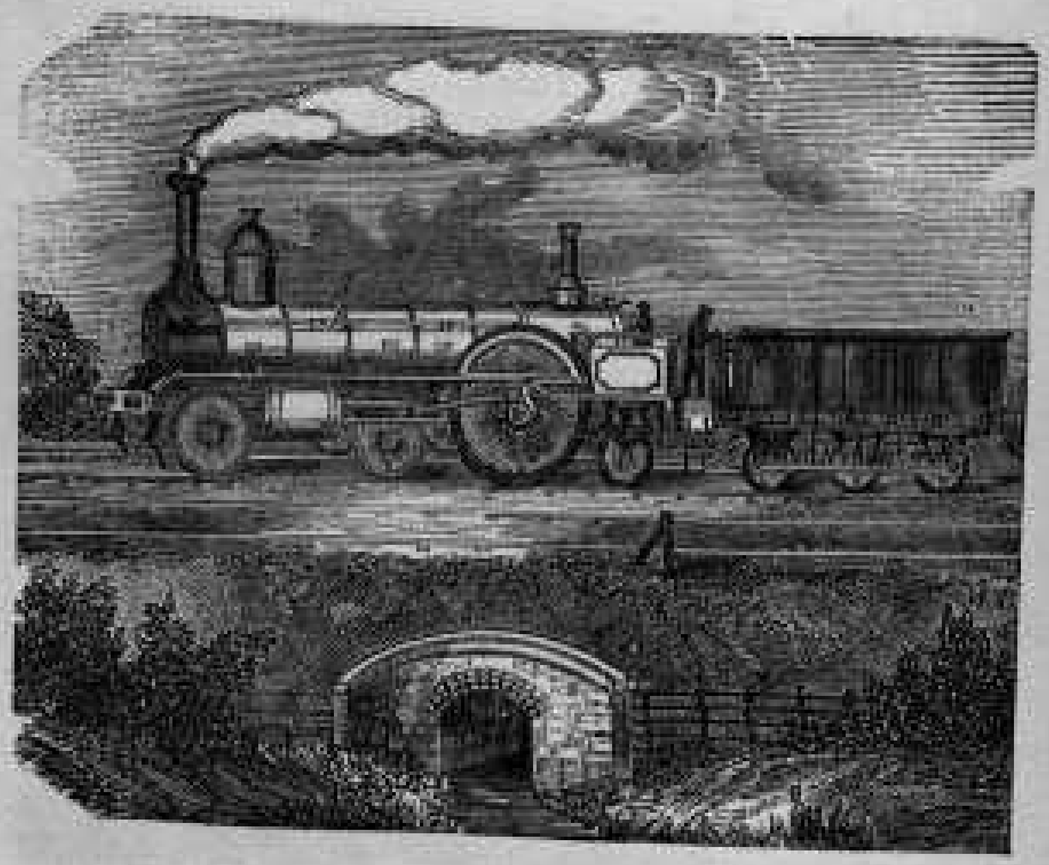

TRAVELLING EXPRESS.

CHAPTER VII.

GEORGE STEPHENSON AND RAILWAYS.

A DENSE cloud of smoke, as usual, hung over Newcastle; the landscape round about the town was not such as a seeker after the picturesque would have selected. As artists say, it wanted colour; there was no blue above and no green below, but murky clouds shutting out the light, and the ground all covered with heaps of ashes and refuse, coal and slag; dreary enough and dull enough at the best of times, but growing terrible as the night came on, and the coal fires blazing from iron furnaces set the black sky a-glowing.

There was a group of folk released from work; they had

come out of the earth, where they had sweated like gnomes, but got no daily cream bowl, but rather skim milk of the skimmiest; but they were talking pleasantly to one another, for the "yel," as they call it, had been better than usual. And there was news, too,—not very important news to be sure,—and news that made one or more of the "lads" smile grimly,—Old Bob of Wylam had another one—a boy, and they were going to call him Geordie.

It was not in the papers; they did not issue offcin. bulletins, they did not set the bells a-ringing, nor light up their houses, nor indeed make any demonstration; they did not even register the name of the new comer in the parish books, but they put it in the Family Bible—"June 9, 1781."

The house where George Stephenson was born stands, as it stood then, a few hundred yards from the eastern extremity of the village of Wylam, eight miles or thereabouts from Newcastle. It is called High Street House, but the reader must not imagine from this that it is by any means an aristocratic residence; if it had been, Old Bob Stephenson, the engine-man at Wylam pit, would never have lived in it, for he and his, though honest folk, "were sore haudden down in the world." It was "a common two-storied red-tiled rubble house, portioned off into four labourer's compartments." Its walls were unplastered, its floor of clay, and the bare rafters exposed overhead. Bob's wages were twelve shillings a week—not much on which to marry and rear a family; to get food enough was difficult, clothing next to impossible, and schooling out of the question. But a merry fellow was Bob, ay, and a shrewd; the children of the village clustered like crickets round his engine-fire and listened with delight to the story of Robinson Crusoe and his man Friday, the impression of the human foot frightening the savages, and the rest of it. And very fond of dumb animals was he—a tender-hearted man—tame robins fluttered round him, and picked up the crumbs saved from his scanty dinner. One of the happiest recollections of his son George was being taken by his father one day to see a blackbird's nest for the first time. Holding him in his arms he let the

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