

THE PLOUGHMAN.

“ Then up wi’ my ploughman lad,
And hey my merry ploughman ;
Of a’ the trades that I do ken,
Commend me to the ploughman.”—*Burns.*

I.



THE aroma from a newly turned divot of earth lying by the gateway is refreshing and sweet to the nostrils in the springtime of the year. Soil thrown up, the weeds dug and buried, their rootlets left to dry in the sun. Moisture unearthed, rising as the team drags slowly along, “feering” the meadow. On the surface of the lea, long glossy black lines mark out the boundaries for the ploughing. The plough-board leaves a smooth face upon the mould, and the sun reflects from its plained surface. The jackdaws come from the towers, and the rooks from the mansion-house woods. Starlings and finches run over the earthy billows. Gulls from the seacoast ten miles away scream above the ploughman’s head. Jackdaws are not so numerous in the shires as they are about the towns, but the finches and linnets make up the deficiency. All are eager for the worms and grubs thrown up by the plough. Starlings especially make good their foothold, although the true tenants of the fields—the rooks—work the ground in a more masterly fashion. An early lark rises over the meadow and sings. In an hour a score are vocal in the sky. ’Mid the songs of larks and the chattering of starlings, the caw of rooks and the whistle of the ploughman, the team work pleasantly, and feel the awakening spirit that is abroad. The team top the brae, and the ploughman bends as he swings round at the head rig. The earth is warm—a stream of heat from horse and earth floats aslant.

A ploughman behind a team of horses considers himself the one great object on the landscape. It is good that it is so, for this simple fact redounds to his own satisfaction and his master’s benefit. It is innocent self-importance. The farmer gets his work accomplished expeditiously and conscientiously. It is to the worker’s

credit that he gives of his best, for his very heart is in his duty. The satisfaction of doing his work well recompenses both the employee and employer. The greatest ambition of the ploughman is to be what his name implies. His desire is so to work that the exhibition of his talent as a hewer of the earth's crust may find his name and fame held in high esteem by his fellow-labourers. The appreciation of his kindred is dear to his heart, and their applause finds a warm corner in his affections. The work directly connected with byre, stable, and cattle-courts he by no means regards with favour. Even carting is performed with a certain degree of careless repose, as if the man had ample leisure and played with his work. Had he the arrangements of the day in his keeping he would relegate all those minor duties to another, and yoke his team to the plough. This department of field labour is the very cornerstone of his ambition. It is no child-play with the worker. It is a real abiding love for the work.

Nowhere on the face of the globe is the tilling of the soil so carefully and deliberately performed as in Scotland. The Continent of Europe has not to be considered, neither the extensive wheat lands of America. In Scotland there is no scratching of the surface of the earth, nor leaving of wracky divots as great blotches on the leaves of nature's book. A Scotsman ploughs, grubs, harrows, rolls, and ploughs again, gathering the weeds and carting the wrack to the lime-heap. The field is one broad plain of pulverised mould. There is no half measure with the Celt. If the land be dressed for turnips the work is always of the highest order. No rule of thumb exists. Every movement is duly reasoned out, and from the first step of the horses "feering" the meadow until the thinning of the turnips, everything is done in the most orderly fashion. Every furrow the ploughman makes he turns at the head rigs to criticise his own handiwork, and to note any inaccuracies existing. Uniformity is the desired end. Even in the sister country there exists a crude and ready style of farming that could and would not hold its own in Northern Britain. The English neglect of farming, considered from a Scottish ploughman standpoint, is a direct slur on the business as a commercial pursuit. And yet the Celt is not so much of a market gardener as his southern brother. Were the English farmers to apply their energies in the direction of their fields, in place of limiting such to the boundaries of their garden hedges,

they would be nearer the Scot in their system of agriculture. The Scottish farmer walks over his fields and neglects his garden, while the Englishman digs and smokes in the latter, leaving the fields to the care of others. The Scot is broader in his commercial arrangements, and performs his farming operations on a more extensive scale. Both the English and Irish nations look upon the Scotsman as a hard-headed, providential being of luck, but it is only the result of well-applied mental and physical labour that turns his farm into a successful venture. If agricultural depression is to be solved, it will be the work of a Scot. No other nation owns the stamina—the force of character—the evolved experiences of years—to enable it to successfully work the problem out. And there is no class of men equal to the ploughmen of the Scottish shires for the special work allotted them. There are certainly degrees of perfection in the ranks of the ploughmen, but, speaking generally, there are no workmen who fit in, and perform their duties so well as Scottish ploughmen.

A man to be looked upon as a "guid hand" seldom finds any difficulty in feeling on the best terms his district acknowledges. A good ploughman is always a careful horseman. The difference noticeable between a tidy and a slovenly ploughman is a most striking characteristic of rural life. A ploughman who is attentive to his personal appearance and that of the horses under his charge may be reckoned a man of superior calibre. The charge of horses in itself is a responsibility that the majority of ploughmen seldom give serious thought to. In all my wanderings I am constrained to give the palm to the north country ploughmen in this special line. Aberdeenshire men appear to have a greater love and admiration for their horses than many who live in other shires. They seem to get much nearer, and appear on more friendly terms with their horses. The sympathy between man and horse is more defined, and the latter act much sweeter at their work. To know the wants of a horse, and to give ungrudgingly the time and labour requisite to the demand, is in a manner a strong test of love and sympathy. Many ploughmen turn in their horses as if they were mere machines. The feeding, watering, and bedding are done as a piece of mechanical labour. In health or disease the horse is treated to the usual routine of labour and stall, stall and labour. Farmers themselves are in a measure to blame for this want of sympathy. It may be the result of a closer

communion between master and servant that gives this trait to the more northern portions of Scotland. Whatever be the fundamental cause, the relationship existing between the dumb animal and his driver is one of the commendable features of rural life in the counties beyond the Esks.

Cutting and laying the earthy billows with almost mathematical precision may seem an easy task to the untutored hand and eye; yet many a man spends a great portion of his life between the handles of the plough, and dies without being considered a ploughman in the deeper sense of the word. To be recognised by rustic critics as a "guid hand," the man must possess no ordinary precision, combined with a true knowledge of the principles of the craft. The ploughman steps between the handles, and gathers up the reins. The plough-line vibrates along the flanks of the horses, as he quietly speaks to his horses and grips the handles of the plough. The horses move forward to their collars, and a tremor passes along the tightening chains, and the coulter digs into the mouldy earth. There is no hurry, no jerk—only a slow, steady movement of man and horses. The art of moderating the draught is acquired from years of practice. A light hand on the plough makes a comparatively light day's work for the horses. This perfection is not attained without its initial stages, its hard work, and direct application and study. Speak well of a ploughman's furrows, and you get straight to his heart. No greater honour falls to his share than to be selected as the representative of his employer at some neighbouring Love-darg. A Love-darg is one of the best of rural scenes. It is a vinous offering of friends to the esteemed one—a love token of help—a poetic tribute 'mid the rough prose of daily toil.

The sons of the soil extract from the special section of ploughing far more healthful enjoyment than can possibly be procured in most other branches of industry. Every ploughman criticises the work of his fellow-labourer. Men who have trod the furrows in early life and adopted other professions retain during their lifetime a vivid interest in the lines cut upon the sward. Many labourers will travel miles on Sabbaths and other off-days to examine and compare decisions relative to the merits of the various fields that may be favourably spoken of during the preceding week.

And yet, with all this, a ploughman's existence is in many

respects not an enviable one. The moment he passes through the field-gate and feels the hard macadamised surface beneath him, he becomes quite a different being. He is at home 'mid the riggs and grasslands, but so soon as divorced from the pastures he becomes awkward in gait and manner. Accustomed to feel the mould slide outwards and kindly encompass his hard shoe leather before the particles become solid and arrest his weight, he finds the roadway plain and smooth, with no earth to cling around his feet in friendly pressure. The road is free and open, and no mud settles upon the soles of his heavy boots. This puts him out, and he feels unsettled. He plants his feet upon the turnpike as if his frame moved on stilts. There is no grasp of earth, no sinking before he gains bottom. It is too glassy and smooth—too free for his stride. Used to holding the plough and treading always the soft land, his leg goes forward a good pace before it reaches *terra firma*. Freed of the plough, he yet relies on its support. Being accustomed to its movement, and to feel himself carried forward without much exertion, he brings his field lessons to the turnpike. With stiff joints, like most outdoor labourers, he bounces, rocks, and swings, bending far forward in his walk. His left shoulder is high set compared with the other, while his arms sway wildly with every movement of his body. Thus he “danders doon the road.”

II.

Realising that farmers and field-labourers depend on the vicissitudes of the seasons, it is a remarkable fact that very few of them know very much about the sciences pertaining to the atmosphere and its phenomena. It is only of late years that the younger generation have gleaned a few fragments of knowledge of the very soils they work. Although both farmer and ploughman are in daily contact with the beauties of Nature, they seldom see or heed the spots of interest set upon the landscape, or note the minor touches painted about the hedges and waysides. Just as a fisherman knows nothing of a seascape—only the winds and tides for the purposes of his vocation—so in like manner the people bred and reared in the shires look upon the months of the kalendar in the light of commercial gods. Doubtless it is only human nature after all. The proverb “Familiarity breeds contempt” is ever receiving due homage. Tourists and holiday-makers see far more of the country

than the natives do in most instances. March goes out and April showers soften the rolled corn-fields—they come and go as if previously arranged at the Farmers' Association Dinner. The seasons have no curve, no angle marked upon the plan, no lines drawn across the map of the year. Spring draws nearer almost unknown. The greenness intensifies, and the buds break from the dull colour of the tree bark. Summer floods the land, and autumn finds the beech-nuts falling, and the bramble-berries ripe, while their branches are bare of foliage. Frost grips the highlands, and sends its breath towards the seashore, thinning the blood of shrub and paralysing the growth of herb and flower. Heat and cold, green and white dress the living and the dead. There is indeed no definite stop, no printed period on nature's page to tell the ploughman that spring is ended and another chapter of summer begun. The cold simply recedes and the vegetation gains fresher vitality—the meadow flowers arise, and the white wind-flower in all its beauty clothes the wooded heights and spreads its snowy petals around the anchorage of fir and sycamore. Visitors from town and city only look upon the full-stored period of the year. They see the ploughman in a niche at the flush of the year. He is knee deep in clover, with the corn ears topping the dry dykes. He is designated the son of freedom, dwelling in Arcadian realms. But the honour is delusive, the hypothesis deceptive. The working of a team of horses involves heavy labour under all conditions of weather. Ploughing and reaping are no parlour pastimes, and the tone of hilarity pervading the person of the horny-handed Scot is in a great measure the emulation of the beholder brain. The mind meets an unrelenting rival when it endeavours to decipher the seasons and place the tillers of the soil in their respective positions. There are the uncounted and unaccountable fractions that go to form the fulness of the landscape, which if unlinked cannot be tied again as a chaplet. The garrulous chatter of the starlings gathered upon the elm-tops mimic the tiny rivulets and waterfalls formed 'mid the pebbles in the burn. The waters flow ever onwards by the field edge and by the farm orchard. In heavy thunder-storms the adjacent fields are flooded—cooled by the volume of "snaw bree" from the hills on the northern skyline. The nature of a burn, and the history of its revolutions as it works in harmony with the demands of the seasons, can only be learned by a residence near its banks. It may be very interesting to a

stranger to discuss the magnitude of the mountain-torrent, and conjecture the amount of debris annually washed down the hill burns to the lower valley. It is well to be a geologist, and with hammer tap the muricated face of the glen, and chop the sandstone croppings in the ditch. But the natives have no heart for either geology or kindred sciences. A year in the fields to many would be utter misery. The dulness and depression would prove too heavy a burden to those who have sipped of the sweets of the city—and loved them. This dulness is ever present unless the mind can rise higher than the low, misty, floating clouds. Yet it is actual—realistic—ever present. Generations have come and gone, and all the while this mental derelict has floated over the shires. The spirit has passed over the land and permeated the pores of the mind. The landscape is still covered as by the curse of listless inactivity. The people are moulded into stolid hewers of wood and drawers of water. The spates in winter do not open the book of science to the ploughman, nor the farmer. The reverse is the case. It is a question with them whether the bank at the dam-head will keep the rush off, or if the rumbling boulders, sand, and rubbish will gain entrance and silt up the pond. The miller rises at midnight to lift his sluice until the flood abates. But there is no lesson culled, no knowledge stored by the mental parts. Dog-rose and nettle float atop the stream, and are sucked under the eddy at the bridge. Hemlock wands are broken with a hollow crack; bundles of thistles and dry dock leaves are washed from the banks, and go down under the arches in company with a moorhen's empty nest. But to the ploughman this is uncongenial. He wants to see the pounds, shillings, and pence, and feel the weight of the gold in his open hand. It matters not although the flowers are blooming, the throstle singing on the high fir top, but it is of vast importance that the wheat value is nearing his idea of visible profit. To him the squirrel's brown body swaying on the beech tree arm is of no importance, unless he knew of anyone who would buy the animal of him if he caught it. The scraich of the partridge in the quiet of the eventide he does not note, although there is nothing so soothing to the ear of a wearied toiler from the city. The ploughman lacks sympathy with the environments that nature has framed for him. Hard work to a certain extent has encrusted his nature that he only toils to live, and to live by the "dour" sweat of his brow. Yet Scotland's Burns was nursed in

the lap of the earth, and many other good and true men date their start in life's race from the rigg-head of the fields. But the exceptions only prove the rule. The average ploughman, when you cross his path, proves conclusively that his sentiment might be greatly strengthened and his ideas broadened of men and things. If a pheasant be lying in the scroggie as he passes he will confiscate the game bird, provided he runs no risk of being seen by the keeper. At anyrate he will kick the bird out if he passes that way. He will not accept the game laws as a wise piece of legislation, and indeed ignores them so intensely that he declines to take mental note of the dates when animals and birds may be captured. The bothy hands sniggle the hares in midsummer, and rustic philosophy pushes the game laws out of mind, while the poacher guesses the weight of his capture and takes a bye-road for home. It is not an ideal world of beauty and play with the man who whistles at the plough, but rather a life of labour and wages.

At "The Shaws"—a place meaning a small wood in a hollow—the ploughmen of the countryside nightly congregate. It is a portion of the road where the carters and vanmen slacken the reins and allow their horses to slow before taking the brae some little way ahead. This is the open hall where the questions of the hour are discussed. Looking at the assembly, one would imagine that the grievances of farm servants and the vexed crofter question might be settled speedily and amicably without the aid of agitators and St. Stephen blue-books. If it be true that sixteen per cent. of the inhabitants of the British Isles exist directly by agriculture, it seems passing strange that ploughmen should be so obtusely slow in the march towards the elevation of their aspirations. Taking the mind back to the date when our forebears simply scratched the upper mould of the ground with a rudely pointed tree bough, and comparing that state of things with the agricultural industry of to-day, it really seems the ploughman has only moved a few paces in the interval. To-day the steam-plough leaves the horses in their stalls, and the reaper and binder has sent the harvest hands home. The old thrashing mills, driven by horse-power, have in a great measure given place to steam. From the time of our forefathers, with their wooden, clumsy ploughs, to the introduction of steam as an agency on the land—even unto the present hour, one might write the history of Scotland over again. But the ploughman would only appear on the page as an illustra-

tion, to give life and human interest to the work. It would be progressive in itself, but its pages would at times miss out the people of the shires, and whole chapters would be given up to steam and the genius of invention.

It is a sign of the times that farmers themselves appear to advance in so far as modern appliances may be noted. This is all the more astonishing when it is seen that they tenaciously cling to many old, antiquated forms in their business relations. It seems almost a remnant of the feudal ages to stubbornly refuse to grant the ploughman his wages as earned. There may be difficulties to be overcome—difficulties, perhaps, that have special bearing on the question in its connection with the land; but personally I can point to trades where the system of weekly payments works admirably, while the material under process of manipulation is of far more perishable a nature than crops of grain and turnips. Again, the absurd notion of feeing for a range of months seems to me to be working its own destruction. The men who are known as “guid hands” are gradually being invited from the fields to posts where their talent is more appreciated and recompensed. The farmers will shortly learn they have been their own enemies; and it matters little whether they realise the position or not, weekly engagements and weekly payments, and also a set range of holidays, must be printed on the ploughman’s programme. The law of labour is not yet drafted, but as the years pass on the mute inner workings of progress will unroll a scheme whereby the ploughman will be enabled to throw off his serfdom and to clothe himself in a more manly independence. The united front of gold and talent cannot and will not stay the wave. It comes and flows over, increasing with the days.

The pigeon is cooing to its mate in love.

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