

(and let no one talk against 'Blacks' in my presence!) and on to the main road lined with poplars. White houses marked O.N.C.

The old man got off just outside Foggia in case an M.P. should choose to make trouble, as civilians are not allowed to ride on W.D. transport.

We reached the Naafi, which had not yet opened. Rita went across to a lorry driver to enquire if he happened to go our way. The *first one* said he was going to Naples via Caserta, and how many were there of us! (Oh, it's quite impossible to get a lift back from Foggia. I would not dream of attempting it if I were you!).

So after we had got some tea for our jeep-driver and wished him all the best, and tried in vain to thank him adequately, we set off and rosaried our way back, and arrived in Caserta about 4 o'clock—just in time for a most welcome cup of tea.

And now we will always be homesick for San Giovanni Rotondo.

II. PABBAY OR THE ISLAND FATHERS

By

PEREGRINUS.

It took an hour and a half in the fishing boat driven by its small paraffin motor. Jonathan, the fisherman, sitting on the box covering the engine, said it was the most perfect day for the trip; as calm as it could ever be, and November was already a week old. Everyone that morning had said it was calm: the parish priest, the man who drove us to the harbour from the north of the island at 8.15 prompt, the man at the store who had known the weather of the Islands for nearly 70 years, for them all it was a miracle of fine weather. This is an important point; for although the boat was of the size that normally takes trippers out into the Channel at Brighton, and although Jonathan's son dextrously steered into the waves so that we never once were splashed, the boat did toss. Jonathan on his perch moved to the rhythm of the waves, but we, his two passengers leaning against a cross-beam two yards away, were alternately looking down at him and peering up at him; and once or twice we were flung brusquely against each other. The sensation was that of a boat swing. This was to be expected. The sun was out, and had been ever since we had first arrived at Castlebay; for fifteen minutes we had peered out under its rays just over the horizon to catch the first glimpse of Jonathan's boat coming round the point from the island of Vatersay. But here we had the Atlantic on one side of us and the Minch on the other, so that the waves met from the mainland thirty miles to our left and from Newfoundland 3,000 miles away on our right. On our return, too, we

saw something of the turbulence of the waters round these little islands and over the many submerged rocks. On a calm day then a boat any smaller than the one we were in would be unsafe. It is not advisable to row a small boat in mid-Atlantic.

We passed the island of Sandray on our right going out; a hill of an island looking green and dank in spite of an old account which says it is the one dry island of those parts. Jonathan had lived there, he told us; his had been the only house on the island; and he had been born and bred on Mingulay, another couple of miles beyond our destination. But now Mingulay was deserted with the ruins of thirty houses, a church and a school and there was no one left on Sandray. Fertile and healthy, all these islands had been abandoned because they were inconvenient—they were so cut off by the Atlantic rollers. So Jonathan had settled down in Vatersay, which was remote enough from shops and civilisation.

We were heading this morning for Pabbay. Pabbay, half way between Sandray and Mingulay, is also an island deserted except for the sheep left there in fearless safety for months at a time. But Pabbay is smaller and more unapproachable. On three sides the cliffs go sheer into the tumbling and frothing waters, on the fourth there are two places where the rocks slope into the sea at an angle of 25° and between them a bay of fine, beaming sand, like the soft, curved belly of a hedgehog only half unfurled. This bay leads directly into the living heart of the island. The highest point, some 600 feet, is on the opposite side, with its sea-hewn walls and its grey, rock-cropped summit protecting the almost cosy bay and a few acres of low-lying land from the prevalent blasts of the Souwesters.

On the southerly spur of sloping rock Jonathan deposited us after some skilful manoeuvring: for even on a calm day a boat could be dashed heavily against these sharp rocks by the swell. The sandy bay would be the normal place for beaching a boat, but even our boat was too large for landing on the soft and gently shelving sand. It was 10.15 as Jonathan and his son backed out into the Minch, off on the quest for lobsters, and we felt that Pabbay was indeed remote from all mankind, our only link being this rough and genial fisherman. Because he knew every square yard of those waters he would—almost certainly—be able to take us off again in the afternoon as long as the weather did not change too suddenly. Remote and cut-off, those are Pabbay's principal blessings, offering one of the few chances in Europe for a final escape from steam and petrol, from the conveyor belt and the daily newspaper, from the senseless rush of modern man. But now was the time for exploration rather than reflection. Beyond the high water level and in and about the foot of the dunes there lay many objects cast up by the sea, a

barrel full of grease, two useful oil containers and enough driftwood to build a comfortable log cabin and keep it warm for a number of years. There were traces of the war, as well; an object that might have been a small bomb and a rusting mine half buried in the sand. Remote we might be, but the war with its foul offspring had been as close to Pabbay as to London or Paris. That was, we hoped as we kept well away from the mine, not a permanent link with civilisation. But it did mean that, if a man settled here, at the best he could only be at peace when the world was at peace, that even on a distant island war throws its hideous cloak and the solitary could be so no longer.

Could a man live here alone and avoid the corruption of twentieth century Europe? That was the problem of our thought and conversation as we picked our steps over the driftwood and followed the stream up to the ruined house and round the base of the prehistoric burial-mound. For there was a house without a roof once occupied by the "tenant" and before him by a crofting and fishing family. It had neither roof, nor windows, nor partition within, but it had two chimneys with the inevitable mass-produced chimney pots gracing the summit of the gable at either end. The hermit need not build himself a log-cabin, but he would need a roof and windows. He could take what was left of a past age just as he could take what the sea offered him of the wrecks of the present. This would not spell dependence on the slave labour of Glasgow or Milan.

Just here a Jenny Wren, curious to see these visitors from another planet, flitted almost under our feet and drew our attention to where we trod. We were climbing steeply up to the house; the sand was giving place to a firmer turf that suggested a firm soil beneath. This flattened out behind the house into a small field that would have needed little alteration to be made into a comfortable football ground. Here the solitary could grow anything that could be grown in the Isles, potatoes, cabbages and lettuce, wheat and oats, and other vegetables suited to a staple diet. Now it grew only docks and grass, but the soil was fertile and the whole place admirably shielded from the gales by the sharply rising wall of rock on the far side. Evidently this had been the crofters' main "cabbage patch". The island would have to be stocked from the world of to-day. The solitary would bring his grain and seeds with him—and his beasts. There were six, only six, sheep at present grazing here, but it could feed many more, and goats and cattle too. We had to relieve the hermit of his cow, though, because of the farcical picture of his rowing her off to the bull. Goats milk and sheep's wool, these would, at least, help him to keep alive.

We struggled up the steep valley until we came to another level stretch, surrounded on two sides by the grey wall of rocks.

Now it was a bog, but surely it could be drained and in the process it might provide peat fuel for a lifetime of warmth. There was more than enough ground for tilling for one man, and the rest of the ground, apart from a broad green belt to the north east, running up from the bay and across the northern hump, was the usual alternating grey bare rock and soggy green grass characteristic of the Isles, but often covered with heather and most nutritious pasturage.

But were we becoming too utilitarian? As we climbed slowly to the highest point in the island we noticed the innumerable primrose leaves and remembered how these places in the spring are always carpeted with the most varied and colourful flowers. And on the summit we could see not only the man-made tower of Barra-head lighthouse, but all those neighbouring islands, great and small, the white crests of the waves between them and at the foot of the cliffs the surging foam of waters beating eternally against the rocks. God made the sea and the hills—*quoniam ipsius est mare, et ipse fecit illud, et aridam fundaverunt manus ejus*—the solitary could hardly escape him here. The Spirit would be for ever brooding over those waters, bringing forth forms, ethereal and undeformed by the touch of materialised man. Angels would rise from those waves, as mermaids and seals had risen up to stir the thoughts of the forebears of these Gaels. The solitary could shout his *Te Deum* and murmur his *Magnificat*; God the Son would hear him, would come to him walking on the waters. *Fear not, it is I.*

Here was a matter to be pondered—Fear. These islands in general were entirely free of the elemental fear that haunts us unconsciously on the mainland. That is the predominant feeling that the stranger experiences when he comes first to Barra. The grown up may scoff at the idea of being frightened of the dark, but it is never quite the same as broad daylight—and he will usually lock his door at night. On Barra not only are doors perennially unlocked, but the animals, the innumerable Collie dogs, the horses loose on the hill sides, all are friendly. Neither man nor beast will ever threaten; the blessing of S. Barr remains almost tangibly on the island. But here on Pabbay stands a curious mound of earth and stones. The people all speak of the "grave-yard", presumably because that is the only English they know to correspond with some general Gaelic name for a place of burial. But it is no yard; it rises a good fifteen feet and is almost pointed. On the top, not quite on the summit, stands a rough oblong stone with a Jerusalem cross incised on one side as by the hand of an amateur. Perhaps the Christian people who died on the island were buried there; perhaps it covers the water-logged bodies of the three last men of the island who tragically disappeared with their fishing boat in a squall some 40 years ago.

The solitary might discover during the long dark nights that S. Barr's blessing had not included this small island, and gaunt fear might come creeping from that prehistoric mound where savages had buried their dead, creeping out at night round the lonely house. Utterly unimaginable on the main island where the Little People are droll and may be friendly, but here the spirits of the island might resent the coming of the hermit. Fishermen and crofters visiting the island to look at their sheep or lobster creels might find a crazed, staring man, dribbling, mumbling, gnawing his fists. Inverness asylum would be a poor ending to so romantic a venture.

A previous owner, indeed, had lived for two years on Mingulay, we had been told. The parish-priest, two authors of repute and some hangers-on had visited him one afternoon when they were "doing" these southerly islands; and had taken afternoon tea with him. He was quiet and charmingly simple in the reception of his guests from the world he had escaped. He did not, as he might have done, and indeed as he may have been drawn to do, protest violently that his solitude had been invaded and the "afternoon tea" standards of a despised civilisation thrust upon him once again. His elegant gentleness was remarked by his visitors. He had a shepherd who, they said, prepared his breakfast for him so that he was not utterly alone; and he had no prehistoric death mound confronting his lonely mansion.

However, we experienced no eerie feelings when we climbed the mound and examined the roughly chiselled cross. True it was daylight and we were together; but it needed a strong imagination to force the possibility of fear into those sea bound surroundings, and we soon forgot the topic and were back to practical, utilitarian problems.

How could the solitary see at night without oil from Persia or Mexico, or at least grease refined for lighting purposes in some factory? The Bard of Barra had told us how of old they used to catch the sea birds on these islands either with a noose over the cliff edge or simply with a kind of club hitting them as they came flying in from the sea. And some of these sea birds, the Puffin for instance, were full of blubber, which might presumably make a candle or light a lamp. But that raised the whole question of killing. The birds were almost like the primroses, part of God's language, his words to the solitary. And the sheep or goats . . . the man would become a primitive hunter before he had been on the island two years. The true hermit, for many reasons, must be vegetarian or his interests would be diverted from God to the chase, to the kill. Moreover, his life would become more and more preoccupied with material details the less dependent on the rest of the world he managed to become. He would have to spin and weave the wool, or perhaps tan a sheep's

hide. There would be the vegetables to be tended, the peat to be dug, the driftwood collected. All his attention would be fixed on self-preservation and God would be forgotten, his fellow men would remain possible rivals, even though they never approached nearer to him than Vatersay or Barra Head. Aristotle once said something to the effect that a man living alone would be either a beast or a superman. Cassian and the Fathers elaborated the same theme when they insisted that none of the brethren should have the audacity to attempt the eremitical life until he had lived with success among his fellow monks; he must be accomplished in and by society before he could be ready for the higher life of the solitary. Even the medieval solitaries, like Mother Julian of Norwich, only set up their anchor-hold after living for, perhaps, many years in the monastery. And finally, for the most part, these men and women were provided with many of the necessities of life by the very society they otherwise shunned.

Yes indeed, the hermit on Pabbay might find himself nearer hell fire than heavenly light after some months. It is evil, a sin which can hardly be fulfilled, to cut oneself off utterly from one's fellow men. The savage roaming the island clothed in a goat's skin and munching scraps of oatmeal and potatoes would be condemned by God and man . . . He would have cast the sacraments back into the face of the Lord, and the devils would have entered into the empty garnished hermitage.

By this time we were standing high up on the green belt of turf on the north of the island. Jonathan had said he would return about 4 o'clock and up there we thought we would spy him approaching from any quarter and have plenty of time to return to the roofless house for our haversacks. Suddenly a distant shout revealed Jonathan already on the northerly spur of rock below us. He had crept in under the cliffs unperceived and was impatient to be off. A run, a scramble, and we were soon chugging along by the steep sides of Pabbay, and gradually the island of dreams was left to the birds, the six sheep and the memory of men who had lived there with no special notions, no self-conscious ideas about society, who had inhabited the island because it was the normal way to live and keep alive.

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We tried to murmur our appreciation to Jonathan, who had caught three undersized lobsters and a crab during a day otherwise spent entirely for our amusement. No, he would hear of no thanks, for this was life to him, moving about the waters between the islands. He was the hermit; we had not realised that at first. He had the faith and he was happy to be alone on the deep, often dangerous waters. He scarcely thought of Birmingham as the origin of the tin of beans he occasionally had for supper. Evil things there were, away on the mainland, but they

did not disturb the quiet slopes of Vatersay, Sandray or Mingulay, and their fruits and offerings were often acceptable—even the paraffin and chugging engine itself. A glance at his rugged face showed that he was nearer the ideal of 20th century eremitical life than we could ever hope to be. We had learned on the mainland things and ways of thought that could never be unlearned.

We said goodbye to Jonathan on the southern shores of Vatersay and walked up to the Post Office, where Peggy had been waiting tea for us for some time. These folk were so full of generosity and kindness, they were the incarnation of S. Barr's blessing. The land and the people breathe the peace which is needed to transform the world. Escape is indeed impossible as well as immoral. But a group could settle under this benediction. They need not sever all connections with the world any more than the Fathers of the Desert, who were not utterly self-supporting. Those Fathers received alms from and gave instruction to the dwellers in the towns of the decaying empire; they spoke with one another, encouraging one another to greater heights of sanctity. No hermit was ever alone in the absolute sense: he dwelt in unity among brethren. Here then in the gloaming as we walked along the uncertain and rocky road to the ferry at the north of the island, appeared the small light of hope. There are many islands in these parts, once inhabited, now forsaken, except for grazing cattle and for shooting, Mingulay, Sandray, Gighay, Hellisay, Fiugay, as well as the perfect Pabbay. On these fertile drops of land in the midst of the ocean could dwell a group, a loosely knit society of men, seeking the divine solution to the problem of a corrupt, decaying civilisation. The modern hermits would be the *Fathers of the Isles*—a possibility, certainly, but we should have to visit the other islands to examine it.

It was dark when we crossed the sound to Castlebay, and we arrived at the pier in the ferry boat simultaneously with the *Lochearn* looking like a fairy house on the waters, its portholes and lower deck shining out gaily on to the quiet waters. Up against the pier, this messenger from the land of machines and business, was soon unloading its burden of goods made in Dundee and Newcastle; there were the pile of cartons from Glasgow containing ready-baked bread for the islanders, and the rolls of newspapers . . . Pabbay was indeed a dream.

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