

Days Red And Green

by Richard Bowes

1:17 P.M.

It was a brisk Sixteenth of March, in a 1954 more or less like any other. The A-bomb had gone off on schedule. Ike was in the White House and Elvis had started oiling his hair.

Agent Jake Stockley, of the Time Rangers, eased a two-year-old blue and white Ford Mercury sedan to a stop on a deserted service road near the harbor in Boston. He wore a suit and hat and looked every inch a cop.

Behind agent Stockley, a subway train ran on elevated tracks, a yard engine pulled freight and cars rolled on the expressway. Before him, hulks of World War Two cargo ships rusted on the sand. Out on the water a tug guided a freighter loaded with United Fruit bananas.

One minute, the only other human visible was an old guy out on a strip of sand, feeding seagulls, mimicking their cries.

The next, a man was striding towards the Mercury. He was in his late twenties, the same age as Agent Stockley, wide shouldered, his overcoat open and billowing, one hand on his hat.

Stockley rolled down the window, turned what had seemed to be a plain silver ring so that a raised spiral design could be seen. Holding up his hand casually he said, "God bless an honest Irish neighborhood where looking like a lawman is a perfect disguise. How are you Ed?"

Ed Brown slid into the front seat, opened his hand and flashed a similar ring. "Upstream, when people see me looking like this, they want to know why I'm dressed up as Dick Tracey."

Stockley looked at the other man. "Something's different," he said. "A promotion, maybe. Deputy Centurion? First in our class!"

"More trouble than it's worth," Brown shrugged. "Nancy sent word you had something to show us."

"Someone to show you," said Stockley. "And I know right where he is." He made a fast U-turn and headed back the way he had come.

Brown glanced around, taking his bearings. "Finding this location is one pain in the ass," he said. "Thought the co-ordinates were off."

"Right on the Main Stream," said Stockley. "Everything just as the gods like it. Well, almost everything."

"Easy to miss, is what I mean," Brown said, gazing at streets lined with wooden three-decker houses. "See one 1954, you've seen them all. They pulled me off a bad '43 for this. You know how wrong stuff can go that year? We got Miss J. Edgar Hoover in the White House. And that's the normal part."

They turned onto Dorchester Boulevard and drove past a big brick church and then a school. The schoolyard buzzed with life. "Saint Killian's," said Stockley. "Saint Patrick's Day Pageant tonight. Linda's in it. She's six. In first grade."

He looked at his watch, slowed down. "Before Nancy and me hooked up, I thought Rangers raising a kid was unfair. A kid needs to grow up with one day, one year following the next in the right order. But Nance already had Linda, so I got to be a dad. And the kid's terrific. Uncanny. Last week, for instance,

she said a janitor at the school wore a crown. Insisted on it. It's why you're here."

"I got dragged eleven years Upstream because of something your kid told you?" Brown asked. "You and Nance getting a little wacky in this backwater, Jakes?"

Stockley grinned. "A couple of days ago, I saw the guy. He's coming up on your left. Take a gander at the one in door."

Ed Brown turned to roll the window down an inch or two. His gaze fell casually on a man in workman's clothes standing just outside the Shannon Bar and Grill. The man's shoulders filled the doorway. His red curls blazed. His eyes were wide and blue and empty.

"Oh hell and murder!" Brown said. "Bigger than life!"

"The Red Man, himself," said Stockley with a tight smile. "Nancy wanted you to see that first."

"OK, I've seen it," Brown replied. "Take me to the boss."

1:34 P.M.

The little hand was on one and the big hand was near seven. But Linda didn't notice. Fascinated, she sat on a folding chair with her feet nowhere near the floor. On the stage of St. Killian's School auditorium, eighty shamrock-bedecked fourth grade boys and girls sang, "It's A Great Day For The Irish."

"Hands up in the air on the word, 'great,'" said Sister Amelia Clair from the piano. Sister Amelia was Linda's teacher and Linda thought she was as beautiful as the statues in the church.

After a moment's pause, the fourth graders began humming "Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly?" and Marjorie Banion came on stage boo-hooing into an oversized hanky. Marjorie was an eighth grader who had starred in every school pageant for the previous seven years.

Her eyes were large, almost ready to jump out of her head. Marjorie's mother, with eyes just as big as her child's, stood near the piano ready as always to mouth the words along with her daughter. "We rehearsed this all last night!" Linda heard her whisper loudly to the nun. Marjorie reached the center of the stage and turned to the audience as a dozen eighth grade boys nearly the size of grown-ups, dressed in police uniforms that looked real, marched on.

They were led by Leo Callahan, the tallest boy in the school even though he smoked. Leo, wearing sergeant's stripes, asked Marjorie in a big, phony brogue, "Sure, Bridget O'Flynn, what is wrong?"

And she replied, her brogue even bigger and phonier, "I can't find me little Tommy Kelly."

"We'll find him for you miss!" said the police in unison and the chorus behind them softly sang the first verse of "Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly? (K-e-double-l-y)." As they did, the police looked all around when suddenly the sergeant blew a whistle, pointed to the back of the hall and said, "There he is."

All the eighth grade police sprinted up the center aisle and returned bearing on their shoulders little Bobby Wright, who got excused early from school twice a week to take dance lessons. Bobby and Marjorie of the Wild Eyes step danced as chorus and cops swayed back and forth humming and finally bursting out with "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling." And that was the first act finale.

Then, Sister Gertrude George, a little fire plug of a woman, called "Two-Gun Gerty" behind her back, cleared everyone off the stage with a great flurry of black sleeves and clicks from her wooden hand signal. She told the children to go outside and play until they were ready to rehearse the second part of

the program.

A few minutes later, Linda Stockley stood in the school yard. The rest of her first grade class waited for their parents to collect them. They wore coats over Dr. Dentons with little balls of cotton sewn on the flaps for tails. Many of them still had on bunny ears and sang "Hipitty-hopitty, Easter's on its' way," bouncing up and down, dazed and runny nosed. A couple of them waved to Linda as they were led away.

Unlike them, that night she would wear a dress of gold and green. Linda had a speaking part and would appear at the finale of the pageant.

She watched the young ladies of the fourth grade break out jump ropes. The boys mostly kept their green plastic derbies in paper bags and their coats buttoned up to hide foot-wide shamrock ties. They slunk about trying to fade into the ground.

The girls, though, looked pleased with themselves. Their green hoop skirts stuck out from beneath their snow jackets. Ropes flicked, saddle shoes flew as they chanted:

In came the doctor

In came the nurse

In came the lady

With the alligator purse

Because Linda was six, impulse seized her legs and she went whirling in a full circle, saw red brick school and convent, rectory and church sail around her. She ended up facing the rectory and the hedge that ran around it. In the leafless twigs was what looked like a pair of beating pearl-colored wings. They gave off a sound like tiny bells.

Linda, wide-eyed, was suddenly aware of being watched. She turned and saw Mr. Clooney.

St. Killian's had two janitors and both were from Ireland. Clooney, the chief, was small and silvery with bright, little eyes and a long crooked nose. Red, the assistant, loomed behind him, grinning, silent. Linda smiled back. The kids all loved Red.

Clooney beamed down at Linda and none could be so ingratiating as the chief janitor. "Did you see something unusual, my darling?"

The little girl, looking where she had before, now saw only Marie, the rectory housekeeper, heading up the back stairs of the priests' house. She was going to say, "That lady had wings." Instead she looked again and said, "A little bird."

Clooney nodded, his eyes gleaming without warmth, and said a soft voice, "As you say, so it is." Watching, they saw a pigeon flutter away.

Red laughed aloud. Clooney looked around and said, "Get about your business you great galoot." That made Linda feel bad. But the big man, seeming not to mind, turned and ambled off.

Clooney considered the child. She had not a wisp of protection, not even an anointed trinket or secret name that some still had put on them on the sly by grandmothers. Yet there she stood, a pebble only he recognized as a jewel. With the gift of Sight and, perhaps, Silent Talking.

No mortal would know things so readily apparent to the eye of a Cluricaun. For Clooney was one of those disreputable cousins of the thrifty Leprechaun. Even among Cluricauns who are given over to drink, gambling, and fast riding, Clooney was considered shiftless. When, a century before, through his own

folly, he had found himself ensorcelled, none of them made any protest.

Now Clooney's indenture was all but up and his rightful nature about to be restored. An imp newly freed from bondage wouldn't want to come home empty handed. In the way of a black sheep returning, Clooney had cast about for a suitably impressive present to bring. Linda would be a graceful adornment indeed to the court of the Sidhe.

"Mr. Clooney!" Two-Gun Gerty called from the school door, "We need to have the rubbish taken out."

For an instant, the little man's eyes flashed. Then his mouth smiled, and he said, "As you wish, it shall be done, Sister."

The ageless little man looked around for Red and didn't see him. "Good day to you, miss," he said to Linda and headed across the schoolyard, careful not to step into the chalked hop-scotch lines. Linda listened as the girls chanted words as magic as a prayer:

He's dead said the doctor

He's dead said the nurse

He's dead said the lady

With the alligator purse

2:07 P.M.

Nancy Stockley, perfectly in period, wore a kerchief and sunglasses as she steered the blue and white Mercury along the service road. She was a pert young wife and mother who had taken the car to run errands and give an old school friend a lift.

"Seeing Jake brought it back." Ed sat beside her and drew deep on a Camel. "Ranger Academy. All of us kids escaped from bad Times and Places."

"From one end of the Twentieth Century to the other," she said. "Jake was born in 1905. I'm from 1982. You were Mr. Inbetween."

"Yeah, I remember you were so sophisticated. He was a farmer." Ed looked at the old man who sat on a chunk of concrete and watched the gulls which ignored him now that he had no food. "Checked that one out?" he asked.

"This morning when I found out you were coming. He's balmy. Harmless."

Nancy came to a stop where Jake had picked Ed up an hour before. "Now we get down to business," she said.

"Century Headquarters pulled me off a special assignment. I got told to contact '50s Decade Command concerning an impending crisis. A Minor Defraction was about to become a major problem."

Ed Brown gazed at her casually as he spoke. "The Decadian, when I got in touch with him, said it had started small. More people seeing flying saucers and commies under the bed than normal. He figured it was some naïve telepath sharing her dreams, a juvenile delinquent discovering he could run amok in the Time Stream.

"He put his best agent, someone in line to be a Station Chief, on the case. Let her husband and her settle down and investigate. For a while, things got quiet. Then, out of nowhere, the Decadian got reports of Major Variations originating right about Here and Now. At the same moment, the agent tells him she and her family have been living down the street from the Red Man. The agent, it turns out, is an old school

chum." Ed Brown waited for Nancy to say something.

"Maybe living here worked out too well," she said. "Linda started first grade. Our cover is that Jake has a confidential government job. So he's gone a lot. My mother's sick, that's why I'm away when I am. It got so cozy we stopped being vigilant.

"The Defraction stabilized. Other things came up. So we let it ride. Then we discovered the Red Man. It gets better. Yesterday, we took a close look at the other janitor and noticed he was a Cluricaun." She paused and said. "I know we should have spotted them."

Ed said, "Jake told me that the local priest, somehow, has the two of them under his thumb."

"A pastor is a king around here. Monsignor Patrick Shaley rules over church and rectory, school and convent. He's got four curates, twenty-four nuns, a housekeeper, a Cluricaun and a hero of the Sidhe working for him. Quite a guy."

Ed Brown looked out at the water and up in the sky. He ground out his butt and prepared to leave. "Kind of funny, Nance. You're looking for trouble and it turns out you've been sitting on it." He wasn't smiling.

"What was it they taught us at the Academy about Minor Defractions? Sometimes people have visions. Massacre their cats. Kill all the left-handed women. Usually, that doesn't matter. Then once in a million times you get the scenario where one of the women would have gone on to be Joan of Arc."

"No Joan and you got a Primary Event," said Brown. "A major shift in the Time Stream. What I'm hearing is that we have another Joan situation on our hands."

"We're pulling Linda out of that pageant tonight. I've got a bad feeling."

"You alter nothing. Do exactly what you normally would until I tell you differently. Understand?"

"When will we hear?"

He looked at his watch. "I'll be back in one hour. Your time. I'll bring your orders."

Ed opened the door and got out. Above them, an American Airlines DC3 headed for Logan Airport. A speed boat cut through the harbor waves. He hummed a tune, flicked his ring around, ran his thumb along the spirals, took two steps, three, and was gone.

For a moment Nancy stared at the empty space where he had been. Then she drove away fast.

2:32 P.M.

Linda sat near Sister Amelia Claire and Sister Gertrude George. Noise came from the back of the auditorium where Red, closely supervised by Clooney, was hauling away debris. Marjorie Banion of the alarming eyes went past trailed by her mother. "She's been up all night anticipating, Sister," whispered the mother.

"Try to take a nap, Marjorie," said Sister Amelia.

"It will be no use," hissed the mother with great satisfaction and they went away.

"A dog with the look of either of those two would be put down," muttered Sister Gertrude George. Then she turned and said, "Stop your noise. We're about to start rehearsals."

"As you wish it, Sister, so it shall be done," said Clooney and yelled at Red, "Cease and desist, you great lug."

The nun, no taller than Clooney, pursed her lips and nodded, unsmiling and reserved. Deep in the Irish West Country where she had been born, people referred to fairykind as the Gentry. Everyone made it a policy to stay clear of the Gentry and not to look too closely at their doings. She found herself following that rule around Clooney.

On Clooney's part, if witnesses were not about, he would have had Red make the rubbish dance down to the fiery furnace. Earlier, under Clooney's direction, the big man had waved his hands and made six hundred and fifty-eight wooden folding chairs snap out of their stacks, march in formation and unfold themselves in unison. For Red had powers even he scarcely remembered.

As it was, Sister Amelia struck up the tune of "The Kerry Dance" and the curtain rose on seventh graders singing in their Kelly green clothes. Clooney and Red stopped to watch the second half of the pageant.

When the kids reached the lines:

*Oh to think of it,
Oh to dream of it,
Fills my heart with tears*

Their voices fell to a low murmur and Mark Hogan, a seventh grade boy, generally agreed to be destined for the priesthood, stepped forward and proclaimed to a girl with a loud voice who played his sister, "Sure, last night I had a wonderful dream."

"Saints preserve us, Patrick and what was that dream?" asked the loud young lady.

"I found that I have a vocation to be a priest!" Mark said. For the second part of the pageant was nothing less than a celebration of the life of Monsignor Patrick Shaley, whose saint's day and fortieth anniversary as a priest this was.

"Mark, speak up," said Sister Amelia Claire. "And with a lot more feeling."

"Sure Patrick, that is wonderful!" said the girl. "And on your saint's day too!"

There followed a long silence. It was broken by the voice of Sister Gertrude George backstage. More commanding than any drill sergeant, Two-Gun Gerty barked, "Soldiers get yourselves in there!" Half a dozen eighth graders, dressed in their grand-father's doughboy outfits, tumbled on stage.

"British soldiers looking for rebels!" the girl exclaimed. As luck would have it, they found one hiding behind a crowd of people and dragged him away. It was then that Patrick Shaley's father, played by a boy wearing a high green hat with a gold buckle on the front, announced that the family would all go to America, the land of freedom.

"Ah, Patrick, you'll pursue your vocation in the New World, I know you will," said the girl. And the chorus hummed as Mark Hogan sang "Minstrel Boy" for no reason other than his having a voice of a purity that always seemed to surprise him.

What followed was a series of brief scenes, illustrating the high points of Patrick Shaley's life. Altar boys pretended to be seminarians, the doughboys sang "Over There," and girls dressed as nuns founded Saint Killian's School.

At the finale, Linda came onstage carrying an envelope half as big as she was. From the wings, Sister Gertrude George pointed to the empty chairs and said, "Monsignor will be sitting right in the first row in the center. Now step forward and speak as if he was here."

Linda did as she had been told, walked past the big eighth graders and faced the hall. She saw Mr. Clooney, way at the back, watching with a little smile as she recited:

*To Monsignor Shaley
Our Pastor Dear
To whom God's love
commits us here ..."*

There was a bit more. Then Sister Amelia at the piano said, "And tonight, you'll come down the steps and hand him the donation bouquet." Linda mimed that and Sister Amelia said, "Perfect."

Before she knew it, Linda was in her coat. She had expected her mother to meet her. But it was her stepfather who took her hand and held it so hard it almost hurt.

2:57 P.M.

Nancy deviated slightly from Ed Brown's order to do nothing until she heard from him. She had Jake pick up Linda and she went to the church looking for what Time Rangers referred to as inter-agency co-operation. Others would call it divine intervention.

Votive candles flickered before the statues. In another time and place, the Archangel Michael and Teresa of Avila might have been Mars and Minerva. The others would also once have had different names. No immortal gave any sign of being present that afternoon.

Elsewhere in the parish, Bacchus was worshipped in a dozen bars. There was even a small bower of Venus down by the elevated tracks. Nancy had no need for those. Help lay much closer.

In a little yard between the church and the convent was a shrine. The Virgin Mother had many names in many places. Here, she wore a halo that was a crown and carried the world in one hand as a scepter. A snake writhed beneath her foot. The Time Ranger held up her spiral ring. "Your ladyship," she murmured, "I am called Nancy Stockley. I serve the Lord Apollo but I request your help. There's a devil in the works." Then she added, and it was the first time she had put this into words, "I believe my child is in danger."

The face of the statue flickered. The eyes of the Mother rested on hers.

3:01 P.M.

Children collected around Agent Stockley. Not just Linda but kids old enough to walk themselves home: a third grader wearing his best cowboy outfit, a little girl carrying her angel wings. A boy with a green plastic hat. Jake took the hat and stuck it on the back of his own head as they went along.

They turned the corner of the school and their attention was riveted by the sight of Red stretched out on the church lawn. The children stopped to look.

"Red has fallen asleep," said Linda.

"Red's drunk and passed out," said an older boy gleefully.

Most other adults would have hurried along and told them this fascinating thing was none of their

business. But Jake stopped and they all got to look at the small man with the crooked smile and mirthless eyes who crouched to whisper in the giant's ear.

Clooney gave a little wink and said, "Ah, he's a genius and descendant of kings, anything at all is possible for him. Even standing on his own feet." He murmured something to Red and with that, the big man lurched upright.

As they walked away, Linda glanced back and saw that Clooney watched them go. She said, "Sometimes Mr. Clooney has green skin." A couple of the other kids laughed. But her stepfather looked at her very seriously indeed.

3:05 P.M.

"Ye great galoot," said Clooney when they were alone. "Do you have an idea at all about the one who gave us so insolent a stare?"

Red shook his head, smiling.

"Well follow him and find out," Clooney commanded. "Keep him away until I've come back into my powers." And with a skip and jump he hurried off. For he had just seen several long black cars pull into the rectory driveway.

A quartet of pastors emerged from Buick four doors and Chrysler Imperials. They carried golf clubs and Monsignor Shaley of St. Killian's led them.

Kids flooded past, singly and in clumps. Some clustered around an adult or two. "Good afternoon, fathers," rolled like a chorus.

Inside the rectory, the priests put down their clubs in the hall and tramped to the study and the liquor cabinet. Shaley called, "Marie is there any ice?" with the air of a man who knows there will be. The housekeeper fairly flew, her hair a tangled white nest, her green-as-the-ocean eyes and round face oddly untouched by time.

"Patrick Michael Shaley, lucky in his help and in his chip shots," said a jolly little pastor.

The priests sat in the rectory study sipping whiskey and smoking cigars. They all four had parishes, but Shaley had the prize.

"It's quite a do they've got planned for you, Pat," one of them told Shaley. "Twenty-five years a pastor. You'll be able to expand the garage and turn the nun's yard into a putting green on the donations."

Shaley gave a small smile and shook his head. Some wondered why he had gone no further. In fact, he had run to the height of his ambitions. In Kerry, when he was a boy, the local pastor was the most important figure in the world of men, the only world of which people openly spoke.

Outside the window, Jake Stockley went past with Linda. He had on the green plastic hat and sang:

*I'm a decent man, I am
And I don't like to shout
But I had a hat when I came in
And I'll have a hat when I go out!*

"Many inhabitants are still clad in traditional native costumes," murmured a monsignor with a long sad

face.

Good afternoon, monsignori," Clooney said at the door. His brogue thickened as he spoke. "I hope the afternoon wasn't too chilly for your game."

"Not at all, thanks." Monsignor Shaley scarcely glanced Clooney's way, so confident had habit made him. "A good brisk game." He smiled at the memory.

"The school hall is all ready for tonight," Clooney told Monsignor Shaley. "And I wondered if you had anything further in mind for us to do."

"Come back in an hour or two, Clooney. We have some business to go over."

"As you wish it, so it shall be," said Clooney and the other pastors marveled at Shaley's good fortune.

4:11 P.M.

The old man walked away from the water looking back on the gulls who ignored him. Nancy pulled up in the Ford Mercury and killed the motor, took a drag on her Old Gold.

Ed Brown strode out of Time a minute or two later. He wore the same hat and overcoat as before. By his stride, though, Nancy knew Ed had been promoted. From a change about the eyes, she knew a bit of time, maybe months, more likely a year or two, had passed for him.

"No trouble finding the place this trip," he said as he slipped into the car. "The route down here from the end of the century stands out like an interstate highway on a roadmap. You're sitting on a Primary Event."

Nancy put her cigarette to smolder on the ashtray. "Decadion, I salute you," she said and did that.

Ed nodded. "Nothing wrong with your powers of observation. I got my decade. Not this one, obviously. I'm further Upstream. But they left me on this case. Because I'm older and wiser. Good thing for you."

She offered him a cigarette and a light. "Being able to smoke without fear of arrest is good," he said. "What's agent Stockley doing?"

"Picking up Linda."

"Just like you had intended to do, right?"

"We decided ..."

"You decided you'd fucked up your assignment so badly that defying orders wouldn't make a big difference." He gazed at her profile and asked, "You find out anything about our friend Clooney in your last sixty minutes or so?"

"Clooney's going to escape." Nancy kept her voice level, watched a freighter float by, drew on her cigarette and said, "He plans to snatch Linda when he does."

"How'd you learn all this?" Ed asked.

"Interagency intelligence," she replied, knowing he knew what had happened and what might happen and that he wanted to hear her tell the truth.

"And you want to take the kid far away before Clooney can try anything," he said.

"Jake and I have it worked out. We can go a few months Downstream and tell Mr. Clooney ..."

"Nancy! What's going to happen here isn't some ripple in the Stream. The reality exists in which Clooney snatches your daughter. For reasons they didn't tell me, this is a Primary Event. A wave gathering size as Time passes. Your kid is important.

"Another event must be created. One where he doesn't grab her. We have to make that version of reality seamless. Unnoticeable. And we have to make it stick. Make that the future that exists Upstream. You know that, Nance."

Ed's tone changed. A Decadion issued orders. "I'm going to give you the solution I got handed by Century HQ."

He told her what she was going to do and Nancy made no reply. Ed Brown let a moment or two pass. Then he raised his hand with the palm open so the spiral ring showed.

"I swear by Zeus, the Lord of the Stream and by his son Apollo the bringer of life," he said. When Nancy still didn't respond, he said it again until she raised her hand and repeated the words.

"That I will keep the peace and guide the innocent amid the twisting currents ..."

Thus they recited the Ranger's oath.

"That my kid will be used as bait," Nancy added at the end. *"That my husband will put his life at risk while I sit and watch."*

"Back at the Academy," said Ed Brown, "All we talked about was making agent. The rest of it—Station Chief, Decadion, Centurion—were secret dreams. What I discovered is command is easy. All you gotta do is tell an old friend she needs to place her family in danger."

"You know," she said. "Jake's from Downstream. Where I came from, they don't make guys like him. He loves Linda more than I do, I think. He'd lay down his life for her. And me"

"I wasn't around when you had the kid," Ed Brown said.

"My first assignment. Bad variation. Major damn-wrong Primary Event. It's 1959 and instead of Krushev and Ike, it's Beria and Nixon and everyone's at war in the Middle East. We're supposed to make *that* go away."

"Before the pyramids get A-bombed. Yeah, we all get to do some work on that variant."

"Beirut in particular is the crossroads of Worlds and Time. Beautiful city. Unless it gets nuked. Mediterranean nights. I was eighteen. Aigan was a foreign correspondent. Very foreign. We were friends. Nothing more. Until one night. I'm not even sure he liked girls. Maybe it was the moonlight. Maybe the Gods. When I missed my period, I knew what I was supposed to do. But I couldn't. And Jake, when we got together later, was terrific about it."

Ed Brown opened the car door. "This is going to turn out okay, Nancy. I'll be back tonight. At 10:45." She saw him twist the spiral ring. A yard engine rolled down a siding, a helicopter flew over the water. He took a stride, then another. And was gone. She started the car and drove away fast.

5:35 P.M.

When Nancy got home, the kid was taking a nap. "The Red Man followed us here," Jake told her. "He's

waiting down the block."

"I know," she said. "Our orders are, we're going to let them try to snatch Linda. Centurian command believes that won't happen." Jake shook his head like he wasn't going along with this. "Honey," Nancy said. "We haven't got any choice. Now, you need to draw the Red Man away. Like we discussed."

She kissed him. Jake took a deep breath, put on his hat and went out. Without looking, he knew Red was trailing him.

A few minutes later, in the Shannon Bar And Grill, Jake studied the big man through the thick smoke. Red had come into the place shortly after him. On the jukebox, Dennis Day sang "MacNamara's Band."

Next to Agent Stockley, two guys talked. One said, "The thing in Korea was a bitch."

"I put my money on McCarthy to find the commies who got us into it," said the other. Jake nursed a 'Ganset and watched the big man hoist a shot. Once, their eyes met but the big man's gaze seemed to go through Jake and through the walls of the Shannon.

Stockley nodded for the bartender to refill Red's glass. When that had been done, he got up and made his way over. Jake was large, but he stood a head shorter than Red.

"I've seen your mug before," Jake said. "At a pier strike in 1940."

"Did you now?" Red seemed mildly interested.

"It was a bitch of a cold night. I was a green kid working undercover for the first time. The picket line held on by a thread. A few dozen guys huddling around fires. The people I work for wanted the strike to succeed. It was important to them. And I had not a hint of an idea how to make that happen. You showed up with a flask and a few words. Stood on the line the next morning when the trucks full of scabs arrived. They saw you and stopped dead. Later the guys told me the Red-Haired Man was always around when things got tough."

Red shook his head in wonder. "I must have been a brave one."

"Come on, since you're following me," said Jake and got up.

"Suit yourself." The big man drained his drink and went out after the Time Ranger.

6:30 P.M.

In the rectory study, Clooney stood, hat in hand, before the monsignor at his desk. Patrick Shaley drew deep on his cigar and said, "I'll be twenty-five years a pastor tomorrow and you will have been with me all that time. Starting at old Saint Luke's in Roxbury. What have you learned in these last thirty years?"

"That it was gambling and a taste for drink, two mutual curses of both our races, that brought me to this sorry state, your eminence," said the Cluricaun.

An idiot I was, Clooney thought to himself. To have made a drunken bet one hundred years ago this day, with a tinker near a well in Donegal, as to which of two spiders would first catch a fly in its web. To have wagered a century of a Tuatha De Dinnan's freedom against the soul of a tinker! And to have lost! He'd be a laughing stock when he returned. Unless he brought gifts of precious price.

"But," said the priest, "through the mystery of God's mercy, those very vices have enabled you, a soulless thing, to serve His ends after your former master donated you to the Church."

"Yes, your grace. Several others had owned my services and passed me on one to the other. The one before you was a gambler, who felt the flames of eternal damnation flickering about his heels. He went to confession and told the priest how he had won me in a poker game while crossing the Atlantic on an ocean liner twenty years before. The priest made as one condition for absolution that the gambler turn me over to the Church in the person of himself."

"And I've no cause to regret it." Shaley had been surprised but not shocked at what the gambler told him. "You serve me well and I have you to thank for Marie here in the rectory."

Enchanting her, Clooney thought to himself, had been no great affair. Marie was a hedge sprite so addle-brained she'd flown over an ocean without noticing.

"And, of course, Red."

That, the Cluricaun knew, had been luck. In this land, barren of their kith and kind, he'd found the legendary Red-Haired Man, Help of Mortals, asleep in an alleyway like any tramp. Warily, Clooney had bade him rise. And the hero obeyed meek as could be. Red could give no account of where he'd been or how he happened to be there. Clooney himself had stopped wondering about it.

"So your pledge will do for them too," said Shaley and stood up. Each St. Patrick's Day eve, the priest renewed the oath by which he held the Cluricaun in bondage. The gambler had taught him the simple ritual. Cross in one hand, holy water in the other, he stood up as fierce as Senator McCarthy confronting a communist professor.

But this time, instead of falling prostrate and cowering, Clooney smiled and said, "Don't trouble yourself, eminence. Over the years, I've grown used to the cross and the holy water. Even hearing my secret name causes barely a ringing in my head. Faith is as diluted as the beer in this wondrous land."

The priest looked irritated the way he did when his car wouldn't start. "I warn you Clooney," he said. "Kneel down and obey me."

Clooney reached over to the desk and took a cigar out of the humidor. "You didn't ask, so the gambler didn't tell you, that my bondage was to last a century. The hundred years ended a few minutes ago."

He waved the priest to be seated. "Foolish man, all that you wished was done as you wished," said Clooney. "Now, what I wish shall be done."

For a while Shaley was defiant. But Clooney grew very great and fierce and green skinned. The study faded away and they stood, the two of them, in a windy cavern with a glow of light that was not electricity. No amount of waving crosses or flinging holy water would make all this go away and the priest grew afraid.

When Clooney said what he intended to do, named the child and the manner of her leaving, Shaley wept but did not refuse.

7:45 P.M.

"I had a bad dream," Linda had told Nancy as her mother got her into her dress of gold and green. "Three great big birds came and took me away. And it was night like now and we flew over the water and I was scared I would fall in."

Nancy took a deep breath and said it was just a dream. Then she said there was someone she wanted Linda to see.

The Mother of the World wore a circlet of flowers. Bouquets lay at her feet. Nancy and Linda knelt down. For a moment, there was nothing but the honking of horns on the streets, the sound of a piano being tuned in the school hall. The statue's eyes moved. With a flicker they directed Nancy to step back. From a few yards away, she heard her daughter say, "My name is Linda, Holy Mother."

Nancy could not hear her daughter or the Goddess at all. But after a moment Linda gasped with excitement and said, "Yes if my mommy lets me!"

When Nancy looked again, the statue was white stone and nothing more. Linda stood and took her mother's hand.

"What did She say?" Nancy asked.

"She asked me to show her how Red looked with his crown and how Mr. Clooney is green! She looked inside me and saw. She asked about my dream. Then She told me what to show Red. And she said you'd let me stay with her when I get bigger."

Nothing in Nancy's career with the Rangers had been or would be as hard as keeping a smile on her face and tears from her eyes that night. For what the Mother said always came to pass and none who visited her returned to the human world.

For Linda, the air tingled as they walked to the school. Kids jerked and giggled like they were pulled by invisible strings, nuns whirled and snapped their hand signals. In the school, radiators clanked and hissed.

Nancy sat with Linda right near the piano. Monsignor Shaley appeared looking pale and drawn, like a man standing at the scaffold.

8:37 P.M.

Jake and Red had walked a fair distance down to the water and stopped on the spit of sand where the old man had fed the gulls.

Jake said. "You were an Irish legend. It was always Micks bullshitting about you. What the hell happened? Why St. Killian's of all places?"

Red looked as if the question puzzled him too. "Clooney's been talking lately about him and me being Tuatha De Danann, the Old Race. And about our going home."

Jake handed a bottle to Red who unscrewed the cap. "Tailing a man is long, cold work," he said and drank a deep draught. "Ahh!" he remarked, "These days, I'm forgetting most of what is to come, and I'm not sure of much of what went before. Moments like this it feels like I've been around a long while. Forever, maybe."

Jake was careful to drink very little. Still, the stars and the moon pulled closer.

After a time, Red said reflectively, "I remember long ago thinking it wrong that the Irish people had two sets of lords: the Gentry of the Air, as my own kind were called, and the gentry of the land, the British or whoever. So I lent my help to make things a bit lighter.

"When they crossed the ocean, I followed. And rough times they had at first, strikes and strife and no friendly hand extended. Lately, though, they found their place and forgot. Oh, they had parades and talk of the Famine. But somewhere along the way, they commenced being oppressors. And a fine work they make of it too.

"That, I think, was where I lost the thread of my own purpose. I took to the comfort of drink and one day I awoke flat on my back with as ugly a Cluricaun as ever there was sitting on my chest and giving me orders. And, finding nothing better to do, I obeyed."

Then the Red-Haired Man began to sing. It was ancient songs at first, ones only he remembered. Perhaps ones he had made up. When the songs got more familiar, Jake joined him. They sang the one about moving the garter on the Irish agricultural girl and the one about the wearing of the green and asked the musical question, "Who Put The Overalls In Mrs. Murphy's Chowder?" They sang them to the crescent moon which paid no mind at all.

Through it all, Jake paid attention to the illuminated hands on his watch. At last, he said, "Let me introduce myself. I'm a Time Ranger, one who serves a god who tries to speak to men and to help them. We consider you an ally of our Lord."

"Do you now?" Red asked and lay back his head and sang:

*Now, Kelly at a passing gent,
Threw a pail of wet cement,
Said Kelly, "Later, when you dry,
You will be a real hard guy."*

Jake looked at his watch. It read a quarter to nine. The singing had stopped. He looked up and in the instant of his glance, the Red Man had shambled almost out of sight, heading towards the church and school.

8:45 P.M.

The piano banged out "Bridget O'Flynn, Now, Where Have You Been?" Everyone knew this was when Marjorie Banion with taps on her slippers would begin the third phase of her annual hat trick of ballet, step dance, and tap dancing. The chorus sang:

*You've been to see the big parade?
The big parade, me eye!*

Clooney, wreathed in smoke, stood at the back of the auditorium. He waved his cigar and Marjorie Banion, eyes wilder than ever, suddenly began to twirl. She smashed into the chorus knocking half of them down. The music stopped but she kept spinning. For a few moments kids and nuns shouted and ran in all directions.

Marjorie tipped over the American flag and wrapped herself in the curtain before Sister Gertrude George and half a dozen eighth graders in police uniforms grabbed her.

"Let her get fresh air!" people cried. And Marjorie Banion, eyes rolling in her head, was carried past them by the eighth graders, all minus their hats, and the two biggest nuns in the school.

Her mother followed keening, "She practiced and practiced!"

Sister Amelia announced that they would take a twenty minute intermission. Shaley sat right where he was, staring straight ahead. Linda was wide-eyed, fascinated. Nancy looked around for Jake.

9:21 P.M.

Two minutes after everyone had filed back into the auditorium, the Red Man appeared and went in a back door of the school. Right after that Stockley came out of the dark and looked around for him.

But it was Clooney who materialized in a puff of smoke from one of the monsignor's big cigars. He stood a few feet away from Stockley. "That which you wished to find, you have found." He spoke with the warm purr of one who has been at the rectory brandy. "It'll be about Linda that you're here."

Stockley stepped forward without hesitation intending to grab the little man and throttle him.

"Ah, we'll have none of that," Clooney said and waved his cigar with a great shower of sparks. Jake found himself rooted to the ground like a tree. A strain of music came from the hall. And with a little skip and a hop, the Cluricaun went back into the auditorium.

On stage, Mark Hogan was asked, "Why are you so quiet today of all days, Patrick Shaley?"

Mark was blank eyed as in a trance. He got out his line, "Oh Peg, I have a wonderful secret." Peg asked what his great secret was. And he said, "Last night I understood that I have a vocation to be ...", and began to cluck like a chicken and flap his elbows like wings. Sister Amelia Claire sat at the piano, stunned.

Clooney came down the center aisle smiling like a wolf and all eyes were upon him. "Good evening, your eminence," he said to Shaley, who shrank in his chair. "This night I'm leaving your service. Ad hoc and good riddance, you pious hypocrite. And I'm taking with me the one thing of value in this dismal place." With that he snapped his fingers and the side door opened.

To the rest of the crowd it was just Red in a janitor's outfit. Only Linda saw the Red-Haired Man with a silver helmet and shield and a flowing beard. He stopped before the audience. Clooney pointed out Linda and told him, "It's her we take, look alive."

Red turned and stared at the little man as if he had never seen him before. He waved his hand and Time stood still for everyone in the hall except himself and Linda. He knelt before her. "I'll ask if you'll come with us, lass. I'll promise you riches and glory, beauty such as tickles the fancy without end."

"The Holy Mother said to show you this," said Linda and held in her mind the picture she had been shown. In it the Lady stood with her halo crown. The globe was in one hand and the other rested on Linda's shoulder.

The Red Man rose up. "Under a strong patroness I'm glad to see. Farewell, miss. May all luck and power travel with you." He turned to go.

"Red!" He looked back to her. "Don't let Mr. Clooney be mean to you."

He grinned, "Ah, that you'll see change right now." With a last nod to Linda, he slung the Cluricaun over his shoulder.

Kicking and yelling, "Put me down, you great baboon!" Clooney was borne out the door. Marie from the rectory, with her hair undone and down to her shoulders, stood waiting.

Red waved his arm over the crowd. As if everyone had taken a deep breath, life returned to the hall. All saw the giant janitor holding Clooney under one arm. "Say good-night, boyo," Red told him. "It's time to take our leave."

"Drunk and disorderly, both of them," someone said with more than a little envy as they went out.

In that moment of confusion, with Clooney's spell faded and no one knowing quite what they had seen, Sister Amelia Claire gestured and Linda stepped forward with the envelope.

Monsignor Shaley
Our Pastor dear ...

She said that and all the rest in a clear loud voice. She looked right at the pastor who could not meet her gaze. Many noticed how teary-eyed he appeared as she handed him the donation bouquet.

9:27 P.M.

Enchanted, immobile, Jake passed what could have been moments or forever. His past and future seemed a dream.

Then two figures, one small and one huge, came out of the School and into the moonlight. The big one was Red. The other was a woman with wild, white hair. Under his arm Red held a tiny squirming bundle.

Jake's heart beat fast. But then the Red-Haired Man said, "Recant the spell."

And it was Clooney's voice that replied, "He'll stay in that spot 'til moss grows on him!"

"Ah it's that way, is it?" Red shook the Cluricaun so hard his head bobbed. When he stopped, Clooney made motions and mumbling and Jake found himself able to move and talk.

"Linda?" he asked.

"She's well. And will be with or without the likes of us," said the Red-Haired Man. "You recalled me to myself for your own purposes. I count it a favor nonetheless. And in return, I'll rid you of this bundle of mischief. Fare thee well, Agent Stockley."

With that, the Red-Haired Man stepped out onto the lawn with Marie beside him and put Clooney down as he did. Stockley stood as if still rooted until he heard the beating of wings and saw three great, silver geese fly across the moon.

12:05 A.M.

Late that night, Nancy and Jake sat in their living room and held each other. "He was old," she said, telling him about seeing Ed Brown for the third time that day. "Pushing sixty. Eyes that went right through me. Used to getting what he wants."

"Centurion," said Jake. "Even when we were kids, we all knew that was going to happen."

She shook her head. "Beyond that. Tribune, maybe. Really distant. Remote."

"But he was happy with what happened. You got your promotion. Station Chief. More important, the kid's safe." His smile faded when she got up and moved away from him. "Honey, what's wrong?"

This was the moment when she was going to tell him how, in order to gain the help of Immortals, you must lose what you most love. And how the Mother would one day claim their daughter.

Instead a voice from the door froze Nancy where she was.

"Mommy. Daddy. I was afraid you were gone," Linda said. She stood in her yellow pajamas with blue ducks on the front.

Jake moved over and picked her up. "Don't worry, honey," he said softly. Nancy said nothing as her husband told her daughter, "Your mother and I are always here to keep you safe."

The End