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## THE OLD RATTLETRAP

In its day, Boulder Pass was an important stop on the main railway line through the mountains. As well as the station and a signal box, it also had a hotel where people could stay over while on their travels. Unfortunately, it was always thought to be a dangerous place. Every year, sometimes twice and three times, rocks would fall from higher on the mountain blocking the railway tracks; and once they actually fell on a train. So a new, safer route was built around the mountain; and Boulder Pass was eventually closed. It was also the end of an era in another way.

Sitting by the platform was the last of the old steam engines. Known fondly as Bertha, she waited, seemingly ready to set off on her next journey; but she was going nowhere now. Bertha and other coal-fired engines like her had been replaced by newer, oil-fuelled trains. These were thought to be better and certainly cleaner because they didn't belch black smoke into the air. So the outdated trains had been taken out of service; and most had been pulled apart for scrap metal. Bertha, however, was the lucky one.

Because it had been such an important station, Boulder Pass had been set up as an example of the bygone days of steam. There were still rooms to rent in the hotel for visitors who wished to stay overnight; and it also provided living quarters for a small staff of retired railway workers who acted as guides for tourists. One such person was Rusty Wheeler. He had fond memories of Boulder Pass and the railway line that used to run there. Rusty had been Bertha's driver, taking her up and back along the same route nearly all of his working life; and although both of them were too old to do that anymore, he still took great pleasure in telling people what it used to be like.

"Me and Bertha could go anywhere; rain, hail or shine," Rusty was explaining to a group of visitors gathered on the platform. "Some folk used to complain that Bertha was too noisy. The old rattletrap they called her; but they were happy enough to hear her coming when their towns had been snowed in and no other trains could get through."

At that point, the driver of the bus that had brought the tourists hurried over. "Sorry folks," he said to his passengers, "We have to leave pretty soon. There's a report of a snow storm coming and we need to get on the road before it hits."

As the visitors piled into the bus, Rusty stepped up to the engine and gave it a friendly pat. "Well, Bertha," he said a little sadly, "That's another lot which wouldn't have had to rush off if we'd been taking them home." He paused for a moment and sighed. "We've had some good times together, eh, old girl; done a few miles between us?" Glancing along the platform to the ticket office, then to the water tank sitting close by, and finally to the hotel he added: "I suppose this is as good as it gets now." With a final pat of Bertha's boiler, he said: "See you later, old girl." Then he walked away, back to the hotel for a bite to eat.

Meal times were always enjoyable for the retired railway workers, chatting as they did about the old days; laughing mainly, particularly when they were joking about Rusty and his rattletrap. "Her name's Bertha," Chuck Coker reminded them. Chuck had been the fireman, the one who had shovelled coal into Bertha's furnace to heat the boiler; and he was nearly as proud of the old train as Rusty. "Show a bit of respect for the best engine in the fleet..." He was about to say more when Rusty got up from the table and walked over to look out of a window. "What's up, mate?"

Rusty had a frown on his face when he turned. "That tourist bus is back. Better go and see if something's wrong."

It certainly was. According to the bus driver the snow storm had hit sooner than expected and the road was blocked. "I don't know what we're going to do now," said the driver, looking at the concerned faces of his passengers peering out through the windows of the bus.

"No worries," Rusty said cheerfully, "A quick phone call to the depot should have a snow-plough out to clear the snow-drift; but it may not be today."

"There's plenty of room in the hotel," Brenda Barrel chipped in, "So you can stay until the road's cleared." Brenda, better known as Bongy, had been a conductor on the trains for many years and she knew all about how to keep her passengers happy. "Why don't you get everyone off the bus? I'll take them to the dining hall first and cook can rustle up some food for them while I organise their rooms."

Calling the depot for a snow-plough was a good idea; except that the phone didn't seem to be working. "I guess the storm must have taken out the phone lines," said Chuck. "There's nothing to do now but wait."

By evening the storm had become pretty fierce which was worrying the bus driver and his passengers; but with log fires blazing to heat the hotel, and after a delicious dinner, everyone was far more relaxed as they went to their beds. Most found it hard to sleep because of the wind howling outside; not the railway workers, though. They were used to the weather at Boulder Pass and thought nothing of it; not until they heard some thumps and bangs at the rear of the hotel. Bongy went out to check and came rushing back to find Rusty. "We have a problem," she declared breathlessly. "The thumps were rocks falling down from the mountain. I have a terrible feeling that we're facing an avalanche! With the weight of all this snow, the whole side of the mountain could come crashing down on us...!"

Whatever else she said, Rusty wasn't listening. "Wake up the tourists and get them into the dining hall, Bongy. I'll roust out our guys. Somehow we have to get everyone to safety."

While Bongy gathered the visitors and tried to keep them calm, the railway workers were huddled together on one side discussing what to do. "I know you have every faith in Bertha," Chuck was saying, "But she hasn't run for years."

"She'll run," declared Rusty with confidence. "I've kept her oiled and greased and in tip-top condition. She'll run, believe me."

"Okay, fine," Chuck admitted, "And there's water in the tank, so we can fill the boiler; but what about fuel? We haven't any coal."

Rusty pondered for a moment, then pointed to a chair. "No, but we've got plenty of wood."

"We can't break up the furniture," someone said, and from the nods among the crew it seemed many agreed. "It's railway Company property!"

"Which is very soon going to be buried under tons of snow and rock," Chuck reminded them. "As will we be if we stay here. Break up the furniture and stack the wood in Bertha's tender. Ah," he added as something occurred to him which he hadn't thought of until that moment. "Even if we can get Bertha fired up and ready to go, what about these people? We haven't got a carriage. Where are we going to put them? They can't all ride in the cab."

"Hitch" Carter used to be responsible for rolling stock, the coaches and trucks that the trains pulled. "What about the bus?" he suggested, as if it should have been obvious to anyone with half a mind. "I reckon I can chain it behind the rattletrap - sorry, Bertha," he added apologetically. "The rough ride along the rail tracks won't do the tyres much good, but the wheels should last long enough to get us all out of trouble."

It was decided, then. Although not entirely happy about it, the driver steered his bus onto the tracks behind Bertha and Hitch chained the two together. In the meantime, his passengers helped the railway workers break up the hotel's wooden furniture and piled it into the tender, the large open container at the back of the engine which was originally intended for coal. All the time they were preparing, more and more rocks tumbled down from the mountain, a very real reminder that there was no time to lose.

The two men in Bertha's cab were, once again, doing what they had done for so many years. Chuck had fired up the furnace and was heaving wood on to build up the heat. They'd already filled the boiler with water and Rusty was checking the gauges. He looked up as a rumble started high up on the mountain. "I think it's time we went, old girl," he said to Bertha, "Let's get up some steam and head out of here."

Rusty waited for the smoke to puff fast enough from the chimney before pushing the lever that would start the train wheels turning; and they did, slowly at first; then a little quicker. Leaning out of the cab, Rusty had one last look at the place that had been home in his retirement and felt a bit sad. Following a blink to fight back a tear, he gave a short wave to the hotel; then returned to the job in hand - saving everyone from the avalanche that was almost upon them.

They only made it out in time before rocks and snow cascaded down to completely bury Boulder Pass station. “That was close,” said Chuck. “Now let’s hope the line ahead’s not blocked.”

Rusty was confident now and just laughed. “If it is, Bertha will get us through. She never failed in the past, and she’s not going to now. Isn’t that right, old girl?” Even though he hadn’t pulled the cord that operated it, Bertha’s horn blew all on its own. “See, Chuck, she agrees with me. Trust her – she won’t let us down.”

Neither did she. With Rusty controlling the speed and Chuck stoking the furnace, Bertha never faltered as she glided over icy rails and pushed through every snow-drift they came across. “It’s good to be back on track, eh mate?” said Chuck, pausing to catch his breath.

“Too right, mate,” replied Rusty, “Just like old times.”

The workers at the rail depot, however, were less than confident. They were concerned that the tourist bus hadn’t returned; more so because the storm had been too strong to risk sending the snow plough to clear the roads. “We can only hope they’ll be alright,” said one of the workers. Another added dismally: “It’ll be a miracle if anyone survives in this weather.” Then someone else said: “Sshh, listen.” Everyone went quiet for a few moments. “I can hear something in the distance. I know it’s impossible, but it sounds like the old rattletrap. It can’t be, can it?”

“Don’t be too sure,” said one of the older crew. “I’d know that sound anywhere; and look...” He pointed into the distance. “Unless I’m wrong, that’s smoke from her stack. It’s Bertha alright, or I’m a monkey’s uncle.”

Like a ghost, Bertha gradually appeared through the white curtain of the snow storm and the waiting crowd first gasped, then began to cheer as they ran to greet her. “It truly is a miracle,” someone said.

The old worker shook his head and smiled. “No, mate. You don’t need miracles when you’ve got Bertha. A rattletrap she may be, and getting on in years; but she’s obviously not ready to retire yet.”

The railway Company certainly agreed. It was decided to bring Bertha back into service. Fitted with old-style carriages, she was to be a tourist attraction taking passengers up and down the track that she knew so well. Rusty, Chuck and Bongy had their jobs back, giving people a taste of what the age of steam trains was all about. On their first return trip in many years towards where their retirement home used to be, they stopped short at the new station that had been built. It was even better than Boulder Pass; and when he saw it, Rusty Wheeler glowed with pride. “That’s a really kind gesture, don’t you think, old girl?” he said, beaming. “Bertha’s Retreat – has a nice ring to it, my word it does.”

And Bertha blew her horn in agreement.