

BLOOD AND CUSTARD



AN INSPECTOR VIGNOLES MYSTERY

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STEPHEN DONE

For Bill

PROLOGUE

September 1952

'I'd like to go home now, please.' The boy's eyes were bright.

'What's the hurry? You're having a nice time, aren't you?'

'Yes.' He hesitated a beat. 'But it's getting awfully late...'

The boy was trying not to sound worried. They were kind and now he felt guilty glancing at his precious Timex watch with the luminous dial, the hands of which were relentlessly moving forward. Half past seven already. Cripes! He felt a sinking sensation in his stomach. He wanted to leave.

'Tell you what, laddie, I'll fetch the train timetable and we can see what's the best one to put you on.' There was a confident quality to the man's voice that made it hard to do anything but agree. You just had to go along with what he said. Earlier that day he'd suggested they sneaked in behind the loco shed to get a better look at the engines. The man had said this with an amused twinkle in his eye, but it had still felt more like a command than a question. And then it had been the man's idea to go back to the house afterwards to warm up after a few damp hours spotting trains. But the boy wanted to hurry back and eat his fill in the refec' with all the other boys. It was shepherd's pie and peas tonight. His favourite.

'That would be awfully kind. They'll be worrying you see. I—I should have said where I was going.' His mouth felt dry and he quickly drank from a glass of ginger beer close to hand.

'They won't mind once you explain. When they know you were being looked after properly.' The lady gave him a cheery smile. 'And besides, you must have some of my nice cherry pie first, dearie. I bet you've not eaten all day.' She was big and rotund, with chubby bare arms blotched with tiny red veins; dimples formed on each cheek whenever she smiled or laughed — which she did frequently. A motherly sort of figure; all floral house coat and massive apron wrapped around her large, soft frame, further enveloped by the scent of baking and washing powder and warm clothes drying on a wooden ailer winched high above the hot kitchen range. The boy took a furtive glance at his watch again, trying to take comfort in the dial that told him it was waterproof to a depth of fifty feet. Why couldn't she check the time and not just laugh it off when he said it was late?

He was hungry, but getting onto a train was more important right now. If they could just be walking to the station it would feel so much better. He'd had a ripping time, but there always came a point in any great day when enough was enough, and that time had come. However, his tummy rumbled, the smell of the hot pie was mouthwatering and the sweet vanilla and cornflour smell of the custard she was stirring in a milk pan was beguiling.

The man spread the timetable open on the big kitchen table and ran a finger down the columns of numbers.

'There you go: steaming hot custard, poured all over my special cherry pie.' The lady placed a bowl on the table before the boy. 'I'm sure you'll like it.'

'Thanks awfully.' He picked up the big, electro-plated spoon, noticing that it was scratched and worn through years of use and cleaning. He wanted to dive straight into the delicious pudding set before him, but his stomach was now strangely contracted and tight. He could feel a knot of tension down there, like a little balled fist pressing on his innards. It felt unsettling being in a strange house and so far away from school on this dreary, wet night. He was going to be in an awful lot of trouble when he got back. He was probably going to get caned on the palms by the headmaster for this.

'Get stuck in, then!' The man grinned at him across the table. Probably it was just the way the light from the overhead bulb reflected off his spectacles, making them like pale mirrors and masking his eyes, but something about him suddenly unnerved the boy. The sharp shadows cast on his face made him look odd, his nose longer and sharper, a bit fox-like. He looked almost sinister. No, that was just silly, and very uncharitable. The boy swallowed, but his throat was as dry as a desert. He glanced quickly down at the blue-and-white pottery bowl and stirred the hot custard, whorling a stain of bright red pie filling into the pale yellow.

Oh bother! If he was going to get a beating for being back after curfew, then he may as well get a belly full of lovely grub inside first. It would be bad manners to refuse, in any case. He tried a taste. It was like nectar. Hot and heavy with vanilla and slightly sour cherry. He dived in again, eager for more. He lifted the spoon, laden with glistening fruit that looked almost glassy beneath the yellow custardy covering, towards his mouth. But his hand was quivering, perhaps with nerves or a sudden dip in energy after a long day fuelled only by two beef dripping sandwiches and an apple. He could not stop the twitching in his arm and so, inevitably, the pie

and custard slipped from the side and plopped in a long, glutinous red-and-yellow stain down his white school shirt.

There was a strange electric silence in the room, broken only by the rattle of rain against the window pane and a howl of wind down the chimney. Eyes met eyes then dropped down to the slithering goblet of what looked like bloody custard.

‘Oh, we don’t like that. We don’t like that at all.’ Her voice was low, calm and yet somehow menacing. ‘Dirty boy.’ She almost whispered the words, yet they were heavy with something that frightened him.

The man closed the timetable and rested his palm upon the cover in an action that had an ominous air of finality about it. ‘Looks like we won’t be needing this, then.’

CHAPTER ONE

Nottingham Victoria

Tuesday 11th November. As the train traversed the impenetrable gloom of the tunnel, Fireman Edward Earnshaw glanced into the intense heat of the fire, flipping his long-handled shovel upside down and holding it just inside the narrow opening of the firebox. By so doing, he bought himself a little protection for his eyes against the white-hot heat. Satisfied with what he saw, he stood up and clanged the thick metal door shut with his steel toe-capped boot. He propped the shovel against the side of the tender and took a swift look at the water gauges, illuminated by a dim light from a tiny electric bulb. Everything looked tickety-boo. He had a good fire, helped by some decent coal in the bunker, and enough room in the boiler to add more water if the safety valves threatened to lift when they came to a stand at Nottingham Victoria.

He glanced across at Driver Hurst, who had one hand on the vacuum brake and an elbow crooked on the narrow wooden ledge of the opened cab window, watching intently for the approach of the half moon of dim light that indicated the exit portal of the tunnel at the northern end of the station. The driver was enveloped in a wreath of exhaust that had become trapped in the cab confines, rendering him like a charcoal sketch in shades of greys and blacks, with tiny white highlights for his eyes.

Eddie liked the approach to this particular station. In his book, 'Vic' was seriously impressive. It was big and grand and, on a sunny day, the light streamed through the extensive glass canopies and striped everything with bold, diagonal shadows cast by the glazing bars. This multi-platform station, with its cheerily tall clock tower, was situated in a deeply excavated hollow, the sheer faces of the rough hewn sandstone towering over everything, amplifying the noise and holding in the smoke that steadily turned the rock black with layers of accumulating soot. He found the setting both dramatic and exciting. However, these same confines could also render the station dark and gloomy, chilled by the rush of pungent air from the yawning tunnels at each end. This was especially true on a rotten wet November day — like today.

He rested his gloved hands on the cab's side sheet and peered forward, squinting to prevent the rain from stinging his eyes. He liked the way the lamplight reflected off the slick

surfaces of the platforms, which stuck out like wet tongues from the train-shed at the station's heart. The rain bounced again off the cab roof as they exited the tunnel, but Eddie was past caring. He was already soaked down one side and pretty much dry and toasty on the other — thanks to the roaring fire. A bit more rain was not going to make much odds.

He could hear the vacuum open and felt the bite of the brakes in response as Driver Hurst skilfully applied them in gentle bursts, easing back and getting a feel for the train slowing before pushing again on the stubby brass handle, polished to a gloss by regular use. The local schools were out and, as Eddie expected, there was already a gang of kids clustered under the nearest awning. Some, with the scant regard of youth for the teeming rain, sprinted forwards, ignoring the downpour, yelping and shouting and pointing, tuppenny notebooks clutched in pale hands, bare knees below shorts flashing in the deepening twilight.

‘It’s a namer!’

‘What’s it called?’

One lad was running out front and, despite his National Health prescription glasses spotting with rain drops, was the first to try to decipher the locomotive’s curious name. ‘It’s *Un-sicky*. No, *Oomseek*. Oh, I dunno.’ He twisted his mouth in puzzlement at the odd name cast in brass.

Eddie was aware of the faces looking up at him, clearly envious of his position on the footplate. They were all watching intently as he nonchalantly leaned on the cab side of his engine whilst it sailed, almost soundlessly, with the regulator now closed, into the station with just a little wisp of steam drifting around the pumping pistons and the big spinning wheels. He enjoyed the attention, although he didn’t wish to make that obvious. However, he still felt the need to readjust his cap, getting the angle correct whilst peering, self-importantly and somewhat unnecessarily, along the thick tube of the rain-varnished boiler that reflected the station lights slipping smoothly along its elegant form.

‘Cor, she’s a belter!’

‘I’ve not copped her!’

‘Brilliant!’

‘Ow d’you say that name, mister?’ The lad with the rain splattered glasses was asking the question whilst he trotted at a slowing pace alongside the engine.

‘*Um-See-Key*.’