

The Day We Got Our Own Back



ONE AFTERNOON some unfriendly men dressed in civilian clothes and carrying revolvers came to our house searching for my father, or for information about him. This was in Dublin, in 1922. The treaty with England, turning Ireland into the Irish Free State, had just been signed. Those Irish who were in favor of the treaty, the Free Staters, were governing the country. Those who had held out for a republic, like my father, were in revolt. My father was wanted by the new government, and so he had gone into hiding. He was on the run, sleeping one night in one house and the next night in another and sometimes stealing home to see us. I suppose my mother must have taken us to see him several times, but I only remember visiting him once, and I know I found it very odd to meet him sitting in a strange person's house and to leave him there when we were ready to go home. Anyway, these men had been sent to find him. They crowded into our narrow little hall and tramped around the house, upstairs and downstairs, looking everywhere and asking questions. There was no one at home except my mother, my little sister, Derry, and me. Emer, my elder sister and my mother's chief prop, was out doing errands. Derry was upstairs in bed with a cold. I was settled comfortably on a low chair in our front sitting room, threading a necklace. I was five.

After the men had searched the house, they crowded into the room where I sat, from which they could watch the street. They brought my mother in with them. They camped around the room, talking idly among themselves and waiting. My mother stood against the wall farthest from the windows, watching them. She was very tense. She feared that my father would risk a visit home and that he would be trapped, and that we would see him trapped. One of the men came and stood over me. He pointed out a blue glass bead for me to add to my necklace, but I explained to him that the bead was too small to slip over my needle and that I had already discarded it. This exchange with this strange man made me feel very clever. He leaned closer to me then.

"Tell us do you know where your Daddy is," he whispered.

I stopped threading and began to think; but my mother flew across the room at him. She is a very small, thin woman with a pointed face and straight brown hair that she has always worn in a bun at the back of her head.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" she cried. "Asking the child questions."

The man drew away from me, and she went back to her place against the wall. At that time, in 1922, she had been through a good many years of trouble and anxiety. All the first years of her marriage were dominated by the preparations for the Rebellion of Easter, 1916, and she had seen my father captured and condemned first to death and then to penal servitude for life. At the time that I was born, he was in jail in England and she was alone in Dublin, not knowing when, if ever, she would see him again. Actually, he was released less than a year later, and in 1921 we moved into our house in Ranelagh, where we now waited to see what was going to happen.

Suddenly my mother, thinking of Derry, alone in the room

above, abandoned her wall and darted to the door leading to the stairs, but one of the men was before her, with his revolver raised against her. She stood with both hands against the doorjamb, staring up at him, half smiling. I have often seen her smiling like that when she is agitated.

"You can't open that door," the man said.

"Didn't you see the little one sick upstairs?" my mother said. "She'll be frightened by herself."

"Never mind about that," the man said. "You're not getting out of this room."

Again my mother retreated to her wall, and I returned to my necklace, and the men continued their talk. After a while, they abruptly got up and went away. My mother remained anxious, suspecting that they might be watching the end of the street for my father's arrival. She went upstairs to speak to Derry, and when she came back, I followed her down the three steps into the kitchen, which was small and squarish, with a red tile floor and a door that gave out onto the garden. She sat down at the kitchen table. I asked her if she would like a cup of tea and she said yes, she would like a cup. I filled the kettle, splashing water all over the floor, but she wouldn't trust me to light the gas, and in the end she had to make the tea herself. Some time later, Emer came home, and my mother gave her tea and told her everything that had happened and all that had been said, not forgetting the question that had been put to me. Listening to her, I was once again spellbound with gratitude, excitement, and astonishment that the strange man had included me in the raid.

The only other raid I remember took place about a year after that, and the men were rougher. Again there were in the house only my mother, my little sister, and I. This time, the men came in the morning. My mother was getting along with her house-

work, and she had an apron tied about her waist. She had shined the brass rods that held our red stair carpet in place, and now she was polishing the oilcloth on the dining-room floor. The men crowded in as before, with their revolvers, but this time they searched in earnest. They pulled all the beds apart, looking for papers and letters, and they took all my father's books out of the shelves and shook them, and they looked in all the drawers and in the wardrobe and in the kitchen stove. There was not an inch of the house they did not touch. They turned every room inside out. The newly polished oilcloth was scarred by their impatient feet, and the bedrooms upstairs were torn apart, with sheets and blankets on the floor, and the mattresses all humped up on the bare beds. In the end, they went back to the kitchen, and they took down the tins of flour and tea and sugar and salt and whatever else there was, and plunged their hands into them, and emptied them on the table and on the floor. They took all the cups and saucers and plates down. Still they had found nothing, but the house looked as though it had suffered an explosion without bursting its walls. At last, they got ready to leave, but as they were on the point of going, one of them, a very keen fellow, rushed over to the fireplace in the front sitting room and put his hands up the chimney and shoved his face as far into the grate as it would go, trying to look up and see what might be there. A great soft shower of soot came down around him, covering his shoulders and his face. He pulled hastily back into the room, with black hands and a black-mottled face. Some of the soot had gone up his sleeves. Some of it was still drifting out over the carpet. He glanced at his companions and pawed at himself, and then they went away.

When they had gone, my mother gazed about her at all the work they had made. It would be a long time before she had the house neat again. We all trailed down into the kitchen and sur-

veyed the mess there. This time, there was no question of making tea, because the tea was on the floor, along with the flour and the sugar.

We had seldom heard my mother's voice raised in laughter. She has a very quiet, almost secret manner in amusement. Now, however, she began to tremble and to smile.

"Oh," she cried, "to see the look on his face when he came back out of the chimney!"

My little sister and I began to jump around, cackling.

"Oh," cried my mother, "what warned me not to have the chimney cleaned? Oh, thanks be to God I forgot to have the chimney cleaned!"

And with us chattering a delighted, incredulous accompaniment, she laughed as though her heart might break.