

HOW I WAS NEARLY SENT TO GLIN

by Joe Malone

My father shouted up the stairs: "Get up, get up you young whelp!"

Nightmares had drained me of energy. Fretting about my court ordeal, I staggered out of bed, still half asleep, wiping my eyes, cackly and red from crying half the night. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I pulled on my rushers over my trousers, thinking to myself: "If I'm sent to Glin anyway, they will give me a bed of my own".

But I was worried - and frightened. Being sent to Glin was like being sentenced to life in Siberia.

I looked at the old bed. It was so big it took up the whole room. It was a wedding present from an old Thomondgate neighbour, who had been given the bed by Dr. Long. She was in service with him for a few years until a priest condemned her from the pulpit, calling her a Souper. It didn't make any difference to her anyway because she was stone deaf. An I.R.A. man had hit her with the butt of his rifle, just because she was being courted by a young British soldier.

I moved towards the landing, making as little noise as possible. I could hear my father sharpening the cross-cut saw with a rasp, chatting with the E.S.B. meter-reader about their wayward sons who mooched from school and robbed orchards by night. They considered themselves two well informed men. Once I heard them say that James Connolly should never have fought in the rising. One of Europe's first working class intellectuals, the meter man called him. "Well, I'll be off. Tell me Buck (that was my father's nickname). I heard a rumour that your daughter was refused a job in Cleeve's. I'm told the manager said when he heard who your daughter was, "No daughter of a Communist will ever work here".

I heard the hall door closing so I slipped into the kitchen. Straight away I noticed the two 'chaney' dogs missing from the mantlepiece - a sure sign of crisis.

The last time the ornaments were missing from the mantlepiece was when my father had been summoned to a trade union conference at short notice. His suit had to be redeemed from the pawnshop.

He had been instrumental in causing a strike at a time, during the war years, when strikes had been outlawed.

But despite the frantic preparations, my father's journey did not take place. He was stricken down with his annual bout of bronchitis and was forced to spend Christmas in the City Home.

Word about his sudden illness had not, obviously, reached Dublin. There were two Special Branch detectives waiting for his arrival at Kingbridge, acting on instructions from de Valera's government.

A young man named O'Brien had gone in my father's place, and he was duly arrested by the waiting policemen. He was only released when the policemen were fully satisfied about their mistaken identity.

Sitting down to our breakfast, my father broke the top off his blue duck egg and pushed it across the table at me, beside a plate of snow white bread - a luxury during the war. "The Bishop hasn't white bread for his breakfast", he said, as he pointed at the summons on the table with his half-finger, he told me on a few occasions that he lost it in the Civil War. Later on in life, I discovered that he lost it setting a rat-trap in Newtown Pery flour mill.

"You are in for it, my bucko, you are". I kept my head buried in the breakfast, glancing up now and again at the

many newspaper clippings he had pinned on the wall. One of them read: "Man in Germany gave motor car for a loaf of bread". It was his way of telling us how well off we were. He reached for his hat from the top of the dresser. "Get ready; your mother is waiting for you up town. She is gone to get you a suit." Having a last look at the kitchen, my eyes drifted towards the range where my mother's uncle was sitting as he packed our saw dust bin with a home-made "posser" - an ingenious method used by poor people who did not have any other way of cooking or heating water.

He called me over to the small tea-canister where he kept his war and rugby medals. He took out a fist of half-crowns and slipped one into my hand. "I'll miss going up to Pery Square next Sunday with you for the Poppy Day march", he said. It was his only day out in the year. A visit to the British Legion; a chat with some of the Munsters and back home. He used to tell us stories about the Great War and when Roger Casement came and spoke to them in Limburgh Prison, where he was imprisoned for most of the war. The German farmer he worked for during the war wanted to adopt him, he looked so like the son who was lost in the same battle.

My father hoisted me on to the bar of his pre-war bike and started our journey. I could hear his bronchial tubes sucking and blowing like the Erin-go-Bragh. He stopped to talk to Mikey who was feeding his finches. Mikey was our bandmaster. "Oh sure, they'll get off, and he was doing so well on the fife". We moved off up the Protestant hill.

We sometimes referred to the hill as "Gugu's" hill.

I could hear Mikey's leg creaking behind me. He had a cork leg. Every child in Limerick at the time imitated his limp.

He shouted to me: "Try to get into the school band".

At the top of the hill my father stopped to talk to George King, an ex-British army soldier who had settled in Limerick after the truce. George had just buried his only son.

I became remorseful listening to George. How often did we taunt the one-armed man with a rhyme picked up from our elders,

"Proddy-woddy, ring the bell,
All the Soupers go to hell".

But the day of his funeral we mooched from school and hid behind the big copper beech - the bough of which "Gugu" used as his way of retrieving his football - and listened to the minister saying prayers over the open grave. It wasn't a bit like our graveside prayers. Our priest used to mumble while he walked away from the graveside. The next time we went to school the master called us to the top of the class and told us we were damned because we prayed for the soul of a Protestant.

It was only on that day I discovered why the two young Protestants in our school were put outside the classroom door while the prayers were being said.

Just before we left the company of George, he showed my father his long awaited discharge papers and citation he had just received from King George. "From King George to George King", George chuckled to himself.

I used to take great delight in watching George refereeing soccer matches, with his cap back to front. His wife objected to him refereeing on Sundays, so George used to "plank" an old pair of boots in the graveyard, and he wore these while refereeing the matches in his Sunday suit. He had a great saying: "England's sons were never slaves".

Back on the bike again we continued our journey. We arrived at Merchants' Quay. The Potato Market was in full session, and the spalpeens were standing on the bridge waiting to be jobbed.

There was a procession of early morning drinkers going from Bowles' pub to the barber shop at the bottom of Bridge Street. The stillness of the morning was shattered by the rumbling noise of the Corporation tipper coming to collect the dead dogs executed by Ned Collins, the Cruelty Man. Ned shot the dogs with his small silver gun, while his kindly wife put the cats to sleep in her tiny gas chamber. The tipper didn't get all the dogs. One well known Limerick dog-robber claimed the corpse of his bulldog and buried him with the high kings of Ireland in St. Marys. Ned Collins cycled around Limerick city in search of mangy dogs and scrawny cats. A very humane man in many ways. They say that when Ned died, he had three bishops at his bedside: the Protestant Bishop, the Catholic Bishop, who gave him the last rites, and the barber, "Bishop" O'Dwyer, who gave him his last shave.

Standing outside the courthouse I could see my mother coming, pushing a boxcar. She beckoned me to come over to her. We went behind the weighbridge, where she took a brown parcel from the boxcar. There was my First Communion suit as new as the first day we bought it - it was only redeemed on very special occasions. If I had to go to Glin, I may as well be well dressed for the journey.

"Medals", mother called him into the weighbridge. She was embarrassed in front of us. She closed the door of the weighbridge. After a few minutes "Medals" came out dressed like a spiv, wearing his new Ozanam House suit and looked at his tame jackdaw perched on the bars of the Potato Market. The jackdaw eyed "Medals" up and down and then flew on to his shoulder. "Medals" had the jackdaw's feet covered in red wool, a trick that he got from his father who had been a cadger with the British Regiment in India, where "Medals" was born. The red wool was to frighten other birds away.

Robbing a Protestant minister's orchard was a serious crime during the war years. As we sat on the wooden bench awaiting our trial, the minister and his wife came into court and smiled at us. He said in a soft voice: "We will speak up for you".

The guard in charge of the case came into the court room with an old crony of my father's. I heard this man telling my father: "If he presses the charge I'll cut off his supply of sugar and fags and he knows it, too".

The first case was called. A man was charged with robbing a sledge hammer. The Justice asked him to account for it.

"I found it floating down the Abbey river, sir".

"Well, you can go up the river for three months yourself", came the reply.

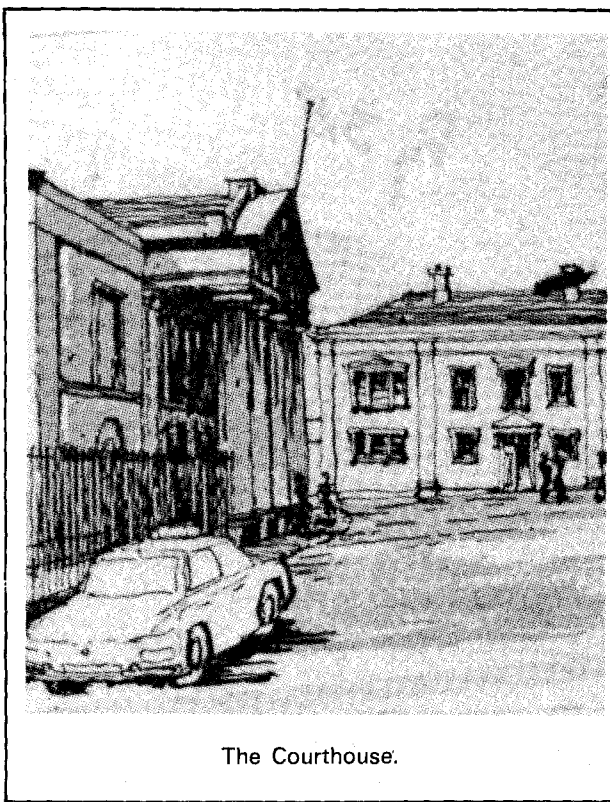
The door of the court flew open and a man came in well drunk. "Who is this man?" said the Justice. "Henry Daly, sir".

"You were due in court two hours ago. What kept you?"

"I could not get apast the crowd outside the Town Hall, sir. The Gas Inquiry is attracting bigger crowds than 'King Cong' at the Lyric".

"You were found drunk in charge of a horse and cart. Two pounds or 14 days".

The man staggered out of the box and fell against a big red-faced sergeant who was about to take the witness-stand. The sergeant said that pilfering was outrageous in



The Courthouse.

the docks. He had arrested three men on information received from a source he wished not to divulge.

"I followed them into a public house. When they saw me they went out by a side door and left a brown paper parcel behind them containing three left shoes, Justice".

"These shoes were intended for a man with only one leg. Is the man in court?"

"Yes, Justice". The man came forward and stood in front of the Justice.

"Were these shoes for you, my good man?"

"No Justice. What would I be doing with three left shoes, sir? I have no left leg".

The Justice roared at the sergeant: "Get down, you fool. Case dismissed!"

Of course, what the Justice did not know was that the three men got so drunk in Liverpool they could not remember which of John's legs were missing. The Justice didn't know that the Limerick Steamship Company was trying to stop the pilfering of shoes and boots, then being imported from England. One week they would bring in left shoes, and the next cargo would be right ones.

There was a pause in court for a few minutes. During the silence "Wedger" told us stories about Glin Reformatory School. He had been in Glin as an orphan. "Dry, hard bread, cold cocoa". One night he was so hungry he tried to boil raw periwinkles in lukewarm cocoa.

Our case was called and the charge was read out. The Protestant minister got the attention of the Justice, and said he wished to withdraw the charge. He said we did not do any great damage, and broke no branches. The guard took the stand and said we were from respectable families. "Two of them are going to England next week, Justice". "Ireland's loss is England's gain", said the Justice. "Five shillings fine", he intoned.

Justice had been done - and been seen to have been done. The majesty of the law had triumphed.

Despite the five bob fine, my parents were happy. I felt relieved. I had escaped the clutches of the law, and the freedom of the King Island never felt better as it did on my way home from the courthouse. The world wasn't such a bad place - and Glin was still a long way off!