

Signs of the Times

by Rosalyn Hurst

1865

The people came slowly to the cross, where the four roads met. The gentle breezes of the long twilight evening brought the sweet perfumes of the mountain down along the winding track, to soothe the coming heartache. The young lads marched ahead, like soldiers to the war, back slapping, the forced joviality and laughter brewed in the early pints. The girls came next, a beautiful flock of gently swans, peeping at the boys over their thick woollen shawls. And then the older folk, some beginning to comfort each other, pride and grief in each step.

The music began, time was short and much had to be done. Dancers stepped up onto the boards and the dancing got wilder, jigs and reels, the sound of the clogs beating their own rhythms, faster till a couple would drop out and run into the field beyond, to hide, to talk of love and farewell, under the watchful eyes of high hedge.

The moon started to rise, and then a pause. Young Jimmie started to cough and a small trickle of blood seeped from his mouth. "He'll not be going in the morning," it was agreed, they knew the Americans would not allow consumptives to land.

In the morning the young men left. The town was silent save for the mothers weeping, the young girls dreaming of following on, waiting for their love to return. Except in Jimmie's family, "did I not warn you not to dance, all that clattering on the boards with those young women who should know better, its heathen, it should be banned."

But his mother said, "hush man, your son is sick, he'll never get a wife now, his friends have gone, this place is in wrack and ruin and this is all a sign of the times."

The town was alive with heady expectation that the Show Band was coming to the Parochial Hall. Under the severe orders of the local priest, no dancing take place within the town, and, although the boards at the cross had been abandoned, the hall had been built in the field nearby, donated by a farmer as part of a penance.

The older married couples arrived early, dancing decorously, old time waltzes, a foxtrot to well known tunes. The men drove their wives around the dance floor with determination and skill they drove their tractors. And then the interval, only non-alcoholic drinks allowed.

Then cars arrived, hooting shouting as the young lads arrived from town, having spent the last few hours in the bars. Girls rode up on bicycles, one or two on the bar of a bike holding brazenly to the neck of those boys still too young to drive.

“It is the swallows, they’ve turned up at last. Isn’t that Mick’s boy, the image of his father?”

“Can that be Mary Griffiths one, look at the cut of her dress, my god father’s is that what the girls are wearing over?”

For indeed, they were the swallows, the children of those that left to find work in England, but who returned each summer for a few precious weeks. The Band began, favourites, Beatles, rolling Stones, the dancing was frantic, some tried to fit a quickstep in, but the swallows brought with them jive, they swung around regardless, collisions met with laughter, girls spun and laughed, the boys looked enviously at the skills of others.

Standing outside in the warm evening as the moon started to rise above the mountain, the old man said, “well, who would have thought we’d ever see this carry on, its just as well the old priest does not come out these days, in no time at all we will lose the old ways.”

And his wife replied, “don’t be talking like that, everything changes, though I see that young lad returned from America is not looking good, he is so pale, its said he coughs blood. I hear it is the new sickness come from America, it may be a sign of the times.”