

The dead were everywhere

Lying in fields and ditches
Clustered in mud huts and caves
Kneeled and crumpled in churches
Eyes blackened, lungs caved

There were to the eye more dead
Than ever seemed to have been alive
And for the living who could
It was time to leave...

CHAPTER ONE

Coffin Ships

Coffin Ships is what they called them, now, and sure coffins they were, going down, some of them, not a full week at sea. And aboard each and all, the ships that made it and them that didn't, the castoff and wretched of famine and want. Sick from the roll of the ship, they were, and soon the typhus too, they died by the score of its fever and pain in the dark and the crowding of their quarters below.

Barely getting by in the good years, the blight of '45 took their pratties that year, and three of the five that followed. And they was all there was to eat, now, the pratties were. Not owning their own land because they was Irish, they was turned out by the thousands when they couldn't pay their rents.

Ach! Away, now! We've heard it all before, we have, at the knee of das and grand das, and uncles too, and why be speaking of it again? 'Breeding like rabbits on land wanted for grazing,' them in charge would be saying. 'So let it come and be done with 'em. 'Tis nature's way to clear the land of them unfit to tend it. Dead where they lived and dead where they dropped and who's to care? They're not of our own, they're not, so be done with 'em now and good riddance.'

An inconvenience is all, that's what Ireland was to England, its poor rents and trouble to keep. Ach! If it

wasn't there, it'd never been missed. But there it was, now, all the same, with the Queen's ministers taking care that it not fall to hostile hands, it being so close and all. But that was all the caring they did, and sure none for them native to it.

And as the crop failed again and again, the small holders in the west, where the blight struck the worst, were driven from their places, threatened with jail or paid short to ship out. And ship out they did, a million or more with Mary Mulholland among them, her son Jack at her breast.

She'd got passage with the promise of more from an overseer who'd taken a fancy to her. Aye! Mary with her high spirit and flame-red hair! She and hers being so desperate, and all, and there being nowhere to turn...

Ach! T'was the times, you know, none harder. Folks lying dead in their rotting plots, hard times, and that's for sure. So, it come to this, it did, Mary with her Jack and needing to leave, getting three months food for her family and gone for America in her shame, an overseer's son never to know his da, his name neither, that being the bargain.

Mary, poor girl, she never looked back, fearing to see her da's face, him torn by the fates and the needing of food for the rest. Sure, hunger's a terrible thing done at God's own hand, him having his reasons why and who's to question? But hunger done at the hand of man? 'Tis a crime it is, and a sin, too.

And sure it wasn't to heathens in the ocean isles they'd done this to, now, neither. No. T'was to Christians they done it – Christians of a different calling, no doubt, but Christians all the same, and they turned them out to waste and rot by the thousands upon thousands with nary a thought.

It was at Fells Point that they landed in Baltimore, weak and wracked from two months at sea, some wandering off to die in a wood. And the orphans, now, their das and mas dead of typhus or hardship and put over the

side, and who's to care for them now? Erin's poorhouses, that's what they called them, the places they landed, Boston and New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore. Thousands by thousands they come, near half the city by some's counting, and what to do with them all?

Now Mary Mulholland had come by the name of a man, and the street where he lived, too. It was got aboard ship from a woman dying, his sister by her telling, and would Mary call on him and tell him what's done? 'Don't know if he's living or dead, but the street's name is Lemmon and his name's O'Connell, and bless you dear lady for trying.'

Living or dead, Mary Mulholland had a name and a place and that was more than most of the rest. And money, too, the overseer as good as his word, four fresh five-pound notes that she'd kept safe from the thieving of others and the damp of the ship.

There were greeters come down to the docks, you know, helping poor souls find a place and some food. *The Ancient Order of Hibernians* is what they called themselves, and God's own help they were, too. One such, a lawyer named Larkin, took Mary Mulholland from her ship and its stench.

A fine summer's morn it was, the sun full on her face and the air clean to breathe. It was first to a bank for her notes to be put, her taking a portion in cash for her needs. From there to West Baltimore they went, Lemmon Street running east to west above the rail yards, house upon house of them, shelter and home to the men who built the B&O and come later to work it, them and their families.

The home of Patrick O'Connell being found, Lawyer Larkin mounted the three steps of the stoop. Two raps on the door with the butt of his cane and soon it soon come open. Mrs. O'Connell, her eyes in a squint and her chin up in an air, sure telling her mind at the sight of them. More

off the boat, she's thinking, and looking and smelling for all of it.

"Good day to you, Mrs. O'Connell," says Mr. Larkin...
"We've news for Mr. O'Connell, if he's to home?"

"He's not," says she. "Gone to work, don't you know?"

"May we call on him later, then?"

"If it please you."

"A time convenient to him, then? And, of course, to you, kind madam?"

"Make it seven, if you wish," the door coming shut and them in the street.

"Ah, 'tis a start, Mrs. Mulholland! 'Tis a start, indeed!"

Now never being 'Mrs.' anything to anyone before, Mary Mulholland took well to the sound of it. 'Mrs. Mulholland,' indeed. And who's to know, aye, who's to know, at all, at all?

Stepping back from the door of the house, she took in the two stories of it, brick at the front and the basement below. And now to the street she was on, its cobble stones warming the bare of her feet, the toes and dirt of them hidden by her dress. Wide it was, wider than that of the village she'd left, her mind counting what she'd seen to here from the ship and all the same, street upon street, row upon row, house upon house of it.

"Now, to where's it we've come, young Jack Mulholland?" says she to him at her shoulder, him looking about in the morning sun. "'Tis heaven, I'm thinking true enough. And right here on God's good earth!"

"Mrs. Mulholland?"

"Yes, Mr. Larkin, yes. I'm sorry, now, my mind's just drifting with it all, you know." She hiked Jack up a measure at her shoulder and smiled. Mr. Larkin, his top hat and kind face with whiskers of white, sure he seemed to her St. Peter himself at the gate on such a day as this.

“Mrs. Mulholland,” says he, “might I suggest McMurphy’s Dry Goods? I know him well and he’ll be treating you fair.” He stepped back a measure to view Mary better. “I think a fresh dress for you and something for the lad, there, as well. And shoes, now, Mrs. Mulholland? Will you be wanting a fresh pair of shoes?”

And so it come that Mary Mulholland and her Jack were to board at the O’Connells. Though saddened to learn of his sister’s passing, Patrick O’Connell took some consolation in the three dollars rent for a basement from which he was expecting another mouth to feed.

And in time it was to be her place, now, Mary Mulholland’s, that is, she learning to read and to write and doing her fine stitching for the better ladies about, and buying the place when the O’Connells left for Ohio. *Mrs. Mulholland*, indeed, it was. Aye! Mother to Jack and widow to poor Sean, him gone in The Hunger, shot for a rebel! Mary Mulholland of Lemmon Street, landlord herself with boarders in the basement and people asking her opinion of this and that, and some even taking account of it!

But a fever had been on her now, two weeks and more, coming and going, but just as sure. ‘Watch her closely,’ says the doctor to Jack for his dollar. ‘Keep her cool with water to hand, and plenty of it.’

And who wouldn’t be knowing that? thinks Mary Mulholland in her bed, up and down in her spirits, but sure weaker by the day. Neighbors nearby and ready to help, as she’d done them before. But a fear was coming to her, now, a darkness at night she’d not known before. ‘Tis it time for the priest?’ she’s wondering.

But it’s Jack on her mind now, joined with the railroad just four weeks before and gone to West Virginia, so far away. Sure, it’s two days now and not a word or a whisper of him. But word of war, aye, there was that, and that all about! The Rebels across the Monocacy and making for

Washington with folks telling of cavalry north and east of Baltimore, scaring people half out of their wits, taking horses and tribute. What's to come of it all? 'And where's my Jack lad, now? Where's my Jack?'

CHAPTER TWO

At War

They'd been at it three full years and more, from Gettysburg to Mobile Bay to Vicksburg and beyond. The whole lot of it. Come June of 1864, Grant had Lee in a pickle near Richmond, things going back and forth with heavy killing since April. Guns and bombs all about, and arms and legs, too. Then the dead, blue and gray, young and old, lying about after a fight, roasting in a summer's sun, bellies swelled to near bursting. Grant was Lincoln's newest general and Abe'd said to him, he said 'Get it done, now, and done quick.'

Lee was holding his own but working hard at it and not knowing where it was all to lead. Something needed deciding and he decided it. He sent near a quarter of his strength west to Charlottesville and from there up the Shenandoah. Under the command of Major General Jubal Early, they were to clear the valley of Yankees and then cross the Potomac east into Maryland and attack Washington City from the north.

Mean of spirit and gifted at war, Early drove his men near 250 miles in the summer's heat and by July 7 stood outside Frederick, Maryland, barely thirty-five miles northwest of Washington City itself. Taking \$200,000 in tribute, he spared the town and made ready for Washington, only a scattering of Union forces and the Monocacy River standing between him and glory.

Now there's nothing like 16,000 marauding Rebels relieving a town of \$200,000 in cash and gold to get the attention of a captain of industry. And sure enough, John W. Garrett, President of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad,

passed what he'd learned of the goings on in Frederick to Major General Lewis Wallace, commander of Union forces in Baltimore. There was a bridge there, you see, a railroad bridge, and Mr. Garrett was after having General Wallace mount a defense of it.

A man of high purpose and great courage, Wallace rounded up 2,800 irregulars which, on the afternoon of July the 8th, the B&O was pleased to deposit at Monocacy Junction, just south of Frederick, forty miles west of Baltimore. Setting up headquarters on the south side of the river, Wallace was quick to confirm that he was outnumbered at five to one and working hard on what to do about it.

And then, as if sent by the angels above, a train load of Union regulars, 5,000 in all, appeared at two o'clock on the morning of the 9th. Under the charge of Major General James Ricketts, they'd been sent by Grant to reinforce Harper's Ferry, forty miles again to the west, against Early's raid. On learning from Wallace that Early was only across the river and making ready for battle, he placed himself under Wallace's command and ordered his men off the train.

It being the middle of a moonless night, there was more than the usual confusion attending the disembarkation of 5,000 troops roused from a hard sleep on a rolling train. There were horses and wagons for two weeks fighting, the whole lot to come off and be put some place safe. And then there's them to be sent forward first, stumbling in the dark, shouting at one another, ordering who's ever about to lift this or shove that and sure doesn't young Jack Mulholland find himself caught up in it all. Just four weeks now with the railroad, he's doing whatever he's told on old Engine 428, glad for his new situation and charged by the danger of battle near to hand.

Come morning, though, Jack Mulholland is on the north side of the river and brought up short by the sound of

the train's whistle as it starts chugging west, great belches of smoke and steam from its stack as it begins to roll. Quick as a snap, he's on his toes, making for the covered bridge he'd crossed from the south, his arms pumping and his chest filling for the run. Not three full strides taken, though, and he's struck by a horse, a cavalryman making for the front. Knocked clear aside, he lands hard in scrub brush like a sack of mail off a train.

It was the bite of a horse fly that roused him, slapping at his own neck to kill it. Lying on his back in the broken shade of the brush, Jack Mulholland brought his hands to his head hammering inside, his eyes hurting and all of him wanting to be sick. Working the sides and back of his neck with his hands, and turning his head left and right, his brain come slowly around.

And there were sounds now, too, horses and men moving about, some shouting, orders given and taken, and the heavy wheels of a wagon rumbling by, its driver calling its team on. Struggling to his feet, Jack Mulholland rose to a crouch, reaching to steady himself on a nearby tree, cowering as he looked about. By the sun he could see it was midday. He'd been out for...

Thud...Thud, Thud, Thud...Thud. Artillery! Low and distant, full runs of it, now, above the hammering inside his head. Ducking, Jack Mulholland looked for cover, the shells screeching in, a piercing scream in his ears, his head splitting from the pain of it. Falling to his knees, he presses his face against the side of the tree, hugging it like a lad at his mother's knee, shells striking the ground, quaking it beneath him, shattered bits of trees flying about, and shrapnel, too. "They're a-coming!" was shouted from the north, and then again and again from every side. "Ready arms, men, ready arms! Steady! Holding fire! Holding!"

Rising a measure, Jack Mulholland could see the Rebel's colors advancing. "Line to the fore, rise and fire!" A line of men rose before him and a fusillade of rifle fire

roared out left, center and right, men shouting, oaths taken, and a return fusillade in. There were screams now, words shouted of mothers and gods. A second fusillade out and more shouting, officers yelling. "Fire and withdraw! Holding ranks...Fire and withdraw...Holding your ranks, men..."

More artillery crashed in and about, Jack Mulholland looking out from behind the tree, and sure the Unions are in retreat. Backing to him, holding ranks, loading and firing, and soon some starting to break, three or four, then others, taking cover behind a tree here or a wagon there, holding in small groups around an officer. "Hold your ranks! Withdraw *in your ranks!*"

The Rebs were on them now, some charging, breaking ahead, others reloading as they advanced and then firing and now charging, their rifles lowered and bayonets pointed. Then the Unions coming nearest to him stopped dead in their tracks, five of them abreast, staring beyond him, their mouths agape, one shouting "The bridge's on fire. *They've fired the bridge!*"

Jack Mulholland turned. The covered bridge was ablaze on its south side. The Federals had done it to keep it from the Rebs, but had trapped their own men in the bargain! It was a rout now. The officers trying to hold the men in formation, their sabers held and pointed at the Rebs but without effect.

The Federals were dropping their weapons and making for the railroad bridge to Jack's right, running by him now, rifle balls whizzing by, coming off the trees, striking a nearby shed, shards and bits of wood in the air, and all about him men falling when struck, some dead where they landed, others stumbling forward. Reb officers up and coming now, calling their soldiers forward, their side arms leveled at the Unions, firing as they ran.

It was every man for himself with Jack Mulholland on his toes passing the slower among them, darting left and

right, in and around them, a blow at his left shoulder and over he goes and rolling up as quick, the bridge not fifty paces and him passing the others still, officers at the bridgehead and others firing at the Rebs in pursuit, waving Jack and the rest on now with Jack slowing a step to gauge the rail ties, then up at speed, leaping every two and landing the third, darting left and right around those stumbling and quick as that he's across, breaking left on orders from those in front, the roar of a battle to his right, now, hundreds of Federals standing their ground, artillery again but even more, and fusillades sounding, the river now to his left and him running along it, the sounds of war less with each stride and him now like the wind through trees and fields and then rails...Tracks! And it's every third again and again for as long as his legs would carry him, slowing in time to take the shade of a tree just off the rails, stepping carefully down the stones of the track bed and under its shade, leaning against it, breathing heavy and free.

Alert to sounds about him, his eyes darting in every direction, he was away from it all...then a dampness at this left hand...Blood! Crimson and deep, and his own, no doubt! Standing straight, he felt for its source, grabbing and feeling up his arm, finding a hole just below his shoulder, wet and tender to touch, and one behind, as well. Shot clean through!

Loosening his bandana, he tied it off quick, pulling the knot tight with teeth and hand, only to see blood on his right hand and his sleeve as well, the run coming back to him now, men stumbling and falling, a soldier's head shot through, the spray of blood and brain from it on Jack's hands and face. Shaking his head to pass the memory, he left the shade of the tree and mounted the rail bed, making east on the tracks for Baltimore.

Covering two miles by dusk, maybe three, Jack Mulholland had come to a cluster of trees by a stream, a cornfield and apple orchard nearby. Stepping down to the

stream, he found a sand flat in a bend and knelt by its edge, palming water to drink as parts of the day came back to him. Running was what he remembered most clearly, the sound of rifle fire and men shouting with others falling around him, a man's head... Feeling his face and neck, there were still bits and pieces...

Jack quick buried his head in the stream to his shoulders, rubbing himself clean, back to front, his eyes closed, the coolness of the water a comfort against the heat of the day. Holding down till his breath was gone, he came out of the water, shaking his head like a dog in the sun and for the moment clean of it all and calmed.

Rising from the stream, he climbed the bank and gathered an arm load of corn and a half dozen apples. These he placed at the base of a tree, nearby a bit of flat ground to sleep on. The holes in his arm were next. Stepping back down to the stream, he eased off his shirt and loosened the bandana. Dried blood had crusted at each hole and black in the failing light, holding the bandana fast to the skin of his arm.

Squatting, then kneeling, he palmed water to the bandana and in time it came free, the jagged edges of the hole in front not so clean as he'd thought. He set the bandana in the stream to soak as he remembered what he'd been told on the docks about the care of a wound. 'Piss in the dirt,' they'd said, 'and make a bit of mud with it. Mix it, now, like a lad in a puddle, and slap it on and cover it over. And if there's a bit of spider web nearby, put that in, too, to keep the paste of it together. That'll do for till you get to a doctor and proper care.'

Pissing would be easy he thought as he palmed water on the holes, front and back. Big as the holes were, though, he was going to need something for webbing, but how to find it in the failing light? His eye then caught the corn he had picked, its silk sticking out, fine as any baby's hair. Husking two ears, he took a handful of silk to a bit of flat

dirt where he pissed himself empty. With a stick, he made a mud of it and dropped in the corn silk, mixing a paste of it all. Going back to the stream for his bandana, he squeezed it dry as he knelt by the mud. Placing the bandana close to hand, he spread the paste to the back and front of his arm, catching it quick with the bandana as he pulled it tight and tied it off.

Holding his left forearm in his right hand to steady it, he came up out of the stream to the tree where he had placed the corn and apples. For all the horror of the day, Jack Mulholland had come to a certain calm, biting into an apple and making ready to husk the corn. He had seen war and gotten through it, tended his wounds and found this place to rest, the last reds of the sun now gone to the blue black of the night.

He would walk the rails tomorrow, east for Baltimore. New Market was ahead, three miles, maybe five, and a railway siding there with a water tower. If Engine 428 was coming back through, it'd be stopping there, or maybe another train headed for Baltimore.

Lying out beside the tree, Jack Mulholland found a troubled sleep, memories of artillery roaring and rifles firing and men screaming and dying all gone to the call of crickets against the quiet of a summer's night. A day at war done, come and done, as quick as that, now, as quick as that...

