

ROUGE ET NOIR.

VOL. VI.

TRINITY COLLEGE, MAY, 1885.

No. 5.

A NIGHT AMONG NEWFOUNDLAND WRECKERS.

When the moon was full, on a cloudless night, Edgar and I were invited on board Jim's skiff. A light breeze, laden with the scent of wild clover from the windy uplands, blew off shore, and we flitted along the dim-lit coast, like some weird bird with tawny wings.

"Do you see that point yonder?" Jim enquired, "Well, just round that is Mermaid's Grot." And then we learnt that before a storm, fishermen sailing by the Grot could hear the sobbing of numbers of mermaids, who foreknew the doom in store for the ships; but that when the nights were calm they sang low, sweet, plaintive songs, as they sat about the rocks, combing their long, black hair. We were filled with a sort of superstitious fascination at hearing the fisherman's story, half rejecting, yet half believing it. "Shall we hear them sing to-night?" I asked.

"Mebbe, and mebbe not; but you'll soon know," and the skiff luffed in under the shoulder of the large promontory that lowered down upon us from the height of the clouds. "See that light?"

"Yes."

"Beyant the bottom of it, where all those shadows are on the wather, is Mermaid's Grot. We'll hug the shore and I'll take down the sails, if you loike; an' we'll row past." But I thought that the plashing of the oars would break part of the spell, everything was so still, so peaceful here. We had now reached within a hundred yards of the approach to the Grot, when suddenly the water all about us burst into a weird yellow flame. The foam at our bow was a blaze of soft, elfin light; our wake was a trail of glory. The faces of my companions took a ghastly pallor, as the glow was shed over our skiff, and not having seen the phenomenon before, and not understanding its cause, I thought that verily we were in the home of the mermaids; that these yellow-white flashes were their light, and that yonder on the rocks we must soon see themselves. Edgar was as much amazed as myself, and I could observe from the low pitch of the fishermen's voices, the manner in which they stopped in the midst of their utterances and looked over their shoulders towards the rocks, looming gloomily above tide-mark; that they, too, felt their share of superstitious dread. I enquired if they knew the cause of this

weird, white light, and was told that it was "herrin' bait driven to the surface by herrin'." We took a bucketful of the glowing water, and I afterwards discovered that "the bait" consisted of minute valvular jelly fishes, belonging to the medusæ family.

"Now, you can hear them singin'," Jim said, his head thrust forward peering through the narrows that led to the Grot. We listened. From the inside, and apparently from all quarters of it, came a low, sweet, complaining sound, half like a wail, and somewhat resembling a cry. I had often heard the sound produced by the surf along the shore after a storm, but in it there was always a harsh, grating note, caused by the outdraggling of sand and stones, as the wave receded from the beach. Inside of the narrows it was calm, and our sails flapped now to one side, now to another. Everything was still, save for this sweet, crying music, which was everywhere; on the face of the sea, along the shore, in the air, and in all the cliffs.

"It must be the washing of the surf upon the shore; and the sound is caught and flung about in echoes by those cliff-walls, till all the place is filled," I said.

"No; the wather doesn't wash hard enough agin the shore to make that sound. *Mebbe* its the current which they say runs through a long passage-way undher the cape an' out at 't other side that causes it; but I doubt it." Perhaps this was not the cause, though a rushing ocean-river, like that which he described, might produce this mellifluous crying. Perhaps it was not due at all to natural causes, and that the fishermen's theory, that it was the mermaid's singing, was the right one. I don't know. Nobody does know. Whatever was the cause, unspeakably fascinating, most strangely doleful, sweet was the sound. I hear it now; and it is like the singing of a wind that comes to you from over some illimitable plain. The phosphoric glow at our prow, when our skiff moved, was not so great here as outside; yet it was sufficient to throw a gloomy light upon the rocks.

"Yonder is the Mermaid's Chair," Jim said in a low voice; and turning I saw about six feet above high-tide-mark a hollow in the cliff's base, walled on either side by a ledge resembling the arm of a chair. Under the hollow was one terrace, above it was another. As these fishermen believed not that the mermaid had sea green hair, but black, so too did they disregard the story of the tail; and had for her little pearly feet. The