**Peig: The Autobiography of Peig Sayers of the Great Blasket Island**

**translated by Bryan MacMahon**

**from Peig: A Scéal Féin**

**by Peig Sayers**

A Feast, an Escort, and a Farewell Forever

A neighbouring family leaves for America – An ‘American wake’ – The convoy –

‘It won’t be long until I send you the fare’

What’s seldom seen is much admired: this statement could be applied to the people of Dunquin. Not very many of them had ever seen an auction and now the only topic of conversation was the auction day, for Muiris’s land was to be put up for sale on Tuesday and we’d have a great day’s entertainment.

On Tuesday morning the auctioneers arrived and every man and boy in the parish had gathered at the place where the auction was to be held. A large number of people were interested in buying the land but because it was in a very remote townland no one from outside the parish was bidding. Pádraig Scanlon, Muiris’s brother, bought the place, for he happened to have the cash – a thing very few people had at that time.

Muiris was thoroughly satisfied with the day’s work. Ever and always he was bent on going to America but he didn’t realize his dream until now. By the time it was dark, Muiris had sent out invitations to all the old neighbours to come and have a social night together. He had a barrel of porter and a gallon of whiskey and you can take it from me that with songs and good company we had what amounted to a minor wedding. For part of the night too, the young people held a dance.

Nothing would satisfy Muiris except to invite my mother. They were next-door neighbours and there never had been a cross word between them so that my mother was very very sorry to see him go.

‘Off with you!’ he told me, ‘and call in your mother. We’ll have tonight’s company together whatever comes or goes.’

Off I went, and of course, the poor woman was delighted. She was a person who revelled in company – may she and all the holy souls be at peace.

When she arrived, Muiris welcomed her and put her sitting on a chair beside the fire. He brought along a jug of whiskey and filled out a glass for her.

‘Here’s a health to you all!’ she cried, ‘and especially a health to Muiris, my gentle honest neighbour of old who never caused a neighbour’s child to cry not to mind coming to my door in anger.’

When Muiris made the rounds a second time with the jug he didn’t forget the old lady. But I swear to you that she soon got her speech and before very long she had started to sing Na Bearta Cruadha and she was bringing vibrations from the ridging of the house! Many a person said that in her day there wasn’t a finer singer in Kerry than my mother.

‘My soul, Muiris,’ said I, ‘the poet was right when he said:

The old crone crippled with gout

Thrown in the corner in pain,

If she drained a fourpenny glass

Her joints would dance once again.

‘Will you look at my mother now,’ I went on, ‘you couldn’t imagine that there was a thing in the world wrong with her.’

‘That’s the way life goes, my girl,’ Muiris said. ‘She had a great heart if it wasn’t for her lack of health.’

Then the dancing started at the other end of the house and we had revelry and applause till day brightened in the east. Time then for everyone to be making for his own home. I took my mother by the hand and led her away with me. A good part of the day had slipped by when she woke the following day.

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At last the day dawned when Muiris and his family were bidding their last good-bye to the neighbours. We had a custom at that time for everyone in the parish, great and small, to ‘convey’ the person who was going to America. The excitement and noise wakened me in the morning. Such running and racing! A large number of his relations were calling at Muiris’s house that morning to bid him farewell.

I got up quickly because I had a number of small jobs to see after. I had my mind now made up that from the moment my health improved I’d go into service again – that is if I got a suitable place. There was nothing to be gained by remaining at home, for however long I stayed there, all I’d get in the end was the road. So I realized that it would be better for me to turn a penny for myself and not to depend on anyone else. And another thing that forced me to a decision was this: Cáit-Jim was going to America with Muiris and she had promised me that she’d send me the passage-money as soon as she possibly could, and it would be advantageous for myself too if I had something put aside towards the fare when my own day would arrive.

I told no one what was going on in my mind but I was ready to accompany Muiris to Dingle. All the morning there was great activity; some people were crying and others were laughing. It’s a sad occasion when a person leaves for America; it’s like a death for only one out of a thousand ever again returns to Ireland. Is it any wonder then that the emigrants’ relations are troubled and upset when their own folks are leaving?

We had neither horse not side-car; all we had was Jim’s horse and common car and that was full of luggage. But whether or no, there was room for Muiris – the rest of us walked.

By the time we moved up the Well Road one would think that it was a funeral procession. The Dunquin people had the custom in those days of ‘conveying’ whoever was going to America as far as the stone heap known as the Leacht. We moved along the road, some of us downhearted and others in good spirits until we reached the top of the Clasach. Then or never there was a right scene; the parting of friends was a sorrowful sight, for parted they were from that day forward as surely as if they were buried in a grave, for none of them ever again met the other. Those who were not going to Dingle said good-bye to those who were leaving and then they turned their backs on one another; one band of people faced for home and the other for the Dingle Road.

We had a long walk before us but it made no matter since there was a crowd of us together and we never felt the journey until we reached Dingle. We made straight for Galvin’s for he was the Booking Agent for America at that time. Those who were travelling had to see after a lot of things – travelling cases and various odds and ends for the following day. I remained with them all the while and when night fell a great crowd of people had gathered into the house for those who were going away were to stay there until morning. There was plenty of company in the house that night for Mr. Galvin was a sociable man on his own floor and we had music and dancing and song until midnight so we never felt the time passing until at last the man of the house said that it was time to go to bed as we’d have to be up early in the morning. There the music came to an end and everyone began to think about sleep.

At seven o’ clock the following morning the little bell on the alarm clock rang and everyone did his best to get dressed so as to be ready for the breakfast. But not many of them felt like eating or drinking as they were too overcome with sorrow.

About ten o’clock they were ready to leave and we said good-bye to one another. I was very lonely after Cáit-Jim. Why wouldn’t I be, for she was my loyal comrade ever since I was a child! Needless to say, I was crying but this is what she said to me:

‘Don’t fret one bit, girl, for if God leaves me my health it won’t be long until I send you the fare. Good-bye now’, she said, and then she herself began to cry.

Before I had time to wipe the tears from my eyes they were all swept out of my sight. That was the last time we laid eyes on one another.