

Mircath

By Fiona Macleod

The Mire-chath was the name given to the war-frenzy that often preceded and accompanied battle.—F. M.

When Haco the Laugher saw the islanders coming out of the west in their birlinns, he called to his Vikings, 'Now of a truth we shall hear the Song of the Sword!'

The ten galleys of the summer-sailors spread out into two lines of five boats, each boat an arrow-flight from those on either side.

The birlinns came on against the noon. In the sun-dazzle they loomed black as a shoal of pollack. There were fifteen in all, and from the largest, midway among them, flew a banner. On this banner was a disc of gold.

'It is the Banner of the Sunbeam!' shouted Olaf the Red, who with Torquil the One-Armed was hero-man to Haco. 'I know it well. The Gael who fight under that are warriors indeed.'

Is there a saga-man here?' cried Haco. At that a great shout went up from the Vikings: 'Harald the Smith!'

A man rose among the bow-men in Olaf's boat. It was Harald. He took a small square harp, and he struck the strings. This was the song he sang:

Let loose the hounds of war,
The whirling swords!
Send them leaping afar,
Red in their thirst for war;
Odin laughs in his car
At the screaming of the swords!

Far let the white ones fly,
The whirling swords!
Afar off the ravens spy
Death-shadows cloud the sky.
Let the wolves of the Gael die
'Neath the screaming swords!

The Shining Ones yonder
High in Valhalla
Shout now, with thunder,
Drive the Gaels under,
Cleave them asunder,—
Swords of Valhalla!

A shiver passed over every Viking. Strong men shook as a child when lightning plays. Then the trembling passed. The mircath, the war-frenzy came on them. Loud laughter went from boat to boat. Many tossed the great oars, and swung them down upon the sea, splashing the sun-dazzle

into a yeast of foam. Others sprang up and whirled their javelins on high, catching them with bloody mouths: others made sword-play, and stammered thick words through a surf of froth upon their lips. Olaf the Red towered high on the steering-plank of the *Calling Raven*, swirling round and round a mighty baffleaxe: on the *Sea-Wolf* Torquil One-Arm shaded his eyes, and screamed hoarsely wild words that no one knew the meaning of. Only Haco was still for a time. Then he, too, knew the nircath; and he stood up in the Red-Dragon and laughed loud and long. And when Haco the Laugher laughed, there was ever blood and to spare.

The birlinns of the islanders drave on apace. They swayed out into a curve, a black crescent there in the gold-sprent blue meads of the sea. From the great birlinn that carried the Sunbeam came a chanting voice:

O, 'tis a good song the sea makes when blood is on the wave,
And a good song the wave makes when its crest of foam is red!
For the rovers out of Lochlin the sea is a good grave,
And the bards will sing tonight to the sea-moan of the dead!

Yo-ho-a-h'eily-a-yo, eily, ayah, a yo!
Sword and Spear and Baffle-axe sing the Song of Woe!
Ayah, eily, a yo!
Eily, ayah, a yo!

Then there was a swirling and dashing of foam. Clouds of spray filled the air from the thresh of the oars.

No man knew aught of the last moments ere the birlinns bore down upon the Viking-galleys. Crash and roar and scream, and a wild surging; the slashing of swords, the whistle of arrows, the fierce hiss of whirled spears, the rending crash of baffle-axe and splintering of the javelins; wild cries, oaths, screams, shouts of victors, and yells of the dying; shrill taunts from the spillers of life, and savage choking cries from those drowning in the bloody yeast that bubbled and foamed in the maelstrom where the war-boats swung and reeled this way and that; and, over all, the loud death-music of Haco the Laugher.

Olaf the Red went into the sea, red indeed, for the blood streamed from head and shoulders, and fell about him as a scarlet robe. Torquil One-Arm fought, blind and arrow-sprent, till a spear went through his neck, and he sank among the dead. Louder and louder grew the fierce shouts of the Gael; fewer the savage screaming cries of the Vikings. Thus it was till two galleys only held living men. The *Calling Raven* turned and fled, with the nine men who were not wounded to the death. But, on the *Red-Dragon*, Haco the Laugher still laughed. Seven men were about him. These fought in silence.

Then Toscar mac Aonghas, that was leader of the Gael, took his bow. None was arrow-better than Toscar of the Nine Baffles. He laid down his sword and took his bow, and an arrow went through the right eye of Haco the Laugher. He laughed no more. The seven died in silence. Swaran Swiftfoot was the last. When he fell, he wiped away the blood that streamed over his face.

'*Skoal!*' he cried to the hero of the Gael, and with that he whirled his baffle-axe at Toscar mac Aonghas; and the soul of Toscar met his, in the dark mist, and upon the ears of both fell at one and the same time the glad laughter of the gods in Valhalla.