

October

~~September~~

1853

A European view of American railroads.

by Hester Crawley

Even the most skilful of doctors goes to a colleague when he wants an opinion about his health. He knows that his own brain is involved in the problem, and that onlookers see most of the game. In the same way it is difficult for the natives of a country to see themselves as others see them. They may or may not be right in priding themselves on such-and-such a virtue, or in insisting on the importance of such-and-such an asset; but it is only guess-work. The American sees far more clearly than the Englishman how the social system operates in Great Britain, for example; and per contra, it may conceivably be of value to the American people to read the opinion of a European on such matters as their railroad system.

This is peculiarly the case because the American has a very special limitation in this particular instance. For years the whole question has been saddled by torrents of polemics. The roads themselves on the one hand; and on the other the politicians, the "reformers", the "muckrakers", and all sorts of interests, from the travelling public to those great businessmen which depend for their profit upon the transport of their various merchandise, have brought the conduct of the roads into a welter of controversy. Each has been naturally unable to see the point of view of the others; first principles have long since faded from sight. It appears useful to recall some of the circumstances which surround the problem; for the conditions in the United States have no parallel with, and present small analogy to, those which obtain in any other country. Comparisons have been more odious in this matter than they proverbially are in most.

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Some of the "elders whose hair has uncurled" can still recall the attitude of the British as a nation to the railroads at the time of their introduction. They were evidently "unscriptural"; they were dangerous, dirty, nasty, un-English things; they were unreliable and inefficient; they threatened vested interests; and <sup>they</sup> would surely undermine the manhood of the country and tend to cause the breed of horses to deteriorate! All these ideas were held fanatically by the class of people whom custom described as "educated". In the matter of steamships, the present writer well remembers his seniors as explaining the wreck of the "Great Eastern" by the Wrath of God, who did not care for steamships to exceed a certain size. The same people gave the same reason for the wreck of the "Titanic".

This sounds incredible to us; it reads more like the "Voyages of Captain Cook" or the Travels of Mungo Park. Yet it is no tale of the Dark Ages; it is no satire of Swift; it is the sober truth about the most enlightened country in the world, and there are plenty of men, yet alive and active, who were brought up in these opinions. It is not among the vulgar and ignorant that we need look for them; but among the clergy, the masters of colleges, and even the men of what in that day passed for science. It is a bitter recollection and an humiliating confession; but it is well to dwell on it for a moment, for in this we may find the root of a popular prejudice, find ~~among~~ the strongest, because subconscious and therefore unavailable by reason, which predisposes many people to think ill of railroads without their knowing exactly why. "A fool is more wise in his own conceit than seven men that can give a reason".

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So-called comic papers occasionally do immense harm. In this matter they are greatly to blame. "Punch" continued for years to make fun of the railroads, to represent them as stupid,

obstinate, dangerous, useless, and worse. It repeated the performance over automobiles. The motorist was a deliberate murderer, and nothing else. Marie Corelli actually wrote a book to prove it, and added that occupants of motor-cars - which came from "atheistic France" -- all broke the seventh Commandment. One cannot dismiss this writer with the obvious sneer; one must remember that she was more or less persona grata at the Court; her works were in fact read by servant-girls and by the Royal Family.

However, though one must wonder at and blush for the blindness of our fathers, one may also perceive some excuses for them. The steam-engine in the time of Stephenson was by no means the superlative success that it is to-day; accidents did happen, and no one could say positively that improvement would be so rapid as the event has proved. Also, the need of the invention was not obvious. People had done very well for a long while with horse-flesh; they had been accustomed to it for centuries; it had got into the blood. Many of the really valuable and beautiful elements in the English character were truly wedded to the system; and even to-day one can say quite legitimately that some lovely things, as well as many uncomfortable ones, passed with the advent of the "Iron Horse".

The actual advantages, too, conferred by the railroads were very limited in character. The great towns were already great, and the distances between them were so small that the saving of time and expense was proportionately ~~xxxx~~ negligible. Their effect in

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Such a contention, too, was not altogether indefensible. All that the railroads had done was to improve existing connexions. Their creative power was masked by the fact that the civilisation into which they had come was already a well-established fact.

In America the conditions were wholly ~~l~~therwise. Great towns did to some extent exist at the time of the introduction of railways, but their importance depended almost entirely on their water communications. At that time America had a merchant marine of prime value. There was to all intents and purposes no communication of any sort by land between the big cities. Even New York and Philadelphia were too far <sup>apart</sup> for land travel, seeing that there were not even good roads for coaches. To go ~~to~~ Charleston from Chicago -- it was almost unthinkable. The popular idea of a journey was gigantic. A man leaving Boston for Washington D.C. would bid his family a ~~not~~ affecting farewell. We must also consider the fact that the country between the cities was mostly desert or very sparsely colonised. A century

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ago the population of Ireland was greater than that of the whole of the territory now called the United States. And there was no inducement to improve the means of communication. Where water was, it was possible; where not, impossible for all practical purposes. Reflect on the hardships involved in the Mormon pilgrimage; think of the conditions of the pioneers in California. There was the most obviously fertile state on the surface of the earth; and it needed the lure of gold before it was colonized.

People are inclined to talk as if there were some sublime virtue involved in the expansion of this country, as if the extraordinary development were a matter of miracle. In point of fact, like the Order of the Carter, there was "no damned merit about it." It was due to one thing, and one thing only; the railroads.

In America, the railroads are not mere links between existing cities; that was their first function, of course, but it soon became subsidiary. People say that America has no poets or artists, but they err. In this country the creative intelligence flowers in a strange fashion. The imagination of the great poets is turned to construction of material things. Collis P. Huntington

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had just as much vision as Michael Angelo or William Blake. He saw a desert on the map, and instead of sitting down in surine contemplation, he pictured a land flowing with milk and honey, and proceeded to realize his phantasy not on canvas, but in nature. Of course his realization was compelled to confine itself to lines dictated by economic considerations; all artists are bound in some such way. In fact, the economic aim is implicit in all this kind of artistry. Where this is neglected, the result is always bad art. The achievement of what the common sense of the people instinctively calls "Go-and-go's Folly" is no good from any point of view. The Eiffel Tower, having served its first purpose of advertising the Great Exhibition, would have been pulled down long ago but for the accident of its being found of service as a wireless station. So the artist of railroads must wed The Beautiful to The Useful; he must consider the cost and the profit; he must try to arrange for a gain in real estate values to compensate him for the loss in operating the road itself. It is his business to be a kind of Quixote; Heaven knows he was laughed at enough on that score; but no sooner does he make good, and show

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that his crazy idea of running a line from End-of-the-world to Back-of-beyond is practical good sense, and says, than the very people who scoffed at him turn round and call him a thief. There are some good folks who cannot conceive their neighbour to be other than fool or knave. This is part of the Puritan tradition which has cursed and blighted America for so long, and is still venomous. Many people cannot bear to think that any outside their own circle is honourable or intelligent; and if the ancients were prone to take the Unknown either for Terrible or Magnificent, the modern American is equally inclined to distrust with one eye, and gloat with the other. Suspicion and credulity seem to be twin faults, opposite though they appear; and certainly the public in the United States have developed both to the maximum. The root of both lies, obviously, in Ignorance. To this was added lack of true imagination; and the resultant was too often used by the selfish in commerce or politics for their own ends. It is a curious commentary, and a cynical, ~~that~~ on human wisdom that the elaborate precautions against the abuse of power which were devised by the framers of the best modern republican states have left them, just as helpless as the most antique monarchies.

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All human institutions depend for their working upon the men who ~~operate~~ operate them; and those statesmen who have tried to make a fool-proof or knave-proof constitution have tried to milk the ram. Socialism, even more than despotism, depends upon the integrity of all concerned. A really bad despot can be shot or beheaded, and there is a fair chance that his successor will take warning; but where a whole community is corrupt, there is no cure but the revolution through the Platonic cycle. The only issue for an unsuccessful democracy is anarchy, out of which leaps tyranny iron-armed. Now it is one of the inherent faults in a democracy that initiative and intelligence are always the objects of mistrust, and this fact is one of the chief elements in the situation with regard to the railroads. The magnates were obviously supermen, <sup>in Ibsen's phrase,</sup> so to speak, the Enemies of the People. But it has not occurred to the average controversialist in this matter to go back to the first principles of the thing, to base his views on spiritual considerations. He has been too prone to hammer away at the local issue, too unwilling to balance the good against the bad. No doubt the page of bankruptcy and

manipulation reads ill here and there; but in judging any event, one must take cognizance of all causes. Is there no excuse for the roads? The most honest, upright, and honourable man will act with precaution if he find himself among suspicious and hostile savages; he will do things of which he would rightly be ashamed if he were sitting at home. And the railroads were really in some such position; they were being assailed with violence and skill by people of whom some were ~~xxxx~~ honest, but others unscrupulous. A great deal of the attack upon the roads was stark blackmail. Even the best of the opponents of the magnates were to be blamed, to some extent; they relied on the false European analogy, and they were quite blind to the vital importance of the roads themselves. The biological argument is of prime value in this matter. As an organism increases in size, its circulation and its nervous development become more and more the crucial questions in its well-being. The height of a man is limited by the hydrostatic consideration that the weight of the earth's atmosphere will support only about thirty feet of water. If our veins were filled with Mercury instead of blood, the height of a man could not

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much exceed 15 inches, unless he had a whole system of heart-pumps instead of one. A small community can live and flourish with few and feeble means of communication; but as its boundaries extend, they must develop, or it will die, just as surely as a man will die if you interfere either with his circulation or his nervous system. If railroads were to be abolished to-morrow, three fourths of the population would actually die of hunger in a few days, and there would be no possibility of saving them. That is the point which has been so fatally overlooked. It is an extreme case, this idea of storage; but it is also true that lesser injuries to the system are proportionately harmful to the community. A single wreck arrests business horribly. Unless we can have swift and punctual trains, reasonable rates for both passengers and freight, and general efficiency and comfort, we all suffer. Now the ~~many~~ opponents of the roads have not given the magnates credit for intelligence enough to perceive this, and to understand also that their own prosperity depended absolutely on that of the whole country. A railroad will not earn much in the Sahara desert, with one terminal in The Belly of the Desert, and

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the other in the Region of the Great Dunes. If the magnates had been left to themselves, their good sense -- I say nothing of their good will -- would have enabled them to bring their systems to perfection all in good time. Crooked business is bad business, and no man knows that better than the man who is capable of running a railroad. It is true that some speculators, men who were not really railroad men at all, butted in, and left a trail of ruin. But such men found their opportunity in the misfortunes of the roads, caused by the interference of the alleged Public. The man who really owns stock is a Bull. He wants dividends. He suffers with his property, and enjoys with it. But the gambler can trim his boat to any sale. He has no interest but his immediate gain. The real owner is a citizen; the gambler is a parasite.

It follows that the roads themselves are trustworthy, from the nature of their true interests. It is only those whose interests were purely artificial, who were not working the roads, but playing with them, that could gain by abuse of privilege. There have been cases of those in charge of affairs deliberately wrecking their own property, but this was due to the fact that their conception

of their interests was at fault. And why was it at fault? Very much because the prospects of legitimate development had been blighted by the senseless or criminal opposition of others.

A man who owns a prosperous business does not burn down his store to get the insurance money. The best guarantee that the People could have had for the good conduct of the railroads was their constantly increasing prosperity. In all countries the measure of conservatism is the measure of prosperity. When everybody is well and happy, nobody wants a revolution. It is a very strange marriage when the parties apply for divorce in the middle of the honeymoon. Of course no business can be run so as to please all the people all the time, but it is the constant aim of those responsible to get as near as possible to that ideal. It is true that the temporary interest of any man may be in conflict with that of his fellows; but this is mere short-sightedness. There are lots of gold-brick men and sure-thing-experts about; but I have yet to see one with a six-figure balance at his bank. It is always to the ultimate interest of a railroad to lower its rates, and to serve the public convenience as best it can. To

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act otherwise is to commit slow financial suicide. No doubt this sort of thing has occasionally been done; ~~the~~ the reason has been not mere greed or stupidity, but despair caused by the bitterness of the struggle against opposition. The conditions were not well studied at first, no doubt; there were few or fallacious data to go upon. In the very early days the struggle was so intense that the temptation to take a profit where it offered must have been hard to resist. But time would have cured this; experience would have shown that all such proceedings were disastrous follies. Constructive criticism would have helped; there may have been here and there a President whose mind needed enlightenment, some demonstration that his real advantage lay in temporary sacrifice to gain a permanent good. But constructive criticism was the one thing not offered by the public; such as there was came from within by the slow course of events and the growth of experience. The average man was made to believe that the Railroads were the common enemy. They were lamooned and vilified in the shallowest way; it never occurred to the publicist to see the utter interdependence of the body politic with its means of communication.

The old fable of "The belly and the members" need<sup>ed</sup> to be brought up to date as "The arteries and the members". Even where this point was apparent, as it must have been to anyone with a calm head on a single moment's reflection, it was thought that reform should come from without. It was accepted as a canon of thought that the ~~xxxxxxxx~~ onlooker saw most of the game, and that the poetical suggestions of amateurs were likely to be of more service than the expert efforts of the men in charge of the business. It is no doubt true that it would be lovely if we all had automobiles, and so there are people silly enough to propose a law that every one should have one. This is only an extreme example of the fatuity of most of the reforms suggested. One remembers the law, proposed in England that a director of the Railway Company should be attached to the front of the engine of every train. It might have caused a somewhat large demand for directors. People with no idea or management whatever of the details of railroad construction put forward the most absurd schemes which were all right on a priori grounds, but utterly unpractical. Today the cry after every accident is for safety automatic devices. No one seems to suspect that the desire

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of the Engineer for all time has been to find some guarantee of safety, and that money has been poured out in floods to make all kinds of experiment. Nobody seems to know the true answer to the problem, which is that all devices of a mechanical nature depend ultimately on human operation, and that to duplicate safeguards is only to complicate the matter, and to make the operators careless by teaching them to rely on the other precaution, and to neglect their own. In the Grantham accident there were five men on the train whose duty it was to stop the train. There was no possibility of error, since the instructions had always been to shut off steam on emerging from a long tunnel. Yet those five men each thought simultaneously that since none of the other four had noticed the error, it must be all right. . . So much for multiplying safeguards. This is but one example of the silly mischief worked by the cobbler going beyond his last. Much, if not all, of the present confusion and trouble in the matter is due to the ignorant interference of outsiders in matters far beyond their grasp. State legislatures have listened to the plausible rhodomontade of demagogues, and passed laws which would make Gilbert and Sullivan

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turn in their graves with envy. Others practiced deliberate blackmail upon the hapless railroads. Instead of confining their resources and their brains to their own legitimate development, they were compelled to keep lobbies and secret service funds and bribery funds to save themselves from extinction at the hands of unscrupulous politicians. They were compelled to fight fire with fire, and thus even their good was turned to evil. They were forced by their enemies to do the very things of which they were being accused. It was tragic alike for them and for the country. The mere survival of the roads is a proof that you cannot kill a good and necessary thing, however hard you try, and no matter what foul means you may employ.

I am only a poor ignorant immigrant from effete Europe, and my opinion is of no particular value. But I should like to suggest to my kind hosts that it would at least be an amusing experiment to try fair play for the railroads for a year or so. By the very accounts of their enemies, the abyss has already been plumbed. Is it not just thinkable that there has been a big mistake, that

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need to be let alone to reach their highest efficiency, and that  
is coordinate with the highest good of the community?

Aleister Crowley.