

## Swept Away

“Gentlemen, let us remember our departed colleague, Thomas Bouch.” The celebrant paused to clear his throat, glancing up from his notes, hoping for our support.

“Thomas accomplished a great deal. His sleek modern style and economy of design invigorated our commerce.” The man shuffled in the chill, calculating the effects of his next words, unable to measure the extent of our approval. “We owe him a great debt of gratitude for his art and his science for he lifted us to heights we could not have imagined.” He swept his arm in an arc to highlight “us” perhaps, the turnout of railwaymen and engineers, or maybe our unimagined heights. “Yet, our people judge him today, Scotland’s Icarus, fallen from the great height whence he soared.”

Mhairi snuggled under my arm as our group huddled closer. I welcomed the warmth and support. Together, we might endure the sadness and the cold.

My thoughts prevailed over the speaker’s words. Standing there in the Dean cemetery, I recalled the crossings I’d made of the Tay. Its dreadful swirling waters made the ferry almost unusable in bad weather and the Tay is treacherous in the most agreeable times. The bridge had been the answer.

One fine summer’s day, I day-dreamed that this was the nearest a man could get to flying through the sky. I sat in comfort with Mhairi by my side and her wee dog in his basket. I could discern the engine ahead, from my carriage window, as we rounded the majestic easterly curve in the bridge. The elegance of Bouch’s giddy design presented views clear to Broughty Ferry with just the water and its shifting sandbanks to be seen. Truly we seemed blessed to live in enlightened and happy times.

Thomas was foremost in our thoughts on that day too. He was our inspiration. He was our leader. Mr Bouch was to be further congratulated by the Queen herself it was said. It was reported that Her Majesty was not averse to peeping the royal face out of the window on such a day as this. I smiled at that thought but was content to leave the window up and the grey engine smoke outside. There had been a touch of the grand entertainer about our new Sir Thomas.

For my part, Thomas had been gracious and kind with his time; he, the renowned creator of railway structures, and me, the fledgling conveyancer of land purchases for his works. We had tamed an abrupt gorge in the border country. The opening ceremony had ended. It was a time when I'd climbed up onto a wooden trestle to approach him where he stood alone contemplating the dedication plate on one of his stone abutments.

"How are you, Sir?" I'd asked. "Is the Tay bridge project to your satisfaction?"

He stood there, frowning, although that was not unusual. His hand caressed the stone of the pier, feeling its presence, immovable as any of his works.

"I've done a lot in my time. You've heard the yatter." he said. He was an Englishman, a northerner. "I know how to do it and I've done it before. Aye, and who could build it better?"

"The people need the bridge, and they need me to build it."

He turned back to read his name on the dedication plate. He nodded slightly that he was their man. Some internal discourse won, he rapped his knuckles on the cast iron plaque, and then he drew himself back to survey his vaulting viaduct.

"It will be better than anything we've seen in our times," he said. And though, affirming that he would indeed be the man to complete the task, he shook his head all the same.

Thomas was forced to cut his cloth to make the bridge. The economics of Thomas' way of working had much to recommend it. It was why he was chosen for the build. That choice was ill for it helped seal his fate.

Mr Meik, his assistant, was of the well-concealed opinion that the bridge suffered because the government had embargoed fine steel produced by Siemens in Germany. It was a tense political circumstance that left Bouch somewhat souciant, forced to soldier on with second rate cast iron when wrought was indicated. "Politics had to be lived with," he conceded, and despite a chronic lack of funds Thomas still felt his ingenious design could compromise and cope.

Our construction team met with Dundee's city councilmen. "We must speak to the safety of your men and the work," spoke the city's purser.

"It is complex matter, Sir," Meik had confided when questions emerged. "We supervised the rescuing of metal girders dropped from great height into the brackish water. Costs were tight. To spare the penny, damaged or not, we brought these back into a serviceable state so that the work might continue. Safety prevails; I assure you."

Whispers passed from the engineering drawing rooms suggested that the stone pillars were to be hollow as chimney stacks until a last-minute re-appraisal indicated they should be stopped full of stone and cement.

A railway man, wise with age, and skin tattooed with coal dust spoke up to Mr Meik.

"Sir," he said. "I observed that the bridge maintenance was quite ad hoc and wanted closer scrutiny," affronting Mr Meik.

This observation was not passed to his superior. The bridge became nauseatingly shoo gly after a short while. I'd experienced this myself. It was somewhat like the constant changes of track while arriving in Waverley, itself a fine testament to Thomas' skills. To dampen the movement, wedges were driven in to still the chattering vibration. But it was like a swaying avenue of young trees too tightly lashed to their stays. It removed their natural yielding nature and risked the loss of their branches in a brisk wind. Thus, it was too with the bridge is seems.

Painters swore the motions made them ill at ease as the bridge swung first right then back and forth while they worked.

The Tay valley accelerated the mountain air past Dundee and onwards to the North Sea. Passing weather buffeted the bridge. Though the structure resisted, it moaned low in the flow as if transformed into a gigantic bassoon whose notes ended in abrupt eddies. Passing gusts swept through the restless structure, beaming it ever stronger like a child's swing. Hurrying squalls primed it as if would spring free, energised to join the wind.

Stevenson's circle expressed concern. They observed politely that the bridge was "Top heavy and too sparsely supported by its piers and its funding." They favoured something somewhat broader and lower slung. "A man could see that the centre of gravity was way up there just waiting to be tipped back to earth."

Bouch worked with what he had, rather than what he needed.

Yet, with his cast-iron reputation who was to say that Thomas would not succeed once again despite dwindling funds and second-rate materials? Why, he didn't even have proper bedrock to build on. To be fair to the profession, our grand Victorian vision delivered ornate and over-engineered, lumberingly safe structures. It was commonplace. Who would even doubt the bridge's strength? Thomas was a winner. He appeared to have taken the next step, the new daring visionary.

By and by, Thomas built the bridge.

I recollect the storm that came over Ben Lomond that day. We watched the weather build over the hills. Great stacks of clouds formed spinning top shapes and white discs like piles of dinner plates. Lanes of them passed over our heads and out of sight, gigantic white ripples mirroring those on the West Sands beach. Some said that they went all the way to Norway.

In the centre of Perth, the river level was rising. It swamped Friarton island, flooding the banks. The river surface was whipped into the air. Rain overtopped the gutters and fans of water fell from roofs. We were early on the road from Perth to St Andrews, already overtaken by the wind-fronts whose growing breakers chased us down. The reins billowed first one way and then another. The sturdy beasts were clearly confused but plodded on in patent exasperation.

A bitter dark overtook us though we set off early. The west wind grew, gusted, and threatened to blow us off the road. Deadening straw swept up from the streets to form great vortices that picked out the shape of the air. The leaf springs jostled us within while the luggage canvas smacked repeatedly on the roof above our heads. All the while, the storm formed low sounds around the carriage.

At last, we approached St Andrews' city walls with the wind driving us before it. I was glad to see the flickering yellow lanterns in the city arches and we soon drove through to reach the safety of the university buildings. While the coachman stood steadfast between the horses' heads, a servant steadied the coach. Mhairi clutched her hat and skirts close and was near swept off her feet. Holding my hat to my head, I rushed the dog's basket after her and we were soon inside. Never was heavy stone so welcoming. We laughed in relief; her wet cheeks reddened in that brief moment in the cold driving rain. Circlets of her hair rebounded with each drop of water shed. Distracted, I forgot the weather for a moment.

The dark sky shrouded the town while we sheltered by the open fire. We listened in awe as wind-blown branches bounced and ruined themselves against honest stone walls and pillars. As we raised a glass, our cheers were accompanied by tell-tale rattles from the windows.

It was while our preparations for Hogmanay in St Salvator's church were progressing that it happened. We learned the news that when the wind shrieked through the bare trees of the college the other night, that same wind carried off the train, the bridge and all those penitent souls to their silty graves. And like fear's icy finger tickling down my neck and freezing my arms to stillness, I judged its inevitability right there and then. Our record-breaking bridge was doomed by the thousand tiny bites to its integrity. We received a rebuke from God himself for our arrogance.

The train was likely stopped in Ladybank junction as we settled for the evening. She generally picked up a fair number of travellers there. Ladybank's platform was surrounded by productive fields and could be a windy spot, feeling quite exposed even in summer. The passengers would have been glad to step inside the warm carriages to get out of the wind. We can just imagine the talk of the weather, the chit chat back and forth. It was the end of the year and a new year beckoned. The furnishings were comfortable enough, and the lamps cast a gay yellow demeanour in the carriages.

The image of a chain of festive golden yellow lights often stirred a wanderlust in my heart as a night train went by. That old train enticed the traveller. "Come with me through the night." The

sleeper was especially beguiling. I did enjoy a bit of bad weather when I was tucked up warm with a book. But nary a night like that though... I would prefer to be home.

The souls inside were soon comfortable and spared the gale. No doubt they were amicable enough as they shared their accounts of the day. The train would rock when struck abreast by gusts, drafting away the usual coal tar smells. What threat could there be? The thought would not even occur. The massive engine would strain and sweat and smoke as it broke free of the station, clouding the foot bridge as it passed. Inside the carriages, waves of thundering rain were subdued by creaking wood and squeaking leather and the hypnotic clack-clack as the joints passed beneath. The familiarity would be re-assuring as the old machine fought through the storm as sure as a blood hound on the scent.

Safely on their way, the passengers trusted the bridge to bear them through a storm that would have left the ferry tied up for the night. The engine eased to a stop to allow its driver to collect his crossing token. Only a single line existed as cost cuts meant the structure was narrow.

Impatient to get on, the engine left the last homely outpost for the darkness ahead. Once clear of the surrounding trees and hills, gusts rocked its carriages. The roiling torrent fell on the coaches, each surge adding to its predecessors, the accidental evil of the predator. It lifted them, unsettling the high causeway in its ferocity, tipping everything into the abyss. Then the dark swallowed them up, sparing us the drama.

Yet, I could see it too clearly. The poor train shuddered and groaned. Coal smoke and sparks flew out to mask the windows, fragmenting in a smog of tortured air. And then a moment's uncertainty. A little lurch forward, unweighting. Then futile braking. The wheels seized, train and carriages rolling to the right. Bags fell and people screamed.

Had it struck the bridge? Neighbours floated from their seats, tumbling amid clouds of breaking glass and long-lost motes of paper, clippings from tickets and stoor clouding the space. Neatly gloved hands grasped aimlessly for handholds or handbags and shopping baskets. Each coach crashed, each one upon its forerunner, heartlessly driving towards a sudden breath-stealing cold amid

writhing froth and tangles of smashed train and bridge girders that stirred the waters. The aerial deluge had carried them off. Then the treacherous Tay swirled on in silence, a retreating wave bearing flotsam out to the sea.

We all knew Thomas would not survive. His mettle was swept away just as surely. Where does a man go as he lies awake in his darkness? The weeds of doubt and guilt grew in his mind to strangle his self-belief and his confidence. And while his hold on this world loosened, his mind echoed like the erratic metallic drip of some distant leak, undiscovered in the night.

Our group broke up, words of consolation trailing away. I gazed into Thomas' likeness carved in the headstone. The sculptor had done well, I thought. I studied the face. I saw the old confidence and energy, the learned brow of his younger self. As I considered, the stone face mellowed, it seemed, reflecting simple human frailty and enduring sadness.

Thomas arrested me one time more. His eyes pled of guilt but a need for understanding and forgiveness.

I turned away.