

MEMOIR OF A CLUBMAN

CURLY

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The following story is fictional except where denoted * and was inspired by the writings of LBSC (Curly Lawrence) for the Model Engineer magazine 1933 – 1967.

CHAPTER 1

Our Speaker for Tonight

I followed the Triumph Herald in front me as it turned off right. 'Church Farm, Church Farm, I know that name I am sure I do.' By this point in my journey I was starting to lose hope of getting to this evening's Club meeting at any sort of reasonable hour, for I had battled the last 3 miles in the dark and through thick fog having left the warmth of my house nearly an hour earlier.

Tonight should be a 'Work in Progress' meeting which I knew for many participants would conjure in the mind an emotion of more work than progress; something I immediately recognised in myself.

Ordinarily such a meeting would have attracted a large audience but tonight with all the fog down on this cold December night I somehow doubted it would bring many out. That in itself would be a pity for I had brought with me the 3.5" gauge chassis my father had started years back but never finished, and which I had hoped to discuss with the other members.

My journey having already been slow was not now being helped being behind this ancient Triumph, for it was slowing my pace even further and possessing as it did the poorest set of taillights I had ever seen now made safety an issue, for in this fog one minute I could see them and the next minute they had gone.

I was beginning to question the wisdom of having followed this car at all and I think had only done so in the vague hope it was another club member heading in the same direction. But given I hadn't seen any familiar landmarks for some time now I was beginning to doubt this.

But Church Farm, why had I heard that name before? I cursed myself for neglecting to pick-up the Tom-Tom my wife and I usually shared, for with it I would now at least have had a bit of a clue as to my present location. Even my phone didn't want to help as it had decided to sulk by doggedly refusing to find any signal at all. I decided on balance to stick with my fellow traveller and to see where we both ended up.

I didn't have to wait long, for after about another 20 yards the road suddenly became a narrow lane which led down to a dimly lit area outside a series of two story buildings set around three sides of a square car park. I parked nose-on to the nearest building and got out.

A cold blast caught me full in the face as I opened the door and put a tentative foot out into the dark swirling fog. As I straightened up, I could just discern the odd smudgy spot of yellowish light coming from one of the few outside lights that overhung the entrance doors to the buildings. Where the light spilled into the car park I could discern the vague outline of the other cars. The Triumph I had been following was in the bay next to mine, but the other cars around me were of the same vintage as the Triumph and were all shapes I recognized from my childhood.

I looked across to the other buildings as they appeared and disappeared in the mist and slowly, I began to feel that maybe I did know them after all, but again from years back; one of these blocks was surely once our Club's old HQ. I was in East Barnet.

If I was, then I hadn't set eyes on it in probably the best part of 40 years, it could even be closer to 50, in fact hadn't they given it up in 1980 when the Council said they wanted to redevelop the site? This I didn't have an answer to as I had lost touch with the Club after leaving school and had only rejoined it in relatively recent years.

'Hello there David,' A voice from behind me brought me up short before I had chance to consider this point further. 'Have you brought your chassis?' Arden's voice was a mixture of friendly welcome and enquiry. 'It's a rough old night and no mistake' he continued, then added the tape recorder is already up there and set-up'. I was so taken aback by Arden's greeting and by seeing Arden again, I didn't stop to question it, instead I just opened the boot of my car extracted my dad's precious chassis and followed after him in the direction of the far building.

As we approached it eventually hit me; it's Arden! And he called me David, my father's name. I stopped dead in my tracks; and what did he mean about a tape recorder? Arden by this time had arrived at the door and turned now to look back at me, 'anything the matter?' he enquired. 'No, all fine' I said trying hard to make my remark sound natural.

The warm mellow glow coming from the upper windows of the club rooms looked extremely inviting as Arden opened the door and we both stepped in. As we entered, I had expected the lobby and stairwell to feel cold, instead we were embraced by a waft of warm air emanating from the room upstairs where I knew the meeting was going to be held. The hum of conversation bounced down the stone steps and around the walls, arriving at my ears and bringing with it the pleasure of more strangely familiar voices. That's ...Ernie, Tom, Geoff, George; oh Bill's there and Ed's made it tonight, great... But how, how are they here?

As we ascended the stairs to the first floor and approached the meeting room, I could hear the once familiar sound of the clink of china teacup on saucer coming from the little room on the left where I knew tea would be dispensed in the break. And as we came level with this cosy little kitchen, I recognised again the reassuring gentle sighing hiss coming from the tea-urn and the rustle of packets of biscuits being split open coming from behind the half-open door.

Just as I was taking all this in, a hand thrust towards me from the direction of the Club room.

'Good evening, David, glad you got here, and you've brought the chassis I see, terrific'.

Entering the room with its smell of stale cigarette smoke and the dust of time mingling with a hint of warm damp, I found who it was that had proffered the hand. I knew anyway by the familiar voice, but yes, Ernie's open friendly face came into view. 'It's good to see you, just find room to put it down on top of the 00 covers, probably somewhere over there' he said indicating the far side of the room with a slight motion of his arm, 'as you can see this side and the front table are already pretty full'.

Looking at the table as I crossed the room, I could see it was indeed pretty full. Not only the table but also the painted wooden covers over the track for the 00 layout attached to the flanking and back walls behind the speaker's table. I counted at least six engines there plus a few bits and pieces lying loosely on top of the covers.

I eventually found other examples of members' work where Ernie had indicated they would be and set about finding a spot in amongst the group to put the chassis down. With barely an inch of spare space left to be found, I managed with some effort to nestle it between the wall and a large reel to reel tape recorder set up beside them. I imagined this to be the one Arden had spoken of, there presumably to record the evening's events for a later write up in the News sheet.

Task completed I looked around for a spare seat. With so many people already present and seated it looked to me likely to be a full house. I knew then my quest would be in vain, so I slowly started to make my way to the very back of the room finding a spot near the window and the door that led into the next room where the club library was housed and where the slot-car lads held their meetings. I had bad memories of this spot and hoped tonight it wasn't going to live up to its old reputation of being known as draughty corner.

As expected I found all the more comfortable metal framed chairs with canvas seats and backs had already been taken, and had to resort to using one of the last of the dull brown village hall style wooden chairs; amongst these only the roughest looking ones were now left, so avoiding the one with some of the slats missing I took its mate and unfolded it as best I could in the limited space available and pushed it hard up against the back wall, and sat down.

The person sitting next to me and wearing a light coloured Sports jacket half turned away and talking to his other neighbour turned out to be Jack. As he turned back, he greeted me, 'glad you made it David; it's going to be good evening.' Then in a slightly whispered tone he continued 'we spent most of today going over there and collecting the engines.'

Mention of the engines made me look again albeit with difficulty from this much compromised position, towards the front table to try to identify them. Right at the front was a compact 2-2-2 engine with its tender which I guessed was 3.5inch gauge. Behind that and taking up the whole width of the table was a very long American type loco in 2.5inch gauge and behind that both left and right were two part built engines.

Looking back towards the door where we had come in and where the covers over the 00 layout started, I could see another 3.5inch gauge engine, maybe a G. W. Grange and to the right of that a largish 4-6-2 tender engine of Southern Region extraction. The engines on the covers behind the speaker's table were a Tich which I instantly recognized as the type of engine I had at one time started to build myself, and beside that another larger tank engine of 0-6-2 configuration.

Turning back to Jack I now saw he had a big smile on his face. 'Are they what I think they are?' I asked. 'Could be' came his reply with more than the hint of satisfaction in his voice. 'But surely' I started to say my voice trailing off and being lost to the sounds of the room.

My thoughts were suddenly in melt-down; I was at Church farm, I was meeting people again that I hadn't seen since my childhood and people were calling me David....But before I could fathom this notion any further the last few members to arrive, noisily squeezed themselves into the very last few areas of space left to sit, just as Tom the section leader stood up from the front row and turned to face the meeting.

A look over the top of his metal round rim spectacles towards the last one or two people who were still talking brought the room to a respectful hush. He addressed the now capacity gathering.

'Gentlemen it's good to see such a good turnout for this evening's guest speaker, especially given the poor conditions outside. Just to remind you' he continued, 'there is strictly no smoking in here tonight. If you want to smoke it will have to wait till the tea break when you can go outside. However by way of compensation' he said smiling, 'as we are starting a bit early this evening we will be having two breaks for tea, AND we have some chocolate biscuits.' This last piece of information was greeted with much enthusiasm by the assembled group. Then half turning back he indicated the engines on the table behind him and said, 'I am sure looking at this magnificent collection you may already have guessed who our speaker may be?' I thought he delivered this last line with more than a hint of a twinkle in his eye.

Just as Tom finished speaking the sound of voices drifted up once more from the stairwell. One I vaguely recognized as coming from one of our older founding members, 'Flan', the other, I definitely didn't recognize and was a much lighter tone, perhaps just short of squeaky, I assumed it must belong to the guest speaker.

Moments later Flans' recognizable and well turned out figure appeared in the doorway wearing a damp heavy grey overcoat under which could just be glimpsed a well-tailored 'city' suit. He was followed into the room by a slightly shorter person wearing a beret and a sensible, though lesser quality over coat. The appearance of the new arrival instantly caused a buzz within the room. Tom stepped forward with his hand outstretched ready to introduce himself and to shake hands with the speaker.

Pleasantries over, as the new arrivals removed their topcoats and settled down Tom turned once more to the meeting.

'Gentlemen, as this is the twentieth anniversary year of our club, may I introduce our very special speaker for tonight' and after a short pause, 'Please welcome our Patron of the North London Society of Model Engineers, Curly Lawrence or as many of you already know him, LBSC.'

CHAPTER 2

The Meeting

With the sound of the applause just starting to fade our speaker took up his position behind the table at the front of the meeting room and looked around the assembled group first as if to reassure himself he was in friendly company. As the room eventually settled, he started to speak, his light but firm voice sounding into the near silence.

'Now Brothers I have been invited by your worthy Chairman to chat to you tonight in this splendid lobby, to tell you a bit about my life and to give you the low-down on my workshop and some of the engines originating from the Purley loco works. After that' he continued, 'and after one or maybe two cups of the *engineman's* best friend, thanks to some of my friends here in the North London and some of my old pals from the Model Engineer, I'll show you some photos of my workshop and a movie film taken by your own Bro B. DeMille of my test track the Polar Route, in action. And as long as the needle holds to the red line so to speak, I'll try then and answer your questions as we go along but bear with me brother loco men as this old noddle is not as young as it used be'.

Just as he was about to continue, Harold who later I learned had also helped collect the engines and set up the meeting room that evening, asked Curly if he would like to have a seat to save standing. 'No thank you' Curly said 'I am used to standing in the workshop for long periods, and anyway just in case I do feel like going 'Pullman' tonight I have taken the precaution of bringing the padded stool from my workshop with me,' then looking over to Flan who was now sitting in the front row asked, 'we've left it in the corridor, is that right?' 'Yes, quite so' 'Flan' replied nodding his head.

'Why then do I want to build steam engines? It's a question I am often asked in letters sent to me'. Curly's voice caressed the hush of the room; and after thinking about his answer for a moment, he continued, 'Well I have always been fascinated by things moved by steam since I was a boy, in fact my Granny can be credited with getting me started when she bought me a toy engine called 'Ajax fitted with a pot boiler and little oscillating cylinders. You must remember of course that this was in the age of Queen Victoria when steam was all the rage and considered exciting as it could replace labour and make more money for people, supposedly for all of us, and that England was at that time the workshop of the world. If any nation could exploit potential in ideas, then it was us.'

Feeling more comfortable now talking to his audience he went on, 'For a boy then interested in steam and therefore mechanics, it was only natural for me to acquire some toolsand to dream of the ones I couldn't afford'. Pausing again for a moment to recollect he said, 'of course a lathe in those days was just that, a dream, but then dreams can happen....especially if one is determined enough, as I was' he gave a slight smile as he savoured the thought, 'my first proper lathe if you don't include the 'little un' that I used in our back kitchen at home, was an original 3.5inch Drummond treadle lathe which some of you will remember had a cantilever bed which I reckon must have been a very early one as I am sure Mr Drummond himself had had a hand in making it, bought on the *never, never*. Do you know I can still remember nervously approaching Arthur Drummond at the Model Engineer Exhibition and asking....'

In the tea break and taking my courage in both hands I approached Curly just as he was finishing off describing to George a detail on the weir pump, he was holding in his large hands. 'Mr Lawrence' I faltered after George had gone, 'my father started building your 3.5 inch gauge Black 5, 'Doris' design about ten years ago and I would like to finish it. But I am having a bit trouble tackling the piston valve cylinders'. Looking at me somewhat quizzically from under his beret his answer was direct and to the point. 'I prefer Curly young man.

Now I know from when I was scheming those cylinders out that some would make a meal of it', I felt myself blushing with embarrassment, 'However' he said in a more conciliatory tone 'if you don't feel confident you could fit slide valves instead, I am sure I schemed out both types for that engine and if I didn't you could adapt them

from another one of my designs, as long as you remember to keep the angles right' he cautioned 'and remember to attach the radius rod under the valve fork on the combination lever.' Then he added, 'mind you'll also need to remember to set the return crank to lead the main crank or you'll never get the valves set correctly.

See' he said with hint of self-satisfaction in his voice, 'I always think of my boys when designing engines as I know not everyone will have the same level of skill. That said', he leant forward and looked hard at me, 'there really isn't anything more difficult in making piston rather than slide valves, in fact they are probably easier as its all turning and boring. Goodness, if I had ten bob for every time someone told me initially they couldn't do them and then wrote back two weeks later telling me they had followed the *words and music* after all and that they now had a pair of working piston valve cylinders ready to go....well, I could have bought a bigger house and built a deluxe Polar Route just like my late friend Bro Wholesale had at Burlesden. Finding this thought agreeable he went on now half smiling, 'why I could even have a fly-over like he had and really give the neighbours something to talk about'.

'Have you started the boiler?' he enquired. 'No I haven't really thought about that yet' I said, 'I did wonder if I might buy one.' Curly gave me a severe look, 'well, you could' he said after what I thought was an uncomfortable amount of time. 'Frankly there are probably only two commercial lads I would trust to make me a boiler' he said sadly....'however as you say you have time enough to think about it. Anything else?' he said seeing someone patiently standing behind me waiting to talk to him.

An awkward silence followed and seeing I had nothing further to add Curly brought our conversation to a close by saying, 'Right then...so I am sure young man, you *could* make those piston valve cylinders if you try hard enough', then he leant towards me again and added in a half whispered voice, 'don't do anything rash regarding the boiler, model engineers usually make their own boilers'.

CHAPTER 3

Masterclass

Tea break over and with the last of the members making their way back up the stairs from outside where they had been enjoying a smoke, I headed back to my seat by the back wall feeling I hadn't given a good account of myself to Curly by asking what for him must have appeared silly questions.

Curly took up his position again behind the table at the front of the room and looked passively at his audience. Finding the need to wait while the last of the coughing and clearing of throats that is so inevitable at such gatherings subsided, I thought I noticed a look of impatience starting to register on his face.

Finally he was able to address the meeting once more. 'Having been approached by some of you lads during the break about problems you are having with building your engines,' this comment was aimed I felt mainly at me, 'I think now would be a good time to take some questions from the floor so you can all learn together, saving the necessity for some of you to write to me at some later date.' I was sure this last statement was also intended to find a target which it did by making me feel even more uncomfortable.

'Curly, 'a voice from the third row broke the hanging silence,' do you have any tips for turning a piston to fit a bore?' Gazing across to the questioner Curly hesitated before answering a look of recognition slowly starting to register on his face. 'Aren't you the Brother who built "Nuff Sed"'? he enquired, 'Guilty as charged' the answer came back as if rehearsed. 'Well,' Curly continued 'you certainly put the cat amongst the pigeons with that one'. Upon hearing this I thought the questioner looked rather pleased with himself. 'But' Curly cautioned, 'it's way too big to handle in the normal way and I certainly wouldn't want it on the 'Polar Route', it would probably damage the permanent way, not to mention the timbers.' At this the person who had asked the question now appeared to me to look somewhat crestfallen by this apparent stinging criticism. 'However,' Curly sounded more accommodating, 'you built something unorthodox to prove a point, and I for one admire that having spent most of my life doing the same thing.' This last unexpected compliment coming from Curly evidently restored the questioner's spirits making him swell once more with pride, his head now held high.

'Anyway,' Curly picked up the question, 'this is about cylinders. I remember learning the hard way what not to do as I first tried turning the pistons for my engine Fayette using 'aero' limits which we had worked to in the munitions-shop which I had charge of during the later part of the Kaiser's war. Well' he continued, the job was a failure simply because the first time the engine was put in steam and the cylinders got hot the pistons expanded and seized up. But having thought it through, I solved that spot of bother on the second attempt by heating both cylinders and pistons to working temperature and then tried turning the pistons to what I considered was the most advisable working clearance. After they had cooled off and contracted, I measured the clearance, and ever since I have fitted my pistons in accordance. I now know the fit I am looking for, so I use the cylinder itself as a gauge when turning them' *

'Do you recommend fitting the turned head to the piston rod first or would you fit it after?' A person sitting behind Flan asked. 'Not exactly' Curly said looking a little disconcerted at having been interrupted. 'No, I do my finish-turning, that is sizing to the bore with the piston on its own rod held in a collet, then I can judge it by feel'. 'And how will you know if the fit is a good one?' the questioner persisted.

After this second interruption Curly now looking slightly irritated but sensing the gathering would benefit from a demonstration, picked up the machined cylinder block from the speakers table in front of him left there ready to demonstrate just such a point, and said. 'The test that can be applied to see if the work is O.K, the simplest test I know of, is to put the plain cover on the cylinder, that is the one without the gland' he continued placing the appropriate cover taken from the table onto the end of the cylinder block whilst holding it horizontally with one hand; then taking up the finished piston and rod from the table with the other said, 'If you have done the job right the piston should slide into the cylinder bore easily, and you should be able to twirl the rod between finger and thumb, with the piston at any part of the cylinder bore' at which point he entered the piston into the end of the block to demonstrate. '

However it is still possible that it is too easy a fit, and the way to prove how good a fit it is, is to hold the cylinder vertically with the cover at the bottom ', he removed the piston once more and turned the block upright, 'and to put your thumb over the bottom port, if the piston will enter only a little way, and then stop by virtue of the air trapped underneath it, there isn't much wrong with the fit. Provided it passes that first test, if you now remove your thumb from the port' he said temporarily removing his own thumb, the piston should fall to the end of the cylinder by its own weight, and if it's *really* good' he went on ' you will be able to do this' at which point he held out the upturned cylinder and allowed the piston to fall from top to bottom in a stop start motion by successively covering and uncovering the port opening with his thumb. *

Murmurs of approval rippled around the room, and I heard more than one person express under their breath the desire that they too wished they could make their pistons fit as well as that.

Quiet anticipation started to return to the meeting room as everyone waited for the next hand to go up and question to be asked. We didn't have to wait long, Ken's hand appeared from the sea of heads in front of me, 'Do you hone your cylinders?' he asked

By this point in the evening Curly had decided to settle on the stool he had brought from his workshop having first positioned it just to the right of the table. He sat composed with his hands now in his lap waiting for the next question...

From the middle of the room a questioner admitted to Curly and to the meeting his own failure in trying to get enough oil into the cylinders of his commercially made 3.5inch gauge pacific engine.

Curly fixed him with a concentrated look and asked him to give a bit more detail. ' Trouble is' the questioner ventured ' if it's on my up and back line at home, then its fine but get it on the track at Colney Heath then by the top of the big straight, where we are proposing to build the tunnel its sounding decidedly rough.' Curly seemed to brighten as the tale unfolded eventually saying; 'Right I know exactly what your problem is. You said the engine is a commercial job, as you know I always thought the *pound shilling and pennies* brigade mostly left a lot to be desired, not least because in my opinion they nearly all had idiosyncrasies inbuilt into their designs; one usually being their ability. or otherwise to provide steady lubrication to the cylinders. I am guessing therefore in this case it has a displacement lubricator?' he said looking over to the questioner who was now looking a little sheepish at the thought of having to engage further with Curly remembering the way he had dealt with the last questioner but managed to reply meekly 'yes I do have one fitted'. 'Well ' Curly said ' I suggest you go home tonight pull off that lubricator throw it in the rubbish bin and fit one of my oscillating cylinder type pumps that will pump all the oil you will need and at a pressure that will astound the natives. Then you will have no more trouble.'

Looking to further emphasise his point he lent forward picking up from the table an old tin box and like a magician about to produce a rabbit from a hat, opened it reached in and lifted out a completed oil pump and tank. Returning the tin box to the table he held up the little lubricator holding it between finger and thumb of his left hand and said, 'Now I always put my money where my mouth is, so I will demonstrate.' As he finished talking he unscrewed a blank union on the bottom elbow underneath the oil tank with his right hand and started to rock the little side lever back and forth, much to the consternation of those sitting immediately in front of him in the front row, for as he did so they received a succession of squirts of oil that shot out of the end of the elbow and headed straight for the comfort of their otherwise clean jacket and shirt fronts.

Placing the pump back into the little tin box and putting it down on the table once more Curly contentedly commented, 'Nuff sed'.

- This is from a description written by LBSC that first appeared in Model engineer Nov 2, 1944, p412

CHAPTER 4

The Film Show

As the second tea break of the evening came to an end, I joined the small queue returning their teacups to the little counter formed across the doorway of the tiny kitchen from where it had been dispensed earlier and followed the other members back into the meeting room to find our seats. As the room started to fill up once more the other half of the group, those that had braved the cold night air for a second time to have a smoke outside also returned, eager now to feel once again the inviting warmth within.

During the tea-break George and Harold had used the time to assemble a screen at the front of the meeting room and had also cleared a space amongst the chairs in the middle so a small 8mm cine projector and stand could be set up and plugged in; on the stand's second shelf a slide projector was placed ready to be brought up onto the top when required. As I passed on my way back to find my seat near the window, I noticed the person sitting nearest the stand was cradling a box of slides having been press-ganged into looking after them and primed to be on standby ready to hand them up one at a time when the slide projector was being used.

With everyone finally seated, Curly finished what he was saying to Mac in the front row and returned the partially machined crank axle he had been discussing with him back to the safety of the 00 covers and took up a position to the left of the screen where he waited once more for the room to settle. Tom stood up tapping the side of his empty teacup to gain the attention of the group as he did so.

'Gentleman, gentlemen' he called out above the chatter. 'Gentlemen, please....that's.....that's better' he said as the last of the hubbub died down. 'For this next part of the evening Curly is going to tell us a bit about his workshop and show us some slides, but before that ' he said gesturing towards the little projector 'we are going to start by showing a short film taken in recent times on the Polar Route, that's Curly's own test track in Purley . Now I am sure Curly won't mind if you want to ask the odd question whilst it is being shown but try to keep them brief, please.'

As Tom sat down, the fan on the side of the projector rattled into life followed shortly after by the distinctive repetitive pick pick picking sound film makes as it started to run. Someone sitting by the doorway half stood up and pulled the door nearly closed leaving just enough light coming from the corridor outside to see a way out, whilst at the same time someone else turned off the meeting room lights just as the first black and white images pictures appeared on the screen.

Following a succession of black, white and grey flashes on the screen the first jerky pictures to appear were overlaid with a row of perforated white dots that danced across the picture partially obscuring a shot taken from the inside of a moving car as it pulled up outside a terraced house.

'Here then is the hacienda' Curly's voice spoke from his vantage point beside the screen. 'That's one of your well known brothers getting steam up on his engine prior to taking to my road' he continued as the picture on the screen changed. The person operating the camera seemed then to be attempting to move their position to show the narrow gauge engine *Susie M* in the process of having a blower pipe put into its chimney. Wobbling once more, the camera then tried to follow the pipe back to what looked like one of two motors mounted on a short plank of wood, the second one of which I thought looked like a small vacuum cleaner with a short handle on its side.

The sound from the projector became more dramatic, the picture suddenly jumped and swayed as a join in the film passed through, eventually settling to show a close-up of someone smiling, roll-up cigarette in his mouth determinedly turning the little handle I had just seen, apparently to produce power to make the blower fan work.

‘As you have no doubt seen before, ‘Curly’s high pitched voice sounded above the noise of the projector, ‘that blower is one your Bro Narrow gauge made up from a surplus hand cranked six volt generator and motor set-up you can buy from those government surplus shops in town’. Another commotion came from the projector, this time a close up shot of a small two pin electrical plug appeared, plugged into a socket on the lower wooden upright of a sturdily constructed water tower. The camera unsteadily pulled away and followed the lead to another blower in the top of the chimney of a second engine, this time a neat looking *Juliet* being steamed close to where *Suzie M* was being prepared. Curly spoke again. ‘This is my current arrangement for driving blowers, the socket is one of those waterproof ones and is now fed from the house through a half inch underground galvanised pipe. I originally had that socket fixed on one of the track uprights’ he continued as the camera attempted once more to *walk* round this time to show the pressure gauge on *Juliet*’s footplate, ‘but I found too much oil and dirt, not to mention the odd earwig was finding its way into the works, so I decided to move it’.

More clattering came from the direction of the projector as the picture leapt again settling once more to show a more general view of the Polar Route, the camera having now apparently been moved to the inside the oval of the railway.

It started to pan, much steadier now, suggesting that during the move it had also been put on a tripod, past an animated scene of three members fussing generally around their engines as smoke was seen issuing from the respective blowers. It then continued to pan smoothly and slowly past a fourth member of the gang who was attempting to take a photograph of the full size railway signal Curly had set-up beside the raised track. At this point the camera stopped panning zoomed in with a motion something akin to us being shot forward from a cannon toward the signal, and we found ourselves looking at its top outline in close detail, the somewhat unsettling change of shot being taken I guessed to record some feature of the signal for future reference. Curly had just started to say ‘that signal was the old number twelve shunt signal from Coulston station ’when the camera appeared to leap backwards to its original vantage point and continued panning in an anticlockwise direction around the inside of the track.

By this time Curly was struggling to keep his commentary in step with what was being shown on the screen. ‘Those lamp posts with the swan necks used to be gas lights’ he said ‘and I had them planted and converted to take Milly Amp when I got them about twenty-five years ago. Oh, yes, now that little hut you just had a glimpse of is my signal hut where’.....just as he said this the screen turned a brilliant white colour hurting my eyes and making everyone in front of me appear as black silhouettes; it was followed almost immediately by a spontaneous eruption of cheers and whistles from within the room as Alan, who was operating the projector, did his utmost to stop the now broken end of film from whipping his outstretched hand as he attempted to switch the machine off.

‘Fixed in jiffy’ Alan called out cheerfully fumbling for a torch as the slowly flickering white light finally went out. ‘Tricky things I always think, bootlaces’ Curly’s voice commented from the nearly dark corner where he was sitting. ‘Always breaking, I remember my old friend Mr Grose trying to show a film to Mabel and I sometime back and he couldn’t keep it on the screen for more than a minute before it broke again.’

‘Right Ho’ a voice from the middle of the room said a few moments later.

The projector picked and clattered back into life as the picture flickered once more onto the screen. ‘Distant and Stop’ Curly said as the camera panned past a miniature two arm semaphore signal at the start of the back straight of the little railway. ‘All twelve volt working; I wrote an article about it all in the ME, 1951 if I remember’. The camera continued to pan showing the bottom curve and behind it a corrugated iron garage could be seen that appeared to fill much of the gardens width. ‘And that’s where the gasoline cart lives’ his commentary now seemed to be back in step with the pictures on the screen, ‘that’s where the power box for the signals is kept set-up’ adding ‘ again all in the ME article’.

As the full sized signal came back into view once more indicating the camera had now turned a full circle, the panning slowed to a stop to show that *Susie M* was now on the main track, its safety valves lifting as the driver was seen adding a shovel-full of coal.

Further clattering came from the projector, this time to reveal a couple of the lads carrying a short passenger car which they placed on the track behind *Susie M*, before climbing aboard. The picture jumped and the next shot showed a smiling driver as he opened the regulator and set off with his passengers all waving enthusiastically as they passed the old lampposts heading in the direction of the first bend.

Just as the engine entered the bend the camera suddenly swung nearly a full 180 degrees to look over to the far side of the railway, the movement being so rapid it caused many of us to instinctively lean slightly over in our seats and to grab the back of the chair in front as if on a roller-coaster, only for it stop as suddenly as it had started seemingly focused on nothing in particular; then a moment later *Susie M*'s distinctive shape and passenger carriage came slowly into view from the right and as it did so the camera effortlessly and most naturally started to pan with it for another 45 degrees or so before letting it exit the left side of the picture.

Another shaky couple of seconds followed as the picture clattered and swayed eventually settling to display the smaller engine *Juliet* once again, this time coming out of the bottom curve past the big signal and entering the little station area where it slowed allowing its driver time to wave and smile at the camera before accelerating past and away. Barely had it left the shot when *Susie M* came into view from the same direction. 'Unfortunately the old Coulston signal wasn't working that day' Curly called out from his corner, 'I found later the magnetic valve on the top of the vacuum cylinder had stuck so your lads got a bit carried away... driving a bit too close I thought' he added disapprovingly.

'This is what the driver sees' he next said as the picture showed a view taken from the moving riding car looking ahead and over the top of the loco.' Smoke gets in your eyes' he chuckled as the regulator on the engine was opened further and the camera was briefly enveloped in smoke.

'Up round dolls house viaduct now....and here we are just coming up to the distant.' Curly was just in mid-sentence when suddenly and without warning there was a loud bang accompanied by the sound of something like pellets hitting a fan and the room went completely dark save for the chink of light coming from the corridor. 'Bugger, bulbs gone I think' an irritated sounding Alan exclaimed in the dark over the ominous sound of metallic rattling coming from inside the projector as it came to an undignified stop.

With one or two lights in the room coming back on again and whilst a new bulb was hastily being located and fitted Curly, apparently completely unfazed by these events got up from the comfort of his padded stool saying; 'Well, while our friends who like to play with kinematographs remove the shrapnel and find another candle, I'll finish what I was saying about my signals and then if we need to fill in a bit more time I'll take another couple of questions.

I track circuited all that stretch after I'd got the big signal set up in.....'

CHAPTER 5

Question Time

After what seemed a long time and with the projector still in several pieces Alan, our projectionist for the evening now a mixture of frustration and embarrassment, suggested to Tom the section leader that maybe Curly could continue taking questions until the new bulb was fitted and he had the machine back in one piece. Curly readily agreed to the suggestion and looked almost relieved at the prospect of speaking directly once more to his audience.

Wasting no time he stepped forward, 'Are there any more questions then?' he asked looking around the room.

'Curly,' Bills rich fruity voice asked from behind where Alan was tinkering with the projector, 'you were talking about cylinders earlier, what are your feelings about port sizes?'

Curly stood for a moment and half smiled; then leaning against the edge of the speakers table he said, 'People just won't be told. I have written goodness knows how many times about following the *Words and Music* when building my engines, and STILL' he said with great emphasis on the last word 'they do something different then write to me telling me it's a shy steamer or loses as much steam as it can make and wants to know why. And when I write back and ask if it is built to my specification.... inevitably they say something like, *I only increased the so and so* or *I thought a bigger something would be better.*'

Standing away from the table once more and looking somewhat irritated by the tale he was relating, Curly fixed everyone in the room with a hard stare and said, 'If you choose not to follow my instructions, then if it doesn't perform, that is entirely your own fault. I build and describe engines that DO work and if you mess with the music....or the words I provide, then it is completely at your own risk.'

Restoring his composure once more he went on now looking less tense.

'Ports and passages are a common problem which people will insist on changing. Now a case in point, someone wrote me telling me their engine was a losing steam as quickly as it could make it and wanted to know why. Seems they had instead of drilling three holes for the passages of such a size that I had specified, they had cut one large slot about the width of the inlet port, between said port and the cylinder bore. Well, of course' he explained, 'with such big spaces to fill with steam I knew straight away it had likely messed with the timing and with so much extra steam in those big passages, I just reckoned that some of it wasn't even reaching its destination before the piston was pushing it all back and out of the exhaust....' **

He paused for a moment, seemingly content with his explanation and waited for a reaction or for another question to be asked; none was immediately forthcoming instead he was greeted with the naked sound of a sweet being unwrapped from a particularly noisy wrapper filling the available silence.

Sensing competition Curly wasted no time in warding off the threat of any more sweets making an appearance to interrupt him by clearing his throat loudly and then cheerfully saying, 'Next question please as they say on *What's My Line....*'

'Curly,' Don's soft West Country burr pleasantly embraced us, 'can you say anything about turning and finishing wheels successfully?' he asked hopefully. 'I'd say make sure they are round' Curly answered mischievously. The room erupted in a roar of laughter, 'though seriously,' he went on, 'I know they can be tricky depending on their size and the quality of lathe you have. In fact it's probably THE most frequently asked question I am asked in the letters sent to me,' a degree of weariness was once again sounding in his voice; but he continued, 'I always use tipped tools, tipped because my first tip is always not to run the lathe too fast, use back-gear and get under the skin of the casting with that first cut and second tip, don't faff with a thousand tiny cuts after. I reckon I can do a five inch wheel on my old Milnes lathe; you'll see it in the pictures of my workshop shortly, using a tipped tool and in two cuts, one roughing and one finishing.' ***As he said this, I became aware that around me a

number of my companions appeared to be quietly whistling under their breath expressing I imagined either incredulity or awe. or maybe it was a bit of both.

By this point in the evening the warmth of the meeting room and the comforting effect of having enjoyed two tea breaks and talked a lot, was starting to have its effect upon me making me feel sleepy and I was finding it hard to keep my concentration. It was not being helped as a tree branch outside the window was now starting to knock against the sill becoming intrusive and making it difficult for me to hear what Curly was saying. ‘...poorly positioned crank pins. So no, I say once more, stick to my *Words and Music* and you won’t go wrong...’ By now his words where becoming smothered and I was really struggling to hear what he was saying as the knocking outside became even louder.

Moments later the noise unexpectedly stopped, and Curly’s voice came through clear as day. ‘I offer guaranteed results my friends’...’Neil, Neil’ I heard Jacqueline my wife’s voice calling from behind the door of the room where the Club library and slot car section was housed close to where I was sitting. ‘Jackie?’...I said to myself straining again to catch what Curly was saying, his voice losing the battle against this further intrusion.

From outside the window a swishing and flapping noise now started like leaves rubbing and smacking the panes of glass. ‘Neil.....Neill’ my wife’s voice was now sounding much more urgent. Suddenly I felt myself falling....falling....f a l l i n g ... ‘Neil for goodness sake!’ I felt Jackie’s grip holding me and stopping me falling any further. ‘Wake up Neil you’ve been asleep.’

Coming to I could see I was no longer in the Clubroom but inside our spare bedroom at home and Jackie was standing beside me.

She leant past me and switched off my father’s old tape recorder, the sound of the switch making an impressive metallic clunk as she did so. The full reel of tape finally slowed with the loose end sweeping one last broad arc before coming completely to rest.

Stepping back from where I was sitting in her mother’s old high backed chair we kept in the spare room, she sat on the edge of the bed and looked across at me with an affectionate but pitying smile reserved for such occasions. ‘I gather you’ve been listening to your dads old recording’ she said quietly. ‘Sorry, I only shut my eyes for moment’ was the best I could manage to say.

As my head started to clear I stood up, picked up the empty tape box from the top of the bedside cabinet where I had left it and retrieved the full spool of tape from the machine putting it carefully inside. “20th Anniversary talk LBSC 1964 tape 1” the label said written in my dad’s unmistakably clear handwriting.

‘Will you go out to the workshop?’ Jackie enquired. ‘It’s still a terrible night outside you can’t see beyond the fence’, adding ‘I don’t think you’ll make it to the meeting this evening.’

Getting up from the bed she walked towards the bedroom door and just as she reached it, stopped. Turning her head she looked back at me. ‘I’ve made some tea if you want to come down’. She stood for a moment longer then half-turned to face me.

As I looked back, I could see a slightly puzzled look on her face. Casually she ventured, ‘oh by the way you left your mobile downstairs, and someone rang so I took a message.’ As she said this, she reached into her jeans pocket and pulled out a crumpled yellow post-it note and looked carefully at what she had written. ‘A Mr Lawrence, is it? It wasn’t a great line, but he said you knew him and could you phone him back.’

Reaching over she handed me the note. I could see she was now looking very puzzled as she said, ‘I am sure I misheard him, but did he say his first name was ‘Curly?’

** This is from a description written by LBSC that first appeared in Model engineer Aug 11th, 1949, p179

*** Sept 29th, 1949, p413

CHAPTER 6

The Visit

I looked again at the post-it note my wife Jackie had given to me with the name 'Lawrence' written on it followed by 'Curly' which was underlined and had a question mark beside it and pondered. I told myself this obviously couldn't be the Curly I had heard on the recording. So who was it? It must be somebody's idea of a joke, and if it was a joke I felt I needed to know who was behind it.

I waited until I was next outside in the familiar surroundings of my workshop before phoning the number on the piece of paper. After much shushing, hissing and crackling on the line, the number eventually connected, the comforting burr burr, burr burr pulsing my ear until eventually it was answered.

'Helloo, Purley 2436' a soft female voice with a hint of a Scottish accent answered from the other end.

'Hello' I stammered, 'I had a message to phone this number to speak to a Mr Lawrence, is this the right number?' and after a pause added 'I am sorry to disturb you if it's not'. 'No, you are quite right' the soft voice replied, 'I'll fetch him'. I heard the sound of the receiver being put down and could discern light footsteps on a wooden floor walking away followed by an exchange of voices in the distance. After a little while what I thought were the same footsteps returned followed by the sound of the phone being picked up once more. 'Hello, can I help you' the light voice I had heard on the recording the other night intoned from the other end.

At the sound of the voice I felt a cold sensation shoot through my body. Steadying myself against the workbench and looking quickly around the inside of my workshop to reassure myself I was actually really there and not dreaming, I took a breath and said, 'Mr Lawrence?' 'Curly if you don't mind' the voice said firmly. 'We haven't met' I said 'but I have read a lot about you, in fact the other night I listened to part of a recording of a talk you gave to the North London model engineers in Barnet in November 1964.' As I finished, I couldn't quite believe what I had just heard myself say.

'Aren't you the chap who asked me about finishing your father's 3.5inch gauge Doris that night.' Curly asked. 'But that was....' I started to say staring hard at the rack of files on the wall in front of me and finding it difficult to take in what I was now hearing. 'Well, aren't you?' Curly's voice sounded impatient.

'I wanted to have a further chat with you about that engine and about the items your father left with me. I didn't get round to doing anything with them after we had discussed it and then time went on'... his voice trailed off, 'and the situation unhappily changed'.

This statement left me feeling decidedly uneasy as I had no idea what Curly was referring to.... if indeed this was Curly I was even talking to, I knew nothing about any 'items' my dad had spoken to him about, in fact I no reason to believe my father had even known Curly. 'Why not jump into the gas buggy and come and see me on Saturday' Curly suggested. 'Yesss, I could ...' I said slowly, 'What time?' 'Shall we say around two thirty' Curly replied.

It took a while before I felt I could broach the subject with Jackie about visiting Purley that coming Saturday as I wasn't sure how she would react if I told her about my recent phone conversation. Besides I needed more time to think about it all.

By the Tuesday of the same week I had decided it was too ridiculous to contemplate driving all that way to the other side of London based on a conversation that had obviously been a 'wind-up.' However on the Thursday morning I had just started breakfast when Jackie appeared in the kitchen doorway holding a postcard.

'Who do you know in Purley that likes trains Neil' she asked inquisitively. 'No one as far as I know' I replied, 'why?' 'Well this card has just come in the post addressed to you. You can't miss the train on the front and on the back,

it just has an address and a sketch of a railway signal with a green lens that looks like its flashing, it's not yet another exhibition is it'?

Taking the card from her I smiled awkwardly, inwardly knowing that this development was now going to require a great deal of care and tact in handling if I was not to find myself in a lot of trouble.

Saturday came and even though I knew Jackie still had severe misgivings about letting me go to Purley, not least because I didn't really suppose she had been won-over by my explanation that I was going to visit someone who, according to the Model Engineer magazine had died in 1967, leaving her therefore in little doubt that I must want to go there for some other nefarious reason; surprisingly, she let me go but on the understanding that we would keep in regular touch throughout the day thereby reducing my chances in her eyes, of me getting up to anything shall we say, more questionable.

Shutting the front door of our house I wondered and not for the first time that day, what on earth I was doing driving all the way to Purley supposedly to meet someone who was definitely not going to be the person I thought they were. However having got official sanction from Jackie to go it seemed a pity now to waste the opportunity to find out who it was behind this charade.

Once in the car I entered the address I had been sent into the Sat-Nav and waited for it to find the location. After a short wait it told me the journey would take around an hour and half using the M25 and to come at junction 6 and head up to Purley via the A 22. With the information successfully loaded I hesitated once more before pressing the start icon on the screen...'was I really going to make this journey'? I asked myself already knowing the answer had to be a definite YES.

Decision made I turned the key in the ignition stirring the engine into life, selected 'Drive' on the gearbox and slowly rolled the car off the hardstand and in the direction of Purley Oaks and 121 Grange Road.

The journey was fairly uneventful save for two tricky patches on the M25 and a minor hold up on the 235 that lost me about twenty minutes all told, so I arrived into the Croydon area later than I had intended just before 2.30. As I got closer it had become overcast and was now drizzling making the windscreen mist slightly. Almost immediately I felt a warm flow of air against my face as the auto de-mist was activated, it was against this and the distraction of the windscreen wipers intermittently rubbing across the screen that my Sat-Nav indicated I was getting near.

'At the next junction turn right' I was instructed, *'Turn right'* it reminded me as found myself leaving Allenby Avenue and at last turning into Grange Road. Then, *'In seventy yards you will have reached your destination.'*

I started to drive slowly down Grange Road looking for number 121. 'Fifty-two....seventy' I said out loud, 'must be on the other side, one hundred and three ...one hundred and eleven there it is one two one'. I continued past the house and turned the car round at the end of the road returning to pull up outside a tidy white painted terraced property; and even though this was my first visit to the area it seemed somehow to be vaguely familiar.

'Ok this is where the fun starts' I said to myself as I got out of the car, closed the door and walked up the stepped path to the front door and pressed the doorbell.

Waiting for the bell to be answered I looked up at the clean bright rendered front of the house, my gaze stopping to admire the white UPVC frames fitted to the windows and thought how smart it all looked. With no immediate response to my ring I rang the bell again and this time could hear it ringing inside. I waited a few moments longer and was just going to ring once more when I saw through the little glazed portion of the front door the outline of a figure approaching from the other side. It was followed shortly after by the sound of a security chain being unfastened followed by a lock being released, the sound of them unexpectedly making my heart thump in nervous anticipation.

Moments later the door opened gingerly, and a kind friendly looking female face appeared in the opening. 'Good afternoon, am I right for a mister Lawrence?' I enquired expecting a blank look from the other side. 'Yes, you're quite right' the same soft Scottish voice that I had heard on the phone answered. 'You're here to see Curly, aren't you?' she said opening the door further, 'please come in'.

As I stepped into the cold hallway I was struck by how much darker it seemed after the white of the frontage. Looking around me I saw that one wall was mostly taken up with a large hat and coat stand, and all the woodwork in the hall, the bare floorboards visible either side of the hall carpet, skirting boards and the staircase itself that filled nearly half the available space fitted with the same no-doubt hard wearing but gloomy coloured carpet, were all stained dark oak. The available daylight reflected from the old fashioned looking distempered ceiling and cream floral pattern wallpaper struggled to overcome their dullness with enough light.

'Forgive me asking' I enquired as my new acquaintance shut the door behind me,' but are you Mrs. Lawrence?' all the time expecting her to say, 'Mrs who'? But instead she stood for a moment seemingly surprised by my asking, 'Why bless you, yes I am, but do feel free to call me Mabel, most of Curly's friends do.' She turned and walked towards a door opposite the foot of the stairs. 'If you would be so kind as to wait in the sitting room, I'll tell Curly you are here' Mabel said opening the door and showing me into a homely but just as cold looking front room.

CHAPTER 7

Breaking the Ice

Mabel pulled the door to the sitting room closed behind her and headed off to tell Curly of my arrival. I sat now half listening to the sound of her receding footsteps as they changed from the starkness of her tread on the wooden threshold to the quiet of the strip of carpet laid along the passageway and then back again as she entered the room next door.

I looked around the little room. My immediate impression was how old fashioned everything looked with its air of old world charm. The tone was not one of neglect, far from it for other than it being a bit cold, every bit of woodwork from the exposed floorboards that edged the square of carpet in the middle of the room to the wood of the furniture and the window frames were either highly polished or freshly painted; it was just, well old school. It reminded me very much of my late grandparents' house with a furnishing style that had been difficult to date exactly as its contents had been bought anywhere between the 1930s and the 1960s when seemingly, certainly in my grandparent's case any further change had ceased, save for the purchase of a large Decca colour television set they had bought for their golden wedding anniversary, and even that I suspect had only been allowed into the house as it was built into its own polished walnut-wood cabinet. But here it didn't look as though any television set had ever made its presence felt.

I fidgeted and tried to make myself more comfortable in the easy chair I had been shown to with its cream coloured antimacassars on arms and back. It was I could now see one of a matched pair that where either side of a very 1930s looking open fireplace, a third chair of similar pattern and colour though possibly from a different manufacturer was diagonally across from where I was sitting and near to the door where we had come in. As my gaze fell upon it, I discovered I had a companion, for seated upon the chair and looking very contented was a Teddy bear with golden fur wearing a red and white neckerchief and sitting upright, its button eyes earnestly looking toward the fireplace.

I could see now that the style and size of all the chairs had been chosen so as to not overpower the modest sized room, for the room evidently also doubled as a dining room when required suggested by the presence of a dark coloured folding gate- leg table stored in the shallow bay window to the left of where I was sitting; its two accompanying straight backed dining chairs were opposite me and placed either side of a heavy looking radiogram come cutlery cabinet, also of dark wood, that I took to be the source of entertainment in this room, and between them all they filled the length of the internal wall up to the doorway that separated this room from the hallway.

Having looked around the room and arrived back at the door once more, I became aware I could now hear a metallic chipping sound accompanied by a slight low resonant humming coming through the dividing wall between this room and the one at the back, which I now took to be where Curly had his workshop. Presently there was a pause in the sound and the resonant note of the humming seemed to lift slightly; muffled undefined voices now seeped through the wall discussing I imagined my arrival.

Shortly after the chipping and humming resumed to its previous level and Mabel reappeared in the doorway. 'I've told Curly you are here' she said in her soft accent. 'He's just finishing something, and he'll be right in...Would you like tea while you are waiting?' she enquired, 'Thank you that would be very welcome' I answered. Mabel paused a while looking thoughtful, 'Would you care to try some of my homemade cake as well?'

Mabel disappeared once more and with the tea arrangements now in hand Teddy and I waited for Curly to join us. As I sat quietly alone again with my thoughts I found my eyes being slowly drawn back once more to the large Radiogram against the opposite wall, for now a shaft of weak sunlight was just starting to shine through the net curtains and was being reflected off the glass of two small black and white framed photographs on its top placed

either side of a very large polished brass plant pot with, what I thought was probably an aspidistra planted in it. Its presence seemed to compliment the calm genteel atmosphere of the room perfectly.

The thought occurred to me that what I was looking at so epitomised everything I had found so far on my visit, it would probably be a good idea to send my wife Jackie a picture of it, and if I included another shot of the old fashioned chairs by the fireplace between the two I felt sure they would reassure her that I was unlikely to be getting up to anything she would disapprove of, especially as I had heard my phone *ping* at least twice since I had arrived into Purley no doubt requesting an update from her as to my whereabouts, so I felt the action would prove to be quite timely.

Two clicks on the phone's camera later and the evidence was gathered; the trouble was I now discovered there to be no phone signal inside the house. I had just stood up and got about half way across the room to seek Mabel out to explain I was going to step outside once more, when the door opened and Curly entered wearing a light brown warehouse coat and his trade-mark beret.

'Hello again Mr. er I mean Curly' I said as we met me in the middle of the room knowing my mistake made me sound foolish. 'Ah,' Curly responded in the same high pitched voice I had heard on the tape the other evening, 'Bro *Steam Raisers* boy, well pleased to see you again, thank you for coming over' he said clasping my hand in a firm handshake. 'I think Mabel is going to give us a call when she has the tea ready, so shall we go next door then and I'll show you the 'Purley Loco Works'.

Curly turned on his heel and headed back out of the door. Barely had he set foot into the passageway when a telephone started to ring in the hall the bell appearing amplified by several decibels as its sound bounced off the halls hard surfaces where the instrument lived on its own little table under the half window, just inside the front door.

'Would you excuse me' Curly said looking back at me, 'you go on into the workshop and I'll join you in a minute'. He turned toward the front door took another step then threw in as an afterthought, 'I'll be taking the Pullman, so you take the other stool'.

I walked the few steps down the passageway to arrive at the doorway of the back room where Curly had his workshop set up just as Curly got to the phone; I heard him picking up the receiver, 'By the way,' he said loudly to catch my attention again, 'you don't smoke do you? Only I won't have it in the house, if you must do it go out through the back door and stand in the garden'. Then turning his attention back to the phone, briskly said, 'Hello, Purley 2436.'

Upon entering Curly's workshop I was immediately embraced by a welcoming warmth coming from an old coal fired heating boiler built into the fireplace on the other side of the room and tucked under one of the work benches, its glowing coals visible through two small little glass fronted doors. The comforting aromas of oiled machinery and the slightly aromatic scent of wood coming from the many tool racks and cabinets I could see located around the room hung in the warm air tantalisingly overlaid with the heavier odour of metal stock awaiting its turn to be transformed into some useful part for a loco.

As I stepped in and closed the door to, I could hear Curly speaking on the phone to his caller and whilst I was not deliberately eaves dropping, I couldn't help drinking in all that I was now seeing and hearing. 'Hello friend Tucker' I heard Curly say, 'I was going to phone you today as I put those drawings you sent me back in the post with my thoughts scribbled on them...er Thursday I think it was, so you should have them back by Monday latest. Mmm..mmm. Yes that's what thought, yes, I thought three thirty-two would be better myself...yes.'.

Shutting the door properly I turned and stood rooted to the spot just looking at the array of machines spread out in front of me. Here was another picture I just had to capture to send to Jackie and if not for her, for me to just remember what I was now seeing.

There was a gentle tap on the door. I opened it to find Mabel standing holding a tea tray which judging by its contents, I thought looked quite heavy. 'Can I take that for you?' I enquired. 'Thank you that would be kind' Mabel answered lifting the tray slightly and passing it over to me. 'Put it down just there' she said indicating the end of one of the benches.

'Goodness those sandwiches and cake look wonderful' I said as I put the tray down.

'Forgive me asking, but this picture' I said by way of starting a conversation lifting down a small picture from the wall above the bench, 'It's an Irish Terrier, isn't it?' 'Bless you' Mabel said with a broad smile. 'Yes, it is but how did you know that?' 'Jackie, that's my wife's family had one when I first met her...' there was a pause, 'they stand well don't they' I said repeating what I remembered Jackie's father saying to someone on one occasion in the hope that it made me sound as though I knew more about them than I actually did. 'They certainly do' Mabel agreed, 'and not just the looks, they do make good companions. That picture was taken in our back garden about twenty years ago, it's of our *Micky*. He really *did* have a lovely nature, absolutely no trouble at all....Curly was exceptionally fond of him, Yes' she said taking the picture from me, 'we were blessed to have him for about ten years.' She paused a moment looking a little sad.

Then upon fully entering the room and still clasping the picture tightly she walked toward the far end of the workshop saying quietly to me, 'come and look here.'

She beckoned me over to look out of the door that led into the garden. As I arrived beside her she gently tapped one of the little panes of glass in the door with her finger, 'You see that little Forsythia bush in the left hand flowerbed? That's where we popped him when the time came....' As she finished, I thought she was going to cry so raw was her obvious emotion in sharing this knowledge with me. 'A lovely reminder' I said stepping back from the door and hoping I was saying the right thing. 'Aye, it is that' she said sadly as she walked back from where we had both been standing.

The handle of the door from the passageway suddenly rattled and Curly entered looking cheerful. Seeing Curly Mabel brightened, 'I have just been telling our visitor about *Micky*' she said showing him the picture and patting him on the arm as she passed. 'Yes, he was a grand sort was our *Micky* Curly' replied, 'a real dog of character. I always enjoyed our little *outs* at the end of each day, helped to settle the old noddle especially if I had been drawing or writing all day.'. Curly too now stood for a moment looking at the little photo, remembering. Then looking down again still deep in thought he suddenly noticed the tray that Mabel had brought in, 'Ah the engineman's best friend!' he exclaimed, 'Let's share a cup together young man and a slice of my beloved's cake and we can talk about the problems you say you are having making those cylinders for your fathers 'Doris'.

Seeing the conversation was moving onto the reason for my visit, Mabel graciously said, 'I'll be in the sitting room if you want anything further, you two boys will no doubt want to talk shop now.' With that she quietly latched the door behind her leaving the two of us to enjoy her lovely tea and cake.

CHAPTER 8

Tea With Curly

Mabel left both Curly and I sitting at the workbench to the right of the garden door located at the far end of his workshop. Curly *going Pullman* as he put it was seated on his favourite padded stool with his back to a tall wooden tool chest tucked into one of the alcoves and between the two benches he used to work on his engines, the 12 inch 'Diacro' bending rolls that he thought highly of and believed, certainly at the time of my visit, to be the only example in England were on the end of the bench by his right shoulder. I sat at the other end of the same bench; in fact technically I was in the doorway that led out to the garden perched on a bare wooden stool, and to my right under the left hand window stood his very substantially built Milnes lathe set on its own cast iron stand.

From our respective positions we both had a good view of either the body of the workshop itself or if we half turned, a view out of the back windows into the pretty garden that Mabel tended, and further beyond that could be seen the outline of the full sized railway signal Curly had set up beside his test track, the line he liked to call the Polar Route.

Having given the sandwiches and cakes I had taken from Mabel earlier a long anticipatory look of appreciation, I took a deep contented breath and thought the afternoon really couldn't get any better.

'I see you are looking at the Wolf-Jahn mill' Curly said, seeing my gaze had eventually rested upon a machine on the far side of the room. 'Well, it's just much more compact than I thought it would be,' I said 'I've only ever seen a photo of one in the past and you couldn't get a sense of scale from that. I always thought having a rotary table as part of the design must make it a really useful machine'. 'It certainly is useful' Curly agreed, 'but you can't push it. You must only see it for doing light work, after all it is essentially for instrument making so you can't expect it to take much metal off, but I do agree the rotary table really is a Godsend. I do most of the cutting of ports on it so long as the vice will hold the cylinder block.' 'Using endmills of the required size I imagine' I said perhaps rather arrogantly by expecting Curly to immediately agree with me. 'Only occasionally, and I think you ideally mean slot drills' he said tersely immediately taking me down a peg, 'point of fact I nearly always use dental burrs as I find them more controllable, but a slot drill of the correct size will definitely do a good job, the burrs *do* of course get into the corners better'.

'No, if I need to remove metal' he continued, reaching for the teapot, 'I rely on the Burke horizontal miller to get the vast majority off, that's it there' he said with a slight gesture in the direction of a solid looking machine about three feet in front of where I was sitting. 'The Leinen Boley mill over there has its uses but to do serious cutting it has to be the Burke miller every time, never lets me down'.

Having dispensed the tea Curly next offered me a sandwich. 'Red Salmon, just the thing for an afternoon chat at the bench' he said smiling. By the way' he said heading back to his stool and putting down the little plate he was holding onto the nearest surface, 'I need to give you this'. He reached up to a shelf above the bending rolls and to my surprise lifted down one of my dad's boxed reels of recording tape which he handed to me.

'You asked how I had met your father. Well he contacted me....goodness probably around 1957 or 1958..'he said sitting down again, 'I remember I was just on writing the series for 'Pansy' at the time, and he told me he had an idea to write a series for your News Sheet a sort of 'People of Our Time,' and he thought that since I was Patron of your Club, perhaps I would make a good subject to be the first person for him to interview. I did wonder at the time if he had mixed me up with a film star; imagine, Sir Curly Lawrence star of stage screen and the Polar Route' Curly chuckled at the thought.

'Anyway, I liked the idea and that's how we first met; and when he came back to do the interview it came out that we both had mutual friends from the war years, even though he had only been caught up in the *blood and thunder*

racket towards the end, but it transpired he knew people that I knew.' Curly paused, 'possibly I said a bit too much. Anyway we got on well.' He picked up his cup and idly stirred the contents with the spoon from its saucer, 'I seem to recall he wanted to call the piece something like "Tea with Curly" which I thought made it sound rather cosy, like a chat in the lobby, so I was all for it.'

'On his second visit he told me he was starting to build 'Doris' to my *words and music*, so after we had done talking, I got down the drawings and we went over a few things. Tell me, did he overcome that problem he was having with the cradle for the expansion links do you know?' Curly took a sip from his teacup and looked expectantly at me. 'Yes, I think so' I answered, 'but of course he was on with building it when I first started to take an interest in his workshop, but as far as I know he did.'

'Well a little while after we had recorded those conversations', Curly continued, putting his cup and saucer down again, 'I was approached by the ME to see if I would like to write a sort of autobiography which they said they would serialise, it was around the time the ownership of the magazine was changing and had I known what was to follow I wouldn't have even given it any thought. Anyway what with already being up to top nut with my writing and building series, for don't forget I was still writing for *the others* at that time, I was too busy to stop and give any time to thinking about the past, then it occurred to me that if your father was happy to let me have what I believe our 'Court' friends call a transcript of his recording, then most of the information I would need was already there. So he lent me the tape to type up and, well as you know time and events overtook us.'

We both sat quietly for a moment each with our own thoughts and I wondered if now would be a good moment to start talking about the problems I was having machining the cylinders for my engine, but judged that the time was not quite right yet, I really just wanted to absorb this agreeable atmosphere and anyway I didn't want to let my father down by appearing too ignorant in front of Curly.

In the silence I became aware of the ticking of a large old station clock mounted above the fireplace looking as if it was in some old railway station waiting room awaiting the arrival of a train to somewhere. The illusion of the waiting room was somewhat diminished however by it being flanked on the wall by a calendar on one side and a framed citation on the other and by Curly having also used the top of the mantelpiece to store his sets of drills and taps.

It all struck me as being *very Curly* but marvellous to have each working day measured by such an historic object, setting the pace as it had no doubt done for many years past and how it must have counted every minute of every year since my father had sat, probably in this very room and talked with Curly as I was doing nowand in that continuity I suddenly felt very comforted.

I took a bite of my sandwich and looked slowly around the workshop searching uneasily for something else to talk about. Curly reached over and took a slice of Mabel's cake losing a small piece to the floor as he did so.

'Is that a *Myford* I can see over there?' I eventually asked realising too late I was talking with my mouthful. 'Oh, you mean the *supersonic*' Curly answered cradling the slice of cake he had taken before taking a bite. 'Yes, our Mr Moore gifted me that one nearly ten years ago now. In some ways it was a difficult present as I had then to make the hard decision to give up my old Drummond as their capacities were about the same.' 'It's a *Super 7* isn't it?' I continued feeling happy to have got the conversation off the ground once more, the one I have is an ML7, least I should say dad's old one is an ML7 that I inherited from him' I corrected myself. 'Yes, I remember him telling me, Curly said, 'I seem to remember suggesting to your father that when the time came to make the injectors for Doris, that he should consider fitting a different two step motor pulley to it, to get the speed well up for drilling the cones, that is where the old *Supersonic* scores of course, Yes. I do like my *Supersonic*.'

The muffled sound of the telephone ringing in the hall filtered through the door of the workshop once more distracting Curly just as he was offering me a piece of cake. 'Thank you' I replied taking a slice and resting it on the edge of my saucer. 'It was a good addition to the *works* though' he continued looking toward the door sensing

Mabel was likely to appear at any moment, ‘ I aim to have a different machine set-up for each part of the job in hand, it’s more efficient that way’.

Sure enough as Curly finished his sentence there was a gentle knock at the door and Mabel looked in. ‘Curly, sorry to disturb you but Alec’s on the phone and would just like to know if you are happy with the latest set of castings he sent you,’ Mabel asked, ‘he said he would like to give the foundry the go ahead before Wednesday if you are happy with them.’ ‘Ok, I’ll come and talk with him’, Curly replied putting the tea pot back on the tray after he had just poured himself another cup.

He stood up, reached to the back of the bench behind the tray of tea and lifted out a cardboard box that I could see contained a clutch of castings and made to leave. ‘Sorry, I’ll be back in a jiff’ he said clasping the box against his warehouse coat with one hand and tucking a 6inch ruler he had extracted from one of the drawers under the bench into his top pocket with the other. ‘Help yourself to another piece of cake’ he called from the doorway’back soon’ and with that he was gone.

CHAPTER 9

Mr Polar Bear

After Curly had left, I sat for a moment in the still of the room listening once more to the ticking coming from the clock over the fireplace and stared into space. As I turned my thoughts over in my head, I started to think about what Curly had said about my father interviewing him, for it was unexpected. Whilst I knew my father did have a tape recorder and apparently had made at least one recording of a Club meeting with it, what Curly had told me suggested that my father may have been much more involved with finding material, perhaps even writing for the News Sheet than I had known about...until now.

Idly I picked up the little side plate I had been given earlier and finished the last few crumbs of cake followed by the remaining tea in my cup before returning them both back to the tray. Then looking up my attention was caught as I noticed seemingly for the first time, the line shafting and pulleys above several of the benches that provided power to many of the machines in the workshop. I don't think I had ever actually seen this type of drive in the flesh before and I was struck by how clunky it was by modern standards, but at the same time I could see it was quite a practical solution for it allowed more than one machine to be run from the same motor.

In fact the more I looked the more I came to realise that in many cases it was really a necessity, as several of the machines were driven by flat belting and due to the confined space, it provided an answer where many of them would have otherwise required a countershaft.

I followed the lines of round bright steel with my eyes across the tops of several of the various lathes, drilling machines and millers and after counting eleven drive belts I stopped keeping score for it occurred to me that far from there being rather a lot of duplication as I had first thought, all of the machines had actually been chosen most carefully not only for their usefulness in performing a particular function, but more importantly for their capacity to remove metal efficiently under differing circumstances. I realised I was looking at a genuine case of *horses for courses*, for over a lifetime of building engines Curly had pretty much whittled down his selection to only those he knew could do what he wanted of them.

The workshop door suddenly rattled open making me jump and Mabel entered carrying a fresh pot of tea. As she came in I could hear Curly in mid flow talking to Alec on the phone discussing a point. His voice faded as Mabel shut the door behind her, 'I thought the tea might be getting cold by now' she said swapping the teapot on the tray for the one she was holding, 'so I brought a fresh one'.

'Did I hear Curly say you are David's son?' Mabel casually asked as she put the pot down. 'Yes, that's right' I replied hoping she wasn't going ask me anything more about dogs as I knew I had already exhausted my limited knowledge of them.

Thankfully instead she said, 'We used to enjoy seeing him, he and Curly used to talk for hours when he visited'.

There was a pause, then she continued, 'You probably don't remember coming over with him on one occasion, do you?' Mabel looked at me now in a knowing way, 'after all you were probably no older than around three then.' 'No..I don't remember being here before' I said, 'at least I don't think I do, but wait .did I sit with you in the kitchen, and you gave me a glass of orange squash?' 'That's right' Mabel said, 'and we coloured in one of Curly's old tracings that he gave you, remember?' 'I am really sorry I don't think I do, at least not the colouring in' I said weakly.

'Wait ...might you have given me the Teddy bear I've seen in the front room to play with?' I asked trying hard now to think back. 'You mean *Mr Polar Bear*?' Mabel replied as she perched on the edge of Curly's padded stool smiling, 'We would have had him then, but I don't think you met him because you stayed most of the time with

me in the kitchen, then after Curly and your father had finished their chat, we all walked up to Curly's railway where he ran an engine for you'.

'*Polar Bear*?' I queried. 'Curly gave him that name', Mabel explained seeing my surprised look. 'I bought him when we used to have a little boy come to see us in the old days, a bonny chap called Dougie, his parents lived in Braemar Avenue, that's the cul-de-sack round the back of us', she gestured with her hand as she spoke, the end of it comes up to where Curly's got his garage. I think Dougie must have seen Curly with his engines through the railings.

He would have been about five I imagine when his father first brought him over to look at the trains.

Well after a couple of visits his parents felt happy to leave him with us for a few hours whilst they went off and did a bit of shopping on a Saturday morning, so we thought it might be nice if Dougie had a little friend here, someone to play with when he was with us.

So the next time I was in Woolworths I bought him that bear, I chose that one particularly because he had such sweet smile; well as you know Curly likes to call his railway the 'Polar Route' and as it was going to be Dougie's special friend to accompany him on the trains, Curly called him his 'Polar Bear'. Mabel gave a big smile as she remembered, 'Oh, you would have laughed if you had seen Curly taking them both for a ride on the trains, Dougie with *Polar Bear* tucked under one arm clinging onto the back of Curly's workshop coat as he sat behind him on the driving car ...he was a real sweetie...'

'Curly and Dougie's father later put their heads together and arranged for a special Christmas surprise for Dougie, father to build a little railway and stations on a baseboard and Curly said he would make a engine for him to run on it'.

'Tell me' she said standing up and moving the conversation on, 'do you have any children of your own?' 'No,' I answered feeling somewhat on the spot, 'unfortunately we couldn't.'

'I am so sorry' Mabel replied, 'I didn't mean to pry. Curly and I love children you see, and Dougie did make us so happy... Curly's friends used to visit with their children of course and Curly's niece used to come over a lot before the war as well.'

She walked over to the fireplace as she spoke and picked up a small, framed picture of a young girl from the back of the mantelpiece and looked at it closely, 'grown up with children of her own now I dare say ...and anyway time moves on,' she said returning the picture back to the same spot with a slight sigh.

'So then', Curly said coming back into the room after finishing his phone call. 'Is that more tea?' he asked spotting the new pot'. 'Yes, just hot' Mabel replied gathering her thoughts once more, 'and I've topped your milk jug up' she added sensing Curly was about ask, 'help yourselves.'

'Right young man, sorry for all the interruptions' Curly said, 'I am all yours now, fetch out those cylinders and let's see what we are dealing with here....'

CHAPTER 10

Curly Investigates

Curly leant back on his stool slowly rotating the machined cylinder casting I had brought to show him against the light coming from the window and frowned. 'Hmm' he said after a while. 'Something doesn't look right here. .let's see what going on.'

With that he slid forward from his stool and walked over to the far side of the workshop, returning back with a small surface plate which he set down with a dull thud onto the top of the bench where he had just been sitting.

Removing the wooden cover that protected its machined and scraped surface, he placed one end of the upturned machined cylinder onto the plates smooth top, lifted down a scribing block from a shelf above the bench and adjusted its height until its point was exactly level with the top of the rear bolting face. He ran the pointer slowly along the edge. 'Ah, ha, I see ' he said quietly.

Next, he put a 4" engineer's square up against the bolting face before stooping slightly so he could sight down the edge of contact. 'Hmm' he said again,' as I suspected, not overly square. What's the other end like' his words this time half spoken obviously still intending them as a private thought. 'Ah, now that's ok.'

After he had finished checking he straightened up and looked over to me.

'Not sure how you did it, but one end is not square to the bolting face or to the other end, which means it's not square to the bore either.' His comments sounded leaden. Then just as I was going to offer an explanation he said rather pointedly, 'I'll guess you turned and bored the first end alright using the faceplate, turned the casting round and tried facing the other end without using a stub mandrel to locate it from the bore...and somehow in the process you also managed to tip it up slightly. Probably by trapping a bit of swarf underneath when you clamped it down...am I right?'

'Y.e.e..s, that sounds about right ' I started to reply feeling the workshop had suddenly taken on a less welcoming air. 'When I turned it round, I put a bit packing between the faceplate and the turned end to space it over the front of the angle plate; that would likely have put the clamp off centre as well'. I think I added this last bit of information in the misguided belief that it would somehow make things sound better.

I hesitated before saying anything further.

I think Curly could see in my face my discomfort and reluctance to engage, so it was a pleasant surprise when he suddenly allowed a slight smile to break his disapproving look. 'I'll also guess you're going to tell me about another misdemeanour' he said more kindly. 'Go on, tell me the worse then.'

'Well', I could feel the blood thumping in my head, 'I turned the steam chest bore after I had turned the casting round as well.'

I wasn't initially sure if Curly had heard me because he didn't immediately say anything. Instead I could see he was mulling something for he was pursing his lips as he considered his options before speaking. Finally he said, 'ah,' there was another long pause while he was obviously wrestling with what to follow this with, then to my huge relief added, 'we all make mistakes in the early stages'.

Given Curly's reputation for being pretty straight talking when dealing with people he considered had strayed unwisely from the path he outlined for them in his constructional articles, I felt if that was the worst he was going to say, then I had got off extremely lightly.

'So, what's to do?' Curly's question suggested he was now stimulated by the challenge I had apparently set him.

‘Do you know what length you have left the block overall? ‘He called across the workshop from where he had gone to look for something. ‘No, not really’ I replied, ‘once the second end was cleaned up I just went ahead and bored it. It was only when I took it all off the angle plate and noticed the packing didn’t look parallel, that I thought something might be wrong’.

‘How did you know where the bore for the piston valve liner should go’ Curly asked as he returned carrying a Vernier height gauge, ‘after all you should have marked them both out on the same end....didn’t you?’ he narrowed his eyes again and looked at me.

Ten minutes later found us back on our respective stools considering what Curly had ascertained so far from his investigations. More correctly Curly was telling me what he had found and what he thought should be done about it short of scrapping the casting and starting again, something which he had left me in no doubt he was not prepared to consider as he thought it unworthy of anyone who, even as an amateur considered themselves in any way to have engineering aspirations. ‘A good engineer saves materials, not wastes them’ he told me.

Happily, Curly was of the opinion that the block would still *just* face to length once the bore for the piston valve had been trued. ‘I think at this stage we need a drawing’, he said tucking the pencil he had been using to scribble down some dimensions, into the top pocket of his workshop coat, ‘otherwise we might be storing up problems for ourselves later on. We need to plan a way forward based on facts not guesses. Look, pop next door and ask Mabel if she will show you where the drawings are kept in my writing room upstairs and bring down the ones for “Doris.”

I got up and made to leave. ‘Hold-on’ Curly called after me, ‘ make sure they are the ones for 3.5inch gauge as I did a couple of drawings for a 5”gauge “Doris” as far as I remember. Meantime I’ll continue to look this over.’

I found Mabel in the sitting room comfortably settled listening to the radio in front of a cheerful looking coal fire now burning in the fireplace I had seen earlier. Having presented my apologies for disturbing her and explaining the reason for my visit, she quietly put the sewing she had been working on to one side, got up from her chair and led the way back out of the room and up the stairs on the opposite side of the hall, pausing momentarily to turn the radio down as she passed.

As she walked, she started to tell me about the play she had just been listening to and in such detail that I wondered if she had been expecting such an interruption to her afternoon and had therefore tried to remember as much of the story as she could so she could work out any missing part upon her return.

‘I suspect Curly, and I must walk the equivalent of two or three circuits of Purely Oaks common each week walking up and down these stairs,’ she said in a slightly breathless voice as she reached the last step. ‘So sorry, what was it Curly wanted you to look for?’ Mabel asked again on reaching the landing and making for a door opposite the top of the stairs that I took to be the back bedroom where Curly had told me he kept his drawings. ‘Oh, one or two drawings for my engine’ I answered as I arrived at the top of the stairs and followed briskly after her.

CHAPTER 11

Further Research

‘Curly keeps all his original drawings in those large chests over there’ Mabel said entering the room and indicating two large plan chests under a short row of windows at the far end.

I looked over and could see two wooden multi-drawer cabinets that between them filled most of the width of the room on top of which Curly had set up a large drawing board with its instruments.

‘You’ll find all the drawings identified by name and drawer number written on this list here,’ she said patting a handful of papers held together by a large bulldog clip hanging on a hook attached to the inner wall of the room. I could see the list was not the only one for it was in a row with several others some with plain clips some on clipboards, but all neatly arranged on their own little hooks attached to a batten on the wall, tidy so as to be ready to hand. Below the hooks a small office desk and chair were positioned up against the inside of the landing wall.

This, I told myself must be where Curly did his writing, for on the desk prominently positioned was a typewriter with a red plastic dust cover over it in front of which was a leather edged green blotter, and to its left stood upended, a large machined 5” gauge loco cylinder that was being used to store pens and pencils. In front of the cylinder lay a thick notebook with the handwritten title, ‘Building Notes 1965 Book 1’ clearly visible; and on the typewriter’s other side lay a copy of Bernard’s Engineers Reference Tables, its red covers tatty and worn from years of use.

The tidiness of the desk impressed me greatly as had Curly’s workshop downstairs, especially when I thought of the sheer volume of articles and work that I knew had come from these otherwise unassuming rooms.

‘Penny for your thoughts’ Mabel’s voice suddenly broke the spell. ‘I am sorry it’s not quite what I was expecting’, I said as my gaze moved from the desk to the rest of the room.

‘Most people say that the first time they see it’ Mabel replied smiling, ‘you’d be surprised by some of the important people from industry that have come here and said just that,’ then seeing the look on my face added, ‘yes, even to finding it hard to find somewhere to sit.’

Given the compactness of the room I was now standing in with no trace of it having ever been used as a bedroom, I could see that even in its current guise it left little space to accommodate the refinement of additional furniture, like a spare chair. I was at once amused at the thought of any distinguished visitor finding it difficult to find room to sit and having instead to resort to standing unless they were going to perch on the edge of Curly’s desk or rest up against the plan chests.

‘Right I’ll leave you to look and get back to the afternoon play and my sewing’, Mabel said making to leave. ‘Only one thing’ she cautioned from the landing, ‘put things back where you find them, he’s a stickler for it.’

After Mabel had left I stood for moment trying to take it all in and soak up the magic of just being there with all the paraphernalia of Curly’s writing and drawing career around me; his typewriter, the drawing board where so many of his designs had first come to life and all the shelves attached to the party-wall on the far side of the room that contained book after book of reference tables, engineering information and railway histories. Yet more shelves filled the wall opposite the windows and contained floor to ceiling box files and bound volume after volume of *Model Engineer* and *Mechanics* magazine going back to the first copy, all clearly identified by gold tooled lettering on their spines.

I walked over to the shelves and ran my finger along the backs of the Model Engineers pulling the odd volume out here and there to look at.

By the time I returned the last volume back to its place on the shelf having flicked through its many pages, I must have built half a dozen workshop items and at least two if not three locomotives.

Next my attention was taken by the row of dull mottled paper covered box files arranged along the whole of the top two shelves for I could see they had the names of Curly's engines written on each one in blue inked capital letters. 'Ford Pacific', 'Fayette', 'Purley Grange,' 'Maisie' I read before reaching to select the file with the name 'Doris' written upon it.

Lifting it down I opened the cover to find it contained typed carbon copies of the constructional articles Curly had sent to the Model Engineer offices, and on the inside of the lid was written the date the first article had been submitted, and extraordinarily I thought, by which post, followed by a list of all the dates and times the others had been sent, right up to the conclusion of the series; all in Curly's neat copperplate handwriting.

I don't know how long I spent looking at the papers; I was just enthralled by seeing and handling them, their odour of fustiness thrilling my senses with the turn of every page as I imagine any archaeologist would have experienced when encountering some ancient papyrus scrolls; but I eventually looked up and realised the room was becoming darker as the afternoon sun was starting to dip.

'Have you found them?' Curly's shrill voice called up to me from the bottom of the stairs. 'Just looking now' I shouted back hurriedly heeding Mabel's warning by returning the box file back to its place on the shelf, feeling strangely like a teenager that had been caught doing something they shouldn't.

'What kept you?' Curly asked as I re-entered the workshop a few minutes later. 'Sorry I thought a bit of reverence was called for 'I said without thinking or really knowing why I had just said it. 'Hmm, I am sure you're right', Curly said looking quizzically at me though I did think rather contently at my comment.

'I can see I'll have to call you Bro Pilgrim from now on' he smiled, 'I hope you only brought down the drawings for the cylinders. I don't often bring any down when I am working, normally I just use my notebooks. .' Then allowing himself a moment of boastfulness, 'don't forget I've done it a lot of times before....'

I carefully unrolled the drawings and draped them temporarily over the arm of Curly's bench mounted jigsaw having already decided this was the least likely place for them to become spoiled with oil, while Curly considered where they should go so as to be easily read.

'Let's see, where we can put them?' Curly said looking around the room.' Right, you see that picture of the Terrier tank engine over there in that corner, lift that down off the picture hooks and we'll put up the Curly Lawrence patent drawing hanger in its place'.

Having set me my task he rummaged under the bench where we had recently had our tea and extracted a length of wooden batten about two feet long with a length of picture chord wrapped around it which he proceeded to unwind.

As he did so it revealed two more bulldog clips spaced about fifteen inches apart and screwed to the wood.

'Right Bro Pilgrim', Curly called over, 'put this chord over the hooks and we can hang the drawings up and see what we are at. While you were upstairs, I turned up a couple of gauges to help with the detective work,' Curly held up the cylinder casting and indicated two rods now pointing out of the ends of the respective bores.

'From what I have seen so far,' he continued cheerfully, the good news is that both bores are as near to size as to makes no difference and the bolting face is nicely parallel to the main bore taken from the first end you turned...the wasp in the jam pot is that the steam chest bore is inclined about six thou closer to the main bore by the time it emerges out from that end. However as there is a decent bit of meat between the bores, if all goes well, we can re-bore that and increase the size of valve liner without danger of it shaking hands with the main piston.

Now we have the drawings here I can check the positioning of the valve chest and the main bore in relation to one another then I'll have a better idea of how it will all turn out.' He picked up the piece of paper he had been using to write down his findings and walked over to the drawing now hanging on the wall.

‘ Bye the wee’ he said looking across to me , ‘ the only downside of having this drawing here by the door, is if you hear footsteps approaching from the other side, move out of the way quick otherwise you might be biffed if the door is opened suddenly. Mabel caught me a lovely *fourpenny one* on the elbow once... I was rubbing it for a fortnight’.

CHAPTER 12

Home to Jackie

Leaving Curly and Mabel's friendly and hospitable company with the promise to visit again as and when work commitments allowed, I headed for home. As soon as I was back on the M25 I phoned Jackie.

'How did it go?' she asked, 'Well. I am just blown away' I said trying to pull the many and various thoughts going round in my head together. 'It was really like a dream Jackie, the place is like something straight out of the 1950s, if not the 1940s. No television only an old radiogram for entertainment in the front room, which is still heated by a coal fire would you believe, and unusually they have a coal fired heating boiler fitted in the back room fireplace, I didn't know such things still existed, hefty looking beast; that's also the room where Mr Lawrence has his workshop by the way 'I added in a hopeful sounding voice, 'I've messaged you a few pics to show you'.

'Well don't come back here with any ideas Neil' Jackie teased half joking, 'especially any idea of you having your workshop in our back room.' There was a pause, and then she said, 'so what of the couple themselves Neil, was it a wind up or have you really been talking to two ghosts all afternoon?

Up to this point in the conversation I thought Jackie had been completely on my side. I thought she had genuinely shared my desire to know who it was I had spoken to on the phone and subsequently been invited down to meet. But now in saying what she did, the way that she did was like having bucket of cold water thrown over me, for I now realised I just had to have been taken in.

Trouble was I really did feel I had met and spoken to Curly again.... *get a grip Neil*, how?

With Jackie's mocking tone challenging me I honestly couldn't seriously believe that. Could I? I must have just got swept up by it all, accepting absolutely everything I had found in Purley, not wanting to question any of it, right from the first moment I had stepped into Curly and Mabel's house...yet I just couldn't ignore what I had seen. I *really* did feel I had spent time with them. In their house.

Snap out of it Neil, you can't be serious! Here I was speaking to Jackie on a mobile phone whilst driving back home on the M25 with all the traffic and trappings of the twenty-first century around me staring me in the face. This, *this* is reality I told myself; Jackie just had to be right, there was no way I had spent an afternoon with a couple who I knew had died the best part of sixty years ago; logic dictated that it all had to be a wind up, and I had gone along with it one hundred percent and indulged myself up to the ears by not wanting to believe anything different.

Back home I found Jackie hunched over her computer halfway through typing a report for her work. To say my arrival back was coolly received would be to understate what I walked into, but things were about get worse.

'What's up Jackie?' I enquired.' Neil', she began, 'we've been together twenty five years; if I thought you were leading some kind of double life then I wouldn't hesitate to pack your bags and throw you out'. 'What's brought this on?' I asked somewhat taken aback. 'Look 'she replied sweeping her mobile up from her desk and almost throwing it at me, 'go on, scroll through the pictures you sent me, and then explain to me where they fit into your day.'

Taking the phone from her shaking hand I flicked through the images. The first picture I had taken was in Curly's front room and should have shown the two old horse- hair easy chairs either side of the open fireplace with the polished coal bucket beside it.

What I was actually looking at was a picture showing a bright magnolia painted room with a wall of books on open shelves, trailing pot plants dotted amongst them and a leather swivelling easy chair with a child's soft toy

draped over one its arms, and no fireplace. Worst of all a pair of women's shoes could just be seen on the extreme edge of the shot. My heart sank.

I flicked quickly to next one that I had taken of the old radiogram with the framed pictures and pot plant sitting on top of a frilly white cotton doily that had so reminded me of something I would have seen in my grandparent's house.

But what I was actually greeted with was a shot of a smart-phone docking station with the phone in place and beside it on a white coaster was a mug with the letter 'L' clearly legible. *What about the one I took from the backroom doorway of Curly's workshop* I said silently to myself. *That should be the third picture.*

What eventually appeared on the screen however was another bright room, this time painted in a soft green showing not only the clean outline of new UPVC French windows at the far end, but more child's toys scattered about on the floor in front of a polished oak fireplace this time with a basketful of dried flowers set upon its hearth.

'Jackie, I don't know what to say to you' I said in a dispirited voice. 'All I can tell you is that these are not the pictures I took when I was there.'

'Well they are the one you sent' Jackie answered now shaking with emotion. 'I can only say I am sorry Jackie and hope I can give you a proper explanation when I have had chance to think about it all'. 'I suggest then' Jackie said in a low strained voice snatching the phone back from me, 'you sod off out to your workshop and think up a decent excuse'.

After sitting in my workshop for a good hour just staring at the pictures on my phone and trying desperately to make sense of it all, I felt things may have calmed sufficiently for me to venture back into the house; for although I knew this was by far the worst upset or misunderstanding Jackie and I had had in many a year, I knew deep down that neither of us would want it to become a full blown crisis. It was time then for me to try harder to make my peace by explaining exactly what I seen when I was there.

Just as I was putting the phone back into my pocket it buzzed indicating a message had arrived. I paused by the open shed door and withdrew the phone again almost dropping it in my haste to see who it was in case it was from Jackie. It wasn't, instead it read: **Neil, heard on the grapevine you may be in the market for 3.5inch castings and a boiler to finish, try this chap he has just posted some stuff on Facebook. Paul.**

Paul was my oldest mate in the Club and even though we hadn't been in touch for a while, with him sending me that message at that precise moment he saved my sanity.

If it was from Paul, I knew it was going to be worth following up; I always trusted his instinct, and despite everything that had recently happened I thought it was worth a look. It might just help to break this unpleasant mood and clear my head a bit by giving me something else to think about.

Delaying my return to the house a while longer I messaged back to the post and after a mercifully short time got a favourable response.

A quarter of an hour later I left the shed with new hope in my heart and though I didn't realise it at the time, a chance to set things right with Jackie.

CHAPTER 13

Richard

Jackie's attitude towards me remained slightly distant over the next couple of days despite my offer to make amends by taking her to see Curly's house for herself. The opportunity had arisen from the messaging I had recently had with the chap selling the loco castings on Facebook, for it transpired that he lived in Brighton Road which by co-incidence was not far from Grange Road where Curly had lived.

Quite how I managed eventually to change Jackie's mind to come with me I can't now remember, but later the following week found us heading back along the M25 and in the direction of Purley.

During the thankfully uneventful journey down and in the many pauses in our conversation, my thoughts ranged from why the photos I had sent to Jackie had been so different from what I had actually seen that day, to the more pleasurable thoughts of hopefully picking up some useful castings and if I had understood the seller correctly, a nearly finished boiler and tender for the same design of loco my father had started to build some years ago and that I wanted to finish.

After finding the address I had been given with some difficulty on the very busy Brighton Road and having broken the ice with its rather extrovert owner Richard, I told him of my recent visit to Curly's house in the next but one street that last weekend and of meeting an elderly couple, hoping he would immediately back up my story to Jackie by saying he knew them.

'Let me see...oh you mean Phil and Catherine' he said after a moment. My spirits lifted, only to be deflated again when he unexpectedly followed this with, 'You know they told my wife the house next door, which is where my dad got the castings from by the way, is haunted.' He said this in a quiet voice so as not to be overheard. 'Really?' I replied feeling decidedly uneasy, 'Yes' he continued cheerfully, 'seems the couple that have it now, Bryan and Liz, have heard sounds, in fact my wife Suzie bumped into Liz only yesterday after they had come back from being with their son in hospital. All very strange, mind, Suzie thought Liz did have a touch of the Twilights about her, she'll be back soon, she'll tell you more about it'.

Ten minutes later saw me heading out with Richard still in full flow to his garage to look at the castings, leaving Jackie at the house to talk with Suzie who had by now returned from dropping their child off at a dance class.

'I actually inherited these bits of engine from my dad' Richard said as we left the house, 'after the old girls in Grange Road died the contents of their house was sold off and he picked up odds and ends from what was left. Apparently one of the sisters had made simply loads of steam engines and used to run them on a little railway out the back' he went on brightly, 'these castings and the boiler were all my dad could afford at the time and anyway it was really only the finished engines that other people wanted to buy, so in the end he got these bits for a song. My dad always said it was odd interest for a woman to have' Richard continued talking over his shoulder as we got closer to the garage; 'to make model trains that is, but well I suppose there's no reason why not.'

'Richard' I said, 'I don't want to contradict you, but why do say it was two women? The couple I met at the weekend were certainly husband and wife'. 'Yes, but you met Phil and Catherine' Richard said stopping and looking strangely at me. He rummaged in his pocket for the key to the garage; 'they live in the house next door.'

Then taking the key from his pocket he said, 'and the old dears, well dad didn't say if he ever actually met them, but the word in this road was that it was two sisters who lived there.' He paused and looked thoughtful, 'and that one of them was virtually a recluse, certainly after the war; mind my granddad', Richard was now back in full flow, 'who was in the ARP by the way, always used to say there was a lot of damage round here in the war. This area was badly hit by the fall out of the blitz, then again when the V rockets started to come came over in 1944.'

Anyway that was a long time ago now. Right then,' Richard had been unlocking the garage door as he finished speaking and now gave the top a sharp shove swinging it up so we could both enter.

'Here's the box of bits' he said dragging out a rather scruffy looking wooden case about the size of a small suitcase from under a nearby bench. 'I was going to have a go at finishing it myself, but I never really got on with metalwork at school much to dad's dismay, so it was always going to be frankly beyond me' he said sadly. 'Dad worked on the tender first as I think he thought it would give him an incentive to finish the rest of it'. He looked into the box, 'but then best laid plans and all that'....

I peered into the top of the open box and could see a heap of castings, some rusty some covered in a greenish patina, but all looked like the sort of castings I would find useful, and beside them tucked up against one side of the box was a long cylindrical wrap of rags which I took to be the boiler. 'Is the boiler any good?' I enquired. 'Sorry my friend, no idea, you are talking to the wrong person, no you will have to take it as you find it' Richard said. Beside the boiler the recognisable outline of the top of a tender tank was just visible. 'Does the tender have a chassis and wheels?' I asked. 'Ah, now there I *can* help you' he replied proudly, 'even I know what that should be like, so yep all there because I looked...'there was a pause, 'actually there is also this.' Richard lifted down an old plastic ice cream tub from a shelf above the bench and pulled the lid off to show me the contents.

'It's 'O' gauge, but it is live steam' he continued as he lifted out a small bundle of rags and started to slowly to unwrapped them. He handed me a small 0-6-0 tank engine painted in a sort of darkish green which I took to have been someone's idea of Great Western green. 'It's from the same place, round the corner' Richard said with a jerk of his head, 'I did have a bit of line here in the back garden at one point, so dad gave it to me. 'Seeing me looking critically at the paintwork he ventured, 'It was the wrong colour for my railway so when I got it, I gave it a repaint....'there was another pause, then he said, 'so what do think then, what will you give for the lot'?

Our business concluded to everyone's satisfaction, Richard and I returned to the house, Richard still chatting away seemingly without pausing for breath.

When we got back, I found that in the time I had been talking to Richard, Jackie having heard the full story from Suzie about the sounds in Curly's old house, had persuaded her to contact the current occupants, Bryan and Liz with a view to us visiting them while we were in the area. I also took from this idea that Jackie was evidently still not satisfied with anything she heard so far by way of an explanation as to my own visit that last weekend, and that she possibly hoped by visiting 121 for herself it would provide the real answers she was looking for.

Extracting ourselves with difficulty from Richard and Suzie's hospitality, I put the items I had just purchased into the boot of my car and we set off on foot back to the house where I had met the couple, I had taken to be Curly and Mabel. 'Give them our good wishes' Richard shouted after us as we reached the corner and headed once more towards Grange Road.

Ten minutes of walking saw me once again outside the front of 121, this time with Jackie beside me. The last time I had been on this spot my heart was thumping even though I had a vague idea what I was going to, but in light of the recent conversation with Richard I was now in a cold sweat at the thought of what we might actually be going to find.

The multiple locks of the UPV front door clicked in unison as Bryan opened the door to us. 'Hello, Neil and Jackie?' Bryan's reassuringly friendly greeting welcomed us, 'do come in.'

As I stepped back into the body of the house once more, the sense of openness was extraordinary, the dull light of my previous visit was replaced by bright clear daylight which I put down to everything now being painted in bright light tones, including the stairs which also sported a warm cream coloured fitted carpet, as did the hall floor.

‘Come in and meet Liz’ Bryan said as he led the way to the back room, ‘Tea?’ ‘Thanks that will be great’ I said anxiously looking back over my shoulder to the front door before following him and Jackie through to the room where I knew Curly’s workshop should be.

By the time I got to the doorway Bryan had gone off to make the tea and Jackie was already in the room being greeted by Liz. She threw me a fierce look as I entered for it was obvious this was the room in the photo I had sent her.

‘Sorry about the toys’ Liz said as we looked for somewhere to sit, but James, that’s our son, is spending some time in hospital after a difficult weekend and I haven’t the heart to tidy them up until I know he is safely coming back’. ‘I am sorry we didn’t know about your son’s illness Jackie said, do you mind us being here and talking to you?’ ‘It’s just that we are visiting the area today and I think we may know something about the people that once lived here’ I said by way of an explanation of our visit ‘and when we heard this morning that you and your husband Bryan had experienced something here perhaps unexplained, we felt, maybe we might have some answers between us’.

‘Well I sincerely hope you won’t make things worse’ Bryan said half-jokingly as he returned with the tea, ‘We’ve had quite a weekend as it is.’ He put the tray down. ‘Only I don’t know that Liz is up to dealing anything too heavy just now’.

‘No Bryan I am ok’ Liz smiled, ‘what did you want tell us?’ she asked sounding non-committal.

‘Well’, I began, ‘I think I visited this house last Saturday after receiving an invitation to do so by someone who on the face of it lived here some time ago. Now I know this sounds ridiculous, but I came in, into this house, I was invited in by an old couple...’ I could see Jackie watching Bryan and Liz’s faces to see how they would react to my tale when Bryan suddenly broke in, ‘Hold fire, ‘you’re saying you were in our house this last weekend, but how? I mean we were not here. Hang on though, you said you met an old people, you must mean Phil and Cath next door?’ ‘I don’t think so’ I said knowing what I was about say was not likely to calm things, ‘you see I took a couple of pictures inside the couple’s house and sent them to Jackie, but what she received were pictures of this house as it is today. I recognise this room’.

There was a long uncomfortable pause, ‘Look I’ll show you’ Jackie said opening her phone and scrolling through her pictures.

Bryan now looking very irritated and seemingly lost for words, lowered his head and stared hard at the coffee table in front of him as if to say, ‘*who are these people*’. Meanwhile Liz having possibly decided we might just be a couple of oddballs appeared to do her best to keep the situation buoyed along by saying cheerfully, ‘oh, let’s see ‘as if we had just asked them to look at something ordinary like our holiday snaps. ‘Right, here they are’ Jackie said as she arrived at the most recent pictures.....

‘What is it Jackie?’ I asked as she starred hard at the screen of her phone. ‘Look’ Jackie said slowly passing the phone over to me, ‘Woah! I exclaimed. ‘What is it?’ Bryan asked looking up, ‘I think you had better see for yourself’ I said passing the phone to him.

CHAPTER 14

Bryan and Liz

‘So what you are telling us’ Liz said a little while later, ‘is that the room we are sitting in now, is the one in the picture with all those big machines in it, and was in fact the old gentleman’s workshop where he made his trains?’ ‘and the picture of that old radiogram thing was taken in our front room’ Bryan added before Liz had finished speaking.

Suddenly Liz said ‘Oh my God! Bryan, if what Neil is saying is true...that really could explain a lot....the sounds I’ve been hearing....I am sure it could be something to do with that old couple. Bryan shot us a glance that said, ‘I think I know what’s coming next.’

‘You see’ she said turning to face us, ‘we bought this house about five years ago when I was expecting our son James, and as you do after moving in we made some changes’, ‘like ripping out that awful mess someone had made of boxing in the front room fireplace’ Bryan said gloomily, the 1970s has a lot to answer for’. ‘Yes’, Liz agreed standing up, ‘probably the only good thing to come out of that upheaval was you finding this photograph in the old hearth’ As she spoke, she picked up a silver framed picture from the mantelpiece.’ I don’t know if it was because I was expecting at the time, but it seemed such a happy picture, so full of promise that I bought a nice frame for it so I could display it’. She leant forward and handed the picture to me. ‘Isn’t it a happy picture?’ ‘Yes, it is’ I replied after looking at it and passing it to Jackie, ‘do you know who they are?’ ‘No idea Liz said, ‘but the child looks so happy, and the parents just seem somehow to be radiating love. I assumed as Bryan had found it in the fireplace, that they must have lived here at some point, and I am sure it’s why I have always felt calm living here, I feel children have been happy in this house’.

‘So has something changed?’ I asked cautiously. Liz walked back to her seat and sighed heavily as she sat down. ‘Things were fine for about the first four years, until about a year ago, then James started to be wakeful around midnight and wouldn’t settle, I could hear he was restless; in fact thinking about it now it was probably around that time when I first started to hear the sounds coming from down here, they weren’t there every night but maybe a couple of times a month.

It would start with a light scampering, I thought at first it could be a mouse up in our bedroom ceiling, but the sound was definitely coming from down here, this room, I think. It would be followed by an indistinct sound bit like a child giggling in the passageway by the kitchen, sometimes that’s all I would hear; but other nights it would continue with other another sound, like a fridge motor makes when it starts, not a harsh sound, more gentle really and a muffled tapping noise would start as if someone was tapping something metal. When I first started to hear the sounds, I assumed it must be those that were disturbing James, but as I say they were not there every night, and on the nights, they were there they had quite the opposite effect on him, for once it had been going for a minute or two, he would settle and was fine then for the rest of the night’.

‘What about you Bryan, do the sounds disturb you?’ I asked looking over to where he was sitting beside Liz ‘. ‘No, not me, I can sleep for England once my heads down’ he said rising to his feet and gathering the empty teacups from the table, ‘I normally leave all the haunting stuff to Liz,’ he said glancing in my direction as he headed back to the kitchen. Seeing he had left one of the cups behind I picked it up and used it as an excuse to follow after him to reassure him we meant no harm, leaving Jackie now with Liz.

‘Did something else happen?’ Jackie asked after we had gone. ‘Y..e..s, this weekend,’ Liz was now sounding emotional, ‘Friday night James hadn’t been well during the day, so I put him to bed early and looked in from time to time. He seemed more restless than usual, but as our bedroom is right next to his we went to bed as normal.’ She paused appearing deep in thought, ‘Then around two am I suddenly woke for some reason but as I couldn’t hear anything, all seemed quiet from James’ room, I thought he must be asleep and allowed myself to drift off again.

No sooner had I nodded off then the sounds downstairs started, this time only the tapping, you know what it's like when a sound breaks into your dream; eventually it wakes you. I lay for while trying to ignore it but it persisted.' Liz now looked concerned, 'almost urgent sounding, louder than I had heard it in the past. It eventually disturbed me so much I just had to get up and come downstairs to have a look, but to look in on James as I went.

When I got to his room,' her voice started to tremble, 'I could see him in the light from his bedside night light...he was so very pale...and .I was sure he wasn't breathing. Oh, Jackie it was awful' she burst into tears reaching out her hands and grabbing Jackie's and started to sob, ' as I went in, I could see he wasn't breathing' she said again in despair' tears now running down her face.

'Sorry Bryan is everything alright? We didn't mean to rock the boat coming here today' I said as I entered the kitchen. 'Hey, of course not' Bryan replied sounding barely convincing.

'Thing is' he lowered his voice and shut the door behind me, 'all this haunting stuff, it's unsettling, I try not think about it too much. Look,' he said as the door clicked shut behind me 'I've never told Liz this and I'd be grateful if you don't let on any of what I am about to tell you; I know that photo I found is not of a family that lived here because not long after we first moved in the old guy next door, Phil, who has lived here for over sixty years told me that he knew the old couple who lived in this house pretty well. And that the old feller, the one who made the model trains, apparently loved having children over and used to give them rides on his little railway, which was in that field out there, at the back. James would have loved to have met him as he's mad about trains. Anyway, seems during the war there was one boy the oldies really seemed to take a shine to, Douglas I think Phil said his name was, his father worked for Southern Railways as a signalman, and as they only lived a couple of roads away in Braemar Avenue the boy used to come over quite often. This was in the early part of the war when the Blitz on London was starting; this area caught it quite badly apparently. Anyway, it seems several unexploded bombs were dropped round here, and because it was early days there weren't many bomb disposal units available and those that did exist didn't have a lot kit to turn out and diffuse them with so didn't always get to them very quickly'. Bryan paused and distractedly started to put the empty teacups into the sink. 'Unfortunately it seems the little lad, Douglas, stumbled across one that no one knew was there as it had buried itself in the corner of their garden and he set it off; it was a really big one, ruptured the gas as it exploded and took the front of the house off, killed the parents as well. Phil reckons the old boy took it really badly and never quite got over it. I think that photo I found might be of them.'

'It's alright' Jackie said clutching Liz's hands tightly, 'it's been a terrible time for you I can see that, are you really sure you want to tell me anymore?' 'Yes, it's helping' Liz said releasing her grip and starting to dry her eyes, 'talking about it now is helping me understand it better...

You can imagine I immediately shouted to Bryan to call an ambulance ...' her eyes welled up once as she spoke, 'but while we were waiting, I had to try and get him breathing again, I had to do something. Anything. I suppose I should have got Bryan to locate the nearest defibrillator, but you don't think clearly when this sort thing happens....your mind is just racing. I knew I had to attempt some kind of CPR on James until the ambulance arrived, but how? I had never done anything like that before, and what if he didn't respond....once I started, I knew I couldn't just stop,' her voice was cracking once more as she relived the memory, 'he was so pale it was obvious I couldn't just stop; I would have lost him... I had given him life, now I was holding that life literally under my hands...' she broke down once more sobbing.

'I thought that ambulance was not going to get here' Bryan said staring hard at me from his position by the sink, the paramedic said after if we had not found him when we did and hadn't started the CPR he would have died no question. He would have died' he said again quietly as if only just realising the seriousness of the situation for the first time.

‘He’s safe now’ Jackie said hugging Liz to console her. ‘He is, thank God, but it was still really touch and go even after we got him to the hospital’ Liz replied releasing herself from Jackie’s embrace.

‘On Sunday morning Catherine, that’s Phillip’s wife from next door came into the hospital to see how we were and brought James a teddy bear. How kind was that?’ Liz was starting to look tearful once more. ‘And do you what I found out later she told Bryan? She said wistfully,’ she had got the bear from this house when they were clearing it after the old couple died and as Catherine and Phillip don’t have any grandchildren of their own thought James should have it, told Bryan it belonged here...in this place. Funny, old people say things like that don’t they?’ Liz stood now looking out of into the garden.

‘Things were not good even after they got James to hospital’, Bryan said. ‘ We both stayed with him all day Saturday and overnight while he was in ICU as the doctors at that time didn’t know why his heart had stopped and felt it could fail again because he was still so weak. I don’t quite know how we got through Saturday, then early Sunday morning I was dozing in the chair by his bed when one of the alarms attached to James was triggered and all hell broke loose, medics arrived within seconds, and we were ushered into a side room whilst they did whatever they did.

I tell you that was the longest three-quarters of an hour of my life’, Bryan said looking at me with tears welling in his eyes, ‘but while we were waiting Cath from next door arrived with some things she thought we might need and brought a teddy bear for James to have. Once she left, we were told we could go back in but not to expect too much, they said even though they had stabilised him he was still far from being out of danger, it was still touch and go.

We went back and I initially just stood by the door, watching Liz as she entered; I think I was too terrified what might happen next. I still don’t know what did happen, I think I just stood there and prayed.

Liz told me after that as she approached the bed she could see James was still looking very pale, she didn’t use the word lifeless but I know that’s really what she wanted to say, and after looking at all the gadgets and monitors attached to James, lights flashing and bleeping, she knelt at his bedside and tucked the bear into the bed; and this is definitely a Liz thing,’ Bryan said dismissively, ‘ she said the moment she put it beside him she felt the same wave of calm and love that she feels from looking at that picture we have on the mantelpiece.

You know Neil, I don’t really subscribe to any of this spiritual stuff, but all I can tell you is from the moment that bear appeared in our lives, things began to improve’.

CHAPTER 15

The Birthday Party

Come to Our Party

Master James invites you his 6th Birthday Party

Food and Games will be provided

Fancy-dress required

2pm 10th July

‘You’ve made some changes since we were last here’ I said as Bryan opened the front door to us. ‘Yes, we found the parking was just becoming impossible around here, Bryan said ‘so we bit the bullet and had the front dug out to give us a decent bit of parking space’.

‘By the way thank you so much for that little engine you sent James for his birthday, he hasn’t stopped talking about it since he unwrapped it’. At that moment Liz appeared at the far end of the passageway holding James who was dressed as an engine driver by the hand. In James’ other hand I could see Mr Polar bear was dangling by a paw. ‘Hello again’ Liz called giving us a big smile, ‘come on through we are having the party in the big garden’.

We followed Bryan down the passageway and as he arrived at the kitchen doorway he stopped, turned to face us putting a finger to his lips as he did so signalling he was keeping a secret. Smiling we walked on past and followed Liz and James through the backroom and out through the French windows. I couldn’t help thinking how very different the room looked from when I had first seen it. Then it was a temple to model engineering, now it had returned to being the inside of a 1930s suburban family house, now tastefully decorated with 21st century comfort.

The ‘big’ garden as Liz had called it was the land beyond their small back garden. I recognised it straight away as being the area where Curly had had the Polar Route set up all those years ago but now save for a couple of the old concrete posts he had put up along the rear boundary by the trees, it was unrecognisable. Flower beds, a cluster of fruit trees, a small vegetable patch were all now neatly laid out around a well-kept patch of grass where James’ birthday party was now in full swing.

As we approached the group of happy smiling parents and the children in fancy dress, Jackie was immediately accosted by a young boy wearing a brown cowboy hat and checked shirt, dressed as Woody from Toy Story who grabbed her by the hand and dragged her straight off in the direction of a large food table set out at one end of the lawn accompanied by shouts of ‘come and have something to eat, I am!’

I paused a moment trying to come to terms with what I was seeing, for it was all so different from the little railway Curly had set up to run his engines on. If his full size railway signal had still been there it would have looked as out of place as a spaceship.

More children rushed past me chasing each other as they headed for the table. Looking back to the house I could see Bryan coming up the garden carrying a huge birthday cake in the shape of a steam engine, with a large number six on the side of its cab. As he passed, I smiled when I noticed one of the six lighted candles had been carefully placed so as to make it look as though a small flame was coming out of the top of the engine's chimney.

'Sorry Neil', Bryan asked apologetically as he passed me, 'I didn't have a free hand to bring the side plates, would you mind popping back to the house; they are just inside the kitchen'.

I returned to the house, but rather than taking the shortest way to the kitchen, instead I was drawn to going back in through the open French windows that Jackie and I had come out of only five minutes earlier.

As I entered Curly looked up from the bench where he was seated on his favourite stool, and upon seeing me put down the tiny item he had been working on. 'Ah Brother Pilgrim, I hear you have gained a boiler from Richard since we last met.'

I am not sure what made me more surprised, Curly saying what he did or the fact that I was once more seeing Curly again. 'Yes, that's right' I said in a matter of fact way without any acknowledgement of the strangeness of the situation. Then without pausing to think picked up what Curly had said. 'Not sure if it will be any good though, I haven't looked at it yet'. Curly gave me what I believed to be an old fashioned look, 'Oh I think you will find it will be ok.' Still not understanding, I blundered on, 'how can you be so sure?' Curly lent back on his padded stool and laughed... 'Because I made it for your father' he said, 'as a thank you.'

Feeling embarrassed beyond words to have been so slow to realise, I felt I shouldn't pursue this any further and instead tried to sound casual about us meeting again. I looked back out of the window. 'Bryan and Liz have had a weekend of it' I said in a masterpiece of understatement.

Just at that moment James came racing down the garden with his arms out-stretched pretending to be an aeroplane before turning sharply and returning back to his friends. 'He's a bonny boy' I said returning my gaze back into the room. 'He certainly is' Curly said with a smile, 'I am pleased Dougie's engine went to him...' We both watched James for a moment running back up the garden. 'I was going to name it 'Polar Express' Curly said as James disappeared from view.

'Still, I am glad we could help them eventually'. 'And Elizabeth is so happy now' Mabel added from the doorway, 'it's all turned out just fine'.

'Why?' I asked. 'Why did we help?' Curly said looking at me, 'It's about the future. Future for them, future for this house...this has been a happy house,' he looked around the room, 'our hacienda. I think I've done a bit to help my fellow brothers over the years but the children, families and children, they are the future and the future is theirs.' I leant against the bench by the garden door sensing Curly wanted to say something more. 'Bryan and Elizabeth.....' he said softly. 'You see Elizabeth is Dougie's great niece, its right she should be here.'

After Dougie and his parents were killed the child, his mother had been expecting was saved and brought up by a relative who lived outside London away from the bombing in the country, near Colney Heath'. 'Does Liz know?' I asked. 'No, she has no reason to know' Curly said calmly, 'sometimes we don't know why we end up where we do, but sometimes it's just meant to be...maybe that's how Bryan and Elizabeth came to live in this house....we were meant to be here to help them, when they needed help.'

Curly half turned once more to look out of the window in the direction of the Polar Route. 'I had to help them you see...had to do something for our Dougie....my help was too late for him ...' as Curly turned back, I was surprised to see he had tears in his eyes. 'I may have done a little to help others, I don't know, but your father seemed to put two and two together. I think it was he who arranged for the citation.'

I glanced toward the fireplace; ‘of course the Citation’ I said as I straightened up from leaning against the bench and walked over to the fireplace.

The framed letter hanging on the wall beside the clock read:

10 Downing Street – Office of the Prime Minister

It has been brought to my attention that your contribution to the War effort during the Second World War has remained unrecorded and unrecognised.

I wish now to remedy that and to thank you on behalf of Her Majesty’s Government of Great Britain for your development work in the design and construction of prototype PASS Type 1 Unit that went on to do so much to aid the safe disposal of explosive armaments used throughout the years 1942 to 1945.

Your knowledge of steam mechanisms and the development of the miniature turbine-vane trepanning cutter undoubtedly helped the safety of the nation and its citizens during this most difficult period in our country’s history.

The Nation and this office duly acknowledge the debt we owe to you.

Maurice Harold Macmillan.
Prime Minister

‘Neil’, Jackie’s voice called from the garden as she approached,’ where are those plates’? Her voice was being partially masked by the sound of the old telephone starting to ring in the hallway, I turned to answer her as she got closer but as I looked the glare from the sun streaming past her seemed to make her invisible.

I quickly turned back as if to warn Curly of her presence, but he was no longer there. Instead the room was bathed in the warm afternoon sunlight, but from the half open doorway leading into the passage I heard Mabel’s reassuringly calm soft voice, ‘Curly we must go now.....’

CHAPTER 16

The Future

‘Neil...Neil, you are alright’ Jackie’s familiar perfume and soft voice filled my senses. Opening my eyes I strained as the light in the room flooded back at me making me wince; strange unfamiliar noises were all around. Jackie’s calming word’s appeared again, ‘Neil, it’s alright you are safe now.’

As my eyes cleared, I started to make out Jackie’s face. I felt her warm hand clasp mine and the sensation of her touch lifted my spirits immediately.

‘What happened Jackie., why am I in bed?’ I asked. ‘You are in hospital Neil’ she answered with a slight quiver in her voice. I could see she had been crying. ‘Crying’ I said in a low voice whisper, ‘you’ve been crying. Did I say something to upset you?’

‘Oh Neil of course not...don’t you remember what happened?’ Jackie’s voice was still unsteady.

I lay looking at the unfamiliar ceiling above me for a moment trying hard to think. ‘I can remember leaving you...’ I said slowly, ‘fog, thick fog making things darker as I drove...I should have turned back...why did I go out Jackie?’

‘You wanted to go to the meeting at the Club that night. But you never arrived’.

‘I can’t have had an accident Jackie’ I said positively still finding the effort to speak hard, ‘the fog was too thick, I could only drive slowly, why didn’t’ I turn back?’

‘It wasn’t you Neil,’ Jackie said reassuringly, ‘a lorry missed the lights as you turned off the North Circular in that fog and hit you broadside. When the police collected me to take me to the hospital, they said they had never seen a car so badly mangled, they reckon it was only luck and the airbags inflating as the car was crushed that saved you.’ Jackie looked away and I could see in her body language she was trying to hold her emotion. ‘Since then you’ve been in coma.’

She didn’t immediately look back at me, instead when she did it was to distractedly straighten one of the lines descending from the group of machines to the left of the bed; when our eyes did meet, I could see at once the look of strain in her face that had probably been there for the last three weeks since the accident had happened.

‘I am sorry if I upset you Jackie’, I said again.

‘Neil, I thought I had lost you’ she said now losing the fight to hold back her tears.

I tried to reach out to touch her and instantly felt a shoot of pain in my right side. ‘Jackie, it’s ok...I am here.’

‘It was nearly so different’ she said rubbing her eyes with the backs of her hands. ‘You didn’t respond for the first week after they brought you here and the doctors where anxious that we could still lose you unless you started to rally; I slept in this chair most of that first week.’

Jackie stood up and turned to look out of the window, ‘They told me you might recover, they really weren’t sure, but said I should keep talking to you, even at night if I awoke, tell you about everyday things.’ Returning back to the chair she said, ‘during the second week they told me I needed to get some headspace, to have a break at home for a short while, they also suggested I compile some music and sounds that you would remember and could relate to.’

Jackie was still looking tense. ‘I can remember the *Bay City Rollers*, but I hope you didn’t play me any of that’ I said hoping to make her smile; ‘otherwise you may never have got me back,’ I tried to laugh through my coughing and was relieved to see Jackie was now laughing with me.

‘No I didn’t think that wise’ she said,’ but I did try and find things from your past, and the present. By the way just how many *Prog Rock* albums do you have Neil,’ she now asked playfully, ‘if I found ten, I must have found twenty! In the end I put together bits from about half a dozen, plus our favourite *Sade* album, bits of *Dire straits* also that *Taylor Swift* record you liked recently.

Paul suggested I could bring some sounds from the Club, so he copied one of your old VHS tapes, the one you took at the 'Curly bowl' all those years ago, he also transferred one of your dads old ¼" tapes you keep in your desk, of those old Club meetings. He said it was a pity you never found his tape recorder; he had a heck of job getting that copied.'

'Jackie,' I said suddenly, 'do Bryan and Liz know I am here?' Jackie looked blankly at me.' Who are Bryan and Liz Neil' she asked softly, 'I think I know most of your friends outside of our circle, I don't think you have mentioned them before'. 'But Jackie, you've met them' I protested, 'we saw them last week when we both went down to Purley, don't you remember'?

Jackie gave a gentle smile, 'But Neil you haven't been out of this room in three weeks we can't have seen anyone last week.' She leant forward resting her forehead on the back of my hand, before kissing it. 'I think you may have met them after your accident.'

'After my accident' I repeated, desperately trying to remember. I felt a calm wash over me and I closed my eyes drifting off once more.

After staying another fortnight in the hospital and despite the hospital's best efforts to dissuade me from leaving before I had fully recovered, I wanted to get back home where I knew I would be happiest. Jackie promised them faithfully I would observe all the daily exercises they had prescribed and that I would keep taking the many pills I needed to keep me going, and on that basis, they agreed to discharge me.

I now planned to catch up on all the writing, phoning and emailing I could before health permitting, I felt strong enough to get back out into the big wide world and of course to the workshop.

After the first couple of days of learning how to navigate my progress from one room to another and learning the shortest route to the downstairs loo from any given point, I started to feel more like getting on with some writing as I had already decided I wanted it to be Club related, and now that I had time on my hands, I felt I could give something a decent shot. The only doubt in my mind was what to write about?

The answer to this problem presented itself unexpectedly and completely out of the blue.

Following a pleasant lunch the next day, Jackie returned to her little home office and I, feeling the need to commit a few preliminary ideas to paper but unable to find a working pen, went in search eventually finding one in the old fashioned telephone table we kept in the hall. Beside it just inside the front door I noticed a cardboard box that at one time had contained crisps but that had now been reused to deliver something.

'What's inside this box Jackie?' I called. 'If it's the tatty one by the door' Jackie's distracted voice answered from her office,' then it's from Rupert and Jean the couple who bought your dads old house. They said they found it when they were putting in some extra loft insulation up in the roof. Apparently, it was right at the back over the bay window; Rupert said they looked like things of your dad's, and he thought you should have them'.

Intrigued I leant against the wall and half stooped to pull at the Gaffer tape holding the top flaps down. As I peeled the tape back instead of it coming away neatly it brought part of the flap with it leaving a hole.

I looked in and could see the box contained a couple of smaller even scruffier looking cardboard boxes. I reached in to take one out foolishly not realising my inability to hold onto it properly with just one hand, and as I tugged at it, it caught on the edge of the second flap whereupon it twisted and distorted to a point where it finally broke open spilling the contents onto the hall carpet.

Jackie hearing the noise came out from where she had been working, 'What are you doing Neil?' she asked coming into the hall and finding me still holding the remains of the ripped box and its one time contents now scattered over the floor.

She bent down and started to gather up several pages of torn notebook and plastic reels that had lain undiscovered for so long out of sight but had now been so violently distributed across her hall carpet. 'You only had to pull the tape Neil, not work your strong man act on it.' she scolded.

Ignoring the jibe I eased myself down to sit on the second step of the stairs holding my still painful chest; carefully I leant forward to pick up a reel that had rolled and lodged against the bottom step. It was a reel of dad's old recording tape *Semprini Serenade* announced the handwritten label attached to its plastic flange.

'Good grief' Jackie exclaimed gathering further spools before handing them to me. 'These must be more recordings your dad made.' As I took them from her outstretched hand, I could see the first one was labelled, *Club talk – Bill Hoole Nov 63* and the second *John Crawley - traction engine talk Oct 65*; Jackie handed me another couple, *Big Band Special R.F.Hall Mar 74 - Club talk, Work in progress Dec 68*. 'Crikey Jackie there's some interesting stuff here' I said after a while.

'You might usefully write something about the history of the Club for the News Sheet from some of these' Jackie suggested helpfully.

'Mmm I could, history sounds a bit dry though and I rather had in mind to have my dad involved in it somewhere' I said, 'maybe about his workshop interests'. 'Well you could develop it, it rather depends what's on them, after all I don't suppose, anyone will want to read very much about *Sing Something Simple* she laughed passing me another tape.

'You sit and sort through them and I'll make us a cup tea; I was looking for an excuse to get away from the tedium of my computer anyway.'

As Jackie disappeared into the kitchen my mobile started to ring, it was Rupert.

'Hello Rupert' I answered, 'Yes, I am just looking at the boxes now... well, yes, I do think they will be useful, rather unexpected really, yes. Thanks. Listen, thanks so much for letting me have them, I have a good feeling that they are going prove useful. .. Yes, it will definitely be something to keep me out of mischief. Bye now.'

Jackie re-emerged from the kitchen now carrying two mugs, 'Rupert, I take it?' she said handing one of the mugs to me, adding, 'they're a nice couple; I am glad you sold the house to them'.

Looking at me still sitting on the stairs now apparently deep in thought she asked, 'I can see the cogs turning in your head, what are you thinking?'

'I am thinking it's too good an opportunity to pass up, you're right, to write about aspects of the Club's history, particularly now these have appeared...but it can't just be what's on them, fact, followed by fact, I'll need to work out a format; I thought maybe I could write it under the title, "*Tales my father told me*" or "*Memories of my dad....Memoirs of my dad*"?

'Hold on Neil' Jackie suddenly said gesturing with her mug, 'you're missing the obvious one, how about "*Memoir of a Clubman*" that would cover the past and the present.

'That's the one, I knew I would come up with something good eventually' I said trying to suppress a smile.

'Now all I have to do is phone Paul and ask him where I can have a dozen spools of 1/4inch recording tape copied....'

This story is fictional and was inspired by LBSCs writings for Model Engineer Magazine