

JAMES ALLAN,

FORFAR.



**FIRST VIOLINIST
OF
STRATHMORE.**

X.

JAMES ALLAN, FORFAR.

As sweet and musical
As bright Apollo's lute, strung with his hair.
—*Love's Labour Lost.*

Stormont and Atholl may boast their "famous Niel" and renowned "Pag.," but Strathmore swears allegiance to "Jamie Allan, of Forfar." It is a quarter of a century now since he broke his last string, but his memory is as green as ever; he is still the standard by which everything *de fidibus* is adjudged in Strathmore, and seems to have fixed for another generation at least the *ne plus ultra* of Scots dance music—Forfar style! With so many perfervid advocates about of the "Perthshire," "Aberdeenshire," "Fifeshire," and "Forfarshire" styles respectively, that reservation is perhaps necessary.

JAMIE'S BIRTH.

James Allan was born at Forfar on the 17th October 1800. His father, George Allan, kept a barber's shop not far from "Samuel Ritchie's corner," and Jamie, the boy, assisted his father for some time, and afterwards went to learn weaving with an old man, whose place was in Sparrow Croft. Neither of the occupations, however, seems to have had great attractions for our friend. The Allans have been noted for generations as a musical family. George Allan himself was reputed a good player; but the most celebrated of his time was Jamie's cousin, Archie, whose style was characterised by great fulness and clearness

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of tone, combined with a remarkably expressive quality in the strathspeys. It was he who on the death of George Allan, when our young fiddler was about 11 years of age, and only beginning to pick up tunes, took him in hand and laid the foundations of his musical education; and there is no doubt that the style which Jamie afterwards developed was modelled to a great extent upon that of his tutor. Archie died in 1837, and by that time it wasn't more than the difference between an up or down bow which was the better player of the two. When about 40 years of age our friend resolved on matrimony, and married a widow who kept a small inn at the East Port of Forfar. His new surroundings were immensely congenial, doubtless; but to one of Jamie's free and easy disposition by no means

AN UNMIXED BLESSING.

By this time his services were in great demand all over the district; he was a prime favourite with the Earl of Airlie, and at Cortachy Castle held much the same position as Niel Gow did at Blair Castle. In 1856, Julian Adams, the indefatigable *entrepreneur*, engaged him and about 30 others, amongst whom were Duncan M'Kerracher, "Atholl's Paganini," for a three months' tour all over the United Kingdom. It was a great success. Next year another tour was arranged for, but unfortunately shortly before the date fixed for meeting Adams at Inverness, Jamie's string band got on the "spree," and the Inverness engagement went by the board. That did not hinder the indefatigable Julian engaging the indispensable Forfar violinist for another tour in 1858; but the company went to pieces at Leamington, and it was only by some friends in Edinburgh sending on

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train money that the fiddlers managed to get back to Scotland. Amongst other engagements he fulfilled were leading the Saturday evening concerts in the City Hall, Glasgow, for many years; playing annually at the St John's and St Andrew's festivals of the Ancient Lodge, Dundee, for over 40 years; appearing at

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in Edinburgh and elsewhere, and at concerts in Dundee, Broughty Ferry, &c. On one occasion in the Music Hall, Edinburgh, he played "Miss Lyall" and "Bonnie Annie" in his best style, and fairly captured the audience — one stentorian voice from the gallery shouting "Weel dune, Farfar!" and thus causing a second ovation. He used to declare he never got his "licks but ance," and that was by a blind fiddler in that very hall. "Man," said he, "whenever that lad started playing he garred my hair stan' on end!" One of his most notable appearances was in Trinity Hall, Dundee, in 1866, where his playing of the "Perthshire Hunt" fairly "brought down the house." One of the audience was so carried away by it that he could not help exclaiming to his neighbour—"Look at that man Allan; he is sending the bow across the strings like a flail!" But he was heard at his

VERY BEST IN PRIVATE,

surrounded by a small circle of kindred spirits, a dram "in his cheek," and his favourite fiddle, the "Shoe," under his chin. He knew but never boasted of his own powers, and no one was more ready than he to acknowledge real ability in others. But he was a terror to bad players. One night, a conceited but indifferent fiddler kept asking him now and then, "Don't you think, James, my playing is

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greatly improved?" "D—d a bit!" grunted "James" at last; "and never will be! Fine loom wark—fine loom wark!" Summing up M'Kerracher, he said to one of his pupils—"He's a guid player—a capital player; but," added he, with a shrug, and waving his "flail" about, "I dinna think ye'd care muckle for that d—d Hieland diddrie-fa, wheetie-whattie style o' his!

A NOTE ON JAMIE'S STYLE.

The veteran violinist and Jamie's most distinguished pupil—Mr James S. Marshall, Carnoustie—thus compares the style of his old master and that in vogue nowadays:—"Jamie's style of playing strathspeys and reels was characterised by full tone and correct accent and rhythm; every note told, the up bow very forcible, and the speed not exceeding that of the ballroom. Of late years a new style of playing strathspeys and reels has come to the front devoid of the fine round swinging style which prevailed 50 years ago—the main characteristic of which is high speed. However clean and crisp the playing may be, the result is a mere jingle of notes—a spurious style, and absence of musical substance. One could wish to have heard Jamie's comments on same. It is a consolation, however, that the large Society in Edinburgh conducted by Mr Archibald Menzies adheres to the true old style of playing Scottish dance music, instead of giving exhibitions of mere high speed and caricaturing our 'auld strathspeys.'"

LIKE ALL GOOD FIDDLERS,

Allan dearly loved a good story, whether as listener or teller, and was full of great good humour. One of his most amusing exhibitions was the imitation of the playing of an old man in

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Tannadice, named David Neish, who thought he could play the reel, the "Salmon's Tail up the Water." Every other note was out of tune, and there were at least seven different degrees of speed in the rendering, which must have cost the wag immense trouble to get up. In 1869 a great "James Allan benefit concert," organised mainly by Mr Marshall, Carnoustie—Mr R. B. Stewart undertaking the part arrangements—came off in the Kinnaird Hall, Dundee. The principal players were:—Mr Stewart, Edinburgh (leader); Mr J. S. Allan, deputy-leader of the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh (son of Mr Allan); Messrs J. S. Marshall, Dundee; James M'Intosh, Edinburgh (Niel Gow's last pupil); D. M'Intosh, C. M'Intosh, C. M. Baxter, R. Stevenson, and Douglas—all violinists; with Messrs J. Stevenson, Dundee, and Jenkins, Edinburgh—violas; Mr Turner, Broughty Ferry—violoncello; and Mr James Wallace, Edinburgh—double bass. The hall was packed in every part, and the concert a great success. Another "benefit" was held in the Reid Hall, Forfar, on 14th March 1873, at which M'Kerracher; M'Leish, of Aberfeldy; W. Bryson, Perth (conductor); James Moncur, Blairgowrie (now of Nevay); J. S. Allan (son of the Forfar violinist); and J. C. Guthrie, Broughty Ferry, and others took part. It was a great success, resulting in some £70 surplus. Jamie, poor soul, was

ILL IN BED

while all the fun and fiddling were going on elsewhere for his sake. After the concert old Dr Lunan—a great friend and admirer of his—accompanied by Mr Moncur, another notable pupil, called upon him. After a compliment to "Diamond," as Jamie always called

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Mr Moncur, on his success, the Doctor sounded the invalid, and the following conversation ensued:—"Are they giein' you anything to drink, Jamie?" "Oh, mighty little o' that," was the mournful response. "Ay, man, but that'll no dae. I maun see that you get a glass every forenoon and anither every afternoon. That should help to mak' you live langer." "Man, Doctor," exclaimed the patient, tears of gratitude in his eyes, "but ye're the best man that's entered the house sin' I lay doon! And dae ye hear that, wife?" shouted he to his better half. "Dod, man, they're measurin' it oot to me in teaspoonfuls the noo!" He lived four years after that. *Verb. sap. fidicinibus satis*—only, don't forget to consult your doctor first!

Jamie Allan breathed his last at Forfar on the 18th August 1877. In 1894, largely through the efforts of Bailie Lawson, an old friend, a handsome marble tombstone was erected to Strathmore's favourite fiddler, bearing the following inscription:—

In Memory of
JAMES ALLAN,
Musician, Forfar.

Born, 1800. Died, 18th Aug., 1877.

Erected by a few friends and admirers in recognition of his genial sociality and his rare musical genius.

"Hale was his heart and hale was his fiddle;
Lang did his elbow jink and diddle,
Which cheered him through the weary widdle
O' this wild warl'."