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I am the boy at Mugby

by Nancy Bertenshaw

Iain Tennant Coulton had joke initials. He was an IT consultant. He would return to the client company's problems at 2pm, after lunch. He bought a triple-decker, veggie sandwich and a take away coffee at an independent shop in town.

Hiding his sandwich and take away coffee, he slipped into the Flea Market chapel. At the far end of the establishment, he ate and drank greedily, with his back to the CCTV camera. Wiping his fingers fastidiously on an un-ironed, clean handkerchief, he noticed, on the stall nearest to him, a black, cloth bound book, with yellowed pages. He opened the pages. Beautiful, cursive, copper plate handwriting in black ink was on every page. 'A Stationmaster's Life' was the title. With fast beating heart, Iain sniffed the pages. Ah! tar and smoke, the real thing!

He read, 'I was 13 when I became the station boy, running errands, doing nothing much. One early morning a local photographer arrived to photograph an advertisement for bicycle hire, just starting at our station. I had gone to the privy and couldn't come out, as four people were already posing for the photograph, silently with boneshakers and a couple of brand new high wheelers. So, I looked through the large, round, air hole and made a funny face. Always a joker, me. I might be in that photograph, though a very small detail. I am the boy at Mugby!'

Paying £2, Iain left the Flea Market, clutching the autobiography, earnestly.

Later that evening, after an adequate, hotel supper, he ambled to his old school hall. Terry Reece, a former pupil, now a photographer, was giving a talk and showing slides from his great grandfather's collection. Old pictures of the town would interest the audience and raise money for the school project.

As he clicked each photo from laptop to screen, he explained more.

‘These were taken, remember, with a wooden cased camera, on wooden tripod legs, black cloth over the photographer’s head. His subjects had to keep very still. The detail is incredible for the time. Look at this.’ He zoomed in. ‘This was an advert for bike hire from the local station. New idea at the time. The four people look very serious and posed. ‘But look here,’ he zoomed in even closer.

‘There is a cheeky face looking out of the round hole in the fence...’ the audience laughed. ‘We shall never know who that was,’ continued Terry.

‘I know!’ said an excited voice from the back of the crowded hall.