

THE OLD PHILOSOPHER

“AM I richt for the Brig o’ Dun?”

“Aye, jump in,” said the porter. But the old fellow wanted to make assurance doubly sure, and when the stationmaster came hurrying along the platform, he asked, “Are ye sure this train gangs to the Brig o’ Dun?”

“Yes, quite sure,” said the official. “If ye dinna get in it’ll be awa’ without ye.”

“Dod, man, you’re in an awfu’ hurry,” exclaimed the would-be passenger for the Bridge of Dun, ponderously mounting the carriage steps, and as ponderously taking his seat. This latter operation was scarcely performed when the engine whistle screamed, and the train moved out of Forfar station.

Taking off his round, soft, felt hat, the old gentleman mopped his furrowed brow with a gigantic red handkerchief, and turned to me—I was the only other occupant of the compartment—with the ob-

servation, "Gey impudent billies them railroad men, dae ye no think?"

I smiled, and remarked that, after all, they had a lot to worry them.

"Fegs! ye're maybe no far wrang!" he admitted. Then he added, with a Solomon-like expression, "We've a' got oor bits o' troubles, I'm thinkin'. I'se warrant ye'll hae yer ain, eh?"

What could I say but that there was none of us without our trials, our disappointments, our sorrows?

"That's jist exactly what I'm thinkin' the day. Here's me, eichty-fower year auld, an' I'm gaun awa' to Montrose to clap ma youngest brither's auldest son below the sod. Fancy an auld carl like me to the fore an' a lauddie like him as deid's a mauch!"

Although greatly tempted to smile at my aged companion's expressive phraseology, I restrained the desire, and said something about human life being all vanity.

"Vanity, vanity!" he repeated with an unctuous shake of the head. "That's what the Psaulmist said—or was it the Preacher? Man, he was a gey deevil, auld Dauvit, to write sic a lot o' wholesome truths! **Vanity! Aye, it's a' vanity thegither.**" Then, with

a sudden return from the realms of philosophy, he turned to me with the query, "Are ye sure I'm richt for the Brig o' Dun? I've to change there for Montrose, ye ken."

I satisfied him that he was "right," and he looked out of the window for a few seconds without speaking. A fine-looking old man he was—a typical Scottish patriarch. His hair and his short bristly beard were white as the driven snow, his cheeks were fresh coloured, and his blue eyes full and luminous as those of a man thirty years his junior. Save for a slight stoop, his figure in repose gave one the impression of strength and grandeur in his manhood's prime.

"The craps are lookin' weel," he latterly commented. "We should hae a guid hairst the year! There's a'e blessin' aboot the railroad, it lats a body see hoo the corn's thrivin' in the different places without movin' aff's seat! At the same time," he went on, "we've had mair than plenty o' rain this past week or twa. I never like ower muckle rain. The damp gets into ma banes an' gi'es me an awfu' wheezin' i' the chest. It started wi' me last Januar, an' it was a' thro' gaun to a waddin'. Man," he concluded, "did ye ever think hoo the customs in waddin's hae changed this when years back?"

This was a subject on which I could speak with some degree of authority, but, as I wanted to hear the old man's views on it, I simply remarked that the marriage customs nowadays were very much altered since the day I was married.

"Mairriages noo are a bit o' a farce," he proceeded. "They maun g'wa' someway for a week's garavarie—a honeymoon, they ca't—as soon as the meenister's feenished them aff. When I got mairried I had to gang oot to ma work next mornin'. I was gey sweer to gang, I will admit, but what could I dae? I had only eichteenpence left. Of coorse, I could've had a honeymoon masel' if I had dune what they a' dae nooadays—get their furniture on tick. But I never was a man for tick; I aye likit to deal wi' the ready bawbees in ma loof. Are we far, think ye, frae the Brig o' Dun? I maun change there for Montrose, ye ken!"

We were still some distance from the "Bridge," and I calmed the old man's fears on the point. Thinking he might have something interesting to say on modern railway trains, I hazarded the remark that the railway system of the country was a wonderful thing.

"Won'erfu'!" he exclaimed. "Man, it's amazin'! What a heid that chap Stephenson maun hae had!"

An' Jeems Watt—him that fun' oot aboot steam efter he had burnt his hands at the spoot o' the kettle—was even smarter, for if it hadna been for him that Stephenson billie would hae been clean beat for something to mak' his engine run. But wasn't it an awfu' daft-like thing for Jeems Watt to scaud himsel' wi' the steam? He nicht hae kent better than try to keep in steam—a'boday kens that! Hoo-somever, his play wi' the kettle made him a famous man. Jeems Watt! I often wonder if he wis ony relation o' Weemie Watt, the polisman in Forfar. But I hardly think they'll be the same Watts; at least I never heard Weemie say onything aboot it, altho', to be sure, he's a thick-heided coof, and maybe doesna ken o' his great relations."

The topic thus raised was evidently a favourite one of the old man, for he continued to give me the benefit of his views on all modern inventions from the X-rays to the motor car. Speaking of the former, he characterised it as "a fell dangerous sort o' a thing when onybody could come along an' shine a fottygraph business on ye an' see hoo muckle money ye had in yer trooser pooches. It's a blessin'," he added, "that thae X-rays capers hav'na got to Forfar, or there wad be some queer stuchies i' the toon."

His opinions of the motor car were equally quaint and original. "I'm dootin' it'll be a black lookoot for the horse breeders, for thae motor cars need nae corn or straw—only a drappie ile and a 'lectric wire or twa. Faith, but they can traivel, too! They fair whup by ye like a flash o' lichtnin'. The ither nicht Kirsty an' masel' got a gey flaig. We were no lang in oor bed—it would be aboot nine o'clock—an Kirsty was jist doverin' ower. I was beginnin' to get kin' o' dwammy masel', when there was a hoot! hoot! on the street below oor windy. Kirsty let oot a skirl an' gruppit me by the beard. 'John,' says she, a' in a tremmle, 'that'll be the fire engine. The hoose is on fire; the hoose is on fire! We'll be burnt to cinders whaur we lie.'

"'G'wa, woman,' says I, tearing her haun's oot o' ma beard; 'it's only ane o' them plaguey motor cars.' But she got a terrible fricht, an' her nerves kept loupin' a' nicht. In fac', she's had the doctor twice at her for nervous debeelity. This train's gaun awfu' slow surely. I'll be richt for the Brig o' Dun, I hope?"

The Bridge was still two stations away, so I again calmed his anxiety. I happened to have the "Dundee Advertiser" in my hand, and, casually glancing at it, I saw a column of a political meet-

ing entitled "Mr. Chamberlain at Sheffield." Here was a chance for elucidating the old fellow's views on a question which was just then shaking the political foundations of the country. "What do you think of this fiscal policy business?" I asked him.

"'Deed," he replied, without a moment's hesitation, "I dinna ken muckle about it. But thae poeetical billies are kickin' up a fell row ower't. At first I thoct it had something to dae wi' the Fiscal at Forfar, an' I speer't Weemie Watt—bein' a polis-man, ye ken, an' conneckit wi' the Fiscal—what he had been daein'. Weemie tell't me that it wasna the Forfar Fiscal at a', it was Joe Chamberlain that had been makin' a' the steer. So I put on ma specs that nicht an' lookit up the reports in the papers. Faith, Weemie was richt enough! There was little else in the paper than speeches about Free Tred an' Protection an' tariffs an' retaliation, an' I dinna ken what forbye. It fair bamboozl't me, and Kirsty said I was an auld fule for botherin' ma heid about sic blethers. But Joe Chamberlain's a clever man, mind ye! We maun a' alloo that! It was him, wasn't it, that inventit screwnails or put the sharp nebs on them, or something like that? Fegs! there's lots o' things easy when ye ken hoo to dae them, but it's billies like

Joe Chamberlain that strike on the idea. The idea's the thing! Ye get mair for a guid idea than the likes o' you an' me wad get for a week's work. Noo, I had an idea when I wis young for iron coffins instead o' widden anes. I never did onything wi' it, but I think there was a fortune intilt. Wha wad be buried in a widden coffin for the worms an' horny-golochs to eat thro' if they could hae a guid strong iron coffin that wad defy the teeth o' a' thae sorts o' beasts—if they have teeth? I tell ye I fair lost ma chance o' becomin' famous, an' here's Joe Chamberlain got his name in a' the papers wi' screwnails and fiscal policies!"

"Speakin' aboot politics," went on the old man, when he had laughed along with me at his own joke, "I'm just wonnerin' if my youngest brither's auldest son was insured. It'll be a rale help to his faither gin he's left a pound or twa. I'm in the Prudential masel', an' Kirsty as weel; no muckle to come, ye ken, but ave a when bawbees for buir'l expenses and the like. Puir Tammas! (That's ma youngest brither's auldest son, ye ken, him that's deid.) He was a nice lauddie, an' a decent, but he got a doon-sittin' cauld twa months ago, an' it made short work o' him at the feenish. I say, ma man," exclaimed the old fellow, jumping up suddenly,

“did we no stop for a meenit back there a bit? I’m thinkin’ I’m wrang for the Brig o’ Dun!”

To my inexpressible regret I recollected that the train had actually stopped for a brief space while my companion was dilating on the fiscal policy and I was listening, all intently, to his quaint observations thereon. There was nothing for it but to go to Laurencekirk, a few miles north, and there, fortunately, my old friend succeeded in catching a train back to the Bridge of Dun. He would still be in time to catch the Montrose connection. The stationmaster was good enough to keep the north-going train waiting while I went across to the other platform with the aged philosopher. He was terribly excited, and kept muttering something to the effect that he was “a bletherin’ auld fule.”

As he took his seat in the south train he again drew forth the ample red handkerchief, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and bade me good-bye, remarking, “It’ll be a bonnie thing if I’m late for the buir’l o’ my youngest brither’s auldest son.”