At the world’s worse end, it is Sunday afternoon in February. Through the edge of the forest a soldier moves without any idea that he’s caught in a mesh of sunlight and shade. Corporal Halloran’s this fellow’s name. He’s a lean boy taking long strides through the Sabbath heat. Visibly, he has the illusion of knowing where he’s going. Let us say, without conceit, that if any of his ideas on this subject were not illusion, there would be no story.

He is not exactly a parade-ground soldier today. His hair isn’t slicked into a queue, because the garrison he serves in has no pomade left, and some idle subaltern is trying to convert the goo into candles. Halloran’s in his shirt, his forage jacket over his left arm. He wears gaiters over canvas shoes. Anyone who knew firearms would take great interest in the musket he’s got in his
right hand. It’s a rare model that usually hangs in the company commander’s office.

The afternoon is hot in this alien forest. The sunlight burrows like a worm in both eye-balls. His jacket looks pallid, the arms are rotted out of his yellowing shirt, and, under the gaiters, worn for the occasion, the canvas shoes are too light for this knobbly land. Yet, as already seen, he takes long strides, he moves with vigour. He’s on his way to Mr Commissary Blythe’s place, where his secret bride, Ann Rush, runs the kitchen and the house. When he arrives in the Blythes’ futile vegetable garden, and comes mooning up to the kitchen door, he will, in fact, call Ann *my secret bride, my bride in Christ*. She *is* his secret bride. If Mrs Blythe knew, she would do her best to crucify him, though that he is a spouse in secret today comes largely as the result of a summons from Mrs Blythe six weeks ago.

One Sunday about New Year, Halloran came to the kitchen door. Ann rushed out to him, and pressed his shoulders with both hands. This economy of endearment was made very spontaneously; and so it’s necessary to say that Ann is not always spontaneous with Corporal Halloran. She sometimes suspects his motives; more often, she suspects God’s.

‘Promise to wait here, Halloran,’ she said, pointing at the threshold. She was whispering like a girl today, not like a conspirator; and she was openly exalted to

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see him. ‘Mrs Blythe wants to talk to you. I was to tell her when you came.’

Hence the rapture, he thought. The front parlour is taking *cognizance* of us, as they say in court.

‘What does she want?’

Ann squinted and made a gesture of tamping down his voice with both hands.

‘I think she wants to make sure you’re decent.’

‘Decent!’ he hissed. He wasn’t angry in any honest sense. Anger was futile since Mrs Blythe had the sovereignty over Ann. ‘Who’s that old Babylonian whore of a heretic to worry whether I’m decent?’

Girlish for once, Ann rocked on her hips, and kept her laughter in with both hands. ‘You make me feel I’m ungrateful,’ she said.

‘To her?’ he asked. ‘Ungrateful to her? I think she might have her eye on your boy Halloran.’

The girl’s mouth went haughty at the very idea.

‘She’s a most sober woman. It’s impossible.’

‘She wouldn’t be the first one who ever wanted to wriggle round the sofa with a well-bred boy like me, who’s got no diseases and doesn’t look too bad.’

‘You make me laugh,’ she said.

She bent with her forefingers of one hand in her mouth and laughed over the top of them. The laughter was supple and shivered with colour like a tree. As soon as Halloran was aware that it was beautiful in itself, instead of relishing it, he winced with pity. He winced,
visibly or otherwise, any time that her defencelessness was revealed. The poets promised the young some sort of leisure of love, some easeful immunity. Forget the leisure of love! A long acrid pity for an Ann who would weep, bleed and perish in season, possessed him most of his days.

However, he covered up the fact that her mortality had stung him. He lowered his eyes and uttered a few worn-out vows, and she took his hesitancy for a sort of ardour, and hunched her shoulders with delight. Once again, poets and story-tellers had formulated what a courting male should say, had created the counterfeit coinage of love; and a man was stuck with it.

She told him to wait, and he prepared himself to face Mrs Blythe. He laboured into his jacket. One of his elbows caught in its hot sleeve, and he snorted. He flattened his canvas hat and stowed it in against his ribs. He forced the uppers of his shoes, which had come adrift from the bark-thin soles, into trim shape.

Ann was back.

‘Be humble now, Phelim,’ she whispered.

Humbly, his canvas feet scraped up the few blocks of sandstone that gave into the back parlour.

He followed Ann around the flanks of a pretentious mahogany table where Mr Blythe starved Mrs Blythe twice a day. The Blythes had shipped out such substantial furniture, because the Home Secretary had intended a volume of industry within the new
colony that would make a Commissary a substantial figure, doing substantial work. But the industries had been all still-born; and all Blythe did now was to see that everyone was given two and a bit pounds of flour, two and a bit pounds of meat and a few sundries of other food each week. He restricted his own household to this bare ration.

Such moral heroism, rare amongst Commissary officials, had been gingerly praised by His Excellency when the new ration was announced to the garrison. One look into Blythe’s household, however, gave a person an indication of Blythe’s true motive: that he was trying to starve his wife, short of killing her, until her pious gut cracked. King in the food store, he could at will prise the lid off a barrel of cheeses and filch one from the top. The Portsmouth victuallers would be blamed for such casual losses as went to keep the Commissary robust.

Now Ann and Halloran had come into the hall. It was breathless and dark, seeming full of the grey ashes of that smouldering day.

‘Be humble, love,’ she repeated, and knocked on a properly-panelled door towards the front of the house.

‘Ongtray!’ called Mrs Blythe.

‘She means go in,’ Ann hissed at him.

‘I know, I know.’

‘Turn the handle!’ called Mrs Blythe, as if a door with a turning handle were a specialty to him.
So Halloran turned the handle, and came into the room where Mrs Blythe used all the day on her devotions and her leg ulcers. She sat in a heavy, straight-backed Italianate chair. Her feet rested on a hassock, and there was a rug over her knees. On a table to her left stood all that was needed to rub, anoint, lance, probe, cauterize and dress her leg. A squat stone lamp, the spoons and needles and lancet, the rags and jars of stewing poultice were, all together, the staple of her life. For Mrs Blythe had been blessed with a putrid leg as other women are with children.

On her right, amongst a deal of impassive mahogany, a slender half-circle of walnut, meant to go against a wall but free to wander in view of Mrs Blythe’s disorder, attended its mistress on foal’s legs. Her books were heaped on it in two tiered pyramids. Halloran had a passion for the leather wholesomeness of books, and the aley smell of book-mould was for him the smell of matured wisdom. So much so that he thought Aquinas must have smelt like that, and Solomon in his chaster days. There was time to read two titles: *Primitive Christianity* by Bishop Cave, *Sermons for Several Occasions* by John Wesley. Then he had to turn to Mrs Blythe.

She had her square owl’s face with its baggy jaws fixed on him. All her hair, not a wisp excepted, was swept up into a tight cap, so that eyes predominated and looked perilously alert. Halloran avoided taking
her on eye to eye. He gazed at an empty space to the left of her head, and dominated it in a relevantly direct, respectful, staunch and soldierly manner.

‘Corporal Halloran,’ she muttered speculatively, as if it mightn’t be such a bad name for a terrier or a horse.

‘Yes, madam.’

‘Errh . . .’ she said by way of a dainty parenthesis, and wriggled her afflicted leg about on the hassock. ‘I’ve asked some of the officers who have visited my husband here, about what sort of young man you are.’

‘Yes, Mrs Blythe.’

‘I was able to ask Captain Allen also, your company commander, I think. He claims that you are a most temperate and reliable young man.’

‘Thank you, madam.’

‘No, don’t thank me, young man. For this reason, that I find that a soldier’s idea, any soldier’s idea, of what is temperate and reliable to be very lacking.’

She leant on one buttock as pain diverted her for some seconds. Her narrow mouth opened to the spasm, not altogether humourlessly or ungratefully.

Shuddering, she asked him, ‘Do you love Ann?’

Halloran’s eyes, having been drawn by the lady’s virtuoso agony, returned to the empty space with which he’d earlier chosen to deal. Whatever could the woman mean by the word, when she locked Ann up
in the kitchen at night against her predatory husband, while she herself sat here morning and afternoon with pain licking up and down her limbs?

‘Yes, Mrs Blythe,’ Halloran decided, loath.

‘I am not the type of lady who lets her servants go to hell in their free time, Corporal.’

‘I’m sure, Mrs Blythe,’ Halloran rumbled, out of the deeps of his blushing throat.

No one would go to hell in peace in her household. Not even old Blythe could damn himself at leisure. For Mrs Blythe had confided once to Ann, and Ann had ultimately reconfided to Halloran, the story of how her husband had *walked disorderly* with a domestic in Portsmouth. Even Ann had thought that, in view of what probably passed between Blythe and the girl, *walked disorderly* was a poor choice of terms. Mrs Blythe’s father had obtained this expiatory post on the edge of the Southern Ocean for his son-in-law, and bullied him into it. The old man was an august Staffordshire potter, now clawing up the breakneck face of his eighty-sixth European winter; and mad Mrs Blythe wrote to him with ruinous frequency, begging him to exclude herself and indecent Mr Blythe from the inheritance.

‘Since the day I had Ann assigned me on the *Castile,*’ the lady was grinding on, ‘she has been as close to me as a servant can be. I approve her industry, and her standards of behaviour are remarkable in this human sink in which we serve our King, Halloran.’
‘Yes, madam.’

Madam took a large, manly handkerchief from her sleeve. She rubbed her neck which grew lividly out of her old lace fichu. Apart from the question of the potter’s fortune, had that flawed skin and baggy throat once put furies into Blythe’s loins?

‘I will not speak indirectly, Halloran,’ she said, chin up and the handkerchief rubbing. ‘I know how men live in this small parish of hell. I ask you straight. Have you ever lived in concubinage?’

‘No,’ he said grudgingly. ‘No.’ Not, he thought, that there would be any concubinage on the earth if all women shared the complexion of Mrs Blythe’s flesh and spirit. ‘You’re not the only one who fears hell, Madam.’

‘I do not fear hell, young man. I have a Saviour. And answer me properly!’

‘No, I haven’t lived in concubinage, Mrs Blythe.’ He swallowed. ‘I live for Ann.’

‘Why don’t you marry Ann, then? It is better to marry than to burn.’

As this random lump of St Paul hit him in the eye, he snorted, continuing in mental revolt. Could the woman believe that someone had once burnt for her, and that her dumpy flesh had quenched any fires?

Suffer it to be said that Halloran was doing better with Mrs Blythe than many an Irishman would have. After all, he knew what a large word like concubinage
meant, although he claimed to have never practised it; and Mrs Blythe somehow expected, when she used the word, that Halloran would understand it. Although he comes from a tiny place along Wexford Bay, he studied for two years, until he was nineteen, in the Bishop’s house in Wexford itself. It was planned that he would be going to the Sulpicians in Paris to be trained and priested. However, he was, there in Mrs Blythe’s sitting-room, as he is here in the forest, a corporal of Marines in a different world. Nonetheless, he could remember that in Wexford he read some moral treatises that advocated marriage as a remedy for lust and a cure for the sin of Onan; and he thought, that Sunday when Mrs Blythe quoted scripture, that, in common with such moralists, she wouldn’t have recognized love on a fine day, with the sun on its face.

‘It is not a matter of burning, Mrs Blythe. We can’t marry except before a priest.’

‘A papist priest?’

‘Yes.’

‘And in the meantime, you expose my Ann to temptation. I find your attitude difficult to understand.’

‘Mrs Blythe, you know of a district of the soul called the conscience. If Ann married against her conscience, she’d despair. Then, certainly, she’d be open to temptation.’

Mrs Blythe screwed her rigorous nose. Pain was at her again. Her eyes closed delicately. Halloran
remembered a time in Wexford, when he himself had been drowning in guilt, and the stairways and the dark corners of rooms had stunk of hell, how a poisoning in his jaw had given him a marvellous repose. He understood Mrs Blythe’s indecency as now she groaned for Brother Pain, who had the knack of flushing out of the veins any sense of immensities, of the terrible height of God and the depth of hell; who left you enjoying the uprightness of your chair, the splotch of sun on the floor, the astringent sweatiness of your face, all for their own delicious sakes.

With her mouth partly open and shut eyes, Mrs Blythe enjoyed these things for perhaps fifteen seconds. Then she came back to Halloran; her face wide open for business again, nasty as a hockshop.

‘When I spoke of temptations,’ she said, ‘I was not referring mainly to temptation from inside Ann herself. I was speaking of temptation from the outside. I was speaking of you, Corporal.’

From the Blythes’ garden, doves were mumbling warnings to him. He wondered whether the woman was merely plagued with conscience on Ann’s behalf. It was a deadly thing to be conscience-stricken for the sake of others. You needed a leg ulcer for respite. Or was she malicious? He would have to take Ann’s advice and be assiduously humble.

‘I promise you . . .’ he began.

‘Your promises won’t buy anything in this
establishment,’ she told him, tipping her right shoulder with the fingers of her right hand. ‘The pledges of our men of affairs have given us the appearance of a godly nation, Halloran. The breaking of their pledges has given us an Empire.’ She became unexpectedly bemused, as if, at the back of her mind, she were ruffling through some of the unredeemed pledges she herself had in hand. ‘I cannot accept promises.’

‘Mrs Blythe, what else can I do?’

Deferece came effortlessly to him, now that he was honestly bewildered.

‘I am aware you are seeking your brand of salvation. I will accept your oath. On my Bible here.’

She had sovereignty over Ann. All the sovereignty under heaven was in the wrong hands, and as soon as the wrong hands had it, they had you taking oaths.

‘Is an oath needed, Madam?’

‘Why wouldn’t it be, Halloran?’

‘I believe my intentions are good, Mrs Blythe.’

‘You may believe it. I don’t. Your intentions are not good enough for me.’

Down came her fist on the griffin’s head in which the chair-arm ended. Poor damned griffin, with its tongue out from being pummelled by such a scourge of a woman. At the same time, her handkerchief fell from her wrist. She allowed Halloran to round the hassock and recapture it for her. It was limp with the heat of the day, and of the day before that too, and
rather yellow. He thought, Ann washes her stinking leg rags.

‘Thank you, Halloran.’

‘I don’t think I can take that oath, Mrs Blythe.’

‘Listen to me!’ She paused to give him time to do so. ‘I can arrange your affairs from this room. If I wanted to, I could pester Captain Allen until he gave way. I could have you sent to the Crescent.’

Which was twenty miles up the river. He scratched the side of his neck with crooked, nonplussed fingers.

‘How do you dare to argue?’ The griffin took another clout. Mrs Blythe held her chin high and shaky; there was some sort of palsy dragging at her far cheek. ‘For Ann’s sake, I am willing to let you see her once every week. On Sundays, since there isn’t any other day; from three o’clock, since there isn’t any other time; and on your own, since there is no one to supervise. But I want her virtue more strictly guaranteed than it is. I want you to call God’s justice on your head, in the event that you wrong her. There! You have had three times the explanation anyone in your position deserves. I won’t have my servant fat with your bastard. Do you understand that? Swear or get out! That’s how simple it is.’

Pain, once more. It took her by the corners of the mouth and the corners of the eyes. Oh, it admired her justice and her buttock-rolling straight-talk.

‘Then I’ll swear the oath for you.’ He was pleased
to find that sullenness helped him to sound a bumpkin, knowing that what Mrs Blythe wanted for her Ann was an honest bumpkin. ‘But I promise as well. And the promise will be just as sacred to me as the oath.’

‘A promise cannot be as sacred as an oath, Halloran.’

She lifted the Bible from the table with her left shaky hand. She fluttered it open. It stood on her palm like a bird, its wings spotted with black truth.

‘Kneel down!’ she commanded.

This afternoon, Halloran is superior to the heat. He isn’t dwelling, at the moment, on Ann’s defencelessness. He’s actually singing, ‘Never have I seen a maid oh half as fair as that Spanish lay-dee’. To such an extent is he enjoying the rare wine of self-confidence, that he has even omitted to bring in his shirt today Dean Hannon of Wexford’s little book, *De Vera Amoris Disciplina*, a small treatise giving counsels on divine and human love. Written in Latin, printed in Brussels, marked and wise-smelling now from having travelled with dispossessed Halloran through such a range of climates, it, and not his oath to Mrs Blythe, gives him a high authority to see Ann.

He has not told Ann that he’s under Mrs Blythe’s oath of decency. Some days after the oath-taking, he recalled in a rush the details of a passage towards the back of Dean Hannon’s book. With his slow Latin, it
took him hours to find the page. When he had found it and read it, it rang in his mind like a mandate.

‘The spouses are the true ministers of the marriage sacrament,’ it said. ‘Does not the Church demonstrate this by one of her laws regulating the sacrament? This is the law which states that two people, moved by mutual affection to contemplate the holy state, yet so placed that they will not, with reasonable certainty, find within a month a priest before whom to exchange their vows, that such people are permitted to administer the sacrament to each other by giving the normal marriage pledges. They are then as truly married as if they had spoken their promises before the Holy Father himself in the Basilica of St Peter.’

‘We are castaways,’ Halloran told Ann. ‘The law is made for us. They are then as truly married . . .’

There was joy in seeing an older, craftier theology triumphing over Mrs Blythe’s blunt and callow one. Yet this was not the motive behind Halloran’s secret marriage. To penetrate his reasons, Ann’s reasons, it has to be explained that in this region were woods and hills and water, yet that they were somehow far too open to a bland, immense and oriental sky. Those who lived here felt that they lived in a desert. In civilized parts, people formed unions for subtle reasons; but in a desert, they united to ward off oblivion. The secret marriage of Ann Rush and Halloran was an attempt at warding off oblivion. It was a pledge by each other to
each other’s survival. It was an attempt to earn pity or leniency from the providence, sultan-wise, sultan-cool, who watched them from the far side of the nightly lattice of stars.

Despite that it is Dean Hannon, Halloran’s teacher in the Wexford days, who states the rule on priestless lovers; despite the canon lawyers of the God-binding Curia, who proposed the rule, and the Supreme Pontiff, who ratified it, it is not possible, except on the most sanguine days, for Halloran to believe beyond doubt that he is a husband and has a bride. He is sanguine today. Corporal Halloran, poet and husband; and nobody knows. His poetry is safe in the back pages of Captain Allen’s orderly book. His married state is safe in the back pages of Dean Hannon.