

10. *Time Passes*

THE DAUGHTER OF THE WOMAN OPPOSITE ·
SHROVETIDE · PROPOSALS AND MARRIAGES ·
DRIFTWOOD · THE DANCING-MASTER · THE MERRY
GENTLEMAN · THE POET DUNLEVY

ONE Sunday a boat came in from Dunquin with a lady in it. Nobody recognized her till she was in their very midst. Who should it be but the daughter of the woman over the way. They kept on shaking hands with her till you would have thought her arm would have been wrung from her shoulder. She wore a picture hat, with a rakish feather or so sticking up from it. A yellow chain of glittering gold lay on her blouse. She carried a sunshade, and there was a twang in her speech, no matter which brogue she was talking—Irish or English. A box or two of all sorts came with her, and, best of all, she had a purse of gold from the States, for she was a master hand at putting it together.

It was impossible to know the good mare's foal, of course, for, though she was dressed up to the nines, there wasn't much more than the skeleton inside. She was never much of a figure, and, after she had spent five years in the land of sweat, she was uglier than ever.

A crowd followed her to their shanty. She had a bottle of whisky with her, and, as it was mostly the old women that went with her, it wasn't long till they were singing the old songs of Munster and praising the girl who had come back with something for them. They spent the day without a bite of food, for there was a taste of the drink for every singer for every song she sang.

It went on like this till Shrove came, and not much of it was gone before the Yank's money was being hawked about. As the old woman had been matching her with me



THE LOWER VILLAGE, THE WHITE STRAND,
AND THE ROCKS OF THE ROAD



HOUSES OF THE LOWER VILLAGE WITH BEGINISH BEYOND

when we were little ones, I took it into my head that maybe she'd start the same talk again, and no wonder as things were now. It would have been strange if it hadn't been so, for she was a girl with gold, and girls of that kind were few and far between in those days.

Before long, the grey woman, her mother, began to hint to my mother about all the gold Mary had and how she wanted to settle out on the mainland in some piece of land. 'Her father and I would rather she stayed near us,' says she. 'And if you like the idea, nobody's keeping her from you,' says she again.

'Yerra, this is how things are,' my mother said to her. 'Our boy's young yet, and I fancy it's not much use talking about anything of that kind to him. I don't think that he's very anxious to stay here, for maybe only himself and his sister would be left here of all the clutch, and, if it hadn't been to please us, I fancy he'd have gone before this.'

'Pon my soul, then,' says she, 'he's wrong there. Maybe he'd be in America a long time before he met a girl as good as she is.'

Early in Shrovetide Bald Tom went off to the mainland and found out a man and a bit of land that wasn't much good—the grass of a cow or two in a poor shelterless place that wouldn't encourage anybody. He gave very little fortune for it, for he was asked only for a little.

When he had everything ship-shape, Tom turned home and sent an invitation to the wedding to every house in the village. The grey woman didn't forget the house across the way, and I went to the wedding, like the rest. There was high feasting at every wedding in those days, all sorts of food and 'kitchen' and a swarm of people to eat it. There were eight barrels of porter there, and there wasn't a drop left in the bottom of one of them by morning.

When it was all over, everybody started for home. When we reached the cliff above the harbour at Dunquin, the

gulls themselves couldn't have left it: the swell was going up over the green grass in every creek and cranny, and we had to stay on the mainland that day and the next day and the day after that again. We spent twenty-one days altogether on land, if you please, and the day we went in wasn't too good. I fancy none of them blessed the wedding, they were so sore about it. She lived there for some time, and had four children before she died.

When we got home the Island was full of wreckage. The White Strand was covered with beams of red and white deal, white planks, a fragment of a wrecked ship, a chair, a stool, apples, and all sorts. The boat in which my father worked got twelve baulks. Some of the others had more, some less. The boat I was coming from the mainland in came across a fine baulk in the middle of the Sound. We had to use the sail rope to tow it, for we had no other rope in the boat. After landing it, we set our faces to the sea again. We came unexpectedly on two baulks next door to one another. One of them was eighty feet long, and thick to match. People said that it was the finest baulk that had ever come ashore within living memory. We had no food except a miserable potato or so in Dunquin that morning, until the dark of night came, and by that time we had saved eight baulks. But that was an unprofitable toil: thirty shillings was all we got for the big fellow—in the Great War that baulk would have fetched twenty pounds!

A dancing-master came on a visit to us for a time, and he set up a dancing school for a month. Four shillings apiece was his fee. The place he settled in was the old monastery of the Soupers, that half of it in which the school used to be in the old days. It had a plank floor which made a great racket. The noise was the best part of the proceedings—at first, anyhow. Not many put their names down the first day, for few were in a position to pay. Before long, however, they were coming to the school in

ones and twos. The teacher was a very good man, and had no fancy for turning out blunderers at a wedding feast. He had pocketed my four shillings, and I certainly got its value pretty soon as far as dancing goes, for the house where he lodged was near ours, and he used to give me a lesson whenever I ran across him. Before long I was a marvellous dancer—but, as always happens even to-day, somebody came to stop him from teaching anyone else, and the dancing school on the Island was put down.

A gentleman came on a visit to the Island soon after the break-up of the dancing school and he started all sorts of merry-making. Barret was his name. He had food and drink of every kind, cold, hot, and boiled. He brought eight bottles of whisky with him, and a variety of other drinks as well. It was a question who should sing him the first song, for they were shy till they saw that he had a good bottle of whisky to give to the first singer. They needed no pressure then, even those who hadn't sung a song for seven years or couldn't sing at all! It was the same story with the dancing; and the lilters got their glass, too!

The old women and the aged men danced also. I was half-topsy most of the time, for the old women and the young girls would keep leading me out, as I was a fine dancer in those days. My father could dance, and he had been teaching me before the dancing-master came. The old women in particular took me out on the floor with them, and so I came home, half-seas over, every night all that week. If any of them had any rest, I hadn't, for I was dancing and singing and lilting turn and turn about: I was a clever fellow in those days!

Two boats from Iveragh were fishing lobsters that year. They were living in a shanty in Beginish with an Englishman in their company. Though the poor fellows used to be tired after the day's work they would find their way to the schoolhouse every night, and one of them was the best

dancer that ever stood on a floor. He got plenty of glasses. They had a lilter, too, and you'd prefer him to any instrument of music.

The drink didn't last the whole week, as he had thought it would. He sent out a boat's crew to the nearest place, and fetched as much again. He must have remembered that week as long as he lived, and so did everybody else who had a share in the sport.

He sent a lot of presents to the Blasket after going home, and a pound of tobacco to the poet Dunlevy. The poet didn't let him go unthanked, for he wrote a poem in praise of him afterwards.

The next Shrovetide after this gentleman, Barret, had left the Island, a marriage proposal came to the King from Dunquin. He hadn't the style of *King* at that time, but, all the same, they were pretty well off. Probably he had plenty of other proposals, for he was a fine man in those days.

There was high feasting at the marriage, you may believe, for there were plenty there to make away with both food and drink. When they were going home, a boat turned bottom upwards in the Blasket creek. Two of the crew were underneath her. When they got them free, they were at their last gasp. Nursing mothers were milking their breasts and giving them the milk in a spoon. But after about an hour they took a turn for the better.

There were four other marriages in Dunquin the night of the wedding in the King's house, and the people of the parish came near to destroying one another. Little wonder, when you consider how much drink there was and all the scandal which had been talked for years before which now had a chance of venting itself. After the night's medley six of them had to be sent to hospital, and they didn't get off too lightly. One man had been hit with a bottle and another with a stone. One of them got a wipé with the tongs,

like Owen Roe O'Sullivan when the woman hit him. Owen died, but this one pulled through.

When I was a young man the poet Dunlevy was composing his songs in the Island. The Island is a little place, you know, and we were always running up against one another every day in the year, in the houses or on the hill or at sea.

One day I wanted to go and cut some turf, for it was a very fine day, and we hadn't much of the old turf left to hand at that time. I went off through the door with a first-rate turf spade all ready and sharp. And though, as far as looks went, I was no match for the Fenians of old, nobody could say a word against me for what I was—I was quick and deft, and knew what was what.

Off I started up the hill, and my breath never came short, my foot had no cramp, my hand didn't shake, there was no pain in my heart till I came to a place where, thought I, there was good turf, and enough of it round me to do my business. I was wild to get to work and do my job. As I had no young folk in the house to bring me my dinner, only the two old people, I took a good hunk of bread with me in the morning—bread of coarse meal, very hard and yellow, only whitened outside with flour, like whitewash on a house wall; a pint bottle of milk from the cow, and a lump of butter about the size of a small potato. And, though no one has a word to say in favour of that sort of food nowadays, I was pleased enough with it then, for I had a mill in my mouth to grind it.

But I had little chance to turn my keenness for work to profit that day. I hadn't long begun on the job, working hard, when the poet Dunlevy came up with a spade under his oxter, to cut a bit of turf for himself; and there were a lot of others with him who had come out to the bog as he had, for it was a lovely day, and at that time there was very little of last year's turf that hadn't been burnt.

I fancy that no poet has ever been much good at carrying through any job that had any work in it except only poetry, and that was the way with Shane, too. I can produce some sort of evidence for this statement, for, whenever I take it in hand to compose quatrains (and I often do) I shouldn't be much use in a gang of workers or in the field so long as I was engaged upon them.

'Well,' says the poet, throwing himself down on a tussock, 'isn't it a pity for you to be cutting turf on such a hot day. Sit down a bit, the day is long and it'll be cool in the afternoon.'

I didn't care much for what he had to say, but I was rather shy of refusing to sit down with him. Besides, I knew that if the poet had anything against me, he would make a satire on me that would be very unpleasant, especially as I was just about coming out in the world. So I sat down beside him.

'Now,' says the poet, 'perhaps you haven't got the first poem ever I made. "The Black-faced Sheep", that was my first, and I had good reason for making it as far as provocation goes.'

Would you believe it—he started to recite every word of it, lying there stretched out on the flat of his back! There was a hummock of soft heather under him, and the scorching heat of the sun was flaming down from the cloudless, deep blue sky over our head, toasting the side of the poet that was uppermost.

I praised the poem to the skies, though it was vexing me sorely from another point of view—keeping me back from the profitable work that I had promised myself that morning should be done. The poet had put a stop to that with his babbling.

'The poem will be lost,' says he, 'if somebody doesn't pick it up. Have you anything in your pocket that you could write it down with?'

If a man isn't in luck's way in the morning and God's favour with him, the poor wretch can't hope to do much. The hapless Tom didn't cut as much turf as would make two loads for an old ass that day that he planned to do so much. And that was one of the first days that I felt the world going against me, for the fact is, for one day that went well with me, five would go wrong for me from that day out.

It wasn't to oblige the poet that I fished out my pencil and some paper I had in my pocket, but for fear he would turn the rough side of his tongue to me. I set about scribbling down the words as they came out of his mouth. It wasn't in the usual spelling that I wrote them, for I hadn't enough practice in it in those days.

I wasn't too happy then; and no wonder: a man who had a sensible bit of work on hand in the morning, and now it was laid aside for a pointless job! When once he'd opened his mouth, the poet had a jut on his jaw to send his voice out. I scribbled away at the words as best I could after a fashion that kept the poem more or less in my memory, and, besides, if a word should drop out here and there, the guide wasn't far from me, ready and willing to waste a bit of his life explaining it to me, even if the plough-team were waiting for him in the furrow.

When the pair of us had done with one another, the sun was sinking over the hill, and it was as much as Tom could do to keep his wits together by that time. When the poet had left me, the very first thing I did was to go to the tussock at the side of which my dinner was, and the dinner was utterly ruined: a horse couldn't have champed the hunk of yellow bread, and my milk had turned to stone in the bottle!

II. *My Manhood*

THE BIG CATCH OF FISH · DEATH OF THE OLD
WOMAN OVER THE WAY · THE SIX GIRLS

SINCE it had come about that the poet had put me back that day I meant to do so much, so that I hadn't cut even a load of turf, I fixed on another day for doing it. I didn't take any dinner with me this day, for my mother told me that she would send a little girl to me with a bit of hot food.

So it was. I ran up the hill and caught up with two others who were in the same hurry as I was. On our way to the mountain one of them glanced out to sea, and what should he see but a school of fish down below us near in to the rock.

'The devil!' says he. 'Look at all the fish shoaling!' Off with us homewards as fast as we could. A boat was launched and the nets were thrown into her: and we never stopped till we had made the spot where the shoal was. It was still on the surface, just as it had been. We made a cast of the net and rowed round the shoal. We took as much as our boat would carry, and there was enough for another boat still in the net.

We had to land a man on the rock to fetch another boat from the harbour to bring the catch home. They pitched on me to go home and get the crew of the other boat, and—though I say it myself—it wasn't easy to find my match to get over the crest of the hill before me. When I reached home, there weren't many men to be got, for they were all at their own jobs.

There was only one boat with a seine net in the Blasket that year. All the rest were little boats. It was one of those that I had to get ready, and two old men were the crew that came in it with me. Well, we managed it all right, for it

was a very fine day. When we reached the seine boat, we filled up the little boat with all she could take; but we were as badly off as before, for the net wasn't emptied yet. There was another boatful of fish still in it. We were in a dilemma, for there weren't enough men to make up the crew of another boat.

The shift we hit on was to send the little boat home with its load to land the fish and come back again. So it was done. She was given four oars and a man to steer her. And it wasn't long till she was back again. The net was heaped into her, and she was full to the chin. Off went the two boats together, both of them down to the gunwale. The fish was May mackerel, every one of them as long as your arm. The old men said that they had never seen a finer catch of fish in a single seine net.

The next thing was to cure the fish; a hard job it was washing it and salting it, for there was no market for fresh fish at that time. There were eight thousand fish in the great heap, for it was large-sized fish. We were pretty well worn out after the day's fishing, and we had a good night's sleep, never fear.

Early in the morning there was a knock at our door. My mother got a surprise, for she it was who opened the door. Who should be there but the old woman's son, collecting men to fetch the priest to his mother, who had been very bad since the middle of the night. My mother gave me a call—I was fast asleep at the moment. I sprang up. I had no wish to fail to do my share of the duty of helping to bring the priest to her. I dressed myself, and my mother got ready a saucepan of warm milk while I was dressing. I bolted it and a hunk of bread, and out of the door I went. I managed to be one of the first who got to the harbour, but they were coming up, man after man, till we were all collected. It was a fine, soft morning, only rather dark. Off we went and came to Dunquin. And the

sick woman's son went to Ballyferriter parish to get the priest, with another lad in his company.

The day was passing, and there was not a sign of man or dog with news, but at last, as the day drew to its end, the priest came, but he had nothing to tell us of the other two, for they had made their call on him early in the day. We launched the boat, took the priest aboard, and made our best speed to sea, home to the Blasket. We weren't far out from the land when a heavy mist descended, so that you couldn't see to put your finger in your eye, but we kept on rowing for a good bit, though we caught no glimpse of land or any house. We were at work so long that we grew weary, and we realized that we were lost and that it was useless to keep on working, so we stopped for some time. Then the priest asked us if we had given up hope. We answered that we had, for we should have reached land long ago if we hadn't gone astray. The priest started on his breviary, and at that very moment one of the men looked out and saw a rock or crag, and off we started towards it, but, alas! we were three miles out of our way.

Well, it began to lift a bit and we managed to make the landing-place, and it was evening by this time. The priest didn't stay long, but came back to us immediately, and off we started again. It was late evening by the time we got out to the mainland again. One of our men looked, and what should he see but the two good-for-nothings down by the shore with blood streaming from them, for they had been rising and falling with the drink they had taken. I say nothing of one of them. But what of the man, the old woman's son, whose mother was at death's door? We returned home, and that day was no holiday for us, any more than was the day on which we had made the great catch of fish.

So does a man's life wear away, and a great deal of it to little profit. I had spent my week without getting any turf,

as I had proposed at its beginning, though I had caught plenty of fish.

A day or two after that the grey woman died. And that meant more work: to go to the town and bring home what was needed for the wake. It is the custom for those who fetch the priest to go for the things for the wake. And so you may be sure I had a hand in all that was going on, for the son came to my threshold—and, of course, it wasn't a refusal I gave him. Off we went in the great seine boat, eight of us with four oars, two men apiece to three of the oars, one on the other oar and a man at the rudder. We got to Dunquin. He arranged for a horse, and they started off. There were three men in the cart, two from the Island, and the driver; and a woman with them. It is an ancient custom for a woman to go with those who get the things for a wake.

I stayed behind in Dunquin. Although I said nothing, I fancied the cart wouldn't be back very quickly. All the same it was. They had good stuff for the old hag's wake with them. You could get a pint of porter there, too, and a glass of whisky. She was taken ashore on a magnificent day, only her family burial place was a good way off, in Ventry churchyard. There was a tavern in that parish, and it was a regular custom for those who followed the funeral to have a drinking bout there. Most of us went in there that day, too. Anybody who didn't go in made his way home, and it was pretty late in the day before we got there. The rest stayed in Ventry parish till the next day, and came home about noon. That was the last end of the grey woman opposite, and I can tell you that, if it wasn't my luck to be rich the day she left the world, it wasn't for want of her good wishes. I hadn't a thing to say against her.

Well, so that was done with. But the dead don't feed the living, and every one of us began to think of what most needed doing. Since it was the turf-cutting season, we were

all making for the hill, every man starting out as soon as his preparations were made. My own spade was in the bog every day, and nothing mattered, I thought, so long as I could have the turf cut before the dry season set in. The thought gave me no rest till I had my hand on the haft of the spade. I was working away splendidly for the most part of the day, and I had a good bit of work done when all the young girls of the Island came upon me, going out to drive the cows home. They set upon me, one of them pulling my ear, another snatching the spade out of my hands, two others looking for a chance to tip me over on the flat of my back in the bog to have some fun out of me. If one didn't think of a trick another had it in a second.

I knew perfectly well that I'd cut my last sod of turf that day when I saw the mop head of the first of them coming between me and the daylight. For the gang of girls we had in the Island in those days were next door to being half wild. And, though I was pretty tired before they came, sure it was they that finished me altogether. And no wonder—six girls, just about beginning to ripen, running over with high spirits, whatever sort of food and drink they had. It's easy baking when you have meal to hand, and so it was with them: stout, strong hoydens, as healthy as the fish in the sea; it made no odds to them what sort of food they had on the table, and they didn't care.

The worst they could do to me didn't vex or worry me, be sure of that. It would have been an odd thing, indeed, if it had, for it was the wild spirit of youth that was driving them, and sure I had a good right to have a spark of the same fire touching me up, too, for there was many a young man of my own kind who'd rather have them playing their games with him than all the turf on the hills.

One day soon after this—that is to say, the day I meant to finish with the turf till the next year (if I lived)—what should come my way but the very same gang of girls. They

used to be driving the cows home and playing all sorts of mad tricks as they did so. Of course, they spied me out. They were on me at once, throwing things at me, and up to every mischief. Since I was putting the last hand to the turf-cutting, I promised myself that I would spend the rest of the evening having fun with them. There wasn't one of the six, if I had given her the wink, that wouldn't have gone with me ready and willing for the knot there's no untying; but, whoever I had my eye on in those days, it wasn't any one of those six. Never mind—it would do me no great harm to have a bit of fun with them, and I had it all right. If I felt any weariness, it left me then, for those six went for one another again and again, and no sooner were they up than they'd be down again, one overturning the other, and the same with me, too. It's long I remembered that afternoon; I remember it still. Says the poet: 'Bothering with women never did a man any good!' and that's just how it was with me, for they sent me astray from my work from that time out.

Well, as I said about these girls, that it looked as though I wasn't going to get on with my job for some time to come because of them, I was right: for, when I saw them heaped hugger-mugger on top of one another that afternoon, it came into my head that the best thing I could do was to get one of the kind for a wife for myself—and it was high time, too!

12. *The Day of the Seal Hunt*

THE TURF-SHELTER · THE DOG IN THE HOLE · THE
SEAL CAVE · TWO ON A ROPE · THE MAN WHO
COULDN'T SWIM · EIGHT SEALS KILLED · THE
SWELL IN THE CAVE · MY UNCLE NEARLY
DROWNED

I HAD the turf cut now, and was fairly satisfied, only there was a great deal of work to be done on it as soon as it dried: and the beginning of the dry season was making itself felt already. My plan was to spend another day in fixing up a good shelter, so that all I should have to do would be to throw the turf in when it was dry, for it would hold me up if I left it till later.

The day I decided on for this was a wild, gusty, dry day, just right for the job I had in hand, and off I went up the hill. When I got there, I stripped to the shirt, for the place where I was going to work was well sheltered.

I set to work right in the very midst of an old stone structure that had never been shifted for forty or sixty years before, and began to set it to rights, designing a new shelter. I had a pup with me, and I noticed nothing till he had slipped between my legs and ran back under an overhanging flagstone that projected far out, with a hollow space beneath it. My pup went so far into the hole under the stone that I couldn't see a trace of him.

Well, I'd lost my fine dog—and a fine dog he was, too. He had a reputable name, for we had gone as far back as the Fenians of old to fetch it for him. Oscar was what we called him. The pup had ruined my day's work for me and put an end at once to all my energy and determination. I started to bend down and peer under the hollow of the stone, and I managed to see about an inch of the tip of his

tail. So I began to call him out, but that wasn't much good, and I realized that he was stuck there. I was in a queer fix then. My new shelter wasn't made yet; my pup was lost, and I was terrified of what my father would say, for he it was who had brought the pup from Dingle, carrying him for eight miles in a basket on his back. I had a big fishing hook in my pocket and a good bit of twine, so I tied it to the handle of the turf-spade and thrust it back into the hole as far as I could. The hook stuck into the top of the pup's behind. I dragged him towards me, and out he came easily enough, with a lump of a rabbit in his jaws; the rabbit was dead, and the pup had eaten one of his front paws, and, when I pulled it out of his mouth, he gave one leap back into the hole again. When I looked for him again, I couldn't see a sign of him. I was beside myself. I failed to get him out of the hole again, and late in the evening I had to go home in a very bad humour.

I got home in a pretty bad temper and hung up the rabbit. My meal was ready, of course, and I went up to the table.

'I expect,' said my mother, 'that it was the pup that caught the rabbit for you.'

'It was,' said I, 'and he's left himself for a forfeit.'

'How did he do that?' says she. 'Did he go over the cliff?'

I told her the whole story from beginning to end—how I fetched him out with the hook, and he dived into the hole again at once. 'And he'll stay there for good and all,' I told her.

'Don't mind if he does,' says she.

My father never breathed a word while this talk was going on, and I thought that he was saving it up for me, and that I should hear what he had to say soon enough: for I fancied that he would think that it was by my own carelessness I had lost the pup.

But often things turn out differently from what we expect. And so it was with me and my father, for when he did speak, there was good sense in what he had to say.

'I believe,' said he, 'that Oscar would never have gone back into the hole if he hadn't scented another rabbit there —possibly two, or even three of them.'

There's nothing children like to hear more than a friendly word from a good father and mother, and that was my case then, for, though I'd been upset enough when I came down from the hill, the worst thing for me had been what I expected to hear from them. As it was, they dispersed all my fear; and things remained like that until the morrow.

If ever I slept late, it wasn't that next morning, as my head was full of thoughts of the pup. So I was up at break of day. I took a bite or two and drank a cup or so of milk. My mother heard me, and asked where I was off to so early: 'Surely you have the whole long day before you, and,' says she, 'do you see your father around?'

'No,' said I.

'He left his bed a while back, and I fancy he went up the hill.'

I had no difficulty in believing this, and, when I was ready, off I went after him. And once I'd started I never stopped until I had reached the spot where I had been at work. The first thing I saw coming towards me was Oscar. He ran up to me pretty soon, and you'd have thought that he hadn't seen me for half a year when he caught sight of me. My father was standing on the flag-stone. He'd just got Oscar out, with five huge rabbits, pulled out of the hole along with the pup. My father was cleverer than I was, for he'd made a channel at the end of the stone, in the place where he guessed the end of the hole would be, and when he thrust his hand in, he found a rabbit, and then two, till he had five of the finest rabbits

that were ever taken out of a single hole. He flung them across his shoulder and went off home. I finished my new turf shelter.

I had planned to have a rest when I had the turf cut and the shelter ready for throwing it in when it was dry; but I didn't get it, my lad! My father had always been a first-rate man in his youth and afterwards, and it was a constant saying of his that nobody ever got anything properly done who lay abed on the flat of his back when the sun was shining in the sky, and that it was bad for the health, too.

Well, whatever he was in the habit of saying, I had arranged with myself to have an extra bit of bed this morning before starting on another job. But before long I heard somebody talking loud. A man spoke by the hearth and asked was Tom awake yet. My mother said no.

'Why do you ask?' says she.

'There's a boat going after seals,' says he.

The speaker was an uncle of mine on my mother's side. At first I thought it was my father speaking, but no—he had gone back to the strand.

I leapt up and, when I'd had a bite, crammed some food into my pocket and set out for the boat. All the rest were ready before me, with everything necessary to get the best of the seals: ropes to drag them out of the cave when they should be dead, and a big, stout club with a thick end to it—we should want that right enough to lay them low. Off we went out of the creek.

Another boat had left early in the morning, but they had taken the direction of the Lesser Blaskets. They had fetched up at Inishvickillaun—a famous place for seals in the caves—for there are a lot of caves in that island.

You need calm weather and a good spring tide. Well, we put out the four oars, 'tough, sweet-sounding, enduring, white, broad bladed', as was the way with the boats of the Fenians of old so often, and stayed not from our headlong

course till we reached the mouth of the cave we had fixed on.

The cave was in the western end of the Great Island. It was a very dangerous place, for there was always a strong swell round it, and it's a long swim into it, and you have to swim sidelong, for the cleft in the rock has only just room for a seal. When the boat stopped in the mouth of the cave there was a strong suck of swell running. Often and again the mouth of the hole would fill up completely, so that you'd despair of ever seeing again anybody who happened to be inside, and that left those of us who were in the boat little to say. The only young men there were myself and another lad, for the likes of us were not experienced enough for the job. It needs grown men, well on in years.

The captain of the boat spoke and said: 'Well, what did we come here for? Isn't anybody ready to have a go at the hole?'

It was my uncle who gave him his answer: 'I'll go in,' said he, 'if another man will come with me.'

Another man in the boat answered him: 'I'll go in with you,' says he.

He was a man who stood in need of a bit of seal meat, for he spent most of his life on short commons. He had a big family, and none of them old enough to give him any help.

The two made their preparations. There was a bridge of rock across the mouth of the cave, with the water above and beneath it. Two men had to stand on the bridge to help the other two in. One of the two was a good swimmer, but not my uncle. The swimmer went in first, carrying the end of the rope in his mouth, the slaughtering stick under his oxter, a candle and matches in his cap and the cap on his head. It was useless to go into the cave without a light, for it penetrated too far under the ground. My uncle followed him, another rope tied round him, and his hand

gripping the swimmer's rope, one end of which was tied up somewhere inside, while its other was fastened to the bridge outside so as to be always ready.

The other youngster and I stayed on the bridge to drag out the seals from the two inside. They kindled a light, and when they reached the end of the cave, there was a beach full of seals there—big and little, male and female. *Bainir-seach* is the name of the female seal, and the male is called the bull. There are some of them that it's absolutely impossible to kill.

The two inside made themselves ready for the great enterprise before them. Each of them had a club, and they aimed a blow at every one of the seals. They had a lighted candle on a boulder. Both of them had a flannel shirt on, dripping, of course, from the salt water it had come through. When they had finished the slaughter and all the seals there were killed, they had more trouble in front of them. Many of the seals were very heavy, and the cave was a most awkward place: there were great boulders between them and the water, and the passage out was a very long one. But there's no limit to the strength a man has when he's in a tight place, and those two, handling the dead bodies of the seals there on the beach underground, worked like horses. They dragged every one of eight seals down to the water, and by the time they had done, the swell burst into the cave, and the two of us who were on the bridge had to grip the rock wall high up.

When that stress was past, there came a calm, and one of the men inside shouted to us to drag the rope out. We thought that one of themselves was on the rope, but it wasn't so. Four huge seals were tied to it. We had to pass the end of the rope to the boat, and, when the seals had been lifted in, to send it into the cave again. This rope was fastened to the rope that remained stretched into the cave, and the man who was with me on the bridge shouted out

loud to them to draw it in again, and they did so in double quick time. Before long those inside called to us to drag it back again. The swell was raging mad by this. When we drew in the rope, there were four other seals tied to it, though we expected that it would be one of the men themselves. We had to do as we had done before and send the rope in again. Every now and then we were forced to leave the bridge from the great seas that swept over it, filling up the mouth of the cave too.

It was the swimmer who took to the rope first to make his way out, leaving it to the other man to use the fixed rope. It took the swimmer in the passage a long time to reach the bridge, there was so heavy a swell. He got there in the end, with his flannel shirt torn to tatters. My uncle—who, as I said before, couldn't swim a stroke—started on the last rope. The rise and fall and suck of the swell made it hard for us to pull him to the bridge. In the middle of it all, the rope broke, and the wave swept him back with it into the cave again. My heart was in my mouth when I saw him going down. I thought he was lost. I plunged down from the bridge into the submerged cave. My foot struck the end of the broken rope under water. By God's grace I brought off my good uncle safe and sound, but we had a desperate struggle for it. I was a good swimmer in those days.

Our big boat was loaded down to the gunwale with four cow seals, two bulls, and two two-year-olds—one for each of the crew. Every one of the men had a barrelful of seal meat, and we reckoned in those days that every barrel of seal meat was worth a barrel of pork. The skins fetched eight pounds.

It's odd the way the world changes. Nobody would put a bit of seal meat in his mouth to-day. They melt it down for light, for it is cram-full of oil. Moreover, if you made a present of the skin to a gentleman, he'd hardly deign to

accept it from you. It's long since anybody tried to do anything with one of them but throw it to the dogs. Yet in those days they were a great resource for the people, both the skin and the meat, and you could get a pack of meal for one of them. And anywhere you liked to take a lump of seal's flesh you could get the same weight of pork for it, if there were any in the house. People don't know what is best for them to eat, for the men that ate that kind of food were twice as good as the men of to-day. The poor people of the countryside were accustomed to say that they fancied they would live as long as the eagle if they but had the food of the Dingle people. But the fact is that the eaters of good meat are in the grave this long time, while those who lived on starvation diet are still alive and kicking.

13. *A Wife proposed for Me*

THE FAMILY IN THE INISH · THE DAY WITH THE
PIGS IN DINGLE · 'IT'S A DAY OF OUR LIFE' ·
SONGS AND REVELRY · THE BIG MAN · COMING
HOME · GOING TO INISHVICKILLAUN HUNTING
RABBITS

THE year 1878 (or about that) was a fine year for potatoes and fish and turf, and it was no hard task for poor folk to pass the time on a bit when things went well with them like that. Usually in a year of this kind there was much talk of marriages. Round Christmas time this year there was a fat sheep hanging up in every house in the Island and rabbits were plentiful, and meat from the town.

I fancy there was no village in the countryside in which meat was so common as it was in the Island at that time. There'd be a bottle of whisky or so, too, either given or bought. I remember the time when there was only one pot-oven in the Island, and it never left the fire for the seven days of the week.

In those days one of the Dalys lived in Inishvickillaun as a herd, and he had a great time of it in the island—that is, when his children were grown up. There was a great demand for the kind of fish known as lobsters, and the herd's children were grown men at the time and had a boat of their own. In those days I myself spent night after night there, for we used to be fishing in the far island all the time, and if we hadn't any fish to take home, we used to run the boat ashore; for that was what the old couple in the house had told us to do.

The people used to say that they were the best couple that had ever stood on the rock. They had five sons and five daughters, the finest family of children, take them for

all in all, that any couple had had for many a long day. I was the only young man in the boat, and, that being so, the young folk and I had a deal to say to one another, and, before long, one of the daughters and I were making up to one another. She was a very fine girl, and the best singer going in her day. We'd made many a call there that season, and had a very good time. The year remained fine for us up to Christmas.

The man on the rock had two splendid pigs, and, as they had always been so good to us, we promised them that we would go to fetch the pigs next week. One fine day in that week my uncle ran in one morning—the uncle for whom I had run into such danger in the seal cave the day the rope broke.

‘What’s your hurry to-day?’ said I.

‘Hurry enough, my lad! We shall have a fine day to-day, and we’ll go to get the pigs, and maybe if anybody’s slow to go there, it won’t be you!’

‘Yerra, why so?’ says my mother.

‘Ye, God help you, if that’s the way with you!’ says he. ‘Aren’t all the young women on the rock running wild after him—and they’re a handsome lot there! You ought to be wanting the help of one of them hard enough by rights.’

‘Be up in two leaps,’ said he to me then.

We went to the rock. When we were starting out from the house with the pigs to the harbour, the old woman of the house handed her husband a bottle of whisky to serve round to us. No woman in her day had a better name for kindness than she had, though I should be sorry to say a word more in praise of her than of her husband, so far as my acquaintance with them went.

We never gave the pigs rest till we’d placed them in the boat—two fine pigs, a year old. The woman herself and one of her daughters—the girl my uncle Diarmid was

always matching with me—went with us. Out we put to sea. Up went the sails. We had a fair wind with us all the way to the creek in the Great Blasket. We landed them there that day so that they might go out with the Island pigs on the morrow.

Next day, when we had eaten, everybody who had a pig or two pigs was making ready to start for the land. I had a fine pig of my own, and my uncle Diarmid had one nearly as good. They were both of them put into the boat, with another belonging to one of the villagers, the two pigs from the Inish, the woman from the Inish, and her daughter. It was a big boat, and the number I have reckoned up filled it pretty well. They were set on shore in Dunquin, and the boat went home again. There were a boat or two, besides, out with pigs, and they went home, too. Off we started along the road, walking, with our pigs. About half-way Diarmid's pig struck; the road was hurting her; she was a very heavy animal, with poor feet. But Diarmid had a friend by him this time.

'Stay by the pig,' says he to me, 'and my soul from the devil but I'll fetch something quickly that'll lift her off the soil of Ireland.'

I had to do what he asked me, though my own pig could have walked to Tralee. The women from the Inish and I and the pigs waited together until Diarmid came back with a good horse and a creel on the cart. The driver was an uncle of Diarmid's, and of my mother, too.

We threw Diarmid's pig in, and that was the stiffest job of work I'd ever known in my life up to then—the driver and my uncle joined hands under the forepart of her, while I had to lift her rear, and the weight would have been altogether too much for me if the Inish woman hadn't lent me a hand. We looked over the other pigs then to see which of them showed most signs of being tired, and we lifted mine and one of the Inish pigs into the cart.

There wasn't room for the fourth one, and we started off. When we found that it held us up too much to wait for the walking pig, the driver and my uncle went off with the others, and were to come back again to pick up the fourth. We continued to walk along, and we had got as far as the corner of the pier in Dingle before they came to us. It wasn't worth while to lift him into the cart then, so we drove him along on his feet. At the corner of the quay Diarmid gave him a slash with a switch he had in his hand. That hurt him, so he swerved, and off he went, helter-skelter, down the quay. The driver got in front of him, but he ran between his legs and carried him off and flung him on the flat of his back out in the sea, and went with him himself.

Diarmid got a hold of the driver, who was only just in the water, and pulled him up, very sorry for himself. The pig faced out to sea.

'Holy Mary! the poor woman's pig is drowned,' says Diarmid to me. 'And isn't it a shame, and she such a decent woman!'

I could see that he was getting at me to save the pig, though he didn't like to tell me straight out to go swimming after it. There wasn't a boat or an oar in the harbour that wasn't in use, and I should have been sorry to see the pig go down. I snatched the switch from my uncle's hand and ran down the quay. I threw off my clothes and plunged in from the end of the quay. Diarmid spoke from above:

'Whatever you do, don't get tangled up with the pig or he'll drown you,' says he.

He needn't have told me that; but he was terribly afraid for me.

I came up with him pretty quickly and turned him in to land. I had to take the switch out of my mouth and make use of it before I could face him for the land. When he reached the slip, the driver got him by the ear: it was

easy enough to hold him now, however it had been when he floored him in his flight. I swam back to my clothes. The pigs were driven into a house. The driver had a drink or two, and then went off home.

'Come along, uncle,' said I, 'and we'll have a bite of food.'

We went into a house where there was food to be had, and both made a thoroughly good meal. Then we went to look up our friend to whose house every Islander who came to Dingle always made his way. He began bargaining for our pigs. He had already looked them over. Diarmid and he managed to come to terms quickly, and then they came to me. He gave five pounds ten for Diarmid's pig, and before long he had my pig, too, for six pounds. We'd only just finished our business when the two women from the Inish came in through the door. I turned to the host and told him to give them any drink they fancied, but the old woman said at once that they ought rather to stand me one, for they'd have lost their pig if it hadn't been for me.

'For Mary's sake,' said Diarmid, 'let him be. It won't do him much damage to stand us a drink when he's just got six pounds clear for his pig.'

'Who bought them?'

'The man of this house bought both his and mine,' says Diarmid.

What I did was to give Diarmid half a pint.

'Look here,' says I, 'take that into that room. I'll come to you later.'

'But where are you going?' says Diarmid.

'O, a small job; I won't be two minutes.'

'O, by Mary! we'll have no fun at all if that's the way.'

I had a good reason for going. I wanted some braces, for my breeches only depended on a bit of string from back to front. My old braces were all in tatters with the work

I'd had with the pigs since the first day we went to the Inish until now.

I left them there and went off to a clothes shop.

'Yerra, welcome from the West,' says the woman in the shop.

'May you live to be a hundred, good woman,' was my answer to that. It wasn't for her deserts that I called her 'good woman'—for I had reason often enough to know that there wasn't much to be said in her praise—but by way of good manners.

She was asking me questions about this and that, and glancing at me now and again all the time to see when I'd begin to ask for what had brought me. Every now and then I'd put a hand in my pocket, and her eyes danced in her head, one on the shop and the other on me.

'Show me a pair of braces,' I said at last. I'd have left her to suffer a while longer without showing her my money if it hadn't been that I was losing all the fun of Diarmid and his half-pint, for I knew he'd give me sport—that's why I'd left it in his hand when I came away. The shop-woman got out a pair of braces at once.

'These are a shilling a pair,' says she. 'They're imported braces.'

I took a pair of them in my hand, and saw at once they were no good.

'Give me the very best, if you have them,' said I. 'If those are imported goods, keep them till customers are imported to buy them from you.'

I scored calmly off the shopwoman, and another woman who was there burst out laughing. The shop-woman flushed up. Then she brought out the old kind. I chose a pair of them, handed her a shilling, and out I came.

When I came back to Sunshine Diarmid—and well he earned the name by this time—every soul in Goat Street

was collected round him. Some of them were sitting on stools, some standing up. The house was full, for all the Islanders who had come with pigs had turned up by now, and the drink was circulating fast. The old woman from the Inish was singing 'For Ireland I won't tell her name', and you'd leave food untouched to listen to her. And her daughter was better than she was.

A man spoke to me and said: 'The fairy music is a-singing.'

We went on like that far into the night—the women singing and the men drinking, all of them talking louder and louder and their wits gone wandering.

All of them took lodgings in the town that night. On the morrow morn there were plenty of pigs and people about. That was a day of drink and good company in Dingle. Each lot of us picked out his own bar. Every family had relations there, and preferred to spend their money in their kinsman's house. We went to the house of the man who bought our pigs from us and sat there. The two from the Inish were with us. Others from the country-side gathered round us—some of them relations of ours and others who had no connexion with us.

A lot of them spied out Diarmid the Joker. They knew well enough that they would have fun with him, and sure enough they had. Round went the drink. The old woman from the Inish stood the first drink, half a gallon of porter, for the boat's crew that had brought in the pigs were there.

Jolly Diarmid shook her hand, and came over to me and shook my hand, too.

'Tune up a song to raise my heart after the week's work,' says he.

I knew better than to refuse him, for he'd make a laughing-stock of me. 'The Dark Woman's Smooth Hill', that was my song, and few spoke till I had finished it. If there were two better than me, there were three worse.

The old woman sang the second song, and she was splendid at it. 'The Soft Deal Plank' was the song the girl, her daughter, sang, and she sang it faultlessly. The drink was being drunk and drawn like anything till everyone had his fair share taken. The house and the pavement outside it were crowded.

Before long I saw a big fellow pushing his way through the people, and he spoke: 'By your leave, men,' says he, and he never stopped till he got to me, and he wrung my hand seven times over. 'Devil carry me! I'd have cleared off home before long and never heard you singing a song!' says he, banging on the table. 'Half a pint of whisky here!' says he. 'Yerra, wisha! out with your voice, if you please,' says he.

We knew one another well, for often before that I'd had to sing him a song. He was a great drinker, but he was decent in his drink. The half-pint came at once, and I couldn't refuse. I had to toss off a glass. Then the music started. Well I remember the song I sang that day. 'For Ireland I won't tell her name', that was it, for I knew well that was the one the big man liked best, for often before had I sung it for him. When it was finished, the big man sent round drinks again.

'I wonder,' says he to me, 'if there's anybody else here to sing a song?'

'There is, my boy,' said I, pointing out the two women from the Inish.

They didn't refuse him, and what did they do but start together, the two of them, to sing the song, for they were mother and daughter. It was no great marvel, for one of them was born of the other. I'm sure that most of that company felt as I felt, that I would cheerfully have spent two days and two nights without food or drink listening to the singing of those two.

When the song was ended, the big man shook hands

with them both heartily, and he did the same to me, as it was I who had guided him to that fairy music: and he beat upon the table again and called for another half-pint. A shilling was the price of a half-pint in those days. It costs nine shillings this very day of writing. He put the bottle in my hand to share it out. One would take it from me for two who didn't. I saw Sunshine Diarmid in the corner piping noisily away, for he had drunk his fair share, and I said to myself that I should have to spend another night in the town.

Before long the big man turned to me again and shook me by the hand.

'I should like to hear another of your songs before we start for home,' says he. 'It'll be a good while, maybe, before we run across one another again.'

I gave in to him, of course. I sang a song or two, and the women from the Inish sang three of them, and another on the top of that, and, when it seemed to me that it was getting on for the time for going home, the company didn't agree with me. At last, late in the day, at the time of the wool market—that's always the latest of all the markets—the time to be making our best speed on the homeward road, Diarmid was getting wilder and wilder, and never thinking of his little home, nor would he have given it a thought before Christmas so long as the drink was going its rounds.

I spoke crossly to him, and said that surely it was high time for us to be getting along home, now we had two days and two nights away. But he only rushed up to me and started mauling me with kisses.

I spoke to the woman from the Inish and gave her the same hint.

'Yerra, wisha,' says she, 'this is a day of our life, and we shan't always be in the way of a day like it.'

I should know how to deal with answers of that kind

to-day, perhaps, when I am old, but in those days I was young and light-headed. I had to bring my uncle back home—and he'd left a houseful of children behind him, some of them with pretty empty bellies until the money for the pigs should bring them something. As for the woman from the Inish, she had only left two stones of yellow meal in that island of the sea, and yet neither she nor Diarmid let the thought of house or home worry them the least bit. When I had thought of all this, I gave up altogether and said to myself that I was done with giving them advice, but would agree with whatever they said; and so it was.

A lot of them had cleared out of the public-house by this, but the big man was still there. The woman from the Inish was talking to him, and in the course of the conversation she said she'd have to hire a horse from the town to Dunquin next day.

'If I'd been keeping my eye on the carts from the countryside since morning, my things would have been there to-night,' says she.

'Have you got a load?' said he to me.

'I shall have about half a sack of meal,' said I.

'Diarmid will have something, too,' says he.

'Certainly he will,' said I. Diarmid hadn't a ray of sense left by this time.

'I pledge my solemn word that I shall be here by eight o'clock to-morrow morning, if I live,' says he.

He put to his horse and drove off down the main street, and I daresay he wasn't long getting home.

I turned in again to the rake, Diarmid. He could hardly stand.

The woman from the Inish came in after me.

'Come along,' said I to him, 'we'll be getting home, or haven't you any feeling for the lump of a wife you've left behind you?'

'Well, she's no beauty,' says he. 'She'll be all right.'

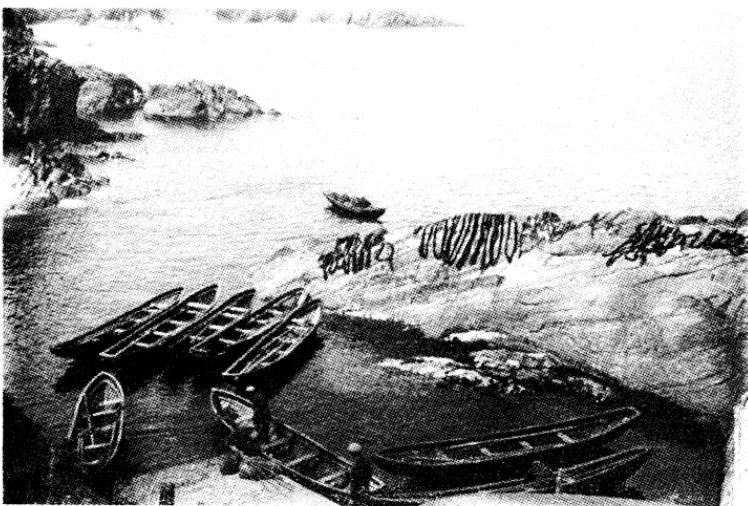
We dragged him out with us, and made our way to a house where we would get some food. They put good food before us, but we ate very little of it. I went off to bed, and fell asleep very soon. It was far on in the night when my uncle came. He fell asleep at once, and slept like the dead. I had another nap, and when I came to myself again morning was breaking and day was coming. I stayed awake, for I said to myself that the man with the cart would be along soon—that is, if he was a man of his word. I never dreamed that he would be there as early as he proposed, but I hoped that he'd come along some time that day, for he was a sensible sort of fellow.

I hadn't been turning over these thoughts for long when I heard the rattle of a cart, but it never passed through my head that it was the big man so early as that. Yet I was wrong, for it was he all right. He put up his horse in his usual place and came to us. We waited till breakfast was ready, and then started to collect our things into the cart, for we'd packed them up the day before. Diarmid the mad was not yet himself, nor near it. However, off we went helter-skelter out of the town, after spending three days and nights there.

We faced for Dunquin and got there fast enough. A boat had come out to fetch the woman of the Inish. The man with the cart bade us farewell and turned towards Ballyferriter, his own place.

We went down to the boat at once and set sail for the Great Blasket. We didn't shift the provisions for the Inish out of the boat, for Diarmid had planned to go back with them, take some hunting tackle with us, and bring a fine load of rabbits with us on our return.

I couldn't escape, though I wasn't very keen to go there after Dingle; but Diarmid was my mother's brother, and, besides that, there was the girl. She and I were always making up to one another. So we hoisted the sails again,



THE HARBOUR



TRANSPORTING A COW TO THE MAINLAND

and off we went at full speed till we reached Inishvickilaun. We spent two days and nights in that rock, bringing lots of rabbits back with us every evening, singing song after song every night till one o'clock, and sleeping till high noon. My uncle never stopped trying to make a match between me and the girl, every night and all the time, and no doubt there was a touch of cunning at the back of this, for she took good care that the two of us had our share of any good things that were going all that time, whether her people knew it or not.

On the morning of the third day it wasn't too fine and we made our preparations for starting home. We were all loaded down as we went to the boat, and every soul in the island followed us to the water. They were thoroughly down in the mouth because we were going. I may as well admit that, whatever was the case with the others, I wasn't too cheerful, and no wonder, for I was leaving behind me the merriest days I had ever known, and, into the bargain, I was turning my back on the girl I liked best in the whole blessed world right then.

Well, we shifted off home, and the people there were pretty jealous of us. We had a cargo of fat rabbits, and all those who had stayed behind had was seaweed and turf and manure.

14. *Christmas Provisions*

DEATH OF BALD TOM · GOING TO DINGLE TO
FETCH PROVISIONS FOR CHRISTMAS · THE
FISHWIVES · TOM'S SHEEP · A BOAT'S CREW
ASTRAY · A WINDY NIGHT · 'HARD LUCK ON THE
DROWNED' · 'A HAIR OF THE DOG THAT BIT YOU'

WHEN we got home, Bald Tom was at his last gasp, in need of a priest. At the end of the night there was a knock on our door, and my mother called me and said that Paddy was waiting for me to go with him to fetch the priest for his father, who was breathing his last.

I couldn't fail him now, since I'd fetched the priest for his mother. Besides, I realized that there are some people that no ill wind goes by without putting them to some trouble or other. There were some of closer kin to Tom than I who were left to have their sleep out that day.

I had a bit to eat and off I went out of the door. Paddy wasn't long in bringing the priest to Dunquin, and the whole trip was over very soon. Tom was dead the next day. Then there was another journey for the wake and another for the burying. That's how I spent my month from the first day we fetched the pigs from the Inish till the day we laid Bald Tom in the churchyard in Ventry.

Paddy was planning to move to another little house higher up; and so he did. It was a wreck of a place just opposite the house we had then. He was married by this.

It was now the beginning of the Christmas month. All fishing was at an end, and the Islanders set about manuring their ground. Late and early we were at it, raking away; and that was our practice in the Island every year up to St. Bridget's Day.

In those days our custom was to go early to town on Christmas business. I had carried a good heap of seaweed

to the crest of the cliff above the strand, and was all set to start carrying it with the good ass I had, for it was a dry, windy day. I looked and saw a young lad coming towards me. I saw at once that he had some business with me.

'What brought you here, my boy?' said I.

'Your mother sent me to you to see if you would go to Dingle,' said he, 'for the whole village is going there.'

I thanked him and told him I'd go.

He went back home hot-foot.

'Tell my mother to have my clothes ready for me, and I'll bring you some sweets,' said I.

I started off after him without much enthusiasm, for all the hindrances were putting me wrong, and I hadn't carried my manure to the field, but since the whole Island was going to get ready for Christmas, I said to myself that I'd find it easier to go in their company, for I should have to go alone if I left it till later.

When I got to the house I was as pleased as anything, for I saw the old man had the ass ready.

'Where's the seaweed back there?' said he.

'The big heap,' I answered.

When I was ready I ran out, and all the men in the Island were on the cliff above the creek, all of them in their new clothes, one man with a sheep or two, another with a basket of fish, a third carrying a sack of wool, and all of them making for the boats to sail them up Dingle Bay and moor them at the quay.

My three uncles and my sister Kate's husband, Pats Heamish, were going down to the boat for Dingle. Though they were all good friends of mine, I wasn't too anxious to go in their company. I'd had enough of Pats Heamish the day I was with him, and of my uncle Diarmid, too, you may be sure, that day with the pigs, and that wasn't so long ago either.

When I came to a halt on the cliff-top, Diarmid came

from below after taking a basket of fish down to the water.

'Are you going to Dingle?' says he to me.

'I was thinking of it,' says I.

'Why on earth, then, couldn't you get ready?' said he.
'Have you got any fish or anything else to take with you.'

'I had half a hundred pollock to take, but I haven't the time now to put them together,' says I. 'Aren't you all ready now?'

'Run off with you now and put them up,' said he. 'The boat will wait for you.'

As I've said before, Diarmid was the best of the whole lot. The rest hadn't a thing to say to me, though all who were going in the boat were kinsmen of mine.

I sprang off at once. I put up my fish with two ropes I had. Another lad brought one of the bundles down to me, and I had the whole thing done in half an hour. The boat was afloat, ready and waiting for me. 'Holy Mary!' says Diarmid, 'you didn't take long.' They took the bundles aboard and off we sailed for Dingle.

In those days there were always women called 'hucksters' on the quay. Their business was to buy and sell fish, and they made their living out of it. When we had cleared everything out of the boat and carried it up, these women rushed at me, and before long they had bought my fish from me for fifty shillings the half-hundred.

'In Mary's name!' says Diarmid. 'You've got the price of a drink off the women pretty quick.'

'He has, my lad,' said a spirited woman of their company, 'and you'll get a drink too. Come on.'

As he had a great taste for it, he went along with me, and we entered the same house. The women paid me every penny, and when I had the money, I asked them what they'd have.

'Oh, you'll have a drink off us first,' said the woman again.

She called for a drink and paid for it on the nail. The second drink was on me, of course, as I was making money, and the third on Diarmid, for the women had bought his fish, too.

Diarmid and I had drunk three drinks by this, and as he always had a slate loose, you'd have sworn he'd been drinking for months. Off we went down to the slip where the boat was: we hadn't made it fast yet. We'd hardly got there when my uncle Tom called to me to go with him for a bit. He hadn't sold his two sheep yet.

'I'll come,' said I.

'Holy Mary!—you may as well secure the boat,' says Diarmid. 'It's late in the day and you'll be all over the town before morning, and maybe the tide will carry her away.'

'Your soul to the Big Fellow!' says Tom, 'you took good care not to worry about the boat before you'd done your business; and hold her tight now or let her go for good, you scamp!'

I've said already in this book that a gust of the ill wind had always been blowing against me ever since the day the poet and his songs kept me from cutting the turf, and just after that when the girls fell on me.

When one of my uncles called the other a scamp, anyone could see that that day would be no holiday for me to range at will, the more so as one of them who had little enough sense at the best of times had a drop taken. I was right, for in a minute Tom had got a coward's blow in the ear-hole.

That blow sent bold Tom off his feet and sent him flying over the sheep on the flat of his back, but, when he got his footing again, he went for Diarmid, and, if the fishwives hadn't been about, he'd have sent Diarmid into the other world and me after him, for, make no doubt,

I'd have died to save Diarmid, as I died—or all but—in the seals' cave.

When the battle was over, the first thing I did was to call the women in with me and give them another drop. Diarmid had escaped into another house farther on in the town by this, and I was glad enough to see him go. The women were dragging at my clothes, pressing another drink on me, but I didn't want to take two drinks in the one day off them. And I had another reason—I knew by the way they were going that my relations wouldn't have much sense to spare soon, and that it was just as well we shouldn't all of us go out of our wits, particularly in this holy season, in honour of which we had come upon that trip.

When I left the public-house with these ideas in my head, at the first glance I threw down the street in which I was, what should I see but my uncle Tom at grips with two skinny butchers who were trying to force his sheep from him for anything they liked to give him. I hurried up to them, and when I joined my uncle, he had gone all colours under Heaven. This affair hurt me sorely, and the two rascals didn't recognize me. They thought I was only a lad from the country. Tom had the sheep tied up with a new rope, and it had cut one of his hands as he struggled to hold back the sheep from going with that pair.

It was the worst bit of luck for the butchers when I came on the scene, for they thought that I was some young country rascal poking his nose in, and that I was on their side.

'Shift the rope out of your hand and give it to me,' said I to Tom. He did so at once.

'Stand up for me and the sheep now, and, if you've got as much spirit as you have strength, you surely won't make much account of these two damned scarecrows.'

I was angrier then, I think, than I had been since I came into the world, or have ever been since.

Tom set to work with his foot first, and the young butcher sprang to one side. The kick landed on one of the sheep and laid her out stone dead. We were in a fine hullabaloo then. The butchers ran off. I had a knife in my pocket, and I rushed to the sheep and let out her blood. Now, if ever, my uncle wasn't pleased with himself: he had one sheep unsold and another was dead, and, another thing, a shilling meant more to him than a pound to my other two uncles. His heart was wrung; but the father of the young butchers found out what they had done, and he gave the same price for the dead sheep as for the living.

I left the sheep-dealer there and went off east along the street. I met with a man or two of my companions going about their business, getting through it with all speed, for they were in a hurry to be going home again, the day being fine.

I hadn't seen Liam yet or Pats Heamish, my sister Kate's husband. I found Liam in a public-house—Muirisín Bán's place. He was a real Irish friend to us. Liam had sold two sacks of wool, and had drunk enough and to spare.

'In with you and take a drop of this stuff,' says he to me. It was porter that he was gulping down as a cow drinks water.

'Serve him with a glass of whisky,' says he. 'I fancy he's no taste for this black stuff.'

The man behind the bar did so. There were five other men round Liam at this time, all talking together and drinking. I heard more talk outside, and I went over to the door to see what was there. What should I see but a couple of peelers taking a man to the jail; and when I looked closely at him, I saw that it was Pats Heamish. I turned round and told the man in the shop what I had seen.

'We can't get him out anyhow until ten to-night,' said he.

In all truth, I was nearly beside myself to hear that.

Our boat's crew were all in a hopeless mess by this, and the other boat's company ready to go home with a lovely evening for it.

I thank God to-day, as I did then, that I didn't do what I had in mind to do, and that is: sit down and drink my fill. I felt that if I did so the world would surely go as easily with me as with the others who were taking that line. I had good cause to be angry: the boat that had come out with us gone home, and the crew of my boat was melting like the foam on the river: three of the brothers sodden with drink, one of them in jail, and, as for the two others in the boat, I hadn't seen them all day up to now—the man we called 'Kerry' and the young lad of his kindred.

I went down to the quay, and at that very moment the other boat had just put to sea from the slip. They said farewell to me, and I sent my blessing with them. It was a lovely evening at this time, though the sky didn't look too promising.

When I turned back from the quay, whom should I see coming towards me from the town but Kerry, with a load of carded wool on his back.

'Where have you brought that wool from?' said I.

'From the carding mill,' said he.

I told him that the other boat had gone home.

'It has, has it?' said he. 'And sure, if it has, it won't get there. I suppose you've got all your stuff put together?'

'I haven't; and I haven't bought sixpennyworth.'

'Well, there's plenty of time yet. It's long enough till ten o'clock.'

'It looks as though you had no more shame than the rest of them,' I said to him. 'The other boat has gone home, and here we are still, and maybe it'll be a week from to-day before we can leave Dingle.'

'We shall be at home as soon as they are,' said he. 'Go in here and we'll have a drink, and we'll start packing up then and have everything ship-shape for starting back after the first Mass to-morrow.'

When I heard that speech, my mind changed, and with good reason—to hear such good sense from this man whom all the rest of the crew considered a useless ne'er-do-well, while they themselves were all crazy by this. We went in. We bought some goods, three of us, and, when we'd done, the shopkeeper stood us a drink. We went up the town then, and whom should we meet coming towards us but the prisoner, Pats Heamish.

'God and Mary to you,' says he.

Kerry returned the greeting. Pats's speech was still wandering. Muirisín Bán had got him out. I hadn't seen the three rakes yet. I left the three others there, and never stopped till I reached the house of our friend Muirisín Bán, where they generally spent their time. The three were there, and every syllable they let out of them would have split a head of brass. They were so dizzy with the drink that they hardly knew me till I spoke.

'Isn't that you?' says cracked Diarmid.

'I'm here,' said I to him. 'Are you in any better way now than when I left you a bit ago?'

'I am, my boy,' said he; 'isn't it a good way to be in to have a full belly? Have you seen Kerry and the other lad since morning?'

'I have, and he's not like you,' said I.

'Ah! devil take him; the lout never was like me.'

'Is the crew of the other boat ready yet?' says Tom.

'They're nearly half-way home by now,' I answered.

When Diarmid heard this, he put his head out at the door, looked up at the sky and the stars for a bit, and then came in again.

'In the name of the Virgin, young lad,' says he, 'that's

a boat that'll never come to harbour, to judge by the wild look of the sky up there.'

When I heard this from two men whom I knew to be good judges of the sea, I left the house where they were and started to visit the shops, where I wanted to spend a crown or a half-crown, for the shopkeepers are always wide awake at Christmas time to get a shilling or two. I never stopped till I had finished with them.

God forgive me! I went that round with the intention, if the next morning shouldn't prove fine, of going back by road and leaving the drinkers in their own company, for I was well aware that so long as they had a penny in their pockets they'd be long enough about packing up.

I hadn't had a bite since I left the house in the morning, nor had any of them. I found a house where I could get some food, and had a meal. When I came out again, the lamps were being lighted, and I went to look for my friends. They were all gathered together in the same house—the three uncles, Pats Heamish, Kerry, and the lad. Every one of them had a white bag open, and the shopman was stripped, weighing out tea, sugar, and everything else they wanted. They filled the bags up—one man with a stone of flour, another with a stone and a half, and a third with two stones. In those days we only took in a small store, and they bought all they wanted in this house.

Then we went out to the lodging-house. One of them took food for two who didn't. Kerry and the lad shared a bed with me, and we had only just lain down when the night blew up to wind and heavy rain.

'Do you hear that, my boy?' said Kerry. 'How far on do you think the boat is by now?'

'Somewhere near Ventry Harbour,' said I.

'If they're as far as that, they needn't grumble,' said he.

As the night went on, it grew wilder, and, though I didn't let on, I was terrified for the boat which had left

me. And no wonder, for some others of my kin were in her, and, besides, even if I had no relations on board, a man is often worried about good neighbours. Before long the house was trembling, so that none of the three of us got a wink of sleep till the light grew in the east in the morning.

When the day was light enough to see anything, there was a lull in the wind, and it blew towards the land from the very point of the compass that we wanted to sail, straight from Dingle Quay to the Blasket Harbour. I flung myself out of bed and ran out at once into the street. I looked towards the four quarters of the sky. The sky was quiet now that it had got rid of its gathered fury, exactly like the drunkards who lay there in the lodging-house and had taken no notice of the wildness of the night or of the coming day either.

I ran in again and went to the place where I had slept, for half my clothes were still there, and I hadn't so much as gone down on my knees to thank God, who had saved me from the night's storm and had given us the blessed light of day so fair again.

'It's a fine day,' said I to Kerry.

The people of the house were astir at once, some of them meaning to go to first Mass. Kerry and the lad were the first two to come down, and he told me to wake up the rest. I told him that, whoever went to call them, it wouldn't be me. I had seen all I wanted of them yesterday, and didn't mean to spend to-day in the same manner. As the pair of us were conversing, who should come down the stairs but Pats Heamish.

'Morning, boys,' says he.

The man of the house it was who returned his greeting.

'How's the day?' says Pats.

'A fair wind home, my lads,' says the man of the house.

Pats turned back upstairs again to call up the rest and before long we were all gathered together. Diarmid ordered

the woman of the house to have everything ready on the table for us when we returned from Mass. We should be hoisting sail on the *Black Boar* as soon as we had eaten.

The congregation was gathering for Mass, and, as soon as it was over, we ate our food and went out. We took all our things down to the harbour, ran the boat down, and threw everything aboard. We turned her stern to land and her prow to sea. Up went the sails, and we set out for the west with a fair following wind.

It took the *Black Boar* no time to make Ventry Harbour. As we were crossing the harbour mouth, one of the crew glanced at the sea between us and the land.

'There's a boat coming out to us,' he said.

I looked closely at her and recognized her sails at once.

'That's the boat that left Dingle last night,' said I.

We brought the *Black Boar* into the wind till the other came up level with us, and sure enough she it was. They told us all that had happened to them, and that all the goods in her weren't worth a crown, for the great sea had swept over them, and if it hadn't been that they had reached harbour before the storm came, not a man of them would ever have been seen again. We let the boats run side by side under their four sails, and we had a fair wind till we reached the harbour in the Blasket. Every woman, child, and babe was there waiting for us. The merchandise was all taken home, and we were telling tales of the town for a day or two.

I had five bottles of whisky with me—one from this man, another from that, and one that I had bought myself. That was easily done in those days. Half a crown a bottle was the price. The crews of the two boats had brought raisins, candles, and lots of sweet things from Dingle with them. There was plenty of turf for fire that year, and potatoes, too, and fish to eat with them.

I have already mentioned that I remembered the time

when there was only one pot-oven in this Island. There were three or four in this year I am speaking of, and, if there were, they had plenty to do.

Next morning my mother had one of these pot-ovens hard at work, for it was only a week to Christmas Eve, and she had four loaves to make for the household. We had only just finished cooking these loaves when in came uncle Diarmid. He had just been visiting the strand.

'My soul from the devil, my duds are falling off me, for I've had neither bite nor drop in my belly since I left Dingle,' says he.

I was sorry for him, and I went to a box I had and brought a bottle and a cup and handed him a drink. He tossed it off without drawing breath.

'Wisha, God send me something to repay you with!' says Diarmid.

'Put a drop of water on the fire,' said I to my mother, 'and make him a cup of tea and give him a hunk of the loaf. He made himself dizzy with drink in the town.'

'O, for God's sake, let me be,' says Diarmid. 'That cup has put me on the pig's back.'

Though a drop of drink had often before made much merriment, I had more fun out of that drop than I've ever had since.

The drink ran through every vein of him in a rush, for his skinny frame was as thin then as a conger that would have spent a week from Monday to Monday in a lobster-pot. I shouldn't have been so pleased with my bargain if it had been early in the day when I gave him the cup, for I should certainly have lost my day's work, and not I only, but everybody else who was in a position to see or hear him. It came pretty near to people declaring that he needed a strait waistcoat. I put my head out in the doorway, and who should be out there but one of Diarmid's boys, snivelling.

'What's wrong with you, Shaneen?' said I.

'I want my dad,' says he.

'O, come in, my lad. He's in here at the top of his form, thinking of marrying again. He's thinking of deserting your mother altogether. I suppose she's sent you to look for him?'

I spoke thus to the boy to cheer him up a bit, for he was the most pitiable object I'd ever seen. I took the lad by the hand and led him up to Diarmid.

'Is this boy yours?' I said to the rake.

He looked at him.

'Yes and no,' said he.

'We know no more than we did before,' I said to him.

'Yerra, my friend, don't you see that he doesn't take after me. He wouldn't have that tough swarthy hide if he'd taken after me instead of that swarthy simpleton of a mother of his.'

'I fancy,' said my mother, 'that none of them take after you. They're all like their mother.'

'Devil a one of them all in this village!' says Diarmid the joker.

I jumped up and gave the boy a slice of the loaf, and told him to run home. His father would spend a bit more of the night with us. I'd no sooner got rid of the boy than a woman came in through the door, and who should it be but my sister Kate. That gave my mother a great start, for she thought that there must be something wrong with one of the children, for she was only a very rare visitor with us.

'Something's brought you here to us so late as this,' said I to her.

'It's Pats Heamish who's not feeling very well. Since he left Dingle he's not had a bite to eat, and it's for a spoonful of whisky I've come,' says she.

'Didn't he bring a drop with him on his way back home?' said my mother.

'Wisha, not he, nor anything else,' says she.

'What should that fellow bring with him?' says Diarmid the cracked. 'He hadn't a blink of sense in Dingle from the time he left home till he got back again.'

'Madmen always plume themselves on their sense,' said I.

Kate was in a hurry. I went to the bottle. She had only brought a cup about the size of an eggshell for fear she would drive me out of the house by asking too much. I fetched a quarter-pint bottle and filled it up. She left me and hurried out of the door, full of thanks and blessings. I turned back again to Diarmid with the half-empty bottle.

'O, may it split me like a salmon if I taste it!' said he. 'I got enough in the one drink.'

I put a glass in my father's hand, and told him to hold it for me. I poured about half a glass into it. My mother did no more than just taste it. Then I filled up the glass for myself—the first taste since I left Dingle. I filled the glass again, and handed it to the joker.

'O,' said he, 'after swearing that oath!'

'Yerra, there's no meaning in that salmon, you fool,' said I. 'It's only an expression people use.'

'Wisha, by the Virgin, I fancy you're right,' says he, and tossed it off.

He stayed with us till it was high time for bed. My mother had never heard of the risk I ran for him in the seal cave until he drank this last glass, and the first thing she did when she heard was to go down on her knees and offer up thanks to God, who had preserved the pair of us. But my father didn't attach all that importance to the thing.

When we'd had our meal, I went out to inquire after Pats Heamish. I said to myself that I'd have a bit of fun with him, too. He wasn't far from the fire, and he had his coat thrown over his shoulders and his pipe in his mouth,

though there was nothing but ashes in it. I asked him if he was on the mend.

'I am, and I'd never have been any good again but for that drop.'

'I fancy there's nothing in your pipe.'

'There isn't—and I've nothing to put in it either, Tom Crohan, my boy,' said Pats. 'I'm suffering very much from a glass of bad whisky I drank the day we went to Dingle.'

'I guess you had others inside you along with it.'

'O, I had five glasses drunk when they ran me in,' said Pats.

I left him there then, Pats, the devil's own (that's the best name I can give him); he'd come back home from Dingle without a scrap for his children but what they could beg; his health was knocked sideways, too, and, from the look of him, he wasn't likely to be well to-morrow or the day after that.

When I got back home I found my trumpeter still going full blast with no check on his flow of speech, no hoarseness in his talk, no weariness in his movements, his tongue never stumbling, and his appetite still unimpaired, so it seemed. My mother was ranging up and down the floor, setting the hearth to rights in preparation for bed.

'By the Virgin!' said he to her, 'you'd do better to get some bouncing girl for your son than be going up and down for ever like that for yourself.'

'Well, it isn't me that's keeping them from him,' says she. 'I'd rather he got one by morning. But I fancy they're not so easy got as all that.'

'Yerra, your soul from the devil! aren't there five women back in the Inish plying their spurs after him, and not a one of them knows which of them he'll give the wink to to take the road with him!'

And after all his trumpeting the whole night long, his

voice was just as clear, just as lively as that of a man on a platform beginning on his first sentence. I'd suspicioned what the rascal was up to, when I saw him coming to the house early in the evening, and guessed that he wouldn't leave the house till he'd started something of this kind, for there had been a lot of talk in the village all the year before about who'd marry and who wouldn't. Besides, I'd had a sort of idea ever since that time with the pigs earlier in the year that he and the old woman of the Inish were putting their heads together about the business, and probably he'd made her a promise that he would open up the affair.

So far as I was concerned, I wasn't ungrateful to him for his jabber just then, particularly if I had any reason to think that anything would come of it; for to speak the truth, that's where I myself would have made my choice at that time.

'Agh!' says my mother, taking up the talk again, 'he's full young yet and for some time to come.'

'Is he of age now?' says the rake.

'Twenty-two three days before this coming Christmas,' says she.

'Yerra, little woman, what was I but barely twenty when I got that swarthy lump of mine over there, and she wasn't much of a match,' says he.

'I imagine,' I said, in answer to him, 'that she was a better one than yourself. It's you that's the comfortless husband. Though you've been away from home, it's a long while since you brought back anything worth while to your poor wife, and you made a miserable waste of your money.'

'Yerra! alas for you, you fool! I'm far more of a boaster than a waster,' says cracked Diarmid.

'Clear off out of my sight in the name of God and the Virgin Mary!' said I to him. 'Or don't you think at all of your hovel or of going to bed, or are you at all afraid that the swarthy lump will go off and leave you?'

He grinned, and 'O!' says he, 'not much fear of that!'

I ran out with a box in which was a handful of potatoes for the ass. I threw down a sheaf of oats, too, for the cow and a calf that we had. My father told me to do this. This was his job, but the trumpeting of the fellow in the house had prevented him doing it that night. When I came back again, he was still standing in the middle of the house, demonstrating to the old couple that the young woman's help would be a great advantage to them, and that, so far as he could see, this girl from the Inish had excellent stuff in her. Though he spoke his speech like a simpleton, some part of his advice was calculated for his own profit. He'd have the whole house to himself, you see. The old woman of the house was his own sister, and this girl wouldn't be his enemy when he himself had got her for us, of course. Often enough in the past, and still to-day, a man has affected the simpleton for his own ends, and I had a strong suspicion that there was a spice of that sort of trickery in Diarmid that day.

I had to take him by the shoulder and run him out through the door. He turned back again into the house and said: 'I mean to kill a big wether on Christmas Eve, and you shall have half of it.'

Out he went through the door, and it was high time for bed by that.