

CHAPTER XV

RAILWAY WORK—CHARING CROSS LINE

LITERATURE occupied a very small portion of my thoughts, and a still smaller portion of my working faculties. It was, of course, a great pleasure to me occasionally to withdraw myself from the daily fatigue of office duties, and take refuge in quiet thinking and reflective study. But I had comparatively little unbroken leisure. When I had done my day's work, and read up the news of the day, there was little time left for other purposes. For months together, I did not set down a word for the printer. There was only enough time left for rest, and recreation, and sleep.

Our company was usually at war with the adjoining companies. On one side there was the Brighton, and on the other the East Kent. They had always to be watched, as they in turn watched us. The Board met only once a fortnight. It was scarcely to be expected that gentlemen who gave only an intermittent attention to the affairs of a large company, could take so much interest in it as the working staff, of whom I was one. It was the subject of our daily business and of our constant thoughts. Mr Eborall, the general manager, a most worthy and excellent man, was in constant communi-

cation with me; and consulted me about everything in connection with the company's affairs.

One of the most trying affairs we had to consider, was the extension of the East Kent line in and through the district which we had heretofore exclusively occupied. It was a short-sighted policy on the part of the previous directors, not to have fully occupied the ground between Chatham and Canterbury, and made a railway for the accommodation of the public in North Kent. But the mischief had been initiated in 1853, before our connection with the company. A line was granted by Parliament, and the works were in course of construction. Overtures were made for the amalgamation of the concerns; but no serious proposal was ever submitted for consideration. Our directors were under the impression that the line would never be completed; and were rather disposed to laugh the new undertaking to scorn.

The rival line was not only made, but new extensions were obtained—eastwards towards Dover and Margate, and westwards towards London. "They would never be made; they could never be finished!" No doubt they ruined many people, shareholders as well as contractors; but they were made, and they were finished. What Oxenstiern said to his son was very true, "Go forth, my son, and see with how little wisdom the world is governed!" the same might be said of some railway directions.

There was one gentleman at our Board, who held the dogma of "closing the capital account." A very good dogma, provided the work to be done is only of strictly limited amount. Suppose, for instance, the Liverpool and Manchester directors had proposed to "close the capital account" when they had completed

their line from Liverpool to Manchester! It would have been equivalent to "shutting up shop"! But instead of this, the company went on adding to their accommodation, until they had as many miles of station siding laid down in and around Liverpool alone, as they had laid down between Liverpool and Manchester! That line of thirty miles became expanded and connected with other lines, until at length it formed part of a network of railways, the property of one company, of over fourteen hundred miles in extent, representing a capital invested in railway works and plant, of over fifty millions sterling.

"Closing the capital account" meant this—"We shall give no further railway accommodation"—and that in the case of a City, the largest, without exception, in the world—a City of about four millions of people, and with a constantly increasing population—a City containing more than the entire population of Scotland, Sweden, Holland, or Portugal. The railway traffic of London is necessarily of immense magnitude, arising from the circumstance that it is not only the great distributive centre of the traffic of Great Britain, but that it contains an aggregate of some four millions of people, who are in a great measure dependent upon railways for their daily trade and their daily food, as well as, in a great many cases, for their daily journey to and from a suburban residence.

The new company, therefore, had no difficulty in getting their Acts passed by Parliament for giving greater accommodation to the county of Kent. Parliament also entertained the idea of giving the public the benefit of unrestricted railway competition. This, however, proved to be a mis-

take. "When combination is possible," said Robert Stephenson, "competition is impossible." At all events, shareholders, when investing their money, look for some profit or other from their undertaking. They do not invest merely from philanthropic motives. Even when they lay down a duplicate line, say between London and Dover, almost parallel with the line already made, they can reckon, at least, on sharing the traffic. And in the long-run they do. The public gets a double service, but it gets no reduction of rates.

This has been the case with the railway competition through Kent. There is scarcely a town that is not served by two railways instead of one; but, instead of having lower fares, the fares are necessarily kept up in order to pay the duplicate working expenses, and a moderate share of profit to those who have invested their money in constructing the duplicate railways. Parliament, in its wisdom, does not seem to have provided for the contingency of the new company combining with the old one, and thus rendering "unrestricted railway competition" impossible.

In an article which I wrote for the *Quarterly Review* in 1868 (after my connection with railways had ceased) I used the following words, which are strictly true:—

"Private companies have had to contend, at great cost, for the privilege of constructing and working the national highways; but, once obtained, the privilege has proved of comparatively small advantage to them, for they have always been open to attack. One of the favourite ideas of English statesmen—but without a particle of statesmanship in it—has been that it is for the benefit of the public that there should be free competition between railway companies;

and with that view duplicate lines—whether got up by schemers, contractors, or bona-fide companies—have been authorised and constructed in all directions. Thus, veering about, our legislators have granted powers enabling the competing companies to amalgamate, or to enter into combinations for the purpose of preventing competition, by which the benefits originally promised have been entirely nullified. There has thus been a great waste of capital in Parliamentary contests, and in the construction of unnecessarily expensive lines of railway; and while some of the companies have been reduced to bankruptcy, and all have been more or less impoverished, the result to the public is that they have to pay more for travelling by railway in England than in any other country in Europe.”*

To return to the position of the South-Eastern Railway. The directors had admitted, when before Parliament, the desirableness of obtaining access to a terminal station at the West End of London; and in 1857, they pledged themselves to call their proprietors together, and “recommend them to promote or concur in the prosecution in next session, of such a scheme as will effectually supply access to the West End of London, and so complete the system of railway accommodation for Kent and the Continent.” Nothing was, however, done to redeem this pledge. But it occurred to me, as well as to others of the

* *Quarterly Review*, No. 250. In this article I endeavoured to give the results of much railway experience. I contrasted the results of railways in Belgium with those in England, and recognised the enlightened policy adopted by King Leopold and his ministers. I quote the words of the leading railway managers (p. 322) as to the utter uselessness, as well as the manifest injury, of unrestricted competition. I advocate (what many people will not agree with) the combination of all the Irish railways, into one company, either to be worked by the State, or by one joint-stock concern, as by far the most conducive to public interest and advantage. The late Sir Rowland Hill was also in favour of this view.

staff, that we ought to do something to keep faith, not only with Parliament, but with the shareholders.

The general manager ordered a return to be made of the directions taken by the passengers leaving the London Bridge Station. From this, it appeared that a very large proportion—more than three-fifths—were for places west of Temple Bar, and especially in the neighbourhood of Charing Cross. The result of the inquiry was, that Charing Cross was found to be the most convenient site for a West End terminus. It formed the centre of a series of important thoroughfares ramifying in all directions—to Westminster and the Houses of Parliament; to Regent Street, Pall Mall, Piccadilly, and the West End squares; as well as to St Martin's Lane, leading to Oxford Street on the north, and to the Strand, in the east. It was found that, in view of the population to be accommodated, the neighbourhood of important public exhibitions and institutions, and the persons likely to travel upon the railway, a station at Charing Cross would be much more convenient than those at the other proposed alternative sites—at York Road or Battersea (south of the Thames), or at Pimlico (north of the river), where we should be merely alongside of our rivals of the Brighton and Chatham Companies.

After obtaining all the requisite information, and conferring with Mr Rees, the solicitor of the company, and Mr Ryde, the surveyor, I prepared an elaborate report, which I first submitted to Mr Eborall, and, after it had received his sanction, I laid it before the Board in February 1858. The Board would not undertake to make the extension to the West End,

notwithstanding their pledge to Parliament. But they had no objections "to promote or concur in the prosecution" of the proposed extension. They were opposed to the construction of new branches, and still desirous of "closing the capital account."

But how was the extension of the line to Charing Cross to be made? By an independent company, supported by the South-Eastern. They gave me permission to take steps to form such a company. Four gentlemen from the outside were induced to join, and, with four South-Eastern directors, a Board was formed, of which the South-Eastern chairman was appointed president. I prepared a prospectus, and issued it to the public. A considerable number of shares were applied for, and in the long run the South-Eastern company subscribed for the remainder.

Many years before, the London and South-Western Company had obtained an Act extending their line from Waterloo Station to the south end of London Bridge. The line passed through a very inferior description of house property, of comparatively inconsiderable value. This Act had been allowed to lapse, through the effluxion of time. The London and South-Western directors were waited on, for the purpose of ascertaining whether they would now concur in the renewed application to Parliament, as the extension of their line to the City would be not less valuable than the extension of the South-Eastern to the West End. But they declined, and it was necessary that we should proceed to Parliament alone.

Mr Ryde laid out the new line of railway; and Mr Rees, the solicitor, assisted in the promotion

of the Bill through Parliament. Both worked with great ability and energy. Mr Eborall, the general manager, gave his cordial assistance, as he saw that the new line would eventually give his company the command in a great measure of the West End traffic. We had the advantage, also, of securing the assistance of Mr (now Sir John) Hawkshaw, as our leading parliamentary engineer. Mr Toogood was appointed the parliamentary agent.

It was originally intended that the West End station should be on the spot occupied by Northumberland House. The Duke of Northumberland's solicitors were seen; and though they were at first agreeable, the duke afterwards withdrew his assent. As his opposition would most probably have been fatal to the Bill, the site was subsequently changed to Hungerford Market; and as the old suspension bridge at Hungerford was not a paying property, we were able to buy the whole affair at a comparatively moderate price. Curiously enough, the chairman of the Hungerford market and bridge was a director of the South-Eastern Company; and he was enabled to perform a little manipulation with the depreciated shares of the former company, very much to his own advantage. From an unwilling abettor of the Charing Cross line, he thenceforward became a cordial supporter. Thus the whole body were pulled, like sheep through a hedge, onwards towards Charing Cross.

The Bill went before Parliament in 1859, and was strongly opposed, principally by the Brighton Railway Company and the trustees of St Thomas's Hospital. The former declined to join in the extension, and probably were opposed to our establishing a West End station in competition with their Pimlico

terminus. But the chief opposition was from St Thomas's Hospital.*

It happened that the proposed line could not be constructed without passing through a corner of the hospital grounds, though without touching the hospital buildings themselves. The governors were of opinion that the construction of the railway would be fatal to the continued use of the place for medical purposes; and there may have been some reason for their contention. At all events, the parliamentary committee adopted their view. They passed the Bill, with the provision that the railway company should, if called upon, purchase the whole of the hospital grounds and buildings.

The Bill was admirably advocated before the Commons Committee by Mr (afterwards Sir) W. J. Alexander, Bart. The printed document which I had prepared for the South-Eastern Board formed his principal brief; and the facts and figures it contained were publicly stated before the committee, and were never contradicted. The great battle with the hospital trustees was settled in the Commons, and the Bill passed the Lords without any difficulty.

Then came the purchase of the hospital property and buildings. It was certainly a very heavy case—perhaps the largest that had ever come before an arbitrator in London. The price to be paid by the railway company was to be settled by an independent valuer. Such a person was found at Manchester. The arbitrator's court was held, with barristers, solicitors, leading valuers, and numerous witnesses. Evidence was given without limit. The arbitrator shed his

* This hospital was then situated in High Street, Southwark, in a building erected in 1706.—ED.

lustre upon the court for a fortnight. At length, after the leading barristers—including Lloyd, of "Lloyd's bonds"—had delivered their final speeches, the arbitrator retired to prepare his final award.

The arbitrator proved a very Daniel. He at length gave in his award, duly signed and attested. It was that the railway company should pay the sum of £290,000 for the property and buildings of St Thomas's Hospital! It was a very large sum indeed. But how had the sapient arbitrator arrived at this precise amount? The valuers were all in a dilemma. At last, Mr Ryde called in upon me one day, and said, "I have found it out! Yes! here it is!" He showed me the figures of the various valuers. There were nine in all. "Add these up, and divide by nine, and there is the result—£290,000!" Any School Board pupil teacher, or even any unskilled labourer, with a little knowledge of arithmetic, might have done as much. There was scarcely any need to send all the way to Manchester for a second Daniel like this. And yet it is to be feared that this rough-and-ready method of arriving at a valuation is not unknown among city valuers even at the present day.

It is unnecessary to say anything about the superiority of Charing Cross as a West End terminus. When Boswell spoke to Dr Johnson of the quick succession of people passing along Fleet Street, the doctor said, "Why, sir, Fleet Street has a very animated appearance; but I think the full tide of human existence is at Charing Cross!" It is the same now as it was a hundred years ago. Charing Cross is still the centre of the West End. Nothing can be compared with it for situation. It is close to all the great clusters of traffic. Carried on a lofty

viaduct across the Thames, and on a level with the adjacent streets, the Charing Cross Station is brought almost to the very doors of an immense mass of people living, or having to do business, in the western parts of London.

Before the line was made, the bridges across the Thames were overcrowded with 'buses, cabs, and hansoms, carrying passengers to and from the terminus at the south end of London Bridge. After the opening of the line, at the beginning of 1864, the bridges were in a great measure cleared, and a great advantage was thus conferred upon the public. But it was not for a merely philanthropic benefit that the Charing Cross Railway was constructed. The South-Eastern Company itself derived the principal advantage. The new line opened up the whole range of sea coast, along the mouth of the Thames, and round by Dover to Hastings, to an immense new mass of population in the western parts of London ; it also brought the wealthiest travelling class in direct communication with the Continent, by Folkestone and Boulogne, and by Dover and Calais.

Where a large and rapidly increasing city has to be supplied with railway facilities, as I have already said, the capital account cannot be kept "closed." The railway company must enlarge its accommodation according to the increasing demands. When, therefore, it was found that the Brighton Company were secretly negotiating with contractors for the extension of their lines to Tunbridge Wells, in violation of the territorial arrangement existing between the companies, our general manager, Mr Eborall, boldly laid a scheme before the Board, for constructing a direct line between Lewisham and Tunbridge (by Sevenoaks) and a loop line between

Lee and Dartford, thereby cutting off the angle at Redhill, and bringing the line into direct communication with Folkestone and Dover on the one hand, and Tunbridge Wells and Hastings on the other; while a direct connection was made with the whole line of the North Kent communications, as far as Gravesend, Chatham, and Maidstone, and afterwards Victoria on the Medway.

Had the "capital account" been "closed," and the Charing Cross line not been made, in addition to these other important extensions, the South-Eastern Company—to use a favourite phrase—would inevitably have been "smashed up." We should have had no station but at the south end of London Bridge; while the Brighton and the Chatham and Dover Companies would each have possessed both City and West End stations. Away would have gone the bulk of the continental, as well as the Tunbridge Wells and Hastings traffic. Indeed, the Brighton Company insisted, in 1860, on 70 per cent. of the Hastings traffic being granted them in the division of the West End traffic.

Since the opening of the Charing Cross terminus, and the direct line to Tunbridge, the results have proved very different. The capital expended has gone up in amount, yet the shares have gone to a premium, and the dividends have been increased. And in time to come, the public will have no reason to complain of the construction of the Charing Cross railway, and the additional facilities which have been afforded them, not only for access to suburban residences in Kent, but for getting readily to the seaside, and for quick communication between Dover and Folkestone and the continental ports.

All this, however, may prove very tedious to

those whose minds are not interested and steeped—as mine then was—in the thought of London traffic and passenger accommodation. There were many other things requiring attention. I remember a most important matter—the remodelling of the rules and regulations upon the line, for the purpose of avoiding accidents. It was found, on inquiry, that some of the regulations were slightly contradictory, and that they wanted codifying and rearrangement. In rendering these rules more intelligible, as well as grammatical, I believe that I was of some use.

The idea of “an accident” occurring on the line always set us “in a quake.” Nothing can be more horrifying to a person employed in railway service. It deprived many of us of our night’s rest. My dear friend Eborall was always of an anxious turn of mind. He could never get rid of his business. He would take it home with him; take it to bed with him; turn it over and over to the loss of his sleep; and rise up with it in the morning; for it ever burdened his mind. Sometimes, when a thing had struck him in the night that he wished to remember, he would get up, light the gas, and commit it to his memorandum book.

But the most careful preliminary arrangements cannot overcome the infirmities of human nature. Rules may be perfect; but not men. I remember one day Eborall rushed into my room, which adjoined his own, and said, with frightful alarm, “I am off to Staplehurst by a special engine: I hear there is an awful accident.” It was too true. It appeared that the “ganger,” or superintendent of plate-layers, had taken up a portion of the line overhanging a rivulet, for the purpose of repairing it with new beams and

rails. He had looked at his time-book, but mistaken the hour! On the previous day, the tidal train would not have arrived till about two hours later; but now (without his knowing it, through his individual mistake) it was due! He had not even sent his signalman along the line, to protect the road. Up came the train from Folkestone, and dashed into the opening; and eight of the fourteen carriages were thrown into the brook underneath. It is a dreadful thing, even to think of. The event occurred on a fine afternoon in June 1865.

Of course, the company had to bear all the expense involved by the accident. Everything was done for the relief of the sufferers, and the people of the neighbourhood were most kind. Gallimore, the district inspector, and Bengel, the foreman platelayer, were found guilty of manslaughter, and were sent to prison. But their punishment could not remedy the awful injury that had been done.

Not long after the accident, a young lady called upon Mr Eborall, and claimed some damage for the injury done to her dress. As it was necessary to ask for references—for it was a practice of certain persons to make a trade of claiming compensation in railway accidents—he desired to know if any person was with her at the time the accident occurred. “Yes!” she said, “my mother, and Mr Charles Dickens.” This was the first time we had heard that Charles Dickens was in the train. I believe that he first referred to the fact at the conclusion of his novel of *Edwin Drood*. He died five years later. Although railway collisions sometimes produce permanent injury to the brain, I never heard that he suffered from this cause. He died most probably from too much work, too much reading of his works, and too much unrest.

Shortly after the occurrence of the above event, we were invaded by a number of inventors, all suggesting remedies for railway accidents. The most extraordinary applicant was an old sea captain. He said no accident need occur if his remedy were adopted. What was it? It was to provide two strong anchors and chains, suspended to the last carriage of every train. When an accident seemed likely to occur, the anchors were to be suddenly let go! I need scarcely say what would have been the result of the adoption of this plan. One might as well have run the train against a brick wall. The result would certainly have been the destruction of most of the carriages, and the ripping up of about a hundred yards of the permanent way. It was merely an illustration of the old story of "Nothing like leather!"