

"AUL WATTIE" GSTLER

THE MAN WHOM BIRDS, BEASTS, AND CHILDREN LOVED

Not so long ago I spent an hour in the old Churchyard of Belt-Aberdeenshire reading the inscriptions on the tomb stones and endeavouring to re-construct the history of the ~~deceased~~ ^{deceased} from the few details provided.

Most of the stones recorded nothing of the one below, further than that he was born in one year and died upon another, his whole history being condensed into the two circumstances common to all mankind.

There was one name there however that brought back memories of bygone days, a name that is still remembered with affection by the older folks of Belt.

The inscription upon the stone, though no register of heroic deeds or great benefactions, but just the record of a man in a humble station of life, was nevertheless a complete appreciation of his worth.

The inscription reads to the effect that it was erected by public subscription in affectionate remembrance of one William Watt, for many years ostler at the Balcarnea Arms, Belt.

"Aul Wattie", the name he was best known by, lived in an age - now alas no more - before the motor car had begun to be a serious rival to the coach and horses as the popular method of travelling, and when the country posting inn, and whipcord breeched ostler were still noted institutions. "Good meat and care for man and beast" was the proud motto of these old time hostleries and "Aul Wattie" was a worthy upholder of this tradition, by the devoted attention he paid to the patrons of his stable, and that without any class distinction.

The tinkers sheet got as good attention as the lairds blood mare and Wattie would as lief split a gill with a tinker as accept a sixpence from a Sir, as quarden for his services.

"Aul Wattie's" only fault - if fault it was - was that  of a dram and in fact it was this liking  him down to the humble position of ostler.

at an inn from the greater dignity of private service, the reduction in rank and the transfer of his activities was a decided gain to the landlord of the inn, for a better servant never lifted brush or comb.

A travelling circus was Aul Watthe's downfall and folk who saw the incident that occasioned his fall from grace, tho' sorry for the happening, laughed for long after at the memory of it.

Watthe had driven his master with his wife and family into town in order to visit the circus, but instead of patronising the show himself Watthe spent the interval discussing news and rips with the proprietor of a nearby inn, till when it was time to collect his passengers, tho' in a most genial frame of mind, Watthe was far from secure upon the driving seat of the carriage, a circumstance that was at once evident to the laird.

Not willing to risk an accident through the misdeemeanor of his coachman, the laird sent his wife and children home in a cab, clumped Watthe in the back seat of the landau, then mounting the driving seat, took the reins himself. His nearest road home was up the long main street of the town and the public that evening saw the strange sight of a prominent laird driving his own carriage and pair, while his coachman in full regalia, sat in state behind him.

To add to the humour of the situation and the ever increasing anger of the laird - Watthe, now thoroughly enjoying himself in his exalted position, was returning the admiring looks and remarks of his audience, by bowing graciously and lifting his hat with drunken gravity, and every now and then addressing uncomplimentary remarks to his driver about his driving ability.

The time between Watthe's arrival in state and departure in disgrace was only a matter of minutes and while private service lost a promising graduate a public benefactor arose from the ruins of a genteel career.

So "Owl Watte" came to Echt, took up the reins of office as ostler at the Balcanes Arms, and for many a year was guide, philosopher and friend to old and young. As a horse keeper he had few equals and no superior and to see him attending to the toilet of his equine charges was an education in the grooms art and would make the present day knights of the stable blush at their own 'licks and a promise' ways.

And not only was Watte an expert in matters horsey he was also a recognized authority upon the breeding care and treatment of all manner of beasts and birds and his advice was sought by gentle and simple all over the country.

Dogs, cats, rabbits, hens and hedge hogs all found a corner in Watte's domain and an empty stall in the stable was the rendezvous for all the boys round about, who came to consult the expert and get advice and treatment for their pets, and woe betide anyone found neglecting his charge or exercising cruelty.

Trapped cats, pigeons with broken legs or wings, sick dogs or rabbits all arrived at Watte's for repairs or medical attention.

Cage birds and common fowls with all the ills that beset their species entered his hospital, were cured and restored to the bosom of their grateful owners and Watte's fame grew apace with every new success. His skill in handling birds and beasts was something uncanny and this very proficiency was at times a matter for regret to the old man for very often when just in their prime and at the height of their careers as artists his performers had a knack of disappearing, especially if they were of the feathered variety, like "Yock" a big rooster, which when bidden by his master would emulate the bird famous in bible history and crow three times.

Getting special attention and always in grand order

Watties proteges were a sore temptation to his sisters and the family pot was the grave of many a promising artist.

Through the old man regretted each succeeding loss he made no outcry about it, for such was the nature of the man. He never harboured hard thoughts and bad feeling had no part in his composition, so he just trained another artist and hoped for better luck and longer life to it.

Children all loved him for their young eyes saw beneath the unprepossessing exterior the heart of gold and sympathetic nature that endeared ~~them~~ him to them all and many a lad and lass now grown to man and womanhood remembers with affection the old man who was at once and the same time their best ~~friend~~ and his own worst ~~enemy~~ friend.

To the public he served so long Wattie was always the respectful, obliging servant, extending that courtesy of manner that was the hall mark of his profession and the special attribute of the old school of ostlers.

In return he enjoyed the trust and confidence of a large circle of friends who had probed beneath the outer clay and found the treasure below.

Watties end was as calm and peaceful as the autumn of his life and end he merited as befitting a good and faithful servant. He smoked his last pipe as usual one night and went to bed, blew out the light and fell asleep for all time and the smile of content on his face reflected a body at rest and a soul acceptable in the sight of his Maker.

So passed a humble man who had so endeared himself to the public that it erected a lasting memorial to his memory. With "Aul Wattie" passing another link with bygone days, customs, and manners was broken, and soon the chain will be rusted beyond repair and cast aside, for a new generation has arisen which knows not or cares for these things.

J. H. Smythe