

Mercantile Emergencies, from 1812 to 1816.

POST-OFFICE CLUB.

IF the reader be still one of the few remaining denizens of this ever-changing community, who can throw his memory back to the exciting period of the two concluding years of the great French war, when each post brought an account of some event which seemed to foretell the speedy close of that dreadful European conflict which had plunged so many hearts in woe and so many families in mourning, then will he easily recollect the hundreds of anxious citizens who every morning hurried to wait the coming of the London mail, and to listen to the horn-blast which announced its arrival at the bridge which then spanned the as yet uncovered Molendinar. It may likewise be remembered that at that time, when the news of any important victory was brought by a mail conveyance, the guard, donned in his best scarlet coat and gold-banded hat, announced the circumstance, by firing off his carabine before reaching the Cross, and that the coach itself was always on such occasions decorated with a red flag which floated from the roof. Many times and oft do we remember, during the cold winter mornings of 1812, when the Clyde had been frozen for weeks and the snow lay deep on the streets, leaping from our comfortable bed and hurrying, with bounding heart, towards the great rendezvous of news at the Cross, there to listen to the bulletins of the Russian campaign, so fatal to the French troops, and to get tidings of General Kutosof and his advancing army; to hear tales of the fearful encounters which took place between the Hetman of the Cossacks and the retreating remnants of the once magnificent Gallic host, consequent on the fatal

passage of the Beresina; or of the *marine-like* manœuvres of Admiral Tchitsigoff, through whose strategy it was expected that Napoleon himself would never have been permitted to recross the Vistula or the Elbe.

It was at this eventful period, particularly when there was not a sufficient number of newspapers received in the Exchange Coffee-room to satisfy the intense curiosity of the City quidnuncs, that either Mr Walter Graham or Mr James M^cQueen was called upon to mount one of the tables of the News-room, to read aloud to the assembled throng the stirring and all-absorbing news of the day. It was also at this period that the CLUB known by the title of the POST-OFFICE was in its most palmy state, and could count the most numerous body of members attending its every evening orgies.

Although, as has been hinted, the Post-office Club may be said to have been in its zenith about the period which is associated with the remarkable events of the Russian and German campaigns, its commencement may be dated at least a couple of years previous to that time; its birth was in fact coeval with the establishment of the Glasgow Bank,* the worthy and kind-hearted cashier of the one being generally the chairman of the other. Around such an attractive star, as the immediate instrument of the liberality so strikingly displayed by that new banking institution as compared with that of the others which then occupied the field of mercantile accommodation, it is easy to conceive that the merchant satellites who revolved nightly were neither few nor unimportant. Among the elder members of the brotherhood, there were several of the more notable merchants and

* The Glasgow Bank was formed in 1809, under the auspices of the late Mr James Dennistoun of Golfhill, whose well known liberality and judgment soon gained for it a high position among the other monetary establishments of the City. The bank was first opened in an old house in North Albion-street, but was soon transferred to the south-west corner of Montrose-street, in a mansion formerly belonging to Mr Buchanan of

Ardenconnel. A manufacturer, lately deceased, used to tell that he discounted a bill in the Glasgow Bank the first day it was opened. Although he was unknown to Mr Dennistoun, the latter had the kindness to say, that if at any time he required money profitably to extend his business "just to let him know." This led to an intimacy between the two, which continued ever afterwards, and was useful to both parties.

manufacturers of the day, while among the junior associates we may find some who are now in the rank of our merchant princes.

The Post-office Club owed its name to the hour of its meeting being eight o'clock at night—an hour at which the London mail was made up, and when all letters for the south required to be lodged in the receiving-box of the central Post-office, which was then a small low-roofed building in Nelson-street, under the superintendence of the late Mr Dugald Bannatyne—who, with his successors in the office of postmaster, have, up to this moment, been most scurvily treated by the Government in respect to Post-office accommodation.* At that hour, a small bell, whose silvery tinkle many of the older citizens may still remember, and which any of the more juvenile may still hear in the rather uncouth campanile of the Bridgegate Church, was nightly rung in the Laigh Kirk steeple, for a quarter of an hour previous to the letter-box being closed, to warn all who had letters to post; and so soon as this tinkle was heard over the then mercantile neighbourhood, the countinghouse clerks or porters were despatched to the Post-office; while, on hearing the same tinkle, the

* The history of the Post-office is perhaps one of the very best indices of the progress of Glasgow. So late as 1694, an application was made to have three *foot* posts a-week to Edinburgh; and even in 1709, there was an application by the Magistrates to Lord Godolphin to have a *horse* post established between Glasgow and Edinburgh. The correspondence at this period must have been of the most limited kind, and continued to be so till nearly the middle of the last century. From 1750, the trade and commerce of Glasgow increased every year, and with it the number of its mercantile letters. In 1750 it took a day and a half for the stage coach to travel from Glasgow to Edinburgh. The first direct mail from London to Glasgow was established 7th July, 1788. Previously the correspondence passed through Edinburgh, where it was detained twelve hours. One of its earliest Post-offices was in a small shop in Gibson's-wynd, now Prince's-street. At that time Mr Jackson was postmaster. Thereafter

it was taken to St Andrew-street. Thence it was moved in 1803 to a court in Tron-gate, north side, which has ever since been called *Post-office Court*. When Mr Bannatyne became postmaster, it was removed to Nelson-street, where it continued several years; and was in 1840 moved to Glassford-street, whence it in 1856 was transferred to George-square. At the period of the Union, the whole postage revenue of Scotland, notwithstanding the very high rates charged for letters compared with the present, was £1,194; and in 1781 the revenue for Glasgow was only £4,341. In 1853, with a penny postage, it amounted to £47,063 7s 5d. From 1844, the increase had been £20,353 11s 11d; of money orders there were, in 1852, 144,787, amounting to £267,444 2s 4d—the increase in eight years being in number 73,986, and in money £133,414 11s 9d. Letters received and delivered in Glasgow, in 1852, 15,597,504; letters received and forwarded in Glasgow, in 1852, 19,496,880.

members of the Post-office Club stepped out of the Tontine Coffee-room to have their two hours' gossip in their Club-room, which was at that period in a tavern in the as yet respectable Tontine-close, kept by one yeleft John Neilson, who, to many of the best qualities of a clever and attractive Boniface, added the unswerving peculiarity of a firmness appertaining to stubbornness, particularly when his *London* porter was condemned, and which was, moreover, by some who were better acquainted with the flavour of Joe Lambert's tap than he could possibly be, declared to be altogether a misnomer!* The beverage indulged in by the regular members of the Post-office Club, to wash down their mercantile news and towns' gossip, had little to do with malt in its *beery* state; it was only patronised when it condescended to become the parent of the best whisky, and even of this spirit-stirring and soothing elixir there was little called for in comparison to old Jamaica rum, which was then the most favourite and fashionable tittle of the day. Of either, however, the whole fraternity took but little; the evening's swallow being generally limited to two small glasses, mixed either with hot or cold water, the latter article having been pretty liberally attended to by the landlord to calm the spirit's potency before it was presented to his guests! To the men who usually encircled the Post-office board, it required, however, but little stimulus to set their tongues in motion, and far more than they ever got there to make them silent. Each successive night brought forth some new object, either of interest or conjecture; and when a topic was at any time wanting to eke out the conversation, the President had always a *London account* to draw upon to fill up the chasm that might be experienced in the colloquial currency.

* The oft repeated anecdote of John Neilson as to London porter, occurred when he kept "The Boot" in the Saltmarket. On the occasion in question, the whole party assembled round his Porter Board felt assured that instead of John giving them the pure double X of Barelay Perkins & Co., he had mixed it with some inferior Anderston Brown Stout; and John being called in and taxed for this,

he tasted it, and tasted again, and pronounced it *no doubt* London Porter; but at length yielding to his customers' incredulity, he said, "it might not be so," and agreed to change it. However, on going out at the threshold of the door, John, with a curious blink in one of his eyes, was heard to say, "Ye may think what ye like gentlemen, its London Porter for a' that!"

From the very favourable mercantile position in which the regular members of the Post-office Club were placed, it may easily be conceived that there were few, if any, of the many evening fraternities which had the same information connected with the trade and commerce of Glasgow and the world, as those who encircled the board of honest John Neilson. It was here that every new phase in the commercial history of the country was at once looked at and discussed; where a rise or a fall in the public funds was probed and accounted for; where the Bank of England stock was ever consulted, as a mercantile barometer, to guide to fortune or to save from shipwreck; and where, especially, the peculiarities of each particular branch of business or manufacture were thoroughly canvassed, and the upward or downward progress of the mercantile or manufacturing firms of the City elicited.

It was in the circle of the Post-office Club, for example, that the first whisper was given of the failure of a well remembered London private bank, which paralysed for a time one of the leading and afterwards most successful establishments in Glasgow. It was here that the agitation excited against the renewal of the East India charter in 1812—a measure condemned by both Whig and Tory—was nightly kept up and encouraged, and where the best arguments were adduced for holding a free intercourse with our Eastern possessions;* and it was here, above all, that the first news oozed out, of the fearful failures which were eventually to take place on the following morning, when stoppages to the extent of at least a million and a-half were declared. Well we do recollect the consternation which ensued, when, on the morning of a day in February, 1816, the news of this catastrophe flew like lightning through the City, and each merchant and manufacturer, when at his desk,

“Held his breath for a time.”

What a rushing to ledgers and bill-books, to discover if possible the mer-

* Messrs James Findlay & Co. despatched the first ship from Scotland direct to India in 1816.

cantile or monetary ramifications that might unfortunately bind any debtors to those who were that day commercially defunct! How many quiet and fox-like queries were put, to fathom, if possible, the ultimate liabilities of those who were in any way connected with the long list of unfortunate bankrupts! It was, in fact, a moment of intense uneasiness and anxiety; and when the gloomy day closed, and darkness covered the City, there was an almost universal impulse felt to hasten to the News-room, and from thence to every Club that was open. It may therefore be easily supposed with what heavy hearts and breathless anxiety the regular members of the Post-office hastened, on the evening of that day of ruin, at the very first tinkle of the Post-office bell, towards the Tontine close—there to worm out, if possible, from the on-that-night taciturn president, the secrets of the Bank prison-house, and to obtain hints that might either prepare for threatened ills, or avert evil consequences. But here, as it may well be believed, there was nothing but reserve and caution on the part of the banker; in short, he was far more zealous to receive than to give any clue to the tangled web of *cross bills* which linked numerous important firms together, and under the weight of which many, who but a few hours before held their heads so high, fell under the terrible crash!*

But let us no longer rest our recollections on the sad events of that dread twelvemonth, but rather recall the universal joy produced at a subsequent meeting of the fraternity, when the first intelligence was announced that the Government had agreed to issue Exchequer bills, and thus to save the *immoveable* stocks of many of the as yet opulent merchants from utter ruin. While, on the first occasion, each member retired to his home from the Club meeting almost in a state of hopeless despair; on the second, he bounded gaily to his family with all the happy anticipations which an honest and hopeful industry with confidence inspired.

It was also amid the circle of the Post-office Club that the successful

* From 1816 to 1818 the failures were enormous; most of the leading mercantile firms came down or suspended payments.

The chains of accommodation bills, or "*kites*" as they were called, were one great source of the calamities.

attempt made by Henry Bell to reach Helensburgh in his tiny steamer called the Comet, was authoritatively announced and commented on; but, assuredly, without the most distant idea of what that first practical effort has accomplished or may yet accomplish! The Comet,* which had for some time been in preparation, at length left the Broomielaw, one morning in 1813, guided by its own engineer, accompanied by its builder, Mr John Wood of Port-Glasgow, and cheered on its course by some of the best mechanics and scientific men then living in the City. We can well conceive the bounding heart of the ill-requited projector, when the revolving wheels first agitated the bosom of the Clyde, and when by their motion the happy-freighted craft was seen to march forward on its course. The experiment was, to the crowd of onlookers, a very small one; but the result of it has been to change every thing that can be affected by increased communication, and cheaper and more rapid locomotion. It was the first trial of a new physical power, destined to accomplish the greatest of moral changes,—the first starting of that new agent which was, ere long, to make Glasgow an ocean harbour, and to unite her commerce with every quarter of the globe,—and to become in short, as it now is, one of the best and mightiest missionaries of intelligence, civilization, and peace. In spite of the sneers of envious skippers, and the doubts of *canny* capitalists, funds were soon raised to attempt a bolder and more successful experiment; and ere two or three years had rolled over, the new motive agent of the Clyde had extended itself to the Thames and the Mersey.† Considering the quality and character of the members of the Post-office Club, it is scarcely necessary to say that in the success-

* The Comet was a boat of only thirty tons burthen, and boasted an engine of only three horse-power.

† When the first Comet began to ply on the Clyde, the public showed themselves deeply interested in its success. In the evenings, hundreds of onlookers lined the banks as far down as Govan, to see her passing up from Greenock, while the masters of the several

crafts which then came to the Broomielaw, looked upon the experiment with dismay and ill will. Among the skippers none regarded the project with more inveterate hostility than the Highland Gabert-men, who recommended their craft to the public, as sailing by the "*Almighty's* *wun* (wind,) *that by the Tevil's* *wun!*"

ful result of Henry Bell's practical experiment they felt the deepest sympathy—wisely accounting it better than all the speculative theories which had hitherto been promulgated;—and, as a token of that sympathy, it may be added, that to certain of the members of this mercantile fraternity belong the honour of having afterwards aided in the establishment of our first coasting, and thereafter of our ocean steamers.

When we think of the many changeful circumstances which attended the mercantile world during the half-dozen years which succeeded the termination of the war, and which were, no doubt, much aided by the Parliamentary tinkering which then took place in the national currency, it will at once be acknowledged that the Post-office Club had abundant subjects for their nightly gossip, and that the conclusions which were arrived at by the various conclaves who sipped their grog or toddy in John Neilson's tavern, were perhaps found to be, when acted on, as great and as beneficial to the community as any of those that were reached by a more quiet and recondite species of ratiocination. One thing is certain, that, during the successive distresses which took place among the working-classes in Glasgow, from 1816 to 1820, there were no individuals who did more for their amelioration than the members of the Post-office Club. When we turn to the glorious records of philanthropy which, during two periods at least, exhibit a subscription-list of nearly twenty thousand pounds, it is but just to state that there is not a name connected with that fraternity which does not figure in these muster-rolls of benevolence; while some of them also, during the prevalence of the typhus scourge of 1818, fearlessly devoted themselves to the philanthropic duty of visiting the haunts of disease and misery, and thereby ameliorated the sad condition of their poorer and neglected fellow-citizens—a duty which, in this instance, gained for them, from a community not always grateful, a halo of respect and admiration.*

* In 1816 no less than £9,653 4s 2d was distributed among 23,130 persons out of employment. In 1819 a sum of £6,624 14s 1d was raised for the cure and eradication of

Such is a brief sketch of the Post-office Club, which, during the years of its existence, was undoubtedly one of the most respectable of our City's social brotherhoods. Its birth, as we have already hinted, took place during a most eventful period. It was cradled, too, amid manufacturing metamorphoses, which absolutely altered the whole aspect of Glasgow society, while it pursued its onward career unimpaired either by the mercantile clouds or sunshine which successively fell upon the citizens, until at length it gave up the ghost, under the destroying influence of a western emigration fever and the loss of him who had so long acted as its loadstone and guardian. Should any youthful citizen ever chance to listen to the silvery tinkle of the bell before alluded to, he, without much stretch of imagination, may at once realise to himself the first call and the last knell of the Post-office Club.

typhus fever; while, in 1819-20, upwards of a thousand persons were employed in public works, to save them from starvation, through the liberal efforts of the citizens and the Corporation. During the prevalence of the fever, no one exerted himself more to alle-

viate distress than Mr William Leckie, a regular member of the Post-office Club; and it is gratifying to think, that when that benevolent-hearted individual became unfortunate in business, he was elected to fill the vacant Collectorship of Police.