

A Dickensian Footplate Ride of 1857

By T. S. LASCELLES

CHARLES DICKENS was in the habit of making personal investigation into conditions in the everyday lives of the workers, and much that his keen observation and insight showed him is recorded in "The Uncommercial Traveller," or in collections of reprinted contributions taken from his weekly journal *Household Words*, and its successor *All the Year Round*. There are several references to railways in his novels and in these occasional pieces, but the titles of the latter seldom indicate the fact. Thus, the article entitled "A Flight" describes a journey to Paris by the South Eastern and the Nord Railways.

Sometimes he would send others to investigate and, desirous of learning what engine driving was like, the novelist obtained from Samuel Smiles, at that time Secretary of the S.E.R., a pass for a new contributor to his paper named John Hollingshead, then 30 years of age and later to become well known as a dramatic critic and theatre manager, to ride on the locomotive of the mail train from London Bridge to Dover and back. Hollingshead recorded his experience in an article in *Household Words* for December 12, 1857, with the title "Riding the Whirlwind." The down train on this occasion left London Bridge at 8.30 p.m. on a cold November evening.

We are told by the reporter that his carriage is "not the padded saloon with the six chocolate-coloured cloth-covered compartments, not that worn, dusty, draughty bare wooden carriage, which in winter is an ice refrigerator, chilblain nourisher, and rheumatism cherisher, in summer an oven of baked varnish, whose walls are decorated with the highest effort of advertising art, the picture of the man with the excruciating toothache, who would not use the ointment of the Druids," nor was it "that large roomy carriage with high wooden sides and extremely narrow doorway, provided by the thoughtful care of a paternal parliament, at the rate of one penny a mile, in which the agricultural body is conveyed from place to

place, smelling very strongly of beer, cheese, and onions." Neither was it the "breezy, open truck used by the navvies," nor "that large, red saloon carriage, emblazoned with the national arms, in which busy men are always sorting letters," nor "the large condemned cell" conveying the luggage. It was, instead, "a compound of the coal cellar, bakehouse oven, and fiery dragon."

The driver and fireman were both named Jones. Hollingshead sat "on the edge of the coke tender with one foot on the sandbox and the other on the handle of the coke shovel," with his head "above the screen which protects the driver and stoker." Emerging from the terminus he noted that the lights were just being extinguished "at that strange looking Tooley Street church—union of the ecclesiastical and gas-works order of architecture," while the signals formed "a brilliant galaxy of red, green, and white lights, looking like a railway Vauxhall, a display of fireworks . . . or a large variegated orrery suspended in mid-air." The train went "branching out on the network of rails into the country about New Cross," and the sight of an occasional coloured signal light made the writer imagine himself to be "running towards a surgery for a doctor in a very energetic manner" but to Tom Jones these signs were "as the leaves of a book in which he often reads a lesson of life and death. . . . On either side the white telegraphic posts pass in rapid and regimental succession the whole way through the journey. . . . I look forward and I see a faint glimmer hovering round what my reason tells me must be the funnel of the engine, but what my imagination pictures as the real 'driver of the train,' a stout, round-shouldered individual, with a short thick neck, and a low-crowned, broad-brimmed hat, like the stage coachman whom I remember in my youth."

Describing in excellent style the journey, Hollingshead continues, "While I am watching and speculating, Tom Jones and his mate have never moved from their posts, looking through the two large

glasses in the screen before them for the various signals. Before me is the shining brass and steel and iron of the engine, a tin teapot with a long narrow spout, full of oil, a small bundle of cotton and wool, the stops and valves, a hand lamp with a red glass, and the partly opened doors of two, glowing ever craving ovens." When these are open "it is useless to look at anything in the front, for the eyes are blinded with the glare and I, therefore, amuse myself by watching the chromatic effects of the light upon my garments as John Jones shovels in the coke."

Presently the train entered the (old) Merstham Tunnel—the route was, of course, *via* Redhill in 1857; "the roar and clatter are louder than ever and the round-shouldered, thick-necked driver in front sits in holy calm with a halo of steamy glory round his head." In the cuttings Hollingshead looked at the shadow of the train and traced "the familiar outline of my friend the German baron"—he had seen him at London Bridge "looking out from the depths of a cavernous cloak like a veritable Esquimaux"—and "the form of the French banker, who is probably dreaming of the *crédit mobilier* and forgetting, for a few moments, the memory of the hateful sea." (The great aversion felt for the Channel crossing by many Frenchmen always made an extraordinary impression on Dickens.)

"I turn to look again at steady Tom Jones, and find him wiping the steam off his glass. . . . At all hours of the day and night he is ready to ride on the whirlwind and direct the storm; to cast into the shade the performances of the genii of Arabian fables, and career through the air at a rate of a mile a minute with tons of animate and inanimate matter, for the very humble reward of from forty to fifty shillings a week. The unwavering faith of the public in Tom Jones is something more than wonderful. . . . And the public confidence is worthily placed. As he stands there before me in the glare of the coke oven, or the flickering light of the station in the middle of the night, carefully oiling the joints of his engine, he is the model of an honest, conscientious workman, dutiful, orderly, and regular. May his shadow never grow less, and his engine never grow rusty!"

Arriving at Dover, where the unfortu-

nate French banker was "given up unconditionally and shudderingly to his enemy the hateful sea," Hollingshead repaired to the Lord Warden Hotel and tried in vain to sleep "with the roaring wind, the hissing steam, and the clattering engine" ringing in his ears.

On the return journey at 8 a.m., Hollingshead found the chimney did "not look so like a stage coach driver of the old school as it did in the night mist. The round shoulders stand revealed in the morning light as the brass beehive-shaped manhole; the broad-brimmed hat is nothing more than the overhanging scroll top of the engine chimney." Starting away, they appeared to "rush towards what appear at first sight to be two upright letter-box slits, cut at the base of the high steep cliff, but which develop, as we draw nearer, into two narrow pointed arches, like the entrance to some old monastery or cathedral. They are surely too narrow to admit the round, broad shoulders and the low crowned hat, and yet we are rushing towards them, reckless of consequences!" (These were, of course, the peculiarly-shaped Shakespeare Tunnels.)

"In an instant we are at the portals of the cliff, which widen at our approach, and I involuntarily shrink as we plunge through them into the thick black darkness. The roar increases, and the hissing is as if our way lay through Pandemonium and over the prostrate bodies of a thousand serpent fiends. . . . I at last discern a very small open church door and through it I can see the faint grey-blue outlines of the country. The doorway appears to be rapidly advancing towards us. . . . I have scarcely time to admire the setting of the picture when, with a whistle, we find ourselves outside the tunnel amongst the sea gulls and the hills. . . ."

"We now make for another cliff, guiding our course towards a small, round, black target mark. . . . It assumes the proportions and appearance of the entrance to a gas pipe. Although I admit that our success was very great in going through the cathedral aisle. . . . the round shoulders are rather too venturesome in trying the passage of such a circumscribed tunnel. But the railway architect delights in a close shave." Inside the Abbotscliff Tunnel the writer felt he was "flying through a gigantic

telescope," and would not have been surprised at a "merman asking for tickets." The far end eventually appeared like "the reflected disc of the large microscope at the Polytechnic. Two specks pass across the circle like the insects in a drop of water; they are railway labourers crossing the mouth of the tunnel."

Continuing the journey, they went "past undulating parks . . . quiet pools and churches in among the hills; past solitary signalmen and side stations, where weary engines rest from their labours; past hurrying down trains, with a crash and a whirl; and at last through arches, in among the crowd of trains, each making for the London terminus . . . the signal houses, the coloured semaphore arms . . . the men waving red and green flags, as if in honour of our approach; the other men, standing motionless, with projecting arms, like raw recruits under exercise, or a mesmeric patient in a state of catalepsy; the discs hanging like enormous spectacles across bare poles . . . the final whistle of the engine and grinding screech of the train." (The men "standing motionless" were, of course, giving the hand "all-right," now "caution," signal, and the "discs hanging like enormous spectacles" were distant signals of that period which became much used on the Brighton line.)

The reporter ended his article, of which the few extracts above can give only a very brief general idea, as follows. "My trip has been short, but it has shown me something of the organisation of a railway; and the order, regularity, care, vigilance and subordinate habits of the officials. When our evening train in future is ten minutes late at the Claypool Station and Mrs. Contributor hints that

the dinner is again getting cold, I shall not write an indignant letter to *The Times* but shall say to her in my blandest tones 'Better late than never, my dear; . . . I am sure you would rather have the mutton spoiled than have me brought up the lane on a stretcher, with my lever watch beaten several inches deep into my ribs and my usually handsome countenance in such a state that it would frighten the baby'." The article is written throughout in Dickens's own style, but is credited to John Hollingshead in the contributor's book of *Household Words*, now in the Dickens House in London. It is possible that he himself edited the text considerably, to give this result, as it was his custom often to do with contributions to that journal, at times even practically re-writing them in his own words.

About the date of this article, Dickens made his country home at Gad's Hill Place, Higham, Kent, and for some years made much use of Higham Station, on the North Kent line, and became very well known on the S.E.R. Returning from Paris, he had a remarkable escape when the up tidal train was derailed at Staplehurst, with the loss of ten lives, on June 9, 1865; he never really quite recovered from the effects of the shock. Curiously enough, his death occurred on the same date, five years later. He displayed much interest in the work and welfare of railway servants and presided at the annual dinner of the Railway Benevolent Society on June 5, 1867—the society had then been in existence nine years—when he delivered one of those characteristic appeals, which always made him in great demand to take the chair at gatherings for furthering charitable objects.