opening extract from

Tales of Terror from the Tunnel's Mouth

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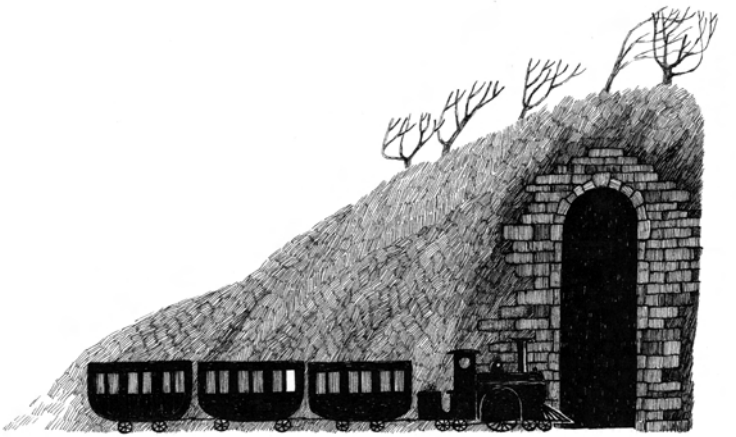

THE TRAIN

It was the first railway journey I had ever made alone. My stepmother had come to the station to see me off and proceeded to embarrass me with unwanted hugs and kisses and the nursery voice she always adopted for such displays of affection.

My father was away at war, fighting the Boers in the searing heat of South Africa, and I would gladly have joined him there in preference to spending another moment with his dreary and irritating wife. Not that I'd ever had what you might call a close relationship with my father either.

But to my relief, the holidays had finally come to

an end and I was off to a new school. Ordinarily I would, no doubt, have felt nervous about this move, but life with my stepmother over those weeks had been an ordeal that had tested and emboldened me to face anything my new school might present by way of challenges. I was fearless.

Or so I thought.

We had been waiting on the platform for the better part of half an hour, my stepmother having insisted on us being preposterously early, so concerned was she that I might miss my train.

We were sitting on a wooden bench on the platform and, conversation having long ago run dry, I was reading the L*ondon* I*llustrated* N*ews* and my stepmother was dozing. She has the most extraordinary capacity for falling asleep at a moment's notice. Any kind of pause in the routine was an excuse for a nap. I swear she was more cat than human.

I looked about me. It was a dull, rural English station on a rather pleasant and sunny morning. There were three or four other passengers who had arrived during the time we were there, and there was a portly, bearded stationmaster, who walked up and down the platform, looking at his watch every two minutes and smiling and tipping his hat to everyone he passed.

All was, in fact, utterly mundane, drearily peaceful – until, that is, my stepmother awoke from her catnap with a sudden strangled yelp that made me jump several inches in the air and caused concerned and embarrassed glances from the other passengers waiting at the station.

'For goodness' sake,' I said, blushing and trying not to catch the eye of any of the onlookers. 'There are people watching.'

'Oh!' she said, turning to me in a quite delirious way, her eyes wild. 'But I've had the most awful premonition.'

I should mention at this point that my stepmother considered herself to have a gift in that regard.

'You were dreaming,' I said, smiling at a man who was looking at my stepmother with an expression that betrayed a not unreasonable concern that she may have escaped from a lunatic asylum.

'But I had the distinct impression of danger, my dear: deadly danger,' she said, still staring at me in that deranged manner.

'What on earth are you talking about, madam?' I hissed.

'I wish you wouldn't call me that,' she said, putting her hands to her temples.

I was fully aware that she did not like it, but there was no way on this earth that I was going to call her 'Mother', as I knew she wanted me to.

'What danger?' I asked again.

'I do not know,' she said. 'I see . . . I see a kiss.'

'A kiss?' I said with a laugh. 'It doesn't sound dangerous. Or at least not deadly dangerous. Unless I am kissing a crocodile.'

'A kiss,' she repeated. 'And a tunnel – a long, dark and awful tunnel . . .'

'I am to kiss a tunnel? Well, that at least sounds a little dangerous,' I said with a withering smile.

But my stepmother continued to stare at me in the oddest way and, ridiculous though her statement was, there was something unnerving about her gaze, and I was forced to look away.

This 'premonition' of my stepmother's was as vague as usual. I sighed and looked down the line, willing the train to arrive. I longed with all my heart to be away from her.

'You were sleeping and had a nightmare,' I said, making no effort to disguise my disdain. 'Or a *day*mare – or whatever it is one has when one is dozing on a station platform in broad daylight.'

My stepmother bristled at my tone of voice.

'Please do not talk to me in that way,' she said.

'I'm sorry if I've said anything to offend you,' I answered, looking away.

But I was not sorry at all.

A whistle sounded down the track and heralded the imminent arrival of my train. I could not have been more relieved. I stood up.

'Well,' I said. 'Here it is.'

'My dear boy.' My stepmother flung herself upon me in the most vulgar fashion.

'Please,' I said, squirming with embarrassment. 'There are people watching.'

I finally extricated myself from her jellyfish embrace and, picking up my bag, I moved to board the carriage.

'I do wish you would catch another train,' she said, grabbing me by the sleeve.

I carried on regardless.

'After waiting here for the best part of an hour? I don't think so.'

The idea that I would willingly spend another moment on that platform with her! I stepped up into the carriage and slammed the door shut with a force I hoped might transmit some of my feelings, but when I looked through the open window of the carriage door, my stepmother was holding a handkerchief to her face and making fanning motions

with her other hand, as if she were about to swoon (while surreptitiously glancing about in the hope of an audience, of course).

A burst of steam hid her from view and I found the illusion of her disappearance intensely pleasurable, but as the train moved off I caught a glimpse of her frantically waving. I pretended not to see and set about finding a seat.

I walked down the corridor, looking into the compartments until I found one with a vacant window seat. The only other occupant was a stiff, military-looking gentleman with a ruddy face, firm and jutting jaw and exuberant moustache. I will call him the Major. He nodded a greeting as I walked in.

'Would you mind awfully if I joined you, sir?' I asked.

'Not at all,' he said, sitting up to attention at my approach.

I smiled and thanked him, putting my bag in the luggage rack above my seat. The Major sniffed loudly.

'Providing that you are not a whistler,' he continued as I sat down.

'I beg your pardon, sir?'

'A whistler,' he repeated. 'Can't abide a whistler.

Sets my teeth on edge, don't you know.'

'No, sir,' I assured him. 'I am not a whistler.'

'I'm pleased to hear it,' he said with another sniff. 'So many young people are.'

'Not I, sir,' I said.

'Splendid.'

I smiled and looked out of the window, hoping that this might bring an end to the strange conversation, which it thankfully did. The Major picked up the copy of *The Times* he had folded in his lap and began to read, making the odd tut or sniff as he did so.

The train moved on, stopping intermittently at stations as prim and as dull as the one at which I had boarded. At each of these, the carriage gained a new occupant.

The first to join the Major and I, choosing to sit beside me, was a bishop (or so I shall call him): a stout, round-faced man of the cloth who, after wishing us good day, took a pile of handwritten papers from his briefcase and began to study them, occasionally making notes with a fountain pen.

The second passenger to join us was a short and wiry man, whom I decided was a farmer. He sat opposite the Bishop and next to the Major. We all nodded greetings to one another as he sat down.

The Farmer's hands had clearly known hard work and his shoes had not been cleaned quite thoroughly enough and still bore signs of fresh mud.

At the next station, a tall, cadaverous man entered our compartment. He was on nodding acquaintance with the Major. He had long, pale fingers and a face to match. He was well dressed and carried a copy of the *Lancet*: a surgeon on his way to Harley Street, I had no doubt. He sat next to the Bishop and opposite the Major. The seat opposite me – the other window seat – remained empty.

I suddenly began to feel a little weary. Perhaps the excitement of travelling alone had exhausted me, or perhaps it was the attentions of the warm sunshine through the carriage window. I closed my eyes.

When I opened them again, I realised that, though I was sure I had closed them for but a short moment, I must have been asleep for some time, because the vacant seat in front of me was now occupied by a woman, a rather attractive woman, in a severe kind of way.

She was still young – not so many years older than I – and very pale and slim. Her face was long, her cheekbones high. Her hair was red. Her clothes, from her shoes to her hat, were white.

I smiled and nodded and she smiled back, her pale green eyes staring at me with unnerving intensity.

I nodded again and looked away at the other occupants of our carriage, who were all, every one of them, sound asleep, the Major, ironically, whistling each time he breathed out.

The other difference of note was that the train had come to a halt, despite there being no station in sight. Flattening my face against the window, I could see that the engine had stopped just in front of the mouth of a tunnel and the carriages were at the base of a huge, steep cutting, the banks so high they all but blocked out the sky and left us in a strange twilight.

My stepmother's foolish outburst came back to me and I shook my head. How she would have enjoyed saying, 'I told you so.' But, however irritating an unscheduled stop undoubtedly was, it hardly constituted any kind of danger.

The woman opposite continued to stare and smile at me in such a forward manner that I began to blush a little.

'Where are we, miss?' I said. 'Do you know? Has there been an announcement?'

'You were hoping for an announcement?' she said.

'Yes,' I answered, 'from the guard, telling us where we are and how long the delay might be.'

'Ah,' she said. 'No, I'm afraid there has been no announcement.'

She looked at a gold pocket watch, then at me, then again at the watch before putting it back in the small handbag she held between her long white-gloved fingers on her lap. I looked at my watch too and sighed, giving it a shake.

'What is the time please, miss?' I asked. 'My watch seems to have stopped.'

'The time?' She cocked her head as though she were a small bird. 'Are you in a hurry? The young are always in such a hurry.'

I found this use of the word 'young' a little amusing coming from one who, as I have said, could hardly have been more than ten years older than myself at most. But I let it pass.

'I'm not in a particular hurry,' I replied. 'I'm being met by someone at King's Cross Station and I should not like to keep them waiting. I merely wondered how long we had been standing here.'

'Not long,' she said.

Again I waited in the hope that she might elaborate, but she said nothing further.

'Robert Harper,' I said, holding out my hand as

I thought my father might have done in these circumstances.

'I'm very pleased to meet you, Robert,' she said, taking my hand in hers and holding on to it for longer than I found comfortable. Her grip was surprisingly firm.

She did not, however, give me her name and, though it probably sounds rather weak, I didn't have sufficient confidence to press her for it. I looked out of the window again and sighed in frustration at the continued lack of movement.

'You seem restless, Robert,' said the Woman in White – I refer to her thus in light-hearted reference to Mr Collins' novel of the same name – and I was already regretting giving up my name, as it seemed immediately to give her an advantage over me.

'I am simply impatient to be moving again, *Miss* . . .' I left a large space hanging for her to offer her name, raising my eyebrows in encouragement, but again she made no move to supply it. I was bold enough to frown, not caring in the least whether she took offence. But if anything her smile widened. I felt sure she was mocking me.

I looked out of the window once more but there was nothing to see, not even the smallest move-

ment of even the smallest creature. As I was thus engaged, a curious illusion made me think that the Woman in White was lurching towards me. I caught sight of her reflection in the window, her face somewhat distorted as she lunged forward. I spun round, pressing myself back into the seat. But I now saw that the Woman in White was sitting unchanged and smiling, and I felt more than a little foolish.

'Is everything all right, Robert?' she asked, not unreasonably.

'I am quite well, thank you,' I said with as much nonchalance as I could muster. 'If a trifle bored.'

The Woman in White nodded sagely and then, with alarming suddenness, clapped her delicate hands together. I was amazed to see that none of the sleepers in our carriage started at the sound.

'We should think of some diversion to amuse ourselves,' she announced.

'Oh?' I said, wondering what she meant.

'You might perhaps enjoy hearing a story,' she said.

'A story?' I asked, a little incredulously. 'Are you a schoolteacher then, miss?' Though as soon as I had asked this, I sensed there was something about her that made this unlikely.

'No,' she said. 'Bless you, I am not a schoolteacher.' She smiled to herself, seeming to find the notion privately amusing. 'I assume you ask because you feel that stories are for children?'

'No,' I answered. 'Not at all, miss. I am very fond of stories.'

'And what sort of stories are you fond of, Robert?' she asked with another bird-like cock of the head.

'Well, I don't know,' I said. 'I subscribe to the *Strand Magazine* and there are lots of exciting stories there – like those of Mr Wells. Or the adventures of Sherlock Holmes.'

The Woman in White smiled at me, but as she made no response I felt the need to continue.

'I read Mr Stoker's *Dracula* and thought it frightfully good. Oh – and I think Mr Stevenson a fine writer, too, but that maybe because we have the same name.'

She raised her eyebrows.

'Robert,' I said to clarify. 'We are both called Robert. As in Robert Louis Stevenson?'

'Yes,' she said. 'I realised that.'

'Oh,' I said. 'Sorry.'

Again there was a pause in which I expected the Woman in White to pass some comment on my choice of reading matter, but none came.

I thoroughly enjoyed *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*,' I continued. She smiled and nodded. 'And I thought *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was very good,' I added, hoping that I might shock her by admitting to my enjoyment of such a notorious work. But her face remained impassive.

'It sounds as if you have a taste for stories of unnatural dangers,' she said, 'for works of a supernatural and uncanny bent.'

'I suppose I do,' I admitted, not sure whether she intended this as a criticism or not.

'Well, then,' said the Woman in White. 'I wonder if I might not be able to come up with a story or two to your taste.'

'Are you perhaps a writer yourself, miss?' I asked. I had never actually read anything by a female writer, but I knew they existed. This might explain her peculiar manner. Writers were a strange sort; I knew that much from the newspapers.

She seemed even more amused by this notion than by that of being a schoolteacher.

'No, no. I am not a writer. But I do know a lot of stories.' She tapped the tips of her fingers together and her eyes twinkled. 'Why not let me tell you one, and see if it amuses you?'

I confess I was unenthusiastic, but it would have

been rude to actually refuse. It was a rather eccentric suggestion. I looked concernedly towards our fellow passengers, but they were all still sound asleep.

'It might while away a few minutes,' she said.

'Very well, then,' I said with a sigh and another sideways glance at the other occupants of the carriage, willing at least one of them to wake and rescue me. 'What is the story about?'

'I'm afraid I cannot say much about it without spoiling it for you.'

'Oh,' I said with a nod, and looked out of the window.

'Do you have an interest in botany?' she asked.

'Botany?' I said, deliberately nudging the Bishop to no effect.

'The study of plants,' she said, tapping her fingers together again as if she had just described something utterly thrilling.

'Not really,' I said with a slight curl of my lip. 'Does that matter?'

'Not in the least,' she said. 'Not in the least.'