



The Silent Witness

Snuff O'Brien was familiar with the noises of a man being killed. He lay hidden in the bushes listening to those sounds coming off the river; the flat slap of wood hitting bone; the plopping splash of a lifeless body falling into water; the whispered shouting of men trying to be secretive.

The first light of day was easing back the darkness over the water. Snuff watched a fishing boat rushing towards the concrete pillars of the railway bridge that spanned the river. Two men pushed hard against the tiller to turn the boat away from the bridge support. An injured man was bent over in the well of the boat, as if he was clutching a wound to stop blood loss. A fourth man, wielding an oar like a club, looked back, searching the surface of the rushing river.

One of the helmsmen shouted an order. The man with the oar turned and braced himself to fend off the approaching bridge. At the point of impact, he shoved the oar against the upright, leaning heavily into it, his feet sliding as the river forced the boat against the pillar. The oar shattered, throwing him against the rail where a tangle of fishing nets snared him from tumbling overboard. The dog crouched beside Snuff yapped at the sound of the breaking oar.

The pillar gouged the side of the boat, leaving it scarred but intact. The swirling tide, tossed into whirlpools by its own fight with the bridge, spun the boat in a circle before spitting it out on the other side of the danger.

As the boat disappeared, Snuff scrambled, up leaning his lean, muscular body on his crutch to take the weight off his wooden leg. He scanned the churning water for a body. Nothing. He fondled the ears of the hunting dog standing beside him. 'Go easy, boy. This has nothing to do with us. Interfering with people and their problems will land us deep in trouble.'

Snuff headed upstream following the narrow animal tracks winding through the bushes along the riverbank. The dog foraged ahead, large and fearsome, a cross between an Irish wolfhound and an Alsatian. It had the amiable appearance of one his bloodlines and the hunting killer instincts of both; the mirror of the crippled man swinging along behind it.



The Reluctant Witness

It was still early morning when Snuff returned along the riverbank with a full bag of poached game, the dog roaming ahead of him. The dog stopped and stiffened. 'What is it, boy?' Snuff whispered, searching the riverbank and the hill to his right. On the cold mountains in his volunteer war in Spain, his life had depended on seeing or hearing the enemy in the distance, giving time to prepare an ambush, or to beat a hasty retreat.

He slid the bag off his shoulder and laid it behind a gorse bush. Hunkering down he listened for any sound of danger. The birds called and threatened each other as usual. Goats bleated intermittently to make sure the herd had not moved far away. The sound of early morning cars and lorries crossing the road bridge half a mile down the river filtered through the morning air like wisps of sound swirled by the wind.

He scanned the riverbank. Ahead, he could see what looked like a smear across the grass leading from the river's edge to a cluster of boulders and wind-scoured gorse bushes. Snuff sat for a long while keeping his eye on the spot where the track across the grass finished. Nothing moved. A few birds flew over the place without any sign of agitation. 'Time for a closer look,' he whispered to the dog, 'and no tearing out of throats, unless I say so.'

A man was lying, face down, half hidden under the bushes.

'Hi there,' Snuff called. 'How're you doing?' He moved some branches with his crutch. 'Can you hear me in there?' Crouching down by a very wet and blood-covered body he felt for and found a weak and erratic pulse. Rolling the man onto his back showed the damage to his face and the side of his head. 'Shit,' Snuff said to himself, 'you're the body from the boat. That's the mark of the blow that drove you into the water, my lad.' The man's shirt had been torn open displaying the wounds on his chest. 'Jesus, would you look at the state of that,' Snuff murmured. 'Someone taught you a lesson with a knife. How did you make it this far?'

Snuff sat back on a low rock staring at the wounded man. Medical help was out of the question. No doctor would come out to this place even if he were paid in advance. The men in the boat might come back, finish off their victim and leave the body behind them. A dead body on the hill meant difficult questions, especially with old man Lacey deceased and his son Gorgeous George on the run. Dumping the wounded man by the busy road bridge hoping someone would take him to hospital posed the risk of being seen. I could wait until he dies and then roll him back into the river, he thought, but some people take hours to die.

In Snuff's volunteer war against General Franco the severely and mortally wounded chose to stay behind to harass and slow the enemy before being killed by them. Except, this wasn't a war and Snuff didn't know who the enemy was now that he was back in Ireland. All in all, he thought, the dying bastard was selfish. He should have died in the water like a decent man would have done, instead of crawling out to make a nuisance of himself. Snuff considered giving him a little help to do the decent thing, like abandoning him to wait for his attackers return, or pulling him across the river bank to roll him into the water, or leaving him exposed to nature and to the wild animals. A stranger was not his concern when all he wanted was peace and to be left alone, keeping trouble from his door.

The nagging irritation from the stump of his missing leg interrupted these thoughts. His memory threw up jumbled flashes of hostile faces, guns firing, unimaginable pain, tanks and soldiers, helplessness and a group of women dragging him to shelter, barely alive. He stood up abruptly, his mind made up. 'Bastard,' he thought. 'You should have done the decent thing and stayed in the river.' Snapping his fingers, he called the dog to him. 'Heel, boy. Find Hercules and drive him down here. Be quick. The sooner we get this fella fixed and off the hill the better. We'll keep well clear of whatever fight he's into.' The dog ran away through the boulders and gorse bushes to find Hercules the donkey and drive him to where Snuff sat glaring at the wounded man. 'If you die before those two get back, you go in the river,' he muttered.

A burst of barking and braying signalled the dog had found Hercules. The donkey was unhappy at being harried. He burst through the bushes across from Snuff, braying and kicking out at the dog.

Calling the dog to heel away from the donkey, Snuff sat until Hercules calmed down and bent his head to pull at the grass around him. Talking to Hercules in a soothing voice, Snuff dragged the unconscious man to the donkey and with some effort, and without any cooperation from the donkey, hoisted the man across the donkey's back. Leading Hercules by the mane and with one hand holding the man steady, the procession of men and animals made their way carefully to Lacey's cottage, high up on the rocky hillside accurately named The Rock.

Laying him on the narrow bed, Snuff examined the man's wounds. His arms were slashed in several places as if he had defended himself against an attacker wielding a knife. A stab wound in his chest was not deep. The knife had probably glanced off a rib. Bruises and older cuts on his body showed he had been beaten at some point in the not too distant past. The head wound had been made by a blunt instrument, possibly by the oar the man in the boat had held. That was the sound Snuff had heard earlier on as the boat passed him.

Whatever story the man might tell, it was clear he had escaped from someone who meant him harm. His pursuers would come back to The Rock to make sure he was dead, or to finish him off. That was the last thing Snuff wanted. Removing the man's clothes and cleaning his wounds, Snuff covered him with a blanket and made him comfortable. Once the man was breathing evenly, Snuff went outside and lay face down on a grassy spot to the left of the cottage, blending into the background of gorse and rock. He had a clear view all the way down the hill to the river and from there all the way along the riverbank taking in the rail and the road bridges that spanned the river.

Goats and sheep moved among the gorse bushes. Grazing with their heads down they showed no concern for anything in their surroundings. The geese hissed at each other but without the incessant clamour and hooting they would start if anyone climbed the hill. Blackbirds click-clicked, arguing with each other, as they scooted from bush to bush. Swifts looped and swooped low across the face of the hill. The long grass on the edge of the river showed no signs of people having trampled through it in the last few hours. A fishing boat with a dark red sail was taking advantage of the slacker current near the far side of the river to make its way upstream.

Unwelcome visitors could not approach across the top of the hill from behind the cottage due to the sheer rock face that was the back of The Rock. The only access to the Lacey house was up the slope in front of Snuff. Anyone climbing The Rock on this side would have to contend with the obstacles of rugged rock and thick gorse bushes as well as bird and animal alarms. For added protection, Snuff rested old man Lacey's rifle on the ground beside him.

By mid morning the only movements on The Rock were those of the stolen pig foraging for food, the sheep grazing and the roused ram trying to mount the younger ewes. Snuff was sure there were no pursuers on The Rock, at least not yet. He made his way inside the cottage. The dog still sat on guard inside the door staring at the rescued man on the bed.

'Good dog. Lie down,' he muttered to the dog, rubbing its head before going to the bed to feel for the injured man's pulse. Stronger than when he had felt it earlier in the day, he thought, but still weak. With a bit of luck he might still die and be put back in the river.

