

Gearing Problem

By David Vickery

It was an unreasonably beautiful morning in early March. The platform was peppered with commuters, but not of course crowded. The scene was familiar to Smith; he saw it every day. And yet for a moment it looked strange to him. He thought back to the book he'd been reading and the bizarre story it told: of packed, sweltering, claustrophobic commuter trains.

He tried to imagine such a scene, of the station platform almost dangerously packed with people, bad tempered, bad mannered, unhappy, stressed – not just once or due to some problem, but every day, as a matter of course! For their entire working lives!

Personally, Smith didn't believe a word of it, any more than he believed the tales of trains and stations covered with graffiti, of people without jobs to go to, or of men and women so obsessed with money that they would spend almost all their waking hours working away like demented beavers. Who would choose to live like that?

The train moseyed into the station at a steady 10 mph. Smith and his fellow commuters held doors open for each other while others stood about taking a last admiring look at the scenery before the journey to Londonbridge. The four guards exchanged waves and banter with them. All this was as it should be. And yet, according to his book, they should all have been pushing each other out of the way in a desperate attempt to get on board first! Smith chuckled over the unlikelihood of it all.

He sat in comfort, enjoying as he did every morning the sight of the well-tended fields on each side of the tracks during the run into the City. London, the great metropolis. Now and again he would engage others around him in leisurely conversation. There was no hint of tiredness or aggression in their faces, no jolting, swaying coaches, as the book – but Smith dismissed the book from his mind. Obviously a work of fiction, and pretty fantastic fiction at that, dressed up in documentary style.

He had plenty of time to enjoy the view and chatter to his heart's content. The ten-mile journey proceeded at its usual stately pace, and with a few stops along the way, almost as though to give the commuters a chance to *really* enjoy the beauty spots, it pulled into Londonbridge just over an hour after its departure from Smith's station.

As always, his fellow commuters disembarked in relaxed fashion and sauntered into the station forecourt, perhaps to have a ten minute chinwag with some business acquaintance before ambling into the gentle city. It was part of the pleasure of commuting.

But one traveller, just one, had not enjoyed the journey. Head Driver Burton stayed in the cab after his two subordinates had wandered off to the canteen. He felt uptight and frustrated. His beautiful new train was streamlined and powerful. It should have shot through the countryside like an arrow. And instead it was forced to crawl to its destination.

Burton took a careful look through the cab windows before slipping the book from his inside pocket. It was a technical engineering manual of his train, and drivers were not expected to have technical knowledge – after all, they were little more than custodians. Burton didn't know if its possession was actually illegal or merely irregular, but he didn't want to attract attention in either case. As he opened the pages and read of the speeds the train was capable of, he lost himself in dreams of flying like a bird. Tension drained out of his body as he read.

"Morning, Harrison," said Smith, as he finally arrived. He hung up his hat and looked around the spacious office with satisfaction. "Anything up?"

"Just this letter from an irate client," said Harrison. Smith looked up in surprise; irate clients were rare. "Listen to this: 'Three weeks for a reply to my enquiry is a disgraceful waste of resources...' But it's not *my* fault. Why blame me for the Post Office's efficiency?"

"Quite right, old chap," said Smith warmly.

"As I recall, I even exceeded by delay quota on that one. And then the PO has to go and throw all my good work in the bin. Typical!"

"Typical!" echoed Smith. He opened his paper. Monday was a crossword day. Wonderful. Time for a few clues before the lunch hours.

"By the way, the Annual Reports arrived today," said Harrison.

"Today? Sounds like another scandalous example of efficiency to me. If you ask me, it's time we found ourselves a decent printer."

"You're absolutely right. Anyway, we're okay: we'll just leave them until mid-April before we have them sent out. The great British public won't have anything to accuse us of *this* time."

"Mid-April? Deadlines, deadlines," sighed Smith, turning his mind to more agreeable things.

Early March was like summer, and commuting was even more enjoyable than usual. Every day Smith made his way to the office, happy and content. It was a pleasure to be alive. Every day he returned home to the wife, the children, the dog and the cat and heard anecdotes of their leisurely days. And every night, Burton sneaked into the depot and worked on his train. Both of them were happy, but Burton was happier than he'd ever been before.

It was another warm, sunny morning and Smith boarded his train as usual. Burton lounged at the controls of his cab. His two subordinates were at the other end of the platform chatting with the crew of guards, as they often did. There was, after all, no hurry.

Only this morning, there was. Before the last of the dawdling commuters were on board and without either of the subordinate drivers, Head Driver Burton secured the doors and tooled the train out of the station. The subordinates were surprised, but not especially concerned; drivers sometimes had these absentminded moments, and they would be picked up by the next service. The few commuters left behind were untroubled also. It gave them more time to enjoy the scenery and perhaps catch up on their quotas.

At a steady ten miles an hour the train moved along the gleaming rails, and a mile along the route Burton slowed to a halt. There were no adverse signals, no obstacles and no problems, but the commuters would be expecting a halt around now. Besides, he wanted to compose himself. His hands were perspiring, his face flushed, joy trembling just below the surface.

He let in the engine again and the train glided onwards, three, four, seven, nine, ten miles an hour. Birds flew overhead. He would soon leave them behind. With his hand now cool, his mind relaxed and confident, he asked for more speed: and the train, now freed from the shackles of its limiter, responded.

Fifteen miles, twenty miles an hour: the train was like some graceful animal finally let free to bound untrammelled. He opened the cab's side windows and let his face meet the onrushing air, cool and clear.

Thirty, forty, fifty miles an hour. It was intoxicating. This was how people were meant to travel, this was what life was all about! His spirit soared like an eagle, but even as he reeled with delight he spared a thought for his passengers. They would be enjoying this as much as he was; and after this journey, could they go back to inching along every day? Obviously, they couldn't! Dreams of a new world transfigured Burton as the train shot along at a steady, effortless seventy-five miles an hour.

Burton proved again what a consummate driver he was by dropping the speed easily and smoothly as Londonbridge approached, rolling up to the buffers and stopping precisely. He got out of his cab to receive his appreciation and share the joys of the great journey once again with that band of brothers his fellow travellers.

As he stood there, his face beaming, the carriage doors opened. Fearfully dishevelled commuters staggered onto the platform. Some were physically sick, others were shouting and quarrelling with each other. But most of them had a single-mindedness they had never experienced before in their lives. They set about the driver with fists, shoes, umbrellas and briefcases and he disappeared under a sea of bodies, his cries of incomprehension drowned by their abuse.

Smith watched the scene with shock, but also a sense of satisfaction, his body still quivering from the breakneck journey. Some of his fellow commuters had called the driver a dangerous madman during that hurtling onrush. But he had been one of the first out of train and had seen Burton's triumphant face. Dangerous he was, but mad he definitely was not.

"Anarchist!" bellowed the normally placid Smith. "Hit him again!"