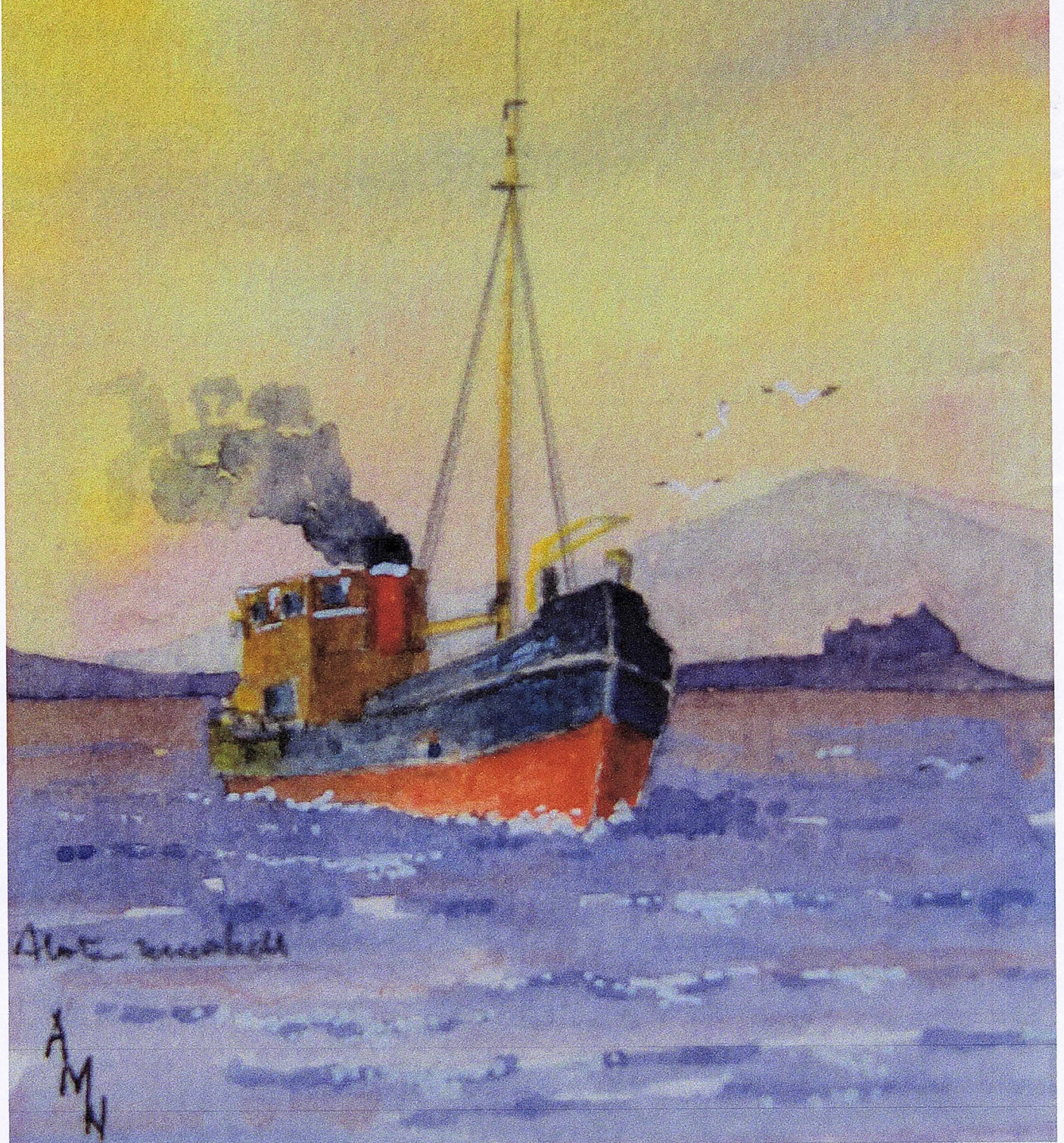


*Home Is The Sailor.*





## HOME IS THE SAILOR

" Just wait till I get my hands on that boy !"

The tone of annoyance and exasperation in Jessie MacDonald's voice penetrated her husband John' s thoughts as he sat comfortably entrenched in his Oban Times.

Friday night at tea time was an honoured ritual. The weekly papers were delivered by the post and John turned his back on the world and his work to study their contents. At the moment he was working through the Births, Marriages and Deaths columns

For a moment he lowered the paper to glance at his wife's frowning brows. " Och, well this is the last night she'll be here anyway. They're sailing with the tide at 7 o'clock.

Jessie was not to be appeased by this piece of information.

" It's all very well for you to sit there and say that. You don't have to wash clothes every day or scrub him at bedtime.

Last night was the final straw. A new pair of dungarees split at the knees and covered in grease and coal dust. Puffers and the sea, that's all he thinks about.

I told him if he went near that boat today he would get the scolding of his life. His time would be better spent at home learning his spellings and tables."

By the end of the first sentence John had retreated behind the safety of his Oban Times.

After last night's episode of the dungarees, he had to agree with his wife's discipline, but inwardly he sympathized with the boy.

In the month of May, spellings and tables were an unappetizing diet for a rather energetic ten year old.



**" Slowly now ! Ready to ship your oars, Donald and Duncan ? ",  
The skippers voice was confident and commanding.**

**The small boat slipped through the water until with a few gentle bumps she came to rest along side the puffer. With speed and ease the painter was made fast by a crew member whose agility at clambering over the side showed he had performed this task many times before. Oars were placed across the thwarts and rowlocks hung by their chains. A few pulls at the hand pump assured them that no water had been shipped during the voyage**

**All these activities were carefully supervised by the skipper, whose calm leadership contrasted with his diminutive stature and freckled face, from which tousled fair hair had to be frequently chased by a toss of the head. A pair of obviously new dungarees displayed repair work on one knee.**

**" We'll be lost when the Glen Isla goes," mused the red-head who had secured the painter, as the boys stood beside the winch watching the fitting of the hatch covers on the hold**

**"I'll bet Angus's mother won't be sorry," piped another grimy little urchin, and at this sally they burst into howls of laughter, that is everyone but Angus, who was still feeling a bit peeved at the scolding he had earned the previous evening. As the laughter died away he quickly changed the subject by suggesting a final visit to the engine- room.**

**This part of the boat was always fascinating, with its pipes and dials. Sometimes the engineer gave them handfuls of cotton waste and brasso, and with an enthusiasm bounded only by their energy, they polished the pipes until they shone.**

**This task made them engineers in their own right.**

**" It's great and warm in here," observed Duncan, the red head.**

**" Remember on Wednesday night how cold the wind was and yet in here we were like pies in an oven ."**



" If I was a sailor I would sleep in that space beside the boiler." The remark came from Jimmy, the smallest of the group,

" What would you do if the boiler burst? " inquired Donald, a member of the band whose imagination at times tended towards the horrific.

" Aye so you could," agreed Angus, gazing thoughtfully at the rather confined space and ignoring Donald's question.

The arrival of the engineer ended the conversation and indicated that the puffer would be sailing shortly. They returned to the quay to await this unfortunate event.

Too soon the skipper shouted to the watchers to release the mooring ropes.

Slowly at first and almost reluctantly the Glen Isla went astern giving the boys the impression that it was them and not the boat that was moving.

When she was about 100 yards out from the pier, she turned, gave a couple of blasts on her hooter and headed out to sea.

The boys stood silently watching her grow smaller and smaller, until only a small orange blob was visible under a pall of thick black smoke.

At last, when even the sharpest of eyes could not pick her out of the hazy bulk of the distant hills, they turned for home with slow steps and a deep feeling of loss. Now and then a head would turn hoping that a miracle had happened and that the " Glen Isla " was again nudging the pier. But the miracle did not happen and soon even the hills seemed to be slipping away as the evening settled itself gradually in the sky.

**" Where's Angus ? "**

The reaction was as quick as that on the parade ground. Feet stuck - heads jerked round. But there was no Angus.

The boys had nursed their sadness in silence, each immersed in his own thoughts, unaware of his companions.

" Och, he's probably still at the pier," stated Duncan. " We're keen, and keen enough on puffers, but Angus is a fanatic."

Knowing this to be a fair judgement of the situation they continued on their way, but with

the spell broken beginning to re-live the adventures of the last few days.



At ten o'clock the question was being asked in their homes by Angus's mother who had decided that even a despondent fanatic should have returned home by that time. The boys were roused from their beds, and subjected to a parental interrogation in an effort to discover the whereabouts of the missing Angus.

Finally when it seemed that the boys had completely drained their memory banks, wee Jimmy recalled Angus' reaction to a remark which he had made earlier in the day. It was only a straw, but a straw to be clutched at nevertheless.

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Once clear of the sheltering land the "Glen Isla" began to nod her head at the short, white - fringed swells which the rising breeze sent to challenge her progress. Dirty - grey, rain - soaked clouds slid threateningly across the fading sky suggesting that the ship might yet have to contend with stiffer opposition. However, undaunted, on she pushed her broad shoulders thrusting aside the oncoming slopes in a smack of spray.

In a very narrow space beside the boiler and hardly noticeable from the deck entrance to the engine room, a small rather limp figure struggled to sit up and make the short trip to the rail outside. He had fought gallantly, both mentally and physically, against this moment, but defeat became gradually inevitable with each rising swell, roll and shudder. Angus, like many a sailor before him, was finding out that the sea has her own catechism which candidates either pass or fail. At that moment he was clearly heading for the dunce's corner.

With surrendering legs, the self assured skipper of a few hours earlier, staggered out to the rail, to be instantly chilled by the racing spray - flecked wind. However pain is a comparative thing, and the greater pain held him white - knuckled to the rail, his eyes entranced by his torturer,. How he wished he could wake to the solid, unmoving warmth of his bed, or jump on some time - machine that would whisk him smoothly back to port where this time he would stand and let all puffers slip off on their voyages alone.

Soaked by rain and spray, frozen by the taunting edge of the wind, the stow - away was hardly conscious of the sailor who bumped into him in the failing light and thus brought about his discovery. Like a soggy rag - doll he was carried to the fo'o'sle to warmth and a bed, albeit a rolling one.



" They would find him very soon, " the assurance was a bit forced, but John MacDonald knew he had to try and make his wife believe it was true. They had driven the fifty miles to Balcraigie in one and a half nail-biting hours, banking on wee Jimmy's memory and their knowledge of the working of their son's mind. They had decided that the puffer skipper would make for the next port on the coast rather than turn back in the worsening weather.

" Butt even if he is on board, anything can happen in this weather."

It was all too easy to think of the possibilities as they stood along with the pier - master, and one or two others who had joined them in their anxious vigil, in the meagre shelter provided by the pier head shed. The pale, watery light of the electric bulbs on the poles overhead etched their worried faces as they stood with eyes straining to catch a glimpse of red and green lights. Gradually the evening sky gave up the struggle and night spread itself over everything except the splashes of light on the pier head. The wind sharpened its many edges by a few cold degrees, and heightened the discomfort of the shuffling, waiting group. They had reached the stage of not talking, but keeping their thoughts and fears to themselves. As their anxiety held back the minutes, John felt that soon they must decide that their deduction was wrong and think of another plan of action. Another half an hour would surely be giving the "Glen Isla " a generous allowance for the conditions of the sea. Inwardly he prayed, and willed the lights to blink their hope from the darkness. Suddenly, his musings were shattered by his wife's near- hysterical shout and fierce grip on his arm.

" She's out there! She's coming ! "

Her pointing hand showed him nothing, but solid black night, but she was insistent that she had glimpsed a green light. Soon , however, he was glad to admit that her eyes, sharpened by worry, were correct.

With a teasing slowness that seemed unending the squat shape materialised out of the dark, to be dramatically highlighted by the pale pier lights.

The MacDonalds moved forward their gaze raking the puffer for a glimpse of their wandering sailor, and were rewarded by the sight of a small, pale-faced figure standing in a tent - like duffle coat in the engine room entrance.

Two hours later as he slid into an exhausted sleep he murmured

" If that's the sea you can keep it ! ".