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Little Sodbury's Tea Room

by Val Howard

I saunter into the railway tea room for my early morning coffee. There is the usual crowd. The lady behind the bar seems to have been there forever, an immovable object serving teas and with the same well-worn banter. There are a few men, dark-suited, anonymous, heading for the city to their bank or accountancy jobs. Apart from the woman serving tea there is little chatter, people only half awake and uninspired by the day ahead of them.

The door opens again. Some people casually glance up and then, slowly, start to stare. The man, who has just entered, is very different from the usual crowd. Firstly, one is aware of his energy, outstanding amongst this somnolent crowd. He stands there, upright, immaculate and with a confidence that radiates. This is someone difficult to place in any pigeonhole. He asks for a black coffee and just gives a vague smile to the woman's arch rejoinder, "On a diet, are we?" He sits down at a vacant table by the window and opens his paper, 'The Racing Post'. This has never previously been seen in Little Sodbury's tea room. Suddenly all eyes are on him, someone so different from the usual crowd, but he seems unaware of their interest.

An announcement comes over the loudspeaker. "Due to an unfortunate accident the train for Chipping Claghorn has been delayed by at least two hours. Further announcements will be made as information becomes available. Our apologies for any inconvenience caused." The effect on the man by the window is overwhelming. From someone so self-assured, so confident, he has become a nervous wreck. His face is grey, he slumps in his chair and one almost expects him to collapse or burst into tears.

One of the dark-suited men goes over to him, "Are you alright, old chap?" The man looks at him, anguish in his eyes, "What can I do," he mutters. "I'm supposed to meet Rose in Chipping Claghorn in an hour. She means everything to me. I want to marry her. But she'll never wait that long. If I phone her she won't believe me. She'll be sure that I'm off to Ascot and that it's just an excuse. She doesn't trust me but I can't live without her," his voice breaks with emotion.

“There’s no need to get that upset. The 38 bus stops outside the station and it’s due in fifteen minutes. You’ll be there before her.” The man looks up with a smile that speaks volumes. “How will I ever thank you?” he asks. “Well you could invite me to the wedding but I suggest that you leave the “Racing Post behind.”