

Walker's Distillery, Thomondgate, at the turn of the century.

THE LIFE OF A LIMERICK DENTIST

BY MICHAEL GUERIN PART ONE

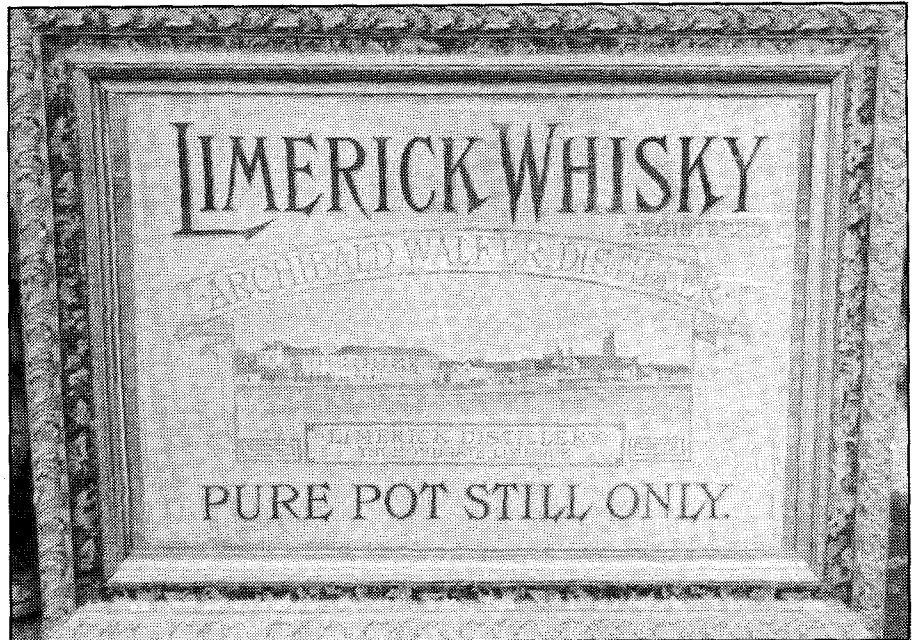
APPRENTICESHIP

I was born on the Island Road, on the banks of the Shannon. Our cottage windows looked across the water to the distillery where my father worked from April to September, during which months sufficient whiskey had been stored for refining. He was paid thirty shillings a week, and in his spare time he went fishing to provide extra food, so that we did not fare too badly. In the winter months, however, life was often very hard and my mother had great difficulties in keeping us all fed and clothed. In spite of this, I recall my childhood as a time of tremendous happiness and this memory has supported me throughout the vicissitudes of life.

There was a child called Molly McCann who was my constant companion, when we were both about four years old. She lived in a house nearby and came to play with me every day, when we would often sit, chatting together, with our backs against the end house of the row of cottages where the heat came through from the fire. She was a Protestant and her family were devout members of their local church. Looking back, I cannot recall a single instance of friction between the Catholic and Protestant communities of my childhood. We were all very poor and the struggle to survive was the same, no matter what church you might attend.

One year, when she was six, Molly went to the seaside for a day out with her parents and a group of people from the church. While playing, she fell off the cliff at Kilkee and was killed. The pain of that death has remained in some part of my mind, though I have lived the better part of a century after the event.

When I was five, I went to the nearby convent school. The nuns knew all my



Poster of Walker's Distillery, c. 1890. Limerick Museum.

family and seemed to be very fond of me. Every morning on arrival, one of the Sisters gave me a cup of hot milk with a thick slice of bread and butter. These were the winter mornings, when the nuns knew well that there was little for breakfast at home.

Those first school days were very happy and the teachers were kind. I remember especially one young teacher called Mary Flynn, who was engaged to a sergeant and who had acquired a great love of foot drill. She had had made, or had procured from somewhere, a great number of wooden rifles and swords which were stored in glass-fronted cupboards around the school. When the class had been very good and had finished all their alphabets and sums, she

would lead us into the hall and hand out a wooden weapon to every child. Then, while she played some stirring music on the old piano, we children marched about forming fours and eights to her commands and to our great delight.

As well as the fish which supplemented our diet, my mother also kept a dozen hens and a cock which enabled her each year to put down a clutch of eggs for hatching. Her life was a busy one and she had to turn her hands to many things. The house was kept warm by a turf fire which was never allowed to go out and the clods were bought from an old woman who was possessed of a large shed where they were stored. During the summer, the turf cost less and my mother would buy as much as she



Collecting turf at Arthur's Quay, c. 1900.

could, piling it at the back of the yard under a cover.

The cooking was done in ovens on either side of the fire and on the big iron hob. Our staple diet consisted of potatoes and cabbage which we grew ourselves, plus eggs, fish, the occasional pig's head and my mother's own soda bread. Everything, of course, was more plentiful in summer, but I never recall being really hungry, no matter the season. Perhaps life was tempered for me because I was the youngest in the family and certainly affection was lavished upon me.

During the summer time, we went bare-foot, saving the shoe leather for the winter days. In any case, we much preferred to run and roam, free from clumsy footwear. There was more than a mile of river shore around the Island where we could explore, paddle and swim to our heart's content. This time of year was very busy and exciting, when the fishermen went out with their nets, seeking the salmon. In one swoop, they came in with ninety-six salmon: that was a day of joy and delight.

Every Sunday, after mass, I went fishing with my father and we rarely returned empty-handed. He made his own flies for fishing, for which I eagerly collected the hens' feathers. I adored my father and asked nothing more than to trot about with him, watching his many activities. When not at work, he was always busy in and around the house; he got cheap off-cuts of leather from the tannery and kept all our boots in repair. He was also the family barber and fairly skilled at the trade, for we all looked neat and trim.

There was one special task, however, which seemed to give him the greatest satisfaction of all: the monthly cleaning of the clock. This time-piece hung on the kitchen wall with two substantial weights on chains, one short, one long. Once a month, the stolid time-keeper was taken down to be cleaned and oiled. I loved nothing better than to watch my

father through this task which was always performed with ceremony and care. It seemed to me that he was keeping time and everything else in my world moving steadily and it gave me a sense of harmony and safety.

When I was about eight years old, came the day of my First Communion. My very first new suit and new brown boots were waiting by my bed when I woke and later I set out for the church in a perfect blaze of glory, accompanied by the whole family. We boys wore a broad, white silk ribbon on the left arm and this was the sign to friends and strangers that our day of days had arrived; as we passed along the street, all was smiles and congratulations.

We met outside the church, to enter in solemn procession together and, as we gathered around our teacher, he took the opportunity to remind us that even the great Napoleon had considered his Communion Day as the happiest of his whole life!

After the ceremony, we all sat down to a good breakfast provided by the nuns. Then we went visiting, for it was the custom for the children to go around in pairs calling on all the relatives in the district. My constant companion was a lad called Micky Danford and we collected a very satisfactory pocketful of coins by the end of the day.

As we walked home along the country roads to Limerick, there was nothing to darken the sunshine or still the laughter. Careless and unknowing, we passed by the wall against which one of us would lie dead in less than twenty years.

There were six children in the family and none of us could stay very long at school. The first to start work was the eldest girl, Tess; at twelve years old, she was found a job by the parish priest as a servant in a large house in the suburbs. Her wages

were only a few shillings a week but she was given full board and, from time to time, the present of a second-hand coat or dress. She never complained and undertook everything with a good heart. Once a week, she came home for her day off and during this time always helped her mother to clean the house throughout, - just as she had done when she lived at home. At the end of each month, when she was given her wages, she arrived at the house in triumph, bringing a pound packet of Mazawatti tea, some tobacco for my father and a big bag of sweets. With each pound of tea there came a print of some famous event in bold colours: these were greatly admired and kept very carefully. Everybody loved Tess but I believe I loved her best of all. It was a great grief to me when she died in her twenties.

At ten years old, I started at the school run by the Christian Brothers. This was a totally different kettle of educational fish, with stricter discipline and harder work, but I soon settled down with some of my old companions. There was one teacher there called Brother McNally who devised a system of rewards for good work and scarcely ever gave any punishment. He was my hero and, next to my father, I loved him better than any other man. One day, however, to my bitter chagrin, Brother McNally was transferred to another school and so disappeared from my life. The new master was a very swarthy, rough sort of man and, like most of the Brothers, very free with the cane and the strap. I did not like him at all.

About this time, there came an order that the school was to be condemned. It was indeed very old, being that same school where Gerald Griffin (the author of *The Collegians*) had been educated and had eventually joined the Brothers. The building to which we were transferred had been a women's prison at one time and to an imaginative small boy it was a strange and forbidding place. Playing truant now became an attractive alternative to school and I took to wandering the countryside from early morning to late afternoon.

In 1905, my beloved father died at forty-two and this event spelt absolute disaster for the family. To me, his death was a terrible blow and from that moment my childhood was at an end. In my mind, my days by the Shannon with him have remained in the sunshine of my memory as the happiest days of my life.

We moved from the Island Road into a tiny house within the town. My eldest brother, Patrick, had become our chief breadwinner at the nearby tannery and the move was convenient for him. Soon after this, when I was just thirteen, a neighbour came in one evening and said: "I've a job for you, Michael, if you want it, at Madden's pub. He'll give you three-and-nine a week and every Sunday off".

I started the following morning at seven and began what was to be my daily routine for the next seven or eight months. I took down all the shutters, staggering away with each one of them to an outhouse where they were stacked

for the day. After giving the windows a rough polish, I went into the bar where pyramids of filthy glasses waited to be washed and wiped: I hated this job and could not finish it quickly enough. Breakfast was eaten at home, then back again to the pub where I went down to the cellar to help with the filling and corking of the bottles which were then loaded into crates and carried to the bar. In the afternoon, the publican filled a big basket with a couple of dozen bottles of stout for a few choice customers, including his father-in-law, and these I was given to deliver; my day finished at nine o'clock. Of my wage of three-and-nine pence, I gave three shillings to my mother, – proud to be another breadwinner.

I had been working at the pub for several months when a pawnbroker's shop opened nearby and its owner, a Mr. Davitt, while passing the time of day with my brother, asked if he knew of a lively boy. Patrick put forward my name, since he knew I was sickened by the work at the pub. Davitt offered me six shillings a week and gave me the task of writing out the tickets and keeping the records in a huge ledger.

The two of us would be waiting when the people came in on Monday mornings with their "pledges": Davitt standing at the counter and I sitting before the account book and tickets, with pen poised. I had never been much good at handwriting in school but now I learned to write quickly, neatly and legibly. For example, Davitt would take the suit from the customer and shout out: "Pants, company one (meaning matching vest) and coat hanging". He would then add the details of the money transaction and within a couple of minutes we passed on to the next customer. Speed and accuracy was therefore of the essence in my new appointment.

People brought anything and everything: boots, watches, wedding rings, horse-saddles and every item of portable household equipment. Women would come in and slip off a heavy outer skirt and leave it in exchange for a few pence to buy bread and tea, saying: "I'll get it out tonight when I've got the day's pay". This money would be earned from washing clothes, cleaning or whatever came to hand. There was one family called Daly and the father worked in O'Mara's bacon factory. They waited until the last thing on Saturday evening and then came into the shop, he in his working clothes and she standing in the doorway, half hiding her face in her shawl. He took off his working clothes, having paid the interest on his Sunday suit; then he dressed himself again in his best attire and left the working garments as a new pledge. On Monday morning, he came in at seven, paid the few pence for the working suit, changed his clothes and, leaving his best with us, went on to the factory. So people lived from day to day, even hour to hour, for there was no assistance for the poor from any quarter, save the occasional handout from a church charity. One bad week and often the die was cast, leaving the family on the treadmill of a perpetual debt.



Clune's shop, William Street, c. 1910.

I found this work very interesting, for I met all kinds and conditions of men and women, always in trouble but bearing their misfortunes in many different ways. My own family had been poor but, as the youngest, I was shielded from the worst effects of poverty and I was indifferent to everything except my own carefree child's life. Davitt was a kindly man and often discussed the problems of our customers, while his assistant began his more important apprenticeship of learning tolerance and compassion.

Of course, it cannot be denied that the pawnbrokers made a good living out of these pathetic, minuscule transactions but "Uncle" was the only lifeline to those in despair and who had no other spar to which they might cling.

Davitt had no faith in banks and kept all his money on the premises, where every Saturday, his son who worked for a local auctioneer, came to count it. The pawnbroker, rather pleased with himself that his business did so well, was sometimes inclined to be boastful and it may be that he spoke a little too freely in the pub and aroused the attention of interested listeners. However it was, some time later, he was robbed of everything, could not get sufficient money to start again – and lived out a rather bleak old age.

When I was nearing my fifteenth birthday, my sister Bridget was taken on as a domestic servant in a dentist's house. This man, whose name was Duffy, had lately come from Dublin and set himself up very comfortably in a fine house. Bridget soon became a popular member of his household; he and his wife were very kind to her, treating her as one of the family. One day, he asked her if she had a brother who would like to learn dentistry. Naturally, she advanced my claim and I went along to be initiated into the art as the sorcerer's apprentice. I found it all very much to my liking and began to learn very quickly some of the tricks of the trade. However, there were some serious

disadvantages in the situation and not least among these was my being used as a porter twice every week. Mr. Duffy travelled by train to his branches outside Limerick and I had to carry the two bags containing the foot-engine and the surgery equipment. This toilsome struggle fast wore away the fine edge of my relationship with Mr. Duffy and this discontent made me the more alert for another chance which occurred at this time.

A dentist called Blaney came from Belfast and had the temerity to open a surgery on the same street as Duffy. He engaged a friend of mine, Sean Hogan, as his apprentice and one day we stood exchanging notes on our respective employers. Sean confided to me that he intended leaving the job as he did not feel that he could ever really like dentistry. I immediately applied for the post and was taken on at eight shillings a week.

Blaney was a very sharp fellow indeed and soon made his mark in the district. He engaged a woman to canvas his services all over the city and the suburbs and he also employed a secretary and a mechanic, who were both kept very busy. Within a short time, he had opened a couple of branches which were staffed permanently. The practice grew by leaps and bounds until presently there were eight of us working in the main office, while four dentists travelled around the West of Ireland, opening branches here and there.

This bustling life greatly impressed me and from the moment I went to work for Thomas Blaney I knew that dentistry was the life for me. I also appreciated the fact that Blaney treated all his employees with fairness and understanding. The staff took my training very seriously and I was well taught both by the mechanics and the dentists themselves. After four years, I was earning more than two pounds a week and was myself in charge of two other young hopefuls. I acknowledge a great debt to Thomas Blaney and the others in the practice, and throughout a long life in dentistry I have remembered them with gratitude.