

V

A CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE

It has not often been my lot to be associated with a being of so profound, and rooted a pessimism as Michael Leary, Huntsman and Kennelman to Mr. Flurry Knox's Fox-hounds. His attitude was that of the one and only righteous man in a perfidious and dissolute world. With, perhaps, the exception of Flurry Knox, he believed in no one save himself. I was thoroughly aware of my inadequacy as Deputy-Master, and cherished only a hope that Michael might look upon me as a kind of Parsifal, a fool perhaps, yet at least a "blameless fool"; but during my time of office there were many distressing moments in which I was made to feel not only incapable, but culpable.

Michael was small, sandy, green-eyed, freckled, and, I believe, considerably junior to myself; he neither drank nor smoked, and he had a blistering tongue. I have never tried more sincerely to earn any one's good opinion.

It was a pleasant afternoon towards the middle

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of December, and I was paying my customary Sunday visit to the kennels to see the hounds fed. What Michael called "the Throch" was nearly empty; the greedier of the hounds were flitting from place to place in the line, in the undying belief that others were better off than they. I was studying the row of parti-coloured backs, and trying for the fiftieth time to fit each with its name, when I was aware of a most respectable face, with grey whiskers, regarding me from between the bars of the kennel door.

With an effort not inferior to that with which I had just discriminated between Guardsman and General, I recognised my visitor as Mr. Jeremiah Flynn, a farmer, and a cattle dealer on a large scale, with whom I had occasionally done business in a humble way. He was a District Councillor, and a man of substance; he lived twenty miles away, at a place on the coast called Knockeenbwee, in a flat-faced, two-storeyed house of the usual type of hideousness. Once, when an unkind fate had sent me to that region, I had heard the incongruous tinkle of a piano proceeding from Mr. Flynn's mansion, as I drove past fighting an umbrella against the wet wind that swept in from the Atlantic.

"I beg your pardon," Major Yeates, began Mr. Flynn, with an agreeable smile, which I

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saw in sections between the bars; "I had a little business over this side of the country, and I took the liberty of taking a stroll around to the kennels to see the hounds."

I made haste to extend the hospitality of the feeding-yard to my visitor, who accepted it with equal alacrity, and went on to remark that it was wonderful weather for the time of year. Having obeyed this primary instinct of mankind, Mr. Flynn embarked upon large yet able compliments on the appearance of the hounds. His manners were excellent; sufficiently robust to accord with his grey frieze coat and flat-topped felt hat, and with just the extra touch of deference that expressed his respect for my high qualities and position.

"Ye have them in great form, Michael," he remarked, surveying the hounds' bloated sides with a knowledgeable eye; "and upon me word, there's our own poor Playboy! and a fine dog he is too!"

"He is; and a fine dog to hunt rabbits!" said Michael, without a relaxation of his drab countenance.

"I daresay, Major, you didn't know that it was in my place that fellow was rared?" continued Mr. Flynn.

Owing to his providentially distinctive colour-



"YE HAVE THEM IN GREAT FORM, MICHAEL"

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ing of lemon and white, Playboy was one of the hounds about whose identity I was never in doubt. I was able to bestow a suitable glance upon him, and to recall the fact of his having come from a trencher-fed pack, of which Mr. Flynn was the ruling spirit, kept by the farmers in the wildernesses beyond and around Knockeenbwee.

“Ah! Mr. Knox was too smart for us, over that hound!” pursued Mr. Flynn, pleasantly; “there was a small difference between himself and meself in a matter of a few heifers I was buying off him—a thrifle of fifteen shillings it was, I believe——”

“Five and thirty,” said Michael to the lash of his thong, in which he was making a knot.

“And I had to give him the pup before we could come to terms,” ended my visitor.

Whether at fifteen or thirty-five shillings Playboy had been a cheap hound. Brief, and chiefly ornamentai, as my term of office had been, I had learnt to know his voice in covert, and had learned also to act upon it in moments of solitary and helpless ignorance as to what was happening. This, however, was not the moment to sing his praises; I preserved a careful silence.

“I rared himself and his sister,” said Mr. Flynn, patting Playboy heavily, “but the sister

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died on me. I think 'twas from all she fretted after the brother when he went, and 'twas a pity. Those two had the old Irish breed in them; sure you'd know it by the colour, and there's no more of them now in the country only the mother, and she had a right to be shot this long time."

"Come hounds," said Michael, interrupting this rhapsody, "open the door, Bat."

The pack swept out of the feeding-yard and were away on their wonted constitutional in half a minute.

"Grand training, grand training!" said Mr. Flynn admiringly, "they're a credit to you, Major! It's impossible to have hounds anyway disciplined running wild through the country the way our little pack is. Indeed it came into my mind on the way here to try could I coax you to come over and give us a day's hunting. We're destroyed with foxes. Such marauding I never saw! As for turkeys and fowl, they're tired of them, and it's my lambs they'll be after next!"

The moment of large and general acquiescence in Mr. Flynn's proposal narrowed itself by imperceptible degrees to the moment, not properly realised till it arrived, the horrid moment of getting up at a quarter to seven on a December

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morning, in order to catch the early train for Knockeenbwee.

In the belief that I was acting in the interest of sport I had announced at the last meet that there was to be a by-day at Knockeenbwee. To say that the fact was received without enthusiasm is to put it mildly. I was assured by one authority that I should have to hunt the hounds from a steam launch; another, more sympathetic, promised a drag, but tempered the encouragement by saying that the walls there were all made of slates, and that by the end of the run the skin would be hanging off the horses' legs like the skins of bananas. Nothing short of a heart-to-heart appeal to my Whip, Dr. Jerome Hickey, induced him to promise his support. Michael, from first to last, remained an impenetrable thunder-cloud. The die, however, was cast, and the hospitality of Mr. Flynn accepted. The eve of the by-day arrived, and the Thunder-cloud and the hounds were sent on by road to Knockeenbwee, accompanied by my ancient ally Slipper, who led my mare, and rode Philippa's pony, which had been commandeered for the occasion.

Next morning at 9.45 A.M. the train stopped by signal at the flag-station of Moyny, a cheerless strip of platform, from which a dead straight

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road retreated to infinity across a bog. An outside car was being backed hard into the wall of the road by a long, scared rag of a chestnut horse as Dr. Hickey and I emerged from the station, and its driver was composing its anxieties as to the nature of trains by beating it in the face with his whip. This, we were informed, was Mr. Flynn's equipage, and, at a favourable moment in the conflict, Dr. Hickey and I mounted it.

"It's seldom the thrain stands here," said the driver apologetically, as we started at a strong canter, "and this one's very frightful always."

The bog ditches fled by at some twelve miles an hour; they were the softest, blackest, and deepest that I have ever seen, and I thanked heaven that I was not in my red coat.

"I suppose you never met the Miss Flynn's?" murmured Dr. Hickey to me across the well of the car.

I replied in the negative.

"Oh, they're very grand," went on my companion, with a wary eye on the humped back of the driver, "I believe they never put their foot outside the door unless they're going to Paris. Their father told me last week that lords in the streets of Cork were asking who they were."

"I suppose that was on their way to Paris," I suggested.

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"It was not," said the driver, with stunning unexpectedness, "'twas when they went up on th'excursion last month for to have their teeth pulled. G'wout o' that!" This to the horse, who had shied heavily at a goat.

Dr. Hickey and I sank into a stricken' silence, five minutes of which, at the pace we were travelling, sufficed to bring us to a little plantation, shorn and bent by the Atlantic wind, low whitewashed walls, an economical sweep' of gravel, and an entrance gate constructed to fit an outside car to an inch. From the moment that these came within the range of vision the driver beat the horse with the handle of his whip, a prelude, as we discovered, to the fact that a minor gate, obviously and invitingly leading to the yard, lolled open on one hinge at the outset of the plantation. There was a brief dissension, followed by a hand gallop to the more fitting entrance; that we should find it too fitting was a foregone conclusion, and Dr. Hickey whirled his legs on to the seat at the moment when impact between his side of the car and the gate post became inevitable. The bang that followed was a hearty one, and the driver transmitted it to me in great perfection with his elbow as he lurched on to me; there was a second and hollower bang as the well of the car, detached by the shock,

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dropped on the axle and turned over, flinging from it in its somersault a harlequinade assortment of herrings, loaves of bread, and a band box. It was, I think, a loaf of bread that hit the horse on the hocks, but under all the circumstances even a herring would have been ample excuse for the two sledge hammer kicks which he instantly administered to the foot-board. While the car still hung in the gateway, a donkey, with a boy sitting on the far end of its back, was suddenly mingled with the episode. The boy was off the donkey's back and the driver was off mine at apparently one and the same moment, and the car was somehow backed off the pillar; as we scraped through the boy said something to the driver in a brogue that was a shade more sophisticated than the peasant tune. It seemed to me to convey the facts that Miss Lynie was waiting for her hat, and that Maggie Kane was dancing mad for the soft sugar. We proceeded to the house, leaving the ground strewn with what appeared to be the elemental stage of a picnic.

"I suppose you're getting him into form for the hunt, Eugene?" said Dr. Hickey, as the lathered and panting chestnut came to a stand some ten yards beyond the hall door.

"Well, indeed, we thought it no harm to loosen him under the car before Master Eddy went riding

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him," replied Eugene, "and begannies I'm not done with him yet! I have to be before the masther at the next thrain."

He shed us and our belongings on the steps, and drove away at a gallop.

The meet had been arranged for half-past eleven. It was half-past ten when Dr. Hickey and I were incarcerated in a dungeon-cold drawing-room by a breathless being in tennis shoes, with her hair down her back, doubtless Maggie Kane, hot from the war-dance brought on by the lack of soft sugar. She told us in a gusty whisper that the masther would be in shortly, and the ladies was coming down, and left us to meditate upon our surroundings.

A cascade of white paper flowed glacially from the chimney to the fender; the gloom was Cimmerian, and unalterable, owing to the fact that the blind was broken; the cold of a never occupied room ate into our vitals. Footsteps pounded overhead and crept in the hall. The house was obviously full of people, but no one came near us. Had it not been for my companion's biographical comments on the photographs with which the room was decked, all of them, it appeared, suitors of the Misses Flynn, I think I should have walked back to the station. At eleven o'clock the hurrying feet overhead were stilled, there was a

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rustling in the hall as of a stage storm, and the daughters of the house made their entry, wonderfully attired in gowns suggestive of a theatre, or a tropical garden party, and in picture hats. As I viewed the miracles of hairdressing, black as the raven's wing, the necklaces, the bracelets, and the lavish top-dressing of powder, I wildly wondered if Dr. Hickey and I should not have been in evening clothes.

We fell to a laboured conversation, conducted upon the highest social plane. The young ladies rolled their black eyes under arched eyebrows, and in almost unimpeachable English accents supposed I found Ireland very dull. They asked me if I often went to the London Opera. They declared that when at home, music was their only resource, and made such pointed reference to their Italian duetts that I found myself trembling on the verge of asking them to sing. Dr. Hickey, under whose wing I had proposed to shelter myself, remained sardonically aloof. A blessed diversion was created by the entrance, at racing speed, of Maggie Kane bearing a trayful of burning sods of turf; the cascade was torn from the chimney, and the tray was emptied into the grate. Blinding smoke filled the room, and Maggie Kane murmured an imprecation upon "jackdahs," their nests, and all their works.

UNION V.



A TRAYFUL OF BURNING SODS OF TURF

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The moment seemed propitious for escape ; I looked at my watch, and said that if they would kindly tell me the way to the yard I would go round and see about things.

The arched eyebrows went up a shade higher ; the Misses Flynn said they feared they hardly knew the way to the stables.

Dr. Hickey rose. "Indeed it isn't easy to find them," he said, "but I daresay the Major and myself will be able to make them out."

When we got outside he looked down his long nose at me.

"Stables indeed !" he said, "I hate that dirty little boasting !"

Mr. Flynn's yard certainly did not at the first glance betray the presence of stables. It consisted of an indeterminate assembly of huts, with a long corrugated iron shed standing gauntly in the midst ; swamp of varying depths and shades occupied the intervals. From the shed proceeded the lamentable and indignant clamours of the hounds, against its door leaned Michael in his red coat, enacting, obviously, the rôle of a righteous man constrained to have his habitation in the tents of Kedar. A reverential knot of boys admired him from the wall of a neighbouring pigsty ; countrymen of all ages, each armed with a stick and shadowed by a cur, more or less

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resembling a fox-hound, stood about in patient groups; two or three dejected horses were nibbling, unattended, at a hayrick. Of our host there was no sign.

At the door of the largest hut Slipper was standing.

"Come in and see the mare, Major," he called to me in his bantam-cock voice as I approached. "Last night when we got in she was clean dead altogether, but this morning when I was giving the feed to the pony she retched out her neck and met her teeth in me poll! Oh, she's in great heart now!"

In confirmation of this statement a shrewish squeal from Lady Jane proceeded from the interior.

"Sure I slep' in the straw last night with herself and the pony. She'd have him ate this morning only for me."

The record of his devotion was here interrupted by a tremendous rattling in the farm lane; it heralded the entrance of Mr. Flynn on his outside car, drawn at full gallop by the young chestnut horse.

"Oh, look at me, Major, how late I am!" shouted Mr. Flynn jovially, as he scrambled off the car. "I declare you could light a candle at me eye with the shame that's in it, as they say!"

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I was back in Curranhilty last night buying stock, and this was the first train I could get. Well, well, the day's long and drink's plenty!"

He bundled into a darksome hole, and emerged with a pair of dirty spurs and a Malacca crop as heavy as a spade handle.

"Michael! Did they tell you we have a fox for you in the hill north?"

"I wasn't speaking to any of them," replied Michael coldly.

"Well, your hounds will be speaking to him soon! Here, hurry boys, pull out the horses!"

His eye fell on the chestnut, upon whose reeling back Eugene was cramming a saddle, while the boy who had met us at the entrance gate was proffering to it a tin basin full of oats.

"What are you doing with the young horse?" he roared.

"I thought Master Eddy would ride him, sir," replied Eugene.

"Well, he will not," said Mr. Flynn, conclusively; "the horse has enough work done, and let you walk him about easy till he's cool. You can folly the hunt then."

Two more crestfallen countenances than those of the young gentlemen he addressed it has seldom been my lot to see. The saddle was slowly removed. Master Eddy, red up to the

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roots of his black hair, retired silently with his basin of oats into the stable behind Slipper. Even had I not seen his cuff go to his eyes I should have realised that life would probably never hold for him a bitterer moment.

The hounds were already surging out of the yard with a following wave, composed of every living thing in sight. As I took Lady Jane from the hand of Slipper, Philippa's pony gave a snort. Some touch of Philippa's criminal weakness for boys assailed me.

"That boy can ride 'the pony if he likes," I said to Slipper.

I followed the hounds and their cortège down a deep and filthy lane. Mr. Flynn was just in front of me, on a broad-beamed white horse, with string-halt; three or four of the trencher-fed aliens slunk at his heels, the mouth of a dingy horn protruded from his coat pocket. I trembled in spirit as I thought of Michael.

We were out at length into large and furzy spaces that slanted steeply to the cliffs; like smuts streaming out of a chimney the followers of the hunt belched from the lane and spread themselves over the pale green slopes. From this point the proceedings became merged in total incoherence. Accompanied, as it seemed, by the whole population of the district, we moved

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en masse along the top of the cliffs, while hounds, curs, and boys strove and scrambled below us, over rocks and along ledges, which, one might have thought, would have tried the head of a seagull. Two successive bursts of yelling notified the capture and slaughter of two rabbits; in the first hour and a half I can recall no other achievement.

It was, however, evident that hunting, in its stricter sense, was looked on as a mere species of side show by the great majority of the field; the cream of the entertainment was found in the negotiation of such jumps as fell to the lot of the riders. These were neither numerous nor formidable, but the storm of cheers that accompanied each performance would have dignified the win of a Grand National favourite.

To Master Eddy, on Philippa's pony, it was apparent that the birthday of his life had come. Attended by Slipper and a howling company of boon companions, he and the pony played a glorified game of pitch and toss, in which, as it seemed to me, heads never turned up. It certainly was an adverse circumstance that the pony's mane had, the day before, been hogged to the bone, so that at critical moments the rider slid, unchecked, from saddle to ears, but the boon companions, who themselves jumped like antelopes, stride for stride with the pony, replaced

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him unfailingly with timely snatches at whatever portion of his frame first offered itself.

Music, even, was not wanting to our progress. A lame fiddler, on a donkey, followed in our wake, filling Michael's cup of humiliation to the brim, by playing jigs during our frequent moments of inaction. The sun pushed its way out of the grey sky, the sea was grey, with a broad and flashing highway to the horizon, a frayed edge of foam tracked the broken coast-line, seagulls screamed and swooped, and the grass on the cliff summits was wondrous green. Old Flynn, on his white horse, moving along the verge, and bleating shrilly upon his horn to the hounds below, became idyllic.

I believe that I ought to have been in a towering passion, and should have swept the hounds home in a flood of blasphemy; as a matter of fact I enjoyed myself. Even Dr. Hickey admitted that it was as pleasant a day for smoking cigarettes as he had ever been out.

It must have been nearly three o'clock when one of Mr. Flynn's hounds, a venerable lady of lemon and white complexion, poked her lean head through furze-bushes at the top of the cliff, and came up on to the level ground.

"That's old Terrible, Playboy's mother," remarked Dr. Hickey, "and a great stamp of an

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old hound too, but she can't run up now. Flynn tells me when she's beat out she'll sit down and yowl on the line, she's that fond of it."

• Meantime Terrible was becoming busier and looking younger every moment, as she zigzagged up and across the trampled field towards the hillside. Dr. Hickey paused in the lighting of what must have been his tenth cigarette.

"If we were in a Christian country," he said, "you'd say she had a line——"

Old Flynn came pounding up on his white horse, and rode slowly up the hill behind Terrible, who silently pursued her investigations. Fifty or sixty yards higher up, my eye lighted on something that might have been a rusty can, or a wisp of bracken, lying on the sunny side of a bank. As I looked, it moved, and slid away over the top of the bank. A yell, followed by a frenzied tootling on Mr. Flynn's ancient horn, told that he had seen it too, and, in a bedlam of shrieks, chaos was upon us. Through an inextricable huddle of foot people the hounds came bursting up from the cliffs, fighting every foot of ground with the country-boys, yelping with the contagion of excitement, they broke through, and went screaming up the hill to old Terrible, who was announcing her find in deep and continuous notes.

How Lady Jane got over the first bank with-

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out trampling Slipper and two men under foot is known only to herself; as I landed, Master Eddy and the pony banged heavily into me from the rear, the pony having once and for all resolved not to be sundered by more than a yard from his stable companion of the night before. I can safely say that I have never seen hounds run faster than did Mr. Knox's and the trencher-feds, in that brief scurry from the cliffs at Knockeen-bwee. By the time we had crossed the second fence the foot people were gone, like things in a dream. In front of me was Michael, and, in spite of Michael's spurs, in front of Michael was old Flynn, holding the advantage of his start with a most admirable jealousy. The white horse got over the ground in bucks like a rabbit, the string-halt lending an additional fire to his gait; on every bank his great white hind-quarters stood up against the sky, like the gable end of a chapel. Had I had time to think of anything, I should have repented acutely of having lent Master Eddy the pony, who was practically running away. Twice I replaced his rider in the saddle with one hand, as he landed off a fence under my stirrup. Master Eddy had lost his cap and whip, his hair was full of mud, pure ecstasy stretched his grin from ear to ear, and broke from him in giggles of delight.

Providentially, it was, as I have said, only a

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scurry. It seemed that we had run across the neck of a promontory, and in ten minutes we



PURE ECSTASY STRETCHED HIS GRIN FROM EAR TO EAR

were at the cliffs again, the company reduced to old Flynn, his son, and the Hunt establishment,

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Below us Moyny Bay was spread forth, enclosing in-its span a big green island ; between us and the island was a good hundred yards of mud, plump-looking mud, with channels in it. Deep in this the hounds were wading ; some of them were already ashore on the island, struggling over black rocks thatched with yellow seaweed, their voices coming faintly back to us against the wind. The white horse's tail was working like a fan, and we were all, horse and men, blowing hard enough to turn a windmill. .

“That's better fun than to be eating your dinner!” puffed Mr. Flynn, purple with pride and heat, as he lowered himself from the saddle. “There isn't a hound in Ireland would take that stale line up from the cliff only old Terrible!”

“What will we do now, sir?” said Michael to me, presenting the conundrum with colourless calm, and ignoring the coat-tail trailed for his benefit, “we'll hardly get them out of that island to-night.”

“I suppose you know you're bare-footed, Major?” put in Hickey, my other Job's comforter, from behind. “Your two fore-shoes are gone.”

A December day is not good for much after half-past three. For half an hour the horns of Michael and old Flynn blew their summons antiphonally into the immensities of sea and sky,

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and summoned only the sunset, and after it the twilight; the hounds remained unresponsive, invisible.

"There's rabbits enough in that island to keep ten packs of hounds busy for a month," said Mr. Flynn; "the last time I was there I thought 'twas the face of the field was running from me. And what was it after all but the rabbits!"

"My hounds wouldn't hunt rabbits if they were throwing after them," said Michael ferociously.

"Oh, I suppose it's admiring the view they are!" riposted Mr. Flynn; "I tell ye now, Major, there's a man on the strand below has a flat-bottomed boat, and here's Eugene just come up, I'll send him over with the horn as soon as there's water enough, and he'll flog them out of it."

The tide crept slowly in over the mud, and a young moon was sending a slender streak of light along it through the dusk before Eugene had accomplished his mission.

The boat returned at last across the channel with a precarious cargo of three hounds, while the rest splashed and swam after her.

"I have them all, only one," shouted Eugene as he jumped ashore, and came scrambling up the steep slants and shaley ledges of the cliff.

"I hope it isn't Terrible ye left after ye?" roared Mr. Flynn.

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"Faith, I don't know which is it it is. I seen him down from me floating in the tide. It must be he was clifted. I think 'tis one of Major Yeates's. We have our own whatever."

A cold feeling ran down my back. Michael and Hickey silently conned over the pack in the growing darkness, striking matches and shielding them in their hands as they told off one hound after another, hemmed in by an eager circle of countrymen.

"It's Playboy's gone," said Michael, with awful brevity. "I suppose we may go home now, sir?"

"Ah! hold on, hold on," put in Mr. Flynn, "are ye sure now, Eugene, it wasn't a sheep ye saw? I wouldn't wish it for five pounds that the Major lost a hound by us."

"Did ye ever see a sheep with yalla spots on her?" retorted Eugene.

A shout of laughter instantly broke from the circle of sympathisers. I mounded Lady Jane in gloomy silence; there was nothing for it but to face the long homeward road, minus Flurry Knox's best hound, and with the knowledge that while I lived this day's work would not be forgotten to me by him, by Dr. Hickey, and by Michael.

It was Hickey who reminded me that I was also minus two fore-shoes, and that it was an eighteen mile ride. On my responding irritably that I was

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aware of both facts, and would get the mare shod at the forge by the station, Mr. Flynn, whose voluble and unceasing condolences had not been the least of my crosses, informed me that the smith had gone away to his father-in-law's wake, and that there wasn't another forge between that and Skebawn.

The steps by which the final disposition of events was arrived at need not here be recounted. It need only be said that every star went out of its course to fight against me; even the special luminary that presided over the Curranhilty and Skebawn branch railway was hostile; I was told that the last train did not run except on Saturdays. Therefore it was that, in a blend of match-light and moonlight, a telegram was written to Philippa, and, at the hour at which Dr. Hickey, the hounds, and Michael were nearing their journey's end, I was seated at the Knockeenbwee dinner-table, tired, thoroughly annoyed, devoured with sleep, and laboriously discoursing of London and Paris with the younger Miss Flynn.

A meal that had opened at six with strong tea, cold mutton, and bottled porter, was still, at eight o'clock, in slow but unceasing progress, suggesting successive inspirations on the part of the cook. At about seven we had had mutton chops and potatoes, and now, after an abysmal interval

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of conversation, we were faced by a roast goose and a rice pudding with currants in it. Through all these things had gone the heavy sounds and crashes that betokened the conversion of the drawing-room into a sleeping-place for me. There was, it appeared, no spare room in the house; I felt positively abject at the thought of the trouble I was inflicting. My soul abhorred the roast goose, and was yet conscious that the only possible acknowledgment of the hospitality that was showered upon me, was to eat my way unflinchingly through all that was put upon my plate.

It must have been nine o'clock before we turned our backs upon the pleasures of the table, and settled down to hot whisky-punch over a fierce turf fire. Then ensued upon my part one of the most prolonged death-grapples with sleep that it has been my lot to endure. The conversation of Mr. Flynn and his daughters passed into my brain like a narcotic; after circling heavily round various fashionable topics, it settled at length upon croquet, and it was about here that I began to slip from my moorings and drift softly towards unconsciousness. I pulled myself up on the delicious verge of a dream to agree with the statement that "croquet was a fright! You'd boil a leg of mutton while you'd be waiting for your turn!"

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Following on this came a period of oblivion, and then an agonised recovery. Where were we? Thank heaven, we were still at the croquet party, and Miss Lynie's narrative was continuing.

"That was the last place I saw Mary. Oh, she was mad! She was mad with me! 'I was born a lady,' says she, 'and I'll die a lady!' I never saw her after that day."

Miss Lynie, with an elegantly curved little finger, finished her wine-glass of toddy and awaited my comment.

I was, for the instant, capable only of blinking like an owl, but was saved from disaster by Mr. Flynn.

"Indeed ye had no loss," he remarked. "She's like a cow that gives a good pail o' milk and spoils all by putting her leg in it!"

I said, "Quite so—exactly," while the fire, old Flynn, and the picture of a Pope over the chimney-piece, swam back into their places with a jerk.

The tale, or whatever it was, wound on. Nodding heavily, I heard how "Mary," at some period of her remarkable career, had been found "bawling in the kitchen" because Miss Flynn had refused to kiss her on both cheeks when she was going to bed, and of how, on that repulse, Mary had said that Miss Flynn was "squat." I am thankful to say that I retained sufficient control of my faculties to laugh ironically.

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I think the story must then have merged into a description of some sort of entertainment, as I distinctly remember Miss Lynie saying that they "played 'Lodging-houses'—it was young Scully from Ennis made us do it—a very vulgar game *I* call it."

"I don't like that pullin' an' draggin'," said Mr. Flynn.

I did not feel called upon to intrude my opinion upon the remarkable pastime in question, and the veils of sleep once more swathed me irresistibly in their folds. It seemed very long afterwards that the clang of a fire-iron pulled me up with what I fear must have been an audible snort. Old Flynn was standing up in front of the fire; he had obviously reached the climax of a narrative, he awaited my comment.

"That—that must have been very nice," I said desperately.

"Nice!" echoed Mr. Flynn, and his astounded face shocked me into consciousness; "sure she might have burned the house down!"

What the catastrophe may have been I shall never know, nor do I remember how I shuffled out of the difficulty; I only know that at this point I abandoned the unequal struggle, and asked if I might go to bed.

The obligations of a troublesome and self-

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inflicted guest seal my lips as to the expedients by which the drawing-room had been converted into a sleeping-place for me. But though gratitude may enforce silence, it could not enforce sleep. The paralysing drowsiness of the parlour deserted me at the hour of need. The noises in the kitchen ceased, old Flynn pounded up to bed, the voices of the young ladies overhead died away, and the house sank into stillness, but I grew more wakeful every moment. I heard the creeping and scurrying of rats in the walls, I counted every tick, and cursed every quarter told off by a pragmatikal cuckoo clock in the hall. By the time it had struck twelve I was on the verge of attacking it with the poker.

I suppose I may have dozed a little, but I was certainly aware that a long tract of time had elapsed since it had struck two, when a faint but regular creaking of the staircase impressed itself upon my ear. It was followed by a stealing foot in the hall; a hand felt over the door, and knocked very softly. I sat up in my diminutive stretcher-bed and asked who was there. The handle was turned, and a voice at the crack of the door said "It's me!"

Even in the two monosyllables I recognised the accents of the son of the house.

"I want to tell you something," pursued the voice.

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I instantly surmised all possibilities of disaster ; Slipper drunk and overlaid by Lady Jane, Philippa's pony dead from over-exertion, or even a further instalment of the evening meal, only now arrived at completion.

"What's the matter? Is anything wrong?" I demanded, raising myself in the trough of the bed.

"There is not ; but I want to speak to you."

I had by this time found the matches, and my candle revealed Eddy Flynn, fully dressed save for his boots, standing in the doorway. He crept up to my bedside with elaborate stealth.

"Well, what is it?" I asked, attuning my voice to a conspirator's whisper.

"Playboy's above stairs!"

"Playboy!" I repeated incredulously, "what do you mean?"

"Eugene cot him. He's above in Eugene's room now," said the boy, his face becoming suddenly scarlet.

"Do you mean that he wasn't killed?" I demanded, instantly allocating in my own mind half a sovereign to Eugene.

"He wasn't in the island at all," faltered Master Eddy, "Eugene cot him below on the cliffs when the hounds went down in it at the first go off, and he hid him back in the house here."

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The allotment of the half-sovereign was abruptly cancelled.

I swallowed my emotions with some difficulty.

“Well,” I said, after an awkward pause, “I’m very much obliged to you for telling me. I’ll see your father about it in the morning.”

Master Eddy did not accept this as a dismissal. He remained motionless, except for his eyes, that sought refuge anywhere but on my face.

There was a silence for some moments; he was almost inaudible as he said:

“It would be better for ye to take him now, and to give him to Slipper. I’d be killed if they knew I let on he was here.” Then, as an after-thought, “Eugene’s gone to the wake.”

The inner aspect of the affair began to reveal itself, accompanied by a singularly unbecoming side light on old Flynn. I perceived also the useful part that had been played by Philippa’s pony, but it did not alter the fact that Master Eddy was showing his gratitude like a hero. The situation was, however, too delicate to admit of comment.

“Very well,” I said, without any change of expression, “will you bring the dog down to me?”

“I tried to bring him down with me, but he wouldn’t let me put a hand on him.”

I hastily got into the few garments of which I

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had not divested myself before getting into the misnamed stretcher-bed, aware that the horrid task was before me of burglariously probing the depths of Eugene's bedroom, and acutely uncertain as to Playboy's reception of me.

"There's a light above in the room," said Master Eddy, with a dubious glance at the candle in my hand.

I put it down, and followed him into the dark hall.

I have seldom done a more preposterous thing than creep up old Flynn's stairs in the small hours of the morning, in illicit search for my own property; but, given the dual determination to recover Playboy, and to shield my confederate, I still fail to see that I could have acted otherwise.

We reached the first landing; it vibrated reassuringly with the enormous snores of Mr. Flynn. Master Eddy's cold paw closed on my hand, and led me to another and steeper flight of stairs. At the top of these was a second landing, or rather passage, at the end of which a crack of light showed under a door. A dim skylight told that the roof was very near my head; I extended a groping hand for the wall, and without any warning found my fingers closing improbably, awfully, upon a warm human face. I defy the most hardened conspirator to have refrained from some expression of opinion.

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"Good Lord!" I gasped, starting back, and knocking my head hard against a rafter. "What's that?"

"It's Maggie Kane, sir!" hissed a female voice. "I'm after bringing up a bone for the dog to quieten him!"

That Maggie Kane should also be in the plot was a complication beyond my stunned intelligence; I grasped only the single fact that she was an ally, endued with supernatural and sympathetic forethought. She placed in my hand a tepid and bulky fragment, which, even in the dark, I recognised as the mighty drumstick of last night's goose; at the same moment Master Eddy opened the door, and revealed Playboy, tied to the leg of a low wooden bedstead.

He was standing up, his eyes gleamed green as emeralds, he looked as big as a calf. He obviously regarded himself as the guardian of Eugene's bower, and I failed to see any recognition of me in his aspect, in point of fact he appeared to be on the verge of an outburst of suspicion that would waken the house once and for all. We held a council of war in whispers that perceptibly increased his distrust; I think it was Maggie Kane who suggested that Master Eddy should proffer him the bone while I unfastened the rope. The strategy succeeded,

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almost too well in fact. Following the alluring drumstick Playboy burst into the passage, towing me after him on the rope. Still preceded by the light-footed Master Eddy, he took me down the attic stairs at a speed which was the next thing to a headlong fall, while Maggie Kane held the candle at the top. As we stormed past old Flynn's door I was aware that the snoring had ceased, but "the pace was too good to enquire." We 'scrimmaged down the second flight into the darkness of the hall, fetching up somewhere near the clock, which, as if to give the alarm, uttered three loud and poignant cuckoos. I think Playboy must have sprung at it, in the belief that it was the voice of the drumstick; I only know that my arm was nearly wrenched from its socket, and that the clock fell with a crash from the table to the floor, where, by some malevolence of its machinery, it continued to cuckoo with jocund and implacable persistence. Something that was not Playboy bumped against me. The cuckoo's note became mysteriously muffled, and a door, revealing a fire-lit kitchen, was shoved open. We struggled through it, bound into a sheaf by Playboy's rope, and in our midst the cuckoo clock, stifled but indomitable, continued its protest from under Maggie Kane's shawl.

In the kitchen we drew breath for the first time,



HE DID NOT DENY HIMSELF A MOST DISSOLUTE WINK

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and Maggie Kane put the cuckoo clock into a flour bin ; the house remained still as the grave. Master Eddy opened the back door ; behind his head the Plough glittered wakefully in a clear and frosty sky. It was uncommonly cold.

Slipper had not gone to the wake, and was quite sober. I shall never forget it to him. I told him that Playboy had come back, and was to be taken home at once. He asked no inconvenient questions, but did not deny himself a most dissolute wink. We helped him to saddle the pony, while Playboy crunched his hard-earned drumstick in the straw. In less than ten minutes he rode quietly away in the starlight, with Playboy trotting at his stirrup, and Playboy's rope tied to his arm.

I did not meet Mr. Flynn at breakfast ; he had started early for a distant fair. I have, however, met him frequently since then, and we are on the best of terms. We have not shirked allusions to the day's hunting at Knockeenbwee, but Playboy has not on these occasions been mentioned by either of us.

I understand that Slipper has put forth a version of the story, in which the whole matter is resolved into a trial of wits between himself and Eugene. With this I have not interfered.