24. *This and That*

THE TENT ON THE MAINLAND · THE INQUISITIVE OLD MAN · THE LAND UNDER THE BOARD · THE BUILDING OF THE NEW HOUSES · THE GANGER THAT DIDN'T KNOW IRISH · RELIGION · STUDENTS OF IRISH COME TO ME · THE GREAT WAR AND THE WRECK

ONE morning people were out early in this island, and what should there be to look at but a great, white tent on the cliff above the harbour in Dunquin. It seemed curious to us, although the landlord had been often threatening us before this. Some of us said that it was the bailiffs, others said no. Whatever the white house there on the land meant, none of us had much fancy for going out. Some of us were near to starving for lack of provisions.

There came a very fine day, and a middle-aged man who had a canoe of his own that wasn't an outsize said that he would go out if two lads would go with him. I told him he'd do better to stop at home, and that it was no good thing that was on the mainland. It was no use being at him since he'd got the idea into his head. He found the lads and started off across the Sound. He was a vainglorious, little fellow, with a bush, like a buck goat's, under his chin.

He never stopped or cooled till he struck Dunquin harbour. My man hurried up to view the tent, and found out at once that it was an army of invasion against the Blasket. He wasn't satisfied without seeing what sort of men it was who were in the white house. He went to where he could see the door opening, and caught sight of a gun or two. There was a man like himself in the tent, with a goat's beard like his own, and he saw that the man outside was a cheeky fellow from the way he was peering at him

through the door, noticing everything. All he did was to snatch up his gun and point it at him.

When the man outside saw what he was at, he bolted from the white house and faced for the harbour, where he had his little canoe. The grey man with the gun followed him for a bit of fun, and he fired a shot to put the fear of death in his heart.

The islandman called the two lads to the canoe. They dragged it down after them from high-tide mark down to low-tide mark. They hadn't been long afloat when the lads noticed the sea-water welling up round their knees, and they screamed out that they were drowned!

Though they weren't far from the land, the old man wouldn't let them turn back for fear of the grey man with the gun. He shoved his vest into the hole the water was coming through, and set a boy to bail her until they reached their own harbour.

I happened to be waiting for them there. I asked the old man to give some account of what was on the land, but it was a surly answer I got: 'There they are for you. Go and see for yourself.'

'I told you not to go,' said I to him, 'for you're no good at home or abroad.' I lifted my fist and fetched him a clout in the ear-hole.

I'd given good advice to the rascal when he was setting out in the morning, and now it was the worst word in his mouth that he had for me when he got back. This wasn't the first time either that such a thing happened, and you see it made me so angry that I lifted my fist to him, the only time in the world that I ever did it to anybody. But the grey man with the gun put such a fright into him that he was never the same man again. When his tale about the bailiffs came to the ears of the Islanders, it worried us a lot. The most that lived there in those days were bitter poor. We were in a trap then, for we couldn't go ashore at all.

When the parish priest heard of it, he didn't like it, and he didn't rest till he could find out if there was any way of setting us free. The Congested Districts Board had been taking up estates in the countryside for some time before this. The priest made inquiries to see whether he could bring the Blasket under the Board. He was told that they were willing to take it on, and he sent a message to us to come out to him at once, for an officer of the Board would be with him on the day he had fixed. The day appointed was too stormy and we couldn't go to our usual harbour, but had to put in to Cuas an Reha. The pair were waiting for us with their backs against a rock.

We talked with them for a bit, and they with us, till they made it clear to us that we should never see the white house again, and, after we'd gone through a lot of explanations, we said farewell to one another. It wasn't a very good day on the sea for us, and though they were on dry land, it didn't deserve a word of praise from them either, for snow showers out of the north-west were blinding both of them and their horses. When we got to the Island, the whole population was down by the water waiting to see what news we had for them. We had good news, and gave it them with joy.

The next day the white house was down, and before long one man after another came to visit us from the Board. 'Tis an old saying that 'God's help is nearer than the door', also that 'the thing a man likes least in the world may be, for all he knows, the very heart of his fortune'. So it was with us in this matter of the white house. However hard our masters may be after us sometimes, the Great Master of all often sends them to the rightabout.

Before long the officer of the Board came. He put up a tent and spent some time among us measuring and apportioning the land. It was I who held the other end of the chain for him. He wrote down our names as tenants

under the Board, and we were to be content with this and that. He brought a foreman with him and a lot of materials in a trawler from Dingle, and put a great deal of work in train. When he'd got everything arranged for the ganger, he left him in charge of the whole affair, meaning to pay visits to us himself now and again. A man used to come to pay wages once a fortnight.

The Board spent a year and a half working in the Blasket, and most of the men in the village were at work every week and every day. Two shillings a day was our pay—pretty good when we were working for ourselves.

Seventeen shillings a year was the rent on my holding, and still is, while my grandfather in the old days used to pay ten pounds. That's a great change in the world.

Five new houses were built in the Island. I and the ganger put up every inch of them, and often the two of us had to work desperately hard. We used a contraption of wooden boards for them, for they are built of mixed gravel and cement, and we had to keep them as straight as a gun barrel. Before they were finished that ganger was called away and he had to go, and another man came who hadn't the least notion of building houses. I had to finish them.

Among other misfortunes, this new ganger didn't understand a word of Irish. A day came when a floor was to be laid in one of the new houses, and there were four men working on a wooden platform mixing the mortar. The ganger wanted to give them an order to mix so much cement with so much gravel. The men mixing the mortar had no English and the ganger no Irish, and that made a mess of the work, and they fell out with one another. I was up under the slates plastering. Before long I saw him coming towards me in a bad temper.

'Come down here,' says he. 'These four at the board are as stupid as four asses.'

I came down a great, long ladder and went to the

platform, and found out the cause of the muddle. I told them what the ganger wanted done. The ganger was cursing away.

'Those are the four stupidest men I ever saw,' says he, 'and I'll have to discharge them.'

'But this is what the four say,' said I, 'that if the Board wants these houses finished, you'll have to be discharged and somebody put in your place who can make himself understood. A man like you can be no use here.'

The ganger never had so much to say after that as before. I fancy he realized that it was with him the fault lay.

The Board improved our holdings so that every man knows his own plot and has it fenced so that he can do his sowing in a part of it whenever he likes. It wasn't so with us before: unless your next neighbour was ready to sow with you, you had to stop, for you couldn't fence your plot; every man's allotment for sowing was too small.

We've never had any distraint for rent since that time, but I'm afraid it won't be so for ever. We are getting poorer every day.

When the land was all tidily settled by the Board and every man had his own field here and there, trimly fenced, there was nothing to prevent us sowing all we wanted, and we used to do that, and more. Before the Board came we hadn't proper fencing for these little fields, and in the little bits of land we did sow—often enough with good potatoes —we used to have pigs and asses, and they'd often make an utter mess of them after all our labour. Many a year I've spent in which I had to do a man's part in the day-time after being up all night, about All Souls' Day, after mackerel; and often enough I've spent a whole week without sleep till I had my potatoes in store. Now, when we had our gardens all ship-shape, so that neither deer nor eagle could go into them, nothing could tire us of sowing and reaping.

At this time there rose up a babbler amongst us, and his idea was to have food without sweat. He stuck his hands under his oxters. As happens with every villainy, it wasn't long till first one and then a pair of lads did as he did, and many of them started to take their ease. This ill-conditioned rascal told them that it was the same food one would get after all, and that only horses and fools worked in this world.

First one field, then two, and then three, went to ruin, and remained fallow without a thing planted in them. The man that started this rascality went to America, and he didn't find bread growing on the hedges there. We've never been so keen on planting since as we were at first, and the walls that the Board set up to fence the fields are beginning to fall.

One day I was fetching a load of turf on the hill, and what should I see but a trawler from Dingle sailing east on the south side of the Island. She had every sail in her set, and a strong gale was blowing out of the north. A fierce gust swept down the hill-side and I heard the clatter coming my way, but I gave no heed to it.

When it struck the ass that was just in front of me, it stripped the baskets off him and knocked him flat, and me, too, and drove all the wits out of my head. I sprang up and looked round me, but I couldn't find the baskets, though I found the ass. I looked after the baskets and saw the trawler, and was amazed when I saw no sails on her—only rags and tatters. The gust had swept them clean away. She lay there like a fool, never moving.

I looked closely and saw my baskets floating out in the great sea about twenty yards from the trawler that was stripped of her sails.

I stood a few minutes to think what I had best do. There wasn't a sod of turf in the house or anything to cook a thing, and my creels were gone! The plan I hit on was to

take the two bags out of the ass's packstraddle and put the turf in them, one of them on either side of him.

In the matter of religious service, so far as my memory goes back, we had endless trouble. We must go across the Sound to Mass, three long miles to Dunquin. In winter the Sound is rarely fit for it, and we were forced, and still are, to stay at home. We were often a whole quarter without a Mass. Any Sunday we couldn't go out we used to say the rosary at the time when the Mass was being celebrated on the land.

As regards Confession, it's only a man here and there that would go out to Dunquin for it, so long as I can recall, but the priests came into the Island once a year. A big boat from Dunquin was appointed by the parish priest to bring them in, and he used to give them all the money that was collected for himself at the Station. That's how it used to be till these big boats went out of use and there were none of them remaining in the Island or out. Canoes from the Island bring them in ever since then.

Not half the respect is paid to the priests now that was paid in the days of my youth. When I was a boy, I remember well nobody was considered to have welcomed the priest properly who didn't put one knee to the ground after sweeping his cap right off his head. In the world of to-day if there is a gathering to meet the priest, those in front will doff their caps, but maybe not another cap will be doffed from there to the back. No woman was allowed to go in a boat with a priest in it, whatever her haste or need, and never one of them came near the landing-place. But, for some time now, there's none to say them nay if the boat is crammed with them.

One of the oldest recollections I have is seeing the bishop in the Blasket. I fancy the reason I took such note of him beyond anyone else was that he had a special mantle on, for I can't have been many years old. If anyone wants to

know exactly where the episcopal seat is on the Blasket, it wouldn't take me long to put my finger on it. He went walking on after leaving the landing-place till he came to a green-grassed place. There was a rock in the middle of this place. The bishop stopped and looked about him and sat down on the rock, gathering his cloak about him. 'This place is just right, since the day is fine,' says he.

I don't remember any bishop coming since then. Once every three years for some time past the young folk are summoned to go out to the place where the parish priest lives in Ballyferriter to be confirmed by the bishop. A house used to be prepared in the Island for the Stations every year when they came; but so long as the school has been here they are held in it.

Many people have been coming to the Island for years in quest of Irish. Most of them spent a month here. I had to spend a time in the company of each one of them, and do my own work into the bargain. A man came to this Island, and he's come a good deal since. 'Bláithín' is what we call him. He is Robin Flower from London. He had heard from Carl Marstrander before he came that he had been with me. When this good fellow got to Ireland, he never rested till he reached the Great Blasket. He's been coming every year since. We used to spend the time together writing. We had two sittings every day at it. He spent some time every year in my company to get every word we had written arranged in order till it was right and easy. That book will tell of every disaster that befell round the Blaskets, both the little and the big: the strait that trapped some of the men, how some of them dwelt for a time in the little islands, how they fared in them, the wrecked ship, the fairy cry, and other apparitions that were to be seen often and often, if report speaks true of them.

The daughter I had—the one that survived that day on

the White Strand—had a relation in Dunmore, and this woman wanted her living near her. She married in Dunmore and had a good place there. Her going made a great gap for me. I had nobody then to look after things for me, but we were left to blunder on, dragging the world after us. I was but a dark, dispirited dullard after my daughter left me. A dozen years she lived in Dunmore after that. She left six young children behind her. Whatever sorrow else befell me, that sorrow of the grave was the crown of them all.

The Great War hadn't been going on for long when ships were being wrecked and destroyed on the ocean and strangers were coming in open boats from every quarter of the sea. The only person I had in the house with me at that time was my brother Pats, who was twelve years older than I was. He had his pension then.

There's no telling of all the goods that were adrift on the surface of the sea while the war was going on. Two miles from the harbour here a great ship ran upon the rocks. The *Quebra* she was called. Her captain said that she had in her cargo everything that feeds mankind except drink. And he was right. The sea filled up with everything eye had ever seen and that we had never seen in this place. Hundreds of pounds' worth was salvaged from the wreck, and the Islanders made a great deal of money out of her, though they didn't get what they ought.

I had nothing to do but to watch them, to be sure, for I went neither in boat nor in bark, and nobody invited me.

While the Great War was on Brian O'Ceallaigh came to me. He spent a year with us, and he was in our company for Christmas that year. When he had gone, I used to send him a journal every day for five years. Then nothing would satisfy him but that I should write of my own life and tell him how I had passed my days.

It was never my way to refuse anybody, so I set about

the job. What you're reading now, reader, is the fruit of my labours. I was putting the world past me like this for some time more; people coming in ones and twos and threes, and every one of them having his own sittings with me.

The Gaelic League had been founded five years when I put my head into it, and, however hard I'd worked, I've been working harder year by year, and to-day I go harder at it than ever for the sake of the language of our country and of our ancestors.

Father Clune came and spent three weeks with me. He said Mass for us every day. He came back again, and I was a month in his company. We helped one another, correcting all the words in 'Réilthíní Óir'. We used to be sitting at it eight hours a day in two sessions—four hours in the morning and four in the afternoon—for all that month. That's the most painful month's work I ever did, on land or sea.

One of my sons had been in America for twelve years. He came home about this time, himself and his wife and two children. He was on the same ship as Archbishop Mannix when he was taken out of the ship. He only stayed with me half a year when he started across the water again and left me. There was no fishing or anything when they came, but they spent the pound or two that they had brought with them, and what he said was that, if things went on as they were going much longer, he'd have spent every penny he brought with him, or that might be coming to him, and that he'd have nothing left at home or abroad. And I think he was right! My brother, the old pensioner, left me when they came home. He was received into a house in Dunquin, and is still there, in his eightieth year.

I have another young son with me, and he has to stay around the house, for there is little good in me except in my tongue. We have neither cow nor horse, sheep nor lamb, canoe nor boat. We have a handful of potatoes and

a fire. I have been twenty-seven years hard at work on this language, and it is seventeen years since the Norseman, Marstrander, came my way. Something or other comes to me now and again, one thing after another, that keeps me from starvation. I hear many an idle fellow saying that there's no use in our native tongue; but that hasn't been my experience. Only for it I should have been begging my bread!

25. *The End*

WELL, I've slipped along thus far to the end of my story. I have set down nothing but the truth; I had no need of invention, for I had plenty of time, and have still a good deal in my head. It's amazing what a lot there is in an old man's head when somebody else starts him talking and puts questions to him. All the same, what I've written down are the things that meant most to me. I considered the whole course of my life, and the things that had meant most to me were the first to come back to memory.

I have brought other people besides myself into my story, for, if I hadn't, it would have been neither interesting nor complete. I never disliked any of them, and I've spent my life in their company till to-day without any trouble between us. I don't know what colour the inside walls of the court in Dingle are, old though I am.

We are poor, simple people, living from hand to mouth. I fancy we should have been no better off if we had been misers. We were apt and willing to live, without repining, the life the Blessed Master made for us, often and again ploughing the sea with only our hope in God to bring us through. We had characters of our own, each different from the other, and all different from the landsmen; and we had our own little failings, too. I have made no secret of our good traits or of our little failings either, but I haven't told all the hardships and the agonies that befell us from time to time when our only resource was to go right on.

This is a crag in the midst of the great sea, and again and again the blown surf drives right over it before the violence of the wind, so that you daren't put your head out any more than a rabbit that crouches in his burrow in

Inishvickillaun when the rain and the salt spume are flying. Often would we put to sea at the dawn of day when the weather was decent enough, and by the day's end our people on land would be keening us, so much had the weather changed for the worse. It was our business to be out in the night, and the misery of that sort of fishing is beyond telling. I count it the worst of all trades. Often and again the sea would drive over us so that we could see the land no more—a long, long night of cold like this, struggling against the sea, with often little to get, only praying from moment to moment for the help of God. It was rare, indeed, for us to get a full catch, and then often we would have to cut away the nets and let it all go with the sea. On other nights, after all the labour of the fishing, the boats would be fairly full, and we couldn't make the harbour or the land, but the swell would be rising to the green grass, the storm blowing out of the north-west, and the great waves breaking. We would have to flee then before the gale, some of us to Cuan Croumha, some to Ventry harbour, some to Dingle.

You may understand from this that we are not to be put in comparison with the people of the great cities or of the soft and level lands. If we deserved blame a little at times, it would be when a drop of drink was going round among us. The drink went to our heads the easier because we were always worn and weary, as I have described, like a tired horse, with never any rest or intermission.

It was a good life in those days. Shilling came on shilling's heels; food was plentiful, and things were cheap. Drink was cheap, too. It wasn't thirst for the drink that made us want to go where it was, but only the need to have a merry night instead of the misery that we knew only too well before. What the drop of drink did to us was to lift up the hearts in us, and we would spend a day and a night ever and again in company together when we got the

chance. That's all gone by now, and the high heart and the fun are passing from the world. Then we'd take the homeward way together easy and friendly after all our revelry, like the children of one mother, none doing hurt or harm to his fellow.

I have written minutely of much that we did, for it was my wish that somewhere there should be a memorial of it all, and I have done my best to set down the character of the people about me so that some record of us might live after us, for the like of us will never be again.

I am old now. Many a thing has happened to me in the running of my days until now. People have come into the world around me and have gone again. There are only five older than me alive in the Island. They have the pension. I have only two months to go till that date—a date I have no fancy for. In my eyes it is a warning that death is coming, though there are many people who would rather be old with the pension than young without it.

I can remember being at my mother's breast. She would carry me up on to the hill in a creel she had for bringing home the turf. When the creel was full of turf, she would come back with me under her arm. I remember being a boy; I remember being a young man; I remember the bloom of my vigour and my strength. I have known famine and plenty, fortune and ill-fortune, in my life-days till to-day. They are great teachers for one that marks them well.

One day there will be none left in the Blasket of all I have mentioned in this book—and none to remember them. I am thankful to God, who has given me the chance to preserve from forgetfulness those days that I have seen with my own eyes and have borne their burden, and that when I am gone men will know what life was like in my time and the neighbours that lived with me.

Since the first fire was kindled in this island none has

written of his life and his world. I am proud to set down my story and the story of my neighbours. This writing will tell how the Islanders lived in the old days. My mother used to go carrying turf when I was eighteen years of age. She did it that I might go to school, for rarely did we get a chance of schooling. I hope in God that she and my father will inherit the Blessed Kingdom; and that I and every reader of this book after me will meet them in the Island of Paradise.

THE GREAT BLASKET
1926