

*Duelling at the Lime Kiln*

by Shane Leavy

The porridge's getting cold. I'm trying to spoon it into me because today, God help me, I don't want an empty belly, but my throat's a knot and it just sticks in my teeth.

I look up; Mam's at the fire, heating an iron, striking up sparks with the poker. She has her old green Galway shawl on, frayed and patched and patched. I slip me bowl to the floor where the dog starts slobbering over it, and I stagger up.

'Wall needs mendin' down at Ballyogues,' says Mam, voice hollow in the fireplace. I can't fathom how on earth she hasn't heard, and I want to throw myself on her skirt and cry, but I can't even trust myself to speak so I just grunt and grab my cap.

My head clips the thatch on the way out and the blast of sunlight is a needle to my head. I feel like I've been up drinking seawater all night, my stomach rolls like an eel in a trap. I shake my head and try to walk.

There's Mary Egan milking a cow.

'Howya Tommy!' she shouts and I nod but my face is clenched tight, I must look a mess.

Mary doesn't notice, she sings quietly and the cow swishes its tail. That cow is destined, one day, to be butchered for the stew pot, but today it blinks its liquid eyes and gazes at me in peace. I pass my uncle Dom's cottage, which has gotten all grimy and green. I'd promised him I'd whitewash it, but I'll be dead before dinner. The world blurs before my eyes.

It's cold. Everything glitters with dew; the whins are glazed with cobwebs and the swallows cluster together, impatient. It'll freeze in another few weeks and that'll be the first frost – I almost laugh but it chokes in my throat – the first frost I'll miss after my death. Yet in

all that cold, with the bluish smoke of morning fires twisting up from every cottage I pass, in that chill with my knuckles cut with cold, I am soaking in sweat.

I know what I look like. I look like defeat. That's what Dom said he heard an officer say before Ballinamuck, when Humbert was beaten: with the redcoats closing in, this fella looked at the rebels and said: 'We look like defeat.'

Dying today. Being chopped to bits by a sword. My God, Brendan Quinn is twice my size! My brain fizzles like the kettle on the fire, I can't stop thinking it over, trying to fathom a way out. It's a dream, I can't believe my feet are taking their last walk from Clonlyn to Michaelstown. I just push my head forward and let my feet plunge ahead because if I stop I'm going to curl up in a ditch and then I am finished. There isn't a soul who will look me in the eye for fleeing a duel.

There's a clatter ahead but it's just yer man Fitzmaurice-Deane on his stallion, heading for the hunt. If Brendan and me have to kill, can't we rise up together and kill him and his kind?

They ignore me; I have to scramble into the ditch to keep out of the hooves. I rub the sweat out of my eyes. I can't breath. I can't swallow. I'm like a fish in the boat, flopping about gulping.

There's the crowd. The kiln, empty today. Martha Níc an Ghoill giggling with her bright eyes; my hopes there have come to nothing after all.

There's Brendan. Someone is showing him a sword and he's slashing at grass with it. I'm dead.

But something stops me and I blink as Brendan scowls and flails about with the sword. There, under his arm, the darkness of damp. He's sweating, here in the chill autumn with the haws reddening on the thorn. He's scared. And I know in a rush what he looks like. He looks like defeat.

I think: I'm going to kill this bastard, I am.