

Oxley James Macdonald

Donalblane of Darien



James Oxley

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CHAPTER I BY WAY OF BEGINNING

It was not just an ordinary sort of name, but one of those which made you think "thereby hangs a tale." In this case the thought goes to the mark, and the tale in question will be told after a fashion in the following pages.

At the outset a quick glance back to times long past is necessary in order to a fair start, and without a fair start it were hardly worth going ahead.

As the seventeenth century drew to its close there came into prominence in England a remarkable Scotsman named William Paterson, among whose notable achievements was having a large share in the founding of the Bank of England, which subsequently grew to be the greatest monetary institution in the world.

He was a member of the board of directors at the opening of the bank, but appears to have sold out not long after, and with his money in hand to have looked about him for some way of investing it that would be for the public good.

Now, these were the days of vexatious monopolies and irritating restrictions in commerce. The trade of Britain with the distant parts of the globe was divided between two great grasping corporations – the East India Company and the African Company – which, although they were at deadly enmity with each other, heartily co-operated in crushing every free-trader who dared to intrude within the elastic limits of their "spheres of action."

William Paterson was an ardent free-trader, and he became inspired with the noble mission of freeing commerce from the hurtful restraints laid upon it by short-sighted selfishness. With a keenness of instinct that makes it easy to understand his previous success, he surveyed the then known world and put his finger upon the spot best suited for the carrying out of his beneficent design.

The Isthmus of Panama, or Darien, is, beyond a doubt, one of the most interesting, as it is certain yet to be one of the most important bits of terra firma on this round globe. The connecting-link between the continents of North and South America, it is also the barrier dividing the Atlantic from the Pacific Oceans, and, in fact, one side of the world from the other.

From the time of its discovery and occupation by the Spaniards, it has been a matter of general belief that whoever had command of this narrow neck of land held the key to the commerce of the world. Here would naturally be concentrated the mutual trade of the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of America. Moreover, it would necessarily form an important stage in the shortest route between Europe and the Indies, as well as the innumerable islands lying far to the south of the equator.

Little wonder, then, that the Spaniards wanted to keep the isthmus to themselves, and always did their very best to make it particularly unpleasant for anybody who sought to share its advantages with them; and in fine contrast to their dog-in-the-manger policy – for they really made little use of their splendid opportunities – was the spirit in which William Paterson conceived his great Darien project, and with characteristic energy proceeded to carry it into effect. It was in the year 1695 that he obtained from the Scottish Parliament an Act for the incorporation of "the Company of Scotland trading to Africa and the Indies," which thenceforth became popularly known as "the Darien Company."

This company was granted very extensive powers, and had the imposing capital of £600,000, one-half of which, it was shrewdly stipulated, must ever be held by *Scotsmen residing in their own country*, thus ensuring the permanence of the national character of the undertaking.

As it turned out, however, this provision might have been omitted, for when, after the Scotch half of the stock had all been subscribed, the books were opened in London for the other half, there came such a rush of applicants for shares that it was soon all taken up. This so aroused the hostility of the two great English companies already mentioned that they actually called upon the House of Commons to assist them in crushing their Scottish rival, and the House of Commons unfortunately was weak enough to yield to the pressure brought to bear upon it.

The London subscribers to the new company were threatened with prosecution for concerting to infringe upon the rights enjoyed by the other companies, which so alarmed them that with one consent they backed out and forfeited their holdings.

With ordinary people this would have meant the collapse of the whole enterprise. Not so, however, with the sturdy Scots who were behind it. The provoking action of their English cousins only served to arouse the national spirit. Their expected allies had failed them. Well, what if they had? Scotland was not to be daunted. She would go on alone, and reap for herself all the glory and the more substantial rewards of the great undertaking. Accordingly another hundred thousand pounds of stock was subscribed by this thrifty, determined people, and so, with a capital only two-thirds as big as had been counted upon, the Darien Company proceeded to carry out the chief purpose of its formation.

But all these disappointments and difficulties had, of course, meant delay, and consequently it was not until the year 1698 that the first expedition was made ready to start.

Among those most warmly interested in William Paterson's project was Alexander Blane, of Leith, a worthy and enterprising shipowner, who had won a snug fortune in the service of that fickle mistress, the sea. After working his way up from cabin-boy to captain, he had settled down on shore, while others commanded his craft for him, and being a shrewd, far-sighted, close-fisted man of business, had prospered from year to year, in spite of occasional inevitable losses.

He had held aloof from the Darien scheme at the start, as was indeed characteristic of him, but when the London folk acted so shabbily his Scottish blood was set a-boiling.

"Hech!" he exclaimed, in high indignation, "the Southrons would have the world to themselves, eh? They're just dogs in the manger, and we Scots shall teach them the lesson they need. I hadna thought of taking ony shares in Mr. Paterson's company, but if it's only to spite the English I'll put me doon for five hundred pounds." And he was not only as good as his word, but he interested himself actively in securing other subscriptions to a considerable amount.

Not having been blessed with bairns of his own, Mr. Blane had adopted a nephew from the Inverness Highlands, whose own name had been foregone in favour of his second father's.

Donald Blane, or Donalblane, as he soon came to be called for short, was a pretty uncouth specimen of a boy when, at the age of ten, he was taken into the Blane household. The term "halfin" would describe him sufficiently to Scots folk, but for others some further particulars may be required.

The son of a shepherd, whose tiny shieling with only a "but and ben" seemed to shelter an impossible number of children, he had practically run wild upon the mountains.

Bare-headed and bare-footed the greater part of the year, he had grown up as sound, strong, and sturdy as one of the shaggy ponies which he loved to bestride in a wild gallop over moor and heather, and although his most partial friends could hardly pronounce him handsome, he bore a frank, fearless, wide-awake countenance that did not fail to make a good impression upon those who took the trouble to look into it. His thick, tousled hair showed a slight tinge of red in the sun; his eyes were deep-set and of a fine, clear grey; his mouth a trifle large, but firm; his chin square, and full of character.

But the most attractive feature of the boy, if so it may be called, was his smile. When Donalblane was pleased or amused his face lit up wonderfully, and his parting lips revealed a double row of snow-white teeth that were a gift of beauty in themselves.

Five years of city life wrought many changes in his outward appearance without in any wise impairing the fineness of his nature. He learned to endure the at first irksome restraints of such troublesome things as trousers, collars, hats, and shoes, and – still harder lesson – to become accustomed to the daily drudgery of school, so that both in body and mind he showed very decided improvement.

But his love of outdoor life lost none of its strength, and there being no moors near by to range over, he took to the water instead, spending as much of his free time as possible with the sailormen, who had such marvellous yarns to spin, climbing up and down the rigging of brigs and barques and ships, and now and then getting a short trip about the Firth of Forth when his uncle permitted. Thus he became filled with a passion for the sea that was at its height when the proposed Darien enterprise set Scotland afire, and down in his heart Donalblane determined that he would do his very best to join the brave band of adventurers into the wonderful New World.

CHAPTER II

DONALBLANE CARRIES HIS POINT

It was one thing for Donalblane to make up his mind to go to Darien, and quite another to carry his resolution into effect.

Alexander Blane was a masterful man, who had no fancy for accepting advice or suggestions from other folk. He much preferred thinking of things himself, and Donalblane knew well enough that for him to make a direct request meant its being turned down both promptly and finally. Strategy was therefore necessary, and, after some deep thought and the casting aside of various schemes, he hit upon one that gave promise of success if judiciously carried out.

Thanks to his natural quickness of mind and his interest in his studies, he had quite won the heart of the dominie who with book and birch ruled his little educational kingdom, and so to wise William Laidlaw he went with his scheme. Now, as it happened, no man in Scotland had been more fired by Paterson's daring project than this school-teacher of Leith. He was a Scot of the Scots, and the bitterest regret of his life was that a crippled leg, which made active movement impossible, barred his own way to joining the expedition.

Disappointed in that direction, he had done what was perhaps even better – he had invested the entirety of his own savings in the stock, and he had by tongue and pen done all in his power to promote the interest of the enterprise. It was therefore only natural that he should listen to Donalblane's bashful confidence with a swelling and sympathetic heart.

"Ay! ay! laddie," he said, regarding the eager, earnest boy with a look of unwonted tenderness, "and so ye wad fain gang tae Darien? I dinna blame ye. Glad wad I be to gang myself, if I were na too auld for sic a far-going. But if I be too old, are ye na too young, Donald?" And he bent a keen look upon him from under his shaggy brows.

Donalblane flushed and moved uneasily on his seat. That was the very argument he most feared. "I am owre young, maybe," he replied; "but I'm verra strong, and big for my age;" which was true enough, as he looked full two years older than he really was. "And then, ye ken, there'll no be anither such chance as this to see the world for the rest of my life."

The dominie smiled shrewdly. That was the usual talk of youth. He knew much better; but somehow the lad's passion for the adventure took strong hold upon him, and the upshot of their talk together that summer evening was that Donalblane went home joyful of heart because he had enlisted an ally who was pledged to help him in realising his desire.

Mr. Laidlaw was on excellent terms with Mr. Blane, and no excuse therefore was needed for a friendly visit, in the course of which the talk naturally enough came round to the Darien expedition, already in course of being fitted out.

"Hech! but I wad fain be going myself," said the dominie, heaving a huge sigh of regret, "and if it were na for this halting leg of mine, I'd be putting my name down."

Mr. Blane indulged in a sympathetic smile. The idea of the limping dominie venturing to face the perils and privations on sea and land that were sure to be encountered touched his sense of humour, but he was too courteous to betray it.

"I'm inclined a bit that way likewise," he responded, "and were I only twenty instead of sixty, I'd be offering myself to Maister Paterson."

"Have ye thought o' sending any one in your stead?" inquired the dominie, as innocently as if no hidden purpose inspired him.

"Ay, I have thought something of it, but I've not made up my mind at all," was the reply.

Having thus secured his opening, the wily dominie, by strategic devices, which did infinite credit to his ingenuity and knowledge of human nature without putting any strain upon his

conscience, at last succeeded not only in filling Mr. Blane's mind with the idea of Donald being sent out in some sense as his representative, but in so doing it that the worthy shipmaster quite supposed he had conceived the notion himself.

Accordingly, a few days later Mr. Blane called Donald into his own room, and began asking him some questions that made the boy's eyes glitter with hope.

The sagacious dominie, knowing Mr. Blane, had counselled Donald not to let on in any way how eagerly he desired to go to Darien, but to seem simply willing to do whatever he was told. He therefore put a strong curb upon himself, and responded respectfully to what was asked of him.

"Ye've got a great liking for the sea, they tell me, lad," began Mr. Blane, with a keen glance at the bright face and sturdy figure.

"Oh, yes, sir," answered Donald emphatically.

"And wad ye care to go away altogether on a ship?" asked his uncle.

"Ay, that I would, sir," was the hearty reply; and then, in a sly, apologetic tone, "But of course I'd like to come back again."

Mr. Blane smiled grimly. He quite understood the boy's eagerness to be rid of the restraints of school and of town life, and did not take at all amiss the readiness he expressed to leave the roof that had sheltered him so comfortably, and fare forth into unknown difficulties and dangers.

"And what wad ye say to going with Mr. Paterson away out to America, if he'll let you?" was the next question; and Donald could feel his uncle's deep-set eyes piercing him like arrows.

But he controlled himself wonderfully, and in a quiet, steady voice, that touched no chord of opposition, said, "I wad like it verra weel, if *you* will let me go, sir."

Mr. Blane was better pleased by this response than he showed, and, after a brief silence, he got up, saying, "Well, well, we'll think about it – we'll think about it. Ye're owre young, maybe, to be leavin' your friends to gang among strangers; but ye're a likely lad, and it may go towards making a man of you. Say naething about it – do you hear? – for the present – not a word."

Donald promptly promised, and left his uncle with a heart full of hope. Only to the dominie did he mention the interview, and then for nearly a week he was kept on tenterhooks of anxiety.

In the meantime Mr. Blane conferred with Mr. Paterson, and having been assured by him that he would take a kindly interest in the boy, and allow him to return at the end of the year if he wished, he fully decided to let him go.

When this was communicated to Donald, he had great difficulty in restraining the impulse to give a great shout and fling his tam-o'-shanter to the ceiling, but by an heroic effort he kept himself in hand, and, after expressing his gratitude to his uncle, hurried away to the dominie with the good news. Thus was this momentous matter settled, and now came the business of getting ready.

Owing to the withdrawal of the English subscribers and the consequent decrease in the amount of capital aimed at, the expedition could not be fitted out on so large a scale as Mr. Paterson had at first intended. Nor was this the only difficulty he had to encounter. If the funds were somewhat deficient, there was no lack of enthusiasm. The chivalry of Scotland had been aroused, and hundreds of men of high family were ready to exchange their prospects in their own country for the golden hopes held out by America, recking little of doubts and dangers.

It became a delicate and troublesome task to select from such a throng of eager volunteers, for, of course, all could not go, and, alas! for the success of the enterprise, in too many cases family interest or personal influence prevailed to find a place for some good-for-nothing scapegrace instead of an honest, hard-working man, who would have been a valuable addition. If only Mr. Paterson had been able to inspire those associated with him with his own unselfish zeal and high integrity, there might have been a different story to tell. Unhappily, he stood almost alone in seeking no advantage or profit. Everybody else had a keen eye to number one. As a natural consequence, numberless jealousies, suspicions, and antagonisms arose. Instead of working harmoniously together, the council in charge of affairs plotted and counterplotted, wrangled and

fought, until poor Paterson's patience was utterly exhausted, and he had good reason to wish himself well out of the business.

Not only were the members of the expedition ill-selected, for the reasons given, but the ships that were to carry them, the arms, provisions, goods, and entire equipment, were all contracted for in a manner that greatly enriched the merchants at the expense of the enterprise, and led to the loss of many a life in the after-days.

The ships were old and rotten, but so painted and fixed up as to disguise the fact. The arms were of inferior quality, the provisions adulterated so shamefully as to be hardly fit for human food, and the merchandise taken for traffic with the natives of the Land of Promise consisted mainly of shop-worn remainders; yet for everything the highest price was charged and paid.

To crown all, the ships were commanded by coarse, brutal, and ignorant captains, jealous of and hostile to one another, and caring little for the authority of the council. But Donalblane knew nothing of this, and, beyond warning him to be very careful to keep his own counsel and to be chary of making new friends, his uncle had not given him any hint of it.

Proud of his substantial wooden chest, containing not only an excellent outfit of clothes, but a good pair of pistols, a sword, and a small quantity of beads and trinkets wherewith to do a little trafficking with the natives on his own account, he stood on the deck of the largest of the little fleet of five vessels one bright day in July 1698.

CHAPTER III OFF TO DARIEN

Five ships, not one of them really fit for the long and perilous voyage, composed the expedition, and they looked gay enough as, bedecked with flags and crowded with excited people, they swung at their moorings ready for departure.

The heart of Scotland beat high with hope. It was her first attempt at founding a colony, although her sons had done so much to help in the founding of English colonies, and now all the glory and the gold to be won in the new world would be hers, and hers alone: no other nation should have any share in them.

Donalblane felt something of this patriotic enthusiasm stirring his young heart. He was not wholly selfish in his desire to be a member of the expedition. Of course, his head was full of wild dreams of what wonders he would see, and the great things he would do in his own interest. But above it all rose a national pride that did him credit. He was a Scot to the backbone; and whether he realised all his own expectations or not he was passionately eager that the great scheme itself should be accomplished, and that his country should take a proud place among the nations.

His uncle, having bidden him good-bye and God-speed, had returned to the quay, and Donalblane, leaning over the bulwarks, was waiting somewhat impatiently for the anchor to be hoisted and the sails set, when a hand was laid gently on his shoulder, and a deep voice said in a kindly tone, "Beginning to feel a little homesick already, lad?"

Looking up quickly, Donald found beside him the master-spirit of the enterprise, William Paterson, to whom he had been once introduced in his uncle's office.

"Na, na, sir!" was his prompt, respectful reply; "I'm wearying to be off. Will the ships be ganging soon, sir?" and he fixed his big grey eyes upon Mr. Paterson's face.

"Oh! is that the way the wind lies?" was the response, as the great man smiled approvingly at the boy, for he was much pleased with his spirit. "You are eager for adventure, eh? Well, my lad, you are likely to have your fill of it." And his handsome countenance clouded as he spoke, for the execution of his scheme had been marked by many disappointments which boded no good for its ultimate success. By his frank, honest way and earnest efforts to do what was best for the interests of the expedition, not for the profit of those supplying the outfit, he had aroused the hostility of many who had not hesitated to plot against him, with the result that latterly he had been practically set aside, and had been compelled to witness gross imposition and fraud which he was powerless to prevent. No wonder, then, that his downcast face presented a striking contrast to that of the enthusiastic boy as they stood on the deck together; and, influenced by the other's contagious confidence, he brightened a little before continuing. "We can hardly fail to have adventures, for it is a new world we are going to, where savages, and, worse than savages, the cruel, grasping Spaniards, are already, and we shall have to reckon with them before we can succeed in our scheme. But with the providence of God protecting us, we shall succeed," and his voice took on a triumphant tone that revealed his faith in the Divine approval of his project. "Be careful what friends you make on board here," he added, once more laying his hand upon the boy's shoulder. "There are many to be shunned, and remember that, for your uncle's sake and your own, I shall always be glad to be of such service to you as may be in my power." And ere Donald could get out his thanks, Mr. Paterson hastened away to speak to one who had just come on board.

The interview had been a short one, but it made a deep impression upon Donald. That the great man of whom his uncle and the dominie always spoke in such terms of admiration should address him so graciously, touched the lad to the core, and from that moment he was ready to yield

to Mr. Paterson the same passionate devotion that the Highland clansmen used to hold for their chieftain.

At last, amid fluttering of flags, booming of cannon, and solemn offering of prayer, the ships weighed anchor and, with all sails set, stood out to sea, the favouring breeze taking them in a few hours well out of the sheltered Firth of Forth into the exposed expanse of the North Sea.

They had not long been tumbling about amongst ever-troubled waters when Donalblane, in common with very many of his shipmates on the *Bonnie Scotland*, had a new experience. Hitherto his personal acquaintance with the sea had been limited to short trips between Leith and neighbouring ports, and now for the first time he was out of sight of land and entirely at the mercy of wind and wave. An old salt would have called the wind before which the ships of the expedition bowled southward just "a fresh breeze," but Donalblane thought it a gale, and the *Bonnie Scotland* had not long been pitching and tossing in lively fashion before something began to go wrong inside of him, making him feel so uncomfortable that he was fain to leave the quarter-deck, where he had been enjoying himself, and to seek a snug corner in which he could curl up unnoticed. By the end of an hour he was completely overcome, and if Mr. Paterson had happened along then with his question, he certainly would not have received so prompt and resolute a response. Not one day's illness had Donald known in the whole course of his life, and this misery of sea-sickness made him as angry with himself as was possible in his prostrate condition.

As the ships got down towards the English Channel they tumbled about more than ever, until the poor boy began to think he was really going to die, and heartily wished himself back upon solid ground. But once they were out in the Atlantic matters improved. Fine, bright weather succeeded, the vessels moved steadily along before a favouring wind, and Donald was soon established on his sea-legs.

He now had a chance to become acquainted with some of his fellow-passengers, the majority of whom had shared his sufferings. They were certainly a very mixed company of men, women, and children. Highlanders and lowlanders, peers and peasantry, grave ministers and gay scapegraces, shaggy shepherds from the hills, and bronzed sailor-men from the coast – a motley throng indeed, the members of which Donald studied with keen interest, for he had a sociable nature, but bore in mind the good advice given him by Mr. Paterson in regard to making acquaintances.

As it fell out, his first friend was won in a decidedly dramatic fashion. Among the occupants of the first cabin was a gentleman by name Henry Sutherland, whose wife and child, a beautiful boy of four years, accompanied him. Donald was greatly attracted by the child, and anxious to make friends with him, but had no opportunity, until one day a startling thing happened.

It was fine and warm, and the little fellow was playing happily about the quarter-deck near his mother, when a sprig of the nobility, the Hon. Hector Simpson, who had been sent out by his family in the hope of improving his habits, sauntered along, and, moved by a spirit of mischief, picked up the child, and held him over the bulwarks, saying teasingly, "How would you like to go and play with the fishes?" The mother screamed and started forward, and the child, terrified on his own account, gave so sudden and violent a wrench as to free himself from his tormentor's grasp and fall into the sea, leaving a portion of his dress in the latter's hands. Appalled by the utterly unexpected outcome of his foolish act, and unable to atone for it by springing after the child, for he could not swim a stroke, the Hon. Hector joined his shouts for help with the shrieks of the frenzied mother.

At that moment Donalblane was leaning over the bulwarks near by and feeling very lonely. He longed for friendly companionship, but was bashful about breaking the ice with any of those to whom he felt drawn, and so far no one, save Mr. Paterson, who always had a pleasant smile and kindly word for him, had taken any particular notice of him.

Now Donald was a strong, expert swimmer. He had dared the depths of many a dark loch before he left his native mountains for the coast, and at Leith he had always been one of the first to take a dip in the spring, and one of the last to give it up in the autumn. Without a question of

fear, therefore, but thinking only of the pretty boy in peril of death, he threw off his coat and leaped over the bulwarks into the heaving waters. Happily the little one was still afloat when Donald's powerful strokes brought him within reach.

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