

The Journey

By Stephen Foster

The motorway ahead was an endless sea of red lights that swam in front of my eyes as the heavy rain deluged the windscreen before the wipers momentary cleared the screen. The large, illuminated screen spanning half the carriageway announced, 'Accident reported ahead, beware vehicles queuing!'

"Great," said Tilly, my wife, "judging by all those red lights looks like the queue is a long one." At that moment, the screen changed to "Major incident! Road closed. Diversions being put in place."

"Must be a bad crash or something to shut the road," I said.

Tilly sighed, "Perfect end to a perfect day" she muttered reaching down to take a drink out of her organically-grown, totally compostable, refillable bamboo drinks container. It was of course 'Father's Day' and with it my opportunity to plan a fun day out for all the family – my choice. It had not come as much of a surprise but did not reduce the amount of eye rolling when I announced that the East Lancashire Railway was having a family day on Fathers' Day and I thought it would be nice for all of us to go.

The Sunday morning arrived and with a great show of dragging of feet and mutterings of "It's daddy's day and we will do something nice next week" the Peterson family of mum, Tilly, daughter Pasha aged 9 – don't ask, something to do with Tilly's grandmother who has money – son Charlie aged seven and me, dad, Tim, set off. The drive down to the railway was uneventful and the day passed with the minimum of moans and groans as we explored the special events and activities that had been laid on. The only really sticky moment was when I suggested that Charlie and I should have our picture taken in Thomas the Tank engine. That resulted in a very embarrassed Charlie telling me and the rest of the world that was so last year. Trips on the steam train, photo taken next to Thomas, queuing for a heavily marked up 'Dad' burger, coffee in a paper cup so thin that you needed oven gloves to hold it were all highlights of the day. The obligatory visit to the station shop and with purchases made, the family returned to the car and the journey home.

"Looks like we are in for a storm," said Tilly. "I hope we can get home before that lot comes down. It would make the drive home unpleasant."

How right Tilly would prove to be, because within three miles of joining the motorway the heavens opened and the rain was so heavy visibility was cut to less than twenty yards. Cars still sped past seemingly oblivious of the weather and road conditions. A mile further on and the red brake lights started to appear. Tilly sighed.

Sit rep in the car. Toilets; been, only had travelled ten miles since the start of the journey. Sweets; plenty, stocked up at the shop. Fruit was available but remained unbitten in bag. Electronic games; not present! It had been decided that for once, and since it was not far, consoles would not be taken that day. It was all about reducing the kids' dependence on the screens and cutting down their screen time. This could turn nasty I thought. An unplanned

stop of undeterminable length with no games to distract the kids. Car radio! Faint music as it faded in and out.

“Must be being affected by the storm,” I said. One last chance, connect up the phone using the link. No link!

“Ah,” said Tilly, “I could not find my lead the other day, so I borrowed the one in the car.”

“But you must have it now,” I said.

“The kids said that if they had no screen time today it was only fair, I had to leave my phone at home as well...”

That was that then, we would have to make up our own entertainment to wile away the time. After the possible solutions to ‘I Spy’ were quickly exhausted and the family sing song curtailed due to no one really knowing more than three lines to any song, only sighs could be heard in the car.

“I know let’s take it in turns to tell a story. We used to do this a lot when we were kids, camping with your grandpa and grandma.”

Looking through the rear view mirror I saw Charlie mouth ‘centuries ago’ to Pasha.

“Yes, Charlie, in fact it was last century, the 20th century!”

“You seem to have put yourself forward as the first to go then,” said Tilly and making sure everyone had a supply of sweets to chew the family settled into their seats waiting to be amazed.

“I know, I will tell you a story that Grandpa John told me once. As you know his dad worked as freight guard on the railway.”

“I knew it,” said Pasha, “It’s about trains!”

Tilly gave her a warning look and Pasha sat back into her seat; arms folded watching the rain run down her window.

“Well yes, it is, but it’s more than that really.”

The story goes back to the 1930s, nearly ninety years ago. If I remember Grandpa correctly, he said it was about a guard called Eric Overton. His dad had worked with him a few times. He had booked on duty at Cudworth.

“Where is that dad?” asked Charlie.

“It’s near Barnsley in South Yorkshire. At one time there was quite a large station there, lots of running lines, sidings and even a loco shed a bit further up the line.”

“See what you have done now, Charlie, you have set your dad off. It will be how many engines, names, dates and everything! Tim, just stick with the story and let’s keep the geography and history lessons for another time.”

“Just answering his question, that was all,” I replied slightly hurt at the caustic tone of my wife’s comments. “As I was saying, he had booked on at Cudworth to work a freight train up the line towards Sheffield.” I continued with the story.

“It was a very foggy night. The fog was that bad that they had called out the fog men”.

“Frogmen!” said Charlie.

“No, ‘fog men’! If the signalmen could not see a certain distance from their signal box windows, they called out the fog men. These were men who sat in special shelters by the side of the track and put detonators on the track that went bang when an engine went over them to warn the crews if the signals were at danger.”

“The railway used explosives?” said Charlie. “Neat!”

Anything that made a loud noise or exploded was alright by Charlie. It was one of the reasons why Tilly had decided to try and reduce the amount of time he spent on consoles playing games.

“Yes, only small amounts but made enough noise to warn the engine crew that there could be danger ahead.”

Tilly shot me a warning look of –‘stick to the story and cut out the lecture’.

“OK, Ok! I will continue with the story.”

Eric read the guard notices about special trains, work on the lines etc and checked over his bag. He paid especial attention to his lamp, ensuring the wick was well trimmed and filled with lamp oil. It was a special lamp capable of showing a white, red or green light.

“How did it do that dad?”

“It had a knob on the top that you could turn that moved a coloured slide in front of the light. I had a torch like that when I was younger. You twisted the end with the bulb in and it changed the colour of the lens. He needed the lamp because it was at night and very foggy so the driver would not be able to see his red and green flag like the guard had today.”

“These are very good questions Charlie and it’s good you are paying such attention but let daddy tell the story or it will never be finished,” said Tilly.

Staring out of the window as the rain continued to pelt down outside, I restarted the story.

Eric then walked the half mile up to the sidings where he was going to start his journey. The fog was very thick, and he had difficulty seeing where he was going and where he was. He

could just make out the muffled noise of an engine passing by, but the fog was that thick he could barely tell which line it was on. Finally out of the fog he saw the orange glow of a brazier that cut through the otherwise grey closed-in night. The shunter cabin was a welcome sight as it helped fix his position. His train would be being made ready on track three and he made his way along the tracks to find his brake van.

After walking for a few minutes and keeping a very sharp lookout for moving trains and wagons he found his brake van. He was surprised to see it was one of the old fashioned Midland Railway vans that only had a veranda at one end. Normally the brake vans had two verandas. It was also one of the six-wheeled versions, as opposed to the normal four. Odd it was here, thought Eric, perhaps it had worked in as part of a special and it was working back to its home yard. Or the yard foreman was short of vans due to the fog and was using rarely used vans from the van siding. Could be in for an interesting ride, never been in one before.

He placed his bag onto the veranda and pulled himself up and opened the door into the van. Casting his lamp around the van he could make out the desk and chair, lockers and the stove in the corner. It looked clean and well cared for. There was even a newspaper on the table. Thoughtful of the last guard to have left him to read. All too often he had turned up to a van that was cold, dirty, missing equipment. He checked the brake wheel was fully screwed on ensuring that it would not be moving. On a cold winter's night a freight brake van was not the most pleasant of places to spend a shift but looking more closely it seemed the last occupant had not been gone long as the stove was well banked with coal. Excellent, a warm van to come back to after making ready the train and a warm trip to Sheffield. He was booked on a semi-fast freight service to Sheffield Wicker's Yard.

He reached into his coat pocket and took out the train manifest that showed the wagons that would make up his train and made his way out into the fog. His lamp barely showed further than a couple of yards as the beam seemed to bounce back from the fog. As he moved back along the track, he could make out the light of another lamp cutting through the fog, shining towards him and close by the muffled noise of buffers clashing. The glow of a fire as the firebox doors were opened to allow the fireman to add more coal indicated the position of a loco. Someone is on the ball tonight, thought Eric. First cut of wagons on its way and he retraced his steps to the brake van, and he swung his lamp from side to side to indicate that the train should continue towards him.

A pair of buffers loomed out of the fog and as they clashed into the buffers of the brake van. Eric raised his lamp above his head and held it there. This indicated to the driver to stop. With his coupling pole he quickly hooked on the three link coupling from the brake van to the wagon. He then slowly swung his lamp up and down which told the driver he could now move away. Further up the track he could make out the shadowy figure of a man, well muffled up, holding a coupling pole moving away across a track and beyond some more wagons. Oh well thought Eric, he helped me but must be on another job now. He shouted "thanks", but the word was swallowed up in the fog. Eric walked past the wagons towards where the next set of wagons would come ready to couple up. Must be a special train thought Eric, as all the wagons were sheeted over with tarpaulins. He reached the end wagon and looked at the links of the coupling. Funny, it looked very strange. Checking that there was no engine or wagons coming on the track he stepped over the rail and by the light of his lamp examined the coupling. It was not the length he expected it to be, it was short. That meant he could not use

this to couple up to the next wagon. He took out his watch. Twenty to twelve, time enough if he needed to cut out the wagon as defective. He looked across and was surprised to see the well-muffled man standing with a coupling pole next to the buffer of the wagon.

“Eh mate, have you seen this? Couplings are too short on this wagon. Going to have to use the couplings on the next wagon to couple up onto.” The muffled man seemed distracted by something up the track but nodded to Eric. Then to Eric’s surprise and alarm the muffled man waved his lamp across his body and Eric yelled “What are you doing?!” Out of nowhere he heard a rumble and turning round less than six feet away was a wagon coming towards him. He dived away to his left, hitting his head against the metal point lever that controlled another track.

He came to with the faces of two of the shunter team looking down on him.

“Are you alright mate?” said one of the men. “What happened to you? Looks a nasty cut on your forehead. Here, let’s get you sitting up.”

Eric very gingerly felt with his fingers the throbbing part of his forehead and was surprised to find that the fingers came away covered in congealed blood. He winced as he traced over the egg shaped lump.

Eric looked around him. Through the throbbing pain of his head he said, “One of your mob nearly killed me! He knew I was between the wagons checking on the coupling and he called down the next set. If I had not dived out of the way I would have been crushed!”

“What are you talking about? Me and Charlie are the only ones been working these lines and because of the fog we have been working as a pair to watch each other’s backs in this poor visibility.”

“I tell you there was a guy here, well muffled-up, cap, overcoat with coupling pole, he helped me with the first set of wagons.”

Eric looked around, “Where is my train?”

“What train?”

“My train, it was on that track,” said Eric pointing to the track next to him.

“No train has been prepared on this track mate, all evening. There was a points failure leading into this track and it’s been out of action since five this afternoon. It was reported as fixed thirty minutes ago and that’s why me and Charlie are here to shunt the first set of wagons onto it.”

“I tell you that there was a brake van, wagons and one of your guys here on that track! I walked up from your hut, found my brake van” pointing down the track, “down there. It was one of the old Midland six-wheeler ones. I checked it over, all the equipment was there, clean van, stove lit, even a newspaper left for me to read.”

Charlie and his mate looked at each other. "I think that bump on your head is more serious than we first thought mate. I cannot remember the last time we had one of those six-wheelers in here."

"I came out of the van after stowing my bag. I saw the first cut of wagons coming, your mate was letting them down guided by his lamp. I coupled those wagons up to the brake van and went forward for the next cut when I discovered the end wagon with the short coupling."

"Short coupling?"

"Yeah, the end wagon had a coupling with a link missing. I told your mate!" said an increasingly agitated Eric. "Then I heard a noise, looked around and saw a wagon close by coming towards me. I dived out of the way and then nothing."

"We did not know you were up here until Bill more or less tripped over you when he came to use the point lever," said Charlie.

Charlie and Bill looked at each other concerned that Eric might have some form of a concussion or something. They knew no engines or wagons had been on that line all evening due to the points failure. They helped Eric up to his feet and after checking he was alright to walk they all slowly made their way back to the shunters' hut.

Inside the hut and in the better light he had his cut examined and he was given a hot drink. He told the yard foreman what had happened and was surprised by his reaction.

"Six-wheeled brake van? Sheeted-over wagons? Short coupling?" The foreman had worked at the yard for over twenty years. "This is a bit of a strange one. Any idea of the time you said this guy was around?"

"Well yes," said Eric, "I had just checked with my watch as I thought I might have to fail the wagon and it might delay the departure of the train. It was coming up wards quarter to midnight."

The foreman sucked in his breath. Taking off his cap he sat down next to Eric. "It looks lad like you have met Ernest Beaumont!"

"What?"

"Ernest Beaumont! He was a goods guard working out of the yard. He was due to take a train out from here to a yard in Sheffield and he found a wagon with a short coupling. He was standing in the middle of the track trying to attach another link when he had to get out of the way of a wagon that was coming towards him. He managed to avoid being crushed by the wagons but dropped the spare couplings on his foot as he dived out of the way. His toes were badly crushed, and gangrene set in. He died two weeks later. I had just started work in the yard, I can always remember the date, it was my first day at work. It was the 8th of March 1911."

On the shed hut wall was a calendar, today was March 8th.

“People have said that they do not like working up in that part of the yard on their own at night. Been reports over the years that on foggy nights, normally around midnight, of hearing an engine shunting wagons and seeing a muffled man with a pole in and around the wagons. But then it turns out there is no engine, or no one is there. Been up there myself like. It’s kind of spooky. In the fog it feels as if there is someone or something around. You can see shapes and hear noises but you just cannot figure what or where they are coming from.”

The hut had become noticeably quiet and the atmosphere had a distinct chill in it that the flaming brazier in the doorway did not seem to be able to shift. Eric was taken for first aid where the cut was dressed. He never made it to Sheffield that night. The next morning his guard’s bag was found on the side of the siding, close by where he had been found the night before. Eric returned to work the next week and had many trips out of the yard, but he always made sure he was not left alone in that part of the yard again.

With that I finished my story. I looked through the rear view mirror to see Pasha and Charlie, heads touching, fast asleep on the back seats. Beside me Tilly’s head resting against the head rest, asleep as well. Stunning delivery, I thought to myself. I had even done voices! The excitement must have been too much for all of them! The red rear lights of the car in front briefly winked as the driver switched on the engine and it started to pull away. Oh well, I engaged first gear and into a clearing evening sky set off once more for home.

Postscript.

Whilst engaged in an internet search, I came across, on the National Railway Museum, the [Railway Work, Life & Death database](#). This records centrally accidents to railway workers from various sources from 1905 to 1923. It makes for a fascinating if not macabre read. The idea for this story came from one of the entries in the database.

E Beaumont was a goods guard working at the Hull and Barnsley Railway yard at Cudworth. He was recorded as at 11.43pm 8th March 1911 sustaining severely crushed toes when heavy metal coupling links fell onto his feet. He had been attending to some Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway wagons that had short couplings. This required additional links to be added before coupling up to other stock. There was a recommendation that the L and Y should adopt couplings that could be coupled up using a normal coupling pole thus reducing this type of injury or the need to go between wagons. There is no record of what happened to E Beaumont after the injury and the story that Tim wove was created for that journey.