

The Naval Cadet

**A Story of Adventure on Land and
Sea**

**BY
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THE NAVAL CADET.

CHAPTER I. THE HERMIT OF KILMARA.

There was something in the reply given by young Creggan M'Vayne to Elliott Nugent, Esq., that this gentleman did not altogether relish. He could not have complained of any want of respect in the boy's utterance or in his manner, but there was an air of independence about the lad that jarred against his feelings, and made him a trifle cross—for the time being, that is.

For Nugent was a great man,—in his own country at all events. He was an ex-secretary from one of the Colonies, and at home in Australia he had been like the centurion we read of in the New Testament, and had had many men under him to whom he could say "Do this" with the certainty of finding it done, for in his own great office his word had been law.

But here stood this kilted ghillie with his collie dog by his side—stay, though, till I present my young hero to you, reader. You will then know a little more of the merits of the case.

Than young Creggan M'Vayne, then, no boy was better known on land or at sea, all along the wild rocky shores that stretch from Loch Snizort to the very northernmost cape of Skye, well-named in the Gaelic "The Island of Wings". At any time of the day or by moonlight his little skiff of a boat might be met by sturdy fishermen speeding over the waves of the blue Minch, or lazily floating in some rock-guarded bay, while its solitary occupant lured from the dark, deep water many a silvery dancing fish. But

inland, too, he was well-known, on lonely moor and on mountain brow.

And Creggan was welcome wherever he went. Welcome when he appeared at the doors of the rude huts that were huddled along the sea-shore, welcome in the shepherd's shieling far away on the hills, and welcome even at the firesides of gamekeepers themselves.

Up to the present time, at all events, Creggan's life had been a half-wild one, to say the least of it. Though tall for his years, which barely numbered fourteen, he was as strong and well-knit as the sinewy deer of the mountains. Good-looking he certainly was, with a depth of chin that pronounced him more English than Scotch; the bluest of eyes, a sun-kissed face, and fair, curly hair of so self-assertive a nature that Creggan's Highland bonnet never by any chance got within three inches of his brow.

From that same bonnet, then, down to his boots, or rather brogues, the lad looked every inch a gentleman. He was just a trifle shy in presence of his elders and those who moved in a superior walk of life to him; but every really good honest-hearted lad is so. Among the peasantry, however, he was always his own manly self.

There was one thing concerning Creggan's wild life that he did not care for anyone to know, not even his best friend, M'Ian the minister. And it was this: he was kind to the very poor. The fact is, that the lad was always either in pursuit of game, as he chose to call even rabbits, or fishing from his skiff or from the rocks, so that he had generally more than sufficed for his own needs and those of his guardian, whom I shall presently introduce to you. So when he appeared at the door of widow M'Donald, M'Leod, or M'Rae, as the case might be—for they were nearly all Macs thereabout,—you

couldn't have guessed that he was carrying a beautiful string of codling or a "sonsy" rabbit, so carefully was it concealed in his well-worn and somewhat tattered plaid.

I am quite sure that Creggan's faithful collie, whose name was Oscar, quite approved of what his master did; he always looked so pleased, and sometimes even barked for joy, when Creggan presented those welcome gifts, and while the recipients called blessings down from heaven on the boy's curly head.

But not only did the poorest among the crofters, or squatters as they might have been called, love the winsome, happy-visaged boy, but many of them looked upon him with a strange mixture of superstition and awe. He was supposed to bear a kind of charmed life, because a mystery hung over his advent which might never, never be cleared up. For Creggan was an ocean-child in the truest sense of the word. When a mere infant he had been found in a small boat which was stranded on the rock-bound Isle of Kilmara, off the shores of Skye, one morning after a gale of wind. In this islet, which indeed is but little more than a sea-girt rock, he had dwelt for many years with the strange being who had picked him up half-frozen, and had wooed him back to life, and became not only a father to him but a tutor as well.

A strange being indeed was old Tomnahurich, the Hermit of Kilmara, the name by which he was generally known. Only old people could remember his coming to and taking possession of the island, which probably belonged to no one in particular, although in summer-time a few sheep used to be sent to crop the scanty herbage that grew thereon. But one beautiful spring morning,—with snow-white cloudlets in the blue sky, and a light breeze rippling the Minch, till from the mainland of Skye it looked like

some mighty river rolling onwards and north 'twixt the Outer and Inner Hebrides,—some fisher-lads on landing were confronted by a tall, brown-bearded stranger, dressed in seaman's clothes, and with a cast of countenance and bearing that showed he was every inch a sailor. He had come out from a cave, and into this, with smiles and nods and talking in the purest of Gaelic, he had invited the young fellows. They found a fire burning here, and fish boiling; there was a rude bench, several stools, and various articles of culinary utility, to say nothing of a row of brown stone bottles, the contents of one of which he begged them to taste.

But where the hermit had come from, or how or why he had come, nobody could tell, and he never even referred to his own history.

He had ceased to dwell in the cave after a time, and with wood from a shipwrecked barque he had built himself, in a sheltered corner, a most substantial though very uncouth kind of a dwelling-hut. As the time went on, silver threads had begun to appear in the brown of the hermit's beard; and now it was nearly white. He was apparently as strong and sturdy as ever, notwithstanding the wintriness of his hair, and the boy loved his strange guardian far more than any friend he had, and was never so happy anywhere as at the rude fireside of his island home.

We never think of what Fate may have in store for us, especially when we are young, nor at what particular date fortune's tide may be going to flow for us.

This morning, for instance, when Creggan came on shore with Oscar, he had no idea that anything particular was going to happen. He had first and foremost drawn up his little boat—the very skiff it

was in which he had been cradled on the billowy ocean,—then gone straight away up to the manse. Here he was a great favourite, and M'Ian, the kind-hearted minister, had for years been his teacher, educating the boy with his own two children, Rory and Maggie, both his juniors.

I am not going to say that Creggan was more clever than children of his age usually are, but as the instruction he received was given gratuitously or for love, he felt it to be his bounden duty to learn all he could so as to gratify his teacher.

His English was therefore exceptionally good already, and he had made good progress in geography, history, arithmetic, and knew the first two books of Euclid; and he could even prattle in French, which he had learned from the hermit. It was usual for Creggan to spend an hour or two playing with Rory and little winsome Maggie, after lessons, but to-day they were going with their father to the distant town of Portree, so, after bidding them good-bye he shouldered his little gun, a gift from M'Ian, and, whistling for Oscar, went off to the cairns to find a rabbit or two.

The cairns where the rabbits dwelt were small rounded hills about a quarter of a mile inland from the wild cliffs that frowned over the deep, dark sea. These knolls were everywhere covered with stones, and hundreds of wild rabbits played about among these. But no sooner had Creggan shot just one than the rest disappeared into their burrows as if by magic. The boy had plenty of patience, however, so he simply lay down and began to read. Not to study, though. His school-books he had left in the graveyard on an old tombstone, and near to the last resting-place of the romantic Flora M'Donald, the lady who had saved the unfortunate Prince Charlie Stuart.

After half an hour he secured two more rabbits, and as the sun began to wester, he strolled slowly backwards towards the spot where he had beached his boat, with no intention, however, of putting out to sea for some little time.

With the exception of his school-books poor Creggan's library was wonderfully small, and his literature was nearly always borrowed or given to him. For instance, even in the most squalid huts he had often found books that gave him no end of pleasure. They were mostly in the grand old Gaelic; but Creggan could read the language well, and in the long dark forenights of winter he used to delight the old hermit by trotting out the mysterious and Homeric-like lines of Ossian's poems. Then tourists, to whom he acted in the capacity of guide in summer-time, sometimes gave him a book, and M'Ian's library was always at his service.

So to-day he had thrown himself on his face on the green cliff-top, and had commenced to read his Ossian.

What a glorious summer afternoon! There was the blue Minch asleep in the sunshine, and stretching away and away far over to the hazy hills of Harris and Lewis. White gulls were floating on its billows close inshore, or wheeling high in air around the stupendous cliffs, where their nests were,—their plaintive, melancholy notes mingling with the song of the lark, the mavis, and the merle, while the solemn boom of the breaking waves made a sweet but awful diapason.

The air all around was warm and balmy, and laden with the sweet breath of wild thyme.

And Creggan M'Wayne was just reading one of his favourite, because most romantic passages, when the dry and business-like

tones of Elliott Nugent fell upon his ear. Beautiful, indeed, did the boy consider every line of that wild and weird poem *Carric-Thura*. The ghost scene therein made him shudder; but it was the death of the lovers on the field of battle—the death of Connal and Crimora that affected him most. She had given him his arms with sad and woesome foreboding, but at the same time had determined to follow him into the fight.

Here was the din of arms; here the groans of the dying. Bloody are the wars of Fingal, O Connal, and it was here thou didst fall! Thine arm was like a storm; thy sword a beam of the sky; thy height a rock upon the plain; thine eyes a furnace of fire. Warriors fell by thy sword as the thistles by the staff of a boy. Then Dargo the mighty came on, darkening in his wrath.

Bright rose their swords on each side; loud was the clang of their steel.

But Crimora was near, bright in the armour of man. Her yellow hair is loose behind, her bow is in her hand.

She drew the string on Dargo; but—erring—she pierced her Connal. He falls like an oak on the plain; like a rock from the shaggy hill. What now can she do, O hapless maiden? See how he bleeds, her Connal dies!

All night long she weeps and all the livelong day. O Connal, O Connal, my love and my friend!

But with grief the maiden dies, and in the same grave they sleep. Undisturbed they now sleep together; in the tomb on the mountain they rest alone, and the wind sighs through the long green grass that grows twixt the stones of the grave.

Autumn is dark on the mountains; gray mists rest on the hills. Dark rolls the river through the narrow plain. A tree stands alone on the hill and marks the slumbering Connal. The leaves whirl round in the wind and strew the grave of the dead. Soft be their rest, hapless children of streamy Loda.

Here Creggan had closed the book with a sigh.

"Boy, are you willing to earn an honest shilling? Keep back that dog, please!"

The boy had sprung to his feet and seized the all-too-impetuous Oscar by the collar.

Nugent's appearance was somewhat out of keeping with the grandeur of the scenery around him. Thin and wan he was, with close-trimmed whiskers turning to gray, a London coat, and a soft felt hat.

"Earn a shilling, sir?"

"I said earn a shilling, an honest shilling. But perhaps you are above that sort of thing. You Skye Highlanders are, as a rule, so lazy."

"Thank you, sir, but I am not a Skyeman, though I should not be ashamed to be. I was born on the high seas, and I have neither mother nor father."

Nugent's voice softened at once. His whole bearing was altered.

"Poor boy!" he said. "I fear I talked harshly. But come, we were directed here by an old man who told us you could guide us over the mountains inland. My wife is an artist, and wants to make a sketch or two. See, yonder she comes, and my little daughter,

Matty. Come, you seem to be a superior sort of lad, you shall have half a crown."

"I don't want your money. I sha'n't touch it. But if you wait a few minutes I will guide you to a strange land far away among the hills. There will just be time to return before sunset."

"And you will take no reward?"

"Oh yes, sir, I will. I love books. I would have a book if you could lend it to me."

"That we will, with pleasure. I have a boy just about your age—sixteen, and he lives in books. You are a little over sixteen, perhaps?"

Creggan smiled.

"No, sir," he replied, taking off his bonnet now, for Mrs. Nugent and Matty had come up; "I want some months of fourteen."

"You are a very beautiful Highland boy," said Matty, gazing up at Creggan with innocent admiration; "and if you is good, mamma will paint you."

"Hush, dear, hush!" cried the stately mother.

Creggan looked at the child. He had never seen anyone so lovely before, not even in Portree. But there was a little green knoll high up in a glen that he knew of, on which, as the old people told him, fairies danced and played in the moonlight. He had never seen any of these, though many times and oft he had watched for them. But he thought now that Matty must just be like one.

I must confess that there was a small hole in each of the elbows of Creggan's tweed jacket, but nevertheless when he stepped right up, as if moved by some sudden impulse and shook Matty's tiny hand, his bearing was in keeping with the action, and even Nugent himself admitted afterwards that he looked a perfect little gentleman.

"I wish you were my sister."

That is all he said.

But for the next few minutes very busy was Creggan indeed.

First and foremost he made a flag of his handkerchief and hoisted it on the end of his gun. This he waved in the air, until presently an answering signal could be seen on the distant island.

Then to right and to left, aloft and aloft, he made signals with the flag, much to the delight of little blue-eyed Matty, ending all by holding his gun perpendicularly and high in air, after which he turned to his new acquaintances.

"I'm quite ready," he said.

The march towards the mountains was now commenced. But the road led past the manse, and thither ran Creggan, returning almost immediately with a tiny Shetland pony. This consequential little fellow was fully caparisoned, with not only a child's saddle but saddle-bags. Into the latter Mrs. Nugent's sketching-gear was put, and then Creggan picked Matty up and placed her on the saddle. Oscar barked, and the child screamed with joy, as off they headed for the wild mountains.

* * * * *

High above the blue-gray hills of Harris lay streak on streak of carmine clouds, with saffron all between, as Creggan's skiff went dancing over the waves that evening, towards his little island home. But the boy saw them not, saw nothing in fact till his boat's keel rasped upon the beach, where his foster-father stood, ready to haul her up.

For Creggan's thoughts were all with his newly-found friends and the doings of this eventful day.

CHAPTER II.

THE NIGHT CAME ON BEFORE ITS TIME.

The home of Hermit M'Vayne, which was Creggan's foster-father's real name, was indeed a strange one. Situated under the south-western side of a rock, partly leaning against it, in fact, stood the strong and sturdy hut. The sides, and even the roof, were of timber, the latter thatched with heather and grass; though only one gable was of stone, and here was the chimney that conducted the smoke from the low hearth upwards and outwards to the sky.

And night and day around this log-house moaned the wind, for even when almost calm on the mainland a breeze was blowing here, and ever and aye on the dark cliff-foot beneath broke and boomed the waves of the restless Minch. But when the storm-king rose in his wrath and went shrieking across the bleak island, the spray from the breakers was dashed high and white, far over the hut, and would have found its way down the chimney itself had this not been protected by a moving cowl.

But I really think that the higher the wind blew, and the louder it howled, while the waves sullenly boomed and thundered on the rocks below, the cosier and happier did the hermit and his foster-child feel within.

Although, strangely enough, the hermit had never as yet told Creggan the story of his own past life, nor his reasons for settling down on this sea-girdled little morsel of rock and moorland, still he never seemed to tire of telling the boy about his adventures on

many lands and many seas, nor did the lad ever weary of listening to these. And the wilder they were the better he liked them.

It was on stormy nights, especially in winter, that Creggan's strange foster-father became most communicative. But on such nights, before even the frugal supper was placed upon the board, the hermit felt he had a duty to perform, and he never neglected it. For high on a rock on the centre of the island he had erected a little hollow tower of stone. It was in reality a kind of slow-combustion stove filled with peats and chunks of wood, and with pieces of seaweed over all. It was lit from below, and when the wind blew through the chinks and crannies, it sent forth a glare that could be seen far and high over the storm-tossed ocean. Many a brave brig or barque staggering up the Minch, and many a fisherman's boat also, on dark and windy nights had to thank the hermit's beacon-light that warned them off the Whaleback rocks.

Having set fire to his storm-signal, the old man's work was done for the day. Supper finished, a chapter from the Book of Books was read, then a prayer was prayed—not read from a printed book,—and after this the inmates of this rude but cosy hut drew their stools more closely to the fire. No light was lit if not needed, and indeed it was seldom necessary, the blazing peats and the crackling logs gave forth a glare that, though fitful, was far more pleasant to talk by than any lamp could have been.

Now, Mr. Nugent and his wife had promised to visit Creggan some evening on his lonely island, and not only Matty but her brother also were to accompany them. They did not say when the visit would be made. Their lives were as unlike Creggan's as one could possibly imagine. They were spending the summer here in Skye, living in a rough sort of a shanty, which, however, they had

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