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## KILMARNOCK IN THE OLDEN TIME. BACK STREET.

"Farewell ye odours of earth that die,  
Passing away like a lover's sigh."

SIR - In our last communication (kindly allowed by you) on our good town in the olden time, and Back Street in particular, we stated that in that street, about the beginning of the present century, manufacturing and trade were carried on to a considerable extent. There were about sixty looms in it, including a small carpet manufactory, some "customer" and blanket work, but the greater part of tradesmen were muslin and blunk weavers. Some of these had their workshop and kitchen in the same apartment; and some individuals had a goodly number of journeymen and apprentices in their establishments. These young lads and strangers kept the waters moving wonderfully, and indeed gave a decided complex on to the more outward manners of the place. All sorts of out-door sports, ball playing, shinty, snow-balling, besides every imaginary mischief, were carried on between those two old walls; like life issuing out of the repulsiveness of decay, or fermentation bringing into existence new forms of vigour and use. The manufacturing, especially, that was carried on, caused a great transfusion of foreign and vigorous life, which operated upon existing habitudes, changing manners and feelings, it might be imperceptibly at the moment, but ultimately in an important degree. The apprentices came from different parts of the town, and were none of your insignificant urchins of a few spans long, scarcely knowing good from evil, such as of later years we have seen wrenched off from their leading strings, but wiful dashing youths, capable of annoying both themselves and others in many forms and degrees, and many of them the rough beginnings of the future brave defenders of our "tight little isle." All of them were ready for any enterprize at a leisure hour, or after the toils of the day, and therefore there was a constant boiling over of the



caldron, and "toil and trouble" was the issue. The journeymen were mostly strangers, the greater part of whom belonged to the emerald isle, which at that time had begun to throw off its superabundant and over-excited population, and Scotland was regarded as the Utopia of bliss, and without doubt the El Dorado of the world. Many of these hardy adventurers found their way, in quest of employment, to the late Mr Mathew Dickie, who kept up a good manufacturing business, besides an extensive agency in the weaving line. He employed nine weavers at his own establishment, the site of which is now spanned by an arch of the Railway Bridge, and many a "honey dear," and "broth of a boy" called and laboured there. None now in Kilmarnock need to be told how to appreciate the jokes, and the jollities, and the "stretches" which were sure to abound amid such a congregating of the sons of Erin, who have long been reputed to march even to death with military glee. One little Highlander, "Hughie Ross," had got edged in among them by good luck, and in the strange world of turmoil and effervescence, found himself dandled and petted like infancy. This individual was in possession of a blissfulness peculiar to infancy, and well suited to the exigency of his circumstances - viz , a happy tendency to somnolency. As the lofty mountain top smiles in repose above the wild thunder storm, and as the sailor boy slumbers amid the tumultuous fury of the tempest, so would Hughie repose amid the war of word, the exciting song, the roar of merriment, and the noise of looms, in the soft arms of Morpheus. However much his cheerful mates "might be blest," Hughie was always "glorious." Neither his snuff mull, which was ever in proximity, nor the urgency of his master for him to "get on," could keep the old man awake. His proboscis would be primed, the "pluckstick" would be grasped anew, and he would get the length of saying to himself, "weel ton goot resolution," when down drops his head, his shuttle gets meshed, and the halcyon dream is dispelled. Many a time, to our young observation, did it appear as the eighth wonder of the world, Hughie Ross sleeping and weaving at the same time. *Query* - Did any of the visions of his somnolency show to him that his blissful weakness would be chronicled in the " Kilmarnock Post" sixty years hence! A rather serious mishap occurred to him at one time from this habit of his. He had got his back to the fire one day, a rather favourite position with weavers of old. His usual inclination of the head came upon him at the time, and this sent some parts of his posterior raiment into contact with the flames; and it was only when the late enough shouts of some of his neighbours roused him to consciousness, that he was convinced of the varnity of lengthened skirts and of the land of "deep forgetfulness." Poor unfortunate wight! First one hand, and then another intuitively went to the rescue. They grasped a shadow, for not a "wreck was left behind." This misfortune remained a standing torment to the poor body, and a theme of laughter to his humorous shopmates for years afterwards.

At the hour of meals, Back Street always presented a scene of eagerness and bustle; each man hurrying what he could to shake hands with his old friends, the bit and the sup. Among the moving groups, the men in Mr Dickie's employment were very conspicuous items. Each man of these was habited and assorted *a la mode* of his native province in the sweet green isle. Some were in the habit of wrapping their handkerchief round their head at work, and walking on the street with these made rather a striking contrast with the sprightly cock-up of the Scottish night-cap. Most of them found time too precious to put their coats on when the hour of meal struck,

and therefore threw them over head or shoulders as it first might happen, and so while it saved trouble, had them either as a shelter from the cold or a covering from the heat. All of them gave good evidence that their habiliments had taken very much the place and shape which good luck had assigned for them, or rather pitched there to, in the hurry of the morning toilette. None were more interested in these ever-recurring and picturesque scenes than the belles of the street; budding beauties giving themselves up to new and pleasing impressions, and those who had been ripening just long enough upon the stem would detect themselves wondering yet once more if the "coming man" was not here at last. Certain it was, however, that at certain times of the day, rather out of the way palpitations would be felt, and every one was more anxious than another to give the welcome hail to her companions to "haste them fast to see Matho' Dickie's Eerishmen." These same Irishmen had not left home without taking with them a due share of the "glamour," which lost none of its virtue on Scottish soil, and some of them managed to take "for better for worse" a number of their fair persecutors. These alliances, indeed, were rather too much at the time for Scottish flesh and blood, and one decent old man declared eternal war against the outlandish race, and said that though "an Eerishmen might behave weel for nineteen 'eers he would cheat you on the twentieth." After all, he lived to see his favourite daughter bound in the indissoluble bonds of wedlock, and comfortably located in Back Street with one of them, where they lived in amity and respectability, and brought up a well-doing family. The good dames of the street, too, talked a good deal about the spreading innovation, but commonly had the good sense to yield to circumstances, "since better could us be;" but only "it had been just as weel if the stupid thing had ta'en up wi' a hereawa' man, for a' that."

One very evident shred of barbarism stuck tenaciously to the people of Back Street at the time in question. Not a married woman amongst them was advanced to the dignity of *Mrs.* Each cleaved to, or was forced to retain her primitive appellations, and that too in the diminutive distinctness which in early life had been assigned. Thanks to the progress of civilization, the ladies, as we must call them, have now got far a-head in honour of their would-be lords. The homeliness of naming, indeed, corresponded quite with the homeliness of female attire. No every-day gown then. Each had her short bed-gown, surmounted by her high-crowned, plain-bordered mutch - not a cap - that was a kirk head-dress, and a bonnet lay deep in the womb of the future. Like parent like child, and therefore the most promising youngster was not encumbered with needless frivolities. The limbs were left very much free to do their work, and the head rejoiced in nature's covering, both by night and day, till the beard had thoughts of starting. Our first head-dress, when able to win it, was an "Andy Duffy" hat at half-a-crown, which could be turned out and in, and in and out, with both pleasure and profit. Neither were our fathers, any more than our mothers, distinguished by any great assumptions. An *Esq.* to them would have been all but an object of worship. Not one *Mr* even, with one exception, was to be found in the whole street. That exception was Mr Dickie, and the honour was brought about only by the force of both wind and wave - it was in fact a pure importation, nothing indigenous about it. The many foreigners who had sat so long at the feet of St. Patrick, and had matriculated with honours bright on the "fairest gem of the sea," would find it, on their numerous callings, to be morally impossible to ask for plain 'Matho'." Physically too, not a mouth of them could frame the word. *Mr* therefore was

unavoidable, and so was introduced into Back Street, Kilmarnock, the civilization of the west. These were the men for the Time, and the Time, despairing of any removal of the obstructiveness of ingrained habit, had been long calling for the Men, and soon we had and still have the happy transfusion of a lusty politeness, alike removed from a degrading sycophancy, and a forbidding sourishness - a six times' thinking, for a once-uttered speech. No joke do we intend by this. No solecism do we admit in what we say. No more than when we speak of a heaven-appointed Luther in answer to mind-manacled humanity, tossing in strange and untellable agony, and beseeching the ear of heaven with groanings that could not be uttered. No more than the terrible meteor Napoleon sweeping the vitiated atmosphere of earth, scorching the base mockery of corrupting courts, blighting and withering priestly arrogance and presumption, drinking up the blood fury of humanity swinging without a God; and at the same wild swoop awakening every slumbering or uncontaminated fibre in the heart of civilised life, to stand up in defence of the brave, the right, the good, and the true. For we must remember that still the Almighty nothing is little, and nothing great; whether the mighty orb that rolls sublimely through the vast fields of ether, or the gorgeous drapery which clothes the tiny insect fluttering its transient hour in the summer air - whether the incipient thought that gives the first stirrings to the hero's blood, or the revolution of empires consummated by the strength of his genius and the prowess of his arm. Our next paper will come a little down the stream of time, and more particularly will notice changes in connection with things and persons of old. - Yours, &c.,

ANTIQUITAS.