

The elderly postmistress of Kerryhaven's small office was in a quandary. The mail-bag, which had just arrived at the village store, a corner of which housed the post office, contained some small packages and ten letters. The addressees of nine of them were familiar to her; the addressee of the tenth was not - or rather, he was too much so. The envelope, a thick business one, was directed to

Mr Michael Muldoon

Kerryhaven, Victoria

Anastasia Flynn read these words slowly aloud, also the post-mark, which was Melbourne C1. She turned the envelope over but, apart from the address, there was no other printing on it. Puzzled, she removed her glasses and polished them before returning them to her thin nose.

"Father," she called.

A narrow door at the back of the store opened and an old man appeared.

"Here is a letter for Michael Muldoon," she said, "and I am not knowing what to do with it. Here it is. Can you read it?"

He peered at the address and slowly repeated it aloud.

"It's plain enough to me," he said. "What's wrong with, Ana?"

"How many Michael Muldoons are there in Kerryhaven?" she asked.

"Well, well, that's a good joke," he said with a laugh. "Four Michael Muldoons, and a letter for one of them! God bless me! It is fine fun you will be having. There's Michael, farmer, Michael, timber-cutter, Michael, fisherman and --"

"And will I not be knowing it?" cried Anastasia irritably. "There's only one thing to do. You must go to the four of them and tell them there's a letter for one of them. But they must all come together here to see who is to get it."

"It's a good idea, Ana, and it will be fun to see them all together arguing to see who gets it, for they all have the gift of the gab."

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The four members of an ancient clan gathered in a semi-circle before the store counter, behind which the postmistress, solemn and dignified, blinked through her glasses and held the letter before her.

"The letter was posted in Melbourne. Have you any friends there?"

"Well," he said slowly, "it might be a fortune to somebody."

What in all the world did he mean? thought the timber-cutter. Had the letter not been for the fisherman after all?

"I would give a bottle of beer to see the letter for myself," he said, half to himself.

"I will let you see it for that, Michael Muldoon," said the other quietly. "But you must swear to keep it a secret. "

The timber-cutter jumped at the offer.

"I swear to keep it a secret," he said. "Where's the letter?"

"Where's the bottle of beer?"

Eventually it was agreed that the bargain should be completed the following night.

"But what am I to say to the others?" asked the timber-cutter.

"Oh, you can tell them that I give nothing for nothing," the fisherman calmly replied.

The indignation aroused in the village was great, but it did not overcome the suspicion and curiosity, which, indeed, became more than ever acute when the timber-cutter repeated the words, "It might be a fortune to somebody." One or two suspicious people advocated the extreme measure of calling in the policeman, who visited Kerryhaven twice a week, but they were not encouraged. After all, the fisherman had never really harmed anybody and, moreover, he had stood three Muldoons two glasses of beer each not so long ago.

Early on the following evening the timber-cutter reached the lonely hut, his jumper bulging with his fee for knowledge.

"Come in," said the fisherman. "You swear never to tell any soul what I show you?"

The timber-cutter set a bottle of beer on the table and took a solemn oath to remain silent about the contents of the letter.

"Read," said the fisherman, handing him the letter. "And remember I never asked you to come here."

The other took the envelope in his big trembling fingers. Three minutes later he flung the papers on the table and cursing strode to the door.

"Remember," said the fisherman quietly, gathering up the papers and returning them carefully to the envelope, "that I have not sworn not to tell a soul."

As the timber-cutter hurried homewards, he met several neighbors bound for the hut. Each carried a parcel of some kind. They accosted him, and

endeavoured to extract information about his visit to the hut.

"It was nothing ^{1/2}/ nothing at all", he replied evasively.

"We will see for ourselves," they stoutly retorted, and headed for the hut. When they reached it they called for the fisherman and proclaimed their errand boldly when he appeared.

"One at a time," he said quietly. "Come you in first, Patrick O'Brien."

"I will give you this half sack of potatoes," said O'Brien, slipping the load from his shoulder.

"It will do. You have offered it to me remember."

Patrick O'Brien took the oath, read the contents of the latter envelope, and departed, cursing softly. He managed to smile, however, as he passed through the cluster of neighbours.

"Here are two pounds of fine butter," said Michael Muldoon, the farmer, on gaining admittance to the hut.

"It will do."

Four minutes later Michael Muldoon went back to the township, cursing.

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It was after nine o'clock when the fisherman was left to himself. He looked about him with a satisfied grin. On the table lay three pounds of butter, a fowl, a pound of cheese, a bottle of beer, a dozen eggs, two twists of tobacco and a pair of heavy socks. On the floor rested a half sack of potatoes and another of neatly chopped firewood.

"What a lot of kind neighbors I've got", he said to himself as he stirred the fire and flung on it a couple of pieces of small wood.

He opened the bottle of beer, cut himself some bread and cheese, drew the table near the fire ~~xxxxxxx~~, and seated himself near the hearth. He got rid of his sea-boots, stretched his feet to the blaze and took from his pocket the now thumbed and frayed envelope. He regarded it almost affectionately.

"I wonder how they knew my name," he mused. "It is strange that they knew my name in Melbourne. But I have heard that people who send letters like this are very clever. Perhaps they just guessed that there was a Michael Muldoon in Kerryhaven. But it is of no matter. It has been a good thing for them as sent it, but now I am finished with it."

He emptied the envelope and a few closely-printed leaflets followed it into the fire. Finally the flames received a neat and brightly colored booklet. As its cover caught fire, the fisherman read its title and repeated it.

"WHAT IS INDIGESTION?" He smiled. "I thank the good Lord that I do not know, and do not want to know," he murmured, and turned to his supper.