

Traitor

An Irish Story

A J S Crawford

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A.J.S. Crawford

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Foreword

For some thirty-five years my family and I have been taking our summer break in Castletownshend, a few miles from Skibbereen in County Cork.

The beauty of the West Cork scenery and the generous welcome of its people have drawn us back yearly, and my brother, after a visit to us there, has purchased a summer house in the village and is a regular visitor three times a year.

His family and mine have roamed that area for three decades and indeed are as well known there as in my home town of Dungannon, County Tyrone. One day we came across the Kilmichael monument with the plan of the ambush and related tombstones, at which point he, my brother, challenged me to write a story from the Republican point of view, knowing that I was a Northern Protestant and a loyal British subject of the Queen, with a grandfather who had been a Sergeant in the Royal Irish Constabulary and a father who had served in both the RIC and then the Royal Ulster Constabulary, right through those troubled times.

I accepted the challenge and began to research the contemporary events and places and when I visited the site of James Connelly's burnt-out home, the story started to take shape in my head.

I was a Primary School Headmaster and sadly had lost my sight. Fortunately, about that time I was lucky enough to have a children's script accepted by a lady called Bernagh Brims, Chief Education Officer for the BBC Schools Programmes, thus beginning a lifetime's friendship and a writing career for her programmes, and much more.

This, then, is the fictional result of my wonderful holidays in Munster and, of course, my brother's challenge.

Prologue

In the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, between ‘trait’ and ‘trajectory’, one finds:

traitor, *n.* One who violates his allegiance or acts disloyally [to country, king, cause, religion, principles, himself, etc.]

Would I have the audacity to criticise such an august publication? This is a rhetorical question, for anyone who knew my father and anyone who knows me will understand that even in the most prodigious of texts, misprints and inadequacies may occur – which those two were only too ready to point out.

You see, some years ago now, I happened to have circumstances, as opposed to greatness, thrust upon me to the effect that there are for me many and varied interpretations of the word ‘traitor’. And when it comes to traitors, Ireland has had more than its fair share.

Well, rather than ramble on, allow me to elucidate thus:

One

He was in his early forties, a man who might have been termed ruggedly handsome, but tonight the old anger and resentment smouldering in the narrowed eyes distorted his features as he watched from the upstairs window. Below their silhouettes were dark against the moonlight as they leaned together staring down over the rooftops stepped steeply down the main street of the little village to the flat calm of the long estuary.

‘One more run, Mary,’ whispered the young man as he kissed the top of her head. ‘One last run an’ that’s a promise.’

She didn’t answer for she had heard it all before, and yet, each time they needed him, his youthful adventurous spirit made him ready to go. She stared below where yellow oil lamps in the windows of the cottages lighted the unmetalled street down past the four trees in the middle of the way, to the harbour with its slipway and small quay. She wondered which of them it was.

‘But Brendon,’ she pleaded, her shoulders rising and falling in a great sigh of despair, ‘they know now that the carrier is from this district. Someone has informed. They would surely have had you that last time if it hadn’t been for the danger signal light flashin’ on Toe Head. Somebody was surely lookin’ after ye that night.’

‘True for ye, my lovely,’ he answered, running a finger down her cheek. ‘I’ve often wondered who that Good Samaritan was.’

He was silent as the events of that run came back to him. He had been still a mile out at sea when, alert as a cat stalking a mouse, he had noticed the winking lamp high on the headland above the rocky inlet, and as he watched it kept blinking into some sort of pattern. He didn’t understand but a nod was as good as a wink and he had ported his helm, picked up the off-shore breeze and sped away along that rugged coast to find the alternative drop beyond Tra Gumna. In the morning he had found out that they had been there all right. He would have sailed straight into their gentle arms and that most certainly would have been the end of all their dreams.

He shook himself.

‘Probably some sympathetic farmer noticed them settlin’ in for an ambush an’ my boat approachin’. It wouldn’t be hard to put two an’ two together.’

‘God bless him anyway, whoever he was,’ said Mary, and nuzzled her head against his shoulder. ‘You’ve done your share aye and more than your share an’ you can’t count on luck like that again. Surely there’s someone else? Another place? Somewhere that hasn’t a snake livin’ among its people. God, Brendon there has to be someone else. You’re not the only one with a sea-goin’ boat and the skills to sail her.’

‘No, but I’m the recent blow-in,’ he answered. ‘I’m the one who has none of the local baggage. I’m the innocent!’

‘But they, the informer I mean, knows all about you,’ she cried, exasperated.

‘Aye girlie,’ he answered, ‘the rat knows as you say, but obviously he hasn’t passed it on yet, my name I mean. There’s a pile o’ men with good boats but they’re already bein’ watched and there’s a pile o’ coves and inlets up and down the coast from Kinsale to Bantry. They’ll need exact information an’ the bastard hasn’t yet got enough King’s shillin’s to tell them that. No, Mary, they’ll never get me. They’ve asked me to do one more run, my love! Just one last night and then we’ll head for me aunt’s brother in Macroom as we’ve planned these three months past and leave it to them and him.’

He nodded towards the house and the watcher eased his face back into the deep shadow. The lad tightened his arm around her slim waist as he kissed her ear.

‘Trust me, Mary! Trust me! I know what I’m doin’. The boys’ll not let me down but God help the piece of dog-shit when they find him, that’s all I say. They have their own way of dealin’ with informers.’

Gently he turned her to face him and this time the kiss was warm and tender on her lips, before he eased her away to arm’s length and looked for one long moment deep into her eyes, green in the moonlight that glistened on the tears, welling up in them. He started down the track. She watched his back till he raised an arm in salute without looking round and disappeared beyond the sharp bend in the road. Then she turned and slowly made her way across the stubbled grass to the old Coastguard house, dark-windowed and silent as the lonely mountain behind it.

In the chill of the night the watcher gently closed the crack in the heavy curtain and stood there for some moments deep in thought before crossing the room and crawling back into the high four-poster bed and pulling the blankets over his head.

Inside the kitchen Mary lit the lamp, stirred the turf into life, and sat down in her father's large armchair, resting her head back as the tears wet her cheeks. In time the snoring from his room upstairs sawed her to sleep.

When she woke, stiff and cold, the grey dawn was paling the quartered window and she struggled up to throw turf on the hot ashes. Unhooking the leather bellows from the jamb, she soon had it blazing and swung the big heavy kettle on its crane over the flames. In no time she was sipping hot, sweet tea from her blue enamel mug. Refreshed, she placed the big iron pan on the glowing peat, cracking eggs into it along with slices of bacon from the fletch hanging from a smoky rafter by the chimney breast.

Soon the mouth-watering smell of an Irish breakfast was wafting through the entire building. Almost like a received signal, she heard his bedroom door open and his steps on the creaking stairs. He came into the kitchen, black-stubbled and dressed in collarless shirt under red braces holding up heavy dark trousers, and without a word sat down at the scrubbed table. His daughter set the plate in front of him and turned back to the fire to get her own.

'An' the top of the mornin' to you too, father,' she said. 'I trust you slept well.'

'How cud a body sleep wi' him about the place? Aye an' God knows what yis bees up te. Huh! If me an' the lads didn't need him, I'd soon give him short shrift, him an' his Northern uppity airs. There's somethin' about that boyo I don't trust for all his sugary talk,' he answered through a mouthful of sausage. 'Is there no fried soda?'

She flicked it off the pan and pushed across the plate.

'Well, dear father,' she said, sitting down opposite him, resting her elbows on the table and cupping her tea in her hands, 'you won't have to be bothered about Brendon for much longer for we're off next week and then you can fight with yourself, aye, and get your own fried soda bread. You're still a young man and perfectly able to do it. His aunt will see to ye as well. Ye always had a notion o' her anyway, ever since mother died. Oh I've watched the pair of yis. Well now's your chance if ye can spare the time from the other goin's on ye do be organisin', and of course prise her away from the bold Mr Heggerty. Wi' Brendon an' me out of the way, there's nothin' to stop ye.'

'You watch yer tongue on that score me girl,' he snapped, pointing the fork at her. 'My position'll not save ye if ye talk loose. None o' that's any o' your affair. Mind that well an' I'll thank ye to leave my private life to me as well. You keep your nose out of things that don't concern ye, me lass.'

‘Och do ye think I don’t know how yis reward traitors. Give me credit for some wit,’ she retorted.

‘Huh,’ he grunted and resumed his meal.

‘Well did ye hear what I said?’ the girl went on. ‘Brendon and me are leavin’ next week. His grandfather in Donegal has left him money an’ the wee farm o’ land. He’s sellin’ the *Northern Star* an’ with the proceeds we’re for Macroom and his Uncle Harry’s till the date for the Cork Ferry. Oh we’ve it all planned. There’s a packet-steamer from there to Derry once a month an’ we’ll be on it before the end of October. There’s nothin’ for us here any more. He’s finished an’ so am I. We want our own life an’ we’re off an’ nobody’s goin’ to stand in our way this time.’

He had stopped eating again during this final speech. Then in silence he finished his breakfast, drained his teacup and rose from the table. In the small back pantry he shaved and washed, before going back upstairs to get dressed. She was still sipping tea when he took his cap and stick from the back of the door and left without another word. Mary smiled at the departing back.

‘That has given ye somethin’ to think about, eh?’ she said softly as she drained her mug and began gathering up the dirty dishes.

Two

Brendon wasn't due until the morrow though he was never far from her mind, imagining all that could go wrong on this last mission. He had promised it would be just that but well she knew that they didn't let you go so easily, never mind the present dangers. All day she went about her chores of feeding chickens, collecting and scouring eggs, milking the cow and washing and hanging out the clothes – more like an automaton than her happy laughing self. As the light faded and night drew down she climbed the stairs to bed and tossed fitfully through the hours of darkness, knowing he was out there somewhere risking his life for a cause she barely believed in, while her father snored loudly in the next room. She had heard him return around one from setting the night nets, and heard the bottle clinking on the glass when he took his nightcap as was his wont, before going up to bed.

The first glimmer of dawn roused her to another day of worry which increased as the hours dragged by and there was no sign of him. She knew Brendon would have his lobster pots to lift and re-bait but that would have been done before midday. The afternoon dragged by but still there was neither sight nor word. Her father was out with his partner, Michaelleen, checking his nets, and when he did return he informed her curtly that he had heard nothing.

It was too late! Something must have happened. For the umpteenth time she went to the window, peering out into the pale light of the hunter's moon but no other darkened figure had trudged up the path since that of her father who, after his supper and whiskey, had gone straight to bed. Far below, the sea was like a silver duck pond with scarcely a ripple and she could see Horse Island a low dark line, barely a mile from the mouth of the inlet. She never knew the details but she knew that out there somewhere was the rendezvous where the foreign ship would lie.

The hours dragged by. She could neither read nor rest. Something must surely have happened. He had been betrayed once more. The Tans had him and even now were employing their well-known gentle persuasions to extract information. Oh God, the very thought!

Suddenly there was a quick tapping at the back window. She sped to the kitchen door and the next moment she and the young man were wrapped in each other's arms.

'Oh Brendon,' she whispered, momentarily tilting her head to indicate the room above. 'Oh sweetheart, I thought they had got you. What happened? Are they after you? Why the mountain path?'

He put his lips on hers and then led her outside. He threw down his oilskin and together they sat down in the soft heather away from the house.

‘They damn nearly did for me this time, Mary. Only I am the strong swimmer.’ He paused to hold her again.

‘What happened? This is the last isn’t it? Oh Brendon!’

‘They were waitin’,’ he went on. ‘Knew the very spot. Thon wee pier at Castlehaven. They were hidin’ in the graveyard. Jeeze it was close. They got the boat and the stuff but I rolled over the gunwale when some one of the eejits rattled a rifle bolt, just as I rounded the point. I’ll bet ye he gets a ballockin’ for his pains whoever he was, God bless him.

‘Made it round to Sandy Cove and climbed up to Carey’s. Michaeleen was still up, after settin’ the night lines with yer father. He gave me dry clothes an’ a few hot whiskeys. I’ve been there all day, waitin’ for dark to come to you. It’s a good thing I know the sheep tracks for I heard them on the road. When Michaeleen came back he made me wait till now for he passed two patrols on his way home. We kept tryin’ to figure out who is the informer. On an’ off all day we went over who it might be. I think he has his own idea but he wouldn’t say. “We’ll not put the black on any man till we’re sure, Brendon,” he said. “It would be a terrible thing to get wrong.”’

He paused to draw breath and kiss her again as she clung to him, herself breathless with her anxiety.

‘Then I came on to get here before daylight.’

He looked across at the lightening Eastern sky to his left.

‘I daren’t go home in case the informer gave me name an’ they’re watchin’ at the cottage.’

‘Oh thank God, thank the Holy Mother!’ breathed the girl. ‘You’re safe. That’s all that matters and we’ll be off to Macroom next week. I’ve told him already.’

‘Aye Mary my love but the Sergeant knows my boat, even if the rat didn’t give me name. Every patrol between here an’ Cork’ll be on the lookout for me.’

They held each other in silence, the full horror of that situation sinking in. Then Mary eased him away from her and said excitedly, ‘Surely ’tis true but couldn’t you say it was stolen or borrowed without you knowin’? Yes it was stolen. That’s the answer.’

Then, warming to her solution, she went on. ‘They couldn’t prove it wasn’t so. Don’t you see, Brendon? If you run you’re guilty. If you face them, what can they prove? Nothin’ but that someone took your boat without you knowin’. You were here all night with me. That has to be the answer, sweetheart.’

She was right. In fact they were both right. The Black and Tans were taking the cottage apart when he got down to the village just as the sun was coppering the long inlet. His aunt stood outside sobbing softly, a neighbour’s arm around her while the Sergeant did his best to restrain the excesses of the pseudo-military personnel.

‘Ah the prodigal returns,’ said the young Lieutenant, slowly taking his revolver from the holster. ‘And where have you been, pretty boy? Midnight stroll or just out for a sail in that fine green and white boat of yours? A strange catch, what?’

‘If it’s any of yer business,’ replied Brendon, looking the man straight in the eye, ‘I was with my fiancée all night.’

The soldiers grinned knowingly at each other, sniggered and made ribald remarks.

‘There,’ said his aunt, staring hard at the officer. ‘Didn’t I tell you? He went up to keep Mary company while her father was out on the night lines. I told you.’

‘Aye,’ said the Police Sergeant accompanying them, ‘He’s marryin’ Mary McCarthy, the daughter. Lives up in the old Coastguard station. Her father Mick fishes. Aye that is the truth of it all right, Lieutenant Brown. They’ve been courtin’ these twelve months past.’

He turned to Brendon.

‘Who did ye lend yer boat to last night?’ he asked pointedly, taking out his notebook.

‘My boat?’ echoed the youth. ‘Nobody. I wouldn’t lend the *Northern Star* to Pontius the Pilot himself. No way, Sergeant. Nobody gets my boat save I’m at the tiller. No bloody way!’

‘So you have no idea how it got into Castlehaven Bay last night with a cargo of bags of chemical fertiliser?’

‘Fertiliser?’ echoed the youth, innocence personified. ‘What are ye talkin’ about Sergeant O’Reilly? I know nothin’ about fertiliser an’ anyway what’s the harm in fertiliser? Can we not even grow spuds any more? Is it back to the famine ye want to drive us?’

Whoever had my boat has a damn cheek on them an' I'll bloody well find out who it was and believe me I won't be comin' to you when I do.'

'This'll take more investigation,' answered the Policeman, replacing the notebook in his breast pocket, slowly buttoning down the flap. 'I'll be havin' a word wi' Mary right this mornin' before you get to her an' ye'd better be tellin' me the truth.'

The Lieutenant listened grim-faced, and for a long minute stared at Brendon but the lad never flinched. Then he said slowly and deliberately, 'And now, Lieutenant, I would appreciate it if you'd get your bunch of thugs out of my aunt's house and take your business away from harassing helpless women. Or is that all you English are fit for? Damn pity the Germans couldn't put manners on yis.'

Everything stopped and the soldiers stood looking at their officer with only the raucous cacophony of the crows in the tall beech trees of the Castle grounds to disturb the ominous silence. For a moment anything could have happened. Villagers stared. His aunt put a hand to her mouth and the Lieutenant, himself scarcely a couple of years out of the mud, blood and guts of the trenches, eyes blazing, slowly raised the Smith and Wesson on its lanyard. Suddenly the Police Sergeant stepped between them, raised his fist and smashed Brendon hard across the face, drawing blood from his lip.

'Watch yer tongue, ye Northern trash. Easy seen yer not a Cork man. We show a bit o' respect when we're talkin' to the Law down here. Now get inside an' mind I'll be keepin' a tight watch on ye from now on till I know a damn sight more about this night.' His face was close to Brendon's, one eye flickered imperceptibly willing silence.

Without a word, the youth strode into the cottage, followed by his aunt. For long moments it was still touch and go but at last the Policeman, arms spread wide like one shooing chickens in the backyard, broke the tension, ushering the onlookers away to their own affairs.

'Come on now. No more to see here. Have you nothin' better to do?'

Replacing the weapon in its brown holster and buttoning down the safety strap, the Lieutenant nodded at his Sergeant who barked an order and with a clattering of boots and rifles, the Tans piled into the high Crossley Tender which roared away up the steep street, back to the commandeered Masonic Hall in Skibbereen. The Policeman stared thoughtfully after it while wiping sweat from the inside band of his tall helmet with his handkerchief, before replacing it in the sleeve of his tunic. He looked towards the cottage where neighbours

were helping to straighten the furniture. Then, shaking his head and with his hands behind his back, he turned down to his station residence, a troubled man, torn between two loyalties.

Three

The kitchen at the back of Heggerty's Bar was dimly illuminated. A heavy curtain had been drawn over the single window. The only light was the blazing of the turf in the open fire, glinting on the five pint glasses of stout on the table and shadowing the eyes in the five faces behind them.

'It was all too damned easy,' said the man at the head of the board. 'All too damned easy! They daren't lift him. They need him again. I tell yis it was too damned easy. Puttin' on a show, they were. A bloody show for the village. No notion o' liftin' him!'

'Ah feck it, Mick,' said Michaeleen, an open-faced, well-built fisherman in his mid-thirties. 'It couldn't be Brendon. Sure wasn't it meshelf that he came to, drowned like a rat. We talked some that night an' I'd swear by him. Oh I know he's a Donegal man wi' ideas above his station but he's a good lad for all that. Naw, Mick, I can't see it bein' Brendon.'

'I'm wi' you, Michaeleen,' said Heggerty, ten years the other's senior and just about showing a small increase around the waist. 'The lad's not the informer or I'm no judge. He bums a bit but what lad doesn't?'

'Aye an' his aunt's a fine-looking woman for her thirty-odd years, Seamus, what?' remarked a man in tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows.

There was a general chuckle in the room.

'That has nothin' to do with it, Mr Murphy,' snapped the publican. 'I still know my duty.'

'That'll do,' said Mick, tapping the bottom of his glass on the wood. 'Keep to the business in hand. This scum has to be caught and dealt with, an' that damned quick. We don't know the ins and outs of the Macroom operation an' it's better we stay ignorant for the present, but I tell ye, we need another delivery an' that before All Souls Day or no more than a week after – an' this time it's not fertiliser. Now put yer minds to it. What man from around here could betray his comrades an' his country at the same time for the English shillin'?''

'Aye,' replied Murphy, tilting his head and letting his gaze rest on the others in turn. 'What man would do such a heinous deed?' He paused, thoughtfully rubbing his chin, then added, 'Or woman?'

There was a silence in the room.

‘Hmmm,’ said the fifth man, a small rat-faced bald character, staring into his pint.

‘Now that’s a thought worth considerin’ so it is, Master. A woman, eh? We hadn’t thought o’ that possibility. Ye see what education does for ye, lads?’

‘Ah don’t be talking’ like a horse’s ass O’Boyle,’ said Heggerty. ‘Sure what woman would know the times an’ places? Talk sense man.’

All eyes turned on the publican but only Mick spoke from the head of the table, for none but the Commandant dared.

‘Any chance ye talk in yer sleep, Seamus?’ he asked quietly.

‘I’m not takin’ this,’ shouted the publican, knocking back his chair and leaping to his feet. ‘I don’t have to take that in me own house.’

‘Sit down, Seamus,’ said Mick. ‘Sit down, man. I’m not getting’ at ye and anyhow, yer both unattached adults. What ye do in yer own time is yer own business. As yer Commandant, I’m askin’ a straight question. Is there any chance ye might talk in yer sleep?’

‘How the hell would I know,’ retorted Heggerty, resuming his seat with an ill grace. ‘There is one thing I’m sure of no matter a damn if there’s anythin’ in what ye say. Annie is one of us through an’ through. She’s no informer. D’ye think she’d put her own flesh an’ blood in danger? Let’s all talk some feckin sense, not like a wasp lookin’ for somewhere to light!’

‘Hmmm,’ said Mick, sipping his pint. ‘That would be my thinkin’ too about the lady but it doesn’t alter my opinion of that nephew of hers. He knows the times an’ places.’

‘Of course, so do we all,’ offered the schoolteacher quietly. ‘So do we all,’ and again he studied the faces around him.

Mary’s father took out his pipe and proceeded to fill it from his pouch, slowly and methodically cutting the dark plug, snapping the penknife blade closed with a click and massaging the slivers in his hard hands. His companions sipped at their drinks. The room was silent, each deep in thought, figuring the pros and cons, jealousies and dislikes, long-past wrongs and distrusts, till Mick’s pipe glowed red in the gloom.

‘A trap,’ he said at last. ‘Put yer minds to it comrades. It’s the only way. A trap for a rat!’

‘Aye,’ answered Michaelleen, ‘but we haven’t decided the bait. Who’s the bait?’

‘I have,’ retorted Mick without hesitation. ‘Even though he thinks he’s marryin’ my Mary, we have most reason to suspect him so he’s the first. If necessary we’ll go through others but he’s the first. Remember, he’s the only one hasn’t taken the oath. That’s my decision. Now let’s get down to a plan for the Tipperary operation has a window in November is all I’m told an’ there’s no time to waste. Let me hear your suggestions.’ And once more the room fell into thoughtful silence and supping.

Four

It was a few nights later, after a quiet but obviously animated conversation over the bar between Heggerty and Brendon, as the other four customers judiciously applied themselves to their card game in the far corner by the fire.

‘Five draw,’ said the small man in the green hat sporting the red cock-pheasant’s feather. ‘Tanners in,’ and he began dealing, head slightly cocked to one side, like a listening bird.

Brendon drained his tankard and with a scowl, gathered up his jacket.

‘Where to?’ he hissed.

‘Ye’ll be met at the wee pier down the lane below Galley Head. Ye know it?’ said the publican in a voice just audible to the lad. ‘I know we’ve sprung it on ye but we want no leaks this time. It’s tonight. There’s no time for waggin’ tongues. Be as near three o’clock as ye can. Ye’ll be met. Same password. Positively the last run, Brendon. Good luck. Yeah, yeah, I know we promised but that other one doesn’t count. This’ll do it. Orders from higher up. Then you’re off the books so to speak.’

‘An’ ye’d bloody well better believe it, Mr Heggerty. You’d better believe it. God knows what Mary’ll say. I promised her the last time would be just that, the last run.’

The publican reached across his counter and grabbed the lad’s forearm, resting there.

‘You can’t tell her,’ he snapped. ‘Not a word till it’s over. That’s an order from the very top. Not a single word!’

‘An’ here’s an order for you, Mr Heggerty,’ Brendon hissed, eyes blazing with anger. ‘You tell them I’m finished. Done. Out. This is the very last run and be damned to them.’ He pushed between empty tables and slammed down the steps into the street, bending his head against the rain as he made his way home.

As the pub door closed behind him, Michaeleen rose from the table.

‘Deal me out this hand, Monaghan,’ he said and, taking his glass, eased up to the bar.

‘I’ll try another, Seamus,’ he said and lowering his voice added, ‘Is the cheese in the trap?’

‘It is, but not quite the way our leader thinks, God save us,’ replied the publican moving the pump handle away and back, filling the pint tankard. ‘There’s just the five Army Council

now who know where the real collection point is. Mick's conveniently away in Cork City on some errand or other, the Master's sound as a bell an' Baldy's on duty. If the lad's guilty, he has only a couple of hours at most to contact anyone and with O'Boyle watchin' him we'll know if he does.'

'Aye that wee shite'll not miss much. That's all he's good for. It wouldn't surprise me at all if he was the informer himself, always ready wi' the smart cracks,' answered Michaeleen, sipping thoughtfully at the creamy froth. 'Aye Brendon's the bait, but the trap is ours, Seamus, an' we have a fir notion who it'll catch. A fair idea!'

'I told him Galley Head, so as I say, only us five know the other.'

Michaeleen took out his pipe and busied himself with contemplation and tobacco plug.

'Hmm,' he said. 'So, if he's the one, the Tans should be at Spanish Head. I have detailed a Clon Volunteer to watch there to see if they turn up.'

'That's it, Michaeleen,' said Heggerty, 'an' if they're not there but at the real rendezvous, then the lad's in the clear an' we know for certain who's been at the sugar sack.'

'True for ye, Seamus,' returned his friend, putting a match to the tobacco and with a few practised puffs, and a hardened forefinger, had it well alight before continuing. 'Hmm. Just so. Just so, but we'll have to get our bit done first. Can't have the lad taken if he's innocent. Can ye close sharp?'

'No problem,' answered the publican. 'There's only the four o' them at the cards and but for Monaghan they have to rise for work in the mornin' so they'll not be late mid-week.'

'Right then,' said Michaeleen, 'see you round on the West Quay shortly after midnight. That should give us plenty of time. I have the other boxes already in my shmall boat. We should make it in an hour. OK?'

'See you then.'

He drained his tankard and made for the door.

'Goodnight lads,' he said, and waving to the card players he stepped down into the street, clicking the latch behind him and started up the hill and off along the Castlehaven Road.

Five

Brendon sat slumped in the big leather chair staring into the fire. From time to time he glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece.

‘What is Mary going to say? I promised her faithfully and all the arrangements have been made. We’re stayin’ with your brother, Uncle Harry in Macroom for a few weeks while I get tickets an’ that, aye an’ decide where we’re goin’ finally. I’ve done my share. We were to get the train from Skibbereen tomorrow.’

‘Where is it to be?’ asked his aunt quietly, sitting across from him with some knitting or other.

‘You know I can’t tell you that, Aunt,’ he answered, looking out at the inky night.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ she answered casually. ‘Just wonderin’ how far and if ye’d be back in time. You know, how long would you be and maybe ye wouldn’t have to alter your plans.’

He shrugged.

‘I can’t depend on that,’ he answered and took another look out the kitchen window.

A thick mist was starting to roll up the estuary. At least that would be a help.

‘I’m to be at the rendezvous about three,’ he said, ‘but the way things are, I can’t guarantee what time I’ll be back. I may have to run for it at best or—’

He didn’t finish his sentence but he didn’t have to.

His aunt looked across at him.

‘Well you’d better go this last time,’ she said. ‘Scribble a note to Mary and I’ll leave it up after you’ve gone.’

She rose, went into her bedroom to get her coat and run a comb through her fair hair in front of the mirror over the fireplace. She stared at herself, indecision in her hazel eyes. Then, picking up a lipstick, she touched her lips and moved them against each other to spread the colour evenly before dabbing scent behind each ear.

Quickly he scribbled some words on a torn sheet of jotter to inform Mary of the change in plans, stuck the envelope and left it on the table.

‘Right,’ he called to his aunt and glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece again: a quarter past twelve. Mary would be sound asleep by now, probably dreaming of their flight

on the morrow. His uncle would not know of the change. Just too bad but they could easily borrow a trap in Bandon and a couple of hours would take them through Dunmanway and into Macroom. Then from there, who knew? Even America! Well the hell with it. He could still do it but Mary would have to make her own way to the station and board the train no matter if he was there or not. He would catch it somehow. He would not return no matter how things went, for after the last time he was not willing to risk being subjected once more to the gentle ministrations of the Black and Tans if the informer was at his dirty work and another escape had to be undertaken. God but he would have to keep his wits about him this night.

Hastily stuffing his few belongings into his rucksack with Annie's help, he took his oilskins from the back of the door.

'Be in touch, Aunt Annie,' he said. 'Get what ye can for the boat an' send it on. I'll let ye know the address. Tell Mr Heggerty he'll find her moored at Clonakilty or somewhere nearby.'

His aunt glanced sideways at him but said nothing.

'I'll try to catch the train there,' he told her taking a last look around his room.

He kissed her on the cheek and she held him tight for a moment.

'I'll see to it and I'm glad you and Mary are getting' out of here,' she said. 'Things are goin' to get worse before they're better. God bless the pair of you. Let me know where you finally decide to live. Take care, Sweetheart.'

He kissed her again and, struggling into his waterproof jacket, slung his bag over his shoulder and stepped out into the thin mizzle and headed down to the little harbour, totally unaware of the small dark figure deep in the shadow of the entry opposite. Allowing him some fifty yards start, it emerged and, keeping close to the wall, started silently after him but froze in his stride as the quiet voice from across the street whispered, 'Mr O'Boyle, a moment if you please,' and he could just make out Annie, silhouetted by the oil lamp behind, standing at her front door.

'How's your wife?' she asked softly. 'The baby should soon be arriving, eh? Oh and how's Maureen, that pretty servant girl. Still willing?'

Brendon untied the *Northern Star* and, with the oars, eased her slowly from the wall and out into the ebbing tide, little knowing that away up the hill in the old Coastguard house, Mary slept soundly and did not hear the creak of the stairs as her father went down into the hall in response to a pebble on his window and opened the heavy door to the note-bearer.

‘Ah you’re back,’ she said softly. ‘I wasn’t sure when I saw no light.’

‘Oh I’m back an hour or more,’ he whispered. ‘The last train. Had to walk the whole cut out. Just been sittin’ up there in the dark watchin’ the sea. Ye get a grand view from my window. I like watchin’ the lights on the big ships far out, wonderin’ where they’re bound. Sometimes I have a wile longin’ on me to be on board one o’ them an’ get away to hell from all this. D’ye ever have that sort of wantin’ on ye, Annie?’

She did not reply. He turned to look at her and sighed.

‘Ah well, no use dreamin’ about things that’ll never be. ‘Tis the oul’ dog for the hard road an’ the pup for the boreen. Here’s where I am an’ here’s where I’ll die, I’ve no doubt.’

He looked at her again.

‘Can’t seem to settle this weather.’

He stood on the doorstep, one arm around her shoulder and seemed to be listening though the night and the sea made no sound.

Then he said abruptly, ushering her into the kitchen, ‘Come on away in. Sit there in my chair. It’s the comfortablest. I’ll stir the fire an’ ye can make us a drop of hot punch. Nothin’ like a drop of hot punch for the talkin’ or the sleepin’,’ and he took a bottle of John Power from the cupboard and set it and the blue-ringed sugar bowl on the middle of the table.

‘For Mary,’ she said, propping the letter against his wife’s silver-framed picture on the dresser, before throwing her coat on the sofa and filling a jug full of water from the white enamel bucket into the kettle and swinging it over the fire.

He stared at the envelope where it sat. Her back was to him when he lifted it and slid it into his pocket, eyes lingering on the framed face behind it.

‘Aye nothin’ like a drop o’ hot punch of a winter’s evenin’ to settle a body. I even knew a fella who tried two o’ them an’ he’s still alive,’ he laughed, easing himself into the other armchair as the kettle began to whistle steam.

‘Now, what have they been up to while I was away?’

Six

As the wind filled the jib of the little sloop, Brendon moved her over to the Rineen side, slipping down the long estuary and out into the Atlantic towards the dark mass of Horse Island, barely visible against a slightly less black horizon. Cloud obscured the stars and moon but the rain had ceased and with it the fog had thinned to a light mist. He cursed under his breath. Why couldn't it last till the job was done? For even so late in the year, the dawn would be upon him around half past six o'clock, some four hours away.

He had rounded the Black Rock off the tip of the island now and as he tried to penetrate the thick night for the bulky shape, a single momentary pinprick of light flashed away to his right for the merest second and he pulled the rudder hard to port, steering for its intermittent flicker. The mainsail filled and the *Northern Star* fairly danced over the modest waves, and in ten minutes, with a practised skill beyond his years, he was turning full into the breeze and gliding neatly alongside the grey hull and hooking onto the chains with scarcely a bump. Foreign-tongued whispers came from high over his head.

'Bold Fenian Men,' replied Brendon quietly and almost at once heard the boxes scraping against the steel of the freighter's side as the two coffin-sized crates were lowered on creaking davits. Carefully he guided them into his hold, almost filling it totally.

'Change in plans, my young friend, 'came an officer's voice from higher up, abaft on the bridge, spoken in strongly accented but perfectly understandable English. 'Rosscarbery Pier. The other is watched.'

Brendon stared up at the dark silhouette.

'But Skipper, my instructions are for Spanish Head,' he began but the answer came back quickly and with the authority of a ship's Master used to giving orders.

'Rosscarbery Pier! Good luck.'

'Same to you, Captain,' replied Brendon shrugging his shoulders in resignation. It was nothing to him. One place was as good as another so long as he was met, and the new rendezvous was closer. He could be back all the sooner. He slid the hatches back into place and tied down the canvas covers. Without another word, he unhooked and moved away along the hull and, running before the wind now, passed Tra Na Marbh, the Beach of the Dead,

getting its name from where coffins were brought ashore for the priest's blessing when the island was inhabited by more than sheep. Then he stood well out across Union Hall Harbour, where, as the story was told, Nelson's body, embalmed in rum, first made landfall after Trafalgar in this very same month just a hundred and fifteen years before. He headed for Glandor Point, some four miles away. A few early or late fishermen's lighted windows in the small village and some deliberately illuminated cottages on the port beam kept him on course, though truth to tell he could have navigated that shore blindfolded.

He was too intent on his mission and its successful conclusion to look back, but even if he had it would have been impossible to make out the low silhouette of the rowing boat, two men on the oars, slipping away from behind the freighter's long, curved, steel hull before its engines began to rumble into life and it eased away South into the Atlantic and its Mediterranean destination.

'A good night's work I do be thinkin',' hissed one of the men as they were swallowed up in the darkness, heading in the opposite direction towards Toe Head and the small cave beneath the cliff, only accessed by water.

'Tis true for ye,' answered his companion. 'Now it's only us an' himself knows the pick-up spot an' only you an' me knows of the wee change in cargo.'

Brendon turned his craft well out to sea as was his wont, lest unfriendly, prying eyes of whatever hue were keeping watch. This doubled his journey but kept him away from hidden rocks till a couple of hours later the fog had given way totally to a thin autumn mist and a gibbous hunter's moon was casting a pale sheen into the comforting darkness. He could just make out the shape of the Church of Ireland Cathedral, halfway up the hill as he tacked in towards his destination. He unclicked the mainsail stays and gathered it onto the roof of the small wheelhouse. Keeping close in under the shadow of the low cliffs, he dropped the jib fifty yards out and coasted easily on the flowing tide to the small, stone famine pier which served the Rosscarbery fishermen, half a mile from the town.

Every nerve was as taut as his sails had been minutes before. He scanned the laneway down from the high road and the sandy shores of the narrow inlet leading right up under the village itself. There was nothing. No lights shone and no bird called. Only the gurgle of the sea along the dressed granite stones made any sound. It was just too quiet. Surely someone should have been there to meet him. It was far too risky to hang about there for long. Where the hell were they? He eased the boat along to the steps, grabbed the iron ring and passed his

bow-line through, hastily knotting it in a highwayman's-hitch for easy escape. Still no sound caught his ears, straining and alert for the slightest click or studded boot on rock. Carefully he mounted the stair and stood erect on the little jetty, breathing heavily. There was a rustle from a bush behind him.

‘Just don’t move a single Irish muscle,’ came a voice. ‘Stand exactly as you are, rebel, if you want to draw another breath.’

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