

THE HANGMAN'S STORY

by

Nicholas Best

On September 7 1956, as part of a fund-raising drive for their forthcoming military campaign, the Leinster battalion of the Irish Republican Army raided the bank at Castledermot in County Kildare. Soon after 9 a.m., three masked men forced their way into the manager's office, held him up at gunpoint, and seized his keys. While one of them ripped out the phone lines, the other two rifled the safe and bundled the contents into a bag they had brought with them. When they had finished, they herded the bank staff into the manager's office, locked the door behind them, and made their escape in a car which later turned out to have been stolen.

But the Irish police were already onto them. An alarm bell shrilled as the raiders left the building. As they sped towards Carlow, they were intercepted by two patrol cars of the Gardai Siochana which gave chase and forced them off the road. The IRA abandoned their vehicle and fled across open fields. They were followed for several miles and finally cornered in a deserted farmhouse backing on to a copse.

In the ensuing gun battle, two Irish policemen, Garda Michael Noonan and Garda Kevin Mulcahy, were shot dead. Two of the IRA got away and are believed to have escaped to America. The third, 18-year-old Eamonn Farrell, was arrested and taken to Dublin, to be tried for the murder of Noonan and Mulcahy. He was found guilty on May 8 1957 and sentenced to death by hanging. He appealed, but the appeal was turned down and the sentence duly confirmed. This is the story of the man appointed to hang him.

They don't have a hangman in Ireland. No one wants the job. That's why they've asked me to do it. I'm the English hangman and I've never had any qualms about putting people away. An eye for an eye, it says in the Bible, if I'm not mistaken. You can't quarrel with that.

My instructions arrived this morning, for the Farrell job. They were quite clear. I have to catch the night train to Holyhead, transfer to the mailboat, and arrive in Dublin the day before the execution. I'm to report to the Governor of Inchicore Gaol that afternoon, in time to weigh up the prisoner and make arrangements for the drop. Then I'm free until eight o'clock the following morning, which is when I earn my pay.

It's good pay too, twice what you get in England. They give you a decent wage in Ireland, partly I suspect because they don't have many executions over there. You can make a tidy profit, so long as you keep your expenses down. Only fair, of course, when you consider what a hangman has to do.

I supply my own tools too. The prisons are meant to provide them for you, but I always like to take the essentials with me, just in case. I keep everything in a brown attaché case. I've never understood why the newspapers call it 'the executioner's black bag'. It's a perfectly ordinary briefcase, the sort you go to the office with. There's no need for dramatics, in my business.

What do I keep in the briefcase? A rope of course, with a metal eye at each end. There's a place in the High Street that sells them. A wrist-strap made of leather, a leg strap, a white hood, a length of twine, a tape measure, a pair of pliers. A spare shackle too, in case of accidents. I always carry one of everything, because I've seen all sorts of things go wrong in my time. You don't want to be left without the tools to finish the job.

The worst hanging I ever witnessed, worst by a long way, was the war criminals at Nuremberg. Adolf's friends. I wasn't involved, I'm glad to say, but I don't care if I never see anything like it ever again. I was the standby, in case the American hangman lost his bottle and couldn't go through with it. John Woods was his name. Funny how nations treat their executioners differently. I was never in the British army - my lungs - but they did give me the honorary rank of Major when I went to Germany. John Woods was only a Master-Sergeant. He gave it up too, after Nuremberg. Said he didn't want the job any more.

Can't say I'm surprised, after the mess he made of those Germans. He had ten men to hang and I don't think half of them died properly. The trap doors were too small, for a start - knocked their noses off on the way down. The authorities had the gallows all wrong. They'd built it in the gym, the prison gym, with thirteen steps leading up to a scaffold in the middle of the basketball court.

You never have steps on a scaffold, if you know what you're doing. Men about to die can't cope with it. Seyss-Inquart had a club foot, for one thing, and Frick was getting on for seventy. Kaltenbrunner pissed himself on the way up, so did Jodl. They couldn't climb those steps properly. Didn't have the legs.

Things weren't any easier when they did reach the top. There were three gallows in a row, two to be used alternately, the third a spare in case of accidents. Woods was hanging them in tandem, tying a noose round the second while the first was still on the end of his rope. The scaffold was curtained off below the traps, so no one could see what was happening underneath. Just as well too, because Streicher wasn't killed by the drop, neither was Sauckel. They both moaned like hell in the pit and John Woods had to go down and deal with them. Keitel lived for twenty four

minutes, didn't want to die at all. It's because the Americans insist on using a standard length rope. They won't adjust it according to individual height and weight.

And that cowboy knot too. They tie this great big knot around the top of the noose, for no purpose whatsoever. You don't need a knot, if you know what you're doing. All you need is to pass the rope through the metal eye and secure it with a rubber clip to stop it slipping. Much more efficient all round. Painless too, I would imagine.

Ribbentrop was the first to go. They brought him in just after 1 a.m., asked him his name, and dropped him off straight away. He was followed by Keitel, who died in uniform but took for ever to do it. We all of us had a cigarette while we waited. There were about thirty of us altogether, official witnesses of one kind or another, and the senior officer said we might as well smoke if we wanted to. So we all lit up while Johnny Woods disappeared behind the curtain, scratching his head about what he was going to do with Keitel. I was longing to go and help him, but he didn't ask and I didn't offer. There were questions of precedence involved. Protocol.

We had to give up on Keitel in the end and were told to stub our cigarettes out while Kaltenbrunner was brought in. Five minutes after he'd been dropped, the doctors put their heads around the curtain and decided that Keitel was dead at last. They wheeled him to the far end of the gym and dumped him behind another screen.

And so it went on, one in, one out, for almost two hours, until all the Nazis had been put away and there was only Göring left. He was dead already of course - suicide in his cell - but the authorities wanted his death officially witnessed, so they had him brought in on a stretcher and we all had to look at his face to make sure it was really him. It was, all right. Larger than life, if I may use the expression. He was dressed in black silk pajamas and had some sort of blue shirt over the top. He'd hidden the

cyanide in the flesh of his belly, underneath some old scar tissue. We all had a good look at him, and then they covered his face again and we filed out one by one and had a cup of tea and that was the end of it. My first big hanging.

It taught me several things, one of which is that you don't waste time when you're going to drop someone. The Americans like to stand a man on the trap for five or six minutes, while they read out the charges against him, announce the sentence, ask him if he has anything to say. That's no way to hang a person. Fifteen, twenty seconds is all you need - fifteen seconds from entering the condemned cell to pushing the lever in the execution chamber next door. It's easy, once you know how.

You need help, of course, expert help. A couple of prison officers to move the wardrobe that hides the entrance to the chamber and lead the prisoner through it, and an assistant to line his feet up on the drop and pinion his legs. My job, after I've tied his hands, is to fix the noose around his neck and pull the white hood over the top. It's the hardest part, because you have to get the noose just right. You position the knot under his left jawbone and nowhere else. The noose always slips a quarter turn to the left after the drop, which means the knot ends up under his chin and forces his head back until the neck snaps. If you put the knot to the right, it'll slip around the back of his neck so that his head is forced forward and he dies of strangulation. That's what John Woods did in Nuremberg, but it's not what I'm going to do to Farrell. I'm going to do the job properly. He's entitled to that much.

I have no feelings towards Farrell, either one way or the other. You can't afford to, in my business. I've seen hangmen come and go, but they never last long if they start thinking about what they do for a living. Far as I'm concerned, Farrell has committed wilful murder and the Irish Government wants him dead. That's good enough for me.

Not for everyone though, because there's been quite a stink about it in the newspapers : the Irish papers, and the American ones as well. Farrell is a big issue in America. His sister has been over, drumming up support. She's been to see Congressmen, the ones with Irish constituents, and she's had herself on television. She's a pretty girl, a redhead by all accounts. She's made an awful fuss, claiming her brother was a legitimate soldier, that he was only eighteen, that he ought to have a reprieve. Won a lot of sympathy too, because Americans are suckers for a pretty face. They've been asking questions in Congress.

The IRA haven't been idle, either. They've sworn they won't let him hang. Farrell is one of their men and they're not going to stand casually aside and watch him die. They're going to attack the prison, they say, or start a riot, or see that the hangman never arrives. They've got quite a little campaign going against me. I know, because I've been warned.

It doesn't worry me though, because I'm not afraid of the IRA. They're not so clever. They don't know what I look like, for one thing. I've never allowed my photograph in the papers. The *News of the World* did get a picture once - the old milk bottle on the doorstep routine - but it wasn't a good likeness. I shoved a hand in front of my face before they could take any more. I don't like publicity of any kind. Madame Tussaud's wanted to make a waxwork of me a few years ago, put me in the Chamber of Horrors, but I wouldn't let them. I'm not a monster.

I'm a perfectly decent human being in fact, with a wife and family like anyone else. Madge is my wife. We've been married twenty years, and I don't mind admitting we did get hitched in a bit of a hurry. You can work out from that how old Trevor is. He's our eldest. We run a little ironmongery business in town, a shop just off the High Street, and I'm hoping Trevor will follow me into the business one day. The opening's

there, if he cares to take it. But he doesn't seem to want to follow in my footsteps, take over the shop. Says he's not interested in doing my job at all. Either of them.

He's a puzzle to us, is Trevor. We don't know what he gets up to in the evenings. He goes out on his own after tea, won't say where he's going or who he's going to see. Comes back very late and we don't know where he's been at all. We think he goes to coffee bars, but we're not sure.

There's Christine too, our daughter. We're having a lot of trouble with her. She won't talk to me, half the time. Won't say a word. Just sits there and ignores me, as if I'm not in the room at all. We had a row once - well, lots of times - and she swore at me, said she was ashamed to be my daughter. Said she didn't like what I did for a living. 'Who pays for all those clothes?' I asked her in return. 'Who buys that make-up that you put on out of the house, that you think I don't know about?' Didn't get any answer, of course. She just stormed out of the room and slammed the door behind her. Went up to bed and lay there crying. She's sixteen.

I suppose it isn't easy for her, in a way. I don't brag about what I do, but people round here all know. We've had excrement through the letter box, broken windows. It goes with the job, I'm afraid, but that's no reason why Christine should have to put up with it. The other kids used to bully her at school, which can't have been very nice for her. She works in the shop now, so things are a little easier.

In any case, I'm sending them all away while I do the Farrell job. The whole family is going to stay with Madge's sister in ... well, I won't say where. It's just a precaution, in case the IRA are up to something. They don't know where I live, so far as I'm aware, but you can never tell. I'm not having any gunmen calling at the house while I'm not there. Can't do the job properly if the IRA are holding your family. So I'm sending them to Madge's sister and they're going to stay out of sight for a while,

keep their heads down until it's all over. I think it's a sensible thing to do, in the circumstances.

It was a policeman who first warned me about the IRA. An inspector. He came to the house in plain clothes, asked if he could have a word. I showed him in to the front room and he told me the Irish were planning to kidnap me before I arrived at the prison. The British Special Branch had been tipped the wink by their Irish counterparts. The IRA were going to spirit me away somehow, and if they couldn't do that they were going to kill me instead. Anything to stop me getting to Farrell.

Well, I've had threats before, I'm quite used to it, but I won't pretend I don't take them seriously. Especially from the IRA. It would be a great coup for them if they could kill the British hangman. Just the sort of thing they'd like. Only it'll never happen, because I'm not going to allow it. I'm taking a revolver on the Dublin trip - I have a licence - and I know how to use it. They won't get me without a fight.

The inspector offered an escort too, a couple of plain clothes policemen to go with me on the boat and see me safe as far as Dun Laoghaire. He didn't say as much, but I gathered they would be armed. I turned him down all the same because I don't want a police escort. The last thing you need, in a delicate situation, is a couple of flat-footed coppers plodding along behind, drawing attention to you. I'm far better off on my own, blending in quietly with the crowd. That's my great asset, you see, that no one knows what I look like. I don't stand out in a crowd. I don't look like a hangman. I could be anyone.

So I'm going on my own, posing as a travelling salesman. If anybody asks, I shall tell them I'm selling ironmongery. Ought to be a good cover, so long as they don't want to see the samples in my bag.

The boat from Holyhead leaves in the middle of the night, which means you don't have to catch the train from where I live until the early evening. I've already got my ticket. I sent Madge to buy it for me this morning, rather than go out myself and risk attracting attention. If it was an English execution, I would have been given a travel warrant, but because it's Irish I have to buy the ticket in advance and claim back my expenses later. So Madge went to get the ticket for me, and while she was there she bought tickets for the rest of the family as well. We're all going our separate ways until the Farrell hanging is over.

'You will take care, won't you?' Madge asked, as she packed her bags for the visit to her sister's. 'You won't do anything silly while you're over there?'

'Course I won't, lass. You know me. I'll keep my nose clean.'

'It's just that I worry, with the IRA and all. You never know what might happen.'

'I'll be all right.' I gave her a squeeze. 'The IRA won't get me. I'll be in and out before they know what's happened. I'll be that quick, they'll never realise I was there.'

Madge didn't seem convinced, so I gave her another squeeze and carried the suitcases downstairs for her. The rest of the family were already waiting in the hall. Trevor had his coat on, and Christine was wearing her 'Wish I'd been born into a different family' face. I wasn't sorry to be seeing the back of her for a few days.

'You two look after your mother,' I told them. 'Carry the cases for her and make sure she's all right. Take the bus the other end. And behave yourselves at Auntie Vi's.'

'I don't see why we have to go at all,' said Trevor.

'You know perfectly well you can't stay here. Not while I'm away. Now get on with you, down to the station.'

I gave Madge a kiss on the way out and saw them all to the corner of the road. Then I went back inside and closed the front door. My own train wasn't for a few hours yet, which gave me time to pack my equipment and have a pint up the pub before they closed. It was almost the last pint I would have for a while, because I never drink on the job. Quite apart from the need to have your wits about you, I've always found it awkward drinking near a prison. You go into the pub across the road, get into conversation with the only other people in there, more often than not you'll find yourself talking to the nearest and dearest of the about-to-be-deceased. It's happened to me before now and I won't pretend it wasn't embarrassing, even though they had no idea who I was. Not something I enjoy.

So I went to the pub and had a pint of mild, and a couple of pork pies to go with it. I stayed there until closing time, then went home again and packed my bag for Dublin. I laid everything on the bed - rope, hood, tape measure, restraining straps - and tested them all to make sure they were in good working order. I examined every inch of the rope, because I didn't want to find it no use when I arrived there. You lose your job if the rope goes bad on you and the condemned man falls to the ground. Everything has to work like clockwork at an execution, or you're out. Rightly so, in my opinion.

But the rope was fine, and so were all the other things. I put them into my briefcase and added a clean shirt, a pair of socks, and my shaving tackle. I did think of putting my revolver in there as well, but decided I'd rather keep it close to me, where I could get at it in a hurry. I slipped it into my jacket pocket instead, underneath my overcoat, and put a handful of bullets into my pocket the other side, to even up the weight. Guns are much heavier than they look, although you wouldn't think so from the films.

What else? I put all the documentation into my inside pocket, the official correspondence from the Irish Government, and patted my wallet to make sure I had my money. The documentation was important, because apart from my joining instructions from the prison Governor, I also had a letter signed by an Irish Minister stating who I was and why I was allowed to carry a firearm. The letter entitled me to obtain assistance from the appropriate authorities, calling on them to do everything in their power to help me. It would be a useful item in a crisis.

I put my overcoat on when I was ready, and my hat, and locked up the house before I left. Madge had already stopped the milk until the end of the week, so all I had to do was turn off the gas and make sure the windows were closed, particularly round the back. You don't get many thieves round our way, but it's as well to take precautions. Wouldn't do to find the house ransacked when we returned. So I closed the windows, made sure the boiler was switched off, and took a final look around before locking the front door. Then I dropped the key into my pocket and set off for the railway station.

It wasn't far. Everything is within walking distance in our town. I left myself plenty of time, so as not to miss the train. I was going to travel across country, changing once at Tamworth and again at Crewe. I was planning to eat en route, but I hadn't booked a sleeper because I didn't think it was worth it. They roust you out in the middle of the night and push you onto the boat. There's no chance of getting your head down properly, so you might just as well sit up and save the expense, in my experience.

The train was half-empty when it came, and only a few minutes late. I found a seat without any trouble and put my briefcase in the overhead rack. There were two other people in the compartment, but neither displayed any interest in me. They were

wrapped in their own preoccupations, so I sat in the opposite corner and finished off the *Daily Telegraph*, which I hadn't had time to get through that morning. There was a lot in it about the new Prime Minister, Mr Macmillan, going to see President Eisenhower in Washington. A lot too about a Member of Parliament named Silverman, who wants to abolish capital punishment. Well, we all know what sort of person *he* is.

When we reached Tamworth, I got off the train and crossed to the other platform to catch my connection to Crewe. It was dark by now and the track was ablaze with lights. Looking at my watch, I saw that I was going to have to wait at least twenty minutes for my connection. I spent the time pacing up and down the platform, wishing it would arrive. I've never liked railway stations. It may sound odd, but in my profession I've always associated them with travelling to a death. I'm not ashamed of what I do for a living, but I don't get any great pleasure out of it either, other than as a job well done. I do it out of a sense of duty more than anything, although that doesn't stop me associating railway stations with death. Particularly after dark, on a cold winter evening.

As soon as the train pulled in, I hurried down the platform and got on at the buffet car, to make sure of a seat for supper. The car was brightly lit, after the gloom of the platform. They had lamb chops on the menu, so I ordered a couple with boiled potatoes and mint sauce, and another pint of mild. I had been hoping to sit on my own, but there were no spare tables: I had to share with a young man who came and parked himself opposite me. He wore a sports jacket and one of those loud ties Americans like, and had an accent I couldn't quite place.

'Going far?' he asked.

'Not too far.' I was non-committal. It was none of his business, where I was going.

'Up north?'

I nodded, without elaborating. Crewe is north of Tamworth. Up through the Black Country.

'Me too,' he said. 'I'm going home for a visit.'

I had some cheese after the lamb, and a cup of coffee. The young man wanted to talk, but I had decided I didn't like the look of him and went off as soon as I had finished to try and find a seat by myself. The train was fuller than the previous one. I did find a seat after a while, but it was between a fat woman who overflowed on both sides and a thin one who sniffed continually. There were a pair of National Servicemen opposite, regaling each other with horror stories of Catterick. They wore their berets tucked into their shoulder straps and were counting the days to their demob. All they'd done for the past two years was peel potatoes, if they were to be believed.

The stations came and went - Lichfield, Rugeley, Barlaston, Stoke, Kidsgrove, and so on up the line until we were almost at Crewe. I must have dozed for a while, because when I woke up the train was slowing down and the servicemen were standing in the aisle, handing down everyone's luggage. It seemed we were coming in to Crewe.

The servicemen had a kitbag each, with their name and number painted on the bottom, and an army-issue suitcase which stood out a mile among civilian luggage. The woman next to me heaved herself upright with an effort and claimed a small vanity case from the rack. The thin one the other side joined her, scrabbling about overhead and effectively preventing me from moving at all. I sat with my briefcase on my knees and waited for everyone to sort themselves out. Then I followed them on to the platform and looked for the train to Holyhead.

Only I wasn't going to Holyhead. I wasn't going to Dublin at all. Not directly, anyway. It was what the IRA expected me to do, and I knew they would be waiting for

me when I arrived. They would be watching the boats at Dun Laoghaire, watching them at Holyhead too, probably. They would certainly be covering the trains from Dun Laoghaire to Dublin, ready to meet them at both ends. I wasn't having any of that. If past experience was anything to go by, there would be a crowd of several hundred people waiting for me at my destination. There often is, when an execution has caught the public imagination. If it's a popular hanging, they'll hoist you shoulder high and try and carry you through the streets. But if it's unpopular ... well, you'd better watch out. Something told me Farrell's hanging was not going to be popular.

So I wasn't travelling Holyhead to Dun Laoghaire. The IRA would be looking for me and I saw no reason to oblige them. I was travelling to Liverpool, and from there on the night ferry to Belfast. I was going to catch the train from Belfast to Dublin next morning and come in by the back door, where they weren't expecting me. They wouldn't be watching the trains from the North. I would be able to slip in unnoticed, at quite a different station, and make my way to the prison without a mob baying at my heels. It was an important consideration, in my line of work.

I looked around for the Liverpool train. It was on the opposite platform, waiting to pick up connecting passengers. I went across, organised myself into a corner seat, and pulled down the brim of my hat in case anyone felt like a chat. It is less than an hour from Crewe to Liverpool and I didn't feel like making any new friends. I just wanted to keep to myself and get there with as little fuss as possible.

We arrived, as I had hoped, in just under an hour. The train made good time and pulled in to the big city shortly before ten. I was standing in the corridor as it came in, ready to open the carriage door. Nobody on the platform seemed to know anything about the ferry, but I looked for the signs and located them easily enough. Plenty of others were going that way too. I joined the crowd and followed them across the

concourse in the direction of the dockside. There may have been IRA among us as well, keeping an eye out for me, but if there were, I saw no sign of them. They were obviously keeping themselves out of sight.

The docks weren't far away, and we found the ferry without any trouble. I couldn't get a proper view of it in the dark, but it certainly seemed large enough. Clutching my ticket, I kept my briefcase close to me and went up the gangplank with the other passengers. A sailor at the top showed us where to go. The place was a bit like a hotel on board, with shops and bars on deck and a restaurant down below.

I had asked Madge to book me a cabin in a false name. Collecting the key from the Purser, I followed his directions and made my way down to D deck, in the heart of the ship. My cabin was aft, on the starboard side. It was a two-berther, but Madge had paid for all of it, so I wouldn't have to share. It had a basin and wardrobe as well as the berths, and a porthole firmly screwed shut, with a view of the side of the dock and not much else.

I didn't go to bed at once, because I found it hard to settle until we had put to sea. The ferry was due to cast off at half ten, which meant there wasn't long to wait. As soon as I had checked out the cabin, I went back upstairs and looked in to the saloon to see what was doing.

I found it full of Irish, settling in for what was evidently going to be a long evening. They had already set the pints up and were passing the jars around. Some were on whisky, but most were on stout, which is what the Irish drink. There must have been a couple of hundred of them in there, all kinds of people, everyone from priests with racing papers to Sisters of Mercy and labourers straight off the building site.

They were all in their best clothes, spruced up for the Christmas holidays. One of the labourers had a squeezebox and was getting a few tunes going, all the old Irish songs. He sang confidently, but out of key, with a mouth that showed a marked absence of teeth. No one was dancing yet, but a few people were tapping their feet, twitching their limbs. It wouldn't be long before they were doing a jig around the bar.

I will say this for the Irish, they're a cheerful people. They know how to make their own entertainment. You get a few of them together, you'll have a party before you know it. A 'craic', as they say. They were all joining in the singing, none of them was stiff or ill at ease, the way the English would have been. I think we could learn from them sometimes.

It wasn't easy to reach the bar, but I battled through eventually and ordered a half pint of mild. The man on my right asked what was wrong with Guinness. When I told him I didn't like the taste, he shook his head sorrowfully, as if that was only to be expected from the English. He pulled my leg about only having half a pint and offered to buy me the other half. We chatted for a while, and then he held a glass aloft in each hand and squeezed back to his family, who had found themselves a table by a window. We parted good friends, which is what always happens in Ireland when strangers meet. I like them as a people, I really do.

Presently I felt a thump beneath my feet and the rumble of machinery as the ship's engines coughed into life. We were preparing to cast off. The shore bell had already sounded; on deck the sailors were busy with the mooring lines. Finishing my drink, I followed them up the companionway and went to the rail to have a last look at Liverpool before we glided out into the Irish Sea. It didn't seem like much in the dark, with the beginnings of a sea mist coming down and the street lights half-lost in the gloom.

I searched for the Cathedral, but must have missed it somewhere. I missed the Titanic too, the monument to the engineers on the pierhead. I did see the Liver Birds though, three hundred feet above the city, and the Cunard Building, and the cupola on top of the Dock Board offices. They were all lit up by floodlights, impossible not to notice, even in the fog. They were a landmark for miles out to sea.

Down on the dockside, the gangplank had been removed and the mooring lines cast off. The ship shuddered for a moment, then gathered momentum and pulled away from the pier, setting a course downriver. One by one the great buildings slid past us, enormous monoliths in stone. There wasn't much traffic on the water at that time of night.

We passed Birkenhead to port, and Wallasey, and continued parallel to the shore for something like five or six miles before coming abreast of the Bootle lighthouse and the wider reaches of Liverpool Bay. The land fell away suddenly and receded astern as we moved out into open water. Before long, the lights had vanished and nothing lay in front of us except darkness. The sea over the rail was as black as you could imagine, cold and cheerless, inimical to life. Just the sight of it made me turn my collar up and thrust my hands deeper into my pockets.

I don't know how long I stood at the rail, but it must have been quite some time, because the sailors had all disappeared and we were a considerable way from shore when I turned to go. There had been one or two foghorns in the dark, but the only other sound came from the thump thump of the engines and the muffled revelry in the ship's saloon.

A stiff breeze was blowing over the bow of the ship, bringing with it a touch of spray. The deck was no place to be with the fog swirling around and the damp closing in. The other passengers had long since gone below and were warm and comfortable in

their cabins, or in the saloon if they had decided to make a night of it. I straightened up over the rail and turned to join them. And then I saw that I wasn't alone.

There was a young man behind me, the young man I had seen on the train. His face was in darkness, but I recognised his coat and tie. He was about three yards away, half-hidden behind a ventilating shaft. He wasn't expecting to catch my eye, because his face fell into the light when I saw him and he immediately looked away, as if he had been caught snooping. He shoved his hands into his trouser pockets and pretended to be admiring the view out to sea. I never saw anyone look so disconcerted.

How long had he been there? Was it a coincidence, or had he been following me? My mind raced back to when I had first seen him. Before Crewe certainly, because we had been in the dining car together. He had obviously changed trains at Crewe and again at Liverpool, or he wouldn't be here now. Was it coincidence, or something more?

I didn't wait to find out. It is a long way over the side of a ship on a dark night. I turned my back on the young man and stepped briskly towards the companionway. A few short strides and I was inside, going down. I hurried across to the saloon and went in to the bar. There was safety in numbers, just so long as nobody knew who I was.

Was I imagining things? Perhaps. People don't often find themselves thrown overboard on the Belfast ferry. It's just not something that happens, even by accident. It's not within the realms of possibility.

And yet I know this, that the man who turned Queen's evidence after the Phoenix Park murders in 1882 was given a new identity and a new life in South Africa. He went out on the boat, incognito, no one knowing who he was. And the Irish caught up with him, the Fenians, or the Irish Republican Brotherhood, or whoever, and they

stuffed him, right there on the boat. He never arrived in Port Elizabeth. They'd done for him long before then.

Not in the saloon, though. Not in front of priests. I was all right so long as I had the Church by my side. No one could do anything to me until the bar had closed and the holy men had dispersed. There was sanctuary of a sort, in that saloon. I ordered another half-pint and went and sat with the man I'd met earlier, the one with the family. He was surprised to see me, but I made a fuss of his children, who should have been in bed, and bought another round for everyone and moved in before they could stop me.

The craic was in full swing by then. People had undone their collars and were dancing jigs, as I had predicted. The floor was slippery with booze, and so were the tables. Someone had been sick, whether from alcohol or the motion of the ship I couldn't say, and the smell of stale beer mingled heavily with the fumes of cigarette smoke. What the nuns made of it all I don't know, though they seemed cheerful enough. They had teamed up with the priests and were having a high old time, all giggling together like nobody's business. It was a sight for sore eyes really. The Irish going home.

I kept one eye on the door, but saw no sign of the young man. Wherever he was, he had decided not to join the party. I wondered if he was still on deck, or whether he had gone below. Either way, he was keeping himself out of sight, which was fine by me. I had no desire to see him again.

The beer in my glass was warm to the touch, but I didn't drink much of it. I nursed it along instead, pretending to be having a good time. One of the kids at the table had a toy pistol which he insisted on pointing in my direction. I tried to see the joke, but I'd have been happier if he'd put it away, found something else to play with.

He spoke with a Birmingham accent, unlike his parents, who both had heavy brogues. They were taking the children home for a visit to their grandparents.

Half an hour passed before the barman called for last orders. Another quarter of an hour and he closed the grille of the bar, leaving only a couple of feet open in the middle. The man with the squeezebox was still playing, but no one was dancing any more. The music was slower, with tears in it, all the Micks singing mournfully about the misery of their lives and the homes they'd had to leave behind. There was sweat on their faces, intoxication. They didn't look so good when they were drunk. They were beginning to lurch a little, staggering from side to side, struggling to keep their balance. The ship was heaving slightly, which didn't help. It was time to call it a day.

The family I was with had already decided to go. Leaving my beer where it was, I stood up and went with them towards the door. There was no sign of the young man outside, so I slipped down the companionway as quick as I could and made my way aft along D deck. No one followed, that I could see. I had my key ready and let myself into my cabin without being observed. I closed the door again behind me and locked it from the inside, leaving the key in the lock so that nobody could get in while I was asleep. It was an elementary precaution, but one I always take when I'm on the job.

I was ready for bed too. It had been a long day, with too much travelling for my taste. Slipping out of my coat, I stretched up and hung it on the back of the door, but didn't undress any further, in case I needed my clothes in a hurry. I kept my revolver beside me for the same reason. After loading all six chambers, I put it on the shelf beside the bottom bunk, a few inches from my pillow.

It seemed a little melodramatic, sleeping with a weapon by my head, but the police had advised me to do so, and they must have known what they were talking

about. I listened to what they had to say and kept the gun close by my side. I checked the safety catch and pointed the barrel firmly away from me, before reaching across to switch off the light. Then I lay down, pulled up the blankets, and in no very calm frame of mind tried to go to sleep.

Not surprisingly perhaps, I slept fitfully rather than well. I found it hard to relax properly, with that young man on the boat. I kept waking up and thinking about him, wondering if there was more to him than was apparent, or whether I was simply imagining things. I had no reason to suppose he wasn't genuine, yet I couldn't help finding it odd that he had been standing right behind me on deck, with the whole of the boat to choose from. He had looked distinctly shifty when I caught his eye. In other circumstances, I wouldn't have given the matter a second thought. With a police warning though, and the IRA after me, I didn't know what to think.

The night passed in fits and starts. Several times, I woke for no reason and reached out to make sure my gun was where I had left it. The cabin wasn't quite dark, because there was a sliver of light under the door from the corridor. More than once I heard people passing in the small hours, saw their shadows pausing outside the door. I thought I saw the handle turn too, but told myself it was only my imagination. I may have been dreaming in fact, because I was in a light doze for much of the time, not awake, yet not properly asleep either. I lay like that for what seemed like hours, ready to spring up at the slightest provocation. And then I drifted off and must have slept solidly at last, because when I woke again it was seven a.m. and the cabin wasn't as dark as before. A grey light of sorts was filtering through the porthole. It was the beginning of the new day.

I felt much better for the daylight, as you always do after a bad night. The fears of the dark melted away to nothing as I went to the porthole and looked out. There was still mist on the water, but I could make out a distant smudge to starboard, which presumably was the Mull of Galloway, and a number of fishing boats hauling in their nets. There were seagulls too, floating on the swell, which meant we couldn't be far from land.

Shaving quickly, I put my coat back on with the revolver in the pocket, and went up on deck to get a better view. I saw that we were indeed near land. The coast of Northern Ireland stretched behind us to port, and the ship was just abreast of the resort town of Bangor. Before long, we would be turning to port again to enter Belfast Lough. The sea part of my journey was almost over.

Going down to the restaurant, which had just opened, I ordered a cup of tea and a roll and pondered my strategy for disembarking from the ship. The way I saw it, there were two options available to me. One was to get off with the other passengers, keeping a low profile and following everyone else down the gangplank, losing myself totally in the crowd. The other was to wait in my cabin until after they had all dispersed, and anyone watching the boat had given up and gone home.

Both options had their advantages, both their disadvantages. In the end I decided to go with everyone else. Viewing it rationally, I didn't think the IRA would be watching the boat anyway. And if they were, they had no idea who they were looking for. The most they had to go on was an old photograph in the *News of the World*, which wasn't even a good likeness. If I kept my hat on and my head down, no one would ever know who I was.

So I waited in the restaurant until the ferry was approaching Belfast, then went back to the cabin and packed my briefcase again. I sat on my bunk while the boat

docked, and didn't return the key to the Purser until the shore officials had come on board and it was time to join the other passengers in the queue for disembarkation.

I found them a lot more sober than they had been last night. They looked grey in the morning light, green almost. There was a smell of old liquor about some of them, hardly surprising in the circumstances. I have never understood why people get drunk when they travel. Does no good at all, in my experience.

The young man in the sports jacket didn't appear to be among the passengers queuing for the gangplank. I looked for him, but couldn't see him anywhere. I had been hoping to stand behind him in the line, on the principle that if I was following him, he couldn't be following me, but he was nowhere to be found and the issue didn't arise. Instead I shuffled along with the others and took my turn down the gangway.

We stepped on to dry land and straggled across the dock into the terminal building. A crowd of people was waiting for us at the far end, beyond the exit signs. They were throwing arms around each other, hugging babies, enjoying family reunions. I had nothing to do with any of that, so I swung my briefcase and sidestepped the whole business. I went through the barrier and passed out of the dock area into the street beyond. No one followed me, so far as I could tell: certainly not the young man.

To make sure, I slipped into a church across the road from the terminus and spent ten minutes admiring the architecture. Then I came out again, carried on the way I was going, and when no one was looking took a sharp left down a narrow street leading to the city centre.

I didn't see much of the city, on my way to the station. Didn't miss much, either. It's a brassy town, Belfast, very commercial, not really Irish at all. I've done several jobs there in the past and have never really taken to it. It has one or two fine buildings - the Law Courts, the City Hall - but there's no style to any of it, no sense of

character. It's too hard-nosed altogether, a bad introduction to Ireland. I didn't waste any time visiting old haunts, but went straight on down towards the station.

The route took me along Donegall Quay, then into Oxford Street and left into Bridge Street. The pavements were crowded, because it was the rush hour, but mostly the crowds were going the other way. I pressed through them and fought my way up Bridge Street to the station on the right. Madge had booked me through to Dublin, which meant all I had to do was find the right platform and fix myself up with a seat.

'What time's the next train to Dublin?' I asked the man at the ticket office.

'Nine thirty,' he said. 'Twenty minutes.'

'Where does it leave from?'

'Platform Three. Just over there.'

The train was due in soon, which just gave me time to get a newspaper to read and buy a present for Madge. I always buy her a present when I'm away. I went across to the kiosk and chose a tin of Belfast fudge with a picture of the City Hall on the top. I'd brought her back some fudge from Belfast once before and it had gone down well, so I thought I would repeat the gesture. I bought a paper as well, the Irish edition of the *Daily Telegraph*, and tucked it under my arm until I had a chance to read it.

The train was in, when I returned to the barrier. Showing my ticket, I walked to the further end to get a seat near the front. Everyone else appeared to have the same idea, because the compartment filled up almost as soon as I got there. I found a space beside the window, with a motherly-looking woman next to me and a pair of businessmen opposite. The seats next to the corridor were taken by a young married couple who didn't have much to say for themselves, beyond exchanging a series of private jokes which had them in stitches but didn't mean a thing to the rest of us. They were in a world of their own.

We had a few minutes to wait before the train began to move. The motherly-looking woman offered me a barley sugar to while away the time, but I refused it politely, saying I'd just had breakfast. She picked up on my English accent instead, asking if I was going South for a holiday. I told her I was a salesman, travelling in ironmongery. We chatted for a while, talked of this and that; and then, as the train pulled out, turned away to our respective reading matter. Hers was a woman's magazine, mine the *Telegraph*. I opened it at the news page and settled down to read.

The lead story was about Farrell, or rather his sister. There was a photograph of her across three columns, looking very pretty. She was on her way to the Irish President's office, to make a last-minute plea for her brother's life. According to the story, she was also sending messages to the President of the United States, the Queen, the Pope, and God knows who else. She was calling on everyone she could think of to stop the execution.

She had her supporters too, if the other faces in the photograph were anything to go by. There was a considerable groundswell of sympathy for Farrell. Even the Primate of all-Ireland was quoted as saying the sentence should be commuted. People in the South didn't seem to want him dead at all.

It bothered me, I don't mind admitting, the idea of a reprieve. They're bad for the prisoner's nerves, bad for mine too. You get all psyched up, geared for what you have to do, and all to no purpose. You don't get paid either, half the time.

People don't seem to realise, in England at least, that a hanging has to be financed out of the Sheriff's own pocket. The High Sheriff of whichever county you happen to be in. He appoints the hangman, arranges the fee, puts his official signature to everything. And he doesn't fork out, quite often, if there's been a reprieve. Just keeps his hand in his pocket, lets you whistle for your money, even though you've had

expenses and lost a day's work. It's no way to behave, in my book. They're not gentlemen, some of these Sheriffs.

But there wasn't going to be a reprieve this time. Not according to the paper, anyway. The President of Ireland had agreed to consider the matter, as he was bound to do, but the prospects for Farrell were not looking good. The feeling was that the President would be forced to give him the thumbs down, write 'The law must take its course' across his papers. It was all because of the IRA. They had a military campaign in progress against the North, raids on barracks and so forth, and the President had to be seen taking a hard line, holding out for law and order. He didn't have any option, really.

So Farrell was set for the big drop, and I for one was glad because it would have been a waste of my time going all that way for no purpose. You feel a terrible sense of anti-climax when you arrive at a prison, only to be told your services aren't needed any more. Quite often they leave it until too late for you to go home that night, so that you have to hang about the prison, if they'll spare you a bed, and sit twiddling your thumbs with nothing to do. It's not how I like to spend my time. I like to get on with the job, then shoot off home as fast as I can.

I folded the paper again and looked out of the window. We were out of the suburbs of Belfast now, into open countryside. It was a nice day too, a bright breezy morning with a wintry light over the fields and the mist still not quite dispersed in the hollows. The scenery was very striking. We passed trees and rivers and pretty little towns, just like the ones you see on tourist posters. Passed hump-backed bridges too, and young girls out riding their horses. It's a beautiful country, Ireland, much more so than people realise, who've never been over there.

I studied my fellow travellers. The man opposite was a thickset, professional-looking type in a dark business suit. He was reading a newspaper, an Irish one by the look of it. I couldn't see the title at first, until he turned over to the sports page. Then I saw that it was the *Irish Press*, and that the lead story, as with the *Telegraph*, was Farrell. The accompanying photograph seemed familiar too. I studied it closer for a moment and saw why. It was a picture of me.

Me, on my doorstep, picking up the milk. They had printed the old *News of the World* photograph from years ago. There I was, first thing in the morning, trying to collect the milk with a couple of journalists leaping at me out of the bushes. I had my mouth half-open, and small wonder. You don't expect the press after you when you've only just woken up.

Fortunately, it wasn't a good picture. It was blurred, for a start, and they had cropped the milk bottles and blown up my head and shoulders too large, to make the picture look better on the page. The camera had caught me at an unfamiliar angle, half-stooping and with my face slightly averted, so that you couldn't really tell who it was. At least I hoped you couldn't. There was a large caption underneath, announcing that this was the face of the British hangman. Not entirely true though, because it was only half my face, and totally unrecognisable at that. Or so I hoped.

Nobody else had noticed, at any rate. Not in the carriage. I glanced around furtively, but none of them was staring at me. The young marrieds were keeping to themselves, the woman next to me was reading an article about Marlene Dietrich, the two businessmen had opened their briefcases and were studying balance sheets. They hadn't twigged who I was. Or if they had, they weren't letting on. They were just sitting there, eyes down, getting on with the journey. I was simply another passenger to them - which was fine with me.

Bloody newspapers! Who did they think they were? They had no right to plaster my picture all over the front page. There was a time when that sort of thing would never have happened, but the time was long ago. Newspapers have no sense of decency any more. They don't care about the damage they do. They simply put a man's picture on the front page and to hell with the consequences, just so long as they can sell a few copies. That's all they care about. Selling copies.

I turned away from the others and stared out of the window, taking comfort from the weight of the revolver in my pocket. I was glad I had it with me. I couldn't imagine ever using it, but I was glad to have it there, all the same, where I could touch it if I wanted to. You never know what might happen, when your picture's been in the papers.

The train rattled on for another quarter of an hour before pulling in to Newry, the last big town before the border. I heard doors banging further along, but nobody entered our compartment. After a few minutes we pulled out again through the fields and hedgerows of South Armagh. We passed the Mountains of Mourne in the distance and picked up speed towards the border.

I don't know when we crossed it exactly, because the train didn't stop or anything, but it couldn't have been too long, because the next station we passed through had its name written up in Gaelic, and the colours of the signs were all different. We were in the South, beyond British jurisdiction. Like it or not, I belonged to the Irish now.

We hadn't progressed much further when I became aware of something going on in the corridor: voices, footsteps, the opening and closing of compartment doors. Somebody was coming along the train. Questions were being asked, by the tone of the voices. I wondered what was happening. Wondered, I won't deny it, if the voices were

looking for someone. There was a note of interrogation about them, an air of authority. I wondered who was doing the asking, and whether it was me they were looking for. Ridiculous perhaps, but that's how you get when your photograph has been posted all over the train.

The voices came closer, one in particular. I heard the man enter the next compartment, heard him interrogating the occupants. They answered indistinctly, and were questioned further. The man must have been satisfied in the end though, because I heard him step into the corridor again, saw his elbow as he closed the door behind him. I kept a hand near my gun as he turned towards us. And then I saw that he wore the uniform of the Irish Customs service.

'Anything to declare, ladies and gents?' He slid the door open, but didn't come into the compartment. 'Any wines, spirits, tobacco, perfumes, watches, jewellery?' He had a list on a clipboard, for those who wanted it. 'Any prohibited articles? Firearms, knives, electrical goods? Books?'

We all shook our heads. None of us had anything to declare, not even books - by which the Customs man meant the works of James Joyce, J.P. Donleavy, and a few other novelists I can't say I've ever read. The Irish are odd about books. They won't allow any smut into the country, or heresy, or magazines like *Health and Efficiency* with the private parts airbrushed out. Or contraceptives, for that matter. But none of us had any of these.

'Anybody been on a farm, then? Had any contact with livestock in the past twenty four hours?'

Again we shook our heads. We weren't carrying foot and mouth.

'All right.' The Customs man looked around the compartment. I saw with growing unease that his eye had fallen on me. 'Would you open your bag, please sir?'

Open my bag? What was he talking about? I couldn't open my bag. Not in front of all those people. I couldn't open it up and show them what was in there. It was more than my life was worth.

With sinking heart, I unfastened the lock and did as I was told. I opened the bag in such a way that only the Customs man could see inside. He rummaged underneath my clean shirt and put his hand unerringly on the rope. Next to it he found the restraining straps and the white hood. I saw his face change as he realised what was in there. He investigated further, found the shackle and the tape measure, and knew exactly what he was looking at. The Customs man read the papers. He knew who I was. Knew beyond a shadow of a doubt.

'That's fine. Thank you, sir.' His voice was calm and level, but a change had come over his eyes. From an expression of genial neutrality, they had altered to one of barely concealed contempt. He looked me straight in the face and I knew he was no friend of mine. I could feel his hostility coming right at me. Menace too. He had pale blue eyes that never wavered. He was a man for whom the English executioner did not rank very high.

'How long before we get to Dublin?' I asked.

'Just over an hour,' he replied. 'Only two more stops.'

Closing my bag once more, I hoisted it up and put it on the rack. The Customs man returned to the corridor and continued along the train. He gave me another look before he went. A look which didn't bode well at all. I had an uncomfortable feeling that I hadn't seen the last of the Customs man, that I would be hearing from him again.

But what could he do to me, on a moving train? There wasn't much. I had my gun with me, and I was his physical equal. You don't get the hangman's job for being puny. He couldn't throw me from the train; he certainly wasn't going to take me

unawares. All he could do was draw attention to me, show me up in front of the other passengers, bring the mob down on my head. But he hadn't done that. He'd just kept quiet and carried on down the train.

I was unhappy, nevertheless. I don't like it when people know who I am. Especially in a place like Ireland, where you can't be sure who your friends are. The Customs man was a servant of the state, just like me, but he could easily have been an IRA man as well. A sympathiser, at any rate. There were countless people in Ireland who would back the IRA against the British hangman. The Customs man might well have been one of them.

I opened the *Telegraph* again, but my heart wasn't in it. The encounter had unsettled me. I kept thinking about the man, wondering what was going through his mind. There had been so much contempt in his face, so much disdain, I had read him like a book. He didn't care for me, or the job I was going to do, and he had made no secret of it. I just wondered if that was the end of the matter, or whether he was going to make trouble. From past experience, I did not rule out trouble.

We came to Dundalk not long afterwards, the penultimate stop before Dublin. We were on the fast train, rather than the local service. For no reason that I could explain, I put my head out of the corridor window and watched what was happening on the platform. The first person I saw was the Customs man.

He had stepped off the train and was walking purposefully towards the stationmaster's office. He was way down the platform, a couple of carriages along, but I didn't hesitate for a moment. Hurrying along the corridor, I pushed into the next carriage and the one after that and kept pace with him inside the train. It wasn't easy, with so many people getting on and off, but I made sure I didn't lose sight of him. I saw him go into the office, saw his peaked cap appear above a half-frosted window,

saw a telephone receiver held to his ear. He was making a phone call. He had left the train to make a call. I couldn't help wondering why.

Whatever the reason, the call didn't take long, because the Customs man replaced the receiver after a couple of minutes and disappeared from view again. He re-emerged onto the platform and stepped back on to the train. We left almost immediately, the wheels gathering pace through the outskirts of Dundalk. We had only one more stop before Dublin, and my head was full of that phone call.

Who had he been ringing? His wife, his office? His garage about the car? His dentist, to make an appointment? He could have been ringing anybody, could have had a thousand reasons for making a call. Everybody uses the telephone. There was nothing odd about a Customs official stepping off a train to use the phone. Nothing odd at all.

I didn't like it, though. Not one bit. My position was too precarious to have people making phone calls, who knew my identity. There had been something about the man's face, when our eyes met, that I didn't trust at all. Something about him that I really did not care for.

The train thundered on, bouncing from side to side along the track. I didn't go back to my seat, but remained standing in the corridor, several carriages down. I had my briefcase with me, so no one could lift it, and the newspaper, although I couldn't settle to reading. I kept wondering about that call, speculating about the Customs man. I'm not a nervous person, but I've learned to be wary in my job. You develop an instinct, when things aren't exactly as they ought to be. Something was certainly wrong here.

We reached Drogheda after another half hour, the place where they fought the battle of the Boyne. I put my head out again as we pulled in. The people on the

platform seemed harmless enough: old ladies, commercial travellers, a young mother with a child in tow. They all started following the train along as it arrived, waiting for it to come to a halt. When it did, they swirled around the doors and climbed on board. I watched idly, without much concern. Their doings were of no interest to me - until I noticed, what I suppose I had been expecting all along, a group of young men on the platform.

Three of them, three fit-looking, lean young men, all in their late teens or early twenties. They emerged from behind a pillar and strolled unhurriedly along the train. They didn't say anything to each other, but kept their hands in their coat pockets and walked parallel to the carriages without making any attempt to get on. They walked towards the engine, taking their time. They didn't stop until they were almost at the front. Then they opened a carriage door and got in. I saw, without surprise, that it was the carriage where I had been sitting.

That did it for me. I wasn't staying on the train any longer. Not with men like that. I shrank back as they passed, making myself as inconspicuous as possible. A porter came along when the train was ready to leave, to make sure the doors were closed. I waited until he had gone by, then furtively opened mine a crack.

As soon as the train began to inch forward, I jumped onto the platform and slammed the door behind me. The porter shouted at me not to be such a fool, but I took no notice of him. I could afford not to. I was on the platform, and the others were still on the train.

Feeling a lot more relieved than I care to admit, I picked myself up and headed for the exit. As I did though, I saw that something was wrong with the train. It hadn't disappeared into the distance, as it should have done. It was slowing down and coming to a halt a hundred yards down the line... as if someone had just pulled the alarm cord.

I watched in disbelief as a door opened. One of the young men jumped out, onto the track. He was followed by the second and the third. All three leapt out and began to hurry back along the line towards the station. They were IRA all right, and they were coming straight for me.

I didn't hesitate for a moment. I knew what would happen if they caught me. Shoving my ticket at the collector, I hurried out of the station and began to run for my life.

To be continued