

## EXTRACT 2

And so, back to the point, and the incident on The Granite City line in our railway-crazed summer holiday of 1964, when the vials of wrath were so plentifully emptied upon my guilty head. Almost the first thing that McAird's son had done, after we had been introduced: ("Young gentlemen, this is ma son, Hector, a guid wee boy") was to take us down the road to the disused and derelict station of Kinbuck.

'But are we *allowed* to go down on the – the platform?' I had asked – regretting doing so a moment later, because it seemed weedy.

'Aye. Where's the harm?'

'But is it safe? I'm only five,' squealed Mike, even more weedily.

'Here we go,' had sneered Hector, gazing at the sky. 'The two wee toffs are skeered. I thought this would happen.'

Mike and I had looked fixedly at Hector. He had a small pointy head and his top lip was curled in scorn.

'Right!' I had cried, making up Mike's mind for him. 'Down we go.'

The station consisted of two short platforms straddling the twin-road main line via a girder pedestrian bridge. Off the up line was a point leading to a little siding in which there was one ancient seven-plank wagon. Three hundred yards beyond this, on the other side of the track, was a neat wooden signal-box with geraniums in tubs.

Within ten minutes of our arrival a fast train ran through, shaking the frosted glass windows and dog-toothed canopy. The waiting-room was empty except for an old electric fire and a dusty table.

'Bet ye can no hae the spunk to stand on the track,' suggested Hector.

After the shortest of pauses, during which it was quite clear to me that Hector was preparing another of his taunts, I leapt down – quite a long way down, for the fall jarred my ankle – on to the line. The twin parallels seemed very far apart now, a lot more so than their four foot eight and a half inches, and the platform extremely far up and awkward to re-ascend. Mike peered down, flipping his fingers.

'If ye lay your ear to the track ye'll see if a train's coming,' said Hector.

He and I bent our ears to the line. This involved lying on the sharp granite chippings. I toyed with the idea of correcting Hector's choice of second verb, and then thought better of it.

'Well?'

Sure enough there was an extraordinary vibrating roar from the shiny rail. I made a convulsive scramble back to the platform.

'Custard!' sneered Hector. To my fury he lay back on the track, folding his arms behind his head and whistling a jaunty air. 'Are ye all custards where ye come from?' jeered Hector. 'Why dinna ye run back to your mammy an' ask her to change yer nap.....?'

Round the eastern bend came a belch of smoke.

Hector was suddenly a blur and next to us on the platform. With a wonderful sensation of continued acceleration a Gresley A4 Pacific shot round the bend with a fast-fitted freight and clattered by the narrow platform deafeningly, the last parcels van causing a rush of air which sucked at us as we crouched in the doorway of the ladies' waiting-room. 1962 to 1964 were the last Indian summer years of those glorious streamlined steam engines (one of which,

“*Mallard*”, holds to this day the world’s fastest steam record, attained on the East Coast main line in the ‘30s), BR having allocated them to the Granite City line to serve out their days.

From this time onward it became a point of honour to take on Hector in ever more hair-raising dares. I often lay in bed desperately thinking of adequate replies to his cutting jibes. Unfortunately I never thought of them on the spot. Clearly, the path of avoidance lay in proving my courage to him.

Thus it was, as that first summer of 1964 at Glenturret wore on, that we stood on the track until the engine’s smoke could be seen above the trees at the eastern bend. When this grew tame we stood on the track until the loco reached the end of the platform. Eventually, we would stand, poised and with hearts thumping, until the smoke burst through the girders of the footbridge – getting up just in time and glimpsing the agonised face of the fireman peering down from the cab as the train shot past at 80 mph. Sometimes the engine let out a shrill, yelping whistle – especially on those occasions when we dared to stand right out on the very edge of the platform, clinging to each other with Mike between us to avoid the wind of a racing express sucking us off the station like three crisp bags.

‘Not off with Hector again, boys?’ Dad would say. ‘Wouldn’t you like to come with us into Stirling?’

The moment breakfast was over, I’d lead Mike round to the cottage next to the garage and whistle. Out would pop Hector, his sharp head gleaming in the sunlight, and down the drive to Kinbuck we would go.

‘I know what I’d like tae do today, but I doubt you two would hae the spunk,’ Hector would begin.

‘How those boys love trainspotting,’ Dad would say to Ma.

It was something of a miracle, therefore, when the hols came to an end and the three of us were still alive.

The following year, 1965, featured once more our trysts with Hector – even though we were a year older, and even though I had made all sorts of firm resolutions at home in London not to get involved in stupid games of dare. Somehow, upon meeting up with Hector once more, and faced with the alternative of sitting quietly in the corner of the library while Grandpa read “*The Times*”, or going shopping with Ma to Dunblane, the adventures at the little station at Kinbuck retained their appeal.

On the best of the ’65 “dare days” – when we had grown courageous enough to stand in the middle of the track until the engine’s smoke had reached the canopy itself – we heard a sort of keening, wailing roar, like the breakers on some stern rocky cliff or a carriage wheel jammed on at speed.

These sound effects came, we discovered, from the signalman, screaming Scots obscenities at us from the neat wooden box. In the summer before, we had not realised that the box had an occupant; perhaps it had been unmanned in July and August of that year. Now, however, a sliding window was open and a grey-haired man leant out, gesticulating with purple face and rolled-up shirt-sleeves. On that first occasion when we were made aware of his existence, we ran for the road – Hector leading the way. But we were not pursued. And so we learnt a valuable lesson for would-be railway vandals: that a signalman, no matter how purple and enraged, cannot leave his post.

Now began our period of greatest endeavour at Kinbuck. We put pennies on the line and peeled them off six times the size after a train had bashed over them. Mike once scrambled down and put on a half-crown to see if it worked with silver – he was always rash with cash. The result remains among my souvenirs: George VI looks like something from among the distorting mirrors at the end of the pier. We placed wood, china, metal Meccano strips and once a Dinky model of a Hudson sedan (we had two) on the line. A milk jug exploded with satisfying violence. Hector suggested putting the massive and ancient electric fire from the waiting-room down there, but some lingering shreds of common-sense made me dissuade him forcibly.

‘Suppose the train derailed?’ I asked.

‘Yer wee custards!’ howled Hector. He was as inordinately fond of that disagreeable word in ’65 as he had been in ’64, and usually its appellation galvanised us into action. But Mike, at six showing a mature grasp of both language and psychology, was a match for him.

‘You are only a chauffeur’s son, so you must do what we tell you. You are a servant. Just like your father being our Grandpa’s servant. You are not as good as us, and you speak in a funny, common way.’

I nodded, forgetting for a moment that we habitually lived, not among servants in a grandiloquently named Scots baronial hall, but in an apartment in Maida Vale, W9, near Dad’s office, in which our only servant, indeed, was Mum.

Mike’s words had a most satisfying effect on Hector, though. He went quite pale with mortification and struggled for words, but none came.

‘You ought,’ I continued, capitalising on the effect, ‘to remember that my brother and I are your *betters*.’

Hector remained silent – grimly so, as I recall. The dusty electric fire remained in the waiting-room. Perhaps the signalman would have been gratified had he known that snobbery had prevented a severe crash on his stretch of line.

From this time on I realised that I had a powerful weapon and I used it as mercilessly as Hector used his taunts. I often spoke over his head to Mike, using words I knew were not in his vocabulary, or Latin tags, and making sophisticated comments about his accent. We were aided in our campaign by Grandpa himself, who overheard McAird addressing Mike by his Christian name.

‘McAird!’ Grandpa had rapped. ‘I think it more fitting that you address my grandson as *Master Michael*.’ These words were spoken in Hector’s hearing, and we often said to Hector afterwards,

‘*Master Michael*, if you please, Hector.’

Meanwhile the adventures at Kinbuck went on. The point, or switch, at the end of the down platform fascinated us like a snake. It had a large rusty turnover handle, so could clearly over-ride wires from the signal-box, even if it had ever been remotely operated.

We all agreed that, between trains, it would be sensible to see if this point worked. After all, it would do no harm – it was a trailing point, as I remember explaining to Hector and Mike at the time, and would snap back the right way if a train ran over it by mistake before we could shut it. What drew us as powerfully as the operation of the point itself was the wagon – that very old sad wagon in the siding beyond it, which had evidently not moved an inch since the previous year. Surely, we argued, it would be a legitimate experiment to see if the wagon could still roll?

We darted through thistle and spiky grass to the hidden end of the wagon. “Return to Perth” was

dimly printed on its sides; obviously someone had forgotten to do so. Up and over from one wheel to the other was a long rusting crank secured in a holed bracket by a thin flaking pin. We pulled the pin out. The long crank easily shifted, and down against the orange wheels we could see that the brake shoes had been sprung back.

‘Shove!’ I cried, and how easily, how delightfully, the wagon creaked a few inches from off rest. Above the chanting of its dry axle boxes came the familiar keening sound of a signalman hurling reproductive and excretory messages across the abyss of the Glasgow to Aberdeen main line.

Next day Mike and I went back to the station alone. We were relieved of the dour company of Hector, who had had to ‘visit on ma gawky cousin Keith at Bridge of Allan.’ His parting sneer to us had been,

‘Ye’ll no do nothin’ at that station wi’out me there tae put spunk in you. Ye’re a pair o’ skeered custards.’

In spite of the fact that we had convinced ourselves of our enormous social superiority over this mere chauffeur’s son, his words, as ever, rankled, and I determined to have done something to report to him when he returned.

The wagon’s brakes were still off, just as we had left them the previous day, and, after a determined heave, I found that the wheels still rotated a little. Sitting on a pile of tarry sleepers, I conceived a plan which proved too irresistibly right to ignore or denigrate. I announced to Mike,

‘Look. I’m going to turn the point and we’re going to push the wagon out on to the main line. Then we can see the next train pick it up on the buffers as it passes.’

‘Scoop! Whoosh!’ laughed Mike. He indicated the process with both hands. ‘And then it’ll go back to Perth like what it says on the side?’

‘Yes. It’ll be something to tell Hector when he gets back.’

‘Whizzoh!’

Hector would have pooh-poohed the wheeze had he been there, precisely because he hadn’t thought of it, but to my mind it was a perfect plan. After all, we had demonstrated that this sort of scooping up could be achieved in 00 gauge – so why not in real life?

Gravity works in the same way irrespective of scale – as I now understand, of course – so that “*The Flying Scotsman*”, falling from a model Forth Bridge in 00 scale, takes an absurd fraction of time to plummet its 21 inches to the water. It travels at the same speed as the real engine falling from the real Forth Bridge. But the orders of mass are so different (look how a toy train can whisk round a hairpin curve without falling over at scale 250 mph speeds, or stop dead without crushing itself) that modellers never have a realistic sense of the vast and implacable forces of nature. So it was that Mike and I did not stop to reflect on the consequences of a real locomotive smiting a real stationary wagon. We began the task - Mike able only to reach an axle box, and my shoulder against a buffer, and helped by the slight downhill gradient - of violently shoving the sad old wagon towards its apotheosis.

The harsh clanging of a police bell broke in upon our ecstasy. A black Austin Cambridge scattered the gravel in the station yard, and flat Scots coppers’ hats bobbed above the stinging

nettles. A second later we were grabbed. It dawned upon me that this part of the story would have to be entitled: “The Signalman’s Revenge”.

Whistling shrilly, a “*Brittania*” class Pacific clattered past with a long maroon train on the main line, and steamed on towards Aberdeen without ever proving whether or not it could scoop up a wagon on its buffers and, propelling it before itself, return it to Perth. The curious faces in the coaches which turned to watch two small boys being swept off their feet by burly policemen didn’t realise what a lucky escape they had had from being one of the “Fifty Killed and Many Injured in Child Vandal Railway Crash Horror”.

So – Home, James! in the police Austin Cambridge.

I have always found something frightening in glimpses of pale faces seen through dark windows – faces with intense, unwinking eyes. An aunt of ours (not the one with the wig) working with the WVS in London after the war, had occasion to visit an elderly man who lived in a first-floor flat in Ebury Street. On the afternoon she arrived, she saw the old boy standing at his window. Just behind him was a tall, very pale gentleman whose face was nearly resting on the old chap’s shoulder. My aunt, when she got upstairs, said, ‘Well, you don’t really need a visit from me today as you’ve got a friend with you.’ To which the old boy replied, ‘Eh? I haven’t seen anyone all week, except the postman.’

It was with something of what must have been my aunt’s emotions, therefore, that I saw the basilisk, the thing from the pit, my grandfather’s face, glaring from the gun-room as the police car scrunched up the gravel and parked by the rhododendrons.

My brother, sobbing, was led off to bed by Goddard, the parlour-maid, supperless and frightened. I suffered the fate of the eldest and was whopped by Dad with one of those Pirelli slippers made of check brown wool; and, although a cane hurts more, let no one underestimate the power of the slipper when propelled by a really exasperated son-in-law.

So our days at Kinbuck station came to an end, and although, not long ago, revisiting past glories, I stopped on the road-bridge and looked down on to the platform and the roof of the waiting-room (now a private house), I had no desire to try to recapture the magic of those earliest attempts to become a public menace. The siding has gone, the heather pushes up and overwhelms the few sleepers and bits of ballast which are left. The footbridge upon which we three stood to let the huge blast of steam locomotives lift us as we straddled the missing planks, has gone. Over the line is a square of untidy stones with grass growing around some wooden stanchions where the signal-box stood – gone too, and the whole line run by computer from Glasgow.

After my thrashing (“hurts me more than it...”) I too was sent to bed, supperless, but not, I’m glad to record, sobbing.

Next morning Mike and I stood trial in the library. The court consisted of:

JUDGE: Grandpa.

PROSECUTION: Grandpa.

JURY: Grandpa.

PROSECUTION WITNESS: Hector “Judas” McAird.

HALF-HEARTED DEFENCE COUNSEL: Dad.

The proceedings went something like this:

PROSECUTION: And do I believe my ears when

I hear that these young ruffians, my grandchildren, *insisted* upon committing acts of vandalism actually within the railway premises over a long period of time prior to the

outrage?

WITNESS: Aye, Sir. I didna want tae go near the wee station, but Master Anthony said I was a servant an' had tae do what I was told, an' they made me put wee bits on the line, an' stand on the track wi' a train coming.

PROSECUTION: And am I to understand that my grandsons actually *endangered* your lives by their folly and hooliganism?

WITNESS: Aye, Sir, they made me do it – they said I was “custard” if I didna.

(Suffocated yelps from the defendants)

PROSECUTION: May I remind you, Bill, that after repeated warnings from Mr Turnbull... [the signalman's name, apparently]...after *repeated* warnings from Mr Turnbull to leave railway property alone, these sons of yours so endangered the safety of the track, and so blatantly and *wickedly* tampered with property not their own, that the County Police had *actually* to be called in to prevent an act of criminal insanity being perpetrated.

DEFENCE COUNSEL: Oh, dear.....

(Breakdown and abandonment of Defence's well-reasoned case that we had never done anything like this before and would never do it again.)

JURY: GUILTY.

JUDGE: With your permission, Bill, of course, I suggest that Anthony be sent to bed every evening at six with bread and milk until the end of the holidays, that the picnic drive to Loch Eal be cancelled, that neither boy sees television – especially not “*Top of the Pops*” – for the remainder of this visit.....

(Gasps from the prisoners, for whom doses of “*Top of the Pops*” were a narcotic craze)...and that they write letters apologising to the signalman and to the police station. Most important of all, they must apologise *here and now* to poor Hector, for making him a party to their insensate, childish and dangerous games.