

## The Edge of Ireland

### *The Islands of Aran.*

Arthur Symons

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*Summer, 1896.*

For two hours and a half the fishing-boat had been running before the wind, as a greyhound runs, in long leaps ; and when I set foot on shore at Ballyvaughan, and found myself in the little, neat hotel, and waited for tea in the room with the worn piano, the album of manuscript verses, and the many photographs of the young girl who had written them, first as she stands holding a violin, and then, after she has taken vows, in the white habit of the Dominican order, I seemed to have stepped out of some strange, half-magical, almost real dream, through which I had been consciously moving on the other side of that grey, disturbed sea, upon those grey and peaceful islands in the Atlantic. And all that evening, as we drove for hours along the Clare coast and inland into Galway, under a sunset of gold fire and white spray until we reached the battlemented towers of Tillyra Castle, I had the same curious sensation of having been dreaming ; and I could but vaguely remember the dream, in which I was still, however, absorbed. We passed, I believe, a fine slope of grey mountains, a ruined abbey, many castle ruins ; we talked of Parnell, of the county families, of mysticism, the analogy of that old Biblical distinction of body, soul, and spirit with the symbolical realities of the lamp, the wick, and the flame ; and all the time I was obsessed by the vague, persistent remembrance of those vanishing islands, which wavered somewhere in the depths of my consciousness. When I awoke next morning the dream had resolved itself into definite shape, and I remembered every detail of those last three days, during which I had been so far from civilisation, so much further out of the world than I had ever been before.

It was on the morning of Wednesday, August 5, 1896, that a party of four, of whom I alone was not an Irishman, got into Tom Joyce's hooker at Cashla Bay, on the coast of Galway, and set sail for the largest of the three islands of Aran, Inishmore by name, that is, Large Island. The hooker, a half-decked, cutter-rigged fishing-boat of seventeen tons, had come over for us from Aran, and we set out with a light breeze, which presently dropped and left us almost becalmed under a very hot sun for nearly an hour, where we were passed by a white butterfly that was making straight for the open sea. We were nearly four hours in crossing, and we had time to read all that needed reading of *Grania*, Miss Emily Lawless's novel, which is supposed to be the classic of the islands, and to study our maps and to catch one mackerel. But I found most to my mind this passage from Roderic O'Flaherty's *Chorographical Description of West or H-Iar Connaught*, which in its quaint, minute seventeenth-century prose told me more about what I was going to see than everything else that I read then or after on the subject of these islands. "The soile," he tells us, "is almost paved over with stones, soe as, in some places, nothing is to be seen but large stones with wide openings between them, where cattle break their legs. Scarce any other stones there but limestones, and marble fit for tomb-stones, chymney mantle trees, and high crosses. Among these stones is very sweet pasture, so that beefe, veal, mutton are better and earlyer in season here than elsewhere ; and of late there is plenty of cheese, and tillage mucking, and corn is the same with the seaside tract. In some places the plow goes. On the shores grows samphire in plenty, ring-root or sea-holy, and sea-cabbage. Here are Cornish choughs, with red legs and bills. Here are ayries of hawkes, and birds which never fly but over the sea, and, therefore, are used to be eaten on fasting days : to catch which people goe down, with ropes tyed about them, into the caves of cliffs by night, and with a candle light kill abundance of them. Here are severall wells and pooles, yet in extraordinary dry weather, people must turn their cattell out of the

islands, and the corn failes. They have noe fuell but cow-dung dried with the sun, unless they bring turf in from the western continent. They have *Cloghans*, a kind of building of stones layd one upon another, which are brought to a roof without any manner of mortar to cement them, some of which cabins will hold forty men on their floor ; so antient that nobody knows how long ago any of them was made. Scarcity of wood and store of fit stones, without per-adventure found out the first invention.” Reading of such things as these, and of how St. Albeus, Bishop of *Imly*, had said, “ Great is that island, and it is the land of saints ; for no man knows how many saints are buried there, but God alone” ; and of an old saying : “Athenry was, Galway is, Aran shall be the best of the three,” we grew, after a while, impatient of delay. A good breeze sprang up at last, and as I stood in the bow, leaning against the mast, I felt the one quite perfectly satisfying sensation of movement : to race through steady water before a stiff sail, on which the reefing cords are tapping in rhythm to those nine notes of the sailors’ chorus in *Tristan*, which always ring in my ears when I am on the sea, for they have in them all the exultation of all life that moves upon the waters.

The butterfly, I hope, had reached land before us ; but only a few sea-birds came out to welcome us as we drew near Inishmore, the Large Island, which is nine miles long and a mile and a half broad. I gazed at the long line of the island, growing more distinct every moment ; first, a grey outline, flat at the sea’s edge, and rising up beyond in irregular, rocky hills, terrace above terrace ; then, against this grey outline, white houses began to detach themselves, the sharp line of the pier cutting into the curve of the harbour ; and then, at last, the figures of men and women moving across the land. Nothing is more mysterious, more disquieting, than one’s first glimpse of an island, and all I had heard of these islands, of their peace in the heart of the storm, was not a little mysterious and disquieting. I knew that they contained the oldest ruins and that their life of the present was the most primitive life of any part of Ireland ; I knew that they were rarely visited by the tourist, almost never by any but the local tourist ; that they were difficult to reach, sometimes more difficult to leave, for the uncertainty of weather in that uncertain region of the Atlantic had been known to detain some of the rare travellers there for days, was it not for weeks ? Here one was absolutely at the mercy of the elements, which might at any moment become unfriendly, which, indeed, one seemed to have but apprehended in a pause of their eternal enmity. And we seemed also to be venturing among an unknown people, who, even if they spoke our own language, were further away from us, more foreign than people who spoke an unknown language and lived beyond other seas.

As we walked along the pier towards the three whitewashed cottages which form the Atlantic Hotel, at which we were to stay, a strange being sprang towards us, with a curiously beast-like stealthiness and animation ; it was a crazy man, bare-footed and blear-eyed, who held out his hand and sang out at us in a high, chanting voice, and in what sounded rather a tone of command than of entreaty, “ Give me a penny, sir ! Give me a penny, sir !” We dropped something into his hat, and he went away over the rocks, laughing loudly to himself, and repeating some words that he had heard us say. We passed a few fishermen and some bare-footed children, who looked at us curiously, but without moving, and were met at the door of the middle cottage by a little, fat old woman with a round body and a round face, wearing a white cap tied over her ears. The Atlantic Hotel is a very primitive hotel ; it had last been slept in by some priests from the mainland, who had come on their holiday with bicycles ; and before that by a German philologist who was learning Irish. The kitchen, which is also the old landlady’s bedroom, presents a medley of pots and pans and petticoats as you pass its open door and climb the little staircase, diverging oddly on either side after the first five or six steps, and leading on the right to a large dining-room, where the table lounges on an inadequate number of legs and the chairs bow over when you lean back on them. I have slept more luxuriously, but not more soundly, than in the little musty bedroom on the other side of the stairs, with its half-made bed, its bare and unswept floor, its tiny window, of which only the lower half could be opened, and this, when opened, had to be supported by a wooden

catch from outside. Going to sleep in that little, uncomfortable room was a delight in itself ; for the starry water outside, which one could see through that narrow slit of window, seemed to flow softly about one in waves of delicate sleep.

When we had had a hasty meal and had got a little used to our hotel, and had realised as well as we could where we were, at the lower end of the village of Kilronan, which stretches up the hill to the north-west on either side of the main road, we set out in the opposite direction, finding many-guides by the way, who increased in number as we went on through the smaller village of Kileaney up to the south-eastern hill, on which are a holy well, its thorn-tree hung with votive ribbons, and the ruins of several churches, among them the church of St. Enda, the patron saint of the island. At first we were able to walk along a very tolerable road, then we branched off upon a little strip of grey sand, piled in mounds as high as if it had been drifted snow, and from that, turning a little inland, we came upon the road again, which began to get stonier as we neared the village. Our principal guide, an elderly man with long thick curls of flaxen hair and a seaman's beard, shaved away from the chin, talked fairly good English, with a strong accent, and he told us of the poverty of the people, the heavy rents they have to pay for soil on which no grass grows, and the difficult living they make out of their fishing, and their little tillage, and the cattle which they take over in boats to the fairs at Galway, throwing them into the sea when they get near land, and leaving them to swim ashore. He was dressed, as are almost all the peasants of Aran, in clothes woven and made on the island — loose, rough, woollen things, of drab, or dark blue, or grey, sometimes charming in colour ; he had a flannel shirt, a kind of waistcoat with sleeves, very loose and shapeless trousers worn without braces, an old and discoloured slouch hat on his head, and on his feet the usual *pampooties*, slippers of undressed hide, drawn together and stitched into shape, with pointed toes, and a cord across the instep. The village to which we had come was a cluster of white-washed cabins, a little better built than those I had seen in Galway, with the brown thatch fastened down with ropes drawn cross-wise over the roof and tied to wooden pegs driven into the wall for protection against the storm blowing in from the Atlantic. They had the usual two doors, facing each other at front and back, the windier of the two being kept closed in rough weather, and the doors were divided in half by the usual hatch. As we passed, a dark head would appear at the upper half of the door, and a dull glow of red would rise out of the shadow. The women of Aran almost all dress in red, the petticoat very heavily woven, the crossed shawl or bodice of a thinner texture of wool. Those whom we met on the roads wore thicker shawls over their heads, and they would sometimes draw the shawls closer about them, as women in the East draw their veils closer about their faces. As they came out to their doors to see us pass, I noticed in their manner a certain mingling of curiosity and shyness, an interest which was never quite eager. Some of the men came out and quietly followed us as we were led along a twisting way between the cabins ; and the children, boys and girls, in a varying band of from twenty to thirty, ran about our heels, stopping whenever we stopped, and staring at us with calm wonder. They were very inquisitive, but, unlike English villagers in remote places, perfectly polite, and neither resented our coming among them nor jeered at us for being foreign to their fashions.

The people of Aran (they are about 3000 in all), as I then saw them for the first time, and as I saw them during the few days of my visit, seemed to me a simple, dignified, self-sufficient, sturdily primitive people, to whom Browning's phrase of "gentle islanders" might well be applied. They could be fierce on occasion, as I knew ; for I remembered the story of their refusal to pay the county cess, and how, when the cess-collector had come over to take his dues by force, they had assembled on the seashore with sticks and stones, and would not allow him even to land. But they had, for the most part, mild faces, of the long Irish type, often regular in feature, but with loose and drooping mouths and discoloured teeth. Most had blue eyes, the men, oftener than the women, having fair hair. They held themselves erect, and walked nimbly, with a peculiar step due to the rocky ways they have generally to walk on ; few of them, I noticed, had large hands or feet, and all, without exception, were thin, as

indeed the Irish peasant almost invariably is. The women too, for the most part, were thin, and had the same long faces, often regular, with straight eyebrows and steady eyes, not readily changing expression ; they hold themselves well, a little like men, whom, indeed, they somewhat resemble in figure. As I saw them, leaning motionless against their doors, walking with their deliberateness of step along the roads, with eyes in which there was no wonder, none of the fever of the senses, placid animals on whom emotion has never worked in any vivid or passionate way, I seemed to see all the pathetic contentment of those narrow lives, in which day follows day with the monotony of wave lapping on wave. I observed one young girl of twelve or thirteen who had something of the ardency of beauty, and a few shy, impressive faces, their hair drawn back smoothly from the middle parting, appearing suddenly behind doors or over walls ; almost all, even the very old women, had nobility of gesture and attitude, but in the more personal expression of faces there was for the most part but a certain quietude, seeming to reflect the grey hush, the bleak greyness of this land of endless stone and endless sea.

When we had got through the village and begun to climb the hill, we were still followed, and we were followed for all the rest of the way by about fifteen youngsters, all, except one, bare-footed, and two, though boys, wearing petticoats, as the Irish peasant children not unfrequently do, for economy, when they are young enough not to resent it. Our guide, the elderly man with the flaxen curls, led us first to the fort set up by the soldiers of Cromwell, who, coming over to keep down the Catholic rebels, ended by turning Catholic and marrying and settling among the native people ; then to Teglach Enda, a ruined church of very early masonry, made of large blocks set together with but little cement — the church of St. Enda, who came to Aran in about the year 480, and fifty-eight years later laid his bones in the cemetery which was to hold the graves of not less than a hundred and twenty saints. On our way inland to Teampull Benen, the remains of an early oratory, surrounded by cloghans or stone dwellings made of heaped stones which, centuries ago, had been the cells of monks, we came upon the large puffing-hole, a great gap in the earth, going down by steps of rock to the sea, which in stormy weather dashes foam to the height of its sixty feet, reminding me of the sounding hollows on the coast of Cornwall. The road here, as on almost the whole of the island, was through stone-walled fields of stone. Grass, or any soil, was but a rare interval between a broken and distracted outstretch of grey rock, lying in large flat slabs, in boulders of every size and shape, and in innumerable stones, wedged in the ground or lying loose upon it, round, pointed, rough, and polished ; an unending greyness, cut into squares by the walls of carefully-heaped stones, which we climbed with great insecurity, for the stones were kept in place by no more than the more or less skilful accident of their adjustment, and would turn under our feet or over in our hands as we climbed them. Occasionally a little space of pasture had been cleared or a little artificial soil laid down, and a cow browsed on the short grass. Ferns, and occasionally maidenhair, grew in the fissures splintered between the rocks ; and I saw mallow, stonecrop, the pale blue wind-flower, the white campian, many nettles, ivy, and a few bushes. In this part of the island there were no trees, which were to be found chiefly on the north-western side, in a few small clusters about some of the better houses, and almost wholly of alder and willow. As we came to the sheer edge of the sea and saw the Atlantic, and knew that there was nothing but the Atlantic between this last shivering remnant of Europe and the far-off continent of America, it was with no feeling of surprise that we heard from the old man who led us that no later than two years ago an old woman of those parts had seen, somewhere on this side of the horizon, the blessed island of Tir-nan-Ogue, the island of immortal youth, which is held by the Irish peasants to lie somewhere in that mysterious region of the sea.

We loitered on the cliff's for some time, leaning over them, and looking into the magic mirror that glittered there like a crystal, and with all the soft depth of a crystal in it, hesitating on the veiled threshold of visions. Since I have seen Aran and Sligo, I have never wondered that the Irish peasant still sees fairies about his path, and that the boundaries of what we call

the real, and of what is for us the unseen, are vague to him. The sea on those coasts is not like the sea as I know it on any other coast ; it has in it more of the twilight. And the sky seems to come down more softly, with more stealthy step, more illusive wings, and the land to come forward with a more hesitating and gradual approach ; and land and sea and sky to mingle more absolutely than on any other coast. I have never realised less the slipping of sand through the hour-glass ; I have never seemed to see with so remote an impartiality, as in the presence of brief and yet eternal things, the troubling and insignificant accidents of life. I have never believed less in the reality of the visible world, in the importance of all we are most serious about. One seems to wash off the dust of cities, the dust of beliefs, the dust of incredulities.

It was nearly seven o'clock when we got back to Kilronan, and after dinner we sat for a while talking and looking out through the little windows at the night. But I could not stay indoors in this new, marvellous place ; and, persuading one of my friends to come with me, I walked up through Kilronan, which I found to be a far more solid and populous village than the one we had seen ; and coming out on the high ground beyond the houses, we saw the end of a pale green sunset. Getting back to our hotel, we found the others still talking ; but I could not stay indoors, and after a while went out by myself to the end of the pier in the darkness, and lay there looking into the water and into the fishing-boats lying close up against the land, where there were red lights moving, and the shadows of men, and the sound of deep-throated Irish.

I remember no dreams that night, but I was told that I had talked in my sleep, and I was willing to believe it. In the morning, not too early, we set out on an outside car (that rocking and most comfortable vehicle, which I prefer to everything but a gondola) for the Seven Churches and Dun Aengus, along the only beaten road in the island. The weather, as we started, was grey and misty, threatening rain, and we could but just see the base-line of the Clare mountains across the grey and discoloured waters of the bay. At the Seven Churches we were joined by a peasant, who diligently showed us the ruined walls of Teampull Breacan, with its slab inscribed in Gaelic with the words, " Pray for the two canons " ; the stone of the " VII. Romani " ; St. Breacan's headstone, carved with Gaelic letters ; the carved cross and the headstone of St. Breacan's bed. More peasants joined us, and some children, who fixed on us their usual placid and tolerant gaze, in which curiosity contended with an indolent air of contentment. In all these people I noticed the same discreet manners that had already pleased me ; and once, as we were sitting on a tombstone in the interior of one of the churches, eating the sandwiches that we had brought for luncheon, a man, who had entered the doorway, drew back instantly, seeing us taking a meal.

The Seven Churches are rooted in long grass, spreading in billowy mounds, intertwined here and there with brambles ; but when we set out for the circular fort of Dun Onaght, which lies on the other side of the road, at no great distance up the hill, we were once more in the land of rocks ; and it was through a boreen, or lane, entirely paved with loose and rattling stones, that we made our way up the ascent. At the top of the hill we found ourselves outside such a building as I had never seen before : an ancient fort, 90 feet in diameter, and on the exterior 16 feet high, made of stones placed one upon another, without mortar, in the form of two walls, set together in layers, the inner wall lower than the outer, so as to form a species of gallery, to which stone steps led at intervals. No sooner had we got inside than the rain began to fall in torrents, and it was through a blinding downpour that we hurried back to the car, scarcely stopping to notice a Druid altar that stood not far out of our way. As we drove along, the rain ceased suddenly ; the wet cloud that had been steaming over the faint and still sea, as if desolated with winter, vanished in sunshine, caught up into a glory ; and the water, transfigured by so instant a magic, was at once changed from a grey wilderness of shivering mist into a warm and flashing and intense blueness, which gathered ardency of colour, until the whole bay burned with blue fire. The clouds had been swept behind us, and on the other side

of the water, for the whole length of the horizon, the beautiful, softly curving Connemara mountains stood out against the sky as if lit by some interior illumination, blue and pearl-grey and grey-rose. Along the shore-line a trail of faint cloud drifted from kelp-fire to kelp-fire, like altar-smoke drifting into altar-smoke ; and that mysterious mist floated into the lower hollows of the hills, softening their outlines and colours with a vague and fluttering and luminous veil of brightness.

It was about four in the afternoon when we came to the village of Kilmurvey, upon the seashore, and, leaving our car, began to climb the hill leading to Dun Aengus. Passing two outer ramparts, now much broken, one of them seeming to end suddenly in the midst of a *chevaux de frise* of pillar-like stones thrust endways into the earth, we entered the central fort by a lintelled doorway, set in the side of a stone wall of the same Cyclopean architecture as Dun Onaght, 18 feet high on the outside, and with two adhering inner walls, each lower in height, 12 feet 9 inches in thickness. This fort is 150 feet north and south and 140 feet east and west, and on the east side the circular wall ends suddenly on the very edge of a cliff going down 300 feet to the sea. It is supposed that the circle was once complete, and that the wall and the solid ground itself, which is here of bare rock, were slowly eaten away by the gnawing of centuries of waves, which have been at their task since some hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, when we know not what king, ruling over the races called “ the servile,” entrenched himself on that impregnable height. The Atlantic lies endlessly out towards the sunrise, beating, on the south, upon the brown and towering rock of the cliffs of Moher, rising up nearly a sheer thousand feet. The whole grey and desolate island, flowering into barren stone, stretches out on the other side, where the circle of the water washes from Galway Bay into the Atlantic. Looking out over all that emptiness of sea, one imagines the long-oared galleys of the ravaging kings who had lived there, some hundreds of years before the birth of Christ ; and the emptiness of the fortress filled with long-haired warriors, coming back from the galleys with captured slaves, and cattle, and the spoil of citadels. We know from the Bardic writers that a civilisation, similar to that of the Homeric poems, lived on in Ireland almost to the time of the coming of St. Patrick ; and it was something also of the sensation of Homer — the walls of Troy, the heroes, and that “ face that launched a thousand ships” — which came to me as we stood upon these unconquerable walls, to which a generation of men had been as a moth’s flight and a hundred years as a generation of men. Coming back from Dun Aengus, one of our party insisted on walking ; and we had not been long indoors when he came in with a singular person whom he had picked up on the way, a professional story-teller, who had for three weeks been teaching Irish to the German philologist who had preceded us on the island. He was half blind and of wild appearance ; a small and hairy man, all gesture, and as if set on springs, who spoke somewhat broken English in a roar. He lamented that we could understand no Irish, but, even in English, he had many things to tell, most of which he gave as but “ talk,” making it very clear that we were not to suppose him to vouch for them. His own family, he told us, was said to be descended from the roons, or seals, but that certainly was “ talk” ; and a witch had, only nine months back, been driven out of the island by the priest ; and there were many who said they had seen fairies, but for his part he had never seen them. But with this he began to swear on the name of God and the saints, rising from his chair and lifting up his hands, that what he was going to tell us was the truth ; and then he told how a man had once come into his house and admired his young child, who was lying there in his bed, and had not said “ God bless you !” (without which to admire is to envy and to bring under the power of the fairies), and that night, and for many following nights, he had wakened and heard a sound of fighting, and one night had lit a candle, but to no avail, and another night had gathered up the blanket and tried to fling it over the head of whoever might be there, but had caught no one ; only in the morning, going to a box in which fish were kept, he had found blood in the box ; and at this he rose again, and again swore on the name of God and the saints that he was telling us only the truth, and true it was that the child had died ; and as for the man who had ill-wished him, “ I could point him out any day,” he said fiercely. And then, with many other stories of the doings of fairies and

priests (for he was very religious), and of the “ Dane” who had come to the island to learn Irish (“ and he knew all the languages, the Proosy, and the Roosy, and the Span, and the Grig”), he told us how Satan, being led by pride to equal himself with God, looked into the glass in which God only should look, and when Satan looked into the glass, “ Hell was made in a minute.”

Next morning we were to leave early, and at nine o’clock we were rowed out to the hooker, which lifted sail in a good breeze, and upon a somewhat pitching sea, for the second island, Inishmaan, that is, the Middle Island, which is three miles long and a mile and a half broad. We came within easy distance of the shore, after about half an hour’s quick sailing, and a curragh came out to us, rowed by two islanders ; but, finding the sea very rough in Gregory Sound, we took them on board, and, towing the boat after us, went about to the Foul Sound on the southern side of the island, where the sea was much calmer. Here we got into the curragh, sitting motionless for fear a slight movement on the part of any of us should upset it. The curragh is simply the coracle of the ancient Britons, made of wooden laths covered with canvas, and tarred on the outside, bent into the shape of a round-bottomed boat with a raised and pointed prow, and so light that, when on shore, two men can carry it reversed on their heads, like an immense hat or umbrella. As the curragh touched the shore, some of the islanders who had assembled at the edge of the sea came into the water to meet us, and took hold of the boat, and lifted the prow of it upon land, and said, “ You are welcome, you are welcome !” One of them came with us, a nimble peasant of about forty, who led the way up the terraced side of the hill, on which there was a little grass, near the seashore, and then scarce anything but slabs and boulders of stone, to a little ruined oratory, almost filled with an alder tree, the only tree I saw on the island. All around it were grave-stones, half-defaced by the weather, but carved with curious armorial bearings, as it seemed, representing the sun and moon and stars about a cross formed of the Christian monogram. Among the graves were lying huge beams, that had been flung up the hillside from some wrecked vessel in one of the storms that beat upon the island. Going on a little farther we came to the ancient stone fort of Dun Moher, an inclosure slightly larger than Dun Onaght, but smaller than Dun Aengus ; and coming down on the other side, by some stone steps, we made our way, along a very rocky boreen, towards the village that twisted upon a brown zig-zag around the slope of the hill.

In the village we were joined by some more men and children ; and a number of women, wearing the same red clothes that we had seen on the larger island, and looking at us with perhaps scarcely so shy a curiosity (for they were almost too unused to strangers to have adopted a manner of shyness), came out to their doors and looked up at us out of the darkness of many interiors, from where they sat on the ground knitting or carding wool. We passed the chapel, a very modern-looking building, made out of an ancient church, and turned in for a moment to the cottage where the priest sleeps when he comes over from Inishmore on Saturday-night to say early mass on Sunday morning before going on to Inisheer for the second mass. We saw his little white room, very quaint and neat ; and the woman of the house, speaking only Irish, motioned us to sit down, and could hardly be prevented from laying out plates and glasses for us upon the table. As we got a little through the more populous part of the village, we saw ahead of us, down a broad lane, a very handsome girl, holding the end of a long ribbon, decorated with a green bough, across the road. Other girls and some older women were standing by, and, when we came up, the handsome girl, with the low forehead and the sombre blue eyes, cried out laughingly, in her scanty English, “ Cash, cash !” We paid toll, as the custom is, and got her blessing ; and went on our way, leaving the path, and climbing many stone walls, until we came to the great fort of Dun Conor on the hill, the largest of the ancient forts of Aran.

Dun Conor is 227 feet north and south and 115 feet east and west, with walls in three sections, 20 feet high on the outside and 18 feet 7 inches thick. We climbed to the top and

walked around the wall, where the wind blowing in from the sea beat so hard upon us that we could scarcely keep our footing. From this height we could see all over the island lying out beneath us, grey, and broken into squares by the walled fields ; the brown thatch of the village, the smoke coming up from the chimneys, here and there a red shawl or skirt, the grey sand by the sea and the grey sea all round. As we stood on the wall many peasants came slowly about us, climbing up on all sides, and some stood together just inside the entrance, and two or three girls sat down on the other side of the arena, knitting. Presently an old man, scarcely leaning on the stick which he carried in his hand, came towards us, and began slowly to climb the steps. " It is my father," said one of the men ; " he is the oldest man on the island ; he was born in 1812." The old man climbed slowly up to where we stood ; a mild old man, with a pale face, carefully shaved, and a firm mouth, who spoke the best English that we had heard there. " If any gentleman has committed a crime," said the oldest man on the island, " we'll hide him. There was a man killed his father, and he came over here, and we hid him for two months, and he got away safe to America."

As we came down from the fort the old man came with us, and I and another, walking ahead, lingered for some time with the old man by a stone stile. " Have you ever seen the fairies.?" said my friend, and a quaint smile flickered over the old man's face, and with many ohs ! and grave gestures he told us that he had never seen them, but that he had heard them crying in the fort by night ; and one night, as he was going along with his dog, just at the spot where we were then standing, the dog had suddenly rushed at something or some one, and had rushed round and round him, but he could see nothing, though it was bright moonlight, and so light that he could have seen a rat ; and he had followed across several fields, and again the dog had rushed at the thing, and had seemed to be beaten off, and had come back covered with sweat, and panting, but he could see nothing. And there was a man once, he knew the man, and could point him out, who had been out in his boat (and he motioned with his stick to a certain spot on the water), and a sea fairy had seized hold of his boat and tried to come into it ; but he had gone quickly on shore, and the thing, which looked like a man, had turned back into the sea. And there had been a man once on the island who used to talk with the fairies ; and you could hear him going along the roads by night swearing and talking with the fairies. " And have you ever heard," said my friend " of the seals, the roons, turning into men?" " And indeed," said the oldest man on the island, smiling, " I'm a roon, for I'm one of the family they say comes from the roons." " And have you ever heard," said my friend, " of men going back into the sea and turning roons again ?" " I never heard that," said the oldest man on the island reflectively, seeming to ponder over the probability of the occurrence ; " no," he repeated after a pause, " I never heard that."

We came back to the village by the road we had come, and passed again the handsome girl who had taken toll ; she was sitting by the roadside knitting, and looked at us sidelong as we passed, with an almost imperceptible smile in her eyes. We wandered for some time a little vaguely, the amiability of the islanders leading them to bring us in search of various ruins which we imagined to exist, and which they did not like to tell us were not in existence. I found the people on this island even more charming, because a little simpler, more untouched by civilisation, than those on the larger island. They were of necessity a little lonelier, for if few people come to Inishmore, how many have ever spent a night on Inishmaan ? Inishmore has its hotel, but there is no hotel on Inishmaan ; there is indeed one public-house, but there is not even a policeman, so sober, so law-abiding are these islanders. It is true that I succeeded, with some difficulty, and under cover of some mystery, in securing, what I had long wished to taste, a bottle of poteen or illicit whisky. But the brewing of poteen is, after all, almost romantic in its way, with that queer, sophisticated romance of the contraband. That was not the romance I associated with this most peaceful of islands as we walked along the sand on the seashore, passing the kelp-burners, who were collecting long brown trails of seaweed. More than anything I had ever seen, this seashore gave me the sensation of the mystery and the calm of all the islands one has ever dreamed of, all the fortunate islands that have ever been

saved out of the disturbing sea ; this delicate pearl-grey sand, the deeper grey of the stones, the more luminous grey of the water, and so consoling an air as of immortal twilight and the peace of its dreams.

I had been in no haste to leave Inishmore, but I was still more loth to leave Inishmaan ; and I think that it was with reluctance on the part of all of us that we made our way to the curragh which was waiting for us in the water. The islanders waved their caps, and called many good blessings after us as we were rowed back to the hooker, which again lifted sail and set out for the third and smallest island, Inisheer, that is, the South Island.

We set out confidently, but when we had got out of shelter of the shore, the hooker began to rise and fall with some violence ; and by the time we had come within landing distance of Inisheer the waves were dashing upon us with so great an energy that it was impossible to drop anchor, and our skipper advised us not to try to get to land. A curragh set out from the shore, and came some way towards us, riding the waves. It might have been possible, I doubt not, to drop by good luck from the rolling side of the hooker into the pitching bottom of the curragh, and without capsizing the curragh ; but the chances were against it. Tom Joyce, holding on to the ropes of the main-sail, and the most seaman-like of us, in the stern, shouted at each other above the sound of the wind. We were anxious to make for Ballyline, the port nearest to Listoonvarna, on the coast of Clare ; but this Joyce declared to be impossible in such a sea, and with such a wind, and advised that we should make for Ballyvaughan, round Black Head Point, where we should find a safe harbour. It was now about a quarter past one, and we set out for Ballyvaughan with the wind fair behind us. The hooker rode well, and the waves but rarely came over the wind-ward side as she lay over towards her sail, taking leap after leap through the white-edged furrows of the grey water. For two hours and a half we skirted the Clare coast, which came to me, and disappeared from me, as the gunwale dipped or rose on the leeward side. The islands were blotted out behind us long before we had turned the sheer corner of Black Head, the ultimate edge of Ireland, and at last we came round the headland into quieter water, and so, after a short time, into a little harbour of Ballyvaughan, where we set foot on land again, and drove for hours along the Clare coast and inland into Galway, under that sunset of gold fire and white spray, back to Tillyra Castle, where I felt the ground once more solid under my feet.

*Summer, 1896.*

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In Sligo.

*Rosses Point and Glencar.*

Rosses Point is a village of pilots and fishing people, stretching out seawards in a long thin single line of thatched and whitewashed houses along the branch of the sea which goes from the little harbour of Sligo to broaden out into the bay beyond the edge of Dorren's or Coney Island, and the rocks of Dead Man's Point. It is a lazy village, where no one is very rich or very poor, but all are able, without too much exertion, to make just enough not to need to work any harder. The people are slow, sturdy, contented people, with a singular dislike of doing anything for money, except that they let rooms during the summer to the people of Sligo, who make it their watering-place, going in and out daily, when needful, on the little paddle-steamer which plies backward and forward between Sligo and the Point, or on the long car which takes in their messages and their marketing-baskets. Very few people from the outer world ever find their way here ; and there are peasants living at the far end of the village who have never been so far as the village of Lower Rosses, on the other side of the green lands. They know more of the coast of Spain, the River Plate, and the Barbadoes than

they know of the other side of their own mountains, for seafaring men go far. I have just been talking with a seaman, now a pilot here, who has told me of Venice and of the bull-fights he saw at Huelva, and of Antwerp, and the Riga, and Le Havre ; and of the coast of Cornwall, and Milford Haven, and the Firth of Forth ; and of America and the West Indies. Yesterday I saw a bright green parrot on a child's hand ; they have been telling me of " the black girl" who came here from some foreign ship and lived here, and knew better than any one else where to find the plovers' eggs ; and I have seen the rim of a foreign ship, rising out of the sand at low tide, which was wrecked here seventy years ago, and is now turning green under the water.

Men and women, here at the Point, loiter about all day long ; there are benches outside most of the cabins, and they sit there, or on the low, rough wall which skirts the road, or on the big stones at the edge of the water, or upon the green lands. Most of the women are bare-headed, none go barefoot, and only a few of the poorer children. And the children here are very proud. They will row you about all day for nothing, but they will not bring you a can of water from the well if you pay them for it. That is a point of view they have learnt from their parents, and it seems to me a simple and sufficing one. For these people have attained comfort, a certain dignity (that dignity which comes from concerning yourself only with what concerns you), and they have the privilege of living in a beautiful, harmonious place, without any of the distractions which harass poorer or less contented people in towns, and keep them from the one thing worth living for, the leisure to know oneself. This fine laziness of theirs in the open air, with the constant, subduing sense of the sea's peril, its hold upon their lives and fortunes, moulds them often into a self-sufficing manliness, a hardy womanhood ; sometimes it makes them dreamers, and they see fairies and hear the fairy piper calling in the caves.

How, indeed, is it possible that they should not see more of the other world than most folk do, and catch dreams in their nets ? For it is a place of dreams, a grey, gentle place, where the sand melts into the sea, the sea into the sky, and the mountains and the clouds drift one into the other. I have never seen so friendly a sea nor a sea so full of the ecstasy of sleep. On one of those luminous grey days, which are the true atmosphere of the place, it is like being in an eternal morning of twilight to wander over the undulating green lands, fringed at the shore by a soft rim of bent, a pale honey-coloured green, and along the delicate grey sands, from Dead Man's Point to the point of the Third Rosses. The sea comes in softly, rippling against the sand with a low plashing, which even on very warm days has a cool sound and a certain gentleness even on days of rough weather. The headland of Roughley O'Byrne runs on, a wavering line of faint green, from the dark and cloudy masses of the Lissadell woods into the hesitating line of the grey waters. On the other side of the bay Dorren's Island curves around, almost like part of the semi-circle of the mainland, its sickle-point leaning out towards the white lighthouse, which rises up out of the water like a phantom, or the stone image of a wave that has risen up out of the sea on a day of storm. Faint mountains glimmer out to sea, many-coloured mountains close in upon the land, shutting it off from the world of strange cities. And if you go a little in from the sea-edge, over the green lands, you will come to a great pool, where the waters are never troubled nor the reeds still ; but there is always a sighing of wind in the reeds, as of a very gentle and melancholy peace.

Go on a little farther still, and you come to the fighting village of Magherow, where the men are red-bearded, fierce, great shouters, and not readier to row than to do battle with their oars. They come into Rosses Point, generally, at the regatta ; and at that time the Point is at its liveliest, there is much whisky drunk, and many quarrels flame up. There is a great dance, too, most years, at the time of the regatta. It is known as the cake dance, and not so long ago a cake and a bottle of whisky were hung out of a window by green ribbons, the cake for the best woman dancer and the bottle of whisky for the best man dancer. Now there is no cake at all, and if there is much whisky, it is handed over the counter in big glasses, and not hung out of the window by green ribbons. The prize now is money, and so the people of the Point, with

their fine, independent objection to doing anything for money, are less ready to show off their notable powers of dancing ; and the women, who, besides, are getting to prefer the waltzes and quadrilles of the towns, will not take part in the dance at all.

The regatta this year was not too well managed, having passed out of the hands of the village pilots ; and it was unwisely decided that the dance should be held the same evening, outside the door of a public-house where the crews of the losing boats had been drinking at the expense of the captains of the winning boats. It was very dark, and there was a great crowd, a great confusion. A somewhat battered door had been laid down for the dancing, and the press of people kept swaying in upon the narrow limits of the door, where only a few half-tipsy fellows pounded away, lurching into one another's arms. Everybody swayed, and yelled, and encouraged, and expostulated, and the melodion sounded fitfully ; and presently the door was pulled from under the feet of the dancers and the police shouldered into the midst of what would soon have been a very pretty fight. The dance was postponed to Monday, when some of the boats were to race again.

On Monday, at about half-past six, I met eight small boys carrying a large door upon their shoulders. They were coming up through the village to the green lands, where they laid down the door on the grass. About an hour afterwards, as it began to get very dark, the people came slowly up from the village, and a wide ring was made by a rope carried around stakes set in the earth, and the people gathered about the ring, in the middle of which lay the door, lit on one side by a ship's lantern and on the other by the lamp of a bicycle. A chair was put for the judge, who was a pilot and a publican, and one of the few Gaelic speakers in the village, and a man of few words, and a man of weight ; and another chair was put for the musician, who played on the melodion, an instrument which has long since replaced the fiddle as the national instrument of Ireland. A row of very small children lay along the grass inside the rope, the girls in one place, the boys in another. It was so dark that I could only vaguely distinguish, in a curve of very black shadow, the people opposite to me in the circle, and presently it began to rain a little and still we waited. At last a man came forward, and the musician began to play a lively tune on his melodion, keeping time with his feet, and there was a great cry of " Gallagher ! Gallagher !" and much shouting and whistling. It was a shepherd from Lower Rosses, a thin and solemn young man, who began to dance with great vigour and regularity, tapping heavily on the rough boards with very rough and heavy boots. He danced several step-dances, and was much applauded. Then, after a pause, an old man from the Point, Redmond Bruen by name, a pilot, who had very cunningly won the duck-hunt at the regatta, stepped forward unevenly, and began to walk about on the door, shuffling his feet, bowing to right and left, and waving a stick that he held in his hand. " When he's sober, he's a great dancer," we were assured. He was not sober, and at first did no more than shuffle. Then he stopped, seemed to recollect himself, and the reputation he had to keep up, and with more bowing to the public, began to sing, with variations, a song popular among the Irish peasants, " On the Rocky Road to Dublin." It is a dramatic song, and after every stanza he acted, in his dance, the fight on the road, the passage from Holyhead, and the other stirring incidents of the song. The old man swayed there in the vague light, between the two lanterns, a whimsical and pathetic figure, with his grey beard, his helpless gestures, and the random gaiety of his legs ; he danced with a wonderful lightness, and one could but just hear his boots passing over the boards.

We applauded him with enthusiasm, and he came and sat on the grass inside the ring, near the children, who were gradually creeping closer in ; and his place was taken by the serious Gallagher, who was quite sober, and who pounded away like clockwork, holding his body quite stiff, and rattling his boots with great agility. The old man watched him keenly, and presently got up and made for the door again. He began to dance, stopped, flung off his coat, and set off again with a certain elaboration, variety, and even delicacy in his dancing, which would have won him the prize, I think, if he had been sober enough to make the most of his

qualities. He at least thoroughly appreciated his own skill. "That's a good reel," he would say when he halted for breath and emphasis.

Meanwhile Gallagher was looking for a partner, and one or two young fellows took the boards, and did each a single dance, in pairs or singly. Then a young man who, like Bruen, was "a grand dancer when sober," but who was even less sober than Bruen, reeled across the grass, kicked over one of the lanterns, and began to dance opposite Gallagher. Then he pushed Gallagher off the board and danced by himself. He was in his shirt-sleeves and without hat or collar, and much of his dance was merely an unsteady walking. He stopped frequently, and appeared to think ; and, after much thinking, it occurred to him that it was the music which would not keep time with his dancing. So he walked up to the musician, snatched the melodion away from him, and marched off with it, I suppose to find another player. He passed into the darkness ; the melodion in his hands squealed out of the darkness. Then he came back dangling it, and was told to give it back again, which he did sulkily, with exactly the look and gesture of a naughty child who has been called to order. And then Gallagher came forward again, and, taking off his hat, said he would sing a song. He got through a verse or two, chanting gravely in a kind of sing-song, and then, coming to the line, "And *he* said to the landlord," paused, and said, "I am not able to do any more." There was a great laugh, and Gallagher returned to his dancing, in which he was presently joined by a new rival. Gallagher got the prize.

I was told that so poor a dance had not been seen before at Rosses Point, and the blame was laid on new ways, and the coming of the waltzes and quadrilles, and the folly of young people who think old things not good enough for them. And the old people shook their heads that night over the turf fires in their cabins.

Seven miles inland from Rosses Point the mountains open, and, entering a great hollow called the Windy Gap, you come upon a small lake with green fields around it and mountains full of woods and waterfalls rising up behind it. This is Glencar, and there is a cabin by the side of the lake where I spent a few enchanted days of rain and sunshine, wandering over the mountain-side and among the wild and delicate woods. Above the cabin there is a great mountain, and the woods climb from about the cabin to almost the summit of the mountain. Fir trees rise up like marching banners, line upon line ; between them the foliage is softer, green moss grows on the tree-trunks and ferns out of the moss ; quicken-berries flame on the heights above the streams ; the many-coloured green of leaves is starred with bright orange, shadowed with spectral blue, clouded with the exquisite ashen pallor of decaying heather. Rocky steps lead from height to height along the edge of chasms veiled with leafy branches, and there is always a sound of many waters, falling in torrents down black stairways of rock, and rushing swiftly along narrow passages between grass and ferns. Here and there a bridge of fallen trunks, set roughly together, and covered with the adventurous soil, which, in these parts, bears fruit wherever it has an inch to cling to, crosses a waterfall just above the actual descent. Winding paths branch off in every direction, and in the soft earth of these narrow and precipitous ways one can see little hoof-prints, and occasionally one meets a donkey going slowly uphill, with the creels on its back, to fetch turf from the bog. And always there is the sound of water, like the cool singing voice of the rocks, above the sound of rustling leaves, and birds piping, and the flapping of great wings, which are the voices of the many-instrumented orchestra of the woods. Here one is in the heart of the mountains and in the heart of the forest ; and, wandering along a grassy path at evening, one seems to be very close to something very ancient and secret.

The mountains here are whole regions, and when you have climbed to their summit through the woods, you find yourself on a vast plain, and this plain stretches so far that it seems to fill the horizon and you cannot see anything on the other side of it. Looking down into the valley, which seems scooped out of the solid mountains, you can see, on the other

side of the Windy Gap, the thin line of Rosses Point going out into the sea, and the sea stretches out so far before it reaches the horizon that you can catch a yellow glimmer of sunlight, lying out beyond the horizon visible from the shore.

The fields, around and beyond the polished mirror of the lake, seem, in their patchwork of greens and browns, like a little map of the world. The mountain-top, which you have fancied from below to be such solid ground, proves, if you try to cross it, to be a great yielding bog, with intervals of rock or hard soil. To walk over it is to move in short jumps, with an occasional longer leap across a dried-up watercourse. I like the voluptuous softness of the bog, for one's feet sink luxuriously into even the pale golden mounds of moss which rise between the rusty heather and starveling grasses of the sheer morass. And it has the treachery which is always one of the allurements of voluptuous things. Nor is it the bog only which is treacherous on these mountains. The mist comes down on them very suddenly, and in that white darkness even the natives sometimes lose their way, and are drawn over the sheer edge of the mountain. My host has just come in to tell me that last night there was a great brewing of poteen on Ben Bulben, and that many of the drinkers wandered all night, losing their way in the mist, and that one of them, not having the drunkard's luck, fell over a rocky place, and is now lying dead on the mountain.

I had been thinking of such possibilities yesterday as I climbed, peak after peak, the mountains on the other side of the lake. Cope's Mountain, Lugnagall, Cashlagall, Cragnamoona. They are bare and treeless, crossed by a few donkey-tracks, and I sometimes deserted these looped and coiling ways for the more hazardous directness of the dry watercourses which seam the mountains from head to foot. Once at the top, you look over almost the whole county, lying out in a green plain, ridged with hedges, clustered with woods, glittering with lakes ; here and there a white cabin, a scattered village, and just below, in the hollow of the land and water, the little curving grey town of Sligo, with its few ships resting in harbour, and beyond them the long black line which is Rosses Point, and then the sea, warm with sunlight, and, as if islanded in the sea, the hills of Mayo. I have never seen anything resembling the view from these mountains ; I have never seen anything, in its way, more beautiful. And when, last night, after a tossed and blood-red sunset, the white mist curdled about the heads of Ben Bulben and Knocknarea, and a faint, luminous mist filled the whole hollow of the valley, there seemed to be a mingling of all the worlds ; and the world in which ships went out from the harbour of Sligo, and the poteen-makers wandered over the mountain, was not more real than the world of embodied dreams in which the fairies dance in their forts, or beat at the cabin doors, or chuckle among the reeds.

*Summer*, 1896.

Cities and sea-coasts and islands (1919)

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