

Folk & Traditional Song Lyrics

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Asleep at the Switch

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"The midnight express will be late here tonight,
So sidetrack the westbound freight."
Those were the orders that Tom had received
As he passed through the roundhouse gate.

Tom was the switchman, with heart true as steel,
And duty was first in his breast;
But the thought of his boy who was dying at home
Crazed Tom, and he fell at his post.

The shrill whistle blew on the freight for the West,
When the rumble was heard on the midnight express.
Asleep at the switch, and no warning light
To signal there trains that rushed through the night:

When down to the gulch ran Tom's daughter Nell,
The crisis had passed, his boy would get well.
She caught up the light and waved it on high,
And sidetracked the westbound freight:

The midnight express all in safety flew by,
While Tom was asleep at the switch
The freight slowly backed on the main track again,
The men called to Tom goodnight;

But only the sob of a girl made reply:
And they saw by the engine's light
Tom lying flat at his post where he fell
And there with her head on his breast,

'Twas his brave daughter, Nell, who saved all their lives
And those on the midnight express.
Each man on the freight for the West bared his head,
For Tom's heart had stopped, at his post he lay dead.

Asleep at the switch, the president read,
"My wife and child were aboard," he said
But as he read on, his stern face relaxed
"This road shall reward such heroic acts."

He sat at his desk and he filled out a check
And sent it with all dispatch,

For Tom's daughter, Nell, for her brave deed that night
While he slept his last sleep at the switch.

From Long Steel Rail, Cohen

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OCT98