

## THE OLD COACH'S LAST JOURNEY.

## A REMINISCENCE OF THE ROAD.

“**R**EAD that all over again, lad, every word on it. Lor! we can't hear enough about coaching now-a-days, seeing that we're laid up on the roadside, all gone but the axletree. And so they've formed a Coaching Club, have they, and are goin' to revive the glories of the road? Ha, ha, that'll take them all their time, I should say.” It was old Jack Splashbar who spoke, one of the best whips on the northern roads in the good old days when steam had not been put on wheels: and the lad he addressed was an old guard who had accompanied him on many a journey. He had just got hold of a copy of the *Morning Post* containing a description of one of the Coaching Club's opening gatherings at the Magazine in Hyde Park, and as for a long time coaching literature, even to the occasional sight of a way-bill, had been at a premium amongst them, it was but natural that they should devour it word by word. Greys, browns, roans, and blacks were all commented on freely, and the mention of each team seemed to raise some warm reminiscences of the olden times, of Jem Barnes and Jack Reed and the old lot, and of nights going over Shap Fell, bless you, when we stuck in the snow.

The old inn in which they sat was just as mail coach times had left it; no modern bar, no polished beer engines, no gilt and glitter, but just a cosy fireplace, with plenty of room for coals and places at the side for two, with, for ornaments, a couple of fitches of home-cured bacon hanging down from the ceiling.

“I tell you what it's comin' to, Jack: everything has its day. What was a good job and bread and butter to you and me, is a nice game now for those gents that lives up in Lunnun, and it'll be the same with the steam-pots.”

“Never, Jim Bryden, never! Blood in themselves won't do that, and grease and smoke on the engine: no, no, believe me they're just like you and me, Jim, and we'd go ten miles over a

hill rather than go one through a tunnel. No, no, Jim, I've driven often with them on the box-seat, blood won't allow 'em to come so low as that."

"Well, well, there's no sayin', but I never thought when I was on the old Highflyer that ever they'd take to playing at coachin'. Howsomever, as the old blacksmith at Gretna used to say, there's no knowin' what thoroughbreds is up to. 'Some come 300 miles,' says he to me when I was postboy and took him up a job, 'to get the knot tied, and then start off 3,000 miles 'to get it cut,' says he, 'but that lass you've got to-day, she's a rum one, for I've had her here three times,' says he, 'and when she slipped me a sovereign to myself says she, "I'll get the change *when I come back the next time,*" says she.' Railroads, however, may have spoiled them a bit."

"Many a good story I could tell you, Jim, about 'em, both going down to the Sellinger or comin' up to the grouse shooting. Oh, those were the times, to be sure! Why, if they'd wanted to make me king I tell you I would have thought twice ere I took the job, I would. 'Magnificent spectacle,' is that what they calls their show? 'Splendid teams' you say the paper says? Bah! playin' at coachin' may be all very well, but it can't come up to the old business, neither for drivers nor hosses. What would some of them make of a bad one and the mail five minutes late, eh? Nothing! I should think so! Why, I recollects once at the Greyhound, at Penrith, when we were a good ten minutes behind time, and I had not got right a-going till I found the near leader was new to the business and a regular she-devil, going ends everyways and not pulling a pound the right way. Well, I was savage a bit, for I was ten behind, and I knew that Mr. Ramsay, of Barnton, had backed me to drive a regular savage for the whole of the next stage. Well my temper gets up a bit, and I gives it her *proper*, and I made so much out of her infernal contrariness, I tell you, that she was the best goin' hoss in the coach and never knew it, no more did she. Well, when I gets to the other end, I flings down the ribbons, jumps inside, and swallows a full pot of ale, for I was dead beat, and in comes Mr. Ramsay. 'Stick her in, Mr Ramsay,' says I, 'stick her in, on the near side, if she's any worse than that rat-tailed Witch o' Endor,' says I, 'I may be licked, but I'll try when my hand's in.' Lor, how he laughed. 'Jack,'

says he, and he laughed again, 'there's a tenner for ye! That's the mare you've been a drivin' the whole time,' says he, 'we sent her down the road, because we thought some passenger or inspector might get hold of the thing and so get you into trouble if anything happened.' Oh, he was a rum lot, but so were they all, Jim."

The old coaching lot at Carlisle is getting very well thinned down now, and railway characters, men who have actually grown grey in the service or been "lopped short," as the old stage drivers used to term it, have taken their places. To the very last, however, the worthies of a bygone age are looked upon with veneration by the "Steam-pot men" and its followers, though the latter have seen probably a hundred times more startling scenes and been in quite as many adventures. There is little that is picturesque or poetical about the rail compared with the road, however, and, as the old driver expressed it, the men of the old school would go ten miles over a hill rather than go one through a tunnel. Its fogs, its chills, its frosts, its snows, its wind storms, driving trees down, over which the leaders had half scrambled in the dark ere they were discovered: its floods, and the long wades through brown currents, with nothing but the tops of gateposts—all considered the old coachman liked his life well, and so did the guard. Their horses were good—better than are to be found in the fashionable teams of the present day, if coaching pictures are to be relied on; they had good wages and better chance tips, while every half-way house was a home. To be snowed up was of course no joke, but snowstorms and snowdrifts were not every-day experiences. Possibly no town was more "coachy" than the merry town of Carlisle in the olden times, as, indeed, there is no town more associated with railways and railway servants at the present day, it, indeed, being the Charing-cross for Scotland, just as Oban, with its steamers, is known as the Charing-cross of the Highlands; and in some of the old houses yet a collection of the coaching relics of the ancient days might still be found. The old coaches themselves however, have mostly fallen off their wheels, or been sold into little country places to run to and from the railway stations on market days. Lower still have some of Her Majesty's mail carriages been degraded; for the last one we saw was used as a portable hen-house, in which the poultry were wheeled out to

the stubble-fields, there to pick up what the reapers and the gleaners had left.

It was while the old coachman, Jack Splashbar, was in a deep study, with eyes gazing into the red fire and arms cocked in front as if still holding the ribbons, no doubt making his team go in memory a good fourteen miles an hour, that Jim ventured to whisper to him—

“You don’t know what they’re agoin’ to do with the Old Flyer, Jack, eh?”

“Put her on the road again, eh?” was the quick answer.

“Put her on the road? Yes; but, what do you think? As a hearse! It’s a fact; I heard it this forenoon. Old Brown says he’s goin’ to stick some black feathers on the top of her and make a hearse out of her.”

“Make the old Highflyer into a hearse, into a miserable, crawling two mile an hour coffin box—why, man, she wouldn’t know how to do it.”

“Do it he means to, that’s all I know,” said the old guard.

“Ah well, he’s going to give us all a drive I know every one of the old lot,” and the old coachman nodded in a suggestive manner to his old guard, “so see if we can’t finish her up in the way a coach should be wound up. A hearse! oh dear, I’d sooner see her made into a railway parcel cart.”

It was a bright morning in the first week of September, and the click of the reaper was heard rattling out merrily amongst the yellow corn which sloped to the Solway. Over Criffel the clouds were trailing in grey fleeces, while the mists hung low on the moss lands of the Border—mists which in days gone past hid the moss troopers in the daytime from the stern-faced burghers who looked northward from those grim castle walls which many a time had been decorated with the faces, still bold in death, of Scotland’s most daring men; but the autumn sun stole through, and everything that was silvery became golden under its rays. Better morning for moors or stubble one could not have, or for a drive away into the mystic borderland, the land of Johnnie Armstrong of Gilnockie, and others of the old cattle-lifting school of warriors. A day indeed it was for one to choose the old stage-coach in preference to the modern railway train. And there outside the old “Bell-wether” was the old stage-coach the High-flyer, just as it stood forty years before, with four eager tits and

old Jack Splashbar on the box-seat. There were none of the old-fashioned travellers in plaids and wrappers, however, but rather a crew of coachmen, guards, and fossilized postboys, "postboyhood" lasting, it may be remarked, all through a man's lifetime. It was the morning of the much-promised drive, and there was a big crowd about to see the old worthies setting out on their outing. Every guard carried a straight-horn, ones that the spiders had woven webs round the mouths of for years in some old corner, and every coachman a whip, so that the Highflyer was pretty well manned. In a minute more the heads of the struggling horses were freed, and, with old Jack sitting as gaily on the box as he did when the handsomest young fellow on the road, and the pride of all the barmaids, and four straight-horns winding all at once, away they went, their red coats shining in the sun, for Beattock—not that they had any particular journey in view. Such a lot of boys of threescore and upwards never had been seen before, and the workers in the harvest-fields behind the modern reaping machines looked up, as did the shearers in the days of old, and gave the customary cheer. Carters pulled aside surprised, and old sportsmen forgot the pointers that crouched with full nostrils over the coveys at their feet as they saw a sight they had been of opinion they never would see again. In amongst the woodland trees they wound the horn, raising echoes which had not been heard for a long time, while giving key-notes of old tunes and old songs which had been familiar to everyone all over the old road in the good old days. Jim, with a voice feeble, yet not cracked, gave the stableman's song of "The Halfway House," or as much of it as he could recollect, getting quite a chorus from the whole of the horns:—

Oft in the merry Maytime,  
When sweet dews clogged the hay,  
We'd lie beneath the hedgerows  
And listen by the way  
Until the sounds came nearer,  
And sweet we heard the note  
Of the horn sweetly winding  
To the old Tantivy trot.

You could hear them sink the hollow,  
You could hear them rise the hill,  
Foot and foot you'd hear them follow,  
Aye, all pulling with a will;

Then, swelling with the breeze, aye,  
 Came that sound that's ne'er forgot—  
 Of the horn sweetly winding,  
 To the old Tantivy trot.

The old inns of course had to be inspected and commented on, and so ere the afternoon was well gone the company were all very happy and joyous. Old songs seemed to come back to them with sudden flashes of memory, nearly all of which recounted coaching feats of the old times. "Canny Geordie Stephenson has got an iron horse" was a favourite, which told about how it "couldn't face a hill," and how "they fed it upon water and tickled up its tail, and that's the kind of nag they have a carrying the mail." Then old Jack insisted on giving just as much as he could recollect of a song he used to sing, which was as to how

"It's nice to see them stretching out as level as a pack,  
 Ribbons just a stented, boys, and not a leather slack ;  
 A cheery lass upon the box ; a bonnie summer's morn ;  
 And some music at the corners on the old straight horn.

Chorus.

"It's fine upon a box, boys, a team to be a tooling,  
 Just a breeze a blowing, boys, to keep the tits a cooling,  
 Here's a toast, my lads : 'It's the best o' well-kept roads,  
 With tight tits, and bright wits, and tidy level loads.' "

When the old man's song, which was received with quite a chorus of horn-sounding from the guards, was over, it was time to resume the journey homewards. As they took their places Jack nodded to the old guard with the remark, "They're too jolly to get killed, and I'll see the Highflyer isn't made a hearse of." When well steadied down he went off at a spanking pace, and as soon as within sight of Carlisle walls he bent off the new road and down the old one which had been shut up for years. "Jack," cried the soberest of postboys, "you're off the road ; for any sake pull up ;" but, with the remark from Jim that Jack had driven the road for twenty years and ought to know, he subsided. So down they went, some singing, and some winding away at the horns, notwithstanding that a farmer waved them back with a pitchfork. Giving them their heads the old coachman literally raced them down a hill, round a



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Robert Bradley

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corner, and on to an old wooden bridge marked "Unsafe for vehicles." A Crash! A smash! and all were in the brook, from which old Splashbar was the first to scramble, muttering, "They can make a hearse of her now if they like, Jim." Whether it was on account of their jolliness, or of having served their apprenticeship in youth to coach accidents or not, we cannot say, but none of them were hurt, nor were the horses; but the Highflyer was a complete wreck. All got home as best they could; and the old vehicle was left there, all but the wheels, to be swept away by the autumn floods. This was the old coach's last journey.

