

15. *A Merry Christmas*

'THERE'S A JOINT FOR YOU, LITTLE WOMAN'.
CHRISTMAS EVE: A JOLLY DRINK AND SINGING ·
THE HURLEY MATCH · DIARMID WOUNDED · THE
SECOND GAME · TOM IS HURT · MUSIC TILL DAWN

IT was the morning of Christmas Eve. 'I fancy that I may as well go and get a sheep,' said I to my mother.

'Don't go,' says she. 'Give windy Diarmid his chance. We shall find out whether he comes up to his trumpeting. If he kills that big sheep there'll be enough for the two houses in her, but I'm afraid he won't made good his swaggering.'

She had far less confidence in him than I had. I expected that he'd keep his promise, if he did lay the big sheep low. He was a finished butcher, for those brothers had a big household when they kept house together. And often enough had the joker put a knife in a fine sheep of their flock without anybody telling him to.

I strolled out late in the evening to look if the cows were coming down from the hill, and what should I see but the rascal coming to the house with half the big sheep on his back. Diarmid had split the sheep so cleanly in two that half the head was still sticking to half the body.

When he went in, he threw off his load.

'There's a joint for you, little woman, for the Holy Day,' says he.

'May this day a year hence find you and us all in prosperity and joy,' said she.

Just at that moment in I came. I looked at the present.

'Yerra, a blessing on your arms, good old uncle!' said I. 'You're a man of your word if anybody is.'

'Didn't I tell you that I'd do it?' said he. 'Sure, if it

hadn't been for you and the help of God, I shouldn't have been alive to kill it. It's in honour of God that I killed it, and to share it with you. I shall never forget the seals' cave!'

I turned away from him and went to the box. I took out one of the four bottles that remained there, and came up to him.

'There, you've earned this drink to-day if you ever did, Diarmid.'

'Mary Mother! wherever did you get it all?' says he.
'Didn't you get a bottle from your friends yourself?'
'Devil a one except one my old friend Muirisín Bán gave me.'

Well, I filled him a glass and a half, for that was the full of the vessel I held in my hand.

'O, King of the Angels! don't you know that my old skeleton can't take in all that at one gulp after the day's toil?'

'This is the little Christmas drink.'

He seized the glass, and before long all its contents were in a place that kept them safe, and he said directly:

'I hope with God that we shall have a good Christmas and a good Shrove to follow.'

Then he jumped up and ran out through the door.

I ran after him and brought him in again.

'Yerra, aren't you in a hurry?' said I.
'O!' says he, 'to-night isn't like other nights, and it isn't right for me to fail my own little crowd on God's Blessed Eve.'

I'd always thought that he wasn't so devout as he showed himself that day, for he was always a rough-tongued chap, and it was his constant habit to go seeking help from hell whenever he was in a rage. His expressions that day increased the respect I had for him. After a bit he went off.

When the time for lighting up came on ‘God’s Blessed Eve’, if you were coming towards the village from the south-east—for that’s the direction in which every door and window faces—and every kind of light is ablaze that night, you would imagine it a wing of some heavenly mansion, though it is set in the middle of the great sea. You would hear a noise in every house that night, for, however much or little drink comes to the Island, it is put aside for Christmas Eve. Maybe an old man would be singing who’d never lifted his voice for a year. As for the old women, they’re always lilting away.

I felt that I would rather go out a bit than spend the whole evening at home. The place I meant to go to was Pats Heamish’s house for a bit, for he wasn’t too well yet. I knew that he hadn’t got a drop of drink, so I got a half-pint. There was a score or so of welcomes waiting for me. He was a man you could get a great deal of sport out of, but he was anything but happy, as he hadn’t got a drop for Christmas. He’d drunk up all that he’d brought with him from Dingle, as his health had gone to pieces after the carouse.

I handed him the half-pint.

‘Drink that down,’ said I to him, ‘for you’ve got to sing a song.’

‘You’ll get no song,’ says Kate, ‘if he once gets the half-pint down.’

‘I’ll sing a song, too,’ says Tom.

He drank a tot and sang, not one song, but seven of them.

On Christmas Day and during the Christmas season we used to have hurley matches, and the whole village used to be mixed up in the game. Two men were chosen, one from each side, for captains. Each of them would call up man by man in turn until all who were on the strand were distributed in the two sides. We had hurleys and a ball.

The game was played on the White Strand without shoes or stockings, and we went in up to our necks whenever the ball went into the sea. Throughout the twelve days of Christmas time there wasn't a man able to drive his cow to the hill for the stiffness in his back and his bones; a pair or so would have a bruised foot, and another would be limping on one leg for a month.

That Christmas Day my two uncles, Diarmid and Tom, were on opposite sides. I was on Diarmid's side, and that's where I preferred to be, for, if I had chanced to be against him, I couldn't have put out half my strength if I had been anywhere near him.

We won three games from them, one after another, and the two sides were raging—they struggling to win one game, anyhow, in the day and the other side swaggering.

When we were approaching the cliff path on our way home, 'O, shame on you!' says uncle Diarmid, 'we didn't let you win a single game since morning.'

When Diarmid made that remark, his brother Tom was going up the path, just in front of him. He turned down, and, raising his fist, gave him a blow in the ear-hole that sent him down on to the strand a cold corpse or nearly.

'Sure, you little devil, it wasn't you that did it.'

He hadn't far to fall, but it was rough ground. He lost his speech, for it was knocked clean out of him, and it was an hour before he could talk, with all the others about him on the strand, all except the man who hit him—he'd gone home. Before long his feeble voice began to strengthen, and when it came back he made no good use of it, for the first thing he said was: 'On my body and soul, I swear I'll be the priest at that fellow's deathbed!'

They set him on his feet, and he wasn't long in coming to himself. He only had a scratch or two on his cheek. We went off home, and it was as much as we could do, we were so tired after the day.

We didn't do much after the great match on Christmas Day, but everyone was pretty well lamed; their feet and their bones were sore, but we had a week's rest till New Year's Day. Those whose hurleys were broken looked out new ones.

Very nearly all the hurleys on the strand came from Ventry parish. They were made of furze stems that had a crook in them, and the ball was made of stocking wool, sewn with a hempen thread. Often it would hit some tall fellow on the ankle, and he'd have no more use of his foot for that day. Whether I was strong or not, I didn't use my hurley clumsily. I happened to be on the outer edge of the game on New Year's Day, and I swiped the ball as hard as I could, and who should be in its way but my uncle Tom, and where should the ball hit him but on the knee-cap. It put his knee-cap out of joint.

'Good for your arm,' says Diarmid, the first voice I heard.

Diarmid thought that his brother was not so badly hurt, but, when he saw that he was, the merry note of his trumpeting dropped a bit. People had to support my uncle home, and Diarmid saw to it that he got there.

As I was returning to my house, who should follow me along the path but Diarmid, and you wouldn't have paid twopence for him after the tiring day. I waited till he came up with me.

'I've got a bit of a job still for you,' said I to him.

He didn't care what the job was, but went along with me.

My mother mentioned Tom's leg to him. Hadn't it got a bad knock, she said, and it would be useless all this year: the knee-cap's a bad place, and very often it doesn't ever go back at all.

'He'll make a fine cripple!' says Diarmid.

'Is that all the sympathy you have for him?' said my mother.

'It's only a week since he shed my blood for little provocation,' said Diarmid. 'Let him come to himself—though I'm sorry for the children.'

After they'd said this much I went to the box and fetched a good big bottle that was still unopened. When Diarmid saw it, he thought that it had fallen from Heaven. I gave him a glass, and he didn't refuse it, for he had no excuse to, and when it was down in the place that stood in need of it, he said:

'My soul from the devil! sure I should have been ready for burial this day if it hadn't been for whatever moved you to bring so much of it with you: I fancy it must have been Providence itself.'

'Agh! I got most of it as a gift, Diarmid,' said I.

'Your soul from the devil! wasn't I buying their goods before you were born, and they gave me little enough of it,' says he.

'I expect they see that you're failing, and that it wouldn't be of any advantage to them to bribe you to get anything out of you!'

'May God give them nothing, the pack of rascals!' said he.

When I had my uncle as I wanted him—and that was when the drink had called to life his feeble voice—I said that I would pay a visit to Pats Heamish. Though he wasn't yet free of the sickness he got in Dingle, he was in the hurley game every day; and he wasn't much good at it that Christmas—a thing you could never have said of him before that. I reflected that a noggin of whisky wouldn't last long, and that I should get its value in fun out of Pats, so I took it with me and went to the house. I was willing to share with Pats, for, if he'd had it, I should certainly have had my share of it.

After I'd been there for a while I said at last:

'There's neither song nor story in this house to-night,

and oughtn't there to be some sort of goings on on New Year's Eve?"

"The man of the house isn't feeling too well yet," said Kate.

"I expect he feels the lack of his rights," said I. "If he had something to lighten his heart, maybe there'd be some sport or other going."

"Devil a lie in that, Tomás Crohan," said Pats, "whatever pains we have in our bones besides."

I ran to the cup that was hanging up on the dresser and brought it with me. I poured a mouthful into it and gave it to him. There was no need to press it on him, and before long he was singing '*Báb na gCraobh*', and he went on from one song to another.

Soon I heard the noise of boots approaching, and I thought it was my father coming to call me in to a meal, but when he stuck his head in, who should it be but Diarmid.

"Your meal's ready," said he to me. He had one of his boys with him who had come to summon him home, but Diarmid didn't want to go home at all, and what he did was to sit down on a stool with only three legs.

"Wisha!" says he, "I suppose you don't know a verse of the "*Súisín Bán*"? It's a long time since I heard it."

"Yerra, sorrow on your heart!" said I to him. "Surely you won't stay to listen to that song when a boy has called you for your potatoes an hour ago."

"God knows, if he sings it, I'll stay, and for another one after that, and till the light comes out of the east to-morrow," said the lunatic. "What is it to you? All you've got to do is to be off to your meal."

Though he hadn't done what I said, I did what he said, and went out and left them there with not a thing in the wide world troubling the pair of them. When I got home, my potatoes were pretty well stone-cold.

'It's a pity you didn't stay a while longer,' said my mother, 'or did the rake give you a call?'

'He did, and the hound's outrun the messenger,' said I. 'He's there still.'

'Mary Virgin! isn't he the useless man,' said she.

When I had eaten my meal, the bee began to sting me again to go to the house where the fun was. I reflected that that night wouldn't come again till the end of another year.

Thinking so, I told my mother that I was going to Pats Heamish's house, and if I should be late in returning, not to worry over it.

'I wonder,' said I to the old couple, 'whether I'd better take a drop with me to Kate's house?' I was just trying it on with them to see what they'd make of it. I'd rather hear what my father had to say, for he'd never grumble at anybody unless he was doing something outrageous.

'Often has a man had a good drink in an enemy's house, and sure your own sister's house is not the house of an enemy: and if your uncle is there, too, isn't it all in the family?'

I went out at the door. I shouldn't have been at ease with my heart in it if the old couple weren't willing. I could hear the jester a long way from the house.

'Wisha! welcome here anyhow!' said he.

'Haven't you gone home yet?' said I.

'Devil a step!' said he. 'I have plenty of friends, God be thanked for it, all over the village. I make myself at home in lots of the houses. I've had my food here, my lad, and drink to go with it.'

'Have you had any singing since?'

'Yes, five songs: and now we'll have some more since you've come to us again. This is a night of our life, and we don't know who'll be alive when it returns again.'

I poured out a dram for them. Diarmid seized the cup and made to sing, and this was his song:

*“Tis the best of the doctor’s prescriptions
If whisky and porter are cheap,
For it cures us of all our afflictions
And puts all men’s sorrows to sleep.
And the old woman, wheezing and groaning,
A-bed for a year in despair,
When she sups her half-pint, stops her moaning,
And kicks the bedclothes in the air.”*

All of us in the house shook his hand, seven times over, as no hand had ever been shaken before, when he’d finished the verse.

‘You sing a song, Pats,’ I said to the other man. He sang ‘Eamonn Mágáine’, and it delighted me, for he had a fine voice—that is to say, when he’d cleared his throat with the right stuff. Then the rake sang ‘Cosa buidhe árda dearga’. He sprang to his feet, and ‘Wisha,’ said he, ‘God’s blessing on the souls of your dead, sing me “The Quilt”. I’ve never heard the whole of it together since the poet Dunlevy let it out of his lips.’

I didn’t require much pressing, though ‘The Quilt’ tried me hard. I sang eighteen verses of it.

‘O, King of Glory! eternal praise be to Him! How on earth did he put it all together?’ said Diarmid.

So we went on till the day lightened over us from the east. The day was breaking when we parted from one another.

‘I pray God that no blot or blame may befall you till the year’s end,’ said Diarmid, facing eastwards to his own house. My way led west. I went to bed, and it was dinner time when I woke again.

The afternoon came on cold and stormy, and my father said to me:

'You'd better go up for the cows, since you've nothing else to do.'

I threw my coat over my shoulders and started up the hill. When I reached the place where the cows were, there were others before me there, and among them was the poet, with a stick in his hand, for he had a cow in those days whose like was never seen at a fair: a handsome, jet-black cow, that filled three firkins of butter every year that she was in good trim. He had a fine heifer, too.

'Well,' says I to myself, 'the poet shan't waste my day to-day as he did that day he met me, when he kept me from cutting the turf.'

We hadn't run across one another on the hill since then till now.

'Have you got any of the "Song of the Ass"?' said he to me.

'Part of it I've got, and part not,' said I.

'Have you got any paper in your pocket? If you have, out with it, and your pencil, too. I shall carry all the songs I ever made to the grave with me if you don't pick them up.'

I wasn't too pleased with what he said, for I didn't want to sit down by a tussock on a cold and chilly evening. But it wouldn't take the poet long to compose a verse on me that wouldn't do me any good! So all of us there threw ourselves down by a low fence, and my fine fellow started to sing his song.

I promise you, friend of my heart, that by the time I had a dozen verses written down that bitter, cold evening I wished heartily that the poet was dead, for, whoever found his ways easy to deal with, it wasn't me, and before I had the poem scribbled down on my paper it was black night.

Off we all started to go home. The cows had got there before us!

'Yerra,' says my mother, 'whatever kept you so long after the cows, a cold, stormy evening like this?'

I told her the truth.

'Well, the poet himself needed all the sense he has to stay out on a hill-top till now,' says she. 'Your food's cold now.'

I gulped down a dozen potatoes that were pretty cold, only that I had a drop of warm milk and some hot fish with them, and then I ran out again. There was a special house in the village that the young folk, boys and girls, used to gather in and stay till midnight. To give some account of that house and the young people that used to gather together in it, I am proud to be able to say that nothing wrong ever happened among them for the sixty-seven years that I've known it.

We spent the night sporting together till it was very late. Then I came home and went to bed.

16. *Shrovetide, 1878*

MATCHES AND WEDDING FEASTS · A QUANDARY ·
MY MARRIAGE · RESPONSIBILITY · WORK ·
CHILDREN AND TROUBLE

SHROVE came early that year (1878), and the Islanders had to set about making their matches sooner than the mainlanders, you see. So one pair set out quickly. I don't think the matter of the dowry held them back very long, for there wasn't any on either side.

When this party got as far as the priest's house, and it was time for the marriage to begin, the girl couldn't be found anywhere, dead or alive, though there was a crowd hunting for her. A man from Dunquin who'd come to Ballyferriter for another marriage told them that he had met her on her way back. They sent a man on horseback to catch up with her, but, when he got to Dunquin, she had set sail for the Blasket in a boat that was going out fishing.

She hadn't been home many days when she started out again with a man she preferred to the first one. Very few people accompanied them, for they thought it rather an odd proceeding. The girl had no one with her. Though there wasn't a pin to choose between the two men, it's plain the girl had some good reason for preferring one to the other. The boy she'd jilted didn't leave his oars idle. He went as far as Tralee for a wife—the daughter of a Dunquin widow who was in service there.

I used to put up at the same farm-house in Dunquin as this young fellow, for I had one or two relations there. It happened that bad weather kept us out there after this comic wedding I've just mentioned. For I had gone to the marriage, and I was a near relation of the girl's, too, though I didn't quarrel with her for doing what she did.

Before we got a chance to go home, the beauty from Tralee was in Dunquin.

Next morning the young fellow who'd been jilted came in at the door of the house where I was.

'I suppose,' he said, 'that you wouldn't care to go to Ballyferriter with me.' That's where the priest lived.

'Why do you think I wouldn't?' said I.

'O, because you've only just been there; and, besides, your relative and I didn't make a job of it together.'

'What's that to you so long as you get another wife?' said I.

'Wisha, on my baptism, maybe you're right! But I haven't got her yet,' said he.

When we got to Ballyferriter there was a great crowd there—men with a thirst, thimble-riggers, and merry-makers. When the Blasket couple came up for their marriage, their own company came with them. That's the time I made the acquaintance of the girl, and I give you my word, if she'd come from Dublin itself, she wouldn't have shamed the city.

The first place we went to after the chapel was the public-house, where there was a great uproar of drinking and dancing and singing, and every other sport that serves to pass the time. When it was getting on for ten o'clock the people were beginning to scatter. You would see a man going off supported between two others, and the woman that belonged to him following behind with a lot to say.

The two wedding parties came back home the same day. They had enough provisions of every sort with them for the whole Island, and all the people of the village revelled and made merry in the two houses. I doubt whether so many Irish songs were ever sung at any two weddings as at those two. Voices were never still till high noon on the morrow in the two houses. Only the girl from Tralee sang a song or two in English. Her father-in-law danced on a table, and

they had to smear it with soap for him, as a lot of people had been dancing on it before him. He was a marvellous dancer, but he'd had a drop to drink, and he hadn't been capering long when he upset, but, all the same, he recovered his stand on the floor and finished the step as prettily as I've ever seen it done.

It's still the custom in the Blasket—as it always has been—that, if any of them start on anything, all the rest are eager to follow. Some years the whole Island gets married, and for seven years after that, there won't be a single wedding. I refer to this year of which I'm talking—for not a single boy or girl was unmarried by the time Shrove was over.

One night after I'd been out—and it was pretty late on in the night, too—whom should I find in the house when I came in but windy Diarmid, and his voice was going as loud as ever I'd heard it; he was getting at the old couple, explaining what an unhandy thing it'd be for them if they spent another year without a soul to help them—‘and maybe two years,’ says he; ‘and I’ve got a proposal for you from the best girl that ever broke bread, the finest and the handsomest girl every way.’

They didn’t break off the talk after I came in, and we kept it up till you’d have thought that everybody in the house was in complete agreement; though the whole affair was to be gone into again, for all the advisers were not present. Be that as it may, Diarmid went out, and he could have trodden on a shell-less egg without breaking it. He fancied that the bargain was sealed.

My sister Maura, who had been in America and who had come back home and married again, heard that Diarmid the rake had been in our house with a match on his hands, and she came to see if there was any truth in the story. We told her how things stood, and she didn’t like the idea at all; she made it plain to the old couple what



AUTHOR (*right*) AND TRANSLATOR



FELT - ROOFED ISLAND HOUSE

a responsibility anyone was taking on himself if he didn't marry near home, but made an alliance with a family that lived a long way off and wouldn't be in a position to lend a hand on a rainy day.

She had herself marked down an excellent, knowledgeable girl, whose people lived in the village, so that they could lend us a hand when we needed it, and she went on to explain the whole affair to us, like a woman reciting a litany, till she had the whole lot of us as tame as a cat.

She'd always had a great hankering after her first husband's people, and his brother's daughter it was that she'd marked down for us. The girl she had such high praise for—and she deserved it—was a sister to the man who is the King of the Blasket to-day—though he hadn't got the title of King in those days or for long after. My sister Maura, who made the match, has been in the grave since December 1923. She was eighty when she died. May her soul inherit Heaven!

A week from that day we were married—Tomás Crohan and Maura Keane—in the last week of Shrove in the year 1878. There never was a day like it in Ballyferriter. There were four public-houses there, and we spent some time in all of them until it was very late in the day. The town was packed with people, for there were a lot of other couples being married. There were five fiddlers there, one in each bar, attracting people to himself, while another of them was not in any of the houses but out in the middle of the street, and he made more than the rest, for most of the people were in the street.

We had to leave Ballyferriter at last, just when the fun was at its height, but since the great sea was before us, and there were a lot of us to take across, we had to go.

Many of the mainlanders went in with us—relations of ours. There was singing in plenty, dancing, and all sorts of amusement, and food and drink enough and to spare, till

high noon on the morrow. Then the mainlanders cleared off.

It was said that there hadn't been so many marriages for fifteen years. The rest of the year was given to hard work. It was a great year for fish. They weren't catching mackerel or lobsters, but other fish which they went after in the day-time in big boats with a seine net in each boat, and the farmers of the countryside bought the catch from them.

I had been frequenting school—whenever we could get one—until I was eighteen. They had no great need of me at home for all that time, as I had a married brother in the house. His wife died and left two children. My mother looked after them till they could go by themselves. My brother went to America. Then I had to leave school, for there was only my father at home. I had left school for three years when I married, at the age of twenty-two.

Till that day I had known little of the world's responsibilities, but from that time on they came upon me. Everything I had to do with changed from that day. Marriage makes a great change in a man's life. His disposition and his view of all sorts of things alters, and, above all, it whets his appetite to be up and doing in life. As the phrase goes, I used to fancy, up till then, that food was sent from Heaven to us.

I set to work with keenness. Away I went to the strand to get seaweed for manure so that we could have more potatoes to rear pigs on. We had two cows at this time. At daybreak, stripped of everything but my drawers, with a rake to gather the weed, out I'd go up to my neck in the sea; then I had to carry it up to the top of the cliff, carry it to the field and spread it. I had no tea or sugar in those days, only milk, bread, and fish. I would be as early on hill as on strand—now off to sea, now hunting seals, another time out in the big boat with a seine net. Each of these

jobs had its own time. The seal chase was pretty dangerous. At a certain period of the year men would race one another to them. On one of these days there would be a heavy swell in Poll na Baise, and a man could only make his way into that cave by turning on his side and trying to swim in, or one must go into a sea-cleft and make a shift to kill the huge seals and fetch them out through that narrow opening. I've told already how one day I nearly lost my life when the rope had broken and my uncle was drowning.

Since the day of my marriage I was always trying my best to provide for my household and get my share of everything that was going. For a long time to come my father was a great help to me in the house and out.

Ten children were born to us, but they had no good fortune, God help us! The very first of them that we christened was only seven or eight years old when he fell over the cliff and was killed. From that time on they went as quickly as they came. Two died of measles, and every epidemic that came carried off one or other of them. Donal was drowned trying to save the lady off the White Strand. I had another fine lad helping me. Before long I lost him, too.

All these things were a sore trouble to the poor mother, and she, too, was taken from me. I was never blinded altogether till then. May God spare us the light of our eyes! She left a little babe, only I had a little girl grown up to take care of her; but she, too, was only just grown up when she heard the call like the rest. The girl who had brought her up married in Dunmore. She died, too, leaving seven children. I have only one boy left at home with me now. There is another in America. Such was the fate of my children. May God's blessing be with them—those of them that are in the grave—and with the poor woman whose heart broke for them.

17. *Work and Wandering*

WORK AND WANDERING · WITH THE SEINE NET ·
THE YOUNG GANNETS ON THE SKELLIG · BOATS
AND CANOES AND TANK SHIPS · A TRIP TO
CAHIRSIVEEN SELLING FISH · 'COME ALONG,
BLASHKET MAN!' · ANOTHER TRIP TO VALENCIA
ISLAND TO FETCH A BOAT

THERE were seven seine boats in Dunquin in those days and two fine big boats in the Blasket, and, though the mainland tribe and the Island people were close of kin and much intermarried, they were always at odds over the fishing.

One day the boats from the two places were all gathered at Inishtooshkert. The fish were shoaling in great numbers. The custom was that each pair of boats had the right to shoot the nets in turn. Two boats had to attend to the seine net every time it was shot, one boat paying it out and the other keeping it out of danger. If there was fish in the net, it was a slow business to get it into the boat, as the weight of the fish and the run of the tide were always carrying it on to the rocks.

We had shot the net round the shoal, and, though the tide was running wildly, our two boats handled the net so smartly that it was out of danger before it had a chance to run on the rocks, and there was enough fish in it to fill one of the boats. That left the Dunquin people nothing to say, and the captain of our boat signed to them to shoot their net, or he would shoot his at once as soon as the seine was cleared. Rather than let the Island boat have its second shot, the Dunquin boat put its net out, and it hadn't been out long when the run of the tide began to carry it on to the rocks: there were crags and sharp points of rock waiting for it, and a strong spring tide was running.

Before long the boat which had the end of the net let it go, and off they went, both boat and seine net, through the channel northwards. None of the other Dunquin boats followed her, for they were afraid to—that same channel wasn't a thing to play with at that moment.

'On my soul and body!' cried our captain, 'sure the boat from Coomeenole is lost. Get ready your oars,' said he to the Island boat, 'and we'll go to her assistance.'

They trimmed their oars at once, and away went the two boats through the sound to the north, and the swell was storming the sky. The boats were through the passage in two minutes, and when we came in sight of the other boat she hadn't gone under yet—but that was all there was to it: she was full of water, and they were bailing hard to keep her from sinking.

The seine net was still in the water, for the boat couldn't carry it. Our captain told us to take the net into our own boat until the other boat had been bailed out, and then to put it aboard her. When she was dry we put the net aboard.

We had a boatful of fish in the two boats. We had to tie the Dunquin boat to us with a rope, and then the two boats must tow her through the passage southwards, which she had been carried through northwards. Our captain cursed the Dunquin people again and again for deserting the boat, and he cursed the boat he had saved as well for shooting their net.

If I ever got a big job of work done any day, it wasn't the days when I was cutting turf, particularly so long as the poet lived, and was able to go on the hill. He was pitifully old at this time when he was herding the black cow on the mountain.

One day, when I was just getting down to my work on the south side of the Island—a warm day of sun and pleasantness—I'd been cutting for a bit, but not for long, when I heard a voice above me. I recognized it all right,

and, may God forgive me, I'd no great hankering after its owner, not that I disliked him, but because he always turned my days into idle ones.

'Yerra, stop a bit, the day's long,' said the poet, who was coming from the north side of the hill at the moment when he spotted me.

'Do you see those rocks to the south?' said he. 'Those are the Skelligs. My father spent a day fighting in them once.'

'How did that come about?' said I. And if I lacked knowledge when I put the question, I didn't lack it long, for the poet was eager to tell the tale, lying there with his belly turned up to the sun:

'The young of the gannet are called "corrai", and, when they are in season, they are all fat. All the gannets hatch on the smallest of the Skelligs, and you never saw anything like the crowds of young birds there. A boat with a crew of twelve men used to be guarding the rock, well paid by the man who owned it. This time a boat set sail from Dunquin at night with eight men in her, my father among them, and they never rested till they got to the rock at day-break. They sprang up it and fell to gathering the birds into the boat at full speed; and it was easy to collect a load of them, for every single one of those young birds was as heavy as a fat goose.

'The captain stopped them then, saying that the boat was full enough and that they must go aboard and be making the best of their way home. So they did at once, and away they went, leaving the rock with their big boat full of fat birds, and they were in fine spirits for the journey home.'

'As they were turning the point of the rock to strike out into the bay, what should they see coming to meet them but the guard boat; they hadn't seen one another till that moment. The guard boat ran up along their gunwale at

once, and they commanded them to throw the birds into their own boat in a jiffy; and even that wouldn't get them off, for they must go with them as prisoners, and their boat, too; and, if they didn't find a rope round their necks, they would have no reason to complain!

'But the Dunquin men didn't throw the birds in to them, and so one of the guards jumped on board and tied a rope to the stern and they began to tow them swiftly and strongly, them and their boat and their birds, towards the land.

'They had gone on so for about a quarter of a mile when a man in the bird boat suddenly jumped up and laid an axe to the rope that was tied to the stern of his boat, and that put the guards in a wild rage. They turned on the other boat, and some of them sprang on board and they fell to hitting at one another with oars and hatchets, and any weapon they could find in the boat, till they bled one another like a slaughtered ox.

'The bird boat won the fight, though it was twelve to eight. The eight Dunquin men knocked the other crew about till they couldn't stir hand or foot. They sprang into the boat and plugged the rowlock holes, and towed them out some distance into the bay, intending to leave them at the sea's mercy, boat and all, so as to finish them altogether. There was a widow's son in the guard boat who had never lifted hand or foot in the fight.

'"It's a shameful thing to send me to my death when I never interfered with you," said he.

'The captain of the other boat said to him: "If we set the sail for you, do you think you could get home to shore with it?" He said he could. Two men went on board and set the sail to rights for him, and he faced her towards his own landing-place.

'The Dunquin boat got back to its own harbour, its crew cut and gashed and mangled, their boat full of fat

young gannets and they themselves not too easy in their minds.'

'And,' said I to the poet, 'have you any tale to tell of the Iveragh boat?'

'I have. The man they hoisted the sail for got her to shore. Two of them were dead, and the rest were sent into hospital. After that they were less keen on that sort of chase and the guard was taken off the rock, and those birds are no longer eaten in these days.'

He told this long tale fine and easy, without effort or haste. Then he said:

'Maybe we may as well do a little more cutting in the bog, it isn't long till dinner time.' And he sprang up and cleared off from me up the hill.

When I myself jumped up after he had gone and saw where the sun had got to, I was in a very bad temper—the best part of the day was spent and I hadn't yet cut three ass-loads of turf. Where was all the work I had promised myself I would do when I left the house in the morning? And another thought ran through my mind: was I myself fated beyond all the people in the Island to have all my time wasted by the poet?—for I never saw him frequenting any of the others, but only me. These thoughts made a great change in me, so that I determined the very next time he should run into me that I wouldn't speak a word to him, and then he'd have to leave me. But that is a plan that I never carried into action, and I'm glad of it.

At that time there wasn't a single canoe here or any of the gear to suit them, only big boats that were always managed by a crew of eight. Each boat carried a big, heavy seine net, with stones tied to the bottom of the net to sink it, and corks on the upper rope to keep the top of the net on the surface. There were little boats, too, used by old men and young lads for line fishing, and they would often be full of the sort of fish that is caught that way.

Somebody said one day that two of the Islanders had gone to a fair in Dingle, and that they had bought a canoe from a man when they were drunk. Before long we saw her coming, and we marvelled at her. The women whose husbands were in her began a long, soft, musical lament when they saw the quill of a boat that they were in. But two of the young lads went up to them and said:

'Yerra, keep your senses, couldn't two of us do the job for you just as well even if they are drowned?'

I never heard such a cursing as the two lads got from the two keening women, for they thought that it was for lack of sympathy they mocked them. I was near the women at this moment, and I had a good laugh at the boys' joke. Isn't it ready they were to take up with the two wailing women the very moment their husbands should have left them?

A day or two after this I went up the hill to fetch a load of turf, and what should I see but this very canoe, I thought, down below me, full of some objects which they were throwing into the sea. But I drove on and brought down the load of turf. But it wasn't the canoe the two men had brought at all, for that one was in the Island creek.

Nothing more happened till the evening, when the canoe came round the Gob from the south with four men in her, who carried her up the Island quay and began to inquire for lodgings. They had a few potatoes and 'kitchen' with them in a white bag. They found a house to put up in. They were from Dingle, and, of course, we knew them well.

They stayed in Pats Heamish's house, and they had brought their own food with them, intending only to spend a week at a time, as they had to go home with the catch. The things I had seen them throwing into the sea were pots to catch lobsters. The Blasket people were as strange to that sort of fishing tackle as any bank clerk at

that time. Not much of the year had gone before there were four Dingle canoes fishing lobsters round the Blasket after this fashion. The Dingle fishermen took hundreds of pounds worth of lobsters from the waters round the Island before we had any notion how to make a shilling out of them. They fetched a pound the dozen, and, to make the story better, the dozen was easy got.

When the people found out how it was done the two who had bought the canoe put pots into her. They took another lad in with them. They fished for a year—the only boat from the Island—and made money. Next year off went the crews, racing one another to get canoes, and they were difficult to come by, for very few were being built. Every new one cost from eight to ten pounds. I went off like the rest to get one, and Pats Heamish went with me. We took another good fellow with us. I found a canoe easily enough, just built, in the hands of a relation of mine, and for eight pounds we brought it away with us. We had to go out again after wifes to make the pots with, and we had had plenty of trouble by the time they were catching fish for us. We rubbed through the season and the fine weather with them, and we had ten pounds apiece after paying for the canoe.

Merchants from Dingle used to buy the lobsters from us in those days, and others of us used to send them to market on our own. They made an excellent fishery, for the seine fishing had failed by this.

When there were a dozen canoes fishing lobsters in this Island, people in England got to hear about it, and a company there sent a tank boat to serve the place. A tank boat is a boat or vessel which has a device to allow the sea to flow in and out in part of the hull to preserve the lobsters alive there.

Pats Heamish and I applied ourselves to the lobster fishing early and late. They fetched ten shillings a dozen

for a good part of the year, and when they grew scarce the price was a shilling apiece. It went on like this for two or three years, and another company in England dispatched another ship to the Blasket which offered a shilling extra a dozen for them. The new man was the man for us, you may be sure, particularly as he raised the price. Half the canoes went to one and half to the other, so as to keep them going.

Lobsters were plentiful in those days. In a few years' time boats from France began to call, offering a shilling a fish all through the year. So they went on till there were five companies blowing their horns off the Blasket coast in quest of lobsters.

A few years went by like this, and the fishers didn't want for shillings, as the boats came to our very threshold with yellow gold on board to pay for the catch, however big the haul might be. Just at the time that these companies were sending their boats to us, the talk was beginning throughout Ireland about self-government, or Home Rule, as it is called in another language. I often told the fishermen that Home Rule had come to the Irish without their knowing it, and that the first beginning of it had been made in the Blasket now that the yellow gold of England and France was coming to our thresholds to purchase our fish, and we didn't give a curse for anybody.

Nobody knows how much gold and silver those ships left along the Kerry coast in those days; while in the rest of the year there were other merchants to buy mackerel and steamships were chartered by them to carry them fresh all over the world. One night in March I got five or six hundred May mackerel and brought them to the Dingle quay. We got four pounds a hundred for them.

So long as those ships were coming to the coast, no poor man wanted for a pound. Lobsters were to be caught every season. Shoals of fish swimming on the surface were to be

caught at night in part of every year, and we did very well with them, for we had the big boats and all the tackle after the seine fishery had failed.

One of these years we had had a great haul overnight, and when we had cured the fish—great heaps of it—there was no sale for it in Dingle. A report ran through the countryside that there was a great demand for fish in Cahirsiveen, for it was scarce there. Then the crew of our boat began to stir one another up, arguing that we were a poor lot if we didn't load up our boat with it, set her sails, and be off with her southwards through Dingle Bay, for it was there we should sell our fish soonest.

Next Monday in the morning we filled up the *Black Boar* with salted mackerel—of fish that wasn't very large or coarse. We had a fair wind blowing to the south to fill our sails till we reached the lighthouse in the mouth of Valencia harbour, and from there on to Cahirsiveen.

When we reached the quay there, a crowd came to meet us. We wanted to find out if there were any buyers of fish in the place, and we were told that there were; some of them were on the spot. One of them started to offer for the fish, but the price he offered was less than our expectations. Another man came down the slip and welcomed us heartily. He had the manners and the way of a gentleman. He called us out of the boat and gave us a drink and bought all the fish in the boat for a crown the hundred, and brought us to his father's house in the middle of the town for a lodging. We had some food there, and then we handed over the fish to the man who had bought it, and when we had finished with one another and he had paid us, he stood us one drink after another and wouldn't take anything from us.

We found our lodgings again, and we asked the host by his leave would we have time to take a stroll through the town. He said that there was more than an hour and we

should have plenty of time. Off went three of us in company, for the rest in the boat were well on in years and had no taste for sightseeing. We went into a fine shop where drink was to be had and looked round us there. After a bit we came out and spent some time amusing ourselves by walking up and down the street. When it was time for everybody to be going to his own place, we returned to our lodgings, and about half-way there, at a street corner, three women came up to us, the three most upstanding, the strongest and the handsomest women for shape and build that any of the three of us had ever seen.

One of us had a grey head—though not from age—and the women spoke to him. They spoke to him in difficult English at first, and he knew a little broken English, but he couldn't understand very much of it properly. The other man with us couldn't understand English at all, whether broken or perfect. The red-headed woman who was speaking to us was a good six feet high. She had a shock of hair, and was a fine woman. She was a fishwife and guessed that we followed the same trade, and she was forcing her acquaintance on us. Before long I heard her say to the grey-haired man:

'Come along, Blashket man, won't you have a drink?'

'I woint nat, mam,' says the poor, grey-haired man, for he didn't grasp what was happening very well, and in a flash he turned to bolt, and, as he turned, she gripped him by the back-piece of his vest and tore away that piece from top to bottom. The red-haired woman followed us to the threshold of our lodgings to return the back-piece of his vest to the grey-haired man, and the two of us were short of breath trying to keep up with our friend's wild rush as he fled from her.

We slept well that night, and when we saw the light of day and had eaten something, we went out again. The grey-haired man had no vest, but he bought a new one,

and a back-piece for the one that was torn. We all bought novelties all over the city so that not a man of the boat's crew brought back to the Blasket a ha'penny of the price of the small mackerel. When we had all our traps gathered together, off we went on the homeward way.

When we got home we had to tell everything, and, as always happens, there was a scandalmonger in our company, and he felt bound to bring up the tale of the vest. He improved the tale for them, and he came near to setting the grey-haired man and his wife by the ears; and the rest of us didn't get off with whole skins either. Whatever price could be got for goods in Iveragh from that time on, the women of the Island were anything but keen to let their men go there to sell anything for some time to come. Idle talk sometimes causes great scandal.

It was not till long after that that we paid our next visit to Iveragh. A night of storm came, and the next morning one of the big boats had been swept away. It was our boat that had gone. There was a hue-and-cry all over the village. This was a heavy loss to us, for she was still a fine, new boat, and for some part of each year we used to make good catches in her. And now she was gone without a trace!

One day I had gone into Dingle. It was a Saturday. In those days foreign boats used to come overseas looking for May mackerel along these coasts, and their habit was to moor in the harbours from Saturday to Monday. They were in the Dingle harbour that day.

I went into a house, and there I heard a boy from one of these boats telling the man of the house that one of them had found a fine boat adrift that morning near the Skelligs completely undamaged, and that they had taken her in to the quay at Valencia and left her in charge of the priest of that island so that he could hand her over to her owners.

'Maybe it's your boat,' said the shopman to me.

'Maybe,' said I to him.

We described the boat to the youth, and he described it to us, and we made out that it really was the *Black Boar*.

I told the host to serve the best drink in the house to the foreigner who had brought me this good news. And the foreigner burst out laughing.

'Surely it isn't the man who's lost his little boat that ought to stand a drink to us who still have our boat and have done well this week! That drink is on me,' said he, and wouldn't hear a word against it.

When I went out I met a man from Dunquin with his horse and cart ready to go home, and I got a lift from him for myself and all the stuff I'd collected in the town. That was a kindness on his part, and I was very grateful to him for it. I stayed with him in Dunquin that night, and on Sunday morning the Island boats were out to Mass. I tell you when they heard that the boat was safe and sound across in Valencia they were surprised and delighted.

On Monday morning we went south with the other boat, eight of us, so that both boats should have a crew of four on the return journey. When we got across we made our way to the quay in Valencia Island, and there the boat was perfectly sound. One of the King's men came up to us, a coastguard, and put questions to us to find out if it was our boat. We said that it was, and asked him if she was ready for us to take away with us; if she was, we would take her at once, for the afternoon was fine for the passage north, and, if the sea should be at all rough against us, we had not enough men to take the two big boats. He said that he had no right over the boat, but was only looking after her; that she had been entrusted to the parish priest of the island and that we must see him.

The parish priest wasn't at home at all, and since this was the case, we had to take lodgings in Cahirsiveen that night. We found the house in which we had been before.

The old couple in the house made us welcome. Believe me, or take the tip of the ear off me, that we didn't go strolling much about the town after the lights were lit that night.

When we had made ourselves ship-shape in the morning, a drink was the first thing to warm our hearts; the next thing was a meal, and we took things as lightly and easily as though we were in the Blasket Harbour.

‘ ‘Pon your souls and bodies!’ says the captain. ‘ Is it that you are without a care in the world on you? When shall we have this old hulk of a boat in harbour in the Island?’

It was a mischief-maker, no doubt, who gave him his answer and said:

‘ This is one of the days of our life, and maybe the last day we shall spend in this town of Cahir.’

When we came to Valencia the parish priest was waiting for us, instead of our having to wait for the priest. We greeted one another, and he questioned us about the boat, and then handed her over to us to take home.

We couldn't be satisfied then without finding a bar to drink *deoch-a-dorish*¹ in, and that was a long and lagging drink. The mischief-maker was the first cause of it, but another man stood a drink after him, and then another and another, and, to make a long story short, we stayed there till night.

There was Dingle Bay to be crossed, and we were not strong enough for the two big boats unless we had a following wind, and that we hadn't got. For one that was in a condition to do his job, there were two that weren't. At last we agreed to wait till the morning and the early part of the day anyhow. The host made room for us, and that suited us well. The next day was a feast day. There would be Mass at ten o'clock, and we should have the long day before us after that. In the morning when we had had some

¹ Stirrup-cup.

food we went back through the island, for the chapel is in the middle of Valencia Island. We got there early, taking notice of everything that came our way. Some of the people there have large holdings—in the best part of the island, you may be sure. These are the foreigners. The rest have little land, and that in the worst part.

We got to the chapel like this, putting questions to a lad from the quay who was in our company. It was an old chapel, with four gables, and not very high or big. Two public-houses faced it.

When the congregation was collected they were all very neatly dressed, and though it was an island you would have thought that they had been brought up in the centre of the country. And as for clean, respectable clothes, those were the sort they wore. When we went into the chapel, the central part of it was open up to the rafters, while the rest of it was covered with a loft on the inside of each gable. Whether I said few or many prayers, they didn't prevent me from casting an eye on the congregation, and I didn't see a swarthy skin or a black-haired head among them in the chapel or out.

We gave the inns the go-by when Mass was over and started off back across the island; for we meant to go home though the day was pretty rough and gusty by this. We went into a farmer's house and got some milk to drink there. We said to one another then that we had best go where we could get a sight of the sea to the north, and we cast an eye over it to see what it was like, and whether it was too wild for us to make a course across.

When we went to the top of a round-topped hill there we came on the big slate quarry that is there on the flank of the hill. It was a wonderful sight for us. Coming down from the quarry we had a fine view of the place of that nobleman, the Knight of Kerry. He was often called the Knight of Glenleem, for his residence is here in Glenleem.

We had had no experience of places of this kind, and it is little wonder that we marvelled at it.

At that time of day in Valencia Harbour there was the greatest sight of masts any of us had ever seen. All these masts were on big ships or little vessels, for fishing boats had collected there from far and near that year after mackerel. Plenty of money was being made, and the poor themselves didn't want for a pound. The upshot was that, by the time we got to the quay, we had pretty well wasted the day looking at this and that. That did us no harm anyhow, for the day was settling. Though it had been very wild in the morning, there wasn't a breath of wind out of the sky by this time.

We ran down to the boats so and set them afloat and gathered all the traps that belonged to them into them. At that moment the mischief-maker, who was always in our company, spoke and said that poor men ought to quench their thirst before venturing into the bay to the north.

Another man answered and said that maybe the crew hadn't much money in their pockets.

'Sure it's a poor pocket that hasn't anything in it,' says the mischief-maker. 'I'll stand you a drink myself,' says he.

There was nothing else to be done but to go with him.

We went. He called for a gallon of porter. When the man who was standing the drinks looked round, there was one of the eight who wasn't in the house, and he sent a man to find out where he was. He was in one of the boats lying by the quay. As he hadn't got a shilling of his own, he was shy of going with the company, and the messenger was hard put to it to fetch him along.

At last all our thirst was quenched, and we started for the boat. We said farewell, with a blessing, to those who were on the quay that fair and lovely evening of holyday. We set the boats' sterns to land and their prows to sea, as the mighty heroes used to do in the old days, and started out

through the channel. The lamp was just lighted in the lighthouse as we were leaving the harbour. Off went our two boats racing together till we reached the landing-place in the Western Island, as we call the Blasket. As the night was short and fine, and we were in no haste or hurry, it was day by the time we got to our houses.