

You wake in the morning after only a few minutes' sleep all night. Your mind goes back to yesterday's scene in the railway carriage of the old and asthmatic steam train with the other schoolboys. It all replays like an endless Hollywood horror movie. Or a nightmare you cannot wake up from. There you were one minute minding your business trying to get some homework done as the train jolted and swayed and coal smoke swept in the window. Then the next moment the biggest boy in the carriage had snatched Charlie Slattery's school rail-pass out of his hand and begun taunting the younger boy. Holding it out and snatching it back until Charlie had a tear or two run down his burning cheeks.

Big Harry danced back and forth between the seats and you had dropped your schoolbook to watch the unfolding scene with growing trepidation. Only that morning at the school assembly, the Headmaster had warned that there had been reports from the railway authorities of bad behaviour on the trains taking the boys home from school. Expulsions could follow if any more reports were made.

So in the carriage that afternoon you had a great dread that something bad was about to happen, so you shrank down on the old leather seat and prayed you would not get involved and nothing too terrible would take place.

You knew that no matter how innocent they were, every boy in that train compartment would be subject to the headmaster's threat of expulsion from the school if Big Harry's teasing and bullying got out of hand. Desperately you shouted at him to give Charlie's ticket back. But this only put you into a worse situation for Big Harry chose you as a co-conspirator and threw Charlie's rail-pass to you to catch. It was like burning brand in your hand so what could you do but toss it on to Gerald at the open window who had been watching the whole event as goggle-eyed as you had. The scenery outside the train was flashing past and another wisp of smoke blew into the compartment. The rail-pass in your hand had been like a bomb about to explode so you had tossed it towards Gerald but at that moment he began desperately trying to close the window. You could see his eyes almost bulging out of their sockets as he waved one hand uselessly at the flying train ticket while the other pushed at the sliding window.

You groaned inwardly as the rail-pass flicked past his left ear and fell like a leaf from an autumn tree, down, down...Oh, my god! you realised the train was just crossing the high bridge over a great river. Down, down the ticket plummeted but at the last minute you saw it land on the muddy bank. The train rushed on and your heart felt as though it had been hit with a hammer. Big Harry, rat that he

was, turned on you with undisguised glee. 'You threw Charlie's ticket out the window! You're in trouble, you dingbat.'

And Charlie was crying properly now, wailing that he would be getting his parents to come around to your house and demand payment for a new ticket. You held your head in your hands. How could you keep all this from your parents, not to mention the Headmaster of your school?

Coming home from the station as the shades of night crept in, your mind would have been feverishly running through all the fearful possibilities and consequences likely to ruin your life in the next few hours. Sick with worry you greeted your mother. She soon noticed your depressed frame of mind and began questioning you. But you grimly tried to keep the dreaded incident to yourself, as silently and unenthusiastically you took your evening meal. Then the phone call came that you were dreading and, yes, it was the mother of Charlie. You scuttled away to your room and closed the door but soon your mother burst in almost hysterical. 'What's all this about you throwing away Charlie Slattery's train ticket? Now his mother is just on the phone demanding we pay for a new ticket. Where do you think I can get the money for that? Your father is going to stop all your pocket money from now on.' You tried to explain you were an innocent victim of Harry Brummy's horseplay and that he was the one who should be paying. But your mother would not be put off. You stormed out of the house and sat down under a bush in the darkness of the garden. It was far too cold and you slunk back inside eventually and lay on your bed in darkness. Later you heard your mother greet your father returning from some business meeting and their voices went on into the night. You hoped they would wait until morning to confront you once again. It was surely the hardest night of your life. But little did they know that in the morning at school you faced an even worse fate.

So the night passed without sleep. In the early hours, tossing and turning you heard strange sounds you never had the chance to hear before as creatures scuttled across the iron roof of the house or scurried in the shrubbery beside your bedroom window. Never before had you been robbed of sleep for a whole night. Your eyes ached, your head ached, your very bones ached, without respite. Until at last you saw a slight greying in the eastern sky and the horrible reality of another day even worse than the one before threatened your whole future. You thought of running away and maybe getting a job as a cabin boy on some ship that would take you across oceans away from your blighted life. Then the sounds of breakfast preparations by your father made you grimly put your school uniform back on and pack your bag, homework ignored. But that was a lesser evil compared to what was going to happen in the Headmaster's office.

'Where is that damn boy?' your father's voice roared and once there was a knock on the door but you kept silent, pretending to be asleep. You heard your mother trying to calm things down before he left for work and felt you might have a friend, finally, who could bring herself to forgive you. But how would she react when you came that evening to tell her you had been thrown out of school? More misery. But by now you were like a hardened criminal who could go silently to the gallows and spit on the jeering crowds of onlookers.

Indeed your mother, red-eyed from her disappointment with you, did seem to know your despairing condition as she put your breakfast plate in front your bowed head. But her compassion did not last long and soon she was yelling at you that you would miss your train. 'Just you wait until your father sees you this evening, my boy! You will have no mercy coming to you from him.' You felt sick in the stomach, knowing the real truth was yet to be revealed to both your parents. The payment for the train ticket would be a minor family problem compared with being thrown out of your school.

At the station you crept onto the end of the platform and hid behind some billboards until the train came in. Then you got into the very end compartment, well away from your classmates. There was only one other passenger, a mother— breast-feeding a baby rather noisily until she got out some stations down the line. Then some office clerks trooped in and buried their noses immediately in morning newspapers. As befitting a criminal person, you kept to yourself the whole way into the city, counting the telephone posts to keep your mind from the looming moment of annihilation. At the city rail terminus you went straight into the station lavatories and stayed long enough to allow your classmates to go on ahead to the schoolground close by. Yet still you dawdled swinging your leather schoolbag, throwing a stone at a stray dog. A girl you knew slightly from dancing lessons with the neighbouring girls' school came by and turned to you with a shy smile: 'You're running late too?' You muttered a reply but kept your head lowered as proper for a condemned man. She hurried on with a shake of her curls. As you watched her disappear into her school gate you made a promise that you would spend the rest of your life as her secret worshipper. She was, after all, the one human being in the world who might forgive your misdemeanours and show some kind of loyalty to your memory at least. That is what Sir Launcelot, of King Arthur's knights, would have done.

School had just gone in when you reached the main entrance so you slunk quickly down the corridors, staying as close to the walls as possible. You could hear Mr Franklin's mellow voice as you approached the classroom doorway. The door was still open and with luck you could make it to your desk almost unnoticed.

'Before we start, boys', Mr Franklin was saying, 'I was here early this morning preparing your maths test and I had a strange visitor from the Railways Department.' You bent over behind your desk pretending to be looking for your maths textbook. He went on, 'Apparently some boy from this school travelling on the Southern Line must have lost his rail-pass as the train crossed over the Mission Bridge. Lucky it was picked up by a worker. Is it one of you boys here, or I will take it round to the other classes?' He held up Charlie's ticket and Charlie, open mouthed, stumbled from his desk and came back clutching the precious item and grinning at you like a chimpanzee.

The master went on: 'You're a lucky boy, Charlie my son. Don't be so damn careless in future. And now open your books at page sixty five!'

What followed was the happiest maths lesson of your life.