Darragh found himself in need of solitude, but such would have to be delayed for a spell. With Deirdre safely locked in her chamber, Dhonal Crone had called a meeting of the household staff. Young Donal was not present, nor his smitten future bride, but Dhonal felt that a plan of action must be crafted before Deirdre realized her imprisonment.

“Lads, my lady’s condition has grown worse and now she is a danger to herself and to us all. When she desires to leave her chamber, whether it be to the chapel or the garderobe, she must be accompanied by a manservant or man at arms at all times. Peadar, please see to this. Darragh, I am afraid this turn of fortune may leave your trupai short one man. Please travel to the villages of Killeen and Balllinafad and recruit a man to begin training with you. Take my bastard sons with you, as they know many there who would jump at the chance for elevation from kerne to castle man at arms.” Darragh agreed and left at once to locate the bastards, in what was nearly unseemly haste for him.

Dhonal’s sons out of wedlock were fine lads and very capable. Their status in the household was nearly equal to that of young Donal, even though Donal an Chogaidh was the presumed future tanaiste and leader of the O’Flahertys upon his father’s death. The Irish of the western shores did not engage in the practice of primogeniture or assured right of succession of the first-born son. The tanaiste must be agreed upon by the clan elders, and a son considered unfit might be passed over for a close male relative, legitimate or not. Therefore, any healthy sons of good physique, showing promise of sound judgment mixed with a warlike disposition might be considered. They were therefore included in the skill and scholarly instructions common to all young Irish noblemen. Darragh considered them both fine lads, and although much younger than young Donal, both had attributes that might make them more desirable tanaistes than that belligerent and rash man.

Darragh had collected the boys, Connor and Cormac, from the small shoreside dock adjacent to the castle causeway. They were delighted by this request, as they had been assigned to patch holes in the castle’s curraghs with hot pitch, a nasty and boring job. A ride with Darragh, whom they discretely worshipped, was tantamount to a vacation. A chance to display their manly horsemanship skills in front of the girls of the villages imbued the eleven and fourteen-year-old boys with such excitement that the younger nearly fell out of the boat he had been patching.

This pleasant and stimulating task was accomplished all too quickly for Darragh and his two temporary apprentices, with three likely men anxious for vetting by Dhonal Crone the next morning invited to the hold. The boys then reluctantly returned to their task of boat patching, made lighter by having fodder for friendly gibes with each other as to which girl smiled the most fetchingly at which lad.

Although Darragh knew his duty should take him directly into the castle, he was loathe to enter just yet. Instead, he indulged in a lakeside walk to clear his head.

Darragh was grateful for his position with Dhonal Crone O’Flaherty. His start in life had been considerably less promising than that of the two young bastards. He had been born to a young girl of O’Flaherty origins indentured to a wealthy English family within the Dublin Pale. A shy and pretty girl from a good Catholic family, it was a certainty that the lecherous man of the house, a corpulent consul from Henry’s court, would seduce the girl. She resisted, but the ensuing rape left her with child.

Contrary to the society’s dictates at the time, the girl was not disgraced and sent home to raise her bastard in her family’s household, as the consul had insisted upon. Instead, the consul’s wife and mother of five, who was deeply committed to assisting the poor of the Dublin slums, reasoned that charity begins at home. She knew the kind of man her husband was and saw in him much of the reason for the impoverishment of lower class Irish. To vex him, she gave him two choices. He could acknowledge the boy and she would raise him with her own, or he could settle a handsome sum of money for the maintenance of mother and child, that with this in hand, she might return to her family with a shred of dignity. It was that, or she would inform her influential brother in Henry’s court to advise the king that the consul was plotting treason and should be recalled.

For one year, the consul chose the first option. Then, the pregnancy of another domestic caused him to rethink his stance and the girl, Mary, was sent back to her family with her little boy Darragh at her breast. For the next fifteen years, a sum of money was sent to family annually, and a letter of thanks and an update on Darragh’s progress from the boy’s grandparents (written by the village priest at first, and then by Darragh himself) was sent in response. Upon her husband’s death from syphilis, she founded a home for unwed mothers and even went to visit Mary and Darragh when he turned twelve years old. She brought with her books in Latin and English, on the subjects of history, philosophy, and even poetry. Knowing that he had not had the benefit of an education achieved through fosterage, she had made sure that a portion of his keep went to a traveling tutor, who stayed with the boy’s family for 30 days every year.