

The White Mountain

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Shadows had begun to creep down the White Mountain, delicately stroking its bold flanks, when the three reached their destination. Their restless glances, their caps, their trenchcoats, with the bulge in the righthand pocket, proclaimed them to be gunmen and "on the run" – as we used to say in the troublous times. Had there been a spectator at hand he would have seen, if he had not been filled with lead first, three figures files for a moment against the saffron sunset and then melt into a tumble of boulders that crown one of the ridges. It was Raftery who led the way, pale youthful fanatical; then came the huge figure of O'Flynn, carrying a bundle; and after him, throwing suspicious glances over his shoulder, a wizened little man who answered to any name that suited the emergency, but was known to his intimates as "Knacker" – from a former and very transitory connection with the horse trade, or perhaps just because he looked like it.

After they had pushed a boulder across the entrance of their sanctuary, they began to put it in order by the waning light that filtered through chinks and gaps in the stones. O'Flynn opened his bundle and spread blankets and food on the ground. Knacker took some black bottles out of a cranny. Raftery peered through the chinks to the N., E., S., and W., biting his nails. For some moments they ate and drank without speaking; they had walked, crawled, run, and foraged for the last five hours. Then Knacker turned to Raftery.

"Well, Commandant," he said sourly, "you've furnished a nice little love nest for us all to be slaughtered in."

"Ah, let me alone, will ye. Is it my fault they made me Commandant when the English got Mike Malone? Isn't it enough to be dying for liberty without you whimpering and snarling at everyone?"

"Let him alone, so," said O'Flynn: "take another sup. It's right stuff, it is. It 'ud have a dead out of his grave. Me brother used to brew it up here and the polis would often come up for their drop. But there's none making poteen now: the country's gone to the dogs, shur."

Raftery's eyes glittered. "I tell yez to God, we'd have had them in the town, all them Tans, if the boys hadn't run away. A grand ambush it was... They're no better than a pack of dirty cowards, the lot of them."

"Ambushes, is it?" answered O'Flynn. "Do ye mind the time we stopped the train at Ballinarie and took out the Tommies on leave; and Mike sent the engine racing up to Dublin full of dynamite and forgot we'd blowed up the viaduct beyant? That was a right ambush, a right -".

"O, shut yer face," broke in Knacker, "you and your blather about ambushes, when there's a carload of Tans scouring the country after us. You'll be shrieking for a priest before the night's out."

"Well, you're a nice fellow to have for the Cause," Raftery exclaimed. His voice grew shrill with intensity. "If Kathleen-ni-Houlihan cries for help before the night's out, there's one here anyway will not be behindhand."

O'Flynn put another bottle to his lips. "Go on with your Kathleens and your rhapsodaisying, Commandant! I'm going to finish the poteen before the Tans come. They're devils for the drink, them ones."

Gradually their talk guttered out. O'Flynn applied himself to the bottles; Raftery to visions of Kathleen-ni-Houlihan. Knacker was nervously fingering his revolver. There was a shred of moon and a few clouds like ink smudges on the sky.

"Did y'hear that? What was that?" exclaimed Knacker suddenly, almost sobbing.

The stripling Raftery sprang up, his whole frame galvanised with the excitement of relief. "You take that corner, O'Flynn! You there, Knacker!"

The two sprang to their places. "Don't shoot till they're within twenty yards... Up, the Republic!" he added under his breath. They listened and peered for a while, but the only sound to be heard was the little man's teeth chattering.

"Stop that din, me little hero!" growled O'Flynn. "What to God's taken ye at all? Ye'd screech if a flea hopped on yer grave. What for did ye join the likes of us, I wonder?"

"I didn't bargain to be chased about by an army of bloodthirsty soldiers. In war you fill your pockets. This ain't a war, it's a ruddy mouse hunt, if you ask me. For the matter o' that, what are you doing here yourself? I reckon you're not one of those flaming patriots like the Commandant."

"What am I doing here The O'Flynn was never ones to be backward when there's fun about. And if ye wag yer jaw any more at me, ye dirty black Protestant shrimp, I'll stamp on ye."

"Quit that!" ordered Raftery. "Is it decent to be bating each other when the enemies of Ireland are all round yez, may be?"

The other two quitted it and lay down in their looted blankets. But there was not going to be much peace in the stronghold of liberty that night. Presently a thin small scream rose into the air outside. O'Flynn buried his head in a blanket. "Mother of God and all the saints protect us! There's a Banshee in it. We're all dead men."

"To hell with yer Banshee!" said Raftery. "That's only a rabbit... When me father shot this mountain there was none dared poach here at all. And now every ruffian of a fellow does be laying his snares about the place. There's not an honest man left in the country."

The scream persisted, thin and unwavering as a spire of smoke from a little wood fire on a windless day. O'Flynn was still moaning to the saints: Raftery relapsed into meditation. Knacker's leathery face quivered: he made a motion to put his hands over his ears. Then abruptly he moved to the entrance and began to tug at the boulder.

"Are ye mad, or what is it?" Raftery hissed. "They'll get ye sure if ye go out." But the little man muttered, "I can't stand it, I can't stand it," and squeezed through the gap. O'Flynn's moon of a face rose above the blankets. "Let um go, and good riddance... I told ye a Banshee was in it."

Knacker was stumbling recklessly down the mountainside towards the noise. He found the broken rabbit. He was so intent extricating it that he did not notice the night around him fell with figures and the rifles pointing at his head. "Put 'em up!" came a voice. "Where's the others?"

Knacker started. Then his wizened face took on the very serenity of the moon-washed night. "They're not here."

"Tell us where they are and we'll not touch you."

"I tell you they're not here: we scattered at Drumnealy, three miles away. An' I hope you find them."

The figures held a brief consultation: the voice said, "We'd best go back again and look for 'em. But we'll finish this – first."

At dawn Raftery and O'Flynn crept out of the boulders. Fifty yards down they found Knacker with many bayonet holes in him and a dead rabbit beside him. There was nothing else on all the White Mountain.