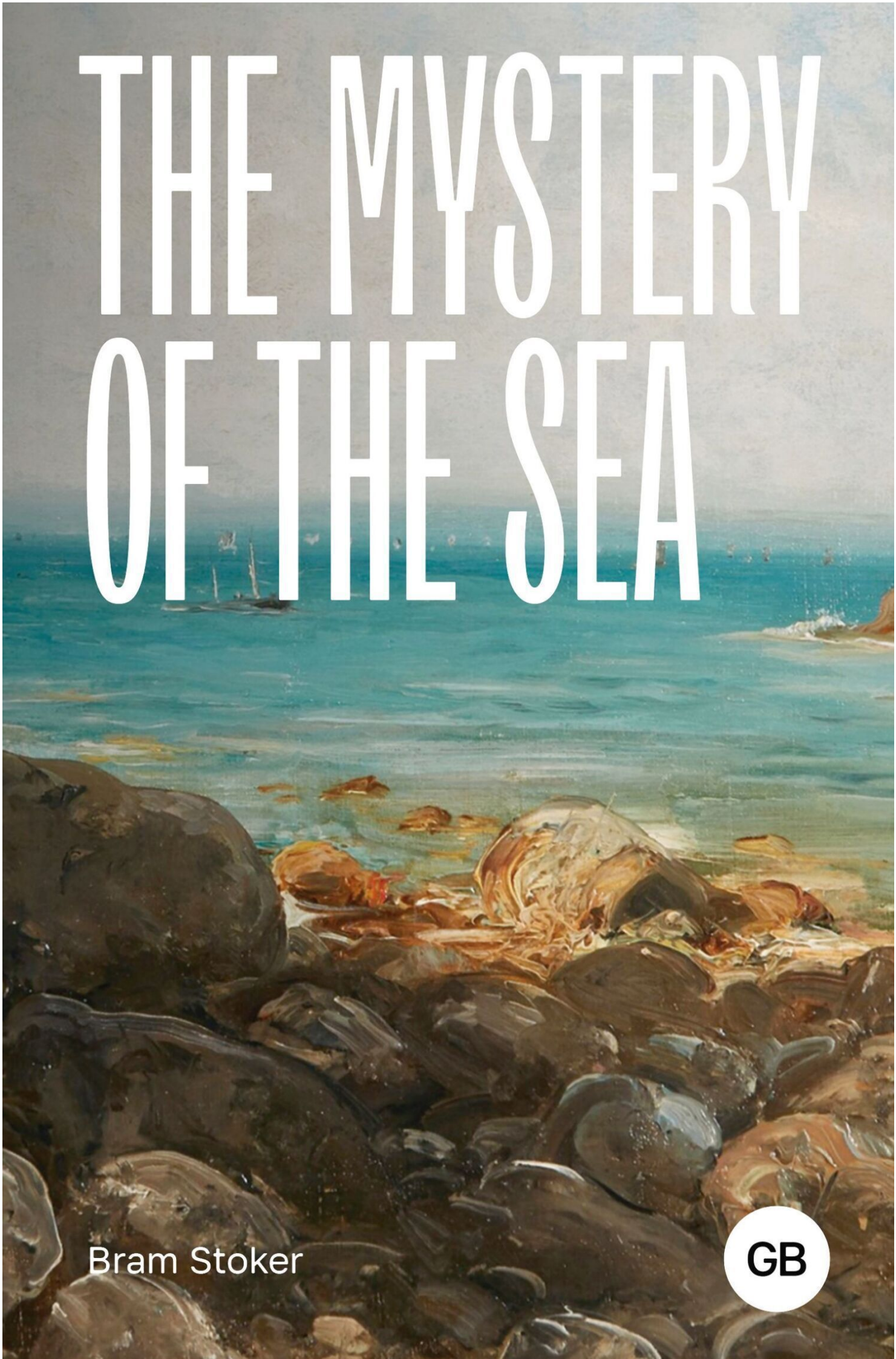
THE MYSTERY OF THE SEA



Bram Stoker

GB

Great Books

Брэм Стокер

The Mystery of the Sea / Тайна моря

«Издательство АСТ»

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Стокер Б.

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Порой случаются невероятные совпадения. Невероятные настолько, что верится в них с трудом. То же случилось и с главным героем романа «Тайна моря» Арчибалдом Хантером. В местечке Круден-Бей, что в Шотландии, череда таинственных происшествий связывает Арчибальда с событиями, происходившими столетия назад. Предлагаем и вам прикоснуться к древним тайнам, читая мистический роман Брэма Стокера на языке оригинала.

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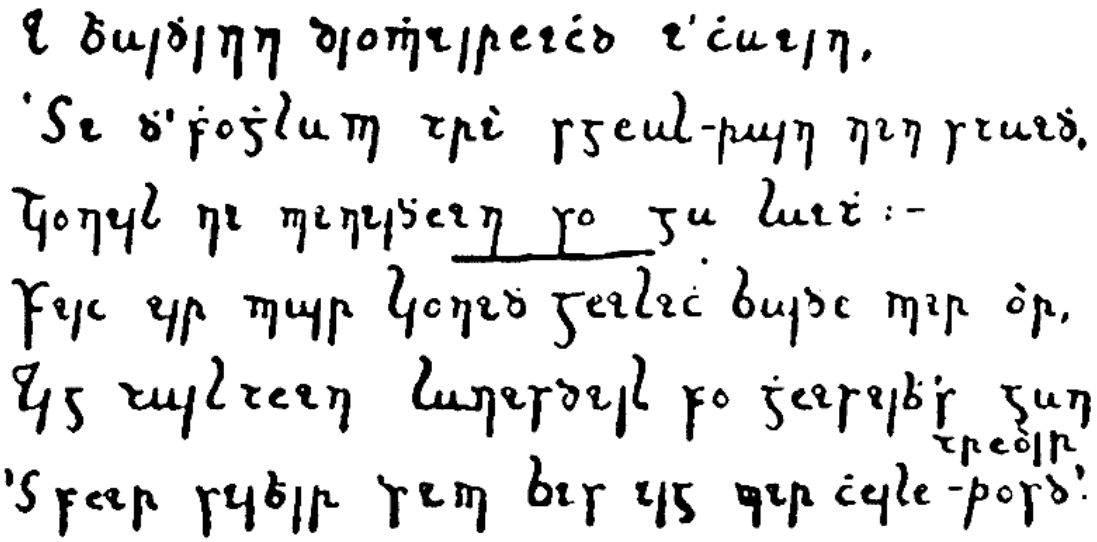
Содержание

Брэм Стокер
The Mystery of the Sea / Тайна моря

TO DAISY GILBEY RIVIERE OF THE THIRD GENERATION OF LOVING AND LOYAL FRIENDS



“To win the mystery o' the sea,
“An' learn the secrets that there be,
“Gather in ane these weirds three:

“A gowden moon on a flowin' tide;
“An' Lammas floods for the spell to bide;
“An' a gowden mon wi death for his bride.”

[Gaelic verse and English translation.]

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Chapter I. Second Sight

I had just arrived at Cruden Bay on my annual visit, and after a late breakfast was sitting on the low wall which was a continuation of the escarpment of the bridge over the Water of Cruden. Opposite to me, across the road and standing under the only little clump of trees in the place was a tall, gaunt old woman, who kept looking at me intently. As I sat, a little group, consisting of a man and two women, went by. I found my eyes follow them, for it seemed to me after they had passed me that the two women walked together and the man alone in front carrying on his shoulder a little black box-a coffin. I shuddered as I thought, but a moment later I saw all three abreast just as they had been. The old woman was now looking at me with eyes that blazed. She came across the road and said to me without preface:

"What saw ye then, that yer e'en looked so awed?" I did not like to tell her so I did not answer. Her great eyes were fixed keenly upon me, seeming to look me through and through. I felt that I grew quite red, whereupon she said, apparently to herself: "I thocht so! Even I did not see that which he saw."

"How do you mean?" I queried. She answered ambiguously: "Wait! Ye shall perhaps know before this hour to-morrow!"

Her answer interested me and I tried to get her to say more; but she would not. She moved away with a grand stately movement that seemed to become her great gaunt form.

After dinner whilst I was sitting in front of the hotel, there was a great commotion in the village; much running to and fro of men and women with sad mien. On questioning them I found that a child had been drowned in the little harbour below. Just then a woman and a man, the same that had passed the bridge earlier in the day, ran by with wild looks. One of the bystanders looked after them pityingly as he said:

"Puir souls. It's a sad home-comin' for them the nicht."

"Who are they?" I asked. The man took off his cap reverently as he answered:

"The father and mother of the child that was drowned!" As he spoke I looked round as though some one had called me.

There stood the gaunt woman with a look of triumph on her face.

*****

The curved shore of Cruden Bay, Aberdeenshire, is backed by a waste of sandhills in whose hollows seagrass and moss and wild violets, together with the pretty "grass of Parnassus" form a green carpet. The surface of the hills is held together by bent-grass and is eternally shifting as the wind takes the fine sand and drifts it to and fro. All behind is green, from the meadows that mark the southern edge of the bay to the swelling uplands that stretch away and away far in the distance, till the blue mist of the mountains at Braemar sets a kind of barrier. In the centre of the bay the highest point of the land that runs downward to the sea looks like a miniature hill known as the Hawklaw; from this point onward to the extreme south, the land runs high with a gentle trend downwards.

Cruden sands are wide and firm and the sea runs out a considerable distance. When there is a storm with the wind on shore the whole bay is a mass of leaping waves and broken water that threatens every instant to annihilate the stake-nets which stretch out here and there along the shore. More than a few vessels have been lost on these wide stretching sands, and it was perhaps the roaring of the shallow seas and the terror which they inspired which sent the crews to the spirit room and the bodies of those of them which came to shore later on, to the churchyard on the hill.

If Cruden Bay is to be taken figuratively as a mouth, with the sand hills for soft palate, and the green Hawklaw as the tongue, the rocks which work the extremities are its teeth. To the north the rocks of red granite rise jagged and broken. To the south, a mile and a half away as the crow flies, Nature seems to have manifested its wildest forces. It is here, where the little promontory called Whinnyfold juts out, that the two great geological features of the Aberdeen coast meet. The red sienite of the north joins the black gneiss of the south. That union must have been originally a wild one; there are evidences of an upheaval which must have shaken the earth to its centre. Here and there are great masses of either species of rock hurled upwards in every conceivable variety of form, sometimes fused or pressed together so that it is impossible to say exactly where gneiss ends or sienite begins; but broadly speaking here is an irregular line of separation. This line runs seawards to the east and its strength is shown in its outcrop. For half a mile or more the rocks rise through the sea singly or in broken masses ending in a dange-rous cluster known as “The Skares” and which has had for centuries its full toll of wreck and disaster. Did the sea hold its dead where they fell, its floor around the Skares would be whitened with their bones, and new islands could build themselves with the piling wreckage. At times one may see here the ocean in her fiercest mood; for it is when the tempest drives from the south-east that the sea is fretted amongst the rugged rocks and sends its spume landwards. The rocks that at calmer times rise dark from the briny deep are lost to sight for moments in the grand onrush of the waves. The seagulls which usually whiten them, now flutter around screaming, and the sound of their shrieks comes in on the gale almost in a continuous note, for the single cries are merged in the multitudinous roar of sea and air.

The village, squatted beside the emboucher of the Water of Cruden at the northern side of the bay is simple enough; a few rows of fishermen's cottages, two or three great red-tiled drying-sheds nestled in the sand-heap behind the fishers' houses. For the rest of the place as it was when first I saw it, a little lookout beside a tall flagstaff on the northern cliff, a few scattered farms over the inland prospect, one little hotel down on the western bank of the Water of Cruden with a fringe of willows protecting its sunk garden which was always full of fruits and flowers.

From the most southern part of the beach of Cruden Bay to Whinnyfold village the distance is but a few hundred yards; first a steep pull up the face of the rock; and then an even way, beside part of which runs a tiny stream. To the left of this path, going towards Whinnyfold, the ground rises in a bold slope and then falls again all round, forming a sort of wide miniature hill of some eighteen or twenty acres. Of this the southern side is sheer, the black rock dipping into the waters of the little bay of Whinnyfold, in the centre of which is a picturesque island of rock shelving steeply from the water on the northern side, as is the tendency of all the gneiss and granite in this part. But to east and north there are irregular bays or openings, so that the furthest points of the promontory stretch out like fingers. At the tips of these are reefs of sunken rock falling down to deep water and whose existence can only be suspected in bad weather when the rush of the current beneath sends up swirling eddies or curling masses of foam. These little bays are mostly curved and are green where falling earth or drifting sand have hidden the outmost side of the rocks and given a foothold to the seagrass and clover. Here have been at some time or other great caves, now either fallen in or silted up with sand, or obliterated with the earth brought down in the rush of surface-water in times of long rain. In one of these bays, Broad Haven, facing right out to the Skares, stands an isolated pillar of rock called locally the “Puir mon” through whose base, time and weather have worn a hole through which one may walk dryshod.

Through the masses of rocks that run down to the sea from the sides and shores of all these bays are here and there na-tural channels with straight edges as though cut on purpose for the taking in of the cobbles belonging to the fisher folk of Whinnyfold.

When first I saw the place I fell in love with it. Had it been possible I should have spent my summer there, in a house of my own, but the want of any place in which to live forbade such an opportunity. So I stayed in the little hotel, the Kilmarnock Arms.

The next year I came again, and the next, and the next. And then I arranged to take a feu at Whinnyfold and to build a house overlooking the Skares for myself. The details of this kept me constantly going to Whinnyfold, and my house to be was always in my thoughts.

Hitherto my life had been an uneventful one. At school I was, though secretly ambitious, dull as to results. At College I was better off, for my big body and athletic powers gave me a certain position in which I had to overcome my natural shyness. When I was about eight and twenty I found myself nominally a barrister, with no knowledge whatever of the practice of law and but little less of the theory, and with a commission in the Devil's Own-the irreverent name given to the Inns of Court Volunteers. I had few relatives, but a comfortable, though not great, fortune; and I had been round the world, dilettante fashion.

Chapter II. Gormala

All that night I thought of the dead child and of the peculiar vision which had come to me. Sleeping or waking it was all the same; my mind could not leave the parents in procession as seen in imagination, or their distracted mien in reality. Mingled with them was the great-eyed, aquiline-featured, gaunt old woman who had taken such an interest in the affair, and in my part of it. I asked the landlord if he knew her, since, from his position as postmaster he knew almost everyone for miles around. He told me that she was a stranger to the place. Then he added:

"I can't imagine what brings her here. She has come over from Peterhead two or three times lately; but she doesn't seem to have anything at all to do. She has nothing to sell and she buys nothing. She's not a tripper, and she's not a beggar, and she's not a thief, and she's not a worker of any sort. She's a queer-looking lot anyhow. I fancy from her speech that she's from the west; probably from some of the far-out islands. I can tell that she has the Gaelic from the way she speaks."

Later on in the day, when I was walking on the shore near the Hawklaw, she came up to speak to me. The shore was quite lonely, for in those days it was rare to see anyone on the beach except when the salmon fishers drew their nets at the ebbing tide. I was walking towards Whinnyfold when she came upon me silently from behind. She must have been hidden among the bent-grass of the sandhills for had she been anywhere in view I must have seen her on that desolate shore. She was evidently a most imperious person; she at once addressed me in a tone and manner which made me feel as though I were in some way an inferior, and in somehow to blame:

"What for did ye no tell me what ye saw yesterday?" Instinctively I answered:

"I don't know why. Perhaps because it seemed so ridiculous." Her stern features hardened into scorn as she replied:

"Are Death and the Doom then so redeekulous that they pleasure ye intil silence?" I somehow felt that this was a little too much and was about to make a sharp answer, when suddenly it struck me as a remarkable thing that she knew already. Filled with surprise I straightway asked her:

"Why, how on earth do you know? I told no one." I stopped for I felt all at sea; there was some mystery here which I could not fathom. She seemed to read my mind like an open book, for she went on looking at me as she spoke, searchingly and with an odd smile.

"Eh! laddie, do ye no ken that ye hae een that can see? Do ye no understand that ye hae een that can speak? Is it that one with the Gift o' Second Sight has no an understandin' o' it. Why, yer face when ye saw the mark o' the Doom, was like a printed book to een like mine."

"Do you mean to tell me" I asked "that you could tell what I saw, simply by looking at my face?"

"Na! na! laddie. Not all that, though a Seer am I; but I knew that you had seen the Doom! It's no that varied that there need be any mistake. After all Death is only one, in whatever way we may speak!" After a pause of thought I asked her:

"If you have the power of Second Sight why did you not see the vision, or whatever it was, yourself?"

"Eh! laddie" she answered, shaking her head "'Tis little ye ken o' the wark o' the Fates! Learn ye then that the Voice speaks only as it listeth into chosen ears, and the Vision comes only to chosen een. None can will to hear or to see, to pleasure themselves."

"Then" I said, and I felt that there was a measure of triumph in my tone "if to none but the chosen is given to know, how comes it that you, who seem not to have been chosen on this occasion at all events, know all the same?" She answered with a touch of impatience:

"Do ye ken, young sir, that even mortal een have power to see much, if there be behind them the thocht, an' the knowledge and the experience to guide them aright. How, think ye, is it that some can see much, and learn much as they gang; while others go blind as the mowdiwart, at the end o' the journey as before it?"

“Then perhaps you will tell me how much you saw, and how you saw it?”

“Ah! to them that have seen the Doom there needs but sma' guidance to their thochts. Too lang, an' too often hae I mysen seen the death-sark an' the watch-candle an' the dead-hole, not to know when they are seen tae ither een. Na, na! laddie, what I kent o' yer seein' was no by the Gift but only by the use o' my proper een. I kent not the muckle o' what ye saw. Not whether it was ane or ither o' the garnishins o' the dead; but weel I kent that it was o' death.”

“Then,” I said interrogatively “Second Sight is altogether a matter of chance?”

“Chance! chance!” she repeated with scorn. “Na! young sir; when the Voice has spoken there is no more chance than that the nicht will follow the day.”

“You mistake me,” I said, feeling somewhat superior now that I had caught her in an error, “I did not for a moment mean that the Doom-whatever it is-is not a true forerunner. What I meant was that it seems to be a matter of chance in whose ear the Voice-whatever it is-speaks; when once it has been ordained that it is to sound in the ear of some one.” Again she answered with scorn:

“Na, na! there is no chance o' ocht aboot the Doom. Them that send forth the Voice and the Seein' know well to whom it is sent and why. Can ye no comprehend that it is for no bairn-play that such goes forth. When the Voice speaks, it is mainly followed by tears an' woe an' lamentation! Nae! nor is it only one bit manifestation that stands by its lanes, remote and isolate from all ither. Truly 'tis but a pairt o' the great scheme o' things; an' be sure that whoso is chosen to see or to hear is chosen weel, an' must hae their pairt in what is to be, on to the verra end.”

“Am I to take it” I asked, “that Second Sight is but a little bit of some great purpose which has to be wrought out by means of many kinds; and that whoso sees the Vision or hears the Voice is but the blind unconscious instrument of Fate?”

“Aye! laddie. Weel eneuch the Fates know their wishes an' their wark, no to need the help or the thocht of any human-blind or seein', sane or silly, conscious or unconscious.”

All through her speaking I had been struck by the old woman's use of the word 'Fate,' and more especially when she used it in the plural. It was evident that, Christian though she might be-and in the West they are generally devout observants of the duties of their creed-her belief in this respect came from some of the old pagan mythologies. I should have liked to question her on this point; but I feared to shut her lips against me. Instead I asked her:

“Tell me, will you, if you don't mind, of some case you have known yourself of Second Sight?”

“'Tis no for them to brag or boast to whom has been given to see the wark o' the hand o' Fate. But sine ye are yerself a Seer an' would learn, then I may speak. I hae seen the sea ruffle wi'oot cause in the verra spot where later a boat was to gang doon, I hae heard on a lone moor the hammerin' o' the coffinwright when one passed me who was soon to dee. I hae seen the death-sark fold round the speerit o' a drowned one, in baith ma sleepin' an' ma wakin' dreams. I hae heard the settin' doom o' the Spaiks, an' I hae seen the Weepers on a' the crood that walked. Aye, an' in mony anither way hae I seen an' heard the Coming o' the Doom.”

“But did all the seeings and hearings come true?” I asked. “Did it ever happen that you heard queer sounds or saw strange sights and that yet nothing came of them? I gather that you do not always know to whom something is going to happen; but only that death is coming to some one!” She was not displeased at my questioning but replied at once:

“Na doot! but there are times when what is seen or heard has no manifest following. But think ye, young sir, how mony a corp, still waited for, lies in the depths o' the sea; how mony lie oot on the hillsides, or are fallen in deep places where their bones whiten unkent. Nay! more, to how many has Death come in a way that men think the wark o' nature when his hastening has come frae the hand of man, untold.” This was a difficult matter to answer so I changed or rather varied the subject.

“How long must elapse before the warning comes true?”

“Ye know yersel', for but yestreen ye hae seen, how the Death can follow hard upon the Doom; but there be times, nay mostly are they so, when days or weeks pass away ere the Doom is fulfilled.”

“Is this so?” I asked “when you know the person regarding whom the Doom is spoken.” She answered with an air of certainty which somehow carried conviction, secretly, with it.

“Even so! I know one who walks the airth now in all the pride o' his strength. But the Doom has been spoken of him. I saw him with these verra een lie prone on rocks, wi' the water rinnin' down from his hair. An' again I heard the minute bells as he went by me on a road where is no bell for a score o' miles. Aye, an' yet again I saw him in the kirk itsel' wi' corbies flyin' round him, an' mair gatherin' from afar!”

Here was indeed a case where Second Sight might be tested; so I asked her at once, though to do so I had to overcome a strange sort of repugnance:

“Could this be proved? Would it not be a splendid case to make known; so that if the death happened it would prove beyond all doubt the existence of such a thing as Second Sight.” My suggestion was not well received. She answered with slow scorn:

“Beyon' all doot! Doot! Wha is there that doots the bein' o' the Doom? Learn ye too, young sir, that the Doom an' all thereby is no for traffickin' wi' them that only cares for curiosity and publeecity. The Voice and the Vision o' the Seer is no for fine madams and idle gentles to while away their time in play-toy make-believe!” I climbed down at once.

“Pardon me!” I said “I spoke without thinking. I should not have said so-to you at any rate.” She accepted my apology with a sort of regal inclination; but the moment after she showed by her words she was after all but a woman!

“I will tell ye; that so in the full time ye may hae no doot yersel'. For ye are a Seer and as Them that has the power hae gien ye the Gift it is no for the like o' me to cumber the road o' their doin'. Know ye then, and remember weel, how it was told ye by Gormala MacNiel that Lauchlane Macleod o' the Outer Isles hae been Called; tho' as yet the Voice has no sounded in his ears but only in mine. But ye will see the time-”

She stopped suddenly as though some thought had struck her, and then went on impressively:

“When I saw him lie prone on the rocks there was ane that bent ower him that I kent not in the nicht wha it was, though the licht o' the moon was around him. We shall see! We shall see!”

Without a word more she turned and left me. She would not listen to my calling after her; but with long strides passed up the beach and was lost among the sandhills.

Chapter III. An Ancient Rune

On the next day I rode on my bicycle to Peterhead, and walked on the pier. It was a bright clear day, and a fresh northern breeze was blowing. The fishing boats were ready to start at the turn of the tide; and as I came up the first of them began to pass out through the harbour mouth. Their movement was beautiful to see; at first slowly, and then getting faster as the sails were hoisted, till at last they swept through the narrow entrance, scuppers under, righting themselves as they swung before the wind in the open sea. Now and again a belated smacksman came hurrying along to catch his boat before she should leave the pier.

The eastern pier of Peterhead is guarded by a massive wall of granite, built in several steps or tiers, which breaks the fury of the gale. When a northern storm is on, it is a wild spot; the waves dash over it in walls of solid green topped with mountainous masses of foam and spray. But at present, with the July sun beating down, it was a vantage post from which to see the whole harbour and the sea without. I climbed up and sat on the top, looking on admiringly, and lazily smoked in quiet enjoyment. Presently I noticed some one very like Gormala come hurrying along the pier, and now and again crouching behind one of the mooring posts. I said nothing but kept an eye on her, for I supposed that she was at her usual game of watching some one.

Soon a tall man strode leisurely along, and from every movement of the woman I could see that he was the subject of her watching. He came near where I sat, and stood there with that calm unconcerned patience which is a characteristic of the fisherman.

He was a fine-looking fellow, well over six feet high, with a tangled mass of thick red-yellow hair and curly, bushy beard. He had lustrous, far-seeing golden-brown eyes, and massive, finely-cut features. His pilot-cloth trousers spangled all over with silver herring scales, were tucked into great, bucketboots. He wore a heavy blue jersey and a cap of weazel skin. I had been thinking of the decline of the herring from the action of the trawlers in certain waters, and fancied this would be a good opportunity to get a local opinion. Before long I strolled over and joined this son of the Vikings. He gave it, and it was a decided one, uncompromisingly against the trawlers and the laws which allowed them to do their nefarious work. He spoke in a sort of old-fashioned, biblical language which was moderate and devoid of epithets, but full of apposite illustration. When he had pointed out that certain fishing grounds, formerly most prolific of result to the fishers, were now absolutely worthless he ended his argument:

“And, sure, good master, it stands to rayson. Suppose you be a farmer, and when you have prepared your land and manured it, you sow your seed and plough the ridges and make it all safe from wind and devastatin' storm. If, when the green corn be shootin' frae the airth, you take your harrow and drag it ath'art the springin' seed, where be then the promise of your golden grain?”

For a moment or two the beauty of his voice, the deep, resonant, earnestness of his tone and the magnificent, simple purity of the man took me away from the scene. He seemed as though I had looked him through and through, and had found him to be throughout of golden worth. Possibly it was the imagery of his own speech and the colour which his eyes and hair and cap suggested, but he seemed to me for an instant as a small fi-gure projected against a background of rolling upland clothed in ripe grain. Round his feet were massed the folds of a great white sheet whose edges faded into air. In a moment the image passed, and he stood before me in his full stature.

I almost gasped, for just behind him, where she had silently come, stood Gormala, gazing not at the fisherman but at me, with eyes that positively blazed with a sort of baleful eagerness. She was looking straight into my eyes; I knew it when I caught the look of hers.

The fisherman went on talking. I did not, however, hear what he was saying, for again some mysterious change had come over our surroundings. The blue sea had over it the mystery of the darkness of the night; the high noon sun had lost its fiery vigour and shone with the pale yellow

splendour of a full moon. All around me, before and on either hand, was a waste of waters; the very air and earth seemed filmed with moving water, and the sound of falling waters was in my ears. Again, the golden fisherman was before me for an instant, not as a moving speck but in full size now he lay prone; limp and lifeless, with waxen cold cheeks, in the eloquent inaction of death. The white sheet-I could see now that it was a shroud-was around him up to his heart. I seemed to feel Gormala's eyes burning into my brain as I looked. All at once everything seemed to resume its proper proportion, and I was listening calmly to the holding forth of the Viking.

I turned instinctively and looked at Gormala. For an instant her eyes seemed to blaze triumphantly; then she pulled the little shawl which she wore closer round her shoulders and, with a gesture full of modesty and deference turned away. She climbed up the ridges of the harbour wall and sat looking across as at the sea beyond, now studded with a myriad of brown sails.

A little later the stolid indifference as to time slipped all at once from the fisherman. He was instinct with life and action, and with a touch of his cap and a “Farewell good Master!” stood poised on the very edge of the pier ready to spring on a trim, weather-beaten smack which came rushing along almost grazing the rough stone work. It made our hearts jump as he sprang on board and taking the tiller from the hand of the steersman turned the boat's head to the open sea. As she rushed out through the harbour mouth we heard behind us the voice of an old fisherman who had hobbled up to us:

“He'll do that once too often! Lauchlane Macleod is like all these men from Uist and the rest of the Out Islanders. They don't care 'naught about naught.'”

Lauchlane Macleod! The very man of whom Gormala had prophesied! The very mention of his name seemed to turn me cold.

After lunch at the hotel I played golf on the links till evening drew near. Then I got on my bicycle to return home. I had laboured slowly up the long hill to the Stirling quarry when I saw Gormala sitting on the roadside on a great boulder of red granite. She was evidently looking out for me, for when I came near she rose up and deliberately stood in the roadway in my path. I jumped off my wheel and asked her point blank what she wanted with me so much that she stopped me on the road.

Gormala was naturally an impressive figure, but at present she looked weird and almost unearthly. Her tall, gaunt form lit by the afterglow in a soft mysterious light was projected against the grey of the darkening sea, whose sombreness was emphasised by the brilliant emerald green of the sward which fell from where we stood to the jagged cliff-line.

The loneliness of the spot was profound. From where we stood not a house was to be seen, and the darkening sea was desert of sails. It seemed as if we two were the only living things in nature's vast expanse. To me it was a little awesome. Gormala's first mysterious greeting when I had seen the mourning for the child, and her persistent following of me ever since, had begun to get on my nerves. She had become a sort of enforced condition to me, and whether she was pre-sent in the flesh or not, the expectation or the apprehension of her coming-I hardly knew which it was-kept my thoughts perpetually interested in her. Now, her weird, statuesque attitude and the scene around us finished my intellectual subjugation. The weather had changed to an almost inconceivable degree. The bright clear sky of the morning had become darkly mysterious, and the wind had died away to an ominous calm. Nature seemed altogether sentient, and willing to speak directly to a man in my own receptive mood. The Seer-woman evidently knew this, for she gave fully a minute of silence for the natural charm to work before she spoke. Then in a solemn warning voice she said:

“Time is flying by us; Lammas-tide is nigh.” The words impressed me, why I know not; for though I had heard of Lammas-tide I had not the smallest idea of what was meant by it. Gormala was certainly quick with her eyes-she had that gypsy quality in remarkable degree-and she seemed to read my face like an open book. There was a suppressed impatience in her manner, as of one who must stop in the midst of some important matter to explain to a child whose aid is immediately necessary:

“Ye no ken why? Is it that ye dinna heed o' Lammas-tide, or that ye no ken o' the prophecy of the Mystery of the Sea and the treasures that lie hid therein.” I felt more than ever abashed, and

that I should have known long ago those things of which the gaunt woman spoke, towering above me as I leaned on my wheel. She went on:

"An' ye no ken, then listen and learn!" and she spoke the following rune in a strange, staccato cadence which seemed to suit our surroundings and to sink into my heart and memory so deep that to forget would be impossible:

"To win the Mystery o' the Sea,
"An' learn the secrets that there be, "Gather in one these weirds three:
"A gowden moon on a flowin' tide,
"And Lammas floods for the spell to bide;
"And a gowden mon wi' death for his bride."

There was a long pause of silence between us, and I felt very strangely. The sea before me took odd, indefinite shape. It seemed as though it was of crystal clearness, and that from where I gazed I could see all its mysteries. That is, I could see so as to know there were mysteries, though what they were individually I could not even dream. The past and the present and the future seemed to be mingled in one wild, chaotic, whirling dream, from the mass of which thoughts and ideas seemed now and again to fly out unexpectedly on all sides as do sparks from hot iron under the hammer. Within my heart grew vague indefinite yearnings, aspirations, possibilities. There came a sense of power so paramount that instinctively I drew myself up to my full height and became conscious of the physical vigour within me. As I did so I looked around and seemed to wake from a dream.

Naught around me but the drifting clouds, the silent darkening land and the brooding sea. Gormala was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter IV. Lammas Floods

When I got to Cruden it was quite dark. I had lingered by the way thinking of Gormala MacNiel and all the queer kind of mystery in which she seemed to be enmeshing me. The more I thought, the more I was puzzled; for the strangest thing of all to me was that I understood part of what seemed to be a mystery. For instance I was but imperfectly acquainted with the Seer-woman's view of what was to be the result of her watching of Lauchlane Macleod. I knew of course from her words at our first conversation that in him she recognised a man doomed to near death according to the manifestation of her own power of Second Sight; but I knew what she did not seem to, that this was indeed a golden man. From the momentary glimpse which I had had in that queer spell of trance, or whatever it was which had come to me on the pier head, I had seemed to*know* him as a man of gold, sterling throughout. It was not merely that his hair was red gold and that his eyes might fairly be called golden, but his whole being could only be expressed in that way; so that when Gormala spoke, the old rhyme seemed at once a prime factor in the group of three powers which had to be united before the fathoming of the Mystery of the Sea. I accordingly made up my mind to speak with the Seer-woman and to ask her to explain. My own intellectual attitude to the matter interested me. I was not sceptical, I did not believe; but I think my mind hung in poise. Certainly my sympathies tended towards the mysterious side, backed up by some kind of understanding of the inner nature of things which was emotional or unintentional rather than fixed.

All that night I seemed to dream, my mind working eternally round the data of the day; hundreds of different relationships between Gormala, Lauchlane Macleod, Lammas-tide, the moon and the secrets of the sea revolved before me. It was grey morning before I fell asleep to the occasional chirping of the earliest birds.

As sometimes happens after a night of uneasy dreaming of some disturbing topic, the reaction of the morning carried oblivion with it. It was well into the afternoon when all at once I remembered the existence of the witch-woman-for as such I was beginning to think of Gormala. The thought came accompanied by a sense of oppression which was not of fear, but which was certainly of uneasiness. Was it possible that the woman had in some way, or to some degree, hypnotised me. I remembered with a slightly nervous feeling how the evening before I had stopped on the roadway obedient to her will, and how I had lost the identity of my surroundings in her presence. A sudden idea struck me; I went to the window and looked out. For an instant my heart seemed to be still.

Just opposite the house stood Gormala, motionless. I went out at once and joined her, and instinctively we turned our steps toward the sand-hills. As we walked along I said to her:

“Where did you disappear to last night?”

“About that which is to be done!” Her lips and her face were set; I knew it was no use following up that branch of the subject, so I asked again:

“What did you mean by those verses which you told me?” Her answer was given in a solemn tone:

“Them that made them alone can tell; until the time shall come!”

“Who made them?”

“Nane can now tell. They are as aud as the rocky foundations o' the isles themselves.”

“Then how did you come to know them?” There was a distinct note of pride in her answer. Such a note as might be expected from a prince speaking of his ancestry:

“They hae come doon to me through centuries. Frae mither to dochter, and from mither to dochter again, wi' never a break in the lang line o' the tellin'. Know ye, young master, that I am o' a race o' Seers. I take my name from that Gormala o' Uist who through long years foresaw the passing o' mony a one. That Gormala who throughout the islands of the west was known and feared o' all men; that Gormala whose mither's mither, and mither's mither again, away back into the darkness o'

time when coracles crept towards the sunset ower the sea and returned not, held the fates o' men and women in their han's and ruled the Mysteries o' the Sea." As it was evident that Gormala must have in her own mind some kind of meaning of the prophecy, or spell, or whatever it was, I asked her again:

"But you must understand something of the meaning, or you would not attach so much importance to it?"

"I ken naught but what is seen to ma een, and to that inner e'e which telleth tae the soul that which it seeth!"

"Then why did you warn me that Lammas-tide was near at hand?" The grim woman actually smiled as she replied:

"Did ye no hearken to the words spoken of the Lammas floods, which be of the Powers that rule the Spell?"

"Well, the fact is that I don't know anything of 'Lammas-tide!' We do not keep it in the Church of England," I added as an afterthought, explanatory of my ignorance. Gormala was clever enough to take advantage of having caught me in a weak place; so she took advantage of it to turn the conversation into the way she wished herself:

"What saw ye, when Lauchlane Macleod grew sma' in yer een, and girt again?"

"Simply, that he seemed to be all at once a tiny image of himself, seen against a waste of ripe corn." Then it struck me that I had not as yet told her or any one else of what I had seen. How then did she know it? I was annoyed and asked her. She answered scornfully:

"How kent I it, an' me a Seer o' a race o' Seers! Are ma wakin' een then so dim or so sma' that I canna read the thochts o' men in the glances o' their een. Did I no see yer een look near an' far as quick as thocht? But what saw ye after, when ye looked rapt and yer een peered side to side, as though at one lyin' prone?" I was more annoyed than ever and answered her in a sort of stupor:

"I saw him lying dead on a rock, with a swift tide running by; and over the waters the broken track of a golden moon." She made a sound which was almost a cry, and which recalled me to myself as I looked at her. She was ablaze. She towered to her full height with an imperious, exultant mien; the light in her eyes was more than human as she said:

"Dead, as I masel' saw him an' 'mid the foam o' the tide race! An' gowd, always gowd ahint him in the een of this greater Seer. Gowden corn, and gowden moon, and gowden sea! Aye! an' I see it now, backie-bird that I hae been; the gowden mon indeed, wi' his gowden een an' his gowden hair and all the truth o' his gowden life!" Then turning to me she said fiercely:

"Why did I warn ye that Lammas-tide was near? Go ask those that value the months and days thereof, when be Lammas and what it means to them that hae faith. See what they are; learn o' the comin' o' the moon and o' the flowin' o' the tides that follow!"

Without another word she turned and left me.

I went back to the hotel at once, determined to post myself as to Lammas-tide; its facts and constitutions, and the beliefs and traditions that hung around it. Also to learn the hours of the tides, and the age of the moon about the time of Lammas-tide. Doubtless I could have found out all I wanted from some of the ministers of the various houses of religion which hold in Cruden; but I was not wishful to make public, even so far, the mystery which was closing around me. My feeling was partly a saving sense of humour, or the fear of ridicule, and partly a genuine repugnance to enter upon the subject with any one who might not take it as seriously as I could wish. From which latter I gather that the whole affair was becoming woven into the structure of my life.

Possibly it was, that some trait, or tendency, or power which was individual to me was beginning to manifest itself and to find its means of expression. In my secret heart I not only believed but knew that some instinct within me was guiding my thoughts in some strange way. The sense of occult power which is so vital a part of divination was growing within me and asserting its masterdom, and with it came an equally forceful desire of secrecy. The Seer in me, latent so long, was becoming conscious of his strength, and jealous of it.

At this time, as the feeling of strength and consciousness grew, it seemed to lose something of its power from this very cause. Gradually it was forced upon me that for the full manifestation of such faculty as I might possess, some kind of abstraction or surrender of self was necessary. Even a few hours of experience had taught me much; for now that my mind was bent on the phenomena of Second Sight the whole living and moving world around me became a veritable diorama of possibilities. Within two days from the episode at the Pier head I had had behind me a larger experience of effort of occult force than generally comes to a man in a lifetime. When I look back, it seems to me that all the forces of life and nature became exposed to my view. A thousand things which hitherto I had accepted in simple faith as facts, were pregnant with new meanings. I began to understand that the whole earth and sea, and air-all that of which human beings generally ordinarily take cognisance, is but a film or crust which hides the deeper moving powers or forces. With this insight I began to understand the grand guesses of the Pantheists, pagan and christian alike, who out of their spiritual and nervous and intellectual sensitiveness began to realise that there was somewhere a purposeful cause of universal action. An action which in its special or concrete working appeared like the sentience of nature in general, and of the myriad items of its cosmogony.

I soon learned that Lammas day is the first of August and is so often accompanied by heavy weather that Lammas floods are almost annually recurrent. The eve of the day is more or less connected with various superstitions.

This made me more eager for further information, and by the aid of a chance friend, I unearthed at Aberdeen a learned professor who gave me offhand all the information which I desired. In fact he was so full of astronomical learning that I had to stop him now and again in order to elucidate some point easily explainable to those who understood his terminology, but which wrapped my swaddling knowledge in a mystery all its own. I have a sneaking friendliness even now for anyone to whom the word 'syzygy' carries no special meaning.

I got at the bases of facts, however, and understood that on the night of July 31, which was the eve of Lammas-tide, the moon would be full at midnight. I learned also that from certain astronomical reasons the tide which would ostensibly begin its flow a little after midnight would in reality commence just on the stroke. As these were the points which concerned me I came away with a new feeling of awe upon me. It seemed as though the heavens as well as the earth were bending towards the realisation or fulfillment of the old prophecy. At this time my own connection with the mystery, or how it might affect me personally, did not even enter my head. I was content to be an obedient item in the general scheme of things.

It was now the 28th July so, if it were to take place at the Lammas-tide of the current year, we should know soon the full measure of the denouêment. There was but one thing wanting to complete the conditions of the prophecy. The weather had been abnormally dry, and there might after all be no Lammas floods. To-day, however, the sky had been heavily overcast. Great black clouds which seemed to roll along tumbling over and over, as the sail of a foundered boat does in a current, loomed up from the west. The air grew closer, and to breathe was an effort. A sort of shiver came over the wide stretch of open country. Darker and darker grew the sky, till it seemed so like night that the birds in the few low-lying coppices and the scanty hedgerows ceased to sing. The bleat of sheep and the low of cattle seemed to boom through the still air with a hollow sound, as if coming from a distance. The intolerable stillness which precedes the storm became so oppressive that I, who am abnormally susceptible to the moods of nature, could almost have screamed out.

Then all at once the storm broke. There was a flash of lightning so vivid that it lit up the whole country away to the mountains which encircle Braemar. The fierce crash and wide roll of the thunder followed with incredible quickness. And then the hot, heavy-dropped summer rain fell in torrents.

All that afternoon the rain fell, with only a few brief intervals of glowing sunshine. All night, too, it seemed to fall without ceasing, for whenever I woke-which I did frequently with a sense over

me of something impending-I could hear the quick, heavy patter on the roof, and the rush and gurgle of the overcharged gutters.

The next day was one of unmitigated gloom. The rain poured down ceaselessly. There was little wind, just sufficient to roll north-eastwards the great masses of rain-laden clouds piled up by the Gulf Stream against the rugged mountains of the western coast and its rocky islands. Two whole days there were of such rain, and then there was no doubt as to the strength of the Lammas floods this year. All the wide uplands of Buchan were glistening with runnels of water whenever the occasional glimpses of sunshine struck them. Both the Water of Cruden and the Back Burn were running bank high. On all sides it was reported that the Lammas floods were the greatest that had been known in memory.

All this time my own spiritual and intellectual uneasiness was perpetually growing. The data for the working of the prophecy were all fixed with remarkable exactness. In theatrical parlance 'the stage was set' and all ready for the action which was to come. As the hours wore on, my uneasiness changed somewhat and apprehension became merged in a curious mixture of superstition and exaltation. I was growing eager to the coming time.

The afternoon of July 31 was fine. The sun shone brightly; the air was dry and, for the time of year, cool. It seemed as though the spell of wet weather was over and that fiery August was coming to its own again. The effects of the rainstorm were, however, manifest. Not only was every rill and stream and river in the North in spate but the bogs of the mountains were so saturated with wet that many days must elapse before they could cease to send their quota to swell the streams. The mountain valleys were generally lakes in miniature. As one went through the country the murmur or rush of falling water was forever in the ears. I suppose it was in my own case partly because I was concerned in the mere existence of Lammas floods that the whole of nature seemed so insistent on the subject. The sound of moving water in its myriad gamut was so perpetually in my ears that I could never get my mind away from it. I had a long walk that afternoon through roads still too wet and heavy for bicycling. I came back to dinner thoroughly tired out, and went to bed early.

Chapter V. The Mystery of The Sea

I do not remember what woke me. I have a vague idea that it was a voice, but whether outside the house or within myself I know not.

It was eleven o'clock by my watch when I left the Kilmarnock Arms and took my way across the sandhills, heading for the Hawklaw which stood out boldly in the brilliant moonlight. I followed the devious sheep track amongst the dunes covered with wet bent-grass, every now and again stumbling amongst the rabbit burrows which in those days honeycombed the sandhills of Cruden Bay. At last I came to the Hawklaw, and, climbing the steep terraced edge near the sea, sat on the top to breathe myself after the climb.

The scene was one of exquisite beauty. Its natural loveliness was enhanced by the softness of the full yellow moonlight which seemed to flood the heavens and the earth alike. To the south-east the bleak promontory of Whinnyfold stood out stark and black as velvet and the rocks of the Skares were like black dots in the quivering sea of gold. I arose and went on my way. The tide was far out and as I stumbled along the rude path above the waste of boulders I had a feeling that I should be late. I hurried on, crossed the little rill which usually only trickled down beside the fishers' zigzag path at the back of Whinnyfold but which was now a rushing stream-again the noise of falling water, the voice of the Lammas floods-and took the cart track which ran hard by the cliff down to the point which looked direct upon the Skares.

When I reached the very edge of the cliff, where the long sea-grass and the deep clover felt underfoot like a luxurious carpet, I was not surprised to see Gormala seated, looking out seawards. The broad track of the moon lay right across the outmost rock of the Skares and falling across some of the jagged rocks, which seemed like fangs rising from the deep water as the heave of the waveless sea fell back and the white water streamed down, came up to where we stood and seemed to bathe both the Seer-woman and myself in light. There was no current anywhere, but only the silent rise and fall of the water in the everlasting movement of the sea. When she heard me behind her Gormala turned round, and the patient calmness of her face disappeared. She rose quickly, and as she did so pointed to a small boat which sailing up from the south was now drawing opposite to us and appeared to be making a course as close to shore as possible, just clearing the outer bulwark of the Skares.

“Look!” she said, “Lauchlane Macleod comes by his lanes. The rocks are around him, and his doom is at hand!”

There did not appear any danger in such a course; the wind was gentle, the tide was at the still moment between ebb and flow, and the smoothness of the water beyond the rock seemed to mark its great depth.

All at once the boat seemed to stand still, – we were too far off to hear a sound even on such a still night. The mast bent forward and broke short off, the sails hung limp in the water with the peak of the lug sail sticking up in a great triangle, like the fin of a mammoth shark. A few seconds after, a dark speck moved on the water which became agitated around it; it was evident that a swimmer was making for the land. I would have gone to help him had it been of use; but it was not, the outer rock was half a mile away. Indeed, though I knew it was no use, I was yet about to swim to meet him when Gormala's voice behind me arrested me:

“Do ye no see that gin ye meet him amid yon rocks, ye can, when the tide begins to race, be no help to any. If he can win through, ye may help him if ye bide here.” The advice was good and I stayed my feet. The swimmer evidently knew the danger, for he hurried frantically to win some point of safety before the tide should turn. But the rocks of the Skares are deadly steep; they rise from the water sheer everywhere, and to climb them from the sea is a hopeless task. Once and again the swimmer tried to find a chink or cranny where he could climb; but each time he tried to raise himself he fell back into the water. Moreover I could see that he was wounded, for his left hand hung idle.

He seemed to realise the hopelessness of the task, and turning, made desperately for the part where we stood. He was now within the most dangerous spot in the whole region of the Skares. The water is of great depth everywhere and the needlepoints of rocks rise almost to the very surface. It is only when the waves are rough at low water that they can be seen at all, when the dip of the waves leaves them bare; but from the surface in calm weather they cannot be seen as the swirl of the tide around them is invisible. Here, too, the tide, rounding the point and having the current broken by the masses of the great rock, rolls with inconceivable rapidity. I had too often watched from the headland where my home was to be the set of the tide not to know the danger. I shouted as loudly as I could, but for some reason he did not hear me. The moments ere the tide should turn seemed like ages; and yet it was with a sudden shock that I heard the gurgle of moving water followed by the lap, lap, lap, getting quicker each second. Somewhere inland a clock struck twelve.

The tide had turned and was beginning to flow.

In a few seconds the swimmer felt its effects, though he did not seem to notice them. Then he was swept towards the north. All at once there was a muffled cry which seemed to reach slowly to where we stood, and the swimmer rolled over for an instant. It was only too apparent what had happened; he had struck his arm against one of the sunken rocks and injured it. Then he commenced a mad struggle for life, swimming without either arm in that deadly current which grew faster and faster every moment. He was breathless, and now and again his head dipped; but he kept on valiantly. At last in one of these dips, borne by the momentum of his own strength and the force of the current, he struck his head against another of the sunken rocks. For an instant he raised it, and I could see it run red in the glare of the moonlight.

Then he sank; from the height where I stood I could see the body roll over and over in the fierce current which made for the outmost point to the north-east of the promontory. I ran over as fast as I could, Gormala following. When I came to the rock, which here shelved, I plunged in and after a few strokes met by chance the body as it rolled upward. With a desperate effort I brought it to land.

The struggle to lift the body from the water and to bear it up the rock exhausted me, so that when I reached the top of the cliff I had to pause for a few seconds to breathe hard. Since the poor fellow's struggle for life had begun I had never for an instant given the prophecy a thought. But now, all at once, as I looked past the figure, lying limp before me with the poor arms twisted unnaturally and the head turned-away past the moonlit sea and the great, golden orb whose track was wrinkled over the racing tide, the full force of it burst upon me, and I felt a sort of spiritual transformation. The air seemed full of fluttering wings; sea and land alike teemed with life that I had not hitherto dreamed of. I fell in a sort of spiritual trance. But the open eyes were upon me; I feared the man was dead, but Briton-like I would not accept the conviction without effort. So I raised the body to my shoulders, determined to make with what speed I could for Whinnyfold where fire and willing hands could aid in restoration. As I laid the limp body across my shoulders, holding the two hands in my right hand to steady the burden whilst with the left I drew some of the clothing tight, I caught Gormala's eye. She had not helped me in any possible way, though more than once in distress I had called to her. So now I said angrily:

“Get away woman! You should be ashamed of yourself never to help at such a time,” and I took my way unaided. I did not heed at the time her answer, spoken with a certain measure of deprecation, though it afterwards came back to me:

“Am I to wark against the Fates when They have spoken! The Dead are dead indeed when the Voice has whispered in their ears!”

Now, as I passed along with the hands of the dead man in mine-the true shell of a man whose spirit could be but little space away whilst the still blood in the veins was yet warm-a strange thing began to happen. The spirits of earth and sea and air seemed to take shape to me, and all the myriad sounds of the night to have a sentient cause of utterance. As I panted and struggled on, my physical effort warring equally with the new spiritual experience so that nothing remained except sentience

and memory, I could see Gormala walking abreast me with even steps. Her eyes glared balefully with a fierce disappointment; never once did she remit the vigilant, keen look which seemed to pierce into my very soul.

For a short space of time there was something of antagonism to her; but this died away imperceptibly, and I neither cared nor thought about her, except when my attention would be called to her. I was becoming wrapped in the realisation of the mightier forces around me.

Just where the laneway from the cliff joins Whinnyfold there is a steep zigzag path running down to the stony beach far below where the fishers keep their boats and which is protected from almost the wildest seas by the great black rock-the Caudman, – which fills the middle of the little bay, leaving deep channels on either hand. When I was come to this spot, suddenly all the sounds of the night seemed to cease. The very air grew still so that the grasses did not move or rustle, and the waters of the swirling tide ceased to run in grim silence on their course. Even to that inner sense, which was so new to me that the change in everything to which it was susceptible became at once noticeable, all things stood still. It was as though the spirits of earth and air and water were holding their breath for some rare portent. Indeed I noticed as my eye ranged the surface of the sea, that the moon track was for the time no longer rippled, but lay in a broad glistening band.

The only living thing in all the wide world was, it seemed to me, the figure of Gormala as, with lowering eyes and suspended breath, she stood watching me with uncompromising, persistent sternness.

Then my own heart seemed to stand still, to be a part of the grim silence of the waiting forces of the world. I was not frightened; I was not even amazed. All seemed so thoroughly in keeping with the prevailing influence of the time that I did not feel even a moment of surprise.

Up the steep path came a silent procession of ghostly fi-gures, so misty of outline that through the grey green of their phantom being the rocks and moonlit sea were apparent, and even the velvet blackness of the shadows of the rocks did not lose their gloom. And yet each figure was defined so accurately that every feature, every particle of dress or accoutrement could be discerned. Even the sparkle of their eyes in that grim waste of ghostly grey was like the lambent flashes of phosphoric light in the foam of moving water cleft by a swift prow. There was no need for me to judge by the historical sequence of their attire, or by any inference of hearing; I knew in my heart that these were the ghosts of the dead who had been drowned in the waters of the Cruden Skares.

Indeed the moments of their passing-and they were many for the line was of sickening length-became to me a lesson of the long flight of time. At the first were skin-clad savages with long, wild hair matted; then others with rude, primitive clothing. And so on in historic order men, aye, and here and there a woman, too, of many lands, whose garments were of varied cut and substance. Red-haired Vikings and black-haired Celts and Phoenicians, fair-haired Saxons and swarthy Moors in flowing robes. At first the figures, chiefly of the barbarians, were not many; but as the sad procession passed along I could see how each later year had brought its ever-growing tale of loss and disaster, and added more and faster to the grim harvest of the sea. A vast number of the phantoms had passed when there came along a great group which at once attracted my attention. They were all swarthy, and bore themselves proudly under their cuirasses and coats of mail, or their garb as fighting men of the sea. Spaniards they were, I knew from their dress, and of three centuries back. For an instant my heart leapt; these were men of the great Armada, come up from the wreck of some lost galleon or patache to visit once again the glimpses of the Moon. They were of lordly mien, with large aquiline features and haughty eyes. As they passed, one of them turned and looked at me. As his eyes lit on me, I saw spring into them, as though he were quick, dread, and hate, and fear.

Hitherto I had been impressed, awed, by the indifference of the passing ghosts. They had looked nowhere, but with steady, silent, even tread had passed on their way. But when this one looked at me it was a glance from the spirit world which chilled me to the very soul.

But he too passed on. I stood at the head of the winding path, having the dead man still on my shoulders and looking with sinking heart at the sad array of the victims of the Cruden Skares. I noticed that most who came now were seamen, with here and there a group of shoresmen and a few women amongst them. The fishermen were many, and without exception wore great sea boots. And so with what patience I could I waited for the end.

At length it came in the shape of a dim figure of great sta-ture, and both of whose arms hung limp. The blood from a gash on his forehead had streamed on to his golden beard, and the golden eyes looked far away. With a shudder I saw that this was the ghost of the man whose body, now less warm, lay upon my shoulders; and so I knew that Lauchlane Macleod was dead. I was relieved when I saw that he did not even look at me; though as I moved on, following the procession, he walked beside me with equal steps, stopping and moving as I stopped and moved.

The silence of death was upon the little hamlet of Whinnyfold. There was not a sign of life; not a dog barked as the grim procession had moved up the steep path or now filed across the running stream and moved along the footpath toward Cruden. Gormala with eager eyes kept watching me; and as the minutes wore on I began to resume my double action of thought, for I could see in her face that she was trying to reason out from my own expression something of what I was looking at. As we moved along she now began to make suggestions to me in a fierce whisper, evidently hoping that she might learn something from my acquiescence in, or negation of, her thought. Through that ghostly silence her living voice cut with the harshness of a corncrake.

“Shearing the silence of the night with ragged edge.”

Perhaps it was for the best; looking back now on that awful experience, I know that no man can say what his mind may suffer in the aftertime who walks alone with the Dead. That I was strung to some amazing pitch was manifested by the fact that I did not seem to feel the great weight which lay upon my shoulders. I have naturally vast strength and the athletic training of my youth had developed it highly. But the weight of an ordinary man is much to hold or carry for even a short time, and the body which I bore was almost that of a giant.

The path across the neck of land which makes the Skares a promontory is flat, with here and there a deep cleft like a miniature ravine where the water from the upland rushes in flood time down to the sea. All these rills were now running strong, but I could hear no sound of murmuring water, no splash as the streams leapt over the edge of the cliff on the rocks below in whitening spray. The ghostly procession did not pause at any of these streams, but moved on impassively to the farther side where the path trends down to the sands of Cruden Bay. Gormala stood a moment watching my eyes as they swept the long line passing the angle so that I could see them all at once. That she guessed something was evident from her speech:

“They are many; his eyes range wide!” I started, and she knew that she had guessed aright. This one guess seemed to supply her with illimitable data; she evidently knew something of the spirit world, though she could not see into its mysteries. Her next words brought enlightenment to me:

“They are human spirits; they follow the path that the feet o' men hae made!”

It was so. The procession did not float over the surface of field or sand, but took its painful way down the zigzag of the cliff and over the rocky path through the great boulders of the foreshore. When the head of it reached the sand, it passed along the summit of the ridge, just as every Sunday night the fishermen of Whinnyfold and Collieston did in returning to their herring boats at Peterhead.

The tramp across the sands was long and dreary. Often as I had taken that walk in rain or storm, with the wind almost sweeping me off my feet whilst the sand drift from the bent-covered hills almost cut my cheeks and ears, I had never felt the way to be so long or so hard to travel. Though I did not realise it at the time, the dead man's weight was beginning to tell sorely upon me. Across the Bay I could see the few lights in the village of Port Erroll that were to be seen at such a time of night; and far over the water came the cold grey light which is the sign of the waning of the night rather than of the coming of the morning.

When we came to the Hawklaw, the head of the procession turned inward through the sandhills. Gormala, watching my eyes, saw it and an extraordinary change came over her. For an instant she was as if stricken, and stood stock still. Then she raised her hands in wonder, and said in an awed whisper:

"The Holy Well! They gang to St. Olaf's well! The Lammas floods will aye serve them weel."

With an instinct of curiosity strong upon me I hurried on so as to head the procession. As I moved along the rough path amongst the sandhills I felt the weight of the burden on my shoulders grow heavier and heavier, so that my feet dragged as do the feet of one in a night-mare. As I moved on, I looked round instinctively and saw that the shade of Lauchlane Mac-leod no longer kept pace with me, but retained its place in the procession. Gormala's evil eye was once more upon me, but with her diabolical cunning she guessed the secret of my looking round. She moved along, not with me but at the rate she had been going as though she liked or expected to remain in juxtaposition to the shade of the dead man; some purpose of her own was to be fulfilled.

As I pressed on, the shades around me seemed to grow dimmer and dimmer still; till at the last I could see little more than a film or haze. When I came to St. Olaf's well-then merely a rough pool at the base of the high land that stretches back from the Hawklaw-the ghostly mist was beginning to fade into the water. I stood hard by, and the weight upon my shoulders became dreadful. I could hardly stand; I determined, however, to hold on as long as I could and see what would happen. The dead man, too, was becoming colder! I did not know whether the dimming of the shadows was from this cause, or because the spirit of the man was farther away. It was possibly both, for as the silent, sad procession came on I could see more distinctly. When the wraith of the Spaniard turned and looked at me, he seemed once more to look with living eyes from a living soul. Then there was a dreary wait whilst the rest came along and passed in awesome stillness down into the well and disappeared. The weight upon my shoulders now became momentarily more intolerable. At last I could bear it no longer, and half bending I allowed the body to slip to the ground, I only holding the hands to steady the descent. Gormala was now opposite to me, and seeing what I had done leaped towards me with a loud cry. For one dim moment the wraith of the dead man stood above its earthly shell; and then I saw the ghostly vision no more.

At that instant, just as Gormala was about to touch the dead body, there was a loud hiss and murmur of waters. The whole pool burst up in a great fountain, scattering sand and water around for a wide space. I rushed back; Gormala did the same.

Then the waters receded again, and when I looked, the corpse of Lauchlane Macleod was gone. It was swallowed up in the Holy Well.

Overcome with physical weariness and strange horror of the scene I sank down on the wet sand. The scene whirled round me… I remember no more.

Chapter VI. The Ministers of The Doom

When at last I looked around me I was not surprised at anything I saw; not even at the intense face of Gormala whose eyes, bright in the full moonlight, were searching my face more eagerly than ever. I was lying on the sand, and she was bending over me so closely that her face almost touched mine. It was evident, even to my half-awake sensibilities, that she was listening intently, lest even a whispered word from me should be missed.

The witch-woman was still seemingly all afire, but withal there was manifested in her face and bearing a sense of disappointment which comforted me. I waited a few minutes until I felt my brain clear, and my body rested from the intolerable strain which it had undergone in carrying that terrific burden from Whinnyfold.

When I looked up again Gormala recognised the change in me, and her own expression became different. The baleful glitter of her eyes faded, and the blind, unreasoning hate and anger turned to keen inquiry. She was not now merely baffled in her hopes, and face to face with an unconscious man; there was at least a possibility of her gaining some knowledge, and all the energy of her nature woke again as she spoke:

“So ye are back wi' the moon and me. Whither went ye when ye lay down upon the sand. Was it back ye went, or forrart; wi' the ghaists into the Holy Well and beyond in their manifold course; or back to their comin' frae the sea and all that could there be told? Oh! mon, what it is to me that any ither can gang like that into spirit land, and me have to wait here by my lanes; to wring my hands an' torture my hairt in broken hopes!” I answered her question with another:

“How do you mean that ghosts go into the well and beyond?” Her answer was at the first given in a stern tone which became, however, softer, as she went on.

“Knew ye not, that the Lammas Floods are the carriers o' the Dead; that on Lammas nicht the Dead can win their way to where they will, under the airth by wherever there is rinnin' watter. Happy be they that can gain a Holy Well, an' so pass into the bowels o' the airth to where they list.”

“And how and when do they return?”

“Dinna jest wi' Fate an' the Dead. They in their scope can gang and return again; no een, save your ain, o' man or Seer has seen the method o' their gangin'. No een, even yours, can see them steal out again in the nicht, when the chosen graves that they hae sought hae taken from them the dross o' the airth.” I felt it was not wise to talk further, so without a word I turned and walked home by the sheep tracks amongst the sand hills. Now and again I stumbled in a rabbit hole, and as I would sink forward the wet bent would brush against my face.

The walk back in the dark dawn seemed interminable. All this time my mind was in a turmoil. I did not even seem to remember anything definitely, or think consecutively; but facts and fancies swept through my mind in a chaotic whirl. When I got to the house, I undressed quickly and got into bed; I must have instantly fallen into a deep sleep.

Next afternoon I walked by the shore to Whinnyfold. It was almost impossible to believe that I was looking at the same place as on last night. I sat on the cliff where I had sat last night, the hot August sun and the cool breeze from the sea being inconceivably soothing. So I thought and thought… The lack of sufficient sleep the night before and the tired feeling of the physical strain I had undergone-my shoulders still ached-told upon me, and I fell asleep.

When I waked Gormala stood in front of me.

After a long pause she spoke:

“I see that ye remember, else would ye ha' spoken to me. Will ye no tell me all that ye saw? Then, wi' your Seer's een an' my knowledge o' the fact we may thegither win oot the great Secret o' the Sea.” I felt stronger than ever the instinctive conviction that I must remain keenly on guard with her. So I said nothing; waiting thus I should learn something, whether from her words or her

silence. She could not stand this. I saw her colour rise till her face was all aglow with a red flush that shamed the sunset; and at last the anger blazed in her eyes. It was in a threatening tone which she spoke, though the words were themselves sufficiently conciliatory:

"The Secrets o' the Sea are to be won; and tae thee and me it is given to win them. What hae been is but an earnest of what will be. For ages ithers have tried to win but hae failed; and if we fail too for lack o' purpose or because ye like me not, then to ithers will come in time the great reward. For the secrets are there, and the treasures lie awaiting. The way is open for those to whom are the Gifts. Throw not away the favour of the Fates. For if they be kind to give where they will, they are hard to thwart, and their revenge is sure!" I must confess that her words began to weaken my purpose. In one way inexorable logic was on her side. Powers such as were mine were surely given for some purpose. Might I not be wrong in refusing to use them. If the Final Cause of my powers were purposeful, then might not a penalty be exacted from me because I had thwarted the project. Gormala, with that diabolical cunning of hers, evidently followed the workings of my mind, for her face lit up. How she knew, I know not, but I do know that her eyes never left mine. I suppose it may be that the eyes which have power to see at times the inwardness of things have some abnormal power also of expressing the thoughts behind them. I felt, however, that I was in danger. All my instincts told me that once in Gormala's power I should rue it, so I spoke out on the instant strongly:

"I shall have nothing to do with you whatever. Last night when you refused to help me with the wounded man-whom you had followed, remember, for weeks, hoping for his death-I saw you in your true colours; and I mean to have nothing to do with you." Fierce anger blazed again in her eyes; but again she controlled herself and spoke with an appearance of calm, though it was won with great effort, as I could see by the tension of her muscles:

"An' so ye would judge me that I would not help ye to bring the Dead to life again! I knew that Lauchlane was dead! Aye! and ye kent it too as weel as I did masel'. It needed no Seer to tell that, when ye brocht him up the rocks oot o' the tide. Then, when he was dead, for why wad ye no use him? Do the Dead themselves object that they help the livin' to their ends while the blood is yet warm in them? Is it ye that object to the power of the Dead? You whose veins have the power o' divination of the quick; you to whom the heavens themselves opened, and the airth and the watters under the airth, when the spirit of the Dead that ye carried walked beside ye as ye ganged to St. Olaf's Well. An' as for me, what hae I done that you should object. I saw, as you did, that Lauchlane's sands were run. You and I are alike in that. To us baith was given to see, by signs that ages have made sacred, that Fate had spoken in his ears though he had himself not heard the Voice. Nay more, to me was only given to see that the Voice had spoken. But to you was shown how, and when, and where the Doom should come, though you yersel' that can read the future as no ither that is known, canna read the past; and so could na tell what a lesser one would ha' guessed at lang syne. I followed the Doom; you followed the Doom. I by my cunnin'; you when ye waked frae yer sleep, followin' yer conviction, till we met thegither for Lauchlane's death, amid Lammas floods and under the gowden moon on the gowden sea. Through his aid-aye, young sir-for wi'oot a fresh corp to aid, no Seer o' airth could hae seen as ye did, that lang line o' ghaists ye saw last nicht. Through his aid the wonders o' the heavens and the deep, o' airth and air, was opened till ye. Wha then be ye that condemn me that only saw a sign an' followed? Gin I be guilty, what be you?"

It would be impossible to describe the rude, wild, natural eloquence with which this was spoken. In the sunset, the gaunt woman seemed to tower above me; and as she moved her arms, the long shadows of them stretched over the green down before us and away over the wrinkled sea as though her gestures were, giant like, appealing to all nature.

I was distinctly impressed, for all that she said was quite true. She had in reality done nothing that the law would call wrong. Lauchlane's death was in no possible way due to any act of hers. She had only watched him; and as he did not even know that she watched he could not have been influenced in any way by it or by her. As to my own part! Her words gave me a new light. Why had

I risen in the night and come out to Whinny-fold? Was it intuition, or a call from the witch-woman, who in such case must have had some hypnotic influence over me? Or was it-?

I stood appalled at the unspoken thought. Could it be that the powers of Nature which had been revealed to me in the dread hour had not only sentience but purpose!

I felt that my tone was more conciliatory as I answered her:

“I did not mean to blame you for anything you had done. I see now that your wrong was only passive.” I felt that my words were weak, and my feeling was emphasised by the scorn of her reply:

“My wrang was only passive! My wrang! What wrang hae I done that you should sit in judgment on me. Could I hae helpit it when Lauchlane met his death amang the rocks in the tide. Why you yoursel' sat here beside me, an' ye no helpit him or tried to, strong man though ye be, that could carry his corp frae here to St. Olaf's Well; for ye kenned that no livin' arm could aid him in that hour o' doom. Aye! laddie, the Fates know their wark o'er weel to hae ony such betterment o' their plans! An' div ye think that by any act o' yer ain, or by any refusal o' act or speech, ye can baffle the purpose o' the Doom. Ye are yet young and ye must learn; then learn it now whiles ye can, that when the Word is spoken all follows as ordained. Aye! though the Ministers o' the Doom be many an' various, an' though they hae to gather in ane from many ages an' frae the furthermost ends o' the airth!”

Gormala's logic and the exactness of her statement were too much for me. I felt that I owed her some reparation and told her so. She received it in her gaunt way with the dignity of an empress.

But there her dignity stopped; for seeing that she had got a lever in her hands she began at once, womanlike, to use it. Without any hesitation or delay she asked me straightly to tell her what I had seen the night before. The directness of her questioning was my best help; my heart hardened and my lips closed. She saw my answer before I had spoken it, and turned away with an eloquent, rugged gesture of despair. She felt that her last hope was gone; that her last bolt had been sped in vain.

With her going, the link with last night seemed to break, and as she passed up the road the whole of that strange experience became dimmer and dimmer.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.