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AYRSHIRE FIFTY YEARS AGO 1856 - 1906.

by
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It is fifty years ago since as a boy I ran about the braes, and paidled in the burn. Meantime the old order has changed, giving place to new. What strikes me most to-day as I come back is what some one has called "the decay of the landed interest". Two generations ago, when a man made a fortune in trade, or in his profession, his one idea was to buy land, to become a laird and set himself to build, to plant and to make improvements. To youthful eyes the landowner then appeared, and perhaps he too often in his own eyes also appeared, to be rich and increased with goods and to have need of nothing. And what a place of wonder and amazement was the home-farm; the horses and the ploughmen; the long byres with the patient-looking cows, and the milking-maids; the shepherd and his dogs, the hen-wife and her baskets of new-laid eggs, the gamekeeper and the forester, and the joiner's shop with its stacks of timber and the freshly-painted cart-wheels, blue and red, drying in the sun. There were the two brothers James and William who worked at the saw-pit - the one standing above on the log, the other down among the saw-dust - both splended curlers in the winter-time, so much for keeping the muscles of the arm in prime condition. Then there were the hedgers, father and son, old Hugh and young Hugh, who did so well in summer with their bees that they /

they took all the prizes for honey at the flower-shows. When yellow autumn came circling round what a regiment of Irish reapers appeared, each with his hook wrapped up in straw slung across his back, his whet-stone fastened in his leathern belt, his "piece" in his pocket, and his dinner-can under his arm. Why in harvest-time the countryside was a far busier place than the sleepy provincial town.

There were the boys who made "bands" for the sheaves, the young women who followed the reapers, and gathered up the corn and bound it into sheaves, "the binders" or "bandsters" as they were called. Some of these workers were town-dwellers too whose only holiday in the year was a fortnight's harvesting with its occupation, its sunshine, and its fresh-air, health-bringing and wealth-bringing. But to-day the train whisks me past the old familiar scenes. I sometimes catch a glimpse of one man alone in a field driving a "self-binder", which tosses out the string-tied sheaves one by one, and but for the whirr of his reaper, no voice nor human sound is heard that world around. Perhaps for an hour before "looseing" time another man may stalk through the field and lift the prostrate sheaves, and make them into stooks. The home-farm indeed is a thing of the past; for the fields are now all "grass-parks". One day the butcher's man comes from the town, and takes away "a wheen of his beasts" to be slaughtered. Another day he brings a fresh lot, not yet "ripe" for marketing. /

marketing. In these old days the school-children even used to earn a little in vacation-time by chipping the bark from the cut timber for use in the tannery but that too is an industry which somehow seems to have faded out of the district.

Do ye mind o' auld lang syne,
 When the simmer days were fine,
 And the sun shone brighter far
 That it's ever done since syne?

I can remember well, as a child, being kissed by the Monkton Minister who wrote that charming poem.

Of late I have heard some of the landless speak of the laird, who to boyish eyes seemed so great, as being "hard up"; indeed as if all the old lairds were now-a-days inevitably more or less poor. The last thing that up-to-date successful men seem to think of now is to put money into land. In their wisdom they say to themselves: "Have not foolish men built houses far larger than their properties could support, even before the rents fell to their present level. Anyone can rent a country mansion for little more than enough to pay the wages of the out-door servants needed to attend to the garden and the grounds". "Why, then" says our modern worldly-wiseman, "go on half-pay, and take 2 per cent for money put into land". ~~The Limited Liability Acts were surely expressly made to enable the modern manufacturer to turn his business, at a week's notice, into a readily realizable asset to be sold to the public /~~

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public at a premium, when its value is over-estimated. He can buy it back again from the public at a discount when the years of depression arrive. But, ^{except} looked at in any light you choose, the position of the land-owning class is far from enviable unless in the immediate proximity of a golf-links or a large and growing city. I remember when Prestwick was a little village of thatched cottages and hand-loom weavers. The few summer visitors, "saut-water folk", were regarded as eccentric cranks, who gathered sea-ware or "wrack" as they called it then, boiled it, and bathed their feet in it. A Highland estate, if the owner wishes to retain for his own use the sporting rights upon it, will yield no better return than a picture by Sir Joshua, ^{or by Raeburn}, or by Raeburn. Many-landowners of course have nothing to live on but the rent they get for the autumn and they must find a sporting tenant or sell their properties. Agricultural land is in many, I should say, in most cases, not worth more than the value of the buildings actually upon it at this moment, possibly also the cost of the roads and fences used by the tenant. Then again how few of the properties in Scotland are other than heavily burdened with debt. The Entail Statutes of last century were passed to relieve men of the immediate difficulty of their position, as limited owners, by charging the lands permanently with the expense of draining, building, and indeed all so-called substantial improvements. In the end the statutes have only sunk estates under heavier encumbrances /

encumbrances than ever. No wonder Mr Gladstone in handing down the Hawarden estates to his grandson warned him to beware of "the fatal facility of borrowing", which had swamped many an ^{ancient} ~~ancient~~ inheritance. He had the true wisdom to entreat his successor never to exercise this privilege. But what is a poor proprietor to do? Rates and taxes go up but do they ever come down? The owner may have heavy death-duties to start with, a way-going tenant to be compensated one year, a new steading to be built another, repairs to the Manse or a new Church to be built. Such extra expenditure always comes at precisely the wrong moment. Many estates could not be sold piece-meal if you tried. Is the representative of an old family to sell the whole inheritance, and from being considered somebody sink to the level of being considered nobody. Any proposal to duplicate the buildings already upon the land is a quite impossible condition to exact from the existing owners. All this time the population of the country-districts has been going down, while that of the manufacturing districts has been going up. Scotland had 3,062,000 inhabitants in 1861 and forty years later this had risen to 4,472,000. While the upper classes have been losing in position, the working class seem to have benefited all round. They have higher wages, and better houses; they are better fed and better clad. The worship of the goddess of cheapness enables them to enjoy many /

X One curious result of the abolition of the toll-bars has been the decay of the art of baking among the cottagers. The baker's van goes through all the district ^{now} without paying the heavy tolls of long ago, and brings the bread to every door.

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many things which long ago they only looked at afar off. Money seems with them much more plentiful. I can recall the lad who undertook for one shilling to learn the whole of the 119th Psalm without a single mistake and did so. The sweet odour of scone-making seldomer floats through the open cottage doors now, and on Saturday afternoons the baker's van from the town seems always delivering sickly-looking white loaves. In the days of my youth there were bannocks of barley meal. X The farmers ^{now} seem to be better provided with the appliances they need, and facilities for disposing of their crops are greater. Fortunes are not made in agriculture to-day such as enterprising men were able to acquire then. The nineteen years leases were at that time looked upon as the sheet-anchor of the tenant's prosperity. Latterly the great desire has been for a lease with a break every five years. So long as the attractions of a farming life are as eagerly sought after as at present, there will be the liability to compete unduly for farms, and the opportunity to make large profits becomes very rare. Many men are satisfied if they can make ends meet, and do not look for more. They are foolish in trusting far too much to the thoroughly unsatisfactory system of abatements in bad seasons to give them relief. But how can a hard-pressed landlord give abatements, even if his sense of equity make him desirous of doing so? Fresh air and fresh eggs and fresh milk for his children, /

children, with free primary education in a land of settled government, is what to some may seem a fortune - it is about all the fortune farmers have had of recent years.

Ecclesiastically we have travelled a long way in 50 years. The Parish Minister, like the Laird, has suffered from the fall in the price of grain. In the meantime the wealth of the country has doubled, and the relative position of the man entitled to the parish stipend has altered for the worse, even where he has been able to get the Court to give him an augmentation of 5 or even 6 "chalders". In one of our old elections a good deal turned upon "the Maynooth grant" to the Roman Catholic University of Ireland. It was a subject sorely vexing to many Scottish Presbyterians. When the next election came round, and the canvassers called to see about a farmer's vote, it was his wife who innocently asked them: "What's become o' Mr Maynooth noo? The puir body's surely no' dead but we hear naething about him?" On another occasion a young man turned up in the parish to hold religious meetings. He was anxious to introduce modern hymns - a thing locally unknown - and was understood to have said that they expressed his own religious feelings in a way that nothing else did. Two old women were shaking their heads over this most unheard of proposal. "He says, Jean, his case is no in the Psalms". "Well, Marget, if his case is no in the Psalms, I doubt he has nae case ava". That /

That seemed to them to dispose of the whole matter. Seventy years ago the laird, just down from London and Parliament, wanted some one to take a message into Ayr in the evening. But not a man was to be found. Every able-bodied person was away attending a "Non-intrusion" Meeting. How many in the parish to-day could explain intelligently what the burning question of non-intrusion was all about. And in two generations from now how miserably small will seem many of the acute differences that sunder many a man from his neighbour.

On Sundays we attended church and had what was appropriately called "a double-diet." A long lecture from the Old Testament was followed by an equally long sermon from the New. Each a complete meal in itself, and as a whole supposed to supply something for all tastes. One hot day when the doors were left open a flock of turkeys came wandering into church yawp-yawping only to be chivied out by the old woman accustomed to feed them and whom they had scented from afar. Another day an urgent message came for the Factor in church. His servant man instead of walking boldly in to deliver the message had, in his modesty, at the door divested himself of his big boots, and then on hands and knees crawled along the passage, bobbing up when opposite the proper pew to give his message and retiring in the same manner as he had entered. In his desire to avoid notice he had only added to the excitement of /

of those watching his entrance and his exit. Old John, the grave-digger, who showed the Minister in, and sat throughout the sermon on the pulpit steps guarding him like a sentinel, had in his youth fought under Nelson at Copenhagen and Trafalgar, but by the time I knew him he was old and bent. On week days he raked the gravel on the long avenues leading to "The Big Hoose". It was probably all the work he was then fit for. John had a temper, and barefoot boys never passed too near to him. At a safe distance of fifty yards, knowing the old man could not run, they would turn and shout contemptuously "Auld Copenhagen" as if to have fought behind the wooden walls of Old England was something to be ashamed of. John would turn as quickly as he could - his old eyes would flash fire, and his whole attitude indicated that if he were once again young and supple he would soon put to silence all his adversaries. It was nearly sixty years after Copenhagen when our present King ^(Edward III) was married. Old John was still to the fore, and his services were called for to load the two ornamental cannons in front of the Laird's house which were fired in honour of the occasion. No one else in the neighbourhood had ever loaded or fired a cannon. Peace to old John's ashes. Ah me! the most of the friends of my youth are now beneath the grass of the green church-yard.

September 1906.

St Quivox