


the matchmaker

owadays one would experience great difficulty in understanding the complexities of matchmaking in rural Ireland as it obtained during the last century, and well into the present one. Curiously enough, the system did not originate among the common people but rather with the uppercrust of society, from royalty down to the landed gentry. Marriages among these classes are still 'fixed up' affairs to a certain extent, and even when couples make their own connections the ultimate bond is sealed only when the parents or other close relatives, on both sides, are satisfied that the prestige of their families is maintained. Thus one need evince no surprise at the international flavour of the genealogy of the royal families of Europe.

After the land war of the last century when some members of the rural community repossessed the old ground, the social cleavage between the tenant farmers and the labouring classes deepened. Up to the present day this sectarianism is almost as sharp as that which exists between black and white in America - and this is a so-called Christian and enlightened country.

While private arrangements of marriages among the upper classes were never referred to as 'matchmaking', the same system among the farming community was. It was a niggardly and dismal tradition and often resulted in many a fine girl being 'left on the shelf' because her folks could not afford the necessary dowry, though some of these innocent victims, faced with the prospect of spinsterhood, broke with tradition and found happiness in marriage with 'someone out of a cottage' - an action that, no doubt, reduced their families' social status.

Though the greater number of marriages were the outcome of ordinary love affairs the matchmaker in rural Ireland was more important than the thatcher and commanded more respect than the missionary. In the ancient district of Park his services were more important still, for here were preserved customs, traditions and a way of life that appeared incomprehensible to outsiders. The people of the district followed their age old traditions with a vigour and tenacity unknown

outside their close knit community. They settled their domestic problems, wherever possible, in their own way, and were slow to acknowledge new contrivances that were afterwards to make life much easier for them in many ways. Hard work and contentment were their common dispositions, and while other folk were loudly lamenting the past the Park people were happily living in it.

Except in the spiritual field their daily lives were governed by the demands on their energy and skills - an acre or two of constantly revitalised black earth was their bank account and larder - there was little time or scope for simple recreation. Marriages, however, were important social events, and were, more often than not, brought about only after slow and careful deliberation by the parents and relatives of the parties, and the well considered appraisal of the intrinsic value of the enterprise to each principal and the economic consequences of so radical and final a decision.

This situation may be better understood if one realises that young couples starting out together in Park had to share the arduous duties that only those born to them could accomplish. The idea of a Parkman 'breaking in' an outside female companion to share the rigours of his hereditary avocation was unthinkable. This consideration was thought to be so important that the clerical authorities during the latter half of the last century, were forced to waive the hitherto inflexible insistence of the observance of the Church laws of consanguinity and granted dispensations permitting the wedding of first cousins.

In this strange and fascinating enclave the matchmaker was a **sine qua non**. Jimmy Clancy of Rhebogoe was the last to fill this office in Park: matchmaking was almost a profession with Jimmy, at least he gave that impression by the ease with which he ironed out the problems and complexities attendant on some of his more difficult commissions. He was no ordinary intermediary - not one who had an unlimited field, with characters of great diversity of age and temperament, but one who had to deal exclusively with an ancient, self-centred and self-contained community whose demands were as peculiar as their unchanging way of life. His role was a vital one, and

the manner in which he carried out his duties held him up to engage the attention and respect of all, even those who had long passed the need for his services.

Jimmy always endeavoured - and invariably succeeded - in matching personalities. He brought a humane approach to his work and was never happy when circumstances compelled him to unite those who were only attracted to each other's possessions.

In a community where the normal contacts between boy and girl could result in an untenable situation for the parents of one or both parties Jimmy's services were much in demand. He was their one and only emissary who could be relied upon with confidence to lay the foundations of a happy and economic union.

By virtue of his pride in his exalted office he cultivated a detailed knowledge of every family between the Groody River and the city bounds, and between Singland and the Shannon. During preliminary 'feelers' his advice was often sought by the parents of a prospective candidate for matrimony about the unknown qualities of the other party.

Parents who were themselves the products of 'made' marriages conducted the weddings of their children as they would any important business deal. They saw nothing wrong with the system, and sure didn't the clergy turn a blind eye to it. Moreover, Jimmy Clancy was their sheet anchor and many happy homes resulted from his diplomatic missions. There were many tillers of the soil whose very existence had been determined by the outcome of a closely argued agreement involving a pig or a perch of ground. But it was also a system that alienated a girl from the boy of her choice and extinguished passions and emotions without compunction.

Jimmy Clancy has long passed to his reward, and so has the need of his office. Marriages are still important events, though they are no longer ordered to suit the economic circumstances and traditions of a community that has been overwhelmed by a more prosperous age. The romantic love affair is no longer of secondary importance, and the situation where basic economics, coupled with a spontaneous desire to maintain old traditions, has passed into the history books.