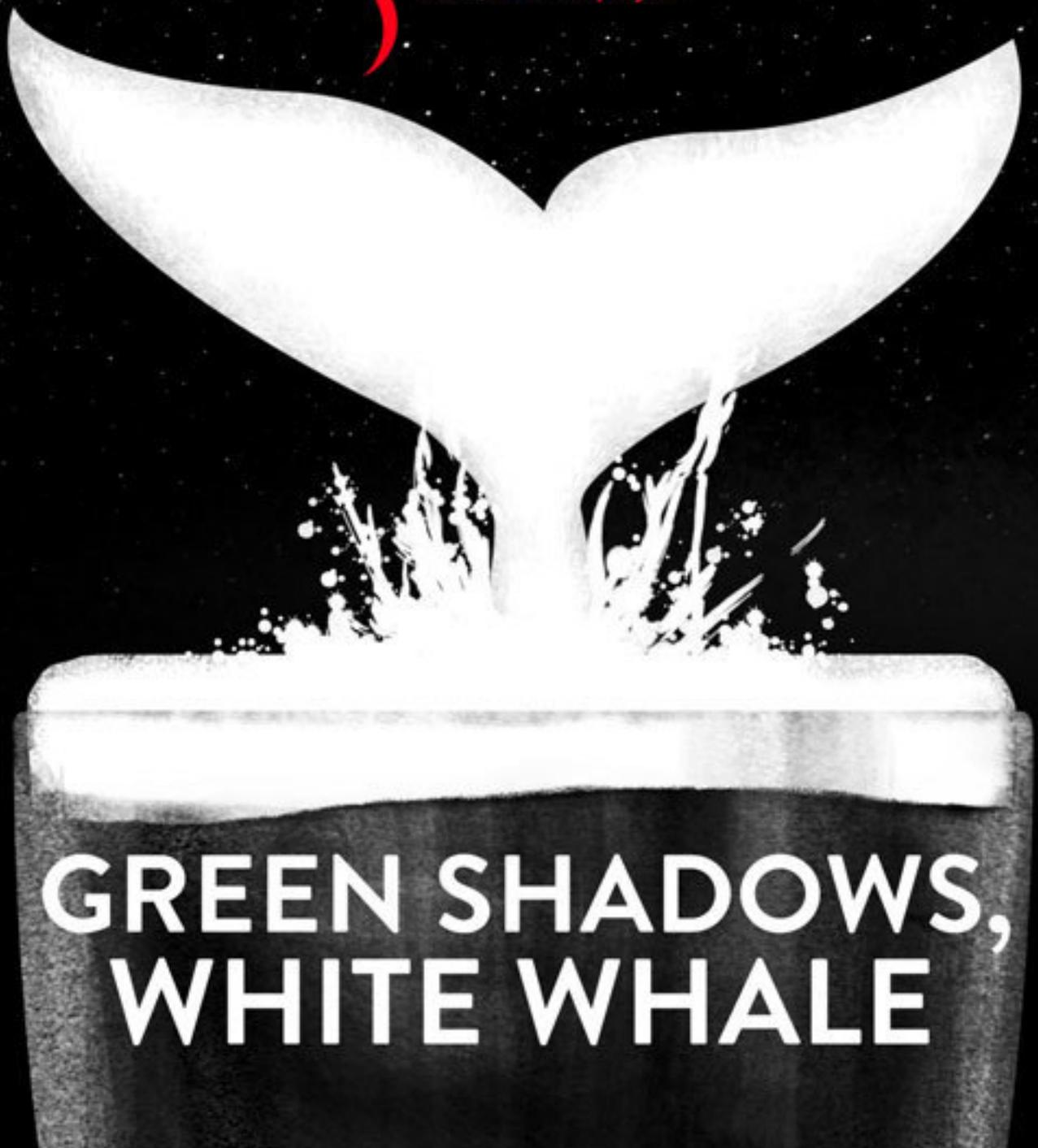


Ray Bradbury



HARPER Voyager



**GREEN SHADOWS,
WHITE WHALE**

Ray Bradbury

Green Shadows, White Whales

«HarperCollins»

Bradbury R. D.

Green Shadows, White Whales / R. D. Bradbury —
«HarperCollins»,

One of Ray Bradbury's classic novels, available as an ebook for the first time. In 1953, the brilliant but terrifying titan of cinema John Huston summons the young writer Ray Bradbury to Ireland. The apprehensive scribe's quest is to capture on paper the fiercest of all literary beasts – Moby Dick – in the form of a workable screenplay so the great director can begin filming. But from the moment he sets foot on Irish soil, the author embarks on an unexpected odyssey. Meet congenial IRA terrorists, tippling men of the cloth, impish playwrights, and the boys at Heeber Finn's pub. In a land where myth is reality, poetry is plentiful, and life's misfortunes are always cause for celebration, *Green Shadows, White Whale* is the grandest tour of Ireland you'll ever experience – with the irrepressible Ray Bradbury as your enthusiastic guide.

Green Shadows, White Whale
A NOVEL OF RAY BRADBURY'S ADVENTURES MAKING MOBY DICK WITH JOHN
HUSTON IN IRELAND
Ray Bradbury



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Dedication

WITH LOVE AND GRATITUDE
TO KATHY HOURIGAN,
WHO HELPED MAP DUBLIN

AND BEYOND
AND TO REGINA FERGUSON,
WHO SHEPHERDED MY FAMILY
THROUGH THAT COLD IRISH WINTER
AND TO THE MEMORY OF
HEEBER FINN, NICK (MIKE) MY TAXI
DRIVER, AND ALL THE BOYOS IN THE PUB,
AND TO THE PROPRIETOR OF THE
ROYAL HIBERNIAN HOTEL, HECTOR FABRON,
AND PADDY THE MAÎTRE D'
AND ALL THE HOTEL STAFF,
THIS BOUQUET
LONG IN COMING

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[Chapter 1](#)

I looked out from the deck of the Dún Laoghaire ferry and saw Ireland.

The land was green.

Not just one ordinary sort of green, but every shade and variation. Even the shadows were green, and the light that played on the Dún Laoghaire wharf and on the faces of the customs inspectors. Down into the green I stepped, an American young man, just beyond thirty, suffering two sorts of depression, lugging a typewriter and little else.

Noticing the light, the grass, the hills, the shadows, I cried out: “Green! Just like the travel posters. Ireland is green. I’ll be damned! Green!”

Lightning! Thunder! The sun hid. The green vanished. Shadow-rains curtained the vast sky. Bewildered, I felt my smile collapse. A gray and bristly customs official beckoned.

“Here! Customs inspection!”

“Where did it go?” I cried. “The green! It was just here! Now it’s—”

“The green, you say?”

The inspector stared at his watch. “It’ll be along when the sun comes out!” he said.

“When will that be?”

The old man riffled a customs index. “Well, there’s nothing in the damn government pamphlets to show when, where, or if the sun comes out in Ireland!” He pointed with his nose. “There’s a church down there—you might ask!”

“I’ll be here six months. Maybe—”

“—you’ll see the sun and the green again? Chances are. But in ’28, two hundred days of rain. It was the year we raised more mushrooms than children.”

“Is that a fact?”

“No, hearsay. But that’s all you need in Ireland, someone to hear, someone to say, and you’re in business! Is that all your luggage?”

I set my typewriter forth, along with the flimsiest suitcase. “I’m traveling light. This all came up fast. My big luggage comes next week.”

“Is this your first trip here?”

“No. I was here, poor and unpublished, off a freighter in 1939, just eighteen.”

“Your reason for being in Ireland?” The inspector licked his pencil and indelible his pad.

“Reason has nothing to do with it,” I blurted.

His pencil stayed, while his gaze lifted.

“That’s a grand start, but what does it mean?”

“Madness.”

He leaned forward, pleased, as if a riot had surfed at his feet.

“What kind would that be?” he asked politely.

“Two kinds. Literary and psychological. I am here to flense and render down the White Whale.”

“Flense.” He scribbled. “Render down. White Whale. That would be Moby Dick, then?”

“You read!” I cried, taking that same book from under my arm.

“When the mood is on me.” He underlined his scribbles. “We’ve had the Beast in the house some twenty years. I fought it twice. It is overweight in pages and the author’s intent.”

“It is,” I agreed. “I picked it up and laid it down ten times until last month, when a movie studio signed me to it. Now I must win out for keeps.”

The customs inspector nodded, took my measurements, and declared: “So you’re here to write a screenplay! There’s only one other cinema fellow in all Ireland. Whatsisname. Tall, with a kind of beat-up monkey face, talked fine. Said ‘Never again.’ Took the ferry to find what the Irish Sea was like. Found out and delivered forth both lunch and breakfast. Pale he was. Barely able to lug the Whale book under one arm. ‘Never again,’ he yelled. And you, lad. Will you ever lick the book?”

“Haven’t you?”

“The Whale has not docked here, no. So much for literature. What’s the psychological thing you said? Are you here to observe the Catholics lying about everything and the Unitarians baring their breasts?”

“No, no,” I said hastily, remembering my one visit here, when the weather was dreadful. “Now between lowerings for the Whale, I will study the Irish.”

“God has gone blind at that. Can you outlast Him? Why try?” He poised his pencil.

“Well . . .,” I said, putting the black sack over my head, fastening the noose about my neck, and yanking the lever to drop the trapdoor, “excuse me, but this is the last place in the world I’d dream of landing. It’s all such a mystery. When I was a kid and passed the Irish neighborhood on one side of town, the Micks beat the hell out of me. And when they ran through our neighborhood, we beat them. It has bothered me half a lifetime why we did what we did. I grew up nonplussed—”

“Nonplussed? Is that all?” cried the Official.

“—with the Irish. I do not dislike them so much as I am uncomfortable with my past. I do not much care for Irish whiskey or Irish tenors. Irish coffee, too, is not my cup of tea. The list is long. Having lived with these terrible prejudices, I must fight free of them. And since the studio assigned me to chase the Whale in Ireland, my God, I thought, I’ll compare reality with my hand-me-down suspicions. I must lay the ghost forever. You might say,” I ended lamely, “I’ve come to see the Irish.”

“No! Hear us, yes. But our tongue’s not connected to our brain. See us? Why, lad, we’re not here. We’re over there or just beyond. Lend me those glasses.”

He reached gently to take the spectacles from my nose.

“Ah, God.” He slipped them on. “These are twenty-twenty!”

“Yes.”

“No, no! The focus is too exact. You want something that bends the light and makes a kind of mist or fog, not quite rain. It’s then you’ll see us floating, almost drowned, on our backs, like that Hamlet girl . . .?”

“Ophelia?”

“That’s her, poor lass. Well!” He perched the glasses on my nose. “When you want a fix on the mob, take these off or you’ll see us marching left when we should be lurching right. Still, you will never probe, find, discover, or in any way solve the Irish. We are not so much a race as a weather. X-ray us, yank our skeletons out by the roots, and by morn we’ve regrown the lot. You’re right, with all you’ve said!”

“Am I?” I said, astonished.

The inspector drew up his own list behind his eyelids:

“Coffee? We do not roast the bean—we set fire to it! Economics? Music? They go together here. For there are beggars playing unstrung banjos on O’Connell Bridge; beggars trudging Pianolas about St. Stephen’s Green, sounding like cement mixers full of razor blades. Irish women? All three feet high, with runty legs and pig noses. Lean on them, sure, use them for cover against the rain, but you wouldn’t seriously chase them through the bog. And Ireland itself? Is the largest open-air penal colony in history . . . a great racetrack where the priests lay odds, take bets, and pay off on Doomsday. Go home, lad. You’ll dislike the lot of us!”

“I don’t dislike you—”

“But you will! Listen!” The old man whispered. “See that clump of Irishmen hurrying to get off the island before it sinks? They’re bound for Paris, Australia, Boston, until the Second Coming.

“Why all the riot to get out of Eire, you ask? Well, if you got your choice Saturday night of, one, seeing a 1931 Greta Garbo fillum at the Joyous Cinema; or, two, making water off the poet’s statue near the Gate Theatre; or, three, throwing yourself in the River Liffey for entertainment, with the happy thought of drowning uppermost, you might as well get out of Ireland, which people have done at the rate of a mob a day since Lincoln was shot. The population has dropped from eight million to less than three. One more potato famine or one more heavy fog that lasts long enough for everyone to pack up and tiptoe across the channel to disguise themselves as Philadelphia police, and Ireland is a desert. You’ve told me nothing about Ireland I don’t already know!”

I hesitated. “I hope I haven’t offended you.”

“It’s been a pleasure, hearing your mind! Now, this book you’ll be writing. It’s ... pornographic?”

“I will not study the sex habits of the Irish, no.”

“Pity. They are in dire need. Well, there’s Dublin, straight on! Good luck, lad!”

“Goodbye ... and thanks!”

The old man, incredulous, stared at the sky. “Did you hear him? Thanks! he said.”

I ran to vanish in lightning, thunder, darkness. Somewhere in the noon twilight, a harp played off key.

Chapter 2

On and off the boat train and along the rainy streets by taxi, I finally signed in at the Royal Hibernian Hotel and telephoned Kilcock to see how I might find the Devil Himself, as the reception clerk put it while handing my luggage to the bellboy, who shuddered me by elevator up to my room to plant my luggage where it wouldn’t take root, as he said, and backed off from me as if he had searched a mirror and found no image.

“Sir,” he said. “Well, are you some sort of famous author?”

“Sort of,” I said.

“Well.” The bellboy scratched his head. “I been asking around the pub and the lobby and the kitchen, and no one ever heard of you.”

At the door, he turned.

“But don’t worry,” he said. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

The door shut quietly.

I was suddenly mad for Ireland or the Whale. Not knowing which, I grabbed a cab that veered through streets filled with tens of thousands of bicycles. We headed west along the Liffey.

“Is it the long or short you’d want?” asked my driver. “The long way around or the short arrival?”

“Short—”

“That’s expensive,” interrupted my driver. “Long is cheaper. Conversation! Do you talk? By trip’s end, I am so relaxed I forget the tip. Besides, it’s a map, chart, and atlas of Liffey and beyond that I am. Well?”

“The long way around.”

“Long it is!” He kicked the gas as if it needed awakening, skinned a dozen bicyclists, and sailed out to snake the Liffey and mind the air. Only to hear the motor cough and roll over dead, just short of Kilcock.

We peered in at an engine long gone in mystery and leaning toward the tomb. My driver hefted a large hammer, decided against giving the engine a coup de grace, slung the hammer aside, and walked to the rear of the taxi to detach a bike and hand it over. I let it fall.

“Now, now.” He reinstalled the vehicle in my hands. “Your destination’s but a short drive down this road.” He shook the bike. “Climb on.”

“It’s been a few years ...”

“Your hands will remember and your ass will learn. Hop.”

I hopped to straddle and stare at the dead car and the easy man. “You don’t seem upset ...”

“Cars are like women, once you learn their starters. Off with you. Downhill. Careful. There’s few brakes on the vehicle.”

“Thanks,” I yelled as the vehicle rolled me away.

Chapter 3

Ten minutes later, I stopped at the top of a rise, listening.

Someone was whistling and singing “Molly Malone.” Up the hill, wobbling badly, pedaled an old man on a bike no better than mine. At the top he fell off and let it lie at his feet.

“Old man, you’re not what you once was!” he cried, and kicked the tires. “Ah, lay there, beast that you are!”

Ignoring me, he took out a bottle. He downed it philosophically, then held it up to let the last drop fall on his tongue.

I spoke at last. “We both seem to be having trouble. Is anything wrong?”

The old man blinked. “Is that an American voice I hear?”

“Yes. May I be of assistance ...?”

The old man showed his empty bottle.

“Well, there’s assistance and assistance. It came over me as I pumped up the hill, me and the damned vehicle”—here he kicked the bike gently—“is both seventy years old.”

“Congratulations.”

“For what? Breathing? That’s a habit, not a virtue. Why, may I ask, are you staring at me like that?”

I pulled back. “Well ... do you have a relative in customs down at the docks?”

“Which of us hasn’t?” Gaspings, he reached for his bike. “Ah, well, a moment’s rest, and me and the brute will be on our way. We don’t know where we’re going, Sally and me—that’s the damn bike’s name, ya see—but we pick a road each day and give it a try.”

I tried a small joke.

“Does your mother know you’re out?”

The old man seemed stunned.

“Strange you say that! She does! Ninety-five she is, back there in the cot! Mother, I said, I’ll be gone the day; leave the whiskey alone. I never married, you know.”

“I’m sorry.”

“First you congratulate me for being old, and now you’re sorry I’ve no wife. It’s sure you don’t know Ireland. Being old and having no wives is one of our principal industries! You see, a man can’t marry without property. You bide your time till your mother and father are called Beyond. Then, when their property’s yours, you look for a wife. It’s a waiting game. I’ll marry yet.”

“At seventy!”

The old man stiffened.

“I’d get twenty good years of marriage out of a fine woman even this late—do you doubt it?!” He glared.

“I do not.”

The old man relaxed.

“Well, then. What are you up to in Ireland?”

I was suddenly all flame and fire.

“I’ve been advised at customs to look sharp at this poverty-stricken, priest-ridden, rain-filled, sleet-worn country, this—”

“Good God,” the old man interjected. “You’re a writer!”

“How did you guess?”

The old man snorted, gesturing.

“The country’s overrun. There’s writers turning over rocks in Cork and writers trudging through bogs at Killashandra. The day will come, mark me, when there will be five writers for every human being in the world!”

“Well, writer I am. I’ve been here only a few hours now and it feels like a thousand years of no sun, only rain, cold, and getting lost on roads. My director will be waiting for me somewhere if I can find the place, but my legs are dead.”

The old man leaned at me.

“Have you begun to dislike your visit? Look down on?”

“Well ...”

The old man patted the air.

“Why not? Every man needs to look down on someone. You look down on the Irish, the Irish look down on the English, and the English look down on everyone else in the world. It all comes right in the end. Do you think I’m bothered by the look on your face, you’ve come to weigh our breath and find it sour, measure our shadows and find us short? No! In fact, I’ll help you solve this dreadful place. Come along where you can witness an awful event. A dread scene. A meeting of Fates, that’s it. The true birth-place of the Irish ... Ah, God, how you’ll hate it! And yet ...”

“Yet?”

“Before you leave us, you’ll love us all. We’re irresistible. And we know it, More’s the pity. For knowing it makes us all the more deplorable, which means we must work harder to become irresistible again. So we chase our own behinds about the country, never winning and never quite losing. There! Do you see that parade of unemployed men marching on the road in holes and tatters?”

“Yes!”

“That’s the First Ring of Hell! Do you see them young fellows on bikes with flat tires and no spokes, pumping barefoot in the rain?”

“Yes!”

“That’s the Second Ring of Hell!”

The old man stopped. “And here ... can you read? The Third Ring!”

I read the sign. “‘Heeber Finn’s’ ... why, it’s a pub.”

The old man pretended surprise. “By God, now, I think you’re right. Come meet my ... family!”

“Family? You said you weren’t married!”

“I’m not. But—in we go!”

The old man gave a great knock on the backside of the door. And there was the bar, all bright spigots and alarmed faces as the dozen or so customers whirled.

“It’s me, boys!” the old man cried.

“Mike! Ya gave us a start!” said one.

“We thought it was—a crisis!” said another.

“Well, maybe it is ... for him anyway.” He jabbed my elbow. “What’ll ya have, lad?”

I scanned the lot, tried to say wine, but quit.

“A whiskey, please,” I said.

“Make mine a Guinness,” said Mike. “Now, introductions all around. That there is Heeber Finn, who owns the pub.”

Finn handed over the whiskey. “The third and fourth mortgage, that is.”

Mike moved on, pointing.

“This is O’Gavin, who has the finest bogs in all Kilcock and cuts peat turf out of it to stoke the hearths of Ireland. Also a fine hunter and fisher, in or out of season!”

O’Gavin nodded. “I poach game and steal fish.”

“You’re an honest man, Mr. O’Gavin,” I said.

“No. As soon as I find a job,” said O’Gavin, “I’ll deny the whole thing.”

Mike led me along. “This next is Casey, who will fix the hoof of your horse.”

“Blacksmith,” said Casey.

“The spokes of your bike.”

“Velocipede repair,” said Casey.

“Or the spark plugs on any damn car.”

“Auto-moe-beel renovation,” said Casey.

Mike moved again. “Now, this is Kelly, our turf accountant!”

“Mr. Kelly,” I said, “do you count the turf that Mr. O’Gavin cuts out of his bog?”

As everyone laughed, Kelly said: “That is a common tourist’s error. I am an expert on the races. I breed a few horses—”

“He sells Irish Sweepstakes tickets,” said someone.

“A bookie,” said Finn.

“But ‘turf accountant’ has a gentler air, does it not?” said Kelly.

“It does!” I said.

“And here’s Timulty, our art connoisseur.”

I shook hands with Timulty. “Art connoisseur?”

“It’s from looking at the stamps I have the eye for paintings,” Timulty explained. “If it goes at all, I run the post office.”

“And this is Carmichael, who took over the village telephone exchange last year.”

Carmichael, who knitted as he spoke, replied: “My wife got the uneasies and she ain’t come right since, God help her. I’m on duty next door.”

“But now tell us, lad,” said Finn, “what’s your crisis?”

“A whale. And ... ” I paused. “Ireland!”

“Ireland?!” everyone cried.

Mike explained. “He’s a writer who’s trapped in Ireland and misunderstands the Irish.”

After a beat of silence someone said: “Don’t we all!”

To much laughter, Mr. O’Gavin leaned forward. “What do you misunderstand, specific like?”

Mike intervened to prevent chaos. “Underestimates is more the word. Confused might be the sum! So I’m taking him on a Grand Tour of the Worst Sights and the Most Dreadful Truths.” He stopped and turned. “Well, that’s the lot, lad.”

“Mike, there’s one you missed.” I nodded to a partition at the far end of the bar. “You didn’t introduce me to ... him.”

Mike peered and said, “O’Gavin, Timulty, Kelly, do you see someone there?”

Kelly glanced down the line. “We do not.”

I pointed. “Why, it’s plain as my nose! A man—”

Timulty cut in. “Now, Yank, don’t go upsetting the order of the universe. Do you see that partition? It is an irrevocable law that any man seeking a bit of peace and quiet is automatically gone, invisible, null and void when he steps into that cubby.”

“Is that a fact?”

“Or as close as you’ll ever get to one in Ireland. That area, no more than two feet wide by one deep, is more private than the confessional. It’s where a man can duck, in need of feeding his soul without converse or commotion. So for all intents and purposes, that space, until he breaks the spell of silence himself, is uninhabited and no one’s there!”

Everyone nodded, proud of Timulty.

“Fine, Timulty, and now—drink your drink, lad, stand alert, be ready, watch!” said Mike.

I looked at the mist curling through the door. “Alert for what?”

“Why, there’s always Great Events preparing themselves out in that fog.” Mike became mysterious. “As a student of Ireland, let nothing pass unquestioned.” He peered out at the night. “Anything can happen ... and always does.” He inhaled the fog, then froze. “Ssst! Did you hear?”

Beyond, there was a blind stagger of feet, heavy panting coming near, near, near!

“What ...?” I said.

Mike shut his eyes. “Ssst! Listen! ... Yes!”

Chapter 4

Shoes pounded the outside steps, drunkenly. The double wing doors slammed wide. A battered man lunged in, reeling, holding his bloody head with bloody hands. His moan froze every customer at the bar. For a time you heard only the soft foam popping in the lacy mugs, as the customers turned, some faces pale, some pink, some veined and wattle red. Every eyelid down the line gave a blink.

The stranger swayed in his ruined clothes, eyes wide, lips trembling. The drinkers clenched their fists. Yes! they cried silently. Go on, man! What happened?

The stranger leaned far out on the air.

“Collision,” he cried. “Collision on the road.”

Then, chopped at the knees, he fell.

“Collision!” A dozen men rushed at the body.

“Kelly!” Heeber Finn vaulted the bar. “Get to the road! Mind the victim—easy does it! Joe, run for the Doc!”

“Wait!” said a quiet voice.

From the private stall at the end of the pub, the cubby where a philosopher might brood, a dark man blinked out at the crowd.

“Doc!” cried Heeber Finn. “Was you there all the time?”

“Ah, shut up!” cried the Doc as he and the men hustled out into the night.

“Collision ...” The man on the floor twitched his lips.

“Softly, boys.” Heeber Finn and two others gentled the victim atop the bar. He looked handsome as death on the fine inlaid wood, with the prised mirror making him two dread calamities for the price of one.

Outside on the steps, the crowd halted, shocked as if an ocean had sunk Ireland in the dusk and now bulked all about them. Fog in fifty-foot rollers and breakers put out the moon and stars. Blinking, cursing, the men leaped out, to vanish in the deeps.

Behind, in the bright doorframe, I stood, dreading to interfere with what seemed village ritual. Since arriving in Ireland, I could not shake the feeling that at all times I was living stage center of the Abbey Theatre. Now, not knowing my lines, I could only stare after the rushing men.

“But,” I protested weakly, “I didn’t hear any cars on the road.”

“You did not!” said Mike, almost pride fully. Arthritis limited him to the top step, where he teetered, shouting at the white tides where his friends had submerged. “Try the crossroad, boys! That’s where it most often does!”

“The crossroad!” Far and near, footsteps rang.

“Nor,” I said, “did I hear a collision.”

Mike snorted with contempt. “Ah, we’re not great ones for commotion, or great crashing sounds. But collision you’ll see if you step on out there. Walk, now, don’t run! It’s the devil’s own night. Running blind you might hit into Kelly, beyond, who’s fevered up with pumping just to squash his lungs. Or you might head-on with Feeney, too drunk to find any road, never mind what’s on it! Finn, you got a torch, a flash? Blind you’ll be, lad, but use it. Walk now, you hear?”

I groped through the fog and, immersed in the night beyond Heeber Finn’s, made direction by the heavy clubbing of shoes and a rally of voices ahead. A hundred yards off in eternity, the men approached, grunting whispers: “Easy now!” “Ah, the shameful blight!” “Hold on, don’t jiggle him!”

I was flung aside by a steaming lump of men who swept suddenly from the fog, bearing atop themselves a crumpled object. I glimpsed a bloodstained and livid face high up there, then someone cracked my flashlight down.

By instinct, sensing the far whiskey-colored light of Heeber Finn’s, the catafalque surged on toward that fixed and familiar harbor.

Behind came dim shapes and a chilling insect rattle.

“Who’s that!” I cried.

“Us, with the vehicles,” someone husked. “You might say we got the collision.”

The flashlight fixed them. I gasped. A moment later, the battery failed.

But not before I had seen two village lads jogging along with no trouble at all, easily, lightly, toting under their arms two ancient black bicycles minus front and tail lights.

“What ...?” I said.

But the lads trotted off, the accident with them. The fog closed in. I stood abandoned on an empty road, my flashlight dead in my hand.

By the time I opened the door at Heeber Finn’s, both “bodies,” as they called them, had been stretched on the bar.

And there was the crowd lined up, not for drinks, but blocking the way so the Doc had to shove sidewise from one to another of these relics of blind driving by night on the misty roads.

“One’s Pat Nolan,” whispered Mike. “Not working at the moment. The other’s Mr. Peevey from Maynooth, in candy and cigarettes mostly.” Raising his voice: “Are they dead, now, Doc?”

“Ah, be still, won’t you?” The Doc resembled a sculptor troubled at finding some way to finish up two full-length marble statues at once. “Here, let’s put one victim on the floor!”

“The floor’s a tomb,” said Heeber Finn. “He’ll catch his death down there. Best leave him up where the warm air gathers from our talk.”

“But,” I said quietly, confused, “I’ve never heard of an accident like this in all my life. Are you sure there were absolutely no cars? Only these two men on their bikes?”

“Only?” Mike shouted. “Great God, man, a fellow working up a drizzling sweat can pump along at sixty kilometers. With a long downhill glide his bike hits ninety or ninety-five! So here they come, these two, no front or tail lights—”

“Isn’t there a law against that?”

“To hell with government interference! So here the two come, no lights, flying home from one town to the next. Thrashing like Sin Himself’s at their behinds! Both going opposite ways but both on the same side of the road. Always ride the wrong side of the road, it’s safer, they say. But look on these lads, fair destroyed by all that official palaver. Why? Don’t you see? One remembered it, but the other didn’t! Better if the officials kept their mouths shut! For here the two be, dying.”

“Dying?” I stared.

“Well, think on it, man! What stands between two able-bodied hell-bent fellas jumping along the path from Kilcock to Maynooth? Fog! Fog is all! Only fog to keep their skulls from bashing together. Why, look, when two chaps hit at a cross like that, it’s like a strike in bowling alleys, tenpins flying! Bang! There go your friends, nine feet up, heads together like dear chums met, flailing the air, their bikes clenched like two tomcats. Then they all fall down and just lay there, feeling around for the Dark Angel.”

“Surely these men won’t ...”

“Oh, won’t they? Why, last year alone in all the Free State no night passed some soul did not meet in fatal collision with another!”

“You mean to say over three hundred Irish bicyclists die every year, hitting each other?”

“God’s truth and a pity.”

“I never ride my bike nights.” Heeber Finn eyed the bodies. “I walk.”

“But still then the damn bikes run you down!” said Mike. “A wheel or afoot, some idiot’s always panting up doom the other way. They’d sooner split you down the seam than wave hello. Oh, the brave men I’ve seen ruined or half ruined or worse, and headaches their lifetimes after.” Mike trembled his eyelids shut. “You might almost think, mightn’t you, that human beings was not made to handle such delicate instruments of power.”

“Three hundred dead each year?” I was dazed.

“And that don’t count the ‘walking wounded’ by the thousands every fortnight who, cursing, throw their bikes in the bog forever and take government pensions to salve their all-but-murdered bodies.”

“Should we stand here talking?” I gestured helplessly toward the victims. “Is there a hospital?”

“On a night with no moon,” Heeber Finn continued, “best walk out through the middle of fields, and be damned to the evil roads! That’s how I have survived into this my fifth decade.”

“Ah ...” The men stirred restlessly.

The Doc, sensing he had withheld information too long, feeling his audience drift away, now snatched their attention back by straightening up briskly and exhaling.

“Well!”

The pub quickened into silence.

“This chap here ...” The Doc pointed. “Bruises, lacerations, and agonizing backaches for two weeks running. As for the other lad, however ...” And here the Doc let himself scowl for a long moment at the paler one there, looking rouged, waxed, and ready for final rites. “Concussion.”

“Concussion!”

The quiet wind rose and fell in the silence.

“He’ll survive if we run him quick now to Maynooth Clinic. So whose car will volunteer?”

The crowd turned as a body toward Timulty. I stared, remembering the front of Heeber Finn’s pub, where seventeen bicycles and one automobile were parked. “Mine!” cried Timulty. “Since it’s the only vehicle!”

“There! A volunteer! Quick now, hustle this victim—gently!— to Timulty’s wreck!”

The men reached out to lift the body, but froze when I coughed. I circled my hand to all and tipped my cupped fingers to my lips. All gasped in soft surprise. The gesture was hardly done when drinks foamed down the bar.

“For the road!”

And now even the luckier victim, suddenly revived, face like cheese, found a mug gentled to his hand with whispers.

“Here, lad, here. Tell us ...”

“What happened, eh? Eh?”

“Send,” gasped the victim. “Send for Father Leary. I need the Extreme Unction!”

“Father Leary it is!” Nolan jumped and ran.

“Get my wife,” husked the victim, “to call me three uncles and four nephews and my grandfather and Timothy Doolin, and you’re all invited to my wake!”

“You was always a good sort, Peevey!”

“There’s two gold coins put by in my best shoes at home. For me eyelids! There’s a third gold coin; buy me a fine black suit!”

“It’s good as done!”

“Be sure there’s plenty of whiskey. I’ll buy it meself!”

There was a stir at the door.

“Thank God,” cried Timulty. “It’s you, Father Leary. Father, quickly, you must give the Extremest form of Unction you ever gave!”

“Don’t tell me my business!” said the priest in the door. “I got the Unctions, you provide the victim! On the double!”

There was a cheer from the men as the victim was held high and run for the door where the priest directed traffic, then fled.

With one body gone off the bar, the potential wake was over, the room empty save for myself, the Doc, the revived lad, and two softly cudgeling friends. Outside, you could hear the crowd putting the one serious result of the great collision into Timulty’s car.

“Finish your drink,” the Doc advised.

But I stood, looking numbly around at the pub: at the recovered bicyclist, seated, waiting for the crowd to come back and mill about him; seeing the blood-spotted floor, the two bicycles tilted near the door like props from a vaudeville turn, the dark night waiting outside with its improbable fog; listening to the roll and cadence and gentle equilibrium of these voices, balanced each in its own throat and environment.

“Doctor,” I heard myself say as I placed the money on the bar, “do you often have auto wrecks—collisions between people in cars?”

“Not in our town!” The Doc nodded scornfully east. “If you like that sort of thing, now, Dublin’s the very place!”

Crossing the pub, the Doc took my arm as if to impart some secret which would change my fate. Thus steered, I found the stout inside me a shifting weight I must accommodate from side to side as the Doc breathed softly in my ear.

“Look here now, son, admit it, you’ve traveled little in Ireland, right? Then listen! Biking to Maynooth, fog and ail, you’d best take it fast! Raise a din! Why? Scare the other cyclists and cows off the path, both sides! If you pump slow, why, you’ll creep up on and do away with dozens before they know what took them off! And another thing: when a bike approaches, douse your light—that is, if it’s working. Pass each other, lights out, in safety. Them devil’s own lights have put out more eyes and demolished more innocents than all of seeing’s worth. Is it clear now? Two things: speed, and douse your lights when bikes loom up!”

At the door, I nodded. Behind me I heard the one victim, settled easy in his chair, working the stout around on his tongue, thinking, preparing, beginning his tale:

“Well, I’m on me way home, blithe as you please, assailing downhill near the cross, when ...”

Outside, the Doc offered final advice.

“Always wear a cap, lad, if you want to walk nights ever—on the roads, that is. A cap’ll save you the frightful migraines should you meet Kelly or Moran or anyone else hurtling full tilt the other way, full of fiery moss and hard-skulled from birth. Even on foot, these men are dangerous. So you see, there’s rules for pedestrians, too, in Ireland, and wear a cap at night is number one!” He handed me a cap.

Without thinking, I took the brown tweed cap and put it on. Adjusting it, I looked out at the dark mist boiling across the night. I listened to the empty highway waiting for me ahead, quiet, quiet, quiet, but not quiet somehow. For hundreds of long strange miles up and down all of Ireland, I saw a thousand crossroads covered with a thousand fogs through which one thousand tweed-capped, gray-muffled phantoms wheeled along in midair, singing, shouting, and smelling of Guinness stout.

I blinked. The phantoms shadowed off. The road lay empty and dark and waiting.

Taking a deep breath, I straddled my bike, pulled my cap down over my ears, shut my eyes, and pumped down the wrong side of the road toward some sanity never to be found.

[Chapter 5](#)

The door swung wide at my knock.

My director stood there in boots and riding pants and a silk shirt open at the neck to reveal an ascot tie. His eyes bulged like eggs to see me here. His chimpanzee mouth fell down a few inches, and the air came out of his lungs in an alcohol-tinged rush.

“I’ll be damned!” he cried. “It’s you!”

“Me,” I admitted meekly.

“You’re late! You okay? What delayed you?”

I waved behind me, up the road.

“Ireland,” I said.

“Christ, that explains it. Welcome!”

He pulled me in. The door slammed.

“You need a drink?”

“Ah, God,” I said. Then hearing my newly acquired brogue, I spoke meticulously.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

As John, his wife Ricki, and I sat down to dinner, I gazed long and hard at the wee dead birds on a warm plate, their heads awry, their beady eyes half shut, and said:

“Can I make a suggestion?”

“Make it, kid.”

“It’s about the Parsee Fedallah who runs as a character through the whole book. He ruins Moby Dick.”

“Fedallah? That one? Well?”

“Do you mind if right now, over our wine, we give all the best lines and acts to Ahab? And throw Fedallah overboard?”

My director lifted his glass. “He’s thrown!”

The weather outside was beginning to clear, the grass was lush and green in the dark beyond the French windows, and I was blushing warmly all over to think I was really here, doing this work, beholding my hero, imagining an incredible future as screen-writer for a genius.

Somewhere along in the dinner the subject of Spain came up, almost casually, or perhaps John brought it up himself.

I saw Ricki stiffen and pause in her eating, and then continue picking at her food as John went on about Hemingway and the bullfights and Franco and traveling to and from Madrid and Barcelona.

“We were there just a month ago,” said John. “You really ought to go there sometime, kid,” he said. “Beautiful country. Wonderful people, it’s been a bad twenty years, but they’re getting back on their feet. Anyway, we had a little event there, didn’t we, Ricki? A small thing got out of hand.”

Ricki started to rise, her plate in her hand, and the knife fell clattering to the table.

“Why don’t you tell us about it, dear,” said John.

“No, I—” said Ricki.

“Tell us what happened at the border,” said John.

His words were so heavy that, weighted, Ricki sat back down and after a pause to regain her breath, held for a long moment, let it out, “We were driving back up from Barcelona and there was this Spaniard wanted to get into France without papers and John wanted us to smuggle him across the border in our car under a rug in the back seat and John said it was okay and the Spaniard said please and I said my God, if they found out, the border guards, if they caught us we’d be held, put in jail maybe, and you know what Spanish jails are like, in there for days or weeks or forever, so I said no, no way, and the Spaniard pleaded and John said it was a matter of honor, we had to do it, we had to help this poor man and I said I was sorry but I wouldn’t endanger the children. What if I was in jail and the kids would be in the hands of others too many hours and days and who would explain to them and John insisted and there was a big row—”

“Very simply,” said John, “you were a coward.”

“No, I wasn’t,” said Ricki, looking up from her food.

“You were yellow,” said John, “pure yellow, and we had to leave the poor son of a bitch behind because my wife didn’t have enough guts to let us get him across.”

“How do we know he wasn’t a criminal, John,” said Ricki. “Some sort of political fugitive, and then we would have been in jail forever—”

“Just yellow is all.” John lit a cigarillo and leaned forward to stare at his wife at the far end, miles away down the table. “I really hate to think I am married to a woman with no guts, who wears a yellow stripe down her back. Wouldn’t you hate to be married to that kind of woman, kid?”

I sat back in my chair, my mouth full of food I could not chew nor swallow.

I looked at my genius employer and then at his wife then back to John and then back to Ricki. Her head was bent.

“Yellow,” said John, a final time, and blew smoke.

As I looked down at the dead bird on my plate, I recalled a scene that now seemed so long ago. In August, I had wandered, stunned, into a bookstore in Beverly Hills looking for a small, comfortable-sized copy of *Moby Dick*. The copy I had at home was too large to travel. I needed something compact. I shared with the proprietor my excitement about writing the screenplay and traveling overseas.

Even as I spoke, astonished, a woman in the far corner of the shop turned and said, very clearly: “Don’t go on that journey.”

It was Elijah, at the foot of the *Pequod*’s gangplank, warning Queequeg and Ishmael not to follow Ahab off ’round the world: it was a dread mission and a lost cause from which no man might return.

“Don’t go,” said the strange woman again.

I recovered and said, “Who are you?”

“A former friend of the director’s and the former wife of one of his screenwriters. I know them both. God, I wish I didn’t. They’re both monsters, but your director’s the worst. He’ll eat you and spit out your bones. So—”

She stared at me.

“—whatever you do, don’t go.”

Ricki’s eyes were shut, but tears were leaking out of the lashes and running down to the tip of her nose where they fell, one by one, onto her plate.

My God, I thought, this is my first day in Ireland, my first day at work for my hero.

Chapter 6

The next day after lunch, we circled Courtown House, the old mansion where my director stayed. There was a large meadow and a forest beyond and another meadow and forest beyond that.

In the middle of the meadow we met a rather large black bull.

“Huh!” cried John, and whipped off his coat.

He charged the bull, shouting:

“Ha, Toro! Toro, ha!”

One minute from now, I thought, one of us will be dead. Me?

“John!” I cried quietly, if such is possible, “please, put on your coat!”

“Huh, Toro!” my director yelled. “Ho!”

The bull stared at us, motionless.

John shrugged his coat back on.

I ran ahead of him to toss Fedallah overboard, assemble the crew, bid Elijah to warn Ishmael not to go, then launch the *Pequod* to sail off and around the world.

So it went, day on day, week on week, as I killed the Whale each night, but to see him reborn each dawn, while I was lost in Dublin, where the weather struck from its bleak quarters in the sea and came searching with sheets of rain and gusts of cold and still more sheets of rain.

I went to bed and woke in the middle of the night thinking I heard someone cry, thinking I myself was weeping, and I felt my face and found it dry.

Then I looked at the window and thought: Why, yes, it’s just the rain, the rain, always the rain, and turned over, sadder still, and fumbled about for my dripping sleep and tried to slip it back on.

Then, late each afternoon, I taxied out amidst Kilcock’s gray stone with green beards on it, a rock town, and the rain falling down for weeks as I worked on a script that was to be shot in the hot sun of the Canary Isles sometime next year. The pages of the script were full of hot suns and burning days as I typed in Dublin or Kilcock, with the weather a beast at the windows.

On the thirty-first night, a knock at the door of my hotel room revealed Mike, shuffling.

“There you are!” he exclaimed. “I been thinking on what you said. You to find the Irish, me to help. I got me a car! So would you get the hell out to find some wild life in our land? And forget this damn rain on the double?”

“Double!” I said gladly.

And we blew along the road to Kilcock in a dark that rocked us like a boat on a black flood until, sweating rain, faces pearly, we struck through the pub doors and it was warm as a sheepfold because there were the townsmen pressed in a great compost heap at the bar and Heeber Finn yelling jokes and foaming up drinks.

“Heeber!” cried Mike. “We’re here for that wild night!”

“A wild night it is!”

Whereupon Heeber whipped off his apron, shrugged his meat-cleaver shoulders into a tweed coat, jumped up in the air and slid down inside his raincoat, slung on his bearded cap, and thrust us at the door.

“Nail everything down till I get back!” he advised his crew. “I’m taking these gents to the damnedest evening ever! Little do they know what waits for them beyond!”

He opened the door. The wind threw half a ton of ice water on him. Taking this as a spur to rhetoric, Heeber added in a roar, “Out with you! On!”

“Do you think we should?” I wondered.

“What do you mean?” cried Mike. “Would you freeze in your room? Rewrite the dead Whale?”

“Well . . .,” I said, and slung on my cap.

Then, like Ahab, I thought on my bed, a damp box with its pale cool winding sheets and the window dripping next to it like a conscience all night through. I groaned. I opened the door of Mike’s car, took my legs apart to get in, and in no time we shot down the town like a ball in a bowling alley.

Finn at the wheel talked fierce, half hilarity, half sobering King Lear.

“A wild night? Ahead! You’d never guess, would you, to walk through Ireland, so much could go on under the skin?”

“I knew there must be an outlet somewhere,” I yelled.

The speedometer was up to one hundred kilometers. Stone walls raced by on the right, stone walls raced by on the left. It was raining the entire dark sky down on the entire dark land.

“Outlet indeed!” said Finn. “If the Church only knew, or maybe it figures: The poor buggers! and lets us be!”

“Where?”

“There!” cried Finn.

The speedometer read 110. My stomach was stone like the stone walls rushing left and right. Up over a hill, down into a valley. “Can’t we go a bit faster?” I asked, hoping for the opposite.

“Done!” said Finn, and made it 120.

“That will do it nicely,” I said, in a faint voice, wondering what lay ahead. Behind all the slate-stone weeping walls of Ireland, what happened? Somewhere in this drizzling land were there hearth-fleshed peach-fuzz Renoir women bright as lamps you could hold your hands out to and warm your palms? Beneath the rain-drenched sod, the flinty rock, at the numbed core of living, was there one small seed of fire which, fanned, might break volcanoes free and boil the rains to steam? Was there then somewhere a Baghdad harem, nests awriggle and aslither with silk and tassel, the absolute perfect tint of women unadorned? We passed a church. No. We passed a convent. No. We passed a village slouched under its old-men’s thatch. No. Yet . . .

I glanced over at Heeber Finn. We could have switched off the lights and driven by the steady piercing beams of his forward-directed eyes snatching at the dark, flicking away the rain.

Wife, I thought to myself, children, forgive me for what I do this night, terrible as it may be, for this is Ireland in the rain of an ungodly time and way out in Galway, where the dead must go to die.

The brakes were hit. We slid a good ninety feet; my nose mashed on the windshield. Heeber Finn was out of the car.

“We’re here!” He sounded like a man drowned deep in rain.

I saw a hole in the wall, a tiny gate flung wide.

Mike and I followed at a plunge. I saw other cars in the dark and many bikes. But not a light. Oh, it must be wild to be this secret, I thought. I yanked my cap tight, as rain crawled down my neck.

Through the hole in the wall we stumbled, Heeber clenching our elbows. "Here!" he husked. "Hold on. Swig on this to keep your blood high!"

I felt a flask knock my fingers. I poured its contents into my boilers to let the steam up my flues. "It's a lovely rain," I said.

"The man's mad." Finn drank after Mike, a shadow among shadows.

I squinted about. I had an impression of midnight sea upon which men like little boats passed on the murmurous tides, heads down, muttering, in twos and threes.

Good God, what's it all mean? I asked myself, incredibly curious now.

"Wait!" whispered Heeber. "This is it!"

What did I expect? Perhaps some scene like those old movies where innocent sailing ships suddenly flap down their cabin walls and guns appear like magic to fire on the foe. Or a farmhouse falls apart like a cereal box, Long Tom rears up to blast a projectile five hundred miles to crack Paris. So here, I thought, will these stones spill away, that house open wide, rosy lights flash on, so that from a monstrous cannon ten dozen pink women, not dwarf Irish but willowy French, will be shot out and down into the waving arms of this grateful multitude?

The lights came on.

I blinked.

For there was the entire unholy thing, laid out for me in the drizzle.

The lights flickered. The men quickened.

A mechanical rabbit popped out of a little box at the far end of the stony yard and ran.

Eight dogs, let free from gates, yelping, ran after in a great circle. There was not one yell or a murmur from the crowd of men. Their heads turned slowly, watching. The rain rained down on the half-lit scene. The rain fell on tweed caps and thin cloth coats. The rain dripped off thick eyebrows and sharp noses. The rain hammered hunched shoulders. The rabbit ran. The dogs loped. The rabbit popped into its electric kennel. The dogs collided, yiping. The lights went out.

In the dark I turned to stare at Heeber Finn, stunned.

"Now!" he shouted. "Place your bets!"

We were back in Kilcock, speeding, at ten o'clock.

The rain was still raining, like an ocean smashing the road with titanic fists, as we drew up in a great tidal spray before the pub.

"Well, now!" said Heeber Finn, looking not at us but at the windshield wiper palpitating before us. "Well!"

Mike and I had bet on five races and had lost, between us, two or three pounds.

"I won," Finn said, "and some of it I put down in your names, both of you. That last race, I swear to God, won for all of us. Let me pay!"

"It's all right, Heeber," I said, my numb lips moving.

Finn pressed two shillings into my hand. I didn't fight him. "That's better!" he said. "Now, one last drink on me!"

Mike drove me back to Dublin.

Wringing out his cap in the hotel lobby he looked at me and said, "It was a wild Irish night for sure!"

"A wild night," I said.

I hated to go up to my room. So I sat for another hour in the reading lounge of the damp hotel and took the traveler's privilege, a glass and a bottle provided by the dazed hall porter. I sat alone listening to the rain and the rain on the cold hotel roof, thinking of Ahab's coffin-bed waiting for me up there under the drumbeat weather. I thought of the only warm thing in the hotel, in the town, in all the land of Eire this night, the script in my typewriter with its sun of the South Pacific, its hot

winds blowing the Pequod toward its doom, but along the way fiery sands and its women with dark charcoal-burning eyes.

And I thought of the darkness beyond the city, the lights flashing, the electric rabbit running, the dogs yiping, the rabbit gone, the lights out, and the rain flailing the dank shoulders and soaked caps and ice-watering the noses and seeping through the sheep-smelling tweeds.

Going upstairs, I glanced out a streaming window. There, on the street, riding by under a lamp, was a man on a bike. He was terribly drunk. The bike weaved back and forth across the bricks, as the man vomited. He did not stop the bike to do this. He kept pumping unsteadily, blearily, as he threw up. I watched him go off in the dark rain.

Then I groped up to find and die in my room.

Chapter 7

On Grafton Street just halfway between The Four Provinces pub and the cinema stood the best, or so John said, Gentleman Riders to Hound emporium in all Dublin, if not Ireland, and perhaps one half of Bond Street in London.

It was Tyson's, and to speak the name was to see the front windows with their hacking coats and foulards and pale yellow silk shirts and velvet hunting caps and twill pants and shining boots. If you stood there long enough you could hear the horses fribbling their lips and snorting their laughter and twitching their skin to jerk the flies off, and you could hear the hounds whining and barking and running in happy circles (dogs are always happy and thus their smiles, unless they are miserable because their master crossed his eyes at them); but as I say, if you stood there long enough waiting for someone to hand you the reins, the owner of the shop, seeing you as one of the blindfolded hypnotics wandered out of Huston's Barn, might come out and lead-kindly-light your way into the smell of leather and boot cream and wool; and buckle on your new trenchcoat for you and fit on a tweed cap abristle for a thousand rains within the month and measure your pigfoot and wonder how in hell to shove it into a boot and all the while around you Anglo-Irish gents being similarly whisper-murmured at by lilting tongues; and the weather turned bad outside within thirty seconds after you set foot within, that you linger and buy more than your intent.

Where was I? Oh, yes. I stood out in front of Tyson's on three separate nights.

Looking at the wax model, as tall as Huston and as stridentful and arrogant in all his Kilcock Hunt finery, I thought: How long before I dress like that?

"How do I look, John?" I cried, three days later.

I spun about on the front steps of Courtown House smelling of wool, boot leather, and silk.

John stared at my tweed cap and twill pants.

"I'll be goddamned," he gasped.

Chapter 8

"You know anything about hypnotism, kid?"

"Some," I said.

"Ever been hypnotized?"

"Once," I said.

We were sitting by the fire after midnight with a bottle of Scotch now half empty between us. I hated Scotch, but since John relished it, I drank.

"Well, you haven't been in the hands of a real pro," said John, languidly, sipping at his drink.

"Which means you," I said.

John nodded. "That's it. I'm the best. You want to go under, son? I'll put you there."

"I had my teeth filled that one time, my dentist, a hypnodontist, he—"

"To hell with your teeth, H.G." H.G. was for H.G. Wells, the author of Things to Come, The Time Machine, and The Invisible Man. "It's not what comes out in teeth, it's what goes on in your head. Swallow your drink and give me your paw."

I swallowed my drink and held out my hands. John grabbed them.

“Okay, H.G., shut your eyes and relax, total relaxation, easy does it, easy, easy, nice and soft and slow and easy,” he murmured, as my eyes shut and my head lolled. He kept speaking and I kept listening, nodding my head gently and he talked on, holding my hands and breathing his mellow Scotch in my face and I felt my bones go loose in my flesh and my flesh lounge out under my skin and it was easy and nice and sleepy and at last John said: “Are you under, kid?”

“Way under, John,” I whispered.

“That’s the way. Good. Fine. Now listen here, H.G., while you’re there and relaxed, is there any one message you want to tell me so I can tell yourself? Give instructions, as it were, for self-improvement or behavior tomorrow? Spit it out. Tell me. And I’ll instruct you. But easy does it. Well ...?”

I thought. My head swayed. My eyelids were heavy.

“Just one thing,” I said.

“And what’s that, kid?”

“Tell me—”

“Yes?”

“Instruct me to—”

“What, kid?”

“Write the greatest, most wonderful, finest screenplay in the history of the world.”

“I’ll be damned.”

“Tell me that, John, and I’ll be happy ...,” I said, asleep, deep under, waiting.

“Well,” said John. He leaned close. His breath was like an aftershave on my cheeks and chin.

“Here’s what you do, kid.”

“Yes?” I said.

“Write the damndest, finest, most wonderful screenplay ever to be written or seen.”

“I will, John,” I said.

Chapter 9

It’s not often in the life of a writer lightning truly strikes. And I mean, there he is on the steeple, begging for creative annihilation, and the heavens save up spit and let him have it. In one great hot flash, the lightning strikes. And you have an unbelievable tale delivered in one beautiful blow and are never so blessed again.

And here’s how the lightning struck.

I had been hard at it with harpoon and typewriter for three hours out at Courtown House when the telephone rang. John, Ricki, and I had gathered for lunch and another try at trapping the pale flesh of the great Beast. We looked up, glad for the interruption.

John seized the phone, listened, and gave a great gasping cry.

“Well, I’ll be goddamned!”

Each word was exquisitely pronounced—no, not pronounced: yelled—into the telephone.

“Well, I’ll be absolutely and completely goddamned!”

It seemed that John had to shout all the way to New York City and beyond. Now, gripping the phone, he looked out across the green meadows in December light as if somehow, too, he might stare long distance at that man he was yelling at so far away.

“Tom, is it really you?” he cried.

The phone buzzed: yes, it was really Tom.

John held the phone down and shouted the same way at Ricki, at the far end of the dining room table. I sat between, half buttering my toast.

“It’s Tom Hurley, calling from Hollywood!”

Ricki gave him one of her elusive, haunted smiles and looked down again at her scrambled eggs.

“Well, for God’s sake, Tom!” said John. “What are you up to? What are you doing?”

The phone buzzed.

“Uh-huh,” said John, emphatically, listening. “Uh-huh! Uh-huh!” He nodded. “Good, Tom. Fine, Fine. Lisa, yes, I remember Lisa. Lovely girl. When? Well, that’s wonderful, Tom, for both of you!”

The telephone talked for a long moment. John looked at me and winked.

“Well, it’s the hunt season here, Tom, yes, great fox-hunting country. Ireland’s the best in the world. Fine jumps, Tom, you’d love it!”

Ricki looked up again at this. John glanced away from her, out at the swelling green hills.

“It’s the loveliest land in creation, Tom. I’m going to live here forever!”

Ricki started eating rapidly, looking down.

“They have great horses here, Tom,” said John. “And you know horses better than I do. Well, you ought to come over and just lay your eyes on the beauties!”

I heard the voice on the phone say it wished it could.

John gazed at the green fields. “I’m riding with the Waterford Hunt Thursday, Tom. What the hell ... hell, why don’t you just fly over to hunt with me?”

The voice on the phone laughed.

Ricki let her fork drop. “Christ,” she muttered. “Here it comes!”

John ignored her, gazed at the hills and said:

“I mean it, be our houseguest, bring Lisa too!”

The voice on the phone laughed, not so loud this time.

“Tom, look,” John pursued, “I need to buy one or two more horses to race or maybe breed, you could help me pick. Or—”

John stared out the window. Beyond, a hound trotted by on the green field. John sat up suddenly, as if the animal were inspiration.

“Tom, I’ve just got the damndest wildest idea. Listen, you do want to bring Lisa along, yes? Okay, pile her into a plane tomorrow, fly to Shannon—Shannon, Tom—and I’ll come to Shannon myself to drive you here to Kilcock. But listen, Tom, after you’ve been here a week we’ll have a hunt wedding!”

I heard the voice on the phone say, “What?”

“Haven’t you ever heard of a hunt wedding, Tom?” cried John exuberantly. He stood up now and put one foot on the chair and leaned toward the window to see if the hound was still trotting across the field. “Tom, it’s just the best damn kind of wedding for a man like you and a woman like Lisa. She rides, doesn’t she? And sits a horse well, as I recall. Well, then, damn it, think how it would be, Tom! You’re getting married anyway, so why not you two pagans here in Catholic Ireland? Out here at my place ...” He cast a quick glance at Ricki. “Our place. We’d call in every horse in ninety miles around and every decent hunter, and the lovely hounds, the loveliest hounds and bitches you ever saw, Tom, and everyone in their pink coats—what color, Tom—and the women in great-fitting black coats, and after the marriage service you and Lisa and I would go to hunt the finest fox you ever saw, Tom! What do you say? Is Lisa there? Put her on!” A pause. “Lisa? Lisa, you sound great! Lisa, talk to that bastard! No arguments! I’ll expect you here day after tomorrow for the Waterford Hunt! Tell Tom I won’t accept the charges if he calls back. God love you, Lisa. So long.” John hung up.

He looked at me with a chimpanzee smile of immense satisfaction.

“By God now! What have I done? Did you hear that? Will you help out, kid?”

“What about Moby Dick, John?”

“Oh, hell, the Whale will survive. God, I can just see the parish priest’s eyebrows burning. I can hear the rouse in the pubs when they hear!”

“I can watch myself cutting my throat in the bathtub.” Ricki headed for the door. It was always the horses to be ridden or tubs soaked in up to her mouth at a time like this, which was usually twice a week, living with a power unit like John. “So long, lousy husband. Goodbye, cruel world.”

The door slammed.

Not waiting to hear the fierce douse of water above in the giant bathroom, John grabbed my knee.

“God almighty, it’ll be a time!” he cried. “Ever seen a hunt wedding?”

“Afraid not.”

“Christ, it’s beautiful! Damn! Beyond belief!”

I looked at the door through which Ricki had gone.

“Will Tom and Lisa come, just like that?”

“They’re both sports.”

“Am I supposed to interpret that as positive assurance we’ll see them this week?”

“We’ll go to Shannon and drive them here, won’t we, kid?”

“I thought I was supposed to rewrite the solid-gold-doubloon-on-the-mast scene, John.”

“Oh, hell, we both need a few days off. Ricki!”

Ricki reappeared in the door, her face the color of snow and lilacs. She had been waiting for the call she knew would come.

“Ricki,” said John, beaming at her as on one of his children. “Goddamn, listen—here’s the plan!”

Tom and Lisa got off the plane fighting. They fought inside the door of the plane. They fought coming out the door. They yelled at each other on the top step. They shouted coming down the steps.

John and I just looked up, aghast. I was glad Ricki was off somewhere, shopping until supertime.

“Tom!” cried John. “Lisa!”

Halfway down the steps, Lisa turned and ran back up, raving. She was going back to the States now! The pilot, on his way out, told her there was a rather slender chance of this, for the plane was not going back immediately. Why not? she demanded. By this time Tom had bounded back up to her side, yelling at the pilot that he should indeed turn the damn ship round and fly this madwoman back, he would pay double, triple, and if he could manage to crash on the way, fine.

John, listening, sat down on the steps of the unloading platform, shut his eyes, shook his head, and bellowed with laughter.

Hearing this, Tom came to the rail above and looked down sharply. “Jesus Christ, John!”

John went up and hugged and kissed Lisa a lot, which did it. We finally saw them through customs, packed them into the Jaguar, and tooled across the vast green pool table of Ireland.

“Beautiful! Beautiful!” cried Lisa, as the hills rushed by.

“What weather!” said Tom.

“Don’t let it fool you,” John announced. “Looks lovely, but it rains twelve days out of ten. You’ll soon be at the whiskey, like me!”

“Is that possible?” Tom laughed, and I laughed with him, looking over. What I saw was what I had seen for years around Hollywood, a man lean as whipcord and leather; hard riding, tennis every day, swimming, yachting, and mountain climbing had fined him down to this. Tom was fifty-three, with a thick shock of iron-gray hair. His face was unlined, deeply tanned, his jaw was beautifully sharp, his teeth were all there and white, his nose was a hawk’s nose, exquisitely pro wed in any wind anywhere in the world. His eyes were blue, water bright and intensely burning. The fire in him was a young man’s fire, and it would never go out: he would never let it go out himself, and there was no man with an ego powerful enough to kill it. Nor, for that matter, was there a woman in the world whose flesh could smother Tom. There never had been, and now, this late, there never could be. Tom was his own mount and saddle, he rode himself and did so with masculine beauty. I could see by the way Lisa held his arm that she both angrily and happily accepted him for what he was, a single-minded man who had roamed the world and done what he wanted to do when he wanted to do it, without asking anyone and without apologies. Any woman who tried to lay tracks down for Tom, why, he would simply laugh and walk away. Now, this day, he had decided to come to Ireland.

Tomorrow he might be with the Aga Khan in Paris and the day after in Rome, but Lisa would be there, and it would go on that way until someday, many years from now, he fell from a mountain, a horse, or another woman, and died at the base of that mountain, horse, or woman, showing his teeth. He was everything men would like to be if they were honest with themselves, everything John wanted to be and couldn't quite live up to, and a hopeless and crazily reckless ideal for someone like me to admire from a distance, having been born and bred of reluctance, second thoughts, premonitions, depressions, and lack of will.

"Mr. Hurley," I couldn't help asking, "why have you come to Ireland?"

"Tom is the name. And ... John ordered me here! When John speaks, I come!" said Tom, laughing.

"Damn right!" said John.

"You called him, remember, Tom?" Lisa punched his arm.

"So I did." Tom was not in the least perturbed. "I figured it had been too long since we saw each other. Years go by. So I pick up the phone and call the son of a bitch and he says, Tom, come! And we'll have a wild week and I'll go on my way and another two years will pass. That's how it is with John and me, great when we're together, no regrets apart! This hunt wedding, now ..."

"Don't look at me," I said. "My ignorance is total."

"Lisa, here, didn't quite warm up to it," Tom admitted.

"No!" cried John, swiveling to burn her with one eye.

"Nonsense," said Lisa, quickly. "I brought my hunt wardrobe from West Virginia. It's packed. I'm happy! A hunt wedding— think!"

"I am," said John, driving. "And if I know me, it might just as easily be a hunt funeral!"

"John would love that!" said Tom, talking to me as if John were not present, riding through green and green again. "Then he could come to our wake and get drunk and weep and tell all our grand times. You ever notice—things happen for his convenience? People are born for him, live for him, and die so he can put coins on their eyelids and cry over them. Is there anything isn't convenient or fun for John?"

"Only one thing," Tom added after a pause.

John pretended not to hear.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Being alone." Tom was suddenly serious. "John doesn't like being alone, ever. You must never leave John alone, remember that, no matter what." Tom looked at me with his keen, clear, bright-water eyes. "John once said to me, Tom, the loneliest time in a man's day is the time between when he stops work and starts dinner. That single hour is as desolate as three in the morning of a long night, he said. Then is when a man needs friends."

"I said that to you?" said John in fake astonishment.

Tom nodded. "I got a letter from you last year. You must have written it at five, some afternoon. You sounded alone. That's why I call once in a while. That's why I'm here. Jealous, Lisa?"

"I think I am," said Lisa.

Tom looked at her steadily.

"No," said Lisa, "I'm not."

Tom patted her leg. "Good girl." He nodded up at John. "How about giving us a road test?"

"Road test it is!"

We drove the rest of the way to Kilcock at eighty miles an hour. Lisa blinked quite often. Tom didn't blink at all, watching Ireland loom at him in landfalls of green.

I kept my eyes shut most of the way.

There was a problem having to do with a hunt wedding. Quite suddenly we discovered that none had been held in Ireland for years. How many years, we never found out.

The second and greatest problem was the Church.

No self-respecting priest was about to show up to fuse the lusts of two Hollywood characters, although Lisa Helm was from Boston and a thoroughly nice lady, but Tom Hurley was from all the points of Hell, a cross-country horseman who played destructive tennis with Darryl Zanuck and advised the Aga Khan on the insemination of thoroughbreds.

No matter. For the Church, it was out of the question. Besides which (John had never bothered to ask), neither Tom, despite his Irish background, nor Lisa was Catholic.

What to do? There were no other churches near Kilcock. Not even a paltry small Protestant chapel you might sleepwalk in for a long Sunday noon.

So it finally fell to me to inquire of the local Unitarian church in Dublin. What's worse than a Protestant? A Unitarian! It was no church and no faith at all. But its keeper, the Reverend Mr. Hicks, agreed, in a rather hyperventilated exchange on the phone, to assume the task because he was promised his rewards on Earth by John Huston rather than in Heaven by a God who was rarely named, so as to save embarrassment.

"Have they been living in sin?" asked the Reverend Mr. Hicks abruptly.

I was shocked. I had never heard such talk before.

"Well ..." I said.

"Have they?"

I shut my eyes to focus the bridal pair, loud in the Dublin streets noon and night.

They had had a fight about one wedding ring, then another, a fight about possible flowers, a fight about the day and date, a fight about the minister, a fight about the location of the ceremony, a fight about the size of the wedding cake, with or without brandy, a fight about the horses and hounds, and even a fight with the master of the hunt, a fight with his assistant, a fight with the Courtown butler, an altercation with a maid, a carousal with the pub owner about liquor, another brannigan with the liquor merchant in town for not giving a markdown on three cases of not very excellent champagne, plus fights in restaurants and pubs. If you wanted to keep a record of the fights in one week, the best way to imprint it on the calendar was with a shotgun.

John loved it all.

"Always like a good scrap!" he exclaimed, his grin so wide it needed sewing. "My cash is on the lady's nose. Tom may ride the days, but she'll win the nights. Besides, everyone has his foibles. Tom drinks too much Old Peculier—"

"Is that a real name?"

"An English ale, uh-huh. Old Peculier. But that's Tom. A pal, nevertheless. They'll finish the fights and settle in for a soft marriage, you wait and see."

"Reverend Hicks," I said over the phone, "Tom and Lisa fight a lot."

"Then they've sinned a lot!" the reverend mourned. "You'd best send them round."

Tom and Lisa fought about going to see Mr. Hicks.

They fought going in.

They argued in front of him.

They yelled coming out.

If a voice can be pale, the reverend's voice was pale describing the pair.

"This is not a marriage," he protested. "It is a rematch!"

"Exactly my sentiments, Reverend," I agreed, "but will you advise them of the boxing rules and send them to their corners?"

"If they'll promise to stay there four days out of five. Is there a Bible chapter, I wonder? Futilities, verse four, paragraph two?"

"There will be."

"And will I write it?"

"I have faith in you. Father!"

"Reverend!" he cried.

“Reverend,” I said.

“Well, how in hell we got into this mess is what I’d like to know!” Ricki said into the phone.

John’s voice barked back from Paris, where he was interviewing actors for our film. I could hear him loud and clear as I helped lug in the flowers and place the table for the wedding cake and count the cheap champagne in cases along the wall.

“Mess!” John yelled. “It’s no mess, by God; it’s going to be the greatest goddamn event in Irish history. They’ll start the uprising over. Are the flowers there?”

“The damn flowers are!”

“Has the cake been ordered?”

“You know it has!”

“And the champagne?”

“The worst, but it’s here.”

“Better get hold of Heeber at his pub. Tell him to bring in the best. God, I’ll pay for it. It’s time Tom scared the moths out of his wallet, but hell! Call Heeber!”

“The alien from Mars just did that—”

“Is he there? Put him on!”

Ricki threw the phone at me. I dodged but caught.

“John, I’ve finished the Saint Elmo’s fire scene and—”

“To hell with that, kid. I’ve fallen—”

“With whom?” I said automatically.

“No, no, for Christ’s sake, no woman! This is more important. Off a horse!”

“Fell off?”

“Shh! Don’t let Ricki hear! She’d cancel the hunt! I’m okay. Just some pulled ligaments. Unconscious five minutes and limping like mad. The Gimp, by God, the Gimp. But I’ll be home late today. Check the last flight from London. I rode at Longchamps at dawn two days ago.”

“I thought you were casting—”

“Sure! But the damn horse jumped when some car horn blew. I flew a mile high. I’m okay now. With a slight tendency, without warning, to fall down and writhe in agony when my back gives. Don’t let me scare you, kid.”

“I’m scared, John. If you die, I’m dead!”

“Nice sentiment. You’re the screwed-tight optimist. Just tell me I won’t fall down and writhe with Saint Vitus at the wedding.”

“Heck, you’d do it just to steal the show.”

“Why not? Hire a cab, pick me up at the airport tonight, tell me the Saint Elmo’s fire scene on the way. Can I stay in your room at the Royal Hibernian overnight? I should be walking without crutches by morning.”

“Holy God, John, crutches?”

“Pipe down! Is Ricki in the room, for Christ’s sake?”

“She went to answer the door. Wait ...”

Ricki stood in the hall looking at a piece of paper in her hand. Her face was a fall of snow and her eyes were beginning to drop tears. She came and handed me the paper.

John’s voice said, “I hear someone crying.”

“They are, John.”

I read from the scribbled note.

“ ‘Alma Kimball O’Rourke fell under her horse today. She was killed instantly and the horse was destroyed.’ ”

“Omigod,” said John, five hundred miles away in Paris.

“She was the wife of the Kildare Hunt’s captain, wasn’t she?” I asked.

“Jesus, yes,” said John quietly.

I finished reading the note. “The funeral’s day after tomorrow. The entire hunt will be there.’”

“My God,” murmured John, growing quieter still.

“That means ...?” I said.

“The hunt wedding,” Ricki said, “must be called off.” John heard and said, “No, no. Only delayed.”

Mike drove me into Dublin to find Tom, who had taken a room at the Russell Hotel. He and Lisa had fought about that too. He wanted to stay at Huston’s with her. But the Catholics and the Protestants, she pointed out, were both watching. So it was the hotel for Tom until the ceremony. Besides, he could play the stock market better, alone in his Dublin hotel room. That cinched it. Tom checked in.

I found Tom in the lobby of the hotel, mailing some letters.

I handed him the note and said nothing.

There was a long pause, and then I could see the thin transparent inner lids of Tom’s eyes, his eagle’s eyes or his lizard’s eyes or his cat’s eyes, slide down between us. They did not slam like the great gates of Kiev, but it was just as final, just as definite, just as complete. The noise his eyelids made closing, while he continued to stare at me, was awful in its silence. I was outside in my world, if my world existed at all, and Tom was inside his.

“She’s dead, Tom,” I said, but that was useless. Tom had switched off whatever batteries kept him tuned to the audible universe, to any air that held words and phrases. I said it again. “She’s dead.”

Tom turned and strode up the stairs.

I spoke to Mike at the door. “The minister? The Unitarian. We’d better go tell him.”

Behind me, I heard the elevator door open.

Tom was there in the doorway. He did not step out. I hurried over.

“Yes, Tom?”

“I was just thinking,” said Tom. “Someone should cancel the wedding cake.”

“Too late. It arrived as I was leaving Courtown.”

“Christ,” Tom said.

The elevator door shut.

Tom ascended.

The plane from London was late getting into Shannon. By the time it arrived, I had made three trips to the Gents’, which shows you how much ale I had downed, waiting.

John waved his crutches from the top of the landing steps and almost fell the length in his eagerness to get down to me. I tried to help, but he all but struck me with his implements, hurrying along in giant bounds like someone who was born and raised an athlete on crutches. With every great jump forward, favoring one leg, he cried out half in pain, half in elation:

“Jesus, God, there’s always something new. I mean, when you’re not looking, God gives you a tumble. I never fell like this. It was like slow motion, or going over a waterfall or shooting the rapids just before you wake—you know how it is, every frame of film stops for a moment so you can look at it: now your ass is in the air, now your spine, vertebra by vertebra, now your neckbone, collarbone, top of your head, and you can see it all rotating, and there’s the horse down there, you can see him too, frame by frame, like you’re taking a picture of the whole damn thing with a box Brownie working away thirty frames a second, but all perfectly clear and held in the second, which expands to hold it, so you can see yourself and the horse, waltzing, you might say, on the air. And the whole thing takes half an hour in seconds. The only thing that speeds up the frames is when you hit the turf. Christ. Then, one by one, you can hear your suspenders snapping, your tendons, that is, your muscles.

“You ever walk out at night in winter and listen? Damn! The branches so loaded with snow they might burst! The whole tree’s a skeleton, you hear the sap bend and the wood creak. I thought all my bones would shatter, shale, and flake down inside my skin. Wham! Next thing I know, they

run me to the morgue. Not that way, I yelled. Turned out it was an ambulance, and I only thought it was the coroner!

“Hurry up, for Christ’s sake—I’m running faster than you are. I hope I don’t fall down right now and have one of my convulsions. You’d really see something. Flat on my back like a Holy Roller, talking in tongues, blind with pain. Wham! Where’s Tom?”

Tom was waiting for us in the Buttery of the Royal Hibernian Hotel. John insisted on crutch-vaulting down to find the American Irishman.

“Tom, by God, there you are!” said John.

Tom turned and looked at us with that clear cold sky-blue winter-morning gaze.

“Jesus,” gasped John. “You look mad. What are you so mad about, Tom?”

“She was riding sidesaddle,” said Tom evenly. “She should not have been riding sidesaddle, damn her.”

“Now, who would that be?” asked John, with that oiled and easy polite but false voice of his. “What woman is that!”

At noon the next day, Mike and I drove John out to Kilcock. He had practiced some great healthy crutch bounds and was apishly exuberant at his prowess, and when we reached Courtown he was out of the car ahead of us and half across the bricks when Ricki came running down the steps.

“My God! Where were you! Be careful! What happened?”

At which point John dropped his crutches and fell writhing in the drive.

Which, of course, shut Ricki up.

We all half-lifted, half-carried John into the house.

Ricki opened her trembling mouth, but John lifted his great glovelike hand and, eyes shut, husked:

“Only brandy will kill the pain!”

She brought the brandy, and over her shoulder he spied Tom’s champagne cases in the corridor.

“Is that crud still here?” he said. “Where’s the Dom Perignon?”

“Where’s Tom?” Ricki countered.

The wedding was delayed for more than a week out of respect for the lady, who, as it turned out, had not ridden sidesaddle but whose misfortune it was to be a small object under a more than substantial burden.

On the day of her memorial service, Tom spoke seriously of going home.

A fight ensued.

When Lisa finally convinced Tom to stay, she fell into a depression and warned of a similar trip, because Tom insisted on not ordering a fresh wedding cake and on keeping the old one as a dust-catcher for more than a full week of mourning.

Only John’s intervention stopped the fights. Only a long and inebriated dinner at Jammet’s, the best French restaurant in Ireland, restored their humor.

“Quiet!” said John as we dined. “The kitchen door as it opens and shuts, opens, shuts! Listen!”

We listened.

As the door squealed wide on its hinges, the voice of the chef could be heard shrieking in frenzies at his cooks.

Open:

A shriek!

Shut:

Silence.

Open:

A scream!

Shut:

Silence.

“You hear that?” whispered John.

Open. Shriek!

“That’s you, Tom.”

Shut, silence. Open, scream.

“That’s you, Lisa.”

Open, shut, open, shut.

Scream, shriek, shriek, scream.

“Tom, Lisa, Lisa, Tom!”

“My God!” cried Lisa.

“Dear Jesus!” said Tom.

Scream, silence, scream.

“Is that us?” both said.

“Or an approximation,” said John, his cigarillo smoking in his languid mouth. “Give or take a decibel. Champagne?”

John refilled our glasses and ordered more.

Tom and Lisa laughed so much they had to grab each other, and then their heads fell to each other’s shoulders, choking and breathless.

Very late, John called the chef out to stand in the kitchen door.

Wild applause greeted him. Amazed, he shrugged, nodded, and vanished.

As John paid the bill, Tom said, very slowly, “Okay. She was not riding sidesaddle.”

“I was hoping you’d say that, Tom.” John exhaled a long slow stream of cigarillo smoke, laying out the tip. “I was hoping you would.”

Mike and I picked up the Unitarian minister, the Reverend Mr. Hicks, the night before the great hunt wedding and drove him to Kilcock.

On his way to the car he had something fine to say about Dublin. As we drove from Dublin he had something truly excellent to say about the outskirts and the River Liffey, and when we hit the green countryside he was most effusive of all. It seemed there was no speck or seam visible on, in, or through this county or the next. Or if flaws were there, he chose to ignore them for the virtues. Given time, he would speak the list. Meanwhile, the hunt wedding lay like white lace on the morning shore ahead and he focused on it, with his pursed mouth, his red pointy nose, and his flushed eyeballs.

As we churned gravel in the yard, he gasped, “Thank God, there’s no moon! The less seen of me arriving, the better!”

“The whole town will see you through the windows tomorrow,” I observed, dryly, “holding the pagan service and fluting the blasphemous oration.”

The Reverend Mr. Hicks turned to a shape carved from a moonstone. “Find me a bottle,” he husked, “and put me to bed.”

I awoke just before dawn in a high attic servant’s room and lay conjuring the great day in the morning this was promised to be.

The theater of Ireland waited.

I thought I heard brogues below, going home late from Finn’s or arriving early for the Protestant Embarrassment.

I thought I heard the huntsman’s horn, practicing on the green rim of the world.

I imagined I heard a fox yipping in response.

There was a small shadow on the edge of the land; the hunted beast, I was sure, arriving to be first onstage.

Then, sprawled in bed, eyes shut, I conjured up the arrival of hounds in tumult and then horses, shivering their skin over their flesh, in bad need of psychologists’ advice, and none here. That was silly, of course. Horses and hounds do not arrive first. The kennelmaster must lead one and the various

bluebloods rein and reassure the others. Yet I did hear blood cries and yawps somewhere in my half sleep, and the jingling of accoutrements galloped to a halt.

Not wishing to be stage director to it all, I churned over into a whimpering and talkative sleep, warning myself to burrow deep and listen not.

Only to hear John's voice at the door to my room, as he stirred the parquetry with his crutches. "No use, kid. Time to get up."

And the real hounds and horses arrived below.

All was in readiness. The stale wedding cake, growing more ancient by the hour, awaited. The tooth-aching and tongue-blistering champagne was laid by.

The horses were steaming the air and smiling derisive smiles in the courtyard.

The hounds were padding in circles, wetting bricks, hooves, and boots.

The lords and ladies and the owners of liquor shops all across Eire had arrived, of course, and dismounted to the nibbling smiles of horses and the suspicious protests of the hounds.

"Stirrup cups for all!" someone cried.

"That's before we ride," a lady corrected. "And it's just for the groom."

"What I meant to say is, is the bar open?"

"There is no bar," announced the Reverend Mr. Hicks, standing so straight and correct it was obvious he had just been there, "but there is champagne, good silver buckets and bad. Beware of the shilling poison up front. Demand the pound sterling Mumm's."

The horses were quickly abandoned and the hounds left to harass the kennelmaster and water the yard.

The guests booted up the steps, making hollow clubbing sounds on the concrete, their faces distorted not by fun house mirrors but by ancestry alone. Time and the patient chromosome had worked their clay, bucking the teeth, rheuming the eye, elongating the lip, beaking the nose, cleaving the chin, hollowing the cheek, jugging the ears, eroding the hair, tufting the eyebrows, bleaching the eyelids, waxing the complexion, pocking the brow, and knobbing the elbows, wrists, and fingers. Some looked as if they had stood too many years inside and looking out from stable doors.

My God, I thought, what a jumble sale of skulls and ears, lower lips and high-flung eyebrows. Here danced the spider, there thundered the hippo, here the spaniel eye wet itself with Irish sunlight, there the hound mouth drooped into despairs of days when no sun rose. Not quite crayfish, a fiddle-crab liquor salesman sidled up the steps, bringing with him the eyes of Adonis locked in a face so crimson he might have parboiled himself for breakfast. Here they all came, in pink or black coats, with bloated brows, insucked nostrils, and wharf-piling jaws.

I reeled back and drifted with the clamor of boots to see elbows shoving about in the rummage for Mumm's as against Twelvetrees bubbly.

"Who put the poison above and the remedy below?"

Instant silence followed as they beheld Tom Himself nodding his face toward the obscure-and-terrible as against the famed-and-fabulous.

"Let's have a tasting," someone said. "Compare old Sour Ditch to Kingsblood Royal."

Tom could not prevent as several dozen hands emptied the tooth-destroyer to make way for Mumm's mouthwash.

All was almost in readiness. Along with the killing wine and its cure, to one side were a few caviar sticks and cheese biscuits that Tom had laid on, while farther on, an ice floe frozen forever, the bridal cake waited for eternity.

Since it had already stalled eight days, its mesa and sides stalwart in the hours and quarter month just passed, the cake had an air of Miss Havisham about it, which, spied, was declared sotto voce innumerable times in earshot of the butlers and maids, who adjusted their ties and aprons and searched the ceiling for deliverance.

There was a sneeze.

Lisa appeared at the top of the stairs, only to sneeze again, spin about, and run back up. There was a sound of nose-blowing: the faintest whiff of hunting horn. Lisa returned, steadied herself, and sneezed on the way down.

“I wonder if this is a Freudian cold,” she said beneath the Kleenex over her nose.

“What in hell do you mean by that?” Tom scowled.

“Maybe my nose doesn’t want to get married.” Lisa followed this with a quick laugh.

“Very funny. Very, very funny. Well, if your nose wants to call off the wedding, let it speak.” Tom showed his teeth, nibbling the air much like the courtyard horses, to prove his humor.

Lisa half turned to flee, but another sneeze froze her in place. Any further retreat ceased when several crutches punched down the stairs, swinging between them in his pink coat the director as clown, the happy huntsman as lunatic gymnast. Taking the steps two at a time and swinging his long booted legs as if to project himself over our heads, John descended, talking over his shoulder and not minding where he fiddled his supports.

“It took an hour for the damned ambulance to get there; meanwhile, I twitched and snaked around and screamed so loud that windows slammed a hundred yards off. Six shots didn’t stop my yells. At the hospital, the Doc took one look, turned me over, and—crack! like a kick in the spine—the pain stopped, as did my screams. Then, by God, I began to laugh.”

Turning from John, I plowed through the champagne mob. “Get me one of those,” called John. “Make it two. Hello, Lisa, don’t you look fine, just fine!”

Lisa sneezed.

“My God, look at your nose, Lisa,” John commiserated. “So damn red it looks as if you’d been up five nights boozing!”

Lisa held to her stomach with one hand, her nose with the other, and ran upstairs.

“Thanks a lot,” said Ricki, halfway down.

“What’d I do?” John protested. “Where’s she going?”

“To powder her nose, dimwit.”

“Where’s Mr. Hicks?” said John, escaping swiftly in leapfrog vaults.

“Hello, hello!” He stopped in midhop to wave at all the windows along the back of the dining room, where two dozen or so local noses imprinted the panes.

The villagers, mad, angry, or irritated housewives, hesitated, not knowing how to swallow John’s happy salute.

A few waved back. The rest pulled off, not taken in by his apish Protestant amiability.

“Welcome, welcome!” John called, knowing they could not hear. “It’s the Hollywood sinner here, born in sin, living in sin, and soon to die, writhing, in sin. Hello!”

Some must have read his lips, for no fewer than a half dozen indignant villagers leaped back as if he had leavened the air with brimstone.

“Drink this against the day.” I arrived with the champagne.

“But will it cure at noon?” John drank.

“One hour at a time,” I said. “Where’s the reverend? Oh, there he is. Reverend!”

The reverend came from the hall, smelling of hounds and horses. “I have been out commiserating with them for partaking in this wicked enterprise,” he said, and added quickly, “Oh, not the wedding, for sure. But the hunt. Everyone seems happy. But no one has invited the fox.”

“We asked, but he pleaded business.” John smiled. “Are we ready?”

The Reverend Mr. Hicks grabbed a champagne from a tray as it passed, gulped it, and said, “As we’ll ever be.”

The lords and ladies and liquor merchants gathered, simmering with the good drinks, hiccuping with the bad—a medley of pink coats, celebrating joy; and black, promising unfaithful husbands and mournful wives.

The Reverend Mr. Hicks positioned himself in front of the glare of Tom and the dabbed-at and snuffling nose of Lisa, who peered around as if blind.

“Shouldn’t there be a Bible?” she wondered.

A Bible, the reverend almost cried out, as he searched his empty hands.

Tom scowled but said:

“Yes. While Unitarian, we are Protestants. A Bible!”

The reverend looked around for someone to fill his hands with such a useful tool, which Ricki did in great haste, wondering if it was proper.

Off balance in two ways, the weight of the thing being one, Unitarian practice another, the reverend clenched the book but did not open it, fearing that some lost chapter or verse might leap to disquiet his mind and capsize the ceremony. Placing the Bible like a brick on the lectern, an ignored cornerstone to his peroration, he lit out:

“Have you been living in sin?” he cried.

There was a still moment. I saw the muscles under Tom’s pink riding coat flex and tear themselves in several directions; one to punch, one to pray.

I saw the clear crystal lid come down over one of Tom’s blazing eyes, in profile, shutting out the dear minister.

Lisa’s tongue wandered along her upper lip, seeking a response, and, finding none, slipped back to neutral.

“What was that again?” Tom’s eyes were burning lenses. If they’d been out in the sun, the Reverend Mr. Hicks would long since have gone up in smoke.

“Sin,” said the Reverend Hicks. “Have you been living in it?”

Silence.

Tom said, “As a matter of fact, we have.”

Lisa jabbed his elbow and stared at the floor. There was an outbreak of muffled coughing.

“Oh,” said the Reverend Mr. Hicks. “Well, then.”

What followed was not a ceremony but a sermon and not a sermon but a lecture. Sin was the subject, and the bridal couple the object. Without actual circling and sniffing their hems and cuffs, the reverend managed to make everyone in the room acutely aware of underwear and of ties that choked. He wandered off the subject and then wandered back. It was sin this and sin that, sins of the lovers and future husbands, sins of the put-upon and not always guaranteed brides. Somewhere along in the hour he mislaid the ceremony. Finding it in the corners of his eyes, and in Tom’s concentrated glare, Mr. Hicks hesitated and was about to ricochet back to pure sin, if sin ever was pure, when John shortened the hour.

He let one crutch slip. It slammed the floor with a fine crack and rebounding clatter.

“Tom and Lisa, do you take each other as man and wife!” cried the Reverend Mr. Hicks.

It was over! No one heard the shots or saw wounds or blood. There was a shared gasp from three dozen throats. The reverend slapped his revised Unitarian Bible shut on mostly empty pages, and the locals from the pub and the town villagers, pressed to the windows, leaped back as if caught by lightning, to avoid the direct-current gaze of Tom, and at his elbow the downcast eyes of Lisa, still recirculating her blush. The reverend ran for the champagne. By some accident never to be explained in Ireland, some of the cheap had risen to spoil the best.

“Not that.” The reverend swallowed, grimaced, and gestured his goblet. “The other, for goodness’ sake!”

Only when he had rinsed his mouth and swallowed to improve the hour did color tint his cheek and spark his eyes.

“Man!” he shouted at Tom. “That was work. Refills!”

There was a show of hands waving goblets.

“Gentlemen, ladies!” John reminded them of their manners. “Cake to go with the champagne!”

“John!” Ricki jerked her head. “No!”

But it was too late. All turned to focus their lust on a bridal confection which had waited, gathering dust, for eight days.

Smiling like an executioner, John brandished the knife. Lisa took it as if she had just pulled it from her breast and desired to shove it back in. Instead she turned to bend over the lonely and waiting cake. I crowded near to watch the speckles of dust flurry up from frosting stirred by Lisa’s breath.

She stabbed the cake.

Silent, the cake was obdurate.

It did not cut, it did not slice, and it gave only faint tendencies to flake or chip.

Lisa struck again and a fine powder puffed up on the air. Lisa sneezed and struck again. She managed to dent the target in four places. Then she started the assassination. With a furious red face above and the knife gripped in both hands, she wrought havoc. More powder, more flakes.

“Is the damn cake fresh?” someone said.

“Who said that?” said Tom.

“Not me,” said several people.

“Give me that!” Tom seized the knife from Lisa’s hands. “There!”

This time, shrapnel. The cake cracked under his blows and had to be shoveled onto the plates with a dreadful clatter.

As the plates were handed round, the men in their pink coats and the women in their smart black stared at the broken teeth strewn there, the smile of a once great beauty laid to ruin by time.

Some sniffed, but no aroma or scent arose from the powdered frost and the slain brandy cake beneath. Its life had long since fled.

Which left the good souls with a confectioner’s corpse in one hand and a bad vintage in the other, until someone rediscovered the rare vintages stashed against the wall and the stampede for the saviors’ refreshment began. What had been a moment of statues-in-panic wondering how to be rid of two handfuls of failed appetite became a wonder of imbibation and loosened tongues. All babbled, churning around and about every few minutes for a refulfillment of Mumm’s while Tom, suffering the rejection of a lost salesman, slugged back brandies to relight the fury in his eyes.

John stomped through the crowd, not hearing but laughing at jokes.

“Pour some on my crutches,” he cried, “so I can move!”

Someone did.

It would have been pitiful had it not been ludicrous to see the gentry wandering with platefuls of hard rock-shrapnel cake, picking at it with forks, saying how delicious and demanding more.

On the third go-round the crowd turned brave, abandoned the vitrified cake, and filled their empty glasses with Scotch. Whereupon there was a general exodus toward the yard, with people feverishly seeking places to hide the last of the concrete cake fragments.

The hounds in the yard leaped, barking, and horses reared, and the Reverend Mr. Hicks hurried out ahead with what looked to be a double double in his fist, garrulous and cheerful, waving to what he thought were village Catholics near the hounds and Protestants by the horses. The villagers, stunned, waved back, in pretense of a religion they despaired of to the point of contempt.

“Did he ...,” said Tom, behind me.

“Did he what?” Lisa sneezed.

“Did Mr. Hicks ... did you hear him say, ‘I pronounce you man and wife’?”

“I think so.”

“What do you mean? Did he or didn’t he?”

“Something like.”

“Something like?” cried Tom. “Reverend ...? Toward the end of the ceremony ... ”

“Sorry about the living-in-sin bit,” said the reverend.

“Reverend Hicks, did you or did you not say ‘I now pronounce you man and wife’?”

“Ah, yes.” The reverend wrinkled his brow and took another snort. “Easily fixed. I now pronounce you man and wife. Go thou and sin some more.”

“And sin no more!” corrected Tom.

“Ah, yes,” said the Reverend Mr. Hicks, and wove himself into the crowd.

“I rather like that.” Lisa sneezed happily. “Go thou and sin some more. I hope you’ll be back early. I sent someone to dope the fox in hopes of an early night. Are you really going to climb on that silly horse with all those drinks?”

“I have only had six,” said Tom.

“Shit,” said Lisa. “I guessed it at eight. Can you really mount that damn horse drunk?”

“I’m in fighting trim. And I’ve never heard you swear. Why today!”

“The Reverend Hicks, in his sermon, said it was the end of the world. Can I help you up on the funny-looking steed?”

“No, my dear,” Tom said and laughed, because people were listening.

With great dignity he strode to his horse and propelled himself into the saddle. Through gritted teeth he said, “The stirrup cup!”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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Green Shadows, White Whale. No image available. Green Shadows, White Whale. Bradbury Ray. GREEN SHADOWS, WHITE WHALE proves her point. Read more. 3 people found this helpful.Â Green Shadows is a memoir of the time Bradbury spent in Ireland in the 1950's working on a screenplay for Moby Dick. Most of the book deals with his impression of Ireland and the Irish, as recounted in personal experiences, possibly embellished with poetic license. His dealings with director John Huston make up the subject for the rest of the book.