

**STEWART JACK,
MEIKELOUR.**



Stewart Jaek

**SLATER AND
VILLAGE
PHILOSOPHER.**

XVI.

STEWART JACK,

MEIKLEOUR.

I.

A fellow of infinite jest.—SHAKESPEARE.

It is a commonplace experience with students of rural life in bygone times which becomes positively monotonous, to find that it hardly matters how small the community one is dealing with, if only the period be far enough back—say, anything from thirty to fifty years as a minimum—there is sure to be one or more outstanding figures in it whose sayings and doings are to become the favourite theme of succeeding generations. Whether the same process is going on in our own day is extremely doubtful; but that is a question we have no business with here. Stewart Jack was a good illustration of this, as the sequel should show. He first saw light in Alyth in 1787. His father and grandfather belonged to the same district, his grandfather being one of the few retainers of Airlie in Alyth who turned out with him in the '45.

HE WAS AT CULLODEN,

and went through the whole campaign, his ardour causing him to lock his wife in the house in order to get off with the laird. A well-dinted shield and much-hacked sword showed the sort of business he had been at while away. The mementoes were sold to a packman by Stewart's

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mother—to the never-ending regret of her son. He learned the trade of slater, and came to Meikleour, some four miles on the other side of Blairgowrie when a young man, and at his most thriving period undertook large contracts as far north as Blair Atholl and south to Edinburgh. Touching “contracts,” the word invariably recalls Stewart’s reply to the smart youths who met him one morning. “Dear me, Stewart,” was their surprised greeting, “we thought you would be in Perth. This is the day the big job is to be settled.” “What’s that?” asked Stewart, with his usual snivel. “Oh, the slating of the railway between Perth and Forfar, you know.” “Man, I’ve been that busy I forgot a’ about it,” replied Stewart, offering his snuff mull without a wince. “You see, I’ve just settled the contract for the Loch o’ Clunie.” Stewart’s name is most frequently associated with such witticisms, but he is

WORTHY OF REMEMBRANCE

on much more substantial grounds. He was an omnivorous reader, and could read comfortably, he declared, going at five miles an hour if the road was familiar; and a great sight it was, too, to see the tall, gaunt figure “shauchlin’” along in his “lum” hat—without which he was seldom seen—a book in one hand and a bundle of tools in the other. Fortunately for Stewart’s taste, and for that of the cluster of hard-headed theologians, politicians, logicians, and whatever else which the village boasted, there was a capital little library in it, fostered by the Baroness Keith and Nairne—grandmother of our present Foreign Secretary. Amongst its contents were “Encyclopædia Britannica,” Hume’s works, Rollin’s “Ancient History,” Chambers’s “Papers for the People,” and possibly the

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works of Voltaire, Volney, and Tom Paine, as Stewart showed a familiar knowledge of these last, and quoted them frequently, as well as from pre-French-Revolution literature generally.

HIS MEMORY.

As for his memory, it was simply perfect—complete *catalogue raisonné* of everything he had seen, heard, or read; every item duly ear-marked and pigeon-holed, ready for production at a moment's notice. He fell in with a band of gipsies about Crieff one day as he was tramping home from Edinburgh, and nothing would do but that he should stop and give them a lecture on their own ancient history. He was awakened in the dead of night on another occasion by a pushful little beggar of a schoolboy—who was in a pickle of trouble to find out the date of Prince Charlie's death. The sleeping slater heard the tapping on his window. "Are you waukin', Stewart?" asked our scholar. "Ay; is that you, laddie?" said Stewart, recognising the voice of a favourite of his. "Ay. Whan did Prince Charlie dee?" "Seeventeen aughty-aucht," was the answer, as he turned over again.

A mistaken statement by someone led him off into a description of the destruction of the Roman fleet off Syracuse by Archimedes with his burning lenses. "Ay, laddie," said he, one night, pointing to the constellation Orion, "there it hings, just as Job saw it from the plains of Syria and the Magi watched it from the towers of Babylon!" A question about the moon brought out a discourse on the solar system. "Tell Stewart, Peter," said a fond grandfather to his boy, "aboot that wonderfu' burning mountain in America." "Oh, ay,"

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said Stewart, at once, "that'll be Popocatepetl, nae doot, the extinct volcano in Mexico, seven-teen thousand seven hunder and aughty-four feet high, and forty miles sooth-east from the city of Mexico. It's aye smokin' yet, laddie, but there hasna been an eruption since 1568!"

THE MAN FOLKS

held meetings frequently, particularly in winter, and what these worthies didn't discuss—and settle—wasn't worth a hoast. The wonder is there is still so much to talk about. Each of them had his own individuality:—Old James Tamson, mason, was regarded as the best logician; Charlie Cochrane was a great wit; John Scott, a remarkably intelligent and well-informed man, &c.; but Stewart was a match for them all—in turn or altogether. There was always a "grand nicht" when Millar, the author of "The Tay," used to visit the village periodically to square up for the "Strathmore Journal," which used to circulate in the district—5d a copy, and no copy with less than five or six subscribers. The slater had pronounced opinions upon everything he read. He was never tired of ridiculing "finality Johnny" (Lord John Russell) and his sliding scale of taxation. He did not care for Cromwell, Hume having carried him away; he admired John Hampden; used to compare David to Rob Roy, and Dr Johnson to an ill-conditioned tyke. He had a mortal antipathy to Henry VIII., being too fond of his own wife, Nelly Walker—despite appearances at times—to abide that much-married monarch. And, touching domesticities, mention must be made of his one great weakness—turning up the little finger. Dearly as he loved Nelly, he gave her many a sore heart. "Is

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it true, Stewart," asked an idle fellow, "that you have drunk as much whisky as might float a 50-gun man-o'-war?" "Weel, I'm no sayin' but I might gie it a gey shog." One day an elder of Lethendy Kirk and Stewart dropped into "Danger Inn," at the east end of Old Rattray, near the bridge. The elder called for a gill, drew down his big blue bonnet and proceeded to say grace—Stewart meantime

EMPTIED THE STOUP.

"It's weel ca'd 'Danger Inn,'" was the remark he made to his companion's astonished look; "an' that should show you that watchin' is far mair necessar' than prayin'!"

He used to declare that he had a ladder so crooked he had to go round it three times to reach the top. He got a present of some firewood so green that it was, like Orr's Almanack—intended for next year. He was on the roof of his own house one day, busy "putting out the lum," and a passer-by sympathised with him. His reply was in the words of the preacher—"Better to dwell in a corner of the housetop than with a brawling woman and in a wide house." A favourite saying of his—referring to the French Revolution and other great movements originating with the people—was that "hunger was the best politician." "What tune's that you're playin'?" asked he of a village flute player. "Waterloo." "I was thinkin' that," remarked Stewart; "for it was a gey ravelled mess!" And so on, ad. lib.

The genuine respect and affection Stewart enjoyed from every one are well shown in a single anecdote. One Saturday night the only grocer in the village ran out of bread, and

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Stewart had to go without. The news spread—“Stewart has nae bread,” and first one, then another, and another, called with bannocks and cakes and bread and cheese, &c., till he might have started a provision store on his own account.