

## **A DIFFERENT THOUGHT OF TRAIN by Valerie Belsey**

The boy's excited voice came before him as he stumbled down the narrow stairs.

"Listen to this mother. That writer knows just how it is.

What I see all the time when they comes in from the railway station,

*And now the bugle plays a lively air as the coach rattles through the ill-paved streets of a country town;*

*And..."*

His mother, Grace, snatched the paper from him unread and threw it down pushing him towards the front door:

"Stir yourself boy, now you get galloping on.

"Get along to the Seven Stars and speak nicely to they gentlemen from London. They'll 'ave some money, sure enough, and will tip a boy like you 'andsomely. So no reading while you're there, look to 'em at all times, not to your letters. I'll be up the tannery when you gets back. Bring what you get directly to me there."

And with that she squeezed past him and went running along the drang outside their cottage in Moorashes hoping not to be late for work again.

Henry stood in the doorway carefully smoothing on his leather gloves, a present to his mother from the tanner, so she said.

It was a drizzly, leaden-skied morning and he ducked reluctantly out into the road hugging himself and hopping over pools of milky, lime fizzing puddles made by the farmers' carts creaking along to the lime kilns at St. Peter's Quay.

He coughed as the stench from the tanning hit him. Pigeon poo, urine, boiling bark and half-stripped cattle carcasses gave him the taste of his day.

He saw the dairyman, on his rounds in Warlands, standing outside a cottage apparently ladling milk into a jug which was suspended in the air just below the lintel. An equally suspended hand delivered a coin into the dairyman's hand then the door slammed shut. The dairyman's milk was always welcome but not always delivered with the milk of human kindness as he was also the local overseer to the workhouse up the road and could easily have you, crying over spilt milk, if he was in a mood.

Henry dodged through the side door into the courtyard of The Seven Stars, just in time. The coach came clattering in bringing passengers from the newly opened railway eager for refreshments. The coachman shouting his,

"Whoa-ho!"

and the ostler clutching at the horses' harnesses, calming down their hoof stamping to a scuffing on the cobbles.

A tall girl, with bright red hair, pushed forward towards the coach. She caught Henry's eye, warning him off.

"You get 'em down the other side, I'll do this."

Out came the bleary-eyed travellers reaching out for a hand to help them down. When Henry's side was grounded he went round back to the girl. It was odd to see a girl reaching out her slim hand to hefty strangers; maybe all the pot boys were busy in the Inn today. He went up to her and said,

"There's still one stuck round your side I see. It's bound to be an old, fat codger who'll flatten you. I'll take this one."

But to their surprise it was the passenger's head which emerged first. He took neither of the hands which were available to him and jumped nimbly out onto the cobbles, his bright eyes twinkling below a mass of straggly hair. He stroked his beard and said,

"Nobody'll flatten you. Don't worry young lady. My boy. But thank you kindly for your offer of assistance."

He took his opera hat from behind his back and bounced it up and down a little on his knee until it concertinared into a dinner-plate. He grinned up at their wonder at this magical trick.

"Well. You two. Where's the fodder? What's on the menu? Where am I?"

The girl replied,

"This is the Seven Stars Inn in Totnes, sir."

"Totnes. To-ter-nes, Totter-less." He swayed slightly as he picked his way over the cobbles and said shakily,

"Well, I'm trying. But rattling around in the train from London has made me a bit earth shy." He laughed and went into the lounge.

Inside the gentleman with the straggly hair and the wide forehead was scooping up the hot broth served up with crusty bread. In between chewing and swallowing, he questioned his fellow passengers, made jokes, exchanged information with everyone in sight. Henry came up to him carrying a Devonshire split oozing with cream and jam.

"Are you so cold young man that you need to keep your gloves on all the time?"

He held Henry's astonished stare knowing that it was possible that his gloves concealed some dreadful injury sustained by children who worked in mines, mills, factories and other worthy Victorian establishments. He had written about them often enough. The red-haired girl was passing and saw Henry's blank response.

"No sir, that not be why he do wear gloves. 'Tisn't cold in 'ere and 'is 'ands be as clean and as strong as any. It's just that....."

She grabbed Henry's wrist and rolled down the leather on the back of his hand while he wriggled trying to free himself. The stranger stared at the bright red colour of the boy's skin. It matched the girl's hair. It was no ordinary sun tan.

"Magically coloured hands. What magic can you do with those, young man?"

The girl came forward again to answer for him.

"Tis just the dye from the tannin' sir. He moves the pelts about what need to be 'tated."

"Tated?" The stranger asked.

At last Henry spoke. "Agitated sir, she means. They need to be moved around."

"Agitated," the stranger relished the word. "That's a good word. But you, young man, don't need to be. Do you like words like that? Like the sound of them?"

He lent back in his chair, folded his arms and smiled up at them.

"And all this leather. I heard just now it was for making tubes for Mr. Brunel's Atmospheric Railway being tried out at your Totter-less station. What do you think of that? Railways, noisy, dirty machines crashing through our cities. Not much good if you want to read and write using interesting words"

He lowered his head towards Henry and said;

"And I think that's what you want to do, isn't it?"

He lowered one arm still holding Henry's gaze of slow recognition and felt around his chair.

"Where's my case, my writing slope? Have I left them in the coach. I never do that, never. Quick, young scholar-tanner. Go and find them"

The parlour door banged loudly as Henry sped towards the coach. An old woman with a broom was just climbing out of the carriage. He squeezed her to one side and searched round in the gloom. He came rushing back into the parlour.

"Now you seem a bit 'tated again, young man. Is that the right word?"

"No sir, more confounded, honoured."

"Me, confound a scholar to be, never! But honour one caught red-handed, yes!"

He pulled a thick leather-bound ledger book out of the writing slope and flicked through revealing pages and pages of spidery black writing.

"Without your ruddled hands – there's a word for you – without your ruddled hands - I would not have this..."

he picked up his leather brief case,

"...or this lovely leather case to keep my papers in."

He opened it carefully and from a side compartment, made of wafer-thin fine leather, brought out a printed paper pamphlet. He held it up in front of them. The girl looked down feeling a bit confused, ashamed by so much print which she could not really read. But Henry's eyes grew bigger as he read aloud the title:

"ALL THE YEAR ROUND". He was just about to say the name of the author below the heading when the traveller flicked open the front page and thrust it into Henry's ruddled hands.

"What do you see? What does it say? Can you read the first line?"

Henry swallowed and said,

*Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show."*

The traveller said,

“Train – station. Time to go. Keep the paper, it’s yours, young scholar. Throw away your gloves, become your own hero.”

With that he thrust the first instalment of *David Copperfield* into Henry’s hands, picked up his slope, his case, his flattened hat and went onwards towards the next destination of his inspirational west country reading tour. By train.

And Henry? Well, since his times, there have been many tellers of magical tales wobbling in and out of Totter-less!

But not many of them had read, read and written themselves free of the everyday because of a chance meeting with one of the most magical story tellers of all time. Mind where you totter, you don’t know who you might bump into or, into whom you might bump!