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The House on Tully Hill

by Mary Brannigan

From the window all that could be seen were fields rolling away below. The cottage stood at the top of the hill. In contrast to the lack of people or traffic outside, this was a meeting place for neighbours from far and wide, especially on winter nights. They usually drifted in about nine and never left before midnight.

The attraction, of course, was my granny who drew people to her like moths to a candle. All were made welcome. She even made a place for Mary all the colours who was an old woman of the roads. That's how granny answered when I asked where she lived. Now she would be called a homeless person. Her nickname came from the many coloured ribbons flying from her hat. She descended on us for a two week sojourn once a year. A bed was made up for her when granny spotted her coming up the hill. It seems she was taken in this way by many other families all year long. I never knew the story of her life.

Mary was glad to join our nightly gatherings to catch up with the news. She was there on the night Young Fergus McGearry came with his sister Una. He was a handsome lad about twenty years of age. As usual the radio was turned on for the news, after which my uncle Paddy took down his accordion. He played till all requests were served and then the local gossip began.

This was in full flow when Fergus suddenly stood up and started singing in a manic sort of way. A hush descended. I knew at once, in the way children often do, that something was wrong. Granny bundled me off to bed. I pleaded to stay, but to no avail. This was not for children's ears. The gathering broke up soon after.

Next day I learnt that Fergus had been taken to the asylum.

He had gone off his head in that house on Tully Hill. The news spread like wildfire, with people commenting that his father had gone the same way. But times had changed since then and there was hope he might recover. His sister, who was married to an American airman, visited him regularly before he was released.

When she went with her husband to America they took Fergus with them. The last I heard he was fit and well and enjoying life in his new home. The nightly gatherings continued, but nothing as dramatic ever happened again. My granny's house was a refuge for all comers. Above all it was my place of safety from the storms of home.