

The Wolf by the Ears

By Mattie Lennon

It has been said that the first duty of a gentleman is to keep out of the hands of the police. Up to the time of writing I have carried out my gentlemanly duties, in that respect, every day of my life, with one exception. That was Tuesday 11th November 1969 when I was the victim of a wrongful arrest and unlawful detention.

At 11:15 A.M. and I was feeding our one and only bonham. A car bearing the roof-sign of our National Guardians of the Peace stopped at the gate of our humble abode at Kylebeg. It was driven by a 38 year old farmer's son, Paddy Browne, from Kenmare. He shared a surname with the one-time Earls of Kenmare but a Protestant farmer who had rented a house to him had once told me that there wasn't much evidence of any nobility connection. The observer was a 44-year-old son-of-the-soil from Kilmorgan, Co. Sligo. His Name was Bill Tighe. (Up to that moment I had little dealings with either officer apart from meeting them during Census-taking. I knew that they referred to me as "the Poet", which was understandable since I was in the habit of linking, even the grimmest situation to a poetic allusion.) Despite their agricultural background they had no compunction about taking me away from my pig-feeding, when they asked me to accompany them to Blessington Station.

If my neighbours hadn't known me as well as they did no doubt they would have been; "*Wondering if the man had done a great or little thing*".

Didn't the poet say:

To every Irishman on earth,

Arrest comes soon or late.

While Browne reversed the Squad-car down our narrow lane Tighe revealed to me that I had stolen an unspecified quantity of ham on Friday 31st October. Looking at his profile from

the back seat I recalled a comment made by one of my neighbours. Whatever about the grammatical correctness of the observation I was now tempted to accede to its accuracy; he had once described Tighe as being; "As thick as the butt-end of a horse's bollocks, that never saw anything only shite."

Once in the station another Garda had something to say. This was 31 year old, Willie Nash, from Gurtnacreehy, Co. Limerick. (You may not have heard of Gurtnacreehy; the only time the word crops up is in the names of Greyhounds.) Nash was so well turned out that he was like a male mannequin compared to his more bucolic colleagues. When he first came to Blessington in January 1962 he was a useful man on the football field and sported a crew-cut. Now he was opting for a (slightly belated) Beatle look. He imparted the additional information that I had maliciously burned a rick of hay, the property of Dan Cullen (who because of a lumber peculiarity, the clinical term for which is *Lordisis* was known as "the Hollow-backed Lad) on Saturday 27th September.

Nash's body language (as he replaced a nail-file in his tunic pocket) proclaimed his lack of self-esteem and the fact that he was well aware of my innocence. His rhetorical question: "Would it surprise you to know that you were seen lighting it?" was slightly off the mark (not to mention off the wall).

I knew, through my own sources, that a quantity of ham had been reported stolen. (I wasn't told if it was a quarter or a half pound) but I doubted the authenticity of the crime. As the interrogation progressed I became more convinced that the case of the purloined bacon should enter the annals along with The Easter Bunny, the Unicorn and a few pre-election promises. I also knew that, even if the ham had been stolen Tighe had established, on Saturday 03rd November, that I couldn't have stolen it.

Despite being the victim of the dirtiest trick ever played on me, being spoken to like an imbecile, humiliated, embarrassed and treated like a criminal I refused to confess to two fictitious crimes. (It's at times like this the words of Ethel Rosenberg spring to mind; "*I am innocent... to forsake this truth is to pay too high a price*"). The Sergeant, looking less than

prepossessing and more than his thirty-seven years, gave the OK to have me locked in a cell. Maurice O 'Sullivan, ex-Mental Nurse (known as a "keeper" at the time), from Slaheny, Co. Kerry, was very concise; his only comment to me was: "I have enough evidence here to charge you". (It was at this stage that I asked myself if I was, in fact, at the mercy of a lunatic, bearing in mind that my father always made a distinction between a madman and what he called a "bad-inclined madman." Perhaps his past was the reason for the brevity;

*For he to whom a watcher's doom
Is given as his task
Must set a lock upon his lips
Etc.*

Did the experience in his previous life prompt him to believe that I was the sort, so much in awe of authority, who would confess to anything? Although it was fifteen years since he surrendered his badge in Saint Finan's Hospital, Killarney, the "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest Syndrome" obtained; He still thought that he could do what he liked? ("...for in a madhouse there exists no law").

I thought of William Blackstone who said: "*It is better that ten guilty persons escape than one innocent suffer.*" I soon reminded myself that Mr. Blackstone didn't spend four years working in a Kerry asylum.)

When I was told, "You'll get out when you tell us the truth" I took on board my neighbour's opinion of the speaker. And the farmer's boots and sly smile I saw as further evidence that Tighe was not a member of Mensa, would not appreciate Tennyson, and so I thought it would be futile to quote;

*This truth within thy mind rehearse,
That in a boundless universe*

Is boundless better, boundless worse.

My father always said that I would “hear the grass growing” and now I became acutely aware of my better –than- average auricular ability. Sound- proofing had not been a consideration in the design of the cell-door and I could hear every word spoken in the day-room. Industrial-relations matters, within the Gardai, were touched on lightly before a turn in the conversation that was very interesting and informative; but that is a story for another day. Suffice, for now, to say that there was paraphrasing of the words of Thomas Jefferson; “*We have the wolf by the ears and we can neither hold him nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale and self- preservation on the other*”

When again I knocked with a hope of being released Browne uncovered the spyhole. His eye, viewed through the small rectangle of light, didn’t look friendly. I was sitting on a wooden bench with some sort of a “tic” on it. Hey! Didn’t I read on the Leinster Leader about a Ballinastockan man being fined ten pounds for pissing on a mattress in the cell of Blessington Garda station? (Of course it wasn’t worded so in the “Leader”.)

“Are you going to tell us about this fire?” Garda Browne enquired.

Now secure in the knowledge that they knew I wasn’t guilty of anything I didn’t protest my innocence. I simply asked; “Are you going to let me out?” Browne didn’t reply. He opened the cell door and allowed me into the day room. As he lit a Goldflake butt with a paper spill from the open fire he again accused me of arson. As I looked at his well-worn shoes and archaic wristwatch I thought of his economy-consciousness which his former Sergeant, Frank Reynolds, had told me about. My comment about the coldness of the cell and my plea to be left in the Day-room fell on deaf, Kenmare, ears.

As he dragged on the ignited butt I was sternly told to “get back in.”

I would compile a letter to the Minister for Justice. But that could wait. This was as good a time as any to make a start on a parody. The air of “The Oul Alarm Clock” would do fine;

Writing Raw

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*"I was told we're going to charge you
With the burning of a rick,
By Nash and Tighe and Sullivan,
An' Paddy Browne the prick."*

The cell door opened. Garda Willie Nash told me, "We're lettin' ye out but we'll be takin' ye in agin."

He wasn't a man of his word; I haven't seen the inside of that cell since.

As I glanced back at the well-groomed man from Gurtnacrehy why did Hemingway's words spring to mind, *"In police stations cynicism was worn like a mask, like armour to shield whatever vulnerabilities remained."*

I had to walk the five miles back to Kylebeg and tell my parents, "Mossie 'Sullivan is trying to frame me for two fictitious crimes."

The End

Mattie Lennon bio: I have written a play; *And All his Songs Were Sad*, which was produced by the Pantagleize Theatre Company in Fort Worth, Texas. I have written a one-act, *We Have a Wolf*, by the Ears which hasn't been staged to date. I write articles for *Ireland's Own* and *Ireland's Eye*. I have a webpage; www.mattielennon.com. Along with John Cassidy I am producing a DVD/ TV Documentary on a less well-known aspect of the Irish Potato famine. I produced a DVD *Sunrise on the Wicklow Hills*. I am a part-time storyteller. I am a Competent Communicator with Lucan Toastmasters and a member of Irish PEN. I am working on a Memoir, the working title of which is *The January Fair*.