

LIAM MCLAFFERTY'S CHOICE

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NO YOUNG LAD in Ireland made worse choices than Liam McLafferty of Rosmuck.

When his brother asked, "Would you rather have this apple or that apple?" Liam chose the one that spoiled first.

When his mother asked, "Would you like to spread manure or milk the cow?" Liam chose to spread manure.

When his father asked, "Would you like to come with me to the Galway fair or stay and mind the wee ones?" Liam chose to stay.

When his schoolmaster asked, "Would you like to stand in the corner or sit beside rough Kieran O'Keefe?" Liam chose to sit beside rough Kieran.

Try as he might, Liam could not make a good choice. On market day, his mother endeavored to teach him. "There now, Liam," she said. "Look at those three pigs. Which should we take home with us?"

Liam examined them closely, as all farmers did. Each pig was round and noisy. Each one would make a fine dinner. But each one looked him square in the face.

"I'll take that sack of potatoes," said Liam, and he covered his eyes as he walked away from his mother's side.

On race day, his father tried to teach him. "Look at all the fine horses. Which will cross the finish line first?" Like his father, Liam slid his hands along the horses' withers. He talked with the riders. He listened to old men placing their bets.

"The wee red mare," said Liam. When the wee red mare crossed the finish line last, Liam covered his ears to block the men's laughter.

One night, Liam heard his parents whispering by the hearth. "Liam is our oldest lad," his father said, "yet how can we leave our field to him? Sure, the land

will be lost if Liam puts his hand to it.”

Liam’s heart broke. Before the sun rose, he walked past the fields to the sea to think. As it happened, he spied two figures upon the beach in the rosy dawn.

“Lend a hand, would you?” called a beautiful colleen as she tugged on her great green cloak, which was caught in the rocks.

“Lend a hand, would you?” croaked an old woman as she tried to hobble up a narrow path in her black shawl and red skirt.

Now, any other young man would have raced to help the beautiful girl. But not Liam McLafferty. Without so much as a second thought, he raced to the side of the wrinkled old woman.

At the top of the path, the old woman turned to him. “Tell me, Liam McLafferty, why did you choose to help me when you might have had that lovely colleen on your arm instead?”

Liam was stunned. In all his life, no one had ever asked him *why* he had chosen the way he had. The wind blew soft against his face as he stood above the rolling sea.

“Now that you ask,” he said, “I thought that a young colleen might be able to free her own self from the rocks. I thought that an old woman might have more use of my arm climbing up a craggy hill.”

“And the apple?” asked the woman as she rested against a rock.

“The riper the apple, the more ready the seeds are for planting,” he said without stopping to wonder how she knew about the spoiled apple.

“The manure?” she asked.

“Why, it helps things to grow,” Liam replied.

“And why stay with the wee ones when you could have gone to the fair?” she persisted.

“They need my stories so they might tell their own someday,” he said. Then he thought about his other choices. “I sat beside rough Kieran, for who else would befriend him? As for the potatoes, don’t they nourish a family without harming a pig? And the wee red mare-well, now, I suppose I saw what she might become instead of what she was that day.”

The old woman nodded as she stood on the path. Then quick as a hare, she

spun around until she was but a blur of black and red. When the spinning stopped, there before Liam stood the queen of the fairy kingdom.

“Liam, for listening to your heart’s own good sense above others’ opinions, you may choose your reward.”

Och! Poor Liam! Another choice to make!

Think hard, he whispered to himself. What would a smart Irish lad choose? A room of gold! he thought. Now, wouldn’t that make Da happy. Oh, better! A village full of friends! Now, wouldn’t that make Ma proud. Liam thought these things, but he said nothing. He was afraid of being laughed at once again.

The fairy queen tapped her delicate foot. “Come, now, Liam. No choice is a choice, too.”

Liam found his voice. “All I ask is a wee dram of knowledge and the wisdom to make good choices,” he said, then cringed, afraid that the fairy queen would mock him.

“‘Tis yours, as it has always been. Trust it,” she said and disappeared.

When Liam arrived at his cottage, there on his cot was a wee slip of parchment. On it were two words: TELL THEM.

The village soon spilled with tales of Liam McLafferty and the fairy queen. The laughter followed. What young man with any sense at all would choose a wisp of parchment over a fortune in gold?

Och. But Liam knew the half of it. For as he soon discovered, the words he carried with him gave him courage. With each choice he made, he explained the whys and wherefores of it. And there wasn’t a reason that didn’t make good sense to the others.

As it happened, the young colleen in the great green cape soon became his wife. With her love and his heart’s own good sense to guide him, he made his father’s land prosper. Villagers came to him for advice, and his hearth never lacked for a friendly face.

Truth be told, as the years passed, all the villagers came to agree on one thing: no young lad in the whole long history of Ireland ever made better choices than Liam McLafferty of Rosmuck.