

THE RABBIT INSPECTOR



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CHAPTER ONE

The Crouching Man

All tragedies have an antecedent history where separate lives or separate chains of events suddenly come together with unforeseen consequences—the “convergence of the twain.” We must begin then, with a history of the farming property *Inishmore* to properly set the scene for its central role in that chain of events known locally as “the shin bone affair.” And we must begin not only with a history but with a geography as well. For, in this age when the vast majority live in great cities, it is easy to forget just how much a local geography was intertwined with human lives in former times. The sense of place is ineradicable from a human life and that sense of place forms part of our identity. Until recently, it was common in most districts to differentiate families bearing the same surname by reference to their location. And if the prophets of old came from the desert, perhaps there is a spiritual geography as well as a physical one. For it is surely true, as the shin bone affair amply demonstrated, that landscape works powerfully on the mind.

Most farming districts have their unofficial historian. In the district of Ryleford, that historian was Patrick Crewther. He was known throughout the district as “The Penciller” for, in rural communities, nicknames were once common and, usually, very apt. In addition to pursuing matters of local history, Crewther also wrote regular letters to the local newspaper complaining of the state of the roads, the inefficiency of the postal service and other such matters. He was, in

short, a minor irritant to local authorities but a useful resource for the *Ryleford Guardian*, whose editor was almost always in need of useful copy.

But the history of the district was his great love, not least because his own ancestors had settled locally in early colonial days. He had heard it said of historians that they were people who lived in the past because they could not bear the intolerable burden of the present. Secretly, the idea pleased him for he knew it to be true in his case. As a farmer he had not really ‘made a go of it’ as they say, and his farming practices really belonged to an earlier age. In truth, he was not ‘cut out’ to be a farmer and he saw himself, not without justification, to be more of a scholar than a man of the soil. He had received a good education and this served him well when he began delving into the historical records. It is to Crewther’s records, then, that we must now turn to obtain some necessary background to the events which would later take place in the district and more specifically, on the property *Inishmore*.

In fact, we must begin in pre-European times for, as Crewther had noted in his account, the hill at *Inishmore*, provided abundant evidence of an Aboriginal presence. There were dozens of middens on the property, recognizable as low mounds of dark-coloured soil. Here, for countless generations, the Aborigines had built their fires and, no doubt, cooked their meals. Such mounds were nearly always upon prominent rises—places where one might easily observe the approach of an enemy. The elevated hill, combined with the smoke from the fires, would also provide some relief from the unwanted attention of mosquitos which, in summer, swarmed over much of the lower country.

From time to time, farmers in the district turned up stone axe heads with their ploughs. Others, with a keener eye, had found grinding stones and spear heads. The presence of a significant Aboriginal population suggested that this was “good tucker country.” Crewther had suggested that the main food was probably brushtail possum, for the surrounding redgum woodland always carried a high population of possums. Many of the trees suffered from termite infestation and hollow limbs were everywhere in evidence. These provide the necessary shelter and breeding lairs for possums and the latter competed with cockatoos for the available sites. No-one had, as yet, come across an Aboriginal burial site but Crewther surmised that the great hill at *Inishmore* might well have been used for this purpose.

Under the provisions of the Robertson Land Acts of 1861, squatters were required to relinquish large parts of their runs to allow closer settlement by small farmers. James Patrick More was such a squatter and his run encompassed a vast area of land including the land of the present-day *Inishmore*. Not unreasonably, Crewther maintained that the name *Inishmore* simply meant “More’s island”, since “inish” was the Gaelic word for island. And indeed, when you stood atop of the great hill at *Inishmore* and looked out to the four points of the compass you were surrounded by a wide plain, stretching out for many miles. It was open woodland country and the colonial judge and writer, Barron Field had described it as a “mere sea of harsh trees.” Baillierie’s Gazetteer of 1866 made mention of *Inishmore*, but it was unclear as to whether, at that time, the name referred to a small hamlet or an individual property.

The hill itself and some of the surrounding lower rises comprised some 320 acres, the maximum selection allowed under the

Robertson Acts. The first selector was a man called MacIntyre, but Crewther was unable to hunt down further information concerning his background. The property then changed hands three times over the next eighty years and it had also, by this time, grown to some 800 acres. Sometime just after the Second World War, the Schofield family had acquired the property and it was still held by Schofield's wife when the discovery of the bone took place. The wife, however, had long since moved to the township of Ryleford, and the property was let out for agistment to nearby sheep farmers. The homestead was now unoccupied and had fallen into disrepair.

In geological terms, the great hill on *Inishmore* was a granitic batholith—a huge extrusion of igneous material subjected to enormous pressures below the earth surface. Later, when the covering strata had been removed by the forces of erosion, the more erosion-resistant granite mass had risen to a height of several hundred feet above the surrounding alluvial plain. Its surrounding slopes, derived from the parent rock were littered with great boulders of granite, rounded into curious shapes by the combined forces of wind and water. The long hill ran roughly east-west and at its western end fell away sharply, its steep side littered with shards and larger masses of fallen rock. Atop its western end, immediately before the sharp decline was a huge granite tor, known locally as “The Crouching Man.” The name was well chosen because, when viewed at a certain point along the main Ryleford road, it looked uncannily like a crouching human figure. There is something about very large rocks of this sort that works powerfully on the human imagination. We think of those great megaliths of Avebury and at other places. All were clearly of deep spiritual significance. Even today, modern pagans come to these sites and perform their rites.

But, in the case of The Crouching Man, its unusual shape and its prominent position attracted the decidedly non-spiritual attention of local youths, who periodically painted large signs on it - "Happy New Year" or "Tigers for Premiers". When one examined the rock at closer quarters, other graffiti was in evidence. Most of the scrawled messages comprised simply a name and a date—some local lad out on a hunting expedition who wished to 'make his mark' in a literal sense. Other marks were simply indecipherable scrawls scratched on the face of the rock with a sharp object. One gained the impression that the only intention was to deface nature. In this sense, they were not unlike those barbarian invaders of old who were often wont to scratch a rune or two on some imposing local monument in lieu of the more time-consuming task of demolishing it.

Granite rock is, of course, a prized building material and the presence of a large stone quarry at the eastern end of the hill at *Inishmore* is hardly surprising. Many of the more prosperous of the early settlers had constructed their houses of this local granite. Granite is durable, appealing to the eye and, in the hands of a skilled stonemason, relatively easy to work. It can be split along natural cleavage lines and anyone with an eye for detail would have noticed that many of the rock fragments littering the slopes of the hill were possessed of at least one clean, flat face. Indeed, some of the great granite tors which stood on the hill like those Easter Island giants, were split in two along such a cleavage line, as if by some giant knife.

The quarry had long since been abandoned but, for at least two generations of *Inishmore* owners, it had provided a useful role as a rubbish dump. It began as a sort of graveyard for dead stock.

Carcasses of dead sheep and, at some much earlier time, the carcass of a dead horse, had been dragged to the edge of the quarry and tipped over. Here the whitened bones lay amongst tangled masses of rusted baler wire, rolls of old barbed wire, old tins, hoop iron, parts of long extinct machines—binders, chaffcutters, old clothes wringers, wagon rails—and other relics of a bygone age. In winter and spring, it was partially filled with water and the lighter debris floated about its surface. All of these things, one might say, were slain victims on the altar of progress. But, in the shin bone affair, they had their little part to play.

The other important feature of *Inishmore*—important for our purposes at any rate—was its rabbit population. Granitic soils attract rabbits like a magnet. They are as a rule, well drained and make for easy burrowing. The boulders and buried sheets of granite are an added attraction for they mean that the burrows extending under them are safe from the depredations of foxes who habitually dig down to the nesting chambers in search of kitten rabbits. The mounds of the old Aboriginal middens were especially targeted by the rabbits because the charcoal-rich soil made for very easy digging and the drainage was excellent. Although rabbits were to be found over the whole district, they were especially prevalent on *Inishmore* and, even to this day, are still in evidence. Whereas the rabbit warrens on the lower slopes and the surrounding plains could be easily destroyed by mechanical ripping or, in earlier times, by teams of men with shovels, the warrens on the great hill were almost impossible to deal with in this way. As a consequence, *Inishmore* was subjected to frequent inspections by the local Rabbit Inspector, James Reidy. He was employed by the then Pastures and Stock Routes Board, a separate part of the Land Occupation Branch. That Branch, in turn was, part of the Department of Agriculture. It was

Reidy's responsibility, amongst other things, to ensure that both rabbits and noxious weeds were kept under control in the district.

“When your neighbour's wall is on fire,” Horace said, “then it becomes your business.” This applies equally well to rabbits and noxious weeds. Most of the farm owners surrounding *Inishmore* had gone to considerable lengths in the past to rid their properties of rabbits and serious noxious weeds. Some had netted their boundaries back in the 1940s when rabbit netting purchases were subsidized by the government. However, “the big fire” of 1957 had destroyed much of the fencing and many had replaced the netting with cheaper, non-rabbit-proof alternatives. Now the rabbits, spilling out from *Inishmore* after the end of each breeding season, were a constant problem. And it was not only the rabbits. Where you have lots of rabbits you also have lots of foxes and lots of feral cats. The foxes, in particular, were regarded as lamb-killers, and their presence on *Inishmore* only compounded the problem. Each year, one or more of the neighbouring farmers complained to the local Board, and, each year, James Reidy climbed about the slopes of the great hill, taking notes on the number of active warrens and the prevalence of rabbit dunghills and diggings. Such evidence was necessary in the event that the property owner failed to take the prescribed control action and was brought before the court. Agisted land was nearly always a problem in this area because the occupier was not the owner and neither party wished to assume the responsibility and the cost of the necessary control works.

Rabbit inspectors and, indeed, any official capable of costing farmers either time or money, are usually disliked by the locals. Reidy though, was an exception. In the first place, he never adopted an officious tone when dealing with farmers. The over-exercise of

authority by minor government officials often betrays a certain ignorance and insecurity, and farmers, particularly older farmers, are expert in detecting such shortcomings. Again, such officials are often ‘imports’ from other places and know little of the district and its people. As such, they are treated as outsiders. But Reidy was a native of the district. Moreover he was well educated, not just in the ways of rabbits and noxious weeds but more generally in what we might call the vagaries and shortcomings of human nature. He had read widely in the classics and, at the same time, was a first-class field naturalist who knew his local flora and fauna well.

In fact, as a younger man Reidy had enrolled in a university course, largely to satisfy the wishes of his parents. His father, who had experienced the Great Depression of the 1930s was a firm believer in the ability of higher education to provide a better life. With a good education the young Reidy might get a good, permanent job with the government. “You can’t beat the old government cow,” he used to say with monotonous regularity.

But university life did not suit the young Reidy. He had enrolled in the humanities with a vague idea of becoming a secondary schoolteacher. It was not really his own choice but the suggestion of his father that had determined the direction of his studies. He disliked the brashness and self-assurance of his fellow students, their coarse jokes and their silly pranks. Not that he was a prude or one who could not appreciate humour. Rather, he was “an old head on young shoulders” as they say. The lecturers too, with one exception, struck him as being shallow—clever but not wise, and unable in their teaching to separate their own prejudices from their subject matter. The one exception was an elderly lecturer called McWhinney who took the students for Classical Literature. The old man had an evident love of his subject matter, no more so than when

introducing the students to Homer and Virgil and their influence on later literature. He had that rare ability of immersing the students in their subject matter so fully that they became, as it were, part of that which was being recounted. They felt the anguish of Achilles as the lifeless body of Hector was dragged through the dust. They imagined the emotions of travel-weary Ithacan sailors as they had their first glimpse of Mount Neriton: "Far seen with quivering leaves."

But this was not enough to sustain Reidy. His dislike of the whole scene continued to grow until, late in his second year, he decided to confide in old McWhinney and seek his advice. Upon hearing of Reidy's deep unhappiness, his sense of not really belonging in the city and his love of the countryside of his birth, the old man fell silent for a time then said "you don't learn the classics, my boy, to get a job, but to get a proper life." Then Reidy told him of the sacrifices his parents had made in order to provide for his education. He told him, too, of his father's desire that he should get "a good government job." "What sort of work interests you then?" To this Reidy replied, "anything that gets me back into the bush." Again, the old man thought for a while. He then opened the drawer of his desk, took out a sheet of paper and laid it carefully on the blotting pad atop his desk. Picking up his fountain pen (for he refused to use ballpoint pens) he began writing. The note was a short one—perhaps two paragraphs. He folded the paper, placed it in an envelope and, picking up his pen again, carefully printed a name on the envelope face—J.R. Warton.

"I want you to go down to the main office of the Department of Agriculture and ask to see the Director of the Land Occupation Branch. Tell the receptionist your name and that your visit is expected. I will make the necessary background arrangements.

There may be a job for you somewhere in that show.” As the grateful Reidy rose to depart, the old man gave one final word of advice. “Keep reading your books, my boy. They make the best of all companions. If you have good books, friends are superfluous.”

After Reidy had gone, the old lecturer picked up his phone and dialled out. “Jim, its Roy McWhinney. How are things in the den of iniquity?” The small talk continued for some time because these two were schoolboy friends and, later, friends at university. Then McWhinney got down to business. “I’m sending a young lad around to see you. Country boy. Very solid. You might be able to place him somewhere in your outfit. He’s an outdoor type. No good in an office I fear. Wouldn’t last in the groves of academe either—he’s too honest. He’ll have a note from me. I’ll stick by what I said in that note.”

Sometime later, a slightly nervous Reidy was conveyed along a thickly carpeted corridor to the office of the Director. Reidy had expected some imposing figure in a three-piece suit and sporting a university tie. Instead he was in the presence of a stocky little man whose hands seemed far too big for the rest of his body. He wore braces and a slightly threadbare shirt with sleeves rolled up. Pleasantries were exchanged and Reidy handed him the note. This he read, carefully and slowly. “Know anything about rabbits and weeds?” “Well, a bit sir. I used to keep ferrets and do a bit of trapping as a young kid.” After a long silence, Wharton directed him to sit down. “I see your lecturer thinks highly of you. I might be able to get you a job, but you will need to apply through the proper channels and, if you are successful, you will start at the bottom of the pile.” “That’s fine sir,” said Reidy. “Anything to get back to the bush.”

And so it was that Reidy returned to the district as junior sidekick to the then Rabbit Inspector for the area. Initially his parents were, of course, greatly disappointed, but that disappointment slowly turned to a mild pride as his suitability for his chosen trade became more and more evident. He was a quick learner, not least because he loved the job. When the old Inspector retired, Reidy was the natural choice. Of course, the duties of a Rabbit Inspector went far beyond the matter of rabbits. The Rabbit Inspector was also a noxious weeds inspector and an inspector of crown lands and stock routes. The latter job was wide-ranging. He might have to oversee grazing licences, report on the condition of the fences and upon any unlawful removal of trees or gravel or sand. In short, he was a jack-of-all-trades. And, amidst all of this, Reidy still found time for his books.

There is perhaps no better collective judge of human nature than a group of CWA ladies at afternoon tea. The ladies of the Ryleford CWA had, on several occasions, considered the case of young Reidy, the Rabbit Inspector. He was undoubtedly a good catch—intelligent, possessed of reasonably good looks and most importantly, a ‘steady type.’ Moreover he had that most valuable of commodities—a permanent government job with prospects of promotion. Perhaps he was not interested in girls at all, one of them had suggested. After all, there was no shortage of eligible young ladies. Indeed, on sale day each week (the combined sheep sale day and shopping day) it was common for proud matrons to display their eligible daughters to the world. The trio of one such lady and her two daughters of marriageable age were even given the nickname “the hen and pullets”. Other of the CWA ladies thought it was just a matter of inordinate shyness in female company. But

Mrs Sullivan, something of a matriarch in the district, maintained that Reidy was simply a loner whose only true loves were his work and his books. This judgement eventually prevailed and, in fact, it came close to the real truth of the matter.

What the ladies of the CWA could not have known was that Reidy had, indeed, been romantically involved with a girl during his university days. Though the knowledge of this fact may have caused the ladies to reconsider their final verdict, this new piece of intelligence, had they known of it, did not invalidate their final verdict. For Reidy's experience in this brief romantic interlude was to set up within him a certain distrust of deep emotional attachment to others. It caused him to retreat deeper within himself and to lavish his emotions instead upon the subject matter of his books.

He had met the girl soon after joining the university bush walking club, early in his second year of study. They had walked and talked together, exchanging small talk at first and then gradually revealing to each other their particular outlook on life, their aspirations for the future and, inevitably for a club of this sort, their views on the place of humans in nature. It was clear from the outset that they held very different views of the world. The girl was studying in the sciences and had imbibed, as it were, a certain empiricist outlook from her lecturers. God, she insisted, was just an illusion. And yet, she had some rather vague notion of a spirituality in nature. This, after all, was the approaching age of the Flower Children and of Gaia, the Earth Mother. Reidy's spirituality, on the other hand, was more traditional in nature. His parents were churchgoers and for some time as a child, he had attended Sunday school. Like most young people entering into maturity, he had undergone a type of spiritual crisis whereby the rather simplistic notions of God that he

had learned at Sunday school no longer provided a satisfactory explanation for the nature of the world and of his part in it.

For a time, he fell into a sort of uneasy agnosticism—uneasy because he felt the need for some firm foothold, some vantage point which would validate not just his own existence but, just as importantly, the worldview espoused in most of those great books of the western canon which he loved so much. Once, after McWhinney had given a lecture on the Pre-Socratics, Reidy came to his office seeking an explanation as to why the later Greeks and, indeed, the great thinkers of the medieval world, showed so little apparent interest in science—in determining causes and investigating the natural world around them. McWhinney loaned him two books to read—C.S. Lewis’s *The Discarded Image* and René Guènon’s *The Reign of Quantity*. These two books had an enormous influence on Reidy and he settled into a sort of non-specific Christianity.

But, as is often the case in young people, the physical and emotional attraction he felt for the girl outweighed all other concerns. They became increasingly intimate, culminating in Reidy spending the night with her at her flat. Here, in that quiet stillness which is the aftermath of passion, she had confided in him that, while she had known other young men and slept with them, he was different. She had, with all sincerity, intended this piece of intelligence to confirm her deepest feelings towards him and hoped that it would be reciprocated. The effect on Reidy however, was quite the opposite. Her casual approach to the whole business of human sexuality disturbed him deeply, and yet he did not have the courage to tell her. Rather, he began a process of gradual disengagement. Suggested meetings were put off because of study requirements and Reidy withdrew from the Walking Club. The breakup was gradual

and, though there were tearful moments on her part, within six months she had found another man and another confidant. For his part, Reidy withdrew into himself even further and became like Plotinus: “the alone seeking the Alone.”

These two aspects—a certain withdrawal from the social world around him and a love of ‘the Great Books’—when combined with his detailed knowledge of the district were to set the scene, as it were, for the unusual relationship of James Reidy with that man known throughout the district as Bluetongue. And it is to the history of Bluetongue that we must now turn if we are to fully understand the events surrounding the shin bone affair.

CHAPTER TWO

Bluetongue

When Sarah Kelly announced to her astonished CWA friends that she was expecting, the news travelled throughout the district rapidly. The matriarch Sullivan was only one of many who had made an immediate connection with the Sarah of the Old Testament. For, like Sarah and Abraham, the modern-day Sarah and her husband Bill were “getting on in years.” She was in her mid-forties and he was almost a decade older. Bill was a bachelor farmer and she had come to the district to teach at the Ryleford Primary School. They had met at the dance, which took place each Saturday fortnight at the Ryleford Mechanics Institute Hall. It was a typical country dance of a somewhat earlier era where each of the female participants was expected to “bring a plate” and the CWA ladies presided over the sit down supper. Music was provided by the Ryleford Melody Makers and the master of ceremonies, who also happened to be the local butcher, announced the program items: “Please take your partners for the Evening Three Step.”

It was, even by country standards, a very long romance, conducted with great propriety. Now, at the dances, they always ‘sat out’ for the progressive barn dance, this being the recognised signal that they were ‘serious’. There followed introductions to respective families and family relatives and, eventually, an engagement announcement in the ‘Personal’ column of the *Ryleford Guardian*.

James Reidy featured prominently amongst those relatives because his own mother and Bill Kelly were sister and brother. At about the same time, Sarah began attending Mass at the local Catholic Church, for her soon-to-be husband was a practicing Catholic. Soon after, she ‘took instruction’ from Father Casey. There was no coercion, either on behalf of the priest or of Bill Kelly but, rather, Sarah, who had been born of agnostic parents in the city, was immediately attracted to the beliefs and rituals of the Church and, especially, to its devotions concerning the Virgin Mary. True enough, she had first accompanied her soon-to-be husband out of some sense of duty, but the evident devotion she saw in the congregation made a great impression upon her and duty quickly turned to desire.

The wedding was a subdued affair, for neither partner could afford grand limousines, spectacular outfits, or lavish feasts. It was, nonetheless, a memorable day in the district. Father Casey’s sermon on that day was long-remembered for its wit and erudition and the simple but heartfelt speeches at the wedding reception, first by Bill’s older brother, then by Bill himself were universally praised thereafter. As the day wore on, Sarah disappeared for a time and then re-appeared to great applause in her very stylish ‘going away’ outfit—mostly a product of her own handiwork. The couple joined hands and Bill announced to the gathered assembly that it was now “time to get back home to the cows.” Corboy’s taxi, specially polished for the event, pulled up at the curb with a great many jam tins attached via strings to the bumper bar. With the clamour of the tins and the cheering of the crowd in their ears, they drove off towards the now setting sun and a new life.

In due course, the baby arrived—a strapping boy “mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms”. With what indescribable joy did Sarah

Kelly carry that baby boy back to the little farmhouse, there to be laid down in his little cot and gazed upon by his adoring parents? The ladies of the CWA, notwithstanding their earlier and somewhat unkind biblical comparisons, busied themselves with the knitting of coverlets, jackets and mittens, and with the provision of all of the impedimenta associated with the management of infant life. Soon thereafter, the infant was conveyed to the church where Father Casey christened him and gave him his name, Brendan Patrick Kelly. As the priest poured water over the tiny head, the infant kicked his legs violently, leading Casey to quip that the young fellow was almost certainly destined to play full-forward for the Ryleford Tigers.

It was not until young Brendan was about four years old that his parents realised all was not well. When other mothers visited with their small children, Brendan showed little inclination to play with them or even to acknowledge their presence. Although he had learned to talk and could communicate his needs and his desires to his parents, it was often difficult to engage him in conversation. This was particularly the case when visitors arrived and attempted to converse with him. He seemed withdrawn and remote. At first, his parents suspected a hearing problem, but the doctor at Ryleford had indicated that his hearing was normal. If the young boy was reluctant to talk, he certainly was not backward when it came to reading skills. Even at four years of age, he quickly learnt the words of 'beginner' texts. Much to the amazement and delight of his parents, he not only knew the words, but could repeat long chains of words after having read them only once or twice. And yet, there was something rather mechanical in this repetition as if he knew the words *qua* words, but nothing at all of their meaning - what they depicted or signified.

The question of schooling now occupied the minds of the parents. They consulted with Fr Casey and, via telephone, with the District Schools Inspector. Eventually, a decision was made to send the boy, now six years old, to the Convent School for Girls in Ryleford. It was felt that the company of small girls might be less of a challenge to the boy than the somewhat more boisterous company of boys. In fact, there were precedents and the nuns had previously admitted a small number of boys. Each morning, Sarah drove him to the school where he was delivered into the care of Sister Agnes, an elderly nun of gentle voice and kind disposition.

Here, young Brendan Kelly made some progress, albeit slow, in his writing skills and his ability to deal with numbers. His speech was still slow but his vocabulary was improving at a rapid rate—clearly related to his obvious interest in reading. Here, he was well ahead of other similarly-aged children. This was due in no small part to the efforts of Sister Agnes, who made a special effort to introduce him to new texts regularly and who rewarded his successful completion of each book with some little holy picture or hand-printed certificate. In the selection of these books, she noted that he especially liked books of the “action and adventure” type. Here, he seemed to show some real emotional engagement with the text and, not infrequently, asked questions concerning the characters involved.

One day she brought to him a small book, with drawings and text, entitled “King Arthur and his Knights.” This was a hugely simplified and sanitised account of Sir Thomas Malory’s book, with the Christian aspects suitably enhanced. The boy was enthralled. Within a few days, he could recount the whole book, word for word. He asked for more, but Sister Agnes could find little. Instead, she began to tell him her own stories of the knights. Sister Agnes was a

“late vocation” as they say, and had worked as a librarian for several years. She had been an avid reader and had read Malory and the Pearl Poet. To her delight, this interest in the literature of the knights spilled over into other areas. The boy suddenly showed an interest in drawing and, prompted by what he had seen depicted in that first little book on the knights, produced surprisingly good work. He asked too, about the Holy Grail and this gave Sister Agnes the perfect opportunity to introduce the boy to some basic Christian ideas.

One night after school, she communicated to Sarah Kelly the boy’s keen interest in Arthurian legend and suggested that the parents might seek out further books. This they did and, before long, the boy had his own small collection. Word of his interest in this area spread throughout the circle of friends and relatives associated with the Kellys, and they often dropped by with books or banners or plastic swords or little cardboard castles. One lady had even bought a chess board, but this was a bridge too far. Each new acquisition accompanied the boy to school and he took evident pleasure in showing such articles to Sister Agnes. She too, shared in his obvious joy but secretly she worried that he might, like Don Quixote, end up living in a fantasy world. For it was clear that, although the boy had made good progress in some areas, his social skills were badly lacking. In the schoolyard he kept to himself and the girls tried in vain to entice him into their games.

After two years at the Convent, the Nuns had suggested that the boy should now go to the local Marist Brothers School to be amongst members of his own sex and to take advantage of a wider curriculum—one that might introduce him to manual skills as well as intellectual ones. And so it was that the young Kelly, equipped

with school hat and blazer, walked nervously through the gate for his first day at ‘the big school.’

For the first few weeks, he seemed to cope rather well but then his mother noticed an increasing reluctance on his part to ready himself for school each morning. She could see that he was not happy in his new environment. Her long years as a teacher had given her a certain ability to diagnose the moods of children and the causes of discontent. She sensed that her little boy was being bullied in some way and yet, she could not elicit from him any sort of confirmation of her intuitions.

Those who keep or have kept dog packs will tell you of the propensity of pack members to turn on one of their own should that individual become injured. Reidy had seen a dog attempt to jump a netting fence in pursuit of a rabbit only to get hung up on the top barbed wire. The other dogs in the pack, upon hearing its yelps of pain immediately set upon it savagely. Had he not intervened, they might have killed it.

Historically, there was a sort of milder parallel to be observed in boys’ schools, amongst those in their pre-teens or early teens. For it was sometimes the case that boys stricken with some disorder, mentally or physically, were turned upon by their fellows. They were given cruel nicknames and generally shunned or lampooned. Young boys, like dogs, often form themselves into little cliques or packs and to be outside such groups was to be a sort of social leper. Their cruelty to the outcast was a sort of blind cruelty—as with a cat using an injured mouse as a plaything or a hawk tearing apart its living prey. If, at the same time, the shunned victim showed evidence of real scholarly ability, the abuse was heightened. This was certainly the case with Brendan Kelly whom they nicknamed “Bluetongue.”

The nickname was conferred upon him because of a certain slowness in his movements and his tendency to poke out his tongue to the side of his mouth when concentrating or when excited in any way. The other boys, most from a farming background, had seen Bluetongue lizards exhibit their tongue in this way when provoked or threatened. The name stuck, as nicknames often do, and it was to follow him to his grave.

The Marist Brothers, who ran the school, were not unaware of the boy's plight. They had called in prominent pack members from time to time and reminded them of their responsibilities as Christians and of the meaning of the term 'charity'. But it fell on deaf ears because, in the minds of the older ringleaders, the Brothers themselves were to be identified with Bluetongue. They, too, were social outcasts. 'Losers' was a term they often used. And, in some sense they were right. Part of the reason that the Brothers had felt so much compassion for the boy was that they themselves could identify with him. They too, occupied a different world, one in which solitude and inwardness were welcomed and not shunned. They, too, felt the harsh judgement of a world whose standards of success fell elsewhere but, unlike the boy, they could reach out to their fellow teachers and, beyond their own resources, to a higher source. There they could find the solace they so desperately needed. Their Kingdom was not of this world. But Brendan Kelly had never known that particular gift of grace to endure the adverse judgement of the world, and human sympathy was a poor substitute. His only route of retreat was to enter that private world of fantasy—a world of knights and courtly manners.

The boy's plight worsened and he became ever more withdrawn and solitary. Then, on sports days, he began wandering away into nearby bushland, where he set up little shelters of branches and leaves, and

lay under them, sometimes for hours. Here, at last, he felt at peace and the trees and birds around him, no less than the open sky above, constituted a sort of benevolent presence - something he had not known before. Clearly, he could not stay at the school and the parents were contacted.

As a result of joint consultation with the Brothers and with the Schools Inspector, the decision was made that Brendan should be taught at home by his mother. This represented a huge commitment on the part of Sarah Kelly for, in addition to all of the normal chores of a farm household—the washing and baking, the house cleaning, tending the vegetable garden, feeding the calves, the pet lambs and the poultry, and a myriad of other chores—she now had to find time to sit with her son for several hours each day and take him through lessons.

At first, the boy seemed to be making some progress with his studies but his problem of communicating with people other than his parents worsened. Not only did he fall silent when visitors came, but he actively evaded them, running off to his room or, sometimes, out into the surrounding paddocks. The one exception was his cousin, the young Jim Reidy. When he saw the familiar white utility come up the long driveway to the house, he ran out excitedly to meet him. Then he waited for the familiar greeting: “Hail, sir knight. Hast won thy jousts today?” This greeting ritual had begun almost as soon as Reidy took up his job in the district. He was still a young man—only six years older than his cousin Brendan, in fact.

Very soon after his return to the district, he had introduced Brendan to Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* and the boy was enchanted. He particularly loved the archaic language and soon learnt, from the glossary at the back of the book, the meanings of strange words like

glaise, *orgulous*, and *puissance*. Reidy spent hours with him, reading and explaining difficult passages and trying to put the best possible spin on a sometimes-brutal tale that old McWhinney had described as “well-mannered savagery.” The strange account of Christianity that filtered through the book was another difficulty. Reidy did his best to reconcile the sort of Christian teaching that the boy had received at school—and from his mother and father, with an account more akin to sorcery and magic.

By the time Brendan was fifteen years old, all lessons ceased. His mother could see that he was not coping with the work and he spent more and more time out-of-doors, roaming the nearby fields and hills. His excursions grew longer and longer. Often now, neighbouring farmers would see his slightly stooped form crossing their paddocks. None of them complained about such incursions, for this was still a time when anyone might roam at will across the countryside in the district.

To all these neighbouring farmers, he was known simply as Bluetongue. By this time, their sons who had been to school with the boy were back home working the farm and it was their naming of the boy that prevailed. It prevailed though, not in any nasty or demeaning way. For by now, those young men had learnt some of life’s lessons concerning “the crooked timber of humanity.” There was a certain genuine feeling for the boy and, indeed, in some cases a sense of shame and regret for their earlier ignorance.

He soon became a familiar sight in that part of the district. Sometimes, farmers would come across little construction that he had made—a little fortress of old hay bales or, perhaps, a little bower of tree branches under which he had rested. But his favourite haunt was the great hill at *Inishmore*, some two miles from his home as the

crow flies. Here, among the great tors on the hill he imagined castles and mail-clad warriors, and great tournaments. At one point on the hill he had constructed a rough seat by arranging the granite rocks. This was his *Perilous Siege* and, though he had made it with his own hands, he dared not to sit in it. Other rocks, imagined as mounted riders, sported little rag pennants fluttering from long sticks. Down at the quarry, he had found the long shaft of a binder roller with a small cog near one end. This served admirably as a lance, though it was carried with difficulty. Sometimes, the clefts in the larger tors had a makeshift sword thrust into them. It might be part of an old fence paling with a short guard attached using rusty baler wire.

Back home, he began missing his lunch and, on several occasions his worried parents went in search of him. After several such episodes, they decided to let him take his lunch with him, along with a bottle of cold tea. And so, he settled into a routine which lasted many years. However, if he happened to see Jim Reidy's utility approach the house, he came home immediately. Sometimes Jim would park his utility on the rise behind the house and blow the horn three times. This was a signal he had arranged with Brendan—a summons calling all knights back to their castles.

There would be much excited talk, but it was becoming harder and harder for Jim to discern what parts of that conversation related to the real world and what parts were wholly supplied from his imagination. Sometimes there were seemingly straightforward statements: "I saw the King today on the island, but he fauted the brand Excalibur." Reidy knew that the 'island' could well refer to the great hill at *Inishmore*, but what of the rest? At other times, he seemed to wander off into a world of pure fantasy where events from Malory's account were re-configured in strange ways: "the Black

Knight has been overhyped and the lady has taken back his brand.” This seemed to be a conflation of quite different events in Malory’s account and Reidy had no idea of what was going on inside Brendan Kelly’s mind.

Brendan’s father, Bill Kelly, died in 1968. He was, by this time a man in his seventies. Brendan seemed not to notice the absence of his father and Sarah regarded this as something of a blessing. She stayed on at the house, and Jim Reidy took over the running of the stock. They sold the sheep and converted to beef cattle—a lower-maintenance arrangement that allowed him to do the necessary farm work on weekends and, in summer, after he had finished his official duties. He still saw a lot of Brendan but the latter had now become a lot quieter, even when the world of knights was discussed.

Then, only a couple of years later on a searing summer’s day that would be long remembered in the district, Brendan himself died. He was still a young man. It was a day of intense temperatures with a hot north wind. On that day, Reidy had seen several small lorikeets fall from the tree near his office and lie lifeless on the withered lawn below. Others had sought refuge by attempting to bathe in the bird bath, but the water was too hot. They too, expired. There was a huge fire in the northern end of the district and Reidy was called in to assist in the main communications office. His knowledge of the district and his mapping skills were an invaluable aid here. He did not get to leave until just on dark and when he got home, there was a frantic call from Sarah, who had been trying to contact him for some time. Brendan had not come home for tea (the term ‘dinner’ in farming communities always referred to the midday meal). He drove out and together they drove around the paddocks, calling for him. Jim called the police station, but they were all busy with the fire. He stayed with Sarah for the long,

sleepless night and, at dawn next morning they resumed their search. They called on several neighbours and, by eleven o'clock that morning a substantial search party had been organised.

It was one of the neighbouring farmers who discovered Brendan's body. It was lying half-way through a plain wire fence. Evidently, he had tried to get through the fence to reach a stock trough, but had collapsed and died. Jim suspected that it would be heat exhaustion and dehydration. Brendan had only taken out a small flask of tea and all of his usual watering spots had now dried out. The autopsy confirmed Jim's diagnosis.

The funeral of Brendan "Bluetongue" Kelly was one of the largest ever seen in the district. The Convent and the Brother's School had been contacted and the Parish Priest had spoken to the Bishop. Few dignitaries in the history of the district had a funeral of this magnitude. The funeral was preceded by a concelebrated Mass, with the Bishop and two priests assisting. Many of those same boys who had taunted the young Brendan at school, now stood, openly weeping, in the pews. After the final blessing in the church, schoolchildren from both schools formed a guard of honour outside the church as the coffin was carried out.

At the cemetery, after the coffin was lowered into the earth, Jim Reidy was seen to approach with a small piece of paper, which he folded and threw into the open grave. It was from one of Brendan's notebooks and in his own careful hand. It read as follows:

Hic iacet Arthurus

Rex quondam, rexque futuris

This, of course, was from Malory—the inscription upon King Arthur's tombstone. He was to be the once and future king.

And Brendan Kelly, though dead like his beloved Arthur, was also to reach out into the future and exert his influence, not just upon the general history of the district but, more specifically, on the shin bone affair at *Inishmore*.

If Brendan Kelly was to influence the future, then it was also true that another event, this one from the distant past, was to give to the shin bone affair an added sense of mystery. The unexplained and the mysterious have a sort of symbiotic relationship and depend on each other for sustenance. Consequently, when a solution is provided for some previously unexplained circumstance or phenomenon, we quickly lose interest, because the sense of mystery evaporates, to be replaced by mere, humdrum fact. Once, we looked up at the moon with sense of awe and mystery but now, when we gaze up at it there, floating in the night sky, we more often imagine its dusty surface to be littered with spacecraft junk and a drooping American flag.

When an entry in Crewther's history entitled "The Swagman's Candle" is consulted, one can see exactly why the shin bone affair at Inishmore excited the imagination of many local inhabitants to such an elevated degree. For in this earlier case, the unexplained and the mysterious had the inestimable advantage of being quite beyond any solution. And for that very reason, the legend of the swagman maintained its hold. Indeed, it does so to this day amongst the more credulous.

CHAPTER THREE

The Swagman's Candle

When Crewther began his history of the Ryleford district, he had intended little more than a chronological list of events. However, in the course of his investigations, he came across certain matters which required some expansion, as it were. One of these was the strange business known locally as 'The Swagman's Candle'.

Sometime in the late 19C—the references were unclear on the matter of dates—a certain swagman disappeared whilst camped near the big hill at *Inishmore*. At that time, swagmen were a familiar site around Ryleford. Many were simply itinerant workers, tramping from one job to the next. They might get temporary work in a shearing shed, or cutting firewood for the farmhouse, or grubbing thistles. This particular swagman, whose name does not appear on any records, was camped in an old abandoned settler's hut on *Inishmore* itself. The hut was on the lower northern slope of the big hill, well placed to avoid the howling winter southerlies. It was a crude affair of redgum slabs and a stone chimney, roughly mortared with clay. Even today, if one looked closely enough, the remains of that old hut would be visible as a low mound of soot-scarred rocks—the fallen chimney. And, each spring, one would find a small clump of flowering Snowdrops—a sort of living testimony to the past. One must imagine that some settler's wife, long years ago had planted

those bulbs in a vast and alien wilderness to remind her of the little English garden of her childhood.

When the swagman failed to turn up at the homestead to join the owner in some fencing work, the latter rode down to the old hut to investigate. There he found the swagman's blanket roll and his few utensils. On the cheap deal-wood table was his pipe and his tobacco tin. But of the swagman himself, there was no sign. The property owner and a couple of neighbouring farmers then mounted a search of the area, but nothing was found. At that time, the nearest police was at Cottsworth and it was days before a police constable arrived. Further searching failed to locate the man and the whole business entered a sort of limbo.

Then, perhaps a decade later, small children peering out of their bedroom window at night saw a strange light moving slowly around the side of the great hill. They had been told of the missing swagman and immediately assumed that what they saw was that same man, attempting to find his way back to the hut. Of course, what they saw was almost certainly a rabbit trapper going around his traps with a 'Lucy Gray'. This last-named was a storm-proof lantern carried by trappers and it drew its name from a poem by Wordsworth. In the poem *Lucy Gray*, Wordsworth recounts the story of a young girl lost at night in a snow storm.

But, of course, the children knew nothing of this and they were convinced that they had seen the swagman with a candle, searching for his home. The story spread, as these stories do, and became a sort of local legend. It was to receive a certain amplification some years later when an Indian hawker swore he had seen the aforesaid candle and was visibly shaken by the whole business.

It was early evening and a massive thunderstorm was brewing. He decided to pull his horse-drawn van close beside the old hut at *Inishmore* and take shelter inside. He hobbled the horse and set up his bed inside the hut. The storm, when it came, was fierce. It was accompanied by shrieking winds, by heavy rain, rolling thunder and almost continuous flashes of lightning. Then, just as quickly as it came, the wind died away, and an uncanny quietness prevailed. When the hawker ventured outside to check on his horse, he saw a sight which unnerved him considerably. In front of the old hut was a dead wattle tree, with a few sparse limbs pointing skyward. From the tips of these limbs, there appeared small columns of light of an unearthly hue. In fact, what the man saw was a phenomenon called St Elmo's Fire. It is most commonly seen at sea, immediately after a storm and it consists of a sort of electrically-charged plasma. Old sailors referred to the columns of light as 'corpusants' or 'saintly bodies'.

Now, of course, when he related his experience to his customers the next day, it immediately brought to mind 'the swagman's candle' and the whole district was abuzz with speculation. Very likely, none of those farmers had heard of St. Elmo's Fire and, therefore, the business took on an air of great mystery. And that air of mystery helps to explain why the shin bone affair was an item of such intense speculation in the district.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Aeroplane Man

Leonard ‘Doc’ Brierley began the slow ascent at the eastern end of the big hill, steering his car between granite boulders and avoiding the numerous rabbit warrens. At this end of the hill, the incline was somewhat gentler and, with care, could be negotiated by a motor vehicle. He was proud of the car, a Jowett Javelin, which he had restored himself, with some help from his son, an automotive mechanic. He was proud, too, of the cargo on the back seat—a scale model of the Slingsby Cadet. This was the well-known training glider used by the UK Air Force in the 1940s and 1950s. His model was about 1/10 scale and this allowed him to carry the wing in the car as one piece. Model building and model flying was Doc Brierley’s other hobby and his favourite launch point was the western end of the great hill at *Inishmore*. Here, when the winds were blowing from the west or the south, he could launch his model and take advantage of the updrafts as the wind was forced to rise over the steep slope of the hill.

For most of his long career as a doctor, Brierley had been a GP in Ryleford—one of only three. He had retired some time ago and his still-steady surgeon’s hand now wielded a scalpel carving balsawood rather than human flesh. He was well liked in the town and known simply as “The Doc”. For the children of the farming families surrounding the great hill though, he was known as “The Aeroplane Man”. If he happened to be flying on a weekend or during school

holidays, the farm children would sometimes labour up the steep hill, scramble up upon the Crouching Man and, from that vantage point, watch the graceful flight of the glider.

But, on this cloudless spring day in 1972, he was on his own. Holding the model craft high above his head, he thrust it forward gently at the very edge of the steep decline and it dipped slightly at first, then rose sharply as the upthrust of the wind caught it. Using his two channel radio, the very latest innovation at that time, he guided the aircraft along the ridge to gain full advantage of the lift, then sent it out over the treed plain in a wide arc. There he circled it for some time, gradually allowing it to lose some height in return for greater speed. After a flight of some ten minutes, he decided to bring it in for a landing and a re-trim of the elevators. Landing was the most difficult part of the whole procedure, for the amount of flat, clear ground on top of the hill was limited. There was, however, a strip of suitable land, perhaps thirty metres long and eight metres wide just to one side of the Crouching Man and immediately behind it. Here, a great flat-topped granite mass was overlain by a thin layer of soil. It was too shallow for the rabbits to dig their burrows and, in any case, was waterlogged during most of the winter. At this time of the year it was covered with what Reidy would call a “rabbit meadow” consisting entirely of low-cropped, flowering Capeweed. Constant grazing by rabbits and sheep had reduced the plants to a height of only a couple of inches.

Brierley guided the model in towards this strip of land but it was travelling a little faster than he had anticipated and he was forced to land at an uncomfortable speed in order to avoid overshooting this natural runway and ending up amongst the scattered rocks at its far end. The aircraft skidded along the vegetation for a short distance, then the nose dug in, causing the whole craft to flip over.

At that moment a gust of wind caught the wings and the whole craft cartwheeled several times, landing heavily amongst some large rocks, just beyond the brow of the hill.

Brierley scrambled towards the crash site, fearing the worst. To his surprise and relief, the aircraft seemed to have suffered little damage. The dried stem of a rabbit thistle had pierced the wing membrane at one point, but that was a simple repair job. Then he noticed, just to the side of the model, and wedged between two granite rocks, a large bone. Bones were not an unfamiliar sight on the great hill because, over the years, many sheep and even more rabbits had died there. This bone though immediately caught Brierley's attention because he knew, instantly, that it was a human tibia—the large shin bone. In his long career, "The Doc" had set many a human bone and explained to many a patient, via reference to the life-size model of a human skeleton in his consulting rooms, just where a break or some other injury had taken place. In short, he knew his bones and this bone was most obviously from an adult human.

Now, all concerns related to the condition of his aircraft were swept from his mind. What should he do? His first instinct was to drive to the nearest farmhouse and phone the Ryleford police. However, upon further reflection, he realised that the police might not thank him for alerting anyone other than themselves to the existence of human remains. After all, it was possible that such remains belonged to some long-missing local whose case was still an 'open' one on police files. Brierley had also considered and then rejected the possibility that the bone was from an Aboriginal burial in pre-European times. The bone was obviously not that old. Though he was no archaeologist, he would put a maximum of fifty years on it. It showed little evidence of severe weathering and, had it been

buried for very long time, dark soil-staining would be obvious. His final course of action was to quickly pack up his glider, leave the bone in situ and drive immediately to the police station in Ryleford.

Within thirty minutes he was at the front reception counter talking to the young policeman behind the counter. The latter was busy eating a meat pie which was still partly contained in its brown paper bag. He first tried to convince Brierley that what he had seen was, perhaps, a kangaroo bone, or the bone of a sheep or a calf. But Brierley would have none of that. He explained his long familiarity with the human skeleton and then suggested that it might be better if he spoke with Sergeant Morris, who he knew well. "The Sarge is down at the Social Services Office", said the young officer. "I think you should ring for him", said Brierley. This he did and, within ten minutes, Morris walked through the door. "I hear you've got a bone to pick with me" quipped Morris. After a few quick words, Morris went to his office, picked up a camera, two torches and a tape measure, and they both walked out towards the police car.

On the way out to *Inishmore*, Brierley recounted the day's events and then told Morris what he knew concerning the ownership of the property. "As far as I know, the hill paddock is being leased by that young bloke out the other side of town with the stock transport business. Dalgety's look after the rest. It's agisted out to dealers who graze it pretty hard. The cockies round here would say that you could flog a flea over it." Morris chuckled. "Any funny business around here that you know of?" he quizzed. "The man you need to talk to on that score is Reidy, the Rabbit Inspector. He knows the goings on in this part of the world better than anyone else".

When they reached the site, Morris took photographs from several angles, then, with his tape measure, recorded the distance to the

Crouching Man in his notebook, adding a little diagram to indicate angles and the placement of the bone in relationship to the rocks around it. Taking care not to touch the bone, he carefully measured its length. Then, leaving the open tape beside the bone, he photographed both. There were a few other brief notes to indicate that the bone had no attached fragments of ligament or dried flesh, that it was white in colour and that there were no obvious marks upon it. Then, replacing the notebook in his pocket, he said to Brierley, "Let's have a look around." They spent the next hour scrambling around the slope, peering under overhanging granite slabs, and shining torches down the numerous rabbit holes on the slope. They found nothing. On Brierley's suggestion, they drove back to the quarry at the other end of the hill. "They get rid of other bodies here", said Brierley, "so let's hope that doesn't include humans." They walked to the edge of the quarry and Morris peered over. "Bloody hell", he exclaimed, "it's a case of pick-a-bone". There were literally dozens of bones and sheep skulls. At its deeper end the rubbish in the quarry was covered by water, in some places, several feet deep and remarkably clear. Brierley scrambled down the other side of the quarry and picked his way between rolls of barbed wire, the door of an old car and great masses of rusty baler wire. "Mostly sheep as far as I can tell" said Brierley. "I think we'll leave that job to the forensic blokes", replied Morris. "Not much else I can do now" he said. "I'll ring the D's in the city when I get back and they will confer with the forensic mob, but don't hold your breath—they may take a couple of days to get here. I can't move anything until they come. I'll get a brief statement from you when we get back. Then, it's just a question of waiting." They walked back to the police car and Morris contacted his office on the two-way radio. "Jimmy, I need you and Big Boy to arrange some sentry duty

out here. We have a possible crime scene. I want no-one on the hill until the ferrets arrive from the big smoke.”

On the way back they said little but just as they were approaching the town, Morris spoke: “Doc, I trust your judgement here completely but, just to ‘dot the i’s’, so to speak, I think I should check out a shin bone at your old practice. Will they still have that full-size plastic skeleton you spoke of”? “I reckon so”, said Brierley, “it wasn’t part of my retirement package.” And so, after dropping back to the Station and writing up a brief statement from Brierley, Morris drove around to the medical practice and duly satisfied himself that what he had seen out on *Inishmore* was, indeed, a human bone. Back at the station, he contacted Missing Persons and asked for information concerning any missing persons, historical or recent, within a radius of fifty miles of Ryleford. When the fax eventually arrived, the search had drawn a blank.

As Morris had predicted, it took two days for the forensic people, accompanied by a detective and the Cottsworth District Inspector, to arrive. A short time later on that day, a mini bus with ten police cadets aboard picked its way up the great hill upon that same track that Brierley had used two days earlier. Also, taking up Brierley’s suggestion, Morris had asked Jim Reidy to come across and confer with himself and the detective. Reidy had brought along a detailed map of the property. This map they spread out on the bonnet of Reidy’s utility and Reidy marked on it the approximate position of the bone discovery. Meanwhile, the forensic people carefully removed the bone and bagged it, then searched the immediate area. The whole group then conferred on a plan of action. “My suggestion”, said Reidy, “is to first focus our attention on all of the rabbit warrens within a 100m radius. I think we have to assume that the bone has been carried from somewhere else, probably by dogs

or foxes. The rest of the bones will not be anywhere near our shin bone—there’s virtually no soil there at all. The warrens will be in deeper soil, maybe deep enough to bury a body. I think you can rule out the bulk of the remains being on the surface. A body on the surface would have been discovered long ago—shooters and ferreters have been coming here for years.” Everyone agreed with his logic. But even as Reidy was speaking, the thought came into his mind that, somehow or other, his cousin Brendan could have been involved in shifting the bone. He said nothing to the assembled group, but the thought worried him.

Eventually it was decided that four of the cadets, accompanied by one of the forensic team, should go down to the quarry and begin the arduous task of removing its contents and carefully examining all bones found. The remainder of the team on the hill then armed themselves with long steel probes and began a careful search of the area immediately around the point of interest. The idea of the probes was not to find bones, but to indicate areas of soft soil—soil that had been disturbed in recent times. These spots were then flagged for future reference.

By midday, they had scanned over the first one hundred metres and there were perhaps twenty flag markers. Each of these sites comprised only a small total area of deep soil. Now using shovels, they dug two sink holes at each site, reasoning that one or other of those holes would strike some part of an extended human body. By late afternoon, they had examined all the flagged sites in this way. There was a brief moment of excitement when one excavation yielded a rabbit skull, but the whole exercise had drawn a blank. Back at the quarry though, there had been one discovery of very great interest. After several hours of laborious work, one end of the quarry had been cleaned out and all the bones laid out for

inspection. None were of interest. However, when one of the cadets managed to move a huge tangled mass of wired netting, there beneath it was the unmistakable shape of a rifle stock, sticking up at an angle. Taking great care, the men then removed all the rubbish from around it and it was carefully lifted out and placed in a bag. The rifle had obviously been there for some years. The stock was bleached and cracked and part of it was missing. It was a bolt action rifle and the bolt was caked in rust. “Let’s hope we can get a serial number” said the forensic man.

By the end of the second day they had completed their examination of the quarry site and no human bones were found. A motor pump had been employed to drain the water from the deeper end, but nothing of interest was exposed. Back at the shin bone site, they had extended their area of interest out for another fifty metres and their technique had yielded nothing of interest. Again, a conference of senior people took place. “I think we will have to wrap it up for the time being”, said the city detective. “We just don’t have the resources to throw at it and, without further evidence, the bean counters will be after us. Let’s see what the rifle can tell us, then we will chew the fat again.” Sergeant Morris had undertaken to visit surrounding farms, on the off-chance that someone had thrown an old unserviceable rifle into the quarry to get rid of it. As they drove back past the quarry site and looked at the excavated items, Reidy noticed that, included in the rubbish was the pink body of a child’s plastic doll with an arm missing, and a broken doll’s pram. There was a certain pathos in the scene.

Examination of the rifle back at the forensic labs yielded less than had been hoped for. It was easy enough to identify as a Lithgow 22 calibre—a ubiquitous rabbit-shooter’s rifle back in the 1950s to 1970s. However, only part of the serial number could be recovered.

The last three numbers were so deeply pitted as to defy identification. This meant that it could be any one of up to a thousand rifles. On one side of the stock, it appeared that some sort of plate had once been in place there. There were two small screw holes and the shadowy outline of what the plate looked like in profile. Historical records from the factory suggested that, whatever the plate was, it was an after-factory add-on. On the side of the barrel near the breech, some sort of metal appendage had been sheared off. It may well have been some sort of home-made sun shade to protect the rear sight from glare. There was only the base of the object left, attached to the breech area by machine screws tapped into the body.

As for the bone, it was almost certainly from an adult male. There were some scratches on it, not inconsistent with the teeth marks of an animal, but they were very faint and the surface of the bone was weathered badly. When, some weeks later, the detectives assigned to the investigation sat down to discuss the future, it was agreed that, without some new breakthrough, the case would cease to be an active one. After all, there was no evidence of any foul play, no identification of the deceased and no way of linking the weapon found to the human remains. In short, they had reached a dead end.

There was, however, one matter which Sergeant Morris would now have to revisit and review in a new light. That matter was the sudden disappearance of Arthur Schofield from the Ryleford district some ten years earlier. Did that bone belong to him? Or, on the other hand, did he leave the district in such a hurry because of some sinister connection with the bone in question? And it was not only Sergeant Morris who posed these questions. In fact, the whole district was abuzz with speculation.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Passing of Arthur

In the not-too-distant past, every small community in rural Australia was possessed of a sort of internal cohesion. It was not, in the first instance, a matter of what we now call ‘community spirit’, but rather a certain accepted pattern of relationships. The latter word must be understood in its most literal sense. Not only did everyone know everyone else, but they also knew their provenance, so to speak. For any given person, most of the locals could tell you where he or she lived, who they were married to, what they did for a living, their economic circumstances, who their parents (and, perhaps even grandparents) were and, most especially, what were their particular failings. There was, in short, a sense of *belonging* in a certain order and a related sense of history. There was also a certain routine to life, and everyone had their place in that routine.

Each Thursday, the farmers and their wives would journey into Ryleford to pick up the week’s supply of groceries, meat and bread. The men might first go down to the saleyards and observe the quality of stock on offer, make some mental notes on prices and, perhaps, make some inquiries of the auctioneers concerning their own intended sale of livestock. Then, they would return to the centre of town, and while their wives did the shopping and sat in Langton’s Tearooms for afternoon tea, they would stand about in small groups or sit in one another’s cars to discuss stock prices, the

lack of rain, the political situation, and other concerns. Whilst pursuing such matters, they would also digress from time to time, to make disparaging comment on some passer-by: "There goes old mother Sullivan. She's certainly got the war paint on today. Look at that hat. Bloody good wind and she'd take off." A small boy might pass. "Who's he?" "That's the bank manager's son." "Look at his buck teeth; he could eat apples through a picket fence."

Under such circumstances, it is not difficult to imagine the sense of mystery and concern, perhaps even of unease, when a stranger turned up in town. It was imperative that such a person should be fitted out with an identity and a defined place in the order of things, such that he or she could then be accommodated into the collective identity of the district.

And so, when the young Peggy Sweeney, all those years ago, walked down the street arm in arm with a strange man, it was the subject of much speculation. A process of intelligence-gathering failed to yield much fruit since the girl was loath to say much to her female friends, and the girl's parents were likewise tight-lipped concerning this new development. It was obvious though, that the parents were not pleased by this new turn of events.

The Sweeney's were, at that time, the owners of *Inishmore*. They had purchased the property in the interwar years and were given a paragraph or two in Crewther's history of the district. They had two daughters and both of these left the district, soon after their schooling ended, to find their fortunes in the city. The elder girl, a stenographer, had met and married a successful solicitor and they settled in Sydney. Peggy had gone away to become a primary schoolteacher, but towards the end of her course of studies, had met and married one Arthur Schofield in a whirlwind romance. He was at least ten years her senior.

Schofield was ex-army. That was clear enough to the frustrated intelligence-gatherers. His boots were always highly polished and he walked with a determined, stiff and upright gait. His hair was cut short and his trousers always showed a well-ironed crease. He was still a relatively young man, but old enough, perhaps, to have seen action in the War. But what concerned the locals most was his facial appearance. His lips were perpetually set into an attitude which was neither a smile nor a sneer, but somewhere in between. The matriarch Sullivan had even suggested a likeness to the expression on the faces of African Bush Dogs she had seen at the zoo—you easily mistake a snarl for a smile. It was, she said, the look of an untrustworthy man. The keeper at the zoo had told her that Bush Dogs were the most unpredictable of all his charges and he would prefer to trust his life to the company of lions rather than to such dogs.

After their marriage in a city registry office, the newlyweds shifted to his rented flat. She finished her teacher-training and he resumed his work as a greenkeeper at one of the posh city golf clubs. But Schofield had ambitions and wished to own his own business. He had taken enough orders in the army and now it was time to become the master of his own destiny. He took on a franchise for selling agricultural chemicals to golf clubs, city park authorities and the managers of sporting ovals. But the monetary rewards were meagre and, had it not been for his wife's income as a teacher, the couple would have starved. He then tried his hand in the retail trade, taking on a small sporting goods store. Again, though the turnover was reasonable, by the time that shop rental and other costs were taken into account, his takings were pitiable. Here, he struggled on for some time until the death of Peggy's father.

The farm had been left, first to Sweeney's wife and then to the two daughters. The wife, however, expressed no interest in staying on at the farm and moved into town. Schofield then persuaded his wife

to approach her mother and ask if they could take over the running of the property. The elder daughter and her husband were consulted and they had no objection. However, it was pointed out to Schofield that the property would remain in the two daughters' hands, and upon their deaths, would come into the joint possession of their children. Sensing possible trouble, the elder Sweeney had carefully excised husbands from his will. The age of 'no fault divorce' had come and Sweeney knew a thing or two about the crooked timber of humanity. As it happened, the Schofield's were childless, but Peggy's sister had several children. This fact ate away at Arthur Schofield and he felt very bitter about it.

As a farmer, Schofield lacked any real empathy with the land. He was by no means a lazy man—he rose early each morning and had a set routine of work. This was due, no doubt, to his army background. But sheep farming requires, amongst other things, a good 'eye' for stock. A good farmer, like a good violin maker, must know his materials intimately. His judgement on selecting breeding stock was poor. His fat lambs were never properly 'finished', and his lambing percentages were well down on the district average. Part of his problem was his reluctance to take any significant measures to deal with the rabbit population on the property. The great hill swarmed with rabbits and though Reidy had told him, time and again, that nine rabbits will eat as much as a sheep, the economic reality failed to sink in. He often invited shooters and trappers to the property, falsely believing that their operations would keep the problem under control. In short, whilst the Schofields managed to survive, they made very little headway.

In terms of integrating into the local community, Schofield had also been less than successful. The couple joined the tennis club soon after arriving but, whilst Peggy did so for mainly social reasons, her husband was fiercely competitive and was a sore loser. On two occasions, he had smashed his racket on the ground and stormed

off to the hotel. And, rather than drown his sorrows, the alcohol had the effect of intensifying them. Amongst heavy drinkers, three main types can be discerned. There are those who, having few too many, become boisterous and over-emotional, hugging all and sundry and singing out of tune. There are others who simply go very quiet and behave much like a sleeping lizard in winter. They seem to turn off to the world and retreat into themselves. Not infrequently, they will doze off in their chairs. The third and most dangerous type are those who appear to go quiet but, of a sudden, will erupt into uncontrollable anger. Pent up emotions, nursed in silence over great periods of time, are suddenly released. Schofield was of this last type, and it earned him a bad reputation in the district. People began to steer clear of him and this only intensified his anger and increased his drinking. He felt that the world had dealt him a bad hand and the blame that he initially lay at the feet of Peggy's father was now transferred on to her and the people of the district in general.

On more than one occasion she had appeared in town with heavy bruises on her face. She tried to pass these off as the result of little accidents about the house, but she was not about to fool the matriarch Sullivan who declared openly to the CWA ladies that Schofield was a wife beater.

Then there came a day when the elderly Mrs Sweeney received a phone call from her daughter at the farm requesting help. The police and ambulance were called. Peggy was badly beaten up and was taken to the hospital. There was no sign of the husband and his car was gone. He was never to return to the district. Despite the best efforts of Sergeant Morris to convince her that she should press charges, she resolutely refused to do so. There was little that could be done. Morris had sent car registration details to the Sydney police, but nothing eventuated.

Of course, the news spread quickly in the district and all manner of rumours surfaced. A certain friend of a certain friend swore that they had seen Schofield in Sydney. Others had heard that he was in Queensland. But, with the inevitability of gradualness, the whole sorry business was almost forgotten. Peggy had gone to live with her aged mother and the farm was let out for agistment.

That situation was, of course, to change dramatically when news of the shin bone discovery was made known. Now, dozens of theories circulated amongst the locals. Schofield had topped himself in a fit of remorse. Schofield had been killed by someone who witnessed the beating. Schofield had killed someone who had heard the wife screaming and had come to her aid. And so on. Each new theory surpassed the last with its bizarre claims. There were even theories relating the shin bone affair to the old legend of the swagman's candle but these, it must be added, were soon pushed to the background by the Schofield business.

Sergeant Morris now had to take some action to end the speculation and to satisfy certain legal requirements concerning due process in the case of unidentified human remains. He spoke first with Peggy Schofield, but she was reluctant to say too much. She insisted that her husband was still alive and that he had once phoned her. Certain arrangements had been made concerning the transfer of a small amount of money. In return, he was never to contact her again and to relinquish all claims to her property. This had been handed by her solicitor son-in-law, but she begged Morris not to pursue the matter further. If there was any foul play proven in relation to the bone discovery, then she would agree to a full disclosure. She wanted the whole business behind her. Morris pointed out that he needed certainty in the matter of her husband's whereabouts. He told her of his intention to issue a press release but stressed that neither his or her name would be mentioned.

A draft press release was drawn up and sent to his Sydney superiors for further action. The substance of the press release was that certain human remains had been found on the property *Inishmore*, near Ryleford, and that police were anxious to hear from former owners of that property or from former workers who had been employed there over the last twenty years. The release stressed that there was, at this stage, no evidence of foul play. The report made the television news and all of the major newspapers.

Three days later, Morris received a call from the Sydney Police Headquarters. They had been contacted by someone claiming to be Arthur Schofield. He had come into a suburban station, given his name, address and telephone number and had agreed to be photographed. He also gave a brief statement as to the reason for his sudden departure. It was surprisingly honest and contained a hint of remorse. The speculation, in large part, had been put to rest.

And there the strange case of the shin bone affair would have ended, suspended in the limbo of dusty files and labelled bags, had not Mother Nature intervened in a most unlikely way. But then, of course, Mother Nature has a habit of interfering in the ways of man so as to deflate his ridiculous pretensions and remind him of his frailties. That is her job.

CHAPTER SIX

Under Notice

Some eight years after these events on the great hill at *Inishmore*, Reidy found himself once again climbing around its slopes. It was late winter and he was, yet again, assessing the rabbit population. In the preceding summer, he had been forced to put the property 'under notice'. This was a term used to indicate that the property owner/s had been issued with a formal order to control rabbits under the provisions of the Rabbit Destruction Act. Now it was Reidy's job to check on overall rabbit activity and to write a report, should the matter be brought to court. Very often, in situations like these, the owners would make some token effort to control the rabbits—perhaps get a workman in for a day or two to fumigate warrens. Although a programme of trail poisoning had been prescribed, many landowners or agisters were loath to take such a step because it meant that they had to remove their stock for anything up to a month.

Reidy was now on top of the great hill and not all that far from the scene of the bone discovery. He walked to the brow of the hill on the opposite side and scanned the slope with field glasses. He was getting a rough count of active warren openings at differing points on the hill. As he scanned across the rocky landscape, a great pile of freshly excavated soil, some two hundred metres below, caught his eye. It was close to the bottom of the hill, where the degree of slope suddenly decreased and the soil was much deeper. He scrambled

down the rocky slope for a more detailed inspection. He had surmised that it was probably a fox den and, as he came closer, his judgement was confirmed.

In Australia, foxes usually mate in early winter and, soon after, a suitable den site is chosen and cleaned out. Very often, an old rabbit burrow is selected and enlarged. The choice is always a careful one, for the den must be both deep and dry. Shallow tunnels are easily dug out by dogs or humans. To further enhance the survival chances of the cubs, secondary or 'emergency' dens are often held in reserve. Should the primary den attract any unwanted attention from dogs or humans, the cubs will be immediately removed to one of these 'fall-back' locations.

As Reidy grew closer to the site early he could see fresh paw prints pushed deeply into the soft yellow soil. This den had been cleaned out very recently indeed—perhaps only last night. He knelt down and peered into the opening. There, grinning back at him was the unmistakable form of a human skull, partly buried in the side wall of the den.

Certain sights elicit an unconscious reaction in humans—an instant recoil in horror. The sight of a snake is one and the unexpected sight of a human skull is another. It is a primordial fear and it takes a conscious effort to disengage from it. Immediately after that moment Reidy recalled a phrase from one of his books—'whistling past a cemetery'. It took him a little time to regain his composure and then, like Doc Brierley before him, he considered his next course of action.

After the big fire in the district, most of the Departmental vehicles had been fitted with two-way radios, and Reidy had a table of channel allocations stuck on the dashboard of his ute. Now he was

able to contact the police station directly. It took some time for the message to be relayed to the Sergeant but, within the hour he was on his way out. As the police car drew near Reidy could see that Morris was accompanied by one of the younger officers. The greetings were short and all three men, with Reidy leading the way, scrambled down to the den site. "Touch nothing" Morris said to the younger officer. He knelt down, careful to place his knees into the same depressions as had been made by Reidy's knees. "Alas, poor Yorick", he muttered. Unlike Reidy, he had been prepared for what he saw.

Now Morris and the younger officer returned to their car and took out a bundle of wooden stakes and a roll of 'incident tape', the latter being a fairly recent innovation. Once the site was secured in this way, Morris instructed the younger officer to stay at the scene until his relief arrived. He left his car with the younger officer and drove off with Reidy. On the way back, they discussed the new development. It was almost certain, Reidy said, that the lone shin bone had been carted from the burial site by young foxes. He explained that, as they got older, they tended to move out from the natal den and take up residence in the 'backup' dens. They also spent a lot of time playing together and would fight over old discarded bird carcasses, pieces of rabbit skin and old bones. A half-grown fox could easily drag a human shin bone about and one could easily imagine that fights over possession might see the bone transported for hundreds of yards. This would explain the circumstances of the original discovery.

With the prospect of a near-full skeleton and, perhaps, a quick identification, the forensic people were much less tardy on this occasion. They were on the scene by ten o'clock the next morning. They were accompanied by the same detective who had come to the

scene many years earlier. He had introduced himself and given his name, but Reidy had forgotten it and knew him only as 'Zorba'—a nickname which everyone seemed to use and to which he took no obvious exception. After photographing the burial site, the three-person forensic team got down to work, carefully removing small shovelfuls of soil and placing it on a large wire sieve. One of the team was a young woman and Reidy was surprised by her deft use of the shovel.

As they neared the position of the skull, the small shovels were replaced by garden trowels and the rate of soil removal slowed considerably. It soon became evident that, at some earlier time, the skull had become detached from the rest of the skeleton and the whole party were now concerned that, just as in the case of the earlier shin bone, they might not find further remains at this site. Very soon, though, they began to uncover other bones and their fears were allayed. After another hour or so, they had recovered over half of the human skeleton. At that point, the young woman began to widen the sides of the excavated hole to facilitate access and allow easier transfer of dislodged soil to the sieve above. Suddenly there was a distinct metallic sound as her trowel hit some object in the soil. Now, with her gloved hand and a brush, she began to uncover this object inch by inch. It appeared to be a metal rod of some sort and, though nothing was said at the time, everyone thought that it could well be the barrel of a gun or rifle.

By four o'clock that afternoon, the team were satisfied that they had recovered all that could be recovered from the burial site. What they had conjectured to be a firearm of some sort turned out to be a long metal rod, perhaps four feet in length. There was, near one end of the rod, a small toothed cog. There was some speculation that this may well have been a murder weapon buried with the victim.

During these discussions, Reidy remained silent and any careful observer would have noticed that something was troubling him.

The entire group now assembled in a semicircle around the large canvas sheet spread out on the ground. On it were the bones that had been recovered, in the exact pattern they had formed in the burial site. Importantly, the left tibia bone was missing and this reinforced their conviction that they had found the owner of the lone shin bone discovered two years earlier. Several other bones were missing, including two of the smaller rib bones and the entire bone assembly of the left hand. The skull was missing its lower jawbone but, in all other respects showed little sign of damage. There were some remains of clothing, most of it badly rotted and fragile. Part of that clothing appeared to be a leather jacket, dark in colour. No coins or rings or wristwatch was recovered and, if there had been a wallet, it had either long since rotted away or had been destroyed by the chewing of fox cubs. There were a couple of coat studs covered in a greenish powder, and what appeared to be a buckle of the sort used in bib-and-brace overalls. One of the studs still had a small amount of leather- or what appeared to be leather- attached to it. Photographs were taken, then each of the bones bagged and labelled. At this point, Reidy caught the eye of the detective and, with a movement of his head, indicated that he wished to confer with him privately. Together, they walked towards Reidy's ute.

Now he made known his concerns regarding the rather strange object found with the skeleton. Reidy knew what it was—the axle from an old binder or machine for making sheafs of hay. He then gave Zorba a brief account of the life of his cousin, Brendan, and of his obsession with the tales of King Arthur. He had, many years ago, seen Brendan with an object much like the one they had just

uncovered. He called it his bleeding spear. He told Zorba too, of the boy's great attraction to the hill at *Inishmore* and of the constructions he had made there. "Unless we get some indication of foul play", said Zorba, "what you have told me may not have much bearing beyond the obvious possibility that the boy buried the corpse for some reason. Let's see how things pan out."

They went back to the burial site and another impromptu meeting took place. A decision needed to be made concerning the likely whereabouts of the bones still missing and here again, Reidy offered valuable advice. "It is more than likely", he said "that this den has been in use for several years. Whoever buried the body probably selected the spot precisely because they knew that a fox den would be in deep soil. Now, very likely, one or more generations of young fox cubs have picked up some of the smaller bones as playthings and carried them out of the den. As the cubs get older they very often shift out into other holes and these could be hundreds of yards away. Moreover, they may well have dragged these bones down the holes with them. In short our missing bones could be many feet under the ground and at locations well away from here." This advice, from someone who obviously knew a lot about foxes, was taken on board and there was general agreement that further searching, beyond a careful scan of the surface in the general vicinity of the burial site, was not warranted. The forensic people were of the opinion that they had sufficient material on which to work and that the few missing bones would probably not make a good deal of difference.

It was several weeks before the local police heard back from the forensic people. In the first place, there was no doubt that the earlier

shin bone belonged with the rest of the skeleton. Secondly, the remains appeared to be those of an adult male, somewhere between thirty and fifty years old. There was no evidence of bone damage consistent with a violent death although, of course, two of the smaller ribs were missing. Certainly the condition of the skeleton gave no indication that the possible murder weapon found with the body could have been implicated in the death. The report stressed, however, that something like a rifle bullet or thin knife could well have punctured vital organs without noticeable damage to bones. There had been some dental work on two of the teeth in the upper jaw but, without further pointers to narrow the possibilities concerning identity, a match to dental records was not possible. This interim, internal report also pointed out that a full forensic report would be presented at an inquest, the date of which was yet to be fixed.

In fact, it took nearly two years for that inquest to take place. Other cases considered to be of more pressing importance had taken precedence and there had been long delays in finalising the forensic report.

CHAPTER SEVEN

At the Golden Fleece

Despite a rather expensive renovation some ten years ago, *The Golden Fleece Motel* still bore unmistakable signs of its 1950s origin. The same neon ram with its dancing lights, atop its now rusted pole, still beckoned the weary traveller as it had done for the last thirty years. Running his eye along the units, Reidy could still make out the little brick squares that now covered the hatch openings for the breakfast trays. The squares were too neat—obviously imitation brick. Food slots! It was surely an American idea, he reflected, for only the Yanks would have elevated personal privacy above human sociality in this way. It reminded him of prison cells. The rooms, too, were a giveaway. The bathroom walls bore the scars of fittings long since removed. The cheap bedside drawer unit still had a dusty copy of the Gideon's Bible and this amused Reidy. It fitted rather poorly with the print of the abstract nude above the bed. What sins, he thought, have been committed in this bed with this Bible beside it? Then there was the neon ram. It seemed out of place now. The wool boom was over and, concerning the other reference, what did they know of the *Argonautica*? Somewhere at home, he still had his Argonauts badge from the ABC and he still remembered that day when, as a little boy stricken with a fever and lying in bed, the announcer gave his crew name and number on 'the ship of limping men'. By the time he was 14 he had amassed 400 points and was inducted into the

Order of the Golden Fleece. These little mementos his mother had put away, along with a lock of his hair as a baby and his swimming medals. Of course, the motel sign had quite a different reference. This was sheep country and there was, indeed, a time when the region, like much of the country, rode on the sheep's back. But that was then. Now it was different. The small sheep farmer and the squatter runs had largely disappeared. In their place were huge grain farms and feedlots. Most of the remaining sheep country had been taken over by large investment companies, or by owners living in the town and driving out each day. The old names—*Tobermory*, *Ben Cruachan*, *Old Pastoria*—had gone and were replaced with more discrete, formal-looking notices—*Austral Food and Fibre*, *AP Holdings*, *Stockvest P/L*.

The motel was on the highway, near the main centre of Cottsworth, a large town some 40 miles from Ryleford. Cottsworth was generally considered to be the administrative centre for the whole region. Reidy had been summoned to attend the inquest at the local courthouse, along with other key figures who had played some part in that series of events at *Inishmore*, culminating in the discovery of a human skeleton. It was a legal requirement, in cases like this, to hold some form of inquiry into the circumstances relating to the discovery of the remains and, in so far as it was possible, to establish the cause of death.

A few cars had already arrived. Reidy set himself the task of identifying the various 'types' of occupant by a quick scrutiny of the now empty vehicles. Some were easy. The Telecom van, for instance, was self-explanatory. So, too, was the mud-covered four wheel drive with orange safety helmets on the back window-shelf and sporting a red flag atop a long fibreglass pole. "Bloody miners", said Reidy to

himself. For, indeed, the whole northern end of the region was now being investigated for coal, and most of the smaller farmers that still remained had large hand-painted signs hanging on their gates—NO MINES IN THE FOODBOWL. There were two other four-wheel-drives of a more genteel breed. One had a stick-figure family stuck on the back window. It annoyed him that they always included cats and dogs, for Reidy was old-fashioned in such matters. “School holiday family”, mused Reidy. The other had a variety of stickers on the rear side windows—*Ettamogah Pub*; *I Crossed the Nullarbor*; *The Big Pineapple*. “Grey Nomads” muttered Reidy to himself. Across the quadrangle, where the units backed on to the creek reserve, were two sedans. These were more challenging. The first gave him no clues at all—simply a late model sedan, well kept, with a sign above the number plate indicating it had been purchased in the city. Nothing on the windows, no ‘fruit’ (a term he had picked up from a younger colleague many years ago and which referred to the sort of extras that young bucks used to deck out their vehicles—mag wheels, brake lights in the back windows, and so on), and no visible modifications like lowered suspension. The other sedan, though, gave him a few clues. The radio aerial, for instance, did not look right. It was a ‘high-performance’ vehicle, as the motoring magazines like to put it, yet not well kept and sporting no extras. The back was covered in a thin film of yellow mud. The car had obviously travelled on back roads. “John hoppers” muttered Reidy to himself. This is a word he had inherited from his father as slang for the police. He had no idea of its origin. “These will be the detectives”, he mused, “and I’ll bet the other car belongs to someone involved in the case—an expert witness maybe. They’ve been out to the site.” He was right on both counts.

He returned to his room and, once again, went over the notes he had prepared for the inquest. He had been asked to give evidence on two matters. The first was an expert opinion on “the likelihood that foxes, dogs or other *ferae naturae*, might remove, carry or consume bones from a human burial site”. The second—and the one that worried him a great deal—was “to give an opinion, based on his prior knowledge and relationship with the deceased person Brendan Kelly, on the likelihood that the aforesaid person had been involved in the placing of an object in the burial site of the unidentified male subject whose remains were discovered on the property *Inishmore*”. The formal notice had stopped short of asking him to comment on the likelihood of his cousin being in some way *involved* in the unknown person’s death. Very obviously, with the evidence at hand, the police had been unable to make a case in this matter. Neither the steel axle rod at the burial site or the rifle at the quarry site could be directly linked to the death of the unknown man. That is why they were holding an inquest and not a formal trial.

Soon after, there came a knock at the door and, when he opened it, there stood the detective he knew as Zorba. “Remember me?” he said. Reidy gave a sort of embarrassed smile. “I only remember you as Zorba”, he said. “That’s OK. My real name is Yanis Kotsianis, so Zorba is easier. And before you ask, my dad didn’t have a fish and chip shop, he was a dealer in fine art.” Jim smiled but said nothing. “What about coming down the town with us for some grub?”

The Cottsworth Services Club, like many such clubs of that era, owed its continued prosperity to poker machines. The dinner party, consisting of Reidy, Zorba the detective and two of the forensic people, made their way to the Bistro Lounge. As they passed the

main gambling room, Reidy looked in at the rows of glowing machines and their players. One such player immediately caught his attention. She was a middle-aged woman in a garish jump suit. She was staring intently at the revolving symbols on the machine and a burning cigarette, with a long drooping ash, hung from her mouth. Such was her intense preoccupation with the machine that she had forgotten the presence of the cigarette in her mouth and it quietly burned away at its own pace.

Reidy disliked the place. Everything seemed tawdry and fake. On the walls, the photographs of long-dead soldiers and the crossed flags of Empire, seemed entirely out of place. Just then, the loudspeaker squealed and gave a brief thump. A recorded voice announced that there would now be one minute's silence for the Fallen. During that minute, which seemed to drag out for an interminable length, Reidy could still hear the whirring of the poker machines coming from the adjacent room. During that time too, the driver of a large semi-trailer on the highway outside suddenly applied his exhaust brakes as he approached the town centre. The din made a mockery of the solemn ritual in the Club. Some lines from Wilfred Owen immediately came to his mind:

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

– Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle

Can patter out their hasty orisons.

Soon after they had resumed their seats, they were joined by Doc Brierley. He had booked into a different motel but had seen the familiar face of Jim Reidy as he entered the Bistro.

The meal was consumed amid small talk, for the most part. Then, as the plates were cleared away, Zorba began in a more serious tone.

“It’s important that we all stick to our prepared notes and don’t wander off too much. There will be a lot of material to get through and clear, concise statements are important. Remember that the Coroner’s job is to satisfy a legal requirement related to the cause of death and the identity of the corpse. In this case, there will be no finality in either of these matters, but that, in itself, will form part of his report. Basically, he needs to show that the Crown has exercised due diligence in pursuing the matter and that all relevant details have been recorded. No one is on trial here because there is no evidence of foul play at this stage. Should there be some further developments in the future, then this Coroner’s report will be an indispensable reference point. Now, I think all of us, in our professional roles, are no strangers to courts and court procedures, so I won’t bother with the formalities of the proceedings.”

Reidy sensed that Zorba, in this little oration, was attempting to give him a clear message regarding his cousin, Brendan. For the detective had sensed that the matter was of concern to him. They then lapsed back into small talk and, soon after, made ready to leave. On the way out to the car, Reidy caught up with the detective and said “can I have a yarn with you when we get back to the motel?” Zorba nodded.

They met in Jim Reidy’s room. “You obviously know that I am worried about the possible involvement of my cousin, Brendan”, he said. “It is pretty hard on his mother too and I have been mulling over in my mind the possibility that we may be able to shed more light on the whole business.” “What have you got in mind?” said Zorba. “Well, I’m not sure at this stage”, said Reidy, “but certain things that Brendan said from time to time lead me to think that he may have seen something on that hill when the person died, and that the event involved a third person.” “Do you want to be more

specific?" said Zorba. "I can't at this stage", said Reidy, "but I was wondering if you might be able to help me?" "I'll do what I can", said Zorba, "but this case will probably go cold now and I will be directed to put my resources elsewhere." "That's OK", said Reidy. "I won't ask unless I have something that you can justify to your superiors." Zorba pulled out his wallet and handed Reidy a card. "I give one of these to all the crims I meet." Reidy smiled, but said nothing. He was, nonetheless, grateful for Zorba's offer of help and he sensed that a sort of friendship had developed.

The Inquest proceeded much as Reidy had expected it would. After preliminaries, Sergeant Morris was called to the stand and he gave a general outline of the events, beginning with the discovery of the first bone by Doc Brierley. He then outlined the subsequent series of events and, as each new development was introduced, he indicated that the person involved would be called upon to enlarge and to substantiate his overview account.

There followed a brief statement by Doc Brierley concerning the circumstances under which he had found the bone. Next, it was Reidy's turn, and he took the stand. After stating his name and occupation, he informed the room as to the purpose of his visit to *Inishmore* on the day the gravesite was discovered. He then read from his prepared notes. Included in his notes was a detailed account of fox behaviour relevant to the circumstances of the discovery of both the single shin bone, then the rest of the skeleton at a later date. He then moved on to describe the likely origin of the steel object found with the body, since he was the only person there with a good

knowledge of historical farming implements. Reference was made to the rubbish dump and to the machine parts found therein. He also pointed out that he had seen objects of this nature used by the son of a local farmer who often frequented this hill and played there, making small constructions amongst the rocks and sometimes, embellishing them with objects from the quarry. At this point he was interrupted by the Magistrate, who directed a question to Sergeant Morris. “Was there any evidence to suggest that this boy might have been involved in the series of events under investigation”? “None your Honour, except for the fact that one of his possible playthings was buried with the corpse and, almost certainly both were buried at the same time, as no doubt, other expert witnesses will attest to shortly. I must add that the boy is now deceased and, unless your Honour requires further details, I would prefer that his name be withheld.” “Entirely proper”, said the Coroner, “this is an inquiry in to the circumstances of a death, not a trial, and we have no business in possibly impugning his good name at this stage.”

Next, the senior medical pathologist took the stand and read from his report concerning the procedures associated with the exhumation and the features of the remains which allowed them to be classified as those of a mature adult male, perhaps in the age range of twenty-five to fifty years. After careful assessment of the material, it was estimated that the remains had been buried for at least 10 years and maybe up to thirty. He gave a brief account of the methodology involved in such an assessment, including assumed rates of decay, depth of burial and, other factors. Importantly, he mentioned the likelihood that disturbance of the sites by the burrowing of rabbits and foxes may well have accelerated the decay process by allowing for aerobic processes rather than anaerobic one.

He went on to state that the skeletal remains showed no evidence of severe damage consistent with a heavy blow from any sort of club-like weapon. However, he stressed that three of the smaller rib bones were not recovered and these might well have shown damage. He then gave details of the condition of the skull, noting that the lower jaw had not been recovered. The skull was undamaged and two of the teeth in the upper jaw showed evidence of dental work. At this point, he was interrupted by the Coroner. "Is it possible that the unidentified person could have met with a violent death, yet the skeleton be intact?" "Indeed so, your Honour. Something like a bullet or a thin knife might well cause fatal damage to internal organs without hitting a bone." There were a few more questions of clarification, then the senior forensic scientist took the stand to read a report concerning the rifle found at the tip.

At the onset, he stressed that there was no direct evidence to link the rifle to the remains in any way. The presence of the rifle at the tip might have another and quite unrelated provenance. For instance, it may have been unserviceable and simply thrown away. Nonetheless, given the circumstances, it was deemed essential to examine the weapon in detail. He then went on to describe the weapon. It was a single-shot, sporting rifle, .22 calibre, and manufactured by the Lithgow Small Arms Factory sometime between 1955 and 1957. This was a very popular small game rifle and many thousands had been made. Full identification was not possible because the last three digits of the serial number were beyond recognition, the barrel having been badly corroded by rust. With difficulty, they had managed to extract the bolt from the rifle and the remains of what appeared to be a live round, were lodged in the breech. The stock of the rifle showed evidence of having some sort of plate attached to it at some stage—perhaps the owner had put

his or her name there. The plate was not recovered at the quarry but, being rather small, could easily have gone unnoticed because the focus of the search was on possible skeletal remains. The plate was certainly an after-manufacture add-on, since that particular model had a plain, unadorned stock. At this point, he was questioned by the Coroner. "Would it be possible to identify the various retail outlets in which that particular model, with that common set of serial numbers had been shipped"? "It might be possible, theoretically, your Honour, but the rifles were usually shipped to a large distributor first and from thence to individual gun shops. Following the trail of something like one thousand weapons would be an enormous task and, even then, might be of little help."

The Inquiry then focussed its attention upon data from the Missing Persons Bureau. A senior officer from the Bureau outlined the steps that had been taken to establish a possible link between the remains at *Inishmore* and the historical records for missing persons. The records indicated that, in the period from 1950 to 1970, some 18 unresolved cases involving adult males were still on the books for New South Wales. None of these cases involved persons reported missing from the Ryleford district. In some of the reported cases, a description of the clothing worn by the missing person when last seen, was not available. He went on to note that, short of further and more specific evidence, it was unlikely that the remains would ever be identified by means of data from the Bureau. He also reminded the Inquiry that his data were restricted to New South Wales. It was entirely possible that the remains belonged to a missing person from another State.

On the way home, after the Inquest, Reidy decided to call in on his aunty back at the farm and to assure her that, although Brendan's name had been mentioned out of necessity, the Coroner had insisted that he was not under any suspicion. He also asked if he could go to Brendan's room and look at some of his drawing and writing books, for most of these had been kept after his death as a sort of memento. She seemed worried by this, but he assured her that his reasons for doing so were to show that Brendan might have observed something on that hill which would help the police.

After Brendan's death, Sarah had cleaned out his bedroom, but could not bring herself to destroy his many little notebooks and the drawings that he had stuck to the wall. All had been bundled into a large cardboard box, and it was this box that Reidy now opened. He began with the drawings. None of the material was in chronological order, but it was obvious that some drawings were much more carefully executed than others. He guessed that the better ones were the earlier. There were knights on horses, castles with turrets, and drawings of swords and lances. But amongst these rather conventional depictions, there was one which stood out. It did not seem to belong to his world of knights and valiant deeds. It was a drawing of a van or truck, rather roughly executed. The wheels were almost square and the body of the van was too large for the tiny cabin in front of it. But what immediately caught Reidy's attention was the logo he had drawn on the side of the truck. It was a crude representation of a helmet with a visor on the front. Under the drawing he had written in large letters THE GREAT DROMOUND ON THE SEA. Reidy knew that a dromound was a ship and that Brendan always referred to the flat land around the great hill on Inishmore as "the sea". His hill was an island—perhaps the fair island of Avalon. There was another detail in the drawing

which was highly significant. To the left of his drawing of the van he had depicted a large hill and between that hill and the van were several tiny strokes that might have represented human figures. He carefully laid the drawing to one side and then began on the three little notebooks.

As with his drawings, Brendan's writing seemed to deteriorate over time. What Reidy guessed to be his early writing—very likely supervised by the nuns or the Marist Brothers—was reasonably neat, but one of the notebooks was filled with what could only be described as almost indecipherable scrawls. Most of the material, like the drawings, dealt with fairly conventional themes from the Arthurian legends. But, in some of the entries, it appeared that quite separate events in Malory's account had been mixed up and placed in a strange context. Other entries were obscure, to say the least. One read "I rescued the infant from the water". This was almost certainly a reference to King Arthur's "May-day babies" with its unpleasant echoes in Herod's murder of the Holy Innocents. The baby Mordred had been rescued, all the others had drowned. Another read "I saw the great battle and took the black knight's sword to the lady". Yet another entry referred to a battle between a red knight and the black knight. It seemed innocent enough, but then Reidy remembered that the remains at the burial site included what looked like the remains of a black leather jacket. Perhaps the battle referred to something that he had seen on the great hill at *Inishmore*. Then he remembered passing the quarry all those years ago and seeing the pink doll lying amongst the rubbish. Was this the infant rescued from the water? After all, for at least half of the year the quarry was filled with several feet of water. There again, perhaps the water in the quarry had been envisioned as that lake where the lady took back Arthur's sword—hence his reference to the

return of the black knight's sword. But the black knight was not Arthur, surely?

Reidy might have dismissed all of this speculation as being out of hand but for one thing. He knew very well that Brendan sometimes reported real events in an Arthurian setting. Many years ago, as Reidy was at the house talking to Sarah, Brendan came running in and said to his mother "I have just seen the Questing Beast". "Where is this Beast?" said his mother. He did not answer but turned to Reidy and said, "Sir Knight (for that is what they called each other) will you come and look? Take me on the white charger" (a reference to Reidy's utility). Brendan directed him to the back boundary fence and there, in the neighbouring property stood a large Alpaca. These animals had recently been introduced as guard animals for lambing ewes, the theory being that they would chase foxes and marauding dogs away. Now, it was not an unreasonable identification on the boy's part, because the Beast of legend was often depicted as having the head of one animal and the body of another. This strange animal in the paddock looked like a sheep with the long neck and head of a camel.

Reidy tried to imagine what the world must look like in the mind of a boy whose knowledge of Arthurian legend probably surpassed that of a university professor, but whose knowledge of the real world around him was restricted, since he had left school, to a handful of people around him and a few hundred acres of farmland. As he grew older, his entire experience was filtered through the narrow lens of Arthurian legend. In this respect, his understanding was even narrower than that of Don Quixote. Fortunately though, he seemed to assume the role of a viewer, rather than an active participant like Don Quixote.

A thousand thoughts revolved in Reidy's mind. What was he to make of all this? If, indeed, Brendan's drawings and writings did have some basis in fact, where could he start? He decided that the most promising lead was the drawing of the van, because here, he believed he had his most promising clue in the matter of the shin bone affair. He suspected that he knew exactly what Brendan had seen when he drew that picture of the van. And, furthermore, he felt confident that the identity of the van, if that were possible, would then offer up many other avenues of inquiry.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Picnic Van

There is a sort of no-man's-land in history where events of the recent past are not yet sufficiently removed from our own time so as to arouse our curiosity, and yet neither are they contemporary enough to form part of the present order of things. Into this category, we must place the phenomenon of the picnic van.

The history of the picnic van begins somewhere in the 1940s and ends in the early 1960s. No-one has described the scene better than C.J. Dennis:

*We got a club, see! Sorta 'scursion club-
A dollar-in all round for beer an fares.
(Saves Sund'y rows at any country pub).
Then Shiner's van it lands us out somewhere
Into the bush, along some quiet track
Where cops is scarce an' blokes can yell an cuss
An' booze an' be themselves, wot? Transport Ack?
Transport or Likker Acks don't trouble us!*

This admirable description is entirely accurate. A large group of city-based men who, at that time, would be classified as 'rough types', would collectively hire a furniture removal van, deck it out with makeshift seats and head off for the bush. There would be much

drinking and gambling on the way. At the destination point, along some quiet laneway or unused road, a large campfire would be lit and more beer consumed. A game of 'two-up' would almost certainly take place. Sometimes the party might include rabbit shooters, or ferreters, or fishermen. They would leave the main group and walk out, sometimes for a considerable distance, to suitable spots for their quarry.

Reidy was very familiar with these hoodlum invaders and with the problems they caused. He was sometimes called in to inspect damage to crown property and to write a report on that damage. Very often, their destination would be a crown reserve, or an unused laneway, formerly a stock watering point. There was often damage to fences, trees were chopped down, and campfires left to burn on, sometimes with serious consequences. Several small bushfires in the district had been started in this fashion. A recurring problem was paddock gates being left open by these unwanted visitors with the inevitable consequence of a 'box up' of different mobs of sheep.

One favoured destination for these vans was an unused road leading down to a streamside reserve, about a mile south of *Inishmore* and very close to the main road. It was well concealed from the highway and the nearest farmhouse was a great distance away. It immediately came to Reidy's mind, as he looked at that drawing in Brendan's room, that it depicted just such a van. And he now knew the reason why the boy had taken an interest in it.

The crude diagram of the van that the boy had drawn included a representation of a helmet and visor on the van body. This was the recognised logo of a very large firm of removalists in Sydney, W.T. Armour & Sons. The helmet and visor logo linked nicely to the

company name and had been in use since the formation of the company back in the 1940s. They operated many vans, some of which were owned by the drivers but operated under a type of franchise arrangement. The company would supply most of the work and allow the use of the name and logo in return for a percentage of the earnings. 'Private' weekend jobs were allowed but, again, checks were made. Conscious of the problem of 'moonlighting', the company had very strict rules concerning the use of log books. Every job was to be entered in the book, along with speedometer readings. Records were then checked against vehicle mileage at regular intervals. Following a spate of city robberies in which large vans were implicated, the police had requested that the Company keep all log books, even after disposal of the vehicle.

At the Inquest, one of the problems that had been highlighted was the *manner* in which the deceased person of interest had come to be on the property. There was no record of an abandoned vehicle, either car or motorbike. The person could have walked in from the main highway after hitching a ride, but this seemed unlikely. Nor did it seem likely that this particular location, not easily accessed by a vehicle, would have been chosen by someone looking for a spot to bury a body. Now Reidy had an eminently plausible explanation for the presence of the person on the hill. And, indeed, he had an explanation for a possible second 'outsider' being involved in the circumstances surrounding the death of that first person.

The relatively large number of 'long term' missing persons had been the subject of some discussion at the inquest. Reidy now believed that he might have a way of narrowing the field, so to speak. In the first place, the data of interest could be restricted to one major city in the state. Although Armour and Sons operated their vans in several cities, only Sydney was within two hour's drive of *Inishmore*. Secondly, Brendan's drawing could only have been made inside a

certain time frame—roughly from 1960 to 1970. This linked in well with the pathologist’s estimate of the time frame for the possible year of death.

But he had one final piece of possible evidence which would narrow the field even further and, indeed, might even identify the actual van that Brendan had drawn. Sometime during the 1960s—he could not be sure of the year until he checked his files—the local police had contacted him re a complaint from a local farmer. This person had seen a picnic van parked along an unused road near his boundary fence. The picnickers had set fire to a large dry tree which eventually fell on the fence and allowed his stock to wander along the lane and up on to the main road. He had taken the number of the vehicle and given it to the police, along with a description of the vehicle. Since the incident was on crown land, the police had handballed the whole business to Reidy. Because the culprits were not caught in the act and were long gone when the police eventually arrived, the probability of a successful conviction was very low. Reidy could not proceed with the case, but he had kept a record of his report on file. Now, it was quite likely that this van was the very same one that Brendan had drawn, since each picnic group tended to have a small selection of favoured spots to which they returned.

It was time, he thought, to set up some sort of working hypothesis concerning the whole affair. Let us suppose that Brendan had indeed seen the picnic van on his way up to the hill from the Kelly farmhouse. Further suppose that he saw one or maybe even several men walk up towards that hill. The man or men would most likely be rabbit shooters, though they might have had ferrets and nets. Once on the hill he either witnesses a confrontation between two men and the death of one, as his notebook suggests, or he just comes across a body lying there without any second party involved—

maybe the man shot himself when getting through the fence at the bottom of the hill. Why would he bury the body? Contrariwise, if there had been a second man who killed the first, why would the perpetrator then bury that man with an old axe by his side? And, assuming the rifle in the quarry was connected to the affair, why would he walk to the other end of the hill and throw the rifle into the quarry? Perhaps Brendan took the rifle to the quarry. But why? It looked nothing like a sword and, if Brendan did think it was a sword, why not bury it with his warrior knight rather than the make-believe lance? The whole thing looked like a hopeless puzzle. Then, suddenly, a possible explanation came to his mind. Indeed, he was overwhelmed by its plausibility.

He recalled, in that moment, that the rifle stock had once carried some sort of plate on its side. The firearms witness at the Inquest reckoned it to be about four inches long and perhaps an inch and a half wide. It could have borne the person's name, perhaps, but it was much more likely to bear the name of a particular model or model modification of the rifle. What if the name plate had *Excalibur* engraved upon it? Then, indeed, Brendan might think he was dealing with the sword of legend, however transformed. And its bearer would be King Arthur. As such he must receive a proper burial, together with his lance, and his sword must be returned to the Lady of the Lake. At this point, Reidy had to check his wild imagination which seemed to be running well ahead of his reason. He told himself to calm down. But, even after regaining some composure, he felt certain that his thesis was eminently sensible and fitted with all the facts before him.

But, if Brendan had buried the body, what did he use to dig the hole? It may have been reasonably soft soil, but it could not be excavated by hand. Some sort of digging tool would be needed.

Reidy estimated that it would take him at least one and a half hours to fetch a shovel from the farm shed and return, but there were other options. Down by the dividing fence, perhaps fifty yards or so from the site, the neighbouring farmer had, generations ago, cultivated the field and had cleared it of loose surface rocks. These rocks were piled up near the fence in several places and, on one of those piles were two rusted ploughshares. One of these could well be used as a digging tool, but it would be slow going. Of course, the hole was being dug on a den site, and he may have chosen this *precisely because* a good deal of the excavation work had already been done for him. In short, Reidy thought that his theory still held up.

Now Reidy had two promising lines of enquiry, once concerning the van and one concerning the rifle. He reasoned that the thesis concerning the rifle should be investigated first, because this would explain, and perhaps exonerate, the actions of his young cousin in the whole affair. The police might have started elsewhere, but his primary motive for undertaking his investigations was to clear Brendan of any wrongdoing.

CHAPTER NINE

The Knife of Serpent Horn

Buried somewhere in the great mass of literature concerning medieval magic and myth is an account of a marvellous instrument called the Knife of Serpent Horn. When set upon the table at a great feast, it would invariably turn and point to someone who intended to kill its owner. Reidy had this legend in mind when he picked up the phone and rang Zorba, for he hoped that his theory concerning the rifle might also unmask a possible killer or, at the very least, help to unravel a mystery.

The voice at the other end simply said, “Kotsianis speaking”. “Zorba, it’s Jim Reidy, do you remember me”? “Never forget a crim. You still skinning rabbits for a living”? Secretly, Reidy enjoyed the insult, for it confirmed for him that Zorba regarded him as a friend. Only friends would address each other in this fashion. “I need a favour”, said Reidy. There was a pause. “You’re not going to try to flog rabbits to me are you? Remember, I’m a Greek and we don’t eat vermin. It’s forbidden anyway—check your Leviticus.” “So”, thought Reidy to himself, “this bloke knows his Old Testament.” “Would you be prepared to look at the *Inishmore* case again if I had a few possible leads for you to follow?” “What leads?”, said Zorba. “Well, some new information on the rifle at the quarry, for starters. What we need to know is whether there is a Lithgow model that may have been marketed as a special *Excalibur* model.” “As in King Arthur?”, said Zorba. “Exactly”, answered Reidy. “I think I can see

where this is going”, said Zorba. Reidy continued: “would your Firearms mob be any good or would it be better to talk to a collector—you must know some firearms nuts?” “Depends”, said Zorba. “If its after-market stuff, you’re better off with a collector. Leave it with me and give me your home number.” Reidy complied. “I’ll need a bit of time”, said Zorba. “Well”, said Reidy, “the dead man’s not going anywhere.”

“What are the other leads you spoke of?” said Zorba. “Well, they are more of a hunch really, but I am going to ask you to get your motor registration mob to look up a number for me.” “Who’s the detective in this show?” said Zorba, “me or you”? “Look, it’s a long shot, but I think that our mystery body may have travelled up to *Inishmore* as part of a picnic van crowd.” I’ve been out at the farm and looked at some of Brendan’s drawings. He’s got one of a motor van, and I reckon it’s one of Armour’s vans.”

There followed more small talk and at the end Zorba said, “how’s Brendan’s mother?” “Going well”, said Reidy. He was both surprised and pleased that Zorba had remembered the boy and his mother.

Whilst waiting for Zorba to get back to him, Reidy had decided on a further course of action which might throw more light on his working hypothesis. If Brendan did, indeed, bury the body—the body that he was convinced was that of King Arthur—then he may well have left some other clues at the scene or elsewhere. It was time to re-visit the grave site and look for something that would not have even remotely registered with the forensic people. For whilst at the excavation, he remembered that part of the undisturbed site had been covered with thin plates of exfoliated granite. To an untrained eye, they may have looked natural enough, but Reidy thought they

looked out of place. He had initially supposed that they were placed there by ferreters trying to recover a ferret from a “stick up”- a situation where a ferret becomes blocked behind a rabbit in a narrow passage. The owner then has to dig down on the burrow, excavating rocks as required. In this fashion, rocks which may have been underground originally were now thrown about the surface. On a wet day, such rocks might be laid out carefully on the surface, so that the ferret owner would not have his knees and lower legs covered in mud as he knelt at his work.

He drove to the site after work one evening and began to examine all the smaller, flat rocks lying about the excavation site. Many had been piled up neatly by the forensic team. On one of these, he found what he was looking for. It was a largish, flat rock, roughly eighteen inches by twelve and quite thin. It had been turned upside down and when he scanned the original, exposed surface, there he could see faint lettering, roughly scratched on the surface near one edge. It read *Hic iacet*. The remainder of the message, if there was any more to be read, had been broken away.

Now he knew, beyond any doubt, that Brendan had scratched this message, for it was the first part of the inscription on King Arthur’s tombstone as related by Malory. And that inscription was the one that he had placed in Brendan’s grave on the day of his burial. Casual observers, walking past this stone may not have even seen the now faint inscription. If they did, they would, no doubt, regard it in the same light as the graffiti on The Crouching Man, directly above—just petty vandalism. Brendan had very likely covered most of the site with thin, flat rocks, emulating the sort of flat tombs he had seen in his books. On the largest of these, he scratched the inscription.

About a week later, he had a call from Zorba. “Good news and bad news”, said Zorba. “The good news is that there is an *Excalibur* rifle and the bad news is that it is a sort of ‘after-market’ add on and not a separate model.” He went on to explain that the Police Firearms people were of no use but that, on their suggestion, he had contacted a firearms collector. This man was an ex-employee of the Lithgow Company and had collected all their .22 models. The *Excalibur* was actually a standard issue rifle which had been modified by one of the major gun shops in Sydney as a sort of marketing ploy. Essentially, all they had done was to add a peep sight to the rifle—a modified back sight, stained and re-polished the stock, and applied a fancy *Excalibur* plate to it. All up, some thirty rifles had been modified in this fashion and sold at both of their two Sydney outlets. Undoubtedly, of course, some of those rifles would have changed hands over the course of the years.

“But that’s not bad news, Zorba”, said Reidy. “Provided the set of readable serial numbers found on our rubbish tip rifle match the numbers of that batch, we will at least narrow the field to thirty rifles.” “My thoughts exactly”, said Zorba. “I’m flat out at the moment, but as soon as I get the time, I will start the business of checking out the firearms registry books at those two gun shops. My gun collector contact reckons the rifles came on the market for a brief time in the late 1950’s. That should narrow the field.”

Reidy then told him of his discovery back at the burial site and that they would now have to accept that the body had indeed been buried by Brendan. Even though Brendan was dead and gone, he still felt it his duty to clear his name, so to speak. He could well believe that the young Brendan, acting in his world of fantasy, had

buried a body, but he could not believe that he would harm another human being. For the sake of Brendan's now aged mother, he was determined to find the truth of the matter. Zorba was quite sympathetic in this regard and agreed to keep Reidy posted on any developments.

Fordyce and Evans, once the best known of all specialty gun shops and gunsmiths in the city, was now reduced to one small store in a City arcade. The business now stocked all manner of sporting goods and their smithing activities had long since ceased. Their somewhat subdued shopfront and small size had initially caused some doubts in Zorba's mind that he would have any success in tracking down the rifle. However, after flashing his card and detailing the reason for his visit, he was pleasantly surprised to learn that the store had retained all of its records related to gun sales for the last forty years. This was a requirement of the law. He was taken out to the back of the store and introduced to an elderly gentleman in a grey dust coat. He could tell that this man was a long-term employee.

"Ah, yes", the old gentleman said, "I remember the Excalibur model very well. I was the one who fitted all the back peep-sights and attached the special rifle slings. A furniture restorer did the work on the stocks. That was in 1958 if I recall correctly." Zorba was impressed with the old man's memory. "What were peep-sights?" he asked. "Well, they were a sort of precursor to the modern telescopic sight. They consisted of a small shielded aperture which took the place of the rear, open sight. They improved accuracy and were greatly prized by many rabbit shooters at that time. Take a seat over there at the lunch table and I will retrieve the firearms registration books for 1958 and 1959. I think we sold these models off fairly

quickly. There were only about thirty of them modified at the time.” He padded off into another small room.

He soon returned with four hard-cover journal books, their red covers now somewhat faded. “Two of these are from our old store in Jerram Street”, he said. “The other two record sales from this shop. We will need to look for entries specifying the Lithgow Slazenger Model 1BE. The ‘E’ specifies our modified version.” “I thought Slazenger was a brand of golf clubs”, said Zorba. “Indeed, it was”, said the old gentleman. “Lithgow Small Arms Factory made their clubs and they joined forces with this rifle. A marketing ploy I suspect, just like our Excalibur model.” He began turning the pages of one of the journals.

“Ah! Here we go”, said the old man. “Have you got your notebook ready?” Zorba nodded. Within the space of twenty minutes Zorba had his list of purchasers and the rifle serial numbers. There were twenty four names recorded. “I thought we did thirty rifles”, said the old man, “but I could be wrong. It’s also possible that a few were changed back by removing the peep sight and the sling. Mind you, some young salesperson could have missed out on putting down the special ‘E’ designator.” “Thank you for your time”, said Zorba. “This information could solve a very old mystery.” “You realise, of course”, the old man said, “that many of those rifles may have changed hands since their initial purchase.” Zorba nodded. “I might get lucky”, he said.

Back at his office, Zorba’s first move was to check his serial numbers against those of the weapon found at the quarry. The first set of sequences matched, so now he knew that the quarry rifle was almost certainly an Excalibur model, just as Jim Reidy had surmised. The

object sheared off the side of the barrel assembly at the breech was, with little doubt, a peep-sight.

Now he went to his filing cabinet and pulled out the state-wide list of missing persons that had been compiled for the first inquest into the *Inishmore* bone. None of the names of the rifle owners matched his list of missing persons. It seemed as if this line of inquiry had come to a dead end. However, he had not checked his rifle records against the national database of extant missing persons from the era in question. He then typed up his list of 24 rifle owners, added a covering letter and faxed the whole lot to Headquarters with a request to check them against the national database.

Meanwhile, back in his office at Ryleford, Reidy began the search for his old report on the picnic van incident from several years earlier. Although most other branches of government had, by this time, shifted over to computerised records, Reidy was still operating with the old 'hard copy' system. Some of his records were in suspension files, neatly tabbed by subject matter. All his legal material, however, was in large file boxes because many legal cases involved a great deal of paper war, far too much for the normal suspension file system. His legal boxes were in three main categories—VNW (for vermin and noxious weeds), CLM (for crown land management), and a MISC (for all other legal matters). Each of the five boxes of crown land management matters covered a five-year period beginning in 1940. He picked out the decade from 1961-1970 and began to remove the file bundles one by one. Each bundle was bound in the traditional way—a cotton string passed through a pierced hole in the top corner of the bundle and was then wound around a small disc of cardboard to secure it.

He found the required file without too much difficulty. It was dated 12th October 1962. There was a covering letter from the Ryleford Police Station which explained why the complaint was being handed on to the local office of the Land Occupation Branch. The duty officer at the police station had written up a short report, the substance of which concerned damage to boundary fencing adjacent to a crown reserve. The name of the farmer reporting the offence was given, as was time, date, and location, along with sketchy details of the supposed offense. "A large number of men, possibly up to 20 in number, were gathered around a campfire which had been set at the base of a dry tree. That tree subsequently fell upon the boundary fence, breaking several wires. The extra strain on the fence wires then pulled over a gatepost, some 20 metres away, allow stock to escape. There was, at the scene, a large furniture van, red in colour, make not recorded but possibly Bedford going on complainant's description. Only the front of the van was seen. Number plate was UJ772." There followed some notes added at a later time. "Scene checked 5.30 pm. No persons or vehicle seen. Log still burning. No bushfire threat."

It took three phone calls to catch Zorba in his office. "Zorba, it's Jim Reidy. Any progress?" "Drawn a blank so far", said Zorba, "but I am still waiting to hear back regarding a match with the national missing persons database. It shouldn't be too long. All those records are now on their computers. Still, I'm not very hopeful." "Well", said Reidy, "I might have something to raise your spirits." "Fire away", said Zorba. "I know you are a born optimist—the sort of bloke that goes to a funeral to admire the floral wreaths." Reidy chuckled. "I've got a vehicle number for you. Pen ready?" "Fire at will." "It's a truck rego, circa 1962, number is UJ772, probably a red Bedford truck." "Got it", said Zorba. "What's the story?" "Well, it's a bit of

a long shot, but Brendan drew a picture of a van like that and he could only have seen it parked near *Inishmore*. He drew it because of the logo on its sides—a knight’s helmet and visor. It’s the logo of Armour and Co., whom you will have heard of. The number I have given you is from a similar van whose occupants caused some damage to a cocky’s fence and to a crown reserve back in 1962. The cocky recorded the rego but, of course neither your mob nor mine could do much, since they weren’t caught in the act.”

“But what’s the link with our body on the hill?”, said Zorba. “Well, some of the things Brendan has written down strongly suggest there was a link. He writes about two knights fighting on the hill and I reckon they could be rabbit shooters from a picnic van.” “Bloody hell”, Zorba said, “you *are* an optimist.” “Well”, said Reidy “all your rego stuff should be on computers now, so it’s not a big ask.” “Leave it with me” said Zorba.

Two days later, when Reidy was back home preparing his dinner, Zorba rang. He was excited. “I can’t believe it”, he said. “Do you wear a bloody rabbit’s foot around your neck or something?” “What’s the story?”, said Reidy. “Well, your truck belongs—or belonged—to one Michael Patrick Burns, who also happens to have a bit of form. A small-time crim, but well worth following up. And yes, his van was an Armours van. But that’s not all.” “Well, go on”, said Reidy, “don’t play games with me.” “Our rifle was almost certainly purchased by the said Michael Patrick Burns, AKA Micky the Mover, at Fordyce and Evans in Sydney in 1958.” There was a stunned silence. “Bloody hell” was all that Reidy could manage.

CHAPTER TEN

Micky the Mover

In ancient Greece, Socrates maintained that evil actions were simply a form of ignorance—no-one who knew better would knowingly commit an evil deed. Socrates, however, had not reckoned on Micky the Mover.

Michael Patrick Burns, to give him the name by which he was known in several courtrooms and on numerous charge sheets, was a bad egg. Born in the Depression years in the Rocks area of Sydney, he had learned to live by his wits at a very early age. This, no doubt, was partially a product of his upbringing. His father, a wife beater and drunkard, had left the scene early and his mother was forced to leave both Micky and his younger brother in the care of their aged grandmother while she went to work at a nearby whitegoods factory. The two youngsters, deprived of any real sense of family life, roamed the streets and frequently absconded from school. Very soon, Micky “fell amongst thieves”, as the famous Newbolt poem has it.

He began by running errands and keeping lookout for some of the local crooks and, in return, they gave him a few crumbs from their ill-gotten gains. Like a hyena at the lion’s kill, he was a sort of scavenger dog of power, and this engendered in him, a certain sense of satisfaction. He saw all human achievement in terms of power alone—possessions were a manifestation of power—and was

determined, from an early age, to carve out his share by whatever means that came to hand.

The particular means showed itself, somewhat fortuitously, in the form of a furniture removalist's van. One of the small-time crooks with whom he was associated was a driver for W.T Armour and Son's, a large firm of carriers, whose fleet of vehicles included several furniture vans. He persuaded Micky to apply for a position as a van driver and, in fact, Micky took very little persuasion because he could immediately see certain 'fringe benefits' as it were. Removalists, by the very nature of their work, get to see the layout and content of many houses and, to a thief, this sort of intelligence is worth money. There were other benefits too, for the opportunistic scavenger. Very often they were called in to shift the belongings of elderly folk 'downsizing' to a smaller house or a flat. Here, there was often an opportunity for a quick buck by offering to take some unwanted piece of furniture off their hands. "That old piano, Missus—do you want us to get rid of it for you? They're practically worthless these days." Then, a very nice iron-framed *Schwechten* would be tarted up with a bit of furniture polish and flogged, for a tidy sum, to a music store on the other side of the city.

And so it came to be that Micky soon became the proud owner of his own van, purchased second-hand by dubious means and with ill-gotten gains. Then, using the opportunity of the Armour and Son's franchise, he picked up whatever work they sent his way. The van carried the Company logo and this gave it an air of unearned respectability. For its part, the Company was blissfully unaware of Micky's background and his extra-curricular activities. It had, by now, grown into a large bureaucratic organisation, communicating to its lower ranks via a chain of command that made deception very easy. The only real check on the activities of the drivers was via

vehicle log books and signed job-sheets. But, of course, the job sheets did not include 'private' jobs, arranged directly with the owner-driver, usually at weekends. Nonetheless, the log books had to be filled in for such jobs.

Micky was well acquainted with the interior of police stations and courtrooms but, miraculously, had managed to avoid a gaol sentence. After his first court appearance, where he copped a good behaviour bond, he quickly learned the ropes, so to speak, of the legal system. Moreover, his very demeanour in the courtroom was calculated to act powerfully on the compassion of the magistrates. He deliberately dressed down, appearing almost like a destitute, hunched over and mournful of countenance. He spoke haltingly and with the air of a man who had lost all purpose in life. Several magistrates took pity on him and suggested mild courses of action that might "save him from a life of crime". But, though you may save a man from many things, you cannot save him from himself. And so, though he was well known to the police as Micky the Mover, most of the time he operated under their radar. From time to time, he would be hauled in for questioning concerning some recent robbery, but Micky was a man of a thousand alibis. Like Macavity the Mystery Cat, he was always somewhere else at the time.

Using the van at weekends for "picnic excursions" was not Micky's idea at first, but that of one of his associates, who was a keen rabbit shooter. The profit from these ventures was meagre and the rabble who were transported in this fashion were, to say they least, difficult and unruly. But Micky knew how to look after himself and had a reputation as being someone with whom a "stoush" was unwise. More than one in that assembly of no-goods had felt the force of his knuckles in the past. Micky very quickly took to the sport of rabbit shooting and became a keen hunter. Often, he could make enough

out of the rabbits to pay for the petrol and he reasoned that, even if he only broke even, it was better than staying home and spending money at the pub. Most of the crowd who paid to go on these excursions simply went for the booze and the gambling. Only a few went for other purposes. The picnic party was usually 'by invitation only', but strangers who had come to learn of the opportunity to 'go bush' were accepted if they could be vouched for in some way, paid up front, and kept a low profile.

For the Saturday or Sunday excursion, he picked locations that were well concealed from the public eye, but reasonably close to good rabbit-shooting country. In fact two or three locations in the general Ryleford area were favoured destinations, not least because of the high rabbit numbers in these areas. He tended to alternate between sites, so that no one site would be visited more than once a year. In this way he made his movements more unpredictable and, therefore, less likely to draw the attention of irate farmers and the police. Once at the site, he would busy himself with the campfire, drag out the trestle seats and appoint some suitably muscular sidekick to impose a modicum of order. Then he would head off with his rifle and sugarbag containing rough sandwiches and a bottle of beer. Rabbits would go into this sugarbag, to be cleaned and paired back at camp. On good days, he might return twice to empty the bag and hang the rabbits inside a rough screen.

There were certain unwritten rules amongst keen rabbit shooters of the period. The first, and most important of these was that you did not encroach upon another hunter's recognised 'patch' without his express permission or invitation. This was not just a question of shooting rabbits that were rightfully his. Of far more importance was the fact that some usurper, not knowing the lay of the land and the preferred stalking spots, would invariably 'spook' most of the

rabbits, causing them to scuttle down their holes before a shot could be fired. They might not re-surface for hours and so, potentially lucrative spots would be ruined. This is why Micky announced, to the rabble at the campsite, the locale of his intended hunting expedition and he made it clear that anyone poaching his site might thereafter be in need of medical attention.

Micky had another rule, but applied it only to himself. Whilst some of his compatriots had repeating rifles or semi-automatic weapons, Micky despised such devices. Part of the challenge, for him, was to make every shot count. In any case, as he correctly surmised, one normally had just the opportunity of a single shot. If that shot missed, the rabbit would be on the move in an instant and almost impossible to shoot. The fewer shots missed, the fewer disturbed rabbits. And, indeed, his tallies of dead rabbits proved his point, for he normally bagged far more rabbits than any of his compatriots.

On some trips there was an option available concerning time of return. Those who had exhausted both their supply of grog and of gambling funds by early afternoon, could elect to be driven to the Ryleford station and there catch the 3.30 train to the city. They still paid the same price for their seat on the van but the extra monetary sacrifice for a train fare was worthwhile if they could arrive home at a respectable hour and avoid a confrontation with an angry wife or girlfriend. The keen hunters and hardened drinkers, meanwhile, stayed on until dusk, to be taken home in Micky's van. The hour or so just before dark was particularly productive for rabbit shooters. During daylight hours, especially in hot weather, fewer adult rabbits ventured above ground. As dusk approached, however, they emerged in numbers, eager to fill their bellies, revisit their dunghills, and establish their positions in the dominance hierarchy.

And so it was that Micky plied his trade, mostly on that murky interface between 'legal' and 'illegal', but sometimes venturing into the more open territory of each. He was careful, he was cunning, and he was not easily caught out. But everyone has some sort of Achilles heel: Micky's unprotected area was his romantic involvement with the opposite sex and, in particular, one Meg Patterson, a lady of mysterious background and well versed in the art of seduction. Like Micky himself, she had been brought up "in the school of hard knocks" as they say. From her mid-teens, she had quickly realised the power of female allurements and turned it to her advantage. She was possessed of good looks and the same sort of native cunning that Micky himself had developed. And she used both her looks and her cunning to maximum advantage. Micky, for his part, abandoned all of his usual caution and fell for her, head over heels. He lavished upon her a considerable proportion of his ill-gotten gains. In her company, he was as meek as a lamb and, as Artemus Ward says, "As sociable as a basketful of kittens". Had she been of a more upstanding nature, she might well have turned Micky from his life of petty crime. But that was not her style.

Of course, Micky was not entirely unaware that she "had a past" as they say. Nor was he under any real illusions when she told him that she did "modelling for women's lingerie". There was, between them, a sort of mutual understanding. She would not enquire of him concerning the working details of his furniture removalist business and she likewise expected that he would not ask for full details of her background and employment. In fact, Micky realized that she was a sort of kindred spirit and was careful not to extract from her any high-minded promises of absolute fidelity. And, in this

matter, he expected and obtained a certain reciprocity. One might even call it a sort of honour among thieves. But it was not to last.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Questing Beast

The Questing Beast is a strange figure in Arthurian Legend. A composite or mixture of several different animals, it has the head of a snake, the body of a leopard and the haunches of a lion. Many a valiant knight set out to hunt and kill it, but, depending on your sources, none or only one actually succeeded. It would be unkind in the extreme to suggest a comparison to Micky the Mover in all respects bar one—the difficulty of hunting him down.

Having now gained some very useful intelligence on Micky, Zorba and Reidy now had two main tasks ahead of them. The first was to satisfy themselves that the van drawn by Brendan all those years ago was, indeed, Micky's van. The second was to locate him. These tasks essentially fell on the shoulders of Zorba, for Reidy had no official involvement and, in any case, was busy with his own work.

When Zorba drove out to the main office of Armour and Co, he was not at all confident that the journey would be worthwhile. The company had recently shifted to this new office, a modern antiseptic construction of glass and gleaming metal, on the city outskirts. The main depot remained at its historical location in a less salubrious part of town, now deemed to be below the assumed dignity of middle and higher management.

In the reception area of the main office was a small desk behind which sat the obligatory, smartly-dressed young lady, exuding charm. On the walls were a variety of large and expensive posters and, of course, a company mission statement. The posters delivered the usual sort of message: ‘Armour & Co—Your Move into the Future’, ‘Armour & Co—the Logistical Choice’, ‘Armour & Co—We Carry the Country’. They depicted smart-looking young men and women in company uniform, standing beside their trucks and vans. The mission statement read: “We are committed to the provision of fast and cost-effective transport solutions for all of our clients, irrespective of size”.

Zorba made himself known and presented his card. “Would you be able to assist me concerning the contact details for one of your former employees a Mr Michael Burns?” he asked. The young lady hesitated for a moment then said, “Perhaps I will get Mr Williams, our staff manager to help you.” She sensed that such information might well detract from the company image and needed to pass the matter on to someone in authority. Williams, a thin angular man whose clothes hung on him like a scarecrow, emerged from a side door. Zorba introduced himself and repeated his request. For an instant, there was a momentary look of concern on the face of staff manager, but he quickly brightened: “Ah, yes”, he said, “Mr Burns was one of our more colourful characters from the past. You realise, of course, that we no longer engage the services of owner-drivers.” “My interest has nothing to do with Mr Burns in his former official capacity as a driver for your company”, said Zorba. “It is a private matter of historical interest only. Mr Burns will have long since retired, I am sure.” Williams looked relieved. Turning to the young lady, he said, “Fiona, would you please bring up the staff database on the computer then, under the ‘options menu’, choose ‘historical’”.

Within the space of a minute, she had found what Zorba was looking for. “Would you like me to write it down for you?” she said. Zorba thanked her. Some twenty years had elapsed since the sighting of Micky’s van by the irate farmer and Micky was, by now, long retired—at least in an official sense—as a van driver. The company records at Armours indicated that he ceased to be on their books as of May in 1972. There had been a complaint delivered to the company by an irate customer concerning the disappearance of a valuable wall clock during a house move. Micky had been allocated the job. He swore, black and blue, that he had never clapped eyes on the said item and even had the temerity to suggest that the customer, an attorney-at-law, was attempting an insurance scam. This was the last straw for management at Armour and Co. Mickey was stricken from their books and made to remove the company logo on his van. The Company did have records concerning his home address and telephone number, but these were now about a decade old.

With this piece of intelligence safely in his pocket, Zorba then queried Williams on the possibility of scrutinising old log books. Sensing some awkwardness, he quickly added that the information he required had nothing to do with a Company job. It was, again, a private matter. “I’m afraid all of those records are kept out at our main depot. Fiona, please give Mr Kotsianis one of our location maps.” She handed the page to Zorba. “When you get there, ask for Mr Barraclough. Sandy is the manager out there.”

Great cities all over the developed world may differ in their history, geography, architecture and layout, but the industrial sections of all of them are remarkably similar. They are dismal places. There are sections of waste land, still awaiting development, where battered chain wire fences enclose former farmland, now given over to the

growth of rank vegetation—docks and marshmallow and phalaris—and half dead trees in whose branches sit flocks of starlings and Indian Mynahs. Flying rats, Reidy called them. Next door might be some massive warehouse, still under construction, or some old, decrepit building, in red brick or rusting galvanised iron—a sad vestige of its former self. The depot of Armour and Co was in such an area of Sydney. Its massive sheds were old but there had been some attempt to tart up the entrance and the main office. Outside the sheds was a vast tarmac upon which were parked dozens of trucks and semi-trailers. Busy forklifts ran about like meat ants at a disturbed nest.

Zorba entered the office through a sliding door and asked to see Mr Barraclough. He had expected an older man, perhaps in a suit and tie, but when the manager arrived, he turned out to be a young, muscular gentleman in sneakers and slacks. Zorba then reminded himself that the Company would need someone capable of exercising physical authority as well as the other sort; and someone who knew the minds of the drivers- their lurks and their petty likes and dislikes. Barraclough, he surmised, was an ex driver with plenty of ambition. He explained the reason for his visit.

“We still have all the old log books”, Barraclough said. “Years ago, the police asked us to keep them. They are all kept over at the old admin building, near the main shed. All the modern stuff is kept on computers now. Follow me and watch out for the fork lifts.” The old building in question was a Nissan Hut—a relic of the War era. It was clearly no longer used for day-to-day operations. They walked past two decommissioned fork lifts, piles of old pallets and abandoned office furniture. Barraclough led him to a long row of old filing cabinets. “What was that registration number again?” Zorba gave it to him.

After some ten minutes of searching, Barraclough had delivered into Zorba's hand five very grubby vehicle log books, their covers badly faded and dog-eared, such that the lettering was barely visible. Zorba surmised that they had perched on the front dashboard of Micky's truck, fully exposed to the sun. On the inside cover of each book was pasted a notice from the Company. This stated the manner in which the entries were to be made. Each trip must be accompanied by a job number and speedometer entry. Non-company jobs were to be designated with the two letters PC (Zorba guessed, 'private contract'). General destination MUST be given. There followed a general warning to all drivers that failure to follow these procedures contravened company policy and the provisions of the Transport Act.

"With your permission, I would like to borrow these for a week or so", said Zorba. "By all means", said Barraclough, "they were kept under police instruction from many years ago anyway." Zorba bundled the books under his arm, thanked the depot manager and drove off.

Back at his office, Zorba began the arduous task of checking through Micky's roughly scrawled entries. On Reidy's suggestion, he first went to the date of the farmer's report back at Ryleford, detailing the alleged offence and the truck registration number. He was pleasantly surprised to see a scrawled entry which read "Cottsworth area PC". This was Micky covering his backside, but not being too specific, Zorba concluded. The speedo readings were consistent with a trip to Ryleford and back, so Zorba now resumed his perusal of the books with a renewed vigour.

Because of constant interruptions and the demands of other investigations, it took Zorba four days and three evenings (he took

the books home) to search through Micky's records. There were only four records that were consistent with a journey to Ryleford over either a Saturday or Sunday. One of these, of course, had already been recorded in Reidy's file. That left three 'suspect' journeys. It appeared that Micky made only one trip to the Ryleford area in any one year and that, in some years, he made none at all.

Now it was time for Zorba to return to his missing persons files for the Sydney area and to look for any matches in dates between Micky's trips and the dates of notification for the missing persons. He had his result in a few minutes and he was barely able to contain his excitement. The person in question was one Alec Forster, last seen on Friday 8th November, 1963. Micky's trip was on the Saturday. Zorba rang the Bureau and asked for the details of Alec Forster to be faxed to him.

The report had been made by Forster's flatmate on Tues 12th November in that year. He had fielded several phone calls by people inquiring of Forster's whereabouts. One of these was his employer, a tyre garage in the inner suburbs. A brief description was given and, significantly, part of the entry read "Possibly wearing black motor cycle jacket and overalls". Forster had indicated to his flatmate on the Friday night that he would be rising early to go hunting. He gave no details of destination. Under the entry headed "Relationship to missing person" was a short sentence: "No relation, share cost of house rent only". That, Zorba surmised, was probably why the notification had been made—Forster owed rent money.

Now it was time to track Micky down. Reidy had suggested social security records because Micky would almost certainly be on the pension now. But this, as Zorba explained to him, would require a

court order. They would need much more evidence to convince a judge. But Zorba had his last known address from Armour and Co., and this was a starting point. He thought it unlikely that Micky would still be there, but it was worth a shot.

The back street in Sutherland was in the process of re-development, but many of the older houses remained. This area had, at one time, been little better than a slum. Zorba, knocked on the door of the house whose number had been written down by the office girl at Armour and Co. There was no answer. He peered in through a bedroom window and could see children's toys on the floor. He knocked again and still, there was no answer. He was about to leave when he heard the voice of an elderly lady call out: "They're both at work". He walked across the road to her. She had been pulling out weeds in her tiny front garden. "I'm looking for Mr Michael Burns", Zorba said. "Long gone", said the old lady, "and bloody good riddance too." "You wouldn't know where I could find him would you?" said Zorba. "No", she said, "but I heard he took crook and finished up in some home or hospital." "Is there anyone who might be able to give me further details?" Zorba asked. "See the green house over there?" she said, pointing across the road, "try the old dame there. She's the local busybody." It amused Zorba that this lady herself was certainly in her eighties, but referred to her neighbour as an "old dame".

In fact the lady who came to the door of the green house looked considerably younger than Zorba's first correspondent. After explaining his reason for the call, the woman beckoned him in. "Will you have a cup of tea?", she said. Zorba could see that she was not about to miss this opportunity to gather some intelligence of her own. Very soon she returned with a teapot and cups on a tray. They talked. Zorba could see that she was an expert at extracting

information. “She’d make a good detective”, Zorba thought to himself. But he was careful to divulge only sufficient information to hold her attention. Now it was his turn. Would she know the current whereabouts of Mr Burns? “Well”, she said, “I think he’s gone to a hospice. The St Vincent de Paul people came around about two months ago and took him away. They used to visit him a lot.” “Would that be the local branch?” asked Zorba. “Oh yes”, she said, “They’ve got the shop in High Street.”

And it was at this shop that Zorba finally tracked down the information he required. Micky the Mover was currently at St. Ursula’s Hospice and was dying of cancer. That night, he rang Reidy and communicated all that had transpired. Reidy was astounded at their good fortune. He now felt sure that Brendan’s cryptic comments concerning the Red Knight and the Black Knight had a basis in fact. It was time to talk to Micky.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Pascal's Wager

St Ursula's Hospice was one of the few remaining institutions of its sort in Sydney. It was operated by the Little Sisters of the Poor, an order of nuns originating in France. They themselves lived a life of poverty and they saw it as their role to minister to the poor, especially the aged and dying poor. For we easily forget, in this age of universal health cover, the plight of the aged poor in former times. And it was not only the poor. Before the coming of what we now call the 'healthcare industry', there were few places, other than such hospices, where *any* aged person, approaching death and without close friends or relatives, might be looked after with genuine care and with attention to their dignity as human persons. Now, of course, old age and death are seen as lucrative investment opportunities and are catered for accordingly.

And so it was that Micky the Mover, now an aged man with terminal cancer, came into the care of the Sisters. Here, perhaps for the first time in his life, he was to experience genuine love and compassion. His still active mind, conditioned by a lifetime of minor stratagems in which human affection and compassion was always in the service of some other end—usually a monetary one, had great trouble in understanding how these women in their strange garb could live as they did. For Micky had but little grasp of the whole notion of religious conviction. Like all of us, the notion of a God and of a possible afterlife had entered his mind from time to time, but such

thoughts were easily buried under the more pressing concerns of the moment. And so, the bulk of his life had passed away in simply living from day to day, without any deep reflection on the possibility of some deeper meaning and purpose being involved in a human life.

The nuns, for their part, placed no sort of requirement upon Micky in this regard. They endured his gutter language with a smile and listened to his complaints with genuine attention. They did not ply him with religious tracts or attempt to convert him. Indeed, one could say of them as Goldsmith said of his Village Preacher:

*More skilled to raise the wretched than to rise.
His house was known to all the vagrant train,
He chid their wanderings but relieved their pain;*

This only served to increase Micky's perplexity, for he had only ever known other people as serving a particular means to his own ends. Genuine affection without the possibility of reward was a notion entirely alien to him.

And so, when Mother Superior came to his bedside and announced that there was a man in the lobby who wished to see him, Micky was instantly suspicious. What could he want? But a natural curiosity overcame this initial fear and suspicion and he told Mother Superior to bring the man to his room.

Zorba had deliberately dressed down, so to speak, for this meeting with Micky. He did not want to come as a detective but, rather, as someone who was seeking Micky's help on behalf of a friend. But Micky was not so easily fooled. "You're a ferret aren't you?" said Micky as Zorba came near his bed. "I'm not here to pull you in or anything Micky. It's a bit late for that isn't it?" Micky had no reply

for this obvious truth. “Why can’t you bastards leave me alone to die in peace?” said Micky. “Like I said Micky, I’m not here to nail you for anything. Let me tell you a story, then you can decide whether you want to help me.” Micky said nothing, so Zorba began.

“Many years ago, Micky, you drove your picnic van up to Ryleford and parked it in the scrub, not far from the big hill on *Inishmore*. I know this Micky, because one of the local cockies took down your rego number (this was a slight misrepresentation of the truth, but Zorba was a pragmatist in these matters). Most of the blokes sat around drinking grog and gambling, but you and another bloke went rabbit shooting. The other bloke was dressed in a black leather jacket, and you were wearing a red shirt or red jumper. You met somewhere on that hill and had a blue. Whatever happened, the other bloke finished up dead. You see Micky, you weren’t the only two people on the hill that day. There was a young teenager up there, playing amongst the rocks. You didn’t see him, but he saw you. He pinched your rifle and he also buried the body. Now he’s going to be the chief suspect in a possible murder case (again, Zorba was a little loose with the truth). You are the only one that can clear him Micky. There’s no point in us charging you. Let’s be honest with each other. You will be dead by the time the whole business comes to court. In any case, you could always claim self-defence. The young bloke didn’t see the actual confrontation, so there are no witnesses. And I’ve seen your police records Micky. You’re not a killer. I know that. So how about it Micky? How about one good turn before you go? We just need a signed statement to the effect that you killed a man - perhaps in self-defence.”

Zorba’s account took Micky by surprise. A dark event in his life, which had happened long, long ago, had suddenly been recounted to him in some detail by a complete stranger. He had been caught with his defences down. He expected to be questioned about some

robbery or other minor matter. Moreover, he had made a very deliberate effort to bury the events of that day into some dark recess of his mind. Zorba could see that his little speech had unnerved Micky and the long silence that ensued, after he had finished talking, raised the detective's hopes a little. But Micky was, as they say, a hard nut to crack. Slowly and somewhat painfully, he raised himself slightly on one elbow, stared at Zorba, and said in a weak voice, "just clear out, you bastard and let me die in peace". Zorba had no other option but to leave. "Give it some thought Micky", he said as he walked towards the door. There was no answer. Significantly, Micky had made no effort to contradict Zorba's account. Before he left the Hospice, Zorba again knocked on Mother Superior's door. He thanked her for letting him visit Micky and handed her an envelope. "This might help to pay for Micky's medicines."

That evening, Zorba rang Reidy. "He's a tough nut Jim. I couldn't get him to spill the beans, but he was definitely there and was involved in that bloke's death. I could see that the account I gave him really knocked him off his perch, but he will never admit to anything. He's been a crim too long." There was a long silence. "I'd like to visit the place Zorba." "You can't Jim, you're not a detective and you're too closely involved with the whole business. It will look bad for both of us." "I don't want to visit Micky", he said. "I want to talk to the nuns." "What for?" said Zorba. "We'll try Pascal's Wager", said Reidy. "What the hell is that?", said Zorba, "some sort of rabbit trapper's swindle?" Reidy just gave a short chuckle. "I'll tell you about it one day."

And so it was that, on the following Saturday, Reidy made the long trip to the city and eventually found his way to the Hospice. He was

ushered in to Mother Superior's Office and she rose to greet him: "How can we help you?", she said. Reidy had spent a great deal of time rehearsing his answer to that question and, taking a proffered seat, he began.

"This is a rather long and complicated story, Reverend Mother, and I hope you will bear with me as I try to explain my presence here today. My name is Jim Reidy and I come from a small town called Ryleford—you may have heard of it." The nun nodded. "The account of events I am about to give to you very likely involves your patient Michael Burns, but I must stress at the outset that neither myself or the police are interested in attempting to prosecute a man on the point of death. For me, rather, it is the case of wishing to protect the good name of a close relative of mine whose unusual relationship to these events I will explain later." At this point he looked directly at the nun and she again nodded. "Some time ago, human remains were found on a property in the district. The remains were those of an unidentified, adult male. They were in a shallow grave and buried under rather strange circumstances. I will explain those circumstances later. The police have evidence to suggest that two other people were involved—one in causing the man's death, the other in burying the body. A rifle was recovered at some distance away. It had been thrown into a shallow pool of water which also served as a rubbish dump. The police have been able to trace that rifle and, almost certainly, it belonged to Michael Burns, your patient. They also have evidence that he was in the habit of visiting the area, because his van had been seen there on a previous occasion."

"By a process of elimination, the police have been able to narrow down their list of missing persons from the Sydney area and now believe they have the identity of the buried man. As it happens, he went missing on the very weekend that Mr Burns drove his van to

Ryleford. We know this from the vehicle log book records. The missing man had told a friend that he was going rabbit shooting but had not indicated a destination. Furthermore, a description of the missing mans' clothing, given by the person concerned by his absence, indicated he was wearing a black leather jacket. Traces of dark leather were also found with the remains and, though a match could never be proved, it is highly likely."

"Now I will move on to discuss my own involvement in this business. I have a cousin, Brendan Kelly, who is now deceased, but his mother is still alive. Brendan suffered from autism and had great difficulty in communicating to others in normal ways. However, like many sufferers of autism, he developed remarkable skills in a particular area. In his case, it was reading. His great passion—indeed, his singular passion—was the literature concerning Arthurian legend. His interest in this subject began at a fairly early age and, both his mother and his teachers encouraged it because it was the one way in which they could engage him in conversation. Sadly, it soon became his only way of communicating with others and, indeed, he saw the whole world through the lens of Arthurian Romance. For this, I am partly to blame, for I introduced him to Malory's *Morte d Arthur*."

"To return, now, to the particular event I mentioned at the beginning, there is strong evidence that Brendan was present at or near the scene when that unidentified man died. By a strange set of circumstances, Brendan became convinced that the dead man was King Arthur. He did so, because that man was carrying a rifle with the word *Excalibur* emblazoned upon its stock. You can, I am sure, imagine how a young autistic boy, living in a world of his own imaginings could convince himself in this way." Again, Reidy looked directly at the nun, and she nodded agreement.

“In his mind then, the weapon, imagined as the great sword, had to be returned to the Lady of the Lake. For Brendan, such a lake took the form of a nearby pond of water. The body, too, would need a proper burial and this he did, burying with it, a long metal rod. The latter was imagined as a lance or perhaps, even as the spear of Longinus. You are familiar with the legends Reverend Mother?” She nodded agreement.

“Now you might come to understand my concern for, although Brendan was in all likelihood entirely innocent of any wrongdoing, this is not how it might look in any official police investigation. Of course, Brendan is now beyond the cares of this world, but his mother is not. She is greatly upset by the whole business. Brendan was her only child and her husband is long dead. That her son might be remembered as someone involved in a likely homicide is more than she can bear. For my own part, I feel, responsible in some way, because I actively supported the boy in pursuing his obsession with Arthurian legend. More than anything else, I wish to set his mother’s heart at rest.”

“And this brings me to the real purpose of my visit here today. Unless Michael Burns can give us an account of what really happened on that day, long ago, Brendan cannot be cleared of suspicion. But Mr Burns, as I am sure you know, has led a life of petty crime and is most unlikely to co-operate with the police. Now it would be improper of me to plead with Mr Burns, because my own cousin is implicated in these matters and this would very likely invalidate anything that Mr Burns divulged to me. In any case, Reverend Mother, Mr. Burns is just as unlikely to co-operate with me as with the police. He perceives us as having something to gain at his expense. Indeed in all his relationships with the world he perceives only the operations of means and ends. Only you, Reverend Mother and your fellow nuns, fall outside his

classification, for with you, he can see no possible source of gain at his expense. Your love is unconditional and without any possible recompense in this world. And now I come to my request: would you intercede with him on my behalf”?

The elderly nun thought for some time, and then replied. “But, as you well know, Mr Reidy, the concept of Christian charity is a difficult one for Mr Burns to understand. You are a Christian yourself are you?” “I am, after a fashion, Reverend Mother, but not a Catholic. However, Brendan was a Catholic, as is his mother.” “Then you will understand that, in one’s final days, the giving up of some dark secret without any possibility of gain or merit, of whatever sort, is very difficult without some concept of an afterlife where such an action may have a positive consequence. Mr Burns, now approaching death, is not remotely interested in the opinions held of him by this world, and does not believe in the next world. I doubt that any fervent entreaty of mine would change that.”

Reidy did not answer that directly but said, “I understand, Reverend Mother that your Order is of French origins and, by your slight accent, I believe you might be too.” She looked at him with a sort of quizzical smile, but nodded. “Then you will know of Blaise Pascal?” At this, the old nun’s countenance visibly brightened. “Indeed, I do. I consult the *Pensées* very often and wish sometimes that I, too, could experience his Night of Fire.” “Then you will certainly know of his famous Wager?”. She nodded. “I suggest then, that you use that form of argument when talking to Mr Burns. Mention to him the plight of Brendan’s mother and his opportunity, by an act of charity, to relieve her of her suffering. Mr Burns knows a great deal about gambling odds so you might couch the argument in these terms: He is soon to die and needs to consider

the possibility of an afterlife for his soul. If there is such an afterlife, he has everything to gain from helping Brendan's mother. If there is no afterlife, then he has nothing to lose by such an action. Common sense dictates that he should not take the gamble of inaction."

The old nun looked at him for some time, then said: "I see you are a man of some learning, Mr Reidy, and are well acquainted with the great existential problems that have always been with us as fallen creatures." Reidy smiled, but said nothing. "I cannot refuse your request, for such a refusal would itself constitute a lack of Christian charity on my part. I will talk to Mr Burns over the next few days, but you must be more specific concerning what you desire from him." Reidy then outlined what would be required. In order to clear Brendan as a suspect, Mr. Burns would need to give an account of what happened, on the day in question, to a detective. That account would be typed up as an official statement and returned to Mr Burns for his approval and his signature, in the presence of a witness.

The Mother Superior rose from her seat and said: "We must pray that Mr Burns is given the grace to respond to this request." Reidy rose from his seat and handed her Zorba's card. "Here is the man who must be contacted, should Mr Burns be agreeable." She looked at the card and smiled. "He has visited recently", she said. "A generous and kindly man, if only Mr Burns knew it." Reidy was slightly taken aback but said nothing.

CHAPER THIRTEEN

The Red Knight

Zorba received his long anticipated phone call from the Mother Superior three days later. She had conversed with Mr Burns over several occasions. On the last of these occasions, it was at his request. He wanted, he said, “to get something off his chest”. He had agreed to talk with ‘the ferrets’, but only on the condition that he would not be charged. The Mother Superior suggested that Zorba come as quickly as possible, for Mr Burns was fading fast and would soon be beyond the cares of this world.

As soon as Zorba entered Micky’s room, he could see that the old man was failing rapidly. His voice was now a hoarse whisper and he required frequent sips of water to enable him to speak. His face was gaunt and angular and his eyes bloodshot. What follows is a general account of Micky’s story, some of it in his own words, which was related in a sort of monotone and contained many a diversion. There were frequent spells whilst Micky fought for breath and reached for his water bottle with its long plastic straw.

For his part, Zorba busied himself with notebook and pencil, careful to capture from Micky’s long and meandering account, the essential facts in what would become a confessional statement or, more properly, a dying declaration.

On that Saturday morning, long ago, Micky had arranged pick-ups at two spots in the city, one near his home and the other closer to the Armour and Co. Depot. Some of his passengers were fellow drivers or fork-lift operators. They left early, probably 6.30 am, he reckoned. Some of the grog had been loaded the night before when one of his cronies came around to help with the long trestle seats. The rest, the blokes brought with them.

They reached the crown reserve at Ryleford about 8.30 am and set up a rough camp. Two of the blokes were fishermen and they headed off down the lane-way to the Honeysuckle Creek. This had many deep waterholes containing redfin and brown trout. Only one of the blokes, other than Micky, was a shooter. He was a youngish bloke in a black leather jacket and overalls. No-one seemed to know him but he had apparently been vouched for by one of the Armour drivers. Micky took an instant dislike to him. He was loud-mouthed and boastful, and one of those blokes who wants to be your friend after only five minutes.

This bloke was keen to get out shooting but, before he left, Micky indicated that the big hill on *Inishmore* was *his* territory. Then Micky helped some of the other blokes to get the campfire going. Together, they dragged out from the floor of the van a large sheet of heavy gauge steel, no doubt lifted from a yard somewhere. This was a makeshift barbeque plate, for some of the blokes had brought sausages to cook.

He went back to the cabin of the van to get his rifle and sugarbag. It was still quite cold, and Micky pulled on his old red footy jumper. Other shooters had told Micky that his red jumper would frighten the rabbits off but Micky said, "I don't see foxes wearing camouflage". When he returned, a few of the blokes were gathered

together, looking at a card or photo and laughing. Micky came for a look see. To his utter astonishment, the photograph was of a scantily clad Meg Patterson. Long experience had taught Micky to disguise any emotions which might betray in him some form of weakness. The cops always tried to get at him that way. He appeared to take little interest but asked, in a casual sort of way, who owned the photo. It was his general intention to get that person on his own and give him a good thumping. It was the bloke in the black jacket, they said. They did not know his name, but one of the blokes had nicknamed him 'motor mouth'. He had lots of photos of her. All the way on the trip out, he boasted of his conquests and said she was a particularly easy one. Inside, Micky was blind with fury, but he kept his cool.

He shouldered his rifle, picked up his sugarbag and headed out for the big hill. As he drew closer, he noticed another figure well ahead of him, slowly climbing the hill. It was the bastard in the black coat. Micky quickened his pace. He would teach this bloke a lesson he would never forget.

It took Micky twenty minutes or so to catch up with 'motor mouth'. He approached stealthily from downwind, taking advantage of large rocks to creep up close behind the black-coated figure. When he was within a few metres, he silently leant his rifle against a large rock and made a rush at his enemy. He hit him hard between the shoulder blades and the man stumbled and fell heavily, still clutching his rifle. Micky was on him in a flash, struggling to get a grip on the leather coat so he could pull him up and give him another thump, this time on the jaw. But his opponent was too quick. He moved sideways, raised his body quickly and swung his rifle barrel towards Micky's chest. Micky grabbed the barrel to deflect his aim and they fought for control of the weapon. Locked

together in this way, they fell and rolled several metres down the slope. The leather-coated man was stronger than Micky had anticipated, and he was struggling to keep the barrel away. By this time they were back on their feet. In a desperate effort, Micky raised one leg and delivered a kick to the man's groin. This caused him to momentarily lose control of the rifle and Micky thrust the barrel back towards him. The stock came down heavily on an adjacent rock and, at the same instant, there was a loud crack. The man fell to the ground.

Micky's heart was thumping in his ears. There was a bad cut on his hand where the top sight of the rifle had gouged into the flesh deeply. Blood was streaming from it. He took out his rifle rag and wrapped it around the wound. Then he looked at his opponent. There was a great pool of blood beside him and he was not breathing. Micky was now beginning to panic. Far below, he saw a family park their car on the side of the road and climb through the fence. They each had a basket and were presumably looking for mushrooms. It was, of course, the wrong time of the year for all but certain toadstools, but that did not help Micky's predicament. The body of Forster was in an exposed position and could be seen from almost any angle. Micky decided to drag it behind a large rock, some ten metres distant. He then came back and picked up the stranger's rifle. After cleaning the barrel it as best he could with the blood-soaked rag, he lay it near the body and at an angle to suggest that the man had accidentally shot himself. He returned to the scene of the shooting and, with his boot, scraped granite sand and soil over the pool of blood to hide it.

Now it was time to grab his gun and clear out. He had devised a plan to walk around the back of the hill and cross the road, so as to come back to camp from the opposite direction. He went back to

where he had propped his gun. It was not there. His panic now turned to real fear. He searched about the place for a few minutes, thinking he may have been looking at the wrong rock. But, there was no doubt about it. The rifle had vanished. Now he tried to calm himself down and to devise a plan. He had no idea if the person who had snatched his rifle was a witness to the whole series of events, but he could see no-one around the place. He could not return without a rifle, because this would immediately cause suspicion back at camp. No rabbit shooter as proficient as Micky would lose his rifle. The only possible course of action was to retrieve the other rifle and pass it off as his own. It was, after all, a similar model of the Lithgow 22. He went back and picked up the rifle. On an impulse, he rifled through the dead man's pockets and found his wallet. This he placed in his sugarbag. He wanted those photos out of circulation, whatever else happened. Then he began his circuitous walk back to the van, nervously scanning the hill all the time. He saw no one.

Once in the safety of the open woodland below the hill, he rested for a time, then slowly walked towards the van. The crowd at the van were, by this time, pretty well under the weather. Some lay, full length on the ground, whilst others had propped themselves against the fence. Two were still playing cards. These saw Micky arrive and yelled at him: "Run out of ammo?" "Nah, cut my bloody hand", he replied. He went to the water bottle hanging on the truck bumper bar and washed the wound. Then he bound it with part of an old shirt stuffed behind the driver's seat.

At three-thirty, he drove the two fishermen and a couple of the drinkers into the Ryleford Station. The others at the camp were pretty much oblivious to proceedings. The two card players were still hard at it and did not even look up when the truck left.

He was back by four thirty. At Micky's prompting, they decided to pack up at five. The grog had run out and Micky was complaining about his hand. "Where's motor mouth?" someone enquired. "Gone on the train", said Micky, as quick as a flash. No one seemed in the least concerned.

Back home, Micky fully expected the police to knock on his door at any time. Indeed, he slept very little for the next two days and nights. He had a story of sorts made up for the police, but it would probably not hold up to close scrutiny. He burned the wallet in his stove, but not before checking the man's name. To his genuine surprise, nothing happened. He had phoned the Company and told them of his hand wound. His story was corroborated by two other drivers. Weeks went by and he began to regain his old confidence. He told himself that foxes or eagles might have eaten most of the corpse. He also told himself that he had searched in the wrong spot for his rifle. But he vowed never to return to that hill, whatever the case.

This then, was the substance of Micky's confession as he related it to Zorba. Extracting the main elements, Zorba prepared an official statement back at the office and quickly returned to the Hospice with the now neatly typed document. He was careful, in that document, to stress that Micky had not confessed to any murder, but that the death was a matter of self-defence. He read the content of the statement back to Micky and Micky nodded assent with a weak movement of his head. In the presence of the Mother Superior and Zorba, Micky signed the printed confession with feeble strokes and with great effort. He was clearly not long for this world. Zorba thanked him but found it difficult to say more. It was, for him, a

very emotional moment. The old man remained silent, breathing in short gasps. As they left Micky's side he asked if he could speak to Mother Superior in the privacy of her room.

"What arrangements will be made for the funeral and interment?" Zorba asked. "Two of the men from St Vincent de Paul will look after that", she said. "I would like to be informed", said Zorba. "You still have my card?" She nodded. "As I understand it", said Zorba, "the Health Department will cover a destitute's funeral costs." Again, the old nun nodded. "I would like to ensure that Mr Burns is buried in a private grave", said Zorba. "Can you please ask the St Vincent de Paul men to contact me in this regard? I would like to help out financially." The old nun smiled graciously and nodded.

Three days after the interview, Micky Burns was dead. Zorba had already contacted Reidy with the news concerning Micky's disclosures, and they had both arranged to attend Micky's funeral together. The old nun had phoned Zorba and given him all the details.

Reidy picked Zorba up in the city and they drove out to the church. There were six people at the funeral, excluding the old Priest who presided over the rites. Two of these were the men from St Vincent de Paul, the Mother Superior made the third, the funeral parlour man the fourth, and Zorba and Reidy, the remaining two. For his short eulogy, the old Priest—a Franciscan in brown garb and sandals—took as his text the parable of the Prodigal Son. He had clearly conferred with the Mother Superior beforehand.

At the cemetery, after the rites of final consignment, Zorba and Reidy spoke to the men from St. Vincent de Paul. They had decided to jointly fund the erection of a simple headstone on Micky's grave. On Reidy's suggestion, it was to carry a simple inscription, stating name, and dates of birth and death. Below this was to be a small Latin motto: *Vince malum bono*, followed by the customary *Requiescat in Pace*. The little motto, in English, simply means "overcoming evil with good". It seemed appropriate for Micky's last actions on this earth. It mattered little that Micky was survived by no relatives or close friends to visit his grave. For Reidy and, if he had only known it at the time, for Zorba too, it was a matter of seeing things *sub specie aeternitatis*—under the aspect of eternity.

Now it was time for Zorba to prepare a detailed statement on the whole shin bone affair and to put the matter into the hands of the police legal people. Clearly, there would need to be a further inquest into the death of Alec Forster. In the legal system, the prosecution of a suspect already dead is rarely undertaken, so a standard trial would not be considered. Death, in a sense, is already considered as a form of restitution for crimes committed. The information, albeit mainly by inference, concerning Brendan's Kelly's involvement in the events surrounding the death would now have to be dealt with in detail, and some finality as to his culpability or otherwise, be given. Again, though, the question of possible prosecution would not arise.

With this in mind, Reidy now set himself the task of trying to enter the mind of his young cousin on that fateful day and, insofar as it was possible, to re-live his experiences. And it is to this matter that we must now turn.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Lady of the Lake

Imagine, if you can, walking down a busy modern street and there in front of you stands a medieval knight in full armour. Your initial reaction of astonishment is soon checked because you immediately supply some *context* for this strange sight—“this must be some sort of publicity stunt for a new movie, or it is some form of advertising for a new product”. In other words, the sight is normalised and brought within the present order of things. That process of ‘normalisation’ is made so much easier if, in that sight before you, there is some little detail which betrays the intended subterfuge—the knight is carrying a copy of *The Financial Review*. Now, try to imagine exactly the opposite sort of scenario—into some real medieval scene there suddenly appears a modern executive in a three piece suit. He is, however, wearing a medieval helmet and visor. And this, Reidy supposed, was exactly Brendan’s position as he watched those two men climbing the slopes of his kingdom all those years ago.

When Micky’s van pulled up in the crown reserve near the hill, it was for Brendan, a great ship or *dromound*, with knights disembarking from it. For the whole of the plain surrounding the hill was a sea. His hill was an island in that sea and Micky’s van had come to its shoreline. As the two men climbed the hill, Brendan could see that the black knight (for these *must* be knights) was wearing what he conceived as a *hauberk*—a jacket of dark mail. The

other knight was strangely appalled in red. Now, we must remember too, that the influences of Merlin and of shape-changing in general were very much in Brendan's mind. Some strange apparition in front of him might well be the work of Merlin. Both men were carrying swords of a very strange shape but, again, this may have been Merlin's work.

Brendan was a recluse by nature and we must imagine that he kept well concealed as the men approached. From his vantage point, he very likely saw part of the battle, but when both contestants rolled down the hill, they were probably hidden from his sight. What he did see, though, was Micky's rifle leaning against the rock. The sun, at this point was falling directly upon the rifle stock and upon its shiny metal nameplate. It reflected back to Brendan's eyes with dazzling brilliance and, in that, he saw some magical sign—a beckoning. He crept closer whilst Micky was busily engaged below in moving the body. And lo! There is Excalibur, gleaming at him with a strange force. And its owner was now 'stricken through the helm'.

Now, his mission was clear. He must return the great weapon to the Lady of the Lake, from whom it came. This was ordained. He ran forward quickly, grasped the weapon and ran, for all his worth, towards the quarry—the great lake. Here, we must imagine, he saw something like the leg of an old armchair or the handle of an old cream separator poking up above the waterline. It was, for him, clearly a ladies arm "clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful". The rifle was thrown towards her and he imagined, nay *saw*, her arm grasp it and pull it down.

But his concern now shifted to the fate of Arthur. Surely, he would not be separated from his weapon if he had been victorious? He

watched the Red Knight walk around the back of the island. Now he was sure that no-one else was on his island. It was time to find the body of Arthur and to give it a proper burial. He knew well of eagles, of carrion crows, and other hateful beasts that come to feast on the battlefields when the fighting has ceased.

After some searching, he found the body behind a large rock on the slope. But it could not be buried there, for the soil was too shallow. Deeper soil could only be found further down the hill. We must imagine that he scrambled down the hill, looking for a suitable site and there he came across an inactive fox den. This was a perfect site, for part of the excavation had already been made. The body was easily dragged down the steep hill to its intended resting place. But now he must have some form of digging tool. Back upon top of the hill he remembered that he had a special lance, hidden in one of his 'castles'. It was the head of an old fish-tail slasher—a broad-faced tool once commonly used for trimming hedges and as a fern hook for removing bracken fern. He had found this in the quarry and had inserted a makeshift handle into it. It was his *gisarm*, or battle-axe. He retrieved the implement, along with a rusted bucket which had served as a knight's helmet.

Now he had the means with which to both dig and remove the soft, granitic soil. The excavation was made in surprisingly quick time, and the body carefully rolled in such that it was face-up. The arms were crossed and on the chest were placed two small fern-sticks in the likeness of a cross. But the King must be buried with a weapon of some sort, for he could not return at some time in the future without a weapon at his disposal. And so, the makeshift lance was buried with him. Then the body was covered, using both hands to push the heaped soil back into the pit. Once the grave had been

filled in, it was time to erect a proper tomb and make the required inscription.

When granite rocks weather, they often undergo a process called exfoliation. Differential heating and cooling, especially after heavy frosts, causes the outer layer of the rock to expand and contract at a different rate to the more protected inner mass. This causes thin sheets of granite to peel off the parent rock. It was these thin sheets—perhaps an inch thick—that Brendan now gathered and used as flat tiles to cover the grave. On one end of the grave, he placed a somewhat larger sheet and propped it up at a slight angle by pushing soil under it. This was the tombstone proper and it was on this stone that Brendan scratched the required inscription.

And there the body lay undisturbed until the following winter, when the foxes returned to refurbish their traditional den sites. For foxes, like humans, are creatures of habit. They will return to a suitable site year after year, if it has served them well in the past. But, we might imagine that, in this first year, the danger signal of strange, human smells might have repelled them. Rather, it would be rabbits which made the first excavation into the grave site, burrowing carefully to one side of the decomposing corpse. Then, in later years the foxes would return and simply enlarge the rabbit warren to suit their needs.

A corpse, semi-exposed in this way, would decompose very quickly and the process would be aided by the activities of dermestid beetles. These same beetles, after all, were once commonly used in museums to clean skeletal material. We must suppose then, that in the space of a decade or so, only the bones would remain.

As time wore on, we must further suppose that one or other brood of cubs discovered the shin bone, now exposed in the passage-way

of the den. This they dragged out as a plaything, each cub fighting for possession. When the cubs begin to lose their first coat of brown, woolly fur and replace it with the familiar rusty-red coat of the adults, they commonly shift to a new den. In our scenario, this new, and more temporary den was much further up the hill. The bone was now taken up the hill in a series of mock fights for possession. And, as the cubs grew older, the juvenile games were left behind and the bone was abandoned. And it was abandoned precisely where Doc Brierley found it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Uncle Eli

Reidy knew that a second inquest was to be held and, with this in mind, he conferred with Zorba concerning the matter of his cousin Brendan. Zorba felt certain that the Crown Solicitor would cover this aspect and almost certainly, call upon some expert witness to comment on the likely state of mind of the boy at the time the burial occurred. Reidy's job, he said, was simply to recount the facts of the discovery and give evidence concerning those habits of foxes and rabbits which might have a bearing on the case. Obviously, he would need to mention Brendan's particular association with the hill, and his re-enactments there. In all probability, Zorba said, the expert psychologist asked to give evidence, would contact him for specific details. Zorba told him to wait until he had a clear directive from the Crown, then prepare his statement according to the guidelines set out in that directive. It was now just a matter of waiting.

Now his daily routine of work tended to push the whole matter into the background for the time being. However a meeting occurred during this period which was to demonstrate to him, the universality of human experience.

He was walking down the main street in Rylesford, heading for the post office and his departmental postal box. On the way, as he passed the memorial park, he heard someone call to him. "Hey,

young Jimmy!” He looked over towards the seats in the park and saw that the voice belonged to Uncle Eli, an old Aboriginal man who he knew quite well. Uncle Eli—for he was universally known by this name—was the unofficial Elder for the local Aboriginal community. He had once been a gun shearer and still held the record for the daily tally in the district. Now, he was an old man, crippled with arthritis—a common complaint in old shearers. Reidy knew him because he had often consulted the old man when drawing up management plans for local parcels of Crown land. Some of these sites were of historical significance to the original inhabitants.

“How are you traveling Eli”, Reidy said. “Orright”, said Eli, “but no good for shearing.” They both laughed. “This bone business on the big hill Jimmy—they tell me you know something about it.” “Well, a little bit Eli, but the Sarge is handling matters, not me.” “Your young cousin, Jimmy, the one they called Bluetongue—he spent a lot of time on that hill at *Inishmore*, didn’t he? I saw him there a few times when I was trapping rabbits years ago. He was a good bushman—he could disappear just like a *Kadaicha* man from up north.” Reidy smiled and nodded.

“You know, Jimmy, my father told me stories about that hill. In the old days, our people used to gather there each year in spring. It was good tucker country. The big hill was on the edge of our country and sometimes, mobs from near the coast would come to trade stuff—you know, black flint rock and shells and stuff. That big rock on the hill—you know him—Crouchin’ Man, that was a sacred place. Somewhere under him was a sacred stone—up north they called him *tchuringa*—you know. This place was where a *gan* - a lizard ancestor

went under the ground.” Here the old man stopped to roll a cigarette. He lit it, took a few puffs, and then continued.

“Down on the flat country, the call him *Thalagal*, the Blue-Tongue Lizard man, just like that young bloke, your cousin. But on the big hill he was a rock *gan*—a big rock lizard. You know this fella, Jim?” Reidy nodded enthusiastically. He knew the lizard well. It was a Cunningham’s Skink. On the great hill at *Inishmore*, almost every rock crevice of a suitable size harboured several such lizards, for they lived in groups. They were beautiful animals, with exquisite skin patterns. Although quite large—similar in size to a small Blue-tongue lizard, they were extremely shy and quickly disappeared into the crevices when someone approached. And, unlike the Blue-tongue lizards down on the plain below, they were relatively fast movers when disturbed. Once in the safety of their homes, they could distend their bellies such that their scaly skin locked onto the rock surfaces and any attempt to remove them was futile.

Uncle Eli continued. “My father told me this story about *Thalagal*. One day, *Thalagal* tricked his friends by pretending he was crook and could not hunt. He asked other blokes to hunt down some food for him—he was a lazy bloke see! You know that Jim—he moves slow. He’s too fat.” Reidy nodded assent. “The other blokes, they brought him back a kangaroo. But this kangaroo, he come from that place belong to the kangaroo totem mob. Yeah, Jim, he was a sacred kangaroo. *Thalagal*, he got bloody frightened now Jim, ‘cause he knew that the Kangaroo Spirit Man would come after him. So he buried the kangaroo on the big hill. But the Kangaroo Spirit Man saw all this and he made *Dingu*, the dog-spirit dig that fella up again. Then he made *Thalagal* crawl on his belly and hide with shame whenever some bloke comes past. Turn him into rock lizard, you

know! You know this Jim?” “Yeah, Eli, those rock lizards get out of your way fast.”

“Now Jim, this shin bone—the *darra-dyarra*—*Dingu* digs him up, see, just like our old people say. You know what I mean?” Reidy nodded again. “Maybe some bloke kills another bloke on that hill, Jim, and the boy Bluetongue bury him, eh! But your young cousin bloke, Jim, maybe he just tries to help *Thalagal* eh! *Thalagal* is his Spirit Ancestor.” “Yes, Eli”, said Reidy, “Bluetongue did what he thought was right.” Then the old man stared at him hard: “You think this is all rubbish Jim?” Reidy thought for a while then answered: “You know Eli, everyone had the Dreaming once. Your people had the Dreaming, so did mine. Most of our mob have forgotten their Dreaming—just like a lot of your mob. But my cousin Bluetongue—he knew all about the Dreaming. This was what we call Western Dreaming, Eli. His Dreaming came from a long, long time ago—just like yours. He had a sort of *Thalagal* too. His name was Arthur. And there was a *kadaicha* man there too—his name was Merlin. And there were big fights between mobs, and magic spears and stuff like that. The Dreaming is real Eli, it’s not rubbish. Without the Dreaming, there is no meaning to life.” When Reidy looked at the old man, he could see tears in his eyes. “You’re a good bloke Jimmy”, he said. “You hang on to the Dreaming, eh! It’s all we got now.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Second Coming

In the legal world, the term ‘reportable death’ has a special meaning. In cases where a person’s identity is unknown, where the death was violent or unnatural, or where it happened in suspicious circumstances, the law requires that some inquest take place. The first inquest into what had now become known as ‘the shin bone affair’, suffered from a dearth of background information. The dead person’s identity was unknown, and the cause of death was unknown.

Now, with a great deal of new information, a second inquest was required. Normally, with the information at hand, there would have been a trial, but Micky Burns was now dead. Normally, too Brendan Kelly might have been called before the law to answer for his actions. But he, too, was dead. Nonetheless, justice must be seen to be done, if for no other reason than to bring some sense of finality to the whole business. The word ‘closure’ was often used, and Reidy hated it. He hated it for it seemed to imply that one could, by some mere court procedure or inquiry, erase or somehow neutralise, deepest human concerns. When the ancient Greeks had said “Call no man happy until he is dead”, they were much closer to the real nature of human restlessness. There is no other real ‘closure’ in a human life.

And so it was that Reidy and Zorba, and most of the other figures involved in the first inquest, found themselves back at Cottsworth for a second coronial inquiry. Once again, several of the people concerned had booked in at the Golden Fleece. Reidy and Zorba booked adjacent rooms for, by this time, a real friendship had developed and they had a good deal of catching up to do. This, they decided to do over dinner, but Reidy was adamant that, this time, they pick a different venue. “Let’s have some real food”, said Zorba. “We’ll go down to the *Zakynthos* Restaurant.” “Wooded *Zakynthos*”, murmured Reidy. “Ah, I see you know your Homer”, said Zorba in a surprised voice. “Not in Greek though, sadly”, replied Reidy. “It’s a lovely place”, said Zorba”, “I’ve been there.”

Soon they were down town and walking in to the restaurant. “I don’t want bloody lamb stew—it’s all you Greeks seem to go for.” Zorba laughed and beckoned to an older man sitting alone at a table with a pile of papers in front of him. Reidy guessed he was the owner, catching up on his bills. He came across and Zorba conferred with him in Greek. They seemed to know each other. At one point in this conversation, they both turned to Reidy and laughed. It was obviously a joke at his expense. When they had settled at a table, Zorba ordered, refusing to tell Reidy just what he was about to eat.

The meal began with a white bean soup—*Fassolatha* and, for this the owner joined them, slurping the soup loudly and talking to Zorba with much gesturing of hands. Then he returned with two dishes to be shared between them—*Keftethes* and *Moussaka*. These were accompanied by a salad. For desert, there was *Baklava*, dusted in sugar flour. Then, the old man returned with sweet Turkish coffee, so strong as to be almost syrup-like. At the end of the meal, Reidy had to admit that it was one of the best meals he had eaten in years.

Now it was time to talk shop. The old man cleared away the plates and they began.

“There are things about this whole business that I still don’t understand”, said Reidy. “Like what?” “Well, for one, how come the dead man, Forster, was not tracked back to Micky and the van when he disappeared?” “Your trouble, Jim”, said Zorba, “is that you live in the bush and have little idea of the sort of anonymity associated with city living these days. People can be next door neighbours and not even know each other. In big cities, there are all sorts of people hiding away from their past. Just think of the Schofield bloke. When someone like that goes missing, hardly anyone would know. My guess is that Forster was only reported missing because he owed money to someone and that someone—maybe a bloke sharing digs with him—wanted to find him for that reason only.” “But what about all those other blokes in Micky’s van?” said Reidy. “They must have noticed that he was missing.” “Well, for starters”, said Zorba “most of them were rotten drunk. And then, remember that Micky made the trip into the railway station for some of the blokes. The blokes on the train would assume that ‘motor mouth’ was still out hunting. The remaining blokes back at the camp would assume—because Micky told them so—that ‘motor mouth’ had gone on the train. And no-one gave it another thought. He was a stranger to them, anyway.”

“And I wonder”, said Reidy, “whether Micky ever said anything to his girlfriend when he got back.” “Not likely”, said Zorba. “My guess is that he would have chucked her. I don’t think the fact that she was seeing other blokes really worried him too much. He knew that she was, in many ways, just like him. No, what cut Micky up was the way Forster talked about her and spread those photos around. When he got back home, I reckon he would have simply avoided

her. What could he say, anyway? That he had just killed one of her many paramours?” “I wonder what happened to her?” said Reidy. “Well, I can tell you”, said Zorba. When I first started out to track down Micky, I had the idea of doing so through her. I went over to the Vice Squad mob and did a bit of asking around. At one stage, she was on their radar—ran a knock shop somewhere. They told me that she eventually hooked up with some bloke out Parramatta way. He had a car yard. It turns out she had a good business head and they made a mint. Last that the Vice Squad blokes knew was that she was now a pillar of respectability—seaside mansion and all that. Drove a Porsche.” “Poor old Micky”, said Reidy. “He missed out on life didn’t he?” “Who the hell are we to make that judgement?” said Zorba.

“Now”, said Zorba, “you all set for tomorrow?” “I think so”, said Reidy. “I’ve prepared my notes according to the brief I was given. Much the same as last time. Basically, I have to recount the circumstances of finding the bones, then move on to a description of the habits of foxes and rabbits pertinent to the whole business. Later in the proceedings, I will be called up again to give a statement concerning Brendan’s association with the hill and his interest in Arthurian legend. Then I guess, they will call on a specialist psychologist to follow up on what I have said.” “Sounds about right”, said Zorba. “Time for us to get back and hit the sack. It will be a big day tomorrow”.

“All rise!” There was a rustling of clothing and a squeaking of chairs as the courtroom rose and the magistrate entered. The clerk of courts then read out a few preliminaries, some of these relating to courtroom etiquette. The matter before the court was announced

and the magistrate then gave a brief overview of the first coronial enquiry. He referred to new developments which had now necessitated a further inquiry. He also pointed out that, since all of the key figures actually involved in the death and burial of Mr Forster were now dead, the question of apportioning guilt was not to be considered. However, insofar as their involvement could provide finality into the matter, all evidence pertaining to their actions must be considered.

Zorba was the first witness to be called to the stand. As the chief investigating officer on the case, it was his job to give a brief account of what had transpired since the last inquiry. He referred, on a number of occasions, to the information given by Reidy, but referred to him as “The Land Management Officer, Mr Reidy”, so as to emphasise the professional nature of their relationship. He then tabled the written statement signed by Micky, and gave a brief account of its contents. He went on to relate how Micky had died soon after signing the statement.

There followed statements by the chief pathologist on the case, and the chief forensic scientist. Much of this repeated information given at the earlier inquiry. However, new evidence (and here, the assistance of Detective Kotsianis and Mr Reidy of the Land Management Branch of the Department of Agriculture was acknowledged) now made it almost certain that both the full identity of the weapon and the manner of death could be accounted for. The likely identity of the remains as being those of Mr Forster was discussed and it was pointed out that, whilst absolute identity could not be proven, the circumstantial evidence was very convincing.

Now, the inquest turned its attention to the matter of the burial and Reidy was again asked to take the stand. He was not looking forward to this moment. Reading from his notes, he began with a brief history of Brendan's illness and his growing infatuation with Arthurian Legend leading eventually to a sort of *idée fixe*. He then spoke of the drawings and the notebooks and of the specific mention of the 'great ship' and the red knight and the black knight. He also drew attention to the inscription on the rifle and how this was almost certainly interpreted by the boy. This, he said, was the key to understanding the young man's subsequent action in burying the body. Several times here, he was interrupted by the coroner, who sought further elucidation.

Next to come to the stand was a prominent paediatric psychologist with a great many years of experience. He began with a general outline of the range of symptoms and behaviour patterns exhibited by children with autism. He pointed out that, in certain cases, the condition could accompany quite extraordinary intellectual achievement in one or, more rarely, several areas. But perhaps the most distinguishing feature of the condition was the fact that affected persons very often had poor social skills and found it difficult to interact with others. In the case of Brendan Kelly, he admitted that he had very little direct clinical evidence, since the boy had only attended the consulting room of a Ryleford GP and that such a person would not have specialist training in this area. Moreover, as he pointed out, the condition was poorly understood at that time. Nonetheless, he said, it was entirely consistent with the known facts of the condition that the boy Brendan Kelly should develop an obsession with Arthurian Legend. This, he said, would form a means of retreat from a world in which he felt he was an outcast.

When questioned by the coroner, the psychologist agreed that such an obsession with Arthurian Legend could actually lead to a situation where the Legend became' for him, a reality—indeed, the only reality. In this case all that he saw or heard would be interpreted through such a lens, as it were. In short, the actions of the boy, in burying the body, could not be seen as having any sort of criminal intent. Quite the reverse. They were for him, the actions of an honourable man, confronted by a certain obligation of duty.

It was now time for the coroner to sum up, as it were, and to convey his intentions concerning the content of his findings. He noted that the general requirements of the inquiry had been satisfied. The identity of the person had been established with a high degree of certainty, but not absolutely. Likewise, the manner of death now had an explanation which he deemed adequate. The death of Michael Burns now meant that the matter would not be further prosecuted, since it would achieve no real end. Concerning the actions of the boy, Brendan Kelly, it was again the case that no further action was required. The evidence suggested that he had acted with the highest motives in mind when he buried the body and, although it was normally a crime to bury a body before identification and the issue of a death certificate, this case was clearly atypical. There was compelling evidence to exonerate the now deceased young man from any blame.

Present in court on that day was a now aged Sarah Kelly. Upon hearing this judgement, she quietly wept and reached out for Jim Reidy's hand. Reidy himself, felt as if a huge burden had been lifted from him. He too, was close to tears.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Icon Painter

Change is the enemy of permanent things. And in modern government departments change is, one might say, the *only* permanent thing. Each new government feels the need to clean out the Augean stables inherited from its predecessor. It has election promises to keep and the simplest answer to an insoluble problem is, nearly always, a re-organisation. Accordingly, the first action of the new incumbents is to re-allocate ministerial portfolios, erect new super-departments or, contrariwise, carve up existing ones. This goes by the name *progress*!

And so it was that Jim Reidy suddenly found himself with a new boss, a new department, a new title, and a new office. It was no longer the Land Occupation Branch but the Resource Management Division of the new Department of Environmental Affairs. He was issued with new office stationery, a mandatory uniform, and a shiny new four-wheel-drive. He should have been a happy man, according to his superiors, but he was not. He was, by this time, in his early sixties, and he was looking for a way to get out. The job had changed, but the man could not.

But there is another inevitable consequence of large re-organisations and we might call it the brief triumph of exuberant hope over painful experience. Very soon, the euphoria of the moment dies away, and the brutal realities of long-term funding

bear down with irresistible force. Now, a cash-strapped super-department must ‘rationalise’ its resources. The first casualty is jobs and the first and least painful path here is to offer redundancy payments to shed staff.

Jim Reidy was only a few years off official retirement. He took the offered ‘package’ with open arms and made plans to spend his remaining active years on the farm. Brendan’s mother had long since died, and now the farm was his. His intention was to become a modern-day Cincinnatus—to withdraw from public life into the quiet obscurity of a rural existence, ‘far from the madding crowd’.

The staff at the new Department of Environmental Affairs Regional Office at Cottsworth were instructed by their senior manager to arrange a send-off for Reidy. This was at the suggestion of the newly appointed ‘Farmer Advisory Group’—a small number of influential farmers in the region whose opinions were sought on certain matters so as to give some impression of community consultation. Some of these knew Reidy from long ago.

Reidy was called down to Cottsworth on the pretext of signing certain forms and delivering some of his historical files. He suspected though, that something was in the wind, and was not particularly happy about the prospect of several hours of backslapping and longwinded speeches. When he got there, he found that the staff room had been decked out with balloons, with old rabbit traps hanging from ceiling hooks, and with numerous photos around the walls and on a table in the centre of the room. These were from the old days. Jim operating a poison cart, Jim with a fumigating machine, Jim beside his first government utility, and Jim outside the courthouse, conferring with ‘The Sarge’.

His initial distaste at the prospect was soon forgotten. Old friends from long ago had come to meet him: Old farmers—some now on walking sticks or walking frames, old colleagues from the Department of Agriculture, and even a few of the townsfolk from Ryleford. But there, amongst them all, to Reidy's utter amazement, was Zorba, talking enthusiastically to the old 'Sarge', now in a wheelchair. Zorba had certainly aged, but he had aged well. His hair was now grey, and there were wrinkles on his once-smooth forehead. His eyes, however, still had that youthful twinkle and his smile had not changed.

Reidy excused himself from a small group conversing together and went over. "You here to arrest me?" he said. Zorba gave him the full Greek greeting treatment and it made him a little embarrassed. "Don't worry", said Zorba, "I'm not asking you to marry me." "You're not still a ferret are you?" said Reidy. "Come on! I retired years ago. We can get out a lot earlier than blokes like you."

Before they could really get settled into a good conversation, the MC announced that 'finger food' would be circulating and speeches were about to begin. The first speech was by one of the older farmers. This was followed by some words from the new Departmental Manager who admitted that he knew little about Jim Reidy but was nonetheless advised that he was a dedicated public servant, that he would be sorely missed, and that no-one could fill his shoes. In short, the usual platitudes. Now it was Reidy's turn to respond. He walked up to the dais amid clapping and cheering. His address was brief and honest. He openly admitted that he was a creature of habit and that he was averse to change. He had not coped well in the new environment and that it was best that some new and younger person, with all the enthusiasm of youth, should take over. He thanked all those who had helped him over the years

and he thanked those who had organised his farewell function. “And now” he said, “I would like to end with a few lines from Tennyson, which I think, sum up my situation:

*For now I see the true old times are dead,
When every morning brought a noble chance,
And every chance brought out a noble knight.
Such times have been not since the light that led
The holy Elders with the gift of myrrh.
But now the whole Round Table is dissolved
Which was an image of the mighty world;
And I, the last, go forth companionless,
And the days darken round me, and the years,
Among new men, strange faces, other minds.”*

There was a hushed silence and some nervous, subdued clapping. When this had died down, he added:

*“The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils Himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.”*

He then stepped down and walked back, doing his best to dissolve himself in the crowd. He had not intended the Tennyson, but the sudden appearance of Zorba had changed things. He knew that Zorba would appreciate the link to Brendan.

The official lunch break was now over, and most of the staff left to get back to their duties. Only a few of the farmers were left, along with Zorba and the Sarge. After yarning on for some time with this group, he turned to Zorba and said; “afternoon tea at woody Zacynthos”. Zorba nodded assent. They said their goodbyes and headed down the street together.

The old café was still owned by the same family, but now the son had taken over. Unlike his father, he had little Greek, and Zorba addressed him in English. “How’s your dad and mum”? “Both very frail”, he said, “but they still come here sometimes”. They ordered coffee and sweet Greek biscuits. “So how do you amuse yourself these days?” said Reidy. “Wrong question, Jim. I don’t amuse myself. Only bored people need amusing. I work.” “OK, what do you do each day?” Zorba looked at him hard with his piercing eyes and said, “I paint Icons.”

Reidy was flabbergasted. “As in religious Icons?” “There is no other sort Jimmy—just people who have pinched the word for other uses.” “Tell me more”, said Reidy. “Well long ago, when we first met, I told you my father was a dealer in fine art. That was only half true. He did arrange some commissions for other artists, but his real work was that of an Icon painter. Do you know anything about the business?” Reidy confessed that he knew little, except that, like the best Chinese calligraphy and painting, most of the work was in the intellectual and spiritual preparation. “Spot on”, said Zorba. “There are, of course, the practical aspects. You have to know a great deal about the traditional materials and the methods used. Most especially, you need to know a great deal about the symbolism involved. Icon painters work with traditional themes—you probably know some of them.” Reidy nodded. “*Pantocrator*, *Virgin and Child*, *Theotokos*, and the *Trinity*—stuff like that.” “Yet again, you surprise me young Jimmy. Where did you learn that?” “General reading”, said Reidy.

“My father taught me the basics”, said Zorba, “and then I went overseas for my long service leave to be taught by an old master in Macedonia.” “So what do you do with these Icons you paint?” “They are commissioned by people in the Greek Orthodox Community.

They don't approach me directly, but go through the Priests at the Churches. They make a donation to the Church and I produce their Icon for them. Somehow or other, I couldn't paint for money—it would destroy the whole purpose. Besides, I've got a good pension coming in each fortnight."

At this point, Zorba reached for a small satchel he had been carrying with him. From it he took a small, flat object wrapped in a silk cloth. He placed it on the table and unfolded the covering. It was an exquisite Icon painting and Reidy knew the subject—a special Russian *Theotokos* called 'The Inexhaustible Chalice.' "This", said Zorba, "is for Brendan. You must hang it on his wall in his old room at the farm, OK. The chalice is his Holy Grail. You know that only a blameless man can succeed in the Grail Quest. Well, that was Brendan—a life of innocence." Reidy had to fight back the tears as a great surge of emotion overcame him. "Thanks Zorba", he blubbered.

They stayed on and talked for a long, long time. They discussed all the big questions—the questions to which neither of them had definitive answers, but which they nonetheless knew to be the only questions worth pursuing. Sometime late in the afternoon, they shook hands and parted company. Reidy promised to come down to the city and visit him as soon as his affairs at the farm were settled.

Envoi

On his way home from the retirement function, Reidy decided to go back once again to the great hill at *Inishmore*. It was now early evening. He knew, as he picked his way along the faint track between the rocks, that this would be his last visit to the place. When he reached The Crouching Man, he parked the farm ute and stepped out. In the west, the last rays of the sun were sinking below the horizon and their weak rays now fell upon The Crouching Man, bathing it in a pinkish light. He watched the sun set. The cockchafer beetles were starting to emerge and their laboured, droning flight heralded the coming of darkness.

Down below, the open woodland of the plain appeared as one dark mass. Only the very tops of the trees showed their delicate outline of leaves against the darkening sky. He noted how gum leaves, at this time of evening, always appear to be much finer than they really are—almost like those of a traditional Chinese painting. There came, on a gentle breeze, the call of a far-distant plover. At close range, such calls are urgent and full of alarm, but at great distances they carry a note of infinite sadness—a lament for all passing things.

He reflected, in that moment, on the life of his cousin, Brendan, and contrasted it with that of Micky Burns. One, a life of innocence, the other a life of deceit. And yet, who was he to make any final judgement on the matter? He thought of Socrates and his famous response to those who had condemned him to death— “The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our separate ways, I to die, and you to live. Which of these two is better only God knows.”

He thought too, of Uncle Eli and the people who had gathered at this very spot for thousands of years—how their traditional stories, after all, differed little from our own. And their totems and sacred objects performed an identical role to Zorba’s Icons—a means of connecting to the Real. He knew also, as he stood there, that he was being watched by dozens of beady eyes—the Cunningham’s Skinks in their rock crevices. He felt like an intruder, disturbing “their ancient, solitary reign”.

As the call of the plover died away on the wind he recalled, too, those last few lines of Tennyson’s *Morte d Arthur*

*... Long stood Sir Bedivere
Revolving many memories, till the hull
Look'd one black dot against the verge of dawn,
And on the mere the wailing died away.*

He walked back to his ute and headed towards home in the darkness. As we all do.

The Rabbit Inspector