

ETHEL ALEC-TWEEDIE

A GIRL'S RIDE IN ICELAND

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A Girl's Ride in Iceland:

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Ethel Brilliana Alec-Tweedie

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

When this little volume (my maiden effort) was published five years ago, it unwittingly originated an angry controversy by raising the question "Should women ride astride?"

It is astonishing what a great fire a mere spark may kindle, and accordingly the war, on what proved to be a very vexed subject, waged fast and furious. The picture papers inserted cleverly-illustrated articles *pro.* and *con.*; the peace of families was temporarily wrecked, for people were of course divided in their opinions, and bitter things were said by both sides concerning a very simple and harmless matter. For a time it seemed as though the "Ayes" would win; but eventually appearances carried the day, and women still use side saddles when on horseback, though the knickerbockers and short skirts (only far shorter) I advocated for rough country riding are now constantly worn by the many female equestrians who within the last couple of years have mounted bicycles.

It is nearly four years since, from an hotel window in Copenhagen, I saw, to my great surprise, for the first time a woman astride a bicycle! How strange it seemed! Paris quickly

followed suit, and now there is a perfect army of women bicyclists in that fair capital; after a decent show of hesitation England dropped her prejudices, and at the present minute, clad in unnecessarily masculine costume, almost without a murmur, allows her daughters to scour the country in quest of fresh air astride a bicycle.

If women may ride an iron steed thus attired, surely they might be permitted to bestride a horse in like manner clothed, and in like fashion.

In past times women have ridden in every possible position, and in every possible costume. They have ridden sideways on both the near and off sides, they have ridden astride (as the Mexicans, Indians, Tartars, Roumanians, Icelanders, &c., do to-day), and they have also ridden pillion. Queen Elizabeth rode thus behind the Earl of Leicester on public occasions, in a full hoop skirt, low-necked bodice, and large ruffs. Nevertheless, she dispensed with a cavalier when out hunting, at the ripe age of seventy-six.

When hunting, hawking, or at tournaments, women in the middle ages always rode astride in this country, reserving their side saddles merely for state functions. Judging from old pictures, they then mounted arrayed in full ball dresses, in long-veiled headdresses (time of Edward II.), and in flowing skirts, while their heads were often ornamented with huge plumed hats.

Formerly, every church door, every roadside inn, had its horse block or "jumping-on stone" – called in Kent and some other

southern counties the "joist stone," and in Scotland the "louping-on stane." These were necessary in the olden days of heavy armour, and at a time when women rode astride. Men can now mount alone, although the struggles of a small man to climb to the top of a big horse sometimes are mightily entertaining; but women have to trust to any capable or incapable man who can assist them into their saddles.

Fashion is ephemeral. Taste and public opinion having no corporal identity, are nothing but the passing fancy of a given generation.

Dress to a woman always seems an important matter, and to be well dressed it is necessary to be suitably clothed. Of course breeches, high boots or leggings are essential in riding; but a neatly arranged divided skirt, reaching well below the knee, can be worn over these articles, and the effect produced is anything but inelegant. Of one thing we may be certain, namely, that whenever English women summon up enough courage to ride their horses man fashion again, every London tailor will immediately set himself to design becoming and useful divided skirts for the purpose.

I strongly advocate the abolition of the side saddle for the country, hunting, or rough journeys, for three reasons – 1st, safety; 2nd, comfort; 3rd, health.

I. Of course nothing is easier under ordinary circumstances than to "stick on" a side saddle, because the pommels almost hold one there: herein lies much danger. In the case of a horse falling,

for instance, a woman (although doubtless helped by the tight skirts of the day) cannot extricate herself. She is caught in the pommels or entangled by the stirrups, both of which calamities mean dragging, and often result in a horrible death.

II. Miss Bird, in her famous book of travels, tells us how terribly her back suffered from hard riding on a side-saddle, and how easily she accomplished the same distances when, disregarding conventionalities, she adopted a man's seat.

The wife of a well-known Consul-General, who, in company with her husband, rode in similar fashion from Shanghai to St. Petersburg through Siberia, always declared such a feat would have been impossible for her to achieve on a side-saddle. Further, the native women of almost all countries ride astride to this day, as they did in England in the fourteenth century.

My own experience as to comfort will be found in the following pages, and I can only add that greater knowledge has strengthened my opinion.

III. Cross riding has been considered injurious to health by a few members of the medical profession, but the majority hold a different opinion.

When discussing the subject with Sir John Williams – one of the greatest authorities on the diseases of women – he said, "I do not see that any harm could arise from women riding like men. Far from it. I cannot indeed conceive why the side saddle was ever invented at all." What more could be urged in favour of cross riding.

Do we not all know that many girls become crooked when learning to ride, and have to mount on the off side in order to counteract the mischief. Is this not proof in itself of how unnatural the position must be?

As women ride at the present moment, horses with sore backs are unfortunately no rarity. It is true these galls are caused by bad riding; still, such things would be avoided with a man's saddle, which is far lighter than a woman's, and easier to carry, because the rider's weight is not on one side, but equally distributed – a great comfort to the horse's loins and withers.

We all know that a woman's horse is far sooner knocked up with a hard day than one ridden by a man, although the man is probably the heavier weight of the two, and this merely because he is properly balanced.

Since this little book made its first appearance, many ladies have followed the advice therein contained, and visited "the most volcanic region of the earth," peeped at Iceland's snow-clad peaks and deeply indented fjords, made acquaintance with its primitive people, and ridden their shaggy ponies. Practically Iceland remains the same to-day as it was a century ago. Time passes unheeded within its borders, and a visit to the country is like returning to the Middle Ages. Excepting in the capital, to all intents and purposes, no change is to be noted; and even there the main square opposite the governor's house forms the chief cod-fish drying-ground, while every summer the same odours ascend from the process as greeted travellers of yore.

Thanks, however, to the courtesy of a couple of friends, I am able to mention a few innovations. Dr. Karl Grossman, who travelled through the north-west of the island, on geology intent, has kindly furnished me with excellent photographs of ponies.

Mr. T. J. Jeaffreson, who knows the island well, intends before joining Mr. Frederick Jackson's polar expedition, to explore and cross the interior of Iceland from east to west during the winter of 1894-95, on or about the 68th parallel, traversing the practically unknown districts of Storis-anch, Spengis-andr, and O-dadahraimm, and returning across the Vatna Jokull or Great Ice Desert. His reasons for wishing to cross in the winter are, first, that in summer ponies must be used for the journey, and they could not carry sufficient food and fuel for the expedition as well as fodder for themselves; second, the roughness of the ground and the weight of the burdens would necessitate very short distances being traversed each day.

Mr. Jeaffreson will, as did Dr. Nansen when he crossed Greenland, use ski and Canadian snow-shoes, and drag his own sledges, in preference to using ponies or dogs. We may look for an interesting volume on the natural history of Iceland from his pen.

Some slight but desirable improvements have been effected in the Capital Reykjavik, the most important being the erection of quite a nice little hotel "Island," which is kept by Halburg, who speaks excellent English, and whose son, formerly a waiter in this country, is a good sportsman and guide. Ponies are supplied at

this hotel.

The chief guide in Iceland is now Thorgrimmer Goodmanson. He speaks several languages fluently, and is by profession the English and Latin schoolmaster; during the summer months, nevertheless, he acts as guide.

The museum has been much enlarged, and is now located in the House of Parliament.

There is a new hospital, and very good public washing sheds have been erected for the town at the hot springs about a mile distant.

There are now several shops, perhaps a dozen, and among them an excellent sporting outfitters, where English cartridges and salmon flies can be procured.

Most of the pony track from Meijkjavik to Akureyri has been marked by stone cairns which show black against the winter's snow; and as there is now a post for nine months of the year (the boats running occasionally in the winter), letters are carried on horseback across from the capital to Akureyri every four weeks.

The "Camöens" runs no longer, but the Danish boats stop at Leith once a fortnight (excepting during January, February, and March, when the island is ice-bound), and after calling at three places in the Faroës and at Westmann Islands (weather permitting) go straight to Reykjavik.

The road from the capital to the Geysers is as rough as ever, but at Thingvalla Parsonage two or three little cabin bed-rooms have been put up, beds being very preferable to the floor in the

opinion of weary travellers.

Tents are still necessary at the Geysers, although a two-roomed shed is in process of erection for the accommodation of visitors.

The Stroker Geyser, which stopped for some time, is now working again, and is kept covered with a little lattice wood lid.

Mr. Jeaffreson told me that at Yellowstone Park, in America, visitors are carefully watched to see that they do not make the geysers work artificially by means of soap. (Hardly explicable in such small quantities by chemistry or physics.) Remembering this experience the last time he went to Iceland, he packed some 2lb. bars of common soap among his luggage.

"When I got to the Geysers," he continued, "the dirty old Iclander guarding them asked me for 5 kroner to make the Stroker play. When I refused his request he became most abusive, but, seeing I was inexorable, finally went away, declaring the geyser would never play unless I paid him, and I declaring as emphatically that it would, and directly too.

"As soon as he was at a safe distance I looked up my bars of soap, and dropping a couple of them under the lid, awaited the result. Very shortly a hiss and a groan were heard, and up went the boiling water, sending the wooden grating into the air.

"Back rushed the dirty man, not knowing whether to abuse or worship me as a worker of miracles. He was profoundly impressed, and finally declared he had never seen Stroker play so well before, but – 'Was it the Devil who had worked the game?'

"I had not enough soap left to try the big geyser, so waited a couple of days to see it play. Fortunately it did so in the end."

If the story of Stroker spread, which it is sure to do in such a very superstitious country, Mr. Jeaffreson will be regarded with a certain amount of awe when he starts on his ski (snow-shoes) expedition next winter.

Although his proposed trip is somewhat dangerous, I hope he may return as happily as Dr. Nansen did from Greenland, and extract as much pleasure out of his skilöbning as we contrived to do by visiting Norway when that glorious land was covered with snow and bound by ice.

When I pen these last lines, on July 12, 1894, I have just returned from seeing Frederick Jackson and his gallant followers steam away down Thames in their quest of the North Pole. A party of friends and several leading Arctic explorers assembled at Cannon-street Station this morning to see the English Polar Expedition off. Five minutes before the train left, Frederick Jackson, who having discarded the frock coat and top hat which had earned for him the reputation of "resembling a smart guardsman with handsome bronzed features," appeared upon the scene with his favourite brother. To-day the leader of the expedition looked like an English yachtsman in blue serge; but he did not personally provoke so much comment as his luggage. All the heavy things were already on board the "Windward," anchored off Greenhithe. When the hero of the hour arrived, a large Inverness cape on his arm, carrying a bundle of fur rugs,

his only article of luggage was a large tin bath!

"A bath," we cried.

"Yes," he laughingly replied, "I've had a small bath-room built on the ship, and when we get into our winter quarters on Bell Island I shall use my 'baby's bath.' I can rough it, and I have roughed it for years, but there is one thing I can't go without – a good tub."

What a true Englishman!

Frederick Jackson was in the best of spirits, and never gave way for a moment, although those many, many good-byes exchanged with intimate friends must have been a sore trial. In spite of his tremendous self-control, he is strangely tenderhearted and affectionate by nature.

When we reached Greenhithe it was raining; but the boats from the "Worcester," manned by smart lads, were waiting for us, and with hard pulling – for the tide was running fast – we were all soon clambering up a rope ladder to the "Windward's" decks. There was not much room. Food at full rations (6½ lb. per man per diem) for eight men for four years fills a good space, and five or six tons of cod liver oil biscuits for the dogs, twelve tons of compressed hay for the ponies, sledges, tents, boats, clothing, &c., was more than the hold could accommodate, and some of the things strewed the deck.

There was considerable fun getting the shaggy black retrievers on board, for they could not walk up a rope ladder, and were almost too big to carry.

Just as we were all leaving to go on board the "Worcester" and watch the final start, it was discovered that one of the picked eight of the land party had never turned up!

Had he lost heart, or made a mistake as to the time of departure?

Great was the consternation, and eagerly all eyes were turned to the shore; but still he came not. As it afterwards transpired, he had missed his train; and, far from his courage having failed at the last moment, so eager was he to be off, he travelled on to Gravesend, where, thanks to the courtesy of an official of high rank, he was put on board a gunboat, and raced down the Thames, just managing to get alongside the Arctic ship before it was too late.

From H.M.S. "Worcester" we watched the anchor weighed, and as the boys manned the rigging of the two training ships, they sent up a tremendous roar of cheers. Flags were flying on every side, for several yachts had come to see the start. "God Save the Queen" sounded across the water from the land, and the sun came out and shone brightly as the stout whaler "Windward" steamed away with her party of Polar explorers in the best of spirits.

A couple of months hence they will be settling down in their winter quarters in Franz Josef Land, there to wait through the Arctic darkness for the return of the sun, when they will push on towards the North Pole, leaving a chain of depôts behind them.

Everyone must wish them "God speed."

They may meet Dr. Nansen, and Mr. Jackson was immensely amused when I handed him a letter for my good friend – addressed

Dr. Fridtjof Nansen,

North Pole

Kindly favoured by F. G. Jackson.

How strange it will be if these two adventurous men really meet and shake hands beneath the Polar star! May good fortune attend them, and their enthusiasm be rewarded.

E. B. T.

London, *12th July, 1894.*

CHAPTER I.

OUR START

As the London season, with its thousand and one engagements, that one tries to cram into the shortest possible time, draws to a close, the question uppermost in every one's mind is, 'Where shall we go this autumn?' And a list of places well trodden by tourists pass through the brain in rapid succession, each in turn rejected as too far, too near, too well known, or not embracing a sufficient change of scene.

Switzerland? Every one goes to Switzerland: that is no rest, for one meets half London there. Germany? The same answer occurs, and so on *ad infinitum*.

'Suppose we make up a party and visit Iceland?' was suggested by me to one of my friends on a hot July day as we sat chatting together discussing this weighty question, fanning ourselves meanwhile under a temperature of ninety degrees; the position of Iceland, with its snow-capped hills and cool temperature seeming positively refreshing and desirable. Mad as the idea seemed when first proposed in mere banter, it ended, as these pages will prove, by our turning the suggestion into a reality, and overcoming the difficulties of a trip which will ever remain engraven on my memory as one of the most agreeable experiences of my life.

When I ventilated the idea outside my private 'den,' wherein

it first arose, it was treated as far too wild a scheme for serious consideration – for 'Iceland,' to Londoners, seems much the same in point of compass as the moon! And there really is some similarity in the volcanic surface of both. Here, however, the similarity ends, for while the luminary is indeed inaccessible, the island can easily be reached without any very insurmountable difficulty.

The somewhat natural opposition which our plan at first met with, only stimulated our desire the more to carry it into effect. The first step was to gain the permission of our parents, which, after some reluctance, was granted, and the necessary ways and means finally voted; our next was to collect together a suitable party from our numerous friends, and take all necessary measures to secure the success of the undertaking.

As soon as our purpose became known and discussed among our immediate circle of friends, many volunteers appeared anxious to share the triumphs of so novel an enterprise.

Thus our number at first promised to be somewhat larger than we had anticipated. Happily, however, for its success, as it afterwards proved, these aspirants for 'fame,' on learning the length of the passage, the possible discomforts, and other obstacles, dropped off one by one, till only my brother and myself, with three other friends, remained firm to our purpose.

It may be well here to introduce our party individually to my readers.

First, my brother, whom, for convenience sake in these pages,

I will call by his Christian name, 'Vaughan,' and whom I looked upon as the head of the expedition, as, without his protection, I should never have been allowed to undertake the trip.

He was a medical student in Edinburgh (since fully qualified), and well suited to the enterprise, being of a scientific turn of mind, as well as practical and energetic, – a first-rate rider, an oarsman, and a good sailor, whilst he had spent his vacations for some years in travelling.

My friend Miss T., my sole lady companion, a handsome girl of a thoroughly good-natured and enterprising disposition, was, on the contrary, no horsewoman, but the exigencies of a trip in Iceland soon made her one. She was an excellent German scholar, and a great assistance to our party in this respect, as the natives could often understand German, from the resemblance of that language to Danish.

As it proved afterwards, it was really fortunate that we had not more than two ladies in our party, for a larger number could hardly have met with the necessary accommodation. Ladies are such rare visitors in Iceland, that little or no preparation is made for their comfort. The captain of our vessel told us that during several voyages last year he had not a single female passenger on board.

H. K. Gordon, an Anglo-Indian, on leave from Calcutta for his health, was likewise a valuable addition to our number. He was accustomed to tent life and camping out, and helped us much in similar experiences.

A. L. T., who completed our party, was a keen sportsman, but the novelties of the trip overbalanced his love for Scotland and the attractions of the 12th of August – no small sacrifice, especially as our travelling proved too rapid to enable him to make much use of his gun, although we often saw game in our various rides.

Of myself, I have only to say that, being worn out with the gaieties of a London season, I looked forward to a trip to 'Ultima Thule' with pleasurable anticipations, which were ultimately fully realised.

Five is not a bad number to form a travelling company, and a very happy five we were, although entirely thrown on our own resources for twentyfive days. Of course we were often placed in the queerest positions, over which we laughed heartily; for on starting we agreed that we would each and all make the best of whatever obstacles we might encounter, and it is certainly no use going to Iceland, or any other out-of-the-way place, if one cannot cheerfully endure the absence of accustomed luxuries. Travellers not prepared to do this had better remain at home.

The decision once arrived at that Iceland was to be our Autumn destination, we endeavoured to collect from our travelling friends any information on the subject, either as regarded route, outfit, or mode of travelling, and whether the scenery and novelty of the trip were likely to repay us for the trouble and roughing we should have to undergo; but unfortunately all our investigations were futile, as we found no

one who had any personal knowledge of the Island. I, however, remembered Dr John Rae, the famous discoverer of the Franklin remains, was an old friend of my father's, and therefore wrote to ask him if he could help us in our difficulties, but his answer was not of a cheering nature, as he had not been in the Island for twenty-five years, and he had then only crossed from east to west – from Beuvfjord to Kekiaviati, which did not form part of our route. He further stated he thought it was too arduous an undertaking for ladies, and dissuaded us from making the attempt. Failing to obtain any assistance from such a high authority, we concluded that it would be useless to make any further inquiries among our personal friends; we were therefore compelled to rely upon our own resources, and extract what information we could from guide books. Our inquiry at a London ticket office whether the officials could give us any particulars as to our route, was equally unsuccessful, the astonished clerk remarking, – 'I was once asked for a ticket to the North Pole, but I have never been asked for one to Iceland.'

But although we never procured any personal experiences, we found there was no lack of interesting historical and geological literature respecting the Island.

Our first step was to place ourselves in communication with Messrs R. D. Slimon, of Leith, the managers of the Icelandic Steamship Company, from whom we learnt that the next steamer would start from Leith on the 31st July (such, at least, was the advertised time and place), but it really left Granton, some three

miles further up the Forth, an hour and a half later than was originally fixed.

Before proceeding any further, it may be well to mention the important subjects of outfit and provisions. As we were not going upon a fashionable tour, it was not necessary to provide ourselves with anything but what was really needed. Intending travellers must recollect that, as all inland journeys are performed on ponies, and the luggage can only be slung across the animals' backs, large boxes or trunks are out of the question, and it is necessary to compress one's outfit into the smallest possible dimensions. The following list will be found quite sufficient for the journey.

A thick serge dress, short and plain for rough wear, with a cloth one in change; a tight-fitting thick jacket, good mackintosh, and very warm fur cloak; one pair of high mackintosh riding boots (like fisherman's waders), necessary for crossing rivers and streams; a yachting cap or small tight-fitting hat, with a projecting peak to protect the eyes from the glare – blue glasses, which are a great comfort; thick gauntlet gloves; a habit skirt is not necessary.

My brother has given me a list of things he found most useful. Two rough homespun or serge suits: riding breeches, which are absolutely indispensable; riding boots laced up the centre, and large, as they are continually getting wet; flannel shirts; thick worsted stockings; a warm ulster, and mackintosh.

Instead of trusting to the pack boxes provided by the natives, a

soft waterproof 'hold-all,' or mule boxes, would be an additional comfort.

On one of our long rides, two pack ponies came into collision, they both fell, the path being very narrow, and rolled over one another. To our horror, one pack box was broken to pieces, while another lost its bottom, and there in all the dust lay tooth brushes, sponge bags, etc., not to mention other necessities of the toilet.

Rugs, mackintosh sheets, and pillows are required for camping out, also towels. Although the Icelanders provide tents, it is advisable to take your own if feasible. Provisions are absolutely requisite – tinned meats and soup, and a cooked ham or tongues; tea, sugar, cocoa, biscuits (of a hard make), and as no white bread is to be procured, it is as well to induce the ship's steward to provide some loaves before starting on an expedition. Butter can be obtained at Reikjavik. Japanned plates and mugs, knives, forks, and spoons, must not be forgotten. We provided ourselves with wine and spirits, which we found of great use to face the cold.

Our purchases being made and our party complete, we arranged to start from Euston on Thursday, 29th July, and go north by the night train. My brother, however, was to meet us at Edinburgh, as he had been away in his small yacht, coasting near Dunbar. We had, however, sent him all particulars as to our plans. Under the best circumstances, and despite sleeping saloons, and other luxuries, it is a long and tedious journey to Scotland, and we were not sorry to find it at an end, as, with a puff and a shriek,

our train entered the Waverley Station, Edinburgh.

Notwithstanding our fatigue, we took a somewhat regretful look at that steam marvel of civilisation, which had brought us thus far on our journey, and to which we now bade farewell for a month, at least, for a much ruder and more primitive mode of travelling.

Some friends had kindly offered to put us up during our short stay, so we made our way to their house, and were soon enjoying the luxuries of a wash and a good breakfast. My brother had arranged to meet us there, but as he did not put in an appearance, we determined to go in search of him at his rooms.

Imagine our dismay on arriving there to be told by his landlady that he had been absent for a week, yachting, and had not yet returned, whilst all our letters detailing our final plans, and date of arrival in Edinburgh, were lying unopened on the table.

We at once determined to take energetic measures to discover any tidings of his whereabouts. As it was necessary to go to Leith to engage cabins and take tickets, we decided to push on to Granton, where I knew he kept his boat, and inquire at the Royal Forth Yacht Club if they knew anything about *The Lily* and her owner.

A tram car took Miss T. and myself to Leith, and after sundry inquiries, we found ourselves in front of an ordinary tin-shop, over which the name 'Slimon' was painted in large letters of gold – an unlikely-looking place, we thought, to take tickets for such an important voyage.

In answer to our inquiries, 'Yes, mum, the office is next door,' was vouchsafed to us in the broadest Scotch dialect, by a clerk, who escorted us there, carrying with him a huge bunch of keys, looking more like a gaoler conducting prisoners, than two ladies innocently requiring tickets. We were ushered into a dingy little office, where we found the only occupant was a cat! Our conductor was extremely ignorant, and unable to supply us with any information, his answer to every question being, 'I dinna ken,' or 'I canna say.'

I explained to him what anxiety I was in about my missing brother, and that our party would have to be broken up unless he appeared before the morrow; consequently, it would be useless for us to purchase tickets until we heard from him. He blurted out in a broad and almost unintelligible dialect, which I am unable to reproduce, that we need not pay until we were on board the steamer, adding, that probably the dead calm since the previous night had delayed *The Lily*. I knew Vaughan had intended going out beyond Dunbar, and feared that he might be out in a gale; but if only becalmed, I felt certain he would somehow manage to get ashore in the dinghy, and was confident he had ascertained for himself, independently of our unopened letters, the date of the steamer's starting, and was too old a traveller to fail his party, and so spoil the expedition *in toto*.

Rattling over the stones to Granton in a terribly rickety 'machine,' as our northern friends call their cabs, the first old salt we encountered on the pier replied to our anxious inquiry,

'Why, that's *The Lily* sailing round the harbour's mouth,' as at that moment she slowly rounded the pier.

When Vaughan came ashore, he told us, after running from Dunbar in a gale, he had been becalmed for two days, and it had taken the whole of that day to cross 'the Forth.' He had not hurried particularly, however, thinking we were not travelling North till the next day, no letters having been forwarded to him. Thus ended happily what might have been a great catastrophe, and compelled us to abandon the expedition.

That night we returned with him to Edinburgh, and on rising next morning from probably the last comfortable bed we should enjoy for some time, we were cheered by a bright sun and cloudless sky – a pleasant forecast for the voyage in prospect. We made several purchases in Princes Street, inclusive of an extra deck chair, warm rugs, etc., and received an influx of '*bon voyage*' telegrams from our London friends – the last home news we should get for a month. Yes, four weeks is a long time never to hear of one's nearest and dearest, or they to hear of you. What might not happen in the interval? So much, indeed, that it passes contemplation, and we had best leave it, and content ourselves with the fact that we had left every one well, and everything all right when we started.

At the pier we found the tender waiting to take us to the *Camoens*, the steamer which was to convey us to the goal of our ambition, namely, Iceland.

How many and varied were our experiences before we

steamed alongside that pier again!

CHAPTER II.

UNDER WEIGH

The *Camoens*, named after the Portuguese poet of that name, is a fair-sized steamer of 1200 tons, which runs during the summer and autumn months at regular intervals of about once in four weeks, between Granton and Reikjavik, the capital of Iceland, calling *en route* at other ports. Subjoined is a map of the Island, with a red boundary line marking the course of the steamer, and her usual halting places.

Her average run, inclusive of stoppage at the various trading ports, is six or seven days at most; but in steaming direct from Granton to the Icelandic capital, the voyage does not occupy more than three and a half days, if the weather is favourable.

On reaching the *Camoens*, we found the rest of our party already arrived, and we joined forces at once. All was not ready, however, on board, for the stowage of the cargo was still in full swing, and sacks of flour and trusses of hay were being alternately hurled round on the crane and lowered on deck, sailors and 'odd hands' rushing hither and thither in the wildest confusion.

Just before our arrival a serious accident had occurred. The steward was returning from market, when the crane struck him and knocked him down, injuring the poor man sadly, breaking

both his arms, and causing severe contusions of the head. He was carried ashore to the hospital, and but slight hopes were entertained of his recovery.

This fatality caused the greatest inconvenience, for independent of his being a valuable steward, and the sorrow to his messmates at his accident, it is not generally easy, just as a steamer is leaving port, to find a substitute. Happily, in this case, a former steward being disengaged, the captain at once secured his services; but as he only came on board at the last moment, and neither knew where the supplies were stored, nor of what they consisted, the ship's company was thereby put to much inconvenience during the voyage.

Messrs Slimons' agent was on board the *Camoens* with his ticket book, and our tickets were at once procured; not expensive by any means, being only £8 each person to Iceland and back, including the trip round the Island; our food being charged at the rate of 6s. 6d. per day extra.

The best berth cabin had been reserved for Miss T. and myself, the one opposite for the three gentlemen, with an intermediate passage, which latter proved a great comfort, as it contained hooks for coats and cloaks, and room for two portmanteaus.

The cabins were unusually small, and required very close arrangement of our effects, and the extra hooks and cabin bags for the wall we had brought with us were most useful.

Our crew numbered thirty-two in all, and rough-looking

specimens of humanity they indeed appeared. We had two stewardesses, who also waited at table, and made themselves generally useful. These were slatternly in appearance, but were very attentive and kind-hearted. There were seven firemen, two working at the same time for four hours at a stretch, thus each couple did duty twice in the twenty-four hours; which means eight hours in the engine-room out of the twenty-four.

There were forty berths on board the *Camoens*, only nineteen of which were occupied during the outward voyage. The ship carried no surgeon, consequently my brother was frequently applied to in cases of burns, sprains, etc.

The captain had a large Board of Trade medicine chest, of which he kept the key, and from which he usually administered the contents when required, to the best of his medical knowledge. I must here refer with ready praise to the kindness of Captain Robertson, a most worthy man, and of general information. He often came and sat with us in the evening in the saloon, or smoked with the gentlemen, and many and varied were the yarns he spun.

We got under weigh about 4.30 on Saturday afternoon, July 31st, being tugged out of the harbour at Granton. The Firth of Forth was then as calm as a lake, scarce a ripple to be seen on its surface. A previous thunderstorm had freshened the air, the rain which had fallen had ceased, and those lovely mists and tints usually to be seen after a storm, had taken the place of the dark clouds now rolling away in the distance. Inchkeith was spanned by a lovely rainbow, and peace, quiet, and beauty reigned around.

The water, indeed, was more like a large lake, such as the 'Chiem See' in Bavaria – dotted with its islands – than an inlet of the sea.

On we steamed, passing Leith, Portobello, North Berwick, with the Bass Rock and the coast of Fife, and, as evening drew on, May Island and Bell Rock. It was indeed a lovely night. The sky, lit up with the deep, warm glow of the departing sun, cast a rosy hue over the whole expanse of water. A night, indeed, so perfect, we all agreed it was worth coming to sea to witness and enjoy.

The human mind is, however, versatile, and before morning we had cause to change our ideas, and several of us already wished ourselves again at home!

On entering the Moray Firth the evening calm of the untroubled sea was exchanged for rough billows, and hour by hour we became more and more miserable, each alike in turn paying our tribute to Neptune, and truly realising the difference between a voyage in prospect and one in stern reality.

My brother, Mr Gordon, the captain, and two other passengers were the sole occupants of the saloon at breakfast. At luncheon, the latter couple were also absent, and more people than ourselves bewailed their misery, and wished themselves back ashore.

The rolling of the steamer was tremendous. It pitched and tossed to such an extent that our bags and other things in our cabin were tumbled about in every direction. Despite the discomfort, we struggled on deck about twelve o'clock, hoping

the air would revive us, and in half an hour felt quite other persons.

The worst of a rough sea is, that when one is feeling sick, and air is most needed, one is obliged to shut the portholes, and only imbibe that which comes from the saloon – a mixture of fumes by no means invigorating.

I had always prided myself on being a good sailor when on yachting excursions and short sea voyages, but that 'Moray Firth' undeceived me in this respect. My misery, however, soon wore off, and save on this occasion, and one day on our return voyage, even in the rough days we encountered in the Northern Atlantic, my peace of mind was not further disturbed.

This first day was indeed a miserable initiation into the hitherto unknown horrors of the sea, and no greater contrast could be possible than the calm of the night before and that wretched Sunday. It rained and blew great guns all day long, and by 6 p. m. the weather culminated in a severe gale, with the glass steadily falling, followed by a heavy thunderstorm, with vivid forked lightning. So furious indeed was the storm, that after passing Duncansby Head, and John o' Groat's House, our captain turned back and ran his vessel into Sinclair Bay, riding at anchor there for the night, not being willing, in the face of such weather, to attempt the 'Pentland Firth.'

The bay was calm, and the gentle movement of the waves was like the rocking of an arm-chair after the shaking and rolling we had experienced. We all enjoyed our dinner in peace,

whilst the warmth of the cabin was a pleasant change from the searching cold on deck, which, despite furs and rugs, had pierced us through and through. Before we retired for the night, two other vessels had likewise put into the bay for safety from the elements, and here we were compelled to remain for forty-two hours while the storm still raged outside. Captain Robertson was a sensible man; when we asked him why he had put into Sinclair Bay, he said he considered it wiser to 'lay-to' for a few hours, and make up the time afterwards, rather than push on through such a gale, burning coal, and only making a knot or two an hour, perhaps not even that, straining the ship with her screw continually out of the water, making every one miserable, and gaining nothing. To this we all agreed, so in quiet waters we passed a comfortable night, and consequently all the passengers put in an appearance next morning at breakfast.

As dirty weather was still reported ahead, we also spent Monday (a Bank holiday) in the bay. Alongside of us lay a large steamer, which had tried the Pentland Firth in the morning, but after five unsuccessful hours had been obliged to put back. This steamer had shifted her cargo, and lay over on her side, in a way that looked to me alarming; we left her in the bay when we weighed anchor on Tuesday at mid-day.

On the previous night some fishing boats put out from Keiss for herring fishing, and one came so near to us that we were tempted to prepare some letters and telegrams, a sailor on board our vessel saying he would try and drop them into the boat, in a

basket. We tied them, therefore, up in a bag, with the necessary money for delivery, and watched their fate with anxiety. 'Letters,' shouted our sailor, but the fishermen shook their heads, evidently thinking it too rough to approach nearer to the steamer. Again the word 'Letters' was repeated, when another fishing smack responded 'Ay, ay,' and tacked, and as she shot past us, on our lee side, the basket was dropped over, accompanied by a bottle of whisky and ten shillings (the two latter being a *douceur* for the fishermen themselves) wrapped up for safety in an old rag, and tied to the bottom of the basket. The smack to which we thus confided our post was going out for the night, but the men said they would put into Keiss next morning, and promised to send the letters ashore, which we afterwards found they did, whilst the bottle of whisky proved so acceptable a gift, that finding us still in Sinclair Bay on Tuesday morning, the fishermen brought some fresh herrings for breakfast, which they threw on board as they passed, and which proved an acceptable addition to our breakfast table.

The crew of the smack were a fine-looking set of men, well made, with handsome, frank faces – six men and a boy; but all they got for their night's danger and toil was some three dozen herrings. Such is the uncertainty of the deep.

Our ship's passengers numbered fourteen, exclusive of ourselves, and while we remained in Sinclair Bay, we had a good chance of criticising them. All good fellows, no doubt, but mostly of the trading class, and not very attractive, physically or

mentally. There were two women in the number, the wife and daughter of a clothier resident in Iceland; but among the entire party we did not find any one likely to add to the sociability of the voyage, so, English-like, we kept to ourselves as much as possible.

How inconsistently some people dress on board ship! Our two women fellow-passengers did not often appear on deck, but when they did venture, despite the wind and rain, the elder wore an enormous hat, with a long, brown feather, which daily grew straighter, until all its curl had disappeared; and a light-brown silk dress, on which every drop of rain or spray made its mark. She was a clothier's wife, and accustomed to sea-travelling; one would have imagined experience would have taught her the advisability of a less gorgeous style of apparel.

The girl wore a huge white sailor hat, covered with a profusion of red poppies, and her whole time seemed to be occupied in holding it on her head with both hands to prevent its blowing away. But it would rain, and the red from the poppies silently trickled all over the hat, and gradually formed rivulets on her face.

Then there was a very corpulent old man, with a large, square-patterned ulster, and a deer-stalker hat, tied on with a red silk handkerchief under his chin in a large bow, matching his complexion. His companion was thin and sallow, and wore a very desponding air, despite a prolific red beard, which, when we landed, caused much excitement among the Icelanders. I think

their admiration made him feel shy, for after the demonstration made in its favour at the first landing port, he seldom went ashore, and even during the four days the *Camoens* lay off Reykjavik, he rarely left the ship.

Life on board ship is at the best monotonous, and we had to be contented with breathing the ozone, rejoicing in its health-giving properties, speculating as to the result of the voyage, and the novel scenes we hoped so soon to witness.

If ever cheap novels have their use, it is certainly on board ship. Soaked with salt water or rain, it matters not; they most assuredly help to wile away many an hour, and even the usually non-novel reader is not ashamed to seize the telltale yellow-covered volume, and lose himself in its romance *pro tem*.

The second day we amused ourselves in making sketches of Noss Head, which one minute was enveloped in thick mist and rain, and the next stood out, clear and distinct, against a dull, grey sky.

When in the midst of our sketching, lo! quite an excitement prevailed among our ship's company, viz., the sight of a twenty-five feet bottle-nosed whale, which every one rushed to see, and which for some time played around the ship, accompanied by a couple of porpoise. The animal caused as much excitement as if it had been the mythical sea serpent itself. We saw them in dozens afterwards, but never with the same enthusiasm. Of course, the first whale had to be immortalised, and two of our party sketched and painted it; not without difficulty, however, for

the rolling of the ship sent the water-colours or the turpentine sliding away at some critical moment of our work, and, on later occasions, chair, artist, picture, and colours were upset together in a disconsolate heap on the other side of the ship, much to every one's amusement.

Sketching at sea, in fact, is no easy matter, chiefly from the necessity of rapidity in the work; while the smuts from the funnel are most exasperating, settling on the paper just where clear lights are most desirable, and – well, paint in oils on a rough day at sea, with a strong wind blowing the smoke towards you, and judge for yourself!

We left, as I said, our haven of refuge – Sinclair Bay – on Tuesday at noon, on a clear, bright day, but with a turbulent sea. However, we passed the Pentland Firth without having to run into the Orkneys for shelter, passing quite close to Pomona, round Duncansby Head and John o' Groat's House, a hideous modern hotel in the midst of a desolate bay.

Some people say that the story of John o' Groat's is merely mythical, and others declare he was a Scotchman, who, for ferrying folks across the Pentland Firth for fourpence, or a 'groat,' received his nickname. Again it is said that he was a Dutchman, with eight stalwart sons, who, having no idea of the law of primogeniture, alike wished to sit at the head of the table, whereupon John had an octagon table made, which, having neither top nor bottom, saved any wrangling for preeminence in his family.

Dunnet Head, which we next passed, is the most northerly point of Scotland. 'Stroma,' viz., the Orkneys, lay on our right, standing out in relief against a lovely sky – just such a picture as John Brett loves to paint.

We were all much struck by the variety of birds in the Pentlands – wild geese, ducks, northern divers, and puffins, with, of course, the never absent gull. What a melancholy noise the gull makes, crying sometimes exactly like a child. And yet it is a pleasing companion on a desolate expanse of water, and most amusing to watch as it dives for biscuit or anything eatable thrown to it from the ship's side. Some of the gentlemen tried to capture them with a piece of fat bacon tied to a string; but although Mr Gull would swallow the bacon, he sternly refused to be landed.

CHAPTER III.

LAND SIGHTED

On leaving the choppy 'Pentland Firth,' we now entered on still rougher waters, encountering an Atlantic swell, caused by the previous storm. How the ship rolled! Walking on deck became impossible, while sitting in our deck chairs was nearly as bad, for they threatened to slide from under us. In despair we sought our berths, but to get into them in such a sea was a matter of difficulty, which practice in smooth waters had not taught us. Tuesday evening we bade adieu to the coast of Scotland, but what a boisterous night followed! Oh, dear! that eternal screw made sleeping at first impossible; we had not noticed its motion while on deck, but as soon as we laid our heads on our pillows, its monotonous noise seemed to grind our very brains. At last fatigue gained the victory, and I slept for some hours.

A sudden stoppage of the vessel awoke me at last with a start; it was still dark, but I heard loud talking and running about on deck overhead. Alarmed I sat up in my berth, and wondered what was the matter. All at once the screw again revolved and then again stopped, and was once more in motion. We seemed to be going backward. I knew we were at least one hundred miles from Scotland, and there was no land nearer.

Wishing to learn what was going on, for in my half-awakened

state, visions of icebergs and collisions rushed through my excited mind, I hastily summoned the stewardess, and asked what was the matter to cause such a commotion overhead. I learnt from her that an unusual and almost fatal event had just occurred. The man at the wheel, suddenly seized with a suicidal mania, had rushed from his post, possessed himself of two mops, which were lying on the deck, and putting one under each arm, with a wild and fiendish shriek had jumped overboard. The captain immediately stopped the ship and ordered a boat to be lowered; but owing to the high sea running, some time elapsed before this could be accomplished, and in the meantime the man had drifted some way from the vessel, and in the grey morning light his form was barely discernible in the trough of the waves. Notwithstanding the danger, the moment the boat was lowered there were no lack of volunteers to man her; but so persistent was the unfortunate man's resolve to perish, that he eluded all the efforts of his rescuers to capture him, and every time he was approached, swam away. The men at the oars had nearly given in, themselves soaked to the skin, when a cheery call from the captain urged them on afresh.

It was only when exhaustion and numbness had rendered the poor maniac unconscious, that the sailors were able to pull him on board in an almost lifeless condition.

At breakfast time the captain informed us that the man's life had only been restored by constant rubbing; and that the poor creature seemed so violent, he had been obliged to have him

locked up, probably a case of temporary insanity, which the captain attributed to the moon! For some days the poor deluded creature was very violent, and made many efforts to escape from his confinement. On one occasion he succeeded in getting half his body through a ventilating hole in his prison, from which he was extricated with great difficulty. The reason he assigned for jumping into the sea was that he feared being 'burnt alive,' in the boiler, a punishment in his aberration he fancied the captain had ordered for him.

As may be supposed, the event caused much excitement on board, at the same time practically diminishing our crew by two, as one man had constantly to be told off to look after the madman. His subsequent career was watched with great interest by those on board. His madness continued during the whole of the voyage, although sometimes he enjoyed lucid intervals, during which his chief desire was to sing, and he was permitted up on deck, when he amused himself by singing sailor ditties and dancing hornpipes to his heart's content.

At other times his madness assumed a more dangerous form, and he had to be closely watched, to prevent him taking his own life. Every kindness was shown him by the captain and ship's officers and my brother attended him daily. When we reached Leith he was handed over to his relatives, and was subsequently put into an asylum, where I fear there was little chance of recovery, as madness was hereditary in his family.

As we steamed on, our voyage became somewhat

monotonous, and we longed for the time to pass when we should reach the first trading port in Iceland, hoping there to imbibe new food for thought and comment. Our table was very fair; but a small steamer in a rough sea has many disadvantages in tempting the appetite. I must say the captain did all he could to make us comfortable, but he was not accustomed to carry lady passengers, and as the 'novelty of discomfort' began to wear off, it rendered us somewhat sensible to its unaccustomed yoke. There was a small smoking-room on deck, large enough to hold about eight persons, but which was always filled with smokers. The only other sitting-room was the saloon, the sofas of which were generally occupied by male passengers fast asleep, so we ladies had to choose between our berths and the deck, and we much preferred the latter in all weather, and under all circumstances.

Our fifth day at sea was one of utter misery. At dinner, despite the fiddles, the soup was landed in my lap, and a glass of champagne turned over before I had time to get it to my lips. I struggled through the meal bravely, and then went up on deck, but found it far too rough to walk about, while sitting down was only accomplished by holding fast to some friendly ropes tied near us with that view. About nine o'clock I sought my berth, but sleep was impossible, as most of my time was spent in trying to keep within the bounds of my bed, expecting that every successive lurch would eject me; whilst the port-holes having to be closed (that greatest of all discomforts in a storm) made the cabin close

and unbearable.

The next morning, everybody had the same night's experience to relate, whilst the state of disorder our cabins were in, proved that we had not exaggerated our misery.

After leaving the Faroes on our right, we never sighted land for two days, nor did we even see a single ship; the one break in the monotony being the spouting of whales.

Two more days of terrible rolling amid those wild Atlantic breakers, which, as they washed our decks, seemed to sway the ship to and fro. Happily the wind was with us during the greater part of our voyage, and the captain crowded on all sail, making about 10 knots an hour.

On the Thursday following, we sighted Iceland, and our spirits rose in proportion as we felt our voyage was nearing its completion. The sea, too, became calmer, and as we neared the coast the view was truly grand. At 10.30 p. m. the sun had not yet set, but was shedding its glorious evening glow over mountains which rose almost perpendicularly from the sea, and whose snow-clad peaks caught the rosy hues and golden tints of departing day. It was one of the most beautiful atmospheric effects I have ever witnessed, doubtless enhanced by the marvellous clearness of the atmosphere. I knew that Iceland was mountainous in its interior, but I had no idea that it had such a magnificent coast line, or such towering snow-capped hills. One thing we made special note of, namely, that while in the day time the thermometer rarely stood above 42° – 10 above freezing

point – it was very considerably lower at night, whilst instead of the damp cold we experienced during the day, at night the air was dry and frosty; the wind blowing from the north-west, and straight over the ice of Greenland, accounted for its being so sharp and keen.

It was well we had provided ourselves with furs and wraps of every possible warmth, for now indeed we required them all. Happily we only saw field ice in the distance, for had we come into nearer proximity with it, we should not have been able to pass round the north at all. No ice actually forms round the coast line, but the sea ice drifts from Greenland, 100 miles distant, causing the north of the Island to be impassable, except during two or three months in the year.

The mean temperature of the south of Iceland is 39° F., in the central district 36° F., while in the north it is rarely above freezing point. During the winter of '80 and '81, when we were having what we thought great cold in England, the thermometer in Iceland was standing at 25° below zero, and polar bears were enjoying their gambols on its northern shores, having drifted thither on the ice from Greenland.

Iceland lies between N. Lat. 63, 23, 30, and 66, 32; and W. Long. 13, 32, 14, and 24, 34, 14; is 280 miles in length, and 180 to 200 miles in breadth.

Steaming up the east coast of the Island we breakfasted the next morning in the Arctic Circle, and what a delight it was to be there, the next best thing to being at the North Pole itself, and

far more comfortable! We were also now in calm water, so could give vent to our excitement without fear of consequences. We had indeed had a terrible time of it since we left Scotland: even the captain acknowledged that the voyage had been unusually rough.

All that day we continued our course along the north-eastern coast of Iceland, in constant admiration of the magnificent wild scenery which broke upon our view. Snow capped-mountains rose almost abruptly from the sea, down which flowed little glacial rivulets, which emptied themselves into the briny deep below. Another clear lovely evening, in which the quaint rocky outlines of the hills were discernible, with valleys, torrents, and glorious fjords, the whole embracing a panorama of miles of grand serrated coast line, showing to the greatest advantage in the curious evening glow.

So calm and beautiful was the scene, that all our party agreed it was worth a few days' discomfort in order to revel in the beauty of this bold Icelandic approach. The water was perfectly green, and as clear as possible, revealing innumerable yellow jelly-fish disporting themselves. We did not, however, see any of the sharks which are so frequently met with in these waters.

Entering the 'Oe Fjord' on our way to Akureyri, a small town lying some thirty miles from its mouth, as the evening lights shed their rich varied hues on all around, it was difficult to believe we could really be, after only a week's absence from home, so far north as the Arctic Circle, the more so as the rich warm colouring

of the landscape resembled rather some southern clime.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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