

Women and Men

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Two days had passed now, warm late-summer days, and no one could pretend for any longer that something wasn't very seriously wrong. From where the two women stood, where a lane joined the road, the clamour from across the valley was loud.

"A mortal sin, that's what it is," the older of the women said, "to leave dumb animals like that." Cows were bawling, pigs were squealing; a continuous nerve-fretting noise.

"Do you think, maybe, she could have gone off again, and he after her?" The other woman was still young, in her twenties maybe, but it would have taken a second or third glance to realise this. Her face was strained and haggard, her hair thin, unkempt and streaked with grey. A wedding ring was her sole adornment. She was heavily pregnant. Four children played in the dust of the roadway, the youngest not a year old. Another child, a boy of maybe nine, stood between the women, beside the field gate, looking off across the valley.

"If the fellow had any sense," the older woman retorted, "he'd let her go. Far better off without her." This woman wore no ring. No, it's not that, Bridie. He would have come over to get our Jemmy to look after the stock for him, same as before. No." Her tone was grim. "They're there. The pair of them."

"Do you think so, Maura?"

Maura didn't answer.

"I heard her say," Bridie said, "that as long as the Sacred Heart lamp was burning, she felt safe from him."

"Ach, if she'd spent more time on her feet about the place than she did on her knees she'd have been safe enough without a lamp." Maura chuckled. "Or more time on the broad of her back, maybe!"

"Wheesht—the child!"

The boy glanced up with only mild curiosity. He looked too wise for a child. The squealing of pigs reached a sudden, frantic pitch. The child turned to gaze back across the valley.

"They're eating each other," he murmured.

There was a lengthy silence.

"What ... what do you think, Maura."

"I think, maybe the Sacred Heart lamp went out."

"God forbid!"

"Troth, he was a quiet man, poor Dan Peadar. Too quiet for his own good—and for hers too, in song!"

"She was a good religious woman," Bridie said. "At confession every week and at the rails every Sunday. Never missed a First Friday."

"Aw a real Holy Joe!" Maura sneered. "But what sort of woman would say what she said at Mona Myers' wedding? And what sort of man would take it, only poor Dan Peadar? A soft man, in song!"

"She had a wee bit too much sherry, that's all. On the day that was in it."

"And if you had too much sherry, would you say it? And if you did say it, sherry or no sherry, in front of our Jemmy, do you think he wouldn't break your jaw? And do you think he wouldn't be right? Troth if it was any other man whose wife had said it, it's a funeral the priest would have had on his hands."

“Wheesht!” the boy said suddenly.

The two women listened. The noise from across the valley had abated for a moment.

“What is it, Tom?”

“I hear my father coming.”

“God bless your hearing, *a mhic*.”

Then, as the noise of the animals abated momentarily again, the women heard it too: the sound of iron-shod wheels and hooves. The boy ran off. The other children ceased their games and clustered around the women. The frantic din grew loud again.

“What’ll we do, Maura?”

“Somebody’ll have to go over. It’s long after time.”

They exchanged a look, Maura’s solemn, Bridie’s full of fear.

“Is Dan Peadar after murdering the Nun?” the biggest of the little girls asked shrilly.

“Shut up you little trollop!” her mother snapped and raised a hand. The child ran a few yards off up the laneway, giggling, fingering a snotty nose. “God forbid,” the woman murmured.

The rumble of the laden cart grew louder. Across the brow of the hill the points of a pair of hames came into view; then the horse, head down, straining, and finally the cart. A man was sitting sidesaddle on one shaft, the boy congruently on the other, an old man’s face on him.

The man reined in beside the gate and stepped onto the road. He approached the two women leisurely, pulling a pipe and a plug of tobacco from the bib pocket of his dungarees. The women waited for him.

“No stir.” It was not a question. The noise from across the valley drowned out the snuffling complaint of pigs from the cart, over the splayboards of which a canvas winnowing-sheet, weathered grey, was tied.

“No stir, Jemmy,” Maura said.

The man set the empty pipe between his teeth and blew through it a few times. He put his hand inside one bulging jacket pocket and worked out a blood-stained corded package wrapped in butcher paper. He handed it to the younger woman. The woman took the meat without a word. He brought another package from the other pocket.

“Sausages. For the childer.” He handed that over too. “You might set the pan a-squealing, woman. I had a long day of it on the fairgreen.”

Bridie took a step toward the laneway, but went no farther. Like the others, in her mind she was across the valley.

The man began to whittle at his plug. He was a big man, up on six foot, stout and heavy, with shoulders as square as a door. He might be forty-five, he might be more, though not a grey rib showed in the hair beneath his grubby cap. His black moustache was thick and bristling, and covered his upper lip completely. Stubble several days old grew on his cheeks and throat, so densely that the porter-stains down the seams that framed his chin could hardly be seen against it.

His sister glanced at him, but didn’t speak, and again they stared across the valley, toward the stand of ash and sycamore, impenetrably green, that hid the desperate homestead. The wife stood behind them, silent.

The man shredded the tobacco between his palms, blew through the pipe once more, and took it from his mouth.

“Da?”

“Aye, Tom?”

“Do you want me to take the mare up?”

“Do that, son. Heel the cart up fornenst the stable door, and put them in there for the time being. Go handy now. Don’t hurt them pigs. Throw a bucket of water into the cart and brush it out. Leave the mare stand for a while before you let her near the trough. Take Packie there to give you a hand.”

The boy took the reins. The mare raised her head from the grass verge and threw the collar back with a thud and a rattle of draught chains. The two children led her off.

“Oh son?”

“Aye, Da?”

The man turned to his wife. “Soak some bran in boiling water. Then throw half a can of oats until it. “I’ll feed the mare later,” he added to his son. Then he filled his pipe, lit it, and smoked for the best part of a minute.

“So—no stir?” he said to his sister.

“You’ve ears on you, haven’t you?”

“I suppose I’d better take a look.” His tone betrayed reluctance. When he set foot upon a rail his wife said anxiously,

“Watch yourself, Jemmy.”

The man made no response until he was standing in the field. Then he turned and threw his chest out.

“Watch myself, is it? On the likes of Dan Peadar? A kabogue of a man that would be bullyragged and bullied by a woman?”

“Well—you never know. He might be lying in wait. With a knife, maybe.”

The man turned his head and set his face across the valley.

“Take a stick itself, Jemmy.”

“Have you nothing to be at, woman? I spent a long day on the fairgreen. Get up there and set that pan a-squealing, like I told you.”

Bridie set off up the lane, at a rapid waddle, carrying the baby. Maura rested her forearms on the gate and followed her brother’s progress down the brae, across the wooden plank that spanned the stream, and up the other side of the valley, until he was lost to view among the trees. The noise of the animals hit a fresh pitch of frenzy.

“Is my da going to get killed?” the little girl asked in her shrill voice.

“Wheesht, child!” The woman crossed herself and muttered something.

The sun sank lower in the sky. The children left their games and went home. The pigs stopped squealing; then the bawling of the cattle began to abate. Bridie returned to the vigil site. Neither woman spoke. The sun was poised above the horizon, the valley silent now but for the sound of children’s laughter and, overhead, the cawing of a cloud of rooks bound for the grove below the mountain. Suspended in the air were the smells of a late-summer evening: warm dung and dust, saved hay and, from somewhere downstream, the stench of retting flax.

“Well, his dinner’s on the hob and if it’s cold by the time he gets back I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

Maura made no answer. The two women peered across the valley.

A man stepped out from among the trees and began to make his way downhill. When they could distinguish his gait, the women said in chorus, “Thank God!” They said no more until Big Jemmy came up to them.

“Well?” Maura asked.

Big Jemmy turned his back on the women to rest his elbows on the top rail of the gate, and looked back the way he’d come. He took his pipe out. He shook his head.

“Well?”

“Never seen the like of it in all my days. Not since God put the breath of life in me.” He lit the pipe and puffed on it. He shook his head again.

“Are they ... there?” Bridie asked.

“Not since God put the breath of life in me. The pigs were eating each other. There’s two of them dead, and another that isn’t going to do. Milk running out of the cows’ tits onto the ground. The suck-calf’s dead in the shed. Never seen the like of it in all my days.” He shook his head again. “I should have gone over last night. Or first thing this morning, before I set out for the fair.”

“Now Jemmy, there’s no one wants to come between a man and his wife without good cause,” Maura said. “It’s not your fault.”

“Did—did you see any sign of them?” Bridie asked.

“Not a sign. The door was locked, and the curtains pulled. But there was a bad class of a smell. And I could hear rats squealing in the kitchen. And there was blood on the doorstep, and a lot of it over by the washtub.”

Bridie began to whimper. Maura crossed herself and moved her lips.

“I shouted,” Big Jemmy said, “but there was no answer.”

“Himself too, then, Jemmy?” Maura said quietly.

The man struck a match and held it to his pipe. He puffed until the tobacco glowed. He fumbled in his pocket.

“I found these in the washtub.”

He turned to face them and reached his hand through the gate. The sun had set now, but in the gloaming the women could see a set of false teeth on the outstretched palm, with brownish smears dried on them. The blood might have been from the butcher meat, but the palate plate was broken.

“Oh he killed her, the villain!” Bridie wailed. “He must have killed her. God have mercy on her.”

Big Jemmy took the pipe from his teeth. He looked across the gate, past the women, up the laneway, toward the sound of happy laughter.

“He must have,” he said heavily. “He must have. God forgive her.”

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