

Mary Donovan

A short story by Nick Fieldhouse

Rory had gone back to see a girlfriend, Mary Donovan, in Ireland on leave from the trenches. The Cork County Club was a haven for officers on leave. The place was full of men from his Regiment, the Leinsters, or what was left of them. Rory had bumped in to his old mate Fitzy, recovering from a mustard gas attack. He was a sorry sight in his cane wheelchair, his mother at the helm. Rory thought he would get over it but he didn't look good. He was whining like a child so Rory made his excuses and left.

Dances and Receptions were the order of the day, and cheap for young officers. He had met Mary at a dance and they had found an instant connection. She had a quick wit and was a student at Trinity College Dublin. She was also very independent minded. If she wanted to be with a young man no-one was going to stop her. They had been spooning in the lanes near the Club when the Black and Tans came by, shooting round the corners as they went. Mary dragged Rory into a ditch for cover, a frequent resort for locals, he learned, since the civil war had started. Rory resolved to leave the Irish to their own devices after that, although he did not confide this to Mary. He didn't need that sort of thing while home on leave, given all that he had seen in France. He would invite Mary over to his parents' in Malvern where they could take up a more peaceful liaison.

Rory and Mary had enjoyed a passionate leave together in Cork. He had smuggled Mary in to his room at the Club over the weekend. She was a carefree and generous lover with little thought for anything but pleasure. The best antidote to war and the oppression of Edwardian parents. He had slowly undressed her lithe form, both of them silent to avoid discovery, locking each other in loving looks. She was a college blue at lacrosse, and her firm pink form was young and wholesome to match his fit soldier-boy muscle.

Fitzy barked at his mother to take him home. Short of breath and in pain he made a sorry sight at the Club, and was very aware of it. The last straw were the rumours about Mary. Now he had seen her for himself, draping herself round Rory, a man from Fitzy's own regiment. Clearly they could not keep their hands off each other. It was too much for Fitzy who had spent his childhood worshipping the girl and planning his future round her. Now this handsome English officer had appeared from nowhere and swept her away. She should be looking after Fitzy back home, not living the high life as if there were no tomorrow with some jumped up boy from the shires.

Unknown to Fitzy the Mesopotamia Campaign was about to take shape and Rory was going to be a part of it. A spell in India before the war made Rory a good choice for an Indian Army corps depleted of Officers on the Western Front. With some basic Hindustani he was lucky enough to get away from the trenches. This was a breath of fresh air after the death and destruction in the France and Ireland he would leave behind him. Rory knew he would be away a while but was sure that Mary would wait for him. They seemed like a match in heaven and Rory was completely smitten.

Fitzy skulked behind his paper in the conservatory. He felt an overwhelming sense of guilt and shame. He should have died like so many of his men. Now he was home and safe, being pampered by mama on the home farm while his men moved on to die at Vimy Ridge. He plumbed a bottomless pit of despair as he re-lived the horrors he had left behind. He had not had the heart to talk to Rory when he had bumped in to him at the Club. What sort of man had he become? A wave of bitterness

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and anger swept over him again as he thought of Mary on Rory's arm. He should have moved in and got between them, reminding Mary who was really who.

Back in Cork Mary sat in her bedroom and looked at herself in the mirror. She brushed her long chestnut hair absently as she looked into those green eyes, set in her ruddy complexion. She had read Rory's letter. He had no idea, and clearly felt as free as a bird. She knew she would not see him now for many months, if at all. To be fair there had not been a feeling of obligation or courtship between them. Rather they had both enjoyed a mad and carefree fling together as an escape from the horrors of war. They were strong, young and bold, and enjoyed the challenge of being free together. The burdens of their time brought with them the right to break away. Did it mean anything to Rory?

Her breasts felt tight, and tingled, and her period was late. She knew instinctively she was pregnant. As a member of the landed Irish gentry that meant shame and banishment. She could be bundled off to a home or an asylum, cast out and ruined for failing to conform. Mary had gone to Trinity College to read History and was something of a bluestocking. Now she was in danger of losing everything good in life, including the baby. She could not imagine the horrors she might have to endure if she did not deal with this. Mary's mind wandered and she thought of Fitzy. Hugh Fitzherbert was her best childhood friend and a sometime teenage sweetheart. The son of a wealthy local landowner, Fitzy had marched off to war swearing he would come back and marry her. Time had passed, and now he was back, briefly blinded, and poisoned by the mustard gas at the front, shell-shocked and weak, convalescing at home. Sometimes petulant in his frustration and shame, he sat giving orders and coughing in his wheelchair. He had sent her a pathetic note, but it had rather been overtaken when she had met Rory at the County Club dance. She was fond of Fitzy, but rather like a slightly dim younger brother, and had never thought she would marry him. She looked on his new weakness with disgust. Why didn't he pull himself together? Slowly, reluctantly, she realised that she must go and see him, and care for him. He would have needs which she would meet at the earliest opportunity. She supposed she could do a lot worse than Fitzy. He would recover in time, surely? Could she build a man back into the wreck he had become?

Mary Donovan got into her riding habit and went down to the stables. She had an old improved hunter called Paddy who was always pleased to see her. It would only take a short ride to get to Fitzy's place and she could do with some fresh air. She saddled up and headed through the lanes at a brisk trot. Fitzy needed a firm hand to get him back in the swim and shake him out of this dark patch. He needed diverting, and Mary would do that. Then they could see. Paddy turned into Fitzy's without a by your leave, dreaming of a second breakfast. Fitzy's had always been a second home to Paddy. Mary handed him to the stable lad and walked round to the front door. Fitzy's mother came out and gave Mary a big hug, a figure of Edwardian maternal splendour. Mary was always encouraged by Mrs Fitzherbert, who chided gently that Mary had neglected them of late. She led Mary to the conservatory where Fitzy sat reading the Irish Times in his wheelchair. His mother went to order some coffee. Mary started as she meant to go on, sitting in his lap and biting his ear lobe. Where have you been all my life, she whispered huskily in his freshly damaged ear. She slipped her hand into his groin and rubbed him gently. She only had a moment before his mother came back so she needed to get the message across loud and clear. Fitzy's pale blue eyes widened as if he'd seen Father Christmas, his face breaking into a boyish smile. He gave her a squeeze and dropped the paper. Was this going to work out? They kissed and Mary kept a weather eye open for Mrs Fitzherbert. This was fun, like they were fifteen again. Mary broke free and straightened her skirt.

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Why don't we go for a picnic by the river, she said. It's a gorgeous day. Fitzzy was an easy boy to love, all golden hair and blue eyes with a slow deep voice, big boned with plenty of muscle. Not the brightest of men but big on humour and gentleness. He protested he might not be strong enough yet for the walk to the barn at the bottom of the estate. They would go with a trap with a hamper and a blanket, she said. She jumped up, kissing him on the nose and went off to organise it with his mother. Nothing could have pleased Mrs Fitzherbert more. Mary was getting her son up and about at last. This was exactly what he needed. She had been fed up with his dark silences and long stake outs in the conservatory. Time to move on.

Mary ate her lunch slowly and prayed for rain. She needed to move Fitzzy into the barn for strategic reasons. Edwardian dress was not easy to deal with and if she was going to lead Fitzzy astray, a bit of shelter in the hay would help. Sure enough the Irish weather came up trumps. Fitzzy was feeling warm and relaxed after some red wine and game pie. They retreated into the barn with blanket and bottle. Mary kissed him and gently pushed him onto his back as she rolled on top, removing her skirt as she went. He may have been wounded and weak, but he was a soldier boy, lying with the love of his dreams. Fitzzy rose to the challenge albeit clumsy and brief in the novelty and excitement of her. Mary gave him a playful cuddle and made a mental note of the date. She needed to engineer an early marriage proposal. She didn't fancy walking down the aisle with too large a bump. Mrs Fitzherbert noticed how close they seemed as they came back to the house, and smiled. She hadn't felt such hope in a while.

Time went by and Mary finished with honours in Dublin. Fitzzy recovered well, and came up by train to join the gaudy. It was as if her care and love had healed him and he was his old self again. He drank too much and laughed too loudly. Good old Fitzzy. His father's wealth would look after them, and his land agents would serve them well. He was handsome in a privileged way, she had to admit. As they went home on the train she whispered in his ear. I think I'm having a baby, she said. Fitzzy was warm and fuzzy with the champagne and his eyes widened. Oh my God, Mary, he said. He was slowly taking it in. Of course they had taken no precautions, it was inevitable, he thought. He was a lamb to the slaughter. Down on one knee in the compartment, he proposed. Mary looked at this simple man boy who was offering his all. I accept your proposal Mr Fitzherbert, she said, smiling gently, a dagger from Rory sliding sharply into her heart. How could she do this, she thought, her breath catching in shame.

Mrs Fitzherbert was a pragmatic mother and when needs must she put her shoulder to the wheel. No-one was going to laugh at her family, so a prompt wedding was the order of the day. Mary was compliant and helpful, agreeing to the choices her mother-in-law-to-be made for the arrangements. She took exercise and tried not to eat too much, while wearing flattering clothes which concealed her bump. The day soon arrived and the chapel on the estate seemed the perfect rural idyll in which to tie the knot. Trusty estate workers and local family would all be there to witness the great event.

Mary thought about Rory. Not so long ago he had been her beau and her big hope for the future. She had not had mail for a while and knew there was unfinished business between them. Did he still have feelings for her? Perhaps she should have given him the chance to be her man. Would he have done it out of choice or merely a sense of honour? It had all seemed too risky, with him so far away and in battle once again. War made things so difficult to control. He was a bigger risk, but such a greater prize.

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All too soon Mary was walking up the aisle on her father's arm. She could see Fitzy peeping round to see her from the altar rail. He was immaculate in his grey tails and white gloves. Next to him was his best man, facing front, a dark secret Fitzy had kept from her. She felt she recognised the stiff figure in his military dress, cap held by his left side, regimental sword and ribbons to boot. Suddenly Rory turned and smiled at her sadly, the love and loss clear in his searching intelligent eyes. How could she do this?

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