



# **IN WICKLOW AND WEST KERRY**

**JOHN M. SYNGE**

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IN WICKLOW  
AND  
WEST KERRY

BY  
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For the last few days--I am staying in the Kerry cottage I have spoken of already--the people have been talking of horse-races that were to be held on the sand, not far off and this morning I set out to see them with the man and woman of the house and two of their neighbours. Our way led through a steep boreen for a quarter of a mile to the edge of the sea, and then along a pathway between the cliffs and a straight grassy hill. When we had gone some distance the old man pointed out a slope in front of us, where, he said, Diarmuid had done his tricks of rolling the barrel and jumping over his spear, and had killed many of his enemies. He told me the whole story, slightly familiarized in detail, but not very different from the version everyone knows. A little further on he pointed across the sea to our left--just beyond the strand where the races were to be run--to a neck of sand where, he said, Oisín was called away to the Tir-na-nOg.

'The Tir-na-nOg itself,' he said, 'is below that sea, and a while since there were two men out in a boat in the night-time, and they got stuck outside some way or another. They went to sleep then, and when one of them wakened up he looked down into the sea, and he saw the Tir-na-nOg and people walking about, and side-cars driving in the squares.'

Then he began telling me stories of mermaids--a common subject in this neighbourhood.

'There was one time a man beyond of the name of Shee,' he said, 'and his master seen a mermaid on the sand beyond combing her hair, and he told Shee to get her. "I will," said Shee, "if you'll give me the best horse you have in your stable." "I'll do that," said the master. Then Shee got the horse, and when he saw the mermaid on the sand combing her hair, with her covering laid away from her, he galloped up, when she wasn't looking, and he picked up the covering and away he went with it. Then the waves rose up behind him and he galloped his best, and just as he was coming out at the top of the tide the ninth wave cut off his horse behind his back, and left himself and the half of his horse and the covering on the dry land. Then the mermaid came in after her covering, and the master got married to her, and she lived with him a long time, and had children--three or four of them. Well, in the wind-up, the master built a fine new house, and when he was moving into it, and clearing the things out, he brought down an old hamper out of the loft and put it in the yard. The woman was going about, and she looked into the hamper,

and she saw her covering hidden away in the bottom of it. She took it out then and put it upon her and went back into the sea, and her children used to be on the shore crying after her. I'm told from that day there isn't one of the Shees can go out in a boat on that bay and not be drowned.'

We were now near the sandhills, where a crowd was beginning to come together, and booths were being put up for the sale of apples and porter and cakes. A train had come in a little before at a station a mile or so away, and a number of the usual trick characters, with their stock-in-trade, were hurrying down to the sea. The roulette man passed us first, unfolding his table and calling out at the top of his voice

Come play me a game of timmun and tup,  
The more you puts down the more you takes up.

'Take notice, gentlemen, I come here to spend a fortune, not to make one. Is there any sportsman in a hat or a cap, or a wig or a waistcoat, will play a go with me now? Take notice, gentlemen, the luck is on the green.'

The races had to be run between two tides while the sand was dry, so there was not much time to be lost, and before we reached the strand the horses had been brought together, ridden by young men in many variations of jockey dress. For the first race there was one genuine race-horse, very old and bony, and two or three young horses belonging to farmers in the neighbourhood. The start was made from the middle of the crowd at the near end of the strand, and the course led out along the edge of the sea to a post some distance away, back again to the starting-point, round a post, and out and back once more.

When the word was given the horses set off in a wild helter-skelter along the edge of the sea, with crowds cheering them on from the sandhills. As they got small in the distance it was not easy to see which horse was leading, but after a sort of check, as they turned the post, they began nearing again a few yards from the waves, with the old race-horse, heavily pressed, a good length ahead. The stewards made a sort of effort to clear the post that was to be circled, but without much success, as the people were wild with excitement. A moment later the old race-horse galloped into the crowd, twisted too suddenly, something cracked and jolted, and it limped out on three legs, gasping with pain. The next horse could not be stopped, and galloped out at the wrong end of the crowd for





















laneway with an old man driving white cows before him. These seemed transfigured beyond any description.

Then I passed two men riding bare-backed towards the west, who spoke to me in Irish, and a little further on I came to the only village on my way. The ground rose towards it, and as I came near there was a grey bar of smoke from every cottage going up to the low clouds overhead, and standing out strangely against the blackness of the mountain behind the village.

Beyond the patch of wet cottages I had another stretch of lonely roadway, and a heron kept flapping in front of me, rising and lighting again with many lonely cries that made me glad to reach the little public-house near Smerwick.

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