

The Expulsion

David Wheldon

The morning sun cast the boy's shadow down the grade of the shallow embankment.

He stood on the platform of the branch-line station, waiting for the local train to the junction. He carried an overnight suitcase: now he put this down beside him. He laid his raincoat on top of it. He went to the booking office to buy a ticket. The dull-brown painted door was propped open with an old flatiron.

'Bristol. Single, please.'

'Half or full fare, son?'

'Full, I'm afraid,' said the boy.

'That's honest of you,' said the railwayman; 'had you said a half I would have believed you: no question of it.' He reached for a ticket.

The boy, who was rather small and young-looking for his age, put his money on the counter of the round-arched ticket-window. His voice, though, was unexpectedly deep. This unexpected voice — which was also laconic and assured — made you look at him twice.

'Lanstone?' asked the railwayman. Lanstone was the name of the school. Lanstone College. This was no great deduction on the railwayman's part as the boy was wearing a Lanstone blazer with the college's crest on the breast pocket.

'Yes,' said the boy laconically.

'The term doesn't end for another fortnight. Are you running away?'

The boy laughed, his laugh short and terse. 'I'd use a better disguise than this were I absconding,' he said.

The railwayman smiled. 'I suppose so.' He was a tall, middle-aged man; his voice had a good-natured rural dialect.

A bell sounded once in the office.

'That's your train.'

A few minutes later a short, two-carriage train came in sight round the bend. It drew to a halt at the platform. The air was noisy with the hiss of steam.

The boy opened a carriage door and entered. At first he had thought the compartment empty, but then he saw his fellow traveller. He closed the door. The single slam echoed round the station.

His fellow traveller was a young woman: she was a couple of years older than him. She was formally dressed. She was sitting in the shadow, and in the bright sunlight he had not initially seen her.

The train began to move and the shadows shifted. She raised a hand to keep the sun out of her eyes.

'You are from Lanstone, I see. My brother goes there,' she said. She had a fluent, educated voice. Her formal clothes were of a fine cut and quality.

'Oh,' said the boy.

‘He’s Kastner. Charles Kastner. I’m Bella.’ She held out her small, gloved hand. With an unusual and adult formality these two adolescents shook hands. The boy seemed a little reluctant.

‘And you?’ asked Bella, noticing this reluctance, and intrigued by it. ‘What’s your name? You might as well tell me, first as last. I’ll have it out of you.’ Bella smiled pleasantly. ‘Really, you don’t have a chance. No-one escapes me. Name?’

‘Eliot,’ said the boy. ‘Eliot Tenley.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘Please don’t question me,’ said Eliot Tenley in his surprisingly deep voice.

‘Why not?’ asked Bella, thoroughly intrigued by the contradictions inherent in the boy. ‘You are behaving as though you had done something wrong.’

‘It’s just that I have been questioned quite a lot recently,’ he said.

‘Oh, I’m sorry about that,’ said Bella.

‘It’s just that —’

‘You need a bit of peace, is that it?’

‘Exactly,’ said Eliot.

‘Maybe time to lick your wounds?’ asked Bella, smiling.

‘Maybe.’

‘Come on: you can commit yourself, you know,’ said Bella, endlessly inquisitive.

Eliot said nothing.

‘In his letter home Charles said a boy was being expelled from Lanstone this week,’ said Bella.

Eliot Tenley turned his head in shame. His face was burning red. He looked out of the window at the passing fields. For a branch-line train this was moving fast.

‘So it was you,’ said Bella.

The train swiftly continued across the level estuarial ground.

[This is a preview. The full text is 7,500 words.]