

## Shadows

At 8am precisely, the Crossley Tender drove out through the main gates of the barracks in the small town of Tullybawn and immediately turned left in the direction of Curramore village, just under three miles away to the west. As it belched its way in a cloud of blue smoke along the small country road, the Black and Tans sitting at the back of the lorry were tense and silent. The journey from Tullybawn to Glenlara Barracks was barely twenty miles but the route was a soldier's nightmare, taking in, not only the village of Curramore, but the deep winding glen of Gleann na gCapall or Glen of the Horses, as the Tans knew it. From the minute the lorry entered the glen from the Curramore direction until it emerged onto the Glenlara side, it would travel through almost three miles of narrow winding road, bordered on one side by high wooded slopes and on the other by a deep ravine with a small fast-flowing river. Sporadic rebel activity had been reported in the Curramore area over the last few weeks and HQ were determined to stamp out any potential trouble by sending frequent high-visibility patrols out around the countryside.

Meanwhile, the small village of Curramore slumbered in the warm glow of the June sunshine. Old Patsy Connors, always an early riser, drew down a bucket of water from the village pump, just a stone's throw from the forge. As early as it was, wisps of smoke climbed leisurely from the chimney. Inside, the forge was full of dancing shadows though it would be a while yet before the sun swept into all the dusty corners. Mort Duggan, bathed in a halo of sparks, hammered at the red hot piece of steel on the anvil. Drops of sweat glistened like marbles on his forehead, even though he wore nothing but a pair of old woollen trousers and a blackened apron pulled over his bare chest. Outside in the sunlight, a couple of Rhode Island hens pecked half-heartedly along the dusty street and Noonan's old black and white sheep dog sprawled in front of the shop, head buried deep between his front paws.

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Private Albert Hawkins, hunched nearest the tailboard of the lorry, rifle in between his knees. Already, he could feel the prickling of sweat under his armpits and his skin itched from the cheap khaki cloth. He knew, same as the others, that the patrol could have gone by the high road, around by Daly's Hill and avoided the glen altogether. But Captain Hastings wouldn't hear of it.

‘Skulking round the long road, loike we're scared! No bleeding way!’

His pencil moustache moved up and down as he spoke and little spots of spittle formed like sea spray on his lower lip.

Old Patsy raised his head. He felt the sweat break out on his body. By the time his shaking hands had closed his cottage door behind him, the Crossley tender was entering the village. Without reducing speed, it roared like a wounded elephant along the long street, throwing up swirling sprays of dust and scattering the squawking hens in a flurry of indignation and feathers. A small pool of water darkened a patch of ground outside Old Patsy's cottage and inside the old man crossed himself while Mort in the forge stopped his hammering and listened intently.

‘Bastards,’ he muttered and his hands tightened unconsciously on the hammer.

Gradually, the peace of the morning was restored as the engine of the Crossley faded away in the distance and the early morning silence settled like an embrace around the village again.

‘Bleeding bastards, all of ‘em,’ Corporal Whyte said savagely to Albert ‘watching from behoind their little windows,’

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Albert said nothing. The lorry entered the glen and he saw the high slopes on his left and the slow snake of water some twenty five feet below on his right. He clutched his rifle tighter, hands sweaty. He looked around at the men, smelling the fear, saw the darting eyes and jumping Adams' apples.

'Perfect for an ambush,eh' the stocky Tan opposite Albert gave a nervous giggle.

'Shut your fucking mouth,' snarled Whyte

Despite himself, Albert found his mind wandering back to last week's dawn patrol. He remembered Corporal Whyte and some of the others, red faced and sweating, standing up in the lorry as they passed through the countryside, shooting at everything, cows, donkeys and crows, whooping and screaming like madmen. Bile rose in his throat as he remembered the slow fall of the old woman, crumpling without a sound on the ground, thin legs sprawled obscenely as the yellow yolk of the broken eggs dribbled away slowly onto the dust.

'No wonder they bloody well 'ate us' Albert thought.

There wasn't a minute of the day when he didn't regret joining up, that he'd never seen that poster recruiting a new force for Ireland. He'd returned from the Great War a hero but found things in Nottingham had changed very quickly. Molly had married. Funny that, he never thought she wouldn't be there for him. Married to Pearson, of all people, with his little shifty eyes, Pearson, who couldn't go to save little Belgium because of his stammer and short leg.

'You wasn't there, Bert,' she'd mumbled tearfully 'I was lonely,'

Suddenly, the heroes of the Great War were yesterday's men, an embarrassment. People's eyes slid away when they saw the broken faces and parents turned their little kids from the sight of empty sleeves and empty trouser legs.

The flu his father had caught in the summer of 1918 had destroyed his lungs.

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‘I’ll be back at work soon as good weather comes round, lad’. Coughing into the ashes, shrunken and beaten, they both knew he would never work again. His mother’s silent despairing eyes were almost worse to bear, so when he saw the poster on the tavern wall, looking for men to sign up and keep the peace in Ireland, he thought it an answer to a prayer. Bloody hell, he’d signed up like a shot. 10 shillings a day would look after the old people, He’d have free board and lodgings and he’d be working, could hold his head up again. Best of all, maybe, he wouldn’t have to see Molly every day and ...

‘Stupid sod,’ he mocked himself, looking at the tense faces of the swaying bodies beside him in the lorry, eyes resting on Whyte, stomach straining against the fabric of his tunic. His tongue, a pink slip of raw meat, popped out every few seconds like a snake, and licked his lips before disappearing back into the pink hole again. Albert felt sick. He took his cap off. Christ, it was hot. Running his fingers around the rim, he heard Whyte say something to him and turned.

The column had been in the ditch almost three hours now. Thomas groaned and shifted slightly. His feet were cramped and he could feel the vicious stabbing of the pins and needles in his left foot. He glanced at his companion. Young Jamsie looked bad – uneven lines of sweat on his face and his burning eyes sunk back in his head. He hadn’t been the same since the column had been forced to spend almost a week sleeping in the open air in mid- April. For almost a week, the Tans had crawled all over the countryside, raiding houses known to be sympathetic to the cause, beating up innocent people, shooting livestock and terrifying everyone.

The lads hadn’t dared sleep in any of the safe houses and to make it worse, the nights had been bitterly cold with icy torrential showers. They’d been almost continuously wet and

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Jamsie picked up a chill, which he'd never managed to shake off. During the last few days, he'd got worse, shivering and feverish but he'd insisted on coming with them. He swore under his breath and squinted down the valley, sleeping like a twisted serpent beneath him. Three fields away, a thin wisp of smoke curled lazily from Timmy Ben's cottage. Another hour and then they'd go.

He settled down again. His eyes drifted over the fields below him and when he turned back, the fox was there – standing not ten feet away from them. Christ, she was beautiful. Her russet coat gleamed dully in the sunlight and she held her tail like she was royalty. She raised her head and sniffed and then padded daintily across the grass and with a quick effortless bound, she was over the hedge at the corner of the field and away. He stood up carefully and watched her, mouth slightly open as she glided purposefully through the scrub grass before disappearing over the brow of the hill. Smiling slightly, he hoped Timmy Ben had his hens locked up. He settled down again and squinting upwards, noted the sun was climbing higher.

He looked down the ditch but could see no one, except Jamsie. He knew they were there though, John and Petie and Mick and Joey waiting his signal. Christ, so many ditches, so many signals, so many killings. He looked back at Jamsie. The lad was so bloody young. He'd been like that once, a lifetime ago, in another world. He remembered the laughing lad whirling Katie Barry like a mad spinning top at Hannigans' barn dance and the sweat streaming down Dinny Moloney's broad face as his fingers raced and leapt over the keyboard of his aul squeeze box. For a moment, his face softened but then he tightened his lips. Enough! Thoughts like that made you soft and when you were soft, you made mistakes. Suddenly, his hand clenched as he heard his father's bitter laugh.

‘Listen boyo, English or Irish, we’ll still be struggling and you’re a bigger bollox than I took you for, if you believe being ruled by Irishmen is going to make any fecking difference to the likes of us’.

Well, that laughing boy was dead, wandering forever in a grey world of bodies and bullets, a world where you trusted no one except those whose loyalty was proven, like the lads in the ditch beside him. For them, there was no yesterday and no tomorrow. There was only the ditch they were lying in, the next ambush and the winding glen below.

Abruptly, he stopped. Eyes narrowed, body rigid, hands clenched on metal, he scanned the glen spread out underneath him. The hum of an engine, faint at first but getting louder and rougher as he listened. Like a shutter, his eyes narrowed in a straight line from the ditch. He turned urgently to Jamie, flapping his hand and pointing. Jamie nodded quickly and began to crawl rapidly to his right.

By the time, the Crossley Tender bellowed into view, they were ready. Thomas squinted through the raised rifle sights and grunted in satisfaction. Christ, there must be eighteen or twenty of ‘em. His sight swung back and rested on the Tan swaying near the tailboard, rifle between his knees, hands clenched around the butt. As Thomas steadied himself, gun and arms resting on top of the bank, the Tan suddenly raised his right hand and removing his cap, he ran a finger inside the rim, before turning slightly to the fat soldier sitting beside him.

Above on the rise, the sun climbed higher. Thomas closed one eye, scanned along the sights of the Lee Enfield and gently squeezed.

From deep in the glen rose a great black swarm of crows gibbering loudly and circling away in the direction of Curramore village.