

CHAPTER XIII

SECRETARY OF THE SOUTH-EASTERN RAILWAY

As Robert Stephenson had predicted, it was not a very quiet berth in which I found myself, at the Board-room of the South-Eastern Railway. The direction of the company was in a state of transition. Mr Macgregor, the former chairman, had been dispossessed of his office by a majority of the directors; but no new chairman had been appointed. The ministry was without a head, and the opposition was strong. It was not so much business as speech-making, that seemed to be the work of the Board. Macgregor was often attacked, and defended himself with ability.

There was even a third party at the Board, headed by Mr Forster, member for Berwick, who, however, like Harry o' the Wynd, often fought for his own hand. I soon found that Mr Forster was ready to trip me up about the composition of the minutes. The reason was, that he had been disappointed in not securing the election, in my place, of a fellow-member of the Reform Club, whom he had introduced and supported. I had therefore to be cautious. When my minutes were first read, he disputed their accuracy. I said that, so far as I knew, they correctly registered the decisions arrived at by the Board.

“That may be,” he said, “but they do not give ‘the proceedings.’” He appealed to the solicitor, who constantly sat at the Board. The solicitor referred to the Act, which said ‘minutes and proceedings.’” I had therefore to amend my ways, and insert not only what was determined upon, but what was proposed and discussed. All this was, of course, with a view to future proceedings, when an appeal came to be made to the shareholders.

The majority of the Board, not having a good speaker, determined to introduce a new man for the purpose of meeting Macgregor and Forster. They found him in an able gentleman, who, however, was without a qualification. The majority gave him the qualification, and elected him to a vacant seat. He soon proved his power as a speaker, by walking into Macgregor. The latter had sent to the Register Office, and ascertained the nature of his qualification. He then rose, pounced upon the new man like a vulture, and tore him to pieces. It was exciting and amusing, but it was not business. I had never seen such a thing before. In former times, I had seen men of active habits meet round a table for the purpose of getting through their work, and pass their minutes without rising from their seats. But here were men who rose to their feet, and made elaborate and cutting speeches, without getting through any work at all. It seemed to me a fruitless waste of time.

But all this was preliminary to an appeal to the shareholders, who were to elect a batch of new directors in the following month of March. Everything gave way to this business. Those who were in wished to remain in, and many who were out desired to become members of the Board. The

number of candidates was great; some with only the bare qualification, and nearly all without any railway experience. Deputations went down to Manchester and Liverpool, where the principal part of the stock in the company was held, to address meetings of shareholders. The printers were set to work, and large numbers of proxies, and conflicting statements, were issued. At last, the half-yearly meeting was held; and a very uproarious affair it was. The result was, that Mr Macgregor, finding that he had no chance, gracefully retired, together with his former deputy chairman; that Mr Forster, with his batch of candidates, was rejected; and that some four or five new directors were added to the Board. I had no difficulty in getting on pleasantly with the new men. After a short interregnum, the Honourable James Byng was made chairman; and I maintained a pleasant and agreeable intercourse with that gentleman during the twelve years that I remained with the company. He was an honest and honourable man, and, in the midst of considerable difficulties, always did the best that he could for the advantage of the constituents he represented.

There was, however, a great obstacle to the prosperity of the company, in the establishment of a rival line within the district that should have been fully served by the South-Eastern Company. In 1853, the East Kent Company had obtained an Act for giving railway accommodation to the important district between Chatham and Canterbury. That accommodation should certainly have been supplied by the company which already had possession of the county. But some feelings of personal pride seem to have stood in the way; and the new

line got into the hands of scheming contractors. It was of no use pointing out that the new line should be constructed and worked by the existing company. I was informed that the requisite capital could never be obtained, and that the new line would never be made. I could only point to the experience I had gained through the Leeds and Thirsk Railway, which had established itself in the face of equally great difficulties, but had been wisely absorbed by the North-Eastern Railway in its more extensive arrangements. The new line pointed to Dover in the one direction, and to London in the other; my impression from the first was, that the line would be made and extended in both directions. And, sure enough, in 1855, an Act was obtained to extend the line to Dover.

Meanwhile, my new Board began its operations. A great deal had to be done to improve matters. The poor South-Eastern seems to have been regarded as a great milch cow, affording sustenance to everybody instead of to the proprietors. The number of "dead heads" (as they are called in America) passing along the railway was enormous. Everybody who wanted an advantage, expected it from the railway.

The Emperor of the French had just made his visit to England with the Empress, and been received at Dover by the South-Eastern magnates with great ceremony, and returned to France with great *éclat*, when an event occurred which threw us into consternation. It originated in the same desire for having a tug at the great milch cow. Railway companies have neither souls nor bodies, but they have purses; and when it was found (as afterwards appeared) that a person high up in the Passenger Department was

in collusion with a guard and a common thief to rob the company of the gold carried on the line for the London bullionists, it must be admitted that things had been allowed to go a great deal too far, and that a clearance of some of the incapables (to say the least of them) must soon be made.

On the 19th of May the news reached London from Paris, that three large boxes, containing bullion to the value of £14,000, had been robbed on their journey between the two places, and that the weight of the bullion bars had been replaced with shot! This was frightful news. The Board was summoned to consider the matter. A reward for the apprehension of the thieves was offered. The police detectives were set to work: and reports came in as to the circumstances connected with the affair.

It appeared that the boxes containing the bullion had been received at the London Station at twenty minutes to eight, on the evening of the 15th of May; that they had been weighed, and the record kept; that they had gone down to Folkestone by the late train, and had remained there all night; that they had been carried over by the *Lord Warden* steamer to Boulogne on the following day, and been given over by the company's agent to the agent of the Messageries Générales; and that they had been finally carried on to Paris by the North of France Railway.

The first idea was, that the robbery had been committed by foreigners on the French railway. Representations to this effect were made to the Central Commissioner of Police at Boulogne, and an inquiry was instituted. It appeared that the weights of the boxes had varied at London and Boulogne; that there was nothing to show that this "audacious

robbery" had been committed at Boulogne; and the commissioner pointed to the fact that the cases containing the bullion had remained at Folkestone from 11 o'clock at night until 10 o'clock the next morning—inferentially pointing to that place as the probable scene of the robbery. A further report came from Paris, to the effect that all investigations had failed to discover any clue which might lead to detection of the thieves.

And here the matter rested for some time. Meanwhile, I was requested by Mr Tester, the assistant-superintendent in the passenger manager's office, to furnish him with a certificate of character on his leaving the company's service, to assume the position of General Manager of the Royal Swedish Railway. I did not know Mr Tester, but was informed by his chief that he had been a faithful servant, and that I might give him the certificate of character which he requested. Who Mr Tester was, will be ascertained in a future part of this narrative.

It was necessary, as I have said, to make many changes, for the management was loose. First, a new engineer was appointed; then a new storekeeper; then a law clerk, stationed in the office, to be constantly at hand, instead of having professional solicitors attending the Board; then a surveyor to look after the company's rents; and, finally, a new general manager and a goods manager. I had great pleasure in acting with these gentlemen. They were active, able, and honest. The law clerk and general manager were long my esteemed friends; and I worked with them cordially for the benefit of the company.

Mr Rees, the new law clerk, was a man of great ability. He was then young, and comparatively

inexperienced, though he has since obtained great consideration as a first-rate Parliamentary agent. He thought it strange that we should have been able to find no traces of the gold robbery; not even a hint of where it had been done. Mr Rees's father was a well-known solicitor, who at one time had been able to effect a discovery in a similar case. The two, father and son, went down to Folkestone, where the gold had lain during the night before its supposed transport to Boulogne. The bullion chests had then lain all night in an office of which the door was always open, and not in the strong-room appointed for the purpose. There could be no doubt, so they thought, that things had been so arranged by design, and that the station-master was in the secret. Old Mr Rees fixed his penetrating eye upon the station-master, who, he thought, quailed before his glance, as much as to say, "Ah! you have found me out, have you?" Hints were dropped, but nothing was done. There was no evidence whatever, nor any symptom of evidence.

Many months passed, until, towards the end of 1856—after the lapse of more than a year—a young woman called at my office, and gave her name as Fanny Kay. She said she had come to give some information as to the gold robbery. There had been a great many hints before this time, and I did not expect much. But, as I was much occupied by correspondence, I took the woman into Mr Rees's office, introduced her to the law clerk, and left her there. I afterwards asked, "Is there any probability of your finding out this affair?" "Well," he replied, "everything is confidential as yet. But if what this woman says be right, we have all been wrong." The next time I saw Mr Rees, he told me that he had been at

Portland Prison, and discovered the whole secret. Here is a very brief account of the transaction. It was the result of Mr Rees's personal examination of a person called Edward Agar, then undergoing penal servitude at Portland.

"The robbery," said Agar, "was first proposed to me by Pearse. I knew him about seven years ago. He was then in the service of the company as ticket-printer. Laward and Burgess, first and second guards, were also to be in it. I went down to Folkestone several times to see how it could be done; but I was afraid to have anything to do with it. I went abroad, first to Paris, then to Jamaica and the United States.

"When I returned from the latter country, towards the end of 1853, I met Pearse by accident just by Covent Garden Market. He was then a clerk in the betting office of Clipson, King Street. I went there occasionally and made several bets. I went to Evans' and other places with Pearse. He again brought up the subject of the gold robbery. He said there had been an alteration in the conduct of the railway, and he thought he could now get the keys of the bullion boxes. I said if he could get the keys, it might be done, but not otherwise. We went down to Folkestone and remained there about a fortnight, watching the arrival of the trains and the management of the bullion boxes. One of the keys was kept in the booking office of the station, the other was kept in a cupboard at the harbour-master's office. Pearse proposed that I should get in at night and obtain the keys. I declined, and said that if the keys could not be got in any other way, I would have nothing to do with it.

"I made the acquaintance of the station clerks, and went with them and played billiards at nights, and a few games at cards. I asked them about the bullion, but I got no information from them. I then went over to Boulogne, to see how the gold was dealt with there. I remained there nearly a week. I then returned to London. During all this time I was in communication with Burgess the guard.

“Previous to my going to Boulogne, Pearse told me that he thought he could get an impression of one of the keys (No. 1), for the other (No. 2) had been lost. I asked how he could get it. He said, from Tester, in the superintendent's office at London Bridge. I said I should like to see the key myself. Pearse saw Tester, who agreed to see me. We all met at a public-house at the corner of Tooley Street. Tester produced two keys, both of one lock (No. 1). I then took the impression of it in wax. I returned the keys to Tester, who took them away. Pearse had told Tester what the keys were wanted for. Tester was to have his share with the rest—Burgess, Pearse, and myself.

“It then became a question how to get at key No. 2. Pearse proposed to send a money parcel down to Folkestone, and that I should be there to receive it, and see where they brought the key from. I consented. I left about £500 with Pearse, and it was sent down in the bullion chest. I went to the office on the day after it arrived, and the clerk brought out the keys from his cupboard, and unlocked the chest, taking out and giving me the parcel, and requiring a receipt. After returning to London, I went down to Folkestone with Pearse; and towards evening, just before the Boulogne boat arrived, as we knew that the clerks generally left the office to attend to the passengers and baggage, we thought that would be our opportunity. We watched the clerks go out, and immediately went into the office, and found the cupboard door with the key in it. We opened it, found the bullion key, and took an impression of it in wax. We returned the same evening to London.

“I got the keys made by a scale-beam forger in Church Street, Shoreditch. I gave him the size, and then myself filed them down to match the impressions. I met Burgess a great many times, and went down with him to Dover to try the keys in the bullion box. One of the locks was not used, but I got both keys to fit. We then watched for an opportunity to effect the robbery.

“We bought a quantity of shot at the Shot Tower by Hungerford Bridge, 28 lbs., and put it into bags, so as to pack readily into the boxes. We

carried them in carpet bags many times, in a four-wheeled cab, to St Thomas Street, while I went to Burgess on the platform of London Bridge Station, to ascertain if the proper quantity of gold was going down. This went on for about a fortnight. One night I observed Burgess just by the exit gate at the Dover part of the platform. He raised his cap and wiped his face—the signal that the gold was there. I went back to St Thomas Street, got into the cab, and told the man to drive round to the station. A porter came and took the bags. I told the man to enter the luggage and wait till I came from the booking office, where I took two 2nd class tickets. Burgess put the two bags into the van behind the door. The bullion safe was then brought up and placed in the van.

“Tester used to meet us every night to give us information as to the gold going down. The reason why we did not go at once was that we wanted sovereigns if we could get them, and we had determined not to go for less than £12,000—the amount which we could carry, and had shot for. Tester met us as usual at 8 o'clock. He walked up to the station and we met on the platform, but we took no notice of each other. I had been up more than once to see Tester in his office.

“I got into Burgess's van. Pearse got into a 1st class carriage, Tester into another. As soon as the train had started, at 8.30 P.M., I opened one of the safes with the key. I then opened the box containing the long bars of Australian gold. I took one of the bars out and put it into a black leather enamelled bag made expressly for Tester. By this time we had arrived at Redhill. Tester came up, and Burgess—as had been previously arranged—placed the bag upon the platform. Tester took it up, and ran across to meet the up train, then about due, by which he returned to London. This was done to relieve us of part of the weight.

“Pearse got into the van at Redhill. We then took the gold out of the boxes, and replaced it with shot. He fastened down the boxes with the same nails and bands as were previously used, and sealed them up as before. We remained in the van for some time after locking up the safe. We got out at Folke-

stone upper station, and took our seats in a 1st class carriage for Dover. The empty boxes went down to Folkestone Harbour. On getting out at Dover, we went to Burgess's van, and each of us took away one carpet bag. We carried them to a coffee-house in the neighbourhood, where we had supper, and shortly after returned to London by the up mail train, of which Burgess was guard. Burgess had provided us previously with two Ostend tickets.

"On reaching London early in the morning, we took a cab on the incline, and told the man to drive us to the Great Western Station. On the road, we told him we had made a mistake, and asked him to drive to Euston. He drove us to a coffee-house in Drummond Street, where we slept for an hour; then to Pearse's house, Kilburn; then by another cab to my house at Cambridge Villas, Shepherd's Bush. There we broke up and melted the gold. Pearse bought some fire bricks and a crucible, as well as an iron ingot. In the meantime, Pearse sold 100 ounces of the gold, a piece cut off one of the large Australian bars. We went on melting, and then took the whole to Pearse's house.

"The proceeds of the sale of gold, to the extent of over £2000, was divided between Pearse, Burgess, and Tester. I was to have mine later, as the others said they wanted money. Burgess had £700, and Tester £700, both in notes. Several sums borrowed by Burgess and Tester were repaid to me. I may add, that on the morning after the robbery I met Tester by appointment at the railway stairs leading down to the Borough Market by St Saviour's Church. He then gave me the gold bar he had brought up from Redhill in the small black bag. When I was arrested, all the rest of the gold was with Pearse at his Kilburn villa as well as the coupons of Spielmans. Pearse told me he should dig a hole in the pantry under the steps of the front entrance, in which to conceal it."

Such was the confession of Agar to Mr Rees at Portland, with a great deal more evidence implicating other parties, which need not be mentioned here.

Agar had been apprehended, tried, and convicted for a crime of which he was probably not guilty. He left his wife and child at Pearse's, and trusted to their being maintained out of the proceeds of the gold robbery. But Pearse and his wife quarrelled with Fanny Kay, and turned her out of doors. Then it was that she called upon me, and that I handed her over to Mr Rees; after which he went down to Portland to collect the above evidence.

Steps were taken to apprehend Pearse and Burgess, the latter still acting as a guard. Tester was expected home from Sweden on a visit to his friends at Deal. He also was secured. The whole of the prisoners were brought before Baron Martin at the Central Criminal Court on the 13th January 1857. The evidence above given was confirmed by Agar in full detail. I was present in the court. Agar was a smallish, thin man, with a keen bright eye; he gave his evidence with great clearness. Baron Martin said of him, that if he had given his attention to some legitimate business or profession, he might have reached distinction. Of the other prisoners—especially Tester and Burgess, who had so dishonestly abused their trust—the Judge spoke with contempt; and Pearse was but a common thief, who, finding that he could do nothing without superior skill, called in Agar—as the ordinary medical practitioners, in a difficult case, would call in an experienced surgeon or physician.

The punishment given to Pearse was too small. He was only convicted of larceny, and sentenced to two years' imprisonment, with hard labour, three of the months to be passed in solitary confinement. Burgess the guard, and Tester the manager of the Royal Swedish Railway, were sentenced to fourteen

years' transportation. Agar was sent back to endure his penal servitude at Portland.

Such was the end of the Gold Robbery!

But what had become of my long-contemplated Life of George Stephenson? I fear that, in the midst of all my occupations, I had omitted further attention to it. I had very little leisure, and my time, even my evenings, were entirely occupied with railway work. I had seen Robert Stephenson from time to time; and in the course of 1855 I had occasion to write to him professionally, requesting him, at the instance of the directors, to advise with them as to an improvement in the Shakespeare Cliff tunnel, near Dover, which had recently been the cause of a fatal accident to a private in the Grenadier Guards. To this letter, I received the following reply:—

“NEWCASTLE-ON-TYNE, *4th October* 1855.

“MY DEAR SIR,—

“By this post you will receive a reply to your official communication, declining to go into the matter, as I have decided (and I have acted on the decision for the last two years) to withdraw myself entirely from all new professional engagements. This I have done chiefly on account of my health not being very good.

“With regard to the notes upon my father's early steps with the Locomotive Engine, they have been done some time, and I hope shortly to see you on this subject; but I shall be engaged for ten days or a fortnight out of London mainly. Since you undertook your new situation, you have frequently passed through my mind, and I began to feel that your new engagements would be far too numerous to admit of your giving the Biography any attention.

“Moreover, I felt that if your Board found that you were not giving your whole time to their business, it might cause dissatisfaction. I was aware, also, that you had had a struggle with a section of the Board, when you obtained the appointment. When

you succeeded, I knew that you would have many serious difficulties to contend with. A divided Board, a reduced income, increasing expenses, and, as a necessary consequence, discontented shareholders. None of these contribute to a secretary's comfort, and as I take rather a gloomy view of the future prospects of the South-Eastern, I fear your troubles are not at an end.

"I intend leaving England for a cruise in some southern clime in about three weeks, but I will make a point of seeing you for an hour or two, before that time.

"Brunel or Hawkshaw would either of them be good men to confer with Ashcroft on the tunnels, and from what I have heard, the matter will not brook delay.—Yours faithfully,

"ROBERT STEPHENSON."

This was wise advice, and I resolved to follow it, until I had sufficient leisure time at my disposal.