

The Festival of the Birds

Before dawn, on the morning of the hundredth Sabbath after Colum the White had made glory to God in Hy, that was theretofore called Ioua and thereafter I-shona and is now Iona, the Saint beheld his own Sleep in a vision.

Much fasting and long pondering over the missals, with their golden and azure and seagreen initials and earth-brown branching letters, had made Colum weary. He had brooded much of late upon the mystery of the living world that was not man's world.

On the eve of that hundredth Sabbath, which was to be a holy festival in Iona, he had talked long with an ancient greybeard out of a remote isle in the north, the wild Isle of the Mountains, where Scathach the Queen hanged the men of Lochlin by their yellow hair.

This man's name was Ardan, and he was of the ancient people. He had come to Hy because of two things. Maolmôir, the King of the northern Picts, had sent him to learn of Colum what was this god-teaching he had brought out of Eiré: and for himself he had come, with his age upon him, to see what manner of man this Colum was, who had made Ioua, that was "Innis-nan-Dhruidhneach" — the Isle of the Druids— into a place of new worship.

For three hours Ardan and Colum had walked by the sea-shore. Each learned of the other. Ardan bowed his head before the wisdom. Colum knew in his heart that the Druid saw mysteries.

In the first hour they talked of God. Colum spake, and Ardan smiled in his shadowy eyes.

"It is for the knowing," he said, when Colum ceased.

"Ay, sure," said the Saint: "and now, O Ardan the wise, is my God thy God"

But at that Ardan smiled not. He turned the grave, sad eyes of him to the west. With his right hand he pointed to the Sun that was like a great golden flower. "Truly, He is thy God and my God." Colum was silent. Then he said: "Thee and thine, O Ardan, from Maolmór the Pictish king to the least of thy slaves, shall have a long weariness in Hell. That fiery globe yonder is but the Lamp of the World: and sad is the case of the man who knows not the torch from the torch-bearer."

And in the second hour they talked of Man. Ardan spake, and Colum smiled in his deep, grey eyes.

"It is for laughter that," he said, when Ardan ceased.

"And why will that be, O Colum of Eiré?" said Ardan. Then the smile went out of Colum's grey eyes, and he turned and looked about him.

He beheld, near, a crow, a horse, and a hound.

"These are thy brethren," he said scornfully. But Ardan answered quietly, "Even so."

The third hour they talked about the beasts of the earth and the fowls of the air.

At the last Ardan said : “The ancient wisdom hath it that these are the souls of men and women that have been, or are to be.”

Whereat Colum answered : “ he new wisdom, that is old as eternity, declareth that God created all things in love. Therefore are we at one, O Ardan, though we sail to the Isle o f Truth from the W est and the East. Let there be peace between us.”

“Peace,” said Ardan.

That eve, Ardan of the Picts sat with the monks of Iona. Colum blessed him and said a saying. Oran of the Songs sang a hymn of beauty. Ardan rose, and put the wine of guests to his lips, and chanted this rune :

O Colum and monks of Christ,
It is peace we are having this night :
Sure, peace is a good thing,
And I am glad with the gladness.
We worship one God,
Though ye call him D è—
And I say not, O Dia !
But cry Beau’il!
For it is one faith for man,
And one for the living world,
And no man is wiser than another—
And none knoweth much.
None knoweth a better thing than this :
T he Sword, Love, Song, Honour, Sleep.
None knoweth a surer thing than this :
Birth, Sorrow, Pain, Weariness, Death.
Sure, peace is a good thing :
Let us be glad of Peace :
We are not men of the Sword,
But of the Rune and the Wisdom.
I have learned a truth of Colum,
He hath learned of me :
All ye on the morrow shall see
A wonder of the wonders.
T he thought is on you, that the Cross Is known only of you :
Lo, I tell you the birds know it
T hat are marked with the Sorrow.
Listen to the Birds of Sorrow,

They shall tell you a great Joy :
It is Peace you will be having,
With the Birds.

No more would Ardan say after that, though all besought him.

Many pondered long that night. Oran made a song of mystery. Colum brooded through the dark; but before dawn he slept upon the fern that strewed his cell.

At dawn, with waking eyes, and weary, he saw his Sleep in a vision. It stood grey and wan beside him.

"What art thou, O Spirit?" he said.

"I am thy Sleep, Colum."

"And is it peace?"

"It is peace."

"What wouldst thou?"

"I have wisdom. Thy heart and thy brain were closed. I could not give you what I brought. I brought wisdom."

"Give it."

"Behold!"

And Colum, sitting upon the strewed fern that was his bed, rubbed his eyes that were heavy with weariness and fasting and long prayer. He could not see his Sleep now. It was gone as smoke that is licked up by the wind.

But on the ledge of the hole that was in the eastern wall of his cell he saw a bird. He leaned his elbow upon the leabharairfrionn that was by his side.* Then he spoke.

"Is there song upon thee, O Bru-dhearg?"

Then the Red-breast sang, and the singing was so sweet that tears came into the eyes of Colum, and he thought the sunlight that was streaming from the east was melted into that lilting sweet song. It was a hymn that the Bru-dhearg sang, and it was this:

Holy, Holy, Holy,
Christ upon the Cross!
My little nest was near,
Hidden in the moss.

Holy, Holy, Holy,
Christ was pale and wan :
His eyes beheld me singing
Bron, Bron, mo Bron! *

Holy, Holy, Holy,
"Come near, O wee brown bird!"
Christ spake : and lo,
I lighted Upon the Living Word.

Holy, Holy, Holy,
I heard the mocking scorn!
But Holy, Holy, Holy
I sang against a thorn!

Holy, Holy, Holy,
Ah, his brow was bloody!
Holy, Holy, Holy,
All my breast was ruddy.

Holy, Holy, Holy,
Christ's-Bird shalt thou be :
T hus said Mary Virgin
There on Calvary.

Holy, Holy, Holy,
A wee brown bird am I :
But my breast is ruddy
For I saw Christ die.

Holy, Holy, Holy,
By this ruddy feather,
Colum, call thy monks, and
All the birds together.

And at that Colum rose. Awe was upon him, and joy.

He went out and told all to the monks. Then he said Mass out on the green sward. The yellow sunshine was warm upon his grey hair. The love of God was warm in his heart.

“Come, all ye birds!” he cried.

And lo, all the birds of the air flew nigh. The golden eagle soared from the Cuchullins in far-off Skye, and the osprey from the wild lochs of Mull ; the gannet from above the clouds, and the fulmar and petrel from the green wave: the cormorant and the skua from the weedy rock, and the plover and the kestrel from the machar : the corbie and the raven from the moor, and the snipe and the bittern and the heron : the cuckoo and cushat from the woodland : the crane from the swamp, the lark from the sky, and the mavis and the merle from the green bushes : the yellowyite, the shilfa, and the lintie, the gyalvonn and the wren and the redbreast, one and all, every creature of the wings, they came at the bidding.

“Peace ! ” cried Colum.

“ Peace!” cried all the Birds, and even the Eagle, the Kestrel, the Corbie, and the Raven cried Peace, Peace!

“I will say the Mass,” said Colum the White.

And with that he said the Mass. And he blessed the birds.

When the last chant was sung, only the Bru-dhearg remained. “ Come, O Ruddy-Breast,” said Colum, “ and sing to us o f the Christ.”

Through a golden hour thereafter the Redbreast sang. Sweet was the joy of it.

At the end Colum said, “Peace! In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”

Thereat Ardan the Piet bowed his head, and in a loud voice repeated— “Sith (shee)! An ainm an Athar, ’s an mhic, ’s an Spioraid Naoimk! ”

And to this day the song of the Birds of Colum, as they are called in Hy, is Sith — Sith — Sith — an — ainm— Chríosa— “ Peace — Peace — Peace — in the name of Christ!”

The Sabbath of the Fishes and the Flies

For three days Colum had fasted, save for a mouthful of meal at dawn, a piece of ryebread at noon, and a mouthful of dulse and spring-water at sundown. On the night of the third day, Oran and Keir came to him in his cell. Colum was on his knees, lost in prayer. There was no sound there, save the faint whispered muttering of his lips, and on the plastered wall the weary buzzing of a fly.

“Master!” said Oran in a low voice, soft with pity and awe, “ Master!”

But Colum took no notice. His lips still moved, and the tangled hairs below his nether lip shivered with his failing breath.

“ Father!” said Keir, tender as a woman, “ Father!” Colum did not turn his eyes from the wall. The fly droned his drowsy hum upon the rough plaster. It crawled wearily for a space, then stopped. The slow hot drone filled the cell.

“Master,” said Oran, “ it is the will of the brethren that you break your fast. You are old, and God has your glory. Give us peace.”

“Father,” urged Keir, seeing that Colum kneeled unnoticingly, his lips still moving above his black beard, with the white hair of him falling about his head like a snowdrift slipping from a boulder. “ Father, be pitiful! We hunger and thirst for your presence. We can fast no longer, yet have we no heart to break our fast if you are not with us. Come, holy one, and be of our company, and eat of the good broiled fish that awaiteth us. We perish for the benediction of thine eyes.”

Then it was that Colum rose, and walked slowly towards the wall.

“Little black beast,” he said to the fly that droned its drowsy hum and moved not at all ; “ little black beast, sure it is well I am knowing what you are. You are thinking you are going to get my blessing, you that have come out of hell for the soul of me!”

At that the fly flew heavily from the wall, and slowly circled round and round the head of Colum the White.

“What think you of that, brother Oran, brother Keir?” he asked in a low voice, hoarse because of his long fast and the weariness that was upon him.

“It is a fiend,” said Oran.

“It is an angel,” said Keir.

Thereupon the fly settled upon the wall again, and again droned his drowsy hot hum.

“Little black beast,” said Colum, with the frown coming down into his eyes, “is it for peace you are here, or for sin? Answer, I conjure you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost!”

“ An ainm an Athar, ’s an mhic, ’s an Spioraid Naoimh,” repeated Oran below his breath.

“ An ainm an Athar, 's an mhic, ’s an Spioraid Naoimh', ' repeated Keir below his breath.

Then the fly that was upon the wall flew up to the roof and circled to and fro. And it sang a beautiful song, and its song was this:

I

Praise be to God, and a blessing too at that, and a blessing!
For Colum the White, Colum the Dove, hath worshipped;
Yea, he hath worshipped and made of a desert a garden,
And out of the dung of men’s souls hath made a sweet savour of burning.

II

A savour of burning, most sweet, a fire for the altar,
This he hath made in the desert; the hell-saved all gladden.
Sure he hath put his benison, too, on milch-cow and bullock.,
On the fowls of the air, and the man-eyed seals, and the otter.

III

But where in his Dun in the great blue mainland of Heaven
God the All-Father broodeth, where the harpers are harping his glory;
There where He sitteth, where a river of ale poureth ever,
His great sword broken, His spear in the dust, He broodeth.

IV

And this is the thought th at moves in his brain, as a cloud filled with thunder
Moves through the vast hollow sky filled with the dust of the stars :
What boots it the glory of Colum, since he maketh a Sabbath to bless me,
And hath no thought of my sons in the deeps of the air and the sea?

And with that the fly passed from their vision. In the cell was a most wondrous sweet song, like the sound of far-off pipes over water.

Oran said in a low voice of awe, “ O our God ! ”

Keir whispered, white with fear, “ O God, my God! ”

But Colum rose, and took a scourge from where it hung on the wall.

“It shall be for peace, Oran,” he said, with a grim smile flitting like a bird above the nest of his black beard ; “ it shall be for peace, Keir!”

And with that he laid the scourge heavily upon the bent backs of Keir and Oran, nor stayed his hand, nor let his three days' fast weaken the deep piety that was in the might of his arm, and because of the glory to God.

Then, when he was weary, peace came into his heart, and he sighed "Amen !"

"Amen !" said Oran the monk.

"Amen! " said Keir the monk.

"And this thing hath been done," said Colum, " because of the evil wish of you and the brethren, that I should break my fast, and eat of fish, till God willeth it. And lo, I have learned a mystery. Ye shall all witness to it on the morrow, which is the Sabbath."

That night the monks wondered much. Only Oran and Keir cursed the fishes in the deeps of the sea and the flies in the deeps of the air.

On the morrow, when the sun was yellow on the brown sea-weed, and there was peace on the isle and upon the waters, Colum and the brotherhood went slowly towards the sea. At the meadows that are close to the sea, the Saint stood still. All bowed their heads.

"O winged things of the air," cried Colum, "draw near!"

With that the air was full of the hum of innumerable flies, midges, bees, wasps, moths, and all winged insects. These settled upon the monks, who moved not, but praised God in silence.

"Glory and praise to God," cried Colum, " behold the Sabbath of the children of God that inhabit the deeps of the air! Blessing and peace be upon them."

"Peace ! Peace! " cried the monks, with one voice.

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost!" cried Colum the White, glad because of the glory to God.

"An ainm an Athar, 's an mhic, 's an Spioraid Naoimh," cried the monks, bowing reverently, and Oran and Keir deepest of all, because they saw the fly that was of Colum's cell leading the whole host, as though it were their captain, and singing to them a marvellous sweet song.

Oran and Keir testified to this thing, and all were full of awe and wonder, and Colum praised God.

Then the Saints and the brotherhood moved onward and went upon the rocks. When all stood ankle-

deep in the sea-weed that was swaying in the tide, Colum cried : “ O finny creatures of the deep, draw near! ”

And with that the whole sea shimmered as with silver and gold. All the fishes of the sea, and the great eels, and the lobsters and the crabs, came in a swift and terrible procession. Great was the glory.

Then Colum cried, “ O fishes o f the Deep, who is your kin g ?” Whereupon the herring, the mackerel, and the dog-fish swam forward, and each claimed to be king.

But the echo that ran from wave to wave said, The Herring is King.

Then Colum said to the mackerel: “ Sing the song that is upon you! ”

And the mackerel sang the song of the wild rovers of the sea, and the lust of pleasure.

Then Colum said, “But for God’s mercy, I would curse you, O false fish.”

Then he spake likewise to the dog-fish : and the dog-fish sang of slaughter and he chase, and the joy of blood.

And Colum said: “Hell shall be your portion.”

And there was peace. And the Herring said : “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost!”

W hereat all that mighty multitude, ere they sank into the deep, waved their fins and their claws, each after his kind, and repeated as with one voice : “ A n ainm an Athar, 's an mhic, 's an Spioraid Naoimh! ”

And the glory that was upon the Sound of Iona was as though God trailed a starry net upon the waters, with a shining star in every little hollow, and a flowing moon of gold on every wave. Then Colum the White put out both his arms, and blessed the children of God that are in the deeps of the sea and that are in the deeps of the air.

That is how Sabbath came upon all living things upon Hy that is called Iona, and within the air above Hy, and within the sea that is around Hy.

And the glory is Colum’s.

The Moon Child

A year and a day before God bade Colum arise to the Feast of Eternity, Pòl the Freckled, the youngest of the brethren, came to him, on a night of the nights.

“The moon is among the stars, O Colum. By his own will, and yours, old Murtagh that is this day with God, is to be laid in the deep dry sand at the east end of the isle.”

So the holy Saint rose from his bed of weariness, and went and blessed the place that Murtagh lay in, and bade neither the creeping worm nor any other creature to touch the sacred dead. “Let God only,” he said, “let God alone strip that which he made to grow.”

But on his way back sleep passed from him. The sweet salt smell of the sea was in his nostrils: he heard the running of a wave in all his blood.

At the cells he turned, and bade the brethren go in. “Peace be with you,” he sighed wearily.

Then he moved downwards towards the sea.

A great tenderness of late was upon Colum the Bishop. Ever since he had blessed the fishes and the flies, the least of the children of God, his soul had glowed in a whiter flame. There were deep seas of compassion in his grey-blue eyes. One night he had waked, because God was there.

“O Christ,” he cried, bowing low his old grey head. “Sure, ah sure, the gladness and the joy, because of the hour of the hours.”

But God said: “Not so, Colum, who keepest me upon the Cross. It is Murtagh, Murtagh the Druid that was, whose soul I am taking to the glory.”

With that Colum rose in awe and great grief. There was no light in his cell. In the deep darkness, his spirit quailed. But lo, the beauty of his heart wrought a soft gleam about him, and in that moonshine of good deeds he rose and made his way to where Murtagh slept.

The old monk slept indeed. It was a sweet breath he drew—he, young and fair now, and laughing with peace under the apples in Paradise.

“O Murtagh,” Colum cried, “and thee I thought the least of the brethren, because that thou wast a Druid, and loved not to see thy pagan kindred put to the sword if they would not repent. But, true, in my years I am becoming as a boy who learns, knowing nothing. God wash the sin of pride out of my life!”

At that a soft white shining, as of one winged and beautiful, stood beside the dead.

“Art thou Murtagh?” whispered Colum, in deep awe.

“No, I am not Murtagh,” came as the breath of vanishing song.

“What art thou?”

“I am Peace,” said the glory.

Thereupon Colum sank to his knees, sobbing with joy, for the sorrow that had been and was no more.

“Tell me, O White Peace,” he murmured, “can Murtagh hearken, there under the apples where God is?”

“God’s love is a wind that blows hitherward and hence. Speak, and thou shalt hear.”

Colum spake. “O Murtagh my brother, tell me in what way it is that I still keep God crucified upon the Cross.”

There was a sound in the cell as of the morning-laughter of children, of the singing of birds, of the sunlight streaming through the blue fields of Heaven.

Then Murtagh’s voice came out of Paradise, sweet with the sweetness: honey-sweet it was, and clothed with deep awe because of the glory.

“Colum, servant of Christ, arise!”

Colum rose, and was as a leaf there, a leaf that is in the wind.

“Colum, thine hour is not yet come. I see it, bathing in the white light which is the Pool of Eternal Life, that is in the abyss where deep-rooted are the Gates of Heaven.”

“And my sin, O Murtagh, my sin?”

“God is weary because thou hast not repented.”

“O my God and my God! Sure, Murtagh, if that is so, it is so, but it is not for knowledge to me. Sure, O God, it is a blessing I have put on man and woman, on beast and bird and fish, on creeping things and flying things, on the green grass and the brown earth and the flowing wave, on the wind that cometh and goeth, and on the mystery of the flame! Sure, O God, I have sorrowed for all my sins: there is not one I have not fasted and prayed for. Sorrow upon me!—Is it accursed I am, or what is the evil that holdeth me by the hand?”

Then Murtagh, calling through sweet dreams and the rainbow-rain of happy tears that make that place so wondrous and so fair, spake once more:

“O Colum, blind art thou. Hast thou yet repented because after that thou didst capture the great black seal, that is a man under spells, thou, with thy monks, didst crucify him upon the great rock at the place where, long ago, thy coracle came ashore?”

“O Murtagh, favoured of God, will you not be explaining to Him that is King of the Elements, that this was because the seal who was called Black Angus wrought evil upon a mortal woman, and that of the sea-seed was sprung one who had no soul?”

But no answer came to that, and when Colum looked about him, behold there was no soft shining, but only the body of Murtagh the old monk. With a heavy heart, and his soul like a sinking boat in a sea of pain, he turned and went out into the night.

A fine, wonderful night it was. The moon lay low above the sea, and all the flowing gold and flashing silver of the rippling running water seemed to be a flood going that way and falling into the shining hollow splendour.

Through the sea-weed the old Saint moved, weary and sad. When he came to a sandy place he stopped. There, on a rock, he saw a little child. Naked she was, though clad with soft white moonlight. In her hair were brown weeds of the sea, gleaming golden because of the glow. In her hands was a great shell, and at that shell was her mouth. And she was singing this song; passing sweet to hear it was, with the sea-music that was in it:

A little lonely child am I
That have not any soul:
God made me but a homeless wave,
Without a goal.

A seal my father was, a seal
That once was man:
My mother loved him tho' he was
'Neath mortal ban.

He took a wave and drownèd her,
She took a wave and lifted him:
And I was born where shadows are
I' the sea-depths dim.

All through the sunny blue-sweet hours
I swim and glide in waters green;
Never by day the mournful shores
By me are seen.

But when the gloom is on the wave
A shell unto the shore I bring:
And then upon the rocks I sit
And plaintive sing.

O what is this wild song I sing,
With meanings strange and dim?
No soul am I, a wave am I,
And sing the Moon-Child's hymn.

Softly Colum drew nigh.

“Peace,” he said. “Peace, little one. Ah tender little heart, peace!”

The child looked at him with wide sea-dusky eyes.

“Is it Colum the Holy you will be?”

“No, my fawn, my white dear babe: it is not Colum the Holy I am, but Colum the poor fool that knew not God!”

“Is it you, O Colum, that put the sorrow on my mother, who is the Sea-woman that lives in the whirlpool over there?”

“Ay, God forgive me!”

“Is it you, O Colum, that crucified the seal that was my father: him that was a man once, and that was called Black Angus?”

“Ay, God forgive me!”

“Is it you, O Colum, that bade the children of Hy run away from me, because I was a moon-child, and might win them by the sea-spell into the green wave?”

“Ay, God forgive me!”

“Sure, dear Colum, it was to the glory of God, it was?”

“Ay, He knoweth it, and can hear it, too, from Murtagh, who died this night.”

“Look!”

And at that Colum looked, and in a moon-gold wave he saw Black Angus, the seal-man, drifting dark, and the eyes in his round head were the eyes of love. And beside the man-seal swam a woman fair to see, and she looked at him with joy, and with joy at the Moon-Child that was her own, and at Colum with joy.

Thereupon Colum fell upon his knees and cried—

“Give me thy sorrow, wild woman of the sea!”

“Peace to you, Colum,” she answered, and sank into the shadow-thridden wave.

“Give my thy death and crucifixion, O Angus-dhu!” cried the Saint, shaking with the sorrow.

“Peace to you, Colum,” answered the man-seal, and sank into the dusky quietudes of the deep.

“Ah, bitter heart o’ me! Teach me the way to God, O little child,” cried Colum the old, turning to where the Moon-Child was!

But lo, the glory and the wonder!

It was a little naked child that looked at him with healing eyes, but there were no sea-weeds in her hair, and no shell in the little wee hands of her. For now, it was a male Child that was there, shining with a light from within: and in his fair sunny hair was a shadowy crown of thorns, and in his hand was a pearl of great price.

“O Christ, my God,” said Colum, with failing voice.

“It is thine now, O Colum,” said the Moon-Child, holding out to him the shining pearl of great price.

“What is it, O Lord my God?” whispered the old servant of God that was now glad with the gladness:
“what is this, thy boon?”

“Perfect Peace.”

*And that is all.
(To God be the Glory. Amen.)*