

3K The Tale of the Ghost

There was a high west wind over the Shropshire Marches – a boisterous, buffeting wind that swept down the slopes of the Long Mynd and over the Vale of Severn to send November leaves whirling through the darkness from the mane of Wenlock Edge. It cried about the walls of the Stiperstones Inn, hurling scuds of rain to rattle like flung gravel against the window-panes. It was a night to make men glad of the warmth and cheer of the fireside.

“Why do the old men call Snailbeach Mine the “ Hell’s Mouth”? Ah, now that’s a long story that is”. With a natural sense of drama, the old man paused to allow the interest of his audience to quicken. He took a deep and noisy draught from mug which was mulling on the hob, filled a yellowing clay pipe with fine black shag from a battered tin and lit it with an untidy spill of newspaper, which he thrust between the bars of the grate. Then at last, settling himself more comfortably in the chimney corner, he began his tale.

“If you got here afore dark, maybe you noticed the old mines on the hill yonder. Well, they were lead mines and were working up to – let me see – fifteen years ago; all but the one right on top of the hill, that is, and that’s been closed these fifty years. Now this be the mine you’ve been on about, though in the really old days it were called Long Barrow Mine because there’s a great mound up there which they do say was the Devil’s burial place when Adam was a boy-chap. I never heard tell of anyone who could say rightly who were buried there, although folks who know about such things have set to a-digging there many a time but never got much forrarder. Not that any of them stayed at it very long. It seems to get on their nerves like, for it be a queer lonely place up there even in day-time and, though rabbits do swarm on these hills, you’ll never see a one there, nor any other natural creature neither. Knowing what I know, I don’t blame them for packing up.

Now, in the old days when my father was a young man, the lead was taken to Pontesbury in wagons pulled by horses. About the time I was born, the railway came and soon after they had steam engines kept up at the mines. They still used horses then to draw the wagons up the branch tracks from the mines ready for the steam engine to pick up, and this were my first job as a nipper, walking one of these horses up from Perkins Level to where the railway was. Then, when I was twenty or thereabouts, I got the job of firing on one of the engines and as proud as Punch I was. She’d seem pretty queer to you folks nowadays but she was a grand little engine in them days and I used to keep her brass Bristol fashion and the copper band round her funnel shone like my mother’s kettle.

It was about this time – one Michaelmas – that the trouble started at Snailbeach Mine. I can remember it as plain as if it were yesterday. We had our shed up there then and we’d just come up with our last load of empties, unhooked, and were running the engine into the shed, when the chaps came off shift. Now, the path from the mine down the hill led past the door of our shed, and I had dropped my fire and was having a last look round just to see everything was right for the night as they come walking by. Usually they would be a-chattering, joking and calling to each other, for they were a merry lot, but this night they were quiet like or talking hushed to each other, and this was the first thing that struck me as being a bit queer. So when one of them, that was a cousin of mine – Joe Beecher his name was – come walking by, I called out to him to know what they was all acting glum about. He turned back into the shed and told me what the trouble was. It was fast falling dark by this time, but I can see his face now in the light of my fire, which was still a-glowing between the rails by the door.

They had struck a new vein just about that time and it seems that Joe and his mates had been working on this new level. Mind you, it wasn’t like the mines you know today, for there was only

about fifteen men at the most below ground. Well, at midday they knocked off for a bite of 'Snap', and started walking back down the level to join their mates. When they got half way, he said, his mate Bill remembered he'd left his tea-can behind and set off back to fetch it while Joe went on and joined the others. They had a laugh about Bill when he was so long finding his can, but when snapping time was nearly up and still no signs of him, Joe said he got a bit worried, and set off down the level to see what had happened to him. He got to the end, and then he said he came over horrid queer because Bill wasn't there at all, so that he felt scared of the dark and the hush there, and hollered out for the others to come down. So they came and looked too, and sure enough there was nothing to be seen of Joe's mate. There'd been no fall to bury him, and of course there were no other way out of the level. They just stood there for a moment very quiet like, and then set off back down the level as fast as they could. Joe said something seemed to be telling him that the sooner he cleared out the better for him, and he reckoned the others must have felt that way too. He finished up by saying something that sounded a bit crazed to me at the time, about the darkness being angry. Anyway, none of them durst set foot in that level for a long while after that."

The old man paused, drained his beer mug and, sucking the drooping fringe of his moustache, seemed to ruminate sadly over its emptiness. His mug replenished and his reeking pipe re-lit, he settled himself once more and resumed his tale. "Nothing else happened for a twelve-month or more, except that they had to give up the new level because no one would work there. But there come a time when they'd worked out the veins on the old levels, and it was a matter of opening up the new level again, seeing as it was very rich, or shutting down altogether. Things had quieted down a bit by this, mind, but for all that they had to give the chaps more pay afore they agreed to go back.

It must have been a fortnight or more after they'd started on the new level again, that we were up there waiting for a return load of trams, and had gone into the winding-house to have a word with Harry Brymer, who was the engine-man there in them days. Died ten year ago up at his daughter's at Crowsnest, he did. It was an old beam winder as was there then, gone for scrap a long time back, though you can still see the engine-house plain as can be on top of the hill, while the old chimney be a landmark ten mile away on a clear day. Well Harry was telling us how they'd had nothing but trouble ever since they'd started on the new level – noting much, mind, but just enough to make the men nervy and talk of an ill luck on the place, although Harry said he reckoned nothing to it for his part.

It was while we were talking to Harry, leaning over the guard rails round the drum and having a smoke, that the bell wire started to play the monkey. There was no such new-fangled notion as electricity in those days, of course, and the signal for winding was a bell as was hung on the wall and rung from the shaft bottom by a wire cable working through pulleys and guides. Well it was this cable that started a-jangling to and fro in the guides just enough to set the bell moving, but not enough to ring it proper. The three of us stopped out clacking and stood dumbstruck watching this bell moving and the cable jerking. And somehow it felt queer standing there in the half-light watching it and waiting for it to make up its mind, like, whether to ring or not.

Then all of a sudden it starts ringing like mad, and kept on, too; so Harry started winding while we went to the doorway to look for the cage, for by that time we had a notion as summat was up. When her came there was only one man on her and that was Joe Beecher; I just caught sight of his face as he come up and I'll never forget the way he looked. He never said nor shouted nothing, nor even saw us, but almost afore the cage stopped he was off and away across the yard, and we could see him running for dear life over the waste mound and along the hillside. And as he ran he kept looking back over his shoulder and then running the harder, for all the world as though Old Nick

himself were after him. Then he got to the wood and we lost sight of him because it was that dark under the trees.

Now this gave Harry and me a pretty turn, I can tell you, but that was nothing to my mate. When we were watching Joe a-running he lets out a yell like a screech owl and then cries out loud, 'Run, run for Christ's sake!' When we couldn't see Joe no more we turned to look at him and he'd gone down all of a heap on the floor. We reckoned then he must have seen summat as we missed, but it was some hours afore he came round, and a week or more afore he could talk plain. Even then it very near set him off again in the telling. I can tell you that if I'd known then what it was he saw, I'd never have gone down that mine as I did with several others as had been working above ground. Even as it was, it was a bit strange, to say the least, going down in that cage and wondering what we were going to see when we got to the bottom.

I know that none of us expected what we did find when we had stepped out of the cage and walked off down the new level – just the quiet and the dark – not a sign of a mortal soul. I understood then what poor Joe had meant about the darkness being angry. I'm not an educated man, if I were maybe I could find a better word for the feeling there was down in that mine. It just told me pretty plain that we weren't wanted down there, and the sooner we cleared out the better for us. I reckon the others must have felt the same thing, for we soon set off back to the cage, walking pretty smart for a start and finishing at a run, so that we fell a-jostling back into the cage like so many sheep into a pen, and mighty glad we were to see daylight, I can tell you."

The old man paused, rubbing his hands nervously, one over the other, and drawing his chair nearer to the fire as though suddenly chilled. "We found Joe Beecher in Snailbeach Coppice", he went on, "at the bottom of the old quarry as there is there. We covered up his face quick with a coat. I didn't fear God nor man in them days, but it were too much for me, and it didn't seem right that a mortal face should take that shape. Meanwhile, of course, my mate was took pretty bad. He'd just lie on his bed come day go day and not a word to anyone, but in the night he'd start shaking all over and crying out something terrible, same as he'd done the first time in the engine-house. He nearly drove his old woman crazy too, but after a time he quieted down until one day he was man enough to tell us what it was he saw.



Then he said that when the cage came up there was something crouched a-top of it, holding onto the cables. He couldn't see it very plain, he said, not half as clear as he could see Joe even in the half-light, but it had a human shape, he thought, even if it did seem terrible tall and thin, and it

seemed to be a kind of dirty white all over, like summat that's grown up in the dark and never had no light. When the cage stopped it come down and made after Joe as quick and quiet as a cat after a sparrow. He could hear Joe's running plain enough across the yard, he said, but this thing made never a sound, though it went fast enough and was catching up on him, so that when he got to the edge of the wood it looked as if it was reaching out for him with its arms.

Well I can't tell you no more. No one ever went down that mine again, and we cut the cage ropes and the guides and covered over the mouth of the shaft with girt old timbers all bolted fast. A bit foolish, maybe you think, but when we heard my mate's tale we fancied, like, that something might come a-crawling up. Any road, that's how it come to be named Hell's Mouth instead of Snailbeach. For myself I reckon hell be too good a name for it. Bible says he'll be fire and brimstone, but at any rate fire is something I can understand and I could abide it better than the dark and the quiet down there."