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 sea-faring 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 anyone 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 gray, 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 gray 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 gray 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 gray waters. On the other side of the bay Dorren's Island curves around, almost like part of the semicircle 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 further 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 whiskey 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 whiskey were hung out of a window by green ribbons, the cake for the best woman dancer, and the bottle of whiskey for the best man dancer. Now there is no cake at all, and if there is much whiskey, 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 gray 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 up-hill, 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 water-course. 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 water-courses 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 gray 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.

ARTHUR SYMONS.