

Fladda Light

Hilton Brown

If you wander long enough in the less-explored channels of the Hebrides, you will find yourself sooner or later looking down the long sable perspective of the Sound of Fladda. Tossing waters and surly terrifying rocks—the prospect is not one over which to linger. Never is the sea at rest in that tortured glack; and in the three-mile narrows of the strait it runs like a race. Add to this odd, unexplained veerings of the wind, sudden reasonless squalls, and a thoroughly inhospitable seabord, and you will have the reasons why the coasting skippers will rather go three times round Divach than once through the Fladda. On the east the grand cliffs of Kinfoy Head march down into the water like armies of men; on the west the grey basalt crags of Divach run mile on unbroken mile. A place with a bad name is the Fladda—and not without cause.

Two objects stand out conspicuously on Kinfoy Head. One is the new Fladda Light—white, shining, looking contemptuously down on the incessant turmoil of the Sound. The other, not far off, is a monument. An arduous climb to its inaccessible site will be rewarded by a fine view of the sea and the flats of Divach, and perhaps by a few minutes moralising on the inscription. This runs ‘Erected to the Memory of Aaron Braid, Master; James Fletcher, ship’s officer’ and some fourteen others mentioned by name of the s.s. Gilderoy, who perished near this place 24th November 1892’. The Gilderoy was a cattle-boat which took the wrong side of Divach one tempestuous night, crashed on the great rock in mid-channel and went down with all hands. One man escaped by a series of miracles, and he told afterwards how Aaron Braid, the master, stood on the bridge cursing the rock, the water, and, above all, those who had set no light in so deadly a passage; and further he cursed—unreasonably perhaps, but with a frightful vigour—all who should ever attempt to set or keep a light in that place in days to come. Aaron Braid was a man known by dark repute all up and down the Hebrides, and there were folk who shuddered as they listened to the survivor’s tale.

There is, then, a third conspicuous object in the Fladda landscape which is otherwise drab as a platter. This is the rock or island aforementioned—nameless on

most maps, named unpronounceably in the Gaelic and styled on Admiralty charts 'Fladda Rock'. It springs up full in the throat of the straits, square-shaped and black, rising perhaps twenty feet above the water. On it there is seen to stand a curious truncated stump—like the relics of a tooth. It is in fact a pediment of stone—all that remains of the old Fladda Light, the light that was built, despite the curses of Aaron Braid, two years after the Gilderoy went down. There it stands, the mere base or pediment of what was once a lighthouse, forlorn under the constant contemptuous sneer of the imposing new light high on Kinfoy.

The rare traveller in these parts must make conversation out of very slight material; almost invariably, while the coasting boat lies off the little sleepy hollow of Foidachin, he goes on shore and makes inquiries about that curious stump on the rock in mid-channel. If he speaks only in the English tongue he will receive only half answers. . . . No, the lighthouse wasn't washed away. No, it did not fall down. It was simply dismantled about the end of the nineties and some of the material was used for the new light on Kinfoy. A wasteful thing of the authorities surely? Oh ay, nae doot, but what was a Government for if it wisnae to waste the ratepayers' hard-earned siller. But why did they want to dismantle the thing at all? Gude kens, but belike it was because very often in the winter months not even a boatie could make the rock to land on it, and it was hard on the poor chiles there all alone, and there werena that many that cam' forrit to apply for the post. That would be it—jist that. M'phm.

But if the stranger had the Gaelic—which, of course, he rarely had—he was given different tales; tales in which the commonplace voice of everyday gave place to the twilight sing-song of the Celt, tales told fearfully and not too loud. He heard something of Aaron Braid, that black figure up and down these waters for forty years—a man charged with the nameless terror of a Stevenson story. He heard of the loss of the Gilderoy and that great figure that stood on the bridge blasting the place with the curses of a man to all intents and purposes already dead. And he heard how the light was eventually built without difficulty or disaster, but how evil came to every man who took on the post of keeper. Men became suddenly and mortally ill; men met with frightful accidents; men fell into—or drowned themselves in—the sea.

'It was not a good place for men to be in,' the informant would say; and then he would lean over to his hearer in an infectious ecstasy of fear. 'There were things

that came out of the sea that it was not good for men to be with.'

'What sort of things?' the traveller would ask; but that was a question to which no answer came. For things such as these even the Gaelic had no name.

The tale of the things that came out of the sea and made landing on the Fladda Rock is hard to come by; we have only the narrative of Burke Hudson, the last keeper of the light—a man of many faults but no liar, a man of many weaknesses but no coward at all.

Burke Hudson was that roughest of all rough diamonds—the diamond that has once been smooth. He was a man of some education, of decent if not exalted birth, and well endowed both in body and mind. He was ruined, however, by two fatal traits—an inability to keep money in his pocket and a total incapacity to adhere for more than the briefest period to any single course or undertaking. At the moment when he half-capriciously took up the appointment of keeper of the Fladda Light he had just squandered all his savings on an insane project to recover the supposed treasure lying in a sunk Armada galleon off the coast of Divach. The business of paying off his men—which he scrupulously did—left him stranded at Foidachin without as much as the fare to Glasgow.

These circumstances were no new experience to Hudson; and to find himself installed as keeper of a lighthouse was to him no more singular than to find himself acting as stoker of an Atlantic liner. In a sense it was less strange, for he had never served as a stoker, whereas he had once acted for a brief time as assistant in a lighthouse and observing station on the coast of Florida. There were few things to which he could not turn his hand. He was not ignorant of the reputation of the Fladda Light; he knew that his predecessor had been found in the sea by the relief-boat, and he also knew, or shrewdly guessed, that no man could get into the sea off the Fladda Roack unless by deliberate intention. But devils were not among the things of which he took account.

He stopped the halting encouragements of the inspector with a laugh.

'I don't believe in any Flannan Isles,' he said. 'You can cut all that out.'

The inspector jumped at it eagerly. 'Of course it was just the loneliness——'

'What else?' said Hudson. 'I've been lonely in worse places than Fladda. I've

got books and I've got a cat. What I want at this moment is a roof and food to eat, not company.'

But for all that, he watched the November twilight falling on the dismal vista of the Sound with a feeling that was new to him. The boat pulled back to Foidachin early in the afternoon; he would not be visited again for a week—and not then unless the elements were favourable. During that interval he would be reduced for company to the cat that was rubbing itself now against his leg. For the moment he wished himself out of it. A bleak wind was buffeting the sea in the straits, the strong ebb was setting past the rock with silken fury; for a moment they seemed to carry with them all the grim old tales of the Islands, all the strange creatures that people these tales, the dark raging figure of Aaron Braid, master of the ill-fated Gilderoy.

He laughed at himself suddenly and quoted half-aloud a line from *The Merry Men*.

'There's de'ils in the muckle sea wad yoke on a Communicant.'

He laughed again. 'They won't yoke on me anyway.'

The cat rubbed itself consolingly against his leg. The mood passed.

But later, lying in his hard cot in the bedroom with the wind wailing round the tower and the seas crashing on the rock below, he had time to remember a disquieting moment in his talk with the inspector. Hudson had asked very naturally to see the diary or log, and the inspector had look nonplussed.

'I'm sorry,' he had said sheepishly. 'Fact is, the thing's lost. De mortuis and all that, but your predecessor was a through-other being. Where he kept the book I don't know, but we couldn't find it. I've given you a new one.'

'I wonder why you're lying to me?' Hudson had thought at the time, and he repeated the thought again now. The inspector had been lying beyond doubt—lying with the clumsy ineptitude of a poor invention that has something it desperately needs to conceal. Why? Why wasn't the book forthcoming? An obvious reason suggested itself and with that he had to be content. Presumably the unfortunate who had held this sinecure before him had gone out of his mind; no doubt he had scribbled things in the diary that would have made unpleasant reading for his successor. But why not be straight about it?

Hudson chuckled. Whatever he felt himself, there was no doubt that his worthy superiors were very genuinely scared of the Fladda.

Hudson's first two days on the rock passed quickly and busily. The working of the light was simple enough; oil fuel and a simple clockwork mechanism driven by a falling weight. It gave Hudson no difficulty. But the inspector had been right; the last man had been a careless dirty creature—spending his days no doubt, poor devil, in the qualms of terror instead of keeping things ship-shape. Hudson went over everything, the cat marching solemnly at his heels. Curious, thought Hudson, how it seemed to cling to him for company; it never left him for an instant. He was busy polishing, tidying, checking inventories. He wrote up methodically in the brand-new diary, making something to record out of nothing.

Hudson was bored but submissive; this interval of lying-low had to be, as such intervals had been before. There was nothing else for it. As for the bogles of the deep, they bothered him not at all. Only once, on the second afternoon, a passing incident occurred. As he stood at the high desk writing in the diary, he had the sudden conviction that a shadow crossed the room behind him. His heart missed a beat; then he laughed at himself again. That was an experience he had had before.

'I suppose it was that sort of thing that drove these poor devils silly,' he said half aloud. 'As if it didn't happen every other hour when a man's been all by himself. I'm used to that anyway.'

It was only when he finished writing up the diary that he missed the cat. He called to it but it did not come. Not till half an hour afterwards did he find it, crouched in an angle by the cupboard in the kitchen. It came when he offered it a morsel of fish, but it seemed cross and uneasy.

The third night closed down with dirty weather, a half-gale coursing down from the north with great clouds riding that seemed to sweep in pursuit of the sunset and swallow it up as the extinguisher douses a candle. Hudson's practised ear told him that the sea was rising; above the normal hiss and rattle of the waters there came every now and then a resonant thud, like the boom of a distant cannon that told of a big wave flinging itself on the rock. Nothing was likely to venture down the Fladda on such a night—nothing of men, that was. Hudson, tending the light with the cat purring at his heels, laughed at himself for that last thought. His had been an odd life; very early he had been forced to conquer and laugh away the

bogies that beset the isolated imagination. He had too often had to live alone in odd places to give way to these.

He went to bed early as was his wont; but woke after an hour or two with a sudden start. The gale was getting worse; it shrieked and tore at the tower; the waves beat on the rocks below no longer in isolated blows but in heavy salvos. The night was full of vague noise that would be awesome if one chose to give way to it. Then suddenly he became conscious of a new sound. There was a movement soft but unmistakable in the kitchen-living-room below.

Just for the moment Hudson's heart failed him. Then he remembered the cat. The cat always slept at the bottom of his bed—a post it had adopted the first night and from which it could not be dislodged. Now it was not there. Evidently it had slipped downstairs and was after the salt beef in the living-room. Cursing all cats for their voraciousness and himself for his foolish predilection for open doors, Hudson took his hurricane lamp and went down the steep stone stair.

In the living-room the sea was louder; otherwise there was not a sound. For a moment Hudson thought all was as he had left it. Then suddenly he became conscious of a faint elusive smell. He examined the room thoroughly, hunted and called for the cat, but without result. The room was normal save for that faint permeating odour to which he could not give a name.

On the way up the stairs again, it came to him—not naming itself but, as smells do, conjuring up a picture. Hudson saw in a vision a small cargo steamer pitching in a winter sea off the French coast, heard again the shouts of man overboard, witnessed again the rescue of the swimmer, saw him carried into the foc'sle. And he smelt again that peculiar pungent smell. It was the smell of heavy seaman's clothing thoroughly soaked with salt water.

Hudson had no such clothing. He had worn ordinary clothes ever since his arrival at the light, and these had never been even damp. His oilskins—not very wet—were drying in the store-room at the bottom of the tower.

Upstairs in his room, he saw something sitting on his bed. It was the cat. But it glared at him, arching its back on which the hair stood up in a crest. It fled from his approach and hid.

Hudson fancied that he had tasted the beginning of fear that night; in the

morning he was undeceived. It was when he went to write up the diary that he learned what fear was.

The diary lay on a high desk in a corner of the living-room furthest from the door. It was a book of about eight inches by five, one opening—two pages, that is—being allotted to a day. Rarely indeed, of course, would there be incident at the Fladda to fill a tithe of this generous space; but the book was a standard type. Hudson had so far prided himself on filling his two pages somehow, much as a journalist prides himself on getting his column out of moonshine.

Today he went to write it up, wondering whether he should or should not say anything of the events of the night. There was no smell of wet clothes in the room now; probably there never had been. The room had been stuffy; the smell if it had ever existed, had been nothing but the kitchen cloths drying by the stove.

He took up his pen and instantly he became convinced that the diary was not as he had left it. He could have sworn its position on the desk had changed; he could have sworn moreover that the book itself had been touched.

He saw the cat sitting watching him with inscrutable eyes; out of bravado he began to laugh.

'This won't do, pussy,' he said. 'Getting the jumps.'

He opened the book at random and the smile died on his lips.

He had opened the diary at a date three days ahead—the day the visiting boat was due. And his eyes were instantly riveted to the page, because along the upper edge, beneath the printed date there ran a succession of very faint marks—not writing and yet a kind of writing too. If some very feeble hand just reaching out far enough to touch the paper with the pencil point and no more had tried to write down something in the book, the effect would have been produced. There were no letters, certainly no words; yet there were strokes that looked like fragments of letters, blocks and divisions that suggested words. It was writing; but whose?

In a fury Hudson reached out for the indiarubber, rubbed hard and brushed away the crumbs. The marks remained exactly as before. Hudson started at them. They must have been in the book from the first, he told himself; they must have been made in the printing or the binding. They must have been. Then he saw

something else.

At the bottom of the pages and near the middle the blue ruled lines were very, very slightly smudged and blurred. There was the faintest visible yellow stain. It was just as though someone, writing on the top lines of the page had rested there—as he naturally would—a wet coat sleeve.

On the Saturday the visiting boat was due. The gale had blown itself out, and through a clear-washed morning of watery sunshine, Hudson's glass showed him the boat staggering up the Sound from Foidachin. He scarcely needed his glasses to show him that she held only two men. He cursed under his breath and then laughed.

He seemed to hear the inspector again talking with that ill-assumed air of confident bluff. 'We don't leave men alone on lights nowadays,' he had said. 'It's against regulations. Your relief boat will come on Saturday. I can't promise you a relief, but it'll be an odd thing if I can't send someone to keep you company. Oh, ay—I'll surely manage that.'

Now in the boat Hudson's glasses showed him only Cattan the boatman and Riach the coastguard. Neither of these was likely to stay to share his vigil.

Should he throw up the sponge and go? Where was he to find food and a roof if he did? Apparently no one but he would face living on the Fladda, but then no one would offer him another job. He procrastinated, telling himself he would make up his mind before the boat's arrival; but in his heart he knew he would stay. Then he thought with a shudder of the event of the previous afternoon.

Every morning after he had gone down to write up the diary he had found that someone had been before him. And every morning those faint marks that might have been writing had strengthened. There was no 'might-have-been' about it now; it was writing, and it was writing in ordinary Roman characters. It was faint, it was smudgy, there was a curious quality about it that ordinary script lacked; but writing it was. Very soon it would be legible. What would he read then?

The previous morning, he had made out the first word. Poring over the book in the strongest light he could find, he seemed to make out beyond all uncertainty the word 'ship'. A very likely word in such a place. A ship was to come by that day perhaps, a ship possibly of some importance to himself? He watched the tossing

waters of the Sound like a hawk till the afternoon began to fall, but no ship ventured on these forsaken seas. Hudson hardly knew whether he was pleased or disappointed. If the writing was meaningless, did that make it better or worse?

At four in the afternoon he had gone out for a stroll on the rock. And almost instantly his eye caught and focussed on a white object that lay tossed up at the southern angle. It was a drowned sheep.

Hudson had gazed at it in horror. It was an unpleasant object in itself, but its physical repulsion was as nothing to the terror that seized upon his mind. That word he had read had not been 'ship'; it was 'sheep'. The writing had a meaning after all. It had recorded the casting-up of the carcass before the event.

He had turned and there was the cat sitting behind him surveying him with its strange eyes.

Now, as he watched the boat plunging towards him through the November sunshine, he thought of the monstrosity of what seemed to have happened. Something—he dared not name it, but it was something that smelt of a drowned man's clothing—crept out of the sea and wrote his log for him in advance—wrote beforehand what he himself might have written after the event. That was what his senses seemed to tell him. Abominable, monstrous as it was, that was what seemed to have happened.

A life oddly spent had left Hudson with an open mind on all supernatural things. He would have said he neither disbelieved in ghosts nor feared them. In so far as a ghost was merely a ghost—a manifestation from another world or from what men call the dead—it was no more terrible and no more strange than many material things. So he would have said; but to be cooped up here alone with such a creature, debarred from human companionship or human help, that was another matter. Could he go through with it?

The boat was now close to the rock and he could see Cattan and Riach clearly. Their expressions brought a smile to his lips again. They were looking now at each other, now at the light; their faces were the faces of men keyed up for a grim experience.

'Wondering what they're going to find!' Hudson commented to himself. 'I expect they've found some pretty rum things here before. Talk about Flannan Isle!'

He coo-ed to them and laughed again at the sudden relief that sprang to their faces. They ran the boat deftly under the rock and made fast.

‘Boat ahoy!’ said Hudson. ‘Got my relief?’

Riach plunged floundering into some complicated explanation, but Hudson cut him short.

‘Never mind that; I wasn’t expecting it. Come ashore.’

They came in and had a stiff whiskey all round in the living-room. Hudson collected his letters and provisions.

‘Are ye a’ richt?’ Cattan asked the question in the voice of a man who could hardly believe his eyes.

‘Might be worse,’ said Hudson curtly. There was no point in expatiating to such as these. ‘but I want you to take off this damned cat.’

Cattan’s eyebrows went up; he peered at Hudson knowingly.

‘Ye dinna like cats?’

‘Hate them,’ said Hudson. ‘And it keeps me awake at nights.’

‘Ay, ay,’ said Cattan, ‘jist that, jist that.’

They stayed only a short while; Hudson laughed to himself at their obvious anxiety to be gone, the palpable relief with which in the end they pushed off the boat and headed back to Foidachin. But as the boat dwindled over the water, he wondered if it were any laughing matter. Here were two full-bodied men, both noted locally for hardihood and courage, whose minds had no rest till they were clear of that cursed rock. Two men of indifferent imagination who had rowed up in fear and trembling as to what they might find, and had rowed away manifestly thanking God that, this time at least, no horror had befallen them. What was there to laugh at in that?

Hudson busied himself with the light, congratulating himself on having got rid of the cat. He hated it for the way it clung to his side, still more for the way it saw things he could not see, for its arched back and staring eyes and its horrible contaminative fear. No more of that at any rate.

In the evening he went to write up the diary, turning not without a shudder to that page where he had first found the marks. Then he stopped and stared at it. There was fresh writing near the bottom of the page. It was faint, it was shaky, it partook still of that indefinable quality that human writing lacked, but it was easily, instantly legible.

'This day, the relief boat came,' read Hudson. 'No relief. Am alone here now till Saturday.'

There seemed to Hudson a sudden swirl in the gloomy air of the room; not a wind but a movement, not a shadow but a sensation. Again, clear and pungent, he felt that horrible smell of wet seaman's cloth. 'Alone now till Saturday.' Was he alone at all?

In a frenzy he shouted out aloud.

'What is it? Who are you? What do you want? Show yourself, I say.'

The murky silence of the room was oppressive. No sound answered but the slap and scour of a big wave bursting on the pediment of the tower.

Cattan and Riach just made out their visit and no more for the new week entered with a gale. All through what were to him the sleepless watches of that Saturday night Hudson marked the growing fury of the wind, and his trained ear heard the steady murderous rise of the sea. Sunday broke late and dimly; all through that day and the Monday that followed it the Sound lay under the lash of a northerly hurricane, sea and sky meeting in a sable inferno where the shores of Divach were entirely blotted out, and only the topmost pinnacles of Kinfoy peered out at intervals sodden and glistening. Yet Hudson was thankful enough for these mundane things; one could set down any odd sound to the many-voiced crying of the sea, any fancied movement to the swirl and frenzy of the wind. Where earth's elements clamoured so loudly items that were not of earth could hardly be heard.

All that Sunday and Monday there was no writing or sign of writing in the book.

On Tuesday morning the gale still blew furiously, but the air had in some measure cleared; a ghostly Divach glimmered through the flying wrack, and Kinfoy stood up black and cruel. Looking into his shaving-mirror Hudson saw that the

strain was telling; the face that looked back at him from the glass was not his face of a week before; he saw reflected the eyes of some other man, eyes that frightened him. He had slept badly; he knew he was deliberately holding himself in hand. Evil things rode down the Sound on that raging wind; in all the dark corners of the tower panic lurked, ready to spring out and seize him. Once give way to these and he knew himself for a lost man. Once let those dark crouching terrors leap out and possess him and anything might happen. He might share the fate of the poor soul who had preceded him, and go into the wild sea itself to escape them.

He finished his dressing and went to the stairs. And as he glanced down the gloomy well of steps it seemed to him again as if something swirled in the dusk; again came that horrible movement that was less a movement than a shifting of the air; in the twilight below him there passed again that something that was less tangible even than a shadow. And instantly the whole air was full of that unspeakable reek of rough cloth soaked in salt water; it seemed to close upon him and choke him as if a saturated pad of the stuff were pressed upon his face. For the moment he went as cold as ice. 'Alone till Saturday?' Oh, God, he was anything but alone!

He took himself in hand and strode down the echoing stairway. In the living-room the smell struck him again. He went straight towards the high desk in the corner and checked as he went. The diary lay open in its place.

He must have left it so the night before? He had not. The panic shapes that lurked in the corners pressed forward a little as if for a rush. The Thing from the sea, whatever it was, was very near. Its presence was about him. With a huge effort he mastered himself and forced his eyes to the book. The terrors relaxed in their corners; their hour was not yet.

It was as he had expected. The book lay open at the day; across the top of the pages he read in print: 'Tuesday, 22nd November'. And below was an entry like the last—clear, legible, distinct:

This day about seven P.M. a small steamer passed on the wrong side of the Light and was lost on Kinfoy Head. The Light was dim.'

Hudson stared at it. Despite the horror of the thing he was fascinated. He made a mental calculation of the tides, allowing for the wind. Clearly the steamer

was to come down the Sound from the north; from five in the afternoon onwards the tide would set in that direction like a race. Any navigator in his senses would hold away to the west of Divach; if by ill chance or ill guidance he ventured into the jaws of the Sound then certainly his one hope was to pass between the Fladda Rock and Divach. Hudson's treasure-hunting work had given him a clear notion of the seas all round that island, and he knew that there would be no need of supernatural intervention to fulfil the prophecy written on the page before him. If a ship took the mainland side of the Fladda with that sea running and that tide, nothing but a miracle could keep her off Kinfoy. And that—again with that sea and that tide—meant loss with all hands.

He read it again. 'The Light was dim.' What on earth or in those places which the writer frequented was meant by that? How could the light be dim? It would not be dim—Hudson struck the book a blow with his hand—it would burn as never before. That at least he could make certain.

All day he sat in the topmost room of the tower sweeping the seas to the north with his glass. The wind beat furiously down the long funnel of the Sound, swinging the tower gently; the seas wrestled and tore at the rock like men thrown down from scaling-ladders in a siege, or swept over it green and contemptuous like a cavalry charge. From the south a coasting vessel struggled laboriously up and disappeared into the haven of Foidachin shut off from his sight by the crags of Kinfoy. To the north there was nothing. About one o'clock, in a clearer interval than usual, Hudson thought he saw a faint trail of smoke but it vanished again almost at once. He took no food, but sat on watching like a man in a trance.

About half-past two a flurry of mist and dense thin rain came down the wind and blanketed everything for over an hour. It cleared suddenly to northward, and Hudson reached out for his glass. But before he could pick it up he gave a gasp of horror. Away at the north end of the Sound, rolling heavily and making the worst possible weather, was a small steamer.

Hudson looked at his watch; twenty to four. The man had a chance yet. If he could get himself round and out of that place within the next hour he could make the west side of Divach. If not, he was caught and down the Sound he must come—in which case he had only the last hope of taking the right side of the Fladda Light. Gazing through his glass in the deepening dusk Hudson saw that something

was wrong. The steamer was rolling inordinately, she moved like a boat only half-controlled. Engine trouble, Hudson thought, his heart thumping. He strained his eyes to see her, and fancied she was slightly nearer than before; he believed he could detect a list to port. Then, just before dark fell, a second scurry of rain came down and blotted everything out.

He looked upwards; the kindly flash of the light cheered him. Nothing wrong there; he had seen to that.

He went down to the living-room to make himself a cup of tea. He bent over the stove; then suddenly the enamel teapot crashed from his hands, and he sprang round with the leap of a startled deer. Someone had stood in the doorway and looked at him; he would have sworn it. But there was no one there.

'For God's sake,' he cried out, utterly unnerved, 'what is it? Show yourself, whoever you are!'

The rain and the wind and the sea answered him in full chorus, but there was no other voice.

Hudson wiped his forehead, poured himself a glass of whisky, and drank it off at a gulp. Slowly he made himself tea—facing the doorway this time and trying vainly to curse himself into reason. Again the corners seemed to him to swarm with figures and shapes of panic that poised themselves for a charge. Presently they would be out upon him; and the Thing that had stood in the door would lead them.

He went slowly upstairs to the bedroom. After the din of the storm up in the light gallery the inside of that tower of stone seemed strangely quiet; his footsteps echoed oddly on the stone stairs. Solitude! The inspector, gross fool, had said something about solitude—loneliness. If only solitude were his portion; if only he could be lonely! But there was no solitude here. The tower was not empty; nay, it was crowded, filled and charged with something that was everywhere and nowhere. Man could endure solitude; but not this, not this.

He paused at the stair head, and looked at his watch; six o'clock. 'Show yourself,' he said again almost in a whisper. 'Show yourself. Do something.'

This time he was answered. Out of the night, at no very great distance, a ship's siren wailed mournfully down the wind.

Hudson dashed up into the light gallery like a madman. The squall had passed but another was sweeping down upon him, screaming and yelling. Blinding rain beat down the gale with the force of machine-gun fire. The tower rocked gently. Behind was the light; beyond was a welter of rain and sea-water, white crests showing here and there, the wind howling like a demon. And somewhere there men were fighting for the lives that hung on a single chance—whether or not they saw the Fladda Light in time to take the westward course.

Shudderingly, in the darkness, the siren sounded again. Hudson gripped the rail with both his hands; unless his senses were wrong the sound came from the east. What in God's name were they doing? Surely they knew where they were? Surely they could see the light? He glanced upwards and backwards and realised a most frightful thing.

The light was going out.

He went into the light-room, waving his hand, shouting nine-tenths a madman. He had tended the light with special care; he had been over everything. The oil-feed, the clockwork mechanism—he had been over everything with a microscope. There was nothing that could possibly have gone wrong. He rushed at the thing again now, examining, adjusting; there was nothing wrong. The lamp should have been blazing; it was not. It was failing, sinking—not flutteringly but steadily. It was as if someone had wrapped an opaque sheet round the top of the tower. The lamp burned but it gave no light. The light was dim. The Very words of the diary! 'The Light was dim.'

Afterwards Hudson had no very clear recollection of how that half-hour passed. At times he strove with the light—uselessly; at times he tried to pray; at times he shouted like a maniac calling on the Thing from the sea to come forward in bodily form and fight him fairly. The siren sounded with frequency, and every time the blast of it tore his heart anew. Sometimes it seemed to move westwards as if they saw the light and were making desperate efforts to round the Fladda Rock ere it was too late; then it would wail out faint and despairing further than ever to the east.

In the end Hudson went out again to the roaring darkness of the gallery and clung to the rail. He could do no more; the ship was doomed and all her people. Not a man of those who were fighting for life in those murderous seas would ever

win to land and make question why the Fladda Light had failed in this of all hours. They were doomed; they were dead men, dead—he shuddered horribly—as Aaron Braid and the crew of the Gilderoy.

At times it seemed to Hudson that a dark figure, tall and with white teeth shining through a beard, stood with him on the gallery. At times it seemed that he was not on earth at all but sailing through the tempestuous night of space. But at all times—in his moments of sheer madness, or when he tried desperately to pull himself together—he was sure he was never for an instant alone.

Then suddenly the siren roared almost in his ear, and out of the rain-swept blackness in front of him came lights and a shape, the faint irregular beat of a disabled engine, a waft of smoke and oil. For a moment it seemed to Hudson as if the thing would blunder on the very rock itself, but it lurched away. The lights came and went in the great seas, the cripple march of the engine was now loud, now inaudible. For a moment there came up to Hudson the terrible sound of men's despair—a vague crying and shouting tossed away by the wind like a seabird's wail. Then it ceased and the lights vanished, and the unbroken fury of the night burst round him again. The boat had passed to the east of the rock within less than a quarter of a mile. In an hour's time she would be crashing on Kinfoyl, and the men whose cries had come up to Hudson would cry no more.

He looked at his watch again. It was exactly seven o'clock.

Simultaneously two things happened. The light beamed out again above him, clear and comforting; and the dreadful company left him; the shapes of fear crept back to their lairs. He was alone.

Hudson slept at last that night as a man sleeps in fever. He woke, with all the weakness of one who has been through high temperatures, to a grey world, the wind fallen away and a white sea fog blanketing all the Sound. As he tried to shave himself his hand shook so that he was forced to give up the attempt, the fact that looked out at him from his glass was haggard and desperate. It required an effort to go downstairs and across the living-room to where the diary lay. But the page was clean and unsullied. There was no writing at all.

That was a long day. The wet fog billowed about the tower, isolating it more terribly than ever; the tide rose and fell on the side of the rock; but nothing else.

Hudson took heart again; perhaps his persecution was over. Perhaps those grim beings who came about the place were designed only to try him, to test his courage. Perhaps the horrors of the preceding night had been their climax. At all events he was today a man alone in a stone tower on a rock—solitary, no doubt, and imprisoned, but no longer maddened by that company who had filled so foully his house and his mind.

Nothing happened all day. Hudson went cheerfully to bed and slept better than for several nights. He made several visits of inspection to the light, which burned steadily and well.

Thursday opened with a repetition of Wednesday—thick fog, little wind, and the sea greatly down. In fear and trembling he went to the book; but again the page was clean; there was not a trace of writing of any kind. He turned back idly to the previous messages, half expecting to find them gone; but there they were, exactly as he had first seen them. He shuddered; the curious shaky scrawls with that odd, unnameable, inhuman quality brought back his past terror all too clearly. Whether the trial were past or no he must get off the rock when the relief boat came on Saturday. He had played his part and he was done.

Supposing the boat did not come on Saturday? Suppose another storm burst? Hudson grew cold at the thought. The calm must hold, the boat must come. It must. He could not go on for another week—not for another day—and live.

The day dragged through; always Hudson had that blessed sense of being alone. Those who had complained of loneliness, he thought grimly, on the Fladda Rock, had had little cause to repine. If solitude had been all their complaint they had been well off.

In the evening, just before dark, the fog blew clear and he saw again the wet, shining coasts of Divach and Kinfoy. The sight comforted him inexpressibly—and the thought that he had only one more day on the rock. Almost, he told himself, he felt like sticking to the post; if the bad time were really over why desert now?

He cooked himself supper and went to write up the diary whistling cheerfully. But at the first sight of the book his cheerfulness died. The writing was there again.

This time it made no prophecy—merely a statement. 'Five years ago this night the s.s. Gilderoy was lost.' That was all; but instantly he knew that it prophesied for

him something very terrible. It was not written there for the mere sake of reminding him of a forgotten disaster. Something would happen that night. 'Five years ago this night' the Gilderoy had come down the Sound and crashed and split on the Fladda Rock, and that frightful man with the black beard had died in the sea, cursing it with the last breath he drew. That had been five years ago; what would happen tonight?

He strove to remember at what hour the wreck had taken place, but if he had ever known he had forgotten. Until day dawned, then, the menace would hang over him. What was he to do?

For a time he gave way and sat staring at the fire, glancing fearfully over his shoulder, sniffing to catch the first hint of that reek of wet serge that heralded the coming of that nameless thing from the sea. But presently his bold nature reasserted itself and he pulled himself together. Nothing, at all events, was happening meantime; the night was calm and clear without, and within there was peace. He made an effort and went up and tended the light. Then he mixed himself a couple of stiff whiskies in the hope of sleep; for once the light could look to itself. He went to bed only partially undressed. Surprisingly, he slept.

He woke sweating in the small hours of the morning and instantly he knew that the things of evil were in possession once again. The tower was full of them; there were vague movements in the room, vague sounds that were not of the sea. He stretched out a hand for the bottle of whisky and drank half a glass of the spirit at a gulp. It steadied him for the moment. He had the clearest conviction that he had been wakened by something special, by some prodigious or impossible noise. And even as he tried to cast back his thoughts into the byways of sleep, he heard it again.

Close at hand, on the north side of the rock, a steamer's siren roared hoarsely in the night.

Hudson picked up his hurricane lantern and ran up into the light gallery. For a moment the hideous fear held him that the light had failed again while he slept, and that a second ship was coming on the rock. But once out in the clear air on the gallery, he saw that whatever it was it was not that. It was a cold, calm night with an old moon swinging up above the mainland; the light of the lamp was sweeping the waters of the straits as usual. In the joint radiance of lamp and moon Hudson

could see a long way up the Sound. And there was not a ship, not a fishing-boat, not a dinghy in sight.

And even as he looked the siren roared again, close in front of him.

‘Oh God!’ cried Hudson with sudden comprehension, ‘the Gilderoy!’

The wind down the Sound struck suddenly chill with a chillness not of the normal earth. It came up to Hudson like the breath of a vault or like an air from those sea-bottoms where the sun never penetrates. It had a curious stale reek as of mud, or damp or deep-sea ooze. Then it seemed to Hudson as though the rock shook under an impact and instantly he heard again that dreadful sound of men in absolute despair. The air was filled with a wailing and crying of many voices blended in agony. It rose and swelled and shuddered upon the water till it seemed that it filled the whole throat of the Sound and rang from the cliffs of Kinfoy on one side to the cliffs of Divach on the other. It rose and climaxed and fell, and in the silence that followed Hudson found himself screaming out in sympathy.

The silence fell; and in that moment—it was very quick but Hudson knew he had seen it—something came out of the sea on to the west corner of the rock and moved with the swift rush of a shadow into the darkness at the base of the tower. It was swift and dim, but Hudson knew it had happened. There was something unspeakably menacing in that flying rush, like a murderer leaping from one point of cover to another.

Hudson’s nerve broke. There all round him was the perfect night, the light seas breaking on the rock, the moon lifting a little higher above Kinfoy. It was good, material, normal. But at the base of the tower lurked something that was none of these things.

On an impulse he ran back into the light-room and down the stair. On the third step his foot slipped and he fell headlong down the short spiral. The lamp flew from his hands. There was a crash of glass breaking and then utter darkness.

Hudson picked himself up and groped his way to the bedroom door and stood there. He found himself gasping and panting, and shivering from head to foot. Inside the tower was absolute silence. Hudson could hear clearly the homely ticking of the wag-at-the wa’ clock in the living-room below. He stood absolutely motionless waiting tensely. Presently, stealing up the stairs like a being, came the

first faint whiff of sodden seaman's cloth. It was barely perceptible; then suddenly it seemed to smother and choke. The Thing was inside.

His heart beating in his throat, Hudson listened. Silence. Still silence. The faintest movement down below in the dark. Then a sound that was hardly a sound—a sort of muttering, like a man talking to himself in a heavy sleep. A creaking and rustling; again that inhuman voice; then, clear, distinct, unspeakably certain—a heavy step on the stair. . . .

With a shriek of uttermost terror Hudson fell back into the sleeping-room and rushed to the bed. He threw himself into it and dragged the clothes over him—sheets, blankets, pillows—like a child fleeing from the terror of the dark.

But for all his tight-shut eyes and for all the huddle of clothes above him, and for all the mantle of the darkness, he knew that presently someone stood for a time in the room and watched him. And in his nostrils was the smell of old sea cloth soaked and wringing wet.

On the Saturday morning in clear open weather Cattan and Riach lay on their oars in the rise and fall of the sea off Fladda Rock. The tower stood up above them white and silent as it had stood on other visits—and with the same air of holding a secret it did not choose to reveal.

Something of this must have been in Riach's prosaic mind, for he said half-aloud:

'Ay, gin ye cud but speak!'

He turned to Cattan.

'It's fell quiet?'

'Ay,' said Cattan uneasily, 'it's fell quiet. D'ye mind——'

'I mind fine!' said Riach quickly. 'There's nae call to mind me o' onything. Gi'e him a cry, Cattan.'

Cattan made a funnel of his huge hands and sent a shout ringing across the narrow space of water. As if in answer to a signal the door of the light flew open, and a man came slowly down the steps towards them. He had the figure of Burke Hudson, but his bare head was grey and he looked at them with a stranger's eyes.

Cattan manoeuvred the boat up to the rock and they stared at the man who stood waiting. Riach drew in his breath with a sharp hiss.

‘God be wi’s!’ said Cattan. ‘What ails ye?’

The ghost of a smile, a smile of contempt for their manifest terror, played over Hudson’s face. What had they to be afraid of; what did they know of fear?

‘I’m all right,’ he said, and at the sound of his voice Riach drew a breath of relief, ‘but I’m not staying here any longer.’ He laughed bitterly at Cattan’s staring eyes. ‘No, I’m not made yet, but I will be if I try another week of this.’

They made fast the boat and helped him out with his things. They made no attempt at remonstrance or persuasion; to Hudson’s surprise they accepted the abandonment of the light as a matter of course.

‘You’ve been through this before,’ he said.

‘Ay,’ said Cattan, ‘twice. But ane o’ them wis——’

‘Haud yer tongue, man Cattan,’ said Riach sharply.

At the last Hudson went back to the living-room for something he had forgotten. Sitting in the boat, itching already to be gone, they saw him come out with a small object in his hands—a book of sorts, it seemed. He stood on the edge of the rock idly turning over its pages as if trying to make up his mind whether to bring it away or not. He dwelt over it so long that Riach grew impatient.

‘Come awa’,’ he cried. ‘Come awa’ an’ let’s oot o’ this.’

His shout seemed to bring Hudson to a decision. he closed the book with a snap; his arm swung like a man about to hurl a bomb. Fluttering like a bird the book flew over their heads and went with a sliver splash into the deep water beyond. Hudson jumped down into the boat.

‘What wis yon?’ said Cattan curiously.

‘Nothing,’ said Hudson. ‘An old book. It’s better in the sea. I think it belonged there.’

Cattan spat on his great hands; his heavy black eyebrows drew together in a frown over his sombre Celtic eyes.

'If a' wis kennit,' said he dourly, 'there's mair things in the sea than fish an' drooned sailors.'

He bent to his oars; and the boat spun over the dancing waters towards Foidachin.