

An Astral Murder

What the Old Station-Master Told Me

By C. W. Leadbeater

Curious things, sir? Indeed, you're right there; I've heard and seen many of them in my time. There's not a man who has been in railway work for forty years, as I have, but could tell you tales—aye, and every word of them true, too—which beat anything you ever read in print. But railway men mostly work hard and say little, so the world rarely hears of them. Ghost stories? Yes, we know something about *them* too, but I don't greatly care to talk about them, for folks who think they know everything are apt to laugh, and that annoys me. Do I believe in them? Well, sir, since you ask me a plain question I'll give you a plain answer—I do; and that you may not think me a foolish fellow, if you have a few minutes to spare I'll tell you a story that will show why I do.

You remember that dreadful accident some years ago at Keysborough, two stations down the line? Ah, I forgot, it was before you came into this neighbourhood; but still you must have read of it in the papers; a sad affair it was, to be sure. It is of the day on which that happened that I have to speak. The third of July it was, I remember, and as lovely a morning as ever I saw in my life; little I thought as I stood at this door and enjoyed it, what a black day it would turn out for so many.

Well, you must know, sir, that shortly before that time there was on this part of the line an express driver named Tom Price, who drove the *Fire Queen*—one of the finest engines our company owned. You know a driver makes his way up gradually as he learns his work. First he drives a shunting engine, then a goods train, then a slow passenger train, then a fast train; and last of all, if he proves himself a thoroughly good man for the work, they put him in charge of one of the express engines. Very proud some of the men are of their engines, too; they seem to look upon them almost like living creatures; and in his own way I believe Tom Price was deeply attached to his *Fire Queen*, and would have felt any harm that occurred to her as though it had happened to himself.

A tall, dark, heavy fellow was Tom, stern and moody-looking; unsociable, a man of few words and one who made no friends, though no one had any complaint against him; but a steady and careful man, always reliable where his work was concerned. It was said in the yard that, though not easily roused, his temper was terrible when once excited, and that he never forgave those who offended him. There was a story told of his lying in wait for three days for a man who had seriously annoyed him in some way, and being with difficulty prevented from killing him by those who stood round; but I can't say how much of it was true.

It was little enough I knew of him, yet perhaps I was as much his friend as anybody, for each day I used to say a few cheery words to him as he stopped here, till presently he got to give me a smile and a word or two in return; and when I heard he was courting black-eyed Hefty Hawkins, whose father kept the level crossing a few miles down the line, just this side of Keysborough, I ventured to joke him about it, which I don't think any one else dared to do. Presently he was promoted to the express engine, and then I saw less of him than ever—or rather spoke less to him, for I was generally on the platform each morning to give him a wave of the hand as he ran the first quick train down; and sometimes I saw him again for a moment as he returned at night.

He had not been many months at his new work when there began to be some talk of pretty Hetty Hawkins having another suitor—a young carpenter named Joe Brown. I heard it first from one of the goods guards one morning, while his train was waiting on the siding for Tom's express to go by; and from the black look on Tom's face as he went through, we both thought that he had perhaps heard it too. This Joe Brown was generally held to be a worthless sort of young fellow; but then he was young and good-looking, and naturally his work gave him many more opportunities of hanging about after a girl than an engine-driver's did, so I felt it was rather hard on my poor friend Tom; for though it may be all very well to sing "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," as far as *my* experience goes I've found a deal more truth in the old proverb "Out of sight, out of mind."

One trick of Joe's I must mention specially, since my story partly turns upon it. Hetty had been what is called strictly brought up—always kept steadily to school and church as a child; and even now she went regularly to a bible-class that the Rector of Keysborough held every Sunday morning for the young people of the parish—he taking the lads, and his wife the girls. Well, what does graceless Joe do—he who was not seen in a place of worship once in three months—but suddenly become extremely religious and join the Rector's bible-class! Of course his motives may have been perfectly pure, but gossips did sometimes whisper that the pleasure of walking through the dewy fields to the Rectory and back with pretty Hetty Hawkins might perhaps have something to do with his sudden conversion.

Meanwhile I wondered what Tom Price thought of all this; but I had no chance to speak to him until one morning, owing to some delay in shunting, it happened that the signals were against him, and he had to draw up for a few moments at the platform.

"Tom," said I, "is this true that I hear about Joe Brown courting your Hetty?"

"Aye," he replied with an oath and a frown, "it's true enough, I'm afraid; but if ever I catch the fellow near her he had better take care of himself, I can tell him."

The signal dropped, and the train started without another word being said; but remembering the look on his face, I felt that if they chanced to meet, Joe's danger might be a very real one; and when in a few hours came the dreadful news of Tom's sudden death, almost my first thought was whether he had passed away with his heart still filled with that black jealousy. I got the particulars of the sad event from his fireman that same evening, and found that it was even worse than I thought. It seems that after leaving here the line was clear for them straight through to Keysborough, and by the time they reached Hawkins' crossing they had got up a good speed, and were bowling along merrily; when, as fate would have it, who should they see but that ne'er-do-well Joe Brown, with his bag of tools on his back, leaning on the gate and talking to Hetty as she gathered flowers in the cottage garden!

The stoker told me that Tom's face was frightful to see; the veins on his forehead swelled as though they would burst, and for the moment he seemed too much choked with rage to speak a word. But he soon found his voice, and broke out into a storm of oaths and curses; and, reckless of all danger, he leaned far out over the side of the engine to look back and shake his fist towards them, though the rise of the bank had already hidden them from sight.

You have guessed how it happened, sir; whilst he in his mad fury was blind to everything, the train dashed under the little wooden foot-bridge, his head struck one of the piers, and he was hurled to the ground. The horrified stoker stopped the train, and went back with one of the guards to pick him up, but they saw at once that the case was a hopeless one, for he was bathed in blood from a terrible cut in the face; indeed the right side of the head, they told me, was

regularly beaten in by the force of the blow. They drew up at Keysborough, and the village doctor was fetched, but he pronounced at once that life was extinct.

“No man could have lived for a moment,” he said, “after receiving such a stroke as that must have been.”

You can imagine how I felt when I heard all this; I don’t profess to be better than my neighbours, but it did shock me to think of a man’s dying in that way with rage in his heart and curses on his lips. Mercifully Hetty Hawkins never heard the whole truth; she had looked up in time to see a black scowl on Tom’s face, and she knew that his death must have happened but a few moments afterwards, but she never had the horror of knowing that she, however innocently, was the cause of it. Of course she was grieved to hear of his terrible end, but she had never really returned his love, and I suppose it made no serious impression on her.

It was the topic of conversation among the railway men for a few days; but presently something else took its place, Jack Wilkinson was put in charge of the *Fire queen*, and Tom Price was almost forgotten. It was whispered at Keysborough that his ghost had been seen once or twice on dark nights, but nobody would admit that he believed the rumour.

It was about the end of May, I think, that this happened; and now I must take my story on to the day of the great accident—the memorable third of July. But before I relate my own experience on that dreadful occasion, I must give you what I myself did not get until the afternoon—an account of what happened in the yard up at the terminus that morning. When Jack Wilkinson came on duty, as he generally did, about an hour before his train was timed to start, his engine, the *Fire Queen*, was not in her usual shed. (Railway men always call their engines ‘she,’ you know, sir, just as sailors do their ships). He looked all over the yard for her, but she was not to be found anywhere, so he went in search of the turner to make enquiries. He, too, was not in his usual box, but presently Jack saw him among a little crowd of others who were gathered round a man lying on the ground, apparently in a swoon. On reaching the group he found that it was one of the pit-sweepers, a man whom he had known for some time. The sufferer was soon able to speak, but seemed greatly terrified, and when asked what had been the matter, could only say in a trembling voice:

“Tom Price! Tom Price!”

“What’s that he says?” cried the turner greatly excited; “has he seen him too?”

Then, in answer to eager enquiries:

“Yes, mates, I swear to you that not half an hour since, when I took the *Fire Queen* into the shed, there I saw Tom Price standing by where I stopped the engine, as plain as ever I saw him in my life; and a frightful object he looked—all covered with blood, and with a great red gash down the right side of his face—so frightful that I jumped right off the other side of the engine, and I have not felt like myself since.

“Yes, yes!” said the shivering pit-sweeper, “that was just how he looked when I saw him; only he came right up to me, so I struck at him with a bar I had in my band, and it went clear through him as though there was nothing there; and then I went off in a faint, and I don’t know what became of him.”

No one knew what to make of this story; it was difficult to put it all down to imagination when there were two separate witnesses, and the general opinion was that some trick had been played, though no one could guess how or by whom. When everybody had had their say in the matter, Jack called out:

“Meantime, Mr. Turner, where have you put my engine?”

“You’ll find her in the shed, my boy, just where I left her when I saw Tom Price,” replied the turner.

“But she’s *not* there,” said Jack, “and I can’t find her anywhere in the yard.”

“Perhaps Tom has taken her,” said one of the doubters with a laugh.

“Oh, nonsense,” replied the turner; “she *must* be there; no one would move her without asking me first.”

Off he went to look, and the others after him; but when they got to the shed, sure enough the engine was not there, nor could they find her anywhere, though they searched the whole yard.

“Well; this is queer,” said the turner; “she must have run away; let us go and ask the signalman whether he has seen her.”

No, he knew nothing of her, he said; certainly some one had taken an engine down the line rather more than half an hour ago, and he had not noticed her come back; but he supposed they were getting up her steam, and thought nothing of it.

“She’s gone, and no mistake about it,” said the turner; “fetch the superintendent and tell him.”

The superintendent was fetched, and at once decided to telegraph to the junction and enquire whether anything had been seen of the missing engine. Back came the answer:

“Yes; single engine passed down the main line at tremendous speed.”

“Then she *has* run away, and there is no one on her,” said the superintendent; and the men all hooked at one another, fearing a terrible accident.

You understand, sir, I knew nothing of all this that I have told you until afterwards; but the morning was so beautiful that I was out and about early to enjoy it, and I was just doing a little in my bit of garden here, when I thought I heard the sound of something coming down the line. I knew there was nothing due for an hour and more, so you may imagine I was surprised, and I thought at first I must be wrong, especially as it did not seem heavy enough for a train.

I stepped out on the platform, and my doubts were soon set at rest, for in a few moments a single engine came into sight round the curve. She was coming along at a very high speed, but as you see this is a steepish incline (a bank, railway men call it) leading up to the station, and that checked her a good deal, so that she swept through not much faster than ordinary. As she approached I recognised her as the *Fire Queen*, but I saw there was only one man on her, and as sure as there is a heaven above us *that man was Tom Price*.

I saw him, sir, I solemnly assure you, as plainly as I see you now, and had no more possibility of making a mistake as to his identity than I have now as to yours. As he passed he turned to look at me, and such a face as I saw then I had never seen before, and I pray God I may never see again. The black scowl of hatred and jealousy was there, and stronger than ever; but with it there was something quite new and much more dreadful—a horrible look of intense, gloating, fiendish triumph that no words can describe. And yet all this terrible, devilish expression was in half the face only, for as he turned in passing I saw that the right side of his head was streaming with blood, and beaten out of all shape and form!

What I felt at the sight of this awful apparition, seen thus in broad daylight on that lovely summer morning, I can never tell you or anyone. How long I stood like one paralysed, staring after it, I do not know; but at last I was roused by the ringing of my telegraph bell. Mechanically I went to the instrument and answered the call from the terminus. The message was to tell me that an engine had run away with no one on her, and that I was to try to throw her off the line to prevent accidents. Then for the first time I saw it all, and it seemed like a great light flashing in upon me and blinding me.

I knew now what that fierce look of joy meant, and my hands shook so I could scarcely send the sad message to tell them that their warning had come too late. I begged them to warn Keysborough, but I felt as I did so that it was useless. I knew that even at that very moment an early market train would be just about leaving Keysborough station; I remembered that the Rector of Keysborough had arranged to take his bible-class out for a picnic among the ruins at Carston, and that, to make the day as long as possible, they were to start by that train; and I knew therefore that pretty Hetty Hawkins and careless Joe Brown, all unconscious of their danger, were in the very track along which that pitiless spectre was hurling fifty tons of iron at seventy miles an hour.

If you read the newspapers at the time you'll know what the result was as well as I do. You don't remember it? Well, it will take but few words to tell you, though it is a dreadful tale. There was the train, crowded as usual with farmers and their wives on their way to the market, and there were the two extra carriages put on behind on purpose for the Rector's party. Everybody was in the highest spirits at the prospect of a glorious day, and the guard was just making ready to start the train, when suddenly, without a minute's warning, the whole bright and busy scene was changed into one of suffering and death.

The heavy engine, coming at that tremendous speed, simply wrecked the train; nearly every carriage was thrown off the metals, and the last three, together with the brake-van, were absolutely reduced to splinters; shattered planks, panels, wheels, axles, door-frames, seats, roofs, were driven about like the chaff from a threshing-floor, and they tell me that the pile of broken wood and twisted iron and mangled corpses was full twenty feet in height.

Many were killed on the spot, and many more—some terribly wounded, some almost unhurt—were imprisoned under that dreadful pile. I suppose only one thing more was wanting to make the horror complete, and in a few moments that thing came, for some of the red-hot ashes had been thrown out of the furnace of the engine in the collision, and the heap of ruins caught fire!

An awful sight it must have been; thank heaven I did not see it, though I have dreamt of it often. Station-master, porters, neighbours, all worked like heroes trying to get the victims out; but the wood was dry and the fire spread rapidly, and I fear many a poor creature must have died the worst of all deaths. The shrieks and cries were piteous to hear, until the good old Rector, who was lying entangled in a heap of woodwork, with an arm and shoulder badly broken, called out in his cheery, commanding voice:

“Hush, boys and girls! Let us bear our pain nobly; all who can, join with me.”

And he began to sing a well-known children's hymn. I suppose his noble courage and the instinct of obedience to the voice they were used to follow strengthened them, for one and another joined in, till from that burning pile there rose a ringing chorus:

O, we shall happy be,
When from pain and sorrow free,
Lord, we shall dwell with Thee,
Blest, blest for aye.

The band of workers increased every moment, and presently the fire was got under and the heap of wreckage torn down, and all were saved who were not already past saving. Many, as I have said, were killed, and many more were crippled, and a pretty penny the Company had to pay for compensation; but I think no amount of money can make up to a young man or a young woman for the loss of health or strength just as they are starting in life. The brave old Rector was

badly burnt, besides his broken arm; but he slowly recovered, and was able to get about a little in a few weeks' time. Hetty Hawkins by a sort of miracle was almost unhurt, escaping with a scorched hand and arm and a few slight cuts; but Joe Brown must have been killed on the spot, for his body was found at the very bottom of all, crushed by the weight of half the train: so Tom Price had his revenge.

The Board of Directors held a great enquiry into the cause of the accident, and of course they would not believe the story that Tom had been seen. They could make nothing out of it, except that the engine had certainly run away, and that no one connected with the line or sheds could have been on her; so they decided that one of the cleaning-boys must have been playing with her (as they sometimes will do, if they have chance) before she made steam, and must have left the regulator open. Two boys were discharged on suspicion, but they declared they were innocent, and I believe quite truly; for I saw Tom Price on that engine, I saw the look on his face; and the decision of a hundred Boards could never persuade me out of that.

Besides, the turner and the pit-sweeper saw him; were *they* both deceived too? People have suggested that there was some one else on the engine, and that our imagination made us take it for Tom; but this I deny. I knew him as well as I do you; I saw him as close and as clearly as I see you; what is the use of telling me I took some one else for him? Besides, if the engine was driven by a human being, where was his body? It must have been found among the victims after the accident, whereas the most careful search revealed no sign of any such person. No, sir; as sure as we stand here now, Tom Price came back from the grave to take his revenge, and an awful revenge he had; I would not have the blood on my soul that he has, for all the gold in the world.

That is my story, sir; I hope it has not wearied you; you understand now why I told you that I believe in ghosts.

* * *

The above narrative will, I think, be of interest to the student of psychology. It tells its own story, and requires but little comment. A wicked man dies suddenly with an intense ungratified desire for vengeance: that vengeance he proceeds to take at the earliest opportunity, employing a method which would naturally have been suggested by his previous life. Quite possibly the members of the commission were right in their opinion that the regulator was left open by a boy, since it may have been easier for the dead man to influence the boy to do it than to apply force directly to the handle.