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**THE RAILWAY  
DETECTIVE'S  
CHRISTMAS CASE**

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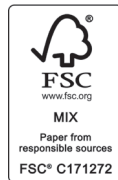
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# CHAPTER ONE

*1864*

A cold December wind was scouring the platform but the hundred or more passengers waiting at the railway station were impervious to its bite. They were in such high spirits that nothing could trouble them. They had enjoyed a free cooked breakfast with a cup of hot tea to wash it down. By the time they reached the station, everyone was buzzing with excitement. Thanks to the generosity of their employer, the workers and their families were being rescued from the stink and smoke of the Black Country and taken to the scenic beauty of the Malvern Hills. It was a day they would never forget.

Presiding over the excursion was Cyril Huddleday, the works manager, a big, solid, middle-aged man, impeccably dressed and wearing the tall, shiny top that set him apart

from anyone else on the platform. Hubbleday was making his way through the waiting throng, beaming at children, smiling politely at their mothers, and nodding at the employees whose work lives he controlled.

Derek Churt saw him coming and braced himself. Arm in arm with his wife, Agnes, he had his other hand on his young son's shoulder.

'Say nothin', Aggie,' he warned his wife.

'We ought to say thank you,' she argued.

'Do as I say, woman.'

'Why?'

'It's not him as is paying for all this – it's Mr Appleby.'

'Ah, yes . . .'

Like her husband, Agnes Churt was short, thin and wiry. She had lost the youthful bloom that had attracted him to her years earlier, and now had pinched features and rounded shoulders. Like her husband and son, she was wrapped up warmly and wearing a scarf and gloves she had knitted. It was not long before Hubbleday came right up to them.

'Good day to you!' he said, raising his top hat.

'Same to you, sir,' replied Churt, dutifully.

'Unless I'm mistaken, you work in a paint shop, don't you?'

'I do, sir.'

'That's right. Chort . . . Chart . . . something like that?'

'Churt, sir. Derek Churt.'

'Then you must be Mrs Churt,' said the works manager, running an eye over Agnes. He bent over the child. 'And who do we have here?'

‘It’s our son,’ explained Churt. ‘Peter.’

Hubbleday grinned. ‘Hello, Peter.’

‘Mornin’, sir,’ said the boy, responding to a nudge from his father.

‘Have you been to the Malverns before?’ asked Hubbleday.

‘I been nowhere, sir.’

‘That’s what most of the children say.’ He patted the boy on the head. ‘You look like a bright lad, Peter. Let’s hope you follow in your father’s footsteps and work for us one day. Would you like that?’

‘Yes, please, sir.’

‘Make it your goal in life.’

After patting him on the head once more, Hubbleday moved on to the next family and distributed a smile among them. Agnes waited until the works manager was out of earshot before making a comment.

‘Will there really be a job for our Peter?’ she whispered.

‘Doubt it,’ grunted her husband.

‘Mr Hubbleday said there would be, and he seems such a nice man.’

Churt curled a lip. ‘You don’t know him as well as I do.’

When the train steamed into the station and came to a halt, the passengers climbed into the compartments allotted to them with shrieks of pleasure. Hubbleday waited until they were all aboard then clambered into the compartment closest to the locomotive. Like all the other employees of the Oldbury Railway Carriage and Wagon Company there, the works manager was proud of the fact that they had built

the carriages in which they were about to travel. Given the nature of the event, it was highly appropriate.

Peter Churt, meanwhile, did what all the other children were doing and stared out of the window of his compartment in sheer wonder. He had never been more than five miles from his home. Until the train was steaming along, he was unaware that, once they had emerged from the permanent dark haze under which they lived, they entered open countryside. The boy had to shield his eyes against the unexpected glare of sunshine. Other delights scudded past every second. He missed nothing. Worcester was a particular revelation to him. Against a clear sky, it looked quite beautiful. As they thundered over the bridge across the River Severn, Peter could see narrowboats moored along the banks and caught a glimpse of the racecourse nearby. The majestic cathedral drew a gasp of delight from him.

‘Why can’t we live here, Dad?’ he asked, innocently.

‘Because we can’t,’ muttered Churt.

‘Why not?’

‘We’re Oldbury folk, born and bred.’

‘It looks so clean.’

‘You heard what your father said,’ Agnes told him.

But her son’s attention had already shifted to something else of interest and he forgot that his parents were even there. It was a journey of discovery for the boy, and he wanted to relish every second of it.

Alone with his companion in their private compartment, Hubbleday removed his top hat and scratched his bald head.

He had lost all trace of his former geniality and resorted to a snarl.

‘I’m starting to hate these excursions,’ he admitted. ‘It’s one thing to give the workers an occasional reward, but Mr Appleby takes it to extremes. An Easter Outing, a Whitsun Treat, a Summer Celebration and now this Christmas Party – we’re spoiling them.’

‘I agree,’ said Drake, quietly.

‘When the men are given an unnecessary holiday, we lose production.’

‘Mr Appleby believes that it helps morale.’

‘I’d prefer to keep their noses to the grindstone,’ said Humbleday, ‘and I daresay that you feel the same.’

‘I do, Cyril,’ said Drake. ‘Far be it from me to criticise Mr Appleby, but we are a manufacturing concern. Workers are there to work – not to be given days off.’

Ernest Drake was the company accountant, a tall, anxious man in his fifties with eyes glinting behind rimless spectacles. Across his lap was a ledger that contained the names of all those on the excursion. It had been his job to allocate the compartments on the train.

‘At least we don’t have to travel with them,’ said Humbleday, scornfully. ‘That would be unbearable. The men stink of mothballs, the women reek of cheap perfume and their ugly, snotty-nosed children have no idea how to behave themselves.’

‘It was wise of you to insist on a private compartment,’ said Drake.

‘We deserve some privileges, Ernest.’

‘I’m grateful to you.’

‘We’re managers. They need to be reminded of that.’

Settling back, he stretched out a hand and absentmindedly stroked the top hat beside him as if he were fondling a favourite cat. He soon went off into a reverie. Drake, meanwhile, opened his ledger and took out a copy of the seating plan he had devised. He unfolded it with care. On arrival, they would all be taken on a ride through the Malvern Hills before arriving at Appleby Court. The visitors would then be shown to their places in the dining room by Drake. He had inked in every name with care. As befitted their position, he and Hubbleday would be seated at the top table with the Appleby family.

When they eventually entered a series of cuttings, daylight was replaced by dark shadows and the stunning vistas disappeared. There was another disappointment. Though they were still short of their destination, the train began to slow dramatically. Hubbleday was jerked out of his daydream.

‘What’s going on?’ he demanded.

‘I don’t know,’ said Drake.

‘This line was supposed to be clear for us.’

‘Perhaps there’s a reduced speed limit for some reason.’

‘Something’s happened,’ said Hubbleday, getting to his feet. ‘Look – we’re slowing by the second.’

‘I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation,’ said Drake.

‘Then I want to know what it is.’

‘All will soon become clear, Cyril.’

‘We have a strict timetable. We must stick to it, or everything is thrown out of kilter. During previous excursions,



the trains always ran like clockwork. Why is this one letting us down?’

‘It hasn’t let us down yet.’

‘Can’t you feel what’s happening, man? We’re grinding to a halt.’

‘I think you’re right.’

Drake knew how dangerous it was to argue with the works manager. If his opinion were challenged, Hubbleday could be fiery and vengeful. It was safer to agree with him. Besides, it was now obvious that the train did intend to stop. It began to rock, hiss, squeal deafeningly and shudder, spreading alarm throughout the carriages. Then, without warning, it came to a jarring halt, throwing Hubbleday forwards. He thudded against the wall panel opposite and cursed aloud.

Regaining his balance, he was quivering with fury. After putting on his hat, he flung open the door and, with considerable effort, jumped down beside the line, finding that they had stopped in a deep cutting. He stormed to the front of the locomotive where the driver and fireman were standing.

‘What the devil is going on?’ yelled Hubbleday.

‘There’s an obstruction, sir,’ explained the driver, indicating with his finger. ‘Someone put sleepers across the track.’

‘We’re expected to arrive on time.’

‘We can’t move until those sleepers are shifted, sir.’

‘Then go and move them at once.’

‘We have to wait for the guard first,’ said the driver. ‘Here he comes.’

He pointed towards the rear of the train where a figure had jumped out of the brake van and was hurrying towards

them. Hubbleday's only interest was in the obstruction thirty yards ahead of them. The sleepers were flanked by two large red flags, signalling danger. Prompt action by the driver had saved the excursion train from almost certain derailment. Instead of praising the man, however, Hubbleday started to blame him for the delay. His howls of rage were short-lived. A shot suddenly rang out and the works manager fell instantly to the ground with blood streaming down his face and with a gaping hole in his top hat.