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Canon Dawson's confession queue had dwindled to Mrs O'Hara. After receiving absolution, Mrs O'Hara, asked by the canon if she was the last, opened the door, took a look, and whispered back that she was.

But Mrs O'Hara was in error. Roddie knelt down on the prie-dieu in the box, causing a switch to activate a red bulb on Canon Dawson's side. The canon had been in the act of standing up to leave but, seeing the light, sat down again unhappily, placing his elbow next to the grille, sighing into his knuckles.

'I have come to make my confession, Father,' Roddie said.

'Make it, so,' said Canon Dawson.

'I confess that I am Roger Casement, come back from the grave. I confess that I have made myself known to Boma Hephernan and Father Devenish. I confess to feelings of frustration that I am not believed.'

'What are you saying, man?' Canon Dawson asked. 'To fool simple believers, to try to fox my curate! That isn't enough, I suppose, without making a mockery of the confessional!'

'I am not making a mockery, Canon,' Roddie replied. 'I know what you have been thinking. I heard you and Father Devenish talking it

over. Lôrd, it's the devil's own job making believers believe! How am I going to manage with the others?'

'All right. What was I doing while I was talking to Father Devenish?'

'You were drinking whiskey. A Paddy as I recall. You had a second and made out that it wasn't like you. But, of course, it was rather.'

'Oh, was it *rather*? You were spying on us through the window!'

'You told Father Devenish that you thought my character precluded my return. I had a fair amount of burning to do; my reputation was in limbo, you said.'

'Spying! Have you no shame at all, man? Laying sin on top of sin!'

Roddie sighed. 'Amn't I in confession?' he asked.

'You are.'

'And it is a great sin to tell a lie in confession?'

'A great sin; a sin of which you are in grave danger of being guilty—'

'I am trying to think how I can convince you that I am speaking the truth. It's an uphill task, you must admit. Do you want a spring to bubble up outside the church? I can give you that if you want. But you'd probably call the Water Board. How about if I turn Miss O'Shea's kettle water to Paddy? Any good? No, you'd just say I'd got in while her back was turned. A phial of blood to bubble away? That might do the trick, eh? Or maybe not. You see, what I don't understand is how you, who make your living from believing every last jot and tittle of Faith, who believe that this confession is being listened to upstairs, that the Good Lord has the time or inclination to hear past the screams from the poor planet, find it so hard to believe a tiny piece of divine intervention on your own doorstep.'

'All right,' said Canon Dawson, 'let's say I do believe you. What then?'

'I have my own reasons for being here. But I'd have thought that the fact of my being here would be immensely consoling for any poor sheep who are having trouble with their shepherds.'

'Not you. You'd be a scandal.'

'For why?'

'If you don't know I can't tell you.'

'You mean the diaries? It's amazing how they come to be the only thing that some people remember. Did I or didn't I write them? Was I or wasn't I? Father, believe me, though I had my fair share of original sin and a few scarlet letters on my front when I dropped, my jottings were the least of it.'

‘Oh, you think so, do you?’

‘You’re not the first to think it, of course. The British government thought so. My prison guards too. I kept hearing that their distribution among friend and foe would do for me. Cardinal Bourne, when I asked to be received into the Church in the weeks before my execution, made it a condition that I wrote a letter apologizing for the scandals I had caused. I refused. Why should I apologize for something that was God-given? It would be like throwing a gift back in the Good Lord’s face. Even if you might never have chosen it for yourself – and don’t you find gifts are often like that? – manners are *de rigueur*. For I had caused no scandals. The British government it was who caused the scandal, distributing my private papers around the world like tongue sandwiches at a wake. And it worked too. You’ve swallowed it. I was made by my writing, then just as surely unmade by it.’

‘But you died a Catholic?’ said Canon Dawson, then, having asked the question, seeing that he was appearing to accept the invisible penitent’s viewpoint, frowned to himself, invisible in his dark box.

‘I did, but only *in articulo mortis* on the eve of the execution. They kept me on tenterhooks to the very end all right.’

‘You know a lot about your subject, I’ll grant you that,’ said Canon Dawson.

‘O ye of little faith,’ Roddie replied. ‘I’m not going to stay here any longer to beat my head against a brick wall. It will all come out anyway. I had hoped you might like to be the ones who passed on some good news for a change. I thought that was what you were about.’

Canon Dawson saw the light go off, heard the door whoosh closed. He got up quickly and threw open the door on his side of the confessional. He looked about him, but the church was empty.

PETER COUGHLIN TOOK HIS CAP OFF TO SALUTE THE STATUE OF ROGER Casement as he passed it on his way to Brennan's Bar that night. He stopped for a moment, admiring the dark silhouette of the life-size figure, the feet planted a foot apart, his back to the night ocean and the great world, gazing – handcuffed – over Irish horizons.

'A fine figure of a man, you were! God bless you!' said Peter Coughlin. Then he put his cap back on his head, and stepped over to the pub.

Peter was not prepared for the crowd of people in the bar. Brennan and his wife were beside themselves trying to keep ahead of the orders. Peter looked around, searching for people he knew. But if there were any regulars there they were hidden from him by the crowd of strangers, men mostly, laughing and drinking. A group had taken the side of the bar he had always considered to be his own. The television, instead of being tuned to the satellite channel and the big match from Sao Paolo, was showing Radio Telefis Eirann, the sound turned off.

'The usual, Peter?' Brennan asked.

Peter nodded. Brennan pulled his pint without another word, took his money and went off to serve some customers at the far end of the bar.

Peter Coughlin stood, a stranger in his own home-from-home, and drank his pint.

A young man occupying his usual seat at the bar, said to his companions, 'We'll walk along the beach to Banna Strand and then cut inland into Ardfert. That way we can see if we can manage to get to all the places Sir Roger was.'

'It's a long way.'

'There's no point taking the car.'

Peter Coughlin approached the group. 'You're here because of Roger Casement?' he asked them.

They exchanged glances. 'We are,' said the man in his seat. 'We've driven all the way down from Dublin.'

'You and the whole world it looks like,' Peter said.

'We wouldn't miss it,' said the man in Peter Coughlin's seat. 'Isn't it a great thing to be happening?'

'It is. If it is, that is,' replied Peter.

'It's happening all right,' said his companion. 'I'm not a great one for miracles but this one is different. Too many things happening all together to be anything else.'

'It's bloody marvellous, that's what it is!'

'He was a great patriot,' said Peter.

The men looked at one another. 'He was,' said the man with the spiky haircut.

'Do you lads have any theories about why he's come back?'

Once again, the men looked at one another. 'Because,' continued Peter, stepping into the silence with both feet, 'I think he's back to expose the wicked lies spread about him by the English.'

'Ah,' said the older man, 'you do?'

'I do. What do you think?'

There was a hesitation, a long moment of diffidence, before the man with the spiky hair said, 'We don't think so.'

'Oh, you don't? What do you think?'

'We think,' the man replied, looking towards his friends to make confession easier, 'we think that Roger Casement has come back to show us that gay can be good.'

Peter Coughlin thought about that. 'So you're saying that Roger Casement was a homosexual, are you?'

'It's obvious,' said the older man. 'You only have to read a few pages of the diaries to know.'

'It takes one to know one,' said the man with the spiky hair.

'And he's back to bring consolation to homosexuals, is he?'

'Well, we could do with a bit. It's not been easy being despised and told you're damned all these years. It's about time somebody came back from heaven to say we're not. We know it. We feel it in our bones. But it's nice to have an informed second opinion.'

Peter Coughlin saw Brennan passing by. 'Did you hear that one, Brennan? These lads are saying that Roger Casement was homosexual!'

Brennan tried to shush Peter Coughlin but it was too late. The bar went quiet. 'If you believe that, you'll believe anything!' Peter said, smiling round the bar, oblivious, looking for support. 'The moon's made of Irish butter too. Did you know that?'

But there was little enough support for Peter Coughlin. Those who might have agreed with him had already seen how the land lay in the bar. A voice from the far end of the bar shouted, 'St Roger Casement was gay. I'm gay and I've never felt better.'

Another man, invisible to Peter Coughlin, said, 'If he hadn't been gay he'd probably have settled down in the Glens of Antrim and never done any of the good he did. He's my patron saint, so he is! I've given St Paul the heave-ho!'

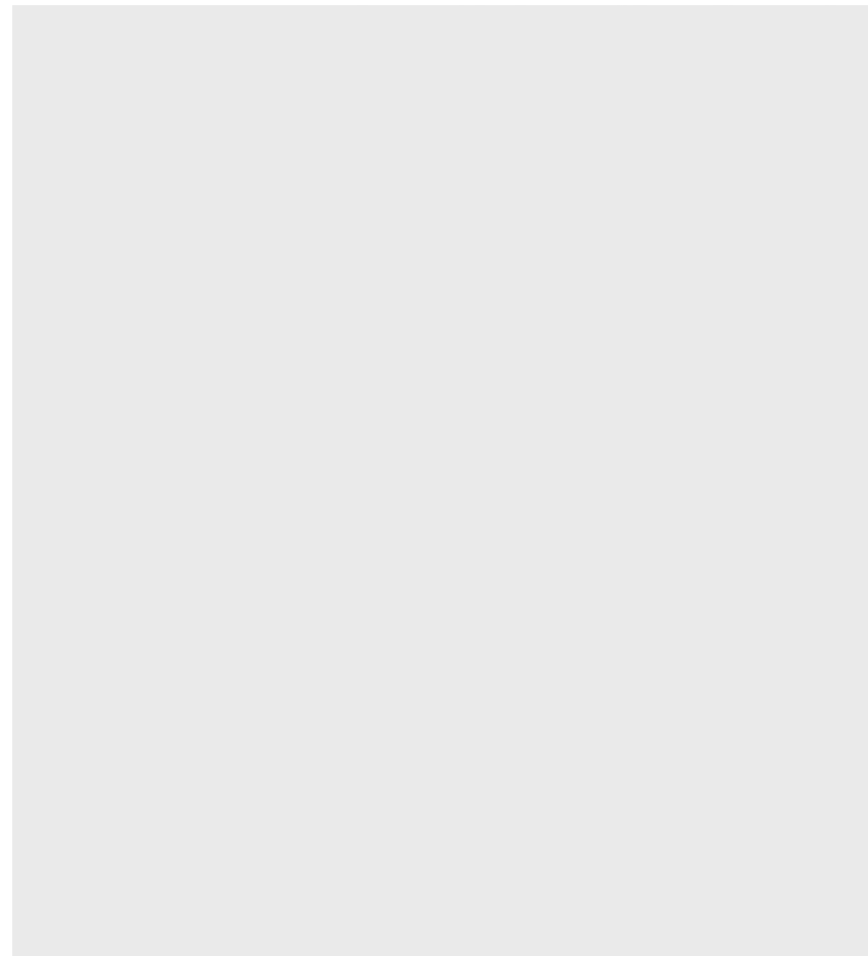
A cheer went up.

Peter Coughlin, seeing at last how the land lay and that it was giving way beneath both his feet, put his unfinished pint on the bar and left

the pub without another word. He heard a cheer as the door banged shut.

The silhouette of the Roger Casement statue loomed across the street. Peter approached it, stood beneath the plinth for a moment, wondering where to go. His cap stayed firmly on his head. He had not frequented any other bar in Ballyheige for years. Not knowing what to do, what to think, he walked off home, forlorn.

The following morning the people of Ballyheige awoke to find the statue of Roger Casement bedecked with flowers. Bunches of daffodils and tulips lay around the plinth. On his head had been set a plaited crown of early bluebells and late primroses.



Definitions¹

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Canon (n.): a Christian priest who works in a cathedral

to dwindle (v.): to gradually become smaller

prie-dieu (n.): a kneeling bench designed for use by a person at prayer and fitted with a raised shelf on which the elbows or a book may be rested

grille (n.): a metal frame with bars running across it that is used to cover or protect something

to fox (v.): to trick or fool someone

curate (n.): a member of the clergy in certain churches who assists the priest in charge of a church or a group of churches

mockery (n.): behavior or speech that makes fun of someone or something in a hurtful way

Roddie: Roger Casement's nickname in this novel

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to preclude (v.): to make something impossible, to prevent something from happening

limbo (n.): an uncertain or undecided state or condition; in the Roman Catholic religion also a place where the souls of people who have not been baptized go after death

uphill (adj.): against difficulties

spring (n.): a source of water coming up from the ground

phial (n.): a small closed or closable vessel especially for liquids

every last jot and tittle (idiom): the very smallest details²

inclination (n.): a feeling of wanting to do something

to console (v.): to try to make someone feel less sadness or disappointment

jottings (n.): notes that are written down quickly

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de rigueur (adv/adj.): prescribed or required by fashion, etiquette, or custom (French)

wake (n.): a time before a dead person is buried when people gather to remember the person who has died and often to view the body

penitent (n.): a person who is sorry for doing something wrong and asks for forgiveness

in articulo mortis (adv.): at the point of death (Latin)

on tenterhooks: in a state of nervousness or excitement caused by wondering what will happen

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to expose (v.): to reveal something

wicked (adj.): morally bad

hesitation (n.): an act or instant of hesitating (to stop briefly before you do something especially because you are nervous or unsure about what to do)

diffidence (n.): the quality or state of being unassertive or diffident (lacking confidence)

obvious (adj.): easy to see or notice

consolation (n.): something that makes a person feel less sadness or disappointment

to despise (v.): to dislike something or someone very much

to shush (v.): to tell someone to be quiet

oblivious (adj.): not conscious or aware of someone or something

heave-ho (n.): the act of causing someone to leave a job, place, or relationship

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to loom (v.): to appear in a large, strange, or frightening form often in a sudden way

plinth (n.): a block of stone or wood that is used as the base for a pillar or statue

forlorn (adj.): sad and lonely

daffodils (n.): a yellow flower that blooms in the spring and that has a center that is shaped like a long tube

to plait (v.): to twist together three pieces of hair (or rope, etc.) to make a braid

bluebells (n.): a plant with blue flowers that are shaped like bells

¹ Unless stated otherwise, all definitions have been taken and/or adapted from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (*Merriam-Webster*, 2021, www.merriam-webster.com) or the Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary (*Merriam-Webster*, 2021, www.learnersdictionary.com).

² «jot and tittle.» Farlex Dictionary of Idioms. *The Free Dictionary by Farlex*, 2015, idioms.thefreedictionary.com/jot+and+tittle. Accessed 20 November 2021.