

Chapter One

The beginning.

There was nothing to warn Bill that the day he viewed from his bedroom window as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes was one that would change his life forever.

Yes, the warmth of the morning foretold what would be—for Campbeltown—a rare heat. The early sun beamed low over the Loch through a blue, cloud-free sky, promising that the day would soon gain in temperature, as it gained height. Yes, he felt a strange sort of calmness, a feeling that—if he had thought about it at all—he would have put down to the fact that he knew just what he was going to do with his new day.

Apart from the weather, the only other thing which was unusual, and over which he could rejoice, was that his normally noisy young brother, Donald, was still sound asleep. The only evidence that he was there at all was the sight of his mop of tousled black hair sticking out of the short gap between pillow and blanket.

Bill crept quietly downstairs as soon as he had pulled on a pair of suitably old and comfortable, short breeks.

He tiptoed as quietly as he could out of the front door and across the open landing to the toilet, which his family shared with the people next door. There he sat for a time, reading from the squares of newspaper placed there by his mother. Toilet paper was a long way off in the future. The cache on the other side of the toilet belonged to the people next door and Bill occasionally took a perverse delight in using some of their paper! He then went back inside the house to give his hands and face the usual

young lad's perfunctory 'lick and a promise' from the brass cold-water tap at the black cast-iron kitchen sink.

"What are you doing up so early on a Sunday morning? Could you not wait till a decent hour before getting everyone roused? You're not going to the Sunday school with these trousers on, you'll affront me. Go and change them right now! Where do you think you are going at this time of day anyway?"

This mixture of question and instruction came from his bleary-eyed mother, Jean, as she surveyed her elder son from the warm comfort of her set-in bed in the kitchen. This tirade, of course, announced that she was now wide awake—a fact that dismayed Bill greatly

"Would you like a cup of tea and a slice of toast, Mam?" asked Bill, hoping that the offer would make her forget to question him further on his intentions. He lit the gas ring and grill on the old cooker while he spoke and then, as he started to fill the kettle he continued, "How many herring did Dad catch last week?"

This was a further attempt to allay the suspicions that he could see growing in his mother's eyes.

"Yes, I'd love a nice cup of tea and toast. And how would I know what herring he had? I didn't get a letter yesterday and even if I did, it would have been posted in the middle of the week. What are you up to anyway? It's not like you to be up so early in the morning, especially on a Sunday."

"I just thought that you could have been speaking to someone who might have known what the fishing was like," Bill continued. "Is this grill ready to put the bread under, or will I let it heat up a wee bit yet?"

"Let it heat a wee bit, it'll be red hot when it is ready—and don't cut that bread too thick, I don't like your usual doorstep slices!" The last was added as Bill took the loaf from the chipped white enamelled breadbox, and started rummaging in an untidy drawer in the kitchen table for the breadknife.

"I asked where you are going. Don't think I've forgotten!"

Seeing that further prevarication was useless, Bill reluctantly faced his mother and told her, as nonchalantly as he could, that he had arranged to go off early to Kilchousland—a favourite sandy bay which lay to the north of Campbeltown—for the day, with his pals.

“You can go to Kilchousland after Sunday school but not before, and that’s final!”

Bill knew that protests would gain him nothing when his mother spoke in such tones, but he couldn’t help trying.

“But Mam it’ll not be worth going then,” he whined. “We’re walking from here on the shore road, along by Macringan’s Point. It’s a five-mile hike and if I don’t get away soon, it won’t be worth my while going at all. Please Mam, just this once?”

“You heard what I said. The kettle is singing now, it’ll soon be boiling. Put the bread under the grill; it’s hot enough now.”

The beauty of the morning seemed somehow to have dulled suddenly and tears of self-pity were not far away, but Bill did as he was told.

“Look,” said his mother, weakening—as mothers always do—when she saw the glistening tears start suddenly in his eyes, “I’ll make you a nice piece, and you can go as soon as you come home, but you have to go to the Sunday school first, and that’s definite.”

Sensing a possible compromise and hoping to lessen the blow to his plans, Bill pleaded; “Let me go straight from Sunday school, Mam, without coming home. I can take the piece with me and it’ll save a lot of time. My pals will be at Kilchousland hours before me, as it is.”

His mother reluctantly agreed to this, having first extracted a promise that he would take care of the new breeks into which he now had to change, and that he would not go swimming without supervision—“You’re only twelve, far too young to be in the water on your own.”

A knock on the door heralded the arrival of his bosom pal Robert, a lad whose parents were not so enthusiastic about their son’s religious instruction. Robert had no brothers or sisters, so Bill filled this gap in his life.

Bill quietly explained his predicament to Robert as they stood on the doorstep. “I wasn’t worried too much about missing Sunday school, Rab, but my Mam says I have to go. I thought she’d forget, or that I could sneak out before she wakened.”

“Tell her you’re going, and then just plunk it, Bill!” was his friend’s whispered solution to the problem.

The thought of dodging the commanded Sunday duty was something that instantly filled Bill with a dread of Divine retribution, an understandable reaction from one whose Scripture teacher’s faith was firmly based upon the Calvinistically wrathful and jealous God of the Old Testament. Taking a day off was perhaps forgivable—only just—but lying to his mother on top of that would surely lead to punishment of the direst sort, from on high.

“No Rab, I’d better not. I’ll maybe see you at the shore later. You just carry on.”

After Robert had left, Bill finished his breakfast chores, a task for which he now spitefully wished he had never volunteered.

When he had finished and while his mother was sipping her tea, he climbed slowly back upstairs to his sparsely furnished attic bedroom, from whence he wistfully gazed over the roofs of the houses that lay between him and the still blue waters of the Loch. The air above the houses, he saw, was already beginning to shimmer slightly in the morning heat. Life was very unfair, he reasoned, as he indulged himself in the bittersweet descent into the mire of self-pity.

Tears were once more not far away.

God, if he were an understanding God, would never have sent such a perfect day on a Sunday, he argued. The more he thought along these lines, the more rebellious he became. This God, he now clearly saw, had deliberately devised all of the hateful things in Bill’s life.

School—a waste of time!

Homework—an extension of his enforced incarceration in school! Why could he not do that which he desired above all else, leave school and be a fisherman? What was the worth of some dim remembrance of Shakespeare’s plays, to a fisherman?

Stupid mathematics had never caught one single herring!

These mutinous thoughts gave sustenance to the seed that had been planted by Rab, and thus grew in his young mind the thought that—for the first time ever—he would take the enormous step of defying not only his mother, but his God also. To strengthen his rebellious resolve, he worked at convincing himself that he was not really doing anything wrong, and that he would make it all up to his Maker in due course. One day off, that was all that he desired.

The fateful decision made, he felt cheered but strangely apprehensive as he took off the old breeks and put on a better pair. He went back downstairs to where his mother had got out of bed and was busying herself around the small kitchen, clad in a threadbare woollen dressing gown.

“You’re early enough for Sunday school, Bill,” was her critical comment as he appeared.

“Comb your hair, and let me see you. I hope you washed at the back of your ears, young man! Hmm, your shoes could do with a lick of polish. Take them off. I won’t have folk saying that you went out of this house dirty.”

She too had been having remorseful thoughts to herself in the hour since her first-born had gone upstairs. She was torn between her love for him and the desire to please him, and her knowledge that the ‘right thing’ had to be done. She sat now on a low stool, bent and started to polish his shoes lovingly.

Bill looked down on his mother’s head as it moved in time with her busy careworn hands, and a great and hurting feeling of love came over him. How could he possibly harm someone who cared so much for him? ‘Honour thy father and thy mother,’ was the instruction in the Good Book. He knew instinctively that she had, with the enforced long absences of his father at the fishing, been both mother and father to him and Donald.

The peace of this tender moment was shattered by the noisy arrival of his brother into the kitchen. Too young for Sunday school, Donald—with his usual brotherly

desire to torment his sibling—announced how sorry he was that “Poor Bill,” as he put it, would miss some of the rare sunshine.

“You’ll enjoy being inside in the nice cool church though,” he concluded just before his mother stopped him.

That verbal assault from his brother was enough to tip the scales once more, in favour of plunking the Sunday school.

“There’s your penny for the collection, and there are your pieces, I put a nice bit of cheese on them,” announced his mother. “Take care of these good breeks now, you should really come home and change them by rights, but I’ll trust you this time. Make sure you are back before teatime, or you’ll be in big trouble and remember, no swimming unless there are grown-ups there.”

Bill ran back up the stairs to the bedroom. Beside his bed was the small tin box that contained all his treasures. A small penknife and a hand magnifying glass were transferred into his pocket—he rarely went anywhere without them. He glanced into the wee diary—three years out of date now—into which he had laboriously copied all the wise sayings that had impressed him and helped form his young mind. His hope was that chance would lead him to find something that would justify the course to which he was now all but committed.

‘The moving finger writes, and having writ moves on; nor all thy piety and wit can call it back to cancel half a line, nor all thy tears wash out one word of it,’ he read from the first page he looked at.

Dismayed, he turned to another, only to see the old Arab proverb, *‘Take what you want,’ said Allah. ‘Take what you want—and pay for it.’*

That’s all a load of stupid old rubbish, thought Bill defiantly, as he threw the book back into the box. He didn’t need anyone’s approval for his actions. He was old enough to make up his own mind!

Downstairs again, he pocketed the sandwiches that his mother had made for him, but had to run the gauntlet of her embrace before gaining the waiting world outside.

“Take care, son, and remember to be home on time.” The words wounded him as he thought of his forthcoming treachery to her.

The north-facing outside stairs led down into a large back courtyard that was bordered to the east and west by high walls. Opposite the dismal grey back of the tenement building the single-storey washing houses stood; one for every four families. There his mother did the washing every Tuesday. These wash-houses completed the enclosure of the back yard.

Bill ran across this yard below his mother’s kitchen window, through the close that led to the front of the building, and on to freedom.

Down the brae he ran, forcing himself to abandon all his misgivings, and instead to think only of the pleasures which lay ahead.

He passed his maternal granny’s house on the brae and then, as the ground levelled off, he turned left into the street where his other granny lived. Still he stayed on course for the Sunday school lest his mother—or more likely his brother—was watching from the bedroom window of their house.

Out of sight of his home Bill slowed to a stroll, beginning to feel the heat, which the clear sky had been promising.

There were few people around yet. It was too early for any of the Protestant worshippers to be about, and all the good Catholics were already at their devotions. He would have to get a move on however, he reckoned, before the people who lived in the big houses along the shore on the north side of the Loch took to the road on their way to church. It would be just like his luck to run into someone who would question him on his intentions. Maybe one of the Sunday school teachers lived along there and would comment on his sighting, to the lady who took his class.

These guilty thoughts sped his feet again and he ran, with the effortless ease of youth, along the road bordering the Loch, towards the path to Kilchousland. Not till he had gained this path and had passed all the houses, did he once more slow to a dawdle and take note of all that was going on around him.

He stopped to watch a busy kestrel hovering over some gorse bushes on the inland side of his path looking, he thought, for a late breakfast or an early lunch. A skylark, invisible high above, poured out its heart in song. The seabirds, he noted, seemed on the other hand to be affected by the heat as they floated aimlessly on the lethargic water at the mouth of the Loch—a Loch whose glassy surface was devoid of any trace of even the faintest air of wind.

Reaching a burn that was bridged by a single plank of wood Bill drank from its yet cool waters and lay down for a spell on the soft young bracken that grew beside it. Lulled by the whispering of the slow moving water close by his resting-place, he dozed quietly.

The Church bells wakened him.

Even from two miles away, Bill recognised the deep, sonorous, comforting baritone of the Lochend and the Longrow Churches. The Lorne Street and the Highland Parish bells were a little more highly pitched, and the Free Church had a sort of urgency about its tenor call that was at odds with the heavy somnolence of the day.

The sounds also awakened the feelings of guilt that lay not far below the surface of Bill's conscience, but with some effort he quickly consigned them whence they had come.

He unwrapped the sandwiches that his mother had so recently made, and munched on one of them thoughtfully.

There was something bothering him.

Not remorse for what he was doing, nothing to do with the fact that he was in defiance of his mother and his God. No, this was something that, in his drowsy state, he just couldn't recognise.

He shook himself, took another drink of water, and continued slowly on his way toward Kilchousland, still slightly troubled. Though he had no way of realising it, the fateful moment, his time of change, was very near now.

The morning air grew still warmer as the sun climbed, and the urgency of Bill's resolve to join his pals waned somewhat under its beneficent but soporific rays.

He wandered slowly down to the rocky water's edge hard by Macringan's Point, and sat on the rock bordering a shallow tidal pool, gazing over the burnished sea towards the great whale-like mass of Davaar Island, which stood silent guard over the entrance to the Loch.

The peace and beauty of the scene, when added to the heat-induced lethargy, caused his thoughts to slowly wander back over the events of the morning and he wondered if his Maker would somehow punish him for what he now clearly perceived as his wickedness.

He recalled the dark evening last winter when he, idle in company with some of his pals, had openly defied God by repeating aloud all of the profanities they had often heard, but had never until then articulated. He had waited in trembling fear for a bolt of lightning from heaven to strike him dead for his sins that night and he recalled his great relief and puzzlement, when nothing happened.

He lay down on his stomach by the sea pool, gazing into its cool waters, watching the baby fish as they, startled by his movements, darted to new positions they perceived as being safer. Now they hovered again under the sheltering fronds of seaweed, their tiny fins shimmering in the reflected sunlight. Cautious crabs, their presence betrayed only by their stirrings, lurked—trusting in their camouflage—on the sand close by the stones under which they would scuttle for shelter at the first sign of movement anywhere.

What happened next was something that Bill would never quite come to terms with in his lifetime.

He lay still, in a state somewhere between sleep and waking, his mind barely active. Why, he wondered, were the wee fish scared into hiding? He felt sure that they had some sort of intelligence but their heads were so tiny compared to his, that any brain they possessed must be minuscule.

The answer—that this behaviour was bred into them—eased into his somnolent mind without any conscious effort on his behalf. He sensed that this was the correct reply to the question that his subconscious thought had posed.

‘I wonder,’ he asked himself, ‘If I would get answers to the other problems that bother me?’

Slowly and lazily he reviewed his life to date. What were the major doubts regarding his future?

School came immediately to mind. Why did he have to continue learning those things that he knew full well would be of no value to him in his life as a fisherman?

Answers to the unspoken questions formed quietly within his mind. He became certain that he would leave Campbeltown and would be a successful fisherman. He also gained the realisation that he should work harder at school. Learning was important.

Long afterwards, thinking on the events of the day Bill could never be quite sure of all that happened that warm morning. Perhaps it was all a part of this mysterious ‘growing up’ he had heard about. At the time it happened he felt quite relaxed, and knew somehow that this inner ‘voice’ was a gift of some kind. Later on he would not be certain if he had fallen asleep in the hot sun and dreamed it all or—and this he would come to think was much more likely—if he just happened to be ‘tuned in’ to something in his inner mind, some ancient long-forgotten power. In time he would learn more of the gift of ‘second-sight’ and would believe that he had been given an insight to this mystic power.

Bill woke up so gradually that he wasn’t sure when the dream-like state ended, and conscious thought began again. It was still hot where he lay but his rocky couch now felt hard and uncomfortable so he sat up, and then stood.

When he looked around he saw that he was still alone on the shore, but towards the Brown Head on the Arran coast he could now see two sails shimmering in the heat, the only signs that he was not alone in the world. The boats he saw were drifting with the tide rather than sailing, he reckoned, but such was his love for the sea that he would have given a lot to be there with them, drifting or not.

Bill put his hands into his pockets.

This was a mistake. His idle fingers found the unaccustomed shape of a penny piece, the one his mother had given him for the collection plate. The find brought him back to the present with a jolt!

He wondered if this whole episode with the voice was a result of worrying over his disobedience to his mother, and his fear of what the outcome of plunking the Sunday school might be. Had the voice been real, or had he imagined the whole episode?

He reckoned that the best thing he could do in order to get back to normality was to continue on his way to Kilchousland—it wasn't too far away now. There, hopefully, he would meet up with Rab, and the rest of his pals.

Bill set off briskly on his interrupted walk along the shore, his mind still in turmoil over what had happened to him.

Why and when would he leave his place of birth to go somewhere unknown? Would he have a choice in the matter, or would it all just happen? The more he thought about it the more he became convinced that it was all a dream, and that he would gradually forget it.

These thoughts filled his mind to the exclusion of just about all else until the sound of happy young voices at play made him realise that he was close to his pals, a realisation that put all of these deep thoughts out of his mind for some time to come.

Off came the good breeks and the shirt and naked, in the confidence that his pals would not be in the water in the buff if there were any spying eyes around them, he joined the others in one of their favourite summer pastimes of feeling with their feet for the wonderfully camouflaged flounders which might be lying on the sandy bottom. The rest of the hot day passed in the innocent play of children who had not yet been indoctrinated into the wicked ways of the world, and it was with great reluctance—and empty stomachs—that the happy band finally got dressed and set off on the long walk home.

During the rest of that summer Bill wondered on several quiet occasions, just what had happened to him as he lay on the rocky shore, but of course he never reached any conclusion other than that it must be part of ‘growing up.’

Autumn came, and the lengthening nights brought different attractions, games in which all the children who lived in and around the tenement joined. Almost all of these games were started by forming two teams, one of which—the hunters—sought to catch and then secure members of the opposition in the den, which was usually agreed to be the doorway of the Co-operative shop just across the road from their homes.

The tenement was ideally placed for this kind of play. Whilst the front of it looked on to the street that led to the town, the rear was bounded, behind the washhouses, by a hill whose steep slopes were liberally adorned with bushes and small trees, terrain which was well suited for the concealment of young fugitives. Almost the only shortcoming of this playground was that it was too close to home and because of this they were never out of earshot of their mothers’ unwelcome call to “Come home, it’s bedtime.”

This was the time when the first awakening of feelings for the opposite sex started to develop in Bill’s young mind. No education was given on this subject either at home or in school, so all the knowledge that he and his peers gleaned came from older boys and was, Bill would later discover, more often than not figments of their informants’ over-fertile imaginations!

What was certain was that during the games they played he now sought out the company of certain girls to whom he had gradually started to feel greatly attracted, girls who had—not so long ago—been thought objects worthy only of derision, by him and his pals.

One of them in particular, Sophie Smith, appeared to respond more actively than any of the others to his innocent advances. She laughed more loudly than anyone else when he joked, cheered him on when he played football and more importantly, she

seemed as keen as he was to cuddle cosily close together when they were hiding from their would-be captors, in a dark corner, during a game of hide and seek.

Surely she didn't feel the same strange urges as he? Did she feel the great warmth that seemed to him to be generated between them in the dark closeness of their as yet innocent embrace?

Girls, he reasoned, would never think the same dark thoughts as the ones that invaded his mind during that delicious period between waking and sleeping, as he lay in his warm bed. What did girls really look like, he wondered? What was the mysterious physical difference in their bodies? Did Sophie know more of this mysterious sex business than he did and if so, would she be prepared to share this knowledge? He wished that he had had a sister. That would have removed his ignorance on the physical difference, he thought—and then was immediately filled with shame at having had such base imaginings.

Part of the answer came one day from the most unlikely source.

Rab and he were exploring a wood near their home, accompanied by Kate, Sophie's big sister. Kate was two years older than either Rab or Bill, and usually sought the company of more mature boys.

"I'm just going behind this bush for a minute; don't you be peeking," she announced.

Something in her voice gave the lie to this admonition. Rab and Bill avoided eye contact as they followed her and then stood and looked on in embarrassed amazement as Kate squatted beside the bush, pulled down her underwear, and proceeded to urinate.

Bill was shocked at first by what appeared to be a total lack of any appendages in the area between her legs, but bending for a closer look revealed that there was in fact that thing—more an omission than anything else in Bill's opinion—to which the older boys had slyly referred.

“I told you not to look!” she cried in what was obviously mock anger and, having waited until they had seen all there was to see she then continued—“You will have to do the same now, I want to have a look at you.”

Rab and Bill took to their heels at that and fled, pursued by Kate’s mocking laughter.

It was an incident that they hid deep in their minds and never referred to again, but now they both knew just what the physical difference between the male and female bodies consisted of. They were no wiser however as to just what the strange urges in their blood meant, or of how these differences could be exploited.

Winter came.

With the cold and rainy West Coast weather that accompanied this season, there was less scope for playing outside.

Because of the enforced absence of his father at the fishing, Bill spent a great deal of his formative time with an old fisherman, Donald Black, who lived alone in the same tenement.

‘Ban’ is Gaelic for ‘white’ so Donald, because of his strong mop of white hair, was called ‘Ban’ by all his acquaintances. He had never married, but had an almost inexhaustible amount of patience with his young friends. He was a large man, who had obviously been very powerful in his youth. His huge red beak of a nose gave rise to the rumour that he was very fond of whisky, but in all the time that Bill spent with him, he saw no evidence to support this theory. Ban lived alone in a sparsely furnished room-and-kitchen, the door to which was in the close that served as entry to the back of the tenement.

Although Ban’s habit of occasionally hanging some of his washing out to dry at his front window scandalised some of the ladies who lived in the tenement, their real problem was with his hobby, which involved keeping ferrets in his coal store! Ban used them when catching rabbits, a pastime that he pursued less often with his advancing years.

“Did you see these long-johns and semmits hanging right beside the close-mouth yesterday? It’s an absolute disgrace!”

This was a common complaint when two or more of the gossiping tenants met, and was often followed by a long discourse about the ferrets—of which the ladies seemed to have an unreasonable fear—and what they perceived as his lack of personal cleanliness.

Ban’s dress varied little from day to day. He habitually wore stout boots on his feet and his heavy trousers were of the variety known locally as ‘fearnoughts.’ They showed not the faintest vestige of a crease down the centres of the legs and were constructed of such heavy material that they gave the impression that they would stand erect by themselves. The entrances to the voluminous pockets, into which Ban’s hands were habitually deeply buried, were, unlike normal trousers, parallel to the waistband. An ancient navy blue fisherman’s jersey completed the rig that remained almost the same regardless of season, although he would don a well-worn tweed jacket on a cold winter day. His flat cap seldom left his head. On a warm summer day, when he was asked if the jersey was not making him feel very hot, he would smilingly reply, “If it keeps out the cold, it’ll keep out the heat too!”

In Ban’s company Bill gained a great deal of knowledge that would serve him well in his life as a fisherman, and also absorbed much of the ancient culture and folklore of the fishing community into which he had been born.

He learned the basics of net mending, and was able to splice ropes with confidence long before he left school.

Learning the art of mending nets was accomplished with the help of an old piece of netting that Ban had obtained somewhere. He would simply tear holes in it and tell Bill to “get on with it now!” When he became reasonably good at making simple repairs, Ban introduced him to ‘stilters.’ This was when a mesh that consisted of four sides was corrupted, either by design or by accident, and now had either five or three sides.

A stilter, or as Ban's accent would have it, 'steelter,' was used when taking a gore out of a net. A triangular piece of net would be cut from a regularly shaped panel, and both sides were then mended together. A gore, Ban explained, helped to shape the net into a bag, when in the water. If one was made accidentally when, for example, putting in a new piece of netting, it would cause problems that would require a great deal of work to correct.

The taboos of life at sea were well explained to him also, and this learning would stay with him for all of his life.

Salmon, pigs, rats and rabbits, were all forbidden words, being replaced by 'red fish,' 'dourkeys,' 'long-tails' and 'bunnies.' Here he heard for the first time the oft repeated tale of the young lad who, when the teacher wrote 'pig' on the blackboard during a spelling lesson in the primary school replied, "Dourkey!" when asked what that spelt. His father, he explained to the baffled teacher, would be very unhappy if he was to say the other word! Swan Vestas matches and white handled knives were banned from fishing boats, as were ministers of religion and most women—red haired ones being considered particularly unlucky. The bad luck that would certainly be brought on by the accidental spilling of salt had to be forestalled by throwing a pinch of the spill over one's right shoulder, but one had to use the left hand to do so. If anyone turned back to their home, having forgotten something, they had to sit for a few moments before leaving the house again. To pick up the item that had been forgotten and to leave with it immediately would certainly bring bad luck.

"And see when you've finished eating a boiled egg," said Ban, "You need to put holes in the bottom of the empty shells. If you don't the witches will paddle out to sea in them in a storm, and sink fishing boats!"

If a jersey was by chance put on back-to-front, it had to remain that way. Taking it off and replacing it the proper way would bring bad luck. If something was accidentally broken, two matches had to be broken at once. Breakages, Ban told Bill, always came in threes.

When going to sea, turning the boat ‘widdershins,’ or ‘against the sun’—in other words anti-clockwise—in the harbour, was to be avoided at all costs. Shoes, particularly new ones, must never be placed on the table and sticking a knife into the mast was just as certain to bring a gale as was whistling, aboard the boat. If a proscribed word was accidentally used, grasping metal of some form whilst at the same time crying out—“Cold iron!”—might possibly compensate for the sin.

Bill was also made aware of the age-old respectability of the fishing profession.

“Where did the good Lord go when He wanted Disciples, eh?”

Ban often asked this rhetorical question and Bill soon learned not to answer it immediately, thereby giving Ban the opportunity he sought—to provide the answer himself. “I’ll tell you where He went, He went to the Sea of Galilee where He knew He would find fishermen; that’s what He did, and don’t you ever forget it!”

Ban was, in common with most of his breed, a very superstitious man, and he also had a deep-seated belief in the supernatural. This might have appeared to be in conflict with his professed Christianity, but in fact it showed the simple acceptance of his upbringing. There was a definite, if somewhat mixed-up link between his forbears’ primitive Pagan beliefs, and his current claim to being Christian. He moved easily on the strangely common ground between Christian spirituality and the ancient religions. Bill saw instances of this for himself in his Catholic friends when they blessed themselves. More often than not this was as much as a good luck invocation, as in prayer.

Ban talked of ghosts or ‘bockans,’ as his Gaelic upbringing would have him say, in a comfortable, matter-of-fact sort of way. They seemed to be a familiar, in-built part of his everyday life and he acted as though everyone else shared his beliefs.

He took great delight in sitting round his meagre coal fire in the dim gaslight that he retained in preference to the new-fangled but colder-seeming electric light, on a dark winter night with some of his many friends, regaling them with tales of the supernatural. This delight was only surpassed when another around the fire would

take up the role of storyteller, especially if they recounted one that he had never heard before or—more likely—one that he had heard, and had forgotten.

Bill used to crouch quiet and unseen on the perimeter of these gatherings, absorbing the deliciously frightening atmosphere. One night he was alone with Ban.

“Tell me one of your bockan stories,” he pleaded.

“No, you are far too young for that,” replied Ban. “Your mother wouldn’t be pleased with me if she heard that I was filling your head with stories of bockans.”

“Do you really believe in ghosts, Ban?”

“Well now, my boy, that’s a big question for a wee man. I would just say that you’ll find out all these things for yourself when you get older. Just you keep an open mind, and remember that nothing is impossible, and that no-one knows everything.”

“But Ban, I have heard a lot of stories in here, are they all just a lot of rubbish?”

“No, they’re not all rubbish. I’ve told you that there are some things in this life that we cannot explain very easily. Just you bide your time and you’ll find out what is what.”

Bill sat quietly for a while, looking pensively and deeply into the glowing coals of the fire. Funny, he thought, how they took on all sorts of strange shapes—swirling and changing as you watched.

“You’re very quiet,” said Ban after a while. “Is there something bothering you?”

Bill thought for a long time before answering. The fact that he had never heard Ban mock anyone, nor take advantage of his or her inexperience helped him to decide that he would confide his doubts.

“Something strange happened to me last summer, Ban, and I’m not sure about it. I’ve wondered about it for a long time now, and it bothers me a lot. Will you not laugh at me if I tell you what happened?”

What on earth is coming here, wondered the old man. He resolved that whatever it was, he would respect the feelings of the young lad who sat staring into the fire.

“No, my boy. You know I’m not in the habit of laughing at anyone, nor of telling tales about them.”

Bill waited for a long time, and then he spoke. He told old Ban exactly what had happened on that summer day when he had plunked the Sunday school.

“Am I going daft, do you think?” he concluded, turning his worried face to Ban at last.

There was a silence that seemed to Bill to last forever, then the old man spoke.

“I believe I know what might have happened to you, my boy, but you are not to bother about it. Some people are given a gift of second sight, which means that they can sometimes foretell the future. I’m not saying that this is what happened to you, exactly, but perhaps when you are in the correct frame of mind you will be allowed a wee glimpse of what may be to come. If that is correct—and I don’t say that it is, mind you—you must never misuse that gift. You won’t be able to call it up when you want to. It will come whenever you are in a certain frame of mind, or when something is bothering you a lot. You may be able to control it more as you get older, or perhaps you will lose the power altogether. The old people knew far more about this sort of gift than we ever will. Maybe it is a good thing that this knowledge is being forgotten, I don’t know. Just you listen to what this voice told you. I’m sure it didn’t suggest anything that will harm anyone at all, and I’d be willing to bet that it never will. You should stick in at the school though, and make the most of your time there. If there are better opportunities somewhere else when you leave school and go to the fishing then don’t hesitate, off you go!”

Bill listened intently to what he was being told. It all made more sense now. Somehow it was in line with what he already intuitively felt, and it was reassuring that Ban did not suggest—as Bill had feared he might—that the lad’s mind was suspect in some way.

Another long silence ensued, punctuated only by the crackling of coal on the meagre fire.

His next question to Ban, “What do you think of lassies?” provoked a great cackle of laughter before the reply came.

“Now then my boy, it is about time you were away home to your bed. You’ve bothered an old man enough for one night.”

Ban also introduced Bill to the special language used by fishermen when they hailed another boat as they as they passed in the night.

“Puckle tonight?” was a common hail to another boat, to discover whether or not they had been lucky.

Answers varied from “A when o’ baskets,” which meant just a few baskets, to the giving of a definite quantity—for example “A couple of hundred baskets.”

“Two or three baskets,” was usually said in a glum manner, as it was less than “A when”!

“A wee puckle,” could really mean anything at all, but if it was said in a smug tone, it meant that the one questioned was well fished, but was not about to reveal the exact amount!

Ban cackled with delight as he recalled the occasion when a pair of Carradale boats was fortunate enough to have caught more than a thousand baskets, early one evening. They almost immediately discharged this fine shot to a ‘klondiker’—the fishermen’s nickname for the trawler-sized boats that followed the fleets around, buying up the catches on the grounds, either boxing or salting the herring into barrels before taking them to market. When they had finished discharging, they dropped their anchors for a few hours sleep before resuming fishing.

They encountered a pair of Campbeltown boats in the dark hour before dawn and were hailed, “Puckle tonight?”

In all innocence the man forward on the boat so questioned replied accurately, “A thousand and fourteen baskets.”

Ban fairly chuckled as he recalled that there was nearly a riot that morning because the Campbeltown man was able—even in the dim morning light—to see that the boat being interrogated was not loaded, and so was led to believe that the Carradale fellow was being sarcastic!

Bill gained practical experience of the fishing profession on the odd occasion when he was taken, against his mother's wishes, to sea for the night on his father's boat. He would be the first to confess that much of his time on these trips was spent hanging over the rail being sick, however, and that he was rarely able to keep awake much beyond midnight!

On one never-to-be-forgotten occasion when his brother and his mother went to spend a week with his aunt in Greenock, he chose to spend the entire week at sea. They were fishing out of Tarbert and the weather was glorious. It was summer and the nights were short, so Bill became acclimatised to the change of being awake all night and sleeping in the daytime. At that time he felt like a real fisherman, following his father up the pier to the sales ring in the mornings with the sample of their catch, feeling vastly superior to those whose luck during the previous night's fishing had not been so good.

Schooling went on as usual, but to the great delight of his teachers and of his mother, who still nursed fading hopes that her son would enter the ministry or some profession other than fishing, Bill now displayed a more healthy approach to learning. If learning would help him in his chosen profession then he would stick at it, he reasoned.

