

**D**omnall O'Byrne cast his eyes over the deck of his small trading cog and out to the broadening estuary of the River Dee. From long experience, he had timed his departure from Chester's Shipgate to catch the turning of the tide from flood to ebb. With half-reefed sails for steerage, he let the current carry his vessel, the *Trosc*, downriver and out to the Irish Sea.

It was a passage O'Byrne had made many times before, bringing woollen cloth from the millers of Chester and slate from the Welsh quarries to eager buyers in the Irish ports of Waterford, Dublin and Carrickfergus. With fair weather for the crossing and a hold full of valuable trade goods, he could not help feeling well-satisfied with this particular voyage, but he cautioned himself to remain vigilant. The Irish Sea was no place to let down one's guard.

But for the moment, the western horizon showed nothing but blue sky and empty sea. With no hazards in view, O'Byrne turned his attention to his four passengers gathered near the bow. While he was happy with the wool and the slate in the hold of his vessel, he was less so with these men. They were a curious lot. By their weapons and their bearing, two were obviously fighting men. In his eleven years as master of the *Trosc*, he had transported many such from England to Ireland. As always, he felt a twinge of guilt at the thought.

He knew that men such as these were, bit by bit, imposing English rule over much of his homeland. While he was honest enough to admit that the new English overlords were hardly worse than the petty Irish kings they had replaced, it still rankled that foreigners held such sway. If the Irish were to be poorly ruled, let it be by their own kind! But a man had to make a living, no matter who ruled and these men had paid their fare from Chester to his first stop at Carrickfergus in good silver. If he did not take the English coin, another shipmaster surely would.

The business of transporting fighting men to Ireland had grown particularly lucrative over the past two years. With the return of King Richard from captivity and the failure of Prince John's revolt against his brother, peace had descended on England like a balm. That led fighting men to look elsewhere for employment. Many joined in the Lionheart's new war against Philip of France, but a large number of Englishmen found there was more profit to be made in the constant warfare in Ireland. And so it would seem with these two soldiers, were it not for the monk and the old man who travelled with them.

The friar was thin and wore the brown robes of an Augustinian. He'd kept up an animated conversation with the two armed men in the group as they made their way down the Dee. Monks were common enough passengers in recent years as the church of Rome, through the English church, busily worked to "reform" the Irish church. Encouraged by the Pope, there had been a flood of English priests and prelates making this crossing to help bring the Irish into the light. O'Byrne sneered at the thought.

After the fall of Rome, it had been the church in *Ireland* that had kept the flame of Christianity alive while barbarians stabled their horses in the holy places of the eternal city. Now, the Italian Pope and his lackeys in the English church thought to instruct the church of Saint Patrick on the proper worship of God. If anything, O'Byrne resented the English priests more than the warriors. It was as though the English could not be satisfied with Irish lands—they wanted Ireland's soul as well!

The fourth member of this odd group sat on a bale of woollen cloth and seemed to doze as the others talked freely. This man had seen many a summer and seemed ill-suited for a long journey, but O'Byrne had noticed the man's eyes as he boarded the *Trosc*. They weren't the rheumy eyes of a doddering old man. They were like the eyes of an osprey—taking in everything.

Two fighting men, a monk and a grandfather. All in all, it was a strange traveling party, but they had paid well and without complaint. He was about to turn his attention elsewhere when he saw one of the warriors turn and make his way across the deck toward him. The man was built sturdily with long russet hair tied off in the back. He wore a broadsword at his hip and moved with an easy grace across the deck, despite the roll and pitch of the *Trosc*. Declan O'Duinne approached the man at the helm with a grin.

"Master O'Byrne, it looks like we have fair sailing ahead!"

O'Byrne shrugged.

"We'll see once we strike the bay," he said brusquely.

Declan dropped his grin.

"If the winds are good, how long to port?"

O'Byrne glanced up at his rigging. The wind was picking up as they neared the mouth of the Dee and it would soon be time to unreef the big square sail.

"Wouldn't count on the wind holdin'," he said, "but if it does we should see land by dawn and if it's clear enough to steer by the stars tonight, we might be near enough to Carrickfergus to drop anchor by late morning."

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"Master O'Byrne is no Master Sparks," muttered Declan as he returned to the group. Master Henry Sparks had sailed them safely to and from the Holy Land aboard his cog, the *Sprite*, and had never failed to be in a good humour, even when fighting off Moors and Berbers at the Pillars of Hercules. "He's Irish and I don't believe he thinks much of us."

Brother Cyril looked back at the man at the steering oar.

"You can hardly blame him. To his eyes, we are but more outsiders, come to plague his native land."

"He took our coin readily enough," said Roland.

Declan arched an eyebrow.

"He may love our money, but not us I'm thinkin'."

They had chosen to sail with Master O'Byrne when they learned he was bound first for Carrickfergus in the north of Ireland. Before they departed Shipbrook, they'd considered the safest route to reach Declan's home in Tyrone. The two nearest ports on the eastern coast of the island were Dublin in the centre and Carrickfergus in the north.

"A landing in Dublin means a three days' ride through the de Lacy lands in Meath to reach the border of Tyrone," said Sir Roger.

"And the Dub Gaill still call Dublin their home port," added Roland. "They'll not have forgot the beating they took from the Invalid Company at Deganwy. Haakon the Black might be dead, but if any of that lot recognize me, we'd not make it out of the city without a fight."

"You can reach Tyrone from Carrickfergus in only a day and a half," said Sir Roger, "though I don't like ye passing through John de Courcy's domain. In truth, I don't trust de Lacy or de Courcy. Either man might look with suspicion on two knights crossing over into Tyrone—particularly if one of those knights is Irish."

Declan nodded. He'd listened carefully to the arguments for both routes. This was his journey and he knew it was his decision to make.

“We’ll take our chances with Carrickfergus,” he’d said with finality.

Now, their course set, they leaned on the rail of the *Trosc* and watched the shoreline fall away as they reached the protected estuary of the Dee and sailed toward the Irish sea proper. An hour before, the cog had sailed past the last ford on the river. Shipbrook was little more than a mile away from that ford, but not visible from the river. To port, they had seen the top of the cross that marked the final resting place of Sir Alwyn Madawc. Shipbrook’s old Master of the Sword now stood constant watch over this ancient crossing point between Wales and England.

As the *Trosc* entered deeper water there was a brisk wind, but fortunately no large swells. As the land receded, Roland leaned in close to his friend and laid a hand on Declan’s shoulder.

“How does it feel sailing for Ireland, Dec? I know ye’ve been of two minds on returning there.”

“Ye know I’ve oft thought about taking this journey, Roland, but one thing or another has inclined me to put it off.”

“Your father?”

“That—and a crusade and a civil war.”

Roland smiled.

“Aye, you’ve had a busy ten years.”

For a while they stood together silently watching Cheshire recede behind them.

“Tell me about Fagan,” Roland said. “You’ve not had much time to grieve.”

“Ahh, Fagan. As a boy, I confess I near hated him. He was six years my senior and regularly beat me when no one was watching. When I look back now, I think I understand. Ye know my mother died givin’ birth to me and I think he blamed me for it.”

“Hardly fair,” said Roland, “but it’s what a boy might dwell upon.”

“Aye, but I feared him and we do come to hate what we fear.”

“What of Keiran?”

“Keiran...Keiran was a gentler soul than Fagan, though on occasion he joined in the beatings. I always thought he was bullied into it by Fagan. He would come around later and say he was sorry and bring me a sweet cake or some other peace offering. Finbar says he should recover if the wound does not fester, but he is not dealing well with the loss of his hand.”

“Would you?”

“Probably not, to be sure. But after seeing what the Invalids can do in a fight, I’d be ashamed to complain about such a loss.”

“Have you thought about meeting your father?”

“I honestly don’t know what I’ll say to him.”

“I’d give anything if I could see my father one more time,” said Roland solemnly.

Declan looked over at his friend.

“Your father didn’t give you away.”