

# BEYOND *This* PLACE



A. J. Cronin

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GRAND CANARY

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# BEYOND THIS PLACE

*By*

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## *PART ONE*



## ONE

ON WEDNESDAY EVENINGS Paul's mother took the tram from her work in the City Hall to the mid-week service at Merrion Chapel and he usually walked over from the university, after his five o'clock philosophy class, to meet her as she came out. But on this particular Wednesday his interview with Professor Slade kept him late and, with a glance at his watch, he decided to go straight home.

It was July, and the lovely expectant evening had imposed a spell upon the begrimed buildings of Belfast. Framed against the amber sky, the roofs and chimney stacks of the northern Irish city lost their prosaic outlines and became mysterious, resplendent as a city in a dream.

As Paul came up Larne Road, the quiet side street of semi-detached brick houses where, on the ground floor of No. 29, he occupied with his mother a three-room flat, a surge of elation took hold of him. He felt suddenly the breath-taking beauty and promise of life. Standing for a moment at his door, an unassuming young man, bareheaded, in a worn tweed suit, he filled his lungs with the soft, still air. Then, briskly, he turned and put his latch-key in the lock.

The canary was singing in the kitchen. Whistling to the bird, he removed his jacket, hung it on a hanger in the hall, and, in his shirt-sleeves, put the kettle to boil and began to see about supper. A few minutes later the nickel alarm clock on the mantelpiece struck seven, and he heard his mother's step in the outside porch. He greeted her gaily as she came in, a spare and enduring figure, bent a little to one side by her indispensable "hold-all" bag, clad in respectable black.

"Sorry I couldn't get across, Mother," he smiled, "but Slade's given me the job. At least, I'm almost sure of it."

Mrs. Burgess studied him. The strand of drab grey hair escaping from beneath her weather-rusty hat enhanced the impression of weariness, of Christian fortitude and resignation, created by her lined features and intent, near-sighted eyes. But her expression melted gradually under his frank and cheerful gaze. It was, she thanked God, a good face, not particularly handsome—again she voiced gratitude to the Deity for sparing him the perils of excessive comeliness—but open and straight-featured, a trifle finely drawn, no doubt from over-study, cheekbones too prominent but with a healthy



complexion, clear, very light grey eyes, and a broad forehead set off by close-cropped brown hair. He was well set up too, a good figure, blemished only by an accident at football which caused him to turn in his right foot slightly when he walked.

"I'm glad it's settled, Son. I knew you'd have good reason for not coming over. Both Ella and Mr. Fleming missed you."

She rolled her cotton gloves into a ball and, casting a practised glance over the table, brought from her satchel some cold ham wrapped in greased paper and a bag of his favourite wheaten scones. They sat down, and when she had asked the blessing, began their simple meal. He saw that, despite her restraint, she was deeply pleased.

"It is a stroke of luck, Mother. Three guineas a week. And for the whole nine weeks of my holidays."

"It'll be a nice change after all your study for your final."

"Yes." He nodded. "Teaching summer school is just like a vacation."

"God is very good to you, Paul."

He subdued his smile and remarked :

"I'm to send off my birth certificate to Professor Slade tonight."

There was a pause. Head bent, she took her spoon and removed a tea-leaf floating in her cup. Her voice was a little indistinct.

"What do they want with a birth certificate?"

"Oh, a pure formality," he answered lightly. "They won't engage students under twenty-one. I'd some difficulty in persuading Slade that I came of age last month."

"You mean he wouldn't take your word?"

He looked across in sharp surprise.

"Mother! That was a little uncalled for. The man's only obeying the regulations. My application, accompanied by my birth certificate, has to go before the Board."

Mrs. Burgess did not answer. And, after a brief silence, Paul launched into a half-humorous description of his interview with the professor, who was also principal of the summer school at Portray. When he had finished his third cup of tea he rose from the table. Only then did his mother stir.

"Paul," she detained him, unexpectedly, "I'm . . . I'm not sure, after all . . . that I like this idea of you going to Portray."

"What!" he exclaimed. "Why, for weeks we've both been hoping I'd go."

"It means your being away from me." She hesitated and again looked down. "You'll miss our week's holiday with the Flemings. Ella will be disappointed. It'll be too much for you."

"Nonsense, Mother. You worry about nothing." Light-heartedly, he dismissed her misgivings, and before she could protest further, moved along the passage to fill out the application in his own room.

This was a small study-bedroom, at the front of the house, its bright wallpaper hung with passe-partout framed photographs of football and hockey groups. On the mantelpiece were a number of cups and other trophies which he had won from time to time at the university sports. Under the windows stood a bookcase containing a selection of novels and more solid works, mostly classics, indicating an intelligent and well-balanced taste. In the alcove opposite, draped by a green baize curtain, was the narrow cot in which he slept, and upon an unvarnished table against the wall his university lecture sheets were neatly laid out beside his study-programme. Everything bore silent witness to the quality of Paul's character, the soundness of his young body, the sensitive vigour of his mind. If one looked for a fault this might have been found in the excessive order of the room, suggesting a certain primness of disposition, an over-striving for perfection which could perhaps have derived from those corrective and "elevating" influences constantly exerted by his mother.

He sat down at the table, uncapped his fountain pen and, with his shoulders squared, elbows well tucked in, expertly completed the form. Reading it over to assure himself that it was correct, he nodded his head, and returned to the living-room.

"Will you get it for me now, Mother? The certificate. I want to catch the nine o'clock post."

She raised her head. She had not begun to clear the table but was still seated where he had left her. Her face seemed flushed, her voice pitched in an unusual key.

"I scarcely know where it is. It's not a thing you can put your hands on at a moment's notice."

"Oh, come, Mother." His glance flew to the bow-fronted chest where she kept all her papers, a few family trinkets, her Testament, spectacles, and other private oddments. "It must be in your top drawer."

She gazed back at him, her mouth slightly open, half exposing her cheap, badly fitting dentures. The flush had faded, leaving her lustreless cheeks more than usually pale. Rising, she took a key from her purse, and unlocked the top drawer of the chest. With her back to him, she searched methodically for five minutes then she shut the drawer and turned around.

"No," she said, in an expressionless manner. "I can't find it. It isn't there."

He bit his lip in annoyance. He was a dutiful and affectionate son, bound by the strictness of his upbringing, yet at this moment he failed completely to understand her attitude. In a controlled tone he said :

"Really, Mother, it's an important document. And I need it."

"How was I to know you needed it?" Her voice trembled with sudden resentment. "These things get lost. You know the struggle I've had, left a widow all those years, bringing you up, with a hundred things to think of, and a bigger load on my shoulders than ever mortal woman had before, worrying half the time whether I could keep a roof over our heads, let alone educate you properly. I can tell you I've had enough to do without bothering about a few papers, especially since half the time I've had no proper place to keep them in."

This outburst, altogether foreign to her controlled nature, took him aback, left him even more perplexed at her lack of reason. But the severity of her expression—a warning signal to which he was well accustomed—forbade further argument. In a quiet tone he said :

"Fortunately it's possible to get a duplicate. By writing to Somerset House in London. I'll do it to-night."

She made a gesture of negation. Her voice was calmer now.

"It's not your place to write, Paul." Reading his doubtful glance she added. "Don't let us make a fuss about nothing. I've not had too easy a day. I'll write for the certificate, on the City Hall notepaper, to-morrow."

"You won't forget?"

"Paul!"

"I'm sorry, Mother."

"All right, dear." Her smile, wavering slightly, lit her harassed features with a pale gleam. "Now, light the gas. I'll clear up, and we'll settle down for the night."

## TWO

DURING THE NEXT two days Paul was fully engaged. Queen's University was breaking up for the Long Vacation and there were numerous obligations connected with the end of term. By general request he acted as pianist at the annual student sing-song. A

mislaid library book proved difficult to trace. There was a last-minute chemistry "practical," and he suffered the usual tension in awaiting the results. But when the lists were posted he had taken a satisfactory place. In general, as a good scholar, an agreeable companion, and an excellent athlete, Paul was well regarded by the members of his class. But his popularity was tempered by an undercurrent of opinion, prevalent mainly amongst the medical students—a reprehensible lot—which belittled his extreme propriety of conduct and found in his abstention from the less inhibited undergraduate diversions an attitude that was regrettably straight-laced.

Once or twice, during his preoccupation, Paul's thoughts reverted to the recent scene with his mother and, watching her, he wondered if she were not showing signs of strain. She seemed on edge, paler than usual, given to moods of queer abstraction. Of course, despite a temperament naturally masterful, and doubly fortified by austere conviction, she had always been a highly-strung woman—he recollected how, in their early days in Belfast, a sudden knock on the door would make her start and change colour. But this was different: now a consuming anxiety seemed pressed upon her brow. On the evenings of both Thursday and Friday she went out after supper to spend an hour with their pastor and oldest friend, Emmanuel Fleming of Merrion Chapel, returning quieted but wan, with a lurking apprehension in her reddened eyes.

On Thursday morning he asked her direct if she had received an answer from Somerset House. She replied:

"No."

Several times thereafter he was on the point of questioning her further but an odd compunction, springing from the subjugation she had wrought upon him, deterred him. There could be nothing wrong, nothing. Yet he was puzzled, and began to seek an explanation of her queer behaviour in his own past history. The facts, however, were all ordinary and open.

The first five years of his life he had spent in the North of England, in Tynecastle, his native town: a blurred background fixed by the sound of the rivet hammers, and the long early morning blast of the "hooter" summoning the men to the shipyards. Threading this dim impression was the glowing recollection of his father, a gay and incomparably friendly figure, who on Sundays took him by the hand to Jesmond Dene to sail little boats, made from folded blue cartridge paper, in the pond; who, when he was tired, seated him upon a park bench in the shade and, exercising a fascinating

natural talent, made sketches of everything around, people, dogs, horses, trees, wonderful drawings, which charmed and tickled his childish fancy, and who, as if this were not enough, when the Sunday passed and weekdays came, brought him home in the evening coloured marzipan fruits, strawberries with green husks, yellow bananas, pink-cheeked peaches, delicious to admire and to eat, made by the national confectionery firm which employed him as a travelling representative.

After his fifth birthday they had moved to the great Midland city of Wortley : a greyer and less happy memory, mingled with smoke and rain and moving about, the glare of steel foundries and the moody faces of his parents, climaxed by the departure of his father on a business trip to South America. Ah, the pang of losing his dear debonair companion, the suspense of waiting for his return, then—as though fulfilling the premonition of that childish yearning—the unimaginable grief on hearing of his death in a railway disaster near Buenos Aires.

Thereafter, a melancholy wayfarer, not yet six years old, he had come to Belfast. Here, through the good offices of Emmanuel Fleming, his mother had found work in the accounts division of the City Health Department. The salary was small, but at least it was secure and had enabled the widow to keep a respectable roof above their heads and, by a miracle of economy and self-denial, to educate her son for the teaching profession. Now, after these fifteen years of her strenuous endeavour, he was within reach of graduating from the university.

Looking back, it seemed to Paul that the very intensity of his mother's effort had constricted their life in Belfast to the narrowest limits. Except for her frequent attendance at chapel she never went out. Pastor Fleming and his daughter Ella apart, she had no intimates. She barely knew their next-door neighbours. At the university he had never been able fully to indulge his sociable nature, for always he had felt that his mother frowned upon his friendships. Often he chafed at this restriction, yet, deeply sensible of what he owed to her, chastened, too, by repeated exactions, he suffered it.

In the past he had credited his mother's protectiveness mainly to her extreme and watchful piety. But now, in the light of her present conduct, he wondered if there were not another cause. An incident came sharply to mind : a year ago he had been honoured by an invitation to play in the international Rugby game between Ireland and England. Nothing surely could have been

more gratifying to a mother's heart. Yet she had positively refused to allow him to accept. Why? Then, he could not guess. Now, dimly, he divined the reason. Indeed, considering the pattern of her existence, in its guarded quiet, its shrinking from all contacts, its secrecy, its passionate dependence upon the Almighty, he saw it, with a start of apprehension, as the life of one who has something to conceal.

On Saturday, which was her half-holiday, she came in from her work at two o'clock. By this time he had made up his mind to have the matter out with her. The weather had turned to rain, and, after leaving her umbrella in the hall, she entered the living-room where he sat turning the pages of a book. Her appearance really startled him: her face was quite grey. But she seemed composed.

"Have you had lunch, Son?"

"I had a sandwich at the Union. How about you?"

"Ella Fleming made me some hot cocoa."

He glanced at her quickly.

"You've been there again?"

She sat down wearily.

"Yes, Paul. I've been there again. Asking and praying for guidance."

There was a pause, then he straightened himself, tensely grasping the arms of his chair.

"Mother, we can't go on like this. There's something wrong. Tell me, did you get that certificate this morning?"

"No, Son. I didn't. I didn't even write for it."

The blood rushed to his face.

"Why not?"

"Because I had it all the time. I lied to you. It's here now, in my bag."

The heat went out of his anger. He gazed at her, startled, as she fumbled in the satchel on her lap and brought out a folded blue-grey paper.

"All these years I've fought to keep it from you, Paul. At first, I thought I'd never do it, it was sore and difficult. Every step on the stairs, every voice in the street made me tremble for you. Then, as the years went on, and you grew up, I fancied with the help of God I had won through. But it was not His will. I had feared the big things, but it was a little thing that did it, just that trifle of your teaching in the summer school. But maybe it had to come sooner or later. So the pastor says. I begged him to help me to put you

off some way. But he says No. He says you are a man now, that you must know the truth."

Her agitation had increased with every word and despite her resolution to be calm she ended with a kind of moan. Her hand quivered as she held out the paper to him. In a daze he took it, looked at it, and saw immediately that the name there was not his name. Instead of *Paul Burgess* he read, *Paul Mathry*.

"This isn't right . . ." He broke off, gazing from the paper to her, a chord, deep in his memory, faintly touched by the name "Mathry," vibrating almost painfully like a plucked harpstring in a long-deserted room. "What does it mean?"

"When we came here I took my maiden name of Burgess. I am Mrs. Mathry, your father was Rees Mathry, you are Paul Mathry. But I wanted to forget that name." Her lips twitched. "I wanted you to be out of sight and sound of it forever."

"Why?"

There was a pause. Her eyes fell. Almost inaudibly she answered :

"To save you . . . from a horrible shame."

Conscious of the rapid beating of his heart and of a hollow sickness in his stomach, he waited motionless, until she should continue. But this seemed beyond her. She threw him a despairing glance.

"Don't force me to go on, Son. Mr. Fleming promised me he'd tell you everything. Go to him. He expects you now."

He saw that it was torture for her to proceed, but he too was suffering and he could not spare her.

"Go on," he said palely. "It's your duty to tell me."

She began to weep, in choking sobs which convulsed her narrow shoulders. Never before had he seen her in tears. After a moment she took a quick, painful breath, as though gathering all her strength. Without looking at him she gasped :

"Your father did not die on a trip to South America. He was trying to get there when the police arrested him."

Of all things that he had expected this was the last. His heart missed a beat, then bounded into his throat.

"For what?" he faltered.

"For murder."

There was a mortal stillness in the little room. Murder. The petrifying word echoed and re-echoed down the rolling convolutions of his brain. He felt limp. A cold perspiration broke all over his body. His question came in a trembling whisper :

"Then . . . he was hanged?"

She shook her head, her pupils filmed with hatred.

"Better for us if he had been. He was sentenced to death . . . reprieved at the last minute . . . he is serving a life sentence in Stoneheath Prison."

It was too much for her. Her head drooped sideways, she swayed and fell forward in her chair.

### THREE

PASTOR FLEMING'S HOUSE stood in the busy heart of Belfast near the Great Northern Station—an ugly, narrow dwelling painted slate-grey, like the adjoining chapel. Although he felt physically exhausted, fit only to hide in some dark corner, a gnawing urgency had driven Paul to trudge through the wet streets, flaring with lights and rowdy with Saturday-night revellers, to see the minister. His mother, recovered from her fainting attack, had retired to bed. He could not rest until he knew more ; until he knew everything.

In answer to his knock the hall light was turned up and Ella Fleming admitted him.

"It's you, Paul. Come along in."

She showed him to the parlour, a low-ceilinged room, with dark red curtains and horsehair furnishings, warmed by a small coal fire.

"Father is busy with a parishioner. He won't be long." She forced a small, suitable smile. "It's turned damp outside. I'll make you some cocoa."

Ella's panacea for most ills was a cup of cocoa—a true parochial gesture—yet, though he had no wish for the innocuous beverage, he was too spent to refuse. Was it his imagination which saw in her too inconsequential manner, her slightly tightened lips, an awareness of his predicament ? He sat down in a deadened fashion, while she brought a tray from the kitchen, stirred the sugar in with the cocoa and poured the hot water.

She was two years older than he, yet with her trim narrow-waisted figure and pale complexion, she had a somewhat girlish air. Her eyes, of a greyish green, were large and expressive—her best feature. Usually they were shining and soulful, but on occasion they could fill with tears, and spark with temper too. Always attentive to her appearance, she wore tonight a neat dark accordion-pleated skirt, black stockings, and a loose, white, freshly-laundered blouse, cut round at the neck.

He accepted and drank the cocoa in silence. Once or twice she



lifted her eyes and looked at him questioningly over the knitting she had taken up. She was naturally talkative, with a flow of bright conversation, and keeping house for her widowed father had given her a certain social assurance. But when he failed to respond to a few desultory remarks, her well-marked brows drew together, she seemed to resign herself to silence.

Presently there came the sound of voices in the passage followed by the click of the front door. Ella rose at once.

"I'll tell Father you're here."

She went out of the room and a moment later the minister, Emmanuel Fleming, appeared. He was a man of about fifty, with thick shoulders and big clumsy hands. He wore dark trousers, heavy workman's boots and a black alpaca jacket turning whitish at the seams. His beard, clipped to a point, was iron grey, but his wide light blue eyes gave him the look of a child.

He immediately came forward, grasped Paul's hand with extra warmth, then with meaningful affection took him by the arm.

"You're here, my boy. I'm very glad. Come along and we'll have a little chat."

He led Paul to his study, a small austere room at the back of the house, uncarpeted, the bare boards stained, sparsely furnished with a yellow oak roll-top desk, some bentwood chairs, and a glazed bookcase. A presentation green marble clock, a hideous affair, supported by gilt angels, weighed down the flimsy mantel-piece, which was edged with a velvet ball fringe. Having seated his visitor, the pastor took his place slowly at the desk. He hesitated for some time, then began, in a tone of affection and sympathy.

"My dear boy, this has been a frightful shock to you. But the great thing to remember is that it is God's will. With His help you'll get over it."

Paul swallowed dryly.

"I can't get over it till I know something about it. I must know."

"It's a sad and sordid story, my boy." The minister answered gravely. "Had we not better leave it buried in the past?"

"No, I want to hear it. I must hear it or I'll never stop imagining . . . " His voice broke.

There was a silence. Pastor Fleming rested his elbow on the desk, shading his eyes with his big hand, as though engaged in inward prayer for help. He was an earnest and well-meaning man who had laboured long and unsparingly "in the vineyard of the Lord." But he was limited in many ways and often, with great despondency, saw his best efforts and intentions go astray. He was