

## CHAPTER II.

### THE JOURNEY TO THE WELLS.

IF need were, I could describe the entire course of the journey from Gushetneuk to the Wells at Macduff. But perhaps to do so would be an undue trifling with a busy public, whose manner of travelling, for health and pleasure, as well as for business, is so different now. The railway system had not penetrated to Aberdeen even, then. Long strings of carriers' carts, jogging on night and day, each with its creel atop, and here and there a jolly carrier lying in the same half or wholly asleep, and perhaps, a more watchful mastiff under the axletree—these did the heavy and slow part of the business; and then there was the mail coach, and the rattling Defiance; and now and again such a vehicle as the Tallyho, for speedy conveyance of passengers, at the average rate of eight miles an hour, stoppages not always included; also the "Flyboat," or "Swift Gig Boat," plying on the Aberdeenshire Canal, whose sideway draught, to the unfortunate horses that ran on the bank, with a laddie rider, dexterously joukin inward and downward at every villanously low bridge under which they went, was the extreme of cruelty to animals.

These things are not only obsolete, but almost completely forgotten, and the idlest, laziest man in the shire grumbles loudly at the unconscionably slow rate of those trains that do not run faster than twenty miles an hour.

Such is the progress of the human race; not to speak of

the electric telegraph, which threatens to land us in a material millennium before we have had time to abrogate the Ten Commandments, and do whatever else advanced minds may think needful to getting our moral equilibrium steadied at a point commensurate with the advance of natural science.

However, I must return to Johnny Gibb, who, in taking a near cut at the outset, had guided his cart and its freight through one or two yetts, the bars of which he took painfully out, and put as painfully in again, and after gaining the high road, had received the salutations of sundry servant lads, early out either on their way to the peat moss, or from which they were already returning with loaded carts. By and by, the voyagers had passed out of kent bounds—bounds kent to the junior passengers, that is to say, for to Johnny Gibb the whole way was as familiar as his oxter pouch; and great was the delight of the lassie and Jock Will, as the scene changed and changed, and first one gentleman's seat and then another, came in view. And Johnny would tell the name of each, and, in sententious phrase, give a brief sketch of the owner.

"Ay, ay, the fader o' 'im was a lang-heidit schaimin carle, an' weel fells the sin for that," was the remark in one case; and in the next, "A braw hoose that, isnint? But, an' ilka ane hed their nain, I wudna say nor the laird wud hae to forhoo's bit bonny nest."

"Eh, sirs: sic a weary wardle," said Eppie Will. "Fa cud 'a thoct it?"

"The tae half o' oor lairds is owre the lugs in a bag o' debt. I wud hae them roupit oot at the door, and set to some eesefu trade."

"Na, sirs," ejaculated Eppie; and Mrs. Gibb put in a deprecatory "Hoot man!"

"Stechin up a kwintra side wi' them, wi' their peer stinkin' pride," pursued Johnny, "an' them nedder able to manage their awcres themsel's, nor can get ither fowk that can dee't for them. Ye're leukin, Jock; gin ever ye be a factor, loon, see an' leern the eese o' the grun, an' keep baith laird an' tenan' straucht i' the theets."

"Eh, John Gibb; for shame to the laddie," quoth Eppie Will. Jock himself gave a soft laugh, looked askance, and rubbed the chaff sack with the palm of his hand.

And thus they moved on mile after mile.

"Gi'e the bairns a bit piece noo, 'oman," continued Johnny, changing the theme, when they had journeyed for a matter of three hours; "the like o' them's aye yap, an' it'll be twall o'clock ere we win doon to Turra to lowse."

"Hear ye that noo, Eppie?" said Mrs. Gibb, affecting the jocular. "That's to lat 'imsel' get a gnapp no!"

"Aweel, sae be't. It's an ill servan't's nae worth's maet. Here's a bit coblle o' fine clear caller water; we'll gie the beast a drink, an' lat'er get a mou'fu' o' girss till we see fat's i' that bit basketie."

And so Jess was set to the grassy bank, with a wisp of half-dried hay strewn before her, and the bearing reins thrown loose. Mrs. Gibb produced an abundant store of cakes and butter ready spread, and the cakes placed face to face, with several kneevlics of tempting blue cheese. The party regaled themselves sumptuously on their wholesome fare, and drank of the caller water to which Jess had been treated.

And, verily, he hath but an imperfect acquaintance with the true philosophy of locomotion, who shall affect to sneer at the mode in which Johnny Gibb and his charge journeyed. Grant but fitting company, favourable weather, and a fair allowance of fresh straw, and the art of man hath not yet devised a more rational and truly enjoyable method of "voyaging" by land than by the use of a common cart, drawn by a willing and intelligent cart horse. Of this truth all practised visitors to the Wells had an intuitive perception; if reliance on it was not, indeed, essential to the integrity of their belief in the entire institution. And how well they could furnish out the cart for the comfortable accommodation and sustenance of those who journeyed therein! Time would fail me to speak of the compendious outfit they could stow away within and about the vehicle. I recollect well seeing one arrival of a large family, the

head of which had boxed up the sides of his cart with rough boards till he had achieved a kind of two storeys, the ground floor containing sundry kitchen utensils, and the upper one the live passengers; and he had actually built in a fixed stair in the hind part of the cart! But this was an extreme experiment, and the usual mode was simply to pack well on the basis of the cart itself.

Resuming their journey, the party plodded on through the romantic den of Gask, and down on the handsome little town of Turriff, with its bleachfield along the quiet burn side, and its common herd, who touted his horn as he wended along, and gradually gathered out the town's kine to feed on the pleasant haughs adjoining.

At Turriff Johnny lows't the mare, and put up for refreshment at the Black Bull Inn, where he and the hostler discussed a gill of the national liquor, very amicably, between them. As the gentlest drink for the ladies, he called a bottle of mulled porter; and, leaving them to sip and sip of the same in the little back parlour of the Inn, with its sanded floor and crockery-shop statuary, he sallied forth to exhibit the lions of the place to the youngsters, not omitting to point out to them the Toon's Hoose, and the Cross, the geographical position of which he took care to explain, as equally distant from Aberdeen and Elgin. As saith the popular distich—

“ Choose ye, choise ye, at the Cross o' Turra,  
Either gang to Aberdeen, or Elgin o' Moray.”

That was a delightful road down by Knockiemill, and along the pleasant banks of the Deveron, in full view of Forglen House, Denlugas, and so forth. This Johnny Gibb knew, and he preferred it to the turnpike road accordingly. I do not know that he escaped a toll by adopting this route, for there was a passport system in force in those days, whereby the man who went through the Turriff bar was armed with a ticket that gave him the privilege of passing the next bar without pecuniary mulct. However that may be, the water-side road was chosen as the more picturesque

—a most legitimate consideration surely with those who travelled for health and pleasure. Up they came again near by Eden, along the turnpike road for some miles, and again diverging to the right, on Johnny and his cart went under the westering sun, till the hill-top was reached; when, lo! there lay before them the calm blue sea, with slight ripples of white here and there, and here and there on its bosom a brave schooner scudding along the Firth, with fully spread canvas, or a boat, with brown sail newly hoisted, speeding away from the harbour mouth; wherein lay sundry craft, the top-masts of which were fully visible as the eye wandered inward over the irregular field of red-tiled roofs, and settled on the vista afforded by the long steep street leading down to the shore.

“Eh, that’s the sea!” exclaimed the lassie, in a rapture of admiration.

“Is’t the sea, mither?” said Jock, not quite assured. “It’s surely nae that colour?”

“’Deed an’ it’s jist the saut sea, whaur mony ane’s gotten a watery shrood.”

“Divnin ye see the ships sailin on ’t?” said the lassie.

“Weel, they’re nae vera muckle anes,” replied Jock.

“But they’re maybe hyne awa.”

“Ho! but a muckle ship sud hae three masts,” said Jock, desirous of vindicating his nautical knowledge, “an nane o’ that has mair nor twa.”

“Will we get a sail on ’t?” was the lassie’s next question.

“’Serve’s, lassie, ye little ken fat ye’re speakin o’. Lat alane the fear o’ the boat coupin an’ you gyaun to the boddom o’ the sea, ye wud seen be as deid’s a door nail wi’ sea-sickness.” And Mrs. Gibb, as a warning to the young people to beware of trusting themselves on the bosom of the heaving deep, related how, long ago, when Johnny and she were young, and Johnny headstrong and reckless, he *would* have himself and his wife conveyed from Macduff to Banff by water; and what of peril and fright the voyage involved, the boat rising up and down on its very ends, and leaning over till the spray actually skippit

her face, while, to crown all, the monster of a skipper sat coolly at his helm laughing at her terror.

As this crack went on in the cart, Johnny stumped along by Jess's head, scanning the countenances of those he met, in search of any stray kent face. By and by his eye caught a formal inscription, in the usual street-corner style, "Duff Street." "Fat whigmaleerie's this noo?" quoth Johnny. "The fowk o' this place wud ca' their vera tykes aifter the Yerl o' Fife. This is fat we hed ees't to ca' the 'Main Street'—Duff Street; fat sorra ither."

The explanation was that, since Johnny's last journey to the Wells, the good people of Macduff had adopted the modern practice of systematically naming and numbering their streets. It was then in the region of Market Street, I do not say that it was in that particular thoroughfare itself, that Johnny found a lodging-house for his charge. Their landlord was Donald M'Craw, a blind old pensioner, who had followed the gallant Abercromby into Egypt, and whose industrious helpmeet occupied her leisure time in keeping a dame's school in the kitchen of their habitation. And while she energetically pursued her pedagogical duties among her noisy charge, the blind Donald was wont to sit in his arm chair in the corner, a not uninterested listener to what was going on, and always ready at an emergency to come in full shout with his military word of command to enforce obedience or silence, as the case might be.