

The Washer of the Ford

By Fiona Macleod

. . . . We are woven in one loom, and the Weaver thrids our being with the sweet influences, not only of the Pleides, but of the living world of which each is no more than a multi-coloured thread: as, in turn, He thrids the wandering wind with the inarticulate cry, the yearning, the passion, the pain, of that bitter clan, the Human.

‘Truly we are all one. It is a common tongue we speak, though the wave has its own whisper, and the wind its own sigh, and the lip of man its word, and the heart of woman its silence.’

F.M.

(From the Prologue to *The Washer of the Ford*)

When Torcall the Harper heard of the death of his friend, Aodh-of-the-Songs, he made a vow to mourn for him for three seasons—a green time, an apple time, and a snow time.

There was sorrow upon him because of that death. True, Aodh was not of his kindred, but the singer had saved the harper’s life when his friend was fallen in the Field of Spears.

Torcall was of the people of the north—of the men of Lochlin. His song was of the fjords and of strange gods, of the sword and the war-galley, of the red blood and the white breast, of Odin and Thor and Freya, of Balder and the Dream-God that sits in the rainbow, of the starry North, of the flames of pale blue and flushing rose that play around the Pole, of sudden death in baffle, and of Valhalla.

Aodh was of the south isles, where these shake under the thunder of the western seas. His clan was of the isle that is now called Barra, and was then Aoidû; but his mother was a woman out of a royal rath in Banba, as men of old called Eiré or Eireann. She was so fair that a man died of his desire of her. He was named Ulad, and was a prince. ‘The Melancholy of Ulad’ was long sung in his land after his end in the dark swamp, where he heard a singing, and went laughing glad to his death. Another man was made a prince because of her. This was Aodh the Harper, out of the Hebrid Isles. He won the heart out of her, and it was his from the day she heard his music and felt his eyes flame upon her. Before the child was born, she said, ‘He shall be the son of love. He shall be called Aodh. He shall be called Aodh-of-the-Songs.’ And so it was.

Sweet were his songs. He loved, and he sang, and he died.

And when Torcall that was his friend knew this sorrow, he rose and made his vow, and went out for evermore from the place where he was.

Since the hour of the Field of Spears he had been blind. Torcall Dall he was upon men’s lips thereafter. His harp had a moonshine wind upon it from that day, it was said: a beautiful strange harping when he went down through the glen, or out upon the sandy machar by the shore, and played what the wind sang, and the grass whispered, and the tree murmured, and the sea muttered or cried hollowly in the dark.

Because there was no sight to his eyes, men said he saw and he heard. What was it he heard and he saw that they saw not and heard not? It was in the voice that sighed in the strings of his harp, so the saying was.

When he rose and went away from his place, the Maormor asked him if he went north, as the blood sang; or south, as the heart cried; or west, as the dead go; or east, as the light comes.

‘I go east,’ answered Torcall Dall.

‘And why so, Blind Harper?’

‘For there is darkness always upon me, and I go where the light comes.’

On that night of the nights, a fair wind blowing out of the west, Torcall the Harper set forth in a galley. It splashed in the moonshine as it was rowed swifflly by nine men.

‘Sing us a song, O Torcall Dall!’ they cried.

‘Sing us a song, Torcall of Lochlin,’ said the man who steered. He and all his company were of the Gael: the Harper only was of the Northmen.

‘What shall I sing?’ he asked. ‘Shall it be of war that you love, or of women that twine you like silk o’ the kine; or shall it be of death that is your meed; or of your dread, the Spears of the North?’

A low sullen growl went from beard to beard.

‘We are under ceangal, Blind Harper,’ said the steersman, with downcast eyes because of his flaming wrath; ‘we are under bond to take you safe to the mainland, but we have sworn no vow to sit still under the lash of your tongue. ‘Twas a wind-fleet arrow that sliced the sight out of your eyes: have a care lest a sudden sword-wind sweep the breath out of your body.’

Torcall laughed a low, quiet laugh.

‘Is it death I am fearing now—I who have washed my hands in blood, and had love, and known all that is given to man? But I will sing you a song, I will.’

And with that he took his harp, and struck the strings.

There is a lonely stream afar in a lone dim land:
It hath white dust for shore it has, white bones bestrew the strand:
The only thing that liveth there is a naked leaping sword;
But I, who a seer am, have seen the whirling hand
Of the Washer of the Ford.

A shadowy shape of cloud and mist, of gloom and dusk, she stands,
The Washer of the Ford:
She laughs, at times, and strews the dust through the hollow of her hands.
She counts the sins of all men there, and slays the red-stained horde—
The ghosts of all the sins of men must know the whirling sword
Of the Washer of the Ford.

She stoops and laughs when in the dust she sees a writhing limb:
‘Go back into the ford,’ she says, ‘and hither and thither swim;
Then I shall wash you white as snow, and shall take you by the hand,
And slay you here in the silence with this my whirling brand,
And trample you into the dust of this white windless sand’—
This is the laughing word
Of the Washer of the Ford
Along that silent strand.

There was silence for a time after Torcall Dall sang that song. The oars took up the moonshine and flung it hither and thither like loose shining crystals. The foam at the prow curled and leaped.

Suddenly one of the rowers broke into along, low chant—

Yo, eily-a-ho, ayah-a-ho, eily-ayah-a-ho,
Singeth the Sword
Eily-a-ho, ayah-a-ho, eily-ayah-a-ho,
Of the Washer of the Ford!

And at that all ceased from rowing. Standing erect, they lifted up their oars against the stars, and the wild voices of them flew out upon the night—

Yo, eily-a-ho, ayah-a-ho, eily-ayah-a-ho,
Singeth the Sword
Eily-a-ho, ayah-a-ho, eily-ayah-a-ho,
Of the Washer of the Ford!

Torcall Dall laughed. Then he drew his sword from his side and plunged it into the sea. When he drew the blade out of the water and whirled it on high, all the white shining drops of it swirled about his head like a sleety rain.

And at that the steersman let go the steering-oar and drew his sword, and clove a flowing wave. But with the might of his blow the sword spun him round, and the sword sliced away the ear of the man who had the sternmost oar. Then there was blood in the eyes of all there. The man staggered, and felt for his knife, and it was in the heart of the steersman.

Then because these two men were leaders, and had had a blood-feud, and because all there, save Torcall, were of one or the other side, swords and knives sang a song.

The rowers dropped their oars; and four men fought against three. Torcall laughed, and lay back in his place. While out of the wandering wave the death of each man clambered into the hollow of the boat, and breathed its chill upon its man, Torcall the Blind took his harp. He sang this song, with the swirling spray against his face, and the smell of blood in his nostrils, and the feet of him dabbling in the red tide that rose there.

Oh 'tis a good thing the red blood, by Odin his word!
And a good thing it is to hear it bubbling deep.
And when we hear the laughter of the Sword,
Oh, the corbies croak, and the old wail, and the women weep!
And busy will she be there where she stands,
Washing the red out of the sins of all this slaying horde;
And trampling the bones of them into white powdery sands,
And laughing low at the thirst of her thirsty sword—
The Washer of the Ford!

When he had sung that song there was only one man whose pulse still beat, and he was at the bow.

'A bitter black curse upon you, Torcall Dall!' he groaned out of the ooze of blood that was in his mouth.

'And who will you be?' said the Blind Harper.

'I am Fergus, the son of Art, the son of Fergus of the Dûns.'

‘Well, it is a song for your death I will make, Fergus mac Art mhic Fheargus: and because you are the last.’

With that Torcall struck a wild sob out of his harp, and he sang—

Oh, death of Fergus, that is lying in the boat here,
Betwixt the man of the red hair and him of the black beard,
Rise now, and out of thy cold white eyes take out the fear,
And let Fergus mac Art mhic Fheargus see his weird!

Sure, now, it’s a blind man I am, but I’m thinking I see
The shadow of you crawling across the dead.
Soon you will twine your arm around his shaking knee,
And be whispering your silence into his listless head.

And that is why, O Fergus—But here the man hurled his sword into the sea, and with a choking cry fell forward; and upon the white sands he was, beneath the trampling feet of the Washer of the Ford.

II

It was a fair wind that blew beneath the stars that night. At dawn the mountains of Skye were like turrets of a great Dun against the east.

But Torcall the blind Harper did not see that thing. Sleep, too, was upon him. He smiled in that sleep, for in his mind he saw the dead men, that were of the alien people, his foes, draw near the stream that was in a far place. The shaking of them, poor tremulous frostbit leaves they were, thin and sere, made the only breath there was in that desert.

At the ford—this is what he saw in his vision—they fell down like stricken deer with the hounds upon them.

‘What is this stream?’ they cried in the thin voice of rain across the moors.

‘The River of Blood,’ said a voice.

‘And who are you that are in the silence?’

‘I am the Washer of the Ford.’

And with that each red soul was seized and thrown into the water of the ford; and when white as a sheep-bone on the hill, was taken in one hand by the Washer of the Ford and flung into the air, where no wind was and where sound was dead, and was then severed this way and that, in four whirling blows of the sword from the four quarters of the world. Then it was that the Washer of the Ford trampled upon what fell to the ground, till under the feet of her was only a white sand, white as powder, light as the dust of the yellow flowers that grow in the grass.

It was at that Torcall Dall smiled in his sleep. He did not hear the washing of the sea; no, nor any idle plashing of the unoared boat. Then he dreamed, and it was of the woman he had left, seven summer-sailings ago in Lochlin. He thought her hand was in his, and that her heart was against his.

‘Ah, dear beautiful heart of woman,’ he said, ‘and what is the pain that has put a shadow upon you?’

It was a sweet voice that he heard coming out of sleep.

‘Torcall, it is the weary love I have.’

'Ah, heart o' me, dear! sure 'tis a bitter pain I have had too, and I away from you all these years.'

'There's a man's pain, and there's a woman's pain.'

'By the blood of Balder, Hildyr, I would have both upon me to take it off the dear heart that is here.'

'Torcall!'

'Yes, white one.'

'We are not alone, we two in the dark.'

And when she had said that thing, Torcall felt two baby arms go round his neck, and two leaves of a wild-rose press cool and sweet against his lips.

'Ah! what is this?' he cried, with his heart beating, and the blood in his body singing a glad song.

A low voice crooned in his ear: a bitter-sweet song it was, passing-sweet, passing-bitter.

'Alt, white one, white one,' he moaned; 'ah, the wee fawn o' me! Baby o' foam, bonnie wee lass, put your sight upon me that I may see the blue eyes that are mine too and Hildyr's.'

But the child only nestled closer. Like a fledgling in a great nest she was. If God heard her song, He was a glad God that day. The blood that was in her body called to the blood that was in his body. He could say no word. The tears were in his blind eyes.

Then Hildyr leaned into the dark, and took his harp, and played upon it. It was of the fonnnsheen he had learned, far, far away, where the isles are.

She sang: but he could not hear what she sang.

Then the little lips, that were like a cool wave upon the dry sand of his life, whispered into a low song: and the wavering of it was like this in his brain—

Where the winds gather
The souls of the dead,
O Torcall, my father,
My soul is led!

In Hildyr-mead
I was thrown, I was sown:
Out of thy seed
I am sprung, I am blown!

But where is the way
For Hildyr and me,
By the hill-moss grey
Or the grey sea?

For a river is here,
And a whirling Sword—
And a Woman washing
By a Ford!

With that, Torcall Dall gave a wild cry, and sheathed an arm about the wee white one, and put out a hand to the bosom that loved him. But there was no white breast there, and no white babe: and what was against his lips was his own hand red with blood.

‘O Hildyr!’ he cried.

But only the splashing of the waves did he hear.

‘O white one!’ he cried.

But only the scream of a sea-mew, as it hovered over that boat filled with dead men, made answer.

III

All day the Blind Harper steered the galley of the dead. There was a faint wind moving out of the west. The boat went before it, slow, and with a low, sighing wash.

Torcall saw the red gaping wounds of the dead, and the glassy eyes of the nine men.

‘It is better not to be blind and to see the dead,’ he muttered, ‘than to be blind and to see the dead.’

The man who had been steersman leaned against him. He took him in his shuddering grip and thrust him into the sea.

But when, an hour later, he put his hand to the coolness of the water, he drew it back with a cry, for it was on the cold, stiff face of the dead man that it had fallen. The long hair had caught in a cleft in the leather where the withes had given.

For another hour Torcall sat with his chin in his right hand, and his unseeing eyes staring upon the dead. He heard no sound at all, save the lap of wave upon wave, and the suss of spray against spray, and a bubbling beneath the boat, and the low, steady swish of the body that trailed alongside the steering oar.

At the second hour before sundown he lifted his head. The sound he heard was the sound of waves beating upon rocks.

At the hour before sundown he moved the oar rapidly to and fro, and cut away the body that trailed behind the boat. The noise of the waves upon the rocks was now a loud song.

When the last sunfire burned upon his neck, and made the long hair upon his shoulders ashine, he smelt the green smell of grass. Then it was too that he heard the muffled fall of the sea, in a quiet haven, where shelves of sand were.

He followed that sound, and while he strained to hear any voice the boat grided upon the sand, and drifted to one side. Taking his harp, Torcall drove an oar into the sand, and leaped on to the shore. When he was there, he listened. There was silence. Far, far away he heard the falling of a mountain-torrent, and the thin, faint cry of an eagle, where the sun-flame dyed its eyrie as with streaming blood.

So he lifted his harp, and, harping low, with a strange, wild song on his lips, moved away from that place, and gave no more thought to the dead.

It was deep gloaming when he came to a wood. He felt the cold green breath of it.

‘Come,’ said a voice, low and sweet.

‘And who will *you* be?’ asked Torcall the Harper, trembling because of the sudden voice in the stillness.

‘I am a child, and here is my hand, and I will lead you, Torcall of Lochlin.’

The blind man had fear upon him.

‘Who are you that in a strange place are for knowing who I am?’

‘Come.’

‘Ay, sure, it is coming I am, white one; but tell me who you are, and whence you came, and whither we go.’

Then a voice that he knew sang:

O where the winds gather
The souls of the dead,
O Torcall, my father,
My soul is led!

But a river is here,
And a whirling Sword—
And a Woman washing
By a Ford!

Torcall Dall was as the last leaf on a tree at that.

‘Were you on the boat?’ he whispered hoarsely.

But it seemed to him that another voice answered: ‘Yea, even so.’

‘Tell me, for I have blindness: Is it peace?’

‘It is peace.’

‘Are you man, or child, or of the Hidden People?’

‘I am a shepherd.’

‘A shepherd? Then, sure, you will guide me through this wood? And what will be beyond this wood?’

‘A river.’

‘And what river will that be?’

‘Deep and terrible. It runs through the Valley of the Shadow.’

‘And is there no ford there?’

‘Ay, there is a ford.’

‘And who will guide me across that ford?’

‘She.’

‘Who?’

‘The Washer of the Ford.’

But hereat Torcall Dall gave a sore cry and snatched his hand away, and fled sidelong into an alley of the wood.

It was moonshine when he lay down, weary. The sound of flowing water filled his ears.

‘Come,’ said a voice.

So he rose and went. When the cold breath of the water was upon his face, the guide that led him put a fruit into his hand.

‘Eat, Torcall Dall!’

He ate. He was no more Torcall Dall. His sight was upon him again. Out of the blackness shadows came; out of the shadows, the great boughs of trees; from the boughs, dark branches and dark clusters of leaves; above the branches, white stars; below the branches, white flowers; and beyond these, the moonshine on the grass and the moonfire on the flowing of a river dark and deep.

‘Take your harp, O Harper, and sing the song of what you see.’

Torcall heard the voice, but saw no one. No shadow moved. Then he walked out upon the moonlit grass; and at the ford he saw a woman stooping and washing shroud after shroud of woven moonbeams: washing them there in the flowing water, and singing low a song that he did not hear. He did not see her face. But she was young, and with long black hair that fell like the shadow of night over a white rock.

So Torcall took his harp, and he sang:

Glory to the great Gods, it is no Sword I am seeing;
Nor do I see aught but the flowing of a river.
And I see shadows on the flow that are ever fleeing,
And I see a woman washing shrouds for ever and ever.

Then he ceased, for he heard the woman sing:

Glory to God on high, and to Mary, Mother of Jesus,
Here am I washing away the sins of the shriven,
O Torcall of Lochlin, throw off the red sins that ye cherish
And I will be giving you the washen shroud that they wear in Heaven.

Filled with a great awe, Torcall bowed his head. Then once more he took his harp, and he sang:

O well it is I am seeing, Woman of the Shrouds,
That you have not for me any whirling of the Sword;
I have lost my gods, O woman, so what will the name be
Of thee and thy gods, O woman that art Washer of the Ford?

But the woman did not look up from the dark water, nor did she cease from washing the shrouds made of the woven moonbeams. The Harper heard this song above the sighing of the water:

It is Mary Magdalene my name is, and I loved Christ.
And Christ is the Son of God, and Mary the Mother of Heaven.
And this river is the river of death, and the shadows
Are the fleeing souls that are lost if they be not shriven.

Then Torcall drew nigher unto the stream. A melancholy wind was upon it.

‘Where are all the dead of the world?’ he said.

But the woman answered not.

‘And what is the end, you that are called Mary?’

Then the woman rose.

‘Would you cross the Ford, O Torcall the Harper?’

He made no word upon that. But he listened. He heard a woman singing faint and low, far away in the dark. He drew more near.

‘Would you cross the Ford, O Torcall?’

He made no word upon that; but once more he listened. He heard a little child crying in the night.

‘Ah, lonely heart of the white one,’ he sighed, and his tears fell.

Mary Magdalene turned and looked upon him.

It was the face of Sorrow she had. She stooped and took up the tears.

‘They are bells of joy,’ she said. And he heard a faint, sweet ringing in his ears.

A prayer came out of his heart. A blind prayer it was, but God gave it wings. It flew to Mary, who took and kissed it, and gave it song.

‘It is the Song of Peace,’ she said. And Torcall had peace.

‘What is best, O Torcall?’ she asked,—rustling-sweet as rain among the trees her voice was.

‘What is best? The sword, or peace?’

‘Peace,’ he answered; and he was white now, and was old. ‘Take your harp,’ Mary said, ‘and go in unto the Ford. But, lo, now I clothe you with a white shroud. And if you fear the drowning flood, follow the bells that were your tears; and if the dark affright you, follow the song of the prayer that came out of your heart.’

So Torcall the Harper moved into the whelming flood, and he played a wild, strange air like the laughing of a child.

Deep silence there was. The moonshine lay upon the obscure wood, and the darkling river flowed sighing through the soundless gloom.

The Washer of the Ford stooped once more. Low and sweet, as of yore and for ever, over the drowning souls she sang her immemorial song.