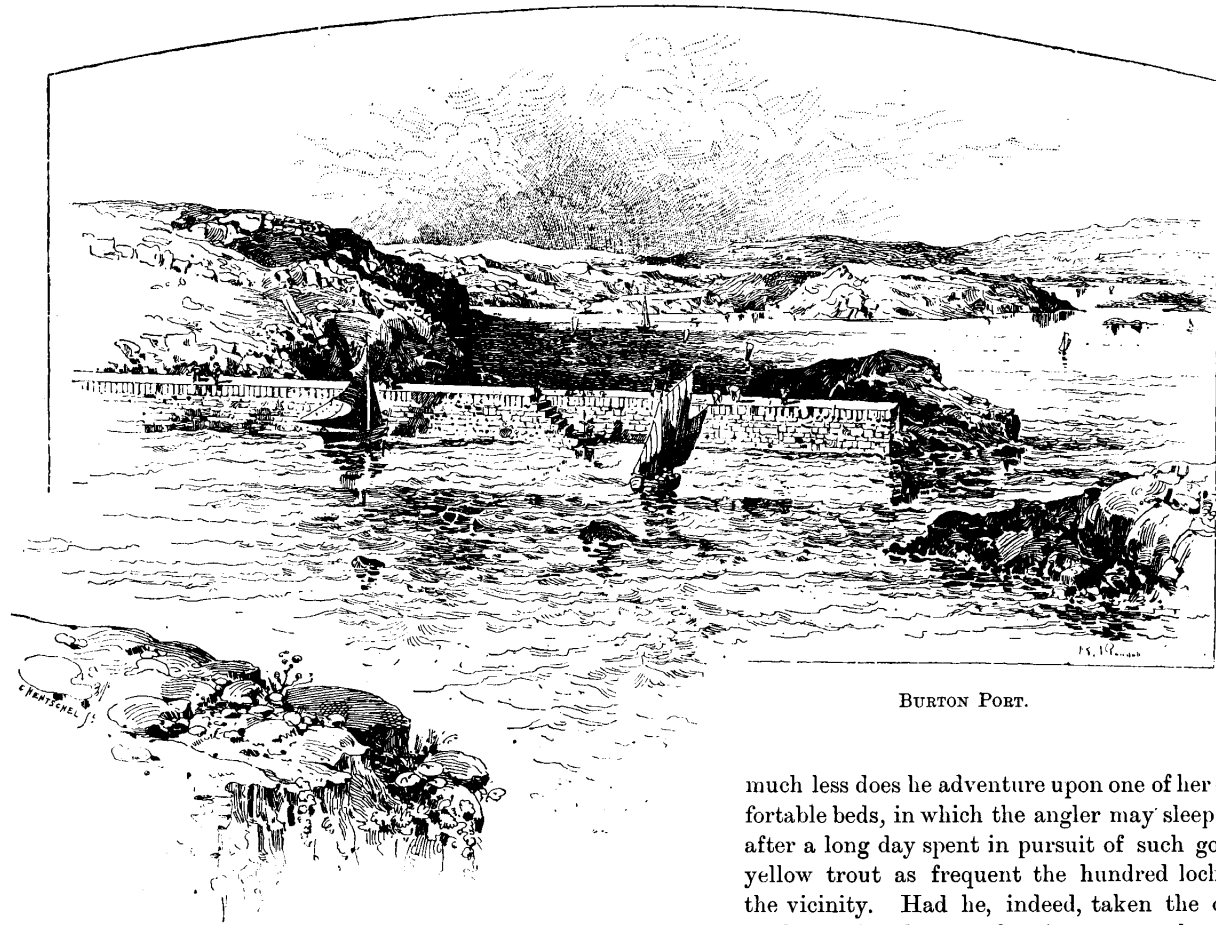


## II.—THE KNITTERS OF THE ROSSES.



BURTON PORT.

**L**IFTING up its granite bulwarks to stem the mighty roll of the Atlantic billows, that portion of the wild sea-board of Western Donegal which is called locally "The Rosses" may well picture itself to the readers of Tasso as his *Ultima Irlanda*—that most forlorn outpost of the civilisation of the sixteenth century which the words suggest.

Rosses, in the Irish language, means just such a "continent of crags" as this, stretching out like the fingers of an open hand into the waste of waters between the little sandy harbour at Bunbeg and Dungloe Bay. Cut off as it is by a lofty chain of barren mountains from approach by rail or tramway, destitute of any pier or landing-stage for the steamers passing constantly outside the headlands, this region eludes the eyes of tourists or newspaper correspondents, and is known only to those who are connected with it by family, or friendly, or business relations. Even the all-informed Mr. Murray is content with such glimpses as the inland road, conveying him from his good quarters at Gweedore to the fine glens and headlands of South Donegal, may offer. He does not even lunch at Mrs. Hanlon's good hostelry when he reaches Dungloe, the metropolis of the Rosses ;

much less does he adventure upon one of her comfortable beds, in which the angler may sleep well after a long day spent in pursuit of such goodly yellow trout as frequent the hundred lochs of the vicinity. Had he, indeed, taken the coast road, crossing the strand at Anagary, and coming round by Kincaslough, with its fine natural harbour, and cheerful white chapel, on one of those lovely days when the sea takes the hue of a peacock's breast, shoaling from purple to a vivid green, and all the countless rocklets and islands it encircles lie bathed in rosy light, he might have been tempted to linger ; for tracing here the footprint of some great sea-bird amongst the profusion of bright wild flowers clothing the sand-hills, he could well fancy himself the first discoverer of this lonely region.

Even as he gazes the "terror of tempest" may sweep across the ocean, when the white spray will fling itself over the Butt of Aran, and fringe the cliffs of Owey (*Ooie*), while Tory Island, lying far out to the north, looks spectral seen through the flying scud. Then he is reminded of that night, four years ago, when the gun-boat *Wasp* ran full on the sheer precipices of Tory, and that merry crew who had just left safe anchorage in Aran roadstead were swallowed by the cruel waves. I spent that night with kind friends at Burton Port. In the morning news came of the loss of two men who had been trying to reach Innishfra Island in a small boat in the teeth of the gale ; the full disaster it had wrought was heard of many hours later.

The women of these coasts and islands are as skilful as the men in handling the oar and rudder. They know every sunken rock and dangerous current of the intricate channels between the great island of Aran and the mainland, and take the boats in and out in all weathers. For many years a Grace Darling of this western coast, the daughter of the pilot who lived on Eights Island, went out in storm and darkness with her old father, never trusting him alone as she knew his weakness for the whiskey. This brave girl never flinched from facing the wildest gales, fearing that disaster might befall her father and the vessels it was his business to guide to a safe anchorage, if she were not at the helm. Many a ship's crew beating about between Aran and Owey owed its preservation to Nellie Boyle. Two sisters have taken the post boat into Aran for many years past, their father, John Nancy, being now old and infirm.

The beetling cliffs and echoing caves of this dangerous coast have a weird charm of their own, and the simple people born within the sound of the Atlantic surges cling with a surprising tenacity to their thatched and roped

of getting stacked before the equinoctial gales begin to blow. Well it would be if these oats, ground into meal, might form a larger part of the staple food of Donegal. Strong tea, boiled in the "wee pot" beside the turf embers, with baker's bread, have now taken the place of the wholesome bone-making porridge on which the canny Scot still lives.

To buy groceries money is needed, and we wonder how this can be earned here. Kelp, or seaweed, burning used to bring them money; and this year, too, thin pillars of blue smoke are rising all round by the sea, showing, let us hope, that the trade in iodine is brisk. The fishing ought to be a fruitful source of prosperity to the Rosses, but on this subject a resident writes in 1884 as follows:—

"To the north of Aranmore, stretching away to the north-west of Tory, there is a fine fishing-bank, where all kinds of fish might be caught every day of the year with suitable boats and gear. In very fine weather our small craft often go out from four to six miles off Aran Heads. Next day they come back laden, and after such a take all the other boats in the neighbour-



THE ROSSES.

cottages, sheltered behind huge round-backed rocks, in the hollows of which they grow their patches of potatoes and stunted oats and barley.

The number of these dwellings, starting up out of what from afar looks like a stony desert, both by the sea and for miles inland, is startling to us who reflect on the possibilities of subsistence afforded by this so-called *land*. The unfailing bog affords ample fuel, it is true, and the potato crop, when as good as now, will last throughout the winter.

In a good season such as this the oats have a chance

hood will go out. It may be that a breeze springs up, the sea rises in the middle of a good catch, then all have to run for home or shelter. Large, well-fitted fishing-smacks could stay out there for days, and make plenty of money too; but facilities for the transit and sale of fish there are none.

"Markets would be found if only the Board of Trade would entertain the beneficent project of building a breastwork to complete what nature has done at Kincaslough to create a pier. The harbour is not tidal, there are eighteen feet of water always available, it is sheltered

effectually from every dangerous wind. It has been estimated by competent authorities that between two and three thousand pounds would complete a pier, at which pier the large steamers passing within two miles twice a week might put in, as they ply between Glasgow, Liverpool, and Sligo. At present captains of vessels windbound in Aran roadstead are much inconvenienced by the distance they are obliged to drive before they can telegraph to owners; Dunfanaghy and Stanorlar being from thirty to forty miles off. It is a great shame for Government to leave an important anchorage like this without telegraphic communication. I presented a memorial to the Postmaster-General, influentially signed, in 1883, asking for an extension of the telegraph to Dungloe and Burton Port, but its receipt has never been acknowledged."

The men migrate to Scotland for the harvest, walking sixty miles to Derry when it is too rough for their boats to reach these passing steamers; but reaping machines are rapidly diminishing the market for hand-reaping in the lowland districts, and they return with but slender earnings for the most part. The land of promise across the western waves, enables many to help friends and relations at home. The Irish emigrant seldom neglects this pious duty. He is very apt to return from America—the "next parish" as he calls it—as soon as he has gathered enough money to enable him to build a slated house amongst the rocks over which his bare feet have sped when he was a boy. Cradled within reach of the Atlantic surges, as they fret and moan in the deep caves, hearing the sad complaining cries of myriads of sea-birds, the Rosses folk cling also to their ancient superstitions, and give human voices to these wailing sounds. This is the spot for warnings and portents, while many a creepy tale is whispered round the glowing turf fires on the winter nights. Charms and talismans are held in repute, and there are still glens in some of the islands shunned after nightfall, for here the fairies—or "good people"—have been seen holding their revels even of late years, by belated travellers, and these dangerous wee folk brook no rash intrusion from mortal men. The Roman Catholic clergy discourage this "superstitious gossip," and turn a deaf ear to legends and ghost stories. Often have I been thrilled with a strange awe, however, to hear a dear relative, a Rosses woman of the "raal ould ancient race," so privileged to hear and repeat its folklore, tell of changeling children, and of tutelary spirits; while in quite recent times a poor woman crossing the bog one day had met a "grey lady," who gave her a magic stone, telling her to rub herself well with it, when all her pains would leave her. She was charged to send this magic stone to all who were suffering, but on no account to take money for its use. Accordingly the amulet was passed on from house to house, coming once to the "big house" also, and it never failed to cure when well rubbed in.

With their soft native language the natives retain many primitive customs. Marriages are settled by the parents, sometimes before the young people concerned have met. The number of sheep or sum of money for the "plenishing" once agreed upon, the wedding takes

place with much mirth, fiddling, singing, and dancing; and these marriages generally turn out happily; but when landlords will permit a "new smoke" is then added, which diminishes the farm, while large families are the rule. The peasantry of Ireland are known to be exceptionally virtuous and modest in their domestic relations. The Rosses people are light-hearted, and on the long winter nights the cheery notes of a fiddle may be heard in most of the cottages. So long as the "potheen" is absent, the dancing which accompanies it is very harmless.

The temptation to distil what used to be called the "Donegal milk" is almost irresistible in some of the islands, and many amusing anecdotes are told of the 'cuteness with which the Owey people elude the Excisemen. The owner of the island tells the following:—

"Two girls landed one day on Cruit (*Cruitt*) with a fine jar of illicit whiskey. Spying two coastguards lying in wait for them, one girl set off running as only a Rosses girl can run, the men after her in wild pursuit. Many a mile she led them, over hill and dale, before she was captured—empty-handed! Her friend had meantime walked on slowly, with the jar tucked safely under her shawl, to the house where it was expected, and delivered it safely."

The people of Aranmore, the large island sheltering many smaller ones and Burton Port, used to regard banishment to the mainland as a great misfortune. Consequently their surnames were limited to a very few. The numerous John Boyles, or Hugh O'Donnells, would take a mother's name by way of distinction in addition to their own characteristics—"Black John Boyle Nancy" degenerating to "John Nancy" presently. These numberless Boyles or O'Donnells were not, however, the old inhabitants of the island. Within the memory of my relatives the last remnant of an older race still lingered there, on a rock overhanging the sea. One day my cousin saw two strange and diminutive people land on the shore near Burton Port. Their eyes, hair, and skins were dark, almost of an Eastern hue, their feet and hands and ankles curiously small; and they looked sad and weird. Leaving their coracle, they took their way across the hill, their faces set to the east, and were seen no more. My cousin was told that for long these forlorn creatures had been treated as pariahs and shunned as uncanny by the Aran folk, living in the caves and inaccessible mountains. At length taking a desperate resolve, they crossed the sea and wandered out into the unknown world.\*

As we steer through the channels dividing the lesser islands from Aran we pass Rutland, a Pompeii of the West. A village and curing-houses for fish were built here during the Lord Lieutenancy of the Duke of Rutland, and the island rechristened: but a man sitting on a mound there lately was told that it covered the highest chimney of these buried houses, over which the white sand has been blown up so as to blot out all traces of their use. A brass cannon of Spanish make was hauled up

\* Since writing the above I find that these aborigines were forced to leave the island by some of the inhabitants whose sheep they had stolen and eaten.

from the bottom of the sea close by Rutland about fifty years ago, giving countenance to the tradition of the wreck of certain ships belonging to the Armada on this coast.

Wrecks were formerly of constant occurrence, but now a tall lighthouse warns vessels off Aran Heads; its bright light also strikes on two wicked rocks, far out at sea, called the Stags, and reveals them to passing ships. The old man in charge of this lighthouse told us once more, a few weeks ago, a story often heard before. The cliff on which the tower stands is 233 feet high, the tower 75 feet. One winter night as he sat in the top chamber watching the light, there came suddenly a mountain of green water, stripping off the roof and flooding the room. It seemed to him like an earthquake-wave, and nothing short of seeing it could have convinced him of its reality.

This lighthouse was obtained by my relative who bought the island with others about forty years ago. Delighted to see the beneficent rule established by Mr. Gage in Rathlin off the Antrim coast, he thought to regenerate Aranmore. "In 1849," writes his sister, "J—— and I often wandered for hours over Aranmore. We were full of zeal, in those days, for the good of the people." The land here is much more fertile than on the mainland, but the island had then a teeming population, which it could by no means support. The only hope of bettering the condition of these starving people lay in emigrating a fifth of them. Accordingly, the tenant-right of many little patches having been bought up, a vessel was chartered and all found, while each family was given £10 to start it in America, in addition to a free passage. Names came in fast, and many offered to go, but when it came to dismantling their hovels before leaving so that no other paupers might occupy them, the attachment to their roof-trees asserted itself, and scenes of great distress had to be endured. My cousin was strong in his belief that he was doing his best for both those who went, and the thousand or so who remained. He walked with the men, encouraging them manfully, all the weary way to Derry, running the gauntlet of much abuse as he passed through villages on the way. The 250 souls who then got safe across the Atlantic settled on an island in Lake Superior, where their descendants are, I believe, doing well to this day. It was then possible to enlarge the holdings, to make roads, and set about many improvements. A lodge grew up where for many a year merry parties of friends and relations enjoyed the splendid air and scenery of this fine coast. This pleasant cottage is, of necessity, now deserted.

This year\* the crops are good, the turf is cut and carried. The men we met loading it in carts, and creels slung over horses' backs, gave back a cheerful response when my companions—amongst them the parish priest—asked after the harvest, as we climbed the hill to enjoy a panorama of blue creeks and inlets studded with islands, and backed by the wild Derry Veigh and Dunleary mountains.

A feeling of deep thankfulness for the good season

\* August, 1887.

was mingled with the pain caused by the absence of those who had once loved the place so well, as we sailed down a "golden path of rays" away from beautiful Aranmore that evening. The tide runs like a mill-race through those tortuous channels, and the moon was glittering on the clear waters before our stout rowers could win us through against the current. Tales of the seals beguiled the way. These gentle creatures are said to retreat to the caves, uttering musical sounds, before they die. Mournful strains are heard floating out on the evening air at times. They are affectionate and soon tamed. Our relations had a pet seal that used to lie before their schoolroom windows the day long. For some reason it was decided that it should be restored to the depths of ocean. It was placed in a boat, rowed far out, and thrown into the sea. Next morning it was seen lying in its favourite lair. Again it was taken out in a boat and committed to its native element, and once more it returned.

But it is now time to say why, in the absence of relations, I too find my way back to the Rosses from time to time. There are still good people at Burton Port able and willing to second any scheme that may be devised for giving work and wages to the poor women of the district, and a quiet bit of work which has this intention has been in progress there during the last half-dozen years, under my direction.

During the last sad winter spent in Aranmore by my widowed cousin and her daughters, I heard much about the low rate of wages for knitting which then prevailed. Well on to fifty years ago, this good knitting, as well as the hand-loom weaving of cloth and flannel, had been brought to great perfection by the beneficent, fostering care of a man whose memory may well be revered by those who knew him as he lived and laboured. Lord George Hill—of whose life-long work at Gweedore it may, perhaps, be my privilege to speak in detail on some future occasion—"taking his courage in both his hands," had purchased five forlorn and God-forsaken properties there in the years 1838–9. With the help of a practical agriculturist, ten years had seen this wilderness brought into cultivation, while Lord George was yearly offering prizes for new fences, straight furrows, tidy cottages, neat gardens, and clean crops. They were not only encouraged to make good butter and rear poultry, but were rewarded for knitting and spinning their best. Excellent cloth was produced, and well-made hose found its way, through a sympathetic channel, to the English market. A certain Mr. Hawes, from London, was wont to visit Donegal at prize-giving seasons, and soon he began to take so much delight in the wild scenery and fine air of Gweedore that his annual holiday was spent there. He bought up the knittings at prices which would surprise some of us poor merchants of a cheaper age. When Mr. Hawes died, another great hosiery house took up the trade with Donegal, and paid the women liberally for good work done. The pleasantest relations existed between employer and employed, the sum paid by one agent alone amounting in 1875 to £900 a year.

Having survived the boycotting which reduced this

payment to £80 in 1885, the work went on again well up to last December, when by the intervention of some conflicting agency it fairly ceased for a time. Another agent suffered in the same way at Dungloe, where, as well as at Gweedore, this underselling has brought about a serious lowering of the scale of wages for the knitting. In my small efforts to supply work, my fear had been that I might clash with an immense and permanent

yet see the market prices raised, a hope which has been realised.

In 1882 I had been much struck by the practical sense and beneficence shown by the good parish priest at Burton Port when, in conjunction with Lord Conyngham's representative and others, he drew up a scheme of relief which might have gladdened the heart of Miss Octavia Hill herself.



A SPINNER OF THE ROSSES.

agency which has long existed at Glenties, in Donegal. Glenties is a long way from Burton Port and the islands, however, and when Mr. McDevitt's manager courteously showed me his warehouses, piled from floor to ceiling with strong coarse knitted goods, I took care to explain that, while our district lay out of his area, my object was to get much finer work than his produced, at a more remunerative price. It seemed well, also, to warn our knitters that in case our sales might slacken they had better take what work could be procured at any price. I was not without a grain of hope that we might

At a time when most Western districts were asking for and receiving *alms*, my friends proposed that a certain amount of improving work should be bestowed by each man on *his own house and land* to entitle him to *wages* in the form of seed-potatoes, corn, or money. Thus his self respect need not be injured.

Laying aside all politics, these good men have preserved their poor neighbours from that system of deplorable begging which is so demoralising. They have encouraged the men to seek work in Glasgow, and the women to knit their best for me. My fine wools have

been travelling over from Alloa for six years past, and coming to me in London in many different shapes. They have also encouraged the Rosses folk to meet all their engagements "like men."

Small wonder is it if, directly you find yourself in the big barren Rosses, you hear "there has never been an eviction in this parish." As we approached Kincaslough the other day we could see, relieved against the blue sky, groups of women sitting on the rocks, their needles flying, their heads tied up in bright red handkerchiefs. When asked for whom they were so busy, those who "had" English said, "Sure, and it's for the lady." The "lady" has to confess that her yarns, being so much finer than Mr. McDevitt's, take longer to knit, and do fairly entitle the knitters to a double wage.

The very fact of doing one thing as well as ever they can, has, I am assured, a good educational and civilising influence upon these bright-eyed, Irish-speaking, bare-footed womankind.

Who knows but that in time we may even rival the exquisite knitting-work which is done at Carrick, under the skilled and most kindly tuition of a Londoner, for a great wholesale house in the metropolis? Here fairy-like garments are produced for babies' wear by girls of fourteen, while their elder sisters are hard at work embroidering for a great Belfast firm. The knitters are earning 10d. a day, while the spriggers can earn 1s. by their beautiful work. The good news that "any amount of sprigging was to be had" has made a pleasant stir throughout the whole of Donegal this summer. It is stated in print that already, during the first six months of 1887, £50,000 has been paid by different firms to the Donegal embroiderers. Before such agencies as these, puny little amateur efforts must "pale their ineffectual fires," and yet I should be very sorry to break the pleasant personal bond which attaches my little "stocking room" in London to the good Father Bernard's small cottage in the Rosses. I have seen the women thronging in by the dozen in search of work, bending eagerly to count the stitches of some new sock, while the tall, stalwart-looking Father translated my directions into their native language. Some had come from the islands in boats; some had run barefoot ten miles over the rocks, the news having sped from house to house that the "big parcels" had come in. Father Bernard sends me his monthly record of the wages earned by each Sheillah or Biddy making jerseys, or gloves, or socks, when I send him a cheque; but, alas! in all the years we have been working, the sum of £900 which I have paid for work only amounts to that expended during the one year 1875 by Messrs. Allen and Solly's agent at Gweedore.

I am keenly touched by the generous kindness of clergymen and others who are so eager to help these poor Roman Catholics by buying their work. But, gentle reader, my object is not altogether to entrap thee into that "stocking room" to buy. If this ramb-

ling sketch has indeed proved worth thy perusal, urge, rather, thy better half—if he be an M.P. so much the better—to help us to that pier which would open up a market for our Rosses products of every description. As we lingered near Kincaslough we saw boxes of lobsters, and crates of eggs at fivepence a dozen, waiting to be carted over the hills, more than sixty miles, to Derry. We saw thousands of snowy water-lilies, and gorgeous yellow daisies—here there is often more daisy than crop—which, if carried fresh and damp to Covent Garden, would bring endless pennies. There is much to import and to export too. There is the excellent cloth spun on the hillsides by the women, and woven by the parish weavers in hand-looms. Many gentlemen who used to wear this warm light freize tell me they cannot now get it at reasonable prices. To them I would say, write to Mr. Neil McNeillis at Ardara, Mr. McClum at Killybegs, or Mr. Robertson at the Gweedore Hotel for patterns. This year, again, I bought splendid thick cloth from the bright-eyed woman we had dealt with at Gweedore years ago, and again we were tempted to carry off sixty yards of lighter texture, brought down to the Lodge at Carrick by a shepherd's wife from Slieve League. So delighted was this handsome old woman to sell her web at 1s. 4d. a yard, that, in the absence of all English, she shook us four times by the hand before departing with her four sovereigns. This cloth is in process of conversion into dresses and ulsters at present. I saw some specimens of dyed yarns sent for exhibition to Strabane from South Donegal. The sad greens and russets, clear browns and blues, might have cheered the heart of Mr. Liberty. Dyeing with many plants, and with the "crottle" or rock lichens, is a very old art in Ireland and the Highlands of Scotland, but I do not know enough about it technically to speak of its merits. Dressing and shrinking the cloth are done in rude presses, and by a species of heavy tailor's goose, in what are called "tuck mills" in West Donegal, but space will not admit of further description of a process which gives a nice finish when the rougher texture is not preferred. In the year 1884 we of the Rosses strongly urged on Sir G. O. Trevelyan and his colleagues the claim of Kincaslough to a pier, but most English Governments have had too many gigantic changes under debate to attend to the mere industrial or material interests of Ireland. It cannot be said that they "begin at the toe," like Steeple Jack when his ladder fell, and he was left alone on a tall mill chimney. "Begin at the toe!" screamed his wife from below, when promptly pulling off the sock she had knitted for him, he began to unravel it, and soon had a thread long enough to reach the ground when weighted with a bit of brick. With this a stronger line was hauled up, and yet a stronger, until a rope sturdy enough to bear his weight was noosed round the chimney, when he descended in safety, saved by his hand-made sock!

DOROTHEA ROBERTS.