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SEA-STORIES OF IAR-CONNACHT

ÚNA NI ÓGÁIN

IT is early morning, some miles out from the Connemara coast, and we are sailing with a light breeze among the outer islands and long, dark reefs, the weed turning golden under a low July sun, which is just high enough to touch the great Cruacha inland with rose-colour, and give the clear shallows above the rocks and shell-sand those dark purples and shining greens which are the glory of these western seas.

There are four of us in the pookawn (or open fishing-boat), sharing the delight of the music of the sea against her bows, and the colour and radiance of the morning. My friends, honest, kindly, brave, are familiar with every foot of the wild and intricate though lovely coast which lies near Ceann Léime; they know their wide island-strewn bay 'like their own house-floor,' as they say. Not a change of the precious weed-growth, not a stray piece of flotsam, escapes their trained observation. They know the wild lives out here well, too, and can tell the larger seals, who lie here undisturbed, one from another. And herein lies at least part of the interest of the following stories, told me 'in friendship,' for they do not readily speak of these things.

We are talking, part Irish, part English. 'You must see strange things at times, by day and night,' I said. 'Tis true for you,' says Martin. 'Only yesterday we were far out, and came among a pack of big fish, the "wild fish" of the great sea. They are not good for a small boat, and they hunting.¹ And there are strange things by night. But the queerest *we* saw was in the day. Pat and I were out in this boat one morning bringing in weed, and all of a sudden a very big man rose out of the sea quite near us, about thirty

¹ The larger porpoise are said by the fishermen on the West Coast to hunt in packs after the 'bradán-stáirne,' or sturgeon, 'like hounds after a fox,' some on the surface, some deeper down; and the sturgeon often takes refuge close alongside or under a sailing-boat.

yards from the boat, and stood up in the sea from his waist up. When he first came up his arms were spread out from him, very long arms, like an oar; and big, long hands, and fingers on him near a foot long, and his height from his waist up about my own height [5 ft. 9 ins. or so]. He stayed looking at us about a minute, and then he brought the hands up above his head, and then down flat on the water before him, and he hit a shower of sea-spray up that near covered him, and it went as high as our mast. He went down into the water then again, under the cover of the spray. He had no dress on him, but his skin was very black-looking and shining. He had not the eyes or skin of a dead man; he was not dead, but had the face of a man in full strength. Both I and Pat saw him plain, in full day. We were too surprised to speak to him. A sea-man he must have been.¹

‘I knew a man well too, a near neighbour (God be with him, he’s dead now), he went out fishing with the lines one Saturday night. ’Tis not held good to go out that time. The men here stay in Saturday night, go to mass on Sunday morning, and out Sunday night. Well, this man was a great sailor, and a strong man, and he went out a long way, by himself. He got a good take of bream and cod; and just as the day was breaking, he saw a man’s head come up from the sea at the bow of the boat. And the strange man took hold of the ropes, and came in over the bow of the boat, and he walked up along her to the second thwart. And he stooped and took up a good cod by the gills, and he spoke no word, and did no harm, but went out quiet and easy over the side of the boat, with the fish in his hand, and down into the sea again. The boatman was left speechless for a good while, and when he came in, he said no matter what length he lived he would never go out of a Saturday night again.

‘There do be mermaids (*maighdini mara*) many a time out on the rocks here, in the deep sea. And there is one point

¹ Corroborated in every point by Pat, his brother.

of rock, within in the bay, where one does be seen at times, before a storm. She was there two years ago. But there are two of the neighbours (and yourself knows them both well), Pat and Shawn, saw one very close. They were out towards Ceann Léime, lifting the lobster pots; and all of a sudden, about two o'clock of the day, they saw a woman out before them in the deep, quite near the boat. Very fair she was, and reddy-gold hair on her head, and down over her. She saw them before they saw her, and was watching them. When Pat saw her he was so frightened the oar dropped from his hands. He stooped for it, and he and Shawn looked at each other, and when they looked her way again she was gone. They both saw her quite plain.'

Then follows an interesting discussion between the elders and the young man as to the form of the *maighdini mara*. The elders are sure the sea-maids and sea-men are shaped just like those of earth. The young man had 'seen a picture of them one time in a book, and they were shaped like a salmon from the waist down, and wouldn't those that could make the book and draw the picture be right?' But the older men are certain that the western sea-maids and sea-people are made just 'like Christians,' only finer—and I, having heard older tales, from other neighbours, know they must be right. Is not their speech full of the quiet assurance of eye-witness? And who, listening to the mysterious talk of such fisher-friends, and surrounded by the sea-lights and wave music, can venture to set limit to the magic of the Fairge Mhór?