

NO ENEMY BUT TIME.

A Story

by

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They were sitting on a bench at Crewe station, waiting for the train going south, an old man and his wife. Their daughter kept a continual look-out. She was calmer than either of them, middle-aged and rather red in the face. When the old man asked her a question, which he did very frequently, she only nodded dreamily, soothing him.

At last the express train came into the platform and, after a word with one of the guards, she called out to her parents: "This is the train! Come on!" She took up their cases, which were each of them strapped and labelled most neatly, and carried them on to the train.

But the old man stayed where he was. He always had a little smile on his face, and, strangely, his eyes, which scarcely moved, seemed to be listening rather than looking.

"Is it the right train?"

He asked this question of the air, for his daughter had gone to find his compartment, while his wife, a small woman dressed in black, sat meekly at his side looking the other way, unable to hear his words. Only when he bent towards her and enunciated his words very clearly and slowly could she hear what he said, and then she would smile, just as if someone had given her an affectionate touch. But her face had not the persistent, wondering smile of her husband. He was brown and fairly agile for his age, while

she had become rather helpless, with the years gradually smothering her.

It was clear that he did not believe this to be the train. His smile seemed to say, They are playing some kind of joke, it is a fancy of the young, this cannot be the train. He required courage. He got up from the bench and himself went to speak with one of the guards. Yes, it was the train. He succumbed now. His daughter, coming down from the train again, had seen him ask the porter, but she appeared quite accustomed to his behaviour, for she said, with a perfectly serious face: "Well, good bye, mum. Good bye, Dad. I've put the cases up on the racks."

He climbed into the train slowly, still doubtful. The matter had perhaps passed too smoothly. He peered at all the compartments and the people in them as he went by, with the same smile, not quite sure of his ground but smiling to keep up a certain polite contact with the deceiving world. He caught sight of a dining-car steward and went and touched his arm. He spoke softly, out of earshot of his daughter, who was attending to the old woman: "Excuse me. Is this the nine-thirty?"

The steward nodded and was about to pass on when the old man put to him a statement, more complicated and tentative than the question: "But what I'm looking for is the through-train to Blacksmith, arriving seven-fifteen."

He seemed to be tracking his train down by means of some system of detection rather than catching it, and the steward, with a homely look in his eye, nodded again: "You're all right. This is the train."

They kissed their daughter at the door of the compartment,

where a young man and a woman with blonde hair were already seated, strangers to each other. The daughter went back to the platform, calmly and seriously, and came level to the window so that she would see them as the train drew out.

The old man looked about the compartment.

"Now where has she put the cases?" he asked.

He looked up at the racks and saw them, one on either side. His smile had something of admiration in it, but always it was the same smile. And though the cases were perfectly secure, fitting squarely into the racks, he went to each one of them and shifted them a little, pushing them with both hands, though the racks were not deep enough for them to ^{go} any further. Then he sat down, opposite his wife. All this time his daughter had watched him. The train drew slowly out of the station, and they waved briefly.

When the platform was no longer in sight he got up and tapped his wife on the knee. He felt it would be better if she sat next to him. He seemed happier with her at his side, and they faced the journey together. Their attitude now was solemn, as if they were present at an event which required tact, sympathy and a certain poise. They were waiting, though the journey must last five hours.

A question posed itself in his mind: What am I to do with my macintosh? The fields were very green after rain, and the sky was low and dark. He arrived at a decision. He took the macintosh off and folded it carefully, swaying as he did so. He put the sleeves inside, shaking them down, then placed it on top of the cases. He did everything slowly, giving each of his movements the utmost consideration, as if it were born of long self-scrutiny.

His hands were hard and strong, unlike the skin of his face. They were cruelly cracked and broken. He had worked for thirty years

as clerk to a small engineering firm at the edge of his village, and he had put in almost an equal number of hours during his life as a gardener, doing odd jobs for the bigger houses. He had been sick three times during those thirty years. The first illness had kept him away from work for five days; the second, eight weeks, and the third, not long before his retirement, a month. Each morning he rose at five o'clock, and he was never in bed later than half-past nine. He had been married for the last forty years. The grass outside the window was not lovely to him: it was the world.

The young^g man was at his side, near the window, and he was alone, more so than anyone else in the compartment. He was also better dressed, and probably he knew more about the world. The old man watched him for a moment: he gave him a guarded, appraising look, as if he could not properly credit him with existence, as if the young man was so much a foreigner that the thought of him made him giddy. And for a brief moment he did experience a certain giddiness as he looked at the young man's jacket, at his crepe-soled shoes, and saw his frown.

The train passed a small town, and the young man leaned forward suddenly, as if he had caught sight of something in the distance, behind the village. He leaned forward close to the window, then, mistaken perhaps, slowly leaned back again. The old man did not understand the significance of this gesture, though for him it was without doubt a public and professional one.

Sometimes he would speak to his wife. He would bend down to her ear as they passed the freshly watered fields and say his words slowly and loudly: "We have half-an-hour, - half-an-hour for the connection"; "We change at Bletchley"; "It is a long journey";

"At Bletchley we must ask."

Whenever one of the other people in the compartment got up to go to the lavatory, he would lean forward and shift his legs, looking up at them as they passed, as if something were now required of him, as part of the dignified ritual of being on a train. He even shifted sometimes when people passed by in the corridor.

A thought occurred to him. Perhaps he was intended to take an interest in his surroundings, for both the blonde woman and the young man were looking through the window, - no, more than looking, craning their necks and staring very intently. In fact, they were thinking, and the trees were only the cradles of their thoughts. But the old man knew, for himself, that they were closely studying the passing landscape, and with a certain academic intentness. So, accordingly, he leaned forward of a sudden, as if to take a closer look at something that had caught his eye. And the smile was still there: it was the smile of one who admired himself for having just complied perfectly with a rule of professional and public conduct. He leaned back, for the moment satisfied.

At one of the subsidiary stations his wife made as if to get up, and this was a movement which caused him immediate alarm. In one instant all his confident assumptions about the connection to Blacksmith, the length of their wait at Bletchley, and the time of their arrival, folded up and sank in his mind, leaving him sick and anxious. The rituals of this journey, made by other creatures than himself, by those who caused him giddiness, were beginning to overpower him, and he felt for the first time that he was fighting a losing battle on this journey.

He drew his wife back in her seat, but this gesture came from his early confidence, which her movement destroyed only a

moment later.

"No, no," he told her. "There are two hours more."

The poise he had slowly manufactured from the time they left Crewe had gone, and he was no longer even sure whether they were travelling south. He knew none of the names of the stations, and it was possible that this was his nightmare fear - they might be voyaging further and further into the land of other creatures, and never regain their foothold in the real, but really real, world, namely, their cottage in Blacksmith.

His wife had not heard him, so he said again: "This isn't our station, I don't believe." His voice was light and subdued; during his life it had commanded nothing, precisely nothing.

The old woman nodded, understanding at last, but his anxiety continued, even as the crisis passed - or abated - and the train drew out of this nameless station. Simply by shifting in her seat she had banished his composure, and from this moment on nothing could be trusted. For an hour he sat without speaking, as the train gathered speed and his wife, rocking a little at his side, began to doze. She had a broad, old-fashioned hat, and lace about her neck, and in her face there was a weariness too old to repair. She did not go so far into the world as her husband did, perhaps because she was deaf. She had long since lost that will to adventure.

A further crisis promised itself, but came to nothing, when one of the stewards walked down the corridor calling into every compartment as he passed: "Take your seats for the first lunch, please." It was a part of the ritual for which the old man had not prepared, and when both the young man and the blonde-haired woman walked by him on their way to the restaurant-car, he

murmured, half to himself, half to them: "Lunch..."

It was said in a musing way, quietly, almost a question, but far more a flat statement about foreign creatures, like 'They mark their faces with blue against the evil eye.' He looked up into their faces as they passed, first at the kindly, lady-helper's face of the blonde woman, then at the lonely, stern brow of the young man. And he saw them as one: he allowed them no self-identity. They were authority, the other side, the impossible. And lunch itself, somewhere in the deeps of the train, far down the limitless corridors, among the evil, quaint and unknowable, lunch itself was impossible, not really real, just between you and me, jokes apart. "Lunch" as said by the steward was only a symbol of a word, like a bell rung by an acolyte, and when the old man musingly repeated it to himself he was only catching at the symbol, turning it over in his hands, wondering at it, before he cast it out on the scrap-heap of dreams most absurd. He did not believe. He refused to be put upon. So there was in his constant smile the confidence of one who knows, even while he is obeying, that he is also being deceived. That was why he asked again and again about the train at Crève, because he so rarely felt able to bestow the gift of his belief.

When the others had left the compartment a proposal formed itself in his mind: Let us eat. It was in no way caused by the dream-word lunch which had tinkled down the corridor. It was a proposal issuing out of nothing quite suddenly. He turned to his wife, and, bending to her ear, called out: "What about a bite of something?"

She nodded, and he chuckled lightly. There was no need to disturb the two cases on the racks. They were in their final and everlasting form, so to speak. They were strapped round, and from the handle of each hung a label, with the following address

written in the neatest and slowest hand: "Mr and Mrs A. J. Cheameley, 5, Eddison Terrace, Blacksmith. Travelling from Crewe to Blacksmith."

These cases need not be disturbed because there was a sling bag which the old woman carried, and this contained, in separate paper parcels, their food for the journey. With the most devoted care she unwrapped two of the parcels, and they began to eat. There was also a thermos flask, and a small silver tin containing saccharine tablets.

This is not to say that his anxiety was over. It was only suspended.

Now came a singular event which took his mind from the journey. It happened when they had poured tea into the small chromium cups. She had placed two saccharine tablets into each, and was now looking for the spoon to stir with. She looked in the side-pockets of the sling-bag, then into the body of it, but the search yielded nothing. He watched her hands all this time, holding his own cup, waiting.

For the first time she spoke: "Did you say the side-pocket?" He smiled and nodded, so once more she felt inside the two pockets, and once more she found nothing.

"I think it's with the food," she added, almost inaudibly.

"But no," he answered, warming to the joke. "I put it there myself. Lil saw me." Then he put his cup on the floor of the compartment: "Give it to me."

His hands trembled as he took the bag. His search was more careful and slower. He did not look down at the bag, but sat with his abstracted smile, staring in front of him as he fumbled among the little articles. It was again a kind of artful quest,

with those same listening eyes, knowing you for the deceiver you were, - clever enough no doubt, and it was just like his quest for the one and only, the true and proper, the really real, train of that day in all the world and the stars beyond.

He was forced to realise that the spoon was in neither of the side-pockets, and now he opened the main part and began fumbling among the parcels of food. His first search was useless. A further decision was clearly required. He would take out each parcel in turn and lay it on the seat opposite: the spoon was sure to be there, at the bottom, hidden at present by the paper.

"I know it's here," he murmured. "I remember plainly. And Lil saw me."

But he said this most to himself, and his wife did not look up at him. She was looking at the bag sleepily as he took out each parcel in turn and laid it on the seat opposite. He was most careful not to disarrange these parcels, or to break the thread with which each was tied. She did not touch her tea, being too interested in the outcome of this search. But when the bag was quite empty of parcels he found no spoon, and his smile seemed to say, as he leaned back with the empty bag before him, that at last the deception had been discovered, and that it was indeed right to withhold belief. It was almost clear that this latest deception had something to do with the train, and its prohibitive rituals.

His realisation that the spoon was lost stunned him. Slowly he put the parcels back into the bag, placing them squarely side by side along the base, then one on top of the other. He took up his tea again and turned to his wife: "The spoon is gone." She had understood him.

"What do we stir with?" he asked.

But this second remark she failed to hear. He bent further towards her and asked more loudly: "How do we stir?" The sleep did not pass from her face, but there was recognition in her eyes - the trace of cleverness lost long years ago - as she answered: "It'll melt!" Nevertheless, the loss of the spoon was like the absence of a favourite companion, and they became thoughtful as they sipped their tea, brooding together.

When the other occupants had returned to their corner seats after lunch, the old man took out his hand-watch and glanced at it. He calculated, still gazing down at the great watch-face, that there was little more than an hour to run, and he realised in the same instant that so far there had been no indications of their actually travelling towards Bletchley. Now his anxiety grew. For what indication had the landscape given, that this was the true train: what indication had been given by the other people in the compartment, by the passing stewards, by the subsidiary stations with their uncommon names? Now there was only an hour more to run, and the signs were by no means providential, for surely, as the great station drew near, there should be an increase of indications, a bustling, as it were, and people warning each other. But there was only the same train on the same course, passing through landscape that looked much the same from hour to hour. The blonde woman and the young man seemed in no way disturbed, for they were clearly at one with the train, not at all in his predicament, and almost able, in a mysterious way, so calm and powerful did they appear, to direct themselves of their own accord to their destination, and the train with them. Whereas he would only come upon his station by accident, after skirting many ambushes.

He felt that the least he could do now was to prepare

himself for the end of the journey. An hour was none too long, and even supposing that the deception was successful and that this train were destined for quite some other place than Bletchley, they would be wise to get down at the next station, whatever its name. So he rose and took his macintosh from the rack. It was his intention not to wear this macintosh at the next station, and he realised that, since they had two cases with them, apart from the sling bag, which his wife always carried, it would be a nuisance: more, it might make the carrying of the cases impossible. It must be remembered that at Crewe there had been his daughter to help him.

He took down one of the cases from the rack. He had attracted the notice of the blonde-haired woman, and she was looking at him as he unbuckled the strap, clearly wondering whether, being old, he needed her help. Very deliberately, the strap now open, he folded his macintosh and laid it over the case. He intended to pull the strap tight over it, so that it would no longer be an extra piece of luggage. He was about to buckle the strap when he grew dissatisfied with the arrangement of the macintosh and began folding it again. Then it was ready and he slipped the tongue of the strap through the buckle, swaying against the seat, and pulled it as far as he could. He wanted to reach the second hole, since he knew only this would secure the macintosh beyond all doubt. The third hole would do, it was tight enough, but he wished to be quite sure that, perhaps as he ran for another train, the coat would not slip away from the case and be lost, like the spoon, for ever. So he released the strap again, rested, then pulled it as hard as he could towards him. This time he reached beyond the third hole, but still he was not

strong enough for the second. The blonde woman was watching him and at last she put out her hand and helped him with it. Together they pulled the strap to the second hole, and the buckle went home. He looked into her eyes and said: "We have two cases, you see."

She smiled and nodded. It occurred to him that in her lay a means of discovering where the train was going. He was about to put to her his anxious question, but she had already turned away and was looking out of the window. The train began to cross a valley, still and dark under clouds, and he sat quite still, staring before him, being rushed at seventy miles an hour into the unknowable.

When he looked at his watch again the crisis happened for which he had all this time been waiting. For he now knew, as a result of suddenly becoming aware of the time, that the train could not be bound for Bletchley. The journey, they had told him, would last five hours: but five hours had already gone by, ten minutes ago, and still there was this terrifying lack of visible indications. He leaned forward. He wanted to fidget. His wife was quite unaware of his feelings, which were now those of a feverish man, for she only wanted to be allowed her old dreams, and the minimum of worldly events. At last he could no longer prevent himself.

It was the young man with the stern brow. He turned to this young man, as being more reliable than the blonde woman, as being calmer and more powerful, more at one with the intentions of the train, more able to understand the impossible.

"Excuse me," he said. The young man turned, his stern eyes full upon him. "We are making for Bletchley. But I don't think this can be the right train. I think we must have passed

it."

He looked from one window to the other, as if to point out that the countryside lacked proper indications. The young man stared into his rather watery, light blue eyes and asked him:

"Bletchley? Is that the station between Oxford and Cambridge?"

But these were only fresh dream-words, much the same as lunch, and there was nothing in them for the old man to grasp on. Indeed, he did not really hear the question. His eyes were abstracted, as if his anxiety were now too great for him to meet the world half way any longer: he would only ask questions, and pass on to a further question before he had a reply. This he did.

"I don't think it can be stopping at Bletchley. It has been five hours already." He shook his head meekly, and this time he smiled across at the blonde woman, involving her. "We should have been there quite a time ago."

"Bletchley?" the blonde woman asked. She had the face of a healer as she turned to the window and saw the sign. "This is Bletchley. Look." Among the trees the words in black could be seen, first on one board, then, two hundred yards later, on another: BLETCHLEY. The old man did not answer her, so sudden had been the verdict of providence. He simply looked her in the eyes as the train drew slowly into the waiting station, and at last he began to understand. Suffering a terrible relief, he took down his cases and supervised his wife's departure from the train. It was indeed remarkable that so much deception should, at the very last moment, have worked round to his advantage. He did not speak to his wife as he carried their cases one at a time to the platform, nor did he instantly make his enquiry about the next train. His reprieve required a brief celebration, and this was silence.

They reached their village that evening, soon after seven-thirty. They were both tired as they left the station, among the deep-green, dripping leaves, and the utterly silent bushes. It was an ugly village, with a narrow main street consisting mostly of identical cottages built with red brick. Each cottage had its four windows, its brown front door, and its ornaments in the lower rooms. They saw no one on their way through the village, which lay in an evening repose, quite forlorn after rain. They walked slowly, he with the two cases, and she with the sling bag.

She opened the door, while he looked for a moment at the geraniums in the front garden and at the weeds which during their two weeks' absence had begun to put up their heads. He was recollecting gradually how each thing was placed, and once inside the cottage he began to pore over every heavy, ageing object there, reviving its reality, entering the world again, a world at last where things could be touched and not denied. For here he was able to believe. He touched his row of old pipes, which he no longer smoked, and he took a duster devoutly along the crowded mantelpiece, among the ornaments, while the old woman brought him tea. He sat facing the window, sipping.

He had taken down a book belonging to his father, and it lay on the table before him. It was the one book he possessed, and he had never before opened it. Though it was not particularly well bound, it had become one of the accepted ornaments in the room, with its special place near the silver trophy, which was also a gift from his father. He had taken it down quite by accident, and even now he was hardly conscious of it at his elbow. But a

moment later he opened it, and before him, near the foot of the page, he saw the words:

The innocent and the beautiful

Have no enemy but time.

His eyes were rested for the first time. They were dreaming. He looked up from the page and stared into the distance, beyond the flowery wall, catching at something, seeking something far beyond himself. And at last his discovery came. He got up from his chair, his eyes fixed on the wall, and murmured quietly: "That spoon. I've just remembered. I've got it in my macintosh."

And the evening grew darker.

~~London, 1952~~
