

THE GARSIDE FELL DISASTER

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'YES, I'M AN old railwayman I am, and proud of it. You see, I come of a railway family, as you might say, for I reckon there've been Boothroyds on the railway—in the signal cabin or on the footplate mostly—ever since old Geordie Stephenson was about. We haven't always served the same company. There were four of us. My two elder brothers followed my father on the North-Western, but I joined the Grand Trunk, and Bert, our youngest, he went east to Grantham. He hadn't been long there before he was firing on one of Patrick Stirling's eight-foot singles, the prettiest little locos as ever was or ever will be I reckon. He finished up driver on Ivatt's "Atlantics" while Harry and Fred were working "Jumbos" and "Precursors" out of Crewe. I could have had the footplate job myself easy enough if I'd a mind; took it in with my mother's milk I did, if you follow my meaning. But (and sometimes I'm not sure as I don't regret it) I married early on, and the old woman persuaded me to go for a more settled job, so it was the signal box for me. A driver's wife's a widow most o' the week, unless he happens to click for a regular local turn.

'The first job I had on my own was at Garside on the Carlisle line south of Highbeck Junction, and it was here that this business as I was speaking of happened; a proper bad do it was, and the rummest thing as ever I had happen in all my time.

'Now you could travel the railways from one end to t'other, Scotland and all, but I doubt you'd find a more lonesome spot than Garside, or one so mortal cold in winter. I don't know if you've ever travelled that road, but

all I know is it must have cost a mint of money. You see, the Grand Trunk wanted their own road to Scotland, but the East Coast lot had taken the easiest pick, and the North-Western had the next best run through Preston and over Shap, so there was nothing else for them but to carry their road over the mountains. It took a bit of doing, I can tell you, and I know, for when I was up there, there was plenty of folks about who remembered the railway coming. They told me what a game it was what with the snow and the wind, and the clay that was like rock in summer and a treacle pudding in winter.

'Garside Box takes its name from Garside Fell same as the tunnel. There's no station there, for there isn't a house in sight, let alone a village, and my cottage was down at Frithdale about half an hour's walk away. It was what we call a section box, just a small box, the signals, the two "lie-by" roads, one on the up and one on the down side, where goods trains could stand to let the fast trains through if need be. Maybe you know how the block system works; how you can only admit one train on to a section at a time. Well, it would have been an eight-mile section, heavily graded at that, from Highbeck to Ennerthwaite, the next station south, and it might have taken a heavy goods anything up to half an hour to clear it. That's why they made two sections of it by building Garside box just midway between the two. It was over a thousand feet up, not far short of the summit of the line; in fact, looking south from my box I could see that summit, top of the long bank up from Ennerthwaite. Just north of the box was the mouth of the tunnel, a mile and a half of it, under Garside Fell. If ever you should come to walk over those mountains you couldn't miss the ventilation shafts of the tunnel. It looks kind of queer to see those great stone towers a-smoking and steaming away up there in the heather miles and miles from anywhere with not a soul for company and all so quiet. Not that they smoke now as much as they did, but I'll be coming to that presently.

'Well, as I've said before, you could travel the length and breadth of England before you'd find a lonelier place than Garside. Job Micklewright, who was ganger on the

section, would generally give me a look up when he went by, and if I switched a goods into the "lie-by", more often than not the fireman or the guard would pass the time of day, give me any news from down the line, and maybe make a can of tea on my stove. But otherwise I wouldn't see a soul from the time I came on till I got my relief. Of course there was the trains, but then you couldn't call them company, not properly speaking. Hundreds and hundreds of folks must have passed me by every day, and yet there I was all on my own with only a few old sheep for company, and the birds crying up on the moor. Funny that, when you come to think of it, isn't it? Mind you, I'm not saying it wasn't grand to be up there on a fine day in summer. You could keep your town life then. It made you feel as it was good to be alive what with the sun a-shining and the heather all out, grasshoppers ticking away and the air fairly humming with bees. Yes, you got to notice little things like that, and as for the smell of that moor in summer, why, I reckon I can smell it now. It was a different tale in winter though. Cold? It fair makes me shiver to think on it. I've known the wind set in the north-east for months on end, what we call a lazy wind—blows through you, see, too tired to go round. Sometimes it blew that strong it was all you could do to stand against it. More than once I had the glass of my windows blown in, and there were times when I thought the whole cabin was going what with the roaring and rattling and shaking of it. Just you imagine climbing a signal ladder to fix a lamp in that sort of weather; it wasn't easy to keep those lamps in, I can tell you. Then there was the snow; you don't know what snow is down here in the south. The company was well off for ploughs and we'd no lack of good engines even in those days, but it used to beat them. Why, I've known it snow for two days and a night, blowing half a gale all the while, and at the end of it there's been a drift of snow twenty feet deep in the cutting up by the tunnel.

'But in spite of all the wind and the snow and the rain (Lord, how it could rain!) it was the mists as I hated most. That may sound funny to you, but then no signalman can a-bear mist and fog, it kind of blinds you, and that makes

you uneasy. It's for the signalman to judge whether he shall call out the fogmen, and that's a big responsibility. It may come up sudden after sundown in autumn, you calls your fogmen, and by the time they come on it's all cleared off and they want to know what the hell you're playing at. So another time you put off calling them, but it don't clear, and before you know where you are you've got trains over-running signals. We had no fogmen at Garside, there was little occasion for them, but we kept a box of detonators in the cabin. All the same, I didn't like fog no more for that. They're queer things are those mountain mists. Sometimes all day I'd see one hanging on the moor, perhaps only a hundred yards away, but never seeming to come no nearer. And then all on a sudden down it would come so thick that in a minute, no more, I couldn't see my home signals. But there was another sort of fog at Garside that I liked even less, and that was the sort that came out from the tunnel. Ah, now that strikes you as funny, doesn't it? Maybe you're thinking that with such a lonesome job I took to fancying things. Oh, I know, I know, if you're a nervy chap it's easy to see things in the mist as have no right to be there, or to hear queer noises when really it's only the wind shouting around or humming in the wires. But I wasn't that sort, and what's more I wasn't the only one who found out that there was something as wasn't quite right about Garside. No, you can take it from me that what I'm telling you is gospel, as true as I'm sitting in this bar a-talking to you.

'No doubt you've often looked at the mouth of a railway tunnel and noticed how the smoke comes a-curling out even though there may be not a sight or sound of any traffic. Well, the first thing I noticed about Garside tunnel was that, for all its ventilation shafts, it was the smokiest hole I'd ever seen. Not that this struck me as queer, at least not at first. I remember, though, soon after I came there I was walking up from Frithdale one Monday morning for the early turn and saw that number two shaft way up on the fell was smoking like a factory chimney. That did seem a bit strange, for there was precious little traffic through on a Sunday in those days; in fact, Garside

box was locked out and they worked the full eight-mile section. Still, I didn't give much thought to it until one night about three weeks later. It was almost dark, but not so dark that I couldn't just see the tunnel mouth and the whitish-looking smoke sort of oozing out of it. Now, both sections were clear, mind; the last train through had been an up Class A goods and I'd had the "out of section" from Highbeck south box a good half-hour before. But, believe it or not, that smoke grew more and more as I watched it. At first I thought it must be a trick of the wind blowing through the tunnel, though the air seemed still enough for once in a way. But it went on coming out thicker and thicker until I couldn't see the tunnel itself at all, and it came up the cutting toward my box for all the world like a wall of fog. One minute there was a clear sky overhead, the next minute—gone—and the smell of it was fit to choke you. Railway tunnels are smelly holes at the best of times, but that smell was different somehow, and worse than anything I've ever struck. It was so thick round my box that I was thinking of looking out my fog signals, when a bit of a breeze must have got up, for all on a sudden it was gone as quick as it came. The moon was up, and there was the old tunnel plain in the moonlight, just smoking away innocent like as though nothing had happened. Fair made me rub my eyes. "Alf," I said to myself, "you've been dreaming" but all the while I knew I hadn't.

"At first I thought I'd best keep it to myself, but the same thing happened two or three times in the next month or so until one day, casual like, I mentioned it to Perce Shaw who was my relief. He'd had it happen, too, it seemed, but like me he hadn't felt like mentioning it to anyone. "Well," I says to him, "it's my opinion there's something queer going on, something that's neither right nor natural. But if there's one man who should know more than what we do it's Job Micklewright. After all," I says, "he walks through the blinking tunnel."

'Job didn't need much prompting to start him off. The very next morning it was, if I remember rightly. The old tunnel was smoking away as usual when out he comes.

He climbs straight up into my box, blows out his light, and sits down by my stove a-warming himself, for the weather was sharp. "Cold morning," I says. "Ah," he says, rubbing his hands. "Strikes cold, it does, after being in there." "Why?" I asks. "Is it that warm inside there then, Job? It certainly looks pretty thick. Reckon you must have a job to see your way along." Job said nothing for a while, only looked at me a bit old-fashioned, and went on rubbing his hands. Then he says, quiet like, "I reckon you won't be seeing much more of me, Alf." That surprised me. "Why?" I asks. "Because I've put in for a shift," he says. "I've had enough of this beat." "How's that, Job?" I says. "Don't you fancy that old tunnel?" He looked up sharp at that. "What makes you talk that road?" he asks. "Have you noticed something, too, then?" I nodded my head, and told him what I'd seen, which was little enough really when you come to weigh it up. But Job went all serious over it. "Alf," he says, "I've been a good chapel man all my life, I never touch a drop of liquor, you know that, and you know as I wouldn't tell you the word of a lie. Well, then, I'm telling you, Alf," he says, "as that tunnel's no fit place for a God-fearing man. What you've seen's the least of it. I know no more than you what it may be, but there's something in there that I don't want no more truck with, something I fear worse than the day of judgment. It's bad, and its getting worse. That's why I'm going to flit. At first I noticed nothing funny except it was a bit on the smoky side and never seemed to clear proper. Then I found it got terrible stuffy and hot in there, especially between two and three shafts. Very dry it is in there, not a wet patch anywhere, and one day when I dodged into a manhole to let a train by, I found the bricks was warm. "That's a rum do," I says to myself. Since then the smoke or the fog or whatever it may be has been getting thicker, and maybe it's my fancy or maybe it's not, but it strikes me that there's queer things moving about in it, things I couldn't lay name to even if I could see them proper. And as for the heat, it's proper stifling. Why I could take you in now and you'd find as you couldn't bear your hand on the bricks round about the place I know of. This last couple or

three days it has been the worst of all, for I've seen lights a-moving and darting about in the smoke, mostly round about the shaft openings, only little ones mind, but kind of flickering like flames, only they don't make no sound, and the heat in there fit to smother you. I've kept it to myself till now, haven't even told the missus, for I thought if I let on, folks would think I was off my head. What it all means, Alf, only the Lord himself knows, all I know is I've had enough."

'Now I must say, in spite of what I'd seen, I took old Job's yarn with a pinch of salt myself until a couple of nights after, and then I saw something that made me feel that maybe he was right after all. It had just gone dark, and I was walking back home down to Frithdale, when, chancing to look round, I saw there was a light up on the Fell. It was just a kind of a dull glow shining on smoke, like as if the moor was afire somewhere just out of sight over the ridge. But it wasn't the time of year for heather burning—the moor was like a wet sponge—and when I looked again I saw without much doubt that it was coming from the tunnel shafts. Mind you, I wouldn't have cared to stake my oath on it at the time. It was only faint, like, but I didn't like the look of it at all.

'That was the night of February the first, 1897, I can tell you that because it was exactly a fortnight to the night of the Garside disaster, and that's a date I shall never forget as long as I live. I can remember it all as though it were yesterday. It was a terrible rough night, raining heavens hard, and the wind that strong over the moor you could hardly stand against it. I was on the early turn that week, so the missus and I had gone to bed about ten. The next thing I knew was her a-shaking and shaking at my shoulder and calling, "Alf, Alf, wake up, there's summat up." What with the wind roaring and rattling round, it was a job to hear yourself think. "What's up?" I asks, fuddled like. "Look out of the window," she cries out, "there's a fire up on the Fell; summat's up I tell you." Next minute I was pulling on my clothes, for there wasn't any doubt about it this time. Out there in the dark the tunnel shafts were flaming away like ruddy beacons. Just you try

to imagine a couple of those old-fashioned iron furnaces flaring out on the top of a mountain at the back of beyond, and you'll maybe understand why the sight put the fear of God into us.

'I set off up to Garside Box just as fast as I could go, and most of the menfolk out of the village after me, for many of them had been wakened by the noise of the storm, and those who hadn't soon got the word. I had a hurricane-lamp with me, but I could hardly see the box for the smoke that was blowing down the cutting from the tunnel. Inside I found Perce Shaw in a terrible taking. His hair was all singed, his face was as white as that wall, and "My God", or "You can't do nothing", was all he'd say, over and over again. I got through to Ennerthwaite and Highbeck South and found that they'd already had the "obstruction danger" from Perce. Then I set detonators on the down line, just in case, and went off up to the tunnel. But I couldn't do no good. What with the heat and the smoke I was suffocating before I'd got a hundred yards inside. By the time I'd got back to the box I found that Job Micklewright and some of the others had come up, and that they'd managed to quiet Perce enough to tell us what had happened.

'At half-past midnight, it seems, he took an up goods from Highbeck South Box and a few minutes later got the "entering section". Ten minutes after that he accepted the down night "Mountaineer" from Ennerthwaite. (That was one of our crack trains in those days—night sleeper with mails, first stop Carlisle.) Now it's a bank of one in seventy most of the way up from Highbeck, so it might take a heavy goods quarter of an hour to clear the section, but when the fifteen minutes was up and still no sign of her, Perce began to wonder a bit—thought she must be steaming bad. Then he caught the sound of the "Mountaineer" beating it up the bank from Ennerthwaite well up to her time, for the wind was set that road, but he didn't see no cause then to hold her up, Highbeck having accepted her. But just as he heard her top the bank and start gathering speed, a great column of smoke came driving down the cutting and he knew that there was

something wrong, for there was no question of it being anything but smoke this time. Whatever was up in the tunnel it was too late to hold up the "Mountaineer"; he put his home "on", but she'd already passed the distant and he doubted whether her driver saw it in the smoke. The smoke must have warned him, though, for he thought he heard him shut off and put on the vacuum just as he went into the tunnel. But he was travelling very fast, and he must have been too late. He hoped that the noise he heard, distant like, was only the wind, but running as she was she should have cleared Highbeck South Box in under four minutes, so when the time went by and no "out of section" came through (what he must've felt waiting there for that little bell to ring twice and once) he sent out the "obstruction danger", both roads, and went off up the line to see what he could do.

"What exactly happened in that tunnel we never shall know. We couldn't get in for twenty-four hours on account of the heat, and then we found both trains burnt out, and not a mortal soul alive. At the inquiry they reckoned a spark from the goods loco must have set her train afire while she was pulling up the bank through the tunnel. The engine of the "Mountaineer" was de-railed. They thought her driver, seeing he couldn't pull up his train in time, had taken the only chance and put on speed hoping to get his train by, but that burning wreckage had fouled his road. Perce got no blame, but then we only told them what we *knew* and not what we *thought*. Perce and I and especially Job Micklewright might have said a lot more than we did, but it wouldn't have done no good, and it might have done us a lot of harm. The three of us got moved from Garside after that—mighty glad we were to go, too—I've never heard anything queer about the place since.

'Mind you, we talked about it a lot between ourselves. Perce and I reckoned the whole thing was a sort of warning of what was going to happen. But Job, who was a local chap born and bred, he thought different. He said that way back in the old days they had another name for Garside Fell. Holy Mountain they called it, though to my

way of thinking "unholy" would have been nearer the mark. When he was a little 'un, it seems the old folks down in Frithdale and round about used to tell queer tales about it. Anyway, Job had some funny idea in his head that there was something in that old mountain that should never have been disturbed, and he reckoned the fire kind of put things right again. Sort of a sacrifice, if you follow my meaning. I can't say I hold with such notions myself, but that's my tale of what the papers called the Garside Fell Disaster, and you can make of it what you like.'