The Impresario

David Wheldon

'The train should be here soon,' said the thin man in the long fawn raincoat.

'I'm tired of waiting,' said the young girl. She stood on the single platform next to him. You knew automatically, even viscerally, that they were blood relations — that went without saying. Father and daughter or uncle and niece. The facts, though, contradicted this strong impression: they had only met each other for the first time ten minutes previously; in fact they had approached the station from different directions, the man from the north-west, the girl, with her leather school satchel, from the east. 'The clock isn't working. I've been watching the minute hand.' She pointed up at the clock on the wall.

'I don't think it's worked for years.'

'Why do you say that?'

'The glass on its face is broken. An act of vandalism one winter's night. The glass hasn't been replaced, and dust will have got inside.'

'That's good reasoning,' said the little girl, still looking up at the clock.

'I'm glad you think so,' said the man. 'And, besides, there seems to be no-one to wind it up.'

'Why do you say a winter's night? Why winter?'

'It has to have been a night during some season. Winter is quite likely. Someone had taken it into his head that he had had enough of time, and, resenting his own ageing, had picked up a stone from the flower-bed where the name of the station was traced in stones, and had thrown it at the clock. Perhaps he believed he had stopped time itself. And then away he went. Who knows? You have to interpret the evidence as you see it. An act of vandalism, as I say. I say he, but it could have been a woman.'

The girl listened to this little story and then looked up and down the platform. 'I'm looking forward to going home,' she said. 'If it's still there.'

'Don't you worry; it'll be there all right.'

'Well, you don't know my home. At least, I don't think you do.' She paused. 'Actually, I'd rather not go home. Not to the home I left. I'd like to stay in the home I've made at the back of my mind.'

The man smiled. 'But surely you carry that about everywhere you go; the real destination is in your mind. Home never really leaves the mind.'

The girl considered this. 'I suppose so. Though it's never complete. My three aunts. Where do you come from?'

The man raised his eyebrows. 'Higher Bibbington. In the Pennines. Near a village called Dove Holes. You wouldn't know it. A hamlet. In fact, one house in a solitary row of terraced houses — twenty-two in all — above a quarry, now disused. They used to be quarrymen's houses. You could see the row miles away, on the skyline, the walls the same colour as the stone outcrops. The houses had all fallen derelict except for one as the quarrying came to an end and the workers laid off. No vandalism there: too remote.' The man looked at his watch. 'When I was very young all the houses in the terrace were occupied. We — our family — were among the last to go. I don't know if the terrace is still standing. It was a windswept place. We were happy enough, though. There was a tin tabernacle nearby; we used to go there on Sunday. It was quite a close community.' He paused. 'Batham Gate ran close by, a roman road, my aunt told me. As a small boy I would imagine an army marching from Navio to Aquae Arnemetiae. My aunt was quite a historian.'

The girl listened to him intently.

He looked at his watch.

'What time is it?' asked the girl.

'I don't know.'

'What does your watch say?'

'It says 6:25, but it's stopped.'

'Why did you look at it, then?'

'Habit. It hasn't worked for days. We do most things in life through habit.'

'Overwound?'

The man raised his eyebrows.

'Oh, it was always happening at home. I know all about overwound watches. Mummy was always overwinding her watch, her grandfather's fob; she kept it in her apron pocket and on her bedside table at night. It was an old admiralty watch; a German-metal case and a black dial with luminous hands and numbers. Though because it was so old the luminous had gone. I was always being sent to the watchmaker's to have it fixed.'

The man looked down at her.

'So we don't know the time,' said the girl. She sighed. 'As though it mattered. The train will come in when it comes in. There doesn't seem to be a time-table.' She looked up at the man. Each held the other's gaze. 'Aren't you worried?' she asked.

'Why should I be worried?'

'It's a worrying place.'

'What's worrying about this station? It's dry and quiet. We seem to be on our own.' He paused. 'The train will come.'

'Not the station: everything. The station's not worrying, particularly, except that it's empty. There's a door banging in the wind. No: not the station. Nothing's what you expect. I'm finding that out fast enough. I got into trouble a little time ago, with Aunt Maud. Mummy was very cross. She would have been mad at me had Aunt Maud left. As it was she took a lot of persuading to stay.'

The man laughed. 'What did you do?'

The girl also laughed. 'I got some gutterings of candle-wax, softened them by rolling them between my finger and thumb, then made them into little horns which I stuck on the heads of the saints in Aunt Maud's room. Two horns apiece; either side of each head.'

'Saints?'

'Plaster saints. They're painted. They are actually quite gaudy. Particularly Saint Mary Magdalene. Aunt Maud has a collection of them on her window-sill. A line of about six. You can see their backs from the garden.'

'Why did you do that?'

'I'm always doing things like that. What I really wanted to know was, how long would it be before she noticed they had horns. That was why I did it.'

'How long did it take before she noticed them?'

'Six weeks.'

'That's a long time for a devout woman to go without looking at her statuary!' The man laughed.

'It is,' said the girl. 'Perhaps she took them for granted. And then she only discovered the horns when there was a full moon behind them. She was lying in bed, and she looked out at the full moon and saw all the figures in black outline with horns on their heads. What a commotion! The whole house was wakened up. Next day she looked at them while dusting. Aunt Maud's a bit slack about dusting. Her room is always dusty. She's not a real aunt. She was hanging about the street, mummy says, with a suitcase, wearing her best dress of plum-coloured velveteen, long in the skirts. Mummy asked her for whom she was looking. "I am looking for Mulberry House, 32 Darwin Avenue," she said. Now, Mulberry House is a boarding-house that takes in single ladies, seamstresses, shop assistants, typists and the like. Anyway, Mummy soon talked her out of staying at Mulberry House — our house was less expensive — and so she came to stay with us instead. She pays her way by making dress gloves. You know; the white cotton ones ladies wear on formal occasions. She's an outworker. They hire her a sewing-machine — a big, black thing with an electric motor rather than a treadle — and she starts work about eight in the morning and you hear the machine practically all day except Sunday. Being religious she

has Sunday off. She can turn out a pair of cotton gloves in minutes, darts and all. She used to give me the old wooden bobbins to collect. Aunt Edith and Aunt Caroline also have rooms. Aunt Caroline is a real aunt, sort of. They all live very private lives, and talk at dinner is usually rather dull. Aunt Caroline and Aunt Edith play badminton on the back lawn. Aunt Maud takes her dinner on her own.'

'What happened when the horns were discovered on the saints' heads?'

'I got into trouble. But I told them that Aunt Caroline had put me up to it. So she got into trouble as well.' The girl laughed. 'Aunt Caroline said that Aunt Maud only had the plaster saints as a kind of reassurance. A sort of religious back-up.'

'You sound like a troublesome girl.'

'I am. With people I don't much like. So I'm not really looking forward to going home. I guess we don't like things to change. On the other hand we get bored when they stay the same.'

'That's true,' said the man. He sighed. 'The sun's starting to go.'

'I'm hungry,' said the girl.

'I have nothing to eat.'

'I'll catch a couple of rabbits. You can light a fire in the waiting-room fire-place.'

'How will you catch rabbits?'

'By hand. It's a pastime of mine. And there are rabbits in the field at the back here. There are droppings everywhere. The grass is close-cropped: didn't you notice? It's rabbit country all right. And it's limestone, so they can't burrow deeply.'

'You can't catch rabbits by hand.'

'You can, if you are lively, and know how to do it. Just watch me. Aunt Caroline taught me. It's a question of reading their little minds. And that's easy to do. Aunt Caroline was good at catching things, sometimes for the table; sometimes just for the fun of it. Rabbits were her speciality. She and I would form a partnership. High sport. We would go out to Stanley Moor, near the reservoir. Rabbits double back, as you know. The technique is knowing the exact moment when he will double back: then you are onto him; he redoubles; becomes confused. Then you are in front of him at his every move. You dominate. He freezes with fear. Occasionally he dies of fright. Young rabbits have a slender grip on life. As for the adult rabbit — you hold his living form. Then — you hold him by the shoulder with your right hand, and with your left you push his muzzle quickly backwards until his neck is broken. That sends him on his way. The work of a second. "Well killed, girl!" Aunt Caroline would say, by her expression. "I watched your every move!" She has an 8mm Pathé cine camera (she found it left in a train-compartment, liked it, and never handed it in) and she would film me hunting, titling the film *Lurcher-Girl*. There was another one of me killing wood-pigeons which I had trapped. The other aunts couldn't bear to watch the films. Aunt Caroline gave me a .410 shotgun which had belonged to her great-uncle as a boy. It is nicely choked: the body of shot stays firm. And a box of cartridges. She gave me a set of traps last Christmas.'

The girl took off her coat. 'Take this. And my satchel. Go and light the fire.' Her eyes gleamed with anticipation as she climbed the fence and surveyed the field. 'There's wild garlic,' she said.

And so they had a good supper together, of jointed rabbit, potatoes and kale, from the fields, stewed in an enamel pot they had found in a cupboard in the railwaymen's quarters, which seemed to be deserted. They pumped water from a well. They found some coarse salt used to make the platform safe in winter frosts.

They sat talking in the waiting room in front of the fire; they had found a bin of wooden rail-keys at the back of the building.

'You are an unusual girl,' said the man.

'Am I?' she asked.

'I think you are very intelligent,' said the man.

'Yes. Perhaps. But I would rather know who I am rather than what people make of me,' said the girl. 'I presuppose nothing about you, yet here we are together, waiting for a train, I suppose, if that has meaning, and isn't just a way of passing time.'

'How old are you?'

'Thirteen,' she said. 'Things alter so at this age. Are you married?'

'No.'

‘Have you thought of getting married?’

‘In a generality. I have often wondered what it would be like. I’ve never met the right woman.’

The sound of a screech-owl came from the North-West. It was answered by another call, this time from the East.

‘Aunt Caroline says that marriage is often a big mistake.’

‘Was she married?’

‘I don’t know. Sometimes I thought she had been, at a very young age, very young, pretending to be older than she was; I think she was fifteen when it happened, if it happened.’ The girl sighed. ‘Well, it happened. Her son was passed off as her little brother, but their relationship was obvious to me. The father cleared off. We kept it a secret between us. An understanding. Do you think the train will come soon?’ She laughed. ‘Oh, I don’t know why I ask you; you don’t know. It’s outside our experience. The train might be going through the night, half a mile away; fifty miles away. There might be no train at all.’

‘It could roar through without stopping,’ said the man.

‘Indeed it could,’ said the girl. ‘At least it would reveal itself as a train. As it is, it is only a mimesis within the mind, an unrevealed possibility. It makes me think of myself.’ She paused.

‘Why is that?’ asked the man, his low voice echoing in the bare room.

‘When I take myself for granted I have no certain identity and yet all goes forward smoothly. When I question myself and look inwardly, words hardly seem to answer. And when I talk to others they assume that I am a girl of a particular age. How people change in their reactions to you as you go through life!’

They sat in silence for a quarter of an hour.

‘You are placed in a predetermined category,’ said the girl.

‘How old are you?’ asked the man, his voice revealing his perplexity.

‘I’ve told you,’ said the girl. ‘I won’t tell you again. I enjoy disguises. Disguise deflects the arrow of expectation. Because I don’t for the moment behave like a thirteen year old girl, that doesn’t mean I am not one.’ She paused. ‘But you are not so very different. No-one knows you. You are content to inhabit your own sensorium. You are at peace with your own vulnerability. That’s quite rare. Most people do nothing but kick up a dust and call that a philosophy of life. It must be getting late.’

‘Indeed it must.’

‘We’ll be warm enough with the fire.’

‘I think so.’

‘We can go on talking when we are lying down. I’d quite like that. I don’t have many people to talk to. Aunt Maud and Aunt Edith treat me as though I were some generality of girl rather than as I am myself.’

They lay down on the boards of the floor in the flickering firelight, using their shoes as pillows, laying them on their sides.

‘You don’t have many people to talk to?’

‘No. Aunt Maud and Aunt Edith don’t have interesting conversations; Mummy is too busy and Aunt Caroline’s dumb. I mean dumb in the sense of the fact that she doesn’t speak. Well, very rarely. She’s very intelligent. She can hear well enough. She just doesn’t care to speak: only clipped comments when something enthuses her. She doesn’t make conversation the way other people do.’

The moon shone in through the window.

‘So, I might say who am I? but when I attempt an answer I seem to grow older and my vocabulary becomes greater.’

And that was the last word before they fell asleep.

In the morning the girl stirred. ‘Did you hear it?’

‘The train? Yes,’ said the man. ‘Unless I dreamed it.’

‘No, you didn’t dream it. I heard the train. It came in very slowly. No-one got on. No-one got off. No doors slammed. As it quietly left I sat up. I could see the lights inside the carriages. Then it was gone.’ She yawned. ‘Were it a dream it was a curiously vivid one.’

‘I should think it was a dream,’ said the man.

‘Maybe. Where would the train have gone?’

‘I am not sure.’

The girl sat up and stretched herself, her action curiously mature. ‘Well, I suppose we had better make our way.’

In the early morning they began their journey.

‘Shall we pass ourselves off as father and daughter?’ asked the man.

The girl thought about this for a little while. She surveyed the level landscape, looking at the edge of the woods; the far hills; the clumps of ash-trees; the farms whose chimneys were beginning to smoke. ‘It’s a disguise,’ she said. ‘All one’s being is a form of disguise — one’s own or conformity to that of the prevailing idea — and another order of it will not hurt. So yes; I’m your daughter. Let’s go.’

Man and girl headed west, over the broad heath, talking together in a friendly fashion.

[This is a preview. The full text is about 12,000 words]

for Aiden O’Reilly, writer
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