

HEARSE

By James Collins

Jack Duggan sat on the barstool in the great empty dance hall and looked at his drink. He picked up the glass and took a sip. He said, to no one in particular in the empty bar, "This is a nice drink." Jack Duggan never met a drink he didn't like. The fact was, Jack Duggan was a drunk. As the old Irish used to say, "Sure and the drink has him by the throat."

Jack worked at a number of odd jobs but specialized in the grocery stores where he could handle a lot of simple chores and positions. He used his spare money for his drinking habit. In effect, he also used the good part of his necessary money for a drinking habit and this left his family in poor straits most of the time.

Jack's wife was an Irish immigrant as was Jack himself. They married in the 20s when times were good and initially the marriage was a happy one. Then the depression struck, Jack, like most of the men, lost his job. He increased his drinking, became an alcoholic and never returned to a normal life style.

Jack lived in his own world. It was a world separated from everyone around him. Every now and then, Jack, in a drunken stupor, explained what he was thinking. This made some people interested, some were shocked, and others had no understanding of what he was trying to explain.

Jack had been too young for World War I and was 4F for World War II. In between, he joined the "Fighting 69th National Guard until the depression terminated that position. The excitement of that part of his life never left him. Jack would strut around as if marching to the sound of a band and he would do this at any time or place. When Jack took too many drinks, it was a very raggedy march, usually ending in a collapse to the ground.

Jack's nephews and nieces by marriage came from Ireland and invested in dance halls. In fact they started a couple of Irish dance halls, which had great attendance on weekends, and they were making a lot of money. Once again, Jack lost his job. The family discussed his position and the rest of his family agreed that they would give Jack a job after hours cleaning up the dance floor with a mop and broom. This was Jack's speed and the money raised did help the family.

A series of break-ins started in the Bronx where the dance hall was located and the family was concerned because they did not want to incur any damage or to have a break-in get into the newspapers. This would discourage the attendance particularly of the young single women. Jack volunteered to guard the dance hall at night. All the members of the family discussed this and they figured a bodily presence in the location would discourage break-ins. Therefore, after Jack finished cleanup, he prepared a cot in the back and would live in the bar overnight.

The dance hall could hold 400 people and was expansive. It had a bar at one end but the owners could not obtain a liquor license so no alcohol was in the facility. Jack brought his own refreshments. The dance hall had a massive antique display. It definitely generated conversation. It was an 1840 horse-drawn hearse, which they mounted on the unused bar. It was shiny and polished in all its black and velvet finery with glass windows and doors all around.

The break-ins started to accelerate. The newspapers reported them every week. Jack whose mind went back in to his National Guard days, at times, decided he was on guard duty. He went home and got his .22 caliber rifle and marched around the hall at various periods of time when he was alone.

One night, in particular, is discussed to this day. It was a stormy night with lightning and thunder, torrents of rain and gales of wind. Jack, sleeping off a drunk in his cot in the back, awakened when a tremendous gust of wind blasted through the windows and shook the walls. Jack awoke with a start. "Thieves!" he said to himself. He reached for the .22 caliber rifle. Jack had been drinking quite a bit that day. If sober, his judgment was never good. When drunk, Jack was unpredictable. Now he was very tenuous. A bolt of lightning and a thunderous clap of thunder, struck very close. All the lights went out. The power had failed. In the pitch black, Jack snapped to attention. Again, the wind blew, the lightning struck, the thunder rolled, and the hearse shook from the wind. Jack clearly heard the noise in the back of the hall. He heard the motion of the hearse on the bar. He was alone. In his mind, it was an invading intruder. He was alert. The lightning struck outside and reflected off the glass of the hearse. He saw the motion of the thief. Jack snapped the rifle to his shoulder and emptied the eight rounds out of the bolt-action clip. Every glass door and window sported a bullet hole. Jack even drunk was a good shot. Unfortunately, his target was not an intruder but rather the bar's major attraction. The family fired Jack.

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