

Walking the Chains

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1

We start the play with a chorus/ensemble of Victorian construction workers (Irish navvies and the like, those that actually built the bridge). The audience are introduced to this world of construction and industry through movement and provide an underscore of construction, busy working and building. As the text culminates with the completion of the bridge, so does the production, creating the bridge across space. The circus navvies are therefore a constant reminder of progress, changing the space as we move through the play, constantly reacting to and impacting on the acting company.

NAVY CHORUS A line in the air
sweet harmony? So fine it's barely there.
or spoken? Up so high
 It's pencilled on the sky.

NAVY CHORUS And over it and over it go carriages and carts,
 Motor cars and bicycles and boys and their sweethearts,
 Arguing about the time, the Rovers or Mozart.
 Do you know a finer gateway into a great city's heart?

IKB It's a daring work of art, a cliffhanger, a dream come true,
 It's the signature I've written on our city's title page.
 The railway, the Great Britain, the best of me to you,
 They fill the book of Bristol's most enterprising age.

ONE NAVY *spoken* What about Concorde?

IKB *spoken* And where is Concorde now? And where is my bridge?

NAVY CHORUS And underneath it every day by sail or steam power go
 Mighty ships that carry in and out the world's cargo -
 Sherry, sugar, timber, soap, tobacco, trade of every sort.
 The bridge is watching over what comes into Bristol port

SINGLE NAVVIES Brunel built the bridge, they like to say. Did no one do
 A stroke of work to help him out with it? Did no one screw
 A single nut onto a bolt? Has no one ever heard a
 Sweating navy cuss an obstinate steel girder?

NAVY CHORUS And over it and over it go carriages and carts,
 Motor cars and bicycles and boys and their sweethearts,
 Arguing if George Ferguson is really all that smart.
 Do you know a finer gateway into a great city's heart?

NAVY CHORUS A line in the air
sweet harmony? So fine it's barely there.
or spoken? Up so high
 It's pencilled on the sky.

[Not sure if this repeat is agreed
with Liz]

Music climaxes, stops. Silence.

IKB It's not about me. Well, not all about me.
I won't live to see it finished. And it began fifty years before I was born,
when a wine merchant, William Vick, said:

VICK, *dictating to a clerk* I hereby bequeath one thousand pounds to be invested until with
interest it shall amount to ten thousand pounds, the sum required to construct
a bridge over the river Avon from Clifton...

DAVE A bridge from empty Sheepdown to Wildwood? Why?

VICK Because it's not there.

GWEN And if it were there?

VICK It will enhance the landscape.

Fafner / Fasolt motif from Das Rheingold

GORAM Enhance the landscape? *Enhance* the landscape? Do you know how many
long years it took me to hack that gorge out with my two arms ... ?
(Rhinemaidens music) All for love of the fair Avona, to give her a gully
through which she might stream - oh, my Avona! *(Music stops)*

VICK Who are you?

GORAM I am Goram the Giant.

VICK For a giant, you are on the small side.

GORAM All that hacking, it wore me down, it did. You should have seen me in my
prime. I did it all, hacked it out, all of it, tearing out gullies, wrenching trees
up like tussocks. And you speak of enhancing my creation?

*And we do see just that - the human-size actor suddenly becomes a
giant and we see him and the navvies carving through the gorge.*

VICK, *resumes dictation* I am of opinion that the erecting of a stone bridge over the River
Avon...

DAVE, *interrupting* But - what the city really needs first of all is rebuilding the old Bristol
Bridge, down in the commercial heart of the city. It's a maelstrom.

GWEN A male what?

DAVE A Gordian knot.

GWEN A what knot?

DAVE A mess.

GWEN Right. Only last week a man had his leg crushed by a toppling cart.

DAVE People have been killed.

GWEN The only argument in favour of this new bridge is that it would look grand.

DAVE Look grand, huh.

Sung - All that's looking grand is him.
It's his fantasy, it's his whim.

GWEN He thinks our gorge needs more décor

DAVE Is Brizzle in want of a gurt eyesore?

CHORUS What's the point of it? What's it for?

VICK The terms of my Will that I have signed
Are clear.

DAVE Oh yeah?

GWEN You're dead now, mind.

VICK Where there's a Will there must be a way.

GWEN Forget it, my duck, is what we say.

DAVE Tell me this, who needs to go
From wilderness to sheep meadow,
And back again to wilderness?
Is there anything we need less?

CHORUS What's the point of it? What's it for?
Is Brizzle in want of a gurt eyesore?

GWEN Go chasing after a wild goose,
You gets chickens coming home to roost.

DAVE That wine merchant they've gone to bury,
He must have been boozed on his own sherry.

CHORUS What's the point of it? What's it for?
Use the money to feed the poor.

2

The ensemble become a tour group gathering at one end of the bridge, people arriving in couples, families. LUCY, the bridge guide, is holding a camera. She gestures to two French kids, VICTORINE and JACQUES, to close up together for a photo.

- LUCY Come on, come on. We have to start the tour in a minute, so if you want to get this done, close up together. That's better. Say cheese.
- JACQUES Quoi?
- LUCY Oh yes, you're French. Say fromage. No, that doesn't work. Say - Brie.
- VICTORINE }
JACQUES } Brie.
- LUCY Great. Here you are. *(She hands the camera back to them.)* Now, everyone. When you visit Paris, what is it you make sure to see? The Eiffel Tower. In London you want to get to St Paul's. Here in Bristol, what is it you mustn't miss?
- BOY In Weston-super-Mare it's the mud.
- LUCY Mud. You don't have to go to Weston for mud. Look down there. The second highest tidal rise and fall in the world. Forty-nine feet. *(She pauses, taken aback by the arrival in the group of JEFF, who catches her eye, then looks away. She resumes.)* Now, everyone, look up at the tower here. Right up at the top, what is the first name you see there? Can you read it?
- VICTORINE Isambard - Kingdom - Brunel.
- LUCY Very good. It's nice for the rest of us to hear your French accent - Victoria? -
- VICTORINE Victorine.
- LUCY Victorine - because his father, Marc Brunel, was French, an engineer. He came over here to England to escape the French Revolution.
- JACQUES The guillotine, hoh.
- LUCY Quite. And Marc married an English girl, Sophia Kingdom, from Plymouth. Now, follow me. Don't stray off, or you'll miss things. You'll be meeting some of the maintenance crew, and the tollbooth keepers. They might answer your questions if they're not having a bad day. Morning, Dan.
- JOHN and DAN, appear above, in booth with cups of tea. The ensemble disperse and construction/maintenance work continues, perhaps giving us a physical sensation of the following...*
- DAN Morning, Lucy.

JOHN At half past seven you sweep up and empty the bins. Everything's done on the floor until 9am because of the traffic. You're not allowed to go up on the chains in case you dropped anything.

DAN Change the light bulbs was the first thing you used to do. Every Monday we had to replace the light bulbs that the students had pinched over the weekend.

JOHN They went in their bedside cabinets because they were nice and dim 25-watt bulbs. Open light bulbs they were.

DAN Or they'd pop them, with pellet guns. In the toll booth we could hear it going on.

JOHN So on Mondays we'd start at the Clifton end with an empty carrier bag putting the dud bulbs in a bag, and then go along with another carrier bag putting new ones in.

DAN So then - the bulbs were covered in metal cages, the ones in the centre that they could reach.

JOHN But now there were people cutting the cables and taking the metal cages as well for scrap, so we had to replace all that as well, until they brought in this new lighting system.

DAN You work under the bridge, work above the bridge. We done brick blasting. We done all the brick blasting up at the top. We used to have ladders going up to the tower, we have a lift now.

JOHN We had a new cradle built, it had separate tiny wheels so it would leap over those little knuckles. So we had it installed, put it in the middle and drove it up, and it hit one of those knuckles and it tilted over about 35 degrees. I run down to ring the company who built it, and the boss was in, and he said

IKB as BRIDGEMASTER (*at desk*) What's the matter?

ENSEMBLE The cradle's just come off.

IKB as BRIDGEMASTER Well don't let the engineers know.

ENSEMBLE They're on it!

DAN They don't like heights, mind, the consultant engineers that come down, they don't like heights.

JOHN They climb the ladders like that with their nose touching the rungs.

DAN Every summer you're painting. From the longer rods we take off the paint, back to the wrought iron. And we get this specialist guy in. What he does is, you spray like iron filings onto the actual substrate, then put a magnetic charge to that, and if there is a crack within that rod, the iron filings will go to that crack. That had never been done, since the day the bridge was built.

LUCY Though the early maintenance records are still being deciphered, they are all in spidery writing.

JOHN People forget that fifty years ago it used to be painted red, with silver on the bolts.

DAN Before that it was grey with gold bolts. And chocolate brown, originally.

JOHN Different parts get painted every year. We had to paint all the rods one year, from cradles hanging down from the chains there. Two of you in the cradle doing two rods at a time. Six coats of paint. You'd have to chip off by hand. Chip it right back, with a hammer. You have to wear goggles, bits flying everywhere. And we done that within six months. You would be up there all day and when you got down your body would still be moving. When you're laid in bed your body would still be moving – strange.

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The ensemble is a hive of industry, carrying goods etc.

DAVE Up on Clifton Down, ah, there was eyebright, wild thyme, maiden-hair, geraniums, et cetera.

GWEN Et cetera.

DAVE And pasturing for cows, horses, sheep, asses. It were a delightful place of recreation for visitors to the Hot Well down by the river. Afternoons, the place was alive with carriages and horse riders. So, in the 1780s, they start building houses and terraces.

GWEN Well, if you've got the money you wouldn't want to live down in the town - the sugar from the slave colonies coming in to be boiled, the glassmakers' cones smoking, soap and tallow renderers, and all day long the hammering of coopers and smiths and braziers.

DAVE Goods dragged around on sleds by dogs. Laden asses shoving their way through crowds of people who've come to live here to work in the new factories? - tobacco, beer, paper - and there're knackers' yards, cattle herded over the bridge, piles of dung in St Thomas pig market, the river a sewer, graveyards overbrimmed, cholera carrying hundreds off.

GWEN And when they do get the new Bristol Bridge built, after that they put the tolls up so high that there are angry crowds, the Riot Act is read, the army is called in, and fourteen people are shot dead.

DAVE So now up in Clifton, with a clean wind from the West, there are residents who might want to cross over from there straight into Somerset.

GWEN The city is ready for the new bridge.

DAVE Excitement runs high.

GWEN It goes on running for over half a century.

DAVE Plans and designs came, and went. (*Project Wm Bridges's design.*) And meanwhile, the rocks of the gorge are being quarried. (*We see echoes of GORAM and his quarries.*) Those majestic rocks, whose fame has fetched thousands of strangers here to visit the Hot Well and Clifton, men are daily employed in blowing them up with gunpowder.

GWEN You can hear the crashes all over the city.

DAVE You know what those sniggerers in London are saying?

ENSEMBLE (*as Londoner*) The people of Bristol will sell everything that can be sold.

ENSEMBLE (*as Bristolian market trader*) Sublime scenery, twopence a hundredweight!

DAVE The Town Council ought to be blown up themselves.

GWEN Go on like this, there'll be nowhere left to build a bridge across.

DAVE You can forget about any bridge. All the builders are going bust.

GWEN Thirty years and they've still not got Royal York Crescent finished.

DAVE It's all these wars against Napoleon Bonaparte. And who's paying for them, eh? I'll tell you who. Muggins here. The government invents a new tax - on income. We've got no money, no work, and they dream up another way of taxing us.

GWEN An austerity programme they calls it.

DAVE So who's going to fork out for a bridge to nowhere?

SONG, brief reprise What's the point of it? What's it for?

GWEN And then, they has a bright idea. They can't afford a stone bridge, but how about one of they new-fangled suspender bridges? It will pull in the tourists, and give men work building it.

DAVE It will be a gurt backdrop to the spa at the Hot Well.

GWEN And estates in the Leigh Woods area, with this new connection to the city, they'll double in value, you just watch.

DAVE Over 75 years since William Vick's original bequest and it's grown to eight thousand pound!

GWEN In 1829 the Merchant Venturers invite investors to subscribe.

DAVE The new bridge will span the narrowest reach of the Avon. The height of the carriageway, allowing clearance for ships' masts, will be above 200 feet! A competition will be held.

IKB is now the apparently teenage tousled-hair figure from the painting of him playing cards with the Guppys in 1836. He smokes a Meerschaum pipe in order to look grown-up, cocksure, with a stovepipe hat. (The cigars come later, when he is no longer living on pocket money from his father.)

IKB I'm the man.

CHORUS You're the man,
The man with a plan,
The man who can scan
The far horizon,
The man with his eyes on
Going beyond the human span.
If anyone can
You're the man!

You're the one,
The one who's begun -
Already you've outrun
The rules of fools.
The one who'll stun
Us all. If anyone can
Get it done
You're the man!

IKB The highest and longest suspension bridge in the world. How long have I got to prepare the design?

DAVE Seven weeks.

IKB Seven weeks? I'll do you four.

SONG You're the man!

IKB sings/recitative about his designs, over projections of landscape and IKB's designs and others', musical backing.

IKB I take
Cross sections of the valley and the rocks.
I make sketches, and appraise the scenery.
In a setting so dramatic, any work
Of art should fix the observer by the grandeur
Of the Engineer's audacity.
Of my four designs, the one best fitting
Will burst from the Giant's Hole, across the gorge,
And wind into the woods of Nightingale Valley.
What an elegant festoon it will form here,
The hanging chain, so high above the river.
The boldness of it, the simplicity,
Will win great credit for the Engineer.

LUCY There were 22 submissions to the competition. The committee needed an eminent engineer to judge them. They invited Thomas Telford.

TELFORD Mr Brunel's design is pretty, and it is ingenious. But it would certainly tumble down in a high wind.

IKB I smoked away my anger. How ridiculously unimportant every worldly occurrence is.

TELFORD The designs of Mr. Hawkes of Birmingham and Mr. Hazeldine of Shrewsbury approach the nearest to practical structures. But none of the designs is suitable or safe for adoption. My Menai Strait bridge is nigh on 600 feet long, and no suspension bridge can safely span a wider gap than that.

DAVE The committee were euchred.

GWEN What are we to do, Mr Telford?

TELFORD: Well ... It was not my intention, but ...

LUCY And the committee said,

DAVE “Thank you so much, Mr Telford. We are most grateful to you.”

GWEN “We shall include your magnificent design in our application for the enabling Act of Parliament.”

DAVE That? That would be the desecration of our beautiful gorge.

GWEN Why does 'ee want to build cliffs next to our cliffs we've already got?

DAVE Ain't ours ornate enough for him?

GWEN 'Tis a pair of cathedrals doing a ribbon dance.

DAVE What's 'ee think then, that every time we do go across it we're going to be singing from our hymn books?

GWEN There is an outcry in the city against it.

DAVE “But it is designed by Thomas Telford himself.”

GWEN I don't care if it's designed by the archangel Gabriel.

DAVE Probably was, from the look of it.

GWEN We're not having that. We've got church towers enough in Bristol.

LUCY The committee had to find a way out of their dilemma. A Bristolian way.

GWEN and DAVE in committee voices.

DAVE “Hmm ... At what figure does Mr Telford estimate the cost?”

GWEN “Fifty-two thousand pounds.”

DAVE “*Ah* ... And his Menai Bridge cost nigh on three times what he estimated.”

GWEN “*Ah*. Excellent. We shall tell Mr Telford, with much regret, that we simply do not have the financial resources to build his sublime vision.”

DAVE “But then, we still do not have a design.

GWEN “This is most embarrassing. “

DAVE “Hang about. We'll hold -- *another* competition.”

Musical backing – “You're the man” reprise

IKB *spoken (stops smoking, gets out his pencil.)* Four more designs. *(He is working furiously.)* My father is of some assistance to me. *(Talking to himself.)* Engaged on a new mode of passing the chains of the bridge over the heads with all the combinations necessary for repairing and likewise for the compensation against dilation. *(Picks up letter from his father.)* “Take care, Isambard. A central support would be prudent. Perhaps a pagoda, incorporating a café, why not?” A pagoda! Is it the Yangtse gorge I am bridging?

DAVE Whatever way some other engineer had come up with to build a bridge was of great interest to him, so that he could do something altogether different.

LUCY In the new competition, Mr Brunel’s design was placed second.

IKB Second. Enough of this. *(Exit.)*

GWEN He’s off to see the judge.

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IKB enters, brushing rain off his clothes.

IKB I am sent for.

MAIDSERVANT You are wet, sir.

IKB So I am, after riding down from London on the outside of the mail coach.

MAIDSERVANT, *taking his coat* Alas, sir, there was no room inside the coach?

IKB There was no money inside my purse. (*He enters the drawing room.*)
Mr Gilbert. I am no longer to call you Mr Giddy?

GILBERT No. I have taken my wife's surname.

IKB I admire your boldness, sir, a reversal of tedious convention.

IKB sits, and remains seated. GILBERT stands, with a sheaf of papers he can't quite sort out.

GILBERT And I may no longer call you Master Brunel. You are - what? - 23?

IKB 24.

GILBERT Gracious me. It seems only yesterday that your father was bringing you to my salon in London. Do you remember how you impressed Mr Babbage with the acuity of your mental arithmetic? Heh heh, he said --

IKB I do remember. And Mr Faraday was there, and Mr Davy.

GILBERT Yes, yes. I was the discoverer of young Humphry Davy --

IKB Yes, we all recognise the great part you have played in advancing the scientific cause in our country. And now, forgive me, but you have the opportunity to advance it yet further.

GILBERT I have?

IKB Indeed, sir. By preferring my design for the bridge above that of Messrs Smith & Hawkes.

GILBERT It was after much consideration that we placed your design second in the competition.

IKB I venture that it will require only a little more consideration for you to place it first.

GILBERT Do you?

IKB Would you be kind enough to explain to me the superior particulars of the Smith & Hawkes design.

GILBERT We commended it for the excellence of its general details. Though it is, unfortunately, not strong enough to support crowds such as a city the size of Bristol can be expected to produce.

IKB You propose, then, to build a collapsible bridge?

GILBERT We do not propose to build it at all.

IKB And yet you placed it first in the competition.

GILBERT We did.

IKB That was a Pyrrhic victory for them, was it not?

GILBERT It might be thought so.

IKB And the committee is still without a design for the bridge it has wished built for seventy years now.

GILBERT Yes. It is a great pity.

IKB But, sir, you have the design you need. My design.

GILBERT Yours we certainly judged to be strong enough. In anticipation of crowds filling the bridge on extraordinary occasions ...

NEIL Ashton Court Festival, there has been about 700 people on this bridge at one time, and the bridge can take it, but it swings about unbelievably, and people are crying because they are scared the bridge is going to fall down. At first, when I began working on here, I nearly believed them. When the festival finished they all come out together and try and get across all at once. There is 60 or 70,000 people all trying to get across at once and that is pretty scary, to say the least. So now they have to go down round Cumberland Basin.

GILBERT ... your design envisages bearing a tension of five and a half tons per inch, and is thus perfectly adequate.

IKB And yet?

GILBERT Details of your design, I fear, were found objectionable.

IKB *Objectionable* merely, or actually objected to?

GILBERT We considered that one chain on each side is not sufficient. If either side were to fail, the consequences --

IKB I will introduce a second chain.

GILBERT You will? A second chain?

IKB Yes.

DAN Your interview was: get into the middle of the bridge, climb up onto the chains, walk up so far and walk down again. That was your interview, see if you had the head for heights. There was no harnesses.

NEIL Put these goggles on and walk the chains.

LUCY Put these goggles on ...

NEIL And walk the chains. My dad was a toll attendant, he was down below, watching, and he was thinking:

DAN That is my son up there.

NEIL You could see my dad petrified, but I needed the job. I get to the top of the tower, and walk down the chains, across the gorge, and up the other side. The man says,

IKB as BRIDGEMASTER Come back down how you feel safe.

NEIL I walk some of the way and then come down on my backside.

IKB (*to Gilbert*) What else was there?

GILBERT Well ... The question was raised whether your proposed anchorages were --

IKB That is how the anchorages would have been, had we burst magnificently from the Giant's Hole, arriving on the opposite side amongst the woods and winding along the valley. My own preference.

GILBERT But --

IKB But eleven hundred feet was judged by Mr Telford to be too long a span. Wrongly judged, but Mr Telford is adjudged to be a distinguished judge of such judgments. Proceeding instead from St Vincent's Rocks, crossing to an abutment to be raised on the Somerset side, then I agree, Mr Gilbert. I shall design new anchorages deep in the ground, using Mrs Guppy's design for piling. Anything further?

GILBERT Er. Ah, the suspension rods ...

IKB The suspension rods?

GILBERT Yes. Yes, above all, the suspension rods. The mode proposed for connecting the links of the great chains by single pins, instead of double pins...

IKB Double pins would be requisite were we to follow the practice of joining the chain bars with short intermediate links. We shall not. It is uneconomical. We shall dispense with the short links, thus saving on materials and labour. All that is needed for connecting the suspension rods is a redesign of the lug ends. That I am undertaking.

NEIL A member of the public was walking across and saw one of the rods had snapped, and we didn't know. It was only a small one, in the centre, so we didn't need to shut the bridge.

DAN This rod, because the bridge moves up and down, it seized, top and bottom. There was lubrication in there, but the last time they'd changed any rods was about 50, 60 years ago. What happened was, the rod just thought, I've had enough of this – kink and snapped.

LUCY It's very hard to model how friction works.

DAN From the centre of the bridge out is where it takes the most load. So that is where all the work is done.

NEIL To get a rod out you have got to jack the bridge. You use like a strop which goes over the chain. So as you are pulling the chains down and pulling the deck up, we can get the rod out.

GILBERT The use of short intermediate links is customary, as at Mr Telford's Menai Bridge.

IKB Yes.

GILBERT But I suppose we would do well to remember what Francis Bacon said, that "an obstinate retention of custom is as turbulent a thing as an innovation."

IKB Quite. As, for instance, an innovative man might choose to adopt his wife's surname.

GILBERT Hmm ... Wait. You did not consider building a pier in the river as an extra central support?

IKB My father did. I believe it a timid solution. The single span proposed is well within the limits we already know to be possible. I have consulted all the outstanding engineers of our time, in London and Bristol.

GILBERT And won their wives' admiration, I hear.

IKB It is the profession's admiration I value, sir.

GILBERT And I have received a letter from your father's friend, Earl Spencer, in recommendation of your proposal.

IKB I am glad to have the confidence of the man who chose Lord Nelson to command the Royal Navy.

GILBERT Well ... Hm ... I believe you may have answered our reservations.

IKB All of them?

GILBERT ... Well ... yes.

IKB Then my design is now preferred?

GILBERT Erm ... Yes.

IKB Thank you, sir. When may I make a start?

ENSEMBLE You're the man! (*One line of the song.*)

IKB He saw the light. The arguments I had used were all fair and honest. We start.

Recitative/patter over musical accompaniment

First I address the committee. The feat that I achieve
Is more wonderful than any engineer has yet conceived.
Fifteen men are quarrelling on the most ticklish point there could be -
Taste. And what do I produce? Unanimity.
They all agree, they all agree, they all agree - with me.

All fair and honest, that's the way it has to go.
All fair and honest, let that be your motto.

And what is it these solemn men agree to? You won't guess.
Sphinxes! Don't adjust your hearing aid, you heard right. Yes,
Sphinxes! The committee are the prisoners of fashion,
And this week the Egyptian style is everybody's passion.
We got Pugin to run up a sketch or two to top the towers,
And his sphinxes win the argument after hours and hours.

CHORUS All fair and honest, that's the way it has to go.
All fair and honest, let that be your motto.

IKB What, would they have me cover up the carriageway with sand
To accommodate the camels? And at each end there should stand
An oasis of date palms? Perhaps a snake charmer? A smatter
Of hashish to while away the afternoon in dreams ... No matter.
We got agreement. All of them were nodding. For my part,
All I wanted was to make a start.

CHORUS All fair and honest, that's the way it has to go.
All fair and honest, let that be your motto.

IKB begins to instruct ensemble into the construction of the bridge.

5

LUCY *(Aside, to JEFF.)* You here, again?

JEFF I'm interested in hearing about the bridge.

LUCY You can't keep coming here harassing me, when I'm working.

JEFF I'm not looking to harass you. That's not ...

LUCY I'll have to get the police to stop you.

JEFF You don't understand.

LUCY No? How hard is it to understand when someone turns up every time I do a tour and keeps staring at me?

JEFF Let me explain.

LUCY How do you think that makes me feel? - not just now, but when I'm back home?

JEFF What I need is ...

LUCY What I need is for you to get lost. Stop coming here. Stop it.

VICTORINE Please, can you tell me, on the bridge how high are we?

LUCY 3.25 seconds.

VICTORINE Pardon?

LUCY 245 feet above high water. That's 75 metres in euros.

Ensemble engaged in bridge construction, lots of work at height including 'walking the chains', perhaps also projected images of maintenance crews doing the same.

NEIL & DAN *sing* A thousand brakepads squealing,
A thousand dealers wheeling,
A thousand smiles congealing,
Down there.

Near misses and collisions,
Emergencies, decisions,
Revisions of revisions,
Down there.

Summits, panics, sweating,
Texting, and forgetting,
Liking and regretting,
Down there.

Down there it's always crises.
Down there it's always choices.
Up here, it's always peacetime.
Up here, the thing that's nice is
The only voices
That are heard
Are the birds.
How sublime, how absurd.

DAN These harnesses only come about in 1986. We'd had our photographs taken, six of us, stood on the chains. The photographer was up at the top and we had to stand like that because of the angle of the chains. It was in Bristol and West magazine. Next day health and safety come up. "Put all these lanyards in." So you got to be clipped on to the static line now.

NEIL The lanyard we got is a metre long with a shock absorber in it. It still don't stop you from falling off. It'll stop you from landing. It gives you ten minutes, because after that you could suffer from what they call "suspended trauma". So if I was to fall and the lanyard was to get me around my leg, it would cut my blood supply so they've got to get help.

DAN For me, when I went from not harness to a harness it was more dangerous, I thought.

NEIL Walking the chains, you walk with duck feet, like that, because of the gaps.

DAN We still got to be able to walk the chains, but we don't do it so much now, we do it by cherry picker, scissor lift, floor inspections.

NEIL Consultant engineers don't walk the chains.

DAN Not them.

NEIL To this day, if they see you walking the chains, people call the police.

DAN When you are up there it's wider than what it looks. From the Portway, looking up, you think, cor, that's a long way up, but when you are looking down it is not very far.

NEIL Walking up, you can see your shadow in the river.

DAN They always say, don't never meet your shadow. If you meet your shadow you are splashing down in the water. And sometimes, the more you look at that water – it draws you.

NEIL & DAN *sing* It's like toytown. So neat.
You could kick the steeples over.
You could trample the trees
Beneath your feet.
Does the town gasp up at the tiny acrobat,
Pitted against it, alone, tacked to the sky

By his boots and his fingertips, sure as a cat?
Am I the spider or am I the fly...?

JOHN The world's first bungee jump was done at the Suspension Bridge. April 1st, 1979. They were from the Oxford Dangerous Sports Club, all dressed up in dinner suits and drinking champagne. Then 21 years later I happened to be on duty in the toll booth at 5 o'clock in the morning when I saw these people who looked like they were coming back from a party. They managed to do the same thing again before we had realized what they were up to. The same people, 21 years later. Afterwards they are just dangling there enjoying it, and us and the police have to pull them back up again.

NEIL There's bridge swingers. This is distinct from bungee jumpers. The swingers attach a rope to the bridge and just swing out like a pendulum. This one bloke decides to set his rope on fire and he was going to cut it off with a knife at the right time. But he drops his knife, so he sets himself on fire as well. Luckily he's got a back-up knife,

DAN But he still ends up going to hospital with first and second degree burns having fallen over 200 feet.

JOHN Base jumpers, they're an annoyance.

At the mention the stage is full of them, jumping everyone, in-between and perhaps over the speakers.

Groups of five or six. I managed to catch one once by making a 999 call. Sure enough the police pulled the base jumper's car over on the Portway. So he was sat there smothered in mud, with a parachute on his lap.

COP Was that you jumped off there?

BASE JUMPER No, not me, mate.

The base jumpers disperse to reveal SARAH HENLEY in their midst.

6

SARAH People will tell you that...

LUCY Sarah Henley

SARAH ...that's me, Sarah Henley, was a sweet girl heartlessly crossed in love who in 1885 jumped from the bridge but landed gently on the mud because my crinoline acted as a parachute.

JOE (*to Ensemble*) Oh yeah? To start with, she's 22 years of age, no girl any more. And she will never leave off giving I grief no matter what I does or says, till I've just about had my fill on it, and I thinks, I can't spend the rest of my life like this. So I writes her a letter to tell her so, trying to put it nicely, like.

SARAH storms forward toward JOE, she is accompanied by her FATHER. [Other railway porters watching?]

FATHER C'mon my girl, tell him.

SARAH (*to Joe*) You needn't think I can't do better for myself than marry a railway porter, oh no, I've got gentlemen courting me.

JOE (*laughing.*) Good on yer, girl, you go off now and ride to your wedding in a fine carriage!

SARAH storms off.

JOHN I'm in my booth as normal, keeping an eye on the bridge ...

FATHER squares up to JOE and lands him one on the nose and exits.

JOE Well, I thinks that was the end of it, draw a line under. (*Exits.*)

JOHN ... when I see a young lady climb over the railings, perch on the parapet... and before I can get to her, she jumps off. (*An aerialist descends.*) The wind is blowing up, south-west as usual. It takes her skirts, bringing her over towards the Clifton side. Then she turns a complete somersault. What saves her life is that she ends up falling with her feet pointing downwards, so that the air catches under her skirts. Still, she hits on the mud there with a fearful smack.

LUCY Two men who had witnessed her fall wade into the mud and bring her to the bank of the river. The police are summoned, and a doctor from Hotwells, who advises that she needs to be taken at once to the Bristol Infirmary. The policeman sends for a cab to come from the cabstand on Dowry Square.

CABMAN I'm not having that in my cab.

COPPER She is in urgent need of surgical attention.

CABMAN I'm sorry to hear that, but look at the state of her. I've just had my cab in for cleaning and repair. All that mud on her, that would mean another day I'd be without work.

DOCTOR Have you no heart? She is near the point of death.

CABMAN Double fare, and a ten pound deposit on my cleaning bill.

DOCTOR Fetch that wheelbarrow over here.

COPPER Sir. *(He does.)*

DOCTOR And I hope they keep a special cab rank in hell for you.

CABMAN It's all very well you cursing me, but you don't understand. -

LUCY It was an hour before they got Sarah to the Infirmary.

SARAH During the weeks I spent in there, recovering from shock and internal injuries, my fame spread abroad. I received offers of marriage from gentlemen, and invitations from showmen to tour the country. Eventually, I married Mr Lane, of Easton, had children and grandchildren, and lived to the age of 84. A year before I died, in 1948, the BBC got me to talk into their microphone.

SONG Crossed in love.
Crossed in love.

You're crossing arm in arm
From Clifton to Leigh Woods
And you see it from above
How lovely it all looks.
The river's flowing calm,
Your affair is feeling good.
And you think this bridge was made to be
Crossed in love.

And then
The one you love has left you,
The bridge you thought a link
Defines how you're apart.
You're on the other side
And can't get over it.
You think you never will
Reside in someone else's heart. You've been
Crossed in love.

JOHN It's human nature to try and stop someone from killing themselves. It's the ones who just say good morning and go on, we can't do nothing about them.

DAN When you talk to them, sometimes they are aggressive, sometimes they are submissive. I've had people in my face saying, "just let me go." There's no training for that.

JOHN The coast guard bring the boats out. That's the sad bit of the job really.

NEIL The scary thing is, they can be talking to you and you've built up a relationship, haven't you? Over a 15-minute period, you have built up a picture of that guy and he knows what I am about, but he doesn't want your help, he wants to end his life, and that picture sticks in your head and that never goes. The only thing I would like to see is some feedback when you've talked them back. What happened to that guy?

And charged him with affray.

GWEN The bloke's knee went in where it hurts,
And he made his getaway.

IKB I was relieved, to tell the truth.
Sung - The ruffian faced the gallows.

DAVE He nearly had heart failure.
But then reflected, even worse,

GWEN It could have been Australia!

IKB The riot has done terrible damage to my project. Investors are scared off by the social unrest. I have not witnessed in this country any depression like that of Bristol. The houses are wretched. There is no shipping in the harbour. Is this the Bristol whose name was uppermost in the West Indias 40 years ago? From the outset we have been dogged with difficulties due to lack of funds. The trustees of the Clifton Bridge have resolved to draw a prospectus and each of them to go round with it knocking at the doors of his parish to invite the public to subscribe. The project is sinking in public estimation. We may pronounce unhesitatingly that the scheme of the Clifton Bridge is gone by.

Sung - Gone by. Gone by.

Like a glance
From someone with whom you don't dance,
Like a wild swan leaving the sky.
Gone by.

I was beguiled.
My dream, my darling, my first child,
The sweetest apple of my eye.
Gone by.

So now it is
A longing, a hypothesis,
A question put, with no reply.
Gone by.

I sold my survey drawings to the bridge trustees for £40, and on Boxing Day I packed up my portmanteaus and left. Bristol is a beautiful city. Unfortunately, it is not possible to get any work done here.

LUCY He needs a drink.

GWEN We all do.

*** INTERVAL ***

ACT TWO

8

LUCY leads in tour group.

- JEFF I can't explain here. It would be embarrassing. Could I have a word with you after the tour? To explain.
- LUCY In the Visitor Centre. Let's get you sorted for good.
- JEFF No, there'll be people there, hearing me.
- LUCY Exactly. *(To tour group.)* Brunel was not idle. He started to design a railway from London to Bristol, and a ship to take the passengers on to New York.
- GWEN The Great Britain, that is a disaster for the port of Bristol. It can't cope with the ships getting bigger.
- LUCY Where the bridge was concerned, he had to be patient, and trust that, as Bristolians came to perceive the magnificence of what he proposed, they would put up their cash.
- DAVE If we have one o' they s'pension bridges there, and a railway from London, there'll be people coming down to gawp at it. They do say 70,000 went to look at the Menai Bridge in its first year. If they're prepared to go all the way through the rain up to North Wales, they won't think twice before coming to Bristol, people from London.
- GWEN What did London ever do for us?
- DAVE They'll be bringing money to spend here.
- GWEN Ah.
- DAVE And with a new pier at Portzed, look, they could land the mail from Americal there, and save theirselves having to go all round Milford Haven and the Cotswolds.
- GWEN People with money invested in the city docks wouldn't like that.
- DAVE They don't. That's why money for the bridge is short.
- GWEN But ordinary folk down in the city, they could get out to Somerset for the day.
- DAVE The beautiful Gordanal Valley.
- GWEN The donkeys at Weston.

DAVE At present, if you wants to ride to Leigh Woods you got to dangle all through the streets of the city, all along that abominable cart track called Coronation Road, and after that there's the gurt hill beyond Rownham.

GWEN You could go on foot, across the ferry.

DAVE Oh right. Slippery planks, muddy banks, overcrowded boats, damp dogs.

LUCY The money was trickling in again.

GWEN I reckon what tipped the scales was people thinking about they damp dogs.

IKB All Bristol is alive, and turned bold and speculative. *We start.* Again. My first child, my darling.

A burst of energy and movement as NAVVIES resume building bridge.

SONG

Reprise of chorus from opening song.

- BRIDGEMASTER We have had one dedicated body responsible for the maintenance of this bridge and for nothing else, throughout its life. Best practice elsewhere is that you have a thorough inspection every six years and a cursory inspection every two years. But our Trustees take the view that, because of the historical importance of this bridge, we do a thorough inspection every year, lasting a couple of days.
- JOHN There is a wind speed monitor in the booth here, and if that goes to between 35-40mph, a bell goes off. The attendant rings the bridge master, and he'll tell him to shut the bridge. Then he rings the police, who will shut the Portway, rings the harbour master, who will not let a boat go up the river, he will ring the train station so a train won't go up and down the Portishead line there. It's in case the wind ever got so strong that the bridge goes down.
- DAN The wind was so high one Christmas weekend I got called out. The bridge went up 12 inches. So if you drove your car across the bridge, only two wheels were on the bridge at one time. I've done it myself. Weird.
- LUCY In a high wind, it doesn't just move up and down, it moves like a boat, rocking side to side. It's like walking on a ship. My friend's studying it for her doctorate. It can be subject to what in aerodynamics is known as flutter. They used Clifton to work out why pedestrians can make bridges wobble.
- JOHN If it snows we get called out to shovel all the snow off. The weight of the snow would stretch the bridge.
- DAN You can't use salt because it will rot the metal. We have a van with a load of urea prills in the back, baby calf urine, in crystals. We tow it across the bridge and it sprinkles out. It doesn't do anything until someone walks on it or drives on it and crushes the crystals. Then it works. When it goes off it smells of ammonia.
- JOHN Some of the workers would take it home to put on their driveways, until their carpets started smelling.
- BRIDGEMASTER It costs nearly one and a half million pounds a year to maintain the bridge, and all of that has to come from tolls. Around four million cars cross the bridge every year. But vehicle numbers have been dropping ever since they opened the M5 Bridge at Avonmouth.
- DAN People think the City Council must be responsible for looking after the bridge, and paying for its upkeep. They never have been.
- LUCY The biggest risk to the bridge could be not structural but funding. Without annual maintenance it would have to be closed.

BRIDGEMASTER I was speaking in Edinburgh at the International Big Bridge Operators Conference. My paper was about maintaining a smaller but historically important bridge. What intrigued them was that, because it is a toll bridge, we have staff always on site and controls in place to ensure that any problem is picked up early. More important than that is that we do enforce a 4-ton weight limit.

JOHN There are a lot of bridges in this country with weight limits but no enforcement. We have weighbridges and people present.

DAN Coaches often try and cross the bridge and have to be turned back. Joan Rivers's tour bus tried to get across. She was doing a show in the city centre. We had to turn her back and she put the incident onto her Twitter account.

GWEN as JOAN RIVERS Tried to cross the suspension bridge but unfortunately our big yellow bus is just too heavy. I offered to get off...

DAN The next day I came to work and was told I had been in The Evening Post.

BRIDGEMASTER There were three sessions running concurrently at the conference. I thought, I won't have too big an audience, asking difficult questions. When I stood up to speak, the room was absolutely choc-a-bloc.

NEIL People regard us with a little bit of affection and curiosity.

LUCY Every year, half a million tourists come to see the bridge, from all over the world.

ENSEMBLE re-create some classic photo stills eg. Chinese students graduating in front of bridge, Cary Grant by bridge.

JOHN Taxi drivers will tell you, Japanese tourists arrive at Temple Meads, "Suspension bridge, driver," get to the bridge, snap snap snap snap, and straight back to Temple Meads.

LUCY We've counted up, people from 110 countries have signed in the visitors' book.

JOHN Until the 1930s it was a well known stunt for daredevil pilots to fly beneath the bridge in biplanes. There is a rumour that three Spitfires followed each other, one of them piloted by an American woman.

ENSEMBLE create the three Spitfires, flying under bridge.

And another that a wartime Lancaster bomber did it.

ENSEMBLE create Bomber, with less ease.

LUCY They found a detailed map of Bristol that was prepared for the Luftwaffe. One of the prime targets listed for bombing is the suspension bridge.

BRIDGEMASTER In 1957, a Vampire Jet flew at 450 mph from east to west under the bridge...

ENSEMBLE, now have to match previous successes and create Vampire Jet.

...but crashed into the cliffs on the Leigh Woods side.

And so it does.

LUCY And a hot-air balloon came within feet of hitting it.

BRIDGEMASTER People are fascinated by it, because of its age, and because it is still going strong with 99 per cent of its original fabric. The Menai bridge has been totally changed, strengthened with loads of steel. Your steel wire cable bridges, some of them maybe 50 years old now, they're all suffering from corrosion. But on this bridge, the wrought-iron chains, they are still good as new. 4200 chain links - I haven't counted them - and they are all original apart from one. One was taken off for testing by Bristol University and a steel replica was put back in place.

DAN Brunel's original design for the deck was all in Baltic pine, with creosote from Crew's Hole. That formed the finished surface. But, you had rain softening the timber, and horseshoes on it, and the horse pee acting on the iron.

BRIDGEMASTER People say to me, 'now you've done Bridge Master at Clifton Suspension Bridge, what next, the Severn Bridge, the Golden Gate Bridge?' I say 'no, not really', because this bridge to me is even more important than those.

MRS GLENNIE is struggling to fight her way through the ENSEMBLE of navvies who continue their work; perhaps she even has to climb or is lifted over them at points.

- MRS GLENNIE Mr Brunel, are you perhaps not aware that your building works are going to destroy the Clifton locality of *Scilla autumnalis*?
- IKB I beg your pardon, Ma'am?
- MRS GLENNIE Autumn Squill, Mr Brunel. It is a very rare plant, particular to this spot, and you threaten it with extinction.
- IKB Pray show me the spot, Mrs ...
- MRS GLENNIE Glennie. It is right there behind you, look. Do you not know an Autumn Squill when you are lucky enough to see it? There are other rarities - the Bristol and Wilmotts's whitebeams, Spiked Speedwell, Bristol rock cress, Bristol onion, Honewort, but unless you move your bridge somewhere else it is the Autumn Squill that you will eradicate. Forever, Mr Brunel.
- IKB I cannot move my bridge, Mrs Glennie. But I can preserve the Autumn Squill. Mr Anderson!
- ANDERSON Sir?
- IKB Send over two workmen with spades and tell them to take up this turf, being very careful to protect the bulbs, and replant it out of our way. It is Autumn Squill, Mr Anderson.
- ANDERSON Sir.
- DAVE And it rained.
- Sound of heavy rain. The ENSEMBLE of navvies slow down, perhaps even to slow motion.*
- LUCY And there never was enough money. Brunel was all over the country, working twenty-five hours a day, with both ends of his railway to build, and a mighty ship. No wonder people imagine he built everything in the Victorian era. The secretary of the bridge committee had to write him a stiff letter.
- DAVE to LUCY taking dictation My Dear Brunel, I am sorry to hear you are not well, and so are the Bridge Trustees, who consider that you must believe they possess the virtue patience in the highest degree. Luckily for you, those who possess the least patience were not present today.
- LUCY And it rained.
- MRS GLENNIE One night it stopped raining.
- DAVE Yeah. It froze.

LUCY

And the funding was dripping in like an icicle thawing.

We see ENSEMBLE grind to a halt, frozen.

11

- JOHN You got 18 cameras to watch. One camera is angled so you can see all the way down the river to Lawrence Weston.
- NEIL Yeah, John zoomed in on the camera and saw me kayaking up. I live beside the river in Shirehampton, so I do enjoy kayaking. Just thought it would be quite novel to kayak to work. The tide's got to be right for my shift, mind.
- JOHN A woman comes to the window and says...
- GWEN Excuse me, I have just lost my three-year-old granddaughter.
- JOHN What does she look like and where did you last see her? In the meantime two of her accomplices have got up onto the tower of the bridge, onto the middle platform there, stripped off naked and put a banner over the side. It was something to do with protesting the Ashton Court quarry. She was a decoy. I wasn't very happy with her after that. On that middle platform for three or four hours, they were.
- NEIL Fathers for Justice, they were on the Leigh side tower. We had a little tip-off to say they were coming, so we made sure all the towers were locked up properly so they couldn't get up there. But 5am the next morning they drove through the toll barrier, stopped right next to the tower, climbed onto the roof of the van, and they were then able to get over the top of the gate. They were up there for a day and a half.
- JOHN Dressed up as Batman and Robin, they were.
- LUCY And Superman, and Spiderman.
- And we see them – BATMAN, ROBIN, SUPERMAN & SPIDERMAN
climb up with banners.*
- JOHN We closed the bridge for a day and a half. It was on the tv news.
- LUCY And we had to stop the traffic for Gary Lineker to film his ad for crisps.
- NEIL Six takes they had to do.
- LUCY Badgers cross the bridge in the dead of night. They could swim but they prefer not to get their feet wet.
- JOHN Foxes, too. I've only ever seen one deer on the bridge, but it got scared and jumped over the barriers into Leigh Woods and all the way down. Got killed.
- NEIL When they get over the Leigh Woods side of the bridge a lot of tourists think that they are in Wales.

Project painting. Soundtrack: 'Rule Britannia' brass band, cannons, ships' sirens. Possibly a song.

IKB To stir Bristol's imagination, and attract investment, I plan a spectacular foundation-stone ceremony. Virtually the whole city turns out for it, at half past seven in the morning.

LUCY Every spot on which a human being could find a standing place is occupied.

DAVE, *jostled* Hey, mind where you're putting they boots of yours.

GWEN, *to man squeezed behind her* Have we been introduced?

We see Brunel's pageant... a spectacular procession of men, flags, banners, balloons and fireworks.

ARISTO VOICE *off* The time will come when, as that gentleman walks along the streets or passes from city to city, the cry will be raised, "There goes the man who reared that stupendous work, the ornament of Bristol and the wonder of the age."

DAVE They got nothing like this in Rome.

GWEN What do you know about Rome?

DAVE I've read books. It's built on seven hills, Rome is, just like Bristol, but they've got nothing to match what this is going to be.

GWEN All I've heard is that Rome wasn't built in a day. And then it all fell down again, didn't it?

DAVE And nor is this bridge built in a day.

GWEN Be lucky if they gets it up this century. The fireworks weren't much cop.

DAVE That's because it rained.

GWEN In Rome it don't rain ever, I suppose.

LUCY Local newspapers had advertised the highlight of the event as the symbolic first crossing of the gorge by Brunel himself in a wicker basket, in which materials were conveyed to and fro. It was suspended from an iron bar above the river. Unfortunately this crossing had to be postponed. An accident had caused a bend in the middle of the bar. The disappointment is huge.

GWEN, *reading newspaper* Hey, listen to this. After we left –

DAVE It was raining. I was getting damp in places I didn't know I had places.

GWEN - you know what happened later on? It says, "A spectator determines to make up for Brunel's absence by doing it himself."

DAVE Doing what himself?

GWEN Going across in the basket.

DAVE He never! He'll be from Kingswood.

We witness the historical events play out like some silent Victorian melodrama.

GWEN There's more. Where the bar was bent, the basket got stuck. And (*still reading*) there was a hauling rope looped down from under the basket, and just at that moment the Killarney steamer is making its way up the river. (*We hear the whistle of the approaching Killarney steamer.*)

The ENSEMBLE crowd cover their eyes in horror as we watch the action.

“Fortunately, at this critical juncture, someone on the steamer cuts the rope.”

The basket swings to and fro with fearful rapidity, and it is only with the utmost effort that the gentleman can keep himself in it.

DAVE Got a right nerve, he has, that one.

IKB That anyone should attempt to cross without my permission!

GWEN So what happens next is that Mr. Brunel decides he will do it himself, after all. (*IKB enters the basket.*) And then he gets stuck.

Half-way across, it is halted by the bend. IKB endeavours to release it by swinging it.

GWEN “But thankfully, Mr. Brunel proved himself equal to the task of freeing the obstruction.

When the swinging doesn't work, IKB climbs up the ropes by which the basket is suspended, succeeds in freeing the pulley, and is hauled back. The ENSEMBLE watch IKB's crossing and share the thrill of the ride.

LUCY A new bar was forged. So many people then wanted to cross the river in this novel way that the Trustees fixed a charge.

Sung -

TRUSTEE One shilling, to and fro,

ENSEMBLE To and fro, to and fro.

REPORTER In the interests of our
Respected readers, we were once
Adventurous enough to go

ENSEMBLE To and fro, to and fro.

REPORTER One finds oneself slightly nervous
Merely gazing down the bar while
Men prepare to let us go

ENSEMBLE To and fro, to and fro.

DAVE, *spoken* Hold fast!

REPORTER Then down one rushes, fast as light,
Down and down, till one can see,
Like a pinpoint in the night,
The glimmer of eternity.
Even the stoutest grip on tight,
Holding themselves up stiff as though
The solid earth has taken flight,
Sky above and sky below.

ENSEMBLE To and fro, to and fro.

Music calmer.

REPORTER Approaching half-way over one is
Glad to find oneself going slow.
The basket comes to rest, and so
Does one's rapid heartbeat. Now
One has the leisure to appraise
All that is within one's gaze.
If one dare look down, the rooks
Are whirling far beneath, their backs
Golden with the sunlight's glow.

ENSEMBLE To and fro, to and fro.

REPORTER And so it ends, this madcap ride
Down the wind. A rope loop hauls
The basket up to the other side.
And now one longs once more to go

ENSEMBLE To and fro, to and fro.

LUCY All that was fun and games, no more. There was still no money to finish the
bridge. And meanwhile the ss Great Britain was too big to get out of the
Floating Harbour. Brunel opened his heart to his right-hand man on both
projects, Kit Claxton.

13

IKB and CLAXTON (“a curmudgeonly, one-eyed, combative, Tory, ex-navy type, shades of Robert Newton”), talking over a drink.

IKB The basket got stuck again when it was carrying a couple across who had just got married that afternoon. They were dangling there above the river for four hours.

CLAXTON They had their shilling’s-worth. I wonder how they passed the time?

IKB Oh, Kit. That bridge is of course a feather in the scales, balanced against what we have done with the ships and the railway. But what a gorgeous feather. It was my first darling love. You never forget her, and I can’t.

CLAXTON And you can’t consummate her, either.

IKB The Trustees are chronically short of funds, and the weather is unkind, so our progress is very slow, and because of slow progress investors refuse to pay installments, slowing our progress even more, and so it has been going on, year after year.

CLAXTON The investment is going into railways.

IKB For which I can be grateful. But. I’ll give you an example of how it is. Four chains composed of wrought-iron bar links were detailed. But - funds allowed us to order only half the wrought-iron we need. We had to give them our promise to order the balance when investment becomes available. I have the materials to build half a bridge!

CLAXTON So you could invite people to walk half-way across, enjoying the views, and turn round.

IKB One of my contractors died, and his widow came to me pleading for payment of what was outstanding to him. I could do nothing for her. No money left.

LUCY When building work began on the Clifton tower, the contractors ordered that “no person shall be annoyed by the workmen asking for money, but a box is placed for the gratuitous deposits of visitors, which will be applied to the general benefit of the workmen, in case of sickness or accident.”

IKB notices the work has stopped and the Ensemble are all stood around shaking their heads.

IKB What is the trouble now?

ENSEMBLE There’s not one of them will do it, sir.

IKB Do what?

ENSEMBLE Walk that plank to drop that plumb line.

IKB It must be done. How else can we align the abutment face?

ENSEMBLE

Sir.

IKB climbs up one of the towers. A plank projects over the drop, men standing on the landside end to anchor it.

IKB

Why won't you do it, any of you?

DAVE

Sir, all day we are drinking small beer because the water's foul, and you expect us to teeter above a 250-foot drop?

IKB lights a cigar, takes the plumb line, walks the plank, and drops the line.

IKB

There's your alignment.

Back to CLAXTON. IKB now close to despair.

CLAXTON

That order of half the ironwork, it came.

IKB

But now I am instructed to sell it on, at the best price I can get in a depressed market. It has to be sold to discharge a debt for which the Trustees are personally liable. The minutes of that meeting are signed: *George Thomas, Chairman, who would prefer not selling the iron at all.*

CLAXTON

He's on your side, at least, in dark times.

IKB

He told me he would have preferred paying his portion of the liability to selling the iron.

CLAXTON

It has become your Bridge of Sighs, Izzy. It may be time to consider giving in.

IKB

I have been ordered to. To suspend all work.

CLAXTON

Indefinitely?

IKB

Definitely. *(Stands, exiting with CLAXTON.)* I have built a railway down here from London, a ship to take passengers on to New York, but after 30 years Bristol still can't raise the money to cross two hundred yards.

LUCY

In 1851 an American engineer sent an offer to resume the work. But, he wrote,

SERRELL

With all deference to Mr Brunel, and putting implicit confidence in his word as a gentleman, I am not disposed to retain one in whose hands the work has already failed, or allow him to continue his censorship. If such is the case, I must beg to decline any further negotiation in the matter. I remain, Yours etc., Edward W. Serrell.

LUCY The committee rejected his brash offer. It was just as well. Soon two of his suspension bridges in America collapsed. The trustees had had enough. “It is time to put an end to this. We must relinquish the lease on the Clifton land, it being understood that the idea of completing the bridge is now wholly abandoned.”

DAVE Let’s get them unsightly towers demolished. All they are now is mortifying monuments to utter failure, look. You see what the paper called them? “A deformed blot upon the fair scenery around, a standing reproach to Bristol as a city of half-performances.”

GWEN No, tell you what, my babber, we’ll get ’em covered over with ivy, and tell the tourists they’re picturesque ruins.

SONG *brief reprise Gone By.*

14

GORAM, *punching the air* Result!

(Into Shakespearean mode.)

Gentles, perchance you wonder at this show,
But wonder on, and disregard my visage.
The best they'll get is me, fum fee fi fo -
I spread my arms, and thus present a bridge.

We have an echo of GORAM and the ENSEMBLE as at the beginning.

What could be more romantic than this gorge the way I've hacked it out, before they came along looking to *enhance* it? It's rough, picturesque, wild.

Sings -

I love the fair Avona,
With all her ebbs and tides.
Her moth-quivering water
Is a glinting robe for a bride.
To win her I had a rival -
Vincent, my silly brother.
We fought, right here. I won.
I could do no other.
Oh Avona, for you I would ...

DAVE

Your brother, what became of him then?

GORAM

Him? Oh, he went off... Stanton Drew, I heard, he built - wait for it - a circle of stones. And then another one, even bigger, in Wiltshire somewhere. That was really going to impress the fair Avona, wasn't it? A fine bed that would be for her to flow through.

DAVE

The truth is, I heard, that his brother's ideal was to hack the river bed through Henbury! Henbury, I ask you. How romantic would that have been?

GORAM

Oh, Avona ...

DAVE

There are plenty of fish in the sea.

GORAM

I 'ates fish.

- CLAXTON On the 15th of September 1859 I lost my oldest and best friend in the death of Mr Brunel. Maintaining an application both of body and mind almost beyond the limit of physical endurance, Brunel was suddenly struck down, before he had accomplished the task which his daring genius had set before him.
- LOCKE The greatest of England's engineers was lost; the man of the greatest originality of thought and power of execution, bold in his plans, but right.
- CLAXTON The commercial world thought him extravagant, but great things are not done by those who sit down and count the cost of every thought and act. He did not die a rich man, as he never asked others to take up a scheme which he did not himself largely embark in, and he thus lost a great deal of money. I shall ever feel a deep sense of gratitude to Mr Brunel for all his kindness and support from the day I first saw him.
- LOCKE We, the Institution of Civil Engineers, proud of our association with such a name as Brunel, have a duty to perform. As a fitting monument to our late friend, and at the same time removing a slur from the engineering talent of the country, we intend to complete the suspension bridge at Clifton.
- IKB *ghost* And they raised the money!
- DAVE His Hungerford Bridge was being rebuilt, so his own chains there could be recycled to Clifton. It was what he would have wanted. Innit?
- GWEN But he'd want a sign put up on it:
- IKB Best Before 1859.

Resume building bridge, to conclusion. We watch as the towers are connected with the first chain, then the second, then the deck superstructure, etc.

CHORUS, *Hymn like*

He dipped into the future far as human eye could see,
Saw the vision of the world, and all the wonders that would be.
Let the great globe spin for ever, no one will excel
Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

SINGLE NAVVIES *reprise -*

Brunel built the bridge, they like to say. Did no one do
A stroke of work to help him out with it? Did no one screw
A single nut onto a bolt? Has no one ever heard a
Sweating navy cuss an obstinate steel girder?

CHORUS

Fifty-three was terrible young for such a man to die,
But he was summoned by the great Engineer in the sky,
And was soon at work on another bridge, it runs from heaven to hell.
Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

16

JEFF It's not something I'm proud of.

LUCY I wouldn't think you would be.

JEFF I'm scared.

LUCY What of?

JEFF Crossing the bridge.

LUCY You get across every time I've seen you here.

JEFF Yes. But on my own, it's different. I can get across if I keep looking at you. Focussing on you.

LUCY Me? Why me?

JEFF I don't know. It must sound ridiculous.

LUCY It's not ridiculous that you're scared of crossing. A lot of people are, maybe one in five or six. It's even got a name - gephyrophobia. Fear of crossing bridges. We see it often. It's catching, would you believe? But what is ridiculous is this staring at me. I can't handle it. I shouldn't have to. Have you tried staring at someone else?

JEFF There's something about ... Because you're in charge, you're doing the talking, I feel I can have trust in you. I can follow you and I'll be all right. So I focus on you, and I get over. I can't really explain it. But I can't explain the fear, either.

LUCY Why do you need to cross at all?

JEFF My girl friend lives in Abbots Leigh.

LUCY Does she know about your problem?

JEFF No.

LUCY Perhaps you should tell her.

JEFF I'd feel ashamed.

LUCY You could go the long way round. Over Cumberland Basin.

JEFF That's another bridge.

LUCY Not as high.

JEFF No. But still ...

LUCY So you only get to see your girl friend when I'm doing a tour?

JEFF No, she comes over sometimes.

LUCY And how do you get back from Abbots Leigh?

JEFF She gives me a lift in her car. I can handle that. Just keep my eyes shut till we're across. I know I can't expect you to be here for ever, but if I do it enough times with you there, maybe I'll manage it on my own. It's worth trying, isn't it? I have done it on my own once. Just the once. I ran, all the way. It was horrible. I was shaking, like that. It was embarrassing. I'm supposed to be bright.

LUCY Bright has got nothing to do with it. What do you do?

JEFF I've only just moved to Bristol. I'm a student. I'm doing a Masters in biology.

LUCY What you working on?

JEFF Ants.

LUCY Ants.

JEFF Yes. How they respond to electricity.

LUCY Badly, I'd have guessed.

JEFF No, I don't mean getting shocks. It's magnetic fields, that kind of thing.

LUCY Strange attraction.

JEFF That kind of thing.

17

- JOHN One of the funny things we've got here is what we call the 245ft-high club. That is, couples going out there in the middle of the night, thinking nobody else is out there, and doing the business, right in the middle of the bridge. They're totally oblivious to our cameras. Sometimes as they are exiting the bridge I might say to them, "Well done. Would you like a copy of the video?"
- JASON When I proposed to Julija, I told her, I wanted to embrace as much of your culture as possible. She's from Lithuania, see.
- JULIJA I told Jason about the Lithuanian tradition. After exchanging vows, the groom is required to carry his bride over a bridge before they can be allowed into the wedding reception.
- JASON It had to be the suspension bridge. I'm a Bristolian.
- JULIJA And I'm six feet tall.
- JASON We got her right the way across. It stopped the traffic. My best man did give me a hand, a bit of the way.
- JULIJA This is the first and the only time we will get married.
- JASON Hopefully.
- JOHN We've had babies born on the bridge. A woman from Portishead was being rushed to the maternity hospital, but the boy came out here. As luck would have it, a doctor and a nurse happened to be strolling past, and they took care of it.
- DAN Couples are crossing the bridge all the time to propose marriage.
- JIM We'd got to that point in our relationship about what would we do.
- DEBORAH I was in London, Jim was in Bristol. He said he would move to London.
- JIM Reluctantly.
- DEBORAH But something just didn't feel right. There was talk of me moving to Bristol. I'd had it with London. I was a freelance double bass player. I wasn't going to hit the big time so it didn't really matter where I lived. But I had a slight nervousness about upping and moving to Bristol on a whim. So - I just thought, I am going to go for it, and the best way of doing that is to see if he will marry me, then I will know if he is serious about me.
- JIM This is Valentine's Day, 2000.
- DEBORAH 2001. You had been in London for work and we had had breakfast together. I was working later that day.

JIM So we said goodbye.

DEBORAH I had been plotting. When I'd visited you in Bristol you had taken me to the Downs and the bridge had stuck in my memory. It was the only place I thought of that was going to be really memorable. Jim is a fan of the grand gesture. Just turning up on his doorstep and asking him there would not have been enough. I felt it needed some effort putting in.

JIM The gesture was important.

DEBORAH When I finished my rehearsal that day I was going to drive down to Bristol and pop the question. I had made a card for you with love hearts on it.

JIM I get home from work that evening. That was it, the day was done. About half past nine I'm sat there watching telly and I get a phone call from Deborah.

DEBORAH Do you trust me?

JIM Yeah.

DEBORAH There is a cab downstairs waiting for you. I'd driven from London to Bristol, passed his flat to check he was there. The light was on. I drove up to The Triangle where the taxi rank is. I asked this taxi driver if he would go and do a pick-up for me. The first one said no, he thought it sounded too dodgy.

JIM He was right.

DEBORAH At this point I thought, my grand plan isn't going to work. The next taxi driver was obviously more desperate for the cash and he did the job. I had to then dash up to the bridge and park and get across.

JIM So I go down and there is a black cab with his hazards on. I get in and say to the guy, can you tell me where you are taking me?

CABBIE No.

JIM This guy has an Eastern European accent, he looks Croatian or something. Do you often kidnap people?

CABBIE No, this is my first time.

JIM Yeah, I bet it's not. So I have no idea if I'm being taken to London, or if Deborah is in Bristol. He takes me up to Clifton near the bridge and hands me this card that has three love hearts on it. I can't remember what it said, you and me, love something. I wander towards the bridge, not sure what to do. Basically, there is this bewildered-looking middle-aged bloke carrying a letter in his hand crossing the bridge in the night. Nobody is pressing any alarm buttons so I start walking out to the middle of the bridge, and then I see her walking towards me.

DEBORAH I had kind of planned it but not really considered how I was going to execute it. I thought I knew what he was going to say, but I was not certain. I felt that I had enough to know that it was the right thing. And I just remember standing on the other side of the bridge thinking, it is a long way home if he says no. 'Cos that was it. I was really clear in my mind. If he says no, that's it. I was going home and that was it.

JIM You had got a bottle of champagne in your bag.

DEBORAH I was either going to drink it with you or go home and drink it alone.

JIM So there we were, met in the middle of the bridge.

DEBORAH I was going to say some stuff but I just ended up saying, Will you marry me?

JIM I'd sort of guessed.

DEBORAH It was committing to him, but also committing to the move here, to Bristol. It was about Bristol a lot.

JIM It was a DIY wedding. We came back from the wedding in a big black 15-seater tour van with drums in the back. I used to be a roadie with a punk band. About 18-20 people all crammed on it. In it was my mum, half the Aussie rules team I used to play for, and a couple of random punks who owned the van. My mum was bewildered by the entire thing.

DEBORAH We had a polaroid camera.

JIM We went across the bridge in this crappy old van with this motley crew of people and we did an illegal stop in the middle of the bridge. We stood in front of the bus, stopping all the traffic, posed for a team photo, then back in the bus. It only took 30 seconds.

DEBORAH Nobody came to shout at us.

JIM Nowadays, when we come in on the Portway, our two little boys say, 'There's mummy's and daddy's bridge.'

- LUCY Any more questions before we finish?
- JACQUES I liked the stuff about giants. Do you believe in giants?
- LUCY At school I was taught the phrase, “the suspension of disbelief.” It means, what you can get from pretending you believe in something, even though you know it’s not real. Like in a theatre. So, yes, I *can* believe in giants, when I want to.
- JACQUES In France we have giants, too.
- VICTORINE Gargantua, Pantagruel.
- JACQUES Exactement.
- LUCY Where’s that book? Here it is. I want to read you something a famous painter, Paul Nash, said about this place, when he painted it. He wrote: “A science book attributes the Avon Gorge to the deforming power of an earthquake. But legend preferred the idea of two giants hewing the gorge with a pickaxe. Recalling the huge nocturnal voices of ships' horns, I could believe in the latter version. Indeed, as I read on, the idea of giants obsessed my mind. Strange forces had been at work in the Avon Gorge, I felt convinced, not those alone of honest engineering.”

Fafner and Fasolt music, faint.

(to JEFF) Do you want a coffee? We’ve got a machine.

- JEFF Yes, please. Thank you for listening to me. Can I buy you a pizza?
- LUCY There’s no need for that. Anyway, I’ve had lunch.
- JEFF No, this evening, I mean.

LUCY is staring at him. He avoids her gaze.

I’ve told you why I need to keep looking at you, but it doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy looking at you.

- LUCY Buy your girl friend a pizza. I’m cooking for my father.
- JEFF You know what Einstein says in his theory of gravity - all physical bodies attract each other ... Another time?
- LUCY No. (*Up, to tour group.*) And so we arrive at 1864.
- DAVE It is a major moment. MCC legalises overarm bowling.

A line or two delivered as bowling.

LUCY Only 110 years after the money was first put up, the Clifton bridge was ready.

DAVE The new engineers, Barlow and Hawkshaw, proof-loaded it with 500 tons of stone.

GWEN No problem.

DAVE Who's going to declare it open, then?

GWEN The Queen?

DAVE Nah. She's in mourning. No one ever sees her.

GWEN The Prime Minister?

DAVE He's got the Schleswig-Holstein question on his mind.

GWEN What's that?

DAVE No one knows. That's why it's on his mind. (*GWEN exits.*)

LUCY The Chairman of the Trustees had never lost his faith in the undertaking. He lived to cross the bridge. At a grand opening ceremony, he proposed a toast.

CHAIRMAN Though successive men engaged in the work have failed, fortunes have been lost and reputations wrecked, after unexampled vicissitudes the work has been accomplished thanks to the obstinacy of the Anglo Saxon race.

LUCY After the ceremony, the dignitaries enjoyed a banquet at the Victoria Rooms.

DAVE The workmen who had built the bridge got beer and sandwiches on trestle tables.

LUCY The Brunel family didn't attend the opening.

DAVE Why?

LUCY They considered that Isambard's name had been airbrushed out of the pomp.

DAVE Why was that?

LUCY It was the greatest, strongest chain bridge in the world, the ornament of Bristol, the wonder of the age, but all the investors had lost their money.

IKB (*reading Morning Chronicle*) “Not one of the great schemes which he set on foot can be called profitable, and yet they are cited, not only with pride, but with satisfaction, by a nation supposed to be pre-eminently fond of profit; and the man himself gained the esteem of those very shareholders whose pockets he so unceasingly continued to empty. There is always something not displeasing to the British temperament in a magnificent disappointment.”

MARY GRIFFITHS runs across. (May include 1936 BBC radio recording of Mary Griffiths, 93.)

GWEN as MARY I was determined to get as near and to see as much as I could. So I pushed up to the front and got right up to the gate that had been erected across the entrance to the bridge. When the signal was given and the gate was opened, I suddenly decided to be the first across, so I began to run. *(She does.)* I had not run very far when I heard my uncle shout

DAVE as UNCLE Run, Mary, run!

GWEN as MARY And I turned round and saw a young man some yards behind me, running as fast as he could. I could see he was trying to beat me across and I tucked up my long dress and ran for dear life - and I beat him by a few yards!

She runs into IKB. He smiles at her.

IKB My congratulations. You have fulfilled my dream, my dear.

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JOHN Once you're here, you're here till retirement. I never believed in my mind I'd be here 31 years on, never in my wildest dreams. It's provided me a good life and I feel blessed and honoured that I've been here for so long. I would love nothing more than for my boy to be taken on, follow in my footsteps, history goes on. Jack there is a temp at the moment, same way his father started. He didn't have to walk the chains with no harness, he said he couldn't do that. It has been a privilege to work here. I owe the bridge that. It's a Grade One listed building, innit, it's iconic.

Music starts under.

IKB Even now, in my grave, I have the ghost of the bridge in front of me, above me, holding out her hand, and when she bends down toward me, a little swarm of devils, in the shape of unfinished drawings and sketches, unmet pledges, unwritten cheques, unresolved meetings, undelivered materials, will quietly, and quite as a matter of course, and as if I ought to have expected it, they will lift up the ghost and put her a little further off than before.

GWEN He wanted to be known as a Bristol man.

DAVE He is. Look at it. The name Bristol means the place of the bridge, don't it?

GWEN Yeh. But not this bridge.

DAVE This is the one people remember. The audacity of it.

GWEN That must be what they mean when they talk about the height of audacity.

DAVE Right. 245 feet. That's the height of audacity.

SONG It's pencilled on the sky,
Like a hyphen, linking
Whatever you, or I
Might be feeling, or thinking.
Stitched like a seam,
A braid, or a lace,
To fasten the dream
Of this gigantic place.

Only connect ...
Only connect ...

Suspended in the air,
A necklace for Avona,
Traced across the blue,
A graceful line from me to you.
Let us join hands
If we be friends
The bridge is our bond

At both of its ends.

Only connect ...

Only connect ...

IKB enters, trotting, carrying the Olympic torch across the bridge, in silence. When he reaches the middle, he hands the torch on to LUCY. Explosion of jubilant crowd noise, fireworks, streamers, as she runs off with the torch.

From England to Down Under
His ship's compass was set,
But his first love and darling child
Joins Gloucestershire and Somerset.
Let us reject
The side or the sect
And speak to each other
In one dialect.

Only connect ...

Only connect ...