

The cliff was two hundred feet high. It sloped outwards from its grassy summit, along ten feet of brown gravel, down one hundred and seventy feet of grey limestone, giant slabs piled horizontally with large slits between the slabs where sea-birds nested. The outward slope came to a round point twenty feet from the base and there the cliff sank inwards, making a dark cavern along the cliffs face into the bowels of the earth. At the mouth the cavern was twenty feet high and at the rear its roof touched its floor, a flat rock that stretched from the base of the cliff to the sea. The cavern had a black-slate roof and at the rear there was a large streak of yellow gravel.

The cliff was semicircular. And at each corner a black jagged reef jutted from its base out into the sea. Between the reefs there was a little cove. But the sea did not reach to the semicircle of the cliff. Only its waves swept up from the deep over the flat rock to the cliff. The sea had eaten up the part of the cliff that rested on that semicircle of flat rock, during thousands of years of battle.

It was nearly high tide. But the sea moved so violently that the two reefs bared with each receding wave until they seemed to be long shafts of black steel sunk into the bowels of the ocean. Their thick manes of red seaweed were sucked stiff by each fleeing wave. The waves came towering into the cove across both reefs, confusedly, meeting midway in the cove, chasing one another, climbing over one another's backs, spitting savage columns of green and white water vertically, when their arched manes clashed. In one monstrous stride they crossed the flat rock. Then with a yawning sound they swelled up midway in the cliff. There was a mighty roar as they struck the cliff and rebounded. Then they sank again, dishevelled masses of green and white, hurrying backward. They rose and fell from the bosom of the ocean, like the heavy breathing of a gluttonous giant.

Then the tide reached its highest point and there was a pause. The waves hardly made any noise as they struck the cliff, and they drivelled backwards slowly. The trough of the sea between the reefs was convulsing like water in a shaken glass. The cliffs face was black, drenched with brine, that streamed from its base, each tiny rivulet noisy in the sudden silence.

Then the silence broke. The sea rushed back. With the speed and motion of a bladder bursting it sprang backwards. Then it rose upwards in a concave wall, from reef to reef, across the cove, along whose bottom the slimy weeds of the ocean depths were visible through the thin sheet of water left to cover the sea's nakedness by the fury of the rising wave.

For a moment the wave stood motionless, beautifully wild and immense. Its base in front was ragged uneven and scratched with white foam, like the debris strewn around a just-constructed pyramid. Then a belt of dark blue ran from end to end across its face, sinking inwards in a perfect curve. Then came a wider belt, a green belt peppered with white spots. Then the wave's head curved outwards, arched like the neck of an angry swan. That curved head was a fathom deep, of a transparent green, with a rim of milky white. And to the rear, great lumps of water buttressed it, thousands of tons of water in each lump.

The wave advanced, slowly at first, with a rumbling sound. That awful mass of water advanced simultaneously from end to end of its length without breaking a ripple on its ice-smooth breast. But from its summit a shower of driven foam arose, from east to west, and fell backwards on to the shoulders of the sea, that came behind the wave in mountains pushing it to the cliff. The giant cliff looked small in front of that moving wall of blue and green and white water.

Then there was a roar. The wave sprang upwards to its full height. Its crest broke and points of water stuck out, curving downwards like fangs. It seemed to bend its head as it hurled forward to ram the cliff. In a moment the wave and the cliff had disappeared in a tumbling mass of white water that yawned and hissed and roared. The whole semicircle of the cliff vanished in the white water and the foam mist that rose above it blotting out the sky. Just for one moment it was thus. In another moment the broken wave had fallen, flying to the sea in a thousand rushing fragments. The cliff appeared again.

But a great black mouth had opened in its face, at the centre, above the cavern. The cliffs face stood ajar, as if it yawned, tired of battle. The mouth was vertical in the cliff, like a ten-foot wedge stuck upwards from the edge of the cavern. Then the cliff tried to close the mouth. It pressed in on it from either side. But it did not close. The sides fell inwards and the mouth grew wider. The whole centre of the cliff broke loose at the top and, swayed forward like a tree being felled. There was a noise like rising thunder. Black dust rose from the tottering cliff through the falling foam of the wave. Then with a soft splash the whole centre of the cliff collapsed into the cavern. The sides caved in with another splash. A wall of grey dust arose shutting out everything. The rumbling of moving rocks came through the cloud of dust. Then the cloud rose and went inland.

The cliff had disappeared. The land sloped down to the edge of the cove. Huge rocks stood awkwardly on the very brink of the flat rock, with the rim of the sea playing between them. Smoke was rising from the fallen cliff. And the wave had disappeared. Already another one was gathering in the cove.