The day began at Daingean Reformatory with the shrill sound of the nightwatchman’s hand-bell as he paraded up and down the centre of the dormitory shouting, “Come on, wakey wakey! Get out of those beds and get dressed before Brother Stack gets in!”

Brother Stack was the Kerryman in charge of the dormitories and the wash-house and his round face was perpetually flushed with anger. He would arrive to take over from the civilian nightwatchman at 7.30 a.m. By then we would all have our beds made and would be lined up ready for the next phase of the never-changing daily ritual.

It was the middle of October 1947 when I arrived in Daingean and I was twelve-and-a-half years of age. The winter of that year was a particularly bitter one and the snow was heavy and stayed thick on the ground. We left the dormitory shouting, “Come on, wakey wakey! Get out of those beds and get dressed before Brother Stack gets in!”

Some boy was heard to whisper to another at the other end of the wash-house. Brother Ahearn went red in the face. “If I catch the fellas that’s taken he won’t be able to talk again for a long time!” He shouted. He had a harsh, grating voice. Then suddenly he seemed to notice something. He jumped down off the box and ran down to where the whisper had come from. He caught hold of the a boy of about fourteen, and broke the silence with the words of an eyewitness...

‘’Ye scum of the earth!’ he screamed, addressing the inmates in general. ‘Ye filthy, scum of the earth! Ye dirty pack of robbers! Ye scum of the earth! Ye scum of the earth! Ye scum of the earth! Ye scum of the earth! Ye scum of the earth! Ye scum of the earth!’

By Sean Bourke

PART FOUR

of the shed to the other down the middle of the floor. On this stand were positioned two parallel lines of tin basins already filled with water. There was only one tap in the wash-house to which was attached a long rubber hose for filling the basins.

The boys lined up on either side of the stand, facing each other, the junior boys at one end of the wash-house and the senior boys at the other, with the youngest of the senior boys closest to the oldest of the junior boys. Near each basin was a small piece of yellow soap the kind used for scrubbing floors. There was no heating in the wash-house and the ice was about a quarter of an inch thick in the basins. I copied the other boys and broke the ice with a quick jab of the elbow before having a wash in the freezing water.

Absolute silence had to be maintained at all times. The first words of the day could only be spoken at breakfast. Brother Stack had departed and Brother Ahearn was supervising the wash-house. He did this by standing on a wooden box at the point where the senior boys met the junior boys and watching every move and listening for the slightest whisper. Brother Ahearn was nicknamed, “The Killer”. I found out why on that very first morning in Daingean.

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Brother Ahearn then resumed his position on the wooden box and glared up and down the wash-house. “Ye scum of the earth!” he screamed, addressing the inmates in general. “Ye scum of the earth!” he screamed, addressing the inmates in general. “Ye scum of the earth!” he screamed, addressing the inmates in general. “Ye scum of the earth!” he screamed, addressing the inmates in general. “Ye scum of the earth!” he screamed, addressing the inmates in general. “Ye scum of the earth!” he screamed, addressing the inmates in general. “Ye scum of the earth!” he screamed, addressing the inmates in general. “Ye scum of the earth!” he screamed, addressing the inmates in general. “Ye scum of the earth!” he screamed, addressing the inmates in general. “Ye scum of the earth!” he screamed, addressing the inmates in general. “Ye scum of the earth!” he screamed, addressing the inmates in general. “Ye scum of the earth!” he screamed, addressing the inmates in general.
junior boys. Further down towards the back of the chapel there was a wide gap separating the boys completely from the special pews for the priests and brothers. The Mass of course was in Latin and went on for about half an hour, being celebrated this morning by a Cork priest named Father Curtin.

After Mass we were marched across the grounds of the Reformatory again to an enclosed, gravelled yard where Brother Ahearn put us through half an hour of P.T. in the snow. Then, at long last, it was time for breakfast. Another march through the gloom to the boys' dining hall. And here another shock awaited me.

The dining hall was part of the main building and comprised the entire ground floor of one of the wings. The building and comprised the entire floor was scrubbed concrete and the walls were painted dark green. From the peeling white-washed ceiling hung the inevitable 40-watt bulbs. Along each of the two longer walls was a row of tables covered with black and white chequered linoleum like large chess boards. There were eight wooden kitchen chairs with spoked backs at each table. In front of each chair was a small cob of bread for every two boys amounting to about two slices each. The centre aisle of the dining hall was marked off from the table areas by two white lines that stretched the whole length of the hall. The boys, on entering the dining hall, had to stand with their toes just touching these white lines and facing each other in two long single files across the aisle, their backs to the tables. Brother Stack was back in charge again. He waited until you could hear a pin drop and, since everyone was starving, he did not have long to wait. Then, very slowly and deliberately, he started to make the sign of the cross and we all followed suit. "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen."

He waited again to see if he could detect a whisper. But the dining hall was as silent as a morgue. Then he went on, the boys carefully following and repeating his every word. "Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts which, of Thy bounty, we are about to receive, through Christ our Lord, Amen. May the souls of the faithful departed through the grace of God rest in peace. Amen."

But some of the boys, in their impatient hunger, had rushed the grace before meals and Brother Stack had noticed it. He made us say the prayer four more times before he was satisfied and by then we had already been ten minutes in the dining hall and the breakfast was stone cold. Finally, he clapped his hands together loudly as a signal for us to sit down.

The porridge was unpalatable and the tiny pat of margarine was hardly sufficient for one of the two slices of bread. Everybody forced himself to drink the cold tea. There was nothing else.

Twenty minutes later Brother Stack stopped his pacing up and down the centre aisle and, placing himself at the point where the oldest of the junior boys met the youngest of the senior boys, he slapped his hands together again about three of four times. Everybody went silent. He clapped his hands again, once, and we all resumed our positions with our toes to the white lines facing each other across the aisle. Again, slowly, and deliberately: "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen."

The grace after meals had to be said three times before Brother Stack was satisfied that we really were grateful to God for his bounty. Then we were marched off to our various jobs. I couldn't help reflecting as we left the dining hall that the Oblates of Mary Immaculate seemed to be more concerned with the dead and their sins than with the living and their sufferings. It was going to be a long three years.