

BLACK 47

"For the love of god, Paudie, wake up and let's get the hell out of here!" But the big lug just lay there snoring. I kicked him in the fat of his arse and he looked up at me like a great big stupid bullock. The dawn was bleeding in through a crack in the wall and I listened in vain for the arrogant squawk of a cock.

How many days now since we'd fled from our own dear village, trudging through these little stony fields of Connaught, with not the sound of a bird to be heard? Just that awful sickening silence. And nothing to be seen, except the thick soupy mist that lay across the land.

He must have smelled the crusts of bread in my hand; in the blink of an eye, he was on his feet beseeching me for the very crumbs. I broke off a smidgen and he devoured it. Then I showed him my back and strode out of the house. "If you're comin', come on!" Just the sight of his begging drove me to distraction.

I took a long deep draught from the little stream. If only water could fill you! Then I heard it again - a little footstep or maybe a rabbit, by Jesus, that we could skin and eat and dull the ache in our bellies. Paudie came stumbling out. "Whist!" I motioned.

"How long to Galway, Séamus?" He whined. I knew his big feet were killing him but I resented his asking. "I don't know, but the sooner we start, the quicker we'll get there." I led the way up the hill. He followed at a distance.

At times, I thought of them and the sorrow would grip my heart, 'til I'd have to drop to my knees and bury my face in the heather. Then a madness of hate would grip me and I'd curse the very names of Lord John Russell, Sir Charles Trevalyn or the great bitch herself, Victoria, who sent five golden guineas to feed the starving millions. I welcomed the hate, for it gave me the strength to go on and make them pay for their crimes.

Paudie heard the keening first. He grabbed me by the arm, his eyes wild with fear. She was lying in the ditch, moaning in a mix of English and Gaelic; strangled and awful, it was, like the first notes of a death rattle. When she heard us; she commenced to scream. Paudie took off down the road like a startled foal, the hunger now a memory. Every Christian bone in my body told me

I should help; but I galloped after him, my heart in my mouth.

Later that night we found a dry hole in the rocks and crept in exhausted. I felt achy all over, my mouth dry and my forehead damp. We'd walked hard, so I gave us an extra piece of crust and was drifting into sleep, when I felt a hand in my pocket and kicked out. A little figure crouched in silhouette against the foggy moonlight. It was hissing like an animal. "Oh Mother of God," Paudie screamed, "it has a beard!"

Its head was gaunt as a skeleton but, far worse, were the tufts of hair growing from its chin. The child gave us one last fearful gaze and then bounded down the hill. We hugged each other in terror. Everyone had heard of them but we'd never before been cursed by their presence. There was no sleep the rest of the night and, in the morning, I felt weak and dizzy. But we pushed on through deserted villages and blighted fields, with one eye out for our bearded shadow.

I knew I was dying. The fever had me in its grip. I tumbled into a ditch and lay there, the life oozing out of me. I could see the big tears coursing down through the rain on Paudie's cheeks. I gave him the remains of the bread. No more struggling now, just a deep delirious sleep. Then I remembered all of them dead and their story never told and I roared at him: "don't let me die here in a ditch".

I woke up in the Quakers Hall, weak as a new born. He'd carried me to the port of Galway and made those blessed people tend to me. God alone knows how he did it, nor where he got the food to sustain us on the ship. And when the fever returned, he nursed me and defied the crew when they sought to throw me overboard.

I lived to fight and scrounge for existence on the docks of New York, until we both headed west to build their bloody railroads and canals, never forgetting those three exemplary Christians, Lord John Russell, Sir Charles Trevalyn and Queen Victoria. May they rot in hell!

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