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# The Torch That Aristotle Dropped

• Joe Coogan

MICKEY LEARY'S ENTRANCE to Mullin's Tap was accompanied by a loud clap of thunder and a brilliant flash of lightning. Brophy, the Prophet, who was sitting at the front of the bar, pointed a bony finger at the little man.

"It's coming," he said; he consulted a large pocket watch. "In fact, it's a few minutes late." Brophy was referring to the end of the world.

"Well, if I hurry," Leary said, "I might have time for a drink."

Mickey Leary was a rotund, amiable man in his early fifties. He carried himself with a certain nonchalant majesty, which had its foundation in a firm belief in the ultimate perfection of his own being.

He sauntered to the bar and sat near a tall blond young man. The young man stared at Leary, shook his head sadly, and looked in the opposite direction.

Dan Mullin, the owner, poured a beer and put it in front of the little man.

"Mickey," he said, "I'm glad to see you. This place is driving me nuts."

Leary brought his right hand close to his chest and flicked his thumb toward the blond man.

"An odd duck," Mullin whispered. "Been here an hour and

hasn't said yes, no, or go to the devil."

The thunder rumbled threateningly outside. Brophy, the Prophet, raised his right hand high in the air.

"Signs and portents," he said.

"Brophy, will you shut up!" Mullin yelled.

"What are you worrying about, Dan?" Leary said. "He's been making the same prediction every Saturday afternoon for the last year."

"I know," said Mullin, "but today it sounds logical."

It was dark in the taproom. The only illumination came from the barrel-shaped juke box near the entrance, which sent green and purple disks of light sliding across the mahogany bar.

Brophy, the Prophet, stood up. His lean, hollow face kept changing color as it reflected the light from the juke box. Just as he turned purple, a happy thought seemed to occur to him and he smiled cheerfully.

"Death and destruction," he said.

Mullin almost dropped a glass.

The blond man chuckled. "There's really no cause to be alarmed," he said, "the poor fellow merely displays an unfortunate but interesting psychological phenomenon."

"Yes," said Leary. "He's plastered."

"It's not too late," Brophy said. "Return! Return to the faith of your fathers!"

"In his own ignorant way," the blond man said, "he's echoing the thoughts of modern spiritual leaders in their plea for a strengthened Christianity."

"Brophy is a devout Druid," Mullin said.

"Beware the Goddess Wyrd," said Brophy, "her hour is fast arriving."

"For the love of Heaven, Brophy," Mullin said, "why don't you run out and go dancing in some damned sacred grove?"

But the Prophet, his message delivered, rested his head on the bar and closed his eyes.

The blond man walked to the juke box and glared at the list of selections. "Trash!" he said. He walked back to the bar.

"Are you a music lover?" Leary asked.

"I'm a scientist," the blond man said, "but I devote as much time as possible to the Arts." He gave the impression that the Arts should feel grateful.

"I'm quite a musician myself," Leary said, "I could have been a great composer if I wanted to. I'll never forget the time I was offered the privilege of conducting a thousand piece orchestra, playing one of my own tunes."

"Was the performance a success?" The blond man's voice held a trace of doubt.

"I refused the opportunity," said

Leary. "I can't stand crowds."

The young man shook his head sadly and turned away.

Leary tapped him on the shoulder. "Did I understand you to say you were interested in science?"

"I'm not only interested," the young man said, "I've devoted my life to it." His words had a clipped, final quality, as if he were reading them from a scroll. "I sometimes like to think that we scientists are the bearers of the Torch of Learning, first lighted by Aristotle and almost extinguished after his death."

"It's too bad he died," Leary said. "But then we all have to go some day."

"I studied at Yale for six years. I was a pure scientist."

"You naturally would be," said Leary, "in such a refined atmosphere."

The Yale man lurched toward Leary, and put his mouth close to the little man's ear. "I'm an expert on atomic energy," he shouted.

"I don't usually mention it," Leary said, "but I'm something of an expert on the atom myself."

"Really," the Yale man said.

"Yes," said Leary, "I almost split the atom twenty years ago. I would have, too—if I hadn't been careful. Me and a fellow named Rattigan, a good scientist though no great shakes for purity, were drinking one afternoon and—"

"My friend," the blond man interrupted, "you're a stretty pupid—or—pretty stupid man." The scroll was becoming blurred.

"So you doubt my word!" Leary shouted.

"Certainly not," said the blonde man. He didn't sound sincere.

"Take it easy, Mickey," Mullin said, "you just misunderstood the man."

"Just a misunderstanding," agreed the blonde man, "I'm very interested in your experience." He sneered. "In your experiments you used Einstein's formula  $E=mc^2$ ?"

"No," said Leary, "I did not."

"Don't think much of Einstein—eh, Mickey?" Brogan said.

"A greatly overrated man."

"But you must admit," the blond man said, "that his theory of relativity has a great deal of merit."

"I admit nothing," Leary said.

"What do you think," the blond man said scornfully, "of his theory concerning the dualistic nature of radiant energy?"

"Balderdash!" said Leary. "They kick up a lot of fuss over a very simple thing. If I had wanted to I could have split an atom twenty years ago and if I put my mind to it I could do the same thing today."

The blond man smiled. "Do it," he said.

"Now, just a minute, Mickey," Mullin said, "we'll have none of your monkeyshines at this bar."

"All right, Dan," said Leary, "you talked me out of it."

"Anyone that won't back up his word," the blond man said, "is completely devoid of honesty and integrity."

"It's a complicated job," Leary said, "and an expensive proposition."

The blond man took a ten dollar bill from his pocket and put it on

the bar. "Will this cover it?" he asked.

"It's no use," said Leary, "I respect the proprietor's wishes."

Mullin scowled. "I'd hate to think, Leary," he said, "that any crumb that came into this establishment was completely devoid of honesty and integrity. I'd throw him out on the street."

Leary's face reddened. The narrow barroom seemed to be closing in on him, and the distant thunder sounded like deep, mocking laughter. He stared dully at the rows of bottles and glasses behind the bar. Then, slowly, a warm buoyant feeling of assurance began to rise up in him. He ran his eyes confidently over the glistening bottles. After all, Aristotle had probably started with less.

"Remember," he said, "you asked for it."

He walked quickly behind the bar, grabbed an almost empty ginger ale bottle, pulled out the large metal "Stay Fresh" cork and poured the contents into a mixing glass. He added a dash of beer, a jigger of rye whiskey, three cigarette butts, a maraschino cherry and two olives. He filled it to the brim with seltzer water and stirred slowly with a Jewish pickle. He funnelled the mixture back into the bottle, jammed in the cork, and placed the bottle carefully on the bar. Nothing happened. He walked slowly back to his place and sat dejectedly on the bar stool. Suddenly his face brightened.

"I almost forgot," he said, "I need about fifty pounds of uranium."

Mullin and the blond man laughed. Leary picked the bottle off the bar and swung it wildly around his head.

"Damn it!" he said, "How can a man do the job if you don't give him the proper tools?"

The blond man backed toward the door. Mullin took a large wooden mallet from underneath the bar.

"Leary," he said, "I'll give you just two seconds to get out of here."

The little man stiffened. He threw the bottle on the bar and turned away.

A sound like a pistol shot echoed in the barroom. The metal cork flew from the bottle and crashed into the juke box. Bright tongues of purple flame flared from the machine and then subsided. Thunder exploded against the walls of the building and a thick cloud of smoke ascended from the juke box. It was

shaped something like a mushroom.

Brophy, the Prophet, leaped to his feet. "I'm coming, Wyrd!" he shouted. He plunged through the smoke, collided against the Yale man and ricocheted out the door.

Rain slanted in through the open doorway and the smoke gradually cleared away.

The blond young man sat on the floor. He shook his head slowly from side to side. "Incredible!" he kept saying, "Incredible!"

Mullin's voice came from the floor behind the bar. "Leary, if you ever split another atom in here—out you go!"

Mickey Leary stood at attention about ten feet from the blond man. There was a large smudge on his right cheek and the smoke had made his eyes water, but his face wore an expression of reverent dedication. It could easily be seen in whose hands the Torch of Aristotle rested.

## ***Futile Effort***

● John Keenan

I have tried to rake leaves on a windy day,  
 Attempting to guide them to captive stacks  
 Where I could deal with them the neatest way;  
 But they're elusive with the wind at their backs.  
 So there I stand with persecuted face  
 And empty basket, knowing for a fact  
 The wind will win and the leaves will play, and  
 So once again chaos will have its say.