

# UNCLE JACK'S CABIN

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THE COCK CREW at Rooney's heralding the breaking of day. Tom Ryan and Joe Flynn walked down the old road to start work in the quarry. Five other men were there when they arrived at the gate. Jack Lynch was the Ganger. He came ten or fifteen minutes earlier, lit a fire in the hut, a small shelter with a tin roof that would provide some shelter from the harsh weather that lay before them.

"We will have to put a name on this hut," Tom said. "I remember reading a book about a young boy sold into slavery — it was called 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'. We'll call it 'Uncle Jack's Cabin'" he said jokingly to Joe.

Jack the Ganger was a man in his late forties, lived with his mother, a very domineering woman in her eighties. There was no one good enough for her "boy". Jack had a "notion" of Mary Doyle, a girl in her twenties, a farmer's daughter who lived near the village. Jack stood in the doorway looking regularly at the watch that hung from a chain in his waistcoat pocket. If you arrived five minutes late you were "quartered" and would have to sit in the hut and "twiddle your thumbs" until ten o'clock. The old Fordson Major was started up and set the stone crusher in motion. Barrow loads of stones were pushed up the steep ramp and fed into its hungry jaws. Chippings and dust were collected underneath. If you were "short taken" you "spent a penny" in the dense undergrowth nearby. The first break was at ten, you got ten minutes. At one o'clock you had your break of forty minutes. During it, the lads starting talking about the dance in the hall the night before.

"There was a great crowd there," Tom said loudly, giving Joe a nudge. "Pat Reilly isn't in today," he continued "Mary Doyle must have kept him out late last night," he said giving Joe another nudge. "She is a fine girl and Pat is a fine fellow too," he added.

They could see it wasn't going down well with the Ganger. He got up off his chair. "Reilly won't have it all his own way," he said to Tom Daly, his right hand man, on his way out. "He got a job here when he hadn't an arse in his trousers."

Jack's "dander was up" and the lads in the hut were enjoying it.

Pat Reilly arrived for work the next morning. The lads were slagging him, teasing him as usual. "Keep away from Mary Doyle," Jack told him when he got him on his own "if you want to keep working here."

Pat told the lads about the Ganger's threat and the slagging stopped. Two weeks later there was a dance in the local hall. All the lads were there. Pat Reilly and Mary Doyle were there too. Jack the Ganger appeared at midnight, the first time anyone saw him at a dance there. He sat in the corner observing everything, stayed for a while, got up and left. The lads from the quarry could see trouble ahead. Work continued as usual the following week. Nothing was said. On Saturday midday when they finished work, Jack was standing in the doorway. He handed Pat a note. It was his discharge ticket. The lads at the quarry were very upset about it. Pat and Mary were great friends since childhood and Pat was trying to earn a few pounds to get his passage to America. The lads gathered a few pounds, and two weeks later Pat was

on his way to New York. This was great news for the Ganger.

After his treatment of Pat Reilly the lads at the quarry decided to teach the Ganger a lesson. They concocted a story and told Tom Daly that Mary was lonely for Pat and they were having a get-together in Bradley's Pub on Saturday night, and that Mary would be there. Daly quickly brought the news to Jack. Now, Mary had a twin brother, Tim, the spitting image of herself — same eyes, same hair, identical in everything except gender. After a lot of persuasion, the lads dressed him up in Mary's clothe — eyelashes done, lipstick on — and headed for the pub. The real Mary Doyle was in on the act and was warned to keep well out of the way.

Tim's feet were killing him when he arrived at Bradley's. He couldn't walk properly in the high heeled shoes. A band was playing and a few people were dancing. "Mary" was sitting in the corner with a pint in her hand. Everyone knew about the setup. At around eleven o'clock, the door opened and Jack and Tom Daly walked in, ordered a drink and sat in the corner. After a few drinks Jack picked up a bit of courage and asked Mary to dance. Tim got out on the floor with the Ganger. Jack couldn't put a foot under him. Tim's feet were sore enough with the high heels and when Jack stood on them he very nearly uttered a four letter word.

"You'll have a drink Mary?" Jack asked.

"Yes please," Tim replied in the best feminine voice he could manage. "I have a touch of laryngitis," he said in a feeble voice, pointing in the general direction of his throat.

After another attempt at dancing and a few drinks, everyone was in great form and the craic was mighty. In the midst of the merriment "Mary" went over and sat on Jack's knee. A great round of applause followed. The Ganger had a grin on him like a Cheshire cat, and Tom Daly was lapping it all up.

Jack arrived home late. Mary Anne, the mammy, was sitting in her armchair in the corner. He couldn't wait to tell her the good news about Mary Doyle.

"You shouldn't be spending your hard earned money on drink!" she warned, "And what would happen if you got that girl into trouble?"

"We meet Saturday night again" Jack announced proudly.

In the meantime, the lads at the quarry could see a big change in Jack. He could be heard humming a tune to himself, didn't look at the watch as often, and the meal breaks were longer. They all met again on Saturday night as arranged. After a few drinks and some dancing, Jack picked up more courage. "My mother would like to meet you," he said, as they sat in the corner.

Tim got an awful shock when he heard this. When he got his chance he told the lads.

"You'll have to go and do your best" they insisted, "or our plan is finished!"

Tim reluctantly agreed.

It was about half a mile from the pub to Jack's house. Joe had an old Morris Minor and drove Jack and "Mary" to meet Mary Anne. She was sitting in the corner when they arrived. Jack introduced "Mary".

Mary Anne looked her up and down and asked about "her" family. Joe was in the corner, trying to keep a straight face.

"You know, we are well respected people," she said boastfully, "and I want Jack to get someone respectable as well," she added. Jack made the tea and passed round the sweet cake and scones Mary

Anne had baked specially for the occasion. It was now one o'clock.

"I think it's time to go," Joe said to "Mary", who thanked Jack and Mary Anne for their hospitality.

"Ye will call soon," Mary Anne said as the relieved pair headed for the car, but their relief was short-lived; they were just in time to see Jack's goat leaving the scene after chewing all the wires leading to the headlamps. All they could do was go back in again and wait for daylight. Joe told Mary Anne what had happened.

"That dirty bugger!" she said angrily, not a woman to mince her words, "He took the clothes off the line and chewed my ould knickers to bits! He has to go! We will have to get rid of him."

Joe started to picture this scene, and despite the predicament Tim and himself were in, took a fit of laughing. Mary Anne wasn't impressed. Out of the blue, there was an almighty crack of thunder. Lightning followed and the rain was coming down in bucketfuls.

"We will have to get some rest," Mary Anne said. "You wouldn't put a dog out tonight," she added. "Joe and Jack can sleep in the settee bed and Mary can sleep with me."

The two lads looked at one another and Tim went pale with shock. He and Joe were caught up in a plan that had suddenly taken a turn for the worse.

"Come on Mary," Mary Anne said, "There was no-one else in this bed since poor Pat died over twenty years ago. It's in the family for generations, and you and Jack can have it when I am gone."

Tim found his legs trembling as he got into bed.

"You need warm clothes!" she said as she felt Tim's leg, "You're shivering! I have something warm for you in the press." She hopped out of bed, very nimble for a woman of her age. A flash of lightning lit up the room as she returned with

something in her hand. The light gave Tim time enough to see a big pair of bloomers dangling over him.

"Put them on," she insisted.

Tim took another fit of shivering, went into the kitchen, stuck them up under his jumper and went back to bed. After talking for a while, Mary Anne fell asleep and started snoring. Tim or Joe didn't sleep. The cock crew in the hen house, the first sign of daybreak. The lads crept out of their beds and quickly made for the car. They had light now and sped off. As they parted, they swore that no one else would ever know what was after happening; they would be the laughing stock of the Parish.

Jack the Ganger was a different man when they returned to work on Monday, but his joy was short-lived. Mary Doyle was busy preparing to go to America, and she left the following week. Joe broke the news to Daly who wasn't long bringing it to Jack. Things went downhill after that. Jack went back to his bad old ways, wandering around the quarry in a daze. The lads were enjoying this. He had made such a fool of himself.

After a few months, the quarry closed. A lot of the lads emigrated, scattered like chaff in the wind. Tim and Joe went to America, stayed in touch, and after nearly twenty years came home with their wives and families for a holiday. As they walked down the road on a fine summer's evening, they stopped at the old quarry gate. A few sheets of rusty iron was all that was left of "Uncle Jack's Cabin".

They passed Jack Lynch's home. Mary Anne had died, and Jack was looking out the window. He was wondering who the two well-dressed men were. When they passed, they looked at each other and smiled. They kept their promise that no one else would ever know about the night they spend there. That secret would be carried to the grave!