CHAPTER ONE

Of all the houses that I remember with love the house called Tigh na Rosan is the sweetest smelling and the brightest. That is to say it is the best of the clean and ordered houses I have lived in. There have been houses that gave by their straw furniture and smells and tattered wallpaper a feeling of ease and warmth unknown to Tigh na Rosan, houses where volunteers were asked during supper, when it rained, to fetch another jam pot to catch a new drip from the ceiling, houses that smelt of bats and mice, houses that made your eyes smart for the first three weeks because the nests of jackdaws in the chimney sent the smoke back into the rooms, houses that smelt of tar and fish, houses too dark to read in, or too bare and hard to sit down in, and these in their way I have loved more. But of clean and moneyed houses Tigh na Rosan is the best.

It is built of granite by the sea, on the northern part of the east coast of Scotland, in a hard, small town called Nairn, which on fine days lies opposite the blue cliffs of Cromarty and on grey days looks out at a rigid black skyline, very close and broken in the middle by a gap called Cromarty Firth.

The drawing-room of Tigh na Rosan looks out in this

direction across a lawn through wide, high windows. In winter hail and wind beat on it from the north and east. In summer the sun slants across the garden, but the drawing-room smells of roses and of potpourri and is always cool. In the drawing-room you do not forget about the sea.

I first went there with my sisters and my mother and father when I was about five. I got to know the drawing-room well, because it had in it an ostrich egg, a large stuffed bird which was grey and scraggy, and a little Indian man who stood on a pedestal on the piano and would not fall off even if you laid him on his side to start him rocking. But I thought a lot more of the pantry, where there was black powder and a polishing machine with a curved handle and a slot for every size of knife. From the pantry and the drawing-room you could see the sea and often you could hear it. It was in the drawing-room that I heard La speak about Mrs Carnoustie and it was in the pantry later that I questioned Mina about Mrs Carnoustie's legs.

La was my mother's cousin. From my place by the window-sill where I was trying to make a red ladybird climb on to a leaf, I heard her say that Mrs Carnoustie was deformed. My mother could not remember that, and La screamed with laughter.

'Do you mean she was a hunchback?' I said.

And La said, 'No. Her back was all right – a bit round, that's all. She was round all over, and fat. She was very smooth and slippery looking.'

'Did she have an iron boot?'

'No. But she couldn't walk very well. Her legs were like flippers.'

'That's absurd, La,' said my mother.

'You must remember. You must. I remember her arms too. It's perfectly true. They only came down a little below where the elbows should be and they were supposed to be flattish, but you never really saw them because she wore big sleeves, big full ones, and I think they were sewn up at the ends. But they looked flattish, like flippers, and she held them against her sides or across her chest and she moved them rather awkwardly. But you could never see her legs. We always wanted to. We wanted to see her in her bath and of course we couldn't, and it was terrible, I remember, never being able to know, and of course we couldn't ask her or anyone else really – anyway we couldn't get proper answers from anyone. And, you see, she was always in the same kind of dress – a long, long grey shiny dress, silk I think, that fastened at the neck with a close collar and came right down to the ground and hid everything.'

'Everybody's dresses came right down to the ground,' said my mother.

'Not as much as hers did, and she was very round and bulged out in the dress in kind of crinkles. And her face was round and plump too, with a small nose sort of flattened and a big wide sort of mouth. And I think she had a kind of moustache.'

'I remember the moustache,' said my mother. 'Or was it that other woman who had a moustache?'

'It was Mrs. Carnoustie. It must have been Mrs. Carnoustie. I remember everything about her. She had black shiny hair – lots of it, but it was close on her head and very smooth. She was smooth looking, all over. And she had brown eyes.' La stopped and I ignored the ladybird.

I said, 'How did she drink her tea?'

'What?'

'If her sleeves were sewn up she couldn't have lifted a cup.'

'I think she could clutch things in an awkward sort of way with both arms.'

'Then it would spill!'

'No it wouldn't,' said my mother. 'You could hold it with two hands, as though you had mittens on. I don't mean mittens. I mean those gloves without fingers.'

'Yes, you could,' I said. 'Only it would be difficult writing letters after Christmas.'

'I don't suppose she bothered much. Mr Carnoustie used to do nearly everything for her.'

'Did he have his sleeves sewn up?'

'Oh no. He was an ordinary man. He had been married before to quite an ordinary woman, everybody said, but after she died he went away for a long time, and when he came back he bought another house near us and he got married to this strange woman. Her eyes were very queer.'

'Why?'

'They were very big. Enormous. And brown.'

'Were they as big as a horse's eyes?'

'They must have been as big as a seal's eyes!'

'Why?'

'Because she was supposed to be a seal.'

'Why was she?'

'People said her mother was a seal. They said her father had met a woman wandering about on the beach somewhere on the west coast, and he got married to this woman. But people said the woman was really a seal – disguised as a woman.

And so when they had a baby it turned out to be half a seal and it grew up to be Mrs Carnoustie.'

I said, 'Did you say she couldn't walk?'

'She could get about all right. But it was slow. We thought she hadn't really got two legs under her dress – just a sort of continuation of her body and two flat feet sticking out sideways.'

'I bet she could swim,' I said. And I swam on my stomach on the carpet, making a noise like the seal I had seen at a circus.

'She wasn't allowed to swim,' said La.

'Why?'

'I don't know why. But I know we did ask her once, just to see what she'd say. And she said Mr Carnoustie didn't like bathing. We wanted her to go into the sea, because then she would have had to take her long dress off.'

I now think that Mina was the mildest and kindest and probably the weakest woman in the world. She was our nurse at that time and we tormented her, but after she was married to a sweetshop man we used often to visit her in her house and then we knew how fond of her we were. She died much too young of a tumour on the brain.

I went into the pantry through the green baize door that opened both ways without a latch and she was standing with her back to me washing something in the sink. Her hair was done up in a thick sleek bun. It was black and shining, covering her temples and her ears and neck. My mother had told me that when she let it down it was so long that she could sit on it. As a greeting she said, 'Now!' when she heard me, but she did not look round, so I stood with my back to the door

and surveyed her. Her heels were together, and her feet stuck out sideways in black low-heeled shoes. I went up and banged her tentatively behind the knees. She said 'Now!' again, this time as a warning. I banged the calves of her legs, trying to hit them in the middle to see if they were joined, and she said gently, spacing out the words in her slow Highland way, 'No, dearie, no. Don't do that!' which made me laugh, because it was usually to my sister Joan she spoke in those words with what she thought was severity. Her mild 'No, Cho-an, dearie, don't do that' had become a catchword with us. So I laughed and tapped her ankles with my boot.

'Have you got legs like Mrs Carnoustie?'

'Who might Mrs. Carnoustie be?'

'She's a seal in a long dress and she's got flippers for legs.'

'Dear me, she must be one of the selchie folk, so.'

'Have you ever seen one?'

'No, dearie, no. It's nothing but an old wifie's tale.'

'Is La an old wifie?'

'Indeed, how dare you say such things of Miss Chalmers.'

'Well, she saw Mrs Carnoustie swimming in the bath like a seal. Mrs Carnoustie turned on the water, took off all her clothes and got in and La saw her legs – kind of all in one with two flat feet sticking out sideways like yours. Mrs Carnoustie swam like this.' I showed her and barked like the seal in the circus.

'I never heard a selchie make a noise like that. It's more like a dog.'

'Is a selchie the same as a seal?'

'She's a big grey seal. She makes a moaning sound and she would put the heart across you with her wailing in the night.'

'Will I see a selchie if I go to the beach?'

'There's no selchies here at Nairn. You'd only see Tangies here, and Tangies are smaller and quite ordinary seals. They don't come ashore to live like people. And they don't care for music in the same way. Of course, there's no truth in those tales.'

'Mina?'

'Yes, dearie.'

'Grandma says your brains are made of hair.'

'Well, if Mrs. Finlay says so it must be true.'

I learned to read at Miss Squair's, and then we left Nairn for Derbyshire, for one of the ramshackle houses away from the sea where our lives were filled with a fox terrier called Kuti and a young wounded crow which Joan had rescued from some boys. Kuti lived with us for twelve years. Jim Crow lived for two years and a bit, partly in the house and partly on the top of a tall tree where he kept a lookout for my mother and would if he felt like it fly down and perch on her hat as she rode past on her bicycle. He died at about the age of two when I was seven.

My imagination while we lived inland was inspired by fire-engines, which were pulled at the gallop by horses and which flung behind them a stream of red coals; by the contemplation of sun-baked cowpats; and by the awful thought of wolves. I suppose most children are uncertain whether to feel relieved or disappointed when they first find out that wolves no longer live wild in England. Into my heart the thought of the wolf struck terror and romance. Old shepherds of the Bible, old shepherds of the Scottish Highlands, Mina's home, the fierce and dashing chases through the Russian steppes, where

desperate drivers cut the traces of one horse and sacrificed it to gain time, the lonely caves on mountain tops, the blackness of the forests, fear, curiosity, the terrifying desire to witness death – these dreams and a hankering for wild places set the wolf before me like a stark silhouette.

The thought of the seal was softer, but the mystery was the same. I had never seen one, but when I went back to Nairn they lived near me and the country people with whom I spent a lot of time at the age of eleven were in touch with them. The salmon fishermen who lived throughout the summer in a tarred bothy on the deserted shore talked often of them, of how they would damage the nets and destroy the salmon – not in hunger but in play. Bob MacDonald showed me three big salmon lying dead, each with a bite taken out of its neck.

'They live like toffs,' he told me. 'Nothing is good for them, only the tenderest part of the flesh. And often times they kill for the sake of killing – like a cat with mice. And one of them will do a hundred pounds of damage to the nets in a night.' He would follow such talk with stories that turned my stomach, describing in horrid detail the brutal revenge which he and his mates had taken on the individual seals they rarely caught. And if Douglas Macrae, the oldest of the fishermen, was there when these stories were told, he would look blank while the others laughed. 'He believes in the old wifie's tales,' Bob would whisper to me. 'He's from the West.' And asking no questions I gradually learned to associate the death of a seal with the death of the albatross in 'The Ancient Mariner', which we had learned by heart at school.

At this time in Nairn, living with my aunt and grandmother at Tigh na Rosan, I visited at various hours of the day the

two men who had undertaken to teach me – a tall, pale minister of the Episcopal Church, and a retired schoolmaster who had kindly, sun-reddened cheeks; but most of my time, from six o'clock in the morning, when I met Bob's father, Duncan MacDonald, and drove the milk cart for him, till four or five in the evening, when I fed the cart horses, was spent working in, or playing at, or dreaming of Sandwood Farm. My grandmother apologised daily to these men and their wives for the smell of cow-dung which she knew so well from my boots.

Tigh na Rosan had ceased to cause me surprise. Romance was made of the shadows and the wooden posts, the chains and buckets, the dark shapes hanging from the rafters, the bins of brown linseed cake, the dung and straw and hay, the steamy warmth, soft flanks and bony hips, warm udders, some with teats that were good to touch, some scabby or misshapen, the taste of the hot froth of new milk, the slow eyes of cattle and horses, the rhythmic munching, the coughing and the shuffling of the byre and stable. Death was only real at the gates of the shambles at Nairn, or by the strawstack when Bob had his hand round the throat of a cockerel. Violence was real in the muddy lane behind Trades Park where the black bull mounted a cow and I was planted with a stick to bar their way from the main road. Birth became real by the light of a hurricane lamp, while a cow moaned and bellowed as three men pulled the calf from her, leaning back with all their strength on a rope, as at a tug-of-war. The men who did this were part of a society which I feared and loved. I was happy with them often. Their activities and the places where they worked excited my mind and drew me into action, but because of

Tigh na Rosan I could never be one of them and could never get rid of the fear. I wanted to be with the women who made crowdie and huge girdle scones in the farmhouse, with the dustmen whose cart I tracked beyond the harbour to the waste by the sea where they tipped their load and sorted it unwatched, with the old leather-faced woman alone in her tarred hovel on the carse, or with the pigman two miles from her by himself with his ponies and pigs. When I drove the milk in the early morning from house to house through the narrow lanes of the fishertown, filling jugs on the doorsteps beside black huts where the herrings were smoked, and when I rattled up the High Street with my empty cans at too fast a trot, I felt for an hour or two that I was one of them. Driving the farm cart on the long, slow road to the distillery near Cawdor, I was one of them again. But Tigh na Rosan and the men who taught me came in between. And when I reached the distillery and waited with the other carts to be loaded with hot draff, my accent betrayed me and I was ashamed.

I suppose it is not an unusual thing to live two lives in that sense. Perhaps many children divide their attention between the people and animals that are familiar and near and those that are unapproachable, clouded with mysteries and dreaming fear. With me it was so. I liked well enough my aunt and grandmother and their friends who lived near Tigh na Rosan in what the shopkeepers liked to call 'the west end' of Nairn. Tigh na Rosan itself with its clarity and precision, with the way it had of tying one's mind to the pleasant aspects of the past, with its windows looking and its garden gate opening towards sea and sand that were not muddled, must have given the people who lived in it a sense of security of which they

were not conscious, and a routine whose value I at least saw only after I had lost it. This house and its people, and by slower stages even the farm animals, shed their enchantment as they drew close. The dustmen and the fishermen and farmers could not draw close. Nor could the wolves and the seals.

Next door to Sandwood Farm there was a big house called Sandwood. The farm I suppose had belonged to it in the days when gentlemen farmers flourished near the Moray Firth, but now the house belonged to my uncle, a business man who had a daughter called Patsy a few years younger than I. It was the summer time. It was somebody's birthday, I think – Patsy's probably – and as the shadows of the guests and trees stretched thin and long in the evening sun there was a dwarf like a witch in a home-made booth. Although I knew that the witch's feet, which fidgeted and stamped as she stood on the table on a level with my shoulders, were really my mother's hands concealed in black stockings and old shoes like slugs, and that the rest of the shortened body, the arms that could touch her ankles without stretching, her contorted voice and face, half hidden, half muffled behind a veil with spiders on it, was really made up of Mina's Miss Chalmers – my mother's mysterious and lovable cousin La – I was afraid. The dwarf witch gave presents to me and to my cousin Patsy.

Patsy had black, shining hair; her face, neck and arms were the colour of thick cream, and every now and then I was in love with her secretly. By looking in the prayer book of the Episcopal Church of Scotland, which was something like the Church of England, except that, as I gathered from the minister who taught me, it regarded the Archbishop of Canterbury with the same distrust as most Protestants allow to the Pope,

I had found out that cousins were permitted to marry.

In the garden under the fir trees there were raspberries and cream and cakes and milk and lemonade. There were musical chairs and tig and a child's version without the kissing of 'Here we go gathering nuts and may', and suddenly I saw outside myself that everyone was laughing, that everyone was happy, including me. And there were chocolate biscuits and cream cookies and everything was as good as it ever had been or could be. One of the grown-up people began to organise my favourite game, which we called 'French and English', a mock fight with lines like the battle lines in the books I then read, such as *Brigadier Gerard*. I was chosen for the French side – the only side that pleased me. Patsy was on my side. I could defend, or pretend to defend, her. The sun shone sideways through the trees, and the sky between the pine needles overhead was blue. My sister Joan was on my side too, and the boy who lived at Clach na Mara was one of those against us. Life on this earth at that moment was arranged like heaven.

There is a time during the plans for 'French and English' when the opposing armies are mixed together talking and unsorted. Nobody would notice one who disappeared. At the height of interest and bright anticipation I chose this moment to slink out. I went through the darkness of the pinewood to the broken gate that used to open on to the stackyard of Sandwood Farm. The old farmer, Duncan, was there beyond the gate with four of his sons and two of his daughters building the first of the oatstacks alongside the hay. Crouching out of sight, I watched them. They made jokes and laughed. I crawled away from them behind the fence. Scratching my knees on the dead twigs that lay on the ground, I crawled till I knew I was out of

sight of the farmyard and the party. Then I ran down across two fields towards the sea. I ran to the beach. Then I ran to the west, away from Nairn, away from Tigh na Rosan.

I stopped beside a whin bush and sat down. I played a solitary game of marbles in the sand with rabbit droppings hardened by the sun and I found a dead rabbit with a bloody hole on the nape of its neck which I knew had been made by a stoat. Then I walked on.

The sand was on my right, ribbed by the tide which had gone out, then the sea with calm ripples shaped the same, and further to my right, the cliffs of Cromarty mottled black and blue by the fine evening. The gap where the Firth lay was in a new place now, and looked unlike the place one saw from Tigh na Rosan. And the sea was flat, with no boats. The carse was flat too, and in the west ahead of me a black mass of cloud began to reduce the sunset to a block like the door of a furnace. I tied my sandshoes by their laces to my belt and walked along.

The carse, as it is called in Scotland, is a level strip of land by the sea, usually uncultivated, scattered with whin bushes and broom and clothed rather patchily with short grass cut close by the wind or cropped by sheep – I am not sure which. I hardly ever saw anything alive on the carse. Perhaps one man in the distance for a moment, perhaps four or five black-faced sheep, a lark rising rarely, curlews and plovers in the air; but on the ground I can remember only corpses and white skeletons and dead wood bleached like bone. The only house ahead of me now was the bothy where the salmon fishermen lived during the week. It would be empty now, I thought, because it was Saturday night.

The bothy was a low hut built of tarred sleepers and driftwood and roofed with sods of grass. A fine crop of wild flowers grew on the roof. The window was cracked and webbed over by spiders and there was a smell of tar and rotting fish. I looked in through the window, but could see nothing in the darkness but a small cracked mirror with a safety razor lying on it. I went cautiously to the door and pushed it open.

One shaft of dusty light stretched from the little window to the corner furthest from me, but all I could see from the door into the darkness were the ends of three wooden bunks built one above the other against the wall. There was a torn towel hanging from a nail and a picture of a naked woman hanging sideways from a pin. I imagined for a moment as I held my breath that there was someone in the room and drew back, pulling the door behind me inch by inch. After a few minutes, while I stood on the white pebbles watching the cloud grow wider and the evening darker, a struggle between fear and curiosity, between the fear of being caught in a place which I had no right to enter and the fear I had of giving in to fear, drove me in to the bothy again. I thought I might find a candle and matches, climb up to the top bunk and lie there to find out what it felt like to sleep without sheets away from Tigh na Rosan, on the carse alone. The beds at Sandwood Farm had no sheets on them. I had made sure of that.

Inside the hut it was like night by now and the smell of fish was strong. I went step by step silently across the wooden floor. And then I put my foot in something wet and warm.

I gasped, gulped air back down my throat and clenched my teeth into the back of my hand, and stood terrified on one foot, quickly thinking where it would be safe to put the other.

I tried it behind me; a step back, something moved and I felt an old man's hairy head against my ankle; to the side and I was in the sticky stuff again. I leapt to the table by the window and sat on it. The mirror and the razor clattered down. I screamed and put both hands over my eyes. I heard heavy breathing. The smell of fish grew worse and the bothy hotter. My mouth was full of spittle. I was sick between my legs on to the floor.

A minute or an hour later I was still on the table when I heard the pebbles crunch outside and looking up saw the outline of a man in the doorway, holding in his arms a bundle of driftwood.

'Who is that there?' he said.

'It's me,' I said.

'You're welcome,' he said.

'I've been sick,' I said, and when he didn't answer I said, 'over here on the floor.' He took a step into the bothy. 'I'm sorry,' I said politely. Something moved at his feet and he stooped down to look. He shouted in Gaelic, and leapt back, threw his bundle into the corner and seized a piece of it.

With five or six horrible blows he beat about him downwards, hitting by turns the boards and this soft thing. I heard scratching and shuffling and with the last blow a tearing moan that let loose in one hopeless breath more pain and horror, more unreasoning despair than my imagination could support. By the voice it was a woman, not a man. I flung myself past them and out through the door.

I climbed into the salmon boat to hide and I wept a lot there and tried to make up my mind what to do. But even here the fisherman did not let me be.

'Pass me yon rope there, ye,' he said, looking over the side. 'Man, man, there's no need to be afeared.'

I saw then that it was Douglas Macrae, the West Highland man. I crawled out and gave him the rope.

'There's an awful mess made i' the bothy,' he said, as we walked back towards it. 'The lads told me for sure they had her killed and laid inside on the floor so there'd be nobody to interfere wi' her till Monday. And there's me coming home to my tea, and yourself and herself inside in it. Och man, there's eneuch o' greeting – wipe your eyes, that's a boy.' He stood still and gave me a fishy brown handkerchief. 'Anyways, she's dead – dead as a crow. But the Dear knows a selchie is hard killed. Yourself and me will drag her out and lay her by the midden.'

'I didn't know it was a selchie,' I said.

'There's only one way to kill a selchie and that's hit her to the nose. The back o' the head's no use – she's all fat there. The lads hit her on the head, I'm thinking, and had her stunned only. The life came back into her that way, as ye saw for yourself.'

As we tied the rope round the dead body, I, standing in my bare feet on the bloody floor, tried to harden my heart to be like the old man. But it was action that stopped my tears. The body was thick and round, at least four feet long, and it took great strength to drag it out through the door across the pebbles to the midden. Its nose was battered, its eyes closed, its whole head clotted with blood, but its smooth belly shone sleek and even in the half light, a creamy fawn in colour. Its back and flanks were mottled with dark spots, haphazard. When we took the rope off, it rolled over on its back and the

two front flippers lay against its chest like hands – like human hands with five fingers webbed with skin. When the old man had his back turned, I felt the hands and stroked the long, round body.

He swilled the floor with buckets of water and swept it clean with a besom. He lit a fire with the dry wood he had gathered on the shore and we had mugs of tea and thick bread and butter by the light of a paraffin lamp. I noticed that he talked as quickly and as much with his mouth full as he did when it was empty, and I liked him better.

'Why did you kill the selchie?' I said.

'I wished it was not me that had the killing of her.'

'Then why did you?'

'Did ye no' see her lying half alive there by the side o' the bed? It's me that's to sleep in the bed and if I put her out the door the way she was, alive, she would travel down to the sea again maybe and the lads would be at me o'Monday morning, thinking I sold her for the skin.'

'You said it was unlucky to kill a seal.'

'And so it is, the more if she's a selchie . . .'

'Then why . . .'

'The others had her killed afore me, did ye no' see that? It's a gey uncanny sicht to see a selchie on this coast. She was gone astray, I'm thinking. She's a stranger this side. She's come out o' the West some way. She's like myself.' He looked across the table at me and stopped chewing. 'It's no' an easy thing to live wi' strangers. Now if ye was at home in England, ye'd soon find yourself.'

'I'm not English.'

'Is that so? To hear ye speaking I thocht ye was. But wherever

ye come from, it's no' the same away. No. No. In the West, now, folks are – well, a man's not so hard on himself for work nor money. If a man has his living fishing salmon he'll not be thinking of threepence here and sixpence there to be got from a day's work skinning a selchie.'

'If he thinks it's unlucky he wouldn't. I expect he'd . . .'

'It's no' the skin that has the bad luck in it. The skin is lucky. Look here at this.'

He handed me an old tobacco pouch made from a skin with short hair like the hair of the body by the midden.

'That pouch there has great luck in it. It is made of the paw of a selchie, the right paw. I had that pouch there of my father and he had it of his father and he made it. He was a seal-killer, my father's father. I saw him once. He had a round cap, too, of the skin of a selchie. I saw that cap. Would you like a jammy piece?'

'Yes, please.'

'There was men that had their trade killing seals those days, when folk did use to press the oil out o' the blubber and burn it in lamps. There ye are now. Pass out the jam from the kist there, that's the boy. And my grandfather was one. But I did hear my father say he was oftentimes afraid because an awful thing did happen to one that was before him in the trade – one by the name of Angus Ruadh of Mallaig. Now the skin ye have in your hand there is never twice the same. How would you say does it feel?'

'It feels nice. It's like . . .'

'Show me.' He took it back and stroked it and began to fill his pipe. 'Aye. It's sleekit now. The hairs is lying even down like the hairs of a sleepy cat. But in the morning likely

they'll be standing like the bristles of a sow. Did ye ever hear tell of another skin that would live that way, after one hundred years?'

'What happened to Angus Ruadh?'

'That pouch there will change its colour, too, following on the tides.'

'What happened to the man?'

'Och, there's no truth in it.' He looked at me closely, shifting the lamp. I saw the deep lines in his face and a kind look in his eyes. I can now imagine what he saw in mine. 'It's no use to frighten you, and you to walk home the length of the carse in the darkness.'

'I'm not frightened.'

'Ye was frightened it's not long since.'

'Anyway, I'll wait for the moon before I go.'

'The moon will be up before midnight. All right so. "What happened to him?" ye say. Well. Well, it happened one night when this Angus Ruadh came home to his bothy, as it might be here, and laid him down on the bunk, as it might be myself coming home with the salmon, he was wakened by a stranger at the door, and this stranger says to him, darkening the door, "Is your name Angus Ruadh, the seal-killer?" he says.

'"That is my name," says Angus. "And what's your name?" he says. "You look to be a stranger."

'"Never mind what's my name," says this one. "I am here to talk business," says he, "and I've no time to waste," he says like an east-coast man.

'"You're welcome anyways," says Angus Ruadh, the seal-killer. "Come in," he says, "and close the door and I'll wet the tea for you presently."

"'I thank you," says the stranger, "But I am pressed for time and the horse I have here does not like to stand. I'm come from a man that has money in his hand for you. Can you get him a hundred sealskins?"

"'A hundred sealskins!" says Angus Ruadh. "That's a terrible number of sealskins," says he.

"'He'll take what you have in the house and give ye a year's contract after."

"'I'll best talk with him so," says Angus Ruadh. "Ye can bring me to your master at first light in the morning." But the stranger says no, it must be this night. "Ye can get up behind me on my horse," he says, "and I will bring ye to my master," says he.

'Well, Angus Ruadh the seal-killer got up on the horse behind him and they took the road so fast that the wind that was in the back of them could not keep pace with them and the wind that was before them could not make away from them. And they came to a place where there was a great black cliff that overhung the sea four hundred feet below. And the horse stood by the cliff's edge and they got down off him, the stranger and Angus Ruadh.

"'Are we gone astray?" says Angus Ruadh.

"'No, Angus Ruadh," says the stranger, and coming close before him he says, "We are here." Angus Ruadh, the seal-killer, made to look about him, but the stranger was always before him. "And where is the person you spoke of?" says Angus Ruadh.

"'You'll see," says the stranger, and he came close and he took Angus in his two arms below the oxters with a strong grip and he pressed his body close to him and blew a long

breath down into his mouth. And they were at the cliff's edge. And the stranger lifted Angus Ruadh and dived with him together down, down into the sea.

'They dived down into the darkness of the sea. They sank deep, and deep down on the sand and seaweed of the bottom they came to a door. Now the stranger opened this door and himself and Angus Ruadh walked in. And Angus Ruadh saw there a lot of rooms and a great multitude of folk that were greeting sorely and wailing. Says he to himself, "I am here now for the rest of my days, for if I try to escape I'll be drowned surely." And says he, "If it's here I'm to live my days, with no green land or heather, and these folk wailing, it is not long my days will be."

'Some o' the folks did feel for him, in spite of their own sadness, and three or four out o' them did try to give him comfort, but he could think of nothing but his own black thoughts. And suddenly the stranger was before him with a long sharp dirk in his hand. Angus Ruadh the seal-killer prayed mercy for his life.

'"Did ye ever see this knife before?" says the stranger to him.

'He looked at it. "I did," says he. "That's my knife," says he, "that you have there in your hand. It's my own knife that I lost this day hunting on the rocks."

'"Is that so?" says the man. "Well, I mean you no harm."

'"I stuck that knife into a seal," says Angus Ruadh, "and the seal escaped with it into the water."

'"That seal was my father," says the stranger.

'"A seal your father?" says Angus Ruadh.

'"He's lying here in the back room," says the stranger. "He's

very sick and like to die," says he, "and it's only you can cure him. And I knew well," he says, "that there was no way to bring you to him only by a trick, and that," says he, "is all there is about the hundred sealskins."

'He showed him to his father within in the room and he was lying on the bed with a huge cut in his hindquarters. And there were more folk there about the bed and they told Angus Ruadh he must close the lips of the wound with his own hand; only his hands would do. And this he did. And immediately the wound was healed and the old seal rose up from his bed in perfect health. And there was great rejoicing round about.

'"Now," says the stranger to Angus Ruadh, the seal-killer, "if you will make an oath before us now never to maim or kill another seal as long as you do live I will take you back to the land where you do live. For it is not good," says he, "to live among strangers."

'Angus Ruadh swore a solemn oath and they went out the door. And the stranger took him again with his two arms below the oxters and gripped him the length of his body with a strong grip and they rose together up to the surface of the sea and when they stood together on the cliff's edge, four hundred feet above, the stranger blew a long breath down into his mouth. Well, the horse was standing there and the stranger put him up behind the saddle, and if they travelled fast when they came towards the cliff, they did travel twice as fast away from it, so fast that the wind that was in the back of them could not keep pace with them and the wind that was before them could not make away from them.

'So did this stranger put Angus Ruadh the seal-killer down at the cheek of his own door, and he made him a present

which did keep him till he died without need to work. The present which the stranger made to Angus Ruadh the seal-killer was a bag of gold – Dane's gold. And that's what I have of the story.'

The search party did not find me till the morning when I was on my way home, because I decided to sleep on the top bunk. I did not sleep much. I heard a horse and cart in the night and low voices talking and when I went out in the morning the selchie had gone from the midden. Neither the fisherman nor I spoke about it, but I knew he was snoring when the cart came and went, and I guessed by his silence that his turn had come to be afraid.