Ven and Glen

Near the Zealand shore, opposite the Holstein Castle, there once lay two wooded islets—Væn and Glæn—with villages and hamlets. They stood not far from the mainland, nor far from each other. But one little island vanished. During the night a terrible storm broke out; the sea rose higher than even the elders could remember; the raged more and more fiercely. It seemed as though the end of the world had come, as though the earth were splitting open; bells in the bell towers swung and rang of their own accord.

It was on that very night that the island of Væn disappeared into the depths of the sea, leaving no trace behind. Yet often afterwards, on quiet summer nights when the sea was clear and transparent, fishermen tracking eels by the light of a lantern fixed to the prow of their boats would see (especially those with sharper eyes) in the crystalline depths the island of Væn, the white bell tower of its church, and the high church walls. And so among the inhabitants of the other little island arose a belief that "Væn awaits Glæn!" Fishermen told how they had seen the vanished island, even heard the ringing of its bells; yet this was merely an illusion. Surely it was wild swans singing, who often basked upon the water's surface there; their mournful song resembled distant bell chimes.

There was a time when many elders among Glæn's residents well remembered that stormy night, and also recalled the days when, as children, they crossed during low tide the narrow strait separating their island from Væn, just as people now cross the strait dividing Zealand from Glæn; for the water reached only up to the axle of a cart.

"Væn awaits Glæn"—such was the belief that took hold, and everyone knew the time would come when it would be fulfilled.

No wonder that many boys and girls often thought during stormy nights: "What if tonight Væn comes for Glæn!" Filled with fear, they would begin reciting the "Our Father," then fall sweetly asleep, and by morning—Glæn, with its forests, grain fields, and welcoming peasant cottages wreathed in hops, remained exactly where it had been. Birds sang in the forest, deer frolicked, and the mole, keen-scented though he was, detected no hint of seawater.

And yet the island's days are numbered; we cannot say precisely how much longer it will endure, but nevertheless its days are counted—on some fine morning the island will vanish.

Perhaps only yesterday you stood upon the shore, admiring wild swans basking on the waters between Zealand and Glæn, watching a boat with unfurled sails glide along the wooded coast, yourself wading across to the island—for there was no other road—while horses splashed straight through the water lapping against the wheels.

But then you depart from there, travel perhaps across the wide world, and return to your homeland only after several years. You look—and before you stretches an enormous green meadow encircled by forest; before the neat peasant cottages haycocks emit their fragrance. Where have you arrived? The Holstein Castle still gleams with its gilded spires, yet it stands no longer right upon the shore, but far inland! You walk through forest, across fields, toward the seashore… Where is Glæn? Before you lies no island, only the open sea! Could it be that Væn has come for Glæn, as the legend said? When did such a nocturnal storm rage, when did such an earthquake occur that shifted the ancient Holstein Castle many thousands of rooster-steps deep into the country?

No such stormy night ever happened; everything occurred in broad daylight, under the sun. Human ingenuity constructed dikes, pumped the water out of the strait, and joined Glæn to the mainland. The strait became a green meadow covered with lush grass; Glæn firmly attached itself to Zealand. The old castle stands in its former place. It was not Væn that came for Glæn, but Zealand that drew it close with its own hands—through dikes, pumping away the water that separated them, and pronouncing a spell that united them in marital bonds. And the island brought with it a dowry—Zealand enriched itself with many dozens of acres of land! All this is true; it was even published in the newspapers. Thus, the prophecy came true—the island of Glæn disappeared.