

The Life Of a Limerick Dentist

by Michael Guerin
Part Three

When I returned to Limerick, it was to find an Ireland in turmoil. Those who had fought in the war were loathed and despised and could redeem themselves only by fighting for independence. I had had enough of fighting and hated the very thought of the gun. Now, after receiving a warning from former friends, I left Ireland, penniless and homeless, to return to England.

I arrived in Liverpool and, after some struggles, found a comfortable lodging in the house of Elizabeth Sisson, in Sugnall Street. She was a pretty woman about six years older than myself, strong-willed and capable. At seventeen, she had sailed to America to work for a wealthy widow who took a great liking to Elizabeth, who became her companion. She was able to save quite a sum of money and, when her employer died, she was left a dowry of silver and linen. She had married young but was now a widow. After some time, she and I decided to pool our resources and we married.

Ex-servicemen were allowed special grants to take further education. Elizabeth encouraged me to attend the Dental School at Manchester University, where I completed my dental qualifications. I now stepped into the ranks of the unemployed. In the turmoil of the twenties and the chaos of the post-war, life was a game of catch-as-catch-can. Into this scene, stepped a new kind of entrepreneur. These were men with a little ready cash and a great deal of confident bluster. As far as my profession was concerned, their game was to open a place called Dental Rooms or Dental Emporium and employ others to do the work.

I answered an advert in the *Liverpool Echo* and received an invitation to call at an address in Garston. The dental "surgery" was situated in a rather mean side street and the door was opened by an elderly, wizened man, with bright, piercing eyes and goat whiskers, smoking the stump of a cigar. He ushered me into a small back room with a stone-flagged floor where the only furniture was a rather dilapidated dental chair and a tiny cabinet containing a few specimens of the dental art. My host introduced himself as Able Norton and explained that he was known locally as "The Professor". He added that he was equally well known in Liverpool and, in fact, as I discovered later, he was very well known indeed. On my enquiring about dental instruments, Norton coolly informed me that I would have to supply everything myself. However, he added that any assistant of his could rest assured

and that I would have a most generous share of the proceeds of the practice.

At this point, he suggested that we should seal the bargain over a drink, so we adjourned to a local pub where I found that he expected me to supply the liquid celebration. Norton was a London Eastender with a slight veneer of polish which he had apparently picked up while living some years in Brighton. It was to Brighton he referred as he drank at my expense, embarking on a series of highly colourful reminiscences. I was to learn that Brighton figured largely in Norton's conversation and he was always promising himself that he would return there – but he never did.

It appeared that Norton had come into dentistry through a slice of good luck. One day, in 1917, he met a dentist who had just received his army calling-up papers. He told Norton that he could find no one to buy his practice. The latter, who was on the rocks (a place where he was frequently to be found!), was only too



Michael Guerin, pictured in 1925.

willing to try anything and agreed to take the place over, employing a man over army age to do the dental work. The business prospered and eventually he had a staff of five.

For some time, he kept the original owner's name on the door but after a while vanity prompted him to put his own name outside. In addition to this, he had his portrait, painted in oils, placed in the window. A card beneath it proclaimed "Mr. Able Norton, at your service in all matters of dentistry". The portrait showed him in a black serge overcoat with alpaca collar, black bow-tie with diamond pin, seated on a chair, perusing a huge book, one hand turning the page, whilst the other held a cigar.

When I met him, Norton had been forced to abandon the original premises and set up in the modest house where I had found him. The portrait was now the centre piece of a rather grimy front window; how had the mighty fallen! However, ever the optimist, he told me that he had recently acquired a good deal of work. A couple of three-masted barques had arrived in Garston docks from Sweden the week before. Norton had gone on board to get on the right side of the captain and obtained from him a promise to send along any of the crew who needed dental treatment. As they had been at sea on a long voyage, quite a number came and gave him a great deal of work to do. Spending like the proverbial sailors, they all decided to have gold crowns fitted – a very popular and stylish tooth ornament at that time. At the cost of two guineas per crown, this was a very profitable affair indeed and the Swedes also laid out their pay for bridges and other interesting work; prospects were good.

When I asked Norton about the last dentist he had employed, he was evasive, only saying that he had been let down and had sacked him. The more I heard, the more reluctant I became to be associated with this character but "needs must when the devil drives".

I arrived the next day equipped with my own instruments and started dentistry under the most awful conditions imaginable. As well as work at the chair, I completed several sets of dentures, only to find that Norton had already recovered all the money from them and had spent it. During the first few weeks, I received two or three pounds but after that the pay became more irregular and weeks went by without my receiving any pay at all.

Norton boasted that he would soon be realising big money and he would then pay me very handsomely. He said that he



Cover of a toothpaste box, in the early 1900s.

was advertising for a sleeping partner and in due course one such arrived on the scene. This was an old chap called George who came from Port Sunlight where he had retired with his life savings.

Now, cajoled by Norton's spell-binding talk, George agreed to invest a sum of £400 in the dental enterprise. I had not been paid any money for several weeks and was still dependent on my wife. The following Monday, while walking to work, I determined to have an understanding with Norton, once and for all.

On arriving at the practice, it was evident that good fortune, so long promised, had arrived. All Norton's children (there were five of them) had new clothes and shoes and Mrs. Norton, many years younger than her husband, was wearing a new frock and looked quite presentable. Norton sported a black Homburg hat, a very large tie and winged collar, while on his finger sat a ring in which a stone of some indeterminate nature twinkled – as did his eyes when he saw my amazement.

"This is only the preliminary canter", he said, winking artfully, "things will be humming from now on".

It seemed that old George had been established as a lodger in the house and now the two of them were preparing to go out for morning refreshment. First, however, Norton took me aside and gave me ten pounds, with the added assurance that there was plenty more to follow. I was invited to go out with them before starting work, so the three of us walked up to the "Queen's Head".

We had several drinks and Norton

generously insisted on paying – with George's money. He talked and schemed and dropped lively hints as to plans he had "up his sleeves" and the money in which we would all soon be rolling. Since my response lacked the enthusiasm he required, Norton turned to old George for his approval and this was given with touching eagerness.

The conversation then turned to music, for a barrel-organ was playing "Lily of Laguna" in the street. Norton at once declared that it was his favourite song and George said that he loved "Just a Song at Twilight". Thereupon, Norton informed us that he was himself a very fine organ player and that he intended to purchase an instrument for the business. I could not conceal my astonishment at this suggestion but Norton explained that music was ideal for giving patients relief when having extractions or dental impressions. "It takes their minds away from the business", he explained sagely.

After a little more of this kind of talk, Norton and George decided to purchase an organ at once. I suggested tentatively that it might be wise to buy some equipment for the surgery but Norton put this aside with a lordly wave of the hand – "Later on, Michael, all in good time!".

The two of them took the tram down town to negotiate the purchase of the organ while I made my way back to the workplace. I had not been long in the surgery when Mrs. Norton, arrayed in her new finery, came in to bring me a cup of tea. She lingered to chat, saying that during the years she had known Norton, he had tried every kind of job but when

they had first met he was selling Singer sewing machines on commission. If indeed he had made a living as a salesman, he would have been a magician, for the moment he knocked he had to be prepared to place his foot in the door to prevent its being slammed in his face. His family – and even Norton – starved when he was on that job. She asked where Able and George had gone and I told her about the organ. She laughed and said that Norton must have been drunk.

"Did he give you any money?" she asked.

"He gave me ten pounds on account", I replied.

"The mean old devil! He told me he was going to give you twenty-five pounds".

After this, overcome by the misery of her life and the poor prospects for herself and her children, she began to sob loudly. Not knowing how to deal with this situation, I suggested that she might make another pot of tea and to my relief she left the room. I felt very uneasy at this burst of confidence for I had no wish to ally myself to either one of that dismal pair.

About four o'clock in the afternoon, Norton and George arrived back in high good humour.

"We've bought it", Norton called out as he came into the hall, "Now we shall be able to have some music".

Sure enough, drawn up outside was Cramer's van and at that moment a couple of workmen were easing an organ out of the back of it. It transpired that it had cost £150 and Norton had paid £40 on deposit. A lively discussion now ensued between Norton and the delivery men, because the organ was so large that it could not come through the door. It was then decided to dismantle the door and the jambs, after which the organ was persuaded into the hallway where it stood while the surgery door was also removed.

After a couple of hours, the instrument was finally installed and Norton gave his first rendering of "The Lily of Laguna", followed by several encores. The men had been invited to drink a few bottles of stout and listen to the concert. I now stood completely bemused until Norton, suddenly tiring of his music, got rid of them with a small tip.

In the event, the organ was only played once or twice to accompany extractions, since Norton was seldom at home during the day. The weeks passed, the instalments were not paid and presently the van re-appeared. The doors came down and the organ made its way from that place.

The money given by George evaporated as snow in noon heat. A period of several unpaid working weeks ensued and I decided to part company with my curious and erratic employer. I packed my dental instruments at the end of one long Friday and left the Norton household.

Soon after, he was declared bankrupt – again – and left Liverpool. Perhaps he returned to his fabled Brighton. Who knows? As for me, I was about to realise my dream: to have my own practice!