

# ONE

St Thomas Aquinas:

*Videtur quod voluntas Dei non sit causa rerum.*

(It can be seen that the will of God is not the cause of things.)

It was Reverend Mother Aquinas who found the body of the dead girl. It lay wedged within the gateway to the convent chapel at St Mary's of the Isle, jettisoned by the flood waters. For a fanciful moment she had almost imagined that it was a mermaid swept up from the sea. The long silver gown gleamed beneath the gas lamp, wet as the skin of a salmon, and the streams of soaked curls were red-brown just like the crinkled carrageen seaweed she had gathered from the windswept beaches of Ballycotton when she was a child. Her heart beating fast, the Reverend Mother unlocked the gate and looked down at the sightless blue eyes that stared up from beneath a wide high brow at the blanched, soaked flesh of the cheeks and knew that there was nothing that she could do for the girl. She bent over, touched the stone-cold face and then with a hand that trembled slightly she signed the forehead with a small cross. The Reverend Mother had seen death many times in her long life, but in the young she still found it was almost unbearable.

She straightened up and looked around. There was no one near. She had left the convent hurriedly, gone out into the fog, unable to bear with patience the sanctimonious comments of Sister Mary Immaculate about the floods being the will of God. Reverend Mother Aquinas, like her namesake, the great philosopher Thomas Aquinas, had no belief in the doctrine of the will of God – it was, for her, just an easy way out, of excusing man's inhumanity, inefficiency and lack of social responsibility. These terrible floods would not happen season after season if some of the wealth of the city was spent on preventing them. Sister Mary Immaculate, she thought with

irritation, would not have been so quick to trot out the customary platitude about God's will if she, like the families of the children who attended the school of St Mary's of the Isle, lived in one of those crowded crumbling buildings flooded with sewage by the overflowing drains. As always it was the poor who had suffered. The rich moved to the hills outside the city.

Floods were nothing new in Cork. The city had been built on a marsh, criss-crossed by streams, beginning with a small monastic settlement, named St Mary's of the Isle, progressing, with the advent of the Vikings, to a second island and then, with the Normans, to a third. Later the inhabitants linked the Viking and Norman islands with a bridge and enclosed them with a high wall, forming the medieval city of Cork, perched just above the swamp, edged with a sheltered harbour and joined to the ocean by the River Lee. The city had become rich, trading its butter, its meat and its hides from the hinterland with nearby England and not-too-distant France and Spain. In the eighteenth century the wealthy merchants had tamed the channels of the river with limestone quays and had built stately homes above basement warehouses, their entrances, like those to medieval castles, placed high above the water with steps leading up from the mooring places. Like a Venice under a grey northern sky, the city grew prosperous and ambitious; but unlike in Venice the merchants were not content with their waterways. They confined the marsh streams into culverts and built wide streets on top of all but two of the river channels. And these two arms of the River Lee, the north and south, still encircled the town and the water beneath the streets remained part of it. From time to time it escaped and the city flooded.

Dead bodies washed up by the flood waters were nothing new, either. The Reverend Mother sighed as she rang the bell on the gate for the gardener, sent him to fetch Sergeant Patrick Cashman from the barracks and waited resignedly for Sister Mary Immaculate to pop out to find the reason for the summons.

'I was just coming to see you, Sister,' said the Reverend Mother as soon as her assistant appeared. 'Could you go into the kitchen and ask Sister Rosario to serve some hot porridge

to any of the children who manage to get here this morning. Oh, and get some of those socks out of the cupboard so that they each can have a dry pair.' That, she thought with some satisfaction, should keep Sister Mary Immaculate busy until the bell rang for the beginning of morning school. Then she excused her lack of charity to her fellow nun by reflecting with pleasure on the comfort that hot porridge and thick warm socks, knitted in such profusion by some of the very elderly nuns, would give to the children. She fished out from her capacious pocket the watch that hung on a silver chain from her belt and looked at the time. Still only quarter to nine – Patrick would probably not arrive at the barracks before nine o'clock and already she could hear the voices of the children coming down the street, excitedly capping each other's stories about the overnight flooding and the size of the rats that scampered around the hallways and crumbling stairs of those four-storey Georgian buildings in Cove Street and Sawmill Lane. Smiling to herself at their animation, and their high spirits, she went back to keep watch over the body, glancing at her watch from time to time as the slow minutes ticked away.

And then she tightened her lips with a grimace of annoyance as she heard the back door to the convent open and the high-pitched voice of Sister Mary Immaculate shouting orders. Of course, she should have remembered that the nun had the habit of marching the older girls into the chapel before the start of morning school.

She was only just in time. Sister Mary Immaculate had already lined up the senior girls, each with a prayer book in hand, for their daily trip to proffer up prayers to God. She'd be better off teaching these thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds extra arithmetic so that a few of them might have some remote hope of getting a job in shop or as a clerk, thought the Reverend Mother tartly as she ordered them to return to their classroom. And then her eyes widened. The last girl in the line was wearing a six-inch-wide flounce of yellow flannel pinned with enormous safety pins to the bottom of her navy-blue gysmlip.

'What on earth is Nellie O'Sullivan wearing?' she asked. Nellie, with her mass of curls, was a pretty girl who from the

age of five had always come to school looking fairly clean, tidy and well dressed – in cast-off clothes distributed by the St Vincent de Paul Society. Since Nellie's taste ran to pink frilly party dresses, eventually Sister Mary Immaculate bestowed an ancient navy blue gymslip on her and added a lecture about suitable clothes to wear in school.

The Reverend Mother rather liked Nellie. She was not particularly academic, but was a well-motivated, cheerful girl who had not escaped from school at the first possible moment – like her eldest sister, Mary – but had stayed on and worked hard. A confident girl, with a strong streak of common sense; the Reverend Mother was annoyed to see her victimized.

Sister Mary Immaculate smiled with pious satisfaction at her question. 'Some of those girls have been shortening their gymslips to a ridiculous degree – so every morning, first thing, I make them kneel on the floor and if their skirt does not touch the boards then they wear the frill until they let the hem down again,' she said smugly.

*For heaven's sake!* Reverend Mother choked back the words. These girls, she thought, did not have much fun. They were poor in a prosperous city. Their youth was being spent in a country at war. The War of Independence had started in early 1919 and had petered out in July 1922 with a treaty that agreed to the partition of Ireland and less than a year later the bitter civil war had begun when brothers and cousins had lined up against each other, and where Michael Collins, hero and leader in the struggle against British troops, had been shot by his former companions. *A plague on both your houses*, the Reverend Mother had often thought, but her pupils were caught in the centre of the hostilities. Day after day, for the last few years, they had been sent home early from school because there had been shooting on the streets; first between the Republicans and the Black and Tan auxiliaries to the Royal Irish Constabulary and later between the Free State Army and the Republicans; between those who were for the treaty and those who were against it – the bitter civil war was almost over in theory, but in practice the guns still spluttered. The children had witnessed the burning down of Patrick Street by the Black and Tans, had dodged the grenades, and the armed

battles that had followed each outrage, had endured raids, poverty, disease, poor feeding and bad housing. She was pleased to think that they had life and spirit enough left in them to turn up the hems of their ugly, shapeless gymslips to a 1920s fashionable length. She would have to have a quiet and tactful talk with Sister Mary Immaculate, who was in charge of the school – perhaps get the children to agree on a sensible length for a gymslip – no more yellow flannel, though, she decided – there was something about that image which revolted her.

However, this poor dead girl on her doorstep had to be cared for now. She sent a messenger around to the other classes ordering that the children be kept within doors for the next couple of hours and then went back to her vigil over the quiet body until she heard the sound of the convent doorbell.

‘Sergeant Cashman to see you, Reverend Mother.’ Sister Bernadette, keys clanking, came in through the garden door. He’s been quick, thought the Reverend Mother; well, this is the age of the car and the bicycle. She moved up the path to greet him, nodding pleasantly at Sister Bernadette. A nice woman, but a terrible gossip, so she waited until the lay sister had disappeared in the direction of the kitchen, before addressing the civic guard.

‘Well, Patrick, how are you and how is your mother?’ she queried. Even a dead body would not be considered a reason to omit the customary enquiries, although his widowed mother lived next door to the convent and probably Mother Aquinas knew as much about her health as did her busy son.

Patrick Cashman, like all the small boys of the neighbourhood, had attended the convent school until the age of seven, when they had sent him on to the Christian Brothers’ elementary school. She remembered all of her pupils, but he had a special place in her heart. He had first come to her notice about fourteen years ago, because he had refused to return from the playground to the classroom until he had finished counting the ants that were coming out of a hole at the bottom of the wall. He had ignored a couple of sharp smacks on his bare and rather dirty leg from his teacher and had persisted. Mother Aquinas, usually appealed to as the last sanction, had

come out from her study to save him from further punishment. Sister Philomena, red with anger, had marched the other children inside, leaving the playground empty except for one small boy and one middle-aged nun who was wrestling with a problem. How long would he keep it up for, she had wondered and then had allowed her thoughts to drift back. Should she leave this place and accept the suggestion made by the Bishop that she should go to Rome as Mother-General of the Order? Had she done all that she could do in making this school somewhere to give hope to the poor? Would she stagnate if she stayed? Would the new position offer a challenge to her brains, to her organizing ability? Should she go, or should stay? She had looked down at the small boy still muttering numbers under his breath and waited peacefully, allowing her mind to take a rest from the problem.

The answer to both of their questions came minutes later when the seven-year-old had looked up at her with a beaming smile, made rather endearing by a couple of missing teeth.

‘You’ll never guess, Reverend Mother,’ he’d said confidently. ‘Not even Holy God himself would have guessed. There’s nine hundred and fifty-seven of them little ants all living in the one little house under that brick.’

Worse even than the slums of Cork, had thought Mother Aquinas: overcrowding in Cork was officially set at a figure of over nine people living and sleeping in the one room and even so the statistics were frightening. Aloud, she suggested that they go and tell the rest of the class about this. She had been amused at the time, but in the years to come she had thought it had been a good indication of his character. He was not outstandingly clever, but was tenacious and hard-working and once he had something to do he could not be deflected until it was finished. And that day she had taken his concentration, and the intense interest shown by the other seven-year-olds in the life of ants, as a sign that she should stay where she was and try to offer a worthy education to the sharp-witted slum-dwellers of Cork city. She had not regretted her decision. And, partly because he had been connected with her deciding moment, she had always kept an interest in Patrick Cashman. Through sheer hard work and perseverance he had got one

of the coveted scholarships to the Christian Brothers' Secondary School at the age of fourteen and so, on leaving school, had the education to get into the newly formed civic guards which had replaced the Royal Irish Constabulary after the War of Independence.

And now there he was, a fortunate young man, earning three pounds a week, in a city that despite independence from England was still full of unemployment and terrible poverty.

He replied politely to her queries and then waited to see what she wanted, glancing in a puzzled way at her as she led the way down towards the chapel.

'There's a body washed up in the lane; it came from the river, I suppose,' she said abruptly once they were alone. 'Come and see, Patrick.'

He was as methodical and sensible as ever, she thought. No loud exclamations; just followed her down through the fog-enveloped gardens. And then there was a quick appraisal of the situation. He checked the body, as she had done, for signs of life. He produced a notebook and pencil and began to write in a fluent and rapid hand that did credit to the teaching of the Christian Brothers. Then he made a few measurements with the tape measure that he took from his pocket, drew a neat map in his notebook. She watched him with an indulgence which reflected their past relationship, but with the impatience of a quick mind confronted with a slower and more methodical one.

'What do you think?' she asked; her eyes were on the dead girl. She could barely contain her impatience to get to the heart of the puzzle.

'Bit different to the usual bodies that we get from the river; normally it's the girls of the street and that like; I've seen plenty of them,' he said slowly and she glimpsed, behind the simple words, a world of experience that was even deeper than hers.

'I suppose,' she said hesitantly, 'this sort of thing often happens; is that right, Patrick?'

'They don't usually look so dressed up,' he said. 'But yes, we do get plenty of bodies.'

'Seems a shame,' she said, thinking of the guns, the killing,

the plotting, the great speeches, the treaties and the promises. Her emotions told her that it was sad that nothing had changed, nothing had improved for people, but her experience of life told her that it was unlikely that anything else would have happened.

He shrugged his shoulders. He would not, she thought, be one to bemoan what could not be achieved by him personally.

‘There’s a lot of trouble around here,’ he said, almost apologetically, almost as though he were responsible for the unrest that happened in the streets around where he had spent his childhood. ‘Not very good housing, in this place,’ he added and both he and she could visualize the street where he had been brought up, the stately Georgian terraced house which was now a crumbling home for twenty or thirty families with no work, little food and no hope. ‘Lots of fights, people get frustrated, they’ll fight over a handful of coins, and then there are the suicides – some of them can’t stand things any longer. But,’ he said, reverting to the body in front of him, ‘this looks like something different.’

She knew what he meant, when he said that the body before them looked different. This girl was no prostitute from Sawmill Lane or beggar from North Main Street. Even the soaking from the river water couldn’t disguise the quality of the gown that she wore – satin, she thought – expertly tailored – elbow-length gloves of fine soft leather clung to her arms, a lustrous pearl necklace was around her neck and a pair of expensive-looking, brand-new – by the soles of them – high-heeled satin shoes were strapped around her ankles. Oddly enough there was something familiar about the hair and the eyes, but she could not think of any young lady of her acquaintance – her life, for the last fifty years, had been spent among the poor of the city.

He was methodical as ever now that he had returned his attention to the dead girl. He took out the notebook again and she could see how his eyes travelled up and down the body, checking that he had noted all the details of the girl’s clothing.

‘She’s got something around her wrist,’ he said.

‘An evening bag,’ said the Reverend Mother sadly. ‘It



matches her dress.’ Her mind went back to the dances of over fifty years ago. The gallant officers who had written their names on her dance programme; did they still do this, nowadays? she wondered. It had been a long time since she had indulged herself enough to think back to the days when she too dressed in silks and satins, wore an evening bag around her wrist.

‘I’ll see if I can get it off.’ The string was wound around the narrow wrist twice, but eventually he managed to disentangle it.

She admired the care with which he opened the soaking wet bag – it was closed only with a drawstring. He put his hand inside it carefully once he had teased the layers apart, drew out something and held it up.

‘Ten-pound note,’ he said reverently. It was, she thought, despite his dazzling new salary as a civic guard, still a big sum of money to him. He replaced the bag on the dead girl’s body and put the banknote carefully inside an envelope that he produced from a pocket. He took his indelible pencil from another pocket, licked its tip and then signed his name over the flap.

‘Would you mind, Reverend Mother?’ He handed her the envelope and the pencil and she signed below his signature.

‘You’re very careful, Patrick,’ she said approvingly.

‘I’ll hand it in as soon as I get back to the station,’ he said as he stowed it away. Then he went back to the bag again. Patrick, thought the Reverend Mother, would always go back and double-check.

He did not comment on the next item, just held it up so that she could see a small dance booklet with tiny pencil still attached. *The Merchants’ Annual Ball*, it said, printed in a fancy, gold-lettered script, and she nodded. Of course, it was March, the first week in March, and then she frowned.

‘The Imperial Hotel?’ she queried. The Merchants’ Balls had been held there in her youth, and were, she thought, still held there. But the Imperial Hotel was not by the river and it was more than half a mile away from St Mary’s of the Isle. How had the body got here? She looked out at the lane where murky water still burst out from what was once a covered

drain. The morning tide had receded a little, but the narrow lane that ran beside the convent grounds still bubbled like a mountain stream with water from the drains and from the nearby river. It had been the usual result of days and nights of rain allied to a south-easterly gale that had blown the spring high-tide seawater straight up the River Lee.

His eyes followed hers, but he did not comment. She felt the sharp, acrid smell of the fog rise up inside of her and swallowed hard.

‘There’s something else,’ he said. ‘It’s stuck to the lining.’ Slowly and carefully he separated the object from the silk. It was small and oblong in shape, soaking wet but not yet pulp. A ticket, she realized; the print was still black and quite visible. It bore the name of the Cork Steam-Packet Shipping Company and was a first-class ticket for the ferry that left Albert Quay and went across to Liverpool three times a week. The date was printed, also: 5 March, 1923 – the midnight ferry, she thought. Patrick looked at it for a long minute before placing it into another envelope and then into one of his wide pockets.

‘What do you think that means?’ she asked eagerly and then was slightly ashamed when he didn’t reply. It was nothing to do with her, this ticket for a journey from Cork to England in a first-class cabin. Her role in this affair should now be at an end. She had reported the finding of a body to the civic guard and they would now take over. He had stood up and straightened himself decisively and she knew that he would not answer: Patrick Cashman did not deal in speculation, but in facts.

‘What will you do next?’ she asked then, as a substitute question.

‘Send to the barracks for a conveyance for the body to be taken to the vault, check the missing persons’ list, make a report to the superintendent, contact the coroner, send for the doctor to perform the post-mortem . . .’

He thought for a moment as though mentally scanning his rulebook and then nodded, ‘And take it from there,’ he finished.

‘You go and report and I will stay and keep guard over the body,’ she said. ‘That will get everything moving more quickly and the less said about this the better, in case there are any

political links,' she finished. It was possible that the death was accidental, or self-inflicted, but murder could not be ruled out. Cork, in its first year of independence, simmered in the heat of a deadly civil war and the resolution of political differences was often murder.

Not *the will of God*, she thought with a sudden anger. No God could wish evil on this child, whoever she was. Her eyes rested on Patrick. He lingered for a while, gently moved aside a strand of wet hair and then stayed very still for a moment, his eyes on a black bruise on the centre of the girl's throat. He made another note and the Reverend Mother bowed her head. She had noticed the bruise when she examined the pearl necklace. This girl, she thought compassionately, had known the fear and intense pain of strangulation before death took her.

## TWO

St Thomas Aquinas:  
*Ignis est essentia Dei.*  
(Fire is the essence of God.)

**A** lone with the girl, the Reverend Mother's eyes lingered over the water-logged body at her feet and then went to the throat. The flood had delivered the body to her gate – she would take that as a sign that she should involve herself in this murder – nothing to do with the will of God, she thought irritably, remembering Sister Mary Immaculate, as she bent her mind to the problem with a combination of compassion and of intellectual curiosity. This was a girl from a privileged background like her own – she would be a daughter of one of the rich merchant families of Cork; even without the dance programme the dress, the gloves, the necklace of pearls, all of these proclaimed her origins.

And why did this fortunate girl have a ticket for the night boat to Liverpool tucked into her satin evening bag? Was she going alone? It looked like it. A male companion would surely keep both tickets in a more substantial wallet.

Reverend Mother shifted uneasily. Her feet were growing cold and the fog that had settled over the flooded city was getting into her lungs and making her cough. She was tempted to go back for her warmer cloak – no one was likely to come – the lane was only an entrance for the local people to visit the small chapel without going into through the convent grounds – after it passed the narrow iron gate, it ended at the river's edge. The original red sandstone to build the chapel, convent and school had been floated up the south arm of the river and then taken by cart, along this lane, on to the higher ground of St Mary's of the Isle. Nonetheless, she thought, looking down at the still figure by her feet, to watch by the body was the only thing left to do for her now; the last service

that she could pay to this unfortunate girl. She rubbed her hands together and then tucked them into her large sleeves and stood immobile, as though listening to the gospel readings at the Mass, gazing at the flood waters that had delivered the body to her gate. Odd, she reflected, that the philosopher Thomas Aquinas used the analogy of fire for the essence of God. Surely water came first. Water was the source of all life, the source of all good but also the source of all evil, depending on how man used it.

But her mind, always the most active part of her, was busy. It was over fifty years since she had danced at the Merchants' Ball in the Imperial Hotel, but she remembered the place well – its cosy, intimate supper rooms upstairs, its magnificent ballroom on the ground floor, the broad stairs of shining wood, the marble-floored hallways with shadowy alcoves. Her mind ranged over it, imagining a quarrel, a struggle. But surely not within the Imperial Hotel! Her memories supplied it with a huge staff, discreetly present in all parts, ready for every eventuality. The Merchants' Ball was the biggest event of the year. What had happened there last night? And how had the body been taken from the hotel and launched into the river?

She was deep in thought when a slight noise took her attention and then she realized that she was not alone. A head had appeared above the wall that surrounded the convent gardens; a head wearing a beret, suddenly silhouetted in the hazy light from the gas lamp. The Reverend Mother stood very still, hands tucked into large sleeves, body half-turned towards the gate. Her cloak, she knew, would cover her white breastplate and she lowered her head so that the black veil threw a shadow over the snowy linen wimple that enclosed her forehead. A long leg with a shining boot swung over the wall, and a shining gold ring appeared, held steady in a gloved hand, as the figure lowered itself down with a slight splash into the flooded lane.

A pistol; thought the Reverend Mother and stayed very still. There was a certain amount of respect still for the clergy, but nerves were at trigger point during these fearful days where brother fought against brother. She had no wish to alarm this young man – a Republican, she thought – and was glad that

Patrick had left. He would have felt it his duty to arrest the stealthy figure and the civic guards were unarmed.

She had been seen, though. A torch was suddenly produced and it flared its light upon her.

The muzzle of the pistol pointed towards her for a second and then was hastily lowered. And so was the torch.

But by then Reverend Mother had seen enough.

‘Good morning, Eileen,’ she said in icy tones and by the light of the torch saw the long legs shuffle uneasily.

Eileen O’Donovan had been one of the most gifted and most advanced pupils that the school on St Mary’s of the Isle had ever produced. When the Reverend Mother had seen her last she had been dressed in a navy-blue gymslip with a blouse that was supposedly white, but had turned to pale grey from the smuts and smoky emissions of the foggy city, and a much-darned navy cardigan. Her black hair had been demurely confined to twin plaits, but now it streamed down her back from her beret and instead of a gymslip she wore a tailored tweed jacket, well-fitting breeches and below them a highly polished pair of knee-high leather boots. For a moment the girl said nothing and then, in a voice that she strove to make sound casual, she said politely: ‘Good morning, Reverend Mother. It’s a terrible morning, isn’t it?’

Reverend Mother ignored this. ‘Are you a member of the Republican Party, Eileen?’ she asked, trying to keep the note of censure from her voice. It was, after all, none of her business what her past pupils did with their lives.

‘Yes, I am.’ By the gas lamp Eileen’s face was defiant. She added a perfunctory, ‘Reverend Mother,’ but closed her lips firmly after that. She was not going to make any excuses or explanations.

‘Your mother told me that you had a good office job.’

‘And so I do; I’m press officer for the Republicans. I’ve had pieces published in all the newspapers – telling our side of the story.’ There was a note of pride in the girl’s voice. She looked in blooming health. She was well and warmly dressed in that good quality cloth and the hollow cheeks had filled out. It was well known that the Republicans paid well – the Reverend Mother had heard that even respectable

young solicitors were not averse to taking part in Republican Courts as the fee was double their usual one from the newly formed Free State. What the Republicans needed, they did not hesitate to take from the prosperous shops in Patrick Street, cheerfully assuring the owners that it was all in a good cause.

‘You always did write . . . did write well,’ murmured the Reverend Mother. She had hastily suppressed the words ‘*very imaginative stories*’ as perhaps an inappropriate phrase in the circumstances. She shouldn’t have been surprised, though; Eileen had always been a rebel. She remembered a lively lesson with the most advanced girls in the school when the struggle through Milton’s poem *Paradise Lost* had been enlivened by Eileen’s sudden adoption of Satan as a revolutionary hero rising up under oppression. However, words were one thing, guns and the taking of life was another. Her eyes went to the pistol which Eileen had hastily shoved back into her pocket and then to the dead girl at her feet.

Eileen’s eyes followed those of her former teacher and she shook her head firmly.

‘This is nothing to do with us, Reverend Mother, nothing to do with the Republican Party,’ she said with emphasis. ‘We were notified and I was sent up to see what had happened.’

‘Notified . . . I see – Jimmy Logan, I suppose.’ Mother Aquinas had wondered why the gas lamp had not been extinguished, but now the matter was explained. Jimmy, the lamplighter, would be a good source of intelligence for the Republicans as, legitimately, curfew or no curfew, he was on the streets every morning and every evening, carrying his ladder with him, and stopping to talk to everyone in the neighbourhood. An unreliable man, she thought dispassionately, a man who had no aversion to manufacturing news when there was none available. He was, of course, in his element in these troubled times.

‘And what have you been sent to do, Eileen?’ She reminded herself that she was no longer Eileen’s teacher.

‘First of all to make sure that no one left any false information – you’d be surprised at the number of dead bodies that have a placard around their neck and the words *Informer*

*Executed by Order of the Irish Republican Party* written on it – mostly misspelt,’ she added with the disdain of one who had mastered spelling of words like ‘committee’ by the time she was eight years old.

‘No, there was nothing left like that; I was the one who found the body,’ said the Reverend Mother and her eyes went to the quiet figure at their feet. Young lives wasted, she thought sadly. This girl here, this child of a wealthy family, with everything to live for – she was dead and Eileen, her past pupil, one of her girls, with all her brains – what would be her future? Long years in prison, death at the end of a rope, death at the back of an alley with a bullet through her heart? Through tears that welled into her eyes, she saw Eileen take out a notebook, rather like the one that Patrick had produced, and make a few notes, looking all around her and then focusing on the body again.

‘She’s posh, isn’t she? Is that velvet, Reverend Mother – that dress of hers?’

‘No, it’s satin.’ The Reverend Mother heard the note of sadness in her own voice, as she blinked back her tears, and knew that this time the sadness was for Eileen as much as for the poor dead girl. Eileen had devoured stories about well-off young ladies going to balls and parties in the works of Jane Austen, Dickens and Thackeray, but her practical knowledge of silks, satins and velvets was as imprecise and vague as the convent’s teaching about the angels of heaven and the devils of hell.

‘We’ll be blamed for it; you know that, don’t you?’ Eileen was still writing busily. ‘Or at least we will if I don’t get in quickly. Today is Tuesday so there won’t be much in the paper tomorrow – no markets today. I was going to try and do an article on the lunatic asylum and what a disgrace it is that no money is spent on it and they are talking about spending £100,000 on a new city hall – a few of the boys were going to come up with me so that I could have a look without being thrown out. But now, I think I’ll do one about her instead. The other will keep – this is topical.’ She looked thoughtfully at the figure on the ground. ‘Wonder who did it?’ she asked, speaking more to herself than to her past teacher.



Eileen would have been used to dead bodies over the last few years, thought the Reverend Mother and then was surprised to see her touch one knuckle to the corners of her eyes in a childlike gesture that brought back affectionate memories.

‘Poor lasher,’ she said compassionately, the Cork slang word coming easily to her lips. ‘There she was all dressed up – wonder whether she was at the Merchants’ Ball last night. The place was stiff with civic guards in front of the Imperial Hotel when I passed down the South Mall last night. Do you know what, Reverend Mother? I’d love to put a bullet in the mullacker that did that to the poor girl – strangled her, didn’t he? You can see the marks of it on her throat.’

The Reverend Mother allowed this to pass. A sudden thought had struck and she grimaced, uncomfortable at her lapse.

‘I should have sent for the priest,’ she said aloud.

Eileen grinned. ‘Well, you’ll excuse me if I don’t go to fetch him, Reverend Mother,’ she said airily. ‘We’re not in great favour with the priests. The Bishop has excommunicated all Republicans – called off the altar we all were. My mam nearly died at the idea of me going to hell. She’s a great one for borrowing trouble, is my mam.’

The Reverend Dr Cohalan, Bishop of Cork, had been most unwise in this blanket condemnation, thought the Reverend Mother; there had been acts of violence on both sides – some acts by the official authorities had out-done, in brutality and loss of life, any action by an illegal organization like the Republicans. The people of Cork would never forget how the Bishop had refused to condemn the burning down of the city streets by the Black and Tans, the so-called auxiliary police, which had left thousands without housing or jobs, but had excommunicated the Republicans for their assault on an army barracks. However, in front of Eileen, she maintained a discreet silence and only said aloud, ‘Well, the civic guards will be back in a few minutes with something to take the body to the barracks. Perhaps it would be best if the priest near there will see to the matter; our Father Murphy is rather elderly to be brought out in this flood and rain.’

‘The civic guards.’ Eileen had picked this up and she stowed her notebook and pencil away in a businesslike manner. ‘I’d

better be off. You don't mind if I go through the convent gardens again, Reverend Mother, do you? Everywhere is flooded except for around St Mary's of the Isle.'

'Go through the gate this time.' The Reverend Mother hesitated for a moment and then added, 'Take care of yourself, Eileen, body and soul.'

A just war, according to St Thomas Aquinas, *must take place for a good and just purpose rather than for self-gain – and peace must be its object*, she remembered, as she watched the trim, long-legged figure springing lightly up the steep steps. What would he have thought of the aims of the Irish Republican Party?

And then the sound of a wagon trundling down the lane, the horse splashing noisily through the flood and from time to time snorting irritably at the water that washed around its knees; the civic guards had arrived, using horse power rather than an engine which could be wrecked in the flood, and the Reverend Mother composed her face to receive them with dignity and to make sure that the body was handled carefully as it was taken under the jurisdiction of the present authority. There were a number of people there – two civic guards who were not introduced to her; Patrick's assistant, a silent young man called Joe; and the doctor.

The Reverend Mother knew Dr Scher, as he had been the convent's doctor for decades. Younger than herself by a good ten years, he had mostly retired from general practice, though he retained his lectureship in dissection at the university – Queen's, she still called it, though now it had been renamed University College, Cork, and he did occasional work for the civic guards. A kind man, though, like Sister Bernadette, a terrible gossip, always on the lookout to increase his knowledge of the latest rumours and scandals in this city of talkers. He shouldn't have retired, she thought. He had been bored ever since, though he still found room in his generous heart to lavish his skill on some of the poor who could not afford a doctor. The children in her school often talked of Dr Scher and of the small presents that he gave to them and of how nice his medicine tasted. She guessed that the pharmacist was ordered to lace each bottle with plenty of sugar.

'Morning, Reverend Mother,' he said heartily, climbing down

from the heavily built brewery wagon and politely removing his glove to shake her by the hand, while his eyes slid across to the girl.

‘Strangulation, is it?’ said Dr Scher and Patrick made no reply, just stood looking down into the dead girl’s face. A tiny crease had appeared between his eyebrows and his hazel eyes were alert and attentive – not, thought the Reverend Mother, looking at the girl’s throat, but at the widely opened eyes that stared sightlessly up into the mist. There was a moment’s silence. Dr Scher had expected agreement – that was obvious by the sharp glance that he gave into the young civic guard’s face – but when he received none, he looked again at the corpse and then cleared his throat.

‘Hm,’ he said, and then, after a few more seconds, ‘well, we’ll see. Do you know her at all? Could she be an informer? The Republicans have taken to murdering these just to deter the others.’

Improbable, thought the Reverend Mother. She was surprised at Dr Scher. She would have thought that he had more sense, more knowledge of what went on in the city around him. Girls dressed like that, in an expensive satin gown, were unlikely to be seen going to a civic guards barracks to inform on a member of the Republican Party. They might murmur something in the ear of a father or a brother, but they would not get involved. She looked across at Patrick wondering whether he would tell Dr Scher about the dance programme in the girl’s bag, but the face of the young guard was wooden and unresponsive.

‘Would you like to have her brought back to the barracks now, Doctor?’ he asked, his voice even and without inflection.

Interesting, she thought, looking from the taciturn young man to the gregarious old one. The Irish were the ones that had the reputation of being garrulous and free with information and the English were supposed to be reserved and cautious in their dealings with their fellow men. Still, Dr Scher was Russian in origin, though he himself had been born and had spent his boyhood in Manchester. Perhaps that made a difference.

‘Yes, yes.’ The doctor did not look at him; he was busy studying the body, looking now at the clothes. ‘Any missing persons?’ he asked.

‘Not so far.’ This was answered by Joe. ‘Probably one of the girls of the quays – their night lasts until the lights are put out,’ he added with a quick glance at the lamp still burning in the yellow fog. And then he looked at Patrick’s still face and became very stiff and still himself. Joe, thought the Reverend Mother, was very young. Not long out of school, she reckoned. He would have even less knowledge of silks and satins than Eileen and would not know that it was most unlikely that a girl of the street would be dressed in a gown like this.

Dr Scher looked at him impatiently and scornfully, but seemed to decide that his remark was not worthy of an answer and he bent over the girl again, a frown on his lined face. A hot-tempered man, Dr Scher – she had heard tales of his outbursts when he did not hesitate to roar at any of the medical students who treated a dead body with jokes or disrespect. Joe shifted uneasily and looked at his superior. Patrick remained aloof, just signalling to the two guards to lift the body into the back of the vehicle. Reverend Mother thought once again about her failure to summon a priest, but said nothing. The matter was now out of her hands.