

*DOON THE WATTER IN THE AULDEN TIMES.*

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IT was in the year 1812 that Henry Bell's puffing little steamboat, the *Comet*, first annihilated time and distance by accomplishing the voyage to Helensburgh in six hours!

Previous to that date the fly-boats ran to Greenock only, reaching that port in ten hours, whence passengers could be

“sailed” to ports further down the coast. The packet boats with goods could, with favourable winds, reach Rothesay, in the Isle of Bute, in about three days; but when adverse winds blew, it sometimes took as many weeks.

For these reasons, “Glesca folks” seldom went farther “doon the watter” in those slow-moving, old-fashioned days than Gourock or Helensburgh, and it was to Helensburgh that David Dinwiddie, an auld Gorbals worthy, and his managing spouse, Mattie, accordingly went on the occasion under notice, by the then elegant and commodious new steamship *Comet*!

The projected “saut watter” jaunt had been long in contemplation, the immediate cause thereof being the condition of Mattie’s stomach, which was past mending by medicine, and was much in need of the strong sea-air to renew its lost tone.

At least that’s what Mattie told her husband, and most stoutly maintained, too, though there wasn’t wanting those who declared, behind back, of course, that it was all a trick of Mattie’s, and that she had invented the doctor’s recommendation of a jaunt to the coast, so that she might in that way accomplish a long-cherished desire of hers to get “doon the watter” for a week, and so be upsides with some of her upsettin’ neighbours who had enjoyed that proud gratification on several occasions, and had made very much of it in the district, having done everything for its publication short of sending round the town bellman with it. However, in whatever way it was brought about—whether by the domestic generalship of Mattie, or by the spoken advice of the doctor—a week’s visit to the “saut watter” was duly fixed on and arranged for, the spot selected being Helensburgh and the means of transit the then wonderful little steamboat named the *Comet*.

It was a fearful business for worthy auld David Dinwiddie, the getting the length of the steamboat at the auld Broomielaw.

The three weeks' active and exciting preparation he had gone through up till the eventful date of sailing was nothing compared to the getting along to the Broomielaw with his large small family.

There were no tram-cars in those slow old days. Even omnibuses, now all but superseded, had not then been thought of. As for cabs, they were few in number, and were the exclusive luxury of the gentry. Even supposing a cab had been come-at-able, it would have been very heavily taxed to accommodate David Dinwiddie's family and effects on that "great and eventuous occasion," as Davie grandiloquently phrased it.

"I say, Mattie," Davie remarked to his wife on that eventful morning, "are ye gaun to flit the haill hoose doon the watter?"

"Div I look like it, *Mister* Dinwiddie, d'ye think!" was Mattie's somewhat tart rejoinder.

"Wonderfu' like it, Mattie. I'm already up to the neck in furniture, no' to speak o' the 'six or eicht weans still to lift; an' I think ye've packit up everything in the hoose—except, maybe, the cat, an' the eicht-day clock."

"Dinna bother me wi' yer aff-takin' remarks, if *you* please," saucily retorted Mattie; "but pit three or fowr o' the family in the coach an' set aff for the boat at yince, if ye mean to catch it."

The "coach" alluded to was an oblong-shaped box, placed on four low-set iron wheels, and drawn by a long, thin, round iron handle, with a cross-piece at the end to pull by. It had been made to special order by a local joiner who happened to be out of a regular job at the time. It was green-painted over all, and looked a thoroughly successful and blooming article—a sort of rude-shaped antediluvian perambulator, pulled by a long rod, and born considerably before its time.

Davie, to make matters go as smooth as possible under

the extraordinary circumstances, began packing the weans into the coach as neatly as he could, in which he so far succeeded that he was ultimately able to stow away not less than four of them inside of it, with a lot of luggage besides.

"Noo, Mistress Dinwiddie, I'm a' ready for the road," Davie at length ventured to remark.

"Weel, tak' it, then," replied Mattie.

"No' till I see that wonderfu' new bannet o' yours successfully set on yer heid, Mattie. Ye've been sweatin' owre't at the gless there for this last half-hour, an' hang me if ye seem to be able to distinguish the back frae the front o't for feathers. Ye look for a' the world as if ye had jist this moment stepped oot o' a chapter o' auld history."

When our comic-minded hero ventured on this sarcastic cut, he was holding the handle of the weans' coach in his hand, ready for the road.

It was, perhaps, as well.

Mattie, stung to the quick by the unkind cut, made a quick movement in his direction. In an instant, however, Davie had disappeared, leaving his spouse, like the last rose of summer, "blooming alone," unless, indeed, her new bonnet be taken in to account, which was a large and very important blooming fact in addition.

"Here, *Mister* Dinwiddie," she cried after him, coming quickly to the outer door, "tak' *that* along wi' ye tae (flinging a bundle of tied-up umbrellas after him), an' *that* (a handbox with Davie's auld lum hat inside), an' *that* (a parcel of worsted, and stocking knittings), an' *that*, an' *that*, an' *that!*" which latter parcels included, according to Davie's idea, every blessed thing inside the house, except, perhaps, the family Bible. What harm the auld family Bible had done that it should be left at home honest Davie was quite unable to discover.

Bewildered to his fair wits' end, Davie surveyed the domestic wreckage lying around him, and began stowing

them away as best he could, putting some in the weans' coach, some in his already well-stuffed pockets, and hanging others over his two arms and round his neck.

At last he picked up the bandbox containing his auld lum hat—the very hat he had been married in many years before.

“Great Abraham!” he said to himself, “surely to goodness the mad woman disna intend me to wear my auld lum hat at the coast? The wee laddies wad pap stanes at me.”

Then, going back to the door, he pushed it up, and thrusting his head half-a-yard inside, he said—

“*Mistress* Dinwiddie!”

“Weel, what's wrang noo?”

“Div ye ackwally intend me to wear my auld lum hat doun the watter?”

“An' what for no', *Mister* Dinwiddie?” rejoined Mattie, with a snap.

“Go you to Dumbarton!” retorted Geordie. “Here, see, there it's back to ye in the lump!” flinging the bandbox at her feet. “If ye will tak' it to the coast, wear it yersel'. It'll suit ye fully better than that fancy cockatoo o' a thing ye've been fechtin' wi' at the lookin'-gless for this last stricken hour.”

Having thus successfully expired his last parting shot, our canny hero returned to his extensive family charge, and proceeded at once to take the road by hauling after him the well-packed family coach.

Reaching the street, a group of wee laddies “hurrahed” Davie and his picturesque equipage as he passed by, as a sort of compliment, presumably, to the surpassing variety and extent of his domestic turn-out.

“Faith, an' ye may weel hurrah, laddies,” said Davie half aloud; “the like o' this has never happened in history afore, an' never will again, I'm certain. It's a fine thing to be a married man—a most delightful, beautiful, captivating thing, as the wee tailor remarked when the frying-pan gently

collided with the back o' his heid—a fine thing for the circulation o' the bluid, an' the clearin' o' the c'esicht. The man that canna see a lump farrer after marriage than before it, is past the help o' the best pebble specks, by a geyan lang chalk mark."

Looking behind him now and again, Davie descried his worthy spouse toiling hard after, with the remainder of the family by her side, her new hat blooming on her head, and any amount of parcels in her arms.

"Faith," thought Davie to himself, "when the domestic barometer is fa'en doun, 'distance lends enchantment to the view,' as yin o' Scotland's poetical chieles has remarked. I'll push briskly forrit tho', an' get to the Broomielaw first. Yince on board the boat, there'll be nae spare room for argiement, or, at the warst, I can gang doun below to the steward's room an' study the machinery."

Thus resolved, our homely hero dug the point of his boots firmer into the ground and hauled splendidly ahead of his spouse, unmindful of the many curious glances and side laughs which his odd appearance created amongst the passers-by.

Arriving at the Broomielaw, he had just time to adjust his "specks" and read the *Comet* advertisement before his spouse arrived on the scene.

The following is an exact copy of the original advertisement:—

STEAM PASSAGE BOAT,

THE *COMET*.

BETWEEN GLASGOW, GREENOCK, AND HELENSBURGH.

*For passengers only.*

THE Subscriber having, at much expense, fitted up a handsome vessel to ply upon the River Clyde between Glasgow and Greenock, to sail by power of wind, air, and steam, he intends that the vessel shall leave the Broomielaw on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, about mid-day, or such hour thereafter as may answer from

the state of the tide, and to leave Greenock on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, in the morning, to suit the tide.

The elegance, comfort, safety, and speed of this vessel require only to be proved to meet the approbation of the public; and the proprietor is determined to do everything in his power to merit public encouragement.

The terms at present are fixed at—Four shillings for the best cabin; three shillings for the second.

Beyond these rates, nothing is to be allowed to servants, or to any other person employed about the vessel.

HENRY BELL.

August 5th, 1812.

Davie had just replaced his "specks" when the reproving voice of Mattie once more took his ears.

"A fine man you are!—a nice, lovin', considerate husband, atweel! To hurry awa' an' leave yer puir wife to trauchle along the crooded streets for this length as best she could! That I wasna run owre, or robbit on the road along here, or openly murdered, is nae credit o' yours."

"An' what about me, Mattie? It strikes me wi' the force o' a flung tattie that I was sailin' in the same boat wi' ye a' along the road, eh? Talk about the cares o' an Empire! What think ye o' a man ha'ein' to tackle a family 'coach' wi' fowr weans packit closely in't, three tied-up umbrellas, about six-an'-twenty bundles o' a' things in his twa airms; an', to croon a', a basket o' bread on his heid! Order a special medal to be struck at yince for me, Mattie, if there's a grain o' humanity resident in yer bosom."

Concluding this spirited blow-out, Davie did not await a reply, but hurried aboard the *Comet*, dragging after him his heavy and very responsible family charge, Mattie and the rest of the family bringing up the rear.

In a few minutes thereafter the novel and wonderful little steam-vessel cast off in very impressive deep-sea style, forging its way through the then salmon-haunted, clear, and pellucid stream of Clyde, at the surprising speed of six miles an hour!

Slow as was the *Comet's* progress, however, they were out

of the harbour and all its associations and belongings in a few minutes. For the harbour was then but a very small concern, and there were no stoppages between ports in those days as now, unless when something went wrong with the wonderful little clank-clanking engine which was performing such curious work down below, on which occasions, these occurrences being frequent, the gallant Highland captain would shout aloud—

“All hands on deck, an’ spread ta foresheet, whateffer; ta useless steam’s off again!”

To which Dougal M’Taggart, the red-headed mate, would reply—

“Hi, ay, sir! Come awa’ forrit, Tonalt, an’ pring Lauchie, ta wee laddie, along wi’ ye, too, also, to help to spread ta foresheet; for tat funny wee fuff, fuffin’ engine is brokit down wance more. It’s no weel this weather, at all. It has brokit down twice next week, an’ three times more the week after, as sure as twa an’ fowr’s five.”

And then, for an hour thereafter on such occasions, the little engines being under brief repair, it was a veritable sea voyage under stiff helm and flapping canvas.

It was all very novel, and in some instances particularly exciting to our homely hero, this wonderful sail “down the watter.” More especially was it so to his worthy spouse, Mattie, who had never been at sea once in her life before, although Davie humorously declared she was deeply “at sea” in Glesca every Monday mornin’ to ken what she had made o’ the ither half o’ the Saturday pey.

Mattie was all eyes and ears for what was transpiring around her, despite the family cares and distractions which surrounded her on board the little steamer, quite as much as at her ain fireside.

She saw some “won’erfu’ sights,” as she termed them on the voyage down, and got at least twa heart-rending frichts.

When opposite Port-Glasgow, where an extensive sand-

bank still exists on the north side of the river, which is daily uncovered with the fall of every tide, Mattie descried a *something* floating in the water.

"What's yon, Davie?" she pointedly asked. "Is't a whale, a porpoise, or a crocodile, think ye?"

Davie put on his specks and looked in the direction indicated.

"Tuts, woman!" he sharply made answer, "it's only a buoy floating in the watter."

"Eh, me! a boy? An' ye ca't *only* a boy! It's aye some body's bairn, shairly. For ony sake tell the captain to screw aff his bizz, turn the han'le o' his helm roun', an' stop an' pick up the puir bit callant, that's in sair danger o' droonin'."

"Woman, I tell ye, it's only a floating buoy, an's no a boy ava," Davie retorted, with some warmth.

"Siccan a flat contradiction I never heard a' my born life! It's a boy, an' it's no' a boy! It's weel seen, my fine man, that ye've been doun below drinkin' yer puir wits awa', little as they are at the best. If it's no' a boy, then," she sarcastically added, "it's maybe a lassie, though the need o' a rescue is jist aboot as great the yae way as the ither, I'm thinkin'."

Our canny-minded hero walked farther forward. The ordeal was too much for him. It affected him acutely, even to the length of his veritable stick leg, which on such trying occasions he was in the habit of vigorously digging into the ground, or into whatever was directly underneath him at the moment.

A temporary break-down of the engines, as suggested, actually occurred, and was an unfortunate affair for our party, in the sense that it delayed their arrival at Helensburgh till nearly nightfall, which was no joke indeed, lodgings being still to look for, and the place being strange to both husband and wife.

Entering the spacious bay of Helensburgh, Mattie got her

second "fricht" by a small incident, which in her opinion brought them all within an inch of a watery grave.

The incident happened in this way:—They were within half a mile of a sloping stone quay, which then stretched far out in the shallow water to suit the fall of the tide, and the lights in the houses and shops on the shore road were quite visible, it being now dusk.

A double-masted vessel was lying ahead of them a bit, between them and the quay, and which was burning red and green lights, in accordance with the newly-issued Board of Trade regulations.

The sight of the coloured ship's lights was at that early date in Clyde navigation new and strange to most river sailors, and was very particularly so to Dougal M'Taggart, the first mate of the *Comet*.

Seeing the strange lights burning red and green straight ahead, he quickly concluded that the *Comet* was running ashore, and that the coloured lights ahead were those of some local apothecary's window. So, with warning voice, he shouted aloud to the man at the helm—

"Roun' wi' ta helm, Tonalt, an' haud hard to ta left, or py ta Lord we'll pe run into a doctor's shop in twa or fowr moments!"

"Eh, me!" loudly sighed Mattie, overhearing the mate's alarming order, quickly concluding that her last hour had come; "eh, me! to think that I've ta'en a saut water voyage to escape the doctor's, and to be wrecked in a doctor's shop after a'! The ekwal o' this never happen't in history afore!"

The helm, however, was hurriedly put round, and the impending collision with the apothecary's window prevented, much to the satisfaction of Mattie, who lost nearly a stone in weight with the sudden fright.

It was an awfu' job getting ashore in the dusk, and a worse job finding adequate lodgings.

The little sea-side township, indeed, was so ill-lit—there being nothing to depend on better than a few small shop windows—that when Mattie at last did fix on lodgings she did so on mere chance more than in any surer and more satisfactory way.

“Weel,” cannily remarked Davie, when the family had at length got under a thickly-thatched roof of straw, “we’ve tookin’ lodgin’s, it’s true; but what’s the rale size an’ nature o’ them we’ll no richt ken till daylight the morn. They’re wee enough for yae thing, I can weel see; an’ it strikes me there’ll be nae spare room here for either argiement or dancin’. It’s a mercy I didna bring down my auld lum hat, as ye stippitly wantit me to dae, Mattie; for hang me if I could ha’e got room for’t here, unless by hingin’t up by a string frae the rafters, like a winter ham.”

“Ah! but I’ve e’en brocht it down alang wi’ the rest o’ the things, my fine man,” triumphantly exclaimed Mattie, clapping her hands in joyous excitement, “an’ if there’s nae room for’t elsewhere ye can hing’t on yer heid, whaur it should an’ *shall* be, if ye’re to walk the shore wi’ me. A fine thing if a man’s best mairrit hat is to lie up an’ waste in a paper bandbox an’ no’ be brocht oot on a special occasion o’ this kind! It’s a most respectable-lookin’ article on a workin’-man’s heid—a guid, soncy lum hat. Ye should be prood o’ baith it an’ me, *Mister* Dinwiddie; for I’m no’ by being looked at yet, no’ to say admired, though I’m sayin’t that maybe shouldna. An’ as for the hat, it has been carefully looked after, tae, an’ was weel brushed an’ blackleaded afore comin’ awa’ frae Glesea, the which I’ll conscientiously maintain, deny’t wha likes.”

“A lum hat down the watter!” exclaimed Davie aghast. “Mattie, as sure’s ye’re there, if ye force that auld hat on me doon here I’ll stap it below the first cairt-wheel I meet on the road, though I shood hing for’t.”

To all which Mattie listened, but said never a word in

reply, knowing very well that the game was ultimately hers, and that the ostracised lum would be finally worn, and, better still, would most certainly be publicly commented on and admired by both natives and coasters.

Things domestic thus roughly arranged for the night, nature craved her dues, and the entire Dinwiddie family having gone to bed, excepting Davie himself, they were all very soon sleeping the deep and sweet sleep of the just.

Perhaps it would be nearer the actual truth to say that the Dinwiddie family were snoring the sleep of the just, for such was most emphatically the case. And such a snoring match Davie's twa lugs never heard before. The fresh sea air of the long voyage had given every one of them an abnormal appetite for sleep, and they were all announcing the fact in happy concert.

"Talk about the pleasures o' single life!" said Davie to himself, who had remained up to enjoy what he termed a pellucid smoke, "single life is a' richt enough in its ain way; but if a man wants genuine variety an' sensation let him gang in for the mairrit life. It's simply beautiful, exquisite, delicious, an' heart-inspirin'! My faith, if the weans a' sleep like that wi' a waff o' the sea air, I canna even guess what'll happen when they tak' to the drinkin' o' the saut watter. There's Mattie; *she's* daein' the big bassoon business, an's snorin' awa' there like a fou horse sodjer. It's aboot time I was joinin' her, I'm thinkin', an' helpin' oot the family chorus.

This said, our canny-minded auld friend laid aside his pipe for the night, and was speedily in bed, where in a very short time he added a deep trombone accompaniment to the grand programme of concerted music which was being so vigorously and so melodiously executed by Mattie and her numerous brood of family chickens.