

SHARP WILLIAM

THE WASHER OF THE
FORD: LEGENDARY
MORALITIES AND
BARBARIC TALES

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and barbaric tales

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William Sharp

The Washer of the Ford: Legendary moralities and barbaric tales

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“Here are told the stories of these pictures of the imagination, of magic and romance. Yet they were gravely chosen withal, and for reasons manifold... What if they be but dreams? ‘We are such stuff as dreams are made of.’ What if they be but magic and romance? These things are not ancient and dead, but modern and increasing. For wherever a man learns power over Nature, there is Magic; wherever he carries out an ideal into Life there is Romance.”

*Patrick Geddes:
“The Interpreter.”*

PROLOGUE

(TO KATHIA)

I find, under the boughs of love and hate,
Eternal Beauty wandering on her way.

The Rose upon the Rood of Time

TO you, in your far-away home in Provence, I send these tales out of the remote North you love so well, and so well understand. The same blood is in our veins, a deep current somewhere beneath the tide that sustains us. We have meeting-places that none knows of; we understand what few can understand; and we share in common a strange and inexplicable heritage. It is because you, who are called Kathia of the Sunway, are also Kathia nan Ciar, Kathia of the Shadow, it is because you are what you are that I inscribe this book to you. In it you will find much that is familiar to you, though you may never have read or heard anything of the kind; for there is a reality, beneath the unfamiliar accident, which may be recognised in a moment as native to the

secret life that lives behind the brain and the wise nerves with their dim ancestral knowledge.

The greater portion of this book deals with the remote life of a remote past. "The Shadow-Seers," however, though of to-day, may equally be of yesterday or to-morrow; and as for "The Last Supper" or "The Fisher of Men," they are of no time or date, for they are founded upon elemental facts which are modified but not transformed by the changing years.

It may be the last of its kind I shall write – at any rate, for a time. I would like it to be associated with you, to whom not only the mystery but the pagan sentiment and the old barbaric emotion are so near. With the second sight of the imagination we can often see more clearly in the perspectives of the past than in the maze of the present; and most clearly when we recognise that, below the accidents of time and circumstance, the present is but a reflection of that past to which we belong – belong, as intimately and inalienably, as to the hour wherein happily content we swing to those anchors which we do not see are linked to us by ropes of sand.

If I am eager to have my say on other aspects of our Celtic life in the remoter West Highlands and in the Isles: now with the idyllic, now with the tragic, now with the grotesque, the humorous, the pathetic, with all the medley cast from the looms of Life – all that and if, too, I long to express anew something of that wonderful historic romance in which we of our race and country are so rich, I am not likely to forget those earlier dreams

which are no whit less realities – realities of the present seen through an inverted glass – which have been, and are, so full of inspiration and of a strange and terrible beauty.

“... from the looms of Life are spun,
Warp of shadow and woof of sun – ”

But one to whom life appeals by a myriad avenues, all alluring and full of wonder and mystery, cannot always abide where the heart longs most to be. It is well to remember that there are shadowy waters even in the cities, and that the Fount of Youth is discoverable in the dreariest towns as well as in Hy Bràsil: a truth apt to be forgotten by those of us who dwell with ever-wondering delight in that land of lost romance which had its own day, as this epoch of a still stranger, if a less obvious, romance has its own passing hour.

The titular piece – with its strange name that will not be unfamiliar to you who know our ancient Celtic literature, or may bear in mind the striking use made of it and its vague cognate legend, by Ferguson, in his Irish epic, *Congal*– gives the keynote not only of this book but of what has for hundreds of years, and to some extent still is, the characteristic of the purely Celtic mind in the Highlands and the Isles. This characteristic is a strange complexity of paganism and Christianity, or rather an apparent complexity arising from the grafting of Christianity upon paganism. Columba, St. Patrick, St. Ronan, Kentigern, all

these militant Christian saints were merely transformed pagans. Even in the famous dialogue between St. Patrick and Oisìn, which is the folk-telling of the passing of the old before the new, the thrill of a pagan sympathy on the part of the uncompromising saint is unmistakable. To this day, there are Christian rites and superstitions which are merely a gloss upon a surviving antique paganism. I have known an old woman, in no wise different from her neighbours, who on the day of Beltane sacrificed a hen: though for her propitiatory rite she had no warrant save that of vague traditional lore, the lore of the *teinntean*, of the hearth-side – where, in truth, are best to be heard the last echoes of the dim mythologic faith of our ancestors. What is the familiar “clachan,” now meaning a hamlet with a kirk, but an echo of the Stones, the circles of the druids or of a more ancient worship still, that perhaps of the mysterious Anait, whose sole record is a *clach* on a lonely moor, of which from time immemorial the people have spoken as the “Teampull na’n Anait”? A relative of mine saw, in South Uist, less than twenty-five years ago, what may have been the last sun-sacrifice in Scotland, when an old Gael secretly and furtively slew a lamb on the summit of a conical grassy knoll at sunrise. Those who have the Gaelic have their ears filled with rumours of a day that is gone. When an evicted crofter laments, *O mo chreach, mo chreach!*¹ or some poor soul on a bed of pain cries, *O mo chradshlat,*² he who

¹ Oh, alas, alas! (Literally, Oh, my undoing, or Oh, my utter ruin.)

² Alas my torment!

knows the past recognises in the one the mournful refrain of the time when the sea-pirates or the hill-robbers pillaged and devastated quiet homesteads, and, in the other, not the moan of suffering only, but the cry of torment from the victim racked on the *cradhshlat*, a bitter ignominious torture used by the ancient Gaels. When, in good fellowship, one man says to another, *Tha, a laochain* (yes, my dear fellow), he recalls Fionn and the chivalry of eld, for *laochan* is merely a contraction for *laoch-Fhinn*, meaning a companion in war, a hero, literally Fionn's right-hand man in battle. To this day, women, accompanying a marching regiment, are sometimes heard to say in the Gaelic, "We are going with the dear souls to the wars" – literally an echo of the Ossianic *Siubhlaidh sinn le'n anam do'n araich*, "We shall accompany their souls to the battle-field." A thousand instances could be adduced. The language is a herring-net, through which the unchanging sea filtrates, even though the net be clogged with the fish of the hour. Nor is it the pagan atmosphere only that survives: often we breathe the air of that early day when the mind of man was attuned to a beautiful piety that was wrought into nature itself. Of the several words for the dawn, there is a beautiful one, *Uinneagachadh*. We have it in the phrase *'nuair a bha an latha ag uinneagachadh*, "when the day began to dawn." Now this word is simply an extension of *Uinneag*, a window: and the application of the image dates far back to the days of St. Columba, when some devout and poetic soul spoke of the *uinneagan Neimh*, the windows of Heaven.

Sometimes, among the innumerable “legendary moralities” which exist fragmentarily in the West Highlands and in the Isles, there is a coherent narrative basis – as, for example, in the Irish and Highland folk-lore about St. Bride, or Bridget, “Muime Chriosd.” Sometimes there is simply a phrase survived out of antiquity. I doubt if any now living, either in the Hebrides or in Ireland, has heard any legend of the “Washer of the Ford.” The name survives, with its atmosphere of a remote past, its dim ancestral memory of a shadowy figure of awe haunting a shadowy stream in a shadowy land. Samuel Ferguson, in *Congal*, has done little more than limn an obscure shadow of that shadow: yet it haunts the imagination. In the passage of paganism, these old myths were too deep-rooted in the Celtic mind to vanish at the bidding of the Cross: thus came about that strange grafting of the symbolic imagery of the devout Culdee, of the visionary Mariolater, upon the surviving Druidic and prehistoric imagination. In a word, the Washer of the Ford might well have appeared, to a single generation, now as a terrible and sombre pagan goddess of death, now as a symbolic figure in the new faith, foreshadowing spiritual salvation and the mystery of resurrection.

If in a composition such as “The Annir-Choille,” there is the expression of revolt – not ancient only, nor of the hour, but eternal, for the revolt is of the sovereign nature within us whereon all else is an accidental superstructure – against the Christian ethic of renunciation, with an echo of our deep

primeval longing for earth-kinship with every life in nature: if here there is the breath of a day that may not come again, there is little or nothing of the past, save what is merely accidental, in "The Fisher of Men" or "The Last Supper." I like to think that these *eachdaireachd Spioradail*, these spiritual chronicles, might as well, in substance, have been told a thousand years ago or be written a thousand years hence. That Fisher still haunts the invisible shadowy stream of human tears: those mystic Spinners still ply their triple shuttles, and the Fair Weaver of Hope, now as of yore and for ever, sends his rainbows adrift across the hearts and through the minds of men. What does it matter, again, that the Three Marvels of Hy are set against the background of the Iona of St. Columba? St. Francis blessed the birds of Assisi, and San Antonio had a heart as tender for all winged and gentle creatures: and there are innumerable quiet gardens of peace in the world even now where the kindred of San Antonio and St. Francis and St. Columba are kith to our fellow-beings, knowing them akin one and all to the seals whom St. Molios blessed at the end of his days, and in his new humbleness hailed as likewise of the company of the Sons of God.

But of this I am sure. If there is spiritual truth in the vision of the Blind Harper who saw the Washer of the Ford, or in that of Molios who hailed the seals as brethren, or in that of Colum who blessed the birds and the fish of the sea and even the vagrant flies of the air, and saw the Moon-Child, and in that seeing learned the last mystery of the life of the soul, if in these, as in the "Fisher of

Men” and “The Last Supper,” I have given faint utterance to the heart-knowledge we all have, I would not have you or any think that the pagan way is therefore to me as the way of darkness. The lost monk who loved the Annir-Choille was doubtless not the less able to see the Uinneagan Neimh because he was under ban of Colum and all his kin: and there are those of us who would rather be with Cathal of the Woods, and be drunken with green fire, than gain the paradise of the holy Molios who banned him, if in that gain were involved the forfeiture of the sunny green world, the joy of life, and the earth-sweet ancient song of the blood that is in the veins of youth.

These tales, let me add, are not legendary “mysteries” but legendary “moralities.” They are reflections from the mirror that is often obscured but is never dimmed. There is no mystery in them, or anywhere: except the eternal mystery of beauty.

Of the Seanachas, the short barbaric tales, I will say nothing to you, whose favourite echo from Shelley is that thrilling line “the tempestuous loveliness of terror.”

You in your far Provence, amid the austere hills that guard an ancient land of olive and vine, a land illumined by the blue flowing light of the Rhone, and girt by desert places where sun and wind inhabit, and scarce any other – you there and I here have this in common. Everywhere we see the life of man in subservient union with the life of Nature; never, in a word, as a sun beset by tributary stars, but as one planet among the innumerable concourse of the sky, nurtured, it may be, by light

from other luminaries and other spheres than we know of. That we are intimately at one with Nature is a cosmic truth we are all slowly approaching. It is not only the dog, it is not only the wild beast and the wood-dove, that are our close kindred, but the green tree and the green grass, the blue wave and the flowing wind, the flower of a day and the granite peak of an æon. And I for one would rather have the wind for comrade, and the white stars and green leaves as my kith and kin, than many a human companion, whose chief claim is the red blood that differs little from the sap in the grass or in the pines, and whose “deathless soul” is, mayhap, no more than a fugitive light blown idly for an hour betwixt dawn and dark. We are woven in one loom, and the Weaver thrids our being with the sweet influences, not only of the Pleiades, but of the living world of which each is no more than a multi-coloured thread: as, in turn, He thrids the wandering wind with the inarticulate cry, the yearning, the passion, the pain, of that bitter clan, the Human.

Truly, we are all one. It is a common tongue we speak, though the wave has its own whisper, and the wind its own sigh, and the lip of the man its word, and the heart of woman its silence.

Long, long ago a desert king, old and blind, but dowered with ancestral wisdom beyond all men that have lived, heard that the Son of God was born among men. He rose from his place, and on the eve of the third day he came to where Jesus sat among the gifts brought by the wise men of the East. The little lad sat in Mary’s lap, beneath a tree filled with quiet light; and while the

folk of Bethlehem came and went He was only a child as other children are. But when the desert king drew near, the child's eyes deepened with knowledge.

"What is it, my little son?" said Mary the Virgin.

"Sure, Mother dear," said Jesus, who had never yet spoken a word, "it is Deep Knowledge that is coming to me."

"And what will that be, O my Wonder and Glory?"

"That which will come in at the door before you speak to me again."

Even as the child spoke, an old blind man entered, and bowed his head.

"Come near, O tired old man," said Mary that had borne a son to Joseph, but whose womb knew him not.

With that the tears fell into the old man's beard. "Sorrow of Sorrows," he said, "but that will be the voice of the Queen of Heaven!"

But Jesus said to his mother: "Take up the tears, and throw them into the dark night." And Mary did so: and lo! upon the wilderness, where no light was, and on the dark wave, where seamen toiled without hope, clusters of shining stars rayed downward in a white peace.

Thereupon the old king of the desert said:

"Heal me, O King of the Elements."

And Jesus healed him. His sight was upon him again, and his gray ancientness was green youth once more.

"I have come with Deep Knowledge," he said.

“Ay, sure, I am for knowing that,” said the King of the Elements, that was a little child.

“Well, if you will be knowing that, you can tell me who is at my right side?”

“It is my elder brother the Wind.”

“And what colour will the Wind be?”

“Now blue as Hope, now green as Compassion.”

“And who is on my left?”

“The Shadow of Life.”

“And what colour will the Shadow be?”

“That which is woven out of the bowels of the earth and out of the belly of the sea.”

“Truly, thou art the King of the Elements. I am bringing you a great gift, I am: I have come with Deep Knowledge.”

And with that the old blind man, whose eyes were now as stars, and whose youth was a green garland about him, chanted nine runes.

The first rune was the Rune of the Four Winds.

The second rune was the Rune of the Deep Seas.

The third rune was the Rune of the Lochs and Rivers and the Rains and the Dews and the many waters.

The fourth rune was the Rune of the Green Trees and of all things that grow.

The fifth rune was the Rune of Man and Bird and Beast, and of everything that lives and moves, in the air, on the earth, and in the sea: all that is seen of man, and all that is unseen of man.

The sixth rune was the Rune of Birth, from the spawn on the wave to the Passion of Woman.

The seventh rune was the Rune of Death, from the quenching of a gnat to the fading of the stars.

The eighth rune was the Rune of the Soul that dieth not, and the Spirit that is.

The ninth rune was the Rune of the Mud and the Dross and the Slime of Evil – that is the Garden of God, wherein He walks with sunlight streaming from the palms of his hands and with stars springing beneath his feet.

Then when he had done, the old man said: “I have brought you Deep Knowledge.” But at that Jesus the Child said:

“All this I heard on my way hither.”

The old desert king bowed his head. Then he took a blade of grass, and played upon it. It was a wild, strange air that he played.

“Iosa mac Dhe, tell the woman what song *that* is,” cried the desert king.

“It is the secret speech of the Wind that is my Brother,” cried the child, clapping his hands for joy.

“And what will this be?” and with that the old man took a green leaf, and played a lovely whispering song.

“It is the secret speech of the leaves,” cried Jesus the little lad, laughing low.

And thereafter the desert king played upon a handful of dust, and upon a drop of water, and upon a flame of fire; and the Child laughed for the knowing and the joy. Then he gave the secret

speech of the singing bird, and the barking fox, and the howling wolf, and the bleating sheep: of all and every created kind.

“O King of the Elements,” he said then, “for sure you knew much; but now I have made you to know the secret things of the green Earth that is Mother of you and of Mary too.”

But while Jesus pondered that one mystery, the old man was gone: and when he got to his people, they put him alive into a hollow of the earth and covered him up, because of his shining eyes, and the green youth that was about him as a garland.

And when Christ was nailed upon the Cross, Deep Knowledge went back into the green world, and passed into the grass and the sap in trees, and the flowing wind, and the dust that swirls and is gone.

All this is of the wisdom of the long ago, and you and I are of those who know how ancient it is, how remoter far than when Mary, at the bidding of her little son, threw up into the firmament the tears of an old man.

It is old, old —

“Thousands of years, thousands of years,
If all were told.”

Is it wholly unwise, wholly the fantasy of a dreamer, to insist, in this late day, when the dust behind and the mist before hide from us the Beauty of the World, that we can regain our birthright only by leaving our cloud-palaces of the brain, and becoming consciously at one with the cosmic life of which, merely as men, we are no more than a perpetual phosphorescence?

THE WASHER OF THE FORD

WHEN Torcall the Harper heard of the death of his friend, Aodh-of-the-Songs, he made a vow to mourn for him for three seasons – a green time, an apple time, and a snow time.

There was sorrow upon him because of that death. True, Aodh was not of his kindred, but the singer had saved the harper's life when his friend was fallen in the Field of Spears.

Torcall was of the people of the north – of the men of Lochlin. His song was of the fjords, and of strange gods, of the sword and the war-galley, of the red blood and the white breast, of Odin and Thor and Freya, of Balder and the Dream-God that sits in the rainbow, of the starry North, of the flames of pale blue and flushing rose that play around the Pole, of sudden death in battle, and of Valhalla.

Aodh was of the south isles, where these shake under the thunder of the western seas. His clan was of the isle that is now called Barra, and was then Iondû; but his mother was a woman out of a royal rath in Banba, as men of old called Eiré. She was so fair that a man died of his desire of her. He was named Ulad, and was a prince. "The Melancholy of Ulad" was long sung in his land after his end in the dark swamp, where he heard a singing, and went laughing glad to his death. Another man was made a prince because of her. This was Aodh the Harper, out of the Hebrid Isles. He won the heart out of her, and it was his from the day she

heard his music and felt his eyes flame upon her. Before the child was born, she said, "He shall be the son of love. He shall be called Aodh. He shall be called Aodh-of-the-Songs." And so it was.

Sweet were his songs. He loved, and he sang, and he died.

And when Torcall that was his friend knew this sorrow, he arose and made his vow, and went out for evermore from the place where he was.

Since the hour of the Field of Spears he had been blind. Torcall Dall he was upon men's lips thereafter. His harp had a moonshine wind upon it from that day, it was said: a beautiful strange harping when he went down through the glen, or out upon the sandy machar by the shore, and played what the wind sang, and the grass whispered, and the tree murmured, and the sea muttered or cried hollowly in the dark.

Because there was no sight to his eyes, men said he saw and he heard. What was it he heard and he saw that they saw not and heard not? It was in the voice that was in the strings of his harp, so the rumour ran.

When he rose and went away from his place, the Maormor asked him if he went north, as the blood sang; or south, as the heart cried; or west, as the dead go; or east, as the light comes.

"I go east," answered Torcall Dall.

"And why so, Blind Harper?"

"For there is darkness always upon me, and I go where the light comes."

On that night of the nights, a fair wind blowing out of the

west, Torcall the Harper set forth in a galley. It splashed in the moonshine as it was rowed swiftly by nine men.

“Sing us a song, O Torcall Dall!” they cried.

“Sing us a song, Torcall of Lochlin,” said the man who steered. He and all his company were of the Gael: the Harper only was of the Northmen.

“What shall I sing?” he asked. “Shall it be of war that you love, or of women that twine you like silk o’ the kine; or shall it be of death that is your meed; or of your dread, the Spears of the North?”

A low sullen growl went from beard to beard.

“We are under *geas*, Blind Harper,” said the steersman, with downcast eyes because of his flaming wrath; “we are under bond to take you safe to the mainland, but we have sworn no vow to sit still under the lash of your tongue. ’Twas a wind-fleet arrow that sliced the sight out of your eyes: have a care lest a sudden sword-wind sweep the breath out of your body.”

Torcall laughed a low, quiet laugh.

“Is it death I am fearing now – I who have washed my hands in blood, and had love, and known all that is given to man? But I will sing you a song, I will.”

And with that he took his harp, and struck the strings.

There is a lonely stream afar in a lone dim land:

It hath white dust for shore it has, white bones bestrew the strand:

The only thing that liveth there is a naked leaping sword;

But I, who a seer am, have seen the whirling hand
Of the Washer of the Ford.

A shadowy shape of cloud and mist, of gloom and dusk, she
stands,

The Washer of the Ford:

She laughs, at times, and strews the dust through the hollow
of her hands.

She counts the sins of all men there, and slays the red-stained
horde —

The ghosts of all the sins of men must know the whirling
sword

Of the Washer of the Ford.

She stoops and laughs when in the dust she sees a writhing
limb:

“Go back into the ford,” she says, “and hither and thither
swim;

Then I shall wash you white as snow, and shall take you by
the hand,

And slay you here in the silence with this my whirling brand,
And trample you into the dust of this white windless sand — ”

This is the laughing word

Of the Washer of the Ford

Along that silent strand.

There was silence for a time after Torcall Dall sang that song.
The oars took up the moonshine and flung it hither and thither

like loose shining stones. The foam at the prow curled and leaped. Suddenly one of the rowers broke into a long, low chant —

Yo, eily-a-ho, ayah-a-ho, eily-ayah-a-ho,
Singeth the Sword
Eily-a-ho, ayah-a-ho, eily-ayah-a-ho,
Of the Washer of the Ford!

And at that all ceased from rowing. Standing erect, they lifted up their oars against the stars, and the wild voices of them flew out upon the night —

Yo, eily-a-ho, ayah-a-ho, eily-ayah-a-ho,
Singeth the Sword
Eily-a-ho, ayah-a-ho, eily-ayah-a-ho,
Of the Washer of the Ford!

Torcall Dall laughed. Then he drew his sword from his side and plunged it into the sea. When he drew the blade out of the water and whirled it on high, all the white shining drops of it swirled about his head like a sleety rain.

And at that the steersman let go the steering-oar and drew his sword, and clove a flowing wave. But with the might of his blow the sword spun him round, and the sword sliced away the ear of the man who had the sternmost oar. Then there was blood in the eyes of all there. The man staggered, and felt for his knife, and it was in the heart of the steersman.

Then because these two men were leaders, and had had a blood-feud, and because all there, save Torcall, were of one or the other side, swords and knives sang a song.

The rowers dropped their oars; and four men fought against three.

Torcall laughed, and lay back in his place. While out of the wandering wave the death of each man clambered into the hollow of the boat, and breathed its chill upon its man, Torcall the Blind took his harp. He sang this song, with the swirling spray against his face, and the smell of blood in his nostrils, and the feet of him dabbling in the red tide that rose there.

Oh, 'tis a good thing the red blood, by Odin his word!
And a good thing it is to hear it bubbling deep.
And when we hear the laughter of the Sword,
Oh, the corbies croak, and the old wail, and the women weep!
And busy will she be there where she stands,
Washing the red out of the sins of all this slaying horde;
And trampling the bones of them into white powdery sands,
And laughing low at the thirst of her thirsty sword —
The Washer of the Ford!

When he had sung that song there was only one man whose pulse still beat, and he was at the bow.

“A bitter black curse upon you, Torcall Dall!” he groaned out of the ooze of blood that was in his mouth.

“And who will you be?” said the Blind Harper.

“I am Fergus, the son of Art, the son of Fergus of the Dûns.”

“Well, it is a song for your death I will make, Fergus mac Art mhic Fheargus: and because you are the last.”

With that Torcall struck a wild sob out of his harp, and he sang —

Oh, death of Fergus, that is lying in the boat here,
Betwixt the man of the red hair and him of the black beard,
Rise now, and out of thy cold white eyes take out the fear,
And let Fergus mac Art mhic Fheargus see his weird!
Sure, now, it's a blind man I am, but I'm thinking I see

The shadow of you crawling across the dead.
Soon you will twine your arm around his shaking knee,
And be whispering your silence into his listless head.
And that is why, O Fergus —

But here the man hurled his sword into the sea, and with a choking cry fell forward; and upon the white sands he was, beneath the trampling feet of the Washer of the Ford.

II

It was a fair wind that blew beneath the stars that night. At dawn the mountains of Skye were like turrets of a great Dûn against the east.

But Torcall the Blind Harper did not see that thing. Sleep, too, was upon him. He smiled in that sleep, for in his mind he saw the dead men, that were of the alien people, his foes, draw near the stream that was in a far place. The shaking of them, poor, tremulous frostbit leaves they were, thin and sere, made the only breath there was in that desert.

At the ford – this is what he saw in his vision – they fell down like stricken deer with the hounds upon them.

“What is this stream?” they cried in the thin voice of rain across the moors.

“The River of Blood,” said a voice.

“And who are you that are in the silence?”

“I am the Washer of the Ford.”

And with that each red soul was seized and thrown into the water of the ford; and when white as a sheep-bone on the hill, was taken in one hand by the Washer of the Ford and flung into the air, where no wind was and where sound was dead, and was then severed this way and that, in four whirling blows of the sword from the four quarters of the world. Then it was that the Washer of the Ford trampled upon what fell to the ground, till under the

feet of her was only a white sand, white as powder, light as the dust of the yellow flowers that grow in the grass.

It was at that Torcall Dall smiled in his sleep. He did not hear the washing of the sea; no, nor any idle plashing of the unoared boat. Then he dreamed, and it was of the woman he had left, seven summer-sailings ago, in Lochlin. He thought her hand was in his, and that her heart was against his.

“Ah, dear, beautiful heart of woman,” he said, “and what is the pain that has put a shadow upon you?”

It was a sweet voice that he heard coming out of sleep.

“Torcall, it is the weary love I have.”

“Ah, heart o’ me, dear! sure ’tis a bitter pain I have had, too, and I away from you all these years.”

“There’s a man’s pain, and there’s a woman’s pain.”

“By the blood of Balder, Hildyr, I would have both upon me to take it off the dear heart that is here.”

“Torcall!”

“Yes, white one.”

“We are not alone, we two in the dark.”

And when she had said that thing, Torcall felt two baby arms go round his neck, and two leaves of a wild rose press cool and sweet against his lips.

“Ah! what is this?” he cried, with his heart beating, and the blood in his body singing a glad song.

A low voice crooned in his ear: a bitter-sweet song it was, passing-sweet, passing-bitter.

“Ah, white one, white one,” he moaned; “ah, the wee fawn o’ me! Baby o’ foam, bonnie wee lass, put your sight upon me that I may see the blue eyes that are mine too and Hildyr’s.”

But the child only nestled closer. Like a fledgling in a great nest she was. If God heard her song, He was a glad God that day. The blood that was in her body called to the blood that was in his body. He could say no word. The tears were in his blind eyes.

Then Hildyr leaned into the dark, and took his harp, and played upon it. It was of the fonnnsheen he had learned, far, far away, where the isles are.

She sang: but he could not hear what she sang.

Then the little lips, that were like a cool wave upon the dry sand of his life, whispered into a low song: and the wavering of it was like this in his brain —

Where the winds gather
The souls of the dead,
O Torcall, my father,
My soul is led!

In Hildyr-mead
I was thrown, I was sown:
Out of thy seed
I am sprung, I am blown!

But where is the way
For Hildyr and me,

By the hill-moss gray
Or the gray sea?

For a river is here,
And a whirling sword —
And a Woman washing
By a Ford!

With that, Torcall Dall gave a wild cry, and sheathed an arm about the wee white one, and put out a hand to the bosom that loved him. But there was no white breast there, and no white babe: and what was against his lips was his own hand red with blood.

“O Hildyr!” he cried.

But only the splashing of the waves did he hear.

“O white one!” he cried.

But only the scream of a sea-mew, as it hovered over that boat filled with dead men, made answer.

III

All day the Blind Harper steered the galley of the dead. There was a faint wind moving out of the west. The boat went before it, slow, and with a low, sighing wash.

Torcall saw the red gaping wounds of the dead, and the glassy eyes of the nine men.

“It is better not to be blind and to see the dead,” he muttered, “than to be blind and to see the dead.”

The man who had been steersman leaned against him. He took him in his shuddering grip and thrust him into the sea.

But when, an hour later, he put his hand to the coolness of the water, he drew it back with a cry, for it was on the cold, stiff face of the dead man that it had fallen. The long hair had caught in a cleft in the leather where the withes had given.

For another hour Torcall sat with his chin in his right hand, and his unseeing eyes staring upon the dead. He heard no sound at all, save the lap of wave upon wave, and the *suss* of spray against spray, and a bubbling beneath the boat, and the low, steady swish of the body that trailed alongside the steering oar.

At the second hour before sundown he lifted his head. The sound he heard was the sound of waves beating upon rocks.

At the hour before sundown he moved the oar rapidly to and fro, and cut away the body that trailed behind the boat. The noise of the waves upon the rocks was now a loud song.

When the last sunfire burned upon his neck and made the long hair upon his shoulders ashine, he smelt the green smell of grass. Then it was too that he heard the muffled fall of the sea, in a quiet haven, where shelves of sand were.

He followed that sound, and while he strained to hear any voice the boat grided upon the sand, and drifted to one side. Taking his harp, Torcall drove an oar into the sand, and leaped on to the shore. When he was there, he listened. There was silence. Far, far away he heard the falling of a mountain-torrent, and the thin, faint cry of an eagle, where the sun-flame dyed its eyrie as with streaming blood.

So he lifted his harp, and, harping low, with a strange, wild song on his lips, moved away from that place, and gave no more thought to the dead.

It was deep gloaming when he came to a wood. He felt the cold green breath of it.

“Come,” said a voice, low and sweet.

“And who will *you* be?” asked Torcall the Harper, trembling because of the sudden voice in the stillness.

“I am a child, and here is my hand, and I will lead you, Torcall of Lochlin.”

The blind man had fear upon him.

“Who are you that in a strange place are for knowing who I am?”

“Come.”

“Ay, sure, it is coming I am, white one; but tell me who you

are, and whence you came, and whither we go.”

Then a voice that he knew sang:

O where the winds gather
The souls of the dead,
O Torcall, my father,
My soul is led!

But a river is here,
And a whirling Sword —
And a Woman washing
By a Ford!

Torcall Dall was as the last leaf on a tree at that.

“Were you on the boat?” he whispered hoarsely.

But it seemed to him that another voice answered: “*Yea, even so.*”

“Tell me, for I have blindness: Is it peace?”

“It is peace.”

“Are you man, or child, or of the Hidden People?”

“I am a shepherd.”

“A shepherd? Then, sure, you will guide me through this wood? And what will be beyond this wood?”

“A river.”

“And what river will that be?”

“Deep and terrible. It runs through the Valley of the Shadow.”

“And is there no ford there?”

“Ay, there is a ford.”

“And who will guide me across that ford?”

“She.”

“Who?”

“The Washer of the Ford.”

But hereat Torcall Dall gave a sore cry and snatched his hand away, and fled sidelong into an alley of the wood.

It was moonshine when he lay down, weary. The sound of flowing water filled his ears.

“Come,” said a voice.

So he rose and went. When the cold breath of the water was upon his face, the guide that led him put a fruit into his hand.

“Eat, Torcall Dall!”

He ate. He was no more Torcall Dall. His sight was upon him again. Out of the blackness shadows came; out of the shadows, the great boughs of trees; from the boughs, dark branches and dark clusters of leaves; above the branches, white stars; below the branches, white flowers; and beyond these, the moonshine on the grass and the moonfire on the flowing of a river dark and deep.

“Take your harp, O Harper, and sing the song of what you see.”

Torcall heard the voice, but saw no one. No shadow moved. Then he walked out upon the moonlit grass; and at the ford he saw a woman stooping and washing shroud after shroud of woven sunbeams: washing them there in the flowing water, and singing a low song that he did not hear. He did not see her face. But she

was young, and with long black hair that fell like the shadow of night over a white rock.

So Torcall took his harp, and he sang:

Glory to the great Gods, it is no Sword I am seeing:
Nor do I see aught but the flowing of a river.
And I see shadows on the flow that are ever fleeing,
And I see a woman washing shrouds for ever and ever.

Then he ceased, for he heard the woman sing:

Glory to God on high, and to Mary, Mother of Jesus,
Here am I washing away the sins of the shriven,
O Torcall of Lochlin, throw off the red sins that ye cherish
And I will be giving you the washen shroud that they wear
in Heaven.

Filled with a great awe, Torcall bowed his head. Then once more he took his harp, and he sang:

O well it is I am seeing, Woman of the Shrouds,
That you have not for me any whirling of the Sword:
I have lost my gods, O woman, so what will the name be
Of thee and thy gods, O woman that art Washer of the Ford?

But the woman did not look up from the dark water, nor did she cease from washing the shrouds made of the woven moonbeams. But he heard this song above the sighing of the

water:

It is Mary Magdalene my name is, and I loved Christ.
And Christ is the son of God, and Mary the Mother of
Heaven.

And this river is the river of death, and the shadows
Are the fleeing souls that are lost if they be not shriven.

Then Torcall drew nigher unto the stream. A melancholy wind
was upon it.

“Where are all the dead of the world?” he said.

But the woman answered not.

“And what is the end, you that are called Mary?”

Then the woman rose.

“Would you cross the Ford, O Torcall the Harper?”

He made no word upon that. But he listened. He heard a
woman singing faint and low far away in the dark. He drew more
near.

“Would you cross the Ford, O Torcall?”

He made no word upon that. But once more he listened. He
heard a little child crying in the night.

“Ah, lonely heart of the white one,” he sighed, and his tears
fell.

Mary Magdalene turned and looked upon him.

It was the face of Sorrow she had. She stooped and took up
the tears. “They are bells of joy,” she said. And he heard a wild
sweet ringing in his ears.

A prayer came out of his heart. A blind prayer it was, but God gave it wings. It flew to Mary, who took and kissed it, and gave it song.

“It is the Song of Peace,” she said. And Torcall had peace.

“What is best, O Torcall?” she asked, rustling-sweet as rain among the leaves her voice was – “What is best? The sword, or peace?”

“Peace,” he answered: and he was white now, and was old.

“Take your harp,” Mary said, “and go in unto the Ford. But lo, now I clothe you with a white shroud. And if you fear the drowning flood, follow the bells that were your tears: and if the dark affright you, follow the song of the Prayer that came out of your heart.”

So Torcall the Harper moved into the whelming flood, and he played a wild strange air, like the laughing of a child.

Deep silence there was. The moonshine lay upon the obscure wood, and the darkling river flowed sighing through the soundless gloom. The Washer of the Ford stooped once more. Low and sweet, as of yore and for ever, over the drowning souls, she sang her immemorial song.

MUIME CHRIOSD

Note. – This “legendary romance” is based upon the ancient and still current (though often hopelessly contradictory) legends concerning Brighid, or Bride, commonly known as “Muime Chriosd,” that is, the Foster-Mother of Christ. From the universal honour and reverence in which she was and is held – second only in this respect to the Virgin herself – she is also called “Mary of the Gael.” Another name, frequent in the West, is “Brighde-nam-Brat,” that is, St. Bride of the Mantle, a name explained in the course of my legendary story. Brighid the Christian saint should not, however, as is commonly done, be confused with a much earlier and remoter Brighid, the ancient Celtic muse of Song.

ST. BRIDE OF THE ISLES

SLOINNEADH BRIGHDE, MUIME CHRISD

Brighde nighean Dùghaill Duinn,
'Ic Aoidh, 'ic Art, 'ic Cuinn.
Gach la is gach oidhche
Ni mi cuimhneachadh air sloinneadh Brighde.
Cha mharbhar mi,
Cha ghuinear mi,
Cha ghonar mi,
Cha mho dh' fhagas Crisd an dearmad mi;
Cha loisg teine gnìomh Shatain mi;
'S cha bhath uisge no saile mi;
'S mi fo chomraig Naoimh Moire
'S mo chaomh mhuime, Brighde.

THE GENEALOGY OF ST. BRIDGET OR ST. BRIDE, FOSTER-MOTHER OF CHRIST

St. Bridget, the daughter of Dùghall Donn,
Son of Hugh, son of Art, son of Conn.

Each day and each night
I will meditate on the genealogy of St. Bridget.
[Whereby] I will not be killed,
I will not be wounded,
I will not be bewitched;
Neither will Christ forsake me;
Satan's fire will not burn me;
Neither water nor sea shall drown me;
For I am under the protection of the Virgin Mary,
And my meek and gentle foster-mother, St. Bridget.

I

BEFORE ever St. Colum came across the Moyle to the island of Iona, that was then by strangers called Innis-nan-Dhruidhneach, the Isle of the Druids, and by the natives Ioua, there lived upon the southeast slope of Dun-I a poor herdsman, named Dùvach. Poor he was, for sure, though it was not for this reason that he could not win back to Ireland, green Banba, as he called it: but because he was an exile thence, and might never again smell the heather blowing over Sliabh-Gorm in what of old was the realm of Aoimag.

He was a prince in his own land, though none on Iona save the Arch-Druid knew what his name was. The high priest, however, knew that Dùvach was the royal Dùghall, called Dùghall Donn, the son of Hugh the King, the son of Art, the son of Conn. In his youth he had been accused of having done a wrong against a noble maiden of the blood. When her child was born he was made to swear across her dead body that he would be true to the daughter for whom she had given up her life, that he would rear her in a holy place but away from Eiré, and that he would never set foot within that land again. This was a bitter thing for Dùghall Donn to do: the more so as, before the King, and the priests, and the people, he swore by the Wind, and by the Moon, and by the Sun, that he was guiltless of the thing of which he was accused. There were many there who believed him because

of that sacred oath: others, too, forasmuch as that Morna the Princess had herself sworn to the same effect. Moreover, there was Aodh of the Golden Hair, a poet and seer, who avowed that Morna had given birth to an immortal, whose name would one day be as a moon among the stars for glory. But the King would not be appeased, though he spared the life of his youngest son. So it was that, by the advice of Aodh of the Druids, Dùghall Donn went northwards through the realm of Clanadon and so to the sea-loch that was then called Loch Feobal. There he took boat with some wayfarers bound for Alba. But in the Moyle a tempest arose, and the frail galley was driven northward, and at sunrise was cast like a great fish, spent and dead, upon the south end of Ioua, that is now Iona. Only two of the mariners survived: Dùghall Donn and the little child. This was at the place where, on a day of the days in a year that was not yet come, St. Colum landed in his coracle, and gave thanks on his bended knees.

When, warmed by the sun, they rose, they found themselves in a waste place. Ill was Dùghall in his mind because of the portents, and now to his astonishment and alarm the child Bridget knelt on the stones, and, with claspt hands, small and pink as the sea-shells round about her, sang a song of words which were unknown to him. This was the more marvellous, as she was yet but an infant, and could say no word even of Erse, the only tongue she had heard.

At this portent, he knew that Aodh had spoken seeingly. Truly this child was not of human parentage. So he, too, kneeled, and,

bowing before her, asked if she were of the race of the Tuatha de Danann, or of the older gods, and what her will was, that he might be her servant. Then it was that the kneeling babe looked at him, and sang in a low sweet voice in Erse:

I am but a little child,
Dùghall, son of Hugh, son of Art,
But my garment shall be laid
On the lord of the world,
Yea, surely it shall be that He
The King of the Elements Himself
Shall lean against my bosom,
And I will give him peace,
And peace will I give to all who ask
Because of this mighty Prince,
And because of his Mother that is the Daughter of Peace.

And while Dùghall Donn was still marvelling at this thing, the Arch-Druid of Iona approached, with his white-robed priests. A grave welcome was given to the stranger, but while the youngest of the servants of God was entrusted with the child, the Arch-Druid took Dùghall aside, and questioned him. It was not till the third day that the old man gave his decision. Dùghall Donn was to abide on Iona if he so willed: the child certainly was to stay. His life would be spared, nor would he be a bondager of any kind, and a little land to till would be given him, and all that he might need. But of his past he was to say no word. His name was to

become as naught, and he was to be known simply as Dùvach. The child, too, was to be named Bride, for that was the way the name Bridget was called in the Erse of the Isles.

To the question of Dùghall, that was thenceforth Dùvach, as to why he laid so great stress on the child, that was a girl, and the reputed offspring of shame at that, Cathal the Arch-Druid replied thus: "My kinsman Aodh of the Golden Hair, who sent you here, was wiser than Hugh the King and all the Druids of Aoimag. Truly, this child is an Immortal. There is an ancient prophecy concerning her: surely of her who is now here, and no other. There shall be, it says, a spotless maid born of a virgin of the ancient immemorial race in Innisfail. And when for the seventh time the sacred year has come, she will hold Eternity in her lap as a white flower. Her maiden breasts shall swell with milk for the Prince of the World. She shall give suck to the King of the Elements. So I say unto you, Dùvach, go in peace. Take unto thyself a wife, and live upon the place I will give thee on the east side of Ioua. Treat Bride as though she were thy spirit, but leave her much alone, and let her learn of the sun and the wind. In the fulness of time the prophecy shall be fulfilled."

So was it, from that day of the days. Dùvach took a wife unto himself, who weaned the little Bride, who grew in beauty and grace, so that all men marvelled. Year by year for seven years the wife of Dùvach bore him a son, and these grew apace in strength, so that by the beginning of the third year of the seventh cycle of Bride's life there were three stalwart youths to brother her,

and three comely and strong lads, and one young boy fair to see. Nor did any one, not even Bride herself, saving Cathal the Arch-Druid, know that Dùvach the herdsman was Dùghall Donn, of a princely race in Innisfail.

In the end, too, Dùvach came to think that he had dreamed, or at the least that Cathal had not interpreted the prophecy aright. For though Bride was of exceeding beauty, and of a strange piety that made the young Druids bow before her as though she were a bàndia, yet the world went on as before, and the days brought no change. Often, while she was still a child, he had questioned her about the words she had said as a babe, but she had no memory of them. Once, in her ninth year, he came upon her on the hillside of Dun-I singing these selfsame words. Her eyes dreamed afar away. He bowed his head, and, praying to the Giver of light, hurried to Cathal. The old man bade him speak no more to the child concerning the mysteries.

Bride lived the hours of her days upon the slopes of Dun-I, herding the sheep, or in following the kye upon the green hillocks and grassy dunes of what then as now was called the Machar. The beauty of the world was her daily food. The spirit within her was like sunlight behind a white flower. The birdeens in the green bushes sang for joy when they saw her blue eyes. The tender prayers that were in her heart for all the beasts and birds, for helpless children, and tired women, and for all who were old, were often seen flying above her head in the form of white doves of sunshine.

But when the middle of the year came that was, though Dùvach had forgotten it, the year of the prophecy, his eldest son, Conn, who was now a man, murmured against the virginity of Bride, because of her beauty and because a chieftain of the mainland was eager to wed her. "I shall wed Bride or raid Ioua" was the message he had sent.

So one day, before the great fire of the summer festival, Conn and his brothers reproached Bride.

"Idle are these pure eyes, O Bride, not to be as lamps at thy marriage-bed."

"Truly, it is not by the eyes that we live," replied the maiden gently, while to their fear and amazement she passed her hand before her face and let them see that the sockets were empty. Trembling with awe at this portent, Dùvach intervened.

"By the Sun I swear it, O Bride, that thou shalt marry whomsoever thou wilt and none other, and when thou willest, or not at all if such be thy will."

And when he had spoken, Bride smiled, and passed her hand before her face again, and all there were abashed because of the blue light as of morning that was in her shining eyes.

II

The still weather had come, and all the isles lay in beauty. Far south, beyond vision, ranged the coasts of Eiré: westward, leagues of quiet ocean dreamed into unsailed wastes whose waves at last laved the shores of Tirna'n Òg, the Land of Eternal Youth: northward, the spell-bound waters sparkled in the sunlight, broken here and there by purple shadows, that were the isles of Staffa and Ulva, Lunga and the isles of the columns, misty Coll, and Tiree that is the land beneath the wave; with, pale blue in the heat-haze, the mountains of Rùm called Haleval, Haskeval, and Oreval, and the sheer Scur-na-Gillian and the peaks of the Cuchullins in remote Skye.

All the sweet loveliness of a late spring remained, to give a freshness to the glory of summer. The birds had song to them still.

It was while the dew was yet wet on the grass that Bride came out of her father's house, and went up the steep slope of Dun-I. The crying of the ewes and lambs at the pastures came plaintively against the dawn. The lowing of the kye arose from the sandy hollows by the shore, or from the meadows on the lower slopes. Through the whole island went a rapid trickling sound, most sweet to hear: the myriad voices of twittering birds, from the dotterel in the sea-weed to the larks climbing the blue spirals of heaven.

This was the morning of her birth, and she was clad in white. About her waist was a girdle of the sacred rowan, the feathery green leaves of it flickering dusky shadows upon her robe as she moved. The light upon her yellow hair was as when morning wakes, laughing low with joy amid the tall corn. As she went she sang, soft as the crooning of a dove. If any had been there to hear he would have been abashed, for the words were not in Erse, and the eyes of the beautiful girl were as those of one in a vision.

When, at last, a brief while before sunrise, she reached the summit of the Scur, that is so small a hill and yet seems so big in Iona where it is the sole peak, she found three young Druids there, ready to tend the sacred fire the moment the sun-rays should kindle it. Each was clad in a white robe, with fillets of oak-leaves; and each had a golden armlet. They made a quiet obeisance as she approached. One stepped forward, with a flush in his face because of her beauty, that was as a sea-wave for grace, and a flower for purity, and sunlight for joy, and moonlight for peace, and the wind for fragrance.

“Thou mayst draw near if thou wilt, Bride, daughter of Dùvach,” he said, with something of reverence as well as of grave courtesy in his voice: “for the holy Cathal hath said that the Breath of the Source of All is upon thee. It is not lawful for women to be here at this moment, but thou hast the law shining upon thy face and in thine eyes. Hast thou come to pray?”

But at that moment a low cry came from one of his companions. He turned, and rejoined his fellows. Then all three

sank upon their knees, and with outstretched arms hailed the rising of God.

As the sun rose, a solemn chant swelled from their lips, ascending as incense through the silent air. The glory of the new day came soundlessly. Peace was in the blue heaven, on the blue-green sea, on the green land. There was no wind, even where the currents of the deep moved in shadowy purple. The sea itself was silent, making no more than a sighing slumber-breath round the white sands of the isle, or a hushed whisper where the tide lifted the long weed that clung to the rocks.

In what strange, mysterious way, Bride did not see; but as the three Druids held their hands before the sacred fire there was a faint crackling, then three thin spirals of blue smoke rose, and soon dusky red and wan yellow tongues of flame moved to and fro. The sacrifice of God was made. Out of the immeasurable heaven He had come, in His golden chariot. Now, in the wonder and mystery of His love, He was reborn upon the world, reborn a little fugitive flame upon a low hill in a remote isle. Great must be His love that He could die thus daily in a thousand places: so great His love that He could give up His own body to daily death, and suffer the holy flame that was in the embers he illumined to be lighted and revered and then scattered to the four quarters of the world.

Bride could bear no longer the mystery of this great love. It moved her to an ecstasy. What tenderness of divine love that could thus redeem the world daily: what long-suffering for all

the evil and cruelty done hourly upon the weeping earth, what patience with the bitterness of the blind fates! The beauty of the worship of Be'al was upon her as a golden glory. Her heart leaped to a song that could not be sung. The inexhaustible love and pity in her soul chanted a hymn that was heard of no Druid or mortal anywhere, but was known of the white spirits of Life.

Bowing her head, so that the glad tears fell warm as thunder-rain upon her hands, she rose and moved away.

Not far from the summit of Dun-I is a hidden pool, to this day called the Fountain of Youth. Hitherward she went, as was her wont when upon the hill at the break of day, at noon, or at sundown. Close by the huge boulder, which hides it from above, she heard a pitiful bleating, and soon the healing of her eyes was upon a lamb which had become fixed in a crevice in the rock. On a crag above it stood a falcon, with savage cries, lusting for warm blood. With swift step Bride drew near. There was no hurt to the lambkin as she lifted it in her arms. Soft and warm was it there, as a young babe against the bosom that mothers it. Then with quiet eyes she looked at the falcon, who hooded his cruel gaze.

"There is no wrong in thee, Seobhag," she said gently; "but the law of blood shall not prevail for ever. Let there be peace this morn."

And when she had spoken this word, the wild hawk of the hills flew down upon her shoulder, nor did the heart of the lambkin beat the quicker, while with drowsy eyes it nestled as against its dam. When she stood by the pool she laid the little woolly

creature among the fern. Already the bleating of it was sweet against the forlorn heart of a ewe. The falcon rose, circled above her head, and with swift flight sped through the blue air. For a time Bride watched its travelling shadow: when it was itself no more than a speck in the golden haze, she turned, and stooped above the Fountain of Youth.

Beyond it stood then, though for ages past there has been no sign of either, two quicken-trees. Now they were gold-green in the morning light, and the brown-green berries that had not yet reddened were still small. Fair to see was the flickering of the long finger-shadows upon the granite rocks and boulders.

Often had Bride dreamed through their foliage; but now she stared in amaze. She had put her lips to the water, and had started back because she had seen, beyond her own image, that of a woman so beautiful that her soul was troubled within her, and had cried its inaudible cry, worshipping. When, trembling, she had glanced again, there was none beside herself. Yet what had happened? For, as she stared at the quicken-trees, she saw that their boughs had interlaced, and that they now became a green arch. What was stranger still was that the rowan-clusters hung in blood-red masses, although the late heats were yet a long way off.

Bride rose, her body quivering because of the cool sweet draught of the Fountain of Youth, so that almost she imagined the water was for her that day what it could be once in each year to every person who came to it, a breath of new life and the strength and joy of youth. With slow steps she advanced towards the arch

of the quickens. Her heart beat as she saw that the branches at the summit had formed themselves into the shape of a wreath or crown, and that the scarlet berries dropped therefrom a steady rain of red drops as of blood. A sigh of joy breathed from her lips when, deep among the red and green, she saw the white merle of which the ancient poets sang, and heard the exceeding wonder of its rapture, which was now the pain of joy and now the joy of pain.

The song of the mystic bird grew wilder and more sweet as she drew near. For a brief while she hesitated. Then, as a white dove drifted slow before her under and through the quicken-boughs, a dove white as snow but radiant with sunfire, she moved forward to follow, with a dream-smile upon her face and her eyes full of the sheen of wonder and mystery, as shadowy waters flooded with moonshine.

And this was the passing of Bride, who was not seen again of Dùvach or her foster-brothers for the space of a year and a day. Only Cathal, the aged Arch-Druid, who died seven days thence, had a vision of her, and wept for joy.

III

When the strain of the white merle ceased, though it had seemed to her scarce longer than the vanishing song of the swallow on the wing, Bride saw that the evening was come. Through the violet glooms of dusk she moved soundlessly, save for the crispling of her feet among the hot sands. Far as she could see to right or left there were hollows and ridges of sand; where, here and there, trees or shrubs grew out of the parched soil, they were strange to her. She had heard the Druids speak of the sunlands in a remote, nigh unreachable East, where there were trees called palms, trees in a perpetual sunflood yet that perished not, also tall dark cypresses, black-green as the holy yew. These were the trees she now saw. Did she dream, she wondered? Far down in her mind was some memory, some floating vision only, mayhap, of a small green isle far among the northern seas. Voices, words, faces, familiar yet unfamiliar when she strove to bring them near, haunted her.

The heat brooded upon the land. The sigh of the parched earth was "Water, water."

As she moved onward through the gloaming she descried white walls beyond her: white walls and square white buildings, looming ghostly through the dark, yet home-sweet as the bells of the cows on the sea-pastures, because of the yellow lights every here and there agleam.

A tall figure moved towards her, clad in white, even as those figures which haunted her unremembering memory. When he drew near she gave a low cry of joy. The face of her father was sweet to her.

“Where will be the pitcher, Brighid?” he said, though the words were not the words that were near her when she was alone. Nevertheless she knew them, and the same manner of words was upon her lips.

“My pitcher, father?”

“Ah, dreamer, when will you be taking heed! It is leaving your pitcher you will be, and by the Well of the Camels, no doubt: though little matter will that be, since there is now no water, and the drought is heavy upon the land. But ... Brighid ...”

“Yes, my father?”

“Sure now it is not safe for you to be on the desert at night. Wild beasts come out of the darkness, and there are robbers and wild men who lurk in the shadow. Brighid ... Brighid ... is it dreaming you are still?”

“I was dreaming of a cool green isle in northern seas, where ...”

“Where you have never been, foolish lass, and are never like to be. Sure, if any wayfarer were to come upon us you would scarce be able to tell him that yonder village is Bethlehem, and that I am Dùghall Donn the inn-keeper, Dùghall the son of Hugh, son of Art, son of Conn. Well, well, I am growing old, and they say that the old see wonders. But I do not wish to see this wonder, that

my daughter Brighid forgets her own town, and the good inn that is there, and the strong sweet ale that is cool against the thirst of the weary. Sure, if the day of my days is near it is near. ‘Green be the place of my rest,’ I cry, even as Oisìn the son of Fionn of the hero-line of Trenmor cried in his old age; though if Oisìn and the Fiànn were here not a green place would they find now, for the land is burned dry as the heather after a hill-fire. But now, Brighid, let us go back into Bethlehem, for I have that for the saying which must be said at once.”

In silence the twain walked through the gloaming that was already the mirk, till they came to the white gate, where the asses and camels breathed wearily in the sultry darkness, with dry tongues moving round parched mouths. Thence they fared through narrow streets, where a few white-robed Hebrews and sons of the desert moved silently, or sat in niches. Finally, they came to a great yard, where more than a score of camels lay huddled and growling in their sleep. Beyond this was the inn, which was known to all the patrons and friends of Dùghall Donn as the “Rest and Be Thankful,” though formerly as the Rest of Clan-Ailpean, for was he not himself through his mother MacAlpine of the Isles, as well as blood-kin to the great Carmac the Ard-Rìgh, to whom his father, Hugh, was feudatory prince?

As Dùghall and Bride walked along the stone flags of a passage leading to the inner rooms, he stopped and drew her attention to the water-tanks.

“Look you, my lass,” he said sorrowfully, “of these tanks

and barrels nearly all are empty. Soon there will be no water whatever, which is an evil thing though I whisper it in peace, to the Stones be it said. Now, already the folk who come here murmur. No man can drink ale all day long, and those wayfarers who want to wash the dust of their journey from their feet and hands complain bitterly. And ... what is that you will be saying? The kye? Ay, sure, there is the kye, but the poor beasts are o'ercome with the heat, and there's not a Cailliach on the hills who could win a drop more of milk from them than we squeeze out of their udders now, and that only with rune after rune till all the throats of the milking lassies are as dry as the salt grass by the sea.

"Well, what I am saying is this: 'tis months now since any rain will be falling, and every crock of water has been for the treasuring as though it had been the honey of Moy-Mell itself. The moon has been full twice since we had the good water brought from the mountain-springs; and now they are for drying up too. The seers say that the drought will last. If that is a true word, and there be no rain till the winter comes, there will be no inn in Bethlehem called 'The Rest and Be Thankful;' for already there is not enough good water to give peace even to your little thirst, my birdeen. As for the ale, it is poor drink now for man or maid, and as for the camels and asses, poor beasts, they don't understand the drinking of it."

"That is true, father; but what is to be done?"

"That's what I will be telling you, my lintie. Now, I have been

told by an oganach out of Jerusalem, that lives in another place close by the great town, that there is a quenchless well of pure water, cold as the sea with a north wind in it, on a hill there called the Mount of Olives. Now, it is to that hill I will be going. I am for taking all the camels, and all the horses, and all the asses, and will lade each with a burthen of water-skins, and come back home again with water enough to last us till the drought breaks.”

That was all that was said that night. But at the dawn the inn was busy, and all the folk in Bethlehem were up to see the going abroad of Dùghall Donn and Ronald M’Ian, his shepherd, and some Macleans and Maccallums that were then in that place. It was a fair sight to see as they went forth through the white gate that is called the Gate of Nazareth. A piper walked first, playing the Gathering of the Swords: then came Dùghall Donn on a camel, and M’Ian on a horse, and the herdsmen on asses, and then there were the collies barking for joy.

Before he had gone, Dùghall took Bride out of the hearing of the others. There was only a little stagnant water, he said; and as for the ale, there was no more than a flagon left of what was good. This flagon, and the one jar of pure water, he left with her. On no account was she to give a drop to any wayfarer, no matter how urgent he might be; for he, Dùghall, could not say when he would get back, and he did not want to find a dead daughter to greet him on his return, let alone there being no maid of the inn to attend to customers. Over and above that, he made her take an oath that she would give no one, no, not even a stranger, accommodation

at the inn, during his absence.

Afternoon and night came, and dawn and night again, and yet again. It was on the afternoon of the third day, when even the crickets were dying of thirst, that Bride heard a clanging at the door of the inn.

When she went to the door she saw a weary gray-haired man, dusty and tired. By his side was an ass with drooping head, and on the ass was a woman, young, and of a beauty that was as the cool shadow of green leaves and the cold ripple of running waters. But beautiful as she was, it was not this that made Bride start: no, nor the heavy womb that showed the woman was with child. For she remembered her of a dream – it was a dream, sure – when she had looked into a pool on a mountain-side, and seen, beyond her own image, just this fair and beautiful face, the most beautiful that ever man saw since Nais, of the Sons of Usna, beheld Deirdr  in the forest, – ay, and lovelier far even than she, the peerless among women.

“Gu’m beannaicheadh Dia an tigh,” said the gray-haired man in a weary voice, “the blessing of God on this house.”

“Soraidh leat,” replied Bride gently, “and upon you likewise.”

“Can you give us food and drink, and, after that, good rest at this inn? Sure it is grateful we will be. This is my wife Mary, upon whom is a mystery: and I am Joseph, a carpenter in Arimathea.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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