



**SLAUGHTER IN THE  
SAPPERTON TUNNEL**

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# CHAPTER ONE

*Spring, 1862*

At a time when most of the nation was still slumbering, the locomotive steamed towards Kemble, its wagons creaking under the weight of their loads and clanking over the rails. Standing on the footplate, the driver and his fireman glanced at the silhouette of the little station that suddenly rose out of the gloom like a friendly ghost to acknowledge their arrival while simultaneously bidding farewell to its fleeting visitors. It was not long before the goods train plunged into the first stretch of the Sapperton Tunnel, emerging briefly into the fresh air after 350 yards or so before hurtling into the much longer stretch. As it burrowed again through the Cotswold escarpment, the darkness was relieved only by the glow from the firebox.

‘I hate this place,’ confided the driver.

‘Why is that, Olly?’

‘I keep thinking of the poor devils who built it.’

‘They did a good job.’

‘Yes, but it was so dangerous. Some navvies had terrible injuries. Just think of it. Working down here with no natural light and filling their lungs with dust every day. It must have been torture.’

‘They got paid for it,’ said the fireman, cheerfully. ‘In any case, they were used to hard labour. Digging this tunnel was a challenge. I reckon they were glad to take it on.’

In the narrow confines of the brick-built structure, noise was amplified, and they had to raise their voices above the tumult in order to be heard. Neither of them was aware of the plaintive bleating towards which they were now thundering. As they strained their eyes to peer through the billowing smoke, they could see nothing to cause alarm. Then, without warning, it happened. As it neared the mouth of the tunnel, the locomotive smashed through the makeshift pen in which a number of sheep had been imprisoned, killing the animals instantly before hitting the boulders that had been piled up ahead on the track. Derailed on impact, the train keeled over and threw both men uncaringly off the footplate. Wagons splintered, overturned or jack-knifed crazily, shedding their loads everywhere. For what seemed like minutes, the sound of sheer chaos echoed through the tunnel and caused tremors in the earth above it.

## CHAPTER TWO

When he let himself into the superintendent's office, Colbeck found the man seated behind his desk, poring over an Ordnance Survey map. It was only when the inspector walked across to him that Tallis realised he had a visitor. Raising his head, he gave Colbeck an unwelcoming glare.

'I did knock, sir,' said Colbeck.

'Not loud enough – didn't hear a sound.'

'You sent for me, Superintendent, but, since you are clearly preoccupied, perhaps it would be better if I returned at a more suitable time.'

'No, no,' said Tallis. 'Now that you're here, you can stay.' He tapped the map with an irritable finger. 'I've been trying to find Sapperton.'

'It's in Gloucestershire, sir.'

‘I know that, damn you, but I need a precise location.’

‘Allow me.’

Walking around the desk, Colbeck looked over Tallis’s shoulder at the map. It took him only seconds to find the elusive village.

‘It’s here, sir,’ he said, pointing. ‘Sapperton is in a beautiful area of the county. The tunnel that bears its name is, in my opinion, one of the most striking examples of railway engineering in the whole country.’

‘You won’t think that when you see it.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’m sending you and Leeming there immediately.’

‘Is there a problem with the tunnel?’

‘A goods train came off the rails there – after it had slaughtered some sheep.’ Picking up the telegraph, he handed it to Colbeck. ‘I still can’t work out if it’s a genuine call for help or a hoax.’

The inspector glanced at it. ‘It’s genuine, sir.’

‘You haven’t even read it.’

‘I didn’t need to,’ said Colbeck. ‘I saw the name of the sender. Stephen Rydall is a member of the GWR board. He’s a landowner in the area. I daresay that the sheep would have belonged to him.’

‘Do you *have* to be so annoyingly well-informed?’ said Tallis, slapping his hand down on the desk. ‘It’s uncanny.’ He sat up in his chair. ‘How on earth did you come to meet Mr Rydall?’

‘I didn’t meet him, sir. I just heard that name more than once when Sergeant Leeming and I were investigating a murder in Swindon. Mr Rydall was spoken of with great respect.’

‘What do you make of his telegraph?’

‘It arouses my interest at once, sir,’ said Colbeck, reading the terse message. ‘I can’t ever remember a case that involves the wanton killing of farm animals. The disappearance of Mr Rydall’s shepherd is quite mystifying.’

‘Not to me,’ said Tallis, confidently. ‘I’ll wager that he’s the man you’ll end up arresting. There’s obviously been bad blood between Rydall and this fellow. The shepherd probably took his revenge by causing mayhem at the tunnel before making a run for it.’

‘I think that highly unlikely, sir.’

‘It’s as plain as the nose on your face.’

‘Shepherds tend to love the animals they look after. And why should this man destroy the very sheep that provide him with his livelihood? Besides, the major crime here is orchestrating the accident. That’s not the work of a shepherd who hates his employer,’ argued Colbeck. ‘It’s much more likely to be the work of someone with a grudge against the Great Western Railway.’

It had happened so many times that Madeleine Colbeck had grown accustomed to it. Whenever he had to set off on an investigation that took him outside London, her husband always made sure that he sent her a letter by hand so that she knew exactly where he was going. His last case had been in the Lake District. Madeleine was relieved to discover he would not be quite so far away this time. Out of consideration for his wife, Colbeck had not only made her aware of his movements, he’d arranged for the missive to be delivered to their home in John Islip Street by Alan Hinton, a young detective at Scotland Yard.

‘Did you know what was in this letter?’ she asked.

‘The inspector told me they were off to Gloucestershire.’

‘Did he give you any details?’

‘No,’ said Hinton. ‘He was in something of a rush.’

‘That’s nothing new, alas,’ she sighed. ‘However, since you were kind enough to act as a postman, would you care for some refreshment?’

‘I’d care very much but I must get back to work.’

‘That’s a pity. Lydia will be here very soon.’

His mood changed at once. ‘Oh, I see . . .’

Lydia Quayle was Madeleine’s best friend. They’d met when Colbeck went to Derby to investigate the murder of her father. Hinton had also met Lydia as the result of a crime, though one less serious in nature. She’d been troubled by a stalker and the detective was able both to protect her and arrest the man who’d been harassing her. As a result, Hinton and Lydia had been drawn together. Meetings between them, however, were all too rare and treasured as a result. It took Hinton a matter of seconds to change his mind.

‘In that case,’ he said, ‘perhaps I *will* accept your kind invitation.’

Madeleine smiled. ‘I had a feeling that you might, Alan.’

Ordinarily, train journeys with Victor Leeming followed a set pattern. He complained when they arrived at the station, moaned when they boarded the train and, if they were travelling in a full compartment that made a private conversation impossible, he’d stare balefully out of the window as if watching his hopes drift past in the opposite direction. The moment they were alone, he was prone to voice his many



objections to the notion of train travel. This time, miraculously, it was different. When first told of their destination, he gave no protest and even managed something resembling a smile.

Leeming was a solid man in his thirties with the kind of unsettling features more appropriate to a desperate criminal. He looked shifty, malevolent and thoroughly out of place wearing formal attire, especially when he stood beside Colbeck, the acknowledged dandy of Scotland Yard. His frock coat was ill-fitted, and his baggy trousers had a stolen look about them.

As they took their seats in an empty compartment, he was actually exhibiting a measure of enjoyment. Colbeck soon learnt why.

‘This train stops at Swindon,’ said Leeming.

‘Yes, it does, Victor.’

‘I have fond memories of the place.’

‘Yet we had some fairly gruesome encounters there.’

‘I was thinking of the Queen’s Tap, sir. It had comfortable beds, a friendly landlord and served a wonderful pint of beer. I don’t suppose . . .’

‘No,’ said Colbeck, firmly.

‘But the pub is no distance at all from the station. We could nip across there to renew our acquaintance with Mr Wells, enjoy a drink, then catch the next train. You said that they run regularly.’

‘They do, indeed, and I’m sure that Hiram Wells would give us a cordial welcome. But getting to the Sapperton Tunnel is our priority. We’re going to the site of a dreadful accident, remember. The damage is extensive, the tunnel is blocked indefinitely, and it may even be that the driver and fireman are murder victims. Really, Victor,’ said Colbeck with a note of

reproach, 'this is not a time to be thinking about a pint of beer.'

'You're right, sir,' said Leeming, lowering his head in penitence. 'It was wrong of me. I apologise. Work comes first, naturally.' When he looked up again, there was a hopeful look in his eye. 'We could always pay our respects at the Queen's Tap on our way *back* to London.'

'Address your mind to the matter in hand,' ordered Colbeck. 'And answer this question. When I gave you what scant information we have about this case, what was your reaction?'

'I felt sorry for the sheep.'

'So did I.'

'Why did they have to be killed like that?'

'I don't know, but I wonder if there's some religious aspect to their death.'

Leeming gasped. '*Religious?*'

'They could have been sacrifices.'

'What sort of sacrifices?'

'We'll have to ask the person who put them there.'

The light was good and the temperature warm. Conditions were ideal for the man. Having carefully chosen his spot, he sat down on a tree stump and opened his sketchbook. As he worked carefully away, the devastation around the mouth of the tunnel came slowly to life on the blank paper.

## CHAPTER THREE

To Alan Hinton's delight, Lydia Quayle soon arrived at the house. Tea was served in the drawing room where they exchanged news. The detective felt a stab of guilt when he thought how Superintendent Tallis would react if he caught one of his officers relaxing with friends while on duty, but that fear was soon removed by the sheer pleasure of seeing Lydia again. To his eyes, she looked more poised and beautiful than ever. For her part, she was equally thrilled at the unexpected encounter. She was also interested to hear the message that Hinton had brought to the house.

'Sapperton?' she repeated. 'I've been there.'

'Really?' said Hinton.

'When I was a child, we used to visit an aunt who lived close to Cirencester. She often took us for a ride in her carriage

to one of the villages nearby. Sapperton was among them.'

'What was it like?' asked Madeleine.

'I can't remember too much about it, to be honest. It was a long time ago. But I do recall that it was very pretty and there was this wonderful sense of space.'

'We don't get that here in London.'

'That's inevitable in a city as big as this one.'

'There are compensations,' said Hinton. 'London is always bustling with activity. There's never a dull moment here, whereas nothing ever happens in a quiet Cotswold village.'

'Something has certainly happened in Sapperton,' noted Lydia.

'It's the exception that proves the rule.'

'I'll be interested to hear more about the case.'

'So will I,' said Madeleine, 'though I'm wrestling with a big problem at the moment. Father always likes to know what Robert is up to and, as a rule, I'm happy to tell him. This time it's different.'

'Why is that?' asked Lydia.

'His son-in-law will be helping the Great Western Railway.'

'Oh dear! I see what you mean.'

'Since he worked all those years for a rival railway company, he hates everything about the GWR.'

'I don't see why,' said Hinton. 'I think that Brunel was a genius. Your father must surely accept that, Madeleine.'

'If only he did,' she said, sadly, 'but he despised the man. He's never said a good word about him. On balance, I fancy, it might be better if I told him that Robert had been sent somewhere on the eastern side of the country.'

‘You’d *lie* to him?’ said Lydia in disbelief.

‘It would spare me another bruising lecture.’

‘But he’s bound to learn the truth eventually.’

‘Yes,’ added Hinton. ‘When he speaks to Inspector Colbeck again, he’ll be told all about the case.’

‘That will make him angrier than ever,’ Lydia pointed out.

Madeleine grimaced. Deceiving her father might not be the best course of action, after all. When he did learn the truth, she’d have to face his resentment as well as his fury. That was a daunting prospect. She decided that she’d have to think again.

Because they were climbing a gradient, the train had slowed down slightly. Leeming was unaware of any change, but Colbeck noticed the lower speed at once. He drew his companion’s attention to it.

‘Some locomotives struggle to get up this incline so they go double-headed. The alternative is to lessen the load they’re pulling.’

‘You mean that they’d detach some carriages?’

‘Only if it were necessary,’ explained Colbeck. ‘And there is a danger involved.’

‘Danger?’

‘I remember reading about an incident on this line that occurred not far from here. The driver of a goods train was struggling to cope with the gradient so he split the wagons into two halves, intending to take the first lot to Gloucester before returning to pick up the others.’

‘What happened?’

‘They didn’t stay where he’d parked them. The brakes failed and the wagons careered back down the incline before crashing into some stationary carriages and coming off the rails.’

‘Were any of the passengers in the carriages hurt?’

‘There were no fatalities, but there were several minor injuries. Also, of course, they had a nasty shock.’

‘I have one of those every time I see the superintendent.’ They shared a knowing smile. ‘When do we reach the site of *our* accident?’

‘The tunnel is blocked so we’ll have to get out at the eastern portal and go to the other end overland. I’m assuming that the GWR will have arranged some sort of transport for us. If they haven’t,’ said Colbeck, ‘there’ll be a lot of very angry passengers. Most of them have tickets for Stroud or beyond.’

Ten minutes later, the train began to slow down so that it could stop at Kemble station. A number of passengers got off, but nobody was waiting to get on. After its brief stay, the train set off again but at a much reduced speed. It soon slowed down so dramatically that they seemed to be creeping forward, as if the driver was eyeing the track ahead with misgiving. It made it easier for the passengers to enjoy looking at the sunlit countryside on either side of them, but it also started to worry them. Even though they’d been warned about the problem on the line, they couldn’t understand why they were now moving at a snail’s pace.

‘What’s happening, sir?’ asked Leeming.

‘We have to be patient.’

‘I could walk as fast as this.’

‘You may well have to do that before long.’

The prediction was soon proved correct. After stuttering along for several minutes, the train came to a decisive halt, jerking the passengers as it did so. Voices were heard outside, then uniforms came into view. Railway policemen were opening doors and telling people to get out, helping them to do so with outstretched arms. Colbeck and Leeming were among the last to descend to the ground.

The first thing they saw as they alighted was the gaping mouth of the tunnel over a hundred yards away. They then noticed the fairly steep sides of the cutting either side of them. Climbing up the grassy bank would involve an undignified scramble. Fit and able-bodied, the detectives would have no trouble, but there were much older passengers as well as a number of women. Colbeck summed up the situation at once.

‘They could do with men at the top, lowering ropes to haul people up. Come on, Victor,’ he said. ‘Some of the passengers will never get up there unaided. Let’s give them a helping hand.’

Alan Hinton had left an hour ago, but Lydia was still there, enjoying her role as an unofficial aunt and dandling Madeleine’s baby daughter, Helena Rose, on her knee. The child was burbling happily.

‘It was a lovely surprise to see Alan again,’ said Lydia.

‘That’s why I asked him to stay.’

‘Thank you, Madeleine.’

‘I had a feeling you’d be pleased.’

‘Did he tell you what he was working on at the moment?’

‘If he has any sense,’ said Madeleine, teasingly, ‘he’ll be trying to devise a plan to see you more often. That’s more important to him than anything else.’

‘Oh, I don’t know about that.’

‘You’re too modest, Lydia. He’s devoted to you. What he’d really like, of course, is to work with Robert. That would suit all of us. We’d be able to invite him here on a regular basis as we do with Victor Leeming. You could . . . just happen to be passing.’

Lydia laughed. ‘Stop it!’

‘I’m simply being practical.’

‘You can be so naughty sometimes, Madeleine.’

‘Is that a complaint?’

Before Lydia could reply, they heard the doorbell ring. She saw the grim look that suddenly appeared on her friend’s face and guessed what had put it there.

‘You’re expecting your father, aren’t you?’ Madeleine nodded. ‘What have you decided?’

‘I suppose that I’ll have to tell him the truth.’

‘It’s the best thing to do.’

‘I’m afraid that you’re right,’ said Madeleine. ‘Brace yourself, Lydia. My father is about to lose his temper again.’

They heard the front door being opened and a brief exchange of voices. Short, wiry and beaming, Caleb Andrews was then shown into the drawing room by the maid. Madeleine stood up to give him a welcome, but it was his granddaughter who offered the warmest greeting. Jumping off Lydia’s knee, she ran across to him to receive



an affectionate hug and to tell him her news. It was minutes before they were able to sit down. After a nervous glance at Lydia, Madeleine cleared her throat. Before she could even mention her husband's name, however, Andrews slapped his knee in delight.

'I've heard some marvellous news,' he cried. 'The Sapperton Tunnel is blocked. It's yet another disaster for the GWR.'

'Who told you?' asked his daughter.

'Word travels fast on the railway, Maddy. You should know that. Whenever there's a major accident somewhere on the network, news of it spreads like wildfire. I burst out laughing when I heard.'

'Then you should be ashamed of yourself, Father.'

'Why?'

'When that train crashed, the driver and fireman might have been seriously hurt, if not actually killed.'

He blinked at her. 'How do you know about the crash?'

'Robert has been sent to investigate it.'

'*What?* He was livid. 'My son-in-law is working for the GWR?'

'He'll solve crimes on the railway no matter where they are.'

'And I admire him for doing so,' said Lydia. 'Madeleine is right to question your response to the news, Mr Andrews. As a former engine driver yourself, I'd have thought you'd show sympathy for anyone who works on the footplate.'

'I do,' he insisted, 'and I'm sorry for those two men. In fact, I'm sorry for anyone forced to work for the GWR.'

'Father!' scolded Madeleine.

'Brunel was to blame. He and his father designed that tunnel. If it had been built much wider then it couldn't have

been so easily blocked when a train was derailed. One track might have remained in use.'

'Robert will find out the full details,' said Lydia, trying to calm the old man down. 'Until then, it's pointless to speculate on what went wrong. But I must say that it's unfair of you to blame the late Mr Brunel.'

'I agree,' said Madeleine. 'It's unfair and unkind.'

'I don't want to hear of any drivers or firemen being hurt on the railway,' he said. 'I've been badly injured myself, so I know how dangerous it is to work on the footplate. But I still think that this latest accident is typical of the GWR because it . . .'

His voice tailed off as he saw the look in his daughter's eye.

'Let's talk about something else,' said Madeleine, firmly. 'What will Helena think of her grandfather if all you can do is to crow over a rival railway company? She's been dying for you to come.'

As if to reinforce the point, the child grabbed a doll from the sofa and put it into the old man's arms as a kind of peace offering.

Andrews had the grace to look shamefaced.