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 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.
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 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 passed along the street, all was smiles and congratulations.

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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 wonderful 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 spelled 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 my father and pals on the river are the happiest days of my life.

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, in Davitt’s case 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 to hand. There was one family called Daly and the father worked in the pub and aroused the attention of interested listeners. However it was, always in touch 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, in Davitt’s case 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.

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 up for 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 canvass 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.