

Cathal of the Woods

By Fiona Macleod

The English equivalent of *Annir-Choille*, as the following tale originally was named, would be the Wood-nymph. The word *Annir* is an ancient compound Gaelic word for a maiden.

When Cathal mac Art, that was called Cathal Gille-Mhoire, Cathal the Servant of Mary, walked by the sea, one night of the nights in a green May, there was trouble in his heart.

It was not long since he had left Iona. The good St Colum, in sending the youth to the Isle of Â-rinn, as it was then called, gave him a writing for St Molios, the holy man who lived in the sea-cave of the small Isle of the Peak, that is in the eastward hollow at the south end of Arran. A sorrow it was to him to leave the fair isle in the west. He had known glad years there—since, in one of the remote isles to the north, he had seen his father slain by a man of Lochlin, and his mother carried away in a galley oared by fierce yellow-haired men. No kith or kin had he but the old priest, that was the brother of his father, Cathal Gille-Chriosd, Cathal the Servant of Christ.

On Iona he had learned the way of Christ. He had a white robe; and could, with a shaven stick and a thin tuft of seal-fur, or with the feather-quill of a wild swan or a solander, write the holy words upon strained lambskin or parchment, and fill the big letters, that were here and there, with earth-brown and sky-blue and shining green, with scarlet of blood and gold of sun-warm sands. He could sing the long holy hymns, too, that Colum loved to hear; and it was his voice that had the sweetest clear-call of any on the island. He was in the nineteenth year of his years when a Frankish prince, who had come to Iona for the blessing of the Saint, wanted him to go back with him to the Southlands. He promised many things because of that voice. Cathal dreamed often, in the hot drowsy afternoons of the month that followed, of the long white sword that would slay so well; and of the white money that might be his to buy fair apparel with, and a great black stallion accoutred with trappings wrought with gold, and a bed of down; and of white hands, and white breasts, and the white song of youth.

He had not gone with the Frankish prince, nor wished to go. But he dreamed often. It was on a day of dream that he lay on his back in the hot grass upon a dune, near where the cells of the monks were. The sunglow bathed the isle in a golden haze. The strait was a shimmering dazzle, and the blue wavelets that made curves in the soft white sand seemed to spill gold flakes and change them straightway into little jets of foam or bubbles of rainbow-spray. Cathal had made a song for his delight. His pain was less when he had made it. Now, lying there, and dreaming at times of the words of the Frankish prince, and remembering at times the stranger words of the old pagan helot, Neis, who had come with him out of the north, he felt fire burn in his veins; and he sang:

O where in the north, or where in the south, or where in the east or west
Is she who hath the flower-white hands and the swandown breast?
O, if she be west, or east she be, or in the north or south,
A sword will leap, a horse will prance, ere I win to Honey-Mouth.

She has great eyes, like the doe on the hill, and warm and sweet she is,
O, come to mc, Honey-Mouth, bend to me, Honey-Mouth, give me thy kiss!

White Hands her name is, where she reigns amid the princes fair:
White hands she moves like swimming swans athrough her dusk-wave hair:
White hands she puts about my heart, white hands fan up my breath:
White hands take out the heart of me, and grant me life or death!
White hands make better songs than hymns, white hands are young and sweet:

O, a sword for me, O Honey-Mouth, and a war-horse fleet!
O wild sweet eyes! O glad wild eyes! O mouth, how sweet it is!
O, come to me, Honey-Mouth! bend to me, Honey-Mouth! give me thy kiss!

When he had ceased he saw a shadow fall upon the white sand beyond the dune. He looked up, and beheld Colum the Saint.

‘Who taught you that song?’ said the white holy one, in a voice hard and stern.

‘No one, O Colum.’

‘Then the Evil One is indeed here. Cathal, I promised that you would be having a holy name soon, but that name I will not be giving you now. You must come to me in sackcloth and with dust upon your head, with pain upon you, and with deep grief in your heart. Then only shall I bless you before the brothers and call you Cathal Gille-Mhoirc, Cathal the Servant of Mary.’

A bitter, sad waiting it was for him who had fire in his young blood and was told to weave frost there, and to put silence upon the welling song in his heart. But at the end of the week Cathal was a holy monk again, and sang the hymns that Colum had taught him.

It was on the eve of the day when Colum blessed him before the brethren, and called him Gille-Mhoire, that he walked alone, brooding upon the evil of women and the curse they brought, and praying to Mary to save him from the sins of which he scarce knew the meaning. On his way back to his cell he passed old Neis, the helot, who said to him mockingly:

‘It is a good thing that sorrow, Cathal mac Art,—and yet, sure, it is true that but for the hot love the slain man your father had for Foam that was your mother, you would not be here to praise your God or serve the woman whom the Arch-Druid yonder says is the Mother of God.’

Cathal bade the man eat silence, or it would go ill with him. But the words rankled. That night in his cell he woke, with on his lips his own sinful words:

White hands make better songs than hymns, white hands are young and sweet;
O, a sword for me, O Honey-Mouth, and a war-horse fleet!

On the morrow he went to Colum and told him that the Evil One would not give him peace. That night the Saint bade him make ready to go east to the Isle of Arran—the sole isle, then, where the Pictish folk would let the white robes of the Culdees go scatheless. To the holy Molios he was to go, him that dwelled in the sea-cave of the Isle of the Peak, that men already called the Holy Isle because of the preaching and the miracles of Molios.

‘He is a wise man,’ said Colum to himself, ‘and he was a pagan Cruithne once, and a prince at that, and he knows the sweetness of sin, and will keep Cathal away from the snares that are set. With fasting, and much peril by day and weariness by night, the blood of the youth will forget the songs the Evil One has put into his mind and it will sing holy hymns. Great will be the glory. Cathal Gille-Mhoire will be a holy man while he has yet his youth upon him; and he will be a martyr to the flesh by day and by night and by night and by day, till the heathen put him to death because of the faith that is his.’

Thus it was that Cathal was blessed by Colum, and sent east among the wild Picts.

It was with joy that he served Molios. For four months he gave him all he had to give. The old saint passed word to Colum that Cathal was a saint and was assured of the crown of martyrdom, and lovingly he urged that the youth should be sent to the Isle of Mist in the north, the great isle that was ruled by Scathach the Queen. There, at the last Summer-sailing, the pagans had flayed a monk alive. A fair happy end: and Cathal was now worthy—and withal might triumph, and might even convert the heathen queen. ‘She is wondrous fair to see,’ he added, ‘and Cathal is a comely youth.’

But Colum had answered that the young monk was to bide where he was, and to seek to win souls in the pagan Isle of Arran, where the Cross was still feared.

But with the coming of May and golden weather, the blood of Cathal grew warm. At times, even, he dreamed of the Frankish prince and the evil sweet words he had said.

Then a day of the days came. Molios and Cathal went to a hill-dun where the Pict chieftain lived, and converted him and all the people in the dûn and all in the rath that was beyond the dûn. That eve the daughter of the warrior came upon Cathal walking in a solitary place, among the green pines beyond the rath. She was most sweet to look upon: tall and fair, with eyes like the sea in a cloudless noon, and hair like westward wheat turned back upon itself.

‘What is the name men call you by, young Druid?’ she said. ‘I am Ardanna, the daughter of Ecta.’

‘Your beauty is sweet to look upon, Ardanna. I am Cathal the son of Art the son of Aodh of the race of Alpein, from the isles of the sea. But I am not a Druid. I am a priest of Christ, a servant of Mary the Mother of God, and a son of God.’

Ardanna looked at him. A flush came into his face. In his eyes the same light flamed that was there when the Frankish prince told him of the delights of the world.

‘Is it true, O Cathal, that the Druids—that the priests of Christ and the two other gods, the white-robed men whom we call Culdees, and of whom you are one, is it true that they will have nought to do with women?’

Cathal looked upon the woman no more, but on the ground at his feet.

‘It is true, Ardanna.’

The girl laughed. It was a low, sweet, mocking laugh, but it went along Cathal’s blood like cloud-fire along the sky. It was to him as though somewhat he had not seen was revealed.

‘And is it a true thing that you holy men look at women askance, and as snares of peril and evil?’

‘It is true, Ardanna; but not so upon those who are sisters of Christ, and whose eyes are upon heavenly things.’

‘But what of those who are not sisters of your god, and are only women, fair to look upon, fair to woo, fair to love?’

Cathal again flushed. His eyes were still upon the ground. He made no answer.

Ardanna laughed low.

‘Cathal!’

‘Yes, fair daughter of Ecta?’

‘Is it never longing for love you are?’

‘There is but one love for us who have taken the vows of chastity.’

‘What is chastity?’

Cathal raised his eyes and glanced at Ardanna. Her dark-blue eyes looked at him pure and sweet, though a smile was upon her mouth. He sighed.

‘It is the sanctity of the body, Ardanna.’

‘I do not understand,’ she said simply. ‘But tell me this, poor Cathal—’

‘Why do you call me poor Cathal?’

‘Because you have put your manhood from you—and you so young, and strong, and comely—and are not a warrior, and care neither for the sword, nor the chase, nor the harp, nor for women.’

Cathal was troubled. He looked again and again at Ardanna. The sunset light was in her yellow hair, which was about her as a glory. He had seen the moon as wondrous pale as her beautiful face. Like lilies her white hands were. He had dreamed of that flamelight in the eyes.

‘I care,’ he said.

She drew nearer, and leaned a little forward, and looked at him.

‘You are good to look upon, Cathal—the comeliest youth I have ever seen.’

The monk flushed. This was the devil-tongue of which Colum had warned him. But how sweet the words were: like a harp that low voice. Sure, sweeter is a waking dream than a dream in sleep.

‘I care,’ he repeated dully.

‘Look, Cathal.’

Slowly he raised his eyes. As his gaze moved upward it rested on the white breast which was like sea-foam swelling out of brown sea-weed, for she had a tanned fawn-skin belted and gold-claspt over the white robe she wore, and that had disparted for the warm air to play upon her bosom.

It troubled him. He let his eyes fall again. The red was on his face.

‘Cathal!’

‘Yes, Ardanna.’

‘And you will never put your kiss upon a woman’s lips? Never put your heart upon a woman’s heart? Is it of cold sea water you are made—for even the running water in the streams is warmed by the sun? Tell me, Cathal, would you leave Mobs the Culdee,—if—’

The monk of Christ suddenly flashed his eyes upon the woman.

‘If what, Ardanna?’ he asked abruptly; ‘if what, Ardanna that is so witching fair?’

‘If I loved you, Cathal? If I, the daughter of Ecta the chief, loved you, and took you to be my man, and you took me to be your woman, would you be content so?’

He stared at her as one in a dream. Then suddenly all the foolish madness that had been put upon him by Colum fell away. What did these old men, Colum and Molios, know? It is only the young who know what life is. They were old, and their blood was gelid.

He put up his arms, as though in prayer. Then he smiled. Ardanna saw a light in his eyes that sprang into her heart and sang a song there that whirled in her ears and dazzled her eyes and made her feel as though she had fallen over a great height and were still falling.

Cathal was no longer pale. A red flame burned in either cheek. The sunset-light behind him filled his hair with fire. His eyes were beacons.

‘Cathal, Cathal!’

‘Come, Ardanna!’

That was all. What need to say more. She was in his arm, and her heart throbbing against his that leapt in his body like a wolf fallen in a snare.

He stooped and kissed her. She lifted her eyes, and his brain swung. She kissed him, and he kissed her till she gave a low cry and gently thrust him back. He laughed.

‘Why do you laugh, Cathal?’

'I? It is I who laugh now. The old men put a spell upon me. I am no more Cathal Gille-Mhoire, but Cathal mac Art. Nay, I am Cathal Gille-Ardanna.'

With that he plucked the branch of a rowan that grew near. He stripped it of its leaves, and threw them from him north, south, east, and west.

'Why do you that, Cathal-aluinn?' Ardanna asked, looking at him with eyes of love, and she like a summer morning there, because of the sunshine in her hair, and the wild roses on her face, and the hill-tarn blue of her eyes.

'These are all the hymns that Colum taught me. I give them back. I am knowing them no more. They are idle, foolish songs.'

Then the monk took the branch and broke it, and threw the pieces upon the ground and trampled upon them.

'Why do you that, Cathal-aluinn?' asked Ardanna, wondering at him with her home-call eyes.

'That is the branch of all the wisdom Colum taught me. Old Neis, the helot, was wise. It is a madness, all that. See, it is gone; it is beneath my feet. I am a man now.'

'But O Cathal, Cathal! this very day of the days, Ecta, my father, has become a man of the Christ-faith, him and his; and he would do what Molios asked now. And Molios would ask your death.'

'Death is a dream.'

With that Cathal leaned forward and kissed Ardanna upon the lips twice. 'A kiss for life that,' he said; 'and that a kiss for death.'

Ardanna laughed a low laugh. 'The monk can kiss,' she whispered; 'can the monk love?'

He put his arm about her, and they went into the dim dark greenness.

The moon rose slowly, a globe of pale golden fire which spilled unceasingly a yellow flame upon the suspended billows of the forest. Star after star emerged. Deep silence was in the woods, save for the strange passionate churring of a night-jar, where he leaned low from a pine branch and called to his mate, whose heart throbbed a flight-away amid the dewy shadows.

The wind was still. The white rays of the stars wandered over the moveless, over the shadowless and breathless green lawns of the tree-tops.

'What is that sound?' said Ardanna, a dim shape in the darkness, where she lay in the arms of Cathal.

'I know not,' said the youth; for the fevered blood in his veins sang a song against his ears.

'Listen!'

Cathal listened. He heard nothing. His eyes dreamed again into the silence.

'What is that sound?' she whispered against his heart once again. 'It is not from the sea, nor is it of the woods.'

'It is the moan of Heaven,' answered Cathal wearily; '*acaina* *Pharrais*.'

II

They found them there in the twilight of the dawn. For long Ecta looked at them and pondered. Then he glanced at Molios. There were tears in the heart of the holy man, but in his eyes a deep anger.

'Bind him,' said Ecta.

Cathal woke with the thongs. His gaze fell upon Molios. He made no sign, and spake never a word; but he smiled.

'What now, O Molios?' asked Ecta.

‘Take the woman away. Do with her as you will—spare or slay. It matters not. She is but a woman, and she hath wrought evil upon this man. To slay were well.’

‘She is my daughter.’

‘Spare, then, if you will; but take her away. Give her to a man. She shall never see this renegade again.’

With that, two men led Ardanna away. She gave a glance at Cathal, who smiled. No tears were in her eyes; but a proud fire was there, and she brooked no man’s hand upon her, and walked free.

When she was gone, Molios spake.

‘Cathal, that was called Cathal Gille-Mhoire, why have you done this thing?’

‘Because I was weary of vain imaginings, and I am young; and Ardanna is fair, and we loved.’

‘Such love is death.’

‘So be it, Molios. Such death is sweet as love.’

‘No ordinary death shalt thou have, blasphemer. Yet even now I would be merciful if I could. Dost thou call upon God?’

‘I call upon the gods of my fathers.’

‘Fool, they shall not save you.’

‘Nevertheless, I call. I have nought to do with thy three gods, O Christian.’

‘Hast thou no fear of hell?’

‘I am a warrior, and the son of my father, and of a race of heroes. Why should I fear?’

Molios brooded a while.

‘Take him,’ he said at last, ‘and bury him alive where his gods perchance will hear his cries and come and save him! Find me a hollow tree.’

‘There is a great oak near here,’ said Ecta, wondering, ‘a great hollow oak whose belly would hold five men, each standing upon the other.’

With that he led them to an ancient tree.

‘Dost thou repent, Cathal?’ Molios asked.

‘Ay,’ the young man answered grimly; ‘I repent. I repent that I wasted the good days serving you and your three false gods.’

‘Blaspheme no more. Thou knowest that these three are one God.’

Cathal laughed mockingly.

‘Hearken to him, Ecta,’ he cried; ‘this old Druid would have you believe that two men and a woman make one person! Believe that if you will! As for me, I laugh.’

But with that, at a sign from Molios, they lifted and slung him amid the branches of the oak, and let him slide feet foremost into the deep hollow heart of the tree.

When the law was done, Molios bade all near kneel in a circle round the oak. Then he prayed for the soul of the doomed man. As he ended this prayer, a laugh flew up among the high wind-swayed leaves. It was as though an invisible bird were there, mocking like a jay.

One by one, with bowed heads, Molios and Ecta and those with him withdrew, all save two young men who were bidden to stay. Upon these was bond laid, that they would not stir from that place for three days. They were to let none draw nigh: and no food was to be given to the victim: and if he cried to them, they were to take no heed,—nay, not though he called upon God or the Mother of God or upon the White Christ.

All that day there was no sound from the hollow tree. At the setting of the sun a blackbird lit upon a small branch that drooped over the aperture, and sang a brave lilt. Then the dark came, and the moon rose, and the stars glimmered through the dew.

At midnight the moon was overheard. A flood of pale gold rays lit up the branches of the oak, and turned the leaves into a lustrous bronze. The watchers heard a voice singing in the silence of the night—a voice muffled and obscure, as from one in a pit, or as that of a shepherd straying in a narrow corrie. Words they caught, though not all; and this was what they heard:

O yellow lamp of Ioua¹ that is having a cold pale flame there,
Put thy honey-sheen upon me who am close-caverned with Death:
Sure it is nought I see now who have seen too much and too little:
O moon, thy breast is softer and whiter than hers who burneth the day.

Put thy white light on the grave where the dead man my father is,
And waken him, waken him, wake!
And put thy soft shining on the breast of the woman my mother,
So that she stir in her sleep and say to the Viking beside her,
'Take up thy sword, and let it lap blood, for it thirsts with long thirst.'

And O Ioua, be as the sea-calm upon the hot heart of Ardanna, the girl:
Tell her that Cathal loves her, and that memory is sweeter than life.
I list her heart beating here in the dark and the silence,
And it is not lonely I am, because of that, and remembrance.

O yellow flame of Ioua, be a spilling of blood out of the heart of Ecta,
So that he fall dead, inglorious, slain from within, as a greybeard;
And light a fire in the brain of Molios, so that he shall go moonstruck,
And men will jeer at him, and he will die at the last, idly laughing.

For Io, I worship thee, Ioua; and if you can give my message to Neis,—
Neis the helot out of Aoidû, who is in Iona, bondman to Colum,—
Tell him I hail you as Bandia, as god-queen and mighty,
And that he had the wisdom and I was a fool with trickling ears of moss.

But grant me this, O goddess, a bitter moon-drinking for Colum!
May he have the moonsong in his brain, and in his heart the moonfire:
Flame burn him in heart of flame, and may he wane as wax at the furnace,
And his soul drown in tears, and his body be a nothingness upon the sands!

The watchers looked at each other, but said no word. On the pale face of each was fear and awe. What if this new god-teaching were false, and if Cathal was right, and the old gods were the lords of life and death? The moonlight fell upon them, and they saw doubt in the eyes of each other. Neither looked at the white fire. Out of the radiance, cold eyes might stare upon them: when at that, sure they would leap to the woods, laughing wild, and be as the beasts of the forest.

While it was still dark, an hour before the dawn, one of the twain awoke from a brief slumber. His gaze wandered from vague tree to tree. Thrice he thought he saw dim shapes glide from bole to bole or from thicket to thicket. Suddenly he discerned a tall figure, silent as a shadow, standing at the verge of the glade.

His low cry aroused his companion.

'What is it, Mûrta?' the young man asked in a whisper.

'A woman.'

When they looked again she was gone.

¹ *Ioua* was one of the early Celtic names of the moon. The allusion (in the fourth line) to the sun, in the feminine, is in accordance with ancient usage.

‘It was one of the Hidden People,’ said Múrta, with restless eyes roaming from dusk to dusk.

‘How are you for knowing that, Múrta?’

‘She was all in green, just like a green shadow she was, and I saw the green fire in her eyes.’

‘Have you not thought of one that it might be?’

‘Who?’

‘Ardanna.’

With that the young man rose and ran swiftly to the place where he had seen the figure. But he could see no one. Looking at the ground he was troubled: for in the moonshine-dew he descried the imprint of small feet.

Thereafter they saw or heard nought, save the sights and sounds of the woodland.

At sunrise the two youths rose. Múrta lifted up his arms, then sank upon his knees with bowed head.

‘Why do you do that forbidden thing?’ said Diarmid, that was his companion. ‘Have you forgotten Cathal the monk that is up there alone with death? If Molios the holy one saw you worshipping the Light he would do unto you as he has done unto Cathal.’

But before Múrta answered they heard the voice of Cathal once more—hoarse and dry it was, but scarce weaker than when it thrilled them at the rising of the moon.

This was what he chanted in his muffled voice out of his grave there in the hollow oak:

O hot yellow fire that streams out of the sky, sword-white and golden,
Be a flame upon the monks who are praying in their cells in Ioua!
Be a fire in the veins of Colum, and the hell that he preacheth be his,
And be a torch to the men of Lochlin that they discover the isle and destroy it!

For I see this thing, that the old gods are the gods that die not:
All else is a seeming, a dream, a madness, a tide ever ebbing.
Glory to thee, O Grian, lord of life, first of the gods Allfather,
Swords and spears are thy beams, thy breath a fire that consumeth.

And upon this isle of Á-rinn send sorrow and death and disaster,
Upon one and all save Ardanna, who gave me her bosom,
Upon one and all send death, the curse of a death slow and swordless,
From Molios of the Cave to Múrta and Diarmid my doomsmen!

At that Múrta moved close to the oak.

‘Hail, O Cathal!’ he cried. There was silence.

‘Art thou a living man still, or is it the death of thee that is singing there in the hollow oak?’

‘My limbs perish, but I die not yet,’ answered the muffled voice that had greeted the sun.

‘I am Múrta mac Múrta mac Neisa, and my heart is sore for thee, Cathal!’

There was no word to this. A thrush upon a branch overhead lifted its wings, sang a wild sweet note, and swooped arrowly through the greengloom of the leaves.

‘Cathal, that wert a monk, which is the true thing? Is it Christ, or the gods of our fathers?’

Silence. Three oaks away a woodpecker thrust its beak into the soft bark, tap-tapping, tap-tapping.

‘Cathal, is it death you are having, there in the dark and the silence?’

Múrta strained his ears, but he could hear no sound. Over the woodlands a voice floated, drowsy-warm and breast-white—the voice of a cuckoo calling a love-note from cool green shadow to shadow across a league of windless blaze.

Then Múrta that was a singer, went to where the bulrushes grew by a little tarn that was in the moss an arrow-flight away. He plucked a last-year reed, straight and brown, and with his knife cut seven holes in it. With a thinner reed he scooped the hollow clean.

Thereupon he returned to the oak. Diarmid, who had begun to eat of the food that had been left with them, sat still, with his eyes upon him.

Múrta put his hollow reed to his lips, and he played. It was a forlorn, sweet air that he had heard from a shepherding woman upon the hills. Then he played a burying-song of the islanders, wherein the wash of the sea and the rippling of the waves upon the shore was heard. Then played the song of love, and the beating of hearts was heard, and sighs, and a voice like a distant bird-song rose and fell.

When he ceased, a voice came out of the hollow oak—‘Play me a death-song, Múrta mac Múrta mac Neisa.’

Múrta smiled, and he played again the song of love.

After that there was silence for a brief while. Then Múrta played upon his reed for the time it takes a heron to mount her seventh spiral. Then he ceased, and threw away the reed, and stood erect, staring into the greenness. In his eyes was a strange shine. He sang:

Out of the wild hills I am hearing a voice, O Cathal!
And I am thinking it is the voice of a bleeding sword.
Whose is that sword? I know it well: it is the sword of the Slayer—
Him that is called Death, and the song that it sings I know:—
O where is Cathal mac Art, that is the cup for the thirst of my lips?

Out of the cold greyness of the sea I am hearing, O Cathal,
I am hearing a wave-muffled voice, as of one who drowns in the depths:
Whose is that voice? I know it well: it is the voice of the Shadow—
Her that is called the Grave, and the song that she sings I know:—
O where is Cathal mac Art, he has warmth for the chill that I have?

Out of the hot greenness of the wood I am hearing, O Cathal,
I am hearing a rustling step, as of one stumbling blind.
Whose is that rustling step? I know it well: the rustling walk of the Blind One—
She that is called Silence, and the song that she sings I know:—
O where is Cathal mac Art, that has tears to water my stillness?

After that there was silence. Múrta moved away. When he sat by Diarmid and ate, there was no word spoken. Diarmid did not look at him, for he had sung a song of death, and the shadow was upon him. He kept his gaze upon the moss: if he raised his eyes might he not see the Slayer, or the Shadow, or the Blind One?

Noon came. None drew nigh: not a face was seen shadowily afar off. Sometimes the hoofs of the deer rustled among the bracken. The snarling of young foxes in an oak-root hollow was like a red pulse in the heat. At times, in the sheer abyss of blue sky to the north, a hawk suspended: in the white-blaze southerly a blotch like swirled foam appeared for a moment at long intervals, as a gannet swung from invisible pinnacles of air to the invisible sea.

The afternoon drowsed through the sun-flood. The green leaves grew golden, saturated with light. At sundown a flight of wild doves rose out of the pines, wheeled against the shine of the west and flashed out of sight, flames of purple and rose, of foam-white and pink.

The gloaming came, silverly. The dew glistened on the fronds of the ferns, in the cups of the moss. From glade to glade the cuckoos called. The stars emerged delicately, as the eyes of fawns shining through the greengloom of the forest. Once more the moon snowed the easter frondage of the pines and oaks.

No one came nigh. Not a sound had sighed from the oak since Múrta had sung at the goldening of the day. At sunset Múrta had risen, to lean, intent, against the vast bole. His keen ears caught the jar of a beetle burrowing beneath the bark. There was no other sound.

At the fall of the dark the watchers heard the confused far noise of a festival. It waned as a lost wind. Dim veils of cloud obscured the moon; a low rainy darkness suspended over the earth.

Thus went the second day and the second night.

When, after the weary vigil of the hours, dawn came at last, Múrta rose and struck the oak with a stone.

‘Cathal!’ he cried, ‘Cathal!’

There was no sound: not a stir, not a sigh.

‘Cathal! Cathal!’

Múrta looked at Diarmid. Then, seeing his own thought in the eyes of his friend he returned to his side.

‘The Blind One has been here,’ said Diarmid in a low voice.

At noon there was thunder, and great heat. The noise of rustling wings filled the underwood.

Diarmid fell into a deep sleep. When the thunder had travelled into the hills, and a soft rain fell, Múrta climbed into the branches of the oak. He stared down into the hollow, but could see nothing save a green dusk that became brown shadow, and brown shadow that grew into a blackness.

‘*Cathal!*’ he whispered.

Not a breath of sound ascended like smoke.

‘Cathal! Cathal!’

The slow drip of the rain slipped and pattered among the leaves. The cry of a sea-bird flying inland came mournfully across the woods. A distant clang, as of a stricken anvil, iterated from the barren mountain beyond the forest.

‘Cathal! Cathal!’

Múrta broke a straight branch, stripped it of the leaves, and, forcing the thicker end downward, let it fall sheer.

It struck with a dull, soft thud. He listened: there was not a sound.

‘A quiet sleep to you, monk,’ he whispered, and slipped through the boughs, and was beside Diarmid again.

At dusk the rain ceased. A cool green freshness came into the air.

The stars were as wind-whirled fruit blown upward from the treetops. The moon, full-orbed and with a pulse of flame, led a tide of soft light across the brown shores of the world.

The vigils of the watchers were over. Múrta and Diarmid rose. Without a word they moved across the glade: the faint rustle of their feet stirred the bracken: then they left the undergrowth, and were among the pines. Their shadows lapsed into the obscure wilderness. A doe, heavy with fawn, lay down among the dewy fern, and was at peace there.

III

At midnight, when the whole isle lay in the full flood of the moon, Cathal stirred.

For three days and three nights he had been in that dark hollow, erect, wedged as a spear imbedded in the jaws of a dead beast. He had died thrice: with hunger, with thirst, with weariness. Then when hunger was slain in its own pain, and thirst perished of its own agony, and weariness could no more endure, he stirred with the deaththroe.

'I die,' he moaned.

'Die not, O white one,' came a floating whisper, he knew not whence, though it was to him as though the crushing walls of oak breathed the sound.

'I die,' he gasped, and the froth bubbled upon his nether lip. With that his last strength went. No more could he hold his head above his shoulder, nor would his feet sustain him. Like a stricken deer he sank. So thin was he, so worn, that he slipt into a narrow crevice where dead leaves had been, and lay there, drowning in the dark.

Was that death, or a cold air about his feet, he wondered? With a dull pain he moved them: they came against no tree-wood—the coolness about them was of dewy moss. A wild hope flashed into his mind. With feeble hands he strove to sink farther into the crevice.

'I die,' he gasped, 'I die now, at the last.'

'Die not, O white one,' breathed the same low sweet whisper, like leaves stirred by a nesting bird.

'Save, O save,' muttered the monk, hoarse with the death-dew.

Then a blackness came down upon him from a great height, and he swung in that blank gulf as a feather swirled this way and that in the void of an abyss.

When the darkness lifted again, Cathal was on his back, and breathing slow, but without pain. A sweet wonderful coolness and ease, that he knew now! Where was he? he wondered. Was he in that Pàrras that Colum and Molios had spoken of? Was he in Hy Bràsil, of which he had heard Aodh the Harper sing? Was he in Tir-nan-Òg, where all men and women are young for evermore, and there is joy in the heart and peace in the mind and delight by day and by night?

Why was his mouth so cool, that had burned dry as ash? Why were his lips moist, with a bitter-sweet flavour, as though the juice of fruit was there still?

He pondered, with closed eyes. At last he opened them, and stared upward. The profound black-blue dome of the sky held group after group of stars that he knew: was not that sword and belt yonder the sword-gear of Fionn? Yon shimmering cluster, were they not the dust of the feet of All dai? That leaping green and blue planet, what could it be but the harp of Brigidh, where she sang to the gods?

A shadow crossed his vision. The next moment a cool hand was upon his eyes. It brought rest, and healing. He felt the blood move in his veins: his heart beat: a throbbing was in his throat.

Then he knew that he had strength to rise. With a great effort he put his weariness from off him, and staggered to his feet.

Cathal gave a low sob. A fair beautiful woman stood by him.

'Ardanna!' he cried, though even as the word leaped from his lips he knew that he looked upon no Pictish woman.

She smiled. All his heart was glad because of that. The light in her eyes was like the fire of the moon, bright and wonderful. The delicate body of her was pale green, and luminous as a leaf, with soft earth-brown hair falling down her shoulders and over the swelling breast; even as the

small green mounds over the dead the two breasts were. She was clad only in her own loveliness, though the moonshine was about her as a garment.

‘Like a green leaf: like a green leaf,’ Cathal muttered over and over below his breath.

‘Are you a dream?’ he asked simply, having no words for his wonder.

‘No, Cathal, I am no dream. I am a woman.’

‘A woman? But. . . but. . . you have no body as other women have and I see the moonbeam that is on your breast shining upon the moss behind you!’

‘Is it thinking you are, poor Cathal, that there are no women and no men in the world except those who are in thick flesh, and move about in the suntide?’

Cathal stared wonderingly.

‘I am of the green people, Cathal. We are of the woods. I am a woman of the woods.’

‘Hast thou a name, fair woman?’

‘I am called Deòin.’

‘That is well. Truly “Green Breath” is a good name for thee. Are there others of thy kin in this place?’

‘Look!’ and at that she stopped, lifted the dew of a white flower in the moonshine, and put it upon his eyes.

Cathal looked about him. Everywhere he saw tall, fair pale-green lives moving to and fro: some passing out of trees, swift and silent as rain out of a cloud; some passing into trees, silent and swift as shadows. All were fair to look upon: tall, lithe, graceful, moving this way and that in the moonshine, pale green as the leaves of the lime, soft shining, with radiant eyes, and delicate earth-brown hair.

‘Who are these, Deòin?’ Cathal asked in a low whisper of awe.

‘They are my people: the folk of the woods: the green people.’

‘But they come out of trees: they come and they go like bees in and out of a hive.’

‘Trees? That is your name for us of the woods. We are the trees.’

‘You the trees, Deòin! How can that be?’

‘There is life in your body. Where does it go when the body sleeps, or when the sap rises no more to heart or brain, and there is chill in the blood, and it is like frozen water? Is there a life in your body?’

‘Ay, so. I know it.’

‘The flesh is your body; the tree is my body.’

‘Then you are the green life of a tree?’

‘I am the green life of a tree.’

‘And these?’

‘They are as I am.’

‘I see those that are men and those that are women and their offspring too I see.’

‘They are as I am.’

‘And some are crowned with pale flowers.’

‘They love.’

‘And hast thou no crown, Deòin, who art so fair?’

‘Neither hast thou, Cathal, though thy face is fair. Thy body I cannot see, because thou hast a husk about thee.’

With a low laugh Cathal removed his raiment from him. The whiteness of his body was like a flower there in the moonshine.

‘That shall not be against me,’ he said. ‘Truly, I am a man no longer, if thee and thine will have me as one of the wood-folk.’

At that Deòin called. Many green phantoms glided out of the trees, and others, hand-in-hand, flower-crowned, crossed the glade.

‘Look, green lives,’ Deòin cried in her sweet leaf-whisper, rising now like a wind-song among birchen boughs; ‘look, here is a human. His life is mine, for I saved him. I have put the moonshine dew upon his eyes. He sees as we see. He would be one of us, for all that he has no tree for his body, but flesh, white over red.’

One who had moved thitherward out of an ancient oak looked at Cathal.

‘Wouldst thou be of the wood-folk, man?’

‘Ay, fain am I; for sure, for sure, O Druid of the trees.’

‘Wilt thou learn and abide by our laws, the first of which is that none may stir from his tree until the dusk has come, nor linger away from it when the dawn opens grey lips and drinks up the shadows?’

‘I have no law now but the law of green life.’

‘Good. Thou shalt live with us. Thy home shall be the hollow oak where thy kin left thee to die. Why did they do that evil deed?’

‘Because I did not believe in the new gods.’

‘Who are thy gods, man whom this green one here calls Cathal?’

‘They are the Sun, and the Moon, and the Wind, and others that I will tell you of.’

‘Hast thou heard of Keithoir?’

‘No.’

‘He is the god of the green world. He dreams, and his dreams are Springtide and Summertide and Appletide. When he sleeps without dream there is winter.’

‘Have you no other god but this earth-god?’

‘Keithoir is our god. We know no other.’

‘If he is thy god, he is my god.’

‘I see in the eyes of Deòin that she loves thee, Cathal the human. Wilt thou have her love?’

Cathal looked at the girl. His heart swam in light.

‘Ay, if Deòin will give me her love, my love shall be hers.’

The Annir-Choille moved forward and brushed softly against him as a green branch.

He put his arms around her. She had a cool, sweet body to feel. He was glad she was no moonshine phantom. The beating of her heart against his made a music that filled his ears.

Deòin stooped and plucked white, dewy flowers. Of these she wove a wreath for Cathal. He, likewise, plucked the white blooms, and made a coronal of foam for the brown wave of her hair.

Then, hand in hand, they fared slowly forth across the moonlit glade. None crossed their path, though everywhere delicate green lives flitted from tree to tree. They heard a wonderful sweet singing, aerial, with a ripple as of leaves lipping a windy shore of light. A green glamour was in the eyes of Cathal. The green fire of life flamed in his veins.

IV

Molios, the saint of Christ, that lived in the sea-cave of the Isle of the Peak, so that even in his own day it was called the Holy Isle, endured to a great age.

Some say of him that before his hair was bleached white as the bog-cotton, he was slain by the heathen Picts, or by the fierce summer-sailors out of Lochlin. But that is an idle tale. His end was

not thus. A Culdee, who had the soul of a bat, feared the truth, though that gave glory to God, and wrote both in ogham and lambskin the truthless tale that Molios went forth with the cross and was slain in a north isle.

On a day of the days every year, Molios fared to the Hollow Oak that was in the hill-forest beyond the rath of Ecta MacEcta. There he spake long upon the youth that had been his friend, and upon how the Evil One had prevailed with Cathal, and how the islander had been done to death there in the oak. Then he and all his company sang the hymns of peace, and great joy there was over the doom of Cathal the monk, and many would have cleft the great tree or burned it, so that the dust of the sinner might be scattered to the four winds: only this was banned by Molios.

It was well for Cathal, who slept there through the hours of light! Deep slumber was his, for never once did he hear the noontide voices, nor ever in his ears was the long rise and fall of the holy hymns.

But when, in the twentieth year after Cathal had been thrust into the hollow oak, Molios came at sundown, being weary with the heat, the saint heard a low, faint laughter issuing from the tree, like fragrance from a flower.

None other heard it. He saw that with gladness. Quietly he went with the islanders.

When the moon was over the pines, and all in the rath slept, Molios arose and went silently back into the forest.

When he came to the Doom-Tree he listened long, with his ear against the bark. There was no sound.

His voice was old and quavering, but fresh and young in the courts of heaven, when it reached there like a fluttering bird tired from long flight. He sang a holy hymn.

He listened. There was no laughter. He was glad at that. All had been a dream, for sure.

Then it was that he heard once again the low, mocking laughter. He started back, trembling.

'Cathal!' he cried, with his voice like a wuthering wind.

'I am here, O Molios,' said a voice behind him.

The old Culdee turned, as though arrow-nipped. Before him, white in the moonshine, stood a man, naked.

At first, Molios knew him not. He was so tall and strong, so fair and wonderful. Long locks of ruddy hair hung upon his white shoulders:

his eyes were lustrous, and had the lovely, soft light of the deer. When he moved, it was swiftly and silently. No stag upon the hills was more fair to see.

Then, slowly, Cathal the monk swam into Cathal of the Woods. Molios saw him whom he knew of old, as a blue flame is visible within the flame of yellow.

'I am here, O Molios.'

Strange was the voice: faint and far the tone of it: yet it was that of a living man.

'Is it a spirit you are, Cathal?'

'I am no spirit. I am Cathal the monk that was, Cathal the man now.'

'How came you out of hell, you that are dead, and the dust of whose crumbling bones is in the hollow of this oak?'

'There is no hell, Culdee.'

'No hell!' Molios the Saint stared at the woodman in blank amaze.

'No hell,' he said again; 'and is there no heaven?'

'A hell there is, and a heaven there is: but not what Colum taught, and you taught.'

'Doth Christ live?'

'I know not.'

‘And Mary?’

‘I know not.’

‘And God the Father?’

‘I know not.’

‘It is a lie that you have upon your lips. Sure, Cathal, you shall be dead indeed soon, to the glory of God. For I shall have thy dust scattered to the four winds, and thy bones consumed in flame, and a stake be driven through the place where thou wast.’

Once more Cathal laughed.

‘Go back to thy sea-cave, Molios. Thou hast much to learn. Brood there upon the ways of thy God before thou judgest if He knoweth no more than thou dost. And see, I will show you a wonder. Only, first, tell me this one thing. What of Ardanna whom I loved?’

‘She was accursed. She would not believe. When Ecta took the child from her, that was born in sin, to have the water put upon it with the sign of the Cross, she went north beyond the Hill of the Pinnacles. There she saw the young king of the Picts of Argyll, and he loved her, and she went to his dun. He took her to his rath in the north, and she was his queen. He, and she, and the two sons she bore to him are all under the hill-moss now: and their souls are in hell.’

Cathal laughed, low and mocking.

‘It is a good hell that, I am thinking, Molios. But come . . . I will show you a wonder.’

With that he stooped, and took the moonshine dew out of a white flower, and put it upon the eyes of the old man.

Then Molios saw.

And what he saw was a strangeness and a terror to him. For everywhere were green lives, fair and comely, gentle-eyed, lovely, of a soft shining. From tree to tree they flitted, or passed to and fro from the tree-boles, as wild bees from their hives.

Beside Cathal stood a woman. Beautiful she was, with eyes like stars in the gloaming. All of green flame she seemed, though the old monk saw her breast rise and fall, and the light lift of her earth-brown hair by a wind-breath eddying there, and the hand of her clasped in that of Cathal. Beyond her were fair and beautiful beings, lovely shapes like unto men and women, but soulless, though loving life and hating death, which, of a truth, is all that the vain human clan does.

‘Who is this woman, Cathal?’ asked the saint, trembling.

‘It is Deòin, whom I love, and who has given me life.’

‘And these. . . that are neither green phantoms out of trees, nor yet men as we are?’

‘These are the offspring of our love.’

Molios drew back in horror.

But Cathal threw up his arms, and with glad eyes cried:

‘O green flame of life, pulse of the world! O Love! O youth! O Dream of Dreams!’

‘O bitter grief,’ Molios cried, ‘O bitter grief that I did not slay thee utterly on that day of the days! Flame to thy flesh, and a stake through thy belly—that is the doom thou shouldst have had! My ban upon thee, Cathal, that was a monk, and now art a wild man of the woods: upon thee, and thy Annir-Choille, and all thy brood, I put the ban of fear and dread and sorrow, a curse by day and a curse by night!’

But with that a great dizziness swam into the brain of the saint, and he fell forward, and lay his length upon the moss, and there was no sight to his eyes, or hearing to his ears, or knowledge upon him at all until the rising of the sun.

When the yellow light was upon his face he rose. There was no face to see anywhere. Looking in the dew for the myriad feet that had been there, he saw none.

The old man knelt and prayed.

At the first praying God filled his heart with peace. At the second praying God filled his heart with wonder. At the third praying God whispered mysteriously, and he knew. Humble in his new knowledge, he rose. The tears were in his old eyes. He went up to the Hollow Oak, and blessed it, and the wild man that slept within it, and the Annir-Choille that Cathal loved, and the offspring of their love. He took the curse away, and he blessed all that God had made.

All the long weary way to the shore he went as one in a dream. Wonder and mystery were in his eyes.

At the shore he entered the little coracle that brought him daily from the Holy Isle, a triple arrow-flight seaward.

A child sat in it, playing with pebbles. It was Ardan, the son of Ardanna.

‘Ardan mac Cathal,’ began the saint, weary now, but glad with a strange new gladness.

‘Who is Cathal?’ said the boy.

‘He that was thy father. Tell me, Ardan, hast thou ever seen aught moving in the woods—green lives out of the trees?’

‘I have seen a green shine come out of the trees.’

Molios bowed his head.

‘Thou shalt be as my son, Ardan; and when thou art a man thou shalt choose thy own way, and let no man hinder thee.’

That night Molios could not sleep. Hearing the loud wash of the sea, he went to the mouth of the cave. For a long while he watched the seals splashing in the silver radiance of the moonshine. Then he called them.

‘O seals of the sea, come hither!’

At that all the furred swimmers drew near.

‘Is it for the curse you give us every year of the years, O holy Molios?’ moaned a great black seal.

‘O Ron dubh, it is no curse I have for thee or thine, but a blessing, and peace. I have learned a wonder of God, because of an Annir-Choille in the forest that is upon the hill. But now I will be telling you the white story of Christ.’

So there, in the moonshine, with the flowing tide stealing from his feet to his knees, the old saint preached the gospel of love. The seals crouched upon the rocks, with their great brown eyes filled with glad tears.

When Molios ceased, each slipped again into the shadowy sea. All that night, while he brooded upon the mystery of Cathal and the Annir-Choille, with deep knowledge of hidden things, and a heart filled with the wonder and mystery of the world, he heard them splashing to and fro in the moon-dazzle, and calling, one to the other, ‘We, too, are the sons of God.’

At dawn a shadow came into the cave. A white frost grew upon the face of Molios. Still was he, and cold, when Ardan, the child, awoke. Only the white lips moved. A ray of the sun slanted across the sea, from the great disc of whirling golden flame new risen. It fell softly upon the moving lips. They were still then, and Ardan kissed them because of the smile that was there.