

From the London Atlas.
RUMBLINGS AND GRUMBLINGS BETWEEN LONDON AND BIRMINGHAM.

My dear Atlas—Pray let go your hold of the world for a quarter of an hour and sit down, and let a pagoda-tree-shaker talk to you.

I promised, when I left India some four months since, to write over to many of my curious friends there some account of what those railways which we read so much about in your columns really are. In the land of the sun, I can assure you, although Atlas is there ubiquitous, we have very confused notions of these same railways, and we associate your ever-recurring railway share lists with an idea that old England has become a very different place altogether from what it was when we left it, some of us not more than eight or ten years ago.

Having occasion to visit an early chum at his place in the north, I think I cannot better fulfil my promise than by inditing a simple story of my progress from London to Birmingham by one of these *chemins de fer*—a thing as mysterious to an Anglo-Indian as the *royaume d'enfer* itself. If you will give it a place it will save me the trouble of making an infinite number of manuscript copies, and your omnipresence in the East will at once make an English railway as well understood throughout India as a palanquin or a *kurranchee*.

At exactly nine o'clock, then, last Sunday morning, with all my traps safely stowed in the hold of a hackney coach, I started from the door of the Clarendon for the Euston-square terminus. This terminus is a huge collection of low buildings snugly ensconced behind a handsome front, with a gigantic portico entrance upon vast pillars of granite. The courtyard inside swarms with porters, who, amid the crash of cabs, seize upon your luggage, and bear it away in a twinkling. Woe to the wight who has not his name distinctly labelled upon his trunks. I felt inclined to label, not only my trunk, but my limbs also; for I had heard fearful stories of multitudes being squashed into one mass of flesh, by what they delicately call a collision, and I had no idea of having an arm or a leg assigned in sepulchral rites to any fat *vis-a-vis* who might happen to be jammed into an undistinguishable union with my own respectable body. Having come back from India to save myself a liver, I had an insuperable prejudice to lose my individuality among the dead.

Having paid my thirty shillings, I passed through the office, and found a long line of heavy ponderous carriages, something like French diligences—looking as though they had been made by Titans, and with such appliances of chains and hooks and springs as showed that they were intended to resist enormous shocks. How any force could damage such solid vehicles it is difficult to conceive.

While I was looking on I heard a mighty *sumph* like an elephant in extremities—then a vigorous hissing—and then a shrill unearthly scream, to which nothing that ever occurs in India can afford the slightest similitude. All this proceeded from a huge thing like a twenty-thousand pounder, if there was such a piece of ordnance, mounted upon four wheels, with steam issuing from its touchhole, and a long funnel rising at right angles with its muzzle. Ring-a-ding-ding goes a hand-bell, 'Take your places' shout the porters, and every body scrambles into his particular pen in one of the carriages—*sumph, sumph, sumph*, goes the engine, and gently the whole train moves on over the tramroad upon which the wheels run.

Gradually we emerged from the quarter of a mile of slated roofing which covers the road at its commencement, and gradually the *sumphs* of the engine become less slow and measured, until they increase to a *phit, phit, phit, phit*, so fast and rapid that the ear could scarcely divide them.

Now we were speeding along at a smooth velocity that I could not appreciate when I looked at the posts and rails which hedge the road—they were flying past us like sand in a simoon. I made my head and eyes ache by attempting to count ten of them through the windows—I might as well have attempted to count ten of the sand atoms as they pass. I put down the window and poked my head out to see how fast we were going—an atom of hot cinder, immediately flew into my eye, and gave me occupation for the next half hour in cursing my temerity, whincing at the pain, and rubbing with my pocket handkerchief. I shall not try that experiment again without a pair of railroad goggles on.

On, on we went, for it was a mail train, and stopped only at what they call first-class stations. 'What's that?' I cried, as a whirr that seemed to threaten instant annihilation, sounded continuously close to my ears, and an indistinguishable phantasmagoria, like a rush of phantoms, swept by within an inch of the coach window.

I suppose I started, for somebody in the opposite corner, told me with a chuckle, and then a broad grin, that that was the up train. 'The duece it is,' said I to myself; 'it came plaguy near, and now I can understand what sort of affair this collision is.'

The carriage had six compartments, but I had only one fellow-occupant of it, and this individual, a fat, common-looking, middle-aged man, the silence once broken, insisted upon talking. He exhausted the whole subject of the weather, for three weeks past and to come; and then he told me how he had been to see Adelaide Kemble the night before, and he energetically swore in an oily rapture that she was the finest singer that he ever had heard in London—a very great deal better than Malibran. Now, I was in England in Malibran's time, and my recollection of her is an idolatry. I had no sympathy with my fat friend's rapture. When he produced the *libretto* of *Elena Uberti* I refused it, I fear rather ungraciously; and when he insisted upon reading some of the songs, and commenting upon Miss Kemble's singing of them, to get rid of the bore I threw myself back and pretended to go to sleep. Verily he had his revenge. No sooner did he convince himself that I was fast asleep, than he positively began to howl forth in full voice the most horrible drastic imitations of the sounds he had heard the night before. Here was I locked up with an enthusiastic vocal bagman, in a box flying with the speed of a whirlwind, and without the possibility of assistance or a chance of kicking him out. Canonize me for patience; for this I endured for half an hour.

But why do I dwell upon this? Merely to show how monotonous and destitute of interest is this railroad travelling. Do you suppose that this could possibly have happened inside or outside of a good English stage-coach? The outside of a stage-coach is one continued amusement. You are always meeting somebody or overtaking somebody, always something to admire or laugh at, always somebody to crack a jest with. On the worst stage-coach that ever was there must have been a coachman, and there must have been opportunities of stretching one's legs at a change of horses: there must also have been facilities for occasional potations of XXX

and brandy-pawnee, and a man who lit a cheroot would not have to expiate each whiff by a day at the treadmill. One could ride upon a stage-coach without sacrificing one's personal liberty, but the man who sets foot in a railway carriage is a slave for the time, being locked into a box like a piece of luggage. The blue-coated mob who conduct the affairs of the railway evidently only look upon him as a sort of appendage to his own portmanteau.

I was grumbling to myself something in this strain, when the carriages entered at a slackened pace into a wilderness of brickwork, and then stopped. A loud voice roared out, 'Wolverton,' the door of the carriage was thrown open, and, as I heard all the passengers pouring out like a swarm of bees, of course I jumped out too. 'Stop here ten minutes,' said somebody. I followed the crowd into one of the large square brick buildings which abound upon all railroads: it was marked 'Refreshment-room.' It has a counter running the full length. On one side stand the crowd, gulping coffee, scalding their throats with soup, cramming pork pies, pocketing banbury cakes, or struggling for the corner where they sell beer and spirits. On the other side is a row of the neatest and prettiest handmaids that you will meet with in a day's march in England, or in a hundred year's residence in India, my nabobs. I give the railway directors credit for their taste in this particular; but these poor girls' beauty must be entirely thrown away here. What does a hungry crowd, with ten minutes for feeding, want of loorees? Before one could even succeed in laying the foundations for a gentle flirtation the damsel will be a hundred miles behind, and will have ministered *khanohpeenah* to fifty more ten minute swains.

This refreshment-room is, I admit, well managed in accordance with the hurry-scurry system to which it belongs. There is no waiting, you seize upon what you like upon the counter, pay for it, bolt it or pocket it, and then the bell rings and the crowd rushes out, tumbles into the train again, the doors are locked, and then *sumph, sumph, sumph—phit, phit, phit, phit*, and away we fly just as before.

To my great relief I found that my bagman had vanished, so that I now had the carriage all to myself. This, however, was no great advantage, for, as I could not sit in six pens at once, and as the divisions prevent one from lying along the seats, the only difference between a carriage full and a carriage empty is that one is abominably hot, and the other insufferably cold.

As to seeing anything of the country, it is quite out of the question. You are either going through what is called a cutting, which means that you are either passing at the bottom of a ditch, or else you are going along a level, where the utmost you can see is three field's length, these being almost always disfigured by railway diggings, furnaces, or coke burnings. If you try to read, ten to one you find yourself the next moment in darkness, only broken by a little glimmering lamp fixed in the roof of the carriages. The train has entered a tunnel, and on it goes, rolling and rattling through the bowels of the earth, perhaps for a couple of minutes. Darkness at midday, and a cold, damp, earthy smell, do not raise my spirits.

Between Birmingham and London one did pass through, and one now passes by Coventry among other places. When the train stopped, and the man called out the name of the place, I had a vivid recollection of the

rattle of the four horses through the streets, the coachman's horn, and the lasses kissing their hands from the windows, as they always do in England when one is bowling away on the top of a coach at the rate of ten miles an hour, because they know they are safe against being made to pay for their advances. Here, however, all I saw of Coventry was a nurseryman's signboard, and the tops of three steeples just visible above it. I declare positively that was the only indication I remarked of our being near any populous place. I don't know that anything more occurred before we arrived at another Babel of bricks, furnaces, engine-house, and train lines. Somebody called out 'Birmingham,' and there we were sure enough.

I had come to Birmingham—112 miles—in less than five hours and a half. I had seen on the way the inside of a well-stuffed carriage, a great quantity of iron rails, a row of pretty girls, and much bricks and mortar. I had been bored and ennuyed to ten times the extent I should have been in double the extent of journey by a coach. But still I had got here in five hours and a half—and that's the consideration which will always decide an Englishman.

My maiden attempt at railroads has convinced me that, although they are doubtless very useful to give ubiquity to a man of business, they are certainly not conducive either to the information or to the pleasure of the traveller.

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