

Home Coming

Twe-e-e-e-et!

The shrill shriek of the little steam locomotive drifted slowly over the verdant glen. The day was mournful, filled with dark, churning clouds threatening of rain. Further out, gossamer veils of mists hung down, masking the distant hills and valleys beyond.

A quite, nearly still stream meandered down the middle of the valley whilst the train continued puffing and huffing alongside it as best as it could. From time to time their two paths crossed and the train rumbled over the water on a low stone bridge barely wide enough to carry it.

The valley was formed between low mountains ground round and smooth by antediluvian glaciers. Now covered with a wild, curly growth of gorse and heather, thick oak forests once flourished on these hills. But those were cut centuries ago both for fuel and for building stout sailing ships. Now just a solitary ancient tree remained, the last of its kind, standing on a hilltop like a tired and wizened sentry guarding the sheep grazing beneath its outstretched limbs. Bare rock protruded through the heather where wind and rain wore the thin crust of earth away. What was once been a majestic forest was now just scrub barely fit for grazing sheep.

The floor of the valley was more regular, divided into a patch-quilt of emerald green fields separated by ancient rock walls long ago infiltrated by grass and shrubbery so they were more hedgerow than stone. Here and there a thin trail of smoke curled up from a thatch-covered stone cottage.

From a distance, the land looked green and robust but deceptively so, for it was tired and spent. Only a few cows were grazing. Fewer people were to be seen. And only one or two of the fields grew something besides grass. Centuries of deprivations drained this land of its people just as the oaks were all but exterminated by uncaring conquerors. However, although the land may have been raped and stripped of its bounty, it still endured – and it still had its beauty. The land is Ireland, in the year of our Lord 1924.

The whistle cried again, echoing through the otherwise silent vale. It was a short train, just the little locomotive, its tender and three cars. Even so, the engine labored under the load, emitting a

plume of thick gray smoke that billowed through the stovepipe stack before it rolled and twisted before it slowly drifted away. Although over a half-century old, the locomotive nevertheless looked bright and shiny in the soft mist-like rain; the wet gave a glisten to the paint, making it look deceptively fresh and new – just like the green valley around it.

And like the valley, the train was sparsely populated. Just a handful of passengers were aboard. If it weren't for the mail in the last wagon, there would be no excuse for running the train down from Belfast twice each day. Even as it was, the British administrators of Northern Ireland looked at the books with a blind eye when it came to tallying up the train's revenues. Like Ireland itself, the train continued on because there was no alternative.



Tired of the long journey, young Michael Corcoran sat in a passenger compartment, bracing himself against the wooden window. Bored, he amused himself by watching the fields as they marched by one after another. His black hair lay parted in the middle, slicked down with pomade; he was obviously an American. He dressed as only an American would – in a dark-blue, nearly black, pinstriped suit with narrow lapels and wide trouser legs – Oxford bags – that were the height of fashion in his native Boston. The suit gave him a gangster appearance that the girls found appealing, particularly when he took them to the speakeasies in the South Side of Boston.

His father was sitting next to him in the center of the bench-like seat, quietly reading. More sensibly dressed than his son in a tan Irish-tweed suit, Robert Corcoran looked at home. His thick mane of gray hair was parted to one side, held in place by its own weight and without the aid of toiletries. Looking older than he was, Robert Corcoran's bushy gray eyebrows peeked around the tops of his gold-rimmed eyeglasses. He turned a page and continued reading.

"How can you be reading a book?" Michael complained, glancing over his shoulder at his father. "I mean, after all these years – we're finally here, and you're reading that book."

The older man sighed as he put the book down. "You've gone to too many novenas with your mother. There is nothing wrong with Mr. Joyce's work. He's a brilliant writer and poet." He held the book up. "*Ulysses* is a master piece. You should read it."

"It's banned!"

Michael's father snorted. "I'm less afraid of burning in Hell than is the Pope. If he doesn't want to read it, that's fine by me, but he doesn't tell me what to read."

"You'll be excommunicated," his son warned, "if you continue to say things like that – particularly here in Ireland."

"Bah!" the older man grumbled. "I've should have been excommunicated thirty years ago when I left the seminary."

Michael held his rebuke. His father was the freethinker of the Corcoran family. Once a devote Catholic, Robert Corcoran once went to a Jesuit seminary only to meet the woman of his life. Torn between the Church and her, he made his decision and left the seminary. But he still loved the Church and so continued his study at university. Now a professor of religion and theology, he knew more of the Church than most cardinals and perhaps even the Pope himself. But he also questioned and grew into something of a gadfly, challenging Church doctrine with insightful queries that few churchmen dared to debate. He was not a man to be trifled with when it came to theology, so they left him alone, obviously pleased that he reciprocated by keeping his views strictly within the academic arena.

Only one person could stand up to him in an argument and that was Mary, his wife. A devout Catholic, she insisted on raising her children in the Church. Knowing that he'd have his chance to explain his views to them later in their lives, Robert Corcoran agreed, and so she ran their home as she saw fit. It was a good life, filled with love and caring. However, not without tragedy and pain. First John and then Patrick were killed in France during the Great War. Then, in 1919, the influenza epidemic took her, leaving him shaken to his very soul. Even the cardinals noticed it. For five years he published nothing. The gadfly had lost his sting.

It is said that time heals all wounds, but in Robert Corcoran's case, he needed more. But he had no idea what. Neither work nor vacations help. Trips abroad did nothing as well for he always came home to the still empty house. Finally, in desperation, he decided to search for his roots as many men his age have. Those were in Kilmurry, County Down, where his grandfather and father were born. Finally on a year long sabbatical, he was returning home, home to his roots, seeking the meaning of his life. His son, Michael, was joining him for the summer seeking adventure in a strange new land.

"How soon will we be there?" Michael whined. Although a

student at Harvard University, he still had the impatience of a child.

His father reached into his waistcoat pocket and pulled out his gold pocket watch. It chimed when he opened it. "About a half-hour yet, assuming the train is on time."

"It is," his son said with a snarl. "It's run by the British."

"We'll not have that, Michael. We're in Northern Ireland, and that's that."

"Ireland should be free – all of it!"

"You've been spending too much time with those IRA hotheads in the South Side."

"They're patriots!"

"They're sodden rummies who haven't a fig of an idea what Ireland is about. Most of them don't even know what direction it lies." Dismissing the discussion, Robert Corcoran picked up his book and reopened it.

Angered, Michael glared at his father. But he long ago learned not to argue with him – he always lost. Instead he turned his head and looked out the window again.

"There are trees now," he commented quietly.

"What?" His father queried, looking up from his book.

"I said that there are trees now. A few minutes ago there wasn't one in sight and now there is nearly a forest of them."

"We're through the Mourne Mountains then," the older man replied. "We're on the coastal plain – it's more fertile." He returned his attention to the book.

Michael stared out the window, watching the fields march by.

Revenge

Sean MacCana lay behind the stone wall, studying the road through the brambles that long ago blocked the disused gateway. The gateway itself was at a turn in the dirt rural road; it ran straight in front of Sean for nearly a half mile. He could see along all of it except for where a swale crossed. Even so, the top half of a man walking along the road would still be visible. Hemmed in on both sides by rock walls, the road was barely wide enough for a motorcar. There was certainly no place to turn around nor anywhere to run. It was the perfect site for an ambush.

Next to him lay Lonan Lynch. Both were young men dressed in tweed jackets, baggy trousers and caps; they were also hot-blooded and about to strike a blow for Ireland.

“I hear the motorcar!” Lonan whispered anxiously.

“So do I, but I don’t see... hold it, there ‘tis.” He raised a pair of binoculars to his eyes and nodded. “‘Tis them RUC pigs, right enough.”

“Let me see!” Lonan demanded, grabbing for the binoculars.

“Pay attention to yer job, Lonan!” Sean hissed angrily. “They’ll be in it in a minute.”

“But them binoculars be mine!”

“Yeh heard the major! I do the watchin’ and yeh do the blastin’. Now prepare the detonator!”

“Are yeh sure ‘tis them?” Lonan checked the wire connections on the detonator and slowly, carefully pulled the plunger handle up until it was fully extended. It wasn’t often they used dynamite for a job – it was hard to get. It was only used for special targets, like the one in the motorcar.

“‘Tis them,” Sean said quietly as memories drifted through his mind. His father and older brother were lying in a pool of their own blood, gutted with bayonets like cattle by the Black and Tans. “Them bloody, bloody bastards,” he whispered.

The motorcar was now only a hundred yards from the stick marking the spot. Suddenly suspicious, it slowed to a crawl like a wary wild animal entering an unfamiliar place, sniffing the air for danger. Two of the men in the open touring motorcar stood up to

peer over the rock walls on either side of the road, checking for assassins waiting behind.

As Sean watched through the glasses, one seemed worried, pointing to a brush alongside the road. A third man, seated in the back, waived his hands in disgust. He was Sergeant William Moore, late of the Black and Tans and now a police sergeant in the Royal Ulster Constabulary or RUC. He was their target.

“Hold it!” Sean whispered anxiously. “Hold it! They’re almost in it... Fock! They stopped!”

Panicked, he rolled over on his back and away from the gateway, fearful that they’d spot his face peeking through the brambles. His heart racing, Sean waited a moment before slowly and cautiously crawling back to see what the men in the motorcar were doing. If they found the bomb now, both he and Lonan would be for it – there would be no place to run and they were outnumbered two to one. Two of the men were out of the motorcar, checking the bush.

Sean inhaled – for the first time in what seemed an eternity. The dynamite was buried in the road not twenty feet from where the RUC men were now standing, probing the bush with a stick. *All they need is notice the disturbed dirt*, he thought darkly.

“What’s goin’ on?” Lonan demanded.

“Shush! Ye’ll be bringin’ them pigs down on us with that yammer!” Sean hissed.

“I’m whisperin’! ‘Tis yeh makin’ all the noise!”

“They’re checkin’ the road – not twenty feet from the fechin’ bomb. If they notice it, we’re fer it.”

“Fock!” Lonan groaned. The RUC men would shoot them on the spot – if they were lucky. If not, they’d spend a week of hell in some RUC gaol praying to die.

“We gotta run!” Lonan began to get up, dropping the detonator box on the ground.

Sean held him down. “Steady lad. Steady. We’re not caught yet. If they spot the bomb, we blow it and run. That will cover us some.”

“And if they don’t see it?”

“They’ll be wishin’ they did. Now be picking up the box, and get ready.”

Calmed by Sean’s cool words, Lonan picked up the wooden box and rechecked the connections. All was as it should be. In the mean-

time, Sean wormed his way back to the opening in the brambles and began studying his quarry.

“Get ready, they’re gettin’ back into the motorcar,” Sean hissed. “They’re movin’ now. Jest ten feet more, now five.... DO IT!”

Lonan pushed down on the plunger as hard as he could. For a second nothing happened. All he heard was the whirring of the magneto inside as it built up its charge. Then a crashing roar, louder than he expected.

The sound echoed as the two men waited, huddled together. Pinging sounds followed as bits and pieces of debris sprinkled down. Finally, Sean stood up and looked over the wall.

“Yeh did it Lonan!” Sean cried exuberantly. “Yeh got them nice and square. Look’t lad, look’t!” He urged his companion up as well, handing him the binoculars. “Look’t yeer handy work.”

Lonan took the glasses. The blast caught the motorcar from directly underneath, ripping it apart. Nobody could have survived. Most of the motorcar lay on top the rock walls, which somehow survived the blast. That impressed Lonan, the walls still standing, that is.

“Somebody knows how to put a wall up,” he said quietly.

“What?” Sean clearly did not understand.

“I said ‘Somebody knows how to put a wall up.’ Look’t, barely a stone is moved.”

Sean nodded as he began to disconnect the wires from the detonator box. “We’ve gotta leg it. That blast will attract every RUC pig fer miles around.”

“We must fetch the wire!” Lonan looked down the side of the wall, eyeing the detonator’s wire. It was almost as hard to obtain as the dynamite itself.

“Let it be,” Sean snapped. “We must be out of here now, if we’re escaping. We did our job and that’s it.” Without waiting for an argument, he began to run.

In protest, Lonan continued to stare at the wire. Finally, reason prevailed, and he picked up the detonator box and ran after Sean to the woods where they hid their bicycles. Within an hour, they should be on the fishing boat and on their way back to Dublin.

Arrival

The train pulled cautiously into the station at Kilmurry. Unlike his American counterparts who appeared to delight in throwing everybody on the train about by slamming on the brakes, this train driver entered the station on tippy toes, gradually slowing the train until it was moving barely at a crawl. It seemed to be neither moving nor at rest as it continued to inch along the station's platform.

Still fuming from his father's haughty dismissal of his friends as sodden rummies, young Michael Corcoran paced back and forth in the compartment like a caged animal, holding his valise in one hand, waiting for the train to stop. His father continued to sit, calmly reading.

"We're here, Father!" the young man called louder than necessary.

The elder Corcoran put his book down just as the train driver finally applied the brakes. The brakes hissed loudly enough although they didn't seem to have much effect. At last, the train stopped. Even before Robert Corcoran could get up and take down his own valise from the overhead rack, Michael had the compartment's door opened and was out on the platform.

"Com'on," he urged, watching as his father slowly opened his bag and packed the book away.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," the elder Corcoran grumbled while he turned to check that they forgotten nothing. Then, only when satisfied that everything was as it should be, he joined his son on the platform. They were the only passengers getting off. Two men in railway uniforms already had the baggage car doors opened and were unloading the Corcorans' bags.

"Yez must be Professor Corcoran and his son," a voice queried from behind. The two Americans turned and found a smile attached to a whiskered face. A derby sat at a jaunty rake upon his head. Short, barely five feet two, the man only needed a pot of gold to qualify as a leprechaun, at least in Michael's mind.

"Fergus O'Toole, at yezer service," the Irishman announced, tipping his hat. The twinkle in his eye told of his amusement. Michael, not certain of the man's intent, stiffened. His father, recognizing the name, chuckled and extended his hand.

“Ah, yes, Mr. O’Toole,” the elder Corcoran replied. “It is so nice of you to meet us at the station. You did write to say that you’ve rented a house for us?”

“Oh, most certainly, Professor,” Fergus replied convivially. “Tis a fine house, ‘tis. It has all the conveniences, if yez know what I mean. Dr. Wicklow is now in England, and sure pleased that the place is getting some use. And besides, the Widow Scott is looking forward for a family to look after again. She’s a fine cook and housekeeper. She’ll look after all yezer needs while yez be staying here. As I said in me letter, she’ll be living in the servants’ quarters on the third floor, if yez don’t be minding.”

Fergus then turned to Michael. “I don’t believe that we met,” he added, extending his hand.

Captivated by the man’s charm, Michael laughed, and taking the hand, he shook it firmly. “I’m Michael,” he said warmly. “I’ll be staying with my father for just the summer. I have to go back to school this fall. He’s on a full year sabbatical.”

“That will be good, finishin’ yeer education that is, Michael. Else wise ye’ll end up like me, doin’ what yeh can for a livin’. And Professor, I’m supposin’ ye’ll be doing some research here?”

“I guess you might say that, Mr. O’Toole,” Robert replied, surprised that a simple country bumpkin should know what an academic sabbatical was.

Fergus noticed that the porters had the Corcorans’ luggage on a wagon and were wheeling it around the side of the station. “Now, if yez will come with me, I’ll be takin’ yez to yezer new home and showin’ yez the sights of our fine town. This way, if yez please.”

Amused, the two Americans picked up their valises and followed as Fergus O’Toole led the way.

“What?” Michael uttered in dismay when they rounded the corner of the train station and saw the porters loading their luggage into a two-wheeled horse-drawn jaunting cart. The horse, black with a white blaze between its eyes, was looking over its shoulder at them. Fergus emitted a good-natured laugh when he saw Michael’s shock.

“No motorcars in Kilmurry, Michael,” he explained. “Not since Dr. Wicklow gone away, anyhow. And good riddance – it was such a bother, getting that petrol stuff shipped down from Belfast on the train. And, pew, did it stink! Worse than any horse. Isn’t that so, Dubhaltach?”

The horse whinnied when it heard its name and swung its head around to let Fergus give it an affectionate pad on its neck.

“Dumb-half-tack?” Michael stammered, trying valiantly to pronounce the horse’s name.

Still holding the horse’s neck in his arms affectionately, Fergus smiled politely at the attempt. “It ain’t easy speaking Irish, Michael, but we appreciate the attempt. His name is ‘Dub-hal-tach’, and it sounds German like, particularly at the ending. It means ‘black-jointed,’ so yeh can call him ‘Blackie’, if yeh prefer. Be getting’ in the cart, now, and I’ll run yez down to yezer new home and show yez where what’s at so that yez’ll know yezer way around.”



The half-mile-long trip from the train station to the two-story Tudor house on the far end of town took far longer on the horse cart than if Michael and his father had simply walked. Fergus insisted on stopping and introducing the two Americans to everybody he saw. It was only after a lengthy explanation of how their forebears came from outside of Kilmurry and that they came back to visit the homeland that he permitted Dubhaltach to trot along a few yards until they happened upon the next person.

Before long, they met the entire town, or at least so it seemed to Michael, who at first braded at the slow pace. But he soon forced himself to relax when he realized that his father was laughing for the first time in years. There was magic in the air that healed. Already it was doing his father good.