

THE BOX TUNNEL

CHARLES READE

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The 10:15 train glided from Paddington May 7, 1847. In the left compartment of a certain first-class carriage were four passengers; of these two were worth description. The lady had a smooth, white, delicate brow, strongly marked eyebrows, long lashes, eyes that seemed to change colour, and a good-sized, delicious mouth, with teeth as white as milk. A man could not see her nose for her eyes and mouth; her own sex could, and would have told us some nonsense about it. She wore an unpretending grayish dress, buttoned to the throat with lozenge-shaped buttons, and a Scottish shawl that agreeably evaded colour. She was like a duck, so tight her plain feathers fitted her, and there she sat, smooth, snug, and delicious, with a book in her hand and a soupcon of her wrist just visible as she held it. Her opposite neighbour was what I call a good style of man, the more to his credit since he belonged to a corporation that frequently turns out the worst imaginable style of young men. He was a cavalry officer, aged twenty-five. He had a moustache, but not a very repulsive one not one of those subnasal pigtailed on which soup is suspended like dew on a shrub; it was short, thick, and black as a coal. His teeth had not yet been turned by tobacco smoke to the colour of juice; his clothes did not stick to nor hang to him; he had an engaging smile, and, what I liked the dog for, his vanity, which was inordinate, was in its proper place, his heart, not in his face, jostling mine and other people's who have none; in a word, he was what one oftener hears of than meets a young gentleman. He was conversing in an animated whisper with a companion, a fellow-officer; they were talking about what it is far better not to women. Our friend clearly did not wish to be overheard; for he cast ever and anon a furtive glance at his fair vis-à-vis and lowered his voice. She seemed completely absorbed in her book, and that reassured him. At last the two soldiers came down to a whisper (the truth must be told); the one who got down at Slough, and was lost to posterity, bet ten pounds to three that he who was going down with us to Bath and immortality would not kiss either of the ladies opposite upon the road. Done, done! Now I am sorry a man I have hitherto praised should have lent himself, even in a whisper, to such a speculation; but nobody is wise at all hours, not even when the clock is striking five and twenty, and you are to consider his profession, his good looks, and the temptation ten to three.

After Slough the party was reduced to three. At Twyford one lady dropped her handkerchief; Captain Dolignan fell on it like a lamb; two or three words were interchanged on this occasion. At Reading the Marlborough of our tale made one of the safe investments of that day; he bought a Times and Punch the latter full of steel-pen thrusts and woodcuts. Valour and beauty deigned to laugh at some inflamed humbug or other punctured by Punch. Now laughing together thaws our human ice; long before Swindon it was a talking-match; at Swindon who so devoted as Captain Dolignan? He handed them out, he souped them, he tough-chickened them, he brandied and cochinealed one, and he brandied and burnt-sugared the other; on their return to the carriage one lady passed into the inner compartment to inspect a certain gentleman's seat on that side of the line.

Reader, had it been you or I, the beauty would have been the deserter, the average one would have stayed with us till all was blue, ourselves included; not more surely does our slice of bread and butter, when it escapes from our hand, revolve it ever so often, alight face downward on the carpet. But this was a bit of a fop, Adonis, dragoon, so Venus remained in tete-à-tete with him. You have seen a dog meet an unknown female of his species; how handsome, how *empresse*, how expressive he becomes: such was Dolignan after Swindon, and, to do the dog justice, he got handsome and handsomer. And you have seen a cat conscious of approaching cream: such was Miss Haythorn; she became demurer and demurer. Presently our captain looked out of the window and laughed; this elicited an inquiring look from Miss Haythorn.

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We are only a mile from the Box Tunnel.

Do you always laugh a mile from the Box Tunnel? said the lady.

Invariably.

What for?

Why, hem! it is a gentleman's joke.

Captain Dolignan then recounted to Miss Haythorn the following:

A lady and her husband sat together going through the Box Tunnel; there was one gentleman opposite; it was pitch-dark. After the tunnel the lady said, 'George, how absurd of you to salute me going through the tunnel!' 'I did no such thing.' 'You didn't?' 'No; why?' 'Because somehow I thought you did!'

Here Captain Dolignan laughed and endeavoured to lead his companion to laugh, but it was not to be done. The train entered the tunnel.

Miss Haythorn. Ah!

Dolignan. What is the matter?

Miss Haythorn. I am frightened.

Dolignan (moving to her side). Pray do not be alarmed; I am near you.

Miss Haythorn. You are near me very near me indeed, Captain Dolignan.

Dolignan. You know my name?

Miss Haythorn. I heard you mention it. I wish we were out of this dark place.

Dolignan. I could be content to spend hours here reassuring you, my dear lady.

Miss Haythorn. Nonsense!

Dolignan. Pweep! (Grave reader, do not put our lips to the next pretty creature you meet, or will understand what this means.)

Miss Haythorn. Ee! Ee!

Friend. What is the matter?

Miss Haythorn. Open the door! Open the door!

There was a sound of hurried whispers; the door was shut and the blind pulled down with hostile sharpness.

If any critic falls on me for putting inarticulate sounds in a dialogue as above, I answer, with all the insolence I can command at present, Hit boys as big as yourself bigger, perhaps, such as Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes; they began it, and I learned it of them sore against my will.

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Miss Haythorn's scream lost most of its effect because the engine whistled forty thousand murders at the same moment, and fictitious grief makes itself heard when real cannot.

Between the tunnel and Bath our young friend had time to ask himself whether his conduct had been marked by that delicate reserve which is supposed to distinguish the perfect gentleman.

With a long face, real or feigned, he held open the door; his late friends attempted to escape on the other side; impossible! they must pass him. She whom he had insulted (Latin for kissed) deposited somewhere at his feet a look of gentle, blushing reproach; the other, whom he had not insulted, darted red-hot daggers at him from her eyes; and so they parted.

It was perhaps fortunate for Dolignan that he had the grace to be a friend to Major Hoskyns of his regiment, a veteran laughed at by the youngsters, for the major was too apt to look coldly upon billiard-balls and cigars; he had seen cannon-balls and linstocks. He had also, to tell the truth, swallowed a good bit of the mess-room poker, which made it as impossible for Major Hoskyns to descend to an ungentlemanlike word or action as to brush his own trousers below the knee.

Captain Dolignan told this gentleman his story in gleeful accents; but Major Hoskyns heard him coldly, and as coldly answered that he had known a man to lose his life for the same thing.

That is nothing, continued the major, but unfortunately he deserved to lose it.

At this blood mounted to the younger man's temples, and his senior added, I mean to say he was thirty-five; you, I presume, are twenty-one!

Twenty-five.

That is much the same thing; will you be advised by me?

If you will advise me.

Speak to no one of this, and send White the three pounds, that he may think you have lost the bet.

That is hard, when I won it.

Do it, for all that, sir.

Let the disbelievers in human perfectibility know that this dragoon, capable of a blush, did this virtuous action, albeit with violent reluctance; and this was his first damper. A week after these events he was at a ball. He was in that state of factitious discontent which belongs to us amiable English. He was looking in vain for a lady equal in personal attraction to the idea he had formed of George Dolignan as a man, when suddenly there glided past him a most delightful vision a lady whose beauty and symmetry took him by the eyes; another look: It can't be! Yes, it is! Miss Haythorn! (not that he knew her name), but what an apotheosis!

The duck had become a peahen radiant, dazzling; she looked twice as beautiful and almost twice as large as before. He lost sight of her; he found her again. She was so lovely she made him ill, and he alone must not dance with her, speak to her. If he had been content to begin her acquaintance the usual way it might have ended in kissing; it must end in nothing. As she danced sparks of beauty fell from her on all around but him; she did not see him; it was clear she never would see him. One gentleman was particularly assiduous; she smiled on his assiduity; he was ugly, but she smiled on him. Dolignan was surprised at his success, his ill taste, his ugliness, his impertinence. Dolignan at last found himself injured; who was this man? and what right had he to go on so? He

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never kissed her, I suppose, said Dolle. Dolignan could not prove it, but he felt that somehow the rights of property were invaded. He went home and dreamed of Miss Haythorn, and hated all the ugly successful. He spent a fortnight trying to find out who his beauty was; he never could encounter her again. At last he heard of her in this way: a lawyer's clerk paid him a little visit and commenced a little action against him in the name of Miss Haythorn for insulting her in a railway-train.

The young gentleman was shocked, endeavoured to soften the lawyer's clerk; that machine did not thoroughly comprehend the meaning of the term. The lady's name, however, was at last revealed by this untoward incident; from her name to her address was but a short step, and the same day our crestfallen hero lay in wait at her door, and many a succeeding day, without effect. But one fine afternoon she issued forth quite naturally, as if she did it every day, and walked briskly on the parade. Dolignan did the same, met and passed her many times on the parade, and searched for pity in her eyes, but found neither look nor recognition nor any other sentiment; for all this she walked and walked till all the other promenaders were tired and gone; then her culprit summoned resolution, and, taking off his hat, with a voice for the first time tremulous, besought permission to address her. She stopped, blushed, and neither acknowledged nor disowned his acquaintance. He blushed, stammered out how ashamed he was, how he deserved to be punished, how he was punished, how little she knew how unhappy he was, and concluded by begging her not to let all the world know the disgrace of a man who was already mortified enough by the loss of her acquaintance. She asked an explanation; he told her of the action that had been commenced in her name; she gently shrugged her shoulders, and said, How stupid they are! Emboldened by this, he begged to know whether or not a life of distant unpretending devotion would, after a lapse of years, erase the memory of his madness his crime!

She did not know!

She must now bid him adieu, as she had some preparations to make for a ball in the Crescent, where everybody was to be. They parted, and Dolignan determined to be at the ball where everybody was to be. He was there, and after some time he obtained an introduction to Miss Haythorn and he danced with her. Her manner was gracious. With the wonderful tact of her sex, she seemed to have commenced the acquaintance that evening. That night for the first time Dolignan was in love. I will spare the reader all a lover's arts by which he succeeded in dining where she dined, in dancing where she danced, in overtaking her by accident when she rode. His devotion followed her to church, where the dragoon was rewarded by learning there is a world where they neither polk nor smoke, the two capital abominations of this one.

He made an acquaintance with her uncle, who liked him, and he saw at last with joy that her eye loved to dwell upon him when she thought he did not observe her. It was three months after the Box Tunnel that Captain Dolignan called one day upon Captain Haythorn, R.N., whom he had met twice in his life, and slightly propitiated by violently listening to a cutting-out expedition; he called, and in the usual way asked permission to pay his addresses to his daughter. The worthy captain straightway began doing quarter-deck, when suddenly he was summoned from the apartment by a mysterious message. On his return he announced, with a total change of voice, that it was all right, and his visitor might run alongside as soon as he chose. My reader has divined the truth; this nautical commander, terrible to the foe, was in complete and happy subjugation to his daughter, our heroine.

As he was taking leave, Dolignan saw his divinity glide into the drawing-room. He followed her, observed a sweet consciousness deepen into confusion; she tried to laugh, and cried instead, and then she smiled again; when he kissed her hand at the door it was George and Marian instead of Captain this and Miss the other.

A reasonable time after this (for my tale is merciful and skips formalities and torturing delays) these two were very happy; they were once more upon the railroad, going to enjoy their honeymoon all by themselves. Marian Dolignan was dressed just as before duck-like and delicious, all bright except her clothes; but George sat beside her this time instead of opposite, and she drank him in gently from her long eyelashes.

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Marian, said George, married people should tell each other all. Will you ever forgive me if I own to you;
no

Yes, yes!

Well then, you remember the Box Tunnel? (This was the first allusion he had ventured to it.) I am ashamed to say I had three pounds to ten pounds with White I would kiss one of you two ladies, and George, pathetic externally, chuckled within.

I know that, George; I overheard you, was the demure reply.

Oh! you overheard me! Impossible.

And did you not hear me whisper to my companion? I made a bet with her.

You made a bet? how singular! What was it?

Only a pair of gloves, George.

Yes, I know; but what about it?

That if you did you should be my husband, dearest.

Oh! but stay; then you could not have been so very angry with me, love. Why, dearest, then you brought that action against me

Mrs. Dolignan looked down.

I was afraid you were forgetting me! George, you will never forgive me?

Sweet angel! why, here is the Box Tunnel!

Now, reader fie! no! no such thing! you can't expect to be indulged in this way every time we come to a dark place. Besides, it is not the thing. Consider two sensible married people. No such phenomenon, I assure you, took place. No scream in hopeless rivalry of the engine this time!