

PEACE COMES OVER ME

EXCERPT FROM THE BLEEDING HILLS



BY WILFRIED F. VOSS

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ANDY had finished his shower, shaved, and put on some good cologne. His hair was still damp when he went down the stairs toward the pub. It was already decently filled, and a session was in progress at the table in the far corner.

He noticed two fiddles, a guitar, an accordion, an Uilleann pipe, and a bodhrán. They had just finished “The Bell Harbour,” and, without a noticeable break, continued with “The Ivy Leaf.”

Also sitting with them was his father with a full glass of beer in his hand. When he saw his son, he gestured at him to take a chair beside him. He nodded to the musicians, and both Ryan McCarthy and his son Andrew patiently waited for the song to end.

It was a rare occasion that the publican would join a session, and as soon as they had finished the last song, the players held on to their instruments and looked at Ryan in anticipation. Even beyond Cahersiveen and the county of Kerry, he was famous for his clear and strong voice. Whatever his performance would be that night, the musicians were prepared to follow his lead.

Ryan McCarthy waited a few moments until he was sure he had the undivided attention of the expecting crowd in front of him.

“Tonight,” he finally said, “I will take the opportunity, and sing a song in remembrance of all those who fought for the freedom of this proud nation, and, most certainly, there is no song better suited than ‘The Boys of Barr Na Sráide.’ ”

A murmur of excitement filled the room, and the musicians laid down their instruments. This next song would be performed *a capella*.

Ryan’s eyes scanned through the room. “I see, we have a good number of tourists from America here tonight, and, so you can enjoy the song to its full extent, I will explain a few things.”

He took a sip from his beer and continued.

“The song I am about to sing is based on a poem by Sigerson Clifford, who was born here in Cahersiveen, and it tells the story of the boys of *Barr Na Sráide* - Top Street - who hunted for the wren.

“You see, on the 26th day of December, we celebrate the first Christian martyr, Saint Stephen. However, the tradition of St. Stephen’s Day long predates Christian rituals. It is also known as *Lá an Dreoilín*, the day of the wren.

“Birds like the wren have a long tradition in Irish mythology. Druids used their flight patterns as auguries. Mysteriously, the wren also had a reputation for treachery, and it is blamed for betraying St. Stephen.

“This explains why the wren was hunted on St. Stephen’s Day and nailed to a pole. There it would serve to head what we call the Mummers Parade. People dress in strange clothing. They wear masks or straw suits and march accompanied by musicians. In some areas of Ireland, they call them the Mummers, and in others they call them the Wrenboys.”

He glanced around the room, making certain he still had everybody’s attention.

“Be assured, these days the wren survives. It is only used in rhymes and the name of the day.”

He paused briefly to take another sip.

“Through the lyrics of the song,” he continued, “Sigerson Clifford not only captures the essence of our town, Cahersiveen, as it climbs the mountains and looks upon the sea.

“He also remembers his boyhood friends, when they were children, and when they grew up to fight for the freedom of our country, to fight the Black and Tans, and up to the civil war.

“As all of us know, the Irish problem went on beyond the civil war, and it ended just a few years ago, but that does not mean that this song lost its meaning.”

He pointed into the room. “I know in America you observe Memorial Day to remember your freedom fighters, your soldiers, and it is a good tradition to remember those who died for the freedom of others.”

A confirming murmur filled the room.

“It may not be a popular view,” he said after silence was restored again, “and some of you will not agree with what I have to say, but tonight I take the liberty to salute all of our freedom fighters, including those of the Irish Republican Army, who fought a good fight, who finished their course, and who have kept the faith.

“Despite their negative image in the world, the folks who fought with the Irish Republican Army were mostly ordinary people. They were no different in their ways than those people assembled by George Washington as he went to fight the British Empire.

“They were not fanatics and not terrorists, only honest people with all their shortcomings who continued to fight for the freedom of our countrymen in the Northern provinces of this island, our Ireland.

“Without their efforts, our Catholic brothers and sisters would not be able to enjoy the freedom they have today.”

He lifted his glass toward his audience that listened to him with fascination.

“So, I am left to sing their deeds and to praise them while I can, those boys of *Barr na Sráide*, who hunted for the wren.”

The room was still, not a word was spoken, and all eyes were on the man sitting in his chair as he put his glass to the floor. They watched as he closed his eyes, as he summoned his thoughts, and straightened his posture. Then, with a strong and clear voice, he began singing, and he sang of the boys of *Barr na Sráide*, who hunted for the wren.

THE BOYS OF BARR NA SRÁIDE

by Sigorson Clifford

O the town it climbs the mountain and looks upon the sea
And sleeping time or waking time 'tis there I long to be
To walk again that kindly street, the place I grew a man
With the boys of Barr na Sráide who hunted for the wren

With cudgels stout we roamed about to hunt for the dreoilín.
We searched for birds in every furze from Letter to Dooneen
We sang for joy beneath the sky; life held no print or plan
And we boys in Barr na Sráide went hunting for the wren

And when the hills were bleeding and the rifles were aflame
To the rebel homes of Kerry those Saxon strangers came
But the men who dared the Auxies and who fought the Black and Tans
Were the boys in Barr na Sráide who hunted for the wren

So here's a toast to them tonight, those lads who laughed with me
By the groves of Carhan River or the slopes of Beenatee
John Dawley and Batt Andy and the Sheehans Con and Dan
And the boys of Barr na Sráide who hunted for the wren

But now they toil on foreign soil where they have gone their way
Deep in the heart of London town or over in Broadway
And I am left to sing their deeds and to praise them while I can
Those boys of Barr na Sráide who hunted for the wren

And when the wheel of life runs down and when peace comes over me
O lay me down in that old town between the hills and sea
I'll take my sleep in those green fields the place my life began
Where the boys of Barr na Sráide went hunting for the wren