

MICHELE MARI
RODERICK DUDDLE



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The Red Goose

Of all the pubs along the coast between Glenties and Cork, the Red Goose in Castlerough is unquestionably the most renowned. However, its fame is not exactly the kind to which an honest innkeeper would aspire: anyone who doubts that may easily enter the tavern in question on any given night, and tell me if he has ever seen such a crowd of swindlers, seamen, carters, vagrants and drunkards gathered in one place. Brought together by a shared passion for cards and rum, many of these fine gentlemen seem to have made the Red Goose their chosen abode, and some of them are so habitual that one can well say that they are now part of the fixtures. The source of this phenomenon, if one is not content to attribute it to the force of habit inherent in the human being, is very likely the beauty, not to mention the seductiveness, of the waitresses serving at the tables, entertaining the customers with all sorts of witticisms, licit and illicit. The owner of the inn, the famous Jeremiah Jones, would personally see to the selection of these consoling lovelies; my informed reader will certainly have heard him mentioned, and not in particularly edifying terms.

In managing his business, Mr. Jones followed a method that a modern-day philosopher would not hesitate to describe as scientific. To begin with he would prowl around those areas where he considered there was a greater chance of coming across the object of his de-

sires, namely, among the market stalls or alleyways of the poorest sections of the coastal towns, in the stables or along the docks. Having picked out one he would describe as promising, that is, a young girl twelve to fifteen years old, he promptly hired her, paying her parents a sum of money consistent with their cunning and greed; indeed, those who didn't need workers at home couldn't believe they were getting rid of another mouth to feed, a circumstance that made that type of arrangement very similar to a permanent relinquishment. Upon returning to the Red Goose with his prey, Mr. Jones turned her over to the cook to make her into a perfect scullery maid. After a year or two, when he felt the time was right, the shrewd innkeeper would promote the girl to waitress, not before having properly cleaned and fancied her up. And above all, having instructed her on how to behave, or rather how *not* to behave, in the performance of her duties. The evolution from scullery maid to waitress also involved moving from a makeshift pallet in the kitchen to a small room on the top floor; there, two to three girls slept on a large straw mattress, while two others each had a room of their own, an arrangement that only a naive innocent would consider fortunate. It doesn't take a great deal of worldly experience, in fact, to guess what these last two rooms were intended to be used for: the holy grail sought by all those pilgrims who could afford it.

The transition from waitress to *Venus mercenaria* coincided, as a rule, with a pedagogical initiation ceremony officiated by Mr. Jones himself. Afterwards, as a prudent manager, he would excuse the two room occupants from serving in the tavern, causing the less well-off clients to protest the sudden denial of that beauty. From time to time, however, it happened that one of the young women would become pregnant, in which case

she could be seen waiting tables again for the period necessary to regain her strength after having gotten rid of the unborn child. In any case, Mr. Jones' practice provided that, having achieved a certain length of service, and having irreversibly lost any trace of freshness and allure, the young lady in question could continue her career as a cook or laundress or stable hand. And so, just as they say that no part of a pig is allowed to go to waste, it may also be said that no attributes of Mr. Jones' employees were ever wasted.

At the time we're talking about, the two attractions at the Red Goose, which is to say of the entire stretch of the coast, were called Polly and Molly, but for a long time, just before them, there had been Skinny Jenny and Fat Jenny. Not that one of them was actually skinny and the other actually fat; on the contrary, both were very curvaceous and well proportioned. The fact is that a slight difference in size was enough to brand them with those nicknames. Besides, no one knew their family names, and they themselves never seemed to remember them. Of the two, the one who drew the most attention was Skinny Jenny: a line of customers often formed at her door, willing to wait rather than make do with the Fat one. It was indeed by virtue of her exceptional repute that the lovely Skinny Jenny achieved what none of her colleagues could ever achieve, even if they had wanted to: she was allowed to give birth to the accidental fruit of her occupation. At first, Mr. Jones wouldn't hear of it; then, faced with her threat to jump off the cliff, and especially after she promised to return to said occupation as soon as possible with renewed commitment, he agreed. And so, in the room where so many men's voices had reverberated, the cry of a newborn was heard one day, a baby who was given the name of Roderick.