



CHAPTER XVI

THE OLD COACHMAN

Looking with due consideration at the inventions and discoveries, the theories and speculations developed in the last few years, it becomes a question as to how much longer the human mind will be capable of *wonder*, or any man remain liable to be taken by surprise. We who have been moving among the shifting scenes of the last twenty years have witnessed in a peaceful way and without any sensible shock to the nervous system, as many mighty convulsions, excruciating throes, and gigantic assaults within and upon what was once called “the established order of things,” as were ever prefigured in the terrifying hieroglyphics of Old Moore and the younger but more highly-coloured, Raphael. These sages have been trying year after year, in a most remorseless manner, to harrow up our fears by frightful illustrations of woes to come within the twelve calendar months immediately ensuing and the seer Raphael particularly, insists on mixing up these woes with such a profusion of cannon-balls and scorpions, tumbling towers and forked lightning, soldiers and sinking ships that the mind which ponders these things in faith must be fully as distressed as a body seated on tenterhooks or on broken bottles. However, we may still be thankful that, despite these dreadful hieroglyphics, our late great Revolution of Interests here in England has been bloodless. Serious down-fallings and rocket-like uprisings we have beheld in its train. Our hearts are perhaps oftener rent at the tale of distress which it has inflicted than rejoiced by the prosperity it has conferred. Be this as it may and to return to our *moutons*, it has been effected by such instrumentality of device and enterprise that the mind *reels* as it regards it and though I suppose it is indisputable that we live in the most elaborated age of the world, I imagine also that he would be considered a bold man who should lay his hand on anything, however surpassingly great or eminently ingenious, and say of it, this is Perfection and shall have permanent endurance!

If *anybody* ever thought in past time that such an idea might safely be cherished and such an assertion be confidently made, it was my old friend, Richard—, when he took the “Old Blue” coach from Southampton into London in twelve hours, the first whip on the road that accomplished that feat. What, thought Richard, as he proudly eyed the “Blue” and its equipments before mounting on the box, what must people’s opinion be of such a turn-out? And now that the twelve-hour journey was added to its credit and renown, what could people, even grumbling people, want more? In Richard’s mind perfection in travelling had been attained and the “Old Blue” would deserve a place in history as that by which unprecedented speed had been realised, consistently too, with the perfect safety of its passengers.

But Richard’s *beau idéal* of perfection in coaching was doomed to be dissipated. A lighter style both of horse and “drag” was conceived and brought upon the road, by which an hour or two was saved upon the dozen occupied by the Old Blue. This was a painful disenchantment to Richard who had attained the utmost speed which it was possible for him to attain and who foresaw, in the patronage that flowed towards his rival the Highflyer, that he and the Old Blue would find it necessary to retire. This the slow and respectable pair at length did, after submitting, as long as it was in the nature of man and coach to submit, to the daily humiliation of being passed by a scornful and successful competitor.

By-and-by, however, this braggart was in its turn humbled and finally set on one side by a still lighter and jauntier drag the Neck-or-nothing which, drawn by fleeter horses accomplished the journey to the metropolis in little more than eight hours and eventually, within that space of time. Coaching had now reached its climax in point of speed and general convenience and as our friend Richard had seen his own old antagonist demolished as the antique Blue had been and as moreover he had realised enough in his palmy days to render

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retirement comfortable, he waxed charitable and even complacent, towards the “fast” establishment and drew near the Coach and Horses a little while prior to the start and scanned the Neck-or-nothing and its appointments with the eye of a favourable critic and watched the bustle of porters and the conceit of stable-helpers, with the interest of a veteran field-officer at a well-conducted review.

Notwithstanding Richard's faith in the perfection of the Old Blue and the Highflyer (as the Blue's decided vanquisher), had in each case been severely shaken, *he* was ready, I believe to argue strongly but civilly, always with civility, that it was quite impossible for anything in coach-shape ever to excel the Neck-or-nothing and as what cannot be excelled may be considered perfect. The Neck-or-nothing was therefore the *ne plus ultra* as a locomotive agent of the stagecoach class.

Truly such an opinion might be accounted reasonable by anyone who leisurely surveyed it, as it stood fronting the Coach and Horses with its spirited and well-caparisoned horses fretting for the signal to be off. Handsomely painted and emblazoned and (for a vehicle of this description) elegantly constructed. Horsed in a style that might have become the equipage of a nobleman. The multitude of its booking-office and stable-yard attache's proud of their connection with it, the grouped or scattered aristocracy in waiting to become its passengers, the zeal of inn-waiters and the strife of tongues and lastly, the well-dressed dignity, conscious importance and cool demeanour of the driver as, stepping from the booking-office, he gloved himself in perfect ease and with duly-arranged ribbons took up his exalted position, to the admiration of the standers-by and the envy of all the underlings. All these effects might well lead on to the conviction that coach travelling had come to its consummation. That it was capable of being improved, friend Richard would have disbelieved but a much graver question forced its way upwards by degrees - was the splendid coach system itself capable or in danger of annihilation?

“Pooh, pooh, sir! A mere joke, too monstrous to pass with anybody, sir, but a born fool, that a drag should do thirty miles an hour, sir, without ever a horse, sir and forced along with the breath of a singing teakettle. Ah, ah, sir! The joke is not so bad though, after all.”

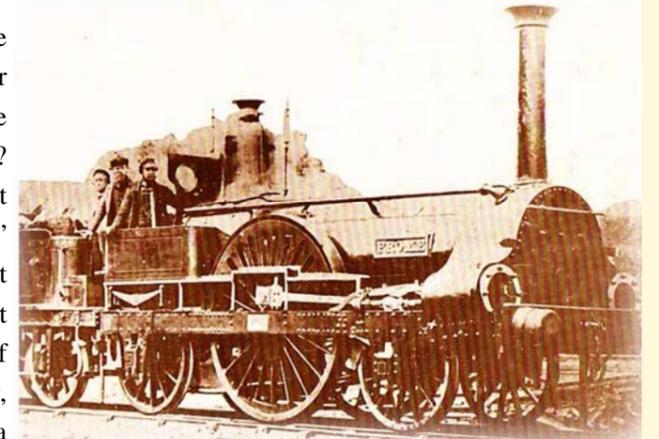
Thus thought and spake the worthy Whip and thus thought nearly the entire coach connection, from the distinguished gentleman who drove, down to the humblest menial who groomed, when the rumour of projected railways broke on their incredulous ear. But when the project which most affected Richard was matured and hundreds of thousands of pounds contributed for its formation had attested the fact that a pretty strong opinion, contrary to that of coachmen, prevailed as to its feasibility then the coterie of which Richard was both the type and a respected oracle, denounced the scheme as dangerous and declaimed against it as outrageously expensive. If it should be ever carried out it would be to the certain ruin of the proprietors and the equally certain blowing up of all who were foolhardy enough to travel that way - “and sarve 'em right sir,” said Richard, with customary blandness but with less than his accustomed charity.

Months rolled on. The road of iron progressed. Projected cuttings and embankments which, when looked at from a distance, appeared as insurmountable obstacles, were overcome by “navvies,” made active by the mountain-moving power of wealth and as the line proceeds and its completed segments get braced together, the sneering scepticism of the coach fraternity becomes less confident and their nerves get more and more unstrung. Some of the subordinates of the yard quake as they read in the taproom Sunday paper of coaching-inn after inn being shut up before some crushing and monopolising railway and so one whispers to another, in strict confidence, which second mentions it secretly to a third and so on, that it may perhaps be just as well to look a little ahead, and get their names down for “stokers or zummut on the new consarn.” Long-sighted landlords, dependent on the daily coaches for their daily bread, look prudently at bankrupt inns as at warning beacons and considering their removal to a railway station as preferable to a location in the insolvent court, concentrate all their influence towards the attainment of that end.

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So that, by the time the railway engine begins its momentous conflict with the Neck-or-nothing, the general staff of the latter has considerably fallen off, on the principle that rats forsake a sinking ship.

The Neck-or-nothing's formidable antagonist is announced to depart from its provincial starting-post at a certain hour on a certain day and immense throngs congregate to witness the event. It is complete at last, at any rate, although it must have cost a mint of money. That matter settled, there is now this important question to be solved. Will this rum-looking drag, with its snorting breath and smoking “chimbley,” convey its passengers in a body safely to the place named in the advertisements, or will it scatter their bruised and blackened carcasses at some place on the line, or off the line, not mentioned in the bills? “To bust, sir,” (as Richard had learnt to phrase it grandly,) “or not to bust? That is the question, sir?” And so deeply rooted in man's heart is the interest of his class that Richard, although of the kindest human nature, was so much under the influence of jealousy on this occasion, that he would, I fear, have been better pleased to hear of a burst than of a safe arrival. No catastrophe however occurred. In the safety and rapidity of the new mode of transit the old stagers foresaw or soon felt their occupation gone and mail-coach, stage-coach, van, and carrier's wagon, were devoured in quick succession by the insatiable South-western.



Richard, in his coaching days, had acquired a love of sporting which in his *otium* he was pleased to gratify and on crack days he was always in the field. His former occupation had familiarised his person to all the neighbouring gentry who had always a regard for him. His knowledge of horses was calculated on and continually appealed to, particularly by sportsmen, for he knew the country and the men and what was the sort of horse-flesh to suit them. His favourite scene of sport lay in the New Forest. Many a morning I have met him, accompanied by two or three companion sportsmen and leisurely proceeding to the “meet.” Richard was a maximist and cautioned many a hasty rider thus - “If you are going to hunt the day with the same nag, sir, take it mild, sir. I never hurry, sir, without I have a fresh horse, sir! You have only to start half-an-hour sooner and then, when you come to the run sir, you've got something to take out of him, sir.” I fancy I see him now with his old brown tops, his white cords, striped waistcoat, green coat *à la Newmarket* with its bright shining buttons, the outer man being surmounted and covered in with a whity-brown hat of the true sporting fashion. Richard was remarkable for his civility, he used to boast that he learnt it on the coach-box. “It's a fine thing sir, many an extra shilling has dropped to me for it, you see, sir and it's not expensive - that's a recommendation, sir.”

There was likewise a quaint touch of humour about him, perceptible only as you became acquainted with the man. His peculiarities were frequently the amusement of those who were fond of a joke. In such case he would slyly pretend to be totally ignorant of their meaning and unless you were used to his manner, you would have been induced to think him so. I remember an anecdote which, as the sport of it was personally known to many of my readers, I will relate here as illustrating this dry humour of Richard's.

Among many of the occasional visitors to the N. F. Hunt, a member of the legal profession was wont to burst the bonds of official confinement and exchange the scenery of musty parchments for that of the cheerful forest. Proceeding one day with the glee of an emancipated quill-driver to meet the hounds, he fell in with Richard and his associates who were jogging slowly in the same direction.

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Richard was mounted on an old favourite mare which he had ridden for a long time. Now, whether he was nervous, or whether it proceeded from the extreme desire he always evinced to take care of himself, I cannot determine but round this said mare's neck there was a leathern strap of about an inch in width, which was held by a connecting strap to the saddle-girth. This was an important consideration with him. On this occasion our learned visitor was more than usually gay and for the sake of a bit of fun accosted Richard as follows:

"I say, Richard, your mare goes well in harness!"

"In harness! Sir, does she?" he replied.

"Certainly she does," answered the lawyer.

"I have never seen her in harness yet, sir," observed Richard.

"Why she's in harness now, is she not? She has certainly got her collar on!"

"Collar! Sir; I don't call that a collar, sir. That's only just a little strap that I use for caution, sir. You see, sir, I am an old man and not quite so active as I used to be and should I fall, you see, sir, I should fall rather heavy," replied Richard, measuring, with a significant glance, from tip to toe the very long-proportioned and most meagre lawyer.

"Oh," returned the latter, "it certainly is a collar. Gentlemen, I appeal to you all, is it not a collar?"

"Well, sir," said Richard, laughingly, "you're a lawyer and therefore you must know best, if you say it's a collar, it must be so - we'll call it a collar, sir."

Now as it respects the corporeal frame of our legal acquaintance, it may be set forth as the excess of slimness. Looking at him, you felt with extraordinary force the proverb that life hangs by a slender thread and I should think the law had no more attenuated limb. As exhibited on horseback, either from disdain or negligence of straps, the termini of his trowsers were in closer neighbourhood to the knee than the heel and a considerable tract of leg was in consequence often exposed to the weather, between the concluding trowser and the commencing boot. This interval occurring, a remarkable display of "calf" was inevitable - a remarkable display, I repeat because, although I live in perfect charity with all lean kine, I never saw a sorrier illustration or more spectral outline of that portion of the leg and as it fell shrunkenly into the expansive boot-top, it always reminded me of a broomstick in a bucket. Out on sporting excursions like the present, he had always a cigar in his mouth and when, later in the day, Richard met him on the field among a group of friends, the coachman thought it was his turn to banter so he said to the lank lawyer, from whose lips continued to issue cigar-clouds.

"I am rather surprised, sir, at your smoking so much"

"Why, Richard, why?"

"Because I've heard on good authority that it's a bad thing for the calves of the legs, sir."

And in the laughter against the lawyer that ensued, old Richard had all that he desired in the way of revenge.

When from age he found it expedient to relinquish the hunt, he became quite a rambler about town and felt a deep interest in its trade and a great attraction in shop windows. "Man and boy, sir, I've been on the road a good fifty year, sir," used to be one of his professional boasts and this long occupation, out of the sphere of trade, had rendered him quite ignorant of its principles and details. Before the window of a fruiterer, for instance, he would make the most intent observations, calculations, and conclusions. He would then address some friendly passer-by with, "I say, sir, Mr. Pineapple has been in this shop a many years, and he's a very respectable man, but d'ye think he's doing much business, sir? I'm not inquisitive, sir, and I hope he's thriving, but I can't make it out, sir. You see that plate there in the corner - the willow pattern, sir? Well, this day week there were seven red apples in it. Three days afterwards the seven red apples were in it and to-day the seven are there still."

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Then he proceeded to cast-up what might be Mr. Pineapple's weekly expenses and hoped that some things sold faster than apples, or Mr. P. would find it difficult to meet them.

Old Richard was sociably disposed and spent his evenings uniformly in the same company. He was temperate and regular in his habits and a warbler of strong lungs. When he gave the "view halloo" in the Death of Tom Moody, he might have been heard at the Town-gate. In another song he was also a great favourite and it was called for nightly. Originally it ran thus, I believe,

**"Down in the grove
There is an alcove;"**

which Richard, by confirmed habit always varied in this manner,

**"Down in the grove
There sits an old cove;"**

and so exacting was his ear in its demand for perfect rhymes when he sung, that customary pronunciation gave way before it in all cases.

"Up in yon boosh, there whistles a throosh," is not agreeable to look at, certainly; and Richard was not wont to sing it so. He rather gave the preference to "thrush," and made "bush" rhyme to it with exactness and great energy. One night, after winning a larger share of compliment than usual and becoming excited by vainglorious notions of strength, which in moments of hilarity un-afflicted old men are prone to entertain, Richard volunteered to dance a hornpipe and it was a very laborious if not a very artistical performance. Sad am I to say that it proved too much for poor Richard. Within a few days and this worthy relic of an outworn class was no more.

Peace to thy manes, honest old Richard!

