

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 856 (which corresponds to Litir 1,160). Ruairidh can be contacted at roddy.maclean@bbc.co.uk.

I was telling the story MacCodrum of the Seals. Neil MacCodrum married the selkie (seal woman). They had two children – Donald and Morag.

Each day that Neil was out in the boat, the children would be on the shore, foraging. Their mother would be along with them. She appeared to be happy enough.

However, when the west wind would come with rain, her appearance would change. She would spin with a spinning-wheel and sing sad songs. She would swing from side to side like a piece of wood in the ocean.

Thirteen years elapsed. One summer day, the woman was on the machair, digging up silverweed roots. Her daughter came. 'Look, mother,' said Morag, 'isn't the big speckled thing I found in an old chest strange. It's as soft as silk!' She had found her mother's old skin. Neil had hidden it in the chest.

Her mother rubbed her skin with her hand. She put her arm around her daughter, and they walked back to the house. She shouted to her son, Donald.

Bha mi ag innse dhuibh an sgeulachd MacCodruim nan Ròn. Phòs Niall MacCodruim a' mhaighdeann-ròin. Bha dithis chloinne aca – Dòmhnall agus Mòrag.

Gach latha a bha Niall a-muigh san eathar, bhiodh a' chlann air a' chladach, a' rùrachd. Bhiodh am màthair còmhlairiutha. Bha coltas oirre mar gun robh i toilichte gu leòr.

Ge-tà, nuair a thigeadh gaoth an iar le uisge, bhiodh coltas eile oirre. Bhiodh i a' snìomh le cuibhle-shnìomh agus a' gabhail òrain tiamhaidh. Bhiodh i a' luasgadh bho thaobh gu taobh mar a bhiodh pìos fiodha anns an fhairge.

Chaidh trì bliadhn' deug seachad. Latha samhraidh a bha seo, bha a' bhean air a' mhachair, a' cladhach freumhaichean brisgein. Thàinig a nighean. 'Seall, a mhàthair,' thuirt Mòrag, 'nach annasach an rud mòr breac a lorg mi ann an seann chiste. Tha e cho mìn ri sìoda!' Bha i air seann bhian a mhàthar a lorg. Bha Niall air a chur am falach anns a' chiste.

Shuath a màthair a bian le a làimh. Chuir i a gàirdean timcheall a h-ìghne, agus choisich iad air ais don taigh. Dh'èigh i air a mac, Dòmhnall.

'I'll be leaving you,' she said to them. 'I love you very much, but I must return to how I was.'

That night, she rose from the bed where her spouse was sleeping. She went to the shore. She took her clothes off. She put her skin around her. She entered the sea.

Another six seals came. They surrounded her. She understood that her own people were recognising her and welcoming her.

When Neil MacCodrum woke, there was no sign of his wife. He looked in the chest. The sealskin wasn't there. He understood that his wife had returned to the sea. She would never return to him.

But it was different for the children. On nights when the moon was waxing and the tide flowing, Donald and Morag would go barefoot to the shore. A speckled seal would come to them. The children would swim with their mother with great delight until daybreak.

'Bidh mi gur fàgail,' thuir i riutha. 'Tha gaol mòr agam oirbh, ach feumaidh mi tilleadh gu mar a bha mi.'

Air an oidhche sin, dh'èirich i bhon leabaidh far an robh a cèile na chadal. Chaidh i don chladach. Thug i a h-aodach dhith. Chuir i a bian uimpe. Chaidh i a-steach don mhuir.

Thàinig sia ròin eile. Chaidh iad ceithir-thimcheall oirre. Thuig i gun robh a muinntir fhèin ga h-aithneachadh is a' cur fàilte oirre.

Nuair a dhùisg Niall MacCodruim, cha robh sgeul air a bhean. Thug e sùil anns a' chiste. Cha robh am bian-ròin ann. Thuig e gun robh a bhean air tilleadh don mhuir. Cha tilleadh i thuige tuilleadh.

Ach bha e eadar-dhealaichte don chloinn. Air oidhcheannan nuair a bha a' ghealach a' fàs agus an tìde-mhara a' lìonadh, bhiodh Dòmhnall is Mòrag a' falbh don chladach casrùisgte. Thigeadh ròin breac gan ionnsaigh. Bhiodh a' chlann a' snàmh còmhla ri am màthair le mòr-ghàirdeachas gu briseadh an latha.