Medals of Honour

Battie White

'HOP-ALONG HENRY! Hop-along Henry!'

Robert Henry could hear the children sniggering behind the high stone wall. It hurt him, more than the pain in his bad left leg. He marched on, pretending not to hear.

The hill up to the village was the hardest part. First the good leg, then the crutches, then the bad leg. Fifty years of practice didn't make it any easier. Near the top of the hill Sean Rooney was sowing cabbage in the small plot at the side of the house. Raising his head to wipe the sweat from his brow, he spotted the limping figure approaching, and bent down again to resume work. The tall gaunt bespectacled man limped on. Dressed in a brown tweed jacket, cavalry twill trousers, hanging short of his brown boots, and a tweed hat, he struggled to the top of the hill and marched up the main street, head erect, into McGraths general stores.

Mrs McGrath, a small woman with glasses, greeted him with a friendly smile.

'Good morning, Mr Henry. Isn't that a grand spring morning?'

'It is indeed, ma'am. Maybe we'll get a few more days like it. It'd do us all a power of good.'

'Now, is it the usual order you need?' she inquired.

He took the sheet of paper out of his inside pocket and handed it across the counter.

'Just the usual.'

She took the list and looked down through it.

'That's grand, Mr Henry. We have all that. I'll get Jimmy to deliver the order sometime this evening.'

'While I'm here I'd like to settle the account for April.'

That's okay, Mr Henry. There's no rush, but if it suits you I'll get the book.'

She went to the small room off the shop, which functioned as the office.

The other customer in the shop had his head buried in his newspaper, pretending not to see him. The man's father had been in the same class as Robert at school.

Mrs McGrath came back with the account book and laid it open on the counter. 'Two pounds four and sixpence altogether, Mr Henry. Isn't it shocking the way prices have gone up lately?'

He took two pounds and a ten shilling note from his wallet and handed it over. 'There's not much we can do about it, ma'am.' She gave him his change.

'Thanks Mr Henry. Jimmy should be down with you around five o'clock.'

He shuffled out the door and headed off back down the hill to his cottage, which was hidden from the road behind an overgrown whitethorn hedge. He hadn't been able to do anything with the garden for years. Encroaching weeds and briars covered over most of the short path leading to the front door, making progress difficult. When his mother was alive he'd been able to keep the place looking fairly respectable. Now he wasn't interested, even if he was, he wasn't fit for gardening anymore. Inside the house it was worse. The flowery kitchen wallpaper was peeling off because of the dampness. Old newspapers were piled up in a corner of the room, alongside a desolate heap of empty tin cans. Only the table, with its faded oilcloth covering under cups and plates, showed that someone lived here.

Apart from his neighbour, Jack Sweeney, no one had set foot in the house for ages. Then one evening, during the Mission, Father Brady called to see him. He invited the priest into the house out of courtesy. It's what his mother would have done.

'Would you like a drink, Father?' He took down the bottle of Powers and two glasses from the dresser.

'Sure, why not? One won't do me any harm. Just a small one now, it's early in the day!'

He held up his hand in protest as Robert poured two large ones and sat down at the table opposite him. 'Well, Father, what can I do for you?'

Father Brady took a sip from his glass.

'Tell me, Robert, do you ever go to Mass? I've never seen you there since I came to the parish, nearly two years ago.'

Robert Henry lowered a mouthful of whiskey before answering.

'Well, Father, it's like this. I see no reason why I should. The people around here that do go to Mass don't seem to me to be any better than those that don't.'

Father Brady digested this remark for a moment.

'It's not up to you or me to judge others, Robert. We'll leave that to the good Lord above. I know you were baptised a Catholic, and they tell me your late mother went to Mass every day she could, until she was no longer able to go out. Surely you believe in God, and Heaven and Hell?'

The old man peered at the priest over his glasses.

'Father, I've seen Hell on Earth at Gallipoli. There was no sign of God there. And there's not much sign of God in the people around this town either. Their religion has nothing in common with the kind of Christianity I was taught at school. For the past fifty years living around here, I might as well have been a leper.'

He drank the remains of the whiskey and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

Father Brady stood up and looked

around the cheerless kitchen. He gave a little cough to clear his throat.

'Well, I'm very sorry to hear that, Robert. That's not the kind of Christianity I learned, either.'

He lifted his hat and put it on.

'Robert, if you ever need me, or if there's anything I can do for you, don't hesitate to get in touch with me.'

Robert accompanied the priest to the door.

'There is one thing, Father. The garden is in a frightful mess and I'm not able to do it myself anymore. Could you get someone to help me with it?'

Father Brady surveyed the tangled mass of weeds and grass, briars and windblown rubbish.

'I'll see what I can do. I'll talk to Eddie Reilly who does the Church grounds, and see if he has time to come down.'

'Thanks, Father.' He watched him go back out the path, holding the folds of the black soutane up from the invading thorns. His mother would turn in her grave if she saw the state of the garden. The next time he was up in Enniskillen with the Legion he would ask them about getting someone to come down and spend a day sorting it out, if the priest's man didn't come.

Only for the British Legion he'd be lost. They had helped him get his Army pension, called on him every few months to see how he was getting on, and once a year they organised a holiday for him and some old comrades from the *Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers*. It was always up North, Portrush or Portstewart or Newcastle. They were all getting on in years now. Every year there were less of them. He was the youngest; soon they'd be all gone.

Shellshock, they said it was. After the operation on his leg they'd sent him to a mental hospital for soldiers, somewhere in Surrey. 'You'll be okay,' they said. 'Just try to forget about it,' they said. 'Time is a great healer.' After two months there was a shortage of beds, and he was sent back home to Ireland, in July 1916.

The nights were the worst. Black clouds would smother him in his nightmarish dreams, mud and guts splashing up under the barrage of exploding Turkish shells. Rats scurried through the filthy trench water, eating any scraps of food they could find. Foul mouthed screaming on that day, when they were ordered over the top, in a desperate attempt to rout the Turkish positions. Johnny Regan was alongside him. They were always together. Johnny was a year younger than him, just gone seventeen. The shell had exploded right in front of Johnny, blowing him to bits.

His head was still attached to his body, but one arm and both legs were missing.

'Move on, Henry, keep up,' yelled the Sergeant, 'no time to be looking back!'

All around him bodies were falling. Shells were dropping from the sky like big black hailstones. A never ending fusillade of enemy bullets flew from the Turkish positions above them. When he stumbled and fell on his face in the mud he didn't realise at first that a bullet had got him in the left leg. The cursing and swearing and relentless exploding of the shells blanked out his mind. When he tried to get up he fell back, and it was only then that he saw the blood.

They patched him up as best they could in the field hospital. Thousands were killed and injured that one day, and the following days. The gangrenous smell of rotting flesh was all around. Bodies too late to save were left lying on the slopes, to be gorged upon later by an army of bloated rats.

Back home in the village in 1916, there was no great welcome for him

'Traitor!' they had called him, to his face. Behind his back, in the pubs, they called him a deserter. His mother had taken him to the doctor and got him tablets, but they made no difference. He just sat in the chair trembling, staring out the window all day, at everything and everyone, and at nothing.

People stopped coming to the house. The only visitor he ever had was Jack Sweeney. Jack didn't take any notice of the smart jibes he heard in the village. He and Robert had grown up together, gone to school together, and played together. Jack had left school at thirteen. They said he was "a bit simple". He would sit with Robert for hours, with all the news and gossip from the village. Now fifty years later Jack still called in.

With the passing of the years the worst of the daytime nightmares had eased, but the nights were as bad as ever. Every sound was magnified by his battle experience. A passing car, shouting on the road, a mouse running across the boarded timber ceiling. Only whiskey eased the pain. He drank as much as he could afford, from his small army pension. In his half awake state he could see the rats racing across the bedspread, imaginary black rats with long tails, coming to eat his bad leg. Daylight would finally come, and with it the start of another depressing dreary day.

Four years after the burglary you could still see the patch of wallpaper on the sitting room, a small square not as faded as the rest. It was the week the Legion had organised a holiday in Bangor. He never kept much money in the house, only a few pounds at most. They had broken in the back door, and ransacked every drawer and cupboard in the place. They took the three medals, fixed in a glass fronted picture frame, hanging on the wall to the right of the fireplace since June 1919. That day in Enniskillen Castle had been the proudest day of his life, standing shoulder to shoulder with his surviving comrades from the Great War, the war to end all wars. The General had commended them for their bravery, for standing by the Empire in its hour of

need against the foreign enemy, when others had taken advantage of the war to treacherously undermine the Empire from within. Britain would be always in their debt, the General said. Their valour would be remembered forever. *The 1914 Star, The British War Medal,* and the *Victory Medal* side by side, his children, his only children. Why did they have to take them? Nights he couldn't stay in the bed, he would get up and walk the floor, trying in vain to crush the malevolent memories inside his throbbing head. The medals, on the faded ribbons, proclaimed his honour and integrity. He was no traitor. Most of the ones around him had never fired a shot in anger in their lives, for any cause. What right had they to condemn him?

The knock on the door startled him. Jack Sweeney had already called in. It was long past the postman's time. He shuffled to the front door and opened it just a bit, on his guard.

He recognised Eddie Reilly, standing there in his overalls. He'd often seen him working around the church in the village, but they'd never spoken.

Eddie cocked his head towards the front garden.

'Father Brady asked me to give you a hand to clear the weeds.'

His voice was slow and deliberate.

'If it suits you I can come down tomorrow and spend the day.'

Robert looked at him open mouthed.

'That'd be great. It could do with some work.'

Robert stood back from the door.

'Would you like to come in a minute, I'll put the kettle on?'

'No thanks. I've a job to do up at the chapel. I'll be here around nine in the morning, if the rain holds off.'

He adjusted his cap and turned to go. He had a good look around on the way out.

'I should get most of it done in the day,' he said, and disappeared out the front gate.

Eddie was as good as his word. He arrived the next morning, bringing his son, James, a big broad-shouldered lad of about sixteen, and all the gardening tools he would need.

Robert watched them through the grimy kitchen window. They tore into the overgrown bushes and long grass with the scythe and slash hook, levelling all in front of them. In two hours they had cleared the area to the right of the path, and bundled the grass and branches into the car trailer. Eddie was clipping the front hedge. James had started on the left hand side. Already the kitchen was brighter, no longer shaded by the jungle growth in front.

James bent down to pick something up, just inside the front wall. The sparkle of the glass pieces in the sun had caught his attention. An old broken picture frame, someone passing must have thrown it away. When he cleared the grass away he saw there was no picture, only some pieces of metal. He picked it up and cleaned off the grass and mud.

'Daddy, what's this?'

He brought it over to his father.

'Looks like old war medals,' said Eddie, 'they must belong to Mr Henry. Give them in to him.'

Robert's eyes lit up when he saw the bronze medals. They were blackened and tarnished from years of exposure to the elements, and the red, white and blue ribbons were in bits.

He took them in his trembling veined hands and looked into James' bright eyes.

'Thank you so much for finding these, sonny. I never thought I'd see them again.'

He brought them in and scrubbed them in soapy water. Then he dried them in tissue paper, got out his mother's old Brasso wadding from under the sink, and did his best to polish the dull metal.

He was still polishing when Eddie came in for tea at lunchtime.

'I'd say you're happy to see the medals again, Mr Henry. How long are they lost?'

'Over four years,' said Robert, 'they were taken in the burglary.'

Eddie and James had brought their own sandwiches. Robert put on the kettle for the tea.

Eddie smoked his pipe while he waited for the kettle to come to the boil.

'At least they had the decency to throw them back,' he said. 'Will you be able to get new ribbons?'

'I hope so,' replied Robert, 'I'll see if I can get them next time I'm in Enniskillen.'

James picked up one of the medals and rubbed it between his fingers.

'You must have been a brave man,' he said.

Robert shrugged.

'I don't know about bravery. They were given for action in the Battle of Gallipoli.'

'Was that the same battle that Frank Regan's uncle was killed in?' asked Eddie.

Robert looked away, towards the window.

'Aye. The Battle of Gallipoli, nineteen fifteen.'

Eddie looked again at the polished medals on the table.

'It's great that they turned up anyways.'

'Tis indeed,' said Robert.

The kettle had boiled and Robert made the tea.

Eddie Reilly passed around his packet of Fig Roll biscuits.

'Another hour and we should get all finished outside. It will be easier for you to manage from now on.'

Robert stirred the teapot and started to pour.

'Thanks, men, thanks for everything. Tell Father Brady I'm very grateful.