The Crowded Earth

David Whelan

ACT I

CHAPTER 1

Haddington Road, Dublin, 1913

'MOTHER, I'M GOING into town, now.'

'Have you seen this?' She hands me one of the trade union flyers.

'*Don't wear clothes made by scab labour*,' I read aloud.

'The workers have no choice. People are starving, *Roopert*. I blame the employers. Your father would know what to do. Wouldn't he?'

My mother still retains that slight inflection in her voice, an indication of her Italian birth, though a stranger could be sure only of a certain exoticness and no more.

'Yes, Mother, Father would know what to do. Would you like me to play some music?' I ask, trying to change the subject.

I am in uniform, readied to report for guard duty. Mother doesn't like to see me in uniform but needs must. I am in danger of being late, and Sergeant Roper will not be happy.

'Is it time to prune the roses, *Roopert*?'

'Yes, I think it would be nice to go into the garden,

Mother. Should I ask Mrs Butler to bring you into the garden today?'

'Not today, *Roopert*, maybe tomorrow. Yes, tomorrow. I think tomorrow might be better.'

'Very well, Mother! Perhaps you should rest today.'

'You're so good my dear, dear, *Roopert*. We'll go into the garden tomorrow to prune back the bushes. It won't be long until winter frosts arrive and everything will die. You look so handsome in your uniform. I remember your father in a uniform just like the one…'

She is staring out the window to the garden, her place of solace against the world beyond its walls, now standing neglected, overgrown with bush and bramble. Father is nearly twelve years dead, and his body buried in the orange-coloured clay of the Transvaal is the flame flickering in the hearth. Mother is the woman still in mourning, her light-soul dulled by this terrible sense of sadness. My father's ghost is always there in Mother's laudanum haze.

Three knocks in quick succession, and the door opens behind me. Mrs Butler, our housemaid, enters. She skirts the edge of the room. I watch her eyes fix on Mother, still standing by the window.

'Ah, Mrs Butler, there you are,' I say, drawing her attention.

'I'm never too far away, Master Rupert. You know that.'

'Yes of course not. I was just telling Mother about the garden.' I make my way to the gramophone and place Mother's favourite record on the turn-table. I wind the arm several times and the record spins. Then as careful as if I am handling a piece of fragile china, I place the needle in the groove.

In the prison cell I sit, thinking Mother dear, of you…

'It's very overgrown it is, and the rabbits have dug holes.'

And our bright and happy home so far away…

'Yes, well, thank you Mrs Butler. I was trying to convince

Mother that it might be nice to go into the garden, to do some pruning.'

And the tears they fill my eyes…

'It's like a jungle out there,' Mrs Butler replies, pulling back the lace-curtain to get a better look. 'My husband knows a little bit about jungles and the like. He fought those Boers. He was at Ladysmith, he was.'

'Is that so?' I say and wait for Mrs Butler to repeat her story for the umpteenth time.

'Yes, my Frank knows all about *them* jungles.' Mrs Butler appears lost in thought for a moment. I see a moistening in her eyes. 'He isn't the same after *them* jungles. No, he's not the same. Well, never mind that. There I go blabbing on about my Frank again when I should be seeing how Madame is doing.'

'Did the doctor say anything about reducing her dosage? You see…'

Mrs Butler takes my arm and guides me towards the fireplace. Crackle, hiss, and spit, a log of seasoned birch burns bright. I feel the heat on my skin and take a step back. Mrs Butler leans towards me and whispers in my ear.

Tramp, tramp, tramp, the boys are marching…

'Your father loved this song,' I hear my mother say.

Cheer up comrades they will come…

'Doctor Finn would like to speak with you when he next comes to visit. He is due next Wednesday.'

'I'm on duty, Mrs Butler. We're all active until this strike is over.'

'My Frank says this strike could go on for years. The workers are determined.'

'I'm afraid Mr Murphy is determined too.'

'William Martin Murphy, now there's a name that will go into the history books. You mark my words, Master Rupert. William Martin Murphy's name is as black as that log there, blacker I'd say. As black as the savages in the jungle! Poor Frank and what he had to put up with.'

'The Boers are white, Mrs Butler.'

'White, well I know that, but my Frank, he was fighting in *them* jungles. They're all savages if you ask me,' Mrs Butler says, biting her bottom lip. 'I'm sorry for the bad language, Master Rupert. It's just that…'

I wave my hand to cut short her explanation. I have heard the story many times. How Mr Butler had survived Ladysmith only to be captured by a tribe of savages and marched through the jungle, of God knows where, to where they made camp and built a fire with big logs. How Mr Butler and his unfortunate companions believed they would be roasted and eaten, there and then, and no one would be the wiser, and Mrs Butler back in Dublin with a gaggle of young children under her wing, and dependent on the monies the Crown sent her. Two-and-six pence all told and Mrs Butler's false teeth worn away from biting hard into the King's shilling. And her Frank rescued before becoming someone's dinner only to arrive home a ghost, unable to speak for months and months. When he eventually spoke his first word after those many months of monk-like meditation, staring wild-eyed into the home fire, puffing on his pipe, was Balubas, and no one knew what he meant by it. Balubas, Mrs Butler, would repeat, over and over. Her Frank, she would tell me, all he would say was, Balubas, and stare off into the distance.

'You're probably right about the strike, Mrs Butler, but I have to follow orders,' I say, steering her back to the subject at hand, but Mrs Butler's thoughts are on other matters. Matters which have no doubt plagued her mind since her Frank returned from fighting the Boer.

'He's not the same since *them* Balubas,' Mrs Butler adds.

I once tried to explain to Mrs Butler that the Baluba tribe were from Central Africa, and her Frank was probably confused, which is understandable given the circumstances, though the threat of being eaten would tend to sharpen, rather than dull the mind. Perhaps certain details became confused in

that terrible moment when someone licked their lips, like a dog sizing up a juicy morsel, and looked Mr Butler up and down, thinking him adequate for breakfast, but insufficient for lunch and tea.

I also informed Mrs Butler that the Boers are different from the Baluba in skin colour, temperament and cultural background. Well almost everything was different, and the only thing the two groups had in common was that they are inhabitants of the African continent. I had learned all of this from our history lectures. The Baluba are not cannibals, I would tell her. In fact, the Baluba are a cultured and advanced tribe. It came as some surprise to Mrs Butler.

I went so far as to illustrate my point by showing Mrs Butler the different geographic locations of the two tribes on one of Father's old maps of Africa. Mr Butler, I explained, would need to have walked nearly two thousand miles, and although known to be a man of great walking abilities, it would have been a feat of gargantuan proportions for a man who had already suffered the trials of Ladysmith. It was to no avail. Mrs Butler was sure her Frank had been captured by the Baluba and has not been the same since. And so the story of Private Frank Butler's epic, Livingstone-like adventure in the jungles of Africa continues to this day, though Mr Butler himself, a small, diminutive man, with round shoulders and stooped posture, says very little about his odyssey. He is, I find, a man of few words, Balubas being one of them.

'Well, I don't think it's quite as bad as all that. The streets are quiet now, *The Hare* landed food from England, and the Dublin Metropolitan Police are taking care of any troublemakers. Victor and I haven't been called on to do anything more than guard the gates of the college.'

Victor and I boarded together at Harrow and have been fast friends since. He's studying to be a lawyer though he tells me he is not terribly interested in going into the law and would prefer to spend his inheritance on travel and adventure.

'Funny name for a ship don't you think? *The Hare!* They might as well have called it *The Rabbit* or *The Fox*. In any case, your father, God be good to his soul,' Mrs Butler blesses herself three times for effect, 'would have supported the workers. I've no doubt about that. Yes, your father was a good man like that, and then…'

From what I know of my father, he was thought to be a fair and just man. Before the army, he had been a businessman though not a very successful one. He was a man of ideas before his time I am told, a better soldier than business owner, a manager of men, an inspirer of confidence and a dreamy romantic.

'Yes, well, let's not dwell on that, Mrs Butler. It's Mother we should be concerned about.'

'What should I tell the good doctor then?'

'I will call to his offices. Yes, tell him I shall call to his surgery today. It's on Baggot Street isn't it?'

'Upper Baggot Street. Very good, Master Rupert, I'll send a messenger to let him know. Now where was I?'

'You were going to give Mother her medicines!'

'Yes, of course. Oh, I mentioned to Mrs Graham that you would not be home for tea this evening, so she has prepared sandwiches and soup and your favourite apple tart.'

'Thank you, Mrs Butler.'

I pull the curtain back and look through the window into the garden below. A solitary tree still bears fruit, a sour, gnarly, misshapen apple, which when sufficiently sweetened with many cups of sugar makes the most delectable apple tart.

'There's plenty of fruit still on the tree, Mrs Butler. Plenty of apple tarts.'

'I'll ask Mrs Graham to pick the rest of them before the frost. They'll keep well beside the range once we've wrapped them in paper.'

'Plenty for Christmas treats.'

'I love Christmas. Don't you Madame?'

Mother is still staring at the window, her arm moving in time to the echo of music as the needle scratches in the groove.

'Would you like me to play the recording again, Mother?'

Her gaze is fixed on something in the garden.

'Winter is coming.'

'It won't be long now, Madame. It won't be long now, atall, atall.'

Mrs Butler props up Mother's head with a pillow. She gives a thin stupefied smile in return. The record stops spinning. I wind up the arm; around and around it goes. I place the needle in the groove, and Victor Herbert's music fills the air once more.

'*Tramp! Tramp! Tramp!*'

'There you are now, Madame. Will I ask Mrs Graham to prepare lunch for you?'

Mother shakes her head. She hasn't eaten in several days, and her features have become pinched. She has taken on a sickly yellow pallor.

'You have to eat something, Mother. You have to keep your strength up,' but she simply stares out the window, waving her arm as if she is conducting an orchestra, visible only to her, an orchestra of flightless birds perched on the leafless branches of a gnarly apple tree.

I am told Mother was once a very beautiful woman, as delicate as china itself, fine-boned. She has an elegant nose and high cheek bones, with long, dark hair, and skin that turns a mahogany colour at the hint of sunlight. I have my mother's temperament, a strong silent, sensitive disposition, but physically I am reminded that I take after my father, broad-shouldered and square–jawed, with fair hair and freckles across the bridge of my nose. I make my excuses, kissing Mother on both cheeks and wishing Mrs Butler a good day.

'Don't forget your supper,' Mrs Butler cries after me.

'Yes, Mrs Butler.'

'Don't forget about the good doctor!' Mrs Butler adds.

'*Tramp! Tramp! Tramp!*' Mother sings as I close the door behind me.