

JAMES MACFARLANE.



Mr James MacFarlane

BLAIRGOWRIE POSTMAN.

XLIV.

JAMES MACFARLANE, BLAIRGOWRIE POSTMAN.

Something like a break in the continuity of things postal seemed to take place in the retiral of Mr Macfarlane a few years ago. He was succeeded, there is no doubt, by thoroughly competent men, but they belong to another generation, have been trained in another school, and will turn out individuals of a very different type from our friend. "Jamie the Post" was an institution, and one which the public grudged to give up—a feeling with which there is good reason for believing our friend himself thoroughly sympathised. But fate, in the form of the Postmaster-General, was too much for him, and he had to submit to enforced idleness after 32 years' faithful service. His retiral may be said to have closed the record of the old school, even though it is recognised that he saw the telegraph and other improvements introduced in his time. Doubtless he considers himself now well out of the rush of modern methods; for, what with telephones and phonographs and Marconi's "wireless telegraphy," we are going the pace in fine style. Dealing with simple postal affairs—it has not yet been ascertained when the first service was started for the district; but when we recall that even so late as 1760 one carrier was considered sufficient for the delivery of the whole of the letters in Edinburgh, and that the mail bag from London would

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sometimes arrive in the Scottish capital with only one letter in it; also, that news was so scarce and travelled so slowly that ministers were known to

OFFER UP SUPPLICATIONS

for the King's long life and health some considerable time after His Majesty had been buried, we may safely conclude that in the "City of Rest and be Thankful," on the banks of the Ericht, letter-carrying was not in a very brisk condition. We find, however, that about the beginning of last century there was a post office in a small shop which stood where Mr Whitehead's place of business is now; and the first postman of which there is any record was one James Peters, who was born in 1766 and died in 1860. In our friend's early days as postman the said shop was carried on by Miss Easson, and business was so slack at times that the postmistress would lock the door and retire upstairs to the dwelling-house. The staff consisted of the postmistress, an assistant during the despatch of mails, and the following letter-carriers: — For Blairgowrie, Allan Heron; Rattray, Peter Young; Forneth, John Dunbar; and Rosemount, William Chalmers. All these, with the exception of the respected postmistress (now Mrs Mungo Clark), have joined the great majority; and it was the fate of Mr Macfarlane to see the officers changed three or four times during his term of service. He was born in Blairgowrie on the 26th October 1847, two days after the fall of the Brig o' Blair as the result of a great spate. He attended school under the late John Inch, father of the Rev. A. S. Inch of Dumbarton. After a few years' stay with an uncle at Moneydie he returned to his native place, and was three or four years with the late Mr Campbell, bookseller, and afterwards with his

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widow, at the corner of Reform Street. A couple of years were next passed as waiter with that ideal host, the late Mr Macdonald of the Queen's Hotel, during which time he had the honour of waiting upon many celebrities when the "Royal route" to Balmoral was patronised by the Queen and, consequently, by everybody that was anybody. In 1867 he entered upon Post Office duties, succeeding Heron for Blairgowrie, and no form has been more familiar to a full generation of Blair folks than that of "Macfarlane James the Post" on his daily rounds. At that time there were two deliveries, one at 7 and the other at 11 A.M. ; now,

BEHOLD THE MARCH OF PROGRESS,

we have a delivery at 7.45 A.M., and another at 6.10 P.M., with a parcel delivery at 10 A.M.—one delivery more (parcels) for 35 years ! The daily average of letters for Blairgowrie and Rattray was then about 1100 ; now, exclusive of parcels, it amounts to about 4000. In 1867 the delivery extended only to the Dunkeld Road on the west, there being no house except the Beeches beyond that point ; and on the north-west there was no building except Viewfield and the South Free Manse. The only stamps in use were the familiar "Queen's head" (1d), twopenny, and six-penny stamps. Halfpenny stamps came later on. Special uniforms were unthought of, and every postman pleased himself. John Dunbar was considered the dandy of the service, and used to sport a long black surtout and a tall, amply-proportioned "tile" with great effect. James himself was once the recipient of a gorgeous uniform from the town ; but, although he was very careful with the town's property, the clothes did wear done, and as there was no sign of another suit from the same quarter, he had to resume his

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own humble habiliments. By and by, however, the Post Office authorities saw to the cleading of their servants in the present garb. The Post Office itself was removed from the High Street to Allan Street (in the shop now occupied by a shoemaker), then back to the High Street (the shop occupied by a stationer); finally, along to "The Cross," where it now is, in the premises known formerly as "No. 1 High Street." Miss M'Hardy—who retired about three years ago—was Postmistress in the last three places, and was preceded in Allan Street by the late James Forbes, and succeeded by Mr Kinnear, the present Postmaster. With 1870 came the introduction of the telegraph—1s for 12 words, address free. Our friend had the privilege of sending off

THE FIRST WIRE FROM BLAIRGOWRIE.

Not long after this the halfpenny post was introduced, and the burdens of the officials increased apace. Then followed the Savings Bank, book post, sample post, postal orders, investments, insurance for compensation, saving of school-pence, reduction of rates and increase of weights, telegraph money orders, free re-direction of letters, &c., until, probably, the Post Office official's lot is not a happy one at times. And still the public cry for more. Our friend himself hopes to see a universal penny postage yet, and it will certainly not be the fault of Mr Henniker Heaton, M.P., if this is not achieved. In his day, as might be supposed, our veteran postman has seen and heard much in his daily travels. He is a staunch Liberal, and amongst the liveliest of his recollections is the great fight in 1868 between C. S. Parker and Sir William Stirling Maxwell, who had sat for Perthshire for 16 years unopposed. There were two polling

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booths—one at Mr Douglas's shop, Perth Street, and the other in the Town Hall. Parker got in with a majority of 279, and the announcement of the figures from the Queen's Hotel window by the late Mr David Grimond was something to remember. Probably another outstanding event was the excitement connected with the memorable "handshaking incident," which arose out of Mr Gladstone's attendance at worship in one of the churches in Blairgowrie while residing as the guest of Mr Armitstead at Blackcraig in the autumn of 1893. But that is another story: so is the incident connected with a certain notable picture which was on exhibition in Glasgow in 1895, and which our friend and another gentleman did *not* go to see, but greatly preferred to inspect a nice picture of sheep and lambs in a shop window instead. Of

AMUSING REMINISCENCES

he tells of a communication having been addressed to a provincial postmaster as follows:—"Dear Sir,—May I ask you to be good enough to let one of your carriers take enclosed postcard to my nephew? He is a young man, I believe, well known in your town, but whose address I forget. He walks lame, owing to a cork leg, and has also a bright, projecting set of teeth. I think he is an assistant or manager at one of your best jeweller's. Hoping this will not trouble you too much,—I am," &c. The town this was sent to contained a population of 72,000, but the cork-legged and bright-projecting-teethed individual was duly identified. Another story of his is about a well-known bookseller in Blairgowrie, long since gone to his rest. The postman to him was seldom a *persona grata*, for he was too often the bearer of some obnoxious bill. If he saw that

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public official approaching he prayed hard, and if his prayer was answered and posty skipped his door, he would exclaim with great gusto—"Thank goodness, the post's past! Another day's grace!" Like another merchant who was similarly plagued, he used to declare that if anyone wished time to pass quickly he should sign a bill. One day, time being up for one, he felt so intensely relieved at the postman's passing on without depositing anything that he went out to the hotel, and treated himself to a dram. Somehow the letter had been mis-delivered; but when the postman called with it in the afternoon, it did not matter very much, for our friend by this time was glorious and

O'er a' the ills of life victorious!

It is not amiss to mention that Mr Macfarlane's brother, Alexander, was Assistant Professor of Mathematics in Edinburgh University, 1879-1881, and in 1885 was appointed Professor of Physics in the University of Texas, U.S.A., and is now Lecturer in Lehigh University, Pennsylvania. Another brother, William, was reporter to the *Blairgowrie Advertiser* and the *Dundee Advertiser*; went to London, and afterwards to China, where he ran a newspaper, and regarding which he wrote a book. He died at Portsmouth. James himself was local correspondent to the *Dundee Advertiser* for five years. On the completion of 25 years' service he was presented with a marble timepiece and a purse of sovereigns. He retired in 1899, the proud wearer of five long service and good conduct stripes, and with the hearty wish of the whole community that he might live many years to enjoy the repose to which his long and faithful services entitled him.