

DRUMCLIFF AND ROSSES

Drumcliff and Rosses were, are, and ever shall be, please Heaven! places of unearthly resort. I have lived near by them and in them, time after time, and have gathered thus many a crumb of faery lore. Drumcliff is a wide green valley, lying at the foot of Ben Bulbin, the mountain in whose side the square white door swings open at nightfall to loose the faery riders on the world. The great St. Columba himself, the builder of many of the old ruins in the valley, climbed the mountains on one notable day to get near heaven with his prayers. Rosses is a little sea-dividing, sandy plain, covered with short grass, like a green tablecloth, and lying in the foam midway between the round cairn-headed Knocknarea and "Ben Bulbin, famous for hawks":

But for Benbulbin and Knocknarea
Many a poor sailor'd be cast away,

as the rhyme goes.

At the northern corner of Rosses is a little promontory of sand and rocks and grass: a mournful, haunted place. No wise peasant would fall asleep under its low cliff, for he who sleeps here may wake "silly," the "good people" having carried off his soul. There is no more ready shortcut to the dim kingdom than this ploverly headland, for, covered and smothered now from sight by mounds of sand, a long cave goes thither "full of gold and silver, and the most beautiful parlours and drawing-rooms." Once, before the sand covered it, a dog strayed in, and was heard yelping helplessly deep underground in a fort far inland. These forts or raths, made before modern history had begun, cover all Rosses and all Columkille. The one where the dog yelped has, like most others, an underground beehive chamber in the midst. Once when I was poking about there, an unusually intelligent and "reading" peasant who had come with me, and waited outside, knelt down by the opening, and whispered in a timid voice, "Are you all right, sir?" I had been some little while underground, and he feared I had been carried off like the dog.

No wonder he was afraid, for the fort has long been circled by ill-boding rumours. It is on the ridge of a small hill, on whose northern slope lie a few stray cottages. One night a farmer's young son came from one of them and saw the fort all flaming, and ran towards it, but the "glamour" fell on him, and he sprang on to a fence, cross-legged, and commenced beating it with a stick, for he imagined the fence was a horse, and that all night long he went on the most wonderful ride through the country. In the morning he was still beating his fence, and they carried him home, where he remained a simpleton for three years before he came to himself again. A little later a farmer tried to level the fort. His cows and horses died, and an manner of trouble overtook him, and finally he himself was led home, and left useless with "his head on his knees by the fire to the day of his death."

A few hundred yards southwards of the northern angle of Rosses is another angle having also its cave, though this one is not covered with sand. About twenty years ago a brig was wrecked near by, and three or four fishermen were put to watch the deserted hulk through the darkness. At midnight they saw sitting on a stone at the cave's mouth two red-capped fiddlers fiddling with all their might. The men fled. A great crowd of villagers rushed down to the cave to see the fiddlers, but the creatures had gone.

To the wise peasant the green hills and woods round him are full of never-fading mystery. When the aged countrywoman stands at her door in the evening, and, in her own words, "looks at the mountains and thinks of the goodness of God," God is all the nearer, because the pagan powers are not far: because northward in Ben Bulbin, famous for hawks, the white square door swings open at sundown, and those wild unchristian riders rush forth upon the fields, while southward the White Lady, who is doubtless Maive herself, wanders under the broad cloud nightcap of Knocknarea. How may she doubt these things, even though the priest shakes his head at her? Did not a herd-boy, no long while since, see the White Lady? She passed so close that the skirt of her dress touched him. "He fell down, and was dead three days." But this is merely the small gossip of faerydom—the little stitches that join this world and the other.

One night as I sat eating Mrs. H——'s soda-bread, her husband told me a longish story, much the best of all I heard in Rosses. Many a poor man from Fin M'Cool to our own days has had some such adventure to tell of, for those creatures, the "good people," love to repeat themselves. At any rate the story-tellers do. "In the times when we used to travel by the canal," he said, "I was coming down from Dublin. When we came to Mullingar the canal ended, and I began to walk, and stiff and fatigued I was after the slowness. I had some friends with me, and now and then we walked, now and then we rode in a cart. So on till we saw some girls milking cows, and stopped to joke with them. After a while we asked them for a drink of milk. 'We have nothing to put it in here,' they said, 'but come to the house with us.' We went home with them, and sat round the fire talking. After a while the others went, and left me, loath to stir from the good fire. I asked the girls for something to eat. There was a pot on the fire, and they took the meat out and put it on a plate, and told me to eat only the meat that came off the head. When I had eaten, the girls went out, and I did not see them again. It grew darker and darker, and there I still sat, loath as ever to leave the good fire, and after a while two men came in, carrying between them a corpse. When I saw them, coming I hid behind the door. Says one to the other, putting the corpse on the spit, 'Who'll turn the spit? Says the other, 'Michael H——, come out of that and turn the meat.' I came out all of a tremble, and began turning the spit. 'Michael H——,' says the one who spoke first, 'if you let it burn we'll have to put you on the spit instead'; and on that they went out. I sat there trembling and turning the corpse till towards midnight. The men came again, and the one said it was burnt, and the other said it was done right. But having fallen out over it, they both said they would do me no harm that time; and, sitting by the fire, one of them cried out: 'Michael H——, can you tell me a story?' 'Divil a one,' said I. On which he caught me by the shoulder, and put me out like a shot. It was a wild blowing night. Never in all my born days did I see such a night—the darkest night that ever came out of the heavens. I did not know where I was for the life of me. So when one of the men came after me and touched me on the shoulder, with a 'Michael H——, can you tell a story now?' 'I can,' says I. In he brought me; and putting me by the fire, says: 'Begin.' 'I have no story but the one,' says I, 'that I was sitting here, and you two men brought in a corpse and put it on the spit, and set me turning it.' 'That will do,' says he; 'ye may go in there and lie down on the bed.' And I went, nothing loath; and in the morning where was I but in the middle of a green field!"

"Drumcliff" is a great place for omens. Before a prosperous fishing season a herring-barrel appears in the midst of a storm-cloud; and at a place called Columkille's Strand, a place of marsh and mire, an ancient boat, with St. Columba himself, comes floating in from sea on a moonlight night: a portent of a brave harvesting. They have their dread portents too. Some few seasons ago a fisherman saw, far on the horizon, renowned Hy Brazel, where he who touches shall find no more labour or care, nor cynic laughter, but shall go walking about under shadiest bosage, and enjoy the conversation of Cuchullin and his heroes. A vision of Hy Brazel forebodes national troubles.

Drumcliff and Rosses are chokeful of ghosts. By bog, road, rath, hillside, sea-border they gather in all shapes: headless women, men in armour, shadow hares, fire-tongued hounds, whistling seals, and so on. A whistling seal sank a ship the other day. At Drumcliff there is a very ancient graveyard. The Annals of the Four Masters have this verse about a soldier named Denadhach, who died in 871: "A pious soldier of the race of Con lies under hazel crosses at Drumcliff." Not very long ago an old woman, turning to go into the churchyard at night to pray, saw standing before her a man in armour, who asked her where she was going. It was the "pious soldier of the race of Con," says local wisdom, still keeping watch, with his ancient piety, over the graveyard. Again, the custom is still common hereabouts of sprinkling the doorstep with the blood of a chicken on the death of a very young child, thus (as belief is) drawing into the blood the evil spirits from the too weak soul. Blood is a great gatherer of evil spirits. To cut your hand on a stone on going into a fort is said to be very dangerous.

There is no more curious ghost in Drumcliff or Rosses than the snipe-ghost. There is a bush behind a house in a village that I know well: for excellent reasons I do not say whether in Drumcliff or Rosses or on the slope of Ben Bulbin, or even on the plain round Knocknarea. There is a history concerning the house and the bush. A man once lived there who found on the quay of Sligo a package containing three hundred pounds in notes. It was dropped by a foreign sea captain. This my man knew, but said nothing. It was money for freight, and the sea captain, not daring to face his owners, committed suicide in mid-ocean. Shortly afterwards my man died. His soul could not rest. At any rate, strange sounds were heard round his house, though that had grown and prospered since the freight money. The wife was often seen by those still alive out in the garden praying at the bush I have spoken of, for the shade of the dead man appeared there at times. The bush remains to this day: once portion of a hedge, it now stands by itself, for no one dare put spade or pruning-knife about it. As to the strange sounds and voices, they did not cease till a few years ago, when, during some repairs, a snipe flew out of the solid plaster and away; the troubled ghost, say the neighbours, of the note-finder was at last dislodged.

My forebears and relations have lived near Rosses and Drumcliff these many years. A few miles northward I am wholly a stranger, and can find nothing. When I ask for stories of the faeries, my answer is some such as was given me by a woman who lives near a white stone fort—one of the few stone ones in Ireland—under the seaward angle of Ben Bulbin: "They always mind their own affairs and I always mind mine": for it is dangerous to talk of the creatures. Only friendship for yourself or knowledge of your forebears will loosen these cautious tongues. My friend, "the sweet Harp-String" (I give no more than his Irish name for fear of gaugers), has the science of unpacking the stubbornest heart, but then he supplies the potheen-makers with grain from his own fields. Besides, he is descended from a noted Gaelic magician who raised the "dhouli" in Great Eliza's century, and he has a kind of prescriptive right to hear tell of all kind of other-world creatures. They are almost relations of his, if all people say concerning the parentage of magicians be true.