

V

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NO ONE SPOKE. The events of the recent past echoed endlessly inside the bleak corridors of my brain. An aching and inconsolable *de profundis*. I heard the clatter and clink of chains large and small, of anchors and capstans, the screaming of the gulls and the bellowing of the guards. I smelled the sharp iodine stink of rotting seaweed and the ammonia of horse's piss and straw from the quayside. I remembered the squall of rain that had sent the bystanders scurrying to the animal warmth of the pubs and out again when curiosity proved more powerful than fear of a wetting.

Most of all, I thought of Máire's last despairing cry and saw again and again the cruel glee of the *saighdiúir* who had jerked me away from her. It would be my last sight of Máire and my last view of the endless Irish rain moistening the sorrow of our land. "Make sharp, convict," Sergeant Sneed had snarled. "No more farkin' Muvver Ireland nah; yer on yer way to the Promised Land!" He followed up this witticism with a volley of oaths and attempted to club me with his musket. I'd worked out his stink: old sweat, shitty hose and dirty wet clothes that had half-dried on his body.

They drove us into the hold like a cargo of cattle for export, but it was fitted out with sleeping benches and an iron bulkhead with grilles through which they could see us always. The impatient turnkeys chained each one of us to a ringbolt in the ship's hull, muttering at us in English to keep still, damn us. Feet thumped overhead and muffled orders sounded up on deck, but little light penetrated into the gloomy hold on that dark afternoon. Not even

Padraig spoke, for perhaps the enormity of what was happening to us had dawned even on him, God save him. As I became accustomed to the dark, I could see the great eyes on him staring at me, begging me in his dim, dog-like way for reassurance. I reached out and patted him on the shoulder and whispered, "It'll be alright, Pat. You're with Maurice here." O, the cruelty of the *Sasanaighe* to put a poor, feeble, crippled creature like Padraig in a place like this. Would it never end?

It did me good to think of the sufferings of others, for a kind of suffocating despair had seized me; a palpably physical sensation that held my heart like a vice. And yet part of me actually welcomed my fate, for reason with myself though I may, I could never forget the terror in John Sullivan's eyes that wet afternoon on the mountain pass. Although my sentence was unjust, excessive and cruel in terms of what they had convicted me of, I felt that it nevertheless was some kind of penance for his murder. It was not that I believed they had even an ounce of justice on their side. They were invaders, oppressors who had stolen our lands and made us strangers in our own country. John Sullivan had been an Irishman, yet he was a venal puppet who shit on Ireland in order to gobble a mouthful of crumbs from the loaves they had stolen from us. And yet he was still a man, and for that reason I was accountable to a higher bar of justice than Lord Norbury's *Sasanach* travesty; my own conscience and the law of the Creator.

At first I considered that perhaps Puffendorf had dished me out an extra helping of gaol and exile to compensate for the capital crime he could not prove I'd done, but that did not explain how it was that he had sentenced my poor wee eejit brother to the same. There was no logic to it entirely. Indeed, Puffendorf was himself bereft of all logic, save that of relentless repression. He glowered with hate at us in the dock, or else smirked at any insult the prosecutor might care to hurl at us. He shamelessly ogled Máire when she stood trembling in the witness box, and then upbraided her for being a fornicator and a liar. O what a brave girl was my Máire, for though she shook like a sapling, she

did not break in the face of the gale of insulting questions in the English that the judge and prosecutor Ferris unleashed upon her. As the day wore on, my mind wandered and I half-imagined that soon I would be free to accompany my love back to the village under the mountains, there to be married. But then the terrible reality dawned and I heard Norbury's voice, harsh as a key in the lock of a cell in the Bridewell, insulting, cajoling, coarsely joking, its owner sure in his God-ordained power to lord it over this misfortunate country of the dispossessed and the starving. "Bog Irish!" he snarled at poor Máire. "Ignorant and superstitious like all the rest. D'ye expect us to actually believe such a put-up tale of old malarkey?"

Yet put-up or not, she persisted in her evidence, as solid as the Rock of Cashel, and not even Puffendorf himself could convict me of Sullivan's murder. The wig on him shaking as if he had the Saint Vitus dance, he rounded on us in the sentencing. We were, he opined, "an awful parcel of rogues who surely deserve to dangle on a rope just as Emmet swung and as Tone ought to have done before he cut his own damned throat and cheated the lawful sentence I had made upon him." The foam fairly flew from his gob across the courtroom and the yellow eyeballs on him were full of the crazed hatred that the rich reserve for the disrespectful poor. He fairly shat out his loathing and fear like a cascade of diarrhoea, befouling anyone of even moderate disposition. We were "vicious wretches", "foul blackguards without redemption", "vile swineherds and cowboys" and "low, idle and disorderly persons" who were the "prime instigators of a combination engaged in traitorous purposes" for which we had "sworn disloyal and secret oaths as is common with Roman Catholics."

It appeared for a moment that he might have a veritable orgasm of hate, so choked was the reservoir of bile that festered and boiled inside him. "The better classes of this country, and indeed the principles of His Majesty's Law itself, demand retribution and I am not the man to shirk my duty," he warned. With that he intoned the formula: "It is therefore ordered and adjudged by

this Court, that you both be transported upon the sea, beyond the seas, to such place as His Majesty, by the advice of His Privy Council, shall think fit to direct and appoint, for the term of fifteen years.” The look he shot us said that he would have willingly torn the throats out of us, had he the power to do so. He hated us for cheating the hangman.

“Take them down,” he said wearily, his passion spent, the great white wig on him drooping, and we were hustled from the dock by the Redcoats without even the chance to thank Mr Brady for his efforts on our behalf and into the back passage, the *anus mundi* that had lead to the Bridewell, exile, the lash and the gallows for so many Irish. It remains a mystery to me as to how we came to have such a fine barrister as Mr Brady with us in court, for he charged not a penny for his services and dismissed my inquiries with a wave of the hand. He was a lovely man and a patriot too, of that I am certain, despite his English accent.

During the following days they marched us in stages in chains along the coast to Cobh, but I remember little of that journey save for the mud and rain that was constantly upon us. At Cobh they lodged us in a hulk anchored under the walls of Spike Island, surely the filthiest hole in all of the British Empire, and comparable with the worst in the Turkish. It was a black, stygian, utterly unsanitary place, with rotten timbers impregnated with the stench of shit and pain. Half the creatures penned up on that hulk were half-dead and the other half were in danger of it. Not a morning went by without some poor man carried away and tossed into a pauper’s grave. There were men there half-demented and others so broken that they would inform on their own mothers for a stale crust.

The days dragged, but one afternoon, as we ate our “stirabout” with our blackened hands and nary a spoon, there was a commotion and a Redcoat detachment arrived aboard with some well-dressed men under their protection. These men, one fat and one thin, held handkerchiefs to their noses as they inspected us,

their piggy eyes screwed up in disgust. They had English accents, but rather more common ones than the likes of the great Lord Norbury or even Captain Reynolds, who had a trace of Lancashire about the vowels but spoke the King's English for all that. They busied themselves by ordering round some worn-looking old codgers who were sorting out piles of clothes.

"Nah, ye lot," said a bored Redcoat corporal, scratching his groin lazily. "The ginnemens 'ere 'as been so kind as ter bring along yer clothin' fer the voyage. Yiz is ter form up orderly-like and git yer issue frum the table. Harfterwards yiz is to be took ashore and to the vessel that'll take yiz to Horse-trailia."

"*An Astráil?*" The words buzzed round the hulk as those who could not understand the *béarlóir* questioned their bi-lingual comrades. "We are going to Australia?"

"Are we to be bathed first?" I asked him, by this time indifferent to the effects of "insolence" on such devils in human form. The corporal merely grinned. But the fat man's jaw dropped, as if he was amazed that such an apparition as myself dared speak, and in the English too.

"Did you hear that, Mr Davidson?" he asked his mate in mock surprise, his triple chins jiggling up and down synchronously with his words. "The creature wants to know if he'll make the acquaintance of soap and water." Turning to me, he raised a monocle to his eye and demanded to know if I wanted lavender water besides.

"No, a bath will do, surely," I replied, causing him to snort and launch into a tirade about the barefaced effrontery of the criminal classes of Ireland. At that, I bowed and assured him in Irish that he was and always would be a pig and that any resemblance to humanity on his part was purely accidental. All across the deck, there were guffaws. It was the first laugh that these men had enjoyed in months and from the way fatty reddened you could tell he understood that I wasn't paying compliments though he had understood not a word.

Thus fortified, we scraped off our rags and prepared to undergo

sartorial refurbishment without benefit of water, thus transferring the stench of the old clothes to the new at the outset. Each of us was issued, quite at random entirely and without regard to differences of size, with the regulation dress for transportees, to wit: “one jacket and one waistcoat of blue kersey cloth; one pair of duck trousers; one coarse linen shirt; one pair of yarn stockings and one woollen cap.” It was, without doubt, a timeworn litany.

One man slapped away across the deck with the trousers extending to the tips of his toes and his jacket half way up his back. The next presented a bizarre spectacle with the strides at half-mast and the jacket hanging down almost to his knees. Another had to hold up the strides with one hand and one presented half an arse to the world. Worst of all was the quality of these garments: the linen, I’m sure, was made of nothing but the sweepings from the floor of a Belfast mill; the cotton was of such inferior stuff that it would be rejected in Calcutta, so thin that you risked poking an elbow or a knee through it by the mere act of walking. I wondered if there was ever any independent inspection of the wares of these contractors, for certainly this rubbish would wear out before we ever saw the shores of Australia.

The fat man and his thin colleague, I realised, were merchants, contracted by His Majesty’s Government to supply the next human cargo out of Queenstown with clothes for the long voyage ahead. One of the old codgers who served as a clerk whispered that they were ships’ chandlers out of Bristol, lately expanded into the Cork district.

“No doubt ye’ll turn in a handsome profit on such goods,” I said to the fat man as I donned his uniform. “It is you, not I, who should be bound for penal servitude in Australia.”

He did not deign to reply, merely grunting to the guard to take me away to the waiting boat that ferried us to the shore. “Carm on, Paddy,” said the Redcoat, not unkindly, a slight smile playing round the corners of his thin lips. “We’ll soon ’ave yer safe and sound aboard the *Adeline* and all yer trabbles’ll be over.”

And so, on that drizzly Cork afternoon with the sun sulking

somewhere off out on the Atlantic, we were marched up the quayside over the slimy cobbles, a file of Redcoats to either side, their bayonets already stained brown with rust in the rain. Not one of us made a sound, save for the occasional suppressed sob escaping from some poor damned peasant soul who had no idea even where *An Astráil* was. Perhaps he thought it was the moon – and it might as well have been. The crowds gawked greedily at the spectacle, but here and there you could see a face, more thoughtful than the rest, understanding that he or she, just as easily as us, could be in chains and about to board the *Adeline*. A guard shoved back the crowd and swore in English for them to make way. It was strange to think it, but if that mass of Irish humanity had chosen to do so, they could have disarmed this “thin red line” and thrown the soldiers in the harbour and set us free. But they were tamed beasts in awe of their masters, and the double file of convicts in absurd contractor’s clothing clanked inexorably forward in their heavy chains.

Just then, I heard my love call my name. Until then, I was taking things with relative equanimity, for I had become emotionally numb in the Bridewell and the hulk, but hearing her voice brought back a wave of pain that scalded and shocked me so that I gasped out loud. I had even accustomed myself to the thought of her marrying another – she deserved a life after all – and yet here she was crying out her love for me in my last minutes in Ireland. The wind sent the rain stinging into my eyes, diluting the sudden hot spurt of tears, but I shook them away and saw Máire there, desperately pushing her way through the crowds. Her shawl had fallen away, revealing her shining black hair and high white brow above her lovely blue eyes. The crowd fell back to let her pass. For some, this was as fine a piece of free theatre as they had seen and they jostled for a view. Others muttered words of sympathy, and one old woman knelt and prayed on the wet cobbles, bless her.

I tried to slow my steps but the chain jerked me forward and the man behind collided into me with a muffled curse, cut off short in embarrassed sympathy. As they shoved me aboard, the

past flooded back: the soft light on the mountains, the gentle rains and the sun's mild eye; my parents, grey and gentle, beside the cottage door. It was all being torn away, along with Máire O'Farrell, the young widow whose husband had fallen into the flooded river and drowned when trying to rescue Fitzgerald's cow. She was a great one for the dancing, which was where, after a decent interval after Seán's death, she'd taken up with me.

"Maurice, I'll wait for ye!" she called as I clattered up the gangplank under the shadow of the rearing masts where sailors swarmed like monkeys in the rigging. The black maw of the hatchway leading down to the hold opened wide and I held fast for a moment to the ship's railing, crying, "Máire, forget me!" Savage hands tore me away, and shoved and pummelled me below, where other savage hands chained me to the hull. The hatchway crashed into position and thick darkness fell. Water fell, plock-plock, from the leaky deck and soon afterwards there was the sensation of silent movement as the ship headed out into the harbour I could still see in my mind's eye. Somewhere above, and separated by an ever-widening gap of water, Máire stood alone on the rainy shore, taken from me forever.

And still no one spoke, for there was both so much, and so little to say.