

The Witness

Dedicated to my cousin Ann Hurley (RIP Oct 2023)

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Characters

Captain – A young British army officer (late 20s / early 30s)

Annie – runs the pub (early 50s)

Kitty – Annie's oldest daughter (16)

John – Annie's husband (late 40s / early 50s)

Molly – Annie's youngest daughter (12)

The play is set in 1921 during the Irish war of independence in a pub in Kilkenny.

Background

The background to the story is that grandmother ran a pub in Friary street, Kilkenny in the early 1900s. At that time, the Kilkenny gaol which was only a short distance from the pub was still in operation. My grandmother was told one day by a man in the pub that he had witnessed the shooting of an innocent prisoner by an officer in the gaol. Someone had overheard the man telling my grandmother this and word got back to the gaol.

A campaign was launched to find out who the man was but my grandmother never divulged her secret. The events apparently went on for quite a few weeks where the family were subjected to constant raids, intimidation and interrogations. My mother remembered being constantly followed around the town by Black and Tans. I suspect the intimidation ended with the signing of the treaty and the departure of the British.

I wanted to tell the story in a simple format within a single scene so I did have to take certain liberties but the core of the story is based on my mother's recollection of the events.

In late 2019, I gave the script to my cousin, Ann Hurley (who sadly passed away after a long battle in Oct, 23). Ann had also heard the story from her mother, Kitty and liked the piece. She was an active member of the Moat Theatre in Naas and planned to direct it for the groups open week which was due to take place in April 2020 but this again like many others fell victim to Covid. The play has never been produced.

A pub in Kilkenny, Ireland 1921. There is a table with chairs centre stage. There may be other tables / chairs. There is an exit USL which leads to a small hallway and door to the street. An exit stage right leads to the family's living quarters.

Lights up. Annie is being interrogated by the Captain while her eldest daughter Kitty looks on.

CAPTAIN: You should sit down. (*Crosses to Annie*) Sit!

ANNIE: I prefer to stand.

CAPTAIN: As you wish.

ANNIE: I'll certainly do as I wish in my own house.

Pause.

CAPTAIN: This would be much easier if you just told me the name.

ANNIE: I don't know what you're talking about.

CAPTAIN: You know exactly what I'm talking about. I have a witness that heard you talking to the man.

ANNIE: Ask your witness what the man's name is so.

CAPTAIN: Don't take me for a fool

Pause.

KITTY: Is it true what he says Mam?

ANNIE: Quiet Kitty.

KITTY: But if it's true, just tell him.

CAPTAIN: Your daughter appears to have more sense than you do.

ANNIE: This is no concern of yours Kitty. *(to the captain)* My daughter doesn't need to be here. Kitty, go on upstairs.

Kitty makes to go. Captain stops her.

CAPTAIN: Stay where you are! Kitty can stay. Sit down. *(She sits, pause)* How old are you Kitty?

KITTY: *(Hesitates)* Sixteen.

CAPTAIN: You look a lot older than sixteen. You're a young woman and a very pretty one at that.

ANNIE: Leave her alone.

CAPTAIN: Some of my men outside are not much older than you

ANNIE: I said /

CAPTAIN: It seems Kitty, that your mother has difficulty remembering things. Perhaps you know.

ANNIE: Leave her out of this.

CAPTAIN: I'm sure Kitty can answer for herself. Well?

Pause.

KITTY: I don't know anything.

CAPTAIN: So your mother never said anything about this?

KITTY: No.

CAPTAIN: Are you sure?

ANNIE: She knows no more than I do. I'd like you to leave my premises now.

CAPTAIN: Just tell me what I want to know and I'll be gone.

ANNIE: You'll have a long wait so.

CAPTAIN: It's up to you. This situation can be resolved very easily. Just tell me the man's name. *(Pause)* I see.

He takes a small notebook out of his pocket and begins to read.

CAPTAIN: Apart from Kitty here, you have two other children; there's Richard. He's the eldest and your youngest is Mary, although, I believe she's known as Molly. *(Waits for reaction)* Your husband is John and although this licensed premises is in his name, it belonged to your father and you run it. It seems to me that you have quite a lot to lose here.

ANNIE: You're a brave boy aren't you? Terrorising woman and children. I'm sure your own mother would be very proud of you. What gives you the right to come in to my home and threaten me?

CAPTAIN: *(He Grabs his uniform)* This gives me the right. Now you will tell me what I want to know or suffer the consequences.

There are raised voices from outside.

JOHN: *(From off)* What are ye doing here? *(Muttered reply)* These are my premises. I live here. Out of my way and let me in.

John enters.

JOHN: What's going on here?

CAPTAIN: And this must be, *(consulting notebook)* John, the man of the house.

JOHN: Who are you and why are there soldiers outside?

KITTY: *(Running to John)* Da!

JOHN: I asked who you are.

ANNIE: He's just about to leave.

CAPTAIN: Not quite yet.

JOHN: What do you want here?

KITTY: He says /

ANNIE: (*Stopping her*) Kitty!

CAPTAIN: I'm sure your wife can tell you exactly what's going on here.

JOHN: Annie?

ANNIE: It's nothing John.

JOHN: Annie, what is it?

CAPTAIN: Yes Annie. Tell your husband.

JOHN: Are you in trouble?

ANNIE: I said it's nothing.

CAPTAIN: You'll find it's slightly more complicated than that.

JOHN: I'll ask you again! Who are you?

CAPTAIN: I am Captain Williams. I am a senior officer in the gaol.

JOHN: And why are you threatening my wife

CAPTAIN: Your wife is withholding information pertinent to an investigation we are carrying out.

JOHN: Annie?

CAPTAIN: She is protecting a man who may be guilty of treachery.

ANNIE: That is nonsense and you know it.

CAPTAIN: So, you do know more than you're letting on. Tell me the man's name. It'll be easier for you if you tell me now.

JOHN: Don't you dare threaten my wife!

CAPTAIN: I am on official state business. I will threaten whoever I like.

John crosses to the Captain.

JOHN: Not in my house, you won't.

CAPTAIN: Don't try to be a hero John.

JOHN: You'll get out of here now.

CAPTAIN: And when I don't?

Pause. John backs away.

JOHN: You're very brave, aren't you?

ANNIE: Leave it John.

JOHN: I'll not stand by and watch this pup threaten you.

CAPTAIN: Well John, in that case, I suggest you have a talk with your wife because I'm not leaving these premises until I get the information I'm looking for. *(Pause)* I'll leave you to have a talk. Don't take too long. My men will be getting restless. I hope you'll see sense.

Captain exits.

JOHN: Where's Molly? I don't want her seeing any of this.

ANNIE: She's doing a message for me down town.

JOHN: What's going on Annie?

ANNIE: It's best you don't know.

KITTY: Tell him Mam

JOHN: Kitty?

KITTY: Mam?

Annie doesn't reply.

KITTY: A prisoner was shot in the gaol last night. One of the workers there saw it and told Mam about it earlier today. There was someone in the snug who overheard it and reported back to the gaol.

JOHN: Why is the captain here?

KITTY: He wants to know the name of the man who told Mam about it.

JOHN: Then tell him Annie and be done with it

ANNIE: It's not as simple as that.

JOHN: Why?

ANNIE: Its best you don't know.

KITTY: The captain has been here ages trying to get Mam to tell

JOHN: Annie? What are you not telling us?

ANNIE: (*Shaking her head*) No.

JOHN: There are soldiers at my front door. I have a right to know why.

KITTY: You did nothing wrong Mam.

ANNIE: I told you, no.

JOHN: You're a stubborn woman Annie. How can I help you if you don't tell me.

ANNIE: Some help you'd be.

JOHN: Maybe I should talk to the captain.

ANNIE: No! He won't tell you the truth anyway.

JOHN: At least I might find out more than I know now.

John moves to go.

ANNIE: Stop! Kitty, go into the back room.

KITTY: No, I'm staying here.

ANNIE: It's for your own good. Please.

KITTY: I want to know.

Pause. Annie is resigned.

ANNIE: It's true that a prisoner was shot in the gaol last night. A man witnessed the shooting. He was the only witness; no one knew he was there. He hid all night and came into the pub this morning. He was in an awful state. He needed to tell someone. *(Pause)* Last night, the captain arrived back to the gaol, drunk. He saw a prisoner looking out his cell window. He pulled out his pistol and shot the prisoner. The man told me this. Then he heard a noise from the snug and ran out.

JOHN: Was there someone in the snug?

ANNIE: Yes and he obviously reported back to the gaol.

JOHN: So the captain wants to know the name of the man who told you?

ANNIE: Aye.

JOHN: And you know the man?

ANNIE: He's been in the pub a few times and don't bother asking me his name.

JOHN: But he works in the gaol?

ANNIE: I can't say any more.

JOHN: You'll have to tell the captain.

ANNIE: And have another innocent man shot. What do you think the captain will do if he finds out? I'll not have that on my conscience.

JOHN: What else can we do?

ANNIE: I'll handle this. That's why I didn't want to tell you. The least you all know the better.

JOHN: Why do you always do this? Why do you have to do everything your way. You've been like that since I met you

ANNIE: I had to look after myself long before I met you and God knows you haven't been much help to me when I needed it most.

John moves to exit right.

ANNIE: Where are you going?

JOHN: I need a drink.

ANNIE: I wondered how long you'd last.

JOHN: What do you mean?

ANNIE: That's your answer to everything. My mother was right!

JOHN: Your mother was never wrong! If you'd listened to her, you'd still be a spinster

ANNIE: Maybe I'd have been better off.

JOHN: No man was good enough for you! I never had a chance.

ANNIE: You had plenty of chances but they were all at the end of a bottle.

JOHN: The worst thing I ever did was agree to move in here after your mother died.

ANNIE: We had no choice. Margaret couldn't run it on her own.

JOHN: And if your mother hadn't interfered, Margaret would have married Tom and we wouldn't be here.

ANNIE: Don't talk about my mother like that.

JOHN: I never wanted to run a pub. We should have stayed where we were. We were happiest there.

ANNIE: Happy!

Kitty who has been watching this finally erupts.

KITTY: Will you both please stop!

John and Annie look at Kitty. Pause.

KITTY: The Captain is still outside. What are we going to do?

JOHN: I'm sorry Kitty. Sorry Annie. I'm trying to help but you won't let me. I've always done right by you. I know I'm not perfect but I've done my best, no more or less than any man would. I care about you and the children more than anything else. You know that.

ANNIE: I know.

JOHN: But you'll still do it all on your own like you always do.

ANNIE: I'll do anything to protect my family.

JOHN: What about protecting yourself? You're a stubborn woman.

There is a commotion outside, raised voices "let me in", "who are you" etc etc. The Captain enters with Molly.

CAPTAIN: This young lady says she's Molly.

MOLLY: Why are all the soldiers outside?

CAPTAIN: Tell her. (*Pause*) Can I gather from your silence that you haven't changed your mind? (*no reply*) Well?

JOHN: My wife can't tell you anything.

CAPTAIN: I'm growing weary of this. I'll give you two more minutes with your family. That ought to be enough to consider all that you have to lose. Think very carefully now. Two minutes!

Captain exits.

ANNIE: Are you alright Molly?

MOLLY: I'm fine but why are they outside. Is something wrong?

ANNIE: It's nothing.

MOLLY: Two soldiers followed me from the end of the street and kept asking about my older sister and how they'd see her soon.

JOHN: You'll have to tell him Annie.

MOLLY: Tell what?

ANNIE: I said its nothing Molly

MOLLY: Did you hear that a prisoner was shot in the gaol last night?

JOHN: How did you hear that?

MOLLY: Everyone is talking about it down town. He was trying to escape and was shot.

ANNIE: Trying to escape?

MOLLY: Yes

JOHN: This is getting worse.

ANNIE: I'll deal with it.

JOHN: Annie

ANNIE: Before you start, I know ... I know it's dangerous but I want to keep you all as far away from this as possible. They have a story now and that might be the end of it. Let me deal with it.

JOHN: But ..

ANNIE: Please Johnny. Trust me. If he thinks that you know the full story then you'll all be targets. I'm sorry I said what I said but I know what I'm doing. You can wait in the back room. If I need you, I'll call.

JOHN: I can't let you do this on your own.

ANNIE: You said yourself that's the way I do things. Let me do this. Go on. All of ye.

JOHN: Be careful.

John and Kitty go towards exit. Molly runs to Annie.

MOLLY: I'm frightened Mam. Will you be alright?

ANNIE: I will Molly. Don't you worry. (*Quietly*) Did you do that message for me earlier?

MOLLY: I did.

ANNIE: Good girl. Now, go along with your father and sister.

They all exit to the back room. Annie sits at the table.

She composes herself

ANNIE: (*Calls*) Captain!

Captain enters

CAPTAIN: Where are the others?

ANNIE: I sent them out. This is between you and me. They don't know anything. It's got nothing to do with them.

Pause.

CAPTAIN: I'm waiting.

ANNIE: Why are you here Captain?

CAPTAIN: Is this more of your games? You know right well why I'm here.

ANNIE: Why are you here? In my country?

CAPTAIN: You really haven't listened to a word I said, have you?

ANNIE: I'm in my home. Where are you? In a country where you're despised. Do you have family?

CAPTAIN: That's no concern of yours.

ANNIE: I hope they're being looked after. What would you do to protect them?

CAPTAIN: It's not my family you should be concerned with.

ANNIE: You'd do everything in your power, wouldn't you?

CAPTAIN: You should think about your own family and realise that any decision you make today will have consequences for you all. Now tell me what I want to know.

ANNIE: Are you threatening my family?

CAPTAIN: I thought that was obvious. Now tell me.

Annie remains silent, staring intently at the Captain.

CAPTAIN: I don't think you fully understand who you're dealing with.

Annie rises and approaches the Captain

ANNIE: Oh, I understand. I can see exactly who I'm dealing with. I see a child not long off his mother's teat. A child hiding behind the uniform of the great English empire. I see a coward who can shoot a man that can't defend himself.

CAPTAIN: That is not what happened.

ANNIE: I know your secret.

CAPTAIN: If you don't tell me the name of the man, I will make your life hell.

ANNIE: Will you listen to yourself? Hell! I've buried eight children. I've had most of my insides ripped out of me. None of that is in your little book, is it? I've survived through all that although, God forgive me, sometimes I wish I hadn't. Do you not think I know what hell is like? There is nothing you can do to me and If you try to harm any of my family, it will be over my dead body.

CAPTAIN: Why are you hiding this man's identity? What difference is it to you whether I know or not?

ANNIE: And what will you do to him? I'll not have that on my conscience. I hear the story around town is that the prisoner was shot trying to escape. By next week everyone will have forgotten about it. You'll have gotten away with it.

CAPTAIN: You're playing a dangerous game.

ANNIE: It might seem like a game to you but not to me. Leave now and I swear I'll never repeat what I know.

CAPTAIN: That's not good enough.

ANNIE: It's the best you'll get. Take it or leave it.

CAPTAIN: No. You don't get out of it that easy.

ANNIE: If anything happens to any of my family, I will tell your story. And you might as well know that I've written everything down. That piece of paper is with a trusted friend. So if anything happens to me, your story will also be told.

CAPTAIN: You did what?

ANNIE: You heard me.

The Captain crosses to Annie with his hand raised as if to strike her. She stands her ground.

CAPTAIN: You stupid woman!

ANNIE: That's it. Go on! Go on! Strike me. Will that make you feel better? Will that make you feel like a big man?

The Captain halts, speechless.

ANNIE: Now, I'll ask you again, leave my home.

CAPTAIN: You haven't heard the last of this.

ANNIE: That's up to you. Your time here will soon be over and you'll be off in another country, fighting some other war but I'll still be here and I won't forget. Be off with you.

CAPTAIN: You are either very clever or very foolish. I will see you again. Mark my words.

Captain exits.

ANNIE: *(After him)* Oh, I'm not clever Captain

Pause as she looks out after the Captain. Slowly she goes to the table and sits down.

ANNIE: *(Wearily)* I'm not clever at all so I must be foolish.

Lights fade.

END OF PLAY