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Feed my lambs

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FEED MY LAMBS

(A novel)

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TO

the memory of

DOROTHY SPEARE

O wherefore did God grant me my request,
And as a blessing with such pomp adorn'd?
Why are His gifts desirable; to tempt
Our earnest Prayers, then, giv'n with solemn hand
As Graces, draw a Scorpion's tail behind?

Paradise Regained

FEED MY LAMBS

C O N T E N T S

P R E F A C E

This is a study in doubt. All of us at one time or other in our lives are plagued by doubt, but few of us pass the whole span of our existence in the constant torments and tortures of scrupulousness and indecision. Only those capable of great faith fall victims of satanic doubt. There is often more to be gained in studying life's failures and misfits than her heroes and leaders.

Boston, 1951

THE AUTHOR

C H A P T E R O N E

And He said to them, "Take nothing for your journey, neither staff, nor wallet, nor bread, nor money; neither have two tunics. And whatever house you enter, stay there, and do not leave the place. And whoever does not receive you -- go forth from that town, and shake off even the dust from your feet for a witness against them."

Luke VIII, 3-5

CHAPTER I.

TAKE NOTHING FOR YOUR JOURNEY

Evening had almost settled on Donegal. Swiftly and savagely it wove the damp bog into the hills, folded it over the valley, and sifted the ashen dusk between the trees. From the west, somber brooding rain clouds chased each other across a slate grey sky, and hurled occasional handfuls of drops on the little village below. Father Cornelius J. McMahon, parish priest of Knockmany and pastor of Our Lady Queen of Peace, stood at his rectory window staring into the darkness with watery, tired eyes. He knew by the signs -- the sighing and screeching of the restless wind as it grappled with the leafless trees in his forgotten orchard, the wild almost frantic waving and jigging of the hedges on what was once his lawn, the monotonous squeaking and banging of the old iron gate -- that this was to be another of those nakedly stark, viciously

turbulent autumn evenings that made the countryside even more dismal than it usually was. Another night of lashing, spiteful wind storms, washed out roads and flooded ditches, angry rain stamping on the skylight, of thunder growling and muttering in the hills, and lightning leaping into the valley; another night that the tourists and cyclists would call bewitching, a night that would make Tim O'Rourke, his sexton and sometime housekeeper, shake his bald head, and observe, "Aye. 'Tis a terror. Did you ever hear the like of it? Such booming and blowing? 'Tis a night for the banshees and the hobgoblins and them what believes in them if there ever was one. Don't you say so, Father?"

Father McMahon never said so. He held neither the romantic nor the superstitious opinion of the climate. Sixteen years of crippling rheumatism and wretching bronchitis, suffered in a land that bore him, but a land he never learned to love nor even tolerate, made him dread all this whirling and fog and dampness. "It's TB country that's what it is. TB country or maybe the influenza, but there's no health in it, and that's for sure", he used to answer O'Rourke in the days when he considered it a matter of simple politeness to give an answer. But that

was long ago, almost two decades, when he first came to Knockmany. Now he and O'Rourke seldom spoke. Too much had passed between them and beyond them, and even the formalities were gone. The housekeeper came and went, and the old priest scarcely noticed him. It was as if the ordinary gestures and salutations of living were no longer needed, as if they already knew too much of each other and themselves and were satiated.

The pastor listened to the mournful murmurings of the fast falling night funneled into his parlor by a broken pane in the casement. Through the barren branches, over the misty turf, down the darkening lough, the wind, remote and sad, was a lonely psalmist droning out a psalter of misery on a melancholy lyre, and carrying back, in dreary, recurring, half-forgotten antiphons, the truant years. Silent. Intermittent. Circuitous. Like the first flurry of a new snow the dreams and yearnings and failures of years gone by came out of the shrouded landscape. hovered about the cracked and peeling wallpaper, and slowly drifted into the dingy room. In swirls and lulls, in sallies and vortices, those terrible days, once dreaded and always remembered, lighted and dissolved on the carpet. Long decayed months,

full of pain and anguish, of things attempted and seldom accomplished, of people and places and events, of blurred snatches of conversations, of faces peering up at the chalice and ears hanging in the fretted oblivion of the confessional, all refused to stay buried in the abyss of the past, and eddied about the dust veiled bookcases in faint, waving parabolas. And in the gaunt, laughing shadows that the low burning turf fire flung across the ceiling, the dying but never dead memories of years lived and relived danced in and out. The night hummed the dun chant of time on the whim of a winter wind.

Father McMahon shook himself from his reveries. He became conscious of the fact that he was no longer looking out of the window where pitch darkness had now settled, but was reading the past in the reflected lights of the room on the pane. With an emphatic, contemptuous motion he pulled down the faded green shade. There was a finality about his action, an abruptness but a thoroughness, as if he sought in that motion of pulling down the shade to shut out, to erase for once and for all this tantalizing past, a past he knew he could never live with, but knew even more certainly that he would die with. "There!" he seemed to say to himself with feigned conviction, "I

have blotted you out! Cut you off completely! You can torment me no longer!"

Somewhat satisfied and comforted by the added darkness he returned to his desk, and with grubby, freckle-stained hands groped for his penknife which lay on top of a disorderly pile of age-bitten books. Almost in rivalry with the whining and sighing of the stormy night he commenced a rasping, meticulous scraping at the freyed cuffs of his cassock. The knife slid back and forth across the shiny serge and scratched away at the jagged accumulations of hardened wax, the professional badge that proclaimed a lifetime spent at the altar, in the sacristy, over the Baptismal font, at the edge of gaping graves.

The old priest licked his gums and smiled gleefully as the little pellets of dried wax tinkled on the floor. Occasionally he ground one of them into the boards with his foot or sent one flying with a vicious kick across the room, but under no circumstances would he dare touch the wax more than the operation demanded. If a stray chip chanced to land on his free hand, he brushed it off with a quick nervous gesture that betrayed a tremble, like one flicking off a

particularly odious insect. Father McMahon hated wax. He had always hated wax. It was one of the tools of his trade and something he had handled for more than seventy years, but he hated it with an almost psychopathic hate. He could not remember a time when the touch of wax did not terrify him and send a chill up his spine. In school the other children jumped at the squeak of a hard piece of chalk against the slate blackboard, and at home his father plugged his ears when someone walked on spilled sugar. Wax had the same effect on him.

The specter of the little room at the back of the parish house in Cross Glen still came into his mind after all these years. It was an almost bare room with a single window spilling a dingy splash of light upon a long wooden table. Here, on Saturday afternoons, the altar boys took their turns at preparing the candelabra and the votive lamps for the weekly high Mass and the novena services. The candles came in wooden cases and were wrapped individually in oil paper. It was the altar boys' job to unpack them, shave the ends with a long knife so they could fit into the holders, and slide the tallow catchers down over the tips. The priest cringed as he thought of the long slivers of wax shaved from the stalks of the new candles. He

could almost see himself again, a pale, sickly child of eight or nine, standing in the little wooden wind-breaker that led to the room at the back of St. Paul's parish house, and nervously scanning the list of altar boy appointments that the nun hung up every week. He recalled the desperate bargains that he tried to make if his name was listed for sacristy duty. Most of the other boys hated funerals and disliked in particular putting out the catafalque for a Missa Cantata. This meant a trip down into the damp and lampless cellar beneath the church where several bishops were long ago entombed, and it meant bringing up the long wooden box that looked like a casket and smelled of incense and decay. He didn't mind that; in fact he rather liked it down there where it was black and cool and mysterious. And he didn't mind going tothe graveyard either because he like to listen to the long prayers that the priest read in English, and count the number of people who were crying, and ride back on top of the empty hearse with the undertaker. Bargains of this kind were usually easy to make, but when they didn't materialize he was panic stricken with the thought of the long wooden table and the big, black handled knife.

One Saturday he ran away and hid in the barn behind Shea's Public House, and when Fathe Kearse found him he was very mad because he thought one of his altar boys was off sneaking smokes from the stable boys. And then there was the time at the High Mass when the Archbishop came down from Armagh, and Father Kearse wanted everything to go right because the Primate was a very fastidious man, one who thought that altar boys should contribute to the efficacy of the congregation and not detract from it by their slovenly service. It happened just as the procession was leaving the sacristy. In dipping his hand into the holy water font, one of the acolytes tipped his candle down so that the hot wax fell on Neil McMahon's neck. He uttered a terrifying shriek that could be heard at the back of the church that brought the Mother Superior out of the front pew on the run. The Primate thought the boy had actually been burned seriously and signalled the master of ceremonies to remove his cope while he examined the victim with his bony fingers. The High Mass was delayed a full fifteen minutes and the choir sang the Asperges three times to fill in the space taken up by the archbishop's arguing with Mother Superior, fussing with the pastor and his curates,

and impatiently trying to piece together what had happened by questioning the trembling altar boy. When Neil got home he told his mother what had happened, blurting out the story in great spasms of tears, but she didn't understand about the wax either. She said what she always said to him in her vain efforts to comfort and understand her only son. "Never mind, Neil. Someday you'll be up there on the altar elevating the chalice and the other boys won't laugh at you anymore. You'll be a priest of God and you'll be a credit to your mother and father, and everyone will come to you with their troubles." It was her constant dream. The only illusion that she allowed herself in a life of drab realism, and the thought of it frightened him almost as much as the wax. He never was able to tell her about the little room at the back of the parish house, and the oil papered candles, and the long thin slivers that felt like spiders crawling all over him. He never could make her understand that it was even worse when it got under your fingertips. The one romance in her life came between them, the romance of his future.

The priest stopped his scraping abruptly, and with a violence inconsistent with his years drove the knife into the table. He turned his yellowish eyes, now full of scorn and trepidation, towards the drawn shade and pointed a shaking finger at it. "So! You have come back, have you?" he shouted in a high, withered voice. "You won't leave me be, you miserable tyrants! Well I'll fix you! I'll fix you! You wait and see. I'll have O'Rourke patch up that hole there and you'll have to stay out then. What do you think of that, eh? Now what have you got to say?" He buried his face in his hands and began to sob, great convulsive sobs that heaved his small back up and down like a bellows. Over the desolate moor of his memory the legions of the past had trampled again, and he had capitulated. He raised himself up on one elbow and scattered the little pile of shavings across the parish marriage record with a contemptuous sweep of his hand. "Wax!" he said, and poured a handful of chips through the palm of his hand. "I'm not afraid of you anymore!" Then he slumped himself across the chaos of his desk and sobbed quietly to himself.

Off in the distance, the seven-thirty carriage from Sligo wailed fretfully toward Belfast, injecting a dissonant chord into the wind's melody. A light rain was falling now, dreary diaphanous drops which arranged themselves in curious geometric patterns on the skylight and doodled on the tile roof with nervous fingers. Downstairs somewhere a door opened softly; hobnailed boots resounded on the carpet-worn staircase, their emphatic progression ending with the shadowy apparition of Tim O'Rourke at the edge of the threshold.

He was neither a large man, nor a small one; or perhaps he was both. He had short thin legs, frail, bloodless hands with long, tapering fingers, and a large, barrel-shaped body, all chest and shoulders. His bald head was too small for his massive bull neck, and he would have given the impression of tremendous, inert power were it not for the fact that his chinless face was puffed and flabby, his eyes weak and shifty and set back far in their sockets, and he had a nervous twitch about the corners of his mouth and suggested a smile in preparation but seldom culminated.

He was one of those people who dwell forever on the outer periphery of other people's lives, who are never noticed when present, but always missed when absent, who go unobserved and unevaluated, but somehow, by their own volition and intent, or everyone's unconcern, seem indispensable or at least strive desperately for that impression. His past was as dubious and rumor-ridden as his monthly visits to Dublin, which provided for the more sensational portion of the village gossip. No one could really say how or when he became sexton at Our Lady Queen of Peace; who was parish priest when he was appointed; who had been his predecessor, or even his rival for the position. It seemed as if he were older than the parish itself, that he had always been there, and that it could not go on effectively without him, although he did next to nothing to maintain the shabby buildings and weed infested grounds. His age was a source of constant conjecture, for he had outlived three bishops and half a dozen pastors, but he could still cycle up and down the steep hills of Knockmany, and climb up on the high altar with the flowers and candelabra. He enjoyed the aura of mystery that he thought he created, but few cared to be mystified. That was his real enigma. He had the curious faculty of being and not being all at once. He did not register.

It was the same in the village. When the nightly circle of tradesmen and farmers gathered around the fireplace in Tabby McCoy's public house for stout and reminiscence, O'Rourke was neither accepted nor rejected. He was just there: like one of the ornamental spigot knobs on the tap, a useless bit of decoration at best, but a bothersome void when absent. If it were not for this unenticing contradiction, the sexton might have been a feared and even a hated man.

He pretended to know everything about everyone. He had the final word, although later no one could ever recall him having opened his mouth, in every piece of backbiting or slander. He told the one orthodox version of any current scandal, and from the prodigious miscellany of his memory could produce irrefutable statistics in support of any calumny, especially if the event had been previously set down in any of the parish records.

It was none other than Tim O'Rourke who aroused the interest of the police in the accidental death of Barney Mulvaney. No one doubted the fall

from a step ladder version of the story, and indeed the coroner had concluded the whole business without bothering to come to Knockmany. The widow Mulvaney was as dejected a mourner as you could hope for at any funeral, no matter how bad the poor deceased might have been in his lifetime. It was as simple and unsuspicious as could be, until Tim O'Rourke went to see her. It was just another neighborly parish call, he told her, which all the trustees were obliged to make in compliance with the Lord's Beatitudes, and he had come to console her. Then he turned those small rodent eyes on her and twitched his mouth a little bit and soon there was talk of wife beati ng and a poor provider and the insurance and doing what was best for the children. When the police inspector came up from Sligo poor Mrs. Mulvaney was at her wits end in trying to cope with his insinuations, and attributed the whole scandal to the malignance of her sister-in-law. Only the intervention of her brother who was a priest in Dundalk and a man of great influence prevented her from being arraigned on a charge of murder.

And it was Tim O'Rourke who kept Knockmany informed of the many eccentricities of the new

parish priest; about his eyesight which was getting worse as the months went by, so that "You know I must read his office to him every day now. Me, reading Latin!"; and about the long conversations and arguments that he had with himself, "Almost daft he is, muttering and whispering to himself like a maniac, and sitting there all day picking at his cassock with that old penknife"; and of his after midnight meditations before the side altar in the chapel, "It's then that you should see him! Like a thing possessed, I tell you! Kneeling there all alone in the darkness with the eyes near popping out of his head. Till morning sometimes! I've seen him when I left at night and he was there when I came back in the morning, crying and jabbering and carrying on like a six months old infant. He's a deep one, let me tell you."

Despite the sensational nature of his material, O'Rourke's delivery was tediously matter of fact. He was never credited with originating a story, and hence missed all the blame for the injury bestowed. He told a tale as if he took it for granted that everyone in the room had heard it before and knew

more about it than he did, and as if it were merely a boring repetition on his part or a summary of the already accepted facts. And so his stories were received. Indeed, because there was nothing of the dramatic in his narration, no air of surreptitiousness, no "just between me, you, and the lamppost" atmosphere, no lowering of the voice, or glances thrown over the shoulder, or chair pulled in, he never created even the mildest of sensations.

No one ever called Old Tim a blabberer or a washerwoman. He was simply that quiet bladheaded fellow who swept up the rice on the church steps after a wedding, or dropped into a wake to say his beads, or passed out a bit of holy water of a Sunday, was always available as a godfather at the Baptisms in the event that a relative didn't show up, and served the early Mass when one of the altar boys chanced to oversleep. There was no harm in the man, none whatsoever. The whole mission of his life seemed to consist of just being there, anywhere, everywhere, at the Holy Name meetings, or a charity bazaar, or a churching, or a crossroads accident, or on his stool in the corner of Tabby McCoy's pub, and no one in the whole world would have wanted it otherwise. To probe his mysteries,

to draw back the flesh from the skeleton of his existence, would be as dull and useless as the dissection of an alley cat. People took no interest in him, and even if they did, they could never match the interest he took in them. He was always just "Old Tim, the fellow at the back of the church."

And now here he was standing in the doorway of the parish house at Knockmany, shifting his weight back and forth on the balls of his feet, and passing his cap from one hand to the other. He stood there for a long time looking into the room. When he finally spoke, his voice was deep and colorless, and his words came slowly. It was as if he were trying not to disturb the steady patter of the raindrops and the barely audible sobbing of the priest. "Aye, 'Tis a terror." he said. "Did you ever hear the like of it in all your born days? Such booming and blowing? 'Tis a night for the banshees and hobgoblins if there ever was one. Don't you say so, Father?"

At the sound of his voice the old priest sat up listlessly in his chair and began

scraping at his cassock again. He made no answer. The sexton moved noiselessly towards the fireplace and took a few pieces of damp turf from the broken wicker basket on the apron of the hearth and arranged them expertly about the low lapping flames. He sang softly to himself in a hissing half-whisper:

I went up to Dublin City
At the hour of Twelve at night
And there I spied a pretty young maid,
Combing her hair by the candle light.

Lummey um ah doo dah dey,
Lummey um ah doo dah dey.

For a minute or two the walls and ceilings turned a bright crimson, and the cracks and peelings of the ancient plaster could be seen in hazy cartography. Gradually the flames died to embers and the gloom gathered itself together again. O'Rourke put the basket down and stood before the priest's desk.

"The train's gone through, Father," he said. "Did you hear it blow for the crossing? Right on the stick as usual. Those fellows are better than the Greenwich clock, they are. I suppose you'll be having your tea now, won't you?"

Father McMahon nodded affirmation without turning towards him or arresting the piston-like movement of his knife blade. The sexton regarded him with a withering stare of contempt and moved off towards the fireplace. "Your visitor should be here soon now," he said while hanging the tarnished green kettle on the hob and pumping up the blaze with the old bellows that hung by the mantlepiece. "We'll have to put an inch to our step if I'm to get the tea things done up in time. You wouldn't want one of them city gentlemen to be seeing the place a mess now, would you?" He spread a soiled table cloth across a cleared section of the desk, and banged the silverware and china into place. Train time was tea time, as regulated and scheduled as daily Mass and Saturday's confessions, as prosaic and methodical as the manner in which Tim O'Rourke set out the service. Like all men who spend their lives in the service of other men, his movements were deft and automatic, lifeless and without love or affection, a cold, machine-like attention to detail which produced crudity where there should have been charm, and expediency in place of tenderness, the unmistakable characteristic of one bachelor waiting on another.

The old priest drew the skirt of his cassock up around his waist and dug laboriously into his trousers' pocket, breathing heavily with each movement of his arm and back. At length after much physical contortion he drew out a dirty, soggy handkerchief, and put it close to his eyes to examine it for a dry spot. This found, he wiped the blade of his penknife carefully, almost lovingly, as if it were some fine piece of family silver that thrived on conscientious attention. Breathing steam on it with a husky, rasping growl of his throat, he massaged the blade briskly on his sleeve, held it up to the light of the fire for a careful examination, and, apparently satisfied with its condition, he folded the tarnished blade, painstakingly without snapping it, into the yellowish bone handle. He contemplated the closed knife in his hand for a long time and then threw it on the desk with a sigh. "Take nothing for your journey," he began and then let the sentence dissolve in a huge snuffle of his nose. Bringing the filthy handkerchief to his parchment-like face, he alternately blew, coughed, and spat into it with gigantic, lung churning turbulence.

He turned towards the window, and regarded the drawn blind furtively. When he spoke, his voice was even and weighted, his words carefully chosen and deliberately pronounced. It was as if nothing had been previously said, as though he were the originator of the conversation and was introducing the subject for the evening's discussion. "Take nothing for your journey," he said, "for the Great Southern Railroad of Ireland has a tariff on all baggage beyond ten stone. Rules of the road. It's provided for in the company regulations hanging in all the stations. Did you ever read them O'Rourke? You're a travelling man...very like the scriptures they are, written in the simplest language so that no man can misunderstand. I must tell the Archbishop about that the next time I see him. The New Testament and the Orders and Decrees of the Great Southern Railroad, an apt comparison." He slapped his knee and threw back his head in a long gleeful laugh.

"It's getting late, Father," O'Rourke said with some hesitation, "hadn't we better be getting these things put away? He'll be along soon now..."

"Yes, he'll be along soon now," the priest repeated, "those kind always are. Very officious with their confounded derbies and brief cases, as dependable as the devil himself. As certain as sin. If it were a raging blizzard, and all the trains stuck in their sheds, and he had to walk the whole way from Dublin, every blessed inch of the way, he'd be here. I know their kind. Very business-like."

"What time did he say he'd be here?" O'Rourke asked in an apologetic tone that marked his uncertainty as to his status in the conversation.

"It doesn't make any difference. Nothing makes any difference anymore. What difference could it make? We're all from the side of Adam, aren't we? "

"No difference, I'm sure, Father. None at all. Only I was just thinking..."

"Ah!" cried the old priest, "There's your trouble now. Just thinking. Don't do it, O'Rourke. Believe me, you don't have the equipment for it. It seems to me that lately you've been going in for

a lot of thinking, and especially down at Tabby McCoy's. What was it you were thinking this time? Some nonsense I'll wager; it's never anything else."

The priest enjoyed the encounter with a savage delight that brought the faintest twinkle into his owlish eyes, but there was no competition. O'Rourke shriveled back from the desk, and sputtered his answer in a nervous stammer, "I was just thinking that maybe you had better go over the books and the papers. I have them ready. The man at the bank brought them up this after, and he said everything was in order. As good as they could be under the circumstances. He said there were things for you to read and sign. I have them right here. Do you want to see them?"

There was a long silence...the ticking of a clock downstairs, the kettle singing on the hearth, the wind whispering through the broken casement. Night padded in.

"No. I don't want to see them..." Father McMahon said after O'Rourke's words had died in the semi-darkness.

"I'll read them to you, if you'd like." O'Rourke offered. "It wouldn't take me but a few minutes."

"Don't bother."

"But, you have to sign them, you know. That's required..."

"Yes, I know. There'll be time enough. Deeds, papers, notes...and they cast lots among themselves for His garments!...a mortgage on the Lord. His tabernacle is in the Bank of Ireland."

"What? What was that you said about the Bank of Ireland?"

"Nothing..."

"Oh." O'Rourke smiled smugly to himself. Here was something for the boys down at Tabby McCoy's, he thought to himself, they'd like that one about His tabernacle being in the Bank of Ireland. He repeated the thought several times to be sure of remembering it.

"O'Rourke," Father McMahon turned to him for the first time, "there was something I wanted to ask you now. Let me see, what was it? I had it on the

tip of me tongue, and now it's gone. Isn't that funny now?"

"Was it about the papers?" O'Rourke suggested.

"Oh no, I remember now." He swung around and pointed a bony finger towards the window. "It was that shade there..."

"The shade?"

"Yes, the shade. The one on the window there."

"What about it, Father?"

"Well, for one thing, there's a hole in it, and I want you to fix it..."

"A hole?"

"Yes, a hole, that's what I said, didn't I?"

O'Rourke stood up and went over towards the window. "I don't see any hole." he said.

"Are you blind too?" the priest cried, "Up there near the roller. It's big enough to put your head through. Do you see it now?"

O'Rourke looked from the window to the priest and back to the window again. "I think I see it now," he lied.

"I don't see how you could miss it, I can see it from here, and you know that my eyes have been none too good these past years."

"I see it," said O'Rourke with a shake of his head.

"Well then, I want you to fix it," said the priest, "and maybe that will keep those things out for once and for all!"

"Keep things out, Father? What kind of things?"

"All sorts of things that the likes of you wouldn't know anything about. But there's thousands of them and they're there night and day. There's never a minute's peace about this house, especially when the sun goes down and the only light is from that sickly fire there."

"I'll attend to it, Father, you can depend on me. I'll patch it up so you'll never know the difference, and those things, whatever they are, won't be slipping in and out. They've no business here anyhow." O'Rourke smiled another smile of satisfaction. He had handled the situation pretty well, he thought. And wait until he spread that one

around down at the pub. The boys would surely put them on the counter all around.

"That'll be fine, O'Rourke; it will mean a great deal to me. Sometimes I think that you're not such a bad fellow after all, but I wouldn't want to carry the thought too far. I think that we understand each other very well, and that's what makes it easy for us. We know each other and we mistrust each other, and that's the secret of our success. Isn't that right, O'Rourke?"

"Yes, Father, I suppose that it is. Here, now, take your tea. It's ready." It was more of an order than an invitation. "He'll be coming up that path there before you know it, and you'll not have your office read."

"Let him wait then! shouted the priest with another high pitched laugh. "Out there in the rain! That's where he belongs! Out there in the rain!" He accepted the cup and drank the tea with a noisy, smacking motion of his lips. O'Rourke took his stool over by the staircase and sat down with his back to the banister. His gaze never left the hunched up figure of the old priest.

Night was fully come, and the wind had died down in the valley so that the rain water could be heard running off the roof into the old wooden barrel at the side of the house. O'Rourke stood up and drew curtains across the skylight. For a few seconds only the fire held back complete darkness, and the room was suffused with a rusty, tarnished glow, like the reflection of late afternoon sun on dingy warehouse windows. He took one of the hurricane lamps from the mantlepiece, and after some experimenting with the cracked globe, he thrust a faggot, drawn from the fireplace, into the little enclosure that held the wick. The bluish flame climbed quickly up the glass and fanned out across the room in a yellowish pallor which turned the priest's face into a leering mask. He was dozing off, slumped back in the worn leather chair, with his mouth fallen open, and a little rivulet of spit trickling down his chin. His face might have suggested a smile were it not for the tautness of his pinched nostrils which drew his lips into a sneer. In his hands he loosely retained a tin snuff box which tinted the air with a musty odor.

O'Rourke took no notice of him. He went to the desk and cleared away the dishes, making no attempt to lessen the impact of his boots on the hardwood floor. When he had satisfied himself as to the perfection of his task, by blowing the crumbs carefully in every direction and shaking the tablecloth over the banister, he took a candle from the cupboard and placed it on an end table. Next he quickly scattered and pushed aside the confused contents of the bookcase until his efforts produced a black morocco gilt-edged volume which he proceeded to kiss very ceremoniously. He held the book up before his face and brought his lips tenderly towards it, as if its tattered cover were the cheek of some venerable patriarch. This done, he fumbled in his jacket pocket and came up with a brown, nicotine-stained clay pipe, which, after casting a furtive glance in the direction of the sleeping priest, he hastily filled from a tobacco can on the desk. Sucking the stem a few times, he reached into the fireplace and applied a coal to the tamped down tobacco. A soft blue cloud of smoke floated lazily across the room. O'Rourke seated himself contentedly in the rockingchair by the table and began slowly rocking back and forth.

"Wake up, Father," he said when he had achieved the necessary momentum in the rocker to give him the courage to rouse the priest. "Wake up, Father, do you hear now? It's time for you to get up." He spoke with the ennui and disdain of a man who had performed the task too often before, but was still a little uncertain of his ability. He was firm but cautious, like a husband attempting to lesson his wife in the disciplining of an errant child, convinced of what should be done, but none too sure that he was the one who could do it. "Come now, Father. Wake up! Wake up! His apprehension was mollified somewhat by the lack of response, and he ventured to raise his voice a little. "Father McMahon! Father McMahon! Wake up now...don't you hear me? Be you deaf as well as near blind?" The old priest sat up a little in the chair and regarded O'Rourke through blinking lids. He jammed his thumb into the snuff box with a vigorous spiral motion and injected a liberal portion of snuff into one of his nostrils. O'Rourke's courage grew to audacity. He seized the box from the priest hands and threw it on the desk. "And you'd better put this out of sight," he said with a vehemence that even surprised him, "my poor old mother always told me that priests smelled of incense and holy oils,

not rat dung and chicken droppings!"

For the first time Father McMahon became fully conscious of O'Rourke's presence in the room. He whirled fiercely in the direction of the creaking rocker, like a jungle beast rearing suddenly and ready to pounce. His voice had lost its far off quality, and he bit his words out so harshly that they were accompanied by a liberal spray of spittle. "And did your poor ould Mother teach you manners, too?" he roared. "Did she? Respect for the priest! One of the Lord's shepherds! Remember to keep a civil tongue in your head from this day forward; it's not one of those cheapjacks at the public house you're talking to, but Father Cornelius J. McMahon, him that was ordained by one of the greatest saints that ever rose up from this land! If you have no respect for the man that is, remember the man that was! Your poor ould mother! That beats everything I've heard yet! Ye sniffling idiot get down on your knees and pray her soul as well as your own out of the torments of Purgatory, and don't be meddling in the innocent pleasures of a poor simple priest. Simple it is he may be, but it'll be a sorry day that would dawn across this land before he bowed to the likes of a Tim O'Rourke!"

Like all men who venture on deeds of bravery ill-equipped for the magnitude of the battle, O'Rourke lost the field completely. He shrivelled up like a whipped puppy, and the twitch at the corners of his mouth grew to such intensity that it made his eyebrows quiver and brought little vibrations to the loose flesh at both sides of his nose. He hurriedly thumbed through the breviary, muttering, "No offense, your reverence, no offense. I merely wanted to point out to you that it was nearing the hour of his coming, and you know what they're like, those government people, all propriety and business the way you said. I was afraid they might get the wrong idea up there in Dublin, them with their high and mighty ways, no offense, surely..."

"I don't care a twopence what they think in Dublin!" snarled the priest. "And I care less for the likes of what's coming here this night. If it's impressions you're after making on them, show them what a reverent and obedient sexton we have here at Our Lady's. One that knows his place in the presence of the parish priest. Show them that for your propriety!"

"I'll do that, Father, I'll do that..." said O'Rourke shaking his head obsequiously and sliding back

tissue thin pages of the book so quickly that it caused the markers to fall out in every direction. "I'll be so grand it's another man you'll think you had here in the house surely. You'd never know me tonight when he comes..."

"Never know you!" cried the priest. "O'Rourke I'd know your likes anywhere. Sure I could smell you all the way to Lough Swilly, were you ten miles out in the bay in a sailboat with the breezes blowing out to the sea! Never know you? Me that knew you for what you are from the first day these faded eyes set sight on you!"

"No offense meant, I'm sure." whispered the sexton, more to himself than to the priest. "No offense, I was merely..."

"Making a fool of yourself as usual! completed the priest.

Finding the place he wanted in the breviary, O'Rourke drew one of the colored silk markers across the page, and after a long silence, said, with some trepidation: "are you ready now, Father?"

"I've been ready these past fifteen minutes, but I don't know where you've been."

"Wednesday of ember week, isn't it?"

"Yes. St. Andrew of Avellino, Confessor. A double."

"I have it here." said O'Rourke.

"Begin then... and be careful of your pronunciations. It's holy Latin you're reading, not some of your public house slang!"

"I do the best I can, Father."

"He does the best he can, Father," mimiced the priest, "and it's none too good let me tell you! I could get one of the little altar boys from down in the first form to read it better."

"I should think maybe you'd be a little grateful..." dared O'Rourke.

"Grateful! Grateful is it!" hissed the priest. "I suppose it was your poor ould mother told you that one too? Get on with your reading and don't tire me with your everlasting nonsense."

"Begin now?"

"Yes, unless it is waiting you are for the Primate to hold the book for you. Perhaps that might be a fitting gratitude for your diligence!"

"Fratres: Omnis Pontifex ex hominibus asumptionus, pro hominibus constitutur in lis, quae sunt ad Deum, ut offerat dona, et sacraficia pro peccatis: qui condolere possit iis, qui ignorant, et, errant: quoniam et ipse circumdatus est infirmitate: et propeterea debet, quem ad modum pro populo, ita etiam et pro semetipso offere pro peccatis. Nec quisquam sumit sibi honorem, sed qui vocatur a Deo, tamquam Aaron...."

The lazy cadence of the Latin phrases droned on and on, mingling with the intermittent popping and crackling of the glowing turf in the fireplace, and becoming a part of the muffled miseries of the night.

O'Rourke's voice rose and fell in a curious, monostrophic rhythm that seemed to match the creaking of the old rocker on the uncarpeted floor. Gradually, Father McMahon's eyelids fluttered closed, succumbing to the repetitious, sonorous melody, and the thick floating smoke of O'Rourke's clay pipe. His head nodded forwards and back almost keeping time with the pendulum-like sweep of the reading and the noise of the chair. Finally, he could no longer distinguish words from sounds. The deep throated bellow of a train in the hills blended softly with the dreary music in the room.

"Deus, qui in corde beati
Andreae Confessoris tui, per ardum quotidie
in virtutibus proficiendi votum, admirabiles
ad te ascensionis disposuistis: concede
nobis ipsius meritis et intercesione,
ita ejusdem gratiae particeps fieri;
ut, perfectiora semper exsequentes ad

gloriae tuae fastigium feliciter perducimur. Per Dominum nostrum..."

Father McMahon lifted his head groggily several times in a vain effort to catch some of the sense of what was being read, but it was no use. It was like listening to a piano tinkling in a far off alley of a dark city after midnight; the music, drifting across the shadows and trickling over the window-sill, was sad and recurring, the tune, old and familiar, but the words would not come.

"Hac nos quaesumus, Domine, sanctorum Martyrum tuorum Tryphonis, Respicii et Nymphae semper festa sectari: quorum suffragiis protectionis tuae dona sentiamus."

O'Rourke read on. Paragraphs followed on paragraphs, page on page, the little ribbon was lifted and set down again, and the tobacco burned low in the bowl. Matins and lauds and vespers and oremuses proceeded

across the room in monotonous procession. The old priest's head had reached the end of its long swaying arc, like a metronome that had stopped ticking, and sleep had almost taken full possession of him. His fleshy chin was resting on his heaving chest, and a little rivulet of drool was snaking down his cassock.

"Munera tibi, Domine, nostrae devotionis offerimus: quae et pro tuorum tibi grata sint honore justorum, et nobis salutaria, te miserante, reddantur.

Now only the crescendo and decrescendo of the sentences rose and fell in the back passages of his mind. Up and down, up and down. Like the staccato drum of horses hoofbeats on a dirt road.

"Beatus servus, quem cum venerit Dominum, invenerit vigilantem..."

Vigilantem. The keepers of the vigil. He could hear them now. All on horses and riding across the night. There must be at least fifty. Down from the Glendowan Mountains.

"Amen dico vobis, super omnia bona sua constituent eum..."

Clop. Clop. Clop. Echoing. Hollow. Over the wooden bridge that crosses the Gweebarra River. Half a mile through the woods.

"Gloria, Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto..."

Faster. Faster. Ballybofey Crossing. Kerry-kiln Road. The cooper's shack. The old widow's place. Why don't they turn off?

"Sicut erat in principio et nunc et semper...."

A cloud of dust at the south pasture. The apparation of mounted men. Up the dusty road by the potato patch, along the edge of the barley field, slushing through the little stream where the cows drank. The steamy breath of horses' nostrils in the crisp moonlight. In the yard now. All of them.

"Et in saecula saeculorum...."

Open up in there! Open up do you hear?

In the name of the Queen! Open this door or we'll kick the bloody hinges off it!

"Amen."

C H A P T E R T W O

And Jesus said to them, "You will all be scandalized thi s night; for it is written, 'I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I have risen I will go before you into Galilee." But Peter said to him, "Even though all shall be scandalized, yet not I." Jesus said to him, "Amen I say to thee this day, this very night, before a cock crows twice, thou wilt deny me thrice."

Mark XIV,27-30

CHAPTER II.

BEFORE A COCK CROWS TWICE

"For the last time now are you going to open this door or must we bust it open?"

Neil McMahon could see them from his bedroom window. They had ridden into the yard and tied their horses to the fence. There were about fifty of them in all, some had rifles and some had huge clubs, and they were circling around the house looking in all the windows. A massive redheaded man with big bushy eyebrows and a thick mustache was standing before the door getting ready to pound it in. Three or four others stood behind him, and one of them had a sturdy felling axe which he kept sliding up and down in his grip.

"Well, what's it going to be now?" cried the redheaded man. "Is somebody going to open this door or must I give the order to chop it down?" He turned around and took the axe from the man behind

him and swung it through the air several times in a movement that displayed the powerful ripple of his shoulder muscles beneath his jacket. One of the men brought a lantern from the cattle shed and held it high so that the axeman could get a better view of the target. In the dingy glow of the flickering light, his face was mean and determined.

"One last chance! Do you hear now?" he called while the others exhorted him to start swinging, "Only God knows why I'm so generous this night, but it's a fine, stout door, and hard to come by these days. It would make fine exercise for me to be splitting it up into kindling. All right, boys, give a man some room, and I'll give you a little lesson in the fine and ancient art of the axe. Here goes now..."

"No! No! Don't! I'm coming, I'm coming!" Neil raised the window and shouted down in a fear quivered voice.

"And be damned quick about it too!" returned the other.

When he ran downstairs he could feel his heart pounding under his nightshirt and the tears beginning

to swim up into his eyes. He struggled with the bolt which refused to yield in his quaking fingers. A pounding came on the door, so vehement that it rattled the pictures on the wall and shook the hugh throw bar. "I said be quick about it!" a voice shouted.

"I'm trying! I'm trying!" Neil stammered. When the door fell back all of the men would have tramped into the room had not the redbearded one held up his hand and stopped them. He moved among them touching one on the shoulder and shoving another aside until almost everyone was either touched or shoved. There was some grumbling and muttering at the back of the crowd but it died down as he reached that part of them, and soon all but a dozen retreated towards the sheds and barns. The rest pushed past the boy into the room and waited for further orders. The redbearded man stood in the doorway and peered about the room with barbarous, animal-like eyes that seemed to be stalking some nearby prey. His gaze fell on the cellar door. "Now, lad," he said, turning toward the boy, "tell me, where is everyone?" A soft smile appeared beneath his mustache, and the parting of his lips dispensed an acrid odor of cheap whiskey.

"I - I don't know," Neil half whispered and

put his hands behind his back to hide their shaking.

The man closed the door. He seemed not to have heard the boy. He went over and sat down in the big armchair and closed his eyes for a few minutes. He appeared to be very tired. "I have a little girl," he said in a very quiet way," and she's six years old and I teach her never to tell lies. It's an awful thing, it is, to tell lies. We wouldn't have half the trouble and heartache that there are in the world today if everyone told the simple God's truth. Don't you think so, lad?" There was a mocking twinkle in his eyes, and the smile had expanded to a broad grin. Neil was afraid to look at him. He feared the slow way in which the man talked and the hollow depth of his voice.

"Yes." said Neil. "I think so..."

"That's fine." said the man. "For a minute I thought maybe we were going to have an argument. I don't like arguments. I like to get along with everyone." He lifted one of the books from the bookcase beside him and read the title on the cover. "The Life of St FrancisXavier", he said, "Very stimulating, I'm sure. He was a great man, what with going to Japan and eating fried grasshoppers and all that."

He threw the book suddenly on the table and seized the boy by the arm. "Where did you say everyone was? he shouted.

"There's nobody home. I told you, already!" Neil cried.

The man pursed his lips and drew another book from the shelf. He had resumed his slow, deliberate movements again, almost playful. "Ah! So you did. So you did." he repeated. "You're here all alone, is that it?"

"Yes sir."

He considered that fact for a minute, screwing up his mouth as if there was some illogical nature to the situation that he was doing his best to sort out. He maintained this attitude throughout the very ceremonious lighting of hand rolled cigarette. Then he turned to the boy again and said very pleasantly: "Of course, you don't mind if we have a look around, do you? That is, I mean to say, it's not that we're after doubting you, but people do have a way of getting lost these days that would perplex the best of us. The lads here will not touch anything beyond what is necessary for the happy continuance of their

meager existence. Barney, take upstair, try all the rooms, and don't forget the closets and the attic. Barneys's a great one for forgetting things," he informed Neil with a wink, "and I must keep after him all the while. You never saw the likes of the man. This very morning he near forgot to bury a man. What do you think of that, now? Forgetting to give a man his Christian burial...Pat, you take the back rooms and the shed and whatever else is out there. Nolan, have a bit of a peek into the cellar here and see if all the mice is accounted for. I'll stay here with the lad and tell him some bedtime stories."

The men retreated to their assignments while the leader moved about the room picking up things from the mantle and the table and turning them around carefully in his large hand. On the arm of the chair by the window he found a newspaper and unfolded it very methodically. "'United Ireland!'..." he read the masthead, and blew a shimmering smoke ring across the room. "A grand and most educational publication. They tell me its all about agricultural subjects and new ways to milk the cow. You don't need the stool anymore, beeause you do it by standing on your head." He sat down and laughed heartily to himself at his own joke.

himself at his own joke.

"What's your name, boy?" he asked when his chest had finally stopped heaving from the long fit of laughter.

"Neil, sir."

"Neilson? Neilson? That sounds Scandanavian to me..."

"No. Neil. N-e-i-l, Neil."

"Oh, Neil, it it? Well, Neil what?"

"Cornelius McMahon..."

"Well that sounds a bit more proper. Mine's Rory. Have you ever heard of that name, Neil?"

"No, Sir."

"You haven't. And do you know what my business is? My occupation?"

"Are you a robber?" ventured Neil.

Rory threw back his head and began to laugh again. "That's a very harsh way of putting it, I'm sure. And I don't think the Queen would stomach the

appraisal...although I think to God that Mr. Gladstone might concour. No, I'm not a robber. In fact, it's the very opposite. I'm an officer of the law, what you might call a constable..."

"A constable? But you don't have any uniform on, and neither do any of your men..."

"Well, I tell you lad, there are constables and constables. There are them what do and them what don't, as it were. I'm one of the ones that don't and so are those other fine lads you saw here a minute ago..."

"And are you looking for a criminal right now?" asked Neil beginning to feel a little easier now that the red bearded man had settled into a soft, conversational tone.

"Yes, we are. Did you ever hear of the Crimes Prevention Act?"

"I don't think so..." said Neil.

"You're not very bright, lad. My little one had it all over you. I was just reading about it here a minute ago in this very house. That paper there tells you all about it. You see, it's a grand

law that Her Majesty the Queen has enacted for the peace and prosperity of all of us, but unfortunately there are a few people who are apt to sometimes forget all about this fine act, and that's where I come in. I'm sent as the Queen's little reminder. Do you understand, lad?"

"Yes sir..."

"Good then, and maybe a fine little boy like yourself could be of some help to us. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Y-yes, Sir..."

"Good again. Perhaps you could tell me if there's a bit of wine anywhere about?"

He smacked his lips at the mention of the word wine, as if he were tasting it, and he looked across the room to where a collection of glasses and bottles stood before the buffet mirror.

"W-wine? I-I don't think there's any in the house. But, we have some brandy, some fine brandy, if you'd like some of that? I can get youa glass..."

"No." said Rory drawing his eyebrows into a heavy frown. "It's a great taste I have for wine like little boys do have for sweets. It's a great pity there's none here."

He rolled his eyes in imagined pleasure at the very thought of the drink and rinsed his tongue around his palate. "It's nothing but envy I have for those priests, them that can have their wine every day of the year, and a healthy goblet full of it too." He advanced to the buffet and took the corks from the bottles and smelled tham. "How old are you, lad?" he said, still sniffing.

"I'm ten, this Tuesday next..."

"Ten is it? Well now, that's a good many years to be on this earth, isn't it? It makes me think how many there are who will not see another ten days on it. Ah, sure there's a great many of them, and it makes my poor heart bleed, it does. 'We know not the day nor the hour' as the good book puts it..."

The man from upstairs came down and reported that he had found nothing beyond a few Fenian pamphlets and some newspapers. Rory took them and put them on the table. They both sat down and waited until the other two

came back. Neither of them said a word to each other or the boy.

Soon the man named Nolan came up out of the cellar and he had a packet of letters under his arm.

"What have we here?" asked Rory.

"Letters." the man from the cellar replied.

"Sure and I can see that for myself."

"They're written from America and I thought there might be something in them. You know the way these fellows do be sending for funds and organizing and what not."

"You did well." said Rory, and he took the letters on his lap and undid the binding. "I know it's impolite to read other people's mail," he said to Neil with a feigned sigh, "but there are such things as public letters, that is to say those of general interest. Now take this letter here for instance. It does not fit into that category at all. It tells about a fine city that goes by the name of New York and all about a nice little social club called The Irish-American Brotherhood which meets in some rooms on Canal Street and discusses religious subjects. All sorts

of religious subjects like murder and rioting and refusal to pay rent. It's a most efficacious society and brings peace to the souls of them what belongs to it."

He was still going though the packet of letters when the other man burst in through the back door.

"Take a look at this!" he cried.

"What is it?" said Rory.

"This!" said the man, and he tossed a long muzzle loading revolver on the table. It was covered with rust and part of the bone handle had been broken off.

"Where did you find it?"

"Out in the shed there, hanging up..."

Rory took the revolver and broke it down.

"It's nothing at all," he said. "It hasn't been fired in years, and it would no doubt explode in your face if you was to put anything in the chamber. It's a monkey gun. That's what it is, a monkey gun? Do you know what that is, boy?"

"No sir."

"A gun used to kill monkeys. They were a great delicacy during the famine. There's many a night I sat meself down to a big roasted ape." He clapped his hands together and laughed hoarsely. "They were the grandest things you'd ever want to eat. Better than snails' eyelids!"

He stopped laughing suddenly and said in a low voice:

"Where have they gone?"

"I don't know..." said Neil.

The cruelty came back into Rory's eyes. He raised his voice a little.

"Where have they gone?" he repeated.

"I tell you I don't know....They went out a while ago..."

"How long ago?"

"I don't know!"

"An hour?"

"I don't know! I don't know!"

"Two hours? Three? Four?"

"I don't know! I wasn't here..."

"You're lying again!"

"No! I'm not. I wasn't here. I'm not lying!"

"You are! You are! I can tell by your face!"

"No! I'm not! Honest, I'm not..."

"Then where are they? Quick! Tell me!"

The man jumped up out of the chair and grabbed the boy by the front of his nightshirt. His face was red with rage, almost as red as his beard, and he was shaking the boy violently.

"You'd better talk, lad!" he screamed.

"I don't know! I don't know! I don't know!" he cried. "Let me go!

"Listen, boy," he shouted, still shaking him, "It's the truth you'd better tell us and be damned quick about it, or it's the whole world will hear you screaming this night. Now where are they? Where's your mother and father? Someone came here tonight, and told them something, and then they went down the road all

together before the moon rose. Isn't that right? Isn't it? Answer, or so help me I'll give you such a cuff across the mouth you'd think every tooth in your head was loosened! Answer me! Do you hear? Answer me!"

"I...I...I don't know..."

"Is that all you can say 'I don't know' like a bloody polly? Speak up now, boy, do you hear? I could slash your scrawny throat from one ear right around to the other, and not even think twice about it. Do you know that? Do you?"

"Y-Y-Yes sir, I'm sure you could..."

"And you wouldn't want me to do that, would you? To be spilling blood all over this pretty carpet here?"

"No sir! No sir!"

"Well then...suppose we were to start all over. Let's say for instance, this is just a supposition, mind you, let's say that someone came here this night. Let's say it was about an hour ago, and let's go a little further and say that your mother and your father and this other one, all of three of them, went off to a meeting. No, a meeting is not the right word. Let's

call it a Mass. That's better, isn't it? A Mass?"

"What....what?"

"A Mass I said..." He had Neil by the wrist and was holding him in a tight grip. The boy could feel the tremendous strength of the huge, hairy fingers which rolled the skin back and pinched it across his bones. The man was talking in a low voice again, but this time it was deep and menacing. "You know what the Mass is, don't you?"

"I'm not sure, sir...that is..."

"Not sure! Not sure!" breathed Rory in a forced, ominous half-whisper that was meant to go with the elaborate astonishment portrayed in the arching of his bushy eyebrows and the enlarging of his somewhat bloodshot eyes. "The lad here says he's not sure! What do you make of that, me buccos? He's not sure!"

The three men said nothing. They continued to watch the scene with growing interest.

"And could you please tell me," said Rory looking into the boy's eyes with a withering stare, "why it is that you are not sure?"

"I don't know! I don't know!" he cried.

"He doesn't know....he doesn't know!" repeated Rory, testing the expression for credulity. "That hardly seems possible, now. Surely every boy of your age knows what holy Mass is. You are a Catholic, aren't you?"

"What? What did you say?"

"Are you hard of hearing, lad? I'm standing right here in front of you. What's the matter with you?"

"I'm afraid! I'm afraid!" whimpered Neil.

"Afraid! Afraid! There's nothing to be afraid of. You're not afraid of me, are you?"

"No...no...but, but it's all of these men sitting here looking at me all the time...it makes me afraid..."

"Oh so that's it, is it? Well, boys, you heard what the lad said. He says that you area miserable lot and he'll do no talking while you're in the room. All right then, let's see if he means it. Wait outside. This won't take more than a minute. We'll see how much he has to say when the pack of you has gone."

The three men got up sullenly and sauntered out of the house. The one called Barney paused long enough at the buffet to stuff a brandy bottle under his jacket and spit contemptuously at the mirror.

"Now where were we?" resumed Rory. "Oh, yes, I remember, we were discussing religion, were we not? And I asked you if you was a Catholic. And, let me see now, what was your answer? The devil if I can recall it!"

"I made no answer..." whispered Neil.

"Oh that's right now, so you didn't. Well then, let's try the question again. Are you a Catholic?"

"No...no...I'm not...I'm not a Catholic..."

"What?"

"I said I'm not a Catholic...not one."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure....yes"

"And what about your mother and father? I suppose they're not Catholics either."

"I don't think they are...I don't think so..."

"Don't you know for certain?"

"Well, they never go to church or anything like that...."

"Snivelling liar!" exploded the man suddenly. "There's the Life of St Francis Xavier in the bookcase, a madonna over the fireplace, and a crucifix as big as a wagon tongue on the wall there, and you're not a Catholic!" He hurled a chair across the room, stood up on it, and unhooked the crucifix.

"Here!" he shouted, "look at that! Now answer me, are you a Catholic or aren't you?" He thrust the crucifix into the boy's lap.

"No! No! I'm not one! I'm not one!" screamed Neil with the hot tears running down his face.

"Look at the crucific! Look at it! Then say it again!"

"I'm not! I'm not! Honest, believe me!"

Rory swept the crucifix to the floor and seized the boy viciously by the throat.

"You're a bloody liar!" he raged. "A bloody, damned liar! And it's the lesson of your life I'm going to give you this night if I have to choke the yellow guts out of you!"

"Let me go! Let me go!" gasped Neil, struggling for breath. "You're hurting me! Stop! You're hurt..." his voice trailed off as the fingers squeezed tighter.

Rory had no idea of the strength he was using until he felt the body grow limp in his grasp. "My God!" he shouted, "I've killed him! I've killed him!"

He released his fingers and held them up before his terrified eyes, while the boy crumbled to the floor. "I didn't mean it! I didn't mean to do any harm! I was only trying to scare him! As God is my witness I never meant to harm him!"

Little beads of sweat formed on his forehead and his hands trembled. He knelt beside the boy pleading:

"Speak to me, lad! Speak to me! For God's sakes don't die on me! I was besides meself with rage and didn't know me own strength!"

There was no answer from the fallen figure. Rory looked around the room with a wild stare, considering flight for a moment. Then he picked the boy up and placed him on the couch. When he lifted him, he could hear the faint beating of the child's heart.

"Thanks be to God he's alive anyhow..." he muttered in relief and began to rub the thin wrists with a vigorous circular motion.

Neil opened his eyes slowly. For a minute the whole room swam about in a lazy shimmer that made everything look wavy and transparent. Then he saw Rory kneeling before him, looking down into his face. He tried to scream but he didn't have the strength to.

"Are you all right, boy?" asked Rory anxiously at these first signs of recovery. "Are you all right? There's nothing to be afraid of anymore..."

Neil could see that the cruelty was gone out of the man's face and that his voice had lost its calculating, ironic tone. He saw one of the big, hairy hands come up and touch him gently on the cheek, and then he remembered those same hands clutched around

his throat. "Go away!" he sobbed, "Go away!"

"Everythings's going to be all right, boy." Rory said softly. "You don't have to be afraid of me anymore. I was near drunk with temper and didn't know what I was about, but I wouldn't have hurt you for the world! I didn't know what I was doing. Now tell me that you'll be all right and I can go off and leave this whole bloody business. I'm sick to the death with it."

"Leave me alone! Leave me alone!" cried Neil.

"I know how you feel, boy." said Rory burying his face in his hands, "I know how you feel. There's ten of them outside would have strangled you the way I tried and not batted an eyelash doing it. But I had a boy once. He would have been about your age too, but they murdered him. Cold, bloody murder! It was as if they'd cut him down with the axe in his cradle. He was sick with the fever and him only a baby and I tramped the streets all night going from one shop to the other to get some medicine. And there's not a one of them would sell it to me. 'Sorry,' they said, 'but I'm not allowed to. You're boycotted.'

In three days he was dead. They murdered him with their bloody boycott! From that day on, I was another man. No better than them, and maybe a hundred times worse."

Rory's face was transfixed with torment, pathetically repulsive and tragically simple. He rolled his eyes wildly until they were all whites.

"And for what? For what?" he moaned, "I'll tell you for what. For the breaking of the bloody boycott! And for the Union! And a lot of silly talk that nobody knows anything about but everybody shouts about. Is it for this that we've become a nation of animals? There's no peace in this land anymore, and that's for sure. It's mother against daughter and father against son. We've all become barbarians! That's what we have! Barns burnings, and floggings, and murders and all sorts of bloody business. The boycott! The Union! Home Rule! Who gives a bloody damn about any of them! It's a great evil has come across this land, like a black cloud settling over the valleys, till everything has become pitchy black night, and there's not a man abroad in the street what knows right from wrong, or gives one care about the difference. It's forgetting we are what it is

to be human beings, created in the likeness of God, and it's destroyed we'll all be before our time is done, devoured like cannibals by our own murderous mouths..."

He was kneeling there in the half darkness, his face contorted in an agony of despair and the tears running down on the superb carpet of his beard. Neil was paralyzed into immobility. He had never seen a man cry before, and the sight of it filled him with horror. He wanted to turn away towards the wall and close his eyes, but he dared not let his eyes stray from the sob-racked figure before him.

"It's a sad journey we're going on," Rory blurted out, "a sad journey, and only God Himself knows where it will end. Animals! That's what we are, animals! Didn't I this very night here have a poor lad's life near squished out between me murder-our fingers? Him what is young and innocent and never did so much as harm a flea! And for what? For what? For the glory of the Queen, the blood of children should drip from the hands of what was once honest men? Would that glory have brought back me darlin' son from the grave? Would it? And would it have cut down the hunger and the emptiness that eats

like a weasel at me poor wife's heart so that she's near mad and doesn't know me nor anyone no more, and walks the lonely country lanes the whole night long, crying out like some lonely bird, and kneeling in the watery ditches and jabbering away at the tombstones?

"I'll have no more of it! No more of it, I tell you! I'm sick to the death of this cursed land, for there's no good in it at all, and the women do be as bad as the men! I'm sick to the death of riding into sleepy little towns, with the lamps burning in the windows, and the way the dogs do be barking, and the faces of the old women and the children peeping out from behind the curtains with the fear bulging out their eyes. I'm sick of it, and I'm done with it! They can do what they like about it, but I'll not ride another night with them. As God is my judge, I'll not have any more of it!"

With a cry, Rory stood up. There was determination in his words, and passion in the way he shouted them, a passion wrenched from a profoundly troubled soul. He raised his clenched fist in the direction of the window. "No more of it!" he shrieked.

"No more of it!"

For a moment his whole body shook with the violence of his rage, until every muscle in his extended arm was taut and vibrating, and the veins bulged out at the back of his neck in quick throbbing ribbons. He stood there: silent, immense, appalling. He was like some huge prehistoric monster rearing back from his first contact with fire, ferociously enraged, stung, wounded, but colossal and unafraid. When it seemed as if the magnificent shell of his body would burst under the fury of his unbridled passion, shattered to fragments by the vehemence and tumult of it, like a ship splintered on the rocks, he subsided suddenly, all at once, spent and exhausted in a moment of terrifying suspense that made the whole atmosphere pause breathless. The blood drained out of his face. His arm fell by his side. He heaved one frail, lingering sigh that dell on the room like the uneasy crash of the surf on some lonely, deserted stretch of beach.

"I'll bother you no more..." he said, his face aimlessly blank and gentle, like the face of an old man lifted to the warming rays of the late

afternoon sun. "It's half dead you are with the fright of me rantings and ravings, and me murderous hands on your neck. But I'll leave you be, now, boy, the way you can be going upstairs and getting back into bed, and thinking what an evil man it was set foot in your house this night."

He groped across the room and paused suddenly before the fallen crucifix. Reverently, he picked it up and cradled it in his arms.

"I used to believe in this once." he said quietly. "I used to get down on me knees every night before it and say me prayers, reciting them after me ould mother. But I don't believe in anything anymore. There's an emptiness and a sorrow that hangs on this land like a curse and makes you forget things like this. It makes you believe in nothing but your own thoughts, and even them do flow up into your brain and send the lie into your mouth. It's a terrible thing it is not to believe in anything at all. It's the loneliest feeling in all this wide, wide world."

He swung the chair nimbly across the room and climbed up on it.

"Here, lad," he said soothingly, "I'll hand this back up for you, the way's you'll have something to say your Hail Mary's before, or whatever it is you do be saying...."

With a clang that burst on the silence of the room like the sudden smash of a window, the crucifix fell to the floor. Its painted saltstone figure, separated from the varnished cross, lay broken in four jagged pieces.

"My God! My God! My God!" cried Rory his face contracted in horror, "I've broken it! I've broken it! The hook's gone, that's what did it. It must have fell out of the wall when I pulled at it before. Oh, as if I haven't done enough harm in this house tonight! It was an evil day indeed for all of us, the Lord included, when I set out for Cross Glen. An evil day!"

He crouched down and tried fitting the pieces together, like a child bent over a woodcut puzzle.

"It's no use," he said. "It's busted for fair..."

Crossing the room, he dug into his breeches pocket and withdrew a little white sack. Carefully, he undid the strings.

"Take this, boy," he said, placing a pound note on the couch near the boy's tightly clenched hand, "and when you go up to the village you can get yourself a new one, all shiny and painted and grand looking, and maybe there'll be a bob or two left for some sweets. I know what a craving it is that all you little lads has for sweets."

Neil lay there without looking at him. He made no motion to pick up the money, nor did he even recognize that it had been placed there. A silence settled on the room for a few moments, more oppressive and stifling than the prelude to a summer storm.

"I'll go now..." said Rory quickly, trying to hide the embarrassment and shame that swept him on seeing the child's immobility. "We may never meet again, boy, but it's a great service you did for a poor miserable felon this night. Remember that, if you can."

He walked slowly towards the door, turned as if to come back, and then, apparently changing his mind, hurried out into the night. The echo of horses' hoof-beats receded and died in the corners of the room, leaving the air hushed and tenuous, like the pall that settles over a church when the casket is moved slowly up the aisle.

Neil raised himself up on one arm, his eyes expanded in a horrendous fear that curled back the lids and fixed the pupils motionless, his gaze never leaving the mottled section of the carpet where the broken crucifix lay sprawled. The faint glimmer of the fire licked a little sheen of light across the head of the figure where the crown of thorns was pressed and the blood dripped down in brightly crimsoned icicles. He feared the sight of this agonizing apparition, but he feared more turning away from it. He let his eyes stray from the emaciated face, so full of compassion and pity, and they fell in their erratic glance on the lower portion of the arm, broken off at the elbow, with the outstretched palm still cupping the piercing nail in a little pool of blood. He felt a deathchill creep into his own fingers and up his arms and down across

his heart. The sweat oozed thickly on his forehead, and his mouth was parched and bitter. In his seared and aching brain the hoofbeats were still pounding, and he could not rid himself of the image of the man with the red beard and the tragically tortured face and the way he held the crucifix in his arms and said, "I used to believe in this once..." Along with the hoofbeats and Rory's flushed face and the broken fragments on the carpet came the words of the Savior, trumpeted across the vault of his consciousness like the blare of doom: "He who denies me before men here on earth, I also will deny before My Father Who is in Heaven."

He was alone now. Completely alone with his sin. He had denied Him before men here on earth and he would be denied before the Father in Heaven. The riders were looking for the priest, and he had not told them where the Mass was being said. He had done worse. The pagan, the publican, the hypocrite in the bible stories were not as evil as he. He had the gift of faith, but he lacked the power to profess it. He had crucified the Christ. He was Judas in the garden, leading the torch bearers to the appointed spot, and

planting the kiss, and saying, "No! No! I'm not a Catholic. Not one!"

He saw himself standing before a splendid, dazzling light on the day of Judgement, and he heard the words of his condemnation: "Depart from Me ye cursed of the Father into the everlasting fires that I have prepared for you for all eternity." And the Archangel Michael stepped forward, grim and magnificent, brandishing his flaming double edged sword, and he felt himself being swept down, down, down into the vast and seething abyss of Hell where the all consuming fires awaited him.

In the lapping flames of the fireplace, he watched his own immortal soul, a blazing turf log, burn forever in reparation for his denial. The soft night breeze blew a faint draft under the door, and it blew eternal damnation into his soul, catching the grey core of embers at the burnt out center of the turf log, and fanning it into a brilliant and terrible living thing. He felt the Hell fires licking at his heart.

"Oh, God!" he sobbed a prayer of desperation, "Be merciful to me a sinner...."

Into the very depths of his consciousness a voice breathed, terrible and quaking in its stark quietude, softer than death's whisper, fainter than the thin rustle of the trees beside the house, ghastlier and more terrifying than the sight of the crinkled pound note on the faded upholstery of the couch:

"Depart from me ye cursed into the everlasting fire..."

C H A P T E R T H R E E

Amen, amen, I say to you, he who enters not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbs up another way, is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is shepherd of the sheep. To this man the gatekeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them forth. And when he has let out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. But a stranger they will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers.

John X, 1-5

CHAPTER III.

BUT HE WHO ENTERS BY THE DOOR IS SHEPHERD

Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. The bell on St. Paul's Church clanged out the hour mournfully across the silver coated rooftops of Cross Glen. Neil stopped running. The sound -- remote, ubiquitous, tremulant -- burned deep into his breast like a trumpet blast from the gray fields of the dead. Hot tears of shame flooded his eyes as he looked down into the valley and beheld the phantasmal sheen of the church steeple, awesomely upright and formidable in the moonlight, rising up from the drab cluster of stables and warehouses by the canal, like a solitary, admonishing finger pointing up to heaven from amidst the grim squalor of the earth. A red lantern, swaying gently back and forth on the railroad crossing gate, flickered faintly in the soft night breeze, and brought to his scorified mind the flaccid glow of the sanctuary lamp, that everlasting light burning on and on

into timelessness before the Sacred Heart of Jesus in reparation for the sins of men. He watched the shimmering vapors that the crisp night air raised from the murky waters of the old canal and thought of the sulphurous boiling waters of Hell, where he would wallow for all eternity with the bodies of the damned. All along the grass lined canal banks, aquamarine in the moonlight, emerald in the shadows, the over-turned dories and dry-docked barges became Hell's foul fiends and fire breathing serpents, their tepid carcasses reeking putrefaction and decay in dense, gagging fumes. Through the crepuscular, jade bosom of the Berryveagh Mountains the nightly train from Belfast slid tortuously, wheezing asthmatically and exhaling from its solitary, cavernous snout a dull reddish stream of smoke and coal dust that splattered the nebulous background of trees and hills into a magnificent gallaxy of twinkling gems with the leaping and lighting and dying of million sparks. Its whistle, forlorn and lugubrious, hung in the twilight like the moan of a homeless dog, a lean, echoing, piercing sound that sent a chill rippling up Neil's spine. Here was the scaly, fork-tongued lizard of perdition, slithering down to the brimstone lake

"Oh God! Oh God!" he screamed, groping feverishly in his brains for the words of an ejaculation that would not come. Of all the prayers he had learned at home and in school and as an altar boy he was not able to fit the words of one into a coherent pattern. They poured into his mind all at once in a confused jumble of praises and responses that seemed sacrilegious and profane. The inability to pray flooded his mind with a new terror, and he ran on again. He ran madly, breathlessly, past the tattered buildings of the cooper's place, and the low hanging roof of the widow's cottage, and on up the dusty road into the woods where the long bending branches of the oak trees hid from his smarting eyes the awful vision of Cross Glen, his city of lost souls.

He slowed down and began to walk again. The darkness was soothing. It eased the empty, sucking feeling in the pit of his stomach and blotted out the swirling, haunting panorama of his sin. Even the throbbing at his temples had ceased, and the shame had given way to a mixed feeling of self pity and remorse which seemed to cheer him. It was as if everyone on the earth had suddenly disappeared and he had ceased to care; as if the only love left in the

world was his own self love, and its very individualism was a precious and intimate thing that he had never known before.

He sat down on the stone wall of the little bridge that arced over the cattle stream and looked into the dark, laughing water. The vaguest suggestion of a breeze sifted through the bushes and trees, and it was refreshing and cool on his face. Thoughts of love brought to his mind the radiant features of Terry Leardon, and he knew that he was not alone in the world. If there was one person in his whole life whom he really loved, it was Terry, and nothing, not even his own crime, could ever displace that love.

He remembered the first night he had ever seen Terry, a scene that he loved to recall, for it was one of the exquisite joys of his short past. The Leardons had moved into the long vacant farm at the top of the hill where the previous tenant had starved to death because the land was so poor and the rent so high. He recalled his father saying that the place could never support a family the size of the Leardons if it had killed old Mike McCarthy who didn't eat as much as a small dog and worked harder than any farmer

on the hill. And Uncle Tom had said the Leardons must be peculiar people to take the place on the basis of a newspaper ad without ever having seen it. Their talk made him wonder about these funny people up the road who never went into Cross Glen, except for church services, and, even then, sat all together at the back of the church and never said more than a greeting to the other parishoners. Some people said that Jack Leardon had killed a man in Tipperary and had come here to get away from the police; while others thought that they were chronic debtors drifting from place to place as long as there was a roof over their heads, and staying only as long as the patience of the landowner held out. These and other speculations worked on Neil's curiosity until one summer evening after supper he decided to wander up towards the old McCarthy place and spy on the new tenants.

He waited until his father had disappeared down the road in the direction of the pub and until his mother had set up the butter churn in the kitchen and then he cut across the fields into the strip of woods where the mountain trail began. The Leardon farm was the most desolate place he had ever seen. Its fences were all broken and scattered as if hurled

by a windstorm, and the roofs on the three shabby buildings tilted and sagged in a weird pattern that suggested to him sketches he had seen of the Civil War in America and the destruction it had brought. Even the grass on the little patch of lawn before the house was parched and withered and worn away, like the grass on the battlefields where the cannons were mounted. While he was thinking of the war and the attack on Canada which his father often told him about, despite the protests from his mother, he was suddenly distracted from his reverie by hearing his name called. The voice seemed to be coming from behind him and it was bright and pleasant. He turned and saw a boy about his own age coming out of the woods. The boy had blond hair and a very fair complexion and large, beautiful blue eyes that seemed to be continually smiling at him.

"I'm Terry Leardon..." the boy said, "and I was wondering when you were going to come up and see us. You're only down at the next farm, aren't you?"

Neil was speechless. He didn't even respond to the extended hand that the boy was offering to him. He had thought that the Leardon children were all girls,

because he had never seen this boy in church with them. And he had expected to find cruel, hard-eyed people, the kind his Uncle Tom described in his stories about murderers and debtors, but here was this gentle, almost meek looking boy smiling at him, and there was something in his eyes, and the way he talked, and the manner in which he kept pushing a strand of golden hair back into place that made Neil's heart go out to him. It seemed to him that the boy was expecting him, as if he had been standing there in the woods for a long, long time, knowing that Neil would come, sooner or later, and that they would be friends.

"Do you ever go fishing?" the boy asked with a radiant smile that lifted the long lashes from his beautiful blue eyes and dissolved the memorized introduction forming in Neil's mind. "There's a stream down in back that Dad says is riot with trout and I have two poles out in the barn. If you wait here, I'll get them, and we can fish together, if you'd like..."

That was three years ago, and all that summer and the next they had roamed the mountains and the woods together, fishing every new stream they could find and sometimes camping out under the stars, until

now they were inseparable. Neil had no brothers or sisters, but he was sure that if he did have any he could never love them as much as he loved Terry Leardon. In fact, he knew in his innermost heart that he loved Terry more than he loved his own mother and father, and sometimes this knowledge made him very said, because he thought it was wrong to love anyone so much. Sometimes he even wondered how he could ever love God with his whole heart, and his whole mind, and his whole soul, when he already loved Terry with all three, and when Terry was always in his thoughts and God hardly ever was. His only consolation in these moods was the thought that Terry was very good and very close to God, and the God could never be jealous of anyone loving a boy as holy as Terry Leardon. He resolved to be more like Terry and in that way love God better.

Together they had become altar boys and hurried across the fields at night with their cassocks and surplices wrapped in burlap lest the night riders should spot them and follow. Together they thought and dreamed of the future; Terry with zeal and inspiration, Neil with reluctance and trepidation. Terry had his heart set on the priesthood. The golden

mission fields of India and China with their tremendous unreaped harvest of souls beckoned to him constantly. Several times a week the two friends met in an abandoned pump house behind the Leardon cottage and played "Mass" together. Terry was wonderful at make believe. He seemed to live in the exciting world of his imagination. He could make you actually think you were kneeling before the high altar in the Cathedral waiting for the Archbishop of Armagh to give you the kiss of Peter and say that you were a priest forever. And Africa, Neil's heart quaked with fear whenever Terry spoke of Africa. He could almost hear the jungle drums beating in the distance and see the savages dancing around and the eyes of the beats peering out of the darkness at the little cluster of huts that made up the mission compound. Neil could never understand Terry's fascination with a future so full of hideous monsters and disease and hardships, and he always went home with the resolution to pray harder for courage and also that he might be able to understand Terry a little better.

Despite the closeness of their friendship there were many things about Terry and the Leardon family that puzzled Neil. Terry seldom spoke of his

family and seemed intent upon avoiding any reference to them. In their three years together, Neil had never been inside the Leardon cottage, and, in fact, had only gone there once without meeting Terry in the woods beside the road. On that one occasion, a rainy, cold evening, he had gotten as far as the front door of the cottage, but, before he could knock, Terry had appeared at the upstairs window and was motioning him towards the barn. There was a frightened look on Terry's face that Neil had never forgotten, and that same evening Terry asked him not to come to the house at any time but to meet him always at their regular place by the pump house. He had asked Neil to please try to understand because there was nothing more he could explain without committing a sin, and it was necessary for Neil never to come to the house if their friendship was to go on. A tender, tragic smile came across his face with this plea, the same smile that Neil had recognized so often before when Terry spoke of Africa and India and of how the lepers were dying for the faith in the Pacific islands. It was a smile of enchantment that seemed to go beyond Neil and include the whole mountain-side, and it was accompanied by a strange, far-away look in Terry's eyes that Neil wondered at and feared, because it seemed

to separate him from Terry, as if the latter had been blessed with a vision of another world, a world remote and ethereal, a world that Neil would never see. He often thought that he hated the priesthood because it would someday take Terry Leardon from him forever. And he hated it more because of his mother's dream for his own future.

The moon had fled behind a cloud and it was very dark when Neil left the little stream and headed down the puddle blotched path that led to the Leardon farmhouse. He hid himself in a clump of bushes by the tattered fance and kept silent watch over the lamp-lit downstairs windows. Inside Terry's sister was humming Salve Regina, and he could hear the rattle of dishes being dried and put away. He knew that Terry was in bed because the village clock was sounding ten when he reached the high road that looked down on Cross Glen. He was afraid that he might have to wait until morning to see his friend. The thought was oppressive. To wait that long would be impossible. In the intervening hours God might come and seal his eyes in death and consign his soul to eternal punishment. He thought of what his mother often said about the hours between midnight and dawn,

the death hours, when the body temperature drops and the cold night air seeps into the lungs of the dying, and the angels of death hover at the lintel of the sickroom, waiting for the last faint beat of the fading heart and the final breath of life gasped out into the darkness and across the world in that one terrible struggle with mortality. The silhouetted figures of the Leardon sisters standing at the sink by the window brought to his mind the rigid circle of parish women who stood in silent cordon, gripping their rosaries, moving their lips soundlessly, and dabbing musk tinted handkerchiefs to their expressionless eyes, around the coffin at his great aunt's wake, the only time he had ever seen a dead person. He saw himself stretched out on the satiny bier with the grim knot of mourners gathered about in the candle light, and he smelled the thick odor of carnations, white for a young boy, and heard the muffled responses of the prayers led by the parish priest.

"Not tonight!" he whispered feverishly to himself. "Please, God, not tonight!"

A long branch, wet and sticky with dew, brushed against his face, and he felt death's cold hand. He rose up and stealthily made his way around

the back of the cottage. The window in Terry's room was open. He could see the curtains flapping in and out. He whistled softly. Off in the shadows of the clustered buildings a dog barked somewhere. Panic seized him and he crouched down in the wet grass. He lay there for a long time afraid to move, even when a mosquito whined raucously in his ear. Soon the lamps were extinguished in the downstairs room, and he heard the footsteps of Terry's sisters going up to bed. He waited until no more sounds came from the darkened house, and whistled again, this time a little louder. No answer came back beyond the sigh of the wind, weak and lingering in the high branches of the spruce trees, He groped for a handful of pebbles and flung them at the window. He haard them strike the upper part of the glass and splatter on the floor. He watched and waited. No one appeared at the upstairs window.

The broken shingles made an easy foothold and he climbed up on top of the kitchen ell and crawled towards Terry's room. Before he reached the sill a dog appeared at the side of the out house, barking up at him in sharp, staccato bursts that made the night echo with alarm. It was a large German shepherd

from the neighboring farm and his eyes glowed in the darkness.

"Neil!" cried Terry, awakened by the commotion, "What are you doing out there. I asked you not to come here! You've got to leave. My father wouldn't like it if he was to find you here. Please, please...I wish you hadn't come. Now you'll spoil everything!"

He was standing there at the window in his night shirt and his beautiful face was paralyzed with fear.

"Shhhh", hushed Neil, "I wouldn't have come only I must see you. It's a matter of life and death. It couldn't wait until tomorrow. I was careful. No one saw me. Let's go into your room, I need your help. It's awfully important.

"No! No!" gasped Terry. "Not in my room. I can't let you. I told you before, you weren't to come here. Oh Neil, I wish I could tell you why, but I can't. Not just now anyway. Please try to understand. Now you've got to go before Dad and Mom get back or else there'll be trouble."

"But Terry, you're the only one in the world

I can talk to. I told you it was very important and I must see you. You know I wouldn't come here like this so late at night unless it was really important."

The dog barked again, and some of the animals stirred in their pens.

"Shh!" cried Terry in terror. "Not so loud. My sisters will hear us. All right, I'll sneak out when they're asleep, if it's as important as all that, and I'll meet you at the far end of the south pasture, by that old mowing machine. I'll come as soon as I can get out, but you've got to go now. Be careful that you don't fall getting down, and don't let my sisters see you."

"What about that dog? Is he vicious?"

"No. He won't hurt you. He belongs to old man Hennessey. But, please, go."

"I'm going Terry. Be as quick as you can, will you?"

The spot appointed for the meeting was a half mile from the house in an unused pasture belonging to the Hennessey farm. Neil circled through the patch

of woods that served as a dividing line for the two properties and came out into the field along an old neglected cow path. The moon had risen again and the giant blade of the mowing machine was bathed in a ghastly pallor. It rose up from the vast, empty expanse like a massive scythe. Death's scythe. Neil clutched at his rosary and frantically searched his memory for the opening words and images of the Apostles Creed, but nothing came into his brain beyond the blackness of his sin and the figure of the broken crucifix and Rory's tortured face and the pound note lying on the faded couch. Despair filled his thoughts and flooded his eyes with tears. He wondered if he was allowed to pray anymore. He knew that those in mortal sin were not allowed to receive Communion or gain any graces for themselves until they had returned to the state of grace. Sometimes it was even necessary for them to go to Rome and kneel before the Pope's throne and ask forgiveness. He thought of the docks and quays he had once seen in Belfast where ships from all over the world were anchored, and he wondered how hard it would be to stowaway on one bound for the Mediterranean ports. Perhaps if he told the captain that he was going to Rome to see the Pope

he might be allowed to work his passage.

A weasel shot out from underneath the mowing machine and scurried through the tall grass. Neil felt his heart leap into his throat, and ran screaming across the field. He plunged down behindaa huge boulder that stood at the edge of the woods and buried his face in his hands. The baying of a homeless hound rang out across the mountainside, pathetic and lonely. His grandmother used to tell him that the howling of a dog at night meant that some soul had died in mortal sin and was on its way to Hell. The hounds of Hell always came out to announce their joy at its arrival. Convulsive sobs shook him as he pictured the huge, famished mastiffs sitting about the fiery lake on their haunches waiting for his soul. He searched the sky for a shooting star, another sign, his grandmother told him, that a soul was plunging down to Satan.

At last he heard the familiar whistle and sat upright. In the hazy glow of the moonlight he could see Terry climbing over the old stone wall. Wildly he went over the events of the night in his mind once more, and rubbed the tears back into his

eyes with his sleeve.

"Neil. Where are you, Neil?" Terry called.

"Over here...behind this big boulder..."

"Oh. There you are. I looked for you by the mowing machine..."

"It was too bright over there, and there was a weasel prowling around..."

"A weasel? They won't hurt you. They only go after the chickens. We've lost a few this month already. I'm sorry I couldn't get out sooner, but I had to wait until everyone was asleep. I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long..."

"No. It's all right. It's just that it's so lonely out here at night and there are all kinds of noises..."

"Yes, I know how it is in the fields alone. But we couldn't talk in my room. The walls are awfully thin and my sisters are very light sleepers. You aren't mad about that are you? I can't say why you're not to come to the house, but you'll know someday, and until then you'll have to trust me,

and I know you do..."

Terry smiled gently at him and Neil thought of what his mother always said about Terry Leardon being so beautiful that he should have been a girl. He wondered why it was so when Terry's sisters were so homely in contrast.

"No. I'm not mad. I'm glad you could get out. I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't seen you..."

"What's it all about? Have you done something bad? Are you in trouble in school again? Old man Mullvaney giving you a going over again like he did last year?"

"No. I wish it were only that, but it's far worse..."

"Well, what is it? I'll do anything I can to help you. You know that."

"Terry, did you hear the horses tonight?"

"No. Were they riding again? I hope they didn't break up the meeting..."

"I don't know if they did or not...but they were riding..."

"Did you see them go by? Were there a great many of them?"

"Yes." Neil breathed heavily. "I saw them. There were about forty of them. They came to our house..."

"To your house!" shouted Terry, his blue eyes sparkling with amazement. "They didn't find him did they? Oh, they couldn't have...that poor old man. Tell me they didn't; tell me quick!"

"No," answered Neil swallowing the sobs deep in his throat, "Not as far as I know. It wasn't held at our house tonight. It was at Tom McGlade's. They were only looking for him then..."

"Oh, I'm glad. I knew they could never get him as old as he is! God would never let him fall into their hands! They didn't hurt your mother or father, did they? I should have asked you before..."

"No. They weren't home. They were at McGlade's too. I was the only one at home. They wanted me to be there in case anything....well...in case anything should

happen..."

"And you told them!" cried Terry in shocked anguish, as if for the first time he was beginning to piece together the little strands of conversation. "You told them that the meeting was at Tom McGlade's! Oh, Neil, how could you? How could you?"

"No! No!" protested Neil, tears flooding his eyes again. "I didn't tell them! I didn't tell them anything about McGlade's or where they went! I was too scared to tell them anything!"

"Oh," sighed Terry in relief, sitting down on the boulder, "I'm glad that you didn't. For a minute you had me scared. But I knew you wouldn't do anything like that. Not after the terrible things they did up in the north and to those poor brothers in Londonderry. But no matter how many horsemen they ride out every night, they'll never get him. I'm sure that his guardian angel is watching him constantly and he'd never let them come near him. Didn't you have that feeling even while the men were in the yard? Didn't you think that no matter what they did to you or your family that you could never let on where he was?"

"No." whispered Neil, "I didn't have that

feeling. I didn't have any feeling...I was too scared..."

He buried his face in his hands and began to sob again. "Oh Terry," he cried, "I'm not like you. I don't think like that. I wish I did, but I don't. I didn't tell them where he was because they didn't ask me. I don't know what I would have told them if they had."

"What difference does that make?" said Terry putting his hand affectionately on Neil's shoulder. "The important thing is that you didn't tell them, and it was probably God's grace that kept you from being asked. I don't know what I would have told them either had they come up here. There's no telling what you'll do when you're scared. I was just thinking of that old man and all the things he has done. You shouldn't feel bad because of something that didn't happen. You should be glad that God kept it from happening..."

"God had nothing to do with this!" Neil shouted.

"What? What did you say?"

"I said God had nothing to do with this! Nothing!"

"But, Neil, you mustn't say that. You mustn't.

It's not right... God had everything to do with everything. I don't know what's got into you. You never talked like this before. What's the matter with you?"

Neil looked at him stonily. He wondered why he had come and what foolish thought had driven him to the conviction that Terry or anyone else could understand and be able to help him. He knew now how complete was his desolation, and he found relief in the thought that life had no more friends for him, that it was he against the whole world, and there was an ironic joy in this feeling of serenity and resentment.

"I don't think God matters much anymore," he said, surprised at the ease with which the words fell from his tongue.

"You don't?" whispered Terry in a voice that had suddenly become very faint. "That's an awful thing to say, Neil. I wish you wouldn't go on talking like this. It's not right! Oh, what's happened to you? What did they do to you? Did they beat you? Did they?"

"No." said Neil calmly. "One of them tried to choke me, but he changed his mind."

"The beast! shouted Terry. "The filthy scoundrel! My father said they were all murderers. Every one of them!"

"This one wasn't. He was a kind man...I'll never forget him...."

"But he tried to kill you, didn't he? How can you say he was a kind man?"

"His name was Rory," said Neil slowly, "and he held the crucifix in his hand and he cried, real tears, as if he was sorry for everything...and I don't think I'll ever forget the way he looked at it and said 'I used to believe in this once, but I don't believe in anything anymore". Then he was very sad because his son had died without medicine during the boycott..."

"It was a miracle!" shouted Terry. "He looked at the crucifix and he realized all the bad things he did. God made him think that way and that's why he didn't murder you!"

"I don't think so," Neil said, smiling wearily, "The crucifix broke while he was putting it back on the wall. It fell out of his hands and smashed into pieces..."

"I still don't understand what this is all about. It wasn't his fault that the crucifix broke, and it certainly wasn't yours. Why are you so...so bitter? You're not like yourself at all."

Neil looked up quickly. Terry was staring at him with an anguished expression in his eyes. And suddenly Neil was sorry that he had descended to such depths of contempt. The insolence dissolved within him in a flash of pity and remorse that left him humble and composed. Sorrow ate at his heart again but not despair. It was as if Terry's innocence and simplicity had become more important than his own crime, as if he feared hurting his friend more than the loss of his own soul. The loneliness and the selfishness had gone out of him in the presence of the person whom he could never stoop to offend.

"Rory asked me if I was a Catholic..."he said quietly."

"And you said you weren't?" suggested Terry with bewilderment growing in his eyes.

"Yes, I said I wasn't. He took the crucifix down off the wall and threw it into my lap and asked me to look at it and tell him if I was a Catholic..."

"And what did you do?"

"I told him I wasn't a Catholic again..."

"And then he tried to choke you?"

"He threw the crucifix on the floor and grabbed me by the neck. I thought he was going to kill me...the way his eyes looked and the way he shouted..."

"But what made him stop? Why didn't he kill you? Was it because of the crucifix?"

"I don't know. I must have fainted or passed out. When I came to he was kneeling beside me and rubbing my arms....I think he was afraid that I was dead..."

"He didn't have the nerve to go through with it..."

"Maybe not...but I'd probably be a lot better off if he had killed me right there and then..."

"I wonder what he would have done to you if you had admitted that you were a Catholic. Do you think he would have strangled you?"

"I don't know," whispered Neil, "I try not to think about that..."

They sat together in silence for what seemed an infinitely long period of time. The moon came out again, cautiously, and cast their shadows across the boulder in gaunt, angular patterns. Neil waited for Terry to speak. He could feel everything slipping and sliding away inside of him, like a huge internal avalanche that was carrying with it in one tremendous roar all the things he had once known and valued: his home, his family, his religion, and, above all, Terry Leardon. He knew that whatever attraction it was that held him to Terry, it was gone now, swept away in that surging cataract where the broken arm of the crucifix bobbed up and down amid a swirling flotilla of familiar faces of people they both knew. In that one terrible moment of revelation everything they had shared together was being washed out and destroyed. He closed his eyes and out of the colored blackness came Terry's handsome features, spiraling down from the precipice of a huge cliff into a valley full of clouds and fog, and he saw himself standing at the top of the mountain with his arms outstretched, trying to call back from the ear splitting din of the cataclysm the swift disappearing image of his only friend. All was swallowed up in the crystalline opacity and only the billowing tumult still rose and

fell in the long caverns of his mind. He opened his eyes slowly, as if he were afraid that Terry would no longer be sitting next to him.

"Terry," he said softly, "Terry, why don't you say something? You've been quiet a long time..."

He had been looking off towards the low hills in the distance, and he turned his eyes slowly on Neil as if he were unwilling to leave that pleasant sight.

"I've been thinking," he said, "and wondering what's going to become of us...all of us. I sometimes think that things will never be peaceful in Ireland again. My father often says that..."

"You think I've done a terrible thing, don't you, Terry?"

"I don't know. I don't know how bad it is..."

"But you wouldn't have done it yourself? Would you?"

"I can't say that either. I've never had anyone put his hands on my neck and try to choke me... I don't know what I would have done..."

"You always said you wanted to be a martyr... or live among the savages..."

"It's a glorious way to die...you go straight to heaven..."

"And when they ask you if you are a Catholic and you deny it, you go straight to Hell if you die, don't you?"

"I suppose so, Neil. That's what Father Kearse said a few Sundays ago...he was explaining one of the gospels. He said that those who deny Christ on earth will also be denied in heaven..."

"I know. I heard him. It's very bad then, isn't it?"

"Yes. I think so."

"And do you hate me for saying I wasn't a Catholic?"

"Hate you? Don't say that, Neil. Of course I don't hate you. You're my friend. It's wrong to hate anyone. Didn't the priest tell us that Christ said we should love even our enemies?"

"Terry...do you think...do you think I'm one of Christ's enemies now? I mean on account of what I did...does that make me one?"

"I don't know...I can't tell you that...I suppose that it does...but..."

"But you think so, don't you? When I was coming up here tonight I passed over the high road and I saw the train go by. I thought how easy it would be to end everything. The people would all think it was an accident. There was a tramp run over by the express last year...you remember that don't you? Nobody knew how it happened..."

"Neil! You mustn't talk like that! There's always hope, no matter how bad things are. If you think like that, you're just like Judas. He hung himself and now he's in Hell..."

"And that's where I'll be too..."

"Please don't say things like that, Neil. It frightens me. You don't really feel like that, and you know you don't. Why you are going to be a priest... everybody knows that..."

"Yes, everybody knows that. I don't think my

mother has missed anybody..."

"Neil, that's not fair! Your mother is a very holy woman. She prays for you night and day, I've seen her..."

"I wish she'd stop praying for me. I don't need her prayers. I don't need anybody's prayers..."

"Neil, you don't know what you're saying. Why don't you go see him and talk to him about it. Tell him everything, just the way you told me..."

"Who? The Monsignor?"

"Yes. Go see him. Go to confession and tell him everything. Tell him you're sorry..."

"But I don't know if I am sorry..."

"You're afraid to go to him..."

"No I'm not..."

"Yes you are. I can tell by your face... You're afraid of Monsignor Kelly! Afraid of what he might say to you!"

"All right, Terry, I'll go. But I want you to know that I am sorry for what I've done, but not

the way I should be. I'm sorry because of you. You don't know what I mean, but it doesn't make any difference..."

"You'll go then?"

"Yes...I'll go...for you, Terry..."

Neil stood lonely in the moonlight and watched his friend disappear down the path. He looked beyond the ivory washed sheen of the meadow into the darkness of a world of dissolving illusions. He lifted his eyes to the sky and beheld the pale glitter of the stars swimming in a universe of fantastic depth and immensity. Somewhere in the deep recesses of the woods a corn crake screamed its idiotic laugh into the night.

C H A P T E R F O U R

Then Jesus answered and said, "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jona, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to thee, but my Father in heaven. And I say to thee, thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Matthew XIV, 17-20

CHAPTER IV

AND UPON THIS ROCK I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH

Four people, two men and two women, were seated in nervous silence around the bare wooden table in Tom Mc Glade's kitchen, arranged like figures in a wax museum depicting some weird game of cards. They seemed unconscious of each other's presence. A little girl with stringy brownish hair and a bearded man in dirty work clothes occupied the two straight backed chairs by the wall. Neil approached timidly and seated himself on the bottom step of the staircase, next to the bearded man. He felt the eyes of everyone in the room guiding his entrance. The girl smiled faintly at him in recognition, but he quickly darted his glance towards the mantlepiece and avoided her greeting. Gladys O'Leary. The shopkeeper's daughter. He wondered what she had done. Perhaps, as he had once seen her do, she had taken some sweets from the glass jar on top of her father's counter.

He decided then that he didn't like her because her sins were petty and her face was dirty. He thought that God must get awfully sick of listening to people like Gladys O'Leary coming in every week with their stupid faults.

There was a noise at the back of the hall and the two men at the table sat up straight. A tall, freckled faced boy appeared at the corner of the chimney, swinging his cap back and forth in his hands.

"Who's next?" he asked in a magnified whisper that caused the two wax ladies to stare at each other accusingly.

"I think I am," said the plump one, smiling foolishly, "but if you're in a hurry? I know how it is with children about..."

"Go right ahead, dearie," returned the other, shooing her off with a flapping motion of her hand against her wrist, "I don't have me sins sorted out yet..."

Neil wondered how many she had to sort out. He lifted his head and watched the plump woman disappear behind a curtain into the back room. A soft

murmur floated across the silence like the easy whirl of seagulls on a summer afternoon, and the people in the room froze in their positions again.

He rested his face between his hands, pressing his temples tightly to ease the quick throbbing of the flood rushing into his brain. The words of the prayer to the Holy Ghost for the grace to make a good confession came into his mind but he was unable to concentrate on their meaning. He felt the baseness of his sin deep in his soul, filling his whole being with a quivering shame and disgust that made him dizzy and nauseous. When he closed his eyes the swirling darkness gave him the sensation of standing on the ledge of a very tall building and looking down at the fly-specks of people below.

"The old gaffer has sure slowed down a lot lately;" observed the bearded man with a loose motion of his lips that sent a spray of spittle onto his beard and into Neil's face, "I can remember when it was 'Three Hail Mary's' and out you went. No matter if you had horse-whipped the Lord Mayor of Dublin or boasted of ten wives. Now he likes to mull over them as if there was nothing else in the world to do. I've been here an hour already, and I'll bet a quid there's not half

a dozen gone into that room."

The man was trying to whisper but his voice kept falling into a harsh falsetto that seemed to penetrate every corner of the room and caused the three people at the table and the little girl to stare at the floor in embarrassment. Neil nodded at his to show that at least he was listening. He wished that the man had picked someone else to talk to, but was glad of the opportunity to escape, even for a second, from his guilt-ridden conscience.

"Well, there's one thing," continued the bearded man, lighting his pipe with great resounding smacks of his moist lips, "that you can say for going to confession at Tom McGlade's. At least you can smoke while you're waiting in line. They never did allow that at St. Paul's, you know!"

He slapped Neil on the knee with a vigorour clap of his hairy hand, and threw back his head in a desperate attempt to smother a volcanic laugh that was already rumbling in his throat.

"No, boy," he half reared, "there's no complaint against McGlade's cathedral on that score. It's just like one of them Hindu temples where you

can draw on your pipe to your heart's content..."

He had given up all attempts at trying to whisper and was drawing icy looks from the other penitents. The woman at the table scowled at him venomously, and shook her head in exaggerated indignation. Neil caught her withering gaze for a second. She pursed her lips fiercely, and he felt responsible for the man's garrulity because he had been singled out as the only listener. He shrugged his shoulders slightly to indicate that he was a mere victim of annoying circumstances, but succeeded only in looking and feeling guiltier.

"What we need in a place like this," the bearded man went on, "is a Franciscan or one of them American priests. They're the boys who can pop 'em in and out quick. I saw one missioner at the monastery in Cork, not so long ago...."

"Shhhhh!" hissed the woman acidly.

"Oh, shhhh, yourself!" returned the man, in less of an undertone than he intended. "These pious hypocrites they give me a pain at the pit of me spine. If it wasn't for the likes of them, none of us would ever have to go to confession.

He threw one leg on top of the other contemptuously and proceeded to blow out sullen smoke rings in a steady stream from the yellowish bowl of his clay pipe. The woman at the table smiled smugly at her victory. An uneasy silence settled on the room, accentuated by every unnecessary stir of the chairs and by the sporadic flutter of the curtains against the low window sill. Neil watched the little girl playing idly with her shoe strings. Her dirty brown hair brought into his mind Terry's curly blond head and glittering blue eyes. He tried to wipe out the memory of their last meeting from his mind by counting the buttons on the girl's dress. Little sharp pin-pricks of sensation tingled everywhere on his body, like hot sparks alighting and dissolving, and he thought of the brimstone lake where the blazing meteors and comets and shooting stars showered down in a dazzling profusion and were extinguished in the bubbling water. He put his hands over his eyes and wished he had the courage to dart from the room. He longed for his old iron bed in the attic where he could curl up and pull the covers up tight over his head and blot out the shame and terror of his sin.

The heavy thud of footsteps shattered the silence. The plump lady reappeared and, for no apparent

reason, smiled blandly all around.

"All right, Molly," she said to the thin faced woman, "go ahead. I'll wait for you at the post office."

"No," protested the other, with a deprecatory arching of her eyebrows, "I believe the gentleman in the corner was here ahead of me."

The bearded man removed the pipe from his mouth with a grand gesture that began with a magnificent sweep of his hairy arm and ended in a cavalier bow of his grey head.

"Not at all! Not at all!" he insisted. "I'm always here early. With me it's by appointment only. You see me and the Monsignor have a system. We take one Commandment a week. That keeps the rest of the people from waiting all night. Now you go right ahead in and unburden yourself, madame, while I do a little more concentrating on me list. I like to sandwich all the big ones in between the little ones. In that way they don't seem so bad."

The woman glared at him for a moment, then rose and escaped into the back room before the echo of his booming, half-smothered laugh expired.

"That's the way to treat them, lad," said the man to Neil, "take none of their blamed nonsence, and then show them right off who's boss. I'm what you might call an expert at these things, seeing as how I've outlived two wives already, and am presently engaged in seeking out the third. No one special in mind as yet, of course, it hasn't reached that stage. It's still in the planning, and, as old Walter Scott used to say: 'The lists are open, let the candidates ride forth'!"

Neil lifted his head quickly and chanced a look into the bearded man's face. He saw that the eyes were all bloodshot and had huge circles of soft fat under them that seemed to quiver with the rollick of his continuous good humor. He wondered if the man had murdered his two wives or if they had merely died. Perhaps the man was here tonight to confess these crimes! He hoped so. That would make it easier when it came time for him to go into the room. Murder was a terrible thing; one of the seven sins that cried out to heaven for vengeance. He remembered Father Kearse saying that at the novena once. Father Kearse didn't compare it with denial of your religion, but he was sure that his own was the worse sin.

The scuffle of a chair being pushed back and the squish of felt slippers on the wooden floor brought the lean faced woman back into the room. She sniffed haughtily at Neil in her minced procession towards the door.

"Well," said the bearded man getting up dramatically, "the time has come to reckon up the mortal tally, and let no man be found wanting. It's into the lion's den we go before half our time is done. I hope that old battlewagon that's just gone hasn't put the edge on the old man's temper. He'll need all his self-control and then some to hear what I have to tell him. But, away with us, the hour has come!"

With that he sauntered off down the hall, stopped briefly before the green curtain to shrug his shoulders in an exaggerated show of devil-may-care courage, and disappeared. His voice could be heard in a resounding rumble that was like the sound of a train passing over a wooden trestle, but the words were indistinguishable. Now that the bearded man had left the room, Neil felt a quick panic growing in his breast. Thoughts of flight, no matter how ignominious, came into his mind, but his feet would not respond to the impulse. Fear and shame reduced him to immobility

as the shattering voice of conscience exploded in his brain. Tears welled up into his eyes again, big, translucent bulbs that made everything in the room shimmer. Only the presence of Gladys O'Leary, swaying back and forth on her chair and humming softly to herself, kept him from bursting out into a spasm of crying. He swallowed a sob back into his throat and blinked the tears dry before they could fall. She would never see him cry. He glanced at her with the disdaining eye of a hardened sinner. To inwardly scoff at her stupid innocence brought relief to his tortured mind. There was an ironic pleasure almost in comparing his estimate of her transgressions with his own deadly sin. When did she ever have a real temptation? She probably never even forgot her prayers in her whole life.

The girl woke from her musing and caught his hard stare. She smiled shyly at him, reducing his resentment and arrogance to trembling embarrassment. He nodded apologetically, as if he were afraid that somehow she had read his thoughts, and he shot his eyes swiftly to the two men seated at the table.

The one at the far side of the table was waxing out his mustache with a delicate sweep of his long fingers, as if he were plucking deftly at a harp.

His name was Brian Boofey, and he ran a poultry shop in Cross Glen. Neil had seen him hanging the headless chickens up by the feet to let the blood drain into a big bucket, and he remembered his uncle saying that Brian Boofey washed his hands nine hundred times a day because he hated chickens and he hated blood and he hated anyone to think that he had anything to do with either. He was a mouse of a man, but he was the backbone of the parish societies when they were operating. Before the trouble started he could be seen every Sunday on duty at the back of the church with a starched white linen collar and a checkered waistcoat, and he always had a pleasant smile for the incoming and outgoing congregations, especially if they happened to be young girls. He had never married, but even at forty-seven he considered himself quite eligible, and a rare prize that could not be too easily garnered. Neil watched him expertly pare the dirt from beneath his long nails with a golden toothpick. He decided that vanity was undoubtedly Mr. Boofey's only sin.

The man opposite Brian Boofey was nodding off to sleep. His head pitched forward lazily only to be jerked back by sudden returns to consciousness, and his nasal breathing almost achieved the sonority of a snore.

He was Paddy Ferris, Mr Boofey's great and good friend, who ran a large dry goods establishment in Cross Glen and had an interest in another in Meighmarra. Everyone in the county knew Paddy Ferris, although he had few friends who knew him and shared his whiskey the way Brian Boofey did. People knew him through his dogs, Lord McCollough and Lough Swilley Star, reported to be among the fastest greyhounds on the island. He brought them to Dublin every summer for the races and spent the rest of the year passing out reports on their speed and behavior. He had a reputation in the village as a sportsman and gambler, but he was neither. The dogs came to him in full payment of a bad business transaction. He enjoyed the popularity that they brought to him, but could never bring himself to make any substantial wagers on their ability. The annual trip to Dublin he looked upon as a social necessity rather than an opportunity to win some high stakes, and he kept it up as a matter of personal prestige. When people came to see the kennels or watch the workouts, he was proud but reticent, lest he should reveal his lack of racing knowledge, and this laconic attitude was misinterpreted as cleverness on his part. The friendship with Brian Boofey was a matter of opposites attracting each other, or at least that was the way they explained it to themselves. Boofey looked upon

gambling and racing as sinful vices and never allowed the subject to enter his conversations. Ferris found a safe confidant in the poultryman, one who never inquired after his dogs or his personal choice in the local meets. They respected each other for what they were not, and enjoyed sharing each other's popularity and esteem. Actually, they were two of a kind, but they would have been the first to disown the comparison.

The solid thump of footsteps in the bare hall brought Mr. Boofey to his feet.

"Wait for me by the gate, Paddy," he said, "and we'll have a few pints on the way back..."

The bearded man came back into the room wiping a huge red bandana across his forehead.

"He hit me with the book!"he exclaimed, shaking his head towards Neil. "There's no heart in the man today. He's a caged lion if there ever was one. Only he had the vestments on I do believe he'd have torn me to shreds for me miserable little misdemeanors. Oh, he was besides himself with rage! Gave me a penance the like of which they haven't handed down since the middle ages. Walk all the way to Croagh Patrick carrying a sack of potatoes on me back! God help us I don't know

what he'd of given me if I'd told him the half of it!"

He poked Neil playfully in the ribs, and then reached into his back pocket for his cap, which he adjusted very carefully on his head.

"Well," he said with a laugh, "I'd better get started if I'm going to walk to Jerusalem this night. Or was it Croagh Patrick? Devil if I can remember! Well, it doesn't make much difference. To get to the both of them you must start at Shea's pub for provisions and equipment, and I think I'll be needing a lot of both."

Long after he closed the door behind him, his laugh could be heard progressing down the road. Neil wondered if the man really had to walk to Croagh Patrick or if he was only joking. Brian Boofey had gone into the back room, and the low murmur of his voice was already drifting through the silence. Neil longed for the hearty laugh and endless chatter of the bearded man. There was nothing left now to keep his mind from the terrifying magnitude of his sin. He thought of the old priest in the room there, the caged lion, and he looked from the little girl to Paddy Ferris, both of whom were listlessly day dreaming. There was still an opportunity

to stand up and walk defiantly towards the wooden door. He might say something about having to meet his mother somewhere, or getting some things at the store before it closed. But he knew from the weak feeling in his knees and the quick beat of his heart that he would never be able to carry it off.

Mr. Boofey came back and the other man took his place in the confessional. Now only Gladys O'Leary was left in the room. Neil looked from the mantle to the pictures of Tom McGlade's ancestors on the wall to the easy flutter of the curtains to avoid her gaze. She went down on her knees suddenly, and the noise startled him. She must have realized this.

"I forgot my prayer for a good confession." she explained meekly.

Neil nodded his head foolishly and felt his face becoming flushed. He tried to think of some answer to give her, but nothing came into his mind. He wished that he had not jumped when she knelt down, and wondered if he had betrayed his guilt.

Her mention of the prayer for a good confession flashed through his brain. He attempted to arrange his sins in an orderly pattern, starting with

the easy ones, like disobeying his parents and being lazy in school, and ending with his denial before the crucifix. He searched his mind feebly for the memory of past offences but could think of none. Everywhere he looked in the shimmering transparency of his thoughts he saw the leering face of Rory with the whites of his eyeballs showing. From out of nowhere came the words of the Confiteor: mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa, and he beat his breast humbly. How often had he repeated these words as an altar boy without dwelling on their meaning or even pausing to translate what he said; but now their woeful indictment resounded through every part of his being.

Paddy Ferris shuffled out from behind the curtain and gallantly held it aloft for the little girl to pass through. He gestured good night to Neil with a flick of his index finger. The high pitched whir of the girl's whispering fanned out across the room like the last notes of an organ caught in the deep vaulted ceiling of an empty cathedral, lost and lingering.

Neil was alone now. He hoped frantically that no one would come in before he was done. He was

afraid that they might know how long he was in there and talk about it later. The fire had burned low and was washing the walls in long ugly shadows. Every stray breath of air leaped it into life and silhouetted the furniture in grim relief. He closed his eyes and listened to the soft sputter of the burning turf. A faint sickness rose from his stomach and crept slowly into his brain, leaving him limp and dazed.

"You're next..." Gladys O'Leary said softly.

He opened his eyes wide in amazement. He had not heard her come back. She was smiling at him again, and he could feel the blood pouring into his head.

"Oh yes," he said, "thank you. I'll go right in..."

He fumbled in his pockets for his rosary, waiting for her to leave. When the door closed he stood up. Here was his chance. He could go now without anyone knowing that he had left. The old priest would think that there were no more penitents because he would find the room empty. He moved carefully towards the front door. One of the wooden floor boards creaked loudly, like the crack of a whip.

Neil stood paralyzed.

"Next! Be quick about it!" a voice boomed from the back room.

Neil turned abruptly and walked blindly in the direction of the speaker. There was no turning back now. He threw back the curtain and breathlessly entered the room. A single candle burning in a bottle on the sink held back the silent gloom. The old Monsignor was seated at the window with his cloak thrown over one shoulder and his purple stole about his neck. Neil knelt on the floor beside him, glad that the wizened face was averted from him.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned;" he said mechanically while making the sign of the cross, "my last confession was two weeks ago. Since that time I have neglected my morning and evening prayers six or seven times. I was inattentive during Mass on two occasions...."

He recited his venial sins, in as disinterested a manner as he was able to feign, trying to avoid hearing his own words, and trying not to think of the old man sitting there in the chair who knew him so well but was Christ at this moment and not

Monsignor Kelly.

"Is that all? Anything else, my son?"

He caught his breath quickly and closed his eyes.

"I denied my religion, Father..."

The priest did not move.

"How? How did you deny your religion?"

Neil panted out the story of the night riders and Rory and the crucifix, although he did not mention the redheaded man by name. When he finished there was a terrible silence for what seemed an interminable period of time. He could hear a train whistle far off in the mountains and the voices of men at the bottom of the road. All of the noises of the night filled the room with a shattering silence: the faint tinkle of a cowbell in the meadow, the hissing and sputtering of the candle, the heavy breathing of the man in front of him. A wave of panic swept over him. He considered getting up and running out into the darkness, but he was afraid even to swallow lest the noise should disturb the priest in his judgement of the crime. The strength dissolved in his legs,

and the pounding in his temples began again.

The priest removed his hand from across his eyes and turned completely around. Neil's heart jumped. It was the most startling thing he had ever experienced, as if a corpse had suddenly moved beneath its shroud. The eyes that beheld him were wonderfully sympathetic but woefully sad. Despite his pock-marked face and balding head, Monsignor Kelly looked patriarchal. He had suffered much,witnessed more, and old age somehow made venerable in him what in another might have been taken for pursiness. The haphazard existence of flight and disguise, of moving by night and hiding by day, of setting up his altar stone in farm houses and barns, of posing as a laborer, a gypsy, and a cartman had enfeebled his features but not his sanctity.

"Give me your hand, child," he said in a voice that was old but still rich in quality.

"What?....."

"Yes....that's it....your hand. You're not afraid of me, are you?"

"N-No...no, Father," stammered Neil.

"There nothing to be afraid of, my child. I

often wonder why it is that the world is so afraid of God's mercy but can forever scoff of His justice. You know, that's Ireland's trouble today. 'If thou, O Lord, shalt mark our iniquities, Lord, who shall stand it? For with Him there is mercy and merciful salvation!' Have you ever heard that before?"

"I think so, Father."

"In the school, from the nuns?"

"Yes, Father."

"That's fine. The nuns will be back soon and we'll have the school open again, and everything will be l ike it used to be. Why is your hand shaking so? Would you like to sit down, are you tired of kneeling?"

"No, Father..."

"How old are you, child?"

"Ten years old, Father..."

"That's very young. I think that God must love the very young a great deal. The very old, like myself, he can only feel sorry for. Pity. He was never old Himself. Timeless. No beginning. No end. Before

Abraham was, I am. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Do you know what that means?"

"I - -I don't think so, Father. I used to know, but I can't think of it now."

"It doesn't matter. When you're young, nothing much matters unless you allow it to. My child, there is one thing you must understand or at least believe; the forgiveness of the Everlasting is boundless. There is no end to it. No way to measure it. No vessel to hold it. No book to explain it. Men can never get that through their heads because it is a mystery and one of such proportions as to tax the intellects of the world's greatest thinkers. God's justice will judge us, but only His mercy will save us. There is nothing else that can do it. No power on earth or in heaven. When men set limits to the mercy of the Almighty, when they say 'He can never forgive me for this or that: I'm lost surely', then it is that they lose everything at one thrust. Who can say where His mercy will end, when it cannot even be said where it began? They sin worse than they ever dreamed they could when they doubt that they can be forgiven. Look at Judas. An Apostle, a beloved friend of Christ. He denied Him and then was

sorry. He even tried to return the money to his conspirators. He thought that they, mere men, would forgive him, but he denied the same mercy to God who is all forgiving and all merciful. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, Father. I understand."

"And you're not making the same mistake now are you?"

"No, Father..."

The sweet and gentle voice of the old man spread through him like a balm, bringing soothing salvation and forgiveness. He felt the weight of his sin disintegrate, and in its place came the buoyant dulcitude of sanctifying grace.

"Is there anything else, my child?"

"No, Father."

"Are you sure...? It doesn't have to concern offenses, you know. God is willing to listen to any of our troubles; that's what He's there for. 'Come to me all ye that are burdened, and I will refresh you.'

'I will refresh you!' The words floated

through his brain like an invigorating breeze on a torpid day. Here was the opportunity he had never dared to hope for. He drew his hand from the priest's light grip and brushed it across his forehead.

"Father?....."

"Yes, child...."

"There is one thing I wanted to talk to someone about; I mean to God about..."

"And what is that?"

He hesitated for a moment, swallowing quickly.

"It's...it's my mother...."

"Your mother? Is she ill?"

"No, Father. She's quite well. What I'm meaning to say is, she wants me to be a priest someday..."

The old man looked at him with a vague smile twinkling in his tired eyes.

"And you don't want to be one, is that it?" he asked.

"Not exactly, Father," Neil replied, "I don't know whether I want to be one or not. I seldom think of it. I try not to..."

"Why is that? What are you afraid of?"

"Nothing, Father. It's just that I'M not sure whether He wants me or not. I pray very hard at night and I listen for His answer, but it never comes..."

"I see." nodded the Monsignor.

"Mother says she just knows that I was meant for the altar. Even the nurse said so when I was born. Everyone says so, but I don't know myself. Sometimes, when the church was open, I used to go in and kneel before the statues - - mostly the crucifix - - - for a long time to see if God would give me some sign that He wants me. But nothing ever happened..."

The old priest took off his stole and kissed it. He seemed disinterested in the boy's recital, as if he had heard it countless times before.

"I see." he snapped. "You want God to work a miracle for you, is that it?"

"No, Father. I never meant that...what I

meant was some way of knowing for sure..."

"How old did you say you were?"

"Ten."

The priest put his thumbs up to his nostrils and rested his head on his enjoined fingers. He sighed softly.

"Ten years old..." he repeated, "you're a little young yet to be thinking about it."

"Yes, Father."

There was a pause while the Monsignor sucked his lips and collec ted his thoughts. The brish bark of a dog cut through the night. Neil looked at the figure huddled in the chair before him. In the yellowish light of the candle the old priest's skin shone like tarnished ivory, and the wrinkled features seemed almost carved. Neil thought of the neglected wood-cut of St. Joseph gathering dust in the basement of the parish church where it had been stored to make room for the new statuary. The wide arc of hair at the back of the Monsignor's head resembled the saint's tonsure. Soon he too would have to make way for a newer generation.

"This matter of looking for signs," the old man resumed slowly, "comes very close to the type of temptation that Satan tried on Jesus. Do you remember them up on the pinnacle of the temple? That's your attitude. 'If you want me for a priest, send down a few choirs of angels and let me know about it!' Isn't that what you're really up to? Jesus told us when to look for signs. Last Sunday's Gospel in fact. 'There shall be signs in the sun and in the moon and in the stars: and upon earth the distress of nations, by reason of the confusion of the roaring of the sea and of the waves, men withering away for fear, and expectation of what shall come upon the whole world. For the powers of heaven shall be moved, and then they shall see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with great power and majesty. But when these things begin to come to pass, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is at hand!' There's a sign for you. Is it something like that you are looking for? A great tumult in the heavens with all the different gallaxies shooting in and out?"

"No, Father." protested Neil.

"Of course not. You'd be foolish to expect anything like that. God doesn't work his miracles

every day in the week for us. If he did, where would the gift of faith be? 'Blessed are they who believe but do not see.' Go on doing what you've been doing, and don't worry about your vocation. If you have one, you'll know it when the time comes. Have no fear of that, there'll be no mistaking it..."

"But how will I know?"

"There will be a sign..."

"A sign?" Neil interrupted, "But I thought you said..."

"So I did," concluded the Monsignor, "but it's not the kind of a sign you have in mind. There'll be no fireworks or pop-eyed statues or anything like that. It will be quite different. It will come to you in the loneliness of your praying hours, when only you and God seem to exist in the world. It will be a sign on your heart, and there will be no mistaking it..."

"A sign on my heart!"

"Yes."

"But--but how will I know that the sign has come, and that it's not something else?"

"You will know," said the priest emphatically, his voice gathering momentum with each word,"because you will pray, and you will pray hard. It will be unlike anything you have ever experienced. It will be the voice of

God speaking into your inmost heart. Remember, boy, that God chooses you. You don't choose Him. 'Many are called but few are chosen', the bible tells us. When you hear the call, you will know that you are being summoned, and you must be ready. Perhaps, like the rich young man in the scriptures, you will by then be unwilling to give up all the pleasures of the world, give all you have to the poor, and follow Him. Only time will solve that. For the present all you can do is love God with all your strength and pray for His divine grace. Give up all your worries and fears and leave here in peace, knowing that God is always watching over you. When your sign comes, wherever you are or wherever I am, come and see me, and we both shall know about it. And above all, come and see me if you are in doubt. Doubt is a terrible thing, especially in the priesthood. I've heard great doctors of the Church say it's worse than a murderer's guilt. There is nothing more desolate and more tragic than an ordained priest living in the knowledge that he never had a vocation. Remember that always. Be true to your conscience. Have the courage to face your call wherever it may lead. Now say your Act of Contrition and I'll give you absolution."

The vigor of the priest's last warning burned deep into Neil's soul and brought a flood of tears into his eyes.

"Oh my God," he prayed fervently, "I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of Hell.."

His voice mingled with the low rumble of the priest's absolution and floated softly to the ceiling. Before he finished the prayer, the precious sweetness of forgiveness had died in the remoteness of his soul-- a fragile, exquisite feeling, like the shy aroma of delicate blossoms vanishing in air. In its place there breathed the damp, chilling mist of doubt, blotting out the final words of his sorrow and blowing terror into his heart. He started at the audacity of his thoughts. Here he knelt before a representative of Christ on earth, and almost at the moment when he saw the hand raised for a blessing, he felt mistrust and scrupulosity taking possession of his being. He was vaguely aware of a sundering of something integral within him. It was as if everything that supported him and held him together and gave meaning to his life was being ripped apart and replaced by something harsh and rapacious.

C H A P T E R F I V E

And there came one poor widow, and she put in two mites, which make a quadrans. And he called his disciples together, and said to them, "Amen I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who have been putting money into the treasury. For they all have put in out of their abundance; but she out of her want has put in all that she had ----- all that she had to live on."

Mark XII, 42-44

CHAPTER V

BUT SHE OUT OF HER WANT HAS PUT IN ALL SHE HAD

In the years that followed, Neil availed himself of the Monsignor's proffered consultation twice. The third time, he returned from his studies at Holymount to find that the old man had been in his grave for nearly three months.

The first opportunity came when he was recalled from the seminary by a message informing him of the death of his mother. He had been there less than a year, and the suddenness of her parting was a blow that he was to remember all his life. The one person, who more than anyone or anything else represented the future for him, his goal and her dream, was gone, and without her he felt adrift in a world of bobbing confusion.

Doctor Brady, the local practitioner, could offer no satisfactory explanation in science for the

rapid deterioration of her system. Prior to her short, final illness her health had been Spartanly robust in the best tradition of the Irish peasantry. She was a woman who had never known a day's sickness in her life; who had worked for forty years in the fields along side the men, sharing with them the back breaking labor of squeezing a meager livelihood from the barren countryside, and in all this time she had never missed daily Mass and Communion, walking the four miles to the church in all kinds of weather. But, in the space of a few months after Neil's departure for Holymount, she had seemingly lost all inspiration to live, and withdrew to her deathbed as if by her own voltition. She gave up completely her many friends and parish associates. She forbade any visitors to the house, and spoke to her husband only when some detail of the household administration required it. For long hours at a time she sat in the rocking chair in her bedroom staring out the window with tear filled eyes. Until just before the very end she refused to see priest or doctor, and threatened to kill herself if either was called.

The mystery that science could not penetrate, philosophy could; the piercing philosophy of Neil's father, who had known her from childhood, and under-

stood her in a way that her son never could. He alone had witnessed the decay of the spirit and knew its cause. He knew the anguish and the loneliness of this courageous woman's love for her only child; of a woman who was unwilling to sacrifice her son to God in a vocation that she had fostered, but loved him too much to keep him from the goal that she considered the highest pinnacle of human achievement. Reconciliation to the Master's will was not in her power; the maternal was too strong in her, the pangs of childbirth too lingering. She found it impossible to utter "Let it be done unto me according to Thy word", when it was the one fruit of her life that was being asked for. Prayer came hard in the last withering hours, and then it did not come at all. Her last pronouncement, spewed up in a pool of blood, was a malediction hurled at heaven for exacting a ransom so costly from her. Her mind could not appease her heart, and Mr. McMahon alone knew it was her heart that had cracked, and not her mind.

"She loved you very much, Neil", his father said on the way back from the funeral, "I don't imagine you'll ever know just how much. From the time you were born, she thought of nothing else but you. I'm sure she never uttered a prayer for herself in the past

fifteen years that didn't in one way or other concern.

The carriage was passing along the Quay, and Neil watched the easy spin of a sea gull in the vast blueness of the sky.

"I know that now." he said quietly.

"You didn't know it before?" his father asked.

"I don't think I ever loved her the way a son should..." he said, surprised at the coldness with which he uttered it.

"I think she knew that all along," Mr. McMahon said, "but I don't suppose it made any difference. Hers was the kind of love that didn't need any exchange."

"I was always sort of selfish..."

They sat for a moment in silence letting the drab warehouses slip by into the late morning shadows. From the narrow cobblestone streets that emptied into the strandway came the noisy laughter of children and the rattle of iron wheeled produce carts filing into the city from the nearby farms. A policeman on the corner doffed his helmet ceremoniously at the empty hearse, and blessed himself with his free left hand.

"Are you going back to Holymount?" his father asked suddenly.

"I don't know." said Neil. started by the question. "I haven't really thought much about it. Do you think she would have wanted me to go back?"

"That's for yourself to answer." Mr. McMahan said briefly.

"But you knew her so much better than I did? You told me about why she died. Can't you help me in this?"

Mr. McMahon took out his handkerchief and wiped his eyes. He avoided Neil's gaze.

"Your mother wanted you to be a priest. As far as I know, you always wanted to be one yourself. It was never my idea."

"You disapproved of it?"

"I didn't say that, but as a matter of fact I did. To tell you the truth, your mother and I had many arguments on the subject. Not really arguments, she was never much for that. I guess I did all the talking, but then, she didn't have to say much to get her point across.

She knew when to look at me with those lonely eyes of hers and get said what she wanted to say. I could never bring myself to deny her anything she ever wanted. The closest I came to hurting her in my life was when the Monsignor came to the house and talked to us about your going away..."

"You opposed it? You didn't want me to go?" Neil asked in amazement. He had never seen his father in a mood like this before. Their relations had always been keynoted by gaiety and laughter.

"Not exactly," his father said sadly, "I couldn't quite bring myself to that. I wanted to put it off until you were older. I told the Monsignor that, but he didn't agree with me. If it was any other priest, I wouldn't have given a damn what he agreed with and didn't agree with."

"You foresaw what was going to happen then?"

"No. I didn't." he said with a shake of his head. "I didn't think it would be as bad as it was. If I did, I never would have allowed it, but that's not right either. She wanted it this way, and that's the way it had to be."

Neil looked off towards the river where a

fertilizer barge was wallowingly wearily up the current. The reflection of the sun on its low bow caught the dingy brass of its nameplate and bathed it for a few moments in a soft golden hue. "The Myrtle B." He thought of the thin cluster of myrtleberry shrubs behind his mother's open grave, and he remembered the pungent odor of freshly turned earth. He had not wept during the whole burial ceremony, even when they slid the coffin slowly into the ground on straps and heaped a shovelful of dirt on top of it. His Uncle Mike had remarked to a cousin about what a brave young man his nephew was to accept the inevitable so calmly, and he had accepted the compliment proudly. No one, not even his father, knew how hard he had struggled with himself to manufacture some semblance of sorrow in his heart, to produce just one convincing spasm of tears for the benefit of the relatives who came to the wake.

The carriage drew up in front of Shea's Public House, and several of the loungers gathered in front of it offered their condolences to Mr. McMahon. He thanked them with a polite touch at the brim of his silk hat.

"Your mother," he said, turning to Neil, "never objected to me having a pint when she was alive, so I don't expect she'll mind it now. I know it's not the

respectful thing to do on the very day of the funeral, but I must have something to stick me insides back together. Are you coming in with me, or will you wait out here? I'll not be a moment."

"I'll go in with you." offered Neil following behind him.

They entered the brownish gloom of the pub and sat at a long wooden table in the rear. His father ordered two porters by raising his middle and index finger aloft in the direction of the bar, and when the man brought them, he drank them in quick succession.

"Do you want anything? Some treacle-water?" he asked.

"No"

"Well then, I think I'll have two more. It's a hot day and the clothing is clinging to me like seaweed."

Mr. Boofey came up and elaborately praised the memory of the dead woman. She had been a steady customer at his poultry shop, and he always lingered long on the loss of a good patron.

"She was one in a million," he intoned, " A God-fearing woman if there ever was one. Many's the

morning I watched her pass by me door on the way to early Mass. Always a friendly greeting on her lips and a kind word for everyone. But that's the way life goes. Here today and gone tomorrow. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. I lost my sister here a year ago, and I know how it is to give up your loved ones."

"It's a pity all right," agreed Mr. McMahon, wiping the foam from his mustache with the back of his hand. "I'll be lost without her."

"And I suppose the lad is beside himself with grief? It's a sad thing for a boy to lose his mother. Thanks be to God, mine's still alive. She'll be eighty four next May. I write to her every Christmas. I believe that you should remember your dear ones while there's life in them, the ways you'll not be after forgetting them when they're dead."

Neil shifted his weight awkwardly on the wooden bench. He was weary of the subject of death and the endless cliches that it evoked, and he wished that his father would find some way to terminate the boredom of Mr. Boofey's remarks.

"How's the young fellow making out at the seminary in Holyhurst?" the poultryman inquired.

"Holymount..." Neil corrected him abruptly.

"Oh, yes. Holymount it is to be sure. I always get them two mixed up."

"He's doing very well," his father said. "The third highest marks in his form the last time."

"That's fine, wonderful!" Brian Boofey commented. "His mother would have been very proud of him. She always stopped by at the shop and reported the lad's progress to me. Well, at least she'll have someone to say her Masses for her and remember her over the years, which is more than a lot of dead mothers can have."

"You're right there, surely," sighed Mr. McMahon, "I only hope he doesn't end up like some of them, forgetting their parents and them what raised them, and the simple folk they sprung from. I've seen lots of them with their aristocratic ways and their fancy vestments, and it's a sad thing, let me tell you, a tragic thing. There's no luck whatever for a man when he gives up those what made him what he is."

Neil felt the remark burn through him. He heard the sob die in his father's throat, and he looked at the long rows of floor boards, blotched and stained with the

dried residue of a decade of drinking. The sunlight spreading out dimly under the back door washed his feet in a dusky glow. The memory of his mother's face appeared suddenly in his mind, smiling gently at him, indulgently, the way she always did when she catered to his childish disobedience.

It was Sunday morning and they were getting ready for church. The rain had been falling since last night in a steady drizzle, leaving the swept dirt floor of the kitchen damp and cold. His father was stooping before the fireplace arranging the faggots into a neat pile and cursing them glibly when they failed to fall into place. He never went to church, except on Christmas and Easter, and then, it was an opportunity to renew old friendships and discuss the past that was so much a part of him.

"Are you ready yet, Neil?"his mother called. "Have you your cassock? I starched your surplice for you. It's on the chair in the bedroom..."

"In a minute, Mother," he said, "I'm looking for the shoe brush."

"I'll get it for you, dear," she offered, "you left it out in the shed yesterday."

"Let him get it himself," his father muttered, "He's not a cripple. He doesn't have to be waited on hand and foot."

They started off down the road together, the two of them, and she was holding his arm tightly. In and out between the muddy puddles they weaved, feeling the keen November wind blowing across the hills and through their thin clothing.

"Neil," his mother said nervously, "I'm very happy that you're serving this morning. It makes me very proud of you. I know that you didn't want to be an altar boy, but you'll never regret it. It puts you very close to God. That's something that no girl or woman can do, no matter how pious or saintly; it's a privilege reserved only for young men, and you ought to be deeply grateful for the opportunity."

"I am, mother." he said unconvincingly.

"I know you are, Neil," she smiled vaguely,"and I know you are doing it for me."

He thought of Terry and the mysterious hold that his friend had upon him. If Terry had not suggested it, with the greatest enthusiasm and delight, he never would

have taken the instructions in Latin and sat through the long afternoons of rehersals and practices. He saw again the long empty nave of the church where the altar boys sat in the first two rows for instructions, and he saw Father Kearse acting out the ritual high up on the altar, and Terry's wild, dancing eyes following his every motion in an ecstasy of fascination and desire. He remembered how delicious were these moments, how precious and luxuriant, because they brought him closer, in some kind of secret, intimate tryst, to his dearest friend.

When the priest finished reading the Gospel, he took off his maniple, placed it on the altar near the tabernacle, and ascended into the pulpit. Neil genuflected quickly and took a seat at the side of the sanctuary in one of the high wooden thrones reserved for deacons and sub-deacons at a High Mass. The odor of incense and freshly cut flowers made the altar seem dank and heavy. He looked out across the maze of the congregation where a lazy sea of flowered hats and colored shawls and glittering bald heads undulated easily in the yellowish light of the gas lamps. He saw his mother seated erect far back in the church, her face radiant with pride, her hands enjoined tenderly in a gesture of profound gratitude. He saw clearly, too, for the first time,

how thin were the ties that bound them together. It was impossible to fill the niche that she had carved out for him in her dreams, and he had no fierce longing to do it. She looked up and saw him staring at her. Her face was transfigured in passionate exultation, her lips parted in a tremulous smile of maternal devotion. He scowled viciously at her, and felt not the slightest remorse at his cruelty. An irresistible surge of self-satisfaction rose up in his breast, reassuring his brutality and appeasing his weakly protesting conscience. He folded his arms casually and looked away towards the altar.

"Be a good fellow, Barney, and bring us another, will you?" he heard his father say.

Mr. Boofey had long since gone back to his shop, and they were alone in the little stall at the back of the pub. His father had been drinking steadily, and his eyes were heavy and glassy. He looked like he had not slept in a long time.

"We'll be bouncing along in a minute now," he explained guiltily, "one or two more, and that'll be it. Mary--your mother, that is--always insisted that I stop by for a few on a hot day. She said it had a medicinal effect on me gall bladder..."

His words trailed off into silence and he considered for a moment the memories that the mention of her name evoked. When he looked up again, there were tears in his eyes and his lip was quivering.

"Oh, I can't blame you, Neil," he said with a sigh, "she was always a soft one for that clerical gibberish."

He hit the glass violently with his hand and sent it smashing to the floor. His eyes were hard with rage and contempt.

"And what did it ever get her?" the words choked out from deep inside him. "I'll tell you what it got her: a lonely grave on a treeless hill, and a lot of foolishness muttered in a foreign language! That's all she'll ever get from it. Well, if it made her happy, and that's what she wanted, who am I to begrudge it?"

The pub keeper came over with a mop and began sweeping up the jagged pieces of glass.

"I'm sorry for that, Barney," Mr. McMahon said pushing back his chair in a gesture of exhaustion, "it was an accident. I must have been throwing me hands back

and forth in some grand oratory."

"That's all right, Mac," the man consoled him, "we break a couple of dozen a week just trying to determine which ones will bounce and which won't. This must be one of the ones that won't."

"It's that for sure." his father agreed.

"I'll bring you another one right away, Mac, the way you won't be parched altogether."

"Do that like a good fellow..."

It was late in the afternoon when they marched through the swinging doors of O'Shea's Public House into the waning sunlight. Long evening shadows were already folding themselves across the dingy rows of shop windows on the opposite side of the street, and the newsboys were on the corners singing out the miseries of the world in harsh resounding chants. They boarded a cab at the stand in front of the Merchants Bank and settled back against the worn opulence of the upholstery in understanding silence. The driver slapped the reins briskly across the flanks of the horse, moving the carriage off towards the strandway. In the distance along the banks of the slow sliding canal the

laborers and stevedores trudged sullenly homeward, like huge armies of sluggish ants, and far back in the hills, where the river stretched off in a silver cord, the setting sun caught for one magical moment the sheen of the water's faintly glittering surface and transformed it into a sparkling jewel, which died reluctantly like the day in grey drabness. The rhythmic patter of the horse's hoofs on the dirt road blended with the bass call of the river boats and the low moan of the wind blowing in from the sea.

Neil closed his eyes and let the monotonous melody of the countryside ease the ache in his heart. He could hear his father's heavy breathing beside him and smell the acrid odor of stout. They passed over the wooden bridge that spanned the canal and began the long climb up the mountain road. As the carriage lurched forward past the scattered outskirts of Cross Glen, he had the feeling of leaving something behind forever, of drawing away from something that had bound him inexorably to the past in fetters of kinship and childhood.

On the following day Neil went to see Monsignor Kelly. The old man heard his story sitting on a hill behind his evacuated rectory, with his two

hunting dogs squatting before him, and his rifle resting on his lap.

"Surely, she's up there in heaven, now." he commented with a sympathetic nod of his bald head. "I never knew a woman so genuinely faithful in her church duties, and so devoted to the Mother of God. In all the years I was at St Paul's, as curate and pastor, she never missed the novena but once, and that was the night you were born. I know, because I looked out and there were close to a hundred people there at times, and, would you believe it, I could tell exactly who was missing and who was there. The night she missed the church looked empty, positively empty! People think we don't notice things like that, but that's our stock in trade, as it were, and we make a point of watching such things. There's a way of knowing, and don't you forget it when you're ordained. Your mother, Neil, was one of those people who would be missed. She's up there in heaven now, if anyone is."

Neil could not bring himself to share this viewpoint. The memory of his father's words were still ringing in his mind, like the unwelcome remembrance of a regretted unkindness done long ago but still stalking

his consciousness relentlessly. He recalled the tears dropping softly on the wooden table in the pub and the hard cynical look in those tired eyes. His father had not spoken with a mourner's sorrow but rather with an executioner's dread, as if there was somewhere in the background of his wife's death an accusation to be made, a vengeance to be reaped, a crime forgiven.

"But what about her death?" he asked. "And her dying words, what do you make of them? Didn't she curse God in those final moments and cry out blasphemies to heaven? Isn't that a sure sign of despair?"

The Monsignor turned savagely on him.

"What about them?" he roared. "A lot of old wives' tales and town pump gossip. Haven't you ever listened to anyone in a fever and a delirium? Well I have! And, when you've sat by as many sick beds as I have over the years, you'll know better than to be coming out with such consummate stupidity! I remember one little altar boy I had, no bigger than your thumb he was, and he asked me to stay in the room while the doctor took his tonsils out. Now this is no lie, but from the moment he went under that ether right up until the time he come out of it, he cursed me the

length and breadth of Ireland. It was something, let me tell you. He called me everything under the sun, and threw in a few new ones just for the novelty of it. A lad I never knew to utter a blasphemy before or since. He's a missionary someplace in India now and I know he'd be purple with the fright if he ever knew that I was telling you this. Now, come to your senses, Neil. What's the matter with you anyway. Is there no reason in you at all? Can't you feel in your own mind the terrible suffering and heat in the final stages of her sickness.

"My father said there was no fever. He was in the room then."

"I didn't know your father was a doctor..."

Neil ignored the sarcasm.

"He said that all night long she argued with herself, and...and with God..."

"A martyr's death!" exclaimed the Monsignor. "Look at Job! What did he do? Did he take it lying down and mum? He did not! He cried out to the skies in desperation and anguish. And on more than one occasion, too."

"But this one occasion was her last. There was no other." Neil said sadly.

"And what?"

"And she died cursing the God whom she spent all her life loving."

The Monsignor took out his clay pipe and pounded it against the heel of his boot. He wrapped his thumb around the bowl rightly, like a child gripping a wedge of chocolate, and from the copious folds of his worn frock coat he extracted a little white sack. With his forefinger he carefully packed the tobacco down, being extremely careful not to lose any stray grains of the precious commodity.

"My boy," he began patiently while in the act of applying a match to the blackened circle of the bowl, "I would say first of all that you are very young, but I wouldn't quite express me feelings. So, let us by all means be frank. You are callow! Callow in every sense of the word. I can see now the reason why Holy Mother the Church waits until young men have reached some semblance of maturity before she ordains them. It saves a lot of nonsense. You

had better learn right now, before you begin hearing confessions and dabbling in other people's lives, a few of the rudiments of theology. In the first place, your job as a priest will mostly consist of listening... listening to the troubles and scraps and complaints of the poor beggars whom you will call your parishoners. This is presuming of course that you do eventually have a parish. Your job then is to listen and maybe help a little with a word of advise here and there. Nothing startling or world shaking, mind you, just the routine advice that has been found unassailable these past nineteen hundred years. And when you have done with that, yours is the power to forgive. Nothing else. There's nothing in the office of the priesthood that entitles you to judge people. That's God's department. Do you understand that? I am very thankful at this present moment that it is Almighty God who is judging your mother's soul, and not you. And you ought to be thankful too!"

Neil had not heard a word the Monsignor said. His mind was wandering back over the events of that tragic deathbed scene which his father had recreated in the funeral coach.

"She didn't receive the last sacraments, did

she?" he inquired dreamily.

The Monsignor stirred uneasily. He stretched out his legs and exhaled a thick cloud of blue smoke.

"No....she didn't...."

"They sent for you?"

"Yes," he said testily, "your father came to the rectory. I was in bed when he rang."

"And you came?"

"You know I did; I don't see what you're asking for..."

Neil smiled at him meaningfully.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to be rude."

"When I got there it was too late," the old priest explained, "she was already off into her delirium. She didn't want to see anyone. She was talking a lot of foolishness the way sick people do."

"It was a priest she didn't want to see!" Neil cried defiantly, "Isn't that it? She didn't want to see you because you were a priest!"

The Monsignor scratched his bald head vigorously.

"You can put it that way if you want to," he said wearly, "but I don't for the life of me see what you gain by it...."

"Don't see what I gain by it!" exploded Neil jumping to his feet. "Why I have everything to gain by it, and everything to lose! That's my sign! The sign on my heart that you told me about once. Don't you remember? You said that God would give me a sign and that would tell me whether He wanted me for His priesthood. It couldn't be any clearer!"

"Is it that clear to you?" asked the priest petulantly.

"Yes. I think it is."

"Oh you think it is! Are you sure? Are you surer than sure?"

"Yes," said Neil, his confidence wavering, "Yes, I think so..."

Monsignor Kelly peered up at him through closely drawn lids. There was a slow fire smouldering in his eyes, and a fierceness in the grim curve of his lips.

"And what makes you think so?" he asked with dissolving calm, as if he were struggling hard to keep control of himself. "How do you know that you are not just reading all this into it? Thousands of boys have lost their mothers before ordination. You aren't the first one. How do you know what real effect your mother's death had on you? It may have had less effect than your going away had on her..."

"There, you see," said Neil bitterly, "even you admit that my going away had an effect on her!"

"Admit! Admit!" raged the old man, "I never denied it! There's the sacrifice! That's what makes her a martyr. Don't you think I saw it too? For heavens sake, you don't live through fifty years of parish life with your eyes closed. I knew she was pining away. I knew it before she knew herself. And you can be sure that I knew it just as well as I know what you're up to! I can see you trying to rationalize something that is above all human reasoning, and something that, mark my words, you will regret later. Of course she suffered! Only God in his infinite knowledge knows how much she suffered, and He's going to take all that into account. Do you think He's going to overlook a lifetime of virtue and piety spent in His service and judge her on the few

irresponsible remarks of her dying hour? Have you ever thought of that, Neil, or are you forever thinking of yourself? Come to your senses, boy! She died for you! Face it like a man. She didn't refuse the burden. She didn't surrender to the temptation and call you home the way another might have. No! She never let on about the sorrow and the loneliness that was eating at her heart like a maggot. She didn't interfere with God's will. She left you there at Holymount because she thought that was the way the Lord wanted it."

"She left me there because she loved me." Neil said coldly.

"And why not! Why shouldn't she love you? Are you making that into a crime too? Has the world and the new generation come to such a state that mothers are no longer permitted to love their children anymore, without the ingrates commenting on the barbarity of it? Mary, the Mother of God, loved her only son in a way no woman ever did or ever will, and, if I'm not mistaken, she died of a broken heart, too. Don't we pray to her under the title of Mary of the Seven Dolors? And aren't there statues in the churches throughout the world showing her heart pierced by seven swords? This may well be your sign Neil, that's for you to decide. I can't help you there.

I can only exhort you to be sure, to be doubly sure, that you are reading it correctly. It could well, for all you know, be a sign from Satan! Go back to Holymount, son, and pray. Pray hard. Harder than you have before in your entire life. Meditate on your mother's death. It will do you a world of good. See then if you think that Almighty God in His Mercy would allow a lifetime of service and devotion to be obliterated in the crying out of a few meaningless words. Someday, Neil, and I hope that day will soon come, you will learn to love God the way your mother did...to love Him until it sends a pain stabbing right through to your heart. Few people are worthy enough to experience that kind of love. Your mother was one of them. I was her confessor in her lifetime. I will not presume to be her judge now. That is in more capable hands."

C H A P T E R S I X

But Jesus answered and said, "O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you and put up with you? Bring thy son here to me." And as he was yet coming near, the devil cast him down and threw him into convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and healed the boy, and restored him to his father. And all were astounded at the majesty of God.

Luke IX, 41-44

CHAPTER VI.

O UNBELIEVING AND PERVERSE GENERATION

In the September after his his mother's death the lingering loneliness and misery that Neil had experienced in his first year at Holymount was remedied somewhat by the arrival of Terry Leardon. Prior to that eventful day, the barren, rugged nature of the climate and the landscape, and the traditionally cold reception accorded seminarians from the western counties had prevented him from locating himself, from finding as it were the necessary ground in which to plant his frail vocation. But all that was changed now.

Almost from the very moment Terry alighted from the train, suitcase in hand, missal tucked under his arm, and his merry eyes dancing, he was the favorite of the seminary. The effect of the high pitched, lyrical quality of his brogue was intoxicating to

professors and students alke, although the same regional traits, when evidenced in Neil, had brought nothing but scorn and derision.

Terry took Holymount as his own, as something that had never really existed before his arrival, and something that would undoubtedly vanish entirely with his departure. Rarely was human conquest more complete. He seemed to electrify the whole community into a frenzy of activity with his presence. Shy, reticent, never one to seek out friends or thrive on any kind of social life, Terry seemed to transform the atmosphere of the century old seminary and its traditions by nothing less than the quiet magnetism of his enchanting smile. In less than two weeks there was a Gregorian choir practicing the Christmas Mass in three part harmo ny in the refectory, a perversion of the rubrics that the faculty, particularly the Old Dutch organist who had studied plain chant at Solemn, had hitherto frowned upon. Within a month he was seen taking long walks with the rector into the neighboring countryside, and, in the words of Brother Sacristan, a competent observer who had watched two decades of seminarians come and go, he had "Made the old man attempt a smile for the first time since his ordination!"

When the Apostolic Delegate came to London in 1891 to sing a Pontifical High Mass in the Westminster Cathedral, Terry Leardon was selected as the official delegate of the seminary and he made the journey in the company of three bishops and a score of monsignori. In house duties he drew an appointment as outside porter, a lucrative and much sought after assignment, and one usually reserved for sub-deacons because it entailed periodic trips to the nearby markets and fish piers for provisions. This invariably meant a good dinner in a local inn at diocesan expense, and perhaps, if no priest came along, and opportunity to see a travelling concert in one of the local music halls. In January, when the quarterly reports were handed out, the rumor spread rapidly through the halls that he was destined for a transfer to the Irish College in Rome; a singular honor achieved only by brilliant scholarship and unimpeachable virtue, and one that held the highest promise of hierarchical rise after ordination.

In addition to these early triumphs which he carried modestly, Terry quickly became a leader in almost all inter-mural activities with the exception of sports. His build was too frail to stand the rigorous bodily contact of football and soccer, although

he was always a wild enthusiast at all the matches and a most popular spectator. He caught the attention of the prefect of discipline with the long hours he spent in the chapel, far beyond the minimum time specified in the regulations for candidates for minor orders. The prefect often found him in deep meditation before the little grotto of Our Lady to whom he had a special devotion. On one of her feast days he read off at the noon meal an ode he had composed in her honor, and it had a singular effect on the rector. He was observed weeping profusely during the recitation.

"Did you see the old man at lunch?" Frank Growney asked Neil during recreation hour. Growney was from Tipperary and he spoke with a deep nasal twang. He had the rector had become acquainted early in the year by reason of a difference of opinion on how to properly pronounce the Hail Mary in Latin.

"Yes," said Neil, "he took it pretty hard..."

"And you don't know the half of it," Growney informed him, "the very latest is that the old billy goat is going to have it framed and hung in the main corridor so that future generations of Holy Mountaineers might witness Sligo's contribution to the art

of mystical poesy. It'll hang next to the picture of old weasel face himself in a strategic position half way between the lavatory and the refectory so's there'll be no excuse for not reading it."

"Go way with you!" Neil scoffed.

"Cross my liver and hope to get caught sneaking down to town!" returned the other. "I got it straight from Jerry Flaherty himself. He copied the letter ordering the parchment and the gilt frame. Oh, you've no idea of the change that's come over the man since that friend of yours go here. I hope he writes off a poem three times a day and reads them at each meal if it makes that one any more tolerable to live with."

In Terry, Neil found the one person he had yearned to confide in, the only companion of his boyhood, and his ideal in life. His presence stimulated Neil's enthusiasm for two subjects which previously he had found dull and difficult: logic and ethics. Every evening after supper they met in the common room to discuss hypothetical problems in philosophy and Theology while their less serious comrades took advantage of the billiard table and the little library of religious

magazines provided, in accordance with the house rules, for the amusement of the students. The bell for evening prayer usually found them in the middle of an excited disputation on the relative validity of an impersonal God. The Jesuit authors, much to the consternation of Neil and the delight of Terry, had marked preference for Duns Scotus at the expense of Thomas of Aquinas. Neil could never fully bring himself to accept their tenuous distinction, and publically questioned it to such an extent as to make himself the classroom foil and sole apologist of heretical thought. The philosophy professor, an impatient, domineering old German priest who had done his philosophy at Bonn and his theology at Wurtzburg found it hard to control his anger in these situations. "You ought to thank God, McMahon," he used to shout when provoked, "that you aren't at the Jesuit seminary. They'd make short work of you I dare say. Perhaps you might make a Franciscan or a Capucian, and do well with the alms collectors, but when it comes to solid thinking! Ach! Never! Never!

The highway accident occurred at the beginning of the summer holidays on a winding strip of road about eleven miles outside of Holyhead in Wales. As far as could be gathered, there were only two witnesses:

a garrulous, stringy-haired wife of a public house keeper who heard the crash in her upstairs room and aroused the neighborhood, and an imbecilic nine year old boy who was sitting on the porch in front of the post office when the carriage came hurtling around the bend and turned over. His testimony was later rejected because it was full of contradictions and because he was under the care of a local doctor who objected to putting the child through the long ordeal of a police examination. The details were hazy and incomplete, but enough of the story drifted across St George's Channel to Sligo to form a sketchy foundation for the nine or ten different episodes that quickly spread throughout the county. There was enough evidence at any rate to create a minor scandal, the whole impact of which was centered on the Welsh girl who had shared the tragic fate.

All versions of the incident had a few bare facts in common, and these constituted the vaguest skeleton of what had taken place. The real difference came in the implications drawn from the narrative, for here it was that emotional bias and personal feelings colored the events in accordance with the emphasis and intensity placed on the facts by the teller of the tale.

The simplest outline of the accident would show that a Holymount seminarian name Terry Leardon and an unknown girl, later identified by her parents at the morgue as Patsy Graham, a barmaid in the town of Stonyhurst, had died instantly when their rented carriage had overturned at a high rate of speed. For a brief period there was even some question as to whether the vehicle had been rented or stolen, but the man at the livery stable in Swansea withdrew his charge when it became known that he had adequate insurance to cover the loss. There was too some suggestion of liquor being involved but this was assailed by almost everyone as being the grossest slander and something that had materialized in the demented chatter of the village idiot. The police found no evidence of intoxicants of any kind, and the autopsy corroborated their reports. A crushed box of Cadbury chocolates, a woman's umbrella, and a large Roman Missal were the only articles turned over to the constable by the pub-keeper's wife, who also vigorously denied the presence of any alcoholics .

"What do you think I'm doing," she demanded querulously, "holding out on you?"

"No, M'am, just a routine question." said the

inspector.

"Well I didn't see any and I didn't smell any, and if I did I would have told you. I make a point of co-operating with the authorities. When you're in a business like mine, you have to...."

"Yes, I'm sure you do, and we're very grateful. Now, when you heard the crash, you came right down. Is that right?"

"Yes, I told you that already."

"You didn't hear the horse racing down the road, or see it happen?"

The woman laughed hoarsely.

"Fifty or sixty carriages go by here every day," she explained. "I don't pay any attention to them. When I looked out the window the thing was already on its side and the wheel was spinning around."

"I see," said the inspector patiently, "and when you got downstairs they were both dead..."

"No. Maybe the girl was but the boy was still writhing around a little..."

"He was? Why didn't you say that before?"

" For the simple reason that no one asked me!"

"Did he say anthing! Could he talk?"

"He was muttering something, but I don't remember what it was..."

"Please," the inspector pleaded, "this may be important. Try to remember what it was."

"Oh, it was all garbled and confused and I couldn't make anything of it, and then he passed out..."

"Can't you remember one word, one sentence?"

"Well, he said something about a poem hanging in an alley somewhere in a golden frame. It didn't make much sense to me..."

"Did you go through his clothes?"

"I did not!" she cried.

"Well, domebody must have. Neither of them had any money or identification or checks of any kind on them, and they were both pretty far from home. They must have had something to eat with..."

"Well, don't look at me," the woman said venemously, "the idiot got there before I did. Why don't you go ask him? Maybe he knows more than he's letting on."

Because of his great friendship with Terry, Neil was selected to accompany the remains back to Ireland, and since he ventured no opinion on the tragedy he immediately incurred the wrath of the townspeople who assembled at the station to form the grim procession up the mountain. In many ways the sorrow was heavier and more personal in Neil than in the Leardon family. They had the advantage of knowing almost nothing and could select and reject the details that suited them. The people of Cross Glen, led by Paddy Ferris who had inside information from a cousin in Cardiff, all agreed that Terry was the victim of pernicious circumstances. They maintained that he had died somehow for virtue, and that he was probably making some dramatic attempt at converting the wayward girl. The fact that she was a Catholic already and had nothing wayward in her background beyond her occupation as a barmaid did not in the least detract from this popular estimate of the situation. Neil knew otherwise.

With the ascendancy of Parnell to the leadership of the Irish bloc in Parliament the activities of the priest hunters had diminished to a few scattered atrocities, and the churches were opened again. Monsignor Kelly was able to sing a Solemn Requiem High Mass over Terry Leardon's polished white casket in old St Paul's where the boy had spent so much of his short lifetime. The number of black edged Mass cards that flooded the vestibule of the re-opened rectory, and the many baskets of flowers and plants up on the high altar, and the way the middle and side aisles were jammed with handkerchief twisting women and glassy eyed men attested to the fact that a soul of no minor magnitude was on its way to God. For many months after the funeral there was bitter feeling in some of the parish societies against the Monsignor because he had elected not to say a eulogy. There was even some talk of his removal on the grounds of senility, and a little committee under the chairmanship of Brian Boofey was making plans to send a delegation to the Primate's residence in Armagh. But, like everything else, the wounded pride of the parish gradually healed and the committee bogged down in parliamentary discussions of such matters as who would bear the expense of the trip and who would be selected to represent the opinions.

The old monsignor had lived too long to have any illusions about loyalty and gratitude on the part of his parishoners. He knew them too well and he knew human nature too well to expect anything else from them, and he refused to take the little mutiny seriously.

He was, however, genuinely disturbed by another report that concerned a more vital matter and one closer to his heart. About a week after the funeral his housekeeper had gone on a holiday to her sister's cottage in Lenderra, one of the little resort towns on the shore of Lough Swilley. While there she thought she had seen young Neil McMahon wandering around the wharves and quays with an old seaman's cap on his head and a Gladstone bag in his hand. She thought at the time that she might be mistaken, because he was some distance off, but when she came back to Cross Glen she made some inquiries in the marketplace. She learned that Neil McMahon had indeed been there, and that he was seeking a berth as an apprentice seaman on one of the fishing boats. One of the women told her that she knew for a fact he had no intention of returning to Holymount because he had already sent for his clothes and his books, and was going to ship out at the first opportunity.

The Monsignor waited impatiently for several days, hoping that Neil would call on him, and, when it became painfully obvious that nothing of the sort would materialize without some initiative on his part, he buried his wounded pride and sent for the young man. He was determined to prevent Neil's withdrawal from the seminary, or at least to ascertain the reasons for it.

"So, you've decided to give it up, have you?" he began after they had seated themselves in his leathery study.

"Yes, I'm not going back in the Autumn."

The Monsignor took a wooden box from the top drawer of his desk and extended it towards Neil.

"Here," he offered, "have one of these. They're from America. My niece sends them every Christmas. Or maybe you don't have any use for these yet?"

"No thanks," Neil said slowly, " an occasional cigarette, but nothing stronger."

The Monsignor selected a stubby brown cigar from the box and examined it carefully, turning it around and around between his fingers, trying to detect

any imperfections in its wrapping. After a long pause, during which he elaborately licked and lighted the cigar, he resumed again.

"I take it then that you have reported your intentions to the Rector?"

"No. Not yet. I thought it was a bit too close to...well a bit too sudden you might say..."

" A bit too close to Terry's death, do you mean?" the old man asked with a shrewd twinkle in his faded eyes.

"Well...yes. I suppose that's it..."

They sat in silence for a long time watching the slate grey of evening settle over the mountains and hearing the uneasy spattering of the fire. The housekeeper came in and set the tea things on the little maple table in the corner. When she departed noiselessly, the Monsignor ground out his cigar in an ash tray and looked up at Neil.

"I suppose you have some definite reasons for leaving, have you?" he asked pointedly.

"Yes, I have. There are several reasons."

Neil said, but he ventured no further explanation.

The Monsignor took out his gold watch and wound it very painstakingly. He looked over towards the corner of the room, gesturing with his hand towards the tea things. Neil got up and set a cup down for each of them. The old priest drank his with long sighs of satisfaction. Ordinarily he would have poured it into his saucer and smacked at it contentedly, but he did not think that such etiquette was proper in the presence of a Holymount seminarian, or what remained of a Holymount seminarian.

"Am I to take it then that your mind is made up ." he asked innocently.

"You can take it any way you like." Neil said with more feeling than he intended.

The priest shook his head sadly.

"Oh, so that's the attitude, is it?"

"No, Monsignor," said Neil regretting his audacity. "I didn't mean it the way it sounded. It's just that I'm fed up with everything. I don't want to talk about it anymore..."

"All right, boy, if that's the way you feel about it, it's perfectly agreeable to me. I had no intention of criticizing your decision..."

"I'm sure you didn't.."

"If your sign has come, then it's come, and it's your place to follow, like I always said..."

"What?" cried Neil in alarm.

The Monsignor rubbed the plume of his biretta gently with the back of his hand. He planned his strategy carefully.

"I said your sign, it's come then?"

"My sign?"

"Yes," he explained generously, "your sign from God. You remember we discussed this a year or two ago? I told you that God would give you a sign on your heart and that would tell you certainly whether he had chosen you or not..."

Neil put his cup down on the desk and gazed into the fireplace where a few wet logs were hissing and smoking. He felt a sudden queasiness in the pit of his stomach, ad if he was about to be violently sick.

"Yes, my sign! It has come!" he said dazedly. "It couldn't be any clearer than it is right now at this very minute. I didn't think it would come in quite this way, but, then, you never know. They usedto tell us out there in Holymount that the ways of the Lord are many and varied."

"They are indeed," the monsignor commented dryly, "and so too are the ways of Satan..."

Neil hadn't heard him. He was still deep in his thoughts. Everything seemed to be unfolding before him in one rare moment of revelation, as if he was seeing the whole span of his life, its past, present, and future, in the proper perspective for the first time.

"Do you know, Monsignor, when I was away there at the seminary I had a chance to do a lot of thinking. We slept in dormitories the first year, and I used to lie awake for hours at a time, after everyone else had fallen asleep, and I did nothing else but just stare at the ceiling and wonder about whether God was calling me or not. I could hear the other students snoring and breathing around me, and I used to marvel at the calm with which they were walking into their life's work. I'm sure that some of them

never gave a single real thought to what it all meant to them and the tremendous obligations they would be undertaking. This always disturbed me. It made me feel that I was different somehow. It made me feel lonely and insecure, as if I did not belong among them. You see, the idea of becoming a priest had been drummed into me right from childhood, and I could never take it lightly. I began to resent the other students and their carefree attitude towards the future. And then, Terry came, and he changed all that, or at least he seemed to in my mind. With him to talk to and go on walks with, I gradually began to worry less and less about my vocation. It was as if he was leading me by the hand into the priesthood, and it was no longer necessary for me to make the decison myself. I found that all the old worries and recriminations were passing away, and that as long as Terry was by my side there wasn't the slighest chance that I could be doing the wrong thing. All my doubts dissolved into insignificance with his coming."

"You were merely homesick and lonely, and Terry filled the void for you..." said the priest.

"Maybe so," continued Neil, "but I think it

was deeper than that. Terry and I talked about the future. Often. We didn't try to avoid it or minimize it. He once told me that he knew for certain that he was being called to the priesthood because he had felt the hand of God on his heart when he was a small boy. I don't think I ever met anyone quite like him. He was so simple, so fundamental....so genuinely devoted to whatever he was doing. And now that he's gone, a lot of what I thought was my vocation for the priesthood has gone with him. You probably think I'm disillusioned, but I'm not. It's just that I see things a whole lot more clearly now. I wasn't following in God's footsteps, I was following Terry, and I think I would have followed him anywhere, because I loved him. He was the most wonderful person I ever met..."

"Well," said the Monsignor with an indifferent shrug of his shoulders, "you knew him a whole lot better than any of us, and I suspect you have reasons for your strong feelings."

"Yes. We were friends from the beginning..."

The Monsignor looked up at him suspiciously.

"And at the end?"

"Yes," said Neil looking at the floor, "at the end too. There was no change then."

Another long silence set in while Neil contemplated his dead friend and the Monsignor thought of Brian Boofey's little committee gathered outside his poultry shop. They listened to the slow drizzle of rain that was beginning to fall in the valley.

"Neil," the Monsignor began again eventually, "I don't know what you've heard and what you haven't heard about me concerning Terry's death, and I don't much care really, except that I want you to know I always liked the boy a great deal. He was one of my favorite altar boys, and Father Kearse, when he was here, always spoke very highly of him. I hope you don't think I'm prying, but you do know a great deal more than you've let on about how he died, don't you? I'm not interested in it so much from his viewpoint as from yours. I think it has a great bearing on what we've been talking about. You wouldn't care to talk about it would you?"

"There's really not much to tell..."

"Well, this girl for instance, what was her name? Paddy Graham?"

"Patsy," Neil corrected.

"Yes. Patsy Graham. Who was she? How does she fit into the picture?"

Neil swallowed hard. He felt the sweat tingling on his scalp.

"I don't suppose he'd mind if I told you. You're the first one." he said. "I didn't tell his sisters or his mother and father. I don't think they would have understood, and it was better for them not to know. You see, they always had him on a pedestal and that's why they never knew him like I did..."

"And this girl?" Monsignor Kelly persisted.

"He met her in town one day. Her father was a sea captain, and she had made the trip with him from Wales..."

"In town!"

"Yes, in town." Neil explained quietly. "Terry had the job of outside porter and he was allowed to go down for the food and things. I think he only saw her once or twice, but he never forgot her. That's why he went to Wales this summer. It was all very innocent. He loved her and that's all there was to it. He was going to marry her in the autumn. He told me so himself.

He loved her a great deal, perhaps too much. That's why I hated her. I had never seen her, but I hated her."

The old priest put his hands across his eyes. He seemed very tired and confused.

"Why are you telling me these things? About yourself, I mean. Do you think that I will understand them?"

"No," said Neil almost to himself, "I don't think you will. I don't think I understand them myself."

"It's dangerous to love anyone that much, Neil. Especially a boy."

Neil sat upright. The remark had startled him.

"But he was so good!" he said, "so genuinely good, everybody loved him. They were shocked at the seminary when the news broke. I know. I was still there because I had an examination to make up. I saw Father Rector's face when they told him. He was sitting alone in the common room. Almost all of the students had left for their holidays. And then someone came in and told him. He looked as though his whole world had fallen apart. Terry was a great favorite of his. And the other priests felt very bad about it too. They acted as if one of the

angels had fallen! They kept asking each other how it could have happened and made all sorts of trite remarks on how evil were the ways of the world. What they all failed to see is that Terry had done nothing wrong. He had simply met a girl and fallen in love with her. It happens every day...not in Holymount, perhaps, but it's impossible. I don't see how Terry could have helped falling in love with her. He loved everyone and he loved them too hard. It was love that made him keep living and it was love that killed him. He wasn't running away from anything...he was running right towards it!"

"There was some mention of liquor..."

"Terry didn't drink at all, and I doubt if the girl did. She may have been a barmaid and all that, but she was only seventeen, and she came from a religious family..."

"And if I remember correctly," Monsignor Kelly said deliberately, "there was also a mention in one of the stories I heard that the carriage might have been stolen. What do you think of that?"

"Malicious calumny on the part of the livery stable owner!"

"The livery stable man?" the monsignor pursued

the thought, "where's his motive?"

"Motive!" said Neil with a cynical laugh, "I've given up looking for motives in the world. I don't need them anymore. There is evil everywhere you look and that's enough motive for me. I never really knew what perversity was until I came back to Cross Glen when Terry died, but I know it now, and I'll never try to explain it."

"I see. So it has suddenly dawned upon you that St Paul's Parish is no idyllic pastoral garden. Well, that's a slim sign of progress anyhow." the priest commented acidly.

Their talk was punctuated by another long period of contemplation while they both reconstructed the events of Terry's death and funeral as they had witnessed them from their different vantage points. The priest lit up another cigar and settled back comfortably in his armchair with his feet up on the hassock.

"I suppose," he said, blowing out a thick cloud of smoke, "that you did the right thing in keeping all this to yourself. Let them talk and talk. It can't hurt him or help him."

"No. And it never could before either..."

"Here they wanted me to bury him as a saint... with a regular funeral oration and special blessings and all that, the way we do for a dead priest. And there, at Holymount, I suppose they were ready to hang him as an apostate."

"Feeling is still pretty high against the girl in both places..."

"Yes, I know," said the priest, "I heard you say that you hated her..."

Neil stiffened.

"I didn't mean that personally. What I meant was they still blame her more than they do him."

"Well, that's the modern reaction, isn't it? There can be no sacrifice without a victim. No crime without an influence or a hereditary environment. Free will doesn't enter into it anymore. People have reduced themselves to a mass of floating cells being drawn this way and that by all sorts of mysterious impulses for which they are no longer responsible. I dare say it's more convenient all around to place the blaim on the girl, but I wonder what the people in Wales think about it? I suppose they too have a picture of a poor innocent seminarian

being led astray by a coquettish barmaid."

"That was really his tragedy." Neil said wistfully. "They never accepted him for what he was; only for what they wanted him to be. He was neither saint nor sinner. He was the incarnation of love!"

"The incarnation of love!" mimed the old priest. "And is paganism one of the courses at Holymount now?"

Neil avoided his gaze.

"I meant the expression metaphorically." he said.

"There's probably a grain of truth in it somewhere, but I shouldn't want to be the one to decide just where."

"Nor would I." said Neil.

"Might I ask what all this has to do with your decision to withdraw? I understand almost everything that you told me, and it explains a lot of things, but I still don't see the connection. There is one, isn't there?"

"Yes. There is a connection. A very obvious one...or at least it seems obvious to me. I think it would be hard for me to explain it in any greater detail than I already have..."

"It isn't remorse, is it?" the old priest demanded.

"Hardly...it's too late for that..."

"And it isn't despair?"

"No." he said pensively, "I don't think it's that either. Not anymore. There might have once been despair, but I've gotten beyond that. You see, I came home with him. He was in the baggage van, and I used to go back there when the train stopped and sit with him. It gave me a chance to think things over. It was easier with him there."

"I see," said the monsignor, "it's unworthiness then..."

"Unworthiness? Yes, I suppose you could call it that. It comes closer than anything else..."

"'What a noble mind is here o'er thrown,' is that it?"

"I didn't know you read Shakespeare..."

The priest laughed vaguely.

"I read a lot of things in between the marriage records and the parish debt. The rural Irish priesthood

has not reached the degree of ignorance they probably attributed to it at Holymount..."

"I didn't mean it that way." Neil protested.

"I'm sure you didn't..."

"They had a great respect for Terry's scholarship at the seminary..."

"And yours?" the priest asked.

"There were no complaints."

"So, they respected everything about Terry there, didn't they?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"People don't change much. You'll learn that. The nuns made a great fuss over him here. I had to speak to them about it. It wasn't good for the discipline. You know what I mean. You told me yourself that you felt unworthy..."

"Unworthy, yes," said Neil, "but never envious."

"So much the worse for you then..."

"How so?"

"Your reaction, " the Monsignor explained, "is, essentially, how can you go on to the priesthood when someone as fine and lofty and pious as Terry Leardon was not permitted to go on? When someone with his qualifications was not called? Isn't that it? Admit it!"

"It's something like that..."

"Pride!"

"What?" asked Neil in amazement.

"Pride! Pride! you heard what I said. What else can it be? You are determined to be a God, to judge everyone...including yourself...so now you must suffer like a god, and crucify yourself on the cross of your own conceit!"

His voice had risen and a flash of anger came into his tired eyes.

"We wouldn't have much of a priesthood," he rasped, "if we had to measure all our priests by the yardstick of the candidates who dropped out? Surely you are not the only one. He must have stood out among all the rest..."

"Yes, he stood out in everything."

"So now the seminary should close its doors! Terry Leardon is dead! There is no further need for priests, so let's close up the whole farce and be done with it! Well, boy, let me tell you something. Even if he had lived they would never have ordained him. It's not allowed. There was insanity in the family."

"What? What did you say?" cried Neil.

The Monsignor lowered his voice.

"I said there was insanity in the family. His brother is a half-wit..."

"His brother?"

"Didn't you know he had a brother? They slept in the same room. Terry was more or less his guard; when he was around there was no trouble. As soon as Terry left for the seminary they had to have the poor fellow taken away..."

The information shattered into Neil's consciousness like a comet exploding in space. That explained so many things: why the Leardons had to keep moving from place to place; why Terry never went to Mass with his sisters; and his stubborness in never inviting Neil to the house.

"I still don't think you're being quite fair to him;" he said when he recovered from the blow, "whether they would have ordained him or not makes no difference."

"Fair! Fair!" cried the old priest, "How can I be fair when you are determined to measure mankind by Terry Leardons? Don't you know that it's not the perfection we carry through life that will save us, but the perfection we strive after. Salvation isn't something passive. It's a striving for and a reaching out after virtue that will save us, not the amount we already possess. Terry Leardon was a wonderful child, a very wonderful child, almost perfect, too perfect. Perhaps Christ didn't want him for His priesthood. He might not have made a good one. Virtue may have come too easy for him; he may have destroyed the incentive in his parishoners. He might have destroyed all hope in them. Have you ever looked at it that way? Have you ever tried to think of Terry from His Maker's point of view? All right, so God didn't call him. How should that effect you? You're an individual, aren't you? You have your life to lead. Only you yourself can know whether God is calling you or not, but don't, for His sake and your own, try to set the criteria for Him to

follow in his selections. Don't restrict Him to the few Terry Leardons the world may produce and He many create. Go back to Holymount or stay on here...It's no concern of mine. But whatever you do, for your own good, please try to find a more sensible explanation than that which you gave me today. I spend a lifetime in the classroom teaching little children that happiness is found in finding God's Will and serving it. And I spend a lifetime in the confessional listening to people tell me what messes they have made of the job. 'God made me to know Him, to love Him, to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in the next'. They all learn that before they're out of the fourth grade. But somewhere along the line, they begin adding a few more, like rewriting the Ten Commandments to suit their own egos and judging the rest of mankind. So you think you aren't worthy enough to be called? Well, maybe you aren't, and maybe Terry wasn't either. But, if I were you, I'd spend more time making myself worthy enough to follow, and less time worrying about who should and who shouldn't be called. That's God's job, and you can't do it for Him."

C H A P T E R S E V E N

Jesus said to them, "Did you ever read in the Scriptures 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the corner stone; by the Lord this has been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes'? Therefore I say to you, that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and will be given to a people yielding its fruits. And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but upon whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.

Matthew XXI, 42-44

CHAPTER VII.

THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED

Since the arrival of Patrick at Saul in 432 A.D., the Irish religion has been, on the surface, monotheistic, predominatly Catholic, sparsely Protestant, but invariably Christian. In spite of this, however, the Irish people have never been able to escape completely from the influence of two thousand years of Celtic myths. Druids, banshees, elves, and fairies still stalk the earth on dark nights. Publicly, the Irishman can laugh and joke about his superstitions, inject a few "praise Gods" into his references to them, and generalize on the whole matter as something peculiar to his national humor. But in the privacy of his own musings, when alone on somber country roads and empty brooding streets, then it is the black cats and full moons and baying hounds take on a terrible reality to him.

Somewhere in the fables of his grandparents or in the hearthside conversation of his childhood, Neil had learned that trouble always comes in threes, never singly or by twos. In later years when he looked back over what he came to call the tragedy of his vocation, he realized that it was essentially a trilogy, a trilogy composed of the deaths of his three closest friends. The death of his mother was sudden, harrowing, ironic; Terry's was swift and violent, a ruthless snatching at immaturity; but his father's was tortuous, patient, long-suffering, a slow, painful reduction into futility.

The final years of Neil's education were difficult and expensive; another human ransom had to be made for the great sacrifice. Mr. McMahon had long since fallen away from the church. He detested the priesthood. He had never forgotten the attitude of the clergy towards the Fenian Brotherhood, and he was an ardent patriot. He had crossed the Atlantic to serve with a Pennsylvania regiment in the Civil War in America when the Irish-American Brotherhood had sent out a call for volunteers; and he had taken part in the unsuccessful attack on Canada in June of 1866. His proudest possession was a piece of the flag that flew over Fort Erie on the day they captured it, and Colonel John O'Neill himself had given it to him.

When he returned to Ireland he became active in the Land League and all other societies dedicated to the freedom of the country from British rule. After his marriage, he outgrew his restlessness and his wanderlust, for he loved his wife dearly, but he never relinquished his fierce nationalistic longings. At first her piety disgusted him, then he grew to tolerate it and eventually admire it. Their life together was easy-going and happy since she was a benevolent wife, and he an understanding husband. She never critized his laxity in religious matters; he seldom openly expressed his contempt for the Church. Before her death he had a reputation in the village as a musician and an entertainer. No fies or bazaar was complete without the lively purr of his fiddle and the gaiety and charm of his wit. Everyone in Cross Glen knew Mac McMahon, and everyone loved him, especially the pub-keepers whom he supported handsomely. When Mary died, his laugh died with her. After that he was seldom seen beyond the boundaries of his farm where he worked himself to exhaustion from dawn till dark.

When the bishops rejected Parnell as being unfit to lead the Irish Nationalist Party, Mr McMahon's resentment towards the church reached its bitterest point, but even then, he continued to financially support his

son's vocation to the priesthood. He did it because he believed that his wife would have wanted it that way. In the process of appeasing this love, he came to despise his son, who had become in his mind the personification of all his troubles. As the years wore on, his detest for the boy had reached a point where he could no longer tolerate having him at home during the summer holidays, and he arranged for him to go off on long and expensive trips to the continent. He spent money freely on him, buying him the best clothes and supplies, and seeing to it that he had everything he needed for his comfort at the seminary. His son's vocation he regarded as a flagrant hypocracy, but he reveled in it because he thought that in some sinister way he was both being reunited with his wife and taking revenge on the enemies who had taken her from him.

Doctor Brady warned him constantly about working too hard and taking a much needed rest, but he ignored the advice and increased his schedule of hours in the fields. He worked feverishly, mechanically, passionately to save enough money for the purchase of a magnificent chalice for Neil's ordination, a dazzling, golden ornament decorated with rubies and diamonds and hand wrought by Swiss craftsmen. He had planned on hiring a coach-

and-six and dressing like a duke for the ordination in Armagh, but he never achieved that goal. When he died, Neil McMahon was a sub-deacon, one year away from Holy Orders, and his father had spared him the embarrassment of that scene.

Although Monsignor Kelly was no longer available for advice, Neil had no difficulty in interpreting his sign when it came. Too much was spent already; the immolation had indeed been costly. His decision was now a matter of loyalty: to Terry, to his mother, to himself. The old world of Sligo crumbled and vanished completely, as if the hand of the Almighty had obligingly removed all sentimental obstacles from his path; the new world of the priesthood lay before him, perhaps not as glamourous and adventurous as Terry had imagined it, but there just the same, and he had no ties to bind him.

On a warm May morning in the year 1897, the Archbishop of Armagh stepped down from the high altar of the pro-cathedral, placed his hands on the shoulders of each of the amiced young men before him, and, while the choir refrained the joyous content of the liturgy in triumphant exuberance, he pronounced each one of them priests of God forever with the powers to absolve and retain the sins of mankind. As a result of this nineteen

hundred year old rubric, Father Cornelius J. McMahon went forth to cope with the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Father McMahon was ordained almost seven years when he decided to make application for missionary work in the Orient. In this time he had served as curate and administrator in a half dozen impoverished parishes throughout southern Ireland. This unusually high number of transfers of a young priest attested to his inability to satisfy any of the pastors he had worked under. His first assignment, a routine appointment as third curate in the thriving fishing town of Glengariff on Bantry Bay, had ended in disaster when he refused absolution to one Michael Dunaffee, a long time contributor to the parish and a high official in the Irish Nationalist Party. The pastor was outraged by what he called "McMahon's intollerable conceit and callosity" and demanded that the bishop remove the impertinent "jackdaw" before the whole parish "drifted off into the next county to avoid going to confession to the pup." From there, in quick succession, he was sent to Buttevant, Macroom, Dunmanway, and Lismore, staying a little less than a year in each place, and incurring the wrath of each pastor. They found him uncooperative, lazy, given to long periods of melancholy

and depression, and in general conspicuously incompetent in his duties. He refused outright to help in any fund raising campaigns of any kind and even had the audacity to echo his feelings on the subject from the pulpit. He was a poor and incoherent speaker, possessed little or no tact when it came to handling difficult marriage cases; and there was never any kind of a line at all outside his confession box because of the reputation he had acquired through the penances he prescribed for the faithful. On more than one occasion he had actually insulted important parishioners of good standing, calling them hyporcrites and pharisees, and threatened to publicly denounce them for what they were. When it came to operating any of the parish societies, he reached the zenith of his failure. The intricacies of parliamentary practice escaped him completely, and his only resort in petty disputes about new officers and standing committees was his violent temper which shocked the women members of his groups and enraged the men. A story made the rounds of the diocese to the effect that he had actually walked into a public house, grabbed a wayward husband by the scruff of the neck and ejected him physically from the premises. A fine display of priestly courage and one that would have drawn the highest praise from the bishop were it not for the fact that the victim in this case

happened to be the Chancellor's nephew.

But for all his unpopularity and his incompetence, there were no complaints leveled at his piety; he was a model priest on that score. Every priest he came in contact with had a keen admiration for his meditative habits and a respect for the painstaking manner in which he performed all his religious duties. They often commented to each other over their dinner tables that "young McMahon may be no ball of fire, but he has it down here, and that's where it counts." The "down here" was indicated by a solemn tap on the breast and a reverent nod of the head.

The idea of going to China came to Father McMahon one afternoon while he sat in his room in Our Lady Queen of Peace's rectory in Ballybunnion, a seaport town at the mouth of the River Shannon. It was a sluggish April morning and he lay on his bed letting the routine noises of the suburban parish mingle with the splatter of rain on the windowsill: the sing-song chant of the alphabet, high pitched and cachphonous from eager voices in the parochial school; the clatter of dishes and sporadic jabber of the housekeepers in the pantry; the harsh unmusical chatter of the blue jay building a nest in the bramble bushes by the shrine.

In fragments and dissonance his past came back, faded and blurred, like the sun-stained azaleas on the wallpaper before him. He closed his eyes and let his thoughts drift back to another April afternoon nearly fifteen years ago; but, memory, his fond and sad reminder of expired dreams and hopes, could not breathe back into his thoughts the warmth and innocence and simplicity that life had sucked out over the years. There was Terry, and there was the Leardon farm, and there he was standing by the old pump house; but it was not the same. Experience with the sins of men, poured through the sifting screen of the confessional, and the unavoidable knowledge that disillusions and destroys had left him a leperous beggar in the streets of yesterday, yet it could do little to alter his vision of Terry. The blue eyes were still sparkling, and in his voice there was the old magic and mystery. China and the East loomed up like immense citadels on a great expanse of desert. Father McMahon sighed wearily and thought of the plans they had made and the imaginary life they had carved out for themselves.

A door slammed loudly downstairs and he heard the quick skip of footsteps on the wooden staircase. A soft rap resounded on his door.

"Who is it?" he called.

"The Pope himself..." a voice answered.

"Come in then, your Eminence, or should I say your immenseness."

Father Jerry Flaherty waddles into the room. He was a jolly figure of a priest, like something out of Chaucer, all pink and round, and he gave the impression of being a man who enjoyed life tremendously because he did not take it too seriously. Actually, beneath his fascade of constant good humor and hard laughter, he had a sturdiness and an unbending will that made him a respected man in the town. He was a tireless worker for the poor and a bulwark in the parish against crime and corruption. Single handedly and without the approval of the local police he had cleaned out two houses of prostitution and exposed graft in the previous administration. Neil knew him from their days together in Holymount, and they understood each other very well.

"Well, how goes everything with the up and coming Primate?" Jerry asked.

"Fine," said Neil, "I've just hit on a plan this morning which I believe will end all my troubles

with Toomey..."

Father Toomey was the pastor and their relations were a great deal less than cordial. Father Toomey secretly disliked Jerry Flaherty because of his popularity with the men of Queen of Peace, but he feared him too and made a point of catering to him. He made no such reservations in his dealings with Father McMahon, whose appointment to Our Lady's he regarded as some sort of revenge on the part of the bishop who may have been dissatisfied with the last annual collection. Whatever he would like to have said to Father Flaherty he always said to Father McMahon, and he was glad to have someone to blame any and all the parish troubles on. While he vehemently abhorred the Sligo priest, he found him a convenient scapegoat, and one who seemed used to accepting critism without any retaliation.

"What are you going to do, get one of them I.R.A. bombs and place it under his chair?" Father Flaherty asked.

"Not quite," said Neil, " I thought I would ask for a transfer..."

"A transfer! You haven't one chance in a million. Old Toomey might curse the ground you walk on

but he'd never let you go. He's never been known to give anything away, especially a curate!"

"Well, maybe no..."

"No maybes about it," insisted Father Flaherty, "he's holding onto you just to show the rest of them up. If I may say so, and there's no offense meant, he's holding onto you because he regards it as some sort of an endurance contest with the bishop. He thinks they sent him a bad apple and he's determined to make a success out of you if it kills both of you. His kind of a success, naturally!"

"Yes," said Neil, "I rather suspected that. I know he doesn't like me..."

"That's putting it very mildly. Toomey isn't a bad egg really. You could have worse for a boss, but I don't think that anyone can come up to his ideal of what a good curate should be. The ideal, of course, would be another Toomey!"

"There was a notice in the diocesan paper a few weeks ago saying they were looking for priests in China. I thought I might apply. He can't stop that. The bishop's very keen on it..."

"China!" exploded Father Flaherty, "and just when did this pipe dream hit you?"

"It's no pipe dream. My mind is made up." Neil said flatly.

"But why? Why? What's the sense of it? Going all the way out there among a lot of foreigners and starving yourself to death. You're doing all right here. The people who really get to know you think a great deal of you. I know several..."

"One or two?" Neil asked with a laugh.

"Aw, come out it, McMahon! Whatever put this crazy notion into your head?"

Neil looked towards the window again. He spoke without looking at the other priest.

"It was about a week ago," he said "I was sitting upstairs in my room and the bell rang. It was my day on duty so I put on my collar and went down to the office. There was a young girl sitting there and she had a marriage problem. You know, Protestant boy-friend, parents objecting, the sort of thing... As she spoke I could hear the sob come into her voice and her heavy breathing. To her it was a great problem,

a tragedy. Everything in the world depended on what I told her. She seemed to think that I had all the answers; all she had to do was present herself at the rectory, let the priest say a few magic words, and then everything would be cleared up, just like that. The more she talked, the more I began to realize how uninterested I was in her problem and in anybody's problem. I actually had the feeling that I didn't care one single bit whether she married the man or lived with him out of wedlock or decided to strangle her mother. I realized for the first time that I had no sympathy whatsoever for anyone's problems. I just didn't care..."

"Sure we all get like that after a while," Father Flaherty said, "there's many a time I feel like giving them all a swift boot in the behind..."

"No, it was more than that," said Neil, "I began thinking the same things in the confessional. People came in and told me their sins and expected so much, while I sat there knowing that I had lost somewhere and somehow all inclination to help them. It was as if it had suddenly dawned upon me that I had no right to be sitting there, that I was occupying a place that belonged to someone who really could help them...."

"And you think China is the solution?"

"I don't know. At least it'll give me a fresh start and give me a chance to think things over on the way out there. Maybe there'll be more of a genuine need for someone like me..."

Father Flaherty narrowed his eyes and looked at him searchingly.

"And if there isn't, what then?"

"I don't know," said Neil quietly, "I don't really know. I've thought a lot about it, and I have to give it the chance."

By custom--a custom which has the virility of a rule in many provinces--missionaries, other than natives, are not permitted to remain in an assignment for more than three years. To strengthen discipline and increase humility, college presidents often become parish priests when their term is completed, and curates in out of the way villages frequently find themselves directors of large hospitals or orphanages. The Director of the Eastern Division of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith found this custom convenient and comforting when dealing with the moody Celt, Cornelius J.McMahon. At times, upon the advice of

subordinates, he even reduced the tenure to less than that prescribed. He became painfully aware that Father McMahon was not destined to any glowing success in the mission field, and was, in truth, unfit for work among the Chinese people. To begin with, he had trouble with the basic language and could never be expected to master any of the numerous dialects. This decidedly cut down the number of provinces in which he could be used.

His first assignment, a relatively simple one, a mission chapel and school in Chin-Sun near Nanking, had ended in miserable failure. He had to be withdrawn after nine months at the request of the village elders who urgently beseeched the removal before all of Chin-Sun was lost to Christianity forever. They found the new priest impossibly anti-social, an unpardonable crime among the Chinese. He never entered the market-place, refused all invitations to tea and dinner, refused a speaking engagement at the inaugural ceremonies for the new police chief, wrongly, or at least unsuccessfully, accused one of the local merchants, a trustee and financial bulwark of the parish, of having a hand in the opium traffic.

Fortunately the director was used to complaints of this type. It was not unusual for green European

priests to offend the natives by their heavy footed methods and to lose control of their parishes by their very enthusiasm to conquer sin in one brief battle. A change to the interior where life was slower and the pace less demanding usually proved helpful in acclimatizing them to the ways of the inscrutable East. Such a course was decided upon for Father McMahon.

Reports from the more remote districts reached missionary headquarters at very irregular intervals. Sometimes six months went by without a report of anything more revealing than a requisition for candles or quinine or text books. Reports from the village of Tino-Wu were even more infrequent and less revealing, but when they came, they were always disturbing. A stray hunter coming out of the bush, an itinerant merchant, a relieved outpost officer in town for furlough, or an occasional tourist brought stories out of the mountains about the peculiar antics of a redbearded priest. It was usually a word here, a reference there, an overheard remark or an innuendo - never anything too definite, always second hand, sketchy, ambiguous. The pieces didn't actually fit together, but there was enough of them to hint that an Irish missionary in the hills somewhere was preaching sermons in a strange language,

probably Gaelic; or a white Father deep in the jungles had killed a native boy caught stealing wine from his hut; a thin tubercular looking priest, somewhere further in, was forcing his congregation to bathe in the river before entering the chapel.

Rev. Father Director was curious about these reports, but he was not disturbed. He preferred to let things go along as they were and convinced himself that his little experiment in isolation would eventually prove itself. He even allowed a year to pass without receiving a letter or a messenger from the priest, and he ignored his own unanswered letters. In fact, Tino-Wu had almost been written off in his mind as a moderately successful mission, nothing dazzling or worth writing up in any of the publications, but a solid, conservative establishment. The idea was purely speculative and very comforting. The vision of this moderately thriving enterprize grew in his mind to such an extent that he came to regard it as an actual fact. In December, when the Belgian Mission Society granted his request for more help, in the form of seven Holy Cross nuns, he decided to favor the little village school at Tino-Wu with this highly prized acquisition. It was a bad mistake. He would have done better if

he had sent them someplace else. His bubble burst completely.

Inside of three months, after a journey of more than seventeen hundred miles into the interior, the seven nuns filed back into his office, all spouting very agitated French at him. Mother Superior was particularly indignant. She fluttered her arms about like a little pigeon on a rooftop. Father McMahon had treated her and her brood very shabbily. He had utterly refused their assistance. In very bad French but in no uncertain terms he had told them that China was no place for a woman, especially a nun. He said that they would do more harm than good, and that they would ruin their lives as he had ruined his. He did not elaborate on this, but he offered to see them back to safety by assigning one of his catechists as their guide. He told them further that he wished to be left alone and he would appreciate it very much if they conveyed these feelings to the Society.

He refused to give them a trial, not even a week; would not allow them to inspect his classroom; became the next thing to insulting when one of the nuns offered to cook his meals and mend his clothes; and he practically had to be forced to allow them to spend a

few days in resting up for the return journey. During this brief stay he avoided every opportunity to review the matter.

Mother Superior had spent twenty years in Africa and seven in India, and she was not accustomed to being treated as a novice. She was outraged and she demanded that something be done immediately. Indeed, it was only the promise of immediate employment for her and her little band that restored any semblance of equanimity to the conversation in the Director's office. When sufficiently mollified she produced a few details on the priest's esistence.

As far as could be gathered in her three days of observation, Father McMahon was on intimate terms with no one in the village. He had no smoking or drinking or card playing companions, and as far as she knew, did not indulge any of these vices. While they were there he also seemed to regard shaving and pressing his clothes as a vice, for his clothing was greatly disheveled, and his personal appearance, while clean, was generally unkempt. She said he had complained of suffering from a stomach ailment, which he described as chronic indigestion. He lived soley on rice and beans and could not be persuaded to try any of the native dishes. Neither

she nor any of the other sisters felt qualified to comment on his knowledge of Chinese, although they did hear him address his altar boy in a curious combination of Latin, Chinese, and English. The content of this hyphenated conversation they were not able to translate. They knew that he had a loathing for the sanitary habits of the Chinese people because he used enormous quantities of lye and other disinfectants in the chapel and the school. Since he would not permit them to enter the classroom during school hours, their knowledge of his educational methods was confined to what could be heard and seen through the open windows. The children in the school were very few even for so small a village, and this they hinted was a result of Father McMahon's not being as generous with candy and holy pictures as was his American predecessor. The nuns could recall hearing the sing-song chant of what must have been prayers, since all the children were kneeling on the floor, in a language that was not Chinese, and very well may have been, for all they knew, English. When they asked him about it, Father McMahon merely smiled and told them it was the "language of God", and he also pointed out that it was impolite in the Orient as well as in the rest of the world to eavesdrop. From their guides they learned that the Irish missioner was a much feared man in Tino-Wu and

that he had won a great victory over the people since the shooting of the young thief. The guides offered no comment as to how well he was liked, but their very reticence proved that he wasn't. On the whole, the nuns had found him perfectly agreeable and cheerful and could find nothing to dislike in him beyond his adamant attitude towards their staying, which, for them, was enough.

Nothing more was heard from the Sligo priest and Tino-Wu for many months, and the Director was inclined to look back on the incident of the Belgian nuns as a routine disagreement between a priest of one nationality and some sisters of another. He had to admit to himself that he was never completely able to relegate Tino-Wu and its curious pastor to a minor place in his worries, but he could, in the running of a large district, at least put off any action on the matter. Since reports were seldom, he preferred to return to his old optimism and invent some sort of success for the village.

One day in the following summer an American Maryknoll priest appeared at his office with a story of needless disaster and slaughter in the mountain village of Tino-Wu. The mission itself had been looted and burned to the ground, along with every house within an area of about two miles, and nearly three hundred men,

women, and children had been murdered. Father McMahon had barely escaped with his life. The Maryknoller stressed the great personal courage and valor of the Irish priest throughout the retelling of the episode, but he could not refrain from accusing Father McMahon of incompetence and a lack of understanding of the Chinese people. He said that everything was the result of the priest's trying to apply Western standards of morality to a typically Eastern problem. By the best criteria of Western Europe Father McMahon was undoubtedly correct in all his actions, but couldn't something be done in the seminaries somewhere to teach these westerners that China was not the British Isles, and a Chinese bandit not a River Liffer rogue?

When the American arrived on the scene it was already several hours after the raid, and he was too late to be of any real assistance. He found Father McMahon lying beneath the rubble of a collasped building, bleeding from a huge gash on his forehead but otherwise unhurt. The bandits had either left him for dead or concluded that he perished in the burning church. They had carried off everything of value, stripping the chapel of statues, paintings, linen, candles, and vestments. Both the school and the priest's hut had been razed to the ground and were still smouldering when he arrived.

Father McMahon seemed to take the whole matter in his stride. He even intimated that he had been expecting the raid for several weeks but had been unable to impress the people with the value of preparedness. He told them, as he told the American, that the bandit chief had been to see him several times about some sort of a bribe which his predecessor had paid every two years. Naturally, he told the Maryknoller, he wanted no part of a scheme like that, and he had prayed that God would forgive the previous fellow for encouraging these people in their perversity. As for himself, he refused to be intimidated by any burglars.

Of course, his whole attitude was very gallant and all that, and it may even have had a salutory effect on the bandit chieftain, but, from the American's point of view, it was a stupid and unnecessary spilling of innocent blood. The Chinese had been paying off their bandits for hundreds of years and they were as used to the idea as the Americans were to the income tax; and they would probably go on paying them for the next few hundred years, despite the protests of Irish missionaries. Father McMahon's was indeed a noble gesture; but he must remember that Rome, and especially the Vatican, was not built in a day, and that he couldn't possibly

expect a curb what has been a racial tradition among the Chinese simply by objecting to it. He should have known that the easterner always regards discretion as a loftier virtue than honesty.

The American priest concluded his story by informing the Director that, when he left, Father McMahon seemed in the best of health, considering everything, and that he was getting ready to rebuild the chapel and school with whatever material he could find. When the American suggested that the bandits might possibly return and destroy the new structure, Father McMahon merely smiled and said that in such a case he should have to rebuild again, and since he was already rebuilding, it would be that much easier the next time.

In the light of these facts the Director thought it best to remove Father McMahon from Tino-Wu and replace him with a more reliable and less scrupulous member of the Society. To make the transfer seem less of a reproach he decided to send for the man and see him in person. He thought he would explain the change as an opportunity for the priest to get back to civilization and perhaps do something about his stomach ailment. He later regretted this decision, and from that time on all dealings with Father McMahon were

accomplished by post.

Their little interview fell a good deal short of his expectations. The angular, sunken-cheeked priest with the small sad eyes and the tightly drawn mouth had a way of looking at people that made them think he was looking beyond them, as if he were standing on a mountain top and focusing his eyes on some far distant object. His mind had a tendency to wander which made conversation annoying and at times impossible. He left sentences hanging in mid air, and seemed to drift off suddenly into long silent periods of meditation that left the listener embarrassed and uneasy. His voice had a far-off quality about it, gentle but full of deep melancholy.

His reaction to the transfer might have been termed Stoic and an example of true priestly obedience were it not for the fact that he seemed positively disinterested. He seemed unwilling to talk about the details of the raid and his own part in it, and he offered no comment on the success of the parish previous to that misfortune. He acted as if nothing really mattered; and more, as if nothing had ever mattered or would ever matter. As for a two-fold morality for East and West, instead of being violent and enthusiastic in his convictions, he was the opposite. He found no one to blame,

unless it was himself, and he did not seem guilt ridden in the least. He just didn't care.

The interview took place on the balcony of the Imperial Hotel in Macau, and the Director had arranged for a nice dinner with the best of everything. It was a warm day, and far out on the South China Sea the fishing boats bobbed up and down lazily. It was the kind of a day when everything seemed slow and torpid, and there was no way of hurrying the fan boys no matter how much you scolded or insulted them. The Director had started off with the best intentions of being friendly and tactful towards Father McMahon, but he found his patience was gradually ebbing away and his anger rising with the temperature.

"You say the men in the village wanted to pay the bribe?" he asked petulantly.

"Yes," said Father McMahon averting his gaze towards the line of the horizon, "they urged me to allow them to pay it out of their own pockets...not out of the church funds or the village treasury...but their own lifetime savings. Of course I told them flatly, no."

The Director tapped his fingers on the railing nervously. He wished there was some way of making the

priest talk a little more quickly.

"Didn't you think the bandits would raid? Did you think they were bluffing?"

"Oh I knew they would raid all right. I knew that the first time I saw them..."

"Did you think they would murder, too?"

"I figured there would be bloodshed. They were all armed when they came to see me..."

"But what then?" the Director said trying to keep his voice level. "Do you think it was worth it?"

Father McMahon smiled vaguely. He seemed very weary.

"I don't know, Father," he said, "I really don't know. It's very hard to say when it's souls you're dealing in. Perhaps a great many of them did lose their lives in fighting the bandits, but perhaps, in the process, some of them saved their souls..."

"Perhaps." said the Director without conviction.

"Do you know what the people told me?" the

priest continued. "They said that the priest who was there before me always paid the bribe. What do you think of that? Year after year! Of course, you can't put too much stock in what those people tell you. They might have been trying to persuade me to give in..."

The Director looked at him sharply.

"That Maryknoll priest who visited you just after the raid, he was in to see me. He said that their Order always pays the bandits. They compare it to the income tax in America. I suppose you have an income tax in Ireland?"

Father McMahon was silent for a long time. His mind was wandering again, and the Director fingered his drink nervously during the interval. He was undecided whether to cut in on the reverie or not.

"Ireland!" the priest said finally, "I haven't thought about Ireland in years. They may have an income tax, for all I know, and they may be paying to a bunch of bandits too, but at least those are legal bandits, and we are required to 'render to Caesar.' There's nothing in the scriptures about rendering to Barabas. No, I'm sorry, I don't see the connection if there is one. I think the American priest are avoiding the real issue.

How can we teach these people the ways of God when we ourselves go along with the ways of Evil?"

"Was it because of the bandits you sent the nuns back?" the Director asked, changing his line of questioning.

"No." said Father McMahon. "I didn't know there were any bandits then. I thought the country was too wild for the sisters...."

"Some of them had been in Africa and India..."

"Yes. They told me they had. But I could tell at a glance that none of them had been in China. They were getting their first real look at the Orient and I could see by their faces that it would never agree with them..."

"With them or with you?"

"Put it whatever way you like, Father Director."

"Well, McMahon, the reason why I said that is I heard from them last week, indirectly. A Franciscan stopped by on his way north and said he had seen them. They are in a very remote district, the mountains around Hailar, and they have organized a most elaborate boarding

school. He said they never wanted to leave China..."

"I'm very glad to hear it." the priest said with a sincere smile. "So you see, after all, everything has worked out for the best. I sent them away and now they are in another place and everyone is happy."

There was no element of mental dueling in his answers. Remarks that by themselves might have intimated irony or sarcasm were rendered perfectly gentle and innocent by reason of the calm, faroff quality of his voice. Indeed, the Director might have been able to regard the interview as a moderate success had he been able to penetrate that annoying wall of pathos and moddiness that seemed to surround the priest.

In the next few days he reviewed the meeting frequently in his mind, but he soon had to check himself because it always left him depressed and irritated. There were too many doubts and reproaches; questions he should have asked and answers that he might have given. He found himself thinking up arguments and counter-arguments and knowing all the while that none of them would have been adequate. By the time he had gotten over the incident, or at least ceased to dwell on it before eventually falling off to sleep, Father McMahon was

already on his way into a new career, a career that would have him tramp, for the next dozen years, the streets and alleys and docks of China's largest cities in the role of a parish priest. In this type of work, while he might not achieve any great reputation or be responsible for a tremendous mass of conversions, at least he was no longer regarded as obnoxious. And as far as the Society of the Propagation of the Faith was concerned, he had ceased to be a square peg.

C H A P T E R E I G H T

To what then shall I liken the men of this generation? And what are they like? They are like children sitting in the market place, calling to one another and saying, "We have piped to you and you have not danced; we have sung dirges, and you have not wept." For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, "He has a devil." The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, "Behold a man who is a glutton, and a wine drinker, and a friend of publicans and sinners!" And wis dom is justified by all her children.

Luke VII, 31-35

CHAPTER VIII.

WE HAVE PIPED TO YOU AND YOU HAVE NOT DANCED

Like the tide of the great China Sea, the years washed slowly in and out, spilling up on the shore of experience a bitter pebble here, a little pink conch shell of joy there, always mutable, sibilant, vacillating, but always monotonous too. Companions in the society who worked with Father McMahon from time to time and had an opportunity to test the rumors they had heard about him, agreed that while he deeply loathed everything about Chinese life, he shunned nothing. This agreement was always made without malice or praise since few were ever able to cultivate his friendship or incur his enmity. Over their teacups and in the peace of their own rectories they were able to analyze him; and it was always a most scientific and impersonal dissection. It was rather like looking through a telescope at some familiar planet about which some recent data had just been uncovered. It was a

hobby and a sport, something to while away the hours with, and it could always be counted on to liven up the dinner conversation or break the ice with a visitor. "Have you heard the latest on McMahon," they often said, "well it seems he met the Archbishop of Newark touring about and he advised him to get back on the boat if he wanted to use the toilet! McMahon would make a wonderful plumbing salesman. I think he missed his vocation there!"

They laughed and joked and retold their stories about his fastidiousness, but they all stood in awe of him. The crowded streets, the shameful poverty, the awful squalor, the sanitary habits of the people, the terrible persistence of disease and stagnation, the primitive methods of food handling and preservation, the burial procedures, and the everyday life of a large eastern city, they knew, were all odious to him; but, for all that, he was fearless, if not slightly foolhardy, in his administration of the Sacraments in contaminated districts of the slums and in the contagion wards of the government hospitals.

A little miscellany of myth and fact grew up about the peculiar Sligo priest and it was passed on from rectory to rectory up and down the coast until it reached

the stature of a legend, never quite fantastic but always interesting. He became a curio of the orient; something that seemed to fit its element, something that added mystery and a tint of fiction to letters home from out-of-the-way places.

Among the members of the Society he was looked upon as a sort of a hermit. The newcomer, fresh with the vigor and sheen of seminary training, might make a feeble attempt at penetrating his shell, but few ventured further than the attempt. The initial repulse was usually enough. If he preferred to be standoffish, that was his prerogative. In the east, where the premium was high on Anglo-Saxon companionships, it was not profitable to run the risk of trying to reform anyone other than the natives. A man was entitled to his idiosyncracies.

As the long months wore on, his fable was elaborately embroidered into the social life of the mission bands, and he won thereby a degree of fame that was completely unknown to him. In Hangchow he had acquired the habit of taking snuff to protect his nostrils from the foul stench of the hut dwellings by the river, and various stories about his interrupting ceremonies and sermons to dig into his pockets for the snuffbox became minor classics in the oral literature that had grown up about him.

The advantage that the shrew merchants were able to take of his ignorance of Chinese bargaining tactics added greatly to his reputation, as did the punitive methods he employed when he was fortunate enough to discover the dupery. This retaliation was usually administered with an umbrella which he always carried, no matter what the weather, because a Bulgarian lay-brother once told him that the plague was at it's worst in the rainy season.

As far as anyone could definitely say, he neither wrote letters nor received any; nor could anyone remember his having entertained a visitor, excepting the bishop at Confirmation time and the inspectors from the Society. He avoided all contacts with his neighboring parish priests and made it known that he would not accept any invitations of any kind unless it was a call for help in some emergency. He was reliable but not noticeably zealous in his parish duties, was neither the bane nor the delight of his superiors, and he never, when his turn came, applied for leave or transfer to his native land. It was obvious to everyone who knew him, no matter how slightly, that he was not at home in China; but it was even more obvious that he would never be at home anywhere else. Society in any and every form seemed to disgust him, even to the point of leaving unread the few

newspapers, books, and magazines that an occasional visitor from the Society graciously left for him. One pastor, who after three years of inventing dinner conversations could no longer stand the noncommittal member of his household, wrote to the Director and asked that Father McMahon be replaced as soon as possible with a more reasonable facsimile of human existence, for the corpse at his table was making serious affronts on his sanity.

And thus it was, upon this recommendation, that Father Cornelius J. McMahon, a grey-haired old man at forty-eight, was sent back to his native Ireland after fifteen fruitless years in the Oriental vineyard. The change was not necessarily a reflection on his ability, for the year was 1916, and the need for priests in Europe was very great. Large portions of the current ordination classes were already signed up for chaplain duty, and many of the older men had been some months at the front. The internal political situation in Ireland at this time demanded the services of mature men with a sympathetic understanding of their country, for rebellion was quite strongly in the air. There was talk everywhere of striking the blow while England was busy on the continent, and the Protestant-Catholic rivalry was reaching its bloody climax with the formation of the Royal Ulster Guards and

the revelation of the true mission of the Irish Republican Army.

The Dublin that Father McMahon saw again for the first time in thirty-five years was a very different Bublin from the city he had once visited with his uncle Michael in his childhood. The pace had quickened; everything seemed to move too fast for him. All life, like the great hurrying crowds disgorging themselves from the trams and buses down on the quay and scurrying and pushing their way along O'Connell Street, seemed to pass him by. His long years in China and his long years within himself had left him lonelier in the midst of this great surging confusion than he had ever been. He was unable to adjust himself to the hum-drum but necessary details of modern city parish life, and his father's keen patriotism, which had so annoyed and pained him, made him unwilling to be caught in the tide of Irish nationalism. It was as if he had already seen too much and heard too much about the Irish claims and they no longer had any validity for him. He knew the division that loyalty to the Irish cause had made in his own home, and he saw no reason for encouraging the already rampant enthusiasm.

Compared to what he had experienced in China, the petty troubles and complaints and woes of the

miserable little people who rang his rectory doorbell every evening and came snivelling into his parlor were as unreal and inconsequential to him as their vapid cliche's about slaying the British lion and carrying the shamrock into Belfast. Their irresponsible day-to-day method of existence nauseated and disgusted him as did their six-day intemperence and seventh day piety. He found that the China of the middle ages had made him out of tune with the Ireland of the Twentieth Century. He was too old and too experienced to share in the patriotic enthusiasm, and too young to forgive the cruelty and heartless impetuosity.

Whatever slight art he once might have had for conversation, he now had lost completely. He saw that it was impossible for him to act natural among his parishioners; living in the old world had made him unfit for the new. Any conversations that he was not able to avoid with his parishioners took on a static quality, a series of long questions on their part and curt answers on his. He often found himself mumbling a few prayers asking that his interlocutor might soon leave the rectory and bring the whole sham to an end. Everything was artificial and posed. He remembered now why he had left Ireland in the first place. The people had an exaggerated idea of the power

and influence of a priest, and a wholly fantastic opinion of his ability to cure any situation simply by raising his voice.

The church he was assigned to was already deep in debt, and the bishop had hopes that a man of his vast experience might be able to do something. It was his first real appointment as pastor although he had charge of a few small chapels in China. The financial status of the parish was indeed deplorable, but Father McMahon was a firm believer in considering the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. To mention any kind of a contribution from the altar was against his personal ethics. He recognized the importance of keeping the plant in operation, and he thought that in time the people would come to realize their responsibility. But his own personality in the confessional and in his dealings in the office was already beginning to work against him. Gradually people began dropping away and going up to the next parish, and this did not promise any immediate relief for the debt troubles.

After much inner struggle and a good deal of procrastination, he decided to attempt a fund raising bazaar, and it was the last one he ever attempted. On the night it was to be run off, the mawkishness and beggary of the

whole thing suddenly broke forth in his consciousness, and he made known his contempt to the little committee who had helped in the preperations. A regular scene took place, painfully embarrassing for everyone concerned, during which the priest berated himself and them as money changers in the temple and unworthy to call themselves Catholics. He apologized for having suggested the bazaar in the first place and asked everyone, committee and patrons alike, to please go home and pray for guidance. Then he began to weep and one of the ushers led him away to the rectory. Someone stood up and explained that the old man was sick and had contracted some sort of a fever in the Orient or Africa or somewhere and that he didn't mean what he said and that everything would go ahead as planned. It did, but even then the committee nervously reported a substantial loss; the prizes could not be paid for nor could the refreshments. Father McMahon thanked them for their efforts and also scolded them mildly for proceeding without his consent. He informed them that if they had made any money he would not have accepted it because it would have been tainted, but he was perfectly willing to assume the debt.

He noted this failure in the annual report to the bishop, but he could not offer any explanation for it. Fortunately that prelate was occupied with more pressing

duties at the time, and no explanation was needed or demanded. A great number of parishes in the diocese were enjoying heavy collections from the momentary war prosperity, and one blot or two went easily unnoticed.

The coldness with which he received the Henry Street parish and they him did not last very long, for these were turbulent years. The ember of mutual indignation was quickly fanned and burst out into something that might have been inconceivable in a more tranquil era. Of course it was always bad to tamper with the prejudices of a people; you may rob them of their morality, their religion, and their ethic, but never their prejudice. Father McMahon underestimated the political fever of his parishioners. He did not believe that Ireland had reached a stage where politicians had more power over the people than clergymen, and it was from this one miscalculation that his troubles really began to mount.

It started simply enough. The Irish Republican Army was officially blacklisted by the British government two years after it was organized, and the police were instructed to look upon it as a dangerous and subversive group. Technically, such an official listing should have been enough either to crush them or drive them underground, but the Irish were never a technical race. Boyle was

their only great scientist, and he yearned all his life to be a metaphysician. To drive the I.R.A. underground would have been a tremendous undertaking, requiring at least a dozen regiments of British soldiers, along with part of the fleet, and a whole new imported police force. The Great War in Europe made any one of these requirements a virtual impossibility. Then too, there was the difficulty of determining who was to be driven and who was to do the driving. The Phoenix Park murders had more or less shown on which side of the law the majority of Irish people would stand in the event of a real showdown; and it was not beyond reason to imagine that a goodly portion of the present constabulary held active, or at least advisory memberships in the organization. Because of these unusual circumstances the I.R.A. had never ceased to function in the open, and for all intents and purposes it was thought to be as respectable as the Knights of The Blessed Sacrament or the Children of Mary. No one who held membership in the organization regarded himself as a criminal or a rogue, and the general public did not look upon them as a left wing element or anarchist group. Indeed, to the eyes of all onlookers, their Sunday morning parade up Grafton Street and through the College Green with the bands playing and the flags waving and the people cheering their lungs out was the most legal and harmless spectacle that

could be viewed. The police were even there to keep traffic back until the last bagpiper went by. If anyone felt subversive he must either have had one drop too many or else be in cahoots with the Ulster Guards, a traitor to himself and his country.

So there was nothing abnormal about Michael Monaghan's presenting himself at the rectory one fine May evening to arrange for the use of the facilities of St. Martin of Tours Church. He was a committee of one from the Grafton Street Merchants, Tram Conductors, and Postal Servants who were going to receive Holy Communion at the eight o'clock Mass in a stout, representative body, and then move on into the school hall for a Communion breakfast, at five shillings a plate, the proceeds of which were to propagate the grand and glorious mission of freeing Ireland from the British yoke. There was nothing abnormal in Mr Monaghan's visit nor in his request to normal Irish minds, but Father McMahon did not wish to be included in that type of normalcy, and he took a dim view of the whole matter. His mental functions were inclined to be extremely analytical during the course of the discussion with the delegate, and he insisted on drawing an undiplomatic distinction between patriotism and lawlessness.

Mr. Monaghan had not the slightest suspicion of Father McMahon's attitude when he entered the little parlor on Henry Street. The fact that an Irish priest could be completely indifferent about a free Ireland had never occurred to him, and he concluded his petition on a grandiloquent plane.

"St Martin's is the only church," he beamed pleasantly, "on this side of the quay that can seat five hundred loyal and devoted sons of Ireland, and accomodate them at its altar rail. It's my proud privilege to ask your permission and to honor your parish with this tremendous spectacle of public adoration."

Father McMahon had not offered him a chair, nor did he sit down himself. He stood by the window playing with the sash cord.

"The doors of this church are never closed towards communicants, nor are any others that I know of in this city. I have no objection whatsoever to their presence. Confessions are from six to nine on Saturday evenings. None before Mass." he said dourly.

"That'll be fine, Father. And where do you want them to sit, in the middle aisle or on the side? We have our own ushers and there'll be no trouble at all.

Any place you say is fine by us."

"They can sit wherever they like..."

"That's very accommodating, I'm sure," Mr. Monaghan purred, "but what I mean is, do you want them on the Gospel or the Epistle side of the altar..?"

Father McMahon went over to his desk and took out a large ledger. He spoke while thumbing through it.

"Whatever seats they can find, let them sit down in them. We have no reserved seats." he said.

"I'm sure you haven't, Father, and it's a grand thing that there are none. Not like those Protestant places where you have to purchase your pew ten years before you're born. But, what I must know, so I can tell the ushers and the officers, is just which part of the church do you want this large body of men to occupy? They'll take quite a bit of room, and we wouldn't want to upset your regular Sunday schedule."

"Mass is held at eight o'clock ever Sunday regardless of who is there and who isn't..." returned Father McMahon, still busy with the ledger.

"But we can sit in a body, then?" persisted

Mr. Monaghan.

"You can sit," said the priest, "wherever you like. I already told you that there were no reserved seats at St Martin's and I mean just that!"

Mr. Monaghan smiled blandly as if some joke had been made that he did not quite catch.

"Well, now I'm sure that's a wonderful attitude for you to take, Father," he said, "and we're very grateful for your kindness. If we can have the pick of the church it's a good deal more than we asked for, but, that's as it should be, you'll no doubt agree, when the cause is as holy as this one. Every man in the church will be offering up his Communion for the liberation of Ireland from the snares of paganism..."

"It's about time someone thought of that!" cried Father McMahon ironically.

"Ah so it is, Father, so it is," agreed Mr. Monaghan condescendingly, "but these things don't happen overnight. Independence is dearly purchased from the tight fist of a usurper. Many's a lad has already given up his life for the cause, and many more will do the same in the near future. Martyrs dying for the faith."

"Hmmmmm."

"I'll send one of the boys over tomorrow with a flag. You can put it on the side of the altar behind the pulpit. It comes complete with stand and everything..."

"What kind of a flag?" snapped Father McMahon, looking up from his book.

"Why, the new Irish flag, of course!"

"I don't need one."

"You already have one? I didn't think they had been distributing them yet..."

"No. I don't have one, and I don't need one, and I don't want one!"

Mr. Monaghan was confused. He shifted from one foot to the other.

"What? But why not?"

"There's one flag in the church and that's enough. The Papal flag..."

"But they have one down at the Pro-Cathedral, Father. I saw it last week; so there can't be anything against regulations in it."

"I'm not interested in the flags they have at the Pro-Cathedral..."

"Well, as you see fit, Father. I thought maybe you might have considered it illegal..."

"And so I do." said the priest.

"Oh. Well, I'm sure that's your right. Some priests do be more concerned with the proper ways for doing things than others. Now, about the school..."

"The school?"

"Yes. The school." explained Mr. Monaghan. "We were thinking of holding the breakfast in the school hall. It's about the only building in the neighborhood anywhere near large enough to hold the crowd. Don't quote me on this, Father, but I know for a fact that they are trying to get Michael Collins himself to address the men. I don't know if he'll come or not, but a committee has gone up to see him."

"The school hall is out..." Father McMahon said curtly.

"What?"

"The school hall is unavailable..."

"It's being used? Sunday school classes or something?

"But surely you could change?"

"It's not being used," said the priest, "it's unavailable. Out."

"You mean we can't use it? You don't want the breakfast there?"

"I mean just that."

"But why, Father. Have you any reasons? Is there anything wrong with a Communion breakfast?"

"I don't need any reasons." said Father McMahon with slow deliberation. "I'm the pastor. And I wish you would discontinue referring to this gathering as a Communion breakfast. Men returning from the Altar after receiving Our Blessed Lord should have their minds filled with His goodness and charity, not filled with a lot of idle gibberish about bloody revolutions and a free Ireland..."

"Don't you want to see Ireland free, Father?" demanded Mr. Monaghan in indignation.

"Indeed I do," answered the priest, "free from

ignorance and sin and petty political jealousies. Free from drink and crime and murder. I want to see Ireland free from the vandals and villains and troublemakers who are always talking about setting her free. In other words I mean the I.R.A. and any other gangsters!"

Mr. Monaghan's forehead turned a bright pink. His hand began to tremble a little.

"What? You think of the I.R.A. as a pack of gansters! You don't approve of them?"

Father McMahon slammed his hand down on the desk.

"I think every last one of them ought to be in jail!" he shouted.

Little beads of silver sweat formed on Mr. Monaghan's pink forehead.

"Those are dangerous words, Father!"

"And just what do you mean by dangerous?"

"Men have been killed here for saying less..."

The priest moved towards him. "You wouldn't be threatening me, Mr. Monaghan?" he said.

"No. I'm merely advising you..."

"Well, then, I'll give you a piece of advice. Tell that band of fanatics, the Grafton Street Hoodlums, or whatever their name is, tell them if they want to save Ireland they're at least starting off the right way: in the confessional. But tell them to give up this foolishness of speeches and parades and a lot of swill about the great birthright of Ireland and the grand heritage of suffering. Tell them to get down on their knees, and not up on their horses. Tell them that they are always welcome at the altar railing in St Martin of Tours when they come with humility in their hearts and no banners flying. And as for the school hall, as long as I'm the pastor here it will not be used as the cradle of any political insurrection. Do you understand that?"

"That is your final decision?"

"It is..." said the priest emphatically.

"Then there's nothing more to say, is there?"

"No. Nothing. Good night, Mr. Monaghan."

"Good night, Father."

With the explosion in the Four Courts, riots

and mass gatherings in St Stephen's Green, and the several attempts to blow up Nelson's Pillar, the Bishop of Dublin began to concern himself with the safety of a priest who was thought to be unsympathetic to the national cause. He transferred Father McMahon to Omeath, a border town between the north and south, where only a man with no opinion at all could be expected to survive for any great length of time. Father McMahon seemed to fit the description perfectly; he was equally censorious of the rebel and the royalist cause, but only when provoked. For the rest of the time he was contented to let the battle rage about him. In the meanwhile he was fighting more pertinent inner battles with frustration and despair.

By the end of 1921 no type of neutrality was possible. A three way Civil War had taken shape by virtue of DeValera's refusal to take his seat in the Dial, and, for a time, the I.R.A. assumed its true character as a midnight organization. Atrocities were violent and frequent on all sides, with the bloodiest skirmishes taking place on the Ulster border where a heavy traffic in contraband arms and ammunition was constantly moving. On February 18th of the following year a little band of marauders, wild with the impassioned shibboleth of Ulster

and Protestantism and frenzied with looted liquor, fell upon St Brigid's Roman Catholic Church in Omeath, setting fire to the buildings, vandalizing the statues and other furnishings, and battering down the rectory door. The pastor greeted them with several cauldrons of boiling water, and was more or less responsible for the revenge they exacted.

The nurse's footsteps on the marble floor echoed hollowly down the marble corridor. She paused before the inscription "Report Every Half Hour" dangling by a string from one of the doorknobs, straightened her starched cuffs and went into the little room. On the bottom railing of the propped-up bed hung the jagged graph of the patient's temperature, which she proceeded to listlessly scan until a writhing motion of the bedclothes sent her to the doorway again.

"Doctor Fogarty! Doctor Fogarty!" she called out loudly. "The priest is stirring. I think he may be coming out of it."

"All right." a voice called out. "I'll be there in a minute. Give him some water if he wants it."

She went back and stood at the little table with its smelly collection of spoons and bottles and bits

of cotton. A completely bandaged head emerged from beneath the blankets, uttered a half audible groan and then slumped back onto the pillow. The doctor came in and stood beside her.

"Has he said anything yet, nurse?" he asked.

"No. Only a groan. Shhhh. Listen..."

"My delight is in the Lord because he hath heard the voice of my prayer. Because he hath inclined his ear unto me...because he hath heard my prayer...my delight is in the Lord! Hahahahah! Heeheheheheee!"

The fit of laughter continued for several minutes while the bandaged head rolled back and forth.

"Is he laughing or moaning?" the nurse asked.

"I don't know..." said the doctor, "it could be either at this stage. Shhh. He's saying something..."

"Gracious is the Lord of Righteousness. Yes, our God is merciful. The Lord perserveth the simple. I was in misery and he helped me. The Lord preserveth the simple, and the simple preserveth the Lord, and the simple preserveth themselves. My delight is in the Lord."

The high pitched laugh shot out across the

hospital, terrible and morbid.

"It sounds like some kind of a prayer." whispered the nurse.

"It is, but I've never heard the like of it before."

"Listen..."

"Blessed are they that look into the darkness and see not the light, and let the perpetual light shine upon them. For the Lord is righteous and he hath delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, my feet from falling. You are a reed blown by the wind, a stray lamb left to die alone on the mountainside, and there shall be joy in heaven before the angels of God and the demons of Hell on one sinner doing penance rather than the ninety nine with the Irish banner waving! For the Lord is merciful!"

"Does it mean anything, Doctor? It sounds like it's from the Bible."

The doctor picked up the clip board and read it.

"A good deal of it is from the Bible all right.

I doubt if it means anything." he said.

"Part of the delirium? He's been that way for a long time now..."

"No. The coma ended before you came on duty. He has no temperature and his pulse is normal..."

"Is he gone then, Doctor?"

"Gone?"

"Mentally, I mean..." explained the nurse, a trifle embarrassed at the suggestion.

"I don't know," replied the doctor, "it's too early to tell yet. He's been badly beaten. You wouldn't think they'd do anything like that to an old man... It was ruthless, but I suppose there's no controlling a mob when it gets out of hand. They're like a pack of wild animals. He was half dead when they brought him in here. I never thought he'd pull through at all."

"Yes, I know. The floor superintendent told me. What about his eyes, Doctor? Is there any hope at all?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, he'll be able to see something." he said. "Probably won't be able to read or write, but he'll be able to get around. Everything will be blurred, like a dog's vision, two dimensional, no reaction to speed or motion, but there'll be an image of some sort. Lye is a powerful corrosive. There wasn't much we could do. The muscles and tissues were almost completely burned away and the retina was badly scarred. He's lucky he's alive."

The nurse looked down at the swathed figure in the bed. He had ceased moving and lay back in the clump of pillows with his arms outstretched. She shook her head sadly.

"Lucky!" she repeated wistfully. "I wonder if he will think himself lucky...."

"Why not? He's had the best of everything. There isn't anything more that could be done. Didn't the bishop order the specialist from Liverpool?"

"Well, you know what I mean, being a priest and saying Mass and all that. I suppose he's more or less finished as far as his work is concerned."

"I don't see why. It's not as bad as all that.

Many people, priest included, lead excellent lives even in total blindness. He can at least see something. Don't worry, they'll find something for him to do."

"I hope so," said the nurse, "and I hope it's soon."

"Soon? Why soon?" demanded the doctor.

The nurse flushed slightly. She avoided the doctor's questioning glance by turning her eyes towards the bed again. Her fingers entwined tightly around the fountain pen dangling from her neck.

"I don't know," she said quickly, "but I just wish they'd get him out of here. He gives me the creeps!"

"Nonsense, nurse..."

"Maybe it is, but the others feel the same way. I don't like being in the room with him. It makes me nervous. I feel that he's watching me all the time... as if he could see through those bandages. And then when he starts that laugh...."

"Come, come. It's all in your imagination. I'm surprised at you, with all your experience."

"Well, I've never had one like him before. Not

a priest, anyhow. I don't know what it is and I can't explain it, but I just wish they'd hurry up and get him out of here. I get the feeling all the time that something dreadful is going to happen; that we'll come into this room someday and find him hanging from the chandelier or maybe his throat slashed or something like that. I know it's silly, but I can't help feeling it."

Father McMahon spent a little less than a year in the Dublin City Hospital. During that time he did not impress the staff as a model patient. He quarrelled constantly with the doctors and nurses, refused to submit to the house rules about smoking and using snuff, and never ceased complaining about the food and service. Any attempts to cheer him up were firmly and sometimes viciously repulsed, as was the case when he sent a set of draughts shattering through the window after an attendant forced them upon him. On several occasions he left the grounds without permission and was found wandering aimlessly through Phoenix Park, waving gaily at the children and laughing softly to himself.

When finally discharged, he proceeded to the diocesan retreat house at Portadown and applied himself languidly to the task of memorizing the Mass for Our Lady, the Mass for the Dead, and the Mass for Continued Peace.

In September of the following year, the Bishop of Dublin appointed him chaplain of the Don Bosco boys' orphanage in Cork City. The bishop reasoned that the limited duties, the cheering influence of the children, and the warm southern climate would soon have a favorable effect on his nervousness and lack of vitality. The bishop reasoned incorrectly. The opposite took place.

Almost from the day he arrived at the little orphanage on the green hill overlooking Cobv Harbor, Father McMahon was destined for another failure. The children at first were frightened by his scarred and skin-grafted features, and they had to be coaxed by the Brothers to go up to him and shake his hand. Gradually, their fear turned to ridicule, and, with the cruelty typical of children, they made jokes about his peculiar walk and his highstrung laugh. They mimicked the manner in which he tried to approach them: the stuttering speech, the foolish smile, the hands outstretched to receive them. They went to Brother-Superior with stories of how he heard confessions while standing up at the window, and how he ran his hands over their faces and made them scream, and held their arms too tightly, and broke into loud, mad peals of laughter for no reason at all. The bravest of them boasted of visiting his room alone, which seemed to

make them some sort of heroes among their comrades. They told fantastic stories of being offered snuff and made to recite the Hail Mary in Chinese.

The Brothers began to pay more attention to these reports as time went on. They noted with regret and embarrassment his clumsiness on the altar, but no longer found excuses for him in his infirmity. Tolerance dissolved with the passing months, and their patience soon reached exasperation as they found it almost impossible to attend Mass with any kind of devotion. He spilled the cruets almost daily; he stepped on the bells, dropped the chalice, shouted at the altar boys for what were his own mistakes, and he delivered wildly rhetorical sermons on the torments of Hell and the wiles of Satan.

The way he crept about the house after dark made them uneasy. They heard him prowling around the cellar one night, and up in the attic the next. He went for long walks by himself and sometimes did not return until near dawn. Brother Sacristan had seen him kneeling in the garden long after midnight gazing at the sky with his horrible faded eyes, and he had heard the chilling pitch of that wierd laugh cut through the night like a razor. The cook informed them that Father McMahon did not eat a quarter of the food that was sent up to him. From the

first day he had refused to eat in the dining room and demanded that all his meals be served in his room. The Brothers were shocked by this request at first, but later, when the reports of his table manners and his disdain for knife and fork reached them, they were glad that he had elected this isolation. In time, he gave up all efforts to win the friendship of the boys and the Brothers, if indeed he had made any effort at all. He was on speaking terms with no one in the place, and permitted no one to enter his room, except the boy who brought his meals, a nine year-old of Chinese extraction whom he seemed to have taken a great fancy to. Beyond saying Mass and administering the sacraments, he avoided all contact with the inside world of the orphanage and the outside world of Cork City.

In June, the Brothers held a retreat. They prayed for guidance, and then they helped Brother Superior compose the letter to the Bishop. The situation had gone too far already and could not possibly go on any longer, not even a month. The discipline and morale of the Don Bosco orphanage was at stake. Father McMahon's transfer was urgently requested, for his own good and the good of the community as a whole. He had shown no improvement in his regretable sickness and none was to be expected.

They hoped that the Bishop of Dublin would recognize the seriousness of the present state of events and grant their request.

The Bishop did. It was Father McMahon's last move. The Bishop saw the one place where his erratic charge could do no material harm. He had planned to close out the near-defunct country parish of Our Lady Queen of Peace in Knockmany, Donegal. It was a financial sore-spot on the diocesan annual report, and its flock was already well depleated. Until a sale of the property could be arranged, he deemed it an ideal appointment for a half blind priest. The country people were less demanding than orphans. They might be inclined to overlook the idiosyncracies of an aging priest, and if they didn't, it made little difference.

And so it was that at the age of sixty-three Father Cornelius J. McMahon, looking more like a man of eighty, went to Knockmany's decay and became a part of it. The world of Tim O'Rourke and Tabby McCoy greeted him unenthusiastically. The west from which he had fled as a young priest now opened a grave for him.

C H A P T E R N I N E

'And whoever swears by the altar it
is nothing; but whoever swears by the
gift that is upon it, he is bound.'
Blind ones! for which is greater,
the gift, or the altar which sanctifies
the gift? Therefore he who swears by
the altar swears by it, and by all
things that are on it: and he who
swears by the temple swears by it,
and by him who dwells in it. And he
who swears by heaven swears by the
throne of God, and by him who sits
upon it.

Matthew XXIII, 18-22

CHAPTER IX.

AND WHOEVER SWEARS BY THE ALTAR IT IS NOTHING

"Presta nobis quaesumus Domine: intercedentibus sanctis Martyribus tuis Tryphone, Respicio et Nympha; ut, quod ore contiguimus, pura mente capiamus. Per Dominum. Statuit et Dominus testamentum pacis, et principem fecit eum: ut sit illi sacerdotil dignitas in aeternum. Momente Domine, David: et omnis mansuetudinis ejus. Deus, qui conspicis, quia ex nulla nostra virtute subsistimus: concede propitius; ut, intercessione beati Martini Confessoris tui atque Pontificis, contra omnia adversa muniamur."

O'Rourke looked up from his reading and listened. A blunt, authorative pounding resounded on the downstairs door.

"My God, he's here already and I'm not half done!" he cried, bounding up from the chair and making a feeble attempt at straightening out the priest's desk. "What the devil is he doing here this early? Get ready now, Father. Here, wipe off your chin and fasten your collar the way you'll like something when he comes in. And that snuff box, you better put it in the drawer for the time being..."

"Don't stand there ordering me around, you miserable idiot!" the priest blazed out contemptuously. "I'm all right as I am, and if he don't like it, that's too bad about him. Now go down and let him in. And remember, this is to be a private conversation. I don't want to hear you slinking about outside there like you usually do. Oh, you didn't think I knew, did you? Well, for your information, there's a lot of things I know now and have known for sometime. My eyes may be gone, but, thank God, I still have very good ears, and I put them to good use. So if you have any idea of gathering material for another public performance down at McCoy's, you had best put it out of your head. Do you understand? Now go down and let him in..."

O'Rourke accepted the command sullenly. He

replaced the Breviary in the bookcase and paddled out of the room with a noisy protest on the part of his wooden heels. The priest settled back in his chair, his legs thrown out stiffly and his arms hanging down. A strange, beautified look spread across his face, and in the candle light his eyes gleamed piercingly, as his lips parted in an ecstatic smile. He seemed completely detached from his surroundings, vacillating, languid, silent, wrapped in a deep world of impenetrable memories that found no foothold in the present. He was like a retired sailor living out his last days far from the sea he had feared and loved, gazing out across the bleak hanging tapestry of the night and transposing the flicker of a star into the familiar flutter of a mast light, the distant stretch of blue mountains into the vast expanse of the seas. There was a loneliness and a fierce yearning in his eyes that told of wasted opportunities and expired hopes, of tragically shattered aspirations and of regret for what had not been attained. The smile betrayed an ironic satisfaction at these musings of a vanishing past, as if the bitter joke of his life had suddenly been turned back on the jokester.

A burst of voices came from the stairwell, and O'Rourke came back into the room followed by a pale

anxious looking man in a heavy raincoat and soft hat.

"Mr. O'Leary, this is Father McMahon." the sexton said with an obsequious bow that was executed by a quick flap of his chin onto his rotound chest.

The man removed his hat, spilling a little pool of water onto the rug. He smacked his tongue against his palate in annoyance at the blunder, side-stepped the blackish damp circle that appeared on the rug, and offered his lean white hand to the priest.

"I forgot it was raining," he giggled, "I'm pleased to meet you, Father. The bishop told me a lot about you. You've certainly lead an interesting life."

Father McMahon ignored the greeting by averting his eyes towards the ceiling.

"Sit down, Mr. O'Leary. You can take off your coat if you like. Hang it on the nail over there. We don't have a coat rack anymore; I don't know what happened to it."

"This will be fine, Father. I can't stay too long. I expected to get the next train back because I have some other business to finish up in Belfast tomorrow."

"As you wish..." returned the priest, fastening his gaze on O'Rourke meaningfully. "And that'll be all I'll be needing from you tonight..."

Mr. O'Leary seated himself in the rocking chair vacated by O'Rourke and began meticulously sorting through a sheaf of papers in his briefcase. He was middle aged in a very competent way; his carefully groomed hair streaked here and there with respectable lines of grey, and his gold rimmed spectacles set tight against his chalky forehead. He had the air of a man who could dispense with the business at hand in as cheerful and exacting a manner as possible.

"It's just a matter of a few simple details;" he said with a professional smile, "they require it by law, you know. It could probably be handled just as well by post, but you know how those things are, Father. People get all mixed up in the legal language and they get panicky over nothing. And that's where I come in. It's an abominable nuisance, but there's not much you can do about it. Ireland may be free, but the British government left us a heritage of paper work that we'll never be able to shake loose from. We've become worshippers of the dotted line!"

Father McMahon reached in his drawer and withdrew his snuff box. He spiraled his thumb into his nostril and sniffed noisily. Mr O'Leary adjusted his glasses expertly on the edge of his nose. The priest's snorting and swallowing filled him with repulsion. He looked down at his papers greedily.

"I always tell me wife," he said with an uneasy laugh, "that I don't know what would become of the Dublin government if the paper mills throughout the world were to suddenly go on strike. I believe they'd have to go back to the tribal system of running things. Don't you think so, Father?"

"I think you'd be out of a job." snapped the priest.

Mr O'Leary laughed heartily with the enthusiastic but cultured laugh reserved for the witticisms of select clients.

"I believe I would!" he cried, slapping his hand on his thigh. "I believe I would. I'll have to tell the wife that one."

The priest swallowed his spittle tastefully. He fumbled in the folds of his shiney cassock, produced

his pen knife, and resumed the attack on the accumulation of wax on his sleeve. Mr. O'Leary countered with a similar groaping through the labyrinthine crevices of his briefcase, and came up with a little silver fountain pen and a tiny vial of ink. He filled the pen with painstaking, dainty motions, being extremely careful that no truant drop should fall on the desk. The elaborate workings of his long fingers was accompanied by a serious, studied exhaling of his slightly asthmatic breath. When satisfied with the proper functioning of the instrument, he pushed it across the desk to the priest along with a pile of neatly folded papers.

"There's the deed now." he said matter-of-factly. "You just sign it at the bottom...I'll show you where...that takes care of the transfer of the property. Title to buildings and grounds go to the railroad with a first mortgage being held by the Bank of Ireland. The house furnishings are not included, of course. I think the bishop said we might be able to sell them at a public auction, unless you yourself wanted to hold onto them. That'll be up to you. He said the sacred vessels and vestments could be taken to Dublin and given to one of the mission societies. He thought you might like that seeing as you spent so much of your time in

the missions over the years. Of course, there's no hurry about moving out. The railroad probably won't do any dismantling until the end of the year when the new line gets through this way. You can move out anytime you like, but I think they would appreciate it if you could vacate by, well, let's say August or September at the latest. However, if that's rushing you, I'm sure that other arrangements could be made..."

Father McMahon went on scraping his sleeve. He made no attempt to pick up the pen or the papers.

"It's right there in front of you, Father..." suggested Mr. O'Leary with a nervous smile.

"I know it is..." muttered the priest, without looking up.

"Just sign your name at the bottom there.." coaxed Mr. O'Leary, hitching himself foreward on the end of the rocker. "There are two copies. One goes to the railroad, and the other the bishop keeps."

Father McMahon smiled at him vaguely. He folded the knife blade carefully back into its bone handle. It was an operation that demanded his keenest attention.

"Two copies! You don't say? Now isn't that something!" he exclaimed, weighing the idea thoughtfully. He threw back his head and scanned the ceiling searchingly, as if it's cracked and soiled plaster held some possible explanation for the two copies. There was a long silence.

The lawyer shuttled his feet back and forth impatiently and then suddenly stood up. He walked to the desk silently on his toes and took the priest's arm gently.

"How foolish of me!" he said with magnificent charm. "I forgot what the bishop told me about your sight. Here, I'll show you where the line is..."

With a flash of violent emotion the priest pushed him away, as if the mere touch of him was odious and obscene.

"You don't have to show me anything!" he cried. "And don't come pussy footing around here telling me what the bishop said and what the bishop didn't say! I don't intend to sign..."

O'Leary stepped back and made an effort at regaining his lost dignity. He fingered the papers in silence for a minute and then tried another approach.

"I'm sorry I disturbed you at a time like this," he cajoled, "knowing how sick you've been and all that, but if you could just sign one of them...put an"x", anything, and we'll be done. You don't even have to read them. I'll get your man there and the two of us can co-sign as witnesses and it'll be just as legal and proper as the other way." He pushed the papers foreward agreeably again, like an exasperated mother trying to entice a stubborn child into taking its cereal.

Father McMahon whirled around in his chair suddenly and sent the documents careening through the air with a flaying motion of his hand.

"I know how to sign me own name!" he screamed, shaking his fist vigorously in front of the lawyer's nose and causing that person to move back in terror. "I've been allowed to have some small dribblings of an education somewhere in life. They don't ordain you if you are a complete idiot! They let you become one after you are ordained! Do you understand that, Mr. O'Leary? They let you become one! Ha! I'll bet you never knew that before, did you? No, they don't try to stop you in the least; as a matter of fact, they even try to help you to it! And here's some thing else for you to think of so long as the eyes are already bulging

out of your head like a bullfrog: I don't intend to sign any papers of any description tonight or any other night. Is that clear? Can I make it any plainer?"

Mr. O'Leary took up a position behind his chair. He felt the composure running out of him at the sight of something undreamt-of, ridiculous, and trying. What had promised to be a very routine evening had turned into something he felt incapable of dealing with.

"What? What?" he asked with a fair show of self control. "You won't sign? Is that what you said, you didn't intend to sign it? But, why not?"

"Why not!" shouted the priest. "How dare you have the insolence to ask me for reasons! Do you realize to whom you are talking? It's not one of your tu'penny tram-clerks or mill girls. You're talking to a priest, and please remember it."

Mr. O'Leary searched his memory for the offending remark, but unable to find it, he muffled an apology.

"I'm sorry if I said something wrong," he stammered, "I meant no impertinence. I merely thought that....well, the Bishop said that you were to...that is, it was my impression..."

Father McMahon crashed his fist down on the desk and nearly yelled:

"The Bishop! The Bishop! The Bishop told me nothing! I haven't seen him in fifteen years...not since I came to this parish. I don't even remember his name! There may have been ten of them for all I know in that time!"

"But he wrote to you..." protested the other.

"I never read letters...lot of foolishness most of the time....I have more to do than that...there are other things more important..."

"But you knew about it! You knew the property was up for sale. O'Rourke told you, and everybody in town knew about it. It was in the papers."

The priest stood up.

"What difference does that make?" he cried. "I know lots of things and I don't have to read about them. I know there's sin in the world, don't I? And I know what they say about me down at McCoy's; and I know who's responsible for it! That doesn't say I agree to, does it? Does it? Answer me, man, does it?"

His face had become flushed and was quivering as if someone had drawn a violin bow across it. The lawyer gazed about the room and thought of the nearness of the exit in the event that he should suddenly need it.

"I don't see what you mean," he said in a peaceful tone. "This is a slightly different matter than what people might say about you. All you have to do is sign the papers and it seems to me that all your worries are over."

"Slightly different! Slightly different!" mocked Father McMahon. "I see no difference! Am I to sign over the house of God and His church property to every black sinner and hypocrite and dirty Protestant that happens along? Am I to sell the Lord's household goods at a public auction, and give His altar up for a railroad platform? Is that what the mission of the priesthood has come to? Are we now supposed to hang up signs and invite the money lenders into the temple instead of driving them out the way Christ taught us? So this is the sorry state the world has come to! They are tearing the roof from above God's head and selling His belongings at public auctions! The modern age! The mission societies can have the sacred vessels, of course! What's the matter with them? Isn't there a

substantial market value for gold these days? Why don't you try the chalice and the monstrance at an auction and see how you make out? Lawyers and auditors and public clerks! Ha! Foul black Protestants and prostitutes, if you ask me! Dividing His garments among them in a new kind of dice game: the public auction. Well, I'll have no part of it! And I don't care what the Bishop thinks. When you see him, you can tell him not to bother sending out any more of his Protestant friends to me. Will you remember that?"

Mr. O'Leary stood aghast at the torrent. He felt his stomach turning over dizzily within him, as if he were being rolled back and forth in a carnival barrel. When the priest showed signs of quieting down by settling back into his chair and drawing his hands over his eyes, the lawyer began collecting his things in the little briefcase, and hurriedly moved towards the door.

"I'm sorry you feel this way about it, Father," he said timidly, "I didn't quite know what the situation was before I came here. However, I do feel obligated to point out one thing in my own defense. Protestants have nothing to do with this. I'm a Catholic myself and have been all my life. I'm proud of my religion and hope that I will always have the strength to live

up to it."

The priest shot out of the chair and whirled towards him.

"Are you?" he shouted. "Are you, indeed! Well, you must be a fine proud Catholic all right. You have every reason to be proud! Coming in here with your sinister papers and your lecherous talk and asking me, one of God's ordained priests, to sell the very home from under His feet to the Bank of Ireland! Is that the kind of a proud Catholic you are? Well, I have another name for it! A Judas Catholic! Thirty pieces of silver is your price. They have a name for it in Canon Law too. They call it simony! If you were living in the Middle Ages they would have your head for it. The simonious act was punishable by death in the courts of papal inquiry. Have you ever heard that? Death! That's what it was, and it was none too good for them!

"That's what they ought to do to every lawyer and charletan that comes around trying to make his living out of selling the Lord's goods at public auction! But, I'll tell you one thing....if it's the last thing I do tell anybody...you'll never get Christ Himself, no matter how hard you try! Do you hear that? You'll never

get Him! Never! Not in a million years! You'll never lay your hands on His sacred body! Do you understand! Do You? You'll not touch one particle of the Sacred Host! Do you hear? Not one drop of his precious blood! Take the house and the grounds and the sacred vessels... take them all! I don't care! But you'll never, never take Him!"

The priest pushed the lawyer aside violently and rushed towards the stairway. He tumbled down a few steps, picked himself up, and darted, as best he could from the house. After a few seconds of rigid astonishment, Mr. O'Leary began to realize what was taking place. He ran down the steps and out across the yard after the priest.

It had stopped raining, and the mist was drawing back a vaporous veil from a night ablaze with the blinking of a billion stars. The lawyer stood for a second in the doorway of the rectory and watched the old priest disappear in the semi-darkness into the church. A shriek ghastly and inhuman pierced the mist like a bullet. It was followed by another even more terrible and ringing than the first, a cry of exasperation and defeat, like the death pangs of some ruthless and primitive creature.

Mr. O'Leary forced himself on. He ascended the steps of the church two at a time. He stopped. He had a sudden feeling of insecurity, of danger present close-by. The blood pounded into his head and he could feel his legs growing weak under him. He entered the vestibule cautiously and slowly pushed the door back.

All at once he shuddered and stifled a scream. The sanctuary was alive with lights. Flames were leaping up the tapestries and pouring across the walls. They seemed to come from every direction and were accompanied by a million sparks that flew up into a shivering whirl of smoke. It was as bright as noon. Great sheets of fire enveloped the oil paintings behind the main altar and curled the metal braces on the stained glass windows.

In the middle of the roaring conflagation knelt Father McMahon, his arms extended to the open tabernacle door, his eyes sparkling in an ecstasy of passion, his lips parted in a tender expression of love and humility. He seemed oblivious of the seering torent that raged about him, and in his left hand he still tightly clenched the long candle holder. Across the night and through the shimmering mist that was gradually lifting over the mountains and the soft green

valley, his voice echoed, a lean, penetrating, mournful cry that seemed to raise itself up like the tumultuous peal of a funeral bell.

"My God! My God!" he cried, "They'll never get you! I won't let them! I've loved you too long and too hard to ever let them get you! Oh God, I know you didn't want me, but I came anyway, and now at last I can save you! You didn't want me for a priest, but here I am at last, consecrated to your service!"