the view escaping past the window. The sprawling green fields in the late summer weather were bathed in sunlight. Sunlight caught the yellows and golds of blonde corn heads. Sunlight shone on stone farmhouses. After a while, the movement of the landscape past him made him sick, the painted stations whistling by, and he returned his aggrieved gaze to the compartment. He noticed the bleached and worn fabric at the edges of the seat cushions, and imagined all the wear they received every day. He stared at this aberration, and bit his lip furiously, his heart racing.

Drumming his fingers on the window trim, Robert closed his eyes and tried to rest. He felt the woman's eyes on him and sharply turned his head away.

As London came into view, the train began to slow into the station. The green iron arches of the terminal engulfed the train like an open mouth, and the sound of the wheels on the tracks echoed grimly.

Robert bit at his nails violently as the train jolted to a standstill and the guard opened the door. He picked up his briefcase and smoothed his hat and coat. Dismounting the train, he tripped on the last step and stumbled onto the platform. Two firm hands caught him.

"Ah! Mr Stevenson? I'm Mr Benson, from Longman Green and Co., and I'm here to collect you. I trust you have the manuscript of your final draft?"

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