CHAPTER I.

"There go the Ships!"

The verdict was given against me when we were living in a rural area of a South English county. Uncontrollable circumstances brought us there, and an uncontrollable temperament, fretting for a return to the beloved Highlands, delivered me from it when not even the solace of work could be found in its utterly alien atmosphere. The Church, with its worshipful services, was, to me, the only redeeming feature of the place and its sole interest .....

To get to Church for Sunday Evensong we are caught up in a stream of traffic as constant as it is varied. Here glides past - so easily that it seems effortless - a Rolls Royce, a man and woman lolling within in spacious luxury. There runs efficiently the ubiquitous Ford, its interior packed with a crush of commonplace occupants, perfectly cheerful in their obvious discomfort. Buses, of course, find place in the long procession, and a few pedal cycles. But, without intermission, shoot past with aggressive assertiveness, accompanied by explosive chug and jarring rattle, motor-cycle after motor-cycle — to the peaceful wayfarer, vilest of inventions.

After the rush and riot of the road, the ordered peace of the little church is welcoming in its restfulness. The twinkle of the tapers on the altar; the lilies flanking the cross: the green frontal of fine needlework - all combine to produce an atmosphere of quiet, worshipful dignity, aloof and alien indeed from the hurry-scurry of the road.

"The twentieth day of the month, Evening Prayer, the hundred and fourth Psalm."

Benedic, anima mea.

The chant, as befits the theme of the psalm, is a brisk and joyful one, and right lustily is it sung by the choir, well supported by the congregation.

In the heart of at least one lover of real country that psalm unloosed tumultuous longings - soon again to be satisfied.

..... The waters stand in the hills ..... They go up as high as the hills and down to the valleys beneath .... The

birds make their nests ..... The high hills ..... The great and wide sea also wherein are things creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts ..... There go the ships, and there is that Leviathan .....

Vanished was the church; blissfully remote the town of tumult and turmoil; for the wearisome racket of the road was exchanged the exultant ecstasy of the sea's roar - Thalassa, thalassa!.....

I am back again on a remote shore locally associated with St. Columba. In the background, craggy hills, gaunt and grim, are broken by valleys of softer character. These are coursed by little burns, on the fertile banks of which may be found, amongst many flowering plants, beds of the Osmunda Regalis. In the foreground stretches of silver sand are broken, or alternated, by great rock barriers and smaller reefs. On both the sands and the higher rocks, sea and shore "birds make their nests", and at low tide the clear shallows of the countless rocky pools are so choked by "things creeping innumerable", as to suggest that the sea has its own problems of overcrowding. It is interesting to pass from these habitations of the living organisms, through the various stages of the evolution of their shells to sand. First, a little further along, there are other patches where the shells have been crushed, but their limpet origin is still recognisable, and so one passes on to areas in various degrees of disintegration, till a bed of sparkling sand shews attrition completed, the preponderating limpet shell determining the colour.

Limpets, by reason of their very commonness, are not objects calculated to arrest attention, yet it is a mistake metaphorically to brush them aside as devoid of all interest. The naturalist on the seashore has not ignored them, and so some discoveries have been made regarding their powers and habits. The extraordinary tenacity of the limpet is not only due to the grip exercised by the mollusc itself, but to the atmospheric pressure - 15 lbs. to every square inch of surface - due to the resultant total exclusion of air. When the limpet does take an occasional short excursion, it is apparently his habit to return to his own old spot, for both limpets and their spots have been distinctively marked in order to ascertain if the mollusc had any homing instinct.

Lobster fishing is practised off this coast, and in rambling along the shore one may find, tucked away in some crevice of the rocks, in order to seek temporary protection against his numerous enemies, a crustacean undergoing the rearmouring process necessitated by his growth. This process is most remark-

able, the lobster waiting till its skin splits, when it begins to extricate itself from its shell. This is ultimately cast off in perfect condition, not only every joint being entire, but the most delicate appendages, and even those portions of thin white shell that penetrate the body, being shed. These cast-off suits of shell-armour may often be found in the most perfect condition on the shore. This initial process being accomplished, the lobster's body is able to expand itself within a new elastic skin, and when at last this has gradually become hard by the deposit of carbonate of lime, the creature, after a period of rest, is able to emerge from its hiding-place and resume its normal life again.

The presence of lobsters, for which otters have a great partiality, may account for the choice by one of these animals of a crevice amongst some rocks on the opposite shore of the little bay, as a summer resort. An otter will turn over every stone he encounters in his search for shell-fish, more plentiful here than any other class of fish. At sunset, when he awakes for his night's work, his silvery whistle may be heard across the bay, and if the surface of the sea be smooth, glasses may detect upon it his "chain" - the stream of bubbles which alone betrays the otter's course when he is swimming below water.

At varying distances out to sea there are many islands, that can be seen on a clear day, and in between runs the broad highway of the Atlantic Ocean. And "there go the ships" that I have watched with eyes that they have so mesmerised that, to the procession of the present there has succeeded the pageant of the past, and it is that that has left the more vivid impression - an epitome of the turbulent history of the Highlands.

There can be no part of these western shores associated with the voyaging of Columba and his fellow venturers that has not given rise to recurrent wonder on the part of present-day landsmen who follow in their wake. It may be that, to the mariner, there is nothing at which to marvel in the thought of a coracle of wicker work and hide, or of a boat hollowed out of a tree-trunk, escaping the snares of the countless reefs with which the coast is bestrewn, to ride easily over breakers where more modern craft would go in danger. Can the immunity
8 of these holy men, living in an age of faith, be ~~wholly~~ attributed to the prayers of St. Columba, as Adamnan would have us believe? For he writes: "The swellings of the waves, also, rising sometimes mountains high in a great storm, were soon quieted and brought low at his prayer; and his ship, in which at that time he happened to be sailing, was brought to the wished-for haven in a perfect calm." Be this as it may, besides landing on these coasts, Columba's vessels in their

voyaging between Iona and the islands, or the mainland, must often have passed along this highway of ocean.

Naturally after the craft of St. Columba and his companions in the conversion of the West, there followed a vision, albeit a brief one, of Haco's great fleet, the most formidable that up to that date (1257) had ever left Norway. For these ships of the Viking twice passed in sight of these shores. Sailing down in all its pride to its doom at Largs, the shattered remnant returned by the same route to the home of the Norsemen.

How fair a sight upon these seas must have been "the sea-borne wooden coursers of Gestils" - the graceful long boats of the Norsemen, made narrow for speed and shallow that they might hug the coast and penetrate by rivers inland! To render turning unnecessary, they were made pointed at both ends, as, indeed, still are some of the crofters' boats on these coasts. The long ships, made higher, if necessary, by the interlocking of the Vikings' shields, had for rudder an oar slung in a rope over the side, ever since called "starboard"; in bad weather, coverings stretched from side to side of the ship sheltered the rowers. Gaily painted, the solitary square sail coloured or embroidered with some boldly designed emblem, a figure of a dragon, head or tail, at either end, no other vessel that sailed the western seas was so greatly feared by the Celtic inhabitants of their seaboards.

Southwards from Sleat in Skye and the coasts of Clanranald, down this seaway must have come, somewhere about 1484, the war-galleys of these chiefs to support Angus Og of the Isles, claiming an independent sovereignty, against the champions of the Scottish Crown. Issue was joined at the Battle of Bloody Bay in the Sound of Mull, and at the close of the conflict it was as victors that the galleys of Sleat and of Clanranald would return homeward in triumph, if a little battered. Northwards, almost 100 years later, there passed in sight of this shore, from the ~~First~~ Firth of Clyde, a MacLeod birlinn, or galley, the landing of which, on the little island that guards the harbour of the Isle of Eigg, was fraught with such ghastly issues. Was there ever such another tale of reprisals? First the MacLeods insulted the women of their enemy Clanranald on the smaller island, and as their punishment they were tightly bound with ropes and set adrift in their boat. Then, rescued by their own clansmen, these insulters of women must needs be avenged, and thus came about the infamous Massacre of Eigg when the inhabitants of the island were smoked to death in Uamh Fraing - ^called popularly, the "MacDonald's Cave" - immediately opposite this viewpoint on these shores. But it was ill-work beard-

ing MacDonalds, of whatever branch, and the murdered islesmen did not lack vengeance at the hands of their fellow-clansmen. The best known of these reprisals is the burning of the MacLeods in the church of Trumpan, Skye, immediately to be followed by the "Fight of the Spoiled Dyke", when MacLeods outside the church fell upon the raiders, and slaying them, tumbled a dry-stone dyke upon the bodies to bury them. To think of so much rioting, burning, and bloodshed issuing from the casual landing of a boatful of men.

These galleys of the clansmen, still found as lymphads on the escutcheons of West Highland families, as the house of Lorn (originally Macdougalls), MacDonalds, MacQuarries, MacKinnons, etc., were obviously a legacy from the Norsemen, though, for the most part, they must have presented a much more primitive appearance. At once the "private carriage" and the principal home of the chiefs living on the western seaboard as well as in the isles, pictures of them constitute one of the favourite and not the least interesting adornment of the beautiful sculptured stones of the Western Highlands. On the stones these galleys are never shewn with their sweeps or oars - which were at least 16 feet long - as in the later representations of the arms of various chiefs. The galleys, while they vary in the number of sweep-holes shewn, in details of helm, rigging, furled sails, shrouds and stays, have almost invariably, like their prototypes, both prow and stern pointed and raised high above the low deck. They often display a shield, or fly a banner, and sometimes there is a figure to represent the crew, of which there would be from 30 to 120 men. Incidentally, it may be remarked, that originally the galley, as the ship of the Highlands, was possibly introduced on these stones as the symbol of the Church. Alternatively the sculptured galley may be taken to typify death as a voyage ended, the vessel sails furled, sweeps shipped - safe in harbour.

In between the Battle of Bloody Bay and the Massacre of Eigg there were seen on this highway of ocean, not once or twice only, but many times, vessels in type very different from the clinker-built long ships and galleys of the chiefs. This was no less than the fleet of the King of Scotland on the many occasions when James IV and his son paid their several visits to the Islands, or when James IV, unable himself to go, sent his famous admirals.

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James IV had a great flair for naval architecture, and navigation was one of his favourite pursuits. Previous to his reign, his predecessors had chartered merchant seamen whenever ships were wanted for the royal use in the service of the nation.

James IV preferred to have a fleet of his own, and surrounding himself with such enterprising seamen as the famous Sir Andrew Wood (of The Flower and the Yellow Carvel), and the Bartons, father and sons, he himself supervised the work of building in his dockyards. Of his ships, the Great Michael, built in 1510, far exceeded in size that of any other warship afloat at the time. Pitscottie says she was 240 ft. long and 36 ft. wide within the sides that were 10 ft. thick. She had four masts and her main mast had two fighting tops. In her building there was used up all the oak wood of Fife, except Falkland - probably because here was a royal palace. Besides this, more oak was brought from Norway, whilst in the construction, which took over a year, numerous foreign shipwrights were employed as well as those of Scottish birth. Although the Great Michael only mounted 35 guns, she carried below decks an enormous quantity of the small artillery of the day, from culverins to cross-bows: and her complement of 1000 men included 120 gunners and 300 mariners. The Lion, commanded by Andrew Barton, was another imposing vessel, inferior in size only to Great Harry, England's largest ship of war. On the fatal occasion when the Great Michael, then in the third year of her age, went with her attendant 30-oared galley, to her doom, thanks to the mad incompetence of her rival, the Earl of Arran, the royal Scottish navy consisted of 13 other great ships of war and about the same number of smaller vessels. Of these ships that so proudly sailed to France, only a few, disabled and shattered, returned, and they did not include the Great Michael. Of her fate nothing certain is known.

No royal progress by sea could have had a finer setting than this stretch of water, up and down which the fleets of both James, father and son, must have often sailed in all their impressive array. Both monarchs realised to the full the value of the pomp and circumstance of pageantry in making impress on the minds of a primitive people. Twice James IV held his court and received the neighbouring chiefs at the castle still standing on these southern shores. In the summer of 1539 James V, himself sailing in his favourite ship, the Salamander, made an imposing progress through the isles, fitting out a fleet of twelve carvel-built ships, amply furnished with artillery and manned by the most skilful mariners in Scotland. Attended by Cardinal Beaton and two great nobles, the Earls of Huntly and of Arran, all with their retinues, it was no wonder that three ships were exclusively devoted to the carriage of provisions. But since the object of this expedition was not only to strike awe to the hearts of the turbulent West Highlanders and islemen, but to make a nautical survey of the coast, James was accompanied by Alexander Lindsay, the most skilful hydrographer in

Scotland, and one whose charts are still preserved. Sailing round by the north of Scotland, the royal fleet on its southward journey would be splendidly visible from these shores whence Skye itself can be seen. It was on leaving this island that, in order to perpetuate the royal visit, the chief harbour exchanged Columba's name for the king's, and Loch Columcille became henceforward Portree.

If on James IV's last visit to the Western Isles, the Great Michael had not then been launched, as seems probable, yet similar ships, even if of lesser build, cannot have failed to have presented an overpowering contrast even to the greatest galley of the island chiefs. Instead of the slim swift birlinns to which they were accustomed, they would see the stately, if somewhat clumsy and slow-moving, carvels with their high projecting platforms, or "castles" with battlemented protection, fore and stern, from which missiles could be hurled upon the enemy as well as from the fighting-top on the mast. Trumpeters, stationed on one of the castles, performed the modern office of the steam siren. The King's own ship, gaily painted, would have the lion of Scotland emblazoned upon the sail, a crown on the end of the bowsprit (from which depended the anchor), and shields on which the lion rampant alternated with those bearing the thistle (the royal badge) and St. Andrew's cross (the national standard) to form the bulwarks.

Who has not heard of the many attempts to salve the wreck of the Spanish galleon, the Florida, that treasure-ship of the Spanish Armada that foundered in Tobermory Bay, Mull; and in search of whose riches hopeful syndicates still pursue hopeless diving operations? Doubtless many another such galleon, after the crushing defeat, with the nearer passage home closed to it, drifted, a battered hulk, along these perilous, and, to the Spaniard, unknown shores. However that may be, the western coast abounds in tales of mysterious Spaniards, and still on the north coast of Scotland there are to be found communities with all the physical characteristics of the Spaniard, traceable, so it is said, to native intermarriage with Spaniards cast ashore from the wrecks of the Invincible Armada.

It was the ship of his chief that, in the 18th century, inspired Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair, one of the most famous of the Gaelic bards, with the subject of his masterpiece. "Alexander the son of Master Alexander" (Macdonald), was himself a schoolmaster and an ardent Jacobite, who fought for the Prince, his father being, as his style implies, a graduate, and the celebrated Episcopalian incumbent of Ardnamurchan. The bard's "Biorlinn of Clanranald" is a lengthy poem divided into many

parts, beginning with an invocation of the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity severally to bless and protect the ship and its gear in all its voyagings. "O God, render Thou the breath of the sky propitious, that it may urge us over the waters, uninjured, to a safe haven". Then follows a benediction of the arms of the crew, and exhortations to them and to the rowers separately, prior to providing the latter with the iorram, or song to be sung as they ply the oars. The setting out to sail is described in detail, and then follows a vivid description of a storm-tossed voyage issuing in a peaceful landing. The account of the tempest piously concludes with a return of "thanks to the King of Kings for having delivered the good Clan Ranald from the fearful death that threatened him."

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Back again in recent years, the much more prosaic procession of ships along this stretch of seaway ~~is~~ yet ~~of~~ interest to hold the eye. The cruisers and battleships of today, in their sombre grey and workman-like appearance, may lack the gallant gaiety of their predecessors, but no patriotic Briton can behold the passing of a squadron without his emotions being stirred. There steams swiftly and silently past the dignified procession of ships, each keeping its allotted distance, led, appropriately enough in waters associated with the remains of the Armada, by the flagship, H.M.S. Queen Elizabeth. Follows a white-winged yacht, her body also in white, making an ethereal appearance upon this rugged coast. In glaring contrast, a tramp steamer, ugly and dirty, trailing a cloud of dense smoke behind her, puffs along. Her successor after a short interval presents an eerie appearance: a ship, evidently fitted with a motor, gliding along under four bare masts without any obvious means of propulsion. Then there are one or two passenger steamers, and "mixed" boats, those carrying both passengers and cattle, in which the feelings of the passengers at least, are of unmixed disgust.

Thus does the traffic of the high seas parallel that of the King's highway, thereby providing an easy transit back to the church in the pseudo-country village, and more particularly to that seat in the nave whence the spirit, stimulated by the psalm for evensong, fled to the sea and the ships. And since, after all, the Church herself is so frequently symbolised by a ship, and therefrom, moreover, the nave itself derives its name, who shall say that, after all, the spirit went far afield, much less that its departure was without excuse and therefore censurable?

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Today, on this little island there is but one sight - and that a peaceful one - to suggest the War. An occasional solitary flying boat is an old acquaintance. Now, however, two or three frequently circle over the unwonted spectacle on these waters of many strange ships. Often one or two amphibians descend from the sky to the surface of the sea, there taking the shape of leviathans ploughing the ocean with trail of foam. These are they that watch over the great convoy of ships anchored in the shelter of the island, to await their escort of destroyers when harbours shall be ready to receive them, either for discharge or loading of cargoes. These vessels, a motley fleet, are drawn up in orderly lines of many types of ship - tramp steamers, both small and greater, consorting with liners, and here and there an oil tanker.

Whilst in the main naturally the ships fly the red ensign, the flags of Norway, Belgium, Holland, and Greece are also to be seen. All are uniform in one particular only - the cannon mounted on the poop of every one. These guns, silent under their coverings of canvas, are the solitary evidence on this island of the War which is being waged throughout the world.
