

OUBLIETTE

(A Fantasy Journey through Irish History)

BY

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This book is Dedicated to three friends,

Sean, Barney and Al

To good neighbours,

Tom and Mary Mongan

And also in Memory of

Louise Tynan of Leenane and

Kevin Mongan of Creggauns:

Gone Too Soon

“Foreigners may imagine that it is granting too much to the Irish to allow them lists of kings more ancient than those of any other country in modern Europe; but the singularly compact and remote situation of that island and its freedom from Roman conquest, and from the concussions of the fall of the Roman Empire, may infer this allowance not too much ... But all contended for is the list of kings, so easily preserved by the repetition of bards at high solemnities, and some grand events of history.”

**(From Inquiry into the History of Scotland by John Pinkerton,
1758-1826)**

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The Meeting (1700 BC)

It was a bright spring morning. On the battlefield the six leaders of the Tuatha De Danann appeared to falter and die. The warriors, male and female, Mac Coill, Mac Ceacht and Mac Greine, Fodhla, Banda and Eire in turn released their spirits from the fleshly robes they had been inhabiting, seemingly falling to the swords and spears of the invading sons of Milidh, but in reality speeding their spirits to an agreed meeting spot, a portal between worlds in the mountains to the north of Ireland to meet each other again in their real form as beings of pure spirit. They had been given many names. in many times, in many countries and in many worlds but, for the purposes of this tale, we will acknowledge them by their titles as Irish Gods and Goddesses:

Danann (Mother of the Gods);
Ned and Nemon(Husband and Wife, God and Goddess of War);
Manannan (God of the Sea);
Dian Cécht (God of Healing);
Bright (Goddess of Poets and Smithies).

And we will creep now, like little mice, into their circle of conversation and, maybe we, mere mortals, may catch a glimpse of the eternal; hear, for a second, the music of the spheres; gain an insight into the purpose and method of our Creator. Let us listen and see.

Danann: “Well met my brothers and sisters. It is good that we pause from our labours for a short space to review our work on this world as a whole before we enter the unwinding path once more and carry on the great work in other worlds at other times.”

Manannan: “It is some 3,500 years, as time is reckoned here, from the Great Flood and the land and sea is largely settled now and should remain so for some 4,000 years.”

Dian Cécht: “Healing plants have been spread and nurtured, and some humans have been trained in their uses.”

Bright: “Communities, which have survived the devastation, have been taught the arts needed to survive and this will be handed on from generation to generation. Some communities have some form of written language already whilst others have an oral tradition which will develop into the written word over time.”

Nemon: “Humans take naturally to war. They are by nature, acquisitive and greedy and the warrior is held in high esteem by all cultures.”

Bright: “But so are the poets and the craftsmen. Humans can create or destroy in equal measure, according to which energies they choose to use. Wisdom comes when a proper balance is found.”

Ned: “Trace memory of all our teaching is instilled in all human groupings and every culture will call upon our assistance using a myriad of names.”

Bright: “The name does not matter, it is the deed that counts.”

Danann: “Portals have been placed in many lands to assist us in our travel on the unwinding path between worlds.”

Nemon: “But why, Sister Bright, have you placed your portal here, in the earth of this barren cave? Why not at some of the great structures we have raised in Ireland to highlight the solstices and working of the heavens for the people?”

Bright: “As you said yourself, Nemon, humans can be acquisitive and greedy and I feel this humble place may protect my portal long after the ones placed in Delphi, Egypt and elsewhere, in marvellous constructions, have been disturbed and despoiled.”

Danann: “This world is now entering a period of stability where civilisations can grow and develop. We have all planted seeds of wisdom and shared such knowledge that human beings can currently assimilate. Now our role will be largely as guides and observers. Our hope is that humankind grows in wisdom and spiritual maturity as time passes on this beautiful planet that gives them all the resources they need for life but the option, to hurt or to heal, to nurture or destroy, is the responsibility of each individual. Time will tell.”

The Warrior (800 BC)

Chapter 1

Bran halted the travelling party. Unease had been growing in him for some time and he was a man to trust his instincts. It had started with the ravens, his personal animal spirit guide. He had heard their distinctive guttural croaking some three hours earlier and had seen two of the black birds on a high rock to his left and they were facing opposite directions one north and one south, both seemingly giving voice to their agitation in different directions. The party had been hugging the roots of the mountain range heading west and had just come to the part of the road where it bent northwards towards home. The party had two warriors mounted on stout hill ponies and he had left one of them, then, at the bend in the trackway with instructions to look for any hunting party that might be following them. Now, he sent his son, Conaire, ahead of them, to a large spur of rock adjacent to the trackway which would give a good view of the northern road stretching out before them. They were, themselves, not on a raid. Emer, the wife of their Chieftain, Ugaine, had given her husband three daughters in quick succession and last winter had given birth to a son and she had wished to visit the Druids at their holiest shrine in order to give thanks for her fecundity. Emer was the only other member of the party mounted on a hill pony. She was accompanied by one female handmaiden and her musician with an armed escort of fourteen warriors and half a dozen other people from the village who had wished to visit the sacred site. Bran caught Emer's steady gaze and thought what a fine woman she was; tall and stately with fair hair and still young, having been married to Ugaine in her fifteenth year.

There had been some upheaval in the land in recent years as a new race of people, smaller, dark haired and swarthy had started to encroach upon their lands from the south and there had been some battles fought over more than just cattle. Bran had kept alert on the way to the seat of the old High Kings of Ulster, Emain Macha, but the trip had been uneventful. The party had rested within the ringed fort and consulted with the Druids for advice or for healing and had then made their way to the ritual cleansing pool to bathe themselves and prepare for their petition to the Gods. The next day they had then followed a steep trackway to the offering pool

where they made their petitions to their personal deities, there being a pantheon to choose from, each throwing an offering in the pool, a gold brooch or bracelet, a metal tipped horn, a sword; some token of worth as an offering to the Gods. Bran had petitioned the God and Goddess of War, Ned and Nemon, thanking them for their protection to date and praying for continuing strength to his arm and courage to his heart. He had felt renewed when he left the holy site; centred, calm and at one with all around him. He was not surprised, therefore, when he spotted his rider hastening towards him from the south. The speed of the rider told him all he needed to know; trouble was heading their way and his instincts had been correct. He turned his gaze northwards towards his son, who was just about at the peak of the spur of rock. He grunted with approval when he saw his son lay himself flat on top of the rock in order to remain hidden from view and lost sight of him for a few minutes as he inched his way forward to scan the northern road. Conaire came back into view quickly and gave his father two hand signals; a spread hand moving downwards indicating the small, dark haired people and then his two hands spread wide, much wider than his body, indicating a party greater in size than their own.

Bran was filled with a savage joy. He felt it was his time to die and he would be blessed by being killed in battle, in full health with a host of victories to his name; he was sure of it. His bravery would ensure a good rebirth and he hoped to kill many of the dark men before being felled. He lifted his face to the sky and gave thanks. His gaze then fell on Emer and he quickly considered all options before him. He must, if he could, return Emer to his Chieftain. They were mostly on foot so they could not drive forward quickly and try to fight their way swiftly through the northern enemies. The enemies to the south would be further away but he could think of no place he had passed on the road which would give them shelter or a fighting advantage. He asked for guidance and was answered. The God Ned, in the form of a raven, flew in from the West over the heads of the party and landed on a bank of heather to the East, making a distinct toking noise. Bran, trusting in this further sign, did not hesitate and told the party to follow the bird into the interior. The party moved swiftly, not needing to be told to keep to hard ground and try to leave no tracks behind them. The two riders, north and south, cut across the heather to meet up with the main party heading East. The riders spoke of a band of fifty men an hours walk to the north and a similar number headed towards them from the south. The massive odds against them didn't seem to overly concern Bran as he knew the worth of some of the warriors around him but it was no ordinary raiding party and he didn't think it was coincidence.

He guessed that their party had probably been recognised heading south. “A woman finely dressed with slaves in attendance” he thought to himself: “Yes, it must be Emer they are after as a hostage for some move they are planning.” He kept the thought to himself for the time being. They carried on and the raven continued in a line roughly East to North East seeming to stop and wait for them at intervals and the natural folds in the landscape soon hid the trackway from view. They continued on this route for over an hour, passing through a band of woodland and, in the latter stages, following the line of a swift flowing river which barred their path eastwards. This led them to a valley entrance with cliffs and high rocks to their left and the river to their right. There was just room for five or six men to walk abreast between the rocks and river; a perfect defensive position. “The Gods are with us” exclaimed the warrior, Melghe. Given their limited numbers, they could not have wished for a better battle ground. The raven, work completed, flew for the heavens.

Chapter 2

Telling him to leave his horse, Bran sent his son, Conaire, further back down the path they had just travelled, telling him to stay there until an enemy came in sight and cautioning him to stay inland, away from the river which would mask noises and hamper his sense of hearing. Then leaving half the party to take up defensive positions along the riverbank and amidst the rocks, he took the rest of the party further into the valley to view the terrain. The area was unfamiliar to him, a seemingly deserted place with a river running through it, protected on all sides by cliffs and mountainside. The light was starting to fade and Bran knew he soon had to decide whether to split his small force and hunt for a way forward or to mass his tribespeople in one place and hope that the geographical advantage would win them an unlooked for victory. He had little hope that they would remain undetected as the dark people had proved more than once to be excellent trackers. One of the villagers, a shepherd boy who had begged permission to go with the party in hopes of obtaining a cure for his sick mother, ran ahead and scanned the landscape carefully. “I know this place” he said, running back to Bran: “It took me a while to be sure as I have only seen it from the back of the valley but I was here some three summers ago. I was looking after the herd in the mountains and found a way down the cliffs at the back and stayed here a few days to fish and forage.”

“Is the cliff path on this side of the river?” asked Bran.

“Yes” replied the shepherd: “About halfway up the valley there is a small cave and where I descended and climbed is a good walk beyond that, near the valley end but it is a hard enough climb and not something to risk in the dark.”

“Then how far across the mountains to our people?” questioned Emer, who had been listening intently.

“Mountain walking is difficult, Lady, and depends on the weather” said the shepherd: “A mist may come down and delay a journey but, if the Gods favour us with a clear path, we will come to the first of our villages in around two days.”

Bran strode to one of the hill ponies and started to unpack spare weapons and provisions. It gave him a few moments to think. He glanced at his friend and neighbour Finn. Finn was not looking at Bran but was gazing out impassively at the valley landscape, his youngest son Melghe at his side. Finn’s family had suffered over recent years. A sickness had come upon the village a previous winter and had struck indiscriminately, taking the daughter and three of Finn’s four sons. Finn’s wife had been overturned by grief and Finn had returned from a hunting party to find she had cut her wrists with flint and died from the wounds. Bran had taken care to visit his neighbour’s round house often after that and the two men had become well nigh inseparable but Finn, always a quiet man, had withdrawn into himself, hugging his hurt to him and his face was prematurely lined with grief. Finn, being a good warrior, would never ask but Bran decided that Melghe must live, if possible, so that Finn’s seed would not fail. He, himself, had no concerns on that score, his numerous children having already borne children themselves.

“Melghe” he said: “You must protect Emer and see her back to our people. Both of you follow the shepherd inland. Take the horses. Camp near the foot of the cliff and climb as soon as the light permits but leave no trace of where you camped as it may guide our enemies. I doubt the dark men will attack tonight but, if they break through at dawn in time to spot your ascent, you must make a stand, Melghe, at the top of the cliff and throw down stones to dislodge and delay the pursuers. If you reach the cliff top and the valley is still clear, go with them to Ugaine and tell him we died with joy in our hearts.” He sent the two axemen with them who could bring back the horses and report on where their only potential escape route lay.

Emer looked at her two slaves, her handmaiden, Mab, a Scottish woman who had cared for her since childhood and her musician Aenghus, a delicate looking young man of about twenty summers. Mab thought fast. She was slowing and she knew she would only hold up the party. Her knees had barely held out on the journey on relatively flat ground and she was no longer fit enough to travel the high places; her cliff climbing days were long since over. “Lady” she began: “I have seen you from child, to bride, to mother so now I would ask you to grant me one wish. When I lived in my own land, I was warrior born and, before the sea raid took me here to you, many of my arrows found a fine mark. I ask that you now let me meet my end, if end it be, as a warrior, so that I can meet my ancestors without shame.”

Aenghus was afraid. He had the soul of a poet and no love for battle but Mab’s courage gave him heart. “I will stay too, Lady” he said: “For, whilst I am no warrior, there are men here who have recorded mighty deeds and at least I can sing a song at their passing.”

Emer saw the fear in the musician and saw the stubborn set look in her dear Mab’s face and knew the real reason why she was staying behind. “My thanks and my love to you both for your service and, now, for your loyalty” she said: “I proclaim you freeman and freewoman and, if it be ordained that we meet again, I will reward you as your actions deserve.” Emer was deeply moved but knew that this was not the time for tears. She headed for the valley interior before her emotion could betray her followed by the others.

Chapter 3

Those remaining, carrying weapons and supplies, headed back towards the mouth of the valley at a quick pace. There was a lot to organise before dark fell. The warriors all had their own weapons and shields. Some were naturally gifted with the bow, others with sword, axe or spear but they were all proficient with more than one weapon and were well armed. The two female warriors amongst them, Sol and Luna, were the most accurate spear throwers the tribe had and were mighty hunters of boar and deer. Spare weapons were first placed in a line for the slaves and village people to pick from. Aenghus and Mab both choose slings and hurried to the water’s edge to collect suitable stones to fire before the dark closed in. Aenghus also set aside a short bow with flint arrows and a copper knife for his belt. Two villagers chose spare bows and one, Enna, was a woodsman and naturally chose an axe. The remaining two villagers, one

man and one woman were obviously totally at a loss so Bran tossed them two copper knives for personal protection and told them he had other work they could do as runners. As a start, he asked them to collect what dry wood they could find and stack it in a corner behind the line of defence and then see to a cold supper of dried fruit and cured meat. They were warned to light no fire.

Bran asked Finn to accompany him and they both surveyed the prospective field of battle from the side of the enemy. They both agreed they should place the two stone slingers on the highest bolder which rose, sheer, nearly twelve feet from the ground, nearest to the mountainside as archers would be too exposed whereas slingers could crouch and rise almost at the last moment, aim and fire. However, there was little protection for them so instructions were given to stack a low dry stone lip at the front rim behind which Aenghus and Mab could have basic cover. There were then a jumble of jagged large rocks which offered ideal cover for the archers with plenty of firing space. The river was examined again and both men felt it was too swift and strong to be forded so no threat was likely to come from the far bank. They turned their attention to what would be the main killing ground; the space between the rocks and the river. They hoped the slingers and archers would do a fair deal of damage but the other warriors would have to take the brunt of the charges of the enemy. They discussed options and, having reached agreement, returned to the others to lay out their plans.

They were joined before full dark by Conaire. A fire had been lit by the dark men further on down by the riverside but Conaire had been too well trained by his father to let down his guard and, listening intently, had heard the faint scrape of metal on rock fairly close to the nook he had chosen to wait in. Silently, his path already firmly pre-fixed in his mind, he retreated and returned to his father, who immediately split the party into three groups, all to take turns in guarding the entrance to the valley through the night, although he himself didn't anticipate an attack until daylight. The warriors were calm and relaxed, talking of past raids and past heroic acts, along with a couple of foolish ones which raised a few chuckles, and their mood soothed the tension of the others, hardy enough people but un-used to the seemingly endless wait on the edge of battle; the calm before the storm could fray the nerves.

Chapter 4

Fachtua, the leader of the dark haired tribesmen, was not in the best of moods. When the party had been initially spotted on the road by a scout it had been his plan to use a pincer movement to waylay the Chieftain's wife on their return but things had gone awry. The southern party had been told to remain unseen until the party had passed but something had occurred to warn the Northerners of his trap and he was angry that his clever plan had gone astray. His trackers, scanning ahead of the main force, had spotted where the party had left the road due to a couple of careless footprints by one of the villagers, but there was no sign of the southern contingent so he had left a tribesman on the road to guide them inland when they arrived and set off in pursuit.

Having reached the river flowing out of the valley, he had a good idea where his prey had gone to ground and ordered a fire to be lit to guide the second party to them all the quicker and decided on a dawn attack with all troops to overwhelm the Northerners with superior numbers. Even when first light showed the advantage the ground gave to his opponents, Fachtua did not stop to reassess his plan. In his head there was only a handful of warriors to stand against him and, anger still ruled him rather than logic. His men would pay a heavy price for it that morning.

Chapter 5

A cacophony of noise greeted the dark men as they neared their objective at dawn. Horns blew, metal clashed on shields, catcalls, shouts and yells greeted them and, rising above all that, the cutting laughter of women which darkened many a warrior's brow. "Run away, little legs" called Luna, one of the spearwomen. Sol laughed loudly. Aenghus started to sing, with a fine tenor, the song of their Chieftain's famous raid and capture of the ten brown cows, reminding his people of their warrior heritage.

Five swordsmen stood abreast the gap between the rocks and the river, their large rectangle shields planted firmly before them and it was here, to the weakest point that the dark men finally charged, recklessly and with little thought for defence, speed being key. Stones felled or halted a handful of them on the way but they were around twenty feet away from their target and running at full tilt when the swordsmen suddenly ducked, lowering their shields over them to show a line of prepared archers in view

who massacred the first row of dark men and then ducked in turn to restring arrows revealing Finn and the two spearwomen who hurled short hunting spears, all finding a mark. The spears having passed overhead, the archers popped up again to find fresh targets and let loose another salvo and the pattern repeated until the dark men wavered and started to retreat back downhill. The swordsmen rushed forward then to despatch the stragglers and the wounded, followed by the archers and spearwielders who retrieved their throwing spears and undamaged arrows where possible to prop up their limited armoury. They then hastily realigned their shield wall to wait on the dark men's next move.

Mab was overjoyed. She had seen one of her stones hit a dark man in the eye, stopping him in his tracks and another had hit a man on the riverbank and he had slipped in and been swept away by the fast flowing river. "Two" she thought to herself: "I'm an old woman and I've dealt with two. Now focus, Mab, and make it three, four and five." Aenghus took advantage of the gap in hostilities to replenish their mound of small stones.

The two runners now came into their own. Back and forth they ran with beer and bowls of vegetable pottage for the fighters and new bundles of arrows where needed. They had water ready and strips of cloth to cleanse and bind wounds but this was, thankfully, not yet needed. That completed, Bran sent them off to gather more wood and to light a fire, caution no longer being needed. The two axemen returned from the interior and, leaving Finn to keep a careful eye on the enemy, Bran had the axeman pass on to everyone directions to the climbable stretch of cliff. He was not a man to waste life needlessly and, if they managed to fend off the dark men for long enough, he planned to give as many as possible a chance to return to their homes. He urged patience to his warriors. They had killed around twenty of the dark men easily but that element of surprise would not aid them again; different tactics were now needed, all in response to whatever attack was being planned next. They had to be prepared to adapt and react.

The dead lay in a jumble, in a rough semi-circle near the entrance to the valley. Not one of them had got within ten feet of the gap and their old comrades would have to scramble over them to get to the enemy. Blood pooled amongst the stones and started to trickle downhill, thick and viscous like lava flow. Crows and other carrion birds soon started to circle the area, drawn by the scented promise of a feast.

The defenders had been fed and watered, had hardly been tested physically with no casualties and one victory under their belt. This especially gave heart to the villagers un-used to warfare. It warmed the hearts of the warriors too, although this was disguised by the feigned nonchalance expected of the battle hardy.

The attackers had been forced to retreat ignominiously with the loss of many of their comrades. Now they milled around in a state of discontent looking for reassurance and leadership. It was a sobering lesson for Fachtua who, counting injuries, had lost nearly a quarter of his men. He called the most seasoned fighters to him then to discuss the best way forward. They suggested that a party of ten sweep wide to the left and creep along the cliffs to try and climb the big bolder whilst the rest of the dark men bombarded the area with stones and arrows. They knew that, if a handful of their men managed to break into the interior, the whole defence would soon be swept away.

Eagle-eyed Finn watched the conference and saw the party break to the left shortly afterwards. He saw the dark bowmen taking positions and the others gathering small stones and the defenders laid their plans. The bombardment started but the defenders were snug, protected from above by the warriors long, rectangular shields which two people could curl inside. The two runners held shields over their heads to form a roof, protecting the line of swordsmen and themselves. The attack party reached the boulder and one comrade was hoisted up by two others only to be cut down by Enna, the village woodsman, before he could get any leverage. Sol the spearwoman took care of the next proposed invader and then the defensive line of warriors in the gap took three steps forward, exposing a small gap to the side where Bran's two best archers started to pepper the would be climbers with arrows. Four men having fallen, the rest of the attack party hit the heather and crawled away. The bombardment came to a staggered halt and the dark men, who had been tense and ready to rush in when their comrades had breached the defences, hesitated and, once more, looked askance at their leader, who signalled them to stand down.

It was barely Noon but the first two attacks had been repelled, the only injury so far a glancing stone wound to Sol's left forehead which was not serious but which bled profusely. It was cleaned and bound carefully by one of the runners.

A lull followed, although either Finn or Bran kept careful watch and the only excitement came when members of the failed attack party, who had not wanted to return to their comrades completely defeated, managed, by following the roots of the mountain, to find a way up to the top of the high cliff. There were a few moments of near panic when rocks started to rain down, followed by a couple of small boulders, but most people made it to shelter under the overhang of the cliff and the shield wall was not touched. Aenghus was the only casualty, a heavy rock crushing many bones in his left foot, but he bound it himself and swapped places with Mab so he could rest his back against the cliff face and switched to a bow and arrow which better suited his immobilised state. The attack party, having run out of rocks and with no idea of whether their missiles had actually hit anything, scouted the mountaintop but could find no way down into the valley. They did, however, manage to return to Fachtua with a measure of pride and information that there did not seem to be any easy means of escape for the Northmen, there being a closed valley behind them and Fachtua smiled, knowing it was now just a question of time.

Chapter 6

It was mid afternoon and the defenders had just finished eating some hot stew when a call from Bran alerted them to another attack. This was going to be more of a test. The dark men were approaching more cautiously this time with a shield wall before them. Their shields were different, rounded and smaller, but they had contrived a formation where the lead warriors held their shields low and the row behind covered the lead warriors upper bodies with a further row of shields making a figure 8 defence formation. Bran knew that hand to hand combat would be needed to break that shield wall and allow the archers to do their work. Finn, Sol and Luna, without needing to be told, swapped their hunting spears for their long fighting spears. All the archers were placed along the rocks and told not to waste their arrows but to wait until the shield wall had been breached and the axemen, spearfighters and swordsmen prepared for battle, cautioned by Bran not to spread to the right, which would block the field of fire of the archers.

As the shield wall of the dark men was traversing the fallen bodies of their comrades, the axemen and spearfighters led the charge. The long spears bit deep and the axemen swirled like dancers, swooping low to chop at unprotected legs or sweeping high at unprotected faces. They fought with grace. Enna the woodsman hurled himself at the shield wall and fought with less skill but with great vigour, killing two of the dark men before a

sword thrust to his side made him retreat back to the rocks but he managed to stay on his feet, defending the gap. The shield wall had been broken and, at a call from Bran, the swordsmen leapt forward to help take on the front lines. It was now brutal hand to hand fighting but the archers succeeded in keeping the dark men from spreading around them and the small fighting space forced the dark men into one on one fighting and stopped the defenders from being overwhelmed by superior numbers. Mab maimed her third and fourth man but, as she rose to launch again, was caught in the chest by a perfectly timed spear throw and the strength of the blow hurled her backwards off the rock. One of the runners, finding courage, picked up Mab's fallen sling and scrambled up on the high rock to fight alongside Aenghus, who was exacting a respectable toll with his bow and arrow. For a time, the battle hung in the balance, with losses on both sides but, eventually, it was the archers who won the day, their steady attrition eventually forcing a retreat on the part of the dark men. Again, the wounded were despatched and undamaged arrows collected but this time there were also bodies to take from the field. Conaire had fallen, as had Luna and one of the axemen named Dara. They were placed alongside the fallen Mab.

The archers took shields and swords and manned the gap whilst stock was taken of those injured. Aenghus had received an arrow wound to his side and the runners packed the wound with moss and bound it tight. They did the same with Enna's injury. Finn, Bran and others had minor cuts which they tended themselves. Looking out, Finn estimated that they had killed close to twenty warriors with others limping back down the riverside, injured by blade, arrow and stone. Bran prayed over the body of his son, proud that he had died with courage, but there was no time for mourning on a field of battle. Sol limped to the riverside and sat on a rock to grieve in private the loss of her hunting partner Luna. Lost for a while in memory and grief, it was she who first noticed a change coming to the river and called Bran over immediately.

The force of the water was waning. It had previously been swollen by rainwater coming off the mountains and had provided a perfect shield for them but Bran could see the flood was now easing and more of the riverbank was drying out. Without further rainfall, come morning, the dark men would be able to ford the river, outflank them on the far bank and pepper them with spears and arrows. He asked the runners and two of the archers to crawl with fuel to the stack of enemy bodies and place kindling and wood alongside them. These mounds were then lit with brands from their fire. Whilst they waited to see whether the fires would

take, Bran explained that the river flow was easing and that there would be no refuge come morning. "I am hoping" he explained that the flames from the bodies will keep the dark men back until dusk and then we will build a bonfire at the gap to keep them clear overnight. Tomorrow will be my death day but I ask no-one to stand with me. Indeed, as many of you that can should leave now and make for the inner valley and climb the cliff at dawn. We have given Emer the start she needed to remain safe and no-one can ask more of you. You are free to choose whether to stay or go, as your hearts dictate and my thanks and blessings go with all of you." Aengus and Enna elected to stay. Indeed, with their injuries, they could now hardly move. Sol elected to stay, as did Finn. Surprisingly, the runner who had found his courage, a middle aged man called Congal, also elected to stay. He had travelled with the party in hope of a cure for a painful swelling underneath his right ribcage and had been perplexed by the message from the Druid: "Your spirit will fly free and soar like a bird". It was now clear to him. He had the choice between a slow death or a quick one. A choice to die moaning in his cot or to be part of the greatest victory in arms his people had ever achieved and, indeed, his spirit did soar to think that he, a humble herdsman, would no doubt be named as one of the valiant who had made a last stand against the dark haired men from the South.

The rest elected to go and made ready to travel into the valley. Bran requested that they load the bodies of Mab, Luna, Connaire and Dara onto the horses and lay them inside the cave on the way to the cliff. Bran himself detached his blue cloak and wrapped Mab with it, hiding her slave tunic and attaching the cloth with his favourite gold broach. She had died a warrior and he honoured her as such.

Fire overtook some of the enemy bodies and they blazed for over four hours, following which Bran lit the bonfire at the gap. A stiff breeze flowed from the valley, fanning the flames and covering the dark men with smoke. At dusk, Aenghus started to sing and he sang long into the night, as the blood slowly drained from his body. He sang of all the beauty he had ever seen and of the love that he would never know and he died at the blush of first light.

Chapter 7

Fachtua himself led twenty men across the river at dawn and they picked their way into the valley mouth. A line of four men and one woman sang a battle song from the further bank as they came into view. Enna was

seated with a bow and arrow on a large stone by the river; Finn and Sol had hunting spears in their hand with more set upright behind them within easy reach; Congal had his sling and Bran had switched to bow and arrow. It was a short and mismatched clash and Finn was the last to fall but Sol gained a last victory with a fine spear shot which hit Fachtna full in the stomach before falling herself to a rain of arrows. The dark men, seeing the mortal wound of their leader, compassionately cut his throat to ease his passing and waded across the river to gather some trophies from the fallen enemy. They scanned the valley but, seeing no movement, did not enter far into the interior, apart from to collect two horses who had wandered near to the valley mouth and the morning was spent constructing a funeral pyre and collecting the remains of their burnt, half burnt and fallen tribesmen in order to conduct a ceremony to properly honour their dead. The dark men from the South cremated their dead whilst the Northmen buried theirs. They left the bodies of the Northmen to the beasts and wild birds and the next day they departed from the valley in solemn mood. They had no hostages and little spoil to show for the loss of so many men. A cursed valley, they called it, with phantom warriors who appeared and disappeared in the mist, singing haunting songs and casting strange spells. They may have won the victory but, with near half their number dead and many injured, there was a taste of defeat in their mouths.

Chapter 8

A few days later, a large war party, mounted and fully equipped for battle travelled swiftly down the trackway and, guided by some of the survivors, rode to the valley mouth. It was the Chieftain Ugaine with members of his household and tribal warriors come to bury and pay their respects to the fallen. They brought shrouds and digging tools but also fine cloth, pots of grain, beer and other tokens for the fallen to take with them into the afterlife. Emer was with them. They viewed the battle ground and the remains of the huge pyre fired by the enemy. The bloated and gnawed remains of the six fighters were carefully wrapped and then transported to the cave to be buried with the others. There was a natural dell inside the cave where four bodies already lay. The six were lain on their sides, men on their right side and Sol on her left side. Swords and spears and an axe of best quality were laid reverently beside them. Clay pots with grain and full drinking jugs were laid at their feet. Emer detached the gold lunula from around her neck and lay it on the body of Mab. A tympan was placed beside Aenghus and two gold decorated hunting horns were placed by the hands of Finn and Bran. The bodies were covered in fine cloth and,

prayers said, Ugainé directed that the dell inside the cave be covered with soil. That having been accomplished, the men set to work to lever thin slabs of stone in place to cover the cave entrance and many hands set to work to build a great bank of earth against the cliff wall to cover all sign of the cave entrance.

The names of the fallen were immortalised in song with their exploits heralded as one of the tribe's greatest victories and children, for many generations, would huddle, bright eyed around the fire to hear the story of The Ten Heroes and the rescue of fair Queen Emer.

The Princess (7th Century)

Chapter 1

Princess Nasca sat on her favourite spot, overlooking Lough Laoigh. Her perch was a natural shelf of rock in the shape of a throne with a cushion of moss and heather and a high stone back which gave natural shelter from the wind. The sun-warmed rock felt comfortable against her back. She let loose from her daily cares and concerns and absorbed herself in nature. Busy bees and butterflies were weaving around her, the crows cawed, the seagulls rode on the air currents and smaller birds swooped low in formation, skimming the sea. A seal, floating on its back, bobbed on the current. The breeze tugged her long brown hair, the pungent smell of salt and seaweed cleared her nostrils; the sun warmed her oval face, the many coloured moods of the sea were mirrored in her grey green eyes; peace enveloped her.

Where the river Lagan ran into the lough marked the western boundary of her kingdom and it stretched, following the line of the shore, to the eastern sea and the three islands and she paid tribute to the Ulaidh King in salt, reclaimed from the sea by a series of salt pans, in fish and in fighters. Nasca had been widowed for the past nine years but, such was her reputation for wisdom and strength, she had been appointed ruler until such time as she chose to give way to her successor, hopefully picked from the one daughter and six sons she had given birth to. She had started life in land locked Midhe in the middle of the country but had been given in marriage to Fiachra Cáecha brother to a High Chieftain of the Ulaidh at the age of sixteen and she had fallen in love with her new home and, in particular, the landscape of rolling hills and restless sea. Her family worshipped the old ways and she took for her personal deity Manannán, God of the Sea, to whom she developed a strong affinity.

There were two main centres of worship in the area. Druids inhabited the series of three caves to be found by the stone cliff that stood out from the hill like the prow of a boat directly across the lough from her dominion and, within her lands, was an ancient oak grove with a Druid temple, known as Holy Wood and she visited both sites often with offerings but, when she had deep thinking to do, her feet always wound their way to her favourite little nook overlooking the sea where she could pray to Manannán for guidance and wisdom.

And, today, the sea seemed to sum up for her the position in which she found herself because she was a far seeing woman, not just concerned with her family, her people, her kingdom or the Ulaidh. She had a sense of her place in the history of her land and her people, aware she was one small link in a chain that spanned the ages and that she had a responsibility to the past, the present and the future. She watched the strong flow of the river as it met the sea water and how they interacted; in harmony with the ebb of the tide and at war when the sea flowed in to claim the shoreline once again. “The old ways are the river waters” thought Nasca “and Christianity is a tide in full flow, threatening to engulf our heritage in the waters of forgetfulness.” And she stood at the meeting of those waters. Already Christianity was building its churches on old temples, taking ancient festival days to be the feast days for their various saints, taking aspects of Brehon Law and acting as judges themselves, Old Irish script and Latin were in competition with each other and Latin was winning; Christianity was assimilating and dominating. But the greatest Christian asset was their emphasis on writing whereas the old ways, the ways of the Bards and the Druids, was largely an oral tradition; rich, in itself, but vulnerable. “If Christianity manages to break that chain of oral tradition, the majority of our heritage will be lost in time” mused Nasca “and this moment in time that I was reborn into to witness, is a pivotal time when so much can be lost”. Nasca believed in what later was to become known as reincarnation; that as nature had its seasons of growth, maturity, death and rebirth, so did the human soul. The Princess felt that she had been reborn into this role, into this place at this certain time for a reason and a sense of urgency had been growing in her to try and find a solution for what she saw as the most pressing issue of her time; how to ensure that her noble and ancient Irish heritage was not lost. And whether it was the case that a natural solution presented itself because she was a woman of high intelligence, or that some ancient God or Goddess had heeded her prayers and given enlightenment, a pathway became clear to her, as she sat on that summer day on the stone seat overlooking the bright waters.

Chapter 2

Nasca’s chief settlement lay close to the shore, near to the Holy Wood. She had other strong holdings as she travelled extensively throughout her lands, preferring to be both seen by her people and seeing for herself what was happening within her boundaries. She gave guidance and listened to requests at regular meet days throughout the year and, whilst she had

learned counsellors and trusted lieutenants, she knew the risks that could attach to too much reliance upon the opinions of others.

Her settlement was well run and orderly, set within a series of defensive ditches with a stone walled enclosure and a raft of serfs and slaves keeping everything in good order. There was a large, rectangular central hall for meet days and feast days, with lavish living and sleeping quarters attached to the main hall by raised, covered walkways and the whole settlement was a hive of industry. She passed her harbour which was largely empty of boats, the fishermen off fishing and some of the warriors off raiding the English and Scottish coast. She passed the warrior training halls where men and women trained for war. Not every woman was made for home and hearth and not every man had a taste for the battlefield and Irish culture and Brehon Law, unique in Europe at that time, gave equal rights to men and women, who could both be warriors, bards, judges, religious leaders and rulers in their own right and in accordance with their individual abilities and desires. Christianity in Ireland also followed the same practice of equality with not only married priests but female priests and bishops and mixed religious houses and around two thirds of Nasca's people were Christian. As a ruler, she gave equal respect to both modes of worship.

Chapter 3

She invited all her children to dine with her that evening. Nasca was no blind, doting mother. She had assessed her children's natures for years, looking to see who displayed the qualities necessary for leadership. They now ranged in age from ten to near twenty and it was high time to determine their future paths in life. Nasca herself had been given no choice other than marriage, politics at the time dictating the match, and she had determined that her own children would have a hand in choosing their own paths. There was no automatic tribal succession and she emphasised this to her children; her choice would need to be ratified, in due time, by both the tribe elders and the King of Uliadh but she stated her opinion that her eldest son Dúnchad along with her third son, Kilian, should be put forward as candidates for tribal leadership and arrangements made for their respective marriages. They were both natural warriors but also intelligent and, moreover, they were close knit and without envy of each other so, whomever was chosen eventually as Chieftain, would find a strong and trusty lieutenant in the other. Both boys were in agreement.

Nasca then outlined the options available to the other five children. She told them that they were on the cusp of adulthood and, as such, should prepare to leave the family home and make their way into the world, according to their own natures. They could study Brehon law and become judges, become a Bard and be trained in music and the oral tradition of storytelling, undertake the long training to become a Druid or a Bandrui, a female Druid, join a Christian monastery or marry into another tribe. Nasca explained that, all too often, families fought jealously against each other, even killing each other in a quest for leadership and stated her determination that this would not happen with her own children, hence she was giving them the chance to make their own way in the world without interference, leaving Dúnchad and Kilian, who thought as one, to hopefully steer the kingdom forward. She asked her remaining children to consider their own natures and to choose a path which they felt would make them happy and gave them some time for consideration.

They met again a few days later. Gobhan, Graphan and Laserian decided to join a Christian monastery, Kevin, predictably because of his outgoing personality and love of music, chose to become a Bard and her daughter, Aynia chose to undertake the long training to become a female Druid.

The following week she called for a meeting of her tribe elders from the various villages, her chief warriors and trusted lieutenants. The elder Druid from the Holy Wood, Egobail, was also invited, along with Ailill the Harper, son of Aedh Slaine, the best bard in the area and Aidan, Abbot of a nearby monastery. With her children around her, Nasca outlined her thinking with respect to their roles going forward and this was met with the approval of her tribe, who saw the wisdom in her thinking. She asked for guidance from her three other visitors with respect to training for her children. Egobail was pleased to accept Aynia for training nearby, Ailill undertook to take Kevin under his wing until such time as a place could be found for him to begin his tutelage in earnest and Aidan undertook to assess the remaining three boys and ensure their future education under the cloak of Christianity. A feast was then held and the five children started to prepare for their departure.

Chapter 4

Having ascertained that the hearts of Dúnchad and Kilian had not already been taken and with their permission, Nasca wrote to the King of Ulaidh with the offer that he could organise their marriage partners in order to

cement alliances against the constant risk of encroachment by the Dal Riata and the Uí Néills, an offer which was gratefully received. She presented Dúnchad and Kilian with the well crafted weapons of their father and new clothing in recognition of their adulthood and their future roles within the tribe and gave them new lodgings where they could live apart, as men. Her gift to Kevin was that of a harp. She gave gifts of cattle, salt and grain to the two religious institutions that were going to train her other children. During their last family meal together she asked them all for one favour. “My children, I have nurtured you in my nest and taught you such knowledge as I possess and it is now your time to fly to new horizons and rise to new responsibilities but one thing I would ask of you all, a promise to your mother which I hope you all will keep. That promise is, that twenty years from now, whether I live or not, all of you still living will meet here together once more with the spring solstice for a space of months and that you all share what knowledge you can of our Irish heritage so that it can be put in writing in the new form, Latin. Aynia, you will not be allowed to disclose much of your Druidic instruction, but share what knowledge you can at your discretion. Kevin, learn our history and the grand exploits of our ancestors and ensure they are transferred to the written word. My three sons who have decided to take the Christian path, transcribe the knowledge of your siblings into Latin and protect our shared history in your monastery libraries as best you can. Dúnchad and Kilian, if I have already travelled to the unwinding path, keep track of your brothers and sister and ensure this promise is kept. This is the only burden I put upon you all and I hope it will not be viewed as a heavy one. My love and blessings go with you always.”

Chapter 5

“How the years fly with the swiftness of eagles” thought Laserian as he wound his way northwards in the spring of 634 AD. His mother had invaded his dreams for the past eighteen months or so and it was only now, with the passing of the years, that he fully appreciated what a special person she was. She had ruled kindly and fairly, treating all with respect, but she had been no fool. Her judgements were wise and she strove always to find peaceful solutions but she was also a deadly warrior. He remembered one meet day in particular when one of the young men, arrogant and foolish, had addressed her without due respect. She had risen from her throne and walked around the man with a calm and reasonable voice, asking if there was some issue or bad blood between them that needed to be discussed but she had spun then, on her heel, her two handed sword that always hung at her side, unsheathed in an instant

and, spinning, had decapitated him with one stroke. It was a mighty blow. He had never forgotten the incident and it replayed in slow motion in his mind, again and again: her long brown hair spun out around her, her green cloak billowing out with the speed of the spin, the flash of the silver sword and the river of red blood that spouted from the now naked neck. The brown, the green, the silver and the red. The price of leadership. Nasca had returned, then, with leisurely gait to her high chair, her sword still unsheathed and had, so calmly and with no sign of agitation, asked her warriors if there was anyone else who had issue with her rule. The men and women had cheered her then and the body of the young man had been removed; his body had been dumped in the lough without ceremony and his head presented as a tribute to the Druids of the caves across the water. He had known, from that moment, that he was no warrior and no leader either and that was when his spirit had first truly embraced the compassionate, peaceful Jesus, who he had learned about from his nurse maiden.

And what a life he had led so far. After two years with Aidan in the local monastery, he had furthered his religious education in a hermitage off the Isle of Arran and had moved, then, to Iona in Scotland. He had taken well to religious life and had gone on pilgrimage to Rome and had been ordained by Pope Gregory the Great and returned to Ireland as a Bishop. His more recent visit to Rome had been less auspicious, Pope Honorius I having been embroiled in a dispute over the nature of Christ which was threatening the unity of the Church. He had been tasked by the latter Pope with, once again, trying to bring the Irish Church into unity with Rome in terms of its calendar, its liturgical images and the role of women as Priests and Bishops which was now anathema to Rome.

His brother Graphan had died young and his brother Gobhan had embraced the tenets of Rome and had announced himself too busy as Abbot of the monastery at Old Leighlin to honour the promise to his mother. Gobhan had aligned himself with the Roman way of thinking quite easily but Laserian, although prudently keeping his reservations to himself, had started to appreciate the core of what had lain behind his mother's request some twenty years earlier and he freed himself from his present obligations by undertaking to try and establish a monastic site on his family's land to the north. He had packed a goodly supply of the best writing materials and was looking forward to seeing his family once more.

He stopped off at the monastery where his religious life had begun and said prayers for Aidan, now long passed and he then followed the

southern shoreline of Lough Laoigh westwards towards the Holy Wood. He drank in again the sights of his childhood home and, although having travelled widely and seen much of the world, felt that this serene little corner of Ireland could compete with anywhere in terms of beauty.

Chapter 6

He was met by his mother at the entrance to the central hall and it was a warm meeting. Nasca was now white haired and somewhat heavy but her eyes were as alert and fierce as ever, her spirit undiminished. They fell into step like old friends, at ease and at one with each other as if the space of years had never happened. He apprised her at once of Gobhan's decision not to come but was frank and open in his assessment that her one promise or request had been a relevant one and committed himself to transferring as much information as he could into Latin as he too cherished his heritage and wanted the knowledge of the elder days to be preserved. He stressed, however, that this exercise would take months and he would need a good excuse to stay in the area and therefore requested that he be allowed to build a monastery in the area as a cover for his continued presence. His brother Dúnchad was now Chieftain of the area and was a renowned warrior in his own right and he agreed to give Laserian a site nearby. Dúnchad had also invited an elderly judge to stay in their community so that Laserian could also make some notes on Brehon Law. Kilian had been drowned some years earlier, when his boat had foundered on the way back from a raid but Aynia was fit and well, living in the sacred oak groves at Holy Wood and a message was sent to her to say that Laserian had arrived. She was unable to say much of the Druidic rites that she had learned over the space of the past twenty years, being forbidden to do so by their law, but Aynia did pass on her herb lore and knowledge of healing, which would prove invaluable to later scholars.

Chapter 7

And so the weeks and months passed with the monastery building being raised with the help of serfs and slaves and Laserian would visit the site each morning and then settle down each afternoon to record Irish history from his many sources. Kevin, the Bard, was the last to arrive, in mid Summer and then Laserian had to source additional vellum to record the wonderful stories with which Kevin kept the high halls of various Kings and Chieftains enthralled.

So passed the Autumn and Winter and the following Spring found Nasca making her way, once more, to her favourite perch of stone overlooking the Lough, with Laserian at her side. "I am blessed" she said to him "to have had this year to enjoy my children around me once more. I feel I will not last another winter and that is as it should be as all things fade with time". Laserian took his mother's hand and they walked a while, companionably, in silence. He told her of his recurring vision of her, a swirl of colours as she spun to despatch the warrior who had displeased her. "I saw a different side to you that day" he said "and I learned about myself as well. I knew I didn't have that kind of strength within me. You were like a Goddess, other worldly and unassailable".

"Oh my dear Son" said Nasca with a wry smile: "If you had only known the fear in my heart that day. I saw the challenge in that warrior's eyes even before he spoke so discourteously and my mind told me that I had no option but to deal with the situation ruthlessly or else I would face endless challenges for my authority. You don't know what it cost me to keep my voice casual and my movements loose until I had a chance to strike. It was his own ego that killed him really; the need to play too much to his audience before striking which enabled me to move on him first and, then, the Gods were with me. Decapitation is rare and the strike seemed to be guided with a speed and strength beyond my own. But you didn't see the hurt it did me, my child. My handmaid was binding my ribs and shoulder for weeks afterwards as I tore many muscles striking that blow. She would help me arrange myself in my high chair before anyone arrived in the hall and it took all my strength to walk, those following weeks, as normal and sometimes I scarce made it back to my rooms before collapsing. Egobail the Druid gave me an infusion from the bark of the white willow to drink which eased me but I had to appear strong as that was an attempt for the high seat and that warrior just a weapon and I had to catch the minds behind the thrust." "And you obviously did" said Laserian, enthralled. "Yes. You may or may not recall an accident which happened at sea a short while later. We announced a raid on Scotland and the other conspirators leapt at the chance to be by themselves in a boat so they could plan their next move. Well, we had scuttled that boat discretely and plugged the holes with boar fat, knowing well that it would gradually be washed away and it worked like a dream. They were just past the headland and into choppy waters when they were swamped and, with their passing, my authority was not challenged again."

Laserian opened his heart, then, to his mother about the concerns he had for the Church and the fact that Rome was using scripture to denigrate

women and to try and oust them from positions of authority within the Irish Church. Having been brought up with Brehon Law and the reality of equality of the sexes, such a mentality was alien and strange to him. Princess Nasca paused before replying. "You have chosen to be a follower of Jesus in terms of the progression of your soul so you must look to his actions in terms of what is right. Re-examine your own Gospels solely with focus on how Jesus treated women. Did he denigrate them or did he empower them? I feel you will find the answer there." And Laserian did and was comforted.

Chapter 8

So the monastery was finished and the family said their goodbyes and, in time, it was assumed that the area of Holy Wood was named after the presence of the monastery, rather than the sacred oak groves of the Druids. Princess Nasca died the following Autumn and Dúnchad was at odds with himself on how best to commemorate the extra ordinary woman who had given him birth. He thought of raising a burial mound in her honour but, in the end, she was placed in a boat lined with the best of cloth, dressed in jewels and finery with her sword at her breast and wild flowers woven in her hair and let drift on the ebb of the tide, in the arms of her beloved Manannán, God of the Sea.

Laserian spent the next few years working hard and travelling throughout Ireland and, always, he carried a portfolio of tan and white calfskin with him filled with writings which he would add to on occasion from discussions held with others on his travels. Then, in 639 AD, whilst travelling south from Doire Calgach, he was taken ill on the road and was conveyed to the nearest monastery, located in an inland valley. After battling a fever in vain for three days and knowing his end was near, he entrusted his precious collection of writings to the Abbot, who undertook to keep them safe. Laserian, in his lucid moments, fell to worrying about his work, left amongst strangers in an obscure valley, but then he reflected that they would be as safe there as they would be anywhere and, turning his thoughts inwards, quietly departed from the physical life as peacefully as he had lived.

The Monk (Early 12th Century)

Chapter 1

Abran had not been voted in as Abbot due to being from a Chieftain's family and certainly not due to his scholastic merit, but because he had three great strengths that the community recognised; humility, kindness and a keen insight into human nature, which enabled him to instinctively grasp who could work together and who could not and how best to utilise each individual's strengths and weaknesses with respect to the work required to allow the community to thrive. The result was an harmonious environment which was a great bedrock for spiritual development.

A monastery had stood on the site for over five hundred years and various refinements had been introduced by different Abbots so Abran had inherited a well organised structure of buildings. The main building, rectangular rather than round, was nestled against the cliff built of stone on two levels with a lighter construction at the top, built of wood and mud with large gaps to let in light. which was used as the scriptorium. There being no glazier, one past monk had made weighted screens from wood and fine linen cloth which hung above the gaps and could be lowered and secured to shelter against bad weather or raised to allow the flow of sunlight to illuminate the work of the illuminators. The ground floor room was split into two by a wattle screen and housed the chapel and the refectory. The first floor had storerooms for more valuable items and sacristy to the rear and closer to the staircase, nestled around the great fireplace which stuck out somewhat from the wall on pillars with a great hood in order to give heat on three sides, were the monk's cells, again separated by wattle screens. The cells closest to the fire were given to the elderly or infirm. There was a walkway through the middle of the room. On the far right hand side was a roughly circular room, partially formed out of the rock face which, due to the fact it had a gaping hole in the middle of the floor, became the monastery toilet. An enterprising carpenter had devised a bench with a backrest and central holes, made of stout oak and firmly anchored, that spanned the gap and allowed the monks a level of comfort. Clothes were hung and the library was also located in this area on purpose built shelving as it was commonly believed that the scent of urine would keep moths and other bothersome, burrowing insects at bay. Outside were the kitchen and bakery, stables, smithy, brewery, more storage huts and a couple of cells for visitors with a tannery for the production of vellum placed away from the structure and close to the river.

There was also a wing used as a hospital where the herbalist would tend to the needs of travellers or provide a peaceful haven for the dying. The cluster of buildings formed a natural cloister and a cliff face spring ensured a steady supply of drinking water. This square of buildings provided a rudimentary defence whilst the door to the main building was placed high in the wall and reached by stout, steep wooden steps which could be raised in an emergency, preventing easy access to the building. It was not an orthodox monastic layout but it fit the landscape well.

The valley and woods catered to all their needs with respect to grazing, planting and fuel and was beautiful besides and, duties completed, monks could often be found sitting by the riverbank or walking the wooded areas before vespers; it was a natural arena for contemplation. Abbot Abran, like many of his colleagues, found solace in nature for a troubled mind and his heart was heavy this early autumn afternoon in 1125 as his feet automatically wound their way across the wooden walkway spanning the river. south east towards his favourite woodland walk.

Chapter 2

First, he pondered the life of the monastery which he had glimpsed from the Book of Abbots, a collection of manuscripts, written on vellum and parchment of varying quality, which began with a few scratchings of Ogham and then, later, more detailed information in Old Gaelic with Latin being the preferred language of the later Abbots. The community had started with individuals who had been attracted by the solitude of the valley and who constructed their own cells and lived precariously off the land. This had not been recorded in writing but evidence of individual cells were still scattered around. Then, spanning decades, men must have come together and realised the strength there was in unity. Early records showed fluctuations in numbers from five to upwards of fifty, and building works began in earnest along with a rhythm of work, prayer and reflection on the Gospels. There had been years of plenty but also years of famine, plague and even one Viking incursion but Abran had been fascinated by the call of Abbots across the span of centuries that had filtered to him via the written word and which underlined for him just how powerful the written word could be. He followed the construction of the various buildings across the manuscripts along with the times of plenty and times of sorrow.

The library had grown with the monastery and a listing had been produced in Latin by Abran's predecessor giving a precis of the various parchments, scrolls and quires in its possession. It had around fifty entries

around a third of which had been properly bound. Work in the scriptorium was mainly centred around reproduction of Gospel texts so some tomes were rarely if ever disturbed. There was also a map of Ireland showing some of the major settlements and monastic sites, one of Europe and around half a dozen paintings with religious themes, listed separately. The level of written industry rose and fell like a tide across the years but, presently, there were four illuminators, working on copying of the Gospels. It was a slow process and, of course, many copies had been donated to other monasteries in order to spread the Word so it was, for the time, a goodly collection. Brother Beoc was responsible for the production of vellum; a laborious process of tanning calf hide with various stages of washing with water and lime, stretching, removal of hair and rubbing in order to achieve a suitable surface for writing. The herbalist would provide the inks of many colours from carefully stored recipes with a wonderful variety of ingredients including, glue from animal bones, hawthorn, charcoal and crushed stones and minerals. Younger brothers were always apprenticed to older ones in order to ensure that that a sudden death would not deprive the monastery of knowledge. The written work was good but could not compare to some of the magical manuscripts being produced in Iona or other major centres of learning but one of the jewels in the library had been acquired by accident. It was a collection of quires and some manuscripts, carefully wrapped in a tan and white calfskin loose covering, which contained in Latin memories of the elder days in Ireland before Christianity which had been entrusted to the monastery by Saint Laserian, who had been taken ill on the road and died in the valley in 639 AD and which seemed to show a line of Irish Kings from near to the time of the Flood which astounded Abran, to think that Ireland had a history to rival that of the Israelites in the Old Testament. A previous herbalist had, delightedly, copied information on the healing properties of plants, which had also been contained within the portfolio.

These remembrances served to increase Abran's sorrow as a written message had been received from the Bishop which indicated that the wonderful, unbroken line of industry and worship in the valley was about to come to an end. He felt akin to Jesus in Gethsemane asking that the cup be passed from him but it looked to be ordained that he be the last abbot of the valley and the thought of it filled him with sadness and dismay.

Ireland's pioneering monks had kept Christianity alive during what became known as the Dark Ages in Europe, with both Irish men and women travelling throughout the various countries and founding holy places to rekindle anew the flame of faith in Christ. But, due to the strange

shifts of power and opinion within the Church, or perhaps out of all too human competitiveness, jealousy or need to control, the church in Ireland, with its different calendar and somewhat different practices had, in recent times, come to be viewed as backward, pagan and unorthodox. "So much for gratitude" Abran reflected. Attempts to bring the Irish church into alignment with Rome had resulted in two recent Synods: the First Synod of Cashel in 1101 and the Synod of Ráth Breasail in 1111 and one of the decisions reached during these Synods was to transform Ireland from a monastic to a parish based church and twenty four Diocese had been established, with the agreement of the Chieftains and Kings in the differing areas. Abran had heard from visitors of changes being put into effect but, up until now, this quiet and secluded monastery had been overlooked, but no more. The letter from the Bishop relayed that a decision had been taken that the brothers should remove to The Connachta to the Parish of Killala the following summer. Abran fully recognised that far more than a change in location was required; it would be a challenge to all of them to embark on a more active rather than contemplative life, ministering to the never-ending needs of the people. He reflected on his brothers and their strengths and vulnerabilities. It was a community of twenty one souls at present and, of them, Abran felt that around half would adapt quite well and two, fiery souls, Vincent and Enda, would thrive on the new challenges the move would represent. However, three of the brothers were older in years and with failing health and some of them might not even survive the journey. The rest were of more fragile substance and would need time to adapt to a new environment. Of particular concern was young Brother Patrick who had been dropped off at the monastery as a boy, found on the road with a serious head wound by a kind soul who knew of the monastery and who had brought him there in time to save his life. Patrick hadn't spoken for three years and, even with the patience and care shown to him, he had only started coming out of his shell in the past eighteen months. The blow had dealt some damage to his brain and he could not master writing although he was a willing worker and good with animals. He had told Abran, in brief patches of remembrance, of his former life as son of a minor Chieftain, of a blood feud which had erupted between two branches of the family which had culminated in the slaughter of all of Patrick's family and of how Patrick himself had been knocked unconscious by a blow to the head which had bled freely and how he had awakened some hours later to find his family dead around him. He had recognised some of his attackers as other family members and even after catching a hill pony and managing to mount it, he had no idea of where to go as there was no place of refuge he could think of. He finally let the pony take the lead and had been found on the roadside some days later.

His name had originally been Munis but he preferred to leave that name behind and remain Brother Patrick. He was now around seventeen years of age but was extremely wary of travellers and would disappear when any visitors arrived. Two or three others, Abran felt, had been attracted to the monastery more to recover from the wounds of life than to seek God, at least initially and it remained to be seen how this move would affect them. He wept for a short time but, being a sensible man, then embraced these new facts, shouldered his burden and focussed on how best to prepare the community for change.

Chapter 3

Abran took Vincent and Enda into his confidence almost immediately and was amazed to reflect upon the fact that two of his most troublesome and restless brothers in time of peace and plenty were now his two greatest assets in time of change and challenge. Discussion of the Gospel was steered by Abran more and more towards the ministry of Jesus and how, apart from some rare disappearances into the desert for contemplation, he had not turned away from the sufferings and needs of the people around him. "Contemplation" Abran preached "was good and necessary for the soul and for allowing an individual to enter into relationship with God but the goal, or end of the path, would always be that of a contemplative in action, in imitation of Christ." Vincent and Enda contributed to these conversations and the idea of change was planted into the minds of the more timid brethren gradually.

In the Spring of 1126 further information arrived from the Bishop as to which Chieftain to report to with instructions to arrive in Killala Bay by year end. Abran then finally relayed information about the move to the community and Vincent and Enda took particular pains to support and encourage the more fretful brethren. Spring crops were sown and preparations made to move after the harvest. Patrick was taken firmly under Abran's wing and he seemed reassured as his family had been an offshoot of the Ulidia to the North East and the move to The Connachta seemed to give him confidence rather than fear, much to Abran's relief. It was Vincent, a native of the port town of Doire Calgach who turned out to be the inspiration Abran needed. He was from a family of boatmakers and sailors and it was he who stated that a trip by land was too arduous and dangerous and suggested they follow the easily negotiated trackway north to his family, who would transport themselves and their goods by sea to Killala Bay using their own cog vessels. A large part of the livestock was sold and a couple of additional carts and cart ponies purchased and, at

Abran's suggestion, Vincent and Enda agreed to undertake the trip during the early summer, along with four or five of the stouter brethren, in order to make a start at establishing their home in Killala over the summer months and Abran ensured they had sufficient funds for anything they needed. Vincent then undertook to return and guide the rest of the brothers on their final journey once the final crops had been gathered in the valley. Surprisingly, Patrick had volunteered to go on the first run with Vincent and Enda and, as he was a hard working youth, they were glad to have him along so one of Abran's concerns was put to rest.

There is an exquisite sadness in a long goodbye. It is a wonder as you have moments to cherish and to fix a memory firmly in one's mind. You have been given precious time to enjoy and to relish, even though the days may be tinged with sadness.

A good measure of vegetables were stockpiled and fish from the river was salted and smoked to ensure a good supply of food for their new home, their next harvest being an uncertain one. Grains and seeds were carefully packed. The herbalist dried as many herbs as he could and took cuttings which he watered carefully and kept in wicker baskets, hoping they would survive the journey and be replanted. Less hay was sown than usual as most of the cattle had been sold and more flour and vegetables were produced. The tailor produced new sandals for the journey as most would be walking to the port, with the exception of the older brothers who would sit on the carts. The best cots were dismantled and the wicker dividing walls laid flat atop the loads in two of the carts to help secure their goods. The few treasures of the monastery were hidden in an ale casket. Anything not taken was left in an orderly huddle in the middle of the courtyard so that travellers could come and help themselves. When Vincent arrived in mid September most of the carts had already been packed and the remaining brothers would be ready to move within the week. He brought good news. Their new site was to be alongside the River Moy which ran into Killala Bay and, because of the cog's flat keel structure, the boat could also negotiate the river right to their new home. Vincent made sure to keep the spirits of the other brothers high as he told them of the work they had been doing and how welcoming the people had been, with many volunteering to assist in the construction work.

Chapter 4

If Abran had been less humble, he would, at this point, have been congratulating himself on the smooth and orderly preparations and the

calmness of his fellow brothers but life was about to throw a stone into the calm pond of the monastery with the arrival the next afternoon of a representative of the Bishop, who had a remit to visit the religious houses in the north to ensure instructions were being obeyed. The visitor was Brother James, a dark man of middling height, given to plumpness which gave him rather a waddling gait and, whilst not blessed with either a true vocation or any real intelligence, had ambition and pride in abundance. He had already visited two other monasteries, one of which he found already deserted. The other had hardly begun preparations and was in a disorderly state and Brother James had relished the opportunity to raise his voice and bark commands at the cringing Abbot, admonishing him for his disobedience. Being a representative of the Bishop gave James a sense of power which he relished and he had confiscated a beautifully wrought chalice at the last monastery for the use of the Bishop, he said, but which was not, in fact, the truth; he was merely making the most of the position he found himself in to the full and, with a bully's cunning instinct, had a keen idea of what he could get away with and with whom.

He arrived just in time for their main meal and set his horse free to graze in the valley, noting the pile of goods in the cloister as he proceeded to meet Abbot Abran, who was standing at the foot of the main building to bid him welcome, as he did with all visitors. Introducing himself, he was shown into the refectory and, not waiting to ascertain any facts, used the group meal to interrogate the Abbot in a manner barely polite. Abran remained calm and outlined all the work already initiated, stating that they had only the library to move and some remaining goods and cooking implements from the kitchen and they would be ready to commence their final journey. But damage was being done. Ripples of unease were emanating from the more delicate brothers and Abran found it hard to remain still, seeing that all his careful preparations to ensure calmness were being disrupted by the stranger. Brother James, meanwhile, was growing more irritated that there was little fault to find. "Why did you not distribute the spare goods rather than leave them in a heap?" he managed. "Why don't you load that fine horse of yours and go and distribute them yourself" replied Vincent smartly, who had already had more than enough of this interloper. He glared at the visitor and then cast his eyes on Abran, who rewarded him with a wink rather than an admonition. But James was not to be cast down for long. "I wish to examine the contents of your Library" he stated. "Monasteries have been found to harbour works which are against orthodoxy and the Bishop has ordered that any suspect documents be brought to him for examination. I take it you have an index or catalogue I could look at?" Abbot Abran was

caught. He had no option but to obey. Following the meal, he and the librarian, Brother Gall gave Brother James a short tour of the monastery: the guest cell, the library and toilet and showed him up to the now deserted scriptorium where there were still two tables and a spare podium for which there had been no room in the carts and no real need, the present number of illuminators being small. "Set a cot up here for me and some refreshments, if you will Abbot" instructed James and, whilst Abran departed to do so, James took the opportunity to bully Brother Gall who, unused to being put under any kind of pressure, soon admitted that there was one item which might be of interest; the works of Saint Laserian, as it talked of ancient times and of Gods of the elder days and, by the time Abbot Abran returned, the manuscripts, with their tan and white covering were already under James' hand on the table and Brother Gall was shaking in a corner.

Abran helped Brother Gall back down the stairs and to the library, swallowing his annoyance as he didn't want to cause any further upset. Instructing Brother Gall to dry his eyes and carefully begin the packing process, which involved the documents being wrapped in linen which had been made waterproof by the application of wax, to be placed carefully flat, where possible, with the heavier tomes at the bottom of wicker baskets so as not to damage the lighter ones and patting Brother Gall on the shoulder to indicate that no blame was being attached to him, Abran sped to find Vincent. "We are leaving at first light tomorrow" he instructed "before that man can cause any more mischief to our library or to our brothers". Vincent nodded his agreement. "Send three men to assist myself and Brother Gall with the library as I want it loaded within the hour, instruct the brothers in the kitchen to prepare some meals we can take by the side of the road and you, Vincent, follow after me and examine every building and room and ensure that I have not overlooked anything. We will all sleep in the wing of the herbalist tonight and pray together before leaving directly after Matins. Brother James has made his nest on the top floor." What had never been highlighted to Brother Gall and what had never been listed in the library index were a series of manuscripts in Old Gaelic which Abran was sure would be confiscated if known about. The work of Saint Laserian might be lost but the Abbot was determined to limit the damage if he could.

Brother James opened the bundle of documents and picked up the first quire, which was in Latin. It seemed to be a list of tribes and kings, supposedly dating back to the flood. Flicking through it, one entry caught his eye:-

“The Age of the World, 3500. The fleet of the sons of Milidh came to Ireland at the end of this year, to take it from the Tuatha De Dananns; and they fought the battle of Sliabh Mis with them on the third day after landing. In this battle fell Scotá, the daughter of Pharaoh, wife of Milidh; and the grave of Scotá is to be seen between Sliabh Mis and the sea.”¹

“Daughter of Pharaoh” mused James, “it is just not possible. These listings and these dates cannot be real”. But he was intrigued, in spite of himself and became engrossed in the manuscripts until the light faded with just necessary visits to use the toilet and the odd cup of ale and slice of cheese so thoughtfully provided by the Abbot. He noticed, on his trips downstairs, that most of the cots and other books had gone but was not overly concerned; he was sure he had grasped the main prize.

But, having travelled long that day and, with the light fading, he retired early to his cot, his travelling cloak wrapped warmly around him as a blanket whilst the monks crept like mice, by torchlight, conveying their last few treasured items to fill the last empty cart remaining.

After Matins, the Abbot addressed his beloved brothers, blessing them for their work and industry and saying a prayer for a safe journey and calm seas. The men then filed out in orderly fashion, the elders being helped onto the carts, the others walking and a quiet procession left the monastery, guided by a single torch held aloft by Brother Gall and headed for the valley entrance where the first smudge of light was embracing the hills. Abbot Abran, last in line, turned to bless the valley and the home that had sheltered and nurtured them for so long. “Please God” he prayed to himself: “protect the works of Saint Laserian, if it be thy will, from the hands of an idiot.” He then turned his gaze forward, towards a new life, companionably falling into step with Brother Vincent beside him.

¹ Extract taken from **Annals of the kingdom of Ireland** by O’Clery, Michael, 1575-1643; O’Clery, Cucogry, d. 1664; O’Mulconry, Ferfeasa, fl. 1636; O’Duigenan, Cucogry, fl. 1636; O’Clery, Conary, fl. 1636; O’Donovan, John, 1809-1861, Page 25 published by Dublin Hodges Smith and Co, Publication Date 1856

Chapter 5

Whether disturbed by some noise or waking naturally, Brother James woke to darkness and lay for some moments recalling the events of the previous day. He was, on the whole, more than satisfied. He had been on the look out for some unknown work of skill and spiritual maturity which he could confiscate and copy as his own work at some future date to speed his rise within the Church, but he was more than satisfied with his find at this obscure little monastery and he was sure the Bishop would be delighted. Needing to defecate, he arose swiftly and, not bothering with a light, made his way to the staircase with a sure step. It was a trick he had learned from an old Brother many years earlier. Count the steps. It was eight steps from his cot to the door, twenty one steps on the staircase to the first floor. 8-21-4-8-25-17. He had the pattern in his head from the previous day. Moving in the dark, with grace, made him feel powerful, almost more than human, superior to those fumbling and peering with lamps. From the staircase he took four steps forward into the hall, then turned and took eight steps left to find the central walkway, turning right he traversed the main hall for twenty five steps and then turned right and walked seventeen steps. He felt the different temperature and odour inside the library come toilet and was confident he was standing directly in front of the commode. He turned and, raising his tunic, sat with confidence and tumbled backwards into a gaping hole to a terrible, smothering death, wrapped in the effluvium of centuries.

“I’m glad I asked you to check after me” said Abran to Vincent as they ate bread and cheese by the roadside. “I never would have thought of detaching the commode and you are quite right, we do not have a carpenter with us who can create another of the same workmanship.” “It was secured by a sliding mechanism which I have tried to commit to memory” commented Vincent. “Whilst it was held securely, we only had to push from one side to free it and there was just room on the last cart for it.” The day was brightening and there was a promise of real warmth in the air. It promised to be a good day for journeying.

Chapter 6

In the scriptorium, the first blush of dawn seemed to bring a gentle breeze in its wake which softly fanned the pages spread on the table. Slowly, as if moved by some invisible hand, the various manuscripts and quires moved together in orderly fashion and the tan and white binding shifted

and wrapped itself securely around the bundle. The two sets of leather thongs tied themselves and then a shimmer appeared in the air around the documents and the bundle slowly faded from view. Abran's final prayer as the last Abbot of the valley had been heard and answered.

The Dutiful Son: (Late 12th Century)

Chapter 1

Ronan couldn't remember ever feeling so tired in his life; his whole body ached, there seemed to be a fog on his brain, dulling his thoughts, his stomach was sickened and his thoughts were sour. He had been roughly pulled from the arms of a deliciously plump lady of ill repute where he taken succour after a drinking bout that had lasted days. Propelled outside with rough words and directions to head for the river, he had staggered through the half light that preceded the dawn, through the still deserted streets of the harbour town of Doire Calgach, towards the wooden bridge to the east that spanned the river and marked both his way home and the road to the impressive monastery that majestically overlooked the town. His father, the Chieftain, Fearghus, was seated on his favourite hill pony on the east bank, flanked, as usual, by his two most trusted lieutenants, Ronan's half brothers, Senan and Sagan, all of them looking at him with expressions akin to disdain. Ronan stopped halfway across the bridge on the barked instructions of his father and he availed himself of the support supplied by the sturdy handrail whilst he waited to hear what his father had to say. There was no love between them, even on the best of days.

"Go back and wash yourself by the west bank and come back to me. I can smell you from here" his father instructed. Ronan did as he was bid, following a gentle dip in the bank to an inlet of shallow water where he did his best to make himself presentable. He noticed red rashes on his arms and stomach and rubbed them with dock leaves to take out some of the itch; fleas were an acceptable hazard in the environments he liked to frequent and, of late, he was frequenting those environments more than usual in order to forget recent sorrows. Ducking his head under the water, he brushed back his shoulder length chestnut coloured hair, combing it with his fingers and cleaned his beard as best he could. He rinsed out his mouth but his breath remained foul. When he returned to the bridge he found a pile of fresh clothes had been placed there for him. He stripped off his soiled tunic and slowly dressed himself under the gaze of the three riders. In varying shades of black, yellow and grey, to denote his status as son of a minor Chieftain, Ronan donned a grey tunic, multi-colour kilt, black jacket, black and yellow mantle reaching to his knees and a bright

yellow cape, draped around his neck and shoulders with a hood to cover his head. Brehon law prescribed how many colours you could wear according to your status and his father was a stickler for protocol.

He noticed a spare pony had been tied to the far end post of the bridge. "You are to go to Ricard's castle" instructed his father. "You are to say you are paying a visit of condolence and present him with gifts. I want you to report on how he reacts and what he says about Aideen. I want you to tour the motte and bailey extensively. Say that you have never seen one before and are curious. I want reports on the defences, a troop count, food stores, water sources, weapons: all the information you can gather. Say you are passing on the way to your uncle in the south. When you think you have all the information you can get, visit your uncle and relay the information to him and then come back to me with your report. I trust you will have the wit to manage it?"

"I'll do your spying for you Lord" responded Ronan. Fearghus pulled his pony around and headed east with his henchmen with no further word. Ronan walked to the tethered pony and, having checked on supplies, headed on a southward path. He had more than a day's ride ahead of him to reach Ricard's castle and his temper did not improve as the day drew on. He still felt drained and feverish and noted, sourly, that his father had not supplied him with ale for the journey, just water skins. He reviewed in his mind the circumstances which had led him to be given this task and his mood worsened as it forced him to review all the circumstances he had been trying to forget for the past months.

Chapter 2

The Normans had conquered England in the previous century but were not seen in Ireland until just over ten years previously when a deposed King of Leinster, Diarmait Mac Murchada, had brought in Norman mercenaries in an attempt to regain his kingdom. Disaster followed and successive waves of Normans had soon overrun the east and south east of the country, their advanced armour and weaponry, along with their industry in building castles, could not be matched by the Irish warriors; who were brave enough but unable to pierce the superior armoury. Years of strife had followed, largely in the south and east of the country, until King Henry II of England had declared his son, John, Lord of Ireland in 1177 which had marked a rapid expansion of the Norman presence throughout the island.

Ronan marked 1179 as the year all their lives had changed for the worse. A band of Normans, a mere thirty knights and one hundred foot soldiers and archers, had crept along the mountain foothills that bordered his father's land and that of his uncle, Murchad and dug themselves in around an abandoned monastery, recognising its defensive potential, placed as it was in the midst of a valley ringed with sheer hillsides and naturally defended.

What happened next defined the difference between his uncle and his father. A hasty council of war had been convened and Murchad had argued for an immediate assault, to catch the Normans before they were too comfortable or had time to call in reinforcements. Fearghus disagreed, arguing that the Normans were now a fact of life and suggesting that a marriage alliance was the way to accommodate the new presence in the area. Murchad, as it happened, had no daughters, only sons. Murchad was a warrior with a warrior's build and a warrior's impatience; Fearghus was small, dark and wiry with a cunning nature and a good brain. He let Murchad lead the charge and sat back to wait on its success or failure. He had all the jealousy of a younger brother and had often eyed Murchad's superior inheritance and compared it with his lesser holdings in the mountains. He would let fate take its course but ensured that two of his spies attached themselves to Murchad's forces. Murchad's sons were, as yet, too young to rule and, if Murchad fell, Fearghus would need to act quickly to take the southern lands he craved for.

Murchad assembled a force of some three hundred warriors and crept into the valley, stealthily one autumn night. They scanned the defences. A rough wooden palisade, around eight feet in height, had been erected in a loop to the west of the river, surrounding the old monastery building. A wooden bridge guarded by two crude wooden towers and a rough drawbridge had been erected and the palisade, following the line of the river bank, swept south and then west in a rough arc until meeting the western sheer cliff wall. "We will attack the southern wall" Murchad announced. "We will thereby avoid the river and should be over the wall and among them before they are aware of our presence." They crept slowly towards the southern wall and attacked with the dawn. The Norman archers were waiting for them.

The Irish warriors raced for the wooden palisade, knowing that, once they got in close, they could no longer be a target for the archers but, close in to the wall, they found themselves hampered. The Normans had dug a channel in from the river, roughly six foot wide and six foot deep. The soil

had been thrown up on either side, making a steep double bank, one protecting the foundations of the wood palisade, the other masking the ditch full of water. It was this defence that Murchad's men floundered into. Their motion slowed and their bright clothing made an easy mark for the Norman archers. It was a scene of slaughter. Murchad quickly recognised that his plan was a failure. It had depended on speed and surprise and now he had neither so, being a sensible man, he called a retreat within minutes. Even so, near thirty men were left behind, dead or dying from Norman arrows. It was an ignominious defeat; a huge loss of men without even engaging with the enemy. Murchad retreated to his lands in the south west to lick his wounds. Fearghus resigned himself, again, to life in the mountains.

Chapter 3

The following spring Fearghus sent a deputation to Ricard FitzWilliam proposing an alliance by marriage with a large portion of the bride price being cattle. Fearghus had calculated that food provision would be a major source of concern for the Normans. The Norman Lord considered the offer. He was a widower in his early forties and had two grown sons living who had already taken charge of his lands in France and England. He was a warrior by nature and had been bored with the English court and attracted by the prospect of extending his reach into three countries, so had welcomed the opportunity to return to war and had paid and equipped his own men from his existing holdings. Ricard left his tower to view the valley around him, hailing the men, who were busy as bees fortifying and working on his tower and motte. Sitting by the river and chewing on a reed, he viewed the valley and was reassured by his choice of location. The upper valley extending to his left, was naturally defended by a circle of sheer cliffs. Good land with a river running through it and perfect for cattle grazing. His castle was on the west bank of the valley, around half way down where the hills closed in for a small space before broadening out again to the lower valley which had just one natural entrance and exit between another circle of hills with steep cliffs. He was adapting his defences to make the most of the protection that nature had already afforded him. He had four guard crofts on the top of the hills, two to the north, on the east and west side, one lower down to the east and one to the south west which afforded a great view of the countryside around him, protecting the only easy road into the valley. He had these crofts manned constantly by squads of two men, taking different shifts so a squad of only eight men could protect his entire holding and give advance warning of any movement close by. As had happened with Murchad's failed

incursion, the guards had spotted their movements well in advance and had lit fire arrows, aimed in towards the keep until an answering fire arrow had relayed that their warning had been spotted. Guessing that the southern wall would be the most likely object of attack, archers had fanned out on the wooden walkway which stretched the whole length of the palisade on the inside and had waited silently for the raiders to come within range. Ricard planned for a second defensive wall to span the entrance to the valley and protect the entire lower valley which would become the bailey, filled with farms, once the work around the motte had been completed.

Ricard was satisfied that he could hold the valley with his present troop levels and his men were as busy as ants on building works, knowing that Ricard would be generous in his allocation of land for farming and would assist with a convoy so their families could join them and settle down to create a good life in this wilderness, once the defences had been completed. But Fearghus, Ricard recognised, had hit upon his only present area of weakness. His nearest Norman neighbour was John de Courcy, who had captured the town of Downpatrick in 1177 and, although the woods nearby had a good supply of timber and were well stocked with game, this offer of cattle would be welcomed as there were no established Norman supply lines this far north. Ricard's father and mother had been long lived and he saw no reason why he could not raise another family here to take over the Irish holdings and he called his trusty kinsman Remann to him to advise him of the offer.

Chapter 4

So it was that, in the summer of 1180, Ronan's life as he knew it, fell apart. Fearghus had been married young and his first wife had produced three boys, two of whom had lived to adulthood. They were wiry and dark and dour, like their father. Fearghus had remarried a kinswoman of the Chieftain Cenél nEógain. She was a gentle soul who had cared for the two boys and had a son and daughter of her own, fair like herself, Aideen and Ronan. She had treated all the children equally but Fearghus had shown a marked preference for his two older boys, who were the spit of him and he felt Aideen and Ronan were too soft in nature, more akin to their mother, and had bullied Ronan to try and toughen him up, without success. So it was while the family were having supper that Fearghus had announced that sixteen year old Aideen was to be married off to the old Norman Lord. Ronan had objected immediately and received a swift blow to the head from his father; an indication that their opinion was not

needed. His mother had learned painfully early on in the marriage not to gainsay her husband so she concentrated on ensuring that Aideen had a good wardrobe and gave her practical advice on what to expect from marriage and how best to bear it. Ronan was bereft. He had not bonded with his half brothers, who had joined in with their father in bullying him and Aideen had been the only companionship he had and they had grown up close knit. His resentment for his father grew apace from the time he saw him leading the wedding party away, Aideen looking backwards for one final glimpse of her home and a final wave from Ronan. That had been eighteen months ago and, at first, reports had been good. The bride and groom had settled down together and, the following summer, it was reported that Aideen was with child.

That autumn, Fearghus had just been congratulating himself on the fact that blood ties would be established and the risk of the Normans greatly lessened, when news came from Ricard FitzWilliam that Aideen had, unfortunately, died due to complications during pregnancy and all Fearghus's plans had come to nothing. He had sacrificed his daughter and his cattle and now had a potential enemy on his doorstep again, with no blood ties to bind and, moreover, more secure than previously as he had nigh on two years to establish himself in the valley. It was a disaster. Fearghus had written, in friendly manner, to Ricard without receiving a response and was now seriously concerned that his own lands might soon come under threat. Ronan found a taste for taverns in an attempt to stem the pain of his loss and tried to keep as far away from his father as he could.

“But” Ronan thought bitterly “Fearghus didn't want to risk his own skin by visiting the Norman or want to put his two precious sons at risk, so he is sending me, the least loved, into that awful place, with no guarantee of safety. These clothes proclaim me the son of a Chieftain but that will be no real defence against Norman ambitions.” Ronan tried to steel himself for what lay ahead. He would listen, he decided, to the story of Aideen and try to piece together what had happened and, if he suspected foul play, he determined to try and kill the Norman Lord and avenge his sister's death. He was no fool and knew he was heading into danger but felt that Ricard would see him as a spy rather than an assassin. His mind made up, he broke off his journey early that afternoon, spotting a natural nook just off the trackway which would provide good shelter for the night. He fed and hobbled his pony and gathered sticks for a fire, cutting bracken with his dagger which he laid on the floor of the cave to form a rough bed. He was not hungry but forced himself to eat and drink a little but he tossed

and turned, unable to settle, his past familial wounds opening afresh and enveloping him in the emotional pain he had for so long tried to avoid. Mother to all, the Goddess Danann, finally lulled him to sleep with a warm, heather scented breeze and watched over him in the wild.

Chapter 5

Ronan was at the mouth of the Norman valley by mid-morning and led his mount across the river. He reined in his pony to look at the wooden battlements that stretched from end to end across the valley entrance. A rough grid of metal had been placed in the river, allowing flow of water but stopping anyone who tried to enter via the riverbank. The sentry atop the wall, near to the only gate called down to him in a strange tongue which Ronan didn't understand so Ronan shrugged and the sentry held his hand out, palm outwards which was universal body language for "wait" so he settled himself down whilst a message was obviously being sent to Ricard at the castle. "Why did we not do this long years ago?" Ronan pondered. "We sit in the hills and herd our cattle on the mountain paths and make life difficult for ourselves. Why did we not think to close off good grazing land and use the material that nature scattered around to build proper defences?" Ronan began to appreciate that the Normans had access to superior knowledge in more than just weaponry. This was confirmed once the gate was opened and he was allowed to pass through. From the front, the defences were of wood but, built immediately behind was a rampart of stone with a walkway for troops and a further gate, sturdy and studded with metal. An approaching enemy would assume they had a simple wooden palisade to negotiate and realise too late the stone that lay behind it. Ronan acknowledged it was brilliant thinking on the part of the Norman. He rode into the lower valley and was amazed at the industry he found there. Crops, some of which he didn't recognise, were growing on the east bank of the river in orderly fashion and well built houses were dotted amongst the fields. To the west, were what looked like warehouses and stores along with a smithy. A carpenter was working wood outside one of the warehouses. Women and children were working in the fields. A real settlement had started to spring up already. He kept east of the river and followed the bank to the large stone bridge that had been constructed as an entrance to the motte. The final section of the bridge was, in fact, a drawbridge which had been lowered to allow him entry. Two sentry towers guarded the entrance to the motte which, again, looked like a wooden palisade but, from inside, proved to be built of stone. Ronan shivered as he felt the drop in temperature when he passed into the stone circle. The sun had not yet risen high enough to bring warmth to the enclosed space.

Again, it was a place of industry with single storey buildings where people were coming and going. The smell of cooking meat assailed his nostrils. Directly ahead of him was the stone keep. It towered over him like an evil giant. A steep bank of earth had been packed around its base and stone steps led up to a single door. A man was waiting for him there. Ronan dismounted but held on to the pony for a moment, trembling. "Coward" he accused himself and forced himself to move, removing a pack from the animal and forcing a smile on his face.

Chapter 6

Ronan had his first reality check immediately upon entering the keep. He spoke to the doorman in Gaelic and met with a blank stare from Remann, who had been sent to greet him. "How am I supposed to measure a man" fumed Ronan "when I cannot even speak his language?" He was shown up a winding stone staircase and emerged in a large open hall where a big man, broad of shoulder with greying blonde curly hair strode forward to greet him, using a few traditional Gaelic words of welcome which Ronan responded to. Ronan studied the man's face. It was a fierce face and showed the marks of war with two scars, one running across the left side of his forehead and another running from the corner of his left eye down almost to his mouth, badly stitched and puckering the skin but it was not a cruel face. Remann entered the hall almost immediately with what turned out to be an interpreter and Ronan breathed a sigh of relief. Ronan was shown to a chair by the great fireplace and given a warming drink which he had never tasted before; mead. Using the interpreter, the following conversation took place:

"You must be Ronan" said Ricard "You remind me of Aideen and she talked often about you".

"I loved her dearly Lord and partly stopped off here from my travels south to ask about her last days." Ronan had already relaxed. The Norman must have made an effort with his new bride as Aideen had felt comfortable enough to talk about her family with him.

"She was heavy with child when she took a fall on the stairs. She lost the child but then continued to bleed and we could not stop the flow and she died soon after" stated Ricard. "She was a gentle soul and I had grown fond of her and mourned her loss. My men will show you where she is buried, if you wish. She was put to rest with high honour and with

prayers said, we being of the same religion and I assure you she is missed.”

Ronan nodded his head. He was satisfied that Aideen had not been abused. He would be no assassin but he was still called upon to be a spy. He presented the package to Ricard; some furs and good quality linen, finely embroidered. He stated that his father wished to continue the good will between them and Ricard nodded his understanding.

Servants entered and filled a nearby table with wooden platters of cheese, sliced meat, bread (to be used as a trencher as there were no plates) and a form of porridge and Ricard invited Ronan to eat with him. Ale was also provided, which was more to Ronan’s taste than the mead, which he found too sweet. He asked leave of Ricard to spend one night in the valley before continuing his travels south to his uncle and asked if he could have use of the interpreter as he had never been inside a Norman dwelling before and was interested in their way of life. Ricard nodded his consent and, meal finished, Ronan made his way downstairs with the interpreter.

Ricard and Renann settled themselves down in front of the fire. “How dishonourable” began Renann “to send an untried boy on a man’s errand. Did you see the sweat on his brow and the shake in his hands? He is barely out of the nursery, that one.” “Fearghus is sly as a fox” responded Ricard: “He knows I can hardly let the boy live, having sniffed out the state of my defences and manpower, but, all the same, Ronan’s mother is allied to a great tribe here in the North, which I learned from Aideen, and Fearghus thinks he is in a win, win situation. Either I let Ronan go with the information, or I risk uniting two Irish tribes against me by killing him. He is subtle, I give him that.” “What will you do?” questioned Renann, secure and confident in his master’s equal guile and intelligence when it came to all the arts of war. “I will think on it, Renann. Join us at our evening meal and wait on my signal before killing young Ronan but do so swiftly and with mercy; I do not delight in the slaughter of innocents. It is a pity I have fixed on the conquest of Murchad with his prime lands along the lakes as my next expansion; I would love to have levelled Fearghus but what need have I for his mountain tops and poor grazing land?”

Chapter 7

Ronan did not have to feign interest in the Norman stronghold. He was keen to learn all about their innovations and not just for his father’s sake

and asked the interpreter for a tour. The Lord lives on the top floor, the man replied and you have seen the great hall on the first floor. The Lord entertains his men regularly there and many feats and old battles are told again there in honour of the many warriors we have amongst us. The interpreter opened a door on the ground floor, next to the exit. "This is the armoury and barracks for the single men" said the interpreter. Married men live with their families on the farms when they are not on duty. Ronan saw a great room with a fireplace at the end and rows of cots which men were sitting on or sleeping in. The seated men eyed him with cold interest, faces blank. Battle clothing took up the left hand side of the armoury, chain mail, steel helmets with rectangles of steel in the middle pointing downwards "to protect the nose" the interpreter explained, other scale armour that seemed to be made of horn and round or kite shaped shields made of wood and hard leather, with different devices painted on them. There was also leg and arm armour to protect the limbs. "This must be heavy to wear" queried Ronan. "It is only worn in battle or when in fear of ambush" stated the interpreter.

To the right of the doorway were the weapons. Metal tipped spears of differing lengths and weights, long swords with wooden sheaths, great axes and lines of crossbows. They all looked far heavier and more effective than the Irish counterparts and, of course, the Celts did not fight with any body armour, preferring quick, skirmish tactics. Ronan had seen enough. He needed some fresh air and retreated outside.

The interpreter showed Ronan two warehouses stocked with grain and great wheels of cheese, larger than he had ever seen before. The man in charge of the cheeses gave him different morsels so that Ronan could taste the difference in the different ages of cheese on offer. He weighed the heavy wheels in his hands. "The river is clean" the interpreter stated, "but its waters are only used for fishing, bathing and cattle, for safety." The interpreter led Ronan to a cliff face to the left of the keep where water sprang from the rock. The interpreter laid his lips against a smooth facing of rock and drank deeply and Ronan followed suit. The water was marvellous; cold and with a mineral taste. He drank deeply; the cheese had been cloying and had irritated his throat. Ronan noticed that stones had been secured in a ring at the base of the rock with mortar allowing the water to gather so that it could be scooped up by bucket. "We normally dig for water and build a well" stated the interpreter "but this natural spring serves all our needs so we did not need to do so here". He was shown into a low building which proved to be a kitchen. There was a great haunch of deer skewered in front of the fire, being turned and basted

regularly. A soup of vegetables was being prepared and the cook passed a brimming ladle of broth for Ronan to taste. Ronan nodded and asked the interpreter to compliment the cook on the taste and was rewarded with another dip. The interpreter showed Ronan a small hut where rows and rows of strips of meat and fish had been salted or smoked and now hung awaiting use. Ronan appreciated that their methods of preservation, along with fresh water supply, ensured they could weather a long siege without undue hardship.

They exited the motte and turned left on a narrow pathway towards the upper valley. One stone building stood apart and the interpreter guided him towards it. It turned out to be a chapel of crude design and the interpreter led Ronan to a slab to the left of the altar, indicating that this was where Aideen had been buried. "It is our custom" he said: "To inter the Lord's family or great warriors inside our churches". Ronan knelt on the cold stone floor. He could not equate his sister with this place but he spotted her name, the only letters he could identify amidst a strange language chiselled on the flat stone and he ran his forefinger softly across her name. The interpreter, being a sensitive man, retreated from the chapel to allow Ronan some time to himself.

Upon exiting the chapel, Ronan looked around him. He thought he could recognise some of his father's cattle in the distance but his attention was arrested by an animal he had not seen before. Small brown and grey furred animals with large ears and a strange blob of a tail were nibbling at the grass some distance from him. He called for the interpreter which was enough to send these strange creatures running and they scattered at quick speed and dived into holes in the ground. "Rabbits" said the interpreter. "I have never seen such creatures before" stated Ronan in amazement. "My Lord had them brought over, males and females, to settle here. Their meat is very pleasant although I have only tasted it once or twice; it is reserved for the Lord's table. These animals breed very fast and have many young and their skins are soft and supple and can be used for shoes or put to many other uses. They dig holes in the ground themselves and eat the different grasses and my Lord uses his trained hawks to catch them when he wishes to feast on them." "Some of my people train hawks" responded Ronan "but it is a rare skill with us. I am delighted to have seen a new animal, it reminds me how strange and varied this world is." They walked a little in the upper valley and then tiredness seemed to sweep over Ronan like a tide. "Fear is draining" Ronan thought. The interpreter noticed that Ronan had slowed his pace. "Let me lead you to the guest lodging inside the motte which has been

prepared for you” he suggested: “I can see that you are weary from your travels on the road and I will personally wake you in good time for the feast this evening where I will be no doubt again at your side so that you can converse with my Lord”. Ronan agreed gratefully and was shown into a clean but basic hut set just inside the gates from the bridge with a crude cot with warm bedding where he could rest.

Chapter 8

Ronan still felt weary upon waking so he walked to the spring to splash his face and take a long, cool drink. Feeling warm, Ronan left his mantle and cape on the cot and was ready when the interpreter called for him. Ronan was shown to the Lord’s table upon arrival, a gesture of honour. He washed his hands in the basin provided for him and set about trying those dishes he was unfamiliar with, including a rabbit stew which had been cooked in his honour. People helped themselves from communal platters and dishes were served first at the high table and then passed along to the second table. Around thirty people were seated at the lower table and, from the interplay between the Lord and his people, Ronan could tell he was not a man to stand aloof from his subjects and seemed to be well thought of. Ronan thought it was a shame that Ricard had chosen to invade their lands as, under other circumstances, he would have liked to meet him as a friend.

It not being a feast day, the meal was not overlong and soon the high table was left to itself. “Here we come to the heart of it.” thought Ronan “He will either let me go or he will not.” He was surprised at his own indifference. He said aloud: “I thank you for your courtesy Ricard. I will be away to my uncle come morning; is there any message you wish me to relay for you?” “Let me think on it” replied Ricard signalling to Renann “Fill Ronan’s cup with ale and we will have a parting toast”. Ronan lifted his cup for Renann to refill and the breath seemed to leave his body; he inhaled and inhaled again but could seem to get no air. His vision fading, his head dipped and the last image he had was of the hilt of Renann’s dagger, which had pierced his chest. There was no sense of triumph around the high table. The interpreter, who had taken a liking to the boy, made a sign of the cross and Ricard and Renann followed suit. “What now Lord?” asked Renann, breaking the silence.

“Renann, go and get his mantle and hood” instructed Ricard. “Strip him of his weapons and dip the mantle, hood and weapons with his blood. Make sure they soak up a good portion. Then take the mantle and hood

to the kennels and let the dogs tear and paw them for a while. They will be attracted by the scent of blood. I want it to look as if Ronan was attacked by wolves. An accident on the road cannot be laid at my door. Saddle Ronan's pony and be sure to repack my gift so it looks as if he was still on the way to me, leave at dawn and travel three or four hours north and then drop the hood by the roadside in one place and the mantle in another, then his sword. Let the horse free to roam and be careful that you are not seen. Interpreter, you throw the body into the oubliette once Renann has finished with it and clear up any blood on the dais."

Ricard retired to his upper chamber and the interpreter stood aloof while Renann went about his work. Then he dragged the body to a side chamber where a black opening yawned in the floor. On impulse, before proceeding, he said prayers over the body, as a form of burial. He attached no blame to his Lord; the deed had been necessary and the form of death had been merciful. He recalled the last time the oubliette had been used, some three months previously. One of the new foot soldiers had been accused of raping the daughter of one of Ricard's best archers. He had been tried in the Great Hall. The man had protested that the maiden had consented, which was doubtful as the girl had a good name. One of the older married women had examined the girl and reported numerous bruises, scrapes and other injuries. She mentioned that two of the girl's fingernails had been broken off whilst attempting to defend herself. Ricard had the man's tunic torn open which revealed scratches around his neck and chest. Ricard, in no doubt as to the man's guilt, had sentenced him to be thrown alive into the oubliette and, although the man's hands had been tied behind him, it had still taken three men to tip him down there. The long fall had not killed him and intermittent screams and pleadings filtered up into the Great Hall for three or four days before silence once again descended into that dark part of the castle. It was every man's wish to die in battle, cleanly and the oubliette was a source of fear to everyone and was therefore good for discipline. No more prayers to be said, the interpreter slowly pushed Ronan's body over the edge until it fell and he returned to the Great Hall to clean up any sign of what had occurred.

Chapter 9

Immediately upon returning from the harbour town of Doire Calgach, Fearghus called for a meeting of his village heads and trusted warriors but, given the distances involved, it was not until around the hour that Renann was abandoning Ronan's pony on the trackway, that the men had

full gathered to hear what Fearghus had to say. Fearghus came straight to the point. "It was told to me some days ago that plague had been reported in Doire Calgach and, knowing that my youngest son was there, I immediately set out with my two other boys. We talked to the bridge keeper, who confirmed the rumour and agreed to find Ronan for me in return for safe haven for him and his family. They are currently in the western high croft with a good store of fuel and food and are to be avoided until it is sure they are free of the disease. I have called you here to let you know that, even now, my men are closing off the four major routes into and out of our lands and will let no-one enter. If you have family still outside, you can make the choice to go out and find them but no-one will be allowed to return, for the good of us all. If cattle stray outside of our markers, consider them lost. In the old days it was said that this was the only way to avoid the pestilence and, now it has returned again, we will respect the old ways in order to try and ensure our survival. This instruction is to last until Easter at least when I will send men abroad to see whether the sickness has passed. If you are short of fuel or food, send word to Sagan as we will ensure that everything we have we will share so do not worry on that score. Senan is in charge of guarding the roads and may call on single men in your villages to do their share of guard duty."

Fearghus paused before speaking of his son, Ronan. He seldom missed an opportunity to advertise his own intelligence but, in this instance, decided to show some humility and to lend some dignity to the memory of his wastrel son. "Ronan met us at the bridge and bade us not to go near him and showed us the round marks of the disease already showing on his skin. Knowing he was sure to die anyway within days, he offered himself as sacrifice and undertook to make his way to the Norman stronghold with a view to infecting as many there as he could before his strength failed him. Come spring, we will know whether our greatest enemy has been defeated without a blow being struck." The men murmured their approval and approbation, one commenting that there were more kinds of bravery than that displayed on the battlefield. Fearghus dipped his head as if he was struggling with his emotions at the loss of his son. Senan and Sagan kept their faces stony and unreadable ... and, three days, later the Norman Lord, Ricard FitzWilliam, awoke with a fever.

The Smithy (14th Century)

Chapter 1

“Dead in a ditch, she was found. Frozen. Curled like an autumn leaf. Poor Maura. A sad end to a good soul.” The Cook’s words repeated and repeated in his head; a never-ending litany. Every time he poured some oats or forked hay, unbidden, the snaking sentence slithered through his thoughts. Dead ... frozen ... curled. Rage gripped him at times. He would come back to himself and realise he had been frozen in one spot; the rake caught in a murderous grip or he with a white knuckled grip on the stall rails. The horses would bring him back. They would sense his mood and stamp and whinny and he would shake the mood from himself, clucking reassurance with his tongue or offering soft words, losing himself in the constant and uncomplicated companionship of good animals. He brushed their coats for hours, long, smooth even strokes, in doing so he knew he was trying to soothe himself.

He remembered Maura arriving at the Tower House. A wee wisp of a girl and him a stable boy of fifteen summers. She had worn an old, yellow wool tunic, mid calf, noticeably too small and patched and shabby but, for him, sunshine had entered the *bawn* as she had skipped within the embrace of its cold, marble veined stone walls. Their friendship had grown with the slow ripening of many seasons. Stolen morsels from the kitchen for him, the occasional, furtive trip outside to the meadows for her. He remembered the sunlight hitting her hair and how the glisten of gold and red would weave a halo for her pretty, pale face in the spring air. Heaven was the remembrance of those savoured moments. Gifted, she was, with the needle and was quickly taken from the pots and pans to the upper stories of the Tower House as seamstress and maid. He saw her less then but loved her more as time passed. No airs and graces with Maura, no lording over the other workers; just kindness. Every change of fortune for farmers and workers round about was marked by Maura’s kindness. A saffron dyed mantle for the ragged or a warm, woollen cape. Something new to wrap every baby in, something fresh to wear for every bride, a linen winding sheet for those who died, with a cross sewn, with delicate stitch, to lend a moments grace to a body bound for the communal burial ditch.

He had dreamed, through the years, and dreams were all they could be, of himself and Maura together, man and wife, with his strength to shield and her warmth to enfold, away from this place of stone. But who was he to have such visions, a stable boy, an orphan, sleeping in the hay and lucky, he knew, to be within the walls and shielded from the famines, the wars and the disease that swept across this land laying waste with dread regularity. Hadn't he seen the starving begging at the gate enough times to know? And the Master and Mistress frowned on such marriages. He, himself, had enough fire within himself, in those early days, to take the chance and maybe, if he had grasped the courage to ask, she might have been of same mind. But always the dream crashed like a wave on the shores of reality. He could not do it; not drag her through the mud from village to town on a tide of little hope. Here, she was safe, he had always thought. Here she was warm. Here, she lives far above me but I can see her from time to time. She always looked for him and he for her and the crowd would disappear for him when their eyes met. Whenever he left the stables his gaze would rise up to the three storied Tower House and he would picture her in some quiet corner, surrounded by the many hued colours of her craft.

And time, time flew with the swiftness of eagles and the seasons merged. Time had been kinder to him than to her. Time had filled his frame and seasoned his muscles. Maura was hunched, thinner and thinner, slower too, careful steps betraying failing joints, too soon, too soon. Those dancing blue eyes now red rimmed bending closer and closer to the cloth she moulded and shaped. But beautiful she was to him, always, his laughing lady of the meadows.

Coward, he called himself. A useless hulk of a man. If he had acted, if only, she would not have died alone, discarded in a ditch. "Time, time roll back and give me the days again"

"How," he asked himself. "How had she been cast there?" She had left with the Mistress and her only child, who was to visit family for a while some three days journey hence. The Mistress had not long returned, having visited a Holy Well to pray for fruit to seed itself in her barren womb, they said. But what had happened on the road?

"Why," he pondered. "Why the silence?" The Master and Mistress had not stirred with the news. Surely some calamity had happened. Yes, a horse had been called for, a letter written and a messenger sent and

returned but surely with their servant dead, their child could be endangered. “Why the silence? Why the stillness ...?”

Wisdom, he prayed for. There was a pattern in this warp and weft, if only he had the wit to see it. He was no fool but his emotion had blinded him, wrapped him and enfolded him. The pain in his heart had bent him double when he had been told. “Heart sick, heart sick, I felt my heart bleed and empty and now a cold stone lies where my heart should be. God, show me, tell me, help me”.

Chapter 2

Cook, with the wise ways of women, had grasped some truths quickly as only women can. Cold and harsh her Master and Mistress were and Cook knew the ways of the world, of time and of use. Time was hard on women and the world was kind only when women were young and strong and useful. If the dangers of childbirth didn't lay you low, how many women had a restful old age, Cook reflected? Precious few. And look to her own history. Married young, but a love match all the same, she reflected, she still missed the ups and downs, the laughter, tears and companionship of Aidan, carried away by a fever with their two children in one awful week. But not her. Raised in the Wicklow uplands, you died fast or else lasted a good distance ... but something had died within her then and been buried with them. Fey, she became, restless and she had moved from place to place, her cooking skills and herb lore superior to most and standing her in good stead. No fear either. What more was there to fear from life, she reflected, when everything you loved had been taken from you?

“... and I swear the hens are laying but half the amount of eggs since news of Maura came ...”

And she had grown fat here these last seven years; fat but not lazy and not stupid either. The Mistress knew the wonders she could work in the kitchen. The Mistress knew she served the best food in the area, although she seldom set foot in Cook's domain. It was the unspoken agreement between them; Cook would do the work but Cook would be left alone.

“... and Brigid, stupid girl, had taken a rock from the fire to heat water and then dumped it back in the flames too fast. The rock had exploded and put a hole in her best clay cooking pot ...”

But Maura never had that luxury of distance. Maura had been under the eye of the Mistress all day, up on the second floor. Cook would mount the narrow, winding stairs when called and wait to be told who was visiting and when and how many she had to plan to cook for. The Mistress kept the keys to the herb chest close and doled out the spices, herbs and priceless sugar cane with great reluctance; her wish for economy at war with her need for extravagant display. It was the only show of power Mistress had so Cook tolerated it. But Cook would watch: “Maura this, Maura that” And then Maura started to fail and, alas, the nettle soup Cook fed her with could only ease the joint pain, not cure it and the Mistress had watched Maura, then, with the eyes of a cat; a cat that had spotted a mouse; a cat that was in no hurry, confident of its speed and strength, coiled, alert, watchful and waiting to pounce and play. And why?

“... and Brigid had come crying to her from her bed by the fire on the ground floor, saying the stones were wailing and that she had heard cries in the night and did cook think it was Maura roaming, not at rest ...”

Jealousy. Jealous as only a cold woman can be. With no love to show her own child, as it was not the precious son she yearned for, she had hated the care that Maura had shown to the girl. Hated it but with no intention of making any effort herself at motherhood. It was Maura who had dried the tears and cleaned the scraped hands and knees, who had encouraged and soothed while the Mistress had only looked for opportunities to parade her wealth and status and her silk and satin and fur around the other lordly houses.

“.. and hadn't she herself only yesterday spilled a good measure of salt on the wet flagstones, of all things the hardest to come by and not cheap either and she was still calculating how she was going to get around that and keep things seasoned until the next load arrived in Spring. It had a ring of bad luck to it, even though she had thrown salt over her shoulder to ward off evil ...”

And now Mistress was pregnant, after all the barren years, although little was showing yet, and wasn't she now lolling in an oak chair by the fire in the Great Hall and praising the Holy Well for answering her prayers. But no word of Maura and no explanation either and Cook knew something was out of step. The three women had set out early heading for the waterways to travel on the river but they had gone before the household had awoken and with only the Master to guide and protect them until they reached the Riverman. None of the usual pomp and ceremony. And one

thing Cook was certain of. At some point in the journey Maura had been turfed out to fend for herself and far enough away for Mistress to feel sure that no word would ever come back about it. Why? Cook could speculate. With this pregnancy in the offing, maybe Maura had seen something she shouldn't or else the Mistress was finally taking Deidre's absence as an opportunity to pounce. That she would never know for sure. What Cook did know was that this household had thrown a woman who had served them close for over twenty years out to die in the wild and that was all she needed to know. Cook would be away back to Wicklow and her kin once Summer came and travel was easier. She would walk the quiet places and forage and stand again on the mountain tops and cherish the wild solitude and beauty of the uplands that had never been tamed. And she would pass on her skills and her herb lore to her young female kin so they had a better chance to survive and to thrive. Cook believed in providence. It was God that had given Maura, near blind and arthritic Maura, the strength to make it back so close to this place and it was providence that Cadhla had been herding sheep back from the hills and had been passing as the body was found.

“But Mistress, Mistress cat, there is one thing we will never know. Did Maura think she had just somehow gone astray and looked to return to the only home she had ever known or had she known of your betrayal and steeled herself to return to you and sit in protest at your doorstep like the great poet did? There is an ill wind blowing through this place, that I know now in my bones, but, just to be sure, I will sing a cursing psalm at your home before I leave, Mistress, and all know that such words have power.”

Chapter 3

Modan the Marshall, the Master to his household was a complacent and lazy man. He sometimes admitted this fact to himself but not as a spur for improvement. He was content to be what he was and found it amusing to present an image of a strong Lord, a man in touch with the affairs of the time, a player on a greater stage than his neighbours. Even on his own land, Modan would not be seen without his raiment of power, his rings, his furs, his great jewelled sword. He learned early on to say little in the presence of his peers, earning the reputation of a man of few words, careful to comment only when he was sure of his facts, more often than not weighing the consensus within a gathering, or gauging the opinion of the man he most wanted to impress and then, catching an eye, nodding his assent and support without the commitment of speech. His wife had

the brains; the inexhaustible interest in the affairs of others, the cold acumen to spot a weakness or an opportunity. They travelled regularly, in great style, to the neighbouring tribe leaders and he was often amazed, upon their return, when she would relate all the information she had garnered from the wives, the servants or any conversations she was so adept at overhearing. She could both read and write and would make notes in her great book so that no information was lost and she would brief him before a visit and, often, old snippets of information, scandal or rivalry, could be put to good use. His father had been wise in choosing for him a bride with Norman blood. The alliance had extended their horse trading to England as well as Ireland and Scotland. She was wise enough too, to give him the respect he merited, within and without, always giving him the credit for her own ingenuity. She had a curious effect on him; whenever they were alone together he could physically feel his own power and autonomy ebbing away from him like a tide, he found it difficult to ever disagree with or contradict her but, as he was indolent by nature and solely concerned with outward appearances, this did not overly trouble him. Her sole failure had been her inability to produce a male heir and now, hopefully, that would be rectified.

His grandfather had laid the foundations for the family fortune by cornering the market in providing hobby horses to Robert The Bruce for his long standing war against the English and to his brother, Edward in his, ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to become King of Ireland. The hobby, a sturdy horse of 13 or 14 hands, was perfect for the guerrilla warfare waged by the Scots against the English. His second stroke of genius was to use the nickname given to him by his Celtic neighbours as a family name, Marshall, denoting "Master of Horses" with its useful association to a far grander role which the Marshalls of England had long held. The third stroke of genius was to secure the old Norman castle, set against a ring of high hills with a natural valley both behind and before it with a clean river running through both. The prime horses were stabled, bred and trained in the naturally defended upper valley along with the food and fodder stores. Lesser breeds and the smithy were located in the lower valley. His father had built steadily on that foundation, extending the breeding bloodlines so that the Marshalls could provide the tall, strong destriers and chargers for jousting and war, agile coursers for hunting and a string of steady palfreys and jennets for lesser Knights, for travel and for female riders. His father had introduced a small square brand with the letter "M" for all his prime horses which now served as both a quality mark and a protection against theft. The Norman keep had been upgraded to a Tower House with the latest furnishings. His father had bought shore

land near Dundalk and built his own quay, fisherman's huts and boats designed to transport horses, ensuring steady transport to Scotland and, later, England as well as a handy by-product of salted and smoked fish which could be transported inland for sale and use. His father had separated those horses he didn't want to breed or which would make a lower sale price and started a rental highway between the North and his village near Dundalk, with a further stable there where horses could be switched to go back and forth to Dublin. Very few people could afford to own a horse and the rental market, together with provision of some lowly pack horses, was of great appeal to the Northern merchants and tradesmen. His father had even rented cart horses to local peasant farmers in return for hay and other produce. All in all, Modan had inherited a well oiled and multi-faceted business and had changed nothing since his father's death ten years previously.

Chapter 4

Mistress Alice had always told her husband: "Never run around looking to speak to servants, it is beneath your dignity. Always have them summoned to you in the Great Hall. If it disturbs their work, so be it, it is your work they are doing and for you to say when they come and go." So Modan was in his great seat next to the fire and was savouring a cup of warm spiced wine, listening to the heavy tread of the Smithy's steps on the circular stone staircase. Smithy was a derogatory term he always used when addressing this particular servant. Trained by his own father, the Smithy was, in fact, the horse master in charge of breeding and training of all the equine animals. Modan had no feel for the trade and had watched with awe, and a certain amount of ire, when the Smithy seemed to effortlessly identify the young horses for sale which had Spanish or Barb blood. Modan could see no difference, one from the next but the Smithy seemed to know a quality animal from one look and, more than that, temperament as well. He could pick out a good potential palfrey or a destrier with equal ease and had rarely been wrong about an animal. His father, reading Modan's jealousy behind the blank stare, had advised him to acknowledge the worth of the Smithy, not to overwork him, to give him plenty of room to operate, boys to train up but not to reward him in coin or give him any resources by which he could make himself independent and Modan had seen the wisdom of those words and had kept his jealousy in check whilst ensuring the Smithy was never given his due. The Smithy was not invited to sit.

First they overviewed demand across both islands. The Scottish demand had trickled away to almost nothing but demand for war horses from England was strong as a result of a resurgence in the conflict between France and England that would later be named the Hundred Years War. A steady stream of horses were being despatched from Dundalk and payment for them was being made using the Gold Noble, the most stable currency of the time, Irish coinage having collapsed into confusion since the Norman decline in Ireland and the strengthening of the Celtic tribes. The Statutes of Kilkenny, a measure introduced to try and underpin Norman supremacy in Ireland, was largely proving unsuccessful and the Celtic tribes were busy re-arming and Modan didn't need to be told that, whilst English gold was the mainstay of his business, it was also vital that he keep in good stead with his Celtic neighbours and kinsmen, even if it meant stomaching Irish silver.

Talk then turned to breeding and colour was the main topic of discussion. A good war horse could command a price twenty to forty times that of the Rounceys provided to the poorer knights of a Lord's retinue but a preference had arisen in recent years for horses of block colour, rather than the spotted horses of old. The Smithy had been put in charge of transforming the primary herd to block colours and, after seven years, the effects of his efforts were becoming evident. "It is not easy Lord" said the Smithy, "You would think that to mate a block stallion with a block mare of same colour was all that was needed to get a block foal but it doesn't work that way always, some foals arrive spotted. It is a slower process than I thought it would be but we have a goodly herd of bays now, of all block hues, which we are training and shipping for the English War. We are middling on chestnut but short on black and that is what I want to work on now. We also need to introduce new blood into the greys."

"There will be little demand for greys from the English" stated Modan (thanking in his mind this snippet of information provided by his wife's family connections), "the infantry is improving as well as the archer's range and greys are thought to stick out too much on the battlefield". We have a good stock of bays, so focus on acquiring some new blood for the block chestnut and black and continue to geld most spotted stallions and steer the spotted horses towards the palfrey, jennet, Rouncey and rental markets. Now, I have two issues for you. The first is O'Neill of Clandeboye who wants to buy Arab/Barb stallions and mares from me, twelve in all, one stallion and three mares, each in block colours. What do you say to that Smithy?"

The Smithy stared into the fire for a few moments and collected his thoughts. "O'Neill obviously wants to start his own stud and, not knowing any different, will think it an easy matter. We have a fine grey stallion of nine years, in his prime so that could be one Lord with three grey mares of good Barb stock. They are noble animals and he should be delighted with them and I doubt the news from England will have reached his ears and there is no point in our keeping a prime stock of horses if there will soon be no demand for their colour. I have a chestnut stallion of six years, block in colour and a fine looking horse, but I have bred him with three block chestnut mares who have produced block foals before and, each time, got a spotted foal so the fault must lie with him and I was thinking to cut him and send him to England, as he is trained as a destrier, but this might be a better option. We should save our black horses and send O'Neill a set of bays but of the darker colour with black points. They will make a striking herd. Also, Lord, Eoin the redhead boy is restless. He is only middling at both the smithy and the horse training but he is from that way and anxious to be closer to home. He is bonded to you for seven years and you could offer his last four to O'Neill, who will be pleased with the gesture, but you will also be knowing that O'Neill's horses will never be trained or cared for to the standard we have here. Also, Eoin knows nothing about the need for new blood. O'Neill is not a man to cross and you will be seen to have more than fulfilled his wishes without, in reality, having given too much away."

Modan pretended to consider the matter and the Smithy, uncomfortable with the silence, cast his eyes over the Great Hall. Great tapestries lined three of the walls, the fourth, with the great hearth being left bare with brackets placed along the stone to hold tallow pillar candles, or wax candles if neighbours of substance were being entertained. The hunting scene on the tapestry nearest the staircase caught his eye and a memory stirred. "I hid behind that as a boy" he thought "Now why did I just now remember that?" He was brought back by Modan giving his assent to the choices. "I will write to O'Neill and tell him we will deliver after Easter" said Modan, "their summer coats will be through if you work on them and they will be looking at their best. Now, I have a request from a quarter I never expected, the Blakes of Galway. They never traded with us before but now they want a matched pair of riding horses of best quality with delivery before Easter and I am of a mind to give them something special to make them regret having ignored us for so long. They have offered to pay in Gold Nobles which makes it even more attractive?"

The Smithy was glad of an excuse to collect his thoughts and it was some time before he responded. "I have a contact with the marshmen in the midlands. I have used them oftentimes to renew the bloodlines and I was there two years ago looking for block colours and bought two bay stallions, if you remember Lord? Well we have those light chestnut horses with the pale mane and tail, striking in colouring, even with winter coats, and I have seen them nowhere else. We have established that colour in our herd now and can spare two for the Blakes. I could strike for Dublin and take the Great Highway across to Galway, even at this time of year and stop with the marshmen to see what they have for sale?"

"I was going to suggest the light Chestnut myself" Modan lied "and, yes, have a look about you for more bloodstock but only pay in silver, mind you. Bring that gold safe back to me, I will give you silver to pay for anything you find fit to purchase. Go soon, Smithy, as I want you back and working on those horses for Clandeboye and take a lad or two with you for security."

Chapter 5

Modan found his wife on the upper floor, inserting a gold satin panel into her favourite green day dress. "Still a woman to be proud of", he thought, not much thickened with age, dark haired, pale skinned and with noble, if narrow, features. Alice caught his eye, rubbed her belly and gave him an arch smile. "We will go to Clandeboye with the horses" she said, "It is a prime opportunity to strengthen ties before I go into seclusion." Modan was surprised: "But what about ...?" "Peace husband. I'll take a good measure of ale, cheese and dried fruits from the store and we won't be gone much above a week. The baby is not due until the summer. I need to secure a wet nurse too and I don't want any from round abouts. We can take care of that on the way." His wife, as always, was way ahead of him and he left content.

"Soon" thought Alice "I can throw the fact of a newborn child in all their faces. For so long, I have had to sit and suffer those wittering women talking about their sons this and their sons that. No matter that I was richer and better dressed and far superior to them in education and looks, my barren womb was always a target for their spite and their mock pitying looks. Well, not for much longer. Please God a son by summer." The sharp mind of Alice, never contented, held quick review of all past slights, real and imagined, with a speed to match her needle working through the cloth.

Chapter 6

The Smithy headed to the training grounds in the high meadow, glad to get away from the house of stone. Winter sun was struggling through the clouds, the odd gleam bringing with it the hope of spring. Even the faint heat felt good on his face. Two bay destriers were already in the fenced in, level rectangle of ground and a third, black, was being brought in. The Smithy lent upon the fence to watch. To the untutored, it looked like a scene of total chaos. The ground in the middle of the field was strewn with straw men and Eoin was weaving his horse through them and around them in circles. Kevin, to his right had his horse standing but was waving a long thin pole in random directions, touching the horses flanks, and shoulder and brushing his ears with it at random intervals. Three of the lads were running around the bays in a wide arc with shields almost as big as themselves which they would bang with stones at regular intervals and fat Tadc, not being up for the chase, sat on the far fence banging a drum and letting out bloodcurdling yells at regular intervals. To the left, three buckets of sheep blood stood at spaced intervals and another boy was leading the black stallion towards them when it snorted suddenly, half reared and backed, the young boy losing his grip on the lead rope. The Smithy was instantly alert: "Hold, hold" he cried: "Let him settle before you approach him again Easy now. No, no, don't approach him from the front boy, to the side always so he can see you and see you are not a threat. OK, now talk to him, stroke and settle him and when he's calm, take a grip on the rope again and lead him round those buckets."

There were two stages to training a war horse and this training was the first. A horse would naturally shy away from the smell of blood and had to be trained to become accustomed to it. He also had to learn to step around the bodies that would be strewn on a battlefield in order to keep a sound footing. Thirdly, he had to get used to the lance and the long sword being swung about and in front of him without reacting to it. Lastly, he had to be trained to ignore the shine reflecting off armour and learn not to react to the noises around him. The Smithy watched the training progress, switching their positions so all three points were covered.

Eoin, he could see, was a fair horseman but would never be a good one. Eoin lived too much inside his own head, a dreamer, with not enough focus on his surroundings or the horse itself. Kevin was a different story; totally in tune with the animal he was riding, alert for changes in mood, graceful and a born rider. He was the same in the smithy. Kevin had

absorbed all of his knowledge and was now way ahead of him, creative and curious, producing bits and spurs, refining and improving agricultural implements, bursting with ideas. Kevin was his favourite, a young man now of twenty or so, flaxen haired and easy on the eye. More than once the Smithy had beat a retreat from the forge as the sound of lovemaking and laughter had drifted down to him from the loft space above but the Smithy didn't mind him; he would leave with a wry grin on his face. It was these young boys who largely ran the castle, slopping out, scaring the birds from the seed, weeding crops and then helping with the harvest, working on the bog, turning spits in the kitchen, running to the spring for water, seeing to the horses, running messages or serving at table and, dressed in finer robes, holding basins of scented water for guests to lave their hands when the Master and Mistress had company. Apart from bird scaring, the training ground was the only opportunity for them to let loose and they relished it and the Smithy loved watching their joy but his pleasure was mixed with a tinge of sadness as he thought "Wouldn't it be a fine world if children didn't have to work and could play without any care".

At his signal the ground was cleared of all equipment and the boys came to stand with the Smithy leaving just the three horses with riders within the fencing. This was the second strand of training for a war horse. Laden down with shield and sword, lance or spear, warriors could not command a horse easily by traditional means and horses were trained to respond to pressure from the rider's legs or their weight and position in the saddle as much as by a pull on the reins. Forward and backwards, the horses responded to their riders but the real challenge was the motion from side to side, an unnatural gait for the horses but stunning to watch when executed correctly and necessary to ensure correct positioning for a group charge in the field. The boys executed the high stepping sideways motion well but the black was stilted and reluctant so the Smithy switched Kevin to the black and the manoeuvres went on, interspersed with canters around the paddock to work off excess energy, the black improving in time.

Training over, the lads trailed back down the valley towards the upper stables and stores with the horses, shields, buckets and straw men but the Smithy held Eoin and Kevin back. Eoin was delighted with the news of a move to Clandeboyne and raced off to share his good news with the others. The Smithy told Kevin that they would be going to Galway in a few days to make some purchases and drop off horses. They walked companionably back down the valley to examine the proposed sale horses and confirm the Smithy's choice.

Chapter 7

The days were kind to the Smithy; distracted by many duties but, come dusk, the night fell on him like a shroud. Memories of Maura crowded in on him as soon as the light faded and, adding to his sorrow, thoughts of his father resurfaced; memories of a big man, even bigger than he was now, with an even bigger laugh. Memories of being on the road together, hard enough times but always the strength of his father was needed at some stop of the road, giving them enough, just enough, to travel a little further. His mother he had never known. They were heading for the lakes, he remembered, his father thinking he would find work on the boats ferrying people south until they stopped at the Tower House looking for shelter, work and food. Memories of a terrified eight year old boy resurfaced in his mind, curled up in the hay for near three days, waiting for his father's footsteps, driven out in the end by hunger and then turning from face to face asking where his father was to be greeted by blank looks and the odd cuff and curse. It was the Old Master who had come looking for him, gentle of speech, saying perhaps his father had gone on ahead and would be back for him but that, in the meantime, they needed a boy for the horses so he shouldn't worry, that there was space for him here. For years his stomach would turn if he spotted a big, dark man on the road, wondering if recognition and reunion would follow but it never had. From one loss to another, his mind wandered with questions, always questions but no answers. How was it that your mind, not content with current pain, would throw up past scars to torment you anew just when you were at your weakest?

Chapter 8

Goddess Brigit in her favourite guise, that of Macha of the Three Morrigna, felt the presence of the travellers in her beloved Armagh and, raising her spirit from the frame she inhabited, she launched skyward to hear what the wind would tell. Keening on the breeze came to her, cries of injustice and pain, women's voices and she shifted, invisible, to the men on horses to read their hearts. Goodly men, she found, gentle lovers of both women and horses, each carrying their own sorrow, burdened and blinded. She returned to her human form and waited for them by the roadside. As they came in sight, a metamorphosis occurred; the fey and beautiful, red haired woman transformed into a near toothless crone, wrapped in rags. Open sores wept on her face and clustered around her mouth, her nose half eaten. "Food, kind sirs" she crowed "to ease an old

woman, but throw it to me, it is the leprosy I have". Kevin who had, so far, been spared the sight of a leper, sat frozen in the saddle but the Smithy dismounted and moved to his pack horse. They had made good time on the road and would soon be in the Master's village near Dundalk where they could restock. "If only" he thought "some kindly traveller had found Maura and taken the time to help, she could have come back to me". He dropped a spare horse blanket on the ground and filled a small sack with dry bread, smoked fish, dried fruit and two clay pots filled with pea and mint pottage. He tossed a couple of small silver coins on the blanket. "God bless you, Lady" he said remounting and leading the horses on. "Thank you, Sir" replied the Celtic Goddess, "May you be blessed with a three fold vision for your kindness and may the sun shine on you." "That was well done" said Kevin to the Smithy, a bit ashamed of his own hesitation, "The prayer says: *"Oft, oft, goes Christ in the stranger's guise"* and that was a good deed. Neither man realised that they had just encountered a deity far older than Christianity.

Chapter 9

At ease in each other's company, they were good companions on the road. The Smithy noticed that Kevin seemed a little withdrawn and took it for nervousness as travel always held the threat of peril from thieves and lordlings looking for payment to pass. "My face is well known on the road" he said "so we won't be stopped and thieves will be looking for easier pickings than the likes of us". It didn't seem to lift Kevin's mood so the Smithy let it pass; he was not a man to pry. Their journey continued, uneventful, as they skirted Dublin and set out on the Great Highway towards Galway. They rode at a leisurely pace, finding a camping space early and taking turns to watch at night and it was then that the Goddess gave the Smithy the three fold vision she had promised him.

In his dream, the Smithy flew like an eagle, high above the house of stone and, with a rush, like wind through the hay, he found himself back in his eight year old body; slipping silently up the round stone steps of the Tower House where his father had been summoned, to see a Great Hall laid out before him. "What are you doing here, boy" his father said "I alone was summoned. Back down now before you are caught." But they both then heard the sound of steps on stone and could not tell if it came from above or below them. His father lifted the great tapestry near the staircase and, seeing a slight embrasure in the working of the stone, guided his son in with a gentle cuff on the head. "Be still, don't be seen. Wait until all is quiet and then go back down to the stable" he whispered, his fingers

digging in his son's shoulder for emphasis. The boy stood rigid with his back pressed against the cold stone and found that, through the wear in the warp and weft of the tapestry he could see his father striding towards the middle of the hall, the light of the fire and the tallow candles on the side wall lending a warm glow to one side of his features. The Old Master entered with two cups of ale. They took the measure of each other between sips. "I need a strong man with a closed mouth to help me with some work" said the Old Master "and feel that maybe it was providence that guided your steps to me at this time". "I am that man" replied his father simply, his lack of elaboration showing his strength of character. "I need not say that my reach is long, should whispers ever return to me?" "You need not say that, Lord." The Old Master drained his cup. "War parties are moving ever closer and I have stripped my home and need to store my treasures safely but I'm fearful my own men may be made to talk if I use them. In reward, I would give you a pack horse and a goodly supply of food besides to speed you on your way. Come, we have some heavy chests to move that will need two men to handle." The boy grew quickly bored as the men moved sacks and chests from the upper floor, stacking them near the fire in the great hall. The cold had entered his bones from leaning back against the stones and his stomach rumbled more than once, seeming loud in his enclosed space. Their moving done, the Old Master moved to the nearest candle bracket to the left of the fire, grabbing the candle from it and twisting the bracket to the left. A grating sound came from the fireplace. "Move that log stack from the left hand side" the Old Master instructed and his father did so noting that the left hand wall of the fireplace had pivoted slightly. The Old Master pushed the wall further and it gave way inwards, the firelight revealing the start of a tunnel. "The tunnel is high further in" said the Old Master "and leads to a storeroom." Each taking a candle, the men lifted the nearest chest and made for the tunnel entrance but his father's candle blew out at the threshold. "Wait" said the Old Master, "I have an oil lamp above". His father took the opportunity to lift the tapestry. "Go down now, quietly, son" he whispered and the boy obeyed, his hand brushing the curving wall to guide him safely.

The wind lifted him again and brought him to the smithy. He knew he had been brought through time as his old, familiar equipment was about him. He heard a sigh and a shuffling above him and the dream wind caught him and lifted him up through the beams. There was Kevin, speaking words of love to a woman laying prone beneath him and a shift in angle revealed the face of Deidre smiling up at her lover.

The wind carried him on upwards through the roof of the smithy and back towards the Tower House, this time depositing him on the upper floor, where he had never been before. There was his Maura, holding a crying Deidre in her arms, and his heart skipped at the sight of that pale, worn, kindly face. Maura bent over Deidre whispering intently: "Never mention his name again child. Hear me! Never. He will not last an hour, they will kill him." The Smithy stood, drinking in the sight of his beloved, while she comforted the girl. "It's early days, Deidre, you will not show for a couple of months yet. We must think what is best to do". Something distracted him, a shadow or a noise coming from the stairs, or else he had that automatic knowing that comes with dreams, but he realised, with dawning horror, that the Mistress had arrived and was lurking there. "Hush, Maura" he all but screamed "She is on the stair; she is listening." But he was not heard, he was an onlooker only on a scene that had already played out weeks before and Maura continued to pour out words of love, of loyalty and support that would reward her with a cruel death within a span of days.

Chapter 10

The Smithy awoke with a start on the hard ground. He stirred and stretched, rose and added some sticks to the fading fire, ringed with stones. Kevin hailed him from his spot near to the hobbled horses. "Get some sleep" said the Smithy "I will keep watch until dawn". He scrambled in his mind to remember his dream but realised that it was not fading, as most dreams will, but was imprinted there so he relaxed and composed himself as best he could and started to review what he had seen. First, the secret space. Why had the Old Master entrusted the sight of it to a stranger? The Smithy knew him as a cautious man. The answer came quickly. The Old Master would trust no-one outside his family with such a secret and a stranger was an ideal solution, fed and lied to and worked and then, what, a knife in the ribs? Oh, his poor father. The Smithy had come to love the Old Master, seeing him as a saviour and a surrogate and, whilst he had never warmed to the son, he had given the family his loyalty and the best of his work and effort. "But why did I not remember that night?" he thought, "through all these years?" He had no answer and no excuse to offer, excepting the fact he had been a young boy, traumatised by his father's disappearance who had accepted, unquestioning, the story that his father had moved on and might be back. He reviewed the events again now, with adult eyes. Why the fear that his son had followed him? Why had his father hid him, why the insistence on quiet? Why had his father seized an opportunity to get him safe away

as soon as he could? Either his father was in ignorance but didn't want him interrupting the man talk, or had a grain of suspicion that the Old Master might want him to perform some underhand work and wanted to get his son away or he had a fair suspicion there might be a trick involved but was secure enough in his own strength to feel he could handle the Old Master if needs be. One thing the Smithy did know. If the Old Master had known he was a witness to that work, he would have come creeping through the hay with soft words and a dagger, not an offer of shelter. The bile rose in his throat and he vomited, rising to rinse his mouth with ale before settling himself by the fire again. "So, it is clear" he thought "If the vision is true, Deidre found herself with child by Kevin and confided in Maura but was overheard and the Mistress schemed to take credit for the offspring, desperate for a male heir herself and in order to avoid shame to the family and that lump of a husband of hers would agree to anything she said anyway. If it is a true vision, the problem and the solution lies within it so I take it that Deidre never left the Tower House to stay with family but is held in that tunnel somewhere and that Maura was tricked into accompanying the Mistress on the road and was left there or else felt something amiss and left herself and was trying to get back to Deidre or to Kevin or me to give warning but her strength failed her." The Smithy was now beyond rage, his brain had tripped into a cold, reptilian mode, calculating options, manoeuvres and angles with swift logic but with no compassion; no mercy. The Smithy was now a dangerous man.

Chapter 11

The Smithy had one final test to see if his vision was true. As they broke fast the next morning, the Smithy held Kevin with his eyes and said: "Do you love Deidre?". Confusion showed in the boy's eyes, guilt and a glint of defiance. "I love her" he replied "But I am afeared she will forget me. What have I to offer her? She is far above me. It was wrong, I know but we couldn't help it." The Smithy weighed respective guilt with the cold scales of his brain but couldn't bring himself to condemn the youngsters. God knows, Deidre was a warm hearted girl and crying out for love in a cold place and what young man would be content with a village girl when the lovely Deidre was in view. Disaster had come from it but the Smithy was determined to save Deidre, for Maura's sake and for Kevin's and to wreck the plans of the Master and Mistress if he could. The boy obviously didn't know she was with child and the Smithy decided it would be safer if he didn't know the facts as yet; this was work for older and wiser heads. "Do you trust me, Kevin?" was his next question. "With my life" Kevin answered simply. "Well said. You cannot go back so I must find some

place for you along the road but, believe me, if there is breath in my body I will bring Deidre to you but you must be patient with her boy, she was born for better things and knows nothing of hard work so you must teach and encourage her. It will be some time before she is a proper helpmate to you.” “If she were with me, it is all I would wish for” said Kevin and the Smithy believed him.

By late afternoon they were at the O'More holding, a collection of paddocks, stable, smithy and round house located just to the south of the Great Highway. The Smithy was glad to see the familiar face of Seathan O'More striding to greet him. They had done business with each other for many years, each knowing the worth and honesty of the other and he and Kevin were soon welcomed and fed and Kevin was sent to bed down with the horses while the older men reviewed events around the fire with a jug of ale. The ongoing skirmishes between the Norman tribes within the pale and the Celtic lords to the south was reviewed and the Smithy updated O'More on the latest trends, including the news that there might soon be a decline in the need for quality grey horses and the reason for it, for which the southern horseman thanked him. The Smithy measured the man before him. As tall as himself but thin, not a peck on him, with a dry wit and an ironic view of life. “I am in need of your help, old friend”. “Ask away” replied O'More, refilling their cups and settling himself into a more comfortable position. “Kevin has pledged himself to a northern girl but there is commotion about it, the families are not happy and I'm afeared it will tip over into a feud. I am fond of the boy and I brought him along to see if I can settle him elsewhere before it all boils to a head.” “Horseman?” queried O'More. “Yes, trained by myself but also a blacksmith even better than myself. He has passed my abilities at the forge and can turn his hand to weapons, arrowheads and craft candle sconces and items of great delicacy as well as farm tools, bits, stirrups and horseshoes.” “Let me think on it” said O'More. “I will travel with you to Galway and send word to my brothers inland to bring up any block horses for you to look at on your return”. Rest for a day or two and primp up those fine chestnut horses so they are at their best for the Blakes and I'll arrange for cover here so I can ride with you with an easy mind.”

The Smithy slept deeply and awoke later than was his wont, rising to see Kevin and O'More working together at the forge. He saw this without rancour. A man was only as good as his word and Seathan obviously wanted to test Kevin's mettle for himself. He himself went to work on their horses, brushing the mud from them, cleaning and combing manes and tails.

They were soon on the road again and Seathan proved to be merry company, with plenty of tales to tell and the mood of the northern men was lifted and the road seemed short to them. Seathan led them off the Great Highway the next morning, heading north west. "We are going to see Barnabas McCahery at Esker" he said. "He is a freeman and a northerner from the lakes but he married local and settled here ten years ago. He has a smithy and was busy with work from the local lords and abbeys and had a good trade even out from Galway but a horse kicked him and stove in his ribs three months ago and he is in need of help with no son old enough to work the forge. I am thinking there will be more than enough work for the both of you, Kevin, even when he is back to himself."

Barnabas was a big friendly man who gave a loud "Halloo" to the arriving party. Introductions having been made and ale provided, Barnabas had his young brood carry out two long stools from the house and the men sat in the yard, enjoying the feel of the Noon sun on their faces. The injury to Barnabas was obvious; his right arm hung, largely unmoving, close to his body and even the act of sitting caused obvious discomfort. The children were then chased away in kindly fashion and the Smithy sat back and let Seathan put forward his proposition and vouch for young Kevin. Swiftly it was agreed that Kevin would start work at once on whatever orders were waiting and, as Barnabas was providing the ore and the smithy and Kevin the labour, profits would be split in equal measure between them until such time as they were both on their feet, Kevin financially and Barnabas physically, when they would share the costs, work and profit in equal measure. Upon hearing that Kevin had a wife, Barnabas offered him a house that was within his holding, standing in a small field and a short distance from the forge. "It is but one room with barn attached" said Barnabas "but it is stone built, not of mud and wattle in a rectangle rather than a circle and has a fireplace within and the land needs to be broken but is fenced in stone and on a slight slope and should prove fertile and easy to drain". Kevin and the Smithy went to inspect the house together. "I was born on a farm" said Kevin "and I can make something of this soon enough, although the land seems poorer than you are wont to find in the north. The house needs cleaning and airing out and the thatch needs work in one corner but the core is sound; it should be warm". The Smithy gave Kevin some silver with which to pay Barnabas his initial rent for the house and land and with which to buy some seed stock and food and gave the pack horse to Kevin with most of the remaining supplies. He was no longer too mindful of his Master's goods or his Master's silver and, knowing Modan's laziness, he knew the Master

would not notice the loss. He also knew that Kevin could make most else of what was needed. Kevin was surprised but did not object, knowing the worth of the start the Smithy was giving him. Kevin caught his arm as he was leaving: "Maybe I should come back with you. I might need to speak to Deidre to convince her to come?" "Trust in me, son" said the Smithy. "I will be back to see you after Easter when the Master goes to Clandeboye and she will be with me, never fear, now trust me and start making a home for her."

Chapter 12

The trip to the walled city of the twelve tribes was uneventful. The Blakes were satisfied with the chestnut horses, the Master's gold was handed over and the trip back to O'Mores went smoothly, aided by less rain and more sunshine than they had seen for many a day. The Smithy thanked Seathan again for all his help with Kevin, knowing that a stranger would not have been accepted so readily without the weight of Seathan's goodwill behind him. They were standing by the O'More paddock inspecting two black horses that had been found for him: one middling mare and a good looking stallion of two years with a single dash of white on his forehead. The Smithy accepted the price without question and Seathan noted the lack of fire and enthusiasm. Negotiation was high drama, to be played out and enjoyed by both parties, and the Smithy's calm acceptance showed his level of inner preoccupation. "I'm thinking" Seathan said "that, having rescued Kevin and his wife from this feud that you might end up embroiled in it all the same, if the families realise you had a hand in moving them on?" "It might be so" admitted the Smithy who had not, until that point, a thought for himself, only for the task he needed to fulfil. "Well, man, make your home here if you wish. The plagues and famines have taken too many of our folk in recent years along with the draw of the big towns and there is nowhere better to lose yourself than in the marshes of the midlands. You need not be here up at the highway where your face may become known. We have herds of horses on the hard ground with causeways to them between the marshland and more than one snug, dry Crannog lying empty. There is a rare beauty and peace to be found in these midland fens. You love Kevin like a son, that is clear and you can visit him between times to see how they are faring. Think on it." "I will do so Seathan" promised the Smithy and there was a warm parting between the two men.

Chapter 13

“Kevin died of a fever on the road” the Smithy lied glibly. “I thought you were longer than was usual” replied the Master, happy with his gold. “I had the monks bury him and left some coin for prayers to be said for him”. The Master looked a little sour at the news but let it pass. “We will set out for Clandeboye four days hence” the Master announced “in full troop and all riding spotted horses to better enhance the block herd we are bringing to O’Neill”. “The Mistress does not miss a trick” thought the Smithy, itching to take a log from the fireplace and stove the Master’s head in with it. “The summer coats are through on the O’Neill herd, Lord, and they are looking at their best. I will make all arrangements”. “Only four days, thank God” thought the Smithy, “Any longer and I don’t think my temper would hold”. He made a bundle of his best clothes, reins, tools and brushes and picked some of Kevin’s favourite implements from the smithy and cursed the four days which seemed to drag into eternity.

He saw the procession off early morning on the final day: the Master in his jewelled finery and the Mistress in hers “With a bolster shoved up her tunic, no doubt” thought the Smithy sourly. The stallions followed and then a cart with provisions followed on and finally a line of boys, leading the block mares, the boys in their best garb and on their best behaviour. Two riders rode guard, one at the head and one at the tail of the column. He gave a final wave to Eoin, who was leading the grey mares and made for the Tower House. Luck was with him as Cook announced that she and Brigid were making the most of the fine weather and were heading for the woods to forage for mushrooms and wild herbs. The kitchen staff on the ground floor were the last hurdle the Smithy had been unsure how to negotiate: whether to confide in the Cook, which might prove dangerous for her, or whether to bluster if his movements were questioned. He called the handful of remaining boys to him, dishing out provender to last the day. “The kitchen is closed” he announced “and you are to split in two, half of you in the high valley working on helping shed the rest of those winter coats and you three down to the fields to weed and scare the birds from the early seed. I don’t want to see you back around here before dark, hear me now”. The Smithy had planned to wait a day until the riders were well on their way but knew this was an opportunity that could not be missed.

Chapter 14

With three good pitch torches to help light his way, the Smithy strode to the Great Hall. The candle sconce twisted with ease and the Smithy lit one torch from the still smouldering fire and entered the secret doorway, leaving the other two leaning on the fireplace. A long, thin passageway was unveiled to him, with stone flooring, following the line of the great hall without. He saw a simple block and chain mechanism on the wall which operated the fireplace door. It was a matter of moments until he reached the end of the corridor and found a barred, heavy wooden door to his right. Lifting the beam with one hand, he set it aside and pulled the door open. Familiar barnyard smells assaulted his nose, that of sweat, urine and excrement. To his right, by the doorway, he saw a large pitcher of ale and a stack of foodstuff. To his left was shelving with various chests and goods stacked. Two of the walls seemed hewn out of bare rock whilst the others were of stone and there was a slightly raised wooden platform or dais taking up the middle of the room. On there a woman lay curled, asleep he thought, until the reflection from the torch showed her eyes were open. "Dear God" he thought, "Has she gone mad?" This he hadn't planned for. He had little knowledge of women but he did of horses and he rammed the torch into a sconce in the right hand wall and instinctively treated her as he would a frightened mare. He called her name gently, over and over, not crowding her, giving her space and time and finally she responded. Letting out a screech she leapt for the open door. "Ah, the bolt" he thought "If I don't catch her she will be down those stairs and out on the lane until her legs give way." He caught her gently but firmly and took her blows as she pounded on his chest, shouting incoherently. The impulse faded from her then and he cradled her gently, saying she was safe, that all was well, that he was here to free her. "Smithy" she cried "Oh, thank God. I thought I was going to die in here". "No child" he said, "Now come with me. They are away delivering horses so you have nothing to fear". He didn't have to elaborate on who "they" were. Taking the torch from the wall bracket, he led her out of the dark place and up to her old, familiar living quarters. "Lay on the bed and rest a while" he instructed. With more light, he could see that she was dirty and dusty and dreadfully pale and also that she was well on with child, seven months or so, unless she looked more advanced because of her small frame. Her hands and forearms were scratched and bruised, no doubt from battering at the stout door of her prison. He brought her some spiced wine to drink and told her that Kevin was waiting. He told her of Esker and the wee house and the work Kevin had obtained in the smithy. He told her he

would take her to him, if she wished it. Deidre lay back on the bed and cried tears of relief. "Where is Maura?" she asked suddenly, "She should come with us". "She died of the cold this winter, Lady, or she would be by your side now. You know she was not strong." This elicited more tears from Deidre and the Smithy stroked her hair making soothing sounds until the storm passed, making a mental note to tell Kevin not to relay the circumstances of Maura's death until he felt Deidre was strong enough to hear it, if ever. He didn't want guilt to mar a new beginning. Where once it seemed that time had panned out endlessly, now it seemed to march and he had thinking to do. He had planned for them to ride to Galway but he could see she was in no fit state to do so. He had lots to decide and he couldn't let her fall back into apathy. "Listen to me, Deidre. We have to be on the road within a few hours and there is work to be done so first I'm going to bring you warm water from the kitchen so you can wash yourself and then get a chest together with your things, but you are going to a peasant's cottage, mind, so no satins or silks or costly dyes, just good plain wool and linen clothing and shoes and warm cloaks and leather belts and ties." He raced down the stairs and soon returned with a basin of water and a drying cloth. Deidre noticed that he had taken the time to sprinkle the water with lavender and this small kindness brought tears to her eyes. The Smithy rummaged through the Master's store of clothes, bringing forth some plain linen short tunics and hose. "Pack those for Kevin but wear some yourself, if you would Lady. A woman will be noticed on the road so you had better be seen as a boy for the first part of your journey at least. I will find you a hat to wear."

He left her then and returned to the courtyard. He decided on the small hay wain with its high wattle woven sides and back and two great wheels, it was sturdy but lightweight and less likely to get bogged down on the road and would be a handy addition to Kevin's barn. Pray God the fine weather held but he added a wax soaked cover for the wagon in case of rain. He hitched up a cart horse and tied a spare horse to the rear, giving them oat bags to keep them occupied, Lining the edges of the cart with hay, he saw he had a solid space within which could be filled with goods and where Deidre could both hide and rest. He packed ale barrels, flour and salt and stuffed two cooking pots with a store of dried food, placing them along one side of the cart and, spritely, caught a cock and four hens which he placed in separate wicker cages. Hens were rare and valuable livestock on an Irish medieval farm.

He was pleased to see that Deidre was washed, dressed and packed upon his return. Placed beside her chest was Maura's sewing box and it

brought a lump to the Smithy's throat to see it there. He envisioned Deidre, sewing by her own fireside with thoughts of Maura running through her mind, in future years. He seized the flock mattress on the bed and, guiding it down the circular stairs, lined the bottom of the cart with it. On his next trip he slotted in the chest and sewing box beneath the protesting poultry and ran up again to the top floor. "Two things more, lady. You are a married woman now so go to your mother's things and choose some plain hair cloths or wimples and then find the best, fur lined cloaks you can. You may not be able to wear them, but they will make for warm bedding. I have one more thing to do; I will return to you soon. Oh, and stack those rush woven mats and roll them if you can". He was thinking of the dry packed earth of the little cottage she would soon inhabit. The mats would fit nicely there and lift the place a little. He was also keeping her busy. "My hair", she said "It is hopelessly matted" turning to show him a tangle of dark wet hair. "I'll have to cut it" he said: "We don't have the time for anything else, but don't worry, it will be back past your shoulders come autumn". He grabbed the Mistresses shear scissors and cut her hair straight across so it lay just below her ears. "Now you look the part of a fine farm boy" the Smithy quipped and was rewarded by a ghost of a smile which he took as a good sign.

Chapter 15

He returned to the Great Hall and threw Deidre's shorn tresses in the fire and then lit the second and third pitch torches, leaving one in the secret hallway and the second to light up the storeroom. He examined the shelves and pulled out a large roll of linen and spread it flat on the ground. Onto it he piled pewter plates and cups, tallow and wax candles, spoons and a stack of good Castile soap. He placed the Mistresses herb chest on the pile and then folded and added some good calfskin for shoes and some well woven wool cloth. Next he opened two coffers, one smaller, one larger, filled with Gold Nobles and silver coin respectively. He filled two cloth bags with silver, one for himself, careful to take only what he felt was his due for his years of service, which he tied to his belt and the other he added to the pile. He then deftly tied the linen ends together to form a bundle for Deidre and Kevin. It wasn't the dowry she deserved but it would be a good start for them, he knew, better than most could dream of. He spilled the ale and split the dry food, crumbling some on the ground and balancing the rest on top of the bundle. The cart would mean a slower journey and he didn't want them to see the untouched food and know how many days headstart Deidre had. With luck and fine weather, they would be past Dublin and on the Great Highway before the alarm was sounded

here and, it not being harvest season, the loss of the cart might not be noticed for some time.

He surveyed the room and kicked the end of the dais. It moved slightly and he saw it was hinged to one side. With little effort he lifted it till it fell back resting on the bare rock. The black maw of a large gaping hole it uncovered answered his final question. His father lay down there. He turned and grabbed a handful of silver, letting the coins fall and knew, by the delay before sounding, that the hole was deep; too deep to attempt to retrieve his father's bones. Was it a stab in the dark or a push and a long fall? He would never know. He knelt and said a prayer by his father's grave.

His eyes lit on a gold free standing crucifix stored on a shelf, set with semi-precious stones it glittered and gave off a warm glow, reflecting the torch light. The Smithy remembered it being put on display whenever a travelling Holy Man would visit the Tower House and say Mass for the household. On impulse, he took it and kissed it and let it drop into the hole. In a less Christian gesture he grabbed the smaller chest and fired that into the hole also, coins flying. "So much for your Gold Nobles, Master" he thought, "Now find them if you can." He knew that gold was of no use to the young couple and that questions would be asked if they traded with it but the Master would assume that Deidre had taken the chest and hopefully would be looking at options other than a peasant's cottage in Galway upon his return. He lowered the boards again, carefully, ensuring the dais returned to its original position.

His anger tempted him to fire the Tower House before he left but thoughts of his stable boys, the Cook and the surrounding peasant farmers stayed his hand. There were many people reliant on the workings of the house and he could not do damage to them. The trade, would carry on for a space of years, he knew, in the well-ordered way he had managed it, but would then, inevitably, begin to fail in quality and design and he knew in his heart that he and Deidre were leaving an accursed and barren house, doomed to fall.

The Soldier (16th/17th Century)

Chapter 1

Henry, 5th Baron of Leyton awoke in the Autumn of 1598 with a sense of purpose. Many things had been mulling in his mind over the previous months but now he felt in a position to move forward and he asked his youngest son to ride out with him that day to review the Estate.

They were a minor noble family and three generations lived together in harmony in a rambling structure, mostly still medieval manor house with a new Tudor frontage providing a couple of grand reception rooms and guest bedrooms which then gave way to a medieval vaulted great hall where the family lived day to day and a warren of multi purpose side rooms and a courtyard with kitchen block, stables and warehouses. Henry had not been cursed with ambition and had largely avoided the very real perils and intrigues of Tudor Court life, marrying the only child of a rich merchant who traded in wool and cloth with the Low Countries. Marriage to Alice had enabled the modern Tudor wing to be added to the home and, some years later, had brought the added inheritance of property in London and a shipping and business venture which was being kept in good order by his eldest son, Thomas. The additional revenue generated was enabling Henry to improve and consolidate his Estate, which was largely marsh to the west and south west, by purchasing adjacent prime woodland and farming land where possible.

Alice had brought more than money with the match. Whilst she had not been highly educated, Alice was a warm hearted and intelligent woman all the same and had given Henry two sons who had survived to adulthood, Thomas and Francis, who had been brought up in a happy and loving environment. When prudent matches had been made for the two boys, Alice had welcomed the two new women into the household without jealousy and treated them like daughters, ensuring the harmony continued with the next generation and, for a measure of years, life had been good to the family and time had passed with little disruption apart from a prudent change of religion to help weather the theological storms of the times and to avoid the taxes imposed on English Catholics.

However, no-one in life is without their share of trials and sorrow had hit some three years earlier when a bout of the sweating sickness had carried away Alice and the entire family of Francis, his wife and three daughters, in one cursed week. Henry had kept a keen eye on his sorrowing son ever since and now was determined to help move him forward, one way or another.

So Henry and Francis rode out together that fresh autumn morning, heading down the Lea valley ostensibly to check on the condition of the bridges that forded the three rivers which lay within their boundary. The Fillebrook and the River Holt were minor rivers and it was the tidal River Lea which was responsible for the marshes which lay along their southwestern border and which needed to be monitored most as Henry had a responsibility to ensure that the roads and bridges were kept operational for travellers. Henry decided to take the bull by the horns. "I asked you with me today, Francis, as I think it is time to look to your future" Henry began. "Now I loved your wife Mary like a daughter and I still feel the gap left by your girls but we are men and the time for mourning has passed so I feel the need to ask you how I can help you rebuild. I am happy to arrange another match for you, if that is what you wish?"

"No, father" replied Francis. "You know I am no coward but all the heart I had in me I gave to my family and, with their passing, I have no desire to marry again. Thomas has enough sons to ensure the family line and I wish him well but I have been restless of late, which you may have noticed?"

"I did, son, which is why I have two options for you to consider; one safe, one more dangerous. You can go into the trade alongside your brother if you care to and, perhaps, travel will help to heal your wounds. You could be our representative in the Low Countries. The alternative is more dangerous but possibly more lucrative for the family. Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, is raising men for the wars in Ireland and, having played here more than once with you both as a boy, has written to see if our family will support him in his endeavour."

"An Estate for us in Ireland, to match the one here; that would be a prize" speculated Francis "And I am more of a natural soldier so the latter option would suit me better, I am thinking."

Henry pulled his horse to a stop at the bridge at the end of Marsh Lane. Both men dismounted and, having checked its condition, settled

themselves along the bank of the river. "Having myself experienced the treachery of Court life, I kept both my sons away from it" Henry began: "But, if you are to embark upon this Irish quest there are things you should know and these are things dangerous to talk about which is why we have ridden to the solitude of the Leyton marshes today. What I tell you, you must always keep in mind but never repeat." Francis nodded his understanding.

Chapter 2

"It starts with King Henry VIII. Now you will know that he had Mary Boleyn as a mistress some years before taking her sister Queen Anne to wife. Our good Queen Bess took Mary's daughter, Catherine Carey, to be her chief Lady of the Bedchamber and you might well think it was solely due to the fact that Catherine Carey was her first cousin. But there is more to this as Catherine, Lady Knollys, was rumoured to be the illegitimate daughter of Henry VIII by Mary Boleyn and, therefore, would also have been half-sister to our Queen, a far closer association. I know this is true and more than rumour as I saw Lady Knollys myself and she was the spit of Henry VIII and all who were at Court and saw her knew without doubt who her father must have been. So, now, you are starting to see the intrigue within the royal court. Our good Queen Bess is following the advice of keeping your friends close but your enemies closer."

"I'm starting to understand father" began Francis. "So when Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester and the Queen's favourite for many years married Catherine Carey's daughter, it was not just female jealousy that had our Queen banish them from Court?"

"Exactly, my son. The Queen is childless and is now a goodly age and the great houses are manoeuvring towards the succession and the succession seems to be heading for the illegitimate line of Henry VIII via Mary Boleyn, the prime candidate being Catherine's grandson, Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, twice related to our Queen: a cousin via the Boleyns and thus related to the powerful Howard family and, also, a great grandson of Henry VIII, although illegitimate. The Queen knew full well that Robert Dudley was deserting the setting sun for the rising star and felt it keenly."

Francis pondered this information. "Now his character becomes clear, father. Robert Devereux seemed to have that sense of entitlement from

an early age. He was always proud and headstrong and rash, even when we played together as children whenever they stayed at Wanstead Hall.”

“Now you see the danger you will be facing” began Henry, “for, ever since he led our forces in the capture of Cádiz three years ago he has been the darling of London and feted wherever he goes and I deem he is now as he has always been, vain and rash in his behaviour. But he has a match in our Queen. Almost since birth she has been tossed from one danger to another. She was imprisoned and close to death at the hands of her own sister and has survived many plots and conspiracies. My feeling is she will be content to let him rule, rather than a Scot, after her death but my fear is he will not have the good sense and patience to wait for the prize to drop into his lap. I feel she has given him Ireland to conquer to keep him occupied and at a goodly distance.”

“So, father, I need to pledge myself to Essex and go to Ireland with one eye on gaining a foothold there for ourselves, whilst avoiding the rash ambitions of my Commander in Chief?”

“I couldn’t put it better myself but it will not be an easy task and you will have to grasp any opportunities” said Henry “so, if you wish to try for it I will equip you with plenty of coin and trusty men who will answer to you first and foremost to aid you in your quest.”

Chapter 3

So it was that Henry, Baron Leyton was able to write and offer Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex a very generous fifty bowmen and some five score of foot soldiers some with muskets, with a small amount of pikemen, along with camp servants (who would fight when needed) and supplies, together with twenty horsemen headed by his second son, Francis and all fully equipped for war for his Irish campaign. In doing so, he was following the orders of his Good Queen Bess, paying homage to a potential future King and scheming to further his family’s fortunes in another country. Francis was given his own cook and pack horses with supplies and told by Henry, an old campaigner, to remain tight knit with his own troops, to look after themselves and not to get caught up with the mass of soldiery. Francis had three trusted veterans of war from his father’s estate to train the troops to fighting readiness and the family steward, a canny Welsh man of middling years called Bran, who had been part of the Essex household since Francis was a boy and who could give his son good on

the spot advice was also enlisted. They had their own family Council of War before leaving with Bran and the three veterans present.

Henry outlined that the war with the Irish had been ongoing since 1593 with the Irish lords now united under Hugh O'Neill, Lord of Tyrone, who had originally looked to the English to underpin his reign before switching allegiance back to his fellow countrymen. Of late, the Irish had gained the upper hand with numerous victories over the English forces in the Ulster region including the capture of Blackwater Fort in Armagh in 1595 and the Battle of the Yellow Ford in 1598 when a force of 4,000 English were routed by the Irish with over 1,500 killed. Henry did not need to further emphasise the need for caution in their affairs. He stated that one of his merchant ships had been re-routed to Chester with funds in hand in order that he could keep his contingent of men supplied but emphasised that it was vital that Francis should not be hemmed in inland but try and secure a posting along the eastern Irish coast where messengers could easily be sent and Henry could ensure proper resupply of food, weapons and reinforcements to his son.

The troop arrived in the spring of 1599 to a chaotic and crowded Dublin and Bran and Francis soon perceived trouble in the making as promised ships and supplies for the 16,000 men mobilised were awaited and not forthcoming. Francis saw the hand of the Queen in this or that of her wily advisers the Cecils, insecure with the adulation shown to Essex by the Cádiz victory, it seemed that they determined to undermine the possibility of further Essex success in Ireland. The Earl himself behaved no better. Immediately upon arrival in Ireland he knighted over thirty men, obviously looking to gain their support in arms for ventures other than in Ireland. As both he and his father had predicted, it looked as if Robert Devereux would not be content to wait for the crown of England. The need to distance himself from this treasonous behaviour was apparent and an opportunity presented itself early on when an urgent call came in around the need to relieve the garrison at Green Castle in County Down. Catching a discrete nod from Bran, Francis immediately offered to take his men north and man the fortifications and Essex, who had no wish to risk his men in the dangerous north without adequate supply lines, warmly accepted his old playmate's offer and then returned to his plans to subdue and garrison the south of the country before turning north to tackle O'Neill on his home ground.

It was not without trepidation that the party ventured north past Dundalk and on to Newry where they then turned south east and followed the

northern Carlingford coastline, skirting the wooded foothills of the Mourne mountains and fording the White Water River but they were somewhat reassured when they viewed their new garrison home. It had been manned by a detachment of twenty men from the larger Carlingford Castle visible across the Lough and they were more than happy to hand the entire structure over to Francis and his men. The castle was a fair sized, three storied structure surrounded by a curtain wall with corner towers and a ditch, raised on a small mott on a flat stretch of land, giving panoramic views all around them. Francis saw immediately that they would not be easily surprised; the countryside around them being devoid of trees and level. The river and the Lough surrounded them on three sides so the place was naturally defended and the Mourne mountain range rose majestically in the distance. The place was filthy and the first order of the day was to see it properly cleansed. The rotting heads of Irish enemies had been placed on spikes around the curtain wall and Francis, with an eye to winning Irish hearts and minds, began by having some of his men ride back to a monastic settlement they had passed on the road from Newry and ensuring the remains were given a Christian burial. A permanent watch with horses was set near the only bridge across the river so that the bridge could be fired if the enemy were spotted. A watch was also set on the curtain wall facing Carlingford Castle so warning beacons could be seen or lit in time of need. The nearest settlement to the East was the fishing village of Cill Chaoil but there were very few native Irish in the area and, after six years of war, supplies were scarce so Francis ensured that some of his spare foodstuff was distributed via the nearby church of St. Colman Del Mourne and no-one who asked for food at the gate was turned away empty handed. Thus, Francis, with an eye to a family holding, sought to stand out from his fellow Englishmen and, sure enough, word was spread amongst the Irish of this English Lord who fed the people and buried the war dead with due honour. A regular chain of supply was provided by Henry via Chester and Francis also sent provisions across to Carlingford Castle but the few Irish, mostly priests and monks looking for alms, who were allowed within the walls of Green Castle saw an orderly house with battle ready soldiers all about and well maintained defences. The garrison never lost sight of the fact that they were but a few days march from Armagh and the front line of the war with O'Neill.

Chapter 4

However, anticipated hostilities never materialised. The supply chain from the Queen to Essex never materialising and having lost thousands

of his soldiers to dysentery and typhoid within the first few months, Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex conducted a parlay with Hugh O'Neill offering generous terms and fled back to England. Following his father's instructions, Francis settled into Green Castle to wait upon future events and was kept clear of association with Essex who led an abortive coup against Elizabeth in 1601 and was executed for treason along with many bright, young noblemen of his time whom he had led to ruin.

The war in Ireland was taken over by George Carew and, with the aid of Charles Blount, 8th Baron Mountjoy, employed divide and rule tactics amongst the Irish nobles and a scorched earth policy which undermined Irish opposition and led to a ceasefire and the Treaty of Mellifont in 1603 where the Irish nobles were allowed to keep their lands but had to give up their troops, titles and independence and swear allegiance to the English Crown, now headed by King James I. Famine stalked Ulster in 1602 and 1603 but Francis was supported with supplies by his brother Thomas, his father Henry having succumbed to a bout of fever in 1601 and, while he was sometimes restless, Francis reminded himself of the need for patience in affairs of the world. Queen Elizabeth I had died in March 1603 and Francis often pondered that, if Robert Devereux had held his patience for just two more years, he could have gained all that he sought. So Francis waited and, whilst assisting the English Lords with detachments of troops, also saw to it that the Irish around him did not lack for bread or pottage and, slowly, word spread through the tribes that the English Lord at Green Castle was somewhat different from his contemporaries.

In 1605 the new Lord Deputy of Ireland, Sir Arthur Chichester, began a campaign to undermine the Irish nobles further by allotting freehold land in Ulster to a rival Chieftain, O'Kane, in order to undermine the leadership and finances of Hugh O'Neill and his old allies. This precipitated the Flight of the Earls, where the cream of Irish leadership sailed for Europe from Rathmullan in September 1607, never to return, thus paving the way for the plantation of Ulster.

And it was in March 1608 that Francis received a most unusual delegation at his garrison in Green Castle. It was a weary band of Irish women and children and he received them in the Main Hall. Bran, the Steward, had admitted them as he had spotted, by their ability to converse in English and mode of dress and items of jewellery and in their general bearing, that these were somewhat out of the ordinary visitors and this soon proved to be the case. They were a collection of families, around twenty in all, who had been left behind with the Flight of the Earls and

who, hearing that the Lord of Green Castle was considered a kindly man who, moreover, had regular resupply from ships that anchored in Carlingford, had decided to throw themselves upon his mercy in an attempt to reach their husbands and kinsmen on the Continent. They were tired and tangled and weary from their journey and Francis had the long table filled with food for the children and moved a couple of long stools to the fire so the women could sit and warm themselves in comfort. They were Maguire and O'Neill clanswomen and needed help to reach Northern France in order to reconnect with their kin and who, despite their desperation, couched their request with dignity.

Asking Bran to see to their comfort and security, Francis undertook to give them an answer the following day and sat back in his chair by the fire to consider the matter. Unbidden, the image of his long dead wife, Mary and the faces of his three beloved girls, Anne, Madge and Kate, came to mind. Thirteen long years he had now been without them but he knew that, if they had still been living, he would have travelled to the ends of the earth to be with them and he resolved then and there to help the families, the only question being how to do so in discrete fashion. The families were advised accordingly the next day and told that the next supply ship was due within six weeks. In the interim, Francis ensured the party were well fed and rested and, in return, the party kept a low profile, even within the garrison walls. Bran and Francis decided that now was the time for Thomas to go into action and petition the King for an allocation of land in Ireland and it was decided that Bran would accompany the women and children to Normandy and then direct the ship back to Essex in order to mobilise Thomas. Francis had grown to love the Mourne area but had little hope that his family would be given Green Castle; them being minor noblemen and the garrison being of strategic importance and a prize jewel on the eastern coast. He was also glad that he had built a small jetty in the long years of waiting to facilitate loading and unloading as it made for a swift departure with respect to his Irish guests and he watched the women and children heading for the ship from the curtain wall when their time came to depart and missed the noise and play of the children after they had gone. He had given some coin to Bran, who was to divide it between the families upon their arrival in France after procuring the services of a guide of good reputation who could assist them with searching for their families.

Francis had another year to wait before finding out whether his years of toil had been successful but, in early summer of the following year, the familiar figure of Bran was seen striding along the jetty and the long wait

was over. The family had been granted a fairly large allocation of land to the North West. Bran unrolled a surprisingly detailed map of Ulster with their portion marked out in red ink. "It is mostly mountainous" Bran commented "but there is woodland and rivers with some fair grazing land and a couple of valleys that might prove of interest." Another surprise was the sight of his nephew, Henry, the third son of Thomas, who had been chosen to take up residence in the Irish holding, along with his wife and two children who refused to be left behind. It was good to be amongst family again and to properly catch up on all the news from Essex but it was only a space of days before a party of twenty well armed men set out to explore their new holdings. They made their way past Newry and Armagh and, crossing the Blackwater Ford, made for the foothills of the mountains and started to explore their territory for a good place to start a settlement. It was tough going for the land was undulating and there were no roads to speak of, just some rough paths that sometimes led them to the middle of nowhere but they slowly worked their way west and then north around the mountains and it was on a cold and drizzling day, sullen with cloud, when Francis was huddled by a meagre fire and just starting to give up hope of finding anywhere suitable to live at all that Henry and Bran arrived back at camp, all excitement, with tales of a fertile valley with Norman castle and stout Norman walls.

The next morning saw the whole party at the valley mouth examining the scattered remains of what had once been a defensive wall and, passing on through, it was as if nature had decided to smile on them and the sun shone through the clouds highlighting a long valley with a river running through it; good land which had obviously been farmed in the past and a collection of stone buildings and farm ruins. Rising on the west side of the valley around half way in was a three storied structure enclosed by a defensive wall with a stone bridge beside it linking both sides of the river. Francis was stunned. "It is as if it was made for us and then left for us to find" he said. They split into two parties and spent the day exploring the valley and could find no fault with it. The surrounding hills were a natural defence, some of the farms could be repaired with minimal work and there was even a smithy in good order in the lower valley. They made camp early afternoon inside the defensive wall and determined to explore the keep the following morning.

They got a good fire going and settled around it and were just warming some pottage when steps were heard on the bridge and a man and woman stepped into the enclosing stone circle with an Irish greeting on their lips. Francis responded in kind and then switched to English and the

strangers switched also to use the English tongue. They introduced themselves as Ned and Nemon, husband and wife and asked to share the fire in exchange for which they would share some of the rabbits they had caught. Henry opened his mouth to speak and, fearing he would say something out of place, received a quick but painful kick on the ankle from his uncle, who proceeded to welcome the couple to the group with every courtesy. Three rabbits were quickly skinned and placed on makeshift skewers over the fire and, whilst they waited for the meat to roast, the pottage was shared with the two strangers and Francis introduced himself and gradually introduced the fact that his family had been allocated this valley and some land about in which to settle and waited to see what reaction this news would elicit. He was surprised at the response. "So would you be the man who headed the garrison out at Green Castle?" queried Nemon. "I am" replied Francis, calmly. "So you would be the man who sheltered the Maguires and the O'Neills and saw them safe to their families in France?" queried Ned. Francis nodded his assent, masking his surprise. "So, you would be the man who fed the people in the famine years." stated Nemon. "My blessings go with thee, for that was a kindly deed". "I am a rough soldier, Lady" responded Francis, somewhat abashed "but I thank you for your blessing". Ned turned out to be great company. He was a small man, well on in years but he moved like a young man and his dark eyes sparkled with merriment. He regaled the party with stories of the Little People and their tricks on humans. The Essex men responded with tales of Black Shuck, a demon dog said to roam the fens and riverways of East Anglia and Essex and the troublesome elf Robin Goodfellow. As the fire died so did the talk and everyone settled down to sleep except Francis who lay still but undertook to stay awake, being a cautious man. But he must have dozed at some point as there was no sign of Ned or Nemon the next morning, although another three dead rabbits had been left for them as a thank you for their courtesy.

The stone keep was examined that morning and found to be an adequate place to live with little work and, whilst a stew of rabbit was being prepared, Francis took young Henry for a walk in the valley. "Did you learn anything from the meeting with the Irish last night?" queried Francis.

"I think so, Uncle" replied Henry. "News of your good deeds has carried quite a distance and I think you are telling me to rule over the Irish kindly as it may pay dividends?"

“They have strict laws of hospitality” said Francis. “If you use one of those cottage buildings in the lower valley as a place of shelter and offer food and a warm nights rest to any who seek it and see them on the road the next day with pottage, cheese or bread to help them on their journey and deal with them fairly, you will be doing more to keep the family land secure than you would by building the biggest wall or castle in the country. Never forget that the Irish have been walking these lands for centuries and, although this valley looks nearly unassailable, they may know of paths up and down these sheer walls that we will never find. That couple last night, for instance. We saw no sign of them at all but up they stepped as if out of nowhere. They had probably been watching us for hours. Never forget that we will always be outnumbered here and maybe your small acts of kindness may save our holding here in future years and, regardless, as a soldier I know that if it comes to be that a man has to fight, he fights much better with a clear conscience.”

Chapter 5

So Bran and Henry, along with half of the men and most of the provisions, were left in the valley to start the work of cleaning, clearing, repairing and planning whilst Francis returned to Green Castle and began preparations to handover the garrison. Hearing of the valley, near thirty of the soldiers decided to move inland with Henry and try their luck in Ireland and the remainder were paid off and made their way to the Pale to find their way home, no ship being due to dock. A deputation from Carlingford Castle rowed across the Lough and took command of Green Castle so Francis was spared the sight of the new owner, who was mostly useless but had a fine leg, a pretty face and a dry wit which had pleased King James immensely.

Francis and his soldiers slowly conveyed Henry’s family and their remaining goods and supplies towards the valley that would be their new home and they settled into a rural routine fairly quickly. Their nearest port was now Derry to the north and, in time, the married soldiers brought their families over to live and the single men met local women and all were given a good allocation of farmstead but the land in the valley was mostly kept for the family.

Francis was now well past forty years and it had been a life of two halves: the first as a young husband and father amidst the familiar setting of his childhood home in Essex; the second as a soldier and adventurer in a strange land that he had come to love. He had aged well and was in good

health, tall and straight with a shock of curly grey hair and calm, steady gaze and the valley seemed to have a healing effect on him emotionally and physically. His eyes started to follow one of the maids who had been brought from England to help care for Henry's children and, as time passed, his interest grew rather than waned and was returned by the lady in question so he found himself, unexpectedly, embarking upon a third stage of life that he had never anticipated.

The lady in question, Joan, was an English Catholic and asked to be married in the Catholic Church. Francis had no issue with this as he had actually been baptised a Catholic with his father later converting the family to Protestantism for convenience rather than from conviction. Joan was also wise enough to know that her soon to be former mistress would have difficulty in now calling her sister or aunt and, being a practical woman, discussed the issue with Francis early on. So the couple saddled some sturdy ponies and set off to try and find a place outside the valley in which they could settle and they fixed upon land further south at the foothills of the mountains, near to two rivers. It had standing stones from the elder days and an ancient air of calm about it which reminded Francis of the valley and his old comrades, once the harvest was in, toiled together to build him a sturdy, stone, four roomed cottage with barn and stable alongside in which to start his married life and his nephew granted him a freehold of two hundred acres, some coin, supplies and livestock so, along with some independent means courtesy of his departed father, the couple had a goodly start.

Perhaps, in part, because he had known huge loss, Francis really savoured married life with Joan, who presented him with two sons in quick succession. Bran, now an old man and starting to fail, came to live with them and was looked after like a king. It was a peaceful and orderly house but there was a lot of work to be done building up a farm from scratch and the days were busy with clearing fields for ploughing and fencing in fields and pasture. There were many people on the road displaced by the war or by the plantation that was now underway in Ulster and Francis was as generous as ever with the few people who found their way to his isolated farm. All comers were given an Irish welcome and a bed of sweet hay in the barn and some days work to give them a chance to rest and recoup with three good meals a day and then coin for their labour and supplies to speed them on their way. Anyone who stood out in terms of work and character was invited to stay with an agreement that they could have their own allocation of land in return for work when required and, within a few

years, a small, scattered hamlet had formed. Joan hired a widowed woman and her daughter to help with the children and the domestic work.

It happened that, one day, a man living some miles away came to Francis for advice, having received a letter but not being able to read. It was the work of an hour for Francis to read him the letter aloud, which was about the whereabouts of a son who had gone to sea and who had been feared dead and to write a reply for the man with direction on how to send it and, in time, the boy returned to his family but you would think that Francis had saved the boy from the waves himself the way his neighbour praised him and soon word spread that, if you had a problem or an issue, Francis, the Old Lord of Green Castle, was the man to go to for a solution. His good deeds from the past were remembered anew and repeated and, before long, a steady stream of people found their way to him for advice and for letter-writing. Anyone with an issue was told “go to Greencastle” and the area bears that name to this day.

Sadly, there was not much commerce between Francis and Henry with even less as the years passed and Francis was somewhat disappointed in his nephew but it was Bran who hit the mark with his assessment of the situation. “Tis the wife” he said bluntly: “She is all airs and graces and little sense which is why I am so glad of the place here. She keeps a cold house. If he had married a goodly woman she would have raised him up but it is one of the perils of marriage that you cannot live in wedlock, year on year, with a person without taking on some of their outlook and Henry has shrunk rather than grown and is as mean minded now as she is.” This caused Francis to reflect even more gratefully on his industrious and kind-hearted wife.

On Christmas Day 1623, Joan was delivered of her third and final child; a daughter and Francis wept. He gazed upon the precious bundle for some time before saying, his voice thick with emotion: “We will call her Patience and I pray to God that I will live to see her full grown.” His prayer was more than answered as he lived past his eighty third year.

The Lady (19th Century)

Chapter 1

The Honorable Sarah Bartlett, daughter of Alexander, Baron Leyton, should, by rights, have been a spoilt child but wasn't. Her mother having died of childbed fever shortly after her birth, the Baron brought his only child up in a rather unorthodox way.

To begin with, Alexander, a tall, sociable and strikingly attractive man who was then only in his late twenties, refused to remarry. For many years the daughters of the gentry in the Essex countryside surrounding his estate were trailed under his nose at various social functions but the bait was never taken and they just couldn't fathom why. In the age of the dandy, Alexander did not drink or gamble to excess, he dressed well but never followed the more outrageous fashions, allowing himself a dash of colour with his choice of waistcoat or cravat but nothing more. He was unerringly polite and showed no outward sign of eccentricity but continued to remain steadfastly single.

The truth of the matter was that Alexander had always wanted to travel and, as a second son, had nearly finished mapping out his itinerary from the large atlas in the library, when his elder brother's favourite hunter had balked at a fence whilst foxhunting leaving his sibling to sail over it and, unfortunately, break his neck. Everything had changed on that day and the envisioned vast horizons had contracted into a narrow litany of onerous responsibilities, the prime one being to marry and secure an heir. His choice eventually fell on Beth, the only child of the Bishop of Bath and Wells who, whilst only bringing with her a modest dowry of three thousand pounds, was chosen above the other available beauties of the day because she had a kind face and a calm and thoughtful air. He was not disappointed in his bride and they grew to love each other with real passion and lived together companionably for six years until she departed whilst giving him the gift of a daughter. Alexander genuinely mourned her passing but, being young, an appetite for life returned to him within a couple of years and the atlas was dusted off and examined, once again, with lingering interest. As there was no entailment to the male line attached to the Barony, Sarah was clear to inherit and take on the title of

Baroness unless, of course, her future husband had claim to a higher title and Alexander was content with that.

Chapter 2

Sarah was a precocious child, in looks and temperament much like himself and, with her personality starting to emerge, Alexander became more and more enchanted with the little individual he had helped to create. Upon reflection, he also felt it would be selfish of him to abandon Sarah, who already was without a mother, whilst he gadded around Europe so a small revision in his plans took place. He engaged an unusually highly educated governess/companion from France for his little girl and encouraged an early start to her broad education which he directed himself. His travel plans had not been shelved entirely but merely put on hold for a few years, until he gauged that his daughter was old enough to be a good travelling companion.

They spent the intervening years split between his Irish and English estates. When he asked his daughter which place she preferred she would always cry: "Ireland, Papa. Ireland is wonderful." which pleased him greatly as he far preferred the hauntingly beautiful valley in Ulster to the orderly industry of Essex and assumed she did too. He was not entirely correct in this assumption. England, for Sarah, meant fine dresses, not to be creased and numerous visits from matronly ladies where she had to sit still and not fidget whereas in Ireland, once her morning studies were finished, apart from obeying the stern admonition to avoid the cliffs and the river, she was free to roam the valley, to ride her pony and to play, and sometimes fight with, the children of the servants and farmers and no-one seemed to worry overmuch about tangled hair or stains on dresses in that part of the world. By the age of twelve, Sarah was fluent in French, Latin and had a good grasp of Italian. She studied languages, music, dance, drawing, needlework and poetry with her French companion, Mimi and astronomy, geography, history and classical literature at the elbow of her father.

The Baron showed an unusual interest in and compassion for his tenant farmers. In an age when great metal mantraps were often set to catch unwary poachers and thuggish gamekeepers abounded, Alexander had an understanding with his tenants that they could fish his rivers in spring and summer and hunt for game in the woods in autumn and winter, thus allowing a six month break in each area so that stocks would not be exhausted. Tenants could also collect firewood on the understanding that

they felled no living trees. This harmonious arrangement ensured that the tenants were warm, their families well fed and the estate was well maintained, all without the need to mutilate, shoot, imprison or transport anyone to the Colonies. Unfortunately, his style of management didn't catch on. His tenants, fully appreciating their good fortune, ensured the unwritten agreement was followed to the letter and any individual who sought to break the rules or displayed too much greed and industry was apt to receive a sound beating from his neighbours to bring him back into line. Alexander replicated this initiative on his estate in Ireland with similar success.

The Victorian era was a time of great innovation and immense change and Alexander was not idle. He found a jewel of a legal advisor in Barking called Harold Soames and, under Harold's careful direction, did very well financially from a diverse portfolio encompassing everything from cotton to coal mines to canals. He invested in the steam engine, wanting to support innovation even though he had to invest more than anticipated and wait some time for a decent return. Holding a seat in Parliament, Alexander threw his weight behind attempts to end the penal laws in Ireland and was delighted when the Roman Catholic Relief Act was passed in 1829. The great Irish activist Daniel O'Connell had been a guest of Alexander on more than one occasion, and he also took over the burden of paying tithes to the Anglican Church from his Irish tenants long before the Tithe Commutation Act for Ireland had been thought of, deeming them to be unfair, so his Estate luckily side-stepped the bad feeling caused by the Tithe Wars of 1830-1836. He also threw his full support behind William Wilberforce in his campaign to end slavery within the British Empire which culminated in the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833.

Chapter 3

By coincidence, because of the Victorian Gothic movement, which started to come to prominence around the time Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein was published in 1818 and went on to dominate the latter part of the century, the rather shabby Tower House was old enough to turn full circle and, once again, be the height of fashion and Alexander, who had his fill of Georgian symmetry and elegance with his Essex estate and house in Grosvenor Square, decided to create something uniquely his in his beloved Irish valley.

On the ground floor, the kitchen was upgraded with a Rumford Stove, the first in the area. It took a month or two for the cook to accommodate it

and she doused it several times with holy water from a safe distance before being reassured it was safe to go near. She then quickly grew to love it. The garderobe on the first floor was properly plumbed outside and, with the addition of a rainwater catchment tank on the top floor, was adapted to a primitive flushing privy of Alexander's own design. Small, stained glass arched windows were added where possible to enhance light. The Great Hall was sub-sectioned off two thirds of the way down with ornamental wood panelling. A great dining table was set beside the staircase and three deep sofas formed a C shaped block around the fireplace. An extra long box bed was commissioned for Alexander from Brittany so he had a bedroom come study on the first floor in the rear right hand side. Two smaller rooms to the left, were a small withdrawing room which was utilised for female guests to retire to after dinner and Sarah's school and playroom with a further box bed for Mimi. Sarah had a small bedroom to herself right at the back. Smaller, cast iron fireplaces were built in these new rooms and the entire top floor was cleared of its old, largely wooden structure and refloored with a slight slope with drains along the edges to cope with the Irish rainfall. But the most striking change was the purchase of a made to measure, cast iron, prefabricated glass house which could be reached from the round staircase and covered approximately the same area as the, now smaller, Great Hall. A double height structure, with built in ventilation system, it enabled orange trees and various tropical plants, fruits and vegetables to be grown, the hardier seeds of which Alexander shared with his tenants to offset their reliance on the potato and, as the glass house rose slightly above the cliff face behind, it caught the glowing last rays of each sunset and shone oftentimes like a lighthouse or beacon of old, one whose waters had long since receded from its feet due to some strange convulsion of the earth. A crenelated battlement and gargoyles completed the gothic picture and the family came to love the glass house, basking in its warmth and sitting there for much of the year and, if the clouds permitted, Sarah and her father would watch the stars from the open patch of terracing to the rear which also accommodated the water tank and new chimney stacks. To finish, Alexander demolished the old encircling bawn and used the stone to dress an L-shaped, modernly appointed, single storey guest wing for visitors.

But it wasn't until her fifteenth year that Sarah was introduced to the final innovation that Alexander had introduced. Following her history lesson one day, her father showed her a sliding panel in his wood lined study which opened onto a roughly round room with solid oak flooring built from part stone and part natural rock with a corridor leading off to the right. Her

Papa informed her that this was where he stored important documents, valuables, his gun collection and the rarer books and manuscripts which had piqued his interest, mainly on Irish history. Guiding Sarah down the corridor, oil lamp raised high, it came to an abrupt end. Sarah looked questioningly at her Papa. "Dear child" he began, "I hope to be with you for many, many years and see you safely and happily married with children of your own. But you know by the sad departure of your own Mama that hope and reality can be different things. Now I have taught you of the evils of the Caesars from Tacitus and words of wisdom from Marcus Aurelius but I see, in your innocence, that you have not as yet connected this learning with the world around you and people are as varied, Sarah, as the differing colours in the sky or flowers in the field and some are painted with very dark hues. Innocence is precious but you will one day be a very rich woman and I need you to develop some discernment when it comes to the world you are living in. This corridor ends by the fireplace in the Great Hall and I'm going to place a chair and some warm blankets here for you and a little table for a candlestick or lamp. I have had some holes drilled in the spaces between the stones so you will be able to hear the conversations around the fire perfectly. Practice with my guests and try to gain an understanding of what really lies beneath the social niceties employed, especially the difference when ladies are and are not present."

What an adventure for Sarah. She had often been annoyed at having to depart after dinner. She felt she had as good a brain as anyone and didn't see why ladies could not take part in conversation but, of course, she would never dream of disobeying her beloved Papa. Now, he had given her a way of learning about what was really going on in the world she was so anxious to explore and she used her little seat on a regular basis.

What Alexander didn't tell her was that he was beginning to cough up blood.

Sarah first discerned that little of import was normally discussed in front of women at all. Secondly, that her father's guests fell mainly into two categories: the thinkers, artists and social agitators of the day, not all gentry either but from all walks of life, whose main concern seemed to be for others, how life could be improved and injustices rectified; and secondly the local landed gentry who were largely dismissive of the poor and seemed to be primarily interested in money and prestige. Her father moved forward in conversation always with the assumption that his little girl was snug behind the wall so would turn any male conversation of a

more earthy nature, thus gaining himself an unfair reputation as a prude. She also realised that the relationship her father had with Con Coyle, a young local man who acted as overseer when the family were in England, was much more of a friendship and less of a master and servant relationship than she had supposed and she learned much of her father's political thinking, especially of his wish for Irish independence, during their discussions as well as the many sorrows which had beset the Irish over the centuries. Sarah absorbed all this new information quietly but could not help, on occasion, turning to her father and saying: "Well, he definitely failed the fireplace test, Papa!" much to Alexander's amusement.

Chapter 4

Dian Cécht, God of Healing, in the form of a Robin, alighted on the battlements near to Alexander one clear winter's day in November 1834 as he was looking out over his beloved valley and assessing his life, what he had achieved, what he had failed to do and, most of all, trying to assess his strength and whether he should try to fulfil his dream and travel to Europe the following summer. The Robin launched into the air and flew far and wide over the valley. He saw cottages that were not mud and wattle shacks but of good stone build with fireplaces, he saw stacks of turf and wood for kindling, he settled on windowsills and saw farmers wives ladling out rabbit stew with onion and cabbage as well as potato, he saw the children plainly but warmly dressed. It was not within his gift to totally heal the man in the Tower House but what he could do was give him that most precious of gifts; time.

Chapter 5

By early December, Alexander felt an easement in his breathing and his lung capacity seemed to improve. He coughed less and with hardly a show of blood at all and he took this as a sign from heaven and threw himself into furious preparations for a return to London in March, keeping his old friend in Barking, Harold Soames and his son Arthur who had also stepped into the family business, extremely busy following his orders.

Sarah was excited to learn that she would be presented, along with other debutantes, to King William IV and Queen Adelaide just after Easter and even more thrilled that, rather than attend the numerous social gatherings of the English upper class that lasted from then on until the start of the shooting season in autumn, which was basically a marriage market, her Papa had arranged for them, with Mimi in attendance, to have a Grand

Tour. She was only seventeen and felt there was plenty of time in the future to go husband hunting although, in reality, girls as young as fifteen were married off by the end of the season.

A new wardrobe for Court and for travel was required for all parties and Sarah was duly presented wearing white silk and displaying due decorum. Alexander compared his daughter visually to the other debutantes at the reception which followed the presentation. Sarah was tall for the time, her dark brown hair was captured in elaborate ringlets and her blue eyes sparkled. She was attractive rather than beautiful and noticeably more tanned than the other ladies present which was not the fault of Mimi, who had always spent an inordinate amount of time chasing Sarah around with long sleeved gloves and broad brimmed hats in a failed effort to keep her fashionably pale. She was naturally slender without the need for excessive corseting and, more, she had a natural joie de vivre that lit up the space around her. Her nature and intellect, he already knew and, overall, he was a very proud parent indeed.

Alexander had already decided not to tax his health unnecessarily with arduous overland travel and had directed Harold Soames to acquire, fit out and man a clipper ship, sharp lined, triple masted and capable of speeds of up to 16 knots. Partially steam propelled ships were making a debut at the time but Alexander deemed them not yet developed enough to risk for his travels, even if one were available. He knew that the whole party had good sea legs from their various travels on the Irish Sea, a notoriously turbulent stretch of water and, indeed, the ladies were delighted with "The Boston Lass" when they boarded her at Harwich. They were greeted by their Captain, Tobias Henshaw, who would be with them for the duration and also by their "Cicerone" for the trip; a man called Boswell who had travelled extensively and would act as both tour guide and mentor. Their accommodation below deck, whilst low ceilinged, was charmingly fitted out with cabins for all of them, a seating and dining area and an attentive yet discrete crew of servants rather than sailors. There was every home comfort Alexander could provide, they had complete privacy plus a privately accessed area of deck to the stern so they could take the air or sit and watch the passing views without interfering with the operation of the Captain and crew.

Once they had settled in, Alexander led Sarah and Mimi to a side table in the main salon where a map of Europe and North Africa had been pinned to the table. "We are starting with Norway" announced Alexander "as I have read about the Northern fjords and always wanted to visit them

and then we will carry on to the Baltic Sea where we will leave The Boston Lass and travel via the River Havel towards Berlin. From there we will see some of Germany and pass through Dresden and Prague towards Vienna where we will rent another boat and sail the Danube north westwards towards France.” Alexander traced the route on the map with his finger. “I plan for us to stay at least a month in Paris and visit Versailles. Our ship will retrace its steps and anchor to wait for us in Brittany at the walled city of Vannes. Here you, Mimi, as a native Frenchwoman will be our guide as much as Boswell as this is your land and you must let us know if there are places you wish to visit or think we should see. After that there are no set plans apart from an intention to sail southwards into the Mediterranean and take life as it comes. There are two areas at war at present which we must avoid, Portugal, Spain and the Basque region as a Carlist war has overtaken that region and we need to be wary of the Ottoman Empire as there is current unrest in Albania, so we will avoid the Iberian Peninsula and sail from the French coast in a long curve down to Gibraltar via Madeira. From there onwards, we will decide together.” He then handed both women blank diaries, beautifully bound, in order that they could record their memories of the trip. He had purchased another for himself.

Perhaps it was the peculiar intimacy of being on board ship at close quarters, or maybe it was a sense of release from the strictures of British society, but, soon after the voyage started, Sarah casually stated, in the midst of afternoon tea, that she was aware that Alexander and Mimi were lovers and didn't have an issue with it. Alexander dropped his scone in shock. Mimi was amused. “How long have you known?” she enquired. “About two years now but it just didn't seem right to bring it up before. But why did you never marry?” Alexander spluttered tea over his pale blue silk cravat. “Your Papa did offer to make an honest woman of me” responded Mimi with a slow, wicked smile: “But then I would have been burdened with all kinds of boring domestic duties and there would have been a scandal that you might have been damaged by and I would have been snubbed by the ladies at social gatherings ... and it is much more exciting being a mistress, you know”. Alexander took a few moments to compose himself and then saw the humour of the situation and relaxed somewhat. He began hesitantly, “Since it seems to be an afternoon for truth telling, there is something I must say” He then found he couldn't go on. “It's OK, Papa. I heard you coughing and I know what it means. Mimi and I have been watching you anxiously for a while now and I'm glad we are going to have this time together.” “My women, my extra-ordinary women” was all Alexander could manage. So it was truly as a family,

without reserve, that they sailed and travelled together through Europe and on to Egypt, cherishing the beautiful landscapes, varied architecture, diverse cultures and each other.

And it was in February 1837, while they were wintering in Florence on the home leg of their journey, that Alexander's health finally started to give way and The Boston Lass speeded them back home so that Alexander could spend his final days and be laid to rest in his beloved Ireland.

Chapter 6

Sarah went into official mourning for her father for the next eighteen months but it was not an idle time. With the assistance of Harold and Arthur Soames, she came to grasp the complexity of her father's investments and holdings and she split the time between her two Estates. The hold of The Boston Lass had been filled with statues, paintings, oriental carpets, Murano glass and other mementos of their Grand Tour with which the Tower House was carefully and gracefully decorated. Sarah moved into her father's room on the first floor. Whenever the gaze of Mimi or herself rested on an item, a memory of their travels was evoked and they found that, as time passed, they could discuss Alexander less with pain and more with loving memory. Sarah had been pleased to learn that her Papa had purchased a generous annuity for Mimi in order that she had financial independence and security for the remainder of her life but Sarah also offered to buy Mimi a property of her choice if she wished to move forward on her own. Mimi said she preferred to stay with Sarah and act as chaperone when Sarah moved back into society after the official mourning period was over. She was nearing fifty and looked upon Sarah as a daughter so had no wish to embark on another life. She also felt it was what Alexander would have wished.

The main addition to the valley made by Sarah at this time was that of a Catholic church and a house and stable for a parish priest. A relaxation in the Penal Laws had led to the founding of a seminary for the ordination of priests and the Royal College of St. Patrick was founded in 1795 with its first priests ordained in 1800. Having corresponded with Maynooth, she undertook to build both structures from her own funds and donate them to the church along with space behind for a graveyard. Whilst the outside and inside of the chapel was very plain and built in local stone, Sarah brought in a stained glass artisan from Liverpool who created three medieval styled foliate windows, with the risen Christ in the centre, flanked by St Patrick to the right and St. Brigid to the left on the main East wall

behind the altar together with a simple lancet of the Virgin and Child above the entrance doors, positioned to catch the rays of the setting sun. It also had a beautiful wood vaulted ceiling and was roofed with slate. When the Parish Priest, Fr Turley, arrived she gave him a horse and trappings from her stable and a donation so that he could fit out his house and the church furnishings in an appropriate manner. Favouring the Coyle family, mostly due to the excellent job Con was making of managing the Estate, she had the only other two storey house, apart from the priest's house, erected in what was to become the hub of a small village. It was a combined shop and public house with living accommodation above for Con's only sister. Also, upon hearing that Con's youngest brother had left Maynooth without joining the priesthood and was at a loss in terms of what to do next, she offered him a home and land in return for opening up a school for the children of the farmers and the final construction was a low, L shaped cottage with a living and bedroom for Martin Coyle with the smaller part of the L being a classroom. There being little money to spare for schooling, a barter system was introduced and eager students would arrive with a few sods of turf or a couple of eggs for the schoolmaster and they, in turn, received a basic knowledge of reading, writing and arithmetic and Martin put his years of education at the seminary to good use. As Alexander had been an MP, a postal stop had been built in the valley some years previously to aid swift communication which, with the later introduction of the Penny Black, opened up the postal system to people other than the gentry. Her final addition was to update the stone bridge spanning the river to securely link the valley floor east and west. Sarah did these things naturally and without fanfare as they made sense to her and didn't fully realise how much her stock rose with the local people by doing so. She had created a hub for her tenants, a sense of community which was precious but, more than that, despite being a Protestant, she had honoured the Virgin and the Irish Saints by her choice of decoration for their Church and many a prayer was said for her and in remembrance of Alexander, within those quiet stone walls.

During January 1839 the house in Grosvenor Square was reopened, dust sheets removed from furnishings and new staff sought to complement the in situ housekeeper and butler, husband and wife team who lived there all year round, having a suite of rooms in the attic. The housekeeper, Karen Canning and her husband, were originally from the Irish Estate and the ladies of society would have been shocked to see the four of them sipping tea in the drawing room, Karen bouncing her beautiful blue eyed boy, Caolán, on her knee whilst Sarah relayed messages from their parents and brought them up to date on the latest news from the valley. Sarah

and Mimi saw to the hiring of the cook themselves, as they wanted someone who could replicate some of their favourite European dishes but were happy to leave all other domestic issues in the capable hands of Karen.

So Baroness Leyton, Sarah Bartlett, at the advanced age of twenty one, had her first London season and, thankfully, entered the fray with enough cynicism to depart from it relatively unscathed. Having Mimi at her side was also an enormous help. They returned to Ireland in September expecting a return to their usual quiet, informal existence but, to Sarah's surprise, the fact that she was officially "out" in London saw a huge increase in visits by the Irish gentry, mostly with an eligible son in tow. She accepted a handful of invitations to parties at other Estates and invited a few parties, to include gentlemen who had piqued her interest, to the valley. She was especially cautious as, if she entered into marriage, she would lose complete control of all her assets to her husband and be a complete slave to his whims with no rights in law at all. She thanked, more than once, her Papa's decision to show her the secret corridor as more than one beau failed "the fireplace test", one in spectacular fashion. In a way, though, it was the secret corridor that finally found her a husband. Having mentally crossed off her latest possibility, having heard his crass statements about women's low level of intelligence, words he would never have uttered in mixed company, she was surprised by an intervention on the part of Arthur Soames, who was visiting on business issues, in support of women and women's rights. "Women are very ill treated in law" Arthur stated calmly but firmly "and because their education takes no account of life's harsher realities, they easily fall prey to the unscrupulous, but I think it is rather due to a lack of application than lack of intellect."

Her thoughts strayed to Arthur Soames over the next few weeks and to how he had really become a pivotal part of her life over the past few years, ever since he had rushed to join The Boston Lass at La Rochelle in 1837 to help escort her father home. It was he who had handled the funeral arrangements and had been back and forth to Ireland many times since seeing to her affairs. He was single, in his late twenties, blonde, attractive and intelligent. Moreover, they were very much at ease in each other's company and like minded on many issues. To test her own feelings, she tried to imagine Arthur married to someone else and was surprised to discover she didn't much like that idea at all. Yes, he was "trade" rather than gentry but he had a law degree and an honest profession and she, of all people, wasn't one to worry overmuch as regards status. She finally

consulted with Mimi, who was delighted. “He has been in love with you for the past two years or more but you never seemed to notice him. However, he is far too conscious of your higher status to pursue you Sarah and, if you want him, it will have to be a case of the fox hunting the hound!”

In due course, just as the society ladies were preparing to write the Baroness Leyton off as a Spinster, their engagement was announced in the spring of 1842 and was followed by an autumn wedding. Incidentally, Arthur had turned out to be quite a catch in his own right, his father Harold having invested wisely for himself as well as for his clients in past years. They settled in Essex for the first years of their marriage in order that Arthur could continue his business and take up the seat of MP which he had inherited by marriage. One boy and heir was followed by twin girls. Sarah was somewhat debilitated for close on a year, the twins having been a difficult delivery and Mimi took charge, delighted by having children around her again. It was a happy household.

Chapter 7

When news reached her from Con Coyle of the potato crop failure in October 1845, Sarah was not overly concerned as such blights had happened before and, thanks to her father’s industry, the tenants were not wholly reliant on the potato. She sent off written authorisation for Con to draw on her funds and take whatever measures he felt necessary and to halt rent payments and arranged for flour and an increased number of various seeds to be provided to kick start the following year’s harvest. The potato crop that year failed throughout Northern Europe but Sarah was aware of how the Irish, in particular, were dependent upon that one food source for survival so, when news reached her of a similar failure in 1846, alarm bells sounded and, feeling back to her old strength, she told Arthur she was going to go to Ireland to see what the situation was and to help if she could. She didn’t want to bring the children, who she felt were too young to travel, and she didn’t want to drag Mimi away either but Arthur insisted that she bring a companion, which is why Karen Canning, the Housekeeper from Grosvenor Square, was decided upon. She turned out to be the ideal choice for what lay ahead of them.

Chapter 8

Arthur had organised a private charter for them from Liverpool to Newry and the family coach was waiting for them as they disembarked. Liverpool docks had been crowded and Sarah heard many familiar Irish voices so

she guessed that droves of people were already emigrating but nothing prepared her for the drive back to the valley. A peculiar stink of rotting crops assaulted the nose. Whole families in rags were walking the roadside and scavenging for food, hollow cheeked, hopelessness emanated from them. They spotted one body by the roadside, pecked by crows. "I've come too late" exclaimed Sarah in tears. "Well, we are here now" replied the ever practical Karen: "We just have to focus on what we can do" but both women were anxious to be home. They arrived early evening and Karen was dropped off at her parent's cottage, undertaking to bring Con with her for a meeting at The Tower House early the next afternoon. Tired as she was, Sarah could not settle for ages. Back in her Papa's old room, memories of him flooded back to her and, she said a little prayer to him, asking for wisdom. And it seemed to work as she awoke feeling strong and refreshed the next morning. She searched for a large plan of the Estate and surrounding area and spread and secured it on the large dining table and sat back to wait for Con and Karen. Arthur and herself had already run through options of what might be needed but no decisions could be made until the situation was properly assessed; first she would listen.

Con, with his Republican connections, had a good grasp of the situation overall which was most helpful. He started with the Estate itself. As expected, it had weathered the situation well because of the diversity of food available and the same could be said for the current year. None of the wheat or other vegetable crops had been affected by the blight or exported. Fearing that the disease was in the land, Con had planted that year's potato harvest in newly constructed ridges but the failure had been the same so he surmised the problem did not lie in the soil but rather was a canker in the air or in the seed itself. Con went on to say that he had set up a separate soup kitchen where the road from the valley met the larger road between Omagh and Londonderry and he had utilised the kitchen in the Tower House for breadmaking and had a supply agreement in place with a local miller, both in terms of milling their own crop and supplying additional flour. Estate produce and stock had been used to produce a hearty stew and bread for travellers. Turning to the broader picture, Con declared that the response from the British Government had been totally inadequate, the workhouses were full to bursting and that, although, the old Tory Government had organised shipments of maize from the US and had arranged relief work in some areas, they had not banned exports from Ireland so a whole raft of crops were leaving Ireland whilst the people starved. The new Whig Government was even worse and, while relief work was ongoing, no food was presently entering the

country. People had pawned everything they had, including their best winter clothing in order to get money but, in many cases, even if they had money there was now no food to buy and the situation was only likely to get worse. Far from remitting rents, many Landlords were serving notice of evictions on tenants or, a new ploy, offering them land in Canada if they would give up their holdings. Country people who had weathered the 1845 failure were now in desperate straits and were on the move to Belfast, Newry and Derry either looking for better opportunities in the larger cities or looking to emigrate altogether. Some landowners were striving to support their tenants but it was piecemeal and Con stated that there was no overall strategy of support for the dispossessed and the Public Works programmes, apart from assisting the rail network, were mostly roads to nowhere rather than structures that would be of benefit to the people. There had also been reports of famine fever which Con had anticipated would happen and was one of the reasons why the soup kitchen had been placed in a hastily extended herder's croft well away from the tenant holdings and run by two widows and a widower from amongst the tenants who had undertaken to stay there for the duration. Con finished by presenting Sarah with a summary of expenditure which she laid to one side unscanned and she thanked him for his industry.

Sarah walked them to the table and showed them the map of the Estate. She placed black chess pieces over the three major port towns that people were heading to. "The Estate abuts the main road from Omagh to Londonderry and again to the south on the road from Omagh to Dungannon. I propose we start off with another soup kitchen to the south, which will ease the passage of those on their way to Newry and Belfast. Then, I'm proposing a building programme in both those areas, new double square structures with a central yard, like our stable block but in a figure eight. The block nearest the road to have new clothing and soap stores, washing facilities, for the people and for their clothing, places they can rest for a few days or so and gain some strength in wards, one for men, one for women and one for families, and a communal dining hall. Three good meals a day. If I had time, we could have planned a proper bakehouse and stoves for heating water but time is what we are short of with winter coming. "We can heat water the old way, using stones" said Karen: "There is a certain stone you use and put a ring of them around the fire. Then you take a pot with cold water and place a heated stone within it. The water boils up within a few seconds and you remove the stone and let it rest before placing it near the fire again. There are scores of them by the river, I just have to pick them out" "Excellent" said Sarah, happy to have one major problem removed so easily. Then, when people,

have recovered a little, they can either move on if they wish and we would provide them with blankets, clothing and some store of food for the road or, if they wished to stay, they could move to live and work in the back square where we will be producing blankets and clothes, making soap, tending fields and livestock to support the kitchens and need staff to help in shifts with the new arrivals. She placed two white chess pieces on the proposed areas. "We could have them weave willow baskets for people to store food on the road" proposed Karen. "We have plenty of willow rods to hand, it is lightweight and most country people know how to weave a creel or a basket for the turf". Sarah ticked off another problem solved. "I like the design" said Con practically, "Hungry people can be desperate people and, if properly gated, these will be secure spaces and we can have a few hardy men around as gatekeepers. We can shut the gate at night but add a hatch accessing the road from the kitchen if you are going to run it in shifts so people can get some bread and soup at any hour they are passing but most of them don't have a bowl or a plate to use". Clay or wooden bowls and cooking pots for people on the road became the first items on Sarah's shopping list. "The next problem" said Sarah "Is sourcing food that will last them on the road. A few meals is one thing but we need to provide them with a food parcel that will not spoil. I was thinking of my trip to Germany where there were all kinds of wonderful salted and smoked meats and smoked cheese but I don't know how to replicate that here". Karen stated, "Salting meat is a brining process, normally beef or pork. I can do it. The meat is boiled in brine or the fish is well salted and they are then hung to dry and last almost indefinitely but tend to be tough and need to be boiled into a soup again to make them tasty. It takes huge quantities of salt, though and I know nothing about smoking in the kind of quantities you would need." Salt was added to the list plus an expert who could build and explain the workings of a smoke house. "We will use our beef livestock to start" announced Sarah "and buy in later as needs be. I am proposing we slowly make the transition to sheep, Con, which will provide both wool and meat but, more importantly, they can be left to roam the hills and herded back in to the shorn and culled. "Pasta" Karen said suddenly. "The Italian cook, Roberto, you hired for Grosvenor House for your coming out season, he used to cook you pasta and he taught me how to make it. Tis just flour and water and needs an awful lot of work but it is perfect for on the road as it is light to carry but only needs boiling for a few minutes and is really filling. I can teach the women how to make it and it is perfect for these times." "Arthur is contacting the Admiralty to try to obtain similar stores to those the Navy have on ships" began Sarah "We felt it was the best option for food that could be stored for long periods. I also wrote ahead and have an engineer

coming down from Belfast in a few days to get plans made up for the two relief centres and to oversee the work. Perhaps he can design a brining kitchen and drying space for you, Karen and advise on the smoke house as well". Sarah was delighted with the progress being made. "Now, for families who have been forced to leave their farms, I propose allocating new holdings here and here". She placed two pencils to the west and south east". The engineer will also look at building roads in the best locations in these areas. I will grant new, free leases to start of around fifteen acres each plus seeds and we can build proper dry stone houses for them with two rooms, chimney and barn and, later on, a central village of sorts in each where they can trade initially and hopefully I can add to it when times are better with a church and a school in each. We can do it slowly. Build the first six, fill them and then on to the next six but we should plant the fields in spring." "That is at least three thousand acres of your best pasture Sarah" Con felt obliged to say. "I see your logic with the switch to sheep who can survive well in the uplands on poorer pasture and this land can support hundreds of families but, if you bankrupt yourself, you can help nobody". "Most of the material is to hand and labour is cheap" replied Sarah "and you are forgetting two important things. I have a ship, a lovely clipper called The Boston Lass. I could never bring myself to sell her and she is, as we speak, being made seaworthy and crewed again at Harwich. It just awaits her first shopping list from me and she can be heading our way. Secondly, I have a very profitable Estate in Essex and can source weaving looms, cloth, wood and clay plates, utensils, flour and seed in lieu of rental there. I was thinking to purchase a warehouse in Londonderry, Belfast and Newry for storage and then maybe build a fleet of carts as a transport hub?" "I'd advise some carts but mostly pack horses which will be faster but what about the island as a whole?" asked Con: "I don't suppose there is anything we can do there? I'm not criticising, Sarah, this looks to be coming together better than even I had hoped. We can work on the two supply hubs now and plan for the road and cottage building come spring but what about the others who won't be passing near us? I'm tortured thinking about them". "I'm thinking Father Turley" replied Sarah "and his links with Maynooth. We cannot reach everywhere but, if we could identify those parishes providing soup kitchens, we could undertake to assist them with food supplies. The Boston Lass can reach every port in Ireland. It will be a good start." Con had one thing to add: "We need a separate building to house those who are sick with the fever or dying plus land and manpower for burying the dead. It's the Christian thing to do and will also help prevent the spread of disease." The outline plan agreed, relief efforts began. Arthur raised concerns in Parliament to little avail and Sarah started on a writing

campaign to try and bring landowners together in a concerted effort to alleviate conditions but she mostly met with a brick wall and won herself few friends and more than one enemy by her efforts. The glass house was stripped of all its ornamental plants and filled with orange trees, seedlings and experimental crops. Fruit trees were planted in the upper valley as well as additional crops and every cottage was a hive of industry but even their best efforts were a drop in the ocean of what was needed as one year of famine followed another.

It is easy to write about a noble deed, the pen flows on the paper and one can imagine a hero or heroine, swimming against the stream, head held high with gaze fierce and fixed. But there is a cost to making a stand; a price to pay for staying true to your convictions; a despair that comes to even the strongest heart when attempting to cure an evil far beyond the reach of the individual. And, as the famine years passed with an ever growing litany of horror and mismanagement, Sarah bowed under the weight of many sorrows, until Karen, who had returned to the valley with her husband and son to oversee, with Con, the day to day running of the relief efforts, sent an urgent message to Arthur who arrived and insisted that Sarah return to Essex and recoup and Sarah both recognised the wisdom in his words and simply didn't have any strength left to argue.

Chapter 9

After a span of around fifteen years, English society decided to overlook Sarah's Irish oddities and to forgive, or chose to ignore, Arthur, Baron Leyton's, low birth in part because he had made a good name for himself in politics and, more importantly, because the family had managed to keep their Estates when all about them were losing theirs. The twin girls, Constance and Victoria, were well married with very respectable dowries and, in his twenty third year, the heir, Alexander Harold, was married to the Honourable Felicity Broadbent under the proud gaze of both parents and a redoubtable Mimi, who was as fit and active as ever, to the despair of the annuity underwriters and it was at this juncture that Arthur and Sarah decided to base themselves in Ireland for most of the year, in order to give the young married couple space in Essex to themselves. Mimi came with them and finally succumbed to a bout of flu in January 1870, having passed her eightieth year, and Sarah had her buried next to Alexander in the family plot deep in the upper valley. For Arthur and Sarah, there was a leisurely unfolding of seasons. Arthur made some repairs to the glass house and was kept busy with his plants between Parliamentary sessions and Sarah developed a fondness for painting,

watercolour in particular, and took a small corner of the glass house where she painted and read. They delighted in visits by their children and, later, grandchildren but were, largely more than content with each other's company but, sadly, the situation was not ordained to last. In 1873, Sarah noticed a persistent cough, reminiscent of her Papa's and sure enough, she started to cough blood soon after and, true to her nature, when she felt herself starting to fail, she announced to Arthur, when they were taking afternoon tea by the fire in the Great Hall, that she needed his advice and help as she had some affairs to put in order. Arthur, who knew his wife's nature very well and had been waiting for her to broach the subject, sat back and waited.

"You know, Arthur, how I have supported for many years the movement for women's emancipation?" "I do indeed" replied Arthur "and have lost count of the times I have been forced to flee my own drawing room by furious, red-faced feminists." They both laughed over that image for a while.

"Well, it has occurred to me that what I was really fighting all along was abuse of power and I have been thinking of our tenants, here and in Essex and wondering if we could not liberate them in some way, especially here where so much abuse has occurred. I'm worried too because young Alexander does not love this place and I can honestly see him selling it and then our people would be at the whim of the new owner who might rescind their fishing and hunting rights and raise their rents until they no longer felt secure in their own homes. I feel I would be more at peace if I knew their futures were secured."

"Young Alexander is just totally English in outlook" replied Arthur "which is not surprising given his education and upbringing, whereas your Papa and yourself were curiously Irish in your thinking but I agree he has no love for the place. There was a Land Law (Ireland) Act passed by Parliament in 1870 on that issue although, as you would expect, the gentry have not generally taken it up. Let me think on it for a day or two and do some digging around on the subject." And so it was Arthur who came up with the plan to secure the future of their Irish tenants. He considered the land, the tenants and family interest and came back to Sarah on the subject laying down the same Estate plan on the dining table that Sarah had used back in the famine days which gave her a curious feeling of repetition; of rightness in terms of what they were planning to do.

“Your Estate measures some sixteen thousand acres” Arthur began “much of which is mountainous and largely worthless. I gauge that just under half of it is prime grazing, workable land and woodland with three main rivers running off the hills in different areas. The inland tenants, as we call them, consist of twenty families but as you have been giving out new tenancies as people married and if they chose to stay, they have fifty farms at forty acres each inland and attached to us here. Because you parcelled out a great portion of land to the west, east and south east to new tenants during the famine days, you have just over 280 tenant farms between them, each of roughly 20 acres. There is some prime acreage left on the road from Omagh to Dungannon and I propose assigning each of our children a plot of 300 acres alongside each other there which has grazing land, woodland and the lower river runs through all three parcels. It is a more practical allocation of land for modern times and would still make a good Estate should they decide to build there but should also be manageable in terms of death duties and any taxes imposed going forward. With respect to the mountainous land and remaining acres of good grazing land, I suggest that you sign it over entirely as Commonage and that includes the Tower House here and the rest of this valley. It means that all the tenants would hold rights to graze on the common land and is also the only way in law that will protect them fully and avoid the prospect of another landlord.” Sarah took Arthur’s hand gently: “But don’t you want to stay here yourself going forward?” she asked gently. “Not without you” Arthur replied. “I have a mind to travel like your Papa did but West rather than East; I will go to Canada and the Americas.” “Thank you, Arthur, for understanding.” “Thank you, Sarah, for many happy years and three beautiful children. I’ll get to work on the freehold Deeds and legal documents now and you have my promise I will look at the Essex estate at some point in the future but I have a request of my own. I know you are scheming in that head of yours for me to go back to London and I know why. You don’t want my last memories of you to be of sickness and decline but I couldn’t bear to leave you so let us spend the winter of our days together as we did all the other seasons. I must insist upon that.”

Chapter 10

So Arthur took over the study area and was busy with paperwork for much of 1874 whilst Sarah cleared the Tower House of many items. Some of the more notable pieces from the Grand Tour, together with some paintings, went to what later became known as the Ulster Museum. Alexander’s gun collection, with the exception of a hunting rifle of which Arthur was particularly fond, inexplicably found its way via the Coyle family

into the hands of the Irish Republican Brotherhood along with a fair supply of ammunition. The schoolmaster was pleased to accept three bookcases filled with literature and educational tomes. And it was in the glass house in the Spring of 1875 where Sarah was sitting in a high backed chair enjoying the warmth and sorting through and packing her father's prized collection of books and manuscripts on Irish history for donation to Trinity College, Dublin that Sarah experienced her final remarkable experience in what had been a far from ordinary life.

She had dozed for a while and awoke to find a woman sitting in Arthur's chair opposite. She was well dressed but in traditional Irish fashion. It was Goddess Brigit in her favourite guise, that of Macha of the Three Morrigna, red haired, green eyed and beautiful and she was carrying a portfolio of papers wrapped in tan and white calfskin. Maybe because of some inherent ability or, more probably, because she was approaching the verge between life and death, Sarah could see past the mortal disguise and saw light flowing from this woman in all directions and knew she was in the presence of one of the faery folk.

"I don't know how to greet you" Sarah began "or whether to hail you as a faery queen or an angel. Is it my time to die, Lady? Is that why you have come?"

"No yet, but soon" replied Brigit, startled to have her disguise seen through so easily "I have a favour to ask of you".

"To do with that book you are holding, no doubt" said Sarah, direct as ever, "Perhaps you wish me to add it to the pile I am working on? Rest assured I will, if that is your wish, but, now that you are here, perhaps you could oblige me by answering some questions? You will appreciate that, as my life is ending, I find I have many and I am impatient for answers."

"These papers contain memories of old days and ways in Ireland before the strangers came" replied the Goddess, "They contain information that can reawaken the Irish to the culture of their ancestors and I have had them under a spell of preservation for many centuries, waiting for the time when they should be brought forth again so future generations can have a voice from the old days, a glimpse of their old culture, before it was largely erased. My hope is that, at some point, the Irish race will fully embrace its fine history, its Brehon laws and finally put away the form of Government imposed upon them by the English. These writings may help

to inspire that. The spell of preservation will last until the bundle is opened and then they will start to age naturally.”

“I will not open it” replied Sarah: “I will lay it in the crate with the other documents untouched, as you wish”.

Bright settled back into the chair. In all the ages of her existence she could not remember talking to a human, as if to an equal, and she delighted in this novel experience and decided to humour the human. “Ask away” she said.

“Tell me about God and creation and your part in it.” Sarah began, not being one to mince words. “How to couch it in a way this human can understand” mused Bright. Then she began: “You can liken God’s creation to a symphony of life, where this planet is but one small note in that symphony. In the way music you hear is actually just a vibration, so all of existence is matter existing at a certain vibration so there are many layers to life at different vibrations or different notes of that symphony. As each living thing has its own spiritual guide or guardian angel, so does every living planet and me and my companions are, what you could call guardian angels for planets or matter existing at a certain vibration. If you read a score of music for a symphony, you will see many “C” notes, for example, spread across the whole work and we look after all planets and planes of existence at this one level of vibration travelling between them on what we call the unwinding path which is outside time and space as you know it and we are here to guide and guard and influence but rarely do we intervene directly. Just as you, on a long coach journey, would stop at various inns along the way, we plant portals on each planet to act as markers on the unwinding path and the portal lasts so long as the earth around it is undisturbed. One of them is not too far away from here. We have been called many names by many races: the Hindus, the Greeks, the Romans, the Norsemen, the Celts. We are Archangels now, to Christians, but, for us, the name does not matter, it is the deed that counts.”

“That doesn’t surprise me” replied Sarah “I always thought this place was special. I suppose the next question is what is the purpose of humanity in all this and why does God allow such evil to happen? Why doesn’t God or why don’t you intervene more?” Sarah was, of course, thinking back to the horror of the famine years when she asked this question; a time she was still haunted by. “You are looking at life from a very narrow perspective” replied the Goddess. “First of all you must truly embrace the

fact that every living thing has a spark of the divine. Your soul is immortal so it cannot be destroyed. No external force can kill that which is divine within you. You are here to learn, to grow and to act. You humans are ridiculously short lived but even in a short span of fifty or sixty years you can make a difference: you can nurture, assist and love God's creation, the expressions of which you can find all around you, in the earth, the plants, the animals or in other human beings, or you can twist and wound and seemingly "kill" but what you are really doing, if you choose to be destructive, is just delaying your own soul's progression to a higher vibration. When you hurt others, you are truly only wounding yourself; when you steal from others, you are in reality only stealing from your own soul's brightness."

"But why does God just not direct us on how to act, it would be much simpler" grumbled Sarah, feeling the answers were getting too abstract.

"Ah, free will" responded Bright: "Because God wants real relationships, real co-workers in the unending unfolding of creation. He does not want mindless slaves who go from A to B at his command, but souls to come to him lovingly and sing their own unique song, adding to the symphony of life. And, believe me, Sarah, nothing will be lost. Eventually, all creation, no matter how far it has fallen, no matter how base the note, will be united with God, in harmony, in an eternal song of creative love. Also, God does send out advanced souls to try and guide his creation but, here, at this level, you sadly all too often kill them or stifle their voices and only the merest whisper of their message is ever understood or assimilated by the many."

Sarah pondered the answers and felt they had a ring of truth and was truly reassured that some part of her would go on. She had a final question but was a bit ashamed to ask it, the Goddess having spoken on such great issues but Bright discerned what Sarah was thinking. "Macro and micro" the Goddess thought but she said aloud: "The answer to your final question, which you have not yet asked, is that your Papa, Alexander, is very proud of you and will be there to meet you as you pass onto the unwinding path". That having been said, the Goddess departed, fading gradually rather than bothering to use the staircase. Sarah sat thinking deeply and must have dozed for a while as she awoke wondering if it had all been a dream and then her eyes fell on the tan and white calfskin portfolio on the table and, knowing she had been truly blessed, she carefully laid it, unopened, within the crate bound for Trinity College along with her father's collection.

Chapter 11

Just as it takes a body some time to break down after the soul has left it, so too it takes time for a home to be dismantled after the owners leave it. For some years, the Tower House stood untouched in the valley in memory of and out of respect for its former occupants. But time passes and the winds blow and needs arise and slowly the home was dismantled by the local people. The glass went fastest, a precious commodity, to grace cottage windows or doors. The larger parts of the metal framework of the glass house were laid across a narrow channel further up the valley to form the foundation of a walkway between the east and west banks of the river to save toiling all the way down to the stone bridge in order to cross. Stone was used to shore up crumbling walls or repair field boundaries or to build a barn. The wood panelling was used to decorate or sub-section a cottage or for fuel. A large part of it went to improve the look of the bar. So it went on for a space of years until the inevitable happened and the building was undermined. Then some unlucky soul happened to step in the wrong place or reach too far to grab a prize and a death or serious injury would occur. From then on, the remains of the building would be viewed as a place to be avoided. Whether the locals felt the house had kicked back at them, weary of all the rapine, or felt it had indeed become an abode for fantastical creatures, or whether they just thought up a poetical story to scare children away from what was now a dangerous edifice is unknown, but the Tower House was, from then on, viewed with distrust and left undisturbed with time as its only enemy.

But people in the country have a long memory and they continued to tend the graves of Alexander, Mimi and Sarah as they did those of their own people, pulling away nettles, fern and brambles and sometimes leaving a posy of small wild flowers before departing and, if you happened to wander there on 1st February, St Brigid's feast day, or the pagan festival of Imbolc, if your learning spanned the elder days, you might find their graves ornamented with a St. Brigid's cross, woven from the rushes of the river.

The Haven (1920s)

Chapter 1

Conor was cursed with shyness. If all the world were a stage, he would be hiding behind the curtain. His shyness was exacerbated by three things. First of all, his youth. He was just eighteen and still very much a child. He had, thus far, encountered none of life's storms which, painful though they inevitably are, do have the bonus of building backbone, so he had none of that armour of experience to draw upon. Secondly, his family owned the local pub come shop and Conor was often, by necessity, to be found behind the counter or behind the bar where he was forced to socialise. He lived in a village nestled within a valley. One pub come shop, one church, a one room post office attached to a cottage and a school but that was enough for it to be the hub of activity in the area. Finally, he was cursed with red hair and pale skin and would redden and blush at nothing and this was a lure to the regulars at the bar, who looked on an day where they failed to light his face up like a beacon as a collective failure.

His chief nemesis was Michael Bike. "Bike" was not a surname in itself but, in an area dominated by people with similar surnames, the locals named you by quoting your father or giving a nickname that could easily identify you, so he was Red Jack's Conor and Michael was Michael Bike as he was the postman and rode his bicycle around the district delivering telegrams and letters. Michael Bike was a bit of an oddity in that, in a rural area where men were careful to try and appear worldly wise, hard-working and steady, at least in the company of each other, Michael Bike was happy to play the role of *amadán*. He never heard a tall tale without adding to it and ascribing the deed to one of his neighbours and, more often than not, in the pub anyway, Conor was his main victim. His lies were even more outrageous. To make matters worse, Conor had no option but to stay behind the bar and suffer it. If his temper flared he would get a name for being "contrary" or "quick to anger", if he disappeared he would be deemed "moody" or "unable to take a joke" so his only option was to blush like a beetroot and carry on drawing pints or washing glasses, praying the conversation would turn sooner rather than later.

There was little peace to be found at home either, although he loved his family dearly. The whole of the ground floor was taken up with shop, pub and storerooms and the family of nine in all lived upstairs with one of the two bedrooms taken by the three girls, mother and father in another with the baby and the boys housed in the attic space. Conor had taken to sleeping on the only sofa with a blanket thrown over him and often, at night, he would think of things he should have said to Michael Bike to turn the joke back at him but, he reflected, there was no point being wise after the event. He cursed himself for being tongue-tied and awkward.

If Conor was hampered by shyness, he was blessed with a love of music. He had shown a little aptitude at a young age with an old fiddle of his grandfather's and Red Jack had taken the time and effort to see he had some private lessons from the old schoolmaster and Conor could now read music and even composed a few airs of his own, although he was too shy to advertise the fact. Red Jack had not been completely altruistic: the draw of music on a Friday and Saturday night ensured a full house on all but the coldest of evenings and Conor would take up position in a corner to the left of the bar twice a week with his Uncle Phonsie on the bodran, with open invitation to the tin whistle and mouth organ players and singers in the district to come and share a few songs and melodies.

The priest had no moral objection as, this being the country, the pub was almost exclusively the province of the men, who mainly congregated around the bar. On the rare occasion that there were females present, the wives and daughters would huddle together around a far table and be fed the occasional sherry or soft drink by their menfolk and would not stir until the man of the house decided to head home whereupon he would indicate his intention with a toss of the head or a crooked finger and the women would duly follow him out like self-conscious dejected ducklings.

Conor's spirit took flight every time he played and all else fell away from him then and was forgotten. Notes would rise and fall, quicken and linger, all in alignment with the earthy beat of the bodran. He had real talent and could switch from a rousing melody to a slow and haunting air with ease; providing unobtrusive accompaniment to a good singer and louder support to offset the more vocally challenged. He was, overall, a kind and thoughtful young man.

Chapter 2

It is not, then, surprising that Conor had a love of the great outdoors and sought the solitude of nature even more than most of the young men of the village. He was often to be seen walking the hills that ringed the valley and one day, approaching his fourteenth birthday, he noticed a small slide of land had revealed an opening close to the ground in the rock face to the right of the old ruin and, slipping inside, found himself in a small chamber. He immediately dubbed it his lair and decided to tell no-one of its existence and it became his practice chamber and refuge. Whether it was a sound effect from the rock surrounding him or due to the freedom of isolation, Conor did not know, but the notes he produced seemed purer and clearer in the cave and he seemed to be able to pluck new bars and variations out of the air effortlessly in his little refuge. Gradually and cautiously he added blankets, an oil lamp and two biscuit tins to his cave; one for his sheets of music and another filled with broken biscuits and other supplies. He slept there sometimes and would double fold one of his mother's discarded old black skirts and drape it over the entrance come dark so no light would escape once the lamp was lit and even went so far as to transplant a furze bush close in against the cliff wall and, after an anxious few months wait, it took and completed the job of disguising his little den. Conor now had the space and the peace to practise and compose and his music came on apace.

It was around this time that some of the locals reported fairy music wafting to them on the night air and the smithy near the road to Omagh had a mysterious run on horseshoes, which were nailed firmly in place around cottage doors.

One evening in early April 1919 he lit his oil lamp near the rear of the cave and caught a flash of light reflecting from a small spur of rock around two feet from the floor. Upon examination, he picked up a coin which had been resting flat on the outcrop and a vigorous polish with the end of his shirt was rewarded with the unmistakable gleam of gold. Conor made a short inspection of the walls and floor around him but had no intention of spoiling his haven by digging around in the hope another could be found but he brought the coin straight to his father, taking care to say he had spotted it by the riverside. It was a coin with an even sided cross in the middle, surrounded by little crowns and figures of lions and it looked old. It was brought for examination to the old schoolmaster and the priest who both took a note of the markings and promised to look into the matter

further. Red Jack, who anticipated it would prove to be a good discussion piece, tacked it firmly to a beam behind the bar and, sure enough, it became a great matter for debate. Speculation was rife that this find was only the tip of an iceberg; that a Viking hoard or a hidden treasury of the once great castle was waiting to be discovered. It heralded the start of a halcyon summer for Conor and a time that he would later look back on with great nostalgia as the final season of his youth and innocence. His apparel was, first off, eyed with regularity and, as he didn't buy any new fancy clothes or goods, the consensus was that the hoard was still there for the taking. Small children would streak into the bar, climb a stool and gaze at the coin before being chased out, good naturedly, by the men. Scores of boys spent the summer ranging up and down the river, digging with sticks and peering into the water looking for an elusive gleam of gold. Even some adults, purportedly fishing, seemed to spend more time roaming the banks away from their traditional stands than would be considered normal. For a while, Conor's footsteps were dogged by even smaller ones whenever he left his home and he was concerned his haven would be spied out, but the children soon learned not to try and follow him into the hills, where his pace soon outstripped theirs. He could not resist, however, taking the occasional stroll by the river and would listen to the fevered, supposedly whispered conversations going on behind him. Sometimes, he would feign interest in a particular rock or clump of rushes and deposit a penny or two which the children could, later, find.

Confirmation came in time from the old schoolmaster that the coin was English and called a Gold Noble and was over 500 years old, which the pub customers found hard to fathom and it was during this discussion that Conor gained an insight into his chief adversary that would stand him in good stead for Michael Bike insisted that it was no ordinary gold, but part of a fairy hoard and implored Red Jack to return it to the riverbank. Michael Bike waxed lyrical on the tragedy that would overtake them if they continued to offend the fairy people: their home would be invaded, their salt would spill, their milk would turn, their drink cellars would be raided, their hair and eyebrows cut in their sleep and all manner of other disasters were foretold and Conor was ready to admit it was one of the postman's best exaggerations when he suddenly perceived that Michael was in earnest and, in fact, had a huge respect or, to be more accurate, fear of, the little people.

Chapter 3

From then on, Conor awaited his chance. Michael Bike lived deep in the upper valley and would emerge every morning to visit the post office and then deliver his allotted mail and telegrams. From mid afternoon onwards he would be found in the pub and his measure of sobriety on the journey home could be gauged by whether he attempted to ride or led his bicycle back towards the interior.

Early one Thursday evening in July, Conor was bringing his fiddle back down to the pub in preparation for the weekend music sessions when he spotted Michael Bike on his way home, leading his vehicle rather than riding it. Racing to get ahead of him on the road, Conor chose to hide behind a raised outcropping of rock to the left of the lane and, as the man neared, started to play, very softly a new piece of music he had learned from Grieg's "Peer Gynt" called "In the Hall of the Mountain King". It was an unusual piece that started off with a quiet pizzicato, then used short bow movements and rose by degrees to a crescendo and was both mystical and menacing. A halt and exclamation told Conor that Michael Bike had come within range of hearing and, after a few more bars, Conor started to talk in an impressive, high pitched, melodic tone: "Michael Bike, is it? Oh we are pleased to see you on the road. Word has reached us of the wonderful stories you tell and we have a mind to take you back to our realm so you can keep us entertained." The sound of a bicycle being dropped was followed by a roar from Michael: "Fiends! Stay back now. I have an iron knife with me, I'm well able for you". Increasing the volume of the music slightly, Conor sneered: "Set cold iron on us would you, boy. We'll see about that now. We have you surrounded on both sides and you can't point that knife all ways at once. Grab him now!" At this point, bicycle abandoned, Michael Bike ran for home at quite an impressive pace with a few "Holy Mother" and "God help me" ejaculations and Conor's music, swelling now to an impressive crescendo, accompanied him for quite a distance in the quiet of the countryside.

Chapter 4

Conor sensed an air of growing consternation amongst the locals at the pub the following week. Michael Bike arrived mid afternoon, as usual, for his porter, but left well before dark and hadn't told a tall tale in days. Finally, they could take it no longer and decided to bring matters to a head. "No sign of that fairy invasion yet, Michael" said Red Jack, certain that

would do the trick. Michael Bike hunched on his stool and stared into his porter glass, wordlessly. That bait having failed, one of the locals felt he was onto a winner bringing up the Widow McCann. The woman concerned was relatively young, childless and in possession of a farm of over twenty acres and had been the unfortunate butt of Michael Bike's stories for a few months now, with various prospective suitors, including Conor, supposedly being spotted by the eagle-eyed postman hiding in hedges sighing deeply, peering in windows looking lovelorn and knocking on doors with bunches of flowers, all in pursuit of the poor lady's heart or, rather, the poor lady's acres, there being few Romeos but many land hungry second sons in the district. "I have nothing to say on the matter" stated Michael Bike, with quiet dignity, finishing his glass and leaving for home. "He's not himself" stated Red Jack, staring after him. "He's strange, alright" agreed a neighbour of Michael's from the upper valley: "He came riding down the lane this morning at a mad speed, as if the Devil was after him and nearly had me and my morning's milk in the ditch, so he did". "Do you think he came off that bike of his and hit his head?" volunteered another drinker, more medically minded, and, at that point, Conor beat a hasty retreat from the bar, his father finding him slumped, helpless and crying with laughter on the stairs a short while later.

But time, being a great healer, and with no further forays by the fairy folk forthcoming, Michael Bike slowly regained his appetite for storytelling and his inventions, once again, came to rival the glory of those relayed in former days.

The Little People, who had dislodged centuries of dirt so Conor could find the coin, as a thank you for all the music he had shared with them, thought it was great crack altogether.

Chapter 5

City people seldom look to the horizon, in part because there is not much of a horizon to speak of in their crowded spaces, but also due to the fact that there is always a convenient doorway, tea room or pub to retreat to if the weather turns sour.

Country people ceaselessly scan the horizon, looking for low cloud and mist at a distance, feeling for a sudden drop in temperature, or looking on the flights of birds, the huddling of sheep or cows lying down in a field all as good indicators of the approach of bad weather. This is because all their work is predicated on good weather and no sensible person would

be found out in the exposed spaces when the wind rose and the rain lashed.

But you didn't need to be a weather master to know that an ominous storm was unfolding over Ireland as the year turned and 1920 began.

With the momentum in public support gained after the Easter Rising in 1916, Sinn Féin had won a landslide victory in the December 1918 elections and, on 21st January 1919 had formed a breakaway government, Dáil Éireann. In September 1919 the British Government responded to the increasing tensions by outlawing the new institutions and the war between Republicans and the British intensified. In order to shore up policing in their colony against increasingly successful Republican operations, the British started to recruit auxiliary troops, mostly English Protestants, and deliberately gave them carte blanche to terrorise the Irish Catholic populace with impunity, in the hope of undermining support for the Republican cause. They became known as the Black and Tans due to the mix of colour of their uniforms.

Talk in the pub soon turned to the greater matters unfolding around them. Republicans stepped up attacks against RIC barracks and tax offices in the North at the start of 1920 and retaliation was swift. The winds of war were drawing closer. Sectarian rioting had broken out in both Derry and Belfast in the early summer and Michael Bike had sad news to relay to his neighbours one evening in mid August from much closer to home.

"Three lads" he began, to an attentive audience, "not one of them above sixteen summers were sitting on the stone bridge on the Omagh road, minding their own business, mind you, and bothering nobody and a lorry full of Black and Tans passed them on the road. Now they didn't shout after it or throw a stone or do anything but those bastards opened fire on them from the rear of the truck: for nothing, for target practice or just for spite and the three young ones fell into the river, riddled with British bullets. One died clean with a bullet to the heart, another was injured but fell onto rocks which put paid to him and one was only winged and, falling into deeper water, managed to hold onto a clump of rushes by the riverbank until he was hauled out. The keening and wailing and outbursts of rage are a sight to behold, it is said". The news was greeted with grim solemnity by the gathered audience, who were reflecting on the dangers of the new world around them, with no rhyme or reason to it and, seemingly, no defence against the sudden onset of disaster. The slow, familiar rhythm of the countryside had been disturbed. Red Jack and

Conor were particularly muted in their responses, being a discreet but committed Republican family whose storerooms had housed far more than flour and porter at differing times.

And perhaps this can explain why Conor was so quick to wake and respond to the rapping on the window of the pub door in the wee hours some three weeks afterwards. He was off the sofa and down the stairs in seconds, to be confronted by two strangers on the doorstep. Covert introductions having been made, Conor showed the men into the bar and sat them by the still glowing fire, throwing on more turf and placing a whiskey bottle and two glasses beside them before quietly returning upstairs to wake his father. "Get that leftover stew warming" instructed Red Jack, quickly taking control of the situation and Conor returned downstairs a short while afterwards balancing two steaming bowls and some bread on a tray.

The two strangers, both Northerners from their speech, advised that they had carried out a raid earlier that evening on an RIC barracks in a neighbouring town. They had "borrowed" a motorcycle with sidecar and the passenger had sprayed the barracks with small arms fire as they flew past. They were fairly sure they had hit at least one sentry but their luck had not held and the motorcycle gave out on them a few miles from the valley entrance. They had, prior to the operation, memorised the nearest safe houses round about and the pub proved the closest to them. "Where did you leave the bike?" asked Red Jack. "We led it a ways down an old bog road and left it in a dip" responded the larger of the two men: "It won't be visible from the road or easy to find". "And where do you need to get to?" asked Red Jack. "We were heading for Derry but any major town will do us" the smaller man responded. Red Jack pondered the problem. "We will have to split you" he announced. "They will be looking for two men on the road. Conor, go and wake Father Pat and tell him he needs to see the Bishop urgently but we have a driver here for him I'm assuming one of you can drive?" "I can" said the smaller man, the big man indicated that he could not by shaking his head. Conor ran to rouse the priest, who understood immediately and asked no unnecessary questions; it was a ruse which had been used before with success and Conor returned to find the smaller man dressed in his father's best black suit and struggling to wedge himself into his father's best shoes. Red Jack mentally thanked God, once again, that their priest had: (a) turned out to be a good Irishman; and (b) that he had a passion for driving and had brought with him the only (Catholic) car within twenty miles; a Crossley 20/25. It was decided that the small man would drive the priest to Armagh and then

make his own way from there and that Conor would guide the big man over the mountain range which ran in a crescent formation most of the way to Magilligan Point where the man could take a boat over to Donegal and work his way down to Derry from the north.

Father Pat duly arrived at the pub in full clerical garb as the first tinges of light were brushing the horizon. He had driving goggles and a flat cap to complete his chauffeur's uniform and insisted that the man leave his pistol behind. "They may stop and search us, young man," he stated: "But they will have no reason to hold us unless we give them one. Believe me, no-one bothers a man in uniform. We will keep the hood off the car and you keep your eyes open and your mouth shut and leave any talking, if needs be, to me in the back." They were soon on their way and attention turned to the big man. Red Jack felt it would be wise for him to lie low for a day or maybe two. The British forces might drive straight past the valley entrance but there was no guarantee; the struggle had now come very close to home. "I know where we can hide without being found" said Conor and stopping only to pocket his small store of coin and place some basic provisions in a flour sack, he and the big man were soon winding their way from the back of the pub up towards the old ruin. Red Jack was, meanwhile, bundling up the small man's discarded clothes for disposal and wiping the pub of any trace of their visit. Conor noted the big man's movements and saw, with relief, from the way the man picked a good trail, keeping to firm ground, and making the most of the folds in the land by way of camouflage, that he would be travelling with a man from the country. Mountain walking was dangerous to the unwary and Conor had been afraid he might have a novice to mind.

There was room in the haven for both men to stretch out comfortably with Conor's blankets and the big man, who introduced himself as Danny, soon fell asleep with Conor following suit not long afterwards.

They awoke together to the sound of rifle fire some hours later. Conor edged forward cautiously to the cave mouth and carefully pushed the gorse bush aside. He saw from the quality of light that it was mid afternoon and also saw billows of dark smoke wafting skyward from the direction of the village. He would be able to see nothing else unless he left his cave. Ignoring an almost overwhelming impulse to run towards home, he inched back and informed Danny that the English were in the valley and the long wait began. He had never felt so helpless and the night had never seemed so long.

Chapter 6

A grim faced Conor cautiously left the cave the next morning. Hugging the hillside, he soon spotted the red hair of his father and two younger brothers and made towards them. The post office had been burned, as had their home and the church. The priest's house, school and a couple of other cottages appeared untouched but the heart had been torn from the village. Not normally demonstrative, Conor couldn't help but hug his father on the road. "We are all fine, lad" said Red Jack in response to the unasked question on Conor's face. They started with the post office and worked down so we had time to grab what we could and head for the countryside but they clubbed the post master and he is in a bad way. Father Pat returned last evening and turned straight round again to take him to the hospital. You can tell your man that the little fellow made it safe to Armagh."

"I heard rifle fire?" queried Conor. It took Red Jack a few moments to answer and Conor realised, with amazement, that his father was fighting back tears. "It was Michael Bike" he managed finally. "He came back from his rounds and, by that time, the pub was on fire as well as the post office and the soldiers had just opened the church doors and were splashing fuel inside so it would go up like tinder and Michael came up the lane and stopped dead in his tracks. Then he just dropped his bike and walked towards them. Not fast, not slow; just a steady stroll. He cursed them from a height. He called their mothers whores and said he wouldn't bother mentioning their fathers as they were bastards, all of them. He cursed them and their seed for three generations. One of the soldiers took a shot at him then and it must have hit because Michael was spun round and went down for a minute, then he stood upright again and continued that stroll of his, right at them and he started quoting the 1916 Proclamation to them, word for word and his voice was loud and clear and didn't falter, but he didn't get to finish it as two of them aimed at him then and he went down and didn't stir again and they lifted him, the heathens, and threw him into the Church before setting fire to it. I've never seen the like of it, Conor. It was the bravest thing I have ever seen and the most foolish. He bore down on the enemy like one of the warriors of old and I am torn between sadness at a life wasted and pure joy that one of us had the courage to do such a thing. I'll never forget it. It even seemed to take the wind out of the English as they left soon after."

Conor went and knelt near the still smoking church and said a prayer for Michael Bike, adding in parting: "I only hope, when my time comes,

Michael, that I can meet death as bravely as you did.” He then returned to his father and said: “Will you rebuild the bar, Da?” “Not until all this is over at any rate” replied his father: “I’ll not rebuild it just to have someone rip it down again. We are at Phonsie’s farm and likely to stay there until all this is finished.”

Conor looked his father in the eye. “I’m away to do my bit, Da, I won’t be back for a while I’d say.” “Well, I won’t try and stop you, son” replied his father slowly “But get word to us if you can, now and again, and we’ll be watching the road every day until you come back to us.”

Chapter 7

Conor returned to the cave and updated Danny on his friend’s escape and what had transpired. “We’ll have a bite to eat and then get going” Conor advised. It was a quiet breakfast. Danny saw the grief on the young man’s face and apologised for bringing trouble to the valley. “You didn’t bring the evil here” replied Conor “And I should be the one apologising. I should have been out fighting with you this whole year past but it took evil to arrive at my own doorstep to spur me on to do what was right. But, I’m with you now, if you can find a use for me?”

*“Glaine ár gcroí (Purity of our hearts)
Neart ár ngéag (Strength of our limbs)
Beart de réir ár mbriathar (Action to match our speech).”*

Danny replied and the two men divided up their gear and slipped silently away towards higher ground.

Chapter 8

God and Goddess, husband and wife, Ned and Nemon, taking the form of two of the Little People, sat companionably above the roadside on the high pass to Derry. They had settled themselves under a lone Hawthorn tree and watched as the sun burned through the early morning mists, unveiling a rolling landscape of varied hues and majestic beauty. The road snaked along the side of the mountain below them, skirting in places a deep valley hewn by water coming off the hills over the space of millennia. They linked with the falcon drifting high on the currents of the air, they curled with the vixen in her den, they listened to the cheerful music of the bubbling waters; they waited

Chapter 9

George Greene was having a bad day. It had started out poorly and was getting progressively worse. An RIC cortege had been due to leave the barracks, two Crossley Tenders, one with eleven troops and one with supplies and two staff cars, one at front and one to the rear. This was standard deployment to counter the threat of ambush and travelled at high speed, or as high as the bad roads would allow, with gaps between the vehicles. But one of the staff cars had developed an excessive blow-by in the crankcase and oil had spilled out everywhere so that was a long job and put that car out of action and, to make matters worse, the best of the two Crossley tenders had simply refused to start and George had tried everything he could think of to get it going and simply could not find the cause, which was highly unusual as he was very good at his job.

George was a cockney from Hackney. He had got an offer from his two first cousins to fix him up with a medical certificate to ensure he could stay at home and not go to war. Ernie and Ron were dodgy characters and had already recognised the opportunities to be seized with black market goods in wartime. They preferred to have family around them, feeling that they would prove more trustworthy than outsiders but George had wanted to do the right thing and had been supported in his decision by his pretty wife Pearl. He had been lucky too in that his skill with engines had seen him move into a support role, fixing a range of motor vehicles away from the front lines and he thankfully had never had to suffer the horrors of the trenches. No, the real problems had started when he got home, with so many others, to find no assistance and no prospect of work. He felt as if he had been thrown on the scrapheap after giving his all for King and Country. His cousins had thrown him the odd few bob here and there to keep his nose above water and he got the odd day with a neighbour who was a rag and bone man, for which he had been grateful, but he had found himself slowly sinking into a mire of inertia and depression; he felt used and unmanned. He had heard about the policing jobs in Ireland with the RIC and was attracted by the prospect of work and the good rates of pay on offer and he had pulled a few strings to get accepted, them not normally taking on married men and, again, his skill with engines had swung things his way. But here things were taking a turn for the worse. A new bunch called the Auxiliaries had arrived. They were all ex-officers and strutted around, arrogant and superior wearing silly Tam O'Shanter caps and word had already reached George of their methods: burning, looting, killing without cause and, as no-one had called a halt to the proceedings, it was obviously sanctioned by the men upstairs and it was some of these

Auxiliaries who were earmarked for the transport. George couldn't stand them and a prime example was standing in front of him now, glaring at him as if he was personally responsible for all this engine trouble. "We will just have to load as much as we can on the one truck we do have" sneered the Auxiliary. George cleared his throat in anticipation of calling after the man to try and reason with him as he obviously didn't have the sense to know that an overloaded vehicle was a dangerously unstable one, but he was halted by a tug on his sleeve from his mate, Bob. "Screw 'em" said Bob under his breath, "Let's go and get a mug of tea".

Chapter 10

The car moved into sight at the start of the high pass, an elegant vehicle which took the bends well. Inside, Auxiliary Kit Russell had just been boasting of his unit's successes in the south to a singularly unimpressed looking RIC constable seated beside him. "We'll soon bring these Northern Catholics to heel, now the gloves are off and my men are here" Kit predicted, the inference being that the RIC hadn't been making much of a job of it up until then.

Ned and Nemon, from their airy vantage point, both fixed their gazes on the Crossley tender following the car and the air seemed to hum with a strange energy.

The front right hand tyre of the tender exploded and it was on the worst piece of road imaginable as a deep ravine scored the earth to the left of the road. The driver, feeling the lorry veer in that direction did the worst possible thing he could do; he slammed on the brakes and jerked the wheel to the right violently. The tender, almost in slow motion, started to overturn and seemed to float for a moment on the edge of the road, engine and men both screaming, before rolling down the ravine in an explosion of noise which shocked the surrounding nature into a state of hushed quiet. The leading car rolled to an unsteady stop. "Don't you think" said the RIC Constable archly after a few moments of stunned silence had passed: "that you had better go and see if any of your men are still alive down there?"

Chapter 11

Ned and Nemon, Gods of War, had meted out justice to the men who had killed Michael Bike, the men who had extinguished the music, the laughter, the prayer and the storytelling from their beloved valley. Their

work complete, they returned, content, to the unwinding path between worlds.

The Priest (1980s)

The Priest had been blessed with a genuine vocation. He loved the monastic life, the orderly routines, the contemplation, the access to the best literature, spiritual and temporal, but, most of all, he loved God. In his nature, he was a strange mixture of opposites: conservative but radical, quiet but fierce, humble but self-assured: in other words, he was his own man and true to himself. He was never seen without his clerical garb, seeing himself as a servant of Christ and, therefore, a servant of the people, on a 24-hour basis, but he sometimes wondered what it would be like to have a job he could shrug off at 5.00pm. He had a great appetite for life and one lifetime just didn't seem enough to enable him to experience all that he wanted to. He had been blessed with a good intellect but had no scholarly detachment. He gave fully of himself to the people around him: he laughed with them, he mourned with them, he battled to help them: a true imitation of Christ.

And, sometimes, the world weighed heavy on him and he would recognise (or be told by one of his brethren) that a break was needed. That was when he would literally head for the hills and climb the mountain paths, finding solace in nature. The priest was deeply involved in trying to promote dialogue and understanding between the warring factions in an increasingly tragic, bitter and heart-rending conflict and it was during a lull in one of these proceedings that he had found himself talking to a veteran Republican from the Civil War days. The man was lean, still straight and alert despite his advanced years, with the very pale complexion which denoted that his hair must have been of a ginger shade before it turned to white. His pale blue eyes shone with cold calculation and a smile seldom touched his lips. He appeared hewn from stone; adamant and unyielding. The man mentioned that he had been born in this area and that was partly why the priest was here on this August day, sitting on a shelf of rock, in a beautiful and largely unspoilt valley viewing the ruined remains of what had obviously once been a great tower or castle, having spent the morning climbing the hills in its vicinity. The priest could find no answer in the beautiful, soft landscape to the riddle of what force or pressure could have shaped this ordinary man into the legendary warrior he had become but the small hotel he had booked into had been kind enough to provide him with a nice packed lunch and he was in a

mellow mood, tamping tobacco into his pipe and preparing himself for the best smoke of all, that which came after a meal.

He had grown up in southern Ireland and his nearest town had boasted a 13th Century castle so he had an interest in old buildings and amused himself by trying to gauge the period of the ruin in front of him but it was a vast confusion of stone with just two walls left, half standing so he was unable to piece the puzzle together to his satisfaction. His thoughts were just turning to a return to his car and a leisurely drive back for a nap and then an early supper when a familiar call floated to him over the furze and heather: "Father! Father!". A man had emerged from the right of the ruin and was making his way over to him. The Priest met him half way. "Father, thank God, you were sitting there. My dog has found something that perhaps you should see". The dog appeared on cue, a small short haired terrier, spotted white and brown. The man was well built, grey haired, roughly in his late fifties with a country accent and an old world deference to a man of the cloth that was fast disappearing in modern Ireland. "Spot found a hole in the base of the cliff and I took a quick look in, trying to get him out and I think there's a body in there". The problem identified, the Priest had no hesitation in following the man and, just to the right of an angle of still standing wall, the Priest saw a small opening in a slight depression of ground, partially hidden by a furze bush. "Did you go all the way in?" asked the Priest, his first thought being that, if it were a crime scene, it should be disturbed as little as possible. "No, Father, I just stuck my head in but I thought I saw bones". "Bones" rather than "body" noted the Priest. "Perhaps if you stay outside and keep hold of Spot there, I'll just have a quick look and see if we need to contact the RUC". By the look that passed over the man's face, the Priest saw that he was relieved to be absolved of the responsibility.

The Priest carefully lowered himself into the depression and ducked into the opening, taking one pace to his right along the inner cave wall in order to allow light from the hole to enter into the void. He then waited for his eyes to adjust.

He was in a chamber roughly ten feet by eight feet reaching high above him. He could see some light filtering in from the near left hand corner about twenty five feet above his head and he realised he was in a sink hole: a very short and common name for the result of a process which had taken millions of years where either a fault or weakness in the rock, together with a constant flow of rainwater had weathered the limestone to form its present vertical space. It did seem, however, that some later

upheaval of the earth had arrested the development of this particular sink hole which, although smooth walled from the passage of water, had not developed into a cave system such as could be found to the south west in Fermanagh. It could not be a well, which would have started at ground level and been bored into the water table, something the early castle building engineers had been surprising good at doing. He was, however, pleased with his initial caution when entering as he could not be sure whether this was the bedrock he was standing on or an accumulation of debris over time that could give way. He knew these sink holes could extend deep into the earth.

Having discerned where he was, he now extracted the petroleum lighter from his pocket and used it to scan the ground around him. In the near left hand corner, he saw signs that water had started to enter the sink hole again in small quantities and had washed away some of the ground sediment, exposing, no doubt with the assistance of a scrabbling Spot, a few fragments of bone and the unmistakable lower jawbone of a human being.

A shadow crossed the light of the cave entrance. "Are you OK Father?" boomed a voice. "Yes, yes What's your name?" "Peter, Father". "Peter, it's fine, don't come in now; I'll be out to you in a minute". But Peter, in his concern, must have lost control of his animal because Spot appeared in the cave entrance. Swivelling his head towards the Priest and baring his small teeth in an unmistakable display of warning and ownership he dashed to the left and grabbed a piece of bone ... "Rib?" thought the Priest in passing ... and dashed back into the sunlight. Peter's agitation was immediately apparent and he seemed to be making several unsuccessful attempts to retrieve the item. "I can't get him Father" shouted Peter excitedly and the Priest thought quickly: "Peter, it's all right, that was an animal bone, I'm sure. Calm down now and, when he comes back put him on a lead if you have one". There was no guidance in the Code of Canon Law that covered cannibal canines.

The bones were old, very old, and the Priest now felt he could hazard an educated guess. The castle was probably Norman in origin and he was standing in an oubliette, aptly named from the French "to forget". Now the Priest in his life, both spiritually and physically, had encountered "evil" and, on occasion "Evil" but his own personal horror and indignation was aroused more than anything by indifference to the suffering of others so, for him, the oubliette was an absolute Evil. To throw one of God's creation into a pit with no light, no food, no water; to be indifferent as to whether

they died from the fall, were smashed at the bottom to die later in agony or, if they survived the fall relatively unscathed, left to endure a slower and more pitiable death was, to him, an unspeakable act. He was also aware that, notwithstanding the Normans, it was a method picked up and employed with enthusiasm by more than one Celtic chieftain.

The Priest was not one, in his personal prayer life, for lengthy incantations. He made a sign of the cross and said simply: "Lord, look upon thy children" secure, in his deep faith, that the message would be heard.

Now the Priest turned to practical matters. He liked archaeology without being particularly fond of archaeologists and some of their methods. If this were reported, no doubt, someone would eventually arrive and layer, by layer, strip the dead of their earthly shroud. Length of bone and condition of teeth would be examined and various suppositions made. There might even be some historical finds, given that oubliettes were often also used to dispose of castle waste and breakages. But no attention would be paid to the spiritual welfare and soul of the deceased that would be found. Being a good Catholic, the Priest was aware that the afterlife was a Divine enigma; being a good Celt, his heart told him that to disturb the dead was wrong and could even be perilous. Even worse, the recent finds in his own county, known as the Derry-naflan Hoard, had spawned a breed of avid weekend scavengers, armed with metal detectors and dreaming of Celtic gold, who spent their weekends foraging in fields with fairy forts, pursued by furious farmers. There was also the risk of further animal incursions and a real health and safety risk if the ground in there turned out not to be solid ground at all. In short, it was clear to the Priest that, all in all, the entrance should be closed off and the dead left in peace. The challenge now was how to ensure that Peter would be of the same mind.

Exiting the sink hole, the Priest took some time brushing down his black clothing and then prepared and lit his pipe, surveying the scene around him. He had found the pipe to be a great aid in discussions and, if he wanted to ponder a point or consider what to say next, or, indeed, if he wanted to give another party additional time to consider an issue, he would automatically reach for his pipe, whether he wanted a smoke or not, and there would follow a natural break in the flow of talk without undue impatience or the awkwardness that can arise in a conversational pause. Peter waited expectantly. "The bones are very old, Peter, and I don't think it is something that would be of interest to the RUC. I've a mind it is a

famine victim we have here, or maybe more than one, who crawled in for shelter and didn't have the strength to leave again." "Poor bastards Sorry, Father" responded Peter shaking his head. "Now I have a mind to bless the site and maybe look for some suitable stones with which to block up that entrance so the poor souls can be left in peace. What do you say to that, Peter?" The Priest deliberately didn't look up to the wall on his left where a suitably large square of dressed stone balanced precariously on the partly demolished wall. In his experience, if a person took ownership of a problem as their own, they were far more inclined to be married to the solution. "Sound, Father, sound."

The Priest reached into his pocket and took out two tools of his craft which he, nor any other priest in Northern Ireland at the time, were, sadly, ever without. A stole and holy oil for Anointing of the Sick, or Extreme Unction, as the Priest still called it in his mind. Placing the stole around his neck, he returned to the entrance in the rock and intoned some prayers, making a sign of the cross at the top of the entrance with the holy oil. "We will say a decade of the Rosary now Peter" instructed the Priest. Halfway through, from Peter's body language, the Priest surmised that Peter had spotted the overhanging stone. He wriggled like an eight year old in class, bursting to tell teacher the answer. Prayers said, Peter pointed with enthusiasm "The stone there, Father, at the top sticking out. I'm thinking between us we could shift it and it might do right well". "Good man yourself" said the Priest "but first, catch Spot and tie him soundly so there's no risk he'll rush in and be hurt". Spot having been safely sequestered, the two men climbed the inner side of the wall and it was the work of a careful few minutes only before the stone toppled to earth with a resounding thud, lodging itself in the depression and covering up a good portion of the entrance. The Priest was satisfied that the part of the furze bush that hadn't been squashed by the stone would soon grow and totally cover the remainder.

The men shook hands solemnly and Peter collected his dog and went on his way. "Now, if there were more priests like that in the world" he reflected "I would be at Mass more often".

The Priest watched Peter depart and judged that he was a sound and kindly man who was unlikely to be tempted to disturb the peace of the oubliette. The Priest was slightly downhearted. "God, is there nothing in your creation that mankind cannot sully and use for evil purposes?" he thought. He stayed to finish the rosary in its entirety and began the walk

back to the road. “Not the Potter, but the Potter’s clay” he reminded himself and his natural optimism started to resurface.

Danaan, Mother of the Gods, stood high on the hill watching the departing priest and, with otherworldly eyes, saw the advanced soul shrouded in earthly flesh. She cast a blessing upon the wind to swoop and encompass him. “Lives innumerable you will save” she intoned: “A Warrior of Light, not of Battle. Wanting nothing; giving all. You will scale a mountain, no-one thought climbable and earn the respect of all Men of Worth.”

The Meeting (21st Century)

It was a bright spring morning. From the portal between worlds in the mountains to the north of Ireland, guardians of this world met each other again in their real form as beings of pure spirit. They had been given many names. in many times, in many countries and in many worlds but, for the purposes of this tale, we will acknowledge them by their titles as Irish Gods and Goddesses:

Danann (Mother of the Gods);
Ned and Nemon (Husband and Wife, God and Goddess of War);
Manannan (God of the Sea);
Dian Cécht (God of Healing);
Brightit (Goddess of Poets and Smithies).

And we will creep now, like little mice, into their circle of conversation and, maybe we, mere mortals, may catch a glimpse of the eternal; hear, for a second, the music of the spheres; gain an insight into the purpose and method of our Creator. Let us listen and see.

Danann: “Well met my brothers and sisters. It is good that we pause from our labours for a short space to review our work on this world as a whole before we enter the unwinding path once more and carry on the great work in other worlds at other times.”

Manannan: “It is over 7,000 years, as time is reckoned here, from the Great Flood and the land and sea has been largely settled for near 4,000 years but, now, my seas are rising and the lands of ice to the north and south are melting rapidly. We are approaching another time of upheaval, challenge and change.”

Dian Cécht: “Healing plants have been spread and nurtured, and some humans have knowledge of their uses but in many places the earth has been poisoned and abused. The balance of nature has been disturbed.”

Brightit: “Communities, too dependent on technology, have lost knowledge of the arts needed to survive and knowledge is no longer being handed on from generation to generation. All communities have some form of written language but the oral tradition has been lost over time and

education is largely parrot learning utilising retentive memory with no encouragement for an individual to grow in their own wisdom.”

Nemon: “Humans take naturally to war. They are by nature, acquisitive and greedy and the warrior is held in high esteem by all cultures.”

Brightit: “But so are the poets and the craftsmen. Humans can create or destroy in equal measure, according to which energies they choose to use. Wisdom comes when a proper balance is found.”

Ned: “Trace memory of all our teaching is instilled in all human groupings and every culture will call upon our assistance using a myriad of names although the new names such as “the Collective ID”, “Synchronicity” and “Sub Conscious”, for me, lack the grandeur of past titles.”

Brightit: “The name does not matter, it is the deed that counts.”

Danann: “Portals have been destroyed in many lands and we must plant more, in the few sparsely inhabited spaces left, to assist us in our travel on the unwinding path between worlds.”

Nemon: “You were wise, Sister Brightit, to have placed your portal here, in the earth of this barren cave. It has survived undisturbed.”

Brightit: “As you have said yourself, Nemon, humans can be acquisitive and greedy and I felt this humble place would protect my portal long after the ones placed in Delphi, Egypt and elsewhere, in marvellous constructions, had been disturbed and despoiled.”

Danann: “This world is now entering a period of instability where civilisations can wither and die. We must all plant seeds of wisdom and share such knowledge that human beings can currently assimilate and our role will be largely as teachers as humankind faces an existential crisis, in part brought about by its own folly, in part because everything has its own, natural beginning and end in the great wheel of life. Our hope is that humankind grows in wisdom and spiritual maturity as time passes on this beautiful planet that gives them all the resources they need for life but the option, to hurt or to heal, to nurture or destroy, is the responsibility of each individual. Time will tell.”

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About the Author & Artist

About The Author

Eileen Coyne is London Irish, born in Hackney and raised in Leyton, East London, with both parents hailing from Renvyle, Connemara. She first had poetry published with the Letterfrack Writers Group in the late 1990s. *Oubliette* is her first novel.

The concept for the book came about when she noticed references on the internet to pre-Christian Irish culture (see Bibliography) which inspired her to write this fictional work in the hope that it would act as a signpost to guide those of Irish descent (or anyone interested in ancient cultures) to examine an era of Irish history still relatively unknown.

Eileen lives and works in Spain. She is a human rights activist and keen environmentalist and donated land in Salruck, Connemara to Green Sod Ireland, a Land Trust charity, in 2013, www.greensodireland.ie.

About the Artist

John Frazer is a Belfast born, Dublin based, artist. He depicts Irish cityscapes and pop cultural icons like Guinness pints and Georgian doors. He has been working in George's Street Arcade and Howth Market for the last six years where his work is for sale. <http://www.johnfrazerprints.com>