RIDERS TO THE SEA

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

By J. M. Synge

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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.

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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.]

THE END