

# FESTERGRIMM

Thomas Taylor

## Ghost Train

It was a cold and blustery day at the wrong end of November when trouble returned to Eerie-on-Sea. Violet spotted it first, of course, but it was I, Herbert Lemon – Lost-and-Founder at the Grand Nautilus Hotel – who had the queasy feeling from the start. The queasy feeling that began when we were sent to meet a surprise hotel guest at the town’s tumbledown railway station.

“I didn’t even know there *was* a railway station in Eerie-on-Sea,” says Vi, as we walk through the draughty ticket office and out onto the platform. The rusty old rail track beside it disappears into the gaping mouth of a tunnel hewn long ago into Eerie Rock. “It looks more like the entrance to a ghost train.”

“Pah!” Mr Mollusc replies, with a scowl at the dead leaves that drift along the platform, and the one fizzing Victorian lamp that illuminates them. The “Welcome to Cheerie-on-Sea” station sign creaks like a broken promise – the letters C and H obscured by a sooty cobweb that no one will wipe away now till spring. The wind moans around the wrought iron columns that hold up the station canopy, and from somewhere there comes a persistent thumping sound that I can’t explain.

“No wonder we get so few guests in winter,” the hotel manager adds, with a shudder.

I glance at my two companions, and my mouth twitches between smile and frown. It’s not every day I’m out and about with my best friend Violet Parma *and* the miserable old manager of the Grand Nautilus Hotel. It’s a strange feeling having to deal with both of them at the same time.

“It’s not a proper railway service anymore,” I explain to Violet. “More a tourist attraction these days.”

The train – an antique steam locomotive called *Bethusulah* – wheezes back and forth along the old cliff-top line during the summer months, stopping at a few half-forgotten villages on the way. I expect the bucket-and-spade tourists who ride it in August think it’s quaint. But *quaint* is one of those words that can tip easily into *eerie* once the weather turns, and the dark of winter closes in. And yet, the train does still sometimes run in the off-season – cliff collapses and bonkers weather permitting. You’d have to be pretty bonkers yourself to use it then though, which is why I’m huddling beside Violet, wrapped up against the icy wind in a coat and scarf, and muttering “I’ve got a queasy feeling about this” as we wait for old *Bethusulah* to bring her mysterious visitor to town.

“And you really don’t have any idea who it is?” Violet demands of the hotel manager, ignoring my quease and taking a crumpled bag of Mrs Fossil’s rum fudge from her pocket. “This special guest?”

“No, I do not,” Mr Mollusc snaps, turning to Violet to bristle his moustache directly at her. “And quite what business it is of *yours*, I don’t know. I am here as an emissary of the Grand Nautilus Hotel, at the behest of Lady Kraken herself. Herbert Lemon is here to carry the bags and do as he’s told. Remind me again, girl, why *you* are here.”

Violet shrugs.

“Maybe I’m a trainspotter,” she replies, with a sweet look of innocence that hardly suits her. “Here to spot a train.”

“Pfft!” goes Mr Mollusc. “Hardly! You’re here to rubberneck at our V.I.P and stop the Lemon boy from doing his work, as usual. But I’m warning you, Violet Parma – her Ladyship has commanded a Grand Nautilus welcome for this very special person, and you will *not* get in the way.”

And he tries to look important as he wipes the remains of the “pfft!” off his moustache with a hanky.

“So, it really could be anyone?” says Violet, her eyes wondering. “Could be a film star! Or a sporting champion, or ...” and she excitedly pops a piece of fudge in her mouth before offering the bag to me “... or a mysterious person with a dark past, whose arrival will spark a whole new adventure!”

The hotel manager frowns in annoyance as he slaps my hand away from the bag.

“No sweets on duty! And no dark pasts or adventures, thank you very much. If I had my way— Oh, what *is* that noise?”

The thumping sound, the one we noticed earlier, has been growing louder.

“It...” I start to say, with a definite uptick of the queasy feeling, “it sounds like footsteps. On the roof!”

“Nonsense!” Mr Mollusc snorts, looking up at the creaky wooden canopy that covers the platform. “Why would anyone be up there? Above us? Walking towards that ... that hole over there? Thumping and lumping along with the slow, uncertain, *awful* shuffle of a ... of a...”

He gulps.

“... of a zombie?” I suggest, and the Mollusc stiffens with fright.

Slowly, the three of us look up at the windy gap in the platform roof as the ... *whatever-it-is* ...approaches.

Thump ... thump...

*Thump!*

The sound comes to an abrupt halt, right by the hole.

And nothing happens.

“Perhaps this *is* a ghost train, after all,” Violet declares brightly, before chomping on another cube of fudge. “How exciting!”

“Oh, really!” Mr Mollusc pulls himself together. “I’m sure there’s a perfectly rational explanation for...”

And that’s when, with a terrifying shriek of despair, the ghost appears!

*Bethusulah*

Or rather, the ghost falls through the hole in the roof and lands on the platform with a thud. And we see that it's not a ghost at all, but...

"A seagull!" I cry, trying to sound like I knew that all along.

Sure enough, a scruffy white and grey seagull is flopping around in the leaves on the platform. It gives another piercing shriek, and pecks ferociously at something blue wrapped tightly around its legs and one wing.

"Disgusting!" Mr Mollusc cries, backing away. "Filthy thing!"

"It's not disgusting," Violet says, "it's *tangled*. Tangled up in an old plastic bag."

Without hesitation Violet pushes the bag of fudge into my hand, and stoops down beside the stricken bird. I'm reminded, as it writhes around beside Violet, of just how enormous seagulls can be. Vi tries to grab the plastic, but has to pull her hands back to avoid a vicious peck. Then, as the gull struggles once more – its one free wing thumping uselessly on the ground – Violet pounces, pinning the bird firmly but gently onto the platform. The seagull pecks at her furiously, but the sleeves of her too-big coat – borrowed once from my Lost-and-Foundery and not yet returned – protect her.

"Don't just stand there, Herbie!" Violet gasps, struggling to hold the bird. "We've got to help it. Do you have something to cut the plastic off?"

"Cut it off?" Mr Mollusc seems to be having as much trouble believing what he's seeing as if an actual ghost had appeared. "*Help* it? Don't be absurd, child! Seagulls are a nuisance. No more than vermin. Just kick it onto the railway line, and let the train put it out of its misery. It'll be one fewer flying rat to deal with."

I rummage deep in my pockets, as Violet glares daggers at the hotel manager. I wish I could use one of those daggers to free the bird. Instead, all I have to give Violet is the key to my tool box.

"It's OK, it's OK," Vi whispers softly to the panicky gull as she saws at the twisted blue carrier bag with my key. "Ignore the horrible man. You'll soon be free."

I say nothing. I hate to agree with Mr Mollusc, but seagulls *are* a nuisance, and thieves, every one! And Eerie-on-Seagulls are the worst of all. I've lost more chips and doughnuts than I can remember to these pesky birds over the years. But, at the same time, I know Violet is right. We can't leave the poor thing to die a slow and plasticky death.

"Pah!" Mr Mollusc says. "That's the problem with you goody-two-shoes types – you're always trying to be kind, even when it doesn't count. But that creature won't thank you, girl."

When it's free you're more likely to end up with a bleeding hand, to go with your bleeding heart."

The bag finally comes away, and the bird struggles harder now that its other wing is loose. Violet cries "stand back!" before lifting her hands to release the gull. It springs into the air, flapping furiously as it rushes across the platform and out into the sky.

"Being kind always counts," Violet says, as she gets to her feet and faces the hotel manager. "One day it might be *you* who needs help from a stranger, and..."

But before Violet can finish, and without warning, the seagull reappears! It swoops straight at her, jabbing viciously with its beak, forcing her to cover her eyes with her hands. The bird hovers over her head, beating its wings and jabbing again and again, as Violet cries in pain. Then, just as I'm finally getting my legs into gear so I can help, the great white bird flaps straight at *me*! It snatches the paper bag of fudge from my hand, and – with a final pterodactyl cry, right in my face – it beats its strong wings out into the sky above the station, and flies away towards the sea, a small scrap of blue plastic still caught around one leg.

"Violet!" I rush over to her. "Vi, are you OK?"

Violet lowers her hands. She has a nasty cut on her cheek, and a look of shock on her face.

And that's when we hear a new sound – a horrible, wheezy rasping that turns out on investigation to be the sound Mr Mollusc makes when he is laughing uncontrollably.

"Ah, *ack ack!*" he cackles. "Oh, dearie me ... *ack!* This is just *too* good..."

He has to gulp in some air before he can continue.

"Maybe you've learned your lesson now, girl. You might think the Universe dishes out rewards to do-gooders, but the seagull says otherwise. Ha! I hope you enjoy your dose of reality. Now, get yourself cleaned up – the train is arriving, and I don't want our special guest to arrive to a pool of blood. Eerie-on-Sea has a bad enough reputation as it is."

All I can do is pass Violet a cleanish tissue – and give her a grin of encouragement – as a distant light grows in the tunnel, and the echoing clamour of the approaching locomotive fills the air.

"Straighten your cap, Lemon!" Mr Mollusc says to me, fiddling with his tie. "And try to look useful for once. Remember, there's no impression like a first impression."

"Even if the first impression is the worst impression," I mutter under my breath, but the Mollusc is too busy arranging his hair to notice.

"That looks nasty," I add to Vi, as she dabs her cheek.

She manages a small smile.

“I’ve had worse,” she says. “And it was *still* the right thing to do.”

“I know,” I reply. “But it feels like a sign of bad things to come. Ever since I heard about this special guest, I’ve been having a...”

“...a queasy feeling?” Violet finishes for me. “Yes, you said. But Herbie, this could actually *be* the start of a new adventure. Aren’t you at least a little bit excited?”

“Nope.”

“Really? You aren’t at all curious about who is on that train?”

“Nope,” I say again.

“But...” Violet is clearly building up to a big argument to persuade me.

“I’m going to stop you right there, Vi,” I say firmly, straightening my cap and giving my friend one of my most determined looks. “I’m doing NOPE-ember this year. I’ve been saying ‘nope’ to everything remotely adventurous all month, and I’ve still got a day to go. I’m here to carry bags and keep my head down, thanks. And after your nasty run-in with that seagull, I suggest you do the same.”

“Herbie!” Violet cries, making her cheek bleed again.

“Nope!” I declare, passing her another tissue. “The sooner we get back to the warm fire in my Lost-and-Foundery the better I will be, and that’s that. Besides, here’s the train.”

With a rush of sooty smoke and a blast of steam whistle, *Bethusuleh* eases into the station. The enormous train puffs to a standstill, wheezing like an old iron dragon with a chesty cough. I’ve never seen the locomotive up close before, and the black and red paintwork of its immense bulk looms over us. Great clouds of steam and smoke – as thick as any sea mist – engulf the platform, making Mr Mollusc splutter into his handkerchief.

“Eerie-on-Sea!” calls a voice, and we dimly see the conductor, dressed in an old-fashioned uniform, step onto the platform and ring a hand bell. “Eerie-on-Sea, and the end of the line!”

“Honestly!” gasps Mr Mollusc, waving smoke from his face. “Only in this ridiculous town would I have to put up with such nonsense. A *steam* train, indeed! This infernal contraption belongs in a museum.”

“Less of that, thank you.” The conductor glares at the hotel manager, giving *Bethusuleh*’s flank an affectionate pat. “Old Beth has years of life left in her yet, don’t you, girl?”

The train emits a mighty POOT from her whistle, as if in reply.

“Now, all aboard if you’re coming aboard,” the conductor continues. “They’re forecasting snow, and the last place you want to get stuck in is Eerie-on-Sea. All aboard!”

“We’re not getting *on*,” Mr Mollusc snaps in reply, “we’re getting someone *off*. A very important someone. Don’t you have any passengers?”

The conductor looks back down the platform. No one emerges from the smoke and darkness.

“Funny, I thought there *was* someone,” he says, with a shrug, “but I must be mistaken.”

Then he signals to the train driver, climbs back onboard, and slams the door behind him. With great deliberation the mighty locomotive gasps out a vast puff of steam, and then another and another, as it begins to ease backwards towards the tunnel.

“Stop!” Mr Mollusc cries, starting after it. “What about my VIP?”

But the train gives a final, echoing whistle of farewell and is gone, leaving behind nothing but swirling clouds and an empty platform.

Except, wait – it’s not entirely empty.

As the sea wind begins to clear the smoke, it seems that something might be there, after all. A shape is becoming visible in the gloom – the shape of a solitary man, standing beside two suitcases.

“Oh!” Mr Mollusc stops, and straightens his tie again. “I *do* beg your pardon, sir. Are you expecting us? We are from the Grand Nautilus Hotel, sent to receive a special guest. Is it ... is it you?”

“Well, well, well,” comes a voice from the shape-of-a-man, “that’s Mr Mollusc, unless I am very much mistaken. Ah, it is *so* good to be home.”

Then the man steps forward into the uncertain light, and raises his hat. I’m so shocked that I cry out an involuntary “NOPE!” before I can stop myself. Violet stiffens beside me, letting out a sharp gasp of her own.

Because, it seems, we *are* going to see a ghost today.

“Perhaps you remember me?” the man suggests, stepping further into the light so that there can be no doubt at all. “I feel sure that you do. My name is Eels. Sebastian Eels.”