

# The Seagulls

The sea haunts me without end. It matters little if I am awake or asleep or that my room at the sanitarium in upstate New York is hundreds of mile away from the ocean. It ceaselessly roars at me till my nerves are frayed and torn. So overwhelming is its tumult that other sounds startle me with a jolt. And above the roar are the endless cries of seagulls. Their hoarse shrieking mocks and taunts me like cruel laughter. It cuts me to the soul belittling my meager human fragility. The worst though is at night when I close my eyes to sleep. It is then that I also see the faces, the fair young faces staring at me with surprise and despair, with the abject horror borne of the knowledge of a fate too unbearable for words. It torments me to no end and all I can do is watch in helplessness. If it was not for the kindly doctors at the sanitarium who ensure with ever vigilance that I cannot hurt myself I would have put an end to this misery long ago.

They say I am mad and surely they are correct. They say my madness stems from the guilt of being the only survivor of a fishing boat lost in a ferocious storm one terrible October night ten years ago. In the most general sense they are correct about this too. However it is not the guilt of being the sole survivor that drives my madness. Instead it is the guilt of what I had to do to survive the storm that fills my endless days with torment. They say my story is a delusion brought about by my madness. This though is not true, my story is real and is the ultimate source of that which keeps me from the rest my tired soul so dearly desires.

I certainly was not always like this. I was a fisherman and sailor of great skill like my father and his father before him. I was raised in and called home a small fishing village on the south shore of Long Island where my grandfather had settled. He had taken up the local trade and soon captained his own boat. Not only did he become the greatest of the local seaman but he also had an uncanny ability to know where the schools of fish were. He was renowned for his boat and his crew's productivity and was as successful as any sea going fisherman could ever be. My father too was of exceptional skill and had risen to be a first mate at the young age of twenty five, but alas he perished in a terrible October storm when I was just three.

I followed in their footsteps, it was in our blood. I was already a first mate at the age of nineteen and no doubt would soon captain my own fishing boat. I had all of the instincts for the sea that a sailor could possess and already was able to out sail experienced men many years older than me. I also had that uncanny sense passed down from my grandfather to always find the largest schools of fish and bring them home to market.

My grandfather's marvelous success allowed him to retire from the sea at a relatively young age and he now owned his own small fleet of fishing boats which too continued the good fortunes that Grandfather had with his own boat. He was a generous man loved by all and it certainly did not hurt that his image was augmented by his exploits during the revolution when he ran the British blockade to run messages for the Continental Army. He was a simple man at heart surviving by his wit and succeeding by an instinct that could guide him through any perils the ocean could throw at him. The simple life of a sea going fisherman was all I desired and I hoped to live out my life here just like my grandfather.

It was he who raised me after my father's untimely passing. It was a wonderful childhood and I learned everything I could about sailing and fishing from him and had begun to go out on the fishing boats at a young age. Although Grandfather had little education he made sure that I received a fine one. So in addition to my inherited instinct for the sea and the catch I was benefited by a knowledge of the nautical sciences and all that they had to tell us about the fish we sought. There was little doubt I would surpass him as both a captain and a fisherman. Since my Grandfather had always shared his success with the rest of the small fishing village it was hoped by all that I would have my share of good fortune and carry on as he always had. This too was my Grandfather's wish and I was eager to carry on his legacy.

Grandfather was an encyclopedia of the lore that all good mariners acknowledge. He delighted in telling me tales of the sea and I was equally delighted to hear them. While there was much practical wisdom in this body of nautical lore there was also a lot of superstition, sailors being a most superstitious lot. Due to my education I never saw the superstition as being anything other than the imaginations of sailors faced with the mysteries and unpredictableness of the vast mighty oceans but still I never got tired of listening to the stories.

My favorite tales always involved the seagulls. In the mariner's tradition the seagulls were an intelligent race that was already quite ancient when mankind was but young. From time immemorial they took wing along the coasts of the Earth's shores and travelled far off over the blue oceans learning its ways and untangling its secrets. The seagulls worshipped a set of dark gods fashioned in their own image much as man worships gods fashioned in their own image. Their gods possessed immense power wherever the ocean reigned and were said to be able to control the seas and command the creatures that dwelt in it. To us they seem capricious and unpredictable for they operated in accordance with rules that man could not even begin to fathom. They were certainly dark gods but could not be said to be evil as this was a human term and could have no meaning when applied to creatures so ancient and different.

The seagulls and their gods generally looked at man with indifference as we were both young and foolish according to the way they thought. They felt us to be inferior and rarely worthy of more than a fleeting glance or a nod. But there were times when the Seagull Gods for reasons we cannot begin to understand felt it important to involve sailors in their mysterious and inexplicable affairs. There were countless stories and legends that tell of these interactions. These tales range from good to bad and when the Seagull Gods got involved with men there was no telling what they wanted or how things would end. They have destroyed many good ships and sent many a mariner to a watery grave for the most trifling of reasons or even no reason at all. On the other hand the Seagull Gods have also without any apparent reason shown great mercy to sailors and have saved them from the most terrible fates. However in many of the stories it seems that the Seagull Gods see humans as objects of play and get involve with us simply for fun and for sport. They play pranks and treat men with an intentionally careless attitude that does justice to their true feelings about us. Consequently it was generally thought best by sailors to avoid the Seagull Gods in all but the most desperate circumstances and certainly one should do their best never do anything to offend them despite that their seemingly arbitrary nature made it impossible to know what that may be.

As I said when I was nineteen I was already a first mate. The fishing boat I was on was the Grey Albatross a member of my grandfather's fleet and one of the finest fishing boats on the shores of Long Island. Its captain was Nathan Long who was himself one of the ablest captains of the times. A jolly man who possessed his own knack for the catch he was loved by his crew who always worked their hardest for him. Not only were they assured of a good voyage and a fair days work but also a share of what was usually a bountiful sea harvest. Captain Long would joke that with such a great crew and a dashing young first mate that he had the easiest job of any captain that ever fished the seas, but we all knew that it was his fair hand and fine seamanship that formed the foundation upon which the rest of us succeeded in our labors.

We set sail that October morning for the final run of the season. Twelve crew members and the Captain ready for one last spell at sea before the long winter set in. A strong morning sun rising in the east sparkled off the glassy waters as we got under way. A cool light breeze propelled us from the shores toward the fishing grounds for four days of work. A good catch would set us all fine for the cold winter ahead. With the weather perfect we did our jobs and by the third day we had already hauled in our quota of fish and our holds were nearly full. The good Captain Long declared we would knock off early and celebrate. Then with a short day tomorrow to top off our holds we would head home for port arriving home earlier than expected.

The crew was in a jovial mood. Not only would they receive maximum pay but they would even be back to their families and loved ones long before supper time. The weather was still perfect and a celebration of good fortunes was begun. Fresh fish were soon cooking and there was extra rum and beer for all. A few of the men had brought instruments and soon there was music lofting up from the deck and the merry crew sang songs of the sea and enthusiastically spoke of how they were going to spend their extra money. Good old Red was going to buy his pretty wife the fancy silk dress she had longed for. Tom now had the enough money to purchase the plot of land he had wanted and build a house big enough for his ever growing family. Ned was going to ask his girl to marry him and so on and so on. The crew toasted to their good fortune and the long life of Captain Long. Never was there a crew of a fishing boat so pleased and gratified with their work.

At about an hour before sunset the strangest thing occurred. An unusually large flock of seagulls flew over the ship heading south. They passed in a great rush and for a moment their cries drowned out the sounds of the crew. Equally strange was that trailing them was a stiff breeze that disturbed the otherwise tranquil waters. Now sailors are a superstitious bunch and normally such an event would have brought a pause and a few words of wonder, but the crew was so at ease that it disturbed them not a bit. It was odd that only I the least superstitious of the bunch found the passing seagulls and subsequent breeze to be unsettling.

I broke away from the crew and their amusement and walked to the foredeck where I found Captain Long. He was a seasoned veteran of many years at sea and knew the oceans were unpredictable and conditions could change without the slightest warning. He had not joined in the merriment, instead letting the crew enjoy why he kept watch just in case. It was his attention to the good of the ship and its crew that really made the crew members trust and respect him.

“Jack, I am not surprised to see you here.” He said to me when he saw me at his side on the foredeck. “You too sense something is not quite the way it should be. Look to the North.”

To the north less than a mile away was circle of rocks known as Gulls Head. Offshore rocks far out in the Atlantic are a rare curiosity and Gulls Head was the most curious of them all. There were six towering rocks jutting from the surface of the sea the tallest of which was perhaps sixty feet in height. Arranged in a circle they were jagged and broken as they spired out of the sea like six tall ancient and crumbling towers. What was even stranger is that the top of each of the six spires seemed in some way or another to have the appearance of the head of a seagull. For some of the rocks the suggestion of the shape of a gull’s head was vague and more than half imagined but the tallest bore a likeness plain as day of the head of a gull. It even had an unusual protrusion that appeared as the hooked beak of a colossal gull.

I scanned the six gull headed rocks jutting from the sea and above them hovered a cloud of ominous inky blackness. Observing for a few minutes there could be no doubt that the unusual cloud was rapidly growing in size and seemed to be coming out of literally nowhere. It almost looked like a cloud of dark smoke growing above a volcano. It was a chilling sight to behold this cloud from nowhere growing above the six strange gull headed towers of rock. It did not appear like anything I had ever beheld before which only served to heighten the unsettled feeling that had come upon me.

“Take a good look Jack.” Spoke the Captain as he handed me his spyglass.

I looked at the rocks and other than the menacing black cloud they appeared as they had all of the other many times I had seen them. Then it struck me. Normally the rocks were full of seagulls but now they were as bare and lonely as could be. I thought of the great swarm of gulls that had passed over us and a shiver went down my spine. Were they fleeing? I wondered at this strange occurrence.

Captain Long was educated too and not a man to put much stock into stories or superstition. So when I handed him back his spy glass and saw the odd concerned look on his face it made me think seriously about the situation. Gulls Head was a place of dark whispered legends. Just its strange configuration in a place where no group of rocks on the ocean should exist would have been enough but there were also strange tales. For some reason the waters right in their vicinity always churned with an unnatural turbulence regardless of the rest of the ocean’s mood and it was almost impossible to get near them. Many a man had tried and failed but some of the few who did reported that there are strange symbols and runes carved on them near the water line. The symbols these men said looked like nothing that any man had ever seen anywhere appearing like mysterious hieroglyphics in inconceivably bizarre patterns. There is also the story that the largest of the six towers of rock has an opening, a small cave also near the waterline. Due to shadows cast by the rock’s craginess the opening cannot be viewed from afar and only a close approach reveals its existence. Since no one ever gets that close the existence of the cave like opening is just a rumor, though there is another story of a sailor who reached the opening and even crawled in. What he saw inside no one knows as when he returned he was stark raving mad and later that night threw himself into the sea never to be seen again.

“Jack get the crew together and let us sail south away from here. Try not to sound alarmed. Something is not right and it is best we played it safe and put a safe distance between us and Gulls Head.” The

Captain's voice was grave and it betrayed great concern. Knowing the Captain well I immediately went among the crew.

Within minutes of gathering the crew and readying the boat to sail south the black clouds that had been hovering over Gulls Head filled the sky. The crew was now quiet as everyone attended to their posts to make under way. Great bolts of lightning fell from the sky and the thunder echoed across a now boiling sea. The winds were howling and a fierce rain began falling in great sheets that made it difficult to see just a few feet in front of you. The crew fought valiantly to control the ship and escape the great tempest that blew with a sudden fury I had never before experienced. We struggled but the boat was caught and tossed about like piece of cork. Then without warning a tremendous wave crashed into our vessel crushing and splintering its very timbers like matchsticks. And just like that The Grey Albatross was lost.

I was thrown clear of the wreck and whirled around without mercy by the fierce raging waters. I was certain I had only moments to live as no man could stay alive in such a maelstrom. It was as black as night out and I saw nothing and heard nothing either but the roar of the ocean and the deafening claps of thunder. A great flash of lightening lit up the waves and I saw a plank floating near me which I grabbed onto. Otherwise there was not a sign of the wrecked boat or its crew.

Clinging to the plank I figured at best I had bought myself perhaps a few extra minutes of life. I thought of my father who I had never known who had also died in a fierce October storm. Was his last few moments of life just like mine? Time slowed down as I rose and fell with waves. The end had to be near and I prayed for forgiveness for whatever sins I had committed in life so I could enter into the next life in peace. There could be no hope at this point and all I could do was wait for my final moment in this world.

Then something beyond belief happened. A seagull appeared flying above me as if it were the calmest of days. It dipped down and floated beside me completely unaffected by the raging storm. I was still being thrown about but with ease the seagull maintained its position in the water right beside me. And then something even more bizarre happened. The seagull spoke to me.

"Do you wish to live?" Spoke the seagull in a voice that seemed soft but was easily heard above the storm. "I can help you," it continued, "but if I do you must agree to help me in turn."

At first I could not speak. Was I hallucinating as I was in the final moments of drowning? How could the seagull help me and what was it I would have to do in return? But there was no time to think and there clearly seemed as though there were no choice. There is little a man will not agree to in the final moments of life if there is any chance that perhaps life may continue after all. Completely perplexed I nodded my head in agreement.

"Then so be it." Spoke the seagull. It spread its wings and lifted itself out of the water. It issued a great cry that could easily be heard above the thunder and the crashing waves. Immediately five other seagulls arrived and in formation they flew easily a few feet above the wild waves. To my amazement the sea seemed to part in front of them offering calm passage. Even more amazing was that the plank

with me clinging to it calmly sailed after them. While all around me the sea surged and raged I sailed along on a little piece of calmness. I was relieved, I was frightened beyond belief, and I was exhausted. I think I then slipped out of consciousness still clinging to the plank as it neatly sailed along following the formation of the six seagulls.

When I came to there was no trace of the storm, the winds and the sea were perfectly calm and the only sound was of the plank sailing along through the sea under whatever mysterious propulsion and guidance affected it. The sky too was clear and the moon, now directly overhead, lit up the seas. I looked ahead and gasped in astonishment. The rocks of Gulls Head were directly before me and the plank I was the passenger on was sailing straight for them. The six gulls we were following had vanished but still we continued on course toward the largest of the six rocky terrible towers. When I was about 50 yards from the rock I let out another and even greater gasp of astonishment. There was a light coming from the largest of the rocks a few feet above the water line. I closed my eyes tightly and began to shake as I was seized by an intense terror. It seemed as if an eternity had passed when suddenly there was a bump and the plank stopped moving.

With great struggle I opened my eyes. The plank had stopped as it had reached its destination the greatest of the rocks of Gulls Head. Directly in front of me was an opening in the rock and a soft glow emanated from it. I could barely comprehend the situation I was in but it seemed obvious enough that I was to enter the opening in the rock and receive whatever fate had in store with me. Summoning up all of my strength and courage I hauled myself out of the water and into the opening. The opening gave way to a short tunnel that was tall enough for me to stand in. The tunnel ended in a set of stairs heading down to who knows where. The eerie soft light was from a phosphorescent lichen that clung to the rock walls of the tunnel and stairway. The light allowed me to see that the walls were filled with carvings. Most were obscured by the luminous lichens but I could see symbols and shapes that appeared to be seagulls and other denizens of the seas as well as other bizarre designs that made no sense to my tired and confused mind. As I descended I counted thirty stairs before reaching the bottom. Past the stairs I found myself at the opening to a large chamber.

The chamber was round and about thirty feet in diameter. The rough rock walls curved inward forming a dome that was also about thirty feet high at its apex. The room was lit by the same phosphorescent lichen and the walls too were filled with carved symbols and shapes. In front of me across the center of the circular chamber stood six magnificent thrones carved from oceanic black basalt and decorated with what appeared to be sculpted and polished abalone. The abalone decoration seemed to flicker and shimmer in a haunting manner despite that the light source in the chamber was completely steady.

Perched atop each throne was a large male seagull. I stood speechless before the scene in complete amazement. At that moment each of the six seagulls appeared to dissolve into a cloud of murky netherness that grew into and filled the seats of the thrones. Then the clouds thickened and materialized into the shapes of six men seated on the six thrones. At least they looked like men at first but I soon discerned they were like no men I have ever seen nor heard of before. They sat tall and proud and although their arms and hands appeared as thin as could be they exhibited the sinewy forms of strength. Their garments covered their bodies completely and appeared like the woven feathers of a

bird in the same grey and white colors seagulls are known for. Their hair was swept back and was hung long. It was so fine and grey and it too reminded one of feathers. Their stern faces were incredibly ancient and so unfamiliar looking to my eyes, taking on a bird like countenance which was reinforced by their long beaklike noses. It was their eyes though that were the feature most unlike those of men. They glimmered the color yellow almost as if they had a light of their own.

“You have been saved as promised. You do know who we are?”

“No, no,” I stammered, “who are you, where am I?”

The six man like beings on their thrones laughed in unison. The laughter reminded me strongly of the cries of a seagull. “Don’t be foolish. Everyone of your kind who plies the seas knows of us. We are the gods of the seagulls and you are in one of our temples.” Then they laughed again and even louder till it filled the room and I was sent to my knees quaking as I realized that what I thought to be superstition was all too real and the old stories were in fact true.

“Do not fear. We did not save you without reason and as long as you do what you are asked as promised there is nothing to be afraid of. However fail to heed us and we will bring terror and suffering to you and perhaps the people you care for. For we are the Seagull Gods and we rule the seas and all that passes across it and lives by it. Do not fool with us for although we saved your pitiful life from the storm we attach no real value to the existence of you or your kind.”

“What we want from you is actually quite simple. We want you to bring us six of the fairest young ladies in your land. The sweetest and merriest of maidens you can find. And we want you to bring them here on this day one year from now.”

I know of no words to describe the dread and confusion in my mind. Everything I believed in had been shaken to the core. I stood before these terrible and extraordinary creatures with unknown supernatural powers more fantastic than anything I could ever have dreamt of and what they asked of me I could barely comprehend. Why could they want me to do such a thing? There was only one purpose I could think of and it was terrible for me to conceive. It was too heartless and diabolical to even contemplate being a part of and I thought at this moment I would not live after all. Time stood still as these thoughts formulated in my mind and finally I spoke in utter despair of my situation. “I cannot do that, you are going to sacrifice them. I cannot trade my life for the lives of other.”

Again the Seagull Gods laughed. “The weak minds of men and their foolish thoughts. We are not simple human gods that require the sacrifice of lives to sustain us. And if killing was our goal we would hardly need your help. No we have something much more subtle in mind for which we do need your help. And we can assure you the six young ladies will live long lives and be well provided for. But our purpose is beyond your meager comprehension so we will say no more of it to you. Just rest assured that while your kind thinks we are wild and unpredictable, we are creatures of our word and we will not betray what we have promised you.”

I trembled at their voices and their unknown purpose only furthered my uneasiness despite their reassurance. "How though can I do this? I will certainly be caught spiriting away six young ladies and be hung. What good then will my life being spared from the storm be?"

"Be assured too that you will never be caught. We will provide you a means of accomplishing your task with ease and in secret. Behold."

A spot of lichen to the left then glowed brighter revealing a stone shelf along the wall. I went over to the shelf and there was a silken grey bag of the finest quality. They gestured me to look inside it and I found six necklaces whose chains were made from the woven strands of fine seaweed. And attached to each chain was a pendant carved from coral in the shape of a gull's head.

"Give each of the six young fair ladies you find for us a pendant and place it around her neck. You will also obtain a small sail boat which you are capable of sailing by yourself and worthy to make the journey with your passengers back to here. On the morning of the appointed day one year from now the ladies will appear at the boat which you will have waiting in a certain hidden cove. This cove shall be made known to you by our minion prior to the day you are to rendezvous with the ladies. Sail here with the six and getting as close to the rocks as you dare, wait until sometime after nightfall when we shall appear. Once you are at sea we will assure that you arrive safely. This is what you must do. Remember that to fail us is to invite certain unspeakable misfortune for you and the people you hold dear. "

They then began to laugh again louder than ever till I was pressed to the floor with the weight of their haughty mocking laughter. The lights went out leaving me in utter darkness and the laughter turned into the cries of seagulls. Everywhere around me they cried and it filled every pore of my soul. Mercifully I lost consciousness and remember no more.

When I awoke I was lying on the deck of a boat that I recognized as the Little Moonbeam another of Grandfather's fishing boats.

"Captain, he's awake." Shouted a sailor.

"Jack you are alive. Bless the Lord." Said Captain Whitaker a man I had known since I was a child. "We have been searching for two days for the Grey Albatross and her crew. We were almost ready to give up and turn back. Then we spotted you adrift in the sea clinging to a plank. Many of us saw the strange storm three nights ago off in the vicinity of Gulls Head. It whipped up and then disappeared in just a few hours. Seemed to stay in one spot it did. Came and went out of nowhere like nothing I have ever seen. When the Albatross did not show up at home the following day we set back out to search near where we had seen the storm. This is certainly a miracle we have found you."

"There are no others?"

" We have seen no one not even a speck of wreckage. But others are looking too and perhaps they've had some good luck. Let's get you below and into a bunk. There will be time for talking later."

Now alone resting in a bunk I wondered if it were all a dream. Perhaps I imagined the whole thing and it was just a miracle that I survived the storm by clinging to the plank. I moved and felt that there was something in my pocket. I reached down and out from my pocket I pulled the silken grey pouch with the six seagull pendants. I shuttered and shoved the pouch back into my pocket. It was no dream, I had met with the Seagull Gods and now I must carry out the task they have appointed to me. I lay there alone with my horror and thinking that no one else must know what had happened.

I told everyone I remembered nothing between being thrown from the ship after it had been smashed by the wave and when I awoke safely on the Little Moonbeam. Other than myself and the plank there was not a sign of the Grey Albatross or its crew as all of the other boats had come home empty handed. Not a scrap of wreckage was ever found. It was easy enough for everyone to believe my story and they rejoiced my miraculous survival, no explanation was needed for the superstitious people of the sea. But even with the joy of my survival there was much sadness for the twelve good men who were lost. Their families and the whole town mourned their loss. Luckily my grandfather was willing to help out the families of those lost and further suffering was averted.

I recovered from my ordeal soon enough and given the time of the year it would be months before I needed to give thought to putting out to sea again. There was no doubt that I would. It is unfortunate for the good people who make their living plying the waters but such tragedies are all too common and were not unlooked for. The dead were never forgotten but people got on with their lives well enough.

I had put the silken pouch with the pendants somewhere safe and for the next few months tried my best not think of what I must do with them. One day soon after the New Year when the cold winter winds had descended and the snow settled all about us I walked down to the water. I was quite alone and despite the frost in the air sat down on an old log and gazed out to sea. That is when a rather large seagull flew by and landed just a few feet beside me. Long it sat and gazed knowingly at me. Cocking its head back and forth it tried to get my attention but I ignored it as best I could. I knew what it was thinking and wondered if it was one of the Seagull Gods or just an ordinary seagull. I thought about what I must do to fulfill my bargain. I knew that my task was wrong, but what could I do? If I refused to honor my bargain with the Seagull Gods what vengeance would they wreak? And not just on me but perhaps my whole village of good sailors and their families. We depended on the sea and I could not anger the powers who controlled the seas. I did not doubt the Seagull Gods and felt that there was nothing I could do but comply.

"I will do what I must." I suddenly spoke out loud. The seagull understood. It let out a loud cry and sailed away on the winds.

I took to travelling about Long Island often staying away from home for days. My quest to find the young ladies that fit the description of the ones the Seagull Gods were looking for took most of the rest of the winter and a bit of the early spring. It was tortured work that I approached with an ever increasing dread which developed into a gloomy resentment. It was a dark time for me and I will not say where I went but I was always sure to stay far from home and the people I knew. I had to appear as if all was normal and that I was unchanged from the man I had always been. No one must ever suspect my true purpose. I

constantly struggled against the thought of what the fate of the ladies I selected might be. I entertained no speculation as surely that would have driven me mad and I would be unable to do what must be done. Deep down I really did not want to know.

In the spring I took some money I had saved and commissioned the building of a small sailing craft. One that I would be able to pilot myself and my six passengers safely out into the ocean to my rendezvous with the Seagull Gods at Gulls Head. The fishing season soon began again and I was the first mate on another of my Grandfather's boats. In my spare time I sailed my new craft often for hours and always alone and always brooding.

It was near the end of the fishing season and my Grandfather's fleet was once again wildly successful. One day while I was in port he came to me.

"Jack, I am so glad that you becoming the great seaman you are and it seems that you have fully recovered from your tragedy last October. But I do sense that something happened to you that night of which you have told no one." He paused to light the pipe that he carried everywhere with him. "Despite what educated folks tell us of the natural workings of the sea there are other powers and forces at work in the sea that transcend a scientific understanding. Yes, great powers with minds of their own and mysterious agendas that cannot be comprehended by the men who sail the seas. And these men who sail the seas are occasionally caught up in the intrigues of these powers, sometimes bringing him good and sometimes bad but usually some of each such that the balance is too hard to calculate."

I looked at my Grandfather's face and found it to be visited by an expression I had never seen on him before. It was a face full of regret and sadness. "I have had success with the sea seemingly beyond what any man could achieve by his own wit and effort. There is a price of course that had to be reckoned with and for a time I hesitated to pay it. Other people suffered for my hesitation for I in arrogance paid no heed to things that are best not ignored. Jack I am so glad I did not lose you as I lost your dear father. My dear poor son so young and promising taken by a wild and unexpected October storm. It is this I most regret."

"Don't worry Jack, I will not speak with you again about this subject. There are forces at sea beyond which any man can be expected to resist and struggle against. Do what you must do Jack. The dice have already been cast and there is nothing left to do but finish what has been started." With that he walked away and true to his word never spoke of this matter to me again.

I thought about his words and wondered what he had done. Had he too made a deal with the Seagull Gods? Had he tried to back out of the deal and paid for it with his dear son's life? I wondered and grew more afraid. For better or worse I was more resolved than ever to complete what I had started. There was no chance I would try and thwart the plans of the Seagull Gods. I knew I could not win against such powers.

About a week before the fateful day of the one year anniversary of the wreck of the Grey Albatross and my bargain with the Seagull Gods I was out sailing my boat to the east of home by shores that were mostly unpopulated and seldom travelled. I spotted up ahead a flight of seagulls in an unusually well-

defined formation and I decided to follow them. They led me to a small hidden cove with a sandy beach that I could easily pull my boat into. I walked around the cove and much to my surprise there were signs of a path leading inland. It was obviously very old and had not been used in recent times perhaps being an old abandoned Indian trail. I followed it for a while and despite its age it was fairly easy to navigate but all it did was head straight inland. I retraced my steps and returned to my boat. I knew this was place that on the following week I was to meet the six young ladies and bring them to Gulls Head.

Oh the six young ladies. I was young and charming with plenty of gold coin so I had no problem finding them one by one. Beauties they were full of life and in the spring of youth and as merry as could be. Their laughter could fill a room with joy and their faces could radiate the darkest night. Each one was like a bright star twinkling in the sky, a beacon of perfection that could fill any man's dreams with enchantment. In each case when I judged the time was right I offered them the necklace with the seagull pendant. In each case they were delighted and I placed it around their fine neck. And in each case they instantly adored the necklace and swore they would wear it always.

The morning of that fateful day I took sail to the hidden cove. It was unusually warm and mild for an October day and I waited to see if the young ladies would show up as the Seagull Gods foretold they would. I waited and waited and right at noon when the Fall sun was at its highest point in the sky the six young ladies came strolling down the ancient path which led to the cove where I sat in the sand in dreaded anticipation of their arrival. Each was wearing their finest dress and made up and bejeweled as if going to a Fall dance. They each carried a picnic basket filled with sumptuous morsels of food and bottles of the finest wines. They laughed gaily as they strolled together in the noon sun. I found this most disturbing, none of the ladies seemed the slightest bit perturbed at attending this gathering in a hidden cove far from their homes with others they had never previously been acquainted with. No questions were asked and they all acted as if this was a completely natural and innocent affair among good friends.

We set sail on a gentle ocean with a calm breeze guiding us to our destination. We arrived at Gulls Head just before the sun set over the western horizon in a fiery performance of reds and purples that appeared as a great majestic eye sinking below the waters of eternity. So still was the ocean that I was able to anchor the boat a mere 20 feet from the rocky spires of Gulls Head. The ladies immediately went to work lighting torches and laying out the feast they had brought with them. One had brought a flute and entertained us with songs. The rest of us with our wine glasses full sang along in the night. If any other boat had been in the vicinity they would have marveled at the festive voices and joyful laughter that fanned from our vessel across the sea.

The full moon rose and illuminated the ocean as a sheet of liquid silver glittering from the gentle motion of the waves. It was a picturesque moment straight out of a romantic novel of faraway places in faraway times. Only I seemed to notice the sinister shadows cast on the silvery waters by the towers of Gulls Head robbing the scene of its splendor and instead imparting a decidedly menacing tone to the atmosphere. The boat just barely rocked in the still seas and except for the ominous presence of the rocks this would have been a perfect moment. In fact, if there had been any other reason for the gathering this would have been the most fabulous night of my young life.

Shortly before midnight when our hearts were quite content with our merry making one of the young ladies suggested that we extinguish the torches and stand by the boat's rails to take in the tranquility of the moon lit sea. We stood there at the bow of the boat silently gazing at the ocean and Gulls Rock.

At the stroke of midnight I heard the cries of gulls. The young ladies did not take notice but I was stricken with absolute terror as I was still secretly hoping that the Seagull Gods had forgotten about our deal or had other more pressing matters to attend to than us. No they had come, six gulls landed in the middle of my small sailing craft and we turned to face them. As they had that night one year before they shimmered and dissolved into a cloud of netherness which gradually grew into the forms of men. And there they were, we stood before the six Seagull Gods.

I could neither move or speak despite that I had expected their appearance. Then without as much as a single word each of the six Seagull Gods took one of the fair young ladies in an embrace and without further ado lifted up their respective ladies and jumped off the side of the boat. I turned to look over the side and all I saw was the dark tranquil waters disturbed only by the ripples where the six couples had landed in the water and sunk out of sight.

I stood in utter disbelief for how long I do not know. They were gone and I was alone. Yes the beautiful young ladies so full of life and energy were gone, sunk below the waves by Seagulls Head. Then I heard a sound behind me and I turned to find the six Seagull Gods again standing on my boat but without a trace of the six young ladies.

"You lied!" I cried in anguish. "You have killed them. What have you done? Why Why?" I shrieked.

They Seagull Gods just stood there with cold calm smiles on their faces mocking me and the horror I felt. "We have killed no one. We have no desire to kill such fine young ladies, but we do occasionally desire consorts. You have done well by us and we consider your debt fully repaid."

The figure that spoke gestured for me to turn around and face the ocean. I did so and when I looked off the side of the boat I saw that the water where the young ladies had sunk below the waves had begun to glow with a radiant bluish light. I saw six figures bathed in the light rising to the surface. When the figures broke the surface I saw that they were in fact the six young ladies and they were quite alive as I could see them moving. At first I felt a great joy but then I caught a glimpse of their eyes for in them was a look of immense surprise, despair, and untold fright. They did not speak for there was no need to, their distraught faces betrayed their thoughts, Why did you do this to us? What have you done?

When they had fully come to the surface of the water I realized what had happened. I will never be able to rid myself of the memory as it is etched so clearly in my mind that it is as if I am seeing it again right now before me. I screamed and screamed. The Seagull Gods laughed and laughed in their sinister fashion which gave way to the mocking cries of seagulls. Still I screamed as the full implication of what I had done became clear. Mercifully all went dark and I remember no more till I awoke the next morning alone on my boat still anchored within sight of Gulls Rock.

What it was that I saw when the young ladies reached the surface of the sea bathed in the unnatural glow torments me to this very day and is the ultimate cause of my madness and desire to be done with my life. You see the young ladies were no longer ladies. Below their waist were no longer the legs and feet so familiar to the human form. Instead were the smooth cold scales of a fish terminating in a tail. The fair young ladies were now mermaids.