THE HALF-WAY HOUSE.

"Go call a coach, and let a coach be called."
—*Chrononhotonthologos.*

FACING a belt of fir wood some little way down the howe, there is a plainly built house of two storeys. The windows are small, and denote limited sunlight in the low-roofed apartments. Only one shutter hangs on the wall of the basement, and the wall itself is black, and the harl riven off in parts. It is the home of outworkers and their families. Like some old hulk stranded on the sea beach, the house has been shunted off the direct main line between the shires and their towns and cities. It is fully thirty yards from the turnpike that connects the hill hamlets with the market town. The wind sweeps the road before it, when the rooks seek their meals in the cattle courts, and when the ringlet and Scots argus butterflies frequent the meadows and corn-fields. Winter's snows fly past in whirling clouds, leaving the icy cart-ruts naked and cold to the eye. Grasses and flowers and open woods are powdered with the summer dusts, as it floats before the June breezes. At all seasons the wind has unfettered freedom; after it rounds the smiddy gable and rushes between the spruce firs and the old block of masonry. All the outhouses are, to a great extent, demolished. To the traveller the place indicates departed greatness, and one intent on learning the history of the country and its people, would naturally stay to question the reason for the seeming change.

Nature loves to go back. The grasses of the field and the garden flowers return to their primitive ways if the artificial hand is withheld. But while acknowledging the present we seldom love it. What is behind and what is before seem greener and fresher to the poetic mind. The present will not write in legible letters. The ripple of modern life is round about,—near at hand. Every-day worries kill the sentiment. The olden times are mellowed and subdued. The personal heart-burnings are buried in the kirkyard long ago. Back fifty years the figures are painted in golden colours, that the years have fixed firm and lasting. Let oblivion whirl its atoms—let the earth revolve—let the fragments

mix awhile. Catch time's cycle with the mind, and watch the pearls that fall from the cemented years. Names that knew not friendship, men and women who worshipped forbidden saints, heroes buried mid the din of human agony—their work is written by hands that have dug the rubble and the rubbish from their lives. We work round, as stray plants take kindly to the open breezes of the fields. Poet Burns is coming nearer to our hearts and homes. Heads that were laid in the common earth are being re-anointed. Ages are carried out beyond the horizon of our vision, but in the day of our thoughts the sun lights up the springs and we drink the waters that bubble in the clay. So we try to forget the present with its shadows, its skeletons and its merry-dancers, and seek to know the past better than we know ourselves. Distance brightens and gone days enchant.

Writing at a distance of over fifty years, one forgets the present aspect of the dwelling and its inmates. The eye alights upon the red tiles—warm in colour—the white-washed front, painted shutters, trim garden with its beds of ranuncului and rows of tulips,—a swinging signboard, long since given to the workman's fire, a piece of art painted to the order of the reigning earl. To-day it would realise a goodly sum under the hammer of Dowell. The land that lay adjacent to the hostelry is now considered a dairy farm. The milk is carted three miles and conveyed seventeen by rail before the city folks taste the essence of the clover, or rye grasses. That favourite herb of housewives—"Aiple reenie"—has run out in the matron's patch at the gable-end. There is no Bible, no white handkerchief, and a twig of the sweet scented plant carried towards the Auld Kirk on Sabbath now. There are no sins to rub out and forgive. No incense to be offered. No love's token to be placed on the narrow bookboard.

The thrushes sing early in the spring time of the year on the tall elm tree. The blackbird builds in the same hawthorn hedge as its predecessors of yore, and even the willow wren nestles in the lower reaches of the poplar as its forebears did; but there is no church hymn chanted in the village yonder, as in the days when that matron's voice led the old-fashioned choir. How the birds used to warble in that garden in the sunshine, as the passenger smoked a choice cigar or a pipe by the hedge, after a lengthened ride and a hot meal. The children played round the stable-door, ignorant of life and its burdens. Down the firwood edge, down

the burn side, down the broad common where the daisies bloomed and the meadow pipits sang. Down wood and water, down grasslands, wading through the tall grasses and the nodding poppies. Mowing the stems and blooms with the feet and ankles. Voices of the air, windy music, tinkling waters—all framed to charm the youthful mind and fix it in early bondage. Nodding, swaying trees, deep canopied fir-woods and brook edges, clothed by reed and sheltered by broom. The water playing wondrous melodies, youth roaming in airy lands of surprise and delights. Fashioning, questioning, reasoning, guessing with faculties crude and immatured, the youngsters lived the life of the open air. Dandering down the plantation and by the burn had a greater meaning than the bairns dreamed of. As they roamed, life came with open hand to lead their juvenile feet where cloud and shadow, wind and shower crossed the sky. Youth queried and answered its own riddle. Some went with the flood and mixed with the flotsam and jetsam of the world. Dunces conquered—dux was washed out to the sea. Some stranded, who set out fair in wind and weather, and others badly built and rudely fitted sail now mid the billows of golden oceans. Lives nursed, tended and reared in care, are to-day as wrecks tossed up on the river bank. Lives dragged along the muddy ridges of boyhood, sail proudly in the mighty seas. Nothings and somethings mixed into one vast concrete mass.

Thus the mind is drawn back to the old hostelry and its crowds of little ones, with the evening resting on the crests of the hills. The red clouds sit upon the peaks, and a warm glow stretches over the valley to the village on the eastern shore of the north sea. Mentally back to the Half-way house, with the local piper marching from the neighbouring "ferm toon" to take his evening turn before the arrival of the "Defiance." Hark!—while he measures his tramp to the music coming up the whinny dyke. Of himself he is the very soul of poetry. From him and his kindred our nation has built up a race of musicians. From the ploughman turning up the timid mouse in the furrow of the land, the crushing the life out of a tender daisy, and linking sweet words and melody by the acts; from the most tender, most pathetic, truest-hearted seer-poet; down through the years, beaded with minor bards, the nation is one long chain of measured words and gurgling rhyme. The heart of the Scot is musical; his soul floats in song.

The love of the bagpipe is often a family trait. The pipers one meets annually at the Highland Games can often boast of a Highland pedigree so far as an innate love of the instrument is concerned. Many a family, for generations, can trace the ancestry of their love, through father and grandfather, back to the days of Prince Charlie and beyond.

There is no music more Scottish than the bagpipes, and no music that can blend with the hill-side so well. As the piper comes up the loan, one's heart takes the wings of lightness and sails amid the airy clouds in harmony with the stirring strains that float on the winds afar. The flycatcher darts from the broomy knowe and dances in mid-air after the gauzy wings of insects. The piper turns at the hostelry and steps round the front court, playing to the silent crowd that frequents the house. The strapper moves nearer, holding his brush and bridle in his hand, and the landlord shakes his pipe on the wall and smiles. From the currant bush in the garden a greenfinch drops to the ground in quest of insects to support its second brood. It carries caterpillars up amongst the branches while they are to be found; but in autumn and winter it eats the chickweed seeds, groundsel, dandelion, and other wild wayside weeds.

Six miles away the landlord can make out the approaching coach. He keeps a field glass, which he says was held by Blucher at Waterloo, although its claim to that distinction is not quite apparent. He stands on the stone that keeps the coach wheels off the garden wall, and informs the company whether the "Defiance" is "full up" or "light." As the mail turns the corner of the Castle grounds he says, "they are over the mill," meaning the vehicle is mounting the brae, with the meal mill immediately over the bank to the left. The piper is playing his best strathspey when the crack of Captain Barclay's thong causes the pigeons to circle afield, and with a rattling swing the team turns in to the Half-way House.

The world went quietly then, and left space for the mail coach with its jolly crew of Whip and Guard and passengers. Like all other undertakings of the Laird of Ury's, the "Defiance" was a model coach. It was the fastest, best equipped, and best conducted stage that raised the dust on the highways of northern Britain. Barclay himself was a noted athlete, a prominent agriculturist, and a genius with reins and whip. The end, rather than the beginning of the nineteenth century, had a place for his talent. He made

coaching a science, and it was more than a hobby with him even when he forced the pace. It was a delight—nay a luxury, to ride on the box seat, when the ribbons passed through his hands. The talk, the joke, the challenge, and the many items that went to make the journey a thing of pleasure, were centred on the box-seat of the "Defiance."

At the "Salutation," as half-past twelve marked the face of the town clock, passengers and luggage from Edinburgh and Glasgow were aboard the north mail. A word to the leaders and a gentle "pull up" forced the team out into the great north road, with Aberdeen mapped out far ahead. Short and sharp stages were the order of the day. Through wooded height, along level pasturage, between blooming gorse, down glen and uphill—steady and safe, at five miles an hour. A basket of trout to take up at the Cross-roads, a brace of grouse for Stonehaven at the Toll-house, or a parcel addressed Aberdeen at the merchant's, standing lonely in a dreary waste of moorland and heather.

When the echo of the bugle had spent itself upon the crags and hill-sides, and the coach had rounded the smiddy on its journey towards the capital of the north, the company would slowly and silently turn to the Half-way House, to learn the latest news from Perth, Stirling, Glasgow, and Edinburgh. The landlord's name was over the doorway, as an author's name is printed on the covers of his book. Travellers from the north, and passengers from the south, contributed to the volume edited by the tenant of the way-side hostelry. Over a glass of ale or a whisky toddy in the side parlour, the landlord's reference library could be consulted on the topics of the day. The times newspaper was the Half-way house kitchen. There were not ten printed volumes within the walls of the hostelry. Rural life required few books, and novel reading bordered on actual sin. Travel, adventure, and works of an ethnographic description were the volumes of passing interest to the folks scattered round the Half-way House. Even in many countrysides and villages the three volume novel is yet comparatively scarce. Country folks do not read as the people of the city do. There is no reading, in fact, on the city system. The working population,—the labouring classes—do not, to any great extent, admire Kipling, Haggard or Stevenson. To most G. A. Sala is a dead letter, and Thackeray might be a god of the heathen. The rich and well-to-do classes scan a work if put into their hands, but the daily newspapers, and

a weekly, embraces almost the whole range of the literature of the opulent. Labourers also read a weekly. There are few libraries of a private nature outside some of the older mansion houses. The scarcity of books in a household—otherwise well appointed—is one of the features of rural life. The gap that exists between the people in this respect is more apparent now, than it was fifty years ago. Newspapers and other advertising mediums are scattered over the land, and no complaint can be made that it is the want of good and cheap literature that keeps people from appreciating personally the genius of the hour. The door stands so wide ajar, that the surprise is that the opportunity is so decidedly ignored. Fifty years ago there were no dailies in many parts, and few weeklies, and the chances of the resident farmer or labourer were few and far between. They had not the articles exhibited to them as they have now-a-days, and thus the vacancy was not so marked and did not appear so pronounced. There are not so many books within the the door of the Half-way House at the present time, as there were when the mail coach halted in the court yard. Certainly the large families that now inhabit the dwelling possess books of a kind, the greater portion of which are according to Acts of Parliament. But excluding school literature the volumes are within extremely narrow limits. As a rule the weekly newspaper is the connecting link between the printing house and the homes of the field labourers. But it is a question which can be answered only according to the individual taste, whether the world has gained in sentiment and improved in morals and advanced in harmony with the radical spirit of the age. To many, the old landlord and his limited library stands out in distinct shadow on the landscape of the mind. In his day and generation life wagged slower than the musty pendulum of the lobby clock. There was time within the grasp, and the secret of living three score years and ten was a real, abiding truth. The passionate throbbing of sentiment is in its grave, and although the days of war are hastening to an end, we only vacate the field, to look at dawn, on the frozen, starved, moral-slain millions that rot under our nostrils, when the sun gets high. Our national Bard touched the lost chord of true life in his words, the sound of which is scarcely yet heard, but as the ages pass away the full music and the echo will reassure, reunite, stimulate, and make mankind strong in love—stronger than iron—true as steel. But poetry is in the backyard blurred by the rain,

and sentiment feels half ashamed to write her name. We draw the pen through the loved words "the good old days," and stand on the bare turnpike before the antiquated hostelry. The pocket diary is printed in ink and dated 1895.

A lad—a labourer's son—leans on the stone wall, intent on the sum figured on his slate. He has four miles to travel yet before the dark sky hides the hills. His fingers are blue and the blood in his little frame circulates but slowly. The brain is working almost before nature demands its action. Not as when the bairns roamed long ago, down knee deep in the haugh and ferns, slates and sums unknown. The lad already earns his bread. He is seeking a place on the surface of his native earth. His sum is a puzzle, but the school must earn the government grant.

A. NICOL SIMPSON.