

The life of a Limerick Dentist

by Michael Guerin
Part Four

My wife, Elizabeth, offered to take a mortgage on her house - and very generously - to sell her jewellery. With this money, I bought myself a partnership in a substantial dental surgery on Lime Street in central Liverpool. My assistant was a young man called Thomas Kelly, who had a club-foot and whose mother was anxious to see him established. She invested all she had in the practice, in order to secure that end.

I was proud indeed when we opened the practice and business began in earnest. Soon after this, my daughter was born and we called her Tess, after my beloved sister. For some time, all went well until the General Strike of 1926. Dental treatment became an irrelevance in the social upheaval and our debts mounted. I retired foolishly and recklessly to them, they seized all the equipment in the practice and then turned their attention to our home. The silver, china, linen and good furniture that my wife had gathered over the years vanished from the rooms. For years, she had let various rooms in that large, rambling house and now the lodgers began to leave to join the ranks of the unemployed and dispossessed. Two or three men left in great sorrow; they were seamen who had been wounded or ill after the war and whom she had often fed from her own kitchen when they were unemployed.

Now, the final blow fell: my wife became seriously ill from kidney failure. In those days, there was nothing to be done and her last sad days ebbed slowly away in progressive self-intoxication, haemorrhage and pain. This time was one of anguish and isolation for I was overwhelmed by grief and guilt for my failure and fear of the future for my little child and myself.

During the days that followed, including her funeral day, there was an influx of my wife's relatives. They treated me with intense hostility, blaming me for her physical and financial ruin. It was the nadir of my whole existence. When all was over, I decided to make a fresh start. Placing my little Tess with one of her mother's sisters, I shook the dust of Liverpool from my shoes.

Having answered an advertisement for a post in Wales, I arrived there on St Patrick's Day, wearing a sprig of shamrock, and immediately started work with two brothers who had a practice at Ystrydd. They were not qualified themselves, but simply employed a group of dentists. They sent me to manage a

place in Treherbert - the ultimate station on the valley line. Each day I did all the extractions, fillings and impressions, bringing back the mechanical work to be completed at Ystrydd.

I had a lodging in a very comfortable house, where another dentist was also staying. The landlady and her daughter were kind and hospitable and the food was



Michael Guerin in later life.

good. My fellow boarder, Roach, a man about fifty-five years old, also worked at the practice doing the greater number of extractions and general chair-work. We used to go drinking together on Saturday night and generally took a couple of bottles of Guinness back to the house where we talked late into the night. After some time, Roach confided that he had been a doctor but had been struck off the medical register some years previously - the reason was never disclosed to me.

It was not long before it became very clear to me that this poor fellow was afraid that our employers had taken on a dentist with a view to getting rid of him. He never lost an opportunity in urging me to leave.

"There is nothing in this valley for a bright young man like you. It would be better, if you were looking out for a place with a real prospect".

Of course, it was easy to see what he was about, and it would have been funny but that I was sorry to see the pathetic efforts Roach made to hold on to whatever he had managed to salvage from the wreck of his life. In any case, I was beginning to be bored, for there was not enough to do and I felt like a change.

One night, while we were talking, Roach, in taking out his handkerchief, pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and it fell on the floor. I picked it up and returned it to him and as I did so, he clasped his hands to his head in feigned astonishment and exclaimed: "Well, look at this! I must have been carrying this around with me for the past few days!"

He showed me the paper and on it was written the name of a Mr. Archibald Mason of Bargoed, who was looking (by a strange coincidence), for a dentist. It seemed that this Mason was well known to Roach and the rest of the evening was spent in his extolling the virtues of the man and the excellent prospects in Bargoed for a young fellow of spirit and ambition.

The upshot of this conversation was that I went to the next valley on my half-day and visited Archibald Mason. In fact, he seemed a very decent sort of chap and he was particularly pleased to see me, since his present man would be leaving in a month. He suggested that I should move in as soon as possible, in order to get my bearings.

I started work within the month and got along pretty well with my fellow dentist. I signed a contract for two years at four pounds ten shillings a week, plus commission - although, in the event, there was very little of the latter.

Mason took me to his own house to



The Irishtown in the 1930s.

lodge: "You can stay here as long as you like. Everything in this house is clean, warm and dry - I insist that it is kept that way!"

And indeed, everything was extremely comfortable: good food, good bed and companionable chat in the evening.

Well, things went famously for a few weeks, until one night when Mason was rather too generous with the Guinness and I made my way upstairs feeling very mellow. After getting into bed, I lay down, after first lighting a cigarette for my usual last smoke.

The next thing I knew was awakening, coughing and retching, with Mason throwing a bucket of water over the smouldering flames and charred fragments that had lately been the chair and my clothes. Another bucket of water followed in swift succession, accompanied by a torrent of words, half-Welsh, half-English, from a miner in his working gear, who was standing over the bed. It was our very great fortune that this man had been passing by, on his way from a shift, when he had noticed the fire glowing in the window and roused the house.

Mason did not waste time in reproaches: "It's all covered by the insurances, so there is nothing to worry about on that score. All the same, old chap, the wife won't sleep easy while you are here, so I'll help you find some other lodging".

He did this - and more. He gave me the money to buy a new suit and, when the insurance came through, he gave me another £10 - altogether, a good deal more than the old suit was worth!

Meantime, the other assistant, Cary, continued to work his notice. He was a man about sixty, a dental surgeon who had been on the old Irish Register of 1878. He was rather arthritic now and obviously found the work too much for him. He had been with Mason since the latter had opened the practice some fifteen years before but he had been told several times during the previous year that he had to be replaced by a younger, more active man. The practice was a very busy one and Mason himself scarcely worked in the surgery at all, doing little more than collect the money. Cary had been trying to find a job elsewhere in the valleys, but without success. Now I had appeared on the scene and Mason was insisting that the old man should go at once. This matter afforded me a glimpse of the ruthlessness that lay under the apparent open-handed geniality of my new employer.

As day succeeded day, it was easy to read the hopelessness and misery that weighed on Cary, as we worked side by side. I was as sympathetic to him as my youth, inexperience and helplessness allowed me to be, but I could not have imagined the awful finality for the other man, of his last week's work and wage. Cary shook hands with me and wished me the best of luck and went home to the little rented house, where he lived alone. Later that night, he killed himself by cutting his wrists.

I never spoke with Mason concerning Cary's suicide. The employer paid the funeral expenses and arranged whatever remained to be settled of the poor devil's

affairs. That, as far as Mason was concerned, appeared to be that. This event, however, had a profound effect upon me and I began again to long for my own practice from which I could not be turned out in my old age. The difficulty was in finding the money to set it up, for I was determined never to go into another partnership such as I had had in Lime Street. As things were, for the time being, there was nothing to do but to earn my daily bread as a hired man.

Mason's practice was the only one in Bargoed and indeed for a good distance around the valley and it brought him a great deal of money. Each evening, at about six o'clock, he came in carrying the case for the takings. The rule was immediate payment for extractions and fillings or weekly payments to a collector at about two or three shillings a time. Mason breezed in each evening with his usual good humour and emptied the contents of the drawer into his case. It struck me that my employer's reliance on my honesty was extraordinary, considering the volume of work I carried out for a very modest salary. On some days, when several dentures or gold work had been settled, I watched my employer actually having to stand on the lid of the case to press down the notes. He showed me his bank books - £10,000 in one and £12,000 in the other: a great deal of money in those days.

"So, you can see, Michael", he would say, "why I don't have to work. I get others to do the work for me!"

In fact, as he never tired of telling, Mason had been very poor in his youth



'He suggested there might be an opportunity to find work at home in Limerick'.

and had a searing loathing of poverty. He had married a butcher's daughter, who brought him a nest egg of £150, with which he had started his practice. However, all these things meant very little to me, for I kept firmly at the back of my mind the black experiences I had known in Lime Street during the General Strike. All the same, I was conscious of the crudeness of this posting and despised Mason's wish to arouse my envy and thus add refinement of pleasure to his immense self-satisfaction.

I led a fairly agreeable sort of life, for I enjoyed my work and struck up many pleasant acquaintances with the people around. One evening in the local pub, I met a young Irish doctor, recently arrived from Dublin, whose name was Lynch. He drank only modestly but he had a temperament that needed no alcohol to enliven it. He was a great companion, full of romantic poetry and stories but all spiced with a sly humour.

In my free time, I travelled around the valleys in Lynch's old car, visiting isolated houses and often assisting him with minor operations which he performed on kitchen tables, sometimes by daylight and sometimes by lamplight. Lynch was a very kindly, compassionate man and he was a friend such as I had not had since my days in the trenches.

A year or so later, however, during a bad winter and after a trip made in bitter cold weather, Lynch caught a cold which

developed rapidly into pneumonia. When he recovered sufficiently to travel, he returned home to Dublin, leaving me disconsolate and restless. Later, he entered the Dáil and was very successful.

In the meantime, my brother continued to write to me, giving me much good advice and news from home. Michael Danford and many other childhood friends had died in the course of the struggle for an independent Ireland. Now, things were quieter and he suggested there might be an opportunity to find work at home in Limerick. When I arrived, I sought out my old teacher only to find that he was dead and his practice was for sale. His widow greeted me pleasantly enough: "I'm glad indeed to see you, Michael, and I only wish that you could take over the place but you see, you would have to buy the house as well and that would take £600. Well of course, I had not that sum, so that was the end of that. Later, it seemed such a ludicrously small amount of money that yet would have bought a beautiful house, a garden and a practice. Ah! if some kind enchanter had only been there to grant me those few hundreds, then what a deal of wandering and knocking about I might have been spared!

Anyway, I found an advertisement for a post in Cork. I wrote, was accepted and set off for that city, having very little money left, but there was in my pocket a ticket for the return passage to England which I had bought - just in case! I went to Cork by bus

and at some point along the route, a big, hearty-looking youngish man boarded and came to sit by me, introducing himself as Devine. We fell to talking together, commiserating with each other, on our misfortunes and the hardness of the times.

"I'm thinking of going to England to try my luck", Devine said, "there is nothing doing here".

I told him that I was going to a job in Cork - a place I did not know at all.

"Have you any lodging?" Devine asked.

"No", I said, "but I'll soon find one when I've had a look around".

"But what will you do tonight?" Devine persisted. It will be very late when we get there".

"Oh, I'll find somewhere, I'm pretty sure".

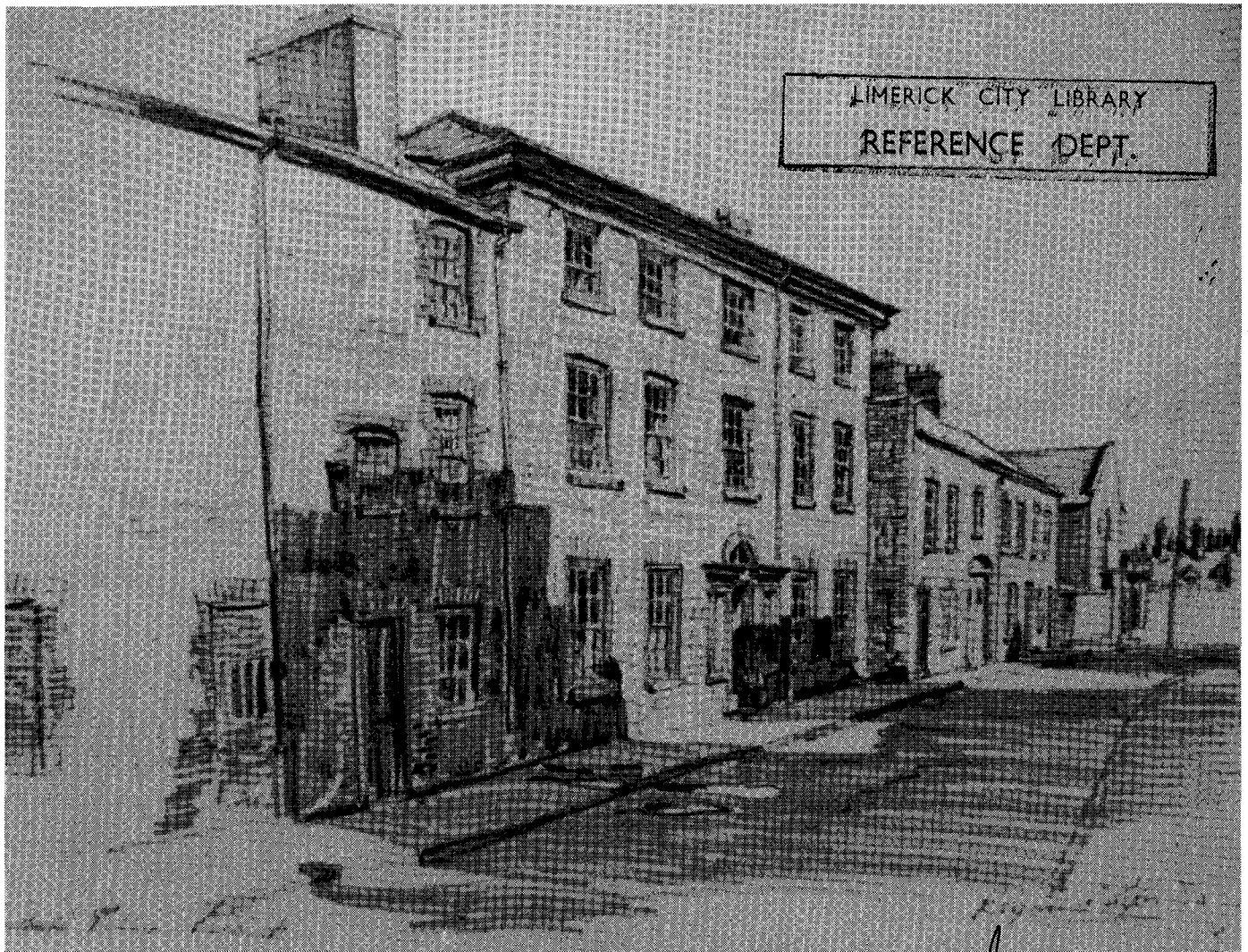
"Listen", the big fellow said, leaning over me confidentially, "you come along with me. I'm going to a place belonging to a fellow I know. He's just back from America and he and his wife have set themselves up in a boarding-house".

"That sounds alright to me", I said - and indeed I was very relieved to have the certainty of that first night's lodging.

"Mind you, Michael, they haven't got every refinement you might want, you know. After all, they've only started very recently".

In the event, this turned out to be a most optimistic appraisal of the situation.

I went along with him and presently came to a dreary three-storey house. A



The Bishop's Palace, Church Street, from a drawing by Raymond Piper.

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burly, red-faced fellow answered our knock and was introduced as the landlord O'Toole. Neither then nor later did his good lady put in an appearance.

"Well", said O'Toole, looking doubtfully at the two of us, "I wasn't expecting this, you know. I have a bed, it's true, but it's rented to another chap who is away just now. Sean might come back any time - in fact, he might be back tonight".

My companion brushed this aside impatiently: "Ah, man, you know very well that when Sean goes away, he stays away a good while; he won't be back!"

His back to the wall, but still battling on against Devine's groundless optimism, the landlord protested: "But, do you see, there's only the one bed and there are the two of you".

"Don't worry about that", said Devine, "we'll bunk up very snug together, won't we Michael?" He gave me a hearty slap on the back, stifling my doubtful murmurs.

The upshot was that O'Toole took us in and provided a very fair supper, after which we retired to our somewhat restricted sleeping-quarters and settled down.

It must have been about one o'clock in the morning when we woke to the noisy chug-chug of a motor bike drawing up outside the house. Sean had returned to claim his own.

Footsteps clumped up the stairs and a

muffled figure came into the room. A match was struck, the gas-mantle flared and the rightful lodger advanced up on the bed, taking off his coat. At the sight of the two heads on his pillow, he stopped short, swaying a little, dazed and perplexed.

Devine sat up quickly and put our case as best he could. Sean's reaction was reasonable but firm.

"All I know is that I've paid for this bed and as I have to go to work in the morning, I need my sleep. One of you, at least, will have to get out".

It had to be admitted that in the circumstances this was a very fair offer indeed and I responded to it. By this time, O'Toole had come in and he offered me a couple of blankets, a pillow and an armchair. With these, I made shift to pass the rest of the night, accompanied by a chorus of snores from the bed.

I woke, from a brief but deep before-dawn sleep, to find the bed and the room were empty. My coat was hanging behind the door and when putting it on, I felt in my pocket for the return ticket to England. It was gone!

Devine had left the house and was not expected back and the landlord, of course, disclaimed all responsibility. There was nothing to do but to go out to seek my new employer. He turned out to be a very decent old fellow, who recommended a

lodging, advanced a few pounds and invited me to take all meals in his house. I passed a few happy months in beautiful Cork until one day this good chap had a heart attack and was advised to retire.

I answered an advertisement for a job in Hereford with a Mr Jones, who replied promptly and told me to come at once. Farewells made, and my few possessions packed, I applied my mind to the problem of getting to England and keeping enough money for a lodging on the other side. Going down to the dockside from which a ship was leaving, I made my way to the gangway. One of the crew was standing there and we started chatting.

"The thing is", I explained, "I've a job waiting for me in England but I haven't the money to get across. Could you help me at all?"

The seaman gave me a steady look, then grinned: "Get on board as quick as you can and make yourself scarce. Look out for me when we get to the other side".

I promptly took his advice and found a dark, quiet corner and slept my way across the Irish Sea. With my friend's help, I disembarked in the same easy fashion and with my last few shillings bought a ticket for Hereford. This last good deed was only one of the countless acts of kindness which have lent a charm to my life and which I kept in my memory.