

The Irish Hunt

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THE IRISH HUNT

By MARGARET COTEN

HUNTING in Ireland! Could anything be more exciting and romantic, I thought? And I was right.

I have never savoured life more deeply than I did when I was out with a harrier pack on the border of Northern Ireland several years ago.

I must admit this was partly due to my doubt that I would come home alive! The air seemed sweeter and softer, fires were warmer, and hot water a benison because of this very doubt. I relished living.

Not that I approve of hunting. It is a cruel business, but at that time I was too excited at the prospect to consider the pros and cons.

The fact that I had never jumped – apart from putting my old school pony at small logs 20 years before – did not dampen my enthusiasm when my Irish uncle, with whom I was staying, announced that he had borrowed Bill Buller's horse as my mount for the hunt on the forth-coming Saturday.

Bill Buller, a neighbour and a gay young blade, was agreeable to this as he played rugger on Saturdays, my uncle said. I doubt if Bill was given much choice. My uncle was a resourceful man and before the great day had gathered my riding kit from friends and relatives.

There was a hat, a rather sloppy coat, my cousin Harry's britches – a bit tight for my generous proportions, but my uncle reassured me – 'Ach, sure, once ye're up no matter if there is a wee split' – a stock and gloves. Boots were a problem and finally I settled for a pair of wellingtons size nine, belonging to Mich, the farmhand.

They were the smallest and smartest we could find. Redolent of the sty, but hosed down they looked quite stylish. I had to wear three pairs of woollen socks to keep in touch with them.

'Darlin, darlin', ye look jest grand!' the family exclaimed when I had a dress rehearsal in the big, warm farm kitchen. Mich stood wordlessly by.

The meet was at noon, seven miles away. I jogged along through seemingly endless lanes while rain fell in gentle mist. My mount was a beauty; although he was inclined to pig-root, and this tendency increased as we approached the meet.

It was a glorious sight. Horses surging, the black- and white-clad riders, the Master in a Lincoln-green jacket, and the eager mass of tan-and-white hounds showed up vividly against the green grass and the sombre, bare trees.

I did not have much time for soliloquy because my mount was close to unmanageable. A middle-aged lady, riding a solid brown cob, took me under her wing – uncle's instructions again, no doubt.

Indeed, I should have been in a quandary without her, as the riders took off over hedges and stone walls with a surprising suddenness.

I followed her more sedately through a farmyard full of mud, startled geese, and pigs, into a ploughed field. The pack was already milling around on a hill opposite. As we cantered soggily down the field I cast about for a way around the wide drain which ran along the bottom of it. It had a low wire fence on the near side and looked all of 12 feet across.

To my surprise my companion put heels to her horse and flew over it. I was startled, but the next thing I knew I was sailing over it, too. Easy! Even if I did lose both stirrups and the reins and had my arms and legs wrapped round the horse's neck!

I struggled back in the saddle just in time to get some feeling of co-ordination with my mount as he took a hedge. My blood started to pound. This was glorious! We went over that drain four times in all and I even stayed in the saddle the last time.

My horse bucked all day, but I had confidence in him now and I knew he would take anything I put him at. All I had to do was stay in the saddle – well – on his back. I remembered a remark my brother, an ex-Light Horseman, once made; you are never off your horse until you are on the ground!

I had little time to think about the chase. I was never even in the same field as the hounds. They did not seem to be in favour, judging by the curses and advice meted out to them by the Master and sundry hoary onlookers.

It was dusk when I got home. I had been in the saddle six hours and I fell in a heap when I dismounted. Water gushed out of Mich's boots.

Later, Bill confessed he had taught his horse to buck when he put his hand on his back, behind the saddle, where my low-slung coat-tails had been tickling him all day.

Unfortunately Bill had fractured his jaw in the rugger game that day, which meant he could not play for a while. Hunting was not vetoed, so he needed his horse.

Unperturbed, my uncle simply told cousin Harry, the owner of the britches, that I was to ride his grey. The grey was young and had hunted only once. That made two of us as we set out to meet the following week.

Harry rode what he imaginatively called the Horse. The Horse stood 17 hands in his bare feet. My mount was called – quite simply – the Big Horse. I looked down on everyone in the field.

The Big Horse and I never really established rapport. He was quiet and well-mannered but did not quite know what it was all about. I fell off early in the first day. Only my dignity was hurt, although I landed on bitumen. Both my boots shot off and with them my top layer of socks, which rolled across the road like scurrying hedgehogs.

To add to my mortification, I could not get back in the saddle. That short stirrup was well beyond reach of my foot even if Harry's britches had not been so tight.

Finally, an obliging ploughman, seeing my predicament, stopped his tractor and came and gave me a leg-up.

I found the body of the hunt near a creek choked with blackberry bushes. Looked at objectively it was a mixed bag. There was a priest on a small bay. The aged vet, sporting a canary-coloured waistcoat and with his trousers tucked into the top of his socks, was on a nondescript black. A farm boy in a tweed suit was riding a camel-like grey, bareback. I drew up beside a pretty little blonde on a dapple pony.

She looked scared and she told me this was her first hunt after a fall in the field the previous season, when she had broken her leg.

Curses were emanating from a nearby wood where huntsmen were trying to restore order among the hounds. I realised that a commanding-looking redhead who had been riding side-saddle was being dragged feet first out of the brambles.

Later I jogged up beside her and said in my matey, colonial way – 'Oh! ho! I see you fell off, too!' She could not look down on me but she withered me – 'I did not fall. My horse came down!' I was pleased to see, as she flounced off haughtily, that she still had a length of bramble caught up in her bun.

Although I was never up with the hunt I was learning fast, not only about the geography of Co. Armagh, but also about the 'shockin' behaviour of the hounds' – they seemed to be a law unto

themselves – royal flies, and double sloughs. I am still not quite sure what constitutes a royal fly. All I remember is a six-strand wire fence mixed up with briar rose coming at me and knowing I was going to come off my horse before we left the ground.

My head felt full of hot prickles when I got up and I thought I had gone blind until I realised I had landed on my head and my bowler was squashed over my face.

Double sloughs are wide, parallel drains, divided by a 12-inch bank. In principle, the horse jumps across the first drain, changes feet on the bank, and jumps the second. Double sloughs did not worry me. In fact I enjoyed them until they showed me one where 'puir auld Paddy had his wee bit of bad luck.' Two years before, the luckless Paddy's horse mis-stepped and he and Paddy fell in the drain in a horrible tangle.

Paddy was dragged out eventually and, despite his cries for mercy, was walked 200 yards across fallow to the waiting ambulance.

'Ach, hould yer whist, man, sure it's just a wee scratch,' they encouraged him relentlessly. He had a fractured pelvis and spent the next six months in hospital. Oh! He was back in the field right enough, but I never felt sure of a double slough again.

I never came off while my blood was up, but when my mind took over it was the end.

Galloping down a lane one day we were suddenly confronted by a five-barred gate. 'Up wid ye,' shouted my companion. Up! I jumped as well as the horse. I swear there was three feet of daylight between me and the saddle and that I could see the sea laid out all round Ireland. But that time I landed back in position.

The grey was a trier. He balked only once – at a hedge with a wide drain in a lower-level field. There is a point of no return on a horse's neck, and, although I knew I had passed it, I hung on hopefully for a moment or two before I let go and fell like a stone into the black slime below.

An obliging huntsman coming up in the rear gave the grey such a whack on the rump that he shot high up and over with surprise.

'Catch him,' shouted the huntsman. 'Catch him.' I took one look at that ton of horseflesh coming down on me and turned and ran as fast as my waterlogged boots would let me. As this gallant huntsman flung me back in the saddle, he assured me that under the circumstances I had made a classic fall. I looked sideways at him, but, no, he was not laughing!

But moments like that were forgotten after we had returned home. Sitting by a roaring fire, eating bacon and eggs, drinking lashings of hot strong tea, we relived the glory of the day.

I still see the subtle colours of the autumn countryside, cloud patterns on the Mourne, the gleam on well-bred horses. I still tingle with the romance.