Riders to the Sea

by J. M. Synge

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Riders to the Sea

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 was a hundred horses, or a thousand horses you had itself, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only?

BARTLEY. Working at the halter, to Cathleen.—Let you go down each day, and see the sheep aren't jumping in on the rye, and if the jobber comes you can sell the pig with the black feet if there is a good price going.

MAURYA. How would the like of her get a good price for a pig?

BARTLEY. To Cathleen.—If the west wind holds with the last bit of the moon let you and Nora get up weed enough for another cock for the kelp. It's hard set we'll be from this day with no one in it but one man to work.

MAURYA. It's hard set we'll be surely the day you're drownd'd with the rest. What way will I live and the girls with me, and I an old woman looking for the grave?

[Bartley lays down the halter, takes off his old coat, and puts on a newer one of the same flannel.]

BARTLEY. To Nora.—Is she coming to the pier?

NORA. Looking out.—She's passing the green head and letting fall her sails.

BARTLEY. Getting his purse and tobacco.—I'll have half an hour to go down, and you'll see me coming again in two days, or in three days, or maybe in four days if the wind is bad.

MAURYA. Turning round to the fire, and putting her shawl over her head.—Isn't it a hard and cruel man won't hear a word from an old woman, and she holding him from the sea?

CATHLEEN. It's the life of a young man to be going on the sea, and who would listen to an old woman with one thing and she saying it over?

BARTLEY. Taking the halter.—I must go now quickly. I'll ride down on the red mare, and the gray pony'll run behind me. . . The blessing of God on you.

[He goes out.]

MAURYA. Crying out as he is in the door.—He's gone now, God spare us, and we'll not see him again. He's gone now, and when the black night is falling I'll have no son left me in the world.

CATHLEEN. Why wouldn't you give him your blessing and he looking round in the door? Isn't it sorrow enough is on every one in this house without your sending him out with an unlucky word behind him, and a hard word in his ear?

[Maurya takes up the tongs and begins raking the fire aimlessly without looking round.]

NORA. Turning towards her.—You're taking away the turf from the cake.

CATHLEEN. Crying out.—The Son of God forgive us, Nora, we're after forgetting his bit of bread.

[She comes over to the fire.]

NORA. And it's destroyed he'll be going till dark night, and he after eating nothing since the sun went up.

CATHLEEN. Turning the cake out of the oven.—It's destroyed he'll be, surely. There's no sense left on any person in a house where an old woman will be talking for ever.

[Maurya sways herself on her stool.]

CATHLEEN. Cutting off some of the bread and rolling it in a cloth; to Maurya.—Let you go down now to the spring well and give him this and he passing. You'll see him then and the dark word will be broken, and you can say "God speed you," the way he'll be easy in his mind.

MAURYA. Taking the bread.—Will I be in it as soon as himself?

CATHLEEN. If you go now quickly.

MAURYA. Standing up unsteadily.—It's hard set I am to walk.

CATHLEEN. Looking at her anxiously.—Give her the stick, Nora, or maybe she'll slip on the big stones.

NORA. What stick?

CATHLEEN. The stick Michael brought from Connemara.

MAURYA. Taking a stick Nora gives her.—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.

[She goes out slowly. Nora goes over to the ladder.]

CATHLEEN. Wait, Nora, maybe she'd turn back quickly. She's that sorry, God help her, you wouldn't know the thing she'd do.

NORA. Is she gone round by the bush?

CATHLEEN. Looking out.—She's gone now. Throw it down quickly, for the Lord knows when she'll be out of it again.

NORA. Getting the bundle from the loft.—The young priest said he'd be passing to-morrow, and we might go down and speak to him below if it's Michael's they are surely.

CATHLEEN. Taking the bundle.—Did he say what way they were found?

NORA. Coming down.—"There were two men," says he, "and they rowing round with poteen before the cocks crowed, and the oar of one of them caught the body, and they passing the black cliffs of the north."

CATHLEEN. Trying to open the bundle.—Give me a knife, Nora, the string's perished with the salt water, and there's a black knot on it you wouldn't loosen in a week.

NORA. Giving her a knife.—I've heard tell it was a long way to Donegal.

CATHLEEN. Cutting the string.—It is surely. There was a man in here a while ago—the man sold us that knife—and he said if you set off walking from the rocks beyond, it would be seven days you'd be in Donegal.

NORA. And what time would a man take, and he floating?

[Cathleen opens the bundle and takes out a bit of a stocking. They look at them eagerly.]

CATHLEEN. In a low voice.—The Lord spare us, Nora! isn't it a queer hard thing to say if it's his they are surely?

NORA. I'll get his shirt off the hook the way we can put the one flannel on the other

[she looks through some clothes hanging in the corner.] It's not with them, Cathleen, and where will it be?

CATHLEEN. I'm thinking Bartley put it on him in the morning, for his own shirt was heavy with the salt in it [pointing to the corner]. There's a bit of a sleeve was of the same stuff. Give me that and it will do.

[Nora brings it to her and they compare the flannel.]

CATHLEEN. It's the same stuff, Nora; but if it is itself aren't there great rolls of it in the shops of Galway, and isn't it many another man may have a shirt of it as well as Michael himself?

NORA. Who has taken up the stocking and counted the stitches, crying out.—It's Michael, Cathleen, it's Michael; God spare his soul, and what will herself say when she hears this story, and Bartley on the sea?

CATHLEEN. Taking the stocking.—It's a plain stocking.

NORA. It's the second one of the third pair I knitted, and I put up three score stitches, and I dropped four of them.

CATHLEEN. Counts the stitches.—It's that number is in it [crying out.] Ah, Nora, isn't it a bitter thing to think of him floating that way to the far north, and no one to keen him but the black hags that do be flying on the sea?

NORA. Swinging herself round, and throwing out her arms on the clothes.—And isn't it a pitiful thing when there is nothing left of a man who was a great rower and fisher, but a bit of an old shirt and a plain stocking?

CATHLEEN. After an instant.—Tell me is herself coming, Nora? I hear a little sound on the path.

NORA. Looking out.—She is, Cathleen. She's coming up to the door.

CATHLEEN. Put these things away before she'll come in. Maybe it's easier she'll be after giving her blessing to Bartley, and we won't let on we've heard anything the

time he’s on the sea.

NORA. Helping Cathleen to close the bundle.—We’ll put them here in the corner.

[They put them into a hole in the chimney corner. Cathleen goes back to the spinning-wheel.]

NORA. Will she see it was crying I was?

CATHLEEN. Keep your back to the door the way the light’ll not be on you.

[Nora sits down at the chimney corner, with her back to the door. Maurya comes in very slowly, without looking at the girls, and goes over to her stool at the other side of the fire. The cloth with the bread is still in her hand. The girls look at each other, and Nora points to the bundle of bread.]

CATHLEEN. After spinning for a moment.—You didn’t give him his bit of bread?

[Maurya begins to keen softly, without turning round.]

CATHLEEN. Did you see him riding down?

[Maurya goes on keening.]

CATHLEEN. A little impatiently.—God forgive you; isn’t it a better thing to raise your voice and tell what you seen, than to be making lamentation for a thing that’s done? Did you see Bartley, I’m saying to you?

MAURYA. With a weak voice.—My heart’s broken from this day.

CATHLEEN. As before.—Did you see Bartley?

MAURYA. I seen the fearfulest thing.

CATHLEEN. Leaves her wheel and looks out.—God forgive you; he’s riding the mare now over the green head, and the gray pony behind him.

MAURYA. Starts, so that her shawl falls back from her head and shows her white tossed hair. With a frightened voice.—The gray pony behind him.

CATHLEEN. Coming to the fire.—What is it ails you, at all?

MAURYA. Speaking very slowly.—I've seen the fearfulest thing any person has seen, since the day Bride Dara seen the dead man with the child in his arms.

CATHLEEN AND NORA. Uah.

[They crouch down in front of the old woman at the fire.]

NORA. Tell us what it is you seen.

MAURYA. I went down to the spring well, and I stood there saying a prayer to myself. Then Bartley came along, and he riding on the red mare with the gray pony behind him [she puts up her hands, as if to hide something from her eyes.] The Son of God spare us, Nora!

CATHLEEN. What is it you seen.

MAURYA. I seen Michael himself.

CATHLEEN. Speaking softly.—You did not, mother; it wasn't Michael you seen, for his body is after being found in the far north, and he's got a clean burial by the grace of God.

MAURYA. A little defiantly.—I'm after seeing him this day, and he riding and galloping. Bartley came first on the red mare; and I tried to say "God speed you," but something choked the words in my throat. He went by quickly; and "the blessing of God on you," says he, and I could say nothing. I looked up then, and I crying, at the gray pony, and there was Michael upon it—with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet.

CATHLEEN. Begins to keen.—It's destroyed we are from this day. It's destroyed, surely.

NORA. Didn't the young priest say the Almighty God wouldn't leave her destitute with no son living?

MAURYA. In a low voice, but clearly.—It's little the like of him knows of the sea. . . . Bartley will be lost now, and let you call in Eamon and make me a good coffin

out of the white boards, for I won't live after them. I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house—six fine men, though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming to the world—and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they're gone now the lot of them. . . There were Stephen, and Shawn, were lost in the great wind, and found after in the Bay of Gregory of the Golden Mouth, and carried up the two of them on the one plank, and in by that door.

[She pauses for a moment, the girls start as if they heard something through the door that is half open behind them.]

NORA. In a whisper.—Did you hear that, Cathleen? Did you hear a noise in the north-east?

CATHLEEN. In a whisper.—There's some one after crying out by the seashore.

MAURYA. Continues without hearing anything.—There was Sheamus and his father, and his own father again, were lost in a dark night, and not a stick or sign was seen of them when the sun went up. There was Patch after was drowned out of a curagh that turned over. I was sitting here with Bartley, and he a baby, lying on my two knees, and I seen two women, and three women, and four women coming in, and they crossing themselves, and not saying a word. I looked out then, and there were men coming after them, and they holding a thing in the half of a red sail, and water dripping out of it—it was a dry day, Nora—and leaving a track to the door.

[She pauses again with her hand stretched out towards the door. It opens softly and old women begin to come in, crossing themselves on the threshold, and kneeling down in front of the stage with red petticoats over their heads.]

MAURYA. Half in a dream, to Cathleen.—Is it Patch, or Michael, or what is it at all?

CATHLEEN. Michael is after being found in the far north, and when he is found there how could he be here in this place?

MAURYA. There does be a power of young men floating round in the sea, and what way would they know if it was Michael they had, or another man like him, for when a man is nine days in the sea, and the wind blowing, it’s hard set his own mother would be to say what man was it.

CATHLEEN. It’s Michael, God spare him, for they’re after sending us a bit of his clothes from the far north.

[She reaches out and hands Maurya the clothes that belonged to Michael. Maurya stands up slowly, and takes them into her hands. Nora looks out.]

NORA. They’re carrying a thing among them and there’s water dripping out of it and leaving a track by the big stones.

CATHLEEN. In a whisper to the women who have come in.—Is it Bartley it is?

ONE OF THE WOMEN. It is surely, God rest his soul.

[Two younger women come in and pull out the table. Then men carry in the body of Bartley, laid on a plank, with a bit of a sail over it, and lay it on the table.]

CATHLEEN. To the women, as they are doing so.—What way was he drowned?

ONE OF THE WOMEN. The gray pony knocked him into the sea, and he was washed out where there is a great surf on the white rocks.

[Maurya has gone over and knelt down at the head of the table. The women are keening softly and swaying themselves with a slow movement. Cathleen and Nora kneel at the other end of the table. The men kneel near the door.]

MAURYA. Raising her head and speaking as if she did not see the people around her.—They’re all gone now, and there isn’t anything more the sea can do to me.... I’ll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other. I’ll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I

won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening. [To Nora]. Give me the Holy Water, Nora, there's a small sup still on the dresser.

[Nora gives it to her.]

MAURYA. Drops Michael's clothes across Bartley's feet, and sprinkles the Holy Water over him.—It isn't that I haven't prayed for you, Bartley, to the Almighty God. It isn't that I haven't said prayers in the dark night till you wouldn't know what I'ld be saying; but it's a great rest I'll have now, and it's time surely. It's a great rest I'll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain, if it's only a bit of wet flour we do have to eat, and maybe a fish that would be stinking.

[She kneels down again, crossing herself, and saying prayers under her breath.]

CATHLEEN. To an old man.—Maybe yourself and Eamon would make a coffin when the sun rises. We have fine white boards herself bought, God help her, thinking Michael would be found, and I have a new cake you can eat while you'll be working.

THE OLD MAN. Looking at the boards.—Are there nails with them?

CATHLEEN. There are not, Colum; we didn't think of the nails.

ANOTHER MAN. It's a great wonder she wouldn't think of the nails, and all the coffins she's seen made already.

CATHLEEN. It's getting old she is, and broken.

[Maurya stands up again very slowly and spreads out the pieces of Michael's clothes beside the body, sprinkling them with the last of the Holy Water.]

NORA. In a whisper to Cathleen.—She's quiet now and easy; but the day Michael was drowned you could hear her crying out from this to the spring well. It's fonder she was of Michael, and would any one have thought that?

CATHLEEN. Slowly and clearly.—An old woman will be soon tired with anything she will do, and isn't it nine days herself is after crying and keening, and making

great sorrow in the house?

MAURYA. Puts the empty cup mouth downwards on the table, and lays her hands together on Bartley's feet.—They're all together this time, and the end is come. May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul, and on Michael's soul, and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch, and Stephen and Shawn [bending her head]; and may He have mercy on my soul, Nora, and on the soul of every one is left living in the world.

[She pauses, and the keen rises a little more loudly from the women, then sinks away.]

MAURYA. Continuing.—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.

[She kneels down again and the curtain falls slowly.]

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK RIDERS TO THE SEA ***

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