

A Backward Glance

Some time ago I heard over the radio an old man describing how each evening at bed time he was "wired up" so that if his heart stopped during the night, an alarm would ring in the home of his undertaker, who would quickly collect his still warm corpse and freeze it. The speaker was convinced that it might be possible within the next twenty years, and certainly within the next fifty years, for science to have developed a means of unfreezing, revivifying and rejuvenating his cadaver. He was so convinced of the possibility of this grotesque resurrection that he had invested very large sums in the undertaking and firmly believed that he would be reunited with his already frozen wife, who would be similarly revitalized. Presumably they would continue their life together behind the chain link fence of some Elysian retirement home designed by Disneyland Incorporated. The old man seemed to be unclear whether this second life would be forever, or if it was to be but a brief second chance. He was certainly unconcerned about the expense of housing and maintaining the constantly increasing numbers of the living dead. It also seemed to me that he was a little naive about the reliability and punctiliousness of undertakers, but I suppose that he would argue that he had nothing to lose.

Many have wondered if Lazarus was happy to be brought back to life after he had been dead only a few days. To return in fifty years might be not only strange but also horrendous.

Subsequently the thought of this old man as a potential Lazarus awakened memories of my own brief experience of a Lazarus-like figure. I entered Trinity College in the autumn of 1939. Earlier that year my father had retired from the Irish Civil Service to a pension, which was much less than his previous salary. Like many Irish Protestants of those years we found that we had "come down in the world". This change of circumstance meant that my personal allowance during my time as an undergraduate was so small as to be virtually non-existent, even when eked out with occasional scholarships and prizes, so that I thought of any odd jobs that came my way as "God sent".

I don't know how it came about, but some time early in 1942 my mother learned that Lady Gore-Booth was looking for someone to take her invalid son for a weekly walk. I wrote to Lady Gore-Booth offering to do this, and was invited to have afternoon tea with her at Power's Hotel - an old, established hotel on Kildare Street used by country families when they came to visit Dublin. Lady Gore-Booth explained that her son had suffered a nervous breakdown and had been in a private nursing home in England, but that at the beginning of the war he had been brought to a similar institution in Dublin. She went on to explain that his health had recently seemed very much improved and that she thought a weekly afternoon outing, either as walk in the country or as a visit to some place of interest in the city, would be stimulating and would gradually acclimatize her son to the world from which he had been absent for twelve years. It was agreed that, once a week at 2:00 o'clock I would pick up Gore-Booth at the nursing home. I was to get ten shillings a week, and if you wonder what that amounts to in real money, it meant ten visits to see Lord Longford's company perform Shaw and Chekhov at the Gate Theatre, or twenty visits to the sixpenny seats at the very back of the Abbey Theatre to see the young Cyril Cusack as Foxter Daley and the like!

When I learned the name of the nursing home I remembered that I knew it already, for when I was seven or eight years old, my mother would come there to visit her youngest brother, my

Uncle Roland, of whom I had only the dimmest memories, and who I was told had to stay there because he was suffering from the effects of shell shock, and of having been gassed in the First World War. Years later, after my mother's death, while clearing out the papers in her desk, I learned that my uncle had been confined there during the late stages of the syphilis, which he had contracted in London as an eighteen-year-old on leave from the Western Front. I must have been aware of my mother's tension and anxiety during these visits. I can remember the high stone wall rising from the sidewalk. Ireland had many well-built high stone walls, often with spikes or broken glass bottles set into their copings - demesne walls, very obviously intended to keep people out. Whatever its original intention, the function of this wall was now reversed: I often sat outside in the car while my mother would go through a door in the wall. Though sometimes I remember going with her and waiting in a large Victorian drawing room, while she went to talk with the matron. On one of these occasions she came back in tears. She had seen her brother walking in the garden with an attendant had hardly been able to recognize him and had not been allowed to go to him, touch him or speak to him.

So on a late February day I walked down the same cul-de-sac, passed through the same door in the wall, and entered again the Victorian drawing room, to meet a different matron and be introduced to Gore-Booth. I had been told by his mother that his breakdown had happened while he was preparing for his final exams at Oxford, where he had been studying Modern Languages with the intention of entering the British Foreign Service. The man who entered with matron was tall, stoop-shouldered, white-haired and gaunt. He must have been about thirty-six years old, though he looked as if he were in his late sixties. He wore a grey Donegal tweed suit with plus fours. Not the baggy plus fours that Oxford undergraduates had made fashionable in the late '30's, but the more utilitarian knickerbockers that a gentleman might wear with gaiters and boots when out shooting; and he carried a countryman's tweed hat. His dress increased the impression that he had stepped out of a time twenty years earlier.

It was an uneasy meeting, for it must have seemed very strange to be taken out walking by a gauche twenty-two year-old. He obviously viewed the undertaking with some suspicion. I too was very unsure of myself and cannot remember clearly what we did on that first meeting. I think we walked to the south out beyond Donnybrook, which at that time was still quite countrified. I had been told that exercise would be good for him. It was a fine day and we took quite a long walk punctuated with hesitant and desultory conversations.

Though this was an uneasy meeting, I had known about the Gore-Booths since school days. Indeed the name had something of a mystic character for me. My school anthology contained a poem by Eva Gore-Booth, *The Little Waves of Breffny*. I think it is the only poem of her's that I have read. In college, one of my best-loved poems was *In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz* by W.B. Yeats.

The light of evening, Lissadell,
Great Windows open to the south,
Two girls in silk kimonos, both
Beautiful, one a gazelle.

The two beautiful girls were the aunts of my walking companion. In these first four lines Yeats remembers the delight of his visit to Lissadell House in 1894. The lines are so beautiful that one

forgets that the poem is profoundly elegiac, mourning not only the recent death of the two sisters, but also the unfulfilled promise of their youth and beauty.

I had also seen, in the section of the National Museum devoted to the Easter Rising, a dramatic photo of a beautiful woman in military uniform and holding a large revolver in her lap. This was Con Markiewicz - she had married a Polish nobleman and became the Countess Markiewicz. The photo showed her in the uniform she had worn as one of the commanders of the unit of the Citizen Army, which had occupied the Royal College of Surgeons during the Easter Rising. For this she was sentenced to death, reprieved and imprisoned. She was the first woman elected to the British House of Commons, where she refused to take her seat. Later she had become Minister of Labour in the first Irish Republican Government of 1919.

A few days before my meeting with Gore-Booth, my father had mentioned that he believed that Sir Henry Gore-Booth, the father of Yeats' beautiful girls, had been an arctic explorer. If my walking companion was suspicious of me, I was awed, as much by the distinction of his ancestry as by the mystique of his mental illness.

Throughout the spring and early summer, whenever the weather was fine, we walked choosing a new location each week: in the Phoenix Park; by the sea at Dollymount; out to the lighthouse at the mouth of Dun Laoghaire Harbour. We once took the tram to Dalkey and walked out along the Vico Road to enjoy the view southward to Bray and the Wicklow Mountains. If the weather was less settled we went to the zoo or to the National Museum to gaze at Celtic gold. We visited the Municipal Art Gallery and the National Gallery of Ireland. I was very attached to a painting by el Greco of St. Francis in Ecstasy, and I remember thinking that except for the large, ecstatically rolling Grecoesque eyes, this St. Francis had much the same gaunt physique as Gore-Booth. During these trips into Dublin we would have afternoon tea in Roberts Café or in Bewley's more magnificent Oriental Café where we indulged a mutual passion for cream-filled éclaires and meringues.

During this time Gore-Booth, while he remained taciturn, began to initiate conversations. It was then that I began to realize that, while Lazarus had only been entombed for a few days, my companion had returned after a much longer time to a world where events were often hard to understand. For instance, he had been interested in foreign affairs and had been taught that the Weimar Republic was a progressive, enlightened, democratic government. So why, he asked was England again at war with Germany? It was sad to realize that he was in a time warp and perhaps even sadder that this was something that he realized only occasionally.

One day in mid-July I called for him as usual. It was fine summer weather and we set out to take the same walk that we had taken on our first outing in late February. Almost as soon as we had set out it was clear that my companion had changed. His taciturnity had gone. He was very animated and he talked excitedly and volubly and it was soon clear that his conversation was strangely distracted. He explained that he had been taught to read the Bible each day, and that he now did this each morning. He had recently been reading the early chapters of the book of Genesis; and there it stated that god had made a woman for every man. Why then had he never found his woman? She had never been given to him, and this must mean that "they" were keeping her from him. He thought that he should talk to the matron and ask her to give him one of the nurses.

I was quite unprepared for this new situation. His excited volubility alarmed me. I was uncertain what might happen next. I agreed that he should talk to the matron. I tried to soothe him and change the subject by talking about the countryside and the state of the crops, or by getting him to talk about his family. This seemed only to convince him that I didn't believe that he was a Christian. He became insistent. He explained that he knew about the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. He knew how it had happened. He believed in it. He explained that they had nailed Jesus to the cross, but that later he had got one hand free, and in that way had been able to keep himself alive by drinking his own urine. I was horrified by the matter-of-fact logic of this vividly presented picture. At the time I was much too disturbed to recognize the particular irony that this odd Biblical exegesis had for me. Some days later the irony was very apparent. In the coming October I was to enter the Divinity School to be academically qualified to become an Anglican priest, though for some time I had been wondering if my notion of the priesthood as superior social work was really a proper foundation for such a vocation.

For perhaps two hours we walked in the summer sunshine, both of us largely unaware of our surroundings. Gore-Booth returning again to the subject of his excited and increasingly distraught conversation, I increasingly alarmed as to what he might do next. Finally we returned to the nursing home and I asked to see the matron, explaining that I thought that he was very unwell. The change was so unexpected and so complete that I was distressed for weeks afterwards.

I never saw Gore-Booth again. Lazarus had come out of the tomb for a few months but now he had gone back in. As I walked away, I remembered that several years before, my house-master, talking of a mutual friend who had gone off his head, had said, "There, but for the grace of God go all of us".