

The Poor Cow

You should always tell your Mam where you're going. One time when I was young I didn't do that, and because of it a lot of people died. It destroyed our lives entirely. And it was only an ordinary day, and I was only trying to help. But the times weren't ordinary, do you see; though that wasn't my fault.

I was in the kitchen that day. I suppose it was around two o'clock. I happened to look out the window and I saw the Tans going through the yard. My mother was foostering around dusting everything, whether it was dusty or not, the way that she did when she'd nothing else to keep her busy. She was a great one for the dusting, my mother. She'd nearly dust the dinner, my father used to say.

'Mam,' I said, soft like, when I saw the Tans. 'Look in the yard.'

She glanced out the window and nearly dropped the cloth she was dusting with.

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph!' she said. 'Are they coming here?'

A few of the Tans looked towards the house, but they didn't stop. One of them, bringing up the rear, saw me through the window. I remember he had a very handsome face. He gave an ugly little smile when he saw me, and pointed his rifle at me through the window as he passed. For a moment I was looking at him down the gun's barrel. Then my mother pulled me away from the window and stood holding me to her. I could feel her heart beating as fast as my own. We listened, but after a while we realised the Tans had just been passing. You wouldn't miss the Tans' knock on your door – if they bothered to knock, instead of just kicking it in.

'Mother of god,' my mother said, 'even the sight of them blackguards would make you weak. What are they doing round here? It's not often you'd see them so far from their lorries.'

From the way that the Tans had been going, they must have come through the fields. I knew there'd been an ambush on the Lackduffane road the day before. The Tans had beaten it off, wounding some of their attackers. I guessed now they were hunting for them, hoping to find the wounded at least. I said as much to my mother.

'Well, they won't find them here,' she said. 'Nor a welcome themselves if they call. There'll be no sort of gunmen under my roof if I can help it.'

It was another little while before either of us thought of Hannah. Hannah was the cow. She'd been out in the near

field since morning, and if the Tans had come across the fields they must have passed through there to get into the yard. I knew they hadn't shot her, as they'd been known to do with cattle sometimes, because we'd have heard the shot. But I'd been told of a case where they'd cut the throats of some cattle, wanting to kill them but ordered by their officers not to waste bullets. That was a kind of wantonness farm people simply couldn't understand. That was pure badness and spite.

The near field was round by the back corner of the house, out of sight of any window. To check on Hannah meant going outside. I wanted to go straight away, but my Mam didn't want me to go at all.

'Them Tans are long gone now,' I said.

She was still nervous, but she was worried about Hannah too.

'All right,' she said. 'But come straight back.'

There were two gates in the near field. One led into the yard, the other one out to the lane. I saw straight away that the Tans had left the yard gate open, but that was all right: we'd have seen Hannah if she'd come into the yard. But when I got to the near field I saw that the gate to the lane was open too, and the field was empty. The Tans hadn't killed Hannah; but they'd let her stray.

'Boy!'

I jumped at the sound of the single word. When I looked round I saw Tans coming through the hedge from

the next field. Like the ones who'd gone through our yard, they were dressed in RIC uniforms. The Tans were gradually being kitted out with proper police clothing, but you could always tell them at a glance, even before they spoke and you heard their foreign accents. The real RIC were all fine figures of men, bigger and taller than almost all the Tans. Even dressed in police uniforms the Tans looked like impostors.

They were breaking the hedge as they came, making it useless. My father would have to repair that, I thought. As if he hadn't enough to do. These Tans were supposed to be the police; but they did more damage than any criminals. They seemed to have a lot of meanness in them.

The man who'd called me was an officer with a little moustache on his lip and a big revolver in his hand. He beckoned me over and I went. He looked me up and down.

'What are you doing here, boy?' he asked me.

I pointed at the house. 'I lives over there, sir,' I said.

He looked where I pointed.

'Seen any strangers around here, have you?' he asked.

'Only some of your own men, sir. They went through our yard around ten minutes ago.'

'Which way did they go?'

'They just passed through, sir. They looked like they were making for the hills above, but I didn't see what way they went.'

He said a curse.

‘They can’t follow the simplest instruction,’ he said. Then he looked away and forgot about me, and shouted at his men to come on. He led them through the gate into our yard. I stood looking after them but heard nothing that suggested trouble, so I thought about Hannah again.

When all was said and done I’d have to go after her. I might as well go now. Hannah had a head start on me, but she’d hardly be gone very far. I should have told my Mam what I was doing, I know. Everything would have been all right if I’d only done that. But I was too taken up with thinking of Hannah. She was the only cow we had left.

I didn’t want to wait till the Tans had cleared out of the yard, and then go in and persuade my Mam to let me go. That would only give Hannah an even bigger head start – if Mam let me go at all. She’d be worried with Tans on the loose. They were unpredictable men, which was exactly why I wanted Hannah back as soon as possible. So I made for the gate to the lane.

Hannah was a hungry cow. I’d hoped maybe she’d stopped in the lane to eat the grass there. Everything would have been grand if she’d only done that. But there was no sign of her, barring a trail of fresh cowdung that showed the way she’d gone – down the lane towards the main road. So I set off after her. It was a rambling sort of a lane, twisting along between the odd-shaped fields, and every time I rounded a bend I hoped to see Hannah there browsing. But I walked on a good bit and all I saw was the dung.

It was a fine day. I pulled a switch off a bare hazel tree in the ditch for when I'd meet Hannah. She was a contrary beast, and needed more driving than most. But with every step that I went I was getting more annoyed, and I knew I'd be only too happy to beat her home today. I'd get in trouble when I got back. I was sorry now I hadn't told Mam where I was going. She'd take the head off me when I got home.

I was turning one bend in the lane when I met Biddy Wall. The Walls' farm, like ours, was small, with scattered fields. A lot of the farms around our way were like that. Biddy, I knew, would be after leaving out their own few cows in a field that the Walls had round that way. She carried a switch like my own, and she was chopping at the nettles with it.

'Larry!' says Biddy. 'The very man. Is your Hannah after going astray?'

'She is, Biddy,' says I. 'There was Tans come through the yard and left the gate open.'

Biddy spat at the mention of the Tans. She was a great one for the spitting, Biddy was. She could spit in a man's eye at five yards, they used to say.

'Well, I met Syl Sinnott beyant at the cross,' Biddy said, 'and he had a cow with him he didn't know. He was nearly after running into her on his ass and car. We thought it was Hannah, but we weren't sure. So I said when I was up this way I'd ask youse was she gone.'

The crossroads was at the very end of the lane, where it came out on the road. I wouldn't have thought Hannah was so far ahead of me. Maybe something had frightened her. Maybe the Tans had stampeded her out of pure devilment. They could have done a lot worse, but it was still an annoyance.

'And where is she now?' I asked Biddy.

'Syl said he'd bring her home to their own place,' she said. 'He'll put her in with their cows and you can collect her any time you like. I'd have brought her up meself only I wasn't sure it was her.'

I sighed. Sinnotts' farm was a lot further than I'd meant to go. But I was gone a good bit already. If I went home now I'd only have the whole distance to go over again, and all because my Mam worried too much.

Biddy half-read my mind.

'Cut across the fields to Sinnotts',' she said. 'You'll still have to bring her back by the road, but it'll save you a distance on the way there at least.'

'Aye,' I said. It would only be making the best of a bad job, but the job would have to be done sooner or later anyway.

I should at least have asked Biddy to go on to our house and tell Mam what I was at. But I never thought of it. Biddy would have suggested it herself if she'd known how things were. But it never struck either of us. I went in over the ditch at the next gap and headed cross-country towards

Sinnotts'. Biddy went back down the lane towards her home.

The fields were empty of people at that time of year, and I had a lonesome journey. I knew the afternoon was wearing on, and started to think that maybe this was all a bad idea. I dreaded the thought of having to drive Hannah home from Sinnotts' in the dark. I wasn't very superstitious, but it was said that old Mrs Mahon had heard the banshee keening three nights running that week. I didn't like the sound of that. And whatever about the banshee, there were the Tans to worry about.

Looking back on it now, my foolishness amazes me. Sinnotts' was miles away by road, and there was no way I'd ever have got Hannah back before night. The sensible thing would have been to collect her the next day. I knew she was safe, which should have been the important thing. I don't know what I was thinking of. Probably I wasn't thinking at all. That's often how bad things happen: not because somebody means to do ill but because they don't think about what they're doing at all.