

The Birdeen

By Fiona Macleod

Some other time I will tell the story of Isla and Morag McIan: Isla that was the foster-brother and chief friend of Ian McIan the mountain-poet, known as Ian of the Hills, or simply as Ian Mòr, because of his great height and the tireless strength that was his. Of Morag, too, there is a story of the Straths, sweet as honey of the heather, and glad as the breeze that, blowing across it in summer, waves the purple into white-o'-the-wind and sea-change amethyst.

Isla was seven years older than Ian Mòr, and had been seven years married to Morag, when the sorrow of their friend's life came upon him. Of that matter I speak elsewhere.

They were happy, Isla and Morag. Though both were of Strachurmore of Loch Fyne, they lived at a small hill-farm on the west side of the upper fjord of Loch Long, and within sight of Arrochar, where it sits among its mountains. They could not see the fantastic outline of "The Cobbler," because of a near hill that shut them off, though from the loch it was visible and almost upon them. But they could watch the mists on Ben Arthur and Ben Maiseach, and when a flying drift of mackerel-sky spread upward from Ben Lomond, that was but a few miles eastward as the crow flies, they could tell of the good weather that was sure.

Before the end of the first year of their marriage, deep happiness came to them. "The Birdeen" was their noon of joy. When the child came, Morag had one regret only, that a boy was not hers, for she longed to see Isla in the child that was his. But Isla was glad, for now he had two dreams in his life: Morag whom he loved more and more, and the little one whom she had borne to him, and was for him a mystery and joy against the dark hours of the dark days that must be.

They named her Eilidh. One night, in front of the peats, and before her time was come, Morag, sitting with Isla and Ian Mar, dreamed of the birthing. It was dark, save for the warm redness of the peat-glow. There was no other light, and in the dusky corners the obscure velvety things that we call shadows moved and had their own life and were glad. Outside, the hill wind was still at last, after a long wandering moaning that had not ceased since its westering, for, like a wailing hound, it had followed the sun all day. A soft rain fell. The sound of it was for peace.

Isla sat forward, his chin in his hands and his elbows on his knees. He was dreaming, too. "Morag," "Isla," deep love, deep mystery, the child that was already here, and would soon be against the breast; these were the circuit of his thoughts. Sure, Morag, sweet and dear as she was, was now more dear, more sweet. "Green life to her," he murmured below his breath, "and in her heart, joy by day and peace by night."

Ian sat in the shadow of the ingle, and looked now at one and now at the other, and then mayhap into the peat-flame or among the shadows. He saw what he saw. Who knows what is in a poet's mind? The echo of the wind that was gone was there, and the sound of the rain and the movement and colour of the fire, and something out of the earth and sea and sky, and great pitifulness and tenderness for women and children, and love of men and of birds and beasts, and of the green lives that were to him not less wonderful and intimate. And Ian, thinking, knew that the thoughts of Isla and Morag were drifting through his mind too; so that he smiled with his eyes because of the longing and joy in the life of the man, his friend; and looked through a mist of unshed tears at Morag, because of the other longing that shone in her eyes, and of the thinness of the hands now, and of the coming and going of the breath like a bird tired after a long flight.

He was troubled, too, with the fear and the wonder that came to him out of the hidden glooms of her soul.

It was Ian who broke the stillness, though for sure his low words were parts of the peat rustle and the dripping rain and the wash of the sea-loch, where it twisted like a black adder among the hills, and was now quick with the tide.

“But if the birdeen be after you, Morag, and not after Isla, what will you be for calling it?”

Morag started, glanced at him with her flame-lit eyes, and flushed. Then, with a low laugh, her whispered answer came.

“Now it is a true thing, Ian, that you are a wizard. Isla has often said that you can hear the wooing of the trees and the flowers, but sure I’m thinking you could hear the very stones speak, or at least know what is in their hearts. How did you guess that was the thought I was having?”

“It was for the knowing, lassikin.”

“Ian, it is a wife you should have, and a child upon your knee to put its lips against yours, and to make your heart melt because of its little wandering hands.”

Ian made no sign, though his pulse leaped, for this was ever the longing that lay waiting behind heart and brain, and thrilled each along the wise, knowing nerves,—our wise nerves that were attuned long, long ago, and play to us a march against the light, or down into the dark, and we unwitting, and not knowing the ancient rune of the heritage that the blood sings, an ancient, ancient song. Who plays the tune to which our dancing feet are led? It is behind the mist, that antique strain to which the hills rose in flame and marl, and froze slowly into granite silence, and to which the soul of man crept from the things of the slime to the palaces of the brain. It is for the hearing, that; in the shells of the human. Who knows the under-song of the tides in the obscure avenues of the sea? Who knows the old immemorial tidal-murmur along the nerves,—along the nerves even of a new-born child?

Seeing that he was silent, Morag added: “Ay, Ian dear, it is a wife and a child you must have. Sure no man that has all the loving little names you give to us can do without us!”

“Well, well, Morag-aghray, the hour waits, as they say out in the isles. But you have not given me the answer to what I asked?”

“And it is no answer that I have. Isla!—Isla, if a girl it is to be, you would be for liking the little one to be called Morag, because of me; but that I would not like; no, no, I would not. Is it forgetting, you are, what old Muim’ Mary said, that a third Morag in line, like a third Sheumais, would be born in the shadow, would have the gloom?”

“For sure, *muirnean*; it is not you or I that would forget that thing. Well, since there’s Morag that was your mother, and Morag that is you, there can be no third. But it is the same with Muireall that was the name of my mother and of the mother before her. See here now, dear, let Ian have the naming, if a girl it be,—for all three of us know that, if a boy it is, his name will be Ian. So now, *mo-charaid*, what is the name that will be upon the wean?”

“*Wean*,” repeated Ian, puzzled for a moment because of the unfamiliar word in the Gaelic, “ah sure, yes: well, but it is Morag who knows best.”

“No, no, Ian. The naming is to be with you. What names of women do you love best?”

“Morag.”

“Ah, you know well that is not a true thing, but only a saying for the saying. Tell me true; what name do you love best?”

“Mona I like, and Lora, and Sills too; and of the old, old names, it’s Brighid I am loving, and, too, Dearduil (*Darthula*) and Malmhin (*Malveen*); but of all names dear to me, and sweet in my ears, it is Eilidh (*Ei’-lee*).”

And so it was. When, in the third week after that night, the child was born, and a woman-child at that, it was called Eilidh. But the first thing that Ian said when he entered the house after the birthing was,—

“How is the birdeen?”

And from that day Eilidh was “the Birdeen,” oftenest,—even with Isla and Morag. Of the many songs that Ian made to Eilidh here is one:—

Eilidh, Eilidh, Eilidh, dear to me, dear and sweet,
In dreams I am hearing the noise of your little running feet,—
The noise of your running feet that like the sea-hoofs beat
A music by day and night, Eilidh, on the sands of my heart, my Sweet!

Eilidh, blue i’ the eyes, as all babe-children are,
And white as the canna that blows with the hill-breast wind afar,
Whose is the light in thine eyes, the light of a star, a star
That sitteth supreme where the starry lights of heaven a glory are!

Eilidh, Eilidh, Eilidh, put off your wee hands from the heart o’ me,
It is pain they are making there, where no more pain should be;
For little running feet, an’ wee white hands, an’ croodlin, as of the sea,
Bring tears to my eyes, Eilidh, tears, tears, out of the heart o’ me—
Mo lennav-a-chree,
Mo lennav-a-chree!

This was for himself, and because of what was in his heart. But he made songs to the Birdeen herself. Some were as simple-mysterious as a wayside flower; others were strange, and with a note in them that all who know the Songs of Ian will recognise. Here is one:—

Lennavan-mo,
Lennavan-mo,
Who is it swinging you to and fro,
With a long low swing and a sweet low anon,
And the loving words of the mother’s rime?

Lennavan-mo,
Lennavan-mo,
Who is it swinging you to and fro?
I’m thinking it is an angel fair,
The Angel that looks on the gulf from the lowest stair
And swings the green world upward by its leagues of sun-shine-hair.

Lennavan-mo,
Lennavan-mo,
Who is it swings you and the Angel to and fro?
It is He whose faintest thought is a world afar,

It is He whose wish is a leaping seven-moon'd star,
It is He, Lennavan-mo,
To whom you and I and all things flow.

Lennavan-mo,
Lennavan-mo,
It is only a little wee lass you are, Eilidh-mo-chree
But as this wee blossom has roots in the depths of the sky,
So you are at one with the Lord of Eternity,—
Bonnie wee lass that you are,
My morning-star,
Eilidh-mo-chree, Lennavan-mo
Lennavan-mo!

Once more let me give a song of his, this time also, like “Leanabhan-Mo,” of those written while Eilidh was still a breast-babe.

Eilidh, Eilidh,
My bonnie wee lass;
The winds blow
And the hours pass.

But never a wind
Can do thee wrong,
Brown Birdeen, singing
Thy bird-heart song.

And never an hour
But has for thee
Blue of the heaven
And green of the sea,—

Blue for the hope of thee,
Eilidh, Eilidh;
Green for the joy of thee,
Eilidh, Eilidh;

Swing in thy nest, then,
Here on my heart,
Birdeen, Birdeen,
Here on my heart,
Here on my heart!

But Eilidh was “the Birdeen” not only when she could be tossed high in the air in Ian’s strong arms, or could toddle to him from *claar* to stool and from stool to chair; not only when she could go long walks with him upon the hills above Loch Long; but when, as a grown lass of twenty,

she was so fair to see that the countryside smiled when it saw her, as at the first sunflood swallow, or as at the first calling across dewy meadows of the cuckoo after long days of gloom.

She was tall and slim, with a flower-like way with her: the way of the flower in the sunlight, of the wave on the sea, of the tree-top in the wind. Her changing hazel eyes, now grey-green, now dusked with sea-gloom or a violet shadowiness; her wonderful arched eyebrows, dark so that they seemed black; the beautiful bonnie face of her, with her mobile mouth and white flawless teeth; the ears that lay against the tangle of her sun-brown shadowy hair, like pink shells on a drift of seaweed; the exquisite poise of head and neck and body: are not all these things to be read of her in the poems of Ian Mar? Her voice, too, was sweet against the ears as the singing of hillside burns. But most she was loved for this: that she was ever fresh as the dawn, young as the morning, and alive in every fibre with the joy of life. The old dreamed they were young again, when she was with them; the weary opened their hearts, because she was sunshine; the young were glad and believed that all things might be. Who can tell the many names of the Birdeen? She was called Sunshine, Sunbeam, Way o' the Wind, and a score more of lovely and endearing names. But to every one there was one name that was common, the Birdeen.

"What has she done to be so famous, both through Ian Mar and others," was often said of her when, in later years, the first few threads of grey streaked the bonnie hair that was her pride. What has she done, this Eilidh, save what other women do? Ah, well, it is not Eilidh's story I am telling; and she living yet, and like to live till the young heart of her is still at last. It will be the going of a sunbeam, that.

But this is for the knowing, and, sure, can be said. She loved the green world with a deep enduring love. Earth, sea, and sky were comrades with her, as with few men and fewer women. And she loved men and women and children just as Ian Mar loved them, and that was a way not far from the loving way that the Son of Man had, for it was tender and true and heeding little the evil, but rejoicing with laughter and tears over the good. Then, too, there is this: she loved the man to whom she gave herself, with deep passion, that was warm against all chill of change and time and death itself. How few of whom even this much can be said? For deep passion is rare, so rare that men have debased the flawless image to the service of a base coinage. She gave him love, and passion, and the longing of her woman's heart; and she was the flame that was in his brain, for he, too, like Ian Mar, was a poet and dreamer. Then, after having given joy and strength and the flower of her life, so that he had the brain and the heart of two lives, she gave him the supreme gift she had for the giving, and that was their child, that is called Aluinn because of his beauty, and is now the poet of a new day.

When she was married to the man whose love for her was almost worship, Ian Mar said this to him: "Be proud, for she who has filled you with deep meanings and new powers, is herself a proud Queen in whose service you must either live or die with joy."

And to Eilidh herself he said, in a written word he gave her to take away with her:

"Rhythms of the music of love for your brain, white-wing'd thoughts for the avenues of your heart, and the song of the White Merle be there!" And the Birdeen was glad at that, for she knew Ian, and all that he meant, and she would rather have had that word than any treasure of men.

To me, long years afterward, he said this:

"I have known two women that were of the old race of the Tuatha De-Danann. They were as one, though she with whom my life rose and my life went was Ethlenn, and the other was Eilidh, the Birdeen at whose birthing I was, and who is comrade and friend to me, more than any man has been or any woman. Of each, this is my word: 'A woman beautiful, to be loved, honoured,

revered, ay, scarce this side idolatry; but no weakling; made of heroic stuff, of elemental passions; strong to endure, but strong also to conquer and maintain.” ‘

Of what one who must be nameless wrote to her I have no right to speak, but here is one verse from his “Song of my Heart,” ill-clad by me in this cold English out of the tender Gaelic that has won him the name “Mouth o’ Honey.” It is in prose I must give it, for I can find or make no rhythm to catch that strange sea-cadence of his:—

“Come to my life that is already yours, and at one with you:
Come to my blood that leaps because of you,
Come to my heart that holds you, Eilidh,
Come to my heart that bold, you as the green earth clasps and holds the sunlight,
Come to me! Come to me, Eilidh!”

But still—but still—“What has she done, this Eilidh, save what other women do?”

Sure, you must ask this elsewhere than of me. I know no reason for it other than what I have said. She was, and is, “the Birdeen.” “Green life to her, green song to her, green joy to her,” the old wish of Ian at her naming, has been fulfilled indeed. Why, for that matter, should she be called “the Birdeen”? There are other women as fair to see, as sweet and true, as dear to men and women. Why? Sure, for that, why was Helen, Helen; or Cleopatra, Cleopatra; or Deirdré, Deirdré? And, too, why does the common familiar bow that is set in the heavens thrill us in each new apparition as though it were a sudden stairway to all lost or dreamed-of Edens? As I write I look seaward, and over Innisdûn, the dark precipitous isle that lies in these wide waters even as Leviathan itself, a rainbow rises with vast unbroken sweep, a skyey flower fed from the innumerable hues of sunset woven this way and that on the looms of the sea. And I know that I have never seen a rainbow before, and of all that I may see I may never see another again as I have seen this. Yet it is a rainbow as others are, and have been and will be for all time past and to come.

Eilidh, that was “the Birdeen” when she laughed at the breast, and was “the Birdeen” when her own Aluinn first turned his father’s eyes upon her, and is “the Birdeen” now when the white flower of age is belied by the young eyes and the young, young heart,—Eilidh that I love, Eilidh that has the lilt of life in her brain as no woman I have known or heard of has ever had in like measure, Eilidh is my Rainbow.