
Opening Extract from...

The Early Morning Light

Written by Edward Forde Hickey

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"… a wonderful collection of tales, resounding with a sense of loss and valediction… an exquisite description of Nature."

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"… a vibrant and entertaining description of Ireland in these wartime years… an enjoyable text, laden with a nostalgia for a rural childhood… written in a lyrical style, very much in the Irish literary tradition."

Jakob von Baeyert (Director, Addison and Cole)

The author spent his early life in Tipperary (Dolla) and now lives in Kent with his wife. He has been writing sporadically since his days at University where he studied Classics.

THE EARLY MORNING LIGHT

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For Grannie and Jack,
who carved out the pathways
of my early Irish childhood.

Dowager with her little evacuee at The Easy Stile

Introduction

The Story of Teddy – a newborn child evacuated from the German Blitz of WW2 and brought up by his grandmother (Dowager) and uncle (Blue-eyed Jack) – took place in a tiny Irish outpost known as Rookery Rally. In years gone by it had been a place for the gentry with their high chandeliers and balls, hunting and steeplechasing, killing the odd fat woodpigeon and long-tailed pheasant – but also a place of menial husbandry and drudgery for the rest of mankind.

Move forward several years and you'd fine it hard to imagine the dark days of World War II when the local country-folk (if they had a bit of land) often felt as though there was no world-war worth talking about, such was their daily lack of any ache or pain resulting from this war's cruelties. Indeed they were seen to be living on their little hillside farms as contented as any rich lord and his lady. Forget about the salmon, forget about the trout and the countless rabbits that they hunted. Hadn't they six or seven shorthorn cows to milk each morning and the creamery cheque each month? Hadn't Teddy and his two guardians their two ploughed fields of spuds (the red for themselves and the white for the pigs) with cabbages and turnips thrown in alongside? Hadn't they money in their fist from the sale of this year's big fat pig (even after bringing home a young pig from the market inside in The Roaring Town) and another pig fattening in the pig-house, ready to be killed and salted? Hadn't they hens and ducks for their eggs? Hadn't they Dowager's black-handled knife to saw the neck of her best goose into oblivion or else make use of her hatchet to chastise a hen's neck when the need arose? Whoever heard of The Famine?

Amongst these farmers this little English boy's story rests, at first within the folds of Dowager's apron and then spreading out on freedom's wings alongside his uncle (Blue-eyed Jack) and around the little farm's nine fields

that crept down to The Bog Wood and eased their way into the black waters of River Laughter. The farm was almost five hundred miles away from the bombed-out ruins of London and his true parents (Little Nell and Shy Patsy). It was the safest and most pleasant spot on earth for any child to be developing his young soul, surrounded by tall windy trees atop of which a colony of rooks kept up a perpetual cawing – hence giving the place the name of Rookery Rally. In tune with all this was the sound of merrily babbling waters which went on from September till April when several mountain springs gushed up out of the earth and melodious little streams tore their eager pathways through every farmyard on their downward sweep from The Hills-of-The-Past towards the distant rumblings of River Laughter and from there on into The Roaring Town River and finally tossed their way through The Jackass Falls as they hurried on into The Mighty Shannon River itself.

Into the eyes and soul of this growing toddler were poured images of the men, women and children, who lived alongside him during the first five years of his life. He would forever remember the lively laughter of them all – flourishing from dawn until dusk, like bunches of untamed nettles – and their daily lives would one day seem to him as something akin to a tune played out by Nature's own vibrant orchestra – at least for most of the time he was in their midst.

ONE

The Dance

When Little Nell met Shy Patsy
at The Platform Dance
in Judy's Meadow

It was June in the year of 1937. The Hills-of-The-Past had always had its fair share of mischief-makers. But there were times when the mountain slopes saw the other side of the coin and the fields echoed with innocent laughter and pure joy. It was then that you'd notice how the rascally devilment that was in the hearts of the boys was replaced with this other gentler mood, namely the shy little sighs out of the older girls and their shivery longing for a bit of feathery romance during a summer's twilight. You'd never see any of these girls climbing up the back of a thatched roof and tying the potato-sacking round the chimney before throwing a terrified chicken down into the fire to persecute the two poor old souls who were saying their evening rosary inside at the fireside. Unlike their brothers, these girls saw no fun in listening to the old folk cursing like blazes and scraping their hobnail boots around the floor as they ran here and there and (blinded with smoke) tried to catch the chicken and throw her out the door. No – our girls were content to spend their summer afternoons leaning on their elbows at the front table and looking out over the scarlet geraniums on the windowsill underneath the thatch. The little dreamers could imagine a gallant horseman on his shining white steed as he pranced out from the pages of their novel and came racing in across the flagstones and up the cobbled yard to the half-door to carry them off to The

Land of Pleasure. If only… if only… and they gave a little shudder and they shook themselves back into their day-to-day reality.

The days during this month of June (1937) were growing longer and they were getting hotter. The girls' hearts were bursting to be off to one of the platform dances that were held out across the fields. Their tingling feet couldn't stay quiet for another minute. The hillside fairies and the woodland fairies and the river fairies (and we all believed in their existence) were in one agreement: there was no place on this earth as wonderfully charming as The Platform Dance in Judy Rag's Meadow. There'd be a crowd of sixty dancers up there, each one anxious to make the most of these fine hot evenings. When summer came to its end they knew that the only dance they'd ever get away to would be the great winter Wran-Byze-Ball above in The Welcoming Room of Din-Din-Dinny-the-Stammerer. This took place on the day after Christmas (St. Stephen's night). The piles of shiny coppers that the youngsters had collected from their house-to-house singing for the old men and women in the hills would allow them to set their skirts a-swirling and their hobnail boots aflame beneath Dinny's rumbling rafters. And there'd be a fine fat feast thrown in as well.

The day before the dance saw Dowager's young charmers doing more than their usual share of the housework: dusting the four corners of the rooms with the big goose-wings and using the little wings for all the more particular work. Their knees were red-raw from scrubbing The Welcoming Room floor. The cups, saucers and plates on the top of the dresser were as white as a haystack in the snow. It would do no harm (such was their cunning logic) for a young girl to have her mother on her side when planning an evening's escape to the hillside dance, which was nothing less than a trip into Dreamland itself.

Once the housework was completed to Dowager's satisfaction they took their bowls of dripping and their pig-grease down to Abbey Cross and they sold them to the passersby or they traded them in over the counter at Curl 'n' Stripes drinking-shop for the price of four pennies, which would get them a few lemonades and a contribution to the musicians at the dance.

The boys, of course, escaped from all the housework but they showed just as much dedication as the girls and they carried back their six buckets of water from the well and they chopped the logs for the fire. Blue-eyed

Jack (the older brother) looked on approvingly and he helped them to stack up the woodpile at the pig-house wall. He could see his own face reflected in theirs. He knew how much his brothers longed for an evening when they could venture like their sisters into the unreal world of Fairyland and escape from the monotony of the house-fire and the ticking of the old clock on the press cupboard shelf.

Wednesday was the evening for the dance and the girls wore their one-and-only posh frock. Maybe it was a cast-off dress from a much older sister. Maybe it was a dress made by their mother from a fine garment given to them by one of the rich ladies in The Big House. One or two of the girls had rich dresses (blue, lavender and even pink) from kinfolk living in that heavenly spot way out across the sea that was still referred to as The Land of The Silver Dollar. Dressed out to kill, they were sure to catch the nod and the wink of every young lad the minute they made their first few tentative dance-steps round the field's dance-boards.

On the evening before the dance (Tuesday) Dowager's daughters knelt down before the bedtime fire. They raised their pious eyes to the oil-lamp on the tapestry and they offered up their prayers for the souls of one or two of their brothers; for these lads were the proud owners of the shiny bikes that the girls would need for cycling the few miles across the countryside to the dance. They stormed into The Big Cave Room behind the hob. They helped Blue-eyed Jack to repair the tyres with the patches, the powder and glue from the yellow tin. When the tyres were pumped up good and hard they helped him to grease and oil the metal parts. They made sure to test the safety of the brakes for the downward journey home when the moon might be fast asleep in her corner behind the clouds. Most girls travelled three-to-a-bike to the dance, taking it in turns to ride the old 'hackle' (their name for a bicycle) with one of them on the saddle and steering the handlebars and the other two on the crossbar and the carrier respectively.

Blue-eyed Jack could do nothing but cast an envious eye at his young brothers and sisters. He knew he was too old and stiff in the knees to go off and enjoy an evening's dancing. All he had these days were a few faded memories of the rosy-cheeked girls that he once held warmly in his arms above in Judy's Meadow. He stood there, admiring his younger brothers; tomorrow they'd be getting themselves dressed up for the dancing frenzy.

They'd be speeding their boots across the shortcut through the wooded slopes of Lisnagorna to meet up with their cycling sisters. But the big man had another little thought inside in his head: it wasn't just running off to this evening's dance they'd be doing (he thought), for a year or two from now each one of them would be flying away from Dowager's nest and taking the Limerick Junction train to faraway Dublin or even the cattle-boat out across the stormy Irish Sea. And whereas there was nothing to keep them here at home, he was the oldest of them all and he had his family duty to be doing – to stay at home and look after his dear old mother and to tend to the little farm – now that his father (Handsome Johnnie) was lying in his grave below in Abbey Acres after coughing up the last bits of his liver. From that day onwards himself and his mother had been known as The Old Pair.

The Day of the Dance

And now it was Wednesday morning and two or three of Dowager's seven sons were stripped to the waist and they were splashing themselves with a fair share of the water from the freezing yard-stream and the girls were fixing up their hair in front of the looking-glass with their papers and their hot rags and they were getting ready to put on their cotton dresses laid out on top of their mother's bed. Four of the older boys now jumped in over John's Gate. They headed down towards River Laughter. When they were in under the metal bridge they threw off their shirts and their trousers and they mocked and laughed at each other's private manly bits, what they called their private credentials. They threw the carbolic soap from one to the other, now and then hitting an unsuspecting daydreamer on the back of his poll with it and soon they were as clean as any scraped pig.

Their laughter and roars echoed out from under the bridge. It caught the ear of Fanny Adams above near the hayshed of her uncle Mikey. That very minute she had arrived breathlessly after her fifteen-mile bike-ride from beyond The Roaring Town. She was here for the birth of her aunt Nora's baby. It was to be a most unexpected little gift, since her uncle Mikey was old enough to be put out to grass like an old horse and it was a pure miracle how he had possessed the energy to be fathering a child at this stage of his life, the crafty rascal. Fanny stood at the cowshed door, admiring

Mikey as he milked his cows and groaned his homemade songs into the cows' ears, encouraging them to spill their swishing milk into the echoing depths of his bucket. She couldn't help from laughing; for whilst her uncle hadn't a stem of music inside in his head, he was the only soul in Rookery Rally who had brains big enough to memorise the words of every song imaginable: wouldn't he make a fine solicitor, she thought? And now she begged him to let her into the bedroom and make herself useful to her poor aunt Nora who was already sweating like a pig on top of the bed and gripping the sheets for dear life, but Mikey good-naturedly hunted her away from the bedroom scene.

Just then, stepping out into the yard, Fanny saw little Sing-me-a-song, the eight-year-old daughter of Cackles. Cackles was a good kind neighbour and she would be down soon to deliver and wash the new baby. Young Sing-me-a-song hopped out over the wire fence on top of the ditch, eagerly looking for news of how many more hours and minutes it might take for the baby to come crawling out from underneath Nora's skirts. To distract her Fanny took Sing-me-a-song by the hand. 'Coom with me, let ye!' she said and she led the child away through the pine-trees. Their feet slipping gingerly over the pine needles, they made their way down over the second wire fence at the lower end of Mikey's orchard. They tiptoed towards River Laughter where the roars of the boys could still be heard.

What a sight met their eyes when they got there! The big girl and the little girl saw Dowager's sons and their friend (Restless Rody) frolicking around in the tea-coloured river. They were bouncing upstream like a frog on one leg and they were pretending to be a band of skilful swimmers, although none of them could swim a single stroke – no one in Rookery Rally could! Little Sing-me-a-song let a frightening yell out of her throat when she saw the boys' hairy nakedness and she watched them as they bent down and cupped their hands coyly between their thighs. 'Don't bother hiding yeer private credentials from us,' said Fanny Adams, 'we have seen them all now!' And she rudely placed her thumb between her fingers and she shouted out words of admiration (or was it scorn?) for the attributes of each young lad. She was a very fortunate young missy to get herself back home unscathed before the boys had a chance to lay their hands on the hem of her dress. If they had caught a hold of this unseemly madam, they'd have shown her that they weren't a pack of soft foreign gentry-folk in their

dealings with the fair sex: they'd have dragged her into the river and introduced her to such mysterious and earth-shaking games as she had never played in all her born days. But that wasn't the end of the matter: what a little heathen this pretty miss and her leering eyes turned out to be; for she did not go back through the pine-trees empty-handed but took home Restless Rody's shirt and his trousers and left him without a stitch of clothing to put on!

Not long afterwards (it was almost two o'clock) Dowager's younger children were playing with their jackstones on the flagstones. One or two of them were trying to draw their mother's face with their coloured pebbles from the river, when they saw the strangest of sights coming on up The Open Road. It was Blue-eyed Jack's four young brothers and half-a-dozen sympathetic men from the drinking-shop. They were marching along in a silent huddle. Unbeknownst to these little ones and hidden away from their prying eyes was the hapless shape of Restless Rody and he was bringing nothing in the world home with him except his own shivery nakedness. The children stopped their play and they scratched their heads and they wondered at the strange spectacle of men marching along like a bunch of soldiers at this unearthly hour of the day. They could see the suspicious eyes of the group peering back into their midst from time to time to see if their prize was safe. What in God's holy name could these men be hiding?

'Is it an escaped calf?' they pondered. It could be.

'Have they brought us back a dead crane?' Maybe.

'Is it a deer that they have just this minute killed with the sickle?'

They were awfully anxious to get a little peep and to know the answer to this mystery of all mysteries. Finally the men reached the stile outside Mikey's grove. Then they reached Dowager's flagstones where they came to a sudden halt. There followed a cute little pause and it seemed to last for as long as eternity itself. Suddenly (and with enough volume to awaken the dead below in the graveyard) the marchers let out a deafening roar and then (the rascally tinkers that they were) they ran off over the singletree and out across Dowager's haggart! Oh me, oh my, oh misery! Oh sheer and dreadful wretchedness! There in the middle of The Open Road stood the misfortunate spectacle of Restless Rody and he pure terrified. He was wearing nothing but his coy little birthday suit and he was holding onto his private credentials for dear life. The laughing children danced around him.

They began poking at him with twigs and they tried to get a little look in under his crossed legs. What tales they'd have for their schoolmaster (Dang-the-skin-of-it) when he asked them for their daily news – the tale of a shy young man and his two fists firmly grasped around his private credentials!

The Journey

Bless the bit! It would soon be six o'clock and the dancers would be late if they didn't hurry on. Dowager frantically tried to shoo her girls towards the bikes at the hen-house wall. 'Can't ye see how the sun's trembling rays (she was always known for her scholarly words) are already starting to depart from ye – she'll soon be hiding herself out over Galway and the sea.'

Within the hour the mountain pathways would be filled with streams of young dancers pedalling (faster, faster, faster – the girls) and running over ditches (the racing boys) towards Judy's platform. The gaiety of the music was like a ship's siren calling to each of them. Judy herself, however, wouldn't be able to hear a single stem of the fine music for she was as deaf as a post and she was a hundred-and-five years of age according to Dowager (who knew everything).

Dowager stood with her daughters at the half-door, fussing over their hair and admiring the dazzle of her would-be charmers. She turned proudly towards her boys, shaking her head unbelievably at the stamp of them. They were in their best Sunday jackets and the white shirts with the collars out over the jacket and their hair was curved back in a wavy quiff with lashings of soapy water. She thought how lucky were the girls that they would be holding in their arms this evening and, as though she were blessing the crops in her fields, she gave each one of them a good shower of her holywater and she said, 'Be good and mind how ye go and always remember what I have taught ye – God is always looking!'

Then she watched them as they set off. 'Look at them daughters of mine,' said she whimsically to herself. 'They are like a crowd of cackling hens, each one of them on the look-out for a handsome young cockerel,' and she re-entered through the half-door, a wise old smile on her jaw as she remembered her own girlhood days.

Her younger children came running out into the yard. They almost

knocked her over as they hurried over the flagstones to give a last wave of goodbye to the bigger girls. There was a mixture of smiles and sadness on their mystified little faces. They would do their own share of praying this evening and get down on their knees and ask God to hold off the rain in the hope that their older sisters would have the merriest of times doing the heel-and-toe above on Judy's wooden boards. In a year or two's time when it was their own turn to reach a certain age of comeliness and maturity they themselves would go off and seek out the heart-rending music and do their own tidy dance steps – steps that'd knock the very strength out of the hills (so they'd be telling you).

With hearts as light as thistledown Dowager's girls and their leggy limbs shot ever onwards, cycling through the green and lush countryside. It was steep at the beginning, up around Mureeny. Then more and more dancers met them beyond the crossroads where once their parents had danced and caroused to the tunes of paper-and-comb and The Shy Scissors Sisters playing their polkas from inside the ditch. And then the hilly lanes suddenly wound upwards and the girls got off and they pushed their bikes. Then they came to the white cross where Little Jack had been crushed to his death by the mistress's unexpecting car on his very first day's outing to the school-house.

Once passed Mureeny the dancers got back on their bikes and they raced on towards the music. Their skirts flapped off of their knees and their heads hung low in the face of the dewy breezes coming down at them through the Lisnagorna pine-trees. They were as determined as a dog with a rusty kettle tied to its tail. From time to time one of the bike's chains came off from the inner cranks and wheels. It was then that a girl's unholy curses could be heard polluting the airy hills: 'Mee feckin chain! Mee feckin chain! – Shit! Will ye look at it!' The other girls ran to the ditches and they brought back fists of sand with which they covered the chain and cranks and away they went again, the sand causing the chain to grip once more. In the distant meadow at the other end of The Black Banks (joy to their ears) they heard the timeless swell of the music, coming from the fiddles and the melodions. Their hearts seemed to be bursting in pounding anticipation and they pedalled faster than ever and they couldn't wait to throw their pennies into the hat at the field gateway.

And Then They Were There

The meadow was edged with four blackened ditches, heaped high with smoothed-away quarry-stones. There were no coloured lanterns or romantic lamps hanging down to glorify the dance-floor and the only illumination was the big yellow moon and the dreamy stars and the lofty silvery clouds dancing gaily across the purple sky. In less than no time the girls raced out onto the platform, their hearts drunkenly full of the music and the thumping hobnail boots of their partners, those strange mountainy men in the 'round-the-house-and-mind-the-dresser' half-sets. Whether the sky glowed or not didn't seem to be bothering the older girls. Indeed the darker it got, the better for some of these romantic little hussies – the music and excitement gradually making them a good bit bolder than their priest in his confession-box would have wished. And as the evening wore on, some of them were sure to indulge themselves in the odd bit of shy and slobbery kissing in the darkened corners of Judy's field, whispering their words of romance into some poor befuddled lad's ears.

Little Nell

During this same sunny June (1937) Little Nell, the future mother of Teddy, was spending her days working from dawn till dusk for a cruel farmer (Sallyswitch) in his great big mansion. She was Dowager's oldest daughter. With her father dead, it was her duty (as soon as she reached thirteen and had made The Sacramment of Confirmation) to take on the role of a pure slave and send home the matchbox with the brown ten-shilling note in it, delivered each month by one of the local farmers on his way home from the creamery. By now it was her seventh year of hard labour and at twenty-years-of-age she was heartily sick of it. Indeed there were times when she was beginning to feel as old as her own mother.

This Wednesday evening would prove to be her one and only chance of a night's enjoyment above in Judy's meadow and she grabbed her dancing shoes with eager hands and she tiptoed out the back-window. She felt almost like a thief. Never again would she get so good a chance to escape from her

drudgery and from the lustful clutches of her drunken old taskmaster, not to mention the yard-brush with which his cruel hag-of-a-wife (La-dee-dah) belted the back of her legs whenever she needed a little bit of extra amusement. The two old heathens had gone to sell their best racehorses at the sales in Newmarket across The Irish Sea and wouldn't be back till the following evening. Little Nell would remember this night's dancing for as long as she lived; for before the night was over she'd find her heartstrings twisted into a great big muddle at the sight of Shy Patsy and his galloping jig-steps.

Prayerful-Tim was a 'silenced' priest (the penalty for innocently mismanaging the diocesan funds) and he was the sharer of Little Nell's gloomy existence in the rat-and-mouse-infested attic. He planned to give her the loan of his rusty old bike as soon as her two cruel taskmasters were on board the big ship. Only too well did a grateful Little Nell know that her slavery would start again at the crack of dawn when she'd be up once more and pulping the turnips and mangols for the six angry sows. But for this one evening in her life she'd be damned if her platform dance wouldn't give her a sweet taste of glory and her life of slavery could go drown itself to hell in one of the many nearby bog-holes!

Earlier in the morning she had run down behind the hen-house, taking with her the broken bit of looking-glass from her drawer. Prayerful-Tim fixed the looking-glass on the hedgerow for her. He helped her with the papers and the hot rags for twisting her hair into ringlets and curls. He carefully combed out her raven locks. Little Nell put a little of La-dee-dah's Sunday-Mass powder to her cheeks and the rouge (a little) to her lips. Her heart was all of a shiver as she shyly stepped out of her old calicos and belted on her best Sunday-Mass frock. Finally Prayerful-Tim (as though he were Cinderella's very own fairy godmother) helped her smooth out the folds of her lovely dress and he made her do a few quick turns and twists around in the yard: 'Nell, my dearest Nell, you look fit to sit at the table with Queen Maeve of Ireland!' She gazed at her face in the looking-glass and she fervently prayed that her wishes would come true and that she'd meet her handsome young prince at Judy's dance this very evening.

Free! Free! Free! Like a bird flown out the window from its cage Little