

James Ewing Ritchie

The Cruise of the Elena: or, Yachting in the Hebrides



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Ritchie J.

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Ritchie J. Ewing James Ewing

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CHAPTER I. off for greenock

The late – I had almost written the last – Imperial ruler of France was wont to say – indeed, it was his favourite maxim – “Everything comes to him who waits.” It was not exactly true in his case. Just as he was to have placed himself at the head of his followers, and make his reappearance in France, and to have effaced the recollections of Sedan, Death, who waits for no one, who comes at the appointed time to all, put a stop to his career. Nevertheless, the saying is more or less true, and especially as regards my appearance on board the *Elena*. Whether my great great grandfather was a Viking or no, I am unable to say; all I know is, from my youth upwards I have longed for a yacht in which I could cruise at my own sweet will. I am no great hand at singing, but when I do sing it is always of a

“Life on the ocean wave,
A home on the rolling deep.”

And thus it happened that, when an invitation was sent to me, just as I was on the point of giving up the ghost, in consequence of the heat of a London summer, to leave Fleet Street, and cruise among the Western Islands of Scotland, I accepted it, as the reader may well suppose, at once.

It is somewhat of a journey by the Midland night express from London to Greenock; but the journey is one well worth taking, even if, as in my case, you do not get a Pullman car, as that had been already filled, and was booked full, so the ticket manager said, for at any rate twelve days in advance. It is really interesting to see that express start. “It is an uncommon fine sight,” said a man to me the other night, as he lit his pipe at the St. Pancras Station. “I always come here when I’ve done work; it is cheaper than a public-house.” And so it is, and far better in awakening the intellect or stimulating the life. It is true I did not see the express start, as I happened to be in it; but I had another and a greater pleasure – that of being whirled along the country, from one great city or hive of industry to another, till I found myself early in the morning looking down from the heights of Greenock on the busy Clyde below. It was a grand panorama, not easily to be forgotten. All at once it opens on you, and you enjoy the view all the more as it comes in so unexpected a manner.

Let me pause, and say a good word for the line that bears me swiftly and safely and pleasantly on.

The story of railway enterprise as connected with the Midland Railway has been told in a very bulky volume by Mr. J. Williams. I learn from it that forty years have elapsed since, originating in the necessity of a few coal-owners, it has gradually stretched out its iron arms till its ramifications are to be found in all parts of the land. Actually, up to the present time it has involved an expenditure of fifty millions, and its annual revenue reaches five. Daily – hourly, it rushes, with its heavy load of tourists, or holiday-makers, or men of business, past the ancient manor-houses of Wingfield, Haddon, and Rousbery; the abbeys of St. Albans, Leicester, Newstead, Kirkstall, Beauchief, and Evesham; the castles of Someries, Skipton, Sandal, Berkeley, Tamworth, Hay, Clifford, Codnor, Ashby, Nottingham, Leicester, Lincoln, and Newark; the battle-fields of St. Albans, Bosworth, Wakefield, Tewkesbury, and Evesham.

But it is to that part of the line between Carlisle and Settle that I would more particularly refer – that boon to the southern tourist who, as the writer did, takes his seat in a Midland carriage at St. Pancras, and finds himself, without a change of carriage, the next morning at Greenock in time for the far-famed breakfasts on board the *Iona*. The ordinary traveller has no idea of the difficulties which at one time lay between him and his journey's end. "It is a very rare thing," once said Mr. Allport, the great Midland Railway manager, a name honoured everywhere, "for me to go down to Carlisle without being turned out twice. Then, although some of the largest towns in England are upon the Midland system, there is no through carriage to Edinburgh, unless we occasionally have a family going down, and then we make an especial arrangement, and apply for a special carriage to go through. We have applied in vain for through carriages to Scotland over and over again." And so the Midland had no alternative but to have a line of their own. When it was known at Appleby that their Bill had passed the Commons, the church bells were rung, and, as was quaintly remarked, the people wrote to the newspapers, and did all that was proper under the circumstances. No wonder Appleby rejoiced and was glad; for, though the county town of Westmoreland, it is not much of a place after all, and the railway must have been a boon to the natives – especially to the ladies, who otherwise, it is to be feared, would have wasted their sweetness on the desert air.

On Monday, the 2nd of August, 1875, after an expenditure of three millions, the Settle and Carlisle line was opened for goods traffic. It must have been an awful undertaking, the making of it. "I declare," said a rhetorical farmer, "there is not a level piece of ground big enough to build a house upon all the way between Settle and Carlisle." An ascent had to be made to a height of more than a thousand feet above the level of the sea, by an incline that should be easy enough for the swiftest passenger expresses and for the heaviest mineral trains to pass securely and punctually up and down, not only in the light days of summer, but in the darkest and "greasiest" December nights. To construct it the men had to cut the boulder clay – very unpleasant stuff to deal with – to hew through granite, to build on morasses and dismal swamps. Near the southernmost end of the valley, watered by the roaring Ribble, the town of Settle stands among wooded hills, overhung by a lofty limestone rock called Castlebar; while far beyond on the left and right rise, above the sea of mountains, the mighty outlines of Whernside and Pennegent, often hid in the dark clouds of trailing mists. Up the valley the new line runs, pursuing its way among perhaps the loneliest dales, the wildest mountain wastes, and the scantiest population of any part of England. Three miles from Settle we reach Stainforth Force, and just beyond are the remains of a Roman camp. At Batty Green the navvies declared that they were in one of the wildest, windiest, coldest, and dreariest localities in the world. In the old coaching days the journey across these wilds was most disagreeable and trying. It was no unusual thing, we read, for rain to come down upon the travellers in torrents; for snow to fall in darkened flakes or driving showers of powdered ice; for winds to blow and howl with hurricane force, bewildering to man and beast; for frost to bite and benumb both hands and face till feeling was almost gone; and for hail and sleet to blind the traveller's eyes and to make his face smart as if beaten with a myriad of slender cords. In Dent Dale, which is almost ten miles in length, the scenery is remarkably fine. Nearly five hundred feet below, now sparkling in the sunlight, now losing itself among some clusters of trees, winds the river Dee; while first on one side and then on the other is the road that leads to Sedbergh. Leaving the tunnel, we find ourselves in Garsdale, in a milder clime and amidst more attractive scenery. Some four hundred feet below us the river may be observed winding over its rocky bed in the direction of Sedbergh, while we get extensive views on the west. Presently we see the Moorside Inn, a far-famed hostelry abounding in mountain dew, standing at the head of the valleys – the Wensleydale, winding eastward towards Hawes; the Garsdale Valley, going westward towards Sedbergh; and the Mallerstang, leading northwards towards Kirkby Stephen.

At Ais Gill Moor the line attains its highest altitude, 1,167 feet above the sea, from whence it falls uninterruptedly down to Carlisle. The country here is very wild and rugged. Stone walls

mark the division of the properties, and scarcely any house can be seen. On the west the grandly impressive form of Wild Boar Fell rises. Still higher on the east is Mallerstang Edge. In the winter you can well believe that along this valley sweeps the wind in bitter blasts. Three miles after we have left the Moor Loch we are in Cumberland, and are reminded of other days when all the old manor-houses and other edifices were built for defence against the invasions of the Picts. Though the upper part of the Eden valley is now occupied by a few industrious farmers and peaceful shepherds, we instinctively think of the time when the slogan of border chiefs and their clansmen sent a thrill of terror through Mallerstang, and when sword and fire did terrible work to man and beast. Here is Wild Boar Fell, where, says tradition, the last wild boar was killed by one of the Musgrave family; and there in a narrow dale, overlooked by mountains and washed by the Eden, are the crumbling ruins of a square tower – all, alas! that remains of Pendragon Castle. About a mile before we come to Kirkby Stephen we pass on our right Wharton Hall, the seat of the now extinct dukes of that name. Near the town are two objects of especial interest – the Ewbank Scar and Stenkrith Falls. The sight from Ormside Viaduct is wonderfully fine. Appleby, as seen from the line, has a very pleasing appearance. The railway runs past Eden Hall, the residence of Sir Richard Musgrave, the chief of the clan of that name. At the summit of a hill, near the Eden Lacy Viaduct, we find the remains of a Druid's temple, known by the name of "Long Meg and her Daughters." Close by is Lazonby, a village in the midst of interesting historical associations. As we pass through the ancient forest, we would fain stop and linger, as the scenery about here is deeply romantic, as much so as that of Derbyshire. At Armthwaite the beauty of the district culminates; and we gaze with rapture at its ancient quaint square castle, its picturesque viaduct of nine arches eighty feet high, its road bridge of freestone, its cataract, and its elm – said to be the finest in Cumberland. At Carlisle there is a fine railway hotel, which you enter by a side door from the platform, and where the traveller may attain such refreshment as he requires. Indeed, it is open to the public on the same reasonable terms as the London Tavern when it was the head-quarters of aldermanic turtle. The town is delightfully clean, and has many interesting associations; and as I stood upon the ramparts of the castle there on my return, smoking a cigar, there came to me memories of William Rufus, who built the wall, and planted in the town the industrious Flemings; of King David of Scotland; of Wallace, the Scottish hero, who quartered his troops there; of Cromwell, "our chief of men," as Milton calls him; and of the Pretenders, father and son. It is with interest I look at the church of St. Mary, remembering, as I do, that it was there Sir Walter Scott was married. I am told the interior of the cathedral is very beautiful, and crowded with memorials of a truly interesting character. Externally the place looks in good condition, as it was repaired as lately as 1853–6. Altogether the town appears comfortable, as it ought to do, considering it has extensive founderies and breweries, manufactories of woollen, linen, cotton, and other fabrics; communication with six lines of railway; a canal, two rivers, and two local newspapers. Nor is Carlisle ungrateful. I find in its market-place a statue to Lord Lonsdale, who has much property in these parts. One can tarry there long. Afar off you see the hills of the Lake Country – the country of Southey and Wordsworth – and, if you but keep your seat, in an hour or two you may be, according to your taste, "touring it" in the land of Burns, or in the district immortalised by the genius of Sir Walter Scott.

As I went one way, and returned another, I enjoyed this privilege and pleasure. At Dumfries I could not but recollect that there the poet Burns wrote his

"Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled;"

that there he died prematurely worn-out in 1796; that there, as he lay dying, the whole town was convulsed with grief; and that there his funeral was attended by some ten or twelve thousand of the people whose hearts he had touched, and who loved him, in spite of his errors, to the end. "Dumfries," wrote Allan Cunningham, "was like a besieged place. It was known he was dying, and the anxiety, not of the rich and learned, but of the mechanics and peasants, exceeded all belief.

Wherever two or three people stood together, their talk was of Burns, and him alone. They spoke of his history, of his person, of his works, of his family, and of his untimely and approaching fate, with a warmth and enthusiasm which will ever endear Dumfries to my remembrance.” Thinking of Burns, the time passed pleasantly, as I mused, half awake and half dreaming, that early summer morning, till I reached Greenock, where sleeps that Highland Mary, who died during their courtship, and of whom Burns wrote, in lines that will last as long as love, and woman, and the grave —

“Ah! pale – pale now those rosy lips
I aft hae kissed sae fondly;
And closed for aye the sparkling glance
That dwelt on me sae kindly.
And mouldering now in silent dust
That heart that loved me dearly;
But still within my bosom’s core
Shall live my Highland Mary.”

CHAPTER II. from greenock to ardrossan

I shall never forget my first view of the Clyde from the heights above Greenock. It is true I had seen the Clyde before, but it was at Glasgow years ago, and it had left on my mind but a poor impression of its extent, or utility, or grandeur. What a sight you have of dockyards, where thousands of men are ship-building! and what a fleet of vessels laden with the produce of every country under heaven! As I take up a Scotch paper, I read: – “The cargoes imported during the month included 64 of grain, &c., 65 of sugar, 22 of timber, 5 of wine, 2 of fruits, 1 of brandy, 1 of ice, 3 of esparto grass and iron ore, 3 of rosin, 2 of oil, 1 of tar, 1 of guano, 1 of nitrate of soda, and 4 with minerals.” And then how grand is the prospect beyond – of distant watering-places, crammed during the summer season, not alone with Glasgow and Edinburgh citizens, but with English tourists, who find in these picturesque spots a charm they can discover nowhere else. Almost all the way – at any rate, since I left Leeds – I have had my carriage almost entirely to myself; and now I am in a crowd greater and busier than of Cheapside at noon, with knapsacks and carpet-bags and umbrellas, all bent on seeing those beauties of Nature of which Scotland may well be proud.

To leave the train and hurry down the pier, and rush on board the *Iona*, is the work of a minute, but of a minute rich in marvels. The *Iona* is a fine saloon steamer, which waits for the train at Greenock, and thence careers along the Western Coast, leaving her passengers at various ports, and picking up others till some place or other, with a name which I can hardly pronounce, and certainly cannot spell, is reached. It must carry some fourteen or fifteen hundred people. I should think we had quite that number on board – people like myself, who had been travelling all night – people who had joined us at such places as Leicester, or Leeds, or Carlisle – people who had come all the way in her from Glasgow – people who had come on business – people who were bent on pleasure – people who had never visited the Highlands before – people who are as familiar with them as I am with Cheapside or the Strand – people with every variety of costume, of both sexes and of all ages – people who differed on all subjects, but who agreed in this one faith, that to breakfast on board the *Iona* is one of the first duties of man, and one of the noblest of woman’s rights. Oh, that breakfast! To do it justice requires an abler pen than mine. Never did I part with a florin – the sum charged for breakfast – with greater pleasure. We all know breakfasts are one of those things they manage well in Scotland, and the breakfast on board the *Iona* is the latest and most triumphant vindication of the fact. Cutlets of salmon fresh from the water, sausages of a tenderness and delicacy of which the benighted cockney who fills his paunch with the flabby and plethoric article sold under that title by the provision dealer can have no idea; coffee hot and aromatic, and suggestive of Araby the blest; marmalades of all kinds, with bread-and-butter and toast, all equally good, and served up by the cleanest and most civil of stewards. Sure never had any mother’s son ever such a breakfast before. It was with something of regret that I left it, and that handsome saloon filled with happy faces and rejoicing hearts.

In about half-an-hour after leaving Greenock, I was at Kirn, a beautiful watering-place in Argyshire, in one of the handsomest villas of which I was to find my host, and the owner of the *Elena*, one of the finest of the four or five hundred yachts which grace the lake-like waters of the Clyde, and which carry the ensign of the Royal Clyde Yacht Club. A volume might be written of the owner, whose place of business in Glasgow is one of the real wonders of that ancient town. Morrison, the founder of the Fore Street Warehouse, and the father of the late M.P. for Plymouth, was accustomed to say that he owed all his success in life to the realisation of the fact that the great art of mercantile traffic was to find out sellers rather than buyers; that if you bought cheap and

satisfied yourself with a fair profit, buyers – the best sort of buyers, those who have money to buy with – would come of themselves. It is on this principle the owner of the *Elena* has acted. It is worth something to see the Sèvres china, the fine oil paintings, the spoils of such palaces as the Louvre or St. Cloud, the rarest ornaments of such exhibitions as those of Vienna, all gathered together in the Glasgow Polytechnic, and to seek which the proprietor is always on the look-out, and to recollect that all this display has been got together by one individual, who began the world in a much smaller way, and who is still in the prime of life. A further interest attaches to the gentleman of whom I write, inasmuch as it was under his roof that the first article of the *Christian Cabinet*, swallowed up in the *Christian World*, was written. It may be to this it is due that at once I am at home with him, and that here on board the *Elena* we chat of what goes on in London as if we had known each other all our lives. By my side is his son-in-law – one of those well-trained, thoughtful divines who have left Scotland for the South, and who are doing so much to introduce into England that Presbyterianism the yoke of which our fathers could not bear, but on which we, their more liberal sons, have learned to look with a less jealous eye; and no wonder, for to know such a man as the Doctor is to love him. And now let me say a word as to the *Elena*, which is a picture to admire, as she floats calmly on the water, or speeds her way from one scene of Scottish story and romance to another. It is rarely one sees a yacht more tastefully fitted-up, and we have a ladies' drawing-room on board not unworthy of Belgravia itself. She is slightly rakish in build, but not disagreeably so. Her tonnage is 200 tons, and her crew consists, including the stoker and steward, of some eight clever-looking, sailor-like men. As we sleep on board I am glad of this. With Gonsalo I exclaim, "The wills above be done; but I had rather die a dry death."

And now, after skirting the greater and the lesser Cumbraes, and the cave where Bruce hid himself, &c., &c., we are coaling off Ardrossan, apparently a busy town on the Ayrshire coast. I have been on shore, and have seen no end of coal and lumber ships in the docks, and in the streets are many shops with all the latest novelties from town, and with ladies lounging in and out. I know I am in Scotland, as I hear the bagpipes droning in the distance, and stop to judge the beef and mutton exposed for sale at the shop of the nearest "flesher." On a hill behind me is a monument which, the natives inform me, is in memory of Dr. Mac-something, of whom I never heard, and respecting whom no one apparently can tell me anything. I know further I am in Scotland, as I see everywhere Presbyterian places of worship, and hear accents not familiar to an English ear. I know also I am in Scotland, as I see no gaudy public-house with superfine young ladies to attract my weak-kneed brethren to the bar, but instead dull and dark houses, in which only sots would care to go. I know I am in Scotland, because it is only there I read of "self-contained houses" to let or sell; and as to Ardrossan in particular, let me say that it is much frequented by the Glasgow merchants in the season; that it, with its neighbour Saltcoats, supports a *Herald*, published weekly for a penny; that from it, as a local poet writes —

"We see bold Arran's mountains gray,
In dark sublimity, stand forth in grandeur day by day."

The poet speaks truly. As I write I see the heights of the Scottish Alps, whose feet are fringed with the white villas of the Glasgow merchants for miles, and washed by the romantic waters of the Clyde.

Anciently Ardrossan was a hamlet of miserable huts, says Mr. Murray – Mr. Thomas, of Glasgow, not Mr. John, of London – gathered around an old castle on Castle Hill, the scene of some of Wallace's daring achievements, and destroyed by Cromwell. It was said to have belonged to a warlock, known as the Deil of Ardrossan. The present town was originated in 1806 as a seaport for Glasgow, but, like Port Glasgow, proved a failure in this respect. It is, however, generally well

filled with shipping. The Pavilion, a residence of the Earl of Eglinton, adjoins the town. Steamers run thence to Belfast and Newry, and to Ayr and Arran and Glasgow.

Let me here remark, as indicating the cultivated character of the Scotchman, one is surprised at the number of local papers one sees in all the Scotch towns. They are mostly well written, and have a London Correspondent. It is beautiful to find how in the Scotch towns there is still faith left in the London Correspondent. The people swallow him as they do the Greater and Lesser Catechism, and even the London papers quote him as with happy audacity he describes the dissensions in the Cabinet – the hopes and fears of Earl Beaconsfield, the secret purposes of the garrulous Lord Derby, or the too amiable and communicative Marquis of Salisbury. When yachting I made a point to buy every Scotch paper I could, for the express purpose of reading what Our London Correspondent had got to say. I was both amused and edified. It is said you must go from home to hear the news. I realised that in Scotland as I had never done before. On the dull, wet days, when travelling was out of the question, what a boon was our “Own Special London Correspondent!”

CHAPTER III. a sunday at oban

Taking advantage of a fine day, we left Ardrossan, with its coal and timber ships, early one Saturday, and were soon tossing up and down that troubled spot known as the Mull of Kintyre. It was a glorious sight, and one rarely enjoyed by tourists, who make a short cut across a canal, and lose a great deal in the way of beautiful effects of earth, and sea, and sky. On our left was the Irish coast, here but fifteen miles across, and far behind were the dark forms of the mountains of Arran. Islay, famed for its whisky in modern and for its romantic history in ancient times, next rises out of the waters. Jura, with its three Paps, as its hills are called, comes next, and then, in the narrow sound between Jura and Scarba, there is the terrible whirlpool of Corrybrechan, the noise and commotion of whose whirling waves are often, writes the local Guide-book, audible from the steamer. The tradition is, as referred to in Campbell's "Gertrude of Wyoming," that there a Danish prince, who was foolhardy enough to cast anchor in it, lost his life. To-day it is silent and at rest, and it requires some stretch of imagination to believe, as the poet tells us, that "on the shores of Argyleshire I have often listened with delight to the sound of the vortex at the distance of many leagues." At length we reach Scarba, Mull is swiftly gained, and there, on the other side of us, not, however, to be visited now, are Staffa and Iona. Altogether, we seem in a deserted district. It is only now and then we see a house, or gentleman's residence, and, except where we pass some slate works on our right, the rocks and hills around seem utterly unutilised. Occasionally we see a few sheep or cattle feeding, and once or twice we are cheered with arable land, and crops growing on it; but the rule is to leave Nature pretty much to herself. It is the same on the water. We on board the fairy *Elena*, and the gulls following in our wake, are almost entirely monarchs of all we survey. On we glide up the Frith of Lorne, which seems to narrow as we come near to Kerrera, which has on its lofty sea-cliff the ancient Castle of Glen; and there before us lies Oban, or the white bay, in all its charms of wood and hill and water. Oban is a growing place, and we land where the steamer which brings on the tourists from Iona has just put down its passengers, amongst whom I see Dr. Charles Mackay, who, in the evening of his days, much affects this delightful retreat – a place, I imagine, quiet enough in winter, but now seemingly the head-quarters of the human race. There are yachts all round, but none equalling the *Elena*. The hotels which line the bay are handsome, beautifully fitted up, and the proprietors are looking forward to the 12th of August and the advent of the English. All the shops are doing a roaring trade, and as to eggs, not one has been seen in Oban these four days. Here come the coaches, something of a cross between omnibuses and wagonettes, which run to Glencoe and Fort William, and other spots more or less famed in Scottish story; and here is the band to remind one of watering-places nearer home. I find here the original Christy's Minstrel (I never thought of finding him so far North), and the proprietor of an American bazaar, who tells me that he has been taking his £40 a night, but who finds himself too well known to the natives, and intimates that he will have to move off shortly; and last, but not least, a gentleman who modestly enters himself in the fashionable announcements as Smith, of London! I should like to see that Smith. I dare say I should know him; but at present I have not succeeded in running him down. If he is going to stay long at Oban, it strikes me he should have plenty of money in his pocket. I don't blame the Oban hotel-keepers. They have a very short summer, and are bound to make hay while the sun shines; but they do stick it on. The Doctor tells me of a Scotchman who came to London, and who, to illustrate the costliness of his visit, remarked to his friend that he had not been half-an-hour in the place but bang went sixpence. That economical Scot would find money go quite as quickly here. At any rate, such are my reflections as I turn into my little cot after, one by one, the lights in Oban have been put out, and the last of the pleasure-seekers has retired to roost.

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