

## Lady Gregory, *The Travelling Man* (1905)

Persons

A Mother.

A Child.

A Travelling Man.

Scene: A cottage kitchen. A woman setting out a bowl and jug and board on the table for bread-making.

Child: What is it you are going to make, mother?

Mother: I am going to make a grand cake with white flour. Seeds I will put in it. Maybe I'll make a little cake for yourself too. You can be baking it in the little pot while the big one will be baking in the big pot.

Child: It is a pity daddy to be away at the fair on a Samhain night.

Mother: I must make my feast all the same, for Samhain night is more to me than to any other one. It was on this night seven years I first came into this house.

Child: You will be taking down those plates from the dresser so, those plates with flowers on them, and be putting them on the table.

Mother: I will. I will set out the house to-day,[Pg 158] and bring down the best delf, and put whatever thing is best on the table, because of the great thing that happened me seven years ago.

Child: What great thing was that?

Mother: I was after being driven out of the house where I was a serving girl....

Child: Where was that house? Tell me about it.

Mother: (Sitting down and pointing southward.) It is over there I was living, in a farmer's house up on Slieve Echtge, near to Slieve na n-Or, the Golden Mountain.

Child: The Golden Mountain! That must be a grand place.

Mother: Not very grand indeed, but bare and cold enough at that time of the year. Anyway, I was driven out a Samhain day like this, because of some things that were said against me.

Child: What did you do then?

Mother: What had I to do but to go walking the bare bog road through the rough hills where there was no shelter to find, and the sharp wind going through me, and the red mud heavy on my shoes. I came to Kilbecanty....

Child: I know Kilbecanty. That is where the woman in the shop gave me sweets out of a bottle.

Mother: So she might now, but that night her door was shut and all the doors were shut; and I[Pg 159] saw through the windows the boys and the girls sitting round the hearth and playing their games, and I had no courage to ask for shelter. In dread I was they might think some shameful thing of me, and I going the road alone in the night-time.

Child: Did you come here after that?

Mother: I went on down the hill in the darkness, and with the dint of my trouble and the length of the road my strength failed me, and I had like to fall. So I did fall at the last, meeting with a heap of broken stones by the roadside.

Child: I hurt my knee one time I fell on the stones.

Mother: It was then the great thing happened. I saw a stranger coming towards me, a very tall man, the best I ever saw, bright and shining that you could see him through the darkness; and I knew him to be no common man.

Child: Who was he?

Mother: It is what I thought, that he was the King of the World.

Child: Had he a crown like a King?

Mother: If he had, it was made of the twigs of a bare blackthorn; but in his hand he had a green branch, that never grew on a tree of this world. He took me by the hand, and he led me over the stepping-stones outside to this door, and he bade me to go in and I would find good shelter. I was kneeling down to thank him, but he raised[Pg 160] me up and he said, "I will come to see you some other time. And do not shut up your heart in the things I give you," he said, "but have a welcome before me."

Child: Did he go away then?

Mother: I saw him no more after that, but I did as he bade me. (She stands up and goes to the door.) I came in like this, and your father was sitting there by the hearth, a lonely man that was after losing his wife. He was alone and I was alone, and we married one another; and I never wanted since for shelter or safety. And a good wife I made him, and a good housekeeper.

Child: Will the King come again to the house?

Mother: I have his word for it he will come, but he did not come yet; it is often your father and myself looked out the door of a Samhain night, thinking to see him.

Child: I hope he won't come in the night time, and I asleep.

Mother: It is of him I do be thinking every year, and I setting out the house, and making a cake for the supper.

Child: What will he do when he comes in?

Mother: He will sit over there in the chair, and maybe he will taste a bit of the cake. I will call in all the neighbours; I will tell them he is here. They will not be keeping it in their mind against me then that I brought nothing, coming to[Pg 161] the house. They will know I am before any of them, the time they know who it is has come to visit me. They will all kneel down and ask for his blessing. But the best blessing will be on the house he came to of himself.

Child: And are you going to make the cake now?

Mother: I must make it now indeed, or I will be late with it. I am late as it is; I was expecting one of the neighbours to bring me white flour from the town. I'll wait no longer, I'll go borrow it in some place. There will be a wedding in the stonecutter's house Thursday, it's likely there will be flour in the house.

Child: Let me go along with you.

Mother: It is best for you to stop here. Be a good child now, and don't be meddling with the things on the table. Sit down there by the hearth and break up those little sticks I am after bringing in. Make a little heap of them now before me, and we will make a good fire to bake the cake. See now how many will you break. Don't go out the door while I'm away, I would be in dread of you going near the river and it in flood. Behave yourself well now. Be counting the sticks as you break them.

(She goes out.)

Child: (Sitting down and breaking sticks across his knee.) One—and two—O I can break this [Pg 162] one into a great many, one, two, three, four.—This one is wet—I don't like a wet one—five, six—that is a great heap.—Let me try that great big one.—That is too hard.—I don't think mother could break that one.—Daddy could break it.

(Half-door is opened and a travelling man comes in. He wears a ragged white flannel shirt, and mud-stained trousers. He is bareheaded and barefooted, and carries a little branch in his hand.)

Travelling Man: (Stooping over the child and taking the stick.) Give it here to me and hold this.

(He puts the branch in the child's hand while he takes the stick and breaks it.)

Child: That is a good branch, apples on it and flowers. The tree at the mill has apples yet, but all the flowers are gone. Where did you get this branch?

Travelling Man: I got it in a garden a long way off.

Child: Where is the garden? Where do you come from?

Travelling Man: (Pointing southward.) I have come from beyond those hills.

Child: Is it from the Golden Mountain you are come? From Slieve na n-Or?

Travelling Man: That is where I come from surely, from the Golden Mountain. I would like to sit down and rest for a while. [Pg 163]

Child: Sit down here beside me. We must not go near the table or touch anything, or mother will be angry. Mother is going to make a beautiful cake, a cake that will be fit for a King that might be coming in to our supper.

Travelling Man: I will sit here with you on the floor.

(Sits down.)

Child: Tell me now about the Golden Mountain.

Travelling Man: There is a garden in it, and there is a tree in the garden that has fruit and flowers at the one time.

Child: Like this branch?

Travelling Man: Just like that little branch.

Child: What other things are in the garden?

Travelling Man: There are birds of all colours that sing at every hour, the way the people will come to their prayers. And there is a high wall about the garden.

Child: What way can the people get through the wall?

Travelling Man: There are four gates in the wall: a gate of gold, and a gate of silver, and a gate of crystal, and a gate of white brass.

Child: (Taking up the sticks.) I will make a garden. I will make a wall with these sticks.

Travelling Man: This big stick will make the first wall.

(They build a square wall with sticks.) [Pg 164]

Child: (Taking up branch.) I will put this in the middle. This is the tree. I will get something to make it stand up. (Gets up and looks at dresser.) I can't reach it, get up and give me that shining jug.

(Travelling Man gets up and gives him the jug.)

Travelling Man: Here it is for you.

Child: (Puts it within the walls and sets the branch in it.) Tell me something else that is in the garden?

Travelling Man: There are four wells of water in it, that are as clear as glass.

Child: Get me down those cups, those flowery cups, we will put them for wells. (He hands them down.) Now I will make the gates, give me those plates for gates, not those ugly ones, those nice ones at the top.

(He takes them down and they put them on the four sides for gates. The Child gets up and looks at it.)

Travelling Man: There now, it is finished.

Child: Is it as good as the other garden? How can we go to the Golden Mountain to see the other garden?

Travelling Man: We can ride to it.

Child: But we have no horse.

Travelling Man: This form will be our horse. (He draws a form out of the corner, and sits down[Pg 165] astride on it, putting the child before him.) Now, off we go! (Sings, the child repeating the refrain)—

Come ride and ride to the garden,

Come ride and ride with a will:

For the flower comes with the fruit there

Beyond a hill and a hill.

Refrain

Come ride and ride to the garden,

Come ride like the March wind;

There's barley there, and water there,

And stabling to your mind.

Travelling Man: How did you like that ride, little horseman?

Child: Go on again! I want another ride!

Travelling Man (sings)—

The Archangels stand in a row there

And all the garden bless,

The Archangel Axel, Victor the angel

Work at the cider press.

Refrain

Come ride and ride to the garden, &c.

Child: We will soon be at the Golden Mountain now. Ride again. Sing another song.[Pg 166]

Travelling Man (sings)—

O scent of the broken apples!

O shuffling of holy shoes!

Beyond a hill and a hill there

In the land that no one knows.

Refrain

Come ride and ride to the garden, &c.

Child: Now another ride.

Travelling Man: This will be the last. It will be a good ride.

(The mother comes in. She stares for a second, then throws down her basket and snatches up the child.)

Mother: Did ever anyone see the like of that! A common beggar, a travelling man off the roads, to be holding the child! To be leaving his ragged arms about him as if he was of his own sort! Get out of that, whoever you are, and quit this house or I'll call to some that will make you quit it.

Child: Do not send him out! He is not a bad man; he is a good man; he was playing horses with me. He has grand songs.

Mother: Let him get away out of this now, himself and his share of songs. Look at the way he has your bib destroyed that I was after washing in the morning!

Child: He was holding me on the horse. We [Pg 167] were riding, I might have fallen. He held me.

Mother: I give you my word you are done now with riding horses. Let him go on his road. I have no time to be cleaning the place after the like of him.

Child: He is tired. Let him stop here till evening.

Travelling Man: Let me rest here for a while, I have been travelling a long way.

Mother: Where did you come from to-day?

Travelling Man: I came over Slieve Echtge from Slieve na n-Or. I had no house to stop in. I walked the long bog road, the wind was going through me, there was no shelter to be got, the red mud of the road was heavy on my feet. I got no welcome in the villages, and so I came on to this place, to the rising of the river at Ballylee.

Mother: It is best for you to go on to the town. It is not far for you to go. We will maybe have company coming in here.

(She pours out flour into a bowl and begins mixing.)

Travelling Man: Will you give me a bit of that dough to bring with me? I have gone a long time fasting.

Mother: It is not often in the year I make bread like this. There are a few cold potatoes on the dresser, are they not good enough for you? There is many a one would be glad to get them. [Pg 168]

Travelling Man: Whatever you will give me, I will take it.

Mother: (Going to the dresser for the potatoes and looking at the shelves.) What in the earthly world has happened all the delf? Where are the jugs gone and the plates? They were all in it when I went out a while ago.

Child: (Hanging his head.) We were making a garden with them. We were making that garden there in the corner.

Mother: Is that what you were doing after I bidding you to sit still and to keep yourself quiet? It is to tie you in the chair I will another time! My grand jugs! (She picks them up and wipes them.) My plates that I bought the first time I ever went marketing into Gort. The best in the shop they were. (One slips from her hand and breaks.) Look at that now, look what you are after doing.

(She gives a slap at the child.)

Travelling Man: Do not blame the child. It was I myself took them down from the dresser.

Mother: (Turning on him.) It was you took them! What business had you doing that? It's the last time a tramp or a tinker or a rogue of the roads will have a chance of laying his hand on anything in this house. It is jailed you should be! What did you want touching the dresser at all? Is it looking you were for what you could bring away?[Pg 169]

Travelling Man: (Taking the child's hands.) I would not refuse these hands that were held out for them. If it was for the four winds of the world he had asked, I would have put their bridles into these innocent hands.

Mother: (Taking up the jug and throwing the branch on the floor.) Get out of this! Get out of this I tell you! There is no shelter here for the like of you! Look at that mud on the floor! You are not fit to come into the house of any decent respectable person!

(The room begins to darken.)

Travelling Man: Indeed, I am more used to the roads than to the shelter of houses. It is often I have spent the night on the bare hills.

Mother: No wonder in that! (She begins to sweep floor.) Go out of this now to whatever company you are best used to, whatever they are. The worst of people it is likely they are, thieves and drunkards and shameless women.

Travelling Man: Maybe so. Drunkards and thieves and shameless women, stones that have fallen, that are trodden under foot, bodies that are spoiled with sores, bodies that are worn with fasting, minds that are broken with much sinning, the poor, the mad, the bad....

Mother: Get out with you! Go back to your friends, I say!

Travelling Man: I will go. I will go back to[Pg 170] the high road that is walked by the bare feet of the poor, by the innocent bare feet of children. I will go back to the rocks and the wind, to the cries of the trees in the storm! (He goes out.)

Child: He has forgotten his branch!

(Takes it and follows him.)

Mother: (Still sweeping.) My good plates from the dresser, and dirty red mud on the floor, and the sticks all scattered in every place. (Stoops to pick them up.) Where is the child gone? (Goes to door.) I don't see him—he couldn't have gone to the river—it is getting dark—the bank is slippery. Come back! Come back! Where are you? (Child runs in.)

Mother: O where were you? I was in dread it was to the river you were gone, or into the river.

Child: I went after him. He is gone over the river.

Mother: He couldn't do that. He couldn't go through the flood.

Child: He did go over it. He was as if walking on the water. There was a light before his feet.

Mother: That could not be so. What put that thought in your mind?

Child: I called to him to come back for the branch, and he turned where he was in the river, and he bade me to bring it back, and to show it to yourself.

[Pg 171]Mother: (Taking the branch.) There are fruit and flowers on it. It is a branch that is not of any earthly tree. (Falls on her knees.) He is gone, he is gone, and I never knew him! He was that stranger that gave me all! He is the King of the World!