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By

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Willie M'Cann was in a rather despondent mood as he made his way carefully down the tailor's lane on a black December night. He felt a desire to unburden his soul to somebody, and who could be fitter for such a confidence than Ned Donnelly, the little tailor, who was the trusted and inviolate repository of all the secrets of the parish.

When Willie lifted the latch and entered the tailor's kitchen he found to his relief that he was the only visitor. The boys who usually congregated there of an evening were either amusing themselves elsewhere, or had been kept at home by the wildness of the night. Their welcome absence gave Willie the kitchen and the tailor all to himself.

Ned Donnelly was a dwarfish little man, who was liked and laughed at and trusted by every soul for miles round Limavady. His advice and counsel were eagerly sought in any and every difficulty- but never acted upon, for the reason that they were never given. Ned's reputation was largely based upon his powers of reticence. He was an untiring and sympathetic listener, and, as many people only discover their beliefs by expounding them, his visitors usually came away from him with clarified and strengthened views. It was not his fault that this happy result should be attributed to the words of wisdom he had left unuttered.

Irish people are notorious for gossip and match-making, yet it

never occurred to any of his neighbours to exercise their minds on Ned's affairs. He was unmarried, and of an uncertain age, and lived all by himself in the little house at the foot of the lane, but no kindly busybody ever thought of providing him with a housekeeper and helpmate. The idea of Ned taking a wife would have seemed altogether startling and impossible. He was complete in himself, an institution and a landmark, a property in which every member of the community had an equal and inalienable right.

When Willie M'Cann came in and took his accustomed seat by the fire, the little tailor was busily engaged in finishing a piece of work. There was scarcely a word spoken for some time. Willie sat puffing at his pipe and gazing into the fire, an occupation which he varied now and then by a deep-drawn sigh. The tailor stitched with an absorbed and monotonous regularity. When the final stitch was driven home, and the coat finished, he put it carefully away, with an air of pride, and took a seat by the fire opposite Willie. He lit his old clay pipe with an ember from the hearth, and soon he too, was puffing away in solemn enjoyment.

"I wanted to talk to ye, Ned," said Willie, at last. "I would like to have your advice about somethin'."

"Surely, surely, wean dear!" said Ned, and waited for more.

"I'm wantin' to get married," said Willie slowly.

The tailor looked up with an interested expression in his faded blue eyes.

"It's Ellie Moran, ould Andy's daughter, o' the Slob," said Willie.

The tailor shaded his face with his hand, and bent over the fire.

"She's far too good for me," said Willie with a quiver in his voice, "but then she's too good for any man, an' I'm the one she likes best. I've been fond of her since the first day I seen her, a wee winsome bit of a thing, with the sun in her bright hair, and the sun in her bonnie eyes, an' she laughin' up at me out o' the boggy hole she had stumbled into. Not a bit o' fear was in her, though many a wean would ha' been cryin' an' blind wi' fright. That's a dozen years ago now, but she's just the same to this day- a wee, laughin', lovely bit of God's goodness! I think sometimes I'm clean daft about her. At work or idlin' I see nothin' but her, an' I hear nothin' but the voice of her runnin' through my heart like the wee birds singin'! Sometimes I couldn't tell ye whether I'm on my head or my heels."

The little tailor seemed more wizened and elfish than ever, as he looked up and fixed Willie with a steady gaze.

"She would give me her word any day, only for the father," said Willie, an' he won't hear tell of it. Ye know what Andy Moran is, an ould, proud, stiff-necked crethur, wi' no thought in his head but lands an' money. He has niver got over his own father's loss of the big place at Glenswilly, an' it murders his pride to have nothin' now but that poor wee bit of the intake. If I had money in my pocket, and a good farm to my name, he would give me Ellie and welcome, foe he likes me well enough, in a dour sort o' way. But without them it's the back of his hand I'll get, an' Ellie- God love her!- won't go against him. She's all he has got, an' she won't desert him."

The tailor nodded silently, and turned his gaze once more on the fire.

"Ye know that farm o' Crampsey's?" resumed Willie, in a hesitating manner. "It joins on to Moran's, an' the ould man has set his heart on gettin' hold of it. Crampsey is thinkin' of sellin' out, an' if I can buy it ould Andy has as good as promised me Ellie. It oughtn't to go for very much money, but it'll be more nor I'd have in my fist for many a long year."

"Thruue enough," said the tailor, gravely.

"There's an uncle of mine has a good shop in Derry," went on Willie, "an' I've been thinkin' I might ask him to len' me the money. I know he has it, an' I don't think he would refuse me. I'd pay it off a bit every year, an' the ould man need niver hear a word about it. But I'm not just easy in my mind about Crampsey's farm. I don't think it 'ud be a safe investment. The bank looks shaky along there an' I wouldn't be a bit surprised if it breaks one o' these stormy days, an' lets the sea in over the country. That would be the last crop Crampsey's farm would ever bear, I'm thinkin'."

"Ye must consider the thing well," said the tailor.

"It's a very odd thing about that bank," said Willie. "There it is, the only safeguard all these people have got, an' they all know well enough it's in danger, wi' all these storms an' big tides. But sorra one o' them will lift his finger to strengthen it."

"What's everybody's business is nobody's business," said the tailor.

There was another interval of silence, and then Willie rose and shook the ashes from his pipe.

" I'll have to be goin' now," he said. "Good-night Ned, and thank ye kindly for advisin' me. There's not another man's advice I would ask in a case o' the kind."

" Don't mention^{it}!" said the tailor. " You're aye welcome, an' I wish ye a happy Christmas!"

" The same to you!" said Willie, and went out again into the black night.

The wish of a happy Christmas did not fulfil itself so far as Willie and the tailor were concerned. The season of peace and goodwill came to them with none of its traditional gifts.

On the morning of Christmas Eve, while old Andy was kept in the house by a touch of rheumatics, Willie and his colleen bawn had a brief interview down by the bank. The scene looked bare and bleak enough in the bitter winter morning, but it was little thought either of them gave to the dismal land or the threatening sea. There was anxious sorrow in Ellie's heart, and a murderous rage in Willie's.

"Are ye jokin', Ellie?" demanded Willie, when she had told him her news. "I can't believe that what you say's throe. D'ye mean to tell me that Ned Donnelly has had the cheek an' impudence to- to-". He broke off, inarticulate with rage.

"It's the truth I'm telling you," said Ellie. He has bought Crampsey's farm, and last night he came up to my father and asked for me. It seems he has plenty of money saved. Father is mad about that farm, and says I must marry Ned."

" The wee viper!" said Willie. " The wee, crawlin' schamer! The dirty wee rascal! To think o' that wee bundle o' villany listenin'

to all my story, wi' this in his mind all the time, an' then slippin' in before me to get the farm and ask for you! When I find him I'll crush the life out of him!" Willie's hands were clenched fiercely, and his face was dark with anger. Ellie took one of his hands in hers, opened the fingers one by one, and drew it around her neck, ~~pressing her neck,~~ pressing her soft young cheek against it fondly. Then she looked up into his face with a tremulous smile.

"Poor Ned!" she said softly, " he is all alone in the world, and it seems he has loved me ever since I was a weeshy child. But he can't have me, farm or none, for I have my own boy that I love, and I won't let him go. You won't try to hurt Ned in any way, Willie dear, because it is your wee girl you would hurt most if you did that. We'll just stick to each other, and be sorry for Ned, for he knows I'll have nothing to say to him."

Willie's anger was appeased for the time; but it rose again when the soothing influence of Ellie's presence was withdrawn. When he came across the tailor on Christmas morning, he passed him with a black scowl that made the little man shrink in his shoes. It was not a happy Christmas to either Ned or Willie.

All the gossips would have been considerably astonished, and intensely interested if they had got an inkling of what was going on. But the people concerned kept the matter to themselves, and very soon there were events of another kind that gave everybody in that neighbourhood plenty to think of.

It was a memorable occasion that January night of 1903, when the

Derry

1 embankment broke near Limavady, and the hardly acquired and patiently cultivated intake was captured again by the sea. Many a time in after years the story would be told, and the listeners would hear with a sympathetic shiver of how the people were turned out of their homes in the dark of that bitter night, to escape through the icy, inrushing waves to the shelter of some kindly neighbour, whose house was beyond the danger line. It meant black and hopeless ruin to many a hard-working man who saw his holding submerged, and everything he possessed swept ~~away~~ from his grasp.

Amongst those who suffered most were old Andy Moran and the new owner of Crampsey's place. Crampsey, no doubt, congratulated himself on having sold out at such an opportune moment. Where the two farms had been, the bleak January dawn revealed a tossing waste of water, with here and there a row of tree-tops revealing some ancient boundary line.

It fell to Willie M'Cann's lot to rescue Ellie and her father on that eventful night. As soon as the startling news was flashed along the country side, he made his way to them with all speed. Their farm was very low-lying, and it was all at once so deep under water that the use of a boat was necessary to get them away. When he had put the Morans in safe shelter, Willie rescued as many of the household belongings as he could, but all he could save was little. The crowning calamity of the old man's life had left him a pauper in his helpless old age. His proud spirit was crushed, and he made no objection now to the betrothal of Ellie and Willie- rather he welcomed it as some solution, however imperfect, of his difficulties.

Some days later, Willie, in the pride of his love and happiness, encountered the tailor. Ned, a pathetic and melancholy figure, stood gazing on the ruins of the home where he had hoped to bring a bride. He started and would have shrunk away when he saw Willie, but the latter came up to him with a friendly hand outstretched.

"I'm sorry for you, Ned," said Willie. "God knows you've had hard luck, man, an' it isn't for me, who have more good nor I deserve, to bear ye a grudge. Shake hands, an' be friends wi' me again."

They shook hands in silence, and then the tailor spoke.

"I hear you're to be married soon," he said, "I wish you an' her joy. I suppose you thought, like all the neighbours, that because a man was dwarfed and quare-lookin' he had no blood in his veins and no heart in his breast. I loved her better nor you maybe, but you've got her, an' I wish ye luck. It's a strange thing the way God uses some people- gives them life wi' ivery gift in it made a curse. He had the quare spite against me always. Maybe it would be makin' too much o' myself to think ✓ He flooded the country in ordher to do me a damage, but that was what come into my head the other day. However, it's no good complainin'. You have no cause to grumble, anyway, an' I hope you'll be good to the wee girl."

"You may trust me for that," said Willie.