

News From Home 23

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McSweeney called round early, to check on the blocked drain, and found that it had magically cleared itself overnight. "Isn't that just the way?", he said, "Sure, patience is a great virtue, and sometimes no action is the best action, as I have demonstrated time and time again." I suggested, now that he was free of his plumbing burden, he might like to check on the intermittent power to the washing machine, seeing as he was here anyway, "As plumbing is the Wet Art, so electricity is the Dry Art, and ne'er the twain shall meet. I must restructure my thinking to avoid a short circuit to the brain", and so saying, he stepped onto the patio, and pulled out his pipe. He seemed a little pensive today, so I inquired after his health. "I am struggling between the immensities", he said. "And what would they be?" I asked. "Why, birth and death, of course – although I could be referring to Mrs. McSweeney and her mother, both of them ample women, and getting more ample by the minute. They take to their dinner with an almost religious fervour." He sighed, and said he felt the march of time today. "It is just age reflecting on youth...speaking of electricity, did I tell you of the days back in Dublin when I was apprenticed to the Great Gorzynsky, probably the finest electrician the world has seen? Some say he was a pupil of Tesla himself, and I would not dispute it. He wired half of Dublin, but insisted on the purity of direct current, the DC, in spite of the dangers – this led to problems later, of course, and many fatalities, and I spent several years undoing his fine work. He had trained his body to withstand over a thousand volts of current, by giving himself increasingly long and powerful electric shocks over the years. His favourite wiring method was – and this will doubtless amuse you - no wires at all! He would install a huge generator at a busy intersection, crank it up to millions of watts – then all the lights in the houses would glow for about a mile around, just from sheer proximity!" Extraordinary, I thought – and said so. "That is nothing. Do you know that to this day, his grave is illuminated from an unknown source? It appears to be from within, but scientists are baffled. And I'm not talking a faint glow here....why, the thing is positively floodlit like a hurling stadium." He was silent for a moment, and then said, " But that was long ago, in my wild youth. Oh, the madness we got up to!" He drew on his pipe. "As you know, I am a bit of a philosopher, mostly of the Bertrand Russell school...you are no doubt familiar with his adage, 'Since Adam and Eve bit the apple, Man has not refrained from any folly of which he is capable'? I said I knew it. "Well, some would see this as a cautionary statement, the kind of thing the Garda say to you before they clap the cuffs on. But I have always taken it as a philosophy to live by, and have therefore never refrained from any folly at all – my life has been most rich and interesting

as a result...did I tell you about the time I won a Bertrand Russell impersonation contest up at Trinity College? Indeed, Russell himself, who heard of it and entered as a bit of a jape to amuse his friends, only managed third place.” Mr. Alphonso’s latest pleasure is latino dancing. Every Thursday at the Franco Fremano Dance Studio, they have dancing for the physically challenged, and the place is thronged with all shapes and sizes. Mr. A has had too many falls from too many horses over the years, to not be reliant on his wheelchair, but his zest for life is undimmed. He loves to whirl, twirl, swing and sway his wheeled chariot to those irresistible beats – he has also figured out that this is a great way to pick up ‘girls’ – a girl being anywhere between 60 and 85. I’ll say this for Mr. A – he can find some small thing that’s attractive about almost any woman, however plain or ‘homely’ she may be (or ancient). If the part corresponds to an anatomical part of a horse, like say, the rump, then so much the better. Mr. A spent the first few dances spectating with me at the side of the dance floor, “Checking out, how you English say, the crumpet?” He gave a running commentary. “Nice muzzle.” “Look at those udders!” “She’s a bit gone in the withers, boyo.” “Whoa! Nice rump!” Mr. A spent most of the evening dancing at least in the proximity of a young-ish one-legged woman from Puerto Rico, who was definitely a champion in the rump department. I should add that Mr. A’s housekeeper and any-port-in-a-storm love interest, Anita, is not invited to these Thursday sessions.

Governor Swarzenegger was punctual as usual for his elocution lesson. We spent the hour working on election friendly phrases. Like ‘union representation’ and ‘migrant worker’, but it is an uphill slog. Is it possible to have too much confidence? Sometimes I feel like I’m teaching Jackie Collins the finer points of the prose of Joseph Conrad. Arnold’s self-confidence is such that he believes he’s great at everything anyway, and it’s hard to convince him otherwise. Only when I resort to the tape machine does he hear the flaws in his tortured delivery. At the end of what felt like a fruitless lesson (but Georgio said he sounded like Roger Moore), Arnold pulled out a creased and scruffy piece of paper from his inside pocket, and grinned. “What do you think of this?” he said. It appeared to be a child’s drawing, executed in rather smudgy pencil, resembling a bunch of ill-defined spiders’ webs. What seemed most paradoxical about it was the Great Seal of the Governor of California on the letterhead. “Errmmm”, I said. “Don’t you get it?” said Arnold, who loves a bit of a riddle. “It’s what you asked for – the plan for the minigolf hole!” I looked again, refocused, and tried to see some logic in the hesitant lines. I was shocked that this could be the work of an adult – I was thinking the child in question was aged about 3. Finally the thing started to make some sense. I saw some mental purpose behind the ragged scrawl, and like Champollion before the Rosetta Stone, I began to decode...and when I had figured the thing out, it was rather good. I asked Arnold what the spiral shapes represented. “Springs”, he said. “I call it ‘Total Recoil!’ The balls are sucked down by gravity” (he exaggeratedly rolled the ‘r’ – he seemed to love this word) – and then shot out – a bit like a pinball machine, ya? The balls shoot at the

mouths of the bad guys –the ones from my movies – Terminator, Conan, Predator– but only one mouth comes out near the final hole. Clever, ya?” I said it was ingenious, and seemed not too hard to build. I would have McSweeney start pouring the concrete immediately. The Governor seemed genuinely chuffed, and stuffed a couple of Romeo y Julietas into my top pocket. “Until the next time”, he said menacingly, only the slightest of winks revealing his wonderful grasp of irony.