

AN APRIL INCIDENT

by Tim Lehane

I HAD an avenue of time to observe Josie. We were both going towards the convent door. He was ahead of me on the warm April evening but there was no mistaking Josie's familiar figure: the long black overcoat corded at the waist; the capped head set close on his shoulders; the trouser ends twined into his socks; the laced ankle boots and the rough walking stick angled from his arm. Josie seemed to 'move' as distinct from walk. His gait was slow, steady, even.

We reached the steps together. I slowed. He didn't look, didn't say anything. He knew where the doorbell was and pressed twice firmly. We waited.

"Have you a fag?"

"Sorry, I haven't any on me".

"Hmmm".

He was clean-shaven, with just an odd blade line of blood on his cheek. He had not removed the quenched pipe from his mouth. I noticed its newly acquired cap — a Jameson bottle top. A golden piece of downright invention cupped neatly over the dark pipe bowl.

Josie's call was being answered. I could hear the approaching swish and rustle within. The large door swung half open. A nun stood there, one of her white fingered hands still holding the high door lock. A split second of summing up the callers seemed a hesitation of eternity. She looked at Josie, at me, at Josie again and then at the two of us. I explained the reason for my call.

"Yes, come in please".

"Ah — would you wait out there for awhile".

Josie hadn't spoken. The door was closed. I was asked to take a seat in the hallway. The nun faded like a whisper into the gloom of waxed corridors. I was left in silence. A shaft of stained light dappled the cold black and white hall tiles. I heard Josie shuffle outside on the steps. Silence. Inside, polish, varnish, twilight. Outside, April brightness, cherry blossoms, stirrings of bright greenery and Josie with a quenched pipe, hungry, in his long overcoat corded at the waist.

I heard footsteps approaching along the avenue, up the steps. The doorbell or knocker wasn't sounded. I listened. Josie spoke to the newly arrived.

"She's just gone in — she should be out in a minute".

"Is she"?

A younger man's voice; so he was going to have to share his sandwiches with a fellow traveller. Josie didn't show any resentment.

"Doul weather have been bad".

"It has".

"It have been awful".

"It has".

Silence.

"Du know what I tink?"

"No".

"Dere's a lot of poishins in the air — I gets oul pains".

"There is".

Silence.

"Where are you goin?"

"Nenagh".

"Is that a good place?"

"Tis good — I'll try the farmers".

"Why so?"

"I'll do a bit of work with dem".

"Are they good?"

"D'are".

Silence.

"Limerick is no good of a place — dere's poishins in d'air".

"I wouldn't stay here much longer".

Silence.

"What does the weather be like in Nenagh?"

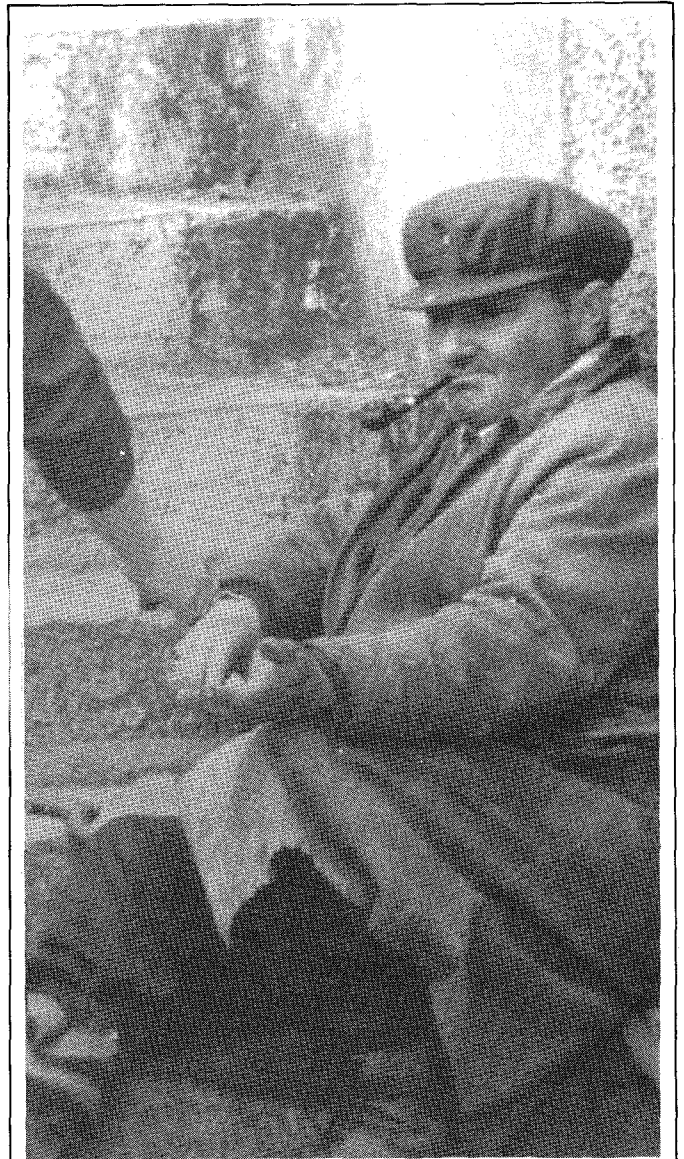
"Ah tis good — tis good in Nenagh".

Silence.

"She should be out soon".

"She should".

Later that evening as I walked through Limerick's hometime traffic and bustle I saw Josie again. The familiar figure moving his own slow way; wondering perhaps if he too shouldn't try Nenagh, a far off world of promise. He disappeared into the crowds. A pulse of Limerick life lost in the surge of an April evening.



A strategic position. Picture by Marion Hartnett.

poration bashed in its roof on top of him. Later he went to live in a laneway near Barrington's Hospital, before crossing the Abbey river to the Simon Community Hostel at Charlotte Quay.

Josie was a man of regular habits and seldom strayed from his beat of sympathetic religious houses and other friendly sources. During less prosperous times he could be seen as one of a weekly Thursday queue at the rear of the Dominican Church, as he waited patiently for the priest's "little help" of six (old) pence. Josie had never been known to badger or harass anybody for money or anything else. Occasionally, however, when all his sources had run dry, he had been known to proffer an empty tobacco-pouch or an upturned palm to a likely passer-by.

Sean Bourke tells how he was strolling past the Dominican Church one day when he met Josie. Dipping his hand into his pocket, he pulled out three two-shilling pieces and offered them to his fellow-Limerickman, Josie looked hard at him and after a slow appraisal said, "You can't afford all that", and promptly handed back two of the three silver pieces.

Josie added a few more attractions to his outfit in his latter years. A bulging bag of his prized possessions and a tin box containing a few cigarettes were among these additions. But the most obvious possession of all was his "poor man's flock" — a small pack of dogs of mixed pedigree, frequently to be seen trailing expectantly along behind him.

Still, Josie's pride and joy continued to be his pipe-smoking achievements. He was never nominated for the "Pipeman of the Year" award but it is difficult to believe that the records of Jack Lynch and other winning notables match Josie's prowess and sense of fulfilment in this, his favourite pastime.



Drawing by

Kevin Hannan.

During the long, hard winter of 1963, a rumour went about that Josie had been found dead in a room in Mungret Street. However, anyone, knowing anything about the man's onion-like ensemble knew better. But the need of crossing a road presented the greatest risk to his life and limb. His habit of suddenly stepping off the foot-path and walking diagonally across the road, oblivious of traffic of any kind, put the driving skills of many motorists to the full test.

He died suddenly and peacefully in 1978 without ever having compromised his life-long refusal to participate in the economic competition of society. It is certain that the world would be a strife-free and tranquil place if all its people were as peaceful as the man with the ill-chosen nickname — "Mad" Josie.



"Lost in wondering, contemplation..." Picture by Joe Hartnett.