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His hands rested firmly on the rail as he gazed out over the Irish Sea. To the east, the Welsh coastline had long since disappeared. Dusk was settling, and in the distance the faint outline of Ireland's east coast began to appear on the horizon. A mist was creeping in, distorting the shafts of white light that flickered at regular intervals from the lighthouse at Kingstown. Such a sight would, in normal circumstances, engender the warmth of having completed the crossing and returning home. Yet on this occasion it succumbed to a different emotion, one tinged with apprehension for an uncertain future.

Alone, the Apiarist stood on the foredeck of the mail boat as it manoeuvred eastward towards the mouth of Dublin Port. To the innocent observer, the solitary figure seemed unaware of his surroundings. One might imagine his thoughts were of the thousands of his fellow countrymen who had crossed the Irish Sea in search of a new life, judging by the solemnity of his expression. On closer inspection, one would have discerned a darkness to his face, as if whatever troubled him weighed heavily.

He found scant comfort in the fact that very few foot passengers had dared to face the crisp spring sea breeze by stepping onto the deck late that evening in early March. A sudden pain pricked his hands as they rested on the cold wrought surface of the iron railing. He had barely noticed the chill as it seeped through to his bones, prompting him to tuck his numbed fingers into the pockets of his overcoat for some respite. As the mail boat approached Kingstown, he decided to rejoin his fellow passengers as they prepared to disembark.

The sharp north-easterly wind that had picked up earlier swept through the railway station at Kingstown, offering little comfort to the few passengers waiting for the last train into the city. The sombre mood had not been helped by the fact that the train was delayed by forty minutes, with no explanation given other than a brief apology for the inconvenience. Deciding to take a seat in the corner of the waiting room, his thoughts were momentarily interrupted by a woman and a young girl, the latter amusing herself by playing hopscotch on the stone floor, aided by a stone she had retrieved from the platform.

"Stop that, Lilly," her mother scolded. "You are annoying the gentleman."

"She's fine," remarked the Apiarist, smiling at the young girl who was oblivious to everything around her, steely focused on the task at hand.

The reaction of his captors in Portsmouth to the revelation that he was an agent for the police operating in Ireland did not match what he had anticipated. In the immediate aftermath, he was taken back to his cell, where he remained in solitude. The following morning, two burly men in civilian clothes transported him to London's Euston Station, where he was put on the mail train heading for Liverpool. No words were exchanged throughout the journey to London. Similarly, his escort did not warn the Apiarist of the consequences should he fail to return directly to Dublin, as such a warning was unnecessary, since the prisoner had neither the funds nor the desire to do otherwise.

Throughout the journey from London to Dublin, his mind had been preoccupied with two solitary thoughts. He had experienced this process before, all those years ago when he was initially recruited as one of His Majesty's agents. His calculated revelation as a spy, though necessary, was, he knew, going to cost him. Yet the exact cost had yet to be determined. Had they released him simply to return to his former life as an informant for Daniel Barton? It was possible, though unlikely. Security services do not simply release assets without first having a plan to protect their own interests. One thing was certain: the military had something planned for their most recently reacquired asset. How and when payment was to be extracted remained a mystery.

More importantly, how was he going to explain his delayed return to Ireland to his comrades in the I.R.B.? Undoubtedly, John Devoy would have sent word of his departure from New York. It was not too difficult to deduce that he should have arrived in Dublin at least three days earlier. How was he to explain away the three days he was detained in Portsmouth without raising suspicion? He knew he had to make contact immediately upon his return, as failing to do so would raise even greater suspicion within the I.R.B., anxious to learn how the meeting with the Germans had gone. Whatever explanation he came up with, it needed to be convincing.

Just after five forty-five that same evening, twenty-two-year-old Richard, known to all and sundry as Dick McKee, left Gill and Son Publishers on Upper Sackville Street, where he worked as an apprentice printer. In his youth, Richard excelled both on the sports field and in his studies, marked out for greatness by his teachers from an early age. Unfortunately, the untimely death of his father when he was just sixteen meant that young Richard had to enter employment, quickly securing a position as an apprentice at a nearby printing works to support the family as the new head of the household.

Although a bright student, he never envisioned a future in political agitation, despite witnessing daily his native city, plagued by abject poverty, affecting not only his widowed mother and four younger siblings but thousands of others on Dublin's north side. It was therefore hardly surprising that Richard McKee joined the Irish Volunteers in 1913 at the first opportunity.

Armed with a sharp mind and detailed knowledge of the city, it was not long before the young Dubliner's talents were recognised among the Volunteers, becoming head of G Company of the Dublin Brigade. Richard McKee would never have fitted the profile of an ardent republican. Yet three events caused a seismic shift in his mindset: the first was the 1913 Lockout, when tens of thousands of Dubliners were locked out of work, forcing the community into destitution; the second was the different treatment the authorities meted out to the actions of

the Ulster Volunteers compared with those of the Irish Volunteers; the final event, which would determine the course of Dick McKee's life, was the decision by tens of thousands of Irish Volunteers to enlist in the British Army to fight in the Great War. McKee instead chose to stay in Ireland with the remaining ten thousand Volunteers.

His talents did not go unnoticed by members of the upper echelons of the I.R.B., and in early 1915 he was sworn into the organisation. It was inside this secret society that his innate skill in blending in and observing became a highly valued asset, particularly for an organisation secretly planning an uprising. Having been a late recruit to the I.R.B. and not originating from a traditional republican background, his name up to that point had never crossed any of the desks in Dublin Castle. This oversight placed Dick McKee in a unique position within the organisation, marking him out for special assignments.

His instructions were clear and succinct: meet at a designated rendezvous immediately after work, ensure you are not followed, and under no circumstances reveal this to anyone — especially your comrades in the Brotherhood. The note's secrecy and urgency left Dick McKee in no doubt that whatever he was assigned was of the highest importance.

Intentionally leaving it until the last minute to depart the print works, he headed out onto Sackville Street as dusk began to settle over the city skyline. On his journey home to Phibsborough, he cycled with greater urgency, using his youth and fitness to ensure that, if he were under surveillance, the old coppers in G Division would not be able to keep pace with him.

Heading over Cross Guns Bridge, McKee did not turn left as usual but continued along the route heading out into the countryside. After a quarter of a mile, he had left the houses on the city's outskirts, stealthily moving among the fields which separated Dublin's north-west from the tiny village of Finglas. By then, night had fallen, shrouding the fields in darkness, save for the faintest glow from the city and occasional moonbeams struggling through the clouds.

As he neared his destination, he slowed before turning onto a narrow lane off the main road. Concealing his bicycle behind the second gate, he remained hidden in the ditch, making one final check to ensure he had not been followed.

Moving swiftly back towards the main road, he surveyed the scene before crossing. Directly ahead stood an imposing barrier in the form of large wrought-iron gates blocking his passage. Grasping the cold metal with both hands, he hoisted himself upwards, using his nimble frame to propel his body to the top. Balancing just below the summit, he effortlessly launched himself over the gate, descending rapidly into the grounds of Glasnevin Cemetery.

Standing in complete darkness, he paused to take in his surroundings and adjust his eyes to the gloom. Satisfied that he had regained his bearings, he then crossed the cemetery, heading north-east towards the large boundary wall separating the cemetery from the neighbouring property. Unlike the entrance gate to the graveyard, the twelve-foot-high wall presented a different challenge to the athletic McKee. Luckily, he noticed a mature elm tree nestled against the boundary wall. Climbing between the branches, he easily manoeuvred himself onto the apex of the wall, carefully scaling into the Botanical Gardens. This time he did not need time to find his bearings, having visited the gardens many times in his childhood.

Facing him directly was the penultimate object of his efforts: the enormous glass and iron structure housing the Garden's tropical plants. Walking steadily across the manicured lawn, he kept watch on his surroundings, paying particular attention to the lodge that housed the groundskeeper and his family. Noticing that only one light was visible from the lodge, he assumed the family was safely ensconced for the night.

Approaching the side entrance, he was relieved when the door handle readily gave way under his hand, indicating the door was unlocked. Entering the glass sanctuary, he was immediately struck by the unseasonal warmth, vital for the plants to survive Ireland's temperate climate. The elaborate greenery shimmered in the moonlight, casting shapes across the metal and glass framework and projecting shadows onto the surface beneath.

As he moved through the centre of the tropical grove, he noticed a dark figure nestled in the corner, lurking behind dense foliage. Normally, such a discovery would startle the intruder, but in this case, Dick McKee found comfort in the presence of another person in this remotest of places.

Moving slowly towards the silhouette, McKee could still make out the figure's outline, which by this time had begun to drift out from behind the dark foliage. As he approached within six feet, McKee quickly gained a clear view of the man's face, instantly recognising its narrow features. Although Dick McKee had never spoken directly to the de facto leader of the I.R.B., he had studied him enough to appreciate who he was meeting. Moreover, he readily understood that whatever he was being asked to do was clearly important.

In a quiet voice, the elder of the two began, "Comrade McKee, it was considerate of you to come."

For his part, McKee remained silent, recognising the courtesy appropriate to the sombre surroundings and wisely choosing to remain quiet. Not inclined to outward displays of emotion, he found it difficult to remain expressionless as the other party began to outline the task ahead. Gradually, it became clear that what he was being asked to do was highly unusual, going against everything he believed in. Yet this request came from the highest authority in the I.R.B., from someone whose commitment to the cause of republicanism was beyond doubt. However sceptical of the other party's motives, he was bound by the code of *omertà*, having no choice but to obey.

Sensing, or perhaps foreseeing, the young man's scepticism, the other party concluded by asking a direct question, inviting a response.

"Comrade McKee, do you have any questions for me?"

"No, Comrade General, I believe I fully understand the request."

"I am somewhat surprised that, given what I have asked of you, you do not have any questions."

"I believe you have your reasons, Comrade General. I will carry out your instructions to the letter."

“Thank you, comrade. You are to report directly to me, and I needn’t remind you that you must not disclose what we have discussed, or anything you discover, to a single soul.”

Creeping out of the large glass structure, McKee took cover behind the tree-lined pathway, using darkness for concealment. Though he wisely chose not to question his chief’s motives, he was deeply troubled by the request. It was not the first time he had been assigned a secret mission by the I.R.B., but it was the first occasion he had been asked to spy on one of their own.

Of greater concern was that he was now being called upon to spy on someone considered most loyal to the cause. He understood that the chief had his reasons, but it simply did not add up.

Climbing onto the boundary wall, he looked back at the silhouette crossing the gardens in the opposite direction. Although it was only a brief glance at his commander-in-chief’s shape, McKee could not help but notice the slightly stooped figure just before it disappeared into the darkness, the weight of the world heavy upon him.

For his part, Dick McKee descended into the cemetery, carefully manoeuvring through the pathways nestled between the countless headstones, barely audible against the night air.

History would record that he visited Glasnevin Cemetery once more, four years later — though, on that occasion, it was he who would be laid to rest within its cold, dark embrace.

