

# In the Middle of the Fields

Like a rock in the sea, she was islanded by fields, the heavy grass washing about the house, and the cattle wading in it as in water. Even their gentle stirrings were a loss when they moved away at evening to the shelter of the woods. A rainy day might strike a wet flash from a hay barn on the far side of the river. Not even a habitation! And yet she was less lonely for him here in Meath than elsewhere. Anxieties by day, and cares, and at night vague, nameless fears, these were the stones across the mouth of the tomb. But who understood that? They thought she hugged tight every memory she had of him. What did they know about memory? What was it but another name for dry love and barren longing? They even tried to unload upon her their own small purposeless memories. 'I imagine I see him every time I look out there,' they would say as they glanced nervously over the darkening fields when they were leaving. 'I think I ought to see him coming through the trees.' Oh, for God's sake! she'd think. She'd forgotten him for a minute.

It wasn't him she saw when she looked out at the fields. It was the ugly tufts of tow and scutch that whitened the tops of the grass and gave it the look of a sea in storm, spattered with broken foam. That grass would have to be topped. And how much would it cost?

At least Ned, the old herd, knew the man to do it for her. 'Bartley Crossen is your man, Ma'am. Your husband knew him well.'

Vera couldn't place him at first. Then she remembered. 'Oh, yes, that's his hay barn we see, isn't it? Why, of course. I know him well, by sight.' And so she did, splashing past on the road in his big muddy car, the wheels always caked with clay, and the wife in the front seat beside him.

'I'll get him to call around and have a word with you, Ma'am,' said the herd.

'Before dark,' she cautioned.

But there was no need to tell Ned. The old man knew how she always tried to be upstairs before it got dark, locking herself into her bedroom, which opened off the room where the children slept, praying devoutly that she wouldn't have to come down again for anything, above all, not to answer the door. That was what in particular she dreaded: a knock after dark.

'Ah, sure, who'd come near you, Ma'am, knowing you're a woman alone with small children that might be wakened and set crying? And, for that matter, where could you be safer than in the middle of the fields, with the innocent beasts asleep around you?' If he himself had come to the house late at night for any reason, to get hot water to stoup the foot of a beast, or to call the vet, he took care to shout out long before he got to the gable. 'It's me, Ma'am!' he'd shout.

'Coming! Coming!' she'd cry, gratefully, as quick on his words as their echo. Unlocking her door, she'd run down and throw open the hall door. No matter what the hour! No matter how black the night!

'Go back to your bed now, you Ma'am,' he'd say from the darkness, where she could see

the swinging yard lamp coming nearer and nearer like the light of a little boat drawing near to a jetty. 'I'll put out the lights and let myself out.' Relaxed by the thought that there was someone in the house, she would indeed scuttle back into bed, and, what was more, she'd be nearly asleep when she'd hear the door slam. It used to sound like the slam of a door a million miles away. There was no need to worry. He'd see that Crossen came early.

It was well before dark when Crossen did drive up to the door. The wife was with him, as usual, sitting up in the front seat the way people sat up in the well of little tub traps long ago, their knees pressed together, allowing no slump. Ned had come with them, but only he and Crossen got out.

'Won't your wife come inside and wait, Mr Crossen?' she asked.

'Oh, not at all, Ma'am. She likes sitting in the car. Now, where's the grass that's to be cut? Are there any stones lying about that would blunt the blade? Going around the gable of the house, he looked out over the land.

'There's not a stone or a stump in it,' Ned said. 'You'd run your blade over the whole of it while you'd be whetting it twenty times in another place.'

'I can see that,' said Bartley Crossen, but absently, Vera thought. He had walked across the lawn to the rickety wooden gate that led into the pasture, and leaned on it. He didn't seem to be looking at the fields at all though, but at the small string of stunted thorns that grew along the riverbank, their branches leaning so heavily out over the water that their roots were almost dragged clear of the clay. When he turned around he gave a sigh. 'Ah, sure, I didn't need to look. I know it well,' he said. As she showed surprise, he gave a little laugh, like a young man. 'I courted a girl down there when I was a lad,' he said. 'That's a queer length of time ago now, I can tell you.' He turned to the old man. 'You might remember.' Then he looked back at her. 'I don't suppose you were born then Ma'am,' he said, and there was something kindly in his look and in his words. 'You'd like the mowing done soon, I suppose? How about first thing in the morning?'

Her face lit up. But there was the price to settle. 'It won't be as dear as cutting meadow, will it?'

'Ah, I won't be too hard on you, Ma'am,' he said. 'I can promise you that.'

'That's very kind of you,' she said, but a little doubtfully.

Behind Crossen's back, Ned nodded his head in approval. 'Let it go at that, Ma'am,' he whispered as they walked back towards the car. 'He's a man you can trust.'

When Crossen and the wife had driven away, Ned reassured her again. 'A decent man,' he said. Then he gave a laugh, and it was a young kind of laugh for a man of his age. 'Did you hear what he said about the girl he courted down there? Do you know who that was? It was his first wife. You know he was twice married? Ah, well, it's so long ago I wouldn't wonder if you never heard it. Look at the way he spoke about her himself, as if she was some girl he'd all but forgotten. The thorn trees brought her to his mind. That's where they used to meet, being only youngsters, when they first took up with each other.'

‘Poor Bridie Logan! She was as wild as a hare. And she was mad with love, young as she was. They were company-keeping while they were still going to school. Only nobody took it seriously, him least of all, maybe, till the winter he went away to the agricultural college in Clonakilty. They started writing to each other then. I used to see her running up to the postbox at the crossroads every other evening, and sure, the whole village knew where the letter was going. His people were fit to be tied when he came home in the summer and said he wasn’t going back, but was going to marry Bridie. All the same, his father set them up in a cottage on his own land. It’s the cottage he uses now for stall-feds, it’s back of his new house. Oh, but you can’t judge it now for what it was then. Giddy and all as she was, as lightheaded as a thistle, you should have seen the way Bridie kept that cottage. She’d have had it scrubbed away if she didn’t start having a baby. He wouldn’t let her take the scrubbing brush into her hands after that.’

‘But she wasn’t delicate, was she?’

‘Bridie? She was as strong as a kid goat, that one. But I told you she was mad about him, didn’t I? Well, after she was married to him she was no better. Worse, I’d say: She couldn’t do enough for him. It was like as if she was driven on by some kind of a fever. You’d only to look in her eyes to see it. Do you know! From that day to this, I don’t believe I ever saw a woman so full of going as that one. Did you ever happen to see little birds flying about in the air like they were flying for the divilment of it and nothing else? And did you ever see the way they give a sort of a little leap in the air, like they were forcing themselves to go a bit higher still, higher than they ought? Well, it struck me that was the way Bridie was acting, as she rushed about that cottage doing this and doing that to make him prouder and prouder of her. As if he could be any prouder than he was already with her condition getting noticeable.’

‘She didn’t die in childbed?’

‘No. Not in a manner of speaking, anyway. She had the child, nice and easy, and in their own cottage too, only costing him a few shillings for one of those women that went in for that kind of job long ago. And all went well. It was no time till she was let up on her feet again. I was there the first morning she had the place to herself. She was up and dressed when I got there, just as he was going out to milk.

“Oh, it’s great to be able to go out again,” she said, taking a great breath of the morning air as she stood at the door looking after him. “Wait, why don’t I come with you to milk?” she called out after him. Then she threw a glance back at the baby to make sure it was asleep in its crib by the window.

“It’s too far for you, Bridie,” he said. The cows were down in a little field alongside the road, at the foot of the hill below the village. And knowing she’d start coaxing him, Bartley made off as quick as he could out of the gate with the cans. “Good man!” I said to myself. But the next thing I knew, Bridie had darted across the yard.

“I can go on the bike if it’s too far to walk,” she said. And up she got on her old bike, and out she pedalled through the gate.

“Bridie, are you out of your mind?” Bartley shouted as she whizzed past him.

“Arrah, what harm can it do me?” she shouted back.

I went stiff with fright looking after her. And I thought it was the same with him, when he threw down the cans and started down the hill after her. But looking back on it, I think it was the same fever as always was raging in her that was raging in him, too. Mad with love, that’s what they were, both of them, she only wanting to draw him on, and he only too willing.

“Wait for me!” he shouted, but before she’d even got to the bottom she started to brake the bike, putting down her foot like you’d see a youngster do, and raising up such a cloud of dust we could hardly see her.’

‘She braked too hard?’

‘Not her! In the twinkle of an eye she’d stopped the bike, jumped off, turned it round, and was pedalling madly up the hill again to meet him, with her head down on the handle-bars like a racing cyclist. But that was the finish of her.’

‘Oh, no! What *happened*?’

‘She stopped pedalling all of a sudden, and the bike half stopped, and then it started to slide back down the hill, as if it had skidded on the loose gravel at the side of the road. That’s what we both thought happened, because we both began to run down the hill too. She didn’t get time to fall before we got to her. But what use was that? It was some kind of internal bleeding that took her. We got her into the bed, and the neighbours came running, but she was gone before night.’

‘Oh, what a dreadful thing to happen! And the baby?’

‘Well, it was a strong child. And it grew into a fine lad. That’s the fellow that drives the tractor for him now, the oldest son, Barty they called him not to confuse him with Bartley.’

‘Well, I suppose his second marriage had more to it, when all was said and done.’

‘That’s it. And she’s a good woman, the second one. Look at the way she brought up that child of Bridie’s, and filled the cradle, year after year, with sons of her own. Ah sure, things always work out for the best in the end, no matter what!’ the old man said, and he started to walk away.

‘Wait a minute, Ned,’ Vera called after him urgently. ‘Do you really think he forgot about her, until today?’

‘I’d swear it,’ said the old man. Then he looked hard at her. ‘It will be the same with you, too,’ he added kindly. ‘Take my word for it. Everything passes in time and is forgotten.’

As she shook her head doubtfully, he shook his emphatically. ‘When the tree falls, how can the shadow stand?’ he said. And he walked away.

I wonder! she thought as she walked back to the house, and she envied the practical country people who made good the defaults of nature as readily as the broken sod knits back into the sward.

Again that night, when she went up to her room, Vera looked down towards the river

and she thought of Crossen. Had he really forgotten? It was hard for her to believe, and with a sigh she picked up her hairbrush and pulled it through her hair. Like everything else about her lately, her hair was sluggish and hung heavily down, but after a few minutes under the quickening strokes of the brush, it lightened and lifted, and soon it flew about her face like the spray over a weir. It had always been the same, even when she was a child. She had only to suffer the first painful drag of the bristles when her mother would cry out, 'Look! Look! That's electricity!' And a blue spark would shine for an instant like a star in the grey depths of the mirror. That was all they knew of electricity in those dim-lit days when valleys of shadow lay deep between one piece of furniture and another. Was it because rooms were so badly lit then that they saw it so often, that little blue star? Suddenly she was overcome by longing to see it again, and, standing up impetuously, she switched off the light. It was just then that, down below, the iron fist of the knocker was lifted and, with a strong, confident hand, brought down on the door. It was not a furtive knock. She recognised that even as she sat stark with fright in the darkness. And then a voice that was vaguely familiar called out from below.

'It's me, Ma'am. I hope I'm not disturbing you?'

'Oh, Mr Crossen!' she cried out with relief, and unlocking her door, she ran across the landing and threw up a window on that side of the house. 'I'll be right down!' she called.

'There's no need to come down, Ma'am,' he shouted. 'I only want one word with you.'

'Of course I'll come down.' She went back and got her dressing-gown and was about to pin up her hair, but as she did she heard him stomping his feet on the gravel. It had been a mild day, but with night a chill had come in the air, and for all that it was late spring, there was a cutting east wind coming across the river. 'I'll run down and let you in from the cold,' she called, and, twisting up her hair, she held it against her head with her hand without waiting to pin it, and she ran down the stairs in her bare feet and opened the hall door.

'Oh? You were going to bed, Ma'am?' he said apologetically when she opened the door. And where he had been so impatient a minute beforehand, he stood stock-still in the open doorway. 'I saw the lights were out downstairs when I was coming up the drive,' he said contritely. 'But I didn't think you'd gone up for the night.'

'Not at all,' she lied, to put him at his ease. 'I was just upstairs brushing my hair. You must excuse me,' she added, because a breeze from the door was blowing her dressing-gown from her knees, and to pull it across she had to take her hand from her hair, so the hair fell down about her shoulders. 'Would you mind closing the door for me?' she said, with some embarrassment, and she began to back up the stairs. 'Please go inside to the sitting-room off the hall. Put on the light. I'll be down in a minute.'

Although he had obediently stepped inside the door, and closed it, he stood stoutly in the middle of the hall. 'I shouldn't have come in,' he said. 'You were going to bed,' he cried, this time in an accusing voice as if he dared her to deny it. He was looking at her hair. 'Excuse my saying so, Ma'am, but I never saw such a fine head of hair. God bless it!' he added quickly, as if afraid he had been too familiar. 'Doesn't a small thing make a big

differ,' he said impulsively. 'You look like a young girl.'

In spite of herself, she smiled with pleasure. She wanted no more of this kind of talk, all the same. 'Well, I don't feel like one,' she said sharply.

What was meant for a quite opposite effect however, seemed to delight him and put him wonderfully at ease. 'Ah sure, you're a sensible woman, I can see that,' he said, and, coming to the foot of the stairs, he leaned comfortably across the newel post. 'Let you stay the way you are, Ma'am,' he said. 'I've only one word to say to you. Let me say here and now and be off about my business. The wife will be waiting up for me, and I don't want that.'

She hesitated. Was the reference to his wife meant to put *her* at ease? 'I think I ought to get my slippers,' she said cautiously. Her feet were cold.

'Oh, yes, you should put on your slippers,' he said, only then seeing that she was in her bare feet. 'But as to the rest, I'm long gone beyond taking any account of what a woman has on her. I'm gone beyond taking notice of women at all.'

But she had seen something to put on her feet. Under the table in the hall there was a pair of old boots belonging to Richard, with fleece lining in them. She hadn't been able to make up her mind to give them away with the rest of his clothes, and although they were big and clumsy on her, she often stuck her feet into them when she came in from the fields with mud on her shoes. 'Well, come in where it's warm, so,' she said. She came back down the few steps and stuck her feet into the boots, and then she opened the door of the sitting-room. She was glad she'd come down. He'd never have been able to put on the light. 'There's something wrong with the centre light,' she said as she groped along the skirting board to find the plug of the reading lamp. It was in an awkward place, behind the desk. She had to go down on her knees.

'What's wrong with it?' he asked, as, with a countryman's interest in practicalities, he clicked the switch up and down to no effect.

'Oh, nothing much, I'm sure,' she said absently. 'There!' She had found the plug, and the room was lit up with a bright white glow.

'Why don't you leave the plug in the socket?' he asked critically.

'I don't know,' she said. 'I think someone told me it's safer, with reading lamps, to pull the plugs out at night. There might be a short circuit, or mice might nibble at the cord, or something. I forget what I was told. I got into the habit of doing it, and now I keep on.' She felt a bit silly.

But he was concerned about it. 'I don't think any harm could be done,' he said gravely. Then he turned away from the problem. 'About tomorrow, Ma'am,' he said, somewhat offhandedly, she thought. 'I was determined I'd see you tonight, because I'm not a man to break my word, above all, to a woman.'

What was he getting at?

'Let me put it this way,' he said quickly. 'You'll understand, Ma'am, that as far as I am concerned, topping land is the same as cutting hay. The same time. The same labour. The same cost. And the same wear and tear on the blade. You understand that?'

On her guard, she nodded.

'Well now, Ma'am, I'd be the first to admit that it's not quite the same for you. For you, topping doesn't give the immediate return you'd get from hay.'

'There's *no* return from topping,' she exclaimed crossly.

'Oh, come now, Ma'am! Good grassland pays as well as anything. You know you won't get nice sweet pickings for your beasts from neglected land, but only dirty old tow grass knotting under their feet. It's just that it's not a quick return, and so, as you know, I told you I'd be making a special price for you.'

'I do know,' she said impatiently. 'But I thought that part of it was settled and done.'

'Oh, I'm not going back on it, if that's what you think,' he said affably. 'I'm glad to do what I can for you, Ma'am, the more so seeing you have no man to attend to these things for you, but only yourself alone.'

'Oh, I'm well able to look after myself,' she said, raising her voice.

Once again her words had an opposite effect to what she intended. He laughed good-humouredly. 'That's what all women like to think,' he said. 'Well, now,' he went on in a different tone of voice, and it annoyed her to see he seemed to think something had been settled between them, 'it would suit me, and I'm sure it's all the same to you, if we could leave your little job till later in the week, say till nearer to the time of the haymaking generally. Because by then I'd have the cutting bar in good order, sharpened and ready for use. Whereas now, while there's still a bit of ploughing to be done here and there, I'll have to be chopping and changing, between the plough and the mower, putting one on one minute and the other the next.'

'As if anyone is still ploughing this time of the year! Who are you putting before me?' she demanded.

'Now, take it easy, Ma'am. I'm not putting anyone before you, leastways, not without getting leave first from you.'

'Without telling me you're not coming, you mean.'

'Oh, now, Ma'am, don't get cross. I'm only trying to make matters easy for everyone.'

She was very angry now. 'It's always the same story. I thought you'd treat me differently. I'm to wait till after this one, and after that one, and in the end my fields will go wild.'

He looked a bit shamefaced. 'Ah now, Ma'am, that's not going to be the case at all. Although, mind you, some people don't hold with topping, you know.'

'I hold with it.'

'Oh, I suppose there's something in it,' he said reluctantly. 'But the way I look at it, cutting the weeds in July is a kind of a topping.'

'Grass cut before it goes to seed gets so thick at the roots no weeds can come up,' she cried, so angry she didn't realise how authoritative she sounded.

'Faith, I never knew you were so well up, Ma'am,' he said, looking at her admiringly, but she saw he wasn't going to be put down by her. 'All the same now, Ma'am, you can't say a few days here or there could make any difference?'

'A few days could make all the difference. This farm has a gravelly bottom to it, for all

it's too lush. A few days of drought could burn it to the butt. And how could I mow it then? And what cover would there be for the "nice sweet pickings" you were talking about a minute ago?' Angrily, she mimicked his own accent without thinking.

He threw up his hands. 'Ah well, I suppose a man may as well admit when he's bested,' he said. 'Even by a woman. And you can't say I broke my promise.'

'I can't say but you tried hard enough,' she said grudgingly, although she was mollified that she was getting her way. 'Can I offer you anything?' she said then, anxious to convey an air of finality to their discussion.

'Not at all, Ma'am. Nothing, thank you. I'll have to be getting home.'

'I hope you won't think I was trying to take advantage of you,' he said as they went towards the door. 'It's just that we must all make out as best we can for ourselves, isn't that so? Not but you are well able to look after yourself, I must say. No one ever thought you'd stay on here after your husband died. I suppose it's for the children you did it?' He looked up the well of the stairs. 'Are they asleep?'

'Oh, long ago,' she said indifferently. She opened the hall door. The night air swept in. But this time, from far away, it brought with it the fragrance of new-mown hay. 'There's hay cut somewhere already,' she exclaimed in surprise. And she lifted her face to the sweetness of it.

For a minute, Crossen looked past her out into the darkness, then he looked back at her. 'Aren't you never lonely here at night?' he asked suddenly.

'You mean frightened?' she corrected quickly and coldly.

'Yes! Yes, that's what I meant,' he said, taken aback. 'Ah, but why would you be frightened? What safer place could you be under the sky than right here with your own fields all about you.'

What he said was so true, and he himself as he stood there, with his hat in his hand, so normal and natural it was indeed absurd to think that he would no sooner have gone out the door than she would be scurrying up the stairs like a child. 'You may not believe it,' she said, 'but I am scared to death sometimes. I nearly died when I heard your knock on the door tonight. It's because I was scared that I was upstairs,' she said, in a further burst of confidence. 'I always go up the minute it gets dark. I don't feel so frightened upstairs.'

'Isn't that strange now?' he said, and she could see he found it an incomprehensibly womanly thing to do. He was sympathetic all the same. 'You shouldn't be alone. That's the truth of the matter,' he said. 'It's a shame.'

'Oh, it can't be helped,' she said. There was something she wanted to shrug off in his sympathy, while at the same time she appreciated the kindness. 'Would you like to do something for me?' she asked impulsively. 'Would you wait and put out the lights down here and let me get back upstairs before you go? Ned often does that for me if he's working here late: After she had spoken she felt foolish, but she saw at once that, if anything, he thought it only too little to do for her. He was genuinely troubled about her. And it wasn't only the present moment that concerned him; he seemed to be considering the whole problem of her isolation and loneliness.



'Is there nobody could stay here with you, at night even? It would have to be another woman, of course,' he added quickly, and her heart was warmed by the way, without a word from her, he rejected that solution out of hand. 'You don't want another woman about the place,' he said flatly.

'Oh, I'm all right, really. I'll get used to it,' she said.

'It's a shame, all the same,' he said. He said it helplessly, though, and he motioned her towards the stairs. 'You'll be all right for tonight, anyway. Go on up the stairs now, and I'll put out the lights.' He had already turned around to go back into the sitting-room.

Yet it wasn't quite as she intended for some reason, and it was somewhat reluctantly that she started up the stairs.

'Wait a minute! How do I put out this one?' he called out from the room before she was halfway up.

'Oh, I'd better put out that one myself,' she said, thinking of the awkward position of the plug. She ran down again, and, going past him into the little room, she knelt and pulled at the cord. Instantly the room was deluged in darkness. And instantly she felt that she had done something stupid. It was not like turning out a light by a switch at the door and being able to step back into the lighted hall. She got to her feet as quickly as she could, but as she did, she saw that Crossen was standing in the doorway. His bulk was blocked out against the hall light behind him. 'I'll leave the rest to you,' she said to break the peculiar silence that had come down on the house. But he didn't move. He stood there, the full of the doorway, and she was reluctant to brush past him.

Why didn't he move? Instead he caught her by the arm, and, putting out his other hand, he pressed his palm against the door-jamb, barring her way.

'Tell me,' he whispered, his words falling over each other, 'are you never lonely at all?'

'What did you say?' she said in a clear voice, because the thickness of his voice sickened her. She had barely heard what he said. Her one thought was to get past him.

He leaned forward. 'What about a little kiss?' he whispered, and to get a better hold on her he let go the hand he had pressed against the wall, but before he caught at her with both hands she had wrenched her all free of him, and, ignominiously ducking under his armpit, she was out next minute in the lighted hall.

Out there, because light was all the protection she needed from him, the old fool, she began to laugh. She had only to wait for him to come sheepishly out. But there was something she hadn't counted on; she hadn't counted on there being anything pathetic in his sheepishness, something really pitiful in the way he shambled into the light, not raising his eyes. And she was so surprisingly touched that before he had time to utter a word she put out her hand. 'Don't feel too bad,' she said. 'I didn't take offence.'

Still he didn't look at her. He just took her hand and pressed it gratefully, his face turned away. And to her dismay she saw that his nose was running water. Like a small boy, he wiped it with the back of his fist, streaking his face. 'I don't know what came over me,' he said slowly. 'I'm getting on to be an old man. I thought I was beyond all that.' He wiped his face again. 'Beyond letting myself go, anyway,' he amended miserably.

'Oh, it was nothing,' she said.

He shook his head. 'It wasn't as if I had cause for what I did.'

'But you did nothing,' she protested.

'It wasn't nothing to me,' he said dejectedly.

For a minute, they stood there silent. The hall door was still ajar, but she didn't dare to close it. What am I going to do with him now, she thought, I'll have him here all night if I'm not careful. What time was it, anyway? All scale and proportion seemed to have gone from the night. 'Well, I'll see you in the morning, Mr Crossen,' she said, as matter-of-factly as possible.

He nodded, but made no move to go. 'You know I meant no disrespect to you, Ma'am, don't you?' he said, looking imploringly at her. 'I always had a great regard for you. And for your husband, too. I was thinking of him this very night when I was coming up to the house. And I thought of him again when you came to the door looking like a young girl. I thought what a pity it was him to be taken from you, and you both so young. Oh, what came over me at all? And what would Mona say if she knew?'

'But surely you wouldn't tell her? I should certainly hope not,' Vera cried, appalled. What sort of a figure would she cut if he told the wife about her coming down in her bare feet with her hair down her back. 'Take care would you tell her!' she warned.

'I don't suppose I ought,' he said, but he said it uncertainly and morosely, and he leaned back against the wall. 'She's been a good woman, Mona. I wouldn't want anyone to think different. My sons could tell you. She's been a good mother to them all these years. She never made a bit of difference between them. Some say she was better to Barty than to any of them. She reared him from a week old. She was living next door to us, you see, at the time I was left with him,' he said. 'She came in that first night and took him home to her own bed, and, mind you, that wasn't a small thing for a woman who knew nothing about children, not being what you'd call a young girl, in spite of the big family she gave me afterwards. She took him home and looked after him, although it isn't every woman would care to be responsible for a newborn baby. That's a thing a man doesn't forget easy. There's many I know would say that if she hadn't taken him someone else would, but no one only her would have done it the way she did. She used to keep him all day in her own cottage, feeding him and the rest of it. But at night, when I'd be back from the fields, she'd bring him home and leave him down in his little crib by the fire alongside of me. She used to let on she had things to do in her own place, and she'd slip away and leave us alone, but that wasn't her real reason for leaving him. She knew the way I'd be sitting looking into the fire, wondering how I'd face the long years ahead, and she left the child there with me to distract me from my sorrow. And she was right. I never got long to brood. The child would give a cry, or a whinge, and I'd have to run out and fetch her to him. Or else she'd hear him herself maybe, and run in without me having to call her at all. I used often think she must have kept every window and door in her place open, for fear she'd lose a sound from either of us. And so, bit by bit, I was knit back into a living man. I often wondered what would have become of me if it wasn't for her. There are men and

when the bright way closes to them there's no knowing but they'll take a dark way. And I was that class of man. I told you she used to take the little fellow away in the day and bring him back at night? Well, of course, she used to take him away again coming on to the real dark of night. She used to keep him in her own bed. But as the months went on and he got bigger, I could see she hated taking him away from me at all. He was beginning to smile and play with his fists and be real company. "I wonder ought I leave him with you tonight," she'd say then, night after night. And sometimes she'd run in and dump him down in the middle of the big double bed in the room off the kitchen, but the next minute she'd snatch him up again. "I'd be afraid you'd overlie him. You might only smother him, God between us and all harm!"

"You'd better take him," I'd say. I used to hate to see him go myself by this time. All the same, I was afraid he'd start crying in the night, and what would I do then? If I had to go out for her in the middle of the night, it could cause a lot of talk. There was talk enough as things were, I can tell you, although there was no grounds for it. I had no more notion of her than if she wasn't a woman at all. Would you believe that? But one night when she took him up and put him down, and put him down and took him up, and went on and went on about leaving him or taking him, I had to laugh. "It's a pity you can't stay along with him, and that would settle all," I said. I was only joking her, but she got as red as fire, and next thing she burst out crying. But not before she'd caught up the child and wrapped her coat around him. Then, after giving me a terrible look, she ran out the door with him. Well, that was the beginning of it. I'd no idea she had any feelings for me. I thought it was only for the child. But men are fools, as women well know, and she knew before me what was right and proper for us both. And for the child too. Some women have great insight into these things. That night God opened my own eyes to the woman I had in her, and I saw it was better I took her than wasted away after the one that was gone. And wasn't I right?"

'Of course you were right,' she said quickly.

But he had slumped back against the wall, and the abject look came back into his eyes. 'And to think I shamed her as well as myself.'

I'll never get rid of him, Vera thought desperately. 'Ah, what ails you?' she cried impatiently. 'Forget it, can't you?'

'I can't,' he said simply.

'Ah, for heaven's sake. It's got nothing to do with her at all.'

Surprised, he looked up at her. 'You're not blaming yourself, surely?' he asked.

She'd have laughed at that if she hadn't seen she was making headway. Another stroke and she'd be rid of him. 'Why are you blaming any of us?' she cried. 'It's got nothing to do with any of us, with you, or me, or the woman at home waiting for you. It was the other one you should blame, that girl, your first wife, Bridie! Blame her!' The words had broken uncontrollably from her. For a moment, she thought she was hysterical and that she could not stop. 'You thought you could forget her,' she cried, 'but see what she did to you when she got the chance.'

He stood for a moment at the open door. 'God rest her soul,' he said, without looking back, and he stepped into the night.