

MERRY MEN

by

Robert Louis Stevenson



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Robert Louis Stevenson

MERRY MEN

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1904 edition

THE MERRY MEN

CHAPTER I: EILEAN AROS

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL MORNING in the late July when I set forth on foot for the last time for Aros. A boat had put me ashore the night before at Grisapol; I had such breakfast as the little inn afforded, and, leaving all my baggage till I had an

occasion to come round for it by sea, struck right across the promontory with a cheerful heart.

I was far from being a native of these parts, springing, as I did, from an unmixed lowland stock. But an uncle of mine, Gordon Darnaway, after a poor, rough youth, and some years at sea, had married a young wife in the islands; Mary Maclean she was called, the last of her family; and when she died in giving birth to a daughter, Aros, the sea-girt farm, had remained in his possession. It brought him in nothing but the means of life, as I was well aware; but he was a man whom ill-fortune had pursued; he feared, cumbered as he was with the young child, to make a fresh adventure upon life; and remained in Aros, biting his nails at destiny. Years passed over his head in that isolation, and brought neither help nor contentment. Meantime our family was dying out in the lowlands; there is little luck for any of that race; and perhaps my father was the luckiest of all, for not only was he one of the last to die, but he left a son to his name and a little money to support it. I was a student of Edinburgh University, living well enough at my own charges, but without kith or kin; when some news of me

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found its way to Uncle Gordon on the Ross of Grisapol; and he, as he was a man who held blood thicker than water, wrote to me the day he heard of my existence, and taught me to count Aros as my home. Thus it was that I came to spend my vacations in that part of the country, so far from all society and comfort, between the codfish and the moorcocks; and thus it was that now, when I had done with my classes, I was returning thither with so light a heart that July day.

The Ross, as we call it, is a promontory neither wide nor high, but as rough as God made it to this day; the deep sea on either hand of it, full of rugged isles and reefs most perilous to seamen – all overlooked from the eastward by some very high cliffs and the great peals of Ben Kyaw. *The Mountain of the Mist*, they say the words signify in the Gaelic tongue; and it is well named. For that hill-top, which is more than three thousand feet in height, catches all the clouds that come blowing from the seaward; and, indeed, I used often to think that it must make them for itself; since when all heaven was clear to the sea level, there would ever be a streamer on Ben Kyaw. It brought water, too,

and was mossy* to the top in consequence. I have seen us sitting in broad sunshine on the Ross, and the rain falling black like crape upon the mountain. But the wetness of it made it often appear more beautiful to my eyes; for when the sun struck upon the hill sides, there were many wet rocks and watercourses that shone like jewels even as far as Aros, fifteen miles away.

The road that I followed was a cattle-track. It twisted so as nearly to double the length of my journey; it went over rough boulders so that a man had to leap from one to another, and through soft bottoms where the moss came nearly to the knee. There was no cultivation anywhere, and not one house in the ten miles from Grisapol to Aros. Houses of course there were – three at least; but they lay so far on the one side or the other that no stranger could have found them from the track. A large part of the Ross is covered with big granite rocks, some of them larger than a two-roomed house, one beside another, with fern and deep heather in between them where the vipers breed. Anyway the wind was, it was always sea air, as salt as on a ship; the

*Boggy.

gulls were as free as moorfowl over all the Ross; and whenever the way rose a little, your eye would kindle with the brightness of the sea. From the very midst of the land, on a day of wind and a high spring, I have heard the Roost roaring, like a battle where it runs by Aros, and the great and fearful voices of the breakers that we call the Merry Men.

Aros itself – Aros Jay, I have heard the natives call it, and they say it means *The House of God* – Aros itself was not properly a piece of the Ross, nor was it quite an islet. It formed the south-west corner of the land, fitted close to it, and was in one place only separated from the coast by a little gut of the sea, not forty feet across the narrowest. When the tide was full, this was clear and still, like a pool on a land river; only there was a difference in the weeds and fishes, and the water itself was green instead of brown; but when the tide went out, in the bottom of the ebb, there was a day or two in every month when you could pass dryshod from Aros to the mainland. There was some good pasture, where my uncle fed the sheep he lived on; perhaps the feed was better because the ground rose higher on the islet than the main level of the Ross, but this I am not skilled

enough to settle. The house was a good one for that country, two storeys high. It looked westward over a bay, with a pier hard by for a boat, and from the door you could watch the vapours blowing on Ben Kyaw.

On all this part of the coast, and especially near Aros, these great granite rocks that I have spoken of go down together in troops into the sea, like cattle on a summer's day. There they stand, for all the world like their neighbours ashore; only the salt water sobbing between them instead of the quiet earth, and clots of sea-pink blooming on their sides instead of heather; and the great sea conger to wreathe about the base of them instead of the poisonous viper of the land. On calm days you can go wandering between them in a boat for hours, echoes following you about the labyrinth; but when the sea is up, Heaven help the man that hears that cauldron boiling.

Off the south-west end of Aros these blocks are very many, and much greater in size. Indeed, they must grow monstrously bigger out to sea, for there must be ten sea miles of open water sown with them as thick as a country place with houses, some standing thirty feet above the tides,

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some covered, but all perilous to ships; so that on a clear, westerly blowing day, I have counted, from the top of Aros, the great rollers breaking white and heavy over as many as six-and-forty buried reefs. But it is nearer in shore that the danger is worst; for the tide, here running like a mill race, makes a long belt of broken water – a *Roost* we call it – at the tail of the land. I have often been out there in a dead calm at the slack of the tide; and a strange place it is, with the sea swirling and combing up and boiling like the cauldrons of a linn, and now and again a little dancing mutter of sound as though the *Roost* were talking to itself. But when the tide begins to run again, and above all in heavy weather, there is no man could take a boat within half a mile of it, nor a ship afloat that could either steer or live in such a place. You can hear the roaring of it six miles away. At the seaward end there comes the strongest of the bubble; and it's here that these big breakers dance together – the dance of death, it may be called – that have got the name, in these parts, of the Merry Men. I have heard it said that they run fifty feet high; but that must be the green water only, for the spray runs twice as high as that. Whether they

got the name from their movements, which are swift and antic, or from the shouting they make about the turn of the tide, so that all Aros shakes with it, is more than I can tell.

The truth is, that in a south-westerly wind, that part of our archipelago is no better than a trap. If a ship got through the reefs, and weathered the Merry Men, it would be to come ashore on the south coast of Aros, in Sandag Bay, where so many dismal things befell our family, as I propose to tell. The thought of all these dangers, in the place I knew so long, makes me particularly welcome the works now going forward to set lights upon the headlands and buoys along the channels of our iron-bound, inhospitable islands.

The country people had many a story about Aros, as I used to hear from my uncle's man, Rorie, an old servant of the Macleans, who had transferred his services without afterthought on the occasion of the marriage. There was some tale of an unlucky creature, a sea-kelpie, that dwelt and did business in some fearful manner of his own among the boiling breakers of the Roost. A mermaid had once met a piper on Sandag beach, and there sang to him a long, bright midsummer's night, so that in the morning he was found

stricken crazy, and from thenceforward, till the day he died, said only one form of words; what they were in the original Gaelic I cannot tell, but they were thus translated: 'Ah, the sweet singing out of the sea.' Seals that haunted on that coast have been known to speak to man in his own tongue, presaging great disasters. It was here that a certain saint first landed on his voyage out of Ireland to convert the Hebrideans. And, indeed, I think he had some claim to be called saint; for, with the boats of that past age, to make so rough a passage, and land on such a ticklish coast, was surely not far short of the miraculous. It was to him, or to some of his monkish underlings who had a cell there, that the islet owes its holy and beautiful name, the House of God.

Among these old wives' stories there was one which I was inclined to hear with more credulity. As I was told, in that tempest which scattered the ships of the Invincible Armada over all the north and west of Scotland, one great vessel came ashore on Aros, and before the eyes of some solitary people on a hill-top, went down in a moment with all hands, her colours flying even as she sank. There was some likelihood in this tale; for another of that fleet lay

sunk on the north side, twenty miles from Grisapol. It was told, I thought, with more detail and gravity than its companion stories, and there was one particularity which went far to convince me of its truth: the name, that is, of the ship was still remembered, and sounded, in my ears, Spanishly. The *Espirito Santo* they called it, a great ship of many decks of guns, laden with treasure and grandees of Spain, and fierce soldadoes, that now lay fathom deep to all eternity, done with her wars and voyages, in Sandag bay, upon the west of Aros. No more salvos of ordnance for that tall ship, the 'Holy Spirit,' no more fair winds or happy ventures; only to rot there deep in the sea-tangle and hear the shoutings of the Merry Men as the tide ran high about the island. It was a strange thought to me first and last, and only grew stranger as I learned the more of Spain, from which she had set sail with so proud a company, and King Philip, the wealthy king, that sent her on that voyage.

And now I must tell you, as I walked from Grisapol that day, the *Espirito Santo* was very much in my reflections. I had been favourably remarked by our then Principal in Edinburgh College, that famous writer, Dr. Robertson, and

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by him had been set to work on some papers of an ancient date to rearrange and sift of what was worthless; and in one of these, to my great wonder, I found a note of this very ship, the *Espirito Santo*, with her captain's name, and how she carried a great part of the Spaniard's treasure, and had been lost upon the Ross of Grisapol; but in what particular spot, the wild tribes of that place and period would give no information to the king's inquiries. Putting one thing with another, and taking our island tradition together with this note of old King Jamie's perquisitions after wealth, it had come strongly on my mind that the spot for which he sought in vain could be no other than the small bay of Sandag on my uncle's land; and being a fellow of a mechanical turn, I had ever since been plotting how to weigh that good ship up again with all her ingots, ounces, and doubloons, and bring back our house of Darnaway to its long-forgotten dignity and wealth.

This was a design of which I soon had reason to repent. My mind was sharply turned on different reflections; and since I became the witness of a strange judgment of God's, the thought of dead men's treasures has been intolerable to

my conscience. But even at that time I must acquit myself of sordid greed; for if I desired riches, it was not for their own sake, but for the sake of a person who was dear to my heart – my uncle's daughter, Mary Ellen. She had been educated well, and had been a time to school upon the mainland; which, poor girl, she would have been happier without. For Aros was no place for her, with old Rorie the servant, and her father, who was one of the unhappiest men in Scotland, plainly bred up in a country place among Cameronians, long a skipper sailing out of the Clyde about the islands, and now, with infinite discontent, managing his sheep and a little 'long shore fishing for the necessary bread. If it was sometimes weariful to me, who was there but a month or two, you may fancy what it was to her who dwelt in that same desert all the year round, with the sheep and flying sea-gulls, and the Merry Men singing and dancing in the Roost!

CHAPTER II: WHAT THE WRECK HAD BROUGHT TO AROS

IT WAS HALF-FLOOD when I got the length of Aros; and there was nothing for it but to stand on the far shore and whistle for Rorie with the boat. I had no need to repeat the signal. At the first sound, Mary was at the door flying a handkerchief by way of answer, and the old long-legged serving-man was shambling down the gravel to the pier. For all his hurry, it took him a long while to pull across the bay; and I observed him several times to pause, go into the stern, and look over curiously into the wake. As he came nearer, he seemed to me aged and haggard, and I thought he avoided my eye. The coble had been repaired, with two new thwarts and several patches of some rare and beautiful foreign wood, the name of it unknown to me.

‘Why, Rorie,’ said I, as we began the return voyage, ‘this is fine wood. How came you by that?’

‘It will be hard to cheesel,’ Rorie opined reluctantly; and just then, dropping the oars, he made another of those dives into the stern which I had remarked as he came across to

fetch me, and, leaning his hand on my shoulder, stared with an awful look into the waters of the bay.

‘What is wrong?’ I asked, a good deal startled.

‘It will be a great feesh,’ said the old man, returning to his oars; and nothing more could I get out of him, but strange glances and an ominous nodding of the head. In spite of myself, I was infected with a measure of uneasiness; I turned also, and studied the wake. The water was still and transparent, but, out here in the middle of the bay, exceeding deep. For some time I could see naught; but at last it did seem to me as if something dark – a great fish, or perhaps only a shadow – followed studiously in the track of the moving coble. And then I remembered one of Rorie’s superstitions: how in a ferry in Morven, in some great, exterminating feud among the clans; a fish, the like of it unknown in all our waters, followed for some years the passage of the ferry-boat, until no man dared to make the crossing.

‘He will be waiting for the right man,’ said Rorie.

Mary met me on the beach, and led me up the brae and into the house of Aros. Outside and inside there were many changes. The garden was fenced with the same wood that

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I had noted in the boat; there were chairs in the kitchen covered with strange brocade; curtains of brocade hung from the window; a clock stood silent on the dresser; a lamp of brass was swinging from the roof; the table was set for dinner with the finest of linen and silver; and all these new riches were displayed in the plain old kitchen that I knew so well, with the high-backed settle, and the stools, and the closet bed for Rorie; with the wide chimney the sun shone into, and the clear-smouldering peats; with the pipes on the mantelshelf and the three-cornered spittoons, filled with sea-shells instead of sand, on the floor; with the bare stone walls and the bare wooden floor, and the three patchwork rugs that were of yore its sole adornment – poor man’s patchwork, the like of it unknown in cities, woven with homespun, and Sunday black, and sea-cloth polished on the bench of rowing. The room, like the house, had been a sort of wonder in that country-side, it was so neat and habitable; and to see it now, shamed by these incongruous additions, filled me with indignation and a kind of anger. In view of the errand I had come upon to Aros, the feeling was baseless and unjust; but it burned

high, at the first moment, in my heart.

‘Mary, girl,’ said I, ‘this is the place I had learned to call my home, and I do not know it.’

‘It is my home by nature, not by the learning,’ she replied; ‘the place I was born and the place I’m like to die in; and I neither like these changes, nor the way they came, nor that which came with them. I would have liked better, under God’s pleasure, they had gone down into the sea, and the Merry Men were dancing on them now.’

Mary was always serious; it was perhaps the only trait that she shared with her father; but the tone with which she uttered these words was even graver than of custom.

‘Ay,’ said I, ‘I feared it came by wreck, and that’s by death; yet when my father died, I took his goods without remorse.’

‘Your father died a clean strae death, as the folk say,’ said Mary.

‘True,’ I returned; ‘and a wreck is like a judgment. What was she called?’

‘They ca’d her the *Christ-Anna*,’ said a voice behind me; and, turning round, I saw my uncle standing in the doorway.

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He was a sour, small, bilious man, with a long face and very dark eyes; fifty-six years old, sound and active in body, and with an air somewhat between that of a shepherd and that of a man following the sea. He never laughed, that I heard; read long at the Bible; prayed much, like the Cameronians he had been brought up among; and indeed, in many ways, used to remind me of one of the hill-preachers in the killing times before the Revolution. But he never got much comfort, nor even, as I used to think, much guidance, by his piety. He had his black fits when he was afraid of hell; but he had led a rough life, to which he would look back with envy, and was still a rough, cold, gloomy man.

As he came in at the door out of the sunlight, with his bonnet on his head and a pipe hanging in his button-hole, he seemed, like Rorie, to have grown older and paler, the lines were deeper ploughed upon his face, and the whites of his eyes were yellow, like old stained ivory, or the bones of the dead.

‘Ay’ he repeated, dwelling upon the first part of the word, ‘the *Christ-Anna*. It’s an awfu’ name.’

I made him my salutations, and complimented him upon

his look of health; for I feared he had perhaps been ill.

‘I’m in the body,’ he replied, ungraciously enough; ‘aye in the body and the sins of the body, like yoursel’. Denner,’ he said abruptly to Mary, and then ran on to me: ‘They’re grand braws, thir that we hae gotten, are they no? Yon’s a bonny knock*, but it’ll no gang; and the napery’s by ordnar. Bonny, bairnly braws; it’s for the like o’ them folk sells the peace of God that passeth understanding; it’s for the like o’ them, an’ maybe no even sae muckle worth, folk dauntin God to His face and burn in muckle hell; and it’s for that reason the Scripture ca’s them, as I read the passage, the accursed thing. Mary, ye girzie,’ he interrupted himself to cry with some asperity, ‘what for hae ye no put out the twa candlesticks?’

‘Why should we need them at high noon?’ she asked.

But my uncle was not to be turned from his idea. ‘We’ll bruik** them while we may,’ he said; and so two massive candlesticks of wrought silver were added to the table equipage, already so unsuited to that rough sea-side farm.

‘She cam’ ashore Februar’ 10, about ten at nicht,’ he

*Clock

**Enjoy.

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went on to me. ‘There was nae wind, and a sair run o’ sea; and she was in the sook o’ the Roost, as I jaloose. We had seen her a’ day, Rorie and me, beating to the wind. She wasnae a handy craft, I’m thinking, that *Christ-Anna*; for she would neither steer nor stey wi’ them. A sair day they had of it; their hands was never aff the sheets, and it perishin’ cauld – ower cauld to snaw; and aye they would get a bit nip o’ wind, and awa’ again, to pit the emp’y hope into them. Eh, man! but they had a sair day for the last o’t! He would have had a prood, prood heart that won ashore upon the back o’ that.’

‘And were all lost?’ I cried. ‘God held them!’

‘Wheesht!’ he said sternly. ‘Nane shall pray for the deid on my hearth-stane.’

I disclaimed a Popish sense for my ejaculation; and he seemed to accept my disclaimer with unusual facility, and ran on once more upon what had evidently become a favourite subject.

‘We fand her in Sandag Bay, Rorie an’ me, and a’ thae brows in the inside of her. There’s a kittle bit, ye see, about Sandag; whiles the sook rins strong for the Merry Men;

an’ whiles again, when the tide’s makin’ hard an’ ye can hear the Roost blawin’ at the far-end of Aros, there comes a back-spang of current straucht into Sandag Bay. Weel, there’s the thing that got the grip on the *Christ-Anna*. She but to have come in ram-stam an’ stern forrit; for the bows of her are aften under, and the back-side of her is clear at hie-water o’ neaps. But, man! the dunt that she cam doon wi’ when she struck! Lord save us a’! but it’s an unco life to be a sailor – a cauld, wanchancy life. Mony’s the gliff I got mysel’ in the great deep; and why the Lord should hae made yon unco water is mair than ever I could win to understand. He made the vales and the pastures, the bonny green yaird, the halesome, canty land –

And now they shout and sing to Thee,

For Thou hast made them glad,

as the Psalms say in the metrical version. No that I would preen my faith to that clink neither; but it’s bonny, and easier to mind. “Who go to sea in ships,” they hae’t again–

And in Great waters trading be,
Within the deep these men God's works
And His great wonders see.

Weel, it's easy sayin' sae. Maybe Dauvit wasnae very weel acquaint wi' the sea. But, troth, if it wasnae prentit in the Bible, I wad whiles be temp'it to think it wasnae the Lord, but the muckle, black deil that made the sea. There's naething good comes oot o't but the fish; an' the spentacle o' God ridin' on the tempest, to be shure, whilk would be what Dauvit was likely ettling at. But, man, they were sair wonders that God showed to the *Christ-Anna* – wonders, do I ca' them? Judgments, rather: judgments in the mirk nicht among the draygons o' the deep. And their souls – to think o' that – their souls, man, maybe no prepared! The sea – a muckle yett to hell!

I observed, as my uncle spoke, that his voice was un-naturally moved and his manner unwontedly demonstrative. He leaned forward at these last words, for example, and touched me on the knee with his spread fingers, look-

ing up into my face with a certain pallor, and I could see that his eyes shone with a deep-seated fire, and that the lines about his mouth were drawn and tremulous.

Even the entrance of Rorie, and the beginning of our meal, did not detach him from his train of thought beyond a moment. He condescended, indeed, to ask me some questions as to my success at college, but I thought it was with half his mind; and even in his extempore grace, which was, as usual, long and wandering, I could find the trace of his preoccupation, praying, as he did, that God would 'remember in mercy fower puir, feckless, fiddling, sinful creatures here by their lee-lane beside the great and dowie waters.'

Soon there came an interchange of speeches between him and Rorie.

'Was it there?' asked my uncle.

'Ou, ay!' said Rorie.

I observed that they both spoke in a manner of aside, and with some show of embarrassment, and that Mary herself appeared to colour, and looked down on her plate. Partly to show my knowledge, and so relieve the party from an awkward strain, partly because I was curious, I pursued the subject.

‘You mean the fish?’ I asked.

‘Whatten fish?’ cried my uncle. ‘Fish, quo’ he! Fish! Your een are fu’ o’ fatness, man; your heid dozened wi’ carnal leir. Fish! it’s a bogle!’

He spoke with great vehemence, as though angry; and perhaps I was not very willing to be put down so shortly, for young men are disputatious. At least I remember I retorted hotly, crying out upon childish superstitions.

‘And ye come frae the College!’ sneered Uncle Gordon. ‘Gude kens what they learn folk there; it’s no muckle service onyway. Do ye think, man, that there’s naething in a’ yon saut wilderness o’ a world oot wast there, wi’ the sea grasses growin’, an’ the sea beasts fechtin’, an’ the sun glintin’ down into it, day by day? Na; the sea’s like the land, but fearsomer. If there’s folk ashore, there’s folk in the sea – deid they may be, but they’re folk whatever; and as for deils, there’s nane that’s like the sea deils. There’s no sae muckle harm in the land deils, when a’s said and done. Lang syne, when I was a callant in the south country, I mind there was an auld, bald bogle in the Peewie Moss. I got a glisk o’ him mysel’, sittin’ on his hunkers in a hag, as

gray’s a tombstane. An’, troth, he was a fearsome-like taed. But he steered naebody. Nae doobt, if ane that was a reprobate, ane the Lord hated, had gane by there wi’ his sin still upon his stomach, nae doobt the creature would hae lowped upo’ the likes o’ him. But there’s deils in the deep sea would yoke on a communicant! Eh, sirs, if ye had gane doon wi’ the puir lads in the *Christ-Anna*, ye would ken by now the mercy o’ the seas. If ye had sailed it for as lang as me, ye would hate the thocht of it as I do. If ye had but used the een God gave ye, ye would hae learned the wickedness o’ that fause, saut, cauld, bullering creature, and of a’ that’s in it by the Lord’s permission: labsters an’ partans, an’ sic like, howking in the deid; muckle, gutsy, blawing whales; an’ fish – the hale clan o’ them – cauld-wamed, blind-eed uncanny ferlies. O, sirs,’ he cried, ‘the horror – the horror o’ the sea!’

We were all somewhat staggered by this outburst; and the speaker himself, after that last hoarse apostrophe, appeared to sink gloomily into his own thoughts. But Rorie, who was greedy of superstitious lore, recalled him to the subject by a question.

‘You will not ever have seen a teevil of the sea?’ he asked.

‘No clearly,’ replied the other. ‘I misdoobt if a mere man could see ane clearly and conteenue in the body. I hae sailed wi’ a lad – they ca’d him Sandy Gabart; he saw ane, shure eneueh, an’ shure eneueh it was the end of him. We were seeven days oot frae the Clyde – a sair wark we had had – gaun north wi’ seeds an’ brows an’ things for the Macleod. We had got in ower near under the Cutchull’ns, an’ had just gane about by soa, an’ were off on a lang tack, we thocht would maybe hauld as far’s Copnahow. I mind the nicht weel; a mune smooored wi’ mist; a fine gaun breeze upon the water, but no steady; an’ – what nane o’ us likit to hear – anither wund gurlin’ owerheid, amang thae fear-some, auld stane craigs o’ the Cutchull’ns. Weel, Sandy was forrit wi’ the jib sheet; we couldnae see him for the mains’l, that had just begude to draw, when a’ at ance he gied a skirl. I luffed for my life, for I thocht we were ower near Soa; but na, it wasnae that, it was puir Sandy Gabart’s deid skreigh, or near hand, for he was deid in half an hour. A’t he could tell was that a sea deil, or sea bogle, or sea spenster, or sic-like, had clum up by the bowsprit, an’ gi’en

him ae cauld, uncanny look. An’, or the life was oot o’ Sandy’s body, we kent weel what the thing betokened, and why the wund gurlid in the taps o’ the Cutchull’ns; for doon it cam’ – a wund do I ca’ it! it was the wund o’ the Lord’s anger – an’ a’ that nicht we foucht like men dementit, and the niest that we kenned we were ashore in Loch Uskevagh, an’ the cocks were crawin’ in Benbecula.’

‘It will have been a merman,’ Rorie said.

‘A merman!’ screamed my uncle with immeasurable scorn. ‘Auld wives’ clavers! There’s nae sic things as mermen.’

‘But what was the creature like?’ I asked.

‘What like was it? Gude forbid that we suld ken what like it was! It had a kind of a heid upon it – man could say nae mair.’

Then Rorie, smarting under the affront, told several tales of mermen, mermaids, and sea-horses that had come ashore upon the islands and attacked the crews of boats upon the sea; and my uncle, in spite of his incredulity, listened with uneasy interest.

‘Aweel, aweel,’ he said, ‘it may be sae; I may be wrang; but I find nae word o’ mermen in the Scriptures.’

‘And you will find nae word of Aros Roost, maybe,’ objected Rorie, and his argument appeared to carry weight.

When dinner was over, my uncle carried me forth with him to a bank behind the house. It was a very hot and quiet afternoon; scarce a ripple anywhere upon the sea, nor any voice but the familiar voice of sheep and gulls; and perhaps in consequence of this repose in nature, my kinsman showed himself more rational and tranquil than before. He spoke evenly and almost cheerfully of my career, with every now and then a reference to the lost ship or the treasures it had brought to Aros. For my part, I listened to him in a sort of trance, gazing with all my heart on that remembered scene, and drinking gladly the sea-air and the smoke of peats that had been lit by Mary.

Perhaps an hour had passed when my uncle, who had all the while been covertly gazing on the surface of the little bay, rose to his feet and bade me follow his example. Now I should say that the great run of tide at the south-west end of Aros exercises a perturbing influence round all the coast. In Sandag Bay, to the south, a strong current runs at certain periods of the flood and ebb respectively; but in this north-

ern bay – Aros Bay, as it is called – where the house stands and on which my uncle was now gazing, the only sign of disturbance is towards the end of the ebb, and even then it is too slight to be remarkable. When there is any swell, nothing can be seen at all; but when it is calm, as it often is, there appear certain strange, undecipherable marks – sea-runes, as we may name them – on the glassy surface of the bay. The like is common in a thousand places on the coast; and many a boy must have amused himself as I did, seeking to read in them some reference to himself or those he loved. It was to these marks that my uncle now directed my attention, struggling, as he did so, with an evident reluctance.

‘Do ye see yon scart upo’ the water?’ he inquired; ‘yon ane wast the gray stane? Ay? Weel, it’ll no be like a letter, wull it?’

‘Certainly it is,’ I replied. ‘I have often remarked it. It is like a C.’

He heaved a sigh as if heavily disappointed with my answer, and then added below his breath: ‘Ay, for the *Christ-Anna*.’

‘I used to suppose, sir, it was for myself,’ said I; ‘for my name is Charles.’

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