



THE BLACK MONTH

IT is the Black Month—the Month of the Dead, the Month of those that do not come home, the Season of widows.

Out upon the furrowed sea the wind swings in gusts and lifts the waves back into a mist of drifting spray: on the beaches the sweeping tides eat into the sand with huge devouring rushes. Sometimes there is driftwood flung ashore; sometimes, where certain currents meet and run landwards, it is other than driftwood that is flung up, pallid and terrible, a wet shapelessness upon the stretching beach, a horror dropping from the lip of the sea. A great grey bay, circled with distant cliffs of granite and sandhills cushioned with the dull green of salty grass; a bay so wide and silent that one is lost in it, in the largeness of its desolate curve, in the levels of sand and dune and water, under the vast of overhanging sky. And between the long pale land and the advancing tide there stand the watchers—dwarfed, minuscule, infinitely small and impotent, mere points of blackness against the grey—waiting, where the currents meet and run landwards, for those that the sea brings home. For the Black Month has its harvest and these are its fruits.

Elsewhere there are others that watch and wait also.

Wherever a cross lifts its grey arms up from the bordering cliffs and overlooks the sea; wherever a stone face, drooping, looks sightlessly out upon the blind world below, and the

water-birds, wheeling and circling, keep voice with the winds ; there are women who at this season come and go, who go and come again, or linger from long hour to long hour, kneeling on the stone steps in the pitiful helplessness of waiting. There are flowers laid humbly about the foot of the cross, there is the tinkle of chaplets passing between restless fingers ; a prayer, ceaseless, monotonous, that is lost in the voice of the water and the singing of the winds, and the long dumb trouble of straining eyes. For it is the Black Month, the month that makes widows, and out yonder the sea is scarred with crossing paths, and ploughed by home-coming boats, and secret with the dim vessels, the soundless feet, that in all the to-morrows shall not come home.

There is not much speech amongst the watchers ; black-clothed and white coiffed, like huge sea-birds alighted, they cluster about the foot of the cross, looking not at each other, but westward into the mist of waters. There is nothing to be seen in each other's faces but what they know is in their own ; there is no word to be said which can hold the outcry of their speechlessness. There is only the habitual, mechanical consolations of the 'Hail, Mary!' the endless murmur that is scarcely prayer and yet is comfort. Sometimes the Curé comes and stands by them a little while in the wise silence that understanding has taught him ; it will be time enough for him to speak, by and by, when the terror of suspense has sharpened into certainty. And sometimes there comes one who has known in her day the anguish of waiting but now has none left for whom to wait, and who turns her dim vision on those about her with the cold regret of age and slackened blood. But always the straining, burning, furiously-patient eyes peer westward through the mist of waters, and the restless fingers incessantly roll the tinkling beads:—

'Hail Mary! Full of grace . . .'

For the sea is secret and the way of the winds unsure, and the Black Month has come round again, the season of the

homeward boats and the making of widows, the Month of the Dead.

And this is the Day of the Dead.

The clouds hang low in the sky—pale, tufted, and immovable; the trees stand on the slope of the cliffs and the landward edge of the sandhills bend to meet the winds that do not blow. Now and then a leaf falls with a jarring rustle athwart the stillness, and settles purposefully on the ground like a bird alighting. The sea heaves smoothly in its bed, lifting a large grey shoulder that is round and unrippled; the winds are silent in their quarters, and the upper air is empty. There are no birds anywhere. There is in all the poising stillness no sound but the tread of feet that come and go upon the path that climbs down from the inset village to the sea: the path that borders in its passing the little grey cemetery where so few have come home to lie. There is no need of much room there: there is place, and to spare, outside. . . .

And presently there is a sound of singing that comes nearer, a grave sweet singing that is small in the large environment of air; there is a huddle of black and white upon the stretching beach, the shining of taper, of swinging censer, of uplifted crucifix, and between the little burying-ground and the wide grey sea there is a kneeling crowd that prays for those that lie in either.

The night gathers early into an intolerable blackness: the wind stirs with a distant whispering, and the air is thick and wet without rain. There is no moon, no light babble of water breaking on the shore, no star answering star from sky and sea; there is no sound of life in all the small dark village, only a close unbroken blackness set interminably between earth and heaven. The people within the little houses have shut themselves fearfully and with prayers into their great enclosed beds; the evening-meal has been eaten in silence, the fire covered over and the lights put out; but the platters are not set away, nor the food lifted from the tables. All is left for

Those that will enter presently by the door which to-night stands open from dusk to dawn ; when in the midst of darkness and at the unspeakable Hour, there comes the sound of feet, which are not feet, upon the causeway, and the touch of hands, which are not hands, upon the latch ; when those that wake and pray and listen will hear about them the pale thin voices that chant the Song of the Dead.

The night comes up weeping from the East, and her cheeks are wet and dark ; her shut eyes weep and her breath whistles between her lips ; the blackness of the night is very black.

It is the night when the Dead walk, and there is no light anywhere.

The Dead have rent their tombs and have come out from them like breath from between the lips ; they have come without sound, without shape, they are but a Blackness within the blackness of the night.

A Blackness within the blackness are the Dead ; cover over the ashes on the hearth lest a flame burst out from them ; cover them over and let the houses be dark as the encompassing night. O let no light wander, for the Dead are abroad ; let no light stray, lest in it they should see themselves !

It is surely a very fearful thing that the Dead should be set loose, dumb and shapeless, an element within the elements ; not even as a sigh in the whispering wind, not even as a tear in the weeping rain, but as a nothing at large in the midst of the world. O what a strait gate is the flesh when it is shut upon the spirit ; and what a large thing beyond all largeness, is the Desire of God !

For the Dead are without sound and without shape and yet there is that which must be spoken, and who will say the words ? They are voiceless, and yet they bear a message ; oh ! who will deliver it ?

Let us gird ourselves and go forth, we, who are the poor and maim, we the poor and desolate; let us go out into the night to meet the Dead, that they may creep into us by our mouths and share the breath of our nostrils. Let us lend these miserable bodies, that by them the Dead may speak.

For years and for generations without number, our fathers have done this thing and the night hath not swallowed them up; for years and for generations without number, the Dead have spoken by them and they have not been consumed. Hervé the Saint went out with them in the days that once were and sang the Song of the Souls: and Hervé the Saint is not consumed, but is entirely blessed. Therefore be not afraid. . . .

The night is dark, surely the night is very dark, and our feet seek in trouble for their accustomed ways; where is the track of my footsteps that I may walk in it? And where are ye, my brothers, that I may hold your hands?

The wind is cold, oh! verily the wind is cold as the hand that gives no alms; there is a weight as of ice that lies about my heart. And what is this that meets me, that is blacker than the night, and colder than the north wind, and wetter than the sea? What is this that wraps me about with a smell as of the grave and a sickness like the coming of Death? Oh! what is this that breathes with my breath, and speaks with my voice, and makes of me a trumpet?

It is not we, the poor and maim, we the aged and desolate, who go from door to door in the midst of the night, but the Dead; it is not we who cry unto you, but the Dead. For the Dead are come into us and we are the Dead; O ye within the houses, wake and pray, for the Dead are at your doors!

The night is black, surely the night is very black, and the wind sings about the keyholes; the night is full of fingers that touch and feet that come and go, and of voices crying upon the thresholds. Blackness within the blackness, and the graves rent open. O ye within the houses, wake and pray, and hear the Song of the Souls.

It is the night, and the hour of the night, when the Dead walk; and there is no light anywhere.

And to-morrow the watchers will stand again upon the beach, in the great bay where the currents meet and run landwards, waiting for those that the sea brings home; and about the cross the women will gather and pray, peering westward into the mist of waters in the dumb suspense which is only less sharp than certainty. But there will be some who stay at home weeping, beside the empty chair that has been set back in the corner all the long Summer; weeping, because, in the black of the night, when the graves are rent open and the depths of the sea laid bare, there was one who came home that should come no more, and the word of the Dead was spoken. For this is the Black Month, the season of widows, the Month of the Dead.

NOTA.—In parts of Brittany it is the belief that on the Eve of All Souls, the Dead are permitted to return to the world; but that, being shapeless and voiceless, they enter into the bodies of the beggars who are called by the people the 'Children of God,' and in their form go from house to house, leaving on each a blessing. In the canticle of St. Hervé it is said that as a child he went out with such as these to 'Sing the song of the souls': and one or more versions of these songs yet linger. As All Souls is the day of the Dead, so November is the Black Month, the Month of the Dead: more especially upon the coasts where the fall of the year brings home the fishermen who have been away at Iceland or the Bank, and of whom, all the long Summer, there has been no news. Day after day through the early Autumn, the 'goëlettes' come in with every tide; but as the time passes, the waiting for those that delay grows more anxious and the home-coming less sure. And as every season there are many who do not come home, it is indeed true that 'November makes more widows than all the rest of the year.'

M. C. BALFOUR.

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