

AN ARTHUR'S QUAY CHRISTMAS

A few pigeons plucked seed outside Croom Mills Bakery. An old man tapped his walking-stick against the thick chains along the quay. A small boy played with a toy drummer-man in the half-dark hallway of the tenements . . .

Later in the evening, when the cold frost descended on the city, the boy heard voices wafting up from Patrick Street, drunken voices on the way home, angry shouts from the lanes near Polly Carr's toyshop, and sometimes gentle voices whispering soft words of love in the night.

A voice resounded close on the heavy stamp of strong feet on wooden steps and the weak groan of rusty door-hinges. His father had arrived home at last to a two-roomed tenement above a public house in Arthur's Quay.

Outside their window, facing the water, the city was quiet. There was a cobweb-covered pint glass on the sill, left over from a previous celebration. A boat siren in the docks re-echoed like a banshee. The young boy strained his neck to see reflections in the dark water. One

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day, his father brought him to the boats. The boy blackened his hands saving coal lumps for the mother.

It had been another cold day, dragging Christmas that little nearer. Four flights of wooden steps led to the hallway where shafts of light filtered in from the street. It had been a happy day when the drummer-man marched through the unnoticed hours rapping out a measured tattoo. Bells began to ring out over the city. A mist rose from the river. A man tapped his walking-stick against the heavy chains along the quay.

Men on bicycles passed the tenements on their way to small houses, which seemed to huddle close and brace themselves against the coming snow. Mighty men on groaning bicycles waved to the young boy. The drummer-man marched smartly on the stone in front of the public house. As the soft mist rose from the river, his mother's voice called out from the wooden steps: 'Come up before you catch your death!'

Morning unfolded slowly. Around them, sleepy dockers heaved burly frames out of creaking beds. Work was scarce, so they arrived early and queued outside the gates.

He awoke slowly, gradually becoming aware of his surroundings, slowly recognising familiar objects, comforted by their presence and knowing that the wooden floor and flights of stairs were still there. From down below came the sound of horse-hooves clip-clopping on cobble-stones and he heard her voice calling his name.

Before the first mists of morning had drifted off the river, the men were at work on the timber and coal-boats in the docks. Sweat and dust covered their bodies. Horse-carts came; bags were filled; drivers dashed their whips and set out on deliveries across the city. It would be a cold Christmas. Carts crunched over cobble-stones by the weighbridge, smashing coal lumps into fragments. Old women in black shawls picked the pieces. It would be a cold Christmas, he had heard her say; it had all the signs.

In the evening, across Sarsfield Bridge, a necklace of Christmas lights



Arthur's Quay, from a watercolour by Carmel Flynn, 1945.

was reflected in the river. His father brought him down to the public house where it was warm and bright. Holly and ivy decorated the big mirrors, and the young boy sat quietly in the snug, gazing up at the golden rings threaded through the brown velvet curtains. Clutching a glass of orange, he sank back into the polished wooden bench and listened red-faced and on the verge of tears, as his father sang 'Some Enchanted Evening' to a blonde-haired woman.

In the last few days before Christmas, his mother brought him to the market where piles of second-hand clothes lined the road. Enormous fat women, with wide money-pockets, sat like guards over the suits, skirts, shoes and coats. Donkey-carts from Park offered cabbage and vegetables, while inside the stone walls feathers floated around the chicken-chokers. Sad-eyed ducks stolidly sat there, as if resigned to death. Red-eyed turkeys cocked their heads and listened and blinked, looking straight ahead.

In a far corner, men with feathers in their hair sat, legs apart, plucking fowl. 'I'll kill that turkey for you, Ma'm'. A deadly fluttering of wings followed and then the furious plucking, until the high breastbone showed and only a few thick black hairs remained around the neck. 'There you are Ma'm, a fine bird you have there, a great weight.'

Looking back at the market gates, he saw dozens of cabbage leaves scattered on the cobble-stones, and old men in long, shiny, stained coats stood around Feathery Bourke's on the corner.

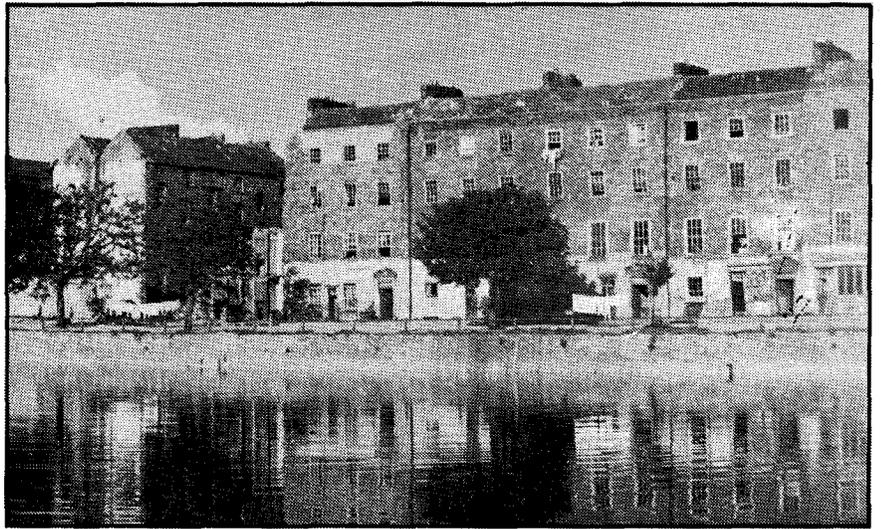
Later his mother visited the shops, he holding tightly to her hand in the Christmas crowds. Men in bright white coats served behind the counters in the Home and Colonial; rows of tinned biscuits were lined along Nelson's counters, and in Lipton's he was offered hot drinking chocolate.

Going home, he saw a long line of young girls walking in pairs behind two black-habited nuns. His mother mentioned the Good Shepherd Convent and being sent there. 'Only if you are bold . . . but sure you're not bold . . .'

Just before Christmas, she ordered coal from Sutton's. The burly coalman, attired in sacks, frightened him. Cursing because of the four flights of steps, the coalman had a black face and made a fearful noise on the wooden floor dumping the coal into the small stair cupboard.

One night, his father came home singing, and lifted him up high. 'What is Santie bringing you?' His skin was rough and red as he swayed unsteadily before the open grate. 'Let him down', his mother's voice chided. 'Can't you see he is frightened'.

In the church, the small boy was frightened while his mother prayed before the crib. They had passed up Patrick Street where he had gazed into the seed merchants and sniffed the air full of different aromas and examined the small green leaves sprouting in butter-boxes.



The last days of the Arthur's Quay houses.

Down Denmark Street, he had glanced skywards to see the golden figure of the archangel atop the church. Afraid that the devil would fall from the heavens, he sat uneasily in the flickering glow of her lighted candles. Then his mother walked him across by Cannock's, down by the red-brick lavatory and under the swivel bridge. They lit another candle in the Franciscan's, and headed across Bedford Row where she pointed out the hospital on the corner. 'I bought you in there for five pounds. It was a lot of money to pay'.

In O'Connell Street, there was real straw in the Augustinian crib. Afterwards, they passed Tait's Clock and the Dominican's, and then through elegant Pery Square where ivy-covered houses faced the People's Park. Around by Barrington Street, the strange quiet street of lace curtain nursing-homes, and out into The Crescent. In the Jesuit Church, Christ was bloodied, beaten, crowned with thorns and locked in a cell.

'For our sins,' his mother whispered, and he was frightened.

From the cell of the long-suffering Jesus, she led him over to St. Joseph's where she had been married only a few years earlier, without fanfare. A wedding-breakfast at home in a small slate grey house. A faded photograph, she in grey pin-striped costume, a sensible outfit, and her husband in the new navy-blue suit from Burton's. Confetti in his hair and that smile . . . She tightened her grip on the boy heading up to the Father's.

After doing the nine cribs, they were on a hill outside Mount St. Alphonsus where the crucified Christ hung on a massive cross. 'Say a prayer for peace this Christmas', she muttered. 'I wish to Jesus he would stop drinking.'

Late in the evening, as the small boy played in the hallway, a big, fat relief postman rapped heavily on the black door-knocker. Encased in a too-tight jacket, his belly bulged out where an off-white shirt had burst its buttons and displayed an expanse of hairy stomach.

Turning a bit too quickly, he lunged

against the doorway as the boy sought refuge behind his mother's skirts. 'My God, tis freezing', he said to the woman as he blew whiskey-scented breath on his frozen hands, still clutching the telegram. 'I have a pain in me back from that bike,' he smiled sheepishly.

He shoved the telegram under her nose.

'God save all here, Missus McCarthy . . . 'tis a telegram for you,' he stammered.

'No McCarthys live here,' she replied, glancing at the green envelope.

'This is Arthur's Quay', he demanded, pushing an ill-fitting cap back on his head. He offered the telegram again. She looked at it and read the address.

'This is for McCarthy in Lock Quay', she said. Befuddled, he gazed foolishly at her,

'Ah, it can't be. There must be some mistake,' he spat out, and rubbed his cold chin.

'Ah, go on . . . take it,' he implored her.

'But it is not for us', she replied firmly, stepping out of the hallway to force him against his bicycle.

' . . . McCarthy Lock Quay', he muttered sadly. The postman staggered away from the door and, with difficulty, mounted his bike and set off zig-zagging down the Quay.

'Happy Christmas', he called back over his shoulder. The small boy looked out from behind his mother's skirts and saw the drunken postman disappear into the misty Christmas lights.

In the evening, lying in bed, he heard their voices. Angry shouting voices, and vicious slamming doors. His father was celebrating the birth of another boy.

Outside on the way, down by Croom Mills and in the dark water-washed lanes of Francis Street, near Polly Carr's, the merry revellers staggered home, full of the spirit of the festive season.

In bed, above the tenements of Arthur's Quay, a small boy cried . . . saw the cobweb-covered glass on the window sill, and clutched tightly to his Christmas drummer-man.