

Ronald of the Perfect Hand

By Leigh Hunt

[The following tale is founded on a Scottish tradition. It was intended to be written in verse; which will account for its present appearance.]

The stern old shepherd of the air
The spirit of the whistling hair,
The wind, has risen drearily
In the Northern evening sea,
And is piping long and loud
To many a heavy upcoming cloud,—
Upcoming heavy in many a row,
Like the unwieldy droves below
Of seals, and horses of the sea,
That gather up as drearily,
And watch with solemn-visaged eyes
Those mightier movers in the skies.

'Tis evening quick;—'tis night:—the rain
Is sowing wide the fruitless main,
Thick, thick;—no sight remains the while
From the farthest Orkney isle,
No sight to sea-horse, or to seer,
But of a little pallid sail,
That seems as if 'twould struggle near,
And then as if its pinion pale
Gave up the battle to the gale.
Four chiefs there are of special note,
Labouring in that earnest boat;
Four Orkney chiefs, that yesterday
Coming in their pride away
From there smote Norwegian king,
Led their war-boats triumphing
Straight along the golden line
Made by morning's eye divine.
Stately came they, one by one,
Every sail beneath the sun,
As if he their admiral were
Looking down from the lofty air
Stately, stately through the gold.—
But before that day was done,
Lo, his eye grew vexed and cold;
And every boat, except that one,

A tempest trampled in its roar;
And every man, except those four,
Was drenched, and driving far from home,
Dead and swift, through the Northern foam

Four are they, who wearily
Have drunk of toil two days at sea;
Duth Maruno, steady and dark,
Cormar, Soul of the Winged Bark;
And bright Clan Alpin, who could lesp
Like a torrent from steep to steep;
And he, the greatest of that great band,
Ronald of the Perfect Hand.

Dumbly strain they for the shore,
Foot to board, and grasp on oar.
The billows, panting in the wind,
Seem instinct with ghastly mind,
And climb like crowding savages
At the boat that dares their seas.
Dumbly strain they, through and through
Dumbly, and half blindly too,
Drenched, and buffeted, and bending
Up and down without an ending,
Like ghostly things that could not cease
To row among those savages.

Ronald of the Perfect Hand
Has rowed the most of all that band;
And now he's resting for a space
At the helm, and turns his face
Round and round on every side
To see what cannot be descried,
Shore, nor sky, nor light, nor even
HOPE, whose feet are last in heaven.
Ronald thought him of the roar
Of the fight the day before,
And of the young Norwegian prince
Whom In all the worryings
And hot vexations of the fray,
He had sent with life away,
Because he told him of a bride
That if she lost him, would have died
And Ronald then, in bitter case,
Thought of his own sweet lady's face,
Which upon this very night

Should have blushed with bridal light,
And of her downward eyelids meek,
And of her voice, just heard to speak,
As at the altar, hand in hand,
On ceasing of the organ grand,
'Twould have bound her, for weal or woe,
With delicious answers low
And more he thought of, grave and sweet,
That made the thin tears start, and meet
The wetting of the insolent wave;
And Ronald, who though all so brave,
Had often that hard day before
Wished himself well housed on shore,
Felt a sharp impatient start
Of home-sick wilfulness at heart,
And steering with still firmer hand,
As if the boat could feel command,
Thrilled with a fierce and forward motion,
As though 'twould shoot it through the ocean.

“Some spirit,” exclaimed Duth Maruno, “must pursue us, and stubbornly urge the boat out of its way, or we must have arrived by this time at Inistore.”¹ Ronald took him at his word, and turning hastily round, thought he saw an armed figure behind the stern. His anger rose with his despair; and with all his strength he dashed his arm at the moveless and airy shape. At that instant a fierce blast of wind half turned the boat round. The chieftains called out to Ronald to set his whole heart at the rudder; but the wind beat back their voices, like young birds into the nest, and no answer followed it. The boat seemed less and less manageable, and at last to be totally left to themselves. In the intervals of the wind they again called out to Ronald, but still received no answer. One of them crept forward, and felt for him through the blinding wet and darkness. His place was void. “It was a ghost,” said they, “which came to fetch him to the spirits of his fathers. Ronald of the Perfect Hand is gone, and we shall follow him as we did in the fight. Hark! The wind is louder and louder: it is louder and many-voiced. Is it his voice which has roused up the others? Is he calling upon us, as he did in the battle, when his followers shouted after his call?”

It was the rocks of an isle beyond Inistore which made that multitudinous roaring of the wind. The chieftains found that they were not destined to perish in the mid-ocean; but it was fortunate for them that the wind did not set in directly upon the island, or they would have been dashed to pieces upon the rocks. With great difficulty they stemmed their way obliquely; and at length were thrown violently to shore, bruised, wounded, and half inanimate. They remained on this desolate island two days, during the first of which the storm subsided. On the third, they were taken away by a boat of seal-hunters.

The chiefs, on their arrival at home, related how Ronald of the Perfect Hand had been summoned away by a loud-voiced spirit, and disappeared. Great was the mourning in Inistore for the Perfect Hand: for the Hand that with equal skill could throw the javelin

¹ The old name for the Orkneys.

and traverse the harp; could build the sudden hut of the hunter; and bind up the glad locks of the maiden tired in the dance. Therefore was he called the Perfect Hand; and therefore with great mourning was he mourned; yet with none half as great as by his love, his betrothed bride Moilena: by her of the Beautiful Voice; who had latterly begun to be called the Perfect Voice, because she was to be matched with him of the Perfect hand. Perfect Hand and Perfect Voice were they called; but the hand was now gone, and the Voice sang brokenly for tears.

A dreary winter was it, though a victorious, to the people of Inistore. Their swords had conquered in Lochlin; but most of the hands that wielded them had never come back. Their warm pressure was felt no more. The last which they had given their friends was now to serve them all their lives. "Never, with all my yearning," said Moilena, "shall I look upon his again, as I have looked upon it a hundred times, when nobody suspected. Never." And she turned from the sight of the destructive ocean, which seemed as interminable as her thoughts.

But winter had now passed away. The tears of the sky at least were dried up. The sun looked out kindly again and the spring had scarcely reappeared, when Inistore had a proud and gladder day, from the arrival of the young Prince of Lochlin with his bride. It was a bitter one to Moilena, for the prince came to thank Ronald for sparing his life in the war, and had brought his lady to thank him too. They thanked Moilena instead; and, proud in the midst of her unhappiness of being the representative of time Perfect Hand, she lavished hundreds of smiles upon them from her pale face. But she wept in secret. She could not bear this new addition to the store of noble and kind memories respecting her Ronald. He had spared the bridegroom for his bride. He had hoped to come back to his own. She looked over to the north, and thought that her home was as much there as in Inistore.

Meantime, Ronald was not drowned. A Scandinavian boat, bound for an island called the Island of the Circle, had picked him up. The crew, which consisted chiefly of priests, were going thither to propitiate the deities, on account of the late defeat of their countrymen. They recognised the victorious chieftain, who, on coming to his senses, freely confessed who he was. Instantly they raised a chorus, which rose sternly through the tempest. "We carry, said they, "an acceptable present to the gods. Odin, stay thy hand from the slaughter of the obscure. Thor, put down the mallet with which thou beatest, like red bail, on the skulls of thine enemies. Ye other feasters in Valhalla, set down the skulls full of mead, and pledge a health out of a new and noble one to the King of Gods and men, that the twilight of heaven may come late. We bring an acceptable present; we bring Ronald of the Perfect Hand." Thus they sang in the boat, labouring all the while with the winds and waves, but surer now than ever of reaching the shore. And they did so by the first light of the morning. When they came to the circle of sacred stones, from which the island took its name, they placed their late conqueror by the largest, and kindled a fire in the middle. The warm smoke rose thickly against the cold white morning. "Let me be offered up to your gods," said Ronald, "like a man, by the sword, and not, like food, by the fire." "We know all," answered the priests; "be thou silent." "Treat not him," said Ronald, "who spared your prince, unworthily. If he must be sacrificed, let him die as your prince would have died, by this hand." Still they answered nothing but, "We know all; be thou silent." Ronald could not help witnessing these preparations for a new and unexpected death with an emotion of terror, but disdain and despair were uppermost.

Once, and but once, his cheek turned deadly pale in thinking of Moilena. He shifted his posture resolutely, and thought of the spirits of the dead, whom he was about to join. The priests then encircled the fire and the stone at which he stood with another devoting song; and Ronald looked earnestly at the ruddy flames, which gave to his body, as in mockery, a kindly warmth. The priests, however, did not lay hands on him. They respected the sparer of their prince so far as not to touch him themselves; they left him to be despatched by the supernatural beings, whom they confidently expected to come down for that purpose as soon as they had retired.

Ronald, whose faith was of another description, saw their departure with joy; but it was damped the next minute. What was he to do in winter-time on an island, inhabited only by the fowls and other creatures of the Northern Sea, and never touched at but for a purpose hostile to his hopes? For he now recollected that this was the island he had so often heard of, as the chief seat of the Scandinavian religion, whose traditions had so influenced countries of a different faith that it was believed in Scotland, as well as time Continent, that no human being could live there many hours. Spirits, it was thought, appeared in terrible superhuman shapes, like the bloody idols which the priests worshipped, and carried the stranger off.

The warrior of Inistore had soon too much reason to know the extent of this belief. He was not without fear himself, but disdained to yield to any circumstances without a struggle. He refreshed himself with some snow-water, and, after climbing the highest part of the island to look for a boat in vain (nothing was to be seen but the waves tumbling on all sides after the storm), he set about preparing a habitation. He saw at a little distance, on a slope, the mouth of a rocky cave. This he destined for his shelter at night; and, looking round for a defence for the door, as he knew not whether bears might not be among the inhabitants, he cast his eyes upon the thinnest of the stones which stood upright about the fire. The heart of the warrior, though of a different faith, misgave him as he thought of appropriating this mystical stone, carved full of strange figures; but half in courage, and half in the despair of fear, he suddenly twisted it from its place. No one appeared. The fire altered not. The noise of the fowl and other creatures was no louder on the shore. Ronald smiled at his fears, and knew the undiminished vigour of the Perfect Hand.

He found the cavern already fitted for shelter, doubtless by the Scandinavian priests. He had bitter reason to know how well it sheltered him; for day after day he hoped in vain that some boat from Inistore would venture upon the island. He beheld sails at a distance, but they never came. He piled stone upon stone, joined old pieces of boats together, and made flags of the seaweed, but all in vain. The vessels, he thought, came nearer, but none so near as to be of use; and a new and sickly kind of impatience cut across the stout heart of Ronald, and set it beating. He knew not whether it was with the cold or with misery, but his frame would shake for an hour together when he lay down on his dried weeds and feathers to rest. He remembered the happy sleeps that used to follow upon toil; and he looked with double activity for the eggs and shell-fish on which he sustained himself, and smote double the number of seals, half in the very exercise of his anger; and then he would fall dead asleep with fatigue.

In this way he bore up against the violences of time winter season, which had now past. The sun looked out with a melancholy smile upon the moss and the poor grass, chequered here and there with flowers almost as poor. There was the buttercup, struggling from a

dirty white into a yellow; and a faint-coloured poppy, neither the good nor the ill of which was then known; and here and there by the thorny underwood a shrinking violet. The lark alone seemed cheerful, and startled the ear of the desolate chieftain with its climbing triumph in the air. Ronald looked up. His fancy had been made wild and wilful by strange habits and sickened blood; and he thought impatiently, that if he were up there like the lark he might see his friends and his love in Inistore.

Being naturally, however, of a gentle as well as courageous disposition, the Perfect Hand found the advantage as well as the necessity of turning his violent impulses into noble matter for patience. He had heard of the dreadful bodily sufferings which the Scandinavian heroes underwent from their enemies with triumphant songs. He knew that no such sufferings, which were fugitive, could equal the agonies of a daily martyrdom of mind; and he cultivated a certain humane pride of patience, in order to bear them.

His only hope of being delivered from the island now depended on the Scandinavian priests; but it was a moot point whether they would respect him for surviving, or kill him on that very account, out of a mixture of personal and superstitious resentment. He thought his death the more likely; but this, at least, was a termination to the dreary prospect of a solitude for life and partly out of that hope, and partly from a courageous patience, he cultivated as many pleasant thoughts and objects about him as he could. He adorned his cavern with shells and feathers; he made himself a cap and cloak of the latter, and boots and a vest of seal-skin, girding it about with the glossy sea-weed; he cleared away a circle before the cavern, planted it with the best grass, and heaped about it the messiest stones: he strung some bones of fish with sinews, and fitting a shell beneath it, the Perfect Hand drew forth the first gentle music that had been heard in that wild island. He touched it one day in the midst of a flock of seals, who were basking in the sun; they turned their heads towards the sound; he thought he saw in their mild faces a human expression; and from that day forth no seal was ever slain by the Perfect Hand. He spared even the huge and cloudy-visaged walrusses, in whose societies he beheld a dull resemblance to the gentler affections; and his new intimacy with these possessors of the place was completed by one of the former animals, who having been rescued by him from a contest with a larger one, followed him about, as well as its half-formed and dragging legs would allow, with the officious attachment of a dog.

But the summer was gone, and no one had appeared. The new thoughts and deeper insight into things, which solitude and sorrowful necessity had produced, together with a diminution of his activity, had not tended to strengthen him against the approach of winter; and autumn came upon him like the melancholy twilight of the year. He had now no hope of seeing even the finishers of his existence before the spring. The rising winds among the rocks, and the noise of the whales blowing up their spouts of water, till the caverns thundered with their echoes, seemed to be like heralds of the stern season which was to close him in against approach. He had tried one day to move the stone at the mouth of his habitation a little farther in, and found his strength fail him. He laid himself half reclining on the ground, full of such melancholy thoughts as half bewildered him. Things, by turns, appeared a fierce dream, and a fiercer reality. He was leaning and looking on the ground, and idly twisting his long hair, when his eyes fell upon the hand that held it.—It was livid and emaciated. He opened and shut it, opened and shut it again, turned it round, and looked at its ribbed thinness and laid-open machinery; many thoughts came upon him, some which he understood not, and some which he recognised but too

well; and a turbid violence seemed rising at his heart, when the seal, his companion, drew nigh, and began licking that weak memorial of the Perfect Hand. A shower of self-pitying tears fell upon the seal's face and the hand together.

On a sudden he heard a voice. It was a deep and loud one, and distinctly called out "Ronald!" He looked up, gasping with wonder. Three times it called out, as if with peremptory command, and three times the rocks and caverns echoed the word with a dim sullenness.

Recollecting himself, he would have risen and answered; but the sudden change of sensations had done what all his sufferings had not been able to do, and he found himself unable either to rise or to speak. The voice called again and again; but it was now snore distant, and Ronald's heart sickened as he heard it retreating. His strength seemed to fail him in proportion as it became necessary. Suddenly the voice came back again. It advances. Other voices are heard, all advancing. In a short time, figures come hastily down the slope by the side of his cavern, looking over into the area before it as they descend. They enter. They are before him and about him. Some of them, in a Scandinavian habit, prostrate themselves at his feet, and address him in an unknown language. But these are sent away by another, who remains with none but two youths. Ronald has risen a little, and leans his back against the rock. One of the youths puts his arm between his neck and the rock, and half kneels beside him, turning his face away and weeping. "I am no god, nor a favourite of gods, as these people supposed me," said Ronald, looking up at the chief who was speaking to the other youth "if thou wilt despatch me then, do so. I only pray thee to let the death be fit for a warrior, such as I once was." The chief appeared agitated. "Speak not ill of the gods, Ronald," said he, "although thou wert blindly brought up. A warrior like thee must be a favourite of heaven. I come to prove it to thee. Dost thou not know me? I come to give thee life for life." Ronald looked more stedfastly. It was the Scandinavian prince whom he had spared, because of his bride, in battle. He smiled, and lifted up his hand to him, which was intercepted and kissed by the youth who held his arm round his neck. "Who are these fair youths?" said Ronald, half turning his head to look in his supporter's face. "This is the bride I spoke of," answered the prince, "who insisted on sharing this voyage with me, and put on this dress to be the bolder in it." "And who is the other?" The *other*, with dried eyes, looked smiling into his, and intercepted the answer also. "Who," said the sweetest voice in the world, "can it be, but one?" With a quick and almost fierce tone, Ronald cried out aloud, "I know the voice;" and he would have fallen flat on the earth, if they had not all three supported him.

It was a mild return to Inistore, Ronald gathering strength all the way, at the eyes and voice of Moilena, and the hands of all three. Their discovery of him was easily explained. The crews of the vessels, who had been afraid to come nearer, had repeatedly seen a figure on the island making signs. The Scandinavian priests related how they had left Ronald there; but insisted that no human being could live upon it, and that some god wished to manifest himself to his faithful worshippers. The heart of Moilena was quick to guess the truth. The prince proposed to accompany the priests. His bride, and the destined bride of his saviour went with him, and returned as you heard; and from that day forth many were the songs in Inistore upon the fortunes of the Perfect Hand and the kindness of the Perfect Voice. Nor were those forgotten who forgot not others.