

The Valley of the Shadow

(Excerpt from the novel 'The Makers of Stories and Songs')

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In 1727, an epidemic of smallpox wiped out nearly the entire population of the isolated island of Hirta, largest of the St Kilda Islands. Only one adult and eighteen children survived. An additional party of three men and eight boys, who had been ferried to a nearby stack to collect birds' eggs, were marooned for nine months until rescue came. The landlord of Hirta, clan chief John MacLeod of Dunvegan, resettled the island the following year. The Makers of Stories and Songs is the tale of those who survived.

In the darkest week of the year, a fever swept through Hirta, felling the weak and the strong alike. No one escaped its grasp, but Isbeil's mother Seana was only lightly affected, as was Neil Clag¹.

These two, as soon as they could rise from their crubs, visited every house in the village, nursing the sick as best they could. Seana chased down a ewe that had lambed early, and stripped its teats of as much milk as she dared, not wishing the lambs to go hungry. She boiled the milk in a thin barley gruel and divided it between the children in the village. Meanwhile, Neil slaughtered one of the Hirtans' precious cattle and from its meat and bones made a rich beef broth, of which there was plenty to go around.

'Have you gone mad?' Seana demanded when she found out. 'That cow belonged to MacLeod's factor!² We were to keep it for when the boat comes next.'

'Would you have the boat arrive to naught but a village of corpses?' Neil replied in his calm way. 'Our people have need of the meat, to make them strong again. The steward and his men can dine on fulmar and oat porridge when they come this time. It may well teach them something about the world outside their own circle of wants.'

Isbeil tried to get up each morning to help her mother, but always she fell back on the straw bed, exhausted. She suffered blinding headaches and her limbs felt as though they had turned to water. Still, she was not as sick as her father, who lay sweating and shivering alternately by the peat fire and occasionally croaked out words and phrases from his blistered throat that made no sense. Isbeil had not come across the term 'delirium' in her schooling with the Reverend Buchan, and she thought that Faolan had lost his mind. She was terrified that the same thing might happen to her. More than anything, she longed to be outside, to stand in the clean, salt-rimed winds and tilt her face up to the sun; to throw her arms wide in a circle, feeling nothing but

¹ Abbreviated from 'Clag a' bhaile', which is Scots Gaelic for 'the town bell', a common nickname given to someone with a loud voice.

² Representative of the chief of Clan MacLeod, who was landlord of Hirta and its people. Each summer the factor, or steward, visited Hirta by boat to collect the annual rent payment.

open space. The only walls would be the green slopes of Oiseval, Conachair, Mullach Geal and Ruaival, rearing up in a protective crescent around the village.

As Isbeil slowly came back to health, she began to notice a worried look in her mother's eyes that had escaped her before. While Isbeil and her father ate their first solid meal in weeks, Seana fed Flòraidh gruel from a tin dipper and Alasdair refused to eat at all. His rasping cough filled the cloying air of the house at night, and the strong brawny arms of which he was so proud now withered away to sinew and bone. One night Isbeil stirred from a fitful sleep and saw the dark shapes of her parents sitting around the fire, murmuring softly to each other.

'Would this be of any use now?' Faolan said, and Isbeil heard the dull clink of a stone bottle.

Her mother answered, 'What ails him cannot be cured by *uisge beatha*³ – there is little hope left,' and began to weep dreadfully, a high keening sound that froze Isbeil's bones, so that she could not have moved if the straw crub had suddenly burst into flames. But when the sun rose the next day, Seana was her stoic self once more, with no trace of the tears shed in the darkness, and Isbeil was inclined to think she had imagined it all.

There came a morning when Isbeil woke to silence. Her brother's coughing had ceased in the night. With a rush of gladness, she saw her little sister sitting up for the first time since her illness, drinking greedily from the tin dipper of warm sheep's milk. Isbeil rolled over on her side and reached across the crub to touch Alasdair's hand. 'Are you better, too?' she asked.

The feel of his skin on hers did not immediately register. It was not burning with fever or clammy with sweat, but cold and smooth as a stone in a cleit⁴ wall. Isbeil recoiled with a small shriek. Looking up fearfully, she met her parents' eyes: her father's hectic and red-rimmed from weeping, her mother's dry and hard, though her hands trembled. Seana lifted a finger to her lips and jerked her head slightly towards Flòraidh, who was still drinking her milk innocently, unaware of the tragedy that had befallen the MacIvers.

Isbeil nodded at her mother in return, then rolled back the other way, facing the soot-blackened wall of the crub.

Alasdair was buried two days later. The Hirtans laid their dead to rest in a flat area just beyond the village, encircled by a low stone wall and starred with celandines and marigolds. It was as tranquil and restful a place to be found amidst Hirta's stark cliffs and austere green hills, but it could not reconcile the grieving islanders to the fact that one so young had been taken from them.

The Hirtans' way of life was a dangerous one. Seana MacIver's brothers had both died in accidents while hunting seafowl on Conachair – one had fallen from the cliff after his rope snapped, the other drowned while trying to approach Conachair from the sea in a boat. Isbeil's friend Finlay had lost his father in a cliff-fall also, and scarcely a family on Hirta went more than a generation without one of its members

³ In English: 'lively water' (whisky). In the 18th century, the Hirtans used it sparingly for medicinal purposes only; recreational drinking was unheard of.

⁴ A cleit (plural: cleitean) was a turf-roofed stone structure built for the preservation and storage of perishable goods. It resembled a large tortoise in shape and was unique to Hirta. Hundreds of them still exist on the island today.

suffering an untimely death. But this did not make their grief any more commonplace or easy to accept.

Isbeil stood with hands clenched at the foot of the freshly dug grave. Behind her, she heard the weeping of the girls who had loved her brother, had flirted and giggled and perhaps dreamt of him as their husband. Isbeil wished that she could cry, too; a hollow had opened up under her breastbone since the knowledge of Alasdair's death had sunk in, and it ached day and night. Surely the pain would abate if she could only cry or find some other way to release her grief. Somewhere within her there must be sorrow and a sense of loss, but Isbeil could only feel the persistent ache in her chest.

And she was tired, too; it was traditional to hold a wake each night until the dead person was buried, and for the past two nights the MacIver house had been full of mourners and the sound of their keening. Seana had dressed her son's body herself, refusing the help of the other women. Isbeil, not wanting to look at her mother's face, had managed to distract herself somewhat from the scene by taking little Flòraidh on her lap and entertaining her with silly repetitive songs, and stories about the ancient huntress of Hirta, who lived long ago – when Hirta and all the Hebrides were joined on the one piece of land – and wore horns of many branches in her hair while she hunted.

There was no church service for the dead; the Reverend Alexander Buchan conducted a burial service in the little kirkyard, with the mourners amassed about the grave. At the conclusion of the eulogy, four of the strongest men lowered the coffin into the grave, while the women's voices rose in keening. The eerie wails made Isbeil's hackles rise. Next to her, Flòraidh whimpered and nestled closer to her sister.

Finally it was over. The sky was already growing dark, though it was hardly noon; the dark months lasted from October through to mid-February, and the fever that took Alasdair had struck just after Hogmanay. There were still at least six more weeks of darkness to endure. As Isbeil left the kirkyard, she thought of the long, dull days ahead of her with despair.

The kirkyard had nearly emptied of mourners and the sky was a murky green overhead when the Reverend Alexander Buchan approached the grieving mother, Seana MacIver. She was still standing at the foot of her son's grave, singing a dirge she had composed herself. Out of respect, the minister waited for her to finish, even though he viewed the singing of graveside laments as a pagan practice, better abolished in favour of Christian hymns.

When Seana ended her song, she bowed her head and stood in silence, giving no sign that she was aware of the minister's presence. He waited for several minutes in growing embarrassment, before finally clearing his throat to break the stillness.

'Mistress MacIver? May I intrude?'

Her eyes opened, grey-green like her daughter's, and full of sadness. 'You are not intruding, Reverend,' she said, offering him a tired smile.

'Aye, you are kind to say so.' He sighed deeply, looking down at the grave. 'Your son is in heaven now, Mistress MacIver.'

Seana's head jerked up; her fingers dug into the folds of her dress, burrowing deep into the thick fabric. 'Heaven,' she scoffed. 'Your teachings mean nothing to

me. I have wished I could believe, for I think it would have made my path in life easier to travel. If you had not come to our island to teach us of your God, someone else surely would have. People are always trying to change that which they do not understand. Oh, aye, I've been bitter, I admit. But what if others came to you and said "Your God is meaningless. You must be listening to us now, for only we can guide you the right way and save you from punishment"? The old ways, the ancient words of our druids and our bards, are what comfort me now. I would far rather my son's spirit lived on in Hirta as a flower or a stone, than in your heaven.'

'Be that as it may,' the minister said uncomfortably, 'I did not come to debate with you on the matters of the spirit.'

'You were the first to speak of it, not I.' Seana knelt to pick a celandine by her feet; she stroked the yellow petals absently for a moment, then laid the flower on the mound of earth before her.

'Aye, I apologise. I came to talk to you about your daughter, Isbeil, and what your wishes are for her future.'

'Could this not have waited for another day? I have just buried my son, Reverend.'

'There will never be an ideal time to discuss this. I thought it best to speak with you as soon as possible.'

Seana sighed. 'What is it you wish to know?'

'As you are no doubt aware, I would like Isbeil to continue with her schooling. But she is a clever lass and will soon have reached the limit of what I can teach her. I would then propose sending her to Glasgow, to the same institution where my own children have been educated. It is a highly reputable place of learning and I feel that she would benefit greatly from it.'

'And never return home, is that what you are saying?'

'That is not what I am saying, but it is inarguable that Isbeil's prospects would be far brighter in a place like Glasgow or Edinburgh.'

'Aye, her prospects,' Seana mocked. 'It is not enough that you have replaced our beliefs with your God, and denounced our old ways as pagan and wicked. No, you must be taking our children from us as well, and teaching them to hate the place that has been home to their families for generations. What is it about our existence that you find so abhorrent? Why can you not be leaving us alone?' Her voice rose to a scream. 'My son has been taken from me. Would you have me lose another child?'

'I only meant—'

'Well, Reverend, I am not interested in what you are meaning. You have made yourself quite clear. But you will not take my daughter away, do you understand that? She will be staying here, where she belongs.'

'But is Hirta where she belongs?'

'I will not listen to any more of this. Isbeil is *my* daughter, and you would do well to remember it. She will be staying here, and she will marry Dùghall MacDonald or one of the other lads, and she will be happy. There is nothing more to be said about the matter.'

Isbeil was indeed her daughter – and if Seana MacIver had given this fact more thought, she would surely have understood that there was plenty more to be said.