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Para Handy

Neil Munro

Para Handy, Master Mariner

A short, thick-set man, with a red beard, a hard round felt hat, ridiculously out of harmony with a blue pilot jacket and trousers and a seaman's jersey, his hands immersed deeply in those pockets our fathers (and the heroes of Rabelais) used to wear behind a front flap, he would have attracted my notice even if he had not, unaware of my presence so close behind him, been humming to himself the chorus of a song that used to be very popular on gabbarts, but is now gone out of date, like "The Captain with the Whiskers took a Sly Glance at Me". You may have heard it thirty years ago, before the steam puffer came in to sweep the sailing smack from all the seas that lie between Bowling and Stornoway. It runs –

"Young Munro he took a notion

For to sail across the sea,

And he left his true love weeping,

All alone on Greenock Quay,"

and by that sign, and by his red beard, and by a curious gesture he had, as if he were now and then going to scratch his ear and only determined not to do it when his hand was up, I knew he was one of the MacFarlanes. There were ten MacFarlanes, all men, except one, and he was a valet, but the family did their best to conceal the fact, and said he was away on the yachts, and making that much money he had not time to write a scrape home.

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"I think I ought to know you," I said to the vocalist with the hard hat. "You are a MacFarlane: either the Beekan, or Kail, or the Nipper or Keep Dark, or Para Handy".

"As sure as daith," said he, "I'm chust Para Handy and I ken your name fine, but I cannot chust mind your face." He had turned round on the pawl he sat on, without taking his hands from his pockets, and looked up at me where I stood beside him, watching a river steamer being warped into the pier.

"My goodness!" he said about ten minutes later, when he had wormed my whole history out of me; "and you'll be writing things for the papers? Cot bless me! and do you tell me you can be makin' a living off that? I'm not asking you, mind, hoo much you'll be makin', don't tell me; not a cheep! Not a cheep! But I'll wudger it's more than MacLean the minister. But och! I'm not saying: it is not my business. The minister has two hundred in the year and a coo's gress; he is aye the big man up yonder, but it is me would like to show him he was not so big a man as yourself. Eh? But not a cheep! not a cheep! A MacFarlane would never put his nose into another man's oar."

"And where have you been this long while?" I asked, having let it sink into his mind that there was no chance to-day of his learning my exact income, expenditure, and how much I had in the bank. "Me!" said he; "I am going up and down like yon fellow in the Scruptures – what was his name? Sampson – seeking what I may devour. I am out of a chob. Chust that: out of a chob. You'll not be hearin' of anybody in your line that is in want of a skipper?"

Skippers, I said, were in rare demand in my line of business. We hadn't used a skipper for years.

"Chust that! chust that! I only mentioned it in case. You are amking things for newspapers, my Cot! what will they not do now for the penny? Well, that is it; I am out of a chob; chust putting bye the time. I'm not vexed for myself, so mich, as far poor Dougie. Dougie was mate, and I was skipper. I don't know if you kent the Fital Spark?"

The Vital Spark, I confessed, was well known to me as the most uncertain puffer that ever kept the Old New-Year in Upper Lochfyne.

"That was her!" said MacFarlane, almost weeping. "There was never the bate of her, and I have sailed in her four years over twenty with my hert in my mooth for fear of her boiler. If you never saw the Fital Spark, she is aal hold, with the boiler behind, four men and a derrick, and a watter-butt and a pan loaf in the fo'c'sle. Oh man! she was the beauty! She was chust sublime! She should be carryin' nothing but gentry for passengers, or nice genteel luggage for the shooting lodges, but there they would be spoilin' her and rubbin' all the pent off her with their coals, and sand, and whunstone, and oak bark, and timber, and trash like that."

"I understand she had one weakness at least, that her boiler was apt to prime."

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"It's a - lie," cried MacFarlane, quite furious; "her boiler never primed more than wance a month, and that was not with fair play. If Dougie was here he would tell you.

"I was as prood of that baot as the Duke of Argyll, ay, or Lord Breadalbane. If you would see me walking aboot on her dake when we was lyin' at the quay! There wasna the like of it in the West Hielan's. I was chust sublime! She had a gold bead aboot her; it's no lie I am tellin' you, and I would be pentin' her oot of my own pocket every time we went to Arran for gravel. She drawed four feet forrit and nine aft, and she could go like the duvvle."

"I have heard it put at five knots," I said maliciously.

MacFarlane bounded from his seat. "Five knots!" he cried. "Show me the man that says five knots, and I will make him swallow the hatchet. Six knots, as sure as my name is MacFarlane; many a time between the Skate and Otter. If Dougie was here he would tell you. But I am not braggin' aboot her sailin'; it was her looks. Man, she was smert, smert! Every time she was new pented I would be puttin' on my Sunday clothes. There was a time yonder they would be callin' me Two-flag Peter in Loch Fyne. It was wance the Queen had a jubilee, and we had but the wan flag, but a MacFarlane never was bate, and I put up the wan flag and a regatta shirt, and I'm telling you she looked chust sublime!"

"I forget who it was once told me she was very wet," I cooed blandly; "that with a head wind the Vital Spark nearly went out altogether. Of course, people will say nasty things about these hookers. They say she was very ill to trim, too."

MacFarlane jumped up again, grinding his teeth, and his face purple. He could hardly speak with indignation. "Trum"! he shouted. "Did you say 'trum'? You could trum her with the wan hand behind your back and you lookin' the other way. To the duvvle with your trum! And they would be sayin' she was wet! If Dougie was here he would tell you. She would not take in wan cup of water unless it was for synin' oot the dishes. She was that dry she would not wet a postage stamp unless we slung it over the side in a pail. She was sublime, chust sublime!

"I am telling you there is not many men following the sea that could sail the Fital Spark the way I could. There is not a rock, no, nor a chuckie stone inside the Cumbrie Heid that I do not have a name for. I would ken them fine in the dark by the smell, and that is not easy, I'm telling you. And I am not wan of your dry-land sailors. I was wance at Londonderry with her. We went at night, and did Dougie no' go away and forget oil, so that we had no lamps, and chust had to sail in the dark with our ears wide open. If Dougie was here he would tell you. Now and then Dougie would be striking a match for fear of a collusion."

"Where did he show it?" I asked innocently. "Forward or aft?" "Aft," said the mariner suspiciously. "What for would it be aft? Do you mean to say there could be a collusion aft? I am telling you she could do her six knots before she cracked her shaft. It was in the bow, of course; Dougie had the matches. She was chust sublime. A gold bead oot of my pocket, four men and a derrick, and a watter-butt and a pan-laof in

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the fo'c'sle. My bonnie wee Fital Spark. He began to show symptoms of tears, and I hate to see an ancient mariner's tears, so I hurriedly asked him how he had lost the command.

"I will tell you that," said he. "It was Dougie's fault. We had yonder a cargo of coals for Tarbert , and we got doon the length of Greenock, going fine, fine. It was the day after the New Year, and I was in fine trum, and Dougie said, 'Wull we stand in here for orders?' and so we went into Greenock for some marmalade, and did we no' stay three days? Dougie and me was going about Greenock looking for signboards with Hielan' names on them, and every signboard we could see with Campbell, or Macintyre, on it, or Morrison, Dougie would go in and ask if the man came from Kilmartin or any way roond aboot there, and if the man said no, Dougie would say "It's a great peety, for I have cousins of the same name, but maybe you'll have time to come oot for a dram?' Dougie was chust sublime!

"Every day we would be getting sixpenny telegrams from the man the coals was for at Tarbert, but och! we did not think he was in such an awful hurry, and then he came himself to Greenock with the Grenadier, and the only wans not in the polis-office was myself and the derrick. He bailed the lads out of the polis-office, and 'Now,' he said, 'you will chust sail her up as fast as you can, like smert lads, for my customers is waiting for their coals, and I will go over and see my good-sister at Helensburgh, and go back to Tarbert the day efter to-morrow.' 'Hoo can we be going and us with no money?' said Dougie – man, he was sublime! So the man gave me a paper pound of money, and went away to Helensburgh, and Dougie was coilin' up a hawser forrit ready to start from the quay. When he was away, Dougie said we would maybe be just as weel to wait another tide, and I said I didna know, but what did he think, and he said, 'Ach, of course!' and we went aal back into Greenock. 'Let me see that pound!' said Dougie, and did I not give it to him? and then he rang the bell of the public hoose we were in, and asked for four tacks and a wee hammer. When he got the four tacks and the wee hammer he nailed the pound note on the door, and said to the man, 'Chust come in with a dram every time we ring the bell till that's done!' If Dougie was here he would tell you. Two days efter that the owner of the Fital Spark came doon from Gleska and five men with him, and they went away with her to Tarbert."

"And so you lost the old command," I said, preparing to go off. "Well, I hope something will turn up soon."

"There was some talk aboot a dram," said the mariner. "I thought your said something aboot a dram, but och! there's no occasion!"

A week later, I am glad to say, the Captain and his old crew were reinstated on the Vital Spark.

END.

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