

A PRISONER IN FAIRYLAND

by Algernon Blackwood

He went over the house from cellar to ceiling...

And finally he passed through a back door in the scullery and came out upon the lawn. With a shock he realised that a long time had intervened. The dusk was falling. The rustle of its wings was already in the shrubberies. He had missed the tea hour altogether. And, as he walked there, so softly that he hardly disturbed the thrushes that busily tapped the dewy grass for supper, he knew suddenly that he was not alone, but that shadowy figures hid everywhere, watching, waiting, wondering like himself. They trooped after him, invisible and silent, as he went about the old familiar garden, finding nothing changed. They were so real that once he stopped beneath the lime trees, where afternoon tea was served in summer, and where the Long Walk began its haunted, shadowy existence—stood still a moment and called to them—

'Is any one there? Come out and show yourselves....!'

And though his voice fell dead among the foliage, winning echoes from spots whence no echoes possibly could come, and rushing back upon him like a boomerang, he got the curious impression that it had penetrated into certain corners of the shrubberies where it had been heard and understood. Answers did not come. They were no more audible than the tapping of the thrushes, or the little feet of darkness that ran towards him from the eastern sky. But they were there. The troop of Presences drew closer. They had been creeping on all fours. They now stood up. The entire garden was inhabited and alive.

'He has come back!'

It ran in a muted whisper like a hush of wind. The thrill of it passed across the lawn in the dusk. The dark tunnel of the Long Walk filled suddenly to the brim. The thrushes raised their heads, peeping sideways to listen, on their guard. Then the leaves opened a little and the troop ventured nearer. The doors and windows of the silent, staring house had also opened. From the high nursery windows especially, queer shapes of shadow flitted down to join the others. For the sun was far away behind the cedars now, and that Net of Starlight dropped downwards through the air. So carefully had he woven it years ago that hardly a mesh was torn....

'He has come back again...!' the whisper ran a second time, and he looked about him for a place where he could hide.

But there was no place. Escape from the golden net was now impossible....

Then suddenly, looming against the field that held the Gravel-Pit and the sleeping rabbits, he saw the outline of the Third Class Railway Carriage his father bought as a Christmas present, still standing on the stone supports that were borrowed from a haystack.

That Railway Carriage had filled whole years with joy and wonder. They had called it the Starlight Express. It had four doors, real lamps in the roof, windows that opened and shut, and big round buffers. It started without warning. It went at full speed in a moment. It was never really still. The footboards were endless and very dangerous.

He saw the carriage with its four compartments still standing there in the hay field. It looked mysterious, old, and enormous as ever. There it still stood as in his boyhood days, but stood neglected and unused.

The memory of the thrilling journeys he had made in this Starlight Express completed his recapture, for

he knew now who the troop of Presences all about him really were. The passengers, still waiting after twenty years' delay, thinking perhaps the train would never start again, were now impatient. They had caught their engine-driver again at last. Steam was up. Already the blackbirds whistled. And something utterly wild and reckless in him passionately broke its bonds with a flood of longings that no amount of years or 'Cities' could ever subdue again. He stepped out from the dozing lime trees and held his hat up like a flag.

'Take your seats,' he cried as of old, 'for the Starlight Express. Take your seats! No luggage allowed! Animals free! Passengers with special tickets may drive the engine in their turn! First stop the Milky Way for hot refreshments! Take your seats, or stay at home for ever!'

It was the old cry, still remembered accurately; and the response was immediate. The rush of travellers from the Long Walk nearly took him off his feet. From the house came streams of silent figures, families from the shrubberies, tourists from the laurels by the scullery windows, and throngs of breathless oddities from the kitchen-garden. The lawn was littered with discarded luggage; umbrellas dropped on flower-beds, where they instantly took root and grew; animals ran scuttling among them—birds, ponies, dogs, kittens, donkeys, and white mice in trailing swarms. There was not a minute to spare. One big Newfoundland brought several Persian kittens on his back, their tails behind them in the air like signals; a dignified black retriever held a baby in his mouth; and fat children by the score, with unfastened clothes and smudged faces, many of them in their nightclothes, poured along in hurrying, silent crowds, softer than clouds that hide a crescent moon in summer.

'But this is impossible,' he cried to himself. 'The multiplication tables have gone wrong. The City has driven me mad. No shareholder would stand such a thing for a minute!'

While, at the same time, that other voice in him kept shouting, ever more loudly—

'Take your seats! Take your seats! The Starlight Express is off to Fairyland! Show your tickets! Show your tickets!'