Of All the Cities

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Abstract

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OF ALL the cities, there is none like London. The streets are wet brick, and there are little fog-bound squares and alleys. There are hidden chimes that strike out through the dark and rain, and everything is secret. The little shops are close and quiet . . . and the public houses blaze with naked light, and the winter nights are black and filled with mist. There are always the sounds and feelings of wetness, and unknown women speak from the doorways.

There was a winter night when a soldier walked through the black streets. He sought a circle of light and warmth where he would drink his gin and lime while the men played at their darts and skittles and spoke of many things, and perhaps there would be a woman there who would drink with him . . . He had the walk of a man who had found a few such places already. He was an expert. By only the degree of a sliver of light behind a blackout curtain he could determine the price of the establishment’s gin. A shrewd and practiced soldier. A long-timer. He was careful to choose. He passed several pubs for some reason of his own, and then there was the sound of a piano and laughter. As everyone knows, a soldier should have music and laughter with his drink, and so the soldier turned in.

There was an open place at the bar, and there was another soldier beside him who said, “My name’s McCarthy, and I was busted last month for going AWOL, but it wasn’t my fault. I want to sing, and you’re the man I’m looking for. You look like a good man.”

“I am a good man, McCarthy, even as you! What would you care to sing?”

“My name is McCarthy, and I would sing the Ballynure Ballad!”

“It is a song of which I do not know the words, gentle McMarthy, but sing while I order an order, an order which I order you to let me buy!”

As I was goin’ to Ballynure, a day I will remember,
For to view the lads and lasses there on the fifth day of November . . .”

[30]
And the song rang.
“McCarthy, may I tender my congratulations. In all the lands of the world there is no man more worthy than yourself. You are a good man, McCarthy!”
“I accept your acknowledgement, my friend.”
“Stay with me, McCarthy, while I raze the walls . . .”
“Another martyr for old Ireland, another murder for the Crown
Whose brutal laws may kill the Irish, but can’t keep their spirit down . . .”
And that song rang, too. It rang from red British face to red British face, to the dart board and velvet curtains, and back to the bartender again.
“I’ll ‘ave to ask you to leave. You’ve ‘ad too much, and we don’t allow song.”
“Another place where they don’t allow song, McCarthy; in a world with already too little song and gentleness.”
“I know a place, old friend . . . it is Pat Mooney’s, and it is by the river. There we will sing, in a gin-mill not yet lost to beauty!”
And then there were wet, winding alleys and the smell of sewer and river. There were leagues of streets that were wild with music that night, and two men whose song filled the darkness. There were two Yankees, by God, who knew all the secrets of life and death, and they would fill all the cold rooms where the people slept with their youth and their song . . . Then the red-headed young woman was walking between them, and she had a package under her arm. She was going to Pat Mooney’s also, she let it be known, and now the song had three voices. The two soldiers were happy. There was another friend in the world, and Pat Mooney’s was just around the corner . . .
“Where is a bare bulb softer . . is a sawdust floor more kind? O Patrick Mooney, you have a good place here by the river, and we will sing all the songs of the world for you . . . hot damn!
“Underneath the Dublin pavement, in a cold and dreary cell,
British soldiers tortured Barry, just because he would not tell
All the names of friends and comrades, and the things they wished to know,
But Kevin Barry was a brave lad . . . to the gallows he must go!"
The big bartender in the striped shirt came from behind the bar and went to the table.
"You can't sing that song here, lads!"
"What the hell's wrong with that song?"
"Nothing, lads, nothing, but there are police about . . ."
The soldiers quieted and talked to the red-headed young woman, and suddenly a man stood by the table. He wore an old black overcoat and was thin. His hair was too long, and the eyes were bright and very, very blue. He nodded at the soldier who had been singing.
"A foine song, sergeant, but one to be sung lowly." He looked at the young woman across the table. "Ye have not bin to a meetin' lately."
"I'm sorry, Sean, but I've been that busy . . . and when is the next one?"
"Tuesday . . . the same."
"I know, Sean; look for me . . ."
"There are things that want talkin' over, girl. We'll be expectin' ye." The blue eyes were burning in the thin face, and they looked at the first soldier. "A foine boyo, and a singer of songs . . . would ye care to come with Kate next Tuesday night?"
The first soldier had been drunk, but he was not that drunk. "No, thank you . . . much obliged, but no . . . my leave's up tomorrow . . . thanks anyway . . . you know how it is, but thanks . . ."
The soldier got up and went out into the darkness. He left the place that had sawdust on the floor and that was nearly empty but for the men who spoke together across the tables, but drank little. There were other places to go, and he went, and he never knew what became of McCarthy and the young red-haired woman with the package.
There was cold rain and the smell of sewers and river. Somewhere far across the river a chime struck the hour, and then there was nothing but the sound of the rain and the gutters. Of all the cities, there is none quite like London.