

door, he drove the little heifer before him into the widow's kitchen. There was place for the beast beside the goats, and it was too dark now to get her home to-night.

Katty had been crouching over the turf sods that smouldered redly on the hearth, but his hand upon the latch had made her start, as though after all these years it were still possible that her own Paddy was come back.

'God save you kindly!' said Hugh. 'Why, Katty, what ails you? Did you think it was a thief you had, comin' to steal all your big fortune?' and he laughed as he laid his hand on the shrunken shoulder.

'Faith, what would a thief be wantin' wid the likes o' me?' retorted the old woman querulously.

'What, indeed?' repeated Hugh with another laugh at finding his jest so seriously taken. 'I'll be in town to-morrow,' he went on. 'Is there e'er a thing I can be doin' for you in it?'

The road to town was too long now for Katty's old limbs, and it was Hugh who brought her whatever little wants the man coming round with the egg-car could not supply. It sometimes seemed that the packet of tea lasted longer when Hughie brought it, that the twist of tobacco was larger, the pinch of snuff more satisfying; once she had taxed him with adding from his own pocket to her order, but he would not admit that his skill in shopping was not alone responsible for this phenomenon. She would not have taken charity, yet, proffered thus, how could she refuse? And besides—but that was still her own secret.

'I was wearyin' for your footstep, avick,' she said, ignoring his question. 'Hughie, I've a thing to ask. Think well now, for I'm an old woman, an' it won't be for long. I'm lonesome up here, alone with meself, an' what would happen me at all if I were took suddent an' no one to go for the priest?'

She paused a moment, looking up to see the effect of her words, but there was nothing yet beyond surprise to be read on Hughie's face.

'Will you come up to me, avick?' she pleaded. 'There's the settle-bed an' all ready, ever since the day that Paddy left me; an' who has better reason than yourself to know that there's enough turf to last us the winter through? I'll be gone, please God, ere ever the spring come in.'

She did not know what she was asking. No one but Hugh himself—and maybe, unknown to him, one other—knew the reason that had kept him all these years in Drinagh. Of course, a fever orphan was a very different thing from a common workhouse child; yet even so, that a servant boy should dare to think of his master's daughter was a thing unheard of in a respectable house like the Carmodys'.

Yet Hugh had dared to think of, to watch, to love Maureen, but in so silent a way that no one dreamed of such a possibility.

Sometimes he questioned himself if he were not a fool to stay. If he had only gone four years ago to America he might by this have started to make a fortune. But deep in his heart he knew that such a thing could never have been. He might have put a few dollars by, but the first hungry child who begged from him, the first comrade in distress who confided in him, would have made an end to his little hoard: besides, and perhaps beyond this reason, he knew that the farm could not wait very long for the money of a rich son-in-law to keep it going. Any fair-day might make Maureen's marriage inevitable. There was a debt on the land on which interest had to be paid, no matter what the price of cattle might be. Had it not been so, the Carmodys would have been quite prosperous; but now things had to go before they had come to their full value. A little sum in hand could not be turned over to advantage for fear that the next pay-day might not be met without it, and it was only the united, determined efforts of Hugh himself and of grim old John Carmody that had so far warded off the evil hour.

For John was no more anxious than Hugh to see a stranger own the farm, and when Maureen married money it would practically come to that. All day long they worked unceasingly, and it was only in the long evenings that Hugh could feast his eyes on

Maureen. Sometimes carding wool, sometimes knitting, or even busy with her spinning-wheel, her place was always where the light of the oil-lamp fell, and he, sitting on the hearth by the big fleece bags, could watch and smoke and dream impossible dreams for the future.

And it was these evening hours that Katty asked him to give up—the golden hours of his life.

He sat down on the low creppie-stool and pushed the turf in with his foot. She could not see his face now, but she felt that for some unknown reason her plan was unacceptable. With a quiet gesture she laid her wrinkled, crooked, toil-marked hands on his.

'You don't know, you don't know how I'm needin' what I ask,' she said, with piteous quivering in her voice.

'I'll come,' he said, quickly, gruffly, and he rose to his feet, as though afraid either of her thanks or that his own resolution would fail.

But she did not speak, did not even say a mechanical word of thanks; only, as he went out, leaving the heifer to be called for in the morning, he caught a murmured Gaelic prayer that said 'God bless him!'

He meant to tell Mrs. Carmody of his proposed move next morning, and before leaving the loft under the kitchen roof where he had slept for the past six years, he put his few belongings into a heap together; but, going down, he saw that something more important than his own change of residence was taking up his mistress's mind.

'Keep in the pony,' John Carmody had bade him as he passed out to set at liberty the beasts that Rory had brought safely home the night before; 'an' throw the saddle on her when you've done with the milkin' of the cows.'

'Is it to town you're goin' this early?' asked Hugh carelessly, curious at this unusual journey.

'It is not,' returned John Carmody with an almost vicious snap, that without further explanation told Hugh in a flash that the blow, so long expected, had fallen at last. He did not know that yesterday John Carmody had received a notice that, owing to the intended sale of the estate, the money which had been advanced on the security of the land must be repaid in full at no very distant date.

There was a jobbing man on the Galway road who, it was well known, could give his son two hundred pounds when he went to look for a wife, and rumour had it that young Edward Gagahan was only waiting for the chance of getting Maureen Carmody. With himself wanting the girl and his father wanting the farm, there was little likelihood of the day's negotiations proving fruitless, and to Hugh it was already a thing settled when he saw the pony's grey quarters disappear round the corner of the mountain path. He had often thought of this day, and somehow in his imagination he had felt much keener pain than now he was feeling in reality. Nothing seemed to be real to-day; nothing seemed to matter, except that his work should be done. He could not remember afterwards having collected his tools, but in due time he found himself using them mechanically on the roof of the old house on the holding that the Carmodys had, beyond Derrynca, where the cattle went for a change of grazing in the summer. It seemed as though there was nothing in the world except this old roof on which he had to bind the thatch. Even when the job was done, it was more from habit than from any action of his that he turned upon his homeward way.

It was only late afternoon, but he realised dully that the evening's work had been hurried forward. The kitchen was already prepared for the coming of the matchmaker.

'Is that Hugh?' It was Mrs. Carmody who greeted him. 'Go out to the byre, lad, an' bid Maureen hurry wid the feedin' of them calves. The father may be in on us any minute now.'

Hugh turned as he was bidden, but as he did so he was at last gripped with the deep, tearing anguish that all day he had numbly been expecting, but that seized him now with the force he never could have even guessed at till it came. His footfall was noiseless in the slush of the yard, and he reached the door of the