

## THE SITTING'-DOON CAULD.

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DOUCE-GAUN, quate-tongued, and canny-minded Wattie Wabster drew cotton thread through a handloom, in the Gorbals of Glasgow, some twenty-five years ago.

Now Wattie, who was on the wrong side of fifty, had been an abstainer in practice, if not in professed principle, for a quarter of a century. He had never been blessed with a family; and for want of occupation of a more pronounced domestic nature, had for many years occupied his leisure hours with books, and the study of elocution, economising his talents in that way by making an occasional appearance as a local Hamlet in the amateur theatricals of some of the outlying suburbs, such as Strathbungo and Camlachie.

Now Wattie, poor man, had been suffering from a chronic cold in the head for a whole month back, and had exhausted a full score of homely cures on the head of his "sittin'-doon cauld," rather than trust himself to the tender mercies and expenses of doctor's drugs.

"Toots!" Wattie would say, when remonstrated with for his persevering obstinacy, "I wadna gi'e ae wag o' my auld granny's mutch-strings owre my trouble—if she was only to the fore, daicent body!—for a' the M.D.'s between this and far enough; deed no!"

So Wattie stuck by hame-poulticing, and his sittin'-doon cauld stuck by him, and things went on in this unsatisfactory way until Mattie says to him one day—

"Noo, guidman, I'll tell ye what ye'll dae. Your voice, ye ken, is sunken awa' doon to a kirk-yaird hearseness, your nose is rinnin' like a burn, an' your twa een are as red as collops, sae ye'll tak' and try for the last time a perscripshun was gi'en me the day by Mrs. Howdie, the auld-wife medical, wha leeves owre by at the burn-side, an' she warrants me ye'll be as hale's hersel' the morn's mornin'. Sae ye'll dae't, Wattie, an' get that unco plaguey cauld lifted oot o' ye; for ye've been naething but a crunkle't an' yisless auld man ever since it settled doon on ye, an' that wasna yesterday, atweel."

"What's the nature o' the cure, Mattie?" quo' Wattie, looking up inquiringly.

"Ye'll get a yaird or twa o' new flannel row't roun' your heid, six or eicht pairs o' auld stockings drawn on ilka foot, hauf-a-dizzen o' woollen grauuits row'd roun' your throat; and then ye'll super-add to that my ain auld marriage-plaid tied roun' your shouthers; then ye'll next——"

"Mattie!" quo' Wattie, in a tone of expostulation.

"——Then ye'll next swallow a pint o' XXX porter, *warm*, wi' a gill o' Irish whisky mixed up wi't, alang wi'——"

"Mattie! Mattie!" again broke in the amazed patient.

"——Alang wi' a guid bit sprinklin' o' cayenne pepper to mak' it ream," continued Mattie; an' then, guidman, ye'll cannily say the Lord's Prayer, an' tumble into bed."

"Mattie! Mattie! Mattie!" interposed Wattie, for the third time; "feth, lass, an' I wad ha'e richt muckle need

to say the Lord's Prayer, an' repeat the Psalms o' Dauvit into the bargain, to face a cure o' siccan stupendous proportions!"

"It's a desperate case, Wattie, and needs a desperate cure. The trouble maun be swat oot o' ye, guidman, at ony cost, and if Mrs. Howdie's perscripshun disna sort ye, there's witchcraft in't, an' we'll be forced, as a last shift, to heeze ye owre the kirk-steeple; draw ye three times under a cuddie's belly; or get ye to eat a roastit moose, to charm the wearifu' cauld oot o' ye."

"Aweel," quo' Wattie, resignedly, "if it maun be, I suppose it maun jist be. But ye ken, Mattie, I dinna meddle wi' the dram, an' I'm no certain hoo the cure wad particularly affeck me," and Wattie dubiously shook his head as if he was morally suspicious of the porter and pepper both, not to speak of the added whisky.

"The cure'll work a' the better o' that, guidman, tak' ye nae fear, an' the morn's mornin' 'ill see ye a new man."

So the "cure" it was agreed, was to be at once acted upon, and Mattie immediately proceeded to envelope Wattie in a triple and quadruple proof-plaiting of woollen hose, soft flannel, and picturesque plaiding, which martyrdom he withstood as became a man, a Christian, and—a weaver!

Then the XXX stout was brought in, the cayenne pepper and the Irish whisky added, a handful of sugar thrown in, and then Wattie heroically swallowed the contents of the chappin bowl, and immediately thereafter warstled into bed with an ill-suppressed groan, and a feeling that he had been fairly done for by Mattie.

Immediately Wattie, douce man, had got into bed, Mattie, kind woman, began to pile fresh blankets and bed-coverlets over him, and to super-add to that anything and everything she could lay hands on in the shape of bed-covers, petticoats, short-gowns, top-coats, and general drapery.

"Oh, Mattie, Mattie!" groaned poor Wattie, his flushed

nose being alone visible through a chink in the enormous pile of bed-clothes.

“What’s the maitter, Wattie, dear?”

“The maitter, Mattie! Ye’ve surely put Ben-Lomond on the tap o’ me; I’m fair bilin’ wi’ sweat!”

“Patience, Wattie! ha’e patience for a wee. Thanks to Mrs. Howdie, the cure’s workin’ grand,” answered Mattie, throwing over him, by way of an addendum to her remarks, an extra half-dozen old coats and petticoats.

“Deil tak’ Mrs. Howdie, an’ her East Indian cure baith! Dinna pit ony mair coats on me, Mattie, for goodness sake, or ye’ll destroy me a’thegither. There’s forty-five pund o’ steam on every square inch o’ the blankets already, an’ if ye dinna act wi’ caution there’ll be an explosion, an’ I’ll be blawn ayont the mune, like the witches in Macbeth, before the morn’s mornin’.”

The bowl of mixed liquors which Mattie had induced her guidman to swallow was clearly beginning to act, and Wattie was fast becoming imaginative and poetical.

“Lie still, Wattie, dear! lie still!” said Mattie, in a persuasive tone of voice, emptying over him a last basketful of discarded clothing. “Lie still, an’ sleep!”

There was silence for a few minutes, and then, spoken in a low, melancholy, impressive, and deeply tragic voice, these words were heard issuing from underneath the piled-up blankets:—

“Sleep, gentle sleep, how have I frightened thee;  
That thou no more will weigh my eyelids down,  
And steep my senses in forgetfulness!”

“Dod, he’s awa’ wi’t noo,” quo’ Mattie to herself, as she cocked her ears to Wattie’s slumberous soliloquy.

Presently the voice of Wattie was again heard issuing from under the bed-clothes, this time in a subdued and persuasive undertone:—

"How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank !  
 Here will we sit, and let the sounds of music  
 Creep in our ears ; soft stillness and the night  
 Become the touches of sweet harmony.  
 Look, Jessica : see how the floor of heaven  
 Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold.  
 There's not the smallest orb which thou beholdest,  
 But in its motion like an angel sings ;  
 Such harmony is in immortal souls."

At the name "Jessica," Mattie visibly started.

"Wha was Jessica?" she mentally queried, with an offended cast o' her dangling "mutch" strings, "I won'er if the daft auld fule is dreamin' o' some fair 'flame' o' his young days. Dod, it's true, I see, what the auld proverb says—when the dram's in, the wit's oot; Oh, Wattie, Wattie!" and lifting a portion of the mixed mass of coverlets that enswathed him, she stared severely at poor Wattie, and suspiciously shook her head.

But Wattie was fast becoming unconscious to his everyday surroundings. He had mounted his dramatic Pegasus, and in fancy was bounding brilliantly through the star-roofed realms of fiction. His eyes were full of supernatural light, and fixing a withering look upon Mattie, he exclaimed—

"Take, oh take those lips away  
 That so sweetly were forsworn,  
 And those eyes—the break of day,  
 Lights that do mislead the morn."

"The man's fairly by himsel'," ejaculated the astonished Mattie.

Presently there was a moment's quietude, and then, suddenly, and without warning, the superincumbent mass of bedclothes heaved up like an active volcano, and Wattie, his eyes flashing fire, and the perspiration thickly beaded on his brow, sat bolt upright in the bed, and cried aloud with deep intonation, and melo-dramatic gesture—

“Give me another horse—bind up my wounds!  
Oh coward conscience, how thou dost afflict me;  
The lights burn blue—it now is dead midnight.  
Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh.  
What do I fear?—myself?  
A horse! a horse! my kingdom for a horse!”

“Mercy me!” exclaimed Mattie, with both hands spread above her head in astonishment, “the puir man’s clean daft,” and the next moment Wattie verified the statement by taking a terrific leap across the table fronting the bed, right out to the centre of the floor.

Catching up the poker, he flourished it above his head, exclaiming—

“Let Rome in Tiber melt! and the wide arch  
Of the rang’d Empire fall! Here is my space;  
On this firm spot unmov’d I stand—or fall!”

“Clean gone!” screamed Mattie, clasping her hands together, “as daft’s the Barber o’ Dunse!” and the next moment, noticing Wattie fixing his glowing eyes on her, she ran for the stairhead, to seek the shelter of the house next door.

Mattie, simple woman, never dreamt for a moment that the “chappin’ bowl o’ liquor” had taken the goodman’s head. She had never seen Wattie the “waur o’ drink,” had never, in fact, seen him in such a state of ecstasy before, and wrongly guessed that the fever had mounted to his brain, and that there was “naething for puir Wattie noo but the hospital an’ a shaved heid.”

But if Mattie was justly alarmed at the sudden turn in her husband’s condition, the neighbours, on hearing her flurried and disconnected story, were with reason more so. She had neither nerve nor time to particularise the nature of the cure which she had prescribed to Wattie an hour before. Therefore the whole stairhead, justly alarmed, and curious to know the extent of the danger, turned out in



force, and advanced into the presence of the disordered weaver in a collective group.

The sight which met their eyes on entering was ludicrous in the extreme, and, despite the insane condition of the dramatic weaver, produced roars of laughter. From his head depended a yard of flannel, like the jaunty flap characteristic of the slashed hat of a pirate. Over his feet and legs were drawn an uncounted number of pairs of stockings, which gave his "understandings" the appearance of being very far gone in a dropsy. Across his shoulders Mattie's "marriage plyde" was artistically thrown—while his own shirt-tails did duty for a starved-looking kilt. In his right hand he flourished the kitchen poker, handling it much in the style of a General's sword. His eyes were dilated and fixed on vacancy. Starting back on seeing the turned-out stairhead enter the house, Wattie extended the poker towards them, exclaiming—

"Look where they come! Not poppy, nor mandragora,  
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world,  
Shall ever medicine them to that sweet sleep,  
Which they own'd yesterday."

"Puir auld Wattie!" said a commiserative neighbour.

"Rin for the pollis," responded a thin acid voice.

"Get him coaxed into bed," suggested a third party.

Jack Seam, a tailor, who lived on the stairhead, and a thin little apology for a man, made bold to step out from the rest, and thought to overawe the demented wabster by combining a gallant bearing with an assumed show of authority.

"Walter Wabster," he began, speaking in as deep a tone of voice as his diminutive form would allow, "I conjure thee to lay aside that misused bludgeon, and to re-assume thy suspended rationality," and the little tailor made a stout show of advancing upon him.

"Another step," exclaimed Wattie, "and I shall run thee through! Caitiff, depart!"

“Tak’ care o’ yer skin ye adventurous buddy!” said some one, “if Wattie kaimes yer heid wi’ that poker, ye’ll claw whaur it’s no yuckie for lang an’ mony a day.”

“Lay down these arms!” continued the valiant Knight of the Needle, stretching himself upwards to his full height, which was less than moderate.

“Withdraw! withdraw!” retorted Wattie;—

“A thousand hearts are great within my bosom,  
Advance our standards, set upon our foes;  
Our ancient word of courage—fair St. George!—  
Inspires us with the spleen of fiery dragons:  
Upon them! Victory sits on our helms!”

Saying which, Wattie flourished aloft his domestic bludgeon, and rushed upon his foes.

Instantly there was a general stampede. The crowd of alarmed neighbours made for their several places of abode, and the last animated object noticed was the retreating form of the tailor, whose heels were seen to play like forked lightning in their flying passage down stairs.

“Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths,  
Grim-visag’d War has smooth’d his wrinkl’d front,”

triumphantly exclaimed Wattie, as he proudly surveyed the deserted stairhead.

Wattie, however, despite his intellectual transmutation to a higher sphere, was not physically beyond frost-bite, and the stairhead being cold and draughty, and his kilts painfully short, he prudently returned to the shelter and warmth of the kitchen-fire. Whether or not he saw the immemorial “faces in the fire” patent to midnight reveries, is not given to say, but he sat there for some time, unmolested and serene, complimenting himself on his brilliant victory in the choicest of Shakesperian quotations.

As for Mattie, poor body, she had meanwhile run over to acquaint Mrs. Howdie with the result of the “cure,” and as



the distance was a good Scotch mile, she had not yet returned.

By and by, when the melo-dramatic wabster had exhausted Shakespeare and himself both, he dozed over into a quiet sleep. The terrible poker had all but dropped from his nerveless grasp, and he was just on the point of completing a third deliberate snore, when a pair of rough hands were laid on his shoulders, and starting up, he found himself confronted by two Highland policemen, who each made a seizure of him.

“What ho! Without there! Unhand me, villains!” exclaimed Wattie, making an abortive effort to shake himself free.

“She’s fou,” said No. 188 policeman.

“As fou’s ta Clyde,” responded No. 199, taking at the same time the poker from Wattie by sheer force.

Full of heroism, Wattie at once sprang to his feet, exclaiming—

“Give me my sword, put on my glorious crown,  
I have immortal longings in me.  
Now, now, no more  
The juice of Egypt’s grape shall moist my lips.  
Softly, good friends; release me where I stand!”

“Hooch!” exclaimed No. 188 policeman, glancing sarcastically at bewildered Wattie’s shoulder-plaid and kilt, “she’ll pe gaun to act ta pold Rob Roy an’ sign ta teetotal all at wance an’ ta same time. Come awa’ to ta office, Shakespeare!” and the two officials made a move towards the door.

Simultaneously with the appearance of the two policemen, the alarmed neighbours, upon whom Wattie had made his brilliant charge, had one by one returned to the stair-head, where much interested discussion took place over his capture and excited mental condition; and as none of the neighbours, in the absence of Mattie, knew anything of the

true cause of Wattie's temporary derangement, the constables were at a loss how to act. Some insisted on his instant removal to prison, or an asylum; whilst others sensibly declared he should be put once more to bed.

While things remained in this way, Mattie, accompanied by Mrs. Howdie, rushed in upon the scene.

"Mercy me!" exclaimed Mattie, when she beheld the two policemen; "what's happened at a'?'—wha's murdered?—what desperate stroke o' mischief ha'e ye committed, Wattie?"

A chorus of voices replied to Mattie's question in a dozen different ways; but above the din of argument and explanation, the deep-toned, tragic voice of the disordered weaver was heard in appeal—

"I have done nought,

The spirit within me hath been so at war,  
And thus hath so bestirr'd me in my sleep,  
That beads of sweat have stood upon my brow,  
Like bubbles in a late disturbèd stream.  
And in my head strange notions have appear'd,  
Of trenches, tents, frontiers, and parapets,  
Of cannon, culverin, of soldiers slain,  
And all the currents of a heady fight:  
Thus, thus, good friends, if I have sinn'd in aught,  
Let gentleness my strong enforcement be."

"Lowse yer han's aff my guidman this moment, ye ill-set loons," broke in Mattie, in an excited tone of voice, catching up at the same instant a hearth-brush wherewith to enforce her command.

"Grup the angry auld wife, Donal, an' I'll haud on by Hamlet," said policeman No. 188. "Tak' the proom frae her. There's craftwitch in her e'e."

When Dougal said "craftwitch," he probably meant witchcraft, and as he happened to be looking over his left shoulder when he spoke, that fact may partly account for the reversion of the syllables.

Policeman No. 199 gallantly went for Mattie, and Mattie, with the courage of her convictions, threw herself into position, and stoutly defended herself behind a chair.

“Give me my sword! Put on my warrior crown!”

again exclaimed Wattie, on seeing his wife in danger, the excitement bringing on a return of his disorder.

“Stop! stop! for guidness sake, let me explain maitters!” exclaimed Mrs. Howdie, and thereupon she proceeded to inform the company as to the nature of Wattie’s trouble—‘A sair sittin’-doon cauld that wadna lift; how Mattie had come to her for advice; the ‘cure’ that had been recommended and tried; and this—the misguided result.”

“An what about Shakespeare, then?” asked policeman No. 188, pointing significantly to Wattie, the stairhead tragedian.

“Pit the pair excited man into his bed, and let him sweat oot the trouble under the blankets,” said Mrs. Howdie.

“Ring down the curtain! Hark! the prompter’s bell,”

added Wattie, with his eyes romantically turned upwards to the ceiling. And to this alternative the two constables agreed.

“Han’le him gently, then,” said Mattie, and in two minutes more Wattie was carefully deposited under the bed-clothes, with the Shakespearian steam pretty well blown off his bewildered brain.

On the retiral of the company, the last incident witnessed was Wattie magnificently waving his hand to them by way of adieu—

“And now, good friends, a long and last farewell.”

So, Mrs. Howdie sat doon by Wattie’s bedside, and assisted Mattie to sweat the “dour cauld oot o’ him.” This task they finally accomplished by the “breck o’ daylight,” the method

of cure being simply a persistent repetition of the hard sweating process.

Then, when the cure had done its work, and Wattie had sunk at last into the silence of exhaustion, his memory of Shakespeare completely defeated and used up, did the sweet influence of sleep, gentle sleep—the blessing of which he had so feelingly invoked in the earlier stage of his disorder—descend upon his troubled senses, smoothing the “wrinkled front of war” within him, and leading his Thespian charger into the peaceful stable.

Next morning, when Wattie had recovered his lost senses, he looked about him inquiringly, and finding Mattie to be alone, he made a signal for “the len’ o’ her lug a moment,” and cautiously whispered—

“Mattie, what ha’e ye made o’ Mrs. Howdie?”

“She gaed hame wi’ the first breck o’ licht,” replied Mattie “an’ ye may thank her skill an’ patience that ye’re in the land o’ the leevin’ this day. She han’ult ye like a licensed doctor.”

“Maybe ay, an’ maybe yes,” quo’ Wattie, with a dubious head-shake. “Nae doot she’s a won’erfu’ woman, Mrs. Howdie; but Mattie, I’ll tell ye a deid secret—the cure was waur than the disease!”

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