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The Mystery of Killard

PART I. THE RACE OF LANE.
Chapter VII (Continued).
"No, no. To-morrow won't do. Luke Dillon, come down at once, or I'll go on my knees to that old she-wolf of a grandmother of mine, and ask her to send storms of hail, snow and wind on you and yours, and your house."
The words were uttered fiercely and rapidly. As this threat of his always immediately preceded quarrelling, the head at the window was withdrawn, and in a few moments the door opened and the two entered.
Dillon's shop, lighted by only the candle the owner carried, looked like a lofty wine-vault festooned with enormous fungi. From hooks in the ceiling hung great misty fishing nets, long whips, bristles, hands of cordage; here and there glittered columns of fishing rods, with shadowy capitals of landing nets; against the counter stood saddles on stands; against the walls, in racks, shone guns and blunderbusses; on the counter were powderflasks.

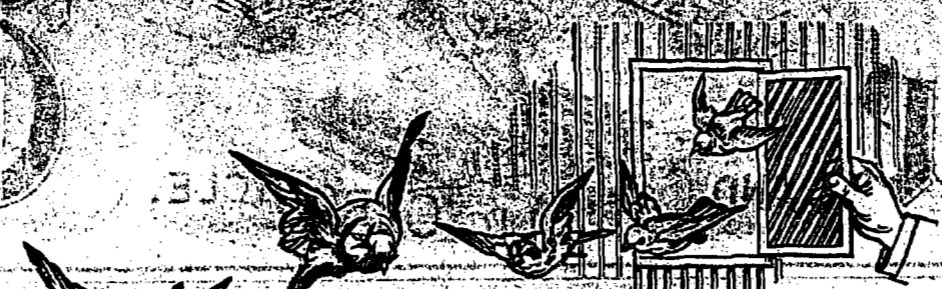
The proprietor, a short, gray old man, turned to Tom and asked, in a querulous voice, "Now, what is it you want at this unreasonable hour of night?"
Before replying, Tom went up close to Dillon, and put his hand on the old man's shoulder. "My friend David Lane wants to buy a gun."
"A gun!" cried the old man, in amazement. "A gun! For what?"
"To shoot sea-fowl on his own property, the Bishop's Island," returned Tom with dignity. Then he added fiercely, "And he's going to do his best for me against the old she-wolf; he promised me that. Now, are you answered, Luke Dillon?"
"But, but—"

"Ah! Is that the way you are, Luke Dillon? Maybe you'd like to have her at first on trial for a month or two. She'd soon find out where the roof is bad, and the sashes rotten; she'd soon scrape the mortar out of the sashes and the mortar out of the slates. Tell me this, Luke Dillon, how would you like to be killed in your sins by a stack of chimneys falling through the floors? Tell me that, Luke Dillon; for she'd do that while a gull would be lifting a sprat out of a shoal!" The dull eyes of the Fool were looking fiercely into the eyes of the old man, and the mute's muscles stood, as it were, at attention.
"But has he got a license? I daren't do it unless he has got a license. It would be as much as my own license is worth."

"He has the gold to pay you with, and I have the silver of Killard at my back; and if you don't take the gold, you'll never see another penny of Killard's money, for I'll go to Blake's for tackle, and you'll have the winds of winter in summer on you and yours."
He made a few rapid gestures to his companion. The latter opened his hand towards the light. Several gold pieces glittered on the red panel.
Dillon stared in wonder. Where could the ragged man before him have got gold. Gold was almost unknown at Killard. Notes and silver and copper were to be found there in small quantities, but not one gold piece. There existed a prejudice against the yellow metal. The old man wavered for a moment. He counted the pieces with his eye; five sovereigns they seemed. But before he spoke he considered the risk. If any evil came of this, what trouble there would be! This ignorant man with a bad name, living in the heart of some great secret—this dumb desperate man—what could he want of a gun? Nothing good. Sea-fowl? They were valueless—that is, Lane could do nothing with them. To trust fire-arms into the hands of this outcast and this half-witted man! No! the risk was too great; he'd take none of it. Then he said, "I daren't do it! I daren't do it. And even if I did the police would take himself and the gun. No one can have fire-arms without a license. The district is proclaimed."

"You won't tell the police, I won't tell the police, he can't tell the police; as to the hag of wickedness, she can only blow and yell, but never say a word. Take the yellow gold and give the gun, or you're done with the gold and silver of Killard, and the storms will be your blankets to-morrow night. Give the gun, at once, for we must be going; it's late, and we have to tramp the road to Killard before day. I want to steal back in the darkness, or she'll see me. The boy is all by himself on the Island, and if the witch knew that the father and I were away she'd raise a whirlwind and kill the boy. Give the man the gun, Luke Dillon."
When Tom spoke in the interests of his friends, the Lanes, there always seemed to be some trace of reason in his words; he appeared capable of calculating the effect likely to be produced by certain thoughts or considerations. At other times he never looked outside himself, but spoke without any regard to effect.
"I won't, I won't—and now that's all about it and you may go."

The shopkeeper's voice and manner were now final. Tom made signs to Lane. Lane looked doggedly at the old man and showed no intention of moving.
"Besides," continued the gunsmith, "you don't know how dear guns are. They cost pounds and pounds. Now here's one of the cheapest I have, and it's ten guineas!"
He took down a wretched old fowling-piece, not worth a couple of sovereigns, and showed it to Lane. He thought upon second consideration, that it would be better to ask an exorbitant price, one quite beyond Lane's power to pay, than to refuse point blank to sell.
A long pantomime ensued between the Fool and Lane. The bright sharp eyes of the deaf mute glittered with swift intelligence. He made rapid angry gestures, breathing hard the while. At length his friend seemed to comprehend.
"Ay, David Lane, you have a head; you have a head!" he muttered with admiration and pride. "You carry the head and I carry the tongue. That's it! He carries the head and I carry the tongue. We are only the makings for one. The black hag scraped the sense out of my head and the speech off his tongue. There was only enough for one man between us, and she divided us into two,



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and there's only one head to plan and one tongue to ask for what two carcasses want."
This, "aside" seemed to weary the mute. During its delivery he had been carelessly examining the piece by the light of the candle. He now placed the gun beside the candle and made signals to Tom.
"All right," replied the Fool, "let us go."
He opened the street door and stepped out. Lane, in following him, stumbled and knocked the candle down and extinguished it. The mute stopped and groped about.
"Tom," said the old man, in a tone of relief, "he was glad to get rid of his visitor—tell him not to mind the candle; I'll find it myself."

The Fool re-entered, and, having touched Lane, the two were soon after in the street. As soon as they were gone, Dillon shut the door and bolted it.
The old man went into the back room—he did not like striking matches in the shop. Presently he returned with one burning in his hand. He sought and found the candle. When it was lighting, he rose from his stooping position and reached out his hand for the gun. With an oath he started back. He was about to rush to the door, and rouse the place and follow the two, when suddenly his eyes caught something glittering at the distant end of the counter. Hastily he approached the spot.
The gun was gone, but on the counter lay ten pieces of gold. He took them up in blank wonderment. He weighed them dreamily on the ends of his fingers. Then suddenly the light came back to his eyes. Something peculiar in the coins riveted his attention, and he whispered in a low voice, as though he doubted the evidence of his senses and expected to wake up in a moment and find it daylight:
"I said ten guineas, ten guineas! thinking he had no more than five sovereigns. There were only five coins then in his hand. But these are not sovereigns, but guineas! Ten golden guineas! Ten old-fashioned guineas!"

CHAPTER VIII.
A SOUND FROM THE ISLAND.
Between the years 1844 and 1854, famine and pestilence visited Ireland. People perished of hunger in the streets, in the fields, in the churches. They crawled from remote villages in the weary hope of obtaining food in the towns and cities, and were found dead by the wayside. Some who reached towns or cities by night, and knew not whither to turn, lay down near bakehouses where bread was being made at midnight, and were taken away stiff and stark before the first woman came to purchase. Men whose business took them abroad early in the darkness, fell over the bodies of women taking their long rest on door-steps. Haggard, wild-eyed spectres of men haunted the roads and streets, and desperate mothers clutched starving infants to their barren breasts.
Before the blight, beggars took offence if offered potatoes only, and potatoes rotted in trenches for sheer want of mouths to eat them. The blight came, and those who had been donors to the poor gnawed cabbage stalks, or strove to allay the agony of starvation with grass and acorns and scraps of leather. In many districts there were for each day more people than loaves or potatoes, and from such places hideous whispers, too awful for human lips to speak aloud.
In the wake of famine, pestilence crept to the shore of the stricken land to finish the work of ruin. Time mowed with no sickle then. There were no fields of men to slay and fields to spare; but, like a storm passing through orchards when the fruit is heavy, all the trees were shaken and each suffered loss. Burying the dead was a monotonous toil; morning, noon and night, men were digging graves and others were filling them in. Often he who dug at dawn was covered in himself before sun-down.
In towns large wooden sheds were erected for those who died the lonely fields, that they might die in sight of man. Most of these fugitives from solitude, after a day or perhaps two days,

would catch his son suddenly, and press him wildly to him, and then, getting him down, regard him almost dumbly for a moment, cover his eyes, and finally hastily away. All this perplexed the child. Sometimes, after one of these scenes, when the father returned, the boy would go up to him and, with his arms round him, and gaze into his eyes with a sad, questioning look, as though in protest. For a while, the love of the parent predominated, and he would kiss the boy; then, when the latter moved his lips, the father, "concealed" his face with one hand, and with the other repelled his son. "All this troubled the child, and given as he sat by the fire his hot tears made gleaming rainbows around the turf, and fell slowly on his listless hands."
This singular man, dwelling apart from all the race save his child, separated from mankind by the terrible affliction his father had deliberately sought to place upon him, had centred the whole affection of his dark and stormy nature on his boy. He had watched him day by day as he grew, and had soled his soul with the thought of their continual intercourse. When he visited Killard his questioning eyes and hands were ever among children, if they were by. He inquired their ages, took them up and weighed them, felt their limbs—curiously, and when the balance turned in favor of his own child, set them down with a proud smile. The people all declared, that, whatever the crimes of the Lanes might be, this man loved his boy as few fathers loved theirs.

Now some canker had entered in—some dark suspicion, some half-developed dread. Yet no alteration was visible in the boy. Tom the Fool, who was strangely quick to notice everything connected with his friends, saw the alteration and wondered. But he was reticent in all things concerning the deaf mute and his son, and told nothing about it in the village. People said the Fool was jealous of his friendship with the Lanes, and in his nebulous mind there lay a band of exclusion round the Bishop's, and he would allow no one inside this band. Tom had frequently interrogated Lane but could get no reply. The father seemed to deny the alteration, and was always angry when the Fool questioned him. Lately Tom had been seldom a visitor to the Island. Often a whole month passed without his once leaving the mainland.
It was broad daylight when David Lane, carrying the gun, arrived opposite the Bishop's. He had paid Dillon five times the value of the gun, but it was not till next morning the gunsmith discovered that with the gun had disappeared a half pound canister of powder. This canister was now in Lane's pocket.
Lane threw the gun down, and, standing on the edge of the cliff, looked round, as if to make sure no one watched his movements. Not a soul was in sight. At the point where he stood, the distance from the mainland to the island was no more than sixty feet. It seemed almost possible to jump across. Two hundred feet below groaned and churned the never-quiet waters of the Atlantic. In the brightest day the sun never reached the bottom of this chasm, and it was always filled with a dim grey darkness, like the blue bloom under trees in summer. Down the side of the island, directly opposite were Lane stood, hung a rope with a loop at the end, and from the loop descended a confused tangle of cordage. The villagers knew that this rope formed the bridge. They had often seen him cross from the Island, but none had ever seen him return.
Having satisfied himself that he was unobserved, Lane stooped, and with his hands removed some clay from the brink. A large iron hook was disclosed. The eye of the hook pointed inland. Two large iron bolts, driven into the ground, held the hook firmly in its place.
So much the villagers knew, and further, that he, when wanting to leave his home, cast that loop over the hook, and crossed under the rope. But they did not know how, when he was once over, and had cast back the rope, he ever re-formed his bridge. How did he get the loop back again? Often, when feeling ran high against the Lanes, the people had talked of coming in the night and tearing up this hook, and so cutting him completely off. But there was an aspect of murder about the idea, and they forebore.

(To be continued.)

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