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Opening Extract from...

Nimrod's Shadow

Written by Chris Paling

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ONE

Reilly, Mountjoy and the Small Matter of the Exhibition

HAVING AT LAST CONVINCED MOUNTJOY TO EXHIBIT HIS WORK – the exhibition just five days away now – T. F. Reilly was painting day and night to ensure he would have sufficient finished pieces to cover the walls of Mountjoy’s coffee shop. But on this bright September day nothing was going right. The artist was working with a fresh flesh tint of ochre, white and vermillion that he had graded into four fine tones by adding increasing quantities of white. The small pots sat beside him on his makeshift shelf. He was currently dipping his sable brush into the third of these pots but the more he worked at it the more ludicrous the skin tone of the reclining woman appeared so he left his studio (the room directly under the roof of the lodging house where he painted – where he slept, where he ate, where he washed, where he cooked, where Nimrod – his Jack Russell – also ate and slept) and he went down the stairs, down a second set of stairs (uncarpeted, like the first), down a third set of stairs (where the carpet clung to the treads like fur on an old alopecic lion), down a fourth (where the stair carpet was intact but greasy), along the dark hallway corridor, negotiating the unused hat stand, and out, through

the old heavy door, into the street. Here he paused and blinked in the sunlight. Summer! Of course. Late summer. Reilly drew in a deep breath, and was immediately assailed by the smell of horse manure, recently deposited in the road by a passing hansom.

The artist, as he acquainted himself with the day, heard an insistent scratching from the interior of the lodging-house hallway. He opened the door. There Nimrod waited, sitting back tautly on his haunches, eyeing his master with his habitual eager disdain. Reilly apologized. Nimrod emerged from the damp shadows of the hallway and, head high, set off for Mountjoy's coffee shop which was, to his mind, the obvious destination. Reilly tugged the door shut and followed on obediently. He was aware of the pavement through the halfpenny-sized hole in his right brogue, but it had been there so long that his exposed sole had hardened to the consistency of leather.

Down the narrow street they paraded, Nimrod pausing at the greengrocer's to sniff at the naked leg of a trestle table. While Reilly waited for him to finish he observed the cherries, and was, in turn, observed by the greengrocer's daughter, Amy Sykes. Reilly was more notorious than celebrated in the vicinity of Old Cross. There was a suspicion that he would play fast and loose with the hearts of the local women, that he would run up credit at the local stores and then vanish in the night – unfounded, as he had few needs beyond his meagre daily ration of food, seven eggs a week (which he used to make the tempera mix with which he painted) and bones and scraps enough for Nimrod. He ordered his paint pigment by post and it arrived on the second Thursday of each month. Amy watched Reilly with fondness – twenty-four years old, young in years and

hopes, old in expectations, with luminous blue eyes and the lanky gait of a butcher's boy. She took a glance over her shoulder. Her father the green-grocer was in the back of the shop with his spiders. 'Take some, darling,' she called to him, *sotto voce*. The endearment rang out like a bell.

Reilly, who was unaware he had been observed, cut round and when he saw Amy he blushed; the handsome, ungainly girl bounded out from the shop door, took up a brown paper bag, palmed a handful of cherries into the bag and offered them to Reilly, whose blush was now as fierce as the colour of the fruit he had been given.

'Here. Take them.' She pressed a kiss onto his warm cheek.

Reilly had nothing to offer in return but his thanks, which he gave, but the gift of the fruit left him with an awkward debt not to the girl but to her father, the notoriously stern and parsimonious Sykes. He would borrow the money from Mountjoy and settle the bill on his way back from the coffee shop. Nor did he like cherries. He was staring at them only in an attempt to discern how many hues of scarlet there were in each drupe. Nimrod watched and waited for his own reward. But Amy had eyes only for the artist and the artist only had eyes for her.

'When will you paint me as you promised?' the girl asked him.

'You know I paint only from memory.'

'Oh – well, remember me and then paint me.'

'Perhaps that's what I'm doing,' Reilly smiled.

'A portrait of me!'

'Perhaps.'

The picture on Reilly's easel was, indeed, of Amy Sykes but he was superstitious about discussing his work in progress. He held the belief

that the mystical process of coaxing something into life with paint demanded a monastic vow of silence. Subjects, if discussed during this process, tend to get their own back on the garrulous artist by refusing to come to life.

‘If you are painting me, don’t make me look old.’

‘I promise,’ the artist said. Now he was aware of Nimrod, whose expression had shifted minutely from expectation to impatience (via a fleeting diversion into disappointment). Few would have registered these changes but man and beast spent so much time in each other’s company that they communicated more effectively than many long-married couples. Nimrod adopted the subservience of a dumb animal only when the artist was in the company of others. The artist had found him one winter’s night shivering on the street corner, frozen, beaten and virtually starved. Wrapping him in his coat Reilly carried him to his room, laid him on his mattress and encouraged him to eat. He had lodged with Reilly ever since.

‘Grieve is very thin. Are you starving him?’ Amy said, at last taking notice of Reilly’s companion. Nimrod of course had borne witness to those afternoons when the lovers tangled on Reilly’s mattress; he had watched them shed their outer skins and roll pink and naked in each other’s arms.

‘He’s no longer called Grieve.’

‘Why?’

‘He didn’t answer to the name when I called – and then Mountjoy told me the story about Edward Elgar, and that seemed to suit him.’

‘What story?’

‘Something along the lines of one of his variations – the tenth or eleventh – supposedly portraying a dog paddling in the River Wye, having fallen in. I liked the notion, but I couldn’t call him “Number Ten” or “Number Eleven” so I called him after the ninth – Nimrod – which is also the hunter, as I’m sure you know.’

‘And does he hunt?’

‘I’d say he’s more of a collector than a hunter – aren’t you, old chum?’

Nimrod looked up and stared at Reilly in puzzlement.

‘Hello, Nimrod,’ cooed Amy Sykes.

At the third unrewarded mention of his name, Nimrod put politeness aside and set off once more for the café.

‘Thank you again. For the cherries,’ Reilly said and followed Nimrod up the road. The girl watched them go. She regretted the gift of the cherries now but she didn’t regret the afternoons spent with Reilly and neither, she was sure, did he.



Nimrod arrived first and waited at Mountjoy’s matt grey door for Reilly to catch up. For some time the exterior of the coffee shop had been in the process of redecoration. Three months previously the door and the frame of the window had been stripped of their old paint, the rotten wood removed, the holes faced up with putty and rubbed down, and the expanse primed. The following weekend the painter had fallen from a ladder and the work had halted. Rumour was that he was now fully recovered but Mountjoy, always careful with his money except for what he considered to be good causes, chose to wait for the man to

re-establish contact. Until he did, the work would remain incomplete, the bill unpaid.

Reilly pushed open the door and Nimrod led the way in. There were two customers in the boxes: a cadaverous old man in a threadbare coat sitting by the window reading a newspaper and a muscular young Adonis in ragged clothes and heavy boots, dusty-haired and -shouldered from stonemasonry work on the local church, at his feet a nut-basket of tools. Applying himself with vigour to one of Mountjoy's breakfasts, he forked the food into his mouth like fuel into a furnace. For the price Mountjoy charged the breakfast was considered a bargain – two fried eggs, two sausages, two slices of ham, one tomato (halved and fried in old beef dripping), two slices of bread, thickly buttered, and a large tin mug of best mocha. Much of Mountjoy's business came from local men employed in the trades and older men and women who saw no reason to spend two or three times what Mountjoy would charge them on lunch in a local eating-house. At half past four Mountjoy turned the key in the lock and at a quarter to five the coffee shop was dark and quiet (a full day's work, as he opened at five o'clock to cater for the underground engineers from the local depot on their way home after a night shift, some early carpenters carrying tool-bags of saws and planes, bricklayers en route to the new terraces, and the occasional exhausted whore). Mountjoy greeted them all with the same enthusiasm. The coffee shop was a happy democracy. There were no delineations of age, race, class or intelligence; everybody was accorded equal respect and Mountjoy's customers generally felt better for having visited his establishment.

Reilly had been a customer there for three years, the length of time he

had been resident in Old Cross, having arrived from completing his studies in Paris. Although on his first visit Reilly had enough in his pocket only for a cup of mocha, he could not resist the lure of the open fire in the small grate and the warm yellow glow from the dim gas mantles. When he first pushed open the door Mountjoy greeted him as though he had been expected. He instructed the artist to take a seat close to the fire, ignored his order for a twopenny cup of mocha and his protests that he had insufficient funds to pay for any food, and brought over a plate of mutton pie, grey boiled potatoes and tinned marrowfat peas. Reilly's debt to Mountjoy was thus established, and it was in the hope of paying it off that he had convinced Mountjoy to allow him to exhibit his paintings.

Mountjoy wasn't in any way typical of a coffee shop owner – men who tend either to be small and at the mercy of their large wives, or well-built, bare-knuckle fighter types: utterly imprisoned or deliriously free. He seemed instead to have been diverted from another, more obscure profession – a part-time shifter of pianos, for example, or a man who owned a shop selling fishing tackle. Facially, in repose, he seemed a content individual. His eyes shone with perpetual delight and occasionally, when registering interest or enthusiasm, the rest of his face would spring to life like that of a circus ringmaster announcing an act (another profession attracting those who seem merely to be marking time). Physically he was above average height. His skin was slightly olive. Over his clothes he sported an apron – fresh each day. He lived alone above the premises.

Today Mountjoy was glad to see Reilly. He had been afraid that the threat of an exhibition was proving too much for the maestro's fragile temperament and he had taken to his bed. The coffee-shop owner looked

on the artist like a fond and proud parent, cajoling him towards a seat at the window with the promise of food. Nimrod was granted a tin plate of cold pork sausages, which he dispatched quickly, and then fell asleep beside the counter.

As was his habit, while Reilly sat by the window and ate, the artist indulged himself by bringing to his mind's eye his latest completed work. The picture was of a boy sitting on a wooden bench. The bench was on a stony beach. In the foreground was a shallow, rectangular, penned-in expanse of seawater. Discernible beneath the water was a submerged rowing boat. The bespectacled boy was looking with some concern towards the boat. Behind him the sky rose in rich layers of duck-egg blue, creamy white, salmon pink, carnation pink, gold, white and royal blue. The hue of the picture was, however, a chilly grey. There was, as in all of Reilly's works, a sense of melancholy, menace and a number of questions unanswered. When Reilly's work was first remarked upon, the critic Gower suggested that he represented those small moments before the larger, more significant moments of our lives. Reilly would not have disputed it. He would occasionally have liked to represent the larger moments, but these never seemed to come to him.

Reilly's pie now finished, Mountjoy came over, enthusiastically inhabiting the seat across the table from him.

'I've been making enquiries,' Mountjoy said, rippling the fingers of his right hand with the motion of a fish passing through weeds.

'Concerning what?'

'Your exhibition.'

'And what did these enquiries concern?'

'Well,' Mountjoy leaned forward, 'we need to drum up interest. Make a splash. I've spoken to the local newspaper and they're sending a photographer.'

'A photographer?'

'Yes. And a newspaper reporter.'

'But surely there's nothing to report.' Reilly pictured the tired man wearily pretending an interest in his paintings; he knew there was no creature on earth more wretched, jaded and resentful than the local hack. At least the photographer would perhaps make no pretence at either understanding or appreciating his work; a selfish witness stealing an image for his own glory and financial reward, nothing more.

'You underestimate yourself, Reilly. This is your first exhibition. That's something the world has a right to know about.'

'I'm not sure about that. Art is rarely newsworthy and I'm not sure the world will be at all interested in my paintings.'

'Of course it will! You're a genius. All we need now is for the world to acknowledge that, and you'll be rich.'

'I'm not a genius and I have no desire to be rich, only to pay off my debt to you.'

'Well, of course you are – and of course you do. Every man wants to be rich.'

'I don't. Not at all. I just want to be left alone. To work.'

'Then you'll have your wish. Being rich won't get in the way of that. I promise you.'

But however much Mountjoy tried to convince him, beyond paying off his debt Reilly refused to accept that the exhibition would do anything

to improve his circumstances, with which he was content. He had, it was true, come to the attention of the critic Gower when one of his paintings had been accepted for a prestigious summer show some three years before. But the interest unsettled him. He heard the critic's praise ringing in his ears when he next tried to paint and eventually discarded two efforts because they seemed like pale imitations of the piece he had entered for the show. The experience was akin to suffering a long and debilitating fever.

'...We need to settle on the price of each painting,' Mountjoy was saying.

'The price, I expect, should represent the cost.' Having never once sold a painting Reilly had no idea what to charge. The two men had reached an agreement that Mountjoy would take a fifth share of the sale proceeds.

'Yes, of course it should,' Mountjoy agreed. 'But when you mention cost...?'

'The cost to me – for the work done.'

'The physical endeavour?'

'In part. And the mental.'

'Physical and mental. Yes. I see. Of course the price should reflect both. I imagine there's a price you have in mind – taking both of the above into account?'

'Not at all,' Reilly said. 'Not at all.'

'Well, this must be resolved.'

'Yes, I expect it must. What would you suggest?'

'Five pounds?' Mountjoy tried. 'For an average sized canvas?'

Reilly's vanity flared. 'Five pounds! What do you take me for? Even a house painter would receive more than five pounds for two months' work.'

'Of course he would,' Mountjoy hurriedly agreed.

'Not that I'm suggesting that I'm in any way superior to a house painter.'

'As a house painter I'm sure you'd do very well. I doubt many house painters would achieve an equivalent result as an artist.'

The two men fell silent until Reilly said, 'Well, perhaps we should estimate what a house painter would charge for a similar period and use that as a yardstick. That at least would lead us towards the value of the physical effort expended.'

'Seven pence per hour.'

'Per hour?'

'Minimum.'

'Seven pence per hour, at forty hours for the week, multiplied by eight comes to...?'

Mountjoy fetched a pencil and a piece of paper and applied himself to the calculation, concluding that on that rate a house painter would receive almost ten pounds.

'Ten pounds, then, for an average sized painting?' Reilly tried. 'For the physical endeavour alone. Then, say, five pounds for the mental effort?'

'So fifteen pounds?' Mountjoy stroked his chin. 'Yes. I see. Fifteen pounds.' The price, worked out against the hourly rate of a house painter, seemed fair, but he knew few, if any, of his clientele would have that kind of money to spare.

Seeing Mountjoy's embarrassment, Reilly relented. 'Perhaps even fifteen pounds seems excessive to you. But for two months' work...'

'Of course...' If he was honest, even five pounds seemed excessive to Mountjoy, but he knew that this was probably not the time to say it.

'I imagine...' Reilly started warily.

'What?'

'I imagine we could approach Gower. I'm sure he'd have an idea of the market rate.'

'Gower?'

'The critic.'

'I know who he is. I'm surprised you mention his name. That's all.' Remembering that he had heard Gower's name invoked only disparagingly in the past, Mountjoy was surprised that Reilly had brought him up. The name wounded him, as if he could feel some of Reilly's pain. But he acknowledged that Gower was probably the best man for the job and might even bring some much-needed attention to the exhibition. But Mountjoy was unhappy with the suggestion knowing, as he did, that this was the first faltering step Reilly had taken on his own. Soon he would stand on his own two feet and surely then it wouldn't be long before he would be lost to him and to Old Cross forever.

So, with a heavy heart, Mountjoy accepted the task of contacting Gower and asking him to value Reilly's work. Reilly thanked him and left the coffee shop with Nimrod in tow. Mountjoy cleared the pans from the range and put up the closed sign. He looked at the bare, filth-blackened walls of his coffee shop and tried to visualize how they would appear with Reilly's work on them. For the first time the walls looked very drab and

the grey undercoat of the door and window frame seemed to chide him for his penny pinching. Whatever the season, the exterior of the coffee shop would always belong to the winter.