

(Beech Cottage, Ballinlea Road,
Killiney)

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House for Sale.

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'We are having pork today.'

Mrs. Dillon spoke reverently and she carved the shoulder of pork with a pontifical air.

Mark, as the honoured guest, knew that he should make some appropriate speech. But all he could say was: 'Pork's very good - one doesn't get it often.'

Mrs. Dillon looked at him archly. He noticed that one side of her nose was over-powdered, and on her fair forehead the pencilled eyebrows showed plainly. But he liked her, he believed that she would be quite a tolerable mother-in-law. There was something a little wistful about her under the archness.

'This is quite a special day .. Mark,' she said, pausing at the unaccustomed name.

At the other end of the table, presiding over peas and potatoes was Deirdre, his betrothed. She helped him to vegetables with a competent air. He noticed that her hair had been newly waved, it was still crimped. Her lips were painted with a cherry red that would not be licked off during dinner.

✓ | He was still bewildered by the way in which events had caught him, showing him into this household where he was now accepted as a stable part of it. While he helped himself to apple sauce he mused over it.

Scarcely a week ago he had gone back to the office to collect some often-forgotten parcel, - a coat from the cleaner's, - that

was it. And there was Deirdre Dillon alone and in tears with her head upon the case of the typewriter. It was a sight so strange, so pathetic that he had paused, quite uncertain what to do or say. That this competent, red-mouthed, red-nailed young woman could cry seemed heart-rending. He stood behind her, touched her on the shoulder. 'I say,.. Miss Dillon,' he murmured, 'has something happened?.. I .. I'm so sorry .. can I do anything for you?'

She raised her head, it drooped against his coat and her tears ~~over~~flowed while she dabbed at them with a moist ball of handkerchief.

'I wish I were dead .. I'm so miserable,' she sobbed.

'Oh, no,' he protested vaguely, 'don't wish that. One does .. but things look better in the morning .. one begins again.'

'I shall never trust anyone' ..

Martin recalled a passing vision of a smartly dressed girl and a red-headed young man. She had been all animation. No eyes for Mark, and here she was weeping on his coat.

'You wouldn't let a girl down, I know you're kind and good..'

'Oh! I don't know .. but if I can help you Miss Dillon...'

'I'm so lonely .. are you ever lonely?'

Mark wondered if he were. He had his books, his Radio, but he said in sympathy: 'Oh! yes one does get lonely.'

She dried her eyes.

'We could help each other,' she suggested, 'perhaps you want a friend .. oh! dear, I can't go home like this .. Mother would wonder.'

'Suppose we go and have supper somewhere and do a picture,' he suggested. He wanted to be kind. He had been touched almost to tenderness by the collapse of something so competent, so sleekly groomed, so well-defended. His heart turned towards failure, humility, disappointment. She had been cheered at once, had taken out a case and done things to her face. Later she had eaten an adequate supper and in the dark picture house had leaned against him. And still later at her own door she had turned her face to his for the kiss she expected. Then somehow they were engaged, he never quite knew how it had happened and here she was, her crimped and competent self. The red nails, so long and glossy, gleamed above the potatoes.

'Dreamy old thing,' she mocked him, 'What are you thinking about?'

'Wondering what you'd like to do this afternoon,' he said to cloak the truth.

'Sit by the fire I think .. sew perhaps.'

'Don't you young people want to look at houses? .. oh! but it's Sunday,' said Mrs. Dillon, 'you won't get in, but you might like to see the outsides.'

'I wouldn't trust Mark to choose, he'll be all for romance and trees, you know what he is, mother..'

'I could look at the outside anyway and tell you,' he suggested, clinging to the idea of a solitary walk, 'I remember two or three addresses.'

'Very well,' she agreed.

She went out to fetch a gooseberry tart.

'Deirdre made it herself,' the mother boasted, 'You won't starve, Mark. She's a good cook.'

Mark admitted to himself that one must eat gooseberries in Spring and find them sour and yet grin and say how good they were and the powder-custard barely mollified them.

Later he stood on the hearthrug, prepared to go out. Deirdre was sewing at some silken garment. Asked its nature she became coy and said: 'Oh, you'll know some time.'

His spirit winced and he said abruptly: 'Well, I'd better go out.'

'Very good .. Cheerio .. don't lose yourself.'

Had he lost himself already? He wondered as he sat on a bus top going he scarcely cared where. He went to the terminus, descended to a suburb that had recently been the country. He followed a tree-bordered road, attracted by the apple blossom in old gardens. A thrush was repeating his phrases with passionate emphasis from the larch over his head, while undismayed by such a bel canto a greenfinch on a thorn tree repeated his little rhyme of song. Mark stood still, quieted, forgetful of the pork, the gooseberry tart and their implications. Then he went along the road full of curiosity to see beyond the bend that offered the unknown.

Spool 2
Ah! there it was — 'House for Sale.' The notice hung to an old iron gate, it looked weatherstained and weeds grew round the gate. Mark tried to open it. It stuck and grated in the gravel. But he managed to open it. The Spring sunshine had been darkened by a cloud and the cold of the day caught him. He shivered suddenly. The garden sloped away from him and a

path led him from the empty house. He saw that the garden, grassy, untended, ran down to a little stream, overhung by willows and ferns. Riotous wild roses would bloom in June; now there were primroses in the grass. He stood enchanted by bird song and blossom and as he stood there a flash of jewelled feathers sped down the stream, lost in the sunlit tunnel of the willows - a kingfisher, the halcyon of happy days.

But someone was calling and he turned guiltily. The voice came from the top window of the old grey house, a window wreathed in wisteria and a climbing rose tree. A woman's head was at the window and someone waved and called. He realized that he was just a trespasser, he should have asked permission at the house, but he thought it was empty. This must be a caretaker who lives, perhaps, in a basement. She had gone upstairs to attract his attention. He made his way under blossoming trees, his feet brushing the daisies. He was preparing his apology for the woman who came out from the house. She was in a green cotton dress and her red head was bare. He had expected an elderly caretaker - perhaps this was her daughter.

'I'm sorry,' he began, 'I should have asked ..'

'Oh no,' she said, 'it's quite all right. You were down by my stream .. let's go back. Come along.'

She walked lightly in front of him, a thin young woman, her step was quick and eager.

'You live in this house?' he asked.

'But of course.'

She looked at him with wide hazel eyes, they were green when she laughed and then they darkened to the colour of the pool at their feet. 'Let's sit down here.'

He spread his coat on the grass and they sat down, he a demure rather stiff figure. He shivered again.

'You're cold,' she cried, 'did you feel it as you came through the gate?'

'Yes, the sun was clouded but it's coming out again - there, isn't it lovely? I do love this garden.'

'You do want to live here?' she asked, her eyes on his face.

'Yes - I do, it's just my dream - but I don't think Deirdre would like it, she'd say the garden was too big, and I haven't seen the house yet - but I know she wouldn't like it - so of course I must look for something else.'

'Tell me about Deirdre, please.'

Mark looked at the grass, his brow was clouded. It did seem to him curious that he should be telling a caretaker about his engagement so he spoke rather formally.

'We're engaged,' he explained, 'we'll be married in the Summer so we're looking for a house .. I said I'd look round first .. I love this, but it isn't her style.'

'No,' she agreed, 'it wouldn't be hers - but you have all the afternoon, so be happy .. she's happy, isn't she?'

'Oh! yes, she's sewing something, she won't miss me.'

'Then there you are, you're warmer now, aren't you?' She touched his hand, hers was warm, the gesture had no coquetry, it was

friendly. The sun had come out and again the kingfisher flashed by. Her fingers tightened on his. 'My kingfisher,' she whispered, then she laughed.

'Not mine .. no, he's God's own jewel. But the robin and the wren are mine, they come to the house. You shall see them .. but now tell me things .. all about you.'

He looked into the green-brown eyes.

'You have woodland eyes,' he said irrelevantly, then added, 'I've nothing to tell, where shall I begin?'

'Oh! you as a little boy. I like little boys .. you were shy and rather timid weren't you? But you loved animals and woods and water - go on.'

Yes, he was recalling it all now, the childish days of wonder, of fears and strange, aloof delights. He had never talked so much and he stopped himself with a jerk to look at his watch.

'Oh! I say,' he exclaimed. 'Why did you let me ramble on? What a fearful egoist I must be to talk for an hour! But really you're so encouraging .. and now it's your turn. You haven't told me what you do in an empty house.'

She laughed.

'There's lots of time to tell you things, we'll see the house presently, you want to tell Deirdre about it.'

'No need, I'll just say she wouldn't like it.'

He could not tell how the slow, gentle Sunday afternoon went by. They had talked .. but what about? Outside the gate it seemed hard to recollect spoken words. When the Angelus rang out from the Convent near by, he started guiltily.

'Why, that's six o'clock' he said, 'I must go back. Deirdre will think I've lost myself. She finds me very incompetent.'

The girl rose at once.

'Yes, you must go back,' she agreed, 'they'll expect you for supper .. it'll be cold pork and salad.'

'Of course .. how clever of you.'

'But couldn't you come back to see the full moon over the garden?.. It will be full tonight. I see it rise from the attic window, do come, you'd love it.'

'Could I?' He was wistfully consulting conscience, then said:

'I'll stay with them till half past nine .. we'll all be tired.

There's the office for us both tomorrow .. yes, I could rush back here for half an hour .. it would be fun.'

No scruple about discretion troubled the prudent young man. He and the caretaker would see the moon rise from her attic window.

Why not?

They walked together to the house; the door stood open to the wide empty hall. The floor was very dusty and as he passed the drawingroom window the bare room looked bleak. His companion had gone into the house. He supposed she lived on the attic floor, he would know tonight. The gate swung open heavily. The thrush was giving his evening concert.

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A week later Deirdre Dillon was writing to a sympathetic friend.

'Of course,' she wrote, 'it was a terrible shock to me.

We were just engaged and Mark seemed so happy. No-one had an idea that he had this clot in his system. It was all very sudden

and quite painless they think. He died on the 'bus before he could be taken to hospital.

But tragic as it is I try to be resigned. Sometimes these tragedies are for the best, meant for our good. I don't know that we were really suited. Our tastes were different. I know he adored me but I felt a lack somewhere and I must be brave and live my life now that he is dead.'

It was a week ago ^{that} Mark slipped off the bus and hurried down the shadowy road. Someone had fainted - perhaps died on the bus and every one was fussing and crowding round the poor fellow, so it was all right to leave them to it. What could he do? A dead man was no concern of his. Now he would be in time to see the moon rise. The iron gate was half open; the thrush had sung his last notes; there was a scent of young leaves and blossom, blossom white in the dusk. A girl's voice hailed him from the open window overhead.

'Come along quick, the moon is peeping over the trees.'

The door stood open but in the dusk the hall looked furnished, rugs on the floor, a tall clock in one corner and there seemed to be pictures on the walls and a scent of flowers. He would ask the caretaker if he had fancied all this.

She was leaning against the attic window and beyond her over the dusky bank of trees the golden target grew and grew to its perfect circle, swung low in the night-blue sky. She took his hand in hers and they stood in silence.