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Catherine Mulamphy and the Man from the North

By *PÁDRAIC COLUM*

I.

MY grandfather used to say that more extraordinary things happened in the hamlet of Coney than in any town or village, barony or bailiwick in the whole of Ireland. They were all red-headed people who lived in Coney; they married through each other, and their names were Mulamphies. Now, when he wished to emphasise the manifestations of the extraordinary Coney spirit, my grandfather used to tell this story.

Mind you, I knew two of the people concerned, Martin Mulamphy and his wife Catherine. Martin remains on the outskirts of my mind, but Catherine I remember very well. I met her once on a mountain road; she was riding, and her bare legs hung across the donkey and her red hair was loose upon her shoulders. Even after they were married, Martin would not let this red hair be put up. My grandfather used to say that no two beings were ever as fond of each other as Martin and Catherine Mulamphy. Every Christmas, after Mass, the pair would come into our house. They used to sit on the settle, and, after some whiskey had been taken, they would sing together, "The first day of Christmas my True-love sent to me One gold ring, one turtle dove, *and* a pear tree." The song, with a proportional increase in the number of gifts, went on to the twelfth day of Christmas. When it was finished the pair would mount the horse and ride pillion-ways off to their mountain hamlet.

After Christmas comes the fair of Cartron Markey. It takes place at the rise of the year, upon Saint Bridget's Day. Now, our Mulamphies had nothing to sell, but that did not stand in the way of their going to the fair. The pillion was put upon the garron and the pair rode off to Cartron Markey. They put up at Mulvihill's. It

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was early in the day, and there was only a few in the shop. A big, round-headed, wide-eyed man, Mulvihill himself, was behind the counter, and Martin stood discoursing with him. Catherine sat on a barrel at the far end of the shop. A Connacht man was closing a bargain with a man of the Midlands. "I declare to God," said the Connacht man, "I would divide the gain. *Dar na Muce!* By the Pigs, we are as friendly as if we were kissing each other." They were shaking hands when Neil MacNeece came into the shop. He was an Ulster man and a horse dealer—a big man with a platter, broad face that fell easily into a grin. "Men," said he, "what are ye having? Fill the glasses again," said he to the man behind the counter. "Och," said Neil MacNeece, "I'm a terrible great man."

"Is there many in the fair that knows that?" said Catherine.

"Ma'am," said MacNeece, "I'd like to be talking to you. You look like a fine woman."

"I was intended for a fine woman," said Catherine. "But what makes you think well of yourself?"

"Will you take anything, ma'am?"

"A half a glass of whiskey," said Catherine.

"Tell us your story, honest man," said Martin.

"Last year I came into this fair, and I had only three shillings in my pocket. I had lost all my money in England. It was early in the morning when I came into the town, and there were only a few people in the place. There was a farmer with a horse for sale, and I went up and spoke to him. 'How much do you want for the beast?' said I. 'Eighty pounds,' said he. 'Let me try him,' said I. I jumped up and galloped off, and that was the last the farmer saw of his horse."

"Do you tell us that?" said the man from the Midlands. The three men waited with the glasses in their hands. MacNeece brought over a glass to Catherine. "Good luck to you," said she.

"It's likely you have more to tell," said the Connacht man.

"I have, and a lot more to tell," said MacNeece. "I came into your grand town this morning and found my farmer with another horse for sale. I stepped up to him and asked him his price. 'Eighty pounds,' said he. 'Let me ride him to the end of the town,' said I."

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‘Faith and I won’t,’ said the farmer. ‘Last year a man asked me to let him try a horse, and I never saw him nor the horse again.’ ‘And would you know the man?’ said I. ‘I would not. I only saw him for a minute.’ ‘I’ll buy this horse without a trial,’ said I. ‘Come into such a house and I’ll give you eighty pounds.’ Well, I handed him over eighty pounds and he gave me a luck-penny. ‘Would you be satisfied if you got eighty pounds for the horse you lost last year?’ ‘I’d be more than satisfied.’ ‘Well, here’s your eighty pounds. It was me that took your horse. And look,’ says I, showing my pouch to my farmer, ‘I made all that out of your nag.’”

“You’re an extraordinary wonderful man,” said Catherine.

“Sowls, but you’re a grand woman,” said MacNeece.

“Do you like me?” said Catherine.

“Ma’am, I like you well,” said MacNeece.

The Connacht man and the man from the Midlands went out.

“Are you buying?” said Martin to MacNeece.

“The only thing I’d buy is the red-headed woman over there.”

“Do you make an offer?”

“Do you own her now?”

“It was me put the ring on her finger.”

Catherine came over to the pair. “What would you give for me?” said she.

“I’d give all I have, ma’am,” said MacNeece. He took a roll of notes out of the inside pocket of his great coat and put them on the counter. They made up twenty pounds. Martin began to finger the notes. There was something of the jackdaw and something of the magpie in Martin. He was acquisitive, and he was vain. He had just put on a new belt. It was a red belt with blue stripes across it, and it had leathern pouches. The notes got into the pouch. Then Martin Mulamphy would let himself but cut across rather than take them out.

“Give the man a luck-penny, Martin,” said Catherine.

Martin took a crooked he’penny out of his pocket and passed it to MacNeece. “Will I be taking you to the North?” said MacNeece to Catherine.

“You must give me law,” said Catherine.

“What law do you ask?”

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"A year from this day."

"And where will I find you at the end of a year?"

"In Coney," said Catherine. "Mulamphy is the name. Come," said she to Martin, and she went out into the street. And all that Martin said to MacNeece was "Good-bye to you, honest man."

They went down the street without a word between them. At the corner there was for sale a cart of splendid appearance. The spokes and shafts were freshly painted red, and the body was of a shining blue. Martin priced the cart, and Catherine stood by and watched the proceedings. She had become the onlooker of Martin's motions and movements. The cart went to three pounds, and Martin paid with money out of the pouch. He put the garron under the yoke, and the pair went home in the new vehicle. It wasn't like being on the pillion. There was silence between the pair for the length of the road.

II.

Christmas came round, and Martin and Catherine came into our house. They sat down on the settle and took the refreshment provided. They sang together "The first day of Christmas my True-love sent to me One gold ring, one turtle dove, and a pear tree." They went out together, and my grandfather watched them from the door. "Believe me," said my grandfather, "I would give that full bottle of whiskey to see Catherine and Martin Mulamphy riding pillion-ways again."

Martin had told him the episode of Cartron Markey, and my grandfather had given him this sage direction: "Whatever else he'll come for, believe you me, the man from the North will come back for his money. Leave the seventeen pounds in the pouch, roll up the belt, and let me have the keeping of it." Now, upon the next Saint Bridget's Day my grandfather was before the house clipping his hedge into the semblance of a lion when a stranger strode up to him. My grandfather knew him at once for the man from the North. "Where is Coney?" said the man. "Maybe you're looking for people of the name of Mulamphy?" said my grandfather. "I am," said the man. "Your name might be MacNeece?"

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said my grandfather. "In sowl, it might," said the man. "We have heard of you," said my grandfather. He put MacNeece on the way to the hamlet, but he neglected to tell him that every one in Coney was called Mulamphy. He went into John's with the Two Chimneys, to Michael's with the Running Dog, and to Bartley the Tailor's. Nellie, the tailor's wife, had a long and interesting conversation with him that kept him from his errand for a while.

That was early in the day. Afterwards Martin came to make a fence for my grandfather. Later on, when my grandfather was playing a game of cards with himself, he saw Catherine upon the road. She had a bundle, and my grandfather thought she was bringing his dinner to Martin. "Good-morrow, Catherine," said my grandfather.

"Good-morrow," said Catherine.

My grandfather thought her manner was not effusive at all.

"Your man will be glad of his dinner," said my grandfather.

"I'm not going to provide it," said Catherine.

"But where are you going?" said my grandfather.

"I'm going from all belonging to me," said Catherine.

"That's a hard saying," said my grandfather. "And what about the man that put the ring on your finger?"

"There it's for him," said Catherine, throwing the ring on the dust of the road. Catherine went her way. My grandfather left the cards on the ditch and walked up and down. Then he called to me and told me to bring to that spot Martin Mulamphy. "Martin, my poor fellow," said my grandfather, "there's your ring on the ground." Martin took up the ring. "It's Catherine's ring surely," said Martin. "I won't keep you in suspense, Martin," said my grandfather. "Catherine threw it there." Martin picked up the ring and regarded it. "She wasn't great with me for a few days back," said he, "but why would she go off like that?" "With a bundle, Martin," said my grandfather, "as if she was going to work in Scotland or England."

"But it's not the season for that," said Martin. "This is only Saint Bridget's Day. By the Cross of Cong," said Martin, "she's gone off with the man from the North."

"Don't say that, Martin," said my grandfather, "the like never happened in this parish. But I'll have to own," said he, "that Neil

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MacNeece was round here this morning, and I gave him all directions for finding the place."

"Amn't I the misfortunate man," said Martin, "with my wife gone off to Cartron Markey with a black-mouthed man from the North."

"I'm loth to believe anything like that," said my grandfather.

"It was a bargain," said Martin.

"Howsoever that may be," said my grandfather, "Catherine went from this by herself."

"I'm very venemous," said Martin. "When I'm roused up I could puck my weight in devils. I'll let daylight through MacNeece if I were to hang as high as Gilderoy."

With that he dragged on his coat and made a run of about twenty yards. My grandfather called to him. "Martin," said he, "rash men will do rash deeds I know, but a man oughtn't to show himself to the world worse than his deed makes him. Don't let the name of money come into the dispute, Martin. Give back what you have belonging to him." My grandfather went into the house and brought out the belt. He handed it to Martin. With the belt in his hand he started down the road. He was making for his mother-in-law's. He would borrow a horse and ride into Cartron Markey. He came to the cross-roads and went down by the plantation. Ahead of him he saw a man in a great coat walking hard. It was Neil MacNeece. Martin caught up on him.

"Och, Mister Mulamphy," said the big man, "I'm glad to see you. I hope I see you sound."

"I'm sound enough," said Martin. "I could fight a man if you fed me?"

"Would you eat a horse," said MacNeece.

"No," said Martin, "but I'd beat a horse thief."

"You have the use of your tongue."

"Ay, and the use of my hands. Would you try a few rounds with me."

"Here, is it?"

"Ay, on the open road."

"Is fighting your wish?"

"Ay; what have you to say again it?"

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"O, I've nothing to say again it. The spirits are that ruz in me that I'd do anything to oblige any man. Fighting, is it? O, very well, Mr. Mulamphy."

"Take the belt," said Martin, "your money's in it."

They went down the road a bit. When they came to the ground he knew Martin took up a position. He struck out. MacNeece sparred good humouredly. Martin was certainly venomous. He manœuvred the fight till he got MacNeece on the ground that dipped to a rotten fence. He struck out and got his adversary on the mouth and nostrils. Through the fence went MacNeece and into a shough of water. Then Martin turned on his heel and went up to his mother-in-law's.

Catherine's mother was at the door. "Wait a while," said she, "and then go up to her."

"Is Catherine here?"

"She's in the room above."

When he opened the door he saw Catherine lying in the bed. She turned angry eyes on him when he came into the room. "You're as mean as ditch-water," said she, "and I'm glad I saw you to say that to you."

"No matter how mean I may be I've done for the man you were going off with."

"The man I was going off with," said Catherine. "Who are you talking about at all?"

"Neil MacNeece. I met him and fought him and left him lying in a gripe at the Kesh of Keel. That's what your bachelor got this Saint Bridget's Day."

She sat up in the bed. "Martin, are you hurted?" she said. She came to him. "Martin, Martin, you're cut and battered. Did he hurt you, Martin? But why did you do badly by me? You said it was a gold ring. After wearing it five years I've found you out in the lie. It's a brass ring after all. O, it's badly you've treated me, Martin. I had a right to go off with Neil MacNeece."

"Were you not going with him?"

"Sure, Martin, I clean forgot that this was Saint Bridget's Day. What did he do to you, Martin?"

"I gave him back the belt and we fought it out."

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"I'm glad he has his money back. But he hasn't it all, Martin. You have a mean little drop in you, Martin. But there. I'm fond of you in spite of it all. But I'll never wear that oul' brass ring again, and I'll make you give the rest of Neil MacNeece's money back to him."

She just said the words when MacNeece's voice was heard below. She went down the stairs and saw him at the door. In two steps he came to her.

"Och, ma'am," said he, "I'm glad to see you. He came up to her and caught her by the arms. "You're looking grand, ma'am," said he.

"Have regard for the day that's in it," said Catherine. "In this part of the country we don't do any courting on Saint Bridget's Day."

"I hear you do more fighting. But I won't mind about that. Give me your hand here, ma'am."

She put her hand in his.

"I wanted to tell you about it. Ma'am, its twins."

"Oh," said Catherine. He was shaking hands with Catherine's mother and talking about the event.

"Twins. Mrs. MacNeece. Two days ago."

Martin was coming down behind them. Catherine turned to him. "It's seldom Mr. MacNeece is in these parts," said she, "and we must do our best to pleasure him. Leave everything aside and we'll go off for the day."

Martin put the horse under the cart. When everything was ready he came in and shook hands with MacNeece. Nothing was said about their previous encounter. They went off to Cartron Markey. They had all the fun of the fair. A tramp fiddler entertained them in the room, and MacNeece began to drink with him. But it turned out that the blind musician was pouring the poteen into a tin behind his wallet. They left MacNeece sleeping in the cart, and Catherine and Martin rode home pillion-ways. They came into our house on their way back. Just as if it had been Christmas, the pair, sitting together, sang of the ring, the turtle-dove, and the pear-tree.