The life and letters of Feathery Bourke

"Feathery was so mean he made Scrooge look like Santa Claus" — Sean Bourke.

MARRIAGE, ROBBERY, MALNUTRITION AND DEATH

Feathery Bourke’s marriage came as a big surprise to his neighbours in High Street and Commarket Row. Once again his brother-in-law and business adviser, Leonard O’Grady played a part in the matter. When he first came to Limerick, Leonard O’Grady had stayed in the same house as a woman named Maude Guerin. Before he married Feathery’s sister, Annie. He introduced Maude Guerin to Feathery and, after a fifteen-year friendship, they got married in 1945. They were both nearly fifty years of age, and the marriage was more a business arrangement than anything else. They got married secretly at St. Michael’s Church, after 8 a.m. Mass. Two hours later Feather was back in his shop buying and selling scrap.

Feathery was not over-generous to his wife and kept a tight control over her few financial transactions. Money and food were strictly rationed, and both lived in frugal circumstances. Many stories are told about Feathery’s relationship with his wife. One such story describes a novel method devised by him to husband their household hoarder. In the gloom, could be seen by him to husband their household hoarder. In the gloom, could be seen by him to husband their household hoarder. He would catch a live fly on the kitchen walls and let it loose. He would then close a large hand glass, starting again almost automatically at page one, volume one when he had reached the last line of volume eight.

Part Three

by Jim Kemmy

Poor Maude had a hard life. Holidays for her were only a far-off dream. During wet summer days, when she would come into a shop, she would console herself by saying: “It must be miserable to be in Kilkee today.”

After about six years of marriage, Feathery’s wife died.

In a prose work in progress Desmond O’Grady has described the assor- tated furnishings of the house, and the haunting scene in the death-room.

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 progress 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.

The funeral of Maude Guerin, like her wedding, was a quiet affair, with only the same small number of people in attendance. After his wife’s death, Feathery withdrew further into himself and continued to live a spartan existence. His relations with his three brothers and two sisters had never been easy. When one of his sisters got married she badly
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to take advantage of her plight to sell
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under a compliment to his other sister,
who lived next door to him in
Cornmarket Row for many years. He or-
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Stella Restaurant and had it delivered to his
store by a messenger-boy on a bicycle.

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Feathery Bourke and party at Madeira.

Feathery continued to work at his store six days a week, including bank holidays. He never again went on a holiday after his return from his last sea cruise in 1939 and he bought no more new clothes in the last 25 years of his life. Fifteen years before his death, he got an old overcoat for ten shillings from Tom Kett to cover the hole that had developed in the seat of his old "cow black" suit. Apart from his sea cruises, the only extravagant gestures he allowed himself, took place on the occasions of a number of Redemptorist Confraternity Retreats when, with another High Street landlord named Foley, the owner of a cheap lodging-house, he hired a jaunting-car and travelled in style to "The Fathers".

By 1964, Feathery was receiving an income of well over £1000 per year from ground rents and was also earning money from his scrap metal business. The district around his store was known as a tough area and was occasionally frequented by prostitutes and their clients. Some well-known money thefts, involving George Lawson, the High Street bookmaker and Thomas Fahy, a publican across the road, on the corner of Mungret Street, took place close to Feathery's store.

Fahy was later killed during a robbery in his bar. Feathery, however, seems to have been impervious to the wiles of women.

While his brother Frank was an experienced and skilful amateur boxer, Feathery, despite the loss of two fingers on his right hand, was no mean performer in ejecting unwanted or drunken people from his store. During his long life, he never allowed himself to be frightened by threats from anybody.

But Feathery suffered one serious robbery in his life. This took place at his house, Portland Lodge, North Circular Road, on January 27th, 1968, when he was 78 years old. He was attacked and beaten by three young men, who also gagged him and tied him. During the evidence given at the Limerick Circuit Court case in May 1968, when a man was charged with the robbery with violence of £1,800, it emerged that Feathery was not sure of the precise amount of money in his home safe. He claimed to have had £2,500 in the safe and to have spent about £700 of this. All the money robbed from the safe was part of the £2,205 sum exchanged by Feathery at the Westminster Bank, London, in 1933. The sum was made up of £20 and £10 "tissue-paper" notes which had long been withdrawn from circulation. The money was, therefore, useless to Feathery and the thieves.

While Feathery had little formal education and was not always literate as a letter-writer, he had an uncanny knowledge of ground rents and property. This knowledge was used solely for his own advantage, but six years before his death he offered his advice free of charge to one of his long-time neighbours Michael O'Grady, owner of the Seven Stars Bar in Robert Street, who had been seeking unsuccessfully for five years to buy the ground rent of his premises. One day, on his way home after yet another unsuccessful visit to his solicitor, he met Feathery standing outside the door of his store.

At this time McKenna's shop, which was next door to Michael O'Grady's bar, was up for sale. Feathery asked O'Grady if he was going to buy this shop. "Let me alone", said Michael O'Grady. "I can't even buy the ground rent of my own pub"). "Come in, sit down and tell me all about it", said Feathery. Michael O'Grady went in and told Feathery that the ground rent was £2 per year and that it was owned by Mrs. Lena McCarthy, (nee Barrett), of the Roche's Street business family. Feathery looked at his watch and then spoke:

Feathery Bourke in Lisbon on 30th June 1937.
It is five-to-one now. Go home and have your dinner. Go out then to where Mrs. McCarthy lives and speak nicely to her. Explain to her that you have a big family (8 boys), and fix things up with her.

"How much will I offer her?", Michael O'Grady asked him.

£30 — 15 years at the present rate you are paying", Feathery replied.

Michael O'Grady had been prepared to pay a few hundred pounds to buy out the ground rent and this small sum came as a surprise to him. He told this to Feathery.

"That's all it's worth. Don't offer any more", Feathery instructed.

Michael O'Grady went off that afternoon and saw Mrs. McCarthy. He had been told by Feathery to suggest to her that if she invested the sum offered for the ground rent (£30) in a bank loan trust she would get back more than £2 per year in interest. Mrs. McCarthy sent for her solicitor and accepted the £30 offer. Michael O'Grady also paid £10 to her solicitor and £10 to his own solicitor and walked home with the ground rent documents in his pocket.

In order to express his gratitude for this help Michael O'Grady called on Feathery shortly after this incident and said: "Let me know when you are going away on holidays and I will go with you".

"Don't you know I haven't made the price of my dinner here in the last six months?", Feathery replied.

"Surely, Mikey, you should be able to take a holiday with all your money", Michael O'Grady suggested.

Feathery looked at him through his beady eyes and countered: "If you enjoy spending money like I enjoy saving it, you will understand why I don't go on holidays."

After Feathery's death, Michael O'Grady stated: "It was very hard to understand how such an intelligent man could lead such a terrible life".

In an obituary article, published in the local press on September 15th, 1973, Feathery's nephew, Sean Bourke, has given a description of his uncle in the last decade of his life.

For the last ten years of his life Feathery Bourke became less and less preoccupied with the business of scrap and concentrated more and more on the proceeds of his various properties in Limerick and Dublin. He still walked six days a week from his lodgings near the bishop's estate in the North Circular Road (he actually sold the estate to the bishop) to the city market. Here he would sit forlornly watching a rapidly-changing world go by, an affluent world of plastic and pre-cast concrete in which there was little demand for scrap of any kind, and in moments of boredom he would pore over a small mountain of tenancy agreements and deeds of title with a magnifying glass clutched in the three remaining fingers of his right hand.

When Sean Bourke first came down from Dublin to live in Limerick about 1970, he took a copy of his book The Springing Of George Blake along to present it to his uncle at his High Street store. Feathery told him very emphatically that he did not want the book. "All I'm interested in reading", he declared. "Is advertisements for ground rents and properties. I can't be wasting my time reading books". Then, as an afterthought, he went on: "Anyway what would happen to it when I'm gone? It would be "blaggarded". Just like all this". He waved his arm around to embrace the assorted rubbish piled up in his shop. "Yes, 'blaggarded', like everything else I have".

In the last years of his life Feathery became a complete recluse. His house became untidy and dirty. He ate sparingly, living on a food budget of about thirty shillings per week, and existing mainly on bread and milk. On Christmas Days he dined on a boiled egg. When he died, in September 1973, he was found to be suffering from malnutrition. He was aged 81.

His funeral, like his wedding, was a quiet affair. Sean Bourke refused to attend the burial. As the hearse passed the Munster Fair Tavern, Bourke, was inside drinking a pint of Murphy's porter. He went out briefly, glass in hand, and watched his uncle's coffin entering St. Lawrence's Cemetery. Bourke explained that he saw no reason why he should go to the funeral as he had neither affection nor respect for his un-
Feathery Bourke on a sea voyage.

Feathery Bourke's death certificate, with its inaccurate "single" classification.