

# DIANA OF THE INLET

BY

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Far already thy wild eyes  
Unlock my heart-strings as some crystal shaft  
Reveals by some chance blaze its parent fount  
After long time, so thou reveal'st my soul.

BROWNING.

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## CHAPTER I

IT was said that the man who lived alone on the Inlet shore was mad. He lived like a hermit—fished and snared wild-fowl for food, sometimes bartering a wild bees' hive, a platypus skin, or a lyre-bird's tail with the islanders or Inlet folk, for a bag of flour or some sail-cloth.

His hut, built of bark and saplings, was on an arm of earth thrown between the Inlet and the roaring Pacific. Wild waters besieged its bold outer shore, but within its embrace the Inlet lay calm as in a basin, sometimes azure, sometimes silver.

Old Mary Mahill knew his story. Moth'r Mary, all the Inlet people called her, for she mothered every ill-used creature, forlorn child or sick cow, in the country-side.

A barque had been blown on the bar in a gale some years before. The Inlet fishermen had rescued one gaunt, white-skinned man from the wreck. He was unconscious, almost lifeless, when they snatched him from the sea. They tended him with kindly sympathy. Moth'r Mary, herself, nursed him through long months of illness—weeks when he lay tossing

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in high fever, wearying night and day with delirious ravings—the cries of a soul in its agony.

“God! God! If there be a god—. . . Where art Thou—God? . . . There is no god.” Always came the same deep, final groan.

Ceaselessly that plaint arose. Its anguish, smiting the starless night, startled the fishermen and the sleeping seabirds on the midnight sea. It greeted the dawn—a monotonous wailing, vague and clamorous. For long he suffered, and the old woman watched and tended. The feverish energy subsided, deep lethargy seized his exhausted body. Not till the spring, till the awakening merriment of birds and earthly life sent a responsive thrill through sentient nature, did it move. Great-limbed and pallid, with nerveless skeleton body and cavernous eyes, he gazed upon the sunlit young earth and sun-blue sea, uncomprehending.

He grew like a strong animal. In the clear airs, the open life, his limbs filled and became firm. Knowledge of the wild life, the wild creatures of the forest and sea, came to him intuitively. In strength and stature he was before long the finest man on the Inlet shores. But his mind had sustained a shock, and the past was a great blank to him. He went to live alone in an isolated cove of the Inlet. The country-folk thought he was mad, because of the strange and silent life he chose to lead. All that they knew of him was a name; and that was engraved on a ring which had fallen from his finger while he was ill.

Michael Greig!

I recognized it with amazement. I had heard it sounded in the world of thoughtful men as that of a genius—radiant

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as the morning star—a man who had leapt into the arena of thought, and stood as it were on a dais, an orator with the flush of youth on his high brows.

His had been an enthusiastic war of words. His argument dredged modern science of the essences of superstition, and yet he used the spiritual hypothesis, the ancient faith, with the reverential simplicity that early association had imbued. The beautiful myth was a halo bound round the brows of his dead mother. The patriarchs of Learning, the magi of knowledge, with incredulity and amaze paid him homage. Wonderment gave place to admiration and applause. The laurels of scholarship were pressed upon him. For awhile the gate to an immortal fame was ajar. "A youthful daring spirit of invention, stimulated by the discoveries of science to take its flight to new and hitherto inaccessible regions," had been written of him.

A recluse, Michael Greig immured himself from the world, that wolfish hunger after knowledge quenching all impulses but one to push beyond. His soul struggled in the solitude of a lonely life, though its wings moved in the serene atmosphere of pure philosophy. Lost in a maze of speculations, in lofty abstractions, his brain grew dizzy. "The consciousness of the limitations of man, that sense of an open Secret—which he cannot penetrate—in which is the essence of religion," probed his faculties, dragging them earthwards. He was impressed with the futility of toiling thought—the inscrutability of the Infinite to the Finite. In a chaos of thought, frenzied with doubt and despair, he cried to the world—that lay with ears a-gape to hear him,

"I know nothing—nothing!"

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And the world with resentful censure proclaimed him a charlatan.

Meteor-like, had Michael Greig flashed through the scientific sphere and fallen into obscurity. Abuse engulfed him, and in an overwhelming wave of antagonism the man was lost.

But here I had found him.

He had found a sanctuary in the South, the south beyond the most southerly mountains of Australia; over the ranges of heavily-timbered mountains, which the driving winds shroud in clouds.

There in the Spring is an El Dorado of vegetable gold.

Lavish outspread beauty, wild and rare stretches everywhere, gold, gold, the gold of wattle and gorse. Gold is on the horizon, the dusty road just edging through it. A cloth of gold covers the green-swarded plains. The spirit of tranquility broods over it. Fecund and vernal it is as the "unfooted plains of Arcady," where roamed the herds of Pan.

From the blue spurs of the Hills the plains stretch: long, irriguous, flower-lapped plains, verging on the margent of the sea. On the West the Inlet water creeps into a hollow of the land. The bold outline of the Promontory extends to the outer ocean along its Western side.

The forests are dense. The outskirts of hazelwood make the air redolent of its musky fragrance. The wayside is bright with flowers—heaths, white and scarlet, thrusting speary points through the sombre-tinted bracken. Red fuchsias droop in the bending green; purple sarsaparilla and yellow wild-pea cast vines along the ground encircling the fallen timber. Every variety of acacia makes the shadowy recesses lambent

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with blossom. Over a stony creek the light woods are laden with a down of creamy flowers. The creek, swollen with plentiful rain, mirrors their drooping shades and the blue patch of sky with its flying scud of clouds. Thin wreaths of smoke curl from smouldering fires in the timber.

## CHAPTER II

NEXT day on the Inlet shores I sought and found my fugitive from the world of thought—the man whom the country folk called the madman of the Inlet.

He was a strange being, with splendid barbarian strength of hairy breast and half naked limb. His was the figure of a noble savage, and I realized that he was mad only in that he had gone back several decades in his way of life, and that his memory had suffered an eclipse. He had reverted almost wholly to the being of primitive senses. He was again the sensitized clay, in the place of that electric dust which is our modern composition. His soul gazed through the sightless orbs of reason, on a primitive earth. The great lonely mind, thrown out upon the world, “saw God in clouds, and heard him in the winds.”

We fraternized.

One day I tried to stir his memory. We sprawled on a spit of sand. The blue waters of the Inlet spat petulantly on the sea edge.

“Much learning hath made thee mad,” I quoted softly.

“I remember an altitude,” he answered me, gravely, after some pause, “where my blood froze. Here life glows within me. There is no cold where the sun is.”

I drew his memory gently across the path of the past. It

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was strewn with thorns whose sharp points pricked faint recollection with darting thoughts.

“There was a lark,” he said, “that lost his song among the clouds, and broke his wings against the sky. There was a man who strode among the stars. He fell. Maimed, he spent the rest of his days in the fields of idle wandering. He was a madman.”

“And now, my Hermit?” I asked quietly. “Would he return?”

“Why should I leave this place?” he demanded impetuously, “leave the wild heavens and the sea, the mountains and the forestry? Their life ebbs and flows with the tide of the soul. I love the wild things, the clouds, the winds, and the sea-birds. In the morning the wild swans rise. You hear them drag the water as they move, see the flash of silver spray. They stretch their long necks as they fly, and the white tips of their outstretched wings shine against the pure morning sky. At night under the shadow of the moon they drift with shrill melancholy piping. All night they wail from their breeding beds on the sheltered shore. The mists creep in from the mainland. The moonlight shines on the water, the waves break in liquid silver. The gulls and gannets with wild unrest startle their mates, and the wind, leaving the sea hushed, sighs up among the landward trees.”

His voice fell into silence. The golden sand at our feet was fretted with foam. The tussocky grass about us hissed in the wind.

“Paugh!” spake the Hermit with a strong man’s contempt. “Do I want the cities of the world? They are plague spots—filthy and reeking of men’s vices. Men and women? Content



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among the muck-heaps, they are born and die, calling the space between, Life.

“What do I want with men?” he added, fiercely. “They are loathsome. With women? They are emptiness, ephemera of false light. They live and die like gnats in the glare of a day.”

The Hermit laughed harshly.

“The whole world is mad! mad! mad!” he continued, “grinding and toiling, seeking and soiling, with its scanty breath, giving birth and dying futilely, because it has lost the way of Life. Here in the solitude is serenity. I live. Leave me this world of sunlight, the sea, the golden sands and clouded skies. The mistress of it all I adore. Her breath it is that sways the sea and the tree-tops, and scatters the stars. Her spirit possesses me. It has murmured to me through space and time.”

“Ah, I called the moon Diane,” he whispered to me, “and worshipped her. My love for her is like the wind beating along the sea-shore. But it never reaches her. I long the more infinitely.”

“Diane!” he called softly, with tenderly love-lit eyes, and outstretched arms. The mellow voice dropped. The throbbing rhythm of it had palpitated with a profound emotion.

“I will tell you!” he said again, with a rush of words. “No one has ever known before. One night she came to me. Clouds were tossed about the moon. Sea-breakers broke with a moaning roar on the Inlet bar. The foam sprang high. Sea-weeds and drift-wood swirled about the edge of the sea. The heavy waves boomed dully along the sands of the Ninety Mile Beach. I heard her cry in the wind. It was fainter and

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wilder than a wild swan's winging homeward in the twilight. The waves threw her high on the shelly strand. She was cold, almost lifeless. I gathered her into my arms. Her limbs were white, like the gleaming breast of a gull, her hair black as a cloud, dripping with sea-water. Chaste she was in her stillness, and holy. Moaning, I held her body against my breast. All night long, chill and motionless, she lay in my arms. In the dawning her eyelids quivered. She cried. I murmured words of tenderness, that the wind and the sea had taught me to woo her with, in the days when I dreamed and waited her coming.

“‘Diane! Diane!’ I called her softly, the wild love throbbing in my throat.

“She trembled. Fear shrouded her eyes.

“‘Diane!’ I prayed. Then sweet contentment filled those beauteous eyes. She was no longer afraid. She clung to me, and slept against my breast.

“We lived here joyously, with laughter, and tears that were the dew of happiness, lived as the birds and flowers do. We chased the rills to their springs in the mountains.

“A creek came down from the hills. We loved him. His life was a merry one in the early year. From a recess in the blue depths of the hills, he sprang. A lucid pool in the green moss-bosom of his mother earth, he lay. The deep shadows of a fern dell sequestered his birth. The latticed roof of his fragrant cradle was myrtle and dog-wood and hazel, tall tree-ferns, blue-tinted sapling gums, and mimosa. Lulled by the low-dropping note of the bell-birds, the whispering winds in the high mountain crags and ravines awakened him. He began to wander. Stray sunlight lit golden upon him. Through

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bowering trees he caught a glimpse of the blue sky above, and a tossed cloudlet. He began to sing as he wound through the shadows. He murmured against his sides. Radiant and green they were, with meadow fringes of tasselled grass, and yellow-eyed daisies. He mirrored mid-heaven, azure blue. The witchery of wattles encompassed him. Golden-haired like naiads, in the cool recesses, they flung seductive arms about him. Their fragrant presence perfumed the breeze that fanned him. Laughing sleepily, he lay in their caress, wrapt in golden sunshine. The birds in the cool of the bank whistled and warbled, merrily love-making. Silver-bellied minnows, darting on sandy shallows, blew strings of airy pearls. A platypus moved his solitary way in the shadow.

“For miles the creek ran through arcades of waving woodland, with lulling charm of soft, low singing, and she and I went with him. At night-fall we all three came to the sea. The ascending star radiantly lit the sky. The great hungry heart of the sea yearned for the river. And I—I yearned for the lips of my love.” The voice went out of him throbbled with a great emotion.

“So passed a time of perfect happiness—so we lived in Eden. But one day she ran to me with sobbing cries.

“‘I must leave you, Tenderness!’ she cried piteously; ‘must leave you. Remembrance has come, and with it a voice of duty. I thought I had passed the portal of life when the gods sent me to you, but it is not so. I live—and must go to my people.’

“‘I held her fast in my arms, and vowed that the gods should not part us.’

“‘My gods will part us,’ she told me with pitiful eyes.

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'They would make thee kempt and shaven, Tenderness,' she cried.

. . . . .  
"She is gone! she is gone!" moaned the Hermit.

"Sh!" He started. A wild swan wailed from a distant cove.

"Is she calling me, or is it only memory repeating her tones, 'Tenderness! Tenderness!' Diane—my soul!"

He stretched his arms to the silver moon, as she swam over the hummocks into the pale sky.

### CHAPTER III

I IDLED the long summer away with my Hermit.

There was love of men between us. He held my heart with the philosophy and poetry of his madness. Our communion of soul and mind was thought itself speaking.

“There was a fire at the end of the summer,” he told me. “The blue haze of smoke touched the far-out sea. The heart of the forest was still when we, she and I, walked there in the heat of the day. The blue breath had crept to its inmost recesses. The air was sultry with fire. The life of the forest was under its spell—the leaves listless, insects sleepily chirring, the birds unheard. In the silence the presaging moan of the fire, hungry for the green world that lay before it, came. It had ravished the ridges. The billowing black smoke swept over the forest. Wreaths of flame leapt higher than the tree-tops. A terrible heat beat against our bodies. She caught at my hand.

“‘Let us go to the boat, Tenderness,’ she cried. Her beautiful wide eyes were filled with apprehension. She clung to me in fear.”

The man’s throat throbbed with the slow music of his voice, for remembrance had with it a troubled sweetness.

“‘Come! Come!’ she urged. I could not move, for the passion of love in me, as I held her, swallowed up fear. She

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drew me with gentle hands. The flames were breaking into our thicket of ferns and mimosa. We came to the beach. Our boat was heavy and flat-bottomed—an old fisherman's craft. Diane drove the white goats into it, at one end. The wind filled its brown sail, and we moved out into the silver breast of the Inlet. There we watched the fire—billows of flame that leapt in a glory from the leafage—fire clinging and swaying—loose fragments that flashed and melted mysteriously, in the heavy dusk of smoke, with showering sparks. I was Parsee and worshipping. She was afraid.

“‘Is it that the Gods are angry with us? Is it a messenger they send to take me away from you?’ she cried. Her beautiful wondering eyes kept my face prayerfully.

“‘No!’ I told her. ‘Fire is the All-mighty, the men of old called it life. Does it not speak to you of power infinite and god-like, Beloved?’”

The massive frame trembled with the intensity of his mood.

“Like children, close breathing together with worship and wonder, we watched. The smoke crept out to us, bearing its harsh smell of burning leaves.

“Birds dropped in the boat. Diane loved the birds. They were her musicians of the woodland. Burnt and bruised, with tremulous beating wings, they died in her hands. She smoothed their ruffled wings, holding them to her face with sorrowing love-words. I had been looking towards the shore, and found her with her lap filled with soft dead bodies. Her tears were falling over them.

“‘They sang and were happy!’ she said. She was aching with the cruel horror of the fire to her beautiful innocents of earth.

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“‘Who told me a God careth for his creatures?’ she lamented. ‘See, they are panting and hurt, Tenderness!’

“I comforted her.

“‘Look at its beauty! Watch with me!’ I said, pointing to the fire. She pressed the feathered bodies to her breast in love and grief.

“The fire displayed itself against a pall of smoke, excrescent green leaves of the young gums, burning silver and phosphorescent. Javelins of flame quivered and chased. The incense of burning filled the air. Ah! the majesty and mystery of Fire. All night we watched, making no sound. Only the waves lapping under the boat, and the drift of the wind in the sails, spake. Once Diane whispered low, and quick, and soft, that our hut would burn. Our eyes searched the distant shore. The glare of the fire enwrapped us. We could discern nothing in it. High up, the ranges dark with smoke, the red columns of smouldering trees, struck against the sky. The sea smell, and the cool of the Inlet tides moving gently, refreshed us. Towards dawn she slept, with her head on her arms at my feet.”

“Diane!”

The word went out of the man with a deep unfathomable intonation.

“My soul dreaming,” he continued, “I kept hand to the helm, and day came. Distant and hazy shores hung on the sea. Smoke, shiftless and blue, drifted along the horizon of the sea and sky. Dim and still the mystic line, like a pencilled veto, stretched. In its desolation the forest faced us, charred and smouldering, all the slender-limbed youth of the greenwood. The giants and patriarchs of yesterday were

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blackened and fallen. Here and there a warrior scathed but alive outstood, his embattling arms stripped of greenery, of tangled ferns and sweet-scented bushes that had clung about his trunk. Not a flower, not a sound of a living creature. In its clearing our hut remained, the sentinel trees dead about it. It seemed to have won through much suffering, and stood with an air of mute homeness for us. Our hearts went out to it, the bark dwelling of our love. She saw, and the joy of her learning lit my soul. I caught her to my breast.

“ ‘The Gods do love us!’ she exclaimed in gladness.

“The creek was crying plaintively. At noon the wind dropped. Afterwards, the noise of thunder rattled and echoed among the hills. It wailed away, with a moaning sob; then awoke again in shattering crashes—a wild beast’s angry fury, sounding long, and dull, and dead, as it sank muttering among the valleys. Far over the plains the storm swept. The thunderbolts, snapping, shook the foundations of the hills. The earth trembled. The voices of earth were mute. The thunder broke again and again from its remote rest, muttering, then breaking in impotent clashing, making forests and hills and valleys quake.

“The rain came, shrouding the purple and heavy blue of the hills in mist. At evening the mists lifted. Sunshine gleamed on the rain-wet world. A cloud curled and gathered and hung in the western sky, a white radiant cumulus, with long shaded lines and drifting gulfs of shadow, corrymbi, and fields of snow. The sun lit golden on its spotless edges. In the night-darkness, heavy and thunderous still, in huge shapeless masses this cloud lay. The lightning played against it, revealing mountainous shadows. Spasms of brilliance lit the



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dark hills, limning each tree and leaflet. The flashes circled the plains and lay out on the cold still sea. Gaps of glory they made among the silent trees, splashes of radiance in the barren blackness. Daggers of light touched forest and sea in a flash. Through the shallow pools of fresh rain-water, mirroring scattered stars, they darted. Then all was ended, of storm and fire. The globe of a silver moon swung serene in a cloudless sky."

There is a marsh near the Inlet where the stillness of death reigns. A stream winds somnolently into it, and drifts to sleep among the water-weeds. The reflection of the blue sky lies in it. We went there together, the Hermit and I. He was in rough, sombre mood.

"She said a nymph slept down there," he told me, his voice vibrant. "A nymph asleep, as women are without love. She used to stoop over those damp edges, staining her white skin with the stagnant waters, to sing and whisper mysterious things of the man-god who would come and catch up the dreamer from her trance, and bear her away. In the summer, at the end of the year, the marsh was dry, the nymph gone. Diane said that she had gone away with her lover. The nymph returns with Autumn. She sleeps all the winters, and springs, and in the summer she leaves with her lover again. The seasons return, but my Love comes not back."

His deep melancholy voice ceased; and he strode hurriedly away.

Peering into the green, slimy depths, I saw in fancy the dreaming nymph, the shadow of her eyes, the ripple of her mouth. She lies with white arms up-thrown. Her drifting hair waves with the sleepy river movement. Sun jewels

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sparkle in it. The edges of her blue garments crinkle over the marsh. Meadow-weeds broider her robes, green and golden, as she sleeps all the autumns and winters and springs. The fringes of it glisten with workmanship of water-flowers. There is a sheen of green-spun foam motionless upon it. Seed-mosses have woven her a light veiling. Yellow marsh-marigolds with their daisy eyes a-stare stretch in a girdle to the water's edge. They have twined in her dusky hair, with the white star-flowers that shine there. Sometimes she sings in her sleep, dreamy liling murmurs that drop and flow faintly. The sighing weeds echo the tremulous strain. Over the brilliance of the waste sometimes a sea bird wings. Sky and stream are vivid with the glory of the flowers, and the golden sunlight.

## CHAPTER IV

FRAGMENTARY threads of gossip were rife about this Diane of the Inlet. No one knew whence she came—whither she disappeared. Moth'r Mary constantly affirmed that she was a witch! I laughed to think that serious belief in the black arts was not dead, but found that several old people in this beautiful wilderness of the world clung to ancient superstitions and remnants of folk-lore.

Some fishermen, driven by a fresh breeze to a far corner of the Inlet, had seen a shadowy figure beside the man's on the distant beach. They had heard weird laughter, and the notes of a siren-song softly borne on the wind. Their sails had flapped helplessly in the wind as they tried to turn. They had tacked in the treacherous shallows on the further shore. Until night-fall they struggled vainly. Presently the singing ceased, and behold! the wind at once filled the sails and the smacks crept quietly into the broader swell. The fishermen told their story in the township, and the cronies decided that witchery had been used.

A settler's boy, driving home his straying cattle through the marshes in mid-summer, had seen the white reflection of a woman's form in a dark pool of water. Voices came through the trees. It was a mangrove and ti-tree scrub, wreathed with the climbing and trailing vines of creepers. Over the reedy,

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cross-grown, deep-shadowed, still waters, gauzy-winged insects spawned. The air was thick with them. The sun shone in shafted light on their iridescent wings. Only the wind and the sunlight and these light-winged creatures of air had ever pierced its depths of vaporous shadow. But the boy had seen the tall figure of the Inlet madman among the trees, seen also a reflection of whiteness and floating hair, in the dark pool beside him. He had heard flute-like laughter, its echoing melody in the leafy stillness, and a deep-throated answer. On the outskirts of the marsh, by the beaten narrow track, the half-scared youngster lay in ambush. He had heard the tinkling cattle-bells grow faint in the distance. Then, escaping from the hidden lair, he ran away with the tale.

In the evening, old men foregathered on the verandah of the "Ship Inn." Heads nodded. Tongues wagged wisely. Mysterious tales of sorcery and the like went round. They conjectured that the madman had dealings with the Evil One. This was the reason of his misfortunes. The witch-woman was, therefore, an emissary of the Devil, they concluded.

An old wood-cutter told me his version of the mystery, with professed dissent from the popular notion. He and some mates had been marking trees in a distant part of the forest and saw a strange spectacle.

A woman all wreathed in flowers, bare-armed and bare-footed, was enthroned on the stump of a tree. In her tangled dusky hair showery clematis was woven. The Hermit lay at her feet, a trailing garland in his hands, his eyes upraised. In the silence a branch of hazel-wood snapped. Like a startled wild creature the woman fled. With swift, naked feet, her flower draperies trailing, she vanished down the long forest

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aisle. The man sprang to his feet, face to face with the surprised intruders. He stood, wild, fierce-eyed, like a lion at bay. His powerful limbs were quivering with passionate strength. Mute and sheepish, the wood-cutter and his mates slunk away down the hill-side.

Wandering high up the range, I sought the scene of this idyll. The mountains rose like a wall from the green of the bush tree-tops. There were depths and depths in their blue recesses. The slope of a timbered spur stood on the verge of a great forest. Through dim arcades of the forest I passed. The primeval majesty, the immensity, of the silent tree-world worked within me. There were patriarchal monarchs of the green-wood, giants of strength and lusty leafage, young trees in their slim, vigorous youth. Maenads, with rugged bark flying from glistening naked limbs, tossed their fragrant foliage. Dead trees with up-raised ghostly arms dolorously wailed a miserere to the blue sky.

The hill-path grew steeper, the trees taller. The mountain gums were like columns of living marble, shining white in the green forest depths. Sometimes their whiteness was splashed with ochre, seamed with coral, stained steely blue. Through a track that was an alley of sweet-smelling flowering shrubs I went.

Restless torrents tossed between the hills, cascading silvery in blue depths of mist. I crept through the dewy fern groves—moist and heated, smelling of life in the fertile mould, through damp ferny coverts of flowers. In the long forest aisles tall waving fern-fans shut away the light. I passed like a pilgrim, worshipping each fresh phase of the way, and found the shrine.

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Giant Eucalypts ranged about a grassy glade were the columns of this woodland temple. A high vaulted pavilion of leaves lifted and drifted in the winds, showing the blue of mid-heaven. Musks and hazel-woods thronged. Mimosas entirely golden with massy down of blossoms, and acacias in every hue of yellow, hedged about it.

Fern-fans waved against the light. Uncurling fronds of ferny undergrowth, golden-brown and chrysoprased, spread among the grasses. Clematis lay like snow among the trees, drooping in pendulous masses, casting starry trails to weave and twine over the bushes. The vines of the purple sarsaparilla ran in festoons, and wound about the stately columns of the gums. At their bases delicate shoots sprang in a thicket of pale blue foliage. Near one end of the screening leafage was the natural altar, a gray, hewn tree-stump. Shafted sunlight played over the grassy lawn. Flights of butterflies fluttered from the shrubs.

I flung myself into the deep fragrant grasses and pondered. There is a mysterious spell in the lonely stillness and beauty of the forest hills. The air, with its mingled musky aroma of trees, its wild, heavy fragrance of flowers, is narcotic. One drifts into a hazy dreamland of imagination. The bird-music swells, the singing and sighing of sweet notes, merry roulades, the long, quivering, tender breaths of sound. Throbbing exultant tremolos, warbling, whispering, and lonely sobbing notes, bouts of gusty merriment, rise and fall distantly on the enchanted air. A shrike's rippled call comes gaily from the misty gullies. White wings sail across the tree-spaces. From under a dewy fern the bell-bird's mellow, liquid note drops falteringly.

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With half-closed eye I looked up at the gray tree stump, the woodland altar. And I saw, in fancy, a flower-wreathed woman, with shadowy hair, garlanded with starry clematis, serving as priestess before it, and the figure of a strong man who worshipped.

In this wilderness of deep green forest and sapphire Inlet, Spring made sanctuary. What an Eden it was in its exquisite loveliness and solitude! Two renegade souls of our modern time had made Eden of it. He was the Adam, purged of memory, she the Eve, "new-waked" to woman's primitive innocence and purity.

But the day of their happiness was ended.

"Happiness is the mirage of Life's Desert," I told myself. Twilight was creeping along the vistas of the forest.

Moth'r Mary told me a story as she clattered backwards and forwards from the well in the gloaming. The old woman, with her stooping figure, short rough skirts, folded shawl and sun-bonnet, had an old-world simplicity. The spring water splashed over her pails. The clanking and jarring of her industrious occupation, the clomping of her hob-nailed boots, accompanied the vigorous recitative. Her tongue ever wagged lustily as she worked.

I hardly heeded the story as I watched the workings of the sunset. The great wall of the forest overhung us. Impenetrable, the green depths faced me, and climbed up the range. Slim white trunks stemmed the darkness. The sun had set in an abandon of gold behind the tree-tops. The afterglow gilded the river meads, where great-horned cattle roamed knee-deep in herbage. Beyond were the glinting fields

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of yellowed summer grass, the sapphire blue of the Inlet on their far edge.

After the old woman had gone, the story emerged from a cell of my sub-conscious brain. Night came. The wall of the hills was dark, lit with the red stars of far-off fires. I mused over this last development of the Inlet Idyll.

The first lambs of spring were crying like children in the chill winds of the morning, Moth'r Mary had said, when the madman of the Inlet strode into the township. The winter shadow of the hills lay on them still. The gorse was gleaming golden by the roadsides. Flocks of snowy geese meandering along the way-side scattered in terror as he passed. He carried something in his arms. The townsfolk—women, bare-legged children, and a few surly men, gathered curiously. He went to Moth'r Mary's humpy at the far end of the road. She crossed herself, and muttered a prayer against witchcraft, when she saw his stalwart, unkempt figure. All the countryside feared him since the rumours of that strange companion of his solitude had spread.

He was gentle and tender as a woman, as he unfolded his arms. Wrapped in the hare-skins, he carried a child—a dark-skinned baby that wailed fretfully. The man's face was agonized at its cry.

"He is sick," he said, giving the child to Moth'r Mary, with piteous eyes.

Half compassionately, half fearfully, the old woman took the infant. He left it with her, but came often again to the township bringing her fish and sea-fowl. She lost fear at the sight of him; scolded him garrulously, ranted, and interrogated.



## THE EQUINOX

But to no purpose. He said the child belonged to him and would say no more.

She protested that the Hermit was "soft," not mad. With serious, tender eyes he watched the child grow, always bringing it some bright feathers or sea-shells to play with.

My first impulse was to attribute the man's action to a compassionate instinct for some woodman's sick child. Scattered through the forests were the bark huts of log-men and road-menders. It found no answering sympathy. The solution to the rustic's mind was the witch woman's existence. I found myself agreeing with them, apart from all fanciful interpretation.

He grew up a slight, wild, merry creature, this boy, and became the scourge of his old foster-mother's life, with his mischievous ways. He was always coming back to her, with a will-o'-the-wisp affection. The neighbours called him "The Devil's Brat," with odd superstition that powers of evil had been agents of his birth. He was a lonely child. The man at the Inlet missed him for weeks sometimes. And at night an elfish face peering in at her window would give Moth'r Mary such a shock that she muttered prayers and charms to herself half the night. Then at dawn her maternal heart would melt when she found a bare, brown body asleep on her doorstep, and saw the pathos of the child face in the weariness and peace of sleep. She crooned a rare wealth of love and pity over him. On winter nights she left the door unlatched, and by the dead leaves round the hearth she knew who had sheltered there. Gifts of wild honey, wattle gum, wild cherries, and such like childish things, he lavished upon her.

He kept the good country-folk in a tremor with his antics.

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He stole their fruit, and chased their cattle away till they were lost beyond trace in the hills. He loved to dash into their kitchens, like a wild thing out of the night. He would laugh and blink at the fires. The farmers' wives called him "Devil's Brat," and, with superstitious fear of contamination, chased him away from their own sonsy and blithe children.

## CHAPTER V

THOUGHT is the music of consciousness. It is the singing voice of the soul. From a world of intense thinking this man had passed. With clouded brain, as from sleep awakened, he went into the morning of a new life; from the darkness of pessimism into the daylight, with eyes dazzled, and the faith of a child. To him the stars were angels' eyes. Earth was a garden—the garden of God. The winds and the sun and the sea had voices, and breathed in his soul. Tutelary nature bred sense anew, with wild untrammelled strength. The poetry of an intense mind thrived. A woman's presence had won him from taciturn savagery.

Was he mad, or was that solitary existence a phase of the eccentricity to which great minds are akin? I asked myself.

What of the woman? Was she some vagabond gipsy creature or perhaps the baggage of a distant islander?

Their mutual love had imparadised life. That was all I knew.

We became close companions, this lonely Man of the Inlet and I. And we would lie together for hours on the sands in the sunlight. In my company his strange restlessness was abated, and although there was a frontier over which his memory of personal things could not pass, his mind in the impersonal realm was vigorous and untrammelled.

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It was one day just after he had left me that I made a discovery. The point of a sapling with which I carelessly disturbed the sand suddenly brought to light a wreath of red berries tied with a woman's dark hair.

Gently and carefully I searched the sand with my hands, and found two shell-strung armlets and a necklace of gray sea-pearls. A woman's ornaments, surely!

Then a piece of newspaper, yellow with sea-water and scarcely legible, hidden among some shells, came to light. But I read on this scrap of paper a paragraph which intimated that a search party was setting out with a view of discovering traces of a young lady who had been lost overboard from a craft called the "Maiai." The vessel had encountered heavy weather rounding the Promontory. A welcome lull occurring after sunset put the passengers and crew off their guard. Suddenly without the slightest warning an immense sea rose. "Big as a mountain," the captain said. It thundered with terrific crash upon the decks, sweeping the vessel from end to end. In a few minutes the sea was again tranquil. Some seamen had observed a woman's figure standing aft before the sea came. The lady, it was feared, had been swept off in the receding swirl of the wave. Some hope was entertained of her being picked up by stray fishermen and being still alive on some desolate Straits Island.

The paper was torn where a name had been written.

With the guilty sensations of a peeping Tom, I peered further into the mystery. According to the ship's reading, the wave had arisen in lat. 38° 5', and long. 146° 4' 5' west. That would therefore be due east of the Promontory about thirty miles—the place where my hermit found his Diane.

## THE EQUINOX

The Powers who in the British churl "chancelled the sense misused" here blinded me. I threw my imagination into the balance with that madman's. The poesy of circumstance, the contemplation of a "soul set free," filled me. A very revelry it was, in the upheaval of those "laws by which the flesh bars in the spirit." Love lies above ourselves. It is that pure inspiration of the great spirit which made idyll in Eden.

This, then, was the haven the immaculate woman of my conception had found. I wondered why she had left her Eden solitudes. Was it fear for the man,—fear of his passion and savage strength if force separated her from him? Did she think he was mad? Would they have fettered those splendid limbs, heaped insult and ignominy on the dignity of that great, simple mind? I seemed to hear a voice pleading with me, the echo of a cry.

"They would make thee kempt and shaven, Tenderness!"  
And again the hopeful "I will come again!"

This scrap of paper must have come in the drift of fishermen's *débris*. She had seen it and fled to stave off discovery.

I thought deeply on the tangled skein of our instincts and conventions. The tide was low. The channels, between the green mud-banks, were blue as the cloudless sky. Sea-birds were feeding on their edge. Gulls and gannets, gathering along the beach and wading in the silver-laved sand, softly whistled among themselves.

The waves rushed murmuringly. Wild swans sailed over the broad bosom of the Inlet. Sea-snipe wheeled with a flash of silvery wings. Great brown gulls hovered over my head. The wing of a white gull cut the blue sky. The wet sands

## DIANA OF THE INLET

swarmed with crabs. They peered at me, in reverie, inveighing against the artificialities of life. Pertinently, I read them a sermon.

“Dearly beloved Brethren!” said I. “The night is gathering out in the west. The tide is coming. Surely it will creep over you, and sweep your shells of being into the ocean of the Unknown. Put not your trust, your foolish, fish-like confidence, in sea-fowl, little Brothers. Your opal backs, your yellow, freckled legs and golden claws, are vanity. Behold the gull how he sails the ether, touches the mountain clouds of heaven, pierces the veil of the distance, fathoms the green depths of the sea. He lives, inspiring ozone on the limitless horizon, the incense breath of earth, fed from the foams of summer-lapped islands, and lo! is a Solomon king-crab in all his glory like unto him?”

“Crabs! O Crabs! ye are dead in the shells of your conventionalities. You emerald-legged fellow sitting athwart a cockle-bed, mud-grubber, solemn and silent, leave worms and other sweetmeats, mistress, thy prying into massy seaweeds and tawdry gew-gaws. Regard the sun. Hear the wind—the voice of the world, for it is written, ‘ye shall lie on the sea-shore, among the calcareous fragments of shell-fish and amphitrite, till the tempests of time annihilate the record of your existence.’”

“One thing is certain that life flies. One thing is certain, and the rest is lies!” I chanted, and said “Amen.”

The soiled piece of newspaper was crushed in my hand.

“Good-bye,” I called softly to the solitary figure of the Hermit, standing alone in the sunlight. He was looking seawards and did not answer me.

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“ Good-bye, my friend,” I called again. “ I am going on embassy to the Moon; shall I tell the woman you want her?” For I wanted to find her—Diana of the Inlet.

I had been wandering at dawn one day. Coming back to my humpy, the sun at the zenith, the hunger of man—human and healthy—gnawed at my vitals. Sounds of disturbance greeted me, a clacking of fowls, and barking of dogs—my household gods in anger. A harsh voice and shrill impish laughter mingled.

Through the trees I could see Moth’r Mary chasing a half-naked youngster with a heavy stick. Her short skirts were flying.

The boy was darting among the apple trees, his bronze limbs brushing the greenery, his mocking and teasing laughter vexing the old woman to tempests of rage. He had apples in his hands, red-russet, striped yellow and scarlet beauties that were the pride and joy of her life. She loved to hoard and gaze at them when the south-wester blew up in sleety rain from the sea, and the snow lay heavily on the gray hills.

She stood still when she saw me, shaking her knotted fists at the recreant. Her gray-green eyes were awful. She spluttered and spat in her haste to tell me of the ragged imp.

He was a handsome, fearless child, and chewed his red apples with wicked eyes that were alive with merry mischief and alert for flight if need be.

“ Och! Masther!” cried the old woman, “ th’ Devil’s brat is after thievin’ yer apples, surre! Th’ ceows ’e ’ve let into the latment ’f turnips. I wus carryin’ pim-kins ’nd marrers from the paddicks, ’n I heart un shoutin’. I thogt that I was dune wid un, I do!”

## DIANA OF THE INLET

She turned in rage upon the boy. He skipped behind the apple tree.

“Och thin! I’ll be after yees!” she yelled. But she trundled away into the house to get me something to eat.

“It’s him!” she whispered mysteriously to me, preparing the meal, “th’ Devil’s brat! Shur-re he do be sassy;” she clasped her old hands, the yellow bony hands of toil. Through the dark thin lashes I saw her eyes gleam tenderly. “Poor baby, whisher, whisher, God bliss ’im! I tuk bard in th’ winter mesilf, and T’rasa me darter, surre, she cum ’nd say to me, ‘ye’re dyin’, shurre, y’are,’ she ses, ‘it’s no good feedin’ yer, ’n’ doin’ fer yer; ye’ll die,’ she ses. ‘It’d be waste givin’ ye what there’s many hungering for.’

“But Devil’s brat cum ’n’ did fer me, he do.”

She raised her hands and sighed happily. “Och! thin,” she went on, the withered old face bright with its simple gladness. “I didn’t die.”

The boy leapt out of the sunshine. He flung a heap of blossom on to the flags of Moth’r Mary’s kitchen. Instantly the hum of scores of locusts arose. A merry wild thing, he sped off again with peals of impish laughter.

The old woman clattered after him, inveighing and scolding indefatigably.



## CHAPTER VI

AUSTRALIA is the happy hunting ground of my wayward Ego. Elsewhere, the wearied limbs are carried in incessant pilgrimage. Here inebriate, with senses beauty-filled, it droops and dreams like a Lotus-eater, deep asleep yet deep awake.

“Oh! rest ye, brother Mariners! Rest ye!” here in the clear air, dewy plains, the blue hills and heavily shaded valleys. Among the trees the shadows lie. Radiant sunlight falls over the fields. The dead grasses glow golden. Shafts of purest light cross the shadows the trees cast.

A symphony of bird-singing, opening with the first flush of dawn in the mellow plains and forest aisles, fills the air with outbursts at first; and then rapturous melodies, flute-like cadenzas of joy, proclaim, “Beloved, it is morn!” Descanting on the joy of life, the purity of Nature, the arisen sun, the bird-world sings.

Pæans of irresistible joyous praise fill the sunny morning hours. The hoarse bass of crows, kah, kah, kah-ing, away on the plains, the wind’s leafy murmur in the trees, and the merry derisive cackle of laughing jackasses, mingle. Wandering bands of magpies in wild vain-glorious minstrelsy warble their lays of romance and daring. Some songster, prolonging the theme with fine conceit in his tuning and turns, out-carols his choir. The soft throaty chatter of parroquets, the chuckle

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of a gray myna in the bole of a tree, and the buoyant communion of her mate, the long piping call of mud-larks across the flats, the laughing echo of jackasses among the blue depths of distant hills, fuse in the intermezzo of gladness.

Small birds lift their faint, sweet roundelay. They chirp and chatter to each other among the thickets, litanies of love and happiness, little thrilling snatches of song, vibrating, irresponsive ecstasies. The soft chirring of the insect-peopled grasses flourishes sweet accompaniment. All the bright hours the soft singing continues. Large amber-winged grasshoppers idly hum about dandelions in the dry, dead grass. Renegade cicadas sing lustily. Butterflies toss in the light air. The efflorescent trees and sweet shrubs breathe wild warm fragrance.

I was revelling in my pure joy of life in this golden south, when I became conscious that I was not there alone.

A woman was there as well as I, a woman of star-like eyes and chill beauty. She flashed past me in the forest, running like a startled hare. The wild scarlet had leapt to her cheeks. In her loosened hair, briars caught. The vines of a gay, wild weed were twined in it. The heath of the dunes was in sight before her feet lagged.

The sand of the hummocks, the golden gleam of the Ninety-mile sands, caught her eye. She climbed the crest of a hillock. It swept steeply down and another sister hillock rose from its base. Her nostrils caught the sea-smell. Silver meshes of the Inlet were just visible between the hills.

She laughed wildly and sweetly. The roseate heath crept like a flush over the hill-side. The purple mists drifted

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between the trees in the valley. The full gleam of the distant sunlit Inlet revealed itself.

“Tenderness!” she called with ringing voice.

Sometimes falling in the red heath she ran on, calling often again with quick sweet laughter. She struggled for breath, her limbs trembling and flesh torn.

“Man! Tenderness!” she cried.

Once she waited as she called. Far over the fells the wind had seemed to breathe “Diane!” as it touched her. Merry wanton laughter was wafted away with it. She ran calling along the Inlet beach, calling, calling. No windy murmur answered. Only the echoes rang—echoes of a name.

“Tenderness! Tenderness!” drifted over the Inlet, mingling with the whirr of winds and the cries of the startled sea-birds.

“Man! Tenderness!” she cried, sobbing now, “Where are you? Where are you?”

The wind on the heaving sea snatched at the sound.

“Where are you? — are you?” it wailed.

The clear sandy beach was silent. The bark hut in the sheltered cove was empty, its doors ajar. Along the boisterous little creek was no sign of living creature. Only a water-rat splashed out of sight as the woman lifted the green boughs of the trees. She turned seawards again. Her tremulous lips framed soundlessly the yearning cry. Her eyes were grown dark and distended with the agony of that aloneness.

From out a tussocky hole in the banked-up sand, a dark-skinned, scantily clothed thing, with trowsled head and bright, shy eyes crept. It was more like some small wild beast than a child.

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The woman caught at him.

“Where is he? Where is he?” she asked fiercely. The boy whimpered.

“Where is he?” the hoarse whispered voice implored. This strange woman with her torn clothing insisted roughly.

“Him?” queried the child, fearing, and pointed in the direction of the bark hut.

“Yes! Yes!” panted the woman.

The child cried softly.

“We were getting birds’ eggs in the tussocks,” he said presently.

“Some one was calling. He put up his arms and ran to the sand-bank, calling to it. He walked right out calling. He was mad. I was feart,” wailed the child. “I could see him awhile, his head bobbing about among the breakers, out there.”

A brown finger pointed to where the ocean breakers tossed white foam on the Inlet bar.

“Then the sea went over him.” The child sobbed as the woman hung over him. “The waves came in bigger ’n bigger. I was feart. The calling came nearer’n nearer. I thought it was witches.”

Lifting wild, frightened eyes, he continued, “Moth’r Mary tellt me of th’ witch of th’ Inlet. I hid in th’ grass. It must have been your calling,” he added. “I heart you meself, but I thought it was witches—or—dead men coming out of the sea to catch me.”

The woman laughed harshly. The child broke away from her detaining clasp.

She ran to the outer beach. For ninety miles the sea

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thundered, thundered and crashed on its wind-swept sands. With muffled boom and roar, waves broke on the bar. The waves rushed shorewards, dark-shadowed, foaming-lipped, with dripping jaws agape—the hungry pack of the *loups de mer*. With hollow growl of baffled rage, they crashed in foam and seethed back, shrieking their terror and spite to the far-off sea.

The wild, fleet figure of a woman sped over the sands, calling her prayers and a name to the pitiless winds, in an agony that was madness. Overcome at last, she sank on the sand. The spray sprang over her desolate figure. The wind lashed her wet hair, her face, with its deathly pallor. Her eyes were wide with the unearthly light of infinite pain. She lay on the lonely shore, shrieking a frenzied lamentation.

Night was glooming in. A child stole across the sand. Silently he watched beside the solitary figure. The woman's clothing was soaked, the rime of the sea-spray lay in her tangled hair. The child crept against the dank form. His serious eyes, wet with distress, covered her. He pressed a bare brown hand against her face in mute sympathy. The woman pushed him roughly away. He touched her stiff hands with compassionate sorrow. The woman moved. She drew back and looked at him. Her face stern and sunken, deathly pallid, with eyes distended, and vacant, tense lips, she confronted the child.

"Who are you?" she gasped hoarsely, straining her eyes on the wistful small face.

"Don't know," he whispered awefully, "Moth'r Mary said I b'longed to him," glancing over towards where the hut was hidden in the cove.

## DIANA OF THE INLET

"She had me, when I was a baby, but I b'longed to him," he reiterated plaintively.

The woman's gaze was steady. She devoured the upturned face with eager eyes. It was wan in the twilight, a child's face, tanned with sun and sea, bearing nobility of feature and luminous eyes.

"What is your name?" she demanded softly.

"Moth'r Mary said, he at the Inlet had sold himself to the Devil. She said that no mortal woman was my moth'r like th' children of th' Dara. She said that I came from a fire in th' earth. They called me the Devil's brat. He said, the gods gave me, and my mother was the moon."

The hoarse chuckle of insane laughter gurgled in the woman's throat. She screamed, clutching at her sea-wet hair, with fearful eyes.

The child began to cry softly.

Then a melting tenderness filled those staring eyes. A smile moved her lips. A low sad sobbing welled sweetly in her throat. She turned to the child with tremulous lips and bosom, and tearful eyes. She called softly to him with infinite love and opened arms. Radiant expectancy was in her shining eyes. He crept into her arms. She cried and sang over him, with voice tuned to a lay of passionate soothing love.

On the lonely sea-shore the breaking waves tossed spectral foam. The sea moaned and wept along its length. A solitary star sprang in the twilight sky.

I found them together, the lonely boy and that wild witch-woman of Inlet superstition; her beautiful face, the haunting sorrow of her eyes, are with me still.

## THE EQUINOX

She talked to me with a tender calm. There was deep sadness in the note of her voice. A fearless dignity and expression of chill nobility enwrapped her.

“My mind is clouded with the dream of a distant time,” she said, “a pungent memory, phantom-like, has haunted me. In my life and the world beyond, my senses swooned on the memory of the Inlet. Then came a thrill of keener recollection.”

She spoke on, with dreaming eyes. The pressure of strong feeling assuaged throbbed in her soft, low voice.

“I recognize in myself that primitive Woman who arises to mock at civilization and creeds,” she said. “The blood of Mother Eve beats against my brain.”

“I want the man! my man—Adam of the Inlet shores!” her arms moved outwards tremulously. “Here is the I, the woman soaring over the immolation of Life, the detestable, heartless hopelessness of existence. I am come back to the Inlet!” she said.

Her words voiced with a throbbing passion fell softly into silence. Then she spoke again, with the slow speech of a mind far away.

“The moon is rising on the Inlet,” she said, “a pale, silver moon in a dim sky; can’t you see it, breaking on the dim waters. The wailing of the swans, the cries of the gulls, the moan of the struggling sea, don’t you hear them?”

“It was the moon he loved as did Endymion. And when I came—a mortal woman, self-sent from a barren and desolate life, he loved and called me after her.”

“Diane! Diane!” Was it the faint wailing note of a wild swan that beat the still air?

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“Coming! Coming!” she cried with low harmonious voice of joyful promise.

She lifted the dark-skinned boy and laid him against her breast.

“Our two selves gave thee Soul, Beloved,” she murmured passionately, cradling the soft dark head in her arms.

Round all the Inlet islands the dawn came stealing, outlining the coves and headlands with a silver thread. All the sea-birds awoke in clamorous choir, with whirring wings. Wild swans took their arrowy flight across the shining surface of the Inlet. Speckled snipe, and red-bills, and oystercatchers were feeding at the silver brim of the sea. A pelican arose from a sandy cove, and with slow flapping flight winged seawards.

On an upland that gave on the Inlet panorama, a woman stood. Her eyes, and the sorrowful thought stirring in their depths, bade farewell to the beautiful scene, the sapphire blue, locked on the west by bold distant mountains. Purple they were, transfused with the pink glow of the morning sky. The broad expanse of the Pacific lay beyond the Inlet. Sea-breakers rose against the sky. Curlews were rising in clouds, with shining wings, and shrilled distantly their soft melancholy calls.

Her tears were falling. They moved slowly from sight of the Inlet shores—the woman and the child, with clinging hands.

A great moon is rising on the Inlet now, as I have often seen it rise, red-gold. The reflection falling, red-gold like a



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wedding-ring, clasps earth and sky. Under the moon a line of wild swans drifts with shrill melancholy piping. The moonlight touches the coves. The water waves from gold to silver. Sea and earth are still, as in an enthrallment.

The vision of the woman floats to my memory—Diane of the Inlet. Her voice clear and thrilling echoes its own fateful story. Beside her comes a man with splendid strength of limb and primitive mind. I hear his deep, tender calling to the rising moon.

“Diane! Diane!”

All the changing scene and colour of the Inlet rises again before me, and the idyll of the madman of the Inlet and the Diane of his imagination.

FINIS

## SILENCE

AMID the thunder of the rolling spheres,  
Herself unchanged despite the changing years,  
    She stands supreme, alone.  
With trembling hands tight pressed to rigid ears,  
Deaf to all prayers, and hopes, and human tears,  
One voiceless Horror—louder than all fears,  
    Filling the great Unknown.

ETHEL ARCHER.