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Saints and Sinners

Written by Paul Cuddihy

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PAUL CUDDIHY

Saints
AND
SINNERS

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I

GUARDIAN ANGEL

It might have been the braying of a restless horse or the snap of a branch, like a chicken's neck being wrung, but when Mick Costello recalled it later, he swore it was a hand that shook his body awake, though when he opened his eyes there was no one there. Whatever it had been, Mick sprung out of bed, alert and on edge. He crept across the room and gently edged the latch up before inching the door open. Clouds of mist silently buffeted each other as they rolled towards the cottage, ready to devour it.

Mick stared hard at the mist – he didn't know why – because there was nothing to see, just a wall of soft, white tufts that moved and shifted shape as they got closer to him. It wasn't even like night-time, when his eyes would adjust to the darkness as he walked across the fields from Doogan's, navigating a precarious path home. He had to admit he'd often owed more to good fortune than good sense, especially when he'd had one too many for the road, and there were times when his mother demanded to know who he'd been scrapping with when she saw the state of him in the morning.

'You'll not tell me you fell this time, Michael Costello,' she'd say, peering closely at his battered face. 'There's an angry fist to blame for that eye and no mistake.'

'I swear to God, mammy,' he'd reply, blessing himself. 'It was an accident.'

She would shake her head as she shuffled away from him towards the steaming stove, Mick's nose sensing breakfast wasn't too far away.

'But you should see the state of the wall that did it.'

'You're an awful boy, Michael Costello. Just like your father and no mistake. He was fond of the drink, too, and that's what done for him, God rest his soul.'

Mick would groan and bury his head under his jacket, though it never drowned out his mother's voice or the clatter of pots and kettles on the stove.

'Now get yourself up out of that bed,' she'd snap. 'Everyone else is already out working and there'll be no breakfast for those that don't pull their weight in this house.'

Now Mick could hear his mother's gentle snoring and he glanced over to where she slept, his youngest sister, Margaret, wrapped across her stomach. The other girls – Bridget and Mary – slept back-to-back in the far corner of the room while Patrick had rolled himself into a ball on the bed where Mick had been lying, his sleeping body suddenly cold with the departure of a warm companion.

Mick sighed, his shoulders relaxing, and he pushed on the door, glancing out one final time before he'd let it close over again. Something caught his eye; a glint of light, just for the briefest of moments before it disappeared in the mist, but it was enough to put him on edge again. His heart was thumping and he checked to make sure it hadn't wakened anyone else in the cottage.

Leaving the door unlocked, Mick scurried back to bed and grabbed his clothes, his head almost diving through the hole in his jumper in its eagerness to help him dress quickly. He waited till he was back at the door before he stepped into his damp boots, like standing in a cold pool, but he knew his feet would soon heat up once he was on the move. Slipping his jacket on, his hand automatically reached into the pocket and retrieved a black, woolly hat his mother had knitted him. It would keep his ears warm, he thought, as he edged his way out of the cottage, closing

the door over as gently as he could from the outside, all the while desperate not to wake the rest of the family.

Once outside, facing the mist like he was standing guard against its inevitable onslaught, Mick wasn't sure what to do next. The noise of a horse made up his mind. He scurried round the side of the cottage and across the sodden turf until the outline of a wall became visible. He leapt over it effortlessly and immediately crouched down behind its solid form, hoping the chickens wouldn't betray him.

His eyes remained focused on the place where he had seen . . . what? Nothing now but the white clouds and Mick began to wonder if his eyes and ears had been playing tricks on him, but he'd had no more to drink the night before than on any other occasion, and his head didn't feel at all fuzzy.

The sound of a horse again.

Mick tensed and lowered himself until his eyes were staring across the top of the wall. Out of the mist they appeared, men and beasts, ghostly apparitions that he still wasn't sure were real or not. He quickly counted them. Twelve, as far as he could see, including two on horse-back, all wearing red jackets – the Queen's men – except for one rider.

When he dismounted, Mick noticed he was all in black, like an undertaker, but he didn't think the man was there with news of a relative's demise, though he suspected he was here to measure someone for the drop. The man took off his hat, wiped the front of it on the sleeve of his long jacket and then slipped it back on, where it perched perfectly on his head. Mick could have blown it off without too much effort if he'd been close enough, but he wasn't for trying it now.

The man in black stood a few paces from the cottage door. He nodded towards the red jackets, four of whom ran forward and disappeared inside the cottage. Mick cursed the fact he'd left the door off the latch. The rest of the soldiers stood alert, rifles pointed at the door. Their comrades quickly re-emerged into the cold.

'He's not there,' one of them reported to the man in black.

‘That’s impossible,’ he said, signalling to the rest of the men. Seven of them disappeared into the cottage while the original four stood awkwardly outside. This time Mick could hear noises coming from inside, raised voices from his family and the soldiers. Then the seven red jackets came out to report the same thing as their four companions.

‘So who is in there?’ asked the man in black.

‘The mother and some children,’ one of the soldiers said. ‘Four of them. Three girls and a boy.’

‘Well, bring them out then.’

Mick gripped the edge of the wall, digging his fingertips into the hard surface until it hurt and turned his knuckles white.

His mother was pushed out first, with Margaret’s thin, bare arms wrapped round her waist. As the older woman stumbled, one of the soldiers instinctively grabbed her arm to steady her. The man in black stepped forward and punched him.

‘This isn’t a mercy mission,’ he said as the soldier staggered back, holding his hand to his face.

Then Patrick and his other sisters appeared beside his mother. The five of them clung to each other for comfort and warmth. The soldiers spread out until they formed a semi-circle round the shivering group. The man in black produced a parchment from his jacket which he unrolled and began reading.

‘By the power invested in me by her gracious majesty, Queen Victoria, Sovereign of the United Kingdom and of the Dominions, in this year of our Lord, eighteen hundred and ninety-one, I hereby serve notice of a warrant for the arrest of Michael Costello, in relation to crimes, specified herein, against said Crown. He is to surrender his person to the authority of the Crown, in this instance being myself as the legitimately appointed magistrate of the county of Galway . . . Where is he?’

There was no reply.

‘I am here for Michael Costello and I will not ask you again. Where is he?’

None of them know where I am, Mick wanted to shout out but he didn’t. He glanced at his fingers, still digging angrily at

the wall as tiny traces of blood began to creep out from under them.

‘Get the woman,’ Mick heard the man in black say and he saw two red jackets grab his mother. He wanted to jump over the wall as the soldiers got involved in a tug-of-war with his brother and sisters over his mother, but it felt like an invisible hand held him back.

The children’s collective strength was no match for the soldiers and his mother stood between the two men while his siblings howled into the cold morning, kept back by the rifle butts of the other men.

‘If you want to defy the Queen’s law, then Ireland will have another few orphans this very morning,’ the man in black said.

‘I don’t know where he is,’ she said, ‘and even if I did I wouldn’t tell you.’

‘So be it.’

The man in black nodded to one of the soldiers, who stepped out to face Mick’s mother, no more than six paces from her. Now was the moment when Mick had to give himself up, but still he couldn’t. His eyes searched the ground around him until they stopped on a rock nestling comfortably in the soggy grass. His bloody fingers started digging at the turf, easily unearthing the rock. It more than covered his hand but he knew he’d be able to throw it as far as he wanted, from here to Doogan’s if necessary.

As he stood up his knees cracked and he paused, though no one would have heard it above the wails of his brother and sisters, which were loud enough even to wake his father, and he’d been dead over five years since. Out the corner of his eye, Mick saw a mound of cow dung and quickly immersed the rock in it before launching it towards his mother. He watched as it sailed effortlessly through the air, piercing the rolling clouds of mist and gliding like an eagle towards its target. He muttered a prayer to Saint Jude, knowing that it would be a miracle if he was successful. And then like a silent bullet, it smacked the soldier pointing a rifle at his mother straight in the face and laid him flat out on the ground.

There was a split second of silence as his comrades tried to comprehend what had happened but before anything else could fill that space, Mick began whooping, giant screams of delight that filled every inch of the air. He was dancing, jumping about like he'd won first prize at the Tuam Fair. Then the first bullet whizzed by his ear and slammed into the chicken coup. He heard a muffled squawk and knew it had found a target. Not waiting to be next, he turned and ran, vaulting over the wall at the other side of the pen and sprinting across the field, stumbling and falling and picking himself up and running again.

He could hear voices and more gunshots trying to hit shadows and still his legs kept moving. The voices weren't getting any further away and he knew he'd have to reach the river to have any chance of escape before the horses caught up with him.

His throat was burning, his chest ready to burst but still he kept going, pushing one heavy leg in front of the other. He'd never been much of a runner but now he felt he could run to the end of Ireland if needs be. His life depended on it, after all. Still the voices pursued him, though they'd obviously decided to save their bullets until they were sure what they were shooting at. That thought gave him a moment of relief but it didn't slow him down.

Then he heard the gurgle of water and felt he was almost safe, though in almost the same instant came a thunderous rumble as hooves closed in on him. He pushed himself even faster, struggling for breath as the dawn cold rushed into his mouth every time he tried gulping for much-needed air. And then he was on his back. He lay flat on the wet turf, dazed. He knew whatever he'd hit hadn't been solid enough to be a wall – he couldn't think of any man-made obstacle in the field anyway – and he'd bounced backwards. A snort told him it was a cow. He'd kill that bloody Edward Ryan when he saw him. He was forever letting his herd have the run of the field at all times of day or night.

Mick pushed himself up on his elbow, aware that the thunder was closer than ever, and came face-to-face with a bull. Shit! He staggered back to his feet, not sure whether to sprint or try to creep apologetically past the beast. He rubbed his head, aware of

a dull pain that would surely produce a great bump before too long, but now was not the time to feel sorry for himself. He stared at the bull, which stared back unblinking. It snorted, rolls of condensed breath escaping from its square nose and mingling with the mist. Mick didn't need a second invitation to start running again.

The bull was right behind him and Mick knew he couldn't run in a straight line. He swerved to the right and then to the left, all the time the beast's heavy breathing following him. Where was the river? He could hear the water, even louder than before, but just as it emerged from the mist he heard a crack, like the angry spit of a log on the fire, and his left shoulder jerked forward, seared by a hot poker. He stumbled on through the reeds and plunged, head first, into the water.

Mick could never decide what hurt more – the ice-cold river as it welcomed his body, or his flesh, burning from the callous brand of a bullet. He flapped and flailed in the water, trying to get back to the surface and at the same time, pushing himself away from the edge. The bull wouldn't pursue him any further but he knew the others would be less reluctant.

'I think I got him,' a voice said above the clatter of hooves on the ground. 'He's in the water.'

Other voices were getting nearer as the soldiers caught up.

'Spread out along the bank and shoot on sight,' one said. 'And someone do something about that bloody bull.'

A single gunshot rang out in the cold morning, followed swiftly by the crash of the dead beast to the ground. Mick swam with even more determination.

The pub was now enthralled, even those who'd heard the story many times before. Mick Costello could tell a good tale, that's what they all said, and he knew it himself. He sat back and folded his arms with a knowing smile.

'It's thirsty work, this story-telling,' he said.

There were a few groans but within minutes another pint and a glass of whiskey appeared in front of him. He took a long gulp of

beer, burping gratefully before sipping the golden liquid and running his tongue across his lips to clear up any stray drops. There were other tales, each one worth a pint or two, and he wasn't slow to produce them on occasion, but this was his favourite. It was also where his story – the reason why he was sitting talking to familiar faces and complete strangers on a cold December Wednesday night in a Glasgow pub – began, so it was well worth the telling, and not just for the drink that wet his whistle and refreshed his memory.

He stood up and stretched, provoking a few groans, and noticed the face of the man who'd supplied the latest drink.

'Don't worry, lads, I just need to make some room for this,' Mick said, lifting up his pint, and the supplier's face relaxed. 'I'll be back in a minute.'

He staggered through the men who'd crowded round the small wooden table and headed towards the back of the pub, the clouds of smoke hovering just below the ceiling reminding him of the mist that morning and a wave of homesickness washed over him. It took him by surprise and he was glad of the fresh air that slapped his face as he stepped outside.

An old man stood at the wall, one hand holding it up while he swayed and sprayed at the same time. Mick stood at the opposite end and stared down at the gutter as he emptied his bladder. A match was struck on the wall behind him and Mick turned his head while trying to make sure he didn't wet himself. Someone lit a cigarette and blew a ball of smoke towards Mick, but the figure stayed hidden in the shadows.

'God save Ireland, said the heroes . . .'

The old man in the corner started to sing. Mick thought he recognised the tune and he was sure the old man heard, in his own mind, the right words, but no one else would know what he was saying.

'God save Ireland, said they all . . .'

A cough from the shadows and another ball of smoke. Mick finished and turned round.

'You're a grand man for the stories,' the smoking man said.

‘Not a word of it a lie and that’s the truth,’ Mick said.

‘No doubt, Mick. No doubt.’

Mick stared at the orange glow in the darkness.

‘Whether on the scaffold high . . .’

‘Who are you then?’

‘Just call me your guardian angel.’

Mick took a step forward.

‘This is not the time for jokes,’ he said. ‘You know my name so I’ll have yours.’

‘Or the battlefield we die . . .’

The smoking man took a deep draw on his cigarette and stepped out of the shadows.

‘You don’t know me,’ he said and it was true. Mick didn’t recognise him at all. The brow of his cap hid his eyes and cast a shadow over half his face every time the cigarette lit up.

‘Oh, what matter when for Erin dear we fall.’

‘Meath?’ Mick said.

‘Close. Westmeath.’

Mick nodded. It was a gift he had and it had won him many a drink and more than a few shillings over time. ‘Two guesses is all I need,’ was always his bet to identify the county of the speaker. If he needed a third go, then the drink was on him and there weren’t many times he had to dip his hand in his pocket.

‘So what do you want with me?’ Mick said.

‘There’s someone been asking after you,’ the man said, taking a final suck on his cigarette before flicking the tiny end in the direction of the old man who was staggering back and forth trying to fix his trousers.

‘Who?’

‘Short fella. Thin. Nose all bent out of shape.’

‘Are you joking me?’

‘Dresses all in black. Do you know him?’

Mick nodded.

‘He’s been offering a tidy sum for any information and it won’t take much to persuade someone. You know what it’s like yourself.’

‘So he’s here then,’ Mick said, more to himself than the smoking man, but he still got a grunt of agreement in reply. The news shouldn’t really have surprised him, yet he shivered like someone had walked over his grave. Part of him was surprised that it had taken so long, yet there was a nagging question at the back of his mind as to how the man in black had found him at all. Even as it pushed its way to the front of his mind, Mick already knew the answer.

It didn’t take too much thought to figure out he was hiding somewhere in Britain. He’d fled without a penny in his pocket so America was out of the question. Then it was just a process of elimination. That it had taken almost two months told Mick the search had begun in England – Liverpool probably, then Manchester, and maybe down to London, before heading up to Glasgow.

‘Just watch your back, Mick,’ the smoking man said. ‘That’s the message I was sent with.’

‘Who sent you?’

The smoking man laughed, a gruff sound that quickly became a heavy cough.

‘Your guardian angel . . . and that’s no joke.’

Mick nodded and slipped back inside the pub, wishing he could make his excuses and leave, but there was a fresh pint and a whiskey waiting for him along with an eager audience which would quickly turn nasty if he didn’t finish what he had started.

He sat back down and clutched his pint, taking a long gulp. His eyes remained on the door at the back of the pub that led out to the toilet but when it opened it was only the old man who staggered in, crashing straight into the back of a heavy, red-haired drinker who spilt the contents of his jug over the floor. He spun round, ready to flatten the culprit, but when he saw who it was he merely shook his head and turned back to his company.

Still the smoking man didn’t appear and Mick realised he’d slipped away as discreetly as he’d appeared. Someone slapped Mick’s shoulder, eager for the rest of the story, and a pain shot down his left arm, reminding him where he’d stopped his tale.

2

GALWAY KISS

Mick knew he'd been shot but he wasn't giving up without a fight. He managed to push himself about thirty yards downstream, thankful of the mist that aided his escape. There were many voices now at the river as Mick had reached the other side. The first time he tried pushing himself out of the water a pain like a hot branding iron on tender flesh fired through his torso and he let out a scream as he fell back into the water. The soldiers immediately raced towards the source of the noise, one or two of them letting off indiscriminate shots that disappeared into the mist.

He tried again to get out, this time biting down on his tongue as the pressure of his emerging body put almost intolerable strain on his shoulder, but Mick knew it was now or never. Falling onto dry land, he staggered to his feet and stumbled until he collapsed and rolled forward, disappearing from the flat land into a ditch that was invisible to the naked eye. Mick started grabbing at the grass and shrubbery, ripping it up and dropping it on top of his body. It was a pathetic attempt at disguise which would probably be spotted right away but he didn't know what else to do. He only knew that he couldn't run any further.

The soldiers were still on the far bank of the river, though he heard a voice ordering someone to search the other side, quickly followed by the splash of a body entering the water. Mick tried to regain control of his breathing but it didn't help that he was shivering as well now. He lay flat on his back and wished the mist

would clear so that he could catch one last glimpse of the blue sky before they found him.

The waiting was the worst part. Waiting to be captured, executed or worse. Tortured. He clenched his fists, ready to throw at least one punch. It would never be said that Mick Costello went down without a fight.

He tensed at the clattering of a rifle on wet boots. Footsteps grew closer and were almost on top of him. He was tempted to hold his breath but knew he'd give himself away when he eventually had to exhale, so he tried breathing softly through his nose. Mick glanced to his right and saw a black, leather boot, so close he could just about kiss it. One step backwards and the boot would crush his face, but it didn't move.

'Any sign of him?' a voice asked out of the mist.

'What do you think?' the soldier muttered before shouting, 'Not yet.'

Mick could hear another horse approaching on the other side of the river and he grabbed hold of the boot, taking its owner by surprise, knocking him off balance and toppling him to the ground. He was upon the soldier in an instant, his thick fingers embracing the man's neck and squeezing as hard as he could, no longer caring that his left arm felt like it was going to fall off.

The neck was scrawny and under-fed but still the soldier thrashed and kicked and fought like a drowning man. Mick knelt on the man's arms and kept squeezing, trying to push the life out of him. He knew it was just a matter of time but he still had to be quick. It was the legs that seemed to die first, seconds before the rest of the body caught up, and when Mick released his grip the soldier sank limply to the ground.

Mick blessed himself as he took a quick glance at the purple face, tongue sticking out like a drunken man, but he was already unbuttoning the red jacket. He wouldn't say a prayer now. He'd save it for the morning after.

'Riley. What's going on over there?'

Mick pushed his foot into the first black boot, which was too small. He curled up his toes and pushed again. It would have to do.

He snatched the rifle up and began to walk away when he realised he'd forgotten the hat. Without that he was wasting his time. It fitted snugly on his head and he tipped it forward to hide as much of his face as possible. He nudged the lifeless body with the toe of the black boot and it rolled into the ditch. Mick took a few steps back and realised that it was almost completely hidden from view.

'RILEY!'

'Sir?'

'Any sign of him?'

'Nothing, sir,' Mick said in a near perfect Cork accent. It was another one of his gifts.

'Well, get back over here. We'll spread out and wait till the mist clears. Then there'll be no hiding place for him.'

Mick inched himself into the water, holding the rifle aloft with his right hand and swimming with his left, though he quickly changed. The pain in his left shoulder was marginally more bearable holding the weapon than trying to push through the water. When he got to the other side he clambered onto the grass, stifling a groan as he accidentally put his full body weight on his injured shoulder. Standing up, he bowed his head and shuffled back towards the rest of the soldiers.

'No sign of him then?' said a voice in the crowd.

'No, sir. Nothing,' he said, finger poised on the rifle's trigger, ready to swing into action at a moment's notice. If he was going down he was going to take as many of them with him as possible. He stopped and waited but no one said anything. A cigarette tin was thrust under his nose and his fingers scrambled among the tobacco to rescue one of the white sticks. He grunted thanks and stuck it in his trembling lips. A flame drew closer to his face, its outer glow offering comforting warmth to his skin and he moved the cigarette closer, drawing deeply on it and nodding.

Most of the soldiers rested lazily on their rifles. One or two had sat down but the ground was still damp. Mick knew he was too wet to bother about the cold seeping through his body but opted to remain on his feet. Whatever might happen, he wanted to give himself a standing start.

He was glad no one wanted to talk to him. It wasn't that he couldn't maintain the Cork accent but he didn't know anything about the recently departed Riley and knew he risked exposing himself as soon as he opened his mouth. It was still early in the morning. These men had probably been awake at least an hour or two before they'd arrived at his cottage and were thankful of the temporary respite.

The rumble of hooves approaching out of the rapidly thinning mist seemed to act like an invisible jolt and men sprang to attention while those on the ground quickly scrambled to their feet. The man in black appeared before them, drawing up his horse a few feet from the assembled group. One of them – the sergeant, Mick guessed – stepped forward with a shake of his head.

'He can't have got far,' the man in black said.

'His body might have sunk, sir,' the sergeant said. 'Devlin said he definitely hit him.'

'Well then, I want a body. Get your men in that water and start searching.'

'Yes, sir.'

The sergeant spun round as the soldiers looked every which way but at him, the appeal of a dip in the icy water lost on all of them. Mick guessed he'd be chosen. He was already wet, after all.

'I want two men to come back with me to the cottage,' the man in black said. 'We're taking his family in. If he's still alive that should flush him out.'

The sergeant nodded and suddenly every pair of eyes was eagerly trying to catch his.

'Murphy and Riley . . . RILEY!'

Mick looked up, then immediately down again, mumbling 'Sir,' and shuffling forward till he stood shoulder to shoulder with another soldier he presumed was Murphy. He'd been too busy thinking about his family. What would this incident do to them, his mother in particular? His teeth crunched together angrily and his finger twitched on the trigger, but he managed to fight the urge to lift the rifle and strike down the man in black.

But he was being sent back up to his cottage. The man in black

had already brusquely steered his horse around and was galloping away up the field, so he began running just off the left shoulder of Murphy, who led the way. Mick glanced round at the rest of the soldiers who shrunk with every step he put between him and them until they vanished. Ahead of him and Murphy were only fields and random clumps of mist, now isolated like lost sheep searching for the flock.

He kept his eyes on his companion, who was concentrating on running across the heavy ground, his irregular breathing a sign of the physical struggle. Mick slipped in behind him and smashed the rifle butt down on the man's skull. He fell forward, his face sinking into the turf and Mick had spun his rifle round and thrust the bayonet into Murphy's back before he'd a chance to even register the first blow. He pulled and tugged until the flabby flesh released the silver blade, now dripping with blood, and he stood, poised to repeat the motion, but Murphy didn't move. Mick blessed himself and then moved on towards the cottage with a surer and quieter step.

He heard the sobs before the cottage came into view, but when he saw his home, he almost charged at it with a blind rage. The peat roof was already ablaze, beyond the point of any rescue even if the whole of Galway had turned up with a bucket of water each.

The man in black stood back from the burning cottage, hands on hips, admiring his handiwork. Mick's family cowered at the side. His sisters clung to each other and wailed, though the cackling flames had dulled the sound, while his mother was on her knees tending to Patrick who was lying flat on his back in the mud. His brother was a fiery character and the fact he was only eleven wouldn't have stopped him trying to protect the family and their home.

Mick strode past the fire as it devoured all the memories of his life thus far, happy and sad. The man in black, wearing a satisfied smirk, looked at him.

'Keep an eye on them,' he said, nodding towards Mick's family. 'I had to sort the boy but the women shouldn't be too much trouble.'

Mick grabbed his hat, throwing it at the man in black, and raised his rifle. The man's eyes opened wide at the same time as his mouth, which no doubt wanted to cry out some plea for help or clemency, but a tiny noise like a creaking door was all that escaped. Mick pulled the trigger and the rifle jammed.

Like a slap on the face it seemed to force the man in black into action and he snatched at the pistol in its holster, but it was barely in his hand when Mick swung the rifle wildly, knocking the weapon out of the man's hand. In the same motion he stepped forward and crashed his forehead off the bridge of the man's nose, flattening him.

He raced over to where his family remained, silent and stunned at what they had just witnessed. Bridget still couldn't quite recognise her brother in a soldier's uniform until he started speaking.

'Mammy, you need to go. Now! They'll kill us all if they find us.'

His mother nodded but her eyes strayed to the prone figure of Patrick. Mick knelt down beside his brother, sliding his good arm under the young boy's back and levering him up.

'Patrick, listen to me. You need to get mammy and the girls away from here.'

Patrick nodded groggily as a dribble of blood trickled down the side of his face from the wound on his temple.

'You're the man of the family now. I'm counting on you. Can you do it?'

Patrick nodded again, this time trying to inject more vigour into the action.

'Come on, let's be getting you on your feet,' Mick said, helping the injured boy up and keeping a tight grip round his waist even after doing so.

'You need to go to John McDonagh's place,' Mick said, looking at his mother. 'Tell him what happened. He'll help you out. You'll be safe there, but you need to go now.'

Mick glanced back at the man in black who still writhed on the ground like a snake. Saint Patrick was meant to have got rid of all

of them, Mick thought with a grim smile. He turned round and stared at his sisters.

‘You three need to help mammy. No more crying until you get to McDonagh’s. Okay?’

The three terrified girls nodded.

‘Go! Now!’

Mick ushered them away and they began to stagger off like wounded beasts. There was no time for goodbyes. Mick didn’t look back at them as he strode across towards the man in black, his eyes searching the ground for the rifle, though when he heard voices floating into earshot about the noise of the fire which was now hungrily devouring the cottage, he glanced round. His family was almost out of sight now and he knew it wasn’t them.

He stopped and listened again. It was the rest of the soldiers. They’d found Murphy or Riley, or both, and he knew they’d be upon the cottage in minutes. He had to delay them long enough to let his family get as far from here as possible and give them a chance of reaching McDonagh’s safely.

His feet crunched on the rifle as he scurried about and he grabbed it up, breaking into a jog round the side of the burning building, stopping to go back and claim the man in black’s pistol. Taking up a position against the wall where he’d hidden earlier in the morning when the soldiers first arrived, he cocked the pistol. When the first shadowy figure appeared on the brow of the horizon he fired. The shot missed its target but still forced the soldier to throw himself hastily to the ground, no doubt followed by the rest of his comrades.

Slowly, Mick could see heads and bodies appearing, though they stopped beside the foremost soldier. Mick breathed deeply and waited. The soldiers must have known it was only one man they were facing but who wanted to be the one who took the bullet so the rest might overpower the shooter?

It was a few minutes before the red jackets began to move forward. Mick grabbed the rifle, closing his left eye and staring through the sight with his right eye. If the thing hadn’t jammed, he’d have a much better chance of hitting someone, he thought,

training the sight on the bobbing head of the sergeant and pressing the trigger in frustration. A roar burst out of the weapon and Mick spun back, tumbling across the grass and dropping the rifle. He heard screams and shouts and knew instinctively that the sergeant was dead. Another sign of the cross, more than he'd ever do in a month of Sundays.

The man in black's horse stared at him as he got to his feet. Mick smiled and raced over to the massive beast. It reared as he leapt on top of it, nearly sliding over the other side as he battled for a few moments to get it under control. He knew his family would get to John McDonagh's and he also knew they'd be safe there. Now he needed to look after himself. He steered the horse away from the burning cottage and it was then that he heard the sobs. He looked down at the man in black who remained head down in the mud, face buried in his hands, and he was crying like a baby. Mick shook his head and dug his heels into the beast, gripping the reins as it galloped away.

There was silence in the pub for a few seconds, maybe even as long as a minute. A few voices that hadn't been listening, or who'd heard the story before, could be heard muttering in the corner and the occasional shout or burst of laughter flew across the room.

'You're saying the man was crying?' somebody eventually asked.

'Sobbing like a baby so he was,' Mick said. 'I couldn't believe my ears.'

He could see his audience struggling with the image. Who ever heard of a man crying? He was no man at all is what they thought.

'Well seeing he was an Englishman,' someone said to murmurs of agreement but Mick shook his head.

'Here's the thing,' he said. 'He was a Mayo man and that's the honest to God truth.'

A few heads shook furiously. Voices expressed disbelief. What self-respecting Irishman ever cried after a fight? It was almost

beyond belief and one or two eyed Mick suspiciously, beginning to doubt the truth of his tale. He was thankful there were no Mayo men in his audience. In the past they'd felt forced to defend the honour of their county and that ensured a messy end to the night. Mick found that a pocketful of pepper was a great advantage. Throw some of that in the challenger's face and follow up with a couple of punches or a bottle cracked over the skull and, more often than not, the fight would be over before it even started.

'Jesus, Mick, God was looking after you that day,' another voice eventually said.

One or two others agreed. Mick just nodded and then leant forward to snatch up his pint and drain it dry, slamming it none too subtly back down on the wooden table. Hopefully someone would take the hint. The news about the man in black's arrival in Glasgow wouldn't leave his mind, however, and it was probably better if he could get away from the pub and have a clear head to think with.

'So did that all really happen?' It was a quiet voice at the edge of the crowd, a female voice, and everyone looked round.

Her hair, tied back, was as black as coal, but a few strands had broken free and dangled down the side of her face. She returned his smile but it was clear to Mick that she was expecting an answer. He hadn't noticed her before and could only presume she'd hidden behind one of the burly men who'd stood at the front. That wouldn't have been too hard, given that she was half their size.

'What do you think?' Mick asked, folding his arms. She mimicked the action and he grinned.

'I think maybe it was a bit of the drink talking,' she said.

'Is that right then?'

'Aye.'

Mick guessed she was about the same age as him, certainly no older than twenty at most, but she was sure of herself amidst this sea of men.

'Well, maybe you're right and maybe you're not,' he said, 'but do you think I could make this up?'

Mick slipped out of his jacket, pulled down his braces and quickly unbuttoned his shirt to expose his bare, left shoulder.

‘Now tell me if you think the drink did that?’

‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph,’ someone said as the girl shrugged, and it seemed like everyone else blessed themselves. It still made Mick smile, even after having seen it happen so many times before.

‘That looks like a map of Ireland.’