

***CHARLES
JAMES LEVER***



***TALES
OF THE TRAINS***

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Tales of the Trains

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INTRODUCTION.

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Let no enthusiast of the pastoral or romantic school, no fair reader with eyes “deeply, darkly, beautifully blue,” sneer at the title of my paper. I have written it after much and mature meditation.

It would be absurd to deny that the great and material changes which our progress in civilization and the arts effect, should not impress literature as well as manners; that the tone of our thoughts, as much as the temper of our actions, should not sympathize with the giant strides of inventive genius. We have but to look abroad, and confess the fact. The facilities of travel which our day confers, have given a new and a different impulse to the human mind; the man is no longer deemed a wonder who has journeyed some hundred miles from home,—the miracle will soon be he who has not been everywhere.

To persist, therefore, in dwelling on the same features, the same fortunes, and the same characters of mankind, while all around us is undergoing a great and a formidable revolution, appears to me as insane an effort as though we should try to preserve our equilibrium during the shock of an earthquake.

The stage lost much of its fascination when, by the diffusion of literature, men could read at home what once they were obliged to go abroad to see. Historical novels, in the same way, failed to produce the same excitement, as the readers became more conversant with the passages of history which suggested them. The battle-and-murder

school, the raw-head-and-bloody-bones literature, pales before the commonest coroner's inquest in the "Times;" and even Boz can scarce stand competition with the *vie intime* of a union workhouse. What, then, is to be done? *Quæ regio terræ* remains to be explored? Have we not ransacked every clime and country,—from the Russian to the Red Man, from the domestic habits of Sweden to the wild life of the Prairies? Have we not had kings and kaisers, popes, cardinals, and ministers, to satiety? The land service and the sea service have furnished their quota of scenes; and I am not sure but that the revenue and coast-guard may have been pressed into the service. Personalities have been a stock in trade to some, and coarse satires on well-known characters of fashionable life have made the reputation of others.

From the palace to the poorhouse, from the forum to the factory, all has been searched and ransacked for a new view of life or a new picture of manners. Some have even gone into the recesses of the earth, and investigated the arcana of a coal-mine, in the hope of eliciting a novelty. Yet, all this time, the great reformer has been left to accomplish his operations without note or comment; and while thundering along the earth or ploughing the sea with giant speed and giant power, men have not endeavored to track his influence upon humanity, nor work out any evidences of those strange changes he is effecting over the whole surface of society. The steam-engine is not merely a power to turn the wheels of mechanism,—it beats and throbs within the heart of a nation, and is felt in every fibre and recognized in every sinew of civilized man.

How vain to tell us now of the lover's bark skimming the midnight sea, or speak of a felucca and its pirate crew stealing stealthily across the waters! A suitor would come to seek his mistress in the Iron Duke, of three hundred horse-power; and a smuggler would have no chance, if he had not a smoking-galley, with Watt's patent boilers!

What absurdity to speak of a runaway couple, in vain pursued by an angry parent, on the road to Gretna Green! An express engine, with a stoker and a driver, would make the deserted father overtake them in no time!

Instead of the characters of a story remaining stupidly in one place, the novelist now can conduct his tale to the tune of thirty miles an hour, and start his company in the first class of the Great Western. No difficulty to preserve the unities! Here he journeys with bag and baggage, and can bring twenty or more families along with him, if he like. Not limiting the description of scenery to one place or spot, he whisks his reader through a dozen counties in a chapter, and gives him a bird's-eye glance of half England as he goes; thus, how original the breaks which would arise from an occasional halt, what an afflicting interruption to a love story, the cry of the guard, "Coventry, Coventry, Coventry;" or, "Any gentleman, Tring, Tring, Tring;" with the more agreeable interjection of "Tea or coffee, sir?—one brandy and soda-water—'Times,' 'Chronicle,' or 'Globe.'"

How would the great realities of life flash upon the reader's mind, and how insensibly would he amalgamate fact with fiction! And, lastly, think, reflect, what new catastrophe would open upon an author's vision; for while, to the gentler novelist, like Mrs. Gore, an eternal separation

might ensue from starting with the wrong train, the bloody-minded school would revel in explosions and concussions, rent boilers, insane luggage-trains, flattening the old gentlemen like buffers. Here is a vista for imagination, here is scope for at least fifty years to come. I do not wish to allude to the accessory consequences of this new literary school, though I am certain music and the fine arts would both benefit by its introduction; and one of the popular melodies of the day would be "We met; 't was in a tunnel." I hope my literary brethren will appreciate the candor and generosity with which I point out to them this new and unclaimed spot in Parnassus. No petty jealousies, no miserable self-interests, have weighed with me. I am willing to give them a share in my discovered country, well aware that there is space and settlement for us all,—locations for every fancy, allotments for every quality of genius. For myself I reserve nothing; satisfied with the fame of a Columbus, I can look forward to a glorious future, and endure all the neglect and indifference of present ingratitude. Meanwhile, less with the hope of amusing the reader than illustrating my theory, I shall jot down some of my own experiences, and give them a short series of the "Romance of a Railroad."

But, ere I begin, let me make one explanation for the benefit of the reader and myself.

The class of literature which I am now about to introduce to the public, unhappily debars me from the employment of the habitual tone and the ordinary aids to interest prescriptive right has conferred on the novelist. I can neither commence with "It was late in the winter of 1754, as three

travellers," etc., etc.; or, "The sun was setting" or, "The moon was rising;" or, "The stars were twinkling;" or, "On the 15th Feb., 1573, a figure, attired in the costume of northern Italy, was seen to blow his nose;" or, in fact, is there a single limit to the mode in which I may please to open my tale. My way lies in a country where there are no roads, and there is no one to cry out, "Keep your own side of the way." Now, then, for—

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“The English are a lord-loving people, there’s no doubt of it,” was the reflection I could not help making to myself, on hearing the commentaries pronounced by my fellow-travellers in the North Midland, on a passenger who had just taken his departure from amongst us. He was a middle-aged man, of very prepossessing appearance, with a slow, distinct, and somewhat emphatic mode of speaking. He had joined freely and affably in the conversation of the party, contributing his share in the observations made upon the several topics discussed, and always expressing himself suitably and to the purpose; and although these are gifts I am by no means ungrateful enough to hold cheaply, yet neither was I prepared to hear such an universal burst of panegyric as followed his exit.

“The most agreeable man, so affable, so unaffected.”
“Always listened to with such respect in the Upper House.”

“Splendid place, Treddleton,—eighteen hundred acres, they say, in the demesne,—such a deer-park too.” “And what a collection of Vandykes!” “The Duke has a very high opinion of his—”

“Income,—cannot be much under two hundred thousand, I should say.”

Such and such-like were the fragmentary comments upon one who, divested of so many claims upon the respect and gratitude of his country, had merely been pronounced a very well-bred and somewhat agreeable gentleman. To have refused sympathy with a feeling so general would have been to argue myself a member of the anti-corn law league, the repeal association, or some similarly minded institution; so that I joined in the grand chorus around, and manifested the happiness I experienced in common with the rest, that a lord had travelled in our company, and neither asked us to sit on the boiler nor on the top of the luggage, but actually spoke to us and interchanged sentiments, as though we were even intended by Providence for such communion. One little round-faced man with a smooth cheek, devoid of beard, a pair of twinkling gray eyes, and a light brown wig, did not, however, contribute his suffrage to the measure thus triumphantly carried, but sat with a very peculiar kind of simper on his mouth, and with his head turned towards the window, as though to avoid observation. He, I say, said nothing, but there was that in the expression of his features that said, “I differ from you,” as palpably as though he had spoken it out in words.

The theme once started was not soon dismissed; each seemed to vie with his neighbor in his knowledge of the habits and opinions of the titled orders, and a number of pleasant little pointless stories were told of the nobility, which, if I could only remember and retail here, would show the amiable feeling they entertain for the happiness of all the world, and how glad they are when every one has enough to eat, and there is no “leader” in the “Times” about the distress in the manufacturing districts. The round-faced man eyed the speakers in turn, but never uttered a word; and it was plain that he was falling very low in the barometer of public opinion, from his incapacity to contribute a single noble anecdote, even though the hero should be only a Lord Mayor, when suddenly he said,—

“There was rather a queer sort of thing happened to me the last time I went the Nottingham circuit.”

“Oh, do you belong to that circuit?” said a thin-faced old man in spectacles. “Do you know Fitzroy Kelly?”

“Is he in the hardware line? There was a chap of that name travelled for Tingle and Crash; but he’s done up, I think. He forged a bill of exchange in Manchester, and is travelling now in another line of business.”

“I mean the eminent lawyer, sir,—I know nothing of bagmen.”

“They’re bagmen too,” replied the other, with a little chuckling laugh, “and pretty samples of honesty they hawk about with them, as I hear; but no offence, gentlemen,—I’m a CG. myself.”

“A what?” said three or four together.

“A commercial gentleman, in the tape, bobbin, and twist line, for Rundle, Trundle, and Winningspin’s house, one of the oldest in the trade.”

Here was a tumble down with a vengeance,—from the noble Earl of Heaven knows what and where, Knight of the Garter, Grand Cross of the Bath, Knight of St. Patrick, to a mere C. G.,—a commercial gentleman, travelling in the tape, bobbin, and twist line for the firm of Rundle, Trundle, and Winningspin, of Leeds. The operation of steam condensing, by letting in a stream of cold water, was the only simile I can find for the sudden revulsion; and as many plethoric sobs, shrugs, and grunts issued from the party as though they represented an engine under like circumstances. All the aristocratic associations were put to flight at once; it seemed profane to remember the Peerage in such company; and a general silence ensued, each turning from time to time an angry look towards the little bagman, whose *mal-à-propos* speech had routed their illustrious allusions.

Somewhat tired of the stiff and uncomfortable calm that succeeded, I ventured in a very meek and insinuating tone to remind the little man of the reminiscence he had already begun, when interrupted by the unlucky question as to his circuit.

“Oh! it ain’t much of a story,” said he. “I should n’t wonder if the same kind of thing happens often,—mayhap, too, the gentlemen would not like to hear it, though they might, after all, for there’s a Duke in it.”

There was that in the easy simplicity with which he said these words, vouching for his good temper, which