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Samuel Smiles

Excerpt

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L I F E  
OF  
GEORGE STEPHENSON.

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## CHAPTER I.

## EARLY YEARS.

ABOUT eight miles west of Newcastle-on-Tyne stands the colliery village of Wylam, consisting of a number of mean cottages, situated on the north bank of the river Tyne. The Newcastle and Carlisle railway runs along the opposite bank; and the traveller by that line sees only the usual signs of a colliery in the unsightly pumping-engine, surrounded by heaps of ashes, coal-dust, and slag; while a neighbouring iron-furnace, in full blast, throws out dense smoke and loud jets of steam by day, and lurid flames at night. These works form the nucleus of the village, which is almost entirely occupied by coal miners and iron-furnace men.

There is nothing to interest one in the village itself. But, a few hundred yards from its eastern extremity, stands a humble detached dwelling, which will be interesting to many as the birthplace of George Stephenson, the Railway Engineer. It is a common, two-storied, red-tiled building,

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portioned off into four labourers' apartments. The house is known by the name of High Street House, and was originally so called because it stands by the side of what used to be the old riding Post Road or Street, between Newcastle and Hexham, along which the Post was carried on horseback within the memory of people still living. At an earlier period, this road used to be so unsafe, that the Judges, when on circuit, were escorted along it by a considerable body of armed men, as a protection against the freebooters who infested the district. A sum of money denominated "dagger money," was annually contributed by the Sheriff of Newcastle, for the purpose of providing daggers and other weapons for the escort; and it is a curious fact that this tribute still continues to be paid in broad gold pieces of Charles the First's coinage, though the necessity for it has long since ceased.\*

The lower room in the west end of the humble cottage referred to, was the home of the Stephenson family, and there George Stephenson was born on the 9th of June, 1781. The apartment is now, what it was then, an ordinary labourer's dwelling,—its walls unplastered, its floor of clay, and the bare rafters are exposed overhead.

Robert Stephenson, or "Old Bob," as the neighbours familiarly called him, and his wife Mabel, were a respectable couple, careful and hard working. They belonged to the ancient and honourable family of Workers—that extensive family which constitutes the backbone of our country's greatness—the common working people of England. A tradition is, indeed, preserved in the family, that old Robert Stephenson's father and mother came across the Border from Scotland, on the loss of considerable property there: Miss Stephenson, daughter of Robert Stephenson's third son John, states that a suit was

\* *Notes and Queries*, December 27th, 1856.

even commenced for the recovery of the property, but was dropt for want of means to prosecute it. Certain it is, however, that Robert Stephenson's position throughout life was that of a humble workman. After marrying at Walbottle,— a village situated between Wylam and Newcastle, he removed with his wife Mabel to Wylam, where he found employment as fireman of the old pumping-engine at that colliery. The engine which he "fired," has long since been removed: as an old villager said of it, "she stood till she grew fearsome to look at, and then she was pulled down."

Mabel Stephenson was the only daughter of Robert Carr, a dyer at Ovingham. Her family had dwelt in the neighbourhood of Newcastle for generations. The author, when engaged in tracing the early history of George Stephenson, casually entered into conversation one day with an old man near Dewley, a hamlet close adjoining Walbottle. Mabel Stephenson, he said, had been his mother's cousin; and all their "forbears" belonged to that neighbourhood. It appears that she was a woman of somewhat delicate constitution, nervous in temperament, and troubled occasionally, as her neighbours said, with "the vapours." But those who remember her concur in asserting that "she was a rare canny body." And a woman of whom this is said by general consent, in the Newcastle district, may be pronounced a worthy person indeed. It is about the highest praise of a woman which Northumbrians can express. The meaning of the word "canny" with them is quite different from that which it bears in Yorkshire or the Scotch Lowlands. To be "canny," amongst the Scotch, is to be somewhat innocuous and rather soft; in Yorkshire, it means sly and knowing, with an assumed simplicity of manner; but in Northumberland, it means goodness itself—something closely approaching to perfection. Applied to a woman, it "caps" every other compliment, and is a climax to them all.

The Northumbrian people generally, exhibit many striking and characteristic qualities, inherited most probably from the hardy and energetic Northmen who settled in such numbers along the north-eastern coasts many centuries ago. Taking them as a whole, they are bigger and hardier men \*,— more enterprising, energetic, and laborious, — and of more marked individuality, — than the inhabitants of our more southern counties. They are rougher in manner and more difficult to polish; but they are full of shrewdness and mother-wit, and possessed of great strength of character, of which, indeed, their remarkable guttural speech is but a type. The name Stephenson or Stevenson is said to signify, in the Norse tongue, the son of Steeve, or the strong; and certainly the subject of this story exhibited, in a remarkable manner, this characteristic quality of his family.

George Stephenson was the second of a family of six children. The family bible of Robert and Mabel Stephenson, which seems to have come into their possession in November, 1790, contains the following record of the births of these children, evidently written by one hand and at one time: —

- “ A Rechester of the children belonging Robert and Mabel Stepheson —  
 “ James Stepheson Was Born March the 4 day 1779  
 “ George Stepheson Was Born June 9 day 1781  
 “ Elender Stepheson Was Born April the 16 day 1784  
 “ Robert Stepheson Was Born March the 10 day 1788  
 “ John Stepheson Was Born November the 4 day 1789  
 “ Ann Stepheson Was Born July the 19 day 1792.” †

As the wages earned by Robert Stephenson as fireman,

\* Their tenacity of life would seem to be greater. The locomotive engineer of a large railway informs me, as the result of a long experience, that the north country engine-drivers and stokers usually recover from injuries to body and limb, which to south-country workmen are almost invariably fatal.

† Of the two daughters, Eleanor married Stephen Liddell, afterwards employed in the Locomotive Factory in Newcastle; and Ann married John Nixon, with whom she emigrated to the United States. John Stephenson was accidentally killed at the Locomotive Factory in January, 1831.

when in full work, did not amount to more than twelve shillings a week, it may be inferred that, even with the most rigid economy, there was very little to spare for the clothing, and nothing for the schooling, of the children. As an aged neighbour, who remembers them well, says of the parents — “They had very little to come and go upon—they were honest folk, but sore haudden doon in the world.”

Robert Stephenson was a slender man, of attenuated frame. He was an exceedingly amiable person, and was long remembered for his curious love of nature as well as of romance. He was accustomed, while tending his engine-fire in the evenings, to draw around him the young people of the village, and to feast their imaginations with his wonderful stories of Sinbad the Sailor, and Robinson Crusoe, besides others of his own invention. Hence he was an immense favourite with all the boys and girls of the place, and “Bob’s engine-fire” was always their favourite resort. Another feature in his character, by which he was long remembered, was his strong affection for birds and animals of all sorts. In the winter time, he had usually a flock of tame robins about him, and they would come hopping familiarly round the engine-fire, to pick up the crumbs which he saved for them out of his slender dinner. In summer time, he went bird-nesting in his leisure hours; and one day he took his little boy George to see a blackbird’s nest for the first time. Holding him up in his arms, the boy gazed with wonder into the nest full of young birds—a sight which he never forgot, but used to speak of with delight to his intimate friends, when he himself had grown an old man.

While a boy at Wylam, George led the ordinary life of working-people’s children. He played about the doors; went bird-nesting when he could; and ran errands to the village. In course of time he was promoted to the office of carrying his father’s dinner to him while at work; and he helped to

nurse his younger brothers and sisters at home,—for in the poor man's dwelling every hand must early be turned to useful account. None of the children ever went to school; the family was too poor, and food too dear, to admit of that.

One of the duties of the elder children was to see that the younger ones were kept out of the way of the chaldron waggons, which were then dragged by horses along the wooden tram-road immediately in front of the cottage door. Wooden railways were early used in Northumberland, and this at Wylam was destined to be the first on which a locomotive engine travelled regularly between the coal-pit and the loading quay. At the time, however, of which we speak, locomotives had scarcely been dreamt of; horses were still the only tractive power; and one of the daily sights of young Stephenson was the coal-waggons dragged by their means along this wooden railway at Wylam.

Thus eight years passed; after which, the coal having been worked out on the north side, the old engine was pulled down, and the Stephenson family, following the work, removed from Wylam to Dewley Burn. The Duke of Northumberland (to whom most of the property in the neighbourhood belongs) had opened a new pit there. An engine was erected, of which Robert Hawthorn, father of the afterwards celebrated Newcastle engineers, was the plugman or engineman; and Robert Stephenson was appointed to act as his fireman.

Dewley Burn at this day consists of a few old-fashioned, low-roofed cottages, standing on either side of a babbling little stream. They are connected by a rustic wooden bridge, which spans the rift in front of the doors. In the central one-roomed cottage of this group, on the right bank, Robert Stephenson settled for a time with his family. The pit at which he was employed stood in the rear of the cottages. It has long since been worked out and closed in; and only the

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CHAP. I.]

DEWLEY BURN.

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marks of it are now visible, — a sort of blasted grass covering, but scarcely concealing, the scoriæ and coal-dust accumulated about the mouth of the old pit. Looking across the fields, one can still discern the marks of the former waggon-way, leading in the direction of Walbottle. It was joined on its course by another waggon-road leading from the direction of Black Callerton. Indeed, there is scarcely a field in the neighbourhood that does not exhibit traces of the workings of former pits. But grass now grows over all the waggon-roads there. The coal has all been “won,” and pit engines, apparatus, and workmen have long since passed away.

## CHAP. II.

## BEGINS A CAREER OF LABOUR.

As every child in a poor man's house is a burden until his little hands can be turned to profitable account and made to earn money towards supplying the indispensable wants of the family, George Stephenson was put to work as soon as an opportunity of employment presented itself. A widow, named Grace Ainslie, then occupied the neighbouring farmhouse of Dewley. She kept a number of cows, and had the privilege of grazing them along the waggon-ways. She needed a boy to herd the cows, to keep them out of the way of the waggons, and prevent their straying or trespassing on the neighbours' "liberties;" the boy's duty was also to bar the gates at night after all the waggons had passed. George petitioned for this post, and to his great joy he was appointed, at the wage of two-pence a day.

It was light employment, and he had plenty of spare time on his hands, which he spent in bird-nesting, making whistles out of reeds and scannel straws, and erecting Lilliputian mills in the little water streams that ran into the Dewley bog. But his favourite amusement at this early age was erecting clay engines, in conjunction with his chosen play-mate, Tom Thirlaway. They found the clay for their engines in the adjoining bog, and the hemlock, which grew about, supplied them with abundance of imaginary steam-pipes. The place is still pointed out, "just aboon the cut-end," as the people of the hamlet describe it, where the



future engineer made his first essays in modelling. This early indication of a mechanical turn may remind the reader of a similar anecdote of the boy Smeaton, who, when missed one day by his parents, was found mounted on the roof of the cottage fixing a puny windmill.

As the boy grew older and more able to work, he was set to lead the horses when ploughing, though scarce big enough to stride across the furrows; and he used afterwards to say, that he rode to his work in the mornings, at an hour when most other children of his age were fast asleep in their beds. He was also employed to hoe turnips, and do similar farm work, for which he was paid the advanced wage of four-pence a day. But his highest ambition was to be taken on at the colliery where his father worked; and he shortly joined his elder brother James there as a "corf-bitter," or "picker," where he was employed in clearing the coal of stones, bats, and dross. His wages were now advanced to six-pence a day, and afterwards to eight-pence when he was set to drive the Gin-horse.

Shortly after, he went to Black Callerton Colliery to drive the Gin there. And as that colliery lies about two miles across the fields from Dewley Burn, the boy walked that distance early in the morning to his work, returning home late in the evening. Some of the old people of Black Callerton still remember him as a "grit bare-legged laddie," and they describe him as being then "very quick-witted, and full of fun and tricks." As they said, "there was nothing under the sun but he tried to imitate." He was usually foremost in the sports and pastimes of youth.

Among his first strongly developed tastes, was the love of birds and animals, which he inherited from his father. Black-birds were his especial favourites. The hedges between Dewley and Black Callerton were capital bird-nesting places; and there was not a nest there that he did not know of.

When the young birds were old enough, he would bring them home with him, feed them, and teach them to fly about the cottage unconfined by cages. One of his blackbirds became so tame, that after flying about the doors all day, and in and out of the cottage, it would take up its roost upon the bed-head at night. And most singular of all, the bird would disappear in the spring and summer months, when it was supposed to go into the woods, to pair and rear its young, after which it would reappear at the cottage and resume its social habits during the winter. This went on for several years. George had also a stock of tame rabbits, for which he built a little house behind the cottage, and for many years he continued to pride himself upon the superiority of his breed.

After he had driven the Gin for some time at Dewley and Black Callerton, he was taken on as an assistant to his father in firing the engine at Dewley. This was a step of promotion which he had anxiously desired; his only fear being lest he should be found too young for the work. Indeed, he afterwards used to relate how he was wont to hide himself from sight when the owner of the colliery went round, lest he should be thought too little a boy thus to earn his small wages. Since he had modelled his clay engines in the bog, his young ambition was to be an engineman. And to be an assistant fireman was the first step towards this position. Great, therefore, was his exultation when, at about fourteen years of age, he was appointed assistant fireman, at the wage of a shilling a day.

But the coal at Dewley Burn being at length worked out, and the pit being about to be "laid in," the family prepared for another removal. This time their removal was to Jolly's Close, a few miles to the south, close behind the village of Newburn, where another coal mine of the Duke's, called "the Duke's Winnin," had recently been opened out.

Jolly's Close then consisted of a small row of cottages