Viscount Carlow recalls the visits which he made to one of his family residences, Emo Court, as a child aged perhaps six or seven (around 1912).

Our place in Ireland was very far away, and it took a long time to get there; the journey was troublesome and necessitated several awkward changes at most inconvenient times. Nevertheless, we went there, and the general unpleasantness of the journey echoed itself in different spheres for some time beforehand. Packing was started several days too soon, and though we did the journey there and back twice annually, it was never definitely decided what should be taken and what not, resulting in far more luggage travelling than was really needed.

Instructions for the rest of the household who were remaining in London, were made out, altered, changed and countermanded, till nobody quite knew what was going to happen. Anyhow it was worth it when we got there.

When I first went to Ireland, I travelled with nanny and the servants, which was an adventure in itself; we allowed nearly an hour and a half to get to the station, this was partly an unpremeditated attempt on the part of the butler to calm the agitation of the servants, whose only thoughts concerning a train were the possibility of missing it, and partly an attempt to get me to bed and asleep before it started, which, if anything, was as pointless as it was unsuccessful.

We travelled to Euston in the station bus, under the guidance and supervision of the butler, who had the tickets. It was packed with luggage inside and out, and the rest of the party had to fit in as best they could, which was more often easier said than done.

The delay of saying goodbye in the servant world is an important ceremony, and like so many of the few plausible Victorian customs, is dying out with the advent of speed; it also had other qualifications, for the final departure on the doorstep was invariably the scene of pathos, kisses and handshakes; everyone kissed everyone else, and we all expressed, in terms so genuine, how much we would miss one another, and how sorry we all were to leave, that I wonder we ever went away at all.

The driver of the conveyance, who had graduated from horses to motor vehicles, started off with such a jerk that the pile of luggage in the interior collapsed onto the floor; this was the signal for tears on the part of someone, generally the under housemaid, whose nerves had been strained to such a pitch that she could contain herself no longer.

The journey to the station was by far the most dangerous and we all sat speechless and terrified while the much overloaded and top heavy omnibus lurched around the corners, grunted, groaned and changed gear even up the most gradual incline. By the expression of mournful surprise on everyone's faces we must have resembled the Pilgrim Fathers (or Mothers, there were chiefly women present) who were never to see their homes any more, which might quite easily have been true.

When travelling over to Ireland all sense of humour was lost – it was a grim battle which had to be got over as well as possible. The silence was broken by the butler correcting his watch as we drove under the Doric Columns of Euston station, and we all disembarked with perhaps more deliberation than we had got in. I can see them all now, sitting in a 3rd class carriage an hour before departure, rooted to their button-covered seats and not daring to get out on to the platform lest the train should be whisked from the station before they could climb back again.

Of the journey I remember little more. We had to get out at two o'clock in the morning at Holyhead and twenty minutes before that nanny took her Mothersill, but I was scarcely conscious enough to take much notice of this, though I distinctly remember a small box of pink and grey pills being produced and taken with a glass of water.

We docked at Kingstown at six o'clock in the morning and one of the moments I remember best of all was the fresh early morning scene of the harbour with the twinkling station lamps reflected in the water and the light blue fringe of the sky on the horizon, which was gradually developing into a sunrise. There was something about getting out on to the platform at that hour in the morning which suggested peace and friendliness and also that the most bitter part of the journey was over. A familiar face here and there greeted us, even at 6 a.m. The newspaper seller who met every boat welcomed us as if he had waited all his life for nobody else, and everyone seemed agreeable and interested in our arrival.

Beside the platform was a long, low, well-heated train which, mingled with the relief of getting on land again was a very pleasant change from the cold night air. Here I was formally handed over to my family, seated in a first-class compartment and left with the sole occupation of contemplating their sleepless and dozing faces. The variety of sudden atmospheric changes had a most subduing effect upon them, and I could never understand how it was that they were tired and I was not; though they said they had not slept a wink they bore all the traces of having just woken from a deep and heavy slumber, and were therefore in no mood for conversation.

I remembered Papa's story of his travelling over to Ireland with his sister and father, and on arrival at this identical point my grandfather, who was enveloped in a long travelling coat, was addressed by his valet with the words: "Has you lordship enough room to sit down?" At which my aunt and father laughed heartily. How times have changed, I thought, for never in my life had I felt less like laughing, apart from the fact that I would have been much too terrified to, if I had. After a long wait at Kingstown and a longer delay in Dublin, during which time my father took the opportunity to visit the Kildare Street Club, we arrived at Portarlington, and thence by car to Emo.

Emo was a fine example of the symmetry and expanse of the Georgian era. The house stood in the middle of a large park with an avenue of Wellingtonia pines leading away from the front and a garden and a lake at the back. The building itself had three floors. The ground floor contained the living rooms; the first floor the bedrooms, and the top floor the servants' quarters, with my usual menage, as in London.

On the ground floor was the hall with a vast collection of spears, swords, pikes and other medieval weapons which some deceased relation had collected at some time or other for no apparent reason. No one liked them there, but as they were a form of mural decoration, nobody though of having them removed. In the left-hand corner was a large box containing rugs, a grandfather clock and an evil-looking Napoleonic boot.

Facing the hall was the dome, which was circular and unfurnished, except for a marble statue of Eve eating the proverbial apple and a few brown alabaster vases reposing in niches round the perimeter of the room. The floor was a magnificent parquet with the family arms in the centre, inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The only other ornament was a massive compressed air gramophone, surmounted by a huge brass horn which frequently blared forth music of every description, especially when Papa was in the house.

The dome had four doors, in a clockwise direction leading to the garden, the drawing room, the hall and the dining room. The hall I have already described. The drawing room was furnished in an early Victorian fashion and spent most of its time under dust sheets. The dining room which faced the garden was equipped with a large table in the centre, a massive mahogany sideboard at one end, two marble topped side tables between the windows and various pictures of early relations on the walls.

The library occupied the width of the house beyond the drawing room and was full of every kind of book from the Army List of 1893 to Sir Walter Scott's novels and the inventions of Archimedes, and it was not until we had a general rearrangement that we realised what a lot of useless literature we possessed. Next to that was the Red Room, later ascribed to myself and Miss Howe, and in which I shed many a tear. Between that and the hall was a broad staircase with a red carpet and brass rails, which due to their loose fit made an imitable jingle as one went up and down.

The other side of the hall came, first the boudoir whose general tone of green mixed well with the chandelier, and Worcester china, and beyond that was Papa's smoking room with heavy comfortable sofas and chairs, sporting pictures on the walls and various tables crammed with cigarette boxes, match boxes, and everything else.

In the passage between these two rooms was an immense electric organ, which put up a rival entertainment to the gramophone in the dome. On the other side of the passage was the Oak Room, full of pewter, and from this went a long semi-circular passage – decorated with all the most offensive articles of furniture which Mama found it necessary to put away – to the bachelors' wing, and the billiard room, both of which were seldom used, except as a dump for tin boxes, containing old family letters and a collection of Victorian truncheons that had been accumulated by one of my more enterprising relations, probably my grandfather.

The out-houses were many and sundry, comprising electric light plant, carpenters' rooms, game larders, store rooms, rooms containing stacks of timber, and a room with an adjoining lawn which became the sanctum sanctorum of my rabbits, until, due to their

unsanitary behaviour they were removed to the laundry, and so it may be realised that we were in no way cramped for space.

When we arrived at Emo, my family, unaccustomed to such early rising, retired immediately to bed, where they remained till lunch time. The first sign of life in the house at that hour was the arrival of Dr Rice in an old clattering motor car.

The doctor, who was not only a great character but the chief advisor and mainstay of the district, was always the first to greet us on our return to Ireland. "The lord has returned to his estates, he must therefore need a doctor", was once his remark to me: I immediately thought that Papa must have been suddenly taken ill, but it was only his way of saying that whatever excuse was necessary, he would be the first to get there.

He was invariably in the good humour characteristic of the nation, and advanced up the jingling staircase bag in hand as if to administer some terrible dose, though nothing wrong could be said for my family other than lack of sleep.

The doctor seemed to assume the privilege of waking them up and after Dale had pushed her way into the darkened room to utter the timid announcement of "Dr Rice, M'Lady", the latter would enter as boisterously as possible, while Dale tugged at the curtains and gathered up the bed clothes which had fallen to the ground during their hour or two of rest.

The doctor was a moving spirit in our household, and a recognised "Delphic Oracle" in the district, and while he made a stethoscopic examination of the occupants of the bed, he gave a running commentary and complete gossip account of the local happenings while we had been away.

He was also a man of great resource, and was remarkably adept at combating any awkward situation that arose, such as settling quarrels among the local inhabitants; extracting the teeth of our kitchen maid, which he succeeded in doing on one memorable occasion, despite the screams of the unfortunate girl who was given neither gas nor local anaesthetic to soothe the pain. He refereed at football matches, cricket matches, and boxing contests, though he never knew the rules of any of them beyond those of his own invention: he settled the dispute between two bands, who had met and had a fearful fight, in a bog, while returning from rival dances. In his self-assumed position as advisor, he had to cope with drunks, Belgian refugees, with which the town was unavoidably encumbered, rogues, ruffians, representatives of the law, fugitives of such, and also my father, who, with the exception of the last mentioned, regarded him as all powerful and never questioned his authority.

Amongst other things, the doctor had a fund of entertaining stories which were related on all suitable occasions in a strong Irish brogue and with an astonishing fluency of speech and without a smile on his face.

I remember his describing, not without a few minor exaggerations, how my grandfather won a lot of money on the Riviera, and that, being an amateur photographer and connoisseur of good wine, spent his winnings on several cases of champagne, and what the doctor described as a camera 'large enough for their two children to go to bed in', pointing at Hermione and myself, with which he duly arrived back at Emo. A subterranean room next to the cellar was equipped as a dark room, and into this my grandfather would disappear for hours on end to develop his plates, helped by the butler. Being next to the cellar, he didn't think it unwise to wander in and refresh himself from the chemical atmosphere in the dark room; and the times were not infrequent when a bottle of 1874 hock was poured into a dish of hypo in mistake for a bromide or some other fixing solution. In fact the number and variety of chemicals which became inadvertently mixed were so many and so frequent that the explosion which removed one side of the butler's moustache and side whiskers could scarcely have been unexpected.

I also have a dim recollection of the doctor telling a story of two rival bands who met late at night and fought on a lonely road crossing a bog while returning from two rival dances. Though the story wouldn't sound funny here, it may well be imagined that the subject might be ripe for an Irish anecdote.

My daily routine was remarkably eventful, consisting chiefly of walks in the grounds with an occasional treat of feeding the horses or fishing with Papa in the lake; but having fed the horses once it was no novelty to feed them again and, as the lake boasted of little beyond a few large pike, who were far too wily to be caught, this form of diversion quickly lost its originality as well. However I did not mind that for I was quite happy enough just being there without having any specific occupation.

It was about this time that I made my first public appearance at a school treat in the grounds, where I had to pour out tea and hand round buns to the local school children; but my staff of office was soon taken away due to an irresistible temptation to sample the buns while dealing them out. I also remember dealing out buns on another occasion, this at the village school. There was an awful silence during the ceremony. The children looked at me with a sharp piercing stare and accepted the buns as doubtfully as though they might have been poisonous.

As the first obstacles of my social debut had been successfully overcome, attention was now turned to develop my sporting instincts as well. According to family traditions and the rather ambiguous meaning of the word "sport" as interpreted by an Irishman, especially if it is in any way connected with a horse.

It began with a few passive remarks concerning Papa's achievements when he was my age, with special reference to his playing cricket on Mrs Dempster's front lawn with the stable boys, but alas! The stable staff were reduced to one groom and Albert the chauffeur, who was far too occupied with looking after an old Wolsley to consider himself a cricket eleven, not that I was particularly keen to invite him to do so.

The next step was a suggestion that I should put on a pair of shorts and run down the drive and back before breakfast each morning; but that too seemed a cheerless form of amusement, and by no means suited to the Irish climate.

However, as I feared, the time eventually arrived when I was to be introduced to that vigorous and more uncertain form of exercise known as “riding”.

The pony which I was to ride was heralded by the early appearance in front of the house of a number of the most doubtful characters in the neighbourhood, headed by the local horse dealer. By the view obtained from one of the second floor windows, I observed that my suspicions of the past few days were to be realised to the fullest extent.

An Irish horse at the best of times is uncertainly tempered, but when surrounded by a crowd of its own countrymen it can be stirred into a frenzy in no time and by the sounds of scuffling outside, accompanied by frequent oaths and the ruthless application of a whip, I gathered that the animal was being prepared for my arrival.

‘Ah! We’ll soon knock some sense into him’, exclaimed one of the throng; a belief which all horsemen hold, though no one has as yet succeeded.

‘Dot’, for such was the animal’s name, was none too encouraging to look at, and its shifty expression materialised into savage and well-aimed kicks directed at the crowd of attendant admirers. If six men could not control its caperings, what chance had I? Nevertheless, resigned to my fate, and hoping that the agony would not be prolonged more than necessary, I prepared myself for an ordeal.

As I came out of the house, I found the groom kicking the brute into a more gratifying position, while the rest of the helpers, who were many and willing, were endeavouring to stop its prancings by holding it down, but they might have tried to hold down an elephant, for all they were successful.

Contrary to my upbringing, I always looked upon a horse with grave suspicion, having been mauled in the hand on one or more occasions when innocently trying to feed it in the stables; so the prospect of riding was far less encouraging; however coaxed by nanny from behind, who, if anything, was even more nervous than myself, and exhorted by the crowd of spectators in front who were all trying to hold the horse at once, I was lifted up bodily and planted firmly on its back.

The result was quite as astonishing as might be expected; I performed what felt like a series of intricate aerial manoeuvres before finally coming to earth, and only then in a state of entirety which baffled the onlookers as much as myself.

The Irishmen did not seem averse to seeing the heir to the Portarlington estates giving a premature aerobatic display. ‘Ah! He has a fine seat’ said one of them as I performed a back somersault onto the ground. But nanny, who till this moment had kept at a safe

distance, came forward with a rustle of skirts and removed me, battered, bruised and in floods of tears, to the sanctuary of the house.

For the moment my horsey education was left in abeyance, that is, as far as actual riding was concerned. We had, however, a pony trap drawn by Tommy, a short tailed strawberry roan. This trap was driven by Hockliffe, the groom, and was always at our disposal. We drove everywhere in it. Up and down the park, to Emo village to see Mr Allardyce the publican, to Coolbanagher to have tea with Mr Fletcher, the parson, and his two sons, to Portarlington to see Dr Rice or the Odlums, where we were usually chased down the street by the cross-eyed old woman who sold oranges. In fact, to anywhere we chose. Tommy lived to a great and noble old age, having travelled England, Ireland and Scotland fairly expensively, and ended up his days in a field near the house at Bryanston. I can see him now, clip-clopping along the stony Scotch and Irish roads, with nanny and myself inside, sometimes also Celia and Hermione, dressed in red tamoshanters and dark blue capes. I can also remember how the harness jingled and squeaked as we trotted along, and how the whole conveyance tipped up when you got into it through that odd little back door and solitary narrow step. I can remember the blue felt cushions, the perforated rubber mat on the floor, the varnished wicker basket which hung outside and held an umbrella, and how we had to get out and walk when we came to steep hills.

In those days a pony trap was till a recognised mode of conveyance. Cars were not yet reliable enough, and in traffic still very much in the minority. I remember having an unrestrainable fondness for motor cars and asking my nanny to take me on a 'bus'. We went to Hyde Park Corner, where to my horror and disappointment I was taken on a horse-bus. Little did I realise then what many opportunities I would have for travelling on a motor bus, and that this was one of the last horse-buses to be left in service on the London streets.

My next introduction to the horse was at Smith's riding school in London, where I was sent to learn what I had failed to acquire on 'Dot'. The two ponies I used to ride were 'Cigarette', a quiet bay, and 'Mimi', an uncertain tempered black, who used to kick and buck and prance around on its hind legs, in fact scarcely the sort of animal on which to teach infants like myself. On 'Cigarette' I could relapse into a coma and feel sure that nothing improper would take place. On 'Mimi' I was always ill at ease, feeling that at any moment I might be flung to the ground and probably kicked at the same time. However, riding at Smith's was a tame affair. We used to walk and then trot, and then gallop round the school, then, crossing diagonally to the other side and round the other way, while Mr Smith stood in the middle of this arena and shouted instructions. 'Now then come on, dig your heels into him, make him trot --- Now then Miss Baker, keep your hands down – toes up – knees into the sides.' At the end of this affair, we had curious physical exercises to do, such as folding the arms and bending backwards, leaning forward and touching the left toe with the right hand, and then finally, the dismount, a welcome relief after the morning's ordeal. Then the important appearance of two lumps of sugar which had to be given to the pony on the flat of the hand, during which process it usually either rolled off into the fibre covering the floor of the school, or else was chewed with the addition of several of one's fingers. It is strange that I never mastered the art of

holding the hand flat when feeding a horse, and it was only by first having it dribbled on and then bitten that I learned that a horse seems lacking in the power to discriminate between food and the hand that is offering it.

By this time, I was beginning to know most of the figures in the district by sight, even if not by name; and the park was by no means lacking in them.

Johnnie Whalen, who lived in a small house half way to the Portarlington lodge gate, had a wife and eighteen children, who according to hearsay, all slept in the one bed: though nobody could vouch for having seen them there.

Johnnie himself, at the stout age of sixty, used to drive the mail cart to and from the town, while his sons and daughters were employed in varying capacities throughout the estate. His eldest, Ned Whalen, an unreliable rogue of roughly 6 foot 4 inches in height became a footman in the house, afterwards to be promoted temporary valet to Papa, but his unreliability got the better of him and he soon vacated his post.

Another large family were the Hinds. John Hinds was the electrician, and Jack Hinds the carpenter, while the other twelve or so were employed elsewhere in the park.

Perhaps the most familiar figures of all were the Dempsters, who looked after the farm just beyond the garden, and lived in a small house with wallflowers growing round the front, and protected by an old and battered fence, which offered no obstacle to Mrs Dempster's donkey who usually strayed into the unpresuming garden and ate the wallflowers long before they were in bloom. Mr Dempster, the gamekeeper, was a man of weighty appearance with a broad expanse of front view well in keeping with his position. Mrs Dempster on the contrary was short, skinny, and talked in a high-pitched croak, at the same time displaying a remarkable absence of teeth. Beset with misfortune throughout her life, her speech had a tone of tragedy about it; either the cow had died, or the donkey had eaten the wallflowers, the dog had bitten somebody and had to be shot, or the turkey was lost; and on top of all this, her youngest daughter Gussie was a cripple, and then her husband died. Nevertheless she was surrounded by a devoted family, Lally, Annie-May, and Gussie, making a sum total of three.

There were others such as the Bradbrokes, Dan Deagon who lived to the age of one hundred and two, the Allardyces who kept the Emo village public house, Chambers with his long white beard, Fitzherbert the agent; Mr Fletcher the vicar, and his two sons, and the cross-eyed woman who sold oranges in the street of Portarlington: all characters without whom the scene wouldn't be complete but to tell their individual histories is rather beyond the scope of this volume.

However, it is enough to say that they all lived the same simple peasant care-free life which made everyone so happy and contented; and which added materially to the charm of Emo and its surroundings. To most of them, the world didn't exist beyond the horizon which they saw. People did not matter beyond these few which they had around them, and life was uninterrupted by the complications of politics, views and opinions.

Again I noticed that the sun shone, the birds sang and the trees were green; the white Georgian house, with its Doric columns and wide stone steps, stood in the midst of it, elegant, graceful and with an air of authority about the whole place. Emo had withstood several generations of Portarlingtons and Carlows and was still intact. Previous to Papa, his father had owned it and had lived there the greater part of the time. His love and affection for his eldest daughter, Aline, was so great that he used to travel over to England and back every fortnight to see her while she was at school. Previous to this, the place was occupied by his father, Hippy Damer, who spent several years consuming large quantities of rich and expensive wine, till he became stricken with gout and had to retire to a wheelchair and a thatched house in Bournemouth. Before him the place was lived in by the diminutive and fussy Henry Portarlington, the changeling, who hated Came because the neighbours were so unpleasant, hinting strongly at the origins of his birth and making gossipy stories about it. But at Emo he lived like a king, dealing out money freely to the poor and so making himself liked by the tenants and being laird, the ruler, he was of course respected by everybody. The strange thing is that although Papa succeeded to the title when only seventeen years old, he can remember his great grandfather.

Emo, as I have already mentioned, was my idea of heaven. It was one of two homes, and I preferred it to Chesham Place.

Wherever I went or whatever I did, my thoughts eventually drifted back to Emo: the wide expanse of soft green mossy turf which seemed to grow so appropriately in front of a Georgian house, the avenue of Wellingtonia pines that stretched from the front door to, what appeared to me to be, the horizon, the woods and the lake, the acres of wild flowers which grew under the tall beech trees, and the squeaky iron gate dividing the lawn from the drive.

I knew it all and loved it, if there had been the smallest change I should have noticed it at once; everything had its familiar sound, the closing of that garden gate, the early morning wind in the trees, the cawing of the crows as they passed overhead on their way to the fields, and again in the evening returning to roost. Unconsciously one lived in a world of sounds which impress themselves on the mind without it seeming in any way apparent, and only come to the surface after many years to remind one of the natural pleasures of childhood.

In the evening when it got dark, the nursery maid would bring in an oil lamp which cast a dull yellow glow over the room and reflected a halo on the ceiling above. Mrs Adams, the housekeeper, made me a present of a hand-painted lampshade executed by herself. It portrayed a cluster of multicoloured apples, of brilliant and totally unnatural hue, but to me they were a work of art, and I valued the gift above all my other possessions.

While at tea, I used to gaze at this shade with pride and wonder, taking in all its detail; the gold edge which fastened it to the wire frame had come unstuck, and I used to lick my finger and try to make a temporary repair, but it was no use. Also the pointed ends to the leaves sometimes came away from the paper and protruded with a hangnail-like

appearance from the smooth surface, but that was no use either, as any attempt to mend it was likely to leave nothing less than a thumb mark as evidence of an amateur attempt to stick it down.

So life at Emo was rural to the extreme. Ireland was a wild place, usually stormy, and I seem to associate it with high winds and threatening clouds racing across an evening sky, the rustle of the leaves in the trees coming in sudden prolonged gusts, and the hollow moaning roar of the wind in the chimney bringing with it a clatter of soot and a shower of sparks from the half-consumed logs in the grate.

Our house seemed so warm and comfortable, safe from the angry winds and storms outside, which battered relentlessly against the windows and whistled through the cracks. There were times, however, when everything was quiet --- too quiet --- sometimes almost frightening, like the lull before the storm. We would sit in the nursery ready to be startled by the slightest sound, the crunch of those half-burned logs settling themselves down on the fire, or the loud ticking grandfather clock in the passage suddenly announcing the hours in a deep sonorous clang.

At bedtime a tin bath used to be laid out on a blanket in front of the fire, the same tin bath that had travelled over with the luggage, and had been used as a packing case for the nursery linen, and whose ill-fitting tin cover at first wouldn't go on, and then wouldn't come off. Nevertheless, it was a wonderful place, full of wonderful people who minded their own business so long as no local disturbance promoted them to interfere in somebody else's. Who laughed and cried with equal ease and sympathy, and who went about their work as if time were no object and eternity, God bless its sacred name, ever so far off. They were nomadic to the extent of wandering about mindful of nothing, in particular always coming and going with no specific destinations. Like the Arabs it was considered rude to pass anyone without uttering some greeting or other, usually accompanied by a broad toothless grin.

But now that I write these words, the happy-go-lucky Irish state of existence seems all too far off.

Though my father was a Deputy Lieutenant of the county and therefore sat on the bench, he took part in all the local proceedings, whether legal or not, and where possible I was included as well.

The local, and informal, cock fighting club was run by a certain Mr Gilligan who was as big a ruffian as the district could produce; he also looked the part with a fearful squint and a mouth that was far from straight.

One day I was taken by my father to see some cock fighting which took place chez Gilligan, in a small whitewashed two-roomed house in a neighbouring village.

One room was kept for the cocks, which were stacked to the ceiling in crates from which they peered out at the odd collection of people confronting them; while the other was

occupied by Mrs Gilligan senior, who was at that time bed ridden at the age of ninety-two.

The effects of a crowd of shouting Irishmen, whose exclamations both in volume and quality were hardly fitting the occupant of the next room, were fortunately lost on the good lady, who, by the grace of the almighty, was past being conscious of anything happening around her.

A loud invocation announced the beginning of several minor bouts, which entailed a lot of side betting, and considerable difference of opinion as to which was the better bird, and then Mr Gilligan, who mastered every situation with the delicacy and persuasion of a true Irish rogue, addressed the assembly in the following terms. “Gentlemen, I am glad to see that his lordship is bringing his son up in the way he should go”, and with the approval of all I was formally presented with a fighting cock.

I accepted the gift, speechless with embarrassment and surprise, wondering first how I should get it home, and secondly what I should do with it when I did. As a pet, it definitely could not be tamed, and would not exactly receive the approval of the presentation committee if I attempted to do so.

Mr Gilligan’s resource once more came to the front. He rushed into the adjoining room where he removed the pillow from under Mrs Gilligan senior with a sudden indifference, that she mightn’t have been there: the old lady’s head cracked against the bed post like the falling of a heavy weight, and she might have died there and then for all we knew.

With a borrowed knife Mr Gilligan pierced several holes in the cover while the remaining onlookers endeavoured to insert the protesting bird, who was fully convinced that its last hour had come and was going to die an inglorious death from suffocation.

The finished parcel was presented to me in reward-like fashion, and with the cordial good wishes of all present.

On arrival home, for want of more suitable accommodation, the bird was induced to seek the companionship of my rabbits, but as it failed to form a very close friendship, it was eventually moved to the care of Mrs Dempster, the keeper’s wife, who kept a large quantity of fowls in her back yard and, after a week or two’s association with hens, its bellicose nature died on it, and it began a career as a proud father of several thousand chicks.

However before this graceless decline, it was produced to entertain the guests by having a few bouts with itself in front of a looking glass, a harmless and inoffensive sport which brought satisfaction to both audience and performer