

CHAPTER II.

Our Particular Ship.

8 It was a superb day - warm and windless. We arrived at the familiar Highland pier just five minutes before our boat was about to leave and I walked quickly aboard. Punctual to the minute, the ship cast off her moorings and steamed away on her course. The captain was on the bridge and a seaman was at the wheel. Instinctively I knew that the steersman constituted the whole of the crew, for some reason to which I was serenely indifferent, ~~because~~ It was no concern of mine. It seemed, too, quite natural that my friend had, obviously, been left behind on the pier, and to find that I was the only passenger on board.

The situation appeared, indeed, so far entirely normal, and only began to change to something gloriously different when, far ahead on the waters of the Sound, my eye caught an unwonted sight. Instantly I whipped out my glasses from their case to train them on the distant object so rapidly approaching us. Then -

"Captain, captain!" I shouted, "there's an enemy vessel bristling with guns bearing down on us!"

"My Chove", he exclaimed, "that's a bit of bad luck, with us that short-handed!"

"Leave that to me!" I returned, in a spirit fiercely exultant at this miracle which had delivered a Hun ship into my hands. How supremely thankful I was at that moment that all my efforts to obtain war work had failed. What dire misfortune it would have been after all had I been young enough to fill a censor's chair. The tide had turned with a vengeance indeed. Nothing, nothing could equal the opportunity I now had of serving King and Country in the most direct manner, by directing the cannon on the poop at this approaching sea-wolf. I made a dart for the gun: trained her full upon the enemy, and triumphantly - CRASH! ... I had dashed the water bottle and glass by my bedside on to the floor.

.

The actuality was very different. It is strange that in dreams no single factor is ever too remote from reality, to

disturb the impression of the dream being a true experience. Otherwise, the mere conception of any Highland boat leaving on time would have warned me that what was to follow would be but the cruellest mockery. the dream god could contrive.

This indifference of the Highlander to time finds expression in one of the folk tales of the Gael. Three giants lived in a cave. The tallest remarked to the second one day: "Was that a wolf that was howling?" A year and a day afterwards, the second giant asked, "What were you asking me the other day?" A year and a day after that again, the third giant said: "If you two fellows would be chattering, chattering all day and all night too, I will be leaving the cave to yourselves."

It was a horrible day of bitter blast and weather entirely unwarranted by the season - late September. The familiar pier presented a wholly unfamiliar appearance with khaki figures on guard at the entrance with fixed bayonets. Anticipating formalities incidental to wartime, we arrived in due time, but in no time we were passed as "friends" and so passed through on to the pier.

The boat, however, was not even in sight, and awaiting her arrival, we endured the time - an hour and a half - before we could board her in company more idiotic than intelligent, and more pungent than pleasant - that of droves of singularly stupid sheep whose "rank offence" did indeed stink to heaven. For these were replaced by the disgorging of other flocks from the Morar's hold, whilst, simultaneously, some score sections of army huts piled high on the deck, were laboriously lifted and carried ashore.

A monotonous routine with a dull cargo in acute contrast with the exciting shipments we used to witness in happier times. These were performances which were invariably so absorbing that they made nothing of an hour or so of waiting. For it was like watching the delivery of a "country order" of goods of every conceivable kind from every department of the most comprehensive of stores. There used to be little mystery about the nature of the majority of these, for most of them travelled starkly naked or had their figures but slightly veiled. Thus we would watch bedstead ends, fireplaces; a wheel barrow; coils of barbed wire; a perambulator; kitchen chairs; bags of cement; a sofa frankly displaying its internal injuries; a feather bed oozing out of its scant wrapping, and a pony trap (or "machine") dangling tremulously in mid-air from the ship's crane, to be engulfed in the all-embracing hold; whilst we

would hold our breath as some article seemed to be about to anticipate its release from the tackle. Were any strangers to the Highlands with us, we would ask them to hazard a guess as to the most unlikely article to be shipped. I never remember even the most imaginative guess being correct.

Cair

Inspection of the bestowal of these and other goods in the hold held no less entertainment. A mattress loosely tied together with ~~wire~~ rope would provide good bedding for the safe transit of a stack of glass panes, and a collie might find a snug corner on it, too. Bags of flour would find firm support against barrels of tar, and barbed wire might nestle against a sheep's corpse, indelicately clad in torn muslin. If adversity makes strange bed-fellows, the various discordant items of a Highland cargo surely make stranger.

Seeing amongst the passengers a youth I knew, and surprised that he, no conscientious objector, should not be in uniform, I strolled over the deck to have a chat with him. After enquiring after his people, I asked him, knowing him to be, as the Gaelic saying has it, "as hale as a salmon", how it was he was "in civvies". He told me a strange tale. When he had been called up, he joined the Army, but could not wear khaki.

"Could not wear khaki?" I repeated, puzzled. Yes, he had stated the literal truth. Never before had medical men come across such a case of illness as his - all due to wearing khaki. Some of the most skilled physicians in the country had been to examine him. At first they thought something in the dye of his particular battle-dress had poisoned him. But no. They had tried him with khaki made by other firms: the result was just the same. He had been in hospital for no less than four months, and on leaving, was honourably discharged from the Army.

With nothing to remind us on our present voyage of these bygone days of extremely mixed cargoes, excepting the welcome appearance, in well-remembered sequence, of familiar mountains, we drew into port and landed without incident on our Island of Enlargement.
