The Light at Maco Station

Over the years this flickering light has eluded all attempts at explanation.

There was fog in the low places and out of the blackness overhead fell a fine, steady rain. It made little ponds of the ruts in the lonely country road.

Hugged by scrub pines, vines, and underbrush, the road straggled for perhaps a hundred yards. Then the woods stopped abruptly and there lay the wet, softly gleaming rails at Maco Station.

Maco lies fourteen miles west of Wilmington on the Wilmington-Florence-Augusta line of what is now the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad. It is today much as it must have looked to Joe Baldwin years ago.

Joe was conductor of a train headed toward Wilmington that rainy spring night of 1867. Just fourteen miles from home his thoughts turned to his family. Would his wife be up to greet him?

Even his train sounded as if it were glad to be on the home stretch. There was something comforting about the chugging noise of its wood-burning engine. For the moment Joe forgot the shower of soot and sparks which he battled daily to keep his coaches clean.
Wilmington
It was time now to go through the cars ahead and call out the station. He glanced proudly at his gold railroad man’s watch. The hands of the watch read three minutes ’til midnight. Just about on time.

He tugged at the door at the end of the car. The night was so dark he couldn’t see the outline of the car ahead. As he managed to open the door, he swung his lantern a little ahead of his body. The foot outstretched to step forward stopped in midair. There was no car ahead! He was in the last coach of the train and it had come uncoupled.

Panic surged through him and for a moment he could hardly get his breath. His first thought was of the train which followed his own. He must signal them. They had to know there was a wild car in front of them.

He raced back through the car. With one mighty heave he wrenched open the heavy door at the rear and was out on the platform. He felt his own coach losing speed and as it did he saw the huge, fiery eye of the train which followed him.

He began to swing his lantern back and forth, back and forth, more furiously as the distance between him and the advancing train grew smaller.

The pursuing train plunged on through the night, its cyclops eye burning balefully. With terrific impact it hurtled into the rear of the runaway coach completely demolishing it. In the collision Joe’s head was severed from his body.

A witness said that his lantern waved desperately until the last, then rose in the air, and inscribing a wide arc, landed in a nearby swamp. It flickered there for a moment and then the flame continued burning clear and strong.

Not long afterward lovers strolling near the railroad late at night reported seeing a strange light along the tracks.
It would start about a mile from Maco Station—just a flicker over the left rail. Then it would advance, growing brighter as it came up the track. Faster and faster it seemed to come, swinging from side to side. There would be a pause and it would start backwards, for a moment hanging suspended where it had first appeared, and then it would be gone.

Watchers over the years have said that the light is Joe Baldwin’s lantern and that Joe is hunting for his head. Once the light was gone for over a month but it always comes back. Joe seems to prefer dark, rainy nights.

After roads were built in the area, skeptics maintained that the light was merely a reflection. Several years ago all traffic in the area was blocked off while a group of observers watched for the light. Joe appeared, swinging his lantern as usual.

A short time before, a company of Fort Bragg soldiers armed with rifles decided to put an end to Joe’s nightly excursions. His lantern eluded both guns and soldiers.

Over the years railroad engineers have sometimes mistaken Joe’s light for a “real” signal. As a result the railroad ordered its signalmen at Maco to use two lanterns, one red and one green.

The tracks have been removed but strangely enough the light continues to return, and those who have seen it say that the ghost of Joe Baldwin still haunts Maco looking for his head.