M. G. LEONARD & SAM SEDGMAN

ADVENTURES ON TRAINS

The HIGHLAND FALCON THIEF



Illustrated by Elisa Paganelli

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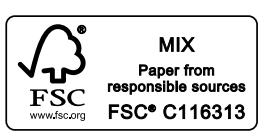
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For three generations of Sparlings,
John, Sam and Seb, and for Arthur.
M. G. Leonard

For my parents, who support me
with big hearts in everything I do.
Sam Sedgman



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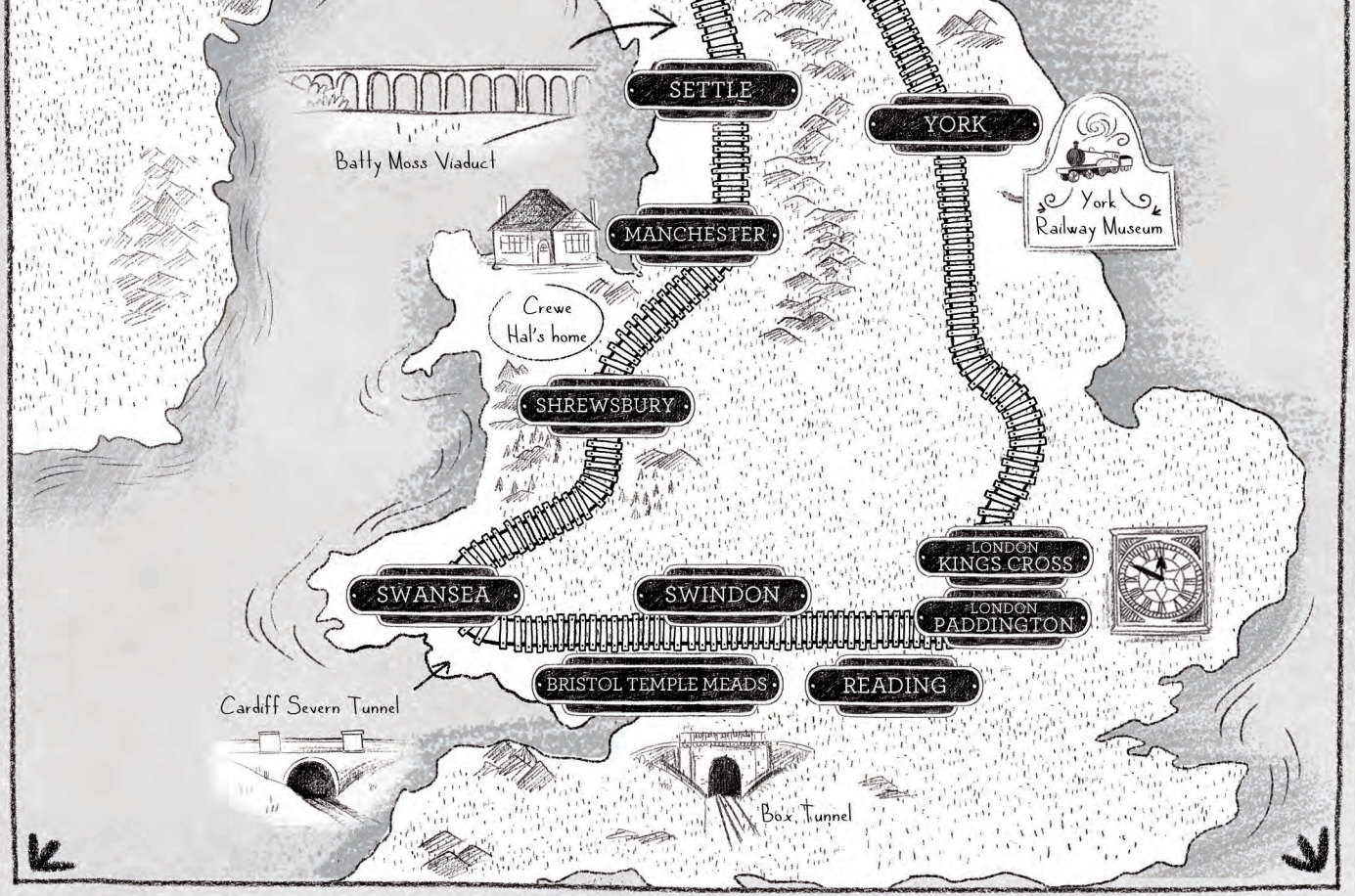
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THE ROUTE OF THE HIGHLAND FALCON


SETTLE
YORK
Batty Moss Viaduct
York Railway Museum
MANCHESTER
Crewe
Hal's home
SHREWSBURY
LONDON KINGS CROSS
SWANSEA
SWINDON
LONDON PADDINGTON
BRISTOL TEMPLE MEADS
READING
Cardiff Severn Tunnel
Box Tunnel

'As for trains – what can beat a train? . . .
To travel by train is to see nature and human beings,
towns and churches and rivers – in fact, to see life.'

Agatha Christie



CHAPTER ONE

TICKET TO RIDE

Harrison Beck pulled a biro from the pocket of his yellow anorak, deftly turning it over his index finger so it was point down, and doodled in the central margin of the newspaper spread across the table. The worry lines he saw carved into his father's forehead were making him nervous.

Colin Beck put down the sports section of the paper with a frustrated sigh and pointed at the station clock. 'He said he'd meet us here at five. We're in the cafe your brother specified; it's five o'clock.' He looked out at the people criss-crossing the station. 'So where is he, Bev?'

'Don't fret, love,' Beverly Beck scolded her husband gently. 'It'll give you indigestion.' She laid her hand on his sleeve. 'Nat'll be here.'

Hal's pen twitched as he studied his mother's face. She looked tired. Dad's blue duffel coat drowned her, but she was so pregnant that her bump bulged out of the front. No one had asked him if he wanted a baby sister, but he was getting one whether he liked it or not. He put down his pen. 'Mum,

I don't want to go with Uncle Nat. I want to stay with you. I don't like trains. They're boring.'

'I know, sausage –' she reached over and ruffled his hair – 'but it'll be good for you to spend some time with your uncle. He's an interesting man.'

Hal pulled a face. Whenever a grown-up said something was good for you, that meant it was dull, or disgusting, or both.

'You'd only be stuck in a hospital waiting room, and that's no place for you to end your summer holiday.' She patted his hand. 'You might even enjoy yourself.'

'I won't.' Hal looked up through the glass roof of the station at a cloudy sky. He didn't want to be packed off on a train journey with an uncle he only ever saw at Christmas. The high brick arches of King's Cross were wrapped in a white lattice-work sculpture that made the inside of the station feel like a hive, and all the busy passengers, bees. A seething tangle of people rushed about dragging bags and carrying briefcases. A man stood next to a metal rack stacked with newspapers, shoving them at people. Hal glimpsed the headline 'Jewel Thief Strikes Again' as a woman in a suit snatched one from the vendor, flipping it under her armpit to read on the train. Two bulging-breasted pigeons strutted towards him, pecking at the floor.

Colin Beck kicked out his leg. 'Get away.' He grunted. 'Vermin.'

Hal frowned at his dad, tearing the crust from his half-eaten ham sandwich and ducking under the table to toss it

to the startled-eyed birds. The pigeons grabbed the finger of bread and began a tug of war. A pair of trainers, charcoal suede with three white stripes, stopped beside the table. Hal saw chestnut herring-bone trousers with a crisp vertical crease. It could only be one person. Mum's metal chair scraped against the concrete floor as she got up.

'Nat!' she cried, waddling around the table and throwing her arms around her older brother.

'Careful, Bev – you'll knock me over.' Uncle Nat put down his battered leather suitcase and umbrella, hugging her. 'How are you, pet? Are you well?'

'Yes,' Mum replied, her eyes darting to Hal. 'I'm fine.'

'Nathaniel, good to see you.' Dad was on his feet, grabbing Uncle Nat's hand and shaking it. 'We appreciate you doing this – we really do.'

Hal's eyes flicked from his uncle to his father. Uncle Nat was composed of straight lines. He was thin with neatly trimmed straight hair and wore thick-framed tortoiseshell glasses.



His crumpet-coloured raincoat and mustard sweater went perfectly with his trousers and shoes. By contrast, Dad was a jumble of circles. His kind round face reached up to a receding bowl of salt-and-pepper hair crowned with a bald patch. His shoulders rolled forward, and his navy plaid shirt was tucked into his brown-belted chinos, underlining his overhanging belly.

Uncle Nat turned to Hal, his eyes twinkling. 'It's about time I got to know my nephew better.' He offered Hal his hand 'You've grown since Christmas, Harrison. Are you excited about our steam-powered adventure?'

Hal shook his uncle's hand and nodded, but he wasn't going to say yes, because that would be a lie. A journey all the way to Scotland and back on the slowest train in the world with his weird uncle was not what he called an adventure.

'Are you sure you're all right with Hal coming with you?' Mum said, picking up Hal's rucksack and slipping it on to his shoulders. 'I've told him to give you space when you need to work.'

Uncle Nat was a travel writer. He'd agreed to bring Hal along with him on a work trip while Beverly Beck went into hospital to have the baby.

'Absolutely. Don't worry about us.' Uncle Nat placed a careful hand on his sister's bump. 'You concentrate on bringing this baby out into the world safely. I expect all three of you to be at Paddington station to meet us on our return, in four days.'

'Yes.' Hal nodded furiously. His mouth moved, but no other words came out.

'I'm going to be all right, Hal,' his mum said softly. She bent down, putting her hand to his cheek. 'You mustn't worry. Your dad'll look after me.' She undid the silver chain that hung around her neck. 'Here, take Grandad's St Christopher for good luck. The patron saint of travellers will keep you safe on your journey.'

Hal gripped the silver coin between his thumb and forefinger. He felt the engraving of St Christopher, staff in hand, child on shoulders. 'But what if you need it?'

'You can give it back to me when you get home.' She did the necklace up and then fussed with his anorak, pulling out the hood where it had gathered under his rucksack. She ran the tips of her fingers through his ash-blond hair. 'You'll be a good boy for your uncle, won't you?'

'Yes, Mum.'

'What route is the Highland Falcon taking, Nathaniel?' his dad asked.

'We'll be travelling up the east coast to Balmoral, where we'll stop for lunch tomorrow, before looping round Scotland and back down the west.'

Hal's dad nodded. 'They've spent days putting up decorations in Crewe. The station looked impressive when we got the train down this morning.'

'I expect there'll be lots of ceremonial pomp.' Uncle Nat winked at Hal. 'This will be a journey you'll remember for the rest of your life.'

'You're lucky to be going on this trip, son.' Hal's dad patted his shoulder. 'When I were a lad, I remember waving to the

Highland Falcon as she passed through Crewe. She's a lovely-looking locomotive.'

'I'm going to miss you.' Hal's mum hugged him. 'Do as your uncle says, and we'll see you in four days.'

'We're going to have fun.' Uncle Nat picked up his suitcase, hooked his umbrella over his arm, and took hold of Hal's hand. 'Right, we've got to get a move on. We don't want to miss our train.'

Hal struggled to speak. He hadn't said goodbye properly. His parents drew back, waving and smiling as Uncle Nat pulled him across the concourse. He saw his father put a protective arm around his mother. They turned and walked into the crowd, and – just like that – they were gone.

'You're going to need your ticket.' Uncle Nat let go of Hal and reached into the pocket of his raincoat.

Scanning the crowd for a glimpse of his parents, Hal only saw the blank faces of strangers. His insides felt hollow. Uncle Nat pressed a white rectangle into his hand.



'Are you ready, Harrison?' His voice was soft, like Hal's mum's.

Hal glanced over his shoulder, then looked up at his uncle and nodded. 'I'm ready.'

A crowd of people were gathered by the platform entrance, jostling for position.

'Let's not dawdle on the red carpet,' Uncle Nat said, striding towards them. 'We'll leave the stage for those who like the spotlight.'

Looking down at his yellow anorak and faded blue jeans, Hal felt a jolt of panic. He wasn't wearing the right clothes for walking on a red carpet.

'Tickets, please,' a uniformed guard said. Hal held out the white card with his name on it. Cameras flashed, and the guard smiled. 'Welcome, Harrison Beck, to the final journey of the Highland Falcon.'

