

VENGEANCE BETRAYED



P.D. LAFLEUR

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With a sharp pull upwards on the heavy knotted rope, the young boy reached the thick branch of the alder that was his goal. The branch was broad and ran nearly parallel to the ground for several feet when it split and made a dense canopy of the deepest green. From this vantage point, not far above the front door of his grandparents' cottage, he could scan east and nearly see the deep cold waters of Carlingford Lough and pretend to be a mate aboard a grand sailing ship. At ten, he had only recently finished Stevenson's *Treasure Island* in which he identified closely with young Jim Hawkins. Like Jim, this lad craved travel and adventure. He reached the crotch of two strong branches and imagined himself perched in the crow's nest of the *Hispaniola*. He probed the horizon and determined it was a fine day for sailing.

Comfortable in his fantasy, he plucked a leaf and stuck the stem between his teeth. Below him, separated from his perch by a scant six feet, was the gray slate roof of the cottage, and a lone pigeon sat at the edge of the painted bricks of the chimney. There was no peat fire today, it being a rare day of relative warmth and sunshine in Rostrevor, and no wisps of smoke escaped the flue and curled its way into the sky as it did on typical damp and foggy mornings. The dull gray pigeon became a bright green parrot and the slate roof the rolling deck of the *Hispaniola*. If the voices of his grandparents had not been so plain and clear through the open door and windows, the reverie might be more complete. Their conversation in their sitting room about the vagaries of Irish weather and the rising price of good beef certainly didn't sound like that of coarse adventurers seeking pirate gold.

The nearest neighbor was the ancient widow Kibroney far to the north. A narrow brook ran past his grandparents' home, and a crude wooden bridge spanned it and led to a narrow path. Widow Kibroney's cottage sat alongside the path several hundred yards away and over the crest of the hill. It

was a mean affair with untended gardens surrounding it, and it reflected the character of Mrs. Kibroney herself. Narrow, with a pronounced list to one side, lonely and unwelcoming.

His grandparents, he was proud to note by comparison, maintained a bright and cheery home, with colorful and aromatic patches of wild gentian and fennel clustered about it, and a garden promising various melons, tomatoes and luscious other payback. His grandfather, recently retired from his professorship at Queens College in Belfast, enjoyed the mornings with his coffee, rolls and newspapers. Grandmother, who had once owned a coffee house in Rostrevor, filled the house with the aromas of baking breads and muffins. The couple was as gregarious as they were gracious and he thoroughly enjoyed the time spent with them and in their care. Friends and relatives were frequent visitors, and he learned as much about horsemanship and dog training as he ever would by simply being in the presence of their conversations.

He only wished that his grandparents would stop calling him “Linny” or “Young Lins”, but this was a small price to pay for the fresh air and trees he enjoyed, the cracking wit and wisdom of his grandfather, and the delicious food and rich desserts his grandmother prepared for him. Except for the silly name, Linny felt like a young prince during his holidays here.

The green hills of Rostrevor and the welcoming warmth of his grandparents were a stark contrast to his own surroundings in London. There, his home was narrow, tall and built of gray granite, sited on a street of nearly identical houses. Gracious in their own way, the buildings reflected a Victorian perspective: Solid, and sound, but simultaneously cold and uninviting. With few trees and fewer grand vistas, London afforded him scant opportunity to exercise his imagination, which he fed with voracious reading. That’s why he leaped at the unexpected opportunity to visit his mother’s parents in Ireland. His father had been called once more to exercise his considerable skill in important negotiations relative to the Middle East, and his mother, as was customary, would accompany her husband on the mission. This was, after all, a summons from the highest authority.

He and his parents rarely took advantage of the country estate of his paternal grandparents in Cumbria. It too was a naturally inviting place with rolling hills and profuse gardens, but it was to his mother's parents that he was sent on occasions such as this. And in truth, he preferred Ireland to Cumbria, and his mother's family to his father's. In Cumbria, grandfather and grandmother furnished a less carefree escape. They were more austere in their approach, more stern in their manner, and more reserved with their emotions. They expected their grandson to dress formally for dinner each evening and to maintain a demeanor appropriate to his family's standing in society.

While he felt affection for his father's parents, they were so unlike his Irish kin who would eagerly trot off to their local for a pint and the crack of conversation and debate. The youngster looked forward to those times when he'd join his Gran and Granda at the pub and absorb the sights and smells and sounds of enthusiasm that regularly engaged his every sense.

Still scanning the Lough from the "Hispaniola", he thought he spied two figures on bicycles riding in his general direction across the fields. Unusual, he thought, but not unheard of, with so few cars on the area roads. Rostrevor had nothing in common with the crowded, smoke-choked streets of London. He studied their forms as they neared: One of marked breadth, and the other much taller but with sloped shoulders and much thinner. Workingmen's clothes. He thought of Mutt and Jeff from the comic pages and noted that the broader of the two carried a rucksack. They were perhaps a quarter mile away when they reached a white wooden fence and dismounted their cycles. They parked their bikes against the fence facing downhill, the direction from which they had ridden, and began to cross the field on foot. There was no doubt now that they were heading directly to the cottage. They moved unhurriedly and uncommunicatively. This looked like it might be a business call rather than a visit from two friends.

He kept silent as a fly in the tree above when the two men reached the cottage and he rested there not six feet above their heads when they rapped at the door frame. The noise stopped his

grandmother mid-sentence. "Yes?" she called to the doorway. Her voice was as bright as a bird's.

"Who is it?"

The bright sunshine outdoors kept the two visitors in deep silhouette. They did not respond at once, and after a moment or two of silence the shorter of the two slipped his arms from the rucksack and opened it while he remained standing just outside the cottage doorway.

"Well, who might you be?" It was his grandfather speaking now. "Come in if you've a mind. It's so bright out there I can't see who you are." He could hear his grandfather's shuffling feet as he made his way across the flagstone floor and approached the front door.

He heard his grandmother say, "Who is it, Ian?"

The shorter of the two visitors removed a long black pistol from the rucksack and calmly handed it to his taller colleague who accepted it and held it waist high. The shorter one then reached into the rucksack and slowly withdrew a long knife, its blade glinting in the sunshine. To this point, neither had uttered a word. The youngster almost gasped aloud when he saw the knife and the pistol and his eyes were wide in alarm as the visitors entered the cottage. He heard a rush of breath and a sucking sound and could only guess that the long knife had been put to use on his grandfather. A low groan, surely the voice of his Granda', confirmed this, and his ears told him that he was slumping to the hard stone floor of the cottage entry. "Why, why?" It was his grandfather in a weak voice.

Again the sound of knife entering flesh. A scream ... his Gran just coming to understand that her husband of forty-seven years was mortally hurt. Then a loud pop ... the gun. Less explosion than a sharp crack, and he heard a body hit the floor hard. Only now did either visitor say a word.

"Tis done. Let's just give them a quick neck slice to send them to their reward in hell."

"Aye", the other responded. Some shuffling about the cottage and the two men walked out as indifferently as when they arrived. Without any evidence of rushing, they made their way to their

bicycles, walking them a ways as they came; no rush and no conversation. The whole scene took perhaps fifty seconds from the first rap at the doorway to their exit.

Young Linny waited until he was certain the men were pedaling their bicycles and heading down the hillside and away before he dared scramble down and enter the cottage himself. Breathing was difficult, coming in short bursts. He stood at the door at the exact spot where the visitors stood and made their presence known. In the semi-darkness of the interior, Linny could see his grandfather lay, head nearly severed, in a thick pool of blood. There was no movement, but his eyes and mouth were wide open in a fixed state of surprise. Not five feet away, his grandmother lay crumpled in the middle of the room, eyes closed, blood still pulsing in dribbles from her neck, her legs quivering once and then again, a flutter of movement from her eyes, both still twitching, but even to the youngster, death a certainty and in short order; there was no saving her. Upon the white wall of the kitchen, directly above the table, a single printed word in blood: "Harvest."