

The Victorians

Victorian railways - The Tay Bridge disaster

Written by Andrew Chater

WOMAN:

When I was a young girl, I used to stay with my Grandfather in a cottage that overlooks the River Tay. And in the hallway of that cottage there was a mirror, with a rather ugly wooden frame, with – as I thought – a woman's name carved in it: 'Vita Brevis, 1879'. And I often wondered about this woman Vita. And one day I asked my Grandfather who she was. And the story he told me – it sent shivers down my spine.

GRANDFATHER:

It's the story, my lass, of a bridge. Not the bridge that crosses the River Tay now, but a bridge that stood in that very spot back in the days of Queen Victoria. I was a young man then, and the foundry where I worked made all the bolts in that bridge and at the opening we were all so proud to have played our part. Two miles long was the longest bridge in the world, and right beneath our cottage.

But your grandmother, she was one of those that never trusted the bridge. Once we'd crossed it to visit cousins north of Dundee, and when we passed over the expanse of water, and the sound of the train on the track changed to a kind of airy rattle, she'd hold her breath, and she'd mutter:

NESSIE:

I don't like it. I don't like it.





- GRANDFATHER: And one day – just after Christmas it was – we were coming back on the mid-day train, and, as we crossed onto the bridge, she said to me:
- NESSIE: Listen. Will you no say she sounds looser than she were?
- GEORGE: How d’you mean – ‘looser’?
- NESSIE: The rattling. They say the bridgemaster comes out in the early mornings and taps wood-shavings into the gaps `tween the struts and the girders. I tell ye – it’s only a question of time.
- GRANDFATHER: And the thing was, you see, she had reason for her fears. For during the making of the bridge, there’d been an accident. One of the girders had dropped down into the water, and they’d pulled it out all twisted from the riverbed, and rather than casting a new one, they’d bent it back into shape, and as anyone that works in iron knows, iron once bent loses its strength.
- And I had to confess, as I listened to the sound of wheel on rail that day, the rattling did seem worse – and then –
- NESSIE: What wa’ tha’? What was that, George?
- GEORGE: That...that were summat as should not be.
- NESSIE: We must talk to the stationmaster when we reach at St Fort. It’s coming apart, I tell ye.
- GRANDFATHER: We got off at St Fort on the other side of the bridge, and we talked to the stationmaster, and he calmed our fears...



But as we walked home the weather began to turn. And as the hours passed – five o'clock, six o'clock – the wind whipped up, and the branches of the trees were lashing against the windows of our cottage. And there, below us, in the darkness, was the bridge. And come seven o'clock my Nessie says to me –

- NESSIE: George it's due any minute – the mail train...
- GRANDFATHER: And I resolved to go out into the storm, to watch – hoping against hope they'd seen sense and stopped the train.
- Outside – you wouldn't believe it – the noise.
- NESSIE: George – d'you hear the bridge?
- GEORGE: Get back inside Nessie!
- NESSIE: D'you hear the bridge, straining?
- GRANDFATHER: And she was right, the metal were calling out to us like some injured animal.
- GEORGE: I can't see it – it's all too dark! – has the train been d'you think?
- NESSIE: No – listen – there!
- GEORGE: She's going slow - she's cut her speed –
- NESSIE: Oh Lord God protect them –
- GEORGE: I've lost her – can't see her – it's too dark! Can you make her out?
- NESSIE: Did you see that?





- GEORGE: Sparks, maybe – light of some kind. Listen -
- NESSIE: Nothing...
- GEORGE: Nothing. Did she make it?
- NESSIE: I don't know, George. I don't know.
- GRANDFATHER: And we went back inside. And we tried to sleep.
And overnight, the storm blew itself out.
- And when I woke – it seemed so quiet – but then I became aware of the noises outside - a tugboat on the water, men shouting.
- VOICE 1: Over here!
- VOICE 2: Starboard!
- GRANDFATHER: And there were people on the shoreline – and the sound of someone crying. And Nessie was standing by the window, looking out, and I joined her...
- NESSIE: Oh George, George –
- GRANDFATHER: And what I saw then -
- GEORGE: Oh, sweet Lord.
- NESSIE: Those poor, poor people!





GRANDFATHER:

The whole of the centre of the bridge was gone. The rail just stopped, hanging out over thin air. And as we watched, we saw men on the tug pull a body from the water – the first of many that bobbed up in the days that followed, from the wreckage of the train on the river bed. Seventy tickets, they'd sold. Seventy tickets, counted by the stationmaster at St Fort. Seventy souls.

WOMAN:

And that was the story. And I asked him about the mirror, and the name on the mirror: 'Vita Brevis' – was she someone lost in the disaster? And he explained: how a few days later some wood from one of the carriages had washed up on the shoreline, and how he'd made a frame from the wood, and carved into the frame, not a woman's name, but a motto in Latin – 'Vita brevis': 'Life is short'. And that mirror reminded them how precious life is. It reminded them to live life to the full – which they did, every day, to the end of their lives.

