

# THE HISTORY OF CANNOCK'S

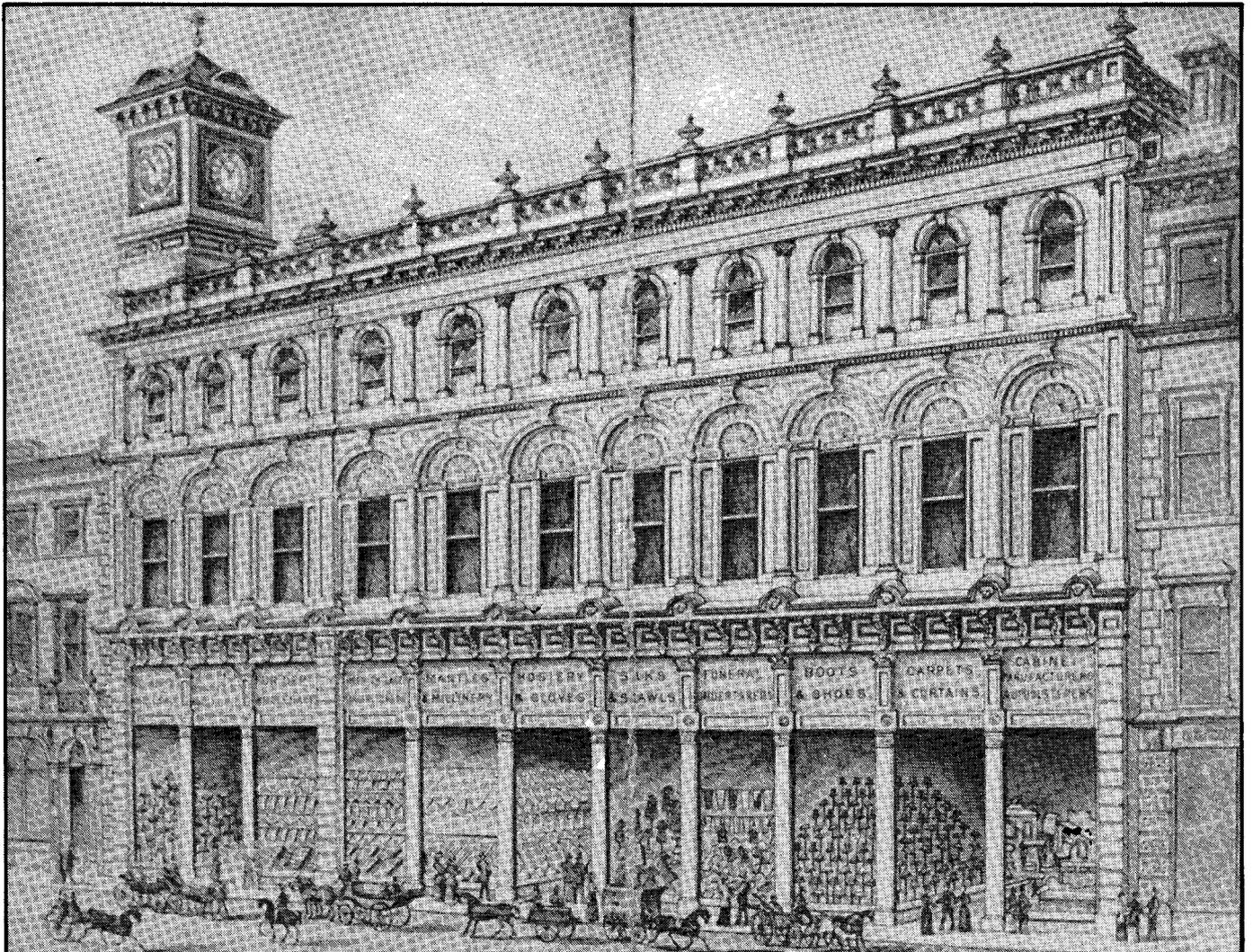
**I**n the first half of the 19th. century, Limerick was an expanding city. After the demolition of the old town walls in 1760, the Hon. E.S. Pery began the construction of that part of the city to which he was to give his name - Newtown Pery. Beginning with Rutland Street, the development continued into Patrick Street and George's Street (now O'Connell Street), embracing the whole adjoining area which is now the commercial centre of Limerick. The distinctive Georgian character and orderly geometrical lay-out of this development made Limerick the envy

*by Finbarr Crowe Part One*

of many a congested town of that era. By 1840 the city had expanded southwards as far as the Crescent with a few buildings on the South Circular Road. In 1835, Wellesley Bridge (now Sarsfield Bridge) was completed, opening the way to further development along the Ennis Road. Though this expansion was originally almost entirely of a residential nature, it gradually adapted to the growing commercial needs of a developing city and many of the buildings became business premises. (We see much the same

process in operation today in the Crescent area, which many citizens remember as a totally residential area).

However, amid all the new development in Newtown Pery, destitution, misery and squalor still existed in the back lanes, particularly in the old city. Mrs. West, a Quaker who visited Limerick in 1846, wrote that she walked "through the filthiest alleys, past broker's shops and all sorts of abominations, to the Cathedral (St. Mary's) which has large trees in front and is



An 18th century drawing of Cannock's.

Peter Tait was born in Scotland in 1828 and came to Limerick in 1838 with seven shillings and six pence (37½p.) in his pocket. His sister was married to Martin Honan, who was mayor of the city in 1842 and 1843. During the summer of 1844, the young Tait worked as a counterhand for Cumine and Mitchell and in the winter he sold shirts to the sailors at Limerick Docks. For a young man he had a shrewd business head and a great capacity to spot an opening and unbounded energy in pursuing new ideas. In his time he was the prince of entrepreneurs and before long he had founded his famous factory in Boherbuoy which made uniforms for the British Army. In 1858, there were 1,300 people employed in the factory and by 1864 he was the largest clothing manufacturer in the British Isles.

On becoming a director of Cannock's, he immediately introduced the art of glovemaking into the store and this aspect of the business soon prospered. (Limerick had a distinguished reputation in glovemaking and, during the 18th century, a glover named Lyons had orders from as far afield as the Court of Russia). In other aspects of the business, too, his presence was soon felt. In particular, he saw the necessity for expanding the premises in order to cater for the many new ideas that his imaginative commercial brain was constantly conceiving.

With this in mind he undertook, in 1858, a major reconstruction of the store, which incorporated all the newly acquired property into one large building. This development gave Cannock's its impressive and ornate facade which was to lend character to the centre of Limerick for over 100 years. The upper storey was designed to cater for all apprentices (there were often 100 "living in"), and it contained a large kitchen, dining and sitting rooms, a library and sleeping quarters. There was also a separate entrance for the apprentices on Honan's Quay. The entire cost of the undertaking was £9,000 and the principal architect was Mr. William Fogerty of Limerick (Fogerty, who was only 24 when he designed Cannock's, became a fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects and President of the Architects Association of Ireland. He also designed Boyd's in William Street).

In 1862, Tait bought extensive property in Brunswick Street (now Sarsfield Street), which was later to house the expanding furniture department of Cannock's. Also in this year he bought property in William Street which he leased to William McCormick. (In later years this property was occupied by Goodwin's, destroyed by fire, rebuilt, occupied by Besco's and finally by Winston's. By an odd twist of fate, Cannock's, having sold their premises in

O'Connell St., to Penney's in 1980, transferred their business to this William St., premises and traded there in the final years prior to closing down. The building since then was replaced by a new shopping arcade known as 'The Mall', which, regrettably, was destroyed by a fire, earlier this year).

In 1864 Tait bought more property in Honan's Quay (where Dunne's Stores is now), so that by the end of that century, Cannock's owned almost all of Honan's Quay.

Under his dynamic management, cabinet-making, polishing and upholstering also flourished in the Store and his drive and encouragement soon made the name of Cannock's synonymous with fine craftsmanship in the furniture trade. In fact so great was their reputation that soon they were the main suppliers to every hospital institution within a 35 mile radius of Limerick. Tait had indeed made his presence felt.

In 1865, Tait moved to London but still maintained his interest in Cannock's and the Clothing Factory. Peter Thom replaced him as managing director of Cannock's and his previous experience in this demanding position helped to maintain the premier position of the firm in the commercial world.

But a man of Peter Tait's stature was not to be easily forgotten by the citizens. A firm believer in freedom of



*South Hill House, the home of Peter Tait.*

otherwise surrounded by walls and mean habitations". The contrast between the old and the new certainly appears to have been a stark one.

Communications into and out of Limerick were remarkably good in those days, particularly the routes to Dublin. The city was linked to the capital by canal and for those with more urgent business a regular "fly" coach service operated. In 1848, the first train ran between Dublin and Limerick, adding further to the city's commercial potential.

Limerick port, at the back of the Custom House, was also thriving at this stage and the expanding trade led to the construction of the New Docks in 1853.

However, in the field of politics Limerick was not so fortunate. In the first part of the 19th century the Corporation had been notoriously corrupt and many attempts to achieve reform had failed. Finally as a result of a persistent campaign by Thomas Spring Rice, it was dissolved in 1840 and replaced by an elective body. The new body, however, was not truly representative of the citizens because of the high property qualifications for voting and membership.

It was shortly after that Thackeray, the eminent writer, visited Limerick. He was generous in his praise of the city and was particularly impressed with George's Street. "The houses", he wrote, "are bright red - the street is full and gay, carriages in plenty go jingling by - dragoons in red are every now and then clattering up the Street, and upon every carriage which passes with ladies in it, you are sure to see a pretty one; the great Street of Limerick is altogether a very brilliant and animated sight".

It was into this "great Street of Limerick", that John Arnott and George Cannock came in 1850, buying the premises at 134 (now 139) George's Street from their fellow Scotsmen Cumine and Mitchell. The premises had been built before 1800 and had been a drapery establishment since 1814, when a Mr. Thomas Waller, "a fashionable woollen draper", took it over. The premises changed hands a few times before Cumine and Mitchell started trading there in 1840. They had planned to expand the business and bought an adjacent premises which stretched back to Honan's Quay. Unfortunately for them, the Great Famine struck in the 1840s and the depressed economic conditions completely upset their plans. Finally, in 1850, they sold their interest to Arnott and Cannock, two vastly experienced businessmen, who were already operating a drapery store in Henry Street, Dublin. (When Cannock retired in 1865 this business became known as Arnott & Co.).

At first they concentrated on



Peter Tait.

developing the wholesale side of the business to supply the small shops which began to spring up in rural areas during the post-Famine period. They were fortunate in having the support of their Dublin Company, as they could depend on a constant supply of merchandise in those unsettled times. Having established the firm on a sound footing, George Cannock concentrated his energies on his Dublin store, while Arnott became deeply involved with his many business interests in Cork (he died a millionaire in 1898). The running of the Limerick store was left in the capable hands of Peter Thom, who became manager, and finally a director, in 1861.

Cannock lived overhead his store in Henry Street, Dublin, with his housekeeper, by whom he had two daughters, Mary and Fanny. The couple separated after this and the two children were put under the care of a governess in Rathmines, both parents having access to them. There was little doubt that George Cannock loved his daughters intensely and, to his credit,

showed none of that moral cowardice that had compelled many other men in similar prestigious positions to disown their own offspring. The girls were sent to a boarding school in England to be educated and were, finally, sent to a finishing school in Paris.

Cannock continued to participate actively in the running of the Dublin store while keeping a discreet eye on his Limerick interests. He retired from business in 1865, although still retaining his financial interest in his Limerick premises. He went to live in London, having amassed a fortune of £150,000.

Meanwhile, Peter Thom continued to look after the affairs of Cannock's and under his prudent management the business continued to prosper. During this period he acquired more property on Honan's Quay, continuing the gradual expansion of the firm.

In 1858, John Arnott sold his interest in Cannock's to a man who was to have a profound influence not alone on Cannock's, but also on the greater commercial life of Limerick.

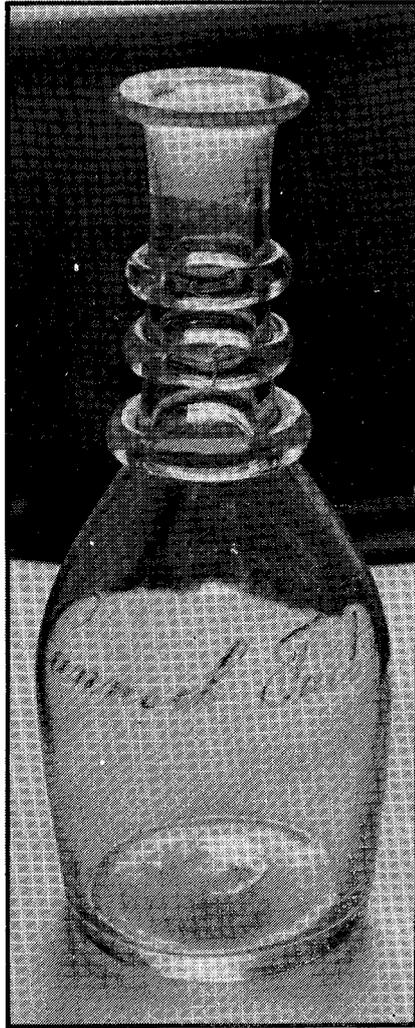
religion, he was renowned for his charitable nature and contributed generously to all denominations in the city. After his departure from Limerick, a committee of business people was set up to erect a memorial to him. John Arnott and George Cannock each contributed £100 towards the fund and the magnificent clock tower erected in Baker Place was a fitting expression of the high esteem in which he was held. Indeed, so great was the citizens' respect for him that in November of that year (1865) he was offered the Mayoralty of Limerick, which he accepted. This was to be the first of three terms which he served in that exalted position.

Tait undertook this new role with his usual enthusiastic flair while still keeping a benevolent eye on Cannock's and the Limerick Clothing Company, both of which he now treated as one inseparable commercial entity. It was somewhat ironic that his first major undertaking as Mayor was to deal with a tailors' strike which started in Cannock's and then spread to other houses. There was dissatisfaction in Cannock's with wages (25/- per week) and the men also demanded the dismissal of women who were engaged in their type of work. Tait was well aware of the implications of this dispute, having many women employed in his Boherbuoy Factory. He acted quickly and decisively, threatening his Clothing Factory workers with instant dismissal if they joined the strike. He refused absolutely to concede the workers' demands and the strike soon petered out. As a result, 30 workers at Cannock's who were 'Society men' (trade union members), were forced to leave the firm but were given alternative employment by Tait at his Boherbuoy Factory. Here, however, they had to work with machines rather than by hand, as before. This was the only recorded strike that Cannock's had in the 19th century.

Tait was now immensely influential in both the economic and political life of Limerick and worked tirelessly to develop communications in and out of the city by road, rail and sea. His enterprise in this respect was enormously successful and the commercial interests of both Cannock's and Limerick prospered accordingly. His reputation and influence soared and in February 1868 he was knighted. He was at the pinnacle of his career when he decided to stand for Parliament. The election campaign was a particularly tempestuous one and there were many violent clashes between rival supporters in the city. Because of its association with Tait, Cannock's did not escape during these disturbances. Its plate glass windows were broken and a fire was started in the calico department.

However, the most vicious affray occurred near the Tait memorial in

Baker Place, during which one of Tait's workers, a tailor named Hill, was killed. These riotous events did little to advance Tait's cause. Nor was he overfortunate in some of those whose help he enlisted, one of whom was Richard Pigott, who was later to gain notoriety as the forger of the 'Parnell letters'. The culmination of all this was that Tait's popularity suffered and he lost the election. Furthermore, he resigned as Mayor in December 1868, having been involved in a dispute over the Mayoral chain.



*A glass decanter from the Cannock/Tait-store.*

Unfortunately for Tait, worse was to follow, as this political episode had diverted his attention and energies from his business enterprises. One of his companies, the River Plate Steamship Company, collapsed and the effects were to prove devastating. Both Tait and George Cannock were the principal partners and they became liable for the company's losses. (These losses were considerable, as limited liability was a very new concept then). We shall see later on how they affected George Cannock.

After this major setback, Tait once more sought a seat in parliament, contesting elections both in Limerick and Scotland. Again, however, he was

unsuccessful. His financial resources had now become considerably drained and this deeply affected his business interests. As a consequence, the prosperity of his Boherbuoy factory declined and it was eventually forced to close in 1875. In that same year Tait left Limerick, finally severing his 37 year connection with the city. He died at the Hotel de France, in Batoum, Russia, in 1890, while endeavouring to set up a Turkish cigarette factory in Salonica. He had no house of his own to bequeath and died almost penniless, leaving a mere £50.

George Cannock, as we have seen, also suffered financially because of the collapse of Tait's Steamship Company. He was forced to sell his house in London and return to the active management of his Limerick store. Indeed, to quote Cannock himself: "I suffered losses in consequence of which I had the bed sold from under me". This was not strictly true but nevertheless his assets were severely diminished.

He moved with his two daughters to Limerick and rented a house at 6, Barrington Street. While there, the girls became involved in the city's cultural life and during these activities became acquainted with Patrick Lynch, proprietor of the Royal George Hotel. They had previously known Lynch in London where, as superintendent of the River Plate Steamship Company, he had been a regular visitor to their home. Mary Cannock, who had led a very sheltered life, had a daughter by Lynch in 1871, and this, needless to say, caused quite a stir. The matter was further aggravated by the fact that Mary was only 18, while Lynch, who was married, was 45 and had 10 children of his own. George Cannock sued Lynch for the seduction of his daughter and won £100 damages and 6/- costs. Subsequently, both Mary Cannock and Patrick Lynch left Limerick, both going their separate ways. Mary later married John McCandie at Chepstow. He had worked at the Provincial Bank, George's Street, during the court case and had given evidence at the trial.

George Cannock continued to manage the store, though he was not now one of the principal shareholders. However, he was forced by ill-health to retire in 1875 and died at Exeter a year later, aged 67 years. He left effects worth £4,000, but, like Tait, had no house to bequeath. He did, however, leave his name to the business, and Cannock's was to be a household name in Limerick for the next 100 years.

Before Cannock's departure, the store had already been effectively taken over by Michael J. Clery and James Moriarty Tidmarsh, in 1871. Tidmarsh was a native of Kilkenny and had been Mayor of that city in 1855. Unfortunately, he died in 1876 though his family was destined to be associated with Cannock's for almost another 100

years. He was succeeded in the firm by his son David.

But it was the astute Michael Clery who dominated Cannock's during this period and his energetic management brought further prosperity to the store in the following years. Clery was born near Kilmallock in 1832 and served his apprenticeship in Cork. He then moved to Dublin, working under George Cannock in the Henry Street store, and eventually became a manager there. Subsequently, he moved to Galway to open his own business and came to Limerick in 1869. In 1878, he bought as his residence 'Fort Mary' on the North Circular Road and spent lavishly on its reconstruction. Though later on he moved to Dublin and acquired a residence there, he retained 'Fort Mary' for his Limerick visits.

Michael Clery, who was industrious by nature, was widely respected for his efficiency and business acumen. He always insisted on punctuality from his staff and believed in a quick turnover of stock. "We cannot have dead stuff lying idle", was one of his sayings. He never underestimated customers and was constantly receptive to their varying demands. "If they are not satisfied", he was wont to say, "they have a very simple remedy". It was to Michael Clery's credit that few customers found it necessary to avail of this 'simple remedy'. Clery was also particularly skilful as a buyer, believing in cash payments and thereby availing of the highest discounts. During his term as managing director, buyers bought according to his policy at the English, Scottish, and Continental markets and Cannock's were able to sell competitively as a result. Consequently, this led to an increase in profits.

In 1878, Clery bought property in Bedford Row in partnership with Todd's. They divided this property (later to become the Bedford Row Hospital) by private agreement and Clery used his part of the building to house Cannock's expanding furniture business.

But Clery's life was not one continuous chain of good fortune. Unhappily, his successes in the commercial world were paralleled by a series of tragedies that struck his family. In 1877, his eldest daughter Louise, aged 13, died of T.B. and three years later his second son, Thomas, aged 15, succumbed to the same dreaded disease. To add to his cup of sorrow, his wife died of acute bronchitis, two days after Thomas. She was only 44 years of age, but this was not to be the end of his tribulations, for though he married again, the remainder of his life was marred by further family bereavements that weighed heavily on his heart.

Cannock's continued to prosper under Michael Clery's management and though at times he appeared over-cautious, he rarely miscalculated a bus-

iness deal. He was keenly aware of the high correlation between the prosperity of the country and the success of his business. For this reason he saw the necessity for a healthy industrial base in Ireland and constantly advocated the support of native products. In the 1882 National Exhibition in Dublin, Cannock's sent exhibits of their furniture upholstery and Limerick lace. This work received extensive admiration, the lace being awarded a prizewinning medal. Cannock's benefitted enormously from this publicity and both the Blarney and Athlone woollen mills could not keep up with the orders they received from the store. At this stage, Clery mooted the idea of a woollen mills for Limerick but the venture never got off the ground.



Trade token of Tait's Clothing Factory.

In 1883, Clery bought his own premises in Sackville Street (now O'Connell Street), Dublin, and, from this point on, he was very involved with the store that was to make his name famous throughout the length and breadth of Ireland. However, he still continued to exert a strong influence on Cannock's and was the largest shareholder in the firm up to the time of his death. He was succeeded as managing director by James Moran, who had served his apprenticeship under Clery in Galway and had moved to Limerick with him. During Moran's term, the premises at 137 George's St., (a chemist's shop) were taken over and, in 1888, renovations were started to incorporate this building into the main store. It was at this stage that the famous clock-tower, which was to become the distinctive hallmark of Cannock's, was added. The clock, which was known as a Westminister Chime Clock, was made by Gillet and Johnston of London and contained 5 bells. It was handwound and rang every 15 minutes, as well as striking the hours.

Cannock's had now grown to be the largest business in the south-west and employed 300 people. But the pressures of business, and the demands made on him by the recent development work, took their toll on Moran. He died three months after the completion

of the work, aged 44 years. Phillip Toppin, a buyer in the Millinery Department, became the new manager and was subsequently appointed a director.

It was during his tenure as manager that Cannock's 'saw the light' for the first time. In 1896, he signed a contract with a Dublin electrical contractor (who had just completed similar work for Arnott's) for the installation of electric light. It consisted of 24 arc-lamps distributed throughout the store. The clock-tower was also lit and could be seen at night at a considerable distance. The current was supplied by two Taunton dynamos, either of which was capable of supplying the whole installation. This ensured that the store would not be thrust into darkness should one fail. The light was switched on for the first time on December 19th 1896 by David Tidmarsh and Phillip Toppin. The press at the time reported that "the public could purchase now with the same facility as they would at noon on a Summer's day, and the ladies would now be in a position to match any shade of colour, with the greatest possible ease, long after the shades of evening had fallen".

Michael Clery did not survive to see this 'lighting up'. Having lost his daughter Josephine (aged 19) in 1887, he was further bereaved by the death of his eldest son, Frank (aged 31), who died in France. Frank had been a director of Cannock's and was succeeded on the Board by his brother Robert. In 1892, 1893 and 1894 Michael Clery lost, in quick succession, Michael (aged 19), Patrick (aged 23), and John (aged 18). All died of T.B. and this tragic decimation of his family took its toll on his health. Having had a history of heart trouble, he suffered a severe attack in his Dublin home in April 1896 and died 20 minutes later. David Tidmarsh had been with him on the previous day discussing the affairs of Cannock's and Clery had been out driving with his wife on the Sunday that he died. His funeral to Mount St. Lawrence's Cemetery (where all his family had been interred) was the biggest ever seen in Limerick. Business in the city came to a standstill as the citizens paid their last respects to a man who had made such an impact on the commercial life of Limerick. To add poignancy to the sad occasion, of his 8 children only Robert was alive to attend his father's burial. The death of Michael J. Clery brought another chapter in the history of Cannock's to a close.

In his will, Robert was nominated to succeed his father in the Dublin store. He left many charitable bequests and all the Dublin hospitals received donations. His cook, coachman and domestic staff were also generously rewarded. and 'Fort Mary', his Limerick residence, was left to his sister Deborah. (To be concluded next issue).