

The Stargate Pit Disaster

Chapter 22 of *Molly Bowes* by Val Scully.

We all have moments in our lives that change us forever: for me, this was one of them. No matter who the casualties were, whether Gabe was one of them, or Belle's husband and his brothers, my view of the world would never be the same. I stared at the impossible beauty of the façade of the Lit and Phil and suddenly I understood. The beautiful pale gold sandstone from which it was built was hewn out of the earth. The coal by which it was heated was hewn out of the earth. The wood from which its shelves were made was cut and transported and planed and shaped by working men. The paper on which its treasures were printed was made in the mills. The leather for the bindings was stripped from carcasses. Everything that went into making an artifact of such great beauty was the product of toil and dirt and danger.

Being so intoxicated by the books, I had barely paid attention to the lectures and experiments that went on in the Lit and Phil but now I saw that the engineering and scientific advances on which the committee placed such emphasis had one common purpose: human advancement, and that included the safety of those who laboured in the earth.

I was in a trance, my sensibilities shifting: it felt like the opening up of the ground beneath my feet. I knew I must go to Gibside.

When I arrived at Dorothy's cottage, there was a group of people clustered around the door speaking in subdued voices. I knew none of them. Reluctant to push my way through, for I had no claim, I spoke to a bent old woman standing alone.

'Can you tell me anything of who is hurt and who is lost?'

In answer the woman shook her head, gathered her shawl to her mouth and shook with silent tears.

A man nearby put his arm around her and spoke over her head. 'The Robson brothers are all gone.'

'Belle's husband?'

'Aye. Deed.'

'And her own brother?'

'Hanging on so far. Burnt. Face an' that. Crushed too. Not looking good, like.'

'Is he in there?'

'Aye.'

The people parted to let me through. In the cottage, the air was thick with smoke and a sharp smell like burnt meat. I discerned that the figure sitting bent over the bed was Gabe's mother. A gentleman who had been washing his hands in the basin touched her shoulder briefly and then left. The room was silent.

'Dorothy?'

She didn't react. Unsure whether to leave or stay, I hesitated in the doorway.

And then her voice came, a whisper. 'Leave.'

I did not know whether she was sending me away because she knew my voice or because she didn't. I had to try.

'Dorothy. It's me, Molly.'

I saw her back stiffen. Then she took a deep sigh. I went towards her and put my hand lightly on her shoulder.

Now I could see the figure on the bed. Gabe, though I would not have known it, for there were no dark curls on the pillow and the flesh was melted from one side of his face. No breath disturbed the blankets.

I held my own breath and watched for what seemed like interminable minutes. One hand lay across his chest and though it was dark with coal dust, it was otherwise unmarked as far as I could see. I focused on that hand, willing myself to discern a movement, a gentle rise to show me he was still alive. Nothing.

I do not know how long we stayed like that in the still room where dust motes hung in the spring light. Time suspended.

At length, I could bear it no more. Though it seemed clear to me that Gabe was dead, I could not bring myself to say the words to his mother.

‘Dorothy, please tell me what the doctor said.’

I thought at first she would not answer. But then she rose in silence and I looked into the serenity of her face.

‘They have brought him home to die.’

‘Is it certain there is no hope?’

‘It seems so, yes. Sit with him a while. I will send those people away.’

‘And Belle?’

‘She is in Winlaton. Her husband is dead and his brothers too.’

‘I...Dorothy...I don’t know what to say.’

‘Say nothing. Sit with him. Hold his hand. Perhaps he will be aware. We cannot know.’

I sat. I held his hand. And I stayed with him.

There were thirty-eight dead. Thirty-eight men and boys, the youngest just ten years old. I could barely believe it: I had never given a thought to the realities of mining. But now it was all I could think about. The Stargate pit, far from being the romantic hollow I had envisaged, was the deepest pit in the area: five hundred feet down into the ground. Unimaginable. While I sat beside Gabe’s shattered body and over in Winlaton, Belle washed the corpse of her husband, others waited at the pit-head for the bodies of their loved ones to be retrieved. By other miners who had to go down into the mine to get them. And bring them up a ladder made of knotted ropes. Perhaps they carried them in the baskets meant for the coal. Perhaps they were not whole men. My mind shrank from the thought.

How could such a thing have happened in these times? I asked the question with the indignation and incredulity of the young and naïve. Because of the Lit and Phil’s role in their development, I had been proud to know about safety lamps: surely they were used? It was ten whole years since George Stephenson and Humphrey Davy had invented similar lamps at the same time. Lamps invented for the purpose by clever men, lamps with a flame enclosed by mesh to keep out the firedamp, to stop the flame igniting. Lord Strathmore himself had presided over the committee that supported their development and examined their relative benefits. It had seemed to me such a fine example of the role of the Society, the encouragement of such research, the weighing of advantages, the recognition. How naïve I was to believe that therefore all mines were safe from explosion.

It seemed that the Stargate pit had been known for its good ventilation. The miners had taken candles into the pit. Candles they bought themselves. There were no lamps provided.

The explosion happened at three o'clock in the morning. Even that I found difficult to comprehend. How had I lived for twenty-six years in rooms heated by coal and not known that men went down into the earth to dig in the depths of the darkness while we all slept safe in our beds?

No-one knew what had caused it to ignite: an accumulation of gas, perhaps caused by a fall of rocks or a collapse of earth and wooden shuttering. It was the start of the shift: everyone was in either the main tunnels or the shaft, and no-one had had any shelter to deflect the blast. The explosion swept back effortlessly through the workings, tossing aside and burning men, boys, ponies and all else that lay in its way. Tossing them aside and leaving them burning in its wake, it exploded up the shaft and bellowed to the world the news of what it had done.

Imagine it. Your man has gone to work, perhaps taking your eldest son with him, a boy of ten. Proud to be a man and go to work like his da. You had their bait ready, you saw them off; you shut the door and sat down by the fireside or maybe went back to bed for an hour or two before the bairns awoke. Life's hard, but it is what it is. All's well with the world.

Except it isn't, though you don't know it yet. Beneath your feet, five hundred feet down, a monster coils in wait. Perhaps there was a rumble. Perhaps the pots on your dresser rattled.

Perhaps you stood up then, a premonition. Perhaps you were on your feet when you heard it, when the mouth of the pit erupted with a mighty roar and rained down on the earth flames and death and destruction: destruction of lives and families and hopes and incomes and homes: destruction of innocence.

And what did it leave behind? Unimaginable pain and grief and loss and poverty. An annex of Hell, open to the skies. And we all fall in, all of us. The innocent - the widows and orphans and mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers; and the guilty - the mine-owners and managers who don't ensure safety; and all the people sleeping safe in their warm houses who have never given it a thought. For if we have a conscience, we should all of us be in hell that we let this happen.

They died together and they are together for all eternity, for most of them were buried beneath a rockery mound in the graveyard at Ryton Church. But Gabe was not among them.

He was the ghost of the man he had been. In every way, he was diminished. We thought at first that his brain was profoundly damaged, for he was mute. The face on the pillow grew cavernous beneath the melted skin. No expression animated his eyes. He took soup and water and when he swallowed, we only knew he had pain because his eyes closed until it passed.

When at last, after days of silence, he murmured an answer, his voice creaked, we thought with disuse but as time went on, we realised the damage was permanent. Perhaps his throat was scorched with air that burnt.

When finally he rose from his bed, his eyes closed against the pain, he could not straighten and the exertion hurt his ribs. His broken hip was healing crooked, but no-one cared, for he was alive.

When we helped him to his seat by the fire, he stared into it unblinking. Who knows what he saw in the flames? He never spoke about it.

I rarely left his side. He seemed to me the embodiment of all the suffering and strength of working men everywhere. He asked nothing of me and I asked nothing of

him. I was as peaceful in those months as I have ever been in my life: my very existence had a centre and a purpose.

But God I was angry.