

The Sniper

by Liam O'Flaherty

📖 The end of the Irish War of Independence in 1921, resulting in the Irish Free State, should have brought peace but instead it brought civil war. The Free State accepted the Peace Treaty with Britain which left six counties in the north as part of the UK. The Republicans wanted all of the 32 counties to be one republic. The war began immediately after British troops withdrew from the new Free State.

This story is set in the centre of Dublin, but feelings were passionate all over Ireland and families were divided, often with tragic results as this story shows.

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Your teacher has an easier version of the text.

The long June evening faded into night. Dublin lay in darkness; only the faint light of a pale moon shone through thin clouds, over the streets and the dark waters of the River Liffey. Around the Four Courts, where fighting was constant, the heavy guns roared. Here and there, through the city, machine guns and rifles broke the silence of the night, like dogs barking on lonely farms. Irishmen were fighting Irishmen: civil war.

On a roof-top near O'Connell Bridge, a Republican sniper lay watching. Beside him lay his rifle and over his shoulders hung a pair of field-glasses. His face was the face of a student - thin and prepared for sacrifice, but his eyes shone with the

cold light of the fanatic. They were deep and thoughtful, the eyes of a man who is used to looking at death.

He was eating a sandwich hungrily. He had eaten nothing since morning. He had been too excited to eat. He finished the sandwich and, taking a flask of whiskey from his pocket, he had a quick drink. Then he returned the flask to his pocket. He paused for a moment, considering whether he should risk a smoke. It was dangerous. The flash might be seen in the darkness and there were enemies watching. He decided to take the risk. Placing a cigarette between his lips, he struck a match, drew some smoke into his lungs quickly and put out the light.

Almost immediately a bullet flattened itself against the parapet of the roof. The sniper drew again quickly on his cigarette and put it out; then he swore softly and crawled away to the left.

Cautiously he raised himself and looked over the parapet. There was a flash and a bullet shot over his head. He dropped immediately. He had seen the flash. It came from the opposite side of the street.

He rolled across the roof to a

chimney in the rear and slowly pulled himself up on his feet behind it until his eyes were level with the top of the parapet. There was nothing to be seen - just the faint outline of the opposite housetop against the blue sky. His enemy was under cover.

Just then an armoured car came across the bridge and advanced slowly up the street. It stopped on the opposite side of the street fifty yards ahead. The sniper could hear the dull noise of the motor, like an animal breathing. His heart beat faster. It was an enemy car. He wanted to shoot but he knew it was useless. His bullets would never cut through the steel that covered the grey metal beast.

Then round the corner of a side street came an old woman, her head covered by an old shawl. She began to talk to the man in the turret of the car. She was pointing to the roof where the sniper lay. An informer.

The turret opened. A man's head and shoulders appeared, looking towards the sniper. The sniper raised his rifle and shot. The head fell heavily on the turret wall. The woman made a run towards the side street. The sniper shot again. The woman twisted rapidly round and fell with a long sharp cry into the gutter.

Suddenly from the opposite roof a shot sounded sharply and the sniper swore and dropped his rifle. The rifle fell noisily to the roof. The sniper thought the noise would wake the dead. He bent down to pick the rifle up. He couldn't lift it. His forearm was dead. "Christ," he said in a low voice, "I'm hit."

Dropping flat on the roof, he crawled

back to the parapet. With his left hand he felt the wounded right forearm. Blood was beginning to appear through the sleeve of his coat. There was no pain - just a deadened feeling as if the arm had been cut off.

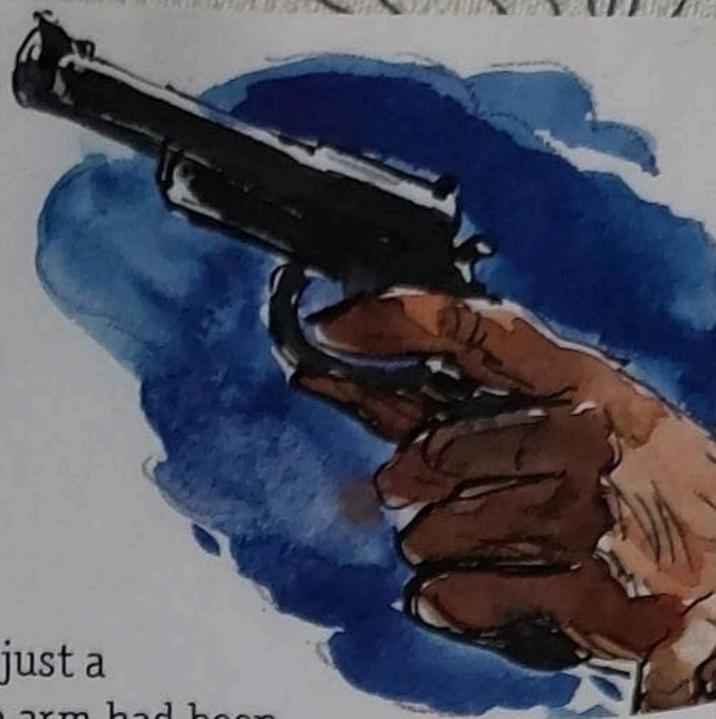
Quickly he drew his knife from his pocket, opened it on the stone-work of the parapet and tore open the sleeve. There was a small hole where the bullet had entered. On the other side there was no hole. The bullet had stuck in the bone. It must have broken it. He bent the arm below the wound. The arm bent back easily. He ground his teeth to overcome the pain.

Then, taking out his field-dressing, he tore open the packet with his knife. He broke the neck of the iodine bottle and let the bitter liquid fall drop by drop into the wound. His whole body shook with the sharp pain of it. He placed the cotton wool over the wound and wrapped a bandage over it. He tied the end with his teeth.

Then he lay still against the parapet and, closing his eyes, he made an effort of will to overcome the pain.

In the street beneath, all was still. The armoured car had retired speedily over the bridge, with the machine gunner's head hanging lifeless over the turret. The dead body of the woman lay still in the gutter.

The sniper lay for a long time nursing his wounded arm and planning escape.





When morning came, he must not be found wounded on the roof. The enemy on the opposite roof was covering his escape. He must kill that enemy and he could not use his rifle. He had only a revolver to kill him with. Then he thought of a plan.

Taking off his cap, he placed it over the end of his rifle. Then he pushed the rifle slowly upwards over the parapet until the cap could be seen from the opposite side of the street. Almost immediately a shot sounded and a bullet went right through the centre of the cap. The sniper then let the rifle hang forward and downward. The cap slipped down into the street. Then, catching the rifle in the middle, the sniper dropped his left hand over the roof and let it hang, lifelessly. After a few moments he let the rifle drop to the street. Then he sank to the roof, dragging his hand with him.

Crawling quickly to the left, he looked up at the corner of the opposite

roof. His trick had succeeded. The other sniper, seeing the cap and rifle fall, thought that he had killed his man. He was now standing in front of a row of chimneys looking across, with his head clearly outlined against the western sky.

The Republican sniper smiled and lifted his revolver above the edge of the parapet. The distance was about fifty yards - a hard shot in the poor light - and the pain in his right arm was hurting him like a thousand devils. He took a steady aim. His hand was almost shaking with eagerness. Pressing his lips together, he breathed in deeply through his nose and shot. He was almost deafened with the noise and his arm shook with the recoil.

Then, when the smoke cleared, he looked carefully across and gave out a cry of joy. His enemy had been hit. He was rolling from side to side over the parapet in his death agony. He struggled to stay on his feet but he was slowly falling forward as if in a dream. The rifle

fell from his hand, hit the parapet, fell over, bounded off the pole of a barber's shop beneath and then dropped noisily on to the road.

Then the dying man on the roof bent double and fell forward. The body turned over and over in space and hit the ground with a dull thud. Then it lay still.

The sniper looked at his enemy falling and his body shook once. The fierce love of battle died in him. He became filled with sadness at what he had done. The sweat stood out in small round drops on his forehead. Weakened by his wound and the long summer day of going without food and watching on the roof, he felt sickened at the sight of the torn and broken mass of his dead enemy. His teeth chattered. He began to talk rubbish to himself, cursing the war, cursing himself, cursing everybody.

He looked at the smoking revolver in his hand and with a curse he threw it hard to the roof, at his feet. The force of the fall made the revolver go off and the bullet shot close past the sniper's head. He was frightened back to his senses by the shock. His nerves steadied. The cloud of fear lifted from his mind and he laughed.

Drawing the whiskey flask from his pocket, he took one long drink and emptied it. He felt less cautious under the influence of the drink. He decided to leave the roof and look for his company commander so that he could report what had happened. Everywhere around was quiet. There was not much danger in going through the streets. He picked up his revolver and put it in his pocket.

Then he crawled down through the skylight to the house underneath.

When the sniper reached street level, he felt a sudden curiosity as to the identity of the enemy sniper whom he had killed. He decided that he could shoot well, whoever he was. He wondered if he knew him. Perhaps he had been in his own company before the army had split into two. He decided to take a chance and go over to have a look at him. He looked carefully around the corner into O'Connell Street. In the upper part of the street was heavy gunfire, but around here all was quiet.

The sniper ran across the street. A machine-gun tore up the ground around him with a shower of bullets, but he escaped. He threw himself face downwards beside the dead body. The machine-gun stopped.

Then the sniper turned over the body and looked into his brother's face.

- "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter". Discuss this statement.
- Do you know of examples of terrorist groups from other countries?
- What do you think of people who risk their lives to plant bombs which will kill people - families, politicians, soldiers? Are they brave or what?

Fact File

Liam O'Flaherty (1897-1984) was born on the Aran Islands west of Ireland. He fought in World War I in the British army and on the anti-treaty side in the Irish civil war. He is well-known for his short stories.