

Sounds And Letters

*Notes from a Lesson given to the Workers of
the Harbour of Refuge, Peterhead, February 1891.*

Binob üt, kel ko man nedeilik vöno etävob :

bin[ön] to be
-**ob** suffix denoting the first person singular - 'I':
thus, 'I am'
üt that very person
kel who
ko with
man a man
ne- prefix to denote the negative, 'noy', 'un-'
deil[ön] to die
-**ik** adjectival suffix: thus 'undying', 'immortal'
vöno once
e- prefix to denote the Perfect, or Past, Tense
täv[ön] to travel, to journey
-**ob** first person singular - 'I': thus, 'I did travel'

I am he, who once with an immortal man did journey.

In truth, had I been given the choice, I would have set out on my journey with no companion at all. For our pace was senescent, our fellowship uncomfortable and our dialogue always disturbing. We left behind the comely town of Cromarty, pressed between the shores of two Firths. To Nairn we travelled, and then wherever business called me: to Forres and to Elgin indeed. From Fochabers, we shunned the road of temptation that leads to Keith, and hastened to the coast, to Cullen and Portsoy; then to the twin towns rich in fricatives, Banff and Macduff; each and every one set as a dim jewel in the tarnished necklace of the cities of the North. On this journey, we circumvented the sapphire in the brooch, the Broch, the fractious town of Fraserburgh; and turned our way southwards, to rough-edged Turriff. And came at last, as all men must do, to Peterhead.

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But first: you must know that I follow a trade which takes me to some of the farthest outposts of civilisation, modest

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places where a man with skills such as mine are called for only on an occasional footing. For I am a repairer and tuner of church-organs. In a great city, such as Glasgow or Edinburgh, men of my profession vie for business as a matter of life or death; under-cutting each other in an attempt to secure the next job, driving each other and themselves into poverty and despair. Such is the nature of Capitalism. But for those prepared to journey out of Edinburgh, there are rich pickings in smaller places. I have established a list of towns which have need of my services, perhaps once a year, strung along the Fife coast, up beyond Arbroath and Montrose, beyond Aberdeen, where a huge land of opportunity opens up; also to the South, into the more obscure Borders towns. I have rivals, sure enough, in Dundee, in Aberdeen and in Inverness; but I have built up my business by the quality and quantity of my work and I have convinced myself that I am a hard man to oust from my contracts. Why, you might ask, do I not make myself resident in some more convenient spot, such as Aberdeen? Certainly, it might be more comfortable, and I could be called on more rapidly in a time of trouble and unexpected catastrophe. But I find that Edinburgh pleases me better. There is an excellent network of railways which will take me to the smallest village in the shortest possible time, should there be an urgent situation; and I can be summoned at the least notice by a letter with a penny stamp.

After thirty-three years at this trade, as apprentice and master, I have established a list of over two hundred customers; if I visit each one just once in two years, then I can lead a comfortable and quiet life, venturing out on these lengthy tours of the hidden country, perhaps three times a year; returning to Edinburgh to pursue my own interests. There is a great sufficiency of work in tending to broken reeds, rotten bellows, abused manuals, and the other depredations to which the organs in small churches are subjected. I admit that my work at this trade, and my frequent journeys into the wilderness, have cost me personal happiness, and encouraged me to actions which I now regret; but that is not the matter of this Hand-Book.

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In late January of 1891, I set off for the North from the

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Caledonian Station in Edinburgh. As usual, I bought a third-class ticket to Inverness; and then travelled by cart and foot to Cromarty, where my first job awaited me. From there, I would make my way southwards, as I have indicated in my preamble to these notes, in the style of the poet Virgil, taking in a number of towns to the north of Aberdeen, the coast-line from Montrose to Dundee, and two small places in the Kingdom of Fife.

My visit was uneventful, up until the time I was about to leave Cromarty. The wind-chest had split in four places, no doubt due to the perpetual dampness which comes in on the church from the cold seas. I repaired it as best I could, given the small amount of money which I had been offered for the job. Having done that, there were three pedals in the pedal-board to be replaced; and finally a dead mouse to be retrieved from the third rank of pipes. This last task took me four hours, since it is no easy task to extract small items from such a perpendicular place. I was still in the church as dusk fell, playing a medley of the tunes *O Tannenbaum* and *The White Cockade*, by which performance I am used to ensuring that my work is complete. Having established that all was in order, I dusted down the wooden surfaces of the organ one last time, and left the church.

Outside, it was cold. The Firth sent in a biting wind, and the bare branches of the trees shook and rattled against each other. Almost all natural light had faded from the sky. The clock in the town struck five, hopeless, dejected, gloomy, dispirited, sombre, and the chimes carried away in the gale. Any man subject to superstition and illogical fears might have found himself tipped over easily into terror by the short journey across the graveyard which surrounds the church. I, however, revelled in the solitude, and in the contemplation of mortality and the transience of the human life; and wondered whether to take a whisky or a beer with my supper, which I foresaw would soon be steaming on a board before me. When a shape suddenly burst out from behind a grave-stone and stood before me, a lesser man might have taken fright. But I realised quickly that this was no bogey, merely a dog. As it did not bark, I continued my way down the path towards it. The dog turned round and trotted in front of me. As we reached the gate which led out into the road, it stopped

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again, turned to me. And bared its teeth. I took one step forward. It growled. I took one step down a path leading to the right. The black dog stopped growling. As I made to dodge past it out into the road, it bounded back in front of me and encouraged me, with its fierce snarling and open jaws, to precede it down the other path. After a few yards, we turned past a stunted tree which grew there, and came across a small shed or building. Its door stood ajar, and a dim light shone out through the narrow opening. Wondering whether some gardener or sexton might be hard at it, I pushed back the door to peer in.

I was surprised to find that, in the damp and mouldy building, something the size of a small van or large privy, an old man was feebly tapping his way up and down, a heavy stick held before him. I coughed gently, so as not to startle him. He whirled round, lost his footing and slumped with considerable noise against the stone sarcophagus, which took up most of the space.

"The Pox and the Devil!" he snarled. "What's your purpose, slithering about like the Viper?" I stepped forward to help him to his feet, as he seemed irretrievably entangled in his coats and his stick. He pushed me off, and, with considerable cursing, staggered to his feet. "Eh? Eh?" he repeated, poking at my chest with a talon.

I am not used to such an ill-welcome; but excused him for his advanced years. I explained as best I could who I was, what I was doing in the church, and that I had seen the light.

"On espionage, then? Well, there's no forgiveness for you. Step in, step in - there's a wind howling that will bring my testicles up with a clang if you do not close the door!"

I did as I was bid, and closed the heavy wooden door behind me. Inside, it was surprisingly snug for a shed. Four or five candles were burning, and the scent of melting wax I found most comforting. It was silent, too - all sound of the wind outside was stilled, as if the external world had ceased to exist. I examined my new acquaintance, and he likewise examined me. He was very old, and his face was weather-beaten - indeed, his hands and the bottom of his legs, exposed where his trousers fitted badly, were also gnarled and of the deepest mahogany colour. His clothes were most surprising: they were of considerable antiquity, and I cannot remember having seen anything of their sort

in all my days, even in some of the more isolated villages of the North-East. If he was, as I conjectured, an octogenarian or nonagenarian, then I supposed that his coat, his waistcoat, his trousers and boots were of the fashion when he was quite a young man. On his head was deposited a large wig, also of a bygone age, which had, perhaps because of his fall, slipped sideways upon his massive skull to expose a most depressing want of hair. Such white threads as still clung to his head were long and feathery.

“Behold, then, an Ancient.” The old man leered at me. “Are you so impudent with all those you encounter? Or only with those gentlemen who display the stigmata of longevitious years?”

I averted my eyes as best I could, and studied my surroundings. I now realised that I stood inside an ample tomb, or mausoleum. A large stone coffin was placed upon some hidden supports; I peered underneath it, thinking to see the dog which had herded me hither. But the dog had vanished utterly. The lid of the coffin was covered in piles of yellowing paper or parchment, covered with scribbled words, some of which had floated to the floor in the draught. There was a tin bucket in a corner on the floor, from which an unmentionable sour stench arose. And the walls were covered in red and gold and black paint, depicting scenes vaguely reminiscent of war and derring-do. The illumination was not sufficient to let me see all the details. But the pictures extended from the floor to the roof, from end to end, and, as I admired them, they seemed to make the place larger, loftier, more spacious. I found that I could stand up tall and stretch my arms out, even stride up and down, but did not find a single obstacle. The old man sat on the coffin and watched me.

“So, Mr. Justice,” he said, after a few minutes, “and how can you beneficate me?”

I was so startled to find that he knew my name, that I stood and gaped at him, presenting the appearance of an imbecile of the orthodox tradition.

Evidently exasperated at my continued silence, the old man struck me several times forcefully upon the lower legs with his stick, which - I confess - caused considerable pain. My cry echoed around the tomb as if it were a palace or the great hall of a mighty fortress.