



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

Queensland Branch

PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION
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Highly Commended in the Open Division

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Food for thought

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Food for thought

Does it ever stop raining in this God-forsaken place?

Irishmen must have webbed feet. Perhaps that's why they don't wear shoes.

The aftermath of spiteful gales that slammed into the south-western coast of County Donegal proved every bit as damaging as the violent sea. Tensions in the area ran higher than the king tide. Storm clouds of a different kind gathered in the autumn of 1845, because a wrecked Spanish galleon stowed more than illicit brandy and tobacco.

William closed his eyes and breathed deeply on clean, moist air. The worn-out breeze wafted irritating mizzle, belying the weather's ferocity just three days prior. From his favourite viewpoint – the hill behind the Coastguard Station – he could see the hull's skeletal remains. It lay in the bay, torn on the rocks off the tiny fishing village of Portnoo. The gaping hole at the fore suggested the ship had died screaming in agony. Why: painful death; fear of law and retribution; futility of lives lost?

How did he, how did any of them, think securing plunder while the storm still toyed with the wreckage, like a cat with a mouse, was a sound idea?

William thought of Patrick, mercifully the only local casualty, who'd been swept off the foredeck as it shattered. He must've been knocked unconscious for he drowned in shallow water. If only they'd reached him in time, but that dark night did no-one any favours. What a waste, especially as the man was only after food – echoes of the famine still etched in his gaunt face.

Couldn't they have waited 'til the storm subsided?

William stretched his thick neck from side to side. He felt pain in his tight shoulders, pushed beyond their limits when he'd fought ferocious wind and wild waves to pull Seán, the thatcher, from beneath a fallen boom. The coastguard's stocky body was tested further when he relieved the wreck of umpteen barrels of Spanish brandy – until ones that should have swished rattled instead. Six of the large barrels concealed vengeance: guns. These, and the surviving crew members, were now under tight security at an inn in Ardara – the largest town near Portnoo – awaiting an escort of infantry. Rumours ran rife that ribbonmen

would storm the building to reclaim their property. Rumours were common-place nowadays. These were troubled times.

Today was Patrick's wake and, much to William's surprise, he'd been invited. The cottage nestled in the distance: small, white, thatched. He observed mourners arrive by horse and cart, but mostly on foot. William stretched again, winced, and took another deep breath. It was Shanks's pony for him, too. He could delay this challenge no longer. The invitation was instigated by Seán and sanctioned by the Chief Boatman. William had hoped the Chief would refuse, given fraternisation between English coastguards and locals wasn't encouraged. Fighting waves was one thing, but attending his first Catholic wake, knee-deep in Irishmen, quite another. According to his Chief – a frequent flouter of 'them bloody imbecilic rules' – any attempt to live apart in such an isolated area was futile and counter-productive – 'Don't ignore an open door' – so, the invitation was accepted, albeit reluctantly. William picked his way down to the beach. A walk along the sands would calm him and halve the distance covered by the muddy, pot-holed lanes that wound around the hills' natural contours.

The expansive beach that edged Gweebarra Bay bore the scars of the last 72 hours. Flotsam and jetsam of rebellious dreams lay strewn across a beach normally washed clean by the incessant ebb and flow of the Atlantic. William picked his way through remnants of once sturdy decking and adventure-filled sails, most of which was being gathered and repurposed. He watched ripples wash softly over detritus, as if trying to gently revive it with a watery nudge. At least the dead fish, given up by the ocean as a peace offering, were gathered instantly and salted as quickly.

What beast does this? One day her anger smashes intruders to smithereens; the next, she nuzzles into the aftermath, trying to kiss and make up.

Those gathered outside Patrick's cottage fell into stony silence as William approached. What was a uniform doing here? Arriving at the open door, William removed his hat, flattened his unruly hair with a spit-wet hand and ducked beneath the lintel. He'd wiped his booted feet but, noticing the earthen floor, wondered why. It took a few moments to adjust to the dingy interior. Dense tobacco fug and smoke from a badly-ventilated peat fire stung his eyes. His lungs struggled too, and coughed in protest at the thick, pungent air. The amiable hubbub was suffocated by the appearance of the coastguard. William didn't exactly blend in.

'Willem Yong, is that yourself? Please be welcome.'

A man with the reddest hair and beard William had ever seen extracted himself from a huddle by the fire. He was unmistakably Seán, the man he'd rescued. Seán shook William's calloused hand vigorously and, in melodic Gaelic, introduced William as the

man who'd not only saved his life, but spared him the fate awaiting plunderers. Mugs and 'sláinte' were raised to William. The grateful survivor turned to him and continued in faltering English.

'Pip?' A clay pipe was pushed into William's hand. 'Smoke.' Seán mimed puffing on the pipe.

'Thank you.' William was unsure why he'd been given the pipe. A gesture of thanks perhaps; but no, every man present sucked and puffed on similar pipes. A tradition, no doubt.

The level of oiled chatter rose once more. Seán rejoined his huddle, which closed in like a giant clam shell, while William attempted to meld into the shadows and take in his surroundings. Makeshift shelves, made from damp planks, presumably from the wreck, lined the back wall. A raised platform was built into the far corner, next to the fire. The curtains would afford privacy at night but were drawn back for the occasion. Three men sat cross-legged on the platform, deep in discussion. William noticed they hadn't raised their mugs earlier, but instead muttered and shot him withering looks.

The late Patrick O'Shea lay on a table in the centre of the room, as if having a good kip. No coffin. No satin. No decorum. On his chest lay several clay pipes, which were presented to each new arrival. William glanced at his; it brought new meaning to shanties about a dead man's chest.

Yo ho ho? I think not.

A priest approached William.

'I believe that's yourself, William Young. They tell me you're a hero. God bless you, son. I'm Father Gallagher.'

William shook the new arrival's hand, even though he'd only understood 'William Young'. He recoiled from his alcohol-laden breath as the priest continued to natter away in Gaelic.

'So tell me, William. I haven't seen ye at Mass on the hill. Are ye a good God-fearing Catholic or a shameless heathen protestant usurper?' The priest chuckled at his own ecclesiastic dig.

William guessed the priest had said something amusing, so he smiled and nodded politely.

'What's that? What ye be smiling at yer daft English bugger?'

The tone continued to sound humorous to William, so he raised his bushy eyebrows, nodded and smiled even more broadly, dimples burrowing surreptitiously beneath his beard.

‘Are ye feckin’ simple? Ah, surely ye’ll be a feckin’ Protty pagan heathen bastard. Ye’ll burn in eternal hell fire, ye know that, son? Ah go on with ye; póg mo thóin’.

The rich, rounded dialect wafted around William’s mind like sea mist – recognisable but impossible to capture. But William had picked up enough Gaelic to know póg mo thóin meant kiss my arse.

‘You must be wondering what the hell’s going on,’ asked a bespectacled man, his clean weilycoat and groomed appearance at odds with his peers. He extended his hand. ‘Jacob Murphy’s the name. Pleased to make your acquaintance.’

‘How do you do? William Young at your service, sir. If I might be permitted to note, you speak very good English.’

‘Thank you, Mr Young. And if *I* might be permitted to note, so do you!’

They stared at each other for a moment, calculating each other’s measure, then laughed. Jacob’s soft hands suggested a desk job; his firm grip – presence and purpose. Strong eye contact revealed confidence and depth, and laughter lines a well-worn sense of humour. William’s first impression was warm.

They engaged in inconsequential small-talk, refilled their clay pipes several times, and imbibed more than their fair share of liquor. William knew it was probably illegal poteen but the more he drank, the less he cared. His tongue loosened in equal measure to increasing bravado, as the conversation turned political. Jacob listened respectfully. He interjected occasionally but mostly just nodded and made affirmative ‘I’m listening’ sounds.

Finally, William’s pent-up frustration about the gun-running operation peaked. He vented his alcohol-fuelled thoughts without guard or consideration of social etiquette.

‘So, why don’t you all just get over it? It was all so long ago. We’re talking centuries, for goodness sake.’

This first question in William’s diatribe gave Jacob the opportunity to counter the Englishman’s statements, having first checked that no-one had overheard what would be considered fighting words. Fortuitously, their declaration had coincided with a man named Padraig attempting a drunken jig before crashing into the fire irons.

‘And you, William. Would you “just get over it”? I appreciate it’s hard for you to understand our position. You’re here at England’s behest; she bows the knee to no-one. Yet

we're expected to.' Jacob tamped fresh tobacco into his pipe and offered the pouch to William.

'But how far back d'you go to seek retribution? At some point we all have to deal with the lot we've been given, surely?'

'Jaysus wept; spoken like a true colonialist, William! That's the issue: the English aren't *given* lots; they're the lot givers. It's a very different side of the coin. What'd you have us do? Rub our hands in humble supplication while England basks in the glory of benevolent benefactress? You can't give to someone something that was already theirs, and expect them to be grateful.'

'Surely England's intervention is to Ireland's benefit?'

'Did we ask for it?'

'Perhaps you didn't realise you needed it.' William waved his pipe expansively at Jacob, his words whiskey-thick.

'Can you hear yourself there, William? Listen my new friend, will you indulge me a wee moment?'

William hiccoughed and nodded.

'Imagine France invades and conquers England tomorrow.'

'But we're not talking *invasion* anymore. Didn't your bigwigs accept peace following the marriage of one of our noblemen and what's-her-name – one of yours?'

'True; they did. But it was a no-win situation. Look, suppose the conquering French marry off a high-ranking aristocrat to a royal, to appease the English – then continue to exert authority.'

'It wouldn't happen.'

'Why not?'

'Well, because we wouldn't stand for it.'

'Ah hah! So isn't historical and current unrest just a symptom of us Irish not standing for it?'

William's brain clunked like an automaton as thoughts registered and found purchase among unchallenged assumptions. Seán brought over a fresh flagon. William declined, distracted by the uncomfortable digestion of insight. Jacob filled his mug and swigged deeply, then coughed and spluttered.

'Shite, Seán; that's enough to draw me arse up to me eyeballs! Who distilled this?'

‘Don’t be blaming me, Jacob Murphy. Patrick Seamus brought it along.’

‘A man could go blind, don’t you know.’ Jacob wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

William didn’t understand a word apart from shite. He continued regardless.

‘But if the French brought positive advancements, things mightn’t be so bad?’

‘Perhaps not,’ Jacob rasped. He shook his head at the disappearing Seán. ‘But how will you feel when your children come home from school and tell you they *have* to study and converse only in French; that they’ll be beaten if they speak a word of English?’

William drew on his pipe. He wouldn’t like it one bit. No sir, not one little bit.

‘It’s an interesting debate, is it not?’ Jacob clapped William on his shoulder. ‘Come now, you’re gaining a reputation as a fair man, William.’

‘Fair *and* law-abiding,’ William emphasised. ‘Granted, I stretch the rules every now and then. Just do what’s right according to my gut. Don’t care what language a man speaks. Right’s right and fair’s fair.’

‘Didn’t you take the law into your own hands when you allowed Seán to slip away?’

‘That’s different. The man was just trying to feed his hungry family.’

‘Ah, I see,’ said Jacob, with a wry smile. ‘William Young, your words are as sturdy as your coastguard’s forearms.’

‘Jacob, what’re you doing, man?’ Padraig had recovered from his fall and wandered over.

‘He’s a feckin’ English tyrannical bastard, here to spy on us. Should’ve slammed the door in his face.’

William took a step back, understanding only the sentiment. Jacob intervened by placing his hand on the latter’s chest.

‘Padraig, sit down you drunk old sod, before you say something we all regret. William’s a good one. Saved Seán’s life. *And* his likely transportation, if not execution!’

‘Ah, feck. Youse probably a traitor too, Jacob. Youse all feckin’ traitors.’ Padraig waved his arms liberally. ‘Youse all feckin’ Pommy sympathisers.’

The crowd cheered and raised their mugs.

‘Don’t ye be listening to him now,’ called a fisherman, one who’d done nothing more in the past than nod curtly at William.

Well, blow me if the old bugger don’t speak English after all.

‘Don’t speak their feckin’ tongue!’ Padraig’s voice rose higher with each affront. Spittle flecked his lips. ‘I’ll kill the feckin’ lot of youse.’

‘Ah, pull the shillelagh out yer arse there, will you Padraig?’ someone yelled.

‘Won’t neither. They killed my mother. The feckers killed my sweet old ma, God rest her soul.’

‘Sweet?’ someone else called across the good-natured laughter. ‘She could arm-wrestle a sailor and drink any man under the table. It was the poteen that did for her.’

‘No, it was the English. I swear it was the English.’ Padraig started to cry. He slumped against the white-washed wall, slid down and passed out.

Father Gallagher stepped into the limelight, even though he could barely stand. He held onto the table and admonished those present to pray. William was surprised at the command the priest held, as the room quietened and heads bowed.

‘Lord God Creator, our Father, and Father of all mankind. And Father of the one true faith and the one true Ireland. We commence to you, *commit* to you our dear brother Patrick, named after your own true servant who rid this glorious green land of ours of the snakes that would kill us in our beds.’ He paused to squint at William through a half-open eye. ‘Strengthen us in our time of trial that we may fright, *fight* the good fright – ah feck, fight – with your might and whatever or whoever else you might send to help us, storms permitting. Drive the devils once more from our midst. Rip out their fangs and neutralise their venom. And *crush* their heads,’ he prayed, as he slammed his fist on the table. He promptly lost balance, slipped sideways and fell over.

‘Come along, Father. Let’s be getting you home.’ Two men helped the inebriated priest to his feet and navigated him towards the door.

William sensed a distinct shift in atmosphere, like opening the front door on a snowy winter’s night. He was about to execute a decorous exit when the most beautiful yet mournful sound rooted him to the spot. The source was a fiddle, soon to be joined by a tin whistle, and then a voice so haunting William felt a mouse run over his grave. The words clearly moved those present. He assumed it was a tribute to the deceased; an acknowledgement of loss. But the deepening chill hinted otherwise. Loss – yes, but not of Patrick. The small group of women who’d remained ensconced by the entrance to the only other room in the cottage moved outside. The men began to talk in low, serious voices. The three non-toasting bed-sitters, as William had pegged them, looked in his direction. They muttered, nodded and nudged. It was definitely time to leave. William ducked outside to offer his condolences to the widow before heading home. Jacob intercepted him.

‘William Young. It was good of you to come, and my privilege to make your acquaintance. I’m taking those families there to Portnoo in my cart. I’ll be glad to extend the offer of a ride. There’s still the threat of a storm. You’ll *not* want to be caught on these lanes alone tonight.’

William glanced at the thick mantle of glittery stars in the clear night sky. Jacob wasn’t referring to the weather. Meanwhile, the bed-sitters had also come to the door. They entreated Jacob to join them.

‘I’ll be with you lads by and by,’ Jacob responded in Gaelic. ‘Let me first make sure the coast is clear.’ He smiled and patted William on the shoulder as he spoke. ‘Come William. I told them I’d promised to see these good families home.’ William was ushered to the cart, to the sound of the cottage door slamming in the background.

It was a dark, uncomfortable journey back to the Coastguard Station. The plummet from amiable, drunken atmosphere to chilled rancour, bordering on frigid resentment, had sobered him quicker than a post-session cold shoulder from the missus. The only brew still active in William were fragments of information that distilled in his mind.

He considered Jacob’s gentle reasoning that he should try to see things from a different perspective, to challenge ingrained imperial doctrine. To do that, he’d need to walk a mile in an Irishman’s shoes. He would. But even so he smiled at the irony.

Most locals didn’t own shoes.