

A COONAGH MAN

by John Walsh

My friend Tom Lynch at the end of his days had little interest in humankind. An exception I might mention in passing was Feathery Bourke, whose name I first heard from him. I often wondered since then what they talked about when Tom journeyed in to Limerick to see him. To me he talked about boats and fishing, and the ways of the moon and the stars. I was sixteen or so, and much given to that sort of thing too.

How was it, he asked me, that the moon revolved on its axis, and yet managed to keep the same side facing the earth as he had heard it did? I didn't know. For it was preposterous to suppose that it should spin at precisely the right speed for all time. The reason, said Tom, must be that its axis pointed towards us.

That explanation satisfied both of us, and indeed it remained a feature of my astronomy for many years. When I chanced to discover that the preposterous was true, I felt I had betrayed a friend. How was Tom to know that the moon contained a great lump in its side, and that the earth's gravity held that side captive like a cable reaching out through space? He would have been delighted to come by that news himself, and relate it in Mrs. Murnane's kitchen.

He was a salmon-fisherman who lived alone on the bank of the Shannon just below Coonagh. "When I was fourteen", he told me, "I put down the books and they gave me an oar into these hands." That made closely on seventy years of oars, and the hands looked it. Even in old age he was very strong. I once forked hay with him, and saw him break two forks with his clumsy strength. He had been an awkward hurler, my father told me, but a champion at the long puck. It was said he made holes in the boss of the hurley to reduce wind-resistance.

I don't know if the holes really helped, but it was like him to think of it. He had that restless intelligence that turns to eccentricity for want of outlet in a country parish. At the time I knew him he no longer bothered to repair his house. As the roof gave way, starting at the western end, he moved his quarters east before it.

For some reason he went in and out, not by the door, but by a ladder propped against the roofless wall. He sometimes slept all day, and set out in the evening to plague people who were already thinking of bed. Once, when he hadn't been seen for some days, the parish priest went down to see if he

was all right. That simple and kindly man crossed in some wonderment the fields and trenches which were the only way to Tom's house, climbed the ladder, and peered in at the hibernator. He received, if the report is true, small thanks for his trouble. Not that Tom was irreligious. Though he made up his own mind about going to Mass, it was with real piety that he once said to me: "Mortal sin is a rare thing. Who'd fly in the face of God?"

He didn't drink. I heard the story that he was once given two pints, drank them down, and said he might as well drink water. There was a scrap of truth in that, but only a scrap. I know because Tom, who was utterly truthful when it counted, told me what happened, and in such detail that I can still remember some of it word for word.

One New Year's Eve when he was still young, he heard the proverbial sound of revelry by night. Even then, he was not one for society. But he heard the bells of Limerick and, as he said, something stirred in him. He left his house and hit out at a jog-trot across the loop of the river for where the people were welcoming the New Year in.

Limerick was maybe four miles away. He was fit and hardy, it was a moonlit night, and he well knew the runs through the corcasses. In no great time he had crossed Sarsfield's Bridge (he called it Wellesley Bridge) and was walking through the populated streets of the town. Still carrying with him, no doubt, an air of the journey he had made.

The crowds were thick around Mary's Cathedral. People in groups were dancing and singing. When the midnight bells came they shouted and sang the more, and the ships in the docks joined in with their hooters.

Tom moved among the people, up one street and down another. But he didn't feel part of it. He watched a tipsy old fellow wandering by, singing a song to himself. "He's happy", said Tom, "and I'm not". A pub nearby was still open. He put his hand in his pocket to check his money, and walked in.

"How much is a pint?" he asked the publican. He was told the price.

"Give me two". He had the price of two pints.

"You must have a desperate thirst on you", said the publican as he pulled them. "to be ordering two at the same time".

"Would you believe", said Tom,

"that I never took a drink in my life".

The barman stopped.

"I'm selling it", he said, "But if you take my advice you won't buy it from me".

"Well", Tom told me with his eyes wide, "I felt that ashamed, I thought I'd never get out of the place.

He went out into the street, and through the crowds - now and then bumping into someone, as I imagined it, his eyes looking past them. He crossed Sarsfield Bridge into the suburbs, and the Lansdowne River into Clare, and the Sandy River into Cratloe, and went by railway-sleepers over trenches across corcasses on the path to the house that the west wind would unroof in time.

"And that", Tom told me in his old age, "was the nearest I ever came to taking a drink. Well, maybe I was as well off". With due respect to Father Mathew and the publican, I didn't think so at all. But I couldn't give him a reason, and anyway it would have been cheeky of me to try.



The estuary of the Shannon.