

BALLEA WRITERS

They burst through the door of The Periwinkle pub in a blast of driving rain. Water dripped from their sou'westers, ran down their oilskins and collected in puddles on the stone floor. They hung their waterproofs on pegs and warmed their hands by the open fire.

Shaky Seany gripped his knees to control a spasm as he settled onto a bench beside Ollie, his baby-faced fishing companion. On stormy days they usually took refuge in pubs like the Periwinkle, a stone and thatched pub, built to withstand the Atlantic rollers. It had gnarled rafters across the low white ceiling long turned yellow from decades of smoke.

"Two hot whiskies and make them doubles," Shaky Seany called.

As they drank their toddies, Shaky Seany gripped his glass with both hands, but it pinged each time it rebounded on his one remaining tooth as he drank.

Observing them from the other side of the fire was a stubbled, wizened sea-dog. He seemed part of the pub, as though he gave meaning to its eternal shadows.

"What's yours?" Shaky Seany asked with a lopsided smile.

"A pint and chaser, thanks. Do you know what that is?" asked the sea-dog, pointing a crooked finger at a glazed niche in the wall that housed a golden trophy.

"It's beautiful. What is it?" Shaky Seany asked.

"Me and me team won it in '43. We were the best rowing team in Munster; held the title for three consecutive years we did." The trophy glistened as the shimmering firelight danced over it. It stood two-and-a-half feet tall, modelled as a three-master in full rig and sail. "That's The Hottentot," croaked the sea-dog, who'd finished his pint and was sipping his chaser. "The real Hottentot was an East India tea clipper. It went aground on the coast of Madagascar a hundred years ago and mysteriously disappeared. Not a soul on board was ever found."

"Will you have another?" asked Ollie.

"Aye. That I will," he said, spitting into the fire.

Ollie went to the bar and beckoned Shaky Seany to follow him.

"We're onto something here," Seany whispered.

"Yeah, if that's gold it must be worth a fortune, but how can we get it?"

They gave the sea-dog his drink and went to the gents' toilet to work out a plan. Near closing time, Seany excused himself and went back to the gents and Ollie followed him later as arranged.

Raucous customers emptied into the street, but the heavy mist chilled their spirits as it sent them on their solitary paths.

The barman did his check-up before closing and knocked on the door of the gents.

"Just a minute," came a voice within.

Seany came out and leant on the barman's shoulder. The barman took Seany's arm and helped him to the door. "Where's your friend, the young one?"

Periwinkled

A Short Story by Michael Mernagh



he asked.

"Gone ahead to bring up the car, I can't get very far with these shakes," Seany said.

"Safe home," the barman said as he gave a sympathetic smile and bolted the front door. He finished checking the till-roll, downed a whiskey and switched off the lights before he left.

Shaky Seany watched with a patience born of years of practice from the shadows down the street. When he saw the lights go off he checked up and down the road, went to the side of the pub and rapped three times on the toilet window. Ollie flicked on his flash lamp and left the toilet. In the bar, he ran the beam of the lamp over the shelf behind the counter. Keys dangled on a hook, just as he'd expected.

Ollie opened the front door, let Seany in and unlocked the back door as well. While Seany held the shaking light on the niche that housed The Hottentot, Ollie set to work. Using his fisherman's knife, he unscrewed the glass cover. He was surprised at how easily it came away from its housing.

Ollie lifted out the trophy and loaded it onto a crate-trolley. He re-screwed the pane of glass and replaced the door key behind the counter. They wheeled the trophy out the back door, closed it behind them and continued round the side until they got back to the road. Seany acted as lookout while Ollie yanked the trolley off the pavement and over to the pier.

Out of breath, Seany caught up with Ollie as they reached where their motorboat was tethered to the jetty. They slid the trophy down into the well of the boat and jettisoned the trolley off the end of the pier. Then they realised that the wind had blown their tarpaulin away. Ollie spotted it with his flashlight, a yellow hood lodged on an outcrop of rocks by the headland.

"Sure the rain's eased off and a drop of mist will do it no harm," Seany said.

Ollie yanked the ripcord of the outboard motor. With Seany at the helm, they steered an uneven course out of the harbour and on towards the open sea.

The pleasure craft was where they'd noticed it moored offshore on the horizon and marked it in the filing cabinets of their devious minds. It rode at anchor, rising out of the water like a great white shark. The Julio Cesare was a gin palace, a millionaire's plaything. It gleamed as it swayed in the rippling moonlight on their approach.

Seany had spent much of his life getting past the menacing glares of the seafaring militias who ran such craft. He was skilled in the arts of ingratiating himself with the epicurean owners. He'd had successes in his day with lady owners or mistresses, but the onset of Parkinson's had ended that, although he

never gave up hope of someday being with a woman again. His family had pushed his nephew Ollie on him as an apprentice or a carer; he wasn't sure which. But Seany had put up little objection and in time had come to love Ollie like the son he never had.

"Leave the talking to me," he warned Ollie as he approached the craft.

"Can we come aboard?" Seany asked a man in a tracksuit and baseball cap. All he could see was an expanse of ivory teeth portraying a smile, but Seany knew not to be complacent for in his experience such types had concealed holsters and even knives in their socks.

"State your business," the man asked.

"We have something that your owner

may like to buy,"

"Show me," he said.

Seany stood aside to reveal the trophy and the guard whistled.

"Come aboard," he said, "and keep your hands where I can see them, no funny stuff mind."

Ollie threw in the rope and the guard tied them on alongside. He helped Ollie lift The Hottentot out of the boat-well and carry it up the steps to the first deck. He frisked each of them in turn, took Ollie's penknife and flicked it overboard. Seany winced when he heard the splash.

"Come this way," the guard ordered.

Ollie winked at Seany. "We're in," he whispered, "How easy was that? What a team. We're real pros."

"Stop whispering, or they'll throw us out. Try to act normal, like you do this sort of thing every day," Seany said.

They reached the oak-panelled door of the stateroom.

"Wait here," said the guard and knocked on the door. "Permesso, Signor,"

"Avanti," came a hoarse reply.

They entered and Seany and Ollie were told to introduce themselves to Don Giovanni Battista da Scrugellione. They could barely see him through the haze of smoke as he drew on a twelve-inch Montecristo cigar. His frame spilled over the leather armchair and his ankles rippled into his slippers. As they stepped closer Seany could see that the Don wore a purple quilted smoking jacket many sizes too small.

Seany bowed and kissed a bejewelled hand. "A pleasure to meet you Sir. My name is Sean O'Brady and this is my nephew Oliver."

"Well what have you brought me from bonny Ireland?"

Seany was puzzled by a hint of Dublin brogue underlying a heavy foreign accent and wondered how much of the Don was for real. But business is business whatever, he thought.

The Captain inhaled deeply and coughed as Ollie stepped forward to reveal the trophy. "Put it on the table where I can see it properly," he said.

The guard helped Ollie lift the trophy on

the billiard table and it groaned as the weight sunk into the fibre.

"How much do you want for it?"

"Well, a man of nobility can afford to be generous,"

"How much? Don't waste my time."

"Ten thousand," Seany said.

"Five. Take it or leave it."

"Done," said Seany.

"Let's wet the deal. Brandy or Rum?" asked the Don as he lifted a chest from the side table and counted out used notes.

"Brandy please," they chorused.

The guard poured them each a tumbler of brandy from a cut glass decanter that looked to Seany like Waterford glass.

They're definitely Irish, he thought, I'd love a set-up like this.

The Don heaved his frame out of his chair and stroked the rigging of the trophy. "Delicate workmanship," he said. He stopped fondling it, looked at his fingers and held them up to his nose. "What's this?"

Seany shot Ollie a glance. They looked at the trophy and then at the table. A pool of yellow liquid oozed from the base of the trophy and stained the green baize with a dark patch. The top of the trophy had become bare of gold and held a silvery hue in the candlelight.

"Either you've brought me a miracle like the weeping Madonna or you've brought me a bad paint job," roared the Don, his face contorted and purple. "It's a fake, a ruddy fake. Is there no honour among thieves anymore? If it were not for your obvious health problem you'd be forced to walk the plank. Sean, you and that whelp. You're mad to try to double-cross a Capo Illustrazio della Cosa Nostra. Leave my ship immediately and never return or I'll have you boiled alive."

The guard shoved Seany and Ollie back to the landing deck where he, at the Don's command, dropped the trophy in the water. Sean and Ollie watched in dismay as it sank. Ollie cranked up their engine and took them up the coast rather than into the bay again. When they came in sight of the Royal Cork Yacht Club they headed upstream and into the safety of Drake's Pool, where they hid for days before venturing further west.

Weeks later, the old sea-dog was trawling just inside the old three-mile limit when something snagged his net. Swearing, he called for help to haul the heavy catch aboard. He was wide-eyed to find the Hottentot trophy in the bottom of his net, shimmering like rainbows of spilt oil amid the fish. He laughed like a child tasting his first ice-cream.

Two American yachtsmen on a trip around the world rested before the fire in the Periwinkle and admired the silver Hottentot trophy. As the old sea-dog approached them he smiled at the vision of many more years of free pints and chasers while he added the story of the trophy's theft and recovery to the story of its origin.

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