



## RAILWAYS: THE PROMISE FOR THE FUTURE

**To commemorate the 180<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russian Railways, the editors rerun this article, an agemate.**

*It is only on a railway that one can fully and accurately grasp what a steam engine is. Anywhere else – on ships, in mines, in factories – the engine is hidden and, apart from the distant knocking, rattling and smoke, it shows not even the tiniest signs of life. In those other places, it reminds one of an old blind horse turning the wheel in a dark corner of some poor flour mill. But on a railway, the steam engine runs free; it breathes, runs, lives in the open; it gallops, flies, stops, trots again, breathless with impatience, and finally reaches the run's destination, all dusty and foamy with sweat! Here, six wiry men throw themselves at it, grab it by the bridle, wipe the dust and sweat off it, bringing it back to life and readying it for the road. This is what a steam engine looks like on the railway, and there is likely more poetry in it than in anything else; but centuries will pass before poets admit it. They are used to horses, darr-rr-ring and stubbb-bb-born; to chariots that fly-oh-so-ffasst and colliding on Olympic stadiums; to unbreakable reins; all their analogies come from ideas of the same order: Fertur equis auriga, neque audit currus habenas.*

*But, we prophesy, poetry will eventually be forced to change its ways and get on the railway. I, on my part, know of nothing that can impress one's imagination quite so strongly as the race, or, more properly, flight of this powerful machine through the fields; it gargles with boiling water, it is full of hottest burning coals; it is a violent but obedient Unicorn; it is a roaring volcano; it flies faster than wind, but a child's hand can stop it! Look at the steam engine from whatever side you please – it is a charming sight from any perspective – from a distance, when it is gliding among the trees planted on the sides of the railway, among flowers and fields of wheat; nothing compares with its beauty, speed, agility, and grace; close by, when the whole mechanism is roaring, fire cracking and flaring, the bellows blowing, the furnace breathing, the wheels grinding steel; when a smoked Cyclops, climbing on the monster's back, is taming down or rushing up its speed at will, – all of this embodies the idea of majestic power in its full self-confidence and strength. With all of these, let anyone dare speak of the pleasures of a high road, of the poetry of the stage coach; let them dare compare meadow-grown, hay-fed horses with my Unicorn, who was born in fire and feeds on fire. Let them praise the artfulness and agility of the coachman; to me, there is nothing more stately than the dignity of my Cyclops!*

*Having admired the machine, I must say a few words of the road. They say there is nothing more monotonous than the sight of a railway; it runs in a straight line, avoids populated areas, eliminates all happenstance, all travel adventures, levels out everything on its way, disperses both birds and*

*animals, flickers before a passer-by, deafens the traveler; and finally, it is alleged to hide more dangers than a well-kept high road.*

*Let us see. Firstly, how come a railway is more dull than a regular big road? It runs through the fields, jumps over ditches and rivers, it penetrates everything: both woods and valleys, it climbs hillsides, it launches bridges over chasms, it even crawls through the darkness of the subterranean! Indeed, railways go around villages, nor do they go through cities; but would cities and villages be so kind as to come closer to railways: they will benefit from it. Yes, be assured to rely on the power of railways; believe firmly in their future. It will not be for long that they run through deserts. Wherever the railway goes, it does try to keep farther away from houses, but houses chase it; everywhere where a station is set up, a town springs into being – but what am I saying? – whole cities are founded.*

*But accidents? Let us talk about them, too. They say, «You will freeze, your breath will stop because of the speed, you'll be deaf from the rattle, you'll suffocate with the smoke, your arms and legs will be broken.» Fortunately, nothing of the kind ever occurs on railways. There have been all sorts of trials: curious experimenters would take the first seats, and then the last ones; they would travel under the open sky with no protection against the wind; they would sit right next to the engine and as far away from it as they could; they would climb on the cars, sleep in the coach, they would travel face forward and back forward, and so? In all these positions no one suffered even the slightest inconvenience either from the road or the machine. The movement of trains is even and undisturbed; the speed, no matter how great, is only noticeable to the eye; the rattle fades away into space, the fast current of air takes away and disperses the smoke. As to important accidents, there can occur only the following three: either the machine jumps off the rails and pulls the convoy<sup>1</sup> after it, or its wheels fracture, or the boiler bursts. In the first case, a few seconds is enough to stop the machine; in the second, which is rare indeed, the same is true; in the third, which with the modern design of machines is almost decidedly impossible, woe, woe indeed is to the unreasonable conductor who disregards life-saving precautions! But most of the others will be salvaged. Since 7 May 1836, more than six hundred thousand people have traveled on the Brussels railway, and over this period, not a single accident occurred. Later on, two people lost their lives: one of his own recklessness, wanting to jump from one car to another; the other was drunk and wanted to stand on the link that connects the convoy to the machine, he fell and got under the wheels. It also happened once that when the machine was approaching, a cow was crossing the railway; scared by the rattling, it was too slow to escape and was hit and broken by the machine, which felt as if*

<sup>1</sup> The train pulled by the steam engine. *Editor of Zheleznodorozhnoye Delo [Railway Business].*





**Drawings of a token issued to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Imperial Edict on Russia's first railway.**

there was a sudden recoil; the cars shook and banged against one another; the passengers were frightened but no one was even scratched. It was only on the next day that the cow's owner demanded a compensation, but he was given nothing, because he could not answer in the positive to the question of whether the cow had been granted the right to walk around on the railway.

So in general, accidents on railways are far rarer than accidents on regular roads: no horses that can spur out of control, no axle that can break, no danger of falling on the side, no drunk or sleepy coachmen that could capsize into a ditch or, in some cases, a chasm. So railways cause not a single one of such unpleasant experiences, probably much to their critics' chagrin, but instead, how many benefits they provide! How much good do they bring about! How profound a change they will make in the mutual relations and dealings between enlightened nations!

I shall not talk much about the speed of transportation and consequential benefits to trade that railways will inevitably and very soon bring about. Look into the ledgers of Manchester merchants before and after the introduction of railways, and judge for yourselves! However, no one doubts these benefits. Many are even scared with the terribly large number of manufacturing facilities that are threatened by the excessive speed of transportation; but they fail to consider that at the same time railways are excellent helpers of consumption. Anyway, everybody agrees on the great benefits coming from the convenience of traveling so fast as to cover 50 and more versts in an hour, or get all sorts of goods or necessities; so I shall not dwell on it: the case is clear.

But this is how railways will deliver the humanity of many maladies against which medicine is helpless now. Indeed, there are numerous and important illnesses the only cures for which that doctors can find are fresh air and motion. How many woes would thousands of families have escaped, how many losses would humankind not have suffered if we could follow doctors' orders in each and every case! But now only the rich can afford travel, can go to places blessed with a health-giving climate that the ill person needs, and even they can do so if they are not held at home by some other business that cannot wait for however little extended time. A lot of people, I am sure, are fading and dying in large cities only because they cannot go on a quick trip at least once a year, to breathe a different air, to see countries that are new to them. Now, thanks to railways, travel to even the most locations will become affordable to everyone, be they poor or rich, sick or healthy. Now when the doctor tells you, «Travel!» he almost in all cases only wishes to get rid of you; and a lot of such go-away patients die each year; but with railways, it will not be so easy to get rid of the patient. He will take the railway

to travel and, returning without a benefit to his health, he will blame the doctor, he will make loud demands to be cured, because all patients want to get cured by all means. Thus, railways will cause the doctors to stop playing jokes on their patients, and will at last be forced to find serious medicines against incurable diseases.

I am saying it without a shade of joke, I am sure that travel by land on steam-driven machines will inevitably become, over time, one of the most actively used and strongest aids of medicine. Today, any motion that you can give yourself, any influence of the air that you can subject yourself to is just one-fourth of what railways can provide. Imagine how powerful an impact on the porous surface of the human body must a stream of air have if you dash through it at a speed of fifty versts an hour. No matter which way the wind is blowing, if you take an open-air seat, the wind will always be in your face, and if it's a headwind, then the impact will be extraordinary. It would feel like a wave in sea bathing during a storm, the air will pour on you with a force equal to the force of pouring water. You will not be able to bear with such a strong impact of air; but the benefit that it affords is beyond doubt. After an hour spent in such a position, you will feel an unusual excitement of all your life forces; your face will clear up, you will stop feeling nausea or having belches, you will become springy, joyous, and your hypochondria will go away completely. I have been speaking of the sick; but the healthy will also benefit, because their appetite will be greatly excited, and I knew a Frenchman in Brussels who ate two dinners: one at three and the other at six o'clock every time he had to travel to Antwerp on business by rail. To have two dinners! This is one of the consequences of the new system of transportation that I present to the judgment of political economists; and it is not an unimportant one.

Anyway, I am convinced that the time will come when travel on steam-driven machines will be prescribed by doctors for some known maladies, and maybe with greater benefits to the patients than today's travels to the waters. It will be phrased like this: make ten, or twelve, or fifteen trips on a steam engine, just as today they say: take ten sea baths, drink fifty glasses of mineral water. They will build hospitals on open-air railcars, and restaurants for the healthy; railways will have special doctors, just as there are special doctors at sources of mineral water. And, who knows, maybe fashion will be of greater help to them than greed itself. Fashion and steam – here are the most powerful agents of our times.

It seems that I do not even need to discuss why robbery is impossible on railways! It is clear that the trade of a robber will never be revived. What can a gang of robbers do against a whole army of travelers that are propelled at such a great speed by the machine? Robbers are left with only tossing pebbles at the track. But how pathetic, how impotent this revenge is! Robbery will die out everywhere where railways are built; but it will be only that one industry that will die!

(Author unknown. From «Moscow Observer», 1837, vol. 2, page 475.

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