

20. *The Troubles of Life*

DEATH OF MY CHILDREN · THE DAUGHTER OF
THE WOMAN OF THE INISH DIES · THE BRASS
BOLTS · MY SON AND EILEEN NICHOLLS DROWNED ·
DIARMID'S SON DIES

IN the early part of the year after the salving of the drift-wood—and I believe we made a dozen pounds out of it, not to speak of any lobsters—we were doing very well, but, ‘the horse doesn’t always keep up its pace’.

At the time when the young birds come and are beginning to mature, the lads used to go after them. My eldest boy and the King’s son planned to go to a place where they were likely to get a young gull—for one of those would often live among the chickens in a house for a year and more.

The two went together after the nests to bring a pair or so of the birds home with them. They were in a bad place, and, as my boy was laying hold of the young gull, it flew up and he fell down the cliff, out on the sea, God save the hearers! He remained afloat on the surface for a long time until a canoe going after lobsters came up and took him aboard.

His grandfather (his mother’s father) was in the canoe that took him in. We had only one comfort—there was no wound or blemish anywhere on his body, though it was a steep fall from the cliff. We must endure it and be content! It was a great solace to me that he could be brought ashore and not left to the mercy of the sea. This was the first beginning, and an ill one it was, God help us!

This happened about the year 1890, just when the boy was developing and beginning to lend a hand. Well, those that pass cannot feed those that remain, and we, too, had to put out our oars again and drive on.

That year did not prove as good as the year before; and we didn't take as many lobsters in the night either, because of it, for the weather was never settled, and there was a constant swell round the rocks—a thing that this kind of fish dislikes. But it happened this year, nevertheless, that fish for curing came well inshore, and the sea was full of them. They were pollock—a large, coarse fish, very troublesome to get in over the boat's gunwale; they were caught with the line, a bit of mackerel for a bait, and a big hook.

We went after them one day with trappings of this kind, and we were so eager to catch them that we had to leave the fishing ground early, for we had the little canoe full and the sea was rough and disturbed; and when we came to the creek, many a man marvelled at what our little canoe had brought us.

We spent part of the year engaged with the fish for curing until we had filled every vessel we had in the house, and by then we had got three hundred pollock salted. There was always a great demand for them among the country people about Christmas for the festival.

I brought fifteen pounds with me from Dingle for my pollock; many of my relations got a couple of them as well, and there were plenty left at home for my own use.

A while after that the daughter of Big Daly, the herd of Inishvickillaun, came home from America. That was the girl whom my uncle, Diarmid the rake, used to be matching with me in the days of my youth. She spent a few years across the water, but her health failed—as is the case with so many others. After her return she got no better, but fell into a decline, though she had come to the healthiest island in Ireland.

She died at last, there on the island, during the fishing season. There were fishermen from Iveragh with them in the island at that time, and, when the news of her death

came, everybody who could did his best to get to the rock to be at the wake.

They were the best and the most hospitable people that ever lived on a rock of the kind, and for that reason everybody tried to get to them in their time of trouble, and there was a great concourse of people collected there that night. Canoes were coming to the island until ten o'clock at night, and a great number of others made the passage to the west across the bay in the morning, for it was a lovely day and the sea was fine and calm. It was the finest day for a funeral I ever saw, and the hottest. The coffin was put into the Iveragh boat, and there was a crew of three good men in her. When they were ready, they turned their backs to the rock and started to make haste east across the bay. When the funeral reached the harbour of the island, more canoes were waiting for us. We had still to go three miles of sea or more. When I threw my eye over them I thought I had never seen so many canoes together. There were eighteen of them. I never saw, nor have I seen to this day, so many boats in a sea funeral. Sixteen or fourteen is the most I have seen since. May God be comforting to the souls of all those whom I must needs bring back to memory; and may He give no ill place to any one of them.

Though the man in the Inish had a houseful of children then, there are only three of them in my neighbourhood now; the rest of them are in America, scattered east and west as with so many others.

The world went on like this from year to year, and I was still living in my old hovel of a house. The thought came to me to leave it and make a shift to build another little shelter, and not to have the hens clucking over my head any longer. Though often enough we found a nest of eggs up there in a day of need, yet all the same the drip used to come through often in their wake. A kind of house was

coming into use at that time which had a timber roof on it—felt, and strips, smeared with tar, over that. They were as slippery as a bottle, and when a hen wanted to go up after her fashion to lay eggs she would fall down again into the yard, and would never try it again.

When a thing once comes into a man's mind, I fancy it has a way of sticking there, and that was my case in this matter of a house. I knew that I shouldn't get any help towards it, only that I had a sort of convenience in my old house being there for me, so that I could take my time over it. I didn't move farther than the breadth of a street, for I had the stones all round me, and I realized that it's easy baking next the meal, and that it was a great thing for me that the materials were all about me. I set to work at once designing the house, and when I had settled its length and breadth I felt as though I should have a palace when I got it up—well roofed with timber and felt and tar. I kept on adding a bit to it when I got the chance, and piece by piece it soon began to have the look of a house; and before long the body of the house had risen, and all I had to do was to put together the two gables, and they were soon narrowing in, one row of stones after another.

Well, I never had an idle moment for a whole quarter, and then I had set the 'crow stone'—that is, the last stone placed on the summit of the gable. I'd finished the job without anybody handing me a stone or a bit of mortar!

It was in the depth of winter that I set about this business of the house: for I shouldn't have had any chance of doing it in the busy fishing season—the time when I placed the last stone, as I've just said. Work was beginning about mid-March: there was the land to dig, and the weed for manure to fetch in the boats or from the beaches, and that was the time when people used to visit the seal caves.

One of those mornings—a fine, soft, lovely morning—there was a knock on my door before day-break, and, as I

was only sleeping lightly, I sprang up at a bound and opened the door, and who should be outside but Diarmid.

'Dress yourself,' said he. 'The day is calm. We'll go west to the islands. Who knows what may be lying in a seal cave or in a creek? Have you a bite of bread cooked?'

'I've got bread enough,' said I, 'only I had no idea of going back to the islands. I fancy it would be a wasted journey so early in the year.'

'Yerra, we'll get something—a string of rabbits, or, perhaps, something better than that. How do you know we mightn't meet with a fine young seal? Take a good hunk of bread that'll do for the two of us.'

'Yerra, what an idle lump of a wife you've got!' said I to him. 'I suppose she's saving meal.'

'Devil a bit! only she's too lazy and doesn't care who's hungry,' says he. 'She's a fine, easy woman, and she never had much sense.'

I put up a good slice of bread, and we went our way together out of the door. The rest of the crew had come. We launched the boat on the water, and off we went. We never stopped till we got to Inish na Bró, where there was a famous seal cave. It was a very rare thing not to find a seal there. We said to one another that we had best search it.

In a moment there were four of us in the cave, for we were keen to leave the boat. We were moving up the cave, and one of the men started peering into a pool there.

'I wonder what those things in the bottom of this pool are?' says he.

One man after another took a look, and we saw that the hole was full of them.

One of the men in the boat was a great swimmer, and he came and looked down.

'Yerra, you devils!' said he, 'they're bolts of copper and brass. Don't you know that a hulk of a ship was wrecked here a bit ago and it was full of bolts of this kind?'

No sooner had he finished that much talk than he cast off every stitch of clothes and plunged his head under the water.

There was little more than a man's depth in the pool, and he hadn't been under long when he came to the surface again with a bolt of copper four feet long.

'By your shining soul!' says he, 'are you depending on me to bring up all that's here? Put a rope round one or two others, and you'd better look sharp before the tide comes, for it's hard to see them when there's any disturbance in the hole.'

That was what should be done; but where were the two to go under water? That was the problem. There were some of them who'd never been in the sea, and others of us who could swim well enough, but we hadn't the habit of going under.

Diarmid rushed across the beach to me. 'Aren't you a marvellous swimmer at other times, and often enough without anything to show for it?' said he. 'Come over here to me and loop this rope round you and fetch up one of those golden hurleys for us. Don't let's have to depend on one only, or on two for that matter.'

Well, even though I didn't like the look of things much, I didn't want to bring that lunatic on top of me, and so I did what he said. I threw off my duds and in I went to the bottom of the pool. The rake was very upset when he saw that I hadn't put the rope round me, as he had said. He thought that I was in a bit of a rage. But it wasn't so, for I stood in no need of a rope at all. All I had to do was to thrust myself to the surface when I wanted, for I was a good swimmer.

When I went down I hit upon a bolt with my foot, and I looked about me to see if I could find another one so that the rake would be surprised when he saw me coming with two of them, for the other chap only brought them up one

at a time, and very set up with himself he was at getting that much.

Well, I searched about a lot, and before long I saw the second one and shifted it easily. One of them was under my oxter and the other in one hand, while the other hand was working for me. I put my feet in position and shot up lightly to the surface, but, even so, the weight of the bolts was dragging me down again, for it chanced that I had come to the surface in the very middle of the pool. But the rake played his part well. He flung the rope, and I caught it in my unemployed hand. When Diarmid saw me coming with the two bolts, then he began lilting. And he had no pity for me since I'd come through alive with something in my hands, for he was a man always keen on making a catch.

'Good for you! You may be slow, but you come heavy laden,' says he to me. 'Down with you again.'

Another man was standing on the brink of the pool. Maurice Bán they used to call him. He was a broad, strong man, and he'd never swum a stroke. He didn't like to see us going into the pool while he was looking on. He said to Diarmid:

'Tie the end of the rope to my body and I'll go down and bring an armful of those up with me, since there's such a lot of them.'

'Yerra, your soul to the swarthy devil!' says Diarmid, 'you must be going out of your senses. One might as well send a bag of salt down as you. Even the swimmers have nothing but the breath left in them when they come up!'

Maurice turned to the other man to tie the rope round him, when he saw Diarmid snarling at him; and that man was a brother of Diarmid's named Liam, who didn't give a curse whether Maurice came out of the hole dead or alive.

Liam tied the rope round Maurice, and down he went, and when he struck the bottom all he did was to pull at

the rope again until he came to the surface without waiting for Liam to pull it up. It was well he did so, for Liam would have given him plenty of time to drown down there.

Before the water began to flood the hole the pair of us had twenty-one bolts, a fine heap of them, both of brass and copper; and it's long before Diarmid would have tired of dragging them out to the boat.

When we had everything ship-shape we began to chew our bread and gulp it down—we hadn't much to say till that was done—with nothing in the world to eat with it for sauce, only now and again a man would stretch out his hand and scoop up a handful of the salt water and send it down to clear his throat.

While we were fiddling about like this, just ready to start for home, Liam gave a look and saw a trawler making for Inishvickillaun.

'Something's bringing them to that place to-day,' said Diarmid.

When she came near the strand of the Inish she let go her anchor as though she meant to make a stay there.

'Well,' says Diarmid, 'out with your oars and let's see what has brought her, and then we'll be off home in God's name.'

We made our way across, for the two rocks are close to one another, and before long we were with them. She was full of people. The chief part of their business was to have a day's fun on the islands.

We had the bolts hidden in the boat so that nobody could see them, but in the end we said to one another that it would be a good idea to show them one of them to see what they would have to say about it. When a gentleman on board saw the brass spar, he wondered where we had come upon it, and asked us at once how much we wanted for it. It was a very long time before he got any answer, for

nobody in the boat had any proper notion of it. At last the captain of the vessel spoke and said:

'This is a man who buys this kind of thing, and he would like you to sell it to him.'

Then we made out that he would buy all we had of them. In the end, to make a long story short, we sold the whole lot to him for sixteen pounds.

We had to go on board the trawler and take food and drink in her—and there was plenty of it to be had, and methinks the place to find plenty and to spare is where the gentry are. At last we said farewell to them.

As we were coming up to the other rock—that is, Inish na Bró—rabbits could be seen dancing on every blade of grass in it. They had the hot weather and the sun and pleasantness on the island to make them do it.

Suddenly, when we were just under the rock, Diarmid spoke. He was our captain. He jumped up now and said: 'It's a lovely, quiet evening, and we haven't a thing to do but go home. We've two good dogs in the boat and a couple of stout spades. Let's pay a visit to the rock and we'll have half a dozen rabbits apiece.'

For one man that fancied what he had to say there were two that didn't, but, all the same, every one of them liked hunting. The boat stopped at the landing-place, and out we went—two of us east and the other two west. It was late in the evening before we met one another again on the edge of the landing-place. The rake Diarmid wasn't the worst off for game. He had as much as any other two, only he had a fine dog of his own; besides, there wasn't a weak place in him or in the dog.

When we had all come to the boat and put the game together, we had eight dozen rabbits—a dozen apiece. The oldest men in the boat said that it was the best sport they ever remembered in the islands in so short a time. There was a smell of wind blowing fair for home.

As few people can keep a secret, it got abroad, from one of us, too, where we had spent the day, and what we had found, and all about the gentry who bought the brass: and, since the secret had got out, we had seen our last of the metals. Before we got together on the morrow the boats of the village were gone. But not many pounds were made out of it ever after. The two pounds I got from this were the first two pounds I paid for the roofing of the new house. Goods were cheap in those days, and the things I wanted for the new house didn't cost me very much. I had by me a lot of the things I needed for it, and it was a little house, although when I was designing it I fancied it was a palace; anyhow it was like a palace compared with the hovel I had. The hovel had one good point—that it gave me time to finish the new house without neglecting any of my other work; and there was another thing, too—there wasn't a thing in it that I had to transfer to the new house. I was at it from day to day, and from time to time, till I'd made a complete job of it. When I'd finished it, who should come by but Diarmid. He stopped to look for a bit, and then he said:

'Mary Mother! how did you put it together so quickly without help from a living soul? Wisha! blessing on your arms! My soul from the devil! but no hen will ever lay an egg on its roof, or, if she does go up, over the cliff she'll go!'

The house stayed like that, all built ready, some time before we went into it. There weren't many of the felt-roofed houses in the Island in those days, and now there hasn't been a house there for a long time without its covering of felt—all except those that are slated. We went to live in the new house about the year 1893, at the beginning of spring. Our chief reason for moving in so early was that manure was scarce that year, and there was as much manure in the old house as would have done for half the

potatoes in the Island : there was nothing in it but soot and manure. Besides, Diarmid was worrying me every day. All he had planted were in very bad trim, for he was a poor fellow, all alone, and he'd calls to attend to everywhere. Too many calls often mean that things are clumsily done, and most of them show little profit. I used to be sorry for him, since the first wife he had was dead, and she had been a good one, while the wife he got next was neither handy nor tidy. Another reason I had for being fond of him —he would give us the very marrow of his bones when his help was needed.

So soon as Diarmid saw the fire and its smoke in the new house, in he came to me and put in a claim for the soot.

'For God's bright sake, don't let anybody else but me have it,' says he.

He was very keen on the look-out for something, but he would have been just as keen to give it away if he had it.

'I won't give your share of it to anybody else, have no fear,' says I to him. 'Have you got much to do to-day?'

'Holy Mary! wisha,' says he, standing between the two door jambs, 'I've nothing much on hand. Why do you ask? Do you need me at all?'

'Well, up you go on the roof of the old house and be clearing the manure for yourself.'

Up he went with a good will.

We had been some time in the new house, getting on very well, and thoroughly comfortable in it. A fine, clean house, without dust or smoke it was. We hadn't been living long in it when whooping-cough, and measles with it, came our way. Three months I spent sitting up with those of my children who took them worst, and I got nothing for the time I spent, only the two best of them were carried off. That was another discouragement for us, God

help us, and be sure that trouble went against us for a long time. However things went with me, I fancy the sorrow of it never left the mother for good or ill, and from that time forth she began to fail, for she was not to live long, and never lasted to be old.

Well, after all this anguish, I was trying to pull myself together. It was imprinted on my mind that there was no cure for these things but to meet them with endurance as best I could, and I kept trying to get through a while more of life—one year good and two that turned out ill.

A few years later a lady from the capital of Ireland came to this Island on her holidays. Eileen Nicholls was her name; and she hadn't been here long when she made a friend of a girl, and the one she chose was a daughter of mine. The two of them spent a part of every day together. One day they would be on the hill, another about the strand and the sea; and when the weather was soft and warm they used to go swimming. One day, when they were bathing, a strong spring tide was running, and when they thought it time to swim in to land they found themselves drifting away from it until they were exhausted. It chanced that one of my sons was digging potatoes in the garden near the house—this was in the beginning of harvest—a vigorous lad, and a good swimmer. He was eighteen years old. He saw the two girls swimming, and saw who they were at once, and that they wouldn't be able to get ashore.

He threw his spade away and took the shortest cuts down the cliff and the beach until he came to the strand. He didn't take off a thing, his boots or anything else, for they weren't too far out, and when he came down to the water he saw the lady sinking. Out he went and spoke to his sister. He told her to keep herself afloat on the surface for a while; that as the lady was drowning, he would go to her assistance first. He went, and he and the lady were drowned

together. Another man brought in the sister, who was at her last breath. The boats took up the other two just as Pats and I were returning as usual from our fishing. That was the sight that awaited us.

Well, I had to face this trouble, too, and go through it. It was the biggest funeral Dunquin had ever known. They were carried together until they parted, going, each one of them, to their family burying place. The lady's family were very kind to me for years afterwards. They both came, the father and the mother, to see me in Dunquin and had me pointed out to them. I hope they did not think that I was angry with them because my son had died for their daughter. I was never so foolish as that. If it was for her he died, it could not be helped. It was God's will.

I think that if it hadn't been for my uncle Diarmid, I should never have recovered from this trouble at all. I had God's help, too, for the daughter who had been in the sea was never expected at first to come round either, since she was still at her last breath. I felt that, if I could be assured that even she would recover, things would not be so bad with me. Diarmid used to come in every day and night, making little of our despondent talk, reminding us of troubles far worse than ours—a ship lost at sea with hundreds on board; a wall of rock falling on all the workers in a mine—so as to put heart in us.

His own good fortune didn't last long. He had some fine strapping lads at this time, and before long he would have been able to do what he pleased if things had gone well with them, with no trouble in the world but to issue orders to them. A little while after my trouble he came in to me and I suspected nothing.

'Something's brought you now,' said I to him.

'Misfortune has brought me,' said he.

'What is it?' said I to him, for I was impatient for him to speak.

'It is this,' said he: 'late last evening the best of my lads was running after a sheep and he stumbled as he ran, and fell, too, and a sharp rock hit him on the brow, and he lost a great deal of blood. It isn't so much the size of the cut, but there is a deep hole in his head, and I fancy that a piece of the bone inside is broken.'

'And what are you to do now?' I said.

'I want the priest and the doctor,' said he. 'As the day is fine, get yourself ready.'

'I'll be with you in a minute,' said I to him. 'Get the rest of the crew.'

When we got to Dunquin, two had to go for the priest and two others took the road to Dingle. Diarmid himself and his brother Liam went that way. I and Pats Heamish went for the priest. They had ten miles to go, and I promise you they had to go and return on foot, without a horse or a foal.

When we reached the priests' house they were out, and we had to wait quietly until they returned; we spent a lot of the day there. The parish priest asked us if the case was dangerous, and we said it was. It was settled that the young priest should come with us. We started off before him, and we took all there was in them out of our legs, for we knew that the priest would be before us, do the best we could, though we were taking a short cut.

When we reached the harbour at Dunquin, the doctor hadn't come yet. The whole day was gone by this. The priest wasn't kept long, however. We launched the boat, and we were just starting when the other two appeared on the crest of the cliff, and the doctor with them. We turned back and took them on board. It was black night by the time we reached the Island. To be sure, we had to go out once more and come back again.

They saw that the boy was in danger, and the doctor said that, if any fragment of the bone inside was broken, it

would always be troubling him. 'But,' said he, 'he'll be all right if that isn't the case.'

That was no idle day for us, and that's how it always is in an island like this—grinding toil always when the time of trouble comes.

The lad never did a profitable day's work from that till he went to the churchyard.

21. *The Yellow Meal*

THE CAPTAIN OF THE DINGLE SMACK · THE MEAL
PUT ABOARD · THE COASTGUARD · A DIFFICULT
PASSAGE TO THE ISLAND · BUYING THE BONHAMS

THAT year was a hungry year in the Island, and in many other places, too, and a gentleman set out from the capital of Ireland to find out where the scarcity was, and he came as far as the Blasket. He sent an order for meal and flour to Dingle. We went there to fetch it.

There was an old trawler in the harbour, and she hadn't done a stroke of work for a long while. There was a man's length of seaweed growing on her—winkles, limpets, and mussels. The old captain who had command of her was like to be in the same case as his ship. The bristle of hair that sprouted out of him when he was young was on him still, undisturbed, flowing down to his breast. And you wouldn't believe that a single drop of water had touched him since the days of the great famine. He wasn't a single day less than eighty. Some good man in Dingle advised him to earn the pence for himself and for his crazy old galley that had never shifted from the slime of the harbour for five years past.

She was brought up level with the quay. Soon the last load was aboard her. Then a coastguard came along the quay and fell to talking with the captain. He asked where was the rest of the ship's crew. The old lad said that he didn't need much of a crew—two besides himself.

The King's man was a strong, vigorous fellow, and he was by way of being angry with him.

'It isn't you we ought to blame,' says he, 'but the people that had anything to do with you, you and your devil's carrion of a ship; and I wouldn't wager half a crown on its

chance of making the Island. Have a crew ready by the time I come back, for, if you haven't, I'll take out of her everything that's in her and put it in another boat.'

The reason why the King's man spoke so shortly to him was that he had been intending to go along with him. The white-haired ancient nearly spurted blood from his nose. He turned blue instead of grey. He rushed the whole length of the quay after the other man, but the Islanders kept him off. When they stopped him, he shouted out like a mad bull:

'By the devil's pulleys, you go on as if you had the right to my boat. And who gave it you?' says he to the coast-guard.

'Is there a man of you there from the Island who could raise the sails to the masthead for me and go with me?' says he, with a wild look in his eyes.

Though the Islanders were in sore need of the meal and flour, they were none too ready to answer him. One of them said they had no notion of the job. He'd just said that much when the King's man came at a trot down the quay with a bundle in his hand as though he had his day's provision put together. The white-haired man didn't spot him till he had jumped aboard.

'Have you got any hands since?' says he.

'What the hell is it to you whether I have them or not?' says the ancient mariner.

Just then there were two peelers standing on the quay. The coastguard ordered them to take the old fellow in charge. He'd ruined the alms of the poor, for the water was already leaking on to the meal, and there was no one in charge of the old hulk to pump her or bail her. The pair gripped the old man.

The King's man asked our King if he would shirk going aboard the old smack with him and some other good fellow in his company. The King agreed, as was his way

when there was need of him—for he was both King and mariner when the call came, as well as being just as handy at planting potatoes and carrying manure for them; many a time has he harnessed his old, grey, bobtailed ass when all else in the place were in their slumbers. He got another man to go with him.

The King came to me before they put to sea. He showed me a box, and put it in my charge. They went aboard, and the man there set them their tasks at once, and before long the old tub was ready to start from the quay. Then the King's man shouted to the peelers, asking if the old captain was agreeable to go with them now, though he wouldn't have any authority over the ship.

Though the white-haired man wasn't too well pleased, he knew very well that, if he wasn't on the ship, he wouldn't get any pay. So he went aboard. The King's man called on another Dingle lad so that he might be with them on their journey home. Then off they started.

The rest of us started off to trudge the way home. We had a lot of trifles with us, and we couldn't carry them on our backs, so we needed a cart. We got it for seven shillings. We threw our stuff into the cart, and I put in the King's box very carefully, and never took my eyes off it till we reached Dunquin. There were bottles in it, and nobody was to be trusted in their neighbourhood. The King's box had rounded Slea Head when he was no farther than the mouth of the Dingle Harbour, for we could see them there.

There wasn't any wind to move the ship, even if she had been any good, but when we had just reached the cliff above Dunquin Harbour a stiff breeze began to blow. We hurried up for fear that the old captain would make the Island before us, since he'd got the wind; but we needn't have hurried. When we came to the Island there was no sign of the ship. As the night drew on, people went up on the hill to see if they could get a sight of her in the bay, and

there was a lump of something that looked like her tacking from side to side just off Ventry Harbour.

One man from every house in the Island stayed up all night. When the morning light came, the old hulk was to be seen off Slea Head without a stitch of canvas on her except a piece on each mast about half the size of a woman's shawl.

Well, it mattered little how she looked since they'd come through by giving her her head and letting her drive on. One after another the men went to their food this way and that, to pass the time till she came to harbour.

But, as the morning went on, she never came an inch nearer. Before long some of the men went down to the creek brink and decided to go out to her with a boat or two, and so they launched a canoe and a little boat, for there were no big boats then, nor had there been for some time past. When we got to the ship, there wasn't a man on board that looked like himself after the night, even the King. It seemed that they had spent the night pumping water out of the old trawler, and she needed it still. They'd had to strike the mainsail for fear the old boat would split and go down under their feet. It's a stiff job pumping a ship.

We tied two ropes to her, and, as the tide was with us, before long we'd brought her to her anchorage. There were eight tons of both meal and flour in her, a great help to the Blasket at that time. When we fell to carrying it home, you'd have thought the harbour was an ant-hill, for every man had his bag on his back. When the two Islanders left the old tub, the only crew left aboard were the three others; we got the anchor aboard for them.

The King didn't forget to ask after the box he'd entrusted to me when he went on the ship; and when I told him that it was waiting for him at home, safe and sound, he was mighty pleased, and forgot all the troubles of the night.

Well, if the Blasket houses had lacked food earlier on in the year, they couldn't say that now since the old tub had managed to make a job of it. It's an old saying that God's help is nearer than the door, and that's no lie; all that lashings and leavings of food had come when we least expected it. The next thought that entered our minds was that it would go mouldy before half of it could be consumed, and that we had best find a way of getting some good out of it while it was sound. The plan we pitched on was to go and buy some bonhams and, when the last of the meal was finished, to begin grumbling again.

We'd only been an hour settling on this scheme when every man had shaved and put on clean duds, and every canoe in the Island was at sea making for Dunquin. When we got to the harbour on the mainland, the whole parish was gathered waiting for us. They thought that it was a funeral on the way, and it seemed odd to them that they hadn't heard tell of anybody's death.

A relation of mine came over to me across the beach.

'Yerra, my heart!' says he, 'you must have come on some important business since all the canoes have come out together.'

'It's a great wonder you didn't manage to ask somebody else about that before you came to me,' says I.

'Yerra, my heart! some of them are not above telling you a lie. They've got a bit of the playboy in them, and I'd find it hard to believe what most of them would say.'

'We're going to buy bonhams,' says I.

'Holy Mary! and me thinking that the most of them there hadn't a bite to put in their mouths. And isn't it a strange thing for you to be going to buy the makings of pigs without a penny to do it with?' says he.

His words maddened me, for he was a mean fellow himself, whose ways were not to my taste.

'If that's a tale you've heard, the man that heard it

isn't up to much, though there are many of your kin in the Island. And it seems that you hadn't much feeling for them when you heard that report, since you had a score or so of bites of food yourself and never visited them to give them a single one of those bites.'

'You're a bit out of temper, and that isn't often the way with you,' says he, and sheered off.

When we had landed the canoes, we made our way to Dingle on foot, ten miles. The country folk were startled when they saw every man of us buying two or three bonhams.

'Yerra, my heart!' said an old woman who'd sold us bonhams, 'sure it's a long way you are yet from the early potatoes to be buying bonhams, and yet what a lot of them they've bought to-day. And I have heard that some of the Islanders haven't a bite to eat themselves, and where have they got help from?'

'Och! it's little you know of the way of the world, or don't you know that He who puts us on short commons at one time gives us plenty at another time.'

We told her the whole tale.

'Holy Mary! it's long before other people would be helped like that,' says she.

'But didn't you get it before we did?' says one of us.

'How so?' says she.

'Because God gave you plenty of your own and left us with little,' and at that he left the countrywoman.

Forty-two bonhams came to the Blasket at that push. I had two of them, and I give you my word I had enough to do with them, and any man that had three would rather that the third one had been drowned in the end: for from the very day we bought the bonhams the alms failed. It was said that an ill report of us had got about. Anyhow my two bonhams did splendidly, and I hadn't had them on my hands long when I got nine pounds for them.

Any time we had pigs for market we had to spend two or three days in Dingle with them, and, often enough, a week in the depth of winter. I and my two pigs spent three nights and three days in Dingle that bout, till I'd spent half the money I got for them—and that's the reason why we've given them up entirely for more than twenty years now.

22. *The Wake*

PREPARING A WAKE · THE HOUSE OF THE WAKE · HOW
WE SPENT THE NIGHT · THE POET DIES · DEATH
OF MY WIFE · DANGER AT SEA IN THE
NIGHT · A FRESH TROUBLE FOR DIARMID

THERE used to be a market every Saturday in the town in those days, and I had only just got rid of the pigs, got the money for them, and was thinking of setting out for home without delay, when I saw a Dunquin man coming my way down the street with a horse and cart, the horse foaming and sweating plenty.

As soon as I saw him stop and start to unyoke the horse, I went towards him to see what he had to tell. He told me that he was fetching stuff for his mother's wake, for she was in the next world since midday. A woman of the village was with him: that is one of the old customs from generation to generation. The dead woman was close kin to me, and so I, of course, gave up any thought I had of making the Western Island or going home.

The man who had come for the goods for the wake told me that another cart had come in with him, and that, if I cared to stay with them, I could have a lift on that cart; there would only be a barrel of porter, and a trifle besides in it. I stayed by them, for I must be at the funeral on the morrow somehow. We had a drink or two—we two and the man who was going to give me a lift. The other chap went off to see if the coffin was ready, for that was what was holding them back now. It was then that I asked the other man about the porter, and asked was it that they were going to have both a wedding and a wake!

'Yerra, my friend, no! don't you know that barrel's for the wake?'



GATHERING FURZE ON THE HILL



GOING UP THE HILL FOR TURF

'But I've never heard of such a thing at a wake nor ever seen it before this,' says I.

'O! it's been coming into fashion for some time now, and, since it is so, no doubt he'll have a barrel, too.'

Soon the two came back to us, and the coffin was ready. Then we turned west. We didn't go very fast, for there were brittle things in the carts, and so it was night by the time we got to the house in Dunquin, where the body was. There was a good share of people gathered there by this, and the night was beginning to fall. All our things were taken indoors. We unyoked the horse. A lamp was burning in the house and a candle or two. Two women jumped up and laid hold of the candles and arranged them properly at the end of the table.

I sat myself down near the door when I went in, but I wasn't left there long. The man of the house found me out and waved his hand to an empty chair in the corner, and told me to stick to it till somebody else should take it from me. I was well pleased with the man of the house for looking after my comfort in this way, for I had been away from my house and my home village for days, and I was pretty well worn out. Besides, it was no dark corner where the chair happened to be, and, what I liked even better than that, I could see all over the house and notice everything.

The feet of the corpse were to the fire and its head to the door. On the other side, facing the door, was the whole set-out. I hadn't been in the corner long when the house began to fill. There was a great flame of fire, a kettle on the hook above it, two kettles at the side of it, and the gathering was beginning—men, women, and children up and down throughout the house. At this moment four people were arranging the corpse finely. 'A dress for the journey to the other side', as one of the women said when they had it done.

Soon after they had sat down, four young women jumped

up and laid down a door lid across two stools, and before long I saw all the crockery in the house put together and arranged on the door. Soon I saw two pots for tea coming to the edge of the ashes, two women carrying one, and one the other. They put tea into them and filled them up with boiling water till the two were full to the brim. The other two women were bringing white bread till the door lid was covered all over.

As I was casting an eye over all these preparations, I saw a man coming up towards me from the bottom of the house with a great white bucket running over with porter in one of his hands, and an empty mug to hold about a pint in the other. The first man who met him after he'd come through the door, he shoved the mug down in the bucket and filled it and handed it to him. He didn't say: 'Take it away.'

Well, I knew in my corner that the whole pint wouldn't be long going down his gullet, for I knew the man who had it in his hand well—a man that'd drink the stuffing out of the saddle, and you could see the signs of his habits on him. I kept my eyes fixed from my corner on those who were handing out the food and drink, and I never saw anyone give the back of his hand to the bucket or the stuff in it till it came to where I was. I turned it down, and the man who was sharing it out was startled. It isn't that I like to break a custom—I've never done it—but I didn't care for the drink that was going round, for I've hardly so much as tasted it ever.

Just then the man who could read my disposition right—the man of the house, I mean—was at the other man's heels with a bottle of whisky and a glass, and he said to him:

'Don't you know he's no porter drinker?' He filled me up a glass out of that bottle and I drank it.

I glanced over to where the candles were flaming at the

end of the table, where were the feet of the corpse, and there were two men there, seated on chairs, who were busied over tobacco and pipes; and that was no pleasant job. One of them was cutting it and bruising it, while the other man was crumbling it small and stuffing it into the pipes; and if I didn't feel much more pity than jealousy of those two, I certainly didn't feel less, for often enough before I'd seen a good man faint at that job.

I hadn't been thinking so long when one of them tumbled down from the chair and fell right on the flat of his back on top of two bouncing women who were sitting on the floor with more than enough to do already. And the job these two women were at was trying to get a good blast of smoke out of two blunderbusses of pipes crammed with fresh tobacco, and all they had to do it with was matches; and it would take a machine a day to make all the matches they had wasted on the job, and the pipes were still unlighted.

When the man fell on the women, they didn't bless him very heartily, for the stems of the two pipes cracked and splintered in their mouths just when they'd got them ready with a lot of trouble, and it only wanted one more match to crown all their labours!

When this man that fell had been lifted to his feet—and he doesn't deserve to be called a man, but a wretch, for if a decent man had been at his job, he'd have left it sooner; but he was trying to make himself out a man, a thing not in his power the day tobacco got the better of him—he was like a man in a swoon. One said that a drop of water should be thrown over him, another that he ought to be given a taste of whisky, but I said they should give him plenty of tobacco, maybe that's what he wanted!

I hadn't felt any liking for him from the moment that I first noticed him fiddling with the tobacco; and I knew that nobody had put the job on him, only his own

interferingness; and I told the man of the house to chuck him down the room, that he wouldn't get his death of it. They lifted my rascal out of the place where he was, and he'd only been cleared out when I heard one of the women saying this to him:

'May the next pipes and tobacco be at your own wake!'

As she said it, she gave a glance at the other woman by her and nudged her, but the second woman neither waked nor stirred.

'Devil take you, how soon you've collapsed!' says she, shaking her harder; but it was the same story. One woman after another came where she was. Someone brought a cup of spring water. They poured a drop over her out of a spoon, and they saw her coming to herself bit by bit.

I had a fine view of them, as I've said before, from the corner where I was placed; and, another thing, I was glad to have that view, for this was the first wake out of the Island that I was ever at.

There was a man sitting by me all the time, a fine, well-spoken man, smoking away at his fine white gun of a pipe.

'I wonder what happened to the man who was stuffing tobacco into the pipes,' says he to me, 'the man that was overset and that I haven't seen since?'

'It was his own insufficiency that did for him first, for he wasn't capable of doing a job like that. Besides, he'd drunk a pint bottle of whisky with the two women opposite that he fell on top of, and one of them fainted after him.'

'And what a sticker the woman there must be, if she had a man's share of the bottle,' says I to him.

'She's the one that got the bottle from the man of the house to share it between the three of them, and I expect half of it is in her stomach.'

'And how disobliging they were to you though you were on the spot!' says I.

'It's fifteen years since as much as a drop of it went into my body. The devil carry it from me!' said he.

I had seen the door in the middle of the kitchen all this time, but by the time they had these casualties cleared tidily away (whatever hole they shoved them in for quiet) the tea was going. There was everything there in plenty and profusion and leave to draw on it—white bread, jam, and tea; there was no butter there, and there never is in houses of this kind. I wasn't the last man to be invited to the board, for the man of the house came to me quickly, and took me and my chair with him, and put me where I could get something, saying:

'You're not like the rest. They're beside their own home, but you are some way from yours.'

I ate my fair share of it, but I didn't overdo it, for I didn't want to make a show of myself in a place of this kind, with a man from the east and a woman from the west present; and, if I was cradled in an island in the midst of the great sea, nobody ever had to complain of my awkwardness or ill manners. A new lot would come to the table when one lot was done until all the company were satisfied, and they'd chat a little till the bucket would come round now and again.

So we spent a good part of the night; tobacco going in plenty; some of them sending their pipes three times to the tobacco place to be refilled; and all that before the day lightened. About two o'clock the man next me pointed his finger across to the other side of the house where there was straw on the floor, and what should I see there but all the women in the house nodding with sleep now that all their fiddle-faddle of work was done.

At the dawn of day there was another meal going, but the people whose houses were near didn't take it. About midday or one o'clock all the people were gathered for the funeral, and when the priest came they started off

towards the churchyard. But the journey wasn't far. Her family burying place was in Dunquin.

That was the wake that interested me most, and the reason was that there was drink at it—a thing I had never seen before. There have not been many wakes since without a cask or two, and I don't think much of the practice, for it's the usual thing that wherever there is drink there is horseplay, and that's not a fit thing in a house of the kind.

The funeral was on a Sunday, and all the Islanders who were ashore went to it, and it was late in the evening before we got home. I've often heard the old people say that a visit to the town did them more harm than a week's work at home—and that was true, but this time we were a week away because we had the pigs, though one of us used to say that he could live there for ever.

Well, that was the end of the pigs fed on the charity meal and of all the bonhams that were bought in one day at the Dingle market.

'Anyone might have known that no luck or good fortune would follow them,' said the poet to me one day.

'I'm sure you will give a reason for what you say,' said I.

'I'm the man for it!' says he. 'When this meal came and was landed below the houses, and then all the bonhams in Dingle market were bought to eat it, that was a strange thing,' said the poet.

'But you haven't produced an explanation of what you said just now,' says I.

'No, only half of it. Haven't you ever heard that there are two sides to a story? When the meal and those bonhams came to this island, it was the talk of all Kerry. There wasn't a man on a hill or on a strand, or a woman in a street or at chapel who chattered about anything else but the meal and the bonhams of the Island, and neither luck

nor good fortune ever attended anything that runs in people's talk.'

'It's likely that there'll never be a pig or a bonham here again,' said I to him.

'That's the idea I have,' says he.

His idea was correct, for there's never been a pig or a bonham in the Island since. If the young people of the Island saw a pig or a bonham in the place, they'd go out of their senses.

Since I'm talking of the poet, I may as well have something to say of him here. It is about thirty-three years since Shane Dunlevy died. It was in the Island he died, after being ill for some time. He had had enough of his life in this world. As he said himself:

*'Of all miseries told 'tis the worst to grow old,
With no man to heed or respect you.'*

The poet had a great character when he was young. It's often I heard my mother talking of him. She was alive in his day. He had great stuff and spirit in him—he'd leap every dyke as he went to Mass of a Sunday; and he was always to be remarked among the men near him for his carriage and his character. I knew his character better than anybody else though he was old in my day. I fancy that his first nest—that is to say, his cradle—was in Bal-línaráha in Dunquin. He married into the Island, a woman of the Manning family, a marvellous woman. She it was who finished the bailiffs and the drivers who used to come here day after day ruining the poor, who had nothing to live on but famine. A bailiff climbed on to the roof of her house and started knocking it down on her and on to her flock of feeble children. She seized a pair of new shears and opened them—one point this way, the other that. A stout woman and a mad woman! The bailiff never noticed anything till he felt the point of the shears stuck right into

his behind. It wasn't the roof of the house that came in through the hole this time, but a spurt of his blood. That's the last bailiff we've seen.

Dunlevy was angry with the crowd that stole his sheep—and well they earned his anger—and he had to make a savage song¹ about them. He spent a part of his life in destitution, like many another. Nobody ever had the least thing against him; he was always a merry man. God's blessing be with them all!

I hadn't been long home when my uncle Diarmid met me, and he had a sorry story to tell me. His second son was failing, and he had got no sleep the night before.

'How came that?' said I.

'O, my dear, he was half out of his wits,' said he.

'But maybe it is that he's sickening for something,' said I.

'I don't know,' said he. 'But I'm afraid that his job's done.'

'Yerra, man, take it easy. How many things happen to people and they shake them off!'

Well, he spent a day or two more without coming into my sight.

'Surely,' said I to myself, 'it's not much out of my way to go where they are and see how things are with them, one with another, for he was always a good stand-by in the day of need.'

At that thought I sprang up, and never stopped going till I reached the house. The poor fellow was in a bad way. I asked him was his son getting better or worse.

'It's increasing on him,' said he.

I was sad and sorry for my poor old uncle, for he'd often come to me to quieten and steady me when I was in trouble; and I had rather that it had been the death sickness that had come upon his son, and so would he, too.

¹ 'The Blackfaced Sheep': a satirical poem against the neighbours who stole a sheep from him.

Death is a fine thing compared with some troubles that hang over a poor sinner.

I went out of the door and left the poor rake—and, though I've often given him that name in this book, it was a wrong name, for he was no rake, but just the opposite. But he was a hapless rake that morning, with all his troubles upon him.

On the morrow of that day my uncle was with me before I got to him. When I saw him, I knew well that he had no good news.

'I have no tale to tell, dear heart, but a tale of woe,' said he. 'The people tell me that if he could be in the hospital that would be the best place for him, where he'd have the doctor. But I fancy that we can't manage him easily in the canoe.'

To tell the truth, the job didn't please me too well. But what was to be done? Isn't the day of need the day when you have to stand to?

We went together—four of us—to see what we had best do, all of us pretty down in the mouth, particularly as we had to go on the sea on a job of this kind.

Well, when a thing has to be done, you may as well get yourself in trim to do it or give it up. We launched the best canoe we had, and then we went towards the house where the sick man was.

Things don't turn out as you expect often, and so it was in this case. You wouldn't have thought that there was a thing in the world troubling him all the time we were dressing him and otherwise making him ready. He went with us to the harbour as easily as he had ever done. Off we started. His father sat by him in the stern of the boat, and four of us were rowing hard to make the passage as short as possible till we reached the harbour at Dunquin. We came home again. The father came home next day, when he had settled the lad in the place that had been arranged for him.

He told me that the poor lad had never once played a trick on him all the way.

It was only a short time till I had to suffer more trouble, for, after all this had gone over me, my own wife died. I was completely upset and muddled after that, though she left two little girls to help me, but there is no great use in the like of them, and even if there had been, when comrades part, the one that remains can but blunder along only too often, and so it was with me. I had to turn my attention to everything, and, do what I would, things would often go wrong. My low spirits did not leave me soon this time, though I was always struggling to shake them off day by day, and, Heaven knows, I had but poor success in it. Something would always be coming across me to wake my trouble again.

The coming season was the time for taking mackerel. We would be abroad in the night and struggling to work by day. We were out one night, and it was a night to beat all others. It was beginning to look dirty, too, and we had to take shelter under the land. We hadn't been there long when another canoe came up to us with a load of fish in the nets—a proof that there was fish to be had if only the badness of the night had not prevented us from taking it. After a bit it looked to us as though a break had come in the bad weather, and we started out again, four canoes of us. When we got to the place where the other people had seen the fish, we cast out our nets, but the last mesh had only just left the canoe when there came violent rain and thunder and lightning so that you couldn't distinguish east from west.

I said to myself that we had best take in the nets again, and nobody contradicted me. I went to the stern of the canoe and ran and took hold of the rope. I dragged at it till I had the net, and two of us fell to pulling it aboard, one working at the corks and the other at the foot. Rarely

had any pair to toil so hard as we, dragging the net on board in a gale of wind, with the sea breaking over us, and when we had the last of it in, there wasn't a glimpse of the world to be had anywhere for the rain and wind.

We got out the oars, and off we went working together, but we couldn't do a thing, because we had to keep our heads down, and we had to depend all the time for our guidance on the man in the bows. He had his head turned trying to keep his eye on the land, though in the end he could see no more than we could, but had to go by guess.

At length we got back to the place we had started from, and one of the canoes had got there first: this was the boat that told us they had seen the fish. She had cut away her nets so that they had only half of them on board now, but they didn't worry at all over the loss of the rest; they were only too thankful to have got away in safety. For some time we didn't know what had happened to the other two boats, but they, too, reached us in the end.

That was the first fright I ever had on the sea, but it wasn't the last. It doesn't matter if one or two feel frightened, for often enough some such would be terrified when the others didn't mind, but that night every man in the canoes admitted that that was the worst night they had ever struggled through.

Well, when we'd got to the creek the storm eased a little. We talked it over, and came to the conclusion that maybe the end of the night would be fine, and, since it was the way of the fish to swim on the surface, we should probably meet with a catch that would pay us for all our agony.

It was so. We acted accordingly, and left the canoes only just up from the water and hastened home all of us and ate some food in the middle of the night. The night was coming on splendidly. When I'd done eating, I went out to the landing-place, and they were coming out of the houses, man by man, going down to the boats. Some of the

rest of the Island fishermen had been deep asleep from the beginning of the night.

Off went our four canoes again, and we never stopped till we'd reached that place in the sea where we had spied the fish in the storm earlier on. We paid out the nets, and they hadn't been out long when you could hear the clatter of fish as they went into the nets right to the very end. Any boat that hadn't her load from her own nets, got more than it could carry from another boat, and in the upshot we had to throw some of the fish into the sea, and some of the nets, too. The morning was coming on, and the four canoes came into the creek brimful with all the fish they could possibly carry. It was a lovely, calm morning, and our four boats started off for Dingle, taking the sea passage, for we could get an extra shilling a hundred there, and, since we could make that much more, we said that it would be to our advantage instead of taking it to Dunquin and paying for cartage.

We ran up the sails, and we had a good smell of wind with us—and that suited us very well, for our boats were down to the gunwale. We got to the quay in the end without wasting too much time, and one dealer bought everything in the four boats at fifteen shillings the hundred.

It's an old saying: 'The lazy lounger doesn't catch fish.' We had fish, for we were no loungers, but those that were got no fish, being asleep.

We had good purses of money now. There were over three thousand fish in each of our boats. We went to a house for food first, and after that to the tavern. We sang half a dozen songs, and that was no marvel, for if there were poor men of our kin, they weren't us that day. We had had enough to eat and to drink, and, more, there was a generous chink of money in our pockets.

Before we left the town we heard the news that the lad from the Island was in a good way, and we were to tell his

father to fetch him; and, though it was late in the night by the time we reached home, I didn't go to bed without going with my good news to my old uncle, you may be sure.

The next day was Sunday, and I thought I should have to go on my journeys again with my uncle, since we couldn't fish that night, but he had thought for me and didn't bother me.

Well, the lad came back to the place he had left late that Sunday, and be sure the whole village went to meet him. There wasn't a thing in the world to notice or remark in him different from any other day, and everybody said that he was finished with his trouble.

That was nothing but guesswork, and sometimes people guess wrong. About three months after this people began to notice that he wasn't keeping steady in his wits, and his family kept an eye on him. One night when all in the house were asleep he slipped out and couldn't be found in the morning. Early that morning my poor uncle came to me, and it wasn't the look of a joker that he had. Everybody in the village went to look for him, but he wasn't to be found, dead or alive, God save us! and we had to throw in our hand.

The Island is three miles long by the old measurement, and the point farthest west from the houses is called the Black Head. Two men had gone there one day on some job or other—I fancy they were hunting—and they had dogs. The dogs left them and went under a big rock there, and, though the men whistled two or three times, the dogs didn't come. One of the men sprang down, and when he looked under the flagstone what should be there but the clothes and the boots of the missing man. An odd feeling came over them, and they hastened home, hunting no more that day.

When they got to the houses they didn't like to go and

tell the true story to the father, but one of the lads was a friend of mine, and they decided to come and tell me first and leave it to me to break the news to his family. It was nearly as bad for me as for them. Anyhow, when I came unexpectedly on poor Diarmid, I asked him to listen, and said:

‘He’s gone, and you have mourned him well already, and you may as well make the best of this piece of news of him.’

‘I will,’ said he.

I told him.

Three weeks after this his body was brought round by the great sea. A boat from the Island came upon him and saved it, and he is buried in Castle Point in the Great Blasket. The blessing of God’s Grace on his soul!

23. *I begin to take an Interest in Irish*

THE COMING OF MARSTRANDER · THE MAN WHO
WASN'T DROWNED · THE GREAT BEAST ·
THE SHARK

SOME years before this it often happened that I would be held prisoner now and again out on the mainland in the winter season. In the house where I used to stay the children were always going to school. The Irish language was being taught in the Dunquin school in those days—as soon as it was in any school in Ireland, I think. The children of this house used to read tales to me all the time whenever I happened to be in their company until I got a taste for the business and made them give me the book, getting one of them by turns to explain to me the difficulties that occur in the language—marks of aspiration, marks of length, and marks of eclipse. It didn't take me long to get so far that I hadn't to depend on them to read out my tale for me once I understood the differences. For my head was full of it, and, if I came across a limping sentence, all I had to do was to hunt for it in my own brain. I could find the correct form of it without troubling anybody.

Very soon I had a book or two, and people in this island were coming to listen to me reading the old tales to them, and, though they themselves had a good lot of them, they lost their taste for telling them to one another when they compared them with the style the books put on them. It would be long before I tired of reading them to them, for I was red-hot to go ahead.

From this time on an odd visitor was coming to the Island. One Sunday at the beginning of July a canoe from

Dunquin brought a gentleman to the Blasket. He was a tall, lean, fair-complexioned, blue-eyed man. He had only a flavouring of Irish on his tongue. He went among the people and observed them, and in the evening he asked some of them whether he could find a place to stay. They told him he could, and he arranged to lodge in the King's house, and went back again without saying or doing anything else.

Not much of the Monday had gone when he had all his traps collected. He was asked what was the reason he didn't stay in Ballyferriter parish, and he said that there was too much English mixed with their Irish, and that didn't suit him; that his business was to get the fine flower of the speech, and that he had observed that the best Irish was here. He asked the King who was the best man to teach him Irish. The King explained to him that I was the man, for I was able to read it and had fine, correct Irish before ever I read it. He came to me at once and questioned me. He put a book before me, '*Niamh.*' 'You're all right, but have you got English?' says he.

'I haven't a great deal of English, sir,' says I to him.

'That'll do,' says he.

The first day we came together he gave me the style of 'master'.

This was Carl Marstrander. He was a fine man, with the same manner to low and high, and, methinks, that's always the way with so many of his sort who have great learning. He spent five months in the Blasket. One sitting a day we had for half that time, two or three hours every day; but he had news that he wouldn't have the time he'd thought at first, and then we had to change our plan. He put another question to me: Was it possible for me to spend two sittings a day with him?

It was after the day's work was done that I used to go to him, for the nights were long at that time of year. We were



WESTERN END OF THE ISLAND, INISH NA BRÓ AND
INISHVICKILLAUN IN THE DISTANCE



ABOVE THE GRAVEL STRAND, LOOKING TOWARDS
SYBIL HEAD

fishing and I had a boat with another man, and that wouldn't permit me to spend any time in his company that would interfere with the fishing. I could only have the second sitting with him in the day-time; but, all the same, how could I give the gentleman a refusal? I told him I'd do my best for him. So we went at it together, and, whenever I came in for my dinner I would go to him, and that wouldn't set me back in my fishing for long. It was just Christmas Eve when he got home after leaving us. He sent yellow gold to me when he had got home. I haven't heard anything from him for many a long day.

It was about the year 1909 when the Norseman Marstrander was with us. It was not long after that when Tadhg O'Ceallaigh came to us. He was a good Irish speaker. He used to have an Irish class in the schoolhouse for about two hours every night. I never let a night go by that I didn't spend with him.

It was at this very time that a letter came to me from the Norseman, full of paper, so that I could send to him in Norway the name of every animal on the land, of every bird in the sky, of every fish in the sea, and of every herb that grows; with orders that I was not to have recourse to any book, but to spell them after my own fashion.

Well, I hadn't too much practice in writing the language at this time, and I tell you, my lad, I'd have needed to be first-rate at it to spell all the names aright. I mentioned the matter to Tadhg O'Ceallaigh.

'O!' says he, 'we'll help one another, and do it splendidly.'

He wasn't slow to get to work, for the task delighted him beyond anything. We used to spend part of the day at them till we'd finished them and dispatched them overseas.

Tadhg only stayed a month.

The year after he left us fish was to be had plentifully every night they could go after them. A half-dozen boats

from Dunquin used to come, too. They were as skilled at sea then as they have been ever since.

Well, it was a soft, calm, moist night, and every canoe we had put out to sea. The night went well till it was half spent. At midnight we made the creek and landed the boats high and dry. Every one of us went to his own house, and we had a bite of food. Then off we started again, and some of the boats went with us, while others whose crews had gone to bed never went out again at all, and some of the Dunquin boats didn't go back home, but remained at sea off the Blasket landing-place. The rain showed no sign of stopping. Off went every boat of us to work, some of them pretty far from home. As for our boat, it wasn't far from the land. We let go the nets, all we had in the canoe. They were only just spread out on the sea when we heard a noise coming our way, and what should it be but a squall. The blast was so fierce that it flung every one of us down off the thwart into the bottom of the canoe, and gave the canoe itself a good shaking.

I sprang to the rope that held the nets at the stern of the boat and fell to dragging on it till the nets were coming towards me. Then the wind went again as fast as it had come, and things eased off a bit. The other pair told me to look if there was any fish in the nets, and there was one here and there.

'Out with them back again,' said they, for not another breath of wind had come all this time.

The rope was but just taut again when there came another noise, seven times as loud as the last one, and it left no drop of water in the sea that it didn't lift into the air. It shook the canoe and tossed her this way and that.

'Be quick and jump and haul back the rope,' cried the pair. 'There will be a storm immediately.'

'We should have had it on board now right enough if

we'd only kept on that time,' says I. And I sprang to the rope at once.

It wasn't in my strength to haul in the breadth of my nail or an inch of the net. I had to face towards the stern of the canoe and set my heels against the foot-boards, and even so it came slow and stiff.

We got the net on board safe and sound; but there never was weather like it by this time, what with rain and wind. We were right to windward of the creek, making for home. One of us was rowing and the two others steering, and, though I had two iron thole pins in the stern, they were bent with the strain on them.

We were dragged to safety, for we had almost been carried past the harbour, struggle as we might. When we reached the harbour it was high tide, and it was a spring tide, and the place was crammed with boats as we came in, and the creek was very narrow.

When we put our rope ashore, we heard that a canoe had been driven east through the channel with only one man in her, a Dunquin man; that the other two of the crew had left him and got to land by leaping on to the rock when they came in without bringing a rope or anything ashore with them out of the canoe. The little canoe with the lone man in her drove east through the channel, and off it went through the stormy night. It was a terrible thing. Could anything be done? But nothing could.

The gale continued blowing out of all measure through the night, and the little canoe and the man were being swept before the wind through Dingle Bay until milking-time next day. Just at that point of the day he was blown into Valencia harbour, himself and his canoe, unhurt and undamaged. He was taken good care of there; he had passed all alone through the storm, and they marvelled that he had not died for very terror in the long, endless night.

When I had come home I must go out of doors again to

find out if my relations were safe at home; it was the children that put me to that trouble, for their uncles were on the sea, and how should they know whether they had been caught in the storm or not? A heavy rain was still falling unceasingly, and I had to crawl on hands and knees from one house to the other. At the very moment when I reached my own house the dawn was beginning and the rain stopping. I threw off my clothes and went to my bed, tired and weary, and soon I was dead asleep in it.

Two days after people went out from the Blasket to the land to keen the drowned man, for there was a sort of wake there. In the middle of the business who should come in at the door to them but the man himself. A steamship had brought him across to Dingle—himself, his canoe, and his nets. The story of this happening spread through the country, and before long somebody from the Government came and looked at the passage. When he had gone back, it wasn't long till they were at work, and the work went on till the passage was closed and raised higher than the land all round. This was going on for a good while. I got fifteen pounds for the work, and I only had one man's pay, and many a day I was not employed at all.

I was out fishing one night after the passage through the harbour had been set right. It was a fine night, and we had no need to go far from home. Anyhow we weren't getting much fish, and we rowed to the White Strand and made a cast of the nets. We hadn't had the nets out long when we noticed something floundering far back in the net. I said to the two others that there was a seal there, and if there were any mackerel there, he wouldn't be long about eating them; but the pair didn't pay much heed to what I had to say, letting it go in at one ear and out at the other. Soon after that the man in the bows said that there was some devil or other in the net, for he was dragging the net and the boat after him at full speed.

The word was hardly said when the thing in the net went mad. It dragged the nets and the boat for about a mile, and came near to drowning us at that effort, only there were twenty fathoms of rope tied to the end of the net, and I had to pay all that out down to the last bit that I held in my hand.

All we could do then was to let him have the nets, and that would be a great loss to a poor fisherman. The man in the bows told me to haul on the rope again. I did so, and we pulled a bit of the seine on board, and it was then that we began to talk to one another! It was a bright moonlight night, and when we saw the huge creature a bit back from the stern of the boat, the three of us went yellow with terror, utterly at a loss to know what we ought to do. The man in the bows told me not to let the nets go. He'd rather be drowned even than lose his nets.

We spent some time like this, and we had to let the net go back and forth. The great beast had the six nets all twisted round him except one net; and when he went down, we had to let the rope run every time till he struck the sand at the bottom. We were fighting him till we came near the landing-place. I had a good knife open all the time ready to draw it across the rope, but there would have been little help in that if the beast had run wild.

At last we reached the harbour, where we got help from two other canoes. The beast was as big as the whole harbour basin. Soon he wallowed all over the basin and drenched all of us that were there, and clouted the rock with his back fin. He split the rock and knocked half a ton out of it. He came near to frightening to death all in the harbour when he was landed. The liver in him provided the whole island with light for five years. It was a tough job to get the nets off him. He left us only the ropes of the nets, all the rest was torn and rent. The three of us have never been the same since; we'd had too great a fright; we

should have been drowned if we hadn't been so close to the harbour.

Another day we had the canoe anchored to a stone and were fishing with the line. Soon a shark passed under the boat, swimming backwards and forwards without leaving it, and he couldn't be driven away. One of us was lying along the thwart, and, of course, his legs were stretching over the gunwale. I was in the stern of the boat, and, glancing down, what should I see but the shark with his jaws wide open, making, belly upwards, towards the feet. I shouted to the man in the boat's waist to draw in his legs. He did double quick. The shark reared up half out of the water, and he nearly sank us with the rush of it. We had to pull up anchor and make the land, and he followed us so long as he had two fathoms of water. We were no good for the rest of that day, and didn't get our courage back again for a week.

I've never seen a sea beast since floating on the surface of the water but my heart shook. It's often that a canoe or a boat has been sunk in the night-time, and often in the day, too, and the people could not make out what had befallen them. It is my belief that it is a monster of this kind that attacks them and overturns them. There's many a danger lying in wait for those that follow the sea.