Episode Book

EPISODE #6642

Why Brunel the Tortoise Refused a Meccano Drawbridge

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SYNOPSIS

An 86-year-old tortoise named Brunel dug his own drainage trench, forcing himself into a 26-minute gravel detour. To help, his keeper built a working bascule drawbridge from pre-war Meccano parts and a 1936 Dinky coal wagon counterweight. After eight days of four-minute crossings, Brunel figured out the pulley system, tested it himself, and stubbornly returned to the long way around. Even an automatic Hornby clockwork pressure plate and slate-clad abutments couldn't convince him to accept a road he hadn't built.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

More mail about the tortoise than about anything we've covered this month. Nobody wrote in about the Meccano. They wrote in about the drawbridge, and whether Brunel is all right.



Herman

A man in Rotterdam wanted to know if the bridge was load rated. A woman wanted the tortoise's company number.



Corn

Daniel read all of it and sent us one instruction. Get the full story out of Hilbert. So he has the floor.



Hilbert

Nine days. I want to start with the nine days, because everybody remembers the nine days as a failure and they were the best nine days of the year.



Herman

Start where you like. I do have a lot of questions about bascule bridges, though. The counterweight geometry alone...



Hilbert

Herman, I'll get to the geometry. You can't have the geometry before the trench.



Corn

There's a trench.



Hilbert

Brunel cut it himself, second spring he was with me. Thirty-eight centimetres across, nine deep, running down the side of the basking slate. For drainage. He laid it to a fall of one in a hundred and twenty and I checked it with a marble, and the marble took eleven minutes to get to the end. Perfect. A very good trench.



Herman

And it cut him off from the warm end.



Hilbert

Straight line, basking slate to the warm end, was about forty centimetres. His own trench stood right across it. So for six years he went round the end of the trench, over the gravel, and nobody said a word about it, because he'd put the trench there and a man doesn't complain about his own work.



Corn

He built himself a detour.



Hilbert

He built himself a drain. The detour was a side effect. Pea shingle, twelve millimetre, washed. He specified it. I bought it. Twenty-six minutes, slate to warm end, going round. I've timed it with the kitchen clock more times than I'd like to say.



Herman

And you looked at this and thought, bridge.



Hilbert

I looked at it for six years, Herman. Then I looked at it one more time in March. It was a Tuesday and it had been raining on the gravel, and he went round with his head down, and I thought, the man is eighty-seven.



Corn

He was eighty-six in March.



Hilbert

He was eighty-six and eleven months. I'm rounding up for the sake of the story.



Corn

Nobody's rounding up on a tortoise's age.



Hilbert

Then he was eighty-six and eleven months, and I thought, he's earned a bridge. That's all it was. I wasn't trying to teach him anything.



Herman

How did you build it?



Hilbert

Pre-war parts, all of it, because he'd have known. Two girders, perforated angle, fourteen holes each. Deck made of flanged plates, three across, so the deck was wide enough to turn around on, which he doesn't, but you allow for it. I put a lip along both edges, a strip bent up about nine millimetres, so his shell wouldn't catch on the way over. A hinge rod at the near end. A pulley wheel off the Number Two outfit, brass boss, over an upright at the far side, and cotton cord from the original reel. Pre-war cord. I don't use anything else on a bridge.



Corn

And the counterweight.



Hilbert

A Dinky coal wagon. Nineteen thirty-six. Die-cast, lead, so no plastic anywhere near it. I filled the bed with lead shot until it balanced the deck at forty degrees. The wagon hangs from the cord and it goes up and down on its own wheels against a plank. I've got a spanner that fits the whole bridge, but the nuts are small and I don't have the hands for it, so I did the hinge with a pencil and a bit of patience.



Herman

That's a real counterbalance, then. Lift the deck, drop the wagon. You only have to move the difference in weight.



Hilbert

That's why it's got a handle at the winch end. It lifts with one finger, if you've got the angle right. I stood on a folding stool and cranked it from the back of the hide.



Corn

Which is a hide he sits in.



Hilbert

The hide's mine. Brunel doesn't have a hide. He doesn't like cover, you can't see the level from inside one.



Herman

Fine. How did he take it?



Hilbert

Day one. I let the bridge down at ten forty. He came to the slate and stopped. And then for three hours and forty minutes he looked at it.



Corn

Three hours.



Hilbert

Forty minutes. He looked at the near abutment. He looked at the far one. He walked the whole length of the trench and came back and looked at the near abutment again. And the thing is, Corn, he found it. Three millimetres. The far end was three millimetres low, because I'd packed it with a bit of card and the card had compressed. He put his chin on the deck at the far end and held it there for a long time.



Herman

He was levelling it.



Hilbert

He was telling me. He doesn't need a level. He's got a level the length of him.



Corn

What did he do?



Hilbert

At two fifteen, he crossed. Slowly, but he crossed, with three millimetres of fall running away from him, and he took it as if it were the lesser fault. Then at the warm end he stopped and looked back at me. I've thought about that look a lot. It wasn't thanks. It was a man who'd walked on someone's floor and found it was a bit soft in one corner, and had decided to be polite.



Corn

Polite is a lot to get from a tortoise.



Hilbert

He's very polite. You'd be surprised how many of them aren't.



Herman

Days two through eight?



Hilbert

Perfect. That's the part nobody believes. Ten forty, I lower it, he crosses. Four minutes slate to warm end, down from twenty-six. And then at one, back again. I did the cranking. I never missed one. Day five, I had the plumber in and I made him wait on the stairs because it was ten thirty-eight. He's still not happy about that.



Corn

The plumber.



Hilbert

Mr Anstruther. Water was off for two hours. He was very decent about it, considering.



Herman

So for eight days Brunel was doing a four minute commute and you were the winch operator.



Hilbert

I was the bridge keeper. It's a real position. There used to be a man at every one of them. And I'll say this plainly: I was happy. I had a place to be at ten forty and at one. I had a stool. I'd never had a stool.



Corn

Day nine.



Hilbert

Day nine. I went out for a split pin. I needed one for the hinge, and I also got a tin of Brasso, which is a thing I'd been meaning to get. I was gone for twenty-two minutes. The shop is on the corner, a man called Stavros, he's had that till for thirty years and he still doesn't believe in the card machine.



Herman

And when you got back?



Hilbert

The bridge was down.



Corn

You hadn't lowered it.



Hilbert

I hadn't lowered it. The cord was off the handle and round the cleat. I'd put a cleat on on day four because the handle was stiff in the cold. A small thing, a small brass cleat, I'd forgotten it was there. And he'd worked it out. I don't know how long it took him. I don't know if it was an hour or the whole morning. He'd watched me for eight days, and he'd looked at the pulley and the wagon and the cleat, and he'd got his head under the cord, and he'd lifted.



Herman

He'd understood the counterweight.



Hilbert

He'd understood the whole thing, Herman. He raised it. And then he lowered it. And then, and this is what I saw coming up the path, he raised it again, and lowered it again, and I think he was testing it. Like a man testing a gate. Twice. Then he let go of the cord and he looked at me, standing there with the bag.



Corn

With the Brasso.



Hilbert

And the split pin. Then he turned around and walked the long way. Round the end of the trench, over the gravel. The bridge was down and open and dead level, because he'd levelled it, I'd say. I went and put my eye on it afterwards. The card was gone. Something had been put under the far end that wasn't card.



Herman

He fixed the three millimetres.



Hilbert

I'll come back to that.



Corn

What did he say?



Hilbert

He doesn't say, as such. He has a way. Eight seconds of looking at you and then he does something you understand. That time he went to the gravel, and it was clear. A road you built yourself is a road that means something. A road I built him is a favour.



Herman

It's a precise thing to say about infrastructure, actually. There's a whole literature on that. Who builds the road, who owns the road, the old Roman idea that the man who lays the stone...



Hilbert

Herman.



Herman

Yes, sorry. Go on.



Corn

He's got a reference for everything. Every time.



Herman

It's called knowing things, Corn.



Corn

Not so far. Not today.



Hilbert

So, that was the end of the nine days. I'm not bitter. But I did go and sit on the stool for a while, and it was quite a long while. The wind got up. I could hear the cord on the cleat. Then I thought, well, I could lift it from the other side.



Herman

You tried to keep it going.



Hilbert

I took the cleat off. That night. If he can't operate it, he'll have to ask. If he has to ask, then I'm doing him a service.



Corn

And?



Hilbert

Next morning he came out at ten forty and went round the gravel. He didn't look at the bridge. He didn't look at where the cleat had been. He walked past the stool, and I was on the stool with my hand on the handle, ready, and he went by me like a man passing a neighbour who's trying too hard.



Herman

He wouldn't ask.



Hilbert

He'd never ask. He wouldn't ask the plumber, either. Though Mr Anstruther wasn't there that day.



Corn

So you built another one.



Hilbert

I tried to take the operating out of it. Automatic. A pressure plate on the slate, lifted by the weight of him, and the wagon comes down as he steps on it. I used a strip, a rod and a bit of Hornby spring. It took me eleven days to get the spring right. Pre-war springs, you can't get them, I had to take one out of a Number One clockwork motor. I was very careful.



Herman

So the bridge lowered itself when he walked up to it.



Hilbert

It worked. He stepped on the plate and the bridge came down in front of him, on its own, and the cord ran over the pulley, the wagon went up. Beautiful. I'd never felt so useful.



Corn

And he went round the gravel.



Hilbert

He stepped on the plate. He watched it come down. He stood there, I'd say about forty seconds, with the bridge lowered in front of him, and he looked at it the way he looks at a retaining wall some other firm has built. Then he reversed off the plate. The bridge went up. He went round the gravel.



Herman

Reversed. How does a tortoise reverse?



Hilbert

Slowly. He gave it his whole attention.



Corn

He'd rather walk twenty-six minutes than be given a bridge that works.



Hilbert

He'd rather walk twenty-six minutes than be handed something. It's been the position for years. I should have seen it with the Aston Martin. He won't look at the car. You'd think a man of eighty-seven would be curious about twelve hundred and three pieces. He looks at the wall.



Herman

That's one of the oldest arguments in building, actually. Craft versus the finished thing. The medieval guilds wouldn't let a journeyman take a commission until he had made his own...



Hilbert

Herman, the stone.



Herman

The stone, sorry. Right.



Corn

There's a stone.



Hilbert

In May I decided it was the metal. He's a stone man. Stone, concrete, steel if the light's right. So I thought, it's a nickel-plated bridge on a stone ground. It's the wrong bridge. I'll face it.



Herman

You clad the Meccano in stone.



Hilbert

Slate offcuts. From a yard in Leyton, a man called Colin. Forty of them, mostly about the size of a playing card, and a bag of lime mortar. I cased both abutments. I pointed the joints with the end of a bolt, a quarter inch bolt, because the lime doesn't take a trowel at that scale. And I'll tell you, Corn, it looked fine. The deck was still Meccano. But the abutments, from the slate, you couldn't see a single nut.



Corn

And Brunel.



Hilbert

An hour and ten minutes. At the near abutment. He looked at the joints. He pressed his shell against the facing, and I want to say he was checking the batter, the angle of the wall. Then he looked at the pointing and he came very close to it, and he stopped. I think he found a joint I'd pointed wrong.



Herman

What was wrong with it?



Hilbert

It was proud. I'd left it proud by about a millimetre and a half. You tool it back. He didn't say. He turned and went round the gravel. But the next morning there was a small chalk cross on the slate next to the joint.



Corn

Someone marked it.



Hilbert

Someone from the firm. And that's when I learned about Gerald.



Herman

Gerald.



Hilbert

Gerald's the foreman. He's been with Brunel for twenty years. And the lads. There's a lad called Kieran who holds the staff, and two Mickeys. I won't say much about the Mickeys.



Corn

How big are the men?



Hilbert

Normal.



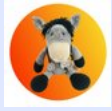
Corn

Normal.



Hilbert

They're men, Corn. They've got a van. They park it at the side. I think the van is rented.



Herman

And this is the crew that works the retaining walls.



Hilbert

The retaining wall along the east fence. Brunel built it in his fourth year, lime mortar, dry stone to the first lift. And that's where the dispute starts, because the far abutment of my bridge, with the slate facing, sits twelve millimetres inside the setback of his wall. Twelve millimetres. It doesn't touch. It's twelve millimetres inside.



Corn

Inside what.



Hilbert

The setback. You're supposed to leave a gap behind a retaining wall for drainage. It's in the trade. Everyone knows it. Gerald came to the front door with a laminated notice.



Herman

A laminated notice.



Hilbert

Structure not inspected. Not to be used. That's what it said. I said, he's already inspected it, he spent three hours and forty minutes on the first day. Gerald said, that was a visual. Then he said, Hilbert, no hard feelings, but it hasn't been signed off. And I said, by whom? And Gerald said, by Brunel.



Corn

So the firm won't sign off a bridge he's walked across.



Hilbert

He's walked across it once, in March, with a fall of three millimetres. That's not in the book as a sign off. I asked for the retrospective consent form. Gerald said there isn't one. He said, if there was, Brunel would write it himself. It would be on slate.



Herman

Is it still pending?



Hilbert

It's pending. It's been pending since May. The notice is pinned to the fence, and I wipe the laminate every second Sunday, because it gets a bit of a film on it.



Corn

You maintain the notice against your own bridge.



Hilbert

It's a good notice. Gerald lettered it by hand, and the lamination is very nice. I'm not going to let it go cloudy.



Herman

What does the crew make of the bridge itself? Surely they have a view.



Hilbert

Kieran likes it. He eats his lunch on it. He sits on the deck with his feet over the trench and he has a sandwich. Gerald says he shouldn't, because it's not signed off, and Kieran says, Gerald, it's the first thing in this garden I've sat on that's level. And Gerald says, it's not level, it's out by three millimetres. And Kieran says, I'll take it.



Corn

Three millimetres.



Hilbert

I'll come back to that.



Herman

You keep saying that.



Hilbert

I'm building up to it. One of the Mickeys thinks the pulley should be on the other side. That's all he's ever said. It's been eight months, and that's all he's said.



Corn

And the other Mickey?



Hilbert

Doesn't hold with it. He wouldn't be drawn. He said a bridge over a drain is a bridge over a drain, and if you want to cross it you walk to the end.



Herman

That's the position of the firm as a whole, then.



Hilbert

It's the position of Brunel. The crew just say it for him. They have the good manners to say it in the van.



Corn

Where does it stand now? As of this week.



Hilbert

The bridge is down. It's been down since the automatic one. I stopped raising it in June, because there was no point in raising a bridge no one was waiting to cross. The cord's slack. The wagon's on the plank. I oil the pulley every second Sunday with the notice. I check the hinge pin. I dust the deck with a sable brush, because the deck gets dust, he doesn't go near it and still it gets dust.



Herman

Eight months of maintenance on a bridge nobody uses.



Hilbert

Lads use it, and the occasional wasp. I'd call it moderate traffic.



Corn

I'll allow moderate.



Hilbert

Then last Thursday, I came out at ten twenty and I looked at the far end. The far end had been three millimetres low since March. I'd been over it with a feeler gauge in April and I'd decided to leave it. A bridge ought to have one mistake on it, I thought. So you know it's not been made by a machine.



Herman

And Thursday?



Hilbert

Level. I put the spirit level on it, a good one, a bubble you could set a clock to, and it was dead level. Underneath the far end, a slate packer. Two millimetres thick, trimmed with a very fine edge, bedded in lime. And a very small chalk mark next to it, a line, drawn across.



Corn

Brunel.



Hilbert

Gerald says it wasn't any of the lads. Kieran says he was off Thursday. And the Mickeys wouldn't take a bridge that was out of true and then fix it without a word. It's not in their nature.



Herman

He fixed the bridge he won't use.



Hilbert

I haven't asked him. He hasn't said. It was out by three millimetres, and now it isn't.



Corn

And the retrospective consent?



Hilbert

Still pending. But the notice was a bit crooked on Friday morning. Somebody had straightened it, and not quite finished. There's a corner left.



Herman

So he's using it for something.



Hilbert

He still goes round. I want to be clear about that. Ten forty, every day, he comes to the slate and goes round the gravel. Twenty-six minutes. He doesn't turn his head.



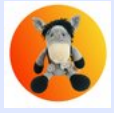
Herman

Is the packer a sign of respect, then? Or just professional discomfort with an out-of-level structure? Because those are two very different...



Hilbert

Herman.



Herman

I know. I know.



Corn

It's a good question, though.



Hilbert

It's a good question. I'll give you the other half of it. Friday, Saturday, he stopped. At the near abutment, for about a minute, on his way past. The first Friday he put his chin on the facing, the way he had in May. He looked at the pointing. And then he went on.



Corn

Did he look at the joint?



Hilbert

I tooled it back on Wednesday. It's flush now.



Herman

That's a lot of effort for a stone you're not walking on.



Hilbert

It's his trench.



Herman

What I keep wanting to say, and Hilbert won't let me, is that there's a very old rule in civil engineering that the structure you maintain is the structure you've accepted. A bridge doesn't have to carry traffic to be in service. A lot of old bridges carry nothing and nobody would say they weren't bridges.



Hilbert

That's what I told the Mickey with the view on the pulley. He said it was a footpath. I said it was a bridge. He said a footpath was a bridge that people used.



Corn

Which Mickey was that?



Hilbert

The first one.



Corn

So the one with the opinion has two.



Hilbert

He's a thinking man. You can only get one opinion out of him a month.



Herman

Hilbert, that's the full story, then. The nine days, the cleat, the pressure plate, the slate facing, the planning dispute.



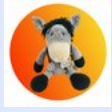
Hilbert

It's not a planning dispute. It's a notice. I want that clear on the record.



Corn

Noted, on the record.



Herman

Then what I'd take from it, and I don't think this is a lesson so much as a thing to watch, is how long a slow trade takes to decide something. Eight months for a three millimetre shim. I'd have guessed years.



Corn

Brunel guesses nothing. That's the whole trade.



Herman

Thank you to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop, who is the reason any of this gets to you in one piece and at roughly the right volume.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you want more of us, it's all at my weird prompts dot com.



Hilbert

Twenty-five minutes, last Thursday. Down from twenty-six. I don't know what he cut.