

# The Dàn-nan-Ròn

By Fiona Macleod

When Anne Gillespie, that was my friend in Eilanmore, left the island after the death of her uncle, the old man Robert Achanna, it was to go far west.

Among the men of the Outer Isles who for three summers past had been at the fishing off Eilanmore there was one named Mànus MacCodrum. He was a fine lad to see, but though most of the fisher-folk of the Lewis and North Uist are fair, either with reddish hair and grey eyes, or blue-eyed and yellow-haired, he was of a brown skin with dark hair and dusky brown eyes. He was, however, as unlike to the dark Celts of Arran and the Inner Hebrides as to the northmen. He came of his people, sure enough. All the MacCodrums of North Uist had been brown-skinned and brown-haired and brown-eyed: and herein may have lain the reason why, in by-gone days, this small clan of Uist was known throughout the Western Isles as the *Sliochd nan Ròn*, the offspring of the Seals.

Not so tall as most of the North Uist and Long Island men, Mànus MacCodrum was of a fair height, and supple and strong. No man was a better fisherman than he, and he was well liked of his fellows, for all the morose gloom that was upon him at times. He had a voice as sweet as a woman's when he sang, and he sang often, and knew all the old runes of the islands, from the Obb of Harris to the Head of Mingulay. Often, too, he chanted the beautiful *orain spioradail* of the Catholic priests and Christian Brothers of South Uist and Barra, though where he lived in North Uist he was the sole man who adhered to the ancient faith.

It may have been because Anne was a Catholic too, though, sure, the Achannas were so also, notwithstanding that their forebears and kindred in Galloway were Protestant (and this because of old Robert Achanna's love for his wife, who was of the old Faith, so it is said),—it may have been for this reason, though I think her lover's admiring eyes and soft speech and sweet singing had more to do with it, that she pledged her troth to Mànus. It was a south wind for him as the saying is; for with her rippling brown hair and soft, grey eyes and cream-white skin, there was no comelier lass in the isles.

So when Achanna was laid to his long rest, and there was none left upon Eilanmore save only his three youngest sons, Mànus MacCodrum sailed north-eastward across the Minch to take home his bride. Of the four eldest sons, Alison had left Eilanmore some months before his father died, and sailed westward, though no one knew whither or for what end or for how long, and no word had been brought from him, nor was he ever seen again in the island which had come to be called Eilan-nan-Allmharachain, the Isle of the Strangers; Allan and William had been drowned in a wild gale in the Minch; and Robert had died of the white fever, that deadly wasting disease which is the scourge of the isles. Marcus was now "Eilanmore," and lived there with Gloom and Sheumais, all three unmarried, though it was rumoured among the neighbouring islanders that each loved Marsail nic Ailpean,<sup>1</sup> in Eilean-Rona of the Summer Isles hard by the coast of Sutherland.

When Mànus asked Anne to go with him she agreed. The three brothers were ill-pleased at this, for apart from their not wishing their cousin to go so far away, they did not want to lose her,

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<sup>1</sup> Marsail nic Ailpean is the Gaelic of which an English translation would be Marjory MacAlpine. *Nic* is a contraction for *nighean mhic*, "daughter of the line of."

as she not only cooked for them and did all that a woman does, including spinning and weaving, but was most sweet and fair to see, and in the long winter nights sang by the hour together, while Gloom played strange wild airs upon his *feadan*, a kind of oaten pipe or flute.

She loved him, I know; but there was this reason also for her going, that she was afraid of Gloom. Often upon the moor or on the hill she turned and hastened home, because she heard the lilt and fall of that *feadan*. It was an eerie thing to her, to be going through the twilight when she thought the three men were in the house, smoking after their supper, and suddenly to hear beyond and coming towards her the shrill song of that oaten flute, playing "The Dance of the Dead," or "The Flow and Ebb," or "The Shadow-Reel."

That, sometimes at least, he knew she was there was clear to her, because, as she stole rapidly through the tangled fern and gale, she would hear a mocking laugh follow her like a leaping thing.

Mànus was not there on the night when she told Marcus and his brothers that she was going. He was in the haven on board the *Luath*, with his two mates, he singing in the moonshine as all three sat mending their fishing gear.

After the supper was done, the three brothers sat smoking and talking over an offer that had been made about some Shetland sheep. For a time, Anne watched them in silence. They were not like brothers, she thought. Marcus, tall, broad-shouldered, with yellow hair and strangely dark blue-black eyes and black eyebrows; stern, with a weary look on his sun-brown face. The light from the peats glinted upon the tawny curve of thick hair that trailed from his upper lip, for he had the *caisean-feusag* of the Northmen. Gloom, slighter of build, dark of hue and hair, but with hairless face; with thin, white, long-fingered hands that had ever a nervous motion, as though they were tide-wrack. There was always a frown on the centre of his forehead, even when he smiled with his thin lips and dusky, unbetraying eyes. He looked what he was, the brain of the Achannas. Not only did he have the English as though native to that tongue, but could and did read strange unnecessary books. Moreover, he was the only son of Robert Achanna to whom the old man had imparted his store of learning, for Achanna had been a schoolmaster in his youth, in Galloway, and he had intended Gloom for the priesthood. His voice, too, was low and clear, but cold as pale-green water running under ice. As for Sheumais, he was more like Marcus than Gloom, though not so fair. He had the same brown hair and shadowy hazel eyes, the same pale and smooth face, with something of the same intent look which characterised the long-time missing, and probably dead, eldest brother, Alison. He, too, was tall and gaunt. On Sheumais' face there was that indescribable, as to some of course imperceptible look, which is indicated by the phrase, "the dusk of the shadow," though few there are who know what they mean by that, or, knowing, are fain to say.

Suddenly, and without any word or reason for it, Gloom turned and spoke to her.

"Well, Anne, and what is it?"

"I did not speak, Gloom."

"True for you, *mo cailinn*. But it's about to speak you were."

"Well, and that is true. Marcus, and you Gloom, and you Sheumais, I have that to tell which you will not be altogether glad for the hearing. 'T is about—about—me and—and Mànus."

There was no reply at first. The three brothers sat looking at her like the kye at a stranger on the moorland. There was a deepening of the frown on Gloom's brow, but when Anne looked at him his eyes fell and dwelt in the shadow at his feet. Then Marcus spoke in a low voice.

"Is it Mànus MacCodrum you will be meaning?"

"Ay, sure."

Again, silence. Gloom did not lift his eyes, and Sheumais was now staring at the peats. Marcus shifted uneasily.

“And what will Mānus MacCodrum be wanting?”

“Sure, Marcus, you know well what I mean. Why do you make this thing hard for me? There is but one thing he would come here wanting. And he has asked me if I will go with him; and I have said yes; and if you are not willing that he come again with the minister, or that we go across to the kirk in Berneray of Uist in the Sound of Harris, then I will not stay under this roof another night, but will go away from Eilamore at sunrise in the *Luath*, that is now in the haven. And that is for the hearing and knowing, Marcus and Gloom and Sheumais!”

Once more, silence followed her speaking. It was broken in a strange way. Gloom slipped his *feadan* into his hands, and so to his mouth. The clear, cold notes of the flute filled the flame-lit room. It was as though white polar birds were drifting before the coming of snow.

The notes slid into a wild, remote air: cold moonlight on the dark o’ the sea, it was. It was the “*Dan-nan-Ròn*.”

Anne flushed, trembled, and then abruptly rose. As she leaned on her clenched right hand upon the table, the light of the peats showed that her eyes were aflame.

“Why do you play *that*, Gloom Achanna?”

The man finished the bar, then blew into the oaten pipe, before, just glancing at the girl, he replied:

“And what harm will there be in *that*, Anna-ban?”

“You know it is harm. That is the ‘*Dàn-nan-Ròn*!’”

“Ay, and what then, Anna-ban?”

“What then? Are you thinking I don’t know what you mean by playing the ‘Song o’ the Seals’?”

With an abrupt gesture Gloom put the *feadan* aside. As he did so, he rose.

“See here, Anne,” he began roughly, when Marcus intervened.

“That will do just now, Gloom. Anne-à-ghraidh, do you mean that you are going to do this thing?”

“Ay, sure.”

“Do you know why Gloom played the ‘*Dàn-nan-Ròn*’?”

“It was a cruel thing.”

“You know what is said in the isles about—about—this or that man, who is under *gheasan*, who is spell-bound and—and—about the seals and—”

“Yes, Marcus, it is knowing it that I am: ‘*Tha lad a’ cantuinn gur h-e daoine fo gheasan a th’ anns no roin.*’ ”

“ ‘*They say that seals,*’ ” he repeated slowly, “ ‘*They say that seals are men under magic spells.*’ And have you ever pondered that thing, Anne, my cousin?”

I am knowing well what you mean.”

“Then you will know that the MacCodrums of North Uist are called the *Sliochd-nan-Ròn*?”

“I have heard.”

“And would you be for marrying a man that is of the race of the beasts, and that himself knows what *geas* means, and may any day go back to his people?”

“Ah, now, Marcus, sure it is making a mock of me you are. Neither you nor any here believes that foolish thing. How can a man born of a woman be a seal, even though his *sinnsear* were the offspring of the sea-people, which is not a saying I am believing either, though it may be; and not that it matters much, whatever, about the far-back forbears.”

Marcus frowned darkly, and at first made no response. At last he answered, speaking sullenly.

“You may be believing this or you may be believing that, Anna-nic-Gilleasbuig, but two things are as well known as that the east wind brings the blight and the west wind the rain. And one is this: that long ago a Seal-man wedded a woman of North Uist, and that he or his son was called Neil MacCodrum; and that the sea-fever of the seal was in the blood of his line ever after. And this is the other: that twice within the memory of living folk, a MacCodrum has taken upon himself the form of a seal, and has so met his death, once Neil MacCodrum of Ru’ Tormaid, and once Anndra MacCodrum of Berneray in the Sound. There’s talk of others, but these are known of us all. And you will not be forgetting now that Neil-donn was the grandfather, and that Anndra was the brother of the father of M̀anus MacCodrum?”

“I am not caring what you say, Marcus. It is all foam of the sea.”

“There’s no foam without wind or tide, Anne, an’ it’s a dark tide that will be bearing you away to Uist, and a black wind that will be blowing far away behind the East, the wind that will be carrying his death-cry to your ears.”

The girl shuddered. The brave spirit in her, however, did not quail.

“Well, so be it. To each his fate. But, seal or no seal, I am going to wed M̀anus MacCodrum, who is a man as good as any here, and a true man at that, and the man I love, and that will be my man, God willing, the praise be His!”

Again Gloom took up the *feadan*, and sent a few cold, white notes floating through the hot room, breaking, suddenly, into the wild, fantastic, opening air of the “D̀an-nan-R̀on.”

With a low cry and passionate gesture Anne sprang forward, snatched the oat-flute from his grasp, and would have thrown it in the fire. Marcus held her in an iron grip, however.

“Don’t you be minding Gloom, Anne,” he said quietly, as he took the *feadan* from her hand and handed it to his brother: “sure he’s only telling you in *his* way what I am telling you in mine.

She shook herself free, and moved to the other side of the table. On the opposite wall hung the dirk which had belonged to old Achanna. This she unfastened. Holding it in her right hand, she faced the three men.

“On the cross of the dirk I swear I will be the woman of Manus MacCodrum.”

The brothers made no response. They looked at her fixedly.

“And by the cross of the dirk I swear that if any man come between me and M̀anus, this dirk will be for his remembering in a certain hour of the day of the days.”

As she spoke, she looked meaningly at Gloom, whom she feared more than Marcus or Sheumais.

“And by the cross of the dirk I swear that if evil come to M̀anus, this dirk will have another sheath, and that will be my milkless breast; and by that token I now throw the old sheath in the fire.”

As she finished, she threw the sheath on to the burning peats. Gloom quietly lifted it, brushed off the sparks of flame as though they were dust, and put it in his pocket.

“And by the same token, Anne,” he said, “your oaths will come to nought.”

Rising, he made a sign to his brothers to follow. When they were outside he told Sheumais to return, and to keep Anne within, by peace if possible, by force if not. Briefly they discussed their plans, and then separated. While Sheumais went back, Marcus and Gloom made their way to the haven.

Their black figures were visible in the moonlight, but at first they were not noticed by the men on board the *Luath*, for M̀anus was singing.

When the isleman stopped abruptly, one of his companions asked him jokingly if his song had brought a seal alongside, and bid him beware lest it was a woman of the sea-people.

He gloomed morosely, but made no reply. When the others listened, they heard the wild strain of the “Dàn-nan-Ròn” stealing through the moonshine. Staring against the shore, they could discern the two brothers.

“What will be the meaning of that?” asked one of the men, uneasily.

“When a man comes instead of a woman,” answered M̀anus, slowly, “the young corbies are astir in the nest.”

So, it meant blood. Aulay MacNeil and Donull MacDonull put down their gear, rose, and stood waiting for what M̀anus would do.

“Ho, there!” he cried.

“Ho-ro!”

“What will you be wanting, Eilanmore?”

“We are wanting a word of you, M̀anus MacCodrum. Will you come ashore?”

“If you want a word of me, you can come to me.”

“There is no boat here.”

“I’ll send the *b̀ata-beag*.”

When he had spoken, M̀anus asked Donull, the younger of his mates, a lad of seventeen, to row to the shore.

“And bring back no more than one man,” he added, “whether it be Eilanmore himself or Gloom-mhic-Achanna.”

The rope of the small boat was unfastened, and Donull rowed it swiftly through the moonshine. The passing of a cloud dusked the shore, but they saw him throw a rope for the guiding of the boat alongside the ledge of the landing-place; then the sudden darkening obscured the vision. Donull must be talking, they thought, for two or three minutes elapsed without sign, but at last the boat put off again, and with two figures only. Doubtless the lad had had to argue against the coming of both Marcus and Gloom.

This, in truth, was what Donull had done.

But while he was speaking Marcus was staring fixedly beyond him.

“Who is it that is there?” he asked, “there, in the stern?”

“There is no one there.”

“I thought I saw the shadow of a man.”

“Then it was my shadow, Eilanmore.” Achanna turned to his brother.

“I see a man’s death there in the boat.”

Gloom quailed for a moment, then laughed low.

“I see no death of a man sitting in the boat, Marcus, but if I did I am thinking it would dance to the air of the ‘Dàn-nan-Ròn,’ which is more than the wraith of you or me would do.”

“It is not a wraith I was seeing, but the death of a man.”

Gloom whispered, and his brother nodded sullenly. The next moment a heavy muffler was round Donull’s mouth; and before he could resist, or even guess what had happened, he was on his face on the shore, bound and gagged. A minute later the oars were taken by Gloom, and the boat moved swiftly out of the inner haven.

As it drew near through the gloom M̀anus stared at it intently.

“That is not Donull that is rowing, Aulay!”

“No: it will be Gloom Achanna, I’m thinking.”

MacCodrum started. If so, that other figure at the stern was too big for Donull. The cloud passed just as the boat came alongside. The rope was made secure, and then Marcus and Gloom sprang on board.

“Where is Donull MacDonull?” demanded M̀anus sharply.

Marcus made no reply, so Gloom answered for him.

“He has gone up to the house with a message to Anne-nic-Gilleasbuig.”

“And what will that message be?”

“That M̀anus MacCodrum has sailed away from Eilanmore, and will not see her again.”

MacCodrum laughed. It was a low, ugly laugh.

“Sure, Gloom Achanna, you should be taking that *feadan* of yours and playing the *Cod-hail-nan-Pairtean*, for I’m thinkin’ the crabs are gathering about the rocks down below us, an’ laughing wi’ their claws.”

“Well, and that is a true thing,” Gloom replied slowly and quietly. “Yes, for sure I might, as you say, be playing the ‘Meeting of the Crabs.’ Perhaps,” he added, as by a sudden afterthought, “perhaps, though it is a calm night, you will be hearing the *comh-thonn*. The ‘slapping of the waves’ is a better thing to be hearing than the ‘Meeting of the Crabs.’ ”

“If I hear the *comh-thonn* it is not in the way you will be meaning, Gloom ’ic Achanna. ’T is not the ‘up sail and good-bye’ they will be saying, but ‘Home wi’ the Bride.’ ”

Here Marcus intervened.

“Let us be having no more words, M̀anus MacCodrum. The girl Anne is not for you. Gloom is to be her man. So get you hence. If you will be going quiet, it is quiet we will be. If you have your feet on this thing, then you will be having that too which I saw in the boat.”

“And what was it you saw in the boat, Achanna?”

“The death of a man.”

“So—. And now” (this after a prolonged silence, wherein the four men stood facing each other) “is it a blood-matter if not of peace?”

“Ay. Go, if you are wise. If not, ’t is your own death you will be making.”

There was a flash as of summer lightning. A bluish flame seemed to leap through the moonshine. Marcus reeled, with a gasping cry; then, leaning back, till his face blanched in the moonlight, his knees gave way. As he fell, he turned half round. The long knife which M̀anus had hurled at him had not penetrated his breast more than two inches at most, but as he fell on the deck it was driven into him up to the hilt.

In the blank silence that followed, the three men could hear a sound like the ebb-tide in seaweed. It was the gurgling of the bloody froth in the lungs of the dead man.

The first to speak was his brother, and then only when thin reddish-white foam-bubbles began to burst from the blue lips of Marcus.

“It is murder.”

He spoke low, but it was like the surf of breakers in the ears of those who heard.

“You have said one part of a true word, Gloom Achanna. It is murder—that you and he came here for!”

“The death of Marcus Achanna is on you M̀anus MacCodrum.”

“So be it, as between yourself and me, or between all of your blood and me; though Aulay MacNeil as well as you can witness that though in self-defence I threw the knife at Achanna, it was his own doing that drove it into him.”

“You can whisper that to the rope when it is round your neck.”

“And what will *you* be doing now, Gloom Nic Achanna?”

For the first time Gloom shifted uneasily. A swift glance revealed to him the awkward fact that the boat trailed behind the *Luath*, so that he could not leap into it, while if he turned to haul it close by the rope he was at the mercy of the two men.

"I will go in peace," he said quietly.

"Ay," was the answer, in an equally quiet tone, "in the white peace."

Upon this menace of death the two men stood facing each other.

Achanna broke the silence at last.

"You'll hear the 'Dàn-nan-Ròn' the night before you die, Mànus MacCodrum, and lest you doubt it you'll hear it again in your death-hour."

"*Ma tha sin an Dàn*,—if that be ordained." Mànus spoke gravely. His very quietude, however, boded ill. There was no hope of clemency; Gloom knew that.

Suddenly he laughed scornfully. Then, pointing with his right hand as if to some one behind his two adversaries, he cried out: "Put the death-hand on them, Marcus! Give them the Grave!" Both men sprang aside, the heart of each nigh upon bursting. The death-touch of the newly slain is an awful thing to incur, for it means that the wraith can transfer all its evil to the person touched.

The next moment there was a heavy splash. In a second Mànus realised that it was no more than a ruse, and that Gloom had escaped. With feverish haste he hauled in the small boat, leaped into it, and began at once to row so as to intercept his enemy.

Achanna rose once, between him and the *Luath*. MacCodrum crossed the oars in the thole-pins and seized the boat-hook.

The swimmer kept straight for him. Suddenly he dived. In a flash, Mànus realised that Gloom was going to rise under the boat, seize the keel, and upset him, and thus probably be able to grip him from above. There was time and no more to leap; and, indeed, scarce had he plunged into the sea ere the boat swung right over, Achanna clambering over it the next moment.

At first Gloom could not see where his foe was. He crouched on the upturned craft, and peered eagerly into the moonlit water. All at once a black mass shot out of the shadow between him and the smack. This black mass laughed,—the same low, ugly laugh that had preceded the death of Marcus.

He who was in turn the swimmer was now close. When a fathom away he leaned back and began to tread water steadily. In his right hand he grasped the boat-hook. The man in the boat knew that to stay where he was meant certain death. He gathered himself together like a crouching cat. Mànus kept treading the water slowly, but with the hook ready so that the sharp iron spike at the end of it should transfix his foe if he came at him with a leap. Now and again he laughed. Then in his low sweet voice, but brokenly at times between his deep breathings, he began to sing:

The tide was dark, an' heavy with the burden that it bore;  
I heard it talkin', whisperin', upon the weedy shore;  
Each wave that stirred the sea-weed was like a closing door;  
'T is closing doors they hear at last who hear no more, no more,  
My Grief,  
No more!

The tide was in the salt sea-weed, and like a knife it tore;  
The wild sea-wind went moaning, soing, moaning o'er and o'er;

The deep sea-heart was brooding deep upon its ancient lore,—  
I heard the sob, the sooting sob, the dying sob at its core,  
My Grief,  
Its core!

The white sea-waves were wan and grey its ashy lips before,  
The yeast within its ravening mouth was red with streaming gore;  
O red sea-weed, O red sea-waves, O hollow baffled roar,  
Since one thou hast, O dark dim Sea, why callest thou for more,  
My Grief,  
For more!

In the quiet moonlight the chant, with its long, slow cadences, sung as no other man in the isles could sing it, sounded sweet and remote beyond the water of the haven, and moved in waving words to tell. The glittering shine was upon lines of fire along the stone ledges. Sometimes a fish rose, and spilt a ripple of pale gold; or a sea-nettle swam to the surface, and turned its blue or greenish globe of living jelly to the moon dazzle.

The man in the water made a sudden stop in his treading, and listened intently. Then once more the phosphorescent light gleamed about his slow-moving shoulders. In a louder chanting voice came once again,

Each wave that stirs the sea-weed is like a closing door;  
'T is closing doors they hear at last who hear no more, no more,  
My Grief,  
No more!

Yes, his quick ears had caught the inland strain of a voice he knew. Soft and white as the moonshine came Anne's singing as she passed along the corrie leading to the haven. In vain his travelling gaze sought her; she was still in the shadow, and, besides, a slow drifting cloud obscured the moonlight. When he looked back again a stifled exclamation came from his lips. There was not a sign of Gloom Achanna. He had slipped noiselessly from the boat, and was now either behind it, or had dived beneath it, or was swimming under water this way or that. If only the cloud would sail by, muttered Manus, as he held himself in readiness for an attack from beneath or behind. As the dusk lightened, he swam slowly towards the boat, and then swiftly round it. There was no one there. He climbed on to the keel, and stood, leaning forward, as a salmon-leisterer by torchlight, with his spear-pointed boat-hook raised. Neither below nor beyond could he discern any shape. A whispered call to Aulay MacNeil showed that he, too, saw nothing. Gloom must have swooned, and sank deep as he slipped through the water. Perhaps the dog-fish were already darting about him.

Going behind the boat Manus guided it back to the smack. It was not long before, with MacNeil's help, he righted the punt. One oar had drifted out of sight, but as there was a sculling-hole in the stern that did not matter.

"What shall we do with it?" he muttered, as he stood at last by the corpse of Marcus. "This is a bad night for us, Aulay!"

"Bad it is; but let us be seeing it is not worse. I'm thinking we should have left the boat."

"And for why that?"

“We could say that Marcus Achanna and Gloom Achanna left us again, and that we saw no more of them nor of our boat.”

MacCodrum pondered a while. The sound of voices, borne faintly across the water, decided him. Probably Anne and the lad Donull were talking. He slipped into the boat, and with a sail-knife soon ripped it here and there. It filled, and then, heavy with the weight of a great ballast-stone which Aulay had first handed to his companion, and surging with a foot-thrust from the latter, it sank.

“We’ll hide the—the man there—behind the windlass, below the spare sail, till we’re out at sea, Aulay. Quick, give me a hand!”

It did not take the two men long to lift the corpse, and do as Mànus had suggested. They had scarce accomplished this, when Anne’s voice came hailing silver-sweet across the water.

With death-white face and shaking limbs, MacCodrum stood holding the mast, while with a loud voice, so firm and strong that Aulay MacNeil smiled below his fear, he asked if the Achannas were back yet, and if so for Donull to row out at once, and she with him if she would come.

It was nearly half an hour thereafter that Anne rowed out towards the *Luath*. She had gone at last along the shore to a creek where one of Marcus’ boats was moored and returned with it. Having taken Donull on board, she made way with all speed, fearful lest Gloom or Marcus should intercept her.

It did not take long to explain how she had laughed at Sheumais’ vain efforts to detain her, and had come down to the haven. As she approached, she heard Mànus singing, and so had herself broken into a song she knew he loved. Then, by the water-edge she had come upon Donull lying upon his back, bound and gagged. After she had released him they waited to see what would happen, but as in the moonlight they could not see any small boat come in, bound to or from the smack, she had hailed to know if Mànus were there.

On his side he said briefly that the two Achannas had come to persuade him to leave without her. On his refusal they had departed again, uttering threats against her as well as himself. He heard their quarrelling voices as they rowed into the gloom, but could not see them at last because of the obscured moonlight.

“And now, Ann-mochree,” he added, “is it coming with me you are, and just as you are? Sure, you’ll never repent it, and you’ll have all you want that I can give. Dear of my heart, say that you will be coming away this night of the nights! By the Black Stone on Icolmkill I swear it, and by the Sun, and by the Moon, and by Himself!”

“I am trusting you, Mànus dear. Sure it is not for me to be going back to that house after what has been done and said. I go with you, now and always, God save us.”

“Well, dear lass o’ my heart, it’s farewell to Eilanmore it is, for by the Blood on the Cross I’ll never land on it again!”

“And that will be no sorrow to me, Mànus my home!”

And this was the way that my friend Anne Gillespie left Eilanmore to go to the isles of the west.

It was a fair sailing, in the white moonshine, with a whispering breeze astern. Anne leaned against Mànus, dreaming her dream. The lad Donull sat drowsing at the helm. Forward, Aulay MacNeil, with his face set against the moonshine to the west, brooded dark.

Though no longer was land in sight, and there was peace among the deeps of the quiet stars and upon the sea, the shadow of fear was upon the face of Mànus MacCodrum.

This might well have been because of the as yet unburied dead that lay beneath the spare sail by the windlass. The dead man, however, did not affright him. What went moaning in his heart, and sighing and calling in his brain, was a faint falling echo he had heard, as the *Luath* glided slow out of the haven. Whether from the water or from the shore he could not tell, but he heard the wild, fantastic air of the “Dàn-nan-Ròn,” as he had heard it that very night upon the *feadan* of Gloom Achanna.

It was his hope that his ears had played him false. When he glanced about him, and saw the sombre flame in the eyes of Aulay MacNeil, staring at him out of the dusk, he knew that which Oisín the son of Fionn cried in his pain. His soul swam in mist.

## II.

For all the evil omens, the marriage of Anne and Mânus MacCodrum went well. He was more silent than of yore, and men avoided rather than sought him; but he was happy with Anne, and content with his two mates, who were now Callum MacCodrum and Ranald MacRanald. The youth Donull had bettered himself by joining a Skye skipper who was a kinsman, and Aulay MacNeil had surprised every one, except Mânus, by going away as a seaman on board one of the *Loch* line of ships which sail for Australia from the Clyde.

Anne never knew what had happened, though it is possible she suspected somewhat. All that was known to her was that Marcus and Gloom Achanna had disappeared, and were supposed to have been drowned. There was now no Achanna upon Eilanmore, for Sheumais had taken a horror of the place and his loneliness. As soon as it was commonly admitted that his two brothers must have drifted out to sea, and been drowned, or at best picked up by some ocean-going ship, he disposed of the island-farm, and left Eilanmore forever. All this confirmed the thing said among the islanders of the west, that old Robert Achanna had brought a curse with him. Blight and disaster had visited Eilanmore over and over in the many years he had held it, and death, sometimes tragic or mysterious, had overtaken six of his seven sons, while the youngest bore upon his brows the “dusk of the shadow.” True, none knew for certain that three out of the six were dead, but few for a moment believed in the possibility that Alison and Marcus and Gloom were alive. On the night when Anne had left the island with Mânus MacCodrum, he, Sheumais, had heard nothing to alarm him. Even when, an hour after she had gone down to the haven, neither she nor his brothers had returned, and the *Luath* had put out to sea, he was not in fear of any ill. Clearly, Marcus and Gloom had gone away in the smack, perhaps determined to see that the girl was duly married by priest or minister. He would have perturbed himself little for days to come, but for a strange thing that happened that night. He had returned to the house because of a chill that was upon him, and convinced too that all had sailed in the *Luath*. He was sitting brooding by the peat-fire, when he was startled by a sound at the window at the back of the room. A few bars of a familiar air struck painfully upon his ear, though played so low that they were just audible. What could it be but the “Dàn-nan-Ròn,” and who would be playing that but Gloom? What did it mean? Perhaps after all, it was fantasy only, and there was no *feadan* out there in the dark. He was pondering this when, still low but louder and sharper than before, there rose and fell the strain which he hated, and Gloom never played before him, that of the *Dàvsa-na-mairv*, the “Dance of the Dead.” Swiftly and silently he rose and crossed the room. In the dark shadows cast by the byre he could see nothing, but the music ceased. He went out, and searched everywhere, but found no one. So he returned, took down the Holy Book, with awed heart, and read slowly till peace came upon him, soft and sweet as the warmth of the peat-glow.

But as for Anne, she had never even this hint that one of the supposed dead might be alive, or that, being dead, Gloom might yet touch a shadowy *feadan* into a wild remote air of the grave.

When month after month went by, and no hint of ill came to break upon their peace, Månus grew light-hearted again. Once more his songs were heard as he came back from the fishing, or loitered ashore mending his nets. A new happiness was nigh to them, for Anne was with child. True, there was fear also, for the girl was not well at the time when her labour was near, and grew weaker daily. There came a day when Manus had to go to Loch Boisdale in South Uist: and it was with pain and something of foreboding that he sailed away from Berneray in the Sound of Harris, where he lived. It was on the third night that he returned. He was met by Katreen MacRanald, the wife of his mate, with the news that on the morrow after his going Anne had sent for the priest who was staying at Loch Maddy, for she had felt the coming of death. It was that very evening she died, and took the child with her.

Månus heard as one in a dream. It seemed to him that the tide was ebbing in his heart, and a cold, sleety rain falling, falling through a mist in his brain.

Sorrow lay heavily upon him. After the earthing of her whom he loved, he went to and fro solitary: often crossing the Narrows and going to the old Pictish Tower under the shadow of Ben Breac. He would not go upon the sea, but let his kinsman Callum do as he liked with the *Luath*.

Now and again Father Allan MacNeil sailed northward to see him. Each time he departed sadder. "The man is going mad, I fear," he said to Callum, the last time he saw Månus.

The long summer nights brought peace and beauty to the isles. It was a great herring-year, and the moon-fishing was unusually good. All the Uist men who lived by the sea-harvest were in their boats whenever they could. The pollack, the dogfish, the otters, and the seals, with flocks of sea-fowl beyond number, shared in the common joy. Månus MacCodrum alone paid no heed to herring or mackerel. He was often seen striding along the shore, and more than once had been heard laughing; sometimes, too, he was come upon at low tide by the great Reef of Berneray, singing wild strange runes and songs, or crouching upon a rock and brooding dark.

The midsummer moon found no man on Berneray except MacCodrum, the Reverend Mr. Black, the minister of the Free Kirk, and an old man named Anndra McIan. On the night before the last day of the middle month, Anndra was reproved by the minister for saying that he had seen a man rise out of one of the graves in the kirk-yard, and steal down by the stonedykes towards Balnahunnur-sa-mona,<sup>2</sup> where Månus MacCodrum lived.

"The dead do not rise and walk, Anndra."

"That may be, maighstir, but it may have been the Watcher of the Dead. Sure it is not three weeks since Padruic McAlistair was laid beneath the green mound. He'll be wearying for another to take his place."

"Hoots, man, that is an old superstition. The dead do not rise and walk, I tell you."

"It is right you may be, maighstir, but I heard of this from my father, that was old before you were young, and from his father before him. When the last-buried is weary with being the Watcher of the Dead he goes about from place to place till he sees man, woman, or child with the death-shadow in the eyes, and then he goes back to his grave and lies down in peace, for his vigil it will be over now."

The minister laughed at the folly, and went into his house to make ready for the Sacrament that was to be on the morrow. Old Anndra, however, was uneasy. After the porridge, he went down through the gloaming to Balnahunnur-sa-mona. He meant to go in and warn Månus MacCodrum.

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<sup>2</sup> *Baille-'na-aonar'sa mhondh*, "the solitary farm on the hill-slope."

But when he got to the west wall, and stood near the open window, he heard Mânus speaking in a loud voice, though he was alone in the room.

“*B’ iongantach do gkràdh dhomhsa, a’ toirt barrachd air gràdh nam ban!*” . . .<sup>3</sup>

This, Manus cried in a voice quivering with pain. Anndra stopped still, fearful to intrude, fearful also, perhaps, to see some one there beside MacCodrum whom eyes should not see. Then the voice rose into a cry of agony.

“*Aoram dhuit, ay an déigk dhomh fàs aosda!*”<sup>4</sup>

With that, Anndra feared to stay. As he passed the byre he started, for he thought he saw the shadow of a man. When he looked closer he could see nought, so went his way, trembling and sore troubled.

It was dusk when Mânus came out. He saw that it was to be a cloudy night; and perhaps it was this that, after a brief while, made him turn in his aimless walk and go back to the house. He was sitting before the flaming heart of the peats, brooding in his pain, when suddenly he sprang to his feet.

Loud and clear, and close as though played under the very window of the room, came the cold, white notes of an oaten flute. Ah, too well he knew that wild, fantastic air. Who could it be but Gloom Achanna, playing upon his *feadan*; and what air of all airs could that be but the “*Dàn-nan-Ròn?*”

Was it the dead man, standing there unseen in the shadow of the Grave? Was Marcus beside him, Marcus with the knife still thrust up to the hilt, and the lung-foam upon his lips? Can the sea give up its dead? Can there be strain of any *feadan* that ever was made of man, there in the Silence?

In vain Mhnus MacCodrum tortured himself thus. Too well he knew that he had heard the “*Dan-nan-Ròn,*” and that no other than Gloom Achanna was the player.

Suddenly an access of fury wrought him to madness. With an abrupt lilt the tune swung into the *Davsà-na-mairv*, and thence, after a few seconds, and in a moment, into that mysterious and horrible *Codhail-nan-Pairtean* which none but Gloom played.

There could be no mistake now, nor as to what was meant by the muttering, jerking air of the “*gathering of the crabs.*”

With a savage cry Mânus snatched up a long dirk from its place by the chimney, and rushed out.

There was not the shadow of a sea-gull even in front; so he sped round by the byre. Neither was anything unusual discoverable there.

“*Sorrow upon me,*” he cried; “*man or wraith, I will be putting it to the dirk!*”

But there was no one; nothing; not a sound. Then, at last, with a listless droop of his arms, MacCodrum turned and went into the house again. He remembered what Gloom Achanna had said: “*You’ll hear the ‘Dàn-nan-Ròn the night before you die, Mânus MacCodrum, and lest you doubt it, you’ll hear it in your death-hour.*”

He did not stir from the fire for three hours; then he rose, and went over to his bed and lay down without undressing.

He did not sleep, but lay listening and watching. The peats burned low, and at last there was scarce a flicker along the floor. Outside he could hear the wind moaning upon the sea. By a strange rustling sound he knew that the tide was ebbing across the great reef that runs out from Berneray. By midnight the clouds had gone. The moon shone clear and full. When he heard the

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<sup>3</sup> “Thy love to me was wonderful, surpassing the love of women.”

<sup>4</sup> “I shall worship thee, ay, even after I have become old.”

clock strike in its worm-eaten, rickety case, he sat up, and listened intently. He could hear nothing. No shadow stirred. Surely if the wraith of Gloom Achanna were waiting for him it would make some sign, now, in the dead of night.

An hour passed. M̀anus rose, crossed the room on tip-toe, and soundlessly opened the door. The salt wind blew fresh against his face. The smell of the shore, of wet sea-wrack and pungent gale, of foam and moving water, came sweet to his nostrils. He heard a skua calling from the rocky promontory. From the slopes behind, the wail of a moon-restless lapwing rose and fell mournfully.

Crouching and with slow, stealthy step, he stole round by the seaward wall. At the dyke he stopped, and scrutinised it on each side. He could see for several hundred yards, and there was not even a sheltering sheep. Then, soundlessly as ever, he crept close to the byre. He put his ear to chink after chink: but not a stir of a shadow even. As a shadow, himself, he drifted lightly to the front, past the hay-rick; then, with swift glances to right and left, opened the door and entered. As he did so, he stood as though frozen. Surely, he thought, that was a sound as of a step, out there by the hay-rick? A terror was at his heart. In front, the darkness of the byre, with God knows what dread thing awaiting him; behind, a mysterious walker in the night, swift to take him unawares. The trembling that came upon him was nigh overmastering. At last, with a great effort, he moved towards the ledge, where he kept a candle. With shaking hand he struck a light. The empty byre looked ghostly and fearsome in the flickering gloom. But there was no one, nothing. He was about to turn, when a rat ran along a loose hanging beam, and stared at him, or at the yellow shine. He saw its black eyes shining like peat-water in moonlight.

The creature was curious at first, then indifferent. At least, it began to squeak, and then make a swift scratching with its forepaws. Once or twice came an answering squeak; a faint rustling was audible here and there among the straw.

With a sudden spring M̀anus seized the beast. Even in the second in which he raised it to his mouth and scrunched its back with his strong teeth, it bit him severely. He let his hands drop, and grope furtively in the darkness. With stooping head he shook the last breath out of the rat, holding it with his front teeth, with back-curved lips. The next moment he dropped the dead thing, trampled upon it, and burst out laughing. There was a scurrying of pattering feet, a rustling of straw. Then silence again. A draught from the door had caught the flame and extinguished it. In the silence and darkness MacCodrum stood, intent, but no longer afraid. He laughed again, because it was so easy to kill with the teeth. The noise of his laughter seemed to him to leap hither and thither like a shadowy ape. He could see it: a blackness within the darkness. Once more he laughed. It amused him to see the *thing* leaping about like that.

Suddenly he turned, and walked out into the moonlight. The lapwing was still circling and wailing. He mocked it, with loud shrill *pçç-wççty, pçç-wççty, pçç-wççt*. The bird swung waywardly, alarmed: its abrupt cry, and dancing flight aroused its fellows. The air was full of the lamentable crying of plovers.

A sough of the sea came inland. M̀anus inhaled its breath with a sigh of delight. A passion for the running wave was upon him. He yearned to feel green water break against his breast. Thirst and hunger, too, he felt at last, though he had known neither all day. How cool and sweet, he thought, would be a silver haddock, or even a brown-backed liath, alive and gleaming, wet with the sea-water still bubbling in its gills. It would writhe, just like the rat; but then how he would throw his head back, and toss the glittering thing up into the moonlight, catch it on the downwhirl just as it neared the wave on whose crest he was, and then devour it with swift voracious gulps!

With quick, jerky steps he made his way past the landward side of the small, thatch-roofed cottage. He was about to enter, when he noticed that the door, which he had left ajar, was closed. He stole to the window and glanced in.

A single, thin, wavering moonbeam flickered in the room. But the flame at the heart of the peats had worked its way through the ash, and there was now a dull glow, though that was within the “smoothing,” and threw scarce more than a glimmer into the room.

There was enough light, however, for Mânus MacCodrum to see that a man sat on the three-legged stool before the fire. His head was bent, as though he were listening. The face was away from the window. It was his own wraith, of course; of that, Mânus felt convinced. What was it doing there? Perhaps it had eaten the Holy Book, so that it was beyond his putting a *rosad* on it! At the thought he laughed loud. The shadow-man leaped to his feet.

The next moment MacCodrum swung himself on to the thatched roof, and clambered from rope to rope, where these held down the big stones which acted as dead-weight for the thatch, against the fury of tempests. Stone after stone he tore from its fastenings, and hurled to the ground over and beyond the door. Then with tearing hands he began to burrow an opening in the thatch. All the time he whined like a beast.

He was glad the moon shone full upon him. When he had made a big enough hole, he would see the evil thing out of the grave that sat in his room, and would stone it to death.

Suddenly he became still. A cold sweat broke out upon him. The *thing*, whether his own wraith, or the spirit of his dead foe, or Gloom Achanna himself, had begun to play, low and slow, a wild air. No piercing, cold music like that of the *feadan!* Too well he knew it, and those cool, white notes that moved here and there in the darkness like snowflakes. As for the air, though he slept till Judgment Day and heard but a note of it amidst all the clamour of heaven and hell, sure he would scream because of the “Dàn-nan-Ròn.”

The “Dàn-nan-Ròn” the *Roin!* the Seals! Ah, what was he doing there, on the bitter-weary land! Out there was the sea. Safe would he be in the green waves.

With a leap he was on the ground. Seizing a huge stone he hurled it through the window. Then, laughing and screaming, he fled towards the Great Reef, along whose sides the ebb-tide gurgled and sobbed, with glistening white foam.

He ceased screaming or laughing as he heard the “Dàn-nan-Ròn” behind him, faint, but following; sure, following. Bending low, he raced towards the rock-ledges from which ran the reef.

When at last he reached the extreme ledge he stopped abruptly. Out on the reef he saw from ten to twenty seals, some swimming to and fro, others clinging to the reef, one or two making a curious barking sound, with round heads lifted against the moon. In one place there was a surge and lashing of water. Two bulls were fighting to the death.

With swift, stealthy movements Mânus unclothed himself. The damp had clotted the leathern thongs of his boots, and he snarled with curled lip as he tore at them. He shone white in the moonshine, but was sheltered from the sea by the ledge behind which he crouched. “What did Gloom Achanna mean by that?” he muttered savagely, as he heard the nearing air change into the “Dance of the Dead.” For a moment Mânus was a man again. He was nigh upon turning to face his foe, corpse or wraith or living body; to spring at this thing which followed him, and tear it with hands and teeth. Then, once more, the hated “Song of the Seals” stole mockingly through the night.

With a shiver he slipped into the dark water. Then with quick, powerful strokes he was in the moon-flood, and swimming hard against it out by the leese of the reef.

So intent were the seals upon the fight of the two great bulls that they did not see the swimmer, or, if they did, took him for one of their own people. A savage snarling and barking and half-human crying came from them. M̀anus was almost within reach of the nearest, when one of the combatants sank dead, with torn throat. The victor clambered on the reef, and leaned high, swaying its great head and shoulders to and fro. In the moonlight its white fangs were like red coral. Its blinded eyes ran with gore.

There was a rush, a rapid leaping and swirling, as M̀anus surged in among the seals, which were swimming round the place where the slain bull had sunk.

The laughter of this long, white seal terrified them.

When his knee struck against a rock, MacCodrum groped with his arms, and hauled himself out of the water.

From rock to rock and ledge to ledge he went, with a fantastic, dancing motion, his body gleaming foam-white in the moonshine.

As he pranced and trampled along the weedy ledges, he sang snatches of an old rune,—the lost rune of the MacCodrums of Uist. The seals on the rocks crouched spell-bound; those slow-swimming in the water stared with brown unwinking eyes, with their small ears strained against the sound—

It is I, M̀anus MacCodrum,  
I am telling you that, you, Anndra of my blood,  
And you, Neil my grandfather, and you, and you, and you!  
Ay, ay, M̀anus my name is, M̀anus Mac M̀anus!  
It is I myself, and no other.  
Your brother, O Seals of the Sea!  
Give me blood of the red fish,  
And a bite of the flying *sgadan*:  
The green wave on my belly,  
And the foam in my eyes!  
I am your bull-brother, O Bulls of the Sea,  
Bull—better than any of you, snarling bulls!  
Come to me, mate, seal of the soft, furry womb,  
White am I still, though red shall I be,  
Red with the streaming red blood if any dispute me!  
Aoh, aoh, aoh, arò, arò, ho-rò!  
A man was I, a seal am I,  
My fangs churn the yellow foam from my lips;  
Give way to me, give way to me, Seals of the Sea;  
Give way, for I am fèy of the sea  
And the sea-maiden I see there,  
And my name, true, is M̀anus MacCodrum,  
The bull-seal that was a man, Arà! Arà!

By this time he was close upon the great black seal, which was still monotonously swaying its gory head, with its sightless eyes rolling this way and that. The sea-folk seemed fascinated. None moved, even when the dancer in the moonshine trampled upon them.

When he came within arm-reach he stopped.

“Are you the Ceann-Cinnidh?” he cried. “Are you the head of this clan of the sea-folk?”

The huge beast ceased its swaying. Its curled lips moved from its fangs.

“Speak, Seal, if there’s no curse upon you! Maybe, now, you’ll be Anndra himself, the brother of my father! Speak! *H’st—are you hearing that music on the shore?* ’T is the ‘Dàn-nan-Ròn’! Death o’ my soul, it’s the ‘Dàn-nan-Ròn’! Aha, ’t is Gloom Achanna out of the Grave. Back, beast, and let me move on!”

With that, seeing the great bull did not move, he struck it full in the face with clenched fist. There was a hoarse, strangling roar, and the seal champion was upon him with lacerating fangs.

Mànus swayed this way and that. All he could hear now was the snarling and growling and choking cries of the maddened seals. As he fell, they closed in upon him. His screams wheeled through the night like mad birds. With desperate fury he struggled to free himself. The great bull pinned him to the rock; a dozen others tore at his white flesh, till his spouting blood made the rocks scarlet in the white shine of the moon.

For a few seconds he still fought savagely, tearing with teeth and hands. Once, a red irreconisable mass, he staggered to his knees. A wild cry burst from his lips, when from the shore-end of the reef came loud and clear the lilt of the rune of his fate.

The next moment he was dragged down and swept from the reef into the sea. As the torn and mangled body disappeared from sight, it was amid a seething crowd of leaping and struggling seals, their eyes wild with affright and fury, their fangs red with human gore.

And Gloom Achanna, turning upon the reef, moved swiftly inland, playing low on his *feadan*, as he went.