

ALEXANDER CRICHTON,
COLLACE,



MR A. CRICHTON.

INVENTOR AND
LITTERATEUR.

XXXIV.

ALEXANDER CRICHTON, COLLACE.

So much one man can do
That does both act and know.

—ANDREW MARVEL.

The Crichtons are said to have been Hungarians originally, coming from Hungary with the daughter of the fugitive Prince of England, who afterwards became Queen Margaret of Scotland. The branch from which our friend has sprung came from Sanquhar to Ruthven, in 1375, and were proprietors of the latter parish about 1745. Both Thomas the laird and John, his brother, were out in the '45, and served as lieutenants at Culloden, fleeing the country after that disastrous event. According to traditions, Thomas borrowed a thousand pounds shortly before his departure from a Dundee merchant called Ogilvy, who had himself proclaimed laird of Ruthven at the Cross of Edinburgh afterwards; another version is that the estate was sold to Thomas Ogilvy of Coul in 1744; in any case, it passed into the Ogilvy family, and has remained there ever since. An extremely interesting and probably

UNIQUE MEMENTO

of Culloden and Mr Crichton's Jacobite ancestors is in his possession. This is a proclamation dated 22d August from the camp at Kinlocheil, by Prince Charlie, offering £30,000 for the "Person

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of the Elector of Hanover." The document is written on paper having the Royal watermark, and is signed "Charles, P.R." Mr Crichton's maternal grandfather was Duncan Macfarlane, of the Moulin branch, who are descended from the Stuarts of Lennox. He was cousin to Daniel Stewart, who erected and endowed Strathtay School, and whose money built Stewart's Hospital, Edinburgh. The paternal grandfather, again, Alexander Crichton, was a self-taught mason and sculptor at Kirkinch, well known over a wide district for his artistic sundials, carved armorial bearings, figures of Scottish heroes, &c., and as a man of strong individuality and sound acquirements. His son Peter (father of our friend) was born at Kirkinch, and bred to the miller business, residing at various periods at Cardean, Keithock, Lewer, Invereighy, Nether Mill, Millhole, Milton (Glen of Ogilvy), and Clockbriggs. On the mother's side, again, it is worth noting that her oldest sister was the mother of the late Engineer-in-Chief of the British Navy—namely, Sir James Wright, who in his time remodelled the whole fleet, and had the honour of Knighthood conferred upon him by the late Queen in 1887. It was at Lewer, in the

PARISH OF FORFAR,

that the subject of our sketch first saw light, and Newtyle claims him as her scholar in his early years. His natural bent was soon exhibited in the production of water-mills, locomotives, &c., even at that time. Doubtless the close proximity to the Dundee and Newtyle railway helped somewhat in the latter direction, and he was never tired examining the machinery of both the locomotive and stationary engines. "Puffin

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"Shusie" was the elegant appellation applied to the locomotive that used to run between Newtyle, Coupar Angus, and Meigle Junction. "Shusie" would not be regarded as a beauty nowadays, and was decidedly *passée* when our young and eager inventor first became acquainted with her, requiring much nursing to keep her running. Her driver, a reckless, hard-hearted Englishman, used to abuse her quite shamefully; for when he got on the spree, which not infrequently happened, he would amuse himself by pelting his old sweetheart with stones—which was nothing to the "langwidge" he used. One day, however, she had a sweet revenge. Fisken—the name of her driver—was oiling the cylinder as they were passing through the wood of Newbigging, when she caught him by the foot and pitched him right overboard and down a steep embankment. She got it 'ot for that, though. Old "Shusie's" water supply had to be pumped up by hand from a well in the village, which was great fun for the boys, who had their pay in a two miles' run on the engine. Mechanics seem to have run

IN THE CRICHTON BLOOD,

for our friend had a granduncle and a number of cousins connected with the Newtyle Railway, and all more or less affected that way. One of his cousins, David Crichton, was a great fellow for working models of steam engines, one of which, made of silver, was well known in Dundee. A beautiful lathe, constructed by him, was sold to a Broughty Ferry gentleman for £45. It was this David who ran the "Caley" engine to Glasgow in the race between the rival lines at the opening of the Tay Bridge, arriving three quarters of an hour before his opponent. Another cousin was the maker of the game little model locomotive dubbed

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"Cutty Sark," which still holds its own at Dundee Exhibitions. At Clocksbriggs the miller's son was sent to the plough, but his heart was never in the work, only, as he trudged the "furs" behind his pair, he was enabled to think out many a problem in mechanics, which for lack of books he had to test by practical experiment afterwards, and too often learned, to his chagrin, that there were other Richmonds in the field. A case of this sort was his "link motion" contrivance, which, later on, he stumbled across at work in one of the ferry boats between Dundee and Newport. But the young man of 16 or 18 was steadily making a name for himself in the district, and

A GREAT TRIUMPH

was his when he managed to make to work properly an old "Watt & Boulton" engine—the first of the kind north of the Tay—at Muirton Mill, near Clocksbriggs, which had beaten all the engineers in Arbroath. About this time, too, he began learning the violin, and recalls as among the things he would not willingly forget the grand playing of Jamie Allan, of Forfar, and his string band, which the young fiddler used to tramp to Forfar to hear. But he was not satisfied with the prospect of turning out a Niel Gow or even a Paganini, and with characteristic restlessness was always

Seeking for some great thing to do
Or secret thing to know.

He must have a shy at the Stradivari business as well, several well-made fiddles being the result. That was only a beginning, however. His next idea was a fiddle-making machine, which automatically carved the backs and bellies of any pattern, following the delicate curves and thicknesses with the greatest nicety. That was 35 years ago;

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what a chance there is here for Scottish thrift and industry! Why should Markneukirchen and Mirecourt fiddles be imported by the hundred thousand every year when we can make better instruments for ourselves? But the young inventor did not stop even there, for he

STARTED EXPERIMENTING

on the shape of the violin itself, and has made a number of the "bell" pattern—an idea of his own—which certainly sound as well as many more expensive instruments of the ordinary shape. Photography next claimed him as a votary, and it was only natural that he should begin by making a camera for himself, the lenses for which were the glasses from an old pair of spectacles! Good old camera! Its work was truly wonderful. In 1868 he removed to Kinlochry, and while there had occasion to thank his stars that he lost a certain train, seeing that it ran into a siding at Auchterhouse, thereby injuring some 40 passengers. About the same time a double collision took place at Alyth Junction. These accidents set our friend athinking, with the result that he invented his "audible signal" contrivance, the chief feature of which was a trigger arrangement which turned on a whistle should any of the signals be passed unawares, and an apparatus which recorded every instance of a driver passing any visible signals without blowing his whistle. The invention was offered to the North British Railway, but the reply was that a (visible) warning signal had already been tried but went to pieces. This suggested his breakable baton device, which, if ever adopted, Mr Crichton thinks can hardly be improved upon. Next we have his great

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STRING-BINDING ARRANGEMENT

for reapers. In 1876 an American wire-binder was at work at Inchtute, after an examination of which our inventor came to the conclusion that wire "would not do," and set about, as usual, thinking out something better—with string. He got little encouragement from those he talked to about the matter; but the respect in which his opinions were held—as well as people's short-sightedness—may be gauged from the fact that an offer to show how it could be done for £50 was not accepted, and he determined to make a model for himself. Want of proper appliances prevented the completion of this before 1878, when he sent it to Hornsby & Sons, the well-known agricultural implement makers, only to be told, after considerable delay, that they could not take the invention up, as they were engaged on a wire-binder. After immense trouble and worry with this and that individual a reaper and binder of his own design was tried on a field at Denhead, near Coupar Angus, in 1885; but it was not till the following harvest, on a field at Kinnochtry, that

COMPLETE AND TRIUMPHANT SUCCESS

rewarded his labours. It does not excite surprise, however, to find that by this time string binders were at work elsewhere—regarding which fact our inventor has his own ideas. Another clever contrivance is the fishing-rod cutter, by which he can turn out the six tapered sections of a cane rod in twenty minutes—equal to the work of a man for a week by the ordinary methods! Some 18 years ago, when gas-engines were so popular, he experimented with benzine and paraffin as motors with perfect success, and thought out a magnet "exploder" of his own—the one he made

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sustaining a weight of 20 lbs. A telephone, a microphone, a magnetic battery, &c., were the by-products of his spare time. In 1889 he came to his present domicile at Milton of Collace, and we find him in 1893 under the spell of electricity. Having constructed a dynamo, fitted up the driving machinery, &c., he had the mill and house lit up with incandescent lights before the year was out. It caused no little sensation in the district, and no end of questions: Was it dangerous? Did he take it out of the water? Did he get it in tins? And, worst of all—What is't a'va'? Even the very tinkers had to be satisfied. Three years later he constructed a larger dynamo, and with its aid had 12 lights running for a couple of nights at a bazaar in connection with the Burrelton Hall Fund—a genuine novelty for such a small country place. But

The world knows nothing of its greatest men,

and it is just in such places they are bred to perfection. The same dynamo lights up the mill and house at the present time, and is as good as when fitted up

SIX YEARS AGO.

The water is turned on, and the beautiful straw-tinged lights, as perfect and as brilliant as may be seen in any jeweller's window in Dundee or Edinburgh, suddenly blossom forth like some wonderful kind of flower from Aladdin's garden—in strange contrast with their surroundings. Then the *genius loci* has so arranged matters that by simply switching out the lights the water is in turn run off the wheel, and the whole mechanism stopped. But even this is only part of a larger scheme of the inventor's own, by which the water-power installation may be started or

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stopped automatically by means of an ordinary clock at any given hour after sunset all the year round, so that the lights in such a village as Burrelton—or in the largest city in the world, for that matter—can be made to appear as regularly as darkness sets in, as quietly and unobtrusively as old sweet-faced Luna herself! But we must call a halt; in one word, there are few trades our friend has not had a shy at, and in which he has not turned out excellent work. In addition to all this, there is

THE LITERARY SIDE

of our ingenious miller, which can only be briefly touched upon here. He has been 24 years one of the leading members of the Burrelton Literary Society—18 years as Treasurer, and some time Chairman—and both by voice and pen has enhanced the reputation and prosperity of that thoroughly live institution. Then there is his notable contribution to the Burns *versus* Lady Nairne controversy in respect to the authorship of the “Land o’ the Leal,” which appeared in a Glasgow newspaper some years ago, and in which he certainly makes out a very good case for the national bard. Finally, it is hardly necessary to say he is as great a student now as ever he was. His one great absorbing passion is to discover as much as may be permitted him of the great mysteries of the material universe around him; and, blessed as he is, under the shadow of classic Dunsinane, with

Content, retirement, rural quiet, friendship, books,
Ease, and alternate labour,

it will be strange if our Admirable Crichton of Collace does not yet eclipse his own brilliant record.