

THE BED

by Desmond O'Grady

The bed was the bed my grandmother had been born and died in and Mykey Bourke had slept in it since the day they took her away in her coffin.

After he married, Mykey shared the bed with his Maude. The bed, together with her nickname, were the closest contacts Mykey had with his mother and the past.

There was not much else to the cottage: a thumbnail of an entrance hall, a small sitting-room with open fireplace, and a kitchen. There was also a cubby-corner of a maid's room stacked high with old newspapers and bundles of the "London Illustrated News", the "Jewish Chronicle" and a magpie assortment of paraphernalia hardly worthy of a pawnbroker's attention.

Mykey was a collector and a hoarder.

In the sitting-dining room stood a bookcase heavy with eighteenth and nineteenth century texts on medicine and medical machinery, devices and inventions, on physiognomy, plant life and silverware, as well as an eight volume "History of England" printed on Indian paper in double columns. Mykey read this "History", year after year, from beginning to end with the aid of a large hand glass, starting again almost automatically at page one, volume one when he had reached the last line of volume eight.

Because Maude and Mykey had no children - either by mutual consent or because they married too late - they had no need for any more space. They had plenty of privacy as the cottage - once the gate lodge of a big house

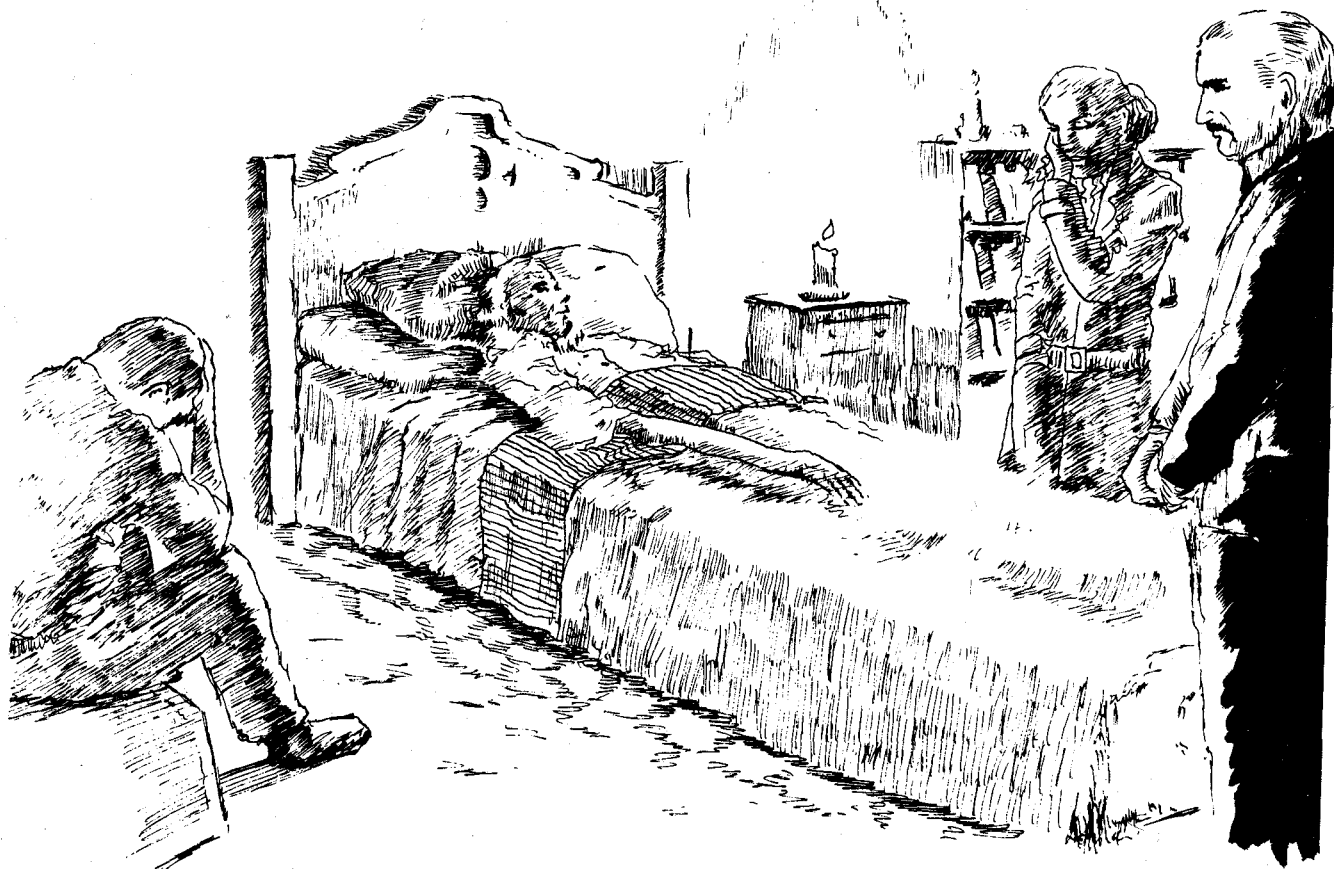
- was set in several acres of woodland, rough lawn, and paddock planned in the natural wild style of Irish gardens. This was Mykey's property. Through it ran a driveway to the coachyard of the big house itself.

The big house was our house.

But tonight all these things, this security, the guarded family history, were being threatened. In a sense they were coming to an end. From now on, because of process and change, children growing and scattering, the fluctuations in material values, everything here would be different, would go back to what it had once, and for a time, been saved from.

Maude, lying there like a bundle of wattle sticks under the bed clothes, looking out at the three of them, was living her last hours dying of cancer. Mykey, Father and Mother were watching her die. I was watching the four of them. Mother sitting on one of her own grandmother's chairs. Father standing, like the outsider he was, looking in and Mykey, with a broken rosary beads clutched in his fist, squatting on what, with closer inspection in the gloom, could be seen to be a black coffin.

Maude lay severely watching them watch her die.



"Maude lay severely watching them watch her die".
Drawing by Tony Hartnett.