Three stories

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THREE STORIES

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts, in the Department of Humanities in the Graduate College of the State University of Iowa

June 1960

Chairman: Professor Paul Engle
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"Yes," said Father Conroy, "we have the good here and we have the bad. Just like anywhere else. But I'll tell you one thing about them." Suddenly rapping his pipe against the empty grate, he shot a baffled glance at the shining shoes of the young man who sat drinking his whiskey. "I'll tell ye one thing. The truth isn't in them."

The young man stirred, as if the remark had been aimed at him, as indeed it had. He shifted his gaze to Father Tobin, the curate, and eased himself back as far as the visitor's chair would allow.

"What's the shooting like this year, Father?" he asked, brightly.

"Haw?" Father Tobin had been leaning forward, staring at the glass of lemonade between his palms, as if there were something wrong
with it.

"I bet there's any amount of grouse in these hills?"

"Oh, 'tis fair. The shooting is fair." The wrinkles tightened again, lifting the eyebrows back into the bald forehead. "So they say!"

"You don't mean to tell me you're not a sporting man?"

"Haw?"

The parish priest rose at that, thrusting his pipe into his pocket. "I think we might go up..... Oh! Don't let me rush ye."

The young man had hurriedly raised his glass. "How about another?"

"No, thank you, Father."

Whiskey! thought Father Conroy. When he asked for the sherry, I should have said I kept it only for the ladies. But that would have proved nothing. It was so easy to shock even the Catholics nowadays.

"Ye're not coming, Father?" he told his curate. God knows what Father Tobin had blurted out on the way up from the curate's house in the village.

"No, Father." The hands shifted on the lemonade glass, but the long body still leant out of the hard-backed chair, supporting that wrinkled, downward-gazing brow. "There's a few things I should rightly be getting at."

Yes, thought Father Conroy, my typewriter! By the look of him, he's thinking up another letter to the papers about the Republican prisoners. "True Gael," how are ye! As if I didn't know!

Father Conroy waited by the door, as the young man came drifting across the room, the heavy brief-case his ballast.
"After you, Father!"

"No, after you, Mr. Bourke!"

Bourke! thought the parish priest gloomily, as he watched the cavalry twill-clad legs out-distancing each other down the hall, like a pair of fumbled callipers. He felt for the small business card in his pocket, confirming the worst. It was the 'o' which had first sounded the warning. Burke, now, was a good name, one that could always be relied on. But that 'o'... It had been added back in the darkness of the Penal Days by the branch that had defected. Still, one could never be sure of a name these days, the way the Catholics aped the affectations of the others.

The kitchen door opened behind him, noiselessly, but he knew it had opened. The whole house felt warmer, brighter, richer with the smell of stew. He knew she was standing there, akimbo, on her own private drawbridge.

"Father!" He came to a halt, like a well-drilled squad, one, two! "Will ye be wantin' him," a jerk of the thumb towards the legs now gliding down the front steps, "for lunch?"

"I don't think so. No! I don't think so."

"Better be sure, Father." Misunderstandings had happened before.

"No." he said.

"Very well, Father!" On his own head be it. He felt the door closing behind him, leaving the house in outer darkness.

"Shall we drive up, Father?" The young man's hand waited on the door of his car (a well-used Austin, model of three years back. Firm can't be doing all that well, thought Father Conroy. Serve them
right, trading under false colors. If they are!

"Drive? But sure 'tis only up the hill here!"

The young man hesitated before he slammed the door shut, just long enough to give Father Conroy a brief glance in at the dashboard. "It's no trouble, Father, I assure you."

"I walk it a dozen times a day," snapped the priest. He had duly noticed the silver St. Christopher badge dominating the dashboard. "Unless you want to."

They can't be doing business with the Protestants anyway, with that up. Dear Lord, he thought, could I be wrong after all? A sin against charity it would be, to judge a man on so little evidence. He walked on ahead, afraid that the young man would guess at his shame.

"I'd say I'm right all the same, Father." The young man suddenly caught up with him.

"How d'ye mean?" He could never stop the color rising when someone stared directly into his face. It flowed into the pock-marked cheeks as unexpectedly as a withered old crab-apple suddenly reddening.

"I mean about the grouse."

"Oh?"

It was the young man's turn to blush. His eyes were feverish. He seemed to be stuck in a conversational bunker, flailing away as he tried to get back on the fairway. His tumbler of whiskey had been generous.

Now's the time, thought Father Conroy. But the subtle question eluded him. His tumbler had also been generous and he wasn't used to whiskey before lunch.

"You shoot, yourself, then?" was the best he could come up with.
"Oh, no, I don't get the time. But I have been out on a few occasions with my principal."

"Ah!" Father Conroy saw his chance and leaped in. "That's Mr......?"

"Mr. White."

Baffled! The name was as inter-denominational as you could get. Father Conroy tried again, a shot in the dark.

"How did you get time for that?"

"Oh, well, I get back to the city some weekends. Saturdays, I mean." He ran on recklessly. "Mr. White, of course, wouldn't go shooting on......"

"Yes, I see." Proof positive! Or almost! What Catholic layman would dream he was desecrating the Sabbath with a shot-gun? None that Father Conroy had ever met. He shook his head as he trudged on. Maybe it was the lowest tender, but it was thumbs down.

At the brow of the hill, the young man was stopped by the view of the bay. Father Conroy pushed open the churchyard gate and waited.

"Are they from your parish, Father?" He was pointing to the little boats rocking slowly in pairs, away out on the grey sea. Father Conroy's sharp eyes scanned the boats. He nodded.

"It must be nice having fishermen, Father?"

"Why so?"

"They're such good people. Honest people!"

Father Conroy glanced quickly at the overlong sideburns, the yellow tie, the tapered suit somewhat ruffled at the rear by the car-seat.

"Ye get all kinds," he said and stopped. Maybe they were that simple, city people, in spite of their extraordinary get-up. Maybe
the lad was a genuine poor fellow, that one of his own parishioners could run rings around. Father Conroy glanced at the young man affectionately. He had a soft spot for simple innocent people, he met them so seldom. It was a great pity about the religion, though. And then, he thought of the St. Christopher badge. He looked away uneasily at the bay. He felt like a judge, before whom both prosecution and defence had laid a cast-iron case.

His uneasiness grew when the young man followed him out from the vestry and casually bobbed a knee before the altar. He watched the young man survey the altar in silence, then open the brief-case and lay out the plans on the altar-step. A propelling pencil had appeared in the young man's hand.

"Well, now, Father, it won't be hard to improve on this. I take it you've decided on the Carrara?"

"No, the Sicilian," said Father Conroy austerely. He had written to his sister, a retired nurse up in Dublin, asking her which was the better value for the money, Carrara or Sicilian. Her reply had begun: "Dear James, What memories your letter brought back! I remember well the day I accompanied poor Mr. Humphreys (the Englishman. Heart) to view the marble quarries at Carrara. The sun was shining beautifully as we reached our destination and all along the railway line, the slabs of marble were gleaming as white as snow. We were taken, first of all, to a charming little village called....." and so on for two pages to "your ever-loving sister in J.C.; Eileen." A post-script followed. "I can't tell you anything about the Sicilian, James, as poor Mr. H. would never go there. He thought the people were not very nice." Father Conroy, repelled as much by Anglo-Saxon prejudice as by the thought of a blazing white sun-altar in his church, plumped for the Sicilian.
"The Sicilian, Father?" said the young man, pursing his lips. He reached into his brief-case. "In that case, you'll probably be interested in a slightly different design I have here. It's very up-to-date, the latest thing, in fact, and not quite so.... severe. We've found it to be very popular all over the country."

"With whom?" asked Father Conroy, hopefully.

"With people who know, Father. Why, only the other day, I got a contract from the Ursulines in Balladine for their school-chapel, a smaller altar, of course, but....."

"Yes," said Father Conroy, losing interest. You could never go by the nuns.

"Now, in the plans we submitted to you, as you'll see here...." The young man was well out of the bunker now, driving confidently down the fairway. Father Conroy watched him glumly. "This, of course, would be somewhat more expensive than the one we tendered for, but when I show you this photograph, Father, I think you'll agree....."

"Yes," said Father Conroy. How were nuns, poor things, to recognise a Freemason if they saw one? But did Freemasons place their cars under the patronage of St. Christopher? Maybe they did? How was one to know these things, never having met one of the breed before?

"Yes," he said angrily, as the young man looked up at him with a query. What difference did it make whether "Church Requisites, Limited" was a masonic outfit or not? He would be accepting the lowest tender in good faith. And anyway, a small Protestant profit was probably better in the sight of God than an exorbitant Catholic one. Still.....

"Yes," he nodded, as the young man laid out the more expensive plan and quickly put out of sight the one tendered for.

Still, at the back of his mind, he had a picture of a group
of parish priests, swaddled in sweaters and gaberdines, stamping their feet at the first tee. As he approached, he could see one of them turn his face aside to mutter something. The others hid their grins as they lifted their clubs in practice swings. He had a good idea what the joke would be. "Hey, fellows!" the wit would have said, "watch out for Conroy's masonic grip*" or maybe, "don't let him talk ye into a cutprice altar. He gets them through the Brotherhood!" Father Conroy stirred with dislike for his colleagues. Sheep, that's all they were ....

"No," he said suddenly, interrupting the flow of sales-talk.

"I beg your pardon, Father?"

"No. I've got to think this over."

"As you wish, Father. But when you compare this with the other design, I think you'll find that for the extra money .... "

"I mean the whole business."

"What?" The young man's face was blank. "But you accepted our tender, Father!"

"I didn't. I mean, I .... " He hadn't signed any contract, not yet.

"But, Father, I'm afraid .... " The young man hesitated, unwilling to utter anything so unpleasant as a threat. Yes, thought Father Conroy, I did accept it. Maybe they'd have a case. "The Masons v. Father Conroy" - he saw it all headlined. Dear Lord, what a mess!

"The diocesan inspector wasn't in favor of sanctioning this at all," he muttered. That was true, the first time the inspector had called.

"I think you'll find, Father," the young man surveyed the drab, offwhite timber structure, something in the style of a kitchen dresser, which the village carpenter's grandfather had made, "when he sees it, that he'll agree that it's in bad shape."
"Maybe," said Father Conroy. 'In bad shape' were the words that he himself had used the second time the inspector had called, this time to be shown a number of small holes which had appeared beneath the Gospel side of the altar. Pat Lacey, the village carpenter, had diagnosed them to be 'the worm', against which even a diocesan inspector had no argument. (Pat had changed his mind later, on hearing that the new altar was not to be of timber. He was going about the parish, saying that his grandfather's altar was good enough to see Father Conroy into the clay, hinting too that the holes were not worm-holes at all, but had been drilled by some unknown person, meaning Father Conroy.)

"Let me talk to him," said the young man eagerly.

"Oh, no, no. 'Tis too much trouble."

"I can easily call on him on my way back."

"No, no. I think I can maybe ... talk him round."

"Good!" said the young man. "Now, Father, if you wouldn't mind casting your eye over this?" The propelling pencil hurried away over the plan, drawing Father Conroy's eyes after it. "As you can see, I'm going to face the risers with Midleton."

"Yes," said Father Conroy sullenly.

"Oh, it's the latest thing, Father. I have a sample of the Midleton here to show you."

Father Conroy looked at the miniature slab of marble, white kidneys in a background of dried blood. "Yes," he said, hopelessly.

"It got great praise, Father, when we used it for the Franciscans' new church at Drumcannon."

The Franciscans! thought Father Conroy. What did they know of the world, who was a mason and who was not? You could never quote the
Franciscans.

"I guarantee you, Father, you'll have crowds coming here just to have a look at it."

"I don't want crowds."

"You could sell them souvenirs, postcard photos. That's what the Franciscans did."

"No." snapped Father Conroy.

"Of course, you're right, Father to think of your own people. After all, it's for them you're getting it."

Yes, thought Father Conroy. And hard enough it was to coax the money out of them. If they knew it was put up by the masons! If Pat Lacey ever found out! He watched the young man resolutely checking the dimensions of the sanctuary. There must be some way of getting out of it.

"It'll do wonders here." The young man folded his rule and patted it back into his hip-pocket. "I really mean it, Father." He strode back enthusiastically across the sanctuary, stopping just in time to bob his knee before the altar. He picked up the brief-case and stood, swinging it against his thigh. "Unless you'd care to see another design, Father? I have it here, though it may be just a little expensive for your taste."

"No, no," said Father Conroy, moving towards the vestry.

"Well, I don't want to be taking up any more of your time, Father." The brief-case was set firmly on the vestry table. A fountain-pen had appeared in the hand, in place of the propelling pencil.

"Let's go down to the house," said Father Conroy.

"But, Father...."
"Stay and have lunch."

"That's very kind of you, Father, but....." The fountain pen reluctantly disappeared. "Are you sure it will be all right? With herself?" So he was used to priests' housekeepers!

"Of course!" lied Father Conroy.

Outside, at the gate, the young man paused, head upraised in a city man's pose. He sniffed eagerly at the sea-breeze, which stirred the branches of the oak trees around the churchyard.

"It's a fine situation, Father. A situation....and a church... like this deserve a fine altar. The best that money can buy."

"Let's go," said Father Conroy.

Approaching the house, Father Conroy thought he heard the clatter of the typewriter. He went up the steps to the hall-door, two at a time. Father Tobin, however, was abstractedly refilling the glass of lemonade.

"All set, Father?" he asked, slowly lowering himself into the hard-backed chair.

"Not quite." Father Conroy looked suspiciously into the china-blue eyes.

"We've decided the other altar would be more suitable," the young man put in, answering Father Tobin's look of enquiry.

"Oh? How much will that be?"

"It's the better altar." The young man was curt, evidently used to dealing with curates too.

"More expensive?" asked Father Tobin.

"Naturally. As it's better."

"I see," pursued Father Tobin, "but how much....."
"Father Tobin," said Father Conroy, "would you mind telling Katie that Mr. Bourke is staying to lunch?"

"Oh?" Again that curious glance, which Father Conroy quickly quelled. "Right you are, Father."

He returned a moment later, jerking a thumb in the direction of the kitchen. "She wants to see yerself, Father."

Katie waited at the far end of the hall, one hand on the door of her kitchen, the other on her hip. He knew the pose. She said nothing until he approached and halted to await his interview.

"Ye want him to stay for lunch, Father?"

"That's what I said."

"Ye didn't say it to me, Father." On any other day, that might have been the last word.

"I'm saying it now," he burst out. "Now get the lunch. And quick!"

"Mercy on us!" The hand flew to the breast, to ward off any assault. As he turned on his heel, the kitchen door slammed behind him.

"...the father of Irish republicanism!" Father Tobin was saying. "Surely ye've heard of the great John Mitchel?"

"John Mitchel?" The young man was bluffing valiantly. "Yes, of course, Father, but my history is a little....."

"John Mitchel was the man who....." Father Tobin, long arm draped over his chair, was getting into his stride.

"Father!" said the parish priest sharply. Father Tobin slumped back into his chair, called to heel.

In the long silence, Father Conroy poured himself another drink, a stiff one. He motioned the decanter towards the young man, who shook his head. "Come on!" said Father Conroy roughly. He splashed the whiskey
into the glass reluctantly extended towards him. Father Tobin rose to go.

"You stay too, Father." He might have need of an ally, even Father Tobin.

"What about....." Father Tobin motioned towards the kitchen.

"Tell her you're staying too," said Father Conroy and he lifted his glass with satisfaction, as the reluctant curate left the room.

He downed the drink recklessly. I'm going to find out, he told himself. Even if it comes to a court-case, I'm going to find out. He hanged to village gossips, be hanged to the wits of the diocese! Watch the fellow closely from now on, he told himself. With the help of God, he'll let it slip.

The young man, however, let nothing slip as they waited for lunch. As the priests listened gloomily, he talked about other parish priests he had done business with, all in distant dioceses. From the next room, Father Conroy could hear the cutlery being slapped on the table. Father Tobin shifted apprehensively at every sound. Please God, thought Father Conroy, make that whiskey work! But the young man prattled on, only very occasionally pausing to take a cautious slip. All the time, Father Conroy felt the fumes within him rising higher and higher, until they mushroomed up through his brain. To keep a firm grip on his purpose, he lowered his head and fixed his eyes intently on the shining black shoes, which began to shift uneasily as if they were on hot coals.

A single knock on the door summoned them to lunch. As they entered the cold dining-room, the door to the kitchen swung sullenly to. There was going to be trouble, he could see that. She might even give her notice. Well, if it was to be, let it be. Only he wished that final scene were over.
"Yes," the young man was saying, "it's so much more satisfactory with the seculars. Not like the nuns or the order-men. No shilly-shallying. They know how to do business."

Without warning, Father Conroy swung into 'Grace' and caught the young man off his guard. It was a shabby trick, he knew that even as he did it. The young man, however, recovered quickly and made a vague circular movement with his right hand. It could have been that of a slipshod Catholic crossing himself after a couple of large whiskies. Father Conroy grunted as they took their seats. Foiled again! Beyond the kitchen door he could hear the kitchen range being raked out, the symbolic start of the cold war. He dipped the ladle in the stew and filled the young man's plate. Well, let it come, he told himself. Let them all come.

The young man had run out of clerical shop-talk. He looked from the heated face of the parish priest to the frowning forehead of Father Tobin, now centered on the dinner-plate. He watched the curate's tireless fork pursuing a lump of meat, which finally yielded in the lee of banks of cabbage and mashed potatoes. "Well done, Father!" seemed the proper thing to say, but instead the young man blurted out, "I was surprised, Father, to hear that you weren't interested in the gun."

Father Conroy let his breath out slowly. He glanced carefully at Father Tobin, who had lowered the fork to his plate, releasing the lump of meat, as if he were restoring it to its natural habitat. Nobody spoke.

"I mean, with all those grouse," stammered the young man.

No, thought Father Conroy, it wouldn't be any use to tell him why Father Tobin was exiled here. You couldn't expect even a Catholic to believe it. That a priest could be so republican as to appeal to his English congregation to help buy arms for the I.R.A. so that they could blow up more English barracks? No, it wouldn't do. Of course, it had
been St. Patrick's Day and Father Tobin was an excitable man. Still, the story was too incredible to use as a decent test of a man's faith.

The young man was picking nervously at his stew, his face scarlet. Poor fellow, thought Father Conroy, suddenly sympathetic. He was about to break the silence, when Father Tobin got there before him.

"What about this offertory table, Mr. Bourke?" The tone was magnanimous, almost jovial.

"What, Father?"

"The offertory table you're supposed to give us?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Father."

"I thought you contractors always throw in a little something. Ye know! For good will and all that!"

"Not my firm, Father."

"Oh?"

"You see, as I explained to the parish priest, we prefer to cut our charges to the minimum than to offer inducements, which after all..."

"Besides, Father," said Father Conroy severely, "I wasn't aware that we needed an offertory table?"

"No," muttered Father Tobin, "maybe not." And he centered his forehead again on the plate and began the long methodical search for the lump of meat that was still at large.

Katie broke the silence, bursting in the door as if she had been leaning against it. She dealt out the tapioca pudding (Father Conroy's least favorite) and a cup of coffee to each man. Then she gathered up the dinner-plates and bore them away, as if they were not only soiled but unclean.

Father Conroy pushed back his plate ostentatiously and reached for his pipe. He was going to make things hot for someone, he promised himself that. When the others were ready, he stood up and took his coffee
into the parlor. As he set it down carefully, he noticed that the fountain pen had appeared again in the young man's hand. Father Conroy cleared his throat, a rasping, brutal performance, which he sometimes found useful in getting a congregation into the right mood. The young man had drawn the brief-case towards him, snapped it open and was stealthily reaching within. Father Conroy ignored the movement. He had thought of a final test. He was going to risk all on it in a gambler's throw. He leaned back in his chair, thumbs in his waistcoat pocket, a raconteur's pose. His voice, when it came, was merciless.

"Those old oak-trees, Mr. Bourke, that you were admiring back in the churchyard?"

"Yes, Father?" The hand stayed its search.

"I had the divil's own trouble over one of those same trees." He paused to light the pipe, his eye on the hand, daring it to move. "This same tree grew right up against the east window. It was that dark inside that I was hard put to it to read the Missal at Mass. And, as we haven't got the electricity....."

"Yes, Father." The hand began to move again, then stopped, waiting indulgently.

"So what did I do but decide to cut it down. Well, I sent up Pat Lacey to do the job, and, bedad, he was back to me within the half-hour. "I couldn't do it, Father," says he. "Why not?" says I. "There's a crowd of the men gathered up there, Father, and they won't let me." "In the name of God, why not?" says I. "'Tis not my place to say, Father, but maybe ye'd best go up and talk to them yourself." So up I went."

He paused to relight the pipe. The hand took advantage of the pause to draw forth the contract form, a single daring movement.
"There was a crowd there all right, idlers mostly and a few of the troublemakers. "What's all this about?" says I. Well, ye know the way they are. They shuffled their feet and stood behind one another, until at last a voice spoke up somewhere. "'Tis Thady Moran, Father. 'Tis growing alongside his people's grave." "Where's Thady?" says I, "let him come out and speak for himself." Well, out he came at long last and he bent over his stick. "Ye're not going to do it, Father!" says he. "'Tis my church," says I, "'tis in my care and I'll see that it gets air and light." "'Tis the grave of my people, Father." "The church must come first," says I. "Oh, no, Father. The church would never want us to disturb our dead." "Oh, what nonsense!" says I, losing my temper with him, "And will ye tell me how 'twould be disturbing yer dead?" "How do I know," says he, and he shaking his big blackthorn stick at me, "or how do you know, Father, but that that tree isn't growing through the stomach of me poor dead mother?"

Father Conroy looked up as the young man drew in his breath. "The stomach of his poor dead mother!" said Father Conroy with relish. "Down with the tree," says I. That started it. I thought some of them were going to come at me with the sticks, while others began plucking at me as if I'd beaten the heads of them. In the middle of the hullabaloo, I heard Pat Lacey's voice at my elbow. "Maybe, Father," says he, "maybe if ye were to tell him I could use the timber for the new altar, maybe Thady would be willing....." "Get thee behind me," says I and I said no more. I turned on my heel and left them there. Well, the tree came down. And the next day I put the ads in the papers, asking for tenders." He rapped the pipe against the empty grate. "So that's what ye're up against," he said, turning to the young man with a cruel smile.

Now! he was thinking, if the fellow's a Catholic, he'll split his sides. Why, the pubs were in a roar for weeks over the story of those
divils using their holy dead to get Pat Lacey the contract. But if he's a Protestant.... why, they're so afraid of death, it always has to wear a straight face for them. He stared down at the black shining shoes and waited.

The young man gulped, then shut his mouth tight. He looked quickly towards Father Tobin, but the frowning forehead gave no help. The young man's hand made a vague circular gesture. "Lord save us, Father." he muttered.

"Oh, God!" thought Father Conroy. A city Catholic. The smile faded from his lips, as he watched the hands picking at the contract form. Was there any real difference between them? Catholic or Protestant, the city made them all the same. Add everything up and it comes to money. And even if the fellow was a masonic imposter, did it matter much? Father Conroy snorted, stuffed the pipe in his pocket and rose, reaching out his hand. "Give us the form," said he.

The young man clung to it a moment. Then, hesitantly, he handed it over. Father Conroy took it to the table and signed it with a flourish.

Outside, the young man shook hands with a sickly smile and got into the car. As it lurched forward, the St. Christopher badge slipped from the dashboard. He hastily caught it and pushed it back with the palm of his hand. So it wasn't attached! Just a sales gimmick! Father Conroy turned away, with a sudden vision of a group of parish priests, swinging their clubs and smiling on the first tee. He found himself facing the apprehensive but admiring gaze of Father Tobin.

"How did ye know, Father?" he asked his curate curtly.

"Haw?"

"How did ye know he was a Protestant?"
"Not Protestant, Father."

"No?" His heart rose, just for a moment.

"Some class of a Presbyterian, Father."

Father Conroy angrily waved aside the irrelevance.

"How did ye know?" he demanded.

"I asked him, Father, and he told me. I asked him right out as soon as he came."

"Ye did?"

"Yes, Father. John Mitchel was a Presbyterian, Father, the first Republican!"

"Oh, confound John Mitchel!"

"Oh, no, Father!" The frowning forehead lowered on him reproachfully. "Oh, no!" And as he passed in, to carry on the unequal battle, the curate turned to follow, the squire, bearing the windmill-breaking lance. "They're a very honest people, the Presbyterians. I mean... they must have been!"

**********
Vincent came down the road from the creamery, carefully
crouching his bare feet in the dust of the cart-tracks. I always waited
for him because I was his pal. It meant being late for school sometimes,
but I never got the stick. Vincent was no bigger than me, but everybody
was somehow afraid of him, even Billy Flahavan who thought himself a man.
And even the master.

I was the only one who knew that his mother made him wear
boots every day. I never let on, even to him, but I had seen him hiding
the boots in a hole in the creamery wall and then splashing through a
puddle to get his feet looking like everybody else's. I think that was one
reason I liked him so much, knowing that. And, of course, I liked him be-
cause of his mother, a terrible woman who would win a martyr's crown for
any fellow.
He nodded and said "morra" to me, as I jumped up to join him. "How's Billy?" I asked. I had heard Billy was in bed after the beating and was probably at death's door.

Vincent shrugged his shoulders, but he knew. He always knew more than we did from the talk at the creamery, but he never let on. It was useless to be asking him.

We stopped at the door of the forge, looking in at the sparks flying in the darkness, while we nibbled away at the jam sandwiches in our satchels. It was Lent, the hungry time of the year, when a fellow doesn't get half enough to eat and the birds go hopping around the dead branches whenever the sun comes out. It was cold too, even with the sun on our bare feet.

"D'ye think he'll still be mad?" I asked, "the master?" I was hoping against hope for the worst, that Billy was lying in bed, dying or already dead. Only the worst was any use to us, for only the gallows would rid us of the master.

Vincent shrugged as if he didn't care. I noticed, though, that he had a good sod of turf under his arm for the school fire, real hard and black, the pick of the big stack in the creamery yard.

Just then the old smith looked up and saw us. "Off to school with ye!" he yelled, "ye little tinkers, ye! D'ye want me to tell the master on ye?"

Vincent tossed a crust in over the half-door to make the smith bawl louder, then he began to run. I followed, wishing I could be like him, afraid of no one, not even after the beating.

When we reached the school, we found Chris on his knees by the
grate, blowing the embers aflame. He looked up at us with his pink eyes, which were never really dry, waiting for us to toss him our sods of turf. It was Chris who looked after the fire all day, cleaned the blackboard and gave out the copy-books. He also went out to cut and trim the sticks for the master to beat us with. We didn't hold that against him, though. It was his job and anyway, he had a real gift which he wasn't a bit stingy with—he could cry any time we wanted him to. For a penny, he'd let the tears roll down his cheeks, while we stood around him, looking as if we owned him, watching the amazement on the face of some new fellow. Sometimes the tears began to roll when he didn't want them to and they kept on rolling until his shirt was wet and we began to get frightened, thinking they'd never stop. Maybe that's why the master never asked him a question. It was just as well, because the poor fellow was very ignorant.

We were sitting very quiet when the master came in. He was a big man, with a gold watch-chain on him like the belly-band of a horse and heavy square-toed boots. I never looked much at his face for fear of him noticing me, but it was the color of soda-bread and he had a big bald head on him, which used to go all red and shiny whenever his blood was up. We sat reading as hard as we could until he spoke. When we heard his voice, soft and deep, we knew it would be an easy morning. He asked Vincent all the hard questions, just as if there was an Inspector there, but any one of us would have got full marks that day. We had taken no chances with our homework. He even cracked a few jokes. When he saw how good the fire was, he said that we must have been keeping the best turf till last. We all split our sides laughing, though most of the fellows didn't know that he was quoting what Our Lord said to the publicans, when He was complaining about the wine.
Just before the break, Billy came in. He was the only fellow in long trousers, but even they didn't hide his stiff walk as he went up to make his excuse.

"Him!" the master shouted, flinging out his arm towards Billy, "Him the Almighty Power hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky, with hideous ruin and combustion, down to bottomless perdition ..." He stopped waving his arm suddenly and said, "Milton! Paradise Lost, Book One! But I might as well be telling the wall!" Then he asked, very serious, "How is it?"

"What, master?"

"Your bottom, boy?"

"'Tis sore, sir," said Billy, rubbing his trousers and cocking a gamy eye back at us, as we pretended to laugh our heads off. Billy always thought it was he who made a joke.

"Sit down, boy," said the master, real solemn, "for your penance, you may sit down."

We all felt Billy's pain, as he lowered himself slowly into his seat. For the rest of the period, we couldn't keep our eyes off those tight trousers, wondering were they stuck to him or was his behind all bandaged up inside them.

Chris went down the road to the master's house to prepare the master's lunch, for the master had no wife. Chris was good at making tea and boiling eggs. He lived with his grandfather, an old soldier of the English army, who used to wander home from the pubs of a Friday after collecting his pension-money, muttering to himself and taking big skelps out of the hedges with his stick. Chris had no mother and no father. Maybe that was why we didn't begrudge him the master.
As it was raining, we had to stay in to eat our sandwiches. We gathered around the fire when the master left, but we kept an eye out for his return. He used to murder us for standing around the fire. He said it made our wits even more sleepy and stupid than God intended.

Billy began telling us how his da had bet hell out of him, because he wouldn't say what the master had bet him for.

"But, sure, ye might as well be flogged by a fly as by my oul' fella," said Billy, "Jeez, I'd make two of him."

"And what did you do, Billy, tell us?" I burst out. I was killed with the curiosity.

"Nothing much," said Billy, in his hoarse bass voice. He had an open mouth like all the Flahavans and a cowslick of hair plastered down with oil (Flahavans' axle-grease, the master called it).

"But you must have done something, Billy?"

"I didn't," said Billy, grinning with that open mouth, "but I might." He stood there, wanting me to keep on asking.

"Go on," I said, "tell us!" I was beginning to get annoyed.

"Ye're too young."

"Was it," out in Vincent, "a girl?"

"Now ye're talking!"

"But..." All sorts of questions were crowding into my head.

"..... what did you do with her, Billy?" was the only one I could ask, very lamely.

"Nothing! Yet! He caught us walking out the Durrow Road. We'll wait till dark the next time, I can tell ye that!"

"You're not going out with her again!" It was the first time in my life I'd talked to anyone who had actually walked out with a girl on his own. And who was so sure about walking out again.
"Of course!" He gave me a push. "Go 'way now, little boy, and play!"

"Who is she?" asked Vincent.

"Wouldn't ye like to know, now?"

"I knew you were making it up."

"Did ye now? Well, I'll show ye. Look!" He produced a brown shopkeeper's envelope, creased in two. "She even wrote to me." He took out the letter, a page of a jotter, and folded it to cover the signature. "Go on! Read it if ye don't believe me!"

Vincent took it as if he really wasn't much interested. We all crowded round, jostling each other as we tried to read it over his shoulder. All I could make out was "Dear Billy, You'd better not walk out my way tonight, because my Daddy ..." Then a shadow fell across it.

"What have ye there?" said the master. He made a lunge for the letter, as Vincent tried to hide it behind his back. His big arms closed around Vincent, lifting him from the floor and twisting him around to straddle him. Then the big black thumb-nail levered at Vincent's knuckles until the hand suddenly opened and the crumpled letter dropped on to the desk. The master laid it out and began to brush it straight with the backs of his fingers.

Vincent's face went red first, then slowly faded to white.

"Give it back," he said, his lips all stiff. We backed away from him, backed away to leave him facing the master.

"What's that?" The master's voice was quick, almost frightened. His mouth dropped open a moment, showing the saliva welling around his teeth.

"I said 'give it back'."

The master's hand opened and closed a few times, as if it had
lost its nerve. Then it opened out, flat, and swung against Vincent's face. There was a sharp crack. Vincent staggered back against the fireplace, clutching at his cheek. None of us made a move. We watched him run his tongue into his cheek and spit a blood-flecked dollop into the fire. Then he turned and without a word or a look, walked out of the room.

We had a rough afternoon, but as most of us had learned our stuff off backways and skew-ways and every way, the master couldn't catch us out. He strode up and down the room, banging his fist into his hand and bawling and looking as if he was going to burst right through the walls. I kept my head down, desperately trying to work out a sum the length of my arm. I was nearly sick inside, thinking of Vincent and of what would happen to him.

We stopped at the forge on the way home. We stared in over the half-door, a line of noses sniffing at the thin white smoke of burning hoof as it melted into the darkness. The sledge rang out on the anvil. Our eyes followed the sparks as they went arching up, then quenched themselves disappointingly in the dry, grey, tindery beard of the smith. We were all poised on tiptoe, waiting for him to turn and bawl at us. When he did so, opening his big spade-mouth to show two yellow tusks, we plunged away with squeals of mock terror. We splashed across the stream, then turned to look back at that terrible face suspended in the darkness of the doorway. We weren't really afraid of him. We knew those black hairy hands of his, that rested like legs of mutton on the half-door, had never beaten anyone. And even if they had, we would have understood why. We had often given them good reason.

There was nothing else to do after leaving the forge. I was too excited to head for home. I left the boys and wandered back through
the village towards the creamery cross. Vincent was up the side-road, leaning against an old rusty gate. He was looking into a nettle-grown paddock, where battered churns and slag and packing-cases had overflowed from the creamery yard. He kept the red swollen cheek turned away from me.

"You going home?" I asked. I took it for granted he was waiting till the usual time, in case that mother of his asked any questions.

"No." He glanced at me, his eyes cold and clear, as if he hadn't cried at all. "I'm going to get that letter."

"But... what d'ye want it for?"

"I want it. That's all."

"How you going to get it, Vince?" I asked after a while. He was looking out over the paddock, as if he'd forgotten all about me.

"In his house, where else? I'm waiting for him to go up to the shop."

We could see the main road from where we were, just the caps and hats and shawls going past and occasionally, a cyclist's head flitting silently by.

"What about Chris?" I asked. Chris had to put on the kettle for the master's tea and sweep the house out. The master had no other help.

"What about him?" He turned to me suddenly. The master's old green hat had appeared, moving along the hedge. "D'you want to come? Or don't you?"

There was nothing I could say except "yes". My hands began to sweat, though, and the inside of my corduroy pants went warm and wet, then cold.

We waited till the hat swam away over the top of the hedge, then we ran across the fields and vaulted over the fence into the master's garden. I had never been in it before. I looked around at the little heaps
of cinders and bottles half-buried under the bare, crooked apple-tree.

"Come on," said Vincent, "for God's sake!"

The back-door was open. Chris was kneeling halfway up the wooden stairs, sweeping away with a dustpan and brush. When he looked up and saw us, he let a squeak out of him. He tried to draw himself up and away from us, but Vincent caught him hard by the ankle.

"If you open your gob," said Vincent quietly, "d'ye know what I'll do to ye, Chris?"

Chris nodded his head up and down.

"You hear, Chris?"

Chris nodded again, up and down. He looked from one to the other of us with his little red soared eyes. He was too frightened to talk.

We found our copy-books on the table in the living-room. It was dark there and smelt of mildew. A small flame was licking around the fresh sods of turf, but there was no heat in the room. Vincent started looking through the copy-books, while I wandered around, looking at the big dark books on the shelves and stacked on the floor. I picked up a book and shook the dust off it.

"Look at this!" I said, "by Dickens! And here's another! Look, there's dozens of them, all by Dickens!"

"I know," said Vincent, "they're classics. They come in sets. My Dad's got one."

On the mantelpiece, between some photographs, was another book by Dickens. It was David Copperfield and it had words underlined in it and a lot of writing in the margins. It made me feel good to find out what he was reading. I had finished David Copperfield months before.

I had a look at the photographs. One of them showed a few
people standing around in a play, all dressed up as actors, the men wearing those sissy suits with silk stockings all the way up. On the back, it said "St. Malachy's Training College Dramatic Society in The Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare". Underneath was a list of names.

"Hey, Vincent," I said, "look it here! He did Bassanio." And when I took up the next photograph, I shouted, "Hey, here's the girl that did Portia."

Vincent stopped his searching to come over and look.

"Yeah, that's his wife," he said.

"But ... I didn't know ..." I felt aggrieved. Nobody told me anything at home. "And where is she?"

"Gone."

"But where to?" I'd never heard of anyone's wife going away, ever before. Alive anyway.

Vincent just lifted his shoulders. "That's all I heard," he said.

"And what about ..." I made a great effort to stretch my imagination. "What about his children?"

"She must have them," said Vincent, "that's if there are any." I was trying hard to think of the master as somebody's father.

"But, Vincent ..." I began.

"Come on, will you?" said Vincent, "we'd better get a move on."

It was then that we noticed that Chris had been standing in the doorway, listening. Vincent went up to him and seized him by the shoulder. "Tell us where he put it!" he said, "You'd better!"

"Don't ask me," said Chris, "please!" And the tears began to
flow, fast and silent.

"Are ye going to tell me?" Vincent raised his hand. And just in time, I found the letter, folded roughly and stuck into a tarnished silver jug on the sideboard.

"Give it here to me," said Vincent. He took the letter between finger and thumb. "Where does he sit?" he asked. Chris pointed to a space on the table between the heaps of books and papers. Vincent tore the letter across quickly. Then he tore it again, more deliberately, back and forth into shreds. The little inky scraps of paper floated down over the empty space.

"You're not going to leave them there, man?" I burst out.

"Come on," said Vincent.

"But he'll have your life."

"Come on."

As we went through the kitchen, I noticed the tray that Chris had prepared. There were two cups, two saucers and two plates on it.

"Chris!" I said, "you don't eat here? With him?"

Chris nodded. He took up the tray quickly and made for the livingroom.

"But, come here, Chris, tell me ..."

We heard the footsteps outside the front door, his footsteps. I made a dart for the scullery door. Vincent caught my arm and held me back, pressed into the corner by the dresser. A warm patch began to spread again in my corduroys. I heard the footsteps go hollow in the hall, then go sharp on the lino of the livingroom. I heard them stop suddenly.

"Who did this?" It wasn't the voice I had expected. It was deep and quiet, as it had been that morning.
"I don't know." Chris almost whispered it.

"You do know. Who did it?" The voice terrified me more than if it had been a big bawl. I thought of Chris and of those tears flowing silently. I made a move towards the room, I couldn't help it, but Vincent's hand dragged me viciously back.

"I don't know!" whispered Chris again, "please!"

There was a long silence. Then the quiet voice said, "All right, boy, you may sit down."

As the chairs were drawn in, I heard the scrape of a match and the globe of the oil-lamp being lifted. Vincent eased the back-door open; and next minute, I was out into the air. Vincent led the way around to the front of the house. We crept up to the ivy-covered window-sill. We were just in time to see the master cross from the mantelpiece and toss David Copperfield on the table. He sat down under the yellow light of the lamp and began to pour out the tea. Chris opened the book. He began to read, his finger crawling down the page after each word. Every now and then he paused, while the master leant over and marked a word with a pencil. Chris would watch, then look up as the master talked, look right up into the master's face. Once he even laughed, not right out, but he laughed as if the master really had said something funny, that a fellow didn't have to pretend to laugh at. I stood there looking at them. I still couldn't believe what I saw, but I liked looking at them. Something made me turn to Vincent, though. When I saw him there, staring, with the corners of his mouth drawn back, I said, "Come on, Vincent, come on, for God's sake."

We had nothing to talk about as we walked home. The hedges on either side of us were alive with small twilight noises. At the creamery cross, we stopped and stood for a while, with our hands in our pockets. I asked Vincent was he going to come to school in the morning, or was he go-
"Yes," he said and left me before I could ask him which he meant.

He was there before us at the cross next morning, waiting for once. The boys crowded around him, full of questions, then found that they had nothing to say to him.

"Well, lads," he said, glancing around the circle of faces, "so every one of you is carrying his sod!"

Each of us looked at his sod and then looked for Vincent's.

"He'll leather hell out of ye," said I.

"I'm not bringing it."

I lifted my sod and looked at it. It was a good sod to look at, but not so good in the hand, heavy and soft after the winter rains. I couldn't, even for Vincent, throw it down.

"Jeez, man!" Billy always swore like that. He never said the full word because he thought it was a mortal sin. Venial sins he didn't mind. "'tis not going to stand up to him ye are?"

"The way you did?" asked Vincent.

"D'ye think I'm mad? What did I get anyway, only a few skelps of an oul' stick? That's all."

"Why, though?"

"Because I was caught, that's why. But I won't be caught the next time. I can tell ye that."

"There won't be any next time, for him."

"But he'll kill ye, man. Jeez, he'll tear the windpipe out of ye."

"I know," said Vincent. None of us could take our eyes off him. His face was pale. His eyes were like glass with a greenish light
shining through them. He seemed taller than any of us, all drawn out. I felt excited inside, but instead of going tall and thin, I went red all over. "Then!" said I, throwing down my sod, "I'm not taking mine either."

The boys stared at it a moment, then one by one, they began to throw down their sods too.

"Hey!" Vincent was staring at us, real mad. "Take up those sods!"

"No," said I, "we're all in this together. Come on, lads, drop them."

Only Billy tried to keep his. He began to sidle out of the group, but some of the fellows caught him by the wrist and twisted the sod out of his hand.

"He can't beat the lot of us," I said, as a few fellows looked back at the heap of sods, "he can't. He'd get too tired."

Chris's was the only sod in the fireplace, perched on a nest of crumpled papers and wooden cipins. We kept watching it, as the master came in. We couldn't take our eyes off it. That was why he spotted it immediately. The color went slowly up through his face and spread all over the top of his head.

"Step out to the line, the boys who brought no turf."

We all stepped out, trying to look calm, but afraid to look at each other. We were watching that red and shining skull, afraid it would do something, flare out suddenly, maybe, like one of those Japanese flowers that you dip in water. He can't beat us all, I kept saying to myself, please God, he can't beat us all. Oh, God, make him too tired.

He handed Chris a pen-knife and motioned him towards the door. We knew we were for it. While Chris went to our a new ash-plant, we waited
in dead silence, twitching now and then like sheep waiting for the shearing. I was wondering if it was going to be on the hands or on the behind. Please God, make him think the behind is too much trouble. It was too, because he had to hold our trousers tight so that it hurt more. But please God, make him remember that.

He stood at the window, cracking his fingers and muttering to himself, as he watched Chris below in the copse by the stream. When Chris came back, he grabbed the stick and flexed it a few times between his hands. Then, suddenly, he caught hold of the first fellow in the queue. Without looking to see who it was, he bent the fellow over the desk and raised the stick. The howling began before the first blow landed. With one hand, the master held the trousers tight against the fork of the legs, while with the other, he beat away as if it was an old carpet he had. The howl dwindled into a squeal and then a whimper as the fellow was hauled up and shoved aside. Then the master seized the next fellow.

He worked away like that for a good while, like a red-hot old steam engine. Sometimes he stopped, gasping for air. Then he was away again, on a hack. Gradually, he began to work himself into a good humor. You could see the bald head cooling off. He began to make jokes like "Next please" and "Step this way, gentlemen" and he bowed to the fellows after he had finished with them. Then he came to Billy.

"Ho!" said he, "himanself again! Might I recommend, sir, a hair of the dog?"

He laid Billy down with great respect, while we tried to laugh at the joke. Billy was smart, though, the smartest of the lot of us, though you'd never think it. He waited, very quiet, for the first blow, then he lashed out suddenly with his big boot, which caught the master right in the chest.
"I'm sorry, sir," squawked Billy, in his hoarse man's voice, "honest to God, I never meant it. Please, sir, listen to me, sir ..." but there was no need to go on. The master had walked slowly over to the window, hunching his shoulders and raising his knees. He stood there a long while, breathing hard and gradually straightening himself up. He turned suddenly to stare at us. His face was terribly pale.

"Is it trying to kill me ye are?" he asked, in a whisper.

We didn't know what to say, without telling a downright lie. We just stared back at him.

"All right," said he, his voice a little stronger now, "go, each one of ye, and bring back your sod of turf. And be here in half-an-hour."

We shuffled to our feet. None of us wanted to be the first to go.

"And if one single boy comes back in here without his sod," said he, his voice strengthening all the time, "there'll be skin and hair flying. Every mother's son of ye will be bet again and those that I haven't bet yet will be bet twice over. So away with ye now, ye pack of little divils out of hell!" Then he let a bellow out of him. "Well, what are ye staring at? Get out!"

We made a dive for the door. Chris jumped out of our way to let us pass. He sucked his fingers as he looked after us.

The little stack of turf was still at the creamery cross, where we had left it. We jostled around it, each of us trying to pick out the best sod he could find. The thought of Vincent seemed to strike us all at once. We stopped and looked up. He was there, watching us.

"Come on, man," Billy said, "get yourself a sod."
Vincent just smiled.

"Come on!" Billy crowded up on him with that squaring, swaggering stance of his. "Billy Flahavan is not going to be bet twice. I can tell ye that. Not over you!"

Vincent stayed where he was, waiting. Billy's swagger drooped a bit, pretended to be a twitch of the shoulder-blades. He glanced back to us for encouragement. "Get the bloody thing, man, can't ye?"

"Yes, get it," I shouted. I felt dirty all over, as if part of me was soft and black as a rotting apple. "We've had enough."

There was a murmur from the lads and they pushed forward behind me. "Yes," they said, "go on, man, get it." Vincent stood his ground, as I was pushed against him. His eyes were staring straight into mine. "Get it!" I said, in a whisper. At that moment, I was all set to hit him. My fists were bunched and I was stiff with all the rage inside me.

Just in time, he turned aside. "Hold on a moment," he said. We watched him run away up the lane to the creamery. We began to wonder if we should follow him, to make sure he came back. Then we saw him coming, with three big black sods of turf under his arm.

"Well, come on!" said he, running his eyes over us, as he used to do, "if 'tis not afraid ye are?"

"We're not afraid," I said.

"Bloody sure we're not," said Billy.

"Follow me, then," said Vincent, marching off. We fell into step behind him. We wanted to take our time, to drag our feet in the dust, but we didn't dare to in case Vincent turned around. "What are ye going to do, Vince?" I asked, moving up beside him.

"You'll find out!" he said, out loud, so as to lump me in with
the rest. "You'll find out, the lot of ye."

The master was at the window, humming a tune as he swished the stick. It was the tune he hummed when he was beating us out of sheer good humor. He used to sing the last line of it, "for you'll remember, you'll remember me," as he brought the stick down hard, emphasizing every syllable. He turned towards us now, as if we had surprised him. "Ah, so soon, lads? Determined not to miss a good day's sport! Amn't I right, Chris?"

"Yes, master," said Chris, from the seat inside the door.

"Now! Stand out those boys, whose hides haven't yet been properly tanned!"

"Aw! Sir!" pleaded Billy, just as he was easing himself into a seat.

"Aw! Sir! Aw! Sir!" The master swished the stick a few times. "Out to the line, you blackguard!"

"Hey!" called Vincent, who was still standing at the door.

"What's that?" the master turned, staring.

"Don't you want your turf?"

"Sir!" the master shouted, "say sir!"

"Don't you want your turf?" Vincent was advancing insolently down the room. He stood, weighing a sod in his hand. He had gone very pale.

The master looked at him sharply, snuffing like a bull. He raised the stick and moved forward, his mouth open, spluttering. He ducked just in time, as the sod flew over his head and broke in two against the blackboard. There was silence as the dust drifted down to the floor. Then the master let a roar out of him. He lifted the stick and advanced again.

Vincent's second sod caught him on the forehead, sending his glasses flying. The sharp crack left a thin line of blood. The master dropped the stick. His knuckles dug into his eyes, which were blinded with
"Look at him!" screamed Vincent, his voice cracking in the middle, "look at him, now!" He turned towards us. "Come on, lads, quick, belt away!"

"Right!" squawked Billy, lifting his arm, "You oul' bastard!" he yelled, as he flung his sod straight into the master's blind face, squashing the nose and mouth. "Now you'll remember me!"

The sods bombarded the master's face from all directions. He sank into his chair, facing us, his hands still at his eyes, that angry line on his forehead, the blood dripping from nose and chin. A sound midway between a belch and a hiccough burst from him. It was followed by a terrible sound, which stayed the hands of those who had not yet fired. It was a sob, a great shaking sob. It tore out of his chest and was followed by another and then another. We lowered our hands and stared. The sobbing eased a little. It became a long continuous moaning sound, like a baby with the colic. We drew back slowly.

"Come on, you fools!" yelled Vincent, "hit him!" He lifted his third sod. Before he could fire it, he was seized from behind. The sod was twisted quickly out of his hand. Chris flung him aside, then stood back panting, with his puny fists up.

"All right, Vincent!" I got between them quickly, as Vincent flung himself viciously forward. "You'd better get out."

He stopped, staring at me, as if he didn't know me. Then he took a look at the shocked faces all around. He began to tremble all over. Suddenly, he turned and walked out the door.

The rest of us sat down, one by one. Only Chris went up to stand by the blind naked bleeding face. He stood by it, wanting to touch it, but afraid to stretch out his hand. The tears had begun to roll down
his cheeks, silently rolling as if they would never stop.

I let the sod of turf fall from my hand. I heard it thump on the floor. I'm sure I heard it. In fact, I know I did. But ever since, whenever I look back, I think that I too lifted it and flung it against the face of the master.

**********
When Padraig and Bairbre set out to destroy each other, we made no move for a long time to come between them; we wouldn't have been able to, even though on a small island like ours we live, you might say, in each other's minds. We knew from the start that whatever had driven them apart had driven them away out of reach of the rest of us.

It was not until he tried to use our own children against Bairbre that we did at last interfere. We had never told the children about Padraig and Bairbre, for we thought that silence would be the best end for their story. We would of course have told them if we could only have guessed what was in Padraig's mind that day, as he came in from the hooker with the island stores.

Most of us were down at the slip, as usual, watching his currach crawling in, heavy with coal and oil-drums and sacks of meal. He jumped awkwardly ashore, careful not to wet his boots. Holding the gob of the currach, he turned and called to the group on the slip, "Here, men!"
Give us a hand here!" Two of the men reluctantly left the group. They ran silently down in their raw-hide slippers and waded knee-deep into the water to lift the currach ashore. Then they walked away up the slip and rejoined the group. Padraig shut his lips tight, glanced after them from under his fox-terrier eyebrows, then looked around for more help. He saw a few schoolboys hitching their satchels on their backs as they turned away. "Here boys!" he called, "Where are ye off to? Come down here to me."

They went down to him. They rolled up the oil-drums and sacks of meal. Then they turned the currach over and shouldered it all the way up the slip. With their bare white legs moving in step underneath, the black currach was like a strange beetle crawling up on the land. They trooped back then to carry up the oars and the baler. They didn't mind working for Padraig. They were hoping he would let them drive the horse and cart up to the village and maybe ride the horse down to the well afterwards.

Quickly, then, they returned to stagger up the slip with the island stores. We called them the island stores, though we still had to buy them from Padraig at a price which he justified by reason of the service he gave. No one in his senses, he said, would ever have thought of running a shop at all in such a place. Not that he ever had to justify himself to us. It was Father Kiely who had done all the complaining, the time he was held on the island by a storm and refused to pay the price that Padraig put on a packet of razor-blades. As both of them were obstinate men, the priest had to return to the mainland with a ten-days' growth of beard. Still, we called the stores the island stores because Padraig was one of us and would always be.

When they had Padraig's cart loaded up, the boys all climbed in and started off sedately for the village. Padraig walked along behind, looking into our fields and gardens, stopping to peer over the walls to see
how the potatoes and rye were doing, putting a price to everything, his price. When he reached Bairbre's shop, he walked straight past without looking to right or to left. Bairbre's son was there, striding up and down the stone-fenced garden at the back of the shop, talking away to himself and wiping the dribble off his chin with the back of his hand. As always, he wore the white town shirt, that she changed on him twice a day as if he were a great gentleman. There was no great desire on Padraig to be looking on that sight.

The boys drew away from Padraig as they went up the hill. They stealthily nudged the horse into a faster pace. On the far side, they lashed it into a gallop and went belting down into Padraig's yard with a rattle of oil-drums and with the boxes of groceries bouncing about as if there were live things inside. Quickly, they jumped down to unload the cart and untackle the horse, so that they could ride it down to water, the lot of them, and be well on their way before Padraig arrived. But just as they slipped the collar off, Padraig came hurrying into the yard. "Tie him up there, boys!" he called, out of breath, "and come in here to me!"

They followed him into the cold kitchen and sat down in a row on a wooden bench, facing the fire which wasn't there.

"Let ye wait a minute," he said as he went to open one of the big cardboard boxes. They waited, lifting their bare feet off the stone floor and rubbing them nervously together, like a line of flies. He took out a bottle of boiled sweets and went along the line, carefully shaking two sweets into each outstretched hand. "Now!" said he, pulling up a chair opposite them and holding out his narrow red hands, as if to shield himself from the glow of a fire, "tell me, how d'ye like them?"

They nodded their heads, their mouths too full to talk. They had stuffed both sweets in, in case there were more to come.
"I'll have sweets here now, from this out," said he, "all kinds of sweets, liquorice allsorts, caramels, marzipans. Let ye tell them all below at the school."

"How much?" asked one of them cautiously. Little Jimín it was, from the Post Office, cracking a sweet in two to let the words out.

"They'll be cheaper than ye'll get in the other place."

"But how much?" Jimín was his mother's son.

"Fifteen a penny them are," said he. The boys sucked their sweets in silence. In Bairbre's shop they got only twelve a penny.

"Well, now!" said he, rising up, "I'm keeping ye from yer homework. That wouldn't do now, would it?"

The boys hung back on their way to the door, hoping that there might be another sample going free, but Padraig was already opening his packages and checking the stores against his invoices.

"Can we take the horse to water?" asked Jimín, when he saw that it was the only thing he had a chance of getting.

"No," said Padraig, "Be off with ye!" When he was working at his invoices, with the steel spectacles clamped on the end of his nose, he'd nearly refuse a man a pint of stout and that's one shilling and threepence worth. We'd have to wait till he was finished with the books before we'd order a drink, as we'd wait for a priest to finish reading his Office.

"All right," grumbled a big boy with a breaking voice. A couple of free sweets had made him too bold. "We might go on buying Bairbre's sweets, so we might."

Padraig looked up at him quickly, with those sharp eyes of his.

"What are ye doing here," he said, "with the children?"

"I'm not doing anything," the big fellow muttered, backing
"Get away and leave them alone," said Padraig, following and aiming a slap at him. "Gach acis a chomhluadar féin – every age its own company! Don't ye know that?"

"I do," the big fellow said.

"Well, then, how many times have ye to be told it? Now, get away with ye. And if ye don't mind all I've said, I'll talk to the master about ye."

That was enough to send the big fellow scurrying off with his ears reddened for him. The children stood looking after him, as if they had been caught out in a shameful thing that no one would explain rightly to them. They always did look that way, when Padraig made use of his piseoga. He had them to suit every occasion. They all went to show what a great order there was in the world of men, from priest, teacher, postmaster and shopkeeper all the way down to the rest of us common people. And woe betide the man or boy who put his foot outside the place laid out for him.

That was how Padraig made the children take the bread out of the mouth of Bairbre and her son. They kept their own counsel for a long time, as our children do, for "every age its own company" is a true saying on the island, though we'd never think to make a law of it, the way Padraig did. The children might never have turned their backs on Bairbre, had they not been as bad as the rest of us for getting value for their pennies. Even then, though, when they had left her, they used to miss slipping into her shop for a pennyworth of sweets, missing most of all the sight of the son sitting quiet in the darkness of the chimney-corner. He'd sit there all day, with cushions snug about him and he slumped the way she sat him, like a rag doll. His eyes were like those speckled stones the children would pick up
on the beach. On those quiet days of his, he'd look tame enough for them to pet him. Not so the dog lying against his feet. It would open an eye every now and then, like the cover of a keyhole drawn back, then silently it would bare its teeth. All of us in the island were afraid of the dog. We'd almost swear it looked out at us with those same speckled stone eyes.

The children, of course, had never heard us speaking of that son of Bairbre. We rarely spoke of the creature even among ourselves; he was born on the day that she had cursed Padraig and some said that the birth was a judgement on her. None of us had any wish to remember her standing on the rock as the bodies of her husband and her two sons were brought in all naked and torn to the slip. While the waves still played with the slats and crumpled canvas of the currach, Bairbre turned around towards the village, towards the fine slated roof showing over the brow of the hill.

"Machadh is báthadh ort," she said in a loud even voice against the tearing gale, "May you never see the glory. May you die with the scream of the dawn!"

Some of the women took hold of her and led her home. But none of them could ever persuade her that it wasn't Padraig who had robbed her of her flesh and blood that autumn evening. Father Kiely, a young man at the time, came over specially from the mainland when he heard what had happened, but even he could not make her understand.

"Yes, but in the name of God, woman," he said, "can't ye see that Padraig had no evil in his mind? Maybe he did offer your men double the pay to bring the Engineer back to the mainland. What harm was there in that?"

"Yes, but why would he offer it? Tell me! Why?"

"Why, because ..." but Father Kiely thought it better not to
go spreading gossip. He knew as well as we did why Padraig wanted to oblige the Engineer; it was a matter of a grant from the County Council for the extension of his store. "Does it matter why?"

"He sent them out because a storm was blowing up. He knew right well they'd be caught on the way back. He dared them to go."

"Nonsense, woman!" but the priest looked taken aback, "Ye don't think the man would do a thing like that?"

She said nothing. She just looked at him.

"But tell us here, woman, what's all this about anyway?" Father Kiely was an obstinate man. He never rightly understood what was going on on the island, but he'd keep a tight hold of a rumor till he'd worry some kind of a meaning out of it. "What's between ye? Will ye tell me that?"

She never told him, but he asked a few questions elsewhere and he went away with a few answers. God knows what queer notions the poor man has of us ever since, that is, if he judges us all by the way Padraig carried on over Bairbre, when 'twas just a question of taking a wife, not to mention the way Bairbre herself behaved when she came back from Bostonmass. A right pair of them there was in it!

She was a wild slip of a girl then, with a great show of American clothes, white gloves and summer hats and satin dresses, which she wore with an air before all the girls of the island. She hadn't over much of the heavy pennies, though, that she should have been putting towards her dowry the three years she was away. However, she had no want of looks from the men's side of the church of a Sunday, but looks of that kind cost nothing; she got very few offers. Those that pleased her vexed her father and those that pleased him sent her into fits of laughter. The offers came either from snug old bachelors or from men whose holdings barely held the grazing of a
Her father, a sensible man, was all for packing the girl back to Boston mass until she got some sense for herself. It was then that Padraig made his proposal. It seemed a good match, better than her father could ever have expected. It pleased her too, not because Padraig would come in for the business and a wealth of money when his mother died, but because the other girls had never dared set their caps at him. He was a student for the priesthood, home for the holidays after four years in the seminary. Though the people said the mark of a spoiled priest would be on him for evermore, Bairbre paid no heed, nor, in their hearts, did the other girls of the island. They could only think how fine his quiet priestly ways were compared with the rough ways of the young islandmen. It was what the girls thought that maybe counted most with Bairbre.

Padraig’s mother fought hard against the match; she had set her heart on making a priest of her son. Unless he went back to the seminary (so she told the men who crowded the counter of her shop every night), she would never again look her neighbours in the face. The tears would creep in to her voice as she resorted more and more frequently to the bottle hidden in the cupboard of the kitchen dresser. The older men would shift their glasses uneasily on the counter, while a few of the young fellows would grin and nudge each other at the thought of how her tactics would over-rule Padraig. They were wrong, though. For the first time in his life, Padraig faced up to her. Neither tears nor threats could move him until at last the match was finally made.

That night, all the people of the island gathered into the cleamhnas party in Bairbre’s house. It lasted all next day and the better part of the following night as well. Some of the women have photographs which show Padraig and Bairbre standing side by side in the sunshine. They
look stiff and a little nervous, but happy in different ways.

In the middle of the second night, when all the company was very quiet, listening to a young girl giving out a song, there came a clatter of boots on the flags of the street. In trampled the captain and crew of a Scottish trawler that had been driven into the sound by a rising westerly gale. The man of the house made them at home, as was right and proper. He plied them with all manner of drinks, until they'd be in form to join in the singing and the dancing. They were gamy lads, the strangers, and it wasn't long before they were in form, too good form - the men of the island thought. Padraig and some of the islandmen had to go down to the shop to bring up another barrel of stout. While they were gone, and later, while they were tapping the barrel out in the hallway, the trawlermen began to make free with the girls. A few of them gathered around Bairbre.

"God damn that westerly wind," said one of them, "that it didn't blow us in here a day sooner."

"Maybe," said the captain and he winking his little blue eye at them, "it got us here soon enough." And he slipped his hairy arm around Bairbre and rubbed his bearded chin against her cheek. She pushed him aside, laughing at his impudence, but when she discovered that he too had spent a while in Boston, she turned to him as if she had met a friend in a distant land. The men stayed around her, laughing and talking. When nobody was looking, they made her try a few sips of cognac they had bought off a Spanish trawlerman. She had never touched strong drink before and she sent them into loud guffaws with the things she said. Poor Padraig was all this time filling mugs and glasses for the crowd and listening to the old people who came to call down God's blessing on his marriage. It was Bairbre's father who at last went up to the trawler captain and said, "Ye know, stranger,
"Indeed then," said Bairbre, "I'm the girl they say is to be married." And she had eyes for no one else but the trawler captain the rest of the night.

The trawler stayed in the sound for the best part of a week. The only man who never knew why was Padraig. He was still fighting hard against his mother who was all set to put off the wedding as long as possible. He never guessed at what had happened till one night several weeks later when Bairbre left the island. Three young lads—they thought she was Helen of Troy or some woman of the songs—rowed her across the nine-mile sound to the mainland. Off with her then to Derry to meet her trawler captain.

It wasn't long afterwards until she was back. She hadn't a word to say for herself. The rumor went around that the fellow was married, but no one could ever say for sure. All we did know was the kind of game the fellow had been up to; we soon saw signs of that. Padraig nearly went out of his mind when he was told of it. He came straight down to the slip, where the men of the island were gathered to mend a currach. We were sitting on the ground, our backs against the stone fences, watching the smoke drifting around the big black pot and the bubbles of tar bursting at its brim. He stood before us, like one of us in his homespun tweeds and bawn-eens, but that long priestly face of his as pale now as that of a dead man. He wanted us to rise up on the instant and make an example of the girl, to tar and feather her as some of the mainland people do. He talked of tying her to the old pagan pillar in the gap by the churchyard, as our people did with those who stole the Indian meal in famine times. None of us made a move to follow him. We're not like that on the island and never were. We men, some of us, have taken our chances too, though not with our own women.
We let the girl alone, as Christ did with Mary Magdalene, but there's little credit due to us for that. The man that would have lifted a stone against Bairbre would want to have been born both blind and deaf.

Coilín Shéamuis married her before her time was come. No one was put out to hear of it. Girls were scarce on the island at the time and several men a lot younger than Coilín would have been glad to have her. They knew at the very least of it that they wouldn't be getting a barren wife, which is the greatest cross of all.

They were a good match, Coilín and Bairbre. He had just come back after a spell in England, where, as he said himself, he'd been selling his sweat for long enough. He was a big burly fellow with a terrible temper when he was roused. Himself and Bairbre had it hot and heavy a few times, but she gave as good as she got. Indeed, it would be hard for any man to best her, for even in anger she had a voice that would tease the birds off the branches. Coilín himself had no sense at all when she was about. We used to watch him, letting on to be working when the women would be gathering in the seaweed to spread out on the land. Bairbre would be standing out in the cold sea, swinging her sprong with the best of them. She looked smaller than any of the women, but she had enough life in her to do for any two of them. Poor Coilín would lose the strength of his arms and he watching her, with her black hair drawn smoothly back, the red flannel petticoat kilted up and the waves breaking white around her thighs. Many's the joke was made about him over the pints of stout in Padraig's shop, though we took care that none of them reached his ears, or Padraig's either.

She had some trouble with her second child, Coilín's first. For nearly sixteen years after, they thought that this was to be the only fruit their marriage was to have. However, the day the bodies of Coilín and her
two sons were brought ashore, she was carrying her third child in her womb. It was born that self-same night and she was to rear it for the mad-house in Ballinasloe.

Coilín had not left her over-endowed with the world's goods (though God knows why she and her little creature had to go on living). The King of Graces, so we have it, is like a friends' house, which no one need leave but by his own free will. And so, we set her up in a snug little sweet shop. We all contributed the money when the curate called for a collection, all except Padraig Mahony. We weren't surprised at this. We hardly expected him to help set up another shop on the island, even though he sold no sweets in his. The least he might have done, though, was to pay the woman her rightful debt, the fare he had engaged to pay to her drowned man. It was the one debt he never paid. Maybe he set it off against what he thought she owed him. He had a very strict conscience about debts, but it worked like one of his ledgers, always in his favor.

Bairbre was no shopkeeper. She was content to make a living and that was barely as much as she made. As the little son grew up, she used talk of sending him to school, as if that would cure him. When the time came, she never did; even she knew. Oftentimes, when the children would come in to buy sweets, they'd find her sitting at the counter with the creature in her lap. He'd have a steel-nibbed pen in his hand, which she'd be guiding across the page of a penny jotter. Even the smallest children would be loth to look at the sight of that.

Maybe that was why, as he grew older, that she drew in on herself more and more. She stopped going down to the well when the women would be there, talking and singing and whiling away the time till their men would be home from the fishing. She seldom spoke to them, only when she'd want one of them to get her stores for her (for she never again darkened
the door of Padraig's shop). Even her nearest neighbours got out of the habit of dropping in on her to pass the time of day. On a small island like ours, it's strange how seldom people see each other when there's no great desire on them to meet. That was why, when Padraig made the children take their custom from her, that we never heard anything about it. She had got out of the habit of talking to us.

It was a good long time before the women noticed that her sweet-jars remained empty and that the toffee-bars and chocolates in her windows had faded in the sun. Then they noticed that the smoke from her kitchen didn't have the smell of a turf-fire. They said nothing, for no woman wants to say something, which one day she might hear said of herself. One evening, though, on their way home from the milking, a group of the women met Bairbre crossing a field in the dusk. She had a sack on her back and we knew then, for sure, that it was the dried dung she was burning. We began to ask a few questions and we soon found out the whole story. On our island, there is no greater sin than to take away a person's livelihood. We told Father Kiely all about it on the following Sunday.

"I'll go talk to him this very minute," said Father Kiely, pushing out his jaw and tugging the wet beret off his head, as if he was going to fling it down at our feet, "I'll go straighten his legs for him."

"Don't say where ye heard it, Father," said one of the old men. We hadn't expected the priest to act that quick, before Mass and all. But then, Father Kiely always was very contrary on an empty stomach.

"Good God, are ye men at all ?" said he, drawing back to look at us. We turned away. It was all right for him to talk. He hadn't got the next season's stock of oats and rye and salted bream promised to Padraig. He wasn't up to his neck in debt for his meal and his oil. And he was a priest.
Padraig was coming out the door of his shop with his Missal in his hand when the priest came up, pushed him back in and shut the door. We left them to it. It was none of our business. We felt in a way as if it was one priest talking to another, for Padraig it was who led the prayers for the dead and kept the book of baptisms and marriages. To tell the truth, he had more of the look of the priest about him than had Father Kiely himself, whom strangers often took for an islandman. If Father Kiely had given his white alb and chasuble to Padraig and let him come out on to the altar, I don't know but that we wouldn't have genuflected in the right places. Maybe that was why Father Kiely always spoke to him in a loud voice, like a man shouting back to the people on the land.

We saw who had the best of it, when Father Kiely swept out in his vestments and crossed himself with a great flourish at the foot of the altar. Padraig edged into the back of the church. When we passed out after Mass, he was still kneeling there, the two red patches still in his cheeks. Not only had he to give up selling the sweets. That evening, he sent little Jimín down to Bairbre's with the whole stock he had on hands. He told Jimín not to tell anyone, but he might as well have told the island as to tell the son of our postmistress. Especially when the news was that Father Kiely had avenged himself at last for those razor-blades.

We thought everything was nicely settled when the children began to deal again with Bairbre. We had reckoned without Padraig, though. He began writing to people on the county council, who were well in with the government up in Dublin. We heard about the official letters going back and forth, but we didn't know what was going on till we heard that he had been made a Peace Commissioner. We were pleased to have a Commissioner on the island, though it was seldom enough that any of us wanted documents sworn. The last thing we expected, though, was that Padraig would use his
new power against Bairbre. In fact, his main purpose was to have her son certified and sent away. The island was up in arms on the instant, but Padraig no longer cared what anyone thought of him. He told a deputation of the men to clear out of his house. Now that he had the official power behind him, as well as the power of the purse, no one could shake him, not even Father Kiely himself.

The day Bairbre's son was sent away, we all gathered at the boat-slip, not to see the poor creature off (for we might as well have seen off his old sheepdog), but to look at a woman who now had more than her share of earthly trouble. God forgive us, not one of us made a move to help her. But what could we have done? She had lost husband and sons all over again; that was what the creature meant to her.

The dog was the only one to cause trouble at the slip. Bairbre stood by herself on the rock above us, her face hidden in the folds of her shawl, as she watched her son being lifted into the currach. Beyond her, up in the village, the dog was howling. We could hear the distant thuds as it hurled itself against the door of her shed. When it fell silent suddenly, we looked up the road and there it was making straight for us. We scattered on all sides as it plunged down the slip and into the water, right under the prow of the currach. It rose, splashing and choking, and hooked a paw over the gunwale. The men beat it down with their oars. The currach pulled out from the slip and rose to the first wave that came rolling in from the sound. It left the dog there in the water, the waves reaching up for its muzzle, it barking resounding off all the cliffs of the island, until the din lifted the wild seagulls into the air.

The barking ceased when Padraig's currach came crawling in from the hooker. The dog shifted its ground uneasily, its eyes still on the hooker which swung around slowly as the sails caught the wind. The
dog let out a couple of deep troubled bays across the widening stretch of water. Then, as the currach ground against the slip, Padraig lashed out at it with his oar, forcing it to retreat away up the slip. It stopped to shake itself, whimpering and trembling all over, then turned and made away up to Bairbre. It pressed its sleek wet body against her skirt and turned an eye down on the man standing below in the overloaded currach.

Padraig clambered ashore. Holding the gob of the currach, he took a quick glance up at Bairbre from under his eyebrows. Then he turned to call the men on the quay to give him a hand. All the time he was unloading the currach, Bairbre stood staring out to where the hooker's brown sails were flitting along the distant blue coast of the mainland. We were afraid she would lay another curse on Padraig. Afraid we were. We try to forget that a man has been cursed, so that we can live on the same island with him. To tell the plain honest truth, the reason that we were so afraid of Padraig was that we could never forget that about him.

This time, Bairbre said not a word. When she turned to go, she came slowly down by the wall of the slip, past the cart which Padraig was busily loading. He kept working away, but he was watching her out of the corner of his eye. She stopped beside him, looking him full in the face. "Muisce, a Phadraig, nach tú an trua Mhuire," said she, "'tis Mary's pity ye are!"

Not a word did he say as he swung a half-barrel of porter up on the tail of the cart.

"Everything I had ye've taken from me," she went on, "would ye not say to me now 'I forgive'?"

"Hold up!" Padraig bellowed, as the horse edged forward to reach for a tuft of roadside grass. He tugged viciously at the reins and the horse reared up with a rattle of chains. "Mind out there!" he called
to Bairbre, as the white teeth grazed her head. And that was all! Bairbre turned away from him and began the long walk up to the village. The dog followed on her heels, turning those speckled stone eyes on us as it passed.

After that day, Bairbre seemed to lose all taste for the business. She sold off the stock she had and made no move to refill those empty sweet-jars. No one said anything to her, but we did take it amiss, for after all it was our money which had started the shop. She took to spending long hours in the old ruined church that the monks from Rome had built in the time of the Saints. Walking up and down the mossy chancel, she'd spend her day telling her beads over and over. Now and then, she'd glance up at the sound of a thrush in the bushes that grew out of the chapel walls. She'd stop a long time watching him giving out his song and he swelling out his breast in the sunlight.

She was seen at dawn a few times, hurrying across the fields before the island was awake, moving with that quick graceful gait of hers, which made it so surprising to look into her face and find an old woman. Then one day, she was seen out west under the cliffs, climbing down over the black wet rocks to gather feochans. It's a sure sign of the bad times when a person goes to gather feochans, for it's barbarous food, shellfish, and fit only for the nourishment of hens and ducks. A few of the women called in to see her one night, to see what they could do for her. They stopped a moment in the doorway, watching her before they said, "God be within!" She was sitting on a stool, away out in the middle of the room, as if she could have been anywhere. The place was smoky and untidy (for like all who spent a spell in the boardinghouses of Bostonmass, Bairbre was never noted for tidiness). She seemed to be listening from a great distance to the tick-tock of the old clock over the hearth. Her hands
rested happily on her knees. There wasn't a stir out of her until the dog
suddenly moaned aloud in its sleep and she cooked a bright blue eye over at
it. "Wisha, isn't it bad ye are!" she said with a humorous lift of her
lip that drew all the lines of her face into a smile.

She rose up when she saw the women and made them welcome. She
put down the kettle and wet a pot of tea. The women sat there all the even­
ing, drinking cup after cup of tea and talking of this and of that. They
might have been sitting there yet for all that they found out about Bairbre.

They dropped in several times after that. Bairbre always made
them at home and talked politely with them, but they felt somehow that they
were intruding on a gathering of her friends. They began to time their
calls for when she'd be out saying her prayers in the old church. They'd
leave in a few eggs for her, or a salted pollock or a loaf of fresh soda­
bread. Next time they'd come, they'd be surprised how little of the food was
gone. It was only when we heard her great news that we realised that it was
maybe because she had no need of mortal food.

A fine evening in spring it was when she told us. The men had
come in after a night setting out their spillets. They had tumbled dead­
tired into their beds, leaving the sea empty of boats and ships.

Bairbre was out gathering dung for her fire. She had wandered
as far as the lonely western shore, when all of a sudden the slanting sun
shone out as strong and as bright as at midday. She straightened up, amazed
at the hush that had fallen on the waves and on all the little birds that
nested by the cliffs. There before her, lay a green and lovely island. She
stood looking at it, at the sheep on the hills and the smoke curling out of
the houses and the fat cows grazing in the pastures. It was so near that
she could see the waves turning over on the strand. Men were walking there,
dressed like great gentlemen in white town shirts. Behind them, the meadows shone as if each blade of grass was lit by the light of the sun. It was the brightness of it all which at last brought a tear to her eye. She blinked it away, but, alas, when she looked again, there was nothing. The late sunlight lay along the green tops of the waves, riding smoothly in to burst below the cliffs with the boom of an empty barrel. The twilight songs of the small birds broke out again from the short rough whispering grasses. The island was vanished away.

The light and stillness of it were still with Bairbre when she came to tell us. First, she paid a visit to the church to thank Almighty God for this promise of a happy death. Her story roused the men from their beds. It was many years since anyone had seen the land of youth and the island had talk of nothing else. The men gathered in the pub, soberly drinking Padraig’s black stout. They listened to the old men talking of those in days gone by, whose eyes had been opened in the same way to the mercy of God. Padraig took no part in the talk. The scratch of his nib behind the counter made the men lower their voices to a whisper.

At the legal time, he rose up and began to close the shop. Seamus Rua, a big lump of a fellow home from England, refused to leave.

"Go on, now!" said Padraig, taking the glass that stood before Seamus, "'tis the legal time and right well ye know it."

"A lot that ever worried you," said Seamus, "as long as there's drink to be sold and money taken in."

"'Twill be the legal time here from this out!" said Padraig, "I'm thinking that there's a great want of law and right thinking here on this island." He looked around at the silent faces of the men. "I never in all my born days heard such nonsense as was talked here tonight."

"Ye're not doubting Bairbre's word, man?" Seamus said, laying
his two big hands down on the counter, as the men behind him murmured among themselves.

"I can't doubt what I never believed," said Padraig.

"Anam 'un Diabhail," swore Seamus, grabbing hold of Padraig's jacket and twisting him nearer, "if I don't ..."

"Easy," the men said, "easy now!"

Seamus drew the man tight up against him, then sent him spinning back against the shelves behind the bar. A bottle of whiskey crashed to the floor, a full bottle, still wrapped in tissue paper. Padraig stared down at it, fumbling at his jacket and trying to pull it straight.

"So ye're going to teach us law and order!" Seamus said, coming around the end of the counter and trailing his fingers along the black wood as he came.

"That's right," said Padraig, as the other man caught hold of him again, "I'll knock the nonsense out of yer heads, so I will. I and Father Kiely!" He brushed the hands off his jacket, roughly. "Now get out of here, you! And don't come back until you have proper respect for this house!"

That quietened Seamus for the night. It quietened the rest of us, too. We had no wish to let Father Kiely know anything of Bairbre's vision. Being a priest and a man from the mainland, we knew he wouldn't understand.

Padraig meant every word he said, as we found out the following Sunday, when he called the priest aside on the way to Mass. We knew from the way Father Kiely flounced out on to the altar, that he was only barely holding himself in till he got to the sermon.

"Are ye Christians at all?" was the first thing he flung at us. His angry blue eyes moved over us, back and forth, as if he was daring one
of us to answer. Then he launched into his sermon. It was his best ever. We were all shaken after it, but deep inside us, we felt glad. We had judged him right. A priest and a mainlander would never understand us, not in this world anyway.

Padraig had a little smile on him as he left the church. He was pale, though, and his face was drawn as if he hadn't slept. He never looked any other way in the weeks that followed. He became a changed man. Every evening, he changed a little more, always in the direction of strictness. He closed his shop at the legal time, though there was no one on the island to set the law on him. The prices of the island stores came down little by little, until they were the same as those on the mainland. He kept a close watch on the men when they were in drinking, to make sure that no one drank more than was good for him. He even took the glass out of old Tom a' Gabha's hand and sent him home to milk his cow and have his supper with his daughter and son-in-law and their children. Old Tom would never again set foot inside the door of the shop, no matter what thirst was on him.

On Sundays, Padraig took to meeting Father Kiely at the boat-slip. "What's the matter with ye?" the priest asked, as Padraig helped him ashore, for all the world as if he had been sent straight to us from Rome, by order of His Holiness himself. "Is it gone in the hoofs ye think I am?" and the priest jumped ashore, as nimbly as a young lad.

Padraig was always first in the line for confessions. During the month of May, it was he who gave out the Rosary in the church every evening. He gave it out, as if he was directing every Pater and Ave beyond the blue-veiled statue of Our Lady, beyond the great crucifix of Our Lord itself, away out the windows to the darkening summer sky. Afterwards, he
stood in the shadow of the porch, to stop the girls from making their dates with the men over the holy water font. In spite of it all, he lost little by little that upright priestly look. His shoulders began to stoop. His cheeks sagged out until the tiny blue veins barely held them. His hair began to go, until he had the look of an old scalded crow that a gale would sometimes carry over to the island from the mainland. The man was dwindling before our eyes, as if the very kernel was withering inside him.

He began to leave his light on all night. Those going the road would sometimes hear his voice raised in the Litany of the Saints. He chanted the responses to himself in Latin, like a chapter of priests. Seamus Rua, who was a bit of a rover after the girls, heard him late one night intoning the 'Tantum Ergo' and then going through the whole ceremony of Benediction. The hoarse rough voice gave Seamus the idea, God forgive him, that the poor man had drink taken. We all got the same idea when we saw Padraig upset the currach on a calm September day by clambering out of it in a panic and throwing himself into the sea. Only for the men on the slip, he'd have lost his life that day and maybe the best part of the island stores as well.

It was when he collapsed at the door of the church on a dark wet Sunday in November, that we began to think that it wasn't the drink but the man's health was at him. Father Kiely hurried around from the vestry in the middle of his unvesting. The men lifted Padraig out of the puddle in which he lay and stretched him out on a fallen headstone. He was frothing a little at the mouth. The veins on his forehead stood out like cords that someone was trying to tear away, skin and all, from his skull. Father Kiely, who had some medical learning (he had to, for he crossed that sound in seas that no doctor with any sense would stir out in) examined the chest
and pulse. When Padraig came round, the priest told him that the best thing he could do would be to see a specialist in the big town.

"But I can't, Father," said Padraig, "what about the island?"

"Ye'll get someone to look after the shop for ye."

"But 'tis not only the shop, Father ..."

"'Tis all ye should be looking after," said the priest, "the island has been here long enough, God knows ..." said he, with that mainlanders edge to his voice, "and 'twill be here long after ..." and then he stopped himself. He was never a great man for tact, Father Kiely, no more than most men from the mainland.

"I can't, Father. I wouldn't know what would be going on."

"Please yourself, then." Father Kiely pulled the purple stole off his neck and pursed his lips to it, as he folded it, "only I won't be thanking you some dirty night when I'm dragged out of my bed to come over to you."

Those were hard words from a priest, but they had their effect. Padraig went away in the hooker the next time it came to the island. He left Jimín, a big lad now, in charge of the shop. He couldn't have made a better choice, for Jimín took to the shopkeeping as if it were second nature to him. And so, maybe, it is with some people.

Padraig hadn't been in the big town since he was a young lad. We wondered how he'd fare there, but we knew that he wasn't one to give us an account of his travels and the strange ways of the people he'd meet. A cousin of the weaver's, however, has a pub house in the town and it was he who told us afterwards what happened. After Padraig had been in to see the specialist, he came straight to the pub house and ordered himself a large brandy. He hardly opened his mouth all day, except to order more drink. Even when the woman of the house came downstairs, hotfoot, for news of her
people on the island, Padraig had nothing to say for himself. He even had a bit of a dispute about the bill when he was leaving. "But don't ye know, man," he said, when he was charged the usual price, "that I'm a shopkeeper too?" He thought his state in life entitled him to drink at trade prices.

"If I charged the way you charged, ye'd be paying as much again," the publican replied. Padraig didn't let that go. He argued the toss for a long time, but he met his match in the publican. When it was time to go down to the harbor, he left the house with more drink inside in him than was good for his pocket or for him. And he looked more out of sorts with the world than he ever was, even when sober.

It was a different man altogether that arrived back to us on the island. He came up the slip, flapping his red hands at us, as if he was motioning us to kneel down for his blessing. The men in the currach tossed his homespun coat and his blue town suit out on to the slip after him. He let them lie there at the water's edge. He was looking at us, smiling and swaying his head from side to side, as if he were waiting for silence. Then slowly, he folded down on to the slip. A wave reached up and almost touched the tips of his black boots.

We carried him to his house, laid him down and forced brandy down his throat. He opened his eyes wide and stared at us, from one to another of us, men, women and children crowded into his bedroom. Some of us began to drift towards the door before those hot yellow eyes swung around to us and marked us out.

"Where's Bairbre?" he asked in a whisper. The women crossed themselves, thinking his mind was wandering.

"Bairbre!" he said.

The men withdrew to the kitchen to decide who was to go for the priest. They could hear him repeating the name over and over again, his
voice falling away to silence. Then suddenly, as if he had been jerked
awake, he shouted out, "Listen! Let ye all tell her. I saw it, the land
of youth!"

The men came crowding back to the door. There was a great hub-
bub for a few minutes, then everybody went quiet, watching him. Not one of
us had any doubt but that he was telling the truth. One look at his white
face was enough and it staring past us into the glass of death.

We told him we were sending for the priest.

"No, no," said he, "what do I want with him? 'Tis Bairbre I
want."

But we insisted. We were afraid of what Father Kiely would say
if we didn't. We sent three of the fastest oarsmen off to the mainland.

The men went back through the kitchen to the shop. They sat on
the benches around the walls and Jimín served them with stout. They tossed
the money into a pint glass on the counter. Then they sat back, watching
that glass, wondering which of the many cousins of various degrees would
empty it and run the coins through his fingers. They could hear the drone
of Padraig's voice from the bedroom, as the women prepared him for the last
sacraments. Telling them of the vision he was, repeating the story over and
over, like a man talking in his sleep. Towards evening, when he was washed
and shaved and tidied, a candle was brought in and he fell silent. He lay
on the white bed under the flickering light, his narrow hands clasped together
on his breast. A little smile touched his face, which was as white as if it
had been dusted with flour. He looked like a man readied for the coffin.

It was the quiet time of the day. The weak western light had
faded off the dark stone walls and the white fronts of the houses. Sudd-
enly down the street came the quick patter of bare feet and the shriek of the children, who all the afternoon had been constrained indoors. They came with wide-eyed faces, their voices wild. They could feel the night coming over the sea from the east, slipping from wave to wave.

The mothers in the bedroom made a move to go quieten them. They had hardly risen to their feet when they stopped all of a sudden at the sight of Bairbre in the doorway. She had her shawl about her face and her head bent, as if she were waiting. Padraig was roused by the silence in the room. He raised himself on his elbow. He was laughing, great gulping sobs of laughter. He pointed his long finger at Bairbre in the doorway.

"There she is now!" said he, "the divil's own liar!"

"Don't, Padraig," she said, "don't take it from me."

"Liar!" he screamed, "but I've seen it. I tell ye, I've seen the land of ..." His eyes went hard. His mouth shut tight, then fell open loosely. We heard the death-rattle as the women eased his body back on to the bed.

"The land of youth?" asked Bairbre. The women nodded their heads. "Oh, thanks be to God," she said, as she sank on to her knees.

She began the keening. The sound was taken up by all the other women. The harsh measured wailing filled the room and brought all the men in the kitchen silently to their feet. It passed out over the litter of the yard, the crates and empty casks. It filled the street and mingled for a moment with the voices of the children, making a strange harmony. When the children turned in silence to face it, it rose above them, taking wing into the dark. Away out on the sea, four men in a currach heard it. The three oarsmen stayed their oars and crossed themselves. The man huddled in the stern raised his head and said in a loud voice, "Requiescat in pace". Then
the sound died away over the dark moving waters.

Padraig was buried after Mass the next Sunday. Six men came out from the crowd at the door of the church, went quickly beneath the bier and swung it up on their shoulders. The white-draped coffin moved away over the heads of the crowd, swaying as it passed through the church gates and down the rocky path between high stone walls. The sun shone on the shawls and the red flannel skirts of the women walking two by two with their men. It shone on the girls in their wide blue skirts, lowering their eyes and smiling as they passed the stares of the young men at the gate. It shone on the bare-legged boys, whose hands were joined in prayer, but whose eyes were alert as the eyes of sparrows. We were all there, following this man, who had once for all his faults been one of us. And after us all, her eyes cast down, her lips moving in prayer, came Bairbre.

On the way to the graveyard, the funeral passed Padraig's house. The bearers laid down their load and wiped their faces with their caps. We knelt down to say a decade of the Rosary, then moved on again. The graveyard was before us on a sandy hill, headstones pressed into its summit like a crown of thorns.

Father Kiely was waiting in his white surplice beside the hole in the ground. He said the prayers and the coffin was lowered in. The women sobbed, as they do whenever any human clay is given back to the earth. There was no keening now, for Father Kiely was there. All around could be heard the murmur of Christian prayer.

Two cousins of Padraig took up shovels, spat on their hands and sent the sand and light clay drumming down on the coffin-lid. One of them was getting on in years. The crowd watched him weakening, as the sweat ran
down his temples into his eyes and blinded him. The young man worked away like a machine. When they were finished, they threw away their shovels and stooped to lay down the top sod. Father Kiely closed his book, blessed himself and turned away.

The crowd broke up. They moved through the long grasses to find the graves of their own people. They knelt beside the headstones. A few flung themselves sobbing on the ground, as if this new death had brought back memories of the other deaths. Bairbre was the only one to stay by Padraig's grave, a rosary beads twined around her withered hands.

She rose when the dog pressed itself against her. It whined a few times, very softly. Its head moved from side to side, making its eyes glint in the sun. When it moved forward to root in the fresh clay, she called out sharply and it turned to follow her.

We looked after them as they went step by step down the path. Below them, the surf beat against the barren cliffs. Beyond, stretched the dim and empty sea. Thinking we were of Bairbre and of the man that was gone. Nobody had told her and we knew that nobody would ever tell her of the terrible vision he had seen. For the land he had seen was as rocky, black and treacherous as our own. And it was set across the sound from Bairbre's land, on the dark and sunless side.

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