

Otago, for it has been a feature of all the accidents that they have not been attended with loss of life, and public alarm is never fully aroused until, in addition to the piling-up of broken wagons and dented locomotives, human life is sacrificed. The people of Otago probably regard the mishaps to the trains as purely accidental, and their frequency as merely a coincidence. Nevertheless, it is not out of place to point out that there may be some fault at the bottom of all the accidents. It is natural under the circumstances to suggest that some such fault exists, and that it might be discovered and remedied by experts. No doubt reports upon accidents have been drawn up by qualified officers of the Department, and it would be interesting, and perhaps satisfying, to the public to learn how railway engineers account for the proneness of our trains to go wrong. Are the mail-trucks insecure, or the wheels of the rolling-stock badly made? Or is the speed of the trains too high for the gauge in use? It would be a pertinent question from the benches of the House to the Minister for Railways, "Can the Department provide the public with any authentic expert information as to the accidents which have recently happened on the Otago Section of the railways?"

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The oft-recurring railway accidents which have occurred during the past few years are making the majority of the travelling public painfully conscious that they enjoy but a very questionable immunity from being mixed up at almost any time in the miscellaneous *débris* of some terrible smash. And they have but very poor assurances, unless some terrible holocaust, some deaths or maimings, are in course of events brought about, that there will be sufficient inquiries made to establish that confidence which those who continually make use of the railway should have.

As regards the fearful accident at Rakaia, the cause was so palpably evident that every person of intelligence who at all interests himself in the matter could not but at once come to the conclusion as to where the chief blame for that blunder lay; and the inquiry did really little more than confirm that. In addition, some minor points of looseness and want of arrangements were brought to light. But, as a rule, when the serious accidents which have become so frequent of late take place, a departmental inquiry is held privately, and the public are allowed to know nothing about it, except perhaps in a brief or few brief paragraphs from the Head Office, Wellington; and the incident and the occasion are soon forgotten. But let not the public think that the accidents which have been published somewhat prominently of late are the only dangers that cause anxiety to the officers at the head of this very important and fast-growing Department. There are many incidents—"close shaves" as they are called—as in all large concerns, which the public never hear of, or they are known only locally. Most of such, when inquired into, result probably in nothing more than in some employee being dismissed—a ganger, a guard, a Stationmaster, maybe, shifted or disrated, or a driver put back to the position of fireman. The employees are under strict orders as to reticence on such an occasion, and it is only when some ubiquitous reporter happens to be about, or nervous officials, off their guard, let fall a few expressions, that the public are made aware of the miraculous escape they have had from a more serious result. We submit that an independent tribunal should be set up, and that every accident, however trivial the Railway Department may consider it to be, should be fully inquired into by such a Board—such Board having power to summon witnesses and to maintain its authority.

At Home the Board of Trade makes the inquiry. Not only so, but it inspects railways and their works before they are opened for public traffic, inquires into complaints from railway servants as to the hours of work, and approves by-laws of railway companies. Only last year this Board issued its first rules under a new Act for prevention of accidents, which involved the fitting of "either side brakes" to all wagons, and other improvements and equipments for safer working, which entailed considerable expense on the various companies. They are at present considering the improvements of fog-signalling and the interlocking of signals and points at junctions. All this tending to lessen the chance of accidents, to ameliorate the conditions of the workers, and to enhance the public safety. Under the new Act just referred to two "assistant inspecting officers" have been during the past year attached to the railway department of the Board of Trade; their duties are akin to those of Factory Inspectors.

This last point is instructive, and leads us to observe that there are other ways of preventing accidents besides rules, regulations, and traffic-circular instructions referring directly to the running of trains. A regular system of overhauling rolling-stock in the workshops should be seen to. We are quite aware that the traffic has increased enormously, so that both passenger and goods traffic show by the financial results the elasticity of the methods adopted, and the public approve of the way in which the management endeavour to meet their wishes in these respects. But we must not be blind to the fact that such a strain is constantly put upon the plant available that, maybe, the inspection is often carried out in too perfunctory a manner for the insurance of safety.

Two serious accidents have taken place now within a few weeks of each other, where in each case a truck seems to have jumped off the rails in the centre of the train, or else an axle-wheel has given way. As a case of this kind may at any time bring about the most tremendous disaster, does it not point to the need of the most careful inquiry—an inquiry in public and publicly reported, so that we may know exactly how the matter stands? The system of tapping the wheels with a hammer might or might not reveal a flaw; and it is this which may go on until the breaking-point reveals only the fact that the vehicle should long since have been "sent in" for the usual overhaul, which it had to miss through stress of traffic.

Referring to the recent accident near Seacliff, it appears that when the driver saw the erratic movements of the faulty wagon he put on the brakes and caused the train to "buckle." Under the circumstances it could do nothing else—the very laws of its momentum would naturally bring that about. If, however, he had signalled the guard to "Down brakes," and thus have pulled up