By the Same Author

IORANA: A Tahitian Journal
THE SEVENTH MAN
A TRUE TALE OF LOVE IN TONGA
COCONUT ISLAND
JOHN GRAHAM, CONVICT
BLUE ANGELS AND WHALES
SWEET THAMES RUN SOFTLY
COMING DOWN THE WYE

LOVELY IS THE LEE

by

ROBERT GIBBINGS

With Engravings by the Author

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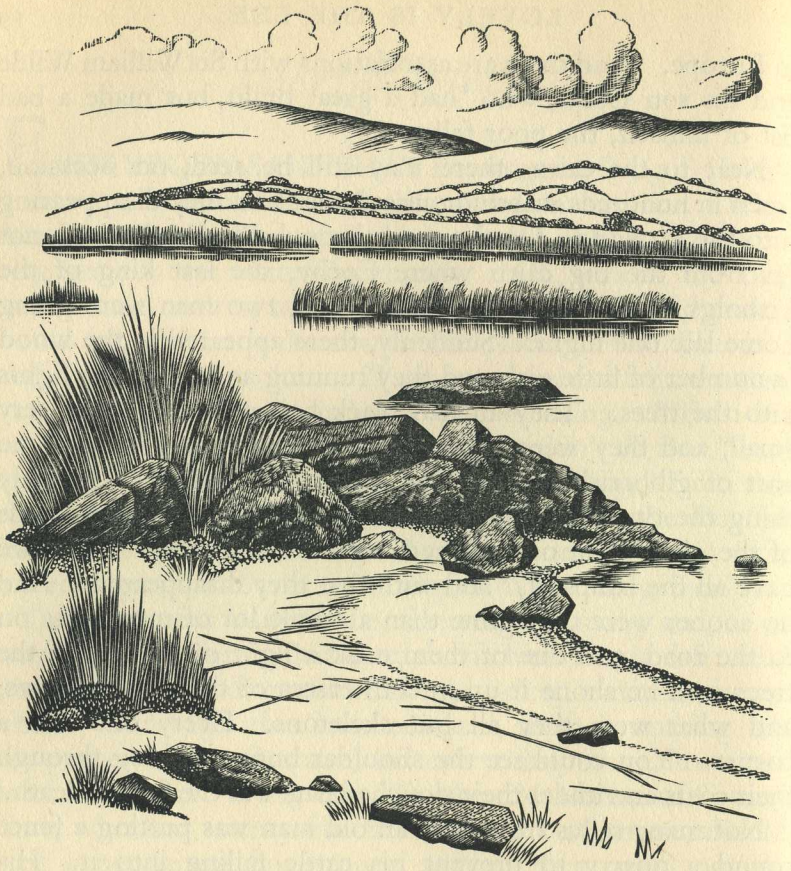


CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AT FIVE O'CLOCK in the afternoon of the 16th May I sat in glory. I had pitched my tent on an island in Lough Carra, and I was surrounded by an aureole of last year's reeds, golden in decay, rising from a turquoise lake. To the west a line of distant hills might have been islands in the Aegean Sea. Pale green lights in the water suggested the shelving sands of coral lagoons. Behind me, to the south, a thick, almost impenetrable wood. To the east, beyond a haze of tall tasselled reeds, the home of my host Robert Ruttledge. He had given me the island, he had given me a boat. When I wanted food there was a chair at his table.

So I sat there, outside my tent, listening to the lapping of the water, to the cries of the gulls, to the love song of a sandpiper, 'Sissis-*see*-si sissis-*see*-si,' to the heavy beat of a pigeon's wings, to the sweetest of all music, the song of the willow wren. Overhead, there was a sky such as one glimpses through a door or window in an early Italian painting. Close by my feet a brimstone butterfly fluttered over the yellow flowers of the trefoil which broke through the grasses among the juniper and sapling birch-trees. While I watched, a mallard with her brood of youngsters swam close to the shore. Through my glasses I could see a redshank feeding on the shore of another island. It had sensed a worm in the mud. Time and again it probed, getting more and more excited each time. But the worm eluded it and the bird continued its peregrinations. Then, in the field beyond, a grey donkey brayed. From half a mile away a small black jackass answered. The two ran towards each other and, meeting, rubbed nose to nose, affectionately.

As the evening wore on I wandered into the wood. It was to me a miniature primeval world. Deep in this small jungle, creepers struggled for supremacy over a carpet of ferns, dead leaves, and nightshade. Ivy and clematis festooned fallen trees, smothering branches already fleeced with moss and lichen. Everywhere a network of interlacing timbers. Deep shadows under thick holly-trees, glints of sunlight on sprays of brier.

In a glade I closed my eyes to the sudden glare of the sun. When I opened them, dazzled, the thicket seemed ablaze with stars. White flowers of strawberry, white flowers of spindle-wood, cool blue of speedwell, yellow of cinquefoil. Flowers of the blackthorn, catkins of alder. Wild thyme and sweetbrier scenting the air.

At the far side of the wood I looked through a curtain of sunlit leaves to a lake whose calm water seemed on fire. The western sky was radiant, but darkness was growing in the stones at my feet. The wind rustled in the trees, a blackbird sang, a moorhen clucked, a heron croaked. Trees grew

black. Again the sandpiper's call, 'Sissis-*see*-si.' A ripple in the water brought a star to shore.

Then came night. The blackbird had ceased its singing. There seemed no sound save only from the querulous gulls. Still a faint glow in the west, but, overhead, the luminous grey of interminable space. The wind had dropped. The night air was heavy with scents. A cockchafer buzzed across the margin of the lake, a moorhen clucked again, a mouse followed the shore line, scarcely perceptible among the dark stones. Those of us born to the day must sleep at night. My bed of heaped-up rushes was waiting. As I dropped to sleep the world seemed full of crying gulls.

It is impossible to describe Lough Carra, because its aspect is ever changing. If at one moment it is burnished as a jewel, reflecting the motley of the sky, at the next there is a patina of ripples, a texture as of homespun. Unlike that of the neighbouring lakes, the bottom of Lough Carra is covered with a thick deposit of white marl, largely due, no doubt, to excess of lime in the underground springs which feed it. It is this which gives the lake its ethereal quality, a dream-like unreality.

'I suppose you haven't a crannog in the lake,' I said to my host, one evening after dinner.

'Indeed we have,' he said.

Next morning he took me to see it. Clusters of stones inside a ring of stakes were clearly visible a few feet below the surface of the water, some half-mile from the shore. We marked each stake and found that they formed a circle about thirty-three yards in diameter. But with the heavy deposit of marl it was difficult to see more than the rough outline of the structure.

'What do you think of that island down there?' he asked, pointing to a group of trees further to the south.

'It seems very neat,' I answered.

'I have often thought it is artificial,' he said.

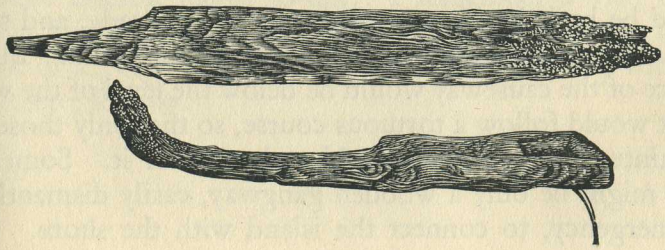
So we rowed over to look at it.

On closer inspection there was no doubt that its almost vertical boundary wall of round stones, uniform in size, and

each about as big as a man's head, could only have been built by human agency. It was quite unlike the formation of most of the other islands on the lake, which were of terraced slabs of limestone, large boulders, and quite small pebbles. We decided that a spade might give us more information.

So that afternoon we set out again, armed with spade, fork, and billhook, and accompanied by Jim Fahy from the farm for better service with these weapons. Ann, aged twelve, and Veronica, aged ten, daughters of the house, came too. They hoped that we would find a corpse. It was as exciting as a child's adventure book.

The wind had dropped, the water was glassy calm, and in the shallow water close to the island we could see strange baulks of timber lying on the bottom. While Ruttledge and I got busy on two of these, Jim began to clear a space in the undergrowth, preparatory to digging. It took us some little time to lever the timbers out of the encrusting marl, but, once into the boat, they fulfilled all expectations. One of them was nine feet long, shouldered at one end, and had, clearly, been worked with an adze. Its other end was charred by fire. Its edges were bevelled. The second baulk, which was shorter, but heavier, tapered to a 'prow' which had also suffered from fire. As the engraving shows, there protruded from the 'stern' a long iron nail.



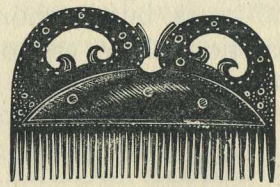
But while we were admiring these discoveries there was a shout from inside the island. 'Look what we 've got,' said Ann, producing a handful of bones. 'And these,' said Veronica, holding out some teeth and two small iron nails. Jim had already reached a depth of four feet, where lay a series of horizontal timbers, the foundation of the early buildings. But that was below the present level of the lake, and already the water was seeping in. There was little to be seen but thick black mud. Veronica jumped into the hole and began fingering the mud. Almost immediately she produced more teeth and bones. Being small and lissom she could fit where no one else in the party could have gone, and being almost double-jointed, she could squat on her haunches with her knees behind her ears and dig in the mud below her feet. More teeth, more bones, a fragment of pottery came to light.

But exploration of this kind is not for the untutored. Our duty was to inform the National Museum and send them our specimens. In due course their report came back. Nails, Early Christian period. Bones and teeth, mainly ox, pig, sheep; fragments of birds, probably duck.

To build one of these crannogs must have been a tremendous undertaking. Hundreds of trees to be felled and prepared. Hundreds of tons of stones to be ferried in cranky canoes. It would seem that the first operation was the erection of a circular palisade of stakes driven into the floor of the lake. Inside the palisade horizontal logs and brushwood were sunk, to form a foundation. Stones were then filled in until they reached a height above the water suitable for the erection of the house, which would be of skilfully mortised timbers, surmounted by a thatched roof. A pier would be built beside an opening in the palisade, and sometimes a stone causeway would lead to the mainland. But the surface of the causeway would be below the level of the water, and it would follow a tortuous course, so that only those well acquainted with its plan could make use of it. Sometimes there might be only a wooden gangway, easily dismantled in an emergency, to connect the island with the shore. Thus

the inhabitants were safeguarded alike from wild animals and human marauders.

They were not always primitive, the people who lived in these lacustrine homes. True, we have reason to believe that many of the crannogs are of very early origin, but we know also that many of them were occupied as late as the seventeenth century. Portions of harps have been found in excavated sites; finely wrought brooches, too, and combs, splendidly chased swords and scabbards, delicate drinking-cups; richly ornamented horse-trappings, beads of amber, jet, and glass set with enamel. These did not belong to an uncultured people.



Of course, Ireland isn't the only place where lake habitation has been favoured. There are well over a hundred sites of crannogs in Scotland, and the pile dwellings in the Swiss lakes are almost too well known to need mention. In Italy, Austria, and other parts of Europe, indeed all over the world, there are the remains of similar pile dwellings. Venezuela, 'Little Venice,' was given its name by the Spanish explorers when they saw the natives living in huts on piles in the water. Prescott, in his *Conquest of Mexico*, speaks of this kind of architecture as one that found great favour with the Aztecs. In East and Central Africa, in Japan, Malay, New Guinea, the same fashion reigns to-day. I remember a visit that I paid to a white man living in such a house far out in the lagoon of a Polynesian island. All the elements of romance were there, for *him*.

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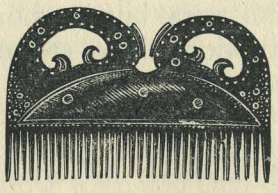

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THERE IS ANOTHER ISLAND on Lough Carra, at the northern end, Castle Island by name, so called from the thirteenth-century ruin that stands there, embedded in trees. There the hoodie crow consumes its plunder. At every step along the shore one finds empty shells, the sucked eggs of wild ducks, tame ducks, moorhens, domestic hens, turkeys, thrushes, and many others. The hoodie, or scald crow, is ubiquitous in Mayo. Everywhere he may be seen waiting, watching to make a sudden swoop on eggs or unprotected nestlings. He has his favourite sites for meals, such as the middle of a big field, out of range of guns on all sides. Castle Island is covered with trees, but its shores are a safe haunt. There are few interruptions there, at most a boat or two in the year to visit a solitary tomb and to read the inscription carved thereon:

GEORGE MOORE

Born Moore Hall 1852 Died 1933 London

He forsook his family and friends
for his art
but because he was faithful to his art
his family and friends
reclaimed his ashes for Ireland

Vale

Moore had expressed a wish to have his ashes scattered over the lake, the lake which he had watched so often as a child, the lake that 'was never out of his brain. Didn't he bring it into every one of his books? Even the Brook Kerith, that 's in Palestine, sure, he compared it with the lake.'

But local feeling in County Mayo was against the idea of such 'pagan' burial. The urn was, therefore, placed in a cist cut in the solid rock of the island, and after the tomb had been sealed friends heaped over it a cairn of stones. 'Mind the wind that it doesn't blow the ashes back into the boat,' he had said to James O'Reilly, his steward.

'When he was doing a book he 'd be right inside it,' said O'Reilly. 'Maybe he 'd be in the middle of a conversation, and an interesting one, too, and all of a sudden he 'd forget you were speaking, and he 'd be a hundred miles away with his own thoughts.'

While we were speaking a dozen whimbrels, like a grey sickle, passed overhead.

'Wasn't it the queer thing that he never brought birds or wild flowers into his books?' said O'Reilly. 'He 'd talk about trees, he was very fond of them, but he 'd never say a word about the birds.'

It certainly was a curious thing if Moore was unconscious of the birds, for in few places could there be a lovelier daily pageant of bird life than on Lough Carra. In the deep water, crested grebe, mergansers, tufted duck; along the shores, dunlin, redshank, ringed plover, curlew, and many others, passing along this chain of lakes on their seasonal migrations, or halting awhile to build their nests and rear their young. The song of the willow wren and chiff-chaff is a characteristic of the wooded shores and islands.

Often from my island I would see the mergansers displaying. It might be one duck and two drakes. Each of the latter, in turn, though sometimes together, would make swift rushes through the water, splashing as he went. Then lifting himself high in the water, balancing almost on his tail, he would show off his salmon-tinted breast. A moment afterwards he would rush through the water again, then, stopping, he would thrust out his head and neck to their farthest extent, at an angle of forty-five degrees, pull them back quickly, and with a bowing action dip them up and down in the water. Or it might be one drake and two ducks swimming peaceably together until at the approach of another party the drake would commence displaying as if to say 'Keep off.'

At other times it might be a pair of great crested grebe facing each other, with ruff spread wide, and swaying their heads from side to side, or perhaps, after a dive to bring up weed, rising almost breast to breast in the water. Sometimes it would be a pair of the less demonstrative tufted duck that