

EDITH

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SUMMARY

The following work comes in two parts.

First is a creative component – *Edith: A Novel*, set in 1921-22, about the writer Edith Somerville.

It is followed by a critical element – *The Play's The Thing: Edith Somerville's Stagecraft*.

This is an essay reflecting on Edith Somerville's engagement with theatre, and attempts to have her play staged, which she adapted from her co-authored Irish R.M. series of short stories.

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ABSTRACT

This project contains two elements, one creative and the other critical. The creative component is a novel in the voice of Edith Somerville as she attempts to convince herself, and others, that the Somerville and Ross literary firm remains viable after the death of her writing partner, Violet Martin (Martin Ross), and that civil unrest in Ireland can neither undermine her work practices nor diminish her audience. The second strand reflects on Somerville's little-known play, *Flurry's Wedding* (1921-3), and critically evaluates why the silence surrounding it represents a lacuna in the scholarly appraisal of a writer with canonical status. The critical component rectifies that omission.

Flurry's Wedding, based on the Irish R.M. stories, was never staged and critics have mentioned it only in passing without attaching any importance to its existence. Nevertheless, its presence amid Somerville's body of work is significant because it sheds new light on her literary practice. Far from immobilising her, the play's failure preceded a burst of literary application which resulted in Somerville's most noteworthy solo novel, *The Big House of Inver* (1925).

This study will suggest that *Flurry's Wedding* acted as a statement of Somerville's capacity to recognise the need to adapt, rather than restrict herself to what has proven to be successful. Its existence showcases a writer some thirty years into her literary career with the interest and confidence to continue exploring new genres. It also reflects on her interest in drama, and offers further proof of her lifelong commitment to earning a living as a mark of independence.

Together, these two components combine to provide new creative and critical insights into an Irish writer of substance who managed to negotiate a pathway through an increasingly capricious environment.

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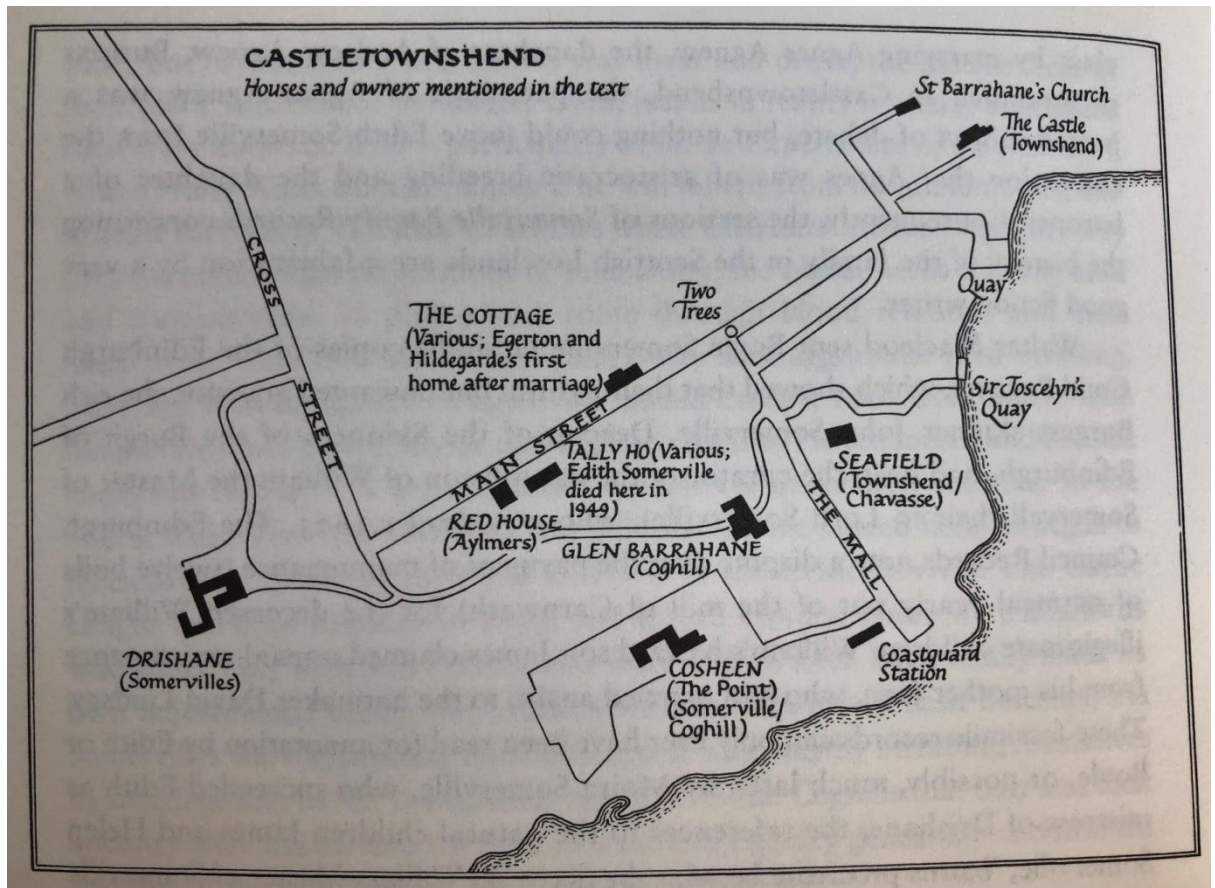
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EDITH

A Novel

‘Only connect.’ – *Howards End* by E.M. Forster



Map of Castletownshend

Dramatis Personae

Edith Somerville (1858-1949) from Castletownshend in County Cork was one half of the bestselling Somerville and Ross writing partnership. In their day they were critically and commercially acclaimed, producing novels, short stories, travel books and journalism, with their three collections of *Irish R.M.* stories becoming the duo's most popular work. Edith was also a trained artist and illustrated their books.

Violet Martin (1862-1915) from Connemara in County Galway, who wrote under the pen name Martin Ross, was the other half of Somerville and Ross. She and Edith were second cousins. After her death, Edith continued to give her co-author status on new work, believing they were in regular contact through automatic writing and séances.

Ethel Smyth (1858-1944) was an English composer, a member of the women's suffrage movement who was jailed for her activities, and the first woman to be made a dame for services to music. She and Edith were close friends for a time following Martin's death.

Flurry Knox, a roguish horse-lover, memorably described as a "half-sir", is a key character in Somerville and Ross's *Irish R.M.* short stories.

Time

1921-1922

A guerilla war known at the time as the Anglo-Irish War, and later the War of Independence, has been fought for two-and-half years between the Irish Republican Army or IRA and the British administration in Ireland, ending with a truce in July 1921. Now, leaders on both sides are engaged in negotiations which pave the way for independence for most of Ireland in 1922, accepting partition in the north-eastern part of the country. But the ceasefire hasn't yet delivered peace. Parts of the country are lawless, with IRA flying columns treating it as an opportunity to re-arm and prepare for the resumption of warfare. And around Ireland people are forced to consider where their loyalty lies.

Chapter 1

Edith Somerville proceeds along Skibbereen's North Street, past the Town Hall with its broken clock face, her mind buzzing with errands. Family silver left in the Bank of Ireland safety deposit box. A birthday gift chosen for a godchild, despite the shops being light on stock because of the Troubles. Letters and packages posted, although no guarantee when they'll arrive with IRA interruptions to the postal service. She's earned herself some luncheon in the West Cork Hotel before setting off homewards. She enjoys a jaunt and is in high good humour as she makes her way towards the riverfront, the late September sunshine an added boost.

'Beggin' your pardon, Miss Somerville,' comes a voice from behind her. Apologetic. But undeniably an interruption.

Shirt sleeves rolled to the elbow, apron smeared, the butcher has darted out.

'What is it, Mattie?'

His Adam's apple works. 'C-c-could you... could you spare me a minute, your honour-ma'am? Inside in the shop?'

'Spit it out now, like a good fellow.'

He approaches, lowering his voice to a whisper. 'The Drishane account. Four months, it is, since 'twas settled.'

'Gracious me, Mattie, you shouldn't leave it so long. Have your boy drop in the bill the next time he's doing a delivery.'

'Won't you oblige me and step inside where we can talk in private, ma'am? It won't take up much of your time.'

She glances at the yellow premises with its black and white sign over the doorway.

Dwyer

Father & Son

Master Victuallers

In the window, trays of interleaved chops and sausage spirals are arranged, flies congregating around their moist pinkness. Sawdust lead from his boots back to the door, like a fairy tale trail of crumbs through the forest. A stray mongrel materialises to sniff at it.

As abruptly as a hunter refusing an easy jump, her serenity is ruffled. Perhaps it's his persistence. Or it might be a flash of foreboding. 'It's not convenient today, Mattie. Now do as I say and send in your bill.'

His voice is somewhat louder and a shade less humble. 'We've handed it in at the kitchen door over and over, Miss Somerville. Mrs O'Shea says she's passed it on to Mr Somerville and what more can she do? Two weeks ago, I took the bull by the horns and went up meself. Waited about for a word with Mr Somerville. He wrote me out a cheque there and then, so he did, and I lodged it the self-same day. But the bank wouldn't honour it. Said the cheque was...' A mumble.

Colour floods Edith's face. That word she couldn't quite catch sounded like worthless. Lately, Cameron has become evasive. When the post does manage to get through, she has noticed a shiftiness in her brother. Anything resembling a bill is jammed, unopened, in his pocket.

A rag and bone cart jangles by, churning up mud. A customer exits the shop and dawdles past, not troubling to hide her curiosity. One of the Finnegan girls, if she's not mistaken. How much has the chit overheard?

Edith hooks Mattie Dwyer with her gaze. 'There must be some misunderstanding. Never mind, I'll settle the account on the spot. If I may, I'll take you up on that offer of a few moments in private on your premises.'

‘I wouldn’t put you to the trouble if the bill hadn’t shot up so high, ma’am. It’s an honour to have the Somerville account, like me father before me.’

She makes a chopping gesture. Stop discussing our business in public, says her gloved hand.

Almost bowing, he stands back, and she precedes him into the shop. Fitches of bacon dangle by their fat outer sides from hooks on the ceiling.

‘Keep an eye on things, Pat,’ he tells a youth in a striped apron behind the counter. ‘Mrs Nagle’s cook will be in shortly to place her order. She’ll want three pounds of rashers and half a dozen rings of black pudding, at least. Make a start, parcel them up.’

Dwyer parts a curtain and ushers Edith into a nondescript room overlooking the back yard. Beneath the window is a table. Dwyer dusts off one of two chairs beside it and holds its back, inviting her to sit. He does not presume to occupy the remaining one. Edith stares through a grimy net curtain at the butcher boy’s delivery bicycle. If Cameron was caught short, why didn’t he borrow from her? She’s lent him cash before. Granted, he owes her a sizeable sum already. But she’d advance him every last farthing rather than discover he’d handed over a duff cheque with a Somerville’s signature on it.

Behind her, at a sideboard covered in brown paper and balls of string, overspill from the shop, Dwyer rustles his accounts book. She hears him breathing through his mouth. And no wonder with those blocked nasal passages. An even more alarming possibility occurs to her. There may be overdue bills with other tradesmen. At the fishmonger’s and grocer’s.

Dwyer clears his throat. ‘Here it is. Colonel Somerville, Drishane House, Castletownshend.’ He hands the account to Edith.

Her eyes skim over the figures and snag on the total. An intake of breath, rapidly suppressed. How on earth did Cameron allow it to mount to such a level? A tower of pork chops as tall as the Fastnet Lighthouse wobbles before her eyes. Sausages laid in a line,

reaching all the way into Cork city. Who is eating all this meat? It's an age since they had a dinner party. The only house guest they entertained was her friend Ethel Smyth a year ago, and she insisted on paying a share of the household expenses.

Edith thought when the Great War ended, money worries would ease. But it's quite the reverse – things keep getting tighter. Hospitality stuttering to a halt is one among many economies they've had to practise. Not least because Ireland's been in a state of ferment for close on two years. Nobody wants to drive about after dark for the sake of some *duck a l'orange* and a couple of glasses of Merlot. Rents are difficult to prise out of the tenants. Drishane's paddocks have never held so few horses – horse coping has been a lucrative side-line for her but it's no longer generating much income. The estate's farm produce is unsaleable, with craters in the roads and blown-up bridges preventing goods from going to market. The IRA is bent on making roads impassable for the forces of law and order, but getting about is a nuisance for everyone else, too. As for the book business, once her cash cow – sales are modest. Her latest hasn't set the literary world on fire.

If times turn any harder they'll be reducing to vegetarianism, like that crank George Bernard Shaw. How her cousin Charlotte puts up with his peculiar eating habits, she'll never understand. An amusing man. But unsound.

All at once, Edith recalls giving Cameron her share of the butcher's bill. Whatever he spent her cash on, it certainly wasn't to pay the butcher. No wonder he refused to take a run into Skib this morning when she suggested it at breakfast. He must have known the bill wouldn't disappear into thin air.

Mattie Dwyer clears his throat. 'I trust everything is in order, your honour-ma'am?'

'Perfectly in order, Mattie. But it's somewhat steeper than I anticipated.' She knows to the last shilling how much her purse contains. 'I find I don't have enough cash on me at present and I've left my chequebook in Drishane. Let me make some inroads into it, at least.' She produces three banknotes and an assortment of crowns, half-crowns and florins

from her bag. ‘Count this up, please, and deduct it from the total. I’ll make arrangements to pay the remainder in due course.’

Except she does not know when that will be. Meanwhile, they must trust to the butcher’s good nature to continue meeting their orders. An ugly word occurs to her. The Somervilles must rely on his charity.

‘And may I check what’s on order with you for the weekend, Mattie?’

‘A mutton joint, ma’am, and some liver and kidney.’

‘Cancel them.’

‘Ah, now, there’s no need for that, Miss Somerville. I wouldn’t see you go without, above in Drishane. That wouldn’t be right at all. I dare say you’ll let me have what’s owing as soon as you find it convenient.’

‘There is no question of us going hungry, Mattie. The cook has fallen into wasteful habits, ordering meat we don’t need with just my brother and me echoing about in the house.’

‘Whatever you say, ma’am.’ He licks the pencil stub and enters the sum paid in his ledger.

It represents three-quarters of what’s due. And now she is stony broke.

*

Edith waits while the stable boy in the West Cork Hotel fetches her dog cart. Does she have a stray coin in her pocket to tip him? Her right leg throbs. She uses a walking stick at home but won’t carry one into Skibbereen, in case the townspeople say she’s ageing. Which is nonsense. She’s a youthful sixty-three – plenty of vim and vigour in her yet.

The boy, one of the Connors clan judging by those curls, has harnessed Tara and leads her back. The chestnut horse huffs out a breath in recognition, and she strokes the mare's forehead along the white flash. Quick to spook, Tara is wearing blinkers for this trip to town.

‘Any packages, Miss Somerville?’

‘Just myself, if you’ll lend me your arm.’ She allows him to hand her up the steps, although once she’d have sprung into the dog cart under her own steam. ‘Are you a Connors?’

He tucks the tartan blanket over her knees, attentive as a lady’s maid. ‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘Roddy’s boy?’

‘No, ma’am. He’s me uncle. Philip was me da.’

She remembers Philip, he died in prison. Caught fever a year into his sentence. He was jailed for something political. A hothead, they tried him out in the Drishane stables but he wouldn’t take orders.

Edith fumbles in a pocket and her gloved fingers close over a disc. A stray button? Too slender and even. Feels like a sixpence. She slides it into the boy’s palm. ‘Thank you, young man.’

He tugs his cap brim. ‘That’s a grand animal you have, Miss Somerville.’

‘Tara’s from a good bloodline.’

‘I hear tell you’ve a stable full of fine beasts above in Drishane.’

She frowns. What business is it of his? Without answering, she clicks her tongue at Tara, who springs forward. The tub-shaped vehicle clatters over the cobblestones and onto the street. By the bridge near the hotel, she meets a neighbour’s son, and pulls on Tara’s reins.

‘Need a lift, Harry?’

Lieutenant Harry Beasley removes his uniform cap. 'No, thank you, Miss Somerville. I've just arrived here. Haven't had a chance to sample Skib's delights yet.'

'How are things across the water?'

'I've been stationed in France. But from what I saw travelling through England last week, there are problems. Nothing that can't be sorted, of course. But shortages, definitely. Too few jobs, too many mouths.'

'Oh dear. Still, I'm sure your mama is delighted to have you home from your regiment. I expect the fatted calf was prepared.'

'She didn't know I was coming. Telegram wasn't delivered.'

'Ah, that's because the telegraph wires have been cut by the flying columns. It's to delay reinforcements when they engage the soldiers.'

He runs a palm over his sleek head. 'Things seem edgy in Skib.'

'Times are tense.'

'The place has taken a bit of a battering. I see the courthouse is burned out, and the Town Hall looks pretty shot up. Mother hadn't told me.'

'I suppose she didn't want to worry you. But Ireland's had a rough time of it.'

'Self-inflicted woes.'

'Skibbereen has received a fair amount of attention from the Crown forces, Harry.'

'What can people expect if they turn rebel? Anyhow, there's a lot of bored uniforms confined to barracks now.'

'Thank heavens for the ceasefire. Hopefully the two sides will knuckle down to peace talks soon. Once a deal is struck, the country will settle itself.'

'The savages are running wild, truce or no truce. They need to be culled. Mother goes to bed every night expecting to wake to a house in flames.'

'You know, the Black and Tans and Auxiliaries are just as bad as the republicans. The people are being terrorised.'

‘I say, Miss Somerville!’

‘It’s true. Ask your mama. Some think the Tans’ behaviour might persuade America to join the fight.’

‘Impossible. America would never side with Ireland against Britain. We were allies in the war. Great Britain needs to take a firmer hand. Swamp the country with troops and crush resistance. That’s the only language rebels understand.’

‘Hmm. Well, I must be pushing along. Oh, Harry, if you happen to know anyone in the market for a horse, I have a couple of beauties I’d be willing to part with. Hunters both. Stallions.’

‘I thought Mother said the hunt had been stopped.’

‘The IRA has forbidden it. Some nonsense about putting an end to the gentry’s days of riding roughshod over the Irish people’s land. Any damage was always paid for.’

‘I’m surprised at our sort, taking orders from those fellows.’

‘They left out poisoned bait for packs where the chase went ahead. Have you ever seen an animal die from a dose of strychnine? Agony for the poor hound. Anyhow, enjoy your leave, Harry.’

The Angelus bell begins tolling for noon. She waves, and guides Tara towards Main Street, with its honeysuckle- and fuchsia-coloured shop fronts. Chicken wire is pinned over windows facing the street. As they clop along, Edith remembers what Mike Hurley told her. The Sinn Féiners are doing American lecture tours. They have friends in high places there. No point in saying that to a young man in khaki, home on furlough.

A wagon delivering laundry to Mrs Nagle’s boarding house holds up the traffic. By rights, the driver ought to use the service entrance but he’s taking shortcuts. Edith prepares to wait it out. A couple of idlers lean against a hardware shop, and she notices them taking an interest in Tara, whispering together.

‘Move that nag of yours. We’ve a train to catch.’ The driver’s head emerges from a yellow motor car in front.

Edith watches. A chauffeur, judging by the peaked cap.

‘Sure what’s stopping you? You could sail an ocean liner down this road,’ shouts the laundryman.

From habit, Edith casts an eye over the dray horse between the shafts of his delivery cart. It looks half-starved. She can’t abide people mistreating animals. Urchins scamper over, pointing and jostling at the chugging motorcar. She didn’t know they came in such a colour. Now, the passenger door flings open and a man steps out. He paces up and down the footpath, watch in hand. An American, by the looks of him. No Irish or Englishman would wear a coat woven from such violently checked cloth.

Enough is enough. She swings Tara around the blunt-nosed motorcar, past the delivery cart, keeping a sharp eye out for pedestrians – the townspeople are demons for stepping onto the road without looking first. Beyond Skibbereen and heading east, she has five miles of obstacle-strewn country lanes hedged by flaming furze to negotiate. But with a horse which knows the way home, there is time to consider Cameron’s behaviour. Her indignation against him simmers. He’s always had an irresponsible streak but instead of fading over time it has intensified. Perhaps it’s more apparent since he retired from the Army two years ago, and is living fulltime with her in Drishane. That squirmer with Dwyer is due directly to her brother.

Remembering a pit in the middle of the road near the O’Mahony farm, its danger camouflaged by branches, she climbs down to lead Tara past. Cameron is in a financial pickle, she realises – the signs were there all along but she’s been slow to detect them. And the disruption to the postal service has allowed bills to mount. Timmy the Post works like a Trojan to scramble through, but he’s only human. She climbs into the cart again and Tara whizzes along, eager for the paddocks.

Ahead, a man is standing by the side of the narrow road. He's in his late twenties, wearing knee-high riding boots and a hacking jacket. There's something familiar about him. She squints at his face but he's bending over, adjusting a boot strap. Just as they are parallel, a flash of autumn sunlight blinds her. They bowl past without her catching a clear sight. Yet the prickle of perspiration against her hairline and in her armpits identifies him. Her body has recognised this man.

No, it's not possible.

It can't be who she thinks it is.

She drives on in a daze.

Martin speaks. 'I saw him, too.'

Edith knows the voice is inside her head. That Violet Martin, otherwise known as Martin Ross – friend, cousin, literary collaborator – isn't here with her in the dog cart. She's dead and buried – gone almost six years now. Even so, their conversations help her to tease out dilemmas.

'Perhaps it was a figment of my imagination,' suggests Edith.

'And perhaps not. Anyway where's the harm?'

The bend for home appears ahead, followed by her first sight of the sea, a hat ribbon on the horizon. Edith continues her conversation with Martin, who isn't there, except in her heart.

'Something will have to be done about Cameron, Martin.'

'Cameron's always hidden from unpleasantness.'

'He simply can't leave bills unpaid. Above all, he can't do it here, where we live. Tongues will wag. They may be flapping already. The family has to live up to its good name.'

'Cameron's Cameron. He'll never change.'

'He must.'

‘You know what you have to do, Edith.’

‘He can’t be left in charge. I thought he could. But I was wrong.’

Edith waits for a denial, a defence of Cameron.

A sigh, whisper faint. It’s corroboration.

When Martin doesn’t speak, Edith does. ‘I’m going to have to do something about him.’

She needs to know how bad things are. A thought occurs to her. One so dreadful that her vision blurs. Has the staff been paid? Or is a backlog building up for Mike Hurley, Philomena Minihane, Mrs O’Shea and Jeremiah O’Mahony? And for the others they use occasionally from the village? She shakes her head to dislodge the appalling possibility. Even Cameron wouldn’t be so irresponsible.

Would he?

Chapter 2

Edith is unpinning her hat as the luncheon gong sounds. It conjures up her brother on the staircase – punctuality was drummed into them from childhood.

Cameron's expression brightens. Only two years separate them and they've always been friends. 'Hello Peg, I thought you were intending to lunch in the West Cork.' He hurries downstairs. 'Good of you to come back. Never much cared to eat alone.'

Edith knows Cameron misses the companionship of military life as much as its certainties. But she's in no mood to be sympathetic. She tosses her hat on the hall stand and pats her hair. 'I did mean to eat out but there was a change of plan.'

'The Murphys will be inconsolable. They depend on the celebrated authoress making an appearance now and again in their dining room – raises the tone of the place. That hotel must be a goldmine for them. It's always heaving whenever I stick my head in. Shall we sit up? The gong's gone.'

'I'll come through directly I wash my hands. Mustn't keep Philomena waiting – the servants have enough to put up with, I suspect.'

'Oh dear. You're using Mama's precise tone of voice when she had a bone to pick with someone. Me, usually.'

That pulls her up short. If he thinks she's attacking him it will prove counterproductive. This situation requires diplomacy.

Just then, Philomena Minihane stomps by carrying a tray. Their housemaid always walks as though she's wearing Wellington boots.

'Shan't be a jiffy, Chimp.' Deliberately, Edith uses her pet name for him. 'By the way, I collected our post in Skib. Couple of letters for you. Left them on the table there.'

Edith washes off the grime from her morning's business in the downstairs cloakroom and joins her brother in the dining room. It's excessive, just the two of them eating here in

lofty splendour, but neither likes to break with tradition. As soon as Edith is seated, Philomena serves steaming soup from a tureen. Her stomach gurgles at the smell.

‘You must be hungry after gadding to Skibbereen and back in a morning,’ says Cameron. ‘Any news from the bright lights?’

Philomena tracks between Edith and Cameron with a basket, offering thinly-sliced toast triangles. Surprised, Edith glances up at her small face crowded with features. It’s a face she knows as intimately as her own.

‘Mrs O’Shea wasn’t able to bake rolls this morning, Miss Edith. The range is acting up again.’

‘We really must have that looked at. Thank you, Philomena, that will be all.’

Alone now, Edith assesses Cameron. He doesn’t come across like a man on his uppers. Look at him, buttering his toast without a care in the world. ‘Any news in your letters?’

‘Weekend shooting party over Ballycotton way’s been cancelled. English guns won’t travel on account of the Troubles.’

‘How disappointing.’

‘Can’t be helped.’

‘How are we fixed as regards bills, Cam? Keeping our heads above water?’

A wave of his hand. An attempt at bravado. ‘Nothing out of the ordinary. Leave them to me to sort out.’

‘But are you taking care of them?’

He blinks. ‘Don’t quite follow you.’

‘Or are you crumpling them up? Throwing them in the wastepaper bin?’

He wets his lips, about to speak. Reconsiders. Lifts his soup spoon and manages a few mouthfuls of oxtail.

She presses the starched linen napkin against her mouth. ‘The bills aren’t going to be abracadabra-ed away in a puff of smoke, Cam. We need to work out how to meet them. I was accosted by the butcher on the street in Skibbereen, in full view of every corner boy. He mentioned an account of four months’ standing.’

‘I don’t remember any bill from Dwyer.’

‘He’s been sending it in, week after week.’

‘No, I expect it went astray. Can’t rely on the post these days.’

‘His boy hands it in at the kitchen door. You know that perfectly well.’

His colour heightens. ‘Stop hectoring me, Edith. You don’t have the right.’

She concentrates on her soup, trying to work out how best to proceed. Cameron may be risking cash he can ill afford on the Stock Exchange. The men in her family have always had a taste for financial speculation.

A tap, the door opens, and Philomena backs in with a platter. At once, Edith’s expression turns neutral, as does Cameron’s.

‘Thank you, Philomena. Leave it on the sideboard and I’ll serve us.’

‘Sure, whatever you like, Miss Edith. If that suits you it suits me. I’ve plenty to be getting’ on with. There’s lovely fresh peas from the kitchen garden to go with Mrs O’Shea’s fish pie.’

A soft thud and the door closes again. Edith rises and scoops a helping of fish pie onto a plate, adds some vegetables and places his luncheon on the tablecloth in front of Cameron. In the process, she rests her hand on his shoulder. ‘Come on, Chimp. Let’s put our heads together. Any ideas? How about your Army pension, could you funnel a little more of that into the estate?’

He stares at the plate. ‘That’s a drop in the ocean when it comes to Drishane.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You seem to imagine I’m in receipt of a massive pension from His Majesty’s grateful government. Quite the contrary. Modest is the best description. And it doesn’t stretch far enough.’

Nonplussed, Edith fetches her own plate and sits down. A brooding atmosphere seeps out through the dark green wallpaper. If only Cameron had married an heiress. He never even made a serious try at bagging one. Either of the Payne-Townshend girls would have been perfect for him. Not only related to the Somervilles, so the right sort, but wealthy in their own right. It seems positively sinful those fortunes left the family. Her second brother, Aylmer, could afford to help, having had the good sense to court a wealthy widow. But it’s possible he feels tapped once too often. In any case, he and Emmie live in England and are distant – both geographically and mentally – from Drishane’s expenses. There are three other boys, and a sister, Hildegarde, but none of them is flush. And they have their own families to consider.

Only she and Cameron never married. There was no requirement for Edith to do so, unless she could pull off a suitable match, which she didn’t manage. A few offers were made but none deemed fitting by Papa and Mama. She shed tears at the time but it’s water under the bridge now. However, Cameron has neglected his duty. He neither bagged an heiress to buttress their house, nor provided an heir to inherit it.

‘Plenty of chaps in the next generation. One of them can take the place on,’ he always says, at any mention of an heir.

But why would they want to be saddled with it? Especially if they didn’t grow up in the house, learning to love its idiosyncrasies? His logic is self-serving. Very well. If her brother lacks the gumption to behave like a responsible Master of Drishane, he’ll have to hand over the reins to her. He can be governor in name. But she’ll be the one who makes sure the family seat is passed on intact to the next generation.

‘This isn’t good enough, Cam. Somervilles have always paid their way. You’re letting the side down.’

‘And I suppose you’re the resident expert?’

‘At least I care about doing the right thing. All you seem to care about are your own selfish pleasures.’

‘Pleasures? Stuck here in the middle of nowhere with all sorts of blackguard behaviour happening under our noses? Believe me, if it was pleasure I was after, I wouldn’t look to Castletownshend. I’m fed up with Ireland and her endless quarrels.’

Silence settles. Cutlery scrapes on bone china. Edith realises the conversation has taken an unfortunate turn. If they start talking politics an almighty row will brew up. Covertly, she watches her brother at the head of the table. He has extravagant tastes. But even Cameron must realise the well has run dry. Granted, retrenchment is challenging. Papa struggled with it too. But Cameron only has himself to consider, whereas Papa had the burden of settling five sons into careers and making arrangements for two daughters. Not that she required much arranging, she aimed to be self-financing from the outset. Earned her first money at the age of sixteen, designing greeting cards.

‘Chimp, frugalities are needed. Let’s just face up to it and introduce them.’

‘I really don’t see how I can frugalise any further.’

‘In that case, there’s no help for it – we’ll have to sell something.’

‘Land?’

‘Certainly not! There’s been enough of that already. You’d have to let it go for half nothing and then it’s gone for good. No, I was thinking of the houses in the Mall.’

‘Your retirement nest egg.’

She shrugs, as if it’s irrelevant. For years, Edith has been using her literary earnings to buy up properties in the village, amassing a modest portfolio. She rents the houses to

suburbans who clamour to stay in Castletownshend during the sailing season, and sometimes persuades a member of their extended family to take out a lease.

Cameron strokes his moustache. 'It might be the answer, Peg. If you don't mind letting one or two of them go.'

Outrage flares at the easy way he accepts her sacrifice. Before she can help herself, Edith exclaims, 'It most certainly is not the answer! It's a stopgap. I won't get one-quarter of the true value, with the state of the country. Cameron, you must go through the household accounts with me and put everything on an honest footing. This may be your house but it's my home and I work bally hard to help keep it going. Shutting me out is unjust!'

Crimson patches his cheeks. 'I loathe this blasted old heap! I'm only living here because you nagged me into it. Told me it's my duty as the eldest son. I'd gladly hand it over to Aylmer, or Boyle, or any of the boys who'd take it off my hands. But none of them will touch it. They've more sense. The tin it costs to keep the house running beggars belief. And you could sink your life savings into the estate without making a jot of difference.'

'Do stop exaggerating, Cam. The house is sound. It simply needs some maintenance. As for running costs, the servants have taken a cut in wages, as well you know.'

'We still have to feed them and keep everything up to scratch. This place is a swamp – gobbles up every last pound in a man's possession, gives an almighty belch and stands ready for more. But you've always been blind to its faults, Peg. Grandpapa made a pet of you and filled you full of stories about the importance of the Somervilles holding tight to Drishane. Trying to do right by it made Papa miserable.'

'At least he didn't sell off fields for ready cash. You don't even drive a good bargain.'

'The land is mine to dispose of as I see fit.'

'It was given to you to hold in trust – not peddle, to supplement your income.'

‘For two pence I’d put the entire estate, house included, on the market tomorrow. Sell it all, lock, stock and barrel.’

‘You can’t mean that, Cam!’

‘Try me.’ A curious note spikes his voice. Almost of relief.

‘Do you really want to go down in family lore as the Somerville who let it all slip through your fingers?’

‘The blasted family myth! Just because you’ve bought into it doesn’t mean I have to. Anyway, who made you the voice of my conscience? You look to yours and I’ll look to mine.’

Edith mangles her fingers. The conversation isn’t going the way she expected. She presumed Cameron would be touchy enough, proud enough, to wince at the thought of The Somerville Who Lost Drishane as his legacy.

‘Chimp, don’t let’s fall out. We’re on the same side, remember? Together, we can handle this.’

‘The best way to handle this is to sell up and find a nice serviced apartment in Kensington or Westminster.’

‘You’d hate it.’

‘You might. I wouldn’t.’

‘I know the estate is going through a bit of a drought. And you’re bound to be worried, as the head of the family. Why don’t we think about ways to economise? Hold our nerve, stand our ground?’

‘Cutting corners won’t do the needful, I’m afraid. That horse has long since bolted.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You might as well know the truth. We’re in a bad way. I’m in a bad way. We could lose Drishane.’

Lose Drishane.

The room blurs. She hears a rushing sound like applause in her head.

The next thing she knows, Cameron is holding a glass of water to her lips. ‘Here, drink something. I think you may have passed out, old girl.’

Trembling, she manages a few sips. When the mist clears, she sees her cutlery has been knocked to the floor. Cameron picks it up.

‘I’m all right. I just had a bit of a turn. Really, I’m fine.’

‘You don’t look fine.’

Her mind begins to recalibrate. She knew they were in a tight spot but not how bleak their prospects were. She hasn’t taken such a knock since her hunting days. With an effort of will, she sits up straight. ‘Cam, what I need from you now is to know exactly where we stand.’

Cameron retreats to the sideboard, pours himself a brandy, and tosses it off in a single swallow. ‘Will you have one?’

‘No thank you.’ She dips her napkin in her water tumbler and presses it against her right temple. ‘Why don’t we strike while the iron is hot? Spend the afternoon going through the household accounts?’

He lifts the decanter again. ‘Come on, Peg, what’s the use? We’re survivors of a bygone age, you and me. Let’s just chuck it over. You could live with me in London – we could share the expenses there just as well as here. And we’d have some capital from the sale.’

‘I could never leave Drishane.’

‘Why not? It’s a draughty old house with rats under the floorboards and walls dripping with damp. It’s in the middle of nowhere. And the natives don’t really want us here – you know they don’t. However much they pile on the flattery.’

She raises a hand, palm outwards. ‘I won’t listen to another word. We’ve been in Ireland nearly as long as the potato. We belong here. Now, let’s order coffee and get down to brass tacks about finances.’

‘Not right now, Peg. Fact of the matter is, I promised to take a run down to the Castle this afternoon. Give the place the once over for the Townshends. You can’t rely on caretakers. Sooner or later they take liberties. Believe I’ll stretch my legs in that direction now.’

‘Chimp, we can’t carry on like this. You’re behaving as if it’s ill-bred to discuss money. Please stay and thrash it out with me.’

‘Sorry, old thing, can’t oblige. We’ll do it later.’

‘When later?’

‘Soon. Although, I give you fair warning, you won’t like what you hear.’ He sets down his empty brandy balloon, jams his hands in his pockets, and saunters towards the door.

Edith knows this invented engagement on behalf of their cousins from the Castle is a deferral tactic. Her brother is behaving like a twelve-year-old whose pocket money has been withheld for smashing a pane of greenhouse glass.

Her face sinks into her hands. And to think she imagined that scene with Mattie Dwyer was the worst the day could throw at her. By and by, she rallies and rings the bell for Philomena.

‘Was that Master Cameron I saw going out without his coffee, Miss Edith? It’s not like him.’

‘We’re skipping coffee today, Philomena. You may clear the table now.’

Edith leaves her to it. In need of fresh air, she throws on a battered old hat and jacket – her Skibbereen clothes are too good for the bluebell woods – and stands on the back step,

whistling. An answering commotion, and her foxhound bolts up. Tongue panting, he wags his tail, spraying water in all directions.

‘Were you paddling in the horses’ water trough again, Dooley?’

She marches along, Dooley trotting at her heels. As she walks, she swipes at clumps of thistles and dandelions with her ivory-handled walking stick. It belonged to her grandfather, Master of Drishane when she was growing up. The Big Master, he was called. Cameron is right. From the outset, she was Grandpapa’s pet. He used to hold her hand taking prayers every morning – staff, family and guests alike assembled for the ritual. It was then she began to feel she occupied a privileged position within the family. Edith could never hope to inherit, despite being the firstborn – too many brothers ahead of her in the pecking order – but she felt herself charged with the role of guardian. A sense of responsibility for Drishane House and the Somerville position in Castletownshend was bred into her.

Cameron, however, is willing to sell the family seat for a song – see it turned into a rest home for Roman Catholic priests, she shouldn’t wonder. Four fulltime staff out of a job, never mind the occasional workers. As for Edith, she’d be forced to make her home among dull English people – worthy, granted, but lacking any joy in life’s quirks.

Even the servants in Ireland have more poetry in them than her own sort in England. Only yesterday, Nora Treacy, who helps Mrs O’Shea with the rough work, told her she’d never marry. Edith took it with a pinch of salt since Nora was all of nineteen. Still, she was impressed by the scullery maid’s reasoning. ‘I had this off my Granny, ma’am,’ she said. ‘Two things every woman should keep from a man: a corner in her pocket and a corner in her heart. If you have to love, let you not do it extravagantly. But to my mind, if you’re not going to do it with a heart and a half, you’d best not do it at all. So I’m planning to stay single. Same as yourself, ma’am.’

Edith finds such conversations invigorating. It's their subtlety, unexpectedness, and the confidential nature of these exchanges. And, yes, the meeting of equals. Drishane's servants always retain something of their independence despite the economic relationship.

A swipe at a clump of nettles. Mrs O'Shea swears by nettle soup. Says there's nothing to beat it for taste. So far, they haven't had to stoop to adding it to the Drishane menu but anything is possible. For decades, it's been a struggle to balance the books, but robbing Peter to pay Paul or sending out an SOS to their brothers in England won't be sufficient this time, judging by Cameron's gloomy prognosis.

How disappointed Papa would be in Cameron. She feels a burst of compassion for her brother. Drishane is his birth right. But he didn't ask for it – it was just landed on him. And he's out of his depth.

'We have to find a new income stream, Dooley,' she tells the foxhound.

He yips, acknowledging that she's addressing him but too distracted by a variety of scents near a tree root to spare her his full attention. Sometimes, that's exactly how her brothers treat her.

A breeze whips against her legs. A blackbird opens its bill, a songburst in yellow. 'All shall be well,' said Martin, in their last automatic writing session. And maybe it will. Meantime, bills take no account of cash flow. There was a time when writing a shilling shocker with Martin was all it took to rustle up the readies. Those were the days. *An Enthusiast*, her latest, is racking up only modest sales. Does she even have another novel in her? Would Longman's bother to publish it? They must. 'Too late to teach an old dog new tricks,' she tells Dooley. Low in his throat, he growls. Perhaps he's picked up the scent of a woodland animal. He's a demon for chasing hedgehogs, never learns how much damage they can do.

Generally, exercise eases her mind. But today, the outdoors can't soothe her. Uphill, she labours, ignoring the ache which causes one leg to drag on the slope. If Martin was

with her, she'd say something to make Edith giggle, forgetting the pain. Martin is always with you, she reminds herself. Even so, there are days when her presence is not as vivid as Edith would like.

She whistles for Dooley, who has skulked off into the undergrowth. A series of yaps, a bustle of paws and he reappears to rub himself against her calf, intelligence sparkling in his black eyes. She stoops to pat his smooth coat, white but for an autumn leaf patch over one eye. 'I wouldn't want to go to Heaven if there were no dogs in it,' she tells him, and he nuzzles her palm. Fortunately, Martin is reassuring on that score. Every pet dog she's ever owned will be waiting to greet her when she presents herself at the Pearly Gates.

Edith straightens, pain jolting through her right knee. The nip of sciatica is a legacy from a lifetime spent riding side-saddle. Even when ladies began to ride astride, she always declined to change her habits. It felt improper. To rest her leg, she sits on a tree stump, the remnants of a diseased elm. A gardener took a saw to it on Papa's orders. Papa hated losing trees. 'Our job is to plant them not cut them down,' he used to say. Grandpapa was the same. But Cameron has no money for tree-planting, and nor does she, for that matter.

Overhead, a flock of pale-bellied wild geese in wedge formation forge steadily ahead, arriving in Ireland to hibernate for the winter. The wind increases in intensity, causing the boughs above her to creak. She slides off the tree base and prepares to press on.

And then it happens. She hears a snatch of song.

In seventeen hundred and forty-four

The fifth of December – I think 'twas no more

At five in the morning by most of the clocks,

We rode for Kilruddery to try for a fox.

She closes her eyes, sensing his presence as the singer draws closer. There's his horsy smell and the tang of fresh sweat. No Paris colognes for him. So, it was Flurry Knox there on the side of the road!

'What's wrong with you, gerrill? You look off colour.'

She allows herself a smile. Girl, indeed.

A sideways glance is slid at the slim figure with muscular legs next to her, in case staring might scare him away. He's holding his bowler hat in one hand and a riding crop in the other, tucked under his armpit. His hair is slick against the outline of his head, and his eyes make you think he's up to no good. Just as she first sketched him all those years ago. If his likeness were used for a pack of cards, he'd be the Jack of Spades.

'Advancing years, Flurry. That's what has me off-colour. And a few other troubles besides.'

'Come on out of that, gerrill. You're a long way off from the finishing line – there's decades in you yet. Take a stroll with me. You'll feel the better of it. And sure, if you tell me your problems, who knows but I might be able to help? Two heads are better than one.'

Edith falls into step beside him. He replaces the bowler, defying gravity with its tilt at the back of his head, and whistles a jaunty tune. *Hunting The Hare*, if she's not mistaken. She's cheered just having him beside her. It's impossible to be in Flurry Knox's company without feeling optimistic.

'So what's eating at you, Edith?'

'I hardly know where to begin. But it's serious. Maybe too serious for me to fix.'

He makes no reply. All the same, she knows he's listening. He has that intent air – the one that transfixes him when the hounds are straining at the leash, immediately before a blast from the horn.

'Mind you, you've helped enormously with my finances over the years, Flurry. You patched the roof, built a glasshouse, paved the avenue and paid my taxes.'

‘Steady, now. Don’t be accusing me of doing an honest day’s work or my reputation might never recover. How did I manage such impressive toil?’

‘The *Irish R.M.* stories. The public lapped them up. There now, I’ll give you a fat head.’

His grin stretches from ear to ear, dislodging his bowler. He catches it gliding off and tucks it under his arm. ‘The public has excellent taste, Edith, if I say so myself.’

They reach the viewing point at the crest of the hill, the beat of the sea below them and the bay spread out as if for their particular pleasure. There’s Horse Island, and Reen Point – America is the next parish over. In the harbour, four fishing vessels bob on the choppy water. Edith sighs with contentment. She can’t imagine Flurry anywhere but here. He belongs to the barony of West Carbery. Both of them do. When she has looked her fill, she surveys her companion. In the quarter-century since she and Martin talked Florence McCarthy Knox into life, he isn’t a day older or a hair greyer. Martin is lying in St Barrahané’s churchyard and Edith’s hunting days are long behind her, but Flurry remains capable of springing onto a flighty mount at a moment’s notice and charging off in the thick of a foxhound pack.

He could be her son now. She reflects. Is she sorry she never married and produced a flesh and blood son rather than this literary version? She is not. He’s more her son than Martin’s, of that she’s certain. Flurry shares her appreciation for horseflesh. His fondness for the hounds is another characteristic she embedded in him. She can’t lay claim to his financial shiftiness – she prefers paying her bills, on the whole, as did Martin. That unsteadiness blended with charm was borrowed from several of her brothers.

Her eyes linger on Flurry’s profile. What is there of Martin in him? His sense of humour, perhaps. Martin had a serious veneer but burst into hoults of laughter at the least provocation.

‘What’s bothering you, Edith? You know you can tell me anything. I’m unshockable.’

‘Money worries, Flurry.’

‘To the seventeen divils I pitch them.’ He snaps his fingers. ‘I wouldn’t let them weigh on me, indeed and I wouldn’t. Money comes and money goes. That’s just the way of it.’

‘Aren’t you the airy-fairy one, you and your Flurryisms. It’s easy to be flippant about money when you’ve no need of it.’

‘Here’s what you do. Find a decent colt, buy it for a song and sell it for a king’s ransom. That’ll take care of any cash shortages. Never fails for me.’

‘It’s not that simple any more. The horse coping business is in a poor way, between the Troubles and the public’s taste for motor cars.’

He flashes a scandalised look. ‘The day an Irishman of any class or creed loses interest in horseflesh is the day the world stops turning.’ He scratches his leg with the riding crop. ‘You could always write another *Irish R.M.* book. Them’s the boys that were your crock of gold.’

‘Out of the question. I haven’t the heart for it with Martin gone. It took the two of us to catch the froth on those frolics and shape it into stories.’ She bites her lip. ‘The truth is I can’t manage it on my own.’

‘Sure where’s the good in your automatic writing sessions with herself, the two of you colloguing together, if you can’t turn a profit from them? Rustle up a few hunting stories?’

Edith suspects a twist to his words. ‘I won’t be mocked, Flurry Knox.’

His smile is sly, and she knows she was right to doubt him.

‘I have it, Edith. Why not go back to some of the stories the two of you wrote together, back in the day, and give them a new lease of life? Use them as scaffolding for a play, maybe? They say there’s a fortune to be made on the stage.’

‘Adapt *the Irish R.M.* for theatre?’ She’s surprised. What does Flurry Knox know about the world of greasepaint and footlights?

‘Yes, for the stage. Why not?’ Grinning, Flurry slaps his hat back on his head.

Edith is seized by a burst of enthusiasm to match Flurry’s. It seems not just possible but probable. ‘Once, Martin said we should grind West Carbery’s bones to make our bread. Back when we were starting out. I can do it again, I know I can! How would you like to strut across the London stage, Florence McCarthy Knox? Are you ready for applause from a metropolitan audience?’

‘Sure I don’t mind at all if it gets you out of a hole, gerrill.’

Chapter 3

A noise wakens Edith. She realises it's Dooley, who is standing on the bed and growling. At first, she thinks it's just this old house disturbing him – like her, Drishane beds down for the night with snaps and groans. But then she hears a smack against gravel. Footsteps outside. A snarl rumbles from Dooley. 'Hush, boy,' she whispers. Throwing back the covers, she shuffles barefoot to the window, the foxhound bristling at her ankles. Cautious, she parts the edge of a curtain. Frost laced on the windowpanes blurs the outside world. She squints past it to where moonlight floods the courtyard. Her eyes patrol the perimeters. No moving shadows.

But perhaps any trespassers are taking cover? They may have seen the curtain move. Maybe she's being watched. She waits, shallow breathing. Her toes curl up, trying to escape the icy floor. She can no longer feel her feet. Dooley skitters over to snuffle beneath the door to the landing.

By and by, she uncoils, too. Perhaps she misheard. It might have been a night creature hunting, or the wind whipping a tree branch against a windowpane. Everyone's nerves are stretched to breaking point, with the country in a state of lawlessness and no credible authorities to complain to about it. She might as well go back to bed.

Dooley remains at his post by the bedroom door, stubby tail erect. Edith considers her little Cerberus. To be on the safe side, she should investigate downstairs. She pokes her feet into a pair of slippers, wraps a wool dressing gown around her, and lifts the torch from her bedside table. She could find her way blindfolded about this house but it seems prudent to bring it. Dooley keeps his mistress in his sights. 'Come on, boy,' she whispers, and he pants with excitement but knows not to bark. Since a puppy, he has always read her moods.

She eases open the door and steps into the passageway. Mrs O'Shea and Philomena sleep at the top of the house. No sound from that direction. Her brother is a few doors away from her along the corridor, but short of a cavalry charge through their rose garden, nothing rouses him. Should she knock on his door? She decides to conduct her own investigation first. Back stairs or main staircase? The back stairs lead to the kitchen, but the formal rooms are more likely to be targeted by intruders. She chooses the back stairs. Discretion is the better part of valour.

Before entering the closed-in staircase, she stands and listens. Her concentration is fixed on identifying any unfamiliar noise. Dooley quivers, inclined to bolt downstairs, but knows he needs his mistress's permission. 'Stay, boy.' The house strikes her as intent. Does it hear her pattering heartbeat? A clock ticks. Cameron's snores whistle along the corridor. Mice rustle and scamper beneath the floorboards. Or rats, possibly – Cameron complained about them earlier. Usually, the dogs keep them under control but it might be time to lay poison again.

Shivering, Edith wonders if she's overreacting to an isolated sound. These are jumpy times. She'll manage no work tomorrow on her play if she tromps about the house at all hours. Just as she's on the point of returning to bed, a horse whinnies. She swivels her head. Sounds like Trumpeter. She decides to check the locks, and switches on her torch, knowing it would be foolhardy to tear about in the dark. She's had her fair share of hunting spills down the years but broken bones at her age take longer to heal.

Edith follows its tapered beam and begins to descend. Her enlarged shadow throws up a distorted version of her silhouette. It occurs to her she has all the components for an atmospheric painting – a woman, her shadow, and a loyal foxhound keeping her company in the fastness of night. In the kitchen, nothing is out of place. She plays the torch along the windows and the back door, and is satisfied. She makes her way to the morning room,

which has French doors out to the lawn. That would be an easier entrance to break through than the front door. Once again, she shines the pool of light against locks. All is intact.

She and Dooley pass through the inner hall, where she flicks the torch towards the face of her parents' grandfather clock, a wedding gift sixty-four years ago which continues to keep perfect time. Lasting better than her, in point of fact. It's almost two-thirty in the morning. The witching hour has passed. But the night has time left for mischief, all the same. This room leads to an outer hall dominated by a massive, nail-studded front door. She plays the torchlight along its bolts and hinges. Nothing appears to be tampered with. Satisfied, she flashes it to the windows on either side of the doorway, which always remind her of squinting eyes framing a nose. Everything looks secure. Dooley conducts his own checks, sniffing along the lip of the door, a grumbling sound issuing from his throat. Inspection complete, he scampers off somewhere to continue his own investigations.

Edith's mouth feels dry. A glass of water and she'll return to bed. En route, she passes the glory hole, and notices its door is ajar. To be sure to be sure, as Mrs O'Shea likes to say, she sends the torchlight tiptoeing around an assortment of boots, rods, fishing baskets, umbrellas and sketching equipment. A three-year-old child would struggle to find a hiding place among such an excess of paraphernalia. Dooley reappears and barrels in, knocking over a discarded kite. She leaves him to root about.

Propping the torch on the kitchen table, she scans for matches, and finds them on a shelf on the dresser beside a pair of lamps. Soon, a yellow glow from one of the lamps reveals a shadowy kitchen. By day, it is homely – not that she often sets foot in it uninvited. The kitchen is the cook's domain. By night, it looks stark. Barred shutters at the windows give it a barracks appearance. Her eye lands on the range used for cooking and heating. Its warmth draws her forward, and she opens the range door to the fire inside, riddling the embers. Even in the middle of the night, the kitchen is cosy compared with the draughty hallways and corridors she's been wandering. She'll develop a chill in her

kidneys from this night's work if she's not careful. Perhaps she should forget about water and heat some milk.

As Edith starts in the direction of the pantry, a loose stone outside is driven along the yard. Mid-step, she falters, a row of tiny hairs quivering against the back of her neck. This time, she distinctly hears footsteps. Her blood flow reduces to a sluggish trickle. The steps approach one of the windows. Metal against stone suggests their owner is wearing hobnailed boots. Crunch, crunch, crunch. A man, and no lightweight. Just one set of feet. He walks directly up to the window and stops. He must see the lamplight and know somebody in the household is awake. Is it her imagination or can she hear breathing?

Paralysed, she waits. Her eyes never leave the shutter fastening. It can't be opened from the outside – while the glass is intact. But removing a square of glass causes little difficulty to the determined housebreaker. She's watched her brothers do it to gain access to a locked boathouse: they wrap an elbow in sacking and push in the glass. A small pane shattering doesn't make much racket.

Dimly, she becomes aware of scuffling noises from the glory hole, punctuated by growling and rapid bursts of barking, but is too focused on the trespasser to pay Dooley any attention. Whatever he's up to, he'll have to deal with himself. Now the footsteps begin their stamping again, this time ranging along the outer wall of the kitchen. As though searching for admission. There is a slit in the shutter nearest to her, where the wood has split. The footsteps stop there. After an eternity, a dark shape flits in front of the gap, moving away.

Belatedly, it occurs to her that she ought to cry out for help. Cam would come charging downstairs with some weapon or other. Not his Army gun, that was handed into the RIC barracks. All firearms had to be surrendered. Otherwise, there's a risk of them falling into rebel hands. But before Cam could arrive, the prowler might force an entry and use her as a hostage – he's just a few feet away whereas her brother is on another floor.

Besides, her throat has seized up. She's not certain she can squeeze out more than a croak. Where's Dooley when she needs him? She hears him barking and scuffling, still wrestling with something in the glory hole. The noise is enough to waken the dead, but the household slumbers on.

Crunch, crunch, crunch. The intruder has passed along the rear of the house and is now heading back to where she waits. He's taking quite a chance. Cam could throw open a window and fire a shot at him. This person doesn't know they have no guns. His confidence sends an adrenalin spike of fury coursing through Edith. Convulsively, her fingers tighten on the milk pan. If he does burst in, she'll clatter him with it.

After an eternity, the footsteps grow fainter. It sounds as if they are retreating across the stable yard, hurdling the gate at the end of it leading to the woods. Exhausted, she slumps into a seat. The thought of malignant forces on the Drishane estate is horrible. She ought to raise the alarm, organise a search of the grounds. But what if there is more than one trespasser and Cam is injured – maybe even killed? Her mind races, weighing alternatives. Leave well enough alone until the morning, she decides. All things considered, it's the safest course.

Drishane is too securely barricaded for any casual robber. Possibly, the footsteps belong to an advance scout. She'll talk to her brother in the morning, and together they can organise further precautions with Mike Hurley, Jeremiah O'Mahony, and any of the villagers willing to lend a hand. There's a thought. Will the villagers stand by them? It's hard to know whose side they're on. Face to face, they're courteous to the Somervilles. But their loyalties may lie elsewhere. The people are seething, between towns under curfew and fairs and meetings banned.

When a truce in the fighting was called two months previously, she hoped they were over the worst. Normal life might resume. Much of the country remains outside the law, however, and units of IRA men are still operating – particularly in Munster. The Royal

Irish Constabulary is depleted, with many constables calling it a day, while those digging in for their pensions are barricaded into barracks, police officers in name only. Last year, England sent over reinforcements – the RIC Auxiliaries, in their debonair Glengarry caps, but a bad situation was made worse with their wildness and tit-for-tat violence. As for the trigger-happy Black and Tans, if you weren't a rebel before meeting those soldiers, you'd be one for certain after an encounter with them. That's if you lived. Jeremiah O'Mahony's nephew was pulled over for not having a light on his donkey cart, taken away for being surly, and flogged near death with a strip of wire. No wonder the people feel rancour.

Thuds and crashes continue to burst from the glory hole.

'Whatever you're doing, stop it at once, Dooley,' she cries.

Edith decides to sit up and keep watch. Sleep is impossible now. At least Martin will help. She has assured Edith there are good spirits in heaven who care about Drishane and can be called upon in emergency. Family members, and so on. Edith feels the dull poke of pain in her hand. Why, she's still holding the milk pan. When she sets it down, she sees a ridge in her palm scored by the handle.

Dooley reappears, a swagger in his demeanour, and between his jaws a dead rat. He deposits it on the tiles and sits back on his haunches, tongue showing, dark eyes lambent.

'So that's what you've been busy with.'

He gives a triumphant yowl.

She tugs gently on one of his ears. 'Quite right, you deserve a prize. You've had rather more success with your unwanted visitor than I have with mine. Let's see what we can find in the pantry.'

Using coal tongs, Edith grasps the rat by its fat, furry middle and opens the range door, dropping it in. Next, she fetches a slice of chicken that seems to have been put by for tomorrow's lunch. Settling herself in Mrs O'Shea's armchair beside the range, she feeds it to Dooley from her hand, morsel by morsel. A final sniff at her fingers and lick of his

chops, and he hops onto her lap, circles twice, and settles down to sleep. The heat from his body spreads through Edith, a comfort to her racing mind. The house has escaped tonight – touch wood – but the family’s good name in the district won’t shield them forever. Sooner or later, rebels will arrive looking for horses, guns and money. She warms her hands on Dooley’s flanks. By and by, her eyes drift shut.

*

‘Saints preserve us, Miss Edith, you’re after giving me a desperate fright sitting there, so you are!’ It’s Philomena, first up to light the fires and carry tea on a tray to Cameron and Edith.

Edith blinks to absorb her surroundings. The previous night’s events return to her with a sour spurt of juice in her mouth. ‘Good morning, Philomena. I seem to have passed the night here.’ She stretches her neck and adjusts her position to massage it, shifting Dooley’s weight.

Just then, their cockerel crows.

‘Imagine being awake before Georgie. I haven’t been abroad this early since my hunting days.’

‘Did something happen, Miss Edith? What were you thinking of, sleeping down here?’

‘I’ll tell you once I’ve had my cup of tea. I’m parched.’

‘Miss Edith? What’s going on? Were we – did you hear something in the night?’

‘Tea first, please, Philomena. We’ll talk then.’

Philomena looks mutinous, but bustles about the flag-stoned kitchen. She pushes the kettle onto a hot plate on the range, ferrets for wood in the basket by the pantry door and

crashes open the shutters. Edith hears snatches of her complaint. ‘Catch your death of cold at that aul’ malarkey’ ... ‘not twenty-one anymore.’

Edith knows she ought to stand up to do some stretches, and her weary bones deserve soaking in a hot bath. But she can’t rustle up the energy to move quite yet. Dooley feels the same. He opens one eye, observes Philomena’s activity, and burrows down into his mistress’s lap. ‘My warrior,’ she croons, caressing his wiry fur. She’s conscious of Philomena’s shrewd glance but pretends not to notice.

‘You’d hand that animal the moon out of the sky if he asked you for it, Miss Edith.’

‘Dooley killed a king rat last night, a fellow as big as himself. I suppose there’s no sign of Master Cameron yet?’

‘Ah, sure, you won’t see hide nor hair of him till I hit the breakfast gong. He’s a man that’s fond of his *leaba*, so he is. You’d imagine he’d be used to early rising after the Army. But divil the bit of it. There’s days I think if breakfast was changed to eleven o’clock in the morning, it would suit Master Cameron just as –’

Enough is enough. Edith interrupts Philomena’s flow. ‘When you bring up his tea you might say I’d like a word with him before breakfast. As soon as he finds convenient. Tell him it’s important.’

Philomena restricts herself to a tight nod.

Oh Lord, thinks Edith, now she has a cross Philomena Minihane on her hands. And if they are to keep Drishane safe, they need the staff onside. A cup and saucer is handed to her. ‘You’re an angel. Make sure you have some tea, too. There’s nothing to beat it for starting the day.’

‘I have to see to Master Cameron first. Tea and hot water for shaving, he needs.’

Edith sips at the steaming brew. Philomena has added extra sugar, a welcome treat – they are meant to be economising on sugar, which is becoming hard to source. Dooley lays his front paws on her chest, pleading with every inch of his dear wee face. ‘Down, boy.’

You'll have your share.' He looks a shade doubtful, but obeys. She splashes some tea into the saucer and sets it on the floor.

Philomena treats herself to an unmistakeable sniff before leaving the room with Cameron's tray. Edith creaks out of the chair and hobbles to the nearest window. She peers outside, alert for some sign of unusual activity. A fastmoving shape catches her eye. It's Mike Hurley arriving for at work, bright and early, as usual. He lives with his family on Cross Street in the village, in the cottage where he was born. There's nothing Mike doesn't know about horses. He trained as a stable boy for the Dunravens at Adare Manor, but leapt at the chance to come home when Edith was able to take him on some years ago. She raps the window pane but he doesn't hear her. Wrenching open the sash window, she calls his name.

'Morning, Miss Edith. You're up with the lark. Did you want me to ready Tara for you? The road's worse than ever, mind you. Holes as big as bullocks. The boys have been busy. Must think there's a chance of the Tans or the Auxies coming this way on patrol.'

'No thank-you, Mike. That won't be necessary.' She beckons with a finger. 'There's something I need to ask you.' When he's standing right outside the window, she leans forward, voice lowered, forefinger against her lips. 'Are all the horses in their stalls? None missing?'

A flicker of alarm troubles his expression. 'I haven't checked them yet, miss. I'm just on my way in to them. Did something happen last night?'

'I believe there was an intruder on our property. I heard footsteps in the yard.'

'Are you all right, Miss Edith?'

'No harm done, I think. I'll have a word with you later, Mike, after I speak to Master Cameron. But please check everything carefully in the stables. And not just the horses. Look over the bridles, saddles, and so on. We shall have to think what to do about the horses. They're an incitement to the robber class.'

‘Right you be, Miss Edith.’

She tugs shut the window. Philomena returns while she’s fiddling with the catch on the sash.

‘The master says he’ll be down directly. Won’t you tell me what’s going on, miss? I know something’s not right.’

Edith hesitates. Maybe she should just tell Philomena. But paws skittering outside signal the arrival of Cameron’s dog Loulou, who hurtles into the room, rushing straight to Dooley’s empty saucer of tea. She gives the china an exploratory lap, more in hope than expectation. Dooley growls and Loulou backs under the table, trailing her plumed tail. The cream Pomeranian, only seven inches high, is dwarfed by the furniture. Dooley, more than twice her size, growls again to show who’s top dog.

‘Ignore him, Lou,’ says Edith. ‘Dooley, mind your temper.’

Where Loulou appears, Cameron is never far behind. He arrives now, scarlet in the face. To her surprise, he is still in his pyjamas and a navy woollen dressing gown. Childhood aside, Edith could count on one hand the number of times she has seen her brother in his night clothes, and still have fingers to spare.

Anxiety splinters his voice. ‘What’s this I hear about you sitting up all night?’

‘Why don’t we go into the morning room, Cam? We can talk there.’

A knock on the back door delays them. Edith and Cameron exchange tense glances while Philomena answers it, converses, and returns to the kitchen. ‘Mike Hurley says to tell you all present and correct, miss.’ An inhalation of breath. ‘He wouldn’t say what he meant by it.’

‘You’ll know soon enough, Philomena. I need to talk to Master Cameron first.’

Edith leads the way, to where the table is ready for breakfast and preparations for a fire are lying in the grate. Ignoring her protesting kneecaps, she hunkers down and strikes a

match. Paper twists catch fire instantly and begin sparking the wood. She hauls herself to her feet and meets her brother's eye.

'There was a man prowling about the stable yard last night, Cam.'

'Why the blazes didn't you call me?'

'I know, I should have. I think I must have been paralysed by fright.'

'If someone is loitering on our property after dark, you can be sure they're up to no good. You really ought to have woken me, Edith.'

'I woke up and thought I heard something, but convinced myself I was imagining things. When I couldn't get back to sleep, I went downstairs to check the locks and bolts. It was just a precaution. Honestly, if I'd believed there was someone I'd have knocked on your door and sent you down. Then when I did realise it, I just sort of froze. By the time I pulled myself together he was gone. So I thought I might as well let you have a night's sleep while you could. Because we have to assume ... I mean, I expect he'll be back tonight. You'll have to sit up.'

'I still think you should have woken me, old girl.'

'It was stupid of me, Chimp. But honestly, I believed the danger had passed. I'm not idiotic enough to tackle a gang of men singlehanded.'

'A gang? I thought you said one intruder.'

'Yes, just one. I think. Let me tell you what I heard.'

After Edith updates Cameron, he says, 'I've been expecting something of this nature.'

'At least we have some notice. We can be ready for them. They'll want guns, of course. You handed in all of yours, didn't you Chimp? We were warned to, in the springtime.'

'I gave our duck guns to the RIC. Along with that old shotgun Hildegarde's Egerton passed on to you. After Skib courthouse was burned out last June, I handed in the small

revolver with filigree work on its handle. The one I picked up in Paris.. Let them shoot me, I thought, but not with my own gun.'

'And your Army pistol? You've surrendered that, too?'

He fidgets with his moustache. 'Can't bear to part with it. But I've hidden it well. They'd have to tear the house apart to find it, Peg.'

'Are you mad, Cam? When Park House was broken into, not a mattress survived their bayonets. Nelly and Mimi's nerves were ground to pieces.'

'You can't expect young ladies to stand up to that kind of pressure.'

She lowers her voice. 'These men have a network of local sources. The servants could be passing on information. Not deliberately, perhaps, but you know how word gets about. What's to stop Philomena mentioning your revolver to Mrs O'Shea, and maybe she'd say something to her sister in the village about Colonel Somerville being armed. And she'd tell a neighbour, and so on. We're watched, Cam, whether we like it or not.'

He crosses to the French windows which open onto a manicured lawn and flower beds blazing with lobelias, Japanese anemones and cactus dahlias. 'It all seems so peaceful out there.'

Edith thinks of the biplane which buzzed the nearby hills earlier in the year, trying to flush out a group of IRA men believed to be hiding there. 'Deceptively so.'

'I can't give up my service revolver. We'd be like lambs to the slaughter.'

'If they find it, your gun will be used against the Crown, dear.'

'They might not find it.'

'And they might.'

He slaps his hand against the window frame. 'Have it your own way. I'll go to Skib after breakfast and give in my revolver at the barracks.'

'Good. The sooner all our guns are off the premises the better. Your service pistol – and any others that might have slipped your mind. When they come, as come they will,

you can look them in the eye and say you have no weapons. If you're straight with them, hopefully they'll spare the house. Doctor Jim gave them a donation instead of weapons. But if you're caught telling an untruth, it gives these people permission to do their worst.'

'Donation my eye,' snorts Cameron.

Edith stands her ground. 'It saved face for the rebels – no one wants to leave empty-handed. I'm convinced that's what stopped Park House being set alight.'

'No wonder the Jim Somervilles sold up. We're fools to hang on here, Peg. At least we still have something to sell. If the house goes up in flames there'll be nothing worth putting on the market.'

So, he's back singing that song. Has there ever been a more ineffectual Master of Drishane? But cajoling, not scolding, is needed. She chokes back her impatience. 'Selling up is the easy answer. They won't get rid of us without a fight. After more than two hundred and fifty years here, we've earned our right to live in Ireland. Let's show them what we're made of, Cam. What we have we hold.' She joins him at the window, and pats him on the shoulder. 'This too will pass. Good times will come again.'

'But what's to happen to us meanwhile? We'll be sitting ducks.'

'What use is one gun or even two against a gang of men? Look, we can't protect the house indefinitely from them. Let's make the best of it, wait for them to come to us and give them some of what they want. If we cooperate, maybe they'll leave us alone.'

'Feed a crocodile and it always returns for more.'

'We don't have much choice. These are lawless times. The police can't defend us. Nor can the Tans. We must look to ourselves. What's the loss of a few possessions compared with keeping Drishane safe? If we get on the wrong side of the rebels, they're capable of torching the house out of spite.'

'You seem rattled, old girl.'

‘That’s because I am. We’re powerless against them, Cam. The Somerville name means nothing to a flying column. I say let them in, be polite, give them a few odds and ends to keep them satisfied. Food, a couple of saddles, a horse if we must, some paste jewellery to sell on – they won’t be able to tell it from the real thing.’

‘Ever the pragmatist, Peg.’

Why must he be so obtuse? She reels in her exasperation. ‘Do you have anything on the premises you shouldn’t? Other than guns, I mean?’

‘Not a thing.’

‘Nothing at all? They’ll come back if they think we’re holding out on them.’

‘Well, I might have something.’

‘What? Cameron, what have you got? Tell me!’

‘Some sovereigns. In my study, in the desk.’

With creditors unpaid? Edith is thunderstruck. But now is no time to challenge him about his stash. ‘Lodge them in the bank when you go to the RIC with your gun. No matter how banjaxed the roads, you must get through to Skibbereen. I don’t have any cash but I’d hate to lose Mama’s jewellery. I’ll wrap it up now. When you’re in the bank, ask the manager to store it in his safe for me. Oh, and it would be a good idea to hold back a sovereign or two. Something to give the rebels.’

He rubs the stubble on his chin. ‘By George, that’s not a bad plan you’ve cooked up, old thing. Give a little, to make them think we bear no ill-will. It’ll buy us time until the rabble is routed.’

Edith isn’t convinced these guerrilla fighters who call themselves soldiers in the Irish Republican Army will be beaten. They don’t play by any of the rules of war her soldiering brothers understand. Her thumb pad strokes the claddagh ring given to her by Martin, worn in her memory on her ring finger. ‘So you’ll go to Skib today with your revolver and Mama’s jewels?’

‘I’ll go. But there’s one thing that’s staying in Drishane, whatever you say.
Grandpapa’s regimental sword.’

‘I’ve heard of them taking those swords.’

‘I’m not surrendering it and that’s final! It’s a family heirloom. It’s hung on the wall since before either of us was born. The only time it was taken down was when we laid it on his coffin.’

She breathes in. Waits a beat. Looks contrite. Choose your battles, she reminds herself. ‘Whatever you say, Chimp.’

Edith know where her priority lies. Preventing Drishane from going up in smoke.

Chapter 4

Edith stands beside Cameron on Drishane's granite steps, under the pillared front door with its arching skylight. Other houses may be tentatively placed, teetering apologetically in their settings, but Drishane is confident without being conspicuous. Its position welcomes in the countryside: open outlooks sweeping towards sheltering hills northwards, while to the south rears a craggy coastline with changeable seas.

A mass of foliage crowds the driveway which curves downwards to join the only road in and out of the village. It's impossible to reach Castletownshend by road, or leave it by road, without passing the Somervilles' gate. Sea routes are a different matter. At the end of the avenue stands the gatehouse, home to their gardener, Jeremiah O'Mahony. Beyond it, to the right, the village begins its downhill meander. Nowhere in Castletownshend is more than a ten-minute walk from Drishane.

Brother and sister watch Mike lead the horse and trap – which Cameron prefers to the smaller dog cart – around the side of the house, towards the front sweep of pathway. Cameron turns to Edith and taps a bulge in his breast pocket, indicating his army pistol. She nods, and casts a practised eye over the way Tara is conducting herself.

'Madam here's gentle as a lamb for now but don't be fooled. She's ready to shy at anything and everything today. A child running out, a white gatepost she doesn't like the look of, even a tree by the side of the road – she'll bolt. You'll need a firm hand on the reins or she'll dance you into a ditch.'

Cameron buttons his driving gloves at the wrist. 'Hold her there, Hurley. I'll soon show her who's boss if she acts up, Peg.' He mounts the trap and cracks his whip in the air. The sound causes Tara to set off at a lively lick, the conveyance wobbling as it corners too fast.

Oh dear, thinks Edith. He needs to humour Tara, not behave like her commanding officer. ‘She’s still inclined to be jittery around motorcycles,’ she shouts after him, but it’s unlikely he hears her.

Mike Hurley shrugs, as much as to say Cameron will have to find that out for himself, and returns to the stables.

Edith’s eyes stray across their land. Imagine having a deer park. But they need the fields for grazing. Tara jumps like a deer – it’s a pity neither she nor Cameron is capable of putting the mare over West Cork’s steep banks. Tempus fugit. She walks behind the ivy-covered house. Drishane isn’t showy. It’s built squarely of grey stone, well-proportioned and many windowed – elegant in its simplicity. Inside, there are smoky chimneys, dog hairs on the soft furnishings and holes blooming in the silk curtains. But the structure, undoubtedly, is a thing of beauty. As for the Atlantic setting, looking west by Cape Clear – it’s inspired.

The artist in her wonders about Drishane’s architect. His name must be listed on bills somewhere but she doesn’t know it. Clearly, he was a man who understood the value of symmetry. Of course, Tom the Merchant, her several times great-grandfather (she loses count), who commissioned the house in the 1700s, had the wit to choose the right man for the job. That earlier Somerville had a fleet trading with the West Indies and Newfoundland in sugar, rum and wine. He made the family’s fortune. It’s been in descent ever since. What was it Shaw called them, last time cousin Charlotte brought her beloved to lunch? Downstarts. Just like himself, he claimed. An imp of a man, says what he likes and does it with a flourish.

Dooley’s yap at a robin, which startles from a bush, reminds her of her little shadow. Remembering his loyalty the previous night, she bends to pat his white bristles, with an extra stroke for the patch of autumn leaf above his eye. As she straightens, a dart of

sciatica jabs her right knee. 'A wooden leg would be a distinct improvement,' she tells Dooley. By rights, she should sit with her feet up, but rest will have to wait its turn.

The smell of damp vegetation and fresh horse droppings signal the stables, where Mike is grooming Pilot with a curry comb. He nods at her but keeps going.

'I'm a bit behind here, Miss Edith, a lick and a promise will have to do them today. But I had a good look round and nothing was taken last night.'

'I wonder if some other house was their target instead?' The repetitive motion of his hand is soothing, and she watches it for a few moments before shaking herself. 'I dare say we'll hear soon enough.'

Trumpeter is in a sulky mood and kicks at the wooden partition, flicking his tail. But Samson pokes his head over the top of his stall and whinnies, his warm breath reaching across to her, friendly as a wink.

'Hallo, old man. You never forget me.' Edith produces a windfall apple from her pocket. With delicate precision, the dappled grey horse takes it between his teeth from the palm of her hand, and munches through it in a couple of bites. He nuzzles her hand in hopes of another. 'That's your lot. We had some high times together, didn't we, Samson?' Once the strongest of hunters, he's now advanced in years and used for farm work.

On impulse, she takes down the hunting horn from its nail on the wall and blows. Samson pricks up his ears and neighs. Alarmed, Trumpeter and Pilot drum their hooves and snort.

'Easy, boy.' Mike pats Pilot, a smile lightening his solemn face. 'You too, Trumpeter. Easy.' Mike is not much past forty, but a life spent working in the open air has aged his skin.

Edith knots her fingers in Samson's mane. 'You'd like to be following the hounds, too, wouldn't you, Samson? Those were the days! Nothing like the music of the horn to stir the blood.'

The highest compliment she ever received was an overheard one, from the groom before Mike. ‘Miss Edith spends more time on horseback than she does in bed,’ he told a visitor’s manservant. But no longer.

She rests her forehead against Samson’s. Once, the stable yard was a beehive of activity, every stall occupied and half a dozen men from the village employed there. A place in the Drishane stables was prized by the locals. The hounds were kennelled nearby, and their yodelling and scrapping among one another fed into the rich soup of estate life. The kennels are silent now, even emptier than the stalls – the pack sold into Yorkshire.

Mike is the only one left to look after the stable’s four inhabitants. A phantom parade of horses rises to her mind: her first pony when she was three, first hunter in her teens – never has she felt more intensely alive than when on horseback, leading the chase. The joy of those four-thirty morning starts when the world was new-minted: cannoning along with the wind at her back, grips spilling from her hair as she took a jump. She’ll never know such exultation again.

Edith shakes herself. Surrendering to nostalgia won’t safeguard the few horses left to her. ‘I wish we’d been able to sell some of the mounts, at least, Mike. They’ll be commandeered if we don’t watch out.’

‘Nothing’s selling these days, Miss Edith.’

‘I know. But if we don’t move them on, they’ll be taken by men who think they’re patriots. And maybe they are,’ she adds hastily. Mike’s never been a Sinn Féiner, but people who were never Sinn Féiners before have turned to the Irish independence party.

‘Ridden into the ground, then shot and e’t. That’s what’ll happen the poor beasts,’ says Mike.

Edith purses her mouth, conveniently forgetting her own set’s habit of feeding horses to the hounds when they’ve outlived their usefulness, or broken legs and necks on the hunting field. She casts a critical eye over Pilot and Trumpeter, both as fat as butter from

insufficient activity. If she could only mount a horse again, she'd exercise the devilment out of those two.

'This pair are prime hunters, Mike. There must be some way to find buyers in England, even if Ireland's in no mood for hunting these days. A lowish price would be better than nothing. A bird in the hand.'

'How would you even get them to England, miss? Word'd get out. They'd be taken off the train in Cork or Limerick. Mick Collins's boys are always in need of horses.' Mike lifts Pilot's hooves, one after another, and checks them. Between the second and third hoof, he says, 'I might see if I can find a safe berth for them. Tide them over the winter. Sure who knows how the lie of the land might be by springtime.'

'Is there anywhere?'

'There's a farmer I know. Lives off the beaten track.'

She doesn't answer, still wedded to the idea of selling the hunters.

'I wouldn't take all day making my mind up, Miss Edith. Time's not on your side.'

His bluntness startles her. 'He's reliable, your friend?'

'To the best of my knowledge. I don't deny it's a risk. But so is having them here, where the world and his wife knows the Somervilles keep decent horses.' Mike straightens and meets Edith's eye over Pilot's back.

'I suppose we should think about—'

'I'll ride over this morning.' He slaps Pilot on the rump. 'This boyo could use the exercise. It'll take me a while, though – I'll have to stay off the roads.'

'This morning?'

'No time like the present. I'll ride Pilot and lead Trumpeter. When the fella I have in mind sees them, he might maybe be minded to give the pair of them a home for the duration. He's a horse fancier like his father before him. He wouldn't want to see good

horseflesh put at risk. They could easy take a bullet, the places them flying columns would take them.'

Edith hesitates. It's unlike Mike Hurley to be so insistent. Does he know something she doesn't? 'You mean leave them with him today?'

'It's for the best.'

She swallows. 'All right, Mike. If you say so. What about Tara and Samson?'

'You can't be without her ladyship for getting about. And Samson is handy for farm work.'

She's relieved about Tara. Without the mare, she can only go as far as these crooked legs will carry her, which is no distance at all. 'I'll give you something to cover their board and lodgings if your friend is willing to take them in. There'll be feed to buy over the winter.'

Mentally, she retrieves two sovereigns from Cameron's hoard. Just before leaving for Skibbereen, he stashed some coins. They discussed safe places, and ended up loosening a hat lining and placing the money inside it. The boater is hidden in the ancient wooden settle in the inner hall.

Samson blows through his nose, as though aware he's being discussed. Edith scratches his ears. 'You're solid gold, old fellow. We had some times of it, didn't we?'

'You could mount a child of two on him and he'd be as gentle as a lamb. Not like the other one, she's a contrary lady. But still and all, she's a well-made specimen with plenty of jizz. 'Your friend beyond in England, Doctor Smyth, took quite a shine to her. Called her Tara-go-round-the-chimney-pots.'

'Tara likes to jump. Especially when you least expect it.'

Edith's mind starts to tick. Ethel Smyth is well-connected. She has neighbours and associates in Surrey who appreciate horseflesh. Could she help her to sell Pilot and Trumpeter? She's still reluctant to trust them to a stranger, who may or may not return

them to her. Possession is nine-tenths of the law. There must be some way to ship the horses to England. Perhaps if she found a buyer she could arrange safe passage for the animals. Pay off someone, if necessary.

Yes, that's what she'll do: write and ask Ethel Smyth to make inquiries about buyers. If only she'd thought of it before Cameron set off – he could have posted the letter in Skibbereen. But there's always a chance Timmy the Post will manoeuvre his bicycle through to them. He lifts it over barbed wire and steers it around potholes in the road. Ireland still produces some people determined to do their duty. Although his diligence may be due to family feeling. As a nephew of their cook's, he's always inclined to go the extra mile to reach Drishane, where he can be sure of a mug of sweet tea and slice of apple tart the size of a cartwheel.

Except she can never be certain about his comings and goings, and she really shouldn't delay selling the horses. She chews her lip, and decides to send a letter via the destroyer in Castlehaven Bay. Her brother, Hugh, told her she could use it for important communications. All she has to do is ask the coastguard to signal, and the captain will despatch a boat to the quay. Hugh is naval commander at Queenstown – it was his idea to send the destroyer to lie in wait at Castlehaven, ready to protect His Majesty's loyal citizens if things turned hairy. A signal arrangement has been put in place. If she waves a red lamp from one of the top windows, fifty crew members will spring into action to evacuate her and Cameron. It's a comfort, of course. But she doesn't want to withdraw from Drishane. It may not be possible to return.

Ethel Smyth – Boney – is her closest friend. Ever since girlhood, Edith has needed an intimate friend. One particular soul mate to whom she can lay herself bare emotionally, sharing her innermost thoughts. There have been several, but none became a bosom friend on the same level as her dearest Martin. Boney comes closest – although there are times when she is fonder of Boney from a distance.

The notion of an intermediary who might sell her horses cheers Edith as she goes indoors, towards the panelled oak settle that's sat there forever. Or at least since the days of Tom the Merchant. From inside the seat, she extracts a couple of sovereigns. She considers nesting there to write her letter because it always looks welcoming, with flowering plants carved on its upright back and *Reste and Bee Thankful* inscribed on an upright panel. But appearances are deceptive. Wood offers no kindness to sore bones. Edith goes to the breakfast room to compose her missive. She must strike the right note. Not desperate to sell, frightened for Drishane's future – but expectant that a friend will do her a favour, if at all possible.

Drishane House

October 6th, 1921

My dear Boney,

I know I sometimes brandish that eminently sensible quote at you, 'Fools rush in where angels fear to tread,' but foolishness or angelic wisdom has overtaken me. One or the other. We shall see. I'm knee-deep in a project which excites me more than anything I've attempted since Martin passed beyond the veil. I'm adapting some of our Irish R.M. stories for the theatre. I can't tell you how elevated I feel working on this material. Naturally, it is a labour of love. Nevertheless, I'm hoping virtue won't be my only reward and the project will reap shekels galore for my sorely depleted coffers.

This is a long-winded way of saying, dear Ethel, that I can't possibly leave Drishane until after Christmas. The play must take priority. In the meantime, you are most welcome to visit Castletownshend if you feel like a break from Woking, although I should warn you that this part of Cork continues to bear the brunt of the fighting. There is precious little sign of any ceasefire here. The post, trains and banks are all being held up and robbed

“for the cause” – where there is anything to steal. Houses, too, are being raided by armed men. I dare say it’s only a matter of time before we are their target here in Drishane.

She considers telling her about the previous night’s intruder and decides against it. The post is said to be opened and read by the rebels. On that basis, it’s a risk to mention the horses but she has to take it.

We have nothing of worth here. It will be a frightful waste of their time if they do honour us with their presence. Meanwhile, we potter along as best we can. Cameron and I managed to have a game of croquet the other day – it was almost like old times. Apart from the unseasonal hailstones!

You don’t happen to know of anyone who’s in the market for a hunter or two? I have a couple of toppers here. One of them is black apart from two white socks. He has the courage of a lion – has never refused a jump in his life. The other is a long-backed roan stallion, a little on the short side but he’d suit a plucky lady rider. Do ask around for me if you can. You’d be doing me ever such a good turn.

Fond regards,

Edith

P.S. Mike Hurley would accompany them and guarantee to deliver them to their new owners in tiptop condition.

Edith puts the letter in an envelope, and addresses it to Doctor Ethel Smyth of Coign, Hook Heath, near Woking, Surrey, England. Boney was awarded an honorary doctorate in music by the University of Durham and friends omit the title at their peril. This afternoon, she’ll make arrangements for it to be sent to England via Hugh’s destroyer. She doesn’t like to abuse his generosity, but selling horses is no trivial business to her.

Now to the play. As she looks over yesterday's work, doubt nibbles. *Flurry's Wedding* tells of Flurry Knox's usual horsey shenanigans and the resident magistrate Major Yeates' attempts to rein him in. Flurry's pranks are all in a good cause, intended to raise the cash to marry his cousin Sally Knox. Edith is convinced it's a cracking piece, full of fun and frolics which are sorely needed in these uncertain times, but how is she to place it?

She has no contacts in the theatrical field. None that count, anyhow. She knows Lady Gregory socially, of course, but has no intention of handing over her work to the Abbey Theatre. Martin would never approve. They manufacture their past, the Celtic Twilighters. That enterprise is too, too worthy. Besides, there's no money in a Dublin run. And even if she were to give it to the Abbey, nationalist Ireland has always been lukewarm about *the Irish R.M.*, perceiving slights where none were intended. No, she doesn't care for the Dublin literary set, all longhaired male poets and shorthaired female novelists. Flurry must be placed with a London producer. He deserves nothing less. Royalties lie at the end of the West End rainbow.

She considers unsealing the envelope and adding another postscript. Boney is a natural born networker and bound to have ideas about whom to approach. But she is such a busybody. If Edith solicits her advice, she'll commandeer the play in its entirety. Before she knows it, her friend will be voicing her opinions on plot, character, staging and scenery. Ethel Smyth is true-hearted, unflagging in her affections and enthusiasms. She charges out to meet the world head-on without ever pausing to check if her hat is sitting straight. But her conviction that she's an expert on virtually everything can be a little trying.

She sucks the lid of her fountain pen, and inspiration strikes. Her cousin Charlotte is married to George Bernard Shaw. Lottie has always had family feeling galore, besides being a helpful sort – nearly clever, but not quite. She'll send the play to Lottie for advice,

and her cousin is bound to ask the great man to take a look. That will set it on its way. If Shaw likes it, he'll recommend it to someone influential. Edith is confident he will. The public loves those hunting stories – their agent, Mr Pinker, was always badgering the Somerville and Ross team for more. Admittedly, it's been a few years since the last R.M. collection. Nineteen-fifteen, in point of fact – such a sad year. She lost Martin a few months after publication. Not lost entirely, she's with her always. But it's not quite the same.

Edith sighs. She must go back out to the stables and give those sovereigns to Mike. Then she really should take a rest.

*

Dinner is a melancholy affair: hunters gone, silverware gone, jewellery gone, guns gone. So far as Edith can judge, Cameron has carried out her instructions. The problem is you can never tell with her brother. She wouldn't be surprised if he'd held back some dagger or spear from his soldiering days. But at least his army revolver is with the RIC and Mama's jewellery is in a Bank of Ireland safety deposit box. She expects him to take more of an interest when she tells him about Mike Hurley's scheme for hiding the hunters, but he's too wrapped up in his own day, chuntering on about detours taken and streams splashed through. You'd imagine he was navigating the Orinoco.

Nodding and looking outwardly sympathetic, she is preoccupied by a heart-stopping realisation. She forgot to give Cameron the most important item of jewellery in her possession. She kept some paste jewellery to palm off on raiders, and handed over everything else in her jewellery box – apart from Mama's ruby ring. The last person to wear it was her sister Hildegard, who borrowed it and noticed the stone was loose. When she returned it, Edith didn't put it back where the ring belonged, instead slipping it into the

pocket of her travel bag because she meant to take it to London to be re-set. But the country was in such convulsions that any unnecessary journey seemed unwise. Which means Mama's ruby ring is in Drishane. Should she confess to Cameron? Not after the row she raised over his service pistol.

She needs a proper chat with Martin. If only she could manage a séance. But her neighbour Jem Barlow, who acts as her medium, has gone away for a time. The nightly diet of rifle shots and flames against the sky – not as distant as one would prefer – have taken their toll, and many of the more substantial properties in the village and surrounding area are deserted. Still, Miss Barlow's absence hasn't derailed her communications with the spirit world. Edith, too, possesses the psychic spark – she's had it since girlhood. Her automatic writing sessions are treasure troves of sensible conversation with Martin. She'll do some after dinner.

Over dessert, a measly affair of stewed fruit with insufficient sweetening, she considers asking her brother to join her. Sometimes, he plays Brahms on the piano to assist with atmosphere during séances. She gauges him through narrowed eyes. No, he's showing the strain of recent events. Look at him fidget – he'd never sit still long enough for her to go into a trance. He's feeding that chubby-chops of a Loulou some leftover slivers of fat cut from his meat. Deceitful little creature, just like her master. Cameron must have slid them into his napkin before his dinner plate was collected. It's a filthy habit, and Mama would never have permitted it at the dinner table. No wonder that creature is like a tiny waddling sofa. Dooley is much better behaved. As a reward for not begging, she goes to the sideboard and lifts a sugar cube from the bowl. She bends down and Dooley takes it from her, table manners as restrained as a duchess's.

‘Any chance of a splash of coffee, old girl? Now you're on your feet.’

‘Of course. I'm being terribly slow tonight, aren't I?’

‘Not at all. As a matter of fact, I’m astounded you’re still standing. Tough as... Chip off the old block. Mama, I mean.’

‘You were about to say old boots, weren’t you?’

‘Steady on, Edith, I was trying to pay you a compliment. But any attempt to flatter women – even a sister – is a risky business.’

Edith pours out coffee, their nightly aid to digestion, and carries the cup and saucer to Cameron. She’s had to tell Mrs O’Shea to brew the coffee weaker than usual because beans are in short supply at the grocer’s. Fortunately, they’re not reduced to reusing grinds yet. And at least her Townshend grandmother’s silver coffee pot is safely in storage, along with its matching milk jug, sugar bowl, tongs and tray. She loved seeing them clustered there, like a plump mother goose with her goslings. But she’s happier not seeing them, currently.

Cameron scratches one of his prominent ears, a pleased expression on his face.

‘You’ll be glad to hear I’ve fixed things with Hurley and his nephew to share sentry duty in the grounds tonight. And I’ll be sitting up, on guard in the house. Thought about roping in O’Mahony but Hurley said he was too old, it wouldn’t be fair. Volunteered his nephew instead. So you mustn’t fret, Peg. We have it all in hand. You can’t lose a second night’s sleep.’

She’s about to protest at him making arrangements without consulting her. On second thoughts, Cameron needs to feel he’s in charge. ‘Well done, Chimp.’

‘You do think Hurley’s trustworthy, don’t you? And the other servants?’

‘They’ve worked for us for years. Surely you don’t suspect them?’

‘They might have divided loyalties, the way things stand. Maybe they’re hunting with the hare and running with the hounds.’

Edith chews her thumb knuckle, slanting the thought this way and that. It’s as hateful as it is logical. The British haven’t ruled Ireland well – quite the reverse. Why shouldn’t

the common people support men of their own sort who tell them they can make a better job of government? Words are cheap, of course, but they may be effective. And you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs.

'But they've never given us any grounds to doubt them,' she says. 'They must have known about your revolver but didn't breathe a word to anyone.'

'I suppose.'

Edith tries – and fails – to imagine running Drishane without staff. Who'd cook their meals and serve them? Set their fires and beat their carpets? Her play will never get written if she has to spend her time thinking about mincing leftover beef into sandwich meat or searching for eggs in the hens' hidey-holes.

'Anyhow, you've asked Mike Hurley now, Cam.'

'Didn't have much choice. There was no one else. Stopped off in the village on the way home from Skib. Thought I'd have a word with some of the men. See if they knew anything. Meant to ask them to help us keep watch. Didn't in the end. There was something odd about the behaviour of two of the Connors boys. Furtive – that's the best way to describe them. I didn't like it. So I said nothing. Came back up the hill to Drishane and fixed things with Hurley instead.'

'Some of those Connors boys are Sinn Féiners. At least one of them is on the run.'

'But their father saw service in the Boer War!'

'That was then.' A dragging sound outside causes her to startle. 'What's that? Are we expecting anyone?'

'The young O'Mahonys. Jeremiah's grandsons. I was able to lay my hands on some empty potato sacks in Skib. Stopped into the O'Mahony place on the way home and squared it with their father. I've put them to filling the sacks with sand. They're setting a battery of sandbags against all the outer doors so no one can force their way in.' He expands his chest, ready for her congratulations.

‘Are they able for it? Can’t be more than twelve or thirteen.’

‘Looked strong enough to me, from farm work. Any chance of another splash?’

She tops up his coffee. Despite her apprehension, the artistic side of her brain admires the arc of the flow from spout to cup. The tree trunk brown colour is perfect for a woodland painting – darker than toffee, lighter than chocolate. ‘I hope you haven’t asked the O’Mahonys to patrol with the Hurleys. They’re only children.’

‘I might use them as lookouts another night. We’ll see how we go.’

‘You know, I can’t help wondering if we aren’t better getting a raid over and done with, dear. We’re in the IRA’s sights. We can’t hold them off indefinitely.’

‘No reason to leave the henhouse door lying open.’

‘I suppose.’

He drains his coffee and stands. ‘Believe I’ll go out and inspect those sandbags. Might look in on O’Mahony, too. Tell him to keep an eye out from the gatehouse. I know Hurley says he’s too old, but it’s all hands to the pump in an emergency.’

When she’s alone, Edith rings the bell for Philomena to clear away the dishes. She intends to work at the dining room table where there is plenty of space to spread herself. She’s seen arms flung about like windmills at trance writing, pots of ink and vases knocked over. She doesn’t need many props – a thick pad of paper, a selection of pencils and Martin’s tooled leather cigarette case will be sufficient. Along with some peace – unfortunately, Philomena is inclined to linger and chat. Abstracted, Edith listens to the casement clock bonging eight-thirty. She had counted on starting now – it’s a conducive time for Martin, apparently.

Her silence doesn’t discourage Philomena. ‘I saw Mike Hurley taking two of the horses away. Then back again on foot, without either one of them. Where he went, he wouldn’t say. Just tapped the side of his nose and said, “that’s for me to know and you to guess”.’

Edith glances up. ‘What you don’t know you can’t tell, Philomena. There’s safety in ignorance. It’s for your own good.’

Philomena’s eyes round, catching her meaning. ‘I hear you, Miss Edith. Shall I leave all the candles lit? Are you intendin’ for to stay and have one of your ghostie-things here?’

‘Yes, leave the candelabra lit. You may extinguish the oil lamp on the sideboard.’

‘It’s a mortal pity to think that you, who was always flourishing about as if you hadn’t a bone in your body, running here there and everywhere, should be sitting in at nights at this aul’ malarkey. Me, I’d have no truck with talking to the dead. Not for all the tea in China. And sure, wouldn’t Father Lambe have me guts for garters if he heard I was at that aul’ caper?’

‘That’ll do, Philomena. I know what I’m about. ‘Incidentally, you may be reassured to know Mike Hurley and his nephew Ned are patrolling the grounds tonight. At least we’ll get fair warning if intruders are about.’

Philomena gives a dramatic shiver. ‘With the help of God. There’s plenty of blackguards taking their chance to settle old scores. All for Ireland, indeed. We’d be greener than cabbage if we believed that yarn.’

She takes a last check that everything is back in place. Adjusting the cut glass bowl of chrysanthemums so that it stands in the centre of the table, Philomena lifts a tray stacked with dirty crockery. Turning with her load, she almost trips over Dooley.

‘I’ll swing for that beast one day,’ she mutters.

Edith chooses not to hear.

Alone, she sits upright in her usual seat at the foot of the dining room table. Three candles burn with a steady flame in front of her. The paper and pencils rest near-hand, ready for the moment of connection. She never doubts her ability to communicate with Martin – Edith knows she possesses the necessary spark of psychical power, her shortcut to the beyond. Her right hand lies on the table, palm upwards, relaxed. She wears a gold

claddagh ring on it, a gift from Martin. With her left hand, she caresses Martin's cigarette case, her thumb pad tracing the initials VM. Martin had a variety of cigarette cases but this was her favourite. A faint scent of tobacco rises towards her nostrils.

Practice has taught her how to enter a trance. She closes her eyes and empties her mind. Pinpoints of light loom and fade behind her eyelids. Distant sounds honeycomb the silence, before the dream state takes over and noise dwindles into nothingness. She slows her breathing, conscious of taking air into her body and holding it in her lungs, feeling it swirl through them before being expelled. Her blood roars along her veins.

Now she feels a tingling, pricking sensation in her right arm. It is followed by a numbness in the arm from shoulder to hand. The limb becomes cold and disconnected, as if it no longer belongs to her. But Martin isn't here yet. Her mind has not yet emptied. It continues to intrude on her connection with the other world. Around her, Drishane is a patient presence. Head tilted to one side, she keeps stroking the case, aware of her ribcage rising and falling. Now she opens her eyes and fixes her gaze on the door opposite. She doesn't see the grain of the wood, nor its brass handle. Even the door's rectangular shape is indistinct. Blankness spreads across her vision, her mind lulled into a dream state.

The force begins to grow within her. A swollen sensation runs up and down the right arm, converging on her finger tips. Without conscious thought, she lifts one of the pencils, leaning it loosely against the web of skin between her thumb and forefinger. She listens, not with her ears but her body. All at once, her heartbeat trips and her hand jolts, fastening tightly on the pencil. It executes a series of circles in the air.

Martin is with her – Edith senses her presence. She knows she must initiate the conversation.

'Are we safe in Drishane, Martin?'

The pencil is propelled towards the paper. As soon as its point touches the page, words spill out: angular, downward strokes scoring deep onto the surface. Edith has no

knowledge of what she's writing. She doesn't even look at the page, gazing instead into the candlelight. For now, her hand does not belong to her – the force causing it to move is external.

The pencil ceases its activity as abruptly as it began writing. Only when it stops moving does Edith feel that she, too, can stir. It's as if she has been held in a gentle but firm grip and is now released. She exhales, and reads the spiky script.

**You must be brave and resourceful a challenging time lies ahead but you are not alone
tap into your reserves of courage believe and all shall be well**

The script has covered almost an entire page. She turns it over, presenting another blank surface. Cameron's doubts about the Connors boys are preying on her mind.

'Are the tenants loyal? And the villagers? Can we count on them?'

**some are and some are not you must take sensible precautions but it will be impossible
to escape the attention of Naboth's vineyard Naboth's vineyard raiders entirely**

She takes another page. 'What do you suggest?'

The pencil rises from the page and moves forwards and back a few times, indecisive, before crashing back down onto the paper.

**You are not alone we who love you guard guard guard guard &&&& _ _ _ we
guard you we patrol Drishane and keep at bay the most desperate among these
men of violence**

'Dear Martin, I'm so relieved. Can we keep the house from being burned?'

**it will be spared your ancestors form a spirit shield a circle of protection that man you
heard last night left because I gained entry into his mind and convinced him to go**

'I wondered why he turned away. Have there been other attempts on the house?'

**gang of ruffians bottom of the avenue several nights ago your papa made a great
racket as though a pack of hounds was charging them and they lost their nerve swerve
verve nervenervenerveyyyyyyyyyy**

‘I wish you’d told me.’

**not permitted to mention it until you did our role is not to cause fear but offer
reassurance**

‘Advise me, Martin. How do we get through this?’

The pencil hovers over the paper, indecisive, before it rears against her fingers like a nervous colt objecting to the bridle.

a stitch in time saves nine

‘I don’t understand.’

Nothing.

‘Martin? Please help me.’

give a littel to save alot

‘Yes! That’s what I suggested to Cam. It’s the practical way to deal with these people. I’ll tell him you urge it. Will the raiders be back tonight?’

they are undecided

Edith places another blank folio beneath her pencil. ‘Martin, Mama’s ruby ring is still in Drishane. Where should I hide it for safekeeping?’

The pencil wavers and dips. When it touches the page there is only a continuous line, broken in the middle.

‘I don’t understand, dear.’

The pencil lies idle.

‘I’ve hidden it but I’m worried it can be found. Won’t you tell me where to put it?’

Still nothing.

Edith sighs. ‘Martin, how do you think our play is going? I feel your hand in mine as I work.’

It is

sailingalong

with the wind

in its sails

She reaches for more paper. ‘Will it be a success?’

The pencil quivers but does not write.

‘Will Flurry help me to keep Drishane in the family?’

The pencil lurches again, and this time the tip begins to shiver across the page.

there

is

a

n

impediment

‘What is it?’

Nothing.

She waits.

Nothing.

Unable to help herself, she bursts out, ‘Martin, don’t desert me! What is it?’

The pencil almost slips from her grasp, so swiftly do the letters pour out.

pmihc

Edith can’t make head or tail of the peculiar word but knows it for a riddle she must set aside to solve later. It is a significant answer, judging by the changed writing size.

‘So this is the impediment. Can’t I overcome it? Or is it too powerful for me?’

Nothing.

‘Is it a person?’

Now the pencil bucks between her fingers.

threeblindmice see how they run

‘Is it someone I know?’

they all ran away from the farmerswife

Edith waits.

??

??

‘I’m still here, Martin. Guide me, dear. I rely on you.’

The pencil fidgets, but is uncommunicative.

‘I visited your grave yesterday, Martin. I placed some chrysanthemums from the hot house in front of your headstone. Bronze coloured. I always feel such a sense of contentment when I’m there. Dooley came with me. Dear, I’m in sore need of your strength and wisdom. Won’t you advise me?’

always use your witsand strik a bargain whereyoucan

‘Yes, I’ll do that Martin. Anything else?’

Sur le pont d’Avignon on y danse on y danse.

‘What times we had in France. Back when the world was young. Didn’t we, dear?’

121-121-121-121-121-121-121-121-121-121-121-121-121-121-121-121

‘Is that a psalm number? A house number? What is it?’

The pencil slips from her hand and Edith feels a sense of emptiness – as though she walked into a room expecting to see someone who is nowhere in sight. The connection with Martin is severed.

Pins and needs prickle in her right hand and arm. She massages it, sensation returning. The intelligence which moved her hand is gone. Still, it has been a reassuring encounter. Parched, she swallows a long drink of water, gathers the sheaf of papers and reads over the messages again. The writing – proof of her communication with Martin – is always as startling as a flash of light in a darkened room.

Her eye snags on that one-word answer about an impediment to Flurry’s Wedding.

pmihc

How poisonous the Lilliputian word looks. She spells it out. P-M-I-H-C. Attempts to say it aloud – pim-ee-hic. What can it mean? She pulls another blank page towards her and doodles a rearrangement of the letters. Sometimes, when Martin is agitated, she gives Edith jumbled up words for answers. A scribbled michp is followed by himcp – both meaningless. Is it possible it's mirror writing? She catches up the sheet of paper and goes to a chiffonier surmounted by decorative etched glass. She holds up the page and reads the reverse image of the ominous word.

chimp

Edith's reflection is grey-white face in the mirror. The enemy is within.

Chapter 5

Three nights later, a fox's bark wakens Edith. Instantly, she is fully alert. She hobbles to the window and parts the curtains by a whisker – enough to catch the moving arc of a torch beam outside. Her dressing gown and a tartan scarf are lying ready on a bedside chair. She pulls on both against the night chill. Next, she collects her old riding whip, which she has taken to sleeping with under her bed, and makes her way along the passageway to Cameron's bedroom near the top of the wide, graceful front staircase.

A tap on his door. 'Cam, there's someone outside.'

No answer. She raps again. Still nothing. She opens the door. A candle burning inside a globe on the bedside table shows the bed to be unoccupied, covers smooth. He must be sitting up again. Senses a-twitch, she hurries downstairs, fingers trailing along the banister – remembering which loose stair tread to avoid, without counting. She passes portraits of her ancestors etched on cavernous walls with the clarity of India ink sketches, Dooley skittering along behind, knowing instinctively to stay quiet. She can see where she's going because Philomena is now leaving paraffin lamps burning overnight at strategic points in the house, on Edith's instructions,.

Near the bottom of the staircase, a dark shape jackhammers her heartbeat. Are they inside already?

'Who's there?' To her annoyance, her voice quavers a little.

'It's all right, Peg, it's me.'

She catches hold of the bannister, knees buckling. 'Are there men outside, Cam?'

'We think so. Young Hurley's just been in to say there's some activity down near the road. He's going to investigate. Mike's manning the back gate and I'm holding the fort here.'

Edith hauls herself to the bottom of the staircase. Cameron is fully dressed, a pool of buttery lamplight falling on an ancient fowling piece in his arms which belonged to their grandfather. So much for handing over all of their weapons to the RIC.

‘You told me you weren’t going to stay up again tonight.’

‘Changed my mind.’

‘I could have shared the wait with you. Four hours each.’

‘Next time.’

Loulou dances into view, emitting a series of self-important yips. Dooley circles her, the two sniffing one another.

‘Pipe down, the pair of you,’ says Cameron. ‘You can do all the socialising you like tomorrow.’

A whinny.

Edith stiffens. ‘They’re at the stables. They’re after the horses.’

‘We’ll see about that.’ He indicates his shotgun. ‘Death or glory, like Uncle Kendall’s Lancers!’

‘Have you lost your mind? That antique will explode if you pull the trigger. It could blind you!’

‘A man feels more secure when he has a firearm.’

‘Cam, you never saw a gun fired in anger in the army. You ran the music school. Put it away!’

The sound of something being dragged at the rear of the house stalls their argument. Brother and sister exchange glances. Turning as one, they head for the back door.

‘You two keep as quiet as mice,’ hisses Edith, and the dogs wag their tails, understanding her, as dogs always do.

The dragging noise is louder here.

‘They’re moving away the sandbags,’ whispers Cameron. ‘I’ll go out through the French windows in the drawing room and see if I can’t take them by surprise from behind. You stay here.’

‘Is that wise? Going outside?’

‘Can’t skulk in here leaving all the risk to the Hurleys.’

Something hard is drummed against the back door. A stick, perhaps, or a weapon handle. Instantly, the dogs unleash a high-pitched cacophony.

‘Did you agree a code with the Hurleys?’ hisses Edith.

He looks remorseful. She resists the urge to pull a face at him.

Cameron lays his forefinger against his mouth, gestures to stay where she is, and approaches the source of the knock. The dogs follow. ‘Who’s there?’

The rat-a-tat-tat is repeated. The dogs begin baying.

‘That you Hurley?’ cries Cameron.

Edith goes to stand beside her brother. She hears other voices outside, their words indistinct. Boots stamp on the cobblestones.

From outside: ‘Open up in the name of the Irish Republic!’

The dogs intensify their racket.

‘Shut up Loulou, Dooley,’ hisses Cameron. He calls out, ‘State your business.’

‘Our business is Ireland’s. Now open the door or we’ll break it open.’

Cameron hoists his gun to rest the butt against his shoulder.

Fear presses against Edith, suffocating. He’ll get himself killed if he carries on like this. ‘No! Let them in, Cam!’

From outside: ‘I’m going to count to three.’

‘This house can’t be defended, Cam. Do as he says.’

‘Absolutely not.’

‘The odds are against us.’

From outside: 'One!'

'A child could break in, never mind a gang of men!'

'Two!'

'Please, Cam!'

'Hold your horses. I'll open up!'

He motions to Edith to step away and she falls back towards the kitchen entrance. He unbolts the door, and gives ground, stepping back to join Edith. Even as he moves, the handle is turned from outside. On a blast of damp night air, a knot of men crowd into the passageway. Lamplight falls onto faces blackened by burnt cork, heightening the menace they project. They surge forward and Edith and Cameron retreat into the kitchen. Edith counts five men. Two are holding rifles, another has a pistol and the others are armed with cudgels. One looks like a policeman's baton. So the stories are true about Republicans using captured weapons.

'I'll be relieving you of that, Colonel Somerville,' says the man with the pistol.

Edith notices his weapon is an army issue Mauser. Robbed, no doubt. She also notices the men keep their caps on.

Cameron is gruff. 'Who are you? State your business here.'

'We're soldiers of the Irish Republic. I won't ask you again. Hand it over.' He wears authority like a familiar coat.

Cameron bites his moustache. Quickly, he bends forward and lays the fowling piece beside his feet.

Good for Cam, thinks Edith. Let the fellow stoop if he wants it.

The leader nods to one of his men, who lifts the weapon and moves closer to the lamplight to examine it. 'A woebegone aul' blunderbuss. Sure even the crows wouldn't be afeard of it.'

‘Should be in a museum,’ says another. ‘Not sure we’ll get much good out of it, Captain.’

‘It might come in handy at a pinch.’ The leader returns his attention to Edith and Cameron. ‘Well, now, aren’t you as snug as thrushes in here. How many in the household?’

Neither of them answers.

‘Don’t make this any harder than it has to be.’

Silence.

‘Did you fucken well hear me, soldier-boy?’

‘Four indoors,’ says Cameron. ‘My sister and me, plus two servants.’

‘I hope for your sake you’re telling the truth, Colonel.’

Edith appraises their visitors, some detached part of her mind urging her to memorise what she sees. None of the trespassers are older than their twenties and one looks like a boy. All are in corduroy trousers and collarless shirts, but have puttees, caps and odds and ends of assorted uniform. Trying to look like an army, she supposes. Two wear filthy trench coats with bulging pockets. Their faces are blackened to limit the possibility of recognition and their headgear is pulled well down on the forehead. None are locals – she’d recognise them, stained faces or not. But villagers must have given them information and fed them, perhaps sheltered them. Yet they carry a smell of the woods and unwashed bodies. Perhaps they’ve been sleeping outdoors. Every one of the men has stubble, even the overgrown lad, suggesting no shaving opportunities for several days.

She pays closest attention to the man doing the talking. He has a Cork city accent and wears a leather motorcycle jacket. His face is lean but unlined beneath the slouch hat with one side pinned up. He’s younger than she expected a leader to be, maybe twenty-three. She can tell he’s like a wasp, ready to sting in a split second.

Dooley darts close to the men, unleashing a furious tirade of yelps. Loulou joins him, snarling, but when one of the men shouts at her the little Pomeranian reverses, yipping, to cower beside Cameron. Dooley holds his position, quivering with fury.

‘What do you want with us?’ demands Cameron.

‘Donations to the cause, Colonel Somerville. You’re nicely placed here. Time to do some sharing.’

‘What cause do you mean?’

‘Oh, I think you know perfectly well, Colonel.’ He turns to one of his men and mutters a command.

‘Right-o, captain.’

‘You go with him,’ he tells the man with Cameron’s fowling-piece.

Sleek as silhouettes, the two leave the kitchen.

Incandescent, Dooley scoots after them.

‘No, Dooley! Stay!’ cries Edith. He crouches on the spot, sides heaving, sending a volley of barks after the men. ‘To me, Dooley!’ Reluctantly, he trots to her side. There, he fixes his gaze on the man addressed as captain and snarls, low in his throat.

One of the men turns his rifle so the stock is jutting out. He points it at Dooley.

‘Either you make that fucker shut up or I will.’

Edith stoops to Dooley, shushing him, and he subsides.

‘Noisy little beggar, isn’t he?’ says the leader. ‘We’ll have to lock your animal in a cupboard if you can’t control him. Still, you have to admire his loyalty. Now, where were we, Colonel? Ah, to be sure, the cause. Irish freedom. Either you’re for freedom or against it. We don’t have much tolerance for them that faces both ways.’

‘We’re for it, of course,’ Edith puts in. ‘I gave one of you ten shillings not four months ago when I was stopped in the village.’

‘Is that so, Miss Somerville? And grateful we are for each and every donation. But eaten bread is soon forgotten and we need to impose on your good nature again. I’ve a column of men to feed and arm.’

‘Isn’t there a peace deal being thrashed out?’ says Cameron. ‘Your chaps, Griffith and Collins, are over in London in the middle of talks with the Prime Minister. Why are you still arming?’

‘Talks can go nowhere. We must be prepared for all eventualities.’

Cameron snorts.

‘What have you done with the Hurleys?’ Edith puts in. ‘I hope you haven’t hurt them.’

‘Tied up in the stables, Miss Somerville. They’ll come to no harm if they stay put. One of our lads is out there, keeping an eye on them. Now, about your donation.’

‘We have no money,’ Cameron protests.

‘Ah-ah!’ He wags a finger. ‘Shame on you for fibbing, Colonel. The likes of you always has some of the readies. Your idea of hard up and mine are two entirely different things.’ He pats the inside pockets of his jacket and extracts a cigar stub. ‘Could I trouble one of you for a light?’

Edith glances at Cameron, who appears rooted to the spot. She fetches the matches kept by the stove and hands over the box.

He lights up, luxuriates in a long inhalation and rattles the matches. ‘With your permission.’ He pockets the box. ‘Never know when a match might come in useful.’

The other men laugh.

Through a smoke ring, the captain squints at Edith. ‘I believe you’re a writer, Miss Somerville. I had a look at one or two of your hunting stories. They gallop along at a fair old lick. You know your stuff, I have to hand it to you. Of course, these parts would have been prime hunting country, back in the day.’

‘The hounds have been stopped.’

A puff on his cigar and he shakes his head. ‘We couldn’t have the High-and-Mighties careering over decent folk’s land, now could we? And not so much as a by-your-leave. What kind of a republic would that be? No, I didn’t much care for your Irish R.M. stories, though I heard the voice of the people in some of them. There was too much forelock tugging and your honour-ing for my liking.’ He taps his breast pocket. ‘I prefer Shakespeare’s sonnets. Carry a copy of them wherever I go. When I read, I want to be elevated. And the Bard never disappoints.’

Edith’s lips purse to the size of a farthing. He doesn’t speak like a gentleman, for all his cigar-smoking and bardolatry. ‘We wrote as we found, my partner and me.’

‘I dare say. But what you thought you saw, and what was there before your eyes, mightn’t be one and the same. Your Ireland is a playground. A land of plucky mounts that never refuse a jump, woods filled with game for your shotguns, and cunning foxes who get the chop after a merry chase enjoyed by all, foxy included. But that’s not our Ireland. You know nothing of the people’s struggles. The constant battle to make any kind of living that keeps body and soul together. The loss of children on the emigrants’ ship.’

‘The land is rich – there’s plenty for all to share. Old grievances do nobody any good.’

‘Share, is it? What do your lot know about sharing?’

‘...ashamed of yourselves!’ It’s Philomena, who arrives in the kitchen with Mrs O’Shea, both wearing shawls over their nightgowns, their hair flopping in a single plait.

Edith’s eyes darken. She has never glimpsed either woman with her hair loose, although they’ve shared a roof for years. Somehow, it strikes her as more shocking than having a kitchen full of armed men. Philomena’s hair is still as black as wet coal, apart from some grey at the temples, but Mrs O’Shea’s is white.

‘It isn’t decent, dragging folk out of their beds at this hour of the night!’ Philomena is shrill with complaint – even the guns don’t silence her.

The men grin with embarrassment, their teeth tobacco-stained.

‘Nobody else here we can find, Captain,’ says one of the men. ‘No sign of any guns, either. We’d a good root about.’

The leader addresses Cameron. ‘You bigwigs are operating on a skeletal staff. Are you certain there’s no one else, Colonel?’

‘I am not in the habit of telling lies. We take people on from the village now and again when we need them.’

‘Are you sure Mike Hurley’s all right?’ asks Edith. ‘And his nephew?’

‘I told you already. Those boys are being looked after,’ says the captain.

‘You haven’t hurt them?’

‘Not a bother on them.’

Edith is about to mention Jeremiah in the gatehouse, but holds off. If they have him, nothing can be done about it. If they don’t, all the better.

Right, ladies, take a seat.’ The captain ushers Edith, Philomena and Mrs O’Shea towards the kitchen table, pulling out chairs for each of them.

‘I prefer to stand,’ says Edith, despite a stabbing pain in her left hip.

‘Then let you stand, Miss Somerville.’

Loulou darts across the room and springs onto Philomena’s knee, burrowing into her lap.

‘There, there, *a leanbh*.’ She pats the dog’s head. ‘I don’t blame you for not wanting to see what’s going on here.’

‘Leave that alone, ya spalpeen!’ explodes Mrs O’Shea. ‘It’s for tomorrow’s dinner.’

One of the men has discovered a cooked chicken in the larder and is gnawing on a leg. He passes the plate holding the meat to a comrade, who pulls off the other leg.

‘Make them stop, Colonel,’ cries Mrs O’Shea.

Humiliation, as livid as a bruise, patches across Cameron’s face. He shrugs.

Edith makes an inventory of the five strangers. Each man has a bandolier or khaki sling containing ammunition over a shoulder and crossed at his chest. The one who found the chicken has a hand grenade fixed to his belt. Edith shudders at the egg-shaped object. A single slip and they could all be blown to kingdom come – Somervilles, dogs, staff and Republicans alike.

The chicken is offered to the captain who waves it away, still chewing on his cigar. A third man, a soiled bandage on his hand, steps forward and breaks the carcass in two. He tears off a fistful of breast, eating it skin and all. The fourth disappears into the larder.

Mrs O’Shea spits out prayers between clenched teeth. ‘Hail, holy Queen Mother of mercy, may the divil toast yiz slowly, hail our life, our sweetness and our hope.’

The captain studies her for a moment, head to one side, while she treats him with majestic indifference. He runs a finger under the rim of his hat where it rests on his forehead. ‘As I was saying, Colonel and Miss Somerville, we’re here to collect donations for the Irish Republic. What can you offer us?’

‘Nothing,’ snaps Cameron.

‘And I thought you claimed to be an honest man.’

‘I have some jewellery you’re welcome to,’ says Edith. ‘Let me fetch it for you.’

‘Go with her,’ the captain tells a young man licking his fingers.

He falls in behind Edith.

Dooley chases round the side of the youth and attaches himself to Edith.

‘Stay, boy.’

Ears pricked, his face betrays doubt. He studies hers for clues. Unusually, he disobeys and keeps trotting behind.

The man with the hand grenade grabs for his collar. Dooley snaps at his fingers, landing a bite.

‘Bastard!’

Scarlet, he lashes out with a boot. Dooley goes flying across the room. The little dog’s head cracks against a metal handle on the range and he lets out a high-pitched wail.

‘Fuck sake. What did you do that for?’ says one of the men.

‘Fuck off yourself. Bastard drew blood. Dogs give you rabies.’ The hand grenade man follows Dooley, foot raised to kick him again, but Edith darts forward.

‘Don’t you dare touch him, you viper!’

‘Easy now. Easy,’ says the captain. ‘Everyone calm down.’

Edith drops to her knees beside the fox terrier, who is curled up and whimpering. Blood leaks from his mouth. She lays his head gently on her lap. His stubby tail moves feebly, acknowledging her presence. Edith’s fingers part his fur, searching for cuts. Foam begins to gather on his muzzle and his eyes glaze over. Recognising the signs, Edith’s voice breaks. ‘Dooley, oh Dooley, what have they done to you?’

Dooley moans and a shudder passes through his body.

Loulou gives a single howl, high-pitched, but is shushed by Philomena. She subsides into a string of whimpers, pressing her muzzle against Philomena’s stomach.

Edith cups her palm under Dooley’s chin. ‘Don’t leave me, little man, I couldn’t bear it.’

His breath wheezes. With her free hand, Edith strokes Dooley. His body begins jerking. Helpless, she watches, keeping her hand in place on his fur. The juddering lasts for thirty seconds. And then the small body stops twitching.

Dooley heaves out a sigh. And is still.

Edith scoops him towards her, pressing her face against his, rocking him back and forth.

‘Ah, Miss Edith,’ says Philomena brokenly. ‘Ah, miss.’

Edith raises her head, her eyes as blank as Dooley’s. His blood is smeared on her cheek and chin.

Chapter 6

‘Someone help me with him,’ says Edith. ‘Dooley’s been hurt.’

‘I think, I’m afraid... he’s gone, old girl.’ Cameron stoops and presses a hand on Edith’s shoulder.

‘No. He can’t be. It’s not true. Fetch a blanket, Philomena. We need to keep him warm.’

‘Time’s wasting. Leave the dog alone.’ The captain raises his voice.

‘Poor Dooley. Heart of a lion,’ says Cameron.

‘Put the bloody dog down or you’ll really have something to cry about!’ shouts the captain.

Cameron shuffles onto his knees beside Edith and tries to take Dooley away from Edith. She resists. ‘Let go, Edith. I’ll look after him.’ He lifts Dooley onto his lap and closes the dog’s eyes.

‘Get a fucken move on, we haven’t got all night!’ yells the captain.

Hand grenade man yanks Edith to her feet.

‘Murderer!’

He makes a fist. ‘I’ll give ya a taste of the same medicine, ya bitch.’

‘Enough!’ The captain pulls her by the elbow away from the other man. ‘Watch that temper of yours,’ he says to his companion. ‘And you, missus, get the jewellery. Chop-chop.’

‘Why should I? You’ve just taken away the thing I love best in the world.’

‘Believe me, we can do worse.’ The captain walks to the range, lifts the poker and flicks it along the shelf where crockery is stacked. Plates rain on top of Mrs O’Shea and Philomena, bouncing from them to the floor, hopping into fragments. The women cry out in alarm, covering their heads with their arms.

‘Now, what’s next?’ says the captain. He opens the range door and riddles the embers inside into flames. ‘What to do with a hot poker?’

‘Stop it, I’m going!’ cries Edith. ‘You can have whatever you want.’

‘I know.’ The captain skims his eyes over to her. ‘Get a move on.’

‘You’ll mind him for me, Cam?’

‘I won’t let go of him. You can count on me, Edith.’

Edith kisses her fingertips and trails them along Dooley’s nose. He’ll never hear her call his name again. She stalks out of the kitchen.

The youngest member of the party follows her along the dim, stone corridor, past pantries, the stillroom and gloryhole. She leads him towards the dining room, lifting the hall lamp in passing. Her destination is the chiffonier. She places the lamp on its polished surface and opens a drawer, removing a cloth bag. In the mirror above the sideboard, she glances at her captor’s reflection. He can’t be more than eighteen or nineteen, composed entirely of angles, his corduroy trousers bagging against hips and backside. Her eyes flick from his blackened face to her own. She looks ghastly, Dooley’s blood blotched on her.

‘I’m sorry about your dog, ma’am. There was no call for it. Your man has a fierce bad temper on him. He’d kill a fella and ate him after.’ A basso voice wells, incongruous, from his frame.

Edith feels nauseous at the thought of her loyal little companion being kicked to death in his own home. She should have been able to protect him. Emotion wells up and she bites hard on her lower lip. What can’t be cured must be endured.

‘They get under your skin, a pet dog,’ he goes on. ‘I had one growing up. Lucky, I called him. Loved that dog like a brother. Everywhere I went, Lucky went.’

She glances at him, assessing. This one’s talkative. ‘What’s your name?’

A shake of his head. ‘No names. The captain warned us.’

A country voice. Soft-spoken. ‘Where are you from? Kerry?’

I'm not allowed to say.'

'They say Kerry is rebel country.'

He snuffles. 'Even the hens lay bullets there. That's what the captain says.'

'A determined sort of a fellow, isn't he?'

Hero worship flashes from moss-green eyes, their colour emphasised by the black streaks on his face. 'The captain's a man that can think things out. I'd follow him to hell and back. He was at the university, above in Dublin, till the Troubles come upon us.'

'He has death in his eyes. If you stay with him, you'll end up dead, too.'

'We give as good as we get. We hit back. Or more, maybe. The captain'll keep us safe. What's in the bag, ma'am?'

'Some jewellery. Your captain can sell it.'

'Can't be much in a small-little bag like that. He'll want more. What else have you got?'

'Nothing. Look, I don't doubt you have your reasons, but this will end badly for you. You're too young to throw your life away. Go home to your family. Your mother must be at her wits' end with worry.'

'I have no home. The Tans burned us out. Me an' the boys, we live like foxes in dugouts or caves.' He tugs open the drawer she's closed and pokes around.

'The drawers are empty. We're as poor as church mice. All we have are the house and land.'

'Nobody's poor that has a house and land.' His eyes sweep the room and snag on the matching candelabra.

Edith pretends to be alarmed. 'No,' she says. 'They're family heirlooms.' In fact, they look more valuable than they are.

'Too bad.' He yanks open another drawer, finds a tablecloth and begins to tuck the silverware into its folds, making a sling of the material.

While he's doing that, Edith tries to prise some information out of him. 'It must be a tough life for you, always on the move. Don't you miss sleeping in a bed? Eating a meal without looking over your shoulder?'

'Freedom can't be won without some hardship. So the captain says.'

'Is he strict, your captain?'

'He likes us column men to shave regular, and keep ourselves clean, ma'am. When we can.' He rubs the shadow on his chin. 'We haven't managed too well this past week.'

The boy pulls open a cupboard door and rummages inside, looking for anything of value that's portable.

'But how do you manage to bathe if you're living in dugouts and caves?' Edith asks.

'We takes a dip in a stream while one of us keeps a look out.'

'And what do you do for towels?'

'Roll in the grass.' He makes an impatient gesture. 'Enough of that aul' blarney, now. These candlesticks isn't enough. Where's your tin? The captain prefers cash, so he does. Get me tin when you can, says he.'

'No doubt. But we have none about the place. You can't draw blood from a stone. Shall we go back?'

'It's best to give him what'll get him to leave. The longer the lads are here, the greater the chances of...something. I dunno. Wouldn't like to say. But something.'

She finds him a canteen of cutlery and a set of silver-plated egg cups.

'What else?'

'Nothing. I told you, we've nothing left to give. You're not the first Republicans to pay us a social call.'

He rubs the back of his hand against his mouth. She can see he doesn't have it in him to order her around the way his captain does, or raise his fist to her like the hand grenade

man. 'Have you nothing else? It's for your own good I'm telling you. This won't satisfy him.'

Edith's meets his boy-bright eyes. 'This is no life for you. Are you trying to be a hero? A martyr for Ireland? Ireland gobbles up blood sacrifices. She'll suck you dry and spit out your bones. You'll be as stiff and dead as...' she gulps, caught in a wave of misery. '...Poor Dooley in there.'

He stares at her, pupils widened. 'The taste of blood gets into your mouth. Once it's there, nothing shifts it.'

Edith waits.

'But there's no going back now. I've crossed the line.'

'It's never too late.'

'It is. I've done things.'

'You could emigrate.'

His voice is almost inaudible. 'They'd never let me go, the others.'

'Your friends?'

He clears his throat. 'I'd never leave them. We're volunteers.'

Edith feels compelled to recover this boy who's not yet a man, despite the bravado.

'I noticed you were limping. Are you injured?'

'No, ma'am. Thank God.'

'Is it your boots?'

He looks at them as if surprised to notice them on his feet. 'I did a swap with me da, the day I left. His were new. He thought he was doing me a favour. But I'm crippled with them.'

'One of my brothers left a pair here the last time he stayed over. They might fit you.'

She leads him to the boot cupboard by the gloryhole, where Dooley had his battle with a rat. Aylmer's knee-length hunting boots are near the front. They can hear voices

from the kitchen but not the sense of what's being said. The youth sits on the floor to try on Aylmer's boots, his face excited, the way a child's is on Christmas morning.

'Holy mackerel, ma'am. Are you really giving them to me?'

'I am.' Edith notices his socks are soaking. 'You'll get chilblains wearing wet socks, you know.'

'I don't have a spare pair, ma'am. I did once. Nobody knits like me ma. But I left the spares after me, clearing out by a nose ahead of the Auxies.'

The Auxiliaries, the Black and Tans, the RIC. It's only a matter of time before military or police catch up with this boy. He feels for his big toe inside the boots, pressing his thumb against the leather. Will he be shot wearing her brother's riding boots? Or hanged? The odds are against him surviving – she's wasting the boots. But they may as well go to another as moulder among family debris. Aylmer's in no hurry to return to Drishane. As the captain has just pointed out, treaty negotiations may be happening in London but the ceasefire is a provisional arrangement.

The boy peeks up at her shyly. 'Can I ask you something, ma'am?'

'Of course.'

'I heard something over the summer I'd love to believe, but dunno if I can. They say there was a butterfly found in Clare, striped green, white and orange. The people are calling it the republican butterfly. Could such a thing be true?'

Edith opens her mouth to deny the possibility. The trust on his face makes her pause. 'Anything's possible.'

He smiles.

Another of the men looms over them. 'Captain says what the feck's keeping you?'

The boy scrambles to his feet, lifts the clunking tablecloth and escorts Edith back to the kitchen.

She drops the cloth jewellery bag into the captain's hand. 'With my compliments.'

Turning on her heel, she goes to where Cameron is nursing Dooley. She holds out her arms and he transfers the stiffening fox terrier into them. 'My gallant boy. You're with Martin now. She'll take care of you.'

'Took a pounding, poor old fellow. Totally unnecessary behaviour. Utterly caddish,' says Cameron.

'Shut the fuck up, soldier-boy,' says one of the men.

Meanwhile, the captain loosens the drawstring, unpeels the bag and an assortment of paste pieces twinkle in his cupped palm. One after another, he inspects them.

Cradling Dooley, Edith's gaze circumnavigates the room. Has anything changed in her absence? One of the men has a sack at his feet. Her forehead pleats.

Mrs O'Shea catches her eye. 'My kitchen supplies. They've helped themselves to what's in the larder. Like sheet lightning, they were, the speed they stripped the place.'

The captain strolls across to the dresser, and holds a drop earring to the lamplight there. He twirls it between his fingers. With his back to the room, he says, 'Now, I'm no jeweller, but these don't strike me as family heirlooms.' His head and upper body whip round towards Edith. 'You can do better than that, Miss Somerville.'

'They're all I have left.'

'She give us these candle sticks, too, captain.' The boy speaks up. 'Solid silver, they are. You should feel the weight of them. And some forks and things.'

'Good work. Nevertheless, I believe the lady can dig a little deeper.'

The captain looks around, spies a newspaper lying beside one of the chairs, and throws it on top of the range. He produces his box of matches and lights the paper. In an instant, it goes up in flames.

Everyone watches. Sparks and blackened embers fly about the kitchen.

One of the men laughs.

Edith swallows. 'If I had any more to give, don't you think I would, to make you leave? You can't imagine my brother and I have any wish to prolong this visit.'

'I've no doubt you'd be glad to see the back of us, Miss Somerville. Nevertheless, you don't strike me as the sort to hand everything over without a fight. Now, here's what I propose. You and one of my men go up to your bedroom and together the two of you take another look through your knick-knacks. I dare say there's a few bangles or a watch that may have slipped your mind. Better still if you remember some bank notes.'

'I must protest! I cannot allow your, your' – wretches springs to her tongue but she resists it – 'your men to traipse through my bedroom. It's private!'

'My men need arms and ammunition. Your privacy ranks a poor second behind that.'

'But there's a truce in place,' says Cameron.

'Ah, that's only all palaver. A breathing space 'til the war's back on. Now, Miss Somerville, off you toddle and see what you can lay your hands on for us. Or else.' He thuds his Mauser butt end against the palm of his hand, with a meaningful jerk of the head at Loulou, cowering on Philomena's lap.

Cameron takes a step towards the captain and two rifles swing towards him in unison. 'This is naked force. You have no authority or right to do this.'

'We learned it from the English. People like you need to decide where your loyalties lie. Either give your allegiance to the Irish Republic. Or clear out.'

'Great Britain will soon bring you to heel,' says Cameron.

'We're not fucken dogs!'

Edith can see the captain's grip on his temper beginning to fray. A vein has pushed up through his forehead. All of his anger appears to be centred on that pulsing stripe. His eyes belong to a man for whom killing has become commonplace. She takes a step towards the IRA leader. 'My brother meant no offence.'

The captain says nothing. Neither does Cameron.

‘Did you, Cameron?’

His face reddens.

‘Did you?’ She pins him with a look.

Cameron exhales noisily. ‘I meant no offence. I spoke ... out of turn.’

The captain passes a hand over his eyes. Pauses. Speaks. ‘The English won’t have things their own way here any more. The people are ready to see this fight through.’ He nods at the man who kicked Dooley. ‘Go with her.’

Edith’s blood slows in her veins. Anyone but him. She looks at the captain and sees there is no use appealing to him. Very well. She lays Dooley on the floor, uncoils the scarf she wound round her neck when she rose from bed a lifetime ago, and rests his head on it. She can’t bear to think of his dear little face pressed to the ground.

As before, she carries the hall lamp, her skin crawling at the knowledge of who is a few paces behind her. He whistles a tune as they walk, but stops to study a collection of fox’s masks mounted on the wall, near the staircase.

‘Caught in mid-flight, you might say,’ says the whistler.

She doesn’t answer. He makes a gesture to move her on, and all at once she sees him as a man with experience of herding cattle. To the slaughterhouse, probably. On the staircase, her leg drags as she mounts. She grits her teeth and listens for the chiming of a clock, hoping to gauge the time, but the muteness of the house engulfs them. On the upper landing, under a window looking over the rooftops of rooms added on to Drishane, in afterthought, he removes his cap and scratches his scalp. Edith sees his hair is dark and untidy, like a windblown hedge.

‘Your fucken brother’d want to watch his manners round the captain. It’s all the same to us if we roast your aul’ barn of a house.’ He jams his cap back on his head and makes a fist of his hand. ‘Whoosh!’ The hand opens, fingers splayed, mimicking an explosion. ‘It’s some sight.’

She points to the grenade, dangling from his belt. ‘Do you know the damage that thing could do?’

‘It won’t do a thing unless I pull the pin.’

‘You might end up doing yourself an injury in the process.’

‘I know what I’m about. Pull, count to three, throw it to Jaysus and hit the ground with your head covered.’

Silenced, she walks ahead to her bedroom door, where she balks. She won’t have this Dooley-murdering devil tramping around in the space where she sleeps. ‘Wait here please.’ Her tone is brisk. ‘I’ll never be able to find what I want with you breathing down my neck.’ She thrusts the lamp into his hand.

To her surprise, he remains on the saddle board. Quickly, she retrieves her best evening pumps from a shelf in the wardrobe. Inside one of the shoes, mummified in tissue paper, her mother’s ruby engagement ring nestles.

‘Show me what you have there.’

‘It’s a ring.’

‘Let me see.’

‘Are you an expert on stones?’

He takes two steps into the room, his boots causing the floorboards to creak. She unpeels the paper and holds the ring aloft by its gold band. Within the lamplight’s loop, the ruby glows with the assurance of a genuine stone.

‘Grand.’

‘Shall we go?’ she asks.

‘Hold your horses.’ His eyes patrol her dressing table. ‘We’ll have them an’ all.’ A forefinger points towards an enamelled hairbrush and hand mirror set, a sixteenth birthday gift from her parents.

She grits her teeth. 'Be my guest. Allow me.' She squeezes past him, carrying them.

She must get this beast out of her bedroom.

He hesitates, nothing else catches his eye, and he follows her.

'I'll take them.'

She scrapes her fingers through the brush to rake out any hairs lodged there. They can have her brush but not them. She hands over the matched pair and he jams them into a pocket. All at once, slyly exultant, she realises he missed the comb that completes the set. It's out of its usual place, left on her bedside table. Small victories are as sweet as large.

He whistles the same tune, walking back to the kitchen, its notes grating in her eardrums. By the time they are back, her hip is aching and one of her legs is dragging.

'With my compliments,' she tells the captain, handing over the ring.

'That's more like it. The Republic thanks you, Miss Somerville.'

She notices the whistler hasn't produced the hairbrush and mirror. Could he be holding them back for a sweetheart? He meets her eye, an evil look on his face. She turns back to the captain.

'Can you leave us in peace now, please?'

'We'll need a horse.'

She thanks her lucky stars Mike Hurley found temporary homes for the young hunters. 'We've only a couple of old work horses left. They pull the plough. They won't be much use to you.'

'There's one that looked fresh enough.'

'That's Tara, highly strung. She'll throw any rider. I'm the only one who can manage her.'

'The gentry aren't the only ones who can manage a horse.'

'I'm not suggesting that. But believe me, horse sense is a misnomer in her case. She's skittish. If you have to take a horse, make it Samson. He's well on in years but

strong – he used to be a hunter. You’ll get some benefit out of him. He’s a horse that could leap a house.’

‘Very well, Samson it is. We have your men in the stable – they can point him out.’

‘The Hurleys – are they really all right?’ checks Edith.

‘Right as rain. I told you before. Now, ladies, Colonel, I wish you good night. *To sleep, perchance to dream.* Let’s gather up, lads.’

‘Will we take this yoke with us?’ Cameron’s old shotgun is waved in the air.

‘Ah, firepower. We haven’t found much in that department, have we? Colonel, do you swear on your honour as an officer and a gentleman’ – his mouth twists, amused by a private joke – ‘there are no other guns in the house?’

‘None. I handed them over at the barracks in Skibbereen.’

‘Make him go on his knees and swear it,’ urges the whistler.

‘Shame on you,’ protests Philomena.

‘Can’t I tell a lie as well on my feet as on my knees?’ says Cameron.

‘No need for anyone to get down on their knees,’ says the captain. ‘Do you swear there are no other guns, Colonel Somerville?’

‘I do.’

‘Very well, I’ll take your word for it. Now, do you have a sheet of paper and a pen?’

‘There are writing materials in my study.’

‘Mrs O’Shea, surely you have something for shopping lists and the like,’ says Edith. Goodness knows what else they’ll lift if they go tramping through the house again.

‘In the drawer on the side of the table,’ says Mrs O’Shea.

The captain pulls out a scrap of paper and pencil, writes on it rapidly, folds the sheet and hands it to Cameron. ‘For you, Colonel.’

‘What is it?’

‘A list of the items we’ve requisitioned.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘The Irish Republic will refund you as soon as it has control of our tax revenues.

We’re not thieves, you know.’

Cameron catches Edith’s eye. Neither of them speaks.

‘You’re all to stay put for the next hour,’ continues the captain. ‘Someone will be watching the house. If anyone tries to leave before time’s up, we’ll be back another night. And you won’t escape so lightly next time.’ He bends at the waist in a mocking bow. ‘And so *slán agus beannacht* one and all. No need to wish me luck. I have the devil’s own.’ Hand shoulder high, he signals to the men. ‘Time we were away, boys.’ They swing around him in a semi-circle.

With the clarity of a flash of light in a darkened room, Edith hears Martin speaking to her. *Remind them about the death coach.* ‘Keep an eye out for the *coiste bodhar*,’ says Edith.

Two of the men bless themselves, another babbles what sounds like an invocation.

Even the captain has some of the swagger knocked out of him. ‘W-what’s that you said?’

‘The *coiste bodhar*, the death coach. It rattles along our roads most nights. Headless horses in the harness and a coachman with his head under his arm. They say no one who sees it lives out the week.’

A moan escapes from the Kerry boy in Aylmer’s boots. The wind whips a branch and taps it against the window. Everyone jumps.

The captain pulls himself together. ‘*Piseogs*. Now remember ladies, colonel, you’re being watched. Let’s go, boys.’

The back door opens and one by one they flit out into the murk.

Chapter 7

The four people in the kitchen strain their ears for sounds from outside. A horse's neigh. A man's voice soothing it – not Mike Hurley's. The crunch of footsteps. The clatter of hooves. Silence.

It is broken by Loulou, who scrabbles over to Dooley and begins to sniff him. An exploratory lick of his mouth. Another sniffing session, this time circling the body. Circumnavigation complete, she sits back on her haunches and begins to yowl.

'Bloody well shut up!' says Cameron.

'Go easy on her, Cam,' says Edith. She's only doing what I'd like to, she thinks.

Mrs O'Shea takes her rosary beads out of a pocket and runs them through her fingers, lips moving.

'How about a nice cup of tea?' There's a tremor in Philomena's voice.

'Good idea,' says Cameron.

'Right so.' Philomena braces her arms on the sides of the chair and tries to stand, but her legs give way and she sinks back into the chair with an 'ooph'.

Mrs O'Shea drops the beads into her lap and reaches across the space separating her from Philomena. The two hold hands. 'There, there, *a stór*,' says Mrs O'Shea. Philomena breathes in, squeezes the cook's hand, and stands up.

'I'll help you with the tea, Philomena.'

'No, you stay where you are and rest yourself, Mrs O. My legs are younger than yours. We've all had a shock. A nice, sugary cup is just what the doctor ordered.'

Edith wishes she could hold hands with them, too. But it would never do in front of her brother. She considers taking his hand in hers but knows he'd resent the staff seeing it.

'Can I have a look at that piece of paper they gave you?'

He glances over it, before handing it to her. ‘Intolerable conceit of the man. Self-styled captain, too, I shouldn’t wonder.’ Cameron’s foot lashes out, connecting with a table leg.

Edith reads the list, laid out in copperplate script, despite the time pressure the captain was under.

Item 1: one horse plus assorted saddles & bridles

Item 2: one ruby ring

Item 3: pair of silver candlesticks

Item 4: CANTEEN of CUTLERY

ITEM 5: silver egg cups (7)

Item 6: Assorted earrings, bracelets & Ladys watch

ITEM 7: One chicken, cooked & various foodstuffs

**Requisitioned from Summervilles of drishane house in name of the irish
republic by captain c.. p. Cork DiVision October 19th 1921**

Well. That IRA man has panache, if nothing else. Edith keeps the thought to herself. Cameron would take it amiss.

Loulou whimpers, and Edith bends over her. ‘Loulou looks overheated. Maybe she’s thirsty.’

‘Shall I fetch you a bowl, miss?’

‘No, Philomena, you keep going with the tea.’

Edith tries to persuade Loulou to drink, but she refuses to lap. Edith dips the corner of her nightdress in the water and squeezes a few drops onto her lolling tongue. Next, she turns her attention to Dooley. ‘Would you bring me his blanket, Cameron? It’s at the end of my bed. We can’t leave the poor boy lying here in his own blood.’ Her voice catches, she swallows and clears her throat. ‘I’ll wrap him up in it. He loves that blanket.’

‘First things first, Edith. We need to let our friends know about a gang of armed men roaming the countryside. They could go anywhere next. To the Castle. To Glen Barrahan. Anywhere. No one’s safe.’

‘First things first means taking care of Dooley,’ snaps Edith.

Mrs O’Shea heaves herself out of her chair. ‘There’s a towel in the drawer here, Miss Edith. It’ll cover the poor wee mite for now. You shouldn’t kneel there like that with him, you’ll stiffen up.’

Together, they lay Dooley on the towel and loosely cover him with it.

‘Miss Edith, let me clean you up.’ Philomena has a damp cloth in her hand. She strokes it across her mistress’s face, wiping away the blood.

‘I suppose I should tell the police,’ says Cameron. ‘Except they’ll do nothing. They’re afraid to leave their barracks without a battalion of soldiers at their backs.’ He cracks his knuckles methodically. First the left hand, then the right.

Edith has a flashback to their mother scolding him about the knuckles habit. She thought he had outgrown it. ‘Does anyone have the time? We’re supposed to stay put for an hour.’

Cameron consults his fob watch. ‘Just after three. Would either of you like to go back to bed? Mrs O’Shea? Philomena?’

‘I couldn’t sleep a wink!’ says Mrs O’Shea. ‘These are desperate times, so they are. From day to day, you’d never know when trouble might come knocking on your door.’

Philomena is mumbling over the tea preparations. ‘One spoon each and one for the pot,’ again and again, like a charm. She’s crunching over shards of china broken by the IRA captain, but no one thinks to sweep them up.

‘I wouldn’t have put it past those scoundrels to torch the house,’ says Cameron. ‘My heart was in my mouth when you gave that ruffian a box of matches, Peg.’

‘I didn’t have much choice.’

The whistler comes to mind – that upwards swoosh sketched with his hand. He was only too keen to reduce Drishane to rubble. What was it she heard about windows? Automatically, her eyes turn to the shuttered kitchen window. A blast of wind rattles its panes. That’s it. They smash the ground floor windows of a house to create an up draught for the flames. The Vane-Brownes told her about it. They lost their home that way – hundreds of years of history up in smoke.

As soon as she heard how Easterfield was scorched to a crisp (‘not half a dozen stones left standing,’ said Timmy the Post) she had Mike harness Tara to the dog cart and drove to Baltimore to see how she could help. The family had managed to salvage some family portraits, war medals and various items of furniture. But their centuries-old manor house lay in ruins still smoldering fifteen hours later. The family lingered there, poking among the rubble, although neighbours begged them to leave.

The butler – a gloomy man who told Edith, ‘Soon you’ll be the only gentry left, ma’am’ – led her towards her old mixed doubles tennis partner, Bertie Vane-Browne. Bertie began talking ninety to the dozen about his doorknobs. They were crafted from eighteenth century silver fob watches, an idiosyncrasy admired by guests, and their loss troubled him. ‘Queen Victoria coveted them,’ he said.

She tried to comfort him, but he was fixated on the handles.

‘Irreplaceable. Those people don’t know what they’ve done. One day, they’ll regret it.’

‘At least no one’s been hurt,’ said Edith.

After all, landlords were being shot. The Vane-Brownes were tremendous fun, horsey to their fingertips, but she’d always heard their tenants had no great fondness for them. They were another of the old county families bailing out.

‘Stay, rebuild – there’ll be compensation money,’ she urged Bertie. But he said Georgina’s nerves had collapsed. His wife wanted nothing further to do with Ireland.

Edith darts a look at Philomena and Mrs O'Shea. For all their words of loyalty to the Somervilles, would they care if Drishane was destroyed? They'd miss the employment but would they be bothered about the house? Edith enjoys crashing out the opening chords of *All Things Bright and Beautiful* when she plays the organ at Sunday service in St Barrahanes, beside the Castle. But sometimes she is uneasy about its assumptions that everyone is comfortable with the status quo. *The rich man in his castle/the poor man at his gate/God made them high and lowly/And ordered their estate.*

Automatically, she accepts the cup and saucer, comforted by Philomena's work-roughened skin as she guides Edith's hand to take it. Philomena's hands are as capable as her brain.

'Drink that, now, let you, Miss Edith.'

Edith does as she's told. The tea is strong and sweet, and its energy-giving properties course through her.

'I believe I'll have mine in my study, Philomena,' says Cameron. 'Bring it through for me, would you? I'll go ahead and see if I can riddle up the fire.'

Edith is taken aback. How can Cam contemplate going off to be alone at a time like this? They need to stick together. Has he ever taken tea with Philomena and Mrs O'Shea? She can't recall an occasion. From time to time, she sits in the kitchen at their invitation, enjoying the companionship and local gossip. Storing away some of their colourful phrases for future use. But Cam has lived most of his life away from Drishane, in army quarters. Probably, he hasn't spent real time with the servants since boyhood.

Edith claps a hand to her forehead. 'The Hurleys! They've been tied up in the stables all this time! We need to see to them.'

'Bit of a risk going out just yet,' says Cameron. 'They said someone was watching the house. Intolerable to be given orders by one's social inferiors, but the world's gone mad.'

‘Cam, we’ve got to help the Hurleys!’ She sets aside her tea. ‘They’ll want hot drinks and a chance to get warm, Philomena. They’ll be chilled to the bone.’

‘I’ll fetch some blankets. Heat them up on the clothes horse in front of the stove,’ says Mrs O’Shea.

‘Do.’ Edith opens a drawer in the kitchen table and removes a carving knife. ‘I’m not leaving Mike tied up for one minute longer, Cameron.’

She steps out into the yard. The night is as black as a bog hole, the moon all but invisible behind a cloud bank, but she’d know her way round the stable yard blindfolded. Sniffing the air, she is surprised to realise it must have rained while they were being held. The ground underfoot is damp, and she can smell fresh horse droppings – poor old Samson. Their sacrificial goat.

Purposeful as a cat, she moves across the yard. The bitter-sweet perfume of laurel is unloosed into the night air. The leaves are poisonous. She’d like to force-feed them to the whistler. Tara recognises Edith’s footfall and whickers to her. Edith considers calling words of reassurance – but on second thoughts, it wouldn’t do to alert a watcher.

The lonely bray of an ass travels across the fields. Tara neighs again. Mike mustn’t be able to speak or he’d call out to Tara. Some of those Irish words he uses on her. The moon pops out from behind its cloud cover, as suddenly as a pea from its pod. It is like the surface of a drum, full and round and waiting for something.

Footsteps tread behind. She turns, heartbeat pelting.

‘I’m coming with you.’ It’s Cameron.

Grateful, she nods.

The stables smell of horse sweat, the warm breath of animals and leather harness. None of the lanterns are lit. Cameron produces a torch.

‘Mike?’ Edith calls.

Tara stamps and clatters her hooves against the side of her stall.

‘I’ll see to you in a minute, milady. Mike?’

‘Hurley?’ says Cameron.

Muffled sounds.

‘They’re in the saddle room,’ says Cameron.

Tara snorts.

‘Just a minute, girl. I’ll get back to you as soon as I can,’ says Edith.

Edith follows her brother into a wood-panelled room where riding equipment is stored. The torch beam shows Mike Hurley propped against one wall, his nephew Ned against the other. Both are wearing gags and are bound hand and foot, tied to wall-mounted metal rings.

‘Mike, Ned, are you hurt?’ asks Edith.

Mike shakes his head.

‘Give me your knife, Edith,’ says Cameron. ‘Here, take the torch and hold it steady.’

He tears off the gag and begins hacking through Mike’s ropes.

‘They took Samson,’ croaks Mike.

Cameron moves on to Ned Hurley and begins to release him.

‘I know,’ says Edith. ‘Poor old trooper. How are you? Did they hurt you?’

Mike stands up, rope puddling at his ankles, holding onto the wall for support. ‘Not me. But Ned took a belt to the side of his head. Is your ear still ringing, Ned?’

A wince and a nod.

‘You’re bleeding, Ned,’ says Edith. ‘I can see it along your ear. Come into the kitchen. We can take a proper look at it there.’

‘They outwitted us,’ says Mike. ‘Captured Ned down by the gates and used him to trick me into going to them.’

‘I was their bait to trap Uncle Mike.’ Ned chafes at the flesh on his wrists. ‘One of them gave me a thump with some kind of bludgeon. Even so, I wouldn’t call to him like

they wanted me to. But there was one lad with a hand grenade. Said he'd pull the pin and ram it down my throat. Meant it, an' all. You could tell. So then I did it. I shouted out. "Mike, Uncle Mike, come here I want you." And they got their hands on the both of us.' He shudders.

'You did the right thing,' says Edith. 'Come into the house, the pair of you look frozen. Ned, we'll get that wound of yours patched up tonight. But I'm calling the doctor in the morning. You can't take any chances with head injuries.'

Uncle and nephew reel towards the door.

'What did you make of their leader, Hurley?' asks Cameron.

'That lad in charge has them well in hand, Colonel. When he says jump, they hop to it.'

'Could you identify him to the authorities? Or any of the gang?'

A sense of unease vibrates from the Hurleys.

Edith intervenes. 'Let them be for now, Cameron. You go ahead with the men. I want to check Tara over.'

'You and your horses.'

'Horse. There's only one left now.'

'Damn thieves. Don't hang around, old girl. It's not safe out here.'

'It's not safe in the house either, is it? Anyhow, Tara's had a fright and I'm going to sort her out.'

'Have it your own way.'

Edith enters Tara's stall and speaks softly to her, the horse's nostrils ruffling at her.

'Poor girl, I bet you're missing Samson. Did you wonder what those strange men were doing?'

Tara tosses her head and blows through her nose, a harrumphing sound.

‘I bet you’ve have thrown them if they tried to mount you. You’d show them.’ Edith tangles her fingers in the young mare’s mane, chilled skin warmed by Tara’s body heat. ‘All’s well,’ she says.

Except it isn’t.

*

Back in the house, Philomena and Mrs O’Shea are tending to the Hurleys’ needs while Cameron stands about brooding. He signals to Edith to step into the passageway.

‘Just a minute, Cam. Jeremiah in the gatehouse. Has anyone thought about him? What if he’s tied up, too?’

‘They didn’t come in by the road,’ says Ned. ‘I’d have spied them if they had. They came across the fields into Drishane. From up somewhere by the O’Driscoll castle, I’d say. A couple of them crept down towards the gates when I was watching the road, and ambushed me that way.’

‘They could have been camping out by the O’Driscoll ruins,’ says Cameron.

‘Even so, we should look in on Jeremiah,’ insists Edith. ‘He could be bound and gagged, for all we know.’

‘I’ll find out.’ Cameron gives Edith a significant look. ‘When I’m back, there’s something you need to see.’ He lifts the torch and sets off in the direction of the avenue.

There’s too much to do to waste time puzzling over what he could possibly mean. She trains a lamp on Ned Hurley’s cuts, cleaned by Philomena. They look nasty. One of them is still oozing. She fetches her medical kit from the bathroom to dab on some antiseptic, and afterwards ties a bandage around his head. When that’s done, she goes to the little Dooley-shaped mound in a corner of the kitchen and kneels beside him, pulling off the towel used to cover him. His body is stiffening already. But he’s still Dooley, her

devoted companion. Bed will be empty tonight without him. She strokes the leaf-shaped patch above his eye.

The back door opens and Cameron stamps in. 'Old Jeremiah heard nothing. Or so he says. I had the devil of a job rousing him.'

'Sleeps as sound as a pound, does Jeremiah,' Mrs O'Shea puts in. 'Sure the house could tumble about his ears and he'd never stir.'

'Damned peculiar at a time like this,' snaps Cameron. 'Edith, a word with you, please. Bring a lamp.'

She follows him out to the passageway, past the gloryhole, as far as the boot cupboard.

'This is what I was trying to tell you earlier,' he says. 'I checked my study. They searched it, judging by the state of the place, but nothing seems to be taken. Surprisingly, I have to say.'

'Good.'

'But they left something behind.' He stoops and lifts something from the ground. 'I found these.' Dangling by the laces from Cameron's hand are the IRA man's discarded brown boots. 'One of those thugs must have helped himself – the cupboard door was lying open. Nincompoop left his own behind. But it's a stroke of luck, don't you see? They can be used against him. *Prima facie* evidence, those lawyer chappies call it. There's a bootmaker's name on the inside. He pulls aside the tongue to reveal the inner back. *Made by J.J. Carroll of Listowel*. He'll know who ordered them. We can trace these back to a member of that cutthroat crew we had the privilege of hosting tonight, and he'll lead us to the others. That ringleader's the chap we need to get our hands on. Cut off the head of the snake and the body collapses.'

Edith realises her good turn is about to send trouble to the door of that boy's family. But she can't tell her brother. 'Cam, we escaped lightly tonight. The house is still standing.

They seemed happy enough with what they took. What if they hear about us cooperating with the authorities and pay a return visit? To punish us? Or warn others off?’

‘I don’t know, Peg. Those blighters could go after the Coghills, the Chavasses, the Bushes – any of us. Would you really care to have that on your conscience?’

‘There’s no protection to be had from the military or police. We have to help ourselves.’

‘I devoted my life to the army. I can call in favours.’

A bank of weariness descends on Edith. ‘It’s been a long night. Let’s discuss it in the morning. We should all think about trying to snatch a few hours’ sleep. I expect the Hurleys want to go home to their own beds. But I wonder if we shouldn’t keep Ned here overnight, on account of that head injury.’

‘That’s another thing. The Hurleys. They recognised some of the blighters, I’m convinced of it. But they’re insisting they knew none of them.’

‘Can you blame them?’

‘They owe us their loyalty. We’ve given their family employment for generations.’

All things considered, their first duty is to their own skins, thinks Edith. But she understands that Cameron feels unmanned by the raid. She pats him on the arm. ‘You’ve done really well, Chimp. No one could have handled things any better. Now, bed for me as soon as I talk to Ned Hurley. We can discuss this again in the morning. *Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.*’

*

Next morning, in that dream state between waking and full consciousness, Edith feels something warm and damp on her cheeks. ‘Dooley,’ she mumbles. He’s licking her face to tell her it’s time to get up. Abruptly, she remembers he’s dead. She sits up, fingers

to her face. Her cheeks are wet with tears. Desolation washes over her. Dooley's loss grieves her more than her mother's ruby ring, despite the ring's being earmarked for one of her nieces, or Samson's seizure, fond though she was of the game old hunter. She swings her legs out of bed. If she lies on, she'll yield to a weeping fit.

Before breakfast, Cameron digs a grave under an ancient oak tree, majestic in its branchiness, where Dooley liked to scabble and sniff. Edith waits while her brother shovels, the little fox terrier's body held tight to her chest. He is wrapped in an embroidered shawl she bought in Rome a couple of years earlier, on a trip with Ethel Smyth. She can't bring herself to part with his blanket, because it retains his smell, but she won't allow her Dooley to go into the earth uncovered. Nor can she bring herself to lay him in the pit when the hole is dug. Cameron takes the bundle from her, and Edith looks away as earth is spaded over her little friend. She gazes up at the tree branches, distancing herself from the mechanics of what's happening. Hardly any leaves left. But he'll have the greenest of canopies next spring.

'There now, nice and deep. And you can visit him here whenever you like, Peg.'

Cameron is panting from the exertion.

Incapable of speech, she manages a nod.

'Let's have some breakfast now, old girl.'

Edith doesn't move. She wants to be left on her own with Dooley. Just for a few minutes.

'We must keep our strength up, Peg. You can't survive on cups of tea.'

Appeal brims from her eyes.

'Have it your own way. Come in when you're ready.'

Alone with Dooley, she allows her mind to drift. Such a feisty puppy – fearless from the start. Hated being separated from her. When she went out in the trap, he'd scamper alongside, doing his stubby-legged best to keep up until she relented and lifted him in. He

was meant to sleep at her feet, above the covers, but there were times she woke to find that damp wee nose a few inches from hers on their shared pillow.

‘Martin, will you take care of him on the other side?’ she whispers, and a rustle of branches overhead gives the response she needs.

Moving with care, as though in danger of fragmenting, Edith returns to the house. Soon, she is seated opposite Cameron in the morning room, all the familiar trappings about them. Edith looks at her blue duck’s egg. The idea of food is repellent but she can’t buckle now. She decapitates her boiled egg and dips a spoon in it.

Cameron is fussing with Loulou, who’s clingy this morning and begging to be allowed onto his knee. ‘Just this once, Lou,’ he cautions, and feeds her some buttered toast. The Pomeranian licks his fingers with her disproportionately long tongue, lapping up buttery residue.

‘About the boots,’ he says over Loulou’s head.

‘Yes?’

‘I’ve decided to hold on to them. Possible evidence when things are more settled. But for now, I think we should keep our heads down. Not draw attention to ourselves. It’s galling to let them off, Peg. But needs must. They’ll get their just desserts in the end.’

‘Whatever you say, Chimp. I’ll be advised by you.’

He touches the knot on his tie, his expression suspicious, but decides to take her at face value.

Edith manages a wan smile at her impeccably turned out brother. After a lifetime in the army, he always looks spotless. She always looks dishevelled. Except perhaps in her riding habit at the start of a hunt. She smooths down the wings of hair on either side of her face. Last night, she tossed and turned in bed, tearing the top sheet – one of Mama’s French linen ones, which she always saved for favoured visitors. How she’d have scolded Edith.

‘Nevertheless, Peg, I’ll pay calls to some of the neighbouring families and alert them.’

‘Good idea. Tara could use a jog out. It’ll help to settle her after last night. More tea?’

‘Thank you. By the way, I thought you told me our ancestors had thrown a spiritual cordon round Drishane and we’d come to no harm? Where were they when we needed them?’

Edith has been gnawing over the same conundrum. ‘I heard Martin’s voice telling me not to antagonise the men. It was good advice.’

‘We could have used something more practical by way of assistance. How did those louts even gain access to the land if our ancestors had the place barricaded?’

‘I don’t know. I’ll ask Martin.’

He glooms over his teacup. ‘If you ask me, the locals are up to their necks in rebellion. They’re as nice as pie to our faces but they aren’t loyal. To us or the Crown.’

‘I don’t know how loyal the Crown is to us, Cam. The Government has mishandled the situation dreadfully. They persist in treating the Irish as naughty schoolchildren and make no allowances for the sense of rage that’s been building over the past thirty years. A bit more common sense all round would go a long way.’

‘You always stand up for the Irish, Edith.’

‘Why not? I’m Irish, after all. So are you.’

‘Not that sort of Irish. And another thing. I’m not happy about Jeremiah in the gatehouse. For all we know, he could be in on what happened last night. I find it damned peculiar, him sleeping through everything. Not sure I believe him. I think we should dispense with his services. Let him find a new billet.’

‘He’s lived there since Grandpapa’s day. Raised a family of six in that little house. Stayed on as a widower after Delia died. You can’t turf him out.’

‘Oh, can’t I? I’m Master of Drishane. I can do whatever I bally well like. Let one of his daughters down in the village take him in. Or his sons. That’s a decent-sized farmhouse two of them have on the road to Skib, however they got their hands on it.’

‘You know very well they made money in America. Cameron, you’re being unreasonable. You don’t know Jeremiah had anything to do with last night.’

‘I know he was asleep on the job.’

‘He’s not a night watchman, he’s a gardener.’

‘It’s highly suspicious, him sleeping the whole way through the raid. He must have heard something. Seen lights.’

‘The gatehouse is at the bottom of the avenue. You can’t see the house through the trees.’

‘I don’t care. He’ll have to go.’

‘Cameron, stop it. Just stop it. Jeremiah O’Mahony has worked in our gardens for half a century. Our grandfather trusted him. Our father trusted him. If you throw him out, I’ll put him up in one of my houses in the village. Rent-free.’

His cheeks flame. ‘It’s outrageous that armed men should be free to trespass onto my land, and walk into my property, bold as brass. As if they owned the place. The world’s gone mad.’ Cameron pushes back his chair and stands up. ‘My land and my property,’ he repeats. ‘And no one cares. There’s no one to complain to.’

‘I care.’

‘I mean no one in authority. Once, I could have whistled up a police inspector to deal with this. I’ve a good mind to take this further. I could go into Skib and see the commanding officer of the Sherwoods. I served with his brother.’

‘Please don’t cause a fuss. It’ll only make things worse. The Government has abandoned us. We have to use our own wits to get through this.’

‘A lorryload of soldiers driving up and down the road between here and Skib would soon put the frighteners on those scoundrels. No, that wouldn’t work, the roads are in pieces. But they could ship them in over water.’

Edith grips the table edge. ‘Don’t even think about it, Cam. For pity’s sake. Imagine if they turned the Black and Tans loose on Castletownshend. The villagers would never forgive you. Our name would be mud forever. The Tans have terrorised the people in other parts of the county – ask the Hurleys, ask Philomena and Mrs O’Shea, if you don’t believe me. The truth is, the Government has washed its hands of Ireland. While the war was on, it let the Tans and Auxiliaries behave any way they liked. They’ve been reined in now because of the truce. But if it falls apart, all hell will break loose.’

Cameron occupies himself with Loulou for a minute or two. ‘I just want peace and quiet, Peg. All those years overseas, I kept thinking about Drishane. It was meant to be my haven. But I don’t feel the same about it anymore.’

‘Because of the IRA raid?’

‘Damned rebels. Strutting about. Making threats.’

He wanted to sell Drishane before the flying squad paid them a visit, but Edith doesn’t point this out. Her brother needs reassurance. ‘I know how you feel, dear. But Drishane will survive – I feel it in my marrow. We just have to lie low. Cam, you’ll leave Jeremiah alone, won’t you? Let him stay in the gatehouse?’

‘Suppose so.’

*

‘Take it easy today, Peg. See you at dinner.’

Edith and Cameron, the latter dressed for a journey, are standing on the front steps. He sees Mike Hurley lead Tara and the trap around the side of the house and raises his voice. 'How's that nephew of yours this morning, Hurley?'

'Not too bad, Colonel. It takes more than a dunch on the noggin to floor a Hurley.'

'That's the spirit.' He walks across the gravel and slips something into Hurley's hand. 'For the young fellow's trouble,' he says quietly.

Hurley touches his cap to Cameron.

Edith observes the exchange with approval. Correct behaviour never fails to please her.

The trap bowls away in a whirl of small stones.

'Just a minute, Mike.' She joins him. 'Are you really all right?'

'Not a bother, Miss Edith.'

'Do you think they'll be back, Mike? Our night visitors?'

'I can't say. All I can tell you is the Somerville name means something in these parts. The people wouldn't take kindly to outsiders doing you down.'

'Outsiders? Were they all strangers?'

A look, quick, before his eyes turn away. 'Mostly, Miss Edith. The fella they left outside to keep watch over us was from somewhere not a million miles from here.'

'I see. Does my brother know?'

'Not unless you have it in your head to go telling him.'

The wind is chilly, pinching colour into her nose and chin. Edith hugs herself with her arms. Lately, she's been feeling the cold. She bends down to pick up a leaf that's the precise shade of the patch on Dooley's face. Dogs – they burrow through your defences and plant themselves in your heart. After they're gone, a piece of your heart is lost with them. Her eyes mist over.

'Miss Edith? Are you intending for to tell the Colonel?'

She pushes the leaf into her pocket. She's planning to do a portrait of Dooley from memory and it will be a useful colour prompt. 'I shouldn't think so. Least said, soonest mended.' She hesitates, wondering how to phrase her question.

If the Somervilles are to survive in Castletownshend, it must be with local support. One of her ancestors saved two local men who were Fenians. That hasn't been forgotten. All of them, Somervilles and villagers alike, weathered the Famine and the Land War. But since that Easter 1916 business in Dublin, certainties have eroded and grievances reignited. Something powerful is swimming to the surface. Over the summer, a scarecrow of a travelling man stopped her near the boathouse and said he wanted to buy back his ancestral lands from them, if you don't mind. As though the Somervilles were squatting on something that belonged to others.

Edith is hybrid and can live with her hybridity. But can the Irish, who are bound to take over one of these days, live with it too? No point in asking Mike. He might give her the answer he thinks she wants to hear.

'All the same, Miss Edith, good job we got those young horses away. In the nick of time, it was.' A slow grin stretches Mike's face.

It's catching. She smiles back. 'Every cloud has a silver lining.'

'We pulled one over on the Sinn Féin boyos, so we did.'

'They'd have loved to get their hands on my hunters. Where are they, by the by?'

'Over by Leap direction. Your sovereigns will see them through the winter.' He tips the brim of his cap to her and walks away in the direction of the greenhouses.

Despite everything, she's less melancholy as she strolls towards the lawns overlooking the bay, Drishane at her back. In the 1700s, the house was designed to face towards the quays where Tom the Merchant could watch his ships load and unload the goods by which he made his fortune. His heirs, who regarded trade as ungentlemanly, were unable to change Drishane's aspect. Instead, one of them re-routed the driveway towards a

different door. Edith thinks of it as a metaphor. Same house, new doorway – things went on as before. Hopefully, things will continue to do that under a new regime.

She watches the progress of a sailboat steering for Castlehaven Bay. It's tacking sideways against the contrary wind. Shading her eyes, she tries to detect which of the local fishermen it belongs to. All at once, she becomes aware she's not alone. For one heart-stopping moment, she thinks the Sinn Féiners are back. Edith lays her hand against her sternum and counts to three before turning her head.

'Hello, Flurry. Where have you been hiding yourself?'

He's watching the boat, too, and doesn't look at her. But he salutes her with a tip of his hat. 'Here and there.'

'We'd a bit of a night of it last night. An IRA captain and his men paid us a visit.'

'Hunters, by the sound of them.'

'Boys, Flurry. Younger than you. And decades younger than me.' She sighs. 'We were expecting a call sooner or later. But the nervous strain of waiting grinds one's nerves to powder. I can't help wondering how long the staff will put up with it.'

'Until they can't, is my guess.'

'One of them, a chap with his teeth hanging out to dry over his lower lip, had a grenade dangling from his belt. He murdered Dooley. Kicked him to death as easy as he'd squash a fly. Are you listening, Flurry?'

From his pocket, he produces a crushed packet of Woodbines, shakes out a cigarette and lights it by striking a match on the sole of his boot. The whiff of sulphur blows across to her. 'Hunting's what I'm thinking about. Are there many foxes in the woods this season?'

'Oh, Flurry, no one has time to think about foxes or hunting.'

His voice radiates reproach. 'What else is there to think about but horses, dogs and foxes?'

‘Keeping Drishane intact for the next generation. Passing it on in good shape.’

Flurry takes a draw, cheeks hollowing, and she smells tobacco smoke. She’s always liked it in the open air.

‘You mightn’t be too keen on handing it over when the time comes. My grandmama has a tight grip on Aussolas. She’s always promising to leave it to me in her will. But as sure as eggs is eggs, she’ll outlive me. Out of pure spite.’

‘Flurry, what should we do? About the raiders, I mean?’

Moody, he studies the glowing tip of his cigarette. ‘If there’s trouble in store, I’d get your brother away from here. He who fights and runs away lives to fight another day.’

‘They can think again if they think they’re going to get rid of us!’

‘The people won’t bother you, Edith. But I can’t say as much for your brother.’

Chapter 8

‘Cam, we need to talk.’

‘Mmm.’ Cameron is sucking peppermints, lost in Bach’s *Italian Concerto* on the gramophone, his foot beating out the notes. Towards the end of his career, he was commander at Kneller Hall in Twickenham, the British Army’s school for bandsmen. It was his favourite posting.

‘The thing is, Chimp, it’s not safe here for you.’

‘Wretched troublemakers. I’d like to horsewhip the lot of them!’

‘I’m worried about you. You’re Master of Drishane. That makes you a kidnap target.’

His eyes snap open. ‘They wouldn’t dare!’

‘You’re forgetting about the heir to the Powys estate. He was held for nine days until a ransom was paid.’

He harrumphs and she presses home her advantage. ‘Look, Chimp, the winds of change are blowing. Old loyalties can’t be relied on. Besides, it’s men from outside doing these things. The Somerville name means nothing to them.’

He broods. Crunches his peppermint. Settles the pleat in a trouser leg. By and by, he says, ‘Doesn’t seem right that our place here should be questioned. It’s our native soil, too.’

A spark flies out from the log on the fire, bright as a miniature comet: glory followed by extinction. Edith shivers. ‘Of course we belong here,. But discretion is the better part of valour.’

‘I’d go away if you came with me, Peg.’

‘But the house. Somebody has to hold the fort.’

‘It wouldn’t feel right leaving you here on your own.’

‘Nobody would trouble themselves about an old woman like me. Besides, I’d have Philomena and Mrs O’Shea. Mike Hurley’s here every day, and Jeremiah O’Mahony’s always pottering about the garden. I wouldn’t be alone.’

‘Why don’t we shut up shop and leave Philomena as caretaker?’

Edith wants to say that Drishane is more than her home – that her sense of self is tethered to the house. And Martin’s presence is powerful here. But she needs to advance a more practical argument to Cameron. ‘I’d be afraid of the place going up in flames with none of the family here.’

‘Animals. Burning two-hundred-year-old houses. No rhyme or reason to their destruction.’

‘The Tans have been torching houses, too.’

‘Cabins and shacks. Hardly in the same league.’

‘You make us a target by being here, Cam. You know you do.’

She waits. He can be as obstinate as a rock if pushed. But she knows he wants to go away.

The music comes to a halt, and he stands up to lift the needle from the disc. ‘By the by, I met a Yank in the West Cork today, when I stopped in for a bite to eat. He’s a reporter for some New York newspaper or other. I forget which. You want to see what his chap was driving. A ripping roadster made by the H.C.S. Motor Car Company of Indiana. Had it shipped over. Bit showy, to tell you the truth. Couldn’t be any more yellow if it was a bowl of custard.’

Edith remembers a man and his chauffeur in Skibbereen, fretting about missing a train. There can’t be two such motor cars in West Cork. ‘How odd he’s still here. You’d think, if it was news he was after, he’d be in Dublin or London.’

‘Fellow was proud as punch of his motor. “I know folks stare but to blazes with them,” he said. What do you say we take a leaf out of his book, Peg? Let everyone go to blazes? You and me, we could take a place together in London.’

‘Cam, I love London for a visit. But I couldn’t live there. I’d turn into one of those lumpen women, from overeating and want of exercise. But you’d enjoy it, I know you would. You could go to concert halls. Stay at your club. Catch up with the family – the boys spend their leave there. I suppose Hugh and Jack think of it as home now.’ She frowns, wishing this scattering hadn’t happened. ‘When everything’s settled in Ireland, you can come back.’

‘Settled? The Irish question? Fat chance.’

‘The politicians are making a hash of things but sooner or later they’ll see the light. As sure as springtime, there’ll be an end to these disturbances. But for now, you go and I’ll stay. Yes?’

‘Let me sleep on it.’

*

‘Cameron, can you come and look at something with me please?’

‘What’s wrong, Edith? You look as if you’ve seen a ghost.’

‘Can you come here? Now?’

Cameron leaves the breakfast table and follows her to the front door, lying ajar. He stands out on the step and gazes down the avenue. ‘Well? What is it?’

‘Look behind you, Cam. On the door.’

Pinned to the wood is a note. Cameron tears it down with an oath.

‘Horrible, isn’t it?’ says Edith. ‘Lucky I spotted it before any of the staff. I was outside picking ferns.’

Flushed crimson, he reads the note aloud.

CROMWELLS SPAWN

YOUR BEING WATCHED YOU LEECHES

YOUR DAYS ARE NUMBERED

YOUR SITTING DUCKS KEEP LOOKING OVER YOUR SHOULDERS

SIGNED THE PEOPLES DEFENDERS

‘Infernal cheek,’ says Cameron. ‘We were never Cromwellians.’

‘Of course not. Though we did marry in...’

‘I see this putrid piece of coercion is anonymous. People’s Defenders, indeed!

Probably some errand boy with no seat in his trousers.’

‘You’re attracting this, Cam, dear.’

‘It’s not addressed to anyone.’

‘Honestly, Chimp, you’re a target. A colonel. A landowner. A gentleman.’

‘It would be shabby to bolt. Besides, I refuse to be intimidated.’ He crumples the dog-earned sheet and throws it on the ground.

Edith picks it up, and they walk back together to the breakfast room. On the way, she smooths out the page, and flicks a glance at the pencilled message. She used one of her graphite pencils. Less chance of the lettering becoming illegible if it rained overnight.

Cameron sits down in his place, expression testy, but Edith goes straight to the fireplace.

‘Don’t destroy it, Peg, we might need to show it to someone.’

‘There’s no one *to* show it to. It’s vile, let’s just get rid of it.’ Quickly, she throws the note into the flames.

*

Edith and Cameron say their farewells in the outer hall, Cam holding Loulou, who knows something is afoot because of all the luggage. She licks his face and keeps her dark eyes on him.

‘My little, little, Lou-lou-lou,’ he says. ‘Daddy will miss you. He’ll think of you every minute of the day. But he’ll bring you back some yummy Swiss chocolate from the Alps.’

A jaunt to Switzerland is news to Edith. ‘I thought you were going to London, Cam?’

‘Yes, all booked. Rendez-vous with the clan, and so forth. But I might go further afield. I’ve been feeling cooped up.’

Where on earth is he getting the money? Edith bites back criticism. The main thing is he’ll be safe.

‘Begging your pardon,’ says Philomena. ‘I just wanted to wish the master a safe journey.’

‘Thank you, Philomena.’

‘Mrs O’Shea will be up directly. She has a cherry cake baked fresh this morning to put in your picnic basket. You won’t go hungry, Master Cameron, even if the restaurant cars are shut.’

‘Everything has gone to hell in a hand cart, Philomena. You’ll look after Miss Edith, won’t you?’

‘You can count on me, Master Cameron. I don’t see how you’ll get across the water at all tonight, mind you. There’s not enough wind today to snuff out a candle.’

‘The boats are steam-driven now, Philomena,’ says Edith. ‘I think perhaps you should go and see what’s keeping Mrs O’Shea. Master Cameron needs to be on the road.’

Just then, Mrs O’Shea huffs up from the kitchen with a basket. ‘Master Cameron, I’ve a feast in here for you, so I have. There’s a couple of chicken legs, ham sandwiches, and I know you’re fond of...’

‘You’re an angel, Mrs O’Shea,’ Edith interrupts the litany. ‘Take that out to Mike, would you, Philomena? Now Cameron, you really must leave. Miss one connection and they’re all at sixes and sevens.’

From a pocket in her vast apron, Mrs O’Shea produces a parcel tied with string. ‘Could I trouble you to post this in England for me, Master Cameron? It’s for me brother Francie and his family in Liverpool. A barm brack made the way our mother always baked them. God rest that hardworking saint of a woman. Francie does be lonesome for the taste of her food. And here’s some money for stamps. I hope it’ll be enough.’

One-handed, still clasping Loulou, Cameron accepts the package but refuses the coins. ‘No need for that, Mrs O. Stamps won’t be a problem.’

Edith ushers him outside, Mrs O’Shea’s effusions trailing after them.

‘You mustn’t worry about a thing, Chimp. I’ll keep everything shipshape here for you.’

‘I know you will, Peg. Wish I didn’t have to leave Loulou behind. Poor girl is sure to get the mopes. But London’s no place for her. Someone would tread on you, wouldn’t they? My teeny-tiny baby-girl.’

‘I’ll see to it she has plenty of exercise.’

‘And her coat needs brushing every day.’

‘All right.’

‘Talk to her – she gets lonely.’

‘I will.’

‘When you’re out walking, watch out for large birds. Remember the time that owl tried to fly off with her? Thought she was prey.’

Edith holds out her arms. ‘I’ll take her now. Off you go, dear, you haven’t a minute to lose. You know how messy the roads can be.’

Cameron deposits a kiss on Loulou’s nose, hands her over and climbs into the trap.

Loulou wriggles in Edith's arms, trying to chase after him, but is held tight. 'Behave, young lady. I'm going to train you. Your master was too soft with you.'

Hurley cries out 'hup' to Tara and the wheels start rolling. Mrs O'Shea and Philomena wave from the steps.

Edith walks alongside for a few steps. 'Tell the boys their sons really need to spend more time in Ireland.'

'Can't think why they'd want to.'

'How are they meant to take care of Drishane if they don't learn to love it?'

The trap picks up speed. He raises his arm in farewell.

Her brother had a spring in his step. He's sorrier to leave this toy dog than Drishane. Edith knows love of place is seeded in childhood. But it can be learned, too. None of the coming generation grew up in the house, the way she and Hildegard and their five brothers did. When things quieten down, she'll write to Aylmer and Boyle's sons and invite them to stay. One of them will be Cameron's heir.

*

Edith expects to feel lonely after Cameron's departure, but the house folds itself around her, as comforting as a patchwork quilt. She plunders the treasure chest of Irish R.M. stories to borrow a line here, a scene there, for her play. It will all culminate in a wedding, of course. "*Journeys end in lovers meeting/Every wise man's son doth know.*" Aloud, she quotes Feste, the *Twelfth Night* jester. But a plot that's all romance and no Flurrying would never do. Fortunately, that reprobate Slipper keeps muscling in, and it amuses her to allow him to steal Flurry's thunder now and again. He'll be a crowd-pleaser. A succession of productive writing days follows, and she is conscious of Martin's spirit

guiding her pen. Not since the earliest days of their literary career has she experienced such a sense of a mission. No wonder tremendous progress is being made.

Writing those stories with Martin was a joyful time, especially the first collection. That was back in the heel-end of the last century. Martin was pain-free then and, although they had family responsibilities, their shoulders could manage the load. Youth helped. Often, they were doubled over with laughter during the plotting, conscious that Major Yeates' wife Philippa was ten times cleverer than he, and as for Flurry Knox, he was so sharp he'd cut himself one day.

She has no need to consult their manuscripts to choose the stories she's using to clothe her play. They remain just-landed fresh in her mind. She does, however, trawl her notebooks, scanning for useful phrases to weave through. Opening those marbled covers never fails to comfort her. It's satisfying to retrieve a sentence written some two decades earlier as an act of faith in the future. That future turned out to be rather more tentative than she imagined. Yet she must make the best of it. Whatever deserts her, courage can never be allowed to fail. A first draft will be completed shortly.

Shortly before bedtime, Edith has an automatic writing session with Martin – it's part of her routine, and tends not to produce anything sensational. Tonight is no exception. After some platitudes, along with reassurances that Dooley is happy in heaven, she sets aside pencil and paper, drinks some warm milk and retires upstairs. She undresses and rubs a skimpy amount of cold cream on her face, eking it out because replacements from the Army and Navy Stores in London can't be relied on. This is the time of day she misses Dooley most. When she knelt on the bedside rug to say her prayers, he'd crouch alongside, paws over his eyes. It's too chilly in the room for lengthy devotions. A rapid *pater noster* and a few invocations, and she slips between the covers, toeing for the hot water bottle. The paraffin oil lamp sighs when she extinguishes it. Edith exhales in sympathy, sinking onto the feather mattress molded to her body shape after decades of faithful service.

*

One day, when a full moon is due, Edith decides to bring her sketching materials to the Castle after dinner. It's empty currently but her cousins, the Townshends, won't object to her setting up easel and sketchpad there. She plans to work up some pastels of the Castle exterior. The *Flurry's Wedding* plot calls for a moonlit scene at Aussolas, old Mrs Knox's home, and she's longing to try her hand at the stage scenery. She instructs Philomena to prepare her coffee in a thermos flask after dinner.

Dismay registers on Philomena's face, as round and plain – and yet as comforting – as an everyday dinner plate. 'Do you really think you should go out on your own after dark, Miss Edith? What if you run into those boyos again, knocking about?'

'I'll bring Loulou. If there's anyone lurking, she'll bark to warn me.'

'True for you. No better one. Except. What good's hearing them and you on your lonesome? At least ask old Jeremiah to go the length with you.'

'It's a long time since I've needed a chaperone, Philomena. Look, if I hear anything suspicious, I'll shelter in the Castle. I know how to get inside, no matter how securely it's locked and barred. One of the benefits of a misspent childhood.'

'I don't like it, Miss Edith. I don't like it at all. If you have to go, let it be early, before the night draws in.'

'I want to see the Castle by moonlight. I –'

A clatter of hooves stops her, drawing both women to the window.

'Glory be to God!' cries Philomena.

'It's Samson!' says Edith.

Riderless, reins trailing, the horse is galloping up the drive.

Edith dashes outside, followed by Philomena. By the time she catches up with him, Samson is in the stable yard, drinking from the water trough. His flanks are heaving and coated in dust. He's thinner, and a quick scan of his legs shows some cuts in need of urgent attention, while a shoe missing from the right foreleg.

'Find Mike,' says Edith.

'He must have escaped from the pups that robbed him,' marvels Philomena.

'Run like the wind. He'll be in Cross Street, at his own place. Tell him I want him.'

Tara whinnies, recognising Samson, but he's too exhausted to neigh back at her.

Edith pats him. 'Aren't you the champion, finding your way home from goodness knows where. There, boy, there now. You're safe and sound.' When Samson has finished drinking, Edith leads him to a bale of fresh hay inside the stable block. She notices sores on his mouth where the bit was sawed at – an inexperienced rider must have been trying to control him. A savage hope flares that Samson threw the scoundrel headlong into a manure pile.

*

Edith and Mike Hurley work in tandem to doctor Samson. Deferring to his expertise, she takes her instructions from him – Mike Hurley is half horse himself. While he bathes the horse's swollen legs in saltwater, and binds them with bandages, she mixes a solution to apply to Samson's chafed areas.

Mike is incandescent at Samson's condition. 'Poor beast was ridden hard and no care taken of him. He'd drop down dead inside a month with this treatment, Miss Edith. No wonder they have to keep stealing horses.'

'Anyone who abuses a dumb animal should be shot.'

'I dare say them fellas will stop a bullet sooner or later.'

Methodical, he checks the leg bandages are tight enough before turning his attention to grooming. Selecting a curry comb, he uses it in circular movements, its short metal teeth dislodging caked-on mud and other detritus. The horse is accustomed to his handling and stands patiently, despite occasional tremors rippling his shrunken frame. Edith tackles his tail and mane, trying to stay out of Mike's way.

Mike shakes out the curry comb, tutting at the dirt that's dislodged. 'Hand me the brush next to you, please, Miss Edith. Not that one, it's for later. I need the hardest one first.' Using short strokes, front to back in the direction of the horse's hair growth, he sweeps stiff bristles over Samson. 'I wouldn't be surprised if them IRA heroes weren't headed back our way. Stands to reason they'd come after Samson. Makes them look foolish, losing him.'

'I thought the same. That IRA captain may be a fanatic but he's nobody's fool.' What if he sends the whistler? Edith quakes at the idea of meeting him again. Fear must be mastered, she tells herself. But that swoosh with his hand, miming a house being set alight, haunts her.

'I'll sit up tonight in the stables, Miss Edith.'

'After what happened last time?'

'Somebody has to see about the horses.'

'I don't know if that's wise.' She hesitates. 'Would some of our tenants keep watch with you?'

'You know they won't, miss. That's asking them to take sides. I could try our Ned again. His mother won't like it, but Samson won't survive if they take him again.'

Edith falls silent. Presently, she asks, 'Is he able for it? After the blow to his head?'

'He's a Hurley – what's bred in the dog comes out in the pup. We'll stick together this time. It was a mistake to separate.'

‘I wish –’ Edith is too overwhelmed to continue. She watches Mike’s sure hands continue their progress over the horse’s hide. ‘No, I can’t allow it. Try Jeremiah. He’ll be company for you, if nothing else.’

Chapter 9

Dinner is consumed in jig-time, since there is no one to talk to and breeding prevents Edith from propping a book against the salt cellar. Standards can't be permitted to slip. During her meal, she decides that communication by automatic writing with Martin is insufficient at this crisis point. While useful, undoubtedly, it has limitations. Could she hold a séance? Imagine if she managed a materialisation! Edith has never been able to effect one. Perhaps, she reflects, a séance is overly ambitious without a medium. On second thoughts, she'll try the Ouija board.

No time like the present. Edith rings the bell for Philomena to clear the table. A knock on the door, and Philomena plods into the dining room, still in the process of unrolling her sleeves. She is inclined to linger and chat, with Cameron's absence narrowing the gap between family and servants. Philomena's strong arms wipe, lift and stack. She could follow a plough with those shoulders and arms, thinks Edith.

'Mrs O'Shea and me thought you might like to join us in the kitchen this evening, Miss Edith. It must be desperate lonesome up here for you, with the master away.'

'How kind. Do please send my thanks to Mrs O'Shea. But I have plans for tonight. Another night, I'd love to take you up on that.'

'We have the latest copy of the *Skibbereen Eagle*. I'm reading it out to her. The eyes aren't able for the small print, dear love her.'

'Perhaps tomorrow, Philomena.'

'I hear one of the doctor's boys has taken a shine to Timmy the Post's daughter. Cornelius, it is, the one that's training to be a teacher. He's like hounds after a fox – oh very determined to have her. But his family is against the match. She has no dowry.'

Normally, Edith's ears would prick at such a titbit, noting down its details for future use in a story. But tonight her mind is on Martin and she hears the words without any sense

of their meaning. Only when Mike Hurley's name is mentioned does Philomena snag her attention.

'I thought I'd bring him out some sandwiches before I turn in. He says he's sleeping in the stable loft tonight to keep an eye on Samson. You'd be rightly shanghai-ed, Miss Edith, if the IRA came back for Samson and took Tara, too, out of spite. I heard they drove off a couple or three bullocks on a farmer out Drimoleague way after he wouldn't give them the time of day, let alone a contribution.'

'Mike and Jeremiah will keep a sharp eye out.'

'But there's only Mike. Jeremiah took a turn, lost his footing, and Mike sent him home.'

Concern pinches Edith. A great deal is being asked of Mike Hurley. 'How unfortunate. I'll go out and speak to Mike before I lock up. Could you check on Jeremiah? See if he needs some beef tea, or a hand getting to bed?'

'Very good, ma'am dear. I'm relieved you're not going off drawing pictures, down at the Castle tonight.'

'I had second thoughts after Samson galloped up. But I've important work to do here in any case.'

Edith goes upstairs to fetch the Ouija board and other props. On her return, Philomena is still tidying the dining room, and when she sees what Edith is carrying, she sets down the willow-patterned tray and folds her arms.

'Miss Edith, I've served you for thirty years and I've earned the right to speak me mind. All this divil stuff you're at. It's a sin, so it is. Father Lambe would go pure mad if he thought me and Mrs O'Shea were staying in a house where the mistress calls up ghosts.'

'Miss Martin isn't a ghost, Philomena.'

'What is she, then, and her dead and buried this past six years?'

'She's a caring, loyal, loving...' Edith is lost for words.

‘Ghost!’

‘Presence. She’s a presence. And there is nothing diabolical about it.’

‘Me and Mrs O’Shea, we don’t like it. It’s not right, Miss Edith. Bothering the dead the way you do. Let them that’s gone stay gone.’

‘Really, Philomena, I’ve indulged you quite enough. I won’t be told what I can and can’t do by a member of my staff.’

‘We’ll give notice, so we will.’

Edith is alarmed. ‘Come, come, you’re over-reacting. Why don’t you make yourself a nice pot of tea and –’

‘We’ll pack our bags. Or Father Lambe will want to know the reason why.’

Philomena blots her eyes with her apron hem. ‘You’re dabbling with dangerous things, miss. You might maybe be putting your immortal soul in danger.’

‘That will be all, Philomena. We’ll talk about this when you’re less overwrought.’

‘I know you’re the mistress but...’ Sniff. ‘Me and Mrs O’Shea...’ Sniff.

‘Off you go, Philomena.’

Truculent and tearful, Philomena trudges out. Edith knows she’ll have to pacify her, but not when she’s emotional.

Now, to the job at hand. Spiritualists always burns incense to enhance the atmosphere, in her experience. As a stand-in for incense, she has decided to sacrifice a muslin bag of dried rosemary from her wardrobe. It will burn slowly. The smell of smoke is meant to alert those who have passed over. So Jem Barlow claims. Apparently, anything but sage is useful – sage drives away spirits, for some odd reason.

She dims the lamps, and sprinkles the rosemary into an ashtray, where it smoulders slowly. A sneeze from under the sideboard, and she realises Loulou has crept into the room. ‘Not a peep out of you, milady.’ She bribes her with a cube from the forgotten sugar bowl.

Edith removes the board from its box. It's a black-painted rectangle with gold markings. 'Yes' is stencilled on one side under a sun symbol, and 'No' on the other beneath a moon symbol. The letters of the alphabet are ranged in a double semi-circle, while the numbers zero to nine are lined up along the bottom.

Loulou scoots over, springing for her lap, and Edith settles her there, stroking the bridge of the Pomeranian's nose. Then, emptying her mind of everything except Martin's face, she places one finger lightly on the planchette, the pointer which slides around the board. She uses her left hand, leaving her right hand free for writing. In a clockwise fashion, she moves the planchette from Yes to No and across the letters, followed by the numbers, doing this for some minutes. When the time feels right, she speaks.

'Are you here, Martin? If you are, spell out words to me, dearest.'

Nothing happens. She continues manipulating the pointer. Sudden as a squirt of perfume, a memory swims through her: Martin smuggling Edith's dog through French customs, concealed in one of her enormous leg-of-mutton sleeves. A bubble of laughter bursts from Edith. She always looked as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. But there was nothing Martin wouldn't do if the humour took her.

The board vibrates. Has she arrived?

'Martin? Can you –'

The door crashes open. A man enters, toting a rifle.

'Beggin' your pardon, Miss Somerville. I'm to fetch you down to the kitchen.'

It's the voice she recognises first. His skin isn't blackened this time, showing a face as sleek as apple jelly. But she knows him. It's the young Kerry fellow who raided Drishane.

From the safety of Edith's lap, Loulou sets up a rumpus.

'Hush, Loulou. Stop that racket. Good evening, young man. How are the boots holding up?'

His face splits into a grin. 'Fit me like a glove.'

'I'm glad to hear it.' She looks at the firearm – at least he has the courtesy not to aim it at her. 'How many are with you this time?'

'Just me and Patr– I can't say his name.'

'The brute who kicked my dog to death?'

'No, ma'am.'

'Thank goodness. Couldn't bear to see him again.'

'He doesn't have much feeling for people, let alone God's dumb creatures. He's as wild as a March Hare.'

'Why are you back? We've nothing left to give.'

'The horse. We saw him in the stable just now. He's some animal to find his way here from Fermoy. It must be seventy-five miles, if it's a step.'

'Poor creature is half-dead, whatever you've been doing to him.'

'Tell you the truth, we've had to put two at a time on his back.'

'You'll kill him, you know. Horses need to rest if they're worked. They're not machines.'

A shrug. 'Captain's orders is to bring e'ther him or another beast. There's a fit-looking mare in the stable. Maybe she'd be a better bet.'

'I hope you haven't tied up Mike Hurley again.'

'The aul' fella? Below in the kitchen with the women.'

'Did you hurt him?'

'No need. He came quiet. Where's your brother, the colonel?'

'England. Didn't the others tell you?'

A nod.

'You're checking our story, aren't you?'

A half-grin breaks through his darkened face. 'What's that you have, ma'am? Is it some kind of board game? Like Snakes and Ladders?'

Advancing, he tracks mud into the Turkey carpet. Loulou launches into another round of yelping.

She covers the Ouija board with its lid. 'Not quite. Mind your manners, Lou – pipe down. You seem like a nice young man. It's a shame to see you embark on a career as a horse thief.'

'I'm a soldier of the Irish Republic.'

'And a horse thief besides.'

'Captain's orders.' Sullen now, his gaze sweeps the room, absorbing its grandeur.

What if he decides to do some looting? They still have possessions to lose. To distract him, Edith says, 'Is this really the life you'd wish for yourself? It must be hard on you – on all of you. Haring about the country, sleeping in ditches, hunting and being hunted.'

'It's for Ireland.'

'Your mother must be worried sick.'

'I wish I could send her a letter. Mam made sure all of us could read and write. Said we'd need some bit of lettering so as to write letters home from America, or wherever we wound up. She thought we'd have to go away to make a life for ourselves, d'you see.'

'Was there a school near you?'

'A good twenty miles away. 'Twas Mam taught me my letters. She cut a willow rod, poked one end in the embers to blacken it, and used it to write on the outhouse wall. A was for where the roof beams joined, B was the priest's spectacles, C was the moon. D a bow and arrow – that's me, so it is.'

'What was E?'

‘E was a gate.’ Unconscious of having given away a clue about his identity, he adds,
‘Mam always wanted us to better ourselves.’

‘You’re going the wrong way about it.’

He gestures with his rifle. ‘That’s enough aul’ blather. Let’s go.’

Edith pushes back her chair and stands, holding tight to Loulou. *Remember always use your wits and strike a bargain where you can.* That’s what Martin told her in automatic writing. She takes a guess. ‘D for Daniel, is it?’

‘My friend’ll be pure mad if we keep him waiting. Come on, now.’

‘Or could it be D for Denis?’

His eyes pop, giving her the answer.

‘Denis. Well, well.’

‘The captain’ll be pure mad at me over this.’

‘It can be our secret. So, Denis, your name’s not the only thing I know about you. I know you’re about to send a storm of trouble raining down on the heads of your family. When you swapped boots here, you left your old pair behind. Colonel Somerville found them. They can be used to trace you – the boot maker’s name is marked on them. J.J. Carroll of Listowel.’

He wilts. ‘Where are the boots? Give them here.’

‘They’re somewhere safe. Elsewhere.’

A moan escapes from the boy. ‘I don’t believe you. I want them back.’

‘You said they belonged to your father. Well, your father can expect a visit from the Black and Tans.’

‘Please, no, ma’am, you mustn’t. It’d kill me mother and father stone dead. Sure, they’ve had the house burned over their heads already by the Tans. A neighbour’s given them an aul’ bit of a cattle byre to tide them over. But if that’s raided maybe nobody’ll take them in. Please don’t do this, your honour-ma’am.’

‘I have a proposition to make you, Denis.’

‘Don’t keep using me name.’

She walks around the table and stands beside him, looking into his face. Reading his uncertainty. ‘I might – *might* – be able to dissuade Colonel Somerville from handing your boots over to the military commander in your area. But you’ll have to do something in return for me.’

‘Tell me.’

‘Leave our horses alone.’

‘Both of them? I can’t do that. Captain says...’

‘Tell him they weren’t here.’

‘But what’ll I say to the other lad? Sure we saw the two of them in their stalls. And how are we to get back to the lads with no horse to carry us?’

‘How did you come here?’

‘Managed to hitch a lift in a wagon most of the way. The people is good to us.’

‘I have an idea about transport. An alternative to a mount. Something that will make your captain think well of you. He’ll be impressed by your initiative.’

‘What is it?’

‘We’ll talk in the kitchen. I’ll tell you at the same time as the other fellow.’

‘I want me boots. No boots, no deal. I know you have them.’

Edith has seen where Cameron stored them: in a battered old seaman’s chest in his study. ‘I might be able to get them for you.’ In a twist of the knife, she repeats the bootmaker’s name. ‘J.J. Carroll of Listowel.’

She can smell his fear, although he’s trying to mask it with bravado.

‘What’s to stop your brother landing me mam and dad in trouble? Soon as I leave here, the bootmaker’s name could be in the hands of the Tans. Them boys don’t need evidence. They’ll torture him ’til he sends them me da’s way.’

‘Look, if my brother wanted to get you in trouble, he’d have done it by now, wouldn’t he? We’re not totally unsympathetic to your cause. Play fair by me with our horses and I’ll play fair by you.’

‘Are you...on our side, ma’am?’

‘I’ll tell you whose side I’m on. Your mother’s. She didn’t go to the trouble of teaching you how to write letters to her, only to receive one telling her you’ve been hanged or shot.’

*

In the kitchen, an unexpected sight meets their eyes. A man cradling a rifle is slumped at the deal table, sound asleep. Philomena, Mrs O’Shea and Mike Hurley are transfixed by him. At Edith’s arrival, Hurley puts his finger to his lips, pantomiming silence.

She is mystified why they haven’t overpowered him, until she realises the intruder’s forefinger is resting on the trigger. One false move will deal out injury or death. Yet how peaceful he looks.

Quick as thought, Denis sets down his old boots, hooks his rifle over his shoulder and approaches the table. Inch by inch, his hand advances on the metal. Inch by inch, he slides it out from under the sleeper. The trigger is gone from the other man’s fingertip but the butt remains under his hand.

‘What?’ The IRA volunteer jolts awake, one hand clamped on his weapon and the other on Denis’s wrist. ‘Feck are you at?’

‘Easy now,’ says Denis.

‘I said, what the feck are you doing with me rifle?’

‘You were asleep. I was afraid of an accident.’

The sleeper's eyes dart around the company. 'Move back. Get over there where I can see ye.'

'We need to buck up,' says Denis. 'We've spent long enough here.'

'Right, so. You,' he waves the rifle at Hurley, 'saddle the horse. And we'll take a spare saddle with us and some extra tackle.'

'Not so fast,' says Denis. 'The animal's half-dead. We wouldn't get the length of Skibbereen on him.'

'So we'll take both. Ride one, lead the other.'

'I've a better idea,' suggests Edith. 'There's a car you can use. It's in the West Cork Hotel. Belongs to an American staying there. Why don't you borrow it in the name of the Irish Republic? Your captain would be terribly impressed if you drove up in it.'

Denis directs a look of admiration at her.

'Sure we wouldn't have a notion how to drive one of them yokes,' says the other.

'The owner has a chauffeur. Perhaps he could be encouraged to go part of the way with you, until you get the hang of things. He'd be cover for you if you run into any patrols. Who'd suspect a fancy chauffeur?'

'Just picture the captain's face!' says Denis.

'The West Cork, you say? And he's there tonight?' The sleeper considers it.

Edith crosses her fingers. 'Yes, both he and the motor car.'

Denis leans into the other volunteer and whispers to him. Their conversation is rapid.

All Edith can hear is, 'How do we get to the hotel?' from the sleeper.

'Mike could give you a lift in our trap,' she says. 'But I'd want your word of honour that both Mike and Tara are allowed home to us. He drops you on the outskirts of Skibbereen. Then he turns back.'

'No bother,' says Denis.

'Is that a promise?' asks Edith.

‘What’s to stop him going to the peelers?’ objects the sleeper.

‘I’ve never given evidence to the police in my life and I’m not about to start,’ says Mike.

‘Besides, you know where we live. Your captain wouldn’t take it lying down,’ says Edith.

The sleeper reflects. ‘That’ll do.’

‘I’ll have me boots now, ma’am,’ says Denis.

She collects them for him.

Hee puts them under his arm, and makes for the door. ‘Come on, Hurley, let’s get the trap on the road. Good night to you, Miss Somerville, and you, ladies.’

Edith catches Mike’s eye. ‘You be very careful, Mike. Please. No heroics.’

Chapter 10

Edith watches the spill of rain turn holes in the avenue into pools of water. Through the downpour, a hunched shape emerges. It is the postman on his bicycle. She hasn't seen Timmy the Post in weeks. Head bent over handlebars, he steers around the side of the house towards the kitchen door. She checks the time and decides to give him twenty minutes to dry off and have a hot drink. But impatience sends her to the kitchen sooner. From the passageway, she hears his voice sharing the latest news.

'The postman beyond in Schull was savaged by a wild dog on his rounds. Some of them beasts would eat you alive and go back for the toenails.'

She clears her throat, to alert them to her arrival, and sweeps in. 'You're welcome to Drishane, Timmy. I hope there's good news in your letters.'

Mug in one hand and rasher sandwich in the other, he springs to his feet. 'Miss Somerville, I'm sorry to be sitting in your kitchen in my bare feet, but the socks and boots are drowned-wet, so they are. Philomena here insisted on drying them by the range.'

'Quite right, too. And it's not my kitchen, it's Mrs O'Shea's.'

Mrs O'Shea, preparing a meat pie at the far end of the table, looks up. 'Timmy O'Driscoll's thinner than a farthing. He needs building up.'

'Indeed he does. Unlike that cat of yours eating our butter.'

A tabby cat, tail as fluffy as a winter muff, is perched on a side table applying her tongue methodically to the butter dish.

Edith claps her hands to startle the cat. 'She should be kept in the barn. And the butter dish should have a lid on it.'

Philomena, who is separating a jumble of fish knives from fruit knives, takes a run at him with a sweeping brush. "Go on out o' that, ya dirty brute!" The cat jumps down and shelters behind the dresser.

‘Really, Mrs O’Shea, I can’t think why you permit this. We’ll all be poisoned.’

‘Ah now, Miss Edith, I just fetched the butter out of the pantry this minute to make Timmy his sandwich. And you know, Tiger is a good mouser. She earns her keep.’

‘Sure the kitchen and pantry would be overrun without her dropping in now and again to put manners on the mice,’ Philomena chimes in.

‘But who’ll put manners on her? Look she’s still here, biding her time. The minute my back is turned she’ll be at the butter again.’

Philomena opens the back door and calls to the cat, which streaks past her and out through the rain. Mrs O’Shea pounds her displeasure on the pastry beneath her rolling pin.

Edith turns back to the postman. ‘I’m glad to see Mrs O’Shea has given you something to eat, Timmy.’

‘Fed and watered like a prince, I am. Faith, you’re always very dacent to me here.’

‘It’s the least we can.’

‘No truer word. We must be good to each other. When St Patrick met Fionn McCool, he asked was God good to the Irish in pagan times. And Fionn said sure there was no need because were all good to each other.’

Mrs O’Shea and Philomena bless themselves.

‘Did you have much trouble getting through to us, Timmy?’

‘’Asier to swim to America than cycle these parts. But I do me poor best. There’s some post from England for you, ma’am. Never fear, I kept it all dry in me pouch.’ Toes splayed, he pads across to his leather satchel, dripping over a three-week copy of *Skibbereen Eagle*.

‘Thank you, Timmy. And how are things in Skib?’

‘You wouldn’t believe the goings-on there, ma’am. ’Deed and troth you wouldn’t. Sure, wasn’t the Yankee gentleman’s motorcar, a great brute of a machine that’s his pride and joy, pinched by the Shinnors four nights back.’

A furtive shaft of joy glows in Edith.

‘They borrowed his driver, as well,’ says Timmy. ‘Didn’t harm him, mind you, and he got the motorcar back last night. But it took a pounding. Dunched, scratched and what not. He’s in a powerful rage. Talking about taking it up with Mick Collins hisself. Says he wants the men responsible handed in to the authorities.’

‘That seems a little ambitious.’

‘Collins might soft-soap him. He might even throw him a few pounds towards repairs. But as for turning in his own men? That’ll happen when yesterday comes again.’

Edith wonders if she ought to make amends to the American – invite him to lunch or something. Without admitting her own role in his misfortune, of course. ‘I should think Mr Collins has bigger fish to fry. But theft of one’s property is irksome. Still, all’s well that ends well.’

‘Sure I’d be banjaxed without me bicycle, on loan from His Majesty King George. The American gentleman, Mr Grun by name, is a journalist. He’s over here reporting on the goings-on. So Mick Collins might be a shade more sympathetic to him than to you or me, ma’am.’

‘In that case, I expect his motorcar is insured and the bill for repairs won’t come out of his pocket.’ Relieved, Edith downgrades lunch to a calling card left at his hotel as a courtesy, perhaps with an invitation to afternoon tea if he should find himself in the locale.

Meditative, Timmy sucks his teeth. ‘There’s some say he’s been spying for the British. Sure what else would he be doing so long in a place the size of Skibbereen?’

‘God bless us and save us! A spy is it?’ Mrs O’Shea drops a piece of diced meat on the floor and the cat materialises to pounce on it. The cook flips a cloth half-heartedly at her. ‘No, Tiger.’

‘How did that creature get back in?’ demands Edith.

‘Through the pantry window,’ says Philomena. ‘I left it open. Sure that’s a day fit for neither man nor beast.’

Edith gives up and returns to Timmy. ‘The American’s taking an enormous risk, surely? He’s hardly inconspicuous. And the flying columns are particularly active in west Cork. I know there’s a truce, but still. You’d hardly know the difference pre- or post-ceasefire here.’

‘Hidden in plain sight, that’s what he is, ma’am.’

Edith decides she has wronged the motorcar owner quite enough without indulging in speculation about his activities. ‘I’ll attend to my letters now, Timmy. There may be one that needs a quick response – I could deal with it while you’re still here, if you wouldn’t mind taking it with you to the post office. Whatever you do, don’t leave until I come back to you. Oh, and make sure your stockings and boots are dry before you put them on. Wet stockings next to your skin do untold damage.’

‘Occupational hazard in my line of work, Miss Somerville, but thank-ee kindly.’

Edith retreats to a chair in the inner hall with her letters. One of them is from her friend Ethel Smyth, announcing her inability to sell the hunters but readiness to pay a visit to Drishane. Would the following week be convenient? She names a day and the arrival time of her train. Edith reflects. She can use the visit as a deadline to force the pace on her play. Ethel Smyth is a disruptive houses guest, all-pervasive, like a Castletownshend sea mist – the prospect of her arrival will act as the impetus she needs to finish *Flurry’s Wedding*. And perhaps she can circumvent postal disruptions by sending it back to England with her.

She scratches out a hasty note to Ethel telling her she’ll send Mike in the dog cart to meet her off the Cork train at Skibbereen station, along with a warning that the unsettled state of the country means little by way of tennis or croquet parties in the neighbouring houses. ‘We’re living as quietly as mice inside a skirting board, trying to avoid the notice

of the resident cat,” she writes. Pleased with her analogy, inspired by the rapacious Tiger, she seals the envelope and goes back to the kitchen.

Passing a window, she notices Jeremiah sheltering under the oak where Dooley is buried, puffing on his pipe. Odd, that business where he couldn’t or wouldn’t sit up in the stables with Mike. The day after Mike delivered the IRA men to Skibbereen, she asked him if there was more to Jeremiah’s inability than met the eye.

‘He’s just old, miss, and has no one to see about him. His daughters call in, but it’s not the same.’

That’s the trouble with the times they’re living in, thinks Edith. You start doubting everyone.

While she’s watching, Jeremiah takes something from his wheel barrow, and places the object under the tree, propped against the trunk. Then he lifts the barrow handles and pushes away with it through the mizzle. Edith waits until he’s out of sight before throwing on a raincoat and darting out.

Why, it’s a white stone, almost an oval, the size of her face. At one end of the stone there’s an indentation, so that it resembles a lopsided heart. Some time ago, unable to find anything that satisfied her, she asked Jeremiah to keep an eye out for an appropriate marker for Dooley’s grave. He’s done her proud.

*

Edith completes *Flurry’s Wedding* on the day Ethel Smyth arrives, radiating vitality. Exuberant in a tricorn hat, which lends her a buccaneering air, she brings the smack of the wider world.

‘Boney, dear, you’re laden down with packages like a Christmas tree. I see you’ve brought champagne. You clever puss, how did you guess I had something to celebrate?’

Boney is her personal nickname for Ethel, because she reminds her of Napoleon Bonaparte, on red alert to conquer the world.

‘Intuition,’ she booms. ‘Besides, catching up with friends is always cause for celebration.’

‘And so say all of us. Let me show you to your room. Then we can have tea.’

Boney slips an arm round Edith’s waist as they walk through the outer hall towards the inner one, leading to the main staircase. She’s demonstrative, overwhelmingly so, in Edith’s opinion, but perhaps it’s understandable after a year apart.

‘And how is every inch of you, Edith Somerville?’

‘As old as Methuselah and stupid in the head from doing nothing but work. Apart from that, all the better for seeing you.’

From habit, Edith pauses at the foot of the staircase, readying herself for the climb.

‘We’ll have to liven things up a bit round here. All work and no play.’ Boney pinches her cheek.

Edith winces. She only attended school for one term – she had to live with a chaperone – but her friend’s behaviour is reminiscent of the schoolgirl crushes she recalls from those Dublin days at Alexandra College. ‘I hope you won’t find it too dull, Boney. There are no race meetings or shooting parties – no jollity at all, apart from social calls, and maybe a few rubbers of bridge.’ She begins to mount the stairs, forcing Boney’s arm to slip from her waist.

‘I’m here to see you, not half the county, dear heart.’

‘The thing is, Boney, we’re sitting on the lid of a seething pot.’

‘I was born in the year of the Indian Mutiny. Nothing fazes me.’

By now, they are on the first floor corridor, where a hissing sound punctuates their conversation.

‘What’s that?’ asks Boney.

‘The bathroom pipes. I’m afraid we’re having problems. Cold water’s all they can manage now – the system simply won’t heat.’

‘Plumbing is one of the myriad mysteries of this old house. You need a nice, modern place like mine. All the conveniences.’

‘Primary among them, a golf course outside your gate. Personally, I like a house that has ghosts flitting through its rooms.’ Drishane is peopled by ghosts. Edith knows her own is among them – the ghost of her girlhood. ‘Here we are, Boney. This is your room.’

‘So far from you? I hoped we’d be next door to one another. Couldn’t you billet me in the room where Martin slept when she lived here? We could swap secrets in the night.’

Edith’s had the same room since childhood, a large, dim space in a wing convenient for the stables. It’s far enough from the other bedrooms to give her privacy and that’s the way she likes it – especially when there are guests. ‘Martin’s room is no longer in use, I’m afraid. But she’s delighted by your visit and says to give you her best regards.’

*

Before dinner, they meet in the drawing room, made cosy by flames crackling and leaping in the grate, under an elaborately carved black oak mantelpiece. Edith has changed into a velvet dress for dinner, while Ethel Smyth’s sturdy body is resplendent in sequins – lavish for a quiet dinner *à deux* but she does nothing by halves. Loulou is curled up on the hearth rug, bubbling with snores. Edith feels a twinge at the thought of how Dooley and Loulou used to lie there, bodies overlapping. Once, she’d have replaced him with another fox terrier puppy, but she’s tired of investing her affections in dogs which reach maturity and die long before she’s ready to part with them.

At Boney’s insistence, the sherry decanter is discarded and the bottle of champagne opened. Crackling with authority, like an officer inspecting troops on the parade ground,

she swarms about the room. Words machinegun from her. She is full of her latest composition, a ballet called *Fete Galante*, and revisions she's made to her opera, *The Boatswain's Mate*. Then there is the woeful performance of another of her works in Hull, where the conductor was such an incompetent blockhead that she left her seat, marched to the podium and snatched the baton from his hands.

'And what of your Irish R.M. play?'

'I finished it today.'

Ethel Smyth's guileless child's smile beams upon Edith. 'Marvellous! It'll run to packed houses in the West End. You'll be lionised! When can I read it?'

'I'll read some aloud to you after dinner if you like.'

'Do it now.'

'You're more impatient than the wind, Boney. There isn't time before dinner.'

Boney refills their champagne flutes and joins Edith on the sofa.

'To company.' Edith clinks the rim of her glass against her guest's.

'To the most agreeable company in the world.'

'Steady on, Boney.' Edith takes a sip. 'I say, do you really think *Flurry's Wedding* will go down well in London? I change my mind from one day to the next.'

'Certainly, it will. Humour is your forte, my dear Edith, and we all need to have our ribs tickled. Especially when times are troublesome. You must come and stay with me in Hook Heath, and we'll attend your opening night together. It'll be a triumph. Your play will be on everyone's lips. I'll organise supper afterwards at The Ritz.'

They relapse into companionable silence, Edith spellbound by the flames in the grate while Boney watches her, and absentmindedly drinks from both glasses.

'I can never decide if your eyes are grey or green, Edith-dearest.'

'That's because they're grey-green.'

'Like the sea around here. Was your hair very dark as a girl?'

Self-conscious, Edith pats her pinned-up grey hair. ‘I suppose it was dark brown. Martin was fair, with hare’s eyes. Terribly short-sighted, though. She was known to shake hands with the butler at social gatherings.’ Boney hoots with laughter. ‘She was delicate looking, not rugged like me,’ adds Edith.

‘I expect she was most awfully clever. But you aren’t rugged. You’re magnificent.’

‘I’m like the Wreck of the Hesperus, you silly thing.’

‘I bet you couldn’t keep your hair up when you went out riding. I expect you flew over every impossible ditch, and somehow kept your seat, but your hairpins went flying. I can just see that mass of dark locks tumbling round your shoulders. And you, laughing and pink-cheeked, too caught up in the thrill of the chase to stop. Absolutely superb – you don’t know how to be anything else. A goddess in human form!’

Edith stares. Clears her throat. The fire crackles. A bong sounds.

Edith is on her feet in an instant. ‘There’s the dinner gong.’ Loulou stirs and stretches. ‘Yes, you greedy guts, nothing wrong with your hearing. We have some lovely brown trout for you, Boney. Mrs O’Shea cooked it in almonds, just the way you like it.’

En route to the dining room, Edith wonders if she can rustle up another house guest to dilute Ethel Smyth’s Ethelness. She’s always been exuberant, but it’s getting out of hand. A week of her is going to prove trying.

Just inside the dining room door hangs a set of still lifes, all dead creatures: oils of pheasants, lobster, and so on. Ethel Smyth pauses to study them.

‘None of these had a happy end. Not yours, Edith. I can tell. Your use of colour has more brio. We must organise another exhibition for you.’

‘Sargent always ripped up a drawing and started over if he didn’t like it and I’m exactly the same. It’s the first impression that matters. Paint quickly to keep it fresh. Never tinker. That’s my motto. Why don’t you take this place?’

In a clean white cap with a pleated frill, hands folded in front of her, Philomena waits by the soup tureen. Edith is proud of her for making an effort. If it wasn't for the hanks of hair escaping from under the cap, Philomena would be as well turned-out as any English servant.

'Good evening, Philomena,' says Boney. 'How have you been?'

'The Lord look down on me in pity this day. Me legs are at me since breakfast. Now, Mrs O'Shea has made you a nice creamy parsnip broth, Miss Smyth, on account of you complimenting her on it the last time you were here.' She begins serving.

'*Doctor* Smyth,' Edith corrects her, before Boney complains. 'And I believe I ordered chicken soup, Philomena.'

'Doctor Smyth, to be sure,' says Philomena. 'I do be forgetting. Mrs O'Shea was run off her feet today and hadn't the time to kill and pluck a hen. I was busy myself, supervising that Treacy girl. If you didn't stand over her, she'd be away like a wild goose, galloping the country.'

'Thank you, that will be all for now, Philomena. You might see to the drawing room fire before bringing in the next course – we'll go back in after we dine.'

'Enjoy your soup.' Philomena leaves the room.

'Unfortunately, we can't get coal from Wales any more, Boney. We have to rely on wood or turf.'

Boney scatters crumbs in a dismissive gesture with the hand holding a bread roll. 'I don't know how you manage in this disaster of a country.'

'We grind along as best we can. Besides, I prefer the smell of wood in a fireplace.'

'What's that?'

'I said there's something about the smell of burning wood.' Was Boney more deaf than the last time they met? Edith finds herself obliged to repeat things.

'Coal is more efficient,' insists Boney.

‘My dear, Ireland has other attractions than efficiency. How is your soup?’

‘Delicious. You know, there’s something I’ve noticed about you.’

‘Go on.’

‘You let the servants ride over you.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘You do. It’s being going on forever, so you don’t even notice.’

‘Mrs O’Shea has a fondness for the hen I ordered her to kill. That’s why we aren’t having chicken soup. It’s a pet of hers, you might say.’

‘Which proves my point.’

‘Your point being?’

‘They lie. They can’t help it, and you go along with it.’

‘It isn’t lying exactly.’

‘What else would you call it?’

‘It’s how it is here. That’s all.’

‘Lying.’

‘Embroidery.’

‘Lying.’

‘They never give the same excuse twice. I enjoy their inventiveness.’

‘You know what the matter with you is?’

‘I’ve a feeling you’re about to tell me.’

‘You’ve a blind spot about the Irish.’

‘Why wouldn’t I? I’m Irish.’

‘There’s no doubting that.’

‘Now you be careful before you say another word.’

‘I always speak the truth.’

‘Well, here’s a truth for you. Wasn’t your grandfather Smyth Irish?’

‘I don’t deny it. Permanently pickled and couldn’t stop talking. What else would he be but one of your lot?’

‘Really, Boney, must you give voice to every thought that crosses your mind? Mama taught us that good manners are an essential shell. Didn’t yours teach you the same?’

‘Mama was too busy finding fault with everything I did. Papa dined out as often as possible.’ Ethel Smyth butters another bread roll. ‘She was awfully good at petit point, though.’

A withering mama softens Edith, who had her own experience in that department. ‘I was never any use at sewing. Hated being cooped up indoors.’

‘Your hands are too large. Beautiful and large, I should say. It’s what allows you to handle horses. Mama was a sprite. If she attempted to lift a footstool, Papa would rush to do it for her. Mama had all sorts of rules about dress and behaviour. Clothes being matched to eyes indoors, and hair outdoors. Stockings coordinated with shoes, and so on.’

After Philomena has served the main course, Ethel Smyth says, ‘My dear, I want you to stay with me after Christmas.’

‘I don’t think I can, Boney. I need to be here to hold the place together. Empty houses are an invitation.’

‘But you must come. Some important news is going to be revealed on New Year’s Eve and I’d like you there to share it. I expect my friends will organise a dinner to mark the occasion.’

‘What news?’

‘I’m honour-bound to keep it secret –’

‘Well then of course you mustn’t –’

‘– But it will be gazetted on December the 31st. It really is most awfully thrilling. Quite an honour. In fact, a victory! Not just for me but for womanhood. Can’t you guess from the date?’

‘I’m afraid not. I was never any good at guessing games.’

Boney’s blue eyes are bulbous in their sockets. ‘I know you won’t breathe a word to a soul. I’m to be cited in the King’s New Year’s Honours List. Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire. I’m the first female composer to receive a damehood!’

‘What wonderful news! Dame Ethel Smyth no less!’ Edith goes to her friend, pressing her pink-and-white cheek against the other’s ruddy skin. ‘I couldn’t be happier for you.’

‘It’s in recognition of my genius as a composer. Long overdue, if I say so myself.’

‘Ethel the Great. Step aside Alexander.’

Boney’s hand reaches for Edith’s, braiding fingers with her. ‘And I didn’t have the benefit of Aristotle as my tutor, like Alexander. All I had was prejudiced male reviewers complaining my work was either too womanly or not womanly enough.’

‘You’ve shown them all, Dame Ethel, as I shall have to remember to call you. You’ve hurdled every obstacle.’ Edith manages to untangle her hand and returns to her seat.

‘I must speak to Henry Wood about including more of my work in his promenade concerts. In fact, he should dedicate an entire programme to me. My *Mass in D* is long overdue for a revival. The Hosanna always brings down the house – the trumpet solo is a triumph. And the Gloria utterly splendid.’

Edith casts her mind back to the *Mass* performance she attended. Her impression was of the Almighty being commanded rather than implored to show mercy. It was positively Wagnerian. But after all, Boney is a female version, teeming with *sturm und drang*.

‘And to think there was a time when I couldn’t cadge an invitation to a Buckingham Palace garden party. Will you come to Hook Heath, Edith, and be with me when the announcement is made?’

‘I couldn’t possibly, dearest. Too short notice, I’m afraid.’

‘But I insist on having you with me. It won’t taste as sweet without you by my side.’

‘I’m thrilled for you, truly I am, but I simply can’t.’

Boney wags a forefinger. ‘I won’t take no for an answer.’

‘You must, I’m afraid.’

‘I give you fair warning. I shall lay siege to you.’

‘Later in January is possible. Perhaps coinciding with the investiture? You’ll need the support of a friend then, too.’

Boney taps a forefinger against her lips. ‘You have a point.’

She begins talking about dates, while Edith drifts among her own thoughts. How nice if she was made a dame. But Irish people aren’t exactly popular in England currently. She might have risen higher if she had based herself in London, embedding herself in its literary circles, but Castletownshend is her centre of gravity. She is jolted back to attention by Boney reaching across the table to tap her on the wrist.

‘See, here, Edith, you’re turning into a hermit crab. You can’t take root in Drishane – we should plan another excursion abroad.’

‘I like my routine. I’m a countrywoman at heart.’

‘I need to be in the thick of things. I crave variety. It’s stimulating.’

‘Trips are stimulating, naturally, but the truth is I can’t afford one right now.’

‘Even with all your irons in the fire? Art, literature, journalism, farming, horse coping? Am I leaving something out, you talented creature?’

‘We can’t sell our farm produce and our horses are stolen from under our noses. Any money I make from *Flurry’s Wedding* will have to go on fixing the roof. Although the roofer says he’d have more luck plugging a bog pool. You’re lucky it hasn’t rained today or you’d hear an orchestra of drips.’

Boney jumps up and conducts an imaginary orchestra.

‘But I’ll visit you in Hook Heath as soon as possible,’ continues Edith. ‘I do have some business in London, as it happens. I really should speak to Mr Pinker in person about placing *Flurry’s Wedding*.’

‘He’s lacking in theatrical contacts. You mustn’t throw away your opus on this jumped-up little money-grubber.’

‘Sometimes, I wonder if Martin and I would have written any of our Irish R.M. books without his nagging.’

‘Mr Pinker has had his pound of flesh out of you –’

‘Ten per cent, dear.’

‘Daylight robbery! For work that sells itself! Under no circumstances must you entrust *Flurry’s Wedding* to this vampire.’

Secretly, Edith resents that commission. Mr Pinker oughtn’t to keep deducting his penny-pinching percentage year after year. She knows it’s in his contract. But really, it’s ungentlemanly to continue chipping away at her earnings simply because he struck a number of bargains for her with publishers years ago. Deals she was perfectly capable of negotiating herself – she’s always been able to paddle her own canoe in business. Boney’s full frontal attack delights her.

But she says, ‘That’s a little harsh on Mr Pinker, Boney. We’ve had a business relationship for decades. His judgment has proven sound on many occasions. I admit, he’s losing his touch and those sons aren’t in his league, but cutting him out would be a wrench. We’ve hunted together. He’s bought horses from me.’

‘I expect he took up riding especially to wheedle into your good books. Bear in mind this is business, not friendship, with Mr Pinker. You mustn’t confuse the two. The literary firm of Somerville and Ross has been profitable for him – the R.M. series alone must have been a money spinner.’

‘I suppose. Frankly, I may have to consider severing ties. I can’t really afford his commission any longer.’

‘Well then, why pay it, Edith?’

‘And he could certainly use a little ginger. I wonder if he’s quite well? Perhaps I should try and place the play by some other means. I’ll give it some thought. But wait until you’ve heard me read from it after coffee. You might think it’s absolute tosh and twaddle.’

‘I shan’t, you darling simpleton. I shall think it utterly brilliant, like everything you write.’

Chapter 11

Ethel Smyth is gazing, rapt, at Edith's face while she reads from the play. She is free to look with intensity because Edith, who has a talent for accent, is engrossed in acting out each character's role. They have reached the point where Flurry is about to abscond with his several times removed cousin, Sally, helped by Slipper, a boozy, unscrupulous hunt servant. Sally's mama Lady Knox is horrified but Flurry's grandmother Mrs Knox is delighted – anything that puts Lady Knox's nose out of joint is good enough for her.

'Slipper yells to Yeates, "Twas yerself called for '*Haste to the Weddin*', long life to ye!" Old Mrs Knox hurries down steps and has an old shoe and rice. Lady Knox dashes back round house. They meet! Curtain. End of scene three.'

Ethel Smyth slaps her knees. 'What a card that Slipper is! I say, is he drawn from life?'

'He's a combination of people I knew from the hunt.'

'Marvellous!'

'Tell me honestly, Boney, is the play any good?'

'It's a tonic for the spirits. It'll raise the roof.'

'Really?'

'Really – you have turned the place into Stratford on Drishane! The only thing missing is music. I could write you some jaunty Irish airs to accompany it.' She beats time against a cushion. 'I can see the framework in my head – the outline of the statues against the sky, so to speak.'

'Please don't trouble yourself. Opera is opera and theatre is theatre and never the twain *et cetera*. Apart from Messrs Gilbert and Sullivan, of course.' Edith slides the cushion away from Boney before her fist bursts the stitching.

'But it will perk up the play enormously. Music improves everything.'

‘You’re too kind. But I’m not convinced the play needs perking up. Music won’t be of any benefit to it.’

‘Nonsense! Music should be mandatory with all stage performances. It’s essential. We can’t have too much of it!’

‘There can be too much of a good thing, you know, Boney.’

‘I disagree. Truly, I’m going to insist on writing the musical score for your play.’ Boney’s arms flail in time to a beat only she can hear. ‘You can supply the libretto. It’ll be a team effort!’

Ice penetrates Edith’s voice. ‘My team efforts are with Martin Ross.’

Even Boney realises she has transgressed. She searches for an olive branch. ‘Have another choccie.’ She passes over another of her gifts, a box of Charbonnel and Walker chocolates.

‘Really, I couldn’t.’

‘Just one more. To show no hard feelings.’

Edith selects a rose cream and nibbles at it. ‘We must put them away after this.’

Boney pops an entire truffle into her mouth. ‘Why? I see no reason not to indulge ourselves once in a while, my little Quakeress. Now, we need to put our heads together and work out how to make *Flurry’s Wedding* the smash of the season. I shall have to tackle some big wigs personally on your behalf. You’re far too modest to do it yourself.’

Edith realises her play stands a better chance if Boney champions it. Exuberant she may be, but her heart’s in the right place. ‘That’s terribly kind of you. I do appreciate how you put yourself out for me, dear.’

‘We’re two sides of the same medal, Edith. I understand you. Better than that family of yours which takes you for granted. None of them appreciates you for the meteor-like talent you are.’

Edith finds she needs to prop up her head with a hand. It's only Boney's first night and already she's bowling her over. No one is averse to a little flattery but Boney over-eggs everything. 'What's happening in London? Is there much interest in what's going on in Ireland?'

Boney's fingers hover over a violet cream. 'There was quite the hoo-ha when I was passing through yesterday, on my way to catch the boat train. Your chaps were in Ten Downing Street.' The chocolate is seized and bitten in half.

'Was anything agreed?'

'Didn't hear.'

'Oh dear Lord, I hope there's an end in sight. They've been wrangling over terms since October. What's your sense of the public mood?'

Cheek bulging, Ethel Smyth considers. 'People are war-weary. Keen to have our boys home. But taking up arms against the Throne was wrong and those rebels of yours shouldn't be let off with a treaty. Personally, I'd have that delegation sent over by your de Valera person horsewhipped and thrown into the Tower.'

'Hurling Ireland straight back into war. I'm very glad it's Mr Lloyd George who's Prime Minister and not you, Boney.'

'If I were Prime Minister I should insist on you moving into Number Ten with me.'

Boney captures Edith's hand and strokes it.

Edith springs to her feet. 'Time to turn in.' She snaps her fingers at Loulou, dozing by the fire. Instantly, the dog is at her ankles. She holds out her arms and Loulou bounces into them. 'Will you ring for Philomena when you're ready to go up? She'll bank down the fire and so forth. Good night, my dear. See you in the morning. Do feel free to lie on after your journey.'

*

Boney's visit proves to be enjoyable, despite her attempts to persuade Edith to commit to things she has no intention of doing. Such as trekking in Turkey's Black Sea Mountains with her next year.

'Everyone will be doing it soon,' says Boney. 'If we go now, we'll be ahead of them.'

'My father always said, "Wherever the world is headed, let you head the other way",' parries Edith.

Boney also tries to turn the croquet lawn into a miniature golf course so she can teach Edith how to play, and harries Edith to do her portrait – Edith refuses, for no reason that she can easily justify to herself.

'But Sargent sketched me. I don't know why you say it's impossible.'

'It just is, Boney. Don't go on about it, dear. Why not play me something rousing on the piano?'

Boney launches herself at the piano. A great tangle of notes flood out, a passage from her *Mass in D* – the kind of music Lord Kitchener would have composed if he'd been that way inclined, it occurs to Edith. Unexpectedly, Boney breaks off and buries her face in her hands.

Alarmed, Edith hurries to her side. 'My dear, whatever's the matter?'

'My ear's at me. Booming and singing away. I'm dreading what it means. What if I go deaf, Edith? It runs in the family. How will I be able to compose music?'

'Well, Beethoven,' Edith begins, but stops short at the expression on Boney's face. A compound of frustration and terror. She tries again. 'Have you been to an ear specialist?'

'Not in a while.'

'Promise me you'll make an appointment with one as soon as you're back home.'

*

‘I say, Edith, who’s that skulking in the flowerbeds?’

Can she see Flurry Knox? Disgruntled at the idea, Edith joins her at the window. A young woman is banging a saucepan lid with a wooden spoon.

‘That’s Nora Treacy from the village. She’s helping with the pre-Christmas cleaning.’

‘Why is she making that racket?’

‘There’s a black hen that’s an escape artist. It’s the one we were supposed to eat on your first night – Mrs O’Shea was too busy to wring her neck.’

‘Too disobedient to wring her neck, you mean.’

‘I dare say she was right. Black Bess lays the most enormous eggs. You had one of hers for breakfast – didn’t you notice the double-yolk?’

‘I was composing in my head. I never notice what I’m eating when the muse is upon me.’

Another crash is delivered to the saucepan lid, along with a roared ‘chuckee-chuckee-chuckee.’

‘Really, Edith, you’re too slack. She should be in the kitchen or scullery. Not loitering in flower beds. Look at her. She’s wandering off now to gossip with your gardener.’

‘He’s something to her. A grand-uncle, I think. The Treacys and the O’Mahonys are definitely related.’

‘This entire country of yours is undisciplined. I meant to tell you about one of the porters at Skibbereen railway station, the day I arrived. Fellow who stank of onions. Asked me where I was destined and when I said Drishane, he told me you were the civillest aul’

heifer that ever drew breath. Then he spotted your man, and would have spent half the day chin-wagging with him if I hadn't instructed Hurley to get a move on and take us home.'

'I hope you were polite to Mike, Boney. I rely on him.'

'His boots were filthy. General Smyth would have made mincemeat of him.'

'Mike's not in the army, and neither is he under your father's command. Do, please, try not to antagonise the staff, dear. For my sake. Now, how about a walk in the Castle grounds? I'd suggest a picnic but the weather has a bad habit of going into floods of tears at the mere mention of the word. We used up all our sunshine for the month yesterday. I know, let's call in with my friend, Miss Barlow on the way, invite her to dinner. She lives on the main street.'

'The medium?'

'Yes, she's back from Belfast. Ever such a gifted sensitive.'

'Anything to Jane Barlow, the writer?'

'A cousin. Martin was frightfully impressed when she discovered it. Literary connections always swayed her in someone's favour.'

'Do you mean Martin knew her when she was alive? Or is this impressed from beyond the grave?'

'Yes, she knew her. I thought we might arrange a séance after dinner, if Miss Barlow is willing. I think you'd find it interesting. You see, a barrier cuts us off from those we love in that undiscovered country on the other side. Miss Barlow's powers help to dismantle the obstructions.'

'I'd rather not.'

'Sorry?'

'I'd rather not have anything to do with that, that – business – if you don't mind, Edith.'

'I didn't realise you felt that way.'

‘Well, now you know.’

*

Towards the end of the week, they hire bicycles in Skibbereen and pedal – slowly – out to Lough Hyne, about three miles from the town. It’s Ireland’s only saltwater lake and a place of enchantment, in Edith’s view. Boney pronounces herself enraptured as they perch on a low wall, admiring the view. Clouds coast overhead and the wind gains in momentum. Edith licks a finger pad before presenting it to the air.

‘Good, it’ll be at our backs bicycling back to Skib. I haven’t been on a bicycle in ever such a long time. Didn’t think I still had it in me. Used to do it years ago with Martin. It was quite the craze at one time.’

‘One year, I galloped everywhere at breakneck speed on a tandem,’ says Boney. ‘Not just me on board, of course. With a dear friend. A very dear friend. She was ... rather special.’

Edith isn’t listening. ‘Years ago, when Noah was a boy, I won a poster competition to sketch a bicycle and rider in twenty lines or less. The cash prize was handy.’

‘What did you spend it on?’

‘Can’t remember. Art materials, I expect. I thought I was going to be the next Renoir. You know how girls are, building castles in the air.’

‘You still do.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Build castles in the air.’

‘About what?’

‘Your life in Ireland. You’re mouldering here, Edith.’

Edith pretends not to hear her. ‘I must have a word with the rector about the list of hymns for St Barrahan’s on Sunday. I’m supposed to play *At Thy Feet, O Christ, We Lay*

on the organ. But I can never keep a straight face with that one. It inevitably suggests hens to me.'

'I see what you're doing. Changing the subject. You could have a wonderful life with me in England if only you'd take a leap of faith.'

Edith scrabbles her fingers along the top of the drystone wall. They close over a loose pebble. She tosses it in her hand. 'Can you skim stones, Boney? I'm a champion skimmer. Come on, I challenge you to a contest.'

Edith walks to the water's edge.

Boney scowls. 'I've a better idea.' She flings her hat on the ground and pulls off her coat. 'Last one in's a rotten egg.'

'You're not serious!'

'Try me.'

'But we haven't brought our bathing costumes.'

'Tosh! Who needs 'em?'

Unbuttoning rapidly, Boney stands stark naked in front of Edith. She catches a glimpse of pendulous breasts with brown nipples like saucers, and a riot of curly grey hair between her legs. With a whoop, bottom cheeks wobbling, Boney makes a run for the water's edge and splashes in, causing a commotion among the waterfowl.

'Whee! Hurry up, Edith!'

'Boney, get out at once! Someone will see you!'

'Let them! I don't care! Come and join me, Edith!'

'You'll catch your death! It must be Baltic in there!'

'It's exhilarating! I love it!' Boney turns on her back and splatters a backstroke.

What an exhibitionist, thinks Edith. But part of her admires Boney's devil-may-care verve.

*

Strolling along a back road parallel with the coast, Edith throws a tennis ball for Loulou. It carries further than she intended and the dog gives chase into a scrubby field. Under Edith's arm is a piece of driftwood. Now that Boney is packing to leave, she'll have some time to herself again. The driftwood's mangled shape appeals to Edith, and she intends to paint it while it dries out. Afterwards she'll feed it to the fire.

Her back is hunched against a searching east wind which somehow manages to sneak under her scarf and down the back of her neck. Edith considers the naked landscape: trees pared back to the bone, mountains scowling under a raincloud. Desolate though it is, there are compensations. Just ahead, a robin bobs along the ditch, hopping on springs, and she stands still to watch. He jerks his head, pulls a worm from the earth and swallows it down. Intent, she misses Tiger's approach along a branch. But the tabby's leap, as fluid as running water, catches her eye. In one bound, the robin is pinioned beneath paw and tooth.

'Shoo!' Edith claps her hands.

But the bird is captured. Still with an inch of worm wriggling from its beak, the robin is stolen away.

'That's nature,' says Flurry. 'Red in tooth and claw. Kitty took that wall with ease. Time was when you could tumble over any wall like a cat, yourself.'

'You have a habit of creeping up on me, Flurry Knox.'

He shrugs. 'You look as if you have the weight of the world on your shoulders. What's on your mind, Edith?'

She leans the driftwood against the wall. 'My play needs a little push to get it out into the world. Any fool can write one but it takes genius to have it staged.'

Flurry tips his bowler rakishly low on his forehead. 'Hasn't your pal offered to help? The one who tosses life like a pancake?'

‘True, and she has contacts in the theatrical world. But Boney is a bull in a china shop.’

‘Who else do you know in that line of business? Now’s no time to be shy.’

‘Cousin Lottie’s husband is a playwright. But he’s puckish. You’d never know how he’d take being asked for a favour.’

‘Nothing ventured, nothing gained.’

‘He’s quite the socialist and fiercely clever. I doubt if my play would be his cup of tea. I don’t think he’d have much patience with horsey matters.’

‘You’re not Old Moore, Edith. You can’t predict how he’ll react.’

‘True. I could ask Lottie to have a word with him. If he likes the play, he might recommend it to a producer. I’m going to send the manuscript back to London with Boney. At least it can’t get lost in the postal service. Things are still haywire here.’

‘Is he a success, this playwright husband of your cousin’s?’

‘Enormously. The problem is that once Boney sees the Shaw name on the envelope, she’ll gallop down to Ayot St Lawrence to meet him.’

Flurry takes off his bowler, removes a fly for a fishing rod inside it, and replaces the hat. ‘Sure, what harm?’

‘It’s a bit risky, unleashing Boney on them. She has an unfortunate habit of making enemies.’

‘I wouldn’t like to get on the wrong side of her. She has a face that could stop a runaway horse in its tracks.’

‘None of your sauce, you scamp. Perhaps it will be all right. Mr Shaw is quite the eccentric. He may choose to find her diverting.’

‘Why not speak to Lady Gregory? She was always hounding you and Martin to write for the Abbey.’

‘Certainly not. Augusta means well. But Yeats is boiling over with conceit.’

‘He reads detective novels,’ says Flurry. ‘Can’t be entirely bad. But this Shaw fellow sounds a better bet.’

The sound of mooing makes her look down the road. A man in a white flannel coat and slouchy hat with its hat-band missing is driving half a dozen cows towards them, swishing an ash plant against their hindquarters. His face is as furrowed as a ploughed field. When he draws level, he touches the brim of his floppy hat. ‘Afternoon, Miss Somerville.’

‘Good afternoon, Thady. The rain held off.’

‘That it did, your honour-ma’am.’

After he has passed, she turns back to Flurry. But he has gone, too.

Edith opens her mouth to call him, tasting the salty wind on her tongue. On second thoughts, Flurry Knox is not the class of man to appear when summoned. Wings beat overhead – birds flying inland. The threatened storm must be approaching.

She picks up the driftwood. ‘Loulou! Where are you Lou? High time we went home. We’ve a visitor to give a send-off to.’

*

Boney wheels and strides, firing directions at Mike Hurley while he loads her luggage into the dog cart for the homeward journey to England. She’s a woman born to wear a uniform, like her father and grandfather before her. But Edith decides Mike needs to be rescued from her attentions.

‘You won’t forget to write to my cousin, Mrs Shaw, asking if you can call with my play? Rather than just arrive? I’ve written to her about you. I expect she’ll invite you to tea. Promise me you won’t simply turn up. They entertain quite a lot and it mightn’t be convenient.’

‘I shall be humming with work. But I’ll take a run down before New Year’s Eve. Otherwise it’ll be impossible because of all the brouhaha over my news.’

Philomena dashes out with provisions for the journey.

Boney slips two bank notes into Philomena’s hand. ‘One for you and one for the cook,’ she says, in a whisper that’s audible a field away.

‘Thank you, ma’am.’ Philomena bobs a creaky curtsey.

Edith observes the manoeuvre with pleasure. Whatever her faults, Boney is no skinflint.

Boney catches her eye and makes an impulsive movement towards Edith. ‘The time has simply careered by, my treasure. I don’t believe I’m ready to leave you quite yet.’

Edith steps back smartly, withdrawing up the steps – her body reacting ahead of her mind. Horrified, she grasps that Boney meant to try and hug her in front of the staff. ‘Have you packed those eggs from the Home Farm carefully? I’d hate them to be scrambled en route.’

‘Yes, yes, they’re well padded. I say, Edith, you will visit soon, won’t you?’

‘Of course. I’ll write and let you know my plans.’ She must manoeuvre Boney into the dog cart before she finds herself wrestled into an embrace. Departures have a bad habit of heightening Boney’s emotions. ‘That trunk looks a little insecure, let me check on it for you.’ She slips past and pretends to busy herself with testing some straps. ‘Mike, would you help Doctor Smyth up, please? We don’t want her missing her train.’

‘To be sure I will, Miss Somerville. Are you ready, Doctor Smyth?’

Boney casts a yearning look at Edith’s back, bent over the fastenings on her luggage. She sighs, ignores Mike Hurley’s outstretched hand, and pulls herself on board. ‘*If it were done when ’tis done, then ’twere well it were done quickly.* That applies to most things in life but particularly to catching trains.’

Edith deems it safe to offer a handshake now. ‘Don’t forget the ear doctor.’

‘I won’t.’

‘Good. By the way, the sooner Mr Shaw reads my play, Boney, the sooner I shall be over.’

Her departing guest presents Edith with a radiant smile. ‘I’ll write to your cousin on the train. You’re destined to realise, my dearest of Ediths, that I’m indispensable to you.’

*

The postal service appears to be working again, and letters are making their way through. The one from Charlotte Shaw, née Payne-Townshend, is everything Edith hoped it would be. She has brought it with her from the morning room into her studio, to re-read for a third time.

I found Flurry’s Wedding vastly entertaining, Edith. It brought to mind so many scenes of Rosscarbery and our girlhood, when you and I would spend the entire day on horseback. Ah, the sweet carelessness of youth. Or as the Bard reminds us,

Youth is hot and bold,

Age is weak and cold

Youth is wild, and Age is tame.

I have passed on your charming play to GBS to read. He’s busy with his own play about Saint Joan but promises to read it soon.

We saw your friend Doctor Smyth’s name in the Gazette announcement – Dame Ethel Smyth as she is now. GBS thinks honours are ridiculous affectations but I must confess to being pleased for her. She bounced in on us saying, call me Smyth to rhyme with lithe. A most vivacious person. Not quite sane, according to GBS, but he insists sanity is overrated.

Edith folds up the letter and returns it to its envelope lined with pale grey tissue paper. Nineteen twenty-two is off to a promising start, and the year is still only eight days old. Her eye lands on Loulou, snoozing on the back of her chair, a high-wire act that's bound to result in an accident, but she looks too comfortable to displace. Edith reaches for her pencils and outlines Loulou's shape rapidly.

As she works, she begins to ponder the possibilities that lurk behind that description of Edith as vivacious in Lottie's letter. Did the new dame commandeer their piano and begin playing her suffrage anthem, *The March of the Women*, whether they wanted to hear it or not? Did she rehearse her grievances against the Synge family for refusing to sell her the rights to *Riders To The Sea* for an operatic adaptation? Did she stray into politics and tell them this new Anglo-Irish Treaty was a shameful and cowardly surrender to the gun?

Edith's speculations are interrupted by the thrum of a motorcar. Loulou wakens, ears pricking. She wobbles perilously, manages a leap to the floor just in time and begins to dance around, barking. The motorcar sputters to a halt at the front of the house, which means Edith can't see who it is from her studio. Keeping an ear cocked, she continues sketching, until Philomena pops her head in to say the American journalist, Mr Grun, has called. Edith puts aside her pencils. Loulou's legs aren't quite right, but if it'll do it'll do.

'He sent in this, Miss Edith.'

A card on a salver reads:

Theodore H. Grun

Europe correspondent

The New York Times

All the news that's fit to print

'Is there a fire lit in the library? Then show him in there, Philomena. And bring us tea as soon as you can. Tell Mr Grun I'll be with him presently.'

Edith pulls off her painting smock, washes her hands and tidies her hair. She sails into the library, where she finds Theodore H. Grun flicking through some back issues of *Punch*.

‘Miss Somerville, ma’am, I took you at your word about dropping in. Decided to swing by and pay my respects.’

‘I’ve been hoping to meet you, Mr Grun. Now, I’ve ordered tea. Does that suit you, or would you prefer coffee?’

‘Tea’s just dandy. A mighty fine place you got here, ma’am.’ He flashes startling teeth, luminously white, as if each, separate tooth has a built-in electric light. ‘Great art and antiques.’

‘Thank you. Just some family knick-knacks. Where are you from, may I ask?’

‘Albany, New York. Gee, I wish my family had knick-knacks in this league. Saw a real old sword hanging up in the hall when I came through. Looked like it would fetch a pretty sum. What d’ya think it’s worth?’

Edith frowns. ‘My grandfather’s regimental sword. We wouldn’t dream of selling it.’

‘Could guarantee to get you a good price if you change your mind.’

‘That’s most unlikely.’

‘Shifted some stuff for a family by the name of Vaughan in a big ole heap over near Killarney. Lot of buyers for this sort of thing, back home in my neck of the woods.’

She stirs her tea. Allows a pause to develop. ‘How long have you been in Ireland, Mr Grun?’

‘Middle of August. Guess I didn’t think I’d be here this long – figured I’d be moving along after a month or so. But the long and the short of it is these are interesting times here. I see your Irish Parliament has okayed the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Though no guarantee the losing side will respect the decision.’

‘I hadn’t heard about Dáil Éireann approving the Treaty. How close was the vote?’

‘Happened yesterday. Sixty-four for, fifty-seven against.’

‘Oh dear. I wish it were more conclusive.’

‘Dominion status for Ireland isn’t a bad result, ma’am. Canada, New Zealand and Australia are able to live with it.’

‘It’s a vote for peace, that’s worth remembering.’ The wind loosens soot inside the chimney breast and it patters on the flames. She shivers. ‘Something just walked on my grave.’

‘Ma’am?’

‘A figure of speech. I wonder if Mr de Valera will stay on as President of the Dáil? He said he’d vote against the Treaty. This result undermines his authority.’

‘The Treaty will go before the people to vote on, I hear. That’ll be the decider.’

The door opens, Philomena appears with a tea tray, and Mr Grun attempts to take it from her.

She holds on tight, flustered by his gallantry. ‘I’m grand, thank you, I can manage.’

‘Don’t seem right, an itty-bitty thing like you and a great big tray-load like that.’

Philomena squeals. ‘The blarney out of him! Did you hear, Miss Edith? Mind he doesn’t try and butter you up.’

Grun winks at Edith.

‘I’ll be on my guard, Philomena,’ says Edith.

Edith waits for Philomena to arrange the tea table and leave before resuming the conversation. ‘How does America feel about what’s happening in Ireland?’

‘America doesn’t like to see Ireland bullied by Great Britain. Folks think the Irish have been real plucky.’ He accepts a cup and saucer, and chooses one of Mrs O’Shea’s shortcake biscuits.

‘I was sorry to hear you had your motorcar purloined some time ago.’

‘I was pretty darn sorry myself, ma’am. Lucky to get it back, I guess.’

‘Owning a motor car must be a dreadful responsibility. Do you hunt? I have some magnificent animals I’d be willing to part with. A noble beast, the horse. Reliable.’

‘I’m a fan of the combustible engine, ma’am. Shape of the future.’

‘If you say so. Where do you intend travelling next for your newspaper, Mr Grun?’

‘Oh, I’m not going anywhere just yet. This tussle isn’t over by a long shot. De Valera’s lining up on one side and Collins on the other. And the foot soldiers are split, too. Things are about to get real personal.’

‘That’s what I’m afraid of.’

‘Can you see this Treaty being accepted by everyone who fought, ma’am?’

She thinks of the captain and the whistler. ‘No. Some want a republic, do or die.’

‘Right. The North is opting out, whatever they decide. Partition.’

Partition. Edith hasn’t heard the term before in relation to Ireland. It sounds ominous. She holds the plate of biscuits in his direction. ‘Will you try another, Mr Grun?’

‘Sure. Great cookies.’

‘May I ask, why aren’t you in Dublin? Can there really be enough to interest you in West Cork?’

‘I come and go. Been to Dublin plenty. Belfast, too. But Skibbereen’s as good a base as any.’

‘Really?’

‘Sure. Say, how does your set feel about Irish independence? Are you a unionist or a separatist? Will you pack up and go once Great Britain pulls out?’

‘Certainly not. This is our home. Anyhow, we don’t know that Great Britain will leave.’

‘Oh, I think it’s inevitable. A matter of when, not if. Now, don’t take this personally, ma’am. But wouldn’t it make more sense for you to bail out? Some might think your family’s exploited the Irish for centuries. Payback time’s just around the corner.’

‘My family has *not* exploited the Irish.’

‘No? You’re taking a heckuva chance others see things the same way.’ Those disconcertingly white teeth make another full-frontal appearance. ‘Strikes me you’re between the devil and the deep blue sea, if you’ll pardon me for saying it. Not Irish enough in Ireland, not Britisher enough in England. But they gotta take you. Whereas you might find you’re not wanted here.’

Edith looks at her cup and saucer. If she squeezes the handle any tighter, the fragile object might smash. ‘Is that your impression, Mr Grun? Have you heard something to that effect?’

‘I hear all sorts, ma’am. How d’ya feel about de Valera? Is he the man to run the country? Or would you prefer to see Collins run the show, once the dust settles?’

‘The dust hasn’t settled yet.’

‘Heard some people in these parts call de Valera the Dago.’

She pretends not to hear.

‘Say, here’s a thought. Would you accept a cash offer to go? I know a couple of individuals with deep pockets. Happy to take an old pile like this off your hands for the right price. Confidentially, I’ve been instructed to sound out some owners, act as go-between, if you catch my drift. What d’ya say? Get out while the going is good.’

‘Are you a journalist or a property speculator, Mr Grun? Or, indeed, something else entirely?’

‘Me? I’m all sorts of things, ma’am. A man of many parts. But sure, I’m a reporter, too. Plenty happening here to share with our readers. Real interested in Irish affairs, the New York Times’ readers.’

‘Well, here’s something you can share with your readers. Or with whoever it is that’s pulling your strings. Edith Somerville is going nowhere. The Somervilles are staying put.’

*

Edith watches the yellow motorcar drive away. But it stops on the avenue, where the chauffeur sticks out his head and beckons to Jeremiah. The gardener doesn’t budge. While the motorcar idles, Grun steps out and goes over to him. He seems to be engaging Jeremiah in conversation. After a minute or two, the trowel is thrown down with a dismissive twist of the hand, and Jeremiah clomps away in the opposite direction. It looks to Edith as if he walked off while the American journalist was still talking to him.

Chapter 12

Tingling from the January cold, leaning heavily on her walking stick, Edith tramps uphill, passing houses with modest facades that open directly onto Castletownshend's main street, and veering left past the landmark twin sycamores which straddle the perpendicular road, splitting it down the middle. Loulou falls behind to nose around the tree roots. Edith is on her way home from the skimmers' beach. In one of her pockets nestles a piece of cobalt blue sea glass found there – she can never resist a random find. Edith waves at two farmers she recognises on the footpath opposite, on their way into Willy Casey's pub for a bottle of stout. By Tally Ho – another empty house in the village, this one belonging to the Somervilles, but they can't find tenants for it – she pauses to catch her breath. Two figures emerge from the Drishane gateway and walk towards her. They are wearing sailor uniforms. They must be from the destroyer, sent from Haulbowline by her brother Hugh, who's commander there.

'Afternoon, ma'am,' they chorus.

'Did you have an errand in Drishane? I'm Miss Somerville.'

They whip their cigarettes behind their backs. 'We was just delivering some post we was carrying for you,' says one.

'Thank you, I'm most grateful. I hope the cook gave you a cup of tea.'

'We was offered it, ma'am. Had to say no. More errands to do.'

'Is there any news?' she asks, more in hope than expectation.

They exchange glances, before shaking their heads.

None they're willing to share then. 'Give my regards to your captain,' she says.

They touch their caps in salute.

Edith looks round for Loulou. 'Look lively, Lou!'

The little dog takes her nose out of a drain and scampers to join Edith, who stomps up the avenue. She trills her fingers at old Jeremiah, busy with the hydrangea bushes. He waves the clippers at her. In her parents' day, there was a crew of gardeners keeping the place up to scratch. They'd spin in their graves to think one old man was left. She wonders what Grun was saying to Jeremiah the other day. Philomena told her Grun's chauffeur asked a lot of questions while they gave him tea in the kitchen.

Coat and Wellingtons are abandoned in the outer hall. In the inner hall, Edith sees two envelopes propped on the mahogany stand. Both have a London postmark, and she notices that one is from Mr Pinker. It feels like the cheque for royalties she's been expecting. But the second letter intrigues her with its tiny, exceptionally neat handwriting. The name and address on the flap reveal the sender to be none other than George Bernard Shaw. Excitement fizzles through her veins.

'He must have read the play,' she tells Loulou.

Edith slides the letter into a cardigan pocket, and sticks her head through the doorway to the kitchen to ask for tea and scones in the library.

'And Philomena, take Loulou and give her a scrub, she's more mud than dog.'

In the library, she riddles the fire to encourage a blaze, adds some pine cones from a basket by the side of the fireplace and settles herself in an armchair. Pine scent drifts through the air. She toes off her shoes and stretches out her stockinged feet to the flames. The envelope crackles and she retrieves it from her pocket, fingers stroking the paper. Good news lies inside, she feels it in her bones. Will she wait for tea, delaying the pleasure, or gobble up the letter's contents at once?

She slides a finger under the flap and prises it open. It is dated 20th January 1922. Her eyes speed-read its message.

Laugh at dirt, worthlessness, dishonesty and mischief.

You write like a lady in the worse sense of the word.

Never seems to occur to you that poor people are human beings.

Stick to your pen and let the stage alone.

Shaw loathes *Flurry's Wedding!* He's telling her it's hopeless and to give up playwriting.

The rattle of the tea trolley announces Philomena. She bustles about, lighting oil lamps and making the room cosy.

'You'll ruin your eyes, Miss Edith trying to read without the light on. I'll draw the curtains. It's hardly day before it's night, this weather.'

A slumped Edith gazes into the fire. Her silence alerts Philomena.

'I hope there wasn't bad news in one of your letters, Miss Edith?'

Edith straightens her back. 'Not especially. Thank you, that will be all, Philomena.'

Alone again, she pours a cup of tea, adds a splash of milk and reads the letter carefully. It's about as damning as it can possibly be. There isn't a ray of light anywhere. Shaw knows exactly what he's saying, judging by his final line.

Forgive me if you can.

Months of toil wasted. No fat fee to keep Drishane afloat. Better too much of a lady than not enough of a gentleman. She pities Lottie, married to such a person. If she can't write, how is it that Somerville and Ross's books were read by royalty, no less? Queen Victoria and King Edward VII were always delighted to receive copies as gifts.

But that was when Martin was alive, whispers an inner voice.

She examines the letter's contents for a third time.

As far as it has any thread at all it deals with the marriage of Flurry and Sally. That is to say, it proposes to entertain the spectators with the marriage of a decent young lady to a blackguardly horse thief, dirty and disorderly when not dressed up for some special occasion, unable to learn an honest living, and in no way distinguishable in culture, in

morals, in interests, or in decency of language from the poorer rascals whom he orders about by virtue of the social position which he disgraces...

Poor Flurry, denounced as a horse thief by an under-bred fortune-hunter who got his clutches into Cousin Lottie's trust fund.

Later, stung though she is, Edith decides Shaw gave his honest opinion – one professional to another. She'll write at once, explaining the play was meant to be humorous and not one of his social satires, thank him for his kindness in reading her work and trouble him no further.

And then what?

She butters a scone, adds a dab of Mrs O'Shea's blackberry jam and waits for inspiration. Martin's advice is needed. She'll arrange a séance with Jem Barlow. The last time they did it, a materialisation was almost achieved.

*

Despite the short notice, Miss J.E.M. Barlow, known as Jem, consents to a séance that evening. Edith has been saving some early blooming African violets, grown in one of the glasshouses. She snips them now, arranging them in a cut glass bowl in the library. They'll wilt before morning but their sacrifice is necessary. Violets will help to lubricate the channel of communication because of their association with Violet Martin.

Edith taps her lower lip. Objects associated with the person on the other side of the great divide are useful. A brainwave sends her to her studio, known as the purlieu in her mother's time, where she riffles through a storm of papers until she tracks down the original manuscript for *An Irish Cousin*. It was their first book together, that shilling shocker whose success changed their lives. The manuscript, handwritten in dark blue ink, is a fair copy executed by Edith because Martin's script was evil (to quote Nannie Martin,

her mamma) but here and there an amendment has been scribbled by Martin. The pages are yellowing, their edges foxed, and a doubled length of green tape holds the stack together. A faint scent of violets drifts from them.

‘Darling old thing.’ Edith strokes the manuscript.

In solitary splendour beneath portraits of her ancestors, she eats scrambled eggs on toast, intending to offer Miss Barlow supper after her exertions. A séance takes its toll on the medium. Philomena’s disapproval was visible in every line of her body when she served the eggs, but Edith refused to discuss it with her.

‘By all means take it up with Father Lambe, but you can’t be allowed to dictate to me, Philomena. Now, please see to it that the library fire is lit and everything left ready, as per my instructions.’

She’s waiting in the library when Philomena shows Miss Barlow into the room with a moody crash of the door, not troubling to knock or introduce her.

Edith ignores Philomena’s display of temper. ‘Punctual as ever, my dear Miss Barlow. I do appreciate your surrendering your evening to me at such short notice.’

She shakes hands with a ladylike person in a feathered hat and silver fox fur stole, somewhat younger than Edith. They are similar in height and frame, but when Jem Barlow fixes the pale blue light of her eyes on someone, she seems capable of seeing right through to their spinal cord.

‘All that’s surrendered is a rubber of bridge, Miss Somerville. And I always lose. You’ve saved me half a crown, at least.’

‘In that case, may we get started, Miss Barlow? I thought it might be a good idea if we turned out the lamps and used candles. I have some here.’

‘Excellent idea. More atmospheric.’

‘Out you go, Loulou.’ Edith turns the door knob and points.

Loulou stands her ground, tongue hanging out. She is stared down, knows it, and shuffles to the door.

Miss Barlow scans the room, sits at a small table in an alcove, and removes her hat and gloves. Edith takes the seat opposite. The manuscript lies between them. Edith counts back. It's almost forty years since she and Martin worked on that novel together, back when the earth was flat.

'Our dear departed will stretch out their hands to us if at all possible, Miss Somerville. To see them, we must look with our inner eye.' The medium reaches out and takes Edith's hands, her hold strong. Next, she lowers her eyelids and breathes rhythmically, her face tranquil.

She could be cogitating on the next day's menu to be agreed with her cook, thinks Edith. Instead, she is a daring explorer in that mysterious country where Martin now lives. As instructed, Edith tries to look with her inner eye, but is distracted by the heat from Jem Barlow's hands. She waits, aware of complementary sounds in the room which grow louder as the seconds tick by on the mantelpiece clock. Miss Barlow's even breaths, the fire crackling, a beam shifting in the ceiling. Outside the window, a bird gives a drowsy series of chirps.

All of a sudden, the grip on her hands tightens. 'Are you there, Miss Martin? Are you able to make contact? One who loves you on the earthward side of the veil is anxious to speak with you.' Her eyes spring open. They are glassy, the pupils reduced to pinpricks. 'Miss Martin? Can you make your way to us? Please try. We're waiting for you, Miss Martin. Waiting and hoping.' She lowers her voice. 'Call her by name, Miss Somerville.'

'Martin!' cries Edith. 'I need you. Do try to come to us, my dear. It would mean so much to see you.'

Still holding Edith's hands, Miss Barlow inhales abruptly. 'She is here! I sense it!'

Edith feels some shift in the atmosphere.

‘She is with us! A materialisation!’ exclaims Miss Barlow.

Edith’s heart skips a beat. The flickering candlelight causes the shadows in the room to bend and waver. Perhaps she does feel some tremor, like the vibrations left after a hand has drifted across harp strings.

Is it her imagination or is there a stronger scent of violets?

Miss Barlow cocks her head. ‘You’d recommend it?’ She is all attention. ‘Naturally we’ll be advised by you. Yes, I’ll tell the sitter. Miss Somerville, my spirit guide, Melville, says you may pose questions through him and he will convey your requests to Miss Martin. She can show herself to us but not speak directly. I fear the obstacles are too great for her to communicate with her own voice tonight. But she is near. Very near.’

Edith’s eyes circumnavigate the room, but detect nothing. Yet how to explain that prickle on the back of her neck? Her gaze latches onto an armchair beside the window where Martin used to curl up and read. Perhaps the air is thickening there. Has it shaped into a woman’s contours?

‘Miss Somerville, do you have a question you wish to put to Miss Martin?’

Edith’s blood drums in her ears. Her throat is parched. She swallows. ‘Martin, what should I do about our play? I’ve had a setback. Should I abandon it – or persist?’

‘She is communicating her answer now through Melville,’ intones Miss Barlow. ‘She says go to London, use your contacts there. You’re too remote from the centre of things here.’

‘So the play will be staged? It will be a success?’

Miss Barlow listens intently to Melville, nodding and pursing her lips. Edith’s eyes remain fixed on the armchair where that dense shadow has appeared. Is it Martin? Along Edith’s spine, the skin feels stretched too taut.

‘You must believe in yourself,’ says Miss Barlow. ‘Your new work will stir interest and comment. Believe in yourself.’

‘I’m riddled by doubt,’ says Edith.

The medium’s shoulders hunch in concentration. She squeezes Edith’s hands. ‘Miss Martin says people become like horses refusing a jump. Uncertainty is their enemy, not inability. You must not surrender to uncertainty. You have achieved great things in life, and are destined for further triumphs.’

Edith becomes conscious of a friendly presence. It’s as if an invisible hand is resting lightly on the small of her back, in a gesture of encouragement. A patch of warmth heats her skin there. ‘Dare I believe, dearest Martin?’

‘You must. What is there but belief to sustain us?’

Other messages follow, inconsequential but heartening. Their gist is that she is to seek the help of well-wishers with influence. In answer to a question from Edith, Martin says she has never wanted to be back in her body again.

‘I feel no sense of separation,’ she says.

‘Oh Martin, I confess that sometimes I do!’

Jem Barlow heaves out a lengthy sigh, and lays Edith’s hands on the table. She opens her eyes, blinks twice, stretches her back. Her pupils are normal. The trance has passed.

‘How did it go, Miss Somerville?’

‘Very well, thank you. We communicated beautifully.’

‘There was a materialisation?’

‘Perhaps. I – I’m not certain.’

‘But the psychic energy crackles still! Can’t you sense it?’

‘I may have seen something...’

‘My dear, there’s been an indisputable force in this room tonight. There can be no doubt of a breakthrough. I confess, I feel positively drained – always a sure sign.’

‘Allow me to offer you some refreshments, Miss Barlow.’ Edith rings the bell for Philomena. ‘Will you take some sherry while supper is fetched?’

Miss Barlow consents to a glass. Edith pours some dry sherry into two Waterford crystal glasses, and while the medium drinks hers, Edith quizzes her on the dream state she entered.

‘I have no recollection of details. It’s a kind of semi-sleeping condition, yet I feel more illuminated by knowledge than in my waking state. That said, the part I play is passive. I know my role is simply to listen and convey messages from those who have gone before us to another plane.’

‘Passive, but essential,’ protests Edith.

‘I do what I can, Miss Somerville.’

‘It gives me such comfort. I miss her dreadfully.’

Miss Barlow clasps her hands together, a topaz ring winking in the candlelight. ‘My dear Miss Somerville, you should never doubt Miss Martin’s friendship. It remains as true as ever. I feel her affection for you in this room. It is flame-bright.’

‘Do you suppose you could materialise her again? I – I think I could make out her form. But it was really only a dim outline.’

‘No wonder it was dim. Her energy has to travel here from such a long distance.’

‘If I could only see her face again.’

‘Believe, Miss Somerville. Believe and it will happen.’

‘I do. Oh, indeed I do.’

But she can’t help feeling a little deflated. Her dearest Martin. So close and yet so far. There but not there. Her words but not her voice. Her shadow but not her face. Within touching distance – but she couldn’t touch her.

*

The letter from Charlotte Shaw is dated the night of the séance. Edith refuses to regard it as a coincidence. She reads it over breakfast.

My dear Edith,

A thousand apologies on behalf of my insensitive husband. I hadn't an inkling GBS was going to send you such a letter. He told me only that he'd read your play and was intending to give you some advice. Naturally I presumed he meant constructive advice. But alarm bells rang when your own impeccably courteous letter arrived, thanking him for his candour, and I asked to see his rough copy of what he'd written. I was aghast! It's not a concert review for one of those London rags you used to scribble for, I told him. This is one of my Castletownshend cousins. You've dined at Drishane!

He concedes that he may have been a little hasty in his "abandon hope all ye who enter here" analysis. There is much wit and joie de vivre in Flurry's Wedding and I feel certain that it can be salvaged, with a little judicious pruning and re-ordering. GBS agrees with me. Won't you come and stay with us for a few days, Edith, and the two of you can discuss how to make progress with your play? He can be tactless and somewhat flippant, but he does understand the theatre world and undoubtedly you would benefit from his expertise. The stage is a different storytelling milieu and some guidance might not go amiss.

Do say you'll come to Ayot St Lawrence. It's just a country cottage, really, and we don't go about much when we're here. The seclusion is agreeable compared with London's hurly burly and GBS finds it conducive to work. Come for my sake if not his. I am in agony with neuralgia at the moment and your visit would be a welcome distraction. Besides which, a visitor from Ireland is the next best thing to being there. With things so unsettled these past few years, I haven't been able to visit as I'd like to do, although we have high hopes the Treaty will hold, and men of good sense on both sides will see this

thing through. Wire us your plans. I have your play put by safely. Strike while the iron is hot!

Fondest love,

Lottie

*

‘I’ll need a mackintosh, Philomena. It’ll be foggy in London. It generally is. Lamps have to be lit all day, sometimes.’

Edith is supervising while Philomena packs her trunk. On her itinerary are a weekend in Ayot St Lawrence, a few days in Ethel Smyth’s Hook Heath house, and a longer stay with her brother Boyle and his wife Mabel in London. She also intends paying a visit to her literary agent Mr Pinker, and has written suggesting a meeting on February the fourth. It’s time for the two of them to part company. She hopes there isn’t a row.

‘What’s London like, Miss Edith?’

‘London is like the ocean, Philomena: vast, bottomless and it refuses no one.’

‘I’d love to see Big Ben, so I would. Is it true there isn’t a corner of London where you can’t hear it?’

‘Not quite. But its bongs do carry.’

A sudden swirl of dust near the door makes Philomena cross herself.

‘Why did you do that, Philomena?’

‘That dust’s a sign. One of the good folk is on the move. You will come back, won’t you, Miss Edith? I’d hate to think of the Somervilles up-and-leaving Castletownshend altogether, the way some of the gentry does be packin’ up and goin’ to the North or to England.’

‘You can bank on me coming back. There’ll be Somervilles in CT as long as there’s a CT. Tell you what, I’ll send you a postcard of Big Ben.’

A loud sniff. ‘God is good and so are you, Miss Edith. I’ll stick it in my scrapbook. Best send Mrs O’Shea one, as well, if it’s not too much trouble. She’d take it amiss to be overlooked.’

‘We couldn’t have that. Now, don’t pack my walking shoes because I’ll need them for the crossing. I may have to leave my cabin and go on deck if the sea is choppy. The air’s like wrapping yourself in a damp sheet. But needs must. Less chance of queasiness outdoors.’

‘Will I pack your hat with pheasant feathers in the hatband? The one that’s as black as a sweep? You’d never know when you might have a funeral to go to, and you with so many family and friends over there.’

‘I wish my family were all here in Ireland, Philomena. But my brothers had to make their way in the world. Yes, pack the hat.’

‘They’ll find their way home, please God.’

Edith thinks about her tribe of brothers: Cameron, Aylmer, Boyle, Jack and baby Hugh, born when she was fifteen. All of them joined either the army or navy and travelled the world. How many will find their way back to Castletownshend? Boyle, for sure, at least. He loves this cranny of Ireland.

‘Miss Edith? Will you be needin’ your painting things?’

Philomena’s voice yanks her back to Drishane.

‘Just a sketchpad and some pencils but I’ll take care of them myself.’ As she leaves the room, she touches Philomena’s work-roughened hand.

Philomena stops folding and smoothing clothes.

‘Am I doing the right thing, leaving Drishane? You haven’t heard anything that worries you in the village, Philomena?’

‘Nobody will lay a finger on this place while I have breath in me body, Miss Edith. We’ll keep everything as safe as if it was in God’s own pocket.’

*

There are no foot warmers on the Dublin-bound train and the cushions feel crusty. An inexplicable halt on the line occurs in the middle of nowhere – Edith guesses Kildare from the flat landscape. For a time, she watches a small boy starfish his hand against the window, making mooing noises at cattle in the fields. ‘Moo-cow, Mama, moo-cow,’ he tells his mother, until she puts aside her magazine and moos along with him.

At the waiting room in Amiens Street, where Edith is passing time until she can board the Kingstown train to connect with the ship, the air is blue with tobacco smoke. Why does the fire in every station waiting room smoke, but not burn, she thinks fretfully. She leaves her bags with the young mother, whose son is now sleeping on her lap, and steps outside onto the street. The smell of unwashed human bodies attacks her nostrils. It’s the same in Cork city, of course, but she objects more to the odour in Dublin. Perhaps, as a Cork woman, she’s inclined to make allowances.

She looks in the direction of the Liffey. Beyond it, across the rooftops, lies St Stephen’s Green. Once, she’d have broken her journey with a stay there, in her aunt Louisa Greene’s house. Aunt Louisa is gone now, too. Another name crossed out in her address book. A man with a sandwich board roped to him shuffles past, advertising *Little Red Riding Hood* at the Gate Theatre. A woman stops a constable, in the distinctive, steel spiked helmets of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, and asks for directions to Jammett’s. Someone is going to dine well on French cuisine, thinks Edith, as the constable points the way to Nassau Street. Barefoot newsboys with marzipan-coloured skin scurry about,

shouting the headlines. ‘Latest Treaty news! Dev snubbed! Overseas Irishmen support the deal!’

Edith fumbles out a coin to buy one. Before she can reach a newsboy, she is intercepted.

‘A penny for the babby. She needs milk.’ A woman with a child wrapped inside her shawl holds out an upturned hand.

Edith considers her. It’s a Madonna-like tableau, one to which she has always been susceptible – in art and in life. The woman is tidy, with a knob of hair on top of her head, but scrawny, as though she hasn’t seen a solid meal in months. She can well believe such a woman isn’t able to produce enough milk for her child. She gives her the shilling she’s holding, and adds another shilling to it.

‘May your soul fly straight to Heaven, ma’am.’

Edith buys a copy of the *Irish Times*. *Last Days of Robert’s Sale* is trumpeted across the front, but she flicks past lists of hemstitched tray cloths and embroidered duchess sets at knockdown prices to arrive at the news section inside.

At the Irish Race Conference, Mr de Valera and his friends have been disillusioned completely about the attitude of overseas Irishmen towards the Treaty. The wild idea of asking the Conference to declare against the peace settlement is not likely to be pressed now, because some of the most influential Irishmen throughout the world are in favour of it.

So, support is growing for the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Perhaps 1922 will bring stability to Ireland. Relief flows like running water through her. She pleats the newspaper, folding inwards its dateline of Friday, January 27, and returns to the waiting room.

*

The mail boat rumbles to the sound of its engines starting up. Edith leaves her cabin to go up on deck, passing a small boy at play with a peashooter. He ignores his mother's urging to wave goodbye to Papa. Edith finds little boys more interesting than girls, whom she tends to ignore. But there are other sights to watch here, and she leans on the railings, inhaling the smells of sea salt and rot. The quay is thronged with people waving hands, handkerchiefs, hats and newspapers at friends. Their shrieks are good-humoured but indecipherable. Further along on the skyline she sees cranes, along with other vessels at anchor. It's an invigorating scene, an antidote to her weariness after a day dealing with talkative porters and uncongenial waiting rooms.

A flock of seagulls are perched on the railings just along from her, their insouciance making her smile. They hitch a ride until the Hill of Howth recedes to the west, its lighthouse piercing the twilight. Smoke billows from the funnels, a foam wake churns behind. Now the seagulls rise into the air with a few lazy flaps, but instead of turning back to shore they follow the ship, letting rip with their screams.

The city lights began to recede, the evening draws in. Edith considers going below for dinner but lingers still, enjoying the sensation of being on the move again after so long at Drishane. Men with cigars pace the deck. She takes a turn, getting her sea legs. Out of the corner of her eye, she notices one of the stewards watching her. There is an intensity to his observation which puzzles her. When he sees her spot him, he backs away, into a passageway. Just as she is about to challenge him, the boat sways and turns, and a cloud of steam is blown directly into her face. The toxic combination of machinery oil and cooking smells sends a rush of queasiness racing through her. It feels as if her stomach is being driven through her back. She staggers downstairs to her cabin. The vessel pitches and rolls all night long and she skips dinner, spending the crossing in bed with her head beneath her arm.

‘Like a sick hen hiding under its wing,’ says a voice suspiciously like Flurry’s, but when she lifts her head the cabin is empty.

Chapter 13

Charlotte Shaw stands in the doorway of her Ayot St Lawrence home, arms open to embrace her cousin. ‘My dear, it’s wonderful to see your rosy cheeks again. How was the journey? Was it too, too dreadful?’

‘Not for a travel-hardened old warhorse like me, Lottie. Besides, I broke it by staying at Boyle and Mabel’s place in London last night.’

‘Come inside, you dear thing. You must go upstairs and freshen up. Then I want to hear all about home. Every little detail.’

‘You won’t like what I have to say.’

‘Won’t I?’

‘I’m afraid not. Ireland’s changed.’

Charlotte is about to speak, but the chauffeur approaching with luggage changes her mind. ‘Fred, leave Miss Somerville’s bags in the hall, please. Mrs Higgs will take care of them.’

Edith is ushered into a modern, red-bricked villa which was a rectory before the Shaws took possession. It feels distinctly suburban and unlovely to her. She is shown upstairs to her bedroom, where she removes her hat and coat, and pats her hair into shape. En route to the drawing room, she passes a room with its door open, and catches sight of cameras, typewriters, an ancient exercise bicycle and a Bechstein piano. The house is a jumble of paraphernalia.

Charlotte has tea waiting, and she accepts a cup gladly. Knowing her cousin, it will be made from some superior blend – her cousin has always been fond of creature comforts. Edith takes in her surroundings. This room, too, is jammed with furniture and bric-a-brac. What a magpie Lottie has turned out to be. Despite the clutter, it’s an oasis of ease and warmth, cushions and footstools positioned at strategic angles, and the air perfumed by

hyacinths in bowls. Books, books and more books are piled, stacked and shelved everywhere the eye falls, along with magazines, pamphlets and train timetables.

‘Is George away from home?’ Anxiety underpins Edith’s question.

‘No, he’s in his writing hut in the garden. The GBS routine is sacrosanct. But he’ll take a break for a cup of chocolate at four-thirty and you can catch up then.’

Edith sets down her cup and saucer and picks her way to the window. Snowdrops flock in beds beneath the lintel, lawns lie beyond them, while at the bottom of the sloping garden a belt of conifers stand sentinel.

‘What a charming situation, Lottie.’

‘Hertfordshire doesn’t hold a candle to West Cork, but it’s nice enough, in its way.’

‘The garden looks delightful.’

‘Our fruit trees give GBS no end of delight. He risks life and limb on wobbly ladders, picking apples and pears to squirrel away. We have a pigeon cote and beehives, too.’

‘I always thought you were a city person. After you inherited Derry you never actually lived in the house.’

‘Its upkeep cost too much. Those old houses suck your blood and grind your bones.’

‘Not if you love them, Lottie.’

Charlotte flushes at Edith’s reproof. ‘I love Derry. But it makes sense to rent it out. My life is no longer in Ireland.’ She strikes a deliberately jolly tone. ‘You should see GBS and me helping Mr Higgs with the garden – sawing logs, digging, planting, whatever needs doing.’

‘Really? Both of you?’

‘Of course. *Et in Arcadia ego*. We love the quiet noises of the countryside.’

Edith tries and fails to imagine the man she thinks of as the Genius – not entirely admiringly – chopping wood or weeding a gravel path. She hopes Lottie handles the axe because her husband is too clumsy to be allowed near a blade.

Charlotte lifts a framed photo of two girls on horseback off the mantelpiece. ‘Look at us, Edith. We never knew what freedom we had.’

‘Was that taken in Derry?’

‘Yes, long before I changed my name to Shaw. You thought nothing of riding the twelve miles to Rosscarbery, and spending all day roaming with me. How light-hearted we were.’

‘Those were the days.’

‘You always suited a riding habit.’

The Payne-Townshends had lashings of loot compared with the Somervilles – Uncle Horace made a packet on the London Stock Exchange. That girl on horseback beside Edith was known as the heiress of County Cork. Lottie and her sister Sissy had the pick of husbands, thanks to their £4,000 a year apiece. She notices, not entirely kindly, that her cousin has piled on weight since their girlhood – she doesn’t so much sit down as subside into a chair, clotted cream draperies fluttering.

‘How are all your doglings, Edith?’

Now isn’t the time to tell Lottie about Dooley. ‘Inconsolable at being left behind.’

Staccato footsteps announce the arrival of George Bernard Shaw. He has a salty beard, hair that clumps at his jacket collar, and a shirt cuff undone.

‘Darling, it’s only three-thirty!’ says Charlotte.

‘A wise man knows when to obey rules and when to ignore them. I left Saint Joan to her own devices and came up to say hello to Edith.’

He jerks forward to shake her the hand, putting Edith in mind of a grasshopper. From behind his back, with a magician's flourish, he produces a russet apple, bows and presents it. 'For the lady convinced Castletownshend is the apple of some god or other's eye.'

Edith is beguiled, while Charlotte looks indulgent.

'Now, Edith, tell me at once, how's this Treaty going down in Ireland?' asks Shaw.

'There's a sense of bewilderment and unreality in the country.'

'But will Ireland accept it?'

'Not if Mr de Valera can help it. He sets my teeth on edge.'

'Darling,' Charlotte intervenes. 'Don't start a cross-examination the moment you lay eyes on Edith. She hasn't even finished her tea yet.'

'I don't mind, Lottie,' says Edith. 'I hope it's accepted, George. But you never can tell. The people say one thing and think another. The old certainties are gone.'

'And good riddance to them,' says Shaw. 'How things are on the ground?'

While Charlotte rings for his chocolate, Edith updates Shaw, who fidgets with a Staffordshire figure of Shakespeare and listens intently to her litany of landlords shot, houses burned and old county families bailing out.

'Is Derry at risk?' asks Charlotte.

Edith pulls a face. 'Ancient scores are being settled. Murdering our houses is one way of doing it. Why should any of us hope for our own to be saved? Yet we do.'

'Perhaps it's not always murder. Maybe some of the houses are committing suicide,' suggests Shaw.

Edith and Charlotte stare at him.

He gives a twitch. 'The houses have been complicit in the subjugation of the people. They symbolise division.'

They continue to gape.

'Are the people united about self-rule?' asks Shaw.

Edith pulls herself together. ‘They are united by suffering. Ireland’s been in a state of unrest and ferment for so long now.’

‘I really can’t imagine how self-rule would work,’ says Charlotte. ‘The Irish are too excitable, and under the thumbs of their priests. The Catholic farming class all wanted to send a son into the priesthood – that’s their idea of achieving respectability.’

‘Many of our neighbours have given up and left,’ says Edith. ‘If the Sinn Féiners take over, there’s a good chance they’ll do like the Communists in Russia and seize everything. May as well sell up and take what we can get now, they say.’

‘Neighbours?’ Shaw has a puckish glint in his eye. ‘Do you mean the villagers?’

‘Well, no. People like,’ she hesitates. Takes a deep breath. Says it. ‘People like us, I mean. The upper classes.’

‘I was a clerk in Ireland,’ says Shaw. ‘I don’t count as us.’

‘Your people were the right sort,’ says Edith.

‘You mean opportunists?’

Charlotte begins to pat the twist of hair on the back of her head. Edith imagines she must be resigned to her husband’s behaviour.

‘You mustn’t use terms like upper and lower classes,’ continues Shaw. ‘Besides, you’re not the sacred Ascendancy any longer. You’re the Descendancy, incarcerated within your demesne walls. You know that, don’t you?’

‘Would you prefer the clean and dirty classes?’ says Edith.

‘Ah, now we reach the nub of it,’ says Shaw.

‘Water costs nothing.’

‘Heating it does. And washing is an effort. You don’t launder your own clothes, Edith, you might be less particular if you did. Working people are bone weary at the end of the day. You must have faith in your community – throw in your lot with your people. And I don’t mean the gentry. Your class are pterodactyls and have outlived your age.’

‘Whatever I may be, I shall be digging in, not clearing out. The violence has to end sooner or later.’

Charlotte chips in. ‘How on earth do you cope?’

‘Good manners and a sense of breeding – we try to do what our ancestors would expect. A sense of duty, I suppose you’d call it.’

‘I believe the violence isn’t all one way,’ says Shaw. ‘The Black and Tans have done dreadful things, by all accounts.’

Edith sighs. ‘There’s a wildness in the Tans. If they don’t start bad, they soon turn that way. It’s been a trial of strength between the military authorities and the IRA.’

‘But the Government condones what’s been done in Ireland,’ says Shaw. ‘With one side of its mouth, it insisted there were no reprisals. And with the other, it said what an effective deterrent they were. Anyhow, killing and terrorising can’t be justified on the basis of “keeping the peace”.’

Edith nods. He’s put his finger on the crux of the problem.

‘English people don’t know what’s happening in their names,’ says Charlotte.

‘The people are frightened of everyone with a gun, Lottie. Whichever side they’re on,’ says Edith.

‘Fighting solves nothing,’ says Shaw. ‘Pacifism is the only solution. If you don’t know that, you know nothing about history.’

‘You may say I know nothing of history but if I haven’t read it I have lived it – and I can assure you it is very unpleasant,’ says Edith.

‘Will the IRA foot soldiers fight on? Regardless of what the politicians cook up between them?’ asks Shaw.

‘If they think the treaty is unfair, yes. They’ve paid a high price already. Surrender is unthinkable. The Roman Catholic priest in Castletownshend claims St Columcille

prophesised the day would come when men would become scarce and not one would be left to saddle a horse or drive a plough. That day could be closer than we think.’

This silences her hosts. Charlotte brushes cake crumbs from her lap into her hand. ‘We can talk again at dinner. Now, why don’t I leave you two writers alone to discuss literary matters?’ She fires a meaningful look in her husband’s direction.

As soon as they are alone, they settle down to discussing her play, which he tells her has too much padding.

‘A play must be nimble, not bulky, Edith. That’s something you ink slingers in the novel-writing game need to learn. And another thing. A play that’s heavy on Flurrying and light on reality will never do.’

She supposes he has a point. What a strange creature he is, though.

He produces her manuscript, sits beside her and takes her through it, page by page, showing where cuts can be made. They spend more than two hours combing the work. His advice is constructive. She’s unsure how much of it she’ll actually follow – he wants an enormous amount of material cropped, and he really can’t abide Flurry, who’s the play’s focal point – but it’s useful to hear him talk character and staging.

‘Is Flurry your male alter ego?’ Shaw asks at one point. ‘You are inordinately forgiving of him.’

Edith is flummoxed.

‘And another thing,’ he goes on. ‘I don’t know why you’re setting the play in the 1890s. Place it in the present day. More relevance that way.’

Absolutely not, she thinks. Besides, that’s rich coming from a playwright working on Joan of Arc, who lived in the fifteenth century.

*

Edith changes for dinner, wishing there had been time for a rest beforehand – but when Shaw was willing to work with her, she didn't like to lose the opportunity. Back downstairs, Shaw is exactly as she left him, except he's reading the *Economic Journal*. He sets it aside at once and stands up. Why, he's still wearing his tweed jacket and knickerbockers. In small matters and in large, he does not behave *comme il faut*.

'You know what you remind me of, George? My youth.'

'How so?'

'Enthusiasms came more easily.'

'As we grow older, we mustn't forget our youth. It's a lighthouse showing us the way we once wanted to go. I've been thinking about your play. Tell me, is this a first effort for the stage?'

'I've written for amateur productions. Fundraisers, and so forth.'

'Let me guess. Did they have elves in them?'

'One did. "A Fairy Extravaganza: In Three Acts, By Two Flappers" – it raised money for prisoners of war and the hunt's fowl fund.'

'I see. It's not the best apprenticeship for a career on the West End.'

Charlotte appears, dressed for dinner, and scolds her husband for not offering their guest a drink.

'He should be a monk, Edith. No meat, no alcohol, no tobacco. Pour us both a glass of sherry, darling.'

Shaw might as well be a Presbyterian minister, thinks Edith.

'You don't mind a vegetarian dinner, Edith? We never serve meat. But Mrs Higgs is a marvel with her root vegetable casseroles.'

As suddenly as a pea shooting from its pod, Shaw vanishes from the room. Over his shoulder, he calls, 'I forgot to check the scales.'

‘Piano scales?’ asks Edith.

‘Weighing. He likes to check his weight several times a day.’

‘But there isn’t a pick on him.’

‘Exactly. And he wants it to stay that way.’

Edith studies her cousin. Charlotte has an untouched look, like a new candle. She wonders at the compromises which must happen daily to make a success of this unconventional marriage.

Shaw catapults back in. ‘Still eleven stone on the nose.’

‘Marvellous, darling. I wish I had your willpower.’

‘Have your two been gossiping about Ireland’s fuchsia-tasselled hedgerows and featherbed boglands while I’ve been away?’

‘Of course. And sharing our thrice told tales of being the belles of West Carbery. Shall we go through?’

Shaw offers both of them his arm, jeopardising a Sevres shepherdess on a side table.

‘About your play, Edith,’ says Shaw. ‘Once you’ve knocked it into shape, why not send it to Yeats and Lady Gregory? For the Abbey?’

‘Mr Yeats and Augusta have an obsession with the ancient heroic ways. I don’t want to be part of that fakery.’

To her surprise, instead of challenging her, she spies an answering tweak of the lips.

In the dining room, the table is laid with a spotless damask cloth and well-polished silver and crystal. A Victorian epergne crammed with out-of-season fruits squats in the centre. The meal is entirely without taste – parsnips, potatoes and onions stewed into a gloop. Peasant food. Wholesome, of course, Edith concedes that. At least the wine is excellent, although Shaw sticks to barley water which he tells her is made to his specification by Mrs Higgs.

‘It’s too bad there are only three of us, not enough for a rubber of bridge after dinner,’ says Charlotte. ‘I should have invited some people over.’

Edith is glad she didn’t. This is a working weekend.

Dessert is strawberries in syrup, bottled by the couple the previous summer, as Lottie tediously describes. Whenever she tells a story, Edith’s mind invariably wanders.

Fortunately, Shaw cuts in and quizzes Edith on spiritualism.

‘It helps me to navigate my life.’

‘Sounds like tomfoolery. And worse. The vulnerable and recently bereaved are exploited.’

‘I’m not the exploitable type.’

‘I’d like to try automatic writing,’ says Charlotte.

‘A parlour game for the susceptible,’ says Shaw.

It occurs to Edith that he’s playing with her, as a cat amuses itself with a mouse.

Mischievous, she pivots to her cousin. ‘We can try some automatic writing after dinner if you like, Lottie. Would you care to join us, George?’

‘Certainly not. It’s the unconscious mind at work. And of my own unconscious, I am – naturally – unconscious. That’s the way I prefer it.’

‘Do you really speak to the dead, Edith?’ asks Charlotte.

‘The so-called dead. Of course I do.’

‘The messages are part of a repressed personality,’ says Shaw.

‘Then perhaps useful for self-discovery, darling?’

‘If you were drunk would you say it was the real you emerging? How can a trance be any more true? It’s self-delusion. Utter poppy cock.’

‘Darling, you’re being dreadfully cranky.’

‘Having now reached the age of Methuselah, I’m entitled to be cranky. But I am a mere man, what do I know of any afterlife?’

Edith happens to know she is six months younger than Shaw.

‘I shall turn in and read over some notes on Joan of Arc’s trial,’ Shaw continues.

‘Good night, ladies. Don’t let me stop you playing with ghosts. Though on your own heads be it.’

Chapter 14

Shaw's departure sucks all the energy from the room. Edith and Charlotte have a stab at automatic writing but make no progress. Privately, Edith thinks Shaw has put his evil eye on it. If he'd wanted to commune with the spirit world, they'd have been table-tapping into the wee small hours. 'Sometimes it just doesn't work,' Edith tells her disappointed cousin. They decide on an early night.

The next morning, Edith reworks her play, and over lunch picks Shaw's brains for theatrical contacts. He tells her on no account should the play be submitted before it's ready.

'Take me, Edith. I've been thinking and reading about Joan of Arc since her canonisation the year before last. I hope I'll be able to translate my French peasant girl to the stage but there are no guarantees. The Maid continues to resist me. Better no play than a shoddy one. Remember that.'

'The hotter the work the sooner the finish,' says Edith. 'Or so our housemaid Philomena insists.'

'Once, the English might have liked that little gem,' says Shaw. 'Not now. We're in their black books.'

'But Flurry is loved. Isn't he Lottie?'

'Of course he is, Edith. But GBS does have a point,' says Charlotte.

Shaw fixes his eyes on Edith, who has a sense of being under a microscope.

'*Was* loved,' he says. 'But times change. Keep up or be left behind. With theatre, the subject must have relevance and I don't see how Flurry Knox fits that requirement.'

'You're working on a play about Joan of Arc. How is she relevant?'

'The Maid is the queerest fish. We've all been quite wrong about her, myself included. I once thought her a half-witted genius, like Admiral Nelson, but now I realise

she was gifted with exceptional sanity. She may have been a Roman Catholic but if you ask me she was the first Protestant martyr.'

'I don't see how Protestant martyrs are relevant,' Edith persists.

'When the world is upside down, as it is now, martyrs appear sane. And people believe they can help us,' says Shaw.

'Really?'

'If they make us think, and question things, yes. But your Flurry isn't capable of making anybody think. He's a wastrel.'

'My Flurry has a good heart.'

'Your Flurry is heartless, Edith. But worse than that, he's something absolutely unforgivable for any character on a stage. Flurry Knox is simply not believable.'

*

In the afternoon, they climb into what Shaw calls his "Henry" – although it's not a Ford but an AC coupé, he tells Edith. Shaw is in the driver's seat, his chauffeur beside him, with Edith and Charlotte in the back. Shaw pings on some goggles.

'How do I look, ladies?'

'A veritable Beau Brummell,' says Edith.

He chortles, and lets out the clutch abruptly, causing the motorcar to judder.

Edith winces.

'What is it?' asks Charlotte, from under her fashionably squashy hat.

'Nothing,' says Edith.

'Perhaps you're cold. Here, share my rug.' Charlotte tucks her in, and Edith is obliged to suffer the fussing and patting.

The motorcar continues to shake.

‘Fred, I think some nuts on the wheels need tightening,’ says Shaw. ‘Something feels not quite right here.’ His foot is pressed on the accelerator, roaring the engine.

‘You need to let off the brake, sir.’

‘Excellent suggestion.’

Shaw releases the brake and the motorcar kangaroos along the driveway.

Edith can’t hide her grimace.

‘Are you in pain, Edith?’ asks Charlotte.

‘A bit of arthritis. In the hip and leg, from riding side-saddle since I was four. All pleasures must be paid for sooner or later.’

‘Poor thing. Have a *marron glacé*.’ Charlotte produces a box of sweets and unties the ribbon. As soon as Edith has helped herself, Charlotte leans forward to Shaw. ‘*Marron glacé* darling? I can stretch around and pop one in your mouth.’

‘Not now, beloved. I’m concentrating.’

‘Easy on the accelerator,’ says Day. ‘You need to take the gate slow, sir.’

Shaw’s speed doesn’t alter. He shoots through the gate, scraping against one of the posts, and bursts onto the laneway.

‘We’re doing twenty miles an hour now,’ Shaw calls over his shoulder. ‘Look at the speedometer!’

‘Both hands on the wheel please, sir,’ says Day.

‘Marvellous, darling. But don’t go any faster, will you?’ cries Charlotte.

Edith peers out at barns and farm gates flashing past. Two ramblers with haversacks tramp across a path between fields.

‘I’m always terrified he’ll take a spill,’ confides Charlotte. ‘He’s such a daredevil. But at least a motorcar can’t topple onto you, unlike a motorcycle. He has one of those, too. GBS is obsessed with modern gadgets. He makes me feel like Rip Van Winkle’s mother.’

By now, they are in the village, passing timber frame houses. Shaw sounds his horn and waves at everyone they pass. Some wave back or call out greetings swallowed up by the thunder of the engine. The majority scuttle away, dragging their children and pets with them. Edith spies a general provisions' shop, some scattered houses which remind her of fondant creams, a couple of church spires and a sprawling, half-timbered inn called the Brocket Arms.

'The inn was a stopping-off point for pilgrims on their way to St Albans Abbey,' says Charlotte. 'It's said to be haunted by a monk who hanged himself there. Or was he murdered?'

They're through the village now. Edith tents her forehead with one hand, trying to take another look at The Brocket Arms, fast disappearing into the distance.

Charlotte leans forward and taps Shaw on the shoulder. 'Darling, did the monk commit suicide or was he done away with?'

'What's that?' Shaw turns his head.

Day grabs the wheel.

'Never mind, we can talk about it later,' shouts Charlotte. She addresses Edith. 'There's not much to Ayot St Lawrence. GBS says the last thing of note to happen here was the Norman invasion. But we like it. We've put down roots.'

They continue for five miles along narrow country lanes, as far as the small town of Harpenden, where they park and stretch their legs with a riverside walk. Edith notices how orderly everything is: English towns are so spick and span. She watches a family of swans on the water, only half-listening while Shaw and Charlotte debate whether or not to take tea. He says it supports local business, while she has reservations about the cleanliness of the teashop he's recommending. Shaw gives way and they return to where motorcar and chauffeur are waiting, Day sitting on the running board. At their approach, he pinches off the tip of his cigarette and puts the remainder in his pocket.

‘I’m glad to see he’s not smoking in the motorcar,’ says Charlotte.

‘Fred Day knows better. I’ve explained about your weak chest,’ says Shaw.

‘Why don’t you let him drive us home, darling?’

‘My dear, I’ve been deprived of Mrs Percy’s Battenberg cake, you surely wouldn’t deprive me of the joys of driving, too?’ With Day holding the door open, he hands his wife into the backseat.

Day goes around the side of the vehicle to open the other door for Edith.

‘Darling,’ whispers Charlotte, ‘it’s silly to keep a dog and bark yourself. You’ll do Fred out of a job. Let him drive.’

Shaw refuses to lower his voice. ‘There’s no danger of that. Mr Day can do all sorts of things I can’t, like fiddle with leads and things under the bonnet. No, I believe I’ll drive back. I find it relaxing.’ He produces his goggles and snaps them over his face.

The drive home is uneventful, until Shaw insists on showing Edith how he can reverse into the driveway.

‘Shall I hop out and guide you, sir?’ offers Day.

‘Not necessary,’ says Shaw.

‘Why not let him give you directions, darling?’ cries Charlotte. ‘The light’s beginning to fade.’

‘Oh, very well,’ says Shaw.

Both Day and Charlotte vacate the motorcar, followed by Edith, who only realises she ought to when Charlotte pops her eyes at her.

Shaw screeches through the gears searching for reverse.

‘Easy, sir. Don’t forget the clutch. This way, sir. Left. No, left!’ calls Day.

Despite Day’s best efforts, his employer flies back and demolishes a flowerbed.

Everyone is somewhat shaken, but Shaw hobbles on his way back indoors.

‘Darling, have you hurt your leg?’ asks Charlotte.

‘Yes. And the worst of it is, it’s my favourite leg.’

*

Over dinner, Shaw talks about his admiration for the Soviets.

Edith weighs in. ‘If you lived in Russia you’d be muzzled like a dog or put up against a wall and shot. Unlike the authorities here, they don’t allow you to be critical of the state,’ she says.

‘You like to see yourself as advanced and freethinking but you don’t have an idea in your head that your grandmamma didn’t have,’ says Shaw.

He’s nettled. Edith twists Martin’s claddagh on her ring finger, taking Shaw’s criticism as a triumph – it’s not easy to score a point off him.

Charlotte intervenes. ‘Edith, what was that you were saying in the motorcar about your literary agent?’

‘You see how my wife saves me from myself?’ says Shaw.

‘You know him, darling,’ Charlotte tells her husband. ‘Mr Pinker. He represented you in the past.’

‘Course I know him,’ says Shaw. ‘Gets his hands on most of us, sooner or later. Persuasive chap.’

‘He takes ten per cent I can ill afford,’ says Edith.

‘He knows what sells. And I dare say he could pinkerise your play for you, if you gave him a free hand.’

‘I think that would be most unwise.’

‘Pinker knows his business. If I were you, I’d follow his advice.’

Edith shakes her head. ‘My friend Doctor Smyth, Dame Ethel Smyth I should say, believes I ought to part company with him.’

‘Ah yes,’ says Shaw. ‘The stage front woman with the demented hat. A person of forceful opinions. Shared at least a dozen with me in the space of half an hour. Expresses herself well. But she’s a composer. What does she know about literary agents?’

Edith hesitates. He has a point. But the sight of Shaw stroking his goatee beard, mischief blistering from every feature, stiffens her backbone. ‘I’m inclined to take her advice. I have an appointment with Mr Pinker on Tuesday in London.’

‘Pinker may dig in his heels and refuse to let you go,’ warns Shaw.

‘Oh, I do hope not. It would be an unfortunate end to things. We’ve worked together since the 1890s, when all’s said and done. But I’m not getting any younger and running Drishane isn’t getting any cheaper.’

‘Presumably you’re under contract to the agency?’ says Shaw.

‘Well, yes, but *Flurry’s Wedding* is new work, because it’s for the theatre.’

‘He might argue, with some justification, that it’s adapted from existing work. So you may find you’re still under contract.’

This isn’t what Edith wants to hear. ‘Mr Pinker has dropped hints about retiring and passing on the business to one of his wastrel sons. I don’t see why I should be handed over. I’m not a parcel.’

‘Again, it depends on your contract,’ says Shaw.

A clock chimes. He bolts off to weigh himself.

During his absence, Charlotte confides, ‘She has a flop on you, you know.’

‘Who?’

‘Ethel Smyth.’

‘We’re friends,’ says Edith. ‘Just good friends.’

‘A huge flop. Plain as the nose on your face. Why would you take advice from someone with a flop on you?’

From outside comes the hiss of sudden rain. Edith avoids answering by talking about the weather.

After she turns in for the night, she finds herself unable to sleep. The dawn chorus is limbering up before she nods off.

*

On the morning of her departure, Shaw pays her the compliment of inviting her to see his writing hut in a leafy nook at the bottom of the garden. It's a revolving hut built on a turntable, an innovation he is ridiculously proud of.

'I just set my shoulder to the side and give it a push every now and again, and around we spin. We follow the sun, my hut and me. It reduces the need for artificial lighting, and keeps the place warm. Sunshine keeps us hale, hearty and happy. What you see before you, Edith, is a simple but effective health measure.' He points to the shed's furniture: a wicker chair, table with flap and narrow bed. 'In case I need to take a catnap.'

'So this is where those successful plays are dreamed into being,' says Edith.

'Some are more successful than others. Everyone has their disappointments.' He hesitates. 'I know I've picked your play to pieces from start to finish. I hope it hasn't been hurtful.'

'I'm not easily hurt and I make it a policy never to bear grudges.'

'I have an urge to improve people. Charlotte says I should have been a missionary.'

'Perhaps if you weren't an artist you'd have been a reformer. Is there anything you miss about Ireland, George?'

'I miss everything about it. But I can't live there. I'm amazed you stick the place.'

'It's my home.'

Chapter 15

Stations flit past on the Piccadilly line of the London Underground. Edith reads the stops, each one bringing her closer to the moment when she must pin her courage to the sticking-place. Mr Pinker suggested taking her to lunch but she declined, although it would be easier to deliver the *coup de grace* in a public place. After more than twenty-five years of doing business together, she must give him the opportunity to say his piece. The escalator at Covent Garden raises her towards street level, past advertisements for Mecca cigarettes, pocket-sized moustache combs and ready-to-wear frocks suitable for all occasions available at Debenham & Peabody. Clustered outside the Underground entrance are flower-sellers. Normally she would linger over their cheerful parade, but she bypasses them, steering towards Trafalgar Square. The National Portrait Gallery is an old friend on the right, while St Paul's Dome rises ahead, effortless as birdsong.

She pushes on for the Strand, along pavements fretful with people, trying to ignore the throbbing in her leg, and arrives at Arundel Street. A flight of granite steps leads up to number nine, Talbot House. The swinging doors rotate and a slight woman in a neat-fitting jacket and skirt emerges. She has a face that would fit into a teacup. For a heartbeat, Edith imagines it's Martin. Every time they entered this building together, they pinched one another because they were successful authors. But when they draw level, she sees the woman is decades younger, and her eyes are not as fine as Martin's.

In a marble hall, Edith is faced with the option of lift or staircase. 'Third floor,' she tells the lift operator, and exits onto a corridor where typewriters clatter from behind closed doors. This building is an ants' nest of industry. She reaches an opaque door.

James Brand Pinker

Literary and Dramatic Agent

Since when was he a dramatic agent?

Two women are working inside, one at her typewriter and the other attempting to put some order on a leaning tower of manuscripts. *Ulysses* by James Joyce is printed on the top manuscript. Hildegard sent her an extract the previous year, published in some magazine or other. She saw, she sipped, she shuddered. Tasteless, puzzling and anarchic. It reads as if scratched out by a semi-literate working man. *Ulysses* deserves to sink without a trace. Boney, on the other hand, lauds Joyce as a genius and window-breaker. 'He lets in the fresh air,' she told Edith.

Both secretaries have cropped hair and trailing strings of pearls. They address her respectfully as Miss Somerville, recognising her before Edith introduces herself, which is gratifying. The older of the two invites her to take a seat while she alerts Mr Pinker to her arrival. He's on a transatlantic call but she's certain he'll be with her as soon as possible. A blue and white tea service sits on a lacquered side-table and the second secretary offers her refreshment, which she declines. Edith does, however, consent to flick through a magazine.

Mr Pinker emerges from his office, slight, rosy, bespectacled and cleanshaven, and bows over her hand. Amid the bustle of welcomes, he ushers her into his office and settles her into a Chippendale chair, beneath an electric chandelier lit up already on this wintry day. As ever, she is struck by the gentleman's club atmosphere of his office. Pinker is dapper in a mustard-and-pink polka dotted bowtie (only a caddish or underbred person would wear such a creation, thinks Edith). He sits opposite her rather than return to his carved oak desk, reminisces about West Cork, and extends courtesies from Mrs Pinker. Edith notices his face is flushed and his voice, always somewhat hoarse, is wheezing.

'As you know, I've written a play, Mr Pinker.'

'Naturally I'll do what I can for you, Miss Somerville. Do you have it with you?'

'I'm afraid not. You see, I'd like to try placing it myself.'

His smile doesn't falter. 'Is that wise? My job is to spare you creative people the trouble of haggling and bargaining. Leave you free to direct your genius to your craft.'

‘We can’t always afford the luxury of being employers, Mr Pinker.’

‘What price peace of mind?’

‘I must put my cards on the table. I’m not ungrateful for your efforts on our behalf – quite the reverse. But the fact is, my income from writing is declining.’

‘Tastes change, alas.’

‘I simply can’t afford your commission. I have expenses to meet.’

‘We can talk about money another time, Miss Somerville. Why don’t I read your play first? Is it ready for submission?’

‘I certainly hope so. I’ve worked most awfully hard on it.’

‘Excellent. Well then, the best thing is for me to take a look at it and see what we can do. The theatrical realm is unpredictable. So many projects come to nothing there. They begin with high hopes, but the march of events intervene.’

‘I’m optimistic about my play’s prospects, Mr Pinker.’

‘As am I, Miss Somerville. As am I. But the theatre world is a jungle. I wouldn’t like to think of you venturing into it without my guidance.’

‘I’m not aware you have any experience of the theatre, Mr Pinker. Your forté is placing novels and short stories.’

‘On the contrary, dear lady. One of my authors, Arnold Bennett, has adapted the script for the biggest box office smash in London currently. *The Beggar’s Opera*. It’s been running since 1920 and still no sign of the public losing interest.’

Pinker’s voice has always been whispery, but now it seems to be emanating from deep in his throat. Is he unwell? He seems most unlike himself. Fidgety and on edge.

He continues, ‘Nigel Playfair – he’s the manager of the Lyric – has struck gold. Naturally I dealt with Mr Playfair on Mr Bennett’s behalf. I could have a word with Mr Playfair about your play. Arrange a luncheon for the three of us. All managers like to be courted a little. But first, I should cast an eye over the play.’

Edith vacillates. Pinker has always been adept at spotting opportunities. But if she shows her play to him, it commits her to a business arrangement.

Pinker watches her carefully. ‘Have you met Mr Bennett? An energetic man. Almost as industrious as yourself. He reposes a great deal of confidence in me.’

‘We’ve nodded at one another.’

‘I choose my authors with care. I hope I’ve never disappointed their confidence in me.’

Edith wishes he wouldn’t witter on about Arnold Bennett – probably, she thinks sourly, he’s made a mint from him.

All of a sudden, Pinker’s face turns ruddy and he fingers his collar. ‘Excuse me while I open a window. It’s stuffy in here.’

Traffic sounds float in – horns, wheels, horse hooves. He leans forward and inhales the grubby air.

When he resumes his seat, perspiration beads his hairline and he mops at it with a handkerchief. ‘Now, where were we, Miss Somerville? Ah yes, your play. Is it a musical?’

‘No, it’s a play.’

‘Musicals are enormously popular with the public. You mustn’t think they’re lowbrow. *The Beggar’s Opera* is a case in point. Mr Bennett says it’s a forgotten masterpiece.’

‘I must try for tickets.’

‘Mrs Pinker and I went to the opening night. Most amusing.’

‘Is that the one about a pirate?’

‘No, a highwayman, Macheath, in a scarlet coat and long curling wig. Mrs Pinker was very taken by him. The Lyric is an intimate little venue, of course, but I believe it’s full most nights.’

‘Doesn’t sound particularly amusing.’

He scrubs at the back of his neck with his handkerchief. ‘Ah, but it is. What did you say your play was about?’

‘Flurry Knox steals a horse from his grandmother. Major Yeates is embroiled by accident.’

‘Readers are fond of that scallywag of yours. But I should warn you, these past years have left us a little out of sorts with our friends in Ireland.’

‘Ireland is my inspiration. I draw my best material from there.’

‘I suppose as long as it has plenty of intrigue, we can drum up interest. The West End enjoys action and adventure.’

She notices his handkerchief is sodden. He must be perspiring heavily. ‘I’m afraid, Mr Pinker, I’m not here about placing *Flurry’s Wedding*, but to explain I can’t afford to retain your services.’

‘A wedding – now that might fly.’ His speech speeds into a staccato burst. ‘Is there plenty of spectacle in it? A matched pair of white horses with plumes on their heads leading the wedding carriage, and so forth?’

‘There *is* a horse but I presumed it would be a mechanical animal. I say, Mr Pinker, are you quite well? You look a little warm.’

‘It does feel close. With your permission.’ He unbuttons his waistcoat jacket. ‘You see, audiences must have spectacle. They’ve become accustomed to real swans swimming about on stage, monkeys dressed up as pages and what not. Mrs Pinker and I saw some...some cowboys. From the American, ah, West. Spin...spinning ropes.’

‘I don’t believe I’d care for specialty acts. That’s not the audience I’m writing for.’

‘Excuse me. Some water. My desk.’ He stands, misses his footing, catches at the chair back.

Edith is by his side in an instant. ‘Mr Pinker, do sit down. Let me fetch your water.’

He slumps in his seat, the heel of his hand pressed against his sternum. His face reminds Edith of a broken doll. But he rouses himself to take the brackish London water from her, finds an enamelled pill box in his waistcoat pocket and taps out two white discs.

‘Shall I call one of your assistants, Mr Pinker?’

He shakes his head. ‘Thank you, no tell you the truth ... little under par.’

‘You do look careworn.’

He finishes the water and recovers somewhat. ‘Mrs Pinker says I, ah, I fatigue myself. On my authors’ behalf.’ He mops at his face and neck again. ‘But my interest goes beyond the financial. I care about my authors, Miss Somerville. I want your talents fully recognised.’

Edith can’t decide if he’s intentionally trying to make her feel guilty. Deliberate or not, it’s working. ‘Couldn’t you manage a holiday? The winter can be tedious.’

‘Not at the moment. I’m obliged to travel to New York to handle a business matter. Frankly –’ His eyes dart around the room. He lifts a magazine from a side table, and fans himself. ‘Yes, truth be told, I’m dreading the journey. But I can’t postpone it. Time and tide wait for no man.’

‘Shouldn’t you ask your doctor’s advice before undertaking such a long voyage?’

‘Doctor advises against it. But as you know, my son Eric is running our American office, and the silly boy has got himself into a spot of bother. Needs his dad to untangle things.’

‘I hope it’s nothing serious, Mr Pinker.’

He hauls himself to his feet, knocking over the glass, which shivers into fragments. She bends to lift some of the largest splinters.

‘I beg you not to, Miss Somerville. Miss Baker will take care of it.’ Skin clammy, he shakes her by the hand. His smile is as cheerful as a corpse’s. ‘Send over your Flurry Knox play and we’ll put our heads together and see what we can do with it.’

‘I don’t think –’

He cuts her off. ‘Been wonderful to catch up with you, Miss Somerville. Meeting you brings back Miss Martin to me. Such a loss to literature.’

‘It’s a poor thing to outlive one’s friends. Don’t see me out, Mr Pinker, I can find my own way.’

*

Edith weaves back along the Strand, past the Savoy hotel, without having accomplished her mission. Mr Pinker simply wouldn’t listen. There’s no help for it, she must dispense with his services in writing. Perhaps she should hold off until she has a bird in the hand. She purges her guilt by remembering his admission about his son. That clueless young man has been up to something shady, if she’s not mistaken. He has educated his boys to be gentlemen but blood will out. Mr Pinker’s father was an East End barrow-boy.

*

Edith consults with Boney, who saw *The Beggar’s Opera* a year ago and pronounced it a rattling good evening. She doesn’t need Pinker to act as go-between, she decides, and composes a letter to Nigel Playfair, manager-director at the Lyric. The missive emphasises her connection with Shaw. ‘You’re laying it on thick,’ hisses her conscience. ‘Contacts must be harvested,’ whispers another voice. Martin’s?

Dear Mr Playfair,

Forgive this direct approach from one who has admired your work for years. My close friend and relative Mr George Bernard recommends that I offer you first refusal on

my new play. He says it's ideal for the Lyric. Might I hand over Flurry's Wedding to you personally? I'll be attending The Beggar's Opera on Thursday night and it would be a convenience to do it then. Yours will be the first eyes, apart from Mr Shaw's, to see my play, which is inspired by the Irish R.M. stories I wrote with Martin Ross.

I'm very much looking forward to seeing your revival – I hear it's the toast of London. It has been remiss of me not to attend a performance sooner but I am only an Irish country mouse. However, as soon as I knew I had business in the city I made haste to purchase tickets.

Yours sincerely,

Edith Oenone Somerville

The following day he writes back, inviting her to have a glass of wine with him half an hour before curtain-up.

*

Nigel Playfair looks like a cross between a bishop and a butler, although one with bulky objects jammed into his dinner jacket pockets. Apart from a blazing fire behind a metal guard, a threadbare Turkey carpet is the only concession to comfort in his office. He is courteous and deferential, pouring her a glass of decent Burgundy and conversing in a voice capable of wooing the world. She remembers he was a successful actor before becoming a manager, and still accepts character roles.

‘Your Irish R.M. stories are classics, Miss Somerville. My nephew told me they were sent out to our boys in the trenches and helped to pass some difficult times.’

‘Did he come home?’

‘Left a hand behind at Ypres – but the rest of him came back. The Great War took many men. Sad days. It’s our duty to distract the public from those unhappy memories. I look forward to reading your play. Is it your first?’

She removes the manuscript from her leather satchel and sets it on the low table beside them. ‘Not entirely. I have adapted work in Ireland for the stage.’

‘The Abbey?’

‘No, for local productions in County Cork. Charity fundraisers. Humble little affairs, but popular. This is my first professional play.’

A flicker of doubt glances off his horn-rimmed spectacles. ‘We’re looking for something with bite to take the place of our ballad-opera when it runs its course. Something for my artistic team to sprinkle their fairy dust over. I don’t mind so much about the critics – *The Beggar’s Opera* had cool notices in the early days. No play is critic-proof, of course. But I had faith in it. And I was justified.’

‘My play is *pour-rire*. People need license to laugh.’

‘Indeed. Well, I’ll read it as soon as I possibly can.’ He lifts it, juggling his hand as though weighing the manuscript. ‘Feels a little thick.’

‘I cut it down considerably, with Mr Shaw’s assistance. Naturally, I’d be happy to effect more cuts, as necessary.’

His jowly face clears. ‘Mr Shaw – keeper of the public conscience. Still, if Mr Shaw had a hand in this, it will be a treat to read.’ Hastily, he tacks on, ‘And, of course, the same applies to anything from the pen of your good self.’ The first curtain bell rings and he stands. ‘Duty calls, dear lady. You have tickets for tonight’s performance?’

‘In the stalls. I’m accompanied by the wife of my brother, Admiral Somerville. She’s waiting for me in the foyer.’

‘Permit me to swap your tickets for my personal box. You’ll be more comfortable.’

‘Too kind, thank you.’

By now, Playfair has his fob watch in his hand, checking the time. He guides her to the corridor outside his office, beckons to a junior stage manager, and instructs him to take good care of Miss Somerville and her guest. Another staff member approaches Playfair and complains about some missing props.

Quickly, Edith asks, ‘When might I hope to hear back from you, Mr Playfair?’

‘I could promise you the sun, moon and gingerbread, Miss Somerville. But whether I could deliver them is another matter. The best I can say is that I’ll read it at my earliest opportunity.’

*

Edith and Mabel Somerville are transported. Light massed into a single beam is trained on the dashing Macheath’s face. He is pleading with Lucy Lockit, the turnkey’s daughter, a young woman whose virtue he stole before abandoning her and their unborn baby. The highwayman needs her help to escape from Newgate Gaol or he’ll dance at the end of a noose. Edith has to acknowledge that visually, the show is daring and innovative, while the fusion of song, dance and drama is a crowd-pleaser. She has never seen anything to compare with the pared-back simplicity used to recreate Georgian London in all its glamour and squalor – there are scarcely any scene changes.

When the final curtain falls, Edith and her sister-in-law wait for the crowd to thin out before leaving the box. Engrossed in possible stage sets for *Flurry’s Wedding*, she lends only half an ear to Mabel’s prattle about the daisy-fresh appeal of Polly Peachum’s pink and green gown. On the street, she recalls her leather satchel left under the seat, and hurries back into the almost-empty theatre. She finds it where she left it, in Nigel Playfair’s box.

‘Wouldn’t do to lose that.’

Edith whips around. It’s Flurry Knox, lounging in the doorway.

‘It’s empty. Mr Playfair has my play on his desk.’

‘Don’t you mean *my* play? Whose name is on it?’

‘You’re the inspiration, you silly boy, not the author. What are you doing, frivolling around London?’

‘Taking a look at the place. So this is the theatre where you’re planning on making a fortune from me. It’s on the small side.’

‘If it’s a hit, we can transfer to a bigger theatre.’

‘If you were going to start small and build, you could have begun in Dublin.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Flurry. Success in Dublin doesn’t count. It’s London that matters.’

Chapter 16

While she's waiting for news from Nigel Playfair, Edith takes a run down to Surrey to spend a night at Ethel Smyth's house. It's only half an hour from Waterloo Station, but when she steps out at Woking it feels like an entirely different corner of England. Through a swirl of steam on the railway platform, Boney's face emerges.

'All hail the dame!' Edith performs a mock curtsy.

'I've ordered new calling cards. I'm furious they haven't arrived yet. Come on, I have a hansom waiting outside for us.' She links arms with Edith and stumps her towards a bay horse with protruding ribs. 'It's not everyone I'd cut short rehearsals for. I'm conducting the Woking Choral Society Choir. We have a performance in two weeks and they aren't ready yet. Not by a long chalk. The only thing they've learned properly is my *Hey Nonny No*. Hardly surprising when it's head and shoulders above everything else in the programme.' She addresses herself to a burly cabbie, pudding rolls at the back of his neck. 'We're ready to go now. Hook Heath. No luggage. I hope you did as I told you and gave that horse a drink of water.'

'He's better fed and watered than me, missis. Can you hop up under your own steam or do you need a hand?'

'We can manage.' Boney rolls her eyes at Edith.

They heave themselves into the cab and Boney raps on the roof with her knuckles.

'Walk on,' calls the cabbie.

'There was no need to meet me,' says Edith. 'I could have found my own way to the house.'

'Of course, you could. But I didn't want to miss a minute of your visit. What news of *Flurry's Wedding*?'

'It's with Nigel Playfair of the Lyric.'

‘He’ll snap it up if he’s any sense.’

‘I shouldn’t count my chickens before they’re hatched. But he was most encouraging.’

‘He knows what’s what. I’m glad you sacked little Pinker and took charge yourself. A writer of your stature needs no agent. Your name is your entrée.’

Edith is ashamed to admit she hasn’t exactly parted company with her agent – although neither did she send her play to his office,. ‘He was about to go to New York when I saw him. Some difficulty or other involving his son.’

‘A Pinker pup!’ Boney screeches.

Edith winces. She sounds like a Skibbereen apple woman. Then she remembers Ethel Smyth cutting short rehearsals to collect her. ‘In fact, there are two Pinker pups.’

‘Hah! Have they inherited his wee, upturned nose and shiny button eyes?’

For some reason, the image sets them off squawking, and Boney becomes so helpless with laughter that she has to rest her head on Edith’s shoulder.

‘We’re like bacon and eggs, the way we fit together, Edith!’

They pass Woking Golf Club and arrive at her house. Boney pays off the cabbie and together they push past gorse bushes to reach the front gate. Coign is a rambling, mock Tudor cottage. A bench rests beneath the drawing room window, for visitors to miss none of Ethel Smyth’s virtuoso assaults on the piano when they take the air. Climbing roses bushes are trained along the walls. To the casual eye, the house has stood there for centuries. But Edith is aware that an American patron of the arts, Mary Dodge, gave Boney the money to buy a plot and build on it ten or twelve years ago. She chose the location for its convenience to the golf club.

The interior walls are white and rough cast, while none of the furniture cost more than a pound or two. Even so, Edith is surprised anew by how comfortable the set-up is. The housekeeper, a Sphinx with straw-coloured hair, as economical with words as Ethel

Smyth is effusive, appears in the hall when she hears Ethel's key in the lock and waits silently.

'Breaded veal cutlets for lunch,' announces Boney. 'When will they ready, Sadie?'

'At one, mum.'

'Excellent. Time for a pre-prandial first.' She leads Edith into the sitting room, where she tries to persuade her to take a glass of Sambuca.

'It's a digestif, Ethel!' protests Edith. 'I'll have to go for a siesta if I start drinking liqueurs at this time of day.'

'Ah, what's time? I ordered it from the wine merchant in memory of our trip to Sicily.'

'A mouse trotted across my pillow in Taormina.'

'You turned it over and went right back to sleep. Nothing fazes you, divine creature. Now, how about a small glass?'

Edith is obliged to consent, although she doesn't finish it.

Lunch is devoted to Ethel Smyth's account of her investiture at Buckingham Palace, including what the King said to her and, more importantly, she said to the King. Beside her place setting rests a shoebox containing congratulatory telegrams, which she insists on reading aloud one by one.

As soon as decency permits, Edith makes a suggestion. 'How about stretching our legs?' The outdoors dilutes Boney's turbulent presence. 'I haven't had a proper walk in days.'

They stroll along the perimeter of the golf course, Edith keeping an eye out for flying balls, her hostess in full flow about the club's attractions.

'Golf is the most stupendous exercise,' says Boney. 'It's exhilarating.' She rolls the r sumptuously. 'You should try it.'

Edith's mouth turns down.

Boney holds up her hands in surrender. 'It's not for everyone, I accept.'

It's a relief to Edith to be led into the clubhouse. Inside, Boney orders a pot of tea and plate of shortbread, but almost immediately a member engages her in conversation about caddies. Left to her own devices, Edith flicks through some newspapers on the table next to them.

In the *Daily Mail*, a headline on page five catches her eye.

Literary Agent's Death

The esteemed literary agent Mr James Brand Pinker has died of influenza in New York leaving a widow and two sons. Among the authors he represented were Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy and Compton Mackenzie.

She tries to catch Boney's eye, but her friend is holding court.

'Never lost a golf ball...utter carelessness...insist on my caddy hunting for it.'

Edith returns to the newspaper and reads through half a column about the unexpected nature of Pinker's death and how doctors were unable to save him. The report continues:

Mr Pinker was a shrewd judge of what the public enjoyed reading. He could spot a bestseller quickly. From modest beginnings in east London, he became a clerk and later a newspaper journalist before setting up his agency in 1896. He spent the past quarter of a century in the service of some seventy-five authors, including stars in the literary firmament.

No mention of Somerville and Ross. Edith feels aggrieved.

He always made a special point of helping young authors in the early stages of their career, when they most needed the aid of an advisor with a thorough knowledge of the literary world and publishing trade. His sons Eric and Ralph Pinker will continue the family business in London and New York.

Edith sets down the newspaper. Now she won't be obliged to have a confrontation with Pinker. Her relief is followed by a prickle of shame. She must write to Mrs Pinker.

Perhaps a floral wreath, too. Does she have their home address? Her forehead puckers. The Pinkers leased a country house in Reigate. What's it called? Bury's Court, she's almost certain of it. She'll send flowers there. Martin stayed a night or two with them once, it must be a decade ago. Tasteless furnishings, she reported back. But opulent. 'He certainly feathered his nest,' according to Martin. Pinker married money.

A crash of chair legs as Boney sits beside her. 'Is anything the matter, Edith?'

She points to the headline.

'By George, what's a stroke of luck! It means he can't interfere with your Playfair contract. The timing is perfect!'

That expression of Edith's inner thoughts shames her. 'In fairness, Boney, he negotiated some excellent deals in his day for us.'

'His deal-making days are behind him now.'

*

The next afternoon, Boney travels to London with Edith. She'll stay at her usual quarters, a hotel in Lincoln's Inn. Meanwhile, Edith is returning to Boyle and Mabel's place in Chelsea.

During the train journey, Boney slaps the palms of her hands against her knees. 'I say, let's you and me go to Hammersmith and see Playfair. Insist he make an immediate decision about your play.'

'Stand down your war chariot, Boney. He's hasn't had it a week. Anyhow, it would be impolite not to make an appointment first.'

'You and your good manners. I'd turn up on his doorstep and brook no refusal. Very well, how about this? What do you say to lunch at Simpson's tomorrow? My treat. We haven't celebrated my damship properly.'

‘Tomorrow I need to spend the day at the British Museum Library. I’m researching a newspaper article.’

‘The day after, then.’

‘I can’t. Mabel has invited some friends to tea. I’m to give them a reading from *Flurry’s Wedding*. I need an hour to practise.’

‘Oh, may I come to tea? I love hearing you read.’

‘It’s not my place to invite you. I’m a guest there, singing for her supper. I thought you had appointments?’

Boney’s answer is shouted down by a whistle blast as the hurrying train enters the tunnel leading into Waterloo station.

‘What did you say?’

‘I’m supposed to be at rehearsals for *The Boatswain’s Mate* in three-quarters of an hour. I shall have to shake a leg. Get there *toute de suite*, as they say in gay Paree.’

‘Gay Paree feels a universe away. Do you know, I think that’s where I was happiest in life.’

‘Because you were devoting yourself to art?’

‘Yes, at the Déléclease and Colarossi studios. My drawing was a little weak, but my teachers were encouraging about my use of colour.’

Wheels and brakes screeching, the train draws to a halt. Someone yanks open a window and a puff of acrid smell gusts in. Edith looks out at grey-tinted London, and hankers after a field of daffodils.

‘We should go to Paris,’ says Boney. ‘Why not? As soon as Playfair pays your advance we’ll take off on a jaunt. You work like a Trojan – you need a break.’

‘This is a break.’

‘Nonsense, it’s all family duty and business. I mean a break away from it all. I’ll go with you. What larks we’ll have! Oh, my dear, your knot has worked its way loose. Allow

me.’ She leans forward and adjusts Edith’s tie. ‘There now, I’ve given you a lover’s knot. That’ll hold ’til the end of time.’

Edith slides to one side, levers herself to her feet and checks the seat for lost belongings. She lurches out to the train corridor, Boney in her slipstream, burbling about picnics in the Bois de Boulogne.

I am *not* going to Paris and that’s that, Edith tells herself. Boney no sooner thinks of something than she does it – she has obligations to no one but herself. Unlike Edith.

A ticket collector takes her return stub. Behind her, Boney causes a holdup by forgetting where she put hers.

Edith glances over her shoulder. ‘Inside your hat.’

‘She opens her mouth with wisdom and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. On our next trip, Edith, you can take charge of the tickets. Parisians are less patient than Londoners.’

Edith forges ahead towards the Underground station. Saying nothing is the path of least resistance. Boney chomps through opposition like a weevil through biscuits.

*

Mabel Somerville has made a home in Netherton Grove and any member of the clan is always welcome, even when Boyle is away with his ship, as he is currently. It’s not the most fashionable end of Chelsea – too close to St George’s Union Infirmary, and distinctly un-grove like – but Edith is glad of a berth in their three-storied terraced house.

A large, thick envelope is waiting for Edith. She doesn’t wait to unbutton her coat before opening it. Inside, a letter from Nigel Playfair rejects her play and returns it to her.

Quite unsuitable for the stage.

Far too many scenes.

Impossible to put on.

The ripple of piano scales drifts downstairs. She lifts her head from the letter. Mabel must be in the middle of her daily practice. Edith's play has been turned down, yet life continues as normal for others. All at once, her insides feel emptied out. She sits on a hall chair, the manuscript thudding to the floor. But the letter is still gripped in her hand. She risks another look.

Old-fashioned.

Muddled message.

Unconditional refusal.

Should she have implanted more of Shaw's suggestions? Is it possible all her efforts with *Flurry's Wedding* are a misfire?

Almost at once, she overrules the thought. The play simply wasn't what the Lyric wanted – she'll offer it to another producer. Boney will suggest a home.

Mabel Somerville appears on the landing. 'I thought I heard the doorbell. Welcome back, Edith. How was your trip to Woking?'

She puts the letter behind her back. 'Enjoyable, thank you, Mab.'

'My friends are terribly excited about your reading tomorrow.'

Edith's heart sinks. It will be an ordeal to read from a play that's just been turned down – what was that odious word? – unconditionally.

'You are still willing, dear? The invitations have gone out.'

'Of course, Mab. You know me, any excuse to show off. By the way, would you mind if I invited Dame Ethel Smyth? She happens to be in town this week and expressed an interest.'

'Your composer friend? Certainly. Perhaps she'd play one of her compositions for us.'

'The difficulty, Mab, would be stopping her.'

*

The rooms are small in Boyle and Mabel's house – space was sacrificed for a suitable address and handsome frontage. To accommodate guests, a set of glass doors between dining and drawing rooms is opened. Edith perches on her sister-in-law's piano seat and faces her audience of a dozen. She has butterflies in her stomach and a frog in her throat. While Mabel says a few words of introduction, she drinks half a glass of water. But as soon as she starts reading, her nerves vanish.

The guests avoid rattling their teacups and laugh on cue – especially when the script calls for a brogue. Is it possible they're enjoying it? Her delivery gains in confidence.

Ethel Smyth sits not more than six inches away from Edith, eyes fastened on her. Afterwards, she rumbles about how the play is a *tour de force* because Miss Somerville strains words through a trellis of loveliness. Her increasing deafness forces people to shout back at her that yes, it's a masterpiece. Edith cringes. After all, her magnum opus has been refused.

But at least the audience asks for an encore – and with enough persistence to make it appear genuine. During the applause, Edith notices Mabel's pretty face is rosy with relief. She knows her sister-in-law finds it daunting to entertain in London, having grown up in Sydney. But her Walzing Matilda cake, topped with pineapple slices and pecan nuts, is a triumph.

After the guests have departed, and Mabel is busy directing her servants to rearrange the furniture, Boney whispers to Edith about the two of them taking some air.

'It's dark out, Boney.'

'There are streetlights. You aren't in the middle of West Cork now.'

'Mind the paintwork!' cries Mabel.

‘Look, I can’t hear myself think with your sister-on-law fussing over her furniture. She should use a spirit level and be done with it if she cares so much about straight lines. Do come out. I’ve hardly seen you. Everyone wanted to monopolise the great playwright.’

‘Let’s sit in the morning room,’ says Edith. ‘It’ll be quiet in there. As a matter of fact, I want to show you something.’

‘Rather,’ says Boney.

Edith raises her voice. ‘You don’t mind, do you Mab, if Dame Ethel and I have a little chat in the morning room?’

‘Go right ahead.’

When they are seated in the small, bay-windowed room overlooking the street, she produces the damning letter. The paper feels forlorn between her fingertips, as if knows its contents are unwelcome. She watches Boney read it.

‘How beastly, Edith! I shall boycott his theatre.’

‘He takes rather a dim view of *Flurry’s Wedding*.’

‘Pearls before swine.’

‘I thought casting might be the issue – suitable Flurrys can’t be found under every gooseberry bush. But I never dreamed the work itself would be rejected.’

‘He’s talking nonsense. You are Edith Somerville! You have magic in your fingertips!’

‘But Mr Playfair isn’t even willing to give me a short run. I could have done rewrites, I could have, I don’t know, whatever was...’ Edith’s voice trails off.

‘Don’t be downhearted, dearest. He’s not the only impresario in London.’

‘Can you recommend one?’

‘Of course. Your play will have its day in the sun. But first, you must stand up for yourself. March straight over to the Lyric, tell Playfalse he’s an imbecile and plant a tomahawk in his skull!’

‘What good would that do, Boney? Other than relieve my feelings? I’m not really in a position to stick in the spurs here. I don’t have the power.’

‘Never underestimate relieving your feelings.’

‘Maybe he has a point...’

Boney is on her feet and marching from one end of the room to the other. ‘Here’s what we’ll do. You and I will call on Mr Playfair and ask him to indicate the scenes which he regards as’ – she consults the letter – “self-indulgent,” “unfunny” and “laboured”.’ A little humiliating, I admit. But his feedback will help you to reshape the material and find it a more deserving home. He’s a boor but he knows his onions.’

Edith sifts her options. Boney has a knack for quarrelling with people. Equally, she gets things done. But it’s mortifying to ask for help from someone who has just rejected her play in the bluntest terms.

‘I say, Edith, how about changing the setting? Make your characters Cossacks instead of Irish. You lot really are out of favour in Britain. That might be why he’s turned you down.’

‘I know nothing about Russia, Boney.’

‘Haven’t you read their novelists? Pushkin, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy?’

‘Afraid not.’

‘Their playwrights? How about Chekhov?’

Edith shakes her head.

‘Really, Edith, you ought to be more systematic about your reading. It can’t all be Shakespeare and the English classics. The Russians are exhilarating. There’s a Russian saying, “The Cossack will starve but his horse will have eaten its fill”. See? Just like your precious Irish. Converting your play would be no trouble.’

Edith is transfixed by an image of Flurry in a fur hat, racing across the steppes. It’s tempting. But no, she couldn’t manage it. ‘I’ll have you know this is an Irish play, not a

Russian one, Boney. But some feedback from Mr Playfair would be useful. Maybe I should go and see him. I'll think about it.'

'I'll meet you at Hammersmith tube station tomorrow evening at six. Fricassee Playfair as an hors d'oeuvre, and we can dine together afterwards.'

'I said I'll think about it, Boney. Don't rush me.'

Boney looks off to the side. Uncharacteristically tentative, she says, 'Do just bear something in mind about Stage Land, Edith. It's a hair trigger business. No one can ever predict whether the public will take to a play. If I were you, I'd think about another novel. You know what you're doing there.'

'You mean give up on *Flurry's Wedding*?'

'Good heavens, no. I mean don't put all your eggs in one basket.'

Chapter 17

Edith stutters about London, licking her wounds and reflecting on whether or not to beard Nigel Playfair in his den. She feels ghosted – insubstantial, humiliated and out of step with this world which once appreciated her talents. When she looks around, she sees faces where the features are blurred. But perhaps she is the one being rubbed out?

Yet London is beguiling in the particular way it knows how to be. Sometimes, she avails of its pleasures by catching a red double-decker omnibus drawn by three horses – her leg won't allow her to climb to the top, unfortunately – at other times, she walks the thronged streets. A visit to Hatchard's at 187 Piccadilly allows her to check its stocks of her books. She finds her latest title, plus all three of the Irish R.M. collections, but considers their placing could be more prominent. Furtively, she rearranges the shelf display.

Outside on the street again, she makes an effort to conjure up Flurry. Inside her head, she says: 'The setting: Piccadilly Circus. Flurry Knox strolls into view wearing evening clothes. He stops by the statue of Eros to light a cigarette.' But he refuses to be invoked.

Thanks to her network of relatives and literary contacts, she is invited to a merry-go-round of social events. A distant cousin on her mother's side summons her to luncheon in an unattractive house close to Hyde Park Corner, whose interior has an extravagance of plush which injures her eye everywhere it lands. Her hostess is resplendent in a burnt sienna frock with a sheen as if raindrops were captured in the cloth. Edith is relieved she took Mabel's advice and wore her most boastful hat.

'My dear, may I ask, is your *chapeau* from Paris?'

'Skibbereen,' says Edith.

Her hostess recovers herself, and points to a man with weathered face and a lavish moustache, glumly inspecting some cloisonné eggs. Although he's not wearing uniform, he radiates a pukka military type aura.

'Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, dear. Chief of the Imperial General Staff during the war,' she hisses in Edith's ear. 'He's just been elected Member of Parliament for North Down – somewhere in the north of Ireland, apparently. Resigned from the army especially to stand. I'll introduce you.'

Edith shakes hands with a tall man, a year or two younger than her, who has a hanging judge's eyes. He has a brisk manner and old scarring above his left eye. They have never met, but she expects they know people in common. Cameron told her Wilson was one of the people pushing hard in 1918 for conscription to be extended to Ireland, but Lloyd George knew it wouldn't fly.

When they are seated for luncheon, she finds herself beside the field marshal. A conscious look passes between her and their hostess, on the opposite side of the table. Edith is being given a place of honour. In return, she's to keep the great man amused.

Over pea and mint soup laced with an excess of salt, Edith makes conversation. 'I believe you grew up in Ireland, field marshal?'

'Just outside Edgeworthstown. The Currygrane estate.'

'The dear friend of an ancestor of mine lived in Longford, too. Maria Edgeworth. Perhaps you're familiar with her work?'

'More of a Kipling man. *'We know, when all is said,/We perish if we yield.'*

'Yielding can take strength. Sometimes, it's the right thing to do.'

'Nonsense! Can't think of a single instance.'

'I can.'

'Well, naturally. You're one of the fair sex. You're predisposed to yield.'

'Am I really? Anyhow, I believe Britain ought to grant Ireland dominion status.'

‘That would be a mistake.’

‘Because it looks like weakness?’

‘Because surrendering to those renegades in Ireland would have a deplorable impact on Palestine, India and Egypt. There are larger issues at stake, Miss Somerville. Irish self-government doesn’t suit the strategic unity of the empire.’

A die-hard. Edith sets down her soup spoon and prepares to do battle. ‘How is there to be a peace settlement if concessions aren’t made?’

The arrival of Beef Wellington interrupts their conversation and Edith makes small talk with her neighbour on the other side. Conscious of eye signals from her hostess, she returns to Wilson, determined to avoid politics.

‘Do you hunt, field marshal?’

‘When I can.’

‘I have a couple of topping young hunters for sale. One of them could jump St Paul’s Cathedral. You might know someone in the market for a mount?’

‘Afraid not.’ He drains his glass of claret and nods at the footman to replenish it. ‘I suppose you’re an admirer of Collins.’

‘I haven’t met him.’

‘Second rate chap. All he’s good for is spreading atrocity propaganda. Every law of civilised warfare’s been ignored by that rabble he runs. Better men than him did their duty in Flanders, up to their eyes in muck and blood. Better men than him are buried there.’

‘And some of them were Irish.’

He spears a piece of meat. ‘Ulster did her duty during the war. We stand by Ulster now. Anything less would be a betrayal. That’s why we’ve partitioned Ireland. Ulster Unionists won’t live under a Roman Catholic government and I, for one, don’t blame them.’

‘But you aren’t standing by Ulster, field marshal. I understand this new Northern Ireland territory consists of six counties, not nine. Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan are to be included in the Southern state.’

A gridwork of broken veins on his cheeks pops up. Loudly, he says, ‘Better for two-thirds of passengers to save themselves than for everyone to drown.’

The eruption of passion simultaneously repels and intrigues Edith.

Their hostess leans across the table, around a dramatic centre-piece composed of two swans with their wings outstretched for flight. ‘Miss Somerville has written some topping novels, field marshal.’

Wilson clears his throat. ‘Yes. Splendid.’

‘Do you read novels, field marshal?’

‘Not much. Lady Wilson’ – he nods down the table – ‘is susceptible to them.’

Edith casts round. ‘Are you a playgoer?’

‘Now and again. You?’

‘When I have the opportunity.’

‘And have you managed to see anything during your current stay in London?’

‘Indeed, I made a point of it. I had a most enjoyable evening at *The Beggar’s Opera* at the Lyric Hammersmith.’

Unexpectedly, his tone of perpetual exasperation softens. ‘Lady Wilson and I saw that production. It’s a little off the beaten track but we’re enormously taken by the show. Hoping to go again, as a matter of fact. Tickets are in short supply. But I’ve left my name at the box office for cancellations.’

‘What draws you back to it, field marshal?’

‘Lady Wilson is musical. She’s taken by the songs.’

‘Miss Somerville is on close terms with Dame Ethel Smyth,’ says their hostess.

‘Ah, the composeress,’ says Wilson. ‘Lady Wilson was favourably impressed by one of her operas. Ships in it. Didn’t make it along, myself.’

‘*The Wreckers*. And what do you like about *Beggar?*’ asks Edith.

‘Seeing that degenerate Macheath get his comeuppance.’ The field marshal’s fingers seek out his moustache. ‘Although I must say, the young lady playing Polly Peacham is most awfully talented. It’s well worth a return trip for her alone.’

*

‘Mr Playfair, how do you do?’

Nigel Playfair looks as surprised as if Edith has just fallen from the sky at his feet. Armed with the knowledge of his arrival time, which he told her was a golden rule on performance days, she has been waiting by the stage door in advance of the matinée.

‘Miss Somerville, to what do I owe the pleasure?’

‘Might I tell you my business inside, Mr Playfair? It’s a little chilly out here.’

Courtesy wars with prudence on his face.

She hunches her shoulders in a shiver. ‘I’m hoping for a few words of advice. Nothing more.’

‘Of course, forgive me. Do come in.’

He settles her into a chair in his office – even more shabby by daylight – but offers no refreshments. She understands this meeting will be brief and takes out her copy of the script, along with a notebook and pencil.

‘I hoped you might do me the courtesy of showing me where you felt my script could be trimmed. It’s an imposition, I know, but I’d be terribly grateful.’

‘Miss Somerville, with the greatest respect, I simply don’t have the time to go through your work line by line. You said you wanted my advice – here it is. Abandon playwrighting and return to novels and short stories, where you excel.’

Abandon playwrighting? She feels winded, as if thrown from a horse. ‘I’ve no doubt.’ She clears her throat and starts again. ‘I’ve no doubt *Flurry’s Wedding* could use some spit and polish. But you’d ... consign it ... to the scrapheap?’

‘Madam, let me be clear. You’ve taken bread and turned it into stones. I wish I had happier news. As regards playwriting – many are called but few are chosen. You have other gifts. Concentrate on them.’

‘Is it because my play is set in the 1890s? I could advance it a few decades, set it just before the war, perhaps.’

‘It’s not the period, it’s the material. You’ve seen what Bennett did with an old John Gay play – he fashioned new clothes for it. Bennett’s a novelist like you, but he took a vicious political satire, out of copyright, and transformed it. He didn’t just salvage it, he unpicked it. Reimagined it and revolutionised it.’

‘But surely that’s what I’ve done. Taken my own material and reworked it.’

Playfair stands. ‘I’m afraid you haven’t. Your characters are drawn with a blunt pencil. Your plotting is unintentionally farcical. And you have written so many scenes, it would require a platoon of stagehands to change them. In short, your play is beyond redemption. And now, Miss Somerville, if you’ll excuse me, a great many matters are pressing on my attention.’

He opens the door and walks into the corridor. She has no choice but to jam the script back in her bag and follow him.

‘You, over there!’ Playfair clicks his fingers. ‘Fellow with the paintbrush.’

A stagehand in overalls is touching up a piece of scenery. He looks over his shoulder. Then, still holding his paintbrush and pot, he walks off in the opposite direction.

Playfair calls again. 'I say, are you deaf? Come back and escort this lady out, please.'

The stagehand sets his brush on the paint pot lid, pulls the peak of his cap over his forehead and moves towards them.

From a distance, his face is fuzzy. But prickles on Edith's skin identify him. Her heartbeat lurches and judders, before resuming at a staccato skip. Aghast, she looks to Playfair for help, but he is in the process of bowing, retreating and closing the door.

She's alone with the whistler.

The stagehand keeps his eyes on the floor. 'This way.'

She doesn't budge.

His tongue darts across his lips, moistening them. 'This way, lady.'

She remains pinned to the spot.

'Want to get me the sack? Guv'nor says show you out.'

The accent is pitch-perfect Cockney, but she isn't fooled. Those eyes like rain-drenched pebbles – she'd know them anywhere.

'He'd kill a fella and ate him after.'

This is the beast who kicked Dooley to death. The adrenalin of fear mixed with outrage gives back her voice. 'Why should I care if they sack you?'

He stretches out a meaty hand and pushes her in the small of her back. 'Time you was going.'

Like it or not, she is propelled along by the force of his hand. 'Robbed many horses lately?'

'Dunno what you mean.'

'I don't believe you.'

'You're mixing me up wiv someone else.'

'I never forget a face. We met in Ireland last year.'

'Never been in Ireland.'

‘Liar!’

‘Served nearly four years in the Norfolks. ’Onorably discharged after the war ended.

Robbing ’orses ain’t in my line.’

By the stage door, Edith manages to shake free. She purses her lips and whistles a few bars of the tune she heard from him in Drishane.

Oh Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling

From glen to glen and down the mountainside

His eyes slit. He pushes one fist into the other. ‘We can do this naice or we can do it nasty. Now, if I was you, I’d run along ’ome and put your feet up. While you still can.’

‘Scoundrel!’ she cries.

He catches her by the shoulders and gives a shake that sets her teeth rattling. ‘There’s more where that come from.’ Abruptly, he lets her loose, and lumbers away.

Outside, Edith is obliged to lean for support against the brick wall of the laneway, smearing dirt onto her coat. Her vision blurs – the buildings in front of her appear to be wobbling. She shuts her eyes and fights to regain control.

What should she do? She could go back inside and tell Nigel Playfair he has an IRA man on his payroll. She could alert Scotland Yard. Or the Home Office. Or the Prime Minister. But what if the whistler tracks her down and pays her back for interfering? Or takes it out on some other member of the Somerville family?

Holding the wall for support, she inches out to the street and flags down a hansom cab. Expense be hanged, she doesn’t feel able for the Underground.

*

‘I expect those Republicans of yours are intending to blow us all to kingdom come,’ says Boney. ‘I bet they have barrels of dynamite hidden in the theatre. Your chaps are notorious for dynamiting.’

‘That was the Fenians,’ says Edith. ‘And it was decades ago.’ Her gaze wanders across the stucco ceiling of the Lyons Tea House where they are meeting. ‘I can’t puzzle out why the whistler is working in a theatre.’

‘It’s cover for him to spy and plot without drawing attention to himself. Stage Land is a free and easy world. People come and go all the time. On no account must you go back to the Lyric, Edith – he might do something desperate.’

‘I wasn’t intending to.’ Apart from anything else, Nigel Playfair has shown her the door.

‘Promise me, dearest. I know how plucky you are. But I’m older and wiser than you. I couldn’t bear it if anything happened.’

‘I promise, Boney. Although you know perfectly well you’re only ten days older. It doesn’t really count.’

‘I wonder if he followed you over here for some reason?’

‘Highly unlikely. He looked as shocked to see me as I was to see him.’ Edith shifts position on her decidedly hard chair. ‘Is there a target near the Lyric, do you suppose? Someplace Irish separatists might want to attack?’

A barge hoots, passing under Blackfriars Bridge, which is within sight of the white and gold teahouse frontage.

‘That’s it – the river,’ cries Boney. ‘The Lyric is close to the Thames. It’s elementary, my dear Watson!’

‘Why does that matter?’

‘It’s a highway. Your rebels could reach all sorts of destinations by river.’ Her blue eyes bulge from their sockets. ‘The Houses of Parliament are by the Thames. I bet they’re planning to do a Guy Fawkes!’

‘Steady on, we don’t have any proof.’

‘Proof be hanged. I have a gut instinct about this. What does yours tell you?’

That the whistler is a bad lot – he’d stop at nothing. ‘Perhaps we should go to the police.’

‘Delay could be fatal. We’d never forgive ourselves.’

‘You’re right. Where’s the nearest police station? Is there one around the corner on Fleet Street? Or up towards St Paul’s?’

‘There’s a station at Charing Cross. Let’s go at once.’ Boney signals for the bill.

‘You’re coming with me?’

‘Naturally, you darling dimwit. We’re two horses harnessed to the one chariot.’

‘What a ripper you are.’

Boney rushes her out to the street, where a gust of wind from the river causes Edith to clamp a hand onto her hat. As she does, a loose folio marked with newsprint flies past. Looking behind, she notices a man in a brown derby hat struggling with his newspaper.

*

As soon as he sets down his pen, Edith realises the desk sergeant is a doubting Thomas. He shifts from one foot to the other, boots creaking. Probably, his bunions are acting up. Policemen always have bunions in her experience.

‘So, let’s get this straight. You believe there’s an Irish rebel working in the Lyric Theatre who intends to blow up Parliament. Is that correct?’ he asks.

‘Yes.’ Bullish, Boney answers for them.

‘And you base this prediction on a hunch, madam? Is that it? Or a premonition?’

‘On the fact he’s a known IRA member. He’s part of a nest of cutthroats who trespassed at the home of Miss Somerville, where they robbed her of horses and other valuables. Look here, my good man, you’re not treating this with the seriousness it deserves. Fetch us your superior officer.’

‘I’m afraid you have to deal with me, madam. The duty inspector is otherwise detained.’

She slaps her calling card onto the incident book. ‘Send in this to him. *Dame* Ethel Smyth. I’m sure he’ll squeeze us in. We can wait, if necessary.’

Mentally, Edith groans. Ethel Smyth is going all Ethel on her. Two heads aren’t better than one when one of those heads is Boney’s.

The sergeant sets his elbows on the desk and leans across it, his metal uniform buttons tapping against wood. ‘Madam, the inspector has no time to squeeze anything in. We have a murder case on our hands. A young woman has been found strangled in her bedroom in Farringdon.’ He turns his attention to Edith. ‘Now, what was that about trespassers in your home, Miss, um, Somerstown. Whereabouts in London was that?’

She reads his name badge. Holohan. Why, he’s one of theirs. Although his accent is Kent, if she’s not mistaken. ‘Not London, sergeant. I live in County Cork, in southern Ireland. We were raided several times by Irish Republicans.’

‘Did they threaten an explosion at any stage of your acquaintance with them, madam?’

‘She doesn’t have an acquaintance with them.’ Ethel Smyth gives the sergeant a look that could slice and dice onions. ‘They’re not neighbours, or people she knows from church. These men broke into her home and tied up her and her brother, Colonel Somerville. It’s a miracle they escaped with their lives.’

‘Did you report the break-in, madam?’ the policeman asks Edith.

‘Naturally,’ says Edith. ‘But it won’t make much difference. Sergeant, I’m sure you have members of the public landing in on you with all sorts of stories about crimes. Some of them utterly implausible.’

‘It has been known, madam.’

A snatch of drunken song bursts from one of the holding cells. Something about a sailor’s life on the ocean wide.

‘Pipe down, Taffy,’ calls a police constable.

A door is rattled. ‘We was promised tea an hour ago,’ shouts another voice.

‘You’ll get it when I’m good and ready,’ says the constable.

The sergeant raises his voice. ‘Bring them in a cuppa, Acheson. It’ll calm things down. I can’t hear myself think here. Now madam, where were we?’

Edith holds his gaze. ‘Believe me, I am not given to imaginings. I have learned to trust my intuition. But why should you, sergeant? Doubt me, by all means. That’s common sense on your part. Nevertheless, it’s highly suspicious that a chap from one of Michael Collins’ flying columns is hanging around London, pretending to be someone he’s not. The evidence I’m laying before you is circumstantial, nothing more. But I would be failing in my civic duty if I did not report it.’

He opens the incident book and lifts his pen again. ‘Working as a stagehand in the Lyric, you say?’

‘Just so.’ Ethel Smyth jumps in. ‘You should haul him in for questioning.’

‘We need to have reasonable grounds, madam.’

‘You have. He’s an Irish rebel. Miss Somerville’s just told you.’

‘England’s had a dose of Ireland to last us for years. But we can’t go hauling in every Mick and Paddy knocking about London. The holding cells would be chock-a-block. Now, could you give me a description of the man, Miss Summers? And do you know what name he’s going by?’

‘Edith, why not draw him? Miss Somerville is frightfully good at portraits, sergeant.’

‘Words would be preferable, madam. When you’re ready.’

Quickly, Edith provides him with height, build and colouring. ‘Sergeant, you have my name and London address. I’ll be here for several more weeks.’ She turns to Boney. ‘I think we’ve occupied enough of Sergeant Holohan’s time. Good day.’

Edith leaves, and Boney has no choice but to follow her out into Charing Cross Road.

‘That fellow was borderline insolent,’ grumbles Boney.

‘He’s the first line of defence, that’s all. It’s a responsible job.’

‘He had all the authority of an amateur organ-grinder. Did your governesses teach you nothing except the multiplication table, Edith? You need to lay down the law with these people. We really should have refused to leave until we saw an inspector.’

Boney is always so emphatic. Edith thinks longingly of an afternoon nap. ‘I don’t blame him for being dubious. The story does sound a bit far-fetched in the cold light of day. I think I’ll run along home now, dear. You were very kind to come to the police station with me.’

‘You know there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, Edith.’

‘What a passion you have for slaying dragons.’

Despite her best efforts, Edith limps as she makes her way towards the Underground station. She half-turns, intending to wave at Boney, and glimpses a man in a brown derby hat disappearing into a tobacconist’s shop.

‘Rest up, my treasure,’ trumpets Boney.

*

The following day, riffling through the late edition of the *Evening Standard*, Edith is transfixed by a headline on page four.

Police Raid On London Theatre

STAFF were shocked today at a London theatre when members of the Metropolitan Police raided the premises with an arrest warrant for a scene shifter lately arrived from Ireland. The drama unfolded at the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith, home to the successful and long-running musical The Beggar's Opera. The man did not turn up for work today and police believe he was tipped off in advance and absconded.

Police conducted a search of his lodgings but it yielded no trace of the fugitive. It seems likely the Irishman fled overnight. Neighbours reported sounds shortly before dawn indicating the wanted man making his escape.

An upstairs back window was found lying open by his landlady, Mrs Thelma Barnstable, who is assisting police with their inquiries. A subversive Irish publication was found under the mattress.

'The man was ever so polite and helpful,' said promising young actress Miss Rosina Bridewell, who has a small but key role in the popular show. 'He sounded as English as roast beef. I'm amazed to hear he's an Irish rebel. I'd never have put him down as one.'

Scotland Yard is asking the public for information on John Green, described as just short of six feet tall and well-built with brown hair and a full moustache. He may also use the name Sean Crowley.

'I was right,' says Edith. 'Just wait 'til Boney hears.'

Chapter 18

The mistscape stifles everything. Murky and yellow, the fog rolls along, deadening sound, obscuring shapes, pinching extremities. Edith shivers as she gropes her way down Netherton Grove. Her sister-in-law warned her against leaving the house. But Mabel was a ‘laugh in the morning, cry by nightfall’ sort of person, always predicting the worst possible outcome. As soon as she advised Edith to cancel her appointment with Mr Herbert Tring from the Society of Authors, Edith was determined to get to Westminster and keep it. An omnibus from the Fulham Road, only a few minutes away by foot, would carry her almost to the society’s front door.

No sooner has she descended the front steps and walked a few paces than she realises her error. What looked like a few foggy feelers a little earlier in the day is now a fog in full bloom. It never fails to surprise Edith how quickly fog develops in London. She is enveloped in great, smelly buffetings. Within a few paces, she feels damp to the skin. She ties her scarf across her nose and mouth, but the strip of material offers inadequate protection – soon, her eyes are stinging, her throat is raw.

The fog slows her progress to a snail’s pace. At least the streetlights have been lit early. She knows she has to turn right somewhere near here, but street signs are impossible to read and distance can’t be gauged. And does she really want to risk crossing the street? What if she steps straight into the path of an omnibus?

If there was a policeman about, she could ask him to help her across, but it’s as if London has been depopulated overnight. The occasional clop of horse hooves and sputter of a motor engine tell her she isn’t by herself – vehicles are passing – but almost no one else is on the streets. Her heart jumps when a woman holding a lantern looms out of the fog bank and almost collides with her.

‘I say, could you –’ begins Edith, but the woman vanishes as quickly as she materialised. She’s alone again. If only she’d sent the parlour maid to the post office on Tothill Street with some silver. A telegram to Mr Tring would have taken care of the meeting. Crablike, she edges along, holding onto the sides of buildings and railings. Her foot kicks against something that makes a clatter. It sounds like an empty bottle. She tries to feel for it with her sole, in case it trips her up, but the object has bowled away. The fog gives her the impression she’s been walking in circles. Perhaps she should go into a shop and check her directions. She passes a bakery, but it’s bolted and shuttered. A few doors along is a public house, which appears to be open judging by the glow from its windows and fanlight above the door. She can hear the rise and fall of voices inside. No, she won’t go into a pub. There’s bound to be some other establishment open.

All at once, the metal beneath her fingers turns to air. She pauses, nervous of taking a misstep and stumbling. Swiping through the advancing clouds with her walking stick, she peers ahead, disorientated. It occurs to her that the safest course would be to do a volte-face. An I-told-you-so from Mabel is preferable to a broken leg.

From behind, a disembodied hand cups her elbow. She smothers a cry.

A muffled voice speaks. ‘If you’ll allow me, Miss Somerville. I’ll see you safely to where you’re going.’

‘Who’s that?’

‘A friend from home, ma’am.’

‘I know that voice.’

‘Do you?’

She turns to face the figure emerging from the haze. ‘Is that you, Denis? Denis from back home?’

‘None other, Miss Somerville.’

A scarf covers the lower half of his face. Peering, she recognises a pair of blinking green eyes. ‘Could you help a lady in distress, Denis?’ Fog enters her windpipe and her breath becomes laboured. ‘I had an appointment. But I’ve changed my mind.’

‘At your service, ma’am.’

‘I’d be most glad...of your arm...to take me home. It’s only a few minutes away.’

‘I’ve a friend with a motor car near here, he’ll give you a lift to wherever you want to go.’ He pulls his scarf away from his mouth, cups his hands around it and cries, ‘Halloooo!’ He waits, eyes watering. Repeats the call. ‘Halloooo!’ Covers his mouth again with his scarf. ‘He’s not far off but you can’t see further than your hand here. I’d go looking for him but then I mightn’t find you again.’

‘You’re very sweet to take this trouble on my account.’ She sneezes, finds her handkerchief by touch in her bag and blows her nose. ‘But really, my brother’s house is quite close. It’s just back up this street.’

‘Let’s give it a minute. My friend is nearby. I thought the sea mists at home were bad but I’ve never known the like of these fogs.’

‘No comparison.’

‘You’d wonder how people manage at all.’

‘In Castletownshend, the people say if you go astray in the mist’ – she hacks out a cough – ‘you’ll find your way home by turning your jacket and hat inside out.’

‘Whisht, now, ma’am. Don’t try to talk. The fog’s getting at your chest.’

She knows he’s talking sense. But something about the isolation caused by the weather conditions forces her to speak. ‘A *piseog*, I dare say. But I’d almost try it today.’

She can tell he isn’t listening.

‘Let me chance going to look for him, Miss Somerville. He can’t be far – I’d stake my mother’s life on it. You stay put now.’

‘Don’t leave me!’ She clamps her hands on his lapels.

Gently, he shakes himself loose. 'I'll be back before you know it. I'll count my paces. That way I can count my way back to you. One, two...' He plunges away, swallowed up in the swirl.

The rhythm of his footsteps echoes back to her. Listening intently, Edith hears a faint 'Halloooo'. She grips the railings, straining to hear it again. Other sounds seep through the fog. The despondent blast of a foghorn, the howl of a dog. Perhaps it's lost, like her. Alone amid these poisonous vapours, Edith's doubts spiral. It would be easy for someone to prey on her –snatch her bag or knock her over. Denis told her to wait but he's a country boy, she begins to doubt his ability to plot a course through a fog-laden city.

'What should I do, Martin?' she asks. Her voice sounds timid. It shames her. She can't turn into a faint-hearted old lady. Edith Somerville must fend for herself.

If she stays in a straight line and retraces her steps, she has to reach home. Clamping her hand on the railings, she begins to work her way backwards, stamping as she goes to stop her feet from turning numb. But she must have taken a wrong turn because the glimmer of the Underground sign tells her she's at Fulham Broadway station.

Any port in a storm. Pursued by tendrils of tobacco-yellow fog, Edith manages to gain the station. There's a bench near the ticket office. She sinks onto it to catch her breath. A burst of coughing overtakes her, and she pulls down her scarf, takes some deep breaths, and massages her throat with gloved fingers. Some lozenges in her bag might help. She retrieves the packet and sucks on a sweet.

Pages rustling inside the ticket office indicate an employee with nothing but the newspaper to occupy him. By the ticket barrier, she sees another uniformed functionary in an attitude of resentful inactivity. The station is deserted otherwise.

'I say,' she calls out to the ticket collector. 'Excuse me, are the trains running? I need a westbound one.'

‘They are, mum, but there ain’t a westbound train due to pass through here for another forty-five minutes. Fog’s playing havoc with the timetable.’

‘You didn’t wait!’ Panting, Denis bursts into the station, boots thudding across the tiles.

‘I thought you weren’t coming back. Why, you look terrified!’

‘You gave me a fright. I thought something must have happened to you. Come on, now, Miss Somerville. I managed to scare up my pal. He’s outside the station.’

‘I’m not sure about a motor car, Denis. You hear such dreadful stories about collisions in the fog.’

His voice turns wheedling. ‘He’s a careful driver, my friend. You’ll be in safe hands. Door to door service.’

His tone is oddly insistent. ‘Have a cough drop while I catch my breath,’ she suggests.

‘No.’ He goes to the exit, waves at someone, hurries back to her. ‘Won’t you come with me, Miss Somerville? I can’t leave you here like this. It wouldn’t be right.’

Edith studies him. He’s over-excited, quivering like a dog on the scent of a fox. The paralysis which overcame her in the fog has worn off. Now that she’s warmed up in the station, she is starting to wonder about the coincidence. First the whistler, then Denis. Two members of the same West Cork flying column here in London. What are the odds? ‘Quite a fluke meeting you, Denis. How on earth did you fetch up in London?’

‘I had to...I wanted... I needed a change, ma’am.’

‘I’m glad you took my advice and got away from those disreputable friends of yours.’

He doesn’t respond. She notices that he’s still wearing his scarf over the lower part of his face, masking his identity. Her suspicions multiply.

‘How *did* you happen to run across me today?’

‘Luck, ma’am.’

Larded with anxiety, she continues to watch him. It doesn’t take a detective to see he’s ill-at-ease. All at once, her thoughts untangle. She’s convinced he loitered outside the house and followed her. He must be mixed up in the same business with the theatre as the whistler. Edith knows she has to escape from Denis. She’s in a public place, there are members of staff nearby – he can’t kidnap her in plain sight. But the minute she climbs into a motor car with him she’s in his power.

She forces a smile to her lips. ‘What a prize fool I was to leave the house today. Now then, I don’t believe I’ll take you up on your kind offer. I’ll just rest here a while and wait for the fog to lift. Goodbye, Denis.’

He bends down and puts his mouth close to her ear. ‘It’s not goodbye yet. I’ve a friend who’s keen for a word with you.’

Her fingers fasten convulsively onto the bag on her lap. ‘Is he in the same line of business as yourself?’

‘He is. I’m under orders to bring you to him.’

Her eyes flicker to the ticket collector.

‘I’m thinking you’d be as well coming quietly. Your brother’s wife, the Australian woman. At home alone, isn’t she? She’d make a useful hostage.’

‘She’s not alone. Your information is incorrect.’

Something about their interaction alerts the ticket collector, who stares openly at them. Just then, a flock of passengers, tired of waiting for trains, disgorges from the escalator, and he is forced to attend to his job.

Denis keeps his voice low. ‘Don’t tell lies, Miss Somerville. You can’t count on the servants. They wouldn’t lift a finger to help her.’

Edith recognises the truth in his words. Mabel’s staff aren’t fond of her.

‘Do as you’re told and nobody gets hurt,’ he says. ‘You’ll get home safely, I promise you.’

Her face is immobile but her eyes blaze. ‘Your promises are worthless.’

‘Look, we’ve wasted enough time. The man I’m bringing you to meet isn’t the patient sort.’

Edith’s eyes roam the station in search of someone she can appeal to for help. But there is no discreet way to do it. And if Mabel falls into this gang’s hands, she’ll wither away. Her nerves would never recover.

‘Let’s go,’ says Denis.

Just then, the man in the ticket booth pulls down his hatch and appears through the office door. Slowly, Edith stands up. The ticket seller pays no attention to them as he locks the door and joins the ticket collector for a chat. But Edith changes course and hobbles across to them, waving her walking stick.

‘I say, excuse me. Would one of you gentlemen kindly oblige a lady?’

‘What are you at, you aul’ bitch!’ mutters Denis.

‘I need someone to call me a policeman.’

‘No need, it’s taken care of,’ cries Denis.

‘Could you help me, please? I’d be most awfully grateful,’ says Edith.

‘No problem, mum,’ says the ticket collector. ‘Glad to take a look. Though I wouldn’t bank on any, out and about in this pea-souper. Is something the matter?’

Denis joins them, so close Edith smells the fresh sweat from his armpits. ‘Bit of a mix-up here. I have a motor car waiting for us.’

‘I don’t want to go with him.’

‘Are you bothering this lady, Paddy?’ The ticket collector moves between them.

‘I’m not, indeed I’m not.’ Denis widens his arms, conciliatory. ‘We know each other from home. I have a car outside for the lady. She’s worried about a friend called Mabel. Jumpy sort, the kind that’d leap right out of her skin if you said boo to her.’

‘No,’ says Edith. ‘Leave her alone.’

‘Mabel goes to a bridge club every Wednesday afternoon, doesn’t she? Coleridge Gardens.’

They know Mabel’s name and her movements. She’s out-foxed and knows it.

‘Lady?’ The ticket collector turns to Edith.

‘I – I. Sorry. Thank you. I’ll take him up on that offer of a lift, after all. I shouldn’t have troubled you.’

Denis tries to catch hold of her arm. Straight-backed, she bats him away and stalks to the exit. Outside, patches of London street are popping up and vanishing, as foggy coils shift about, revealing snapshots before blotting them out again. A motorised hackney chugs by the kerb, its window shades pulled down. Edith thinks of the *coiste bodhar*, the death coach.

Denis hustles her into the vehicle and fists the back of the driver’s seat. A jolt, and they begin moving.

‘You took your bleedin’ time,’ says the driver. He’s wearing a brown derby on the back of his head.

‘I did the best I could,’ says Denis.

‘I did the best I could,’ mimics the voice in a falsetto.

A Liverpool accent, Edith notices. Its nasal inflection is distinctive. She makes out the back of his neck, two hairy hands on the wheel and one hairy ear.

Denis pushes back his cap and wipes his sleeve across his forehead. He burrows into the corner behind the driver, draws his feet to his chest and curls into a hedgehog.

He's still wearing Aylmer's boots. They've changed for the worse in his care – unblackened and unacquainted with a boot tree. Big Ben chimes the hour, causing him to uncoil momentarily, lift one of the blinds and look out. They must be somewhere near Westminster. He frowns, tugs away his scarf at last, and settles down to gnaw at bitten fingernails.

She reviews her dwindling options and considers it politic to be pleasant to her kidnapper.

'You're a long way from home, Denis.'

A grunt. He's been practising at the whistler school of charm.

'How do you like London?'

He shrugs. 'I'm not here to see the sights.'

'Why are you here?'

'To pull the lion's tail.'

'Ah, Denis, this won't end well for you. You should go on back to Ireland while you can.'

Denis rubs the heel of each hand into his eyes. When he drops them, the whites are veined and reddened. He looks utterly exhausted.

Edith says 'I remember how difficult I found it to sleep at night, the first time I visited. We're spoiled for silence in Ireland.'

Now his eyes twitch towards her. 'The noise does never be stopping here. Night and day, there's no difference betwixt them. And the people everywhere! More people than I thought the world could hold, all bunched up here. Roaring like a pack of heifers. Your head'd be melted by this place.'

Edith leans forward. 'Denis, I don't know what you're up to and I don't want to know. It's none of my business. Can't we leave it at that? Let me out. I'll forget I ever saw you and you can forget you ever saw me.'

‘No. I’ve to deliver you to somebody.’

‘Who?’

‘That’s for me to know and you to guess.’

‘I was never any good at riddles.’

He shrugs.

‘So, you didn’t cut loose from those friends of yours, after all. All your talking in Castletownshend was only that. Talk.’ She leans her forehead against the window shade, not caring that it’s soiled and smelly. ‘It’s not too late, Denis. Let me go. You’re better than them.’

He broods, until all at once he flares up. ‘Shut your trap! You wrecked months of work. You were seen at the police station. You’re an informer, that’s what you are. Lowest of the low.’

Chapter 19

The hackney slows, the driver says something about gates.

‘Stay here.’ Denis jumps out.

Edith tries to see where they are but all she catches is a patch of wire fencing. They could be anywhere. Now she feels the vehicle roll forward, taking its time. Voices. Male. Barking instructions. The motor halts, its engine is cut off. Cautiously, Edith lifts a corner of the blind. They seem to be inside a building.

Denis wrenches Edith’s door. ‘Out you get.’

She tries to stand but her bones have stiffened, and her ankles give way – she topples forward. Denis hops onto the running board and catches her. His hands are moist on her body. She wishes she could shove him away, the thankless reptile, but can’t manage without his help. Her body creaks as she descends.

‘My bag,’ she says. It’s still in the motor car.

‘It’s grand there. Nobody’ll touch it,’ says Denis.

‘Thieving’s not in our line,’ says the driver.

The space feels cavernous. Two strangers holding tilly lamps are standing beside Denis. A dense, yeasty odour fills her nostrils. Packing cases line the walls and she realises she’s inside a warehouse.

HUNTLEY & PALMERS

READING & LONDON

is printed in red and blue ink on the outside of the boxes. ‘Sweet Kinds’ are stamped on some, ‘Unsweetened Kinds’ on others.

She shifts her attention back to the men beside Denis. They are dressed like dockers but somehow don’t strike her as labourers. For starters, they aren’t muscled. Men who earn their daily bread by hard labour have a physical presence, which these two lack. Besides,

when one of them walks behind the motor car to close the warehouse door, she sees he has a pronounced limp – his knee doesn't bend. She looks at the shape beneath his trouser leg. Perhaps it's an artificial limb.

'Is he in the back?' Denis asks.

'In the office. Been askin' after her for the best part of an hour.' A Cockney accent. But that long chin is Irish. He hands his lamp to Denis.

Denis catches at Edith's arm to hustle her along. Feeling her unwillingness, he says quietly, 'We'd best not keep him waiting.'

She allows herself to be led through the warehouse. This person waiting for her must have heard their arrival but he's sitting tight. It's a way of emphasising his authority – Cameron told her they were taught that in officer school.

Her body is leaden but her mind races. Denis called her an informer. Informers are murdered. Is she going like a lamb to the slaughter? Imagine never seeing Drishane again. She'd be reunited with Martin, of course. But her skidding heartbeat tells her she's not yet ready to die.

Perhaps they only want to warn her off. There's no need to drag her to a biscuit warehouse to kill her. Denis could have done it in the fog – left her in a crumpled heap in a doorway and no one the wiser for hours. By now they have reached the back corner, where temporary walls and a door create a room. It's lying ajar.

Denis knocks. 'She's here, Camel. I have her with me now.'

'Send her in.' A Scottish voice. Educated. 'Then shut the door and clear the fuck off.'

By the lamp's flare, Denis's moss-green eyes are troubled. Beside his mouth, a tic has shoved up through the skin. She realises he's frightened. Her heartbeat trips.

The room is windowless, lit by the shadowy flare of a single lamp. Its occupant is in profile. He sits side-on at a desk, legs outstretched, a cigar smoldering between his fingers.

A handsome man in his late twenties, cleanshaven, with slicked-back hair as black as a sweep's face. He's like one of those actors from American cinema she saw in a magazine in Pinker's office. Valentine? Valentino? On the desk are an ashtray, a mug and a novelty Huntley & Palmers tin shaped like a milkmaid. Across the top of the biscuit tin lies a foot-long knife in a sheath. Edith's eyes glide over it, refusing to look directly at the object. He must have placed it there deliberately.

The occupant of the office does not acknowledge her presence. He turns the tip of his cigar towards him to examine the burning ash, and takes another draw. A blue spiral of smoke drifts towards her, pricking her throat. The silence stretches. Her right leg throbs. Her glance darts about for a chair but there is nowhere else to sit. She thinks with longing of her walking stick. Even something to lean on would ease the misery. She must have left it in the hackney or maybe the Underground station. Can't be helped. Edith shifts her weight onto the left leg and plaits her fingers together, keeping him in her line of vision without staring.

At last, he moves, knocking some ash from his cigar onto the ashtray. Still without looking at her, he speaks. 'You've been sticking that overbred nose of yours into places it doesn't belong.'

He waits. As does she.

'Going to the peelers.' He sighs, twitches a trouser leg, settling the pleat. 'That wasn't nice.' A rummage in the desk drawer produces a pencil and box of matches. 'You're a risk.'

His voice is chiselled, thinks Edith. No mercy in it.

He tosses aside the pencil, strikes a match and watches its flame. 'And in my line of business, we eliminate risks.' A puff of air and the flame is extinguished.

Edith understands he's trying to menace her. She must exert willpower and block him. But her body refuses to be schooled by her mind. Dread shivers through her. In an

effort to keep it dammed inside, she wraps her arms about herself. Her mouth dries out.

She licks her lips.

He turns his head a little and reads her fear. The longer he observes her, the more insubstantial Edith begins to feel. Even if she speaks now, no one will hear her. If Denis or any of the others came in, they might step right through her. If she tries to open the door, her hand won't be able to grasp the knob. Her sense of humiliation intensifies. This is what he wants, she tells herself. Don't surrender to him. She pits her willpower against his.

I am Edith Somerville of Drishane House, Castletownshend. I will not be bullied.

'Have you ever...' he halts, reflects, picks up the thread again. 'Eaten potatoes boiled in seawater?'

Could she have misheard him? Inconsequentially, her mind fastens on that Scottish accent. The Somervilles have Scottish blood.

'Have you?' he repeats.

She clears her throat. 'No, I don't believe I have.'

'No taste to match it. Lends a certain *je ne sais quoi* to the dish.' He ruminates, toying with the matchbox. 'Maybe you don't bother with potatoes? See it as peasant food?'

'I eat potatoes.'

'Grown on your own land?'

'Where possible.'

'Been in your family long, the land?'

'Since the 1700s.'

'Sir Walter Raleigh brought the potato over from Virginia. Quite the adventurer. Came to a sticky end, mind you. Lost his head on the block. Didn't he have an estate in Ireland? Somewhere near Youghal, I believe.'

'If you say so.'

‘Yes, quite an unpleasant end. *A fronte praecipitium a tergo lupi.*’¹

Show-off. Edith thinks it means something like between a rock and a hard place. He’s trying to browbeat her with this talk of execution and undesirable alternatives. Somehow, she injects a sliver of ice into her voice. ‘Really, Mr whoever you are, I’m dog tired. I’ve been dragged here against my will. Perhaps you’d kindly tell me what you require from me and allow me to be on my way.’

He turns his head fully. Edith sees him face on for the first time and forgets herself. She gapes. The left side of his face is a reddened mass of scar tissue. The lashless eyelid is closed. The ear is a stump. The mouth is twisted downwards.

A flick of the eyebrow on the unspoiled side of his face. To blazes with you and your shock, it says.

‘Oh, I don’t know if we can allow that. The truth is, we’re disappointed in you, Edith. Going to the peelers like that. Unwise. Most unwise.’ He shakes his head. ‘A sensible person would have chosen not to notice.’

She bites down hard on her lip. Perhaps it was ill-advised. In fact, standing here, terror drumming at her temples, she has to agree it was extremely reckless.

‘We understand you met Wilson,’ he continues.

‘The field marshal?’

‘None other. Sir Highly Decorated Himself.’

Her antennae quiver. These people have Sir Henry Wilson in their sights. ‘Yes, we met.’

‘What did you talk about?’

She’s afraid of saying anything that might put him in jeopardy. ‘Nothing memorable.’

¹ A precipice in front, wolves behind

‘Nothing? Come now, Edith, you can do better than that. I have it on the best authority the pair of you were deep in conversation.’

The servants, she thinks. She pinches the bridge of her nose, concentrating. ‘People we knew in common. The weather, I suppose. Kipling came up.’

‘Ireland?’

‘Yes, in passing.’

‘Flog the savages, and so on and so forth?’ She nods. ‘Anything else?’

‘Not that I recall.’

‘Did he mention any plans while he’s in London?’

She remembers him saying their names were left at the Lyric in case of cancellations. The Lyric. Where the whistler was working. Her heartbeat is a gigantic metronome. ‘Not to me.’

‘Any travel plans? Belfast, maybe?’

‘No, nothing. We just talked about... gardening.’

A finger against the crimped wreckage of his mouth, he weighs her answer.

Pinpricks of perspiration break out and Edith is desperate to leave. The longer he detains her, the more she fears she’d say anything to get away.

Hesitant, she risks a question of her own. ‘Is that all – are you finished with me?’

‘Finished? That’s a good question. Are we finished with you?’ That single eye glares at her, every drop of his rage and misery visible in it.

Edith’s courage falters, folds and deserts her. He’s ready to rain down fire and brimstone on her head and there’s nothing she can do to stop him. ‘Please. I just... want to... go home.’

He stubs out his cigar. ‘We don’t care tuppence for what you want. It’s less than nothing to us.’ Purposeful, he pushes against his chair so that it clatters to the ground, and

reaches for the knife, which he pulls it from its holder. When he begins to walk towards her, she sees his left hand is twisted into a claw.

This is the end, she thinks. Her heartbeat accelerates even as time slows down. She listens for some comfort from Martin – *I'm waiting for you, dear Edith, we'll spend eternity together* – but hears nothing. Apart from the rush of her own blood, this scarred stranger's voice is the only sound in her ears.

'Your wishes don't weigh one feather with us,' he hisses.

The odours of tobacco and coffee are rank on his breath. Involuntarily, she shrinks back, stumbles, and bangs the back of her head against the door. She leans against it, tremors coursing through her body. The knife is aimed at her throat. Her heart lurches. She can't take her eyes off the blade. Pointed. Sharp. Close. Closer. Her breath pants, exiting her body. Death feels as concrete a presence as if there's a third person in the room.

His voice is pitched barely above a whisper. That web of skin with its puckered mouth is a few inches from her face. A guttering light gleams in his one, beautiful eye. 'You've caused us a great deal of trouble, Edith, and I can't think of a single reason to excuse you.'

The air crackles. The room holds its breath. A spurt of adrenalin drives Edith to cross her arms and raise them chin high, warding him off. He thrusts aside her arms and strokes the edge of the blade against her cheek before laying it in the hollow at the base of her throat. Inside its cage, her heart skids to a halt. She knows death is brushing up against her.

A tiny flick of the hand and her skin is nicked. A thread of blood dribbles out. Her eyes well with tears.

He smiles. Waits. Studies her.

In no hurry, he withdraws the blade. ‘Chin up, only the good die young.’ Mouth pursed, he studies the blood on the tip of his knife, leans forward and wipes it on the front of her coat. ‘But if I have to speak to you again, I’ll make mincemeat of you and enjoy doing it.’ His voice slows down, its tone becoming apocryphal. ‘I am. An instrument. Of vengeance. If you ever. Go. To the peelers. Again. About anything. Even a runaway dog. I’ll track you down. Personally. Whether in Buckingham Palace. Or that fancy Irish house of yours. And slit your throat. From ear to ear. Leaving you. To bleed. To death. And when I’ve done that. I’ll work my way. Through your family. Bairns included. Do we understand one another?’

She is incapable of speech.

‘I’m waiting. And I’m not a patient man. Do we fucking well understand one another?’

The ghost of a nod.

‘Is that a yes?’

‘Yes.’

‘I CAN’T HEAR YOU!’

‘Yes.’

‘Excellent.’ He returns to the desk, sets down the knife, picks up the chair. With his back to her, he says, ‘Now, sod off back to Ireland on the next boat. And keep your mouth shut.’

She’s too petrified to move.

‘Fuck sake, do I have to do everything myself?’ He strides back, sweeps her away from the door, opens it and calls to the men in the warehouse. ‘We’re done here.’

Denis runs up and hovers in the door jamb.

‘Get rid of her.’

Edith hears a humming in her ears.

‘Where?’ Denis asks.

The buzzing intensifies.

‘...Cross.’

He’s changed his mind about letting her go. He intends having her crucified! Edith moans. The room blurs. She staggers. The man with scars catches her by the shoulders.

‘Careful there.’

He passes her over to Denis, as casually as a pound of sausages. Tottering, she leans on Denis, who half carries her into the warehouse.

‘Are you going to kill me?’ she manages to gasp.

‘Saints preserve us, no, Miss Somerville. I’m to see you as far as King’s Cross.’

She manages to turn her head and look at him. Is he telling the truth? What if he isn’t? She should make a run for it. But she’s floppy. He guides her to the motor car and bundles her in. Slumped down, her hammering heartbeat is the only thing in the world she’s conscious of – it feels as if that organ might tunnel through her chest.

‘There, there, Miss Somerville, we’re finished now. Fog’s lifting. You’ll soon be safe home,’ Denis murmurs, over and over.

The motor car has started up and Edith’s stomach begins to react against its swaying. She groans. The colour drains from her face and the contents of her stomach corkscrew and curdle. The vehicle takes a sharp corner, and the manoeuvre unravels her self-control. She clamps her hand against her mouth, scrabbling for the window catch.

‘Jaysus not in here!’ Denis springs to his feet, pulls up the blind and forces open the window.

A slimy mass of semi-digested food erupts into her mouth. Somehow, she manages to push her head through the gap and evacuate down the car’s outer flank. After she has finished heaving, she hangs over the side, breathing in the air. Dimly, she becomes conscious of the driver cursing and Denis telling him to mind his own effin’ business.

Edith wilts back into her seat. Denis takes her handbag, roots about, and pushes a handkerchief towards her. She holds it to her mouth.

‘Shut the bleedin’ window,’ says the driver. ‘What if she spots a copper and lets out a yell?’

Edith forms prayer peaks with her hands, begging Denis to leave it open. The breeze is making her feel less queasy.

‘She mightn’t be finished throwing up,’ says Denis. He whispers to her, ‘He’s not a bad skin, really. Try and breathe in the air. It’ll help.’

By and by, she gasps out, ‘Who was that? In the factory?’

‘I’m not allowed to say, ma’am.’

‘He’s insane.’

‘Mad as mischief,’ Denis allows.

The drive is smoother now. Her stomach begins to settle. ‘How on earth did you get mixed up with him?’

‘I was sent.’

‘They used you to get to me, didn’t they? How did they know to use you?’

He wriggles in his seat. ‘I might have said we were friends.’

‘Friends? Really?’

His eyes slide away to the side.

‘Is this how you treat your friends?’

He doesn’t answer. Finally, he says, ‘Camel is a man wouldn’t give this’ – he snaps his fingers – ‘for either me or you. But he knows what he’s about. He’ll show the English what’s what.’

‘He’s a killer. I don’t know how you can have it on your conscience, getting tangled up with him.’

Something in the clench of his jaw tells her Denis has made his choice. She doesn't know what happened to change his mind – war steals some part of a man's soul, she supposes.

'You look to your conscience and I'll look to my mine,' he says.

All at once, the smell of vomit on her handkerchief revolts her and she hurls the scrap of linen out of the window. 'What happened to his face?'

'He was a pilot. Shot down by his own side – friendly fire, they call it. A miracle he survived. Managed to land his plane but as soon as it touched the ground it went up in flames.'

'Was he in the Royal Air Force?'

'Well, he wasn't fighting for the Germans.' He hesitates. 'Whatever he told you to do, I'd do it, Miss Somerville.'

'You heard him. I'm to go home and speak to nobody.'

His eyes turn as distant as a bird in flight. 'Going home's no hardship. This place is too flat altogether. I grew up in the shadow of a mountain. Spoils you for anywhere else.'

She's only half listening, thinking back over her encounter with Camel. He ran a risk, letting her go. A man with his scarring is easily identified. It's almost as if he has a death wish. But she certainly doesn't. Edith has no intention of making a return trip to a police station.

Denis is still gabbling about his damned mountain. 'It crouches over the village, guarding us. Never looks the same two days running. I like it best when there's a cloud of mist wrapped round it, blue as Our Lady's gown. Sure, the mountains on the moon is nothing compared to mine.' His voice thickens. 'I hope to God I'll see that mountain again.'

You don't deserve to, you stupid boy, throwing in your lot with killers like Camel.

For a moment, she thinks she was unguarded enough to speak her thoughts. She checks

Denis's face. No, she can't have said it. Steady there, Edith. You're not out of the woods yet. 'It wasn't very kind of you to take me to him.'

'I know, Miss Somerville. The things I've done. Sometimes, when they come to me, I feel my head will bust open like a rotten cabbage.'

'Has it never occurred to you that you could give them the slip, here in London? It's a big place. Easy to lose yourself in it.'

'I can't. It's hopeless.'

'Nothing is hopeless. When you're as old as me you'll know that, Denis.'

'I can't desert my comrades. This is a fight to the finish. And with men like Camel on our side, we're bound to win.'

'Win what, exactly?'

'Our country's freedom, of course.'

Edith feels blunted, incapable of another word. Men and their causes. If she had the energy, she could tell him he'd be no better off in a Republic. That what's happening in Ireland is a playing out of romance versus reality. That the dream of patriotism is being exploited by lies and propaganda. But he wouldn't listen.

The motor car pulls over, its engine running. The driver turns his head. 'This is it.'

'Time to get out, Miss Somerville,' says Denis.

'Where am I?'

'King's Cross station. You'll be able to find your way from here. See? The fog's lifted.' He turns the door handle and helps her to the running board but stays inside. 'Best of luck to you, now.'

'Luck is always temporarily on loan from someone else, you know. Sooner or later it runs out.'

He makes a helpless gesture with his hands. Edith glances back at him. He's shrivelled up inside his skin.

‘This is a murdering world, so it is, ma’am. But God save Ireland.’

The driver crunches the gears, and the vehicle pulls away, its door swinging shut.

A chilly twist of night air nicks her hat brim, making it flap. Her skin pimples. There are just a few foggy tatters now. By the light of the moon, profligate in its radiance, Edith can see railway arches. A row of houses with muslin curtains at the windows. A queue of motorised hackney cabs. Unexpectedly, she feels ravenous for a pot of tea and lashings of hot, buttery toast. She waits for a motorcycle to splutter past, leaving an evil cloud in its wake, before crossing the road to the hackneys.

‘Netherton Grove, Chelsea,’ she tells the cabbie.

Edith’s knows she’s had a narrow escape. Something precious has been restored to her.

Life.

Chapter 20

‘Edith, were you insane going out in the fog?’ It’s Boney, who has parked herself in Mabel and Boyle’s house.

‘My dear, thank goodness you’re home safe. Dame Ethel and I have been worried sick about you.’ Tension is visible in Mabel’s pursed-up mouth – partly as a result of Boney’s thunderclap presence, Edith guesses.

‘I’d sell my soul for a hot bath. Might I have one, do you suppose, Mab?’

‘Of course. I’ll send Doris up to draw it for you right away. Do sit down, Edith. You look all done in.’ She melts away to issue instructions.

‘Tell her not to stint on the bath salts. Lavender if you have them. Good for rheumatism,’ Boney calls after Mabel. ‘I say, you’ve been sick all over the front of your blouse, Edith.’

‘Putrid, isn’t it? I took a funny turn. What are you doing here, Boney?’

‘I came to invite you to the highlight of the music season. But when I saw how worried Mrs Somerville was, naturally I stayed to support her. I’m directing the overture to my Cornish opera, *The Wreckers*, at the Royal Albert Hall next week. They had an unexpected gap in their programme and asked me to oblige. Queen Mary may attend – I’ve been in touch with one of her ladies-in-waiting about it. My sister met her at a supper in Lady Shelby’s.’

‘I’m afraid I won’t be here next week. I have to go back to Ireland as soon as possible.’

‘Nonsense, you can’t possibly leave. I won’t hear of it.’

‘Boney, I don’t have the energy for a row.’

‘You’re overwrought, Edith. Nobody’s rowing.’

‘You are.’

‘I really do need you at the Albert Hall next week.’

‘And I simply can’t be there, I’m afraid.’

The door opens and Mabel’s head appears through the gap. ‘Your bath’s ready, Edith. I’ve left a glass of brandy beside the soap dish. You look like you could use a pick-me-up.’

‘You’re an angel, Mab.’

‘Shall I come up and keep you company while you bathe, Edith?’ asks Boney.

Mabel’s eyebrows are scandalised.

‘Would you mind not, dear?’ says Edith. ‘I’m too exhausted to concentrate on a word anyone says.’

‘Quite right,’ says Mabel. ‘Edith, don’t trouble to come downstairs afterwards. I’ll send you up some supper on a tray. You can have it in bed.’

‘But I need to talk to you about my overture.’

Edith waggles three fingers in farewell.

‘I’ll be back in the morning,’ Boney tells her back.

*

Later, checking on Edith in bed, Mabel remarks, ‘I thought she meant to stay the night, invited or not.’

‘Dame Ethel Smyth no sooner thinks of something than she does it.’

‘You look worn out, Edith. I wish you’d stayed home today.’

‘Me too, Mab. But I was safe as the Bank of England, waiting out the fog with Mr Tring in Tothill Street. He was kindness personified. I think I could sleep now, if you don’t mind.’ She makes a mental note to send Mr Tring a telegram in the morning. She never turned up for their appointment – although he may have been unable to keep it, too.

‘Not at all, my dear,’ says Mabel. ‘I’ll take your tray. Sleep tight.’

Exhausted though she is, Edith finds herself unable to drop off. Camel’s face is planted in her mind. That single, awful eye. The way his mouth coiled into a sneer. She clicks on her bedside light, fetches paper and a pencil, and props herself up against pillows. An automatic writing session is bound to help. Habit helps her to enter a state of trancelike stillness. Soon, she is communicating with Martin.

‘That swine has me in a bit of a funk,’ Edith says.

nowonder hes a loathsome skunk high ti me you returned to drishane

This is exactly what Edith wants to hear, although it feels as if she’s being cowardly.

‘But what about *Flurry’s Wedding*?’

*you can make copies at home and send it to other theatre managers one swallow
doesnt make a summer nothing canbe read from one rejection*

‘Will I be safe in Ireland? Will that monster come after me?’

*he was born to dangle on the endofaroperoperope skippingskipppingskippping rope
hope soap*

And nothing else is forthcoming from Martin that evening.

*

True to her word, Boney is back in Chelsea next morning. To spare Mabel, Edith takes her walking as far as Brompton Cemetery, where there are seats near the main avenue. A morning in bed to recuperate would have been preferable, but Edith has decided to leave London on the *Irish Mail* that evening, and there are errands to run before she goes. The eight-forty-five train from Euston connects with the overnight sailing from Holyhead to Dublin. Mabel received her decision without comment, apart from promising

some Scotch eggs as eatables for the six-hour train journey, and volunteering Doris to help pack her trunk. Boney is being less cooperative.

Edith rests on a bench beside a barbered patch of grass, watching a woman in deepest mourning attend to a grave. Boney is too agitated to sit and rampages around, crushing early primroses underfoot. Her feet meet the ground on assertive terms, hitting it as decisively as drumsticks against goatskin.

‘This may be your last opportunity to see me direct my own work, Edith.’

‘There’ll be other triumphs I can share.’

‘Not like this. I insist, Edith. I absolutely insist on having you in the audience.’

‘You won’t miss me with Queen Mary there.’

‘I’d always miss you, whoever was there. Change your plans. Do, please.’

A shadow touches Edith and she startles, until she realises it’s only a man walking past to join the mourning woman – her son, perhaps. He takes her arm and they walk along the central avenue towards the chapel.

‘Edith?’ says Boney. ‘You aren’t listening.’

‘Yes I am. You want me to change my plans. But I can’t.’

‘You must.’

‘The world doesn’t revolve around you, Boney.’

Ethel Smyth throws herself down on the bench beside Edith. ‘Don’t you understand? I’ll never conduct again. This is probably going to be my last time. You see, it’s not just one of my ears troubling me now. Both of them are booming and singing.’

‘You mean your other ear has started acting up?’

Edith nods. ‘Not all the time, but often enough. Soon, I’ll be as deaf as a post.’

Edith is appalled. Poor Boney. Her refusal to stay must seem heartless. For once, that vivid face beneath its tricorne hat looks vulnerable. She touches Boney’s arm. ‘I’m so sorry, dearest.’

‘That’s why next week is madly important. I’m going to storm the gates of heaven with my music. If it’s to be my last performance, by jingo it will be my finest. If I have to bow out, it’ll be with a bang and not a whimper.’

‘Good for you. I’m proud of you, you splendid thing.’

In a small voice, Boney says, ‘Except I’m not. I couldn’t admit this to anyone else, but I’m frightened.’ She lays her head on Edith’s lap. ‘I’m staring defeat in the eye. But I won’t go down without a fight.’

Edith pats her back. ‘You’ll be magnificent.’

‘I am, usually. But these stupid ears are liable to let me down. With no warning. I could be standing in front of the orchestra, baton in hand, royalty in the box behind me – and bong! Deafer than deaf. Dearest, life has never seemed blacker. I’m feeling utterly desperate. I can’t bear to lose you, too.’

Edith is in a quandary. Is there any way to explain why she has to leave London? Not without revealing she was abducted – and Boney will react to the news by trooping straight off to Scotland Yard, with or without her. Her conscience pricks about the field marshal. But he’ll be fine, surely. He must have protection. A phalanx of it. When she went to the police about the whistler, she ended up kidnapped. There’s no telling what might happen to her if she goes to the authorities about Camel. Sir Henry Wilson will be fine.

Boney lifts her face from Edith’s knee, eyes moist. ‘Say you’ll stay with me, Edith. Help me to face whatever lies ahead. You’re so stout-hearted, you’ll infect me with your pluck.’

‘Oh Boney, if only you knew how spineless I truly am.’

‘Well then, move into Coign with me, why don’t you – there’s plenty of room for two – and we can be spineless together.’

Edith recoils, but tries to hide it. She eases Boney's head off her lap. 'Oh look, your hat's crooked. Let me fix it. I wish I could stay for your overture. Believe me, I do. But it can't be helped.'

'You force me to tell you about the surprise I was planning for you.'

'Surprise?'

'I mean to dedicate the concert to you. I was going to announce it from the stage.'

'Oh, Boney.'

'Now will you stay?'

'I can't. I simply have to go back home to Ireland.'

'Why now?'

'I have my reasons.'

'Give me one good reason. Just one. I'll shut up if you do.'

'I've spent long enough away from Drishane. My duty is there.'

'Drishane is your brother's show. Why should you have the trouble of it?'

Because he doesn't know how to run it. Because it feels as if she's the only Somerville interested in saving the house for the next generation. Because apathy will root out the family more thoroughly than the IRA, if they're not careful. 'Do we have to go through all this again?'

Boney's mood pops as abruptly as a soap bubble. She springs to her feet and begins prowling about again. 'You're living in a fool's paradise. Don't you know the wonderful life you could have if you shrugged off Drishane, and your family, and Ireland? I thought we meant something to one another.'

'Of course, we do. But don't you understand? Drishane, and my family, and Ireland are mostly what make life wonderful for me. It wouldn't be the same without them.'

'Ireland? Wonderful? With murder gangs roaming the countryside?'

'Drishane is a safe place.'

‘If it’s safe, how come your unspeakable countrymen order you about at gunpoint?’

How were they able to stroll in and steal your horses and jewellery?’

‘That was last year. Old grievances are settled now. There’s a treaty. Listen, Boney, I really must get going. I’ve ever such a lot to do if I’m to catch the boat train. I want to go to Fortnum’s for Bath Olivers and Madeleines, I need to order flowers for Mabel, send a telegram to Drishane, and I saw a tortoiseshell moustache comb in Regent Street that’s perfect for Cameron.’

‘You treat your family as if they’re semi-divine. Spend your money on yourself, why don’t you?’

‘On what? I need nothing.’

‘We could travel.’

Boney halts in front of Edith and stands there, rocking on her heels. ‘If you won’t come and live with me in Coign, at least let’s take a trip, dearest. Remember what fun we had in Sicily? We could go to Egypt and see the pyramids together. You’ve never travelled by dromedary, have you? There’s nothing to match it. Please, Edith, say you’ll come away with me. Somewhere far, far away. Just the two of us.’

Boney is keyed up – unpredictable. Her urgency unnerves Edith. ‘I couldn’t possibly.’

‘You’ve changed. You’ve forgotten what it’s like to be spontaneous.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous!’

‘When’s the last spontaneous thing you did? You see? You can’t remember. You think of yourself as an artist but you’re a Victorian maiden-miss – conventional to your fingertips. It’s not experience you lack, it’s emotion.’

‘And you have too much. You’re emotionally extravagant.’

‘I’m offering you a lifeline, if only you knew it.’

‘You’re hectoring me.’

‘I’ve never hectored anyone in my life.’

‘You’re the high priestess of hectoring!’

‘Is it any wonder, when you try to leave me in the cloakroom for months on end, like a forgotten umbrella? I deserve more. I demand more!’

Edith measures out her words. ‘Stop it, Boney. Just stop it. I’m sorry about your ears, honestly, I am. But I see rocks ahead for us if you insist on pursuing this ridiculous line. You always want more than I can give you.’

‘I’m greedy for life. I make no apologies for it.’

Edith sighs, and offers an olive branch. ‘Why not spend Easter in Castletownshend? It’s only a month away. You can criticise my organ-playing in St Barrahanes. It’ll be warm enough for boating, and we can walk together in the bluebell woods. The bluebells are always my favourite part of April. They won’t mend your ears, but they’ll raise your spirits, I promise. Say you’ll come and stay in Drishane.’

‘Draft-ridden, ramshackle barn! I’d rather die in a ditch!’

‘In that case, I shan’t ever invite you again.’

‘Oh, don’t sulk. You know I don’t mean it.’

‘Why say it?’

‘Because you keep on retreating into your Irish world where I can’t follow you.’

‘I’ve just asked you to stay.’

‘You know precisely what I mean. You’re unavailable to me there, somehow, surrounded by your Irish mists and bogs. I know Castletownshend is Shangri-La to you, but I’ve had enough of the place. I want to be with you – but elsewhere. With no distractions. How about New Zealand? What an odyssey that would be! I’ve always had a hankering to go. You haven’t really travelled until you’ve been on another continent. Won’t you consider it? For my sake?’

‘No, Boney, and you must stop pushing me. It’s tiresome. I haven’t the money for such a trip. And before your offer, I don’t want to borrow it from you. My mind is made up. I spoke to Martin last night and she agrees it’s time I went home.’

Boney says nothing.

Edith rises, gathering her umbrella and bag.

A dam burst explodes in her path.

‘Your automatic writing is muddleheaded tosh! You use it to suit yourself!’

‘You don’t have a psychic bone in your body. How would you know?’

‘I know codology when I see it. Martin’s dead, Edith, dead and gone. But I’m here. Living and breathing. And loving. You can have *me* if you want me.’

Shocked to the core, Edith chooses to disregard the second part of what she’s just heard. ‘Martin is as real to me now as she ever was. Death changes nothing.’

‘She’s a figment of your imagination. That automatic writing comes from your consciousness, not hers.’

Edith covers her ears. ‘Enough! I won’t listen to another word!’

Boney tugs away her hands. ‘I’ll make you hear this if it’s the last thing I do. It’s no wonder you can’t write for the stage – every ounce of your imaginative powers is bound up in the spirit world. An artist must mean what they’re doing. But you’re too busy pretending.’

‘Goodbye, Boney. I’m off to Fortnum & Mason’s now. I shan’t have time to see you before I leave. Good luck at the Albert Hall.’

‘You don’t know what to do with my love, Edith Somerville. That’s your misfortune. And one day you’ll regret it.’

Chapter 21

Ireland's morning skies are brooding, like a forehead wrinkled in thought. Edith disembarks in the prosperous port of Kingstown, just outside Dublin, and transfers by train to the city's Westland Row railway station. Under its glass dome, a troop train is preparing to depart. So the newspapers are right, the regiments are being called back to England. The men are boisterous, and she listens to their banter while a porter collects her luggage.

'I'll miss the black stuff,' shouts one.

'Won't miss the Micks,' yells another.

'Apart from the girls, Nigel,' cries a third. 'Bet you've left a little Nigel behind.'

The porter trundles up from the platform with her bags and crooks his eyebrows in their direction. 'Can you imagine the havoc those boyos would have wreaked, day after tomorrow, if they had the chance?'

'Why the day after tomorrow?'

'St Patrick's Day, ma'am. Soldiers always drink the pubs dry then.'

Mid-March already. 'I suppose the natives give them a run for their money.'

'Not them boys. The Lancashires. They'd drink the eye out of a cat.'

Edith doubles his tip in honour of that dash of local colour, but not before instructing him to wheel her luggage down the ramp to the street and hire a hackney cab for her.

It carries her along Dublin's noisy, smelly quays to Kingsbridge station, from where she travels on a series of stop-start trains towards Cork. None of them with a restaurant car. The landscape unspools through the centre of Ireland, magic lantern fashion – from the flat plains of Kildare to the lush meadows of Tipperary. She sees churches with weathervanes, a bridge across a river, a round tower. The further south-west she advances, the less substantial England becomes in her mind. Ireland is her reality. And a pre-Industrial Revolution world it is, compared with London's chimneystacks. The engine's rhythmic

drone lulls her into a state of quiet joy – she knows it’s no Eden, yet the landscape fills her with a sense of the divine.

Sometimes, the tracks run so close to the road that she catches glimpses of people going about their daily business. Motor cars are less commonplace here. She spots a messenger boy fiddling with his bicycle wheel, perhaps patching the tyre, and notices a farmer’s cart stop to give a lift to some children on the roadside. Sheep and cattle are freckled across the hillsides. A brindled greyhound lopes alongside the train for a few minutes, before dropping back.

At Limerick Junction, where the train crawls into the station, people emerge from their whitewashed cottages to watch its arrival. They’re picturesque, with their thatches and half-doors, often with a horseshoe nailed on for luck. Low hedges have clothes draped to dry over them. When the train whistles, the occupants of the cottages wave, as if greeting old friends. Edith has visited enough of those cabins to imagine what lies inside: a smoke-blackened kitchen with low *súgan* chairs and stools, a wooden settle which doubles as a bed, a spinning wheel in the corner, a kettle hanging from a metal crane over the glowing turf. She’s eaten their bread baked in a pot under woody ash, which lends it a distinctive flavour, and drunk their sweet, stewed tea, sometimes with a splash of *poitín* in it. The crathur, they call it. They have holy pictures on their walls – tasteless art, she thinks of it – and prints of Robert Emmet and Daniel O’Connell, or maybe Lord Edward Fitzgerald. She supposes De Valera and Collins will be added to the repertoire, in time.

‘Change here for Limerick or Waterford,’ carols the train guard.

She beckons to him. ‘I have bags in the luggage car that need to be transferred onto the Skibbereen train in Cork city. Somerville, three pieces.’

‘No bother, ma’am.’

‘You won’t forget? You look very young to be a train guard.’

‘Me, is it? Sure, I’m as old as a pot of last week’s tea.’

Whooping with most unladylike laughter, she slips him a coin.

The train idles as passengers disembark and embark. Two men in homespun tweed pass along the corridor, engrossed in conversation.

‘Act for ourselves... give the people a chance... an end to inherited privilege,’ she overhears.

All this talk of Ireland’s independence makes her impatient when it’s clear the people still don’t possess much. What difference will a change of regime make to them?

The train shrills its departure. Wheels grind and screech. Automatically, Edith waves at the country people raising their hands shoulder high, faces wreathed in smiles. She used to believe that if they didn’t own much, yet they never seemed to want much. Were they deceiving her – or was she deceiving herself?

She considers this world through the train window – there is a sense of fixed places within it. Just as the patchwork fields are fixed into place by the stone walls separating them. But she knows that unchanging quality is no longer the case. Three years of war in Ireland have shaken something loose. Come what may, we’ll always have Drishane and its lands, or at least most of them, Edith reminds herself. But is that another of her fictions? Her thoughts, chug-chugging to the engine’s beat, make her uneasy. She fidgets at the cuff of her new, grey suede gloves.

The train’s approach to Cork city distracts her. Here, single cottages give way to a straggle of terraces and then to tall houses and warehouses, spaced so tightly they catch one another at the heels. Amid clanging doors, puffs of steam and bellowing porters, she steps onto the platform at Glanmire Road Railway Station. As if on a signal, a small, white missile anoints the back of her right glove. She looks up. Pigeons are fluttering about the station roof’s metal fretwork. That dropping is meant to be a sign of luck. It means she’s been singled out. Dashed inconvenient, though.

She hurries into the public convenience to dab at it, before crossing over to another platform. There, she joins a smaller train waiting to carry passengers to Bandon, Clonakilty and Skibbereen. On board, passengers mill about, blocking the aisles and carriages, arranging themselves and their belongings – mostly secured with leather belts and lengths of string – to their satisfaction. The train releases a series of authoritative blasts. Metal heaves out a groan, the engine jolts and they are shunted forward to the accompaniment of slamming doors. Advertising hoardings for health tonics, ladies' fashions and a music hall production swim past. As they exit the station, the door to her second-class carriage opens. A priest in clerical black enters, nods at his fellow travellers, and takes a seat next to Edith. He removes a book and pair of spectacles from his bag, and places the bag in the overhead luggage rack. From habit, she looks at his reading matter, expecting it to be his breviary. It's *Whitaker's Almanack* – the only book Flurry Knox reads.

Edith wonders what Flurry will make of her failure to place *Flurry's Wedding*. She half-expects to see him reading the yearbook over the priest's shoulder – he's addicted to its information about postage rates, cab fares, government salaries, the opening hours of the British Museum, Easter, Passover and Ramadan dates, and miscellaneous anniversaries including the death date of Napoleon III. She met the emperor's descendants in Sicily with Boney. A genteel little bandbox duke, and his sister in pearls the size of hen's eggs. Poor Boney, she's her own worst enemy. Things will never be the same between them.

'Excuse me, Father. I've been away for a while. Are we out of the woods yet, do you suppose? Is the country settled? It's just that I saw a regiment evacuating from Dublin.'

'Not yet,' he says. 'But please God we're getting there. The generals are pulling out their men very slowly, to be on the safe side – still plenty of boots on the ground in Dublin, Cork and the Curragh.'

'The barbed wire has come down in Dublin.'

'Do you say so? That's a good start.'

‘It would be lovely if the peace held. The country people have suffered dreadfully.’

‘Indeed and they have. Mankind has an extraordinary capacity for war. But peace always breaks through, regular as the tides.’

She returns to the passing scenery, wilder now, the fields irregular and separated by gorse bushes, the horizon a purple blur. The sea isn’t far away. If she rolled down the window she could inhale its saltiness, but smuts of soot from the engine are liable to blow in. The glass is grimed with it. How clear the terrain is beyond this train. Some of that clarity seeps into her thoughts. London wasn’t real life – this is reality. Ireland is where she belongs. And nothing will dislodge her.

*

Mike Hurley meets her at Skibbereen station, Tara in the trap. He tips his hat – ‘Miss Edith. Your telegram arrived this morning. You’ve been missed’ – before collecting her luggage from the porter.

Tara neighs, pawing the ground with front hooves until attention is paid to her. While Mike fastens Edith’s bags into places with rope, the mare nudges her palm for sugar, and Edith conjures up a lump saved from her cup of tea at Kingsbridge. A donkey and cart clops past, the driver’s feet dangling behind its tail, his wife sitting on a sack behind and facing in the opposite direction. Daylight is nearly leeches from the sky, but Edith recognises Barney and Nora Egan, who farm a few acres near the famine graveyard. Their son ran the holding with them, but was executed in Cork jail a year ago. She wonders how they manage on their own. Perhaps the younger boy who emigrated will return home from Boston.

‘Grand, soft evening, Miss Somerville. Keeping well, Mike?’ Egan calls out, and Edith greets the couple by name. Barney nods and mutters a few words, but Nora Egan doesn’t speak – it’s said not a word has passed her lips since her son was hanged.

Mike Hurley laces his hands to give Edith a footrest, she stands onto his palms and clammers aboard. She sits side-on to him, in the back of the trap, drawing comfort from his stable yard smell. She’s content for him to take the reins. He’s a natural born horseman.

Beyond the town, a dash of light rain tickles her face, but the shower is over almost before it began. They jingle along, her eyes rested by the raindrops glinting on the foliage, caught in the arc of their passing lights.

‘How are things in Drishane, Mike?’

‘No complaints.’

‘And in the village? Are they for Dev or Collins?’

‘The Treaty doesn’t please all. And them that’s not pleased is a contrary bunch. Father Lambe reads them the riot act in his sermons.’

‘How do the people take it?’

‘There’s some mutter “Up the rebels!” but not so loud he can hear them. Father Lambe runs a tight ship.’

‘I had a letter from Master Cameron in Switzerland. He’s planning to come home soon.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Don’t you think he’s been gone long enough?’

‘No harm for him to sit it out a wheen longer. Till he sees what way the wind blows.’

‘It doesn’t sound as if Michael Collins is in charge of his own men.’

‘Indeed and he’s not. There’s anti-Treaty boyos the length and breadth of the country aren’t too fond of him. Particularly here, in his home county of Cork. They’re

calling him a sell-out. There's trouble coming, Miss Edith. Things'll be a sight worse before they're better.'

Edith's mind sheers away from images she prefers not to dwell on.

'How's your comrade? The one that's powerful fond of music?' asks Hurley. 'Sorry to see you go, I dare say.'

Comrade? That's the best description she's heard yet of her relationship with Boney. 'I suppose she was sorry. But she's a busy person. Plenty to occupy her. I meant to say, I found a buyer for Pilot and Trumpeter in England. Friends of the George Bernard Shaws. I'll be asking you to travel over to Oxford with the horses, as soon as we can pin down the arrangements. They're still with your friend in Leap, I take it?'

'Still there, Miss Edith.'

Tara pricks her ears, rounding the bend towards Castletownshend. Before Mike opens his mouth to direct her with a click of his tongue, the mare veers to the right, carrying them through granite gateposts and along a shady, tree-lined avenue.

In the minute or so it takes them pass along the driveway, Edith resolves to write a letter to Boney before bedtime. She rehearses it in her mind:

You must make arrangements to see that Viennese ear specialist you mentioned. He may have a cure. I'd like to go with you if you're willing to have company. I should be able to get away again after Easter. Meanwhile, you mustn't play golf or tennis in the rain. And thank you, dear, for putting up with my vagaries. I cannot change friends as readily as my gown and so you remain stuck with me, if you'll have me, as a comrade.

They swing right again, towards the front door which lies ajar, despite the night air, lamps lit in welcome either side of it. Loulou bolts out, yapping up a storm. Poor Dooley, there'll never be another like him. He was always first to greet her. Still, this salutation from Loulou is gratifying. Mike Hurley jumps down and extends a hand to guide her from the trap. Her aches and pains have multiplied after the Irish Sea crossing. She has some

mustard plasters in her overnight bag, she'll put hot poultices on her back and neck, by and by.

Loulou darts about like a fish, tail quivering, before making a flying leap and landing in Edith's arms. Lavish with saliva, she licks Edith's entire face including both ears. This excess of affection charms Edith into forgetting her stiff joints.

'What a little kangaroo you are. Clearly, absence makes the heart grow fonder.'

For a few moments, she stand and looks at the house. In an unpredictable world it remains unchanged. Drishane restores her to herself. A half-remembered bible quote drifts through her mind. Something about the peace which passeth all understanding.

On a whim, she goes to the kitchen window and looks in. Philomena is in her favourite armchair, smoothing buttermilk over her eczema, while Mrs O'Shea is kneading dough at the table. Her cat, Tiger, is poised on the table-top, vigilant for whatever can be hijacked. She turns her poisonous, pond-green eyes on Edith, but stands her ground. Edith gazes her fill. How satisfying it is to reach journey's end.

She raps on the window and Philomena and Mrs O'Shea's faces light up. But the cat's triangular face registers alarm and she flits away.

Edith and Philomena meet in the inner hallway, each hurrying towards the other.

'You're as welcome as the flowers in May, Miss Edith!'

'Each time I make it over and back to London, it feels as if I've accomplished something as difficult as Hannibal crossing the Alps. Any chance of a pot of tea?'

'Of course, Miss Edith. You'll have it in jig time. Sure, the kettle's always boiling. We've supper ready for you, whenever you've a mind to take it. How was London-town?'

'Oh, I lolloped about enjoying myself. But after a while, you realise there's no place like home.'

'No truer word. Where would you like your tea?'

‘With you and Mrs O’Shea, of course. In the kitchen. I’ll just wash my hands first. I’m dusty from travelling.’

‘Mrs O’Shea has one of her cherry cakes baked fresh for you.’

Philomena trots ahead, taking a passing swat at a dusty rubber plant with the hem of her apron. It occurs to Edith that Philomena knows Drishane in intimate ways she can never match. At floor level from scrubbing, at cupboard level from tidying and itemising contents, at ceiling level from balancing on a ladder attacking spiderwebs. Philomena is familiar with its plates and glasses, its knives and napkin rings. She beats its rugs and airs its curtains, polishes its windows and sweeps its passageways. It may have been commissioned by Edith’s forebear Tom the Merchant, it may be her family history embedded in the brickwork. But it’s still standing because of Philomena Minihane, and other Philomenas before her.

Each to their own, thinks Edith, and nuzzles Loulou before setting her on the floor. ‘You’re heavier than when I went away, Lou. Mrs O’Shea’s been feeding you cake.’

As if conjured up, the kitchen door swings open. ‘Miss Edith!’ cries Mrs O’Shea. She has gained an extra ruffle of skin under her chin in Edith’s absence. ‘Welcome home! As soon as you take the weight off your feet, I’ve a message for you from my sister who’s cook to the Salters. They’ve a new litter of fox terriers, born to a sister of Dooley’s. The pick of the litter is yours for the asking.’

Edith unpins her hat. ‘I couldn’t possibly.’

‘Yerrah, time’s a great healer, Miss Edith.’

Chapter 22

Frisky as a lamb, Edith jump-steps across a brook frothing like wedding lace over pebbles. Even her damp shoes and the twinge in her leg as she lands don't cause her regret. Sometimes in life, a leap has to be taken. It's summertime. A sun-gilt morning in late June. Just ahead is Pinker, her new fox terrier puppy, who yipped as he splashed through the water and doubled back to repeat the manoeuvre. Edith tried to entice out Loulou for some exercise, too, but she point-blank refused to leave Mrs O'Shea's kitchen.

The day has been set aside for sketching. In a satchel, strapped across her front, are a collapsible easel and painting materials. Grass swishes against her legs, seagulls whirr overhead and the sea breeze is at her back. The climb is steep going – once she raced up these Carbery hills on horseback, following the hounds – but she won't indulge in nostalgia for what has been. Besides, she has a flask of coffee and sandwiches packed to revive her when she reaches the top.

She sits on springy ground clotted with clover and buttercups, bees bumbling among them, and drinks it there. Somewhere nearby a thrush chants its matins. Pinker curls into her lap, paws on her breastbone, and begs prettily for scraps. On an impulse, she unpins her tam o'shanter to feel the sun on her scalp, and he snatches up the woolen hat as a plaything.

'Drop it, Pinker. Drop it. Do as you're told. Let go.'

She wipes it off with a handful of heather. He's learning. It'll take time.

Edith leans back on an elbow and shades her eyes to take in the view. That line where sky meets sea never fails to enchant her. The land makes jagged forays into the sea, and corners of it have broken off and floated out to form islands or crops of semi-submerged rocks. Foam-coated waves hint at the restless motion of the pilgrim ocean. Fishing boats with white sails bob along near Reen Pier. Her painter's eye notices how

light searches out water and bounces off its surface. In the distance, if she squints, she can distinguish the ruins of the O'Driscoll castle, clan chieftains here before the potato came to Ireland. St Barrahané's is easier to pick out, where Martin lies in the churchyard. One day, she'll be buried beside her. But not any time soon.

'Plenty of jizz in me yet,' she tells Pinker, who licks her hand.

There is no longer a destroyer in Castlehaven Bay – the British evacuation from Ireland is almost complete now, and Michael Collins is chairman – such a funny title, she thinks – of the new Irish Free State. Not a republic, after all, but a dominion with a role for the King, and a partitioned-off slice at the top called Northern Ireland. The longed-for peace has splintered into civil war, bitterest of all conflicts. Brother versus brother, friends versus friend, Free Stater versus Republicans. A point of no return has been passed.

Cameron is home again, following political events meticulously – as closely as Edith watches him, in case he sells any more of Drishane's lands. Her brother is a Collins man, he tells her, and predicts he'll have crushed all resistance before summer is over. And then what? Her spirits are wearied by the lot of them. Yet war seems distant on this hilltop. Life is what she feels in this place. Perhaps even eternity.

Near a windblown tree, Edith sets up her easel, pins on paper, unfolds her sketching stool and sets to work. Even in summertime, a palette of mossy colours is needed to capture the scene. Pinker romps around, chasing imaginary enemies, his doggy burbling folding into the peaceful background noise. But when he begins scuffling at the trunk of the tree, her concentration is interfered with, and she puts aside her pencils to investigate. Pinker has unearthed some bones belonging to a small animal. She pours water over them and admires their bleached purity. A fox may have feasted on a rabbit on this hilltop. She's not the first picnicker. Pinker is reluctant to yield his find but is bought off with a triangle of ham sandwich. The bones belong in her picture.

This is one of those days when she wishes she'd devoted more of her life to art than literature. It was Martin who pressed them to become writers. Left to her own devices, she'd have been an artist, instead of juggling both. Edith knows art is the finest part of her.

That's enough preparatory business with pencils. Pig-hair brush in hand, she begins to paint with water colours. While one corner of her mind concentrates on transferring what she observes to paper, another considers an idea for a new novel that's nibbling at her. It's a decaying Big House story, perhaps that's why she felt compelled to include the bones. Long ago, she and Martin discussed the outline. It concerns a minor dynasty in Ireland which rises and rules and riots, before crashing in ruins – yet clinging by their fingernails to the ancestral home. It's an ambitious project. Is she capable of tackling it? Even with Martin's help?

Hours pass during which Pinker explores the hillside, vomits up some earthworms and takes a nap, Edith working steadily all the while. Finally, she stops and examines her sketch. It seems to her she's caught something of the essence of the landscape – mountains, sea and sky funnelled onto the page. Despite the sunshine, her scene is melancholy, an effect caused by the way the shadows fall. Or it could be because of those tiny, picked-clean bones. 'If it'll do, it'll do,' she says, and packs up her equipment. Time for home. She had intended staying out for longer – Cameron had business in Skibbereen and planned to lunch at the West Cork – but her limbs have stiffened. Her sixty-fourth birthday crept up on her in May. Boney sent a card with a saucy message.

She whistles for Pinker, who abandons his games and dances around her ankles, before scooting ahead. Going downhill is as challenging as the uphill trek with this lame leg of hers. Still, she'll be able to work those sketches into a decent landscape. On the flat, she realises she's lost Pinker again. Standing still to catch her breath, she finds herself holding it. A russet fox with a black mask is a few feet away. A dog fox in the whole of his health, with a fine brush. He appears through a gap in the hedge, sniffs the air, and listens,

ears cocked. Catching her scent, he turns his yellow eyes on Edith and holds her gaze momentarily, before sliding away. It's almost as if he dissolves into thin air. If she can hold his image in her mind, she'll paint him.

Pinker rushes up, twitching with excitement, and noses the ground where the fox stood. 'Too late,' she tells him. 'Anyhow you're not big enough to take on a fox. Give it time.'

She continues homewards, listening to a chorus of country sounds – clucking, mooing, honking, bleating. Hens are perched on half doors, hopeful of food. A flock of geese commandeer the road, and she waits in a ditch until they've passed, holding Pinker, who's inclined to give chase. A barefoot goose girl, her skirt kilted at her knees, calls out a greeting. One of the Treacy girls by the look of her. Nora Treacy has gone to Chicago. Would her sister be able to help out with the cleaning at Drishane? She must mention her to Philomena.

Back at Drishane, a motorcycle with sidecar is parked outside the front door. Mike Hurley emerges from around the side of the house.

'Visitors, Miss Edith. A couple of lads from that new Civic Guard.'

Edith turns waxen. 'Is it about Master Cameron?'

'Didn't say what it was about.'

She presses her hands together, readying herself. 'Take Pinker with you, would you Mike? I don't want him biting strangers' ankles. That's how we lost Dooley.'

Waiting in the inner hall, leaning against a desk where her grandfather once sat to accept his tenants' rents or their excuses, two men in dark blue uniforms and peaked caps are waiting. The Civic Guard, a police force set up to replace the recently-disbanded Royal Irish Constabulary, hasn't bedded down yet – tensions keep flaring between ex-IRA members and those who belonged to the RIC. Cameron claims the IRA enlisted for the sole purpose of destabilising it.

Edith enters, composed of sharp edges, determined to deal with them quickly. The warning from that Camel creature isn't easily set aside. The men straighten at her approach.

'Miss Somerville?' The burlier of the two addresses her.

'I am she.'

'My name is Sergeant Maguire and this is Guard Tomelty. We'd like a word with you please.'

An Ulsterman – Monaghan, maybe. Once, she'd have known the local policemen. There are strangers everywhere now. She notices neither man appears to be armed. Of course, the Civic Guard was established deliberately on that basis. If she must have strange men in uniform about the place, it's a relief they aren't pointing weapons at her.

'How can I help you, sergeant?'

'It's about these.' He jerks his head at the constable.

The younger man has what appears to be an old pillowcase wedged under his arm. He loosens the drawstring and pulls out a pair of riding boots. Shyly, he holds them out, like a salesman inviting her to admire his stock.

Edith strokes the leather, apple-skin smooth beneath her fingertips. She knows whose they are. Still in want of a lick of polish, too.

'I see you recognise them,' says Sergeant Maguire.

'I believe so. They look like my brother's. Aylmer Somerville.'

'Show the lady.'

Guard Tomelty rolls down the top of one of the boots.

Aylmer Somerville

Drishane House

Castletownshend

Her synapses begin clicking through the permutations of what this means. Denis must have been caught. Odd, that she should care, but she does. It was only a matter of time before his gallop was halted. Maybe it's better for him to go to jail for a while, out of harm's way. 'What happened to the man who was wearing them, sergeant?'

'Hit by an omnibus.'

'Is he... did he... is he in hospital?'

'In the ground is where he is. Dead and buried.'

'Dead?'

'As a door nail.'

The sergeant's outline appears to waver and recede. She blinks hard, several times, clearing her vision.

'That's right, ma'am. Killed on the spot. In the middle of an act of stupidity. I suppose he'd call it heroism.' He shakes his head.

'I don't understand.'

'He was running away. Being chased by a crowd. In London, it was. The police there contacted us for help identifying him. On account of these boots he was wearing.'

'The boots. Yes, I see. They were stolen during a raid here last October. Another brother, Colonel Somerville, Master of Drishane, reported it.'

'Write that down, Tomelty. Aye, I've read the report. There's no mention of any boots stolen. A horse, some jewellery and silver, is all.'

'I suppose Colonel Somerville didn't think it worth mentioning. The boots aren't of much value. But one of the intruders helped himself to them. The colonel can corroborate what I say, and two members of the household were also present. Our cook and housemaid. They're here at the moment if you need to speak to them, but I'm afraid my brother is attending to business in Skibbereen.'

‘Guard Tomelty will need to take statements from whoever was on the premises during the raid.’

‘Of course. Do you mean now?’

‘No time like the present.’

‘If you’d care to follow me, guard.’

‘You can’t be present when he interviews them, Miss Somerville,’ warns the sergeant.

‘Naturally not.’

Edith leads the young civic guard to the kitchen, where Philomena and Mrs O’Shea start talking about making him something to eat to build him up. ‘But I don’t need building up,’ he protests. ‘I’m here on official business.’ She leaves him alone to fend them off, if he can.

Back in the inner hall, head on one side, Sergeant Maguire is studying her grandfather’s regimental sword mounted on the wall.

‘That’d do some damage, if it was kept sharp.’

When Edith was a small girl, Grandpapa told her he sliced off noses and ears with it. She used to think he was teasing, but in later life wondered if there might be some truth in it. ‘It’s ornamental, Sergeant Maguire. I expect it saw action in its day. But that was a long time ago. In the middle of the last century, in India.’

‘Relatives of mine served in India. About these boots. A decent, sturdy pair, I grant you. But what happened his own if he swapped them? Did he leave them behind? Would you happen to have them?’

She can see the boots in her mind’s eye. Brown, ankle-high, *Made by J.J. Carroll of Listowel* on the inner back. ‘I’m afraid he took them with him.’

‘I suppose they were a battered aul’ pair, in flitters.’

‘No, they were new, but too tight. His father’s boots.’ She feels a catch in her chest at the thought of Denis’s father giving his boy the boots off his feet before he left home.

‘May I ask the name of the man captured wearing Aylmer’s?’

‘An *amadán*. That’s who he was. Don’t know that I ought to go handing out his name yet. He was a young fellow from Ireland, got mixed up in a bad business.’

‘What kind of bad business?’ She hopes he’ll tell her Camel has been put behind bars.

‘Did you hear about what happened to Field Marshall Wilson, across the water?’

Edith stiffens. She had a sleepless night after reading about his death in the newspaper, convinced Camel must have been tangled up in it. If she’d gone to the police, the field marshal might still be alive. On the other hand, she would have turned herself and her family into targets. It’s a circle she’s unable to square. She made a decision knowing someone might suffer by it. *But what choice did I have?*

She brings her hands together, knuckles showing through the skin. ‘I read about Sir Henry in the newspaper. Dreadfully sad. I hope he didn’t suffer. I hate to think his wife saw it happen – it said in the paper she did. But perhaps that’s one of their exaggerations?’

‘Hard to miss gunfire on your own doorstep. He was shot right outside his house. Eaton Place. He’d just stepped out of a hackney cab. Coming home from unveiling a war memorial in Liverpool Street station. Three men were waiting for him. Irregulars. One of them was wearing these boots.’

Edith’s throat tightens. She swallows past the constriction. ‘I’m sorry, did I hear you correctly? Are you saying the man wearing these boots killed Field Marshal Wilson?’

‘Not sure who pulled the trigger, but he was part of it. They fired on Wilson, left him bleeding to death, and made a run for it. Some members of the public chased after them. One of the gang panicked and dashed out in front of a motorised omnibus. Driver couldn’t stop. It rolled right over him.’

He's still talking but Edith doesn't take in what he's saying. Her mind is clutching at alternatives. Perhaps it wasn't Denis wearing the boots – he could have lost them, with that vagabond lifestyle of his. Or it might be a case of mistaken identity. What if he lent the boots to the whistler, or one of the others? There's a stabbing pain in her palm. She glances down and realises she is digging her nails into it. But if it's really Denis who died, then he was part of an IRA gang that assassinated the field marshal. It sounds like the sort of affair he'd be involved in. After all, he lured her to that bloodthirsty pilot with the ravaged face. Who'd have slashed her from ear to ear, if the humour took him.

'I'd take it as a favour –' She halts, regroupes and tries again. 'I'd be most awfully grateful if you'd tell me. Confidentially, of course. What's the name of the young man who died?'

'Ach, I suppose it'll all come out in the wash. I dare say the newspapers will print it. Denis Brophy, that's who he was. Nineteen years of age. Came from Listowel in County Kerry. Used an alias, forbye. Dan Keane.'

Denis Brophy. So it was her Denis. She never knew his surname. There's an inevitability to his death. She can't say it's a tragedy, or that she's truly shocked. But she does feel regret clot inside her. Denis took the wrong fork in the road.

'Such a waste.' Edith walks to the nearest window. Pinker is digging up a flowerbed, decimating her mother's dahlias, but she hasn't the energy to rap on the pane. 'And the other men he was with? Do you know anything about them?'

'Caught alive. More's the pity for them, maybes. Young fellows, aged twenty-three or twenty-four. Grew up in England, the pair of them. But, you know, Irish parents.'

She turns back to him and finds a brooding expression on his face. 'What will happen to them?'

'They're in Wandsworth Jail now. There'll be a trial, the law will run its course. Ex-soldiers, they are. Fought in the trenches. One of them lost a leg at Ypres. That's why they

didn't get away. He fell, his pal doubled back for him, and they were surrounded. Poor beggars. They weren't the ones pulling the strings. Mark my words, there's others behind this hit.'

So, they'll hang. At least Denis escaped the noose. Edith wonders if they might be the two men with tilly lamps in the warehouse. She realises she's been holding her breath, and lets it escape. 'Where will it all end?'

Sergeant Maguire clears his throat. 'Maybe that's what them'uns who ordered the killing want. For none of it to end. For the fighting to go on. And on. Why do you think Mick Collins shelled the Four Courts, the week after the field marshal met his maker? Pressure was put on him to sort things out, if you ask me. You do it, sonny Jim, or we'll do it for you.'

Edith leans her forehead against the windowpane. 'Such a waste. Boys, all of them.'

'Aye, but they caused a mountain of trouble. After the field marshal went west, the English said the Treaty was broken. That's what tumbled us back to war. And war agin our own kind, this time. Mick Collins made a choice to stand over the treaty. It was either fight the empire again, a long, drawn out handlin', or fight ourselves – and hope for a swift finish.'

'Will it be? A swift finish, I mean?'

'Aye I dare say. Ireland's had enough of revolution.'

Guard Tomelty returns, notebook in hand. A look snakes between him and his senior officer. The guard nods. Edith's story has been validated.

Sir Henry Wilson didn't approve of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, Edith recalls. A shameful and cowardly surrender to the gun, he called it. 'Is it true the field marshal drew his sabre and ran at them when he saw their weapons?' she asks.

'So the newspapers say. I wasn't there,' says the sergeant.

‘Odd, to survive that slaughterhouse of a European war and end up felled on your own doorstep.’ Guilt jabs at Edith again. She should have gone to the London police with her suspicions that he was a target. But that Camel creature terrified her. She shudders. ‘At least Sir Henry was wearing his uniform. A man like that would hate to die in his nightshirt.’

‘Up to his neck in blood, he was,’ says the young guard.

‘That’ll do, Tomelty. Speak no ill of the dead.’

The sergeant’s tone of reproof causes a blush, pink-tipped like a daisy, to creep over Guard Tomelty’s cheeks.

Suddenly, Edith wants these functionaries of the new Irish state gone from Drishane. Their presence reminds her she ought to have contacted the authorities, scared or not. ‘Now that I’ve solved the mystery for you, sergeant, is there anything else I can help you with?’

The tilt of his head shows his resentment at being dismissed. ‘Not at present. I’ll bid you good day.’

Guard Tomelty gathers up the boots and jam them into the pillowslip. Irrationally, she feels an aversion to the idea of Denis’s boots being taken away, and perhaps used as exhibits in a trial. ‘Do you need to keep them, sergeant? I should prefer to keep them, if that was at all possible.’

‘May be required for evidence, Miss Somerville. If not, they’ll be returned to you.’

*

Edith and Cameron are sitting on the lawn by a sundial which claims *I onlie count the sunnie houres*. Cameron brings her up-to-date on the news from Skibbereen, while she watches a cloud of bluer-than-blue butterflies riot among the glossy leaves of magnolia

bushes, and listens to the hum of industrious bees settling and rising from one flower to the next.

‘Shall we have a game of backgammon after dinner?’ suggests Cameron.

‘If you like.’

‘Here’s Philomena now with the drinks.’

Philomena deposits the tray with gin decanter, soda siphon and glasses on a wrought iron table. ‘Faith, but the Lord God himself would look down and pity me this day, Miss Edith.’

‘Your eczema?’

‘Exactly. The pair of yiz look as broody as hens on a clutch of eggs on them low chairs. Personally, if I sat into one of them there deck chairs I wouldn’t be fit to stand up again.’ She lowers her voice, although it is still perfectly audible. ‘Have you told the master about them boyos calling to the house, asking questions to beat the band?’

‘Indeed, I have, Philomena. He’s sorry to have missed them, aren’t you Cameron?’

‘I wish I knew what happened to those boots I left in the seaman’s chest,’ says Cameron. ‘They’d have been jolly useful for the investigation.’

‘Thank you, Philomena, that will be all,’ says Edith. She waits until they are alone. ‘But they have the men who shot Sir Henry. They have visual evidence – they don’t need circumstantial proof.’ She accepts a glass from her brother. Idly, she tries to separate out the swallow’s sweet twitter from the wren’s piercing note. Over by the rhododendron walk, her peripheral vision catches a figure in jodhpurs, hacking jacket and riding boots. Polished ones, unlike Denis’s.

‘I seem to have pins and needles in my foot, Chimp. Won’t you excuse me? I believe I’ll take a constitutional around the garden.’

Flurry Knox is lounging against a horse chestnut tree, one slim, horseman's leg crossed over the other. His bowler hat is resting on his chest and a scent of hair oil rises from him.

Despite having changed for dinner, she lowers herself to the ground and settles herself beside him on the grass. 'Mr Fox himself.'

'None other.'

'Flurry, do you ever wish time could run backwards?'

'I do not. That's a waste of a wish when there's so much else you could be wishing for.'

'Such as?'

'You tell me. You're not too old to dream up your own wishes, gerrill.'

'*Flurry's Wedding* a West End hit?'

'Ah, what's the West End to us here in Castletownshend? When we have heather to rest on, the thunder of swans' wings in flight to listen to, and the great vault of the sky above us?'

'You've turned lyrical since I saw you last. Anyone would think you'd fallen in love.'

'I have. With a long-backed hunter that's within the black of my thumbnail off sixteen hands. Which reminds me, I can't lie round here gabbing. I need to push off and seal the deal.'

A puff of laughter billows from her. Flurry Knox has always lightened her mood.

He scrambles to his feet and, by way of farewell, makes her a mock bow from the waist. 'There's a stench off the past and that's the truth of it. The future's where you want to point your nose, Edith Somerville.'

Author's Note:

In 1925, three years after the end of this novel, *The Big House of Inver* was published. It proved to be Edith Somerville's most successful solo novel – although she still insisted on using the dual Somerville and Ross signature.

She never did get *Flurry's Wedding* staged, despite revising it repeatedly over a seventeen-year period. But the Somervilles held on to Drishane House, largely thanks to her efforts, and the family still lives there.

THE PLAY'S THE THING: Edith Somerville's Stagecraft

INTRODUCTION

In their ladylike way, Somerville and Ross were sticks of dynamite. Between 1889 and 1915 they operated one of Ireland's most thriving literary partnerships, and appeared to be unstoppable. Their work was serialised in popular magazines and repackaged in book format, enjoyed predominantly favourable reviews in a broad range of influential publications, and provided an unusual level of financial autonomy by means of a self-generated income stream for women at that time.¹ The collaboration between second cousins and close friends Edith Somerville (1858-1949) and Violet Martin (Martin Ross, 1862-1915) lasted for almost three decades and produced fourteen co-authored books, including five novels, three short story collections, travel memoirs and essay compilations.² Their dual names signified "a distinctive literary product, 'the Ireland of Somerville and Ross'," according to Bette London in *Writing Double: Women's Literary Partnerships*, and assumed in their own time "the status of a minor culture industry".³ Martin's premature death at the age of fifty-three was a serious setback for Somerville.⁴ It called into doubt the continuation of their profitable writing firm, causing her position in the literary world to become insecure – a precarious situation exacerbated by her position as a member of the Ascendancy class at a time of regime change.

This shifting ground was complicated by gender. Issues of gender had become "an explicit theme" from the late nineteenth-century onwards, says James H. Murphy.⁵ The

1 Their work appeared in numerous magazines including *The Badminton Magazine*, *Black and White*, *Blackwood's Magazine*, *Cornhill Magazine*, *Lady's Pictorial* and *The World*, and they were in the fortunate position of being courted for articles. From the outset, they proved adept at approaching contacts to garner reviews and were regularly reviewed in *The Observer*, *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Daily Chronicle*, *The Athenaeum*, *The Graphic*, *The Westminster Gazette* and *The Quarterly Review*, among others.

2 Martin Ross also wrote a solo book *A St Patrick's Day Hunt* (1902), illustrated by E. O.E. Somerville, while Somerville was solely responsible for *Slipper's ABC of Foxhunting* (1903).

3 Bette London, *Writing Double: Women's Literary Partnerships* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), p.92

4 Somerville always referred to Violet Martin as Martin and this study will follow her example.

emergence of the ‘new woman’, an independent figure resistant to male control, was debated widely in literary, political and social circles; as professional writers earning a living and controlling expenditure of that income, Somerville and Ross were part of the transformation. However, they were also operating in a man’s world, interacting with a male agent, male commissioning editors and male publishers. While many women writers flourished at this time, especially as the market expanded, the business of publishing rested almost entirely in the hands of men.

Somerville had coupled herself to a masculine topic – the hunting field – and was conscious that women were believed to have limited expertise area in this area. In an astute move to silence critics, Somerville became the first female Master of Foxhounds in Ireland, with the West Carbery Hounds, a position she held for five years from 1903. She defended the expense as a way of conferring authority on the Irish R.M. stories.⁶ Still convinced of the role’s symbolic value, she revived the West Carbery pack in 1912 despite the “immediate negative financial impact” of her decision, according to her biographer Gifford Lewis.⁷ Master of Foxhounds was a station to which only those of a certain rank could aspire, highlighting how questions of gender were complicated by class identity, and interlinked with it. While gender, undoubtedly, was an issue for Somerville and other writers at this time, she was privileged by caste. As a member of the gentry she had certain advantages, predominantly through her social network, and she and Martin were assiduous in their use of contacts and well-placed relatives to promote their work.⁸

Martin’s death in December 1915 was a watershed for Somerville. Writing with Martin afforded Somerville a certain amount of cover for the public position she adopted

5 James H. Murphy, ‘Fiction, 1845-1900’, *A History of Modern Irish Women’s Literature*, eds. Heather Ingman and Cliona Ó Gallchoir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p.98

6 Referenced in E.O.E Somerville and Martin Ross Exhibition at Queen’s University Belfast, Oct-Dec 2006. Somerville succeeded her brother Aylmer in the role.

7 Gifford Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), p.261

8 Anne Jamison, *E.O.E. Somerville & Martin Ross: Female Authorship and Literary Collaboration* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2016) pp.83-5

as a writer, and without her literary associate she felt vulnerable. A few weeks after Martin's death, Somerville characterised herself as "the wretched heartbroken survivor of 'the once brilliant literary collaboration'," in a letter to her brother, Cameron.⁹ 'Survivor' rather than 'heartbroken' is the key word. To continue writing, which was both a financial and creative imperative, Somerville reinvented her relationship with Martin. She persuaded herself their group effort persisted beyond the grave, through automatic writing sessions and séances which she engaged in regularly, convinced she was discussing the work in hand with her dead partner.¹⁰ "When shall I try and write again?" she asked during her second automatic writing session on 18 June 1916, six months after Martin's death. The answer was reassuring. "When you feel impelled, my dear," came the reply, ostensibly from Martin.¹¹ Clearly, Somerville was anxious to take up her professional pen again, and as far as she was concerned, the post-1915 books were written by the two of them.¹²

This position represented an imaginative and, indeed, audacious leap whereby Somerville retained the symbolic dual signature. As a female author in a marketplace which became more daunting overnight, her insistence on the dual signature was a source not only of confidence, but of access to the advantageous Somerville and Ross label, as Anne Jamison has shown.¹³ In short, it was a risk mitigation strategy, allowing her to shield herself behind the reputation built up by their collaboration, and maintain her rights

9 Letter, Edith Somerville to Cameron Somerville, 6 January 1916, Drishane Archive, Castletownshend, Co Cork

10 Somerville's first attempt to communicate with Martin after her death convinced her that Martin wanted them to keep cooperating. In her diary, dated 16 June 1916, Somerville made the following entry about that evening's automatic writing session: "You and I have not finished our work. Dear, we shall. Be comforted. V.M." This persuaded her to keep going. Maurice Collis, *Somerville & Ross: A Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), p.177

11 *Ibid.*, p.178

12 In 1932, when Somerville was awarded an honorary Doctor of Letters degree by Trinity College Dublin, she accepted on condition that Martin Ross's name was associated with hers during the conferral. Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, p.374

13 In her study, Jamison remarks on how the automatic writing mode of communication "mimics and adopts strategies" employed during the duo's literary partnership. While Somerville convinced herself their connection was kept operational through spiritualism channels, in fact she was quarrying their notebooks, letters and manuscripts, along with remembered conversations, to write novels they had discussed and partly plotted. Anne Jamison, *E.O.E. Somerville & Martin Ross: Female Authorship and Literary Collaboration*, pp.159-60

to a profitable brand. Despite the shock of Martin's death, Somerville did not retreat, hobbled, into the family home, Drishane House in Castletownshend, Co Cork (pictured in illustration one, and with Somerville's oil painting of the house in illustration two, which hangs in situ).¹⁴ Rather, by recreating the Somerville and Ross partnership, she rescued her career and maintained financial independence.



Illustration one (above): Drishane House. Picture: Anne Minihane

Illustration two (below): Somerville's signed depiction of her family home, 1887

14 Edith Somerville to Cameron Somerville, 6 January 1916, Drishane Archive



Although she expressed initial doubts about her ability to work without Martin, Somerville soon proved to be energetic and industrious. She began with an essay collection which contained a panegyric to Martin, and between 1917 and 1921 produced two essay collections and two well-received novels.¹⁵ It would have been prudent to concentrate on writing more hunting stories: with their “social comedy” and “mockery of the country-life set”, as Declan Kiberd defines them, they were the most commercially successful work and had gained a large following.¹⁶ Despite this, Somerville was either unwilling or unable to devise new stories about the hunt on her own. The creative sap to write the Irish R.M. stories appeared to require rather more than a succession of automatic writing sessions. However, she valued the lucrative income stream they generated, and recognised early on

15 Somerville’s rose-tinted memories of Martin are contained in *Irish Memories* (1917), in the essay ‘When First She Came’. The other books she wrote during this period were *Mount Music* (1919), *Stray-Aways* (1920) and *An Enthusiast* (1921)

16 Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics* (London: Granta Books, 2000), p.360

that her literary reputation rested largely upon them.¹⁷ Once again, Somerville devised an inventive solution. Five years after the partnership with Martin came to an unexpected halt, Somerville decided to repurpose the Irish R.M. material. In the early 1920s, she tried to reposition herself as a playwright by adapting several of the more popular stories for the stage.

Critics from Gifford Lewis to Julie Anne Stevens and Anne Jamison have noted how Somerville and Martin always insisted on their status as professional authors, which meant payment for work.¹⁸ Somerville was in financial difficulties during the volatile years leading to the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922, and needed to raise money to help fund the family estate – her letters to correspondents in 1920 and 1921 show her circumstances becoming increasingly pinched.

She cast around for solutions, one of which was to attempt to disengage herself from her agent, J.B. (James Brand) Pinker, because she felt his ten per cent commission was no longer affordable.¹⁹ Her other answer was to look to where a great deal of money could be made – the London stage – and her determination to adapt existing material for this platform was predicated on revenue generation. She assumed she could write a play, felt she had the right material in the enormously popular Irish R.M. series, and believed she had the contacts who could help her to place the work. Somerville regarded her audience as based principally in Britain, and never considered offering her work to the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, where she may have had a more sympathetic hearing but any

17 These stories have “served us well, and got us more fame and kudos than anything we have yet written!” Edith Somerville to Cameron Somerville, 2 August 1899, Drishane Archive LA-282 a-b

18 Gifford Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005); Julie Anne Stevens *Two Irish Girls in Bohemia: The Drawings and Writings of E.O.E. Somerville and Martin Ross*; Anne Jamison, *E.O.E. Somerville & Martin Ross*.

19 The Somerville and Ross archive at Trinity College Dublin charts the importance of revenue generation to the duo. The collection is based primarily on business correspondence between the writers and Pinker, and shows them acutely aware of how much is owing in royalties and outstanding fees. These papers are described in Julie Anne Stevens, ‘Writing and illustrating Ireland: the Somerville and Ross exhibition, Trinity College Library Dublin November - December 2002’, pp.18-20

playwright's fee would have been modest. She was acutely conscious that a West End run could deliver the profits she needed, and that was where she trained her attention.²⁰

Chapter two interrogates some of the context for her decision not to attempt to have the play staged in Ireland.

The material she chose with which to strike out in a new direction was far from novel. The group of stories had been sculpted with Martin, gathered into book format in three collections between 1899 and 1915, and featured characters already recognisable to Somerville and Ross readers.²¹ Somerville branched out, though, with her decision to translate them into a new medium. It was astute to choose the hunting stories as a support in her pivot to a new genre because they were the most recognisable Somerville and Ross work. Her rationale was that if a reading audience existed for the exploits of the roguish “half-sir” Flurry Knox and his hapless stooge Major Yeates, a theatrical audience was also feasible.²²

Unfortunately, she encountered two obstacles, one of ability and the other of timing. In the first case, while Somerville was successful in other genres, she lacked the aptitude to transition into drama. In the second instance, the relationship between Ireland and Britain changed irrevocably during the early decades of the twentieth century, as we shall examine later, meaning the stories were out of step with the times. This would not have been an insurmountable obstacle if the play had been more appealing, but *Flurry's Wedding* always sounded like a stale and verbose novel. Despite Somerville's tenacity, as she embarked on repeated rewrites and tapped into a rich vein of theatrical contacts for

20 In 1892, Oscar Wilde turned down an offer of £1,000 for a share in *Lady Windermere's Fan* – that year alone it netted him £7,000, according to Eleanor Fitzsimon in *Wilde's Women: How Oscar Wilde Was Shaped by the Women he Knew* (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2013), p.4

21 Irish R.M. stories were included by *The Times* in its broadsheets of popular literature sent to soldiers in the trenches during World War One. Anne Jamison, *E. OE. Somerville & Martin Ross*, p.89

22 The half-sir is first mentioned in *Tales of the Munster Festivals: Card Drawing, The Half Sir, Suil Dhuv, The Coiner* by Gerald Griffin (Dublin: James Duffy and Sons, 1891) [First published in London in 1827] Somerville and Ross borrowed Flurry's name – Florence McCarthy Knox – from a Lady Morgan novel of 1818, *Florence Macarthy*, which censures England's neglect of Ireland and its consequent poverty.

assistance over a seventeen-year period, ultimately the exercise proved futile. *Flurry's Wedding* was never staged.

The play is based on four stories from the Irish R.M. cycle, disassembled and refashioned into a new form. The stories chosen by Somerville will be considered in chapter one of this study. The first collection provided the bulk of source material, although stories were mined from two collections, and at one stage she considered using material from all three collections. From *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* she took 'Trinket's Colt', 'Lisheen Races, Second-Hand' and 'Oh Love! Oh Fire!', while from *Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.* she borrowed 'A Royal Command'. Like the stories, the play is a comedic social satire, hinging on the money-spinning machinations of Flurry Knox, aided and abetted by the unreliable Slipper, with the resident magistrate Major Yeates unwittingly embroiled in their conspiracy. In plot and characterisation it covers familiar territory, while dialogue is transplanted intact from the original stories to the stage.

23

I discovered the play by chance while engaged in research in the private family archive at Somerville's home, Drishane House, where some 3,800 original documents and artefacts are held by the Somerville family.²⁴ Her letters contain numerous references to the drama, and her tireless efforts to have it staged. They show it was conceived in the autumn of 1921, drafted in late 1921, redrafted in 1922, and revised again in 1923. That complete iteration is included as an appendix at the end of this essay. Somerville returned to the play in the 1930s, and scripted amended versions in 1933 and 1938. As soon as the first version was completed, she had no hesitation in approaching her prime contact in the dramatic sphere. Somerville turned for feedback to George Bernard Shaw, using his wife

²³ Julie Anne Stevens suggests Henry Addison's *Recollections of an Irish Police Magistrate* (1862) may anticipate the Irish R.M. stories. Vokes is the magistrate, his name originating with Thomas Vokes who delivered law in Limerick and Clare in the 1820s. Stevens posits Addison's character as a possible source for Major Yeates. Stevens, *The Irish Scene in Somerville & Ross*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007); p.139

²⁴ This private collection was archived by Otto Rauchbauer who edited the *Edith Oenone Somerville Archive in Drishane House: A Catalogue and Evaluation Essay* (Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission, 1995).

and her cousin Charlotte Shaw (née Payne-Townshend) as conduit. Undoubtedly, Shaw could have eased her path professionally, although they were not an obvious fit. At that time he was mulling over the play which became *Saint Joan*, prompted by Joan of Arc's canonisation in 1920.²⁵

From Joan of Arc to Flurry Knox is quite a leap, and the Drishane archive contains his uncompromising response. By January 1922, he had read her play and concluded she should abandon the attempt to write for the theatre. “[Y]ou write like a lady in the worse (sic) sense of the word,” his letter remarked.²⁶ Chapter two provides a closer exploration of Shaw's analysis of her shortcomings in the genre, along with his complaint about platforming Flurry's rascally behaviour onstage, and Somerville's reaction to his critique. Further letters indicate that soon afterwards she was a guest of the Shaws in their country home at Ayot St. Lawrence in Hertfordshire, where he advised her on revisions. Next, she stayed with family in London and with her composer friend Dame Ethel Smyth in Woking, and letters home show her continuing to refine the play, sounding out alternative champions to Shaw.

Despite this intriguing material, a search of Somerville's private literary archive at Drishane yielded no sign of the play's original text. However, a visit to Queen's University Belfast to examine its Somerville and Ross collection turned up *Flurry's Wedding* – and more, besides. On file was a handwritten early outline from 1921, complete with copious cross-referencing to page numbers and specific episodes in the Irish R.M. stories, and a handwritten, incomplete version of the play, also from 1921, see illustration three.

²⁵ *Saint Joan* helped to win George Bernard Shaw the 1925 Nobel Prize in Literature, underscoring how highly Somerville aimed in seeking his assistance.

²⁶ Letter, Shaw to Somerville, 20 January 1922, Drishane Archive

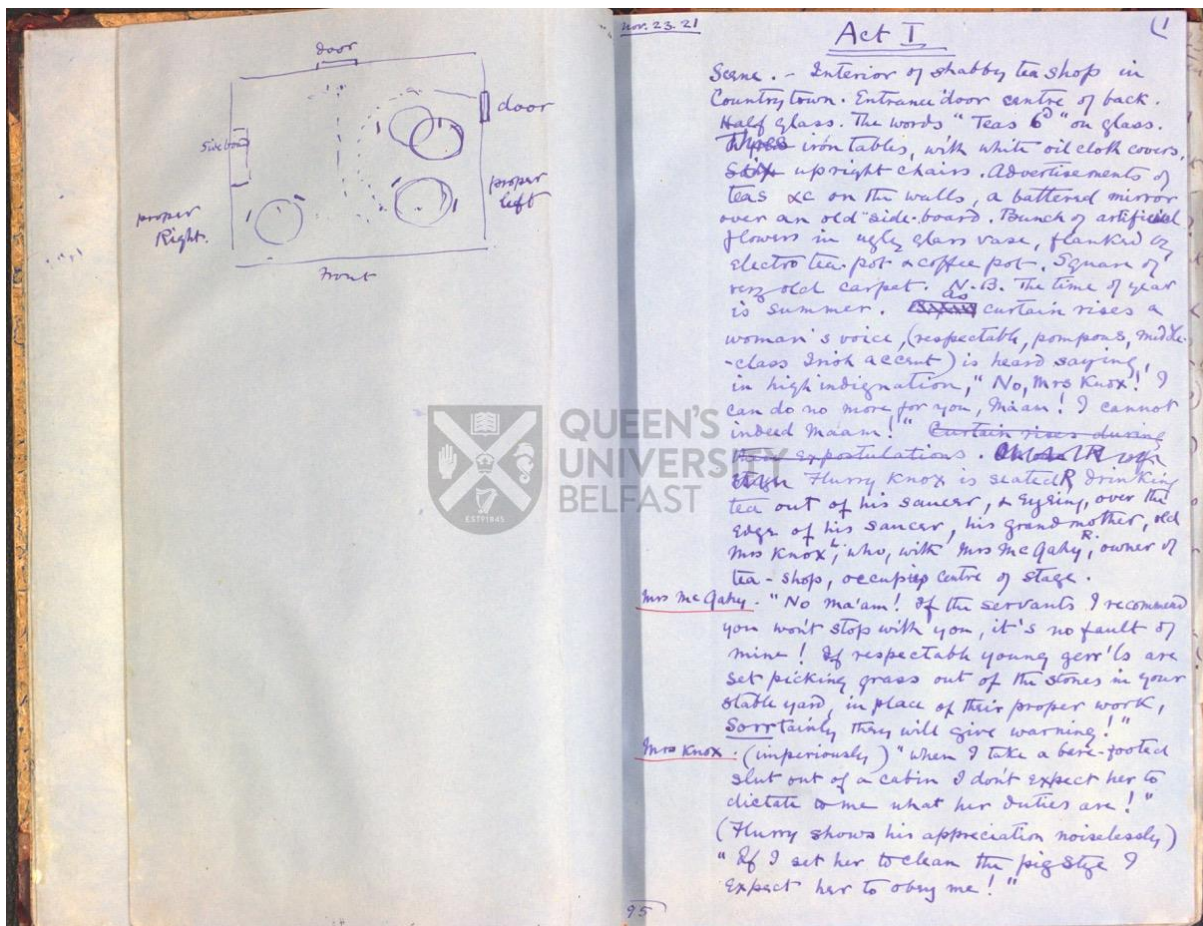


Illustration three: Flurry's Wedding, handwritten, incomplete version dated 23 November 1921. It includes a sketch of the stage set showing entrances and exits. Note Somerville's rendition of Mrs McGahy's accent, with the word certainly rendered as "sorrtainly"

In addition, there were three typed and complete iterations dated 1923, 1933 and 1938, all of which will be explored later in this study. By 1933, the play had been renamed *A Horse! A Horse! A Comedy*.²⁷ Somerville's taste for recycling material was unabated: *A Horse! A Horse!* is the title of a short story in two parts in the second series, *Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.* Her notes reveal that Somerville also debated *Mrs Knox – Dictator* as a possible title.²⁸ Later, she shortened the title to *A Horse! A Horse!* without specifying its comedic nature. Minor details vary from one version to the next, some of them reflective of social change, as when Flurry Knox's love interest Sally Knox takes up smoking in

27 Somerville often quoted snatches of Shakespeare in her work. The title was a nod to *Richard III*, labelled a tragedy on its title page (possibly why she inserted the word 'comedy' in her play), where the fallen king lost his mount in battle and cried, "A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse."

28 Presumably Somerville was influenced by shifting power dynamics on the world stage during the 1930s, but wisely decided that Mrs Knox was no dictator, however autocratic her personal behaviour.

public, or a motorcar plus chauffeur make their appearance, but the basis of the narrative in each iteration is unchanged. It hinges on Flurry stealing a valuable colt from his grandmother with the intention of selling it to finance his elopement.

Returning to Drishane, I continued reading Somerville's letters, tracking the play's genesis and development. It emerged that she used Ethel Smyth's theatrical contacts, and possibly Shaw's, to approach London impresarios about staging *Flurry's Wedding*. Those who read it during this early phase, in addition to Shaw and Smyth, included at least three prominent, London-based producers: Nigel Playfair of the Lyric Theatre; Belfast-born actor turned playwright and producer James Bernard Fagan of the Court Theatre in Sloane Square (who helped to popularise Seán O'Casey in Britain); and an unnamed theatrical contact of former Abbey Theatre actor Sara Allgood, most likely Basil Dean of His Majesty's Theatre.²⁹ All three producers briskly turned it down.

Allgood not only tried to find a home for the play, but expressed a willingness to appear in it.³⁰ However, she had second thoughts, and chapter two looks at an original letter from Allgood in the Drishane archive, in which she finally rejected *Flurry's Wedding*. Allgood's letter indicated the play was problematic because of the rancorous relationship between Ireland and Britain stemming from political tensions, but she may have stressed this as a reason to soften the blow. In any event, timing was not the only problem. Irrespective of repeated revisions, *Flurry's Wedding* never recovered from flaws embedded in the work – defects of construction, tone and relevance for an audience – as will be explored later in this study.

The material from these primary sources allows us both to construct a trajectory of the play's evolution, and follow the ways in which Somerville repeatedly modified an idea

²⁹ Allgood was familiar with a number of London producers though her work on the British stage, and there is a strong possibility that she approached Basil Dean. Their paths crossed when Dean was the first Controller of the *Liverpool Repertory Theatre* between 1911 and 1913, following which he pursued a career as director and later writer and producer in London.

³⁰ Letter, Allgood to Somerville, 1 April 1922, Drishane Archive LB 11 a-b

that had already delivered success, refining it for use in another format. The archive charts the creative end of her playwriting practice, showing scenes deleted and dialogue amended; it also reveals the business side of the process through Somerville's engagement with prominent literary, theatrical and musical figures as she harvested her impressive contact base. Regardless of her drive, charm and literary reputation, Somerville was unable to get the play staged. Possibly, Pinker's death in February 1922 was a factor; he was astute, well-connected and understood the marketplace, and the loss of this beneficial business relationship is considered in chapter two.³¹

Despite the play's ostensible failure, this study argues that *Flurry's Wedding* assists in our understanding of the altered Irish-British relationship during the years preceding and immediately following partition and the formation of the Irish state. Significant change occurred between 1915, when the final Irish R.M. collection *In Mr Knox's Country* appeared, and 1922, when she first tried to place her play. Somerville neglected to take these changes into account. When her play first made the rounds of London producers in 1922, it could hardly have done so at a less propitious period. Somerville was pitching her work in the immediate aftermath of a two-year conflict between the two nations. There was now an interregnum, by which time the war-weary British public, still feeling the World War One aftershock, had lost its appetite for Irish frolics. That said, excellence tends to find its audience. An Abbey Theatre production of *Juno and the Paycock* had a positive reception in London in 1926, while its playwright, Seán O'Casey, moved to Britain and worked there productively after his fourth play, *The Silver Tassie*, was rejected by the Abbey in 1928. Space was made for Irish playwrights if their work merited it, but it seems that less slack was cut if the fare on offer lacked substance, no matter how reputable the writer.

31 It was Pinker who pushed Somerville and Ross to write the Irish R.M. stories because he knew there was a ready market for the work – their letters in the Trinity College Dublin archive show he had to harry them to do it.

Numerous critics, including Vera Kreilkamp, John Cronin and Roy Foster, have indicated that Somerville earned a place in the canon not just because of her ear for dialogue and the humorous interplay between character and situation in her work, but because she was mapping the demise of her caste contemporaneously.³² (It should be borne in mind that she did this from a privileged position as an insider – never questioning the power and privilege that was beginning to decline.) While her ability to capture a moment in time makes her a noteworthy writer, it is not the full story. She is also significant because she managed the transition from one dispensation to another, carving out a place for herself under a new order. Indeed, Somerville’s 1921 novel *An Enthusiast* is set during the contemporaneous War of Independence, and contains a protagonist with Irish nationalist sympathies. In a review of the novel published in the *Edinburgh Review* in the autumn of 1921, Stephen Gwynn identified it as proof of evolution in her thinking.³³ However, she never again ventured into present day terrain in her fiction, and in the same year that *An Enthusiast* was published, she began work on *Flurry’s Wedding* – returning to the ‘safer’ setting of the 1890s.

Somerville and Ross’s archival material has generated significant critical engagement, and overviews of their corpus have been produced by Hilary Robinson, Julie Anne Stevens, Anne Jamison and Violet Powell, among others.³⁴ Critics have occasionally examined Somerville’s essays, journalism, travel writing and artwork, with

32 Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998); John Cronin, *Somerville and Ross* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1972); R.F. Foster *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972* (London: Penguin, 1989) and *Paddy & Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History* (London: Allen Lane, 1993)

33 Gwynn’s appreciation of Somerville and Ross in the *Edinburgh Review*, October 1921, was unusual as a nationalist commentator taking the writers seriously at that time. He said *Mount Music* (1919) and *An Enthusiast* (1921) were documents “because they show how far the minds of Miss Somerville and her comrade were modified by the social revolution which was in progress through their whole lives”.

Lennox Robinson, while paying tribute to the “power” of Somerville and Ross’s work, notes, “Curious, how little the troubled Irish times she lived through all her life find an echo in her work.” Lennox Robinson, preface to Geraldine Cummins, *The First Biography of Dr. E. OE. Somerville*, p.xi

34 Hilary Robinson, *Somerville and Ross: A Critical Appreciation* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1980); Julie Anne Stevens, *The Irish Scene in Somerville & Ross*; Anne Jamison, *E.OE. Somerville & Martin Ross*; John Cronin, *Somerville and Ross*, (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1972); Violet Powell, *The Irish Cousins: The Books and Background of Somerville and Ross* (London: Heinemann, 1970).

three biographies published to date; none of these texts pays much attention to *Flurry's Wedding*. From the first, rather breathless account of Somerville's life by Geraldine Cummins in 1952, to Maurice Collis's over-hasty decision to read a sexual relationship into Somerville and Martin's 'Boston marriage' arrangements without corroborating evidence in 1968, to an extensive biography by Gifford Lewis in 2005, each of Somerville's biographers records the play's existence without reflecting on its significance.³⁵ Collis, in particular, disdains it as a "distraction" and cites Shaw's dismissal as the final word. "The correspondence between Shaw and Edith is amusing, but as he finally said the play was no good, it is unnecessary to pursue the matter," concludes Collis.³⁶

It seems curious that, despite this impressive array of scholarship, virtually no attention has been paid to Somerville's aspirations to reinvent herself as a playwright. Granted, her playwriting cloth was cut from earlier work (not uncommon in her writing practice), but even so, it represents a serious endeavour on her part to enter a new sphere. This oversight can be attributed, perhaps, to appraisal largely converging on the Somerville and Ross oeuvre until 1915, with the work after Martin's death overlooked in comparison. *The Big House of Inver* is the exception to this argument, and has gained some critical attention over the years.³⁷ That novel aside, Somerville's solo work has not captured the same focus as her collaborative material; and while the quality of some of the later books is uneven, such an oversight is a deficit in any assessment of an author whose career spanned a sixty-year period.

35 Geraldine Cummins, *The First Biography of Dr E. OE. Somerville* (London: Andrew Dakers, 1952); Maurice Collis, *Somerville & Ross: A Biography*; Gifford Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*.

36 Oddly disapproving, Collis also cites the approaching civil war in Ireland: "But in fact it was no time for play writing." Collis, p.208

37 Two exceptions are Anne Jamison and Julie Anne Stevens, although their emphasis differs and is not directed at the merits of any solo literary work. In *E.OE. Somerville & Martin Ross*, Jamison pays attention to the putatively collaborative nature of the later work. In *Two Irish Girls in Bohemia: The Drawings and Writings of E.OE. Somerville and Martin Ross* (Cork: Somerville Press, 2017), Stevens focuses on the art and artistry.

Some of the extensive critical commentary is nuanced: for example Cronin pointing up the writers' hybridity, "socially secure in a poor country, socially insecure in a declining class," and noting they "looked at their Irish world with clarity, geniality and much sympathetic insight."³⁸ Elsewhere, criticism pigeonholes the writers as "two daughters of the Big House" in the words of David Norris, associating them indelibly with the milieu of the Irish R.M. stories and the nineteenth century expanse of their greatest achievement in the novel format, *The Real Charlotte*.³⁹ Roy Foster takes the same tack in characterising their work as "a reassuring collusion between the big house and disaffected peasantry."⁴⁰ More recently, Vera Krielkamp considers their exploration of the "unwomanly woman" in *The Real Charlotte*, upending traditional Victorian representations, and pointing to Somerville's continued subversion of gender conventions in her fiction after Martin's death, a good example is the representation of Shibby Pinder in *The Big House of Inver*.⁴¹ Arguably, inside the popular literary fare they produced, agreed norms about appropriate female behaviour and aspirations are rebuked rather more than one might expect from two daughters of the big house.

Flurry's Wedding complicates attempts to compartmentalise Somerville. The play, although unperformed, is intriguing, not least because it serves as a reminder of Somerville's cultural breadth and willingness to experiment in different art forms. Her career has proved to be rich pickings for biographer and critic alike precisely because she plied her craft across a variety of genres, from short stories to novels, and from travel books and biography to memoir and journalism, as a Grub Street irregular or occasional contributor. She also illustrated her own work as a talented, Paris-trained artist, co-

38 John Cronin, *Somerville and Ross* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1972), p.101

39 David Norris, 'Imaginative Response versus Authority: A Theme of the Anglo-Irish Short Story' in *The Irish Short Story*, eds. Terence Brown and Patrick Raffoidi (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1979), p.48

40 R.F. Foster, 'Hubert Butler and His Century, in *Unfinished Ireland: Essays on Hubert Butler*, ed. Chris Agee (Belfast: Irish Pages, 2003), p.43

41 Vera Krielkamp, 'Recovery and the Ascendancy Novel', in *Irish Literature in Transition, 1880–1940 Volume 4*, ed. Marjorie Howes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp.73-94

designing two of her book covers, and exhibiting in London and New York.⁴² Yet her handiwork for the theatre has been virtually ignored, and the absence of critical engagement cannot be attributed simply to its status as a flawed piece which was never staged.

Somerville was mystified, but gracious, when theatre experts were unpersuaded about her play's worth, remaining ever ready to return to it when any possible new avenue to dramatisation opened up. In part, this was due to a youthful fascination with the stage which never left her, as we shall consider in chapter one. Failure and the theatre are common bedfellows – and the humiliation is particularly public when a play is produced and fails, as writers from Henry James to F. Scott Fitzgerald to James Joyce have discovered.⁴³ Somerville's rejection happened earlier in the process. While Joyce and Fitzgerald accepted their inability to conquer the theatre (James was slower to surrender the dream), Somerville held tight to her hopes of finding the magical ingredient; she tinkered with the play fitfully over the course of two decades until 1938, producing numerous iterations.

The valuable source material used here – possibly disregarded because it had to be drawn from scattered locations, from the Somervilles' literary archive in Cork to original manuscripts held at Queen's University Belfast and Trinity College Dublin – allows for a

42 Gifford Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, pp.146, 304, 341, 353, 359, 373

43 Like Somerville, Henry James turned to playwriting to earn money in the face of dwindling royalties. He had a bruising encounter with the theatre world in 1895: although his play *Guy Domville* ran for 39 performances, it was catcalled at its premiere by a sector of the London audience as he bowed onstage. Disheartened, he returned to novel-writing. James also wrote a number of forgotten, unproduced plays between 1890 and 1895, but his adaptation of his novel *The American* was staged in 1890 by the Compton Comedy Company, and appealed to theatregoers even if reviews were sniffy.

Joyce's only extant play *Exiles* was rejected by theatres in Ireland, England and the US, including by W.B. Yeats at the Abbey. It was first staged in Munich in 1919 and then not again until 1970 in London. A copy was found among his father's possessions after his death. Philip Hensher described it as "a notoriously plonking effort" in *The Guardian*, 26 July 2006, 'The play's the thing...unless you're a novelist'. He was also biting about Ivy Compton-Burnett, Graham Greene, William Golding, Muriel Spark and Iris Murdoch as failed playwrights.

During his teens, between 1911 and 1914, Fitzgerald wrote four romps produced by a local theatre group in St. Paul, Minnesota. In 1922, he wrote another play, a satire called *The Vegetable*, intended for New York City. It was trialled in Atlantic City, where it flopped, and the Broadway debut was cancelled. In 1929, it was revived and ran at the Cherry Lane Theatre, New York for thirteen performances.

fuller critical evaluation of Somerville's literary practice than is possible in the absence of any detailed acknowledgement of her playwriting ambition. This study will show why she felt drawn back constantly to the work. Her habit of returning to this play, which she even considered remaking as a musical, indicates it was not simply a palate-cleansing exercise between her novels, *An Enthusiast* and *The Big House of Inver*.⁴⁴ Financial necessity may have been the catalyst, but does not explain her attachment – disproportionate to its merits – to a work which was only one among many in a lengthy and industrious literary career.

Flurry's Wedding was a gamble which did not pay off in terms of the effort she devoted to it, but the play's lack of success should not negate its interest for scholars. On the contrary, it allows for a deeper understanding of Somerville's literary practice, revealing a mid-career attempt at reinvention by a writer with canonical status. The play's presence, although a generally unheeded facet of Somerville's career, disturbs received notions about Somerville's writing. *Flurry's Wedding* may not be worthwhile stagecraft, but its existence deserves better than silence. This study rectifies that omission.

⁴⁴ Somerville also produced an essay collection, *Wheel-Tracks* (1923), while working on *Flurry's Wedding*.

CHAPTER ONE

The distance between big houses meant that if guests paid a visit, they stayed for a few days, which required entertainments to be organised. Amateur dramatics was one way of keeping visitors amused.¹ Consequently, Edith Somerville was no novice to theatricals. Long before she tried to write a professional play, ample proof exists of her interest in the theatre as both writer and performer, a pastime shared by her writing partner, Violet Martin. Both Somerville and Martin regularly dressed up and acted in family theatricals, as the photographic archive in Drishane House reveals.² Somerville's protracted interest in playwriting appears to have originated in the amateur playacting she enjoyed as a young woman, which shaped her theatrical practice.

This evidence of her bent for drama has not been ignored by critics: Gifford Lewis and Julie Anne Stevens each remarks on it. While neither scholar engages with *Flurry's Wedding* as a finished piece of work, both recognise the attention paid to stagecraft by Somerville. For Stevens, Somerville and Ross were interested in the art of appearing Irish and theatrical self-display in their representation of Ireland. Stevens makes the case for a theatrical influence permeating her writing, pointing to *The Real Charlotte*, where the Dysart family butler, James Canavan, plays Elizabeth I in an amateur production showcasing the Amy Robsart Dudley story. In the Dudley story, the queen's suitor is suspected of having his wife murdered, and this device is used to draw attention to the theme of deception which runs through Somerville and Ross's novel.³ Lewis notes that

1 David Thomson remembers "home-made plays and pantomimes" when guests stayed, in his memoir *Woodbrook*, p.29

2 Rauchbauer, *Edith Oenone Somerville Archive in Drishane House: A Catalogue and Evaluation Essay*. The family bent for theatricals can be tracked in Somerville's nephews Sir Ambrose Coghill and Nevill Coghill. Sir Ambrose had a successful career as an actor in TV and film while his elder brother Nevill, an Oxford don, directed university productions. In 1968, he co-wrote a successful musical based on *The Canterbury Tales* for the West End and Broadway – accomplishing what his aunt never managed to do.

3 Stevens writes that both authors "followed developments in popular theatre" and made use of that theatrical tradition in their writing "for parodic purposes". She suggests *Flurry Knox* is a carnivalesque or "madcap" 'Lord of Misrule' character and identifies a thread of harlequinade looped through their work

Somerville and her first collaborator, her ‘Twin’ or special friend Ethel Coghill Penrose, a neighbour and cousin, “had written plays together” in the 1870s before Penrose’s marriage.⁴ This interest did not end when Somerville’s first literary partnership concluded, after Penrose married in 1880 and left Castletownshend, the source from which Somerville drew much of her creative nourishment (pictured in illustrations four and five).



Illustration four: Castletownshend’s vertiginous main street. In her youth, Somerville danced a mazurka down it to a waiting boat party

which she traces to the European tradition. Julie Anne Stevens, *The Irish Scene in Somerville & Ross* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), p.20; Julie Anne Stevens, *Two Irish Girls in Bohemia: The Drawings and Writings of E. OE. Somerville and Martin Ross* (Cork: Somerville Press, 2017), pp.83-4
4 Gifford Lewis, *Somerville and Ross: The World of the Irish R.M.*, p.31

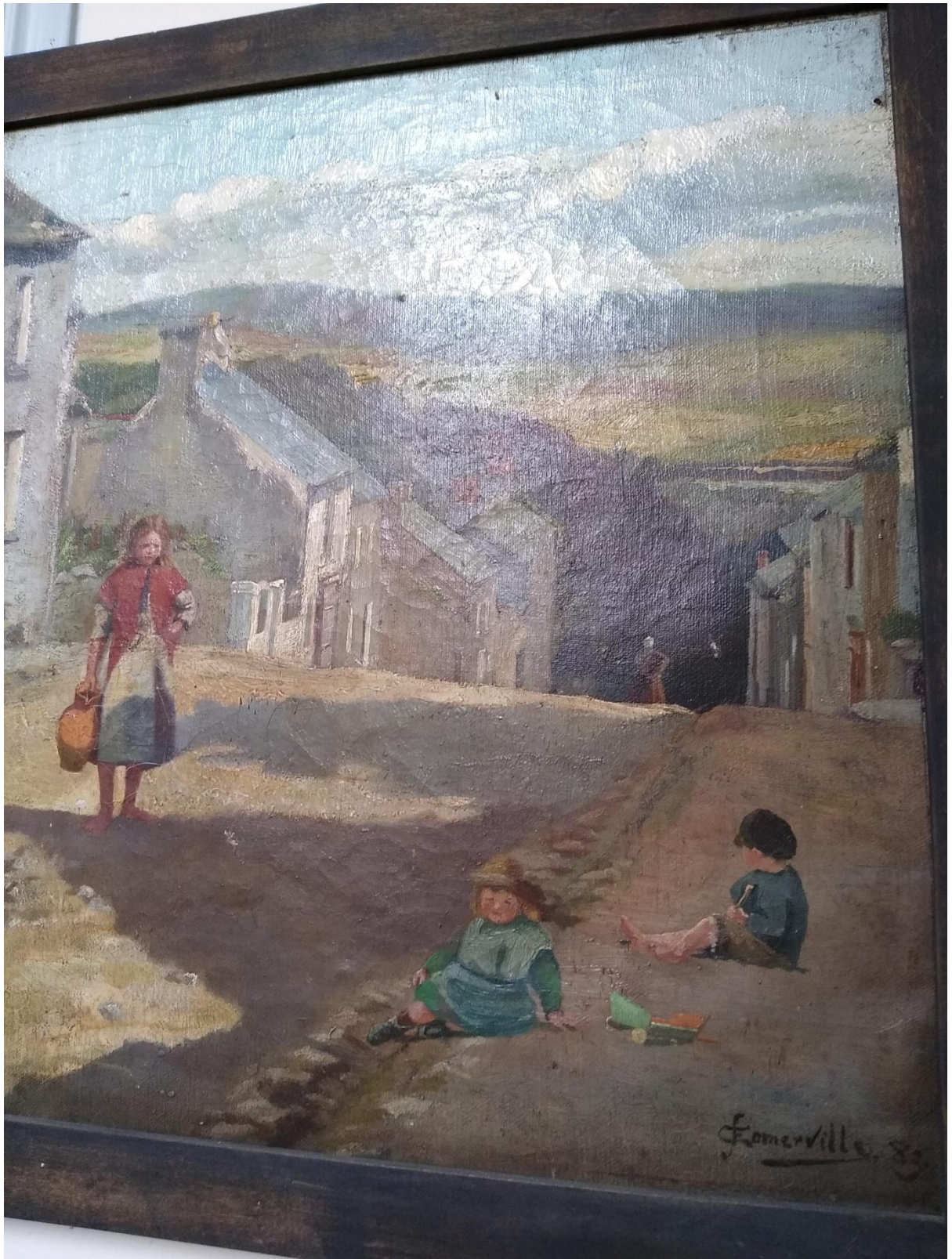


Illustration five: Somerville's painting of the same Castletownshend scene, which hangs in Drishane House. Note the barefoot local children

When she was a young woman, Somerville scripted and performed in amateur plays and pantomimes as charity fundraising initiatives. She particularly enjoyed the

comedy opera duo Gilbert and Sullivan, and participated in local productions of their work in Ireland and England during the 1880s and 1890s. In 1885, she appeared with her Coghill cousins, Egerton and Claude, in an amateur version of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Sorcerer* at Finghall Rectory in Yorkshire, where she was transformed by stage makeup into an elderly woman named Mrs Partlet.⁵ “[H]eaps of people utterly refused to believe that I was not an old woman of at least sixty,” she wrote to her brother Cameron.⁶ That same year she produced a comic review of *Macbeth* by a travelling company at Skibbereen Town hall for the *Home Chimes* magazine, under Cameron's alias, telling him *post facto*.⁷

Next, Somerville turned her attention to a rhyming verse pantomime co-authored by her and Penrose in the 1870s, with a view to repurposing it. As with Martin subsequently, the two young women had been obliged to lock themselves away from social demands to ‘conflagrote’ or collaborate on it, as Somerville confided to her diary in the Buddh slang of their family group.⁸ The piece was unperformed until Somerville decided to adapt and stage it in 1887. It went on in Castletownshend's Village Hall, where members of the Somerville and Coghill families appeared in her adaptation of the Sleeping Beauty story: *The Fairy Play, or A Fairy Extravaganza: In Three Acts, By Two Flappers*.⁹ This was an early example of Somerville's lifelong literary practice of modifying existing material. In July 1916, she resurrected the play yet again. Thirty years after its debut and forty years after it was conceived, yet another revised version, *Chloral, or The Sleeping*

5 Gifford Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, pp.83-4

6 Letter, Edith Somerville to Cameron Somerville, 26 April 1885

Like other family members, Cameron also dressed up for theatricals, and another letter from Edith to her brother teases him to keep for her a pink gingham dress he wore, as referenced by Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, pp.119-20

7 *Ibid.*, p.84

8 *Ibid.*, p.31

Buddh refers to descendants of Charles Kendal Bushe, Lord Chief Justice for Ireland 1822-41, common ancestor of Somerville and Martin. Buddh may be a corruption of Bushe. Penrose, Somerville and Martin, all descendants, compiled *The Buddh Dictionary. A Dictionary of Words & Phrases In Past & present use among The Buddhs* (sic) – a list of words or expressions peculiar to their families. Lewis, *Somerville and Ross: The World of the Irish RM.*, p.27. Copy of dictionary held in Trinity College Library, Dublin MS 11373/3

9 Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, p.291

Also, p.40, Lewis notes this is the only extant work of the youthful collaboration between Penrose and Somerville.

Beauty, was performed twice by nieces and nephews in Drishane House to raise funds for the Prisoners of War Knitting Fund and the Fowl Fund of the West Carbery Hunt.¹⁰

Gifford tells how she wrote to Pinker about it, describing it as “an old play written ever so many years ago by Mrs Penrose and me”.¹¹

In 1888, Somerville played Buttercup in Gilbert and Sullivan’s *HMS Pinafore*, in three performances by the Bedale Musical Society in Yorkshire.¹² While she was known to her family as a gifted mimic, dumbshow appeared to be another strong suit, according to Lewis.¹³ The local newspaper’s reviewer spotted this, singling her out as a humorous performer with “powers of facial expression”.¹⁴ Somerville details the capers in two letters to Martin, the first from Bedale Hall, where she was a guest of the Peirse family, dated 29 April 1888, and the second from Finghall Rectory on 3 May 1888.¹⁵ Rehearsals were “great fun” the first letter reports, and her co-performers complimented her for being “very good” in the role. In the follow-up letter, she tells how all three nights “went awfully well” and she and one of her fellow performers were “a good deal loved for various vulgarities” of humour.¹⁶

The following year, she romped in an amateur production in Skibbereen Town Hall. *Irish Women’s Letters* includes a letter from Somerville to Martin dated 5 Sep 1889, in which she describes two consecutive nights of theatricals for charity there.¹⁷ “I cant (sic) act, but I can produce a sort of imitation of acting that is good enough for a fifth rate audience,” wrote Somerville, describing how she sang a duet with renowned songwriter Robert Martin, Martin’s brother, known for the Ballyhooley Ballads, “and we danced

10 A manuscript of the play is held at Queen’s University Belfast, Special Collections, along with playbills of the 1877 and 1916 performances which reveal Nevill Coghill played a nurse in the 1916 version. MS 17/887.

11 Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, p.291

12 *Ibid.*, p.124

13 Somerville lent this characteristic to Mrs Knox in *Flurry’s Wedding*, for example stage instructions indicate she blinks both eyes elaborately at the audience to indicate scoring a point off her grandson Flurry.

14 Letter, Somerville to Martin, 8 May 1888, quoted by Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, p.12

15 Lewis, *The Selected Letters of Somerville and Ross*, pp.69-76

16 *Ibid.*

17 Skibbereen is reimagined as Skebawn in the Irish R.M. stories

round together, which fetched the crowd satisfactorily”.¹⁸ As part of the frolics, Somerville added music to a farce called *Poor Pillicoddy*, and played Miss Maria Noodle Poodle in a sketch adapted from German by her uncle, Sir Joscelyn (sic) Coghill, according to Stevens.¹⁹ Clearly, her dramatic influences were light-hearted, and that reliance on farce for audience engagement was reflected in the only play she wrote for the professional stage.

Martin had also experimented with playwriting before she teamed up with Somerville, working with her cousin William or Willy Wills, a professional writer who had achieved some success in the theatre.²⁰ Lewis recounts how Martin spent time in London collaborating with Wills in 1884, but the intended play never materialised.²¹ Stevens says Wills paid Martin for her work with him, and made apparently fruitless efforts to secure commissions for her with other playwrights and directors.²² Martin shared this desire to write for the theatre with her brother Robert, who wrote a series of burlesques in the 1880s for the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin.²³

Somerville and Martin were acutely aware of the theatre work associated with the Celtic Revival, not least because they were active at the same time as its flowering. In 1901, Martin visited the Abbey Theatre incognito to observe a production of W.B. Yeats and George Moore’s co-authored play, *Diarmuid and Grainne*, and reported back to Somerville in critical terms about its “strange mix of saga and modern French situations”.²⁴

18 *Irish Women’s Letters* compiled by Laurence Flanagan (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1997), pp.131-5.

Robert Martin was head of the household at Ross House in Galway, even *in absentia*, but Martin appropriated his title with her symbolic Martin Ross nom de plume drawn from Martin of Ross.

19 Stevens, *The Irish Scene in Somerville & Ross*, p.83

20 Wills wrote the play *Charles I* for Henry Irving and adapted *The Vicar of Wakefield* for Ellen Terry, renaming it *Olivia*.

21 Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, pp.102-3

22 Julie Anne Stevens, ‘The Staging of Protestant Ireland in Somerville and Ross’s *The Real Charlotte*’, in *Critical Ireland: New Essays in Literature and Culture*, eds. Aaron Kelly and Alan Gillis (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), p.67

23 Stevens details Robert Martin’s theatricals in *The Irish Scene in Somerville & Ross*, pp.142-3

24 Martin to Somerville, 28 October 1921, in Lewis, ed., *Selected Letters of Somerville and Ross*, p.253

Somerville and Ross were courted by Martin's relative, Augusta, Lady Gregory to write for the Abbey, but while they always remained on pleasant terms they felt suspicious of the political ambitions underpinning the Dublin literary milieu.²⁵ Lewis writes, "Lady Gregory and William Butler Yeats were well aware that Somerville and Ross were authors of note. In 1904 they tried to persuade Edith and Martin to write a play for the Abbey but Martin was determined against it."²⁶ The following year, Lady Gregory suggested a play based on the Irish R.M. stories, offering them a berth at Coole Park while they worked, along with every assistance she could provide. Martin wrote to Edith at Drishane:

It seems to me that they are very anxious now to rope in the upper classes, and to drop politics. When I divulged the fact that you had faint aspirations towards a play, and had written a children's one, Augusta was enraptured – 'A week at Coole would do it – We could give you all the hints necessary for stage effects etc – even write a scenario for you – the characters and plots picked from your books – I will look through them at once –' I gave no further encouragement of any sort – and said we were full up.²⁷

Although curious about the Irish literary revival, the pair were wary of it, and Somerville described herself and Martin as being on its "outer skin" in a letter in 1906.²⁸ Nevertheless, as authors who deliberately wrote performance into their texts, according to Anne Oakham in an essay dealing with theatricality in the Irish R.M., they paid attention to what the Abbey was producing.²⁹ In January 1906, Somerville attended Synge's *Riders to*

25 The relationship was close enough for Martin to attend Augusta Persse's wedding to Sir William Gregory in 1880 and Martin later visited Coole Park where she signed the Autograph Tree.

26 Lewis, ed., *Selected Letters of Somerville and Ross*, p.110

27 Martin to Somerville, 30 April 1905, in Lewis, *Selected Letters of Somerville and Ross*

28 Letter, Edith Somerville to Cameron Somerville, 6 June 1906, Drishane Archive LA 509 a-c

29 Anne Oakham, 'Theatricality and the Irish R.M.: Comic County (sic) House Dramatics Versus Abbey Theatre Ideology', in *New Voices in Irish Criticism 5*, eds. Ruth Connolly and Ann Coughlan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), p.165

the Sea there and praised it.³⁰ In the summer of 1909, Somerville and Ross paid several visits with Charlotte Shaw to the Abbey, where they saw Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, Yeats and Gregory's *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*, Gregory's *The Workhouse Ward* and *The Rising of the Moon*, and Shaw's *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet*. Somerville's diary pronounced herself "delighted" by Gregory's work, but noted that she "disliked" Synge's play and found Shaw's "most moral & melodramatic".³¹

Many people in Ireland at this time with an interest in culture were looking towards Dublin rather than London, judging by audience attendance and scripts submitted to the Abbey, and it was a richly productive time for Irish theatre. It was largely a labour of love for playwrights and actors alike. This would not have suited the Somerville and Ross partnership: the duo were conscious of their professional status, and tailored their writing towards revenue generation.³² Oakham suggests the authors had "a mocking hostility towards the way in which authenticity and nationalism become theatrical constructs" in the Abbey's Celtic productions, and that Somerville's relations with the Abbey and revivalists "waned somewhat" after Martin's death.³³

Yet their decision to refuse Lady Gregory's offer was a career misstep, as will be considered in chapter two, especially in Somerville's case because she nursed hopes of having a play mounted. Lady Gregory was in a position to ease her passage through the world of Irish theatre, as a co-founder of the Abbey and a successful playwright in her own right. However, the pair were wary of her perceived motives. Molly Keane says Somerville and Ross were suspicious of the separatist agenda underpinning the Irish cultural movement and "did not entirely approve of Lady Gregory," although such an analysis may

30 Ibid., p.158

31 Queens University Belfast, Edith Somerville diary 25 Aug 1909, QUB MS 17/874

32 The Abbey did not start paying its playwrights until 1910.

As early as 1894, in a letter from Somerville to her brother Cameron, she spoke of the impetus "to quarry coin out of the public". 9 October 1894, Drishane Archive, LA 58 a-b

33 Oakham, 'Theatricality and the Irish R.M.: Comic County (sic) House Dramatics Versus Abbey Theatre Ideology', p.160

have applied to Martin more than Somerville.³⁴ They may also have rejected her suggestion because the Irish market was never their priority.

While the Somerville and Ross partnership never worked together on a play, they were not unwilling to consider a theatrical version of their work. Somerville and Ross commissioned the Abbey's production manager and actor, Frank Fay, to read two short stories – 'Poisson D'Avril' from the Irish R.M. stories and Martin's standalone *A Patrick's Day Hunt* – at The New Century Club in London's Barclay Square in 1906.³⁵ The former is the closest an Irish R.M. story has come to a professional stage performance. Neither Flurry Knox nor his sidekick Slipper feature in the episode, which centres on Major Yeates careering about Ireland, trying to buy a salmon and make travel connections to join a house party in England. Oakham characterises the Fay interpretation as destabilising the text as written artefact, and subjecting it to "live or theatrical interaction", speculating on the potential for modification to the work as the authors absorbed an audience's response.³⁶

Bearing in mind Somerville's interest in amateur dramatics, her tilt towards the stage was inevitable. She began *Flurry's Wedding* in the latter part of 1921, borrowing freely for source material from four stories: taking 'Trinket's Colt', 'Lisheen Races, Second-Hand' and 'Oh Love! Oh Fire!' from *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* and 'A Royal Command' from *Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.* Initially, she intended to include an extract from 'Major Apollo Riggs', from the third collection, *In Mr Knox's Country*. This extract appears on scrap pages in the archive, marked 27 February 1922, showing deleted passages in which a scene in Flurry's garden tells the story of Major

34 Lewis, ed., *Selected Letters of Somerville and Ross*, foreword by Molly Keane, p.xvii

35 *A Patrick's Day Hunt* was written by Martin and illustrated by Somerville. The reading is referenced in Gifford Lewis, ed., *The Selected Letters of Somerville and Ross*, p.271 and described in a letter from Martin to Somerville dated 12 June 1906.

36 Oakman, 'Theatricality and the Irish R.M.: Comic County (sic) House Dramatics Versus Abbey Theatre Ideology', pp.164-5

Riggs dallying with an earlier Lady Knox and being murdered by her husband. It does not surface in any finished version of the play.³⁷

The play's evolution can be followed through a series of eighteen autographed drafts, some typed and others handwritten, all heavily annotated, in a variety of notebooks and folders held in Queen's University Belfast's Special Collections. Somerville marked up her play manuscripts with page number references linking back to the books. This heavy reliance on source material from stories published in 1899 clearly indicates her inspiration dated from the 1890s, although stage directions at the start of *Flurry's Wedding* read: "TIME The month of June in any year between 1897 and 1914."³⁸ Here, then, was a writer seeing the world as she wished it to be rather than how it was.

Overall, the play is a farce, and this is hardly surprising given Somerville's early theatrical influences. The plot, combined from disparate episodes in those stories, blends race-fixing mischief at a country meeting ('Lisheen Races, Second-Hand'), with a hard-up Flurry's theft of a promising colt belonging to Mrs Knox ('Trinket's Colt'). It features the tenants' dance given by Mrs Knox at Aussolas which culminates in both a house fire and the marriage of Flurry and Sally ('Oh Love! Oh Fire!'), while also managing to shoe-horn in "the Sultan of X---, who had come over from Cowes to see Ireland and the Dublin Horse Show" and invites himself to lunch at Shreelane Hall ('A Royal Command').³⁹ The play draws together familiar characters, principally Flurry, his grandmother Mrs Knox, their relative Lady Knox, her daughter Sally Knox, Major Sinclair Yeates and his wife Philippa, and Slipper, Flurry's bibulous wingman.

As to the play itself, Somerville sketches out a draft synopsis in note form in October 1921. The first known outline for *Flurry's Wedding* is contained in a small, black

³⁷ Queen's University Belfast, Special Collections, MS 17/890/1

³⁸ Ibid., MS 17/905/4

³⁹ 'A Royal Command' from *The Irish R.M. Complete* (London: Faber & Faber, 1928; this edition 1973), p.186

hardbacked notebook, lined and suitable for account-keeping, written in blue ink and sometimes in pencil in Somerville's cursive handwriting. It opens with:

Shreelane Hall. F. drinking tea with Yeates. F. Might tell story of
old Mrs K. in tea shop.

Old Mrs Knox's Voice is "incisive + slightly cracked".

"a tiny fragile thing".⁴⁰

Some of her remarks have I, II and III listed after them, indicating which collection the incident is lifted from. By the time she writes a fuller account in the same notebook, still in memo form, she has moved the opening scene to a tea shop, as follows:

Scene 1

Tea Shop. Flurry drinking tea &C in alcove with 4-fold screen.

Enter Yeates.

Conversation re colt (see pages 51-2.) Old Mrs Knox on other side
of screen and teahouse woman. (conversation see page 53) Exit

Mrs K. Conversation re horse resumed. (p.53-54-61) + is

interrupted by arrival of Philippa + Sally. P talks to Yeates bewails
difficulties of servants dinner, (p.124 Lisheen Races, Second-Hand

) says she has come to try and buy some fish in the town. Long cry

heard in street "Mackerel, fresh mackerel &c", Mrs Brickley

appears (vol II pages 140-143)⁴¹

Somerville shows her intention here to lift dialogue from the stories without amending it for the stage, believing she can transplant conversations intact. At this point, it appears she is also mulling over how to advance the plot; for example, it is by no means certain Major Yeates will be invited to the tenants' dance, or at least not at this juncture in

40 Queen's University Belfast, Special Collections, MS 17/890/1

41 Ibid.

the storyline. The notes read: “enter Yeates is introduced to Mrs K. who sails off after a sentence or two. Q. does she ask him to dinner for tenants’ party? ‘a long invitation’.”⁴² However, the “Eastern potentate – he is mad about horses” is included at this early stage.⁴³ Some characters and scenes in the outline do not survive into the first draft, such as Mrs Brickley and a fish-haggling interlude, but the thrust of the plot – a horse theft and runaway wedding – is already fully realised and remains constant through multiple iterations.

Scene two moves to Shreelane Hall, home to the Yeates family, where they are preparing for the arrival of a wealthy foreigner prepared to buy Irish horses. On a left hand page, a scene between Flurry and Sally is added later, in which they discuss marriage. It appears to be a hopeless prospect because he has no money, while she is under age (Sally is nineteen years old) and her mother disdains the match. Scene three transfers the action to an outdoor setting, where Slipper is guarding the stolen horse. Presumably influenced by her own experience in amateur dramatics, Somerville intends *Flurry’s Wedding* to be a musical play, and the scene opens with Slipper singing a comical song, whose words are scribbled, note form, on a left hand page, the singer addressing a girl named Judy whom he wishes to wed.⁴⁴ When it ends, two police officers enter in search of the colt. Other scenes

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 I’m as proud as the Sultan of Turkey
I’m as high as the sun in the skies
But what’s family pride to the lust --- tre
That shines from my Judy’s black eyes?

O Judy you are so handsome
+ you are so nate + straight
Your form is it so slender
And your figure is all complete
And if ye’ll only marry me
O - I’d never care at-all
If there never grew a pratie
In the town o’ Donegal

For I’m allied (in a circle and above it related) to the Lannigans, Brannigans,
Noolans+Doolans + many besides,
But what’s family pride to the lus-tre

include a tenants' dance at Aussolas Castle, home to Mrs Knox, but the format is sketchy without dialogue in full. For example:

During conversation Yeates would see all guests turn to the steps –
Flurry + Sally on them.

They see Yeates looking at them + Sally kisses her hand to him, +
vanishes. Flurry shoves through the people and behaves as if he
were screwed.

p.294-295 Dances jig with his grandmother – Discusses with
Crusoe punch-making all in obvious excitement. Finally someone
shrieks the house is on fire. Smoke from windows + hall door &C
general scrimmage.

Same Scene. Early morning light behind mountain + lake gradually
strengthening.

Pictures, bundles, silver dishes lying about.⁴⁵

The fire scene outlined above is of particular interest because the events it depicts are contemporaneous. As Somerville devised her play, the houses of many members of the gentry in Ireland were being burned, and possessions were damaged or dispersed; this scene of goods piled on the lawn was familiar to her, and had happened to neighbours.⁴⁶

That shines from my Judy's black eyes!

Me fathers + mothers was ladies and gintlemen back to the Flood
Don't be talking of Paddies and Thadies
There isn't any arguil in blood!
I'd a sister that lived in great splendour
With one Justice Mooney that's dead -
She'd servants in throops to attend her
6 candles to light her to bed.

45 Ibid.

46 During and after the War of Independence, at least 285 country houses owned by Protestant landowners were burned by the IRA. Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2005), p.210

Next morning, Sally and Flurry elope, with *Haste to the Wedding* played as the curtain falls – another musical inclusion. After the finale, Somerville lists phrases which she regards as useful, intending to jam them into the play, such as (sic): “Need’nt quote the Bible to me as I know it all by heart”; “Wont go to churchyard till I go then with four horses + me feet foremost -!”; “Not so much rags on him as’d wipe a candlestick.” Some of these are scribbled out subsequently. Other notes read, “Memory failing? Going all day + nothing to show for it – like a pig’s tail” and “The sистер was engaged to a plumber – such a nice young man – but he died. So she put a bit of his hair in a locket + O (I assure you) whenever she’s open the locket + see the bit of hair in it, me sистер’d ro-ar!!” A blue ink drawing of Somerville’s fox terrier, identified by its name, “Taspy Aug 23”, is doodled alongside, beside some sums, as illustration six shows.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Ibid. The notebook is an eclectic source of material. It continues with draft notes for *The Big House of Inver* (1925), while the beginning has Munster Women’s Franchise League (MWFL) notes from 1912 with details of tickets sold at threepence each for Miss Helga Gill’s Lecture and a copy of a letter sent to John Walsh Esq MP in March 1912, inquiring about his intentions regarding the forthcoming bill for the extension of the franchise, signed E. OE. Somerville President MWFL

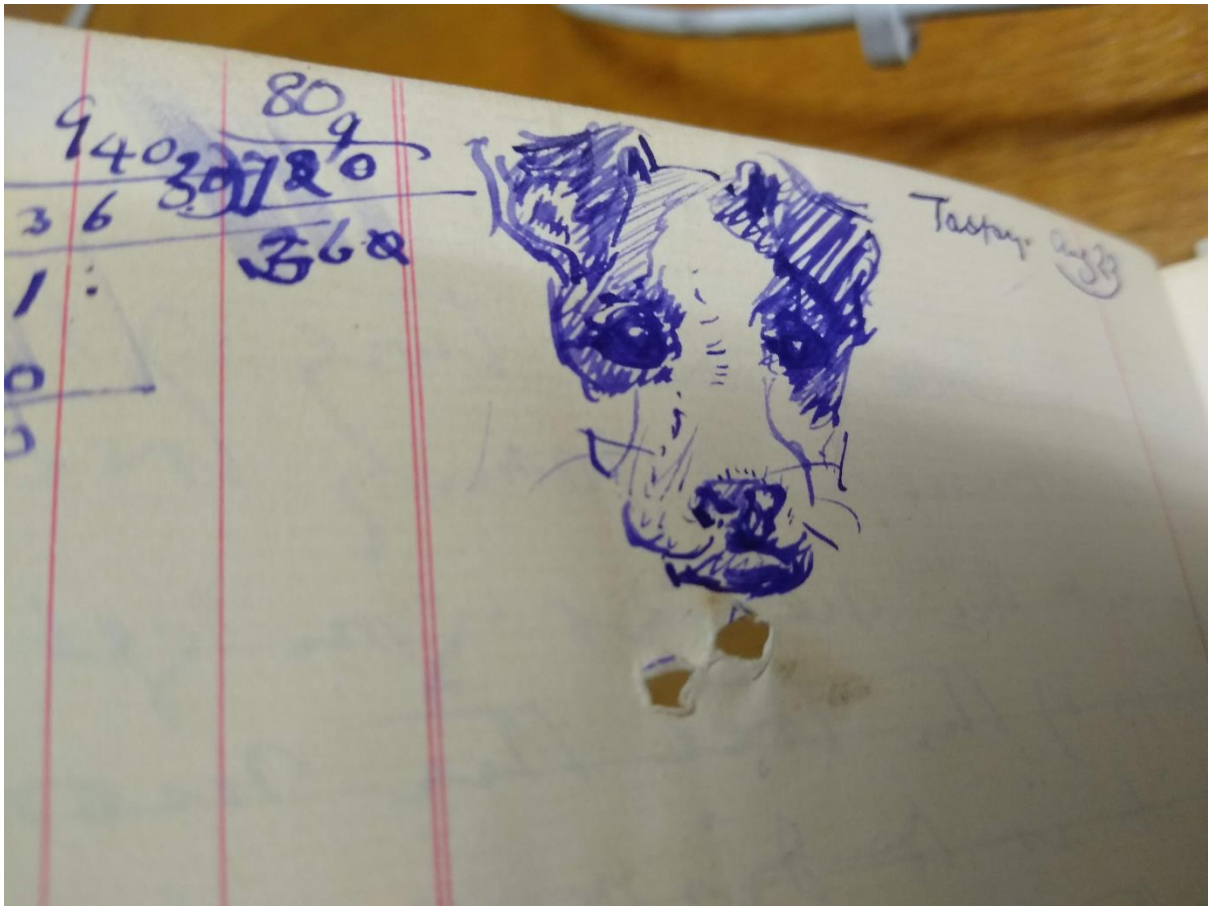


Illustration six: Doodles in a 1923 iteration of Flurry's Wedding

The following month, Somerville sketched out further plot ideas in another notebook dated 23 November 1921.⁴⁸ This was handwritten in blue ink, and on a left hand page (left blank for additions) she drew the stage with entrances and exits indicated. She still intended a musical component: scene four opens with Slipper singing a different comic song, this one about the devil digging for potatoes.⁴⁹ A finished version of the play must have been ready by January 1922 when she sent the manuscript to Charlotte Shaw, clearly expecting her to pass it on to her husband George Bernard Shaw, but no trace of this script has yet been found. However, a complete version of the play is held at Queen's University Belfast, typed and bound, dated 18 May 1923, and this is the first full iteration

48 Queen's University Belfast, Special Collections, MS 17/890/2

49 Did you ever see the Devil
With his little spade + shovel
Diggin praties in the garden
With his tail cocked up! (sic)

to surface.⁵⁰ This copy uses the Somerville and Ross signature despite Martin being dead for more than seven years. Annotated at the end of the first act is another date: “August 1, 1923,” suggesting ongoing revisions even after typing. The title page is set out as follows:

Flurry’s Wedding
(An Episode in the Career of an Irish R.M.)

An Extravaganza

drawn from life

by

E.OE. SOMERVILLE and MARTIN ROSS

In Three Acts.⁵¹

Any reading of *Flurry’s Wedding* shows Somerville had a habit of dropping in repartee wholesale from the stories for the sake of a colourful phrase, regardless of whether it advanced the plot, and her notes indicate this specific intention. For example, the play opens with an altercation between a country woman and Mrs Knox who, according to stage directions, speaks in a “shrill, cracked, well-bred voice, with Irish accent, but not a ‘brogue’” – which, presumably, would not have been well-bred. The woman says she will no longer recommend girls as servants to Mrs Knox because of the kind of work she expects them to do, to which Mrs Knox makes a sharp reply. There appears to be an increase in stage Irishness in the full iteration compared with the outline, with Slipper using more brogue than previously and words such as “venerable,” “gintlemen” and “dhropeen” included in the text.

50 Queen’s University Belfast, Special Collections, MS 17/890/4

51 Ibid., MS 17/890/2

Each act has two scenes. Act I, scene one is labelled Curranhilty Race Course, the setting, with “Owld Boccock’s Mare” as a handwritten note in pencil, suggesting the scene is transplanted from ‘Lisheen Races, Second Hand’. Scene two is specified as ‘Trinket’s Colt’ with an explanatory “Flurry’s Field” handwritten in pencil. Act II moves the action to Shreelane Hall (‘A Royal Command’ is noted in pencil as the story reference) and scene two transfers to Flurry’s garden. In Act III, both scenes are set in Aussolas Castle, Mrs Knox’s lair, at 9.30pm for the first scene and 6.30am the following day for the play’s dénouement. As previously noted, the period is identified as “The month of June in any year between 1897 and 1914” – indicating a halcyon period from Somerville’s perspective before the outbreak of World War I in September 1914 and the loss of Martin in 1915. Oddly, although the period is loosely defined, Somerville is explicit about the timing of the action, and specifies an interval of two days between scenes one and two in Act I, the same between each of the scenes in Act II, while four days elapse between Acts II and III.

She retained the comic song sung by Slipper at the beginning of Act II, a ditty which would not be out of place in a music hall, although Louise Collis reports that Ethel Smyth, whose compositions included works for choral, chamber music, orchestra and operas, gave Somerville tips.⁵² Despite this ‘high art’ influence, Somerville had a predilection for slapstick, and the pantomime nature of Slipper’s performance is emphasised by his “species of cake-walk” dance at the close of the number.⁵³ She combined this with a taste for Shakespeare, and inserted a number of quotations from his plays into the dialogue, including “By the pricking of my thumbs’/Something wicked this

52 Louise Collis, *Impetuous Heart: The Story of Ethel Smyth* (London: William Kimber & Co, 1988), p.167

53 A cakewalk was a dance from the mid-nineteenth century in which slaves in America mocked the stately minuets of slaveowners. It is interesting to speculate on whether Somerville, either consciously or unconsciously, was aligning native Irish people with slavery in suggesting the dance for Slipper. Somerville was a keen dancer in her youth and is said to have once danced a mazurka down Castletownhend’s steep hill to a waiting boat party. Her love of dance is noted in Lewis, *Somerville and Ross: The World of the Irish R.M.*, p.34.

way comes!” spoken in Act III, scene one by Mrs Knox when her enemy Lady Knox approaches, bent on thwarting the marriage.

The play also uses language widely regarded as racist and offensive today – terminology which was viewed more leniently in some quarters at the time. Flurry and Major Yeates repeatedly refer to the sultan as “a nigger” or “the nigger”. Philippa tells her husband in act II, scene one to “be sure and lock up the dogs, the Sultan’s black face might upset them!” While Somerville revised the play continuously over a seventeen-year period, she retained the term “nigger” in every version – it appears a total of six times in the 1933 iteration, used by both Flurry Knox and Major Yeates. This distasteful terminology, a disturbing element in the work, remains something which is difficult to reconcile. It is linked to the imperialist mindset; despite her developing Irish nationalist sympathies, Somerville was invested in empire by caste and family. She was enormously proud of her father and grandfather’s military record, while all five of her brothers joined the armed forces and were posted to far-flung points of the British empire.

Somerville was tone-deaf about racial caricature, for example remaining “entranced by” *Punch* magazine throughout her life, according to Lewis, without registering its contemptuous, anti-Irish stereotyping.⁵⁴ Characters in *Flurry’s Wedding* who are dirty, inefficient or slippery are invariably Irish; and as part of that representation, she portrayed poverty and ignorance as humorous, as is evident in an early scene in the play involving slovenliness in the tea tent at the races. While such a depiction might have passed muster in the 1890s, an audience would have been less likely to view it as picturesque or amusing in London of the 1920s or early 1930s. When otherness is represented, whether of class or racial difference, it is coloured by a colonialist mentality of power and privilege; and while

⁵⁴ Lewis says Somerville’s grandfather had a complete set of *Punch* which she loved to read, enjoying its graphic and verbal humour, but “blinkered to its racism”. Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, p.2

that is especially true in depictions of characters who are not white or European, it is also evident in representations of characters from Catholic, rural Ireland.

In 1933, Somerville completed yet another version of the play, handwritten in a loose-leafed naval log book, which can be seen in illustration seven.⁵⁵

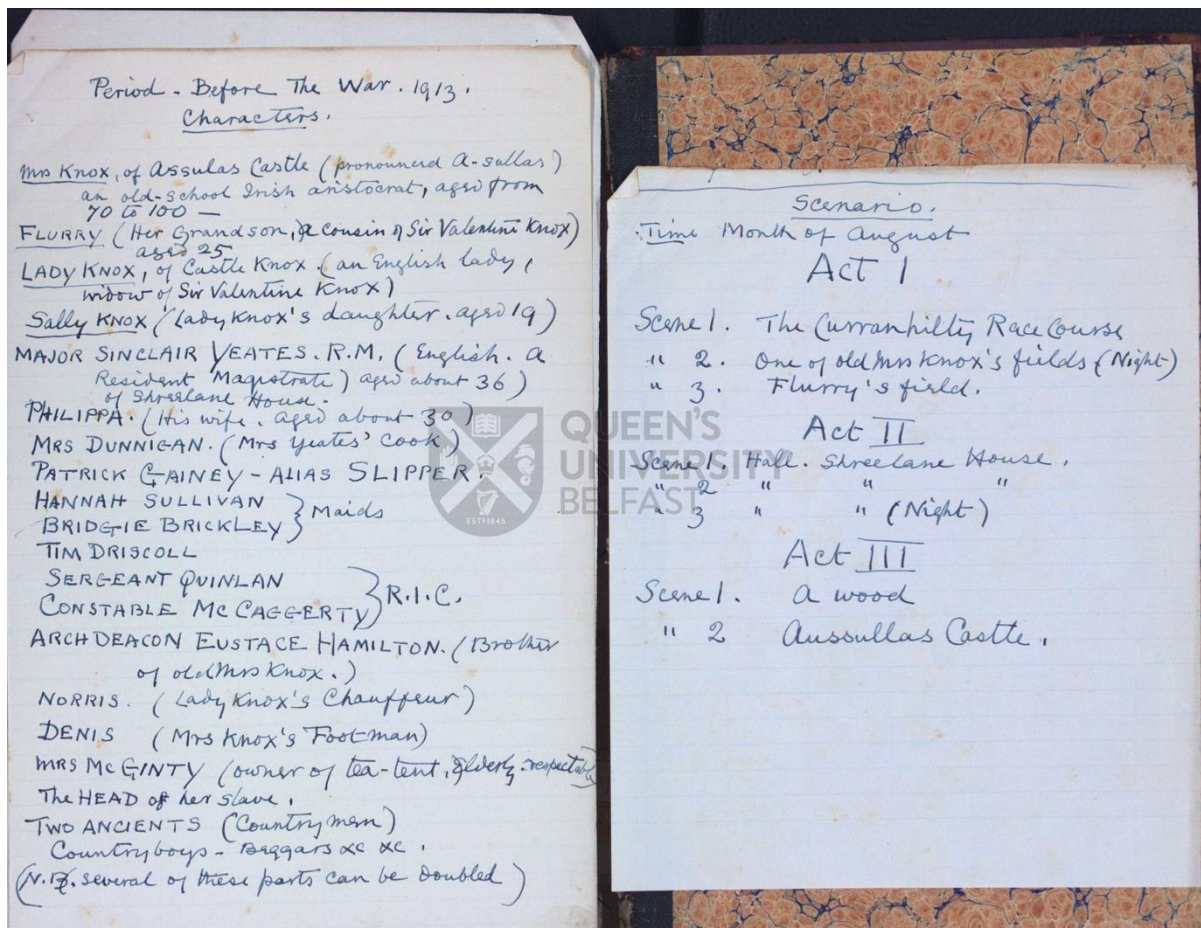


Illustration seven: 1933 handwritten version

By now, there has been a change of title to *A Horse! A Horse! A Comedy in Three Acts*.

There is also a typed version.⁵⁶ At this stage, Somerville becomes more specific about the play's period, and describes it as "Before the War, 1913"; she also lists a lengthy cast, while helpfully suggesting actors can play several roles in some cases, and advises on how to pronounce the name of Mrs Knox's home, which she spells in several different ways.

55 Queen's University Belfast, Special Collections, MS 17/890/9

56 Ibid., MS 17/890/8

The plot alters hardly at all, except the fire at Aussolas Castle during the tenants' dance is cut, but elsewhere inclusions are suggestive of altered social attitudes. Sally smokes in this version, while changing times are signalled by the appearance of a motor car, complete with chauffeur, sent to Aussolas to collect her. The 1933 iteration contains a scene in a police barracks for the first time, while in act III the police arrive at Aussolas with a search warrant for Sally after she goes missing prior to her elopement. A further change is the introduction of another character. Sally's wealthy English admirer, Bernard Shute, appears as a character in his own right prior to the elopement, as opposed to someone mentioned by others. In Act II, scene three, Bernard proposes to Sally, but the scene is represented as comedy: she teasingly pretends to misunderstand him, and assumes he wants to marry her mother.⁵⁷

Somerville finished yet another iteration in 1938.⁵⁸ Again, both handwritten and typed versions exist; although even when she received the latter back from the typist, she added handwritten corrections; and the piece runs to a prolonged seventy-three pages, see illustration eight.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Queen's University Belfast, Special Collections, MS 17/890/3

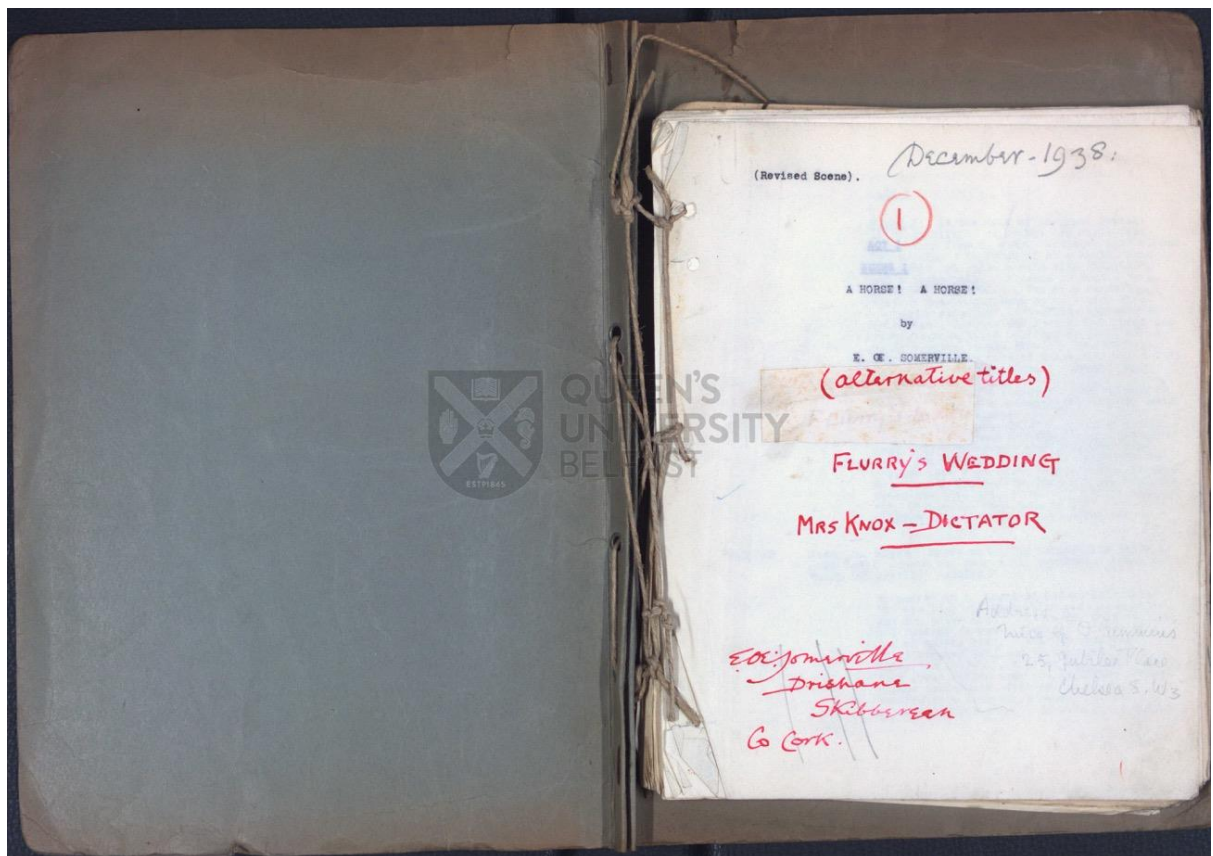


Illustration eight: 1938 version of Somerville's play with three possible titles

By now, she had shortened the name to *A Horse! A Horse!* – while hedging her bets with the other possibilities listed on the title page. She continued to revise the play, even at this advanced stage in its development, and on page twelve of the manuscript, during an exchange between Lady Knox and Philippa at the races, she jotted a note indicating “possible omission here”. Major Yeates stutters more than he did previously, and there is an increase in stage directions about how characters speak; prompts include “nettled”, “tranquilly”, “facetiously”, and so on. Somerville is increasingly prescriptive, too, about Philippa’s depiction and emphasises the way she enunciates, underlining every other word in the manuscript. In the first act, stage directions insist: “She talks mainly in italics, but is not affected, only enthusiastic.”⁵⁹ What is most noteworthy about this iteration is that its authorship is attributed to Somerville alone rather than to Somerville and Ross. Finally,

59 Ibid.

seventeen years after embarking on the project, she takes sole possession of the material,
stating confidently:

A Horse! A Horse!

by

E. OE. Somerville.

CHAPTER TWO

Once written, Somerville expected *Flurry's Wedding* to make a seamless transition from page to stage. She was convinced her play was destined for London's West End, and a prolonged bout of over-confidence in its merits was barely dented by her experience of rejection. Under normal circumstances, a completed piece of work would be forwarded to her agent, but she broke with habit over her play. Somerville was reluctant to continue paying J.B. Pinker's fees – the standard ten per cent on earnings for all written work, including journalism – and was convinced she could bypass him. She therefore set about plundering the contents of her address book, using her extensive social and familial network to try to place the play.¹ Somerville understood the value of her contacts, and these ensured her work was considered by some of the theatre world's leading lights.

During 1922, the early and most vigorous phase of the *Flurry's Wedding* project, Somerville arranged for introductions and made approaches to a number of key people in a position to help steer the play towards production. Initially, Shaw was targeted. Following his suggested script revisions, she contacted four other people: Nigel Playfair of the Lyric in Hammersmith; Bernard Fagan of the Court Theatre off Sloane Square; Basil Dean, managing director of the Reandean Company; and Abbey actor Sara Allgood, who was also working in repertory in England and had a number of potentially useful associates. Somerville was aiming high – Allgood aside, these people were industry heavy-hitters.²

1 This was a model Somerville and Ross followed: they called "on family and relations for help throughout ... their writing lives," notes Mary Ann Gillies in *The Professional Literary Agent in Britain, 1880-1920* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), p.116

2 Allgood showed the play to a number of unnamed people. In 1922, she was under option to Leslie Howard, who combined acting with directing, producing and playwriting, and it is intriguing to imagine the actor coupled with the courtly Ashley Wilkes in *Gone with the Wind* ventriloquising one of the Irish R.M. characters.

Shaw, the first to be contacted, wrote to Somerville in January 1922 with a critique of her play. His advice was blunt: he told her to abandon any thoughts of being a dramatist, and explained that what could be tolerated by Irish R.M. readers “would revolt” in the theatre.³ He dismissed the play as “abominably immoral at root” and claimed she was asking the audience to laugh “at dirt, worthlessness, dishonesty and mischief for their own sakes”. Shaw said that as far as her play had any thread – an implicit denunciation of the plot – it dealt with the marriage of Flurry and Sally, and he was particularly censorious about this storyline.⁴ He also complained that “it never seems to occur to you that poor people are human beings. They are simply figures of fun to you”:

I must not keep on lecturing and abusing you; but you had better get it straight between the eyes from me now than go through a long tragedy of hope deferred and final disappointment. I do not think there is any use your trying the theatre at all whilst you are in your present attitude towards it. You have been very badly brought up in some ways, as all we Irish people have been: we have trained ourselves to bear the dirt and ignorance and poverty of our unfortunate country by two villainous drugs: drink and derision... Until we get away from all that...stick to your pen and let the stage alone.⁵

Somerville was convinced he had missed the point. The play was “pour-rire,” she complained to Ethel Smyth the following day.⁶ To Shaw, she wrote expressing her gratitude “for having taken so much trouble and written to me such a valuable exposition

3 Letter, Shaw to Somerville, 20 January 1922, Drishane Archive, LB 315 a-e

4 Ibid., Shaw wrote to Somerville, “That is to say, it proposes to entertain the spectators with the marriage of a decent young lady to a blackguardly horse thief, dirty and disorderly when not dressed up for some special occasion, unable to earn an honest living, and in no way distinguishable in culture, in morals, in interests, or in decency of language from the poorer rascals whom he orders about by virtue of the social position which he disgraces...”

5 Ibid.

6 Somerville to Smyth, 21 January 1922, quoted in Gifford Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, p.325

of the Art of the Theatre [...] please believe me that I am most sincerely grateful to you and recognise the value of all you say, as well as your great kindness in saying it to one who has ‘rushed in’ where she should have feared to tread”.⁷ Unable to resist a defence of her protagonist, she insisted: “We may be very immoral Irish people, but we are all very much attached to Flurry and think he would make an excellent husband!”⁸

An invitation was quickly forthcoming to the Shaw home in Ayot St. Lawrence, presumably orchestrated by Somerville’s relative Charlotte Shaw, and by 6 February 1922 she was a guest there.⁹ During her stay, Shaw advised significant cuts.¹⁰ It is unclear how closely Somerville paid attention to him, but an indication that she listened, at least, to Shaw’s criticism of Flurry as a rogue eventually crops up in a draft of the 1933 version. There is a handwritten note beside a scene in which Flurry admits to Major Yeates that he stole Trinket’s colt. It reads: “SEE G.B.S. p. 35 SALLY + YEATES - SHE IS ANGRY WITH FLURRY.”¹¹

Soon after her stay with the Shaws, Somerville based herself in London, where she remained until April 1922, on the hunt for other champions while reshaping *Flurry’s Wedding*. A series of letters from Somerville to her brother Cameron, Master of Drishane, with whom she corresponded regularly, allows progress to be charted.¹²

On 21 February 1922 she wrote to him that she was “slaving at the play” with the help of useful criticism from Dame Ethel Smyth and “Muriel C.[urrey]” (no mention of Shaw), and had “recast and practically rewritten the final scene, to, I think, its considerable

7 Somerville to Shaw, 21 January 1922, quoted in Gifford Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, p.325

8 Ibid.

9 Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, p.326

10 Shaw’s correspondence shows he believed in serving an apprenticeship at a craft. “In London all beginners are forty, with twenty years of obscure hard work behind them,” he wrote to Reginald Golding Bright, in a letter dated 30 April 1894. George Bernard Shaw, *Advice to a Young Critic: Letters 1894-1928*, with an introduction by E.J. West (London: Peter Owen Ltd., 1933), p.14

11 Queen’s University Belfast, Special Collections, MS 17/890/3

12 Somerville shared their home with Cameron after his retirement from military life in 1919; she wrote often to all of her siblings when apart, and letters were intended to be shared around for their news. The letters to Cameron in 1922 which map the play’s progress are written in purple ink, a reminder that colour mattered to Somerville, a Paris-trained artist.

advantage.”¹³ Buoyant about its prospects, despite Shaw’s biting analysis, she envisaged it would be staged within months. “I shall have to get a good deal of it retyped, and then can send it to Nigel Playfair. Even if it is accepted I don’t suppose it would be produced till the autumn, unless it was set going for *The Provinces* during the summer.”¹⁴ Two days later, she was staying with Smyth at her home in Coign, Woking, where she wrote to Cameron again emphasising her work on revisions. “I think I shall stay here till I can hand the play to someone in authority – (N. Playstairs)?? – to read. It is getting on, and I don’t think the work (wh[ich] has been, and is, heavy) is wasted.”¹⁵ This letter contains the first reference to Playfair, and either Shaw or Smyth is likely to have recommended him.

Back in London, another letter to her brother on 2 March 1922 outlined developments. “I shant (sic) get the play back from typing and binding till Wednesday next, at best, so cant give it to Playfair till this day week I fear. These delays are maddening but were quite unavoidable. I have worked like a nigger and there had been no dawdling. I am longing to get home but dont think it can be done much before 16th (this day fortnight.) If Playfair turns the play down, I have another string to my bow – one Basil Deane (sic). Ethel now has high hopes, and believes in it wholeheartedly, wh[ich] she didn’t at first, and she is a very good judge. I am to meet N. Playfair at lunch with her and talk it over with him.”¹⁶ Dean was a former actor who had moved into the production of plays, and was known for his imaginative use of stage lighting. He achieved dazzling success in 1926 when he partnered with Margaret Kennedy to adapt her risqué novel *The*

13 This letter reveals she continued to believe she was being advised by Martin during automatic writing sessions, where it notes Smyth and Muriel C.’s criticism “(As Martin wrote a night or two ago) is ‘worth a whole candelabra! We shall light London!’” Edith Somerville to Cameron Somerville, 21 February 1922, Drishane Archive L 1108 a-b

Muriel C. is Muriel Currey, Martin’s niece.

14 Ibid.

15 Letter, Edith Somerville to Cameron Somerville, 23 February 1922, Drishane Archive LA 1109 a-d

16 Letter, Edith Somerville to Cameron Somerville, 2 March 1922, Drishane Archive LA 1110 a-b

As discussed earlier, the term ‘nigger’ is a casual expression of racism which is problematic in Somerville’s work.

Constant Nymph, dealing with adolescent sexuality and class, for the stage.¹⁷ Playfair was director and actor-manager of the Lyric, an intimate venue which had developed a cutting-edge reputation. At the time of Somerville's approach, he was the toast of the West End for his imaginative revival of *The Beggar's Opera* set in London's criminal netherworld, which ran from 1920 to 1923 for a record-breaking 1,463 performances.¹⁸ Somerville recognised no disparity between her own rather dated material, presented in a traditional format, and the innovative work in which both Playfair and Dean were engaged.

By the second week of March, she had dispatched the play to Playfair, her first choice. "I have today, at last, sent the play to Nigel Playfair. I hope he will be as good as his name," she wrote to Cameron.¹⁹ Playfair wasted no time in refusing it. She knew it had been turned down a week later. As with Shaw, she wrote at once thanking him for his candour. It is notable how quickly Playfair assessed the play, suggesting that Somerville's manuscript had been advanced to the top of the reading queue. Playfair's rejection letter has not yet surfaced, but on 20 March 1922, ten days after submitting her play, Somerville told Cameron she had received a second letter from him. In it, he appeared to feel he may have been too blunt, because he asked her to pay him another visit, saying: "[D]o remember that I criticise your play from a very high stand point. Of course as it stands it is far better than ninety per cent of the plays that are sent out."²⁰ This reveals Playfair had been highly critical. Somerville told her brother, "I cannot imagine why, since Nigel now thinks it is among the first 10 plays out of a hundred, he didn't say so before instead of uttering a sweeping condemnation!"²¹

17 In 1923, the energetic Dean formed a touring company, DeeCee Tours Ltd. In 1926 he set up on his own as Basil Dean Productions Ltd. *The Constant Nymph* opened at the New Theatre in St Martin's Lane in 1926 starring Noël Coward and later John Gielgud, and was adapted for film in 1928, 1933 and 1943.

18 The adaptation was by Arnold Bennett, from John Gay's 1728 script, and that original production also broke records. Bennett was another of Pinker's clients, and Pinker must have had contractual dealings on his behalf.

19 Letter, Edith Somerville to Cameron Somerville, 10 March 1922, Drishane Archive LA 1112 a

20 Copied into a letter from Edith Somerville to Cameron Somerville, 20 March 1922, Drishane Archive LA 1113 a-b

21 Ibid.

Undeterred, she continued to quarry her contacts. The same letter mentions an approach to Allgood. “In the meantime I await the response from Sara Allgood.”²² Allgood had connections with Liverpool Repertory Theatre, where Dean had been Controller, which suggests Somerville may have been using her as their intermediary. Additionally, a well-known actor’s name attached to a script would render it more marketable. “I am longing to meet Sara Allgood. I hear that she can “do any brogue” but I dont believe it,” wrote Edith.²³ Soon after, assiduous on her play’s behalf, she met Bernard Fagan of the Court Theatre, and it is possible that Shaw supplied his name because Fagan produced *Heartbreak House* there in 1921.²⁴ A letter from London to Cameron in Drishane at the end of March reported on their meeting. “I went to see Mr Fagan at the Court Theatre. A nice man, Irish, and a gentleman (in spite of his awful name). He knew Martin’s and my books intimately, and seemed keen to read the play. He says Irish plays go well in London but badly in the provinces, and in America he lost £1200 on the *Whiteheaded Boy*, tho’ he had a splendid company! He takes my play on Friday, on a holiday, and will be away a fortnight, so I shan’t wait for his return. I can’t say I have any hope about it, but it will be interesting to hear what he says.”²⁵ From this, we can deduce that Irish themes weren’t necessarily precluded from the British stage, despite combustible relations between Ireland and Britain at this time.

On 3 April, Somerville wrote to Cameron that Allgood was keen to read her play to her stage manager “and praises it very highly, only suggesting some change re last scene! I don’t know what her game is, but I must await Fagan’s reply before dealing with

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

Somerville may have anticipated Allgood, who had a gift for comedy, playing one of the servants if she was commenting on her ability to speak with a brogue.

24 James Bernard Fagan was an actor, playwright and theatre producer who took over the Court Theatre, later the Royal Court, in 1920. Fagan was interested in Irish playwrights and brought Seán O’Casey’s work to the British public with *Juno and the Paycock* in 1925 and *The Plough and the Stars* in 1926. He struck a winning formula with an adaptation of *Treasure Island* at the Savoy, which opened in December 1922 and was revived every Christmas until the outbreak of World War II.

25 Letter, Edith Somerville to Cameron Somerville, 29 March 1922, Drishane Archive LA 1114 a-c

her.”²⁶ Allgood’s response was the most positive to date, apart from relatives and friends. No further mention was made of Fagan, suggesting he did not warm to *Flurry’s Wedding*. By June 1922, Allgood was also reversing away from the script, citing anti-Irish sentiment. Although this might well have been a factor, Allgood may also have been trying to let down Somerville gently. Allgood’s letter sent from Liverpool to Somerville, back in Ireland since 11 April, offered a string of excuses.

I’m delighted to hear about the play, and only wish I could produce it – the plans at present are, we tour till September, (business permitting). Up to the present, it has been awful, and then my present contract ceases, unless the manager Leslie Howard, can book autumn dates. And he has an option on me till Xmas. I’m afraid the Irish question, is doing us a dreadful lot of harm, especially in the provinces, and unless I could get back to London, it would be suicidal to attempt to put on another Irish play. Let’s hope by the autumn, things will be amicably settled between the two countries and then there will be hope for yr play and me as an Irish actress. (sic)²⁷

Meanwhile, throughout those months in London, Somerville was indulging her amateur dramatic instincts, and possibly singing for her supper, with a series of readings from *Flurry’s Wedding* among her social and family circle. After her visit to the Shaws in early February, she stayed at the Theydon Bois home of Smyth’s socialite sister Mary, Mrs Charles Hunter, where she read aloud from her work-in-progress.²⁸ In March, she read at a tea party for fifteen people hosted by her brother and sister-in-law, Boyle and Mabel Somerville. “It went very well, and I think they really enjoyed it. They laughed

26 Letter, Edith Somerville to Cameron Somerville, 3 April 1922, Drishane Archive LA 1115 a-b

27 Letter, Sara Allgood to Edith Somerville, 1 April 1922, Drishane Archive LB 11 a-b

28 Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, p.326

very well, anyhow. Boyle said he hardly recognised it, it was so changed and improved – wh[ich] was satisfactory.”²⁹ In the same letter, she told Cameron “LooLoo” had visited her to discuss another reading at Constance Bushe’s the following Thursday, “very few of the family only, as audience (I should know it by heart pretty soon!).”³⁰ Still wildly unrealistic about her play’s prospects, unless it was an attempt at humour, she added, “A car in London is the first luxury I shall have when ‘Flurry’s Wedding’ has run for 10 years.”³¹ By 29 March, she was booked for yet another reading, writing to Cameron that two of their brothers were joining in. “I am pledged to Mrs Savile tomorrow afternoon to read the play, and as my throat is getting husky, I am importing Boyle and Jack to read the men’s parts! I fear they ought to have a rehearsal, and doubt its being feasible at such short notice; however it will be typical, anyhow, and better than failing Mrs S.”³² Clearly, hearing Somerville read aloud from the play at social events in her circle was becoming *de rigueur*.

While family and friends appear to have enjoyed her readings, the reaction from professionals indicates the play was regarded as box office poison. Rather than accept this analysis, Somerville preferred to blame the taste and judgment of managers. In the same letter to Cameron, she wrote, “Maurice Baring has done 2 or 3 admirable plays. A Professional dramatic reader told him that one of his plays was the best they had been offered for years, but the managers have so low an opinion of public taste that they think they must put on what they know are rotten plays! And, as a result, 3 or 4 this year have been taken off after 3 nights! Arnold Bennett’s last (ie play) will – they say – be scrapped soon, being too utterly poor – yet they spend hundreds putting them on! It is inscrutable.”³³

29 Letter, Edith Somerville to Cameron Somerville, 20 March 1922, Drishane Archive LA 1113 a-b

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Letter, Edith Somerville to Cameron Somerville, 29 March 1922, Drishane Archive LA 1114 a-c

33 Letter, Edith Somerville to Cameron Somerville, 29 March 1922, Drishane Archive LA 1114 a-c

Baring was a friend of Smyth’s, who based her opera, *Fête Galante*, on his short story by the same name.

Somerville continued to tinker with possibilities for *Flurry's Wedding*, and by 1923 she was exploring the possibility of mounting her own amateur production. In a letter from Shropshire to Cameron, undated but with 31 May 1923 added later, she wrote, "I have heard from Ethel, to whom I had written asking her to play Mrs Cadogan, saying very wise and discouraging things about the play; she thinks – and I'm afraid rightly – that there would be no assets after the theatre and other exes [expenses] were deducted from the takings. I must talk seriously to Lady K.[enmare] and we must find out more before going deeper into it. Tootsie very kindly offered to speak to Lady Bindon Blood about it, but I think it would be better to hold hard for a time before doing so."³⁴ No more was heard of this possibility.

By 1926, Allgood was back in the frame. Somerville's diary records a visit to London that January, where she attended a performance of *Juno and the Paycock* presented by the Irish Players on 23 January.³⁵ "Eliz. [Lady Kenmare], ES [Ethel Smyth] and I went behind and talked to delightful Sara Allgood and her sister Maire O'Neill."³⁶ Here was another opportunity for her play. Upon returning to Castletownshend, Somerville made a fresh copy, had it typed, and sent it to Allgood. Nothing further ensued.³⁷ Undaunted, Somerville tried elsewhere. Later that year, Lewis's study of Somerville's diaries reveals that on 11 June 1926 "Mrs Anstey has asked Gerald du Maurier if he would read *Flurry's Wedding* and he had answered 'delighted to read play'".³⁸ By 12 July he had refused it.³⁹ Also in 1926, Somerville entered into negotiations with her publisher, Longmans, and it appeared as though the play would

34 Here, Somerville has invited Smyth to take the part of Major Yeates' cook. Edith Somerville to Cameron Somerville, 31 May 1923, Drishane Archive

35 The date suggests it was Fagan's production.

36 Queen's University Belfast diaries, 23 Jan 1926 MS 17/874/1

37 Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, pp.351-2

38 Gerald du Maurier was Daphne du Maurier's father and a well-known actor and manager who had recently moved from Wyndham's Theatre to the St James's Theatre. It is notable that he agreed to read it following an approach from one of Somerville's social circle.

39 Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, p.353

spring to life as a text. In her biography of Somerville, Lewis reports that a wrangle developed over American dramatic rights, and the offer was withdrawn, as noted in Somerville's diary on 6 August 1926.⁴⁰

In light of her inability to place the play herself, it was an error of judgment for Somerville to begrudge Pinker his commission – he understood business even if he lacked specific theatre expertise. He was an able negotiator with an eye for placing material, who had guided her career shrewdly, and despite Somerville's resourcefulness she lacked his skillset as a modern agent. Pinker operated one of the first and foremost agencies, and when Somerville and Ross signed with him in 1896 they were early arrivals among a stable of authors which swelled to include Henry James, Arnold Bennett and Oscar Wilde.⁴¹

“[W]ithout Pinker's astute management of their career, both (Somerville and Ross) might have been forced to give up their estates and their way of life,” according to Mary Ann Gillies in *The Professional Literary Agent in Britain, 1880-1920*.⁴² He formulated “the recipe” for the Irish R.M. series, says Gifford Lewis.⁴³ In his book on Joseph Conrad, another of Pinker's clients, Cedric Watts stressed how his “nagging insistence that Conrad regularly produce copy for the market may have exasperated his client, but it also served as a goad.”⁴⁴ That talent for chivvying writers was extended to Somerville and Ross, who were slow to produce their Irish R.M. stories and did not initially recognise their potential, whereas Pinker stressed their value and steered them

40 Ibid., p.352

41 J.B. Pinker (1863-1922) had an office in The Strand and the cable address Bookishly, London. His literary agency handled authors including: Arnold Bennett, Joseph Conrad, Stephen Crane, Ford Madox Ford, John Galsworthy, George Gissing, Aldous Huxley, Henry James, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Compton Mackenzie, Seumus MacManus, Thomas Mann, Somerset Maugham, George Bernard Shaw, Osbert Sitwell, Somerville and Ross, H.G. Wells, Edith Wharton and Oscar Wilde.

42 Gillies, *The Professional Literary Agent in Britain, 1880-1920*, p.135

43 Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, p.2

Pinker was dubbed “a pioneer” by Robert McCrum in an article on the phenomenon of literary agents for *The Observer*. (16 June 2002, ‘Kings of the Jungle: Are Agents Good For Publishing?’); and an “impressive negotiator” by David Finkelstein in *The House of Blackwood: Author-Publisher Relations in the Victorian Era*.

44 Cedric Watts, *Joseph Conrad: A Literary Life* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989), p.88

adroitly towards the profitable format.⁴⁵ Preoccupied by domestic and social duties, they had a tendency to ignore deadlines, and Pinker was obliged to “harry them” for material, said Lewis. She noted a diary entry of Somerville’s for 16 June 1898 on holiday in Étaples: “Heard from Pinker again. He said that Watson of the Bad. Mag. is shrieking for hunting stories.”⁴⁶

As writers who prided themselves on being professionals, Somerville and Ross felt entitled to share in the profits of their work, and were quick to recognise the importance of representation by a literary agent to negotiate on their behalf.⁴⁷ Martin behaved in a similar role to an agent with their first novel, “performing the business functions that a literary agent would have undertaken,” thereby augmenting its chances of commercial and critical success, says Gillies.⁴⁸ Their collaboration with Pinker was lengthy and rewarding, and he proved adept at handling them: Gillies portrays the pattern of their relationship as “praise followed by sound, practical business advice”.⁴⁹ They also socialised together, and Somerville asked him to find buyers for her horses.⁵⁰ She also called upon his assistance for buying and selling art.⁵¹ However, from 1919 onwards, a cash-strapped Somerville was

45 “‘To use literary slang’ – said Pinker – ‘this is *your own stuff*,’ and no one else does anything like it,” Somerville quoting Pinker at a meeting he arranged with Lawrence and Bullen publishers. Edith Somerville to Violet Martin, 25 April 1897. Lewis, *The Selected Letters of Somerville and Ross*, p.243

46 Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, p.182. On this French holiday Somerville and Ross finally settled down to write the stories for the first Irish R.M. series. The opening story, ‘Great Uncle McCarthy’, appeared in *The Badminton Magazine* in October 1898, the authors sharing a fee of £18 4s 6d, pp.189-190,192

47 By 1889, when Somerville and Ross had their first book published, writers were becoming more professional. Successful writers began turning down one-off payments in favour of royalties, as books became cheaper to buy. This was due to machine-manufactured paper and more efficient printing presses, which increased sales volume, and the replacement of the expensive triple-decker format by less costly paperbacks. These developments meant there was money to be earned from writing, which could become a trade rather than a genteel pastime. The rise of the literary agent coincided with this expansion, with the profession established in 1881 by A.P. (Alexander Pollock) Watt.

48 Gillies, *The Professional Literary Agent in Britain, 1880-1920*, p.112

49 *Ibid.*, p.121

50 The Somerville and Ross collection at Trinity College Dublin reveals how Pinker was on the receiving end of a stream of letters from two extremely determined ladies. They were quick to remind him when royalties were due, and a constant refrain was that publishers weren’t proactive in promoting their books, while they also wanted cheaper sale prices and thicker paper. In a letter dated 11 Oct 1899 from Somerville to Pinker, she urged “a strong and vigorous publisher (not gentlemanly reticence) who would advertise well and prove capable of pushing a book.” Somerville and Ross: Business Correspondence 1884-1948, TCD

51 Gillies, *The Professional Literary Agent in Britain, 1880-1920*, p.122

trying to disentangle herself from their business relationship.⁵² Correspondence between them that year is instructive. A letter on 18 January 1919 from Somerville to Pinker, marked ‘Private’, said:

I hate having to write this (as I believe you will understand) but I am truly sorry to say that the 10pc upon the book’s earnings is a matter that I cannot at this juncture afford to lose. I may come over to London when the manuscript is ready for typing, and I would then worry round to try and place it. [...] I do hope you will forgive me, and will not feel wounded or hurt in any way by what I have said. It is truly a case of ‘needs must’ and I expect you have met with such before.⁵³

She then backtracked, proposing that Pinker read a few chapters of the novel, *Mount Music*, and if he considered it would achieve an acceptable offer she would leave the business dealings to him.⁵⁴ “If I got a good price I could afford the commission, otherwise I must hoard every ha’penny!”⁵⁵

By late 1921, Somerville was taking steps to place *Flurry’s Wedding* without his assistance, ignoring Pinker’s contractual interest in any Irish R.M. related material. At the end of December, a letter arrived from him claiming £52.10s for withdrawal of dramatic rights.⁵⁶ Somerville’s volcanic friend Dame Ethel Smyth was informally advising her at this stage. In Smyth’s biography of Maurice Baring, she quoted him with approval,

52 Gillies notes that throughout their career, Somerville and Ross tended to make short-term economic decisions: “One thing that becomes clear is that their need for money drives their decisions on what to write, where to place it, and how much to ask for their work. Their judgment in each of these respects is not always good, and in fact sometimes results in short-term economic gains that end up costing them money in the long term.” One example was selling their copyright. Gillies, *The Professional Literary Agent in Britain, 1880-1920*, p.115

53 Letter, Edith Somerville to J.B. Pinker, 18 Jan 1919, Drishane Archive

54 *Mount Music* (London: Longman’s, Green & Co., 1919)

55 Letter, Somerville to Pinker, 18 Jan 1919, Drishane Archive

56 Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, p.323

“[O]nly one thing matters, the creation of works of art.”⁵⁷ Such lofty sentiments were not designed to help Somerville find a platform for her play. Smyth did, at least, acknowledge how success was never guaranteed, again quoting Baring that “anyone acquainted with stage-land in any shape is aware that success is a hair-trigger business”.⁵⁸ A hair-trigger business would suggest the need for expert guidance, but Smyth argued against Pinker, insisting he knew nothing about the theatre world, and Somerville was ready to be persuaded. A showdown was looming, but averted because Pinker died unexpectedly of influenza in February 1922, during a business trip to New York. After Somerville read his death notice, her diary entry recorded his passing in a singularly insensitive manner despite a close and mutually beneficial relationship spanning two and a half decades: “Am relieved to think that the impending row with him has thus been averted.”⁵⁹

It was far from unusual for novelists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to attempt stagecraft, as Arnold Bennett observes in *The Author's Craft* (1914): “[E]stablished novelists not infrequently venture into the theatre with audacity,” he says.⁶⁰ However, audacity indicates a risky business. Somerville needed allies for her foray, and unfortunately her dismissal of Pinker’s talents was not her only miscalculation. Her decision to concentrate on West End producers was also a tactical error.⁶¹ While she appeared to have no contacts in provincial theatre, apart from Allgood, in Dublin she had access to an influential, experienced and successful playwright and producer in the shape of Lady Gregory. She was a social connection of Somerville’s, and was related to Martin.

57 Ethel Smyth, *Maurice Baring* (London and Toronto: William Heinemann Ltd 1938), p.126

58 *Ibid.*, p.146

59 His death was reported on 10 February 1922 in *The New York Times* under the headline ‘James B. Pinker Dies Here’ (page 13) and in the *Daily Mail* under the headline ‘Literary Agent’s Death’ (page 5). Pinker’s success as an agent can be gauged by the value of his estate which was worth £40,000, twice the amount left by Joseph Conrad and greater than the £36,000 left by Arnold Bennett. Cited in Watts, *Joseph Conrad: A Literary Life*, p.89

When he died, he had spent the last twenty-four years of his life in the service of at least seventy-five authors, says Kerry Lee Sutherland in ‘The Prince of Agents: James Brand Pinker and Henry James’ (PhD dissertation for Kent State University, Ohio, 2012), p.187

60 Arnold Bennett, *The Author's Craft* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1914), p.70

61 Often, plays toured the provinces before transferring to the West End, allowing glitches to be ironed out.

Uncharacteristically, this was one contact Somerville shied away from using. Granted, London was where money could be made, but successful Abbey productions did lucrative tours of Britain and the United States, and burnished a playwright's reputation.

When the Irish Literary Theatre was founded by W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn in 1899 (coincidentally the same year that the first collection of Irish R.M. stories was published), their mission statement insisted, "Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism" and claimed the Irish people were "weary of misrepresentation".⁶² This might suggest that the Irish R.M. and the Abbey Theatre were not an ideal fit. However, Lady Gregory was actively looking for Irish material, as quoted in a 1911 newspaper interview during an American tour with the Abbey: "We read and search anxiously in the mass of manuscripts that comes in."⁶³ Lady Gregory moved in a world which "viewed the Rising as an abject piece of treachery" and trod a tightrope between pro-empire and pro-independence camps, says Colm Tóibín in *Lady Gregory's Toothbrush*.⁶⁴ Somerville, while unconvinced by the Irish cultural revival, managed comparable accommodations to Lady Gregory, and their political positions were not dissimilar. "[S]uch shiftings and turnings and dichotomies and inconsistencies are part of the history of Ireland in these years [...] In the period between 1890 and 1925 every force changed and adapted," Tóibín notes.⁶⁵ It is not unusual for political views to mutate, and Lady Gregory's ambivalence about the 1798 Rising metamorphosed into the ringing affirmation of 'Cathleen ni

62 From 'Statement of the Irish Literary Theatre' by W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn, 1899. Reprinted in *Handbook of the Irish Revival: An Anthology of Irish Cultural and Political Writings 1891-1922*, eds. Declan Kiberd and P.J. Mathews (Dublin: Abbey Theatre Press, 2015), p.91

In *Ave*, the first instalment in his three-book memoir, George Moore recounts a visit by Yeats and Martyn in 1899, to tell him they were founding an Irish literary theatre. Moore was aghast. "A forlorn thing it was surely to bring literary plays to Dublin!... Dublin of all cities in the world!" he wrote. (London: William Heinemann, 1911), pp.41-2

63 Lady Gregory: Interviews and Recollections, ed. E.H. Mikhail (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), p.63

64 Colm Tóibín, *Lady Gregory's Toothbrush* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2002), p.92

65 *Ibid.*, p.43

Houlihan' (sic).⁶⁶ Similarly, Somerville could rail against Parnell and his Land League "wolf-pack" who were "out for blood", but was able to send a letter – although unsigned – to the *Times* of London in 1916 begging for the Easter Rising participants to be spared.⁶⁷ By 1921, she was writing to her sister, Hildegarde, Lady Coghill, that a fellow house guest, Lady Kitty Lambton, said to be "a *mad* Sinn Feiner" was "moderate, not much worse than mine!".⁶⁸ It is not difficult to envisage the two women cooperating on a play.

Lady Gregory was well-positioned to guide Somerville in adapting material for the stage. Despite her background in amateur dramatics, Somerville had not served an apprenticeship, and failed to realise that prose could not be transferred indiscriminately to a script; nor did she understand that a play should not be crammed with scenes, but required compromise and shortcuts.⁶⁹ These were techniques she could have gleaned from Lady Gregory, who enjoyed piloting new playwrights. Furthermore, the Abbey was actively looking for plays by women, according to Robin Jackson Boisseau in 'The Women of the Abbey Theatre, 1897-1925', with four women playwrights featured in 1913, for instance.⁷⁰ At the same time that Somerville trawled London for a producer, the

66 A one-act play co-written by Yeats and Lady Gregory, which debuted in 1902. Maud Gonne played the title character in the first performance.

67 Queen's University Belfast, Somerville and Ross Collection, Sotheby's Catalogue, No.881; Parnell reference in Somerville and Ross, *Irish Memories* (London: Longman's, Green, 1917), p.91

The contextual difference between the Land War in the late nineteenth century, and the Easter Rising in the twentieth, was significant. Parnell, Davitt and the Land League had an instant, negative impact on people of Somerville's caste, whereas the Rising was an urban-based insurrection which did not affect landlords immediately.

68 Letter, Somerville to Coghill, 17 Sep 1921, quoted by Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, p.320

69 "The last suburban train is the best friend of the dramatist, though the fellow seldom has the sense to see it," wrote Arnold Bennett, advising dramatists to be succinct. Arnold Bennett, *The Author's Craft* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1914), p.79

70 These were: *The Home-Coming* by Gertrude Robins, *Broken Faith* by Suzanne Day and Geraldine Cummins, and *My Lord* by Mrs Bart Kennedy. Cited by Robin Jackson Boisseau in 'The Women of the Abbey Theatre, 1897-1925' (PhD dissertation for the University of Maryland, 2004), p.228

In addition, Eva Gore-Booth recast Irish myths for the contemporary stage, but reversed gender roles to give women strong central roles, for example in her version of the Cúchulainn story, *Unseen Kings* (performed 1912 at the Abbey Theatre), says Tina O'Toole in 'New Irish Women and New Women's Writing', *Irish Literature in Transition, 1880-1940*, ed. Marjorie Howes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp.152-170. O'Toole also cites Gore-Booth's version of the Queen Maeve story which emphasises the mother-daughter relationship in *The Triumph of Maeve* (1905), in 'New Woman Writers', *A History of Modern Irish Women's Literature*, eds. Heather Ingman and Cliona Ó Gallchoir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p.126

Abbey was staging work by Dorothy Macardle and Fand O'Grady (Kathleen Cruise O'Brien's nom de plume). Macardle's plays were political, with a contemporary message despite their historical setting. The first, *Atonement*, opened in December 1918, and dealt with sins of the fathers. Her second, *Ann Kavanagh*, was staged in April 1922 and addressed the subject of a mixed marriage during the 1798 revolution.⁷¹ In February 1925, Macardle's third and final play, *The Old Man*, dramatised the 1848 uprising.⁷² While Somerville's stage work avoided any political message, this would not have made it unsuitable for the Abbey. In 1923, the theatre staged O'Grady's one-act play *Apartments*, a positively-reviewed, humorous piece in which Sara Allgood as Mrs Mccarthy (sic) ran a boarding-house, pledging her lodgers' property to keep a pawn-broker, book-seller, grocer and others in business.⁷³

As noted, Lady Gregory offered to host Somerville and Ross at Coole Park in 1905 and assist with working up a scenario, but Martin rebuffed her. In *Interviews and Recollections*, Lady Gregory provided a good example of what she had in mind with her mention of Douglas Hyde's play *The Twisting of the Rope*:⁷⁴ "This was an adaptation made in three or four days by him at my home in Coole."⁷⁵ In his introduction to the Abbey chapter of *Lady Gregory's Journals*, Lennox Robinson characterised her as "an excellent producer of plays, a most helpful critic of production, a merciless critic of players".⁷⁶ He also noted, "She went to great pains, gave much time to try and improve some play she liked or some young dramatist's work. In every case I know of the

71 The plot has Miles Kavanagh and his men chase a British soldier, intending to execute him, but Kavanagh's wife Ann interferes because her friend was killed in similar circumstances.

72 Reviews were mixed and it proved more successful with audiences than critics, according to Boisseau in 'The Women of the Abbey Theatre, 1897-1925', p.335

73 *Ibid.*, pp.334-5

74 *Casadh an tSúgáin* or *The Twisting of the Rope* was a popular comedy first performed by the Irish Literary Theatre in 1901 and revived frequently in both the original Irish and its English translation.

75 Lady Gregory: *Interviews and Recollections*, ed. E.H. Mikhail (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), p.63

76 *Lady Gregory's Journals 1916-1930*, ed. Lennox Robinson (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947), p.53

dramatist thanked her.”⁷⁷ If Lady Gregory had read Somerville’s play, there is a strong likelihood she could have helped refine its adaptation. After all, she persuaded O’Casey to strip away the extraneous and focus on nothing but character and dialogue in *The Shadow of a Gunman*. The Abbey staged three O’Casey plays between 1923 and 1926: *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) – all of which referred explicitly to recent conflicts and managed to transform the Irish experience into a universal one.⁷⁸ In general, Ireland’s theatre audience wanted realism – modern drama and a reaction against the past were in vogue, observe Nicholas Grene and Chris Morash in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre*.⁷⁹

Somerville’s work, which had seemed lively at the turn of the twentieth century, was outdated by the 1920s in both Ireland and Britain. The British public flocked to *The Beggar’s Opera*, which critiqued the rich and powerful – a sentiment capturing the post-war mood. Playfair’s daring version used one simple set with virtually no changes. This experimental or *avant-garde* style compared with Somerville’s multi-set, multi-scene approach.⁸⁰ Naturalism as a form of realism had begun to appear on European stages by the late nineteenth century. Writers such as Shaw and O’Casey were influenced by this stylistic innovation, as was Joyce – as an eighteen-year-old, his first extensive published work was a review of Ibsen’s *When We Dead Awaken* published in the *Fortnightly Review*. Inspired by Ibsen, Joyce wrote his first play, *A Brilliant Career*, but destroyed it

77 Ibid., p.54

78 *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre*, eds. Nicholas Grene and Chris Morash (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.20

Juno and the Paycock would have been particularly instructive for Somerville, whose characters’ shower of blarney was never undercut by anything unexpected.

In addition, another O’Casey play, *Cathleen Listens*, was staged in the Abbey in 1923, a skit on Irish politics

79 Ibid., p.9

80 Philip Hensher writes in *The Guardian* that a novelist’s mastery of dialogue is not necessarily the same as a playwright’s and “any kind of falsity will be ruthlessly exposed.” 26 July 2006

soon after in 1902, according to B.J. Tysdahl.⁸¹ In London, the trend towards realism manifested itself in Ibsen translations, according to Patti P. Gillespie and Kenneth M. Cameron in *Western Theatre: Revolution and Revival*.⁸² Gillespie and Cameron noted, “Works such as *A Doll’s House* and *Ghosts* abandoned the use of non-realistic devices, such as addressing monologues and asides to the audience, portraying instead characters whose psychological motivations were clearly expressed in natural-sounding dialogue, with exposition unfolding through conversations between characters rather than through unmotivated monologues.”⁸³ By comparison, Somerville’s stagecraft was clunky, and her authorial presence too obtrusive as she inserted herself into the text, not realising she must remain backstage.

There was room for comedy on the London stage, as at the Abbey, and another successful West End musical at the time was a pantomime-style musical, *Chu Chin Chow*, a version of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, which capitalised on public tastes for orientalism and ran for five years until 1921 at His Majesty’s Theatre in London’s Haymarket. Elsewhere, *Whirled Into Happiness* at the Lyric Theatre in Shaftesbury Avenue – a musical in which a hairdresser’s assistant was mistaken for a marquess – garnered enthusiastic reviews and ran for seven months between May and December 1922 before touring the provinces the following year.⁸⁴

Somerville’s problem was not her humour but her subject matter. Even if the Abbey had backed it, a farce about the landed gentry was probably a hard sell in the new

81 The article was published on 1 April 1900 under the headline ‘Ibsen’s New Drama’ and earned Joyce twelve guineas. Richard Ellman, *James Joyce* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p.74
A review by Joyce of Ibsen’s first play *Catilina* appeared on 21 March 1903 in the *Speaker*, says B. J. Tysdahl in *Joyce and Ibsen: A Study in Literary Influence* by (New York: Humanities Press, 1968), p.24. Joyce wrote a play, *Exiles*, staged in Munich and later London, but it was not a success, see Introduction, footnote 33.

82 Patti P. Gillespie and Kenneth M. Cameron, *Western Theatre: Revolution and Revival* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), pp.427-431

83 Ibid.

84 A production also toured Australia between 1924 and 1925.

Irish state, intent on sloughing off its colonial past and emphasising its Gaelic identity.⁸⁵ It was also unlikely to thrive in Ireland-weary England. The light touch of the Irish R.M. stories had reaped popularity in Britain when the imperial link appeared to be secure, but waned as the relationship with ‘John Bull’s other island’ changed. “I’m telling you...Joxer... th’ whole worl’s...in a terr...ible state o’... chassis!” intones Captain Boyle in *The Plough and the Stars*.⁸⁶ That state of chassis was a condition familiar to Somerville, who was reworking her material during an unsettled period politically, at the same time as O’Casey was writing mordant contemporary pieces for the Abbey. While she positioned *Flurry’s Wedding* in the 1890s, her chosen time period might have flourished if she had refashioned her ideas and clothed them with modern relevance, as Bennett did with the historical material in *The Beggar’s Opera*. Somerville was acutely aware of current affairs, judging by her diary entries and letters to correspondents including Smyth; *Flurry’s Wedding* ignores politics, however. Nor does it define new territory, its sole thrust the “pour-rire”, but the fun is never irreverent.

“The 1890s were the golden age of their [Somerville and Ross’s] collaboration, a sort of Indian summer of the ascendancy after the agrarian outrages of the previous decade but before the crises of the new century,” reflected Declan Kiberd.⁸⁷ The temporal context is significant: it was post-Land War and pre-Easter Rising, when a truce existed between landlord and tenant, the link with Britain was not sundered, London was still town, old habits of deference clung to the tenant class, and Martin was alive.⁸⁸ This was a

85 In *Irish Literature in Transition, 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), Vera Kriekamp’s chapter ‘Recovery and the Ascendancy Novel 1880–1932’ notes a slow, critical evolution; from Daniel Corkery’s 1931 attack on Anglo-Irish authors as “spiritual exiles” from Ireland, to a growing appraisal of Somerville and Ross, and other fiction writers. It is suggestive of “the gradual shedding of a post-colonial critical hegemony,” according to Kriekamp, p.73

Corkery reference is taken from *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (Dublin and Cork: Cork University Press, 1931), pp.9-10

86 Seán O’Casey, *Juno and the Paycock & The Plough and the Stars* (London: Macmillan St Martin’s Press, 1928, this edition 1972), p.73

87 Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics*, p.363

88 Hubert Butler describes the kind of deference that was still apparent, even during an IRA raid in the War of Independence: “My mother and I were in the porch and she danced about with fury. ‘I know who you

productive and stimulating period for Somerville when her star was in the ascendant.

Perhaps she might have won playwriting success if she had shaken off her preoccupation with the West End as the natural home for her drama, swallowed her nostalgia for the landlord system, left the past alone, and concentrated on the present.

are,' she said to one of them. 'You're Jim Connell. Take your cigarette out of your mouth when you're talking to me.' He took it out and I began to scold my mother for interrupting what might have been a revealing conversation. It was only the second time I had seen a republican, and when I went back to Oxford I wanted at least to say what they were like and what their plans were. My mother answered me sharply and we started an angry argument. The two men looked at each other with embarrassment and slunk politely away." Butler, *Escape from the Anthill* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1986), p.98

CONCLUSION

Flurry's Wedding captured Somerville's imagination, but no one else in the theatre business shared her faith in it, and the play was never performed professionally. As a Somerville collaborator, the Abbey playwright Geraldine Cummins, noted ruefully, quoting a drama critic, "Anyone can write a play, but it takes a genius to place it."¹ Somerville began the project in 1921 with high hopes, expecting it would deliver wealth, enhance her reputation and platform the theatricality of the Irish R.M. stories.² Her attachment to *Flurry's Wedding* never wavered, in part because the work was rooted in the Irish R.M. series, one of her career highpoints. Unfortunately, it always remained a piece of cultural and social nostalgia rather than a riotous reimagining of bygone days. Over the course of almost two decades, she struggled against the play's rejection, doggedly repurposing the work and seeking new champions, but fundamentally unable to confront its defects of composition. One of her characteristic sayings was, "if it'll do, it'll do" – she even pinned it as a motto on her studio door – but despite this evidence of a pragmatic streak, she never reconciled herself to setting aside the play. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s there were numerous false dawns. Ultimately, however, she had to content herself with informal readings staged amid the teacups for family and friends.

Collaboration always mattered to Somerville but she was choosy about partners. Her idiosyncratic writing habits after Martin's death, using séances and automatic writing to unpick tangles in plots, were an example of her attachment to a collaborator she trusted.

¹ Geraldine Cummins, *The First Biography of Dr E. OE. Somerville* (London: Andrew Dakers, 1952), p.83
² Anne Oakman suggests Somerville and Ross specifically wrote "theatricality or performance" into the stories. She points to the authors commissioning Frank Fay to perform two Irish R.M. stories at the New Country Club in London in June 1906 as another level of theatricality. His performance "destabilizes the text as written artefact and subjects the work to live or theatrical interaction and possible connotative modification, much as popular nationalist theatre in Dublin was subject to and partially formed by audience reaction," she says. Anne Oakman, 'Theatricality and the Irish R.M.: Comic County (sic) Dramatics Versus Abbey Theatre Ideology', *New Voices in Irish Criticism 5*, eds. Ruth Connolly and Patricia Coughlan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), pp.164-5

“All art is a collaboration,” Synge writes in his 1907 preface to *The Playboy of the Western World*, recognising how a play’s success is reliant on the influences that shaped an author, as well as the team producing the work and the actors interpreting it in a particular context.³ Somerville’s residual attachment to *Flurry’s Wedding* betrayed a simultaneous appreciation and misunderstanding of the collaborative process. Oddly, considering how fruitful her partnership with Martin proved to be, she never grasped the need to pool resources in practising her stagecraft. She was open to suggestions, whether from George Bernard Shaw or Ethel Smyth, and in later life from Cummins, with whom she laboured over *Flurry’s Wedding* from 1929 and through the 1930s (although without crediting Cummins). But Somerville held the reins. “Brilliant lines in the dialogue were not sufficient to make up for its shapelessness and the expense and difficulties entailed in so many scenes,” Cummins reflected twenty years later, in her biography.⁴ “I cannot see it as a success on the stage.”⁵

Cummins wrote about carrying the script to London in 1932 to try and place it. This was a decade after Somerville’s first journey on the same mission. Cummins’ friend, identified as Mrs George Curzon (Louise, wife to a well-known actor), gave it to another actor identified only as R to read (Ralph Richardson is the likeliest candidate).⁶ “R. had some financial backing and proposed that he should come in as a collaborator and rewrite the comedy, cutting out some of the scenes and giving it the necessary shape for the theatre,” recalled Cummins.⁷ Somerville’s response followed a pattern: she wrote to Cummins on 25 November 1932 stipulating a veto. She could agree only if “I have complete control of the words, and power to veto vulgar situations. –If bring the play ‘up-to-date’ means a ‘Bedroom scene’, while admitting its attractiveness, I feel my family

3 J.M. Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World and Riders to the Sea*, ed. Henry Popkin (this edition New York: Avon Books, 1967), p.19

4 Geraldine Cummins, *The First Biography of Dr E. OE. Somerville*, p.83

5 Ibid.

6 At the time, Richardson was with The Old Vic, and excelled in comic roles.

7 Cummins, *The First Biography of Dr E. OE. Somerville*, p.83

might disapprove, and I should reluctantly be obliged to turn it down.”⁸ Unsurprisingly, R. did not proceed.

Curzon continued her efforts in London, and Cummins reported that an impresario – whom she identified by the pseudonym “Jacob” – was offering to stage a musical version. Somerville denounced musical comedy as an “abhorrent thing”, “trash” and “tripe”. In the same breath, she cited *The Beggar’s Opera* and Gilbert and Sullivan as exceptions, implying *Flurry’s Wedding* could aspire to such heights, and professed herself excited by the thought of “enchanting Irish tunes, jigs, reels, and one or two traditional songs”. Any prospect of a deal quickly faded as she specified, in a letter dated 28 November 1932, “(If) we do this thing at all it must and shall be high-class... As to the lyrics; they would be a matter for careful discussion. I might be able to do some myself – I should dread Jacob producing musical comedy song-writers.” She announced herself determined to stick to her ideals and not be bullied, expressed concern about “the horrors that I may have to submit to”, fretted whether Jacob had “any pretensions to being a gentleman”, and wondered if he was ill-advised enough to be “steeped in theatrical conventionalities”.⁹ Flurry Knox and Major Yeates were not destined to burst into song: Jacob pulled back from *Flurry’s Wedding*.

The following year, in a letter to her sister, Hildegard Coghill, Somerville mentioned revising the play with Cummins and complained about social duties intruding: “It *maddens* me having to leave my play just when I’m interested!”¹⁰ She always kept an eye out for advocates, and after meeting the actor Micheál MacLiammóir of the Gate Theatre in Dublin, she offered him *Flurry’s Wedding* in January 1934. “He might be disposed to give it a try-out,” she told Cummins.¹¹ Finally, twelve years after completing

8 Letter, Somerville to Cummins, 25 November 1932, quoted in Cummins biography, pp.83-4. Somerville was aged sixty-four at the time she expressed concern about her family’s disapproval of a bedroom scene.

9 Letter, Somerville to Cummins, 28 November 1932, pp.84-5

10 Letter, Somerville to Coghill, 22 June 1933, quoted by Lewis in *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, p.382

11 Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, pp.384-5

her first draft, she was prepared to consider an Irish production. The play was read and rejected – *Flurry's Wedding* remained impossible to place. By June the same year, Somerville was dining with the director Tyrone Guthrie and his wife in London, where the work was critiqued. “[T]oo many scenes, needs compression ... He said the dialogue and the characters are *brilliant* but ‘no manager could put it on the stage in its present form’ ... but it can be put right and there *is* money in it.”¹² Despite this useful appraisal, nothing came of her meeting with Guthrie.

Somerville's lack of solid theatrical grounding is apparent in the construction of *Flurry's Wedding*. Possibly, if she had absorbed the lessons of rejection from the various theatrical experts who assessed it, and applied them to a new piece of work, she might have achieved some success in writing for the stage. Alternatively, collaboration with an established playwright may have helped to overcome her deficiencies of technique. This option carried no guarantees, however. While Somerville revised her play with Cummins, who had three co-written dramas staged by the Abbey and a fourth by a London theatre, both voices were not equal. Somerville always considered herself the final arbiter.¹³

In 1933 and 1934, the faithful Cummins also cooperated with Somerville on an even more ambitious project, a silent film adaptation of the first Somerville and Ross novel, *An Irish Cousin* (1889), but the script went no further.¹⁴ It is an example of Somerville's unflagging readiness to modify her work for new art forms. “The result was an excellent short story but not a film scenario!” according to Cummins.¹⁵ This further evolution of Somerville's literary practice has also been neglected by commentators on her

12 Ibid., pp.385-6 quoting a letter, Somerville to Coghill, 14 June 1934

13 The plays were *Broken Faith* (1913), *The Way of the World* (1914) and *Fox and Geese* (1917), all co-written with Suzanne Day and a solo play, *Till Yesterday Comes* (Chanticleer Theatre, London, 1938).

14 *An Irish Cousin* (London: Richard Bentley, 1899)

An outline and two finished scripts, with multiple revisions, are held at Queen's University Belfast, Special Collections, MS 17/905/4

15 Cummins, *The First Biography of Dr E. OE. Somerville*, pp.67-8. She also speculated that *Flurry's Wedding* would make “an amusing picture”, p.82

Somerville may have inspired, in part, by a 1924 British silent film adapted from Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn* which shares melodramatic characteristics with *An Irish Cousin*.

work, as well as by archivists. While searching the Queen's University Belfast collection, I found the film material, including a complete script, misidentified and misfiled among the *Flurry's Wedding* iterations as a treatment for theatre.¹⁶ As with the play, the film script shows Somerville constantly amending work during her later years. While this might suggest ideas were drying up, it can also be read as evidence of her lifelong interest in condensing material and evolving it into new formats. Certainly, she remained aware of new mediums throughout her life, but unfortunately lacked the ability to grasp their intricacies.

Somerville is typically remembered as a short story writer and novelist, with little, if any, interrogation given to her aspirations as a playwright. However, the existence of *Flurry's Wedding* prompts the need for a more comprehensive re-evaluation of her writing practice. She had no shortage of drive and aspiration, and was entirely self-confident when it came to belief in her ability to write in new genres – a conviction which proved to be misplaced in relation to playwriting. Nevertheless, by any standards she enjoyed an industrious and lasting career. Few writers are without examples of unpublished work in a desk drawer, but such material does not necessarily represent wasted effort. For Somerville, drilling into the short story collections had the practical effect of keeping her occupied with her literary practice, particularly useful at a time when her confidence was flagging, while flexing that creative muscle meant other work was produced.

Because *Flurry's Wedding* was never staged, it is a neglected element in Somerville's aesthetic development and career. Yet to overlook the play is to ignore Somerville's lifelong interest in stagecraft, which filtered through to her novels, and to understate her willingness to experiment. Its significance to Somerville is evident from the

¹⁶ Two scenarios for a film based on *An Irish Cousin* are held in Queen's University Belfast, one in loose folios and the other handwritten in a navy notebook. There is also a complete, typed script of the film treatment. As with her notes for *Flurry's Wedding*, in sketching out scenes she refers to page numbers in the book to indicate where incidents can be mined. The script reads well, and although the plot is melodramatic, that would not have deterred cinema audiences of the period. It seems a pity it was never made. Queen's University Belfast, Special Collections, MPC Catalogue 97 MS 17/905/4

substantial portion of her working life she devoted to the text, polishing it repeatedly over a seventeen-year period. Emotionally, she was captured by it, and perhaps this can be interpreted as a coping strategy after Martin's death. It helped Somerville to continue her alliance with her collaborator: in a sense, *Flurry's Wedding* kept Martin alive by maintaining the conversation about storytelling they had engaged in during life. Arguably, Somerville's focus on the Irish R.M. hinged less on waning powers of inventiveness, and more on her attachment to that happy era of productive teamwork. Equally, it is worth noting that Somerville also broke away from their literary alliance with her foray into professional writing for the theatre. Her move in this direction could be interpreted as an act of self-assertion: this was her own project, although a bridgehead was retained by using material she and Martin had fashioned together.¹⁷

Potentially, as an artist and illustrator, Somerville could have developed a vision for how to transfer the Irish R.M. characters to the stage, but chose to draw on her prose rather than her artistic skillset. Genre was pivotal in this respect because her efforts were complicated by her reliance on the sole author template, which made her proscriptive about the work. She was accustomed to write a text which appeared in print more or less as envisaged, whereas drama is a collective enterprise realised through performance. Her play's essential weaknesses were connected to her reluctance to cede authority. Even in the case of the musical, with no track record of writing songs, Somerville proposed to supply material – never doubting her aptitude to do so.

Perhaps Somerville was a fiction writer at heart, rather than a dramatist, accustomed to almost total control. Perhaps Martin was the only partner she was willing

¹⁷ Somerville also worked independently of Martin during the latter's lifetime. Solo projects included *Slipper's ABC of Foxhunting* (London: Longman's, Green, 1903), as noted in the Introduction to this essay, and two children's books. She wrote and illustrated a bloodthirsty picture book, *The Discontented Little Elephant* (London: Longman's, Green, 1912), envisaged as a companion book to the even gorier *The Crocodile King*. The latter was rejected by the publisher in light of disappointing sales.

to acknowledge, which left her resistant to other collaborations.¹⁸ Perhaps her instinct as a professional writer to look towards London rather than closer to home was an impediment to her play's production. Perhaps she had the confidence of her caste and recognised no difference between her ability to draw a crowd to a Skibbereen hall and a West End theatre. Perhaps she was out of step with the times – her stagecraft appealed neither to the new Ireland intent on shedding its links to the United Kingdom, nor the modern Britain emerging from World War I to sweep away the Edwardian order. Whatever the reason or reasons, Somerville was blind to the essential differences between a play and a story.

While perseverance is admirable in principle, Beckett's totemic "Try again. Fail again. Fail better" cannot be described as her mantra because she never failed better at playwriting; she simply failed.¹⁹ Her willingness to devote seemingly limitless time and energy to *Flurry's Wedding*, and her inclination to badger acquaintances to promote the text, were extraordinary. The play met with repeated rebuffs from theatre professionals, but nothing dented her belief in it. Yet sometimes writers are gripped by an *idée fixe*, and feel obliged to pursue it, even if they come to realise the idea has little intrinsic merit. It can be a means of freeing them psychologically to proceed to a more fruitful project. Sometimes, too, writers veer off into uncharted waters as a way of testing their boundaries, or cleansing their palates between assignments. Failure need not be the final word if the writer possesses self-belief and fortitude. Somerville's rejection in the marketplace as a dramatist coincided with a period of doubt, following Martin's death, where she was trying to find a way to continue her work. The fate of *Flurry's Wedding* could have immobilised her, as rejection has frozen others, but she did not allow it to

18 By comparison, Synge was attuned to the fact he was working with a talented and dynamic collective at the Abbey, recognising it as a group enterprise drawing upon multiple talents – some of whom, such as Sara Allgood and Barry Fitzgerald, achieved international stardom. Lady Gregory was on hand to offer advice, and in turn derived inspiration from Yeats, while also influencing Yeats herself.

19 Samuel Beckett, 'Worstward Ho', *Nohow On* (London: John Calder, 1989), p.101

define her. Undeterred, she kept working, accepting disappointment as an inevitable part of the writer's lot, but continuing to be productive.

The retrieval of the *Flurry's Wedding* material matters for another reason. In the shadow of failure, amid the interstices surrounding her spurned drama, something powerful was born. Somerville rallied to produce *The Big House of Inver*, published in 1925, a well-received historical novel with a memorable and daring choice of protagonist in the character of the illegitimate Shibby Pinder, whose integrity and loyalty are in marked contrast to the ignoble behaviour of legitimate members of her family. In the novel, Somerville "boldly" reflected on the theme of "illegitimacy in the gentry class, a taboo subject only hinted at in their first novel," Gifford Lewis notes.²⁰ While flawed, this ambitious book comes closest of all the Somerville and Ross material – both before and after Martin's death – to matching the literary promise of *The Real Charlotte*. Anne Jamison calls it the "most noteworthy novel" written after Martin's death, while Lewis describes it as "a roaring success" and quotes from Somerville's diary of 16 October 1925 which mentions a "gorgeous review" in the *Times Literary Supplement* and good notice in *The Observer*.²¹ As with *Flurry's Wedding*, the novel was a collaborative project, seeded in an idea discussed with Martin. In 1912, Martin wrote to Somerville describing a visit to Tyrone House in Galway where:

[T]here *rioted* three of four generations of St. Georges – living with country women, occasionally marrying them, all illegitimate four times over. Not so long ago *eight* of these awful half peasant families roosted together in that lovely house and fought, and barricaded, and drank, till the police had to intervene...

20 Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, p.2

21 Anne Jamison, *E. OE. Somerville & Martin Ross*, p.163; Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, pp.351-2

Edith's handwritten note on the letter reads, "Tyronne House: a possible subject for a book."²²

Tellingly, the novel deals with failure. By the close of action, the gentry family loses its big house despite Shibby's efforts to halt the decline – suggesting Somerville had absorbed, and was willing to examine, the question of where fixation on an unviable idea could lead. Her failure as a playwright immediately preceding the novel appears to have catalysed its creation. Somerville transitioned from the failure of *Flurry's Wedding* to a representation of failure in *The Big House of Inver*, carrying off the evolution with aplomb. Yet curiously, while clear-eyed about the waste of Shibby's life caused by preoccupation with a single, compelling idea, Somerville did not make the connection with her own circumstances. She grasped how attachment to an unlikely objective overshadowed her character's life, but remained gripped herself by *Flurry's Wedding*.

Flurry's Wedding is germane to any critical evaluation of Somerville's literary practice, as a writer whose work has continuing relevance in a contemporary context. Part of her legacy lies in her insistence on achieving financial independence by her own labours, rather than rely on her father and brothers for support, as women of her class often did. In partnership with Martin, and subsequently on her own, she earned a reputation as a professional woman writer with a knack for meeting the demands of the market place – if not always, then often enough to keep her work before the public eye. Somerville's oeuvre also expands our understanding of Irish life at a time when the Ascendancy was yielding to a new order, while her personal evolution represents a fluidity which bridges constructs of Irishness and Britishness. Today, notions of Irish identity have expanded, and Somerville's work helps to explain the complexities of the past, casting light on earlier configurations of Irish identity. Ireland's ongoing Decade of Centenaries is designed to advance historical openness, and Somerville, with her dual allegiances, staked a claim on hybrid identity. As

²² Martin to Somerville, 18 March 1912, in *The Selected Letters of Somerville and Ross*, ed. Lewis, pp.293-4

someone with co-existing Irish and British loyalties which broadened to encompass post-independence Ireland, she enables others to take that imaginative step towards recognising inclusivity. “[O]ur duty is here. I am sure of that. We owe Ireland nearly 300 good years and must try and ‘stick it’ and hope for luck,” Somerville wrote to her sister, Lady Coghill, in 1922.²³ Today, hybrid identities and allegiances are accepted in a positive light, with many regarding themselves as Irish and European, or Irish and Northern Irish, or Northern Irish and British; Somerville was an early advocate of this line of thought.²⁴

Somerville’s writing remains relevant, not only because of the astute social observation and wit underpinning it, but because her harvested matter and attempt to seed it within new genres suggests a fertile rather than barren imagination. Her ideas were sufficiently dynamic to encompass multiple incarnations, and in that sense *Flurry’s Wedding* acts as a statement of her multi-tasking modernity, despite her categorisation by many critics as a Victorian writer. Proof she was on the right track in seeking to dramatise the Irish R.M. stories happened in 1983, when they were adapted for a television series starring Peter Bowles, Brian Murray, Beryl Reid and Lise-Ann McLaughlin. Its reception was popular enough for two further series to be screened.²⁵

Long before that, two of the stories enjoyed a new lease of life. In late 1927, Somerville was approached by the BBC to record one of the Irish R.M. stories for a radio broadcast. Her diary details a voice trial in London, and she was booked for a recording on the strength of it.²⁶ Invited to choose a reading, she opted for ‘The House of Fahy’ from the first collection. The recording led to a second invitation from the BBC, and she returned the following May to record another story, ‘Philippa’s Fox-hunt’, also taken from the first collection. It was broadcast in a fifty-minute slot for which she received

23 Letter, Somerville to Coghill, 6 June 1922, Drishane Archive

24 Lewis says Somerville considered herself an Irish nationalist, and this was a view that was not incompatible with her family history of service to the empire, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, p.322

25 Three *Irish R.M.* series, running to fifteen hours of television, were broadcast between 1983 and 1985 as a James Mitchell Production, in association with Channel 4, Rediffusion Films, Ulster Television and RTÉ.

26 Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, p.354

twenty-five guineas.²⁷ Handwritten manuscripts of both adaptations, complete with words and phrases underlined in coloured pencil for emphasis during the recording, are held in the archive at Queen's University Belfast, and one manuscript contains the announcer's introduction to the reading.²⁸

Somerville not only effected a successful adaptation of both stories for radio, but gave a convincing impersonation of her characters, demonstrating those playacting talents put to use in amateur dramatics when she was a young woman. A gleeful note in her diary records that family and friends, listening to the first broadcast in Willy Casey's pub in Castletownshend, were unaware of the performer's identity until she cried the words "you brute".²⁹ She enjoyed the experience of being recorded, and those two forays into the medium of radio, which provided a new platform for her Irish R.M. stories, may have been some slight consolation for her inability to have *Flurry's Wedding* staged. Equally, they may have bolstered her conviction that she would yet be recognised a dramatist. In any event, Somerville's belief in the play endured.

Somerville's career lasted for six decades, from publication of the novel *An Irish Cousin* in 1889 to an essay collection, *Maria and Some Other Dogs*, in 1949. This is an extraordinary feat by any standards, and points to her ability, tenacity, courage, strong work ethic and unshakeable inner belief.³⁰ Her theatrical gamble should not be dismissed as an outright failure. After all, while both Somerville and Martin had a lifelong interest in the theatre, Somerville is the only one of the pair who managed to produce a finished play which is still in existence today. *Flurry's Wedding* may not have achieved dramatic recognition, but it is worth more than a passing nod from scholars. The play stands as

27 *Ibid.*, p.358. Unfortunately, although I searched the BBC archive, it appears the recordings were not retained. In 1938, when the BBC broadcast another Irish R.M. story 'Poisson d'Avril', it was read by Denis Johnston and precipitated a cross letter to the broadcaster from Somerville. She complained to her sister that he had "a foul Dublin cad-voice". Lewis, p.402, from a letter Somerville to Coghill, 13 November 1938

28 Queen's University Belfast, Special Collections, MS 17/891

29 Lewis, *Edith Somerville: A Biography*, p.354

30 Somerville wrote a further fifteen books after Martin's death in 1915.

evidence of a writer who was unafraid, even in old age, to continue stretching herself, and who never allowed rejection to impede her creativity.



Illustration nine: A selection of Somerville's oeuvre

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APPENDIX

Flurry's Wedding

(An Episode in the Career of an Irish R.M.)

An Extravaganza

Drawn from life

by

E.OE. Somerville and Martin Ross

In Three Acts.

18 May 1923

CHARACTERS

MRS. KNOX, of Aussolas Castle (an old-school Irish aristocrat)

FLURRY KNOX (her grandson) of Tory Lodge

LADY KNOX, of Castle Knox (an English lady, married to distant cousin of Flurry Knox's)

SALLY (her daughter)

MAJOR SINCLAIR YEATES, R.M., of Shreelane House (English, Resident Magistrate)

PHILIPPA, (his wife) (English)

PATRICK GAINEY, alias "Slipper".

Other servants plus a fiddler, country people, workmen etc but some parts can be doubled

ACT I

SCENE 1 The Curranhilty Race Course Owld Boccock's Mare (handwritten note – music to be played I presume)

SCENE 2 Trinket's Colt (Flurry's Field)

ACT II

SCENE I Shreelane Hall (A Royal Command)

SCENE 2 Flurry's Garden

ACT III

SCENE 1 Aussolas Castle, 9.30p.m.

SCENE 2 Aussolas Castle, 6.30am

TIME The month of June in any year between 1897 and 1914

There is supposed to be an interval of two days between Scenes 1 and 2, ACT 1. The same between each of the scenes in Act II. Four days between Acts II and III.

ACT I
Scene 1

A small young man, (in white shirt, with green ribbon across shoulders, trousers stuffed into long-boots, a shabby old green silk cap, carries a cutting whip) runs out of whisky tent and follows SLIPPER, who has advanced to table with glasses, and is drinking what is left in one of them.

DRISCOLL (Catching SLIPPER by shoulder) Slipper! Tell me, have they the race started? Is it four times or three times around the coorse they're going?

SLIPPER Take your time, boy, take your time: sure the Commy-tee's atin' their lunch in the whisky-tint this minnit, and the len'th o' the coorse'll be decided by whether the Judge have owld Funny-face backed, that'll stay gallopin' a year; or Rambling Katty, that has the legs o' thim all, but'd die down dead after two turns!

DRISCOLL Ah what good is Rambling Katty! Sure she had no more body on her than a crow!

SLIPPER Why then she's as breedy a little stick as ever stud in the streets o' Cork. And she have as good a speed in her anny greyhound I ever slipped, since ever I was called out o' me name, and people put the name o' 'Slipper' on me! And that's a good while back, me Boy-o! (He picks up another glass, and while drinking, eyes DRISCOLL up and down over its rim) Well, well, Tim Driscoll! Aren't you a lovely young man altogether! I'd love me eyes for lookin' at ye! Tell me now, is it going dhrawin' a net ye are, and your mother put thim waders on ye, the way she'd keep the owld throusier dhry on yet?

DRISCOLL (without animosity) May the divil choke you, Slipper! Sure don't ye know it's going ridin' a race I am?

SLIPPER Ho! Ho! Is that the way? An' what'll ye ride?

DRISCOLL It's owld Boccock's mare I'll ride.

SLIPPER Great Ned! Is it that little owld staggeen from the mountains? Sure she's something about the one age with meself! Be said by me now, boy, and stand out from owld Boccock and all belongin' to him, and go home out o' this.

DRISCOLL (indignant) And who'll ride her so?

SLIPPER (darkly and sententiously) Let the divil ride her!

Voices, excited and exultant from behind whisky-tent: Tim, Tim Driscoll! Hurry! Come on, Slipper! The people are screechin' and sayin' there's a man killed north! Come on north till we see him!

A crowd emerges from whisky-tent. SLIPPER & DRISCOLL join with it. all rush across back of stage and exeunt L. As they disappear, old MRS. KNOX and FLURRY come out of tea-tent, FLURRY holding apart curtains while his grandmother comes forth. She is tiny; wears purple velvet, enormous bonnet, spectacles, wisped and shabby knitted shawls, full, sweeping, rusty black skirt, elastic-sided boots, white stockings, no gloves on her little brown claws of hands; many diamond rings & brooches. Red flannel petticoat, which shows when she raises her skirt, she carries a crutch-handled stick.

FLURRY is slight, fair, clean-shaved. Good figure. Wears rather old, but well-cut shooting coat – leather on shoulders, and breeches. Brown gaiters. Spurs. Carries a cane. Bowler hat with perfectly flat brim.

Old MRS. KNOX is scolding as she comes. FLURRY looks furious.

Mrs. KNOX (shrill, cracked, well-bred voice, with Irish accent, but not a ‘brogue’)
Upon me word, your impudence is phenomenal! One hundred pounds indeed! Will you kindly give me any good reason why I should put me hand into me pocket for you to the tune o’ that? (She bangs her stick on the ground) And the more so that I’m likely to find nothing in it but your own hand, that’s never out of it! I suppose you think that because I have the misfortune to be your grandmother I’ve nothing to do but to spoon-feed you and your hounds, and submit to your depredations! I’d be glad to know how much of my hay and oats went to feed your horses last season! It’s a pity it isn’t your own wild oats you fed them on! They’d never come short of a feed then! (She utters an angry cackle of triumph, feeling that she has scored.)

FLURRY (angrily) I’m not asking you to make me a present at all! It’s only the loan of one hundred pounds I want from you. You know as well as I do I’m selling I’m selling the bay horse at Cahirmee next month, that’s worth twice that, & there’s no fear I won’t pay you back!

MRS. KNOX I know very well that you’ll do no such thing, and for one reason that you’ll get no hundred pounds out o’ me, and for another, that that bay horse is as well known as yourself, and like yourself he’s neither fit to lead nor drive! If that’s how I’m to be paid back I’ll be a long time waiting to see the colour of my money! Until you choose to settle down and take your proper place in the county –

FLURRY (interrupting) That’ll be the workhouse, I suppose!

MRS. KNOX (viciously) It’ll be an agreeable surprise to me if it’s not the County Jail! (She sits down at table on which is ENGAGED card) If you were worth your salt you’d marry that little Sally Knox, and not be content to see her snapped up by young Shute, or the next man that has sense enough to know a nice young girl when she sees one!

FLURRY (defiant) You can make the match so! I’ve no fancy for having doors slammed in my face! (He turns away)

MRS. KNOX (imperiously) Well I’ll not be tormented now with your arguing! Be off with yourself at once and find Denis, and tell him to put the horses to. I’ve had enough of this & I’ll go home.

FLURRY swings out, L, in a rage. MRS. KNOX watches him out of sight, chuckling, says triumphantly, I’ll teach him how to behave himself before I’m done with him!

Enter R., LADY KNOX. Very broad, stout, and tall lady, wears tight, tailor-made, iron-grey coat and skirt. Grey felt “sports’ hat. Thick boots and gaiters. Has race-glass over shoulders, carries waterproof, and man’s umbrella. She is rather lame, and has a red, gouty complexion.

A dirty and untidy woman, MRS. McGAHY, emerges from tea-tent. Hurries to meet Lady Knox, obsequiously takes coat & umbrella, puts them on table at which Mrs. Knox has seated herself.

MRS. McGAHY (nervously, to Mrs. Knox) I beg your pardon Mrs. Knox, but Lady Knox has this table ENGAGED, Ma'am.

(Mrs. Knox rises, with dignity, & confronts Lady Knox. The ladies bow, coldly, to one another. Exit Mrs. McGahy into tent.

LADY KNOX (gruffly, in deep and gentleman-like voice) Sorry to disturb you – (It is evident that they are on bad terms. MRS. KNOX moves away from table)

MRS. KNOX Far be it from me to presume to sit in the Seat of the Mighty!" (She surveys Lady Knox's very bulky person) The more so that I'm afraid I'm entirely inadequate to the task of filling it!

(She moves past LADY KNOX with a ceremonious bow.)

LADY KNOX (domineeringly) Thanks! I'm quite prepared to fill it for myself!

(Enter FLURRY. He takes off his hat to LADY KNOX, who gives a scanty nod in reply, and addresses his grandmother.)

FLURRY (stiffly) Denis is ready for you, Ma'am.

LADY KNOX (to Flurry, her manner is hostile) Mr Knox, may I say a word to you? I should be glad to know to what I am indebted for the honour (with grim facetiousness) of a daily visit from you and your hounds? I have been awakened at 5 o'clock every morning for the past week by the intolerable noises under my bedroom windows –

MRS. KNOX (smiling malevolently) Your Ladyship may be assured that the serenade is not dedicated to you!

FLURRY (ignoring Mrs. Knox, says quickly and gruffly) I'm sorry you were disturbed. I've got the puppies in from 'Walk" and I was steadying them to sheep in the Park.

LADY KNOX (interrupting, bullying manner) Ah! Possibly that accounts for the lamb whose body was found on the avenue this morning! It was steady enough! Steadier than your hounds, perhaps!

MRS. KNOX (interposing, pulling up her skirt and extracting from large under-pocket an old bag-purse) Perhaps I may have the privilege of compensating your Ladyship? May I ask what you're claiming for the lamb?

LADY KNOX (indignantly) I make no claim! I merely asked a question! It's possible, I suppose, that the lamb was killed by foxes –

FLURRY (laughing offensively) That's not likely! The Castle Knox keeper takes good care there'll be no trouble from foxes! I wonder had he poison laid in the lamb's body!

LADY KNOX (furious) My keeper knows better than to dare poison foxes! I will not listen to these impertinent insinuations! I merely request that, in future, you select some other place in which to exercise your hounds.

MRS. KNOX I don't wish to be indiscreet but I may say that my grandson has not visited Castle Knox without an invitation!

FLURRY (scowling at MRS. KNOX) That's nothing to say to it!

LADY KNOX (simultaneously) Not from me!

MRS. KNOX (archly) 'Tis a pity a young lady's fancy for early rising should be discouraged! In my young days we used to think there was nothing like the morning dew for the complexion! But nothing can be of more importance than your Ladyship's beauty-sleep and indeed, it's easy to see that it has been interfered with of late! (she gives a scald-crow cackle) Come, Flurry we must'nt keep the horses waiting. (She takes Flurry's arm and they retire L. LADY KNOX has opened and shut her mouth but is too angry to think of a repartee. When they have gone she speaks)

LADY KNOX Detestable old hag! (She strides to the tea-tent opening and shouts) Tea for four, at once. When Miss Knox comes, tell her I have gone to fetch Major and Mrs. Yeates. (Exit L)

(Before she has left the stage, SALLY KNOX and FLURRY are seen, R. SALLY comes cautiously forward, and sees her mother going. She then beckons to FLURRY to advance. He comes to front. SALLY goes to tea-tent and speaks through curtains. FLURRY stands waiting near bench, looking moody.

SALLY is small, pretty. Very well dressed. Pretty summer frock; shady hat. Very attractive, has no accent, but can imitate it if she wishes to do so.

SALLY (recrossing stage to FLURRY) It's all right! She's just gone to find the Yeates'es [sic] – Why are you looking at me as if you were at your own funeral and I had murdered you? One would think that it was my fault that you've been backing the wrong horses all day long! As if all the horses here were'nt 'wrong 'uns'! (She pauses and waits for response, which FLURRY is too cross to make) (continuing)
And how could I run about looking for you? If you had wanted me, you ought to have come and found me! I was lunching with the Shutes.

FLURRY (sourly) I know that well enough!

SALLY Well, and why shouldn't I lunch with the Shutes when they ask me? It was very interesting. Did you see that little black man in a frock-coat and a white turban, that was in their motor? Do you know he's a real Sultan? From North Africa! And do you know what he wants?

FLURRY (huffy and unfriendly) How would I know what a Sultan wants? Wives, I suppose! Is it a riddle?

SALLY No, of course it's not! Don't be so stupid! I can tell you he may be very useful to you! He wants to buy young Irish horses. They asked me if I knew of any, and I thought of you, at once! (She bestows a very charming glance upon FLURRY, whose gloom softens for a moment, but quickly returns)

FLURRY Why doesnt Bernard Shute sell him that grey mare he had you schooling over fences for him yesterday? He's afraid to ride her himself! I suppose that's why he put you up on her!

Sally (indignant) He said I might ride any of his horses I liked, and I chose her!

FLURRY O, I suppose all that he has is yours!

SALLY (defiant) Not yet!

FLURRY (blackly) What do you mean by that?

SALLY Just whatever you please to think! (sudden change of manner) Ah Flurry! Don't be so cross! You know very well it's all about nothing!

FLURRY I suppose you call it nothing to have me hanging about all day, wondering when you'll take the trouble to say 'good morning' to me, while you're parly-vooving up in the Shutes' motor-car with the black man!

SALLY Well, and if I were, I was only trying to help you to make some money!

FLURRY (still angry) How can I sell him what I haven't got? God knows I want money badly enough!

(He hesitates, looks at Sally, and says gruffly) And you know that – Sally! Look here – I've just had the deuce of a turn-up with your mother...

SALLY (Horror-struck) What about? O, why couldn't you keep out of her way?

FLURRY She says I'm to keep myself and the hounds out of Castle Knox for the future. You needn't fear I'll not keep out of her way, and she needn't fear either! I'll not have the hounds much longer. I'm broke. And much anyone cares! And you least of all! (He turns away from her)

SALLY (moving near him; says reproachfully) Ah Flurry, you know

FLURRY (swinging round and catching at her hand) What do I know?

(Before Sally can speak, enter MAJOR YEATES. She snatches her hand away and turns to YEATES)

SALLY How do you do Major Yeates?

(YEATES is tall, slight, small moustache. Aged about 36. Well-dressed. Has a very slight stammer. He begins to speak to FLURRY while shaking hands with SALLY)

YEATES (eagerly) look here, Flurry, I've just been speaking to Shute. He's got a Sultan of sorts with him who wants to buy some young horses to take back to Timbuctoo – or wherever it is he hangs out."

Flurry (CROSSLY, breaking on in YEATES' speech) That's the ninety-seventh time I'm after hearing of that fellow! I've no horses for him, or anyone else! Who'd buy one o' those old skins of mine, I'd like to know!

YEATES Well, but couldn't you pick up a four-year-old somewhere that you could sell the fellow?

FLURRY Let Bernard Shute find horses for his dirty nigger himself! I'll not be bothered with him! And what's more, there isn't a four-year-old in the country that I'd be seen dead with, at a pig-fair!

(He thrusts his hands in his pockets and walks away, turning his back on YEATES and SALLY. SALLY looks at YEATES despairingly. YEATES laughs)

SALLY Isn't he maddening?

(Before YEATES can reply. LADY KNOX and PHILIPPA enter L in front of the tea tent. LADY KNOX sees SALLY and calls to her immediately, dictatorially.)

LADY K. Sally, I want you! Tell that woman to bring tea at once. I'm going home as soon as possible. My gout is too bad; I can't walk any more.

(SALLY crosses to tea tent. FLURRY has moved to the rear at the sound of LADY KNOX's voice YEATES follows him. LADY KNOX and PHILIPPA seat themselves at table. SALLY, on coming out of tent, quickly follows YEATES and FLURRY, her mother being engaged in taking off field glasses etc. YEATES, FLURRY and SALLY remain talking. They wander off R behind tent and return, still talking. LADY KNOX is obviously annoyed, and keeps looking sharply to try and see them. PHILIPPA, who has looked on nervously, now tries to engage LADY KNOX's attention. She is fair, pretty, charming, very well-dressed, aged about 30. She talks mainly in italics, but is not affected, only enthusiastic.)

PHILIPPA Dear Lady Knox, I'm so grateful for this little opportunity of taking to you! I do want some help from you so much! I find housekeeping in Ireland so difficult –

(Lady KNOX, ignoring PHILIPPA, thumps table-bell, and calls 'Sally'. SALLY moves further away and replies, 'Coming, Mama!')

PHILIPPA (daunted, but continuing) That old cook, Mrs. Dunnigan, who was bequeathed to us by your cousin (whom, by the way, she absolutely adores) – Flurry Knox I mean –

LADY KNOX (interrupting hotly) Please don't call that young man my cousin, Mrs. Yeates! I find, in Aarland, that 15th removed cousins consider themselves near relations if they live within a radius of twenty miles!

PHILIPPA (truckling) How true that is! But you know everyone loves Flurry! I think he's really rather a darling! And I quite admire his looks!

LADY KNOX (rapidly and angrily) My dear Mrs. Yeates, do you know what his old cat of a grandmother said of him? She said 'Flurry looks like a gentleman among stable-boys and a stable-boy among gentlemen!' And I agree with her – and to the latter proposition, at all events! And that's a thing I don't often do!

PHILIPPA (extenuatingly) But dear Lady Knox, Flurry's such a sportsman! I'm sure that that must appeal to you!

LADY KNOX A sportsman! He professes to keep hounds, but it is a perfect travesty! I am certain the fox could smell them long before they could smell him! Not that they

particularly want to hunt foxes! They are inveterate rioters! They killed one of my sheep only this morning! I believe young Knox says himself that they 'will hunt anything that will road before them'! Such a thing for a Master of Foxhounds to admit!

(PHILIPPA laughs and murmurs) Delightful Flurry!

LADY KNOX (indignant) Can't say I agree with you! He's as common as he's worthless! That you cannot deny!

PHIL (still apologetic) Oh I think he puts some of that brogue on – but perhaps some people might say he was rather a rough diamond.

Lady KNOX (interrupting) A rough diamond? Mrs. Yeates, allow me to tell you that there is only one way to deal with rough diamonds – and that is to cut them! (looking very much pleased with herself, she thumps the table-bell)
Why don't this woman bring tea? I ordered it hours ago! (turns to PHILIPPA) I'm not surprised you find Irish housekeeping difficult! I know these people!

PHILIPPA Oh, but it isn't the people, it's the good [sic] – fast-days for instance. One can't get fresh fish here now, and the maids refuse to eat salt fish unless it's fried with onions! – it sounds disgusting, I think – and Mrs. Dunnigan says she 'won't go to them extremes for servants', and she thanks God she has no appetite'!"

LADY Knox (cross and restless, trying to attend to PHILIPPA, her mind set on SALLY) But I thought they had just started a fish shop here?

PHILIPPA So they had, but they closed it almost immediately, and do you know why? (she laughs) They said they must give it up because 'morning, noon and night, people were eternally bothering them for fish'!

LADY KNOX (laughs savagely) A triumph of the artistic temperament, I suppose, some people would call it – What is it?

(The untidy and dirty head and face of the tea-tent woman is projected from between the tent-curtains.)

THE HEAD If you please, my lady, I'm after sending to try could I get the loan of a kittle. The owl kittle that's in it wept down on the coals and the fire is quinched.

(The HEAD is withdrawn. Lady KNOX, no longer able to control her fury, springs to her feet)

LADY KNOX Who was it said twenty-four hours under water was the only treatment for Aarland? I should double the dose and make the water boil! And that would'nt clean the creature's filthy face! I shall go home!

(She tramps quickly across stage, followed by PHILIPPA)

PHILIPPA But the poor thing will be so disappointed!

LADY KNOX I sincerely hope she will! Sally! Come at once! I'm going!

(She and PHILIPPA exist behind the tent, L. SALLY turns to YEATES)

SALLY (hurriedly and with emphasis) Fight him, Major Yeates! Don't let him be an idiot!

(She runs after her mother and PHILIPPA. FLURRY advances to front and flings himself down on bench. YEATES stands, looking at him.)

FLURRY (bitterly) Much she cares whether I'm an idiot or no! Nor anyone else, either! I'm sick and tired of this stinking hole and all that's in it! If I'd a blasted ha'penny I could call me own, I'd clear out and go to America tomorrow! (He stands up and faces Yeates) There's me Grandmother that's rotten with money, and she won't so much as lend me one dirty hundred pounds that'd put me straight – let alone give it to me! Little she cares if I'm broke or no! I'm no better than a pauper this minute! If I wanted to get buried, or – or married, it'd be all one – I couldn't do it! (He flings away from YEATES, crosses stage, and sits down on a tea-tent chair, his hands in his pockets and legs thrust out)

YEATES B-But, my dear fellow, if you want to get married, or b-buried – and it's news to me that you contemplate either catastrophe – why chuck away a chance like this of making a few dollars? (He has followed Flurry and seats himself beside him)

FLURRY (sulkily) Well then, that's they why!

YEATES (aggrieved) This is the first time since I've known you that you have'nt [sic] had a horse to sell! I was talking to your grandmother about it – I met her just now – I said I was going to lay you on to the job."

FLURRY (growls) What did she say?

YEATES (laughing) Well, if you ask me, she said that you were no use to yourself, or anyone else! She also informed me that you were like a p-pig's tail! Going all day and nothing to show for it! And she ended – you may be p-pleased to hear – by saying she was washed her hands of you!

FLURRY (nettled; quickly) She did, did she? Then it's the only time she washed her hands for the past month anyway! (he falls into thought, frowning and biting his nails. YEATES watches him with amused interest, and lights a cigarette. Presently FLURRY says, broodingly)

I'm like a pig's tail, am I? Begad, I might have something to show her for it, after all, before all's said and done! (He continues in meditation; a burst of cheering is heard, + a shot, some men run across back of stage, as if from whisky tent.)

YEATES Hullo! That was another race, and we've missed it – I must go and find Philippa. (He rises, FLURRY, still seated, rouses himself from meditation)

FLURRY (more good humouredly) Hold on, Major! There's no hurry. They'll be fighting the Commy-tee, and killing the Judge, and the Referee, for a good two hours before they start the next one... (pauses) There's a notion I just got – I'm thinking maybe I might knock something out of the black man after all... Sit down awhile. See here. Did you see the Grandmother's old shandry-dran just now? Well, that chestnut mare that was on the near side, Trinket, her name is – is mighty near clean-bred.

YEATES (interrupting, puzzled) But my dear fellow! Do you mean to say you want to sell that old mare to the nigger? That Frenchman that's looking after him is no fool, and make no mistake about that! (He has sat down again beside FLURRY)

FLURRY (regarding YEATES, quietly) Well, there's some that are, thank the Lord! Or horse dealing'd be a worse trade than it is! (He laughs saturninely) See here. Me grandmother has a four-year-old colt o'Trinket's that'd be good value for a couple o'hundred sovereigns of any man's money.

YEATES (interrupting) But you've always told me Mrs. Knox won't sell her horses?

FLURRY No more she will either – but there's more ways of killing a pig than cutting his throat! Long ago she promised me a foal of Trinket's the day I was one and twenty, and I'm five and twenty now, and the dickens a foal I got from her yet! Well now, my birthday's tomorrow, and me and you are to dine with her – Don't forget that now, for your life! She thinks the world of you, and maybe if you'll sloother her well and be telling her what a good boy I am, she might stick up to her word and give me the colt! She's a bit out with me now, but maybe the huff wouldn't hold her. I was a darling pet with her one time – 'Tony Lumpkin' she used to call me – though deuce a one but herself knows what she meant by it!

YEATES (humorous and patronising) O she meant no harm, old chap!

FLURRY disregards him. Leans back and falls into thought. Takes a packet of 'Woodbines' from his pocket, and a box of matches. Shakes box – finds it empty. YEATES hands him his. FLURRY lights cigarette, automatically puts box in his pocket. YEATES silently and firmly holds out his hand till FLURRY returns it, with a laugh. YEATES pockets it, and says with ingenuous inspiration:

YEATES Well, anyhow, Flurry, if we can coax the colt out of the old lady, you might make a bit with him. By Jove! why shouldn't you pass him on to the nigger!

FLURRY (laughs pitying) Well, that might be too! (He fixes his eyes questioningly on YEATES. He is evidently thinking hard. Then he slaps his leg, laughs at his own thought, and says)

By Jingo! I'll have a shot at it! If I had Slipper, + Tim Driscoll – he's handy enough – and maybe I'd want another chap I could trust - ? (He looks again, dubiously, at YEATES)

YEATES (facetiously) To 'sloother' your Grandmother? I should have thought Slipper and Tim Driscoll would have been sufficient support!

FLURRY (ignores YEATES' remark. Says abruptly) See here Major! Keep your mouth shut about the nigger! If Grannema [sic] got the notion I wanted to part the colt I mightn't get him from her-

(Here SLIPPER staggers round the tent R. He is rather drunk. He advances on FLURRY and YEATES)

FLURRY By Jove, here's the man I want! Come here, Slipper, I want you!

SLIPPER advances. SLIPPER'S manner is pompous and rather owlsh, but he is in full possession of his faculties.

SLIPPER (in the manner of a proclamation) Good evening to my vinerable friend, Mr Flurry Knox, and to the Honorable Major Yeates, R.M.! Where were ye at all, gintlemen, and the finest race of the day just afther bein' run? Sure it's what we were all sayin' it was a great pity your Honour was not there, for the likin' ye had to Dhrishcoll.

FLURRY Never mind about the race, Slipper. Listen to me now - if you're not too drunk to understand what I'm saying to ye!

SLIPPER (interrupting with dignity) I am not dhrunk, Master Flurry! I have no more taken since morning than one small droppeen, to put blood in me eye! (hiccoughs) And my name is Gainey, sir, Patrick Gainey –

FLURRY Ah, go to blazes, Slipper! I'll call you a pair o' boots if I like! Attend to me now! You've got to get hold of Tim Driscoll for me. I'll be wanting him+yourself for a very particular job tomorrow night.

SLIPPER (funereally) Tim Dhrishcoll was as fine a young man as ever stud in Curranhilty – and that's a big word – But he'll do no more jobs for you, Masther Flurry.

FLURRY Why not?

SLIPPER Because he's killed dead!

FLURRY (contemptuously) Ah, go on!

SLIPPER (hiccoughing) He is I tell ye! Killed to the bone!

YEATES (anxiously) By Jove, I'd better go and see about this.

FLURRY Ah, not at all, Major! Go ahead, Slipper. How did it happen?

SLIPPER (with solemnity) It was Owld Bocock's mare that poor young boy was ridin'.

YEATES (very attentive and professional) Wait a minute – who's Old Bocock? I never heard of him in this country.

SLIPPER You did not, your Honour, and it's as good for ye! Sure he's from back in the mountains, and if the Divil sent the bellman round Hell, he couldn't find a more consecrated owld blagyard than the same Bocock!

FLURRY Present company always excepted, Slipper!

SLIPPER (with old world courtesy and an eye that takes YEATES into partnership) Sorrtainly Mr. Flurry!... Well, gintlemen, the Commy-tee orders the race to be for startin', and I puts a bully face on meself and I clears the coorse. (He cracks his whip, and roars) 'Ahoy, Boys, ahoy! Honomawndhiaoul! Make way for the Horses!' I says! (resumes ordinary voice with a hiccough) With that then I gathers a few o' the lads. 'Stand aisy now, by the last obshtackle' – says I to them. 't'is here the fatal cash'alty is most likely to occur', says I, 'and it'll be a convanient spot to encourage th'owld mare if she's annyway wake in herself,' says I, cuttin' somethin' about five foot of an ashplant out o' the plantation –

(Here PHILIPPA enters quietly, and takes up position, standing behind YEATES, with her hands on his shoulders. FLURRY stands up. SLIPPER greets her with a low bow, sweeping off his hat. He then proceeds with his story, addressing it chiefly to PHILIPPA.

SLIPPER Well, Mrs. Yeates and gintlemen, I hadn't the switch barely thrimmed when her was the race comin' on, an' sorra jock in it at all only two, and thim was Drishcoll and one Clancy. Well, when I seen them comin' on this way, leppin' all before them, an Drishcoll a matther o' three pairches behind Clancy, I lets a couple o' bawls!" (he yells, brandishing whip) 'Skelp her, ye big brute!' says I, 'What good's in ye that ye aren't able to skelp her!' (He staggers about, exemplifying his action.)

FLURRY I'd have said Tim Driscoll was a good warrant to skelp her for himself!

SLIPPER (he tells his story slowly, and with enormous zest, + dramatic feeling) Sure it was the way he hadn't a hand spared with the grab he had o' the saddle fore and aft! Now I declare to ye, Mrs. Yeates and gintlemen, when owld Boccock's mare heard thim roars, she shtretched out her neck like a gander, and when she passed me out, she give one grunt and looked at me as ugly as a Christian! 'Hah!' says I, giving her a couple o' dhraws o' th'ash-plant across the butt o' the tail, the way I wouldn't blind her, don't ye know! I'll make ye grunt!' says I. I'll nourish ye!' well, whether it was the vinom that was in her, or whether it was some slither or slide that come to owld Boccock's mare, I d'no. But she was bet up agin the last obshtackle, and before ye'd say 'Shnipes!' she was standin' on her two ears beyant in the other field! (He looks round proudly on his audience) I declare to ye, Mrs., Yeates and gintlemen, on the virtue of me oath, she stud that way till she reconnoithered what side would Drishcoll fall, an' she turned about then, and rolled on him as cosy as meadow-grass!

PHILIPPA (who has been listening with rapt attention) Good Heavens! How terrible! (Her eyes are rivetted (sic) on Slipper, who, much flattered, now directs his discourse exclusively at her)

SLIPPER (with unction) The blood was dhruv out though his nose and ears, and you would hear his bones crrackin' on the ground! You'd have pitied the poor boy!

PHILIPPA (horrorstruck) I never heard anything more awful!

FLURRY (casually) Was he hurt, Slipper?

SLIPPER (indignant) Hurt, is it? Killed to the bone, I tell ye! (He looks round audience sternly. His face then softens, in happy reminiscence) O divil so plesant an afthernoon ever you seen! Indeed Mr. Flurry it's what we were all sayin' it was a pity your Honour was not there, for the likin' ye had to Drishcoll!

(Before comment is possible, loud shoutings are heard from behind whisky-tent. Cries for 'Slipper!' 'I seen him goin' this way!' Then follows a rush of men on to stage, headed by Driscoll. He head is now tied up in a red cotton pocket-handkerchief, and his shirt is covered with mud and blood. He stares round him, one eye being covered by bandage.

DRISCOLL (shouting) Show me Slipper! Show me that dirty little under-looper till I have his blood!

(He seizes SLIPPER by the collar and shakes him violently. FLURRY and YEATES jump up. The bench is upset. The table with glasses is just saved by one of the onlookers. PHILIPPA tries to keep YEATES out of danger zone. Some of the crowd snatch SLIPPER from DRISCOLL's grasp. Others hold back DRISCOLL, who is flourishing his cutting-whip.

DRISCOLL Hadnt I the race won only for he souring the mare on me! Didn't he leave seven slaps on her with the handle of a hay rake!...

FLURRY (tranquilly) Well, Tim, since it wasn't the teeth of the rake he left on the mare you needn't be talking! Come over to see me to-morrow morning! I have a job for yourself and Slipper. Don't forget now at all. T'is a hurry-job and important.

(SLIPPER has slipped from grasp of his preservers and is now seated on floor, front centre.)

SLIPPER (with resounding hiccough) O, divil so pleshant an afternoon ever you seen!

CURTAIN

(handwritten date: August 1, 1923)

ACT I
Scene 2

“Trinket’s Colt”

A furzy field. Hills in background. Fine: a sunny afternoon in mid-June. Blue sky. Furze in blossom. Larks singing. R. a few slender, white-stemmed birch-trees. L. is a low heap of grey rocks, with furze bushes among and around them, (projecting from wing). Same scene as in Scene 1 minus tents.

SLIPPER discovered, centre of stage. He wears a very shabby and ragged checked suit. Yellow, with large check in brown and red. Dirty green frieze cap. Much-worn leather gaiters, and countrymen’s heavy boots. A dirty white shirt, no collar or tie. He has a blackthorn stick under his arm, and a stable-bucket in one hand; he is handling the oats that are in the bucket, running them through his fingers. He looks towards the heap of rocks and bushes.

(addressing heap of rocks) Well, boy! It’d be as good for me to give ye what’s left o’ them! There isn’t much more than what’d blind yer eye, and bedad, it’s little more ye’ll get for a whileen! Fine, weighty oats they are too-

As he speaks he goes to the heap of rocks L. with bucket. He goes behind the front row of bushes, and stoops down, saying, ‘Pr’ssh! Whee! Whee!’ (as to a horse). He then returns to centre front, swinging bucket. He turns bucket upside down, and seating himself upon it, begins to fill his pipe. (a small brown clay with a tin stopper). The tobacco he extracts from a screw of newspaper. He is in very good spirits.

SLIPPER Well isn’t that a grand day! I declare the sun’d rise yer heart! (He begins to sing, in a hideous voice, the first note consisting of a long-drawn howl he sings unaccompanied by orchestra.)

(sings) Och...me fathers and mothers was Ladies and Gintlemen back to the Flood!
We’d a boat there, just like the O’Gradies.
Sure there isn’t our aiquils in blood!
I’m as grand as the great Alexandher!
I’m as high as the sun in the skies!
But what’s family pride to the lus...tre
That shines from my Judy’s black eyes?

Chorus

For I’m allied to the Lannigans, Brannigans,
Noolans and Doolans, and many besides!
But what’s family pride to the lus...tre
That shines from my Judy’s black eyes!

At the end of the verse he stands up and shuffles a few steps round the bucket. Sits down before beginning again.

(sings) I’d a sither that lived in great splendour
With one, Justice Mooney, that’s dead.
She’d servants in throops to attend her,
Six candles to light her to bed.
But for all I’m so grand I’m good-natured,

Consate is a thing I despise!
And what's family pride to the lus...tre
That shines from my Judy's black eyes!

Chorus

For I'm allied to the Lannigans, Brannigans,
Noolans and Doolans, and many besides!
But what's family pride to the lus...tre
That shines from my Judy's black eyes!

After a species of cake-walk, he lights pipe and strolls again towards the bushes, stooping and looking behind them.

SLIPPER Who-ho, me hearty boy! (he strolls back to bucket and says, admiringly) Well, isn't Mr Flurry the divil painted!

He reseats himself and is looking idly towards the middle of the wings, R., when an expression of mingled rage and horror appears on his face. He stands up, looking off, R.

SLIPPER By the Gash of War, isn't them the Peelers? ... That they may languish away in bitterness! They're in me thrack always, like lap-dogs!

Two tall POLICEMEN in R.I.C. uniform, wearing helmets, march on, side by side, R. and advance to front. SLIPPER, who has reseated himself, and is smoking, apparently oblivious of their approach, affects to realise their presence with surprise. He then rises with dignity and salutes, with soldier-like smartness and gamin impudence.

SERGEANT (very superior in voice and manner, yet genial) Good morning to ye, Slipper.

SLIPPER (with cool assurance) Good morning, Sergeant Quinlan.

SERGEANT Well, Slipper, you're a great man for horses always! I wonder can you tell us anything about wun of Mrs. Knox's colts that's missing since last night?

SLIPPER (more coldly) I'd be thankful that ye wouldn't call me out o' me name, Sergeant. My name's Gainey, Patrick Gainey.

SERGEANT (facetiously) For as long as I knew you, I never knew that! I ask your pardon, Mr. Gainey!

SLIPPER (with quiet dignity, his manner softening a little) T'is granted!

SERGEANT (facetious, yet official in manner) Well now, Mr Patrick Gainey, I'm sorry to incommod you, but I have to put a few questions to you, and it is my duty to warn you that what you say may be taken in evidence against you.

He signs to CONSTABLE, who produces pencil and notebook.

SERGEANT (official manner) Will you inform me where you were at ten o'clock last night?

SLIPPER (thoughtfully) At ten o'clock is it? (pause) Well now, that's a mystery!...Faith, I couldn't hardly say, Sergeant, but I am of opinion that it was within in the snug at Goggins'es I was, at somethin' about a quarter-past nine, an' I afther havin' no more than three pints of The Wrastler –

CONSTABLE (who has been writing assiduously, stops and says in strong North of Ireland accent) What's that ye had?

SLIPPER (compassionately) Porther, Constable McCaggerty. P.J. Howrahan's porther! Well Known to th' Aristocracy and Ginthry as 'The Curranhilty Wrastler', by raison of the powerful grip it's able to take of your interior! Though there's some low, mean subjects that calls it 'Howrahan's Purge'!

SERGEANT (severely, to CONSTABLE) There's no need to take that down. (to SLIPPER) That was at 9.15 you say you were at Goggins' public house. Can you substantiate that?

SLIPPER (confidently) I can sure, for there was a friend o' me own, one Dhriscoll, come in then, an' t'is what he said, an' he comin' in the doore, 'Arragh, what use is porther!' says he to Goggin, 'Have ye nothin' better than thim Temperance Dhrinks?' says he. 'I have whisky that'd make a rabbit spit at a dog!' says Goggin, says he –

During this speech SLIPPER has moved quietly away from centre to R. of front, and has kept the bucket in his hand unobtrusively. He continues with artless candour.

SLIPPER Well, Sergeant, we had two fingers o' that all round-

SERGEANT (interrupting) I suppose them was the drinks I was told you ordered and left your friend, Driscoll to pay for?

SLIPPER (solemnly) Sergeant, I'm not denying it! T'is what is the matter with me, I'm too lion-hearted for me manes!

SERGEANT Well, when you had Driscoll landed for your drinks, what did ye do then? Were ye lion-hearted enough to go and steal Mrs. Knox's colt, or did ye do no more than go out and spit at a dog?

SLIPPER (with rollicking humour) Begot, Sergeant, I couldn't rightly say what did I do! But I was that jolly I could have spit at a pack o' hounds, and Mr. Flurry himself at the head o' them!

CONSTABLE (with suspicion) What had he in the bucket, I wonder, Sergeant?

He walks quickly back to where SLIPPER had been sitting, stoops, and examines the ground. He returns with something in his hand which he holds out to SERGEANT.

CONSTABLE It's a strange thing what he's doing with oats here, Sergeant!

Both POLICEMEN look menacing and important.

SLIPPER (with gentlemanly frankness) Well now, Sergeant, I'll tell ye the truth and no lie! I have a little small, bit-een of a donkey-een, and she have the fashion of thresh-

passing on Mr. Flurry Knox's land – though the dear knows there's not as much grass on it as'd sop a lark – and t'was the way I was bringing her a susp-een o' oats for herself-

CONSTABLE (darkly) She's that small I cant see her!

SERGEANT What are ye doin' here now, anyway?

SLIPPER (affectedly and impudently) Sure I'm admiring the bewties o' nature, Sergeant! I'd love to hear the little birds screechin', and ye'd get the smell o' the flowers here lovely – like whisky on th' air it is!

SERGEANT (now very angry) Here, we've had enough o' this! Give over your chat! You're too handy entirely with your tongue! You'll come down with us now to Major Yeates'es [sic]- (SLIPPER looks aside and winks) and you'll want to give a better account of yourself before we're done with ye! Come now! Quick march!

The party retire, SLIPPER cutting a sort of caper as he starts, swaggering between the two POLICEMEN, swinging his blackthorn, quite undismayed. The bucket is left on the ground. Exeunt R.

Enter FLURRY L. front. He strolls in carelessly, but looks sharply about him. Having carefully surveyed the scene, he notices bucket and picks it up, muttering 'Confound that fool SLIPPER!' Then he walks round rocks and bushes, regards them from different points of view, says That's all right!' Is walking off. L. with bucket, when he sees YEATES entering R. He hides his bucket behind a rock and advances to meet YEATES, grinning broadly.

FLURRY (to YEATES) Well, who's coming next, I wonder? It isn't twenty minutes since I had two of your d----d peelers searching me breeches pockets to try had I Trinket's colt hid away in them!

YEATES (horror-struck) What do you mean? What have the Police got to do with it? You told me last night when we were coming away from Aussolas [sic] that you and your Grandmother had made it up, and that she was satisfied to let you have the colt, and you were only taking him then to save time.

FLURRY And it was true for me too. She was well satisfied enough one time, but it seems like she's forgotten her promise! Anyway she had a messenger over to the Police Barracks at cockshout [sic] this morning to say Trinket's colt was stole from her, and that she blamed me for it! But, by the blessing of providence, Tim Driscoll's sister is 'slap-cabbage' at the Barracks, and she heard Denis giving the Sergeant the message, and then she heard them saying they believed Slipper and her own brother were in it with me, and with that she legged it off for Tim – she's a smart little girl – and Tim picked up Slipper, and the pair o' them came along to me, and b' Jove we weren't long putting the colt where the bobbies won't find him in a hurry!

YEATES What do you mean? Where is the colt? For heaven's sake don't tell me you've sent the brute over to my stables?

Flurry (enjoying Yeates' anguish) What a fool I am! No fear I did! Are'nt the bobbies on their way to Shreeland this minute to consult you about it! You yourself! The R.M. if you please! (laughs) The colt's where they'll not get him! No! Nor grannema neither! He's a

devilish good colt! A lot better than what I thought he was! I tell you that no one'll get him without they give me two hundred and fifty good looking sovereigns for him! Ho-ho! It's the funniest hand I ever played!

(Handwritten note here in Edith's script saying: 'See G.B.S. p. 35 Sally + Yeates – she is angry with Flurry)

YEATES (very angry and scared) Oh yes it's damned funny, no doubt, but I give you fair warning that if Mrs. Knox asks me any questions, I shall tell her the whole story of how I have been bamboozled by you into disgracing myself! (groans) When I think that I have been her guest, eating her mutton and drinking her p-port!

FLURRY And dam' bad it was too!

YEATES And that I then went straight from her table and stood by, while you and those two blackguards-

FLURRY (grinning, interrupting) Ah Major, you're too modest altogether! You were very useful to me! I couldn't have got on without you! You mustn't forget to tell Grannema how it was you that belted the colt out on to the road over her own bounds-ditch! – You might say how well he shapes for jumping! That'll please her!

YEATES (in black despair) Very well. I may as well send in my papers. They'll break me over this.

FLURRY (soothingly) Ah hold on, Major, it'll be all right. No one knows a ha-porth about it. it's only on spec that the Grandmother set the bobbies at me. If we keep quiet it'll all blow over. Anyhow no harm'll happen you!

YEATES (firmly) It's no use your talking to me. If I meet the unhappy old lady who has the misfortune to be your grandmother I shall tell her all I know!

FLURRY (tranquilly) Well, please God you'll not meet her. Anyhow it's not once in a blue moon that she comes this way. (sudden change in his manner to exhilarated horror) Holy Fly! Isn't that her bonnet below over the wall? (He is staring R. beyond clump of trees) By the living Jingo! It's herself! She'll be here in a minute! Hide, Major! Hide for your life!

He grasps the panic-stricken YEATES by the shoulders, runs him across stage to heap of rocks, L., and shoves him down on hands and knees behind front row of bushes, which are so disposed as to conceal him from R. and centre., but leave him visible to the audience. FLURRY then goes to meet MRS. KNOX R. Enter MRS. KNOX in bath-chair, steering herself, and propelled by DENIS, in old-fashioned footman's blue livery. Tail coat, stripe down trousers, red waistcoat, dirty brass buttons, top hat with cockade. He has a long red beard, and his hair is in need of cutting. The bath-chair is very old. Its wheels shriek for oil. MRS. KNOX's red shawl is fastened with a large diamond brooch, and her little brown claws are covered with diamond rings. As she comes on she is talking to FLURRY, and trying to outscreeam [sic] the shrieking wheels. DENIS pushes her slowly and steadily onwards till they reach the front, R. side.

MRS. KNOX (to FLURRY) What's that you say? (to DENIS, imperiously) Stop, I can't hear a word! (to Flurry, in fury) It is perfectly useless for you, sir, to prevaricate and tell

lies! Trinket's colt was taken out of my field last night, and I know well you are the only one capable of such an act!

FLURRY (with equal fury) Is it that curby, common, long-backed, foxy Garran you're talking of? Sure you promised him to me long ago – and I'm not surprised you wanted to be rid of him – but I wouldn't be bothered with him!

MRS. KNOX (in a scream of rage) Curby! Long-backed! Common Garran! Trinket's colt! T'is [sic] amazing to me that even you can have the abominable impudence to stand there looking at me and saying such things! The best colt I ever bred! How likely I should promise him to you! (pants for breath) And even if I were so bereft of my senses, is it likely that you'd refuse him! I'll do you the justice to say that you're more of a knave than a fool! (she turns to DENIS) That's a fine story Master Flurry's asking me to believe! What do you think of that, Denis?

DENIS (with portentous gravity) Fie! Fie! (pronounce "Foy")

FLURRY (in righteous indignation) Very well, Ma'am, I suppose I'm a liar and a thief!

MRS. KNOX (swiftly) I'd be more obliged to ye for the information if I hadn't known it already! (She blinks both eyes at audience in triumph over this hit) If you went down on your knees, on a stack of Bibles, and swore to me you had no hand in stealing my colt, I wouldn't believe you! I shall go straight to Major Yeates and ask his advice. I believe him to be a gentleman, in spite of the company he keeps!

During this speech, YEATES, who is on all-fours under bushes, tries to recede, moving sideways to the L.side. He is then seen to be arrested by something, and remains motionless, paralysed by what he is looking at. At this moment a shrill neigh comes from the thicket that is beside the one beneath which YEATES crouches. MRS. KNOX stiffens. She leans forward, clutching arms of bath-chair, her spectacles directed at bushes. FLURRY moves a few steps behind her chair, facing audience, and puts his hands in his pockets.

FLURRY (grinning, recognising that the game is up, chants Deedlety-Eedlety-Idlety!

DENIS rushes from behind chair, snatches at nearest bush. It comes away in his hand, having been only laid on the ground, and reveals the crouching YEATES. He remains transfixed, while MRS. Knox scrambles quickly out of her chair in order to make sure that her eyes are not deceiving her, and advances on YEATES.

MRS. KNOX Major Yeates! What are you...

Her voice fades away. YEATES, in rising to his feet, has kicked away the bush behind him. Another whinny is heard, and Mrs. KNOX, in mid-speech, Has seen a horse's head, just above ground, the rest of his body (presumably) buried. The head must be made to move and to turn towards MRS. KNOX. YEATES, tousled, no cap, hair rough, hurries to her side to support her in case she falls. She remains speechless, leaning on her stick, gazing at the head. FLURRY is shaking and stamping with uncontrollable but noiseless laughter. DENIS, standing between the audience and the horse, repeats, ceaselessly, looking up and down from the horse to heaven, in horror, The Lord save us!

MRS. KNOX (faintly and very slowly) Major Yeates...will you tell me...am I in Bedlam or are you? ... and what is that?

She points shakily at the horse's head. It moves and whinnies again. She staggers, clutches at YEATES' arm, and begins to laugh, getting more and more overcome at each moment, finally mopping her eyes and squeaking and squealing with the extreme of laughter. She releases YEATES' arm, and wildly claws a handkerchief out of a detached bag-pocket, from under her skirt, (exhibiting her red flannel petticoat + white stockings.) YEATES and FLURRY are equally overcome. DENIS continues to invoke the protection of Heaven.

MRS. KNOX (wiping her eyes and spectacles) I acquit you, Major Yeates! I acquit you, though appearances are against you! She stops and glares at Flurry, her bonnet over one eye. And as for you, Sir, I'll thank you to take that unfortunate animal out of that sand-pit, or quarry, or whatever it is, before I leave this place! I'll not stir till I see him above ground! ... And when you've dug him out you may keep him! I'll be no receiver of stolen goods! (She breaks off, and shakes her little fist at Flurry) Upon me conscience, Tony, you rascal, I'd give a guinea to have thought of it myself!

CURTAIN

CURTAIN (temporary, rising on Tableau)

MRS. KNOX is seated in bath chair, with FLURRY, restored to high favour, sitting at her feet on the step. MRS. KNOX's hand is on his shoulder. He is evidently talking eagerly to her, in a low voice, her head is bent down, listening to him.

YEATES and DENIS are standing gazing at the horse's head. They have been joined by SLIPPER, whose pose would suggest triumph.
All is peace.

End OF ACT I

ACT II

“A Royal Command”

Scene 1

“Shreelane House”

The hall at Shreeland. Staircase (at middle of L. side) leading into it. A door, L., between staircase and front. In centre of back, a large, double, solid hall door. Centre of R. side, a door leading into a passage. A window on either side of hall door. Hall door opens onto backing of trees. There is a shield on one wall with a trophy of spears and weapons of sorts. A rack with guns. A few sporting prints. A large Chesterfield sofa, half-front, R. side. High-backed “Grandfather” chintz-covered chair. A table with books and papers. A vase of tall and noticeable blue flowers. The effect is bright and pleasant. As curtain rises, two MAIDS, one HANNAH, trim and tidy, the other BRIDGIE BRICKLEY, very much the reverses, are in the act of carrying a long writing table through door L. into hall. HANNAH is coming in backwards through doorway.

HANNAH (as the table is clearing doorway) Mind the paint, Bridgie!

BRIDGIE (knocks her knuckles, gives a squall of pain and rage, drops her end of table hastily, putting her knuckles to her mouth) Bad luck to ye, Hannah Sullivan! Look at me hand in gores of blood from ye!

HANNAH (apprehensively and swiftly) Whisht gerr’!

She looks across stage to door R., whence issues, large and terrible, MRS. DUNNIGAN. She is the cook, She wears a high white cap, helmet-wise. Print dress. Large cooking apron (not clean) over her large person. She is red with rage and effort. Her angry voice precedes her.

MRS. DUNNIGAN Bridgie! Bridgie Brickley! Are ye there? (She advances, swift though ponderous)

BRIDGIE (pertly) I’m here, Ma’am!

MRS. DUNNIGAN (furiously) why then I wish the divil would burn the two heels off ye, wherever ye are! Aren’t you the biggest brat that ever Ireland reared? What did ye do with me beautiful head and me lovely feet? Will ye tell me that?

BRIDGIE (unintimidated) Sure they’re bilin’ in the pot, Ma’am! Didn’t yourself tell me to put them down on the range an hour ago, and to leave them simpering there for the soup? And I done it too.

MRS. DUNNIGAN (still raging) How well ye wouldn’t let on ye done it. The way ye’d have me distroyed lookin’ for them! (she turns on Hannah) What are ye doin’ with the Major’s table? Don’t ye know the Major’ll ate the flesh off anyone touchin’ his table? (She pants) Such Tally-wack and tandem never I see!

She swings across stage and exit, door R. BRIDGIE puts out her tongue at HANNAH, who is shocked. Hall door opens (half door only), enter MAJOR YEATES. He wears dust coat, soft felt hat, carries an umbrella and suit-case: is evidently returning from journey. He

stands and stares at the MAIDS, who are still standing, uncertain, with the table between them.

YEATES What's all this? What are you doing here?

HANNAH (terrified) T'was the Misthress told us we should clear that smoking-room, Sir – for the servant of the – the black Gentleman that's coming to lunch to-day –“

The two MAIDS hurriedly carry the table back to smoking room. Door L. and do not return.

PHILIPPA (calling from top of stairs) Wait, Sinclair! I'm coming down-

She hurries down the stairs in charming negligee wrapper. Hair wild, silver hand-glass in one hand. She gives YEATES no time to speak.

PHILIPPA Oh my dear, I'm so thankful you've come! I've so much to say to you-

YEATES (interrupting, grimly) Then perhaps you will begin by kindly explaining what the butcher wants my spears for? Or is it merely that Mrs. Dunnigan has gone out of her mind?

PHILIPPA (with slightly anxious and very conciliatory gaiety) I was just coming to that, dearest. Let me break it to you as gently as possible! I had a line yesterday from Sally Knox, saying that Flurry (meaningly) you know I think there's more going on there than meets the eye!

YEATES (interrupting, crossly) Whose eye?

PHILIPPA (sweetly) Yours, darling! Also Lady Knox's! – though I think she's beginning to take notice, and what will happen when she does I can't think!

YEATES (Impatiently) May I ask what all this has to say to the question of the butcher and my spears?

PHILIPPA Well, you see, Sally says that Flurry wants to sell that colt – (teasingly) that you helped him to steal, dearest! – to the Sultan, and oh, by the bye, she says she's trying to keep all that rather unconventional little transaction a secret from Lady Knox – and she begs you to do the same –

YEATES (interrupting, bitterly) She need feel no uneasiness on that score, as far as I am concerned! Once more, will you kindly tell me what on earth all this has to do with my spears?

PHILIPPA (disregarding him, and sailing on rapidly) Well, that's what Sally said, and she begged me to introduce Flurry to the Sultan/ (She hesitates a little) You know, of course, that I met the little being and his bear-leader – that charming Captain Délécluse at the Shutes, and you may or may not be surprised to hear that I appear to have been a devastating success, and the Sultan has insisted on coming to lunch here! He's left the Shutes and gone to the hotel in Curranhilty, and this wire came yesterday (she picks up telegraph form from table) – 'The Sultan wishes to lunch with you tomorrow Délécluse'!"

YEATES (fuming) The devil he does! I suppose you've been making eyes at the nigger? Or was it at the charming Délécluse? Or both, most likely!

PHILIPPA (cajoling) How silly you are! (She holds his coat lapels with both hands, looking up at him) But listen, dear old thing, and be calm! I had to wire back 'enchanted'! You know it's a kind of Royal Command! I believe you ought to wear your London clothes!

YEATES (appalled, with last effort for firmness) I'm dashed if I do that!

PHILIPPA (diplomatically, waiving the point) Well, darling, be that as it may, we're in for it! I wired to Flurry to come and make himself agreeable and sell his horse; and of course Sally is coming too – and oh, dearest, I was forgetting to explain about the spears! You know they all tell me that the Sultan must have speared mutton! (she giggles) Some sort of religious ordinance, I suppose! That's all right – I've wired to the butcher about it – and the native attendant must have a place to eat by himself. That's why they're clearing out the smoking-room.

YEATES (crossly) I call it an infernal liberty of this Frenchman's! dumping his damned menagerie on us in this way! – And I may tell you that those spears of mine are poisonous!

PHILIPPA Oh darling, don't be so horrid! Inventing difficulties like that! And I don't believe you! Now I really must fly – Do go and make yourself look nice, darling. Nicer than that! (She holds up mirror so that YEATES may see his indignant face in it. he laughs, weakly. PHILIPPA goes to stairs, as she mounts each step, she pauses and utters a fresh command) Oh, and Sinclair, - get out some champagne, won't you? And get a few roses for the table, like a dear – and be sure and lock up the dogs, the Sultan's black face might upset them! Oh, and tell Hannah on no account to forget about the strip of red carpet at the hall-door – and do find the children, and see that they are clean, and scold them if they are being naughty, - and oh, darling, I forgot! Mrs. Dunnigan's just told me that the butcher's been so tiresome about the mutton, and it's not been speared! What shall we do? Would you go out and spear a chicken? Poor little thing! It sounds so cruel! DO do it as mercifully as you can – it might do as well – (she reaches top of stairs)

YEATES (with fierceness inspired by terror) I shall do nothing of the kind! Let the brute starve! And Philippa! (he shouts up the stairs after her) For Heaven's sake don't be late! You know I can't speak French!

PHILIPPA (out of sight) Send Hannah to me at once...! (she ends on a high note)

YEATES walks to door L. calls loudly for HANNAH. Pause, during which presumably he gives message. Interval. YEATES returns to front.

YEATES (gloomily) Let me see...what is it I have to do? (he counts on his fingers) One, make myself look nice. 'Hm! That's more than I feel! Two, get out champagne – That's better. Three (rapidly) get flowers. Four, lock up dogs. Five, tell Hannah something – ? Heaven! I've forgotten what! (desperately) I don't care! Six, find the children. Seven, wash them. Eight, beat them – no objection to doing that. Nine, spear a chicken, as mercifully as possible. No, hang it! I draw the line there –“ (He groans and picks up his hat) I wish I were in bed with the bedclothes over my head-

YEATES is opening hall-door when PHILIPPA's voice is heard again, calling him. He returns to middle of hall. PHILIPPA runs quickly down stairs, and whirls to front, confronting Y, in what is evidently a gust of fury. She is now wearing a smart dress. One sleeve is transparent. The other does not exist. She extends both arms to YEATES.

PHILIPPA (in level tone of concentrated indignation) Sinclair! I ask you to look at my dress!

YEATES (nervously) It – it looks very nice, dear. I know it, don't I?

PHILIPPA (witheringly) Know it! Did you know that it had only one sleeve?

YEATES (helpless) Well, I can't say I did. Is it a new fashion?

PHILIPPA opens her mouth and shuts it two or three times, rejecting words as inadequate to express her contempt for YEATES. HANNAH slides into room, door R.

HANNAH (abjectly) it's what they're after tellin' me, Ma'am, t'was took to sthrain the soup!

PHILIPPA (at high pressure) They took my sleeve to strain the soup?

HANNAH (whimpering) She said she got it in the press in the passage, Ma'am, and she thought you were afther throwing it. (she gazes round imploringly at YEATES for the moral support that he is powerless to bestow)

PHILIPPA (with glowing cheeks and starlike eyes and head erect) Who are you speaking of?

HANNAH (in tears) It was Bridgie, Ma'am –

She is interrupted by entrance, R. of Mrs. DUNNIGAN, with a plate in one hand on which is a small mound of brownish rag. She tramps to front of stage, picks up rag in front of PHILIPPA, and lets it fall, sopping, on plate.

MRS. DUNNIGAN (in storm) There's your sleeve, Ma'am! And if I could fall down dead this minyute, it'd be no more than a relief to me! And as for Bridgie Brickley -! (pause, inarticulate with rage) I thravelled many gentry-kitchens, and thanks be to the Almighty God I never seen the like of her! I'm not one that holds with loud mockery and harangues, but I declare to my conscience that t'is five weeks tomorrow that she's in this house, and there isn't a day but I should give her a lacer-atin'! A Turk couldn't stand her! Sure the hair's dhroppin' out o' me head, and the skin rollin' off the soles o' me feet with the heart-scald I gets with her – the big, low, dirty buccaneer of a proud tinker! And I declare to you, Ma'am, and to the Major – (she swings on her heels from one authority to the other) – I have a pain switchin' out through me hips this minyute that's bring down a horse!

HANNAH (clapping her hand over her mouth, her eyes on YEATES) O God!

Philippa, with one wild look, also at YEATES, falls into laughter. Mrs. DUNNIGAN stands like a stag at bay. The hall door-bell rings. Hurried dispersion ensues. Mrs. DUNNIGAN exit R. PHILIPPA, saying Wait, Hannah! flies to stairs, checking HANNAH, who is going to the hall-door. YEATES bolts, in long, hurried strides, by door L.

PHILIPPA at foot of stairs cries hoarsely to HANNAH, ‘Say we’re dressing – But I’m sure it’s only Miss Knox- (exit upstairs)

HANNAH opens half hall-door. Enter SALLY KNOX, followed by FLURRY. Both are in riding dress. SALLY wears Panama hat, soft collar and black tie, white linen coat, grey riding-skirt, brown butcher-boots, carries small cane. FLURRY is in neat grey coat and breeches, snowy hunting-tie. Well-polished brown gaiters and boots, and shining spurs (brown straps). He looks smart and clean. Deposits soft felt grey hat and cane on hall table.

HANNAH The Major and the Mishtriss are above stairs, dressing themselves, Miss, and will you please sit down?

Exit HANNAH, R. SALLY seats herself in corner of Chesterfield sofa, R. FLURRY looks at her, and then, with some defiance of manner, sits down in the other corner of sofa. SALLY picks up ‘Punch’, which is lying on the sofa, and turns over the pages. It is evident that relations are rather strained. SALLY laughs occasionally at the pictures and murmurs comments, as to herself.

SALLY Rather good... That’s quite funny... O that’s as old as the hills! How I wish they wouldn’t try to have Irish jokes...!

FLURRY is restless and gloomy. He fidgets, looks at his wrist-watch, and scowls at SALLY, who seems unaware of his presence. Finally he starts to his feet, and stands, looking down at her, his hands in his coat-pockets. SALLY finds another picture that amuses her, and laughs again.

FLURRY (Bitterly aggrieved) Considering what I told you awhile ago, I think you might leave down that rotten old paper!

SALLY (airily) It’s not in the least rotten, it’s rather amusing, and what did you tell me (mimicking him) ‘a while ago’? I forget.

FLURRY You know very well what I said! But it’s easy seen it makes no difference to you!

SALLY (affecting to remember with difficulty) O...you mean that nonsense about going to America?... You know as well as I do that you’re not going to do anything of the kind!

FLURRY (angrily) I can tell you this. If I could raise the wind to pay for a third-class passage, I’d go there to-morrow.

SALLY (laughing a little, indulgently) I shouldn’t care to raise the wind if I were going on the sea! And you’ll change your mind when you’ve brought off this deal, and have your pockets full of the little Sultan’s money! You’ll be going to England then to buy hounds! Take care he doesn’t pay you in cowries! P’raps that’s why people talk about shelling out! (She laughs, and looks to Flurry for a laugh, which he does not vouchsafe) I wonder how many cowries a hound would cost! About a million I suppose!

FLURRY (grimly) No fear I’ll buy hounds with his money! That’s the money that’ll pay my debts and’ll start me in the States – though God knows it wasn’t for that I wanted it! There are things I want more than hounds!

SALLY (frivolously) Tell me what they are? Cowries?

FLURRY (hotly) Have done with that rot about cowries! I'm not joking at all!

SALLY (beguilingly) Well then, tell me what you dowant.

FLURRY (looks at her foolishly for an instant, then pulls himself together, and says, harshly) Plenty!

SALLY O very well! Don't say anything you don't want to! I can read PUNCH!

She picks up PUNCH. FLURRY turns his back on her, standing up, his hands in his pockets. She looks at him over the top of the paper. He walks away from the sofa, and stands for a moment, whistling a dreary little jig-tune between his teeth. Then he strides back, and sits down on the arm of the sofa, farthest from SALLY, his back half turned to her, swinging one leg like a pendulum.

FLURRY (In Devil-may-care-voice) Well! God be with the old times!

SALLY (re-buried in PUNCH, does not look up) What old times?

FLURRY (bitterly) The times when me and you were friends! When you weren't too grand, or too bored, to speak to me. The times when we'd go riding the one jackass, or go fishing pollok [sic] at the harbour's mouth in the one punt, or leathering out the finish of a good hunt together! You've got too dam' smart for me now! It's rich Englishmen, like Bernard Shute, is all you think of! If it wasn't for me having the Hounds, I don't believe your Mother would let you speak to me at all – nor you wouldn't want to neither! She and you think, maybe, it's handy to keep in the with M.F.H! [sic] (he laughs bitterly) Well, it won't be handy for you for long! I'm going to chuck the whole blooming box and dice, and the devil a bit I care!

He is seated almost with his back to SALLY but he watches her over his shoulder.

SALLY (jumps up, walks past him and then turns and talks indignantly at him) I don't know why I'm being scolded like this! You asked me to come and help you in this deal with the Sultan, because you said you were 'hard up', and you wanted to 'raise the wind' and so on! And here I am! Then you quarrel with me about Bernard Shute, and nonsense like that, all the way here and you say silly things about going to America – goodness knows why! You don't, anyway, - and wanting money for this, that and the other; and when I try to take an interest, and ask what for, you won't tell me, and you get as cross as – as a bag of weasels!

She is near tears. She flings past him, and going back to her original corner of the sofa, sits, like him, on the arm, kicking her leg, and, when she speaks, doing so, like him, over her shoulder.

SALLY (with finality) I think you're horrible, Flurry!

F (over his shoulder) That's no news to me! I'm well aware of your opinion of me, thank ye!

SALLY (her anger turning to reproach) I don't know what we're fighting about! Is it because I don't go riding 'the one jackass' with you? (she again mimics his manner) – or sitting in the swell at the harbour's mouth, lolloping up and down, and catching nothing, and wondering how soon I shall be sick? – And how can we go 'leathering out a hunt' in the month of June? (she pauses. He does not move) Or is it because you say you don't want to go to America and I...I...I don't want you to go away –

FLURRY swings round on his end of the sofa. SALLY continues to look away from him.

FLURRY (roughly) What's that you're saying?

SALLY (piteously) It's bad enough to have Mamma always in a rage with me, and tormenting me about Bernard Shute – I hate the very sound of his name! and everything – without you, that I thought was my friend –

FLURRY (interrupting, still rough in his manner) You thought that, did you? (He rises and comes round behind the sofa, to where she is sitting on the arm. He puts his left hand on back of sofa, and leans over SALLY who is still perched, like a little bird, on the arm looking to the front) You thought I was your friend, did you? ... Well, that's where you made the big mistake!...(his voice softens) I can tell you it's not friendship you'll get from me –“ (he puts his left arm round her waist, and says, in a whisper) – “something more than friendship, Sally-gerr'!

SALLY HAS turned her head away. FLURRY, leaning closer, puts his right hand under her chin and turns her face towards him.

FLURRY (softly) If I rise the wind, will you come sailing with me in my boat? It's only a small little punt, but it'd hold you and me very snug, Sally-gerr'l-eeen!

There is a brief pause. Sally tries to draw herself away from him, then gives in, raises her eyes to his, and he kisses her. SALLY slips from end of sofa on to her feet. FLURRY's arm is still round her. She takes his wrist, and frees herself from his embrace.

SALLY Flurry! You know this can't be! It's perfectly useless your talking like this – (he kisses her again) – or – or behaving like this – useless!

FLURRY It's useful enough for me! (He is now gay and triumphing)

SALLY (holding his hands, and half-pushing him away) Flurry! – Dear! – Don't make it too hard for me – It's all impossible! Think of Mamma!

FLURRY I'd rather not, thank you! One at a time's plenty!

SALLY (despairingly) But you must think of her! She's just heard about your stealing the colt and she's absolutely furious with you. She'd never have let me come here to-day if she had guessed I was going to meet you. She says I am never to speak to you again. She simply hates you!

F Well, if it was her I wanted to marry, that'd be a bit of a drawback. But, you see, that isn't my idea at all! That's the difference of it, don't you know!

He is trying to draw her to him again, when the hall-door is flung open, and HANNAH dashes in with a large bunch of flowers in her hand. She calls to SALLY in high excitement.

HANNAH O, Miss Knox, he's coming! He's coming! I seen the car on th'avenya, [sic] and I haven't as much as the table laid, picking flowers for the Major! Where's the Misthress at all?

SALLY (with equal excitement) I'll call her, Hannah! (She runs to foot of stairs, and shrieks) Philippa! Major Yeates! Here's the Sultan! Come down! Hurry!

HANNAH, assisted by FLURRY, drags out from behind the sofa a roll of red carpet. YEATES comes running down the stairs, wearing new grey suit, buttoning his waistcoat as he comes. His eyeglass hangs down the middle of his back.

HANNAH flings open both sides of hall-door, and hurls the roll of carpet down the steps, spreading it up the middle of hall. FLURRY retreats, and stands at foot of stairs. PHILIPPA comes flying down, beautifully dressed, stumbles and nearly falls at FLURRY's feet, but is caught by him. HANNAH has taken shelter under stairs, L.

FLURRY (to PHILIPPA, as to a horse) Hull' up, Mrs. Yeates! Hull' up!

He steadies her on her feet. All turn towards hall door. There is a tense pause. YEATES fumbles in vain for his eyeglass. He stands nearly facing hall-door, through which light streams. Suddenly, on threshold, silhouetted against light, a short, stout figure is seen. It wears a frock coat, and black trousers, and has on its head something white and voluminous, like a turban.

YEATES (bowing low, and backing before the visitor, who moves hesitatingly up the red carpet) Sire! J'ai l'honneur de vous..."

He breaks off, in entire confusion, as the figure, who is SLIPPER, extends a telegram to PHILIPPA.

SLIPPER (advancing to front, to Y, who has recovered eyeglass) Yerra-my-law, Major! Don't be makin' game o' me this way! (He plucks off the turban and begins to remove the white "wheeper" from his cap) Sure I'm just after comin' from poor owld Jimmy Canty's funeral. And I got the tallygram from the post-boy that's afther breaking his bike below on the road.

PHILIPPA, with shaking hand, tears open telegram and reads it aloud.

PHILIPPA 'Ten thousand regrets motor failure will Mr. Knox send horse here Délécluse.'

FLURRY (in high spirits) Will I, is it? Will a duck swim?

YEATES (passionately) Thank God!

PHILIPPA (to YEATES) Sinclair, how silly you are! (Turns to others) Well, I must say, I'm rather disappointed!

CURTAIN

ACT II
Scene 2

In Shreelane hall, a week later. Scene as before save that the vase of flowers is now different (yellow instead of blue, or pink) and the furniture is changed in position; the armchair is near the front, facing audience, L. The Chesterfield sofa R. half-facing audience. FLURRY is discovered on sofa reading a letter. He is in clean white flannels, snowy tennis shoes, a new Panama hat and a lawn tennis racket [sic] are on the table. he looks very cheerful. He is following with his finger the lines of the letter that he is reading, and is softly murmuring the words as he reads. It is evident that the letter is an agreeable one.

Enter Yeates, hurriedly, by halldoor (which stands open) FLURRY quickly slips letter into breast pocket, rises, and shakes hands with YEATES.

YEATES How are you Flurry? I've only just heard that you were here.

FLURRY (genially and facetiously) Sit down Major! Make yourself at home! I heard you were about the place and I said I'd wait for you. I just drove the trap over and brought my racquet along on the chance of having a knock-up with you – and – (he laughs rather foolishly) I've – I've got something to tell you –

(YEATES has seated himself on sofa beside FLURRY)

YEATES (in voice expressive of injury) I've got something to tell you, my son! I've got a complaint –

FLURRY (interrupting, sympathetic tone) Oh my! Not bad I hope? What is it? Gout? Or liver? Or a bad stomach -?

YEATES (implacably) No! I'm not going to be side-tracked! It's a very serious complaint, and it's against that confounded old hound and her whelps that you planted on me last week. She half killed poor old Maria yesterday, and the puppies have eaten a bed of geraniums and my bedroom slippers. And most of the servants have given warning every morning since the brute came to the place!

FLURRY Is it poor Venus? Ah, there's no harm in her!

YEATES (warmly) There's the best part of a sirloin of beef in her if you call that no harm! She took it off the side table this very morning! Philippa knew nothing about it till Mrs. Dunnigan sent in curry for lunch, with a pleasing message that 'that was all she could do with what was left of the beef after she got it from the hound, it was that dragged!' Nice for us who had eaten the curry!

FLURRY (pacifically) Ah, it's equal to anyone what they'd eat in Mary Dunnigan's curry. I know it well. You'd take a splint off a horse with it.

YEATES (refusing to be appeased) That's all very fine, but there's a limit to human endurance, and –

FLURRY (interrupting, goodhumouredly) Oh, all right, Major! All right! Send her back to me! I've three litters in the place this minute – Gaylass, and Dauntless, and old Desperate – but no matter! The more the merrier! Send her along!

YEATES (incredulous) By Jove! I will! This very day! (He stares at FLURRY, and says, solicitously) You're not drunk, are you?

FLURRY (still more jovially) Not a colour! Look here, old chap, damn Venus! Do what you like with her! Shoot her if you want to! Now's your time! (He sings)

YEATES (bewildered) But why? – What?–

FLURRY (triumphantly, pulling out letters and handing one to YEATES) Here's the why and the what! Look at that!

YEATES (takes letter out of envelope and reads aloud) Darling old Flurry – Hullo! Hullo!

FLURRY (snatching letter from Y, hilariously) Confound you, Major, I gave you the wrong one! Never mind! It's the right one for me! (He puts it back in pocket and gives YEATES the other.) Here, read this...and look at that! (He waves a cheque in YEATES' face) Here's what'll put me on the pig's back!

YEATES God help the pig that has you on his back! (takes cheque and looks at it) Hullo, what's this? Three hundred pounds! By George! Do you mean to say you've taken three hundred out of the nigger for that colt? I congratulate you! ... You'll send the cheque to Grandmamma, of course!

FLURRY (with triumph) I declare you I believe she'd send it back to me if I did! I'm the Whiteheaded Boy now!...But maybe it'd be as good not to try her too high after all! (He puts cheque carefully into pocket book and replaces it in pocket) I've plenty to do with it meself!

YEATES (stupefied) Well, if that doesn't beat the bees and the making of wax!... May I ask if it is your Grandmother who writes to you and says 'Darling old...'?

FLURRY (faintly embarrassed, laughs foolishly) Ah shut up, Major, and I'll tell you a secret! That day last week when I was here – that day we were looking out for the Sultan, and you did Poojah to old Slipper – dont [sic] you remember? Well, that same day I fixed it up with Sally! I can tell you I was in a bit of a funk before I said the 'hard word'! It was a pretty blind place, and I didn't know what the landing was going to be like! But I just shut me eyes, and jammed in the spurs, and –

YEATES And you found it was a soft corner, after all! (He shakes FLURRY'S hand and thumps him on the back, with suitable facetiousness) You're [sic] in luck, my son! But what am I going to say to Miss Sally? D'ye mean to say I'm expected to congratulate her?

FLURRY (in high good humour) You needn't strain yourself! I can tell you Sally's as pleased as Punch! And why wouldn't she be?

YEATES And what about Lady Knox? May I ask if she's as pleased as Punch too?

FLURRY (grinning) Well, as to that I couldn't exactly tell you – and no more could she, for the matter of that, and for a very good reason too! – that we didn't let the wind of a word get to her yet!

YEATES (gives a long whistle, expressing warning and amused anticipation of trouble)

Well! That's something to look forward to! And what about Grandmamma? Have you told her?

FLURRY To be sure I did, and she was that delighted she was near kissing me! But thank God she let me off! I tell you it's taken twenty years off her to think how mad Lady Knox'll be!

YEATES (screwing eyeglass into eye and surveying FLURRY) Fine fun for the old lady, I daresay! But what are you going to do if Lady Knox sticks in her toes and won't allow an engagement? Miss Sally's only nineteen! What are you going to do about that?

FLURRY (devil-may-carelessly) I d'no what will I do, but I'm not going to meet the devil half way, the way you'd like me to! I'm getting a new carpet for the parlour, and I've ordered a new set of single harness and a clipping machine, and I'm going to turn Gaylass and her pups out of the drawing-room – and – and – (with determination) by Jove, I'll get it washed down too!

(He stands up and looks down at YEATES, with defiant self-satisfaction.) I tell you I'm not going to do things by halves!

YEATES (chaffing him and grinning) That's why you're getting spliced I suppose! Poor old Flurry! Who'd have thought you'd come to this! And new flannel b-bags too! It f-frightens me!

FLURRY (jubilantly) You've no call to be frightened at all, you never saw me better! I'm as gay as a little trout! But wait awhile till we're in howlts with Lady Knox! You might be sayin' a prayer for me then! She'll be mad! She'll be fit to tear iron! (He becomes serious, and looks at YEATES with anxiety) By George, yes! Me and Grannema will have our work set with her! She's a holy terror!

YEATES (still chaffing and grinning) Never mind, Flurry, I'll back you and your grandmother! By Jove! Caliban and Sycorax would'nt be in it with you! 'Coragio, Bully-monster! Coragio!' All my money's on Caliban and Sycorax!

FLURRY (suspiciously, and ready to be angry) What rot is that you're saying? Are them horses?

YEATES (lightly, rather pleased with himself) Only a quotation, old chap – Shakespeare, The Tempest – that's all! Rather appropriate these stormy times!

FLURRY (suspiciously) You'd better keep your Shakespeare quotations for Grannema! They're more in her line than mine! And, by the same token, dont [sic] forget she's having her Tenants' Dance next week, and you and Mrs. Yeates are to dine at Aussullas [sic], and the Archdeacon – that's her brother y'know, me Great-Uncle Eustace – are to meet you –

YEATES Oh, I'll not forget - upon my word after that disgraceful affair you dragged me into, I wonder the old lady is kind enough even to speak to me!
(As YEATES speaks there comes a rapping, as with a cane, at the hall door. Both men rise, and, as they turn towards the half-open door, SALLY runs in)

SALLY dressed for riding, as in last scene) Oh Major Yeates, forgive me for rushing in like this -: (She sees FLURRY and stops dead. FLURRY strides quickly to her and takes her hands in his)

SALLY (continuing in great agitation) I want so much to see PHILIPPA –

YEATES (with concern) I'm so sorry – she's out –

FLURRY (interrupting, very anxiously) What is it Sally? What's up? Has your mother found out? (He jerks his head at YEATES) It's all right – he knows

Sally (turns to YEATES, struggling with tears) I wanted to tell Philippa – (she sobs, and turns again to FLURRY) It's all over, Flurry! Mamma found one of your letters this morning and there's been a perfectly awful row! She says I can defy her as much as I like, but that I'm not of age, and until I am I must obey her!
(Her voice breaks. Flurry takes her in his arms. YEATES moves away and takes up a book)

FLURRY (murmurs) There now – don't cry – it'll be all right –
(Sally yields for a moment, then raises her head from his breast)

SALLY It's no use! We might as well say goodbye, and be done with it – now – at once! She tries to pull herself away from him, but again breaks down, and sobs on his shoulder. He makes her sit beside him on the sofa.

FLURRY (tenderly and incoherently) Sally, don't cry – never fear – my darling – don't be frightened at all! D'ye think I'd ever let you go from me, my own little girleen?

SALLY But I'll have to go from you! Mamma says I'm to go to England next Friday with Miss Shute and Bernard; it's all settled! I'm to stay with them for a bit –

FLURRY (between his teeth) I'll take me oath you won't!

SALLY (continuing) – And then I'm to go on to stay with Mamma's sisters, for ages! We've just got to give everything up, and give in! Mamma's absolutely determined, she hates you, and your grandmother so awfully! And this last attack of gout's made her worse than ever! Nothing on earth could move her!

FLURRY (fiercely) Is it not move her? Little I think of her! To the Seventeen Divils I pitch her!

SALLY (between laughing and crying) You know you c-c-could'nt do anything of the kind! She's too b-b-big! And if you could, she wouldn't care! She'd squa-squa-squash them all flat, and come back and squash us!

FLURRY Let her! She'll not squash me, nor you either! Listen! My cob's here, and I'll take him out of the trap and throw a saddle of the Major's on him, and you and me'll just canter over to Aussullas, and we'll have a talk to Grannema. It'll be a queer thing if she cant [sic] give us a help somehow! She thinks mountains of you, as little as you are! (He holds Sally away from him and gazes at her rapturously) Big or little, Sally my darling, you're the full of my heart!

(Sally is unconsolated. She shakes her head.)

SALLY (despairingly) I'll ride to Assullas [sic] with you, if you like, but no one can help us! (She leans back, hopeless)

FLURRY Ah, never fear! Let you wait here – I'll have the pony saddled in five minutes-

(Exit FLURRY by hall door. SALLY stands up and watches him out of sight. Then, with a heavy sigh, seats herself in the high-backed chair. She is completely hidden from the stage. She has forgotten YEATES, and sits silent, gazing tragically into space. The ping of a bicycle bell is heard outside. YEATES puts down the book he was reading, and see Lady KNOX standing at the halldoor [sic]with her bicycle. With apprehensive glance at SALLY, he hurries to the door.

YEATES (speaking loudly so that SALLY may hear) How do you do, Lady Knox? Let me take your bicycle. (He so handles it that it impedes LADY KNOX, she stumbles up the steps into the hall and nearly falls.)

YEATES Oh, I beg your pardon! How clumsy I am! Do forgive me – I'm so sorry my wife's out, but do come in. –

(SALLY, clasping her hands, squeezes herself into the corner of the big chair. LADY KNOX cannot see her.)

LADY KNOX (Very red in the face, and very angry, outs her hat straight and tidies her rumpled costume) I've come to find Sally. Have you any idea where she is? I was told she was seen riding in this direction –

YEATES stammers, clears his throat, but before he achieves a reply, SALLY descends from chair, moves into view, leaning on it with one trembling hand.

SALLY I'm here, Mamma!

LADY KNOX surveys her grimly. Notes pocket handkerchief clutched in hand, hat pushed back, hair rough, etc.

LADY KNOX So I see. Where's your horse?

SALLY (faintly) He's just coming. I – I was going – I was just going on to see –

YEATES (interposing quickly) Philippa! Wasn't it, Miss Sally?

(During this conversation, which is taking place at front of stage, MRS. KNOX has entered by open hall door, unperceived. She advances to centre front, shakes hands with YEATES, makes formal bow to LADY KNOX, beams on SALLY. Takes the stage.

MRS. KNOX (to YEATES) Your hospitable open door invited me to come in, Major! If you'll pardon me for contradicting what I've just overheard, I may say that I've this moment been told, on very good authority, (she winks both eyes at SALLY) that I was to have been favoured with a visit from Miss Sally this afternoon!

LADY KNOX (very grim and dictatorial) That visit must be postponed! Sally, go and get your horse. You can ride home with me.

Mrs. KNOX (suavely) If our kind friend, Major Yeates, will permit it, it would give me very great pleasure if I might join what seems to be his little tea-party, and so enjoy a talk with Miss Sally here?

YEATES (nervous, but hospitable) Oh, c-c-certainly! – only d-d-delighted! I hope you'll all –

LADY KNOX (interrupting, a fierce eye on MRS. KNOX) "I should not think of inflicting myself unasked, upon Major Yeates!

(YEATES attempts a protest) Oh please, Lady Knox –

LADY KNOX (very emphatically) No thank you, Major Yeates! You are very kind, but I wish to go home at once! Come, Sally – (She moves towards Sally, who is standing by the chair, supporting herself by it. Lady Knox has a boot on one foot and a galoshe [sic] on the other. She is rather lame.)

SALLY (nervous but mutinous, moving towards MRS. KNOX) I can stay for a little longer, if you like, Mrs. Knox. (to her mother) I shall be home as soon as you are, Mamma, by going by the old road –

MRS. KNOX (very quickly, before LADY KNOX can speak) I shall be more than delighted if you will do so, my dear, and Flurry will be delighted to escort you home!

LADY KNOX (losing such control of temper as she still possessed) Sorry to disappoint you, but Sally is to return with me at once! In any case, an escort is quite unnecessary! (She turns her back on Mrs. Knox and says to YEATES, with a snort that is intended for a laugh) Really, the idea of an escort being required, is an old-fashioned absurdity that I did not expect to hear of again!

YEATES (nervously) Perhaps not, as a measure of – er – of protection, but it is pleasanter to have a companion, don't you think?

He is standing as a buffer between the two ladies, who address themselves exclusively to him, ignoring each other.)

LADY KNOX (ferociously) If the companion were of one's own class, possibly! But not otherwise!

MRS. KNOX (to YEATES) T'is a remarkable thing to hear a lady insinuate that her daughter is not of the same class as her own husband's cousin! It makes me wonder what are the reasons for such humility!

LADY KNOX (to YEATES, hotly) I think, Major Yeates, you will agree with me in thinking that the lowest twig of the lowest branch of the family tree need not necessarily be treated as an intimate! I prefer something a little further removed from the Mud!

MRS. KNOX (blandly) Well, Major, you're a man of the world. I wonder if you ever noticed that the higher up the tree – the social tree, or even the Family Tree – some people go, the easier it is to perceive the yellow clay on the soles of the boots! Or, possibly, of the galoshes! He! He! He! (She ends with a prolonged cackle and vigorous rubbing of her old beak.)

LADY KNOX (furiously) I've had enough of this! Dotage is no excuse for gratuitous impertinence! Sally, go at once and get your horse!

As she finishes speaking, FLURRY's voice is heard outside.

FLURRY Come on, Sally, the horses are ready –

He comes in on the words, and stops dead on seeing Lady Knox.

LADY KNOX (to FLURRY, very offensively) What do you mean? What horses are you speaking of? My daughter is to ride home with me!

FLURRY (firmly but not rudely) I beg your pardon, she's promised to ride with me. I'll see her home. Come on, Sally.

LADY KNOX (losing self-control, and snatching SALLY's arm) Over my dead body she shall ride with you! – and not otherwise!

MRS. KNOX (to YEATES, sniggering) That'd be asking too much of a jump of any horse!

LADY KNOX (to SALLY) How dare you promise to ride with him! A man no better than a common thief! A low horse-stealer! (She turns on FLURRY) Nothing shall induce me to let her ride with you! I forbid her to have anything to do with you! She shall come home at once with me!

FLURRY (with equal heat) A thief, am I? A low horse-stealer? Maybe I'll steal more than horses before I'm done!

He strides off, through the hall door. There is a crack of a whip. His voice is heard from outside, shouting Stand back, there! Mind yourself, you fool! There is a clatter of hoofs. Then a groom's voice, excitedly Woa! Woa! I can't hold him, Sir! Then FLURRY's furious voice, Then let him go!

A couple of cracks of a hunting whip follow. LADY KNOX, YEATES and old MRS. KNOX rush to doorway, while a horse's galloping hoofs are clearly heard.

SALLY is too much broken to move. MRS. KNOX (half back) claps her hands, and shrieks with laughter.

LADY KNOX, out of sight, thunders Who let him go?

Enter FLURRY. A hunting crop, with thong, is in his hand. He comes quickly up to SALLY.

FLURRY (wildly) That's settled it, anyhow! Your horse's bolted! He's away for his own stable!

SALLY (scared) Bolted? Why did he bolt? What has happened?

FLURRY He bolted because I hit him a couple of belts across his quarters that he won't forget in a hurry! Your mother wouldn't let you ride with me, my darling, but you shan't ride without me! You shall drive home with me, and let her ride her old bicycle by herself! I've bested her this time, and by God! I'll beat her again!

He catches SALLY to him and kisses her.

Old MRS. KNOX approaches, laughing and rubbing her hands, and triumphing openly over LADY KNOX. The latter has returned and is standing, petrified with rage and horror at seeing SALLY in FLURRY's arms.

CURTAIN

CURTAIN rising again discloses Lady K grasping SALLY, but FLURRY still holds one of her hands.

ACT III
Scene 1
Assullas Castle

Scene: The wide gravel sweep in front of Aussolas Castle hall door. Evening light, that deepens, as scene progresses, to moonlight. The front of castle, with high and broad flight of steps, is three-quarter view to audience. At end of Castle, L. near centre, back of stage, is an ivy-covered tower, detached by five or six feet, or width of a path, from Castle. Half the tower only, on the stage. A path leads to it and (apparently) encircles it, reappearing between tower and Castle. This path is an offset from the main avenue, which winds towards R. back. On back-cloth are trees, (possibly a glimpse of lake and mountain) and rising behind trees is a church spire. A group of dark trees forms right wing at about midway or the depth of the stage (vide Plan). Not far from hall-door steps, L. front, is MRS. KNOX's bath chair. The time is 7.30 p.m. There is good light and the moon is up. A few Chinese lanterns are hung up and are lighted.

Old MRS. KNOX is discovered on hall door steps. She descends, walks a few steps, looking down avenue. Enter FLURRY quickly from behind tower, L. He is in riding dress. MRS. KNOX turns, he hurries to meet her.

MRS. KNOX (angrily) High time for you to be arriving! Don't you know dinner's at a quarter to eight, and the Yeateses and your Uncle Eustace are here already! I'm ashamed keeping them waiting for you!

FLURRY (disregarding her) Has it come?

MRS. KNOX Has what come? What do you mean?

FLURRY The car with Sally and Mary Dunnigan, of course! What else'd I mean?

MRS. KNOX (indignantly) I know nothing about it! How can I know what I'm not told? I'm waiting all day to know what your plans are!

FLURRY And how could I tell you what I didn't know myself? I have as much settled and done this day as'd sicken an ass!

MRS. KNOX (mocking, putting up her mittened hands as ears) Hee haw! Hee haw! You're standing it well, my dear, all things considering! (laughs) Never mind that now, tell me what have you settled about Sally?

FLURRY (triumphantly) She's coming here to-night! – Sally is!

MRS. KNOX (interrupting) Heavenly Powers!

FLURRY (continuing) – And the license is all right, and I fixed it all up with Uncle Eustace this afternoon. He'll marry us the first thing tomorrow morning! He made no bones about it at all! He likes Lady Knox about as well as you do!

MRS. KNOX B' the light of Pharoah [sic], this is a word and a blow! One'd think Eustace was dumb as well as deaf! He never said a word to me of all this, and he's here twenty minutes waiting for his dinner.

FLURRY How could he say anything with the Yeateses there? I told him for his life to keep his mouth tight shut till I had all ready and Sally safe here!

MRS. KNOX (who is secretly delighted) Safe here indeed! Upon me honour I never knew your equal for impudence! Poor old Assullas transmogrified into Gretna Green! And may I ask you what's happening about her Ladyship? Is'nt she going to have a word in the matter?

FLURRY (with triumph) Not a word at all, good nor bad! We've squared that nicely! She has it all settled to send Sally to England the day after tomorrow, and on the head o' that, Sally got leave of her to go say goodbye to the Yeateses, and dine and sleep there ..."

MRS. KNOX But child alive! Did you forget the Yeateses are dining here – and the tenants' dance – and all?

FLURRY I didn't forget at all, but Lady Knox knows nothing of all that, nor the Yeateses know nothing about Sally either! It's Mary Dunnigan and Slipper who are running the whole show. Slipper's bringing her and Mary Dunnigan here on the sidecar – they'll be here any minute. You needn't floosther yourself! I have it all regulated as neat as a watch! To-morrow morning will see Sally and me spliced for good and all!

MRS. KNOX (slightly huffed by F's cocksure manner) I'm not in the habit of 'floosthering' myself about other people's arrangements, though I may reserve my own opinion of them! If I presumed to offer a suggestion to one so much younger than myself, I might say 'if t'were done, then it were well it were done quickly'! Moreover, I should look to the front gates – But I refrain!

She moves towards hall door and goes up steps and enters house. FLURRY remains where he is and lights a cigarette.

Enter from R. MRS. DUNNIGAN. She is dressed in sumptuous black. A beaded satin dolman, a plumed and jettied bonnet. A large, black-edged pocket-handkerchief, an umbrella. No gloves. She is carrying a large brown canvas suit-case. She advances cautiously towards FLURRY, looking left and right as she comes. FLURRY chucks away the cigarette and goes to meet her.

MRS. DUNNIGAN (in hoarse and resonant whisper) Masther Flurry! I'm here, Sir!"

FLURRY (eagerly, but with carefully controlled tone) Well done, Mary! You got away all right? Had you any trouble?

MRS. DUNNIGAN H'th then, I had me share! Didn't Bridgie Brickley come axing a seat on the car from me! 'T'is me brother's car is waiting below on the road for me, and four of his own daughthers on it this minyute!' says I – God forgive me the lie! Sure a pairson couldn't hardly live without they'd tell a lie sometimes! – 'An' how would I give you a seat?' says I. She was for follying me then to see who had I on the car –

FLURRY (breaking in) The devil she was! What did you say to her?

Mrs. DUNNIGAN (in scorn) Is it spake to that one? No! But what I done was dhrag her by the hair o' the head and throw her in the scullery!

FLURRY Quite right, Mary (Here a workman enters carrying lanterns. FLURRY instantly raises his voice and says loudly) And you brought one of your nieces along then, did you? Good!

MRS. DUNNIGAN (realising that workman has paused in his work, and is listening, also speaks loudly) I did Sir, and she with her head tied up in a shawl, and the mother's old cloak on her, for she havin' the toothache! 'It's at home in your bed you should be!' I says to her; 'Didn't meself have a toothache one time for three months with drivin' in the cold!' says I. 'Sure I was roaring like a Banshee with it!' says I, "I'd be holding me mouth over the steam o' the kittle and the clear, cold wather'd distil down out o' the tooth! – And that's what'll happen to yerself me gerr'll!" says I. (In pensive retrospect she adds) "And faith t'was throe for me. In the lather end the doctor pulled it for me. T'was a fine young tooth.

During this speech she moves slowly away from the lampman, who, though ostentatiously busy with the lamps, is obviously listening to her; FLURRY moves with her, realising the object of the recital.

FLURRY (cautiously) Bravo, Mary! Of course she's safe with the Mistress, back in the house now?

MRS. DUNNIGAN glances round, and speaks in sibilant whisper.

MRS. DUNNIGAN Why then, t'is what I done, I left her sitting up on the car below on th' avenya, back o'the rosydandherums, Sir. I wouldn't know what kit o' gerr'ls'd be in the kitchen here this night, an' they having' every pup in the place in a thrain at the back-doore!

FLURRY (hurriedly and sharply, to man with lamps) Danny! You needn't be in such a hell of a hurry hanging all those lights! Take the rest o' them back and quench them! And then run away down as quick as you can and lock the front gates – that's the Mistress's orders..."

Exit MAN. FLURRY turns on MRS. DUNNIGAN, and fires questions at her like pistol-shots.

FLURRY D'ye mean the big rhododendron on the front avenue? Who's with her? Was there anyone about?

MRS. DUNNIGAN (rather frightened and apologetic) No one at all, only meself, Sir, and Slipper, that dhrove the car – I'll run back to her now –

FLURRY No, stay here, I'll go myself.

Exit FLURRY at a run, R. As he disappears enter SLIPPER, round tower. His usual impudence is gone. His tail is between his legs. He comes close to MRS. DUNNIGAN before he speaks.

SLIPPER (in hoarse whisper) Did she come this way?

MRS. DUNNIGAN (in instant horror) What's that you say? My God! Have you lost her?

SLIPPER (very nervously) She heard a mothor screechin' back on the road, and she thought it was the mother that was lookin' for her, an' with that she lep' off the car and she legged it into the wood for fear would she be cot!

MRS. DUNNIGAN (bursting like a volcano) And you're standin' there, ye rotten, hungry, little crowliaun, tellin' me ye let her go away losin' in the woods in the night, and ne'er a one with her but herself! Ye're half a fool and the other half's not sensible! (her voice rises) She that I thought I had as safe as if she was in God's pocket, to be thrown out in the wild woods and maybe dhrowndin' in a boghole this minyute, or whipped away by some Bad Thing that's be runnin' in the dark! What good were ye that ye couldn't go with itself, if ye couldn't howld her? Answer me that!

As she denounces SLIPPER he retreats before her in a serpentine course, as though blown by successive gusts. She storms after him, as it we Mount Aetna [sic] in eruption.

SLIPPER (angry and terrified) How could I go with her? How could I leave Mr. Flurry's horses, an' he only half-broke?

Mrs. DUNNIGAN (Prestissimo) And why couldn't ye leave the horse? If it wasn't that ye had a head on ye the size of a bullawawn with the len'th o' drink, ye'd know all the horse 'd do 'd be walk away for himself to his own stable! (howls) O vo! Vo! My young lady that's lost to us! My lovely gerr'!

All this is uttered in one unchanging high note, and is delivered at highest practicable rate of speed. With another howl she turns again on SLIPPER.

MRS. DUNNIGAN And look at you, standin' there, lookin' at me as childish and continted aas anny owld dog! it's what I wish the divil would melt ye, the same as the froth'd melt off porther! Ah-ha! Wait till Mr. Flurry ketches ye! That's the gentleman that'll drink yer blood!

MRS. KNOX appears on hall-door steps.

MRS. KNOX (shrilly and angrily) What's all this noise? Who is this woman? (She descends steps. MRS. DUNNIGAN comes to meet her and curtsies) O it's you, Mary Dunnigan, is it? You've come all right, have you? Safe and sound, eh? That's all right. Run round to the kitchen now, like a good girl, and tell them to send in dinner at once. Mr. Flurry's come – I want to get dinner over before the people come –

MRS. DUNNIGAN (scared, suddenly regaining complete control of herself; in very small voice) I will Ma'am.

She hurries away round tower, taking suit-case with her. SLIPPER is sneaking after her when he is arrested by MRS. KNOX.

MRS. KNOX You there! I can't see who you are? What are you doing here?

SLIPPER (abjectly) I'm Gainey, your Honour Ma'am, waiting for Mr. Flurry I am, Ma'am. (with more courage, meaningly) I was dhrevin' his car for him this evening, Ma'am.

MRS. KNOX (scans his face. She has come half way down the steps) Ah, I remember you now. Wasn't it you that stole my colt? It was, to be sure! You're the man that is said to tell the truth now and again by mistake, aren't you? Well, be careful this evening, if you're asked any questions, that no such accident occurs!

SLIPPER (humbly) Yis Ma'am.

MRS. KNOX re-enters house. SLIPPER takes off his cap, extracts large pocket-handkerchief from its depths, and wipes his face and head, with every symptom of exhaustion.

SLIPPER Well, well! The Dowager's a terror, and Mr. Flurry's very wicked when he's vexed, but Patsey Dunnigan, my poor man, you're in Curranhilty Churchyard now, and if ye'll be said by me – an' I b'lieve ye will too! – ye'll stay there! If ye were in Hell itself, my poor Patsey, b'lieve me ye're betther off there! Divil such an ateing ever I got from woman! The dogs wouldn't pick me bones afther her! (He replaces handkerchief in cap, puts cap on. Trying to restore self-confidence by cocking it at its usual oblique angle, when enter FLURRY (R. back). He catches SLIPPER by coat collar and whirls him round.

FLURRY (furious) What have you done with the car? It's not on the avenue! What way did Miss – the lady you were driving – go?

SLIPPER (stammering with fright) I left the car safe in the yard, Sir – Mrs. Dunnigan's in the house, Sir – she knows – she can tell you –

FLURRY drops him and dashes up steps into Castle. Exit SLIPPER L. front, round end of Castle. As he goes he murmurs: "O Murdher! O murdher! I may as well go undher the sod! He'll kill me clear dead altogether!"

A motor horn sounds several times from back of stage R. It is not very loud, as though at some distance. Then silence for about a minute. Then from group of dark trees (wing R.) a small woman, wearing a countrywoman's hooded cloak, her head wrapped in a shawl, the hood of cloak over it, creeps hastily into view. She looks left and right. The horn sounds again. She shrinks quickly back into shadow of trees. After brief pause she again emerges, and has started, almost at a run, to cross the broad, moonlighted expanse, when a man's heavy footstep is heard from back, R. The woman hesitates, has gone too far to retreat, and creeps on, walking like a very old and infirm person. The man enters. He is a chauffeur; he passes the woman and goes up hall door steps. The woman follows very slowly, and sits down on step of bath-chair. The chauffeur glances at her, then knocks on the open door. DENIS comes to door, with a dinner napkin over his arm.

CHAUFFEUR It's a queer thing locking the gates so early! I had to leave her ladyship in the car below on the road outside, and to come in meself by the small gate! I'm sent up for Miss Knox! She's to come back in the car, now this minute, with her ladyship.

DENIS (surprised) Sure Miss Knox isn't here at all – only the Archdeacon and Major and Mrs. Yeates that's dining here –

CHAUFFEUR Then where is she at all? I left her at Major Yeates's meself, this afternoon. I had a message to do in town, and she got off at the back gate –

DENIS is swung aside by FLURRY.

FLURRY (genially) Hullo Norris! You come over for the Tenants' dance, have you? You're a bit early –

NORRIS No Sir, I've come up for Miss Sally, Sir. Her ladyship's waiting at the gate for her, Sir. I couldn't drive up; the gates were locked.

FLURRY We had to lock them to-night, so that the carts and horses would come up the back way and not cut up the whole place –

NORRIS But Miss Sally, Sir? Where is she? (confidentially) Her ladyship's mad altogether! She says she's to come away with her at once!

FLURRY But how can she come when she's at Shreelane?

NORRIS (still more confidentially) Mr. Flurry, sir, I tell ye now, that cock won't fight! We've been to Shreelane!

FLURRY Look here, Norris, I'll tell you the truth! I've only just come here myself, and I don't know from Adam where Miss Sally is! I wish to God I did! Couldn't you coax Lady Knox to go home, and tell her Mrs. Yeates will bring Miss Sally back after dinner?

He takes a note out of a picket-book and pushes it into Norris's hand.

NORRIS (dubious, shaking his head) Thank you, Mr Flurry, I'm obliged to you, Sir – (pockets note) but I dunno about the coaxing! Her ladyship's a fright altogether with the gout! Something cruel she is! (He prepares to go) I'll do what I can for you, Sir, and I'd lose me life for Miss Sally! If her ladyship asks to come up the back way, maybe I might contrive a puncture!

FLURRY Well whatever you do, for the Lord's sake don't be in a hurry about it – give us all the time you can –“

Exit NORRIS. FLURRY is perturbed. Listens, looks all round while NORRIS tramps away.

FLURRY (distractedly) What'll I do now? Of I knew what way to go look for her myself! As likely as not she's running bang into her mother and the motor this minute!

THE WOMAN (rising from step of bath-chair; in croaking voice) Ye neednt go far to find her, Sir!

FLURRY (fiercely, advancing towards woman) Who the devil are you? What business have you here?

The woman throws back her hood and shawl, catches at FLURRY's hand and says, in broken voice

O Flurry, darling, don't be cross to me! I'm frightened!

FLURRY drags her to him and twists her round, facing moonlight

FLURRY You! Sally! My darling! I might have known you wouldn't fail me! But it's all up. Did you hear what Norris said? Your mother's come after you! She'll be here any minute – we're dished!

SALLY clings to him. The dinner gong roars. MRS. KNOX appears on the steps.

MRS. KNOX Flurry! Who's that you've got there? Why, Sally, my jewel, is that you? That's a brave girl! Come in to your dinner now, the pair of you, it's ready.

FLURRY It's Sally right enough, but we're beaten, Ma'am! Her mother is after her, she'll be here in five minutes, or less, to fetch her away! We're done!

MRS. KNOX (instantly furious) What are you saying, you poltroon! Don't let me hear you talk like this! Beaten, are we? We'll soon see are we beaten! That's a word that's not in my dictionary!

She stands in tense thought. She is on the lowest step. YEATES, PHILIPPA, and the ARCHDEACON (a small old man, rather like his sister, Mrs. KNOX) crowd out of hall-door on to steps. PHILIPPA and YEATES in evening dress. MRS. KNOX sees them and turns to FLURRY and SALLY.

Mrs. K (excitedly) Upon me honour I have it! T's the only solution! Flurry! Listen to me! You have the license in your pocket! Away with you and Sally to the church this minute, and get yourselves married as fast as the knot can be tied! Lose no time talking, but be off, and you can get away to Dublin by the night mail before any one can stop you! (she turns on YEATES) Major, go you and give Sally away! Here's my ring, for fear of accidents! At all events it'll fit her better than the key of the church-door!

She gives ring to YEATES, who is aghast.

YEATES But Mrs. Knox – I really cannot do this – it's out of the question – impossible!

PHILIPPA (with enthusiasm, interrupting) Yes, yes, Mrs. Knox! Splendid! Of course he will, and I'll be bridesmaid! Sinclair! how silly you are!

During this conversation FLURRY is whispering eagerly to SALLY. Mrs. Knox now turns on the ARCHDEACON, who is deaf and has an ear-trumpet. She screams into it.

MRS. KNOX Off with you now, Eustace, as fast as your old legs will carry you! You're no brother of mine if you desert the young people now! If you could marry them to-morrow morning, you can just as well marry them to-night! Don't talk to me! Away with you all!

She drives them, like fowl, before her.

ARCHDEACON (protesting) But Eliza! – but Eliza! It isn't decent – such haste – what does it mean?

Mrs. KNOX It means, my dear, that they're marrying in haste so that they'll have plenty of leisure afterwards to repent in! He! He! He! Come now, no more talking! 'Hecate calls! Anon, anon!'

She has driven them all off the stage R. in the direction of the church, when she calls after them. FLURRY runs back.

MRS. KNOX Flurry, make them ring the bell when the deed is done! I'll be griddling till I hear it!

She claws FLURRY to her and kisses him.
She is obviously moved and excited, but her courage holds fast.

MRS. KNOX Don't be frightened, Tony m'dear! 'I, with two more to help me' (she waves at SLIPPER and DENIS) 'will hold the foe in play!' But be as quick as you can for God's sake!

Exit FLURRY running. MRS. KNOX walks slowly to bath-chair and seats herself in it.

MRS. KNOX Phew! I'll thank God when all's safely over! Such a to-do about a lover and his lass! They say marriages are made in Heaven, but I'm taking the worst of the work off their hands up there in this affair at all events! Please the pigs it won't be botched before the deed is done! (She pulls out of her belt a little gold watch on a long gold chain and looks at it) Let's see what's o'clock? If I can keep her ladyship in play for ten minutes it should do the job, if only they can put spurs to Eustace! – This is counting time by heart-throbs, indeed!

Here SLIPPER's voice is heard off.

SLIPPER This way, my lady, would ye be plazed [sic] to take my arm –

MRS. KNOX sits erect, listening. LADY KNOX's voice is heard in angry reply.

LADY KNOX Don't touch me! I don't want your help!

MRS. KNOX 'By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes!'

She gets out of chair, and stands, leaning on her stick. Enter LADY KNOX. She is very lame. One foot is wrapped up, and in a large, red bedroom slipper, the other is in a stout laced boot. She has a stick. She comes on as rapidly as she can, and halts, facing MRS. KNOX. SLIPPER and DENIS remain near, interested spectators of scene. N.B. MRS. KNOX speaks slowly and sententiously. LADY KNOX fast and furious.

LADY KNOX (ferociously) I want my daughter! I have been to the Yeates's to fetch her, and I was told that they were here, and of course she is with them.

MRS. KNOX (blandly) I am having a little gathering of my tenants here to-night, and Major and Mrs. Yeates are honouring us with their presence –

LADY KNOX (interrupting, roughly) It's a matter of indifference to me what is going on here! I want my daughter. I insist on knowing where she is!

MRS. KNOX I'm afraid that's more than I can tell your ladyship. You know they say Love and a Cough can't be hid, but for my part I wouldn't give a snap o' me fingers for any pair of lovers that couldn't keep out of sight of their chaperons when they wanted to!

LADY KNOX What's love or lovers got to say to it? I didn't come here to discuss abstractions! Be good enough to answer my question.

MRS. KNOX Unfortunately, that's just what I'm not able to do! My guests have forsaken me, and are, I believe, gone to see 'how sweet the moonlight sleeps on younder' – lake! – if my old friend Mr Shakespeare will pardon a mis-quotation!

LADY KNOX What do you mean? Is Sally with them? Which way have they gone?

MRS. KNOX (archly) Ah! Where there's a will there's always a way! But two young people are apt to keep it to themselves when once they've found it! He! He! He!

LADY K (wildly) What young people are you talking about? Do you mean to say that your good-for-nothing grandson has gone off with my daughter?

MRS. KNOX Let me assure your ladyship that your daughter is safely guarded by Church and State! My brother, the Archdeacon, and Major Yeates, the Resident Magistrate, are both of the party! And as to the young gentleman whom your ladyship is pleased to call my 'good-for-nothing grandson', I may tell you that if he marries in accordance with my wishes, he will be good for as much as any young man in the county, or possibly even more! I'm not so poor that I couldn't start him comfortably if I took a fancy to his wife! (She looks at her watch, then begins again) But that's the use of talking? Your ladyship has forbidden the match I fancied, and that's all about it! Perhaps you would like to follow the party to the lakeside? Would you allow me to put my bath-chair at your disposal? I see that our common enemy, the gout, has made a victim of you! – Here, Denis, Gainey! ... bring my chair here for Lady Knox.

During this speech several countrypeople [sic] have come on the stage, L. They approach SLIPPER. He points to the church, and they hurry away, R.

SLIPPER (to MRS. KNOX) I'm coming, your Honour Ma'am!

DENIS has gone to the chair and is arranging the apron and cushions etc. At this moment MRS. DUNNIGAN rushes down the hall door steps. She sees only SLIPPER and shouts to him.

MRS. DUNNIGAN Slipper! Slipper! Will I be late for the wedding? Why wasn't I told? My darling boy! My heart's crown!

She dashes onwards and exits in direction of church.

LADY KNOX (staggering and gasping) What's this? What wedding? O...! I see it all now! ... I may still be in time! (She wheels round in a frenzy, and is beginning to hobble in pursuit of MRS. DUNNIGAN when MRS. KNOX snatches at her arm and holds her.)

MRS. KNOX Get into the chair, my dear! Quick! You're not able to walk! They'll have you at the church in a jiffy! Help her ladyship, Denis!

While DENIS does this, MRS. KNOX beckons to SLIPPER, whispers emphatically in his ear, making gestures that sufficiently explain subsequent proceedings. He takes the

steering handle. DENIS pushes at the back. They start at a trot, but instead of talking the road to the church, they diverge to their right.

LADY KNOX (loudly) Where are you going? You're making a mistake!

SLIPPER This is the near way, my lady!

He and Denis quicken up and exit behind the tower. They soon reappear, having gone round it, and return to main avenue. As they return LADY KNOX is vociferating 'Stop! Stop! Let me out!'

SLIPPER (keeping up the pace, yells) Sit aisy, Ma'am, and if we can't be aisy, be as aisy as ye can! Now then Dinnis! We'll make a better shot this time!

They come into main avenue, describing a figure of eight, and start again for the tower.

MRS. KNOX (watch in hand, shrieks) Be careful! Don't upset her ladyship! Try again! If you'll give your consent, Lady Knox, my dear, I'll give the young people a thousand a year!

Faster than before the bath chair is whirled away round the tower. MRS. KNOX falls into a fit of laughter, and begins to sing, in a cracked voice,

MRS. KNOX Here we go round the mulberry bush,
The mulberry bush, the mulberry bush!
Here we go round the mulberry bush!
All of a Wed-densday [sic] evening!

She picks up her petticoats and dances a step or two as she sings. Then she looks again at her watch, and listens eagerly for the church bell. As the bath-chair returns LADY KNOX is trying in vain to hit SLIPPER with her walking-stick.

LADY KNOX Stop! Stop! Let me out! How dare you, you blackguards! You horrible old woman! I'll prosecute you! You shall go to prison for this!

MRS. KNOX (agitatedly, listening for church-bell) What's delaying them? What's delaying them? It's that miserable old Eustace, that's no more use than a blue-bottle! (as the bath-chair approaches her she screams) Lady Knox! I'll make it two thousand - !

At this moment, just before the bath-chair is turned out of the main avenue for the third time, the church-bell starts a wild and rapid peal.

MRS. KNOX (flinging up her arms) Victory! Victory! And I was just going to make it Three Thousand -! (she calls to chair-men) Stop! Stop! That'll do! They're Man and wife now! Huzzay! Huzzay! (She waves her cane round her head.)

Lady KNOX has fallen back in chair, overcome.

MRS. KNOX's cheers are repeated from back of stage.

Enter MRS. DUNNIGAN, prancing, cheering and waving pocket-handkerchief, with her is a fiddler, playing 'Haste to the Wedding'. They are followed by an outside car, with NORRIS, and other men, between the shafts, pulling, and others pushing. FLURRY and SALLY are seated on one side. YEATES, PHILIPPA, the ARCHDEACON, and groups of

tenants follow. SALLY and FLURRY get off the car and go up to LADY KNOX, who is still seated in bath-chair, too spent to stir. SALLY goes up to her and takes her hand, holding FLURRY's hand, and dragging him after.

SALLY Mamma! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Forgive us! Flurry! Tell her you're sorry!

FLURRY (beaming) Well, I wouldn't like to tell a lie, but I'll promise never to do it again!

SALLY kisses her mother and puts FLURRY's hand in hers. LADY KNOX looks wildly from one to the other.

MRS. KNOX Your ladyship had better lose no time in forgiving the Happy Pair, or they'll miss the Dublin train, and that would never do! I wouldn't wish people should have it to say that there was anything unusual or irregular about my grandson FLURRY's WEDDING!

CURTAIN