

# THE NEW MAN

By DAVID MARCUS

NEAR ten o'clock the tree-cutters came from the direction of the city and, passing under the arch of the green gate that marked the entrance to the Mardyke Walk, stopped before the first tree, about seven or eight yards along the footpath. They were a team of three—a foreman and two cutters—in the employment of the Corporation, and they had come to give the trees their annual trimming. The foreman and one of the cutters were obviously experienced men, but the other cutter had a nervousness about him of being new—new to the district and new to the job. He carried his saw in his right hand by the handle and every now and again it would scrape along the road and bounce against his shin. The other cutter had his saw resting on his left shoulder, like a rifle, with the teeth turned away from him. Around his other shoulder were coils of strong rope. He was chatting easily to the foreman who was dressed as if for an outing, in a stained navy-blue short coat and baggy flannels, but his shirt-collar was spotless. He puffed at a heavy pipe that had in the course of years singed the lower hairs of his white moustache and left a dark stain under the front rim of his dented bowler.

The cutter who walked beside him, gossiping in the thick misty accents of the West Corkman, was a butty of his; they were always out on the same jobs. But he was older than the foreman—much older. He walked with a sort of rolling broken gait, putting each foot down rather tardily, as if uncertain whether it would hold him. The skin on his hands was white, like the skin on his face, and the veins writhed along his powerful arms like angry snakes. He, too, wore dirty baggy flannels, but his khaki-coloured shirt was open at the neck and tangled dark hair curled out. His eyes, which were very large and staring, gave him a somewhat ghostly appearance. This, however, was offset by his hat—a felt one, without any shape, and clamped straight down on his head, nearly touching his thick, bushy eyebrows; the whole effect was almost funny. His name was Pat, but the foreman always called him Paddy-boy and always put into the name a soft warmth as if he were speaking to some child. The foreman was nearly forty, the cutter fifty-three, yet, even so, it was always 'Paddy-boy' from foreman to cutter, and because of this, it was 'Boss' in return.

Neither of them knew anything about their companion,

the other cutter, except for his name and for the fact that he obviously knew nothing about tree-cutting. His name, Dominic Byrne, the foreman had read when he checked his card. But he had had little to say all the way down to the Mardyke Walk. He had agreed that he was not from the city and, a minute later, quite as softly and respectfully he agreed that he was from the country. Yet he did not say from which part of the country, and to the others his accent was unfamiliar. So they knew only what they saw: a man, or perhaps a youth, smooth-skinned, with quick dark eyes, and quietness in his face; tall, spare, fitting well in his dungaree outfit and check cap; a person uncertain, even frightened, and shy; a young man who looked and moved like a young girl. They wanted to be friendly; to put him at ease; to let him know, if only by the merest hint, that they were ready to help, and that he need not worry. But some tension about him kept him back. They felt that to give any hint that they were aware of his inexperience would shatter the confidence he was so desperately trying to build up. The foreman, watching him out of the corners of his eyes, shook his head slightly and thought; he just isn't the man for the job.

Most of the early-morning bustle had disappeared by the time the cutters arrived and laid their saws and ropes against the wall beside the tree. The foreman immediately looked all about him, as if searching for something. Then he paced into the centre of the road-way, deliberately planted his feet apart, and gazed city-wards. In this stance he took a huge pull on his pipe, blew out the smoke, spat into the stream, and turning, said quietly, as if to himself, "Blast them, they haven't sent the ladders yet, Paddy-boy."

A few children late for school stopped to wonder at the cutters but edged away when the foreman smiled at them. Business-men who had lived in the district for years passed by and were acknowledged with bright salutations. Paddy-boy usually joined in throatily but the new man ignored them all. He stood eyeing the tree apprehensively—wondering what exactly was to be done, and how. He saw a common elm, the huge serpentine lines of its bark running up to a forest of leaves and branches. The branches were thin though long enough to meet those of the tree across the road, but the leaves were small and dull. It was too early in the season for them to have that bright, alive green of maturity.

"The day's half gone," said the foreman suddenly, "let's get started." Paddy-boy made no move.

"Yourself can get up there," he continued to the new cutter, "and trim the bottom growth." The foreman took the stem of the pipe away from under his lips and pointed it at the low wall running behind the tree. The cutter climbed awkwardly on to the wall, forgetting to take his saw with him. Paddy-boy handed it up without looking. Gingerly he rested himself against the iron railings and, with quick, nervous actions, commenced to cut and pull at the first growth he saw. This was a cluster of young twigs, each no thicker than a pencil, almost leafless. He tried to get right in between the tree and the railings so as to hide from the foreman and Paddy-boy, but he saw that they had moved off down the road to look for the man with the ladders, and seemed to have forgotten him completely.

At last from around the corner appeared a little man pushing a cart on which were two extension ladders. As soon as he came near enough the foreman halted the cart, doffed his hat with a flourish, and said with great accent, "And what, m'lord, delayed m'lord so long?" Paddy-boy came up on the other side. "What kept cha, Pinky? We've been waiting." The little man, Pinky, put down the handles of the cart and blinked from the foreman to Paddy-boy. He was like a child, chastised. "It's not so late," he complained bitterly. The foreman drew from some waistcoat pocket a magnificent shining gold watch, snapped it open and read solemnly "Seventeen minutes past ten o'clock." Pinky grew more perturbed and hastened to drag the ladders off the cart. Paddy-boy helped him to put them by the side of the footpath.

"And remember," admonished the foreman as Pinky began to push the cart away, "don't be so late coming back." "Oh no, sir," said Pinky, saluting earnestly, "six o'clock on the dot." "Aha, you devil," growled the foreman, "shure we'll be gone then. Five-thirty, m'lord, five-thirty you'll be here."

"Yes, sir; five-thirty, sir; yes, sir," and Pinky was off at a trot.

Paddy-boy already had one of the ladders against the face of the tree. Dominic's head peeped out from behind, watching him closely. The foreman and Paddy-boy pretended not to notice. "Now," said the foreman as Paddy-boy mounted the ladder, saw in hand, "start on the lower branches to the left, eh, Paddy-boy." "Good enough, Boss," came the answer from the top of the ladder.

Paddy-boy swung a leg over the strongest limb in reach and

laid the saw across two of the branches. The foreman took a coil of rope, ran it a few times around the bole of the tree and threw one end up to Paddy-boy. Carefully Paddy-boy passed it over and under the limb on which he was sitting, let some yards of it slack, tied it once around his waist, and then knotted the free end on to another thick branch above him. When the rope was secure, he took the saw and commenced to cut easily at the nearest branch. The foreman rested his back against the ladder and puffed gloriously at his pipe.

The work progressed. After a while the flagstones about the tree were littered with leaves, twigs, small branches, and bits of bark. Some of the leaves had settled, too, in the brim of the foreman's bowler and on his coat. Unconcernedly he still gazed at the sky, his pipe glowing, and his voice throwing itself up to Paddy-boy, lost somewhere in the dense growth. And Paddy-boy's answers, often drowned amid the rustling and sawing, fell down through the still air. Neither of them spoke to Dominic or paid him any attention. There seemed to be a tacit agreement between them to leave him alone as long as possible so as he could get used to the job and feel they trusted him. He was still searching around the back of the tree, trying to find something to keep him busy.

After a while the noise of the saw ceased and Paddy-boy's hat and half his face emerged from a clump of leaves. He gave a sharp whistle. The foreman looked up. Paddy-boy's face did not move but his eyes shifted a little down to the left where the new cutter was snipping out of sight. The foreman nodded slightly. "Ay, Paddy-boy, may as well, may as well," he said to himself. Paddy-boy's hat was withdrawn into the foliage.

The foreman bent down, grunting exaggeratedly, picked up the second ladder and with great caution laid the top of it against the side of the tree. The new cutter stopped work. The foreman looked kindly at him and then back at the ladder. "You'll have a better sweep if you perch yourself on the top of that, me lad," he said. "But be careful," he added, moving away. Dominic did not reply. He jumped down from the wall, lightly ascended almost to the top of the ladder and resumed trimming the bottom of the branches.

By now a little crowd of women and children had gathered around the tree. The children were ragged urchins from the slum-district. Few of them had shoes or stockings, or even any more clothing than was just necessary to cover their nakedness.

The hair was wild and uncombed, their faces unwashed, their teeth black, crooked and broken. They spoke hardly at all, but when they did their voices were of a kind; all harsh and strident and monotonous. Every one of them had a small wooden cart or box-car whose wheels screeched savagely. As soon as a car was filled with twigs and branches, it would be trundled away, its noise splitting the air. The women were the children's mothers, or relatives, or neighbours. They were dressed without exception in the voluminous black shawl of the Irish countryside. It completely enveloped their bodies to the knees and was pulled well over their heads like a cowl. The faces of the women, even those of the younger ones, were lined and wrinkled but, nevertheless, expressionless. A battered and scratched old perambulator, with rusty wheels, stood beside or behind practically each woman as she gathered the branches from the pavement. The few who had no mechanical means of carriage hugged as great a bundle as possible to their bosoms and marched away.

To all this the foreman remained impervious. Nobody spoke to him or looked at him. Paddy-boy had stopped talking, for he was cutting grimly through a big, thick branch almost a foot in diameter. Eventually enough of it was cut away for him to prepare the operation of lowering it to the ground. First he untied the rope from the branch above, unwound it from his waist and passed it over another limb, just next to the one he had been cutting and almost as strong as it. Then bending forward along the now creaking branch, he tied the end of the rope as far out as he could reach with safety. A few more jabs with the saw and the limb was weak enough for him to break off by pressing down on it with his full weight. Hearing it snap, the foreman looked up, shepherded the women and children away, and stood beneath as if he would catch it himself. But Paddy-boy had hold of the rope and, heavy as the limb was, he was able to ease it gently down to the ground. Immediately the foreman untied the rope, the women and children clustered over it, stripping it with their bare hands. Slowly Paddy-boy came down the ladder, put his saw against the wall, and wiped round his face with a handkerchief the same khaki colour as his shirt. Although his forehead was glistening with perspiration, he did not remove his hat.

The new cutter had stopped work to watch this operation, but seeing Paddy-boy glance up at him, he blushed and hastily stuck his head back among the leaves. Paddy-boy prodded the

foreman and took up his saw. "I'll slice that one now," said he, going towards the limb lying on the footpath; "may as well tell the young fellow to cut another. There's plenty work up there." "Ay, Paddy-boy, may as well, may as well," responded the foreman as before. But in his mind there was a definite misgiving. Cutting a branch was a difficult business that needed experience and confidence. The foreman wondered whether it was safe to let him try it. Would it be too much for him? Well, he'd seen Paddy-boy cut one already. Yes, perhaps it would be best to break him in. "May as well, may as well," he muttered to himself again. He caught the end of the rope, shouted to Dominic and threw it up. Startled, Dominic grabbed at it clumsily, just managing to catch it as it was falling down again. "Fix yourself well with that and cut one of the big ones," shouted the foreman. "Will you be O.K.?" Dominic nodded and climbed up into the tree. Slowly he did as he remembered seeing Paddy-boy do; twice around the thick limb, once around his waist, and again around another limb above him. Then he took his saw and attacked the first big branch that caught his eye. The foreman had watched him this time and turned away to resume his smoke. There was nothing more he could do, and to keep on watching him would only reveal their anxiety and make him more nervous than ever.

All was peaceful for some minutes. Paddy-boy lazily cut the shorn limb into small logs, giving one to each of the women and children. Housewives passed along with their parcels, paying scant attention to what was going on and taking care not to walk under any of the ladders. A stray terrier romped among the whirling leaves, kicking them up with his paws and snapping at them in the air.

Suddenly, with a whistling sound, a saw fell from the tree and landed beside the foreman, bouncing and twanging almost right across the road. Everybody looked up. There was a noise of tearing and cracking from the midst of the tree. Like a snake, the end of the rope slid out from the branches and with it fell the cutter's spread-limbed body. For a moment his fall was checked about twelve feet above the path as the rope tightened about his waist. Then he folded up like a penknife. There was a dreadful silence except for the zip of the rope along his stiff dungarees as it failed to grip. Head first he plunged for the ground.

A woman screamed. Immediately the foreman and Paddy-boy were on their knees beside the cutter. His left leg was

twisted up under his body, an arm lying completely lifeless along the road. His long, shy face was white and from the side of his head blood flowed, drenching the roadway and soaking into his cap which had been knocked off with the impact. His eyes were closed.

"Paddy-boy, Paddy-boy, run for a priest and a doctor! Hurry now," gasped the foreman. Paddy-boy ran off towards the city. Some of the children were crying, the women crossing themselves and muttering. No one moved. The foreman bent his face nearer.

"Byrne, lad, what happened? Tell me." The cutter did not answer. Nobody had noticed that since his body hit the ground he had not breathed. But the foreman went on asking, the words catching in his throat, "Byrne, lad, tell me. Tell me. What was it? What was the matter?" Though in fact he knew and perhaps had known from the very first. He just wasn't the man for the job.