**Passengers on the Ro-Imo Express – Part One**

*“All around us are people, of all classes, of all nationalities, of all ages. For three days these people, these strangers to one another, are brought together. They sleep and eat under one roof, they cannot get away from each other. At the end of three days they part, they go their several ways, never, perhaps, to see each other again.”*

Marion closed the eBook where she had found that quote and put the tablet back in her handbag.

She looked around at the train carriage that had put her in mind of the scene. It was not the dining car of the Orient Express where Monsieur Poirot's friend made the observation. It wasn’t the Blue Train that was Marion’s favourite train journey of all.

This train was on another planet. It linked twin capitals, Ro-Imo I and Ro-Imo II, cities five thousand miles apart governing a population of five billion people. Marion and Kristoph were visiting the cities by invitation of the Ro-Imo government, on behalf of the High Council of Gallifrey. It was taken for granted that they would travel between the two cities on the high-speed mag-grav train that was the pride of Ro-Imo engineering.

There were five quite spectacular bridges across rivers, two tunnels and seven designated places of special beauty where the train slowed down for the edification of the passengers, but for most of the journey it was so fast that looking out of the window was uncomfortable. Passengers closed the automatic blinds and looked for other things to do to pass the time – reading, sleeping, needlework, snacking, drinking. Some talked to each other. Kristoph had left his seat to discuss the intergalactic diamond exchange with two businessmen.

Marion was doing what Monsieur Poirot did in these circumstances. She observed her fellow passengers carefully and deduced what she might about them.

The two businessmen were obvious. Diamonds were their whole raison d’être. One of them had a titanium plated valise chained to his wrist. It contained ten million galactic credits in gems. The other man was, from what she overheard, a humanoid computer devoted to the mining, cutting and sale of diamonds. Even Kristoph, who understood the diamond trade very well, looked to him for the most up to date information.

Marion turned from them to other passengers seated on horseshoe-shaped sofas with tables within reach where food and drink was placed by white-gloved and crisply uniformed stewards.

There was a tall, strongly built woman dressed in dark blue, tightly buttoned up from neck to the hem of her ankle length skirt. If she hadn’t been accompanied by four girls dressed in blue pinafores and white starched collars, clearly identifying her as a governess, Marion might have guessed her job as policewoman, Sergeant-major, prison guard!

Certainly, she was someone who believed in discipline and order amongst her charges. The four girls sat quietly with appropriate reading matter and raised their hands to be excused to go to the bathroom through the door and into the corridor beyond. Their food and drink was thinly cut sandwiches and nourishing milk along with portions of fresh fruit.

The girls must be the children of a Ro-Imo aristocrat. The waiter who brought the milk bowed to the girls while merely nodding courteously to the governess.

Ro-Imo was a Constitutional Monarchy, of course. A dual monarchy, in fact. One King with his immediate royal family lived in one city. A Queen and her family lived in the other. Various dukes, earls and other ranks had splendid houses in both places and in the rural parts of the planet These girls were doubtless from one of those scions. The senior royals would surely have their own private train carriages.

Whoever they were, Marion thought, they must be proud of their four beautiful children.

She looked from them to a couple who sat on the right side of the carriage where they were currently being served drinks – a tall, colourful cocktail for the lady and whisky sour for the gentleman. They were beautifully dressed in a style that wouldn’t have been out of place in the first-class restaurant car of Agatha Christie’s Orient Express. The lady's dress suit in black silk and green linen with a small pill box hat and court shoes was immaculate. The gentleman’s light grey silk suit was impeccable. The lady succeeded in that upper-class trick of drinking her cocktail without getting her lips wet, something that Marion had taken a long time to achieve.

They had to be a married couple. Happily married. The man had the sort of indulgent smile for his wife that Kristoph had for her.

As Marion watched them, the woman spoke to a steward who went out to another carriage to fetch a maid with a small leather case. The maid set to work manicuring the lady's nails.

Marion laughed softly. Yes, this couple could fold straight into Agatha Christie’s pages. They were both clearly born to a life where servants could be summoned to give manicures while speeding along on a train.

She looked at her own nails. They were fine. They had been done yesterday. They wouldn’t need attention again for a few days. It would never occur to her to bring along a maid to do them on the train.

That, she supposed, was the difference between being born to privilege and marrying into it.

There was a lady sitting alone. She, too, knew how to drink in a sophisticated way, and was immaculately dressed in a red satin dress that fitted closely to a perfect figure. Marion knew enough about clothes to recognise that the fit was the work of a dressmaker, not the good fortune to have a figure that allowed her to look good in dresses that were ‘off the peg'. She had blonde hair that had obviously been set only a few hours ago and make up applied by an attendant.

But although the lady could drink cocktails neatly, she was drinking far too many of them. The steward took away three empty glasses and replaced them with full ones in only a few minutes. Behind perfect mascara the eyes were glazed and her hand shook as she reached for a fresh drink. Nor was she a happy drunk. Her finely carmined lips when she thought nobody was looking formed a disconsolate expression.

What story lay behind such a public display of comfort drinking Marion couldn’t possibly know, but it was possible to make a few guesses. She could be going through a divorce or suffering a recent bereavement. Perhaps her marriage was an unhappy sham. She certainly gave the impression with her body language that she was drinking to blot out some sort of pain rather than because she enjoyed drinking alcohol.

It was a bad reason to drink. The absolute worst reason. Marion hoped that there was somebody at the end of her journey who might help her see that before it was too late.

There was a man who DID seem to be drinking because he liked it. He was sitting a few metres from the sad woman and had already emptied one whole bottle of liquor and was demanding another. The steward was trying to refuse him discreetly, but the man didn’t want to be discreet. He swore loudly at the steward. Several men looked around and were on the point of rising from their seats, but they were beaten to it by the Governess, who crossed the carriage in a few strides and faced him without any outward sign of fear.

“Sir,” she said firmly but in measured tones. “If you cannot respect the presence of ladies within earshot, you might at least remember that there are children here. They don’t need to hear that sort of language or witness an adult in such a state. Compose yourself as a gentleman or leave this carriage at once.”

The drunk looked at the Governess as she loomed over him, then stood, swaying a good deal, and saying that he would like a bottle brought to his sleeping compartment. He staggered towards the door leading to the sleeping car. Everyone seemed to agree that the lounge car was a more pleasant place without him.

The Governess returned to her charges, who had sat quietly through the whole débâcle. She had them take out their tablets and do maths problems for a half hour – long enough for the disturbance to pass from their young minds.

Kristoph nodded his approval of the Governess’s handling of the situation and tried not to compare her too unfavourably with the terrifying lady who had taught him Political Ethics a long time ago at the Prydonian Academy.

He looked at Marion and caught a stray thought across the carriage even though he was not deliberately reading her mind. He saw the Agatha Christie theme in her mind and recalled the quote from Monsieur Bouc, director of the Companie de Wagons Lit that Marion had looked up. He agreed that it fitted exactly the people here in this luxurious lounge of the Ro-Imi Twin City Express. His two business companions, Mr. Erro and Mr. Matthi, were slightly below the social strata who normally travelled in this sort of style and comfort. Their tickets were paid for by the firm they worked for in the belief that first class was a safer way to transport their gems. Mr. Matthi, in truth, was much poorer than his companion. He spent too much of his very good income from diamond brokerage on gambling.

There was a ready-made Agatha Christie character. A man with money worries carrying a fortune in diamonds.

Kristoph moved on before he allowed his imagination to concoct an entire Christie-esqe plot around the diamond merchant.

The aristocratic couple were, as Marion had guessed, very happily married. Even Agatha couldn’t find a chink in their lives to insert a devious plot. They were the Duke and Duchess of Exemi, the third largest city on Ro-Imi’s western continent. They were art collectors and connoisseurs of all that was fine and tasteful. They had no children, but they had several nieces and nephews to bestow their wealth upon in the course of time.

The four little girls were the richest people on the train. Regini, Marta, Alici and Shari were the children of the Grand Duke and Duchess of Arris, nieces of King Rupert of Ro-Imi I. Regini, the eldest of the four young duchesses had an additional title similar to ‘the Infanta’ of the Spanish royal line and her own set of crown jewels to call her own. They could, of course, travel in a private, luxury carriage of their own with an array of servants at their beck and call, but the Grand Duke believed that his daughters should not be spoilt. First class luxury under the supervision of the formidable Miss Addiso, the Governess, was good enough.

The other well-dressed lady was….

Marion turned her attention back to the woman who had been quietly drinking away her troubles. She had put down her drink and was slowly rising from her seat. As she passed the happily married couple she picked up a butter knife from their table and carried on walking to the end of the carriage.

Not the end that led to the sleeping cars, but the other way, to the bathrooms. Beyond there was the galley where the food was prepared, then tyevFirst-Class luggage car and the locomotive that pulled the train. Both of those sections were locked during the journey.

She was going to the bathroom with a butter knife!

Marion rose slowly and quietly followed her. By the time she reached the corridor, one of the luxury cubicles with marble and gold fittings and fresh flowers in vases was locked from the inside.

Marion knocked softly and called out, but the only answer was a loud sob.

“Marion!” Kristoph's voice by her ear was a surprise. She hadn’t heard him following behind.

“She....”

“Yes, I know,” he told her. “Step back and let me deal with the door.”

He already had his sonic screwdriver in his hand. It was only a matter of seconds before the door sprang open.

The lady inside sobbed even louder and backed away, the butter knife still in her hand but in no way held as a weapon. She hadn’t even, yet, succeeded in hurting herself. Kristoph took it from her easily and put it into his back pocket. He grasped the lady's hand and drew her out of the cubicle.

“Nothing can ever be so bad as that,” he told her.

“How could you know?” she answered. “How could you know what it is to lose a child?”

Marion took a deep breath, but it was Kristoph who answered.

“Yes, I know,” he said. “Believe me, I know. But even that is a grief that can be overcome in time.”

“Not... Not with a husband who thinks it’s all my fault... Who does not even look at me any more... Even when he is sober… which is not often.”

Marion was thinking, perhaps a little uncharitably, of the pot calling the kettle. Then she recalled the other recent drama in the First-Class lounge.

“Oh... Your husband is the one who....”

“Marion, help Lady Agafya Charll to wipe her eyes, then take her back to the lounge. Order a pot of tea and sit quietly.”

“What are you going to do?” Marion didn’t need to know how he knew her name, and Lady Agafya herself was still too distracted to realise he hadn’t asked.

“Drunk or sober, there's a man who needs a good talking to,” Kristoph answered as he slipped away.

Marion turned and brought Agafya back into the cubicle and helped her to wash her face, removing the streaked and spoilt make up. She was still red around the eyes, but it was possible for her to walk through the lounge without attracting undue notice. Once they were sitting quietly there was much they could talk about.

But they never got there. As they came from the cubicle the train suddenly lurched sideways with a terrible scream of metal against metal. The two women slipped to the floor together.

“Hercule Poirot never had to worry about THIS!” Marion cried out illogically as the floor tipped and they fell again against the bathroom cubicle door.