

VIII

"A HORSE! A HORSE!"

PART I

"OLD Jimmy Porteous!" I ejaculated, while a glow of the ancient enthusiasm irradiated my bosom, "Philippa, I say! Do you see this? Jimmy Porteous is to command this District!"

"No, darling, *not* with an egg!" replied Philippa, removing the honey spoon from the grasp of her youngest child, just too late to avert disaster, "we *don't* eat honey with eggs."

The heavy hand of experience has taught me that at moments such as these the only possible course is to lie to head to wind, till the squall passes, and then begin from the beginning again. I readdressed myself to my newspaper, while the incident went, like a successful burlesque, with a roar, sustained from the foot of the stairs to the point when the nursery door slammed upon it.

Philippa resumed her seat at the breakfast table.

"Yes, dear, what were you saying?" she said,

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

yielding me the laborious but vague attention that is the best any husband can expect from any wife on such occasions.

I repeated my statement, and was scandalised to find that Philippa had but the most shadowy remembrance of Jimmy Porteous, who, in the days when I first joined my regiment had been its senior subaltern, and, for me and my fellows, one of the most revered of its law-givers. As a captain he left us, and proceeded to do something brilliant on somebody's staff, and, what time I got my company, had moved on in radiance into a lofty existence in the War Office and newspaper paragraphs.

I recalled these things to my wife, coupling them with the information that she would have to call on Lady Porteous, when the door opened, and the face of Flurry Knox, unshaven and blue, with the miserable mother-o'-pearl blueness of fair people in cold weather, appeared in the opening.

He had looked in, he said, on his way home from the fair, to try would we give him a cup of tea, and he went on to remark that the wind was cold enough to cut the horns off a cow.

I asked him if he had seen my beasts there, and if they had been sold.

"Oh, they were, they were," he said tolerantly; "it was a wonderful good fair. The dealers were

"A Horse! A Horse!"

buying all before them. There was a man said to me, 'If you had a little dog there, and he to be a calf, you'd have sold him.'"

It was one of Flurry Knox's ruling principles in life to disparage the live stock of his friends; it was always within the bounds of possibility that the moment might arrive when he would wish to buy them.

"I met a man from Sir Thomas Purcell's country yesterday," said Flurry presently; "he says there's been the father and mother of a row down there between old Sir Thomas and Hackett, that's the man has the harriers. Sir Thomas is wild because they say the soldiers are giving Hackett as good a subscription as himself, and he says Hackett has all the foxes killed."

"But surely—harriers don't hunt foxes?" said Philippa ingenuously.

Flurry looked at her for a moment in silence. "Is it Hackett's harriers!" he said compassionately; "sure he flogs them off hares."

"Talking of soldiers, they've just sent a man who used to be in my regiment to command this district," I said, plucking my own topic from the tangle of inter-hunt squabbles; "a great man to hounds he used to be, too."

"Would he buy the Dodger?" asked Flurry swiftly. "Would he give a price?"

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

"I daresay he would if he liked the horse. If I got a chance I might tell him," I said, magnanimously.

"I tell you what, Major," said Flurry, with an eye on his ally, Philippa, "you and me and Mrs. Yeates will go up and have a day with Sir Thomas's hounds, and you'll say the word for me to the General!"

Looking back at it all now, I recognise that here was the moment for firmness. I let the moment slip, and became immersed in tracking General Sir James Porteous, K.C.B., through the pages of an elderly Army List. By the time I had located him in three separate columns, I found that Philippa and Flurry had arranged unalterably the details of what my wife is pleased to call a ramp—*i.e.* an expedition that, as its name implies, suggests a raid made by tramps.

"—Why, my gracious! aren't they cousins of my own? They'll be only delighted! Sure, Sally had measles there three years ago, and 'twas as good as a play for them!—Put us up, is it? Of course they will! The whole lot of us. D'ye think Sally'd stay at home?—No, you'll not take your own horses at all. Hire from Flavin; I'll see he does you well."

"And you know, Sinclair"—thus the other conspirator—"it would be an excellent chance

"A Horse! A Horse!"

for you to meet your beloved Jimmy Porteous!"

It was not Mr. Knox's habit to let the grass grow under his feet. Before I had at all grasped the realities of the project, my wife heard from Mrs. Sally Knox to say that she had arranged it all with the Butler-Knoxes, and that we were to stay on for a second night in, order to go to a dance at which we should meet the General. At intervals during the following week I said to Philippa that it was preposterous and monstrous to dump ourselves upon the Butler-Knoxes, unknown people whom we had but once met at a function at the Bishop's. My remembrance of them, though something blurred by throngs of the clergy and their wives, did not suggest the type of person who might be expected to keep open house for stray fox-hunters. I said all this to Philippa, who entirely agreed with me, and continued her preparations, after the manner of experienced wives.

It was raining hard one afternoon in the following week when a four-wheeled inside car—an admirable vehicle, which I wish in no way to disparage—disgorged its burden at the door of Garden Mount House. One item of the burden was experiencing a sensation only too familiar, such a sensation as a respectable seaman might

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

feel on being pressed into a crew of buccaneers. The house loomed over us, large, square, and serious, in the wet moonlight of the January evening; the husky, over-fed bark of an elderly dog was incessant in the hall. If by laying hold of the coat-tails of the leading pirate, as he got out to ring the bell, I could then and there 'ave brought the expedition to a close, I would t'ank-fully 'ave done so.

The door was opened by a melancholy old gentleman with a grey moustache and whiskers; he might have been Colonel Newcome in his decadence, but from the fact that he wore an evening coat and grey trousers, I gathered that he was the butler, and for any one skilled in Irish households, he at once placed the establishment—rich, godly, low church, and consistently and contentedly dull. As we entered the hall there arose from some fastness in the house a shrill clamour that resolved itself into the first line of a hymn.

Flurry dug me in the ribs with his elbow. "They've found!" he whispered, "you needn't look so frightened. It's only Lucy and Louisa having the choir practice!"

To these strains Colonel Newcome ushered us into the drawing-room. There was no one in it. It was a large double drawing-room, and nothing but heavy maroon curtains now separated us from

“A Horse! A Horse!”

the choir practice. The hymn continued, a loud and long-drawn proclamation, and, pending its conclusion, my wife and Mrs. Flurry Knox swiftly and stealthily circumnavigated the room, and appraised all its contents, from a priceless Battersea basket filled with dusty bulbs, to a Chippendale card-table with a sewing machine clamped on to it, while Flurry, in a stage whisper, dilated to me upon the superfluous wealth that Providence had seen fit to waste upon the Butler-Knoxes. The household, as I had gradually learnt, consisted of an elderly bachelor, Mr. Lucius Butler-Knox (commonly known as “Looshy”), his unmarried sister, Miss Louise, his widowed sister, Mrs. Hodnett, and a corpulent, grey-muzzled black-and-tan terrier. Their occupations were gardening, and going to what they called “the city,” *i.e.* the neighbouring county town, to attend charitable committee meetings; they kept a species of philanthropic registry office for servants; their foible was hospitality, disastrously coupled with the fact that they dined at half-past six. It was one of the mysteries of kinship that Flurry Knox and our host and hostess should possess a nearer relative in common than Adam. That he should have established their respectable home as his hostelry and house of call was one of the mysteries of Flurry Knox.

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

The hymn ceased, the raiders hastily formed into line, the maroon drapery parted, and the ladies of the house, flushed with song, and importing with them a potent sample of the atmosphere of the back drawing-room, were upon us, loud in hospitable apologies, instant in offers of tea; the situation opened and swallowed us up.

The half-past six o'clock dinner came al' too swiftly. Glared upon by an unshaded lamp that sat like a ball of fire in the centre of the table, we laboured in the trough of a sea of the thickest ox-tail soup; a large salmon followed; with the edge of dubious appetite already turned, we saw the succeeding items of the menu spread forth on the table like a dummy hand at bridge. The boiled turkey, with its satellite ham, the roast saddle of mutton, with its stable companion the stack of cutlets; the succeeding course, where a team of four wild duck struggled for the lead with an open tart and a sago pudding. Like Agag, we went delicately, and, like Agag, it availed us nothing.

I watched my *vis-à-vis*, little Mrs. Flurry, furtively burying a slab of turkey beneath mashed potatoes as heatly as a little dog buries a bone; her green kitten's eyes met mine without a change of expression, and turned to her glass, which Colonel Newcome had filled with claret. "The

"A Horse! A Horse!"

beaded bubbles, winking at the brim," had a greyish tinge.

"Cousin Lucius!" observed Mrs. Flurry, in a silence that presently happened to fall, "can you remember who painted that picture of our great-grandfather—the one over the door I mean?"

M. Butler-Knox, a small, grey-bearded, elderly gentleman, wholly, up to the present, immersed in carving, removed the steam of the ducks from his eye-glasses, and concentrated them upon the picture.

"It's by MacIise, isn't it?" went on Sally, leaning forward to get a nearer view.

In that moment, when all heads turned to the picture, I plainly saw her draw the glass of claret to the verge of the table, it disappeared beneath it and returned to its place empty. Almost simultaneously, the black-and-tan terrier sprang from a lair near my feet, and hurried from the room, shaking his ears vigorously. Mrs. Flurry's eyes wavered from the portrait to mine, and her face became slowly and evenly pink, like an after-glow.

It was but one of the many shameless acts of my party during the age-long evening. At ten o'clock we retired to rest, for my own part, thoroughly overfed, not in the least sleepy, worn with con-

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

versation, and oppressed by the consciousness of flippant, even brutal, ingratitude.

The weather had cleared next morning to mild greyness, that softened even the asperity of half-past eight breakfast. I lumbered stiffly downstairs in a pair of new butcher boots, and found with thankfulness that our hosts, exhausted possibly by their efforts, had kept their rooms.

Marshalled in order upon the sideboard stood the remains of all the more enduring items of last night's dinner, cold indeed, but firm and undefeated; hot dishes of ancient silver roasted before the noble brass-mounted fireplace; there were vats of lethargic cream, a clutch of new-laid eggs, a heap of hot scones.

"It's easy seen it wasn't cracking blind nuts made Lucy Hodnett and Louisa the size they are!" remarked Flurry, as the party, feeling more piratical than ever, embarked upon this collation. "Mrs. Yeates, do you think I am bound to dance with the pair of them to-night? *You* are, Major; anyway! But I might get off with Louisa."

"Oh, Sinclair's card is full," said my wife, who was engaged in trying to decipher the marks on the cream jug without upsetting the cream; "he and the General are plighted to one another for the evening."

"I wonder if the claret has stained the carpet!"

“A Horse! A Horse!”

said Mrs. Flurry, diving under the table. “It has! How awful!” Mrs. Flurry’s voice indicated the highest enjoyment. “Never mind, they’ll never see it! They’re too fat to get under the table!”

“If they did, it’d be the first time old Looshy’s clarinet ever put anyone there!” said Flurry.

We have never known the precise moment in this speech at which “Old Looshy’s” butler entered the room; we only know that while Mrs. Flurry, much hampered by habit and boots, was in the act of struggling, from beneath the table, he was there, melancholy and righteous, with a telegram on a salver.

It was from Flavin, the livery stableman, and its effect upon the spirits of the company was that of a puncture in a tyre.

“Regret horses not available; am trying to procure others; will send by next train if possible.”

We said that there was no answer, and we finished our breakfasts in a gravity scarcely lightened by Flurry’s almost religious confidence in Flavin’s infallibility, and in his power of making horses out of rushes, like the fairies, if need be.

I was, I may admit, from the first thoroughly pessimistic. I almost went up and got into ordinary clothes; I at least talked of doing so, as a means of preparing Philippa for the worst. I

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

said it was a mere waste of time to send the Butler-Knox coachman to the station, as had been arranged, and I did my best to dissuade Flurry from his intention of riding to the meet by way of the station to help in unboxing animals that could not possibly be there.

In abysmal dejection my wife and I surveyed the departing forms of Mr. and Mrs. Florence Knox; the former on the Dodger, a leggy brown four-year-old, the planting of whom upon General Porteous had been the germ of the expedition; while Sally skipped and sidled upon a narrow, long-tailed chestnut mare, an undefeated jumper, and up to about as much weight as would go by parcel post for ninepence. There then ensued a period of total desolation, in which we looked morosely at old photograph books in the drawing-room, and faced the prospect of a long day with the Butler-Knoxes, while heavy footsteps overhead warned us that our entertainers were astir, and that at any moment the day's conversation might begin.

I was engaged, not, I fancy, for the first time, in telling Philippa that I had always said that the entire expedition was a mistake, when Colonel Newcome again entered the room.

"The Master sent me to ask you, sir, if you'd like to have the pony-phaeton to drive down to

"A Horse! A Horse!"

the station to meet the half-past ten train. Flavin might be sending the horses on it, and it'd save you time to meet them there."

We closed with the offer; at its worst, the pony-carriage could be smoked in, which the drawing-room could not; at its best, it might save half-an-hour in getting to the meet. We presently seated ourselves in it, low down behind an obese piebald pony, with a pink nose, and a mane hogged to the height of its ears. As I took up the whip it turned and regarded us with an unblinkered eye, pink-lidded and small as a pig's.

"You should go through Fir Grove, sir," said the boy who had brought the equipage to the door, "it's half a mile of a short cut, and that's the way Tom will come with the horses. It's the first gate-lodge you'll meet on the road."

The mud was deep, and the piebald pony plodded through it at a sullen jog. The air was mild and chilly, like an uninteresting woman; the fore-knowledge of fiasco lay heavily upon us; it hardly seemed worth while to beat the pony when he sank into a walk; it was the most heart-broken forlorn hope that ever took the field.

The gate-lodge of Fir Grove 'fulfilled the assignation made for it by the stable boy, and

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

met us on the road. The gates stood wide open, and the pony turned in as by an accustomed route, and crawled through them with that simulation of complete exhaustion that is the gift of lazy ponies. Loud narrative in a male voice proceeded from the dark interior of the lodge, and, as we passed, a woman's voice said, in horrified rejoinder :

"The Lord save us! She must be Anti-Christ!"

Here, apparently, the speaker became aware of our proximity, and an old woman looked forth. Her face was apprehensive.

"Did ye see the police, sir?" she asked.

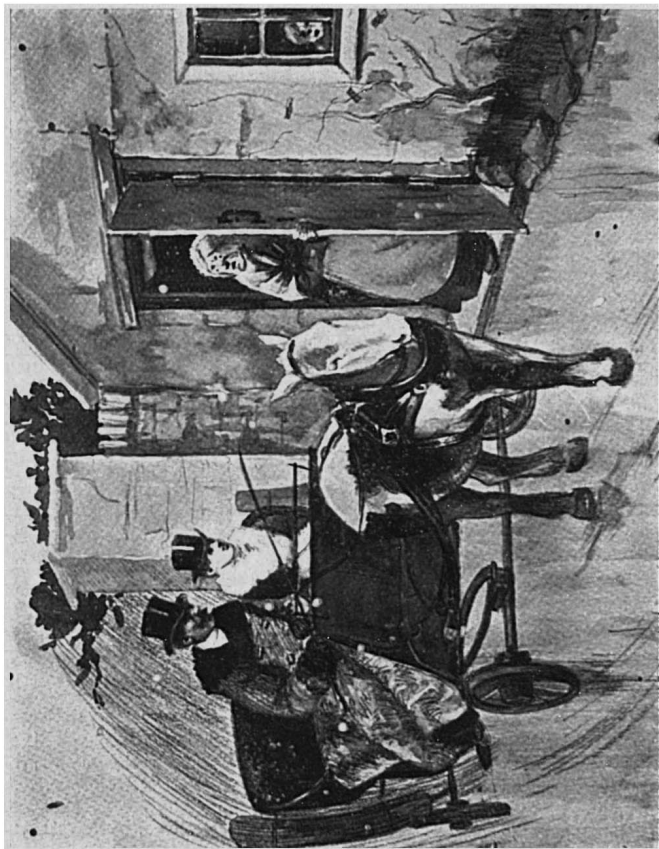
We replied in the negative.

"Please God, she'll not come our way!" she said, and banged the door.

We moved on, heavily, in the deep gravel of the avenue.

"Isn't this rather awful? Shall we go on?" said Philippa.

I replied with truth that there was no room to turn. On either side of the narrow drive laurels and rhododendrons were crammed as thickly as they could be planted, their dark foliage met overhead; if the inexpressible "She" referred to by the lodge-keeper did come our way, retreat would be out of the question. The tunnel ran



"DID YE SEE THE POLICE?"

“A Horse! A Horse!”

uphill, and I drove the pony up it as one drives a hoop, by incessant beating; had I relaxed my efforts he would probably, like a hoop, have lain down. Presently, and still uphill, we turned a corner, the tunnel ceased, and we were face to face with a large pink house.

As we advanced, feeling to the full the degradation of making a short-cut past a strange house, in tall hats and a grovelling pony-carriage, we beheld figures rushing past the windows of one of the rooms on the ground floor, as if in head-long flight. Was this the fulfilment of the dark sayings of the lodge-keeper, and was “She” “coming our way?” The bouncing strains of a measure, known, I believe, as “Whistling Rufus,” came forth to us hilariously as we drew nearer. The problem changed, but I am not sure that the horror did not deepen.

Divining the determination of the piebald pony to die, if necessary, rather than pass a hall door without stopping at it, yet debarred by the decencies from thrashing him past the long line of windows, I administered two or three rousing tugs to his wooden mouth. At the third tug the near rein broke. The pony stopped dead. Simultaneously the hall door was flung open, and a young and lovely being, tall, and beautifully dressed, fluttered out on to the steps

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

and peered at us through long-handled eye-glasses.

"Oh! I thought you were the police!" exclaimed the being, with unaffected disappointment.

The position seemed, from all points, to demand an apology. I disengaged myself from the pony-carriage and proffered it; I also volunteered any help that a mere man, not a policeman, might be capable of rendering.

The young lady aimed her glasses at the piebald, motionless in sullen stupor, and replied irrelevantly:

"Why! That's the Knoxes' pony!"

I made haste to explain our disaster and the position generally, winding up with a request for a piece of string.

"You're staying at the Butler-Knoxes!" exclaimed the lady of the house. "How funny that is! Do you know you're coming to our dance to-night, to meet your old friend the General! I know all about it, you see!" She advanced with a beaming yet perturbed countenance upon Philippa, "I'm so glad to meet you. Do come in! We've got an infuriated cock at bay in the kitchen, and things are rather disorganised, but I think we can rise to a bit of string! The pony's all right—he'll sleep there for months, he always does."

“A Horse! A Horse!”

We followed her into a hall choked with the exiled furniture of the drawing-room, and saw through an open door the whirling forms of two or three couples of young men and maidens.

“They’re polishing the floor,” said our hostess, sweetly shutting the door, “they make a hideous noise, but it keeps them quiet—if you know what I mean. It’s most disastrous, that my husband has gone out hunting,” she pursued; “this odious cook only arrived two days ago, and——”

At this juncture a door at the end of the hall burst open, disclosing a long passage and a young and crimson housemaid.

“She’s coming, my lady! She’s coming! Mr. Ralph’s sent me on to get the door open!” she panted.

At the same moment a loud and wrathful voice arose in the passage and a massive form, filling it from wall to wall, appeared; the capitulating cook, moving down upon us with the leisurely and majestic truculence of a traction-engine. As she came she chanted these words in measured cadence:

“Lady Flora,
Gets her brother
To do her dirty work.”

By the time this rune had been repeated three times she was in the hall, shepherded by a tall

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

young man, obviously the brother referred to, and by the butler, the vista being filled in the rear by a wavering assortment of female domestics. As the cook tacked to weather a sofa, there was something about her that woke a vague and unpleasant chord of memory. Her ranging eye met mine, and the chord positively twanged as I recognised the formidable countenance of a female, technically known as a "job-cook," who for two cyclonic weeks had terrorised our household while Mrs. Cadogan was on leave. I backed convulsively into Lady Flora, in futile and belated attempt to take cover, but even as I did so the chanting ceased and I knew the worst had happened.

"Is that my darlin' Major Yeates?" shouted the cook, tacking again and bearing down on me full-sailed. "Thanks be to God I have the gentleman that'll see I get justice! And Mrs. Yeates, a noble lady, that'd never set foot in my kitchen without she'd ask my leave! Ah, ha! As Shakespeare says, I'd know a rale lady as soon as I'd put an eye on her, if she was boiling cabbage!"

She caught my reluctant hand and waved it up and down, and the muffled triumphings of "Whistling Rufus" in the drawing-room filled up the position.

Through them came a sound of wheels on the



"IS THAT MY DARLIN' MAJOR YEATES?" SHOUTED THE COOK

“A Horse ! A Horse !”

gravel, and through this again a strangled whisper from behind :

“ Take her out to the steps ; I hear the car with the police ! ”

Holding the fervid hand of the job-cook, I advanced with her through the furniture, skew-wise, as in the visiting figure of the Lancers ; there was an undoubted effort on her part to keep time to the music, and she did not cease to inform the company that Major and Mrs. Yeates were the real old nobility, and that they would see she got her rights.

Followed closely by the shepherd and the butler, we moved forth on to the steps. The police were not there. There was nothing there save a complicated pattern of arcs and angles on the gravel, as of a four-wheeled vehicle that has taken an uncommonly short turn. At the bend of the avenue the pony-carriage, our link with the world without, was disappearing from view, the piebald pony heading for home at a pig-like but determined gallop. The job-cook clasped her hands on my arm and announced to the landscape that she would live and die with the Major.