

*THE COLOSSUS OF RICHARD O'LEARY*

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Mickey O'Leary

Richard O'Leary was furious. He stood inside the boathouse with clenched fists and teeth, glaring at an overheated winch bolted to the floor. "I'm so blasted mad," he yelled at the broken machine, "I could break your ugly black carcass into a thousand useless pieces."

The steaming motor, once operated by the United States Navy to load torpedoes aboard PT boats, hissed violently before finally shutting down.

The winch had given him trouble for too many years. His promise to replace the World War II era machine—a threat he made each spring and sometimes in the dead of winter—was a toothless threat. She broke down often; he fixed her with reluctance. It was a bad relationship. He kicked the heavy object with his boot, then stormed from the boathouse and walked across the wooden deck. He looked into the sky: clouds of black fury rolled across the heavens, bulldozing an angry path towards his rocky island.

"God must have something to settle with one of the fishermen," he said in a calmer voice. "Maybe someone has been taking too much fish from the sea."

He heard a rumble of thunder and watched a bolt of jagged lightning strike further up the island, close to his wooden lighthouse. He clutched his tweed cap and plodded to the

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edge of the deck. The cold wind bit and howled at his ears. He gazed down the wet tramway: his small sailboat, a narrow single-man vessel, was fastened to the end of a frayed rope near the bottom of the ramp—some 30 yards away. The other end of the rope was stuck in the mouth of the broken winch.

“Fire Wolf!” he shouted angrily for his assistant lighthouse keeper. But the Native American was missing again. He crumpled his cap and stuffed it inside his pocket. Further up the island he saw the shadowy figure of his assistant standing inside the lighthouse gallery, faithfully observing boat traffic. “Oh, you devoted rascal. You’re never around when I need you.”

He ignored a rush of guilt. *Should be in your lighthouse!* But just fifteen more minutes, he pleaded. Fifteen more minutes to batten down the hatches and save me precious sailboat. He swore he would return quickly to the lighthouse.

“Father—can I help?”

His son stood in the shadows of the boathouse. O’Leary spoke eagerly, “Mickey-me-lad! Well of course you can lend a helping hand. What are you hiding from? Come and take hold of this rope. Not much time. The storm!”

The 10-year-old emerged from under the eaves of the boathouse. He stood chest-high to his father, his blue eyes cast down. A cowlick lifted a wisp of wet hair from the crest of his skull. O’Leary was proud of the signature cowlick. He had one just like it.

“What are we going to do?” Mickey asked hesitantly.

“Why, we’re gonna save our boat, lad. That’s what we’re gonna do. We’re not losing our sailboat just because a worthless machine has upped and quit. Manpower. I’m talking about good, old-fashioned manpower. There’s nothing like it.”

He left Mickey holding the rope and headed for a flight of weathered stairs that zigzagged in and out among the rocks. Halfway down, he jumped over the handrail and landed on a mossy slab, before climbing onto the ramp’s rattling planks.

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The weather was capable of knocking any man from his feet, not Richard O'Leary. Steadily poised for danger, he kept his balance and with both gloved hands took hold of the rope and descended slowly towards his precious sailboat—stranded a few yards away.

“You defiant rascal,” he shouted to the boat. “It’s not time for you to test these dangerous waters. I say when it’s time. Hear me?”

He worked his stout body behind the craft, pressing his shoulder firmly against the outer wallboard, positioning his legs squarely for leverage. He knew he could make it to the boathouse landing without stopping. His lungs were strong and his legs powerful. Atop the deck, the boy braced himself behind a solid piling and drew clumsily on the line.

“Pull like a mad ox,” shouted O'Leary. “Don’t make me do all the blasted work.”

A swell surged against the barnacle encrusted ramp and sprayed over the keeper. He slipped and cut his forehead against the boat. Blood trickled down the side of his face. He took his gaze from the vessel and stiffened with the cold. The icy spray felt like an onslaught of iron pellets striking into his flesh.

“God,” he swore, “I don’t know who you’re mad at, but I won’t let your wretched sea have this boat. Not without taking me first. Not without a fight!” Repeatedly he warned God to “stay out of the way” while attempting to rescue his sailboat.

He pushed fiercely, gaining momentum.

Another bolt of lightning crackled overhead, illuminating the wooded hills, U-shaped valleys, and barren rocks of nearby islands.

He knew it was foolish to be outside with lightning overhead, with the powerful winds and the resurgent squalls of rain. But at that moment all common sense had left him. His decision to brave the stormy weather was final. The stranded boat was simply too special and he refused to let it slide into

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the churning sea without putting up a fight. He'd built the vessel with his own hands and planned to have his son sail it solo to Petersburg the next year.

"Keep yanking on that damn rope, lad. Make our Irish ancestors proud. O'Leary's aren't quitters. We haven't a white flag amongst us!" But when the boy fell helplessly upon the slippery boathouse deck, the Irish-American keeper growled louder than ever. "What's wrong with you today, eh laddie? Why, you're just flapping along like a landed fish. Get control of yourself."

"Sorry, father . . ." said Mickey, fighting back tears of anger. He hated and feared the sea. At times like this he hated and feared his father.

"Keep to your damn feet. I won't take well to being hurt because of your mindless mishaps." O'Leary drew a long breath and calmed himself, wiping the spittle from his lips.

Aye, we O'Leary's aren't quitters, he thought proudly. We've been fighting in wars ever since the birth of Christ and aren't about to stop fighting now.

Beads of rain pelted against his determined face, at times forcing his eyes shut, even slowing him down. For a moment the voices of his Irish ancestors bellowed madly through his head, pushing him on, like he'd pushed Mickey moments ago. "Immigrant," he could hear them saying, "you came to this blessed country alone . . . barely 17-years-old . . . rode the railway from New York to Seattle . . . worked a salmon boat north to Juneau . . . all on your own merit and with God as your judge."

More senseless grunts and mutterings pierced the weather. He threw his might into the wooden boat. He called the thing a "floozy" and a "tramp" and a former lover named "Dolly."

Get this job done and lash the boat to the deck, he thought heatedly. Then go back to your lighthouse and man your Light. He snarled like a fierce dog through the wind and rough water that broke against the island.

"Push, O'Leary, push!"

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Gradually the boat moved upward, inching slowly with his driving legs, making ground. He soon found a powerful rhythm and glided the boat along a saving course. Within minutes he'd made safe footing atop the landing and lashed the boat to the deck.

Surrounded by his fishing equipment, spools of rope, a barrel of oil, and a 100 gallon tank of gasoline, the fatigued keeper fought back a spell of dizziness as he gasped for his breath. He stripped the leather gloves from his rough hands and trudged inside the boathouse.

Again the winch caught his attention. He kicked it with his glistening boot. "You wicked contraption," he growled. "I've invested a great deal of money to keep your oily insides going. Nay. Nay. You aren't indispensable, I say. I've a very respectable savings account in a fancy bank in Juneau. I can buy a much newer and much better winch than you."

He barred the double doors with a water soaked timber before turning to his son. Drenched and shivering, Mickey O'Leary was leaning against a sawhorse splattered with colorful shades of paint. He said, "Who knows? I might turn you into a good Irishman, yet. "

"Yes, father."

"In the meantime . . . go back to the house and see to your mother and sister. They might need some assistance with battling this storm."

"Yes, father."

"And tell your mother to bring me my lunch. I'll be at the lighthouse all afternoon and long into the night." Richard O'Leary wiped the blood and rainwater from his face with a soiled rag; he placed his hand on Mickey's red hair. "It's a matter of principle that we saved our sailboat, lad. Principle will be everything in the coming life ahead of you. Any man, I say, any man without principle is knee deep in sin and forever chastised beneath God's mighty right hand!"

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