

## The Romance of the Rail

In these iron days of the dominance of steam, the crowning wrong that is wrought us of furnace and piston-rod lies in their annihilation of the steadfast mystery of the horizon, so that the imagination no longer begins to work at the point where vision ceases. In happier times, three hundred years ago, the seafarers from Bristol City looked out from the prows of their vessels in the grey of the morning, and wot not rightly whether the land they saw might be Jerusalem or Madagascar, or if it were not North and South America. "And there be certaine flitting islands," says one, "which have been oftentimes seene, and when men approached near them they vanished." "It may be that the gulfs will wash us down," said Ulysses (thinking of what Americans call the "getting-off place"); "it may be we shall touch the Happy Isles." And so on, and so on; each with his special hope or "wild surmise." There was always a chance of touching the Happy Isles. And in that first fair world whose men and manners we knew through story-books, before experience taught us far other, the Prince mounts his horse one fine morning, and rides all day, and sleeps in a forest; and next morning, lo! a new country: and he rides by fields and granges never visited before, through faces strange to him, to where an unknown King steps down to welcome the mysterious stranger. And he marries the Princess, and dwells content for many a year; till one day he thinks "I will look upon my father's face again, though the leagues be long to my own land." And he rides all day, and sleeps in a forest; and next morning he is made welcome at home, where his

name has become a dim memory. Which is all as it should be; for, annihilate time and space as you may, a man's stride remains the true standard of distance; an eternal and unalterable scale. The severe horizon, too, repels the thoughts as you gaze to the infinite considerations that lie about, within touch and hail; and the night cometh, when no man can work.

To all these natural bounds and limitations it is good to get back now and again, from a life assisted and smooth by artificialities. Where iron has superseded muscle, the kindly life-blood is apt to throb dull as the measured beat of the steam-engine. But the getting back to them is now a matter of effort, of set purpose, a stepping aside out of our ordinary course; they are no longer unsought influences towards the making of character. So perhaps the time of them has gone by, here in this second generation of steam. *Pereunt et imputantur*; they pass away, and are scored against not us but our guilty fathers. For ourselves, our peculiar slate is probably filling fast. The romance of the steam-engine is yet to be captured and expressed -- not fully nor worthily, perhaps, until it too is a vanished regret; though Emerson for one will not have it so, and maintains and justifies its right to immediate recognition as poetic material. "For as it is dislocation and detachment from the life of God that makes things ugly, the poet, who re-attaches things to Nature and the whole -- re-attaching even artificial things and violations of Nature to Nature by a deeper insight -- disposes very easily of the most disagreeable facts"; so that he looks upon "the factory village and the railway" and "sees

them fall within the great Order not less than the bee-hive or the spider's geometrical web." The poet, however, seems hard to convince hereof. Emerson will have it that "Nature loves the gliding train of cars"; "instead of which" the poet still goes about the country singing purling brooks. Painters have been more flexible and liberal. Turner saw and did his best to seize the spirit of the thing, its kinship with the elements, and to blend furnace-glare and rush of iron with the storm-shower, the wind and the thwart-flashing sun-rays, and to make the whole a single expression of irresoluble force. And even in a certain work by another and a very different painter -- though I willingly acquit Mr Frith of any deliberate romantic intention -- you shall find the element of romance in the vestiges of the old order still lingering in the first transition period: the coach-shaped railway carriages with luggage piled and corded on top, the red-coated guard, the little engine tethered well ahead as if between traces. To those bred within sight of the sea, steamers will always partake in somewhat of the "beauty and mystery of the ships"; above all, if their happy childhood have lain among the gleaming lochs and sinuous firths of the Western Highlands, where, twice a week maybe, the strange visitant crept by headland and bay, a piece of the busy, mysterious outer world. For myself, I probably stand alone in owing to a sentimental weakness for the night-piercing whistle -- judiciously remote, as some men love the skirl of the pipes. In the days when streets were less wearily familiar than now, or ever the golden cord was quite loosed that led back to relinquished fields and wider skies, I have lain awake on stifling summer nights, thinking of

luckier friends by moor and stream, and listening for the whistles from certain railway stations, veritable ``horns of Elf-land, faintly blowing." Then, a ghostly passenger, I have taken my seat in a phantom train, and sped up, up, through the map, rehearsing the journey bit by bit: through the furnace-lit Midlands, and on till the grey glimmer of dawn showed stone walls in place of hedges, and masses looming up on either side; till the bright sun shone upon brown leaping streams and purple heather, and the clear, sharp northern air streamed in through the windows. Return, indeed, was bitter; Endymion-like, ``my first touch of the earth went nigh to kill": but it was only to hurry northwards again on the wings of imagination, from dust and heat to the dear mountain air. ``We are only the children who might have been," murmured Lamb's dream babes to him; and for the sake of those dream-journeys, the journeys that might have been, I still hail with a certain affection the call of the engine in the night: even as I love sometimes to turn the enchanted pages of the railway a b c, and pass from one to the other name reminiscent or suggestive of joy and freedom, Devonian maybe, or savouring of Wessex, or bearing me away to some sequestered reach of the quiet Thames.

Non Libri Sed Liberi

It will never be clear to the lay mind why the book-buyer buys books. That it is not to read them is certain: the closest inspection always fails to find him thus engaged. He will talk about them -- all night if you let him -- wave his hand to them, shake his fist at them, shed

tears over them (in the small hours of the morning); but he will not read them. Yet it would be rash to infer that he buys his books without a remote intention of ever reading them. Most book lovers start with the honest resolution that some day they will "shut down on" this fatal practice. Then they purpose to themselves to enter into their charmed circle, and close the gates of Paradise behind them. Then will they read out of nothing but first editions; every day shall be a debauch in large paper and tall copies; and crushed morocco shall be familiar to their touch as buckram. Meanwhile, though, books continue to flaunt their venal charms; it would be cowardice to shun the fray. In fine, one buys and continues to buy; and the promised Sabbath never comes.

The process of the purchase is always much the same, therein resembling the familiar but inferior passion of love. There is the first sight of the Object, accompanied of a catching of the breath, a trembling in the limbs, loss of appetite, ungovernable desire, and a habit of melancholy in secret places. But once possessed, once toyed with amorously for an hour or two, the Object (as in the inferior passion aforesaid) takes its destined place on the shelf -- where it stays. And this saith the scoffer, is all; but even he does not fail to remark with a certain awe that the owner goeth thereafter as one possessing a happy secret and radiating an inner glow. Moreover, he is insufferably conceited, and his conceit waxeth as his coat, now condemned to a fresh term of servitude, groweth shabbier. And shabby though his coat may be, yet will he never stoop to renew its pristine

youth and gloss by the price of any book. No man -- no human, masculine, natural man -- ever sells a book. Men have been known in moments of thoughtlessness, or compelled by temporary necessity, to rob, to equivocate, to do murder, to commit what they should not, to "wince and relent and refrain" from what they should: these things, howbeit regrettable, are common to humanity, and may happen to any of us. But amateur bookselling is foul and unnatural; and it is noteworthy that our language, so capable of particularity, contains no distinctive name for the crime. Fortunately it is hardly known to exist: the face of the public being set against it as a flint -- and the trade giving such wretched prices.

In book-buying you not infrequently condone an extravagance by the reflection that this particular purchase will be a good investment, sordidly considered: that you are not squandering income but sinking capital. But you know all the time that you are lying. Once possessed, books develop a personality: they take on a touch of warm human life that links them in a manner with our kith and kin. Non angli sed Angeli was the comment of a missionary (old style) on the small human duodecimos exposed for sale in the Roman market-place; and many a buyer, when some fair-haired little chattel passed into his possession, must have felt that here was something vendible no more. So of these you may well affirm Non libri sed liberi; children now, adopted into the circle, they shall be trafficked in never again.

There is one exception which has sadly to be made -- one class of men,

of whom I would fain, if possible, have avoided mention, who are strangers to any such scruples. These be Executors -- a word to be strongly accented on the penultimate; for, indeed, they are the common headsmen of collections, and most of all do whet their bloody edge for harmless books. Hoary, famous old collections, budding young collections, fair virgin collections of a single author -- all go down before the executor's remorseless axe. He careth not and he spareth not. "The iniquity of oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy," and it is chiefly by the hand of the executor that she doth love to scatter it. May oblivion be his portion for ever!

Of a truth, the foes of the book-lover are not few. One of the most insidious, because he cometh at first in friendly, helpful guise, is the bookbinder. Not in that he bindeth books -- for the fair binding is the final crown and flower of painful achievement -- but because he bindeth not: because the weary weeks lapse by and turn to months, and the months to years, and still the binder bindeth not: and the heart grows sick with hope deferred. Each morn the maiden binds her hair, each spring the honeysuckle binds the cottage-porch, each autumn the harvester binds his sheaves, each winter the iron frost binds lake and stream, and still the bookbinder he bindeth not. Then a secret voice whispereth: "Arise, be a man, and slay him! Take him grossly, full of bread, with all his crimes broad-blown, as flush as May; At gaming, swearing, or about some act That hath no relish of salvation in it!" But when the deed is done, and the floor strewn with fragments of binder -- still the books remain unbound. You have made all that

horrid mess for nothing, and the weary path has to be trodden over again. As a general rule, the man in the habit of murdering bookbinders, though he performs a distinct service to society, only wastes his own time and takes no personal advantage.

And even supposing that after many days your books return to you in leathern surcoats bravely tricked with gold, you have scarce yet weathered the Cape and sailed into halcyon seas. For these books -- well, you kept them many weeks before binding them, that the oleaginous printer's-ink might fully dry before the necessary hammering; you forbore to open the pages, that the autocratic binder might refold the sheets if he pleased; and now that all is over -- consummatum est -- still you cannot properly enjoy the harvest of a quiet mind. For these purple emperors are not to be read in bed, nor during meals, nor on the grass with a pipe on Sundays; and these brief periods are all the whirling times allow you for solid serious reading. Still, after all, you have them; you can at least pulverise your friends with the sight; and what have they to show against them? Probably some miserable score or so of half-bindings, such as lead you scornfully to quote the hackneyed couplet concerning the poor Indian whose untutored mind clothes him before but leaves him bare behind. Let us thank the gods that such things are: that to some of us they give not poverty nor riches but a few good books in whole bindings. Dowered with these and (if it be vouchsafed) a cup of Burgundy that is sound even if it be not old, we can leave to others the foaming grape of Eastern France that was vintaged in '74, and with it the whole



range of shilling shockers, -- the Barmecidal feast of the purposeful novelist -- yea, even the countless series that tell of Eminent Women and Successful Men.