Riders to the Sea

J. M. (John Millington) Synge

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A PLAY IN ONE ACT

by J. M. Synge

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INTRODUCTION

It must have been on Synge's second visit to the Aran Islands that he had the experience out of which was wrought what many believe to be his greatest play. The scene of "Riders to the Sea" is laid in a cottage on Inishmaan, the middle and most interesting island of the Aran group. While Synge was on Inishmaan, the story came to him of a man whose body had been washed up on the far away coast of Donegal, and who, by reason of certain peculiarities of dress, was suspected to be from the island. In due course, he was recognised as a native of Inishmaan, in exactly the manner described in the play, and perhaps one of the most poignantly vivid passages in Synge's book on "The Aran Islands" relates the incident of his burial.

The other element in the story which Synge introduces into the play is equally true. Many tales of "second sight" are to be heard among Celtic races. In fact, they are so common as to arouse little or no

wonder in the minds of the people. It is just such a tale, which there seems no valid reason for doubting, that Synge heard, and that gave the title, “Riders to the Sea”, to his play.

It is the dramatist’s high distinction that he has simply taken the materials which lay ready to his hand, and by the power of sympathy woven them, with little modification, into a tragedy which, for dramatic irony and noble pity, has no equal among its contemporaries. Great tragedy, it is frequently claimed with some show of justice, has perforce departed with the advance of modern life and its complicated tangle of interests and creature comforts. A highly developed civilisation, with its attendant specialisation of culture, tends ever to lose sight of those elemental forces, those primal emotions, naked to wind and sky, which are the stuff from which great drama is wrought by the artist, but which, as it would seem, are rapidly departing from us. It is only in the far places, where solitary communion may be had with the elements, that this dynamic life is still to be found continuously, and it is accordingly thither that the dramatist, who would deal with spiritual life disengaged from the environment of an intellectual maze, must go for that experience which will beget in him inspiration for his art. The Aran Islands from which Synge gained his inspiration are rapidly losing that sense of isolation and self-dependence, which has hitherto been their rare distinction, and which furnished the motivation for Synge’s masterpiece. Whether or not Synge finds a successor, it is none the less true that in English dramatic literature “Riders to the Sea” has an historic value which it would be difficult to over-estimate in its accomplishment and its possibilities. A writer in The Manchester Guardian shortly after Synge’s death phrased it rightly when he wrote

that it is “the tragic masterpiece of our language in our time; wherever it has been played in Europe from Galway to Prague, it has made the word tragedy mean something more profoundly stirring and cleansing to the spirit than it did.”

The secret of the play’s power is its capacity for standing afar off, and mingling, if we may say so, sympathy with relentlessness. There is a wonderful beauty of speech in the words of every character, wherein the latent power of suggestion is almost unlimited. “In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old.” In the quavering rhythm of these words, there is poignantly present that quality of strangeness and remoteness in beauty which, as we are coming to realise, is the touchstone of Celtic literary art. However, the very asceticism of the play has begotten a corresponding power which lifts Synge’s work far out of the current of the Irish literary revival, and sets it high in a timeless atmosphere of universal action.

Its characters live and die. It is their virtue in life to be lonely, and none but the lonely man in tragedy may be great. He dies, and then it is the virtue in life of the women mothers and wives and sisters to be great in their loneliness, great as Maurya, the stricken mother, is great in her final word.

“Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied.” The pity and the terror of it all have brought a great peace, the peace that passeth

understanding, and it is because the play holds this timeless peace after the storm which has bowed down every character, that “Riders to the Sea” may rightly take its place as the greatest modern tragedy in the English tongue.

EDWARD J. O’BRIEN.

February 23, 1911.

RIDERS TO THE SEA

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

First performed at the Molesworth Hall, Dublin, February 25th, 1904.

PERSONS

MAURYA (_an old woman_)..... Honor Lavelle BARTLEY (_her son_)..... W. G. Fay CATHLEEN (_her daughter_).... Sarah Allgood NORA (_a younger daughter_).. Emma Vernon MEN AND WOMEN

SCENE.

An Island off the West of Ireland. (Cottage kitchen, with nets, oil-skins, spinning wheel, some new boards standing by the wall, etc. Cathleen, a girl of about twenty, finishes kneading cake, and puts it down in the pot-oven by the fire; then wipes her hands, and begins to

spin at the wheel. Nora, a young girl, puts her head in at the door.)

NORA. _In a low voice._—Where is she?

CATHLEEN. She’s lying down, God help her, and may be sleeping, if she’s able.

[_Nora comes in softly, and takes a bundle from under her shawl._]

CATHLEEN. _Spinning the wheel rapidly._—What is it you have?

NORA.
The young priest is after bringing them. It’s a shirt and a plain stocking were got off a drowned man in Donegal.

[_Cathleen stops her wheel with a sudden movement, and leans out to listen._]

NORA.
We’re to find out if it’s Michael’s they are, some time herself will be down looking by the sea.

CATHLEEN.
How would they be Michael’s, Nora. How would he go the length of that way to the far north?

NORA. The young priest says he’s known the like of it. “If it’s Michael’s they are,” says he, “you can tell herself he’s got a clean burial by the grace of God, and if they’re not his, let no one say a word about them, for she’ll be getting her death,” says he, “with crying and lamenting.”

[_The door which Nora half closed is blown open by a gust of wind._]

CATHLEEN.
Looking out anxiously.—Did you ask him would he stop Bartley going
this day with the horses to the Galway fair?

NORA. “I won’t stop him,” says he, “but let you not be afraid. Herself does be saying prayers half through the night, and the Almighty God won’t leave her destitute,” says he, “with no son living.”

CATHLEEN. Is the sea bad by the white rocks, Nora?

NORA. Middling bad, God help us. There’s a great roaring in the west, and it’s worse it’ll be getting when the tide’s turned to the wind.

[_She goes over to the table with the bundle._]

Shall I open it now?

CATHLEEN. Maybe she’d wake up on us, and come in before we’d done.

[_Coming to the table._]

It’s a long time we’ll be, and the two of us crying.

NORA.
Goes to the inner door and listens.—She’s moving about on the bed. She’ll be coming in a minute.

CATHLEEN. Give me the ladder, and I’ll put them up in the turf-loft, the way she won’t know of them at all, and maybe when the tide turns she’ll be going down to see would he be floating from the east.

[_They put the ladder against the gable of the chimney; Cathleen goes

up a few steps and hides the bundle in the turf-loft. Maurya comes from the inner room._]

MAURYA.
Looking up at Cathleen and speaking querulously.—Isn't it turf enough
you have for this day and evening?

CATHLEEN. There's a cake baking at the fire for a short space. [_Throwing down the turf_] and Bartley will want it when the tide turns if he goes to Connemara.

[_Nora picks up the turf and puts it round the pot-oven._]

MAURYA. _Sitting down on a stool at the fire._—He won't go this day with the wind rising from the south and west. He won't go this day, for the young priest will stop him surely.

NORA.
He'll not stop him, mother, and I heard Eamon Simon and Stephen Pheety
and Colum Shawn saying he would go.

MAURYA. Where is he itself?

NORA. He went down to see would there be another boat sailing in the week, and I'm thinking it won't be long till he's here now, for the tide's turning at the green head, and the hooker' tacking from the east.

CATHLEEN. I hear some one passing the big stones.

NORA. _Looking out._—He's coming now, and he's in a hurry.

BARTLEY. _Comes in and looks round the room. Speaking sadly

and quietly._—Where is the bit of new rope, Cathleen, was bought in Connemara?

CATHLEEN. _Coming down._—Give it to him, Nora; it's on a nail by the white boards. I hung it up this morning, for the pig with the black feet was eating it.

NORA. _Giving him a rope._—Is that it, Bartley?

MAURYA. You'd do right to leave that rope, Bartley, hanging by the boards [_Bartley takes the rope_]. It will be wanting in this place, I'm telling you, if Michael is washed up to-morrow morning, or the next morning, or any morning in the week, for it's a deep grave we'll make him by the grace of God.

BARTLEY. _Beginning to work with the rope._—I've no halter the way I can ride down on the mare, and I must go now quickly. This is the one boat going for two weeks or beyond it, and the fair will be a good fair for horses I heard them saying below.

MAURYA. It's a hard thing they'll be saying below if the body is washed up and there's no man in it to make the coffin, and I after giving a big price for the finest white boards you'd find in Connemara.

[_She looks round at the boards._]

BARTLEY. How would it be washed up, and we after looking each day for nine days, and a strong wind blowing a while back from the west and south?

MAURYA. If it wasn't found itself, that wind is raising the sea, and there was a star up against the moon, and it rising in the night. If it

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