

## The Other End of the Rainbow

My childhood was spent almost entirely in the blazing heat of the summer in Ballyrowan, a little market town on the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. Summers were about five times as long back then, and adults didn't bother children very much. They left us alone to get on with things, and that was what we did. There were trees to be climbed, tadpoles to be netted, woods, fields and streams to be explored and a lake that some thoughtful deity had provided for swimming, fishing and the testing of homemade rafts and leaky plywood canoes. The gap between the world of children and the world of adults was absolute.

We heard rumours of all kinds of goings-on that didn't concern us, like petrol smuggling, recruiting for the IRA, military manoeuvres in the Sligo hills, bomb factories, illegal whiskey-brewing, teenage pregnancies, cattle-rustling, race-fixing at the local greyhound track and the questionable financial practices of the Ballyrowan Town Council. Our world though was a different one, defined by the distance a ten-year-old could wander in a day and still be home for teatime: a landscape of streams and fields and woodland, full of secret places we shared with the rabbits and the foxes and the frogs. More importantly though it was a landscape of the imagination, peopled by pirates, Martians, cowboys, dragons, explorers, emperors, knights, distressed maidens, exotic tribesmen, wizards, witches, and of course, The Little People.

There was in the town of Ballyrowan one adult who was a citizen of our world and not of theirs. He had been around for as long as anybody could remember, even our parents had known him when they were children themselves. Everybody called him The Rainbow Man. This was because he was, to all outward appearances, a walking rainbow. He shared the magpie's love of bright shiny things, especially the most vulgar dyed cloth and gaudy costume jewellery, and with the compulsive genius of the true artist he would use his own body as his canvas to create for himself an entirely new persona every day, employing his collection of old curtains, seat-covers and bric-a-brac as the raw material of each new masterpiece. Today he might be a king or a caliph, a maharajah or a court jester, or a personage of some less certain category, but always the creation would be dazzlingly colourful and have a consistent style and theme.

It wasn't just the appearance of The Rainbow Man that made throngs of children follow him Pied Piper-style through the streets of Ballyrowan and the surrounding countryside, it was the conversations in which he was continually engaged with the people that only he could see, and of course the stories that he told. As he walked, The Rainbow Man's dialogue with his unseen respondents was continuous, and had a slightly strained but still discernable logic. "I don't think you've done all that bad, Yer Holiness, I don't see as how the other side has made any great shape of their job. Take measles, for instance. Wiped out by a wee pinch of the fungus off an ould slice of soda bread. And Original Sin.

Washed clean with a half a mug of water. Sure, Yer Holiness, ye'd near be sorry for the poor wee devils, so weak are they against the powers of the righteous, an' the wonders of medical science. I said the self same thing to the Angel Gabriel on Friday night. 'Call themselves devils?' says I. 'Sure they're no good at it. If I wanted to be a devil I'd come up with somethin' a damn sight cleverer than measles or Original Sin.' I only wish I wasn't so busy or I'd come over there to Rome meself an' explain it to you properly... Rome? Oh aye. I've been there many's a time. Rome an' Paris an' New York an' Jupiter. Sure there's nowhere I haven't been that's worth being. Big cities. I'll tell ye for nothin' what's wrong with big cities..." And so it went on. "Guests"

came and went but the conversation itself never ended.

When The Rainbow Man sat down he could often be persuaded to tell a story. He had a large stock of tales, and he told them with elegance and wit, and a freshness of approach on each new occasion. He himself was invariably the hero of his stories, and there was usually a moral or lesson of some kind in each of them that the older children might just grasp if they were so inclined, but the story itself was what mattered.

We children listened to his one-sided conversations and his stories, tried to join in from time to time, and imitated The Rainbow Man when we were far away from adults, because we knew that public mimicry of a madman's behaviour would create trouble for both ourselves and him. But the experience of knowing and spending time with The Rainbow Man implanted in our young and pliable minds the idea that it was alright to imagine things and to make up stories that weren't true. A few of us grew up unable to free ourselves from this tendency. For decades to come the voice of The Rainbow Man inside our heads would make some cryptic pronouncement that signalled the beginning of a story, and we would feel a compulsion to tell it.

One of his most asked-for stories was the one about how he had lost his wits. The Rainbow Man was in no doubt about having lost them at some point and felt no embarrassment in the fact. "The story about how I lost my wits?" he would muse, in answer to some child's request. "Sure the loss of a person's wits is no great thing. There's many a world leader, priest and critic without wits and yet people think them wise. But if ye want to know how I lost mine, and with them my cares, so that now I can dance from today into tomorrow or tomorrow into yesterday and skip over today altogether without missing a step, sure I'll tell you the story."

Now this happened a very long time ago, when I was a fine strong young man, before the great Shannon River had found its way to the sea, when the crows still nested on the ground. I worked for a farmer outside of Sligo and lived in a cottage on his land, built with my own hands out of the stones I had cleared from the way of the plough. I used to stand inside the half door in the evenings and wonder why it should be that the farmer who did nothing but tell others what to do had more than he needed of everything, while the likes of meself, who worked from dawn till dusk, had barely the rags on our backs and the few potatoes we boiled for our supper.

I was thinking these thoughts one autumn morning early when I saw a great bright rainbow over the world, with one end of it just behind Ben Bulbin mountain, not twenty miles from where I was standing, as the crow flies.

Now I knew, like everybody did, that if you got to the end of the rainbow you would find a wee leprechaun with a crock of gold and he would make you the richest man in the world. Well I was young and fit, and I could have walked twenty miles in a day and never thought twice, but not up one side of the mountain and down the other, so what I needed was a horse that could take me around the mountain. I knew the oul' nag that pulled the plough would be no good to me but the farmer had a hunter that would do the distance in a while of the morning and not be breathing heavy at the other end. The only trouble was, the boss wasn't going to lend his pride and joy to the likes of me.

So I went to the farmer's house and his wife it was that answered the door. "Goodness gracious me, yer ladyship," I said when I saw her, "isn't that a terrible colour you have in your cheeks this morning. De ye feel a tingling behind yer eyes, by any chance?"

"Well, now that ye mention it," says she, "I think I do."

"An is there a sort of heavy feeling in the pit of your stomach, an' a throbbing when you put

your two fingers into yer ears?"

She tried the experiment and agreed that I was right in every detail. "Ye know what it is?" I said darkly.

"No," says she, "tell me quick. Is it serious?"

"Serious?" says I. "Well, it carried off my mother in half a day. We had no horse and we couldn't get the doctor quick enough for her."

"Oh, my good Lord up in heaven! I've got to get straight back to bed before it gets any worse. Isn't it a fine thing that we've got a fast horse. Will ye take the master's horse and ride into town as quick as you can and get the doctor to come out here?"

"Sure of course I will," says I, an' that was how I got the farmer's horse and an early start on me journey to the end of the rainbow.

Well, I rode the young stallion hard and fast, past the town and as far out along the Sligo road as I'd ever been. The only other soul I met was an ould woman with a basket who was chasing along after a white sheet that the wind had caught up from her dry washing and was flying down the road ahead of me like a ghost that needed to be somewhere in a hurry.

"Young man with yer fine horse," says she, "will ye chase after my sheet before the wind drops it in the road and gets it all dirty again? Sure it's the only sheet that I've got in all the world."

"Ould woman," says I, "I'm on my way to the end of the rainbow, and have no time for the likes of yerself and yer sheet that's playin' games with the wind."

So I passed her by and a minute later passed her sheet as well, just as it settled into a brown puddle by the side of the road. I never slowed my pace until the great Ben Bulben was towering above me hardly a mile further, and then I looked up and what do you think I saw dipping down the back side of it? Nothing. Not a blind thing. The rainbow had disappeared!

I let the horse slow to a gentle trot and took a look around me at me surroundings. There was a gypsy caravan painted all the colours you could imagine and then a few more, parked in a field near by, with a wee dwarf man sitting down beside it and cooking a rabbit that he'd caught over a camp fire. Now gypsies are the descendants of the last true kings and queens of Ireland and they have the wisdom of the ancient Court of Tara, so I went up to the dwarf an' I said to him: "Yer honour, I have a problem that you might be able to solve for me, if you're not too pressed for time and don't mind sharing yer wisdom with the likes of me."

"My time is my own," says he, "an' wisdom does not grow smaller with the sharing." So I told him how I had been riding all morning to find the end of the rainbow and that now it had vanished and had no end to it at all any more.

"Ah now, that's nothing to be worried about at all," says he, "sure we all lose sight of what we're after every now and again. What you need is the Spectacles of Dreams, that let you see what you want to see when you put them on." An' sure enough he went to his caravan and got me a fine pair of spectacles in a leather case, with glittering gemstones all around the frame, and a bit of a rose tint to the two lenses. I put them on and looked over towards Ben Bulben an' there was the rainbow again, brighter than ever, with its end dipping down behind the mountain, just like before.

"Sure that's fantastic," says I, "I can see it there again, as plain as day. How much do ye want for these glasses?"

He looked at me an' I could tell that he knew right well I didn't have two pennies to rub together. "That's a fine horse," says he, "as fine as any stallion I've seen in these parts. Those

spectacles are worth a lot of money – but so is your horse."

"The horse for the glasses? But I need the horse to get to the end of the rainbow. What if it disappears again before I can get to it on foot?"

"Those are the Spectacles of Dreams, like I told you. When you look through those, you'll always see exactly what you want to see. The rainbow will always be there."

So I did the deal, and I swapped the farmer's fine horse for the Spectacles of Dreams.

I shook hands with the gypsy and walked on down the road to Ben Bulben, with the rainbow there in plain sight every step of the way.

Before I'd gone too far I saw the most beautiful wee lassie I'd ever come across, picking blackberries from the brambles by the side of the road and loading them into a tin bucket. I doffed me cap to her an' I says: "God bless ye' an' save ye' young lassie. Ye do make the wild flowers in the hedgerow pale to ugliness with your beauty. Is it an angel you are, or the queen of the fairies or what?" All the girls like a bit of blarney ye' know. There was never a female born, to a high station or a low one, that didn't like to be told she was beautiful.

"What I am is for others to judge," says she, fast as lightning, "and what you are is for me to judge by your actions and not by your words."

"What actions can I do for you," asks I, "that'll make ye think the better of me? Will I gather blackberries for ye and help ye to fill up thon bucket?"

"I thought you were in a great hurry, with a mighty end in view," she says, "and no time to pause, even to save an old woman's washing from the mud."

Well, I was shocked by her words, as well anybody might have been, and it was then I remembered I was still wearing the Spectacles of Dreams. I lifted them up a wee bit above me nose an' looked out from below them. An' may the Devil roast me if it wasn't the same ould woman whose request I'd turned down not an hour ago, a couple of miles up the road. I drew in me breath an' damned if I could think of a word to say.

"You gave me no help when I asked for it," she said quietly, "and the only friendship you offered was meant to serve your own gratification. But despite all that I'll give you good advice, if you only have the wit to take it." She paused and stared me straight in the eye. "The end you think you see is wrong for you. Look elsewhere, take a broader view."

An' what do ye think she did then? Aye, you're right. She disappeared in front of me eyes. Not even a puff of smoke. I don't mind telling ye I took to me heels and ran down that road like a whippet that had sat on a hot coal.

Well, I slowed my pace eventually and walked on steadily, all the way around to the back of Ben Bulben where the end of the rainbow touched the ground. An' sure enough there was a wee man there with a huge ox cart pulled by two oxen so big he could have stood under one of them if it was raining. He wore green trousers and a red jacket and his hat was leather with a narrow brim and a purple band all around the crown. He was sitting on a wooden stool, hammering away at a pair of boots that he was making, with the tools of his trade all laid out beside him: the lap-stone, the stirrup, the whet-board, the pincers and the nippers. As he worked he sang a little song to himself, to go with the rhythm of the hammering:

*A Gentle Craft that hath the Art,  
To steal soon into a Lady's Heart.  
Here you may see what Guile can do,  
The Crown doth stoop to th' Maker of a Shoe.*

Me heart was beatin' harder than his hammer as I walked up to him. For a minute or two he didn't seem to notice me, being that busy with his craft; then he stopped his hammering and looked up. Me jaw dropped down to me knees. It was the wee dwarf from the gypsy caravan.

"Well, well," says he, "'tis the man who trades that which isn't his, to win that which he doesn't deserve." He put away the boot and the hammer and stood up, and the top of his hat came little higher than the belt on my waist. "How fares the ould woman with the white sheet?" he asked me, with a coldness in his voice.

"The ould woman," said I, "how did ye come to hear about her?"

"Straight from the horse's mouth," says he. "Yer horse told me manys a thing about ye, none of them flattering."

"There's none of that counts for a thing," says I, mustering all the pride an' confidence I could find in me trembling body, "I've got to the end of the rainbow an' I claim my crock of gold. There's nothing in the rules about how you get here."

"Aye, nothing about how you get here. But you've made one very serious mistake." He looked up at me an there was an evil twinkle in his eye. "You've come to the wrong end of the rainbow. The crock of gold is at the other end."

"You can't do that!" I shouts, "that's not fair! It's a trick! Everybody knows you get a crock of gold if you get to the end of the rainbow. This is the end of the rainbow. I want my crock of gold!"

"A trick indeed? No trick whatsoever. Have ye ever heard tell of two crocks of gold?"

"No, of course not."

"One crock of gold then. And how many ends has the rainbow?"

I could see the logic of what he was saying. There was no answer to the point he was making.

"All ye had to do was employ yer wits," said he. "You were told that this end was wrong for you. When a man reaches the end of the rainbow, what he finds there is what he deserves to find. And since ye don't employ yer wits, I'll have them now and hand them on to someone who'll make better use of them."

"You can't take my wits!" I shouted, but when I looked down he'd pulled a tiny matchbox from his inside pocket and was slipping my wits inside it, which he was able to do without any trouble at all, and still leave lots of room for the matches.

"Now, I'm a fair man," he told me solemnly, "and I would never take a man's wits without relieving him of his troubles as well, so the lack of your wits will never cause you a moment's worry."

And sure enough as soon as he said it I could see all my troubles piled up behind him in a heap about the size of a house and a half. When I left he was still loading them onto the ox cart, and the axle was beginning to bend in the middle."

"And is that what happened," one of the children at The Rainbow Man's feet asked in wide-eyed fascination. "Did the lack of your wits never cause you a moment's worry?"

"Not a moment. A person's wits are the most over-rated thing in the whole world, and a person's kindness the most under-rated. Sure years later on the road to Belleek I met the same wee man with the gypsy caravan and the ox cart loaded high with my troubles, and he said to

me: 'Ye know, maybe it wasn't right to take away your wits. I've had a hell of a time hauling your troubles around with me on that ox cart, and I wouldn't mind giving you both of them back if you'll only take them.'"

"Take them back?" says I. "I may not have me wits, but I'm not daft enough to walk into another of your traps. Good day to ye." And I passed him by on the other side of the road as quickly as ever I could.

There was a pause while the children took in the enormity of The Rainbow Man's decision.

"And what about the glasses that let you see the world as you want it to be?" one of them asked. "What happened to them?"

"I threw them away. Sure there's no need for special glasses to do that. It's what nearly everybody does nearly all of the time. The trick isn't to see the world as ye want it to be but to see it as it really is. An' even when I had my wits I was never clever enough to do that."

Again his audience paused. "Do you think you could tell us another story?" one of them asked at last. "Well, if you're not in any great hurry, an' have no urgent business to attend to, I suppose maybe I could..."