

I do not like this train.

I sit here, in my assigned seat, like a child being punished. When I tried to walk around and explore a bit, the uniformed conductor (a tubby little man who would not dare vex me should he meet me without this ridiculous disguise) glared and harrumphed and made such a fuss that I sat back down so that I would not be required to gut him as an example.

This annoys me. I have never demanded favour nor praise, but only a few days ago I helped to save that tubby little man and his entire grubby little world from the madness of Magnus Greel, who would have destroyed all in his attempt to flee this time and place.

I sigh. I cannot say that I blame him. But then I smile, remembering Jago and Lightfoot – fine men, and as brave as any warrior of the Sevateem in their own strange, polite way. It is good that I saved men like them along with tubby conductors and those who build trains.

The Only Reliable Thing

by George Potter

This trip – from the vast city of London to a place called Manchester – was the Doctor’s idea of a reward for those events.

“What is there to see in this Manchester?” I had asked. The Doctor shrugged.

“Nothing that springs to mind, admittedly,” he said. “But that’s not the point, Leela. The travel is the thing, the trip itself! Haven’t you learned that from me by now? We’ll enjoy the train ride and the scenery. This is England, 1888, the height of Empire.”

I glance out the window. This scenery is unimpressive, and the Empire seems mostly composed of cows and sheep. Forever unrolling fields populated mostly by dumb, tame, utterly challenge-free prey animals. Not even the sight of a dark forest and the delicious

scent of a real hunt. These people may be well fed, but they probably weep themselves to sleep every night, as dull as their lives must be.

And the train ride itself is no enjoyment. In addition to the officious conductor and the stiff backed and ridiculously suited passengers, this train is bouncy, noisy, and feels mostly unreliable as it chugs along its tracks. Perhaps a small child might enjoy such noise and jostle, but it is hardly fitting entertainment for a warrior.

As this impractical outfit is no fit clothing for a warrior. The Doctor insisted and I must admit to holding it against him. Beyond the fact that it would hinder me in a fight, the way the thing looks offends me on some level. It is a collection of frilly layers of thin cloth. I feel like a festival juggler.

“Your deal, I think,” I hear the Doctor say, from behind me. He was allowed, with a smug hat tip from the conductor, to wander as he pleased, and soon fell into a conversation with another passenger. They agreed to play some form of game, called both ‘cards’ and ‘poker’ and ‘just a friendly game, let’s not soil the chance with money,’ though I do not think that last was an actual name.

I take the small mirror from the little bag the Doctor insisted I carry and pretend, like the other women around me, to be vain and stare at my face. I am not staring at my face: I am keeping an eye on the Doctor and his mysterious game partner without having to turn my head to look, which seems to be taboo in this foolish time and place. Withering stares and sour frowns met my attempts, from both other women and men. What sort of primitive tribe places taboo on simple observation? The Doctor claims that these fools are my own ancestors. I trust him and believe him in most things, but I must admit that tries my imagination.

I remain vexed: all that I can see is the Doctor’s large, bushy head, his hat, and that impossible scarf that I secretly consider his shaman talisman. His partner is still, annoyingly, out of sight. But the Doctor is relaxed, and laughing frequently. I must consider that the situation is well in hand.

I try to return to my book, but even a few paragraphs cause me to snap it closed again, gritting my teeth. The Doctor told me that reading was one of the glories of being human, and that the teaching machines on board his ship would make learning to do so as simple as a short nap. He was correct in that, but I think perhaps learning to read was a mistake. I seem to be thinking differently. Not as if possessed by some night spirit or shadow

walker, no, but... I cannot explain it. My thoughts are still my own, I know that with deep certainty, but the machine has expanded them somehow. I suddenly know and understand words that I should not know or understand! Words I would never say but nevertheless think! See! There is one now! 'Nevertheless!' What sort of pointless word is that? What is wrong with a perfectly useful word like 'still'?

And this book! It is called *The Murder Of Roger Ackroyd*, by someone named Agatha Christie. The Doctor says that it is a 'classic.' I do not know why. I am a third of the way through it and all it has done is anger me. It involves people so weak and spineless that, when a member of their local tribe is murdered by some nameless coward, they cannot even be bothered to hunt the killer down themselves and allow his closest kin to serve justice. Instead, they rely upon an outsider, who – though he reminds me of the Doctor in wit and intelligence – strikes me as far more pompous and insulting. And the person telling this story I simply do not trust. I have known he was hiding something from the first few sentences, the way I always knew when the kell beast was about to spring or when the hard rains would turn to devilstorm. That flutter in my stomach and the back of my head, that sudden certainty that the Doctor mostly dismisses but, sometimes, pays attention to.

It would not surprise me if this so-called 'Doctor' James Sheppard were the killer himself.

I sigh again, allowing a bit of frustration to come through this time. For all that this was supposed to be a reward for me, it seems only the Doctor is having a good time. I glance into the mirror again, and still see no sign of his new companion. At the very least, he could have sat and kept me company. As cryptic and wearisome as he is, he remains my only friend in a very large and unwelcoming universe.

I remember something, a saying from the master of the hunt in those terrible and wonderful days after I had passed my trial and been allowed to enter training with the old warriors. "When the eyes fail, the ears must suffice." This was about tracking at night, of course, but like most warrior wisdom, it had many meanings.

I close my eyes and relax. I pretend to float in the jungle night. I examine every sound; the creaking and chuffing and thumping of the train, the murmured conversation of the passengers, the sounds of my own breathing and heartbeat. One by one I acknowledge

them and dismiss them, forcing them to fade so that the only thing that remains is the voice of the Doctor and his unseen companion.

There, in my still and quiet, I listen.

“Sir,” says the stranger. “May I be so bold as to ask a personal question?”

“I’ve always been partial to boldness,” the Doctor replies. “Though, so far as the personal part goes, you should know that I’m a fantastic liar.”

“All intelligent men are, sir! We must be, don’t you agree?”

“I’ll take two cards.” A pause. “Thank you.” Another pause. “Must we?”

“Certainly. For intelligent men are a frightfully rare breed amongst these... amongst humanity. The dealer shall take three.”

“This rarity demands deception?”

“Of the highest order, sir.”

“Isn’t that akin to hiding one’s light under a bushel?”

“Mmm. Yes, in order to not have it snuffed out by those frightened by their superiors.”

“I see.” A pause. “Full house.”

A short, guttural laugh. “Well, played, once again. If I did not know you for a gentleman, why, I’d suspect cheating, sir!”

“Well, yes,” the Doctor replies. “And your suspicion may well be correct. The problem is that I’m so good at cheating that I rarely even catch myself doing it.”

Another laugh, uglier than the first. “I find myself truly enjoying your company, Doctor... what was it again?”

“Just the Doctor, really. Says it all.”

“As you like. I, too, am a medical man. Doctor James Liduma, at your service!”

There is a long pause. It stretches to the point that I almost pull myself from the hunting trance to look. Then the Doctor finally speaks and I know something is wrong, just by his voice. It does not sound different. It feels different, and that flutter in my stomach and my head thrills through me.

“You said you had a personal question?”

That ugly laugh again. “I say! So charmed was I by our conversation that I’d lost my train of thought! Yes, I do.”

“Then ask.” His voice, to any other, would sound pleasant, amused even. I know better. The Doctor is angry, and deadly serious. The games have ended.

The stranger speaks low, so that I must strain to hear. “Does it not drive you mad? The hiding?”

“Whatever could you mean?”

“Come now! We’ve both known from the moment we laid eyes on each other.” His voice drops even further. “Neither of us belong on this world!”

The Doctor’s tone is just as quiet. “Careful – they’ll think us mad.”

It is the stranger’s turn to change his tone. He grows contemplative.

My mood is the opposite, and I struggle to maintain the listening posture. Danger is very close to my friend and it is my nature to respond. But the Doctor is no ordinary man. He has, I know, chosen a way to play this out. That was what the pause when the stranger spoke his name meant.

“Tell me Doctor, are you familiar with a story recently published in the journal of the Royal College of Science? *The Chronic Argonauts* by a young man named Herbert George Wells?”

“I am,” the Doctor replies. “A very imaginative fellow.”

“Indeed. I was quite entranced by his prose, and feel he may have invented an entirely new form of fiction – one that speculates not on what was or is, but what might be. I have even pondered a story such as that of my own. Would you like to hear my idea?”

“Certainly.”

“Let us imagine, then, a faraway world in a faraway future. And on that world lives a proud but brutal race. We’ll call them, oh, Androgums. I find that a pleasant name.”

“Fascinating.”

“The Androgums were shaped by their environment into a culture of nearly limitless personal hedonism. A culture of absolute might makes right. They are tribal and clannish and even those small social groups are... fluid, shall we say, with the most cunning and opportunistic amongst them taking any advantage to rise in power and influence. All to satisfy those personal desires, of course.”

“Of course.”

“The Androgums are defined by hunger. It’s the thing they cannot deny. This environment and culture has led to a race of great strength and speed, but of limited

technical advancement. They are too busy fighting and eating and breeding to get much past the Iron Age, you understand.” He pauses, as if collecting his thoughts. “Now! A weaker but far more technically advanced race stumbles upon the Androgums while exploring with their great space fleet. These weaker kind are no less brutal – they war incessantly. They simply do so with machines and tools that allow them to remain at a safe distance from those they are killing.”

“I’m beginning to think young Mr Wells has nothing on you in the imagination department.”

The stranger chuckles. “There’s more. Those brutal weaker kind are not defined by hunger, by imagination, they are defined by limitation, by reason. Cold, pragmatic, seeing the universe only in terms of how they may make use of it. They saw the Androgums and saw a use for them. With some modification and training via their fantastic science, they could create the perfect soldiers. The Androgums were not that different in appearance from them. What a fantastic weapon, they decided. Covert troops who could be sent amongst their enemies and triggered to strike by surprise.”

“This is all very interesting.”

“Oh, I am still not finished. An army of Androgums was kidnapped from their world, medicated and mind altered, modified physically and emotionally. Taught to use tools and techniques beyond their kinds understanding. Then, using a machine such as the one described by Mr Wells, they were sent back into the past to infiltrate their enemy. And here is the surprise twist, Doctor, the one that shall leave the reader stunned and amazed. That enemy was the human race itself! And that past? This very era!”

“Ingenious.”

“Oh, perhaps, if it had worked.”

“The plan failed?”

“Yes. The chronic device was unstable and was damaged on arrival. The altered Androgums were all killed, save one, who managed to escape into a strange world, alone.”

“I suppose he would have to assimilate. To blend into that world.”

“He would try perhaps, and perhaps succeed for the most part. He would have advantages. He was trained as a generalized warrior, and his minor field medic skills, from such an advanced future, would make him a far better doctor than any of that era.” A pause. “For example.”

“Of course, of course.”

“But... only for the most part. He would still be what he was at base. He would not be a creature of reason, sir, but a creature of imagination. Reason is bounded and knows its limits. Imagination is endless. And hungry.”

“Ah, yes. The hunger. How could I forget?”

“And how could he? Oh, he’d try to fight the desire of course. He was alone, after all. Despite his strength and speed, he was outnumbered by an entire world. But... he would be what he was. On that you can rely. It’s the only reliable thing. That nature will out.”

The stranger utters a low sigh, one that causes my flesh to crawl.

“But... he would be careful, yes? He’d make sure to only sate his hunger on those that few would miss – fallen women, perhaps. A nasty, habit, yes, but he is trying to be courteous.”

“But that wouldn’t last,” the Doctor says. His tone is firm and brooks no argument.

The stranger gasps. “What do you mean?”

“Simple narrative logic. You say this is a creature defined by hunger, imagination, and hedonism. There’s no way he’d be able to force himself to stay with one taste, one type of sustenance. Especially not such a low grade of product.” The Doctor sniffed. “The idea is silly, really.”

“I, I...”

“No. He’d want cleaner treats. Better bred and raised. Younger, more succulent. Why, eventually he’d not be satisfied until he’d sampled every delicacy available.”

I cannot resist any longer. I grab the mirror and raise it to my eyes, unable to understand what the Doctor is playing at. It sounds almost, in the convoluted manner of the conversation – which I know to be only playing at being a story – that the Doctor is encouraging this creature.

In the reflection I get my first sight of the stranger, though not of his face. He sits slumped, as if the Doctor’s words have affected him. He is a broad, thick man, dressed in the normal suit of clothes for this time and place, with a hat even more elaborate than the Doctor’s.

“Why would you say that?” the stranger asks.

“Oh, don’t think I’m judging you,” the Doctor says, cheerfully. I instantly know, for the first time in this conversation, that the Doctor is lying. He is judging this stranger, and

harshly. "As you so observantly noted, I am not of this place either. Why should my morality match it? As you said, nature is nature. You and I will act according to our natures, as will everyone on this train. That is, indeed, reliable." There is a final pause from my friend.

"Thank you so much for the game," he says. His tone is one of dismissal.

The stranger raises his head, and I finally see his, its, face. It looks human, but barely. The eyes are close to feral, and the features subtly off. I shudder, and realize that it is suffering from a wave of bloodlust, barely contained. It sits a moment composing itself, or trying to.

And that is when the Doctor, without warning, raises his own mirror. Our reflected eyes meet and the intensity in his sends a spike of worry through me.

Then the Doctor nods, a simple short but unmistakable gesture. And through that gesture, and the weight of his eyes, I know what he wants me to do.

But suddenly the glass changes: it ripples and reshapes, seeming to gain a strange depth. And I find myself watching a scene play out on it as if it were the visualizer on board the Doctor's ship:

It is another sort of train, I realize, though very different than the one I am on. Two beautiful, dark skinned young women enter the scene, both looking confused and frantic. An ethereal voice speaks: "You reek of artron energy!"

The scene becomes jerky and hectic – one of the young women seems to be suddenly fighting with an invisible opponent.

Slowly, to my eyes, the strange creature attacking her fades into view. And from the look on the other woman's face, to her eyes as well.

"Attack my little sister, and you have me to deal with, tramp boy!" she cries, and joins the fray.

The scene slowly fades as they do battle with their much larger opponent, untrained and sloppy, but with a courage that would do any warrior proud.

The ordinary reflection returns to the small mirror, and with a slight shock I see the creature staring at me. He is smiling, a nasty little smile, and his eyes hold nothing but hunger.

I return the mirror to the small bag and place it on my book. I begin to compose myself. I know what must be done. The Doctor has told me without a word, with just a nod and a look. And he knows that he may rely on me.

“I appreciate both the game and the conversation, good sir,” I hear him say. “But now I must be off. I find myself... somewhat peckish. And I hear this train has a dining car with a reputation for delicious offerings.”

The Doctor says nothing.

I stand, ignoring the glare of the conductor. I take a deep breath and turn. The creature himself has stood, holding a small black leather bag, and is casting his glance about the car, lingering on the women first and foremost, as if judging the treats on display at a feast table. The women sit unawares, much like the creatures in the fields we roll past.

I make a small sound and he whips his head up to look at me. That ugly smile returns. “Much like her, eh? So beautiful on the outside! It makes any man wonder what deeper loveliness lies within!”

The Doctor, again, says nothing.

I nod, feigning shyness, and turn. I walk away.

I make my way from the half full car where the Doctor and I have spent the journey, heading towards to the small passage that connects the cars of the train. I pass through an identical space: this with fewer travellers, mostly dozing in the quiet as the evening falls on the scenery of fields and sheep and cows outside. Before I pass from this one a young girl meets my eyes and – unlike most of her fellows on this train – she smiles and nods with friendliness. I return the gesture and move on, even more determined now.

I shall bait the beast and show him a truth. As I am proud to have helped my friends Jago and Litefoot, I am proud to help that smiling child, who may have become the prey were I not here to draw the creature.

In a small maintenance hatch between cars I halt and set to work. I do not have long, for I know when I am being tracked. There is a small door, obviously leading to the outside. It is locked, but one of the first skills I learned in my travels with the Doctor was how to pick locks, and this is a particularly simple one, requiring only a few quick bends to a supple piece of wire, and a moment of careful exploration. The mechanism clicks with a satisfying sound.

Then I back into the shadows and calm my breathing. I let the hunting peace descend into me and through me. My heart slows, the blood becomes silent in my veins.

We warriors of the Sevateem know how to kill quietly and quickly. We know how to kill without a single drop of the preys blood staining our clothes, just as a righteous kill – for

food or protection or justice – will not stain a warriors soul. We know how to deal with the carcass and how, when a hunt is over, to walk again amongst those whose natures would shy from such work.

I have changed much in my travels with the Doctor. I have learned many things, from the truth of my own kin to the secrets of distant worlds and the weaknesses of false gods. My very thinking has changed, and though it would horrify my tribe and cause them to make hex signs and mutter old prayers, I know this to be a good thing, a fine thing. I know that I will continue to change and do not fear that. In fact, I relish the thought.

But there are some things that do not change. There are some things that may be forever relied upon as the basis of ones very soul.

I am Leela, of the Sevateem. Friend and companion to the Doctor. I stand, loyal, for what is right and fair. I will not allow a beast to slaughter the innocent when it is within the reach of my arm to stop it. This is my truth.

And with that I hear the footsteps, and smell his scent, and feel the flutter in my stomach and the back of my mind. I press deeper into the shadows as the door to the hatch quietly opens. He is no fool, but the bloodlust is on him now, his desires distracting him. He has entered the hatch and closed the door before his own hunting sense tells him that he is not alone.

Too late. From the folds of this ridiculous costume comes another reliable thing, another truth; six inches of good steel that gleams even in this dim light.

And before he can turn I, and it, have proven our truth again.



George Potter, 1973-2014