



# Liminal

How we put life into stones

*Merlin Smallbone*

# Liminal

*You can look at the Shropshire market town of Liminal, going about its business before the First World War, as a collection of ordinary eccentrics or as a gateway to exciting things just out of view. When I tell you "He didn't look like a wife murderer." I'm hoping you pause to ask questions. 'What does a murderer look like?' 'Why even bring up the subject?'. Standing stones on the moor are just stones, but we dress them in our strange whimsy. Not fairytale fantasies but x-ray-mirrors to look inside ourselves.*

*This book is easy to read, full of curiosities, fun and emotional moments. Most of all, at the right angle, you can glimpse a lost fairground of ideas through translucent pages.*

*Merlin Smallbone is a prolific multi-genre writer from Essex in England. Find out more at [merlinsmallbone.shop](http://merlinsmallbone.shop)*



# Preview

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Merlin Smallbone

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First edit print 4<sup>th</sup> Mar 2019

Minor edits, small additions. Dec 2019

Produced on 7 Jan 2020 at 18:32:00

MSBC : LI-C-12

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# LIMINAL

It is time to consider the friendliness of things. Come with me to where we can find, amongst other things, seven knitted left handed yellow gloves, a salamander nesting in a cuspidor from a congo river steamer, a necklace of kidney stones taken from dead triplets, and a device for listening to the clouds chattering.

A rowing boat is not friendly. Its wooden shell wobbles with no comfort. The oars may perform a service but there is no soul in it to be friendly. A long-case clock has a voice and knows something. Is it friendly or mocking as it measures out long seconds? To discover the equilibrium of how things play with our mind we should compare a chart for measuring the size of owl's eggs and a maroon pram that makes a pleasant tingling sound as it goes along.

Imagine a small market town in rural Shropshire a while before the First World War. Add sparse Scottish detail, Welsh presbyterian severity, and a fine helping of antique English eccentricity and you have an inkling of the town called Liminal. It is upstanding and proud in a grandmotherly way, yet

materially twisted, patched, repaired and cranky like another grandma. Washing day is Monday, market day is Thursday, football is Saturday, Sundays are for congregating. It is a peaceful place yet riven by bitter personal feuds known to practically everyone. Indiscretion and gossip never lead much beyond 'well I never - who'd ha' thought it'. Of course there are tea-set coteries trying to lick the pattern off the plate of outrage. News of high-jinks is spread about in the public bars. Gossip flits through the market stalls like little dust devils. Yet even the strict chapel brethren and sistren couldn't bring themselves to a lynch-mob hysteria about fornication and drunkenness. In short Liminal was full of interesting people going about mundane lives. How times have changed.

Perhaps I'd better start with the unique railway as it's a convenient way to introduce you to some of the more unusual characters, as you might feel the projections of a sack to guess the contents. In the middle of the nineteenth century, land agents in cahoots with solicitors carrying carpet bags arrived to sell shares in railway construction. The prospect of profits to the

landowners were rather like valley mist on an early autumn morning. It might clear in an hour or rise in a grey haze to spoil the last of the summer sun. Some farmers considered they could sell produce further afield for a better price, others pointed out that wide availability would reduce the prices on top of an already depressed market. Lord Trandillion, owner of the 'rest home' argued with his son about the opportunity of having a connection to the growing national railway network. Son said they could advertise for customers as far away as Bristol and Birmingham. Father twirled his mustache, waved his cigar, and said so they could but the thing about a 'rest' home was it was restful and so should remain undisturbed by snorting monsters and day trippers. Father had always regretted indulging Rupert from his very first wooden pull-along engine. At school he'd been caned for asking the Latin master what good were the Romans if they didn't have Steam Engines. Much greater stinging and lasting humiliation came to Rupert when he asked his fellow boys to call him Isambard. As father owned the land in the valley, Liminal remained six miles from the proper railway. After a brief military education for officers, where mules and coolies featured in transportation more than the telegraph and high pressure steam, Rupert went off in a huff to India to try his hand at building a Government railway up the Himalayas or

whatever mountains they had there. He only managed a perfunctory tour of the steamer's engine room as the poor boy didn't realise that money was required to defeat the mutual contempt between passengers and crew. During the oven of the equator he dreamed of the time when the pressures of imminent danger would allow him, a natural leader and expert, to coax the machinery. Without hurricanes, pirates, collisions in fog, sea monsters, earthquakes, the sky turning red or even the captain having a rare madness brought on by tiger-spiders (whatever they were) eating into his brain, Rupert was forced to smile and play cards in the saloon. He was late to the flirting parties as well. But when he arrived at Delhi to get his bearings, he met a recently widowed lady who, as Angostura bitters is to Pink Gin, soon knocked him into shape. She showed him how to be an man and entertain himself without looking silly. They made an interesting couple. Victoria and Albert with him playing the role of a squat Victoria complete with chubby face and thin, almost beak-like, lips catching up with the latest joke. She had the attentive yet friendly gaze of a monarch's consort, obviously without the mutton chops. In the limited circle of the British army officers and civil servants of the Raj she soon became known as 'Albert without whiskers'. Rupert had the misfortune to be stuck in Delhi for over eighteen months due to the shortage of manpower and various

emergencies like plague and famine. At least he had a role to flounder about in and staff to give orders to, but Arwen was no nearer escaping the desiccating atmosphere of the desperately arid female British society. As any good, or should we say great, British woman at a loose-end would do, she invented a mission for herself and commandeered half a dozen of her 'beloved' servants for expeditions to paint watercolours. She wrote dispatches to the London Times but it's not recorded if any were ever printed. She had a nasty habit of adopting native children for a few rupees which had to be returned for a lot more rupees when everyone found out. Naturally this child-hunger made people wonder about Rupert as much as they were concerned about Arwen. While Rupert had proper, if minor, documented credentials, Arwen could only claim title to an offshoot of the Royal house of Sweden for which there were no reference books to hand. Her husband had been a respectable captain in a respectable, for India, regiment and the men liked her as she laughed and winked where that sort of thing was supposedly frowned upon. She remembered their names and was just that fraction older so as to be their older sister when it came to unburdening the stresses of separation and yearning. So it was with regret to those left behind, that Rupert and Arwen boarded the P&O steamer *Bombay Bay* to return to Blighty. Rupert felt emotional as if saying good-

bye to his school chums. Arwen was tense until they were steaming over blue not brown seas and she'd made sure the chief steward was 'approachable'. Comfort and privilege were her objectives. Soon she would be Lady Trandillion. The betrothal wasn't official but barring acts of God it was inevitable.

Two days after the monotony of ship-board life had set-in Arwen said to Rupert. "When will we get married dear?"

"Next year I suppose dear."

"Why wait a whole year dear?" She stroked her hands across his oiled black hair.

"I haven't told father yet."

She tickled his bare chin. (Beards and hot climates didn't mix.) "Naughty boy! Anyway you're old enough to get married on your own."

"But he could disinherit me. Or just be awkward."

"Oh really Rupert dear. In these modern times! It's hardly likely." She curled her finger around the curls of his ear. "What do you think he could object to? Is my nose too squat?"

"No... Oh no... It's not squat at all."

"Is it my face?"

"No dear. Um. He's just awkward and ready to find fault with anything."

"How strange. Father and son so different. He can find fault with anything." She puffed in his ear. "Complete opposites."

Even Rupert twigged there was something cracked about this conversation. "I suppose you could say that dear."

"What are my faults dear?" She stood back and while staring at him reached behind her neck to unclasp her necklace of native pearls.

The monsoon comes with a bit of a warning. There's a period of anticipation. The dust clouds of drought about to be turned to seething and streaming flood and mud. Their cabin was filled with that pressure of plunging from desperation to pandemonium. Later it occurred to Rupert that Arwen's habit of buying children might be a fault but by then it was too late and they'd been as good as un-official husband and wife for over a year so he might as well make her an honest woman. It never occurred to him that he might be making himself honest at the same time. A suitable gratuity to the chief steward made the captain amenable to conducting a marriage ceremony before they reached Capetown.

I've been trying to tell you about this railway. It's about two feet gauge. Three miles long in the shape of a V. Liminal is at the apex of the V. The station is a station master's house with

carved gables, finials and a chimney topped with a decorative terra cotta chimney pot in the shape of a Turkish belly dancer complete with a cut glass 'gem' in the belly button. You could walk the full length of the weed-free single platform in five seconds. At one end is an apple-green signal box overlooking the single set of points which switch between the branches. At the other end of the platform is a siding and a somewhat dilapidated wooden shed with a corrugated iron roof. This shed is kept in repair though because it has the dual functions of firstly hiding a vehicle and secondly hiding two vehicles and their occupants. When the wind blows from the south or east the doors grind and jolt like the gearbox of the motor bus to Wembleton taking a run up Market hill. Everyone knows that sound. Luke from Outwell can mimic it perfectly. Many people have stumbled as they hear it coming unexpectedly and make a rush. So he says.

There are garden paths with more pretensions than this railway. It doesn't have a name which is good for ignoring official enquiry letters from the Board of Trade. There are no trains as such, just a few coal waggons and private conveyances which will be described later. When constructed by Rupert, the rails were second, third or fourth-hand taken from quarries, brickworks and mines. In places

they've been replaced by angle iron, gas-pipe and even oak staves. Bill from the 'rest home' is sometimes called-on to make essential repairs or shore-up weak spots. Nowadays his daughter-in-law sends an itemised bill in duplicate while his son tries to live up to daughter-in-law's billing. It gets the job done though as Bill collects payment a week later in person and any deficiency in his work would be pointed out to him. Bill can't read so he has to get his daughter-in-law to arbitrate in any dispute. She's good at being sharp but fair. A little on the sharp side of fair perhaps, but as Bill appears so innocently enthusiastic who else would they employ for a few shillings. Bill can smooth-over confusions and leave everyone optimistic for the next time there's a little crisis with the permanent way.

The railway was built by Rupert to please his new wife. It was a folly but also a show of individuality and determination. His father understood and had anyway been wooed by Arwen. It was one of her prongs of attack. She wasn't going to let Rupert or herself be cast aside by some stuffy milord. Her main thrust was her maturity leading Rupert to settle-down and have children. Lots of children. When she realised the profitability of the 'rest home' and saw some further business potential it was her suggestion that

Rupert should go to Switzerland for six months to study their methods. That would give her time to fully win father Trandillion's trust. A supposed miracle baby on the way meant she could reasonably stay here while Rupert went away. Father took an hour to understand that Arwen was a determined business woman and whatever her real relationship with Rupert was, she was an asset to the family.

About a month after Rupert had left for Switzerland, Lord Trandillion, Eric, asked Arwen as they were sitting together on the verandah overlooking the farms in the valley. "Can I ask you a personal question my dear?"

With the reflex speed of a professional she said "Yes of course."

"It's this. Shouldn't you be with Rupert in Switzerland?"

"I'm torn dear father. You see on the one hand I know he's lonely – but in a way he's used to that and it'll make him want to come back here more with the knowledge to make the rest-home business twice or ten times as profitable. On the other hand – if his future is here at the family seat then I want to keep it warm for him if you know what I mean. He needs to be happy here. Have you thought of taking another wife Eric?"

She didn't need to look at his face to see the accuracy of her suggestion. There

was a certain lady of a certain age much like himself. Leaves of whispers blowing in the wind were plenty enough for Arwen but had been nothing more than wishful thinking and the occasional secret tryst to Lord Trandillion. "Surely father – Rupert's future is here. If there's a profit in the home then won't that make you and say – say a certain lady who breeds horses at Ofertheir happy together?" Arwen knew how to confuse with multiple possible good news.

Within a year Lord Trandillion had skedaddled to the lower pastures more suitable for horse breeding and riding for private pleasure. Two could tackle wooded hills on steaming mounts to gaze over valleys with April cloud shadows racing across the bracken and gorse then jump up on the other side. His hair grew longer, smile grew to a joyful grin and everyone smiled at his transformation from grey to 'hooray!'. He was delightful to the female servants and visitors without ever feeling the need to dominate, seduce or take advantage. Strangely his returned free energy was returned in good humour. He found Rupert's new dedication to business as if it was some religion rather disturbing and intensely boring. Eric's cartwheeling honesty was offended by his son's attention to manipulation and profit. Father and son did have a long talk about being careful in business

ventures but the paying crops of percentages and margins beat the flamboyant weed of letting things continue as they had been. Arwen occupied Trandillion Hall. Rupert became his father's previous image, lived there and conducted business using his imagination and Arwen's profits. Many years later, after Rupert was put in a 'rest home' the railway still existed and an old lady could be seen pushing a sky-blue pram along it. Inside were a dozen empty sauce bottles she called 'her children'.

## 2

To you and me, a lightning conductor is a friendly guardian for when the world becomes upset with electric rage. The bright powder-green of the copper, black stains dripping on the brickwork from the fixing bolts, draughtsman's folds and very-topmost spikes are signs of necessary security in an untrustworthy world where nature may spit on man's creations. We might imagine the ear-shattering second when, in the middle of a torrent, the lightning conductor earths a blinding flash, but mostly we are content to register the wisdom of solid building. Two men in Liminal were curious about the question: Why do churches have lightning conductors?

Religion in Liminal was well observed. Practically every family had an allegiance to some church or chapel. Each sect was known for the style of the preachers and social benefits. There was no more animosity between congregations than say between those who went to Boydens the butchers and Albert King's. Everyone knew that the very best fashionable hats came from Shrewsbury but when it came to millinery for the majority of those who lived in and around Liminal, there were two

choices and you stay loyal to the milliner you were brought-up with. Summer picnics and pageants were the highlight for the children. There was an element of competition between the congregations but only the Unreformed Wesleyans were huffy about guests joining-in. With so many children to supervise, young men and women, smiling in their Sunday best, would be required. Even though their parents, aunts and uncles might be present, there was no embarrassment walking right beside a nice girl or boy, and every expectation of being asked to tea on another date.

Samuel Torrens lives in the Station Master's house and is often seen proudly wearing the shabby and well-repaired morning suit he uses for an official uniform. Apparently, so he says, the station masters at Crewe and Swindon have top hats and gold watch chains so he ought to make the effort. As there were only six official users of the line and there were no such thing as tickets, his duties were rather more imaginary in the arabesques of performance than onerous. Although to be fair, it took a lot of experience to be a humble servant perfectly poised between the menial tasks of carrying shopping and minding dogs, and solemn secrecy of handing over the key to the 'engine' shed to either Lancelot from the Lonaway branch or Judith from the Offertheir branch.

Sam's wife, Aggie, had hit on the idea of using 'her gift' of poetry to write ballads, melodramatic tear-jerkers, morals and gripping tales of heroic deeds on the railways. Her publishers were always asking for more. She invented apparitions, prevented accidents by having dogs and ghosts send a message across the moors, wept over personal tragedies by boiler explosions, foolish excesses, sudden smashes or sweet-hearts waving goodbye for ever as the train steamed-off into the distance leaving a broken heart to suffer on the platform. When her invention dried-up she took her husband for a rather luxurious trip to the Lake District, by train and steamer. This satisfied her so much and confused him so much that it wasn't long before Sam had to look after the grey cat and the green parrot all on his own. At least she sent postcards.

Inspired by his absent wife's profitable poetry Samuel tried his hand at writing. 'A year in the life of a country stationmaster' took him nearly two years to write. When he showed it to his wife on one of her dutiful visits she realised the bits that were invented were dull or ridiculous, while the true bits would get him straight into court. She also realised that Sam was a decent sort, and even though she was now a bohemian free-spirit, she couldn't forget him like she'd forgotten the cat and the parrot. With her experience she could rewrite

Sam's two years of labour in less than two weeks. Whilst in other company she might have been greedy and seen an opportunity for herself, back in Liminal this was his gift to her and she should give him a bigger gift in return. She asked Sam to clear out the collection of spidery creepers and spiky cacti habitually abandoned by 'Duchess' Anastasia out of the booking office and sat down to set about a complete rewrite. After a week she took what she'd done to her Birmingham publisher and returned with a cheque for her previous sales and a receipt for part one of *A year in the life of a country stationmaster's wife*. She showed both to Sam and made him open a bottle of wine from a case she'd had sent from Birmingham.

"You know I'm TT Aggie. Why do you make me do it?"

"A glass of wine won't send you to hell Sam. A bottle might but it's perfectly civilised in all the best towns."

"Aye! I've heard of all the drunkenness in all the towns. Big to small – even here in Liminal. I cry when I see Davies drinking his wages while his daughter and her children are starving. She works hard but he just takes money from her."

"You're right as always Sam. But is it the drink or his weakness? He's a weak man and..." She was already sketching stanzas in her mind...

Later she said "I've decided to call you Tilly in your books."

"Books!"

"Oh yes. More than one. You see why it's better as a station master's wife don't you?"

"No. Not really dear."

"Because it's more interesting coming as women's gossip and men don't mind it either. Men like engines, trains, telegraphs and getting places but would look down their noses at some wayside station master. Would you buy say 'Memoirs of a butcher' or 'Bootmakers' tales'. No of course not. But 'You'd never believe the things I've seen in the street outside my shop' might be a bit more tempting. I have to get people to plunge into their purse at a station bookstall for fourpence to read my books. I know what I'm talking about."

"I'm sure you do dear. This wine tastes like vinegar."

"I suppose it would after so long without. We'll have to leave the red for now to let it settle but that tastes more like slightly burned crusts and blackberries."

Sam's younger brother Thomas was one of those who asked the 'lightning-conductor question'. In his case he wanted to find out about everything. Having been a star pupil at the grammar school he was asked to stay on as an

assistant master. As his sweetheart was the headmaster's daughter there was little chance of him refusing. He would often cycle thirty miles to astronomy society meetings and stay the night. He read every book on scientific subjects he could find. The headmaster was not scientifically minded but open to progress. It looked good on the prospectus to appear progressive. After all, there was a new world of technology and science where his pupils might do well. Especially those with County scholarships and no family connections who might make their way with mastery of steam, dynamos, steel and reinforced concrete. Medicine was probably out of their reach though, and of course law and the church required traditional scholarship rather than technical knowledge.

Tom was an irrepressible enthusiast with the knack of getting projects completed even if they didn't work. He said that the making of things was a skill to be nurtured and whatever the result of the project turned out to be, he'd learned more about making things. Gwendoline, the headmaster's wife, had a soft spot for the polite and energetic Tom as a boy and encouraged her daughter Sybil to appreciate the sense of scholarly achievement and potential in a man. She'd also been worried that her daughter hadn't shown any signs of settling down and gently asked her

husband to encourage Tom's experiments as they were practically the only thing Sybil showed any enthusiasm for. They didn't want a repeat of that time when she locked herself in her room for five days while looking for Pythagoras' triangles with prime-number sides! Sybil suggested things in a silly unscientific way that tickled Tom. It was all girlish flights of fancy but what other interest was there for her in Liminal? Her parents weren't going to let her discover the fleshpots of Oxford or Cambridge, London or even Aberystwyth. Alone with Tom her contribution extended beyond fluffy suggestion to decoration and geometrical design details. Tom, with her father's permission, suggested she should take up photography and by that means become an artist of capturing moments. Tom was really very clever so they spent quite a lot of time together in the darkroom. Darkrooms don't have keyholes.

Tom preferred to read books, order parts, then sit at a bench and make cameras rather than take photographs. Sybil found she could make a suggestion for something to make and Tom would take it seriously. A perambulator which made a soothing jingly sound as it was pushed along was simple. They both knew a periscope attached to a safety bicycle to look out for penny-farthings was daft but according to Tom it was a

worthwhile exercise to learn about periscopes and optics first-hand. Of course, no matter how much Sybil contributed, it was Tom who met with 'scientific' gentlemen to share progress and problems. Sybil did have a lovely draughting hand. She could draw diagrams and decorate apparatus to make it look like it belonged in a gentleman's study rather than being the product of a late night failures in a draughty workshop smelling of an old paraffin lamp. At one Sunday tea Sybil suggested a device to listen to the clouds chattering.

Her father looked up and from deep inside his beard said "If you're going to be silly then you might as well stay silent."

Her mother said "Don't be so harsh George. Have another jam fancy. Just because you can't hear the clouds chattering doesn't mean nobody can."

"I've never heard of such a thing. What about Tom? Have you ever heard of such a thing?"

"No Sir – But once upon a time nobody had ever heard of America. Absence of proof is no proof of absence."

"But the clouds are around us every day. If they made any noise whatsoever then it would be common knowledge."

"Not if they whistled at the high frequencies dogs can hear but we can't."

Sybil said "Or too low. We might not hear those either."

After a gap in the conversation filled with the refilling of teacups, mother said "What might the clouds be talking about Sybil?"

"Perhaps it's not real talking. I'd be very surprised if one cloud says to another 'Why don't we go over there and rain on that Church fete.' That would be bizarre." She sat back as if that master argument dealt with everything.

Tom said "But perhaps we just don't know enough about clouds to tell."

George thumped the table with his fist, rattling tea spoons in their saucers. His round glasses sparked in the gaslight. "I've never heard such rubbish!"

Tom said "With respect Sir – I don't think anybody was suggesting the clouds are sentient... Observation tends to show they're completely different from flocks of birds say. But nevertheless there's lots we don't know. Why should a cloud decide to rain? I know it doesn't 'decide' and it doesn't have a mind to change – but something changes to turn a floaty-cloud into a rain-cloud."

Sybil said "See father! Tom is a proper scientist. That's proof. When can we get married?"

George looked at his wife. "Tom's only twenty. He's one of my best masters – and if I may say so his youthful and energetic reputation adds considerably to the reputation of the school. So

much so that for the first time in a while we've got no spare beds and have a waiting list. Gwendoline and myself will have to retire one day and I think I speak for both of us when I say your happiness is our first concern. Unfortunately Tom doesn't have the necessary university qualifications to become a headmaster." At that instant he belatedly realised there was an emotional side to this he should address. "What I mean is that Tom – is a fine – intelligent – useful – hard working young man but the ultimate objective will be denied to him." The women became overcast. George tried to show he was honest in the face of adversity and reached over to pat Tom on the shoulder as a mark of solidarity and trust.

Tom said "I know I'll never be a headmaster. That's not my ambition though. I don't have the right brain for business. By the way – why do we have different sorts of minds... Anyway I want to be a professor in the university of the unknown. How does that suit you?"

Sybil beamed. Mother Gwendoline was used to staying silent with a mixture of enquiring and downcast looks as required. George said "That's a fine ambition. Perhaps we should have had this talk a while ago. Unfortunately we get paid to teach boys facts not unknowns – guesses – speculations. The square root of four is two is sufficient – if not much more than sufficient for every parent and they are the ones who

pay the fees. When was the battle of Hastings and who won is enough. I do happen to know that the famous Bayeux tapestry isn't a actually a proper tapestry but I wouldn't dream of confusing parents. They want their sons frothing with facts not floundering in unknowns."

"So then Sir – If I may ask a respectful question – Why did you say my reputation has attracted people?"

"Aha! I see your misapprehension Tom. By your name being mentioned as an enterprising scientific wizard and that name being connected to our modest academy. I've talked to prospective parents on the basis that we encourage the scientific ambitions of our pupils. Obviously somebody with your reputation is not an idiot. As a cheerful youngster you appeal to mothers wondering about the brutality of a grammar school education. Are we like those other schools where everyone learns by rote. Yes we are – but as far as mothers and liberal fathers are concerned we also allow some expression of personality. But what they want is exams passed without fail. That's what pays the fees." Gwendoline faced Tom and said "I'm afraid George is right. Our cake has a bit more icing on it than the others. You're that icing... And you're sweet as sugar." Sybil beamed.

Tom said "I've told you I don't understand and if I'm honest between my wonderful mother and father-in-law to

be – I can't be enthusiastic about business. Sybil teases me with the most silly ideas – every one of which I have to examine because 'everybody knows' isn't an answer for the sort of questions she asks."

"I asked him why negative numbers don't have square roots and he gave me a silly answer. Now I'm drawing Argand diagrams and it's so wonderful in an imaginary world."

George said "Stop changing the subject Sybil."

She bit back "What was the subject father?" When he was flustered she continued "My ambition is to be a professor of all knowledge and tickle darling Tom every day about what he doesn't know."

George said "Um. I can see I'm the native hiding behind the woodpile here. I don't wish to be the cloud that rains on anybody but high hopes are not enough."

Tom said "If you won't pay me a good wage then from what you've told me I should be able to get employment elsewhere. If I have solid employment then I believe Sybil will be my wife. Here or elsewhere. If not here then I'll seek my fortune in another town where I can get introductions. But I would wish firstly to stay here as you're the kindest souls. I believe you have three choices sir. Outright refusal which would be churlish and ignored. Ap-

proval as an asset to your school. Grudging approval once I have alternative employment."

Sybil said "Father! We're going to listen to the clouds whatever you say. The square root of minus one is  $j$  and it's just like the chatter of the clouds. It's there if you can see it."

In desperation he said "What do you say Gwen dear?"

Gwendoline took her time to answer. She steepled her hands under her chin, looked directly at each of the others around the tea table, investigated her empty teacup for a second then said "The clouds have been chattering long enough in workshops and darkrooms and one day they must rain small clouds and you and I will be grandparents. I'm so pleased you told us your ambition Tom. I was just thinking I really want to know the unknown. I'd really like you weave your threads of unknowns further afield than ignorant Liminal but if you two can't find a home elsewhere then you'll be welcome here. Bless you both."

It was considered unseemly to marry, on a whim as it were, without a decent period of formal betrothal. The chattering of the clouds project soon turned into the shouting of the clouds. What was this thunder and lightning all about? Electric sparks obviously. Obviously to any observer but to a

scientist this phenomenon was far from explained. Surely in a wet cloud the electric charges would leak away? How on earth could a cloud have hundreds of millions of volts difference to another two miles away? *Something* was going on but there were more questions than answers for anyone who had heard the first answers. Sybil persuaded the vicar of St Roger's on the top of the hill to let them fly kites from the top of the tower. It looked good to appear progressive in the school's prospectus. To begin with all parties had insisted that any kite strings should be firmly tied to the lightning conductor. Then the vicar, having specially insured the tower with three insurance companies, pointed out that this wasn't a fair experiment with a whopping great copper strip leading to ground so use the flagstaff instead. There were three storms where the exhilaration for Tom and Sybil shivering together on top of the tower was indescribable, especially indescribable to a mixed audience. Have you ever stood on the top of a church tower in a storm? Have you watched the slanting front of white sweep across the countryside below and then varnish the town's roof-slates? The noise and uncertainty of air draw attention from observing phenomena to being attacked by those phenomena. The temperature drops but if you're with someone of the opposite sex there's a defiant warmth as you cling together, point at the horses patiently suffering a soaking below, the silver and

green of leaves being swept back as branches wrestle the wind, while shouting excitement into each other's faces and holding the edge of your hats against the worst. There's a part of you that wants to run back to the trap-door and take shelter but that's no more than cold flint sparking LIFE. Faces spattered then covered by raindrops. Ankles getting soaked. But who cares! Today. This hour. This minute. This minute is a perfection of sensual experience shared with a gripping body who will be gripping you differently later but for now is as close as you can get. A thousand ballerinas of dancing raindrop splashes. A developing tray of greys covers everything. Greys highlighted with the most amazing light. Icicle clear white. Grey sharp sea? Fuzzy apricot yellow. White-hot pinpoints.

The vicar, Whitby Margrave, suspected his wife, Viola, of adultery. She knew he was an adulterer but it didn't worry her. However it would be nice to get rid of him. The trouble was now she was penniless and anyway without shameful evidence, he would probably orchestrate some humiliation for her. He was just on the living side of skeletal, having a long bull's face with bulging brown eyes and blubbery lips as his ears stood out. He could snort too. The other religious institutions in Liminal had a lot to thank him for, as he managed to be irritatingly loud without the depth of

anger that Dionysus Dispatch of the Holy Scripturists could reach without pausing in his stride between notices and some trivial ungodliness in the world such as newspapers on Sunday or the display of female ankles. Titus Warnock of the Gospel Evangelicals had the art of familial friendship to perfection. No mother was safe from his happiness as he scooped-up their child in his huge blacksmith's arms and praised the beauty and behaviour of the little beast. Against this competition Whitby Margrave's attempts were slobbering leers and a grasping claw.

Tom constructed what he called a lightning laboratory. Others in the public houses called it Thomas' Patent Thunderbox. It was to be the lightningologist's equivalent of diving bell. Constructed like a large barrel with a pointed top, made of a wooden inner frame covered with galvanised sheets reinforced with riveted iron handles and copper rods. Inside was very cramped with a low circumferential seat around a bench for instruments. A feature omitted from the scientific descriptions was that by the clever use of toggles and rope loops, the bench could be removed and two people could sit facing each other provided they didn't mind sharing the leg space. Many letters had been exchanged and visits made by learned enthusiasts. As fish in fishponds were known to be

vulnerable in thundery weather a locker for a fish tank was built under one seat. Word had been passed along to zoologists that electric eels might be required for study. The problem of ventilation and being able to communicate with the outside caused a lot more correspondence. A telephone with potentially lethal wires was out of the question and so for the same reason was a brass speaking tube. Tom first installed two 'elephant trunks' made from vulcanised rubber with varnished calico trumpets on the ends. The intention was to be able to point the trunks in different directions but this was too difficult without complex wires and ropes which even if they didn't direct lightning straight to the ears of the intrepid scientist would get tangled in the wind. In the end they changed the system for four three-foot long calico cones strengthened with bamboo pointing slightly up from the pointed 'hat' of the vessel, each having a rubber tube, with a loop in it at the outer connection to stop water dripping down, which could be used as listening devices or in an emergency to call for help. They'd found early on that it could get very hot and sweaty inside even with the door hatch completely removed (although at the time the workshop door was wedged shut). A few 'bung holes' at the bottom had no effect so a foot operated bellows system was installed to expel air drawn in at the bottom through a gutta-percha vent in

the side. One of the improvements planned was a windmill, Tom called it a Darius Turbine, connected to a fan. In the meantime a ship's porthole was fitted in the door that served the dual purpose of fresh air and observing the outside. It could be bolted shut for what Tom called 'electrical skin continuity' when strikes were imminent. Sybil made a black velvet curtain with an elasticated edge to hook around the fixing bolts. She also stained and varnished the wood door in the side, painted the galvanised sheet a deep blue and polished then varnished the metal handles and rods. It was a labour of love and much more exciting than a simple darkroom. Regardless of the fire risk she embroidered cushions and straps to hang onto. 'In the case of emergency' she explained. In late June it was taken to stand under a tarpaulin next to St Roger's church tower on the top of the hill and the lightning conductor was attached to the top point so all they had to do was wait and explain to the curious.

# 3

Did I tell you there were only six official users of the railway? Many others used it as a convenient path to wherever they were going. Some even tried to cycle but the bumps and inevitable upset if straying from the middle of the track meant cycles were mostly pushed. Drinkers claimed to have glided home in the moonlight, but that was 'when they were younger'. Sunday's would often see regulars on their way taking a short cut to their congregation. Everyone knew exactly the sort of couple who 'went for a walk on the railway'. Anyone with the slightest respect would never dream of suggesting it... Except at brambling time when it was hardly a private paradise for lovers anyway. Hedges of blackberries had grown up over the years along the line while families had taken to 'owning,' so they imagined, the most fruitful patches. These rights were jealously guarded with youngsters being sent out before dawn to scare away any pirates with squeals and shouts. Strictly speaking the brambles and their fruit were the absolute property of the unnamed railway but never in the history of everyday people was such birthright defended with such jealousy.

The 'duchess' of Skwlch, (apparently from the Ancient British for 'muddy place') was not a real duchess as you'd find in Debrett's *Peerage* but in appearance and manner she filled the role perfectly. Once a flirt, always a flirt. Once a kept-woman and the skill of sweeping away any stains remains. Once a showgirl bride and you have to make the best. It's wonderful what cosmetics, a husband's position and an assumed birthright can do. Her husband, a stockbroker with variable fortunes was a very pleasant buffer in his semi-retirement. His first wife had title to the Fillingrave estate but died of falling in the water (a surprisingly common outcome around here for what was normally a shallow and placid river) with a verdict of taking her life while her mind was disturbed (a surprisingly common convenience around here for what was normally a well informed and gossipy community). Bringing Anastasia (Anna Jacobs) here worked well for both of them. She could be the milady while he didn't have her sitting on his knee all afternoon at his London office. (When would they bring a proper railway here! Oh! Hang-on... Perhaps it was for the best.) As it happened the 'duchess' was happy with the arrangement because it meant she was the reigning monarch of her domain of three farms, a stone quarry, and a sanitary ware factory. After a conversation with one of the Lords Trandillion she established an agency for essential 'hotel' necessities

and thus made a lifelong enemy of Forrester Fosket the Head of Commissary at the spa by saving hundreds of pounds a year through honest trading. Her slogan was 'a week is a long time to go without a pillowcase' and she would personally send a telegram in the case of delay. Further, if the delay continued then she'd pay for the disappointed client to visit the supplier so they could both have their say. 'No nonsense' was a great success. She really enjoyed taking a farm-wife for a day and a night to London or Manchester on the train. At heart Anastasia was Anna Jacob's mother and it didn't take long for her shell of untouchability and respectability to crack when they were in a Ladies-only compartment. This was the real thing! A child from the streets or forgotten fields spitting in the faces of the factory bosses.

She had a vehicle manufactured by a well known electric automobile maker sent to the Birmingham Tram Coy. to convert into a bogie saloon chassis. She arranged a local coachbuilder to create, and adapt as the exigencies of service required. Was it fit for freight? In any event it needed a driver's compartment and a saloon for four. The result was a impressive yellow and chestnut tramcar which hummed on battery power as it rolled along the uneven track. She could have just purchased a 'humming-bird' for the road but if you've got your

private railway then, as anyone in Liminal would, it's normal to use the opportunity fortune has provided.

So today we see the Duchess Anastasia being driven into town by her chauffeur Lane in the 'Flying Banana' for her weekly whist session in the back room of the Tortoise Hotel. Nobody respectable played for money but halfpennies weren't real money were they. Anna really wanted to win all the time. She did win a lot of the time and that made her happy for a moment then guilty. She soon learned that if you lost at whist it was obvious you were making silly mistakes. In the end all she could do was say "You can't do anything if the cards are against you." Nevertheless there were raffles and subscriptions tentatively proposed that she could support. While Mrs Drawbridge was hardly capable of counting to ten any more it would be cruel to ask her not to come. It was the same for everyone except Mrs Drawbridge's long-suffering daughter who had to partner her mother for the whole afternoon. At least Anna could do something about that! A husband in another town perhaps. An introduction and it would be done... Except daughter Harriet realised the game and wouldn't abandon her mother whatever the sacrifice. When this conversation occurred Anna hugged her and showed Harriet glittering eyes of passion. Passion for escape

# Then...

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Merlin lives in Witham, Essex and writes when he's not programming computers. He is what they call a character, but whether it's a ! or ? remains a mystery. Most of his leading characters are strong and positive, although of course the interesting bits are their weaknesses and doubts. A glance at the catalogue shows a wide range of settings. Typically he writes interesting characters in interesting situations so that 'stuff happens' but there will be ideas and issues that hover in full view yet in the background until spotlighted, when for many readers that's the moment they realise they've been reading a proper book not just a story.