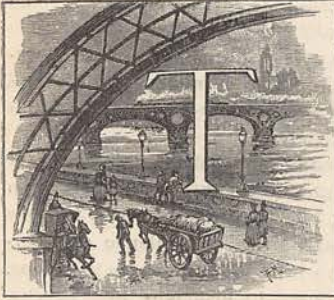


THE ARTISTIC ASPECT OF RAILWAYS.



HERE is so much talked by people of semi-artistic tastes about a railway being a blot on a landscape, that to adopt the opposite position, and to say that it positively improves it, seems a silly

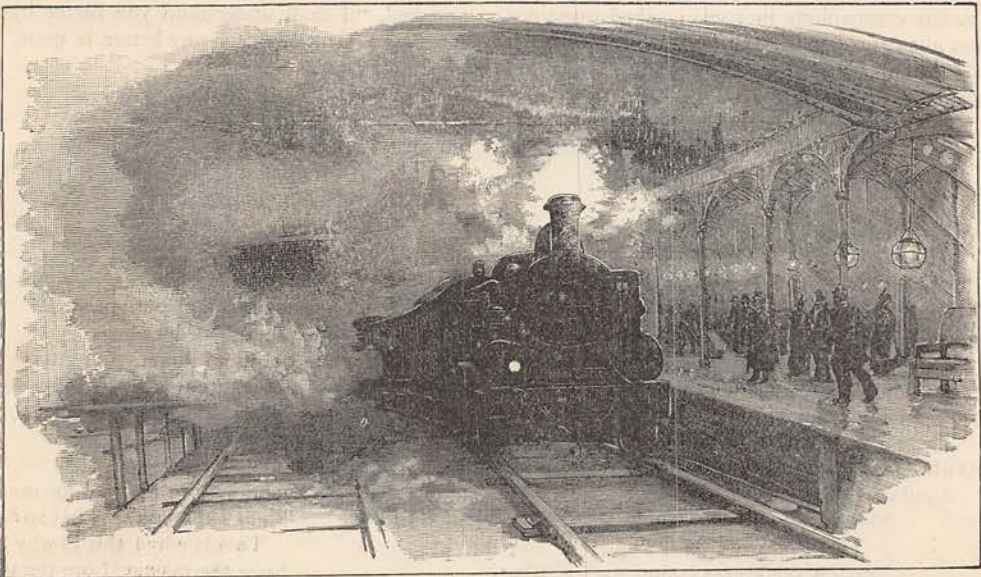
and defiant position, like asserting that Shakespeare is poor reading. When a man tells Professor Seeley that history is dull, the professor does not attempt to alter history, but the mind of his interlocutor; and when a man says that railways are beautiful, we conclude that there is a deep and radical deficiency in his artistic nature.

Mr. Ruskin and his school are really to blame for the contemptuous way in which railways are spoken of. These philosophers found that the chimneys of smelting furnaces and iron foundries and great mills exercised a pernicious effect upon the surrounding country; they dirtied streams and withered trees, and these manufactories being generally built of ugly materials and without any attempt to ornament construction, they somewhat hastily concluded that anything of a commercial nature was artistically revolting. We do not even agree with Mr. Ruskin and his school about these buildings themselves. A walk by night through a country of blast furnaces is one of the most exciting and impressive spectacles

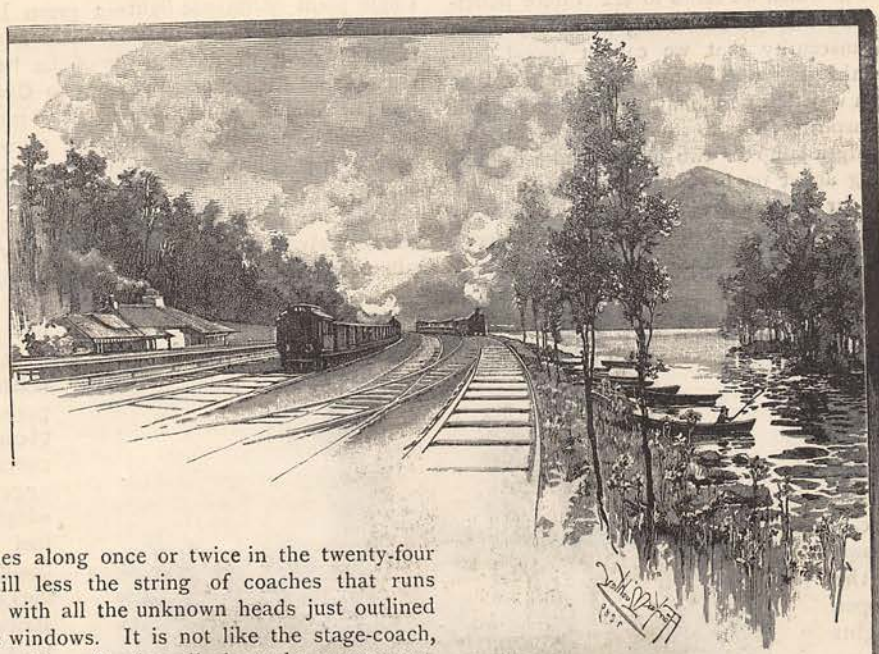
that an ordinary man can see: the high towers vomiting smoke and flame; the mysterious underglow from hidden furnaces thrown on the streaming pillars of smoke, and the high wheels solemnly turning; the gigantic tubular frameworks; the mysterious shadow of the huge rods rising and falling with grave regularity behind the smoke-dried windows; and the sounds from the endless din of wheels, the snort of the piston-rod, and the plunge of the great beams. We venture to say that if Dante could have been transplanted to such a scene as this, he would have erased much of his "Inferno," and set himself to reproduce what he had seen as faithfully as possible.

Of course we do not go so far as to wish to introduce a railway wherever Nature is at her loveliest and wildest. Apart from all other considerations, the making of it is an ugly work; the burrowings of that gigantic mole, the contractor, across a heathery moor or close to a clear mountain stream are far from beautiful. It is indeed strange what villainous colours can "be dugged out of the bowels of the harmless earth," especially if it is done more or less in a straight line.

But, on the other hand, when your railway is once made, what is there to offend the eye? Certainly not the geometrical line which it draws along the hill-bases. We find no such fault with a road; and when Nature does the same thing herself by old raised beaches or flat-topped heights or river terraces, we make a great deal out of it and draw pictures in our guide-books. Certainly not the laden luggage-train with the puffing steam-horse in front, and the guard looking peacefully out from the balcony of his van,



AN UNDERGROUND METROPOLITAN STATION (p. 14).



"CLOSE TO A CLEAR MOUNTAIN STREAM" (p. 12).

that rumbles along once or twice in the twenty-four hours. Still less the string of coaches that runs merrily by, with all the unknown heads just outlined against the windows. It is not like the stage-coach, which stops at inn after inn all along the great mountain roads, and disgorge a string of turbulent pleasure-seekers, who have no intimacy, and do not seek to have any, with the heights that frown above them. But the unknown and unrecognised identities that flash past in the passenger trains—what is there about them to terrify or disgust? They are merely a portion of the last great town being transferred to the next. They are like shadows on the wall, and fleeting past, lend a dash of human interest to a scene, without vulgarising it in the least.

Even a dilatory branch line is an attractive feature in a landscape; but the man who is not stirred to some emotion at the sight of a *main line* sweeping through the country-side must be dead of soul indeed. Every true lover of the country knows what a thrill comes over him if he passes out of winding lanes on to some famous highway like Ermine Street or the Ickneild Way. He looks right and left and cannot but admire; but what is a high-road to a railway? It is so strong and straight, whether it runs through level cuttings among quiet fields and the edges of coverts, with bridge after bridge marking the old field roads, or tops a broad embankment which overlooks the water-meadows, half as high as the hedgerow elms, and higher than the red-tiled villages and the long roofs of granges or mills.

It is true that our railway bridges and embankments have not had time to grow venerable yet, but the time is coming. An earthwork is a stately thing. The emotion that we feel at the sight of such a work as the Devil's Dyke at Newmarket, or the hill-terraces of Old Sarum, is pleasure not unmingled with awe. The trenches of a Roman camp, such as Cæsar's Camp near Bracknell or Brent Knoll, add an interest and a mystery to a hill that would be tame enough without them. The

fault of art is that it always hankers after the past; it is apt to praise the added lustre of tradition and age as though it had been part of the intrinsic conception. Let us have a little prophetic courage about our railways, and own that they are majestic constructions, suggestive of vast power and myriad labour. If the time ever comes that the land is desolate, that civilisation draws away westward, as some think it is bound to do, we may be sure there will be no monument of our fallen greatness so tremendous as the vast hill-cuttings, the long embankments, the daring river bridges, and the huge tunnellings among the downs. The remnants of our race, decayed into savage hunters or meagre tillers of the soil, as they stumble painfully up the embankments or peer into the darkness of crumbling tunnels, will have every justification for believing that the men of former days were wizards indeed, and that such work could hardly be of human origin.

But if these iron roads are impressive by day, what are they by night? We have seen the lava streams flow from Etna; we have heard the stones whiz upward through the sulphur smoke of Vesuvius; we have seen the avalanche fall with a sound of hushed thunder from the Eiger; we have watched the green rollers of the Atlantic fall on Helston Bar—but we hesitate to affirm that any of these spectacles strike such an awe into the spirit as the sight of a night express thundering through a deserted station. There is a brute force, a gigantic horror about the operations of Nature when she is hard set on working off her humours; while there is a familiarity about the works of man, a calculated result that we all understand, which takes away something from the hushed

bewilderment in which we stand to see Nature buffeting herself; and there is something about the sense of personal insecurity that we cannot divest ourselves of, in the presence of these passion-fits, that appals us in a way that no human energies can. Still it is an awe-inspiring thing to stand on the silent platform, with only a lamp or two alight, and a belated porter moving about on his rounds, and to hear the dull murmur far off among the fields which heralds the approaching monster. On she comes, till every moment we believe that she must be at her loudest, and still the thunder grows, till at last the huge funnel flashes into the light with the roar and rattle of a hundred wheels, and the flash of the bright panels of the carriage windows. Overhead the glare of the open fire-box lights up the volleying steam. We draw involuntarily back, but in an instant all is over and we can only see the triangle of red points swaying from side to side, and narrowing rapidly in the darkness.

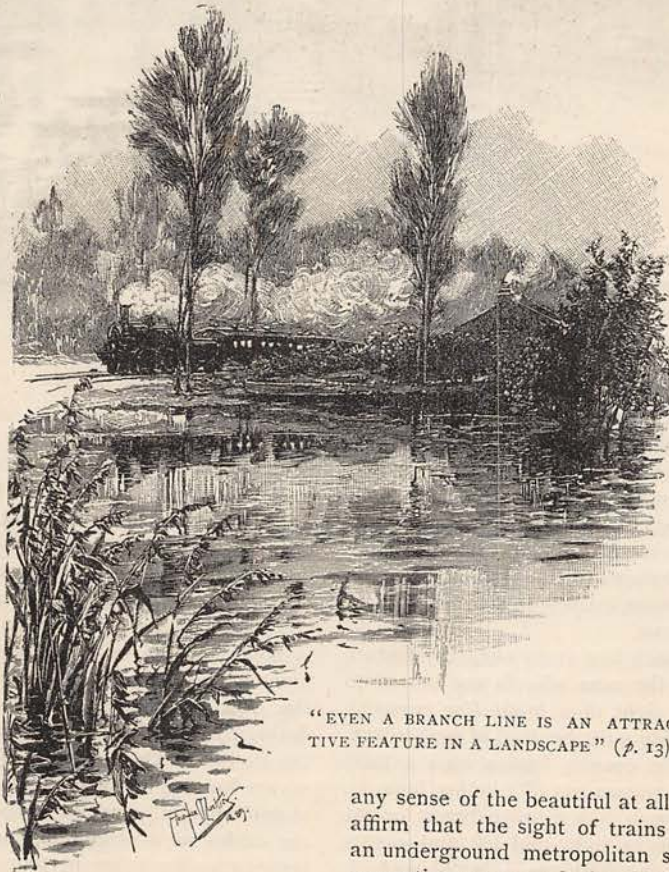
There are hundreds of magnificent effects of all kinds which can be seen on railways and nowhere else: the view from the windows of a train as it draws near some terminus on a frosty night; the glare of the great station; the galaxy of lights, the dim forms of semaphores; the rows of silent wagons—the only wonder is that no painter has ever arisen to depict them. Beauty! no, it is not exactly that; but effectiveness and suggestiveness, and the sense of human power and energy. Nowhere else are they found in equal proportions.

Among a series of very striking little impressional sketches by a clever artist named Van Beers, exhibited a year or two ago, was one of remarkable power. It represented a dull sky, just at dusk—a tall embankment crossed the picture from side to side; at one place the phantom forms of trees were indicated against the heavy air. On the embankment was a heavily laden baggage train, evidently moving very slowly, with a

single point of intense light—a green lamp on the engine. The whole thing was weird and impressive to the highest degree. Talk of the “funeral with plumes and lights” passing down to Camelot! The Lady of Shalott would have had far more difficulty in keeping her attention on the mirror if it had been a luggage train between Reading and Pangbourne.

When our artists get together and make an audience for themselves, as they have been lately doing, they talk with a dogmatism and a self-absorption to which

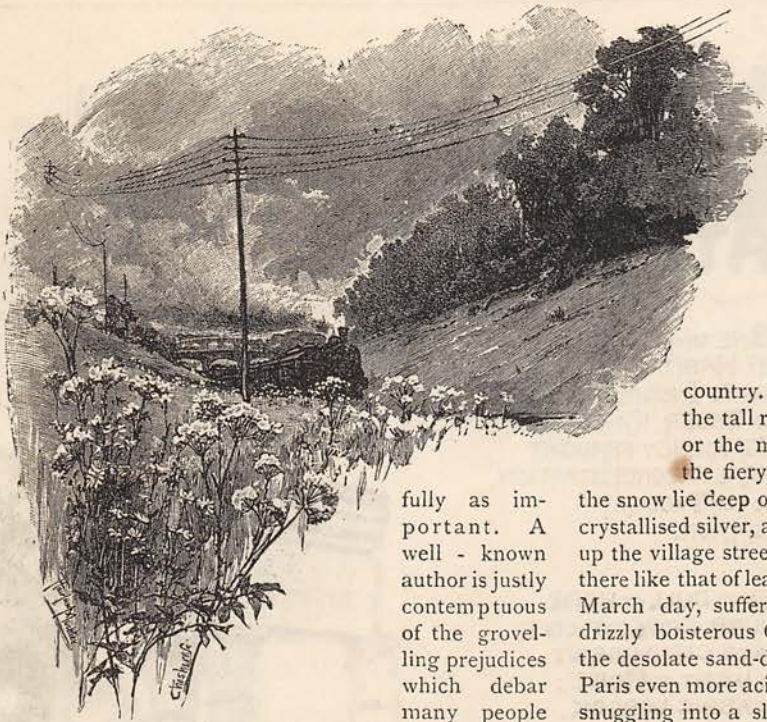
the statements on most other platforms are elastic by comparison. One gentleman discoursed about the urgent need which the public had for seeing beautiful buildings and graceful statuary. Why will they overlook all the things that—if not exactly beautiful—are solemn and awe-inspiring and impressive to a degree that no purely artistic creation can ever be? A heavy London fog settling down on Ludgate Hill is a sight of soul-stirring import to a man who has



“EVEN A BRANCH LINE IS AN ATTRACTIVE FEATURE IN A LANDSCAPE” (p. 13).

any sense of the beautiful at all. And we venture to affirm that the sight of trains entering and leaving an underground metropolitan station is, to a man of perceptive nature, calculated to touch those feelings which art labours so assiduously, and often so vainly, to affect. We do not want pictures such as Frith’s “Start of the Scotch Mail”—that is merely a study of humanity seen under its fussiest and most distressing aspect; but we want studies of such things as the night and the stars, and the walls of the gigantic cuttings, and the monstrous rushing thing charged so securely with human lives, labouring along the iron roads from town to town. Such a picture would touch all of us, because it is the glorification of the familiar, the interpretation of common things; and art must have a familiar basis if it is to have a general influence at all.

Hitherto we have been dealing purely with the objective view of the question—the picturesque and sentimental view of railways as a feature of landscape; but their subjective usefulness from the artistic side is



"ACROSS A HEATHERY MOOR" (p. 12).

asure derivable from a railway journey. Surely it is no inconsiderable thing to have a lovely English panorama unrolling itself minute by minute through the glass panels at your elbow : never so fast as to be obscured, and never so slow as to forfeit the tantalising element which is so important in all true artistic pleasure. It combines in this point the best features of both music and painting, just as you sit to hear an enchanting quartett of Bach's, with the airy presences flitting so delicately from the strings, conscious that you must seize and enjoy the passing moment, that you may neither indulge foretaste nor retrospect, but devote your whole energies to the enjoyment of the instant. And so the landscape sweeps past the window, neither lingering nor yet making haste. Perhaps you are indulged for a few moments longer with the sight of a wooded hill, green and glowing in the summer air, or under the misty glories of autumn with the branches reddening beneath the sombre pines ; or you are sobered by the stately monotonous outline of distant shaven downs—by the farmhouse among the trees, the mansion winking drowsily through its sun-blinds with the lake flashing at its feet, the village church among the graves, the sportsman at the edge of the covert looking round for an instant to see you pass, the waves breaking at the foot of some sandstone pinnacle—all these little vignettes, that you are never allowed to dwell upon to satiety, are a perpetual delight ; as also to see them in such lazy comfort, and to feel the slight pressure of the book upon your knee, which tells that when you are tired of looking

you may rest a while and be refreshed. All this is very unlike the weary fretted frame of mind with which even the hardest traveller attacks a picture gallery, or even gazes at the scenery that he has undergone such discomfort to see. And then, too, a railway carriage is nearly the only place where you can see in perfect comfort every kind of atmospheric effect over a broad expanse of changing country. Seated at your ease, you may see the tall rain-column stalk up the steep valley, or the mist shroud the meadow-lands, or the fiery sun pierce through a frosty fog, or

the snow lie deep over field and fen, casing the trees in crystallised silver, and accentuating cornice and gable up the village street. What pleasure in the world is there like that of leaving London in a raw cross-grained March day, suffering the accumulated horrors of a drizzly boisterous Channel passage, sleeping through the desolate sand-dunes on the Norman coast, to find Paris even more acidly repellent than London, and then snuggling into a sleeping-car, with the consciousness that you are paying for your uneasy sleep at the rate of about a penny a minute, and waking by Tarrascon or Avignon, to find yourself in the midst of a sunny spring day, with the Judas-trees flushing purple against the blue sky, the buttercups covering the fields with sheets of glossy gold, the roads actually tremulous with the coming heat, and the tall white houses drowsing under the shadow of grey spires ! The intoxication of such a transformation is one of those things that make life beautiful.

Life is seen in its most spectacular and, therefore, in its most delightful aspect, from the windows of a railway train. The people are mere picturesque phantoms, created for your amusement and delight : people—what a joy it is to think of it!—with whom one is never destined to have any personal relations at all. Tableaux ! that we may not mar their sweetness by any words. If you had speech with the farmer jogging along the roads, all that you would hear would be prophetic grumbling about the crops, or clumsy denunciations of misapprehended politicians ; but in the train you get all that is delightful of him without any drawback. There is the tramp, lighting his wayside fire, to whom you may not, even if you would, extend your weak charities, or feel remorseful because you have not done so ; the village children clambering on a gate ; the rector buying his morning paper at the little station where you stop for water—a man, perhaps, who, if you knew him, would wax warm over Queen Anne's Bounty, and the inadequacies of the system of preferment. A man becomes an optimist, in spite of himself, behind the window of a railway carriage.

