

An Litir Bheag

le Ruairidh MacIlleathain

An Litir Bheag is a shortened and simplified version of Ruairidh's Litir do Luchd-ionnsachaidh (also available on the BBC website), designed for those who are at an earlier stage of learning Gaelic. The topic each week is the same as Litir do Luchd-ionnsachaidh so that, once the Litir Bheag is mastered, a student of the language might wish to try the full Litir. This is Litir Bheag 855 (which corresponds to Litir 1,159). Ruairidh can be contacted at roddy.maclean@bbc.co.uk.

I am going to tell you a famous story – MacCodrum of the Seals. A long time ago, there was a fisherman in the Western Isles called Neil MacCodrum. He was living by himself. At times he was lonely as he had no wife.

One particular Spring evening, the men were bringing their boats to land. Every man had a creel full of herring. Neil was the last one to bring his boat up the shingle beach. The other men had gone home with their wives.

Neil was thinking that he was by himself. But he heard an unusual sound – women laughing. He went towards the sound. He hid behind a rock. He saw seven young women. They were naked. Their skin was as pale as a swan. They were dancing in a circle on the shore.

Then Neil saw something else – a pile of skins on a rock close to the women. He understood that the women were selkies (seal-women). When they were at sea they were like other seals. But, when they came to land, they would take off their skins. They would appear like women then.

Tha mi a' dol a dh'innse sgeulachd ainmeil dhuibh – MacCodruim nan Ròn. O chionn fhada, bha iasgair anns na h-Eileanan an Iar air an robh Niall MacCodruim mar ainm. Bha e a' fuireach leis fhèin. Aig amannan bha e aonaranach oir cha robh bean aige.

Feasgar earraich a bha seo, bha na fir a' toirt an eathraichean gu tìr. Bha cliabh làn sgadan aig a h-uile fear. B' e Niall am fear mu dheireadh a tharraing a bhàta suas am mol. Bha na fir eile air a dhol dhachaigh le 'm mnathan.

Bha Niall a' smaoineachadh gun robh e leis fhèin. Ach chuala e fuaim annasach – boireannaich a' gàireachdaich. Chaidh e a dh'ionnsaigh an fhuaim. Chaidh e am falach air cùl creige. Chunnaic e seachdnar bhoireannach òga. Bha iad rùisgte. Bha an craiceann cho bàn ri eala. Bha iad a' dannsadh ann an cròileagan air a' chladach.

An uair sin, chunnaic Niall rudeigin eile – meall de bhèin air creag faisg air na boireannaich. Thuig e gur e maighdeannan-ròn a bh' anns na boireannaich. Nuair a bha iad aig muir bha iad mar a bha ròin eile. Ach, nuair a thigeadh iad gu tìr, chuireadh iad am bèin dhiubh. Bhiodh coltas boireannaich orra an uair sin.

Neil bent down. He crawled towards the skins. He took hold of the first skin. He put it under his arm. However, one of the women saw him. They all ran to the rock, they picked up their skins and they went to sea.

Except for one. She stood in front of Neil. Her skin was shining like a pearl in the light of the moon. She said to Neil, 'Will you give me my skin?'

Neil refused to do that. 'Come with me,' he said. 'I'll give you new clothes.' She had no choice.

They married on a fine day at the time of a waxing moon and an incoming tide. Neil MacCodrum was really happy. But his new wife – well, she was quiet, as if she were listening to the sound of the sea rather than fiddle music ... You'll hear the rest of the story next week.

Chrom Niall sìos. Shnàig e a dh'ionnsaigh nam bian. Ghabh e grèim air a' chiad bhian. Chuir e fo achlais e. Ge-tà, chunnaic tè de na boireannaich e. Ruith iad uile chun na creige, thog iad am bèin agus dh'fhalbh iad gu muir.

Ach a-mhàin aon tè. Sheas i air beulaibh Nèill. Bha a craiceann a' deàlradh mar neamhnaid ann an solas na gealaich. Thuir i ri Niall, 'An toir thu thugam mo bhian?'

Dhiùlt Niall sin a dhèanamh. 'Thig cuide rium,' thuir e. 'Bheir mi dhut aodach ùr.' Cha robh taghadh aice.

Phòs iad air latha brèagha aig àm fàs na gealaich agus lionadh na tìde-mhara. Bha Niall MacCodruim cho sona ri bròg. Ach a bhean ùr – uill, bha ise sàmhach mar gun robh i ag èisteachd ri fuaim na mara seach ceòl na fìdhle... Cluinnidh sibh an còrr dhen sgeul an-ath-sheachdain.