

The Anointed Man

By Fiona Macleod

Of the seven Achannas—sons of Robert Achanna of Achanna in Galloway, self-exiled in the far north because of a bitter feud with his kindred—who lived upon Eilanmore in the Summer Isles, there was not one who was not, in more or less degree, or at some time or other, fèy.

Doubtless I shall have occasion to allude to one and all again, and certainly to the eldest and youngest; for they were the strangest folk I have known or met anywhere in the Celtic lands, from the sea-pastures of the Solway to the kelp-strewn beaches of Lewis. Upon James, the seventh son, the doom of his people fell last and most heavily. Some day I may tell the full story of his strange life and tragic undoing, and of his piteous end. As it happened, I knew best the eldest and youngest of the brothers, Alison and James. Of the others, Robert, Allan, William, Marcus, and Gloom, none save the last-named survives, if peradventure *he* does, or has been seen of man for many years past. Of Gloom (strange and unaccountable name, which used to terrify me, the more so as by the savagery of fate it was the name of all names suitable for Robert Achanna's sixth son) I know nothing beyond the fact that ten years or more ago he was a Jesuit priest in Rome, a bird of passage, whence come and whither bound no inquiries of mine could discover. Two years ago a relative told me that Gloom was dead, that he had been slain by some Mexican noble in an old city of Hispaniola beyond the seas. Doubtless the news was founded on truth, though I have ever a vague unrest when I think of Gloom, as though he were travelling hitherward,—as though his feet, on some urgent errand, were already white with the dust of the road that leads to my house.

But now I wish to speak only of Alison Achanna. He was a friend whom I loved, though he was a man of close on forty and I a girl less than half his years. We had much in common, and I never knew any one more companionable, for all that he was called "Silent Ally." He was tall, gaunt, loosely-built. His eyes were of that misty blue which smoke takes when it rises in the woods. I used to think them like the tarns that lay amid the canna and gale-surrounded swamps in Uist, where I was wont to dream as a child.

I had often noticed the light on his face when he smiled, a light of such serene joy as young mothers have sometimes over the cradles of their firstborn. But, for some reason, I had never wondered about it, not even when I heard and understood the half-contemptuous, half-reverent mockery with which not only Alison's brothers but even his father at times used towards him. Once, I remember, I was puzzled when, on a bleak day in a stormy August, I overheard Gloom say, angrily and scoffingly, "There goes the Anointed Man!" I looked; but all I could see was, that, despite the dreary cold, despite the ruined harvest, despite the rotting potato-crop, Alison walked slowly onward, smiling, and with glad eyes brooding upon the grey lands around and beyond him.

It was nearly a year thereafter—I remember the date, because it was that of my last visit to Eilanmore—that I understood more fully. I was walking westward with Alison, towards sundown. The light was upon his face as though it came from within; and when I looked again, half in awe, I saw that there was no glamour out of the west, for the evening was dull and threatening rain. He was in sorrow. Three months before, his brothers, Allan and William, had been drowned; a month later, his brother Robert had sickened, and now sat in the ingle from morning till the covering of the peats, a skeleton almost, shivering, and morosely silent, with

large staring eyes. On the large bed, in the room above the kitchen, old Robert Achanna lay, stricken with paralysis. It would have been unendurable for me, but for Alison and James, and, above all, for my loved girl-friend, Anne Gillespie, Achanna's niece and the sunshine of his gloomy household.

As I walked with Alison I was conscious of a well-nigh intolerable depression. The house we had left was so mournful; the bleak, sodden pastures were so mournful; so mournful was the stony place we were crossing, silent but for the thin crying of the curlews; and above all so mournful was the sound of the ocean as, unseen, it moved sobbingly round the isle,—so beyond words distressing was all this to me that I stopped abruptly, meaning to go no farther, but to return to the house, where, at least, there was warmth, and where Anne would sing for me as she spun.

But when I looked up into my companion's face I saw in truth the light that shone from within. His eyes were upon a forbidding stretch of ground, where the blighted potatoes rotted among a wilderness of round skull-white stones. I remember them still, these strange far-blue eyes; lamps of quiet joy, lamps of peace, they seemed to me.

"Are you looking at Achnacarn?" (as the tract was called), I asked, in what I am sure was a whisper.

"Yes," replied Alison, slowly; "I am looking. It is beautiful, beautiful; O God, how beautiful is this lovely world!"

I know not what made me act so, but I threw myself on a heathery ridge close by, and broke out into convulsive sobbings.

Alison stooped, lifted me in his strong arms, and soothed me with soft caressing touches and quieting words.

"Tell me, my fawn, what is it? What is the trouble?" he asked again and again.

"It is *you*—it is *you*, Alison," I managed to say coherently at last; "it terrifies me to hear you speak as you did a little ago. You must be fëy. Why, why, do you call that hateful, hideous field beautiful—on this dreary day—and,—and after all that has happened,—oh, Alison?"

At this, I remember, he took his plaid and put it upon the wet heather, and then drew me thither, and seated himself and me beside him.

"Is it not beautiful, my fawn?" he asked, with tears in his eyes. Then, without waiting for my answer, he said quietly, "Listen, dear, and I will tell you."

He was strangely still, breathless he seemed to me, for a minute or more. Then he spoke:—

"I was little more than a child, a boy just in my teens, when something happened, something that came down the Rainbow-Arches of Cathair-Sìth." He paused here, perhaps to see if I followed, which I did, familiar as I was with all fairy-lore. "I was out upon the heather, in the time when the honey oozes in the bells and cups. I had always loved the island and the sea. Perhaps I was foolish, but I was so glad with my joy that golden day that I threw myself on the ground and kissed the hot, sweet-ling, and put my hands and arms into it, sobbing the while with my vague, strange yearning. At last I lay still, nerveless, with my eyes closed. Suddenly I was aware that two tiny hands had come up through the spires of the heather, and were pressing something soft and fragrant upon my eyelids. When I opened them, I could see nothing unfamiliar. No one was visible. But I heard a whisper: 'Arise and go away from this place at once; and this night do not venture out, lest evil befall you.' So I rose, trembling, and went home. Thereafter I was the same, and yet not the same. Never could I see, as they saw, what my father and brothers or the islefolk looked upon as ugly or dreary. My father was wroth with me many times, and called me a fool. Whenever my eyes fell upon those waste and desolated spots, they

seemed to me passing fair, radiant with lovely light. At last my father grew so bitter that, mocking me the while, he bade me go to the towns, and see there the squalor and sordid hideousness wherein men dwelled. But thus it was with me: in the places they call slums, and among the smoke of factories, and the grime of destitution, I could see all that other men saw, only as vanishing shadows. What I saw was lovely, beautiful with strange glory, and the faces of men and women were sweet and pure, and their souls were white. So, weary and bewildered with my unwilling quest, I came back to Eilanmore. And on the day of my home-coming, Morag was there,—Morag of the Falls. She turned to my father, and called him blind and foolish. ‘He has the white light upon his brows,’ she said of me; ‘I can see it, like the flicker-light in a wave when the wind’s from the south in thunder-weather. He has been touched with the Fairy Ointment. The Guid Folk know him. It will be thus with him till the day of his death, if a *duinshee* can die, being already a man dead yet born anew. He upon whom the Fairy Ointment has been laid must see all that is ugly and hideous and dreary and bitter through a glamour of beauty. Thus it hath been since the Mhic-Alpine ruled from sea to sea, and thus is it with the man Alison your son.’

“That is all, my fawn, and that is why my brothers, when they are angry, sometimes call me the Anointed Man.”

“That is all.” Yes perhaps. But oh, Alison Achanna, how often have I thought of that most precious treasure you found in the heather, when the bells were sweet with honey-ooze! Did the wild bees know of it? Would that I could hear the soft hum of their gauzy wings!

Who of us would not barter the best of all our possessions—and some there are who would surrender all—to have one touch laid upon the eyelids, one touch of the Fairy Ointment? But the place is far, and the hour is hidden. No man may seek that for which there can be no quest.

Only the wild bees know of it, but I think they must be the bees of Magh-Mell. And there no man that liveth may wayfare—yet.