

MR. DONALD MACDONALD

About a Mysterious Letter and a Curious Clan.

By J. J. BELL, author of
"Wee MacGregor."

THE elderly postmistress of Port Sunart sub-office was in a quandary. The mail bag which the bi-weekly steamer had just put ashore contained seven letters and postcards. The addressees of six of these were familiar to her; the addressee of the seventh was not—or, rather, he was too much so. The envelope, a tightly packed business one, was directed in type-written characters to

"MR. DONALD MACDONALD,
"Port Sunart,
"Argyllshire, N.B."

The postmistress read these words aloud several times, also the postmark, which was "London, E.C." She turned the envelope and examined the back with its Oban postmark. With a sigh she laid the packet on the counter, and from a tin labelled "Finest Cough Drops," took a pair of eye-glasses with a cracked lens. Some years ago these glasses had been lost by a tourist in the neighbourhood; they had been advertised as "found" on a half-sheet of note-paper stuck on the little window of the post-office, which was also the shop of Port Sunart; six months had passed without any claim; the soiled advertisement had been taken down, and the postmistress had felt justified in regarding the glasses as her own. They made her eyes ache, but she put them on when her official duties were exceptionally trying. Fortunately for her sight this was not often.

Placing them upon her nose, which the spring gripped rather painfully, she again took the packet in her hand and gazed upon it till the tears came. But no inspiration accompanied them.

"Father!" she called.

A narrow door at the back of the shop opened, and a very old man came slowly forth.

"Here iss a letter for Tonald Mactonald," she said speaking English, as she and her father always did when the matter was official. "And I am not knowing what I am to do wis it."

She paused, and the old man looked inquiringly.

"There iss the letter. Can you read it?"

He peered at the address, and slowly repeated it.

"It iss plain enough," he said. "What iss wrong wis it, Flora?"

"How many Tonald Mactonalds are in Port Sunart?" she asked meaningly.

The old man began to laugh.

"Well, well, that iss a goot joke! Five Tonald Mactonalds, and a letter for one! Got bless me! It iss fine fun you will be hafing, Flora. There iss Tonald Mactonald, Fesdale; and Tonald Mactonald, Inverewe; and Tonald Mactonald, the Ness; and—"

"Will I not pe knowing it?" cried Flora irritably.

"Haf any of them peen puying stamps the last mons (month) or two?" her father inquired.

The postmistress shook her head.

"And there haf peen no letters for any of them since little Tonald Mactonald's sister tied in Greenock. And that will pe three years and more."

"Then what iss to be done, Flora? Could you not send pack the letter?"

"How could I send pack the letter when there iss plenty of peoples to teliver it to? Do not speak such foolishness, father! If you will help me, you will go to the five Tonald Mactonalds and tell them there iss a letter for one of them; but they must all come togesser to see who iss to get it."

"A very goot observation, Flora," said the old man. "I will pe going now. Maype there will pe a fortune for one of the Tonald Mactonalds."

The five members of the ancient clan gathered in a semi-circle before the counter, behind which the postmistress, solemn and dignified, blinked through her glasses. The men replied to her questions in Gaelic. None of them had seen typewriting before. They examined and touched the packet.

"The letter wass posted in London," said the postmistress. "Haf any of you got friends in London?"

There was a long silence, broken at last by Donald MacDonald, Inverewe.

Twelve years ago, he explained, he had tried the lobster-fishing, and had sent a consignment of the crustaceans to a man in London, who had never paid for the same.

"Perhaps," he concluded, "the man has reformed, and sends me the money at long last."

"That is very likely, indeed!" said Donald MacDonald, whose croft was called Sligachan. He spoke sarcastically.

"If the letter had been from Campbeltown," began Donald MacDonald, Fesdale.

"Or California," put in Donald MacDonald, the Ness. "I once had a cousin—"

"The letter is from London," interrupted little Donald MacDonald, who had no special address. He dwelt alone in a small hut on the shore, and was no great favourite in Port Sunart. "The letter is from London," he said dryly, "so there is no use speaking about other places. I am the only Donald MacDonald whose address is nothing but Port Sunart, and I will take the letter."

A murmur rose from the others.

"Do you know anypody in London?" demanded the postmistress as a tear rolled from under the cracked lens.

"How can I tell till I see the letter?" retorted the little man, holding out his rough weather-bitten hand.

The postmistress looked at the others. With one accord they forbade her to deliver the packet.

"What am I to do?" she said helplessly.

A tremendous discussion arose among the five and seemed like to continue indefinitely, when the father of the postmistress, who had been watching the proceedings with an amused grin, held up his hand and called for silence. He was highly respected by the Port Sunart folk, all of whom were his customers, and not a few his debtors.

"If you cannot agree who iss to get the letter," he said, "we will send it pack to the Post Office in London. Will not one of you open it and see what—"

Five hands were outstretched.

"One of you."

But that could not be arranged.

"Draw lots who is to open it," cried Donald MacDonald, Sligachan. "If it is not for him, he will give it to the right man."

After much talk the suggestion was accepted. The old merchant cut out five pieces of paper, marked a cross on one, folded them up and shook them long and violently in an empty tin.

"The biggest man will draw first," he said, and this was agreed to in spite of little Donald's protest. "I am the oldest," said little Donald, vainly.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Donald MacDonald, Sligachan, whose mind was fertile in ideas. "I propose that the man who gets the letter stands a glass of good whisky to each of the others before he opens it. That will make it fair for everybody." This suggestion was also carried in the face of little Donald's frantic protests.

The postmistress may not have approved of the method for the delivery of a portion of His Majesty's mails, but the glasses were causing her such discomfort that she could hardly think of anything else. Still, she was determined to keep them on until the business was concluded.

The drawing proceeded, and the crossed paper was the last in the tin. Little Donald took the letter, and sulkily led the way to the inn, while Flora doffed her glasses and wiped her streaming eyes. She was doubtful as to whether she had done right, but the old man reassured her by saying:

"If it iss for none of them, you can still send it pack."

At the inn little Donald stood treat in a surly fashion. The others laughed as the glasses of Talisker were set before them. Never before had a man in Port Sunart been treated by little Donald, who was reputed to be a miser, though what he could have found in his poor fisherman's life to amass would have been hard to tell.

"You can open the letter now," said Donald MacDonald of Fesdale.

Little Donald said nothing, but betook himself to the farthest corner of the taproom. There he turned his back, and the others heard the tearing of paper. It took him some time to understand the contents of the envelope. When he did so he swore under his breath and scowled blackly. Gradually, however, a sly smile dawned on his bronzed, bearded countenance. He returned the contents to the envelope, and turned towards the four, who had now grown mightily curious.

"For whom is the letter?" said two of them together.

"For myself," said the little man, grinning. "I knew it would be for myself."

There was a short silence. None of the four knew, exactly what to say. Then, to their amazement, little Donald called for five glasses of the best Talisker.

"You have good news?" they exclaimed.

"It will not be bad news," said little Donald pleasantly. "But it will be private."

The whisky was brought and paid for.

The little man raised his glass. "Your very good healths, all you Donald MacDonalds!" he said. He gulped the neat spirit and left the tap-room.

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Alas for the four Donald MacDonalds! With the second glasses of whisky four fiends, more potent than the fiery spirit, entered into them and would not be at rest. In two bosoms the fiends were Curiosity; in the others they were Suspicion. What was the letter about? Was it really for the man who now possessed it? Ere long the entire adult population—happily, in this case, a small one of thirty souls—of Port Sunart was stirred to its minds' depths. The farming and the fishing were no longer the chief topics of conversation; the kirk controversy then raging was, for the time being, allowed to lapse; the hatchet was buried under an avalanche of suggestions and suppositions regarding the mysterious letter; while the possibility of a visit from the royal yacht during the approaching summer was scarcely discussed.

Little Donald kept more aloof than ever, but it was observed, by those who contrived to see his face at close quarters, that he smiled the smile of one who knows something.

His entering and his leaving the lonely hut were closely watched, and at night the men sneaked along the shore in the hope of making discoveries. But nothing happened.

By the end of a week the situation had become desperate. It was rumoured then that the little man had been seen purchasing a postage stamp, though no confirmation of his having posted a letter could be obtained. One bold spirit made enquiries at the post-office, but the postmistress, donning her glasses in a hurry, sent him out in quick time. His Majesty's mails, she informed him with crushing dignity, were private.

From being desperate the situation soon became intolerable. The suspicious party called for action, the merely curious echoed the call. Some suggested a deputation, others pointed out that a deputation would either alarm or irritate the holder of the secret.

Then came Donald MacDonald, Sligachan.

"Leave it to me," said he. "I will find out what is in the letter." He was of the curious party.

And that evening Donald MacDonald, Sligachan, called on Donald MacDonald, Port Sunart. To his surprise he was received in quite a friendly fashion. He was no hypocrite, and he came to the point at once.

"Is it a fortune?" he asked.

Little Donald stroked his grizzled beard, smiling a knowing smile.

"Well," he said slowly, "it might be a fortune to somebody."

What in all the world did he mean? thought the Sligachan Donald. Had the letter not been for the little man after all?

"I would gie a bottle of the best Talisker to see the letter," he said, half to himself.

"I will let you see it for that, Donald MacDonald, of Sligachan," said the other quietly. "But you must swear to keep it a secret."

The crofter jumped at the offer.

"Where is the letter?" he cried eagerly.

"Where is the best Talisker?"

Eventually it was agreed that the bargain should be completed the following night.

"But what am I to say to the others?" asked the crofter.

"Oh, you can tell them that I gave nothing for nothing," the fisherman calmly replied.

The indignation aroused by this message was great, but it did not overcome the suspicion and curiosity, which, indeed, became more than ever acute when the crofter repeated the words, "It might be a fortune to somebody." One or two advocated the extreme measure of calling in the policeman who visited Port Sunart twice a week, but they were not encouraged. After all, little Donald had never really harmed anybody, and, moreover, he had once stood four men two glasses each of the best Talisker.

Early on the following evening the Sligachan man reached the lonely hut, his jersey bulging with his fee for knowledge.

"Come in, Donald MacDonald," said the fisherman. "You swear never to tell any soul what I show you?"

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