

PIRACY IN THE KYLES Abridged

From 'In Highland Harbours with Para Handy' by Hugh Foulis (Neil Munro)

"I'M goin' doon below to put on my slippers," said the Captain, as the vessel puffed her leisured way round Buttock Point; "keep your eye on the *Collingwood*, an' no' run into her. The mate looked along the Kyles towards Colintrave, and remarked that he wasn't altogether blind.

"I didna say you were," said the Captain, you canna be too cautious. You'll mind you were up last night pretty late in Tarbert."

Macphail, the engineer, projected a perspiring head from his engine-room, "Whit's the argyment?" he asked. I'm in the middle o' a fine story in the 'People's Frien', and I canna hear mysel' readin'. I wish ye would talk wee."

Para Handy turned his back on him, and confined his address to Dougie. "I'll never feel safe in the Kyles of Bute," he said, "till them men-o'-war iss oot o' here. I'm feared for a collusion. I haf seen a smert enough sailor before now come into a collusion wi' the whole o' Cowal. And he wassna tryin't either!

The Captain returned on deck, and watched a couple of fishermen culling mussels off the lower plates of the obsolete ship of war.

"They're a different cless of men aboot the Kyles from what there used to be," said he, "or it wouldn't be only bait they would be liftin' off a boat like that. If she wass there when Hurricane Jeck wass in his prime, he would have the very cannons off her, sellin' them for junk in Greenock.

"There's no' that hardy Brutish spirit in the boys that wass in't when Hurricane Jeck and me wass on the *Aggie*."

"Tell us the baur," pleaded Sunny Jim, seated on an upturned bucket, peeling the day's potatoes.

To let you ken, Jum, Hurricane Jeck wass a perfect chentleman, six feet two, ass broad in the back ass a shippin'-box, and the very duvvle for contrivance. You know that, Dougie, don't you?"

"Whatever you say yoursel'," replied the mate agreeably, cutting himself a generous plug of navy-blue tobacco. "I have nothing to say against the chap--except that he came from Campbeltown."

"He sailed wi' me for three or four years on the *Aggie*," said the Captain, "and a nicer man on a boat you wouldna meet, if you didna contradict him. Six feet three, if he wass an inch, and a back like a shippin'-box!"

"Where does the British spirit come in?" inquired the engineer. "Hold you on, and I'll tell you that," said Para Handy. "We were lyin' wan winter night at Tighnabruaich wi' a cargo o' stones for a place they call Glen Caladh, that wass buildin' at the time, and we wanted a bit o' rope for something in parteecular--I think it wass a bit of a net. There wass lyin' at Tighnabruaich at the time a nice wee steamer yat belonging to a chentleman in Gleska that was busy at his business, and nobody wass near her. 'We'll borrow a rope for the night from that nice wee yat,' said Hurricane Jeck, as smert as anything, and when it wass dark he took the punt and went off and came back wi' a rope that did the business. 'They havena much sense o' ropes that moored that boat in the Kyles,' said he; 'they had it flemished down and nate for liftin'. They must be naval architects.' The very next night did Jeck no' take the punt again and come back wi' a couple o' india-rubber basses and a weather-gless?"

"Holy smoke!" said Dougie. "Wasn't that chust desperate?"

"We were back at Tighnabruaich a week efter that," continued Para Handy, "Nobody had been near the wee steam-yat, though the name o' her in the Gaelic was the *Eagle*, and Jeck made oot it wass a special dispensation. 'The man that owned her must be deid,' said he, 'I'll take a turn aboard the night wi' a screw-driver, and see that all's in order.' He came back that night wi' a bag o' cleats, a binnacle, half a dozen handy blocks, two dozen o' empty bottles, and a quite good water-breaker.

"'They may call her the *Eagle* if they like,' says he, 'but I call her the Silver Mine. I wish they would put lights on her; I nearly broke my neck on the cabin stairs.'

"Mind you, Jeck,' I says to him,' I don't ken anything about it."

"It's aal right, Peter,' says he, quite kind. 'Flotsam and jetsam' Oh, a smert, smert sailor, Jeck! Six feet four in his stockin's soles, and a back like a couple o' shippin'-boxes."

"The Glen Caladh job kept us comin' and goin' aal winter," pursued the Captain. "Next week we were back again, and Jeck had a talk with the polisman at Tighnabruaich aboot the lower clesses. Jeck said the lower clesses up in Gleska were the worst you ever saw; they would rob the wheels off a railway train. The polisman said he could weel believe it, judgin' from the papers, but, thank the Lord! there wass only honest folk in the Kyles of Bute. 'It's aal right yet,' said Jeck to me that night; 'the man that owns the Silver Mine's in the Necropolis, and never said a word aboot the wee yat in his will.' In the mornin' I saw a clock, a couple o' North Sea charts, a trysail, a galley-stove, two kettles, and a nice decanter lyin' in the hold."

"Jeck,' I says, 'is this a flittin'?"

"I'll not deceive you, Peter,' he says, quite honest, 'it's a gift'; and he sold the lot on Setturday in Greenock."

"A man like that deserves the jyle," said the engineer indignantly.

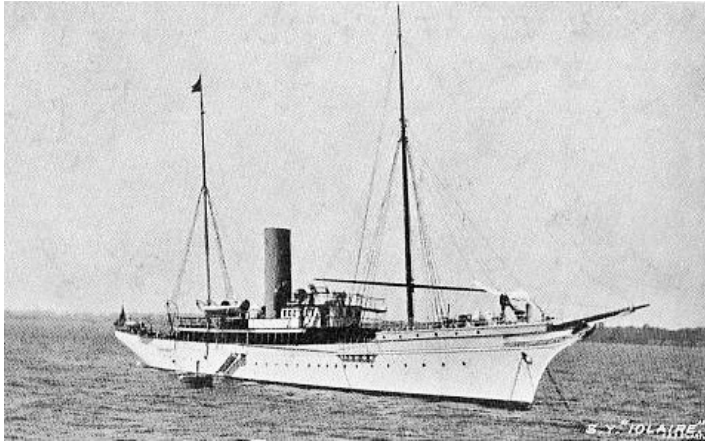
"I wouldna caal it aalthegether fair horny," admitted the Captain, "parteeculariy as the rest of us never got more than a schooner o' beer or the like o't oot of it; but, man! you must admit the chap's agility! He wass six feet six, and had a back on him like a Broomielaw shed. The next time we were in the Kyles, and he went off wi' the punt at night, he came back from the Silver Mine wi' her bowsprit, twenty faddom o' chain, two doors, and half a dozen port-holes."

"Oh, to bleezes!" exclaimed Sunny Jim incredulously, "noo you're coddin'! What wye could he steal her port-holes?"

"Quite easy!" said Para Handy. "I didna say he took the holes themsel's, but he twisted off the windows and the brass aboot them. You must mind the chap's agility! And that wassna the end of it, for next time the *Aggie* left the Kyles she had on board a beautiful vernished dinghy, a couple o' masts, no' bad, and a fine brass steam-yat funnel."

"Holy smoke!" said Dougie; "it's a wonder he didna strip the lead off her."

"He had it in his mind," exclaimed the Captain; "It wass aalways a grief to Jeck that he didna take the boat the way she wass, and sail her where she would be properly appreciated. 'My mistake, chaps!' he would say; 'I might have kent they would miss the masts and funnel!'"



The yacht referred to in the story as the *Eagle* was probably the *Iolaire* (pictured above). She was moored in the bay each summer. Her owner was not from "Glesca" but was the Lancashire businessman William Birtwhistle.