

# Silk o' the Kine<sup>1</sup>

By Fiona Macleod

“What I shall now be telling you,” said Ian Mòr to me once,—and indeed, I should remember the time of it well, for it was in the last year of his life, when rarely any other than myself saw aught of Ian of the Hills.—“What I shall now be telling you is an ancient forgotten tale of a man and woman of the old heroic days. The name of the man was Isla, and the name of the woman was Eilidh.”

“Ah yes, for sure,” Ian added, as I interrupted him; “I knew you would be saying that; but it is not of Eilidh that loved Cormac that I am now speaking. Nor am I taking the hidden way with Isla, that was my friend, nor with Eilidh that is my name-child, whom you know. Let the Birdeen be, bless her bonnie heart! No, what I am for telling you is all as new to you as the green grass to a lambkin; and no one has heard it from these tired lips o’ mine since I was a boy, and learned it off the mouth of old Barabol MacAodh, that was my foster-mother.”

Of all the many tales of the olden time that Ian Mòr told me, and are to be found in no book, this was the last. That is why I give it here, where I have spoken much of him.

Ian told me this thing one winter night, while we sat before the peats, where the ingle was full of warm shadows. We were in the croft of the small hill-farm of Glenivore, which was held by my cousin, Silis Macfarlane. But we were alone then, for Silis was over at the far end of the Strath, because of the baffling against death of her dearest friend, Giorsal MacDiarmid.

It was warm there, before the peats, with a thick wedge of spruce driven into the heart of them. The resin crackled and sent blue sparks of flame up through the red and yellow tongues that licked the sooty chimney-slopes, in which, as in a shell, we could hear an endless sighing of the wind.

Outside, the snow lay deep. It was so hard on the surface that the white hares, leaping across it, went soundless as shadows, and as trackless.

In the far-off days, when Somhairle was Maormor of the Isles, the most beautiful woman of her time was named Eilidh.

The king had sworn that whosoever was his best man in battle, when next the Fomorian pirates out of the north came down upon the isles, should have Eilidh to wife.

Eilidh, who, because of her soft, white beauty, for all the burning brown of her by the sun and wind, was also called Silk o’ the Kine, laughed low when she heard this. For she loved the one man in all the world for her, and that was Isla, the son of Isla Mòr, the blind chief of Islay. He, too, loved her even as she loved him. He was a poet as well as a warrior, and scarce she knew whether she loved best the fire in his eyes when, girt with his gleaming weapons and with his fair hair unbound, he went forth to battle: or the shine in his eyes when, harp in hand, he chanted of the great deeds of old, or made a sweet song to her, Eilidh, his queen of women; or the flame in

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<sup>1</sup> *Silk o’ the Kine*, one of the poetic “secret” names of conquered Erin, was in ancient days, there and in the Scottish Isles, a designation for a woman of rare beauty. The name Eilidh (pronounced *Eill’ih*, or *Isle-ee* with a long accent on the first syllable) is also ancient, but lingers in the Isles still, and indeed throughout the Western Highlands, as also, I understand, in Connaught and Connemara. Somhairle (Sommerled) is pronounced *So-irl-û*.

his eyes when, meeting her at the setting of the sun, he stood speechless, wrought to silence because of his worshipping love of her.

One day she bade him go to the Isle of the Swans to fetch her enough of the breast-down of the wild cygnets for her to make a white cloak of. While he was still absent—and the going there, and the faring thereupon, and the returning took three days—the Fomorians came down upon the Long Island.

It was a hard fight that was fought, but at last the Norlanders were driven back with slaughter. Somhairle, the Maormor, was all but slain in that fight, and the corbies would have had his eyes had it not been for Osra Mac Osra, who with his javelin slew the spear-man who had waylaid the king while he slipped in the Fomorian blood he had spilt.

While the ale was being drunk out of the great horns that night, Somhairle called for Eilidh.

The girl came to the rath where the king and his warriors feasted, white and beautiful as moonlight among turbulent, black waves.

A murmur went up from many bearded lips. The king scowled. Then there was silence.

“I am here, O King,” said Eilidh. The sweet voice of her was like soft rain in the woods at the time of the greening.

Somhairle looked at her. Sure, she was fair to see. No wonder men called her Silk a’ the Kine. His pulse beat against the stormy tide in his veins. Then, suddenly, his gaze fell upon Osra. The heart of his kinsman that had saved him was his own; and he smiled, and lusted after Eilidh no more.

“Eilidh, that art called Silk a’ the Kine, dost thou see this man here before me?”

“I see the man.”

“Let the name of him, then, be upon your lips.”

“It is Osra Mac Osra.”

“It is this Osra and no other man that is to wind thee, fair Silk a’ the Kine. And by the same token, I have sworn to him that he shall lie breast to breast with thee this night. So go hence to where Osra has his sleeping-place and await him there upon the deer-skins. From this hour thou art his wife. It is said.”

Then a silence fell again upon all there, when, after a loud surf of babbling laughter and talk, they saw that Eilidh stood where she was, heedless of the king’s word.

Somhairle gloomed. The great black eyes under his cloudy mass of hair flamed upon her.

“Is it dumb you are, Eilidh,” he said at last, in a cold, hard voice. “Or do you wait for Osra to take you hence?”

“I am listening,” she answered, and that whisper was heard by all there. It was as the wind in the heather, low and sweet.

Then all listened.

The playing of a harp was heard. None played like that, save Isla Mac Isla Mòr.

Then the deer-skins were drawn aside, and Isla came among those who feasted there.

“Welcome, O thou who wast afar off when the foe came,” began Somhairle, with bitter mocking.

But Isla took no note of that. He went forward till he was nigh upon the Maormor. Then he waited.

“Well, Isla that is called Isla-Aluinn, Isla fair-to-see, what is the thing you want of me, that you stand there, close-kin to death I am warning you?”

“I want Eilidh that is called Silk a’ the Kine.”

“Eilidh is the wife of another man.”

“There is no other man, O King.”

“A brave word that! And who says it, O Isla my over-lord?”

“ I say it.”

Somhairle, the great Maormor, laughed, and his laugh was like a black bird of omen let loose against a night of storm.

“And what of Eilidh?”

“Let her speak.”

With that the Maormor turned to the girl, who did not quail.

“Speak, Silk a’ the Kine!”

“There is no other man, O King.”

“Fool, I have this moment wedded you and Osra Mac Osra.”

“I am wife to Isla-Aluinn.”

“Thou canst not be wife to two men!”

“That may be, O King. I know not. But I am wife to Isla-Aluinn.”

The king scowled darkly. None at the board whispered even. Osra shifted uneasily, clasping his sword-hilt. Isla stood, his eyes ashine as they rested on Eilidh. He knew nothing in life or death could come between them.

“Art thou not still a maid, Eilidh?” Somhairle asked at last.

“No.”

“Shame to thee, wanton.”

The girl smiled. But in her eyes, darkened now, there shone a flame.

“Is Isla-Aluinn the man?”

“He is the man.”

With that the king laughed a bitter laugh.

“Seize him!” he cried.

But Isla made no movement. So those who were about to bind him stood by, ready with naked swords.

“Take up your harp,” said Somhairle.

Isla stooped, and lifted the harp.

“Play now the wedding song of Osra Mac Osra and Eilidh Silk a’ the Kine.”

Isla smiled, but it was a grim smile that, and only Eilidh understood. Then he struck the harp, and he sang thus far this song out of his heart to the woman he loved better than life.

Eilidh, Eilidh, heart of my life, my pulse, my flame,  
There are two men loving thee, and two who are calling thee wife!

But only one husband to thee, Eilidh, that art my wife and my joy;  
Ay, sure thy womb knows me and the child thou bearest is mine.

Thou to me, I to thee, there is nought else in the world, Eilidh, Silk o’ the Kine,—  
Nought else in the world, no, no other man for thee, no woman far me!

But with that Somhairle rose, and dashed the hilt of his great spear upon the ground.

“Let the twain go,” he shouted.

Then all stood or leaned back, as Isla and Eilidh slowly moved through their midst, hand in hand. Not one there but knew they went to their death.

“This night shall be theirs,” cried the king with mocking wrath. “Then, Osra, you can have your will of Silk o’ the Kine that is your wife, and have Isla-Aluinn to be your slave,—and this for the rising and setting of three moons from to-night. Then they shall each be blinded and made dumb, and that for the same space of time. And at the end of that time they shall be thrown upon the snow to the wolves.”

Nevertheless Osra groaned in his heart because of that night of Isla with Eilidh. Not all the years of the years could give him a joy like unto that.

In the silence of the mid-dark he went stealthily to where the twain lay.

It was there he was found in the morning, where he had died soundlessly, with Eilidh’s dagger up to the hilt in his heart.

But none saw them go, save one; and that was Sorch the brother of Isla, Sorch who in later days was called Sorch Mouth a’ Honey because of his sweet songs. Of all songs that he sang none was so sweet against the ears as that of the love of Eilidh and Isla. Two lovers these that loved as few love; and deathless, too, because of that great love.

And what Sorch saw was this. Just before the rising of the sun, Isla and Eilidh came hand in hand from out of the rath, where they had lain awake all night because of their deep joy.

Silently, but unhasting, fearless still as of yore, they moved across the low dunes that withheld the sea from the land.

The waves were just frothed, so low were they. The loud glad singing of them filled the morning. Eilidh and Isla stopped when the first waves met their feet. They cast their raiment from them. Eilidh flung the gold fillet of her dusky hair far into the sea. Isla broke his sword, and saw the two halves shelve through the moving greenness. Then they turned, and kissed each other upon the lips.

And the end of the song of Sorch is this: that neither he nor any man knows whether they went to life or to death; but that Isla and Eilidh swam out together against the sun, and were seen never again by any of their kin or race. Two strong swimmers were these, who swam out together into the sunlight: Eilidh and Isla.