

A Rough Riding Steam Engine

THE moon was full and high as a pilot steam engine backed down on to the front of the late express train from Sheffield to Derby. Its job was to add extra power to the heavily laden train, helping the newer express engines, slow to climb but like greyhounds on the flat. The express had its own driver and fireman. The engines were quickly coupled up. The old pilot engine was wheezing steam and smoke. As the fireman tidied the footplate, tended the fire and checked the gauges, all was well. Pressure was rising slightly in the glass, a little wisp of steam escaped from the safety valve. Just about right!



Driver turned to the fireman, “We’re in for a rough ride tonight! What with being late, the heavy climb out of Sheffield and then the fast ride down into Derby — there’ll hardly be chance to breathe. Be ready to hang on! Everything OK?”

“Aye, Aye captain!” was the fireman’s answer, with a twinkle in his eye. He knew it was going to be tough, but he relished the challenge.

Confidence and Power

Then the fireman said a quiet prayer. Not everyone knew it, but he had been a conscientious objector during the war years; a man of faith. As a consequence he had to stay working on the footplate and learn to take the rough with the smooth. Sometimes he worked with drivers who had absolutely no tolerance for “conscies”, especially if they had fought or lost family fighting in the war. Life then could be very difficult. At other times, like this night, it was OK; they worked well together.

The whistle blew and the fireman waved in response to the guard’s green flag. Almost immediately there was a ‘whoosh’ of steam and movement as both engines moved in harmony, easing out of the station, into the night and the first big test as they climbed. Soon the regulator was open wide and both engines barked savagely as they got to grips with the task in hand. It was on this part of the journey that the secondary passenger engine would really earn its keep, but by the crest of the hill it would feel as though the smaller engine was flying for its life with the express well in charge of the whole train. It was also clear that the

express crew were intent on regaining the lost time. Could they really regain all the time by Derby?

As they crested the hill, the fireman finished firing and shut the doors on the fire and they felt the rear engine buffer up, just a slight bump which shivered through the tender to the footplate. “Now we’re for it!” said the driver above the rattle of wheels on track. They felt the speed increasing, no speedometer, but the quarter mile posts seemed to flash past alarmingly quickly.

“Signals all seem to be off, ready for us, but what about the slacks?” (Slacks were places where speed restrictions applied). “I don’t think they have any intention of observing many of those tonight.”

“But what about that really tight curve at Ambergate?” “Hold on and pray!”

Too Much Excitement?

The rattles and bangs continued to the rhythm of the rails, with the wind rushing past. The cab swayed to and fro. The two men hung onto the hand rails at the side of the cab. The fireman stuck his head out, searching for the next signal – clear away! They were really moving now – something near 80 mph! The old engine swayed around as if the next roll would take her right off the track.

Ambergate curve came on all too soon. “We should be slacking off,” yelled the fireman. “Does he really know the road?” thinking of the express driver.

“The best we can do is shut off so he’s having to really push us.” With that the regulator was closed and the whistle sounded. They felt the train begin to slow, but it seemed marginal.



The next second, they hit the curve: the scream of wheels and rails could be felt as much as heard as the train struggled to stay on the tracks. Finally the express driver had got the message and they felt the brakes go on – so theirs could too.

The curve was coming to its end, the pilot engine came onto the straight and everything just seemed to settle down. The driver opened up the throttle again, brakes off, the fireman tended the fire.

“Straight run into Derby now. The sooner this old lady gets a refit the better.”

Relief

A few minutes later, they pulled to the end of platform six and came to rest. An inspector stood by the cab with his fob-watch in his hand. “Well done lads! You must have flown! If we can get the passengers to move on, you’ll leave here on time.”

“Just a minute,” said the driver, “I need to stand down on the platform, my legs haven’t stopped shaking. Fireman’s alright though, he takes his God with him!”

The fireman thought of his favourite Psalm:

I called on the LORD in distress; The LORD answered me and set me in a broad place. The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? (Psalm 118:5–6).

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