

FAINNE GEAL AN LAE

BY James Skivington

As the morning sun lifted above the horizon, throwing a glowing orange ribbon of light across the sea, Rosie McKay emerged from the front door of the Glenariff farmhouse and stood for some moments in wonderment at the scene before her: the long fingers of shadow from trees and houses stretched across the sunlight on the valley floor, the fresh blue in the eastern sky slowly pushing the darkness away to the west. Then, as she crossed the cobbled yard towards the cow byre, her heart sank at the prospect of having to muck out six cows, feed pigs and chickens and only then make a start on the work for which she had actually been employed, that of housekeeper.

Some weeks before, she had gone to a hiring fair in Ballycastle and been taken on by Sean O’Cathain, a widowed farmer. Some were of the opinion that his late wife would surely be happier in her current location than she ever had been on O’Cathain’s poorly-run farm. Others harboured darker thoughts as they endured his drunken declamations in the pubs of Cushendall, where he could never have been credited with buying a drink for friend or stranger.

‘Thon fella would wrastle a ghost for a ha’penny,’ someone had said. And when he had taken on Rosie, he had told her, ‘I wouldn’t be givin’ ye the full wages until I see how ye shape up.’ Even the ‘full wages’ had been a disappointment to Rosie, though she had had little choice but to accept and had packed a small bag with her few clothes and walked the six miles from her home in Glendun to O’Cathain’s place.

As she began to shovel the cow dung from the byre into a wheelbarrow and take it out to the dung heap in the yard, the front wheel wobbling and creaking as she went, she started humming an air from an old song her mother had taught her. Ever since she could remember, she had been continually humming a tune or singing the words of a song beneath her breath. It helped to lift her a little out of the rut of deprivation and labour from which she had suffered for most of her eighteen years of life. But whilst it may have started as a kind of defence mechanism, it had grown and matured, so that now she was known and admired in her community as a singer with a fine voice and outstanding technique. And, unusually, the majority of her singing was in the Irish language.

As she dumped a barrowful of muck onto the heap, she paused and again looked down Glenariff. It was somewhere down there that would be held the first Feis na nGleann, a festival of music, dancing, arts, crafts and sports. Since hearing of the event, Rosie had more

than once imagined herself in the singing competition, up on a stage, showing the spectators and indeed the wider community that she could do much better than singing to a bunch of cows or pigs, could merit better accompaniment than the howl of her father's sheepdog. And she knew what she would sing, her favourite song, 'Fainne Geal an Lae', known in English as 'The Dawning of the Day'.

As the sun slipped further above the horizon and she felt the warmth of it on her face, she began to sing the song, at first quietly and then more loudly, as though it were a paean to the dawn itself.

'What the hell're you about, girl?' The gruff voice rang out, reverberating from the walls of the byre and outhouses, encircling her, confining her with his authority. She started, then slowly turned, her eyes downcast.

'I was just . . . singing, Mr O'Cathain. I wasn't . . .'

'I don't pay ye tae sing! An' especially not in Irish. Can't be doin' wi' that oul culchie stuff. This is nineteen-oh-four, girl, the twentieth century, in case ye didn't know. Speak English 'round here or houl yer wheesht. Now get on wi' yer work!'

With that, O'Cathain turned and walked back to the house, his ruffled hair, holed vest and grubby long johns giving him the appearance of an old sheep startled out of its slumber. It was the first time Rosie had seen him emerge from his bed before ten o'clock in the morning. In quiet defiance, as he went into the house, she began to hum the song under her breath.

Two days later, on her half-day off, Rosie was walking down the loanen behind Glendun Lodge, the home of Ada McNeill, who was universally known as Miss Ada. Despite being from a strongly unionist background, she was widely known for her strong support and promotion of Gaelic and nationalist causes, and now, alongside friends such as Roger Casement and Bulmer Hobson, was instrumental in setting up the first Feis na nGleann, due to take place the following week. As Rosie passed the back garden of the Lodge, she glanced in and saw the gardener hoeing between onion rows, then a voice rang out, high, clear, almost commanding.

'Is that Rosie McKay?'

In some little trepidation, Rosie approached the fence as Miss Ada came striding towards her.

'Yes, Miss Ada. I was just . . .'

'I'm more than a little surprised, Rosie, that I haven't seen your name on the list for the singing competition at the Feis. It is next week, you know.'

‘I . . . can’t go, Miss Ada. I’m working an’ . . .’

‘But of course you can! You’re one of the best singers in the Glens. What’s to stop you going, may I ask?’

‘Well, I’m doing housekeeping for Mr O’Cathain and, well, I know he wouldn’t give me the time off.’ And then, for good measure, she added, ‘And he said singin’ in Irish was just “oul culchie stuff”. Sorry, Miss Ada.’

Ada McNeill’s eyes narrowed and she said coldly: ‘That wouldn’t by any chance be Mr Sean O’Cathain of Glenariff, would it?’

Rosie slowly nodded, at once overtaken by the fear that she would now surely lose her job.

‘I would’ve thought you could’ve found yourself a better position than one with *that* man. I will see what I can do. And with regard to your singing at the Feis, say nothing to Mr O’Cathain. I’ll handle it.’

As Ada McNeill turned and walked down the garden path, Rosie blurted out: ‘He won’t let me, Miss Ada. I know he won’t!’

Ada McNeill stopped and glanced back at Rosie, who looked ready to burst into tears.

‘Perhaps not if I ask him, Rosie—we have crossed swords in the past. But, as the saying goes, there’s more than one way to skin a cat. Good-day to you, and keep practising.’

Sean O’Cathain stood in his front doorway, leaning against the jamb, one hand holding his pipe, the other lazily scratching at the grey vest which covered his protruding belly. Someone had sworn that he had been wearing the vest for so long that his chest hair had grown out through it. He had two days’ beard growth and his hair stuck up from his head like the bristles on the yard-brush which had been lying unused until Rosie had come to work for him. Then he stood up straight as he heard the clatter and rattle of hooves and wheels coming along his rutted loanen. A moment later, a pony and trap appeared, came into the yard and swept around to pull up before him. As O’Cathain tried to smooth his hair and pull his shirt closed, a tall, well-dressed man with dark hair and beard stepped down from the trap and came towards him, hand extended.

‘Good morning, Mr O’Cathain.’ He grasped the other man’s hand with a firm grip and shook it. ‘Very pleased to meet you. My name is Roger Casement.’

At the mention of the name, O’Cathain’s eyes widened and he had difficulty forming a reply. He had heard of this man, as indeed had many others in the United Kingdom, who had, barely three months ago, delivered his report to Parliament on the horrific treatment of native workers in the rubber plantations of the Belgian Congo. O’Cathain blinked rapidly. What

could such a man possibly want with him? Would he too be reported to Parliament for the treatment of his worker?

‘Pleased to meet ye, Mr Casement, sir.’

‘This is a fine place you’ve got here,’ said Casement, looking around. ‘And well-kept too, with the help, I believe, of young Rosie McKay, your housekeeper.’ He gave a vague smile. ‘Though it would appear that she doesn’t quite know where the house ends and the yard and byre begin.’

Again O’Cathain blinked rapidly as he tried to understand what had just been said to him.

Casement went on: ‘As a man of your sensibilities will surely know, Rosie is an outstanding singer. Indeed, you may have joined her in a song or two as she worked—and she wishes to take part in the upcoming Feis on the 30th.’

O’Cathain opened his mouth as if to speak but Casement continued: ‘Now, I would deem it a personal favour if you could ensure that Rosie gets time off from her work here so that she can attend the Feis. D’you think that would be possible, Mr O’Cathain?’

Sean O’Cathain’s mouth opened and closed a couple of times before he managed to say, ‘I’m . . . I’m sure that could be done, sir, as a personal favour tae yersel’, like.’ It was a story which he would tell again and again in the public houses which he frequented. Casement shook the farmer’s hand with vigour.

‘Thank you very much, Mr O’Cathain, you’re a gentleman. Good luck to you, now.’ Casement turned, climbed into the trap and with a flap of the reins and a ‘Hup!’ was off along the loanen. O’Cathain slowly leant against the door jamb, a bemused smile on his face.

On the morning of the Feis, when she should have been getting dressed, Rosie was feeding pigs and chickens. O’Cathain may have agreed to Roger Casement’s request to give Rosie time off for the singing competition, but that didn’t mean that she could give up any of her normal duties.

‘Ye’ll just need tae get out yer bed a bit earlier, girl,’ he had told her. It was a good two-mile walk from O’Cathain’s farm to where the Feis would be held, at the foot of Glenariff and Rosie knew that there was no prospect of her employer taking her there in his horse-drawn cart. In addition, she had no means of telling the time and had to rely on the position of the sun for an approximation of the day’s progress. At last, she finished her chores and ran to the house, quickly changing into her one good dress and pulling on a pair of buckle shoes she had borrowed from her mother. Though they pinched her feet and were down-at-heel, she knew that they did look smart.

She hurried out the door, with no sign of O’Cathain to wish her good luck, and went off at a trot up the rutted loanen, once or twice almost falling over. By the time she got to the main road she was sweating, her breath coming in snatches. Then, a quarter of a mile further on, she did go over on her ankle and rolled halfway down into a ditch, her right shoe falling into the muddy water and slowly sinking out of sight. She lay slumped on the bank and the tears welled in her eyes. What was the point? Why had she even thought of such a stupid idea? As she slowly pulled herself up onto her knees, she heard the clatter of hooves and the rumble of iron-shod wheels. Before she had time to look up the road, a pony and trap pulled up beside her.

‘What’s this, Rosie? Clearing the sheughs in yer best dress?’ It was young Mike McAuley, from a farm further up the glen. He jumped down from the trap and helped her to her feet. ‘What happened ye?’

‘I was rushin’ down tae go tae the singing competition in the Feis an’ . . . an’ . . . Oh, it’s too late now!’ She gave a great sigh. ‘An’ I’ve lost a shoe.’

Mike McAuley laughed. ‘Take off the other one. That’ll square ye up. C’mon. Let’s see if we can get you there on time.’ With a quick heave he had her up and into the trap, before climbing in himself. Then with a flick of the reins and a shout, they were off, flying down Glenariff at breakneck speed. Rosie’s eyes widened, a grin of sheer excitement on her face. Halfway down the glen she took off her remaining shoe and with a whoop she threw it high over a roadside hedge.

‘There’s a dance at the end of the Feis, Rosie,’ Mike McAuley shouted. ‘I’ll maybe see ye then.’

‘But I’ve got no shoes!’

‘That’s alright. We can both dance in the bare feet!’ The two of them burst out laughing and Mike McAuley urged his pony to go faster.

In the front row, facing the temporary stage, sat some of the people who had been instrumental in setting up this first Feis na nGleann: Margaret Dobbs, F J Bigger and Ada McNeill, beside whom was Roger Casement. When Rosie had arrived, breathless, barefoot and with wild hair, Miss Ada had said, ‘Rosie, I would like you to go on last.’ She gave her enigmatic little cat’s smile. ‘And how is the bold Mr O’Cathain?’

‘I haven’t seen him today, Miss Ada.’

‘Hmph, a rare bird, spied only in its nest or perched by the bar in a public house. I’ll talk to you later, Rosie. I may have a solution for your employment situation. Good luck in the contest.’

With fluttering heart, Rosie stepped onto the stage, feeling the rough floorboards against the soles of her feet. She looked out over the crowd before her. She had never seen so many people in her life. This was definitely not the same as singing in the kitchens of family and friends, but as she began singing, quietly at first, the noise from the spectators died away and her bright, clear voice rang out the words and melody of ‘Fainne Gal an Lae’—‘The Dawning of the Day’—and even those who did not understand Irish stood enthralled. And when she came to the end of the song there was a brief silence before there erupted a chorus of applause, cheers and whistles, as a blushing Rosie executed a half-bow, half-curtsey and saw the particularly enthusiastic clapping from Ada McNeill and Roger Casement, who knew that they had completed more than one good deed that day.

Later, when Rosie was handed first prize in the senior singing competition, she saw Mike McAuley smiling up at her.

That evening, she knew, she would be ready to dance on the head of a pin.