

The Laughter of Scathach the Queen

By Fiona Macleod

Scathach (pronounced Sca-ya or Sky-ya) was an Amazonian Queen of the Island of Skye, and is supposed to have given her name to that island.—F.M.

In the year when Cuchullin left the Isle of Skye, where Scathach the warrior-queen ruled with the shadow of death in the palm of her sword-hand, there was sorrow because of his beauty. He had fared back to Eiré, at the summons of Concobar mac Nessa, Ard-Righ of Ulster. For the Clan of the Red Branch was wading in blood, and there were seers who beheld that bitter tide rising and spreading.

Cuchullin was only a youth in years; but he had come to Skye a boy, and he had left it a man. None fairer had ever been seen of Scathach or of any woman. He was tall and lithe as a young pine; his skin was as white as a woman's breast; his eyes were of a fierce bright blue, with a white light in them as of the sun. When bent, and with arrow half-way drawn, he stood on the heather, listening against the belling of the deer; or when he leaned against a tree, dreaming not of eagle-chase or wolf-hunt, but of the woman whom he had never met; or, when by the dûn, he played at sword-whirl or spear-thrust, or raced the war-chariot across the machar—then, and ever there were eyes upon his beauty, and there were some who held him to be Angus Ogue himself. For there was a light about him, such as the hills have in the sun-glow an hour before set. His hair was the hair of Angus and of the fair gods, earth-brown shot with gold next his head, ruddy as flame midway, and, where it sprayed into a golden mist of fire, yellow as windy sunshine.

But Cuchullin loved no woman upon Skye, and none dared openly to love Cuchullin, for Scathach's heart yearned for him, and to cross the Queen was to put the shroud upon oneself. Scathach kept an open face for the son of Lerg. There was no dark frown above the storm in her eyes when she looked at his sunbright face. Gladly she slew a woman because Cuchullin had lightly reproved the maid for some idle thing; and once, when the youth looked in grave silence at three Viking captives whom she had spared because of their comely manhood, she put her sword through the heart of each, and sent him the blade, dripping red, as the flower of love.

But Cuchullin was a dreamer, and he loved what he dreamed of, and that woman was not Scathach, nor any of her warrior-women who made the Isle of Mist a place of terror for those cast upon the wild shores, or stranded there in the ebb of inglorious baffle.

Scathach brooded deep upon her vain desire. Once, in a windless, shadowy gloaming, she asked him if he loved any woman.

'Yes,' he said. 'Etáin.'

Her breath came quick and hard. It was for pleasure to her then to think of Cuchullin lying white at her feet, with the red blood spilling from the whiteness of his breast. But she bit her under lip, and said quietly—

'Who is Etáin?'

'She is the wife of Mídir.' And with that the youth turned and moved haughtily away. She did not know that the Etáin of whom Cuchullin dreamed was no woman that he had seen in Eiré, but the wife of Mídir, the King of Faerie, who was so passing fair that Mac Greine, the beautiful god, had made for her a grianan all of shining glass, where she lives in a dream, and in that sun-bower is fed at dawn upon the bloom of flowers and at dusk upon their fragrance. *O ogham mhic*

*Gréine, tha e boidheach,*¹ she sighs for ever in her sleep; and that sigh is in all sighs of love for ever and ever.

Scathach watched him till he was lost behind the flare of the camp fires of the rath. For long she stood there, brooding deep, till the sickle of the new moon, which had been like a blown feather over the sun as it sank, stood out in silver-shine against the blue-black sky, now like a wake in the sea because of the star-dazzle that was there. And what the Queen brooded upon was this: Whether to send emissaries to Eirèann, under bond to seek in that land till they found Mídir and Etáin, and to slay Mídir and bring to her the corpse, for a gift from her to lay before Cuchullin; or to bring Etáin to Skye, where the Queen might see her lose her beauty and wane into death. Neither way might win the heart of Cuchullin. The dark tarn of the woman's mind grew blacker with the shadow of that thought.

Slowly she moved dun-ward through the night.

'As the moon sometimes is seen rising out of the east,' she muttered, 'and sometimes, as now, is first seen in the west, so is the heart of love. And if I go west, lo, the moon may rise along the sunway; and if I go east, lo, the moon may be a white light over the setting sun. And who that knoweth the heart of man or woman can tell when the moon of love is to appear full-orbed in the east, or sickle-wise in the west?'

It was on the day following that tidings came out of Eirèann. An Ultonian [Ulsterman] brought a sword to Cuchullin from Concobar the Ard-Righ.

'The sword has ill upon it, and will die unless you save it, Cuchulain, son of Lerg,' said the man.

'And what is that ill, Ultonian?' asked the youth.

'It is thirst.'

Then Cuchullin understood.

On the night of his going none looked at Scathach. She had a flame in her eyes.

At moonrise she came back into the rath. No one meeting her looked in her face. Death lay there, like the levin behind a cloud. But Maev, her chief captain, sought her, for she had glad news.

'I would slay you for that glad news, Maev,' said the Dark Queen to the warrior-woman, 'for there is no glad news unless it be that Cuchullin is come again; only, I spare, for you saved my life that day the summer-sailors burned my rath in the south.'

Nevertheless Scathach had gladness because of the tidings. Three Viking galleys had been driven into Loch Scavaig, and been dashed to death there by the whirling wind and the narrow, furious seas. Of the ninety men who had sailed in them, only a score had reached the rocks, and these were now lying bound at the dun, awaiting death.

'Call out my warriors,' said Scathach, 'and bid all meet at the oak near the Ancient Stones. And bring thither the twenty men that lie bound in the dun.'

There was a scattering of fire and a clashing of swords and spears when the word went from Maev. Soon all were at the Stones beneath the great oak.

'Cut the bonds from the feet of the sea-rovers, and let them stand.' Thus commanded the Queen.

The tall, fair men out of Lochlin stood with their hands bound behind them. In their eyes burned wrath and shame, because that they were the sport of women. A bitter death theirs, with no sword-song for music. 'Take each by his long yellow hair,' said Scathach, 'and tie the hair of each to a down-caught bough of the oak.'

¹ 'O beauty of my love the Sun-lord' (lit. 'O youth, son of the Sun, how fair he is!')-F.M.

In silence this thing was done. A shadow was in the paleness of each Viking face.

'Let the boughs go,' said Scathach.

The five score warrior women who held the great boughs downward sprang back. Up swept the branches, and from each swung a living man, swaying in the wind by his long yellow hair.

Great men they were, strong warriors; but stronger was the yellow hair of each, and stronger than the hair the bough wherefrom each swung, and stronger than the boughs the wind that swayed them idly like drooping fruit, with the stars silvering their hair and the torch-flares reddening the white soles of their dancing feet.

Then Scathach the Queen laughed loud and long. There was no other sound at all there, for none ever uttered sound when Scathach laughed that laugh, for then her madness was upon her.

But at the last, Maev strode forward and struck a small clarsach that she carried, and to the wild notes of it sang the death-song of the Vikings—

O arone a-ree, eily arone, arone!

'Tis a good thing to be sailing across the sea!

How the women smile and the children are laughing glad

When the galleys go out into the blue sea—arone!

O eily arone, arone!

But the children may laugh less when the wolves come,

And the women may smile less in the winter-cold;

For the Summer-sailors will not come again, arone!

O arone a-ree, eily arone, arone!

I am thinking they will not sail back again, O no!

The yellow-haired men that came sailing across the sea:

For 'tis wild apples they would be, and swing on green branches,

And sway in the wind for the corbies to preen their eyne.

O eily arone, eily a-ree!

And it is pleasure for Scathach the Queen to see this:

To see the good fruit that grows upon the Tree of the Stones.

Long, speckled fruit it is, wind-swayed by its yellow roots,

And like men they are with their feet dancing in the void air!

O, O, arone, aree, eily arone!

When she ceased, all there swung swords and spears, and flung flaring torches into the night, and cried out—

O arone a-ree, eily arone, arone,

O, O, arone, a-ree, eily arone!

Scathach laughed no more. She was weary now. Of what avail any joy of death against the pain she had in her heart, the pain that was called Cuchullin?

Soon all was dark in the rath. Flame after flame died out. Then there was but one red glare in the night, the watch-fire by the dun. Deep peace was upon all. Not a heifer lowed, not a dog

bayed against the moon. The wind fell into a breath, scarce enough to lift the fragrance from flower to flower. Upon the branches of a great oak swung motionless a strange fruit, limp and grey as the hemlock that hangs from ancient pines.