

# **The Barford Snake**

## **A Tale of the Flying Londoner**

**by Edgar Wallace, 1875-1932**

**Published: 1909**  
in »The Pall Mall Magazine«



Illustration

EVERY railway man knows the „Barford Snake.“ There isn’t one of us on the road that can hear the very words without shuddering. It has brought bad luck enough to a hundred poor souls, as I well know, and might have added me to its list of dead and crippled and mad victims, but for the strange fact that down in Bymouth, where I went to school, the teacher knocked a whole chapter of Shakespeare’s play, Julius Caesar, into my thick head. How I used to curse Wednesdays!—that was poetry day at our board school—when I had to stand up before the class and stammer and stutter those words, to me without sense or meaning.

When the time came for me to go into the engine shed at Trentbury and change my books for a bundle of cotton waste, and my atlas for the Manual for Firemen, I felt a great load drop from my mind, and, in my fancy, I kicked Julius Caesar from one end of the fitters' shop to the other.

I didn't know much about Barford in those days. I'd heard drivers and firemen grumble and grouse about it, but it had not earned its reputation then. What was wrong about Barford, was the road in and out! If you want to get a rough idea of what it was like, you've got to put three „s's“ end to end like this and remember that the whole distance they represent is about three-quarters of a mile, to realise what it meant to drivers. It was dead slow driving from end to end, and it spoilt the finest non-stop run in England, for it was a company order that no train should run through Barford junction.

The Barford Snake—as we called it—had a curious history. The Great Radial was one of the first roads to be built, and, at the time, there was a lot of opposition. It seems strange to us up-to-date folks that olden people should try to stop railway building, but so it was, and the bitterest enemy the rail had in the country round Barford was a chap named Germott: a regular savage fellow he was; said that railroads would ruin the country, and when the company came to him and offered to buy his land, he not only flatly refused, but induced other landowners to do the same. They tried (the company) all sorts of legal methods of making him quit, but he was protected with freeholds and every kind of ancient rights, and they couldn't get round him. He was only a young chap at that time, full of energy, and he worked his hardest to keep the railway out of Barford. He might have succeeded, too, only one or two of the men who had promised to support him turned traitor and sold their lands, and the consequence was that the company was just able to get a road into Barford and out again; but it was a devilish road to make, for it had to twist and turn and dodge in and out to avoid Farmer Germott's lands.

He never forgave the Great Radial for outwitting him. For years and years he fought the company in the courts and out of the courts for damage to crops by fire, trespass by employees, damage to stock by fright: there wasn't a single sin that the railway company didn't commit. Sometimes he would succeed, for juries were very prejudiced against railways in those days, and it wasn't a very difficult matter to get a verdict—at least, so I've heard Mr. Dash, the Company solicitor, say.

But as often as he won, he lost, and even when he got damages against the railway, they were all swallowed up in legal expenses.

It became a perfect mania with him, fighting the company, and it was the talk of the country that he was ruining himself in his desire for revenge. He got as near ruin as he could, and that made him the more bitter. Then he took up with a girl from Ouseleigh named Lune—an elf of a wench all eyes and hair. Lune her name was, and she was well named, for there wasn't one of the Lunes that hadn't a touch of madness somewhere in them, from Cabel Lune, who became a celebrated fiddle-player in London, to Jim Lune, who did ten years' for shooting a gamekeeper. It was the worst kind of wife he could have had by all accounts, but he took her, and in course of time had three children, two of which died young; the third lived long enough to get married, then he died—killed on the railway by ill-luck, and there was an action at law, which was decided in favour of the company. Gwen Germott was born after her father's

death, and lived with her mother and grandfather on the farm, this side Barford.

In course of time the mother died—old Dame Germott went to glory twenty years ago—and this old man and his grand-daughter lived together in solitude, the man teaching the child his creed, the young one feeding the fires of hatred in her very ignorance.

I mind the first time I ever saw them. It was the day I took my own engine out of the shed, and a proud day it was for me... „97 Up“ was the train, minerals and empties to Barford, but for me it was the „Flying Londoner“, and I trod on air.

We pulled into Barford thirty seconds ahead of time, or rather we pulled up at the distance signal that stood at „danger,“ when my mate said:

„Dan, do you want to see the man who made the Barford Snake?“ and pointed.

They stood by a gate of a level crossing. The old man must have been nigh on seventy then, and the girl was a lanky, thin-legged girl with the same eyes as, from what I've heard, her grandmother had, big and black and solemn. They stood hand in hand—a strange picture: for the old man had a long white beard that reached below his waistcoat, and a shaggy mane of white hair hanging over his collar. His face was pinched and scarred as though his fight with the railway had been a physical fight, and his thin hooked nose was more like the beak of a bird than a human feature. He saw us looking at him, and raised his fist passionately, and the girl followed suit, her thin little hands clenched and her small face all twisted with anger.

„Curse you!“ I heard him roar above the hissing of the exhaust, and just then the signal fell with a „clack“ and I took „97“ into the junction.

A driver who has got his heart in his job as I had, and was as anxious to get on as I was, hadn't got much time to worry his head about the feuds of a mad old farmer and his impish grandchild, but from time to time I heard of them, though I never saw either again for five years—an eventful five years for me. I rose rapidly, passing to slow passenger work and fast mail work, till I was chosen to run the „17 Up“, one of the most important passenger services of the day. „17 Up“ and „112 Down“ on alternate days: this was the service I was chosen for, over the heads of older, and I dare say better, men. There was only one higher step I could take and that was to run the „Flying Londoner“, but it was not a step I expected for many years, for three of the best drivers in England were engaged in that run. They were all men at the top of their class, men who knew their engines as a mother knows her baby, who could hear above the roar and the thunder of their pounding machines every single part at its work, and knew instinctively the cause of every tiny ailment that affected her.

The first definite news I got of the Germotts was that they had taken a house in Trentbury—they'd driven forty miles by trap sooner than come by railway. It was Bill Sanders, a fireman on one of the locals, who told me. „They've got religion,“ he said, „at least the girl has.“

„Starting a mission to railway men, I'll be bound,“ said old Carter jokingly—old Carter was one of the drivers of the „Londoner“.

There's many a true word spoken in jest, and it turned out to be just as old Carter said.

She held little meetings in a disused workshop in the town and sent round handbills to the fitters and the cleaners asking them to come. A good many went out of curiosity, although the district superintendent passed the word privately that no good could come of having anything to do with the Germotts.

I did not go myself: from all accounts it wasn't so much religion the Germotts had got, as spiritualism, and there's no doubt at all about it, that, wherever she picked the jargon up, she had got it all at her fingers' ends, and folk who went to scoff at her came away half-converted. They told me she had grown into a beautiful woman, and that may have been one of the reasons our young sparks found spiritualism so attractive. But it wasn't only the young ones—the old fellows, staid sober men like Carter, were influenced.

They say she spent hours struggling with old Carter, wrestling for his astral soul, or whatever you call it, only she and him and her arguments must have been mighty powerful, for when the old man left her house, he was as white as a sheet. I could name a dozen other men, Nick Fremlin, George Willowby, Dick Selby, who took up most powerfully with this new-fangled business.

I had half made up my mind to go to the little hall one evening and see and hear for myself, when something occurred to stop me.

I pulled out of Barford one night on the down trip, went dead slow round the curves of the Snake, got „All right“ from the guard, and opened up for the last spin of forty miles. It was a beautiful night. There was a young moon, and the hoar frost glittered on hedge and field, as if some mighty hand had sprinkled the world with the dust of diamonds.

We ran shrieking through Marborne and Mutwell, and struck the straight level road between the last station and Trentbury. Halfway home we saw the lights of the „Flying Londoner“ ahead, and I never realised so vividly why she got her name as I did that night—for she came past us like a flash, and with a buffet of wind that nearly made me lose my balance.

I looked back over the side of the cab and saw her red tail lights vanish, then looked at my mate. „What's wrong with old Carter—is he late?“ he asked.

I looked at my watch. I was running to time, and was due to cross the „Londoner“ at a point ten miles north of Trentbury.

„He's not late,“ I said; „we don't usually cross him so soon.“ And it was not till ninety seconds later that we reached the little bridge where, day by day, year in and year out, as regular as clockwork, the „112“ and the „Flying 6“ passed each other.

Nothing upsets a railway man so much as to meet a train unexpectedly, and a train that is ahead of time is always unexpected. My mate did not speak till Trentbury was in sight, then he turned his troubled face to me.

„Was there a director on board?“ he asked; but I shook my head, for I knew on our line that if the greatest man in the land were on board, it would make no difference in running time.

We drew into the station, were uncoupled, and instantly got a clear road to the shed.

I had my hand on the regulator when the shed signal swung to danger and the „three siding“ lamps went green, then I heard my name shouted.

I looked out of the cab.

Somebody was running along the platform toward me.

It was the district superintendent, and his face was the colour of ashes.

He sprang on to the footplate.

„Pull out!“ he gasped. „Couple the breakdown. The ‚Flying 6‘...“

„What?“ I whispered, and my heart almost stopped beating.

„She’s a wreck at Barford,“ he said, with almost a sob.

„She took the Snake at eighty miles an hour,“ he groaned. „Oh, my God!“

Ten minutes later I was flying back to Barford with the breakdown train and a gang of about a hundred men. On the way I had time to mention the incident of passing the „Londoner“ ninety seconds ahead of time.

„That means he’d gained three minutes in twelve miles—it’s incredible, it’s unthinkable!“ said the superintendent. „Why, Carter is the steadiest man on the road.“ I was silent. The watch could not lie, and the superintendent knew it. Incredible or not, it was true.

He gave me some information about the wreck—just as much as he had been able to get through. The „Flying 6“ had run past the danger signals, both the „distant off“ and the „home“.

„What was the engine?“ I asked.

„794—she wouldn’t go wrong,“ he said; and, indeed, I knew there wasn’t an engine on the road less likely to play tricks than No. 794.

I won’t describe to you the ghastly sight that met our eyes at Barford; the engine crumpled like a piece of paper, the carriages splintered as if they were so many match-boxes, the horrible, silent rows of dead that were laid on the station platform.

I was sick at heart and weary when I drew into Trentbury next morning. I had helped to draw poor old Carter from underneath his engine...

It was the sensation of the day. The newspapers were filled with speculations. Why did the accident occur? How it happened was obvious. No engine that was ever built could negotiate those damnable curves at eighty miles an hour. Even at forty it would have meant disaster. Was Carter drunk? They hinted as much, but we knew him for a staunch teetotaler. Had he gone mad? There wasn’t a saner man living. Had he had a fit? Against this theory there was his mate, the fireman—it was not possible that both men should succumb at the identical moment.

If it was a mystery to the newspapers, it was doubly a mystery to us who knew the inside working of a railway. But it was a mystery which seemed as though it would never be solved.

There were inquests and Board of Trade inquiries, and a private inquiry by the company, and then we buried our dead, and the story of the Barford disaster passed into history. Dick Selby was given poor old Carter’s job, and Barford became a bad memory.

Two months afterwards I steamed out of Barford at the usual hour for the home run, as I had done for a year.

It was not curious that I should have been reminded of that dreadful night when we met the „Flying 6“ thundering to her doom. I never passed the little bridge to meet the oncoming rush of the „Londoner“ without breathing a silent prayer of thanks. But to-night something loosened my tongue, and I turned to Dixon as we cleared Mutwell and said: „This is the worst part of the run, Ned.“

He understood me and nodded.

„I’ve never got her out of mind. Good God!“ He stared ahead, and I looked.

Right ahead of us, tearing along the up road, swaying from side to side, came the „Londoner“.

„Whar-r-r-!“ she roared, and was past.

We stared at each other: mechanically my hand went to my watch.

„She's two minutes ahead!“ I whispered hoarsely, and there came to me a horrible premonition of disaster.

How well justified that foreboding was, all the world knows; for the tragedy of two months previous had been re-enacted. The „Flying 6“ was a blazing wreck in exactly the same place where poor Carter had gone to his death.

Dick Selby, the driver, was alive when they got him out, and they did all that they could for him, not only for humanity's sake, but because they knew that their only hope of clearing up the mystery lay in him.

Crushed and mangled and burnt, with scarcely a sound bone or organ in his body, they carried him into Barford Cottage hospital, and officials watched him through the night, trying to piece together from his mutterings some story of the disaster as he had seen it. „Straight!“ he muttered all night long, „straight as an arrow—straight as an arrow!“ and no other word passed his lips till he died in the early hours of the morning.

If the first wreck had caused a sensation, the second seemed to electrify all England. It was the horrible coincidence that startled everybody. On the same spot two trains had been wrecked. Both were driven by sober, competent drivers; both met their fate through a glaring breach of regulations; both drivers had ignored the company orders which prohibit a greater speed than seven miles an hour when passing the Snake, and both had been wilfully blind to signals.

One morning after the inquest I was sent for from the loco-superintendents office.

When I got there I found the general manager and the secretary of the company. They looked very grave, and the manager, a courteous, elderly gentleman whom I knew by sight, motioned me to a seat.

„We have sent for you, Willis,“ he said, „because we have decided to appoint you to the 'Flying 6' in place of the unfortunate man who has just met with so terrible a death.“

I murmured my thanks. A year ago the appointment would have fulfilled my most ambitious hopes, but now there seemed a bitter taste to the sweet I had craved.

„I want to tell you,“ said the manager, „that I have made most careful inquiries into your life, and I am satisfied that you have all the advantages of the men who preceded you—and one more.“

He paused, and I wondered what particular gift I had that poor Dick Selby had not. He soon enlightened me.

„You have not meddled with the Germotts,“ he said quietly, „and I trust you will give them a wide berth.“

I gasped: I hadn't connected the farmer and his elvish grand-daughter with the disasters; indeed, I had forgotten their very existence. „Both Selby and Carter,“ the manager went on, „were regular attendants at these meetings of the Germotts. Please God I am doing no injustice to the living or the dead, but I have a doubt—a very terrible doubt.“ He nodded to me as if to dismiss me. „You understand,“ he said, „that this conversation is absolutely confidential. I have spoken to you as much for your own good as for the good of the company.“

I left him with my brain awl with suspicion and bewilderment.

The next three months were eventless. I took the „Flying 6“ to London every other night, and brought her back every other morning, and with all things

running smoothly, the passengers who had fallen away, and chosen slower, and as they thought safer, trains, came back to the „Londoner“.

I saw nothing of the Germotts, but a month after I had been appointed, a letter came from the girl asking me if I would not come to one of the meetings. I took no notice of the letter and she wrote again. Then she called on me at my lodgings. I am a single man and rent a couple of rooms with a respectable couple, who have a cottage close to the station, and it was whilst I was taking my tea one Sunday afternoon that she walked in unannounced.

They had told me she was beautiful, but I never expected to see any human face as beautiful as hers. It might not appeal to some tastes, but to me she was the most wonderful creature I have ever seen. Her hair was as black as jet, her skin as white and as clear as ivory, there was no single touch of colour in dress or face save her lips, which were vividly red. Her eyes were big and black and shaded with long lashes, and she had a trick of looking at you from under them that gave you the curious sensation that comes to you when you know that some unseen person is observing you.

I knew her instinctively and rose to my feet. I did not for one moment regard her seriously as being a danger, but I was on my guard.

Though I was over thirty, I'd had little to do with women, so far as friendship was concerned.

Her first words were commonplace, for she smiled and said, „I am interrupting your tea—please go on, Mr. Willis.“

But I stood waiting.

She took a chair by the table and rested her head on her hand easily. „Why have you not been to see us?“ she asked.

I replied that I had had no time, and she nodded.

„Will you come this evening?“

She almost pleaded, but I shook my head.

„I'm afraid I'm not a go-to-meeting man.“

Then she did an astounding thing, for she rose and put both hands on my shoulders. „Please come,“ she said, and looked me in the eyes. I shook my head again.

I was uncouth, I know—I am not a lady's man—but I took her hands from my shoulders and blushed for shame at myself when I found I was doing so.

„I can't,“ I muttered gruffly.

Without a word she left me.

It wasn't the last time she came. She seemed to know when the family I lodged with would be out, and she would open the latch of the cottage door and walk straight to my room.

I began to get worried for fear my superiors would get to learn of these visits, but strangely enough, the fact never seemed to reach them.

Worse than fear of discovery, I found that every time she came made it harder for me to refuse her, and that I looked forward to her visits, and even went so far as to devise means for getting my landlady out of the way.

All this may sound very weak and very foolish, but I was thirty and she was beautiful. More than this, I found the temptation to take her into my arms and kiss those scarlet lips of hers well-nigh irresistible, and whilst I cursed myself for my folly, with every recurring visit the temptation grew.

The climax came one night.

It was a Sunday—my off-day. I had spent the morning walking, and had come home to dinner dog tired. I dozed in the afternoon, and my landlady brought me my tea about five. I had finished tea, when I heard the family depart, and a few minutes later the girl's step sounded on the stair.

We talked for some time. I forget on what subject, the weather maybe, and then came the moment when she rose to depart. I heard her pleading voice, I felt her hands upon my shoulder, and the warm scent of her hair was in my nostrils.

„Won't you, won't you...?“ I heard her murmur, and then she was in my arms, her white face upturned to mine, the wild splendour of her eyes fixed steadfastly on me.

I don't know what she said; I only know I kissed her again and again; that she murmured something monotonously.

I caught it.

„You have been very hard, very hard,“ she said in a low voice, but I was dazed and did not understand her. Then very gently she slipped from my arms and laid her hands upon my shoulder in the old way, staring at me with those eyes of hers.

„...straight—straight as an arrow,“ she said.

#### Illustration

I nodded stupidly.

„It is a straight road,“ she said slowly, and never taking her eyes from me.

„Yes,“ I said dully.

„There is no Snake—it is a straight road through Barford—straight as an arrow,“ she repeated.

I nodded; I must have collapsed, for half an hour later, when I came to myself, I was huddled up on the floor and she was gone.

I have no distinct recollection of what happened that night or the next day. I was numbed and stupid, but nobody seemed to be aware of my condition, and I took my engine from the shed that night as usual and coupled on to the coaches that stood at the platform. All day long I had found myself repeating the words „straight as an arrow—straight as an arrow,“ but without knowing why.

In a dim kind of way I knew that we had a crowded train—I think the station-master must have told me, but a matter of greater importance occupied my mind.

...The Barford road was as straight as an arrow!... and all these years we'd been deluding ourselves into the belief that there were Snake curves in and out of Barford! I could have laughed at the ridiculous mistake we had been making. Just before the starting signal was due to fall an inspector hurried up to me.

„You'll be late getting the *right away*,“ he said, „there's been an accident. Old Germott and his grand-daughter have been thrown from a trap. The old man was killed and they're taking her into Barford—to the hospital.“

I nodded listlessly. I wasn't interested in Germott's grand-daughter. I saw her pass on a stretcher without emotion, her white face whiter than the pillow on which it lay.

I watched them without interest as they pushed the stretcher into the guard's van next to the engine, and the two doctors jumped in with her.



Then the starting signal fell, and we moved slowly across the points to the up road.

Dixon was very silent—even in my state of mind I noticed that much. He went about his work mechanically, not speaking a word. I thought once I saw his lips moving, and fancied he muttered the word „arrow.“ So he had found it out too! I remembered that he was a regular attendant at the Germott meetings, so of course he would have been told... been told.

Told what?

The last remnant of my reasoning power fought for assertion.

Told what? and by whom?

I put my hand to my forehead and tried to think.

Out of the darkness flashed a red lamp—and was gone.

A danger signal?

Well, it was natural they should put the „danger“ against me, these foolish folks who did not know that the road into Barford was as straight as an arrow!

Was it, though?

I wanted to think: I wanted to sit down undisturbed by the rattle and clank of machinery, without these bothering red lights that came up out of the darkness and vanished. We passed a down express. It was the „112 Down“. I used to drive that—I was on that when I passed the „Flying 6“ that went to destruction on the Barford Snake...

Barford Snake? There was no Barford Snake—„Straight as an arrow—straight as an arrow.“

If I could only think... not little dots of thought, but consecutive reasoning, logical thought.

Dixon was crouched down on the floor of the cab, his back against the tender-bulkhead. I could get no help from him.

Words came to my mind, a string of words—that was better: here something actual: a handle to grip reality by.

*„That you have wronged me, Cassius, doth appear in this:  
You have condemned and noted Lucius Pella  
For taking bribes here of the Sardians.“*

Who was Lucius Pella?... Bribes?... There was an inspector who took bribes from a firm of carriers and was dismissed... Dick Selby wasn't dismissed, he was killed on the Barford Snake.

„Straight as an arrow—“

*„I am a soldier, I,  
Older in practice, abler than yourself  
To make conditions.“*

I was younger than old Carter—Carter was killed on the Snake—seven miles an hour... regulation...

*„A friend should bear his friends' infirmities,  
But Brutus makes mine greater than they are.“*

Another red light snicked past... we must be near Barford... a straight road...

Another red light. Five-mile point...

*„There is my dagger,  
And here my naked breast; within, a heart  
Dearer than...”*

I babbled the words, I shouted them. I was trying to keep down some horrible lie that was oppressing my mind. I raved with all the fervour of the tragedian and forced my leaden limbs to the regulator.

*„If that thou be'st a Roman, take it forth.  
I that denied thee gold will give my life!”*

I shrieked the last words and threw my weight on to the lever...  
Another red light.

*„Strike as thou did'st at Casar!”*

I brought the vacuum brake down, down, down! A thousand devils forced up my hand, but I brought it over... a child might have done it without effort, but the sweat poured from me.

I heard the brakes grip and felt the jar, and the shudder of our stopping, then ahead of me I saw the snake-like twist... and the train jolted to a standstill.

Then I awoke bathed in sweat, trembling in every limb—the horrible dream had passed.

I looked at Dixon: he was shaking as with ague.

Before us the signal stood at danger. I looked at my watch—we were nine minutes ahead of time!

We brought the „Flying 6“ to Barford platform, safe.

I saw a knot of people at the guard's van, and heard the doctor's voice.

„She died when the train stopped,” he said.

