

GEORGE STEPHENSON.

THE death of Robert Stephenson has very naturally and properly directed public attention to the valuable and important services rendered to the community at large by the Stephenson family. The importance of these services can scarcely be over-estimated, when we consider the immense advantages which have accrued from the adoption of the steam-engine as a locomotive power. "Honour to whom honour belongs," is the spontaneous sentiment of the human heart, as well as a Christian precept, and in offering to the names of Robert Stephenson the respect which was rendered by some of the most illustrious of our countrymen, the nation only performed a duty incumbent upon it. Amongst the wisest and wittiest, the fearless and the famous, Stephenson the engineer takes his place as a benefactor of his country. But what of George Stephenson? Great as were the services of the son, they could scarcely be said to equal those of the father; and certainly the son could never have rendered those services had not the father contrived, and laboured, and thought, and worked to give to that son the education of which he himself had felt the want. The public is not ungrateful. It has been suggested that the body of George Stephenson should be removed from its quiet resting-place, and laid in the great national mausoleum at Westminster. Other suggestions have been made with respect to the erection of a monument; and although, considering our railway traffic, it may be said of Stephenson as it is said of Wren, "Si momentum quaeris, circumspice"—"If you are seeking for his monument, look around"—it is, nevertheless, desirable that some great public work should be erected as a national testimony to his merit and his fame.

George Stephenson has appropriately been described as the Father of Railways. To him we are mainly indebted for that gigantic network of lines which intersects our country, and for that system of locomotion which seems to defy both time and space. And George Stephenson was a man who possessed no advantages of birth or education. He was one of those hard-handed children of toil who literally eat their bread by the sweat of the brow. It is unnecessary to follow the details of his extraordinary story, as we have already given some particulars of his career (see vol. i., p. 360), but the whole of that story is a striking illustration of the self-helpful power which may be exercised by a strong-minded, strong-hearted, strong-handed man. We discover George Stephenson among the ashes and slag of a poor colliery village, intrusted at an early age with widow Ainslie's cows. His wages were one shilling a week—not much from which to make a fortune. There sat the future engineer, as our artist has represented him, employing the comparative leisure of his occupation in examining a cog-wheel. "The boy is father to the man," and George Stephenson as a child showed his attachment to engineering pursuits. By-and-by, he was promoted to be driver of a gin-horse at the Black Callerton Colliery; then he became assistant fireman; then a full-paid labourer with twelve shillings per week—a sum which so elated him that he said, "Now I am a made man for life." Then he learned to read and write; then he took to cobbling old shoes and making new ones, filling up his time by cultivating his bit of garden-ground at Killingworth, producing some monster cabbages, and adopting all sorts of experiments to make his little strip of land as pleasant and profitable as possible. He figured also as clock-doctor of the neighbourhood, invented an alarm, and, a true blessing to mothers, a smoke-jack that would rock a baby's cradle! but never giving up the honest, regular, daily toil at the pit, and every day learning more and more of the steam-engine; at length, he emerges into the broad light of day, an engine-wright, and so rose upward to reputation, wealth, and honour.

When George Stephenson began to study the steam-engine, the locomotive was commonly regarded as a curious, costly toy. No one entertained the idea that its employment would, in the course of a few years, effect the most extraordinary change in the mode of travelling. Even Stephenson himself formed but an inadequate conception of the real power of the locomotive engine. He was satisfied that the cumbersome construction which had been tried on the Wylam tram-road was capable of improvement; but the extent of that improvement he had yet to ascertain. His own engine, built at the Westmoor workshop, was comparatively awkward and cumbersome; but it was a decided advance upon the old system, especially when the steam-pipe was turned into the chimney, carrying up the smoke with a steam-blast, thus adding to the intensity of the fire, and the consequent rapidity of



GEORGE STEPHENSON, THE FATHER OF RAILWAYS, IN HIS GARDEN AT KILLINGWORTH.

the action. Still, the colliery engines ran on tram-roads—rails were not invented; and Stephenson spoke of engine and rail as man and wife. So he set to work to bring about this desirable union, and succeeded—the Killingworth Colliery Railway being the first railway in the world. Stephenson kept that little line in excellent order, and did that which boards of directors very often fail to do—he made it pay.

It has been urged with some strong arguments recently that the union of rail and engine is not so essential as Stephenson maintained it to be. Engines may be employed on common roads, and thus rendered useful for the most ordinary purposes. To some extent this is done in England, and is carried out to a greater extent in America. But the rails are absolutely essential for all purposes of rapid travelling.

The Killingworth railway was finished about six and forty years ago, and it is difficult to estimate the extent and traffic of the colossal railway system—in England, Europe, the world—which has sprung out of it. Railways and steam-engines—although their origin is of so recent a date—are familiarised to us all; the advantages they offer are within the reach of all. The excursion trains which, in the summer-time, bear tens of thousands away from smoky towns into the open country, and to the sea-side; the express and ordinary trains, bringing distant places, as it were, together, facilitating trade and commerce, and ministering to comfort and convenience; the parliamentary trains, cheapening travel, and making a long journey an event within the reach of those of slender means; all contribute to the public welfare, and may all fairly be traced back to George Stephenson. "New lines of railways are being constantly

planned and executed; new fields of commercial enterprise and speculation are opened to the moneyed interests of the country; new sources of employment are discovered for our industrial population; a new impetus given to national progress; the advantages being alike experienced by the rich and the poor.

We cannot imagine that the highest triumphs of railway engineering are yet attained, nor that their full utility is yet experienced. Great as are the railway works in England and on the Continent, they are not to be compared in their extent to those of the United States. Of this, a striking instance is furnished by the line from Portland to New Orleans, recently completed, and which extends for a distance of more than 2,000 miles. There can be no doubt that railway engineering is capable of much improvement, and that it might be employed more to the advantage of the public than it is. We shall, in course of time, no doubt attain to a much higher standard in this respect, and travel with increased facility, improved comfort, and additional safety, at a cheaper rate. We may have railways taking us into the very heart of London, and extending through the streets of our capital and other large towns; but, for what has already been accomplished, there is much reason to hold in the highest estimation the memory of George Stephenson.

To the author of railways some national monument is due. We erect monuments to many who deserve them far less—to some who deserve them not at all. We commemorate the great deeds of warriors and statesmen; why not offer some mark of distinction to one who, as an engineer, has bequeathed to us a more valuable boon than was ever won for a nation by a soldier's sword, or a statesman's sagacity?