



Joseph Rowntree and the Train Journey

The following letter from Steven Burkeman, Chair of The Rowntree Society, was published in the Guardian on 18th April 2007-

Rebecca Front (*The stench of a wrong, April 14*) describes acquiring, but not paying for, a garlic bulb in error, and subsequently paying for two but taking only one in order to make amends. This calls to mind a story told of Joseph Rowntree (1836-1925), the Quaker philanthropist and cocoa manufacturer. On one of his travels by train, he got into a first-class coach by mistake, having bought only a second-class ticket. He was prepared to pay the difference, but the ticket inspector never checked. This weighed heavily on his conscience. So, on the next occasion that he travelled by train, he bought a first-class ticket and travelled in a second-class coach. I can't work out if this shows him in a good light, or as somewhat neurotic.

As a result of the publication, Roger Morton, a retired Trustee of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, contacted Steven Burkeman with a variation on the story told in SB's letter. Steven encouraged him to submit the following letter for publication, though sadly the Guardian didn't publish it –

I first heard the story about Joseph Rowntree's train journey to Scarborough which Steven Burkeman recounts (*letters, 18th April*) from his great-nephew Christopher Rowntree. There was a subtle difference as he told it which suggests that Joseph was not being merely neurotic in paying for a first class ticket but travelling third on his next journey.

In that version, the train was already very crowded when Joseph, by then quite elderly, tried to board it. He was walking along the platform at York looking for a carriage with a spare seat when the guard came up to him and said something on the lines of "It's all right, Mr Rowntree, sir, you get in here" and ushered him into a first class carriage. When JR protested that he only had a third class ticket, the reply was "Don't let that worry you, sir". In the days of non-corridor trains, that was effectively the end of any opportunity to put the matter to rights there and then.

I'm sure that what really troubled him was being treated differently from someone of similar age but less obviously able to afford to travel first class if they chose to. All he could do directly about that was to make sure that he at least paid appropriately. Indirectly, he worked on the bigger problem through the three trusts which he founded and inspires to this day.

There were further responses to SB's letter. As a result, a direct descendant of Joseph, Emily Spence (his great-great granddaughter) produced what we take to be a fairly definitive version (with an added twist) -

I remember Aunt Jean (JWR¹'s daughter), talking about this incident, although I'm not sure whether she was referring to this one, or to a similar one. She told me that JR used to invite groups of workers out to the south of France every year. On one occasion, either on arrival or on their return from a day trip, they told him that they had paid for third class tickets, but travelled first. He said nothing, but the next day, took them back to the station, where they (and he) bought first-class tickets, but travelled third. She also used to tell me that one man asked for some time off as he was getting married, and JR said that as this was so important, he wouldn't expect him in until the afternoon! I suspect this story to be true... and I'm sure the first story² is, too, in one version or another!

And in a BBC film, first broadcast in 1984, Richard Naish, JR's grandson, gave his own account, transcribed here, except for one indecipherable place name –

He was no linguist and he accidentally went first-class along the coast from Cannes to M???? and he bought a third class ticket, which worried his tender conscience, and he made it his business the next week to buy a first-class ticket and travel first-class, which is silly, but shows the acuteness of his sense of social responsibility.

SB/14/05/2007

¹ John Wilhelm Rowntree, Joseph's son.

² This refers to the version published in the Guardian.