

Over the Tuppenny

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES
FROM IN AND AROUND
GRACEHILL AND AHOGHILL

Margaret Cameron



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by the
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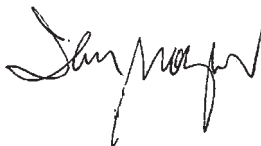
FOREWORD

The Ulster-Scots Agency is delighted to be associated with this collection of short stories by Margaret Cameron, who has captured for posterity a flavour of life in the Gracehill / Ahoghill area in years gone by.

Stories like the Pruta Getherin, The Twelfth, the Swaree and the Wee Blue Blossom, which remembers the flax harvest, will stir happy memories in the reader far beyond the part of county Antrim which inspired them, for they reflect life in many Ulster-Scots communities around Ulster.

Throughout the stories, you will find many common Ulster-Scots words. People use them every day, but are often not aware that they are Ulster-Scots. Helpfully, this publication includes a glossary to help you to understand any words that you are not familiar with. Many others will only use these words at home with friends or family, leading people to refer to Ulster-Scots as ‘the hamely tongue’.

It is small wonder then that we have chosen to support this charming collection of stories which truly are tales of hearth and hame.



Ian Crozier
Chief Executive,
Ulster-Scots Agency



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank, first of all, the Ulster-Scots Agency, in particular Ian Crozier LLB, Chief Executive and Gillian Pearson BA (Hons) DipM, Information, Communication and Marketing Manager, for their interest and capable management in having this book published.

I am also indebted to Ian Crozier for writing the Foreword to this book.

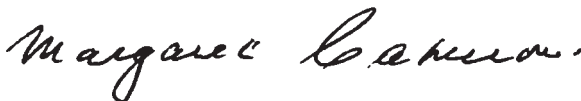
I have greatly benefited from the advice and direction given by Rodgers Thompson Partnership, the Design and Formatting team also from the skill of Roger Bradley, the photographer.

I am particularly grateful to the many local shops in and around Ahoghill, Gracehill, Galgorm and Cullybackey for their support in readily agreeing to stock the book.

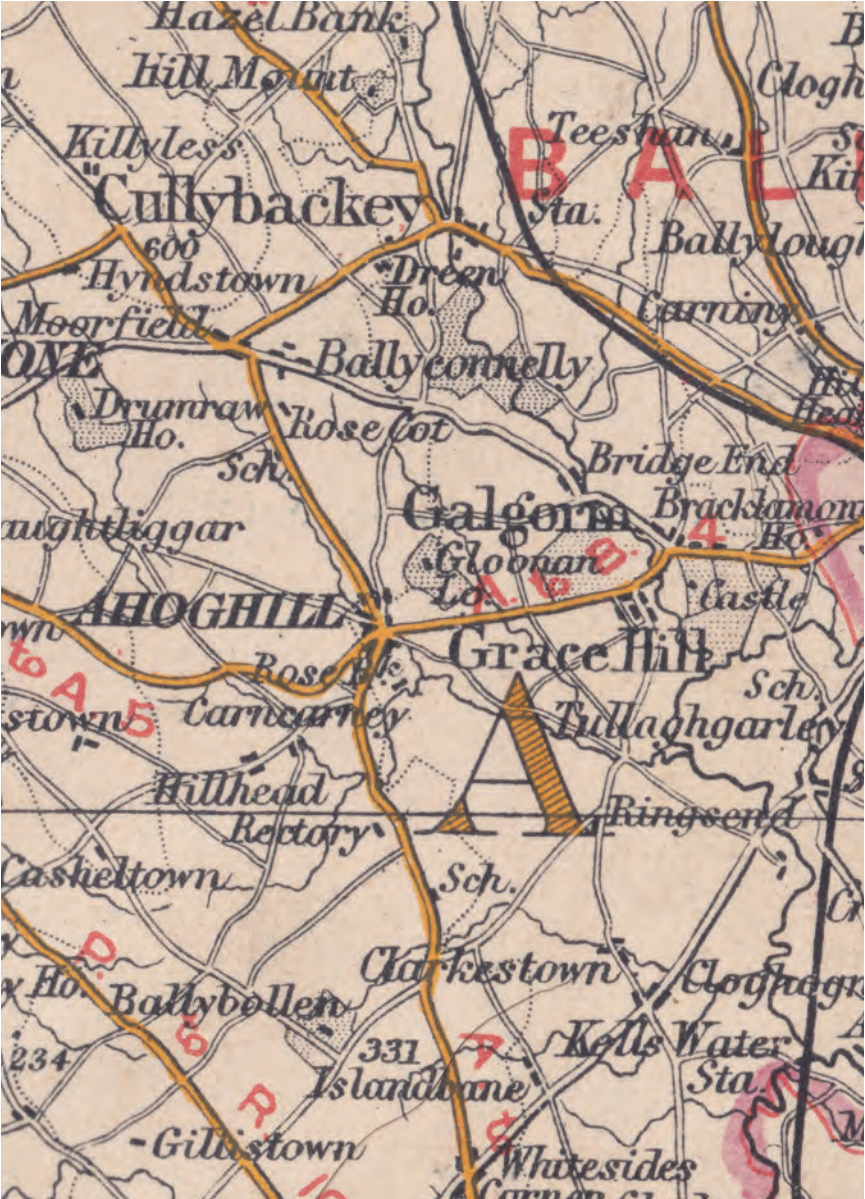
I acknowledge the source of the following photograph/document -

Photo of the Flax Blossom – Elaine Flanigan, Keeper of Collections, Irish Linen Centre & Lisburn Museum, Market Square, Lisburn.

Copy of Gloonan LOL 504 Invitation – Helen Johnston, Museum Administrator, Museum of Orange Heritage, Schomberg House, 363 Cregagh Road, Belfast.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Margaret Cameron'. The script is cursive and elegant, with a large 'M' and a long, flowing 'C'.

Margaret Cameron



From Bacon's Library Map of the Province of Ulster, 1910

PREFACE

On retirement I joined a Creative Writing Group and as a result started writing short stories. Many were published in *Ireland's Own Magazine* and in other publications.


Some time ago my cousin, Margaret Ann Kennedy from Cullybackey, suggested that I should put the stories together in a book. The seed was sown and eventually has come to fruition in the form of this book entitled 'Ower the Tuppenny.'

I was brought up on a farm in the Ahoghill – Gracehill area and walked the Tuppenny Road for many years to and from Gracehill School. I attended church in Ahoghill, therefore, I have many happy memories of those days and feel a sense of pride in belonging to both villages.

I am familiar with the local dialect and Ulster-Scots 'speak' which was and still is widely spoken in the area. We spoke Ulster-Scots at home and 'proper' (meaning English) at school. I can boast of being bi-lingual!

There is a richness in the local dialect and in the Ulster-Scots words. What word can truly describe the dust the corn thresher emits when in full throttle other than the word 'stoor.' There is a nice ring to the word 'fornent' and the descriptive word 'coggly' vividly paints a word picture of something that is unsteady. There is a cosiness and warmth about being told 'to take a wee seat' or to 'put your wee card in' when at the cashier's desk. Wee is a lovely wee word.

Glorious and Immortal Memory.



1688. 1690.

No Surrender.

Gloonan Loyal Orange Lodge, No. 504.

The favour of your company is respectfully requested
to an **ORANGE BALL**, to be held in the house of
MR. JOSEPH HUSTON,
CARMACMOON,
On Friday Evening, 22nd December, 1865.

STEWARDS:

George M'Dowell, Master, James Johnston, D. Master, George M'Meekin, Treasurer, John Sloan, Secretary,	Samuel Brown, James Doweey, James Brown, William M'Kay.
---	--

Arise from your slumbers and come to our ball,
It is the Gloonan Orangemen gives you the call ;
We now do request that you will with us join
To commemorate the victory gained at the Boyne.
Come, Ladies, come, with hearts still true
Unto the Orange and the Blue,
One night to share your festive joys
With Gloonan loyal Orange Boys.

Gloonan LOL 504 Invitation

I am indebted to many local people, including my own relatives, who unwittingly use some expressive, unadorned phrases. Some time ago I attended a function in Ahoghill and during tea I was in conversation with a local man from the Straid. We were talking about a lady who had been ill but was now visibly enjoying the tea and buns. He said, 'Agh, she was aye a guid feeder.' I noted it down as a real gem of a 'turn of phrase' and have used it in the book – thank you Billy.

I want to stress that the stories are fiction – in other words - made-up, not true, a figment of my imagination. The stories are based on memories of people, places and little incidents which occurred years ago. They are now embroidered, stitched and sewn together to make a patchwork collection of stories.

I have incorporated place and setting into the work to give the stories an identity.

I also emphasise that the names of the characters in the stories are false and do not relate to any particular person. I apologise if I have used someone's name.

The stories are meant to be simply read and enjoyed and not subjected to speculation as to the identity of a particular character.

Happy reading.



Margaret Cameron



Lisnafillan Mission Hall, erected 1931

~ 1 ~

OWER THE
TUPPENNY

It was a soft summer evening when Lily and her neighbour Jane set off for the wee Mission Hall. They were dressed in their Sunday best frocks and each wore a white cardigan on top. The mornings were always a busy time on the farm with feeding the livestock and getting the weans out to Sunday School then there was the Sunday dinner to prepare so as a result neither of them ever got to Church in the mornings. The Wee Hall, as it was known locally, served both their spiritual and social needs.

It was a pleasant walk from the Gloonan ower the Tuppenny. This stretch of the road was made narrow and tunnel-like by the long grasses on the banks that encroached onto the road and the tall beech trees on either side that formed an arch overhead. The air was filled with the smell of summer grasses and wild flowers. It was a favourite part of the road for courting couples out for a stroll especially on a Sunday evening.

At the crossroads Lily and Jane turned left up a wee brae that led to where the Mission Hall was situated. The wee Hall was a popular venue, not only with the farmer's wives, but with people from the two nearby villages and a clatter of young folk who always sat in the back rows.

"It's more a 'pair meeting' than a 'prayer meeting' for those young ones," Lily once said.

On this particular evening the Speaker was a man home from the Mission fields and the two women looked forward to hearing about faraway places and also to enjoy the music and the singing. The singing was always powerful with rousing hymns and choruses from Alexander's Hymn book such as – *'Since Jesus came into my heart'* or *'There shall be showers of blessings.'*

At the close of the meeting the local preacher invited everyone to stay for tea and buns.

"There's nothing like a wee cup of tay, it tastes better than ye would maak' yoursel' at hame," said Lily as she settled herself and chatted to others in the nearby seats while she enjoyed the supper. "Oh, there's Greta," said Jane, "She must hae got ower that wee bad turn she had."

Both women looked over at Greta, a rather gaunt looking woman, who was filling her plate for the second time.

"Well she's eating richtly."

"Ugh, she was aye a guid feeder," said Jane.

After a time the folk began to drift away home. The young ones were milling about outside the door of the Hall when Lily and Jane emerged. Most of the boys were circling around on their racer bikes showing off their skills and manoeuvres.

"Look at that eejit on the yellow bike," said Lily.

They both watched the young lad as he rode around with his arms folded across his chest and at other times he swung his legs up on the handle bars. Others were trying similar stunts to impress the young girls.

"Come on," said Jane, "afore he comes a cropper."

The two women dandered on down the road to the crossroads and then continued back along the Tuppenny Road. It was now dusk but still a warm sultry evening.

"I wouldn't like to be a Missionary oot in them foreign countries. The people must be poor with nethin tae ate."

"Aye, but the Missionaries that come back aye look well fed," said Jane.

They chatted together about the Service, the Speaker and



exchanged views about those who had attended the meeting. They had passed the stone farmhouse and were entering the stretch of road where the beech trees formed a guard of honour. “Did you ever see the like o’ thon hat Mrs...?” “Shush,” whispered Jane, “there’s a courting couple in the dyke.” They could see the glow of a cigarette and make out the form of a couple in the gloaming. Just then the two women were startled by the swish of tyres and a shout, “Get out’a tha road.” They clutched each other and stood in the centre of the road not knowing which way to go. The two cyclists made to pass on either side of the women but the cyclist passing on the side of the courting couple was thrown into the ditch and the rear wheel of his yellow bike spun round and round. As he scrambled to entangle himself a tall man rose from the ditch and lifted the back wheel off his legs and set the bike upright. “Where do you think you’re going? You rode over my feet.” “You shouldn’t hae yer big feet oot on tha road,” said the young lad. “Feet like a Clydesdale horse,” he added.

He pulled the bike away from the man and began to examine it. "If you've buckled my wheel you'll pay for it, you big drink o' water." "Shush," whispered Jane, recognising the man. "That's the new polis man in Ahoghill." "Listen young lad, I'll report you. You have neither a tail-light nor a bell. What's your name?" "I'll report yeh to the Sergeant for dollin' in the dyke," said the young lad, "and you're not on duty anyway." "Come on," said his friend anxiously. The two young cyclists quickly threw their leg over their saddles and sped away.

With an embarrassed sideways glance at the man, Lily and Jane scuttled away quietly. When they felt they were out of earshot Jane said, "Has he lay doon again?" "I don't want to look roon. He might be watching us." The two women went silent again as they became aware of another courting couple a bit further along. "Do you think he'll report the young lad?" Jane continued. "Naw, he wouldn't want the Sergeant to know he was dollin ower the Tuppenny. Anyway, he's new, he wouldn't know who the young lad is."

"Aye, but who was the girl he was dollin? I tried to get a skelly at her but she aye kept her face covered." "Aye, and she never got up, lay there like a big bag o' prutas and did you hear the cackles o' her." "Oh, I've heard that cackle afore. I've heard her cackling on the Cross Keys bus. You would know that cackle anywhere. I'll find out."

The two woman reached the junction of the Gloonan and the Tuppenny Roads and stood chatting before parting. "It was a guid night oot. Let me know if you find oot who yer woman is." "Oh, I will, I will. Well, goodnight Lily." "Goodnight Jane."





Gracehill old village shop, built in 1787

~ 2 ~

THE PILLION RIDER

The bells suspended above the door of Gillen's shop jangled as Hubert pushed open one half of the double doors and stumped in. He shook himself and banged his gloved hands together; the leather made a fat puffing sound.

Then he drew the gauntlet gloves off, tucked them under his arm and fumbled with his chinstrap to take off his helmet. The wet helmet sent a cascade of dark stains across the wooden floor.

Sammy looked up from behind the counter where he was weighing out half pounds of broken biscuits into brown paper bags.

"Heavens above Hubert, what brings you out on a morning like that on the bike, have you no bed to lie in?"

"Agh, that woman," mumbled Hubert.

It was indeed a drooky morning for Hubert and the shop served as a shelter from the onslaught.

Gillen's Grocery, Hardware & Meal, was the main shop in the village and it stood, a handsome stone building skirted with wrought iron railings, overlooking the village square. It also housed the Post Office in a corner set apart. A long wooden form placed against the wall next to the post office counter served as a waiting area for the customers dawdling in for their pensions. The form was as inviting as any chaise longue to shoppers of all sorts and to some like Hubert, as on this occasion, a retreat - a place to get out of the road - when things were less than pleasant at home.

Hubert took off his waterproofs and planked himself down beside Davy and Jamie, two locals, who sat idly smoking their pipes.

"Is she back 'reddin' up?" asked Jamie.

"Aye... but sure I never know when she's coming."

"She's trying to catch you out Hubert, in case you have another woman installed." Davy cackled at his own joke.

"She caught me out alright," mumbled Hubert, "always giving off about the auld bike."

The men grinned knowingly, showing tobacco stained teeth spaced like tombstones.

"How's she running Hubert?"

Sammy, a small insipid figure in a fawn dustcoat, liked to engage his prospective customers in chat. He glanced over at the trio sitting on the form as he wrestled with a bag of Kerr's Pinks.

"Like a bird," answered Hubert. Hubert continued to pare slices from a block of War Horse tobacco with a stumpy knife, rubbed them between his palms and then packed them into the bowl of his pipe. He was slow and deliberate in his actions.

Stripped off his bulky riding gear, he was a thin lanky man in his sixties, with a mournful expression. He wore the carelessness of a long time bachelor.

"I got a new carburettor for her. Had to send to England for it."

He drew steadily on the pipe, flicked out the match then settled himself contentedly on the form.

"What age is she now?" asked Davy.

"Awh, my brother got her on his seventeenth birthday, I was only a wee nipper at the time but I remember the rows." He paused: sucking the pipe he gazed at the floorboards. "My Mother was dead against him riding," he finally added.

"Awh, but Geordie was some rider in his day. Didn't he win all in front of him?"

"Aye, and to think of the way he was taken in the end; just cutting a tree with my father." His voice was bitter.

A silence fell on the three men while business went on in the shop and Post Office. They sat quietly puffing reflectively reliving the past through the swirling smoke and half closed eyes.

The young fresh-faced youth thundering along the country roads

on the big 500cc Norton bike was the envy of them all in those far off days...days of blue skies and sunshine, sports jackets and open-necked shirts. But in the Wilson household there were clouds of rows and arguments continually between Geordie and his parents. "You'll get killed yet on that thing," scolded his mother. "Or kill somebody else," added his father but Geordie zoomed out of the gate and away when things got unpleasant. Am I now doing the same thing? Hubert questioned his thoughts.

The young Hubert listened to it all back then, just biding the time when he too would be old enough to ride. His parents were very aware of this.

"If it hadn't been for you," he once said to his sister – four years his senior – "I'd be the age to ride."

"Oh, excuse me for existing. You couldn't ride a trike never mind a motorbike, you're not Geordie," she tossed her head making her ringlets jiggle and dance.

Her words stung, even yet...he never was as good as Geordie nor ever got the chance to be. His parents had suffered enough. Even when Geordie began to bring trophies home, his mother's praise was dampened with dread but Hubert sensed his parent's pride on seeing his name in the weekly papers ... 'Geordie does it again'... 'The Wilson/Norton Duo.' His father had smiled and taken the papers away quietly for another read.

Looking back it seemed as if Geordie had just rode off one morning into the sunshine of his life. He was there laughing that morning as Hubert left for school. Hours later Hubert had been sent home to find his parents bereft.

Geordie looked the same as he always did when asleep except for the dark purplish bruise on his temple. A bough of the tree, he and his father had been felling, had struck him. His parents drew comfort from the big funeral, the important people who attended from the biking world and the photos and articles in the papers.

For Hubert it was an ending of his own dreams. His recollections of life after Geordie were misty.

The Norton lay idle in the barn for months until Hubert and his pals started her up again and were forever tinkering with her. Eventually he began riding at the cost of strained relationships with his parents.

“We have lost one son.”

Hubert knew he could never enter the world of racing and so contented himself over the years with tootling around the roads and to the village.

Sammy came round the counter and stopped beside the three dreamers. He scratched his head...it was time they bought something or dozed somewhere else. “She’d be worth a quare penny now Hubert,” he said as a means of stirring them back to the present. Hubert drew in his sprawled legs.

“I wouldn’t part with her for all the tea in China.”

“And he wouldn’t part with big Aggie either.”

Hubert remained grim while his cronies laughed heartily at Davy’s joke.

“Is there something I can get youse afore ye’s go? Tobacco or matches? I have some nice corned beef.”

“Have ye a nice cleaning woman for Hubert?”

“I’ll take a quarter of tay and the Weekly News,” Hubert said ignoring the banter as they all struggled to their feet.

Hubert’s plight with Aggie was common knowledge. It was usually aired on pension days. His cronies looked forward to the continuing saga as if it was a serial in a weekly magazine. It had been going on now for about six months without a solution. For Hubert, life had been a long plod with few highs or lows. He had left school, started work in Lisnafillan Factory and also helped his father on the small farm. When his sister married and moved abroad he developed a greater bond with the auld motor bike. Unlike Geordie, he was no ladies’ man.

Then his father passed away leaving him solely responsible for his ailing mother. It was during the last months of his mother's illness that Aggie began to visit and gradually she started to tidy-up and do some chores.

"Now be civil to Aggie," his mother had warned him, "she's a guid help aroon the hoose and I'm not able."

And indeed she was a good help, he confessed, especially at the time of the funeral six months ago.

But Aggie didn't end there. She now came as if of right and in spite of Hubert's mild, "Ough, there's no need," she would lift the brush and start cleaning and washing with great gusto.

Aggie was a buxom, handsome woman in her early fifties. An able woman, 'she could turn her hand to anything,' her late husband used to proudly say. After the dust had settled and she had gone, Hubert had to admit the place looked more like that of his mother's heyday. "But the house is not my own anymore," he had complained. "You don't know when you're well off, I wouldn't mind big Aggie coming round," some had joked.

"Tell her straight that you don't need her," others had advised.

"I've tried. She says the place is getting like a pig-sty," said Hubert.

It was when he started to keep the motor bike in the kitchen that matters really got serious for Hubert. "She ordered me to tak' her oot o' that," he exploded.

His pals were suitably shocked.

"Imagine that," Davy said with great deliberation.

"What you need is opposition," said Sammy who was listening from behind the counter.

"Opposition?" the men looked at Sammy enquiringly.

But as the weeks went past Hubert played a cat and mouse game with Aggie: always trying to have the bike removed before she would appear. When it worked he was happy.

Hubert was in a happy mood when he next called at Gillen's. An hour or so had passed contentedly sitting on the form with Davy and Jamie when Sammy decided to make a move. He clapped and rubbed his hands together.

"The smoked bacon is selling well, would youse like a bit afore it is all gone?" he said as an opener.

"Oh, by the way Hubert, I've got a cleaning woman for yeh," he added.

"Cleaning woman?" Hubert blinked, "I've already got one that I can't get rid of." He laughed ruefully while the others immediately sat bolt upright.

"Aha, but this is my niece. She's here on holiday from college and she can do you a wee turn around the house. It'll fairly put Aggie's nose out of joint."

His words hadn't properly sunk into Hubert's brain when a young woman strode out of the door from behind the counter.

"This is Melanie."

"Hi Hubert, I hear you have a Norton ...man that's cool."

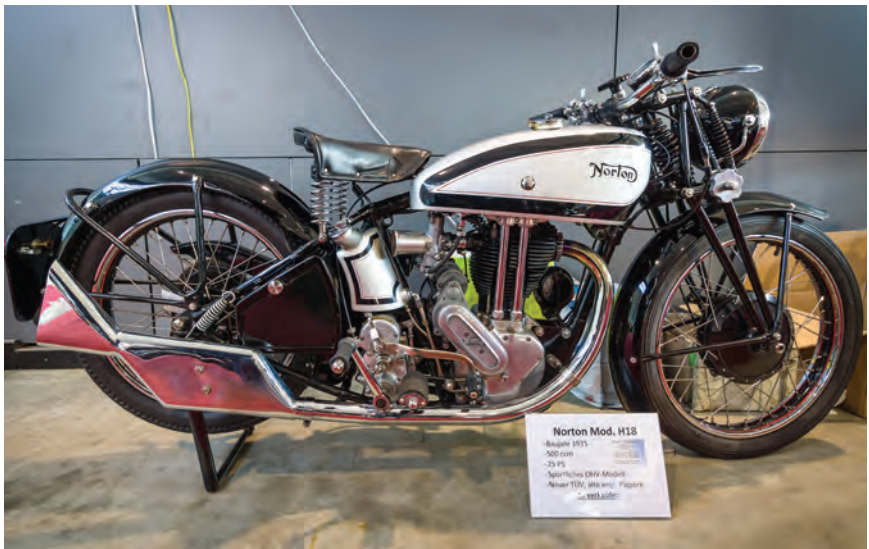
Three pairs of eyes stared at her, mouths slack. She pushed her fair hair underneath the helmet and went out to where the bike was parked by the railings. The trio plodded out after her followed by Sammy.

"Shouldn't she be wearin' mair claes," remarked Davy in a loud whisper.

"Naw, these young wimmin never feel the cauld." Sammy spoke authoritatively.

"Is that a fact...?" Jamie's words petered out as Melanie put her hand on Hubert's shoulder and swung her leg over the pillion seat. Hubert kicked the bike into life.

"Melanie, don't forget to make a list of any wee things Hubert might need," called Sammy before the Norton phutt, phutt, phutted away down the Nursery Road.



“I hear you have a Norton – man, that’s cool.”



~ 3 ~

JUST THE THING

When Roseanne picked up the brochure in McKinney's Estate Agents her dreams soared. She and her husband Jimmy had been looking for a place of their own for some time. The Agent's write-up had her visualising a lovely romantic stone bridge over a babbling stream and a driveway, banked on either side with primroses and violets, leading to a cottage with a Monet type garden.

"Whoever wrote that twaddle would need their head examined," she had said later. Her round smiling face had sagged into a disappointed pout. The property was approached from the road by crossing a crumbling mortar and stone bridge onto a pot-holed lane, the sides of which were a mass of overgrown wild carvey. The cottage stood at the top of the lane surrounded by a yard, a number of ramshackle outhouses and a few acres of land. The garden was just a piece of rough ground at the front of the cottage where a clump of marguerite daisies struggled to exist amongst the tangle of grass and dandelions.

"Just the thing," said Jimmy pushing his thumbs into his belt as he strutted around like a banty cock surveying the property. "I'll have plenty of space to set up a repair business as well as doing a wee bit of farming." While Roseanne was still but ...but... butting...Jimmy bought the property. That was almost twenty-five years ago and Roseanne's disappointments and frustrations then, had multiplied many times over the years. She was a placid easy going woman but the years of yearning showed in her wistful grey eyes.

"The place looks like a scrap yard," she had complained every time Jimmy dragged home another piece of angle iron, rusty corrugated sheeting or an assortment of old car parts.

"You wouldn't have got away with that at your parent's home," Roseanne had said bitterly remembering how her mother-in-law had ruled the family.

"That's why we came here, a place of our own to do what we like." He gave her a look of amazement – did the woman not understand how lucky she was.

Roseanne managed to make a home out of the cottage. Every chair was cushioned, every wall papered and painted and the windows were dressed in chintz curtains. The house was snug and comfortable inside but the outside hadn't improved except for the garden. She had dug, weeded and planted and was eventually rewarded by having something in bloom throughout the year. The garden however, was open to the poultry and any animal that came about. Her heart was broken shoeing cats and chickens. If only she could get Jimmy to erect a little wall with railings on top, it would be complete. But he always had more important things to do.

No one could say that Jimmy was lazy. He was a small, spare build of a man who had plenty to say about everything. By day he worked as a caretaker at the village school. He kept a few cows and sheep plus the poultry on the few acres and in the evenings he was to be found, grease to the elbows, adapting some contraption for use.

Things didn't improve when he palled up with Frank, a dealing man, and they started going to auctions together. Old iron beds, creamery cans and tea chests crammed with items were lugged off the car trailer and tumbled into one of the outhouses. Nothing was ever taken to Frank's place. Oh no, Emma wouldn't like it, Frank admitted sheepishly.

However, it was Frank, on seeing Roseanne's big purple-faced pansies clawed out of the flowerbeds by the cats, who had convinced Jimmy to fix the garden. Roseanne was thrilled and couldn't wait to return home from her part-time job in the Yew Tree Hairdresser's to see the results. When she got to the top of the lane she froze. The sides of the

old iron beds had been used as ‘just the thing’ for the posts to which chicken wire was attached.

“Where’s the wall and the railings?” Her voice came out as a squeak. Jimmy raised his cap and scratched his head. He looked wide-eyed and puzzled.

“But this will keep the cats and chickens out. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

Frank scuffed the ground with his foot.

“Maybe you could grow roses up the wire,” he said.

“Roses, my foot,” said Roseanne, “it’s like a chicken pen.”

She stumped into the house.

Time went on and men from far and near, looking for spare parts or bringing their broken-down lawnmowers, bikes or engines to be fixed, descended on Jimmy’s place like seagulls to a fishing port.

“Jimmy, would you have a bolt that would fit this?”

“Jimmy, could you weld a bit onto the end of that?”

Often things lay around for months and then spilled into years and Roseanne suspected Jimmy’s yard was being used as a dump. The outhouses were now filled. In the fields old baths were used for drinking troughs and old doors bound with wire served as gates.

Still Roseanne contented herself by browsing the magazines in the hairdresser’s for new ideas to improve the home. A little sun porch, she thought would look well at the front door where she and Jimmy could sit in the evenings as the sun went down. She was surprised when he agreed and soon Jimmy and Frank started building the porch. Roseanne was excited. She began planning the décor and the furniture. Two wicker chairs would look nice and she could make little coloured scatter cushions. A hanging basket and a few potted plants around the windowsills would make it just like a conservatory. She was humming to herself the evening they were due to complete the porch when Jimmy put his head round the kitchen door.

“I’ve got just the thing for the porch,” he said proudly. Roseanne’s heart sank.

“Ah no, what?” she asked.

“It fits in really well,” he said indicating the seating. The back seat of an old Morris Minor car and a passenger’s seat sat side by side against the solid wall as if waiting for passengers. One passenger was already installed – Frank. Jimmy threw himself down on the other seat and sprawled his legs out waiting for the praise.

Roseanne’s face said it all.

“What?” Jimmy looked bewildered.

Roseanne turned on her heel and went inside.

“What’s wrong with her?”

“She doesn’t appreciate your ingenuity Jimmy,” Frank said with a chuckle to himself.

“Improvisation, that’s what it’s called,” said Jimmy grandly, “I doubt there’s not going to be any tea or official opening.” The two men laughed.

Standing in the kitchen Roseanne could hear their laughter. Her dislike for Frank deepened.

She had never visited Frank’s house throughout the years although Jimmy was often there. She had however, a nodding acquaintance with his wife Emma and was forever hearing about their talented son Garry Brian. Now that GB, as he was known, was to be married Jimmy and Roseanne were invited to the wedding.

“I’ll have to get something to wear,” Roseanne said one evening as they discussed attending the wedding.

“You’ll have to get them a wedding present,” Jimmy said.

“Me?” Roseanne asked.

“Agh, I wouldn’t know what to get to please them.”

“Aye, you’re right there,” said Roseanne dryly.

It was a struggle for Roseanne to climb up into the cottage attic. She hadn’t been up there for ages. She knew she was heavier and stouter now when she had to stop to get her breath. She wondered if the gold shoes would still fit. With her torch she searched through all the clutter and trumpery that had accumulated and eventually found the shoes and the matching clutch bag she had stowed away so carefully in a brown paper bag. Then she saw the tea chest.

She remembered the day that Jimmy and Frank lugged the tea chest into the kitchen. It had been sold as a 'Lot' at an auction and contained all manner of things from a colander to chicken feeders and included a framed picture.

They had pulled out the picture, which was about eighteen inches wide by twenty-four inches long and held it up before her as if they were gallery experts. The picture was of a very lithe young woman in a slinky dress, her head thrown back to look over her bare shoulder: smiling, she held a pink rose between her lips.

Now as Roseanne rubbed the dust off the glass with her sleeve she recalled the pang of jealousy she had felt at the time as she watched Jimmy and Frank gawping at the picture – their crinkly eyes bright in admiration and smiling like two old goats.

To Roseanne the picture was an embodiment of lost dreams. She felt a deep sense of loneliness.

"Nice rose," Frank had said in an effort to defrost the atmosphere. The picture and the chest were bundled up into the attic and that must be going on ten years. Roseanne got up off her knees and manoeuvred the picture down the ladder. She polished the mahogany stained frame and cleaned the glass – it looked well, perhaps she should hang it up in the new porch, after all it didn't annoy her now.

Later that evening over supper Roseanne asked, "Are you thinking of going to Frank's tonight?"

"I might. Did you get the present?" He was instantly interested.

"Aye, I did," said Roseanne. She rose and unhooked the picture from the wall above the Morris Minor seats in the porch and held it up before him.

Jimmy gawped: but in a different way than he did some years back. His face puckered into a frown.

"I thought..." his voice trailed off, "do you think that's suitable?"

"Of course," said Roseanne, "it's just the thing."



Skip your way to fitness

~ 4 ~

KEEP THE KETTLE BOILING

*‘Keep the kettle boiling; miss the rope you’re out.
If you had been where I had been, you wouldn’t have been put out.’*

Granny Johnston’s clear singing voice could be heard above the whack of the skipping rope. The words of the skipping song and the laughter of the girls followed Maureen like a phantom as she jumped on the bike and pedalled furiously to get back home.

The back door burst open and then slammed closed. Maureen stomped into the kitchen where her mother was baking.

“Don’t bang the door like that dear, are you trying to shatter the glass?” Gertie Johnston buffed her two floury hands together over the baking bowl and looked intently at her ten-year old daughter sensing something was wrong. Maureen stood with a scowl on her face and her small body bristled with temper.

“What’s wrong? Why are you back so soon?” asked her mother, “I thought you were spending the afternoon with the wee girls round at Granny Johnston’s?”

“I am never going to Granny Johnston’s again; never, ever, in my whole life. I was affronted in front of my friends.”

She headed for the hall, “Everybody was laughing at Granny,” she called over her shoulder before she thumped up the stairs to her bedroom.

“My goodness... whatever has Granny done,” Mrs Johnston muttered to herself.

She lifted the buttermilk and continued baking.

Granny Johnston had always been a firm favourite with the grandchildren and indeed with all the neighbouring children who lived in the same cul-de-sac. It was considered safe for the children to play on the road in front of the houses there. Granny Johnston's bungalow was open house to all and had a lived-in appearance and ambience. The grandchildren loved visiting and foraging down the back of the settee cushions for toffees and loose change. The flattened scatter cushions with their crochet covers could be discovered under last week's newspapers and magazines.

Granny never worried about such things as sandal buckles plucking the upholstery: she was too busy with new ideas which she now referred to as her 'projects' ever since she got a computer and attended a computer class. Compared to their parents, the grandchildren regarded Granny Johnston as 'cool'

It wasn't until the evening meal when the family was seated around the table that Granny Johnston's fall from grace was disclosed. Maureen, still miffed, was coaxed into telling how she and the other girls were skipping out on the road in front of the houses.

"Rosemary and Vera were turning the rope and we were having fun and then Granny came out."

Maureen stopped, swallowed hard and batted her eyelids for effect. After further prompting from the family she continued.

"She said she could skip and started singing a song about *'keep the kettle boiling'* and then she tucked her skirt into her knickers and ran into the rope and started to skip, first with her two feet together and then foot about as if she was dancing."

Maureen batted her eyelids again in a display of disapproval then went on to say that Mr Kirk, who was working in his garden, came over and began singing, "*Knees up Mother Brown,*" and then Granny joined in and they both sang, "*Knees up, knees up, don't get the breeze up, knees up Mother Brown.*"

The family were unable to stifle their laughter. Maureen glared at them. "Don't let it worry you Petal, sure everyone knows what Granny is like," said her father gently.

“Daddy, everyone was laughing. Rosemary and Vera kept turning the rope faster and faster and shouting, ‘Look at your Granny, Maureen,’ I was affronted, it wasn’t dignified.”

“Dignified! Ohoo,” teased one of her brothers.

Maureen slid off her chair and ran to the comfort of her bedroom.

During the following days Gertie Johnston pitifully watched her daughter play alone in the back yard with her single skipping rope. She was still pondering whether she should go round to see what Granny Johnston was up to when Granny arrived on her purple bike and colour co-ordinated leisure suit and crash helmet.

“I’m doing a mail drop,” she announced handing Gertie a leaflet.

”You’ll come, won’t you? It’s my latest project. Can’t stop, have a few more to deliver.”

With a twinkle of her fingers she disappeared as quickly as she had arrived. ‘The Purple Rocket,’ indeed thought Gertie as she remembered the boys’ nickname for her. Gertie looked at the leaflet that was obviously produced by Granny on her computer. The caption read:

SKIP YOUR WAY TO FITNESS

— an afternoon for the over 40s.

The leaflet went on to list the benefits of skipping – increases co-ordination, brainpower and metabolism. Scares the daylights out of cardiovascular, osteoporosis and cholesterol problems!

The leaflet was passed around the tea table that evening to the amusement of the family.

“Don’t go Mummy,” said Maureen anxiously when the other members of the family coaxed her to go.

“Granny Johnston’s street parties are always a hoot. Pity we’re back at school,” the boys said.

“It’s for ould dolls only,” said their father wickedly.

“That settles it. I’m not going,” said Gertie laughing. Maureen smiled primly.

Gertie was busy ironing when the phone rang in the late afternoon of the Skipping Party. It was Granny.

"Gertie would you have any sticking plasters? Can't find any here for love or money?"

"I have," said Gertie, "is there something wrong?"

"Ugh, no, no, Olive and Doris got a few wee scratches on their knees, that's all," Granny said in her usual laid-back manner.

"Serves them right," said Maureen when she heard the news. She was now insistent in accompanying her mother round to Granny's.

"I'll carry the First Aid box," she said importantly.

The cul-de-sac had returned to its normal respectability except for a few lonely deckchairs still remaining unclaimed but inside Granny's bungalow the merriment was deafening. Ten ladies sat hugging either a sherry or a wine glass while two neighbouring men, Alan Kirk and Hughie Burns, were swigging out of beer cans.

"Gertie, you missed a great afternoon," they chorused. Maureen looked disappointed. "Oh, here's Nurse Maureen," said Doris eyeing the First Aid box. She was seated on the settee with her leg propped up and her knee bound with a blood stained hankie. Olive came forward to have the scratches on the palms of her hands and knee attended. Maureen looked askance at the ladies as her mother was applying the first aid.

The chatter continued about the afternoon. The rope wasn't long enough, someone offered as an explanation for the mishaps while others suggested it was the wearing of skirts rather than trousers that was the cause.

"They've got duck disease. Their backsides are too near the ground," quipped Alan Kirk as the good-humoured banter flew back and forward.

"Were you skipping too Mr Kirk?" Maureen asked in a voice squeaky with disbelief.

"Indeed I was not. Hughie and I were turning the rope."

"Daddy said it was only for ould dolls anyway," announced Maureen.

"Maureen!"



Gertie grabbed her daughter by the shoulder and shook her. "Ohoo," chorused the ladies as they all turned their attention to look at Maureen in amused surprise.

Maureen gazed back at them stubbornly for a moment then burst into a howl. Granny Johnston immediately sprang to her side and smothered her in a great big hug as she walked with Maureen into the kitchen.

"Mummy is cross with me," sobbed Maureen.

"Ugh, Mummy's always cross. She's an ould spoil-sport."

"Am I an ould spoil-sport Granny?"

"No, indeed you're not. You're like your Granny. Now come and help me to make the tea."

Maureen brushed away her tears and began to smile as she brought out the cups and saucers with the big yellow roses on them and set the tray while Granny rummaged through several biscuits tins.

"The kettle's boiling Granny."

'Keep the kettle boiling, miss the rope...' sang Granny Johnston as she grabbed Maureen in passing and twirled her around the kitchen floor and then went on to lift the lid of the delft teapot to wet the tea.



~ 5 ~

MEG'S THANK YOU GIFT

The McKenzie family settled around the kitchen table, bringing the day's work to an end. Supper was the most relaxed meal of the day but Meg hated suppertime. It was always porridge. She didn't mind the tea, bread and jam that followed, but porridge... grey and slimy...ugh. She paddled her spoon around the blue striped bowl feeling miserable.

Her mother, Jeanie McKenzie, seated in the midst of her family, broke off from relating the day's events and frowned.

"Would you quit paddling about with that spoon and eat up your supper." She spoke sternly.

Meg face crumpled and the tears ran in two meandering streams down her grubby cheeks and mingled with the milk and the grey slippery porridge. She sniffed and wiped her face on her cardigan cuff. "I don't know what's wrong with that child today," Mrs McKenzie said to no one in particular.

"I sent her to the shop for the messages and she came back without the change and I had to send her back again," she continued.

"And did she get it?" Andy and Sandy asked in unison.

"Aye, she did. Hannah said she had forgot to give it to her, didn't she Meg?"

Meg's tousled head remained bowed over her bowl but she peeped up from the eves of her eyebrows and nodded.

"I saw ould Hannah going up the road to Ahoghill a while ago, probably to evening Mass," said Willie McKenzie to his wife.

"She's away to say her prayers and to ask forgiveness for trying to diddle Meg," said Andy as he shovelled food into his mouth with a spoon.

“She knows Meg can’t do sums,” said Sandy.

Meg went into kinks of sobbing.

“That’ll do,” Jeanie said with a warning look at her twin sons, “nobody’s blaming Meg, it was Hannah’s fault.”

The evening wore on and the four McKenzie children later sat round the big kitchen table doing their homework. Meg chewed the end of her pencil and idly looked at her twin brothers. They sat huddled together, their heads touching, engaged in their own private worlds. They were oblivious of others and never needed outside help. Everyone admired the twins – pink and podgy with fair curls. Meg thought they looked like those cherubs you saw pictured flying about on Christmas cards or on religious pictures. She wasn’t quite sure whether she liked cherubs or not.

But she liked her eldest brother, she was sure of that. She looked across the table to where he sat engrossed in his homework. Davy always had time for her no matter what he was doing and he never made fun of her. He was five years older than Meg and was happiest when he had his head buried in a book.

As Meg gazed at Davy she wondered how she could get him on his own. She couldn’t tell him here. She would wait her chance before she went to bed.

“Aren’t you in bed yet?” said Jeanie as she caught sight of Meg, clad in her nightdress, slipping back into the kitchen.

“It’s past your bedtime,” she said as she continued to wind the skein of wool she had stretched around the backs of two chairs.

“I just want to tell Davy a wee thing,” said Meg.

“Upstairs you go...”

“I’ll be up in a few minutes,” Davy said interrupting his mother. He closed his book.

Meg was sitting up in bed waiting when Davy opened the door. He was a thin boy with a pale studious face.

“What’s up with you the night?” He spoke kindly as he planked himself on the bed.

“It wasn’t Hannah’s fault about the money.” Meg searched his face

for reaction then continued, "Mummy's blaming her in the wrong." "So whose fault was it?" he asked with a shake of his head as he waited for his sister to relate another escapade.

Meg had been happily singing as she swung through the air on the swing that dangled from a bough of the horse chestnut tree. The wind caught her frock and ballooned it up in front of her.

'My grandfather's clock was too large for the shelf so...'

Her mother's voice penetrated her singing.

"Meg, where are you?"

Meg slithered off the swing and came to her mother at the back door.

"Meg, run down to the wee shop. I need a plain loaf, matches and some salt. Get the Ballymena Observer for Daddy if it's in. I've written it down and the money is rolled inside the note. Take the basket."

Meg trotted off down the farm lane with its ditches and open slaps to explore, then crossed the bridge onto the country road where the wee shop nestled at the bottom of the brae. Shopping gave Meg a sense of being grown-up and she happily birlled the basket as she skipped along.

The wee shop, thatched and white washed, had two small windows that twinkled with so many interesting things. Amongst the spools, packets of safety pins, hairpins and Mrs Cullen's Powders were a rubber doll and a windmill.

Meg gazed wistfully at the assortment before pushing the half-door open. Coming from the outside it always took a little time to get used to the dark interior. The counter towered high above Meg because of the row of big glass sweetie bottles each almost full of clove rock, cinnamon lozenges, dolly mixture or Blue Bird toffees.

Hannah's living quarters were partitioned off with onion boxes that served as shelves and storage within the shop side. Meg could see Hannah sitting dozing at the smoking hearth fire. Hannah moved and pulled her black shawl around her shoulders and came to the counter. Meg sometimes thought Hannah looked like a witch and felt an excited uneasiness.

"Mummy sent me for the messages," said Meg and handed the warm sweaty note and the basket to Hannah.

Hannah smoothed and peered at the crumpled note.

"Did your Mammy not send any money? There's none in the note."

Meg could see the empty note and her mother's writing on it. Realisation showered on her like rain and then panic rose within her.

"Oh, Mummy will beat me," Meg howled.

"Easy, easy dear, let's look in the basket, maybe it fell in there."

"No, I held it tight in my hand," sobbed Meg.

The old woman tried to comfort the child and they both searched the two pockets of Meg's floral dress but the money wasn't found. Meg continued to sob loudly and to gaze at the old woman. Hannah saw the depth of pleading in the child's eyes.

Quietly she put a loaf, box of matches and a packet of salt in the basket, then added the newspaper. Meg grabbed the handle as if afraid Hannah might change her mind and with a brief 'thanks' dashed out the door.

Hannah woke out of a warm doze and saw the child standing looking at her from the end of the counter. Goodness did she not go home, Hannah thought, then becoming fully awake she asked, "Did you find the money?"

Hannah watched as Meg's face screwed up in a flood of tears.

"No"...there was a lull before she continued, "Mummy said you didn't give any change and she sent me back for it."

"Dear me, did you not tell your Mammy what happened?"

"No...I couldn't," she gulped.

"Do you know how much she sent?"

"Mummy said there were three shillings in the note."

The child and the old woman looked at each other across a generation gap of almost seventy years. Both knew that Jeanie McKenzie wouldn't be pleased.

Hannah hirpled up from the stool and counted out some coins.

Meg watched anxiously as the thin spindly fingers put them into a used grubby envelope.

"Now, you must be more careful and don't go losing anything again. It's sad to lose things. I lost my big black cat and it still vexes me."

"And I'm vexed too," said Meg.

"Thanks Hannah," said Meg as she took the envelope and again hurried out of the shop. Hannah toddled back to her stool by the hearth. Later Mrs McKenzie put the change into the crockery jam jar that sat on the top shelf in the cupboard and started to prepare supper. "Stir the porridge Meg," she said energetically.

Meg snuffed and twisted the front of her nightdress as she unfolded her tale of woe to Davy and then she heaved a sigh at the end. He watched the forlorn face and the expectant look that he could put things aright.

"But Hannah will expect to be paid eventually," he said. She looked startled.

"Hannah said it is sad to lose something. She still misses her cat."

"I know ..." Davy said pondering, "you could give her your new kitten."

"Awha," began Meg.

"Yes," he said decisively, "Hannah would like that and that's fair."

Meg was warm and comfortable when her mother came to tuck her in and say goodnight. "Mummy, I'm going to give Hannah my new kitten," she announced happily.

"My goodness, what brought this on? I thought you wanted the kitten."

"But Hannah lost her black cat and she is vexed about it. Davy said she would like it."

"Oh well, Davy would know. Good night dear, now go to sleep."

Jeanie stooped and kissed her daughter, pleased to see her happy again.



“Hang it out on the clothes line and let it air”

~ 6 ~

WILLIE JOHN'S
WEDDING SUIT

“You’d think you could tie your boots,” she snapped as soon as Willie John came into the kitchen. He eyed her from under his shaggy eyebrows while he dried his hands on the roller towel behind the door.

She was scooping the hot oil over the eggs in the frying pan on the range. In her cross-over apron she looked neat and tidy, her greying hair pulled back into a tight bun at the nape of her neck. Willie John pursed his lips and stumped over to the table, his boots dragging on the quarried tiles. She turned and planked two plates of Ulster fry on the scrubbed table. He was immediately wary – aye, she was still on her high horse, he thought. He always knew from the banging of the crockery. It was her wee way, but she’d come round in the end.

Still standing, she poured the tea into the two mugs, sending japs over the butter plate. Her face although etched with fine lines, looked fresh in the pink flush of anger. Willie John bowed his head to the task of eating. He knew from experience that it was better to say little. He would keep out of her road today.

They ate in silence. He had weathered this storm over the weekend and it would soon blow over.

“Couldn’t you eat without smacking and use your fork.” With a bound she grabbed the teapot from the range and refilled the two mugs. Her sharp remark took him unawares and brought him back to the present.

"Heavens above, can I do nothing right, all because of this 'la-de-da' wedding, I suppose."

"And a right spectacle you're going to look in that suit."

"Oh, we're back to that again." He pretended to be surprised.

"You promised Elizabeth at the weekend that you'd get a new suit on Monday and now it is Tuesday and the wedding tomorrow."

Her voice was plaintive. He ignored her vexed look. Women, they were full of guile, she'd start the wheedling again and that was worse to handle.

"There's not a thing wrong with the suit I have."

"Except that it's about thirty years old and reeking of moth balls."

"Hang it out on the clothes line and let it air."

He was sick of this nagging. He would have to be firm with the womenfolk he decided and with that he got up, took a long swig from the mug and clumped out of the kitchen. She sat on at the table resting her chin in the heart of her hand. She had worked on him all weekend. Later as she pulled the dark suit out from the back of the wardrobe she felt defeated. It looked worse than she had remembered.

Willie John wasn't one for dressing up. He was happiest in dungarees and collarless shirt. He had an everyday suit for going to the Fair Hill on Saturdays and a middle suit for Sundays and this specimen for 'special occasions.'

It had been tailor-made for their eldest son's wedding. Even then it had been an eyesore and continued to be every time it came out of storage for a wedding, funeral or christening.

"The tailor must be blind," she had said at the time, when she saw the hand-sewn stitches, like big teeth, around the buttonholes. Surprisingly, he still managed to squeeze into the suit, which pleased him no end.

"I'm as tight a man as ever," he had said patting his stomach, when he last donned the suit six months ago for a neighbour's funeral. He hid the fact that the two top buttons wouldn't fasten around the

waistband of his trousers, so he kept the tips of his waistcoat well pulled down.

As she floured the baking board she could see the jacket on the hanger, swinging on the line and the trousers puffed out with the breeze. She hated that suit and tried to push her thoughts to the back of her mind. Not for the first time had she nursed ideas about getting rid of it but somehow she couldn't bring herself to do so.

If only something would befall it – but no – the moths steered clear of it, the mice were more interested in gnawing the skirting board and even the birds, now with their opportunity, misfired. This thought brought the first smile of the morning to her face. Then she heard a car coming up the lane, now voices. It was Elizabeth and her daughter Anne. She saw Willie John come out of the barn to greet them.

Anne was their only granddaughter and what a lovely bride she would be tomorrow. Her dark flowing hair, her big brown eyes and her warm olive skin. Oh poor Elizabeth and Anne would be let down by this auld clown of a husband of hers.

They came into the kitchen and Anne threw her arms around her grandmother's neck.

"All set for tomorrow Gran?" she asked, her brown eyes shining.

She looked over Anne's shoulder to Elizabeth for help.

"Everything's ready except that Grand-dad still hasn't got his new suit yet."

"Oh-o-o, and what's that auld bygone doing on the line?" asked Elizabeth in disbelief.

Willie John gave his wee slippery smile. A body had to humour them, he thought, that's the easiest way out. He put up no argument but just smiled through half shut eyes when Elizabeth and Anne arranged to drop him off at Alexander's in Ballymena on their way home so that he could buy the suit.

They sat at the kitchen table in happy conversation. She ladled out the soup into bowls and passed it around. Once the meal was over Willie John changed into his Sunday suit and seemed as happy as a pig going to hoke. Elizabeth gave her mother a knowing wink and then the three of them were gone.

She did a little jig around the kitchen in her delight. A cloud was lifted from her world. Going outside she pulled the suit off the line and bundled it up. She got pleasure from ramming it into the ottoman at the bottom of the bed and slammed the lid on it.

The afternoon was carefree. She went off to get her hair done and later on return, she laid out her new frock and jacket for the morning.

The clock ticked past the closing time for shops and the earlier humour left her. But she needn't have worried: she saw him coming up the lane with one of his cronies and he had the long awaited parcel.

"There's a wee wife awaiting," he made an effort to sing.

She knew from his high spirits and the flush on both their faces that they had a few drinks in them.

"You got the suit," she said.

"Aye, I got it out on appro and I got more than that," he said, "Samuel James treated me as grandfather of the bride." He clapped himself on the chest. He dropped the parcel on the sofa.

"What about a mouthful of tay for Samuel James?" he suggested.

"I'll have a wee look at the suit first," she said, pulling at the string.

"The tay, the tay," he called. "Pull up your chair to the table Samuel James."

In her excitement she fumbled as she opened the parcel then she froze. She held up the jacket. It was a light grey colour with big bold squares of different coloured checks. The crossing lines confused her, blinding her. She felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“How’s that?” he laughed.

She could only whisper, “Oh, heavens above”.

“What do you think of that Samuel James? For the grandfather of the bride.” He made it sound like a toast.

“Holy smoke, Willie John, you’ll be like a bookie in that, a real toff.”

She looked at her husband and recognised the satisfied smirk on his face. Well, hadn’t he got them a suit that they had been craiking about for days? He watched her from out of the corner of his eye for a reaction. She lifted the teapot. Her body had tightened and her back was straight as an arrow. With any luck the suit would go back with the excuse that the wife didn’t like it. A man always had to be two steps ahead.

Safety in number was another of his little tricks when faced with a delicate situation. With Samuel James at home to ceilidh for the evening he had a safe run until bedtime. He was asleep by the time she had retrieved the suit from the ottoman, put away the smoothing iron and came up to bed.

Hers was a disturbed sleep. She was playing hopscotch and as she jumped one-legged onto the squares they got bigger and bigger and kept changing places. Finally she was stranded on a square unable to jump. Her classmates were shouting at her: their mouths gaping buttonholes. She woke in a sweat, thankful when at last it was daybreak.

The wedding morning was sunny and warm outside but inside it was frosty as they dressed. The car came on time to take them to First Ahoghill. As she sat beside Willie John in the back seat she glanced sideways at him. He sat contented-looking with his knees apart, holding the tips of his waistcoat. The big teeth around the buttonholes on his jacket seemed to be leering at her.



The old First Ahoghill Presbyterian Church

~ 7 ~

MAKING THEIR APPEARANCE

On Sunday mornings the men always gathered outside the Church fifteen or twenty minutes before the service began. The young downy-faced youths stood in clumps, some leaning against the grey stone wall of the building. Others stood with a leg bent backwards; the foot flat against the wall for support. A few were noisy on their feet as they trampled about like leggy foals.

When the girls went past they dunted each other with their elbows while they tried to out-do Joey with something ‘fly’ to say to them.

Joey was sparely built, his ginger hair sleeked back with Brylcreem, above a freckled cheeky face. He strutted with his chest puffed out like a banty cock.

“Chilly for June,” called the pimply-faced youth with a row of pens in his breast pocket. The two dirndl-skirted girls passing clung to each other and giggled, hanging their heads. The boys guffawed loudly. Joey pushed forward: he liked to cause the laughs.

“Hi Sunshine, your back wheel’s going round.” The cyclist pulled a face at him and rode on round the side of the Church. It was a new wisecrack and he was pleased with its effect.

The older men stood stiffly in a row like beading along the wall to the right of the Church entrance. They were canny in case they rubbed their Sunday suits against the green-mossed stone and suffered weekly from the stiff-collar studs cutting into their Adam's apples.

While more subdued than the young men they didn't miss a wink, a wisecrack or even a crow flying past. Some were well-weathered bachelors, still watching for the right woman.

When the Church bell gave its last tinny clang the men all headed for the Church door in a drove, jostling one another to get to their pews in time. They had collected enough news and tit-bits to amuse their families when they later gathered round their dinner tables for spuds and broth.

The Sunday that Hughie was missing from the seasoned bachelor's group caused a stir. He was the main topic around the Church walls and later at the dinner tables.

"I met him in the loanen heading off all toffed up on Wednesday morning," said Davy whose farm marched Hughie's. "Somebody was driving him in a big swanky car," he added.

"I never thought he would take the plunge while his Mother was alive," said Jimmy.

"Boys, he never let on last Sunday, the sleekit wee weasel," said another.

"Who's the woman, anyway?" asked Jimmy.

"Ugh, he been dollin' a woman up about the City for the past two or three years," said Davy, "She's something big in the Young Farmer's Clubs up there," he continued.

"Well she getting a quare wee young farmer," said Jimmy.

Their faces, like brown paper-bags, creased into laughter. They were silent for a time as they chewed on their thoughts and this latest bit of fodder.

Hughie had stood around the Church wall for many a year.

He wasn't too tall of a man and now that he was in his late forties he had broadened out giving him a squat appearance. His hair had receded at the temples and he wore a hat like most of the other men. He was a tapping good worker and always cleaned up well on a Sunday.

"I've never seen him with this bird," said Andy breaking the silence. "How could he bring her down here, sure the ould one would hear about her," said Davy.

"Well, she'll know now."

"Boys, there'll be skin and hair fleein. She has a heart like a lion to go in there to that ould doll," said Jimmy.

The Church bell brought their comments to an abrupt end and they stampeded towards the entrance door.

It was the local custom for newly married couples to make their appearance at Church the first Sunday after the wedding or honeymoon and Hughie's Sunday had arrived.

The men and the youths took up their usual places: glad that it was a soft warm morning without any rain which would have sent them scurrying indoor. The youths trampled around, occasionally combing their hair with a small comb kept in their breast pockets. Joey taunted the girls and some tried to match his wit.

The older men, strung along their usual wall, talked about the general events of the farming week. An air of expectancy, however, showed itself in their constant skelly towards the wrought iron entrance gates.

Hughie and his bride left it quite late before making their appearance through the big iron gates to walk down the path towards the Church door. Hughie sauntered along, lifting his feet as if he was walking over a clod field... his bride, in her going away ensemble, looked trig in a powder blue suit with matching hat and navy accessories. The pillbox hat and veiling nestling on top of her head, was buried in the mound of blonde curly hair. Her mouth was bright scarlet below the large brown winged glasses.

The older men peeled off the wall and shyly moved nearer the door. The youths on the other side nudged each other for a good view and Joey pushed to the front. He stood with his feet apart: his hands in this trouser pockets held his jacket back like curtain tie-backs, to expose his chest. He grinned at the approaching couple. Hughie plodded on.

"That's a quare flashy tie you've got Hughie," called Joey. Hughie put a hand up against the youth's face, pushing him backwards and walked on with a sheepish glance over towards his bachelor cronies.

He tossed his head with a wink in the usual salutation.

"This is the Missus," he said when he was level with them. They were silent, no one wanting to be the first to speak but shrewdly took stock of the bride. Mr Agnew, the local auctioneer, stepped forward offering his hand, "Welcome to First Ahoghill."

Others came forward and the couple's hands were clasped and pumped up and down in greeting.

"Boys, you kept that quiet," said Jimmy, slapping Hughie on the back.

Hughie came in for further good-humoured banter.

The bride in the meantime stepped aside and was immediately confronted by Joey who stood and gaped into her large glasses. He was lost for something clever to say. He felt mesmerised as she held his gaze.

Then she pouted her scarlet lips and said softly, "Oh, don't look at me handsome, I can't help being beautiful."

Joey's mouth gaped open. With a laugh over her shoulder at him, she walked forward to join Hughie and they continued on into the Church.

Joey blinked and then bounced two feet off the ground, "Did you hear what she said? Did you hear what she said to me?" he called excitedly.

The older men, deep in conversation, ignored him.

"Boys, that's some filly Hughie has got himself," said Jimmy. "He must have 'hooched' on her glasses when he proposed." The men laughed.

“Did you see the hair? Peroxide, I suppose,” said Andy.

Joey was still jigging around, excitedly telling his pals what the bride had said and returned to tell the older men.

“Did you hear what she said to me? She called me handsome.”

“Agh, you’re aye sticking your neb in where it’s not wanted,” said Davy. “Poor ould Mrs Logan won’t have her sorrows to seek with that one.”

The Church bell gave its last tinny clang calling the flock inside but the first to elbow his way out at the end of the Service was Joey – in a hurry to get home to tell the latest.



The church bell gave its last tinny clang calling the flock inside



~ 8 ~

THE AUTOGRAPH
BOOK

Fay gazed at herself intently in the mirror and tried to picture herself through his eyes. Yes, she was still slim and willowy but her short brown curly hair was now silver grey and groomed into a neat bob. The once impish face was now serene but creased with the tell-tale lines of years that had brought both laughter and sadness.

She sensed a wave of unease. What if he doesn't recognise me after all these years, she thought. Heavens above what have I got myself into? I could strangle Cathy: she was the instigator of all this. What if I don't recognise him? Perhaps I should wear my glasses. She glanced around the Ladies room in the Dunadry Hotel as if for inspiration. The golden décor enhanced with vases of daffodils and bowls of lemon smelling potpourri gave a sense of spring and a renewal of life. She checked her watch – she didn't want to be too eager or too late – it was time to go. She lifted her handbag, put on her designer glasses and gave a quirky smile over her shoulder at her reflection in the mirror then headed for the foyer.

This situation had come about in the autumn when Fay decided to have the roof space in her bungalow insulated. She hadn't actually been up in the attic for years: it had been a matter of shoving Christmas decorations and other articles up through the trap door and closing the door down quickly. When her mother died a few years ago she had cleared the house and brought many boxes

containing articles and treasures from her childhood home and teenage days and stored them up there.

In preparation for the loft insulation, however, she had gone up and spent days sitting on her knees, on the small floored area, going through the accumulated range of boxes. There were bundles of magazines that she wondered why they were kept in the first place yet felt obliged to go through each magazine and then the yellowed books. She was surprised how the hours had flown.

There were boxes and albums of faded photographs. That had been a marathon, looking at each photo, reliving each memory and finally deciding what to keep and what to discard. It was then she came upon the old autograph book. Its tartan cover was scuffed, faded and worn yet it seemed like yesterday since she had gone on the Church Choir day trip to Scotland with her friend Cathy. She had bought the book as a souvenir and pestered everyone thereafter to write a little message.

On the fly leaf she had written –

*Go little book, go far and near
To all the friends I love so dear
And get each one to write a page
That I may read in my old age.*

My goodness, she thought, I gave little thought then to my old age. The time has almost arrived she acknowledged with a wry smile. The little book rested on the kitchen table for days and at odd moments she would ponder over the insertions.

'May a moose never leave your meal poke with a tear in its eye.'

Jean Brown.

Goodness, I wonder whatever became of her, I'm sure I wouldn't know her now. And who on earth was A.Young who wrote, *'Love many, trust few, always paddle your own canoe.'*

It was the lost memory of some of those who had written in the autograph book that prompted Fay to get in touch with Cathy again. It had been ages since they had last met, in fact they lost touch after Fay had left home and moved to the City to take up nursing. Her life took on a new meaning with new friends and different interests. It was only when her mother died and she had spent time clearing out the family home in the country village that she had renewed their friendship. They had promised to keep in touch but it had waned again.

The little tartan book resting beside her breakfast cup finally spurred Fay to ring Cathy. They agreed to meet for lunch in the Adair Arms Hotel, a favourite haunt from their teenage days. They talked non-stop over lunch and then Fay produced the musty smelling autograph book.

"I can't believe it," said Cathy flipping through the pages. They forgot their matronly status and giggled and tittered like two schoolgirls as they read over the entries.

"Oh, there's Daisy Stewart, she would write something profound and serious, wouldn't she?"

"Oh, let me see what Vera thingy wrote. I haven't seen or heard of her for years."

"She worked in a solicitor's office in Ballymena for a time and then she went to Canada."

"Oh, what did she write?" asked Cathy taking hold of the book. She read aloud, *'It starts when you sink into his arms and ends with your arms in the sink.'*

"Oh, that sums me up okay."

They continued to leaf through the pages commenting on all the entries and the authors.

"Who wrote that?" asked Cathy pointing to the initials SJE.

"Ugh, you remember Samuel James, we used to call him 'Solemn James' because he was that serious."

"Oh, I do indeed; he had a great notion of you. He married a teacher and had a whole squad of children," Cathy babbled on, "look what you missed," she teased.

“Ah, my heart was elsewhere then,” said Fay, “Jonty Millar, remember him?”

She leafed through the book to a particular entry.

“Jonty! Ugh, he’s often around our place, he became a vet you know. He lost his wife about five years ago in a road accident.”

Cathy pulled the book towards herself and they both looked at the big loose writing and what he wrote -

*When the golden sun is setting
and your mind from care is free
while on others you are thinking
Will you sometimes think of me?*

“Aha-a,” said Cathy, “how sweet. Would you ever think of getting married again? On second thoughts maybe you’re better off the way you are. Humph, being married to a farmer is no picnic but a vet! You wouldn’t know where his hands had been.”

They both went into hoots of laughter attracting the waitress’s attention.

“Here, it’s time I got home, Farmer John will be waiting for his tea.”

Fay checked her watch and realised it was time she travelled back to the City before the traffic rush. They parted with promises to lunch together more often.

“My treat next time,” called Cathy as she drove off in her Range Rover.

It was about three weeks later that the phone rang. A man’s voice said, “Is that Fay...keeper of the autograph book?” There was a note of laughter in his voice. Fay hesitated in answering. Then he continued, “It’s Jonty Millar here. A voice from the past. I was talking to Cathy.”

“Oh,” said Fay. She felt as tongue-tied as a teenager. Later, thinking back she couldn’t remember what had been said other than that she had agreed to meet him for dinner at the Dunadry Hotel where he was attending a Veterinary Conference.

“And bring the autograph book,” he said before he went off the phone.

She walked past the Reception Desk to the seated area. He rose from a leather-bound chair – tall, slightly stooped - and extended a big hand.

“Fay, good to see you. You haven’t changed,” he said looking intently into her face.

She clasped his hand and smiled into his weathered face. Thoughts of Cathy and her devilish remarks made her choke with laughter. “I’ve brought the autograph book,” was all she could manage to say – but she knew they had all evening to talk.



Adair Arms Hotel, Ballymena



Plaque Commemorating Ahoghill Young Farmers' Club
85 Year Anniversary

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ARE YOU GETTING UP?

Rosemary jiggled the bike over the rough stones of the cassey and parked it beside the rosebush that straggled in front of the kitchen window. A warm smell of freshly baked bread and buttermilk greeted her from the open doorway.

“Hi Mum, you’re early at it this morning ... where’s Dad?”

Her mother moved the griddle to the side of the stove and straightened her back.

Rosemary noticed the striped mug, plate and eggcup sitting spaced at the top of the table. “Is he not up yet?” she continued.

“Naw, give him a shout. I’m fed up calling him,” said Madge McFetridge.

Madge turned to the griddle again and watched the bubbles rise from the last batch of pancakes and then with a flick of the broad bladed knife she turned them over. Her movements echoed her mood – sour as her buttermilk.

“Oh, let him stay where he is,” Rosemary said soothing the atmosphere. She lifted the kettle.

“We’ll have a cup of tea together and a pancake.”

“I’ve brought the morning paper if you want a look at it before Dad grabs it,” she added.

The two women sat at the big kitchen table. Rosemary enjoyed her frequent visits home. It made her feel comfortable and safe. She didn’t want anything to change yet she sometimes worried about her parents. Were they growing apart? Was there a vacuum in

their lives now that the family had all married and left? Mum was lonely, that was it... and Dad?

She looked across at her mother. Madge was already engrossed in the paper. A strand of pale golden hair fell across her forehead: her face and eyes looked forlorn and faded.

Rosemary idly stirred the tea in her cup. The old walnut clock in the parlour chimed releasing echoes from the past.

"Well, well!" Madge suddenly said, perking up. "They're going to reopen the Red Barn."

She spread the paper on the table. Rosemary looked at a picture of a dilapidated building.

"Ugh, that old hall has been lying empty for years," said Rosemary. "It's an eyesore, they should pull it down."

"They should do nothing of the sort," said Madge, stoutly. "That's where your father and I met. On second thoughts maybe they should pull it down." She shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh-o-o Mum, he's not that bad," Rosemary said gently.

But Madge wasn't listening, she was intently reading and muttering to herself... "Imagine that, it's been closed since the seventies ... it seems like yesterday ... Oh goodness I remember all those bands ... the Clipper Carlton, the Royal and Brendan Bowyer singing the Hucklebuck... my, I was no goat's toe then."

Her voice trailed off as she raised wistful eyes from the paper. A wan smile hovered on her lips.

"The Show bands were really something," she said decisively, leaving the newspaper down and nestling herself in the chair like a clocking hen. An easy smile softened her face and her eyes took on that misty far-off look. She moistened her lips.

Rosemary knew the signs and refilled the teacups.

"We used to dance two or three times a week following the big Show bands... The Drifters and the Melody Aces. We danced at the Flamingo, Hall's Hotel in Antrim or the Floral Hall and every Saturday night we went to the Red Barn. There was this big burly

‘Chucker Out’ who stood at the bottom of the stairs and we used to ask him if there were many in before we would pay our admission.”
 “How much was it in those days? I suppose it was Lsd.”

“I can’t remember but I remember teetering up the wooden stairs in stilettos to the Ladies Room. It was bedlam, everybody pushing to get sight of their faces in a mirror. You could have been powdering someone else’s face in the crush. Some were backcombing their hair, others putting on lipstick or trying to get a full-length glimpse of themselves to see if their nylons were straight. It was like getting ready for a stage performance. I always hated wearing a suspender belt. It was like a britchin for a horse. You don’t know you’re living wearing tights.”

Madge stopped to laugh then continued, “We left our coats in at the cloakroom and got a ticket which we always kept in our shoe. At the end of the night the ticket was damp and sweaty and had to be peeled off the inside sole of the shoe...”

“Did you not have a handbag or a purse?”

“Naw, we carried everything in our pockets or handed it in with our coats ...I used to like the excitement of going into the dance hall.”
 Madge paused for a moment giving a dreamy sigh.

“The women all sat around the walls and the fellas stood about the door then when a dance was announced we used to stand up in the hope that we would be better seen. But it was dreadful if everyone was picked and you were left standing or sitting.”

“Were you ever a wallflower?” asked Rosemary amused at her mother’s seriousness.

“Aha... I didn’t do too badly.” She winked impishly at Rosemary and took another sip of her tea.

“The fellas used to walk up and down past us, viewing us as if they were at the horse fair ...it’s a wonder they didn’t ask to see our teeth.”
 Rosemary shook her head and laughed. Madge enjoying the fun continued ... “and some of them were no oil paintings ...you wouldn’t have pulled them out of a sheugh. And there was always some ould gansh you couldn’t get rid of...he spoiled your chances with the other guys.”

“Couldn’t you have politely said, ‘no thanks’.”

“Ah, well you couldn’t be too choosy, you know, you mightn’t have got a dance at all.”

The two women burst out laughing together. Rosemary looked into her mother’s eyes and saw the girl in her come to life.

“I take it then that Dad was no gansh.”

“He was a bit of alright...then.” Her mood changed.

“And what’s wrong with him now, Mum?” Rosemary spoke tenderly, feeling as if she was in a reversed role with her mother.

“It’s just that he’s not interested in anything. He would lie in bed all day if he got away with it but if anybody comes about the house, oh, he’s up like a lilty and all chat then alright.”

Madge spoke bitterly, her frustration clouding the happy recollections of the dance halls.

Frowning she stirred her tea noisily and a silence fell between the two women.

Rosemary drizzled more honey on another pancake then asked brightly, “Was Dad a good dancer?”

Madge quickly sparked into good humour.

“Oh, indeed he was. He took his dancing seriously. I remember when I started going out with him we all went out to his friend Bertie’s house to practise the moonlight saunter and where do you think we did our dancing but in the byre. Well he did one of his fancy turns and the next thing I knew I was ankle deep in the guirp in cow manure and in my good suede shoes. They were navy shoes with wee white bows on the front. I was livid. It nearly ended our romance.”

“Maybe that was his way of breaking you in to be a farmer’s wife,” laughed Rosemary.

“Well, I had no notion then of being a farmer’s wife, the fellas were just good fun. There was a crowd of them, with open-necked shirts and sunburned necks and they ran around together like a herd of cattle. Most of them belonged to the Ahoghill Young Farmers. They came to the Red Barn because the Cadets were playing that night.

I used to be daft about the Cadets. They wore a naval style uniform with gold buttons and badges and peaked caps with an anchor on the front. I always fancied a man in uniform.”

“Oh, well,” Rosemary said with a wry smile, “if you didn’t get a man in uniform you got one in an open-necked shirt.”

“Aye, and do you know what his first words were to me that night at the Red Barn? He came over when a dance was announced and dunted my shoe with his toe and said, ‘Are you getting up?’ And here I am thirty odd years later and now I am the one asking him, ‘Are you getting up?’ But it’s not on a dance floor, worse luck, it’s to get him out of bed.”

Rosemary looked at her mother compassionately, again she felt in the parent role - her mother - the child making an earnest complaint.

“Mum why don’t you and Dad take up dancing again?”

“Och, sure there are no real dances now.”

“Well, now’s your chance.” Rosemary lifted the paper, “Look, it says here, there’s going to be ballroom dancing, line dancing and barn dances at the Red Barn when it opens in two weeks’ time,” Rosemary read from the newspaper article.

“Do you think I could get him to go?” Madge said thoughtfully.

“You know Mum...maybe Dad is a bit lost for something to do. He has nothing to get up for and this could renew his interest. Anyway, it’s time you both started practising the moonlight saunter. Get him up and we’ll work on him,” said Rosemary with an impish grin. Madge rose with a spurt and opened the door to the hall and called, “Jimmy, are you getting up?” “Rosemary’s here,” she added.

The two women settled themselves like waiting vultures for Jimmy to appear.



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THE ROOSTER'S UNWELCOME VISITS

The flick of the curtains being quickly tugged back caught the rooster's attention. He stood; head cocked sideways, and stared at Agnes with a beady eye through the bedroom window. She had to admit he was a lovely bird. Like a bronze statue, his feathers glistened as if polished by the morning sun – burnished copper and gold with tinges of green. She doused her admiration and remembered her hatred for him.

Angrily she shook her blouse at him and shouted, 'Shoo.' He coolly batted an eyelid at her. Eventually he strutted away out of her vision. She heard his crow again, defiant, taunting her.

"A body can't get a bit o' peace in the mornings now," she grumbled aloud as she pulled on her old duds. She hirpled outside. He was at it again – scratching in the vegetable patch, sending the soil skiteing behind him in a cloud. On seeing her he skedaddled round the corner of the cottage to his own territory.

Agnes held her backache as she bent down to replace a cluster of shallots that he had clawed out. The rooster was forever slipping round early in the mornings and clawing in the soil, disturbing the vegetables. This had led to ill feeling and a few harsh words with her neighbour Charlie.

The two white washed cottages were joined shoulder to shoulder but stood with the gable-end towards the road. In a back-to-front

arrangement, Agnes's cottage faced north and her neighbour's faced south, each having their own cassey to the front.

Agnes had made a small vegetable garden from the patch of ground that extended along the hedge opposite her side of the cottages.

The Carson's – Charlie, a bachelor in his forties and his mother Kitty, kept their patch in grass.

Charlie's greyhound was mostly tethered there also a goat which Kitty looked after and a dozen or so hens – Rhode Island Reds, Leghorns, speckled Sussex and black Orpington's – that pecked and ruffled themselves in the mould around the turf stack.

All was peaceful until Charlie brought the rooster home under his arm one Saturday night.

"I won it in a raffle," Charlie had told them. "We'll have our own setting of eggs in future," he added.

It was when Charlie caught Agnes throwing a brush at the rooster one evening that things went wrong.

"Don't you dare touch him, you ould hairpin? He's a prize rooster, he's doing no harm."

"Look what he's done to my garden. I'm sick of him."

Agnes appealed to Mrs Carson who sat singing, her knees hugging a pail as she milked the goat.

"Never listen to him Agnes," she said, "Don't fash yourself, he has a sup o' drink on him."

She continued singing again, her round merry face half hidden by tails of lanky hair.

"Keep your rooster on your own side," Agnes said spreading her feet apart in a stance.

"Aye, and you keep to yours," Charlie said.

He unleashed the greyhound and stumped past her – a thick set of a man with a thick temper.

Agnes never went round to the Carson side of the cottages again. The 'ould hairpin' remark had stung like a nettle.

“Humph, him talking, he’s like the rooster himself - red neb and chollers,” she said aloud to comfort herself when she saw him occasionally at a distance.

Yet, she missed her chats with the Carson’s. Usually they were up at McNeill’s farm where they both worked during the day but in the evenings Agnes longed to go round especially when she heard Charlie tut-tutting away on his BSA Bantam motorbike. But the rooster stood as a barrier to the visit.

It was late morning the day that Agnes took a notion of tidying up the undergrowth at the top hedge near her outside toilet. The nettles and wild caraway were almost as tall as herself. She had made some in-roads using the hook in a scything fashion.

Suddenly a loose-feathered black hen rose with a squawk and went clucking noisily round the side of the cottage. Agnes was startled then peered in under the flower heads of the caraway and saw the old three-legged pot lying on its side. Discarded months ago because of a split in the metal, it had become a nest of dried bracken with nine brown eggs.

Agnes felt the eggs: they were blood warm to the touch. It was years since she held a hatching egg in her hand. Her old face took on a tender look as she pictured her home, way back sixty odd years ago – her mother tying the clocker by the leg to a weight to keep her from roaming with her chicks.

With a spurt Agnes hobbled into the kitchen clutching the warm egg. Her mother’s example still remembered. She put the egg in the web of her hand between the thumb and index finger and held it up to the light, shading the top. Her old heart gave a lurch when she saw the dark form of the chick pulsing inside the egg.

She returned the egg to the nest and for the following days she and the hen kept their secret. She visited the nest every day and in time the clocker became used to her and didn’t go dashing off.

After a week or so had passed she pressed an egg to her ear and heard the chipping sound from the inside and later a little beak showed through a hole. She was as excited as a seven year old when the chicks eventually tumbled out of the shells – blobs of yellow cotton wool on matchstick legs.

She moved the hen and brood into the back room. An old tea chest turned sideways was converted into a nest box. Doubts, however, about keeping them started to creep in and thoughts of Charlie finding out scared her. She felt like a smuggler when she bought chick-mash from Gillen's shop and concealed it at the bottom of her basket.

The hen and chicks kept her busy and interested to the extent that the vegetable garden was forgotten and then she realised she hadn't seen the rooster for some time. She was stooped over the griddle turning the fadge farls one evening when she heard the clatter of boots on the cassey. Charlie's heavy shoulders and jowled face leaned in over the half-door. She waited expectantly.

"The ould girl wants you to come round," he said gruffly.

Agnes continued tapping the farls with the back of the knife in still silence.

"I've cut the fut aff her, could you come round now?"

"You've what?" Agnes was now alarmed and turned to stare at him.

"It's them ould corns of hers. I can't pare them the way you did. I've cut her." He looked helpless.

"Aye, I'll come," said Agnes lifting off the griddle and smoothing down her overall.

Mrs Carson was sitting with her legs spaced like two paling posts and bared to her dimpled knees. One foot was in a basin of water and the other wrapped in a towel.

"Am I glad to see you Agnes, that handless cratur nearly cut the fut aff me."

Charlie lifted his coat. "I'll leave youse to it," he said.

They heard the motorbike rev as Agnes lifted Mrs Carson's foot onto her lap.

The two women talked as if there never had been a rift in their relationship. Mrs Carson gave off good-humouredly about men in general.

“Agh, Charlie’s not the worst I suppose. He has cooled down since he got the bike fixed.”

“Was it broken?” Agnes asked as she bathed the foot.

“The ould rooster gave him a toss and he dinged the bike, he was hopping mad.”

Agnes saw this as an opportunity to put matters straight.

“I haven’t seen the rooster lately,” she said evenly.

Mrs Carson threw herself back in the chair and laughed heartily.

“Between roosting on the bike and spleutering all over it and then giving him the toss, Charlie was glad to get rid of him. The McNeill’s have him now.”

“Ooh...is that so,” said Agnes idling for time, “agh.... by the way ... one of your hens has been clocking round at my place.”

“Aye, I knew that wee black one was laying away. How many did she hatch?”

“Nine,” said Agnes. Then she lifted her head and looked up at Mrs Carson from her stool, “So you know, then?”

“Of course I know, sure half the country knows.” She gave a whoop of laughter.

“Don’t you buy the chick mash in Gillen’s?”

Agnes smiled sickly as she got up off her knees. So Sammy had gabbed. “Don’t worry yourself Agnes. You’re welcome to the clocker and chicks.”

She leaned forward, her sunny face beaming, “But if there’s any roosters among them, keep them to your own side, away from Charlie’s bike.”

She sat back in the chair and folded her arms. Her shoulders shook with her laughter.



~ 11 ~

A HAT IN TIME

Kate watched her husband from the kitchen window as she washed the breakfast dishes in the enamel basin. He backed the horse between the shafts and busied himself fixing the collar and haims. The horse stood passive. He was a nervous animal and had to be blindfolded when being yocked.

This Saturday morning Kate wasn't too concerned about the horse, her thoughts landed and stuck like a cleg on her husband, especially his paddy hat. That hat...her grey eyes clouded.

She looked again over the half-nets on the window and could see the hat bobbing up and down as her husband footered with the britchen. Then he took the reins and removed the old coat off the horse's head. He took a toe-hold on a spoke of the wheel and quickly swung himself up into the cart.

Seated on the tailboard which was placed across the cart he and the felt hat went jiggling off down the lane. Kate swallowed as if her spittle was bitter.

She quickly finished the dishes and threw the basin of water out over the half door onto two old barnacle hens. They flew with a squawk and flapping of wings into the bushes.

Her spirits rose a notch her two, however, as she dressed herself for town. She always went in later on the Cross Keys bus and

usually met her husband in a café near the Fair Hill and then they travelled home together on the cart.

Today she wasn't meeting her husband nor travelling with him. There was a determination about her as she twisted her long hair and wound it round and round into a bun and stabbed it with hairpins.

As soon as she stepped off the bus in Ballymena she took the homemade butter to her customers and then she was free to shop.

She walked purposely into Alexander's Draper's shop.

"Show me some paddy hats Joe," she asked the assistant as he came forward rubbing his pale papery hands.

"What size and colour would you like Mrs Campbell?"

"Is it for the boss?" he continued when he saw that she looked puzzled.

"Aye, it's for him. I don't right know the size."

Kate rummaged through the hats placed on the counter while the assistant explained that the size would be marked on the inside.

She gave a wry smile as visions of her husband's present hat came to mind. It had been bought when they married and with the years of wear it had turned from a respectable grey to the colour of a flow-turf. It had a dark greasy ring around the inside where the felt had absorbed the sweat.

The crown was dented and a hole had worn at the peak that had formed where he lifted it on and off with two fingers and thumb. Sometimes a tuft of black spiky hair poked through the hole.

She wasn't going to be seen with him wearing that hat ever again, she had decided, when talking to him had proved no good. She had refused point blank to try to repair ita new band indeed, so it remained wavy brimmed.

"I'll know the size by looking at it," she told Joe. She chose a tweedy green shade with a little speckled feather in the hat band. Joe put the hat in a big brown paper bag and left a loop of string with which

to carry it. Kate waited patiently while the payment container travelled on the zip wire system overhead to the cashier's elevated office and returned with the change and receipt. She left the shop as pleased as if the hat was for herself.

The Saturday market came to an end with a flurry of horses and carts, cattle drovers and housewives laden with baskets all heading for home. On the bus Kate held the paper bag on her lap.

"Have you got yourself a new hat Mrs Campbell?" asked her seat companion.

"Naw, it's for Alec."

"He's certainly got his wear out of that one he's wearing," said Mrs Martin, her brosie face lightening up, "It's beginning to sprout. I saw him in the Fair Hill this morning," she said above the laughter. "Johnny, the 'Skive,' will be wanting it for his scarecrow," someone else added to keep the banter going.

Kate's mild face hardened. The thin voice of her sister-in-law tiptoed back like a ghost from the past to haunt her again.

"Can't you get him to buy a new hat? He's a sketch in town. I'm ashamed to be called his sister."

Did she think I liked the ould hat? ...her talking. Wait till she gets a man of her own, she'll know then that they don't listen to a woman's bidding.

She was startled from her scolding thoughts by the loud shout of Mrs Martin above the din of the bus.

"Look at that horse and cart in front."

Everybody craned their necks to look out. "It's a runaway horse," someone said excitedly.

The bus went quiet except for the hum of the engine. Ahead they could see the cart, the man and the horse.

The box cart bounced along the country road, the red spokes of the wheels awchirl. The horseman, seated on the tailboard, had his

booted feet braced against the front panel, his elbows tucked back as he pulled on the reins.

The black shiny rump of the horse glistened in the afternoon sun. His neck was arched, his mane flowing and ears flattened. He held his head tucked in against the strain of the reins on the bridle and bit. As he frothed and snorted, he bolted on.

The sound of the bus getting nearer seemed to fire the horse to greater wildness. The horseman now stood up and the seat bounced into the well of the cart. With his legs apart and feet propped against the front of the cart, he see-sawed on the reins. His jacket, caught by the wind, fanned out behind him and his black spiky hair stood on end.

“It’s Alec Campbell,” gasped Mrs Martin, breaking the silence in the bus. Everyone instinctively turned to look at Kate. She already knew.

She sat silent and helpless as she looked at her husband and sensed the power struggle. The horse wrestled to get its head but the man, his knuckled fists white, refused to give up his mastery. He still held control with the reins and the bit.

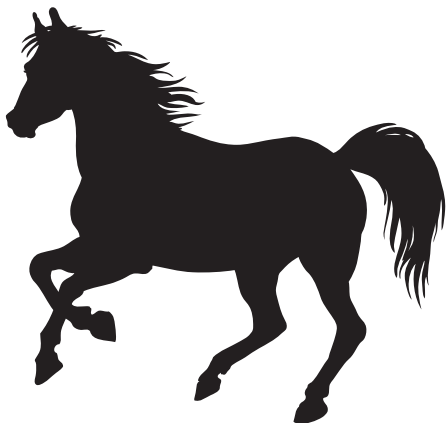
The bus driver slowed down: he couldn’t pass as the horse took possession of the narrow road. Time passed unnoticed as the bus idled. The Campbell farm was only a little way ahead now.

“Will it turn in at the Straid Bridge or do you think it will go on up the road?” someone whispered.

Kate, the brown paper-bag dangling from her finger, moved up the bus and now stood stooped to stare out.

“It’ll head for the stable. Oh, heavens, where is young Eddie?” she said, more to herself than the passengers. She had just remembered about their neighbour’s son who came over the fields to help at weekends.

The horse took the turning sharply but the cart remained upright. Kate ran from the bus. When she arrived in the farmyard the cart



had come to a halt. The horse stood sweating and panting with the blindfold over its head. She ran to her husband where he stood with young Eddie. "Are you alright?" she asked anxiously as she searched his face.

"Agh, Eddie got him stopped wye tha coat. I stopped at Gillen's for a brush head and he bolted just as I stepped up on the spoke o' the wheel to get into the cart. I was lucky the boot broke or I might have got trailed."

She felt a sense of shame and guilt about her recent anger towards him...but with the danger past she was now relaxed.

He bent down to examine his foot and the toeless boot. Then he straightened up and raked his fingers through his hair.

"I've lost my hat," he said in a baffled tone.

"Never mind," said Kate innocently, "as long as you're alright sure that's all that matters." Then, as though an afterthought she added, "I'll get you a new one with the butter money."

She smiled at him sideways. He knew that look.

He eyed her step lightly across the farmyard to the kitchen door clutching the brown paper-bag by the neck in front of her.

His eyes narrowed and he gave a resigned smirk.

"Aye, you're quare and soft," he muttered to himself.



“How can one person play snakes and ladders?”

~ 12 ~

IT'LL DO ME MY DAY

Martha parked her car at the two pillars that stood like two forgotten snowmen at the mouth of the lane leading up to the homestead.

She patted her tight perm as she glanced at her round rosy face in the driving mirror. Satisfied with her appearance she eased her plump body out of the car. The walk up the lane would not only stretch her legs after the drive, it would also give her a chance to see around. She noted the pillars were turning a dirty amber colour and sighed. That wouldn't have happened in their parent's day. She thought back in time to the yearly 'redd-up' around the house at the beginning of July when the pillars were whitewashed, the hedges cut and the outhouses painted to look tidy for the Twelfth.

As youngsters, she and her sister had helped to cut the grasses on the ditches along the lane with a hook and forked stick. Now the lane was overgrown with great big white lacy heads of wild carvey and tall grasses that bowed tasselled heads as she passed by.

The two-storied farmhouse had been in the family for generations and had been renovated during her upbringing. The roof had been slated, a bathroom installed and the outside pebble-dashed. It was a substantial house in its day but now ...

Martha dallied along, her heart vexed, not for the first time at the state of the place compared to her years at home. But it could easily be restored she thought throwing a shrewd eye around the yard which was enclosed by the outhouses.

The big hayshed lay idle and the roof of the byre had caved in. The barn and the calf house were empty with the doors hanging sideways. The piggery, once a riot of noise, was now silent.

Martha now stumbled briefly on the gravel as the collie came bounding and barking around the corner of the house.

“Down Rover.” She spoke crossly.

She brushed the front of her skirt where the dog had planked its two front paws. She hated that dog ...it couldn't even have two eyes the same. The odd eye reminded her of a glass marble she used to have with its swirls of pale blue and white.

Her face scowled as she watched the dog continue to bark and run round in circles. There always had been dogs around the farm but they stayed outside.

In spite of the barking there was no sign of her sister to greet her. Martha went in the back door to the scullery which lead to the kitchen. The dog scuttled past her determined to get in first: its hair coarse against her legs.

Sadie, seated at the end of the long kitchen table raised her head, smiled wanly and sat back.

“Happy Birthday,” said Martha joylessly. She planked a homemade sponge cake on the table.

“Agh, you minded...I wasn't expecting you. Aye, I'm sixty-five today...Oh now, time goes on.”

Martha eyed the Snakes and Ladders board-game spread in front of Sadie and recognised its tattered and faded appearance from the years of play back in the 1950's.

“What are you doing?” she asked sternly.

“Oh, I'm just passing the time playing a game,” Sadie said pushing the board carefully aside.

“How can one person play Snakes and Ladders?” Martha's voice was scathing.

“Oh, I just take turns at playing my right hand against my left hand.”

“Humph,” said Martha easing herself into the sunken sofa beside the Slemish black leaded range.

“You’ll have a cup of tay.”

Sadie rose and took the sponge cake with her to the scullery.

She was a tall angular woman with a mop of tousled curly hair that always looked unkempt but had retained its rich carrotty colour. Her hooded eyes were watchful and her smile slow. In her absence the dog took control of the kitchen. He trailed a log out of the turf box from the side of the range and began to gnaw it in the middle of the floor.

Martha looked around the spacious kitchen and her heart squeezed under the weight of nostalgic memories. The floor tiles looked anaemic from the lack of her mother’s treatment with Cardinal red polish. The redwood clock ticked emphasising the march of time.

“Sit over,” Sadie said smoothing her hands down the sides of her black printed overall. Martha struggled out of the sofa and joined her sister at the table.

She hated these visits home. It was as if time had stood still except to crumble occasionally. She could thole it during her Mother’s time. She didn’t expect their Mother to make changes but when she died five years ago Martha decided Sadie needed to be taken in hand.

In fact Martha and her husband had often discussed the matter.

“I don’t know how Sadie will manage once Mother goes.”

“She’ll never stay there on her own,” Andy had replied.

“Mother does everything for her, she can’t make a decision for herself.”

“Aye, it’s a pity to see the place going to wreck and ruin. Our Joe could make a quare go o’ that place.”

When the Mother died, family and friends all rallied around for a time then eventually crept back to their own lives.

“Come and stay with us for a while,” offered Martha but Sadie shook her head.

"I couldn't leave Rover. He's fretting for Mother and he wouldn't settle at your place."

So Sadie and Rover stayed put and surprised everyone and annoyed Martha.

"She'll neither fix the place up nor move out. She's in a rut," fumed Martha as she bustled around her kitchen noisily clanging dishes about.

"She'd be far better in a smaller place. That wee cottage down at the road-end could be fixed up for her," Andy said one evening.

"Right enough," said Martha, "and she would have our company any time she wanted."

"Joe could work the home place rightly. No use setting land to neighbours."

"Och, sure it will likely be his one day. Who else has she to leave it to?"

It had taken Martha a few visits to get the idea over to her sister.

"You'll be nearer the shops and we would always be around if you were sick."

Sadie blinked her heavy eyelids and said nothing.

"It's like talking to that stone wall. She sits there wye that big heid o' hers like a whun bush," announced Martha to Andy after another trip to see Sadie.

"She just listens and then talks to that ould dog."

"Oh, give her time, she'll come round."

The birthday served as an opportunity to visit again.

The cake was enjoyed and the tea things put away. Martha took up residence again on the sofa and Sadie returned to her chair by the table. They chatted idly about the local news for a while.

"Well, did you think about what we were talking about the last day I was here?" Martha said at last.

"What was that?" Sadie narrowed her eyes in thought.

"You know...about moving into the cottage down from us. Our Joe

has it well fixed up. Sure this place is beginning to crumble around you.”

Sadie sat in silence leaving a space for Martha to blether on... “And what will happen you if you take sick?”

“Look Martha,” said Sadie after a long silence, “This is the home farm, it’ll stay in the name for as long as I live. It was good enough for our father and mother and it’ll do me my day.”

She turned her chair to face the table and drew forward the board game.

There was a long silence. Martha sprauchled to her feet.

“I’ll be going then,” she said stepping past the dog.

“Aye,” said Sadie.

At the door Martha hesitated and looked back but Sadie was engrossed in throwing the dice with her left hand. The dog stopped chewing the log and watched Martha with its blue and white eye until she closed the door.





~ 13 ~

NO ROOM ON THE HEADSTONE

Isobel and Liz were often seen padding along the country road leading from their farm into the village Diamond to do a bit of shopping or to attend the family plot in the graveyard. Although the journey was about a mile, the road was familiar to them. Every whin bush, slap or wee brae was part of their lives, something they had grown up with since their schooldays.

Now that they were nearing the end of their tethers, they were never in a hurry and never found the journey wearisome. What with chatting to the neighbours, looking into gardens, taking the odd slip off a shrub and commenting on the efforts or otherwise of their neighbours, the time purred by smoothly.

“Look at that,” Liz once said, “Mrs Hill with all her big splash of doing things in the Church and look she’s only putting her washing out now and it Wednesday.”

“Agh, sure she’s aye dibbling and washing throughout the week.”

“Aye, and John’s simmit as grey as a flure cloth.”

“Humph, she didn’t make much o’ a hand at bleaching Morton and Simpson’s flour-bag sheets either. There’s nothing beats washing soda for getting rid o’ the big blackbird.”

To the onlooker Isobel and Liz looked like two round balls of wool trundling along. Winter or summer they were always knitted from head to toe and they dressed the same since their birth 76 years ago.

Their parents Willie and Minnie Stewart had been hard working in their day and in the evenings after the farm-work was redd-up Minnie and her three daughters would chat happily around the black-leaded range while their knitting needles clicked industriously. It was a way of life Isobel and Liz continued long after their parents died.

As a result they had a fine collection of woolly hats, scarves, and gloves and knitted suits, all in tweedy mixtures the colour of porridge or a haggis. Often the two women were seen beavering away in the graveyard, their knitted bottoms upturned and the stiff bones of their stays protruding like docked tails.

It was one of those graveyards where the graves shouldered each other for space in a haphazard lay-out in an absence of paths. The headstones knelt all around the Church and then continued down the sloped ground at the rear.

The Stewart family plot was down the slope. In all types of weather Isobel and Liz picked their way over other graves, tangled grass, withered flowers and crumbling grave surrounds. The switch-grass was sometimes long or had been haggled at with a hook when there wasn't room for the swing of a scythe.

"Look at the state o' Millar's grave. Wouldn't you think that big glipe of a son would tidy it up now and then," Isobel scolded as she stepped gingerly across.

"If it wasn't for us sure our grave wouldn't be much better. You'd wait a long time for Harry to lend a hand."

"Right enough," replied Isobel. She put down the bucket and implements they had brought and began to weed the grave and to give the headstone a face wash.

Willie Stewart had acquired the grave in the Churchyard many years earlier.

"It's a six plot," he announced proudly at the supper table, "There'll be room for us all."

“Ah, quit your joking,” said Minnie feigning shock but she joined in the laughter of the children.

The need for the plot seemed a long way off then. In the intervening years the four Stewart children left school, pulled on Wellingtons and became absorbed in the farm. It was a household run by women and Harry, the youngest, happily enjoyed a pampered life.

“I don’t need any hired help, Ellen is as good as any man,” Willie often bragged about his eldest daughter. But Ellen, however, when in her early forties, was the first to have her name inscribed on the Stewart headstone. Willie and then Minnie followed this later.

It was about then that Harry gave up any hope of ever clearing the house of women in order to bring in a wife.

Isobel and Liz just weren’t going to budge. So, he did the next best thing – he married a good-doing widow with a farm in a neighbouring town-land and moved in with her.

“She’s a bit older than him but she’ll be all the wiser,” the Post Mistress had remarked at the time.

Isobel and Liz could never quite make up their minds whether they were in favour of the marriage.

“He had no need to go and get married, he was alright here with us and him with a bad chest.”

“Agh, he was useless anyway, he just wants somebody to mollicoddle him,” said Isobel.

“Well, didn’t we do that all these years?”

Harry and his wife Elizabeth settled down to married life but there wasn’t much come and go between the two households. Isobel and Liz kept a grumbling distance.

“Harry won’t have it all his own way with that one, with her high-falutin ways,” Liz once commented.

It was a fine spring morning when Isobel and Liz were in the Post Office that the Post Mistress casually said, “I hear Harry is very bad, the Doctor was with him last night.” She waited for a reaction

but Isobel and Liz said little until they got outside.

“Oh naw, she wouldn’t think of letting us know and him our brother.”

“Aye, and the country has to tell us,” added Isobel.

They scolded the whole way home from the village.

But Elizabeth did let them know later that, “He isn’t going to pull through this time.”

Before they could pull on their woolly hats to visit the sick, she sent further word that he was gone.

Isobel and Liz were flabbergasted but after the initial wave of shock and anger had died down they began thinking in a practical way.

“I wonder where she is going to bury him,” said Isobel as she pulled a haggis coloured skirt out of the wardrobe in preparation to attend the wake.

“In our plot of course, where else?”

Liz twisted her long hair into a roll at the back of her head and secured it with hairpins.

“She could bury him in with her first husband.”

“She couldn’t do a thing like that. Harry wouldn’t stand for that.”

Liz put the comb and hand mirror down with a clatter.

They continued dressing, both in deep thought.

“If she buries him in our plot where do you think she’ll go when it comes her time?” Liz said breaking the silence.

“I suppose in with us.”

“But there won’t be room for us all. Anyway I don’t want her name and age on the headstone. She’s five years older than us and people might think the Elizabeth Stewart was me,” Liz said indignantly.

It was getting dusk when they set out for the wake fully dressed in their tweedy suits and hats. They walked along with a purpose in their step showing no interest in the hedgerows or the neighbours’ gardens. The two hats bobbed and nodded now and then as the owners made a point in their conversation.

While they trundled along the conversation ebbed and flowed as

they surmised what Elizabeth might decide and by the time they reached their destination the quandary had grown like a boil ready to spew.

"We'll find ourselves pushed out of our own grave," Liz said with a nod of finality.

The kitchen was full of men when they arrived and they were shown into the parlour. Elizabeth, her silver hair coiled up in a chignon at the back of her head, looked the grieving widow in a slim fitting black frock. Neighbours and friends surrounded her. She was gracious in mourning as Isobel and Liz offered their sympathy. They also received condolences from those gathered. The roomful of ladies chatted in hushed tones and coughed politely as they sat primly in their seats. Tea was served and still Isobel and Liz waited to find an opportunity to broach the subject that was bothering them.

The visitors came and went and Elizabeth eventually found herself seated on the sofa with her two sisters-in-law.

"Have you all the arrangements made then?" asked Liz as an opener.

"Yes," said Elizabeth, "the..."

"Where's he going to be buried?" interrupted Isobel.

"He's not going to be buried, he's..."

"What?" Isobel and Liz chorused. Alarmed, they stiffened in their seats.

"Harry and I discussed the matter some time ago and we agreed that we would be cremated when our time came." She spoke slowly and calmly, a wan smile on her soft pink face.

"Cremated!"

"Yes, and our ashes are going to be scattered on the Maine River at Bridge End where Harry proposed to me."

Isobel and Liz looked at each other wide-eyed. "Cremated!" they whispered.

"Oh, what a lovely thing to do Mrs Stewart," spoke up the Post Mistress who was leaning across to hear. She was having difficulty

trying to listen to all the chatter around her and memorising all the tip-bits of news and gossip for later dissemination.

Isobel and Liz were speechless for the remainder of the time at the wake. All the pent-up fizz had gone out of them and they felt empty. When they had stayed what they considered a decent time, they got up, said their stiff farewells and scuttled out.

The chill evening air made Isobel and Liz shiver slightly and to hunch their shoulders. They turned out of the lane and onto the main road before either of them spoke.

“Well, I never heard the like o’ it... cremated!” Isobel said the word with a mixture of wonder and disbelief.

“I felt a stranger in my own brother’s house.”

“All that nonsense about the proposal at Bridge End and ...”

“She reads too many books,” butted in Liz.

“And not a word about her first man,” Isobel finished.

“Oh, she a clever one that, she got out of taking sides.”

“Agh, I suppose our plot isn’t good enough for her,” said Isobel peevishly.

“Aye,” said Liz, “and Harry won’t have his name of the headstone,” she said sadly.

Isobel and Liz walked the remainder of the journey home in silence, feeling as deflated as the tyres of the old bike lying idle in the barn. Spot, their dog barked as they turned the corner into the farmyard. They were glad to be home amongst their familiar surroundings.





The River Maine at Bridge End



Gracehill Old School
Image courtesy Gracehill Old School Trust (GhOST)

~ 14 ~

THE CLASH-BAG

The stone bridge over the wee burn stood with its back arched like an angry tomcat. It was the entrance to the loanen leading up to McDonald's farm and the last 'carry-on' stop before Meg and Rab parted from their school friends.

They 'carried-on' for a while around the bridge. Some leaned on their stomachs on the parapet to plop stones down into the water and the boys, running from one side to the other, tried to bombard a syrup tin as the flow carried it along.

After a time Meg lifted her schoolbag.

"See you tomorrow," she called and started up the loanen. She had no sooner left her friends when Rab came pitter-pattering after her. He hitched his bag up on his back and ran past her. "I'm going to tell on you," he shouted over his shoulder to Meg. "Tell what?"

Meg started to run after him choosing the soft grassy parts of the loanen between the cart ruts.

"About what you did in the singing class."

He kept on running away from her. Meg knew she couldn't catch up with him as she watched his podgy legs pound up the loanen. His grey socks were wrinkled down his legs leaving a long gap between sock tops and the short trousers.

"Ould clash-bag," Meg shouted after him, her anger aimed at the brown leather knapsack that jiggled up and down on his back.

When Meg arrived in the kitchen she was relieved to find her mother entertaining.

“Come and say hello to Aunt Bella before you have your dinner,” Mrs McDonald said, her aproned bottom sticking up as she stooped down to open the oven door.

Rab, all smiles at the visitor, was seated at the table. Meg caught his eye and screwed up her nose at him but he was already too interested in his meal to bother with her. “Rab, after you have eaten I want you to convoy Aunt Bella down home and carry the crab apples for her.”

After school the children had their specific chores to do before the evening meal. Meg looked after the poultry and busied herself gathering the eggs, feeding the fowl and later closing the hen houses for the night.

There were young calves to feed and the pigs that kept up a squealing racket once they heard the sound of the galvanised buckets.

Her two elder brothers were able to handle the horses and help with the milking. But Rab was the nuisance.

“Och, you’re too wee,” the elder brothers would say when he wanted to accompany them around the farm. “Go with Meg.”

“He’s a scourge,” said Meg in annoyance but Rab was never put-off or offended.

When the milking was done and the livestock fed and bedded for the night the McDonald family gathered around the kitchen table for the evening meal. The blinds were pulled and the chintz curtains drawn. The oil lamp threw a circular glow over the red roses on the shiny oilcloth covering the table.

Archie McDonald sat at the head of the table with Rab and Meg on his right. The conversation usually covered farming matters – the price of potatoes or grass-seed, the Government, subsidies, the weather or their farming neighbours.

Tonight the conversation centred on their earlier visitor.

“What had Bella to say?” asked Archie. “Och, she’s going to make

crab-apple jelly but she was telling me that the Logan's had bad luck with their last litter of pigs ..." Jeanie's voice went on but Meg wasn't listening.

Rab, sitting next to her looked pleased with himself since he came back from escorting Bella. Meg waited for a lull in the conversation.

"Did Aunt Bella give you anything for convoying her home?" she asked.

"Aye...a glass of lemonade."

"Was that all?" Rab pretended not to hear.

"She did so," insisted Meg, dunting him with her elbow.

"She gave you sweets, didn't she Rab?" said Jeanie happily.

Rab smiled at his mother but was non-committal.

"You'll have to share them, so you will," announced Meg.

An argument started but Archie quickly settled it by saying,

"You'll share them around and no nonsense."

Rab's face fell then it brightened.

"She's always starting a tirade. She started one in school today," he said.

"What about?" Jeanie's voice was slightly alarmed. All eyes were now focused on Meg.

"She wouldn't sing for Mrs Young," he said triumphantly.

Mrs Young lived in the big castle just outside the village where the Primary School was situated. She was a highly respected lady in the community. Every now and then she visited the school where she played the piano and the children sang for her. The pupils looked forward to her visits especially when an arithmetic class was abandoned for singing. She spoke real posh and the girls were particularly interested in her clothes. She always dressed in layers of long loose fitting ensembles with hats that had the girls gawking. Some hats swirled with a froth of netting and others displayed big silk roses around the brim.

What interested Meg most were Mrs Young's fingers as she rattled up and down the piano keys. Her hands and fingers were

wrinkled and gnarled like the old trees up at the Scrogs, but she wore the most magnificent rings reaching down to her knuckles. Meg was used to seeing her mother's one and only ring – a simple wedding band – but Mrs Young's rings had diamonds and gems and jewels that sparkled and glittered.

Yes, Meg had to admit to herself, she admired Mrs Young. She wasn't too happy about what she planned to do but she had to show dissent by taking counteraction.

It was her birthday two months earlier that brought her to this decision. She had waited a whole year for her twelfth birthday to come around. During that time she had constantly talked about the ring she was hoping to get as a birthday present.

"Stop drumming on the table," Rab had complained: annoyed when his tower fell over. "You're knocking our dominoes down." Rab and his pal Jim glowered at her.

"I'm not drumming, I'm playing the piano. I'm Mrs Young," said Meg as she admired her fingers adorned with the imaginary rings.

"Mrs Head-bin," muttered Rab.

Her father and mother were bound to have known exactly what she wanted. As long as it sparkled and shone like one of Mrs Young's rings that was all she had asked.

But when the birthday arrived she knew by the box that the present wasn't a ring. She looked at the spongy-soled brown sandals and sobbed bitterly.

"We haven't money for fancy rings like Mrs Young, dear." Jeanie tried to comfort her explaining about the more needful things they had to buy and added, "Daddy didn't get the calf subsidy this year."

So that was it. Meg remembered an earlier conversation at the supper table when her father had said, "A fat lot of good that ould

Basil Brooke is to the farmers. They have cut the calf subsidies.” So he was to blame, no wonder Mrs Young had money for rings and nice things as she was married on to the Brookes.

A buzz went around the classroom when Miss Wilson announced that the geography class was suspended and they were to go to the assembly room as Mrs Young had arrived. This was the visit Meg had been waiting for since her birthday.

Meg was always one of the pupils chosen to sing solo or in a duet. She went along with the others to the assembly room but her mind was set.

Mrs Young, seated at the piano, pounded out the notes of ...*Land of Hope and Glory, Mother of the free*...while Miss Wilson stood in front of the combined junior classes and flopped her hands back and forward in the air as she conducted the singing. From her position she was quick to see that Meg wasn't singing and frowned at her, Meg stood tight-lipped.

After the first song died away Miss Wilson wagged her finger at Meg and said through her teeth, “You're not singing,” then she smiled sweetly as she joined Mrs Young at the piano to select another song.

The words of ‘Hearts of Oak’ reverberated around the room... *‘Come cheer up my lads ‘tis to glory we steer’*...the children sang with gusto, all except Meg. She avoided looking at Miss Wilson who was punching the air with her clenched fists to the beat of the music.

Meg thought Miss Wilson had surely got the message that she wasn't going to sing and was shocked when she heard her name called to sing a duet with Molly Grant. She was yanked out of the class row and stood stubbornly beside the piano with Molly. She saw Rab in the front row watching her and for a moment she feared what her father would say about her behaviour. Then the glint of the rings caught her eye and she was defiant again.

Molly sang her heart out ... *'Yestreen the Queen had four Mary's, the nicht she'll hae but three'*...Meg loved this song but she remained mute.

Mrs Young played on unconcerned while Miss Wilson pulled faces in all directions until the singing ended. Mrs Young turned around on the piano stool and said lightly, "One of us is not singing today."

She smiled at the little slim girl in knee socks and sandals. Sullen faced, Meg stared back and buttoned her mouth.

Miss Wilson's red-blotched face and neck had now deepened to a crimson colour.

"Meg McDonald why are you not singing?"

"I'm...I'm..." stuttered Meg. She was at a loss for the words to express the reason for her rebellious behaviour. I just want to get my own back, she thought.

"Never mind, never mind," interrupted Mrs Young graciously, "We'll now sing, *'Scots wha hae wye Wallace bled.'*"

All eyes were on Meg. She felt a sense of achievement; she had rebelled against the injustice of not getting her birthday ring.

All eyes were on her again as she sat at the kitchen table a few feet away from her father. Rab had told the story of her disobedience. There was a silence then her mother asked sternly, "What on earth came over you Meg, to do such a thing? You like singing," she added.

"Well, I didn't get the ring I wanted for my birthday."

She heard her elder brothers' snigger and laugh and one asked...

"And what has that to do with Mrs Young?"

"Well Daddy didn't get the calf subsidy money and he said ould Brooke was to blame and his son is married onto one of the ladies from the castle and Mrs Young is her Granny. I might have got the ring if it wasn't for them."

"Good grief ...what logic," hooted her eldest brother. The two boys guffawed loudly. Rab, eager to gang up with his brothers said, "Mrs Young never even missed her wee squeaky voice."

The family went quiet. Meg raised her head and looked at her father, still expecting to get scudded around the legs. She saw the glance that passed between her parents. Her father had a crooked smile on his face as he rose and moved over to his armchair and lifted the Ballymena Observer.

“Ould clash bag,” whispered Meg to Rab as she passed his chair to help clear the supper table.

“Now divide out the sweets,” she said with a satisfied grin.



Galgorm Castle, built 1618



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THE PRUTA GETHERING

It was a real hardy mornin' whun Rab and Jim arrived in Aggie McClure's cassie tae help wye tha pruta gethering. They slapped their arms aroon their bodies and stamped their feet tae keep warm tae the annoyance o' a big rooster and four hens that ran awa flapping and screakin leavin yin oul Rhode Island Red that stud all gethered-up and dozey eyed.

"That oul hen's dwammy leukin," said Jim as he took a race at tha hen. "It's going to croak."

The hen humped ower tae the hedge.

"Ye twa boys, lave the chuckies alane or ye'll get a skite aroon tha lug," warned Aggie who appeared oot o' tha byre wye a bucket in her haun.

"Get awa doon tae tha Langstone field til tha ithers and get sterted. Stannin there like a couple o' stookies."

Aggie wus a big sonsie woman who plowted aboot tha ferm in wellie boots that wur turned doon at the tap tae mak a cuff aroon her legs. She aye wore a black flowery overall that wus faded and worn in tha front.

It wus tha custom for tha neebors tae get thegither tae help at set times such as tha pruta drappin or getherin and at tha corn threshin. Aggie's late husband had aye been a guid neebor in his day.

Now Aggie's turn had come and it wus a busy mornin' in tha field. Tha tractor, drevin by Rab's faither, kept up a constant drone as tha digger birrled tha soil and prutas frae tha drills. Jim and Rab wrotch thegither, luggin a creel between them. Then stapped noo

and then tae straighten their backs and tae blow on their blae fingers. Sometimes they shoved each other aboot for a carry-on or clodded tha ither boys aheid o' them, but frae oot o' tha Autumn mist a voice frae a ghost-like figure wud gulder at them tae quit their nonsense and tae get a move on.

Tha scholars leuked forrit tae tha schule holidays tae wrocht for tha neebors.

"Aggie will gie us yin or twa pun," said Rab as he thought o' all tha prutas he had gethered in his faither's fields for naethin.

Tha mornin wus broken whan Aggie broght oot a can o' tay and chunks o' soda breid split wye butter and rhubarb jam. Everyone gethered roon. Tha steam riz frae tha dark mahogany coloured tay in tha mugs. "Hae ye ony lemonade," aixed Jim.

"Get awa wye ye," said Aggie, "It's tae cauld for lemonade, hot tay's what ye need."

By midday the mist had risen and Rab and Jim aye skellied towardst tha fermhouse, langin fer Aggie tae wheeple on the whistle tae announce dinner. They wur famished. At last they saw her.

Tha kitchen was warm wye smells o' cookin. Twa tables had been pulled thegither end tae end and places set up each side wye cutlery. Rab and Jim wur tha first tae clump indoors and seated themselves up at tha far corner whur a wheen o' coats hung frae a hook. Every-yin tuk their seats and Aggie bustled aboot laddling oot soup intae soup bousls. Fower big platter dishes o' prutas wur spaced doon tha middle o' tha tables.

"There, guid chicken soup," Aggie announced as she planted tha soup bousls in front o' Rab and Jim.

Rab geeked doon intae tha depths o' tha boul. He dunted Jim.

"Leuk, there's a feather," he said pointing inta tha boul.

They baith leuked closely.

"It's frae thon oul dwammy hen we saw this mornin. I tauld ye it wus gawn tae croak."

Rab felt scunnered and purtended tae boke. Jim sniggered. "What's them twa boys up tae?" asked Aggie glaring back at Rab and Jim.

Rab's faither glared up the table towardst tha boys. "Behave yersels." He glowered and then continued in tha chat wye tha ithers aroon tha table.

Rab and Jim sat gawking intae their soup. Efter awhile Rab lint back tae turn awa frae tha boul and suddenly eyed a pair o' wellie boots stannin in the corner beside him and sheltered by tha coats.

He thocht quickly – with one swift movement he couped his soup intae yin o tha wellies and returned tha empty boul fornest himsel. He skellied roon tha table tae see if he had been noticed and tae check oan Aggie's whereabouts. She was coming roon wye mair prutas.

For a wheen o' minutes Rab was pleased with himsel, then he leuked doon – tae his horror his boul had been replaced by a fu' boul o' soup. Jim was sitting smirking wye the empty boul. Rab grabbed tha empty boul but Jim houlst on tichtly and a tussle tuk place – what a norration!

"What's that pair at noo?" Aggie was getting carnaptious as she made her way roon the table towardst them.

"Put that boul doon, are youse trying to smash it?" she scowld. She grabbed tha empty boul frae tha boys.

"Get that soup intae ye. Jim has his supped up and thae ithers are nearly fenished."

She stud ower Rab and he cud hear her peighin behint his heid. He was cornered.

He lifted tha spoon and began to sup.



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THE WEE BLUE BLOSSOM

Hughie sat down on the wooden chair at the end of the kitchen table with a grunt and pulled on his socks and boots. Sometimes now he felt it easier to stay bent over than to straighten up. He automatically fumbled the buttons of his waistcoat into the frayed button-holes and slapped the flat cap on his bald head.

As the wag-on-the-wall struck eight o' clock he took a mouthful of tea, slammed the door and clumped down the lane, his feet dropping mechanically. The morning sun was shining and winked through the hedgerow. He knew every pot-hole and cart rut in the lane and indeed he was familiar with every dyke and sheugh in the fields on either side which lead down to Alec Hill's farm.

In the spring he had helped Alec to sow the lint and as spring turned to summer he watched the crop grow until eventually he seemed to be walking down the lane through a sea of pale blue. In all his seventy-five years he never ceased to marvel at the beauty of the blue blossom of a field of flax.

His thoughts, when coloured with blue, always strayed to the Hill children, the two boys and especially the wee girl. She was the grand-daughter he never had but would have liked – blue eyed with a red ribbon in her long blonde hair. It was the blueness of her eyes and the fact that she was born at the same time the lint was in bloom that made him christen her his 'wee blue blossom.' The name took root and she became known within the family as Blossom.

But he often cursed the cruel crop in spite of its beauty. The crop was ripe for harvesting when the small blue blossom died and the seed-heads turned from green to pale brown, usually in August, about a hundred days after sowing.

"I'm getting too old for this work," he often grumbled.

"Agh, get on with it Hughie, there's life in you yet."

Alec, who had spent evenings making rush bands, now loaded them onto the horse and cart. Hughie went off to distribute them in the lint fields, muttering, with only the horse prepared to listen.

Afterwards, Hughie spent days with the extra workers to the farm, pulling the lint out by root by hand and tying it in beets with the rush bands. It was back breaking work and his hands bled and smarted. The days were heartened only by the sight of Mrs Hill, in her black floral overall, coming with the big tin can of tea and freshly baked currant soda.

"Goodness Hughie, rub some of that Snowfire on your hands or you'll have hacks," she would say in her bustling way as she swilled tea into the enamel mugs and handed round big doorstep slices of bread.

Now as he passed the row of lint dams, he smiled in remembrance of the antics of the children the previous evening when they escorted him part of the way home. It was their last opportunity to tramp the retting beets of lint in the dam. Bare-footed they jumped and splashed on and off the large stones that had kept the lint beets submerged in the water for the past ten days.

"Hughie, my feet's sore," called Blossom as she hirpled over the prickly boughs.

"Come on out Blossom, your Mammy will be looking for you."

He scuffed her feet with his hand, pulled on and buckled her sandals.

"Now, the lot of you, go on back home."

He had watched them running down the lane towards the

farmhouse with Blossom, her blonde hair flowing, shouting at her brothers to wait for her.

Hughie was conscious now of the odious smell from the dams that polluted the morning air. He didn't look forward to the day's work.

The farmyard was busy. Cows were being driven out to graze after milking, byres were cleaned out and other livestock fed. After breakfast they prepared for the lint dams. Alec and his brother Jack pulled on thigh waders. Hughie along with Tam, who worked for Jack, gathered up a collection of graips and pitch-forks.

First the stones were removed from the dams and then Alec and Jack stood in the stinking water and lifted the beets onto the banks with a pitch-fork or graip. Hughie, Tam and the boys loaded the beets onto the carts.

"Look at that, my bag-apron is soaking already," growled Hughie as he eyed Tam's oilskin one. "The big rook couldn't get me one like that."

The morning was broken with occasional stops for drinks of buttermilk from the can that was submerged in a sheugh to keep it cool. Mrs Hill's appearance with the tea can brought a sigh of relief to Hughie and he sprawled on the grass. Blossom carried a can of fresh buttermilk.

"Right boys you could start spreading," said Alec getting up, signalling the tea break was over. Hughie and Tam started carting the lint up to the adjacent fields and deposited it at intervals while the boys and young workers spread it in rows.

"Do you think Alec will produce the bottle before dinner," asked Tam, echoing Hughie's own thoughts.

They eyed Alec toiling in the dam. His brown sinewy arms straining as the graip dug into the sodden beet and he began the lift onto the bank. He was a big whang of a man, black haired, with a long back

that he supported with a broad brown leather belt.

Hughie and Tam watched his every move like two gun-dogs as they filled the cart. They took heart when eventually they saw him prod the fork into the bank and step out of the dam. Their hopeful eyes followed him as he went towards the house.

He returned carrying a big bottle by the neck and his fingers thimbled with glasses. Blossom trailed after him.

"Right boys, a drop before dinner." He poured each a glass and then snapped the spring stopper in place closing the bottle.

Hughie held his glass up and looked at the liquid...clear as crystal. He wet his lips, "Nectar," he whispered.

"Here's to a good yield Alec." Hughie's face cracked into a smile for the first time that day.

"I'll drink to that," said Tam.

The four men stood on the bank forgetting for a time the strong noxious smell that heightened during the heat of the day. They had just swallowed the last drop when Alec said, "Go on up the two of you and help the boys with the spreading until dinnertime."

They took a last lingering glance at the bottle lying tilted on the bank against the stones, its contents winking at them in the sunlight. They crossed the ditch to the other field where the lint was being spread to dry in the sun and wind.

The noon-time dinner whistle brought the men clattering into the kitchen, glad to straighten an ache. Their chat was lively as they bantered the young boys. When they rose to start work again Mrs Hill said, shaking her head, "That cow's not making much headway."

"Keep an eye on her and give me a shout if she gets any worse," Alec replied.

The long afternoon continued like a toothache for Hughie and he

was uncomfortable in his old corduroy trousers.

"Would you take it easy and quit scudding about."

He glared at Tam who was younger and more supple boned.

They both stopped for a moment and looked over at the two brothers still tossing the lint out by forkfuls.

"He's going to finish it today," said Hughie, "Anything to squeeze the last gasp out of us."

Tam's laugh was interrupted by Mrs Hill's shout. They looked towards the house and saw her waving. The two brothers stepped out of the dams and squished past in their waders towards the house.

Hughie immediately tugged off his apron and lay down on his back. Tam fumbled in his pocket, filled his pipe and sat down on a grassy mound. The day was mellow now and they both enjoyed the warm rest.

"Waken up Hughie." Blossom arrived quietly on sandaled feet.

He heard her voice at the same time as his shoulder was tugged. He lay still, his eyes closed and he felt her small hands on his face. She pulled one of his eyelids up, exposing a bluey-pink, marble-like eye.

"Are you dead Hughie?" Blossom asked.

"I am," he said... "I need a drink to bring me back to life."

"Buttermilk," said Blossom, more to herself.

"Naw, Blossom." He squinted up to see her rise from her hunkers beside him. Her cotton frock frilled around her sun-browned legs.

"Do you know where your Daddy put the lemonade bottle this morning?"

"Aye, it's in the calf shed."

He watched her squeeze through the hole in the hedge and cross the lane to the shed.

"You'll get the wee lass into bother," said Tam.

"Aye, but you'll drink it all the same. You'd drink it out of a sweaty sock. Coming down here and showing off the great worker you are."

Tam sat complacently, the smoke curling over his shoulder. Hughie lay back again on the grass.

"You're a great wee girl, Blossom," said Hughie as she flounced down beside him again, carrying the bottle.

He rolled over onto his elbow and took a swig from the bottle

"Ah-a-a," he said and wiped his mouth and moustache with the back of his hand.

"Are you living now Hughie?" asked Blossom.

"Aye, Blossom, I'm back to life...you saved my life."

He sat up and wheezed in laughter as he savoured another mouthful.

"I suppose I better give you some," said Hughie glaring at the criss-crossed braces on Tam's back, "Here, turn your ould humpy back roon."

Tam turned round and took the bottle. The two men continued to pass the bottle back and forth while they watched Blossom chase a frog that always jumped from her grasp.

"Stay well away from the dams wee lass," Tam warned.

The two men slipped into a happy timeless mood.

"Tam you're not the worst. It's a pity you aren't working for Alec instead of me."

"You just stay with the big black rook and I'll stay where I am."

They both went into kinks of laughter and Hughie, now in a dare-devil mood, flung the empty bottle into the nearest dam.

The day, which had turned into a golden, mellow afternoon, was broken when they heard the crunch of breaking twigs as Alec broke through the hole in the hedge. They made to sprauchle up but were unsteady.

"Youse took the bottle," Alec's face was frozen in anger: with his hat pushed back on his head, he eyed the two of them now swaying and trying to focus on him.

"Where had ye it?"

"You knew ..."

"Daddy," Blossom interrupted excitedly, running up and taking his hand.

“Hughie was dead and I saved his life.”

The men glowered at one another in a battle of wits.

“Boys, but you’re sleekit...using the wee lass,” said Alec breaking the silence.

“I wanted a drop for the cow to warm her up and stop her shivering.”

“I thought it was a drap o’ the hard stuff we were drinking,” said Tam putting an arm round Hughie and looking closely into his face, “instead, it was a drench for a cow.”

He hee-hawed loudly before slithering down beside the wet lint beets.

“Wheest,” said Hughie, remembering who he was.

“Ah-a-a, don’t blame wee Blossom,” wheedled Hughie, “She’s my wee blue Blossom, aren’t you? Blossom looks after me.”

“Yes,” said Blossom happily. She smiled up at her father and swung on his arm as he turned and strode away towards the farmhouse.





Ahoghill Orange Hall, built 1868

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THE TWELFTH

The morning sun was weak and watery but still it was only 7am. I wish it was time to go, thought Ruby, I hate all this preparation and waiting beforehand, it's like waiting for the Sunday school trip or waiting for Christmas Day.

The preparations had started two days earlier. Hedges had been cut and trimmed, the grass verge along the lane tidied and the two entrance pillars to the farm given their yearly whitewash. Inside the farmhouse Mrs Weir had been busy. The windows had been stripped of their curtains and looked naked until redressed by the well-blued nets. Shirts ballooned on the clothes-line like yacht sails, then were brought in and ironed with care. With just the right dampness and the correct heat, the box-iron glided over the shirts. Ruby assisted her Mother by changing the irons in the box. The glowing iron was retrieved with the tongs from the blazing coal in the stove and inserted through the trap-door of the box iron and the cold iron dropped back into the hot coals for the next change over. The kitchen smelt of the warm damp air as the steam rose from the ironing board.

Then the men-folk's suits were brushed and pressed and a clean hankie put in the pockets; shoes polished and clean socks at the ready. The big brown paper bag tied at the opening with flour-bag string had been recovered from the top shelf of the wardrobe. This had been the resting place of Tommy Weir's hard hat since the last Twelfth. It was brushed and aired and given a final brush to ensure the 'pile' was all going the same way. The sash had been folded away in tissue paper and had the same musty smell as the

hard hat. Now it was hung on a hanger to air and to let the creases drop out.

At last, the morning milking was done, the livestock fed and now the Weir family sat down to breakfast. The sun was stronger now and as Tommy Weir pulled down the Holland blind of the kitchen window, a warm amber glow enveloped the breakfast table. An air of excitement was mounting amongst the children.

"I wish I could get carrying the tapes," said Ralph wistfully.

"Oh, you will when you get bigger," said Mrs Weir. "It would be too far a walk for you yet."

Turning to her two elder sons she said, "Now remember to wear your school shoes, those Sunday school shoes are not broken in yet and will cut the heels of you, it's a long walk."

The two elder brothers had been chosen to carry the banner tapes for their father's lodge - and they felt important this morning, Ruby felt a sense of unfairness. She knew she would never get carrying the tapes: it was only the boys who got this privilege. Anyway she didn't want to be an Orange-woman when she grew up.

They look silly walking in high heels and swinging handbags and wearing all different outfits. At least the men all look the same in dark suits. Mrs Stuart walks and I don't want to look like her, thought Ruby. Then Ruby's thought's brightened as she remembered her new ankle socks with the pink stripes around the turn-downs and her new brown sandals.

The chat was lively at the table as the family talked about the new members to the Lodge and those who wouldn't be walking this year.

"Willie Campbell will never be able to walk the distance this year," said Mrs Weir.

"Oh, he'll be there but he'll probably travel by car to the field," said Tommy.

"Come on you boys, it's time you got ready. I don't want to be late getting to the Hall," said Tommy rising from the table. Soon Tommy and his two sons were ready. Mrs Weir bustled around giving a last

brush to the suit collars, final comb of the boys' hair and a smooth of her hand on the sash.

The silver fringe of the sash glinted and quivered as her father moved and reminded Ruby of Christmas tinsel.

"We'll see you in the Field," said Tommy to his wife as they left for the Orange Hall.

Mrs Weir tidied her kitchen and then got herself and the two younger children ready. Ralph amused himself by twirling the kitchen brush in a pretence of leading a band. Ruby felt the excitement well up inside her as she put on the ankle socks and sandals.

"Mummy will you tie my hair?" called Ruby as she held the switch of hair back with her left hand and the pink ribbon in her right.

The bands could be heard in the distance as Mrs Weir set off to Ahoghill with her children. The crowds were beginning to line the street so they selected a good spot to view the parade. Mrs Weir chatted with neighbours and relatives and at the same time answered her children's questions.

"Will they be coming soon Mummy?" asked Ruby getting impatient.

"Will we see Daddy? Will he be on our side of the road?" asked Ralph.

The first banner could be seen coming as a backdrop to the quick-stepping flute band and soon the parade was on its way. People closed in, shoulder to shoulder, to see the bands and the marchers. Mrs Weir pushed her children to the front of her. Ruby liked the pipe bands best, with their tall black busbies and swinging kilts. There were girl pipers with white frilly blouses. Then came the soft-toned accordion bands playing hymns.

The spectators called to the marchers whom they knew – "You're looking well William James," and William James waved back to the crowd. The banners swung and dipped as they moved along and everyone looked for their own member of family among the marchers to see if they were looking well.

“Mummy, there’s a picture of Moses on that banner,” said Ralph. “Was Moses at the Battle of the Boyne?” enquired Ruby confusion stirring in her mind. “Turn round and watch the parade,” instructed Mrs Weir. “Children, questions and questions,” she said shaking her head good-humouredly to her neighbours. “There’s a man carrying the Bible on a cushion,” said Ruby to Ralph. “Mummy, is the story of King William in the Bible?” “Oh, here’s the Gloonan coming now,” said Mrs Weir. “Where’s Daddy and David and William?” called the children, their interest now solely for their own folk.

The Lodge was led by two fifers and two Lambeg drummers. Not much of the drummers could be seen apart from their feet and muscled arms as they waddled along with the huge drum strapped to their stomachs. The sweat streamed down their red faces.

Ruby flinched and put her hands over her ears as the drummers came along side. The battering of the drum brought tears to her eyes. She could never understand her Daddy’s praise for the music of the fife and drum.

“Mummy, there’s Uncle John. Why has he an apron as well as a sash?” asked Ruby, “Daddy hasn’t an apron.”

“Mummy, I’m going to be a drummer when I get big,” said Ralph awe-struck.

Uncle John winked when he saw Ruby and Ralph and waved to Mrs Weir.

“There’s David and William,” called Rab excitedly as he saw his brothers stepping along holding the banner tapes.

“Come back here Ralph,” scolded Mrs Weir, “There’s Daddy,” she added pointing. Tommy waved to his wife and children. Ruby felt proud as she looked at her father wearing his hard hat – he looked important.

The rest of the parade didn’t hold the same interest for the children. They were anxious to get to the Field to meet their father and brothers. Soon the crowd fell in behind the last Lodge and followed to the Field.

“Watch where you are going Ruby,” said Mrs Weir as Ruby’s sandal sank into a soft cow-clap.

There were huge thistles and families were selecting pleasant areas to sit down. After milling around for a time Mrs Weir saw Tommy and the boys.

“It was great,” William and David chorused. “We got lemonade at the Orange Hall before we started.”

Mrs Weir found a nice grassy spot and gathered her family around her while Tommy went for the Twelfth treat - lemonade and Paris buns. It was great fun drinking lemonade out of a bottle and the fizz came down Ruby’s nose and made her blink and gulp. The Paris buns, speckled on top with coarse-grained sugar, tasted better than any buns their mother made at home.

The hot day made the ice-cream sliders melt and the children, with tongues extended, licked round and round the sliders between the wafers.

In the distance the voices of the platform party could be heard but no one but the dedicated few cared what was being said. Tommy was content to lie back on the grass away from the farm for a day. Mrs Weir was happy with her family around her and the chit-chat with her friends and the children were only interested in something new to eat. The sun shone hotly down on the happy gathering, interrupted only occasionally by clouds floating like soap-suds across the blue sky.

A movement across the Field signalled the rest was over and bands and lodges began to assemble again. The Field already looked empty as the spectators moved out to get a good position to view the return of the parade to the village.

“Look at your hair, Ruby. Where’s your ribbon?” asked Mrs Weir.

“Oh, Mummy I’ve lost it,” said Ruby realising her hair was falling forward across her face.

“For goodness sake, Ruby, that’s the second ribbon you’ve lost this week,” said Mrs Weir taking Ruby’s hand firmly.

“Can’t we go back and look for it?” said Ruby, now starting to cry.

“No, it would be trampled on by now,” said Mrs Weir.

The thoughts of the new pink ribbon being trampled on and possibly in cow-clap brought howls from Ruby, much to the annoyance of Mrs Weir.

“What’s wrong with the wee lass?” asked one of the men standing in the front rank of a lodge holding a sword over his shoulder.

“Oh, she’s lost her hair ribbon,” said Mrs Weir trying to ignore the howls.

“It was a new pink ribbon to match my socks,” sobbed Ruby.

“Sure here’s a far nicer ribbon,” said the man as he untied the streamers from the handle of his sword and reached them to her.

Ruby looked at the man in awe through her tears. Such an important man giving her his sword ribbons. Not only one but two – an orange one and a purple one. Ruby had to be reminded by her Mother to thank the man, in her haste to show Ralph the ribbons.

“Ralph, Ralph, look what the man with the sword gave me,” said Ruby dancing excitedly, “nobody else at school has got orange or purple hair ribbons.”

“Pity I hadn’t lost something. I got nothing,” said Ralph as the last of the parade passed and they all made their way home.



Orange and purple ribbons for her hair



Ahoghill in Bloom

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THE SWAREE

I min yin time me and mae maither waur gaun tae this social in the Church Lecture Hall. On the way up tha road we ower tuk Maggie-Ann Craig pauchling along in her Moorland's fur-lined boots and peck-pecking tha road wi tha point o' her big black umbrella that she carried rain, hail or shine. She was gaun tae tha swaree tae so we convoyed her up tha road.

Further up at the mill-dam Betty Clarke came oot o' her hoose a' trigged up and fell into step wye us. These twa auld dolls used to be very 'big' wye yin anither but then they fell oot so mae maither and mesel walked a'tween them or they wud hae bin fightin' like twa terrier dugs.

Tha Lecture Hall in those days was upstairs ower a big hall whur tha folk left their bikes. The fower o' us stomped up tha stairs tae tha Lecture Hall and we sat in a row wi ithers on yin o' tha big lang forms in front o' tha platform. It was the Congregational Social and a' these men o' the Kirk that teach Sabbath School or lift tha collection got up and made speeches and towld us how things wur doin and o' course on these occasions they are aye lukin money. Then a clatter o' auld Meensters got up on tha platform and praised yin anither up and doon. Some towlt guid jokes but I cudnae mind them whun I got home. After that tha Kirk Choir sang a few sangs.

Then t'was time for tha tay. A' these weel-heeled weemin in thir swanky claes haunded roon tha cups o' tay and big trays wi thick roons o' currant loaf and plates o' wee buns wye icing and a cherry on tap like a wee tappietourie. Weel everytime tha trays were

passed doon tha row I cud see Maggie-Ann's big hand grab a fistful o' currant loaf roons and in nae time she was up scraichen at the weemin tae come roon agin.

Mae maither was blethering awa tae a' those aroon her but I tuk anither wee skelly up tha row at Maggie-Ann and in nae time tha breid she had on her lap had disappeared. Mind ye, she's a quare big wummin but I thocht tae mesel that they micht as weel be feeding a thresher as Maggie-Ann. Yin thing for sartin, she got a quare guid feed that nicht.

Efter tha tay was ower Sammy McDowell got up and wheepled a few tunes on his flute and John Connor's twa wee lassies did a bit o' Scottish dancing. Then Miss Kennedy, tha elocution teacher, did recitations in a high-falutin voice but a' the folk ca'ed on her tae dae, *'He's gone tae schule wee Shughie.'* I thocht mae Maither was gaun tae greet whan she heard it. His Reverence brocht tha swaree tae an end wye tha Benediction.

T'was a braw guid nicht but then it was time tae gae hame. Mae Maither was still gabbing aboot clocking hens and settin' o' eggs as usual but Maggie-Ann went forrit and pushed and shoved her wey doon tha stairs and was oot tha dour aheid o' us. When we got ootside it was teemin. Betty towlt Maggie-Ann tae pit her umbrella up but Maggie-Ann says, "Och, it's only a wee skiff." O'course that sterted a tirade between tha twa o' them and mae Maither stud there smiling as she poked in her beg and brocht oot twa rain-coats for hersel and me.

Folk waur cumin' oot tha dour wye their bikes and thur was tha twa o' them bairgin' awa.

"Staun in," says Maggie-Ann pittin' her backside up agin tha dour-jam, "It'll be ower in a minute."

Well Betty tuk a spang forrit and grabbed tha umbrella frae Maggie-Ann and hoisted it up like a banner and doon came a clatter o' breid



ower her heid and lugs.
We a' stud gawking at
tha guid breid lying in
tha wet grund. A wee
tappit bun trundled awa
in tha dour and this big
gulpin stamped on it as
if it was a rat runnin oot
o' a cornstack. "Got it,"
says he.

Betty was stunned
but Maggie-Ann as
cool as sheugh-water

stooped doon and gaithered up a wheen o' rounds o' currant breid
and gave them a skite agin her coat.

"A body likes a wee bite afore they gae tae bed," says she.

"It'll be a weethin wet, Maggie-Ann," says mae Maither.

"Qch weel, it'll maak panade," and with that she rowled tha slices
up in her heidscarf and stuck them in her poket.

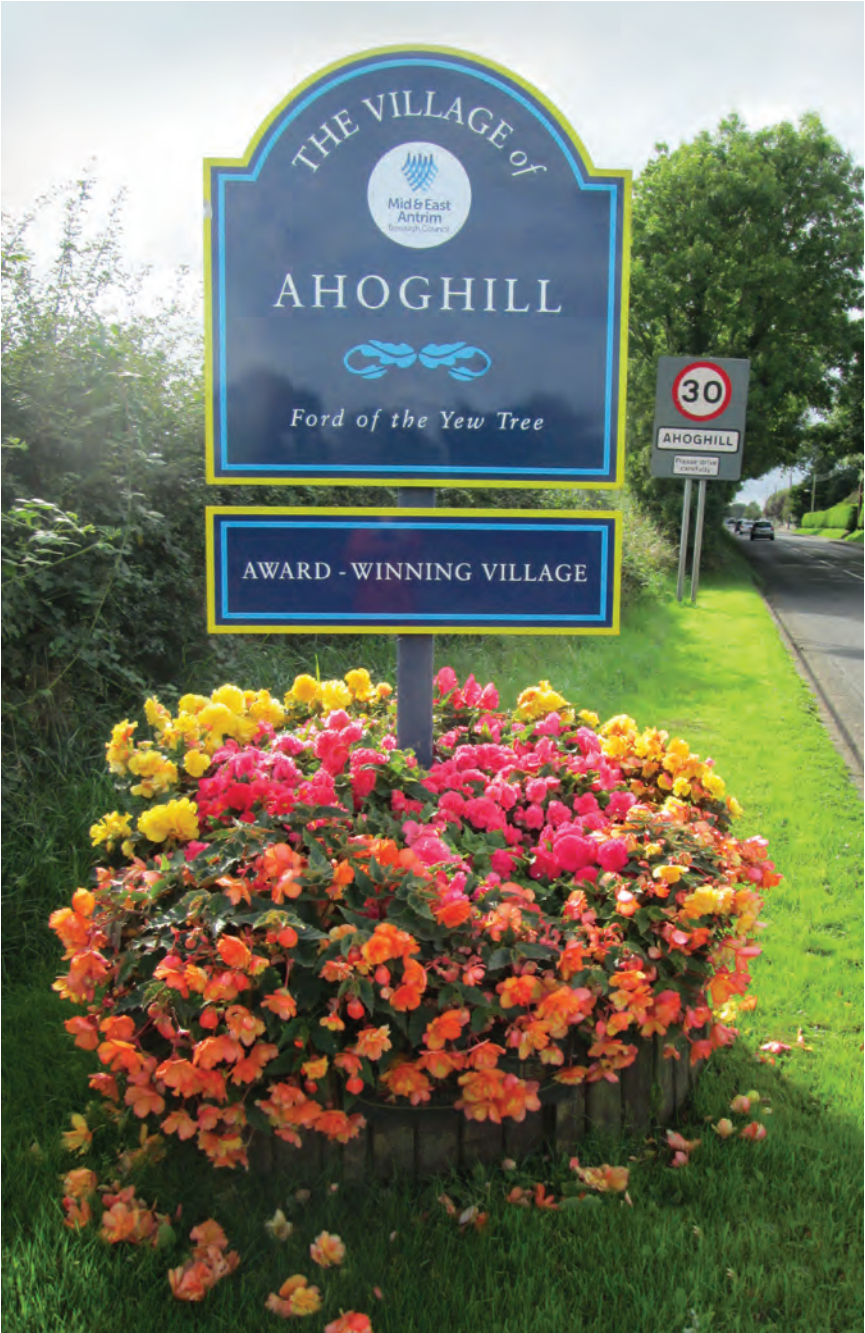
Mae Maither kept tha chat going on tha wye hame as tha twa auld
dolls weren't spaking. Maggie-Ann pauckled along and wouldnae
gae Betty shelter under tha umbrella. Betty loked like a drooned
rat by tha time she reached her hoose.

Maggie-Ann continued on doon the road wye us till she reached her
hoose at tha bottom o' the hill. I cudnae wait tae get hame tae tell
tha ithers aboot tha breid. Maither wet a pot o' tay and as we sat
forrit tae tha table we towlt tha ithers aboot the carry-on.

"It's a wunder she hadnae brung a beg wye her," says yin o' tha
braithers.

"Aye," says mae Maither as she placed a plate wye twa slices o'
currant loaf in front o' my faither.

"That's for you," says she.



A BRIEF WORD ABOUT AHOGHILL

A hoghill means the 'Ford of the Yew Tree' and the yew tree features on the Ahoghill Coat of Arms.

The village can be traced back to medieval times from the ruins of an old church and graveyard located in Church Street. The village is well catered for as regards churches, having three Presbyterian Churches, one Church of Ireland, a Roman Catholic Chapel and a Gospel Hall. The village had strong connections to the 1859 Revival.

The Diamond is at the centre of the village where the incoming roads converge and has as its centre-piece an orange and blue box-cart planted with flowers. Ahoghill has won several Britain in Bloom Awards in recent years including Gold in the Champion of Champions competition. The result of the 2016 Britain in Bloom competition was announced in October past and Ahoghill won one of the top accolades in the UK. They are again the winners of the prestigious Champion of Champions (small town) category.

The village, with a population of 3,403 (2011 census) is well-supplied. There is a selection of shops, cafe/restaurant and public houses.

The Ahoghill Young Farmers' Club, a very enterprising group, celebrated their 85th anniversary in 2016.

Fourtowns Primary School dates back to 1900 when the local Church Schools amalgamated to form Fourtowns National School. This school was replaced in 1962 and the present school was opened in 2007.

Ahoghill is a busy village accommodating a steady flow of through traffic.



A BRIEF WORD ABOUT GRACEHILL

The village of Gracehill is a settlement founded in 1759 by the Moravians, an ancient episcopal church that started in 15th century Moravia and Bohemia, now the Czech Republic. The village is laid out in a simple grid system with a village square with a pond in the centre. The buildings and the unique Georgian style of architecture remain much the same as in the 18th century. The Church, which faces the Square, is central to the village and is flanked by the Manse and the Warden's house. The graveyard called Gods Acre, at the rear of the Church, dates back to 1761.

The Moravian values called for a community-based way of life, with residents following trades and crafts for the benefit of the settlement. There were single brethren and sisters houses and a widows' cottage in addition to family homes.

At its height the village had four schools including an Academy providing elementary and secondary education with day and boarding facilities for boys and girls. It is now served by a Primary School.

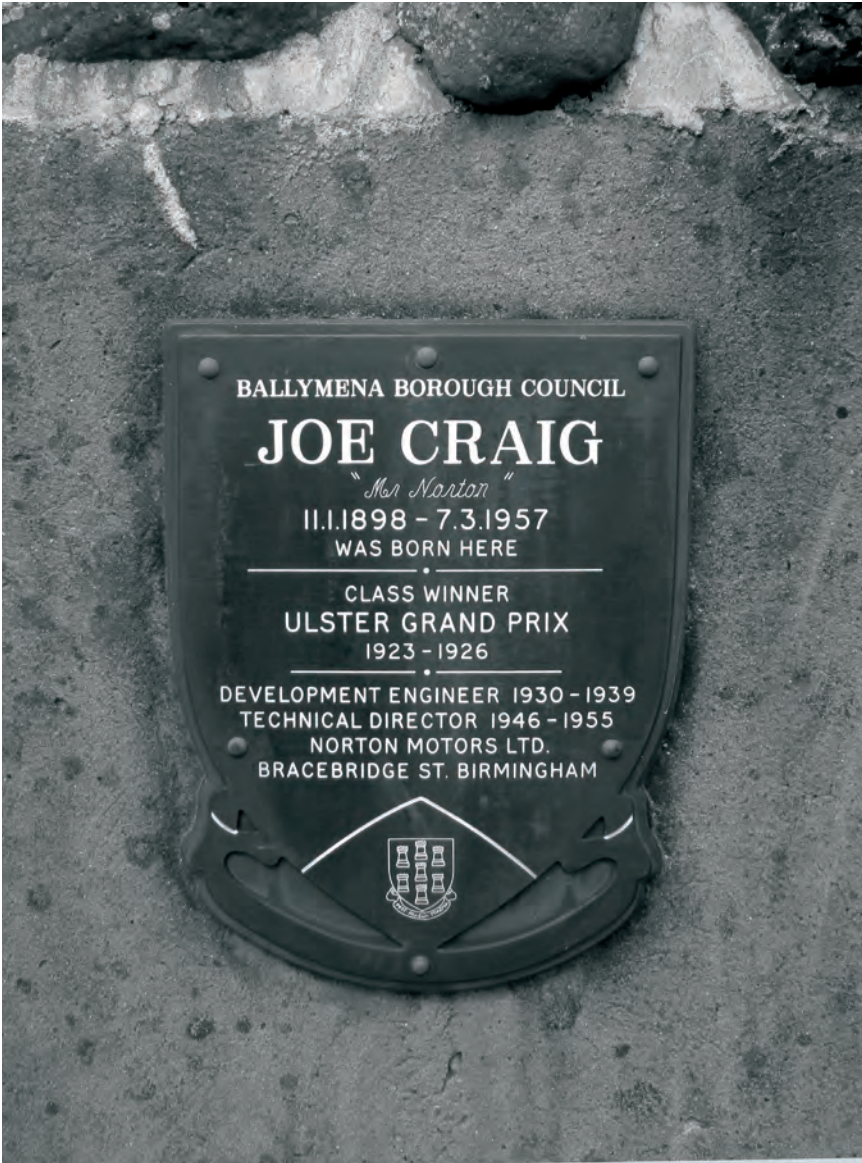
During the United Irishmen's rebellion of 1798 the settlement gave refuge to those who arrived for safety irrespective of religion or whether they were friend or foe.

The village was designated a Conservation area in 1975 and is a very popular venue during the annual European Open Heritage weekend.

The village holds a Country Market twice a month and has an up-market restaurant and a hairdressing Salon.

The river Maine divides Gracehill from Galgorm.

Gracehill is a peaceful and tranquil village.



Plaque situated at the former Craig family home
at 94 Straid Road, Ahoghill

GLOSSARY

Aff – off
 Agh – exclamation expressing frustration
 Aheid – ahead
 Aixed – asked
 Alane – alone
 Aroon – around
 Auld – old
 Auld doll – old woman
 Awa – away
 Awh – exclamation meaning oh!
 Aye – always/yes

Bairgin – to scold, speak angrily
 Baith – both
 Banty – a bantam fowl/conceited person
 Behint – behind
 Birled – whirl round
 Blether – long winded or idle talk
 Bouls – bowls
 Brae – a small hill
 Braw guid nicht – fine good night
 Breid – bread
 Britchen – part of a horse's harness
 Brocht – brought
 Brosie – plump and healthy looking
 Brung – brought

Carnaptious – irritable/ quarrelsome
 Carry-on – lively fun
 Carvey – wild caraway
 Cassey – area around a farmhouse
 Cauld – cold
 Chollers – wattles of a fowl
 Chuckies – hens

Claes – clothes
Clash bag – a tell-tale
Clatter o' young folk – group of young folk
Cleg – horse fly
Clocking hen – broody hen
Clodded – throw stone
Convoy – accompany
Craiking – nagging/ complaining
Cratur – creature
Croak – to die
Cudna – could not

Dandered – walk leisurely
Dinged – dented
Dollin – courting
Dour – door
Drap – drop
Drooky – wet
Drooned – drowned
Duds – clothes
Dunted – nudged
Dwammy leukin – sickly looking
Dyke – ditch

Eejit – idiot

Fadge – potato bread
Faither – father
Fash – annoy
Ferm – farm
Fleein' – flying
Flow (flough) – spongy peat
Flure – floor
Footered – fumbled
Forrit – forward
Fower – four
Fu – full
Fut – foot

Ganish – inarticulate fellow
 Gaun to greet – going to cry
 Gawn – going
 Geeked – peeped
 Gethered up – hunched
 Glipe – an uncouth fellow
 Graip – pronged fork
 Gruip – drainage channel in a byre
 Grund – ground
 Guid – good
 Gulder – shout angrily
 Gulpin – thick witted

Hae – have
 Haggled – cut roughly
 Haims – collar for a horse
 Hame – home
 Hault – held
 Haun – hand
 Heid – head
 Hirpled – hobble
 Hooched – breathe hard on an object before polishing
 Hoose – house

Ithers – others

Japs – splashes

Lang – long
 Leuk – look
 Lilty – bouncy/energetic
 Loanen – lane
 Lugged – carried

Maak – make
 Mae – my
 Mair – more
 Maither – mother
 Meensters – ministers

Naw – no
Neb – nose
Neebors – neighbours
Nethin – nothing
Nitch – night

Ony – any
Oot – out
Ough – expressing exasperation/weariness
Ower – over

Pauchling – to walk in a clumsy way
Peighin – breathe heavily
Plowted – wade about messily
Pruta – potato

Quare – remarkable/excellent
Quit – stop

Redd-up – tidy up
Richtly – rightly
Riz – rise
Roon – around
Rowled – rolled

Scould – scold
Screakin – shriek/screech
Scrogs – area of gnarled hazel bushes
Scudded – smacked/hit
Scudding – moving quickly
Scunnered – disgusted
Sertin – certain
Sheugh – a drain
Simmit – vest
Skelly – glance sideways
Skiff – light rain
Skite – to brush or flick aside
Skiteing – hurry about
Skive – prowl about

Sleekit – cunning/underhand
 Sonsie – buxom/plump
 Spang forrit – leap forward
 Spleutering – messing
 Sprauchled – clamber to get up
 Staun – stand
 Stays – corsets
 Stookies – slow-witted persons
 Stud – stood
 Stunnered – astonished
 Swaree – soiree/social gathering

Tae cauld – too cold
 Tappietourie – raised top/very high
 Tappit – raised top
 Tay – tea
 Teemin – raining
 Tha – the
 Thegither – together
 Thole – endure
 Thon – yon
 Thocht – thought
 Tichtly – tightly
 Towarst – towards
 Towlt – told
 Tramped – trample
 Trigged up – dressed smartly
 Twa – two

Weans – children
 Weari – wearing
 Wee – small, tiny
 Weel-heeled – well-to -do
 Weethin wet – a little wet
 Wheen – a few
 Wheepled – played a tune
 Wheest – hush/be quiet
 Whun – when
 Whun – whin/gorse

OWER THE TUPPENNY

Wimmin – women

Wrotch – worked

Wus – was

Wye – with

Ye's – yous

Yeh – you

Yer – your

Yin – one

Yocked – to attach horse to cart

Youse – you (plural)



Braid River at Tullaghgarley Bridge, Sourhill, Galgorm



Located at Church Street, Ahoghill



The Seal and Symbol of the Moravian Church



St Colmanell's Church of Ireland Church Ahoghill



Ahoghill still Blooming



Lynwood House, 8 Montgomery Street, Gracehill
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Margaret Cameron is an established writer and published Author, with two non-fiction books - *The Women in Green* and *Share – their Story*. Margaret also enjoys writing fiction and has appeared in *Ireland's Own Anthology of Winning Irish Short Stories* in 2015 and in 2016.

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