

The Djinn of Shubel's Mountain

A Maritime Tale

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THE night was dark and forbidding. The sea fretting and nervous whined on the shores of Sandy Cove like a dog in the presence of a witch. Above in a ravine on Shubel's Mountain, a djinn worked vigorously, preparing magic to taint the clean new moon that hurried through the portals of infinity. Soon the little silvery crescent would climb into the heavens and look down on a miniature lake over whose surface spread a thousand hooded water lilies, which when touched by the invisible fingers of light would undo their hoods and uphold their myriad faces, pink, white and red to its innocent pale beauty.

The lake was bottomless. A meteor having once fallen into it cleft a subterranean passage through to the sea. And its waters black as an evil broth trembled and paled when the djinn cursed by day the sylphides of the air, and damned the nymphs and undines who dwelt in it. Nor were the *durdallas*, who lived in the plants that skirted its banks or the *diamias* who dwelt in the pebbles and stones on its shores free from the cruelties of the djinn who alone in his kingdom ruled with a tyrant's hand.

But tonight they were free. The djinn was brewing mischief for the moon. Over a faggot of flaming brushwood in his cave, hung an iron pot in which was cooking pearl-wort, lactuca, swamp smallage and fillet of snake in the tallow of horned

lizards. From the pot the djinn took a phial of the amber coloured liquid and held it up to his small round eye and grinned. An insane desire burned in his veins and his face was frightful and gay.

"Ah, the moon," he repeated in a rasping thin voice, "the pure virginal moon will soon climb into my cave," and he whispered a monstrous caress, and laughed his chill, small laugh.

Through the evils of black magic he compelled the moon to draw on the waters of the sea, till the tides rose and fell to the highest and lowest point of any place in the world. He was supreme. A master of all he surveyed. A destroyer of ships and of men, and his kingdom was rich with the treasures of ships wrecked on the rocks, and the gold of brave men dead in the sea.

II

WHEN the clouds lifted and the first faint light of the stars burned dimly in the heavens, some helmeted Norsemen edged their brigantine along the thin strip of land that reached out into the sea like the arm of a dethroned titan, and entered into a sheet of water that was smooth, calm and warm. The chieftain's daughter who had accompanied him was in her eighteenth year, and lovely as a flower of the ocean, a flower whose beauty increased with the soft spray and gentle rip-

lets of the waters so that time almost ceased to exist for him. But after they had sailed long in the quiet waters they came to the little inlet of Sandy Cove. It was so friendly, so beautiful in its tranquility that she turned to her father and said: "It is as lovely as the Blessed Virgin. Its waters are warm and soft as the countenance of Our Lady. It is Saint Mary's Bay." And they left their ship and went into the meadows to found a community.

At first the djinn did not notice the Norsemen who had invaded his realm. He was communing with the Prince of the Powers of Darkness. In the boiling cauldron he could see the waters of the ocean churning dizzily in the presence of the moon. The billows tossed and rolled with his own maniacal passion; they strove, fought and thundered in their passionate fierce desire to follow in the path of the ever-fleeing, ever enticing moon as it waxed and waned in the dark, dreadful spaces of his evil mind.

Turning from his cauldron in which boiled the pungent yellow liquid to search the horizon for the first signs of the expectant moon, the djinn saw some figures moving in the meadow below. The small black shadows came and went before his searching gaze with mischievous playfulness. A fierce chill ran down his back and he cursed the stars that peered from behind the serrated clouds. His eyes became dull and dazed then blazed up like the crackling brushwood that burned under the iron gurgling pot. The moon cautious as a kitten crept above the horizon, then hid behind the clouds. The djinn turned from his cave and leaping on the back of a weeping sylphide winged his way to the meadow.

The small black figures which he had seen from the heights of Shubel, became the blond men of the North. Their helmets glistened, defiantly in the ever increasing light of the moon and the stars as they laboured anxiously, erecting a handful of huts against the hazards of nature. The chieftain sensing the presence of evil clasped the hilt of his sword and raised his head to the sky, but all that challenged his suspicion was the coyish little moon, white

as a camillia and silent as sleep. He smiled and releasing his hand from his sword drew it thoughtfully through his beard. The heavens grew brighter. The clouds chaotic and jagged became soft as the garment of a pearl, small silver patterns tinged the edges of the mountain and tumbled like falling water into the ravine in which the djinn lived. Then there was a pause, a halting in the pulse of nature, and a gust of wind swept the meadow and enveloped the Norsemen. The spiral airs whistled around them. The Norsemen striving to withstand the buffeting of the wind flung themselves full length on the ground and clung to the earth with strained aching fingers. Through the din and terror of frenzied, unearthly voices the screams and sobs of the chieftain's daughter came to them, asking, pleading in her helplessness for the friendly hands and stout hearts that had braved the hardships of the sea. But they were listless as children. Like men in a dream they strove to lift themselves from the ground, but the weight of the world was upon them and they groaned madly, unable to cry out, unable to move. Then the wind abated with the swiftness with which it had arisen. The moon looked down, pensively and sad, the chieftain's daughter had vanished.

Nearby in a dark alcove of the lake, the djinn held a fair-haired girl in the palm of his hand. She was so small that a drop of dew brushed from the corolla of a lily would suffice to bathe her feet. There was fear in her lovely face, but her voice was so frail that it could not be heard above the clamour of the cricket's small bell. In the other hand the djinn clasped an oyster. It lay open exposing its pink nacre to the night. In a voice evil and thin he mumbled some words; placed a tiny dagger in her hand and putting the girl into the oyster bade it close. Then he put it into the water and said:

"Each day thou wilt wound thy keeper the oyster. And each night at the hour of twelve when the sea gives up its treasure I will come for thy ransom, a pearl. Once only, each month when the moon passes through the portals of infinity, art thou free to lift thy voice to thy kin. Then only wilt thou wound not thy keeper the oyster."

And then the oyster sank into the lake and the djinn returned to his cave, satisfied that he had deprived the Norsemen of their spirit; dissolution would follow.

III

A GAIN in his cave the djinn worked feverishly. The fire crackled and sputtered under the iron pot, forcing the ever darkening liquid into a mass of gurgling bubbles. Slowly the moon rose, inch by inch it crept up the ravine and into the opening of the cave. A tuft of slumbering grass rustled in its sleep, and a tawny owl hooted from a rotten limb that hung like a drooping arm from a sparsely leafed tree. In the distance, the sea throbbed and rumbled at intervals against the rugged coast. The moon edged nearer. The fire spit-tered and sent up a fierce blue flame and licked the cauldron. The djinn leaped from the ground, clasped his hands and cried in ecstasy: *Hyrus Nocturnus!* The little crescent, leaned forward, tasted the liquid and plunged headlong into the cauldron. The tide rose, thundered and sent a heavily laden brig against the hagged reef. The djinn laughed, put his brown evil hand into the boiling liquid and pinched her painfully and shamelessly. The more awful, the more intoxicating it became, and his laughter was like the barking of a dog.

From somewhere in the distance the crowing of a rooster was heard. A damp mist floated up from the earth. The moon swam out of the iron cauldron and into the sea. The djinn shivered from the morning dampness and crept into the inner darkness of his cave.

The rooster crowed on.

Deep in the lake near the subterranean opening which led to the sea, the oyster laboured. The fair-haired girl had plunged the miniature dagger into the glistening nacre and a drop of the oyster's blood gathered round the wound. Like a tear beautiful and sad it hung a *pearl* of eternal reproach to the evil dark djinn of Shubel's Mountain, who when the darkness of night again fell over the world and the midnight hour was sounded, emerged from his cave, opened the oyster, took the pearl and

cursing the girl placed it again into the lake. Day after day and week after week the distressed girl wounded her keeper the oyster, and as faithfully did it sorrow and bleed and give up to the djinn a drop of its precious blood. Then on that night when the moon soared through the portals of infinity, and the night was dark, save for a few dimly lit stars, the oyster rose to the surface, opened its tender bosom, and the fair-haired girl raised her voice in song; lamenting her evil plight and calling on her kinsmen in distress.

All about her there was peace, but in her heart was distress and sorrow. And when she sang her song of sadness the lilies unfolded their hoods to listen and the blue-bells and nun-like violets, blue and white, inclined their heads towards her. The winds stirred from their sleep in the trees and wafted her song across the meadow to the Norsemen. To the father who was troubled and sad in his rest it came as a supplication from the grave. He started from his sleep, and following her voice to the lake, plunged into the waters to rescue her and was drowned. For a second her voice increased in sadness and the beauty of her song was irresistible. Then it faded into the hush of the waters and was gone.

Again she returned to wound her keeper the oyster, and each night the djinn came to curse her and to collect his pearl. And each day before the new moon rose the oyster came to the surface, opened its bosom to the night and she lamented her plight, calling on her kinsmen in distress, till one by one the Norsemen followed her voice to the lake, plunged into the waters and were drowned.

IV

A BOVE in his cave on Shubel's Mountain the djinn rejoiced. He had destroyed the men who had come from the North to threaten his power. The tides would now rise and fall at his bidding so long as the moon waxed and waned. And if anyone came to challenge his right to rule there was the fair-haired girl in the oyster singing from the lake her song of death. And if no one came there was her ransom, the pearl.