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MISS McCARTHY'S "REPPITATION"

There was a big sept of O'Briens in the Northeast in those days, distinguished from each other, according to old local custom, by descriptive agnomination, said Father, settling back in the old saddlebag. We had O'Brien the Bargee, O'Brien the Rake, O'Brien the Liar, and O'Brien the Spy, who disturbed courting couples on the banks of the big river. And we had O'Brien the Ka Ka, named for a stupid-looking bird found in the big swamps. What follows is a transcript from the life history of the last-named O'Brien, who should properly be called something other than Ka Ka for a stupid swamp bird.

Though I am somewhat prejudiced in O'Brien's favour, Father confessed, I cannot deny that on appearances the soubriquet fitted him. He was a herculean simpleton, with prominent ears and a voluminous beard, and his daily bread was gained by carrying the mail from the river landing to the nearby township of Frogmore, with a little sleeper-cutting thrown in. The Ka Ka was as proud of his "contrack" as if it had been the postmaster's job, and he valued it all the more as it brought him into contact, in an official connection, with pretty Mary McCarthy the daughter of the storekeeper and postmaster at the Landing.

Long, long had he sighed for the print-clad divinity of McCarthy's Landing. Not that he had ever spoken to her on the subject of his affections. He was far too diffident for that; indeed he seldom addressed her at all. Sometimes when she handed him the mail-bags, which she always made up, he would blush right down to his collar bone and remark, with confused inappropriateness: "They say that sleepers'll

be five bob at the stump before the winter's over". Or he would tell her, gasping the while with nervous trepidation, that his brother Pat had just brought a fiddle, or something else equally inconsequent and silly. Then Miss McCarthy would scrape a speck of sealing wax from her apron, make some commonplace reply and, with a whirl of her skirt, would be swallowed up in an avenue of axe-handles and flour bags which bisected the paternal store. Whereupon a lump would arise in the joyful Ka Ka's throat and, climbing to the saddle, with a shake of the reins he would gallop off, an inarticulate Lochinvar in moleskin and dungaree.

But O'Brien the Ka Ka's poor unsubstantial little idyll came to an end with the arrival of William Taylor, the new postmaster and telegraph operator at Frogmore. This functionary was the first fruit of a new regime. Heretofore, old, staid married men had been sent to fill the official positions in the country north of the ranges in the Murray's isolated townships, but now an attempt was to be made to improve the social conditions in these God-forgotten settlements. Spruce and personable young postal clerks were to be sent up, and their influence would wean the local misses from their tendency to wear brown winceyette and elastic-sided boots. They would, moreover, be an object lesson in culture to the timber-getting and sleeper-cutting aristocracy generally.

A well-shorn and well-groomed young fellow, Taylor had been small potatoes enough in metropolitan society but here, amid the nascent civilisation of Frogmore, he became a social star of the first magnitude. The sale of stamps trebled in the first week; only Heavens knows what the girls did with them. And there was an epidemic of dances and picnics and riding parties, mainly for the delectation of the young Caesar, who had come, had seen, and ^{had} conquered the local femininity.

In the eyes of Mary McCarthy Taylor presented such a contrast to the hirsute, rough and ignorant masculinity in her unbeautiful surroundings that she fell a

victim at their first meeting. Their official connection favoured social intercourse and, ere long, their relationship had become such as invariably, when the embers of passion have ashened to the greyness of satiety, ends in misery. Probably he was first attracted to her by her hoydenish prettiness, but masculine human nature cannot long endure female initiative in love-making, and his passion had scarce begun to wax ere it began to wane. But, although Mary was unmaidenly in her methods, she did not deserve Taylor's treatment of her.

Meanwhile the poor Ka Ka had watched the wreck of his dreams with rare stoicism. The appearance of this Satanas in his Eden had seared his heart, but he winced not; at least not until it filtered into his dull comprehension that his divinity was being talked about in the market place, and in other centres he visited.

One day, some months after Taylor's arrival, I overtook the Ka Ka on the road between Frogmore and McCarthy's Landing. As his mount cantered slowly along, he sat dejectedly in the saddle and warbled to himself an interminably long bush balled called "The Wild Colonial Boy".

"Ah, O'Brien", I said, as I drew up alongside. "Light-hearted as usual?"

The Ka Ka looked at me very hard. "You know better than that, mister", he said, "and well you and everybody else knows why, mister".

I made a negative gesture, but O'Brien went on:

"No, mister, you know right enough. I respect you because you're always writin' in the papers for the good of the district, like havin' metal on the roads and new timber on the Landin', and as I must talk to somebody, I'd rather talk to you than anybody else. What's worryin' me is Miss McCarthy's reppitation. Now p'raps you think I'm jealous because he cut me out? No, it ain't that. I felt it bad, of course, but I never squealed. It's this, mister. When a country girl goes balmy

over a city toff, and lets him see it morning, noon and night - well, we all know what happens. It happens to lots of women, but we don't like it to happen to our sisters or them we're fond of, mister, although we know if our women escape, then somebody else's has to suffer to make the average come out right".

"Why, O'Brien", I said, "you're quite a philosopher".

"I don't know what that means, mister, but up to the point what I was talkin' about it was only human nature. But do you know what that mongrel did this morning? I was in the office at Frogmore awaitin' for the mails, and he was on the ticker talking to his pals along the line about what he was doing with Miss McCarthy. I know the keyboard sounds all right - practised them for months after old Tom Salter the last lightnin' jerker who was at Frogmore learnt me. But he didn't know that. Yes, mister, he was clickin' orf his villany to these coves and they signals back 'Good on yer" and 'Good fer yer'. And he sits there grinnin' at their words, so in the intrests of Miss McCarthy's reppitation, I donged him on the skull with a bit of quarterin' that was lyin' on the counter and flattened him out".

"Good Lord! You didn't kill him?"

"No, mister, I let him orf, and pulled him around with some brandy, and used some stickin' plaster. I told him he mustn't put Miss McCarthy's reppitation into dots and dashes. And I could've killed him like a flea if I hadn't thought that we might want him as a husband later in the intrests of that reppitation. D'you twig?". And the poor devil winked mysteriously.

"Ah, he was dirt all right. You ain't got no idea what that girl has done for him. The mail from the Landin' got very heavy after he came, with her puttin' jars of rassberry jam and sheep's tongues in parcels in the bag and sendin' them to him. After that the bags got heavier, but I didn't say nothin'. But when the

contract's up I'm goin' to double my tender or give it away. Mind you, all this extra weight ain't because of her parcels for him, but since she began it's made up a lot of it. And that cur who's been gettin' it all, to go a'braggin' of her shame over miles of wire, contry to regilashuns. But you can bet I'll look after her. So long, mister", he said as we came to the point where I turned off the main road. "Keep your thumb on what I told you, in the intrests of you know what".

Shortly after the meeting with the squire of Miss McCarthy, I left the district, and the pettinesses of my Frogmore experiences were fast being swallowed up in the larger interests of a metropolitan newspaper, when, one day, I was surprised to read in our country news column that Shaun O'Brien, a mail contractor at Frogmore, on the upper Murray, had pleaded guilty in a Wodonga court to a charge of tampering with a mail-bag between Frogmore and McCarthy's Landing. Sentencing O'Brien to twelve months imprisonment, the magistrate said he took a merciful view of the offence because the accused seemed a man of weak understanding. Poor Ka Ka, I thought. He would have been the last man I would have thought of as a thief.

About a week later I received a copy of a weekly news sheet, which circulated around the upper Murray district, from a friend at the local pub up there and, among the Frogmore items reported, was that of a farewell dance given to the postmaster, Will Taylor, who had resigned from the Post Office, and intended settling in West Australia. There'd be a lot of broken hearts left around the big river, especially one at McCarthy's Landing, I thought.

But I was not yet done with news from that far-away territory, for two days later I subbed a press telegram from my old location announcing that the district had been shocked by the accidental death by drowning of Mary McCarthy, daughter of Patrick McCarthy, J.P., storekeeper at McCarthy's Landing. There was a

vagueness in the detail, which, to an experienced pressman, suggested a "hush-up". Properly it would have been my duty to wire for further particulars but, remembering the unfortunate Ka Ka's tender feelings for Miss McCarthy's reputation, and his faith in me "to keep my thumb on it", I forebore.

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It was not until the following year that I learned the true story of the strange happenings in the Frogmore district subsequent to my departure from it, and it was the Ka Ka himself who gave me the facts when I met him unexpectedly in a Wangaratta street. I had gone to the northern town to report a big sheep-stealing case, and I saw him sitting on a seat outside the Catholic church. He had been out of gaol only a couple of weeks, he told me when our happy greeting was over, and had got a job splitting sleepers in the bush nearby. He seemed much the same as when I last saw him, except for his prison-crop, which certainly didn't improve his appearance.

"I have just come in to pay for some masses for Miss McCarthy," he said. "If the priest'd sell curses for the villyan who drove her to it, half my money would have gone that way. But that was along time ago, and when you feel lonely it's good to meet somebody like you agen, mister. You didn't blow the gaff on what I told you she sent in the mail-bag, so I'll tell you what happened after you left there, and how I got jugged".

O'Brien gazed up the sunny street, appreciating what he saw after a long sojourn behind cold stone walls.

"The day before it happened", he said, "I had got the tip that a postal inspector would be at Frogmore the next day to see the mail-bags opened. There was rumours of something crook there; p'raps he'd been skitin' about the free rassberry

jam and all the other things she had sent him in the bags. Well, I wasn't goin' to see Miss McCarthy gettin' in the soup if I could help it, so I kept an eye on her through a hole in the winder frostin' while she was makin' up the mail. This day she was as pale as a ghost and there was something strange about her, but I put it down to her not bein' too happy with him. She put a fairly big parcel in the bag while I watcheé. 'It's not jam or sheep's tongues', I thought, but there was no stamps on it, so I knew it was not regler.

"Anyhow, I got away with the mail all right, but the parcel without the stamp, and the notion of the inspector waitin' at the other end worried me, so I rode into the bush, and broke the seal on the bag. I took out the parcel and untied it, and I got the surprise of my life when I opened it up, mister, for in it was a poor little dead baby wrapped in a little white dress. It was plain to me that poor Miss McCarthy wanted him to share it with her. 'But,' thinks I, 'Miss McCarthy's reppitation first', so I wraps it up agen and buries it back in the scrub where nobody would find it. After that I went on to the office where, sure enough, the inspector was waitin'.

"And, of course, he twigs the open bag, but I didn't let on. They gave me twelve months in the cooler but I didn't mind, except it was a bit crook that the blokes I knew would think I pinched things. But that was the best way, wasn't it, mister, because after that I knew that the poor girl's reppitation was safe. Ah, there goes the priest", and he got to his feet.

"So long, mister. It's been nice seein' you ^uagain. He squeezed my hand and walked towards the church. He must have squeezed it hard, for my eyes were dim.

So long, the Great Heart, I thought, as I watched him enter the church. Never, never were you the poor Ka Ka.