

Chapter 4

..... And Out of His Pants

The afternoon had become a fine warm evening by the time Hitch squeezed through a gap in the boundary fence just large enough to let him pass. He looked about him hoping to find that things had not changed since last he had been here. If that were so, Lurkin-Long-the-Lake still would be a goods depot. There he hoped he would find a goods van. Carriages may be all very well for those smart painted plastic and metal dolls that went endlessly round, day long, but he would find it impossible to squeeze into one. He was not ashamed to go 'goods' and any way for him it would be a comfortable ride.

Just as he remembered it, some way off, he could see the station. There too lay the path towards it as of old. He thrilled. Now memories fairly rushed upon him. Nothing seemed to have changed. By scenting the grasses he found his way along. A lesser path slipping off to his left made him pause. From that direction there came, borne as on a shallow breath, a feeling of excitement. It seemed to take a hold upon his nose which dampened. His stepping towards the turning made the summons stronger. He reached forward his head and it seemed that he was drawn as if by a magnet. It was the call of tribe. Whom would he find: stranger, relative or friend?

A thicket hemmed the path's end. Bracken and the sinewy stems of bramble and wild rose made dense with clumps of last year's grasses formed the walls of a humble dwelling place. To give it roof, the quick-green leaves grew in plenty. There, taking his ease, Hitch found one he had not seen since he was a young hog. The form was larger and bulkier than in those times. A face much furrowed, the general movements now slower, told of the passage of time. What had not changed was the waggish humour still in the old, old eyes, that had saved him in many a scrape in his harum-scarum youth.



They gazed at each other; remembering; making sure. Hitch exclaimed with mounting pleasure:

“H-i-c-k-e-y B-u-r-r!”

A slightly gruff, wheezy voice returned:

“I do believe it’s young Hitch. What be you doing in these parts, now? Come, come, sit you down. It’s a long time since I’ve had the pleasure of a chat with anyone. I don’t go very far nowadays. ‘The hunter home from the hill’, you understand? I’m content.”

Hitch sat down gladly. Much of his time, like the rest of his kind, he spent alone. Fending for himself was as natural as breathing. To meet with a fellow was a treat. They exchanged news with relish.

He told of his reasons for moving out to the wide country. Men had come to build the by-pass and soon everything was changed. So he had gone to places he had visited only briefly before, to settle and make a new life.

“Only they’ve changed too. Board and lodging’s hard to find. River’s choked. Used to be such deep water ’til the humans took so much, weed was kept properly in its place. Now the weed’s taking over. Fair vexes the salmon that can make it upstream. Sea or river, they say, are not what they used to be.”

Hickey’s eyes lost their twinkle for a moment as Hitch went on;

“Yes quiet backwater it was. Now heavy machines shake the very ground, ’til you’re fair dizzy. Venturing out, you risk your life. If you’re not knocked down as like as not you’ll come by food that’s poisoned. Don’t know how the badgers put up with it all. You have to hand it to ’em. Raise whole families out there, they do. One such I used to see, many a night, strung out one behind the other on dormitory fatigues; Mrs. Brock in front and all the little Brocks afollowing her with their bed-bundles. Other times there’d be Mr. Brock on sunny mornings, airing the bed-clothes in the forecourt. Fair put out he was sometimes, with all the humans’ comings and goings. Yet stick it out they all do. Heard of one that was moved out even before my time; ’twas a motorway acomin’ in then. Moved right back in under it, soon as he found a place where he could dig. Wasn’t a patch on the old natural rock though, I heard. Mind this was rumour. Keep m’ distance always, you understand; you know how badgers can be towards us?”

Hickey Burr nodded:

“Always been like that. Depends on how hard times be. S’pose we be all alike, come to that. Humans be bigger problem though, like you say. Build all over everything don’t they? Their suburbs creep like fungus. Fill the air with their nasty fumes. Change everything. Nobody stands a chance ag’in ’em.” He warmed to his theme. “Too many of ’em for their own good. Though I’ve heard, some say now, ‘Two will do in any family!’”

It was Hitch’s turn to nod agreement, but at the same time he looked a trifle embarrassed:

“We go in for fair sized families,” he reflected. “If...”

“Good thing too,” he was interrupted, “or there wouldn’t be any of us left, the way things are.” The glint came back into Hickey’s eye. “As it used to be said, you can’t always tell sometimes what’s least expected most and a few more scallywags like me might live to my age!”

Hitch chuckled:

“Oh I hope so.” He paused in thought and then confided: “Talking of families, I’m on m’ way to see m’ daughter Holly and her family.” With studied carelessness he added: “Thought I might take a train.”

Hickey Burr regarded his visitor with a mixture of amused delight and some hesitation.

“How long since you be in the park? There be a few changes of late. But there...nothing really that’s likely to set you in check. Not likely you’ll get lost, I know. Place is well signposted I hear, so the humans can wander and enjoy themselves as they please. Haven’t been far this year as I said, but there’s never a shortage of news. There be plenty of newsmongers both above and below ground in the model village. Model village! ... Funny how everybody calls it that, when there be a town and several villages all connected by roads and railway.”

“When I was here,” rejoined Hitch, “people came in at the gate near the workshops and the park-owner’s house. Used to be an odd job and handy-man the gardeners and men in the workshops called ‘Old Harry’. Kept his brooms and such in the Stores where they stored the seed, and tools and the like.”

“Still here,” he was assured. “They’ve built a tea-shop next to the Stores. Enlarged the Engine Shed, too and keep all the steam engines in there when they aren’t running. Come out on to the turntable and off on the main line. That goes right the way round the outer part of the park and has branch lines. The Carriage Shed hasn’t needed any alterations, I heard; only the place where they’ve the controls of the trains. The ‘Cabin’ they call that.”

“Blinkers Wink was the name of the town. Is that the same?” enquired Hitch.



“Bit bigger; biggest collection of buildings there is. The little houses be very pretty. Next to the Town Hall there’s a fire-station. They even tried having the fire-engines coming out with their bells ringing but it never worked properly, so they gave it up. Oh, ar! And the little ol’ factory for makin’ carriages ’as an ’ooter. That does work, with the little plastic men comin’ out and into the canteen when it goes. Every quarter of an hour the church clock chimes and the organ plays inside the church. All been done with some kind of thing called a ... what was it? ... Oh I don’t know ... anyway, some kind of machine that sends out noises, whatever it might be. There’s another along at the next village, Larkin-in-the-Park that has a peal of bells. Coming along the line this way, the next station is the one near here. Expect that’s where you’re heading, Lurkin-Long-the-Lake, isn’t it?”

Hitch nodded:

“Saw it in the distance before I branched off to find you. Still a goods depot, I hope?”

“That’s right. You won’t go far wrong there. Same as it always was. Which way do you travel, through Wych-Wood-End by Wych-Elm-Wood?”

Hitch had not yet decided:

“It’ll depend upon what choice I have at Lurkin-Long-the-Lake.”

“Well certainly going by train, you’ll miss that climb up the hill above Wych-Wood-End station and over to Bentwhistle Tunnel and Holly Hocks Halt.”

“Does the line still run up to the Spinney from Bentwhistle Tunnel?” Hitch wanted to know.

“Ah yes, up through Wheezing-on-the-Hill and Gaspers Gap, but it’s not called just ‘the Spinney’ now,” chuckled Hickey Burr. “They had a Very Important Visitor who was much taken with those model petrified trees that they put up there to give it more character. Said their weird twisty bare limbs were fascinating. After dark they must look like bony, clutching fingers; witch’s work. A groundsman said it was a pity then, the visitors missed the thrill. The park was always closed before the glow-worms were snuffing out those slithering sly-boot snails. Glow-worms made an eerie sight at night and it was a regular haunt of theirs.

“Ah HAUNT,’ said the V. I. V. “Spooks Spinney!”

“Been called that ever since.”

Hitch grinned.

“Used to be a good view of that shallow lake with the model steamers and all kinds of craft on it, from there,” he commented.

“Still is. Mouldy Moorings hasn’t changed much either, save that there’s a public address system in the station. Heard it just once, last time I was out as far as that: a while back. Gave me quite a turn. Nobody about so far as I could see; then:

“The next train for Blinkers Wink, Cowslip Down and Trampledon, will be from Lurkin-Long-the-Lake and Larkin-in-the-Park.”

Reminded of Lurkin-Long-the-Lake Hitch was also reminded of the time. If he was to find his goods van and be safely aboard his train when it started, he must be going. He could not afford to miss it as it would be the last goods train of the day.

Sadly he said goodbye to Hickey Burr. Equally sad, the old hedgehog watched his younger friend set off on his journey again. He turned again to rest, this time with much to mull over and ponder.

Hitch approached the goods depot from the back, came round its wall, up the ramp to the platform and along its length. Once through the double doors of the shed he eased into the van there and settled himself as comfortably as he could. There was still a while to wait he discovered. Time passed. He was beginning to feel slightly cramped and bored, the way we have all felt at some time when waiting, however patiently, for something to begin.



Added to this was another odd feeling: some kind of tickliness about the lower half of his person. He had felt it while talking to Hickey Burr, but a quick hitch or two had rid him of it. He hitched again now. The feeling stopped. The train started.

The black, puffing, noisy tank engine eased the train along the siding and out towards the headshunt and main line. As it crossed the points the tickling sensation began again. Something had to be done about this, before it could drive him as mad as a March hare. Hedgehogs are such private beings that their garb tends to go unnoticed. Hitch was very much aware of his at this moment. The best thing to do was to shake out, outside, whatever was in them. He slid open the door, held them out through it and had barely time to note that it was the army of ants who had caused the trouble, when W O O S H , a passenger express hurtled by at what seemed lightning speed. All was gone including the ants. Hitch fell back in the van and gasped. What a fix! It changed everything. He could not go to Holly's like this. Recover his belongings he must, but how? Where were they? Well yes, on the front of an engine; but where was the engine? Then he thought of the ants and how they must be feeling as surprised as he was. He laughed aloud. No doubt they were earning for themselves great glory; a place in ant history; and a long dusty walk home.

The thought of his own plight sobered him again.

“Shake my spines, things do become complicated!” he grunted, thinking hard. Where would the engine be going? All around Knotty Cot, he wouldn’t be surprised. Ah! but it would end up in the Engine Shed. Hadn’t Hickey Burr said that all the engines were kept there when they weren’t running? Now he could leave the train at Blinkers Wink instead of going on to Trampledon, the station nearest to Holly’s place. Keeping to the side of the track he could follow it round until he came to the Engine Shed. It couldn’t be far, from what he remembered of it. He would ‘hang about’ there until everything was being closed up for the night. With luck he should be able to slip in when no one was looking. If he were to be discovered on the way out it would not matter. Hereabouts, hedgehogs had always been welcome. It was understood that humans were glad of their help against pests. Many a supper and breakfast had come his way from the park-owner’s little daughter, who seemed to know all about, and understand, his weakness for dog food. Always she greeted him with delight, begging him to stay, offering him a bed and the free run of the garden. If all went well now, he would do something about that before going on to Holly’s.

“I’ll nab m’ reach-me-downs, then I’ll go round and look her up,” he promised himself.

He ran into no difficulty at Blinkers Wink freight depot since no one was about. Scrambling quickly from the train he was off down the platform ramp, across the track leading to the Engine Shed and away beside it. All was quiet and peaceful. His spirits rose as he went. He felt he had the whole matter in hand. A little farther and he would be able to decide which end of the Engine Shed would be best to try for a way in.

There it was. Now he must go carefully. He stopped, sheltering behind a feathery evergreen and scanned the scene. Men were standing beside the turntable with their hands busy and backs turned as they put away the engines. It was to be a long wait. When the men moved to some task near the Carriage Shed, Hitch, keeping out of sight moved forward. Gaining the end wall farthest from the power house and stores, he rounded it and slipped quietly in at the first pair of double doors standing ajar. He was inside: that hadn’t been difficult.



He walked the length of the Shed, his head almost reaching the ceiling. Rows of steel pillars underpinned the framework that held up the plywood roof. It was pricked with skylights to let in a smoky-pearl light and covered outside with tarred felt to keep all dry and snug. The glare from tiny electric torch bulbs that here looked like the full scale ones, made him blink. Between the rows of pillars, on the real concrete floor, railway lines were laid, making the stalls on which the engines rested. Over each stall ran a louvered smoke vent, the full length of the Shed. It would have taken away the smoke from the funnel when the engine was fired up in the morning and damped down at night, if it had been a real Steam Shed. To make it seem real, for of course the whole railway was worked by electricity and controlled from the 'Cabin', matt black paint had been liberally daubed about the vent to make it look sooty. Between the rails of each stall was a service pit. As in real life, spare parts had been left about, resting against the walls under the big many-paned windows, or hanging on hooks and nails. Oil-cans stood in the rings made by the drips that had run down their sides, together with the tools of the trade. Several wheels were propped against the end wall between the doors leading to the power house and stores. A number of little plastic figures, men in boiler suits, stood about in the manner of men working and handling the gantry crane. This crane was the pride of the men who had made it. It ran on overhead rails and reached all parts of the Shed.

The model steam-engines, like their full size counter-parts, rested in their stalls after their labours. Faint gleaming and brass polished, they were proud and splendid monsters. There was the passenger express the Princess Coronation, splendid in blue, next to an empty stall. In the third and fourth stalls, two more passenger expresses, the Jubilee and the Royal Scot, one in black and the other in crimson. Beyond these Hitch could see the mixed traffic or general service 'Crab' Mogul also in crimson and then the dull black of the 8F goods express. The next, the Fowler Tank engine, looked familiar. It had pulled the goods train that had brought him to Blinkers Wink and he felt just a little more at home with that one having travelled behind it. A Flatiron almost hid one of the shiny red shunters, the Jintys, last in this glittering parade.

The doors to the stall nearest to him, the empty one, were wide open. It was most likely that the engine he wanted would come in there to

be with the other passenger express locomotives. Keeping carefully to one side to be clear of the track he peered round and out through the double doors and waited. While he had been checking those inside the Shed, another locomotive had come into the yard and was standing on the turntable. Slowly it swung round. Ah, here it came now, one of the biggest and best. It must be 'his' engine. Was there anything on the front? Being short sighted, he just could not make out at this distance. His heart thumped. Almost filling the doorway with its bulk the Princess Royal came in past him. Yes, he was in luck! Then a distant voice spoke:

“Bring out the Red Princess again, will you please? I think it looks in need of a bit of cleaning up.”

The engine moved past him again, going out. Hitch reached out but was nervous after his earlier brush with it. He fumbled, was not quick enough and it was gone. This was too much. It upset his usual steady temper. Rashly he launched himself after it, missed his footing and fell into the service pit. In a great huff he clambered out and looked for the safest exit. Having squeezed through the door at the back of the Shed he could hear the voices of the men even more clearly as they stood over the engine. It was no use, he decided. Something then, seemed to snap inside him. He must get away. Which way, though? There seemed to be people everywhere. Losing all sense of direction, he went rushing round and round, in a wide circle. The men straightened from the engine and stared with amazement. Regaining his wits he plunged into the nearest cover and lay there.

After a while it grew quiet. Sniffing and listening he came out of hiding. All was tidied and closed up. They had indeed tidied up the engine for there to one side of the turntable lay the cause of all his troubles. That which was lost was found. A few moments later he was completely himself again and free to roam. Which way now?

He explored a little to the north and found the 'Cabin', near a cluster of trees that grew beside the park-owner's garden wall. They sheltered a whole collection of odds and ends put there to come in useful again some day.

Day was drawing to a close. Westwards the sky spun to limpid blue caught fire and the sun slipped from the flame-red glory through amber

veils to sink in the purple clouds that lay like some dreamlike shore on the low edge of the sky. In the mellow softness of the golden twilight that followed, Hitch feeling more lively with every step, turned westward. If he was to pay that visit to the park-owner's garden, now was the time. It was but a short way from here.