

Ula and Urla

By Fiona Macleod

Ula and Urla were under vow to meet by the Stone of Sorrow. But Ula, dying first, stumbled blindfold when he passed the Shadowy Gate; and, till Urla's hour was upon her, she remembered not.

These were the names that had been given to them in the north isles, when the birlinn that ran down the war-galley of the Vikings brought them before the Maormor.

No word had they spoken that day, and no name. They were of the Gael, though Uia's hair was yellow, and though his eyes were blue as the heart of a wave. They would ask nothing, for both were in love with death. The Maormor of Siol Tormaid looked at Urla, and his desire gnawed at his heart. But he knew what was in her mind, because he saw into it through her eyes, and he feared the sudden slaying in the dark.

Nevertheless, he brooded night and day upon her beauty. Her skin was more white than the foam of the moon: her eyes were as a star-lit dewy dusk. When she moved, he saw her like a doe in the fern: when she stooped, it was as the fall of wind-swayed water. In his eyes there was a shimmer as of the sun-flood in a calm sea. In that dazzle he was led astray.

'Go,' he said to Ula, on a day of the days. 'Go: the men of Siol Torquil will take you to the south isles, and so you can hale to your own place, be it Eirèann or Manannan, or wherever the south wind puts its hand upon your home.'

It was on that day Ula spoke for the first time.

'I will go, Coil mac Torcall; but I go not alone. Urla that I love goes whither I go.'

'She is my spoil. But, man out of Eirèann—for so I know you to be, because of the manner of your speech—tell me this: Of what clan and what place are you, and whence is Urla come; and by what shore was it that the men of Lochlin whom we slew took you and her out of the sea, as you swam against the sun, with waving swords upon the strand when the Viking-boat carried you away?'

'How know you these things?' asked Ula, that had been Isla, son of the king of Islay.

'One of the sea-rovers spake before he died.'

'Then let the Viking speak again. I have nought to say.'

With that the Maormor frowned, but said no more. That eve Ula was seized, as he walked in the dusk by the sea, singing low to himself an ancient song.

'Is it death?' he said, remembering another day when he and Eilidh, that they called Urla, had the same asking upon their lips.

'It is death.'

Ula frowned, but spake no word for a time. Then he spake.

'Let me say one word with Urla.'

'No word canst thou have. She, too, must die.'

Ula laughed low at that.

'I am ready,' he said. And they slew him with a spear.

When they told Urla, she rose from the deerskins and went down to the shore. She said no word then. But she stooped, and she put her lips upon his cold lips, and she whispered in his unhearing ear.

That night Coil mac Torcall went secretly to where Urla was. When he entered, a groan came to his lips and there was froth there: and that was because the spear that had slain Ula was thrust betwixt his shoulders by one who stood in the shadow. He lay there till the dawn. When they found Coll the Maormor he was like a seal speared upon a rock, for he had his hands out, and his head was between them, and his face was downward.

‘Eat dust, slain wolf,’ was all that Eilidh, whom they called Urla, said, ere she moved away from that place in the darkness of the night.

When the sun rose, Urla was in a glen among the hills. A man who shepherded there took her to his mate. They gave her milk, and because of her beauty and the frozen silence of her eyes, bade her stay with them and be at peace.

They knew in time that she wished death. But first, there was the birthing of the child.

‘It was Isla’s will,’ she said to the woman. Ula was but the shadow of a bird’s wing: an idle name. And she, too, was Eilidh once more.

‘It was death he gave you when he gave you the child,’ said the woman once.

‘It was life,’ answered Eilidh, with her eyes filled with the shadow of dream. And yet another day the woman said to her that it would be well to bear the child and let it die: for beauty was like sunlight on a day of clouds, and if she were to go forth young and alone and so wondrous fair, she would have love, and love is best.

‘Truly, love is best,’ Eilidh answered. ‘And because Isla loved me, I would that another Isla came into the world and sang his songs—the songs that were so sweet, and the songs that he never sang, because I gave him death when I gave him life. But now he shall live again, and he and I shall be in one body, in him that I carry now.’

At that the woman understood, and said no more. And so the days grew out of the nights, and the dust of the feet of one month was in the eyes of that which followed after; and this until Eilidh’s time was come.

Dusk after dusk, Ula that was Isla the Singer, waited by the Stone of Sorrow. Then a great weariness came upon him. He made a song there, where he lay in the narrow place; the last song that he made, for after that he heard no trampling of the hours.

The swift years slip and slide adown the steep;
The slow years pass; neither will come again.
Yon huddled years have weary eyes that weep,
These laugh, these moan, these silent frown, these plain,
These have their lips acurl with proud disdain.

O years with tears, and tears through weary years,
How weary I who in your arms have lain:
Now, I am tired: the sound of slipping spears
Moves soft, and tears fall in a bloody rain,
And the chill footless years go over me who am slain.

I hear, as in a wood, dim with old light, the rain,
Slow falling; old, old, weary, human tears:

And in the deepening dark my comfort is my Pain,
Sole comfort left of all my hopes and fears,
Pain that alone survives, gaunt hound of the shadowy years.

But, at the last, after many days, he stirred. There was a song in his ears.

He listened. It was like soft rain in a wood in June. It was like the wind laughing among the leaves.

Then his heart leaped. Sure, it was the voice of Eilidh!

'*Eilidh! Eilidh! Eilidh!*' he cried. But a great weariness came upon him again. He fell asleep, knowing not the little hand that was in his, and the small, flower-sweet body that was warm against his side.

Then the child that was his looked into the singer's heart, and saw there a mist of rainbows, and midway in that mist was the face of Eilidh, his mother.

Thereafter, the little one looked into his brain that was so still, and he saw the music that was there: and it was the voice of Eilidh his mother.

And, again, the birdeen, that had the blue of Isla's eyes and the dream of Eilidh's, looked into Ula's sleeping soul: and he saw that it was not Isla nor yet Eilidh, but that it was like unto himself, who was made of Eilidh and Isla.

For a long time the child dreamed. Then he put his ear to Isla's brow, and listened. Ah, the sweet songs that he heard. Ah, bittersweet moonseed of song! Into his life they passed, echo after echo, strain after strain, wild air after wild sweet air.

'Isla shall never die,' whispered the child, 'for Eilidh loved him. And I am Isla and Eilidh.'

Then the little one put his hands above Isla's heart. There was a flame there, that the Grave quenched not.

'O flame of love!' sighed the child, and he clasped it to his breast: and it was a moonshine glory about the two hearts that he had, the heart of Isla and the heart of Eilidh, that were thenceforth one.

At dawn he was no longer there. Already the sunrise was warm upon him where he lay, newborn, upon the breast of Eilidh.

'It is the end,' murmured Isla when he waked. 'She has never come. For sure, now, the darkness and the silence.'

Then he remembered the words of Maol the Druid, he that was a seer, and had told him of Orchil, the dim goddess who is under the brown earth, in a vast cavern, where she weaves at two looms. With one hand she weaves life upward through the grass; with the other she weaves death downward through the mould; and the sound of the weaving is Eternity, and the name of it in the green world is Time. And, through all, Orchil weaves the weft of Eternal Beauty, that passeth not, though its soul is Change.

And these were the words of Orchil, on the lips of Maol the Druid, that was old, and knew the mystery of the Grave.

When thou journeyest towards the Shadowy Gate take neither Fear with thee nor Hope, for both are abashed hounds of silence in that place; but take only the purple nightshade for sleep, and a vial of tears and wine, tears that shall be known unto thee and old wine of love. So shalt thou have thy silent festival, ere the end.

So therewith Isla, having, in his weariness, the nightshade of sleep, and in his mind the slow dripping rain of familiar tears, and deep in his heart the old wine of love, bowed his head.

It was well to have lived, since life was Eilidh. It was well to cease to live, since Eilidh came no more.

Then suddenly he raised his head. There was music in the green world above. A sunray opened the earth about him: staring upward he beheld Angus Ogue.

‘Ah, fair face of the god of youth,’ he sighed. Then he saw the white birds that fly about the head of Angus Ogue, and he heard the music that his breath made upon the harp of the wind.

‘Arise,’ said Angus; and, when he smiled the white birds flashed their wings and made a mist of rainbows.

‘Arise,’ said Angus Ogue again, and, when he spoke, the spires of the grass quivered to a wild, sweet haunting air.

So Isla arose, and the sun shone upon him, and his shadow passed into the earth. Orchil wove it into her web of death.

‘Why dost thou wait here by the Stone of Sorrow, Isla that was called lila at the end?’

‘I wait for Eilidh, who cometh not.’

At that the wind-listening god stooped and laid his head upon the grass.

‘I hear the coming of a woman’s feet,’ he said, and he rose. ‘Eilidh! Eilidh!’ cried Isla, and the sorrow of his cry was a moan in the web of Orchil.

Angus Ogue took a branch, and put the cool greenness against his cheek.

‘I hear the beating of a heart,’ he said.

‘Eilidh! Eilidh! Eilidh!’ Isla cried, and the tears that were in his voice were turned by Angus into dim dewdrops of remembrance in the babe-brain that was the brain of Isla and Eilidh.

‘I hear a word,’ said Angus Ogue, ‘and that word is a flame of joy.’

Isla listened. He heard a singing of birds. Then, suddenly, a glory came into the shine of the sun.

‘I have come, Isla my king!’

It was the voice of Eilidh. He bowed his head, and swayed; for it was his own life that came to him.

‘Eilidh!’ he whispered.

And so, at the last, Isla came into his kingdom. Mircath

But are they gone, these twain, who loved with deathless love? Or is this a dream that I have dreamed?

Afar in an island-sanctuary that I shall not see again, where the wind chants the blind oblivious rune of Time, I have heard grasses whisper: Time never was, Time is not.