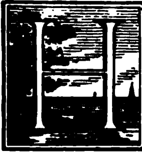
THE CROSS-ROADS.

> "Oh, there is not lost
> One of earth's charms from off her bosom yet,
> After the lapse of untold centuries."
>
> —*Percival.*



OAR FROST lies over the meadow and fallow land. It seeks a place between the muddy ridges at the gateway where the plough has been dragged from the meadow. As the gloom fades and day comes in, the fall wheat and new grass lands get cold and moist. Cold, because then seen—moist, because the sun breaks the frosty crust. The rooks are astir before the maid at the farm-steading lights her lamp to visit the byre. An early blackbird goes down the road and turns the dead leaves on the ditch side, before the crofter leads his old mare from the thatched stable to the cart-shed. It is quiet then. The crofter lights his cutty, as a first duty after dressing, and works slowly and methodically in all things. His horse runs in the same groove. The man walks with deliberate steps—his beast gets into harness in like fashion. Both seem to drag out the first half-hour, as if their limbs were stiff and swollen. By the time the last rook crosses the old toll-house, horse and man are heated and active. Farm hands all work after the same style at day-break.

But in the Shires life is not yet a neck-to-neck race. The generations that lie still, by the foot of the hill, where the Auld Kirk stands, never dreamed of city activity. They built their huts of clay and boulder, lived peacefully, and died in a deep trust of the great unknown. Generations reared castles of stone and lime, planted and fenced, but time judged, and nature swept the images off the stage. Folks lived long days then, and many a light went out, only after the physical parts were unable to move in unison. This sturdy characteristic is still apparent in the children of those men and women. It can be recognised in the children's children. There is even yet no haste or hurry, and mental worry only rarely comes inside the door. Domestic troubles certainly visit the

Shires, and many anxious moments become the lot of husband and wife, but I speak of everyday annoyances, so prevalent to city dwellers, compared with the trials of rural life.

Blue smoke curls towards the clouds, the village carrier wends along the dyke-side and the days become instinct with throbbing life. Teams of farm horses come through the mist bearing their attendants to their fields of labour. The Clydesdale gelding steps steadily onwards, the grey horse hanging on the rein, yards behind his leader. On the frosty air the melodious whistling of the ploughman keeps time with the steps of the Clydesdale. Listen to the sound of the falling hoof and the notes of the rural ditty! Horses move quieter and steadier to that music and oxen will work so pleasantly while the voice charms their march. Before the horses start for the real work afield, the stone-breakers have wheeled their barrows from the gate-way, and the farmer has made the round of his byres and courts. The hum and boom of the threshing mill is heard in the rickyard and the merry laughter of men and women breaks forth at intervals between the strokes of the engine, as it turns the flapping belt, and sends its smoke in clouds across the field. So still and clear is the atmosphere, that every sound strikes the ear suddenly; quick, as if a hawk darted over, dropped its quarry in fright, and dashed over the firs.

There was formerly a long range of willows on the lower side of the turnpike, *i.e.* the arm of the cross-roads that points to Edinburgh. Those willows, my schoolmaster told me, were planted by one of the best and greatest of men. Strange to say, his name is not in any school book or history of the Scottish nation, but he must have been a great man nevertheless, or my dominie would not have said so. That dominie died, aged 47. I looked at his tombstone not so long ago, and felt I had mistaken the date, or that there must be an error somewhere. But it turned out, that he only lived 47 years, and that the distance of time had marred my imagination. When I knew him in the flesh, he seemed a great-grandfather, and now the milestones are few I have to pass to reach his goal. His willows are still known as the "Saughs." In his day, they were cut annually for basket-making purposes, but the business has departed years ago. The road-men cut them now when their boughs over-reaoh the ditch. A couple or two of water-hens go out and in amongst the sedges, and explore the reedy channels, and often a ploughboy leaves his horse and leaps

over to cut a switch that looks straight. All branches seem straighter when on the tree than they do after being chopped off. There is an art in selecting a straight branch, but many of the ploughmen have this faculty, and with some, the cutting of canes is a craze. Gamekeepers know a good wand amongst hundreds of an inferior description. The modern demand for walking sticks, fashioned after the old shepherd's crook, dates its origin from the hillside. A sportsman envied the keeper's stick and carried it townwards. The keeper made others in his spare hours, and the sportsmen of the following autumn purchased the pile. The supply not being equal to the demand, machinery pushed the keeper out of the bnsiness he had inaugurated. The main road that goes north from the toll-house has a bare, unwooded aspect. A long line of stone wall runs on either side, and whin, broom and heather, usurp the plains and slopes for miles. The road dips as it reaches a solitary belt of fir wood, and from the toll-house the eye catches the North road on the further slope, winding along mid the heather and rock. When the toll-house was converted into a cottar's dwelling, and the big white arms of the check-bar were carried into the neighbouring field, the country made a stride nearer to town and city. Mail-coach and pedler, creamer and carrier, gipsies, coupers, and showmen, became less and less characteristic of the Shires. Four-in-hand coaches, resembling the old mail, are now few in number, but a four-in-hand club in a measure takes the vacant place of Captain Barclay and his team. It is a most delightful pastime—coaching—to those who love to handle a willing team of bays; to whom appeals the merry crack of the thong, and the bugle sounding down the wood-edge. Of pedlers, their name is legion; but they are modernised and practise deceitful arts and ways. A pedler to-day has no reputation to uphold, and he scarcely understands the meaning of the word. There are very few gaberlunzies worthy of alms, only a race of idle, loafing vagabonds prowl the lanes and turnpikes. A greasy cap and coat-collar, shady trousers and matchless boots, denote the man who hates work. At night a barn, a hayrick, or a fir-wood cover, shelters his seedy garments, and as the light breaks again, he issues forth to live upon the sympathetic kindness of mothers and daughters. The creamer and the carrier have been ruined by steam power, and the hand-loom weaver by the same agency. Here and there a remnant lingers of the one or the other, but few

rural directories contain the names of young men who have taken to either calling. The horse, sheep and cattle trysts still draw one or two gipsy camps. Like the old world couper's trade, the public auction-marts have withdrawn the supplies from those hill-fairs, and the gipsy-dealer and the cattle-couper have turned into other paths. The showman is going too, and the little accessories of "Puffing dart," "Pipe stem and Coin," and others of that ilk, follow the stream that bears the wrecks of a slower age.

In years gone, the highway that winds from the sea coast towards the hills, and passes the deserted site of the check-bar, was once the route of smugglers, on their inland journeys. Old Murray was the tenant then, a steady old veteran, who knew good liquor, and many an evening his little lamp danced along by the "Saughs" as a signal to the advancing troops. The road passed under Murray's window, along the whinny dykes, over the near hill, then along by the river in the adjacent valley. By morning the smugglers would be beyond the lofty sheepland and deeper in the recesses of the glen. Those quaint picturesque figures are now absent, but the landscape is not altogether robbed of its beauty. The keeper strides by, carrying his big bag, and his setters trot at his heel. In autumn, the southern "Shooter" brings his household north, and spends his money to brighten the little homesteads dotted over the fields. The laird chats with the road-side joiner, and the red painted van, with the village bread, carries the gossip and the hour, to the cottar and farmers' doors. The sickle and reaping-hook—the heuck—is but an echo of lost voices, of brawny men and tanned women's faces. Oats and barley go down under the touch of the mowing-machine: wheat is tossed aside as if a hidden spirit was at work. Where the convolvulus hides there is equal beauty on the fields now as of yore. The sinews of man and beast are left to grow strong at the expense of the modern binder. Yet no injustice is done to the wheatlands, and no harm done to the fertile acreage of the Shires. The steam-plough conquers the meadow with its budding robe of sorrel and golden cups. The lark's nest, where the songster had so often slept between its musical acts, is beaten into the sward. Red sorrel, daisies, buttercups, and the food of bird and beast, become the prey of steam, that wrestles to darken the land for a while. The earth is opened—spread—and looks upon the azure sky, and the lark sings upon the clod in the light that pierces the haze. Larks sing, and thrushes trim

their feathers on the sheltered bank of the burn. Where the cuckoo in early spring mocked the echo of the woods with his quaint, hollow voice, the steam whistle sounds the call to arms. Sawyers and lumbermen pass through the heated vapours and black smoke, carts come and go, trees fall, the engine pants, and logs—trees only dead an hour—become almost living sacrifices to the sharp teeth of whirring steel. Posts, boards, staves, drop where they were planted as tender saplings. They grow and are scattered to the corners of the isle, shaped after the manner of the hour. There is less carting of the rough logs to town now, compared with former years. Time and labour are both dearer, so the rtistic figure of the wood-cart, entering the quiet street in the gloaming—once so common—will be an indistinct landmark with our children. Like the rude weapons of savage, Celt and Roman, the implements we now employ will be object lessons to generations that are to come: where we now cut and plough and write, prehistoric legends, historic stories, and ancient ballads, are as morning mists. In the low swampy meadow, the earthy ramparts and deep ditches make a page of Roman romance in those latter days. Roman soldiers have marshalled where the dragon-fly beats his wings in the sun. Camp-fires burned where the rooks are nesting, and the croft near the cross-roads is the site of the halting place of a Wolsey of that far off date. There are few traces of the ancient Roman in the aboriginal fir forests of the Highlands. There are indeed no marks of his footsteps; no lasting impressions of moat or trench; no trails of those Wolseys beyond the barriers of the Grampian hill-front. They journeyed along the valleys and lowlands, and were satisfied. When they reached the mountains they lighted their fires and were at once an idle army. As a pastime they hunted, but their feet never crossed the hill or pressed the heather. No ptarmigan started from the crag and sailed over the deep valley, and no peregrine screamed affrighted by invasion. Roman camp-fires burned brighter and longer in Southern Britain than in our colder climate. Highland blood is warm as the colour of heather when the bees dance over the blooms.

Then troops of lordly barons with their vassels and serfs possessed the land, and hunted the wild woods, often trafficking in human blood. Nomadic monks, like birds of passage, crossed the landscape, carrying their shrines upon their shoulders. Courtly gallants and gay ladies in castle and chase followed, and we again

reach the pedlers, gaberlunzies, and quiet pastoral landscapes. The old white arms of the check-bar halts the steed at eventide, and the figure of Murray and his lantern issues from the grey hut at the bend of the road, while the gabble of midnight geese is a voice that stretches from sea to loch. A white-washed, grey-slated cottage, with a sloping parterre, going down to the turnpike, with no fence to mark the boundary, was once old Murray's home.

A. NICOL SIMPSON.

To Flora.

In Summer, when the roses were in bloom,
From Mary's hand the pleasure oft was mine,
Plucked from the door porch, laden with perfume,
To get a dewy rosebud rich and fine
What time we parted at the solemn eve—
Her tender gift my feelings to relieve.
But now she's gone to fill a happy hearth,
And all the honours of a wife receive;
Leaving thee, Flora, of a later birth,
Around her lovers airy spells to weave.
O darling Flora! O ecstatic bliss!
Thy sister's flower was naught beside thy kiss!
What though the Winter roses all eclipse,
When I get rosebuds from thy honey lips!

J. S.