IN THE SHADOW OF THE OMBÚ TREE

By the same author

ANCESTRAL VOICES

'Ryan's pure, lilting, pensive prose is like a cool refreshing stream running through this affecting and healing meditation on Irish history...'

Publishers Weekly USA

ON BORROWED GROUND

'Once in a while there comes a book which is quite extraordinary in its ability to recreate times past, to bring us an evocation of a whole way of life now gone and to encourage us to remember with affection mingled with a little awe what was, as distinct from what might have been. This is such a book… Amid a welter of modern mediocrity, this is one of those rare gems.'

The Cork Examiner

REPRISAL

'…a human and humane account excellently told'

KEVIN MYERS, *The Irish Times*

'…a finely written historical novel that is at ease with time and place'

Sunday Press

THE KYBE

'…a well-researched, well-constructed and well-told tale'

The Irish Times

'…an attractive and well-told story with fresh dialogue and a strong Irish sense of place'

Irish Press

HUGH FITZGERALD RYAN

IN THE SHADOW OF THE OMBÚ TREE

First published 2005 by
CHAOS PRESS
16 The Orchard
Bellefield
Enniscorthy
County Wexford
IRELAND

This novel is based on the story of my great-grandparents. I have gathered the scattered shards of fact and pieced them together with the malleable clay of fiction.

The author gratefully acknowledges a travel bursary from The Arts Council of Ireland.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 9548529 1 5 paperback
ISBN 0 9548529 0 7 hardback

Cover typography: Alan Ryan
Cover illustration: Alan Ryan
Typesetting: Chaos Press
Printed in the Republic of Ireland by Betaprint, Dublin.

Acknowledgements

The story of my great-grandparents and Estancia Santa Catalina, as told to me by my mother, a Wexford woman, flitted in the background of my imagination for more than half a century. Yet I could never locate it in a real place until I encountered the web-site of William Revetria, chronicler of his native village. William anchored my researches to the Department of Soriano and provided me with a thesis by local historians, Ana Bentancor, Cecilia Clavijo and Malvina Ruiz. This thesis gathered together many disconnected pieces of information and charmed me with stories of the earliest inhabitants, both indigenous and settler. William, Luján, Gabriela and Cristina welcomed us to Uruguay and pointed us in the right direction.

I wish also to thank the Pupils and English teachers of Liceo Justo P. Rodriguez in Cardona for their interest and advice. Similarly the Governors, Teachers, Parents and Pupils of Escuela Pablo Purriel in Santa Catalina were unstinting of their time and generosity in helping us. A particular thanks must go to the Alfonsin family of Estancia Santa Catalina who enabled us to see at last, the dwelling places of John and Catherine and the land that shaped their lives. I acknowledge gratefully the encouragement of: Intendente Correa of Soriano; his cultural representative, Enrique de Leon; the Mayor and Social Club; the Librarian; the Church communities of Santa Catalina; Professor Manuel Pirez, Archivist of Mercedes; Sr. Aguiar of Cardona, horseman, farmer, sportsman, historian and finally, our guide and interpreter, Ignacio Gussoni. In Colonia del Sacramento the staff of the Museum of the Indigenous People brought vividly to life the history of the long vanished Charrúa people. Hilary Murphy and the members of the Wexford Family History Association and also many Cardiffs and Doyles from South Wexford provided me with invaluable nuggets of information.

My brothers and sisters kept the story alive in my imagination for many years, each contributing some fragment from their recollection of what they had been told. Our family, Tom, Alan, Alison, Sarah, Fergus, Jenny, Erika, Justin, Michael, Ellis, Eimear, Felicia and Paul, consistently encouraged and facilitated the work, although convinced that we would get irrevocably lost in the vastness of the Pampas. Maybe, on reflection, that was part of their plan.

My greatest debt in bringing this novel to completion is to my wife, Margaret, relentless scrutineer of proofs, tolerant supporter and indefatigable companion, who took Santa Catalina and the story of John and Catherine to her heart.

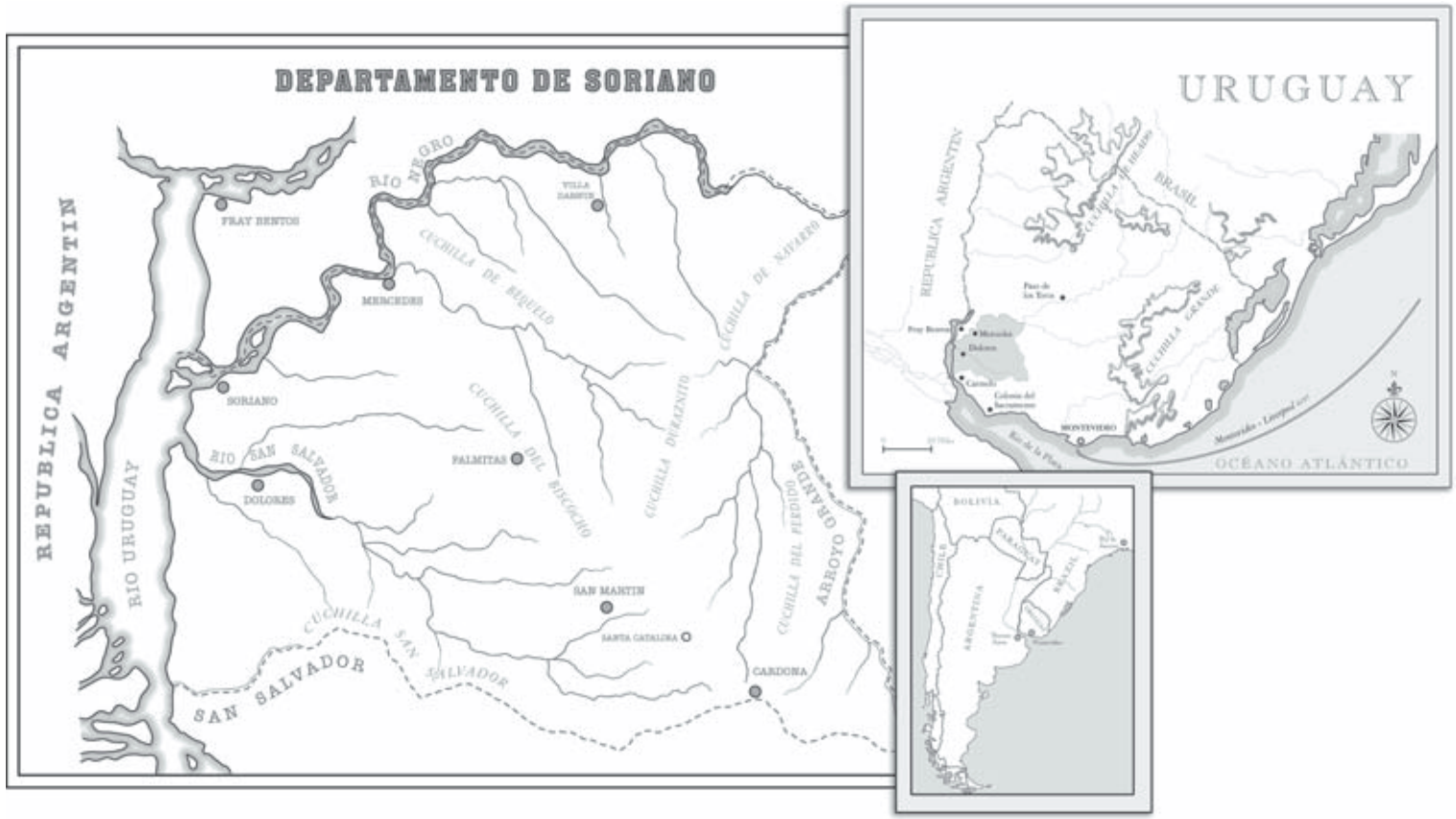
This book is dedicated to the memory of John and Catherine Cardiff of Wexford and Santa Catalina and to their great, great, great grandchildren, Sally Anne, Victor, Josephine, Kim, Leo, Sophie, Alice and those who are expected but have not yet arrived.

Nunca prosperará la casa sobre cuyo
techo cayó la sombra del ombú.

The house on which falls the shadow
of the ombú will never prosper.

Proverb

BOOK ONE


DEPARTAMENTO DE SORIANO
REPUBLICA ARGENTIN
RIO URUGUAY
RIO NEGRO
FRAY BENTOS
MERCEDES
VILLA DARWIN
CUCHILLA DE BIGUELO
CUCHILLA DE NAVARRO
SORIANO
CUCHILLA DEL BIZCOCHO
CUCHILLA DURAZNITO
RIO SAN SALVADOR
DOLORES
PALMITAS
CUCHILLA DEL PERDIDO
ARROYO GRANDE
SAN MARTIN
SANTA CATALINA
CUCHILLA SAN SALVADOR
SAN SALVADOR
CARDONA
URUGUAY
REPUBLICA ARGENTIN
BRASIL
CUCHILLA GRANDE
MONTEVIDEO
OCÉANO ATLÁNTICO
BOLIVIA
PARAGUAY
CHILE
ARGENTINA
BRASIL

THE BEGINNING

Uruguay 1603

As soon as his feet felt the soft mud of the riverbank, the slave knew that this was the place. He heard the voice of his mother, the old witch, who had come from Africa all those years ago, saying to him: "This is the place. This is the time. Go now and be free."

She always knew. Everything that had happened, she knew and everything that was to be.

He tugged on the rope and the boat swung into the shallows, keeling slightly as the officer stepped ashore. The officer looked about, fingering the finely chased silver of his sword hilt. He strode to the top of the bank and fastidiously wiped his boots in the long grass. He removed his peaked helmet.

Downriver the first cattle and horses were coming ashore, struggling in the yielding mud. Their hooves churned the stretch of riverbank into a quagmire. The herdsmen shouted and urged them on. Behind them, almost to the middle of the stream, stretched a line of animals, swimming desperately, their eyes rolling whitely, their long curved horns like serpents rising from the glittering surface.

The slave scooped a handful of water and rubbed his neck, where the iron of his collar was hot against his skin. He took another handful and drank. This is the place, he thought again. The officer, irritable in the heat, ordered him to make the boat fast to an overhanging branch and help to drive the animals away from the riverbank.

Everything irritated the officer, his high ruffed collar, the breastplate hot to the touch, the idleness of slaves and the indignity of having to serve as a common herdsman to the Governor of Paraguay and The River Plate. It might be a shrewd investment for generations yet unborn, to release animals into this empty eastern province, but neither His Catholic Majesty nor his Governor or his misfortunate lieutenant, would live long enough to enjoy the profit. He watched idly as the cattle shook their flanks dry and began to graze. The herdsmen shouted, jabbing at them with long lances topped by half-moon blades. The horses, half wild already, tossed their manes and whinnied, sniffing the air of this new country and finding it to their satisfaction.

His reverie was interrupted by a shout. He saw a soldier lifting his firelock and settling it in the forked staff. He saw the slave running between two horses, holding a twist of mane in each hand, urging them towards the line of trees and scrub a few hundred yards from the water. He saw the black smoke. He heard the loud report. The noise reverberated on the water. The slave flinched, but retained his grip. He kept running.

The officer laughed. It was astonishing to think that anyone could hit a moving target at such a distance. Pure luck. He laughed at the effrontery of the slave and at the prospect of the chase. He shouted to a herdsman to dismount and surrender his horse. He dug in his spurs and swung the horse towards the trees. He drew his sword.

The slave felt his shoulder shattering and the power going from his left arm. His fingers, suddenly cold, let go of the horse's mane. He staggered but retained his grip on the other animal. He heard the hoofbeats behind him and the mocking cheers of the soldiers on the riverbank. The strength went from his legs. He fell and the horse veered away. The rider loomed over him. The sunlight caught the blade.

He saw a humming bird attending to a flower on a branch high above. The bird stopped in the air, its wings the merest shadow, its body a dark spot against the light. The flowers were waxen, yellow and pink. The branch bore savage thorns. He knew that the bird would save him. He heard the whirr of its

wings. He saw a stone strike the officer's temple and that nobleman of Spain pitch sideways from the herdsman's sheepskin saddle. He closed his eyes and smiled. This is the place, he said. The humming bird flicked to another flower in search of nectar.

The soldiers watching from the riverbank, saw the savages emerging from the trees, two small stocky men, naked, dark skinned, darker than the Indians of the other side of the river.

"Charrúas," muttered a herdsman, "fieras, wild animals." He shuddered. The soldiers looked at each other. Their numbers were small. Their work was done. They knew the ferocity of the Indians of the Pampas, the terror of raids in the middle of the night and they had heard mention of the Charrúas of the Eastern Shore, the most terrible of all the savage tribes.

They saw the savages dragging the two bodies into the trees, a slave and an arrogant fool, not worth the life of an honest soldier. They turned to their boats and the safety of the opposite shore, a misty line in the distance.

The slave heard voices, the grunting of men, the twittering of children, the nasal tones of women. He opened his eyes. He lay in the dappled shade of a ceibo tree. Drifts of crimson blossom hung over him. The chattering ceased. The people were watching him in silence, an old man, naked except for a cloak of jaguar skin, draped loosely over his shoulders, several younger men and women, a group of children jostling to get a better look at him. He was conscious of a dull pain in his shoulder and turned his head. The wound seemed to be packed with moss and what he took to be spiders' webs. He grunted. The people gave a collective sigh, as if in relief. Dark skinned people, but not as black as his own people. High cheekbones and straight black hair, in some cases held back by a band of twisted plant fibres or the skin of some animal. The sunlight fell in patches on their shining bodies.

He smiled as if in recognition. His teeth gleamed in the shadow and against the blackness of his skin.

"Buenas tardes"! he said and the chattering began again. He made to sit up but the pain shot through him. He lay back.

The old man stood up, gathering his cloak around him with an imperious movement. He walked away, past the fire and the flimsy twig shelters, through the long grass, until he came to the riverbank. With the blade of his stone axe he knocked the top from an anthill. He lifted the gleaming skull of the Spanish officer and dislodged the angry black ants. They fell from the eyes and nostrils and the shattered temple where the slingshot had struck. He dipped the skull in the water, rinsing away the last of the scurrying insects. He knew that the strange dark man would not be strong again until he drank from the skull of his enemy. Carefully, with his axe, he chopped at the skull until he had fashioned a bowl from the crown. He threw the fragments and the jawbone into the water, white shards in the dark waters of the great river. He returned to the camp.

They caressed the slave's skin, comparing it with their own. They touched his hair and laughed. They tested the rough woollen cloth of his breeches. He laughed with them. This was like the home his mother had told him about. He sat upright with some difficulty and ran his fingers under the iron collar. They touched the collar, muttering among themselves.

"Fierro," he said, picking up a pebble.

He clinked it against the collar. "Fierro."

"Fiera," they replied and he clinked the pebble again.

"Fiera, Fiera" chanted the children in delight.

"Ah, Fiera," said the adults, pleased to know his name, but they could not manage the sound. They were calling him a wild beast, he thought with amusement.

The old man crouched beside him with a bowl of green liquid, a kind of sludge made from leaves. He gestured to him to drink. He sniffed an acrid earthy smell. He drank and grimaced. They laughed and gestured to him to drink again. He realised that he was thirsty. He drank. The leaves filled his mouth and he chewed on them, trying to swallow, to the huge amusement of the onlookers. He closed his teeth and filtered the liquid carefully. He felt a warm glow inside himself and the pain in his shoulder began to abate.

He took the stone again and tapped the collar. He scraped a bright streak on the dark metal. The people gathered closer and

he repeated the motion, signifying that he wanted to cut himself free of the encumbrance.

"Ah!" they said understanding his intention. A woman knelt beside him and placed her fingers inside the collar. He felt the warmth of her forearm on his shoulder as she braced herself. She took a flint blade and began to scrape at the rivet which held the collar in place. The stone screeched on the metal and the people watched in rapt attention as she began to cut.

"Fierro," she said softly as if claiming him as her own.

Chapter One

Wexford 1864

When the tinkers came to the door at Lingstown, Dorothy Wray would run them. She was still Dorothy Wray, the Protestant woman who married Tom Doyle the farmer. She had no time for idleness or vagrancy.

"Go away," she would say sharply. "You'll get nothing here."

No matter how many prayers they promised she would not bend. Papist promises of Papist prayers, which she knew they would never pay anyway. Papists, she felt, were profligate with their prayers, throwing them around like snuff at a wake, as they say, devaluing them like a base coinage, telling their beads in a meaningless mumble. One good well washed and combed prayer on a Sunday morning was worth a thousand of the others.

"Be off with you!"

They would shuffle away, still promising a prayer or two in forlorn hope.

She knew however, that they seldom went away empty handed. She knew that her husband would have a few eggs for them or a wisp of hay for the ass or his favourite, a cut from a piece of ling that he had drying on hooks on the gable end of the house.

"Ah the poor children," he would say. "You couldn't refuse the poor children."

He always fidgeted with his knife, wiping the blade and snapping it shut, only to open it again, trying to make it look like a routine inspection.

"You'll have us in the poor house some day," was her usual accusation. Yet she was glad somewhere deep inside herself that

he had given something. He knew that too, even though she set her mouth in a straight line of disapproval. Tom was no fool, even if he had a soft heart and always thought the best of people.

He tended to believe what people told him and was disappointed in a general way if he found it to be untrue, but still could not be harsh with the liar. He knew he would get no prayers for the pieces of fish, but it amused him that they thought they were diddling him and he knew that the fish would fill some empty bellies.

Tom Doyle had no political opinions. He had no grand plan to solve the troubles of the land or to alleviate the poverty that he saw around him. He believed that it was his duty to work and look after his family and lend a hand, when he could, to anyone that asked. With a farm of land at Lingstown, overlooking the lake and two boats fishing out of Kilmore Quay he felt he was not doing too badly. With two fine sons to take over after his time and good freehold land to leave to them, he was, he concluded, a happy man. Then there was Catherine, seventeen years of age, nearly a grown woman already, a daughter who would bring joy to the heart of any father.

Catherine was the centre of Tom's universe. He prided himself that he did not spoil her, despite his wife's warnings. She did her share of work like everyone else and did it cheerfully, often singing as she went about the house, some little French song, maybe, that the nuns taught her up in Wexford in the boarding school, or maybe a song in the Gaelic.

It was hard to have to send her away, but necessary nonetheless. Her mother had a great regard for education, even if it had to be with the nuns.

"That girl will go places," Tom used to say. "She'll do well for herself."

He had a great belief in the power of education even though he had little of it himself. As for the boys, they had always smiled tolerantly at the idea and gone back to the boats or to the horses. It was enough for them that Catherine would carry the standard of book learning in the family.

On that particular Easter day Tom sat, smoking his pipe by the gable end of the house. He looked down at the lake where the young people were having a picnic. It was grand to see them

enjoying themselves, Catherine and her school friend with her brother and that other lad, Cardiff, the doctor's son from Wexford. His own two boys had been there for a while, Laurence and Michael, called for his brothers who had gone out foreign. He noticed that they had left the picnic party, probably remembering things they had to do.

"What happened to the fish?" His wife's voice broke into his thoughts. "Where's the fish? It could be drying in this sun."

"I took it down. I, eh, put it back in the salt."

"And why did you do that? Wasn't it salty enough?"

"Ah well, you know."

"Oh, I know, all right."

He saw her mouth close into that familiar line of disapproval, with small spider-web wrinkles at the corner and with a shock of realisation, he saw that she was getting old.

"I know right well. Young madam there, told you to take it down, so as not to embarrass her in front of the quality."

"There's nothing wrong with a decent bit of ling."

"So why take it down, then?"

He knew that she was right, but he did not want to admit it.

"She's only a child and this is the first time she has brought her friends home. I just thought I'd tidy up around the place."

He knocked his pipe on the side of the bench and trod on the dottle, grinding it into the gravel.

"Well, I'll be as happy if they don't come again in a hurry."

"Why is that?" He had to admit that she had the name of being a shrewd judge of character.

"That young fellow Boxwell is a decent enough young man, but I think his sister is sly."

She said it without elaboration or corroboration. He wondered how she had come to this conclusion.

"Why do you say that?"

"There's something about her, the way she looks at you. I don't know. All sweetness to your face. Too sweet in my opinion."

It might have been a prejudice, she admitted, about this branch of a fine old Protestant family who had turned Papist for no good reason that she could think of. She wiped her hands on her apron, still looking down at the group by the lakeside.

"I'd be afraid Catherine would be said by her too much."

Tom moved aside, motioning her to sit down, but she declined.

"I've things to do."

"They can wait." He loosened his high collar and removed his bowler, brushing it with his cuff, although it was spotless. She sat down reluctantly, as if ready to spring up again and go about some urgent task.

"What about the other fella, then?"

He was teasing her, deferring to her astute judgement, yet knowing that she knew he would take no notice. It was a game he played which sometimes amused her, but this time she did not smile.

"There are two kinds of Cardiffs, the mad ones and the grand ones. I don't know which is worse."

He laughed, "The mad ones and the grand ones. Which have we got here today?"

"That's what I can't make out."

"He seems a very fine young man to me."

"Keep him away from our daughter, that's all I'm saying."

'Our daughter,' he reflected, realising her genuine concern. It was 'your daughter' when he was indulging her, when she was dissociating herself from the situation, but now she was closing ranks. He said nothing, feeling her concern. My daughter, he thought. Our daughter. He felt a sudden pity for his wife.

Her family had it hard as far back as Ninety Eight and the rising, when the roof was burned over their heads. Her father, the Reverend Wray, took the fever during the potato famine and left them near penniless. She was always on guard, he thought, expecting the bad times to come back, unable to relax in a bit of prosperity. Now there was another thing to worry about.

"But sure they're only children. Time enough to worry about all that sort of thing later when she's grown up."

Still this was a cloud on the horizon. She twisted the apron in her hands.

"Mad Cardiffs and grand Cardiffs." He laughed at the conjunction. "We could do without that."

She stood up suddenly.

"Anyway, enough of this nonsense. You can get the pony trap ready for them. I dare say they'll be starting back soon enough. Then you can put the fish back."

"Time enough for that." He crossed his legs and began to refill his pipe. "Maybe you'd bring me a light when you have a minute."

"Hmm!" she grunted and went indoors.

Catherine knew that Elizabeth had brought John Cardiff just to make her jealous. Although they were best friends, she knew that Elizabeth liked to put her down, always in the nicest way of course. Elizabeth had the ability to say things that were hurtful in intent and yet when you unpicked the words, there was nothing that you could put your finger on. She always thought of the right retort for Elizabeth, but always a day too late. Sometimes she thought she hated her. But this time with a surge of joy, she knew that Elizabeth's plan had backfired. That was what her uncle Laurence said when he came back from South America with only one eye. She was very small at the time, three or four when he made his last visit. He had a black patch over his right eye.

"Blasted thing backfired," he said, "savin' your presence, Ma'm." This to her mother, who never allowed profanity. He held the imaginary musket to his shoulder and swung it around to take aim. "A painted savage, he was." He laughed at the humour of it all.

"Blasted thing backfired." One in the eye for Elizabeth. John Cardiff preferred her to Elizabeth. She knew it in her soul. Robert was a nice enough fellow but John Cardiff had fire in his blood. When he looked at her, she knew that he was the only one for her, forever and ever. She smiled broadly. He watched her with interest.

"What's so funny?"

He lay propped on one elbow, elegant and casual. His straw hat lay beside him on the grass. She thought of one of those French writers or maybe a poet, but his athletic looking body suggested a man of action, maybe a soldier.

"What's so funny?" he asked again, smiling.

She felt that Elizabeth was watching her intently and for a moment, she caught the hostility in her eyes. She looked away, enjoying the moment.

"I was thinking about my uncle who lost his eye."

"And that's funny?" he persisted.

"No, no. It was the way he explained it."

"I don't see how that could be funny," Elizabeth said, sniffing in disapproval.

"He was fighting savages, with my other uncle, Michael. His musket backfired."

"I still don't see what's so funny," he said wrinkling his brow in puzzlement.

"Blasted thing backfoired," she said, mimicking her uncle's deep south Wexford accent.

"Backfoired." They never lost the accent, her two uncles, even after years in South America. She wondered how they managed with the Spanish.

"Backfoired," he said, smiling, "So that was how he lost his eye."

"I still don't see what's so funny," said Elizabeth rather coldly.

"What happened then?" asked Robert, practical as always.

"Oh, my uncle Michael shot the Indian. A painted savage, he was," she said, completing the formula.

"Where did all this happen?" asked Robert. He was a person who dealt in facts.

"In South America, in Uruguay, years ago when they were getting rid of all the Indians."

"Why did they do that?"

"I don't know. I suppose they had to make room for all the cattle. I don't know really." She was not interested in pursuing the matter. "They say there are millions of cattle there running wild. There for the taking, my uncles said. Pucks o' them, they said."

"Pucks," said Elizabeth, raising an eyebrow. "I never heard that expression before. Is that what they say down here?"

That eyebrow, thought Catherine. Elizabeth used it like a weapon, an evil eye, to turn people to stone. But she did not care this time. This time it had no effect.

"Yes, that's what people say down here." She emphasised the last two words almost defiantly. She felt a kind of elation. "Down here we country bumpkins have lots of strange expressions, you know. We even have our own language."

There was a silence. She thought she saw a flicker of a smile on John Cardiff's lips and she knew that she had won.

"So anyone can claim the cattle if they want to. That's interesting." Robert was unaware of the duel that was taking place. "Are your uncles still out there?"

"Presumably. We haven't heard from them for years. It's easy to get lost out there. It's a great big empty land."

"With no Indians," John interjected. "Now that your uncles have shot them all. We should all go out there and start an empire."

He rolled on his back, squinting his eyes against the light. He hummed a tune. Elizabeth plucked at a blade of grass.

"I think it's time we were going," she said abruptly, standing up, brushing at her skirts. "We don't want to be caught out in the wilds after dark."

"Beware of the painted savages" said John, "but sure Catherine can shoot them all for us."

"I still don't see what was so funny about losing an eye. I don't think it's funny at all."

She began to gather things into the picnic basket, throwing them in any old way. John looked at Catherine. He winked conspiratorially and her world seemed suddenly perfect.

Far in the distance a cockerel crowed, a small pin-prick of sound in the immense silence of the night. First with the news, like an eager child. There were still stars in the square of window and only the dimmest suggestion of dawn. Catherine lay there reliving the day. Nearer home another cockerel joined in, claiming his portion of credit. She listened to their insistent duet, waiting for their own fellow to take up the cry.

She thought of the boat on the lake and how she trailed her fingers in the water, languidly, like a lady in a picture, as John pulled on the oars. She should have worn a crown of daisies. It made no difference that Elizabeth sat beside her in the stern, a dowdy lady-in-waiting to a queen. Let her wait, she thought. Her Lancelot handled the little boat expertly, backing water, making the craft curvet like a restive horse. The lady of the lake.

"This is where they found the chalice," she said.

"You are indeed a fount of information."

She wondered if he were teasing.

"Just down there, shining out of the sand. Somebody hid it in the water when Cromwell was coming and they forgot where it

was. Maybe Cromwell killed the person who hid it. It wasn't found for a hundred years."

"Who found it?"

"Some old ancestor of mine. He was fishing just about here and lo! A hand, clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful, rose from the water, holding the golden cup."

"Liar," said Elizabeth but even she was interested.

"Excellent," he said. "Did you make that up yourself?"

"Not exactly. I read it somewhere."

"Let's see if there's anything else down there."

He leaned over the side. The boat swayed with him.

"Careful, man," said Robert, "or you'll have us all in the water."

"Nothing there," said John. "Maybe over this side." He tipped the boat abruptly the other way.

The two girls shrieked, gripping the gunwale. John continued to rock the boat, heaving on the oars, enjoying their alarm, until he tired of the game.

She could go to him now, she thought, standing in the little boat, her white robes drifting in the light dawn air, through the cut in the sand built ridge that separated the lake from the sea, borne on the tide to Wexford, in among the great ships, their spars black against the morning light and he would be there on the quay. He would know. Somehow he would know that she was coming and they would sail away forever to the end of the world.

The cockerel squawked outside her window. His voice was broken. He could never reach that final note. A dishevelled, down-at-heel fellow, he always came late to work, hurrying to catch up on the others. He squawked again, defiantly, putting his shoulder to the wheel, heaving the sun over the horizon, entitled to a measure of the praise.

Her mother did not approve.

"Plenty of time yet to be thinking about young men," she said. "You'll have your pick of them all in good time."

"Yes, some ignorant farmer with a few acres, that you'll pick out for me."

She was not prepared to take the topic seriously. There was no need to.

"I didn't do too badly with your father and he with no grand airs about him."

Catherine felt disloyal and disloyal too to her own brothers, shy country boys, ill at ease with the visitors.

"That's different," she said.

"As for that young Cardiff boy," her mother went on, "sure the Cardiffs wouldn't walk on the same side of the street as ordinary folk."

Catherine said nothing.

"A medical student, is it? I suppose he'll take over after his father in the fever hospital."

There was a silence. An old atavistic fear came back to haunt her.

"That's no life for anyone." She shivered.

"Times have changed," said Catherine guardedly. "Anyway, it's none of my business what he does with his life. It's no concern of mine. He is just a friend of a friend, that's all. I couldn't care less."

She thought her mother had looked at her strangely. She dropped the subject.

The last star faded in the window. Sounds of the awakening farm came with the sunlight, the whinny of a horse, the clank of a milk pail and the chirping of sparrows. From out beyond the lake came the ululation of wading birds, foraging the tidal mudflats. She closed her eyes. It was the whooping of Indian warriors galloping across some far distant pampas.

Chapter Two

The castle of Ferrycarrig stands like a chess piece, commanding the river crossing. Upriver the stream is broad and slow. Oarsmen in their flimsy skiffs, darted like insects on the placid surface.

"This is a Norman castle," said Mother Alacoque and the girls listened respectfully. Mother Alacoque believed in exercise. Exercise and hygiene, although neither to excess. The girls bathed regularly, but always in long cotton shifts. In each bathing cubicle there was a notice: 'God sees you', pinned to the door. Catherine thought that it was rude of God to be peering at schoolgirls in the bath, but accepted in a vague way, that He had a job to do.

Every Saturday, Mother Alacoque took them for a brisk walk in the country, walking two by two in a long demure crocodile. Idle chatter was not encouraged. Anything of an educational nature was noted. It was such a small castle, perched there on its rock. She wondered if their feet stuck out through the little windows when they lay down to sleep, armoured feet and silver spurs bristling out of the walls. She had heard all this stuff about the Normans so many times.

"Not the original castle of course," continued Mother Alacoque. "That was up there on the hill. Fitz Stephen's castle. It's all gone now, but we still have the names with us, haven't we girls?" They nodded. Some of them bore those very names, "Prendergast, Roche, the people of the rock. They spoke French, you see." They knew that already.

"Cardiff, FitzMaurice – oh hundreds of them."

Catherine started. This was the usual dry history lesson, but now she was listening.

"They took our land from us and gave it to the king of England."

Mother Alacoque combined in her lesson a deep pride in the history of Wexford and an inveterate hatred of England. Yet she liked the Normans as such. They spoke French, which was a point in their favour and they became more Irish than the Irish. They were a paradox which she never tried to resolve.

Catherine watched the oarsmen, lithe young men in white, cutting through the water in that start-stop way which she found almost mesmeric. Then she saw him again, sculling along in a tiny shell of a craft, tanned skin against the white of his singlet. Deliberately he cut in towards the bank, until only a few yards of reeds separated him from the watching schoolgirls. He looked up, smiling and she knew that he had seen her. He pulled away smartly, followed by twenty pairs of eyes.

Catherine felt a nudge. It was Elizabeth.

"I suppose you think he's after you," she whispered.

Catherine did not reply.

"You do, don't you?" persisted Elizabeth. "Come on, you can tell me. I'm supposed to be your best friend."

She had to tell someone. She wanted to share this happiness. She wanted everyone to know that she loved John Cardiff more than anyone else in the whole wide world, more than her family or even life itself and that she would die if he did not love her too.

"He's all right, I suppose," she conceded.

"I knew it," said Elizabeth in triumph. "I could see it straight away. Oh, I'm so happy for you."

She wanted to move on to the next stage. She wanted to know everything before there was even anything to know. She was prepared to consign her own romantic longings to dust in the interests of intrigue and excitement. In a moment of bleak recognition, she realised that she needed Catherine because she was beautiful and good and people gravitated to her, while she herself appeared cold and forbidding, making people wary. It was untrue and unfair. She had feelings too, even if her heart was not pinned to her sleeve.

"You could write to him. I could give it to Robert to deliver. I can go home on Sunday. In fact, you could come with me, if you get permission."

Catherine shook her head. It was too daring, too forward. He would think it forward of her, even common, to go chasing after him like that.

"No, I couldn't do that."

Yet, why not? Life is short. Already she was seventeen. Soon she would be old and he might marry someone else. Her life would be spent in loneliness and grief. It would be too unbearable. She felt tears stinging her eyes at the dismal prospect. She would be brave. She would be reckless and seize her opportunity.

"No, I couldn't do that," she said miserably. "I could never write to him, just like that. It wouldn't be proper."

"I was only trying to help, silly goose. Have it your own way then, but don't come running to me when he goes off back to college and meets somebody else," Elizabeth sniffed her disapproving sniff. She turned away. A dark cloud of despair settled over Catherine. She completed her walk in glum silence.

Despite official indifference and an almost total absence of printed material, Mother Alacoque taught her girls the Irish language. She sat them in a semicircle, conversing with them in the musical Irish of Munster. She wrote on the blackboard, old poems she knew by heart, in a strange and elegant script, in lines as straight as a ruler. She corresponded with Gaelic scholars in Dublin, sharing her findings with joy and enthusiasm.

"Without our own language we might as well be English," she explained, a fate too terrible to contemplate.

The girls responded to her, listening to her stories of blind poets and visionaries and rack-renting landlords, driven demented by the sharp barbs of the satirists. Most of all she loved the story of Art O'Leary, a brave soldier of Ireland, murdered by the oppressor and keened in heart-breaking verse by his faithful wife.

'Mo ghrá go daingean tú,
My love was fast to you
Lá da bhaca thú
The day I saw you,
Ag ceann tighe an mhargaidh

At the top of the market house.
Thug mo shúil aire dhuit.
My eye gave notice to you,
Thug mo chroidhe taithneamh duit.
My heart gave love to you.
D'éalaíos óm' charaid leat.
I fled from my kinsfolk with you,
I bhfad ó bhaile leat.
Far from my home with you.'

Catherine felt the tears coming. She tried to stop them, but in vain. She began to sob as the tears trickled down her cheeks. She plucked the handkerchief from her sleeve and blew her nose, attracting the unwanted attention of her classmates. Mother Alacoque looked up in surprise, pausing in her reading.

"Is there something wrong, girl?"

Catherine shook her head, unable to speak.

"It's, it's just…" she began and halted.

"I know," said the nun with unexpected gentleness. "It does you credit to feel so deeply, but perhaps you would like to go outside for a little while to recover your composure."

She knew how easily young girls could let their emotions get out of hand and she had no desire to let such strong feelings take hold of the entire class.

"No thank you, Mother," said Catherine, dabbing at her eyes. "I'm all right now." She looked around sheepishly and lowered her head, scrutinising her exercise book. She had no desire to draw any further attention to herself. She began to write, conscientiously taking the lines from the blackboard, forming her letters with elaborate care.

At the break of class, amid the clatter of chairs, Elizabeth slipped the book to her, a soft cover of embossed calf leather with gold writing, Tennyson's poems, with the initials J.C. on the fly-leaf. She felt her heart lurch with joy.

"Poetry," said Elizabeth, who had examined the book minutely the night before. "To be taken in small doses, if that's the effect it has on you."

Catherine smiled at the joke and touched her friend on the wrist, Elizabeth, the best friend that anyone could ever have.

She slid the book into her satchel, contraband, certain to be snatched away by the authorities, if ever discovered. Dangerous romantic stuff that could turn a sensible girl's head.

The Reverend Mother scrutinised the letter carefully through her reading glass. She looked up at Catherine, standing by the desk. She forgot for a moment to put down the glass. Catherine was startled to see a vast cyclopean eye staring at her, seeing into her innermost thoughts.

"And this is your father's signature?"

"Oh yes, Reverend Mother. You see my mother wrote the letter. She has a very good hand you see."

"Yes, I can see that." She felt that there was a kind of Protestant tidiness about the note, a certain stiffness and formality in the mode of expression.

"But my father signed it, because he is the head of the household, you see."

"There is no need to explain that, child. He is of course, the head of the household. I hope you appreciate what a very good father he is to you too."

"Oh, I do, Reverend Mother. I do."

"Your mother too, of course," almost an afterthought.

"Oh, yes of course, Reverend Mother."

Catherine shifted from one foot to the other.

"Kindly do not fidget, child."

"I'm sorry, Reverend Mother."

"Hmmm!" She folded the letter, tapping it several times on the desk. "I suppose it would be in order. The Boxwells are a very fine family. You will, of course, conduct yourself properly, as befits a pupil of this establishment and you will return here by six o'clock, as your parents direct."

"Oh, yes Reverend Mother. I will of course."

It was so easy really. Her father could never refuse her anything, although she suspected that her mother had been less than overjoyed. Words like 'importunate' and 'stringent conditions', words her father would never have used, suggested a certain reluctance, a sub-text of disapproval.

"You may go. Go now. Go on. Away with you."

The door clicked behind her. She was free. She wanted to

leap in the air and yell, but she must comport herself like a lady, at least until Sunday.

"I'm afraid we have been very dull company," said Mrs Boxwell with an elaborate sigh, "what with the rain and Elizabeth taking to her bed like that. I thought we might have had some tennis or a nice walk by the river." She was concerned for Elizabeth, but it had happened before, particularly on a Sunday afternoon when the prospect of school on Monday quite overwhelmed the poor child. The patient, tucked up in bed with a hot lemon drink and a fire in the grate, looked as if she might just about survive.

"Oh, but I have enjoyed myself, Mrs Boxwell. I really have."

She had enjoyed the dull afternoon enormously, even more so, because of Elizabeth's sudden chill, the result of walking from Mass in the rain. Everyone else had got wet too, but they were made of coarser material. Not that she wished her any harm, but after sitting with her for an hour or so it was a relief to escape downstairs where the others were gathered by the pianoforte.

"I insist that Robert walks you back to school. He must take an umbrella. Robert," she said, "you must walk Catherine back to school and take care that she doesn't catch a chill, like your poor sister. Take an umbrella."

"Please allow me," said John, getting to his feet with alacrity. "It's on my way. It would be my pleasure."

Robert looked at the rain bucketing down and made no argument. Catherine smiled demurely.

"I'm so sorry I have to go, but you know Reverend Mother and her rules."

"Quite right too," nodded Mrs Boxwell. "We must all live by the rules. Isn't that correct, John?"

"Indeed, yes, Mrs Boxwell. Indeed we must. So I shall make it my bounden duty to see that this young lady is back safely by six o'clock."

Catherine looked down. She fidgeted with her bonnet, turning it in her hands.

"Oh, my dear," said Mrs. Boxwell, "I hope you're not getting a fever. You look quite flushed to me. John, you're a medical man, do you think she looks flushed?"

"Permit me," said John, assuming a grave, professional air. He touched her forehead and cheeks with the backs of his fingers, lingering a moment, looking thoughtful. It was more caress than diagnostic technique. She felt a turmoil inside her. She looked into his eyes.

"Hmmm," he said smiling, "I don't think there is any cause for alarm."

Despite his reassurance, she felt suddenly a roaring sound inside her head, like the sound of the waves on a stormy night as they broke over the sand bar into the lake at home. Dark patches floated in front of her eyes. She turned away, fumbling with her bonnet, closing her eyes for a moment. The waves died down and her vision cleared.

"I'll just go and say goodbye to Elizabeth," she said, anxious to be by herself for a moment. She hurried out of the room.

At the turn of the stairs she paused with one hand on the banister and took several deep breaths. She became aware that she was trembling. She heard voices below as they came out into the hallway. She heard the rattling in the hall-stand as Mrs. Boxwell selected a suitable umbrella. She ran upstairs for fear that they might see her.

"This is a good stout car umbrella," Mrs. Boxwell was saying. "See the double spokes. We always use it when we drive out."

"A very reliable instrument, Mrs. Boxwell," John agreed, examining the umbrella, giving it an experimental flap.

"Oh please, don't open it in the house. Don't you know how unlucky that is?"

John slid the umbrella closed. "No, I never heard that," he said. "We wouldn't want to bring bad luck on such an agreeable afternoon."

He looked up as Catherine descended the stairs.

"I was just saying how much I enjoyed the afternoon, Miss Doyle and how agreeable it was to meet you again."

He made a swordsman-like flourish with the umbrella, declaiming:

"And drunk delight of battle with our peers,

Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy."

Mrs Boxwell looked puzzled. "It should certainly stand up to this weather anyway."

Catherine caught his eye and smiled. Mrs. Boxwell opened the door. The rain fell like a curtain. A small river swirled in the gutter.

"You had better take my arm," he said, as they stepped outside. Catherine complied, holding her skirts out of the wet with her free hand. The stones were slippery underfoot. The rain drummed on the umbrella. She felt safe and warm.

The streets were empty except for a few dejected animals standing outside a public house, two ponies drooping in the shafts of dishevelled traps and a donkey with crooked and cruelly neglected hooves.

"What was that line you were quoting when I came down?" she asked, after a long, awkward silence.

"Ah, so you haven't read my present," he accused lightly.

He was correct in his assumption. She had not read the book, but she had caressed it, revelling in the sensuous softness of the calfskin and the flickering gold on the edges of the pages as she fluttered them with her thumb. She had held it to her breast in the darkness of the night, longing for the time to luxuriate in its verses, perhaps by the river on a sunny day, or reclining in her little boat while he…

"I didn't thank you properly. It was very nice of you. Was that line from the book?"

"Ulysses," he replied. "My favourite." He quoted again:

"For our purpose holds to sail beyond the sunset,
And the baths of all the western stars, until we die."

They walked in silence for a while. Rainwater spurted at them from downpipes but they paid no attention. She did not notice that her buttoned overshoes were already soaking or that her hem dragged in the wet. She gripped his arm.

"Ulysses," he said. "He's the man for me."

"But aren't you going to be a doctor?"

He snorted in derision.

"I thought I was, but no. Do you know what I'll be studying if I go back? I'm supposed to go back on Wednesday."

"What will you be studying?" She thought of cadavers and grisly anatomy rooms.

"Pill rolling," he said, laughing. "We have to learn to make pills. They want to make an apothecary out of me. We have to

weigh the stuff and roll it into pills on a little tray. Can you imagine the boredom?"

"But surely you have to know everything there is to know. It is a very noble calling, don't you think?"

"I look at my father dealing out dribs and drabs of medicine all his life and still the people die. Even the doctors die. What's the point of it all, tell me?"

"It is a noble calling to help others," she said primly.

"The noblest calling," he said with sudden vehemence, "is to be yourself, not what others want you to be."

She pondered for a while.

"You said 'if'," she pressed.

"If what?"

"If you go back on Wednesday."

"Did I?"

"Yes."

They walked on some distance in silence. He took out his watch and flicked it open.

"Come down by the quay," he said "to look at the ships."

"Why?"

"I like to look at them."

"Why?"

"There's something about a ship. Any boat really. As soon as you cast off, everything changes. All bets are off. Think about that day on the lake. I know what you were thinking then."

He became animated. "It's an act of faith. There are only a few inches of timber between you and a watery grave. Yet we trust the boat to keep us alive."

"I never thought about it like that. Anyway what was I thinking?"

He chuckled and said nothing. They emerged onto the rain-washed quay. Schooners lay against the wall. Far out on the harbour a white sail made towards open water.

They made their way through the clutter of cordage and barrels, stepping over mooring lines.

"What was I thinking?" she challenged him. A seaman in streaming oilskins watched them with idle interest, a Mulatto, a Lascar, some foreign race. He leaned on the rail of a little steamer, sheltering his pipe under the broad brim of his hat, impervious to the rain, his face impassive.

"You were thinking," said John, lowering his voice, speaking with sudden intensity, "you were thinking that if I asked you to come away with me, to leave home and family and come away to the ends of the world, you would come with me."

"I would?" She felt a chill of fear.

"You would. You know you would."

"But that could never happen."

"It can. It will," he said urgently, gripping her by the elbows. The umbrella fell unheeded to the ground. It bowled towards the quayside, vaulted once over its shaft and dropped into the water. The breeze caught it, taking it out into the stream.

"I would," she said softly, moving close to him. "I would. I would." She turned her face up to him, oblivious of the rain and he kissed her. The Lascar, impassive, drew on his pipe. The umbrella made good speed down river towards the open sea.

They walked, linking arms together. They plotted and planned their future. They laughed at anything and everything and nothing at all. He quoted again:

"It may be that the gulfs will wash us down.
It may be we will reach the Happy Isles
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew."

She knew that no gulf would wash them down. He stood on a bollard to declaim the poem. He raised his hands aloft, as he spoke in a fine ringing baritone. He leaped down and embraced her. They shook hands on the deal at White's Hotel, reaching across the narrow thoroughfare, as people delighted in doing. They splashed through the puddles, until, suddenly, it was half past eight and she arrived at the convent gates, soaked through to her undergarments and in serious trouble.

Chapter Three

The note in her missal told of Saint John, plunged into boiling oil on the orders of the Emperor, but saved by a striking miracle.

'Thou hast protected me, O God, from the assembly of the malignant, from the workers of iniquity, alleluia.'

The priest droned on, thinking of his breakfast. An unfair thought, she reflected. There was a chill in the church at such an early hour and a hollow echo which picked up the voice of the celebrant and carried it, reverberating, into the rafters.

'You see that on every side, we are afflicted by evils; grant we pray you, that the glorious intercession of blessed John, Your apostle and evangelist, may be our protection.'

Boiling oil would be the least of her troubles if Reverend Mother had her way. A stern letter to home, asking for an immediate interview had most probably arrived. Her parents might well be on the road already.

'The just shall flourish like the palm-tree,' she read, 'florebit in aeternum.' She savoured the words. She knew that there were palm-trees in that country.

The girls shuffled to Communion with heads bowed, but some of them looked curiously in her direction, a public sinner, kneeling in her place, barred from the sacrament until such time as her sin should be expiated. It was a deliciously interesting situation and some wondered if her parents would cast her forth from their door into a life of penury and shame. They hoped that nothing terrible would happen of course, but it was interesting

all the same. She had spent a whole day, unchaperoned, with a man. Who knows where? It was known that he was a doctor from Dublin and that he smoked Spanish cigars. Elizabeth Boxwell knew the whole story but of course, she was saying nothing.

'And the heavens shall confess thy wonders.'

The Mass concluded. The priest closed the book with a resounding thwack.

"No talking please," said the old nun, as they fell into their accustomed line. She resented this extra responsibility, wishing fervently that the workmen would hurry up with the new convent chapel. The girls were hungry however and would make good time.

The streets were becoming busy. Shopkeepers were opening shutters or pulling down their sunshades. The nun yawned. She looked at the fish in the fishmonger's window. They stared back at her with their mouths open; haddock, hake, lugubrious gurnet. Disgraceful prices, she thought. Impossible to feed people at those prices. She resented her responsibility as bursar. Nobody appreciated how difficult it could be to balance the books.

A herd of cattle passed by, heading for the Liverpool boat. The girls scattered in alarm, cringing in doorways until the way was clear again. Meat, too, thought the nun. Scandalous!

A young man raised his cap to her and she acknowledged his greeting. A fine looking fair-haired young fellow, carrying a valise and helping an old woman in a black hooded shawl. He held her elbow as they crossed the street, stepping carefully to avoid the dung. It was unusual to find such courtesy in young people nowadays, even if he was smoking a slim panatella. She remembered the smell. She remembered her father's shop, how he would indulge in a smoke at the end of a long day and how proud he was when she told him that she was going to enter the convent. He took down a box and extracted a cigar, sniffed the length of it appreciatively and snipped off the end with a little metal device, which he kept in his waistcoat pocket.

"This is a cause for celebration," he said expansively, lighting a paper spill from the sputtering oil lamp.

The smell of the young man's panatella lingered in the air. Suddenly she longed for home, for her parents and the children

she never had and she felt grief for the old woman in the black cloak, hobbling beside her boy, taking him to the boat, saying goodbye to him for the last time, probably never to see him again in this world. She said a little prayer for mothers everywhere and was glad that she would never feel their pain.

"Scandalous prices," she said aloud, clucking her tongue. She ushered the girls onwards, hurrying to keep up with them, reflecting that she was letting her mind wander from her responsibilities. She resolved to make some little act of self-denial as a penance.

Tom Doyle was intimidated by the convent parlour. He shuffled his feet awkwardly, fearful that he would scrape the polished floor. Dorothy sat quietly, with her hands joined in her lap. She approved of the neatness of the place and the absence of dust on the highly polished furniture, but the holy pictures she found oppressive.

The Reverend Mother entered like a whirlwind. The large beads which she wore at her waist, clattered against the door.

"She's gone," she said without preamble. "That wicked, wicked girl."

Tom started to his feet. He would not hear his daughter spoken of in such terms.

"No," he began and then the meaning of her words dawned on him. "No," he said again sitting down, shaking his head. He made a vague gesture with the hand that held his hat, "No, no," he said again. "No."

"What do you mean, gone? Where is our daughter?" He heard as if from afar, his wife's voice, stern and unwavering.

"She has gone," replied the nun, "She has run away. We have searched everywhere. We have notified the police. I have personally questioned every girl in the school and find no trace of her."

Tom got to his feet again.

"She must be somewhere around," he said anxious to go, to search the streets, to stop everyone he might meet. "She must be around somewhere." He felt a cold fear clutching at him and his mouth was dry. "She must be around somewhere."

"Your letter mentioned a young man." Dorothy rose to her feet. Her face was grim.

"I have already communicated with his parents. They dismiss the notion that he might be involved, quite out of hand. They are a very good family, you understand."

"How dare you? Are you suggesting…?" Dorothy's face was white with fury. "You had the care of our daughter and you have failed in your duty."

Tom looked at his wife in amazement. She had the rights of it, but he would never have dared to put it so bluntly.

"She is a very headstrong girl, that's all I was suggesting," mumbled the Reverend Mother, taken somewhat aback.

"This young man's name, please, and where may we find him?" said Dorothy coldly.

"He is Dr. Cardiff's son, John. I am informed that he returned to his studies in Dublin this very morning. They are one of the best families in the town," she added uncomprehending. "Very respectable people."

"Come away, husband," said Dorothy. "We have no further business here."

Tom followed her from the parlour in a kind of daze. He saw the bright May sunlight dazzling on the black and red tiles of the corridor. He heard the chatter of schoolgirls and their bright, echoing laughter. He trembled with dread.

"Good heavens, no," said Dr Cardiff. "My son is a scapegrace young fellow at times, but I assure you, he would never do anything dishonourable."

He put his hands behind his back, swishing the tails of his frock coat. A watch chain gleamed on his waistcoat. He paced a few steps along the corridor then turned to them again, simple country folk in some distress.

"I'm sure there is some explanation. In all likelihood she will be waiting for you when you get home. Young girls, you know, they take everything so seriously. You say she was in some spot of bother in school."

"Aye, that's right, Doctor," said Tom, hoping that the doctor could make sense of it all. An educated man. "She arrived back late on Sunday."

"With your son, they tell us," said Dorothy, coming directly to the point.

"Ah," said Dr Cardiff, pacing again. "But I can assure you…" He paused and rubbed his bearded chin. He dismissed the thought. "My son has gone back to college in Dublin. He went back this morning."

"This morning? Do you not think that a bit of a coincidence?" She knew that this must be the explanation and was relieved at the certainty that Catherine was alive. I'll kill her when I get my hands on her, she thought, furious with the girl and furious with the two slow-witted men who stood before her, frowning.

"We must follow them," she said.

"I can give you the address of my son's lodgings, but I am sure there is no need."

"Yes, yes," said Tom. They could get to Dublin in a few hours and have her home the following day, before any harm came to the poor child.

Dr Cardiff wrote on a piece of paper with the stub of a pencil.

"These are his lodgings," he said. "Perhaps he can shed some light on the matter, but I fear you are putting yourselves to a lot of unnecessary trouble. However, there is a train this afternoon, to the best of my knowledge."

"Aye, thank you, Doctor," said Tom. His wife looked at him sharply, as if he had put a knuckle to his forelock.

"We will leave you now, sir," she said. "If you hear of anything, perhaps you will be good enough to let us know."

"Of course. Of course," he said with professional gentleness. "In the unlikely event of what you are saying, being true, however, let me assure you that my son is an honourable man who would treat your daughter with respect." He dismissed the absurd notion from his mind. "I'm sure you will have better news presently. You'll see. These things work out in the end."

He shook their hands and showed them to the door. Tom raised his hat. Dorothy pulled on her gloves, thinking of fever. The doctor frowned for a moment. He shook his head, dismissing the thought and returned to his rounds.

The priest looked at the young couple sitting in the pew. Not the usual Irish emigrants who poured through Liverpool on

their way to the New World. These were well dressed and well shod, with an air of confidence about them, particularly the young man.

"I think you would do better to go home and ask your parents' permission. It's better in the long run. There is no harm done, so you tell me." He coughed awkwardly. "There is still time to put things right with your people."

Catherine shook her head. She would not allow her happiness to be snatched away from her at the last minute by some old priest who knew nothing of the world or of love. Strange, she thought, that her day had begun in a church, with the Mass of St John, the boiling oil and everything and now the day was ending in a church, in a strange city, with the light fading and the hustle and bustle of a great sea-port all around them.

"You would not want us to burn in Hell for all eternity, would you?" There was almost a tinge of insolence in the way John put it, with a half smile twitching at his lips. "Would that not be the greater evil?"

"There is the matter of the banns. I would have to read the banns."

"Banns or no banns," retorted John, "We will be on a ship tomorrow morning, bound for South America, even if we have to ask the captain to marry us."

"That would be no marriage in the sight of God," said the priest severely. "I forbid it."

"Very well," said John, getting to his feet. "We must take our chances with the fires of Hell."

The priest looked down at the young girl, little more than a child. Tears glistened in her eyes, catching the light from the candles before a shrine.

"I want to be married in church, Father," she said, "but whether or no, I will be John's wife."

The priest sighed. They would need whatever blessing they could take with them to their new life in some wild and savage country. He wished that his words had the power to make them return to their people, but it was hopeless. In the deepest recesses of his soul, he envied them.

"Very well, then," he conceded, defeated on his own terms. He went to speak to the sexton, who all this time had been

engaged at the back of the church, knocking a broom against the furniture, making the most intriguing echoes, in between testing the creaking hinges of the doors and the confessional. The sexton departed and reappeared presently with the housekeeper, a gaunt, spare woman, a poor substitute for family and friends.

The priest drove a hard bargain, insisting on confession and absolution before any wedding could take place. He spoke to them of the pain they had caused by their wilfulness and how they must write immediately to their parents, assuring them of their safety. This was a condition of absolution, he insisted. Furthermore they must continue to write. He had seen too many Irish disappear into that great void. Then he joined their hands together. They became man and wife and John gave her his grandmother's ring, the grandmother who had doted on him and had put the money by for his education.

Then it was done. She thought of how happy her parents would be when they heard. She thought that some day they would go home to Wexford, possibly with children and they would all celebrate together. She thought that her happiness would last forever and no matter what happened, no matter how they might lose patience with each other sometimes, or grow old and cranky, it would be enough for one of them to mention Liverpool and their wedding and all would be well again between them.

In a cheap hotel she tasted wine for the first time, strong wine from Portugal, a deep ruby red. It made her laugh. People looked at them, smiling. They had giggled about this at school, what men and women do. There had been jokes about wedding nights and talk about farm animals. She knew a certain amount about all that. She recalled her father taking the cows to the bull and how her mother would enquire as to whether everything had gone according to plan, as she put it. Even the old crack-voiced cockerel did his duty manfully, crowing about it afterwards.

Now it was no subject for joking or sly innuendo. Now she was a woman. In that small sloping bedroom at the top of the house, she made love with John and felt pain, joy and physical delight in his warm hard body. This was not something she could explain even to her closest friends. He knew what he was about

and she responded to him, despite the pain and the sharp points of horsehair in the mattress. She wished that this could last forever, but suddenly he groaned and shuddered, rolling away from her with a long sigh. He laughed.

"If they could see us now," he said.

She pondered the idea in silence.

"What would your mother think of us?" he teased.

Catherine touched the ring, turning it on her finger. There was no going back.

"I am a Cardiff now," she said, "for better or for worse."

They lay together, secure in the warmth. The clock ticked insistently. A ship's bell clanged. A foghorn groaned far away, like a sick cow.

She turned to him again, eager for his touch, but he was asleep. She looked at him in the dim light and felt a great tenderness. He was exhausted. He had great responsibilities ahead of him. She touched his cheek as he had touched hers on that rainy day so long ago in that other world. She lay close to him, listening to his breathing. The clock ticked. Voices sounded in the street below, loud laughter. Footsteps retreated. The foghorn groaned again and amid thoughts of home, she drifted into sleep.

Tom Doyle read the letter again. It was creased and frayed from folding and opening. She signed herself *'Your loving daughter, Catherine.'*

"Put it away," said his wife. "There's nothing to be done about the situation for now. When we get an address we can write to them and persuade them to come home."

"Aye," he nodded, replacing the letter in his inside pocket. "We can do that."

"She has a lot of growing up to do," said Dorothy "but they will be back. That young man has no staying power. You'll see."

"You could be right. We'll see her come in that gate in a month or two, when she comes to her senses."

"We can help them get started. Things are not so bad."

"Aye the money is there. We could maybe buy a bit of a farm for them. That's what we can do."

She knew that he was trying his best. She knew that his heart was broken. She felt a hard cold anger for what her daughter

had done to them and particularly what she had done to Tom. He was incapable of anger, even towards the young man, but Dorothy was different. If she could eliminate him, she would. If he fell from the ship and was devoured by sharks or mangled in the paddle wheel, she would feel no grief for him.

"He sounds like a good lad, all the same," said Tom. "She says that they are all right for cash. Sure if Catherine loves him he must be a good lad. I dare say he'll be good to her."

"I dare say he will," she agreed. Her anger was ebbing away. "We must make the best of it. He is a part of our family now."

Tom looked at her in surprise. He had never seen her cry before, in all the years they had been together. He patted her shoulder with awkward gentleness.

"We'll make the best of it," he agreed. "He must be a good lad all the same, if she feels that way about him."

She patted his hand. "Well, we have things to do," she said briskly. "We can't stand around moping all day."

She took her apron from the hook on the back of the kitchen door, her hands fumbling as she made a bow at the back. She paused for a moment, then straightened the starched white cloth, smoothing it downwards with both palms.

"We have things to do," she said again, picking up her broom. Tom looked out of the window at the lake, the stiff reeds at the margin and the sea stretching endlessly beyond the sandbar.

"Aye, that we have," he said, but he made no move.

Chapter Four

The steamship, *Mersey*, butted into an unseasonable westerly gale, with the flag of the Royal Mail streaming bravely on the mizzen and all sails furled. Each time a wave caught the housing around the paddle wheels, the ship jolted or lurched to one side or the other. Sometimes the wheels flailed in vain, catching only air and the ship seemed to stop for an instant before ploughing ahead with renewed determination.

Below decks, the thump, thump of the engine reverberated through all parts of the ship. In their cramped cabin, no bigger than a wardrobe, John wished that he could die. The air was fetid with the smell of sickness. The curtain which shielded them from other passengers, did nothing to keep out the constant groaning of the sick and the crying of infants.

"Leave me alone," he said miserably, pushing her hand away, "I don't want it."

The smell of the soup made him retch and Catherine stepped back in alarm. He sank back onto the bunk.

"I'm sorry," he gasped. "I just can't manage it."

She wished that he would eat something. She had struggled through the crowd for that pannikin of soup, pushing her way to where the steward stood, bracing his knees against the huge pot and ladling the soup out to anyone who could stomach it. In fine weather the surge of people was even worse, but even now it was a struggle to be served. Food would be good for him, she was sure. She could not understand his attitude or why he had become so bad tempered. She thought the sea journey a fine adventure and delighted in walking on deck, even in rough weather. She left him to his misery and went up on deck. The

wind was sharp and clean. The hood of her black silk school visite fell back. Her hair streamed in the gale. She warmed her hands on the tin mug. It would be a sin to waste it. She sat up on a folded life raft, swinging her legs like a child, sipping the well-salted soup and looking around. The deck was almost deserted. Black smoke rolled from the funnels overhead. The furled sails looked grey and soiled. She had expected canvas, white as the breast of a swan, carrying her over the water to her new home, but here she was in a snorting iron tub that wallowed in every trough. It amused her to think that things never work out the way you expect them and she felt a small triumph that she at least, was enjoying the experience.

The only other people on deck were a low-sized stocky man with a small moustache and a lady whom Catherine presumed to be his wife. They gripped the rail, enjoying the sea air and conversing in a language which she guessed was Spanish. The man wore rather baggy trousers, she noticed, tucked into his high boots. The lady gathered a shawl about her shoulders. Her hair was black and gathered at the back by a tortoise-shell comb. They looked in her direction. She lowered her eyes, concentrating on the soup. She heard their footsteps on the boards and they sat down beside her.

"You are enjoying your dinner?"

She looked up shyly. The man was smiling. His eyes were dark brown, with creases at the corners, as if he squinted into the sun a lot or maybe smiled a lot. She could not decide.

"Oh yes thank you, sir." She raised her voice against the wind and the thrumming of the rigging.

"It is pleasant to dine out of doors."

She nodded.

"You are travelling with your parents? Where do you go to?" enquired the lady.

"No, Ma'm. I am travelling with my husband, but he isn't here. I mean he isn't well. He's in bed."

"Your husband!" said the lady, raising her eyebrows. "But you are too young to have a husband."

"No I'm not," said Catherine defiantly. "We have been married since..." She hesitated. "Since Wednesday." She blushed.