

### *3. Our Houses*

THEIR DESIGN · THEIR FURNITURE · OUR  
ANIMALS AND FOWLS · OUR FOOD AND DRINK

I MAY as well give some brief account here of the way we managed things in this Island when I was young, more particularly since the fashion of that world has passed away and nobody now living remembers it except a few old people.

As for the houses that we had in my youth, and for some time after, they differed among themselves, just as in other places. Some of them had a handsomer appearance than the rest, and others were pretty wretched. A number of them were only ten feet by eight. Others were larger—from that size to fifteen or twenty feet long. To divide the house into two a dresser stood out from the wall in the middle of the floor, and a partition met it from the other side. There were two beds in the lower portion, where people slept. Potatoes would be stored under these beds. A great chest was kept between the two beds up against the gable end. On the other side of the partition—the kitchen side—the family used to spend the whole day, or part of the day, ten of them perhaps. There was a coop against the partition with hens in it, and a broody hen just by it in an old cooking pot. At night-time there would be a cow or two, calf or two, the ass, the dog on a chain by the wall or running about the house. In a house with a large family you would find a post-bed, or maybe a bed on the floor. The old people used to spend the night in that beside the fire, with an old stump of a clay pipe going, or two pipes if there were two of them living, and smoking away; they would have a wisp of straw for a pipe-lighter.

A good fire of fine turf smouldered away till morning; every time they woke they took a light from the fire and puffed at the pipe. If the old woman was alive, the old man would stretch across to give her a light from the wisp; then the smoke from the two old pipes would drift up the chimney, and you could imagine that the couple's bed was a steamship as they puffed away in full blast.

Two or three dogs would stretch out at the foot of the bed, the cow or the cows below them, head to the wall, and there would be a calf or two with the run of the kitchen, or lying muzzle to the fire. The ass would be tied up on the other side of the house opposite the cows, and a cat with a couple of kittens, maybe, in the chimney niche. The rest of the trumpery in the house was stuffed under the post-bed for the night. This bed was more than a couple of feet from the ground, and it was made of wood or iron. Some of the houses had no division to make a room, but there was a post-bed in one corner and a bed on the floor in the other. The dresser was up against the wall or the gable-end. Every kind of house had two or three barrels of fish. And, besides all the other animals, you would find a pet lamb or two running about the house.

Those houses were made of stones mortared with clay, and most of them were very roughly finished, for their building was always hurried through, and everybody took a hand in it. Rushes or reeds were the thatch, over a layer of thick and stout scraws. The thatch would have been all right if the hens would only have let it alone, but they wouldn't. As soon as the rushes began to decay, and worms could be found in them, a man with a gun couldn't have kept the hens away from scratching and nesting there. Then the drips would begin, and a dirty drip it was too, for there was too much soot mixed with it. The hens nested so deep in the thatch that the women often lost them, for a hen wouldn't even answer the call to food when she was

broody. The little lasses very often brought a hatful or a capful of eggs down from the houses. The children made a mess of the thatch, too, always hunting for eggs. It was as good as a day at Puck Fair to listen to two of the women whose houses adjoined, quarrelling with one another about the ownership of the eggs.

The good houses were from ten to twelve feet wide, and from twenty to twenty-five feet long. They had a cupboard and a dresser arranged crosswise to make a room of the lower half of the house, and two high post-beds below them. They were thatched in the same way as the little houses, though the hens had an easier job with the little houses, because they were built lower. I remember, however, a funny thing that happened in one of the big houses, the like of which never occurred in one of the little ones, in this very matter of hens. The family of this house were gathered, every one of them, round the table at supper, with plenty of potatoes, fish, and milk before them, and all their jaws keen set to grind them and send them on down. The man of the house was sitting at the head of the table, with a wooden mug full of milk beside him. He'd just put his hand to his plate, to take out a piece of fish, when he saw some object fall into the mug. He looked down, and there was a lump of something drowning in the milk. They had to fetch the tongs to get it out, and not a one of them had the faintest idea what it was.

'It's a young chicken,' said the woman of the house, 'whatever the dickens brought it there?'

'It doesn't matter a damn to you what it is,' said the man of the house. 'It has sent you out of your wits soon enough,' said he, 'for where on earth do you imagine a thing of that kind could come in your way from?'

All at the table were getting madder, and Heaven knows how the evening would have ended if another chicken hadn't fallen on the potatoes, alive and kicking.

'For God's sake, where are they coming from?' said the woman of the house.

'Can't you see that they're not coming from hell, anyhow,' said the man of the house. 'It's some consolation that they're falling from above.'

A lad at the lower end of the table glanced up at the timbers of the roof and saw the wind and the sun coming through.

'Devil take it! there's a hole in the house,' says he to his father. 'Come here and you'll see it.'

When the man of the house saw the hole, 'Wisha,' said he, 'may Satan sweep all the hens and eggs and chickens out to sea.'

'God turn a deaf ear to you,' said the wife.

When they went to the hole to close it, they found ten other chickens and the hen.

I was cradled in one of the medium-sized houses. It was a little cramped house, but what there was of it was kept neat, for my father was a very handy man, and my mother never knew what it was to be idle. She had a spinning-wheel for wool and another for flax, and combs for carding, and she used to have the job of spinning threads ready for the tailor with the distaff from her own wheel. Often enough she would spin it for the other clumsy women who couldn't put themselves in shape to do it, and were too lazy, anyhow, even if they knew the trick.

Some ten years after my marriage I built a new house. Nobody handed so much as a stone or a lump of mortar to me all the time I was at work on it, and I roofed it myself. It isn't a large house, but, all the same, if King George were to spend a month's holiday in it, it isn't from the ugliness of the house that he would take his death. It is roofed with felt, as every other house and shed in the village was until the Board put up six slate-roofed houses. When the new house was finished, a hen fluttered up on

to the roof. My uncle Diarmid was just going by. He stopped to watch the hen and the desperate struggle she was making to maintain herself on the roof, but the slippery felt shot her off.

'Devil mend you,' said my uncle, 'that the day has come upon you when the roof shot you over the cliff!'

In my young days Patrick Keane, and some time before him, Patrick Guiheen, were the two chief men in the Island. I remember when this Patrick Keane—the grandfather of the King we have now—had four or five milch cows. I never saw the other, Guiheen: his grandchildren were alive in my day. I've often heard that he had eight or ten milch cows, a mare, and a wooden plough. A red mare she was. She helped to draw the gravel for the old tower on the Island, whenever that was built, and he was in attendance on her when he was sixteen years old. John Dunlevy, the poet, was a baby in the cradle at that time. That makes the poet sixteen years younger than the King's grandfather. The men of their standing had some half-dozen houses that were pretty good.

The tables used in the little houses were rather like a kneading trough—a board with a raised frame round it to keep in the potatoes or anything else they put on them, and a stand of tripod shape that could be folded up so that the stand and the kneading trough could be hung up on the wall till they were needed.

One day my uncle Liam came back from the strand with a fierce hunger on him. The tripod frame was standing ready, with the kneading trough on it, full of potatoes and whatever 'kitchen' went with them. A good-sized potato fell from the trough. Off went the dog after it. He carried the stand away with him, and the trough and all its contents rolled every way through the house. His wife fell to gathering up the potatoes. 'Holy Mary! little woman, it's as good as a fair day with you,' says Liam.

We had bowls and plates in every house, wooden mugs, a chair or two, and a few stools. The chairs had seats of twisted rope made of hay or straw. There was a pot-rack of iron in every house, and still is, to hang things on over the fire, and there was a pair of tongs of some sort or other on the hearth.

They have cups and saucers in every house now and a full dresser, making a fine show. Only human beings live in the houses in these days; the animals have their own sheds out-of-doors. Cressets and fish-oil, with tapers or rushes on the cresset, renewed as they burnt away—that's the first contrivance for making light that I knew. The fish-oil was got from scad and pollock. 'Dip' was the name we gave to the scad's fat; the pollock grease was called 'liver'. We used to melt it. They employed seal-oil for light, too, but they didn't put much of that in the cressets, for they used to gulp it down themselves, dipping their bread of Indian meal in it; and they needed it badly enough. I was well in the teens, I think, while this kind of light was still in use. The cresset was a little vessel, shaped like a boat or canoe, with one or two pointed ends, three or four feet to it, and a little handle or grip sticking out of its side—the whole thing about eight or ten inches long. The fish- or seal-oil was put into it, the reed or wick was dipped in the oil and passed over the pointed end of the cresset, and as it burnt away, it was pushed out. The pith of the rush formed the wick, and often they used a soft twine of cotton or linen for it. They would often use a large shell instead of a cresset for a light. I don't remember at what date paraffin came in. A fragment of turf or a chip of bog-deal was the older fashion, I used to hear them say.

I lived for a long time from my young days on two meals a day. I'd have a lot of work done on strand or hill or in the field, and the cows would be coming to milking when I'd be thinking about taking my morning meal. The

sun would be far down in the west when I had the evening meal. We never called them breakfast or supper, but always the morning and the evening meal.

Potatoes and fish and a drop of milk—if there was any—that was our food in those days. When the potatoes failed, there would be only Indian meal, just shelled. People to-day couldn't make a shift to eat the bread it made, do what they would; they haven't got the teeth for it. I am sorry that I don't have the same food to-day, with the same jaws to eat it with, and the same good health.

In the days when I was young two stones of flour used to come in every Christmas. I was a grown man before tea was known, and, when a pound of tea came our way for Christmas, it was sparingly used, and the remnant saved up till the next Christmas. But the tune has changed altogether in the matter of food for a long time now. We have wheat-flour in these days, and tea and sugar. Some of them fiddle with food four times a day. At that time we used to eat as much food in one meal as in those four meals put together. People lasted two days on one meal of the kind, if they needed to. A man can't go a pike's length in these days without tumbling on his backside, for they don't eat a meal at all, but a miserable bite or two.

## *4. In School and Out*

THE FAMILY OVER THE WAY · A NEW TEACHER  
COMES · THE CRABS · THE FOUR-EYED INSPECTOR

THERE was only a yard between us and the house over the way, and both houses had only one door apiece. The other family had the lower half of the yard and we the upper, and the two doors faced one another. If the old hag had wanted to, she could have scalded my mother from her own doorway with boiling water, and my mother could have done as much to her. My mother often bade me keep clear of the grey woman, for she had a cranky nature, and she herself had to purchase peace from her, and that was true. Still she had a generous heart.

My mother used to do everything for her, for she was an untidy worker, and so was the man she had—my father used to tighten up everything for him, spade and ass gear, even the thatch on his roof. I never saw a man more unhandy at his work than he, but he was a thoroughly decent man. Bald, or Crop-eared, Tom they called him, for he hadn't a button's breadth of ear on him. But he had the brains of the seven seers in his head, so that, if he only had had the education, he could easily have bested the whole of Ireland. My mother often sent me to him to find out when such and such a holy day was due, and if they were eating any manner of food, the two of them would come between me and the door to force me to take some of it. I never knew a more hospitable cabin, and since it has come to pass that all who lived in it in my time are with the company of the dead, and I live still, may God grant them a better habitation than that poor wretched hut.

They had a son and a daughter. I don't know whether there were ever any other children. The daughter had her

mother's wild hair, and the son was a stunted, spiritless loon, and he had his father's untidiness. The sea never suited him. He'd no sooner set foot in a boat than he'd be seized with violent vomiting. So he never brought back a catch from the sea, and he spent much of his time as a labourer.

There was nobody living in the Island, young or old, or in the mainland parishes either, that Bald Tom didn't know his exact age—the day, the year, and the hour of his birth. The people said that there wasn't his like for a long memory in the countryside, though he didn't know the ABC in any language. He often used to tell me that the Christmas cakes were ready baked when I was born, on St. Thomas's Day, that comes three days before Christmas—that was the day my mother found me on the White Strand. 'How many years ago is it now?' the grey woman would ask. He never hesitated: 'Fourteen years ago come Christmas,' he would answer.

From that time on the old hag used to be making up to me, for my house made me the messenger between the two houses. I took more from my house than I brought back to it. I'm not making a boast of it. Maybe it wouldn't have been so if there had been plenty in the other house.

I remember one Sunday, when every lass and lad faced for the White Strand, every one of them carrying a hurley, and after a meal, not of bread, but of potatoes. Soon I was ready, too, my clothes well buttoned up, new clean breeches of undressed sheep's wool, my policeman's cap with the two peaks, and my face dipped into a basin of water and scrubbed clean. It wasn't my mother who washed me in those days, for I was a man grown, my boyo!

I started for the strand with my hurley—a furze stick with a twist in the end of it. Nora and Eileen went with me, and we went straight ahead till we were in the middle

of the hurly-burly, and not a one of them on the strand wore shoe or stocking. Those days of hurling on the strand on Sundays were the hardest days any of the young people had to face.

Somebody spied a boat coming from Dunquin under full sail, and when she was making the harbour we all left the strand and went to meet her. There was a woman in the stern, the new teacher, a sister of the first one, Kate Donoghue, a fine, comely girl.

School again on Monday, you may be sure, and we were all of us at our posts. Sure enough the King found his place next to me. As I was ten years old when I went to school for the first time (1866) I must have been fourteen at that time—that is, in the year 1870. The teacher had new little books to distribute. She kept the blackboard going, too, and she was amazed that there was hardly anything she put on the board that one or other of us couldn't explain, so she had to make it harder. The Island children took great delight in this new employ, and, that being so, they had a natural gift for learning. Some of us had the spirit of a King: all of them had the spirit of the sea and the great ocean in them. The breeze blowing from the shore was in their ears every morning of their lives, scouring their brains and driving the dust out of their skulls. Though I had a King in the making to sit by me whom the hammers of a smelting mill couldn't drive from my side—whatever it was that made him take interest in me—he kept me from going ahead, for he was always glancing restlessly this way and that. That's the chief fault I had to find with him, for he was always distracting me just when I was beginning to make some progress. We got on very well, but we were always glad to see Saturday come to set us free to go romping off wherever we wanted.

Well I remember one of those Saturdays after St. Patrick's Day. It was a fine, calm year, and there was a

dearth of fish in the village just then. My father came in at the door, after working in the field, and there wasn't a bite of food ready for him. 'What's brought *you* home?' said my mother to him. 'It's a lovely calm day,' says he. 'If I could get a crab, I might have the luck to catch a string of rockfish,' and out he went again.

What do you think if I didn't go out after him, and when he saw me coming after him, 'Where are you going?' says he. 'I'll go with you,' said I, 'and look after any crabs you catch.' He went eastwards past the landing-place, and out to an island there. He had to swim across. He dipped his head under water and brought up two crabs from one hole.

He brought them to where I was standing and gave them to me to keep—a male and female crab. The names we give to two crabs in one hole are *collach* and *fuaisceán*. Collach is the word for the male crab, and he hadn't been long in my hands before his claws separated, and when they closed again he caught me by the thumb and the next finger to it, and I couldn't shift or shake him off. I screamed like anything for terror, and my father heard me at once. He came running to where I was, for he knew well enough why I had screamed. The crab had me in so tight a grip that my father was forced to break its claw off, and even then he couldn't get the claw apart without smashing it with a stone.

Well, there were my two fingers useless, and the worst of it was, it was my right hand. My blood was sprinkled on the ground and my fingers as black as coal, but my father didn't mind so long as I hadn't fainted—though I was near enough to it. He twisted his hat-lining round the fingers. He expected that my mother would be angry with him for letting me go with him, but she wasn't. My sisters were very sorry when they saw the state I was in at the end of the day. My mother plunged my hand in hot water and

washed it carefully. That did it a great deal of good. Then she got a plaster and bound it up. The pain left it then.

I was singing ‘*Donal na Greine*’ at once. The grey woman came in to ask after me. If she was an old gossip, she didn’t want me to lose my fingers. I’ll take care to give her her due, since I can’t explain my own life without bringing her in again and again, for I never got a sight of the sky any morning in the year without seeing her, too.

My father had four crabs. He thrust them into a bag and went off along the hill, a good way back, to find the likeliest places. He was away the length of a tide and more, and he didn’t come back empty-handed. He had a bagful of fine speckled rockfish, and when my mother emptied them out there was a heap of them. She took up a big one and turned to me with it. ‘Here, Tom, my lad, be off with this one to the grey woman.’

I didn’t say no to my mother, even if I’d been unwilling—and I wasn’t. Off I went with the rockfish, and handed it to the old hag. She wondered where I had got it, for she didn’t know yet that my father had caught anything. She liked me well enough by this time, though there had been times when we weren’t the best of friends. She began to be so sweet to me that you’d have thought that I was a little god to her. Bald Tom, her husband, was at home, and the daughter and the son, too. They’d just finished their morning meal.

‘Have you got anything to give him?’ said Bald Tom.

‘I’ve nothing that he hasn’t got already,’ said she, ‘but I’ll give him this girl for a wife when he’s two years older.’

Although she couldn’t have promised to give me anything more precious to her than the fruit of her own womb, I felt at once that that promise would bring me more harm than good.

The speckled rockfish and the old hag’s speech plunged

me into despair, and no wonder, when you think of the gift I was to get when two years were up.

The new teacher spent three more years with us before she caught her sister's complaint—a marriage proposal. Her people came from the neighbourhood of Dingle, and a lad from the town married her—a pleasant, personable man.

We were in school one day when a boat came from Dunquin. A watch was kept for all the boats coming in, for unpleasant people were about in those days—drivers and bailiffs watching to snatch everything they could lay their hands on, and leave you to die of hunger.

But the man in the boat that day was a school inspector, and not one of that kidney. When we heard that, we were in a bad way. A lad kept going to the door to see when he would come in sight. A bouncer of a girl saw him first. She dashed back from the door with a look of horror in her eyes. Soon enough he entered the house. You could see a child here and there with his hand over his mouth, and, as for the big girls, one of them burst out laughing, and pretty soon another one joined her. The inspector had his head in the air staring, now at the wall, now at the timbers of the roof, and now at the school children.

'Holy Mary!' said the King to me in a whisper, 'he's got four eyes!'

'He has,' said I, 'and a light to match in them.'

'I've never seen a man like him,' said he.

Whenever he turned his head, there was a glitter in his eyes. At last the whole crowd burst out laughing—all the big ones, and the young ones were screeching for fear. The teacher nearly fainted with shame, and the inspector was beside himself with rage.

'There'll be murder done,' said the King again under his breath to me. 'I wonder now did anyone ever see another man with four eyes?'

That was the first person wearing spectacles that the children ever saw.

The inspector gave the teacher a good talking-to, in a jargon that neither I nor anyone else in the school understood, and when he'd finished his speech, he seized his bag and went out of the door, and on board the boat that was waiting for him, and never came back to the Blasket again.

This madman left the school as he found it, without putting a question to a single child, and I'm ready to make a bet with my readers that they've never read of a similar case, nor will as long as they live. The poor mistress fainted as soon as he'd gone. I had to go and fetch a cup of fresh water for her. Eileen sent me to the next house for it.

We had full leave to talk before the teacher recovered.

'We'd better run off home,' said the King to me, 'while she's weak, for she'll surely kill us when she comes to herself.'

'Yerra, there isn't much of a soldier in your make. What a funk you're in!' said I. 'Wait a bit and we'll get what the others get.'

In round about half an hour's time she came to. All of us thought that she'd leather us as long as there was any warmth in our bodies, but things are not always as you expect, and so it was this time. She didn't strike a blow or speak a sharp word to any of us. She could have dealt with the case of one or two, but, since we were all in the same boat, she treated us sensibly—a thing she couldn't have done if she hadn't possessed sense. She sent us home at once, and she had as sore need as any of us to get back to her own house.

The King was as fascinated as any of the scholars by the sight of four eyes in one man's head, but he never said as the others did—that the man came from hell.

A month or two later another inspector came to us: a lean, swarthy, withered man, but he had only two eyes in

his head. He fell to work and asked us all searching, difficult questions. There were eight in my class. One or two of them rose high and tall above the others. Though all of them had fine handsome heads, and the inspector thought that such heads must hold the answer to every question, that wasn't the way of it at all, for the little skulls put them to rout. The inspector was in the brightest of humours when he left. He gave a shilling to the best scholar in each class, and when he handed out the shilling to our class, it wasn't one of the big ones that got it, but myself. My father was delighted when I gave it to him. He got a fine lump of tobacco out of the inspector, though it wasn't only the inspector that brought it to him, for if I'd failed in class, it wouldn't have come his way.

## 5. *My First Visit to Dingle*

IN A BOAT ON THE SEA · THE VIEW ON  
LAND · JERRY SEASICK · DINGLE · THE NEW SHOES

IT was holiday-time with us for a while after that, and it was a fine calm year. The big boats were bringing home quantities of fish. The three of them were full to the brim every day. As my father and Pats had two men's share, we always had a fine show of fish in the little house.

That was the first time, I think, that I ceased to be a spoilt darling, for my sides were sore that day from carrying the fish home in a bag on my back. Each man of the crew had a thousand fish, so that made two thousand for us. My father said that I carried more than a thousand home. 'And I'll take you to Dingle with me to-morrow, if the day's fine,' said he, 'for the boat's going to fetch salt.'

When I heard that I could have cleared a house with one leap.

It wasn't me, but Kate, that was first to look out at the door next morning, for she was my mother's help at that time. She was too big and too old when the school came. I saw her right enough.

'How's the day, Kate?' said I.

'Very fine,' said she.

I was at her side on the hearth at one bound.

'Holy Mary! what's got you up so early, or what are you after?' said she.

My father was the next to get up, and he put on his new clothes. He looked out at the door. Then he told Kate to give me my new togs. She didn't know till then what I was after.

My father took a bagful of rabbits' skins, and off he

went to the harbour. The others came along, one by one, as they were ready, till the whole boat's crew was collected. They came about the boat on either side, and thrust her down till she was afloat on the main sea. The oars and sails were put aboard, and then they set her prow to sea and her stern to land, as they did in the old tales long ago.

Two sails were run up, and we had a good helping wind east along Dingle Bay. Another lad of my own age was in her, a cousin of mine named Jerry. By the time the boat was east of Slea Head, Jerry was changing colour till he was as white as paper. The men knew well enough what was the cause of his change of colour, but I hadn't the least idea. I thought he was on the verge of death. His father came to look at him, and told him that if he could be sick, he'd be all right. The boat was running along very sweetly now, for she had wind and to spare. Soon one of the men said that Jerry was being sick. He was, too, poor chap, and all the food he'd swallowed that morning was thrown overboard to feed the gulls. I was bursting with laughter, and Jerry was crying.

An uncle of mine was at the helm, and I kept putting questions to him, asking about every strange thing I saw. There was a big slate-roofed house in the middle of a farm. 'Who lived or lives in that house?' I asked.

'A pretty bad person,' said he, 'Bess Rice. Have you ever heard tell of her?'

'I've often heard my father, and Bald Tom, too, talk of her,' said I.

When we came in sight of the fine, broad harbour of Ventry, we could see a lot of big, white houses. He named every one of them—the Catholic church and the Protestant church, the police barracks, and the coastguard houses, and everything else that took my fancy.

My companion was coming to himself now that the gulls had snapped up all the contents of his belly; his voice

was a feeble, famished squeak, and he had a worn, deathly look. He came over to where I was with the steersman, who was his uncle, too.

'How far is it to Dingle Harbour?' he asked the captain.

'By my cloak! it's a fair way yet, my good lad,' said he, 'and I think you'll never get there alive, since you've nothing left in you but your guts. Sure you're not a bit like the other lad.'

The words had hardly left his lips when the men saw a fierce squall of wind, and they had to pull down the stern sail, and the boat hardly managed to carry the foresail—the sea whitened so under the wind.

She was not long after that in making the mouth of the harbour. I thought at first there was no harbour there at all until we'd got half-way in, it was so narrow, but after a bit it widened splendidly till it looked like a lake.

We reached the quay, and my eyes were as big as two mugs with wonder. I saw gentlefolk standing there with chains across their bellies, poor people half-clad, cripples here and there on every side, and a blind man with his guide. Three great ships lay alongside the quay, laden with goods from overseas—yellow grain in one of them, timber in another, and coal in the third.

Before long my father called to me, saying that all was in readiness, and that the men were going up to the town. Off we went, I and the boy Jerry, and, though there was little enough remaining in his body after the passage, he would rather have been left looking at the ships than attend to the call to food. All the crew of the boat, big and little, crowded into one house. There was a table laid with bread and tea for us, and I promise you there was little said till we were near to being full fed. They paid the woman of the house, and out they all went.

The salt shop was the next place they went to. Every man had his own bag with him. Two hundredweight of

salt was put in each bag, and we left the salt there till we should be ready to go back.

I followed my father then into all the shops, and, though Jerry's father was there, too, he stuck close to my heels. The pockets of the grey breeches were not empty of money that day. When the boat was ready to start on the return journey, my father searched my pockets, and, as most of their contents was copper, there was a good heap there. When he had finished reckoning up, 'By the breviary!' said he, 'you're only a shilling short of the price of a pair of boots.'

Who should be present at that moment but a sister of his, a woman who was always in Dingle—now at home and now in the town. 'If that's so,' said she, 'here's the shilling, too, for you, and put the boots on him, since this is the first time he ever came to town.'

When I heard my aunt say that, my heart leapt for joy, for I knew well that my father wouldn't go back on his word. I was right.

'Come along then, we can get them just up there.'

Off I went with him, wild with delight. I had no stockings to put on my feet, but the woman in the shop gave me some stockings on condition that my father should bring them back again. It's then that my boots squeaked under me. It's then that I felt a gentleman. And who dared say that I wasn't! A suit of undressed wool on me and a two-peaked cap! Jerry was cheerful enough till he saw the new boots on me, but he hadn't a word to say after that..

When the boat reached the landing-place in the Island, loaded with salt and food from Dingle, according to the custom which we still have to-day in the Island, the cliff above the creek was crammed with people, be sure, to see if there was any news. There was nobody in the boat that they didn't recognise at a glance but the young gentleman

—some of them maintained that he was a child of great people in Dingle who were sending him to spend a week running about the Island. One of my sisters, Eileen, was among them on the cliff, and she couldn't be certain that it was me because of the shining glory about my feet, for I was a thin-legged, barefooted starveling when I left home. Kate and Nora were at the boat down by the water. Pats, my brother, carried the bag with two hundredweight of salt home on his back, for some of the fish was still unsalted.

My mother thought some great finished man was coming when she heard me pounding along with my pair of boots. Everybody marvelled at my getting boots so soon, for in those days men and women alike didn't usually put on boots until their wedding day.

The two of us who had been in Dingle were served with a three-cornered lump of bread and a saucepan of milk. We didn't care for fish; we were sick of it. Nora jumped up and brought four eggs.

'I thought,' said my mother, 'that there wasn't an egg in the house to-day.'

'I found a hen's nest on the roof yesterday with eight eggs in it,' said she.

'You'd wait long enough before you found a hen's nest, or a cock's nest either, on the roof of a slated house,' said old-fashioned Kate.

When I'd devoured my lump of yellow bread and my saucepan of milk and my two eggs, out I went, and lost no time in going straight into the old hag's house to have a bit of fun with her, for I was as deft a speaker as herself by this time. The poor woman welcomed me home from Dingle. 'May you live to wear out your boots; how soon they've put them on you!' said she.

When I saw how courteously she treated me, I put my hand in my pocket and gave her an apple. I gave them all

an apple, and sweets, too, for my mother had charged me to do it. She sprang up, crunching the apple like a horse chewing, and took half a rabbit out of the pot and handed it to me.

'Perhaps you'd fancy that,' said she, 'since you're such a man.'

'But I can't eat it,' said I.

'Give it to your mother, then,' said she.

I took the rabbit home with me and handed it to my mother. She gave me a leg of it, and I picked it.

Night was coming on, and very soon I began to nod and went to bed. I fell dead asleep at once, for I was weary after my visit to the town.

It was school time and past next morning when I jumped out of bed. My mother told me that I had almost died in my sleep. I was as lively as a trout then, however. I plunged my head into a basin of water and rubbed the sleep out of my eyes, and off I ran to school.

## 6. *Bald Tom and the Old Days*

THE SCHOOL CLOSED AGAIN · A HOOK IN MY  
FINGER · THE BOAT OF GORTADOO · BEATING  
THE LAW · THE BURNING SHIP · THE NORA  
CREENA · THE AGENTS

THE King was in his usual place, and, being big and heavy, must have left his mark on the stool. He was whispering to me about Dingle. He'd been there himself—three times, once with his grandfather, and the other times with his father. But it was 'sweets' that were at the bottom of his blarney. I knew that well enough, and I should have been a poor friend, too, if I had forgotten him. I handed four to him, and he was very grateful.

We were let out in the middle of the day.

'Listen,' said the King. 'The mistress will be leaving us soon.'

'How do you know?' said I.

'She got a proposal yesterday. She is to be married at once.'

'What sort of a man is he?'

'A gentleman's coachman somewhere.'

He was right, for she only spent the week with us, and went out on Sunday. The school was shut again.

It was about 1873 that the second mistress left us. That meant I was sixteen. I had had six years at school, and I hadn't mastered English or near it.

On Monday—since there was no school—the King ran in to me pretty early in the morning. He had had his breakfast, too, and I was just beginning mine. I was eating a fine fresh loaf of new yellow bread, just taken from the fire, and 'since it's a rare thing to see a cat with a saddle on him', as the old saying goes about any improbable

thing, I had a lump of butter, too. We had a good milch cow, and my mother had made a lot of butter in a big tin. I had a salted scad and a saucepan of milk, and, better than all, a mill of teeth to grind them with.

My mother was pressing a hunk of bread and some butter on the King, but he wouldn't take it. Probably he hadn't much appetite left that morning. My mother would never have offered the yellow bread to him, if he had been called 'King' in those days, but he wasn't.

The King's business with me was to take me fishing from the rocks if we could get a crab for bait.

'Take care of yourselves,' said my mother, 'when you're after the crabs, for it's neap-tide.'

Out of the door we went to hunt for crabs, but we had no luck at all.

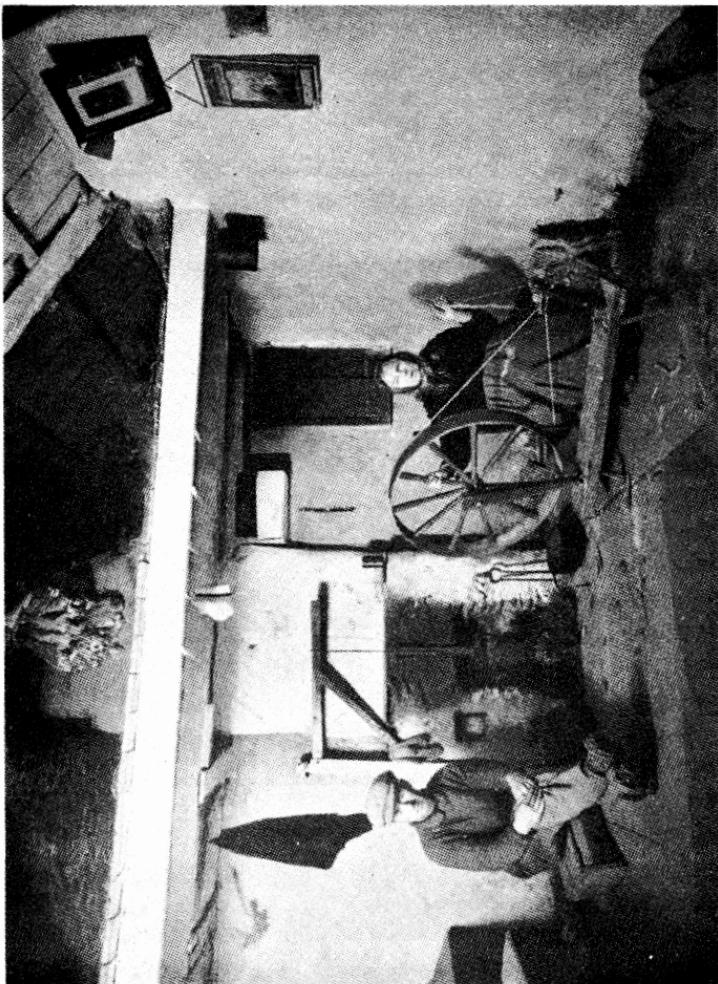
'There's nothing in these little holes,' said the King. 'We'd better take our clothes off and go under the water in some place where we're likely to get them.'

No sooner said than we were stripped to the pelt and diving under and coming up again both of us. I went into a hole as deep as myself, and when I got my foot into the hole there was a crab there. It was hard for me, and more than I liked, to get my head down as far as my feet, but it was harder still to let go the thing I wanted. I bent down, but the water kept me up, and I couldn't get my hand to the crab. I thrust my foot down into the hole again, and what do you think! I fetched him up on one of my big toes. He was a huge male crab, and, usually, if one of those is in a hole, his mate is along with him. I put my foot down again and found the other one, but it was a smaller one than the first, and came easily. I had enough bait for the day then.

The King came to me with his clothes all buttoned up. 'Come along,' said he, 'we've got plenty of bait for the day. You have two fine crabs, and so have I.'



ISLAND KITCHEN



I dressed, and off we went along the rocks. The King had to go back to the upper village, for he wanted a line and hooks. But he was with me again at once. We went westwards to Dunlevy's Point, named after the Island poet. Rockfish were biting freely, and every now and again we pulled up a fine fish and put it behind us. At last I was throwing out my line, and if the hook didn't catch in my finger! I'd caught my last fish that day! The King had to cut the twine that bound the hook to the line with his knife. The hook was fixed in my finger with the twine hanging from it. I didn't feel much pain, as the hook wasn't very far in. We had forty rockfish—twenty apiece. The King carried them all home, and we divided them in our house. The hook was taken out at once, for Kate cut away the piece of skin in which it was fixed with the razor. My finger gave me a lot of pain, and I suffered a good deal before I was through with it.

Bald Tom used to spend every night with us till bed-time. He was excellent company, and I hardly noticed my sore finger most of the time when he would be talking and telling tales of the hard times he had known. Though my father was much the same age, he hadn't half his gift for remembering the past and recalling every detail.

'I wonder,' said my father one night, 'what the trouble was that set the parishes of Dunquin and Ballyferriter by the ears for so long in those days?'

'O,' said Bald Tom, 'haven't you heard the tale of the Boat of Gortadoo?'

'I have, indeed,' said my father, 'but I don't remember it very well now.'

'There was a ship adrift north of Beginish and a Dunquin boat went out to her. They boarded the ship and threw down into the boat everything they fancied. A boat set out from Gortadoo with twenty-one men in her—the chief men in the parish. They never stayed till they came up to

the drifting ship. On board they went, looking for booty and laying their hands on things already picked out by the Dunquin people. They came to blows and had at one another, and the Dunquin men were driven from the ship. The Ballyferriter crew were throwing things out of the ship till their boat became overloaded and sank, and every soul in her was lost except the last two, who remained on board throwing the things down, and they never came out of her.'

'Perhaps those two are still alive in her,' said I to Bald Tom.

'Hush, you whelp,' said he. 'That ship was smashed to atoms against Ferriter's Raven that very afternoon.'

'And how did it come,' my father asked Bald Tom again, 'that the people of the northern parish were so bitter against the Dunquin folk for so long after?'

'Yerra, my friend,' said Tomás, 'because they didn't take a single one of them out of the sea, though they were beseeching them, and gripping the blades of the oars, praying them to take them in, but all they did was to drag the oars out of their grasp and leave them to go with the tide.'

'And wasn't it strange that they didn't save some of them, though their boat could hardly carry all the twenty-one in addition to her own crew,' said my father.

'It wasn't possible for them to take them all,' said Bald Tom, 'and they weren't keen to do it either, seeing that they had attacked them in the ship and had taken out of their boat anything they needed or had a fancy for, and had refused to let them come near the ship once they themselves were on the scene.'

'I suppose,' said my father, 'that the two crews were related to one another.'

'They were,' said Tomás, 'some of them very closely, and that nearly caused the wreck of the Dunquin boat, for

one man tried to drag on board a relation of his who was clinging to an oar-blade. But the captain put a stop to that, saying: "They'll all be trying, one after another, to save their own relations, and the boat would never manage it." So the twenty-one from the Gortadoo boat were drowned and the Dunquin boat came safe home with all her crew.'

'I expect the people of the northern parish were savage with them,' said my father to Tom.

'Yerra, man,' said Tom, 'they were laying for them at church and at the fair. Didn't they come over in the dead of night? They used to go into the houses and maltreat the people in them. They killed a fine young fellow, the son of a woman of my kin, in the mill of Belaha, out there on the mainland, and every market-day in Dingle there would be six or seven in need of a priest after the day's brawls.'

'And what made peace between them in the end?' said my father.

'I'll tell you that,' said Tom. 'A girl from the cantankerous crowd wedded a Dunquin man—that was the first peace between them. But it was a long time before that came to pass—after they'd half-killed one another!'

'God bless the souls of the dead!' said my mother. 'I never heard a proper account of their doings until to-day. They were a merciless, savage lot in those days. Thanks be to God, again and again, that that world is passed away!'

It was getting near bedtime and Tom was thinking of going home and the rest of our family coming back from visiting in the cottages.

I spent a month suffering from my finger, with little pleasure or merriment. But it never felt sore or painful while Tom was telling his tales. He used to be in our house every night, and, as my father said the rosary every Sunday, Tom repeated it every Sunday with us, and he was a great hand at reciting his decade.

Tom was poor always, and he had to put his son out to service in Ballyferriter. He spent five years herding cattle there, without a shoe or a stocking to his foot. Not long after the son went, the passage-money for America came for the daughter from an uncle of hers on the mother's side. She went off at once and spent five years there. They had to fetch the son home then. The girl sent a pound or two across the water now and again that was very useful to them.

The old hag over the way was often up very early in the morning after her daughter went away, and she was often heard keening in the dawn. There was nothing strange in that, for the girl was all she had, and she never looked to see her again. Every time I heard her keening, I felt very sorry for her.

One morning that she was out early, what should she see riding off the harbour and the White Strand but a steamship at anchor, full of dark men—that is, men with dark clothes and caps. She rushed off in a panic and knocked at our door.

'Donal,' she cried.

'Hullo!' said my father. He thought that there was something up with her son or with Tom himself.

'What's wrong with you?' he asked.

'There's a big ship anchored out in the bay just below your house, full of men with dark uniforms and high caps.'

'That's so,' said my father. 'It was due to come sooner or later, and I fancy there won't be many houses left in this Island by evening.'

'God's everlasting help to us!' cried she. 'The news is always getting worse, but we never touched bottom till it came to losing our huts.'

We were all up in a second and off to the landing-place.

When I came on the scene the women gave me a job. I was set to gathering stones with the rest of them. We

never rested till we had a ship's load of them heaped up. One of the women said that they surely had enough ammunition now, and that something would have happened by the time we'd shot it all off. 'But I expect,' said another woman, 'that the bullets will have killed us all first.'

'Yerra! may you die as they died in the Doon! Won't you be better off dead than lying in a ditch, thrown out of your cabin?'

A big boat crammed with men put out from the ship's side, and when they came inshore they were astounded to see the vast gathering above the harbour. They had expected that every living soul would have hidden in terror. And no wonder! for every one of them had a gun ready in his hand. But these women weren't a bit afraid of them.

The men went off and the women gathered round, every one of them with a chunk of rock in her hand. The men in the boat didn't know what to make of it when they saw the women standing their ground, and they slowed up as they came in to shore. At last they ran the nose of the boat on the rock, two of them standing in the prow with nothing to do but keep their guns levelled at anybody who should lift a hand against them. As soon as the first man left the boat, a woman flung a great stone down that came near to knocking him off his feet. He glanced up at the cliff and pointed his gun at them, but not a woman stirred. They kept their ranks unbroken above the harbour. Soon a woman threw another stone, and then another, and another, till they made the whole beach echo with the clatter. No more men got out of the boat, but they had to make haste and take the man they had put on land aboard again, and clear off out to sea as hard as they could. Two other boats coming in met them, and they held a consultation. Then those boats drove into the creek in a furious rage. They ran the stern of their boats hastily on the rock and landed their men; but all the same the stones showered

down on them, and one of their men was struck on the crown of his head and laid out flat at their feet. It was a light stone, for one of the little lasses had flung it. He'd have been a dead corpse if it had been one of the strong women who had thrown it!

The captains commanded them to get back into the boats at once. They did so—though they were delayed by having to take the half-dead man with them. The three boats, full of armed men, stood by for a time to talk it over, and the result of the talk was that they came to make another attempt, for they thought that the women had shot off all their ammunition. But the boys had gathered another pile of stones, and they began to cast them down again, and, though there was a danger that the armed men might fire on the women, they weren't a bit afraid. They felt less fear than they inspired.

There were five women standing to one side, and they hadn't enough stones to throw. One of them was carrying a fat lump of a boy in her arms, and think how angry or frantic she must have been when she couldn't find anything else in her neighbourhood to throw at the two police who were trying to make their way up a grassy slope below—'Devil take my heart,' said she, 'I'll fling the child at them!'

'Yerra, you cursed fool,' said the woman next to her, 'don't lose your wits; stick to the child.'

She had swung the child to throw it when the other woman gripped it. In that moment a woman had come up on the other side and flung a lump of sod down that sent the two tumbling over. The child that was so nearly thrown is strong and well over in America to-day.

The ship cleared off with all its crew that day without taking a copper penny with them.

When the report got abroad that a steamship had been in the Great Blasket with armed men aboard, and that

they had failed to get either rent or tax, it set all Ireland wondering. Things stayed quiet for some time. A few years later another ship of the same kind moored below the houses. There were some civilian people in her and a few men with guns. The Islanders had been warned that something of the kind was coming, and that the best thing they could do, probably, was to let them have their way and to drive all the cattle and sheep to the western end of the Island. So they did. The lads drove them as far as they could. The sheriff was in the ship with all his officers. They were not interfered with, but the Islanders gave them rope to do their business. Off they went up the hill, the bailiffs and the police in a bunch. The sheriff went as far as the Tower and found nothing. He sent a number of them half-way across the Island, but it was just the same. They found two old mules with nothing alive in them but their eyes. The sheriff was asked if he wanted to take the mules with him. He wouldn't take them, for he was afraid that the people would make a joke of him, he said. They went home as they came—without cow, horse, or sheep.

One cold winter's night Bald Tom strolled into our house, as was his way. There was a great fire of turf blazing up the chimney, and, as the house was a small one, it was hot enough indoors, however cold it was without. The crop-eared man had come before I had time to get clear of the house. The other young people had gone visiting: that was an old custom, and our young people keep it up still. 'If you had any sense,' said my mother, 'you'd stay at home and not be off to those bare houses without fire and warmth, and you'll have plenty of entertainment with your father and Bald Tom,' said she.

It wasn't this advice from my mother that was the chief check on me, but I was passionately fond of Tom's tales, and that's why I chose to stay and listen to him. The first thing the two began to talk about was the ship on fire.

'Well, Tom,' said my father, 'we had to sweat pretty hard that day when the ship was on fire.'

'We had,' said Tom. 'Two of our crew nearly died when they stopped rowing.'

'We might have known,' said my father, 'since the ship was moving, that there was something driving her and that she wasn't on fire at all, as there was no wind and she had no sails up, and we were following in our boats rowing our guts to catch her, without getting any nearer.'

'That was the first steamship to come this way, and we thought she was on fire, so off we went after her,' said Tom. 'She was going to Limerick with Indian grain.'

'Boats came out from Dunquin and Ballyferriter as she went north,' said my father.

'Was it long after that that the fat bullocks came ashore?' asked my father.

'Just a year after, in the spring, a week before St. Patrick's Day,' said Tom.

'Weren't there a lot of them washed ashore, perfectly whole?' said my father.

'Nobody knows how many,' said Tom. 'There were twelve barrels of salted meat in a single house in Fearann in Ballyferriter parish.'

'We made least out of them, I think,' said my father.

'Yes, and there was a reason for that—the weather was stormy and the men couldn't go out to fetch salt. But, however ill provided they were, the man that had least got a year's meat. I had more than a year's supply, though I went shortest of all, as I had no salt. I fancy you had enough of it to pay your rent, Donal?'

'I had four barrels, brim-full, cured and salted,' said my father. 'That was a great year for potatoes, and fish, too.'

'Every man in our boat made thirty pounds,' said Tom.

'Wasn't it in one of those years that the *Nora Creena* came, Tom?'

'The year after. Not a single pound was made that year, for the rascals in the old hulk seized every fish in the Island, and I've no doubt that somebody's curse fell on them when the bottom dropped out of the ship at Edge Rock as she was going back to Dingle full of fish!'

'O! the curse of everybody in the Island was on them, I fancy,' said my father.

'It was,' said Tom, 'and God's curse, too, and it fell on them all right.'

'How do you make that out?' said the other. 'You know not a soul of them was drowned when the bottom dropped out of their old tub. What was it saved them?'

'A great big boat they had tied to her, and when the water came spouting up they all went into her,' said Tom.

'But how else did God's curse fall on them, then?' said my father.

'Like this,' said Bald Tom. 'Some forty of them came to this Island in the days of the persecution to collect rent, and not one of them died in his own house except one man who lived out there in Coumeenole. They all died in want in the poorhouse; and that was only just. Thanks be to God that they are all dead and we are alive still.'

'John Hussey was the first honest man that came to collect the rent,' said my father.

'And a very straight man he was, too,' said Tom. 'He never took a penny too much off any man from the first day that he got the job.'

'That's true, Tom, but he often made trouble enough for people doing work for him. Boats had to go with him to cut seaweed and gather mussels for manure and to shear sheep without pay, and on bad food—a lump of yellow bread three days old and a mug of thin sour milk with the cream gone from it two days ago. And since the people survived him, and he didn't drown them, their luck will be in for good.'

'O! the curse of the twenty-four men rest on him!' said the small-eared man. 'He came near to losing a boat that I was in, rowing north through the tide with a load of black weed to Keel Harbour. The tide was too strong and the boat too deep in the water, but two good men in her threw overboard five or six horse-loads of the weed.'

'He took two boats' crews of us to Inishvickillaun to shear sheep,' said my father. 'We spent three days shearing them. The man in charge of the rock had brought some wreckage ashore, and we had to take the wreckage east to Beal Dearg.'

I never noticed the night slipping by as I listened to the two of them talking things over after this fashion.

## *7. My Last School*

THE OLD SOLDIER AS TEACHER · THE INSPECTOR  
COMES TO SEE HIM · MYSELF AS A TEACHER ·  
HUNTING RABBITS

ONE fine Sunday a boat came in from the land with strangers in it. Nobody knew who they were, and the people gathered above the harbour. It was a big, lanky, lean fellow, with a sickly aspect. He looked old, too. He was married and had his wife with him and two children. The woman had three legs—a working leg, a short one, and a wooden leg. People began to snigger on this side and on that, and someone said:

‘They may be pretty miserable, but look what fine children they have.’

‘That’s the will of God, man,’ said another man, answering him—a man who knew the points of the Faith better.

They reached the schoolhouse. That house was divided into two, to lodge the teachers. The people brought them plenty of turf, and they settled in to begin their work. He was an old soldier who had stopped a bullet or two in the Army, and he had sixpence a day pension. He couldn’t lace up his boots or stoop at all because of the bullet in his thigh. They were a wretched pair, not that I’m throwing it up against them; but the three-legged woman was a bit the better of the two, for she’d get to the town quicker than any two-legged woman, for she stepped along fine with her stick.

The school had been closed nearly a year at this time, and it was opened on the Monday. Nobody was absent that day. A new teacher, you know! The old people could hardly keep themselves from going to see how the new

man got on. School-teachers were few and far between in those days, and the priest hadn't been able to find anybody, and, as he thought the school had been closed too long, he sent this man in for a while. He had never been in any college and hadn't done too well in the elementary school, either. However, study began in the morning on Monday.

The King was waiting for me on his stool exact to the minute. He beckoned to me to sit next to him, and I did so. He whispered to me:

'Hasn't the old chap got a pitted skin?'

'He's pretty well pocked,' said I. My father had told me that they were the marks of smallpox, but at that time of his life the King didn't know what smallpox was at all.

The rabble at school didn't acquire much learning that day, for they weren't attending to papers or books, but staring at the three-legged woman, who showed herself now and again. The teacher was a decent man, and we weren't as frightened of him as we should have been of a bad-tempered man. Anyhow the scholars behaved very well with him.

Once a quarter he used to go to the town and bring back a box of sweets and some apples to the scholars. If a child stayed at home any day, he would go to visit him with an apple or a sweet, and the child would go with him gladly, crunching a lump of an apple like a horse. He had such a kind way with him that few of the children missed a day of school.

This was the last teacher I had, and the King, too, and a lot of others, for he spent a good time in the Island. It was ill health that drove him out at last. He started for Cork, but he died on the way, poor fellow, near Tralee. There was little learning in him that we hadn't picked up before he went.

Though the master had a lean, swarthy countenance,

you would have thought that it wasn't the same man at all one day that an inspector came in at the door. There was a slight flush in his face such as you would see in a man who wasn't quite right in his head, and I'm inclined to think he was a bit that way then, whatever else was troubling him. I certainly didn't blame him for the change that came over him when the fellow entered, for the whole crowd in the school shuddered at the sight of him. He had such a thick, yellow hide on him that you would have imagined that he was cradled in some part of China. Every one of us, little and big, had nothing to say and went on quietly with whatever work we were doing. Before long the master came up to me with some figures on a slate and told me to cast them up as quick as I could. That was a soft job for me, and I soon had it done. The inspector had set him the task, and he was so confused that he couldn't make the sum out at all.

As the teacher was in bad health, the fright the inspector gave him made him ill, though the school was open every day. He said that he would be eternally grateful to me if I would take his place in the school, with the King to help me. His wife was a dressmaker, and she came to my mother and told her to say a word in my ear and urge me to take the school so long as the master was ill. 'And if you have a quilt or anything else to make, I'll make it for you,' said she.

The King and I were a couple of teachers for a month, and—keep it dark—we were a pretty poor couple, for, whatever we might have done, the misfortune and the mischief kept us from doing it. There were a lot of sturdy young things in the Blasket school in those days, and they paid more attention to playing pranks and courting than to making themselves experts in learning. Anyhow we got through the month in this fashion, free of all trouble and care.

Soon after that the teacher died. The school was shut up again and the King and I were together once more, free to follow the chase on hill or sea. If I had a touch of the spoilt child in me still because I was the last of the litter, the King was the same way, because he was the first of the litter. For that reason we were free to do almost anything we liked, good or ill.

One morning he came to me very early.

'You had some reason for coming so early,' said my mother to him.

'We'll go hunting,' said he. 'It's a very fine day. We'll run from here to Black Head, and maybe we'll get half a dozen rabbits. Where's Tom? Asleep still, I expect.'

'That's just what he is,' said she.

'Here I am, my lad,' said I, for I knew his voice better than the voice of any of the visitors to our house.

'Jump up and we'll be off hunting,' said he.

'But I've nothing any good for hunting with,' says I.

'We have, my boy,' said he. 'I'll bring the ferret with me.'

'But I'm afraid they won't let you have her,' said I.

'I'll steal her from my grand-dad.'

My mother gave me my breakfast, and I wasn't long gulping it down, and what I couldn't take at a gulp, I had a good mill to grind it down with—a slab of bread made of coarse Indian meal, hard enough for a horse, a scad, and water mixed with milk.

Off we went, the two of us. He stuffed the ferret down his chest. We had two good dogs, and I carried a spade on my shoulder. We made up the hill at our best pace. When we came near the rabbits, we found a warren. The King pulled out his ferret, tied a string to her and sent her in. Then he stretched a net over each of the holes in the warren. Soon a rabbit rushed out and the net caught him at once. That settled him, for there was a running cord to it that made a pocket of it.

He picked him out of the net, and set it again as it had been before. That was no sooner done than another rabbit dashed out at another hole. The ferret didn't come back till she'd sent out the last of them to us. The ferrets always come out when they can't find any more. Seven fine rabbits had been hunted out of the hole to us by the ferret and caught in the nets. Off we went to another hunting ground some distance away. The King sent the ferret in, and she stayed in a bit before anything came out. At last a big strong rabbit dashed out through the hole. The net caught him, but he pulled up the peg that held it, and off he went down the hill, but our two dogs soon caught him up.

When the evening was growing late and the sun sinking westwards, the King spoke:

'We'll never be able to carry the rabbits home for hunger,' said he.

'I never saw a man of so strong a make as you so quickly overcome by hunger as you always are,' said I, 'and if we don't get any more, I'll carry the lot home.'

We'd killed a dozen and a half by this time—a fair load—and we were thinking of turning our faces homewards. I had a coat with a big inside pocket and a large hunk of bread in the pocket. It wasn't I that put it there, but my mother. She thought, I suppose, that the day is so long and young people have good appetites, and she was right, too.

I pulled it out, tore it in two, and gave half to the King. Kings weren't as hard to satisfy in those days as they are to-day. He crunched it down with great satisfaction, and it tasted good to him, for there wasn't enough of it for him. When he'd chewed it all up, he felt himself strong again, and he put the ferret into one hole after another till we had a dozen rabbits apiece when we came home with the stars shining over us.

## 8. *Marriage*

OUR FAMILY SCATTERED · THE HUNTERS WHO  
WERE CARRIED OFF TO BELFAST · PATS HEAMISH  
IN DINGLE · THE DYESTUFF ON THE PETTICOATS

My sister Kate married and went to live in a little house in the village. Her husband was a good fisherman. I often held him down under water with an oar whenever we wanted crabs for bait. I kept him under too long one day. He was at his last breath when he came to the surface, and his face was blue. He never trusted himself to me again.

The house Kate went to was just like the one she left—with eggs in the roof, too. Pats Heamish was her husband's name, for his father was called Big James. Pats had a fancy for joining the Army before he married, but his father used to say to him: 'Pats, my boy, think of the load on top of you!'—reminding him that he'd have to carry a bit of a burden. When the country people used to brawl and fight at the markets and fairs, Big James was captain of one of the factions, for he came from Ballyferriter to this Island. They were good enough at rough work, but they weren't handy. Kate used to climb on to the roof after the hens' nests there, for she had the trick of it, and would just as soon look for them there as in the coop.

I must leave them now to rub along together till my story brings me back to them again.

My brother Pats married the year after Kate. His wife was a girl from Dunquin, a weaver's daughter. They had two boys by the time she died. The youngest was only three months old and my mother had to set about bringing him up when she'd finished with her own clutch. Maura was still in America, and Nora and Eileen were at home. Maura meant to stay across the water till the other two

joined her, and so it fell out, for in a very short time she sent them the passage-money. They went off in the same year. As soon as she saw that they had their eyes open in the New World, she began to think of moving, for her boy was still in Ireland, and she wanted to get his rights for him, and her own rights too, and to have the law of the uncle who had turned them out. She reached the Blasket at the end of harvest, having nearly a hundred pounds with her. No sooner had she reached home than she set the law in motion, and by the time she'd done with the uncle—her husband's brother—he wasn't worth much. She got something herself, and the money that was adjudged to the son was put in the bank. Before long the bee stung her, and she began to think of marrying again. A tight young fellow, stout and strong, was the man she chose, with nothing in the world but his clothes, and they not too good. They built a tiny little new house for themselves and jogged along like anybody else. The young fellow was a good fisherman, and, as for her, she could live where a rabbit could—like all the rest who had seen America or spent any time there.

Not long afterwards the bee stung my brother Pats, and before anybody knew where he was, he was half-way across to America, leaving the two young ones to my mother. My father was well on in years, and there was nobody left now for them to count on to keep the little house going but the spoilt child—myself.

You see how soon we were scattered! The merriment, the jokes, the fun that never ceased—before meals, at meals, and after meals—it was all gone now, and not a sound was to be heard but the voice of the old hag opposite and the droning of Bald Tom: but, 'it was some comfort that even they were there', as the man said of Cuan Croumha.

'Wisha, God's blessing on the souls of your dead!' said

my mother to Tom one night. 'Have you the tale to tell of the hunters from the Island who were taken to Belfast?'

'That's a strange question to ask me, considering that my father was mixed up in that affair,' said Tom.

'Wisha, God bless you!' said she.

'He was, I tell you. He spent a fortnight away from home in misery. I was a little chap in those days, but I remember perfectly that I couldn't believe it was my own father when he came back. There was a boat's crew of them that went as far back along the Island as the Mullach Rour one fine, sunny day in a boat to hunt rabbits. They left the boat in a creek there and went after the rabbits on the hill. Before long they saw a ship coming through the Sound from the north, and she looked as though there was something wrong with her. They hurried down to their boat and went on board; and they'd have done better to stay where they were. It appears that the captain had a very short crew. He was a thorough rascal, and looked it. No sooner had they left their boat and gone on deck than he seized a gun and pointed it at them. He flung the Island-boat's rope into the sea and let her go with the tide, and prevented them from getting into the boat to go home. He forced them to hoist all his sails for him, and the night blew up into a violent gale. He carried them as far as the north of Ireland—as far as he was going himself, and if he'd been going farther, he would have taken them farther, too.'

'He lodged them in an inn there, and ordered the hostess to have them there when he came back or she'd hear about it. One of them left the others by stealth—Big James's father—and no man that ever travelled through Ireland suffered as he did, without a shoe to his foot or any clothes to speak of, but hunger and cold vexing him and terror on the top of that, he was so afraid of being arrested from moment to moment. When the captain was ready he

had them charged in court and condemned. They didn't understand what was going on, and nobody understood them, for they had no English, only Dunlevy's father knew a word or two. They would have gone to jail if it hadn't been for a gentleman who stood their friend. He heard all the talk going on as he passed the court-house, and he asked a youngster in the doorway what all the row was about. He told him what it was and where the men had come from. The gentleman was a captain in the Army, a native of Kerry. He went in at once to where they were, and, with the gentleman's help, the whole truth about the villainous captain was explained to the judge. He was condemned to pay down forty pounds on the table and the value of the boat he'd destroyed, ten pounds more.

'The man who had started out first was forced to walk all the way from the north, and he wasn't worth much when he reached the Island. He was a poor man with a large family, and, once the fear was upon him, he had no choice but to bolt as soon as he got the chance. I often heard my father say that the whole lot of them would have done as he did if it hadn't been that they agreed among themselves that their only chance of escape was to stand fast, though the captain would have been just as pleased if they'd all gone off. Although he told the landlady to keep them fast when he was speaking in front of them, he told her a different story behind their backs: to let them go if they showed any sign of escaping, for all he wanted was to get off paying them any wages; and he came very near to winning the trick.'

'Wisha, long life to you!' said my mother, who had been listening to the tale as eagerly as anybody.

Before we knew, Pats came in at the door, back from America, with nothing but his clothes, and poor clothes at that. I fancy somebody else had lent him the money to buy even them. We expected that he'd stay to keep us

company for the rest of his life, but expectations are often disappointed, and that's how it was with Pats. The very next spring came a call from across the water for himself and his two children. He answered the call at once. He took up the little one, who could only just walk, in his arms, and kept him there till he got across. The other boy was strong enough. Pats started in to pay their way and his own, working hard every day, and he spent ten years thus. After all those years, though he'd never had so much as a headache or missed a single day's work, he hadn't saved a single pound. He was a tall, spare man, who had a passion for work, and he could do as much work as two men. That's the reason he was never in want of work for a day all the time he was in America. Of course, men were unemployed often enough in that period of time, but the ganger used to keep the best man to the last, and that was always Pats's lot.

Three of the family were at home now and three overseas. The old pair had to look to the pet now when there were only the three of us in the cabin. I was a good twenty years old at this time, and we did very well for some time. I used always to do marketing in Dingle, going sometimes by land and sometimes through the whole length of Dingle Bay. Occasionally we had pigs with us, or fish, or sheep, and so on, and now and again a bullock or a load of wool. On my first visits there I used to surprise the other men when I named the houses, for the sign outside told me who lived there.

I was in Dingle one day with Pats Heamish, my sister's husband, and we kept together all day long. He was the sort of man that couldn't keep a glass of whisky or a pint of porter long between his hands without pouring them down him, and he never enjoyed the taste of anything he paid for with his own money, but liked it well when another man jogged him in the back to have one with him.

The upshot of it all was that the drink got the upper hand of him entirely that day and made a complete scatterbrain of him. It didn't leave a stim of sense in him any more than he had on the day he first began to crawl after leaving the cradle. And since I hadn't had the luck to leave him before he went right out of his mind, I couldn't clear out now and leave him under the horses' bellies. Late in the evening we were in Main Street. There were crowds of people sauntering up and down, and some of them would come up to us now and then, acquaintances of ours, to welcome us in from the Island. He turned nasty at last.

'Where's this gang of devils from?' he kept saying. 'Talk's the best part of you. It isn't as easy to get a drink out of you. And your poor friends here parched with thirst!'

Sure enough he was telling the truth, but what was the good! The truth itself is bitter sometimes. It gave me a stitch in the heart to listen to his pointless babble, but what could I do but keep it to myself. Every now and then a brace of peelers would come our way, and I'd cheer up, thinking that they'd take him by the ear and relieve me of him, and put him safe somewhere till he recovered his senses. But so long as he saw them in the neighbourhood you'd take your oath that he was a parish clerk, he'd behave himself so well till they were clean out of sight. But the moment the King's men had cleared off, up would go his hat in the air and he'd be the merriest man in the street again. Some fellow would come up and let on to fetch him a clout, but Pats would give him a kiss.

Well, things were very well and not so bad; and bad as a man's case is sometimes, things can be worse often enough, and oddly though I spent the day with the rascal, the worst of all was yet to come. He shoved his hand in his pocket and pulled out his pipe, with its clay bowl, and nothing in it but chalk.

'Holy Mary! I haven't a thread of tobaccy,' said he. 'Come into this big shop here—they've got good tobaccy.'

'Yerra, we can get good tobaccy in the shops on our way home,' said I to him. 'Don't trouble about this one.'

'If I was there I should be coming back here after the good tobaccy they keep in this shop,' said he.

There's not a living soul that would say that he had a drop of drink in his body while he was jabbering about the tobacco. I knew that he wouldn't listen to a word I said, and off we went across the street. The big shop was a branch of a company from another part—Atkins's—selling all sorts of goods. It was a fine, handsome shop. There was a model of a woman standing on a chair between the two counters facing the doorway, as bulky as any woman of the countryside. When my man was coming through the door, he swept off his hat in greeting to the woman!

'Good day, Mrs. Atkins!' says he.

Ever since the days of the great famine no speech has caused so much laughter in Dingle as that. There wasn't a man from anywhere in the shop that didn't drop stone-dead, every one of them, writhing with laughter, shopmen and masters alike, when they heard what the fool said. If there had been the faintest trace of too much drink on him, none of them would have given a thought to what a man in that state said or did; but he showed no sign of it.

Night was coming down on us by this time, and the rest of the Islanders in the town were making their best speed home, but it was no good telling him that; he would sooner have gone east than west, and, in fact, that's the way he should have gone, for it was the way to the mad-house, and that was the best place for him that day.

When we left the big shop they were lighting the lamps, and we hadn't gone far when he said:

'I can't go any farther, Tom,' says he.

'Yerra, what's wrong with you now?'

'I'm dropping with hunger, and I'm thirsty, too.'  
'Sure I thought nobody suffered from the two plagues at once.'

'Well, 'pon my soul, I've got them both now!'

I carried him off with me to a place where we could get something to eat. I thought they hadn't enough food for him in the house, but they had. What he ate wouldn't have kept a rat going. He went to bed, and nobody knew whether he was alive or dead till ten o'clock next morning.

When I got back home, after three days away because of Pats Heamish—Pats, the devil's own (God forgive me for calling him that)—there was a lot of wreckage afloat round the Island—all sorts of flotsam, timber and huge boxes full to the brim. Nobody recognised the stuff in the boxes when they broke them open. They kept breaking them up and carrying them home after throwing away all their contents.

When the Islanders saw that they could make no use of the goods in the boxes, they let the sea carry them past when anything else came their way. The women wore black flannel petticoats in those days, and they used to dye them with woad. They used to dip them first before they put the dark dye-stuff on them, and, only think! one of the housewives who had two petticoats to dip, got the idea of using the stuff in one of these boxes her husband brought for the first dipping. She had noticed that a colour came out of the stuff when it was damped. When once she had the idea, she carried it out, and it was a complete success, for no colouring matter ever went so deep into a petticoat as that did. She showed what she had done to one woman after another, and she'd no cause to be ashamed, for she had done the trick properly.

'What a godforsaken man I have!' said a railing woman who saw the petticoats prepared for the dye. 'He never brought a grain of it to the house for me, and I have had

two petticoats in the house for three months with nothing to ready them for dyeing. I wouldn't give much for him when once I get my hands on him.'

'For heaven's sake,' says the other woman to her, 'let him alone.'

The woman hadn't been home long when her man came down from the hill carrying a huge sack of turf.

'Devil take it, Joan! I've strained every sinew in my back,' says he. He thought that she would sympathize with him, you see, but she did the other thing.

'Sorrow on the day, I wish it had put your thigh out!' says she. 'For it's a long day before you'd bring a richer sack than that to my kitchen.' And her eyes were blazing as she said it.

'Yerra, I can't remember when I left outside any sack that was worth bringing home,' says he.

'Yerra, you devil, didn't you leave the stuff in the boxes behind you, and it would have readied the petticoats,' says she, 'I've had waiting for it these three months.'

'You're in a temper, little woman,' says he.

'And no wonder, when *she*'s got three great boxes of it in that house over there and I haven't a pinch I could throw to the chickens,' says she.

'It's no matter what you have or haven't, for you're clean beside yourself,' says her husband.

'O! ill luck to you, and ill luck is what you have and anybody that's near you!' says she; 'and lop the ears off me if the man who brought home those boxes doesn't get the fruit of them; surely such fine boxes never had bad stuff in them—each box lined all round inside with lead as bright as a shilling.'

The husband was a fine, easy-going man, but, when she put him in a passion, he went for the railer.

One day in the next week this woman visited the woman who had dyed the petticoats again; and they were still

perfect. She had another story to tell about the stuff, and another use she was making of it—she had two ravenous pigs that were dying of hunger, and since she'd started boiling the stuff for them, mixed with a handful of meal, they lay at their ease, belly-upwards, in the yard. 'And pretty soon they'll be fine and fat,' says she.

'Wisha, ruin and decay on the man that never brought home a grain of it,' says the railing woman, 'and I have two famishing pigs ready to eat the children for hunger—all skin and bone though they're nearly a year old.'

'Yerra,' says the other woman, 'since the thing's done now, don't give it away that you mind.'

When this villain of a woman got home, she was spoiling for a fight, and grudged every minute till her husband came home. She dressed him up and down.

'Yerra,' says he, 'I'm not the only man, by a long chalk, that threw it away.'

'Devil a one except some fool like yourself,' says she.

She made him so savage in the end that the neighbours had to come and separate them.

Next morning the husband bestirred himself. He pretended that he was going to Dingle to get meal for the pigs. He borrowed bits of clothes from this man and that, and never stopped till he reached the town.

Some relations paid his fare, and he's never come back since.

The stuff in those boxes was tea—the first that ever came to the Island. We should know it well enough now.

## 9. *Gathering Seaweed*

THE SEAL ON THE BEACH · THE FIGHT · KILLING  
THE SEAL · THE WOUND IN MY LEG · FETCHING  
THE CURE

ONE morning, I remember, I set my face to the shore. It was the season when we were getting seaweed for manure. I was bright and early, and had a fine, new fork with me for gathering any handful of weed that should come my way. When I came to the cliff above the strand, I leant with my breast against a little round-topped fence there, but there wasn't light enough to see anything from the top, and, that being so, I made my best speed down till I came to the pebbles. There was a little weed lying high and dry all along the line of the high tide, and I heaped it together with my fine new fork. I was by way of being rather set up with myself to think that I had done that much good work while the rest were asleep, but I fancy that kind of conceit never lasts a man long—and that's how it was with me, too.

After a bit I heard a hideous snore behind me, a queer sort of snoring that frightened me out of my wits, for there was nobody near me, and nobody coming towards me, and there wasn't much light in the morning yet. But I reflected that I should be a poor sort of chap, now that the day was coming, if I didn't go in the direction the snore was coming from, since I had a good weapon in my hand. No sooner was the word out of my mouth than I heard snore after snore. I swung round in a jiffy to where I heard them coming from, and what should I see but a huge great mottled seal, with his head in the air and the rest of his body stretched out on the sand. My heart leapt, though not for fear of the seal, for I knew that he could not do me any

harm so long as I kept away from him and let him be. But the fear I had was that I shouldn't get him, for we thought more of one of them in those days than of the very finest pig. He stretched himself out to sleep again.

I saw now that it was a cow seal, and I plucked up courage, for I had always heard that it was an easier matter to kill seven of them than one of the bulls. She was lying at the edge of the water, and it was low tide. I looked to my fork while she was sleeping. I held the iron socket in my hand, with the handle stretched out in front of me, and started creeping up to her to fetch her a blow; but she lifted her head as though she had scented me, and gave vent to a loud, wild snort, and began to stir and to leave the nest she had made in the pebbles. As she turned towards the sea, I gave her a blow, six blows one after the other, but she paid no more attention to any of those blows with the haft than if it had been this pen in my hand that had struck her: and with one of them I broke the haft of the fork in two. I gave her a whack across the snout with the bit left in my hand, but she caught it in her mouth and chewed it, and made bits of it. All I had then was a stalk of the weed, and I showered blows on her with that as fast as I could, but I was doing her no harm, only that I was hindering her from getting to the water, which was not far from her by this time. In the end, when I was worn out, and she was, too, I managed to bang her on the top of the head with a lump of rock from the shore, and the blow turned her belly upwards, but she soon came to her senses again.

At last I thought she was dead, and I was still whacking away at her with a stalk of weed, when, what do you think? I went too close to her, and she had a shot at taking a bite out of me. And she managed it, too! She bit a huge lump out of my calf. As much as her four front teeth could get a grip of—all that she tore out of my leg. I didn't give in,

though blood was flowing out of it in torrents, just as it was out of the seal.

Well, I'd finished the seal at last, and the seal had pretty nearly finished me, too, and it was like to be my last day when I looked closely at my leg and saw the lump out of it and the fountain of blood spurting. The last drop had nearly left my heart; I had to strip off my little vest and twist it round my leg, binding it with the cord from my waist. The water was coming up with the rising tide and the seal was not far from the edge, so that I was terrified that the sea would carry her off again from me after all my trouble; there was not a soul coming next or nigh me. It was the middle of the morning by now, and, as I thought the thing over, I cast a glance now and again at my leg, which was spouting a stream of blood.

At last, when my strength was nearly gone, I saw a man on the crest of the cliff, and he came down to me at full speed. It was an uncle of mine that we used to call Mad Diarmid. He was astounded, and said that he had never seen a seal of that size dead before.

'I've got the seal, uncle,' I said, 'but I've lost my leg.'

He staggered and nearly fell when he saw the great bite out of the leg. One man after another came down to us soon after that, and we carried the seal out of reach of the high tide and came home. My mother and father were in a terrible state when they saw the great hole in my leg, and they got little satisfaction out of the seal since the boy who had killed it hadn't got off with a whole leg. A crowd of them went off to skin the seal, with Mad Diarmid to direct them. My father didn't go at all. He was beside himself on account of my leg, but he sent the ass with Diarmid to bring it home, and he told him to give a slice of it to each man who helped in the skinning.

Old women were running in and out inquiring after my leg, every one with her own remedy. The old woman

opposite came, too, quickly enough, and when she saw my leg: 'Yerra,' says she, 'there's not a pin's worth wrong with the leg.'

When she said that, I give you my word I was very grateful to her, for I thought it a better saying than the talk of the rest of them, which was that I should lose the leg. She said she had seen a bigger bite than that taken out of a man's leg by a seal in Inishvickillaun, and it didn't take a week for it to heal. Shaun Maurice Liam killed the seal that had taken the lump out of his leg. His father killed another seal, took a fresh piece of its flesh and placed it on the wound, then he bound it with a strip of cloth, and left it so for seven days. When he untied it, the hole had filled up with the natural flesh, so said the old hag.

'And how long after that was it before the skin grew on it?' said my mother.

'The very day the strip was taken off he went for a walk on the Island, without any covering on his leg, which was left bare to the sun, and that same evening the skin had grown on it,' says she.

My mother looked out and saw Bald Tom coming with a big lump of the seal on his back. One end of the lump touched the nape of his neck and the other end was down to his knee joint.

'Here comes Tom, Eileen,' says my mother to the hag.

She sprang up at a bound and ran out, and when she saw the fine burden her man was bringing her, she screamed with laughter. For a good while before that she had had nothing but a grain of rough salt to eat with her potatoes.

Then Diarmid came to the door with his ass, and nobody had ever seen an ass so heavily laden before. All you could see was his ears and his tail. All the rest was hidden with heavy lumps of seal, and the driver himself was bent down to the ground under his own load.

There was a loud burst of talking then, and, in the midst of all the chatter, my mother said:

‘This lad will lose a leg by that seal, I’m afraid.’

‘That he won’t, believe me,’ says Diarmid, ‘since he managed to kill the seal; if he hadn’t done that, he wouldn’t have had much chance.’

Then mother told him what old Eileen had said.

‘That certainly did happen, ’pon my soul,’ says he. ‘A bit from another seal was put in the hole from which the lump had been taken. And, my soul from the devil! by this time to-morrow you shall have a lump from another seal for your shinbone, my lad,’ says Wild Diarmid.

The *Black Boar* left the Blasket harbour on the morrow morning, with a crew of eight, four oars, two sails, two masts, and two yards. There was a strong gale blowing hard from the north-east. She was a fine, big, new boat, and the crew knew their business. The sails were hoisted and they let her go with the wind. One of the men followed her along the hill with his pipe lit, and the boat was in Inishvickillaun before the pipe was cold in his mouth.

The man who lived in the island thought that she was a boat from a wreck or that half her crew were dead, and he was waiting for them up to his waist in the water of the creek, for there was a heavy swell running. He asked them at once what had brought them on a day like that.

‘This is what brought us,’ said Diarmid, telling his tale, ‘and we won’t leave the island without something alive or dead.’

‘Pon my soul,’ says the man of the island, ‘you’ll have your work cut out beyond anything you ever knew.’

The day was beginning to blow hard, and I was in and out of the house, for my leg wasn’t sore or painful. Mother was up and down, too, listening to the loud wind like a hen with an egg, and after a bit she said:

'I'm afraid the men at sea will have to pay dear for their day's work to save your leg.'

However much I was afraid for my leg, and at the thought that maybe I should have to have a wooden leg, I was more worried about the *Black Boar* and all her crew at that moment.

The islandman took the men to his house and gave them something to eat. When they had eaten, he called for some of them to go with him to look for the seal. After they had searched every cave in the island, they failed to find a single seal. So they had to turn back home.

Diarmid went on terribly then, thinking that the boy with the leg must die. The islandman said there was still just one hole left, and that they would have to have twenty fathoms of rope to go into it—'and,' says he, 'I have a rope here that I use for getting sheep out of bad places.'

'Where's the rope?' says Diarmid.

He flung the rope over his shoulder and off he went, and the others with him. They lowered him down on the rope with a stick under his oxter to kill the seal, and a knife in his mouth. They paid out the rope till he was in the mouth of the cave, and then lowered the islandman after him.

That was a fine action of theirs, and I was grateful to them till the day they died. May their souls inherit the Kingdom of the Saints!

They brought the seal up with them, and, when they had him, the men said that no open boat could get home in such a storm. Diarmid said if they would set the sails for him, that she'd have to get back as she had come! Out they drove, into the great sea, and Diarmid fetched Slea Head on the first tack and the Blasket landing-place on the second, and he never stopped till he'd stuck a lump of the seal's flesh tight into my leg, and, a week after, I was as well as ever I was.