

Cold Kisses

by Lisa Rose & Simon Waltho

The Green Man stood by the first lock on the outskirts of town, where the canal flowed southwards away from the secluded hollows and lonely oaks of the Heath, through woods of beech, ash, rowan and yew, before turning abruptly, just beyond, to burrow through redbrick suburbs into the heart of the City to the east.

The pub had long been a haunt of the bargemen, who would moor up on the edge of the Heath before the final stage of their journey from the factories and potteries in the grey industrial heart of the country to the warehouses of the City docks. Recently, it had also come to favour with those drawn to the town by the promise of work in the pits, close as it was to the terraces of once-grand houses that had been turned into a warren of cold-water flats to serve as their digs.

And so it was that there was quite a crowd of us to witness, that Saturday afternoon in late summer, the breeze snapping at our skin with the first bite of the coming autumn, how Mary Wood's story came to its end for the first time.

It was cruel mischance that her family's barge, the *Joyce*, was the first to enter the lock that day. Cruel mischance that it was her eldest and fondest brother Arthur who had climbed onto the bank of the upper pound to open the paddles. Cruel mischance that, as the water drained into the lower pound and the boat descended, he should be the first to see her head as it crowned the foaming green swell.

There was no stopping the turn once started, and no speeding it either. As slow minutes crept by she hung like a crucifix on the back wall of the chamber. Her long black hair was matted and knotted with weeds. The mirror fragments sewn into her sodden shawls reflected a grimy rainbow of spent diesel in the wan orange sunlight. Her face was peaceful, but no longer pretty: her pale skin blue-tinged and bloated, the fat, dead tongue lolling from between her parted lips.

At last it was over. Arthur dropped grim-faced from the upper gates to the cill. He looked at neither the crowd nor his two younger brothers, summoned from inside the barge by his low anguished moans of despair, as he hooked his arms under Mary's and tenderly drew her up toward him.

If he heard the murmurs that began to spread along the shore, Arthur showed no sign of it. But he must have known that we had all seen. It was not just canal water that had swollen his sister's body. As the level had fallen in the lock it had sucked and stripped her heavy skirts away. It was now plain to all what had been known before only to me, her, and one other. Mary had been with child.

The pitmen in the crowd cast nervous glances amongst themselves as Arthur, Mary now slung over his shoulders, climbed the gates and fetched his long wrought iron lock-key from the ground by the winding gear. But he kept his eyes to the floor as, still not uttering a word, he walked down to the *Joyce* and carried his sister aboard.

The howl that came, after that, from within the barge felt like a sharp nail scraped down our spines. Moments later, Old Ma Wood scuttled out onto the towpath, a fat black spider trailing a web of coarse grey wool. As she hunched her way up towards the pub, flanked by the two younger brothers, the pitmen backed away and cast their gazes toward their shuffling feet.

They were hard men, true, and many had seen worse than what the canal now offered up during the long years of war. But they were, in the main, country men still, and it was in their mother's milk and the marrow of their bones that the old women of travelling folk were not to be taken lightly.

Drawing to a halt, Old Ma Wood raised a single gnarled and calloused digit towards the one broad back that had stayed turned to her, as it had stayed turned to the lock throughout, and called out a name:

“*O'Malley!* You listen here, *O'Malley!* We have our ways, man, and I'll see them held to. Mark me, *O'Malley,* but you'll be her bridegroom yet!”

O'Malley remained still, at first. Then, slowly, he raised two crooked obscene fingers to his right muttonchop, before smoothing the hairs down toward his chin. The woman and her grandsons seemed of as little consequence to him as the flies buzzing around the pint-jug of bitter from which he then took a nonchalant swig.

Old Ma Wood turned on her heel and hobbled back to the *Joyce*, the brothers following silently. Had it been anyone else to ignore her, the pitmen would have muttered amongst themselves the odds for his meeting a bad end. But not *O'Malley*. For we all knew that not one of us, nor any one of the bargefolk neither, was man enough to bring that about.

The pits had begun to be dug at the start of the summer, to provide gravel needed for construction of the new estates being built to replace the bombed-out slums of the City.

In those lean times, many men had come to sweat the five back-breaking days with shovel in hand that meant, on Fridays, they had half a decent wage to send home to their families. What remained after board and lodging they would spend in a frenzy of drinking, singing and – often enough – fighting in the pubs around the pits and beside the canal.

At seventeen, and still too slight for the hard work of digging gravel, I had instead gotten a job fuelling the trucks that rumbled it away. At first I had taken pride in the pitmen welcoming me as one of their own. That had faded soon enough once I had seen my first brawl.

In brawls in Westerns at the pictures, a man hit over the back with a chair slumped to the floor and was left alone. He didn't lie there, spine splintered, piss running down legs that twitched like a half-swatted fly, howling and sobbing as hobnailed boots smeared his nose and lips and eyes all over his face.

Of all the men of the pits, *O'Malley* was the hardest, and the worst. Rumours whispered that he had no family to send his wages to, or that he had one, or more, and did not care. He suffered not even the minimal restraint imposed on the other pitmen by their war-widow landladies, who kept house with strong right arms thickened by a lifetime at rolling-pin and mangle. Flush with money, he dwelt in a solitary cottage of his own.

He walked with a tomcat swagger and a smile that was often cruel, except when his roving eye had lighted on a girl that took his fancy. Then it would turn charming and his eyes would twinkle and his purse empty for drinks or nylons or more – until, at least, he had got what he wanted in return.

Soon enough, that roving eye had fallen on Mary.

I had known Mary since we were children, but not well. Those bargefolk who had stubbornly clung to their home on the canal even as the torrent of goods from the factories had dwindled to a trickle were an insular lot and, law or no law, kept their children out of school where they could. Men in their waistcoats and clogs, women in mirrored shawls and heavy skirts, their accent neither of country nor City nor town, they had hauled their cargoes along that waterway for the past two centuries, and were not minded to change their ways now.

Mary liked to walk on the Heath and through the woods on those spring and summer days she was not needed on the *Joyce* to cook or clean or mend, plaiting daisies to place in her hair, and singing the old songs of the bargefolk in her soft, high voice. It was on the Heath that I had first met her, out with my grandfather hunting rabbits for the pot. She had glanced away shyly on seeing us, and mumbled a vague “good day” before scurrying back off toward the canal like a frightened mouse.

In all the subsequent times she saw me, either with my grandfather or, as I grew old enough to be trusted with his gun myself, alone, she never once met my eye. Yet as she blossomed into beautiful young womanhood I dreamed, as boys will, that one day she might love me. Watching her idly as I lay on the grass and waited for rabbits to break cover, I would imagine her singing those soft, sad songs to me as she cradled my head in her pale arms.

I was not the only one to go hunting on the Heath. Times were hard, meat still rationed, and a little extra to put on the table was always welcome. And so it was that Mary came to O’Malley’s notice. She was shy with him at first; shyer, even, than she was with me or anyone else. But he could be gentle, when it suited him to be so.

Soon enough, I watched with a heavy heart and a jealous twist in my stomach as he led her by the hand into the woods, through a carpet of bluebells that glowed in dappled shafts of sunlight. His eye caught mine as they passed by where I lay, and his face twisted into a triumphant, mocking leer of hard lust, gone just as quickly when Mary turned her eyes back upon him.

When I saw them together again, months later, his face showed nothing but that cruel mockery. I was not close enough to overhear the angry words they exchanged, but I knew enough of their meaning from the despair on Mary’s face as she gestured toward her belly. O’Malley balled a fist and made as if to punch her where she pointed, only to tip back his head in laughter as she shrank away.

Turning on his heel, he spat words to me as he strutted past where I lay:

“Have her now, if you want, boy. She’s of no more use to me”

O’Malley was strutting still in the days following Mary’s death when, shovel on shoulder, I saw him pass the fuel pumps on his way to the pit. If anything, he seemed more cocksure than ever, viewing his fellows who had feared the old woman’s words with ever greater contempt.

As the nights drew in, however, something changed. That tomcat swagger was gone. No longer did he hold his head haughtily back, no longer was his gaze measured and confident. He barrelled along angrily, head down, glancing suspiciously from side to side. He drank and brawled and fucked as much as ever he did before, but there seemed no joy for him in it.

Mary’s story ended for the second time one night in the hard winter of that year, and this time there were but three witnesses to it.

I had gone to the canalside woods by the light of a poacher’s moon to shoot rats. It was a good way of making a little extra money back then. You took a lump of food – butter or cheese if you could get them, chocolate if you were lucky enough, but most often, as on that night, lard – and laid it in the light of a pocket-torch or lamp. You lay in wait with an air-rifle just outside the circle of light and picked them off as they drew near to the bait.

The rats didn’t seem to mind or heed their dead fellows, and within a few hours you would have a nice pile to pick through. Saw off the tails with a penknife, and soon you had a full paper bag to be exchanged for pennies at the council offices the next morning.

In the west, the last of the sunset showed as a bar of burnt marmalade against the horizon; east, towards the City, the sky was a bruise of yellow sodium against slate-grey coal smog. I lay on a thin blanket in the

hoary twilight, sighting along the barrel of my air-rifle, and waited. It would normally only take a few minutes for the first rat to scurry sniffing towards the bait. But that night, none came.

After a few hours waiting, my eyelids grew heavy. So, at first, I thought I must have been dreaming when I heard the singing, soft and sweet and familiar. I shook my head in the sharp, cold air. No. I was awake.

From yards away down the bank, around a slight bend, I made out a light. It seemed unlike any bargeman's lamp or rat-hunter's torch: pale, cold and green as the canal water itself. The singing continued. Over it I heard a ripple, as though something were being dragged from the water. And then, one by one, the soft slap of wet steps on the concrete towpath.

Leaving the rifle and blanket where they were, I got up and rounded the bend. The singing was growing more distant, and turning my head toward it, I made out a glimpse of the green light, moving away from the canal and into the woods.

Drawn toward it I knew not why, I followed, fast as I could, snapping bare, thin branches as I went. Soon I came to a clearing in which stood a cottage. The door was closed, but the light shone still, through the frosted glass of a window.

I drew closer and crouched by it, scraping a little frost from the pane and trying to peer into the gloom within. I could make out the foot of a bed and a pair of heavy pitman's boots, but no more. The singing continued, more softly still: a gentle murmur in a lover's ear.

There was a cry of alarm and horror, and a match flamed in the darkness of the cottage. Darkness again. Silence. And then, moments later, a pair of angry eyes met mine through the window by the light of an old gaslamp. I stumbled backwards and turned to run. Too slow: in a moment O'Malley was out of his cottage door, his great heavy hands heaving at my shirt as he caught hold of me and dragged my face level with his.

"So it's been you, has it, you little bastard? Watching at my window just as you watched us on the Heath! Singing to me at night to what – drive me mad, was it?"

One of his hands moved to my neck, the hard fat fingers squeezing tighter and tighter. Through the pain and panic, against O'Malley's wild eyes and sour breath, I barely noticed how cold and damp his skin was, face and fingers both, nor the wet vegetable smell of canal water that clung to his clothes.

"Watching us the whole time, tugging at your little lad as you did so. Filth. And now this. Think you loved her? Think you're some knight from a storybook coming here to right her honour?"

"Love and revenge are men's business both, boy, and you've not the stomach nor the strength for them yet. But I do. I can snap your neck as easy a rabbit's, and I've a mind to do just that".

My vision began to swim, everything around his hideous, staring eyes fading into reddish blackness.

It was then that I remembered the penknife in my pocket.

I stabbed down with panicked strength at O'Malley's thigh, felt the blade punch through his skin and scrape against bone. I twisted, hard as I could, as he shrieked and loosened his grip around my neck. Sucking down rough, cold lungfuls of air I stumbled, then ran, into the trees.

An age passed before I finally half-fell onto the towpath. The shadowy bulk of a barge loomed before me, squat and silent, moored up for the night. It was a moment before I recognized it as the *Joyce*. I hammered my balled fist against the gaily-painted sides, forcing hoarse shouts for help through my bruised throat. But if the Wood family heard me at all, there came no sign.

Too late I heard again the crack of branches as O'Malley followed the path I had trampled through the woods. I turned to run once more, but the path was icy in the clear moonlight and I lost my footing, twisting as I fell and landing heavily on my backside.

O'Malley, face bone-white in the pale moonlight, walked slowly towards me, his face not flinching once even as each step on his wounded thigh squeezed a little more blood through his coarse linen trousers. In his right hand, he held his shotgun. He laughed, cruelly, as he saw my fearful gaze drawn toward it.

"This is not for finishing you, boy. Just to bring you down if you hadn't managed to yourself. Like a rabbit, I said, and I'll be pleased to carry it through." He tossed the shotgun to one side, and walked slowly toward me, cracking one by one the knuckles of each brutal hand. I tried to rise and run once more, but could only sink, trembling, back against the frosty ground.

There was a flash and a sound like a railway carriage running over a single sleeper. O'Malley, arms flailing like a ragdoll, was spun about.

A figure hunched in the shadow of the trees, O'Malley's shotgun cradled in its arms, smoke curling from one of the barrels. The pitman's shirt had been torn away and his exposed flank was scored and bloody where the pellets had grazed and torn at the skin. Yet the main force of the blast had been into the night air and the rippled waters of the canal, and he remained standing. Putting a hand to his wounded side, he took a step forward.

"It'll take more than that to stop me, woman," he spat "and more than one barrel left, if you can't finish me first time from that distance."

"I hit what I aimed for, O'Malley," stated Old Ma Wood, her voice flat and matter-of-fact, "and will again". And she raised the gun, though only partially, and fired once more.

This time, the blast was at O'Malley's feet, and he stumbled backward. Catching his heel on a patch of ice, he tumbled over into the canal.

Old Ma Wood walked to the bank and squatted on her haunches, staring at O'Malley as he righted himself in the water and touched down upon the slimy canal bed. His eyes remained fixed on the old woman, fresh murder in them, as he made to take a step towards the bank.

He did not move.

O'Malley tried again, and again, harder each time. His expression changed from baffled, to annoyed, to infuriated.

And still, he moved not. One. Inch.

Then, once more, I saw that pale light, in the water all about him, and heard that same soft melody that must have haunted his nights since Mary had drowned those months before.

A slim pair of arms reached out from the water behind O'Malley and wrapped themselves lovingly about him.

He began to struggle, the thick corded muscles of his chest and neck straining hard – harder, even, than I had ever seen in the pits. And a wild horror came into his eyes as that gentle iron embrace loosened not at all.

Slowly, as slow as the turn of a lock, it began to pull him down into the cold green water.

"We have our ways, O'Malley," said Old Ma Wood softly, calm and still where she squatted, "And I will see them held to."

O'Malley's eyes were imploring now, as his head began to sink below the surface. I dragged myself onto all fours and crawled toward the bank, reaching it just as he went fully under.

In the pale light that illuminated the waters, I could see O'Malley still trying to struggle, twitching and twisting and choking. But for all his desperate violence, Mary's light, tender, terrible embrace held him still. She rested her head on his shoulder, her drowned eyes gazing kindly on his horrified face, her blue lips planting cold kisses on his cheek.

"Didn't expect to be best man to the likes of him, I'll wager," laughed Ma Wood, as the light faded and the water resumed its still, silent darkness "I know you were sweet on her and I'm sorry. But she made her choice."

She cast the gun into the canal, and turned on her heel. "And now it's finished. Get home to your bed, boy. And no mention of this to anyone come the morning."

O'Malley's body was never found. He was not especially missed from the pits when he stopped showing up for work, and there was no one who cared enough to report his disappearance. Truth told most were relieved to see him gone.

These days the pits are lakes, filled in with rain water, surrounded by gleaming new buildings of steel and glass. The children and grandchildren of the bargefolk are long settled in the estates the gravel went to build, the canals home now only to the rusty wire skeletons of abandoned shopping trolleys. Meat is plentiful, even when money is not, and rabbits run free and untroubled on the Heath.

Yet on winter evenings, if I turn my ear toward those silent waters, I fancy I can hear Mary yet, singing her haunting songs to the reluctant husband whose head she cradles amidst the weeds.