

Greg Hollingshead

Last Days

The sun is setting on what remains of September 10, 1782, a Thursday as I recall, they had the party for me, and it is setting on the hills that do what little they can to protect our hamlet against icy winds that howl down from the north and west, particularly in the winter months, and it is setting on the flat bowed head of my dear mother M. Byrne who has balanced her washbasket on one of the three or four large stones outstanding in the crumbled wall of what they call the west bridge and there huddles mad with sorrow at the feet of her own long shadow to weep. I am leaving tomorrow, for ever. I am setting off for the metropolis, London in this case, a lad of twenty-one, big for his age, and there the most celebrated doctor of the day will cut me up into pieces a half to a quarter the size of your Sunday roast, and boil my skeleton until it is clean, and when I am dry and the heat is off, he will wire me together for display in his famous museum where I intend to remain to this day, unless I was destroyed by the bombing, I can never remember. She knows all this, my mother, in her metaphorical peasant way, and sometimes she wails for me, on bridges, at sunsets, in the midst of changing horses she'll throw herself down in the stream and thrash. Rites of passage are the big killers. Otherwise she's gay enough, no more Charles to feed, that's me, I must eat tons, so it just may be that J. O'Haligan will come out of his trench and snatch her up, a bargain at half her age, she's not so old, thirty-six, a good ten years in her yet. But look! She straightens, dear ma, how I love you, and wipes away the tears, I wonder if she can smell the sulphuric acid, and smiles a brave smile through which she spits on her fingers and smooths her hair, and before I know it the basket is on her shoulder and she is swinging her large buttocks, my first roof, you know, she squatted, as all women should, and had me under a tree, I have never noticed how sexy that sounds, swinging her large buttocks as she picks her way towards the green, where the party they are having for me is at full steam. Never mind the details, I won't, being unconscious, for the following reason.

As a treat they have given me, for the first time in my life, the killer gin, and it has gone to my head, which has struck the ground. What has happened is, I have toppled backwards off a sort of rustic throne constructed for me out of sod wrested from D. O'Grady's recent home, and have knocked my head on one of those large stones of which village greens ought reasonably to be free. Gamedly have I sprung to my feet to resume my rightful if temporary seat and fainted immediately, my fall broken only by my skull, which has sunk a short distance into the ground, the desperateness of the head at times of faintness to get itself below the level of the feet, being what it is. As I lie here unaided by my drunken townsfellows, I realize I have digging into my ribs a sign that was hung around my neck only minutes ago by the children, it says, "God Help Him," or perhaps, "God Help Me," I forget, it's the same idea, we all know who they mean. Nothing else important comes to mind. J. O'Haligan is here, he has a hand on my mother's pudendum, and she will have more than that on him before the dawn, bless them. As for D. O'Grady, he is dead, as I will be before too long, and meanwhile I drink and meditate on a throne built from chunks of his ex-dwelling. Irony is a fine tonic. It is time to be up and doing. While the hamlet sleeps off her farewell, I shall make tracks for Larne. My dream is to find an exotic creature living in a humble cottage along the road, and marry her on the weight of my fame. It is not to be. Two hours from home and nobody knows me. They scurry off babbling into thickets of incredulity, first others' and eventually their own, which is not the same as saying my fame doesn't grow. I walk all that first day and night, sleep thereafter in woods and ditches by day and travel only at night. A shepherd discovers me under a hedge and scuttles off to spread the word. A child who ought to be in bed holds out a flower to me, she is blind, of course. I take it, uneasily, in one hand and cup her head in the other. With one enormous finger I could fill her adult life with vague guilt and indefinable longings, but I am not that kind of monster. By a stream in a shady glen I sit down and quietly cough up my first ribbon of blood in some weeks. Ah, mortality! In Larne, more children. Astounded by me, they throw stones and call names. Foot-Long. Big Oaf. Drooler. And of course, with youth's passion for sarcasm, Half-Pint. They gather in short crowds with terrible racking coughs under the one dirty pane in my lodgings, and shout their innocent abuse. The publican who lives on the ground floor is a Christian gentleman, he shoos them away when he thinks of it, has offered most kindly to manage me. I decline, explaining with a few coarse, badly chosen words that were my heart not set on reaching London and becoming the toast of Europe, I

would never for one moment hesitate to sign with the pen he has placed in one hand the contract he has placed in the other. Altogether he masks his disappointment with surprising grace, delivers food and gin to my rooms at only twice their market value, offers to run out for tobacco, mentions his daughter in the same breath as "our little deal." Yes, I say, when he gives me a moment to myself, and before the gin has fuddled me beyond all syntax, this is the world, at last I am out in it, and it feels . . . how does it feel? Difficult to describe. A hollow leg in the soul comes to mind. Sickness of some kind. Greed. I want to be fat. Never to move from this spot, immediately to move from here. My heart is not pure, I have many desires. London the City of Life is calling me, that was a joke, Charles! Charles! Come and get it! I slip onto the Larnestranaer ferry, the mob tears me to pieces almost, more epithets, more brickbats, have they never seen a freak? The sea! mother of Man, she's rough tonight, I park my biscuits as we kneel in prayer, and receive from my fellows sidelong glances, whatever they may be saying to him. Scotland, our neighbour to the north and east, how I love thee! is my crack as we dock. It's night again somehow, and we are on the move. I have the coach to myself, the suspension screeches objections, no one cares, the horses least of all, their sensible minds on oats, a quiet stall. To be dropped off in Edinburgh, Jewel of the North, I have given the driver one-half my mother's savings, the other half to be paid on arrival, I have grown more cunning in my latter days, but is it enough? My professional career begins under the auspices of J. "Blackheart" Vance. The nickname should have been the clue, it was too obvious I suppose, the world is too obvious. I appear before packed houses from three to five in the afternoon and from six to eight at night, six days a week, admission is one shilling, drop over sometime, the hall seats 81, stands 12, and rents for £10 4s per day; there are four shows, two in the afternoon and two in the evening. Blackheart pays me four shillings a day. His cut is high, more than 10%, he must be a good agent: remember inflation: gin of a reasonable quality is available for four shillings a day. I have vast epidemics raging inside, they cry out for medicine. The mockery can burn like acid, the pity is worse, and the amazement of small children is like quick slashes with razors. My landlord has been around to tell me the rent is past due. I call on Blackheart, it's all a big joke to him, he presses £2 into my hand and tells me not to worry about money. So far so good. He disappears. I sign a new contract with T. Dudgeon, a gentleman projector in the old style, as I imagine it. I like the man, he has no qualities beyond those of a gentleman, with the exception that everything about him is shiny, his face, his whiskers, his green coat. He

pays my rent plus £3 per day for the honour of putting me onstage from two until six at MacIver's Coffee House, a friendly place, no longer extant, I must have been happy there. I have my own airless room upstairs for putting my feet up between shows, I take my tea at four, everyone is very kind, at six I go to Adamthwaite's, one of the nicer gin cellars, and see what £3 will buy. Mr. T. Dudgeon is an excellent mentor, he has paid up the sum outstanding on the hall that Blackheart rented, and he has paid two bullies seventeen shillings between them to find and terrorize J. "Blackheart" Vance. Everything is rosy, but try to spend £3 on gin day in and day out, particularly during those halycon months of late 1782, and you will know how difficult it is, unless there's another hand in your pocket, not to stagger up out of your seat with your trousers full of change, and this change soon accumulates on your dressing table until you have enough to buy up all six seats on a night coach to Newcastle where you are exhibited for two weeks by J. Timmins and his brother-in-law H. Scarlatti, who together take you to Manchester where you appear in a private gentleman's club with a troupe of acrobats called The Tiny Terrors. J. Timmins and H. Scarlatti are not my kind of people but they are professionals, this is how I justify signing the contract, what baloney, deceit was written on their faces, grog blossoms and pencil moustaches don't lie. The next thing I know they're at each other's throats, the cause an incident too sordid for relation, I have a tone to sustain. It involves H. Scarlatti and two of the Tiny Terrors, I don't wonder, salacious little hoydens, my sympathies fall in with Scarlatti, I may be wrong, it wouldn't be the first time, but Timmins is a maudlin drunk, I would rather not drink at all than listen to that, a man must free himself of his sister-in-law, if the world gives us nothing else it gives us qualms, there was talk of a duel but nothing came of it, Timmins was gone suddenly, nowhere to be found. Scarlatti and I moved on to Birmingham, that was March 14, we're a little way into 1783, the end is nearer, flip the pages if you want to see how near. The contract was for six months of appearances at £8 6s per working day to be paid three months in advance, do you see how far along the economic scale I've come, it takes one's breath away sometimes, a fistful of ten guinea notes, a circle of straining faces, new friends, I have never been much good with sycophants, but I love J. Borulwaski, the famous count. If every Christian has a Judas, he is mine. He came backstage to see me on the last Tuesday in March, it was after a matinee, me flagrantly idle in my silk dressing robe, sipping warm gin. Count Borulwaski, an honorary title, has always been scant, of stature not words, oh heavens no, he can talk the hair right out of your head that little man, his diction

impeccable, a breath of Poland in it, I admire a good talker, it can't be helped. And now for something senseless. April 3, 1783, H. Scarlatti dies of pistol wounds in the abdomen, the assailant appears to have fired while sitting on the floor, it is very queer. When the Count bursts into my room to insist we leave at once for London, I am still scratching my head. We arrive on April 11, oh to relive those first days! in a city like this you forget the jeers and the stink. On April 23 we begin a series of appearances in a large room in a cane shop in Spring Gardens, hours of admittance, eleven to three and five to eight, admission half a crown. J. Hunter, M.D., a personal friend of the Count's, and widely known to readers of popular histories of medicine as the Shakespeare of English Surgeons, attends the premiere, the Count leaves his ushering activities to extend to him a warm welcome, what is he saying? When I ask, the Count tells me he has offered to hire for Hunter the best painter in London to do of me a portrait worthy to hang in Hunter's collection alongside those of the Count himself and the Sicilian Fairy, a tiny girl, you may have heard of her. But listen, here is the Count introducing me. *A prodigy like this has never made its appearance among us before. He is beyond what is set forth in ancient or modern history. The sight of him is more than the mind can conceive, and stands without parallel in this country. 'Take him all in all, we shall scarce look on his like again'* (Shakespeare), pretty noble, the curtains part and there I am, enthroned, in oak this time, struggling, in deference to all the lords and gentlemen present, not to cough or drool, we have a sort of act we hammered together, it's all the Count really, I just stand there, he alongside my leg to start with, he's only three foot eleven, his ear brushes my thigh, it must be a comical sight, tears of laughter roll down the gentlemen's faces, I scoop up the Count in one hand, he somersaults and hangs from two of my fingers, and so on, the gentlemen are in raptures, what a brilliant success! but why is Dr. Hunter staring, neither smiling nor applauding, and why does he leave only minutes after the show begins? The answer appears that same night in the form of a man named Howison, a ghoulish who works for Dr. Hunter who has offered £75 for my 'darling', which is Howison's word for me, dead, of all the nerve, and how much does the Count get? Howison mumbles and haws, I give him £10 and he blurts "a hunnerd." Sold up the spout! I cry. Never! and begin to cough, my worst fit to date, I'm a dying man, Hunter has seen that at a glance. Get out, I tell Howison when I have caught my breath, he slouches away, amiably enough, but he is there at every performance, I watch him slip along the crowded street, follow my carriage, sit with me invisible in the shadows of the gin cellars of Spring Gardens. On the

where I worked as a porter once, for a day or two. When I pay the driver I will have no money. I am walking in the park at dusk, it could be dangerous, no one comes near me, and then the walk back to Cockspur Street, the children know me, the Irish Giant, silence as he passes, is he crying, the odd intake of breath, the odd scream, he's sitting on my front step, Howison I mean, and I am fainting, as ever, a sucker for oblivion. He must have rung the door, the servants carry me inside, I am dying, he can't come in, dismiss this quack doctor, he knows too much, call the mortician, S. Farley, he's got the arrangements, the lead coffin, the Irishmen, I can hear the four of them, vulgar Hibernian chat in the hallway, where's the fifth? don't tell me, he's at the Peacock, arranging the pay-off with Howison. Hunter's behind this. The price is £50, not much for a darling like mine, the others agree, the fifth returns, the pledge is now £100, he returns once more, all this outside my door, £500, that's more like it, the bargaining has reached a happy conclusion, nothing to do now but worry or die, there'll always be something, take this quack, if he leaves me now I'll be coffined alive, what a predicament, never mind, my mistake, the coffin will go down without me, that's the point. And now I can't feel a thing, always a bad sign they say, it depends on what your good is, sardonic to the last, that's nature, no sense of the occasion, I need a drink, a network of weakenings inside me, subtle collapsings at the heart of me, no pain to speak of, nothing to worry about, the bone has gone to dream, why did you say it wouldn't, mama? such a sexy kidder she was, it's all right, the last of the wind now, at least this one soft expulsion or the next the last, a little whoosh, that's it, didn't hurt, and I am gone, the rest is clear, it might as well be the moon, they're all over the darling, stripping its clothes off, why compound this with theft, after all, but what about the genitals. What about them? not a snicker, perhaps I was wrong not to persevere, my humble creature in the exotic cottage, a burlap sling is all for me now, the back stairs steep and narrow, be careful, darlings bruise easily, or not at all, I forget, the carriage door stands open, money is changing meathooks, my last ride in a coach, a bag of enormous bouncing bones in Dr. Hunter's arms, that's me, a foggy dawn, a fine rain on Howison hunched in the driver's seat, I hope I don't leak on Dr. Hunter, he's so nervous. I never expected that, it's the mob that terrifies him, not the law, the law will cover its eyes, the mob have no eyes to cover, that was clever. An iron door clangs shut behind us, we're under the earth now, my darling recognizes the sensation, a basement lab, the cauldron is steaming, the horses' noses scream sulphur, Howison will lead them away soon enough, but first I must be rolled out of my burlap sling onto

wet warm marble, everything is warm, and Hunter has gone to work, cutting the flesh off me, the incisions go deep, a Shakespeare of the knife, this monster, he doesn't nick a femur, the flesh is peeling away, a streaming pile of fillets and guts on a carpet of *Daily Post-Boys*, my foot- and leg- and arm-bones in the pot now, it's warmer in there, and my pelvis, what a complicated spine, to think I thought of it once as nothing but pain, all that stooping, my ribs and collarbone, I forget the different names of these bloody meaty segments, Hunter knows each one and where it fits, such knowledge is power, the skull finally, scalped, my beautiful thin hair in the heap of guts, genitals, brains, there are my wretched lungs, the gristle of my nose, he knows what he's doing, a nose won't make it through a night like this. In the morning my bones are clean, he dries them, wraps and labels them, one by one, in gauze, the man is a perfectionist. you have to admire that. I'm stored in a wooden cabinet, in pigeonholes, it's comfortable enough, the newspapers of June 1 and subsequently of June 2 describe how I was dumped into the sea at Margate on the morning of May 31, the Irishmen have done their job to the world's satisfaction. In the winter of 1784-85, J. Hunter assembles me on newspapers, in the evenings of a month he has wired me into a skeletal facsimile of the source of astonishment I was. A beautiful oak case has been built for me, with a full-length glass window, it stands in Hunter's museum by the door at the end of the hall that leads from the top of the winding staircase to the left as you go in, it's been a long trip. Alongside me are the portraits of Count J. Borulwaski, my good friend and Judas, and of T. Farinella, the Sicilian Fairy, I never met her, she was twenty-two inches tall at the age of nine, when she died, and weighed six pounds. The portraits are charming but flawed, unlike my darling, which is brown from the acid, but otherwise perfect.