

The Judgment of God

By Fiona Macleod

The wind that blows on the feet of the dead came calling loud across the Ross, as we put about the boat off the Rudhe Callachain. The ebb sucked at the keel, while, like a cork, we were swung lightly by the swell. For we were in the strait between Eilean Dubh and the Isle of the Swine; and that is where the current has a bad pull, the current that is made of the inflow and the outflow. I have heard that a weary woman of the olden days broods down there in a cave, and that day and night she weaves a web of water, which a fierce spirit in the sea tears this way and that as soon as woven.

So we put about, and went before the east wind; and below the dip of the sail alee I watched Soa grow bigger and gaunter and blacker against the white wave. As we came so near that it was as though the wash of the sea among the hollows bubbled in our ears, I saw a large bull-seal lying half-in, half-out of the water, and staring at us with an angry, fearless look. Phadric and Ivor caught sight of it almost at the same moment.

To my surprise Macrae suddenly rose and put a *rosad* upon it. I could hear the wind through his clothes as he stood by the mast.

The *rosad* or spell was, of course, in the Gaelic; but its meaning was something like this:—

Ho, ro, O Ron dubh, O Ron dubh!
An ainm an Athar, O Ron!
'San mhic, O Ron!
'San Spioraid Naoimh,
O Ron-à'-mhàra, O Ron dubh!

Ho, ro, O black Seal, O black Seal!
In the name of the Father,
And of the Son,
And of the Holy Ghost,
O Seal of the deep sea, O black Seal!

Hearken the thing that I say to thee,
I, Phadric MacAlastair MhicCrae,
Who dwell in a house on the Island
That you look on night and day from Soa!
For I put *rosad* upon thee,

And upon the woman-seal that won thee,
And the women-seal that are thine,
And the young that thou hast,
Ay, upon thee and all thy kin
I put *rosad*, O Ron dubh, O Ron-à'-mhàra!

And may no harm come to me or mine,
Or to any fishing or snaring that is of me,
Or to any sailing by storm or dusk,
Or when the moonshine fills the blind eyes of the dead,
No harm to me or mine
From thee or thine!

With a slow, swinging motion of his head Phadric broke out again into the first words of the incantation, and now Ivor joined him; and with the call of the wind and the leaping and the splashing of the waves was blent the chant of the two fishermen:—

Ho, ro, O Ron dubh! O Ron dubh!
An ainm an Athar, 's an Mhic, 's an Spioraid Naoimh,
O Ron-à'-mhàra, O Ron dubh!

Then the men sat back, with that dazed look in the eyes I have so often seen in those of men or women of the Isles who are wrought. No word was spoken till we came almost straight upon Eilean-na-h' Aon-Chaorach. Then at the rocks we tacked, and went splashing up the Sound, like a pollack on a Sabbath noon.¹

“What was wrong with the old man of the sea?” I asked Macrae.

At first he would say nothing. He looked vaguely at a coiled rope; then, with hand-shaded gaze across to the red rocks at Fhionnaphort. I repeated my question. He took refuge in English.

“It wass ferry likely the *Clansman* would be pringing ta new minister-body. Did you pe knowing him, or his people, or where he came from?”

But I was not to be put off thus; and at last, while Ivor stared down the green shelving lawns of the sea below us, Phadric told me this thing. His reluctance was partly due to the shyness which with the Gael almost invariably follows strong emotion; and partly to that strange, obscure, secretive instinct which is also so characteristically Celtic, and often prevents Gaels of far apart isles, or of different clans, from communicating to each other stories or legends of a peculiarly intimate kind.

“I will tell you what my father told me, and what, if you like, you may hear again from the sister of my father, who is the wife of Ian Finlay, who has the farm on the north side of Dùn I.

“You will have heard of old James Achanna of Eilanmore, off the Ord a' Sutherland? To be sure, for have you not stayed there? Well, I need not tell you how he came there out of the south; but it will be news to you to learn that my elder brother Murdoch was had by him as a shepherd, and to help on the farm. And the way of that thing was this. Murdoch had gone to the fishing north of Skye, with Angus and William Macdonald, and in the great gale that broke up their boat, among so many others, he found himself stranded on Eilanmore. Achanna told him that as he was mined, and so far from home, he would give him employment, and though Murdoch had never thought to serve under a Galloway man, he agreed.

“For a year he worked on the upper farm, Ardoch-beag, as it was called. There the gloom came upon him. Turn which way he would, the beauty that is in the day was no more. In vain, when he came out into the air in the morning, did he cry *Deasiul!* and keep by the sun-way. At night he heard the sea calling in his sleep. So, when the lambing was over, he told Achanna that he must go, for he hungered for the sea. True, the wave ran all around Eilanmore, but the farm was between bare hills and among high moors, and the house was in a hollow place. But it was needful for him to go. Even then, though he did not know it, the madness of the sea was upon him.

¹ The Iona fishermen, and indeed the Gaelic and Scottish fishermen generally, believe that the pollack (porpoise) knows when it is the Sabbath; and on that day will come closer to the land, and be more wanton in its gambols on the sun-warmed surface of the sea, than on the days when the herring-boats are abroad.

“But the Galloway man did not wish to lose my brother, who was a quiet man, and worked for a small wage. Murdoch was a silent lad, but he had often the light in his eyes, and none knew of what he was thinking; maybe it was of a lass, or a friend, or of the ingle-neuk where his old mother sang a’ nights, or of the sight and sound of Iona that was his own land; but I’m considerin’ it was the sea he was dreamin’ of,—how the waves ran laughin’ an’ dancin’ against the tide, like lambkins comin’ to meet the shepherd, or how the big green billows went sweepin’ white an’ ghostly through the moonless nights.

“So the troth that was come to between them was this: that Murdoch should abide for a year longer, that is, till Lammastide; then that he should no longer live at Ardoch-beag, but instead should go and keep the sheep on Bac-Mòr.”

“On Bac-Mòr, Phadric,” I interrupted, “for sure, you do not mean *our* Bac-Mòr?”

“For sure I mean no other: Bac-Mòr, of the Treshnish Isles, that is eleven miles north of Iona and a long four north-west of Staffa; an’ just Bac-Mòr an’ no other.”

“Murdoch would be near home, there.”

“Ay, near, an’ farther away; for ’tis to be farther off to be near that your heart loves but ye can’t get.

“Well, Murdoch agreed to this, but he did not know there was no boat on the island. It was all very well in the summer. The herrin’-smacks lay off Bac-Mòr or Bac-Beag many a time; and he could see them mornin’, noon, an’ night; an’ nigh every day he could watch the big steamer comin’ southward down the Mornish and Treshnish coasts of Mull, and stand by for an hour off Staffa, or else come northward out of the Sound of Iona round the Eilean Rabach; and once or twice a week he saw the *Clansman* coming or going from Bunessan in the Ross to Scarnish in the Isle of Tiree. Maybe, too, now and again a foreign sloop or a coasting schooner would sail by; and twice, at least, a yacht lay off the wild shore, and put a boat in at the landing-place, and let some laughing folk loose upon that quiet place. The first time, it was a steam-yacht, owned by a rich foreigner, either an Englishman or an American, I misremember now: an’ he spoke to Murdoch as though he were a savage, and he and his gay folk laughed when my brother spoke in the only English he had (an’ sober good English it was), an’ then he shoves some money into his hand, as though both were evil-doers and were ashamed to be seen doing what they did.

“‘An’ what is this for?’ said my brother.

“‘O it ’s for yourself, my man, to drink our health with,’ answered the English lord, or whatever he was, rudely.

“Then Murdoch looked at him and his quietly; an’ he said, ‘God has your health an’ my health in the hollow of His hand. But I wish you well. Only I am not being your man any more than I am for calling *you my* man; an’ I will ask you to take back this money to drink with; nor have I any need for money, but only for that which is free to all,—but that only God can give.’ And with that the foreign people went away, and laughed less. But when the second yacht came, though it was a yawl and owned by a Glasgow man who had folk in the west, Murdoch would not come down to the shore, but lay under the shadow of a rock amid his sheep, and kept his eyes upon the sun that was moving west out of the south.

“Well, all through the fine months Murdoch stayed on Bac-Mòr, and thereafter through the early winter. The last time I saw him was at the New Year. On Hogmanay night my father was drinking hard, and nothing would serve him but he must borrow Alec Macarthur’s boat, and that he and our mother and myself, and Ian Finlay and his wife, my sister, should go out before the

quiet south-wind that was blowing, and see Murdoch where he lay sleeping or sat dreaming in his lonely bothy. And truth, we went. It was a white sailing, that I remember. The moonshinings ran in and out of the wavelets like herrings through salmon nets. The fire-flauchts, too, went speeding about. I was but a laddie then, an' I noted it all; an' the sheet-lightning that played behind the cloudy lift in the nor-west.

"But when we got to Bac-Mòr there was no sign of Murdoch at the bothy; no, not though we called high and low. Then my father and Ian Finlay went to look, and we stayed by the peats. When they came back, an hour later, I saw that my father was no more in drink. Hr had the same look in his eyes as Ronald McLean had that day last winter when they told him his bit girle had been caught by the smallpox in Glasgow.

"I could not hear, or I could not make out what was said; but I know that we all got into the boat again, all except my father. And he stayed. And next day, Ian Finlay and Alec Macarthur went out to Bac-Mòr and brought him back.

"And from him and from Ian I knew all there was to be known. It was a hard New Year for all, and since that day till a night of which I will tell you, my father brooded and drank, drank and brooded, and my mother wept through the winter gloamings and spent the night starin' into the peats wi' her knittin' lyin' on her lap.

"For when they had gone to seek Murdoch that Hogmanay night, they came upon him away from his sheep. But this was what they saw. There was a black rock that stood out in the moonshine, with the water all about it. And on this rock Murdoch lay naked, and laughing wild. An' every now and then he would lean forward, and stretch his arms out, an' call to his dearie. An' at last, just as the watchers, shiverin' wi' fear an' awe, were going to close in upon him, they saw a—a—thing—come out a' the water. It was long an' dark, an' Ian said its eyes were like clots o' blood; but as to that no man can say yea or nay, for Ian himself admits it was a seal.

"An' this thing is true, *an ainm an Athar!* they saw the dark beast o' the sea creep on to the rock beside Murdoch, an' lie down beside him, and let him clasp an' kiss it. An' then he stood up, and laughed till the skin crept on those who heard, and cried out on his dearie and on a' the dumb things o' the sea, an' the Wave-Haunter an' the grey shadow; an' he raised his hands, an' cursed the world a' men, and cried out to God, '*Turn your face to your own airidh, O God, an' may rain an' storm an' snow be between us!*'

"An' wi' that Deirg, his collie, could bide no more, but loupit across the water, and was on the rock beside him, wi' his fell bristling like a hedge-rat. For both the naked man an' the wet gleamin' beast, a great she-seal out a' the north, turned upon Deirg, an' he fought for his life. But what could the puir thing do? The seal buried her fangs in his shoulder, at last, an' pinned him to the ground. Then Murdoch stooped, an' dragged her off, an' bent down an' tore at the throat a' Deirg wi' his own teeth. Ay, God's truth it is! An' when the collie was stark, he took him up by the hind legs an' the tail, an' swung him round an' round his head, an' whirled him into the sea, where he fell black in a white splatch a' the moon.

"An' wi' that, Murdoch slipped, and reeled backward into the sea, his hands gripping at the whirling stars. An' the thing beside him louped after him, an' my father an' Ian heard a cry an' a cryin' that made their hearts sob. But when they got down to the rock they saw nothing, except the floating body a' Deirg.

"Sure it was a weary night for the old man, there on Bac-Mòr by himself, with that awful thing that had happened. He stayed there to see and hear what might be seen and heard. But nothing he heard, nothing saw. It was afterwards that he heard how Donncha MacDonald was on Bac-Mòr

three days before this, and how Murdoch had told him he was in love wi' a *maighdeannmhara*, a sea-maid.

“But this thing has to be known. It was a month later, on the night a' the full moon, that Ian Finlay and Ian Macarthur and Sheumais Macallum were upset in the calm water inside the Sound, just off Port-na-Frang, and were nigh drowned, but that they called upon God and the Son, and so escaped and heard no more the laughter of Murdoch from the sea.

“And at midnight my father heard the voice of his eldest son at the door; but he would not let him in; and in the morning he found his boat broken and shred in splinters, and his one net all torn. An' that day was the Sabbath; so being a holy day he took the Scripture with him, an' he and Neil Morrison the minister, having had the Bread an' Wine, went along the Sound in a boat, following a shadow in the water, till they came to Soa. An' there Neil Morrison read the Word a' God to the seals that lay baskin' in the sun; and one, a female, snarled and showed her fangs; and another, a black one, lifted its head, and made a noise that was not like the barking of any seal, but was as the laughter of Murdoch when he swung the dead body of Deirg.

“And that is all that is to be said. And silence is best now between you and any other. And no man knows the judgments a' God.

“And that is all.”