The Battle of the Birds (2)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

"NOW," says the *famhair*, "there's a pine tree beside that loch down there with a magpie's nest at the top. The eggs you'll find in the nest, I want them for my breakfast (*gu mo cheud-longaidh*). None must be cracked (*sgàinte*) or broken, and there's five in the nest."

This is the last of three tasks that the hero of "Cath nan Eun" ("the Battle of the Birds") must perform to win the *famhair*'s youngest daughter. *Famhairean* are big men who live in the countryside, dodgy-sounding characters whose families intermarry with fairies and often practise witchcraft, especially the women. It was the girl who accomplished the first two tasks for the hero – mucking out the byre and thatching it with feathers of many colours – by working her magic.

You'll recall that I'm retelling the story to bring out its humour, colour, sensuality and visuality. Just don't expect many birds, as we've left them behind. The subject is really "The Power of Love", but Gaelic stories don't have names like that.

The tree turns out to be five hundred feet high, and that's only as far as the first branch. When the girl turns up to see how her hero's getting on, he's walking round it and she remarks: "You've lost the skin of your hands and feet, *a mhic an rìgh*."

"Ach yes," he says, "I'm no sooner up than I'm down. *Cha luaithe shuas na shìos mi*."

Chan àm fuireachd seo, says she. "This is no time to be hanging about." And what she does is this. *Shàth i meur an déidh meur gus an d'rinn i fàradh do mhac an rìgh gu dol suas do nead na pioghaid*. "She thrust in finger after finger till she'd made a ladder for the king's son to go up to the magpie's nest."

Now ladders in Highland homes used to be of the simplest possible kind – a single birch trunk, as straight as possible, with pegs thrust through it where there were no natural stumps. She climbs it behind the hero, reaching up with one hand to thrust her fingers through the trunk for him, while reaching down with the other to provide the pegs she was standing on herself. She must have been a big girl with sharp fingernails.

They have to be quick, for, as she puts it, *Tha anail m' athar a' losgadh mo dhroma*. "My dad's breath is burning my back."

He gets the eggs, but in the rush she leaves her *lùdag* (pinkie) in the top of the tree. Before parting she explains that he can marry her tonight provided he recognises her – her father will have her dressed and made up to look the same as her two sisters, but of course she'll be the one with the missing pinkie. Sure enough the wedding guests start arriving, *famhairean* and gentlemen and her suitor, the Prince of the Green City, whom she loathes. There's dancing, and what dancing! The house shakes. Then the *famhair* makes a speech, gesturing towards his identical daughters: "It's time for you to go to bed, *a mhic rìgh na Cathair Shìomain* – take your wife from amongst those."

A pinkieless hand emerges, and the hero takes it. "Your aim's been good this time too," says the *famhair*, "but who knows we won't counter you some other way."

We're allowed to assume that the marriage is consummated, for next thing we know she's whispering fiercely: *A-nis, cadal cha dèan thù* . . . "Now, don't fall sleep or you'll die. We must flee, or my dad will certainly kill you."

They leap on the *loth dhonn* in the stable. To me this is a brown filly, but Campbell's translation in "Popular Tales of the West Highlands" makes her a blue-grey. Never mind. Before they gallop off, as in all good movies the girl has a trick up her sleeve. She cuts an apple in nine pieces and leaves them in a trail from the marriage-bed, presumably pointing in the wrong direction. Her father wakes up and calls, "Are you two asleep?"

Chan eil fhathast, replies the apple at the head of the bed. "Not yet."

After a bit he calls again. *Chan eil fhathast*, replies the apple at the foot of the bed.

After a bit he calls again. *Chan eil fhathast*, replies the apple at the door of the *cadha* (passageway).

After a bit he calls again. *Chan eil fhathast*, replies the apple at the front door.

"You're getting further away," calls the *famhair*.

Chan eil fhathast, replies the apple outside the door.

"You're escaping!" cries the *famhair*, leaping out of bed, and so the chase begins. By daybreak the girl says her father's breath is burning her back. "Put your hand in the *loth dhonn*'s ear and whatever you find there, throw it behind you."

We're now treated to three exciting set-pieces. In the first, what comes out of the filly's ear is a hawthorn prickle (*bior de sgitheach*). When the hero throws it, it becomes twenty miles of hawthorn so thick that a weasel (*neas*) couldn't get through it. The *famhair* has to go home for his axe and forest knife (*corc choille*) to hack his way through. When this is done he says he'll leave (*fàg*) the tools there, but in Gaelic stories that word is a cue for a crow to appear (don't all crows say *fàg*, *fàg*?) and this one points out: *Ma dh'fhàgas, goididh sinne iad*. "If you leave them, we'll steal them."

So he brings them home before renewing the chase, but in the heat of the day his daughter feels his breath burning her back again. This time what comes out of the *loth dhonn*'s ear is a splinter of grey stone which becomes a big grey rock twenty miles wide and twenty miles high. To get through this the *famhair* has to fetch his crowbar (*geamhlag*) and pickaxe (*matag*), but when he's finished he lets the crow do his worst, and at daybreak (*bristeadh na fàire*) the girl again feels his breath burning her back.

What comes out of the *loth dhonn*'s ear the third time is a bladderful of water which becomes a loch twenty miles long and twenty miles wide. The *famhair* is moving so fast that he's in the middle of it before he can stop, and he drowns.

As they sit beside a well with their backs to an oak-tree, the *famhair*'s daughter tells our hero to go home and tell his people that he's married, but to make sure he's not kissed, otherwise he'll forget about her. That goes fine, except that an old greyhound bitch (*seann mhial-chù de ghalla*) bounds up to lick his face, and he forgets about her. She sits and sits beside the well, and no one comes, so in the evening she climbs into the tree and falls asleep.

At noon next day a shoemaker's wife comes to the well for water, and a wonderful piece of visuality ensues. Seeing the reflection of the *famhair*'s beautiful daughter looking down from the tree, she thinks it's herself. She throws down her bucket, storms back home and declares: *A bhodaich leibidich shuaraich gun mhaise, dh'fhan mi tuillidh 's fada 'nam thràill uisge 's connaidh agad*. "You clumsy worthless ugly old peasant, I've stayed too long as your fuel and water slave."

Taken aback, the shoemaker asks his daughter to fetch the water instead. The same thing happens, and her language is equally choice: *A pheallaig bhodaich nam bròg, an saoil thu gu bheil mise gu bhith 'm thràill uisge agad?* "You hairy old shoe-rag, do you think I'm going to be your water slave?"

The shoemaker goes to the well for himself, sees the reflection of the most beautiful woman he has ever seen, looks up, and there she is in the tree, so he invites her back to his humble dwelling. A day or two later three young gentlemen

come by to have shoes made, for the king has come home and is to be married. “You have a lovely daughter,” they say to the shoemaker, eyeing our leading lady.

“But she’s not my daughter.”

“*Nàile!* By St Nail,” says one of them, “I’d give £100 to marry her.” And the others say the same thing.

“But I have nothing to do with her.”

“Still,” they say, “you ask her tonight, and let us know tomorrow.”

When they’ve gone away the girl asks, “What’s that they were saying about me?” He tells her and she says: “Go after them. I’ll marry one of them this very night, and he can bring his purse of silver.”

So one of them is brought back and gives the shoemaker £100 as dowry (*air son tochar*). She pops into bed, and when the young man has his clothes off she asks him for a drink of water from the horn (*còrn*) on the table. He goes to get it but turns into a statue (*ás a-sin cha tigeadh e*) all night, holding the water-horn. *Òglaich thù*, says she, *car son nach dig thu laighe?* “You fine fellow you, why don’t you come to bed?”

He’s stuck like that *gus an robh latha geal a-màireach ann*, till bright daylight next day. The shoemaker comes to the door and she asks him to “take away that useless lout” (*an slaodaire balaich sin a thoirt air falbh*). The last thing he’s going to do is tell his friend what happened, so along comes the next victim. This time the sweet voice from the bed says: *Seall a bheil an crann air an doras*. “See if the bolt’s on the door.”

Air a’ chrann ghabh a làmhan greim . . . He seizes the bolt with his hands, and from there he can’t budge till bright daylight next day. Thus also the next fellow. He’s stuck with *cas air an leabaidh ’s cas eile air an ùrlar* (one foot on the bed and the other on the floor), and can’t move an inch till *latha geal a-màireach*.

Next day she gives the shoemaker the entire *sporan òir* (purse of gold), but he has to bring the shoes to the castle, so she goes too, saying, “I’d like to get a glimpse of the king’s son before he marries.”

When the courtiers see this beautiful woman they usher her into the crowded wedding chamber where our hero is seated on his throne of heather rope. A glass of wine is placed in her hand. As she puts it to her lips a flame leaps out, followed by a golden dove and a silver dove. They’re flying around when three grains of barley fall on the floor. The silver dove swoops down and eats them, and the golden dove says to him: *Nam biodh cuimhn’ agad nuair a chairt mi ’m bàthaich, chan itheadh tu siud gun chuid a thoirt dhòmhsa*. “If you’d remembered the time I mucked out the byre, you wouldn’t have eaten that without giving me a bit.”

As the wedding party watches in astonishment, three more grains fall. The silver dove eats them, and the golden dove says: “If you’d remembered the time I thatched the byre (*nuair a thubh mi ’m bàthaich*), you wouldn’t have eaten that without giving me a bit.”

Three more grains fall. The silver dove eats them, and the golden dove says: “If you’d remembered the time I robbed the magpie’s nest (*nuair a chreach mi nead na pioghaid*), you wouldn’t have eaten that without giving me a bit. I lost my pinkie bringing you down, and I’m missing it yet.”

The hero remembers. He leaps from his chair, kisses the *famhair*’s daughter from her hand to her mouth (*bho làimh gu a beul*), and when the priest arrives they marry a second time. Do the Grimms have anything as good as this?

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