



THE SNOW-SLEEP OF ANGUS OGUIE

ONE day, among the hills, Angus Oguiie lay in deep sleep. It was a fair place where he lay, with the heather purple about him and the bracken with its September gold in it. On the mountain-slope there was not a juniper tall enough, not a rock big enough, to give rest to a raven: all of gold bracken and purple heather it was, with swards of the paler ling. The one outstanding object was a mountain ash. Midway it stood, and leaned so that when the sun was in the east above Ben Monach, its gold streamed through the feather-foliage upon the tarn just beneath: so leaned, that when the sun was on the sea-verge of Ben Mheadhonach in the west, the yellow glow, lifting upward over leagues of golden bracken, turned the rowan-feathers to the colour of brass, and the rowan-berries into bronze.

The tarn was no more than a boulder-set hollow. It was fed by a spring that had slipped through the closing granite in a dim far-off age, and had never ceased to put its cool lips round the little rocky basin of that heather-pool. At the south end the ling fell over its marge in a curling wave: under the mountain ash there was a drift of moss and a cool, fragrant growth of lomeroid, as the Gaels call the bog-myrtle.

Here it was, through the hot tides of noon, that Angus Oguiie

slept. The fair god was naked, and was as a white flower there in the sunflood. His yellow hair lay upon the green loneroid, like fallen daffodils in new-mown grass. Above him was the silent sky, a suspended, unfathomable sea of blue. Not a cloudlet drifted there, nor the wandering shadow of an eagle soaring from a mountain eyrie or ascending in wide gyres of flight from invisible lowlands.

Around him there was the same deep peace. The wind was not. Not a breath stirred the rowan-leaves, or the feathery shadows these cast upon his white limbs: not a breath frayed the spires of the heather on the ridges of Ben Monach: not a breath slid along the aerial pathways to where, on Ben Mheadhonach, the sea-wind had fallen in a garth of tansils and moon-daisies and spread there his foam-white pinions, moveless as a lapsed wave.

Yet there were eyes to see, for Orchil lifted up her gaze from where she dreamed her triple dream beneath the heather. The goddess ceased from her weaving at the looms of life and death, and looked long at Angus Ogue—Angus, the fair god, the ever young, the lord of love, of music, of song.

'Is it time that he slept indeed?' she murmured, after a long while, wherein she felt the hot blood redden her pale lips and the pulse in her quiet veins leap like a caged bird.

But while she still pondered this thing, three old Druids came over the shoulder of the hill, and advanced slowly to where the Yellow-haired One lay adream. These, however, she knew to be no mortals, but three of the ancient gods.

When they came upon Angus Ogue they sought to wake him, but Orchil had breathed a breath across a granite rock and blown the deep, immemorial age of it upon him, so that even the speech of the elder gods was no more in his ears than a gnat's idle rumour.

'Awake,' said Keithoir, and his voice was as the tempestuous sigh of pine-forests when the winds surge from the pole.

'Awake,' said Manannan, and his voice was as the hollow booming of the sea.

'Awake,' said Hesus, and his voice was as the rush of the green world through space, or as the leaping of the sun.

But Angus Ogue stirred not, and dreamed only that a mighty eagle soared out of the infinite, and scattered planets and stars as the dust of its pinions: and that as these planets fell they expanded into vast oceans whereupon a myriad million waves leaped and danced in the sunlight, singing a laughing song: and that as the stars descended in a silver rain they spread into innumerable forests, wherein went harping the four winds of the world, and amidst which the white doves that were his kisses flitted through the gold and shadow.

'He will awake no more,' murmured Keithoir, and the god of the green World moved sorrowfully apart, and played upon a reed the passing sweet song that is to this day in the breath of the wind in the grass, or its rustle in the leaves, or its sigh in the lapping of reedy waters.

'He will awake no more,' murmured Manannan, and the god of the dividing seas moved sorrowfully upon his way; and on the hillside there was a floating echo as of the ocean-music in a shell, mournful with ancient mournfulness and the sorrow-song of age upon age. The sweet sound of it is in the ears of the dead, where they move through the grey glooms of silence: and it haunts the old time-worn shores of the dying world.

'He will awake no more,' murmured Hesus; and the unseen god, whose pulse is beneath the deepest sea and whose breath is the frosty light of the stars, moved out of the shadow into the light, and was at one with it, so that no eyes beheld the radiance which flowered icily in the firmament and was a flame betwixt the earth and the sun, which was a glory amid the cloudy veils about the west and a gleam where quiet dews sustained the green spires of the grass. And as the light lifted and moved, like a vast tide, there was a rumour as of a starry procession sweeping through space to the clashing cymbals of dead moons, to the trumpeting of volcanic worlds, and to the clarions of a thousand suns. But Angus Ogue had the deep

immemorial age of the granite upon him, and he slept as the dead sleep.

Orchil smiled. 'They are old, old, the ancient gods,' she whispered.

'They are so old, they cannot see eternity at rest. For Angus Ogue is the god of Youth, and he only is eternal and unchanging.'

Then, before she turned once more to her looms of life and death, she lifted her eyes till her gaze pierced the brown earth and rose above the green world and was a trouble amid the quietudes of the sky. Thereat the icy stars gave forth snow, and Angus Ogue was wrapped in a white shroud that was not as that which melts in the flame of noon. Moreover, Orchil took one of the shadows of oblivion from her mystic loom, and put it as a band around Ben Monach, where Angus Ogue lay under the mountain ash by the tarn.

A thousand years passed, and when for the thousandth time the wet green smell of the larches drifted out of Winter into Spring, Orchil lifted her eyes from where she spun at her loom of life and death. For, over the shoulder of the hill came three old Druids, advancing slowly to where the Yellow-Haired One lay adream beneath the snow.

'Awake, Angus!' cried Keithoir.

'Awake, Angus!' cried Manannan.

'Awake, Angus!' cried Hesus.

'Awake, awake!' they cried, 'for the world has suddenly grown chill and old.'

They had the grey grief upon them, when they stood there, face to face with Silence.

Then Orchil put down the shuttle of mystery wherewith she wove the threads of her loom, and spoke.

'O ye ancient gods, answer me this. Keithoir, if death were to come to thee, what would happen?'

'The green world would wither as a dry leaf, and as a dead

leaf be blown idly before the wind that knows not whither it bloweth.'

'Manannan, if death were to come to thee, what would happen?'

'The deep seas would dry up, O Orchil: there would be sand falling in the place of the dews, and at last the world would reel and fall into the abyss.'

'Hesus, if death were to come to thee, what would happen?'

'There would be no pulse at the heart of earth, O Orchil, no lift of any star against any sun. There would be a darkness and a silence.'

Then Orchil laughed.

'And yet,' she said, 'when Angus Ogue had the snow-sleep of a thousand years, none knew it! For a thousand years the pulse of his heart of love has been the rhythmic beat of the world. For a thousand years the breath of his nostrils has been as the coming of Spring in the human heart. For a thousand years the breath of his life has been warm against the lips of lovers. For a thousand years the memory of these has been sweet against oblivion. Nay, not one hath dreamed of the deep sleep of Angus Ogue.'

'Who is he?' cried Keithoir. 'Is he older than I, who saw the green earth born?'

'Who is he?' cried Manannan. 'Is he older than I, who saw the first waters come forth out of the void?'

'Who is he?' cried Hesus. 'Is he older than I, who saw the first comet wander from the starry fold; who saw the moon when it was a flaming sun, and the sun when it was a seven-fold intolerable flame?'

'He is older!' said Orchil. 'He is the soul of the gods.'

And with that she blew a frith across the palm of her hand, and took away the deep immemorial age of the granite that was upon the Fair God.

'Awake, eternal Spring!' she cried. And Angus awoke, and laughed with joy; and at his laughing the whole green earth was veiled in a snow of blossom.

'Arise, eternal Youth!' she cried. And Angus arose and

smiled; and at his smiling the old brown world was clad in dewy green, and everywhere the beauty of the world was sweet against the eyes of young and old, and everywhere the pulse of love leaped in beating hearts.

'Go forth, eternal Hope!' she cried. And Angus Ogue passed away on the sunflood, weaving rainbows as he went, that were fair upon the hills of age and light within the valleys of sorrow, and were everywhere a wild, glad joy.

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And that is why, when Orchil weaves dumbly in the dark: and Keithoir is blind, and dreams among remote hills and by unfrequented shores: and Manannan lies heavy with deep sleep, with the oceans of the world like moving shadows above him: and Hesus is grown white and hoar with the frost of waning stars and weary with the burden of new worlds—that is why Angus Ogue, the youthful god, is more ancient than they, and is for ever young. Their period is set. Oblivion is upon the march against their immemorial time. But in the heart of

Angus Ogue blooms the Rose of Youth, whose beauty is everlasting. Yea, Time is the name of that rose, and Eternity the beauty and fragrance thereof.

FIONA MACLEOD.