

BENJAMIN BLACK

HOLY ORDERS

A Quirke Mystery



MANTLE

1

AT FIRST THEY THOUGHT it was the body of a child. Later, when they got it out of the water and saw the pubic hair and the nicotine stains on the fingers, they realised their mistake. Male, late twenties or early thirties, naked but for one sock, the left one. There were livid bruises on the upper torso and the face was so badly disfigured his mother would have been hard put to recognise him. A courting couple had spotted him, a pale glimmer down between the canal wall and the flank of a moored barge. The girl had telephoned the guards, and the desk sergeant had dialled Inspector Hackett's office, but Hackett was not there at that hour, and instead he got the inspector's assistant, young Jenkins, who was in his cubbyhole behind the cells writing up his week's reports.

'A floater, Sarge,' the desk man said. 'Mespil Road, below Leeson Street Bridge.'

Detective Sergeant Jenkins thought of telephoning his boss but then decided against it. Hackett was fond of his night's sleep and would not take kindly to being disturbed. There were two fellows in the duty room, one, Quinlan, from the motorbike corps and the other in off his beat for a tea break. Jenkins told them he needed their help.

Quinlan had been about to go off duty, and was not pleased at the prospect of staying on. 'He's on a promise from his missus,' the other one, Hendricks, said, and snickered.

Quinlan was big and slow, with slicked-back hair and eyes that bulged. He had his leather gaiters on but had taken off his tunic. He stood with his helmet in his hand and looked at Jenkins stonily out of those gooseberry eyes, and Jenkins could almost hear the cogs of the big man's mind turning laboriously, calculating how much overtime he could screw out of the night's work. Hendricks was not due off until four a.m. 'Fuck it,' Quinlan said at last, and shrugged in vexed resignation, and took his tunic down off the hook. Hendricks laughed again.

'Is there a car in the yard?' Jenkins asked.

'There is,' Hendricks said. 'I saw one there when I came in.'

Jenkins had never noticed before how flat the back of Hendricks's skull was—his neck ran sheer all the way to the crown of his head. It was as if the whole rear part of his cranium had been sliced clean off and his hair had grown back to cover the scar. Must have a brain the size of a lemon; half a lemon.

'Right,' Jenkins said, trying to sound both brisk and bored, as his boss somehow always managed to do. 'Let's get going.'

They had a hard time of it getting the body up. The level in the lock was low, and Hendricks had to be sent to Portobello to rouse the lock-keeper out of his bed. Sergeant Jenkins set Quinlan to examining the scene with a flash-

light, while he went and spoke to the couple who had spotted the body. The girl was sitting on a wrought-iron bench under a tree, white-faced in the shadows, clutching a hankie and sniffing. Every few seconds a great shiver would run through her and her shoulders would twitch. Her fellow stood back in the gloom, nervously smoking a cigarette. ‘Can we go now, Guard?’ he said to Jenkins, in a low, worried voice.

Jenkins peered at him, trying to make out his features, but the moonlight did not penetrate that far under the tree. He seemed a good deal older than the girl, middle-aged, in fact. A married man and she his bit on the side? He turned his attention back to the girl. ‘What time was it you found him?’

‘Time?’ the girl said, as if she did not recognise the word. There was a wobble in her voice.

‘It’s all right, miss,’ Jenkins said gently, not quite knowing what the words were supposed to mean—it was the kind of thing detectives in the movies said—and then turned businesslike again. ‘You phoned straight away, did you, after you found him?’ He glanced at the man in the shadows.

‘She had to go down nearly to Baggot Street before she could find a phone that worked,’ the man said. He had given his name but Jenkins had immediately forgotten it. Wallace? Walsh? Something like that.

‘And you stayed here.’

‘I thought I’d better keep an eye on the—on the body.’

Right, Jenkins thought—in case it might get up out of the water and walk away. Making sure not to be the one to make the phone call, more like, afraid of being asked who

he was and what he had been doing on the canal bank at this hour of the night in the company of a girl half his age.

A car passing by slowed down, the driver craning to see what was going on, his eager face at the window ashy and round like the moon.

The girl had permed hair and wore a tartan skirt with a big ornamental safety pin in it, and flat-heeled shoes. She kept clearing her throat and squeezing the hankie convulsively. She had the man's jacket draped over her shoulders. The man had on a Fair Isle sleeveless jumper. The night was mild, for April, but he would be cold, all the same. A display of chivalry; in that case, he must certainly be her fancy-man.

'Do you live nearby?' Jenkins asked.

'I have a flat over there in Leeson Street, above the chemist's,' the girl said, pointing.

The man said nothing, only sucked on the butt of his cigarette, the tip flaring in the dark and throwing an infernal glow upwards over his face. Small bright anxious eyes, a big nose like a potato. Forty-five if he was a day; the girl was hardly more than twenty-one. 'The guard here will take your details,' Jenkins said.

He turned and called to Quinlan, who was squatting on the canal bank looking down into the water and playing his flashlight over the floating body. He had found nothing round about, no clothes, no belongings, so whoever it was down there must have been brought here from somewhere else. Quinlan straightened and came towards them.

The man stepped quickly from under the tree and put a hand on Jenkins's arm. 'Listen,' he said urgently, 'I'm not supposed to be here. I mean I'll be—I'll be missed at home,

this late.' He looked into Jenkins's face meaningfully, attempting a man-to-man smile, but the one he managed was sickly.

'Give your name and address to the guard,' Jenkins said stiffly. 'Then you can go.'

'Is it all right if I give my office address?'

'Just so long as it's somewhere we can contact you.'

'I'm a surveyor,' the man said, as if he expected this to be a significant factor in the night's events. His smile kept flickering on and off, like a faulty light-bulb. 'I'd be grateful if—'

They turned at the sound of heavy steps behind them. Hendricks was coming down the cinder bank from the road, accompanied by a heavy-set man with an enormous head and no hat. The man was wearing a striped pyjama top under his jacket. It was the lock-keeper. 'Jesus Christ,' he said, without preamble, addressing Jenkins, 'do you know what hour it is?'

Jenkins ignored the question. 'We need the water level up,' he said. 'You'll have to do it slowly—there's a body in there.'

As he moved away, the man Walsh or Wallace tried to pluck at his sleeve again to detain him but was ignored. The lock-keeper went to the edge of the canal bank and leaned forward with his hands on his knees and squinted down at the body. 'Jesus,' he said, 'it's only a child.'

They positioned the squad car sideways with its front wheels on the path so the headlights would illuminate the scene. The lock-keeper had used his key and the water was

falling in a gleaming rush through the opening in the sluice-gates. Quinlan and Hendricks got on to the barge and found two long wooden poles and braced them against the wall of the canal to keep the barge from swaying in and crushing the body.

The corpse was turned face down, the arms lolling and its backside shining with a phosphorescent glow. Walsh or Wallace and his girl had given their details to Quinlan but still had not departed. It was apparent the girl wanted to be gone, but the man hung on despite his earlier anxieties, eager no doubt to have a look at the corpse when it came up. Quinlan had brought a sheet of tarpaulin from the boot of the squad car and now he spread it on the grass, and the two guards knelt on the granite flagstones and hauled the sodden body from the water and laid it on its back. There was silence for a moment.

‘That’s no child,’ Quinlan said.

Hendricks leaned down quickly and peeled off the man’s one sock. It seemed the decent thing to do, somehow, though no one made any comment.

‘Look at his face,’ the man said in an awed voice. They had not heard him approach, but he was leaning in between them now, staring avidly.

‘Kicked the shite out of him, they did,’ Quinlan said. Jenkins gave him a look; Quinlan had a foul mouth and no sense of occasion. It was a dead man he was speaking of, after all. Hendricks knelt on one knee and folded in the tarpaulin on either side to cover the lower half of the body.

‘Poor bugger,’ the lock-keeper said.

No one had thought to send for an ambulance. How were they going to get the body out of here? Jenkins thrust

a fist into the pocket of his overcoat and clenched it in anger. He had no one but himself to blame; that, he reflected bitterly, was what it was to be in charge. Hendricks went to the squad car for the walkie-talkie, but it was being temperamental and would produce only a loud crackling noise and now and then a harsh squawk. 'There's no use shaking the fucking thing,' Quinlan said, with amused disdain, but Hendricks pretended not to hear. He kept putting the machine to his ear and talking loudly into the mouthpiece—'Hello, Pearse Street, come in, Pearse Street!'—then holding it away from himself and glaring at it in disgust, as if it were a pet that was refusing to perform a simple trick he had spent time and energy teaching it.

Jenkins turned to the girl sitting on the bench. 'Where was that phone box?'

She was still in a state of shock, and it took her a moment to understand him. 'Away down there,' she said, pointing along Mespil Road. 'Opposite Parson's bookshop. The one on Leeson Street is broken, as usual.'

'Christ,' Jenkins said under his breath. He turned back and spoke to Quinlan. 'Go over there along Wilton Terrace and have a look. There might be one nearer.'

Quinlan scowled. His expression made it clear that he did not relish taking orders.

'I'll go,' Hendricks said. He shook the walkie-talkie again. 'This yoke is useless.'

Jenkins dithered. He had given a direct order to Quinlan; it should have been obeyed, and Hendricks should have kept out of it. He felt giddy for a moment. Getting people to acknowledge your authority was no easy thing, though Inspector Hackett did it seemingly without effort. Was it

just a matter of experience, or did you have to be born with the knack?

'Right,' he said to Hendricks gruffly, although Hendricks had already set off. Should he call him back, make him salute, or something? He was pretty sure a fellow on the beat was supposed to salute a detective sergeant. He wished now he had phoned Hackett in the first place and risked the old bugger's wrath.

Walsh or Wallace, who was showing no sign at all now of his earlier eagerness to be gone, went up to Quinlan and began to talk to him about a match that was set for Croke Park on Sunday. How was it that sporting types always recognised each other straight off? They were both smoking, Quinlan cupping the cigarette in his palm—officers were not supposed to smoke on duty, Jenkins was certain of that. Should he reprimand him, tell him to put that fag out at once? He decided to pretend he had not seen him light up. He realised he was sweating, and ran a finger around the inside of his shirt collar.

The girl on the bench called softly to the man—'Alfie, will we go?'—but he ignored her. He was bare-headed as well as being without his jacket, and though he must have been freezing by now, he appeared not to mind.

Jenkins looked at the body lying on the grass beside the towpath. The water had drained from the hair, which seemed to be red, though it was hard to be sure in the stark glow of the street-lamp. Jenkins felt himself shiver. What must it be like, being dead? Like nothing, he supposed, unless there really was a Heaven and a Hell, all that, which he doubted, despite what the priests and everyone else had spent years earnestly assuring him was the case.

HOLY ORDERS

At last Hendricks came back. He had found a phone box. The Holy Family was the hospital on duty tonight. The ambulance was out but they would send it as soon as it came in. 'Have they only the one?' Jenkins asked incredulously.

'Seems like it,' Hendricks said.

'A fine player, that lad,' Wallace or Walsh was saying. 'Dirty, though.'

'Oh, a tough bollocks,' Quinlan agreed, and chuckled. He took a drag of his cigarette, throwing a glance of lazy insolence in Jenkins's direction as he did so. 'I seen him in the quarter-final against Kerry,' he said, and laughed again. 'I'm telling you, if that little fucker got his elbow in your ribs you'd know all about it.'

The girl stood up from the bench. 'I'm going,' she said to the man's back. He flapped a hand at her placatingly, and Quinlan said something under his breath and the man gave a loud guffaw. The girl moved irresolutely towards the cinder track that led up to the road. When she reached the gate in the railings she turned back, though it was not the man she looked at this time but Jenkins, and she smiled. For years afterwards, whenever he thought of the case of the body in the canal, it was that sad, wan little smile that he remembered, and he felt, every time, a mysterious pang.

2

QUIRKE HAD AN ABIDING dislike of rain. Every woman he had ever known had laughed at him for it. Women did not seem to mind getting wet, unless they had just got their hair done. Even when they were wearing good shoes or a new hat they would stride through the downpour and appear not to notice. He, on the other hand, would wince when he heard the first hollow taps on the brim of his hat and saw the pavement in front of him greyly sprinkled. Rain gave him gooseflesh, and he would shudder even at the thought of a drop getting under his collar and sliding down the back of his neck. He hated the way his hair went into kinks when the rain wetted it, hated too the smell of sheep his clothes gave off, which always reminded him of being at Sunday-evening devotions in the chapel at Carriclea, the institution where he had spent the better—or rather the worse—part of his childhood. For as long as he could remember, rain seemed to have been falling on his life.

He had got out of the taxi by the river because the sun was shining, but he was still not even in sight of the hospital when a shadow swept across the street and a wind out of nowhere set dust devils spinning in the gutters. Spring was not his favourite season, though for that matter

he was not sure which one was. He quickened his pace, pulling his hat low on his forehead and keeping in close by the brewery wall. A tinker boy mounted bareback on a piebald pony, with a bit of rope for reins, clattered past over the cobbles. A warm and slightly nauseating smell of hops was coming over the brewery wall, from the big vats simmering away in there.

The air about him grew darker still. He had been drinking whiskey the night before and there was a metallic taste at the back of his tongue, even though he had left McGonagle's early and gone home to bed, alone—Isabel Galloway was off touring in *A Doll's House*, which would have made him a grass widower if he were married to her, which he emphatically was not. The thought of Isabel set going a familiar confusion of emotions inside him. He sighed. Why was it not possible to switch the mind off, to stop it thinking, remembering, regretting, even for a moment? Isabel was a good-hearted woman, kindly behind a mask of brittleness, and if she was no longer exactly young she was still good-looking. He did not deserve her. Or rather, he told himself ruefully, she, being decent, did not deserve him, and all that he was and was not.

Sure enough, it began to rain.

There were cranes and cement mixers in the hospital grounds, where a new extension was being built, an ugly concrete cube that was to be a recovery ward for young mothers who had suffered complications giving birth. It would be called the Griffin Wing, after the late Judge Garret Griffin, Quirke's adoptive father, as it happened, who had left money in his will to build it. Oh, yes, Quirke thought. Conscience money.

The rain was coming down heavily now, whipped sideways by the sudden wind, and he sprinted the last twenty yards and at last gained the shelter of the red-brick portico. He stopped, and took off his hat and tried to shake the rain from it. The legs of his trousers were cold and clammy against his calves. A young couple appeared behind him, coming out from Reception, the fellow holding the door for his wife, who seemed hardly more than a girl, drained and dazed-looking, with lank blonde hair. She was carrying a baby in her arms, wrapped in a pink blanket. She smiled shyly, tentatively, at Quirke, while the young man scowled. He had an oiled quiff and long sideburns and wore drainpipe trousers and a coat-length jacket with high shoulder-pads. Through the doorway the hospital breathed out its sharp, caustic smell; it was a smell Quirke had never got used to, although it was in his pores by now and must be the smell he too gave off. The teddy boy, for all his scowling, went on holding the door until Quirke, nodding at him and his drab wife, had stepped through. They must think he was a doctor; a real doctor, that is.

There was a new nurse at Reception, pretty in a mousy sort of way, and painfully young. Often these days Quirke had the feeling that he was older than everyone around him. He realised suddenly that he was missing Isabel. He was glad she was not young, at least not young like this nurse or like the couple he had encountered in the doorway, half-grown-up children. When he smiled at the nurse she blushed and bent her head and pretended to be looking for something on the desk.

He went down the big curving marble staircase, and as he did so he had, as always, the panicky yet not entirely

unpleasant sensation of slowly submerging into some dim, soft, intangible element. He thought again of being a child at Carriclea and how, when he was having his weekly bath and if there was no Christian Brother around to stop him, he would let himself slide underneath the water until he was entirely submerged. He would keep his eyes open, for he liked the shiny, swaying look of things through the water, the gleaming taps and the rippling edge of the bath and the ceiling that all at once appeared immensely far off above him. Often he had stayed like that for so long it had seemed, thrillingly, that his lungs would burst. More than once, when things were bad, and things at Carriclea could be very bad indeed, he had thought of keeping himself under until he drowned, but had never been able to summon up the courage to do it. Besides, if there was a world waiting for him on the far side of death he had a strong suspicion it would be another version of Carriclea, only worse.

At the foot of the stairs he turned left along the green-painted corridor. The walls down here had a permanent damp sheen, like sweat, and the air smelt of formaldehyde.

Why, he wondered, did he think so much about the past? The past, after all, was where he had been most unhappy. If only he could forget Carriclea his life, he was sure, would be different, would be lighter, freer, happier. But Carriclea would not let him forget, not ever.

Bolger, the porter, with mop and bucket, was swabbing the floor of the dissecting room. He was smoking a cigarette; it dangled from his lower lip with a good inch and a half of ash attached to it. Bolger, Quirke reflected, could smoke for Ireland in the Olympics and would win a gold

medal every time. How he managed to keep the fag adhering to his lip like that, without the ash falling off, was a mystery. He was a stunted fellow with a sallow face and a big set of badly fitting dentures through which, when he spoke, tiny whistling sounds escaped, like faint background music. Quirke, as far as he could recall, had never seen him without his drab-green coat, which gave him, oddly, something of the look of a greengrocer.

‘Morning, Ambrose,’ Quirke said. Everyone else called him Ambie, but Quirke always gave the name its full flourish, for the mild comedy of it.

Bolger returned the greeting with an awful grin, showing off those outsized and unnervingly regular teeth. ‘Rain again,’ he said, with grim satisfaction.

Quirke went into his office and sat down at his desk and lit up a Senior Service. He still had that tinny taste in his mouth. The strip of fluorescent lighting in the ceiling made a continuous fizzing. There was a slit of window high up in the wall that was level with the pavement outside, where heavy rain was still falling. Now and then a passer-by was to be seen, the feet only, hurrying past, oblivious of walking over this place of the dead.

Bolger came to the open door, mop in hand, bringing with him a whiff of stale water. ‘There’s a new one in,’ he said. ‘Fished out of the canal in the small hours. Young fellow.’

Quirke sighed. He had been looking forward to an idle morning. ‘Where’s Dr Sinclair?’ he asked.

‘Off today, I believe.’

‘Oh. Right.’

Bolger detached the cigarette from his lip and knocked

the ash from it into his cupped palm. Quirke could see he was getting ready for a chat, and stood up quickly from the desk. 'Let's have a look at him,' he said.

Bolger sniffed. 'Hang on.' He laid his mop aside and crossed to one of the big steel sinks and dropped the cigarette ash from his palm into it, then went out and returned a moment later wheeling a trolley with a body draped in a nylon sheet. The rubber wheels of the trolley squeaked on the wet tiles, setting up a brief buzzing in Quirke's back molars. He wondered how many years there were to go before Bolger's retirement; the man could be any age from fifty to seventy-five.

Bolger had reinserted the butt of his cigarette into the left side of his mouth, and had one eye screwed shut against the smoke. He drew back the sheet. Red hair in a widow's peak plastered to a skull that was small enough to have been that of a schoolboy. Bruises on the face, purple, mud-blue, yellow ochre.

'Right,' Quirke said, 'get him on the table, will you?' He began to move towards the sinks to scrub up, then stopped, turned, stared at the corpse. 'Jesus Christ,' he said. 'I know him.'