

The Ninth Wave

By Fiona Macleod

The wind fell as we crossed the Sound. There was only one oar in the boat, and we lay idly adrift. The tide was still on the ebb, and so we made way for Soa, though well before the island could be reached the tide would turn, and the sea-wind would stir, and we be up the Sound, and at Balliimore again almost as quick as the laying of a net.

As we—and by “us” I am meaning Phadric Macrae and Ivor McLean, fishermen of Iona, and myself beside Ivor at the helm—as we slid slowly past the ragged islet known as Eilean-na-h’ Aon-Chaorach, torn and rent by the tides and surges of a thousand years, I saw a school of seals basking in the sun. One by one slithered into the water, and I could note the dark forms, like moving patches of sea-weed, drifting in the green underglooms.

Then after a time we bore down upon Sgeir-na-Oir, a barren rock. Three great cormorants stood watching us. Their necks shone in the sunlight like snakes mailed in blue and green. On the upper ledges were eight or ten northern divers. They did not seem to see us, though I knew that their fierce light-blue eyes noted every motion we made. The small sea-ducks bobbed up and down, first one flirt of a little black-feathered rump, then another, then a third, till a score or so were under water, and half a hundred more were ready at a moment’s notice to follow suit. A skua hopped among the sputtering weed, and screamed disconsolately at intervals. Among the myriad colonies of close-set mussels, which gave a blue bloom, like that of the sloe, to the weed-covered boulders, a few kittiwakes and dotterels flitted to and fro. High over head, white against the blue as a cloudlet, a gannet hung motionless, seemingly frozen to the sky.

Below the lapse of the boat the water was pale green. I could see the liath and saith fanning their fins in slow flight, and sometimes a little scurrying cloud of tiny fluckies and inch-long codling. For two or three fathoms beyond the boat the waters were blue. If blueness can be alive, and have its own life and movement, it must be happy on these western seas, where it dreams into shadowy Lethes of amethyst and deep, dark oblivions of violet.

Suddenly a streak of silver ran for a moment along the sea to starboard. It was like an arrow of moonlight shot along the surface of the blue and gold. Almost immediately afterward, a stertorous sigh was audible. A black knife cut the flow of the water: the shoulder of a pollack.

“The mackerel are coming in from the sea,” said Macrae. He leaned forward, wet the palm of his hand, and held it seaward. “Ay, the tide has turned—

*Ohrone—achree—an—Srùth-màra!
Ohrone—achree—an—Lionadh!”*

he droned monotonously, over and over with few variations.

*“An’ it’s Oh an’ Oh for the tides o’ the sea,
An’ it’s Oh for the flowing tide,”*

I sang at last in mockery.

“Come, Phadric,” I cried, “you are as bad as Peter McAlpin’s lassie, Fiona, with the pipes!”

Both men laughed lightly. On the last Sabbath, old McAlpin had held a prayer-meeting in his little house in the “street,” in Balliemore of Iona. At the end of his discourse he told his hearers that the voice of God was terrible only to the evil-doer but beautiful to the righteous man, and that this voice was even now among them, speaking in a thousand ways and yet in one way. And at this moment, that elfin granddaughter of his, who was in the byre close by, let go upon the pipes with so long and weary a whine that the collies by the fire whimpered, and would have howled outright but for the Word of God that still lay open on the big stool in front of old Peter. For it was in this way that the dogs knew when the Sabbath readings were over; and there was not one that would dare to bark or howl, much less rise and go out, till the Book was closed with a loud, solemn bang. Well, again and again that weary quavering moan went up and down the room, till even old McAlpin smiled, though he was fair angry with Fiona. But he made the sign of silence, and began: “My brethren, even in this trial it may be the Almighty has a message for us”—when at that moment Fiona was kicked by a cow, and fell against the board with the pipes, and squeezed out so wild a wail that McAlpin started up and cried, in the Lowland way that he had won out of his wife, “*Hoots, havers, an’ a’! come oot a’ that, ye Deil’s spunkie!*”

So it was this memory that made Phadric and Ivor smile. Suddenly Ivor began with a long rising and falling cadence, an old Gaelic rune of the Faring of the Tide.

*Athair, A mhic, A Spioraid Naoimh,
Biodh an Thi-aon leinn, a ia’s a dh’ oidhche;
S’ air chul nan tonn, no air thaobh siam beann!*

O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
Be the Three-in-One with us day and night,
On the crested wave, when waves run high!

And out of the place in the West
Where Tir-nan-Òg, the Land of Youth
Is, the Land of Youth everlasting,
Send the great Tide that carries the sea-weed
And brings the birds, out of the North:
And bid it wind as a snake through the bracken,
As a great snake through the heather of the sea,
The fair blooming heather of the sunlit sea.

And may it bring the fish to our nets,
And the great fish to our lines:
And may it sweep away the sea-hounds
That devour the herring:
And may it drown the heavy pollack
That respect not our nets
But fall into and tear them and ruin them wholly.

And may I, or any that is of my blood,
Behold not the Wave-Haunter who comes in with the Tide,
Or the Maighdeann-màra who broods in the shallows,
Where the sea-caves are, in the ebb:
And fair may my fishing be, and the fishing of those near to me,
And good may this Tide be, and good may it bring:
And may there be no calling in the Flow, this Srùth-màra,
And may there be no burden in the Ebb! *Ochone!*

*An ainm an Athar, s' an Mhic, s' an Spioraid Naoimh,
Biodh an Tri-aon leinn, a ía's a dh' oidhche,
S' air chul nan tonn, no air thaobh nam beann!
Ochone! arone!*

Both men sang the closing lines with loudly swelling voices and with a wailing fervour which no words of mine could convey.

Runes of this kind prevail all over the isles, from the Butt of Lewis to the Rhinns of Islay: identical in spirit, though varying in lines and phrases, according to the mood and temperament of the *rannaiche* or singer, the local or peculiar physiognomy of nature, the instinctive yielding to hereditary wonder-words, and other compelling circumstances of the outer and inner life. Almost needless to say, the sea-maid or sea-witch and the Wave-Haunter occur in many of those wild runes, particularly in those that are impromptu. In the Outer Hebrides, the runes are wild natural hymns rather than Pagan chants; though marked distinctions prevail there also,—for in Harris and the Lews the folk are Protestant almost to a man, while in Benbecula and the Southern Hebrides the Catholics are in a like ascendancy. But all are at one in the common Brotherhood of Sorrow.

The only lines in Ivor McLean's wailing song which puzzled me were the two last which came before "the good words," "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit," etc.

"Tell me, in English, Ivor," I said, after a silence, wherein I pondered the Gaelic words, "what is the meaning of—

'And may there be no calling in the Flow, this Srùth-màra,
And may there be no burden in the Ebb?'

"Yes, I will be telling you what is the meaning of that. When the great tide that wells out of the hollow of the sea, and sweeps towards all the coasts of the world, first stirs, when she will be knowing that the Ebb is not any more moving at all, she sends out nine long waves. And I will be forgetting what these waves are: but one will be to shepherd the sea-weed that is for the blessing of man, and another is for to wake the fish that sleep in the deeps, and another is for this, and another will be for that, and the seventh is to rouse the Wave-Haunter and all the creatures of the water that fear and hate man, and the eighth no man knows, though the priests say it is to carry the Whisper of Mary, and the ninth—"

"And the ninth, Ivor?"

"May it be far from us, from you and from me and from those of us! An' I will be sayin' nothing against it, not I; nor against anything that is in the sea! An' you will be noting that!

"Well, this ninth wave goes through the water on the forehead of the tide. An' wherever it will be going it *calls*. An' the call of it is, '*Come away, come away, the sea waits! Follow! . . . Come away, come away, the sea waits! Follow!*'¹ An' whoever hears that must arise and go, whether he be fish or pollack, or seal or otter, or great skua or small tern, or bird or beast of the shore, or bird or beast of the sea, or whether it be man or woman or child, or any of the others."

"Any of the others, Ivor?"

"I will not be saying anything about that," replied McLean, gravely; "you will be knowing well what I mean, and if you do not it is not for me to talk of that which is not to be talked about.

¹ Ivor of course gave these words in the Gaelic.

“Well, as I was for saying: that calling of the ninth wave of the Tide is what Ian-Mòr of the hills speaks of as ‘the whisper of the snow that falls on the hair, the whisper of the frost that lies on the cold face of him that will never be waking again.’”

“Death?”

“It is *you* that will be saying it.

“Well,” he resumed after a moment’s hush, “a man may live by the sea for five score years and never hear that ninth wave call in any *Srùthmàra*, but soon or late he will hear it. An’ many is the Flood that will be silent for all of us: but there will be one Flood for each of us that will be a dreadful Voice, a voice of terror and of dreadfulness. And whoever hears that Voice, he for sure will be the burden in the Ebb.”

“Has any heard that Voice, and lived?”

McLean looked at me, but said nothing. Phadric Macrae rose, tautened a rope, and made a sign to me to put the helm alee. Then, looking into the green water slipping by,—for the tide was feeling our keel, and a stronger breath from the sea lay against the hollow that was growing in the sail,—he said to Ivor:—

“You should be telling her of Ivor Mac Ivor Mhic Niall.”

“Who was Ivor MacNeil?” I said.

“He was the father of my mother,” answered McLean, “and was known throughout the north isles as Ivor Carminish, for he had a farm on the eastern lands of Carminish which lie between the hills called Strondeval and Rondeval, that are in the far south of the northern Hebrides, and near what will be known to you as the Obb of Harris.

“And I will now be telling you about him in the Gaelic, for it is more easy to me, and more pleasant for us all.

“When Ivor MacEachainn Carminish, that was Ivor’s father, died, he left the farm to his elder son and to his second son, Sheumais. By this time, Ivor was married, and had the daughter who is my mother. But he was a lonely man, and an islesman to the heart’s core. So . . . but you will be knowing the isles that lie off the Obb of Harris,—the Saghay, and Ensay, and Killegray, and farther west, Berneray and, north-west, Pabaidh, and beyond that again, Shillaidh?”

For the moment I was confused, for these names are so common: and I was thinking of the big isle of Berneray that lies in huge Loch Roag that has swallowed so great a mouthful of Western Lewis, to the seaward of which also are the two Pabbays, Pabaidh Mòr and Pabaidh Beag. But when McLean added, “and other isles of the Caolas Harrish” (the Sound of Harris), I remembered aright; and indeed I knew both, though the nor’ isles better, for I had lived near Callernish on the inner waters of Roag.

“Well, Carminish had sheep-runs upon some of these. One summer the gloom came upon him, and he left Sheumais to take care of the farm and of Morag his wife, and of Sheen their daughter; and he went to live upon Pabbay, near the old castle that is by the Rua Dune on the south-east of the isle. There he stayed for three months. But on the last night of each month he heard the sea calling in his sleep; and what he heard was like ‘*Come away, come away, the sea waits! Follow. . . Come away, come away, the sea waits! Follow!*’ And he knew the voice of the ninth wave; and that it would not be there in the darkness of sleep if it were not already moving towards him through the dark ways of *An Dàn* (Destiny). So, thinking to pass away from a place doomed for him, and that he might be safe elsewhere, he sailed north to a kinsman’s croft on Aird-Vanish in the island of Taransay. But at the end of that month he heard in his sleep the noise of tidal waters, and at the gathering of the ebb he heard ‘*Come away, come away, the sea waits! Follow!*’ Then once more, when the November heat-spell had come, he sailed farther

northward still. He stopped a while at Eileari Mhealastaidh, which is under the morning shadow of high Griomabhal on the mainland, and at other places, till he settled, in the third week, at his cousin Eachainn MacEachainn's bothy, near Callernish, where the Great Stones of old stand by the sea, and hear nothing forever but the noise of the waves of the North Sea and the cry of the sea-wind.

"And when the last night of November had come and gone, and he had heard in his sleep no calling of the ninth wave of the Flowing Tide, he took heart of grace. All through that next day he went in peace. Eachainn wondered often with slant eyes when he saw the morose man smile, and heard his silence give way now and again to a short, mirthless laugh.

"The two were at the porridge, and Eachainn was muttering his *Bui'cheas dha'n Ti*, the Thanks to the Being, when Carminish suddenly leaped to his feet, and, with white face, stood shaking like a rope in the wind.

"'In the name of the Son, what is it, Ivor Mhic Ivor? What is it, Carminish?' cried Eachainn.

"But the stricken man could scarce speak. At last, with a long sigh, he turned and looked at his kinsman, and that look went down into the shivering heart like the polar wind into a crofter's hut.

"'What will be that?' said Carminish, in a hoarse whisper.

"Eachainn listened, but he could hear no wailing *beann-sith*, no unwonted sound.

"'Sure, I hear nothing but the wind moaning through the Great Stones, an' beyond them the noise of the Flowin' Tide.'

"'The Flowing Tide! The Flowing Tide!' cried Carminish, and no longer with the hush in the voice. 'An' what is it you hear in the Flowing Tide?'

"Eachainn looked in silence. What was the thing he could say? For now he knew.

"Ah, och, och, ochone, you may well sigh, Eachainn Mhic Eachainn! For the ninth wave o' the Flowing Tide is coming out o' the North Sea upon this shore, an' already I can hear it calling, '*Come away, come away, the sea waits! Follow! . . . Come away, come away, the sea waits! Follow!*'

"And with that Carminish dashed out the light that was upon the table, and leaped upon Eachainn, and dinged him to the floor and would have killed him, but for the growing noise of the sea beyond the Stannin' Stones o' Callanish, and the woe-weary sough o' the wind, an' the calling, calling, '*Come, come away! Come, come away!*'

"And so he rose and staggered to the door, and flung himself out into the night, while Eachainn lay upon the floor and gasped for breath, and then crawled to his knees, an' took the Book from the shelf by his fern-straw mattress, an' put his cheek against it, an' moaned to God, an' cried like a child for the doom that was upon Ivor Maclvor Mhic Niall, who was of his own blood, and his own *dall* at that.

"And while he moaned, Carminish was stalking through the great, gaunt, looming Stones of the Druids, that were here before St Colum and his *Shona* came, and laughing wild. And all the time the tide was coming in, and the tide and the deep sea and the waves of the shore and the wind in the salt grass and the weary reeds and the black-pool gale made a noise of a dreadful hymn, that was the death-hymn, the going-rune, of Ivor the son of Ivor of the kindred of Niall.

"And it was there that they found his body in the grey dawn, wet and stiff with the salt ooze. For the soul that was in him had heard the call of the ninth wave that was for him. So, and may the Being keep back that hour for us, there was a burden upon that Ebb on the morning of that day.

"Also, there is this thing for the hearing. In the dim dark before the curlew cried at dawn, Eachainn heard a voice about the house, a voice going like a thing blind and baffled,

'Cha till, cha till, cha till mi tuille!' "
(I return, I return, I return never more!)