

RACE DAY

COME on, Harry said. I've finished, Margaret said. Have you, indeed? Mrs. Lenihan said. And what's that on your plate?

Get it down, there's a girl, Mr. Lenihan said. It'll make your teeth curl and your hair white.

Margaret smiled, as at an old, old joke, and bent over her plate where the cooling porridge rose like larval islands through the milk.

Wait for your sister, Harry, Mr. Lenihan said.

I didn't hear anyone ask to leave the table, Mrs. Lenihan said. But perhaps I'm going deaf.

Say your piece, son, Mr. Lenihan said.

Just this once, Grace, Mr. Lenihan said. They're itching to get out.

They're itching, Mrs. Lenihan said. And who are they?

Off you go, Mr. Lenihan said.

And they edged around the table and ran through the house, but not until they were wedged, side by side in a space between the verandah posts, did they begin to believe that it was real, after all. But there it lay, a one day wonder, an oval of rich green in a summer-coloured oblong park, washed on one side by the tide which rose through the mangroves and held on the other by the shine of the harbour beach. Once each year they saw it as something wholly new. Their eyes looked out over the road and the sunken houses to where it lay, beyond and below, almost empty at this hour of the morning, but hung above with flags and rinsed in sun, a racecourse for one day in the year.

The sun warmed the wide rail on which they sat and the night's dew steamed still. Harry had his father's binoculars hung by their strap from his neck; as he leaned forward they knocked lightly on the wood. Below their dangling feet, ten feet down, carnations tangled in the garden border.

THE line of traffic thickened until it was a solid stream, moving slowly, turning down the side road under the signalling white-sleeved arms of a policeman on point duty. The cars rolled richly over the spurting gravel.

Mr. and Mrs. Lenihan crossed the verandah and began to descend the steps; Mrs. Lenihan in purple and white—huge flowers like stains of dry blood on the silk—and Mr. Lenihan in a grey suit that would, later in the day, be much too hot. A *Members' Enclosure* card hung from Mr. Lenihan's lapel.

What are you sitting on top of one another for? Mrs. Lenihan asked. There's plenty of room.

Be good kids, Mr. Lenihan said. Remember to back all the outsiders and you can't go wrong.

They laughed and arm in arm climbed down.

Mr. Lenihan blithely hummed:
Bet my money on a bobtail nag,
Somebody bet on the bay . . .
Goodbye, he called.

And Harry put the binoculars wrong-end-round to his eyes and watched his father and his step-mother descend, small, precise, and a long way off, a

flight of steps that went down and down until they seemed to plunge like a spear into the lawn. He changed ends and they were at the gate, so out of focus that his eyes watered as if in grief, and his father's hand was waving right up against the glass. The binoculars made no difference to the voices. He turned them end for end again and swept them around in a wide arc so that the earth seemed to spin past, from left to right, and Mr. Toms, swinging on crutches three-legged through his garden, was appropriate denizen of a collapsing world.

Please, Harry, let me look, Margaret said. Please, before they are out of sight.

And she, too, turned the binoculars on those retreating backs and watched her father cross to the outside of the pavement and extend his doubled arm. And, although it was all too far away for her to have heard anything, she knew her father would be saying, mocking, *And if I might have the honour, Mrs. Lenihan*, in a brogue which, she did not know, he had preserved as carefully as the manner of his remarks in the years, a lifetime, since Dublin had seen him last. But had she known, she would not have cared. What she saw was indistinguishable from what she felt and that brogue, telling tales, lay under her childhood like foundations of water. The tales seemed to whisper to her now from the magic glass.

And yet the grey back, turned solidly to her and moving away, mocked her as she looked.

THE racecourse, outside the oval of the track, had lost to bright fashion its summer colour and only inside the track, where a grey ambulance waited and a few men moved, was the grass still to be seen, brown and burned by the sun.

Margaret focused the glasses, won from Harry by promises she could never keep, until the whole racecourse lay clear and close, almost under her hand. In the birdcage the horses for the first race circled and danced, perched on by jockeys as light and as perky and as gay as parakeets, and threaded out curving and sidestepping on to the unmarked track. Above the roofs of the buildings—the totalisator, the members' stand, the grandstand, the bar—the red balloon rode as no balloon ever rode, rigid from its mast, and away to the left the tide rose in patterns of light and shadow through the mangroves. The horses, rich as velvet, strained on tight reins past the grandstand, out to the barrier wires. Shredded by the breeze the tatters of music blew up, harsh and gay, to where the children



A Short Story by MAURICE DUGGAN

sat; and with one arm hooked around the post Margaret stared through the binoculars.

Can you see anything? Harry asked. She did not answer.

Swinging and turning the horses came into line, broke, re-formed and burst away, running in silence, charging, while the wide line narrowed and beat against the rails, and she saw them go into the bend and show again, smaller now straining in the same amazing silence across the back-straight and run towards her, colour after colour bright in the sunlight, to come to the hurdles where, still in silence, they stretched out and hung a moment as though carved from something solid and eternally still, and ran on. They raced in silence, or to a series of sounds—the banging of a gate, a radio playing, a car passing on the road—which served only to heighten the silence within that charmed lens. She felt that she had by some magic entered a world where, because of the silence, nothing human might ever enter again, and even Harry shouting for his turn, could not disturb it.

Singly, in twos and threes, the horses rose and came on, fleeing across the confining circle until, when they were almost free, she shifted the binoculars and they were caught again. In the silence the billowing colours drummed and shone. She outpaced the running horses merely by moving her wrist and waited them at the double jump. The first horse rose to it and touched and rose again and was gone; the brush on the hurdles trembled. But before she, too, could swing away the following horses showered into the lens and, all grace gone, struck and fell, and a jockey in crimson and yellow silks and white breeches made an absurd clash of colour on the green grass.

Only when she took the binoculars from her eyes did the shouting beat up

to her, blown, too, like the music, to shreds, whispering and roaring over the rooftops and the road.

Could you see anything? Harry asked.

THE air was growing colder. A wind blew across the mangroves, where now the tide had stolen from the muddy channels. They sat now out of their niche, on the top verandah step, and stared down: they had not spoken for a long time.

How many have you got? Harry asked.

I wasn't counting, Margaret said.

I've got hundreds, Harry said. Not counting the people; they don't count.

Not people, Margaret agreed.

But horses do, Harry said. And horse-floats. They're four, and an ambulance is three—but I haven't seen one.

There was one on the racecourse following the horses round.

A brewery lorry counts, Harry said.

And jockeys? Margaret asked.

Jockeys, but not proper people, Harry said.

How much do they count for? Margaret asked. But she did not wait to hear.

Now the cars had begun to move again, nosing out into the main road and accelerating up the hill. The shadow of the house fell across the lawn and the road. A flat above the grandstand caught the last of the sun and stretched and flapped and the traffic policeman waved his white arms. Mr. Toms swung through his garden of jockey-bright flowers, watering his plants with a hose: through the blowing spray a rainbow arched. Mr. and Mrs. Lenihan came through the gate.

Hallo, Mr. Lenihan cried, breezy and boozy, up from the gate. Have you made a pile?

Hallo, they said in unison, descending.

We nearly made a killing, Mr. Lenihan said. But the judge was a blind man.

A blind man on a left-hand course, Mrs. Lenihan said, like someone repeating a lesson.

Remembering that Mr. Toms had been almost blind since his fall, Margaret looked to see if he had heard: she looked to where the spray was drifting back over the beds of flowers, but Mr. Toms was gone. She followed her father into the house, where his gaiety hammered in all the rooms. Under the gaiety, she mused, nursing mournfully and yet with delight, a vision of the silk and velvet colours falling spread out through the silent circle, falling to the silent grass. It might have been a vision—perhaps of death—multicoloured and fantastic and benign, from which smothering her in wonder, the silence had taken all but the charm. But she did not know. On the short grass the gay colours had lain so still.

Mr. Lenihan was quiet. He pushed himself up from his chair and crossed the darkened room to where she sat. In a pale recollection of his former gaiety, he smiled.

Ah, well, he said, the judge is a blind man and that's that. A blind man, he joked to her wondering face.

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