

The Last Stage Coachman

By Wilkie Collins

The last stage Coachman! It falls upon the ear of every one but a shareholder in railways, with a boding, melancholy sound. In spite of our natural reverence for the wonders of science, our hearts grow heavy at the thought of never again beholding the sweet-smelling nosegay, the unimpeachable top boots, and fair white breeches; once so prominent as the uniform of the fraternity. With all our respect for expeditious and business-like travelling, we experience a feeling nearly akin to disgust, at being marshalled to our places by a bell and a fellow with a badge on his shoulder; instead of hearing the cheery summons 'Now then, gentlemen,' and being regaled by a short and instructive conversation with a ruddy-faced personage in a dustless olive green coat and prismatic belcher handkerchief. What did we want with smoke? Had we not the coachman's cigar, if we were desirous of observing its shapes and appearances? Who would be so unreasonable as to languish for steam, when he could inhale it on a cool, autumnal morning, naturally concocted from the backs of four blood horses? Who!—Alas! we may propose questions and find out answers to the end of the chapter, and yet fail in reforming the perverted taste of the present generation; we know that the attempt is useless, and we give up in sorrowful and philosophic resignation, and proceed undaunted by the probable sneers of railway directors, to the recital of—

A VISION

Methought I walked forth one autumn evening to observe the arrival of a stage coach. I wandered on, yet nothing of the kind met my eye. I tried many an old public road—they were now grass-grown and miry, or desecrated by the abominable presence of a 'station.' I wended my way towards a famous road-side inn: it was desolate and silent, or in other words, 'To Let.' I looked for 'the commercial room:' not a pot of beer adorned the mouldering tables, and not a pipe lay scattered over the wild and beautiful seclusions of its once numerous 'boxes.' It was deserted and useless; the voice of the traveller rung no longer round its walls, and the merry horn of the guard startled no more the sleepy few, who once congregated round its hospitable door. The chill fire-place and broad, antiquated mantel-piece presented but one bill—the starting time of an adjacent railroad; surmounted by a representation of those engines of destruction, in dull, frowsy lithograph.

I turned to the yard. Where was the oastler with his unbraced breeches and his upturned shirt sleeves? Where was the stable boy with his wisp of straw and his sieve of oats? Where were the coquettish mares and the tall blood horses? Where was the manger and the stable door?—All gone—all disappeared: the buildings dilapidated and tottering—of what use is a stable to a stoker? The oastler and stable boy had passed away—what fellowship have either with a boiler? The inn yard was no more! The very dunghill in its farthest corner was choked by dust and old bricks, and the cock, the pride of the country round, clamoured no longer on the ruined and unsightly wall. I thought it was possible that he had satisfied long since the cravings of a railway committee; and I sat down on a

ruined water-tub to give way to the melancholy reflections called up by the sight before me.

I know not how long I meditated. There was no officious waiter to ask me, 'What I would please to order?' No chambermaid to simper out 'This way, Sir,'—not even a stray cat to claim acquaintance with the calves of my legs, or a horse's hoof to tread upon my toe. There was nothing to disturb my miserable reverie, and I anathematised railways without distinction or exception.

The distant sound of slow and stealthy footsteps at last attracted my attention. I looked to the far end of the yard. Heavens above! a stage coachman was pacing its worn and weedy pavement.

There was no mistaking him—he wore the low-crowned, broad-brimmed, whitey-brown, well-brushed hat; the voluminous checked neckcloth; the ample-skirted coat; the striped waistcoat; the white cords; and last, not least, the immortal boots. But alas! the calf that had once filled them out, had disappeared; they clanked heavily on the pavement, instead of creaking tightly and noisily wherever he went. His waistcoat, evidently once filled almost to bursting, hung in loose, uncomfortable folds about his emaciated waist: large wrinkles marred the former beauty of the fit of his coat: and his face was all lines and furrows, instead of smiles and jollity. The spirit of the fraternity had passed away from him—he was the stage coachman only in dress.

He walked backwards and forwards for some time without turning his head one way or the other, except now and then to peer into the deserted stable, or to glance mournfully at the whip he held in his hand: at last the sound of the arrival of a train struck upon his ear!

He drew himself up to his full height, slowly and solemnly shook his clenched fist in the direction of the sound, and looked—Oh that look! it spoke annihilation to the mightiest engine upon the rail, it scoffed at steam, and flashed furious derision at the largest terminus that ever was erected; it was an awfully comprehensive look—the concentrated essence of the fierce and deadly enmity of all the stage coachmen in England to steam conveyance.

To my utter astonishment, not, it must be owned, unmixed with fear, he suddenly turned his eyes towards my place of shelter, and walked up to me.

'That's the rail,' said he, between his set teeth.

'It is,' said I, considerably embarrassed.

'Damn it!' returned the excited Stage Coachman.

There was something inexpressibly awful about this execration; and I confess I felt a strong internal conviction that the next day's paper would teem with horrible railway accidents in every column.

'I did my utmost to hoppers 'em,' said the Stage Coachman, in softened accents. 'I was the *last* that guy' in, I kep' a losing day after day, and yet I worked on; I was determined to do my dooty, and I drove a coach the last day with an old hooman and a carpet bag inside, and three little boys and seven whopping empty portmanteaus outside. I was determined my last kick to have *some* passengers to show to the rail, so I took my wife and children cos nobody else wouldn't go, and then we guy' in. Hows'ever, the last time as *I* was on the road I did'nt go and show 'em an empty coach—we wasn't full, but we wasn't empty; we was game to the last!'

A grim smile of triumph lit up the features of the deposed Coachman as he gave vent to this assertion. He took hold of me by the button-hole, and led the way into the house.

‘This landlord was an austerious sort of a man,’ said he; ‘he used to hobserve, that he only wished a Railway Committee would dine at his house, he’d pison ’em all, and emigrate; and he’d ha’ done it, too!’

I did not venture to doubt this, so the stage coachman continued.

‘I’ve smoked my pipe by the hour together in that fire-place; I’ve read ‘The Times’ adwertisements and Perlice Reports in that box till I fell asleep; I’ve walked up and down this here room a saying all sorts of things about the rail, and a busting for happiness. Outside this wery door I’ve bin a drownded in thankys from ladies for never lettin’ nobody step through their band-boxes. The chambermaids used to smile, and the dogs used to bark, wherever I came.—But it’s all hover now—the poor feller as kep’ this place takes tickets at a Station, and the chambermaids makes scalding hot tea behind a mahuggany counter for people as has no time to drink it in!’

As the Stage Coachman uttered these words, a contemptuous sneer puckered his sallow cheek. He led me back into the yard; the ruined appearance of which, looked doubly mournful, under the faint rays of moonlight that every here and there stole through the dilapidated walls of the stable. An owl had taken up his abode, where the chief oastler’s bedroom had once rejoiced in the grotesque majesty of huge portraits of every winner of every ‘Derby,’ since the first days of Epsom. The bird of night flew heavily off at our approach, and my companion pointed gloomily up to the fragments of mouldy, worm-eaten wood, the last relics of the stable loft.

‘He was a great friend of mine, was that h’ostler,’ said the Coachman, ‘but he’s left this railway-bothered world—he was finished by the train.’

At my earnest entreaty to hear further, he continued,

“When this h’old place, was guv’up and ruinated; the h’oastler as ’ud never look at the rail before, went down to have a sight of it, and as he was a leaning his elbows on the wall, and a wishing as how he had the stabling of all the steam h’ingines (he’d ha’ done ’em justice!) wot should he see, but one of his osses as was thrown out of employ by the rail, a walking along jist where the train was coming. Bill jumped down, and as he was a leading of him h’off, up comes the (rain, and went over his leg and cut the’os in two—“Tom,” says he to me when we picked him up; ‘I’m a going eleven mile an hour, to the last stage as is left for me to do. I’ve always done my dooty with the osses; I’ve bin and done it now—bury that ere poor os and me out of the noise of the rail.’ We got the surgeons to him, but he never spoke no more, Poor Bill! Poor Bill!’

This last recollection seemed too much for the Stage Coachman, he wrung my hand, and walked abruptly to the furthest corner of the yard.

I took care not to interrupt him, and watched him carefully from a distance.

At first, the one expression of his countenance was melancholy; but by degrees, other thoughts came crowding from his mind, and mantled on his woe-be-gone visage. Poor fellow, I could see that he was again in imagination the beloved of the ladies and the adored of the chambermaids: a faint reflection of the affable, yet majestic demeanour, required by his calling, flitted occasionally over his pinched, attenuated features: and brightened the cold, melancholy expression of his countenance.

As I still looked, it grew darker and darker, yet the face of the Stage Coachman was never for an instant hidden from me. The same artificial expression of pleasure characterized its lineaments as before. Suddenly I heard a strange, unnatural noise in the air—now it seemed like the distant trampling of horses; and now again, like the rumbling

of a heavily laden coach along a public road. A faint, sickly light, spread itself over that part of the Heavens whence the sounds proceeded; and after an interval, a fully equipped Stage Coach appeared in the clouds, with a railway director strapped fast to each wheel, and a stoker between the teeth of each of the four horses.

In place of luggage, fragments of broken steam carriages, and red carpet bags filled with other mementos of railway accidents, occupied the roof. Chance passengers appeared to be the only tenants of the outside places. In front sat Julius Caesar and Mrs Hannah Moore; and behind, Sir Joseph Banks and Mrs Brownrigge. Of all the 'insides,' I could, I grieve to say, see nothing.

On the box was a little man with fuzzy hair and large iron grey whiskers; clothed in a coat of engineers' skin, with gloves of the hide of railway police. He pulled up opposite my friend, and bowing profoundly motioned him to the box seat.

A gleam of unutterable joy irradiated the Stage Coachman's countenance, as he stepped lightly into his place, seized the reins, and with one hearty 'good night, addressed to an imaginary inn-full of people, started the horses.

Off they drove! my friend in the plenitude of his satisfaction cracking the whip every instant as he drove the phantom coach into the air. And amidst the shrieks of the railway directors at the wheel, the groans of James Watt, the bugle of the guard, and the tremendous cursing of the invisible 'insides,' fast and furiously disappeared from my eyes.