

Cassocked Savage

The life of Patrick Brontë

Cenarth Fox

Cassocked Savage

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This novel is based on the play *Saucy Pat* by Cenarth Fox.

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Reviews

A splendid story, reading like a Victorian melodrama ... the convincing story of Patrick's family life at Haworth. **Louise Joy**

Portrays the life of Brontë in remarkable style giving a deeper insight into a famous literary family. **Rev. Philip Higgins**

I absolutely loved this book. Patrick Brontë was a Man of Sorrows. **Marie Ryan** Readings and Writings

Cenarth Fox has seized the day to revisit Patrick Brontë, an extraordinary man who encouraged his children to read, to think, and hence to imagine. **Geraldine Starbrook**

I loved the book and I loved Patrick. All the characters are so believable. They made me cry. **Veronica Hannebery**

I laughed and cried in my journey through the pages ... a beautifully written portrait of poor old Patrick. **Jonne Herbert**

I have thoroughly enjoyed reading "The Cassocked Savage" it was an excellent mix of fact and fiction which took me on the fabulous, and unfortunate journey From Poverty in Ireland to the Yorkshire I know and Love. Sympathetically dealt with the Gaskell episode. The Dialogue between Patrick and Maria brings the Story to life, and the arrival of the Children in quick time was treated with respect. Your chapter on Thornton and Hartshead is wonderfully evocative. **Steve Stanworth** (Churchwarden and Site co-ordinator for the Bronte Bell Chapel, Thornton)

Chapter 1

‘THROW IT OVERBOARD, NOW!’ screamed a sailor. The crew member holding the bundle prepared to heave it into the Irish Sea.

‘No!’ screamed the woman as she raced across the deck. Others ran too; more sailors, the woman’s husband and the ship’s captain. The woman got there first and grabbed the bundle.

‘Get off,’ yelled the sailor. ‘You’re the jinx.’ He clutched the bundle with one arm and tried pushing the woman away with the other.

She slipped and fell but shouted, ‘Hugh, stop him!’

The captain and the woman’s husband grabbed the bundle and wrestled it free. The bundle was a child, alive, terrified and whimpering. Not that you could tell as the filthy youngster was dressed in rags and behaving like some wild animal. Other sailors moved in and secured the human cargo. Hugh helped his wife to stand. Bríghid Brunty was furious.

‘I’ll report this to the authorities. You were going to murder that child.’

‘Please, madam,’ said the captain, ‘the child is safe and was only being warned about the dangers of being a stowaway.’

‘What did he mean about my wife being a jinx?’ snapped Hugh.

‘Please, sir,’ said the captain, ‘bring your wife to my cabin.’

‘And make sure that child is kept safe,’ threatened Mrs Brunty.

The couple sat in the cabin and the captain tried to explain.

‘There are still many sailors, madam, who believe a woman on board a ship brings bad luck. And yes, I know it is superstitious nonsense.’

‘Forget that,’ said Mrs Brunty, ‘what about the child?’

‘We often find stowaways. Poor, desperate people hide their children on board before we leave Liverpool and hope the child will be rescued and find a better life in Ireland.’

‘And will it?’ continued Mrs Brunty.

‘Once we reach Drogheda, the child will be handed to the harbourmaster, who will send the boy to the Foundling Hospital in Dublin.’

‘You don’t care,’ snorted Mrs Brunty.

‘Madam, I run a cargo ship for cattle traders like your husband. This is not a rescue service for abandoned children.’

‘Then we will take the child.’

Hugh was shocked. ‘My dear, it’s thirty miles to Dublin and ...’

Bríghid Brunty swept from the cabin causing her husband to hurry after her. She reached the stowaway and addressed the sailors.

‘The captain has given me the responsibility of caring for the child.’ The men looked at their captain who nodded. Bríghid took control.

When the ship docked in Drogheda, the Bruntys stood on the quay with Mrs Brunty firmly holding the child’s hand.

‘Dublin is too far,’ said Hugh. ‘It’ll be dark soon.’

‘Then we’ll take him home,’ said his wife, and she and the child climbed onto the cart for the trip to the Brunty farm. Yet again, Hugh played catch-up.

He assumed his wife would take the child to the local authorities tomorrow or the day after. But until then, there was no way the caring mother would allow the stowaway to roam the streets of Ireland, creating mischief or worse, suffering, even starving to death.

Not surprisingly, the trip to Dublin didn’t eventuate. The authorities were never told about the urchin, as the Bruntys bypassed everyone, unofficially adopted the boy, and kept him in their home on their farm by the River Boyne. Overnight, their family grew by one.

The Brunty children, brothers Brendan, Michael and Sean, and sisters Bree and Mary, worried. Apart from looking wretched, the child was swarthy with eyes that threatened, even shouted at you. He trembled, and fear added to his spooky appearance.

He needed a name, and as he only spoke a few words in what Hugh believed was an accent from Wales, the new “son” named himself. ‘We’ll call him Welsh,’ said his “father”.

And so, from an appalling childhood, Welsh Brunty, now sporting the first pair of shoes he’d ever owned, literally fell on his feet. In the Emerald Isle, Welsh Brunty was a four-leaf clover kid who became one of the Brunty brood. He changed from a street ragamuffin to a much-loved member of a prosperous Irish farming family.

Now to say Welsh was “much-loved” needs clarification. His parents bestowed kindness and affection upon the lad; his siblings, particularly the boys, did not. They hated him.

They distrusted and disliked the incomer. Bullying was rife. Welsh copped it and often, but not one to take things lying down, Welsh hit back by hiding or breaking things precious to his brothers. Favourite

possessions disappeared. The brothers knew who was to blame, but couldn't prove it. Having survived living on the streets, Welsh became an expert at not being caught.

And he was smart. He knew his parents had the power, so made himself as attractive as possible to the adults. They would protect and promote him. When the patriarch came home, Welsh was always the first to greet the head of the family.

The siblings' resentment increased as Welsh grew into the apple of the old man's eye. Welsh took to farming and was more enthusiastic about cattle breeding than his brothers. The bond between Hugh and Welsh grew stronger.

Hugh took Welsh to cattle markets in Ireland, and used the lad to spy on fellow farmers. Had Welsh lived in 19th century London, he would've made an excellent member of The Baker Street Irregulars.

He was small for his age and played the role of a carefree child, happy to be at the fair on a day out with his dad. The locals took no notice. But Hugh trained Welsh to collect vital information.

'Find out what they'll accept for their cattle, m'boy,' said Hugh, and so, pretending to be a child at play, Welsh moved close to the farmers, heard their gossip and plans, and reported back to Hugh HQ.

'The man with the big, black hat said he won't take less than forty, Father.'

'I see,' smiled Hugh. 'And what about old man McGuinness?'

'I think he's in trouble and will take even less.'

'You're a grand boy, Welsh Brunty. I'll see you right, lad.'

And so armed with his customers' secret prices, Hugh pitched his bids under the vendors' lowest price then "reluctantly" raised his offer. The farmers thought they got a good deal and, thanks to son Welsh, Hugh Brunty clinched another sale making even more money.

Their prosperity continued from Ireland to England. Hugh took his new assistant abroad, and in the cattle markets of Liverpool, Welsh perfected his spying techniques. Father and son made a great team and the Brunty bank balance bloomed. Hugh trusted Welsh who graduated from spy to trusted partner. To Hugh, Welsh was indispensable.

The three legitimate brothers grew ever more worried. The interloper positioned himself to pinch their inheritance. If ever anyone had a motive for murder, it was the brothers Brunty.

The years went by and Hugh's success as a farmer and cattle breeder continued. His children were now young adults with Welsh his favourite. The brothers stopped bullying Welsh, turning their naked hatred into plans for revenge. How could they remove the foreigner? An "accident", whereby Welsh drowned in the River Boyne, became the number one murder plan. But how and when might it happen? And did Welsh suspect fratricide was on the agenda?

Hugh aged and knew his time as an active farmer and cattle breeder was coming to an end. He planned a final push, amassed his largest herd of cattle, and shipped them across the Irish Sea. Thanks to Hugh's and Welsh's expertise, the profit made in Liverpool was the greatest ever. Life was never so good.

Sailing home to Drogheda with serious money about his person, Hugh stood on deck with Welsh, watching for the coast of Ireland. Without warning, the older Brunty clutched his chest and collapsed.

'Father,' screamed Welsh and knelt beside the stricken man.

Fellow passengers and crew members rushed to help. They carried Hugh to the captain's cabin and made him comfortable.

Distraught, Welsh begged for help. 'Please, can't you do something?'

'I'm sorry but we have no doctor, sir,' said the captain. 'And I fear that even if we did, it would be too late.'

Hugh suffered a massive heart attack and died with his face frozen, contorted with pain. Welsh held his father's lifeless hand. The captain leaned forward, closed Hugh's eyes, and then placed a hand on Welsh's shoulder.

'We'll be home soon, sir. I'll leave you alone with your father.'

Tears streamed from Welsh's eyes. He was sad but had rat cunning, and no amount of grief could remove his ability to connive. He was a survivor, and when the packet boat tied up, the papers and money once strapped to the dead body of Hugh Brunty, were now strapped to the living body of his adopted son.

The Church of Ireland funeral service was packed. Hugh's widow and children were grieving. Their beloved husband and father had died away from the bosom of his family, and they were not with him at the end.

The day after the funeral, the family gathered to discuss their situation. Welsh was missing, and when he arrived his appearance shocked everyone. Fashionable clothes were never his style and yet here he was, strutting about like some poor man's fop.

When he first appeared at the farm fifteen years ago, he wore hand-me-down rags. From these he graduated to simple, basic garments. Now,

with the rest of the family in mourning, Welsh bobbed up dressed as a dandy. The siblings were ropeable. The brothers were sure he'd bought the fine clothes with money he stole from their father. Their shock became anger. Welsh flaunted his crimes and mocked them.

'I have a proposal,' he said.

'Where's the rest of the money my father earned on his last trip to England?' growled Michael, the second oldest son.

'Please, let's not argue,' begged Hugh's widow.

'I showed you the papers from the sale,' said Welsh, maintaining his calm and superior manner.

'You showed us *some* papers from the sale,' snapped third son, Sean.

Welsh shook his head. 'If you won't trust me, I'll leave, and you'll never hear my proposal to save the Brunty farm. And if *I* go, the farm will go, and with it a home for our mother and sisters.'

Silence. The brothers had never hated Welsh more, but this was a crisis. Their late father was the sole reason the farm prospered. Now he was dead and without Welsh, so too was that prosperity.

Thanks to their father, the brothers received a good education and found well-paid jobs, two of them in England. But only Welsh knew how to run the farm and breed cattle. Without him, it was finished.

An absentee Englishman owned the land, and could evict any of his tenants at the drop of a hat. He dropped his hat with gay abandon. If that happened on the Brunty farm, Mrs Brunty and her daughters would be dumped on the road at the end of the drive.

Welsh waited until the hostility subsided then spoke without emotion.

'I propose that I become the new tenant of the Brunty farm.'

You could cut the atmosphere with a knife.

'You conniving, little rat,' spat Brendan, the oldest. He stopped when he saw his mother's pathetic face. Grief overwhelmed her. Losing her beloved husband was devastating, but watching her family fight was too much. Brendan backed off and Welsh continued. He revelled in the moment.

'As the new tenant, I will run the property and breed cattle just as our dear father taught me.'

Nobody spoke. The sound of the ticking clock dominated.

Mrs Brunty spoke first. 'I think Welsh's proposal is good.'

None of her children moved. They knew their mother spoke the truth, but couldn't bring themselves to say so. Welsh continued.

'If I become the tenant, I will make sure our mother and sisters remain in the family home.'

Mrs Brunty nodded and her daughters felt a small sense of relief.

‘What else?’ asked Michael. ‘With you, there’s always something else.’

Welsh took a deep breath, opened his box of tricks, and withdrew a serve of fake sincerity.

‘It’s hard to express my love for this family. You rescued me from a life of poverty and crime. You gave me a future. Everything I have and know today I owe to the Brunty family. And now I want to repay that debt by saving the Brunty farm.’

He stalled and in the silence, nobody guessed his next sentence.

‘And as a sign of good faith, I will take dear Mary as my wife.’

The family sat stunned. They took a moment to comprehend Welsh’s words. Mary, the youngest of the five siblings, couldn’t believe her ears. This was the first she’d even heard of such a union. Then the fury exploded.

‘You what?’ roared Michael. ‘Marry Mary? How dare you even think such a thing?’

‘Please, Michael,’ begged his mother.

He ignored her plea. All three Brunty brothers hurled abuse. Mary’s sister, Bree, comforted her distressed younger sibling, and Mrs Brunty despaired as the men traded insults.

Tempers flared and swearing dominated. Sean swung a fist at Welsh who blocked it and punched his attacker flush on the nose. Just as the brawl began, Mary screamed. It was loud and shrill and everyone stopped and looked at her. Sean forgot his bloodied face. The room was silent as Mary stared at the expectant Welsh. She spoke from the heart.

‘I think you are so rude to suggest marriage when our dear Papa is only just in his grave, and when you have never spoken a single word about it. You are disrespectful to my parents and me.’ She paused. Her soft words were powerful, her final sentence brutal. ‘And I will never agree to marry you.’

Her brothers jeered the shattered Welsh. Inside he fumed. His marriage proposal being rejected was not a part of his plan. But for Welsh, worse was to come.

Brendan spoke for his brothers. ‘And we will never allow you to control our family’s farm—*never*.’ His brothers agreed.

There was no need for violence. The words Welsh heard caused far more pain than any blows. His plan, his scheme was dead. He looked at his family with the eyes they saw when he first arrived years ago—if looks could kill. He moved to the door, turned and spoke in a low, threatening voice.

‘You will regret this day, you will lose your farm and income, and be spread far and wide; you fools!’

He left, slamming doors. The family tried to put on a brave front. ‘Thank God he’s gone,’ said Michael.

His brothers nodded and mumbled. The women said nothing and the family sat in silence, listening as Welsh’s horse carried their brother away. They felt good having sent packing the sibling they hated, but felt bad knowing he was the best chance, the *only* chance they had of keeping their farm and their home.

It was difficult to know why Welsh was nasty. When you consider the miracle that saw him rescued, loved and educated by the Bruntys, you’d reckon he’d turn out half-decent. Alas, no. Greed and grudge-bearing were stamped upon his soul.

He resorted to Plan B. His goals remained the same—become the tenant of the Brunty farm and marry Mary—but he needed another strategy to achieve success.

To enact his new plan, he called on the local agent, the man responsible for collecting rents from tenant farmers. The agent was all powerful, the local magistrate, the person who controlled the living conditions of so many people. Welsh slipped into his salesman suit.

‘Sir, I am ideal to work for you as a sub-agent.’ Welsh looked and sounded believable.

‘And why would I employ you?’ replied the sceptical yet curious agent.

An ambitious and devious individual is always attracted to one of their kind. Just as opposites attract, greedy criminals unite.

‘Allow me to explain, sir. I’ve lived here all my life.’ Not true but then Welsh and the truth were never close. ‘I know the area and the farmers, and can mix with these men, their families, friends and enemies, and give you valuable information. I assume you want their secrets.’

‘You assume well.’

‘Then I’m your man, sir. My information will allow you to increase rents at will. Like you, I’m ruthless in business and enjoy the power of the word *eviction*.’

The impressed agent disguised his feelings. He played for time. But with a joker up his sleeve, Welsh was relaxed.

‘Interesting,’ said the agent. ‘What else?’

The two men stared at one another. Neither spoke. Both were excellent card players. Without shifting his gaze, Welsh withdrew a

handmade envelope and pushed it towards the magistrate. There was another pause then more silence. The agent blinked first. He picked up the envelope and examined its contents. His face remained blank.

‘As it happens,’ he said, ‘I do need a new sub-agent.’ Welsh smiled. The agent joined the grinning club. ‘When can you start?’

And so, through baloney, bravado and bribery, Welsh Brunty started a new career as a sub-agent. He was perfect for the job—greedy, sneaky and sans conscience.

At that precise moment, Hugh Brunty turned in his grave. All those spying skills he taught his adopted son were about to be used to harass, rob and evict tenant farmers. Surely Welsh wouldn’t turn his attention to the family which once saved and succoured him.

Ah, but that’s exactly what he did—and without mercy. Plan B began.

Michael and Sean Brunty worked in England and sent money home to their mother and sisters. Brendan married a local girl, Sheenagh, and moved north to make a start on his own property. Back home, the Brunty farm collapsed. The women decorated the old house, grew their own fruit and vegetables and collected eggs, but life was a constant struggle. The once thriving Brunty farm and cattle business was no more.

Welsh spied on his former home, and told lies about its occupants to the agent, who responded with a rent increase. Welsh’s treachery knew no bounds. He hoped the family would quit but, desperate to survive, and with help from the boys, they paid the higher rent.

Welsh thrived in his new role. Thanks to his late father, Welsh knew the drinking habits, farming skills, marital situation and health problems of many local tenant farmers. He plied some with drink, and they revealed gossip and details of their income and those of their neighbours. He told his boss which farmers were making good money, those who were struggling, and any who pretended to struggle but had secret funds. This was priceless information for Welsh’s boss and even more so for the absentee landlord. “Pay the new rent or we’ll evict you”.

Welsh stayed patient. Holding the whip hand, he knew what he wanted. He was a merciless sub-agent, hated as much as any cruel absentee English landlord. Farmers refused to cross him knowing his power might increase their rent or worse—evict them. Mind you, hatred can linger for many years, which Welsh would one day discover.

The sub-agent’s agenda still included marrying Mary, and he switched tactics adopting a charm offensive. You don’t have to be sincere to flatter, and Welsh used every trick in the book.

In many a tenant-farmer's house, he threatened eviction unless paid a we-can-make-this-go-away bribe. Desperate farmers made offers.

'We have no cash, sir but will you please take my wife's (or daughter's or mother's) bracelet (or ring or necklace) as payment.'

'If you insist,' said the smirking sub-agent.

A charming bracelet made a charming gift for a charming lady. Mary Brunty received gifts from an admirer.

'This one arrived today, Mama,' said Mary showing the bracelet to her mother and Bree.

'It's lovely,' said Mrs Brunty.

'Don't you want to know who sent it?' asked Mary.

Her sister spoke. 'We know who, and we know why.'

Mrs Brunty looked at her daughters. Bree hated Welsh, Mary was confused, and Mrs Brunty wished the matter would go away. Tension crept into the room.

Welsh played the long game. One summery Sunday afternoon, when he knew his mother and sisters would be strolling to the local village, he borrowed a carriage and horses from a wealthy tenant farmer, now in debt, and, with a driver, went riding. Welsh travelled a la royalty.

The carriage came along at a gentle clip and, as it passed the Brunty women, Welsh leant out of the carriage and waved.

'Good afternoon, ladies,' he called, then disappeared inside leaving the women to stare in amazement.

'That's an expensive carriage,' said Bree.

'He didn't stop to offer us a lift,' said Mrs Brunty.

'We wouldn't accept it anyway,' said Mary as she set off for home.

One of the other sub-agents was a woman called Marta. Welsh introduced himself, complimented her, and asked if she could do him a favour.

'I'll pay you,' said a friendly Welsh. 'I'm having trouble courting a young lady, and I need a woman's touch.'

Marta laughed. 'So why isn't she in love with such a fine, young man as y'self?'

Welsh liked Marta. They were alike—ambitious and sincerely insincere—and made a good team. Welsh sent Marta to the Brunty farm to speak to Mary on his behalf. Marta had the gift of the gab.

'Did y'not know, Miss Brunty, Mr Welsh is doin' such a grand job, we're expectin' him to become the agent and magistrate any day now.'

Mary was impressed. Marta leant forward and whispered.

‘I happen t’know a secret.’ Mary was hooked. ‘The poor man’s heart is broke because the woman he loves cares not a fig. It’s a terrible shame now, Miss, don’t you tink?’

When Marta left, Mary told her mother and sister everything.

‘Perhaps your brothers were too hasty,’ said Mrs Brunty.

‘Oh, Mother,’ said Bree. ‘You and Papa loved the urchin, but your children despised him—*still* despise him.’

Mrs Brunty was dismayed. She and Bree looked at Mary, who said nothing. Was Mary wavering?

Welsh persisted, never losing sight of his goal. He adopted a new tactic meaning Mary received beautiful bunches of flowers.

What a considerate man, thought Mary. Alas, it wasn’t a case of no expense being spared but rather, no expense being spent. The so-called generous suitor helped himself to various tenants’ garden-beds with the gardeners afraid to say a thing—once a thief, always a thief.

Next, Welsh tried the glorious hero approach. He sent Marta to the Brunty farm where she addressed all three women.

‘Ladies, I’m not sure you know dis, but in recent times strong moves have been made to see you ladies evicted.’ The Brunty women froze. ‘The only reason you good folk are still here is because Mr Welsh moved Heaven an’ Earth to save your position.’

Bree was sceptical. Marta produced official documents which had nothing to do with Welsh.

‘Here are the documents which show how Mr Welsh intervened to protect his dear family.’

Mrs Brunty and her daughters looked at the papers with limited understanding. Marta’s acting skills were first-rate.

Oh no! The man we drove away, the man Mary spurned, is an unsung hero. Why were we so cruel?

Marta left to report to Welsh, and the Brunty women discussed the situation. Had they misjudged the man? Perhaps they should invite him to visit once in a while. They talked about the three boys and their possible reaction. Mrs Brunty closed the discussion.

‘What the boys don’t know can’t hurt them. We’ll invite Welsh to tea next Sunday.’

It was a tricky occasion. The last time Welsh stood in the Brunty parlour, threats were uttered, blood spilt and Mary threw Welsh’s marriage proposal—if you could call it that—back in his face.

Welsh dressed down for the visit. He remembered how once his outlandish clothes infuriated the Bruntys. This time he brought beautiful flowers and fine homemade jam, all stolen. Mrs Brunty was civil, Mary nervous and Bree fought to control her anger.

‘It’s lovely to see you again, my boy,’ said Mrs Brunty. ‘We often speak of you; don’t we girls?’

An uncomfortable pause was broken by Mary. ‘We do, and thank you for all your kind gifts and flowers over many months.’

‘I haven’t changed,’ said Welsh, coming straight to the point. ‘My offer to run the farm still stands.’ More silence and a longer pause. ‘And it breaks my heart to see how rundown things have become.’

Mrs Brunty spoke. ‘Let’s have some tea, girls.’ The sisters went to the kitchen. Their mother called. ‘And bring that lovely jam your brother gave us.’

Alone, Welsh stared at the woman who’d saved his life. They discussed Welsh’s job and his brothers until he changed the subject and spoke with a softness Mrs Brunty had never heard.

‘I can make this farm like it was when my dear father was alive.’ Tears filled Mrs Brunty’s eyes. ‘I can make you and Mary happy. Tell me it isn’t true.’

Welsh said his piece with Mrs Brunty about to burst into tears when her daughters arrived with the tea.

The rest of the visit involved bland conversation in which the weather received an exhaustive workout. Welsh ensured he didn’t overstay his welcome. He stood to leave and thanked each of the women in turn. They remembered the last time he stood in this room. The hatred and slamming of doors became smiles, fond good wishes and the softest of departures. Alone, the women discussed their visitor.

‘He looks well,’ said Mrs Brunty.

‘What did he tell you?’ asked Bree.

‘Perhaps he *has* changed,’ said Mary thinking aloud. ‘Perhaps he only wants to be a part of our family again.’

Her mother and sister stared at her. What did this mean?

Welsh played it cool. After the visit, he ignored the Bruntys, and kept them guessing. Then, weeks later, a letter arrived for Mary from Marta.

‘What does she say?’ asked Mrs Brunty.

‘Marta has important news and wants to tell me in person.’

Bree snorted. ‘More tricks.’

‘Marta wants to meet me in the village next Saturday.’

‘Whatever can it be?’ asked Mrs Brunty.

‘Don’t go,’ said Bree.

Mary was confused.

‘I’ll come too,’ said her mother. ‘I’ll be your chaperone.’

Mary looked at the others. ‘Thank you, Mother, but I’ll go alone.’ She did and met Marta by the church gate.

‘Hello Mary. Tank you for comin’.’

‘What is so important that we have to meet here in the village?’

‘Ah, come out of dis wind. Dere’s a ladies’ room in the pub.’

Marta set off and Mary scampered to catch her. They walked down the lane beside the hotel and Marta opened a door. They entered an empty room. Mary felt uneasy.

‘What is this place?’ she asked.

‘Not here,’ said Marta moving to a door. ‘Dere’s a lovely fire in here.’

Marta opened the door and ushered Mary inside. She froze. A fire crackled in the room which also contained a bed and a man. Standing by the window was Welsh Brunty. Mary turned to leave but the door closed and the key on the outside clicked.

‘Thank you for coming,’ he said.

‘You told me you’d changed,’ she replied. ‘Now you’ve played a terrible trick and put me in this compromising position.’

‘Believe me, I didn’t want it this way. It was Marta’s idea. She said you’d never accept me even though you loved me.’ He paused. ‘You do love me, Mary, don’t you?’

She paused. All the cards were stacked against her. Her father was dead, her brothers gone and her financial future bleak. So many women endured this awful situation. She decided.

‘Will you promise to care for my mother and sister too?’

A shocked Welsh didn’t at first twig that Mary had agreed to marry him. ‘Of course, of course,’ he babbled, then moved to her and kissed her hands. ‘Oh Mary, you’ve made me the happiest man in all Ireland.’

He was happy but not so Mary. She accepted his request for a small, private wedding. She knew if her brothers heard the news there would be murder done. Her mother had mixed feelings, wondering what her late husband would say. Bree expressed her disgust, packed her belongings, and departed for a friend’s home in Wexford never to return.

The marriage ceremony was performed by a disgraced and disgraceful clergyman, sober enough to make it to the, “I now pronounce you man and wife” bit.

Welsh was over the moon, Mary was over the honeymoon, and the couple returned to the Brunty farm. Mrs Brunty senior moved to a back bedroom and the newlyweds started life as lord and lady of the manor. Welsh moved to the next item on his agenda.

He sat in the agent's office and explained how he should now be given the tenancy of the Brunty farm. 'I grew up there and know everything about farming. I can fix that place.'

'Well if you do, y'rent'll go up,' said the agent.

Welsh laughed. 'Maybe,' he said. 'But once I breed cattle, paying the rent won't be a problem. First, I need that agreement.'

He got it.

Weeks after their sister's wedding, the Brunty brothers received the news. Their baby sister had wed and the groom, the one they referred to as "that miserable bastard", was the new tenant of the family farm. Blood boiled and the brothers headed home.

Michael and Sean came from England together and arrived before Brendan, who only lived about sixty miles away. His letter went astray. The two younger brothers discussed tactics en route, with the preferred options being a simple killing, or anything involving severe torture. A crude bribe firmed as the rank outsider.

It felt strange knocking on the front door. This had been their home for years and they always entered via the kitchen. The front door opened and their mother's face was a picture.

'My boys,' she cried and hugged and kissed them. She called. 'Mary, come and see who's here.'

Mary entered, wiping her hands on her apron. She too was shocked but delighted her brothers were home. But the happiness disappeared when Michael spoke.

'Where is he?'

'Now Michael,' said his mother, 'you mustn't be angry.'

'I'm not angry, I'm furious.'

'How could you, Mary?' asked Sean.

She despaired. 'Welsh has saved this ruined farm.'

'Not your marriage, the tenancy. Who you marry is your business,' said Michael, 'but *we're* the rightful tenants. Our father and the agent agreed that when we had enough money *we* would take over, not that thieving nobody.'

'So where is he?' snarled Sean.

Mrs Brunty begged them. 'Please, boys, no violence. Promise me.'

This slowed things. The sons had total respect for their mother.

Michael nodded. 'For you, Ma, but God help him if he tries anything.'

The men went looking for the "rat". The women exchanged glances and hugged with a mixture of fear and hope. Welsh was in the barn stacking hay. He heard footsteps and turned.

'Well, well, look what the cat dragged in.'

The brothers approached. The tenant grabbed a pitchfork which had strong, sharp prongs.

Michael was calm. 'We don't care about your marriage to our Mary, only about you stealing our tenancy.'

'Your tenancy,' scoffed Welsh. 'I've heard of an absentee landlord, but never an absentee tenant.' Welsh turned nasty and jabbed the pitchfork in their direction. 'Now get off my land!'

The brothers stalled as they knew Welsh wouldn't hesitate to use the weapon. He advanced making them retreat. It was the calm before the storm. The brothers separated and stopped. This created a problem for Welsh. With his opponents no longer side by side, he turned friendly.

'Ah, c'mon lads, I've fixed the farm. It's now like the old man's place.'

That last comment was a red rag to the bullish brothers. As one they raced at Welsh. Sean was faster so the pitchfork swung in his direction. The lethal prongs were about to be thrust into flesh when Michael launched himself and crashed against Welsh causing both men to fall. The pitchfork landed on the ground and Sean joined the fray.

Two to one should prevail but Welsh had street fighting skills. He broke every one of the yet-to-be-invented Marquess of Queensberry's Rules. All three combatants fought with screams and threats until a loud voice interrupted the punch-up.

'That's enough!'

The trio of fighters froze. They looked up and saw Brendan holding the pitchfork, thereby ending the brawl.

Inside, Mary and her mother repaired the wounded "little boys". Without any cuts and bruises, Brendan held court.

'This has got to stop. Welsh is making a go of the farm and providing a home for the ladies. So long as he pays the rent and cares for mother and Mary, then that's it.'

'But he stole our tenancy, yours too,' groaned Michael, as his sister dabbed his bruised face.

The fighters continued complaining before agreeing a fragile truce. The visitors retired to their old bedrooms not knowing Welsh had plans. He hated being beaten, wanted revenge, and called in a favour.

Next morning, the three brothers prepared to leave when a posse of locals arrived. Imagine the brothers' fury when they were dragged before the local magistrate and charged with various crimes.

Mary pleaded with her husband to withdraw his complaint. The senior Mrs Brunty despaired. Reluctantly, Welsh stated that Brendan wasn't involved in the assault. He was released but not so his brothers. Michael and Sean were thrown into a stinking, rat-infested prison and kept there for many months. This was a classic case of how not to unite the family with brotherly love.

And all this only added to the strain on Welsh and Mary's marriage—made in Heaven it wasn't. At least the Brunty farm recovered. Not to its former glory, but sufficient to generate a reasonable income. Would Welsh come good?

The years went by and little changed. Mary was barren and the lack of a son and heir—daughters didn't count—ate away at Welsh, making him ever more bitter. The expert cattle-breeding skills possessed by Hugh Brunty were not easy to grasp. Welsh drank too much. Mrs Brunty senior died, leaving Mary alone with her morose brute of a husband.

It was a late summer's night and Mary lay awake beside her drunken, snoring spouse. She wondered if her life could become even more soul-destroying than it was right now. Alas, it could.

Mary smelt smoke. She sprang out of bed, ran to the kitchen, and opened the door where the heat and flames drove her back. She raced to the bedroom screaming at Welsh. He kept snoring. She punched and slapped him. That got him awake.

'Fire!' she screamed. 'The house is on fire!'

Welsh roused himself and they ran to the kitchen. The house was well alight. They got outside and Welsh yelled at Mary.

'Get help! Get help!'

He grabbed a bucket of water and screamed for the farmhand, but the man lived in the smaller cottage and was oblivious to the catastrophe. His punishment would keep. When an exhausted Mary returned with a neighbour, the house was gone. The dying embers cast an eerie glow.

Welsh spat on the ground near his wife. 'What took you so long?'

Mary couldn't speak. Losing the Brunty home was devastating. Being spoken to like that was beyond belief. The neighbour, who had long despised Welsh, walked up to him, glared and without saying a word,

smashed his fist into Welsh's stomach. The neighbour walked away leaving Mary watching her groaning husband rolling in his own vomit.

People have long memories. The house fire was lit by a former tenant farmer who, years ago, was hounded off his smallholding by the pitiless sub-agent, Welsh Brunty. What goes around comes around.

Welsh and Mary moved to the smaller cottage built by Mary's father when times were good. This was a major downsizing. Gormless Gallagher, the farmhand, moved to the barn.

Having lost all their possessions in the fire, Welsh and Mary struggled to make ends meet. It was tough but their troubles had only begun.

The agent and magistrate who first employed Welsh was murdered, and his replacement was devoid of compassion. Welsh lost his job as a sub-agent and the boot was now on the other foot. When the new sub-agent arrived to collect the rent, Welsh couldn't pay.

He begged for mercy but got derision and laughter. It was crunch time. Mary's precious "gifts", the trinkets Welsh stole in his wooing days, had been buried to foil any thieves. The precious items were recovered and sold. Who said crime doesn't pay?

By now, Welsh and Mary were no spring chickens, childless and struggling to make ends meet. One night, as they shivered in their tiny kitchen, Welsh had an idea. 'Let's visit brother Brendan.'

Mary was unmoved. 'Brendan? Why?'

'He likes you. And I got him off those charges many years ago.'

'You got him *on* those charges many years ago.'

'He owes me.'

'But why Brendan?'

'He's family. Families stick together in good times and bad. And he's got a tribe of kids.'

Mary looked at him. In the flickering candle light his eyes gleamed.

'So?' she asked.

He shrugged. 'We could start a family.'

Chapter 2

‘HELLO!’ cried a waving Welsh, driving his cart into Brendan’s yard. Welsh had written to his brother suggesting a visit, but got no reply. Welsh decided to go anyway and the journey took four days.

Brendan’s wife, Sheenagh, opposed the visit and didn’t mince her words. ‘You always said he was trouble. And why would he come after all these years?’

Brendan and Sheenagh had four children—two of each. The youngest was a lad, Hugh, six, named after his grandfather, Welsh’s benefactor. The lad was friendly, trusting and a redhead.

Sheenagh’s spirits sank when her dreaded brother-in-law arrived. But Brendan was keen to see his sister and wanted to know her news. Released from jail long ago, their brothers returned to England. Mary knew nothing about sister, Bree.

Welsh and Mary fascinated the children. The dark and unusual Uncle Welsh turned on the charm, and the children’s reticence disappeared.

Welsh became Mr Jolly. He played games with the children, helped Brendan with his farm work, and complimented Sheenagh to the point of embarrassment. After a week, the kids were delighted, but not so their parents.

When will the house guests leave? And why did they come in the first place? Two weeks rolled by and Sheenagh wanted them gone.

That night, the two men were alone with Brendan under instructions to give Welsh and Mary their marching orders. But before the host could speak, Welsh come up with a stunning suggestion.

‘Brendan, I’ve been thinking. Wouldn’t it be just grand for your little Hugh to inherit the tenancy of his grandfather’s farm?’ Brendan was hooked. ‘You named your boy after his grandfather, and think how proud your dad would be to have his grandson milking cows and breeding cattle on the family farm.’

‘But how?’ queried Brendan.

‘Well, if the lad came to live with Mary and me, we’d educate him, give him a grand life, and when he grew older, the farm would be his.’

Welsh paused. The serious suggestion came without warning.

‘Welsh, what can I say?’

‘Say nothing. Sleep on it and we can chat in the morning. Oh, and another thing. While Mary and I have enjoyed your grand hospitality, it’s time we made tracks for home.’

Brendan felt overwhelming relief. Sheenagh would be thrilled the unwanted guests were going. But what would she say about their youngest being adopted?

Brendan crept into bed and told his wife the good news about the departing guests. ‘Hallelujah,’ she cried, but when Brendan described Welsh’s offer, Sheenagh’s delight died in a heartbeat.

‘You cannot be serious,’ she said, frantic and stunned. ‘He wants to adopt our Hugh?’

‘It’s only a suggestion,’ replied her defensive husband.

‘Which you refused.’

‘Not exactly.’

‘Brendan!’ Her loud voice dropped to a savage whisper because of Brendan’s manic shushing. ‘How dare you even consider such a monstrous idea.’

‘I agreed to talk in the morning. That’s all.’

‘Hugh goes over my dead body.’

It was a restless night with the couple sleeping so far apart, there was room for a sheep in the middle of the bed.

The next morning, Hugh’s adoption wasn’t mentioned. Maybe Welsh’s wild idea had been forgotten. Not so. What Brendan or Sheenagh didn’t know was that ever since their house guests arrived, Welsh had been grooming young Hugh for a new life as his son and heir.

He took the boy for walks, helped him climb trees, and told him tales of life on the farm by the River Boyne. Welsh told Hugh the names—all invented on the spot—of his pigs, chickens and cows, and described the fun you could have picking apples and playing games with the dogs. He spoke of adventures going fishing and swimming, chasing rabbits and riding ponies. Welsh stopped, paused, and looked at the child.

‘Do you fancy your own pony, Hugh?’

‘Oh, yes please, Uncle Welsh,’ beamed the boy, his eyes wide and wild.

‘And how about your own dog?’

That was the clincher. Little Hugh loved dogs. He was speechless with expectations of joy.

Now this sneaky grooming was Welsh's secret weapon. When he again raised Hugh's adoption, the greatest supporter of the proposal was the wee boy himself. He wanted to go with his aunt and uncle. Welsh's immaculate planning worked a treat.

Hugh's mother refused point blank. She placed the child on her knee and told him how much she and his Daddy loved him. They wanted to care for him forever. But Sheenagh's heart turned to stone. Her youngest, her darling baby boy, was not interested in his parents; he wanted to be with the wonderful Uncle Welsh and Aunt Mary. The boy's head had been turned. His heart belonged to Welshy.

That night in the dark, Sheenagh lay in bed and wept.

'It's not the end of the world,' said Brendan, moving closer to her.

'I'll never see him again.'

'Nonsense. The farm is not all that far away, and Hugh can come home for Christmas.'

Sheenagh shed more tears.

Brendan tried a new tack. 'Imagine. One day our Hugh will inherit his grandfather's farm.'

'It's wrong, the whole horrid idea is wrong.'

'But think of the boy. He *wants* to go. He'll be upset if Welsh and Mary leave without him.'

Sheenagh cried herself to sleep. In her heart she knew her boy was lost. Had she known the real story, she would have died of sorrow. You see, Brendan and Welsh had agreed a secret deal, meaning Hugh would never see his parents again. If any of his family visited or contacted him, the boy would never inherit the Brunty farm's tenancy. Brendan and Welsh swore an oath and told no-one.

The next day, the visitors took their time packing their belongings and loading their cart. Brendan shook his head in confusion and Sheenagh shook hers in torment. Why the delay?

Welsh rounded up the children and they went for a walk in the woods. Hugh sat on Uncle Welsh's shoulders. He and Mary fussed over their new "son", their special passenger, who was never more excited.

Brendan wondered why they didn't set off first thing. His confusion increased because, after they returned, it was time for lunch delaying the departure again. Brendan couldn't stand it any longer.

'Why have you not left? It'll soon be dark.'

'Best time to travel,' said Welsh. 'The roads are clear and we don't pay for those damn expensive inns.'

Brendan had serious doubts. *Have I done the wrong thing?*

As daylight faded, Welsh announced they were leaving. He helped Mary onto the cart seat. The lad kissed his siblings and father, then ran to Welsh who swept him, squealing with delight, into the air and placing him on the seat beside Mary. Inside, Sheenagh wept. She couldn't bear to watch. Welsh climbed onto the cart and sat beside little Hugh. The lad was snug between his new parents. Welsh waved to Brendan and the siblings and smiled. Then with a shake of the reins and cries of "Goodbye", the new Brunty family set sail.

The gloom and rain swallowed the cart and in the darkness, Hugh snuggled into his Aunt Mary. He was cold and wet but excited about his new adventure, and couldn't stop chatting. He didn't hear Welsh who spoke in a low growl.

'Shut y'gob.'

Hugh went on babbling away but stopped when his aunt pulled him close and whispered in his ear. He looked up and saw a different face. For the first time, a tiny seed of worry took root in his heart.

Mary knew her husband was a man of many moods; charming and kind one minute, cruel and evil the next. She prayed the boy would be safe.

Hugh became quiet as they plodded along in the darkness. The unseen potholes caused problems because when the spring-less cart hit one, the travellers bounced. A large pothole caused a severe jolt. Hugh yelled as he shot in the air and landed, his bottom smacking the hard, wooden seat.

Welsh roared at the boy. 'I told you to shut y'gob!'

This time the child heard every word, and in the blackness his uncle's eyes burned with anger. Hugh's happiness switched to fear. He said what he thought.

'Why are you angry, Uncle?'

Welsh hissed. 'Be quiet.'

The terrified boy spoke the truth.

'I want my Daddy. I want to go home.'

Welsh belted the boy's face with a backhander. It smashed into Hugh's soft face and, after a moment of shock, the pain kicked in and the boy screamed like a victim of torture.

Welsh snapped. With one hand he grabbed the boy's hair and yanked him up and over the back of the seat tossing him onto the tray of the cart.

Hugh shrieked in pain and fear, Mary wailed and the child experienced unimaginable terror.

Adults use life's experiences to prepare for unexpected events. They draw on these experiences to deal with accidents, tragedies and death. Being young and innocent, a child lacks life's experiences. Hugh trusted adults and enjoyed their protection.

In an instant, he went from the joyful expectation and excitement of a new adventure, to inexplicable horror, shock and pain. And the suddenness made it worse. His life changed in a heartbeat.

His body throbbed with agony, his mind in turmoil. *Why?* was his first thought. Then *What did I do wrong? Why is my uncle a monster?* Terrified, Hugh howled in anguish.

Mary looked back at the miserable child.

'Leave him,' snarled Welsh.

'He didn't mean no harm.'

'I said "leave him". He'll never learn if you go soft on him.'

Mary shook her head and faced front as the cart bounced over yet another pothole. Hugh's painful cries grew softer becoming a whimper. He opened one eye and saw the backs of the adults. He risked lifting his head. In the darkness he heard his father running and calling. "I'm here, Hugh. Daddy's here".

Hugh raised a hand towards his father, and opened his mouth to call out when his youthful brain told him to stop. The night had played a trick. He was alone and sad beyond belief.

His mother taught her children to pray. As Hugh lay on the wet straw, he remembered a prayer.

Dear God. Please bless Mummy and Daddy and my brother and sisters. And please bless ... He wanted to say *Uncle Welsh and Aunt Mary* but the words wouldn't come.

At least the soft Irish rain was kind. It mingled with his copious tears.

Welsh drove in the darkness for different reasons. If they spent the night at an inn, he would have to pay for everything. Travelling by night, meant they could stop at an inn by day. Welsh paid for food and drink, but they could sleep by a fire for nothing.

And Welsh didn't want to be seen, or the boy to see anything. The further they got from Hugh's family the better, and with no knowledge of signs or landmarks, little Hugh couldn't escape and return home.

Next morning, they stopped in a village where Welsh left the cart at the back of a pub. Mary carried the sleepy, snivelling child inside, and fed him bread and butter and milk. She was his only friend, and Hugh avoided even looking at Welsh.

‘What?’ snapped Welsh, after the child whispered in Mary’s ear.

‘He wants the privy.’

‘Then take him.’ Mary led Hugh and Welsh called. ‘And don’t let him out of your sight.’

When they returned, Welsh had gone. Mary put Hugh on a bench near the fire. She helped him lie down and covered him with her shawl.

‘You sleep, little one. I’ll find you some new clothes.’

She left and Hugh fell asleep. The fire warmed him, with sleep his best friend. But not for long.

‘Who’s this then?’ asked an old man with whiskers. Hugh didn’t stir so the gent prodded the boy who sat up in fright.

The friendly gentleman wanted to know why a small child occupied his favourite seat. The man’s dog moved in to investigate and Hugh pulled back.

‘He don’t bite, laddie. Go on, give him a pat.’

Hugh loved dogs and for the first time in many hours reached out and touched a friendly creature. The happy dog asked for more.

‘So what’s your name, young man?’

‘Hugh, sir.’

‘And where be your parents?’

‘At home, sir.’

‘At home? Are you on your own?’

‘No sir. I’ve been took by my Uncle Welsh and I’m afraid.’

‘Took?’

The pub door opened and Welsh entered. ‘What’s this? I told you to sit over here.’ He grabbed Hugh. The dog growled.

‘Sir,’ began the old man.

Welsh threatened him with a look and spoke in a low, sinister voice. ‘Mind y’own feekin’ business.’

Mary arrived with a bundle of clothes. Welsh queried her but she ignored him. She took Hugh’s hand and led him back to the fire. The old man smiled but said nothing. His dog wanted to chat. Mary removed Hugh’s wet clothes and dressed him in dry, warm ones. The trousers were far too big and made of a strange material called corduroy. Mary hoped her nephew would live long enough to grow into them.

The family stayed in the pub and Hugh slept with his head on his aunt's lap, and the dog by his side. With the daylight fading, the family went outside, mounted the cart and continued their journey. Hugh sat next to his aunt but followed her advice and said nothing. It was difficult to imagine the misery and loneliness endured by the child.

They repeated this travel routine for another three days—sit by fire in pub by day, and take to road by night. The weather was never a factor—if it rained, too bad. On the third night, they placed Hugh on straw under the seat of the cart. Beneath his useless blanket, the constant pothole jarring kept him awake. He looked and felt terrible.

Late in the afternoon of the fourth day they reached the Brunty farm. Through endless rain, Hugh saw nothing of the ponies, pets and promises, and was bundled inside the cottage.

‘Show him round and then I’ll speak to him,’ said Welsh.

He went to check his animals and his farmhand, Gallagher, who’d been in charge during the boss’s absence. Gallagher, a nasty sycophant, grinned exposing his black and yellow teeth. He once helped Welsh in his work as a sub-agent, and had a long history of criminal activities.

Mary showed Hugh his bed, the privy, and where not to go—ever. The boy took no notice. Mary thought he was desolate when in fact he was ill. In the kitchen, she made supper. The starving child gobbled the food then, looking at her, spoke.

‘Please Aunt, why is Uncle Welsh angry?’

Mary looked at her nephew’s pathetic face. ‘I don’t know, child, but if it’s any help, he’s angry at everyone.’ It wasn’t the answer he wanted but it was something.

They heard footsteps and voices and the ogre appeared. He seemed even more evil on his own patch. Welsh grabbed a chair and sat.

‘Come here, you.’ Mary looked at the boy and nodded. He moved to Welsh who turned him so the lad’s back was to the door.

‘Now listen, son, and listen good. This is your home now, and me and your Aunt Mary, we is your parents. Your Daddy and Mummy wants you to be a farmer. I can teach you but by Jesus, boy, you’d best be grateful. All right?’ Hugh couldn’t speak. Welsh shook him and spoke louder. ‘All right?’

‘He understands,’ said Mary.

‘You keep out of it.’ She did. Welsh continued at Hugh. ‘Whatever I say, you do. And if you don’t, I’ll skin you alive. All right?’

This time Hugh nodded. He thought he’d seen the worst of the madman, but his young brain calculated, in childlike thinking, that he’d

only just reached the gates of Hell, and something unimaginable was yet to happen once he entered the furnace proper. Tears welled in his eyes and he cried in silence.

Welsh coughed and, unseen by Hugh, the kitchen door opened. Mary gasped. Welsh held the boy's shoulders in a vice-like grip and issued a warning.

'I'll be watching you, boy, every minute of every day. You try to run away, steal something or get lazy and I'll know. D'ja hear me?'

The terrified child nodded again. But his terror was soon to plumb new depths.

'And when I'm not watching, he will!'

Welsh spun Hugh. Bent low, only inches from Hugh's tear-stained cheeks, was the face of the appalling Gallagher, who couldn't remember his last bath. Baring his terrifying teeth, he grinned at the youngster then ran a hand through the boy's hair, grabbed a fistful and yanked the lad even closer.

'I'll be dis close,' he smirked as most of his free-range spittle found its mark.

Welsh thrust Hugh sideways where he landed in the folds of Mary's skirt. She half-carried the shattered child to the bedroom. In the kitchen, the men laughed.

Hugh's bedroom was the only bedroom. His bed was a box with straw at the foot of Welsh and Mary's bed. It brought him closer to the fire with a shorter trip to the privy. But that's where the benefits stopped.

At night, two roosters and a sow with piglets shared the bedroom. Welsh used the fowls as an alarm clock. They fired up at dawn and guess who let out the feathered creatures and cleaned up when the roosters' bedroom became their shedroom?

The sow was a danger to adults, let alone small children, and clearly the sleeping habits of little Hugh Brunty were unhealthy. Add to the mix his uncle's snoring and farting, and the life of the future Brunty farm tenant did not begin or bode well.

On Hugh's first night in paradise, Welsh fell asleep and snored. Mary crept out of bed and knelt beside her nephew. The fire's dying embers created a half-light, and in this atmospheric setting, and while the piglets squealed and the roosters flapped, Mary kissed her nephew.

'Goodnight, little Hugh,' she said.

He tried to say "Goodnight," but his silent sobbing choked the word.

Next morning before dawn, Mary put out the roosters and the sow and her litter. Hugh was asleep so Mary left him there. She went to the kitchen and started her breakfast routine.

After a few minutes, she returned to the bedroom and knelt beside Hugh's box. She turned his face to her and gasped. He looked strange, like death. He was awake but not moving. She touched his hot face, panicked and raced to Welsh.

'Welsh, wake up, the boy is poorly. *Welsh!*'

He grumbled and turned his back to her. Mary slapped his head. He spun around, furious. 'What?' he roared with memories of a house fire.

'Come and see the boy. He's dying!'

Complaining, Welsh fell out of bed, bent over Hugh and made a cursory inspection.

'He's shaming.'

'No he's not. Feel his face. He's got a fever. Look at him.'

Welsh fumed. He'd gone to no end of trouble to capture the damn kid who now looked like dying. What a waste of time and money.

'He needs a doctor,' said Mary. Welsh hesitated. 'Go! Send Gallagher.'

Welsh staggered out to find the farmhand. Mary struggled to lift Hugh out of his box and place him on the bed. She covered him with bedclothes putting her shawl on top. She lit a fire as Welsh came in with Gallagher.

'Not in here,' snapped Mary. 'Fetch the doctor.'

Welsh knew the boy was ailing. He turned on Gallagher. 'If the kid dies, I'll tell the magistrate about you and Marta and your black market baby business.'

Looking scared, Gallagher turned and ran. Welsh yelled. 'And hurry.'

It took more than an hour for the doctor to arrive. Mary tried to give Hugh some warm milk but he struggled to swallow and seemed delirious. Welsh suggested a drop of whisky.

The doctor took only seconds to decide. 'The child has a fever, a bad one.'

'Will he die?' asked a desperate Mary. Welsh too wanted the answer although for another reason.

'He may. Has he been ill long?'

'He hasn't been ill,' said a frustrated Welsh. 'Yesterday he was as fit as a fiddle.'

The doctor didn't believe Welsh. He gave medicine to Mary with instructions to keep the child in bed and warm.

Mary stayed with Hugh. She bathed his head, spoon-fed his medicine, and prayed with a passion. Welsh went farming and popped in once.

‘Any change?’ he asked.

‘He’s worse.’

‘Well I can’t afford the doctor no more.’

‘What can I tell Brendan and Sheenagh?’

‘Tell ‘im nothing. He’ll never want to know.’

‘What?’ Mary was in shock. ‘Why won’t he want to know? What have you done?’

Welsh pointed at his wife. ‘Just get him better.’ Welsh left.

That night, Hugh slept beside Mary with Welsh grumbling before falling asleep. Mary kept waking up and speaking to Hugh. She needed sleep but dreaded nodding off thinking that, when she woke, she’d be beside a dead child. Hugh showed no signs of recovery. From time to time he coughed giving Mary some comfort. *At least he’s still alive*, she thought.

Next morning, Hugh was much the same. Mary kept thinking about what had happened, about the scheme her husband hatched with her brother. She blamed herself. *Why didn’t I oppose this?* The boy’s fever was so unnecessary; all those nights travelling in the cold and rain. No wonder the child was dying.

Hugh looked terrible. Late the next day, he swallowed the last of the medicine. Mary sat on the bed weeping. Welsh stopped calling in for reports. Mary stopped praying. Any death can be heartbreaking, but when it’s an innocent child, the pain is pure torture.

She needed the privy. She kissed Hugh, went outside, and was walking back when the family dogs came up to her in the hope of food—any food. They liked her but feared the men.

Welsh and Gallagher abused the animals, which were banned from the cottage. Mary looked but couldn’t see her husband. ‘Come on,’ she said and the dogs didn’t need a second invitation.

She found some rabbit scraps and the canines devoured the food with relish. ‘Out you go,’ she said, ‘and don’t tell your master.’ She opened the door, heard Hugh coughing, and so headed for the bedroom. Hoping for more food elsewhere in the cottage, the dogs trotted after her.

Mary didn’t notice them. She sat beside Hugh and stroked his forehead. The dogs jumped on the bed giving Mary a fright. She was about to order them outside but stopped.

The patient fascinated the dogs. *Who is this? He’s new.* They sniffed and stared. Soldier, the brave one, pawed Hugh’s covered body. Keeper

took courage from his comrade's behaviour, and moved closer to the child. The dog inched forward and licked Hugh's face.

Mary raised a hand and the dogs moved back. They knew she was gentle, unlike Welsh and Gallagher, and just as Mary decided it was better for the dogs to be put outside, Hugh shifted a smidgeon. Beneath the bedclothes, he moved. Mary leant closer.

'Hugh, are you all right?'

He looked at Mary and then the dogs. Hugh extracted an arm and offered his hand to the canines. They were gentlemen and responded in kind.

Hugh's two excited new friends licked his hand and the smile on the boy's face made his aunt weep for joy. The sound of the kitchen door being opened changed everything. The dogs became scared. Mary patted them and told them to stay.

In the kitchen she spoke to Welsh.

He replied with a crescendo. 'What? Inside? On my bed?'

Mary stood up to her bullying husband and, thanks to her bravery, tamed the brute who came to the bedroom door sans bluster, and saw an amazing sight.

Hugh was sitting up in bed with a tail-wagging dog either side, each being patted by the boy with a much reduced fever.

The good news was that Hugh recovered. The bad news was that his life as a slave began. It took days for the patient to be ready for hard labour and, once he was able, Hugh's first tasks were to let out any animals in the house, clean the fireplaces and set the fires, fetch wood, fetch water, feed the chickens and collect their eggs. Throughout the day he followed his uncle, and needed to be ready to jump when ordered.

If Hugh made a mistake or was too slow, he was yelled at or struck or both. Soon the lad understood the moods of his master. Hugh was a quick learner and taught himself not to cry.

But he didn't learn the evil ways of the gruesome Gallagher. The man was a sociopath who delighted in the suffering of others, and would do anything, especially lying, to inflict pain on Master Brunty. Gallagher reported to Welsh.

'He spilt milk in the barn.'

'He never closed the gate.'

'He broke an egg.'

'He give the dogs food.'

The list was endless. Depending on his mood and alcohol intake, Welsh would slap or beat the child, send him to bed without supper or worse; threaten the most evil of punishments.

‘Do that again, boy, and I’ll lock you in the barn with Gallagher.’

The farmhand shuddered with delight and Hugh and Mary shuddered with fear.

When Gallagher’s lies didn’t produce enough misery for the child, the evil labourer damaged tools, spoilt food and even maimed cattle, before blaming it on that “lazy feekin’ urchin”. Hugh survived the vicious punishment; it was the injustice which stung.

For the next decade, Hugh Brunty endured bullying and beatings. He was an unpaid farm worker on the property once run by his grandfather, another Hugh Brunty.

When he first arrived, little Hugh watched for visitors, looking at anyone passing the farm and wondering, *Are you my father coming to take me home?* But no-one came for Hugh. His misery was exquisite and only two things kept him alive and sane—his aunt and his dogs.

Mary befriended and cared for her nephew. She told him stirring stories about his grandfather.

As for the dogs, well, they adopted and adored him. They slept outside but come the dawn, there they were, awaiting their loving master. When Hugh set out to herd cattle, pick potatoes or pen sheep, his best friends ran in circles around the boy, barking their pleasure.

The years rolled by and Hugh grew from a child to a boy to a young man; tall for his age, strong and good looking. And as he got bigger and stronger, Welsh and Gallagher got older and slower. Both became less aggressive bullies. They knew one day the lad might stand and fight. The bullies weren’t stupid.

The dogs too got older; Soldier in particular. He tried to keep up with Hugh, but the dog’s liver and eyesight were shot, and arthritis made the once active dog lame. Hugh’s heart ached as he tried in vain to hide, feed and care for his dying and much-loved friend.

The day Welsh saw the limping animal and went for some rope, Hugh made no protest. He knew it was right but that didn’t stop his tears.

‘Not here,’ pleaded Hugh. ‘Not in front of Keeper.’

Welsh had no sentiment and killed the dog in an instant. ‘Feed it to t’pigs,’ he snorted and Gallagher laughed.

Hugh agreed, but that night, he carried Soldier across the darkened fields where, beneath a gnarled tree by the useless bog, Hugh dug a grave and laid his companion to rest. Keeper sat staring, panting, thinking. Reluctant to leave, he wanted to stay with his mate.

And Hugh wanted to be with Keeper. Now aged 15, Hugh thought about running away. He faced many problems, the toughest being what to do with Keeper. He owed the dog his life.

One day, as Welsh and Gallagher repaired a fence out on the farm, Hugh chopped wood in the yard and Mary called to him.

‘Will you come into the house, Hugh?’

He slammed the axe into a block of wood, and joined his aunt in the kitchen. She looked ill.

‘Are you poorly, Aunt Mary?’

‘I must tell you something.’ She hesitated. Hugh sensed her distress as she took a deep breath.

‘Is it Uncle Welsh?’

She blurted out her news. ‘I’m having a baby.’

Mary worried her nephew wouldn’t understand. He’d never been to school, was illiterate and had little contact with anyone who might explain the facts of life. Welsh couldn’t care less about educating the boy.

‘Oh,’ said a surprised Hugh.

‘Perhaps I should explain how babies are born and then ...’

‘Thank you, Aunt, but I know already.’

‘You do?’ said an astonished Mary.

‘Gallagher told me.’

‘Gallagher!’ gasped Mary.

‘He explained because I didn’t understand when he told me about my mother.’

Mary was in total shock. ‘Your mother?’

‘Gallagher said I was stupid, like my mother, because she once slept in the same bed as Gallagher.’

Mary screamed so loud it frightened Hugh and Keeper pawed the kitchen door.

‘No! That man is evil, *evil!*’ she cried. ‘What he says is not true; never true. Your mother’s a fine, Christian woman, a wonderful mother and loyal to your dear father. Do not believe that awful, awful man.’

There was a long pause before Hugh spoke.

‘I must tell you something, too.’ They looked at one another. ‘I want to leave.’

Hugh expected his aunt to be shocked and angry, but instead she quietly spoke the truth.

‘I’m surprised you haven’t gone already.’

‘I can’t. You know I have no money or clothes, and I only stay because of Keeper and you.’

‘Me? You must not stay because of me.’

‘But you have cared for me and now I am older, I must care for you.’

Mary wanted to cry. Despite the years of abuse her nephew suffered, he rarely expressed any feelings of revenge; in fact he had a kind and loving nature he always showed to his aunt. Silence dominated, and neither wanted to speak until Mary could keep quiet no longer.

‘I have a secret to share with you. I’ve wanted to say this for years. Your Uncle Welsh is not a Brunty.’ This shocked Hugh. ‘It’s true your father is my brother, but he and I are not blood relatives of your Uncle Welsh. Do you know what blood relatives are?’

Hugh nodded. ‘I think so.’ Mary continued.

‘My parents, your grandparents, adopted Welsh when he was a little boy; about your age when you came here.’

‘So I’m a Brunty but he’s not?’

Mary nodded and explained. ‘Your grandfather Hugh called the little boy Welsh because of the way he looked and spoke. When your grandfather died, Uncle Welsh tricked your father and his brothers, and took over this farm.’

‘Just like he tricked my parents into letting me come to live here.’

A stunned Mary whispered. ‘How long have you known?’

‘And now you are having a baby, I will lose my inheritance. A second Brunty will lose this farm.’

They stared at one another. Mary opened her arms, Hugh moved to her and they embraced. She wept. He’d trained himself not to cry.

The mood changed when they heard yelling. It was Gallagher.

‘Help! Somebody help! Help!’

Hugh raced into the yard. Keeper barked with excitement. In the far field, Gallagher waved and called. Hugh and the dog ran towards him and reached an exhausted Gallagher. With torn clothes and a bloodied face, he pointed and gasped. ‘Your uncle—he’s fighting with Kelly.’

Hugh and Keeper took off with Gallagher limping after them. Hugh reached the boundary fence and saw Welsh and his neighbour, Kelly, in a no-holds-barred brawl. Swearing was compulsory with both men bruised and bleeding. Welsh wanted to quit; one of his talents.

Gallagher caught up with Hugh. ‘Help him. He’s gunna be killed.’

Hugh looked at the coward Gallagher then at his uncle. Hugh jumped the fence and waded into the flooded bog. Keeper followed. Kelly prepared to deliver the coup de grâce. Hugh and a bounding Keeper got closer. Kelly saw them and hesitated. Hugh stopped.

Kelly was the neighbour who ran to the burning Brunty farmhouse many years ago. There was no love lost between Welsh and Kelly. Despite its peat being long removed, the two men had disputed ownership of this useless bog for years.

Kelly knew about the abuse Hugh suffered, and the cruelty inflicted by Welsh the sub-agent. Kelly hated Welsh and this dispute over worthless land was as much about child abuse and theft.

The combatants glared at one another and, without speaking, called it quits. Hugh collected Welsh and helped his uncle home with little help from Gallagher. Mary became doctor, nurse and psychologist, and the patient was quiet—for weeks.

Hugh went to visit Mr Kelly and they chatted. The old man remembered Hugh's grandfather and knew the story of Welsh's trickery.

'I know you was treated bad, son,' said Kelly. 'At least when that bastard dies you'll have the farm to y'self.'

'Perhaps not,' replied Hugh, and told Kelly about Mary and her baby.

'My God, boy, you've got to escape. Leave now while you can.'

Hugh agreed but kept thinking about Keeper and Mary.

'One day,' said Hugh, 'and if I go, sir, will you help me? Please?'

Kelly nodded. Hugh half-smiled, and whistled for his dog.

Mary had a son and Hugh knew his so-called inheritance was lost. Welsh recovered from his war wounds and took a perverse pride in becoming a father. Mary and the baby did well.

Hugh's bond with his aunt and dog was never stronger, and this made his wish to escape difficult. He had to go but couldn't abandon his friends. He cared not for the inheritance, but greatly for those he loved.

That night, Hugh slept in his part of the barn with Keeper by his side. Moonlight kept them company as the barn door opened. Keeper's ears pricked but Hugh snored. Soft footsteps got closer and the dog growled. The intruder drew near the still sleeping boy. Then Keeper exploded, barking with aggression.

Huge awoke in an instant, looked at Keeper, and then turned to see a large figure looming above him holding a raised pitchfork. Hugh dived towards the dog as the prongs plunged into his bedding.

In the soft moonlight, the shadowy humans played a deadly game, with one armed and the other not. But the other had a friend who leapt into the fray. The first human sound was the screaming from Mr Pitchfork as the canine sank its teeth into flesh.

Hugh called off the dog. The wounded man howled. Hugh recognised the pathetic sounds and shape of Gallagher.

‘Get him off!’ bleated the bully turned coward.

Hugh was furious but called Keeper who returned to his master. ‘Stab a man in the back—what a surprise!’

‘I’m bleeding. That feckin’ dog bit me.’

‘You’re lucky it wasn’t your throat.’

Gallagher crawled away from the enemy. ‘It’s not my fault.’

‘It never is. You’re a coward; always will be.’

‘Your uncle made me do it.’

Hugh baulked. Gallagher lied for a living. But could it be true? Hugh picked up the pitchfork and Gallagher prepared to die.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Please don’t. I’ll leave. I’ll leave now. Please.’

‘Too late,’ said Hugh and raised the pitchfork like a javelin thrower. Gallagher whimpered and cowered in the foetal position. Hugh hurled the pitchfork with all his might, plunging it into the timber inches above Gallagher’s body. The pitchfork wobbled for ages. Gallagher was alive but never in more need of a bath.

Hugh went straight to the cottage. He didn’t knock but entered with Keeper at his heels. Mary nursed the baby. Welsh dozed by the fire, and Hugh mimed an apology to Mary before slamming his fist on the table.

Welsh woke up and saw the intruders.

‘Hey! Get that feckin’ animal out of ...’

He stopped when Keeper growled. Hugh didn’t bother with small talk.

‘Did you tell Gallagher to kill me?’

A terrified Mary cradled her crying son.

Hugh yelled. ‘Did you?’

Welsh fought back. ‘Don’t you dare come in here making filthy accusations. Now get out!’ The baby cried louder.

Hugh boiled with rage. ‘You’ve cheated me out of my family, my inheritance, and now you’ve tried to murder me.’

‘No!’ shrieked Mary. This fight promised bloodshed. She begged. ‘Stop, Hugh, please.’

Hugh hated distressing his aunt and her son. Welsh didn’t give a fig. He grabbed a kitchen knife and threatened the lad. Keeper barked.

Mary screamed. ‘No Welsh!’

‘Feekin’ bastard,’ roared Welsh. ‘I should’ve drowned you when I had the chance. We fed an’ clothed you f’years, you ungrateful bit of shite.’ He raised the knife.

Hugh stood tall. This defiance inflamed Welsh even more. He started towards the teenager and drew back the knife. Mary screamed. Keeper barked with fury, and as Welsh lunged at Hugh with the knife, the boy kicked his uncle’s kneecap. It sounded like a whip crack, and Welsh’s scream was louder and longer. He lay on the floor, writhing in agony.

Hugh grabbed the fallen knife and stood over his wailing tormentor. Keeper kept barking. Right now Hugh wanted revenge for the years of abuse he’d endured from this evil man. Mary wept and Welsh howled. His dramatic performance drowned out the baby’s cries.

Hugh looked at him, raised the knife to stab Welsh, then shook his head and hurled the knife against the wall. He moved to his aunt, kissed her and the baby, and walked out of the house. Keeper followed.

Back at the barn, Gallagher had vanished. Hugh jammed a piece of wood against the door, lay down and tried to sleep. He’d escape all right, but when and how?

Early next morning, he crept into the cottage and took some bread. He headed across the fields towards the river. As Keeper bounded along beside him, Hugh broke his rule of never crying.

He reached the spot by the river where he often bathed, stripped off his old, tattered clothes and shivered in the chill morning air. He removed the last piece of bread from his trousers before folding his garments and placing them in a neat pile. His tears flowed as he pointed to the clothes and said, ‘Sit’.

Keeper did as he so often did. He loved pleasing his master. The dog sat on the clothes, guarding them for when his leader returned.

Hugh’s heart broke as he gave the bread to the dog, stroked its head and fondled its ears before slipping into the Boyne. He swam downstream and rounded a bend. He drifted out of sight. Keeper waited as he always did. He waited in vain.

Farmer Kelly sat eating his breakfast when his dogs started barking. The old man wasn’t surprised to find a naked young man in his yard.

‘You won’t get far in that outfit,’ said the farmer. ‘Come inside.’

Kelly wanted to help Hugh. The second-hand clothes and boots he gave him didn’t fit, they smelt and needed repairs. Hugh loved them.

‘I can’t thank you enough, Mr Kelly. You’ve saved my life.’

‘I’ve put food in y’pockets and here’s a coin or two.’ There were three.

Overwhelmed, Hugh choked and struggled to speak.

‘Mr Kelly, I have one more favour to beg of you.’

‘I can’t spare a horse, lad. You’ll have to walk.’

‘It’s my dog. I can’t take him with me, and I’m afraid my uncle will hurt him or ...’

‘Where is he?’

Hugh explained and Kelly said he would take his dogs, go to the bridge, and fetch Keeper straightaway. Again Hugh ignored his rule about not crying, and with tears streaming down his cheeks, Mr Hugh Brunty shook Mr Joseph Kelly’s hand for a long time before starting this long-awaited journey.

Where Hugh was going, how he’d get there and what he’d do when he arrived, was all in the lap of the gods.

PREVIEW ENDS

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