

## THE FIFTY-POUND DEPOSIT

"Now, not everyone wants to go to Australia, Canada, or America, even if there ain't much to do around here. We hear tell that you have a depression around there, too. Besides, what son o' the Lord in his right mind would ever want to go to a place where just recently there's been prohibition?"

The man at the bar took a slow sip from his half-consumed pint.

"Prohibition. Hell, what can one expect from a place that has that many protestants? Not that we're all good catholics, mind you. But honorable ones we are. Take O'Neill, for example.

"Now, he never had any desire to migrate when his older brother married and took over the cottage. But, then, he never wanted to do anything but play the horses, in a place where he knew their smell, and where he even had credit with every bookmaker for acres around. Sometimes he'd win, sometimes he'd lose. More often than not he'd lose, of course, and that's when he'd take a job just to catch up. Never defaulted on anyone.

"Ask Callaghan, here, if O'Neill ever went without paying his tab. An honest man, O'Neill was. God bless'im wherever he might be now. Not that he's dead, mind you. O'Neill just takes off now and then. Like the time he won big and decided to visit Liverpool."

Actually, no one really knows if O'Neill had ever been to Liverpool. It all started one morning when O'Neill told the crowd at Callaghan's that he'd hit it big on the horses the previous week. Even Callaghan was amazed when he saw O'Neill pay his entire tab in full. On previous occasions, even when he had money, O'Neill would leave his bill partly unpaid as if he needed to have something to call him back to the pub and its assorted crew of regulars.

"So, what're gonna do with the money?" Someone asked.

"I suppose I'll visit Liverpool, and probably even London. Before I go, though, I'm leaving fifty pounds with Father Flaherty. I wouldn't want to take it all with me, just in case. It's no fun to be poor, you know."

"It ain't like you, O'Neill, to be prudent."

"Ah. You're right," O'Neill replied. "But, then, I've never been rich, either. This time, even if I blow it while I'm away, I'll still have some left when I return."

By the end of the week, everyone in town knew of O'Neill's plans.

"So, have you left the money with Father Flaherty yet, O'Neill?" Someone asked.

"Not yet," he replied. "But I'm goin' to today just before the Dublin bus arrives. Somehow, havin' an extra fifty, even if I don't plan on spendin' it makes me feel like a squire. That's why I'm waitin' to the last before handin' the money to the good father."

Suddenly O'Neill was gone as if he had emigrated. If he sent his older brother any news, no one ever knew. But, then, O'Neill may not have been much for writing, anyway. Lots of people from the town had left in the past also, and were never heard from again.

Leaving, it seems, was the town's primary occupation - next to the church, of course, where Father Sean Flaherty seemed to have become a fixture as old as the edifice itself. No one knew how old the priest was. In fact, many wondered if the bishop had forgotten that the church existed at all. No other priest had ever been sent in from anywhere to substitute for Father Flaherty, as was occasionally done in other parishes when priests go on brief holidays, or are required to update their studies. In fact, no other priests had ever passed by even to look in and see if they would be interested in having the local parishioners as their flock once Father Flaherty passed on. The younger set seemed more interested in migrating also, where loads of opportunities existed in such far-away places as Melbourne, Boston, New York, Chicago, and even Vancouver. They justified their actions by calling attention that it was the duty of every good Irishman to take the faith to the far corners of the world, just as their predecessors had done when Europe was a dark continent.

The man at the bar stopped. He reached into his pocket for his pipe and brought it to his mouth. He didn't bother to light it, even though he then took two deep puffs from it. That done he then took the pipe in his left hand and held as if undecided to whether to place it back in his pocket, or return to his mouth. He reached for his half-consumed glass of Guinness and, after slowly bringing it to his mouth, took another long, deliberate sip, enjoying every drop. Once he had quenched his thirst, he returned the glass to the counter. It was almost empty.

Callaghan was obviously accustomed to the ritual. He approached the man and without looking at him, picked up the glass. "Would you care for another," the publican asked the American who up to then had been quietly learning about O'Neill.

The American was somewhat puzzled by the question. "Yeah, I suppose," he said as he looked at his still partly-consumed beer.

"And one for your friend, too, I suppose," Callaghan asked, still holding the glass.

"Sure," replied the American and looking towards the storyteller as if

to ask what all that had been about. The man was ready to resume. "Yes. O'Neill. We'd lost track o'him until that hot sunday morning. The breezes were blowin' through the open windows at St. Margaret's. A nice summer day. We were all at Mass and Father Flaherty, as was his custom, had just made us recite the Lord's Prayer, why, with Latin and all, he didn't feel comfortable we'd pray at proper time, so before Mass he always made us recite the Our Father, when, just as we'd finish sayin' 'and forgive us our debts...' there's O'Neill's voice 'Father,' he says, 'and speakin' of debts, I hope you ain't forgot the fifty pounds I left with you before I went abroad.' We didn't even know he'd returned. The last bus from Dublin had come in the night before and stopped right in front of Callaghan's, No one got off, but there he was live as spit for all the world the see.

"Father looked at him. 'Fifty pounds, my son,' he says. 'What fifty pounds?'

"The fifty I left for you to keep for me while I was away. I said I'd be back for it.'

"Why, son. You never left anything with me. In fact, I haven't seen you in months.'

"Oh, but I did, Father,' says O'Neill.

"The old man was really puzzled. Why, everyone in town had known about the fifty. We all heard O'Neill say what he'd do long before he left. Naturally, we suddenly realized that the old father was losin' it.

Why, with his advanced age, and all.

Happens to everyone. He tried to deny his debt once more, only to have his words sort of die in midmouth. One could see his tongue standing still right through the open lips. O'Neill insisted. It was then that Squire Deneher, bless his heart, came to the rescue.

"O'Neill,' he says. 'Leave Father alone, man. Don't you remember? You did leave fifty pounds. But not with Father. You left it with me. Remember?'"

"You should'a'been there to hear the hush. Everyone felt relieved that, although Father Flaherty had lost it, he was after all the only priest we had. It was then that, when the quiet abated, O'Neill piped right up.

'You're right, Squire. You're a man of honor, Sir. I had forgotten I'd left the fifty with you. Thanks for remindin' me. But I wasn't talkin' about that fifty. I was talkin' about the other.'

"We suddenly heard a thud as Father Flaherty hit the floor still holding on to his chest, bless his soul.

Nat'rally the Mass wasn't finished that day. 't was the first time as

far as I remember that we didn't take St. Margaret's image to the seashore on her day to celebrate her feast. But first things first. After we'd all chipped in, we saw that O'Neill got his fifty. We wouldn't want Father's soul to float in purgatory for such a flimsy sum, even if we had to scrape far to get it. The Squire, on the other hand, and we'd never expected that he'd try to cheat an honest man out of his horses' winnings, did eventually come up with the fifty he owed O'Neill. Oh, was he mad. 'Let O'Neill pay for the funeral,' he said, again trying to break tradition. His family had always paid for the priests' funerals for as long as there's been a Deneher around these parts. Never expected that from him, although, what with an English grandmother, one never knows what can come up in future generations. But honor prevailed, my friend.

"Honor. That night we all celebrated with O'Neill picking up the tab. Right, Callaghan?"

The publican smiled while looking at the still untouched filled glasses he had just poured.

"We haven't seen O'Neill since. Don't even know what bus he took - but he'll be back. The Squire, however, says he'd better not.

Who knows. Perhaps he still owes him money and is tryin' to wheedle his way out once again. One can never trust people with English blood."

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