

## BALLEA WRITERS

**J**ohn Henry McManus was 80 years old. As he swung his legs out of bed and began to dress himself, he thought with pride and satisfaction how good it felt to have reached his 80th birthday. Now, John Henry didn't hold much with birthdays, cards and all the fussing people went on with, but today was special he felt. He remembered the grim words spoken 15 years before when the doctors had given him six months to live and smiled contentedly, well pleased that he had proved them wrong. The buttons on his shirt were giving him trouble. His fingers were no longer nimble and were inclined to be stiff in the mornings. His legs too, were only very fair, he thought. He had to use a walking stick to get around and even then, he could only move slowly. Still, it was good to be alive and he would walk a few rounds of the yard before his breakfast and that would loosen him up. 'Discipline man' he said out loud - 'that's the key'.

John Henry lived alone and frequently talked out loud to himself. He even sang songs out loud in his thin cracked voice and recited poems he had learned as a schoolboy. His memory was extraordinary, but also selective, and he mostly only dwelt on the happy times of his youth and the stories his father had told him of times long ago.

John Henry lived in a large bungalow on the edge of town. A country boy all his life, he had moved into the town 30 years before and built this house, which had been luxurious, and the height of fashion at that time. It had been a diversion for him then and he had needed to move away from the people and places that held so many memories.

Looking back now, he thought there had been a kind of madness on him at that time.

The children were now grown and married and gone their own way, as was only right, but they were good and called frequently and made sure he was well looked after. Repeated offers to go and live with one or other of them had John Henry shaking his head, smiling and saying 'Thanks all the same but I could never live in another man's house'. That was just the way he was, he supposed, he had been independent for too long now.

John Henry had run away from school at 11 years of age. He often told the story of the Master chasing him over the fields to get him to finish his schooling and he would laugh heartily at the memory of it. At 11 he had decided he had had enough education and he must work to earn money to help his mother rear their large family, a sick frail man, his father had not been able to work for some years and they were poor, poorer than most. John Henry was the eldest and with seven younger than him, his mother had been hard pressed to feed and clothe them all. What he had lacked in physical stature, John Henry made up for with guts and determination and worked at any and every job he could get. It wasn't long before the brothers and sisters grew up and started earning as well and life became easier for their mother.

Life had been so full then. Working hard by day, a few woodbines and a couple of pints at night with the lads, hurling and football at the weekends, but most of all John Henry had loved the dancing, either at the platform or in one of the local dancehalls. The music enthralled him and the dancing, swing the girls round and around. Ah! Happy Days, gold Days, he would often say as he thought about those far off times.

With breakfast over, John Henry settled down to read the morning paper, but first he would switch on the radio. That modern music, he thought to himself as he padded across the room, wasn't music at all, only a lot of noise. Before he reached the sideboard where the radio was, he heard the announcer introducing a song by some fellow with a queer foreign sounding name but the name of the song made his pause and listen. 'Lady in Red' the song was called and he listened and remembered his own Lady in Red dancing with him long, long ago it seemed now.

Returning to his chair, newspaper forgotten, he recalled the scene clearly. How he had spotted her immediately he had entered the dancehall. The red dress, with its full skirt billowing out as she danced, her head thrown back laughing at the fun of it all, and her hair, masses of wavy chestnut curls swinging out behind her as she twirled and turned. He had fallen head over heels in love with Peggy O'Connor

# The Gathering

by PAT GOULDING

that night. They had courted for eight years before they could afford to get married, but she had shared his ambition and they had built a successful business and a wonderful life together. They had been deeply in love, but most of all they had been best friends. He often remarked that they had been two people but the one person. Her laughter and love of life filled his mind now as he thought of those happy times.

It had all ended so suddenly, so tragically. Travelling abroad at the time, he had not even been there when it happened. A shocking accident, they had called it. His grief had been a terrible thing. Rage and fury gave way to numbing pain that



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threatened to consume him. Looking after the needs of his children and business had kept him going until somehow the pain had lessened, but there was still a lonely, empty place within him. John Henry shook himself out of his reverie. Dwelling on those sad times only upset him. He settled down once more to read his newspaper and so absorbed did he become he did not hear his daughter Mary come in the back door.

Mary came in every day to get his dinner and to do a bit of tidying up. "Happy Birthday, Dad", she said cheerfully as she entered the room. "Ah! Mary, my darling girl," he said, his face wreathed in smiles. "My Mary of the curling hair", he chanted at her, his good humour completely restored. Mary had brought him a book on Irish history, which delighted John Henry and he joined her in the kitchen, where they chatted while Mary worked. "I suppose the others will call today, seeing as the day that's in it", said John Henry as the dinner was placed before him. "Oh! I'm sure they will", said Mary, hiding a smile. "Sure isn't Joe calling tonight anyway to take you out for a pint".

Joe was his eldest son and John Henry would enjoy his outing to the pub, although he sometimes thought there seemed fewer and fewer of the old crowd left now. Mary left soon after the dinner and John Henry settled down for a bit of a doze, which he often did in the afternoon.

Later on, when Joe arrived, John Henry thought he looked very spruced up just for a visit to the pub and he plied Joe with questions about the business and was so busy chatting in the car, he hardly noticed that they had passed their usual 'watering hole' until Joe stopped outside the hotel.

"I thought we'd have a change of scenery tonight", Joe said, helping his father out of the car. John Henry was not best pleased. He didn't care much for these places anymore; however, if that was what Joe wanted, he'd have to go along with it.

Negotiating the steps at the front door took all of John Henry's concentration and when he raised his eyes again, Joe was ushering him into the hotel bar. There was a big crowd in tonight, he thought absentmindedly and then a cheer went up. He saw his brothers, Mike and Jerry and even young Patrick. The girls were there as well, Bridget who lived locally and even Kitty, Mary and Eileen all the way from England.

The tears streamed down John Henry's face and he reached for his handkerchief and dabbed at his eyes. They were all around him now, congratulating him.

He could see all the nieces and nephews at the edge of the crowd and he was very moved by the sight of all his family gathered together.

The sisters from England kissed and hugged him and Kitty was crying copiously as she always did at family gatherings. It had been too long since all of them had been fathered together like this and there was some amount of talking to be done.

A meal was served in the dining room, photographs were being taken and there was even a video camera. John Henry shook his head smiling indulgently as he turned to listen to Mike who was telling story - slow and ponderous was the way Mike spoke - reminiscent of a Sheanachai.

The stories were punctuated by pauses while Mike lit his pipe, which duly went out as he talked and then he would go through the ritual of lighting it all over again. Nobody ever minded. They waited expectantly on his words and the stories were always spellbinding, usually about ghosts and strange happenings in the countryside long ago.

Then it was Kitty's turn. Kitty could tell the simplest story with such drama and effect, it would turn into a pantomime and they laughed until the tears ran down their faces.

After the meal, someone called on John Henry for a song. He didn't have to be asked twice. "Help me up there boy", he said to one of his sons and hobbled up to the microphone. He cleared his throat and began to sing 'Paddy Maginty, an Irishman of note...' the thin, cracked voice was made audible by the amplification. Verse after verse he sang, pleased that he could recall all the words and had the complete attention of the crowd. Cheers and shouts erupted as he finished and sat back down.

Then the party began in earnest. The young ones danced with the energy and enthusiasm only the young can produce. The old folks were still telling jokes and stories. John Henry looked at them all and his heart swelled with the love he had for them and contentment coursed through him. He watched his daughter Mary on the dance floor. How very like her mother she looks tonight, John Henry thought. He felt tired out now from all the excitement but it was a good kind of tiredness. He would close his eyes for a few moments rest and just listen to the music and the sounds of the voices all around him.

John Henry had just closed his eyes when he heard a familiar voice. He looked around the dance floor again. Then he saw her - it was Peggy - she beckoned to him to come and dance. 'Wisha, I can't Peggy girl' he said, 'sure my old legs won't carry me'. 'Come on John', she said as she laughed and threw back her head making her chestnut curls wave and dance. Then he noticed she was wearing that dress, the red dress. With no great effort, he got to his feet and found he didn't even need his stick. His legs were fine and he walked steadily towards Peggy, marvelling at the sight of her beautiful, laughing face.

He could hear voices calling his name and he shouted back, his voice loud and strong. 'I can't stop now, can't you see I'm going dancing with Peggy. She's been waiting long enough.' Peggy gathered him into her arms and they danced away across the floor, laughing together at the wonder of it all.

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