

NIGHT RIDE

By PHILIP F. ROONEY.

CHAPTER I.

It was now so long since that few remembered how it began. It had been a small thing, more than likely: the price of a horse that had turned out to be a rogue; the death of a dog caught red-fanged at the harrying of sheep; stinging words coined in the heat of fair-day whiskey.

And the succeeding years had added the bitterness of petty squabbles—wrangles over badly maintained boundaries, a dragging right-of-way lawsuit, the souring acid of imagined wrongs. Not even James O'Byrne clearly remembered all the details of the feud; he only knew that he was an O'Byrne of Meedin Hill, and that between him and the Hogan's of Castlelost was bitter and ancient enmity.

Coat collar upturned against the keen nip of the easterly wind, the leaf of his stiff hat drawn forward over his lean, frosted face, he swung loose-footed down the narrow byroad.

"I should about meet her at the cross if she doesn't take it into her head to cut back by the fields from Tullaghans-town," he said, an unexpected smile softening the hardness of his eyes and mouth as a gleam of wintry sun mellows the stiff outlines of frost-bound trees.

Out of the by-road he came smartly, and stopped on the crown of the ringing highway.

"Hello! If it isn't Dad." The girl on the upstanding bay checked her mount's tired walk and smiled down at him. "Don't tell me you've come all this way just to meet me."

There was more than a hint of nervous expectancy in her hurried voice, and a lack of ease in the fluttering of her gloved hand to the coil of dull-gold hair that had escaped from under her hat.

"We'd a wonderful day, simply wonderful." Her wide, dark blue eyes were on him uneasily. "The biggest meet this year; a glorious run from Raheen out to Carronmore and across by Bellewstown."

"And Sheila handled that big mare of yours like an old hand, sir." Barry Hogan stroked his fretting hunter to quietness, and joined easily in the conversation.

"When I saw her ride for the big double by Raheen, I can tell you my heart stood in my mouth; but she made the old mare jump like a cat an' kept her there right to the kill."

For a tense moment O'Byrne did not reply; his eyes went contemptuously from the uneasy roan to the slim, dark youngster in the saddle.

"I'm beholden to you, Mister Hogan." His voice was coldly inimical. "I'm thankful to ye, to be sure, for your fine opinion of my daughter and of my horse; but have ye know that when I want the praise of a Hogan from Castlelost I'll ask for it. Good day to you, mister."

"Dad, please!"

"Sheila." Barry Hogan's easy voice soothingly smothered the girl's angry protest; his dark, steady eyes caught her's warningly; beyond a hardening of the cheek muscles in his tanned face he showed no sign that he had heard the older man's insult. "Get someone to have a look at the mare's pastern tonight, and if you want any advice just, ask me."

There was the ghost of a smile on his lips as he gave the roan its head, and clattered down the road, a smile that O'Byrne savagely sensed without seeing.

"He's a Hogan, Sheila, an' isn't that enough for you." So, he answered the girl's protests as he strode down the homeward road, the mare's rein loosely across his arm, his step crisp and even, his trim back stiffly firm for all his five and fifty years. "It'd be hard for me to take kindly to the sight of a Hogan and a daughter of mine an' them as thick as two thieves. Wouldn't it, now?"

Sheila swayed easily in the saddle and leaned over to touch his squared shoulder. She was not smiling now, and the rising colour in her sweet face owed little to the thundering excitement of the hunt.

"Barry's a decent lad," she protested, "and even if he is a Hogan, you can't expect me not to be friends with him just because you didn't pull well with his poor father. God rest him."

They had reached the gateway of the long, rambling farmhouse, and as he helped his daughter out of the saddle,

O'Byrne's hand tightened affectionately over her slim fingers.

"You're a plucky girl to talk like that to your old father," his weathered face creased in a warm smile. "But I know best, Sheila; I know best."

Erect and slim she faced him in the cobbled yard-way, straightly meeting his anxious eyes, her riding whip beating out an uneasy tattoo against her riding boots.

"Do you, dad?" she asked slowly, very slowly; and there was a note of doubt in her voice.

"Of course I do, girleen. Run in now, you must be tired out." He bent down stiffly and ran a searching hand down the mare's leg. "I'll look after Grania for you just as well as any of the great horsemen from Castlelost."

When he had seen the mare safely stabled, O'Byrne turned back to the house. In the darkened, hallway, as he paused to light his pipe, a husky voice spoke out of the shadows.

"There's a visitor waiting for you in the big room, Mr. O'Byrne." Danny Magennis, the yard man, came down the unlit passage. "Mr. Roger Derham of Durhamstown it is; an' if I was in your boots I'd be off in to him before he's able to see the bottom of yer whiskey bottle. An' be the pipers of Moses that won't take the same gentleman too long."

O'Byrne pushed past to the living room and flung open the door. In the deep armchair by the glowing wood fire, a slight, youngish-old man in mud-spattered riding clothes sprawled lazily. At his elbow stood an almost empty bottle and a glass liberally filled.

"Good-night to ye, Derham." O'Byrne eyed his unexpected guest coldly. "I didn't know you were here."

"I made myself at home." The flush of liquor showed dully in Derham's pallid, peaked face; a lock of muddy-fair hair fell damply across his narrow forehead. "Magennis found the whiskey for me, an' I helped myself to a drink—or two."

O'Byrne pulled up a chair to the fire and sat down heavily.

"About that field," he began bluntly. "Did you make up your mind to sell?"

Into Derham's close-set, faded eyes came a gleam of malicious amusement.

"I'm selling all right." He tilted his glass and half-emptied it. "It's out of the way for me, and I might as well sell if I get a good price. But you're not the only buyer in the market."

"The field is right between your farm and young Hogan's, an' he might give me a better price for it; it was his father's field, and the young lad might spring a good price for the sake of getting it back."

The ruse worked even better than Roger Derham had dared to hope. Angry colour flared sullenly in James O'Byrne's face; his firm lips hardened to a thin, dour line.

"I'll buy," his voice snapped like a whip lash. "The field suits me, an' I'll buy it. We'll look over it tomorrow morning, and I'll offer you a fair price."

CHAPTER II.

There was, Barry Hogan thought, an air of emptiness about the house this morning. Back of it, the wide fields stretched away cold and grey-green with the dour bleakness of late winter. The solid lines of the house stood out harsh and clear against the leafless wintry trees. The shrill barking of the young terrier pup in the cobbled yard cut shrilly across the still frosty silence.

"Here, young fellow!" Barry's fingers teased the dog's ears; his firm mouth twisted in a kindly smile. "What are you kicking up the row about? Feeling lonely, are you?"

He lifted the dog and swung it into the crook of his arm.

"You're a fine lad, Bran." His fingers slid down the pup's fine mask, and pinched the firm, straight legs.

"You'll make a fine present for a fine little lady."

As he spoke, there was before him a picture of Sheila O'Byrne, as he had last seen her; slim and graceful in the saddle of the big hunter; her eyes starry with excitement, her face flushed against the dead gold of her hair.

The dog still in the fold of his arm, he crossed the yard to the stable door, and in five minutes he appeared again, leading a big, powerfully boned roan gelding ready and saddled.

He was swinging into the saddle when his house-keeper hailed him from the kitchen door.

"Will you be away long, Master Barry," she asked. Arms akimbo, she stood in the doorway, her broad, middle-

aged face creased with disapproval. "With all the men away in the lower fields, it does be powerful lonely on a body to be in this house all on their own." She wielded her head determinedly. "I said it before, an I'm saying it again, that there's a mistress wanting in this house."

Barry's deep laugh had a happy ring.

"Hannah, you're my heart of corn." He smiled down at her. "With all the advice you're so fond of giving me that's the best I got yet—and I'm going to take it."

He was laughing softly to himself as he broke the gelding to a smooth canter down the narrow sunken road, and in his voice, as he called the dog sharply to heel, was a lilt of happiness.

After a moment's indecision he decided to turn right towards Bellewstown, and his choice was lucky, for on the rutted road that skirted Tullaghanstown bog he overtook Sheila returning from a morning canter.

"Good morning to you, lonely lady." Barry smiled gaily as he ranged alongside, the drum of his horse's hooves deadened in the peaty softness of the road. "You look as lonely as a snipe, all on your lee lone, as Hannah says."

Sheila reined in her mount, and gave back his smile warmly.

"And you look as lazy as—as Barry Hogan," she countered. "And could anyone look lazier than that? Haven't you any work at all to do, lazybones'?"

"Plenty. But this morning I'm out to do good turns to lonely folk instead."

Smiling, he sat easy in his saddle, the clean lines of his shoulder relaxed under the rough tweed of his coat; his thick, black curls bare to the nipping wintry wind.

"I brought you a little present."

Bright-eyed, Sheila watched him as he swung lightly to the ground and lifted the pup that had trotted up, tongue a-loll.

"He's a clean legged little lad is Bran, Sheila; with a good drop of blood in him. His dam won half a dozen show prizes, and his father had more fight in him than a tinker's lurcher."

"Thanks, Barry; thanks indeed." Sheila cradled the pup against the pommel of her saddle, and let his pink tongue flicker over her ungloved hand. "We'll be great friends—Bran and I."

As she spoke, a snipe rocketted suddenly from the verge of the bog, and Bran exploded into excited action. Yapping shrilly, he pulled clear of Shelia's hands, and launched himself on to the roadway. His hind paws slashed across the horse's neck; and quickly, so quickly that Shelia had no more than time to snatch at the looped reins, her mount was streaking down the road in a bolting, terrified gallop.

"Run him out. Barry screamed the words as he sprang to his own mount. "Ride the head off him! Don't try to check!"

He spoke too late. As his big roan fencer stretched out in a tearing gallop after the runaway, Shelia bore heavily on the reins. Her mount checked, spun and gathered with the perfect ease of long practice on the hunting field, and took the low hedge that guarded the bog, in a long, raking jump.

"She's done." Barry Hogan's eyes narrowed to mere slits; the line of his mouth hardened to iron. "One slip, and she's gone."

There was one bare chance, and he took it. His heels rapped sharply in his horse's ribs as they rose to the fence, and drove forward slant-wise in a desperate endeavour to cut across the runaway's path.

A bog-hole, water-filled—more dangerous than the water jump of Aintree—showed before them, was passed in a crisp, breath-taking leap. Twice on the crumbling, treacherous peat they checked at a low turf-clamp, and as the big fencer rose gamely to the unaccustomed obstacles, Barry Hogan felt hope swell within him.

Now they were clear of the worked peat, and before them stretched the grass-coated, reclaimed bog-land. Hands down, heels down, every nerve alert, Barry was riding all out. Foot by foot he was overtaking the runaway; now they were almost level, and the drum of hooves rolled like distant thunder over the silent bog. Now they were level, racing neck and neck; the lathered runaway, the driving roan.

"Hold tight for the jolt." Barry spat the words out of the corner of his mouth. "Hands and knees, and use your weight."

He gathered in his own reins, and crouched forward in the saddle. To a split second he judged the time; his fingers

locked desperately on the runaway's head-straps; the two horses slid together to a sliding, plunging halt.

For a moment both Barry and Shelia sat silent on the blown, foundered horses. When Barry spoke again, his voice was sharp and forced.

"I'm sorry, Shelia." His face was haggard. "It was my fault; mine and that darned dog's."

They brought the horses back at a walk to the road, and as they went slowly across the churned-up turf, Shelia turned in the saddle.

"Please don't say that, Barry." The colour was coming back to her white face, the fear was leaving her eyes. "How can you say it." She paused, and then added simply: "You saved my life."

Reaching the road-way, they dismounted to allow the horses a breathing space for recovery, and Shelia laughed shakily.

"I shouldn't be allowed out alone, Barry." She smiled up at him. "I need a keeper."

"Barry Hogan was not smiling now. His eyes were very serious, his voice deeply grave.

"You need someone to mind you, Shelia," he said softly; "and I'm willing and anxious to mind you now and always. May I be the one, Shelia?"

The delicate colour flared into Sheila O'Byrne's face, her hand fluttered nervously to her hair, and her eyes were very soft and gentle.

"I won't answer that just now, Barry." She looped the reins over her arm. "You must give me time to think it over. And now I'll walk home—alone, please, Barry." She smiled suddenly. "Bran has deserted me already; he must have run home to your place."

"It's a danged shame to let land run waste like this, so it is." James O'Byrne halted squarely on the headland of the broad, sweeping field, and scowled at Roger Derham. "What kind of a farmer do ye call yerself at all, at all. Briars an' thistles an' the dickens knows what else."

Roger Derham laughed back easily at the complaining man. Very trim and dapper he looked in the fine grey tweeds that set off so well his trim slightness. He was handsome, too; but with a surface good looks that did not stand close examination. The dragged lines that marked his face, too plainly told of ill-spent years; the weakness of his chin gave too patent evidence of slackness of character; and in the close-set nearness of eyes, and the soft red fulness of underlip there was too little of manliness.

"It'll be in the hands of a good farmer soon," he countered. "If you think the price too high, young Hogan won't."

"Young Hogan 'll never set his foot on this land, Derham." O'Byrne's voice crackled like a whip. "The price is high, but I'm no pauper."

Roger Derham nodded slowly. The price he had asked for the field had been ridiculously high, and the surprise he felt at O'Byrne's ready acceptance of it helped to harden in his mind a half-formed idea that had been there these many days.

"You don't like Hogan much, O'Byrne."

Derham was thinking swiftly, and scarcely heeded O'Byrne's harsh reply. The man who would pay so heavily to satisfy a personal spite, he reasoned, would not chaffer and bargain about his daughter's dowry. And Shelia O'Byrne was a nice girl. Derham's eyes narrowed in an effort of concentration. A pretty girl and a handsome dowry—that about summed up what he wanted. Of late he had been taking more out of Durhamstown than he had been putting into it.

"I didn't know you hated him like that." Derham's eyes were keenly intent on O'Byrne's face. "To tell you nothing but the truth, man, I wouldn't have believed it only you say it yourself."

He fumbled for his cigarette case, found and lit a cigarette.

"You see, O'Byrne," he went on with elaborate carelessness; "like everyone else, when I saw young Hogan and your daughter so very much together, I thought you were all good friends. Sure, the whole countryside thinks that there's the making of a match between them."

O'Byrne's face darkened with anger.

"A match, is it? A match between my daughter and that—that . . ."

"I'm glad I was wrong," Derham cut in smoothly. He was smiling faintly as he knocked the ashes off his cigarette. "I'm glad there's no truth in that. Shelia is too fine a girl to be thrown away on a young whipper-snapper like Hogan."

He dropped his cigarette and trod it underfoot. Arms folded, he stood squarely before the older man, and now in his voice was a deep gravity of tone that would have passed for sincerity with a wiser and less prejudiced man than James O'Byrne.

"I'm very glad," he went on slowly; "very glad. I've known Shelia many a day now, and it's in my head this long time back that the only girl I'd ask to come as my wife to Durhamstown 'ud be Sheila O'Byrne."

He silenced O'Byrne's attempted interruption, and went on evenly:

"Of course, Sheila knows nothing about this; I don't play Hogan's trick of trying to sweep a young, inexperienced girl off her feet." His voice was now a nice blend of indignation and straightforwardness. "I did what any decent man would do, I came to you first. I'm asking you now, James O'Byrne, for your consent to my marriage to Shelia—if she'll have me."

He paused expectantly, and when O'Byrne did not immediately reply, added: "There's another thing: Shelia is young, an' this Hogan fellow has an oily tongue an' a bit of a way with him; so if you give your consent, I'll be expecting you to talk some of the foolishness out of the little girl's head, and show her what's the right thing for her to do."

Taken unaware, O'Byrne stood silent; the very suddenness of the proposal bewildered him. All the ingrained caution of long experience prompted him to shelve the question—to play for time.

"It's a big matter, Derham; a big matter."

He was staring down the field, and his eye fell on a little terrier pup trotting up the grassy slope. Mechanically, scarcely heeding what he did, he snapped his fingers, and Bran, homeward-bound after an eventful run on the bogland, trotted up.

Tail wagging, brown eyes trustfully on the two men, the pup drew nearer. Derham moved impatiently, and Bran, sensing a game, jumped; his muddy paws raked along Derham's trousers, leaving a dirty stain.

"You dirty little mongrel." Derham stepped back. His impatience at James O'Byrne's silence suddenly flared out in stark, ugly temper. Twice, three times his foot crashed into the pup's ribs with brutal, killing force. "You filthy little brute," his voice rose to harsh shrillness. "Take that!" Over the shrill scream of Derham's voice, James O'Byrne suddenly heard the urgent clatter of horse's hooves behind them, and, turned in time to see Barry Hogan come flying over the low hedge and thunder down the field.

"Easy there, Derham."

In a single, lithe movement, Barry was out of the saddle and standing toe to toe with Roger Derham. One glance at the pup told him he had come too late, and a cold, destroying anger swept over him, draining the colour from his face, making iron of the firm line of his mouth, setting alight a frozen gleam in his eyes.

"You did this thing, Derham." His voice was very low and had the chill of frost in it. "Why?" The question snapped like a crackling lash.

It was too late now for words, and Roger Derham knew it. What weakness was in him was not physical cowardice, and he did now the only thing left for him to do.

For a second he balanced on the balls of his feet as a fighter stands; then, arms aswing, he drove forward at Hogan.

"You asked for it, Hogan," he grated, "and you'll get it."

Barry Hogan knew in that first enraged moment that he would have to fight as he never fought before to hold Derham. The advantage of weight was slightly with him, but Derham had dropped easily into the fighter's crouch that bespoke the trained and experienced boxer.

In the dead silence, Barry could hear the shuffling of shoes on short grass as they circled cautiously; warily they sparred, Derham's sleek, fair head sheltered in a curve of tweed-clad shoulder. Then came the "Slap Tap" of long-distance punches.

Then, suddenly, Barry exploded into swift action, arms swinging, he smashed through Derham's guard.

The whirling moment's crash of in-fighting brought back his failing confidence.

"That's the idea." His short-arm jabs thudded home in Derham's ribs, breaking the smothering clinch. "I've got to fight him! Fight him right off his feet."

They pushed apart, and now Derham was watching his opponent, boring cautiously, avoiding the punishing

rushes, sending in punches with saving deliberation.

A full five minutes had passed, and Derham was winning easily. Barry's swollen lips hurt fiercely, his eyes smarted under the trickle of blood that ran into them. Over the low drumming in his ears, he heard James O'Byrne's harsh, delighted voice.

"That's it, Derham; wade into him."

But Derham was not to be hurried.

Taut as a strong wire, he danced out of reach of Barry's driving left, jiggling a second on his toes, he grinned ever so slightly. And in that unconcentrated split second, Barry jumped. The long, raking punch came straight from the knee to snap cleanly home on Derham's jaw.

The anger went out of Barry Hogan as he stumbled back and watched Derham sprawl heavily on the sparse grass.

"I'm sorry, sir." He turned to James O'Byrne. "I'm sorry this had to happen."

"Get off my land." There was triumph in O'Byrne's voice as he noticed Hogan's surprise. "Yes; it's my land now, and I'm telling you to get off it."

Slowly, Barry picked up the suffering, dying pup. As Bran's tongue licked at his hand, his voice hardened.

"Derham deserved what he got." He jerked his head in the direction of Roger Derham who was scrambling painfully to his feet. "Any man doing what he did, deserved it."

James O'Byrne turned slowly. He spoke to Barry Hogan, but his words were a direct answer to the question Roger Derham had asked him fifteen minutes before.

"Be careful of what you're saying, Mister Hogan." The words came slowly, unevenly. "Remember when you're speaking of Roger Derham that he's the man who is going to marry my daughter, Sheila."

CHAPTER III.

The big living-room was silent save for the sullen splutter of the big wood fire and the sharp tap of wood on iron, as James O'Byrne knocked out his pipe against the grate.

"Did ye go for a long walk, Sheila?" He glanced back over his shoulder. "I was expecting you this hour past."

Slowly Shelia pulled off her gloves, and crossed to the fireplace. Her forehead was puckered in tiny wrinkles of thought, her eyes were gravely steady.

"I met Roger Derham on the road beyond Durhamstown," she said with slow directness; "and he asked me to marry him. Why didn't you tell me that he had spoken to you, dad?"

All the doubts and misgivings that had assailed him since the previous evening now came back with fresh force to James O'Byrne. He had passed his word to Derham in a moment of spiteful temper, and by now he doubted the wisdom of his action.

"What answer did you give him?" His voice shook as he evaded the girl's direct question. "What did ye say to him?"

"What could I say?" Sheila's toe tapped nervously on the hearthstone. "What would I say but 'no' to such a good-for-nothing scamp."

She stood squarely before her father, her eyes steady upon him.

"Last night Roger Derham and Barry Hogan fought; did they fight about me?"

The direct question took her father of his guard; he fumbled at his pipe, evading her eyes.

"No, Shelia, no; 'twas nothing like that. It's how Hogan was trespassing," he lied, "and he had words with Derham. There was always bad blood between them, so there was; and they came to blows."

He pushed on sensing an opportunity for which he had long waited.

"I want to talk to you about young Hogan,' Shelia. Ye're too much together, so ye are; an' people are talking, saying that there's the making of a match between ye. Is that true, I ask you? Is it true?"

Shelia stepped away from the fireplace. Faintly, a fine scarlet glowed along the oval of her cheek, her soft lips were pressed to a thin red line.

"Please, dad," she pleaded, "don't make things too hard for me. I'm going out now where I'll have room and time to think. When I come back I'll answer your question."

And before her father could speak again, she had passed out of the house and turned down the road into the gathering darkness of the wintry evening.

At the gate of the big ten-acre pasture she met Barry Hogan. Walking slowly across the rutted path, she halted before him.

"You fought with Roger Derham last night, Barry, she said plainly; "was that fight about me?"

As plainly, Barry answered her:

"No, Sheila; it was not."

"I'm glad; very glad."

The dusk was gathering very quickly, and her face was no more than a dim, pale oval in the deepening twilight. "Last night, Barry, you asked me to marry you." Her voice was very low and very even. "Tonight I'm giving you my answer: I will."

"But Derham—"

"We will forget Roger Derham, Barry." Her voice rang clear and true. "We will forget Roger Derham altogether. But there is something else."

She leaned back against the massive pier of the gate, and looked up into Hogan's face.

"Father dislikes you, Barry; he dislikes you very, very much. And my father is becoming an old man—hard and set in his opinions as old men are, and he would never consent to our marrying."

Her hand fluttered to the boy's arm, stilling his muttered protest.

"No, Barry, dear; I'll never marry without my father's free consent. But this I promise you, dear: that I'll wait for you until we do get his consent—as we will, some day."

There was a song in her heart as she tramped down the homeward road, and a sparkle of spirited life in her eyes as she stood before her father in the cheery, lamp-lit room.

"I'll not marry Roger Derham, father," she told him firmly; "and I know that you'll never force me against my will. About Barry Hogan—" She paused. "I promise you this, dad: I'll never marry without your consent. I'll never marry the man who wouldn't be welcome inside my father's door."

Christmas was gone, and the dark days of winter were lengthening to welcome the spring. Already there was a keen freshness in the air and a promise of mildness to come.

In the house at Meedin Hill there was an unspoken understanding that Roger Derham's name should not be mentioned; and James O'Byrne, content that Barry Hogan had no chance of becoming his son-in-law, did not press Derham's suit on Shelia.

But with the reassuring memory of his daughter's promise, and uneasy remembrance of her troubled voice rankled freshly in O'Byrne's mind. Striding down the length of his fertile fields, examining the cropped strength of his stiff fences, waiting in the warm barn while the milk hissed smoking into the pail, he would recall with a glow of secret pride the soft affection of her eyes as she had given him her promise; then, with the chill hardness of sudden hail blotting out the sparse winter sun, he would hear again the marked hesitation of her young voice.

And at such a time, if he was alone in the quietness of the fields, his fine drawn face would frost over with anger, and something of the dark coldness of ice would come into his hard grey eyes as they sought the long, dim lines of Hogan's house, nestling among the trees on the gentle-rise at Castlelost.

"Be hanged to you, Hogan." Now there would be a hard uneven edge to the soft drawl of his voice. "Breed, seed an' generation of you was rotten, but I have you now. There's only one of yer rotten lot left, an' he'll get no welcome inside James O'Byrne's door."

But his boast lacked certainty, and there was a faint, uneasy questioning in his eyes as he watched his daughter quietly busy about the house. Humming softly at her work in the long, lamp-lit evenings, the bronze cap of her hair a gleaming, shadowed gold; there was a little of his own dogged obstinacy in the pretty determination of her softly pressed mouth.

She had firmness, too, as when her slim fingers steadied a too-spirited Grania and brought the lively bay to a decorous trot down the spring-bordered road. And about her at times was a secret gaiety that was dangerous, because it went deeper than the smile that flickered gleaming white against the cool freshness of her lips; deeper than the

passing merriment that caused her eyes to sparkle as sparkles Lough Ennell when gentle wind and glinting Sun are together on the face of its waters.

As on the evening of the races at Crossakiel.

"You should have come, dad." Tired and happy, she slipped into a low chair. 'Twas great racing. Johnny Mahon had the race of his life on Castle Gay to beat Major Cokran's King of Munster. And the way Mrs. Irwin stole the race on Carronroe was worth walking miles to see; she rode the little mare all out from flag-fall to finish, and won with some of the best chasing riders in the country up against her."

"They're great horses." O'Byrne's eyes were on the cord he was binding round the handle of a whip. "Great horses an' great riders. When it comes to riding over stiff country, you can't beat the Meaths."

Her delighted laugh was soft as the rustle of water in the gravelled throat of a stream.

"You can, and we did; Barry Hogan won the Moytown Handicap on Coolavin had with half Meath racing against him." With smiling gravity, she ticked off formidable names against her fingers. "There was Winning Ace and Blarney Stone, Brassbound and White O'May, the Sparkler and Ben Rulbin. And for riders. Wasn't there Lord Finglas that'll ride White O'May in the National; Coleman, Matty Mullarkey, Tim Blake, an' Bob Ferguson, him with the bad hand and the devil's luck. And Barry Hogan beat them all.

The whip-cord snapped like rotten thread between his fingers.

"Ay! Beat them in bad going with the field labouring like plough horses."

"Beat them on top of the ground, dad. Clean, hard racing, and crowded jumps."

"An' if he did. What do they know about real racing, anyway. Twenty years ago we knew what racing was; 'twasn't hack riding over ladies' country. Young Whipper-snappers aping the fine gentleman on fancy circus ponies. Ay!"

When she was gone from him and he was alone in the widening circle of firelight, an uneasy fear that he had lost forced itself against all his stubborn resistance.

Grimly he pictured the crowded, excited hill at Crossakiel; horses single footing from the saddling ring to the course; wind-whipped gaudy silk and gleaming satiny coats; smart hunting pink, and the creak of saddle leather.

And Barry Hogan! Too clearly he could imagine the youngster's slim straightness swaying to the dancing step of the mincing roan, his keen dark face darker and keener against the crimson of his riding shirt, and the gay quarterings of his jockey cap, steady hands on the sawing reins.

Then the crowded charge from the starter's flag; clever cautious riding, every sense alert, steadying a split second at the jumps, the perfect timing, the gathering speed as the field raced down to the last fence, the thundering run home.

He could see it all. Hogan, mud-splashed, spent and smiling, riding in between two pink-coated huntsmen, the crowd cheering a good win. A sight to please any girl. Ay! he could understand that.

His eyes hardened, his weather-beaten face furrowed into tiny wrinkles of thought. Hogan would beat him, unless, unless

"Andy Connor will lend you a mount if you want one for the next few weeks, Sheila," he said suddenly after breakfast next day. "I'll be wanting Grania myself."

"You'll be wanting Grania? What ever for, dad?"

"To ride." He watched the smoke curl from his freshly-lit pipe, and prepared to lie glibly. "Grania's no mount for you, girleen; that iron mouth of hers is a danger. I'll ride some of the wickedness out of her before the point-to-point meeting at Ardnashee; then with a good rider up, she should about win a race that 'ud get me a decent buyer for her, and a safer mount for you instead."

There was a new lightness in his step and a glint of dour amusement in his eyes during the hours he spent preparing Grania for the Maxwell Challenge Cup. To Sheila's questions, he returned evasive, non-committal answers; so that her interest had faded to chaffing amusement by the time the day of the race arrived.

CHAPTER V.

"Here's dad himself, Barry." She was with Barry Hogan when he found her on the crowded hill. "He'll tell you all about his mystery horse; I don't even know who is riding Grania."

"I'm riding Grania myself, Sheila." O'Byrne's eyes swept Hogan from gleaming riding boots to gaudy cap. "I

wouldn't trust a good horse with the milk-an'-water gentlemen jocks that spend their time circus parading now-a-days."

"Sound man, dad. We'll show them how."

As he listened to his daughter's delighted, chiming laugh, James O'Byrne was certain at last that he had guessed aright; that by riding against Barry Hogan and beating him he would take from the younger man some of the glamour he had acquired in the girl's eyes. But Barry Hogan's face was very grave.

"Look here, sir." He flushed awkwardly. "I don't like to say it, but do you feel up to it? It's a trier of a course—as stiff in its way as Punchestown—and it certainly wants knowing. This'll be my fourth year racing over it, and I won't feel any too happy till I bring Coolavin Lad safely past the judges."

The real anxiety in the boy's voice stung O'Byrne to cold, unpleasant anger.

"An ounce of courage is worth a ton of experience, Mister Hogan; I'll be jumping so far ahead of you that I'll be in no danger of coming down because some poor fool is too cowardly to ride his jumps," he said bitterly; "but when the formal procession of riders and stewards had paraded down to the starter, he felt less sure.

He tensed his feet in the riding irons, smoothed the faded silk riding shirt that flapped loosely against his spare, elderly body, and eased Grania into the shifting nine of waiting horses.

A dangerous field, he thought. There was Maxy Carter, peak-faced and wizened, whispering in a soothing sing-song voice to his mount, the lovely-lined Kilvan; Masterson easing the raw-boned gelding that was forecast as a likely trier over the formidable jumps at Aintree in the coming spring; Lord Finglas on the three quarter bred Knight Commander, powerfully built, dangerous. There, too, was Barry Hogan, curbing the restless footing of Coolavin Lad, and catching the boy's eye anxiously upon him, O'Byrne was glad of the clanging bell and dropping flag that sent them smoothly away.

They hurdled the first fence cleanly in a ragged, cautious line. Once over, the fighting for position began. Already Masterson had sent the Loafer to the head of the field, striding out powerfully on the firm turf. Kilkelly, the Army man, was giving his mare, the little Lilian, her head, and a reckless youngster, had pushed the awkward, sorrell outsider, Maypole, into clumsy terms with the leaders.

Clear of the field, O'Byrne held Grania to an easy pace. Still in his seat, hands down, eyes fixed on the ground before him, he barely heard the dim thunder of galloping hooves as the field broke up into separate, striving groups.

Right-handed, they swung into the open country, and at the water jump Knight Commander went out to join the leaders. A clear half dozen lengths now divided the first and second flights; beside him, O'Byrne could see Coolavin Lad fighting for his head; half a length ahead, Tim Blake, on Blarney Stone, was racing smoothly, waiting patiently, tensely; to his right he could hear the senseless, sing-song stream of cursing as Maxy Carter brought Kilvan abreast.

The formidable double showed before them; as he felt the mare's sure, cat-like movement, the perfect placing of her changing feet, confidence surged over O'Byrne. They were racing now, overhauling the leaders. To the threatening thorn hedge they came with steady, controlled recklessness. A vicious dig of the heels sent Grania cleanly over, saved from the dull crash that told of the outsider's fall.

Two miles from home. The keen wind slashed fiercely at O'Byrne, tearing the breath from his aching chest; his arms were tiring a little, but his hands were steady on the mare's mouth as he put her over the stone wall in company with the leaders.

Slowly, so slowly, he drew ahead. Kilvan had fallen, and with her the striding Knight Commander. Tim Blake was waiting no longer, and Barry Hogan had given Coolavin Lad his head.

A mile to go. Suddenly Kilkelly sat up on Lilian, the reins slackened, the little mare slowed to a spent canter. Of the field of sixteen, only four were left in the first flight now: Coolavin Lad racing steadily on the outside; next to him, Masterson on the lumbering Loafer; Tim Blake crouched steeply in Blarney Stone's saddle, riding dangerously close to Grania.

And Grania was racing less sweetly now. O'Byrne's breath came in sharp, tearing gasps; the strained socket of his right shoulder ached unendurably as he strove to check the mare's vicious left hand bore. Above the steady drumming hooves, over the muffled roar of the nearing crowd and the thundering blood in his ears, he could hear Blake scream shrilly at him.

"Ride him clear, ould fellow!" Blake's eyes were steady on the ground before him, his knife-sharp face cold,

concentrated, inimical. "Ride her clear, dam' you." she'll cross at the corner jump an' have us all down."

"Ride her clear!" 'O'Byrne's tortured chest wheezed for air; he canted sharply in the saddle and fought the mare's pulling head. He'd ride clear all right! His heels thudded angrily into Grania's ribs, the mare drove forward, checked, rose recklessly to the bristling jump.

Even before he heard the crashing thud as her irons slashed through the stiff thorn, O'Byrne knew that she had failed, and bunched himself for the sickening fall that sent him under the feet of the watchers at the jumps, safely clear of the hurtling, killing irons. Dazed and shaken, he saw the riderless mare check the field, saw Hogan drive out Coolavin Lad for the thundering run home to certain victory.

He was limping stiffly, his face grey white under the caking mud, when Sheila and Barry Hogan found him amongst the hard-faced horsemen whose interest in point-to-point racing lies in the buying and selling of promising bargains.

"I'm all right, girleen; all right, I tell you." His voice was sharp and testy. "The mare ran bad-tempered and jumped dangerously. But I'm rid of her now, and Matty Kivlehan is welcome to the bargain he got in her."

"You sold her, sir?" Relief rang tactlessly in Barry Hogan's voice. "I think you did well. She was no mount for Sheila; and Tim Blake says he'd as soon race beside a mad dog."

Sheer rage clutched chokingly at O'Byrne's throat, the wrenching pain of his bruised body was suddenly shot with tiny flames of fury.

"I sold her to buy better. I bought O'Riordan's Leitrim Belle, an' though you won that race today, young fellow, you'll find that Leitrim Belle will be worse racing company for you than any mad dog when it comes to winning the County Cup at Hazelwood."

CHAPTER VI.

He was strangely glad, when Sheila left next day on a three weeks' visit to a married cousin. She would, he felt, have probed to the heart of his sudden interest in racing, and would have seen that the long hours he spent working over Leitrim Belle owed less to any wish to own a good winner than to a growing desire to beat Barry Hogan at all costs.

Day after day he rode out the small, iron-grey mare; rode her over the stiff, wire-dangerous fences of his own land, over the deceptive stone walls of the higher country 'round Killnagore, tested her across the crumbling banks and dangerous dykes of the boglands at Tullaghanstown. And with each day, he liked her better; his faith in her spare, compact frame grew steadily. At times, even, the dour purpose for which he bought her was overshadowed by vague memories of Tipperary Tim and Heartbreak Hill, of Sean Spadagh and Sergeant Murphy; but his determination to beat Hogan's Coolavin Lad never left his thoughts for long. It warmed him with a soft glow of satisfaction as he rubbed down Leitrim Belle on the morning of Sheila's return, the day before the races of Hazelwood.

"She's a little beauty, Sheila; a little beauty." His hand slid lovingly over the mare's silken muscles. "There isn't a thing in that race tomorrow that'll be within a fence of her when she comes home. Mr. Hogan can say goodbye to winning the Cup now, so he can."

"I'm glad she turned out so well, dad." So interested was he in the horse that he failed to notice his daughter's pale weariness. "Barry'll be disappointed if you beat him in the Cup; he had hopes of pulling it off for the third year in succession and winning it outright."

"Well, he won't, my girl; he won't, Roger Derham is coming over this evening to give Belle 'a pipe-opener before he rides her tomorrow, an' with him up, what hopes has the likes of Hogan?"

"Derham! Is he riding for you"? All the distaste she had for Roger Derham, and the fear she felt that her Tat* might think this a fitting time to mention Derham's proposal again, showed in the girl's tired voice. "Well, I hope he gives the Belle a good ride. I think I'll rest for an hour or two; one of Mary's children was ill last night, and I didn't get much sleep."

O'Byrne nodded absently, unheedingly; he scarcely heard her, so busy was he rehearsing the instructions he would give Roger Derham.

"You'll want to take her clear out as soon as you can, Derham " he said later, as the rider swung into the saddle.

"Take her out at once and keep her there. .

"I know, old man; I know. You just leave it to me." Derham grinned down at him, a crooked, shallow smile. "I'll manage all right tomorrow. An' now I'll breeze the little lady down the field just to see how she moves."

"Hyep!" His hand came down flatly, and the grey mare swung out smartly into the wide ten-acre field. She moved well, her rider swaying easily to her smooth, powerful stride; and watching them, O'Byrne almost forgot the rank smell of stale whiskey that hung on Derham's breath, the glazed sickness of his faded eyes.

"Hep, girl." Now they had circled the field, and Derham was putting her down the length of it. Straight down the gentle slope to the stiffly wired fence they went, now the rider canted forward, his heels went sharply back, the mare rose gamely.

It happened so swiftly that O'Byrne could see no detail of it.

When the hurriedly-fetched shot gun shortened the broken-backed agony of Leitrim Belle, and Derham white-faced, stuttering apologies, had gone, he stared dumbly for a moment at the dead horse, and then swung out savagely past the house on to the quiet roadway.

Darkness had come softly by the time his angry, aimless stride brought him to the sunken road that skirted Castlelost.

"You beat me, Hogan." His teeth bit fiercely into his pipe stem. "I had ye whipped when bad luck and a drunken fool gave you the race."

The long walk had tired him and he was glad to rest on the low wall. Before him the dim square of Hogan's house lay in darkness, quiet save for the uneasy yapping of a restless dog. The disappointment in him hardened to hate.

"You'll be a fine fellow tomorrow. Mr. Barry Hogan on Coolavin Lad, winner of the County Cup. No wonder Sheila'll think you're the grandest fellow in the world and that her poor old father is no more than a cranky old fool."

In the darkness his eyes narrowed as they made out the stable that housed Coolavin Lad; he listened carefully to the dog's fretful bark. The pipe died between his teeth, there was the moisture of nervousness on his calloused hands. He slipped softly from the wall on to the silent carpet of grass beyond.

It had been easy, much easier than he thought. The house was empty save for a sleepy and ancient housekeeper drowsing over her knitting at the kitchen fire, the dog had come quietly to his soft whistle—as dogs will, even to a slinking thief, glad of human company in the lonely night—and beyond a sudden, frightened snorting Coolavin Lad had been easy, too, had clip-clopped quietly behind him a half mile down the empty roadway, responsive to the swiftly-tied handkerchief that served as a halter.

"Take a little trot tonight, boy." O'Byrne's face was drawn and ugly, his voice harsh-edged and uneven. "A little canter tonight an' you won't be in much form for the big double at Hazelwood tomorrow."

"H'up!" His heavy boot swung viciously, his unsteady laugh jarred after the startled, bolting gelding into the ringing darkness.

He hoped that Shelia would not be there to meet him when he reached home. Not that he was sorry for what he had done, his lips twisted in a grim smile as he remembered the flying, frightened hooves and pictured Hogan's dismayed anger on the morrow. Yet he half feared meeting the steadiness of her eyes and knew that he would lose utterly if she suspected that he was responsible for interfering with Coolavin Lad.

"What has you up at this hour, woman?" He slung his hat on a chair and turned irritably to his elderly housekeeper.

"It's Miss Shelia. Poor little Shelia. The woman's nervously fluttering hands suddenly angered him. "The poor little girleen so bad and not a word of complaint from her, so bad that . . .

"What is it, woman? What is it. Quit gostering an' say what's wrong, can't you." His voice was harsh and strident with fear.

"Tis her throat. She was sick this morning an' now she's fair fighting for breath. It's diphtheria, that's what it is; it's nursing them young whipsters of children of her cousins she got it, an' now she's dying herself."

His fingers sank fiercely into the woman's arm as he shot question after question at her.

"Sure, Magennis drove that Derham fellow into Mullingar an' he isn't back yet, so I couldn't send him." She shook herself free and fussed to the fire. "I sent Ellen Jane on her bicycle to Milltown for Dr. Gallagher an' if he isn't here soon it's heaven help the poor little girleen upstairs."

"I wouldn't doubt you, woman." Furiously he tugged off his heavy coat and crammed on his hat. "Doctor Gallagher is on his holidays this week past and that dunderheaded girl will never have the sense to find another doctor. I'll away down to Gleasons of the Cross and get them to send a car to town for Doctor Mackay."

As his flying feet hammered out the four mile run to Gleasons Cross his mind was washed clear of all thought save the stark image of his daughter's danger and the need of immediate aid. Forgotten now was his hatred of Barry Hogan and his dour determination to lower the lad in Sheila's estimation. He ran on blindly.

But now, as the Rock of Carrick loomed up out of the bare houseless countryside, and his breath came less easily, though but half his journey was done, another thought hammered through his mind.

"That drunken fool Derham. I'd have a doctor in half an hour only for him. He killed the Belle an' he's killing Sheila."

He was running less easily now; the breath tore from his breast in great gasping sobs, blood drummed agonisingly behind his eyes so that the car was round the sharp corner and almost upon him before he saw the stabbing lights.

"Is that O'Byrne?" Mackay pulled open the door. "Jump in, man, jump in. Now take it easy."

The car raced on into the darkness; O'Byrne slumped weakly in the seat beside the doctor.

"Your messenger couldn't find Gallagher," Mackay explained curtly, "and rode into town for me. Lucky to catch me in, I must say. Ah here we are."

Not even the doctor's assurance that all danger was past had quite soothed James O'Byrne's fears. For the tenth time he had tip-toed to her bedroom to watch a moment as she slept, and now he had returned again to the quiet of the midnight kitchen when a soft tap on the window brought him to the door.

"How is she, sir?" Barry Hogan faced him in the dim-light. "Is she . . . is she out of danger?"

"She's all right now." He spoke softly fearful of waking her. "The doctor says she's out of danger; there's nothing to worry about."

"I hate bothering you on a night like this, but do you mind if I put up Coolavin Lad in your stables?"

Something of the sudden fear O'Byrne felt must have showed in the defensive hardening of his face for Hogan went on hurriedly.

"I wouldn't ask you but the Lad's absolutely foundered and I don't like to walk him on to Castlelost."

They had reached the warm stables and Barry Hogan was busy over the ill-used horse before O'Byrne could trust himself to speak.

"What happened?" He held up the storm lantern and hoped fervently that his voice was steady.

"Hanged if I know." Hogan's eyes were on the blown horse. "I was strolling home from Killnagore when who should I meet but the Lad breezing along all on his own. I got hold of him and was walking him home when I met that little servant girl of yours on her bicycle."

Busy with the gelding's swollen leg, he failed to see the changing expression on O'Byrne's face.

"She told me about Sheila so I rode over to Doctor Gallagher's place; Gallagher was away so then there was nothing for it but a hell-for-leather, bare back ride into town to Mackay."

They walked out into the still night and as he locked the stable door O'Byrne broke the awkward silence.

"Coolavin Lad is a ruined horse, Hogan. He'll win no race tomorrow, or any other day."

"Oh, well!" Hogan turned up his coat-collar against the night air. "He won a good race tonight; a powerful race for big stakes."

Then, suddenly, O'Byrne felt tired; tired as a spent rider in the testing third mile of a four-mile 'chase, who sees the field draw ahead and knows that there is nothing left for him now but a slackened rein and a saving canter home.

"He did so; he did so, indeed." He felt the fine rain on the night wind and suddenly made decision. "'Tis going to rain, rain heavily, Hogan, and maybe it 'ud be as well for you to stay the night. I'm going to sit up till Sheila wakes in the morning and if you'd like to keep me company you're welcome. Maybe she'd like to speak to you when she wakens."

Then, slowly, he pushed open the house door and let Barry Hogan pass in before him.
