



# Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

0:4:00

## The Opium Saturated Gentleman

By David Rowlandson

It was a peasouper of a November night in East London as Robert left the Opium Den. It had been three months since the funeral of his beloved wife, Mary. Robert's only way of dealing with her death was his regular visit here where he could dull the pain he felt while he was awake.

His clothes reeked of the smell of the opiates he and others had smoked in the dark enclosed spaces of the dilapidated Victorian building. The drug had done its job. He felt nothing. He thought nothing. At that moment in time he had no memories. He wasn't aware that he was a respected surgeon in a London Hospital; someone people looked up to; a real pillar of the establishment. There was no recollection of his receiving a knighthood at the Palace, just one year before. He had forgotten how proud Mary had been when Queen Victoria had ceremoniously honoured his services of looking after the down and trodden inhabitants of this squalid area of the city.

The only thing in his mind now was to put one foot in front of another. As he walked the streets he failed to notice the grubby children lying in doorways begging for coppers or any morsel of food. As he passed the Three Tuns Tavern three ruffians stumbled out of

the open door, raucously displaying the effects of consuming cheap gin. A well-dressed toff walking the streets they inhabited incited their inner prejudices. The shortest, scruffiest of the men, drunkenly swaggered into the path of Robert, uttering a vulgar outburst of profanities, no doubt his intention was to provoke Robert. "What the 'ell is someone like you doin' in our manor?"

Robert ignored him or was unaware of the lout standing in his way and continued on the path he had chosen, inadvertently knocking the man over. His two mates laughed loudly, not offering to help him to his feet. Angrily the little man grabbed the brown leather bag Robert was holding, hauled himself up and pulled the opium soaked man to the ground. Something snapped in the good doctor and from his position on the ground he swung his bag at the legs of his assailant, causing him to once again lay spread-eagled on the ground, much to the amusement of his fellow drinkers.

Robert stood up. Without looking at the men, he continued his trance like route. The two snickering drunks appeared to forget the recent scuffle and after hauling their friend to his feet they disappeared once again through the tavern's door.

As the doctor passed the alley adjacent to another public house a young woman stepped out in front of him. Dressed in a long skirt reaching the floor, her shoulders covered by a woollen shawl, she approached Robert. "You alright Mister?"

Something registered with him and he halted.

"I saw what happened back there. It's typical of what goes on around 'ere," she offered in her strong cockney accent. "Just ignore 'em. They get drunk every night and you ain't the first, nor the last to cross 'em."

The expression on Robert's face didn't change. He continued staring at the female in front of him who didn't appear bothered by his demeanour. She lifted up her hair behind her neck in a provocative manner as she addressed him again. "My name's Mary Jane. You look like a man who needs cheering up. Only cost you a tanner."

The fog continued to swirl around the dimly lit gas lamp as Robert trudged on heading west towards his home in Camden Town. Whether it was the effects of the opium or the distractions of his encounters, he never noticed the hansom cab approaching at speed as he crossed the cobbled road.

In a flurry of hooves the cab's horse clattered into the doctor, trampling him underfoot and failing to stop until the vehicles wheels had completed the damage done to the opium saturated gentleman.

Somehow keeping control of a frightened horse and a swerving vehicle, the hansom cab driver hauled it to a halt and vaulted from his seat, on to the ground. He rushed to the body lying prostrate on the ground. He took one look and impulsively grabbed the side of his face with both hands. "Oh my God," he uttered out loud as he gawked at the broken body at his feet. Around him a small crowd was building. He could hear a whistle blowing loudly and watched as a burly policeman pushed his way through the gawking pack.

"What's happened 'ere?" ventured the copper, his accent reflecting he had grown up in that part of London.

"He just stepped out. I had no time to stop. It wasn't my fault constable," offered the cab driver. "I think he's dead. He must be. There is so much blood all over him. Who would expect so much blood from an accident? What shall I do?"

The copper examined the scene. Shaking his head he suggested, “Drag him on to the pavement. There’s not much we can do for him now. Wait ‘ere with ‘im ‘til I get back”. He turned and the mob parted. “I’ve got to go. Those whistles you just ‘eard are because there’s been another murder ‘ere in Whitechapel. I’ve just left there. It was horrible, she was slit wide open. Blood everywhere. Looks like Jack the Ripper has struck again. That’s six tarts killed by my count. Maybe this time we’ll catch ‘im.”

Nobody noticed a young urchin pick up the surgeon’s blood splattered leather bag that had landed in the gutter and disappear down a nearby alley.

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