

The best stone-cutter in the country

'I DON'T care what you think, but the best man this country ever produced in our line was a stone-cutter by the name of O'Dowd, and a Limerick man to boot'. So began Nedgill one day at dinner-hour.

'To see that man working was a treat. He made stone-cutting look simple and you would wonder why the blazes you had to serve seven years to it. I don't know how he did it, but he had a system of working which left everyone else standing. I saw him get up a big apex stone about a ton weight and tear into it like 'twas beerstone. You know the work there is on an apex-stone - all angles. Well he had it blocked out while another man would be marking it on. He was the best man I ever saw to use a hammer-point, every blow down to themaker's name! And a skim over with a skew-chisel and he was out. 'Twas enough to make any man give up the trade and go peddling bootlaces, because you'd be ashamed of yourself working near him.'

'What used to beat me was that you got the impression he was taking it easy and sure he'd be walking away from you. I remember we were doing a moulded cornice for a bank, and big stones they were. It was overhanging the building so the beds had to be big enough to hold it and we were all banked together on it. That was the way they used to test the men in them days - all of us trying to best one another. It should never have been allowed because it always caused trouble among the men. For the first day we'd all be watching to see who was going to make the pace, and then one of us would start going it and 'twas every man for himself, each fella going about the job in his own way and taking all the short cuts he knew.

'You know the way it goes - you get the rake of the

by Seamus Murphy

moulding with the template, block off the waste and put in a chase a bit stiff of the line and claw-tool it down. Then you get in the lines of moulding and put in the ends. I was always a bit nervous of getting down a face too quickly; I like a bit on for the skew-chisel. Now and then I leave a bit too much on and it means making a face twice over. It is hardshipping to try and skew-chisel a quarter of an inch off a bed. You want a mallet point.

'But, to get back to the cornice—'

'Take off another length of it now', said the Gargoyle, 'you wiped out that course in no time and, as far as I can see, O'Dowd couldn't hold a candle to you.'

'Let me finish what I was saying', said Nedgill, 'you never lost it - always butting in on a man! Well, we were all on the cornice. I think there were six of us. We had a man from Waterford, a man from Dublin, from Ballinasloe and Tralee, along with myself and O'Dowd - 'twas like an inter-county competition! And they were all good men.'

'Including yourself,' said the Gargoyle.

'Yes,' said Nedgill, 'I'm one of the best men in Ireland yet'.

'How do you know that?' asked the Gargoyle. 'Sure you never worked outside of Cork, and that's only a small part of Ireland.'

'No more old buck out of you, now,' said Nedgill, 'if you're not interested, the other men are.'



Taking stock. Drawing by Tony Hartnett.



Figuring out the job. Drawing by Tony Hartnett.

We appealed to the Gargoyle to shut up, now that the story had taken on a competitive aspect we were all attention.

'Well, the Ballinaloe man was the first to get ahead, he was used to the Ballinasloe stone and could cut it like cheese. At the end of the second day he was walking into them. Then the Dublin man showed up. He was a man with a good head on him and he never made the mistake of wasting time marking the guide lines; he always saw his job finished the first minute he took it up. I learned a lot from him. Anyway there wasn't much to choose between us after three day's work, and there was over a week's work in each stone.'

'None of us took much notice of O'Dowd. He'd only been jobbed a few days before and we didn't know exactly what he was made of. But by the time we were finished with that cornice we'd good reason to know. He finished his job a day and a half ahead of me, and I was a good few hours ahead of the rest - and into the bargain his job was better masoned than mine. I needn't tell you we were leaping mad at the beating we got and to give the foreman his due he said it was astonishing how any man could have got away with it. 'Nedgill', he said, "you are well over a day ahead of what I allowed for the working of these stones, and, at that rate, the Limerick man is two and a half days ahead. I wonder did he get a kind bit of stone, or did he come in over the wall and do a bit at night? It's a mystery to me anyway.'

'I agreed because I had never in all my natural days worked so close and along with that I had no trouble, everything went smooth from the start but in the end I was left standing. The foreman had a smack for me. 'Twill look bad", he said, "on the time-sheets. What will the boss say? And unknown man from Limerick wiping the floor with the rest of ye".'

'Then I had a brainwave. I thought of Padna. At that time he was in his prime, the best man in this town, or any town outside, for that matter. "You're right", said the foreman, "I'll banker him with Padna. We'll have to uphold the honour of Cork."

"But not on the cornice", said I, "the Limerick man will make the next bit of that with his eyes shut and Padna hasn't worked any of it". "I'm fly for that," said the foreman. "I'll give them one of the bases for the columns, and there's at least ten day's work on one of them with the beds made."

'He bankered them and tipped Padna off: "For the

sake of the old town, don't leave us down or 'twill be all over the country and we'll never live it down."

"Anyway they got started. We were all excitement wondering how our man would fare. "Don't stir from the banker", says I, "if you have any tools to sharpen let them on the rub stone and I'll do them for you. And I won't talk to you on the job. Come up to the house in the evening and we'll work out all the short cuts possible."

"After about five days I noticed Padna looking a bit down in himself so I arranged with the other men that we give him a few pints in the evenings to keep his heart up. So we used all waltz into Miss O's and try to cheer him up by telling him how well he was going about the job and that we were all depending on him. But 'twas no use, he seemed to have got it into his head that the Limerick man was just a little bit too good for him, though, to give Padna his due, he worked like a nigger and never let up for an instant.'

'Then I got an idea. I suggested to the other men that the best thing at all to keep him in form would be a visit to the Turkish Baths. 'Twas agreed, and I took him along the next evening to the old baths in Maylor Street. The baths were old-fashioned compared with what they are now. You undressed in an outer room and then proceeded to the wash-house, where you filled a basin with warm water. A dipper with a handle was provided and you poured the warm water over you and then went into the sweating room.

'I gave Padna two pints before we went in as he was a bit nervous. Anyway, stark naked we went into the wash-house. I filled the dipper with water from the stone basin and poured it over Padna - merciful Heaven, he let a roar out of him that nearly brought the house down. Instead of being warm, the water was icily cold! I'll never forget Padna's language. The attendant rushed in and ordered us out for misconduct.

'On the eighth day Padna was looking very shook in spite of everything. The sweat was streaming down his face, making channels in the dust on it. Just before lunch he collapsed at the banker. He had worked himself to a standstill and made no impression at all on the Limerick man'.

'I'd believe it,' said the Gargoyle. "'Twas given up to O'Dowd as being the best stonie that ever worked in this part of the country.'



Lettering. Drawing by Tony Hartnett.