



NIGHT IN ARRAN

EIGHT o'clock, and the dusk of the Summer night had begun to gather in the little Shisken valley. One after another lights began to shine amid the shadow of the hillside opposite; and down to the right, where the valley opens on Kilbrannan Sound, a thicker cluster of them marked the fisher hamlet of Blackwaterfoot.

The scene was familiar enough to Hector Mackenzie as he looked on it from the road under Drumadoon, for every night as the darkness fell, for the first fifteen years of his life, from the window of his father's sheiling of Torbeg he had seen these yellow lights shine out. Each one of them he knew by name, and each brought to him some separate picture of thatched bigging and upland croft, whose mossy dyke-sides and straw-strewn shed or barn had been the haunt of long Summer Saturdays in school-time. How well, too, he knew the murmur of the burn over its pebbles, which came up now faintly, the only sound amid the darkness. Many a night, in his little low-roofed attic under the thatch, it had lulled him to sleep with its quiet tune. Had he not, all his early days, breathed the bracing air of these hills, understood the homely fragrance of the peat-reek, and been familiar with the drifting scent of the white clover in the meadows?

Sixteen years, however, had somehow made a difference—six years in the grey university class-rooms, and ten in the laboratory of the grey scientist, revered and loved as the greatest of the modern seers. It was not for nothing that the Arran boy had seen the lightning bridled, and the universes weighed; had looked on at achievements, chemical and mechanical, which outstripped a thousand times the utmost dreams of mediæval magicians and astrologers. In his blood ran the Celtic fire, quick with the hidden memories and imaginings of seventy generations of the most emotional and spiritual race in the world; and who knows what long-forgotten instincts of heredity may suddenly waken again to consciousness in the blood at the touch of their mysterious affinity?

At any rate, this night, when he stood again on the hillside under Drumadoon, in the little Arran valley, he seemed to look around him with opened eyes and a keener sense. The dusk as it gathered and deepened, the breath of the meadow clover, and the quiet murmur of the burn water, seemed, like music, emotions in a primæval language of their own, understood silently by the heart. These inner meanings the poets here and there have tried to translate and place on record, but the cumbersome machinery of human speech proves but ill fitted to reproduce so subtle a thing. More truly has this been done by the great religions of the past; for the greatest of all the poets have been prophets and priests, and for the stirrings they felt at the movements of sun and sap, at the quickening of life, the flash of lightning and the roar of the sea, they invented a word, and spoke of communion with Bel or Jah.

Mackenzie walked along the hillside eastward. No sound of wheels or footsteps was to be heard on the road, either behind or in front, and the shoulder of Drumadoon rising on his left, and the dip of the valley on his right, were alike now dark. Before him, inland, no lights were to be seen; only, overhead in the dark heaven, twinkled and flashed and burned a myriad jewel-points of fire. Presently, below and in front of him, as the road trended away to his left, spread the wild heath of Tor-

more ; and from the spot where he stood, looking out over its expanse, he could imagine, if he did not see, the grey stone circles of the Druids. Familiar to him from his boyhood, yet looked on always with a traditional awe, these grey memorials, in their vast theatre of the hills, seemed now, amid the darkness and the living silence, to waken the aspirations of some half-forgotten dream. Suddenly he remembered it was Beltane Eve, the first of May.

The spot is a quiet one, and the night was warm and dry. He seated himself under the side of a great boulder, on a bank of wild thyme, and gave himself up to picturing the pageants and mysterious rites of a forgotten age to which the worn stone circles on the moor below him had been silent witnesses.

The hours must have passed unconsciously, and it must have been after midnight when he became aware that the moon was rising. A thin crescent of clear and lovely fire, she rose slowly from behind the dark mountain edge opposite, and stood presently, shining, radiant, serene, in a clear space of the eastern heaven. The fact dawned on Mackenzie at the same time that the moor below was no longer either forsaken or entirely silent. Round the stone circles there shadowy figures were moving, and once and again there rose and died away on the stillness of the night a passionate murmur as of adoration. 'It is the worship of the goddess,' he said to himself with awe, and at that moment he felt his own heart move within him with a wonder of wild memory and emotion. What could be more worthy to be worshipped than that ethereal splendour in heaven? what more enamouring to the heart than that pure presence walking the star spaces, drawing after her with a mighty passion even the great bosom of the sea? Strangely, then, he remembered the names under which she had been loved and worshipped by various races in succeeding times—Istar, Ash-taroth, Astarte, Aphrodite—ever the same goddess drawing after her by a nameless magic the inexpressible longing of men. Was not she the ruler, indeed, of all earthly loves, the controller of the birth-times of all living, the mysterious measurer to man

and beast and flower, of the weeks of bringing forth? Well advised, truly, were those priests among the Arran menhirs, and their kindred in Chaldea, Moab, and Greece, to reverence so lovely a presence, possessed of so absolute a control over the hearts and lives of living things and over the movements of the wind and the deep.

As he watched and worshipped and remembered, the night must have flown, for presently he began to notice a paleness spreading in the eastern sky. Higher and higher rose the blue dawn, putting out the stars. Then a yellow radiance began to strike upward from the mountain's edge, growing brighter every moment, while a clear light spread along the hills. At last, suddenly, there appeared a point of dazzling fire, too shining to look upon; and the first rays touched the grey stones on Tormore. At that moment on the moor there rose a cry, and from the eastern stone shot up a tongue of flame. 'Baal has risen,' said Mackenzie; 'it is the Bel-tein, the Baal-fire!' Then the crowd of shadowy forms about the stone circles began to move, and he saw, as it were, men and children, cattle and sheep, passing between two fires—the fire on the menhir and another on the ground. 'They are the Devoted,' said the watcher, 'passing through the fires to Bel, blessed by the god for another year.' And as he looked at the happy folk and the grey figures of the priests, the reverence and reason of their worship came upon him. Their god, who else? was the source of all light, the giver of all life. He who made the seeds to spring, the leaves to break forth, and the Summer to blossom, the fountain and upholder of all law, the origin of the earth itself and the other planets, who held the worlds still in his control in their dizzy sweep through space: what more glorious was there for the eye to see or for thought to master? All these things, as their stone memorials tell, these worshippers knew. It may be that they knew more, for the same priests who were aware of the indestructibility of matter and energy, taught also, it is recorded, the immortality of the spirit of man. Time, at any rate, has proved their teaching true. The soul of the

Druid lives to-day in all the higher faiths of the world; and whether or not he dreamt of a mightier behind Bel, his face, as he looked to the rising sun, was at least turned towards God.

Mackenzie woke with a start. The sunlight fell warm on the moor. The sheep that had lain all night in the shelter of the great menhirs were beginning to move among them and feed; and under their feet, he knew, lay the empty graves of Celtic priest and chief, not dead, but alive to-day, dust and spirit, in the beating hearts of men.

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