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Riviera Express

Written by T. P. Fielden

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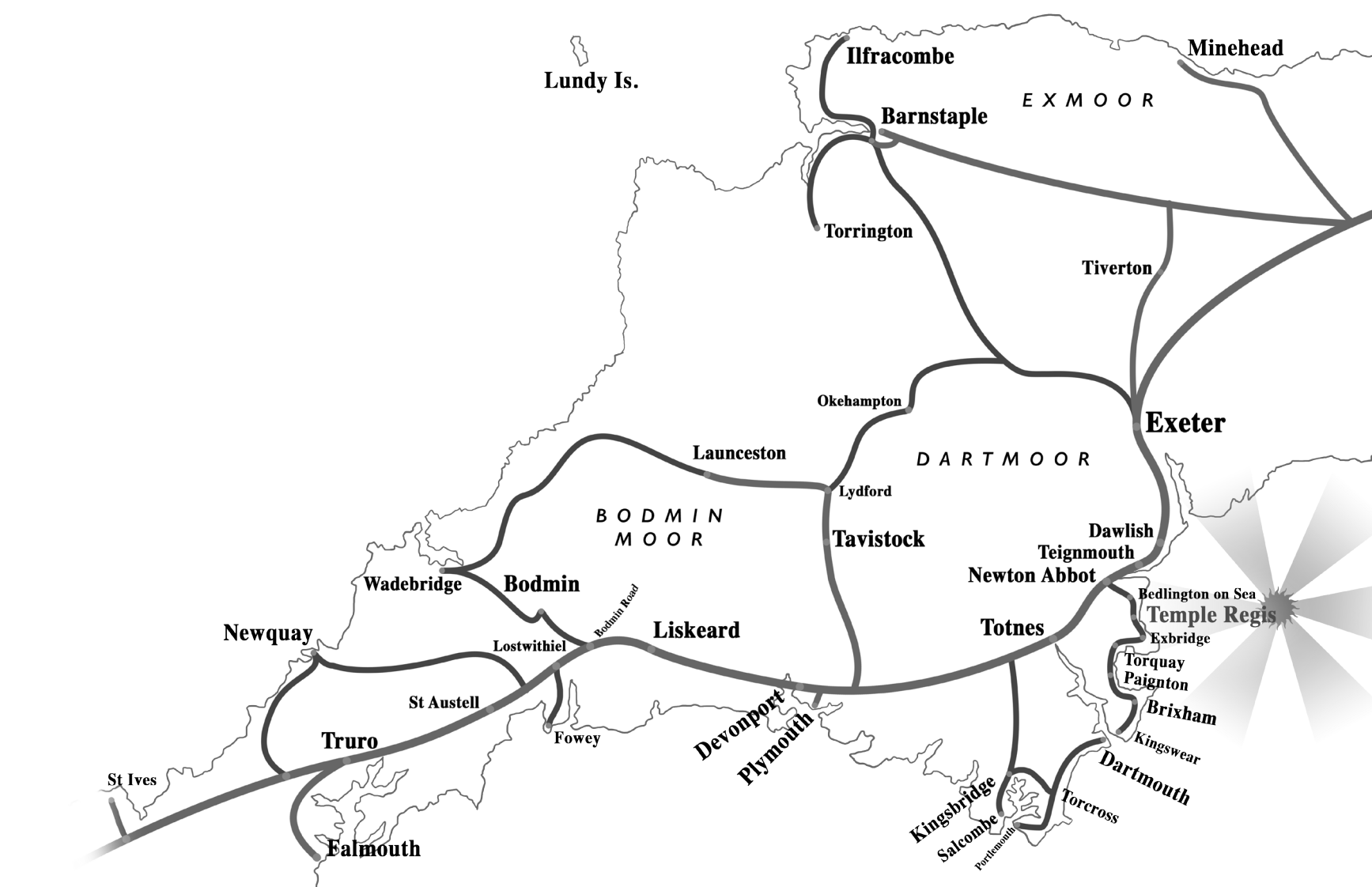
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THE RIVIERA EXPRESS

TP FIELDEN

ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

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For CRCW
Dei due, la migliore

ONE

When Miss Dimont smiled, which she did a lot, she was beautiful. There was something mystical about the arrangement of her face-furniture – the grey eyes, the broad forehead, the thin lips wide spread, her dainty perfect teeth. In that smile was a *joie de vivre* which encouraged people to believe that good must be just around the corner.

But there were two faces to Miss Dimont. When hunched over her typewriter, rattling out the latest episode of life in Temple Regis, she seemed not so sunny. Her corkscrew hair fell out of its makeshift pinnings, her glasses slipped down the convex nose, those self-same lips pinched themselves into a tight little knot and a general air of mild chaos and discontent emanated like puffs of smoke from her desk.

Life on the *Riviera Express* was no party. The newspaper's offices, situated at the bottom of the hill next door to the brewery, maintained their dreary pre-war combination of uprightness and formality. The front hall, the only area of access permitted to townsfolk, spoke with its oak panelling and heavy desks of decorum, gentility, continuity.

But the most momentous events in Temple Regis in 1958

– its births, marriages and deaths, its council ordinances, its police court and its occasional encounters with celebrity – were channelled through a less august set of rooms, inadequately lit and peopled by journalism's flotsam and jetsam, up a back corridor and far from the public gaze.

Lately there'd been a number of black-and-white 'B' features at the Picturedrome, but these always portrayed the heady excitements of Fleet Street. Behind the green baize door, beyond the stout oak panelling, the making of this particular local journal was decidedly less ritzy.

Far from Miss Dimont lifting an ivory telephone to her ear while partaking of a genteel breakfast in her silk-sheeted bed, the real-life reporter started her day with an apple and 'The Calls' – humdrum visits to Temple's police station, its council offices, fire station, and sundry other sources of bread-and-butter material whose everyday occurrences would, next Friday, fill the heart of the *Express*.

Like a laden beachcomber she would return mid-morning to her desk to write up her gleanings before leaving for the Magistrates' Court, where the bulk of her work, from that bottomless well of human misdeeds and misfortunes, daily bubbled up.

After luncheon, usually taken alone with her crossword in the Signal Box Café, she would return briefly to court before preparing for an evening meeting of the Town Council, the Townswomen's Guild, or – light relief – a performance by the Temple Regis Amateur Operatic Society.

Then it would be home on her moped, corkscrew hair

blowing in the wind, to Mulligatawny, whose sleek head would be staring out of the mullioned window awaiting his supper and her pithy account of the day's events.

Miss Dimont, now unaccountably beyond the age of forty, had the fastest shorthand note in the West Country. In addition, she could charm the birds out of the trees when she chose – her capacity to get people to talk about themselves, it was said, could make even the dead speak. She was shy but she was shrewd; and if perhaps she was comfortably proportioned she was, everyone agreed, quite lovely.

Why Betty Featherstone, her so-called friend, got the front-page stories and Miss Dimont did not was lost in the mists of time. Suffice to say that on press day, when everyone's temper shortened, it was Judy who got it in the neck from her editor. Betty wrote what he wanted, while Judy wrote the truth – and it did not always make comfortable reading. She didn't mind the fusillades aimed in her direction for having overturned a civic reputation or two, for ever since she had known him, and it had been a long time, Rudyard Rhys had lacked consistency. Furthermore, his ancient socks smelt. Miss Dimont rose above.

Unquestionably Devon's prettiest town, Temple Regis took itself very seriously. Its beaches, giving out on to the turquoise and indigo waters which inspired some wily publicist to coin the phrase 'England's Riviera', were white and pristine. Broad lawns encircling the bandstand and flowing down towards the pier were scrupulously shaved, immaculately edged. Out in the estuary, the water was an impossible shade of aquama-

rine, its colour a magical invention of the gods – and since everyone in Temple agreed their little town was the sunniest spot in England, it really was very beautiful.

It was far too nice a place to be murdered.

*

Confusingly, the *Riviera Express* was both newspaper and railway train. Which came first was occasionally the cause for heated debate down in the snug of the Cap'n Fortescue, but the laws of copyright had not yet been invented when the two rivals were born; and an ambitious rail company serving the dreams of holidaymakers heading for the South West was certainly not giving way to a tinpot local rag when it came to claiming the title. Similarly, with a rock-solid local readership and a justifiable claim to both 'Riviera' and 'Express' – a popular newspaper title – the weekly journal snootily tolerated its more famous namesake. If neither would admit it, each benefited from the other's existence.

Before the war successive editors lived in constant turmoil, sometimes printing glowing lists of the visitors from another world who spilled from the brown and cream liveried railway carriages ('The Hon. Mrs Gerald Legge and her mother, the novelist Barbara Cartland, are here for the week'). At other times, Princess Margaret Rose herself could have puffed into town and the old codgers would have ignored it. Rudyard Rhys saw both points of view so there was no telling what he would think one week to the next – to greet the afternoon arrival? Or not to bother?

'Mr Rhys, we could go to meet the 4.30,' warned his chief reporter on this particular Tuesday. 'But – also – there's a cycling-without-lights case in court which could turn nasty. The curate from St Margaret's. He told me he's going to challenge his prosecution on the grounds that British Summer Time has no substantive legal basis. It could be very interesting.'

'Rrrr.'

'Don't you see? The Chairman of the Bench is one of his parishioners! Sure to be an almighty dust-up!'

'Rrrr . . . rrr.'

'A clash between the Church and the Law, Mr Rhys! We haven't had one of those for a while!'

Rudyard Rhys lit his pipe. An unpleasant smell filled the room. Miss Dimont stepped back but otherwise held her ground. She was all too familiar with this fence-sitting by her editor.

'Bit of a waste going to meet the 4.30,' she persisted. 'There's only Gerald Hennessy on board . . .' (and an encounter with a garrulous, prosy, self-obsessed matinée idol might make me late for my choir practice, she might have added).

'Hennessy?' The editor put down his pipe with a clunk. 'Now *that's* news!'

'Oh?' snipped Miss Dimont. 'You said you hated *The Conqueror and the Conquered*. "Not very manly for a VC", I think were your words. You objected to the length of his hair.'

'Rrrr.'

'Even though he had been lost in the Burmese jungle for three years.'

Mr Rhys performed his usual backflip. 'Hennessy,' he ordered.

It was enough. Miss Dimont noted that, once again, the editor had deserted his journalistic principles in favour of celebrity worship. Rhys enjoyed the perquisite accorded him by the Picturedrome of two back stalls seats each week. He had actually enjoyed *The Conqueror and the Conquered* so much he sat through it twice.

Miss Dimont did not know this, but anyone who had played as many square-jawed warriors as Gerald Hennessy was always likely to find space in the pages of the *Riviera Express*. Something about heroism by association, she had noted in the past, was at the root of her editor's lofty decisions. That all went back to the War, of course.

'Four-thirty it is, then,' she said a trifle bitterly. 'But *Church v. Law* – now there's a story that might have been followed up by the nationals,' and with that she swept out, notebook flapping from her raffia bag.

This parting shot was a reference to the long-standing feud between the editor and his senior reporter. After all, Rudyard Rhys had made the wrong call on not only the Hamilton Biscuit Case, but the Vicar's Longboat Party, the Temple Regis Tennis Scandal and the Football Pools Farrago. Each of these exclusives from the pen of Judy Dimont had been picked up by the repulsive Arthur Shrimsley, an out-to-grass former Fleet Street type who made a killing by selling them

on to the national papers, at the same time showing up the *Riviera Express* for the newspaper it was – hesitant, and slow to spot its own scoops when it had them.

On each occasion the editor's decision had been final – and wrong. But Judy was no saint either, and the cat's cradle of complaint triggered by her coverage of the Regis Conservative Ball last winter still made for a chuckle or two in the sub-editors' room on wet Thursday afternoons.

With her raffia bag swinging furiously, she stalked out to the car park, for Judy Dimont was resolute in almost everything she did, and her walk was merely the outer manifestation of that doughty inner being – a purposeful march which sent out radar-like warnings to flag-day sellers, tin-can rattlers, and other such supplicants and cleared her path as if by miracle. It was not manly, for Miss Dimont was nothing if not feminine, but it was no-nonsense.

She took no nonsense, either, from Herbert, her trusty moped, who sat expectantly, awaiting her arrival. With one cough, Herbert was kicked into life and the magnificent Miss Dimont flew away towards Temple Regis railway station, corkscrew hair flapping in the wind, a happy smile upon her lips. For there was nothing she liked more than to go in search of new adventures – whether they were to be found in the Magistrates' Court, the Horticultural Society, or the railway station.

Her favourite route took in Tuppenny Row, the elegant terrace of Regency cottages whose brickwork had turned a pale pink with the passage of time, bleached by Temple

Regis sun and washed by its soft rains. She turned into Cable Street, then came down the long run to the station, whose yellow-and-chocolate bargeboard frontage you could glimpse from the top of the hill, and Miss Dimont, with practice born of long experience, started her descent just as the sooty, steamy clouds of vapour from the *Riviera Express* slowed in preparation for its arrival at Regis Junction.

She had done her homework on Gerald Hennessy and, despite her misgivings about missing the choir practice, she was looking forward to their encounter, for Miss Dimont was far from immune to the charms of the opposite sex. Since the War, Hennessy had become the perfect English hero in the nation's collective imagination – square-jawed, crinkle-eyed, wavy-haired and fair. He spoke so nicely when asked to deliver his lines, and there was always about him an air of amused self-deprecation which made the nation's mothers wish him for their daughters, if not secretly for themselves.

Miss Dimont brought Herbert to a halt, his final splutter of complaint lost in the clanking, wheezing riot of sooty chaos which signals the arrival of every self-regarding Pullman Express. Across the station courtyard she spotted Terry Eagleton, the *Express*'s photographer, and made towards him as she pulled the purple gloves from her hands.

'Anyone apart from Hennessy?'

'Just 'im, Miss Dim.'

'I've told you before, call me Judy,' she said stuffily. The dreaded nickname had been born out of an angry tussle with Rudyard Rhys, long ago, over a front-page story which had

gone wrong. Somehow it stuck, and the editor took a fiendish delight in roaring it out in times of stress. Bad enough having to put up with it from him – though invariably she rose above – but no need to be cheeked by this impertinent snapper. She had mixed feelings about Terry Eagleton.

'Call me Judy,' she repeated sternly, and got out her notebook.

'Ain't your handle, anyways,' parried Terry swiftly, and he was right – for Miss Dimont had a far more euphonious name, one she kept very quiet and for a number of good reasons.

Terry busily shifted his camera bag from one shoulder to the other. Employed by his newspaper as a trained observer, he could see before him a bespectacled woman of a certain age – heading towards fifty, surely – raffia bag slung over one shoulder, notebook flapping out of its top, with a distinctly harassed air and a permanently peppery riposte. Though she was much loved by all who knew her, Terry sometimes found it difficult to see why. It made him sigh for Doreen, the sweet young blonde newly employed on the front desk, who had difficulty remembering people's names but was indeed an adornment to life.

Miss Dimont led the way on to Platform 1.

'Pics first,' said Terry.

'No, Terry,' countered Miss Dim. 'You take so long there's never time left for the interview.'

'Picture's worth a thousand words, they always say. How many words are you goin' to write – *two hundred*?'

The same old story. In Fleet Street, always the old battle between monkeys and blunts, and even here in sweetest Devon the same old manoeuvring based on jealousy, rivalry and the belief that pictures counted more than words or, conversely, words enhanced pictures and gave them the meaning and substance they otherwise lacked.

And so this warring pair went to work, arriving on the platform just as the doors started to swing open and the holidaymakers began to alight. It was always a joyous moment, thought Miss Dimont, this happy release from confinement into sunshine, the promise of uncountable pleasures ahead. A small girl raced past, her face a picture of joy, pigtails given an extra bounce by the skip in her step.

The routine on these occasions was always the same – if a single celebrity was to be interviewed, he or she would be ushered into the first-class waiting room in order to be relieved of their innermost secrets. If more than one, the likeliest candidate would be pushed in by Terry, while Judy quickly handed the others her card, enquiring discreetly where they were staying and arranging a suitable time for their interrogation.

This manoeuvring took some skill and required a deftness of touch in which Miss Dimont excelled. On a day like today, no such juggling was required – just an invitation to old Gerald to step inside for a moment and explain away his presence in Devon's prettiest town.

The late holiday crowds swiftly dispersed, the guard completed the task of unloading from his van the precious goods

entrusted to his care – a basket of somnolent homing pigeons, another of chicks tweeting furiously, the usual assortment of brown paper parcels. Then the engine driver climbed aboard to prepare for his next destination, Exbridge.

A moment of stillness descended. A blackbird sang. Dust settled in gentle folds and the reporter and photographer looked at each other.

'No ruddy Hennessy,' said Terry Eagleton.

Miss Dimont screwed up her pretty features into a scowl. In her mind was the lost scoop of *Church* v. *Law*, the clerical challenge to the authority of the redoubtable Mrs Marchbank. The uncomfortable explanation to Rudyard Rhys of how she had missed not one, but two stories in an afternoon – and with press day only two days away.

Mr Rhys was unforgiving about such things.

Just then, a shout was heard from the other end of Platform 1 up by the first-class carriages. A porter was waving his hands. Inarticulate shouts spewed forth from his shaking face. He appeared, for a moment, to be running on the spot. It was as if a small tornado had descended and hit the platform where he stood.

Terry had it in an instant. Without a word he launched himself down the platform, past the bewildered guard, racing towards the porter. The urgency with which he took off sprang in Miss Dimont an inner terror and the certain knowledge that she must run too – run like the wind . . .

By the time she reached the other end of the platform Terry was already on board. She could see him racing through

the first-class corridor, checking each compartment, moving swiftly on. As fast as she could, she followed alongside him on the platform.

They reached the last compartment almost simultaneously, but Terry was a pace or two ahead of Judy. There, perfectly composed, immaculately clad in country tweeds, his oxblood brogues twinkling in the sunlight, sat their interviewee, Gerald Hennessy.

You did not have to be an expert to know he was dead.