

“ OLD GIBBIE,”

KETTINS.



MR JAMES GIBB.

**STRATHMORE
SCHOOLMASTER
AND
CURIO-HUNTER.**

VI.

“OLD GIBBIE,”

KETTINS.



He could distinguish and divide
A hair 'twixt south and south-west side.—HUDIBRAS.

The outstanding dates connected with the life-history of this remarkable old dominie are comparatively few. James Gibb — remembered familiarly as “Old Gibbie”—was born at Burnashada, Bamff (where his father, David Gibb, was farmer and “hameit weaver”), in 1794; he came to Kettins, near Coupar Angus, in 1825; was appointed Session Clerk in 1827, and elder in 1837; retiring, after 48 years' service as parish schoolmaster, in 1873; and finally departing this life two years later, on the 8th April 1875, in his 81st year. and while holding the offices of ruling elder, Session Clerk, Inspector of Poor, Registrar, and Treasurer to the School Board. In his youth he learned to weave, &c., and would take share in the “hairst” as it came round. He used to drop dark hints as to having carried malt to the smugglers on the Alyth hills, and how he never returned without a jar of “grand stuff,” upon which, as often as not, “Jamie Sandy,” and he would

SPEND A WHOLE NIGHT

conducting scientific experiments of a profoundly absorbing character; so absorbing, in fact, there was little of the liquor left in the morning. Later on, he is supposed to have

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies:

attended one of the Universities, raising the wherewithal for this by hawking jewellery and watches about the country during the summer. He first comes into notice as one of a considerable number of applicants for the schoolmastership of Kettins parish. Lord Douglas Gordon of Hallyburton, who was then laird, and something of a phrenologist, invited these all up to the House in order to have their bumps examined, and his favourable report on Gibbie's craniological development, particularly for mathematics, secured him the appointment. The method has its merits, and is commended to the attention of worried School Boards. Our dominie, it may be noted in passing, served under four ministers in his time—Rev. John Ross Macduff (1842-9), Rev. John Tulloch, who left Kettins as Principal of St Andrews (1849-55), Rev. John A. Mackenzie (1856-67), and the present universally esteemed minister, Rev. James Fleming (1868). In addition to his mathematical gifts, which were remarkable, our friend was well versed in the sciences of astronomy, geology, archæology, and meteorology, as well as in the theory of music, and with a turning-lathe and a fine collection of tools, could give a very good account of himself as

AN ALL-ROUND MECHANIC.

Amongst the rest, he made very good astronomical lenses, and supplied Dr Graham, of Errol, with his. As a land surveyor he could not be excelled, his measurements being always accepted as final. As a mathematician he was held in such high esteem all over Strathmore that the late Mr Macpherson of Blairgowrie engaged him to "coach" his two sons in mathematics. He was also a good French scholar,

“Old Gibbie,” Kettins.

and had a high admiration for the great preacher Massillon. That did not prevent him, however, from being rather broad of speech, and it was only natural that his scholars should take after him. One day Dr Barty, of Bendochy, was examining Kettins School, and nearly fainted on finding that not a single boy could spell the word “poison.” “Hoots,” retorted the man who knew better, “that’s your way o’ puttin’ it.” Then, turning to the boys—“Spell ‘poosh’n,’ billies!” Immediately out went a score of hands, while as many voices shouted—“p-o-i-s-o-n—poosh’n!” History is silent as to Dr Barty’s comments upon this exhibition of English as she was spelt in those days. Gibbie was a connoisseur of everything ingenious, curious, or valuable—particularly in the mechanical line—and would make frequent excursions not only to London but to the Continent in search of bargains—at which he was a pastmaster. On these occasions he frequently left the school in charge of the present Mr Alexander Geekie, Abbotsville, or of the late Major Buttar, Corston—both capital scholars, and ready to oblige the old man in this way. Once he bought two transit instruments, which had been lying about as lumber at Ochtertyre, Crieff, for £17. He soon put them right, and Professor Grant, of Glasgow University, hearing of them, came on post-haste, cocksure he could carry out the programme *veni, vidi, vici*, and secure them for an “old song.” He was minus £80 before leaving Kettins, and Gibbie expressed his regrets afterwards he didn’t hold out for £120! He made a shrewd bargain for a harmoniflute on one occasion. The instrument appeared to be in very good condition, but had this peculiar fault, that, whereas every white key produced a perfect

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies :

note, not one of the black notes would produce any sound whatever. Old Gibbie, like the famous parrot, thought much but said nothing, finally securing the instrument for 30s. He was gratified to find that his strictly private theory was the correct one—the former owner, having been an unskilled musician, had gummed paper over all the black note openings. A damp sponge, a rub or two, and *voilà!* an instrument worth £4 to £5! He made fiddles, too, and could play fairly well. Many a night he spent with his instrument at the Corston, Mrs Buttar, the best player of Scotch music in Strathmore, at the piano. But he would insist on having a ridiculous metronome ticking away during the strathspeys and reels, and thus putting everybody out of time, and tune, and temper.

He supplied the whole district with watches and chronometers, and always carried a good specimen of the latter in his pocket. The story goes that while in London on one of his runs he dropped into Benson's, the world-famous horologers, and, drawing out his timekeeper, after a critical comparison with the standard electric clock, nodded his head in its direction approvingly. "Gey near the time," remarked he. "Sir," was the indignant response, "we *are* the time!"—which was more than the Forfarshire dominie was prepared to admit, however. In appearance, he was a little man, with

A GRANDLY DEVELOPED HEAD ;

shaggy brows over bright, kindly eyes ; a rather finely-shaped nose, large mouth, and huge ears ; a man full of humour and good stories, a first-rate fellow to pass an evening with. In business affairs, the embodiment of honesty and

“Old Gibbie,” Kettins.

trustworthiness. His apparel was generally a black dress coat, black vest, and trousers, black stock, and tall hat; and if everything he wore was not second-hand, the village gossips had not the truth in them. There is no getting away from the fact that he was atrociously close, and even miserly in his later years. He is credited with allowing his housekeeper 1½d a day to keep house with during his absences—to get “twa rows (rolls) an’ a ha’penny’s worth o’ milk!”—and inventing a contrivance to prevent the mice nibbling at his cheese. But the best story illustrative of this trait is about his calling upon Mr B——, a neighbouring proprietor, whose doctor had prescribed wine, and, after explaining that he himself was under the same regime, but found it “awfu’ deeficult to get the richt thing,” had the coolness to suggest that Mr B—— should give him some of his. Mr B—— was good natured enough to express his readiness to do so. Gibbie, accordingly, got a couple of bottles of “the richt thing,” and this is what the old sinner had the cheek to say—“I micht pay ye for the wine, Mr B——, but that would put ye in a corner, for, ye see, ye havena the leeshence (license)!”

An old-fashioned, central-fire, six-chambered revolver, without which beneath his pillow he never slept, was the occasion of several “close shaves.” One day the dominie’s valuables were being packed by Mr John Harper (now cycle manufacturer, Blairgowrie) when Gibbie was leaving the Schoolhouse to make way for his successor (the present Mr Macqueen). The old man went out, returned hurriedly, did something at one of the tables, and went out again, without saying anything. In came a ploughman, took up the revolver which he saw lying on said table, and, in the usual fatuous

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies:

style, presented it at Mr Harper's head, and pulled the trigger. The weapon did not go off—but that ploughman did, double quick, or it wasn't Mr Harper's fault. By and by old Gibbie returned, and going to the table, at once asked "wha had been meddlin' wi' the revolver." He was told all about it. "Just what I jaloosed," exclaimed he, "an' a guid thing for you I cam' back to draw the charges!" Sure enough, there were the six charges beside the revolver. Shortly after his death two legal gentlemen—a Mr M'L. and Mr J.—were engaged making up the inventory when the former on two successive days took up the revolver, and, pointing it at Mr J., jocularly asked how he would like to be shot. He did not, however, draw the trigger. Finally, it having been arranged that the goods were to be disposed of at M'Dowell's salerooms, Edinburgh, a young man named Meikle, while engaged packing, pointed this old demon revolver at a corner of the room, and drew the trigger. The result was a report and a fine old atlas spoiled that stood in the way of the bullet! The other five chambers were emptied outside.

Old Gibbie was found dead one morning in his chair. As might be expected, his effects were of

A VERY MIXED DESCRIPTION,

and included a large number of watches, chronometers, &c., with some half-dozen or more eight-day clocks by Ivory, Dundee. Over £1000 was realised by the sale.

He was laid to rest in the sweet little kirk-yard of Kettins, 'midst scenes he dearly loved, and where he had lived and laboured for nearly half a century.