

PETER REID,

FORFAR.



PETER REID

PUBLIC BENEFACTOR.

XXV.

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There is that scattereth, yet increaseth.—Pro. xi. 24.

To the present writer the most striking feature in the career of Peter Reid, of Forfar, is neither his long life of persistent, plodding industry and thrift nor his great good-heartedness. Many other men have passed as laborious days as he did; it is to the credit of humanity that there have been others—although not in superabundance—like Andrew Carnegie, of our own time, who, having made their “little pile,” have desired that their less fortunate brethren should share in it to some extent even before the owners themselves had ceased to have any further use for it; but the spectacle of a man submitting to such protracted and unremitting grinding drudgery, under the spell of the “*auri sacra fames*”—so opposed to the spirit of generosity—all to end in returning his acquisitions to their original source, with compound interest, is sufficiently rare to excite more than passing curiosity. There seems to be only one explanation for such cases, and that is that the work is better than the pay—pursuit, not possession, is the real pleasure of the chase. Pity that poor millionaires did not realise this oftener than they do, and thus reduce their own ranks as well as

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those of their opposites at the same time. Peter Reid, at any rate, was blest in that, while still far from his journey's end, he came to realise that the business of being happy prospered most by forgetting all about it, and in seeing what could be done for other people in that way, and lived long enough thereafter to enjoy the fruits of his conviction. He was born in Forfar on the 6th October 1803, the youngest of a family of three. His father—Peter also—wheelwright to trade, came from Brechin to Forfar in 1790, and four years later opened what was to be the genesis of

THE GREAT "FORFAR ROCK" BUSINESS

in the form of a small grocery and confectionery shop near where the round well stands at the top of Queen Street, then known as Back Wynd. Betsy Reid, Peter's wife, kept the shop, while Peter himself attended to his own trade—an honest, industrious, "weel-doin'" pair, the two of them, anxious in good old Scottish fashion to "bring up their family respectable, and to pay their way and be respeckit." After a short spell under one of the local dominies, young Peter was sent to Forfar High School, the Headmaster of which at that time was one Gibson. It is interesting to note in passing that it was to a former Headmaster of this school—James Clarke—that Burns wrote on his deathbed (26th June 1796) asking the loan of a pound. Peter was a brisk, intelligent scholar, with quite an average schoolboy's love of mischief, and even more than the average love for pet animals—a trait which he exhibited all through life. After leaving school he was sent to learn the loom; by and by the shop becoming a rather pros-

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perous little concern, particularly in the confectionery department on account of the rock, which was becoming familiar in the mouths of youngsters all over the district at a great rate, he was kept at home altogether in order to assist in the manufacture of the toothsome commodity. On the death of his father in 1827, the young confectioner was called upon to take charge of the growing "establishment;" and eleven years later, when his mother followed, the business had greatly increased, and the two brothers and the sister—William, Peter, and Margaret, none of whom were married—settled down more strenuously than ever to gather "the gear" which was to benefit their native town in such a marked manner in later years. And regarding the famous "rock" itself: it will have been inferred from the foregoing that this was not the discovery of Forfar's great benefactor, nor of his father either, according to tradition, which runs to the effect that a grateful gipsy woman confided the secret of its manufacture to Peter's mother in return for some kindness the latter had done her. The family kept the secret well, and wrought it for all it was worth for the matter of fifty years. It proved a veritable gold mine; but if the profits on the rock were great, the work, for many years at any rate, was very hard, until the hand "tawing," as it is termed, was superseded by machinery. But our friend was a veritable glutton for work, and kept all intrusive recreations and holidays and

GOSSIPY NEIGHBOURS AND SWEETHEARTING,

and other such like dissipations and distractions strictly on the other side of a triple-barbed wire fence, within which not even that insinuating

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creature, my Lady Nicotine, or that jolly dog, John Barleycorn, was allowed to enter. He had but one real love in life, and that was his work, and to that he was loyal. Business with him was strictly "pleasure and profit" in one. As might be supposed, he was seldom from home, but on two occasions at least he managed to get the length of London, intent upon learning as much as possible of the newer methods of making confectionery. Both occasions were by boat, and on one, it is said that when paying his bill in a hotel, he remarked to the waiter that there were evidently "ither places besides barbers' shops far a man could be shaved!" The great hulking metropolis was nearly capturing him for all that, and he was immensely impressed by the infinite possibilities for rock consumption which it offered. In imagination he saw all the windows everywhere stuffed with nothing but Peter Reid's famous Forfar rock—people tumbling over each other in their anxiety to get supplies—every man, woman, and child going about the streets munching away the whole day long at the delectable delicacy he was so deeply interested in. What a sweet prospect! He was so taken with it that had it not been for Margaret, his sister, who objected to make the change, the probability is that he would have succumbed to the temptation, and Forfar known him no more. What that might have meant for his native town it is useless speculating, the chances being as likely one way as the other. Years passed on. Both William and Margaret had slipped away—the latter in 1868—and Peter was left alone. Over 50 years of unremitting application to work, assisted by the possession of a very lucrative monopoly, had brought him in a large fortune; but the loss of

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his brother and sister, his nearest relatives, and so intimately associated as they had been with all the engrossing affairs of his circumscribed life, doubtless gave him a lonely feeling. His own end would surely come—how soon or late he knew not—and there was that heap of siller of his. What should he do with it? Then it was that the idea—an idea which had first occurred to him as a note of ambition when he was a mere youth of 20 years—of erecting some worthy memorial to perpetuate the name of his family and benefit his native town at the same time took full possession of him, and the splendid Reid Hall was the result. The foundation stone for this edifice was laid with full Masonic honours by the Earl of Dalhousie on the 6th August 1869, the whole town being en fete to a degree never witnessed before or since. The procession of trades, Freemasons, volunteers, public bodies, &c., numbered between 3000 and 4000, and was over a mile long. The hall was only opened one Saturday night in May, 1871, Peter being

TOO BUSY IN THE SHOP

to bother about such trifles. The cost was £10,000 from first to last. A convalescent ward to the Royal Infirmary, at a cost of £700, was his next gift. Then came 1892, when he beat his own record by handing over to the town a public park of 13 acres, part of it tastefully laid out, and adorned with lodge, drinking-fountain, &c. Not to mention other benefactions, it is calculated that Forfar was made the richer by over £25,000 in one form or another through the open-heartedness of her worthy son. Not without opposition in certain quarters, and unkind things being said about him in others, was it all done, however. And, in good sooth, this old man was a strange

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compound at best. His unconventionalism, both of word and act, was proverbial. With respect to the former, while credited with many witty and humorous "obiter dicta," his jokes were too frequently served "au naturel," or so highly spiced they fired the palate. Touching his manner of life, it could hardly be expected that ordinarily built church-goers would express complete satisfaction with the man who, with his brother and sister when they were alive, never entered a church door from one year's end to the other. These were the "unco guid," doubtless, but it is to the credit of the man that their opinions regarding him never made the slightest difference in his behaviour towards the public, and he went on with his schemes for the raising of the status and ideals of the working classes, the brightening of their lives and homes, the nursing and comforting of them in sickness and distress, and otherwise making everyone the better for his presence in their midst, in his own unsanctified way to the end. He was equally obstinate in doing much good elsewhere, it being said there was hardly a charitable institution in the country he did not subscribe to. It was a curious twist in his nature, however, that made him charge a halfpenny for every half-crown he changed! In line with that is the story of the remission of the sugar duties. Between 1820 and 1840 he used to inveigh vehemently against the corn laws, unequal representation in Parliament, and other grievances—above all, the iniquitous and unparadonable duty upon sugar, which was such a hindrance to the development of

THE GLORIOUS ROCK.

industry. By and by the duties did come off,

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and, like Goldsmith's dog, which, "to gain his private ends," went mad, bit a respectable religious man, and—died of blood-poisoning, the unexpected happened, for, instead of giving the public the benefit of the improvement, he made his sticks of rock a little smaller. In the same category was his persistent refusal to give discount, even when as much as £10 worth of rock was bought. The two aspects of the man are brought out in the story of a lady coming into the shop one day ordering £1 worth of rock, and suggesting that, as it was for charitable purposes, he should make a reduction. "Not a farthing!" exclaimed he, and the full amount was accordingly handed over with a grudge. That being settled he asked a few questions in a casual sort of way about the object the lady was interested in, and finding it worthy, returned the £1 as his contribution to the fund, remarking with a twinkle to a gentleman who was present and saw the transaction that one had to "take care no to mix business wi' charity." That the real character and goodness of the man were recognised and appreciated by his fellow-townsmen was shown in many ways, amongst others by electing him to the Town Council in 1869, in which body he rose to the dignity of Provost in 1881, retiring in 1884. He served on the School Boards also for some time. During the last three or four years of his life, this genial lover of his fellow-men began to feel the infirmities of age—he was over 90—to the extent of being more or less confined to the house; but, with his simple tastes and long life training in the lessons of self-restraint, he was quite happy in his friends and his books, and in watching the growing prosperity of his numerous charitable schemes. He passed quietly

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away on the 16th January 1897, and nothing fitter comes to mind with which to close this sketch of a remarkable and lovable man than his own quaint saying, "The Lord will hae to ca' awa' a gey while afore he gets my shoon filled!"