A PLACE REMEMBERED

BY CICELY FORDE

I close my eyes and in an instant I am there. It happens quite easily now. A gift from the gods, one of the few compensations that come with age.

I see my other self - the self that was. A small, dark, solemn child, always tagging on, desperate to be one of the group. No social barriers separated us, our kingdom was the street, our centre the park in Pery Square where we climbed the steps of the Monument. Who was it erected to? I never found out, as I had left Limerick by the time I would have been old enough to care. My mother said it was an unhealthy city. Her one fear, diphtheria had attacked so many of the city children, and according the her, so few of them survived.

The house I grew up in, No. 26, Glentworth Street, was an old-fashioned five-storey house, one of a dozen neatly arranged on either side of the street, rows of doctors, dentists, and lawyers, all enclosed behind spiky railings, each with a concrete back-yard. No green lawns or flower beds here, but much more interesting, a passage in the end wall leading down to the old wine cellars. I can still smell the dusty damp of the place, remember with what ease two of us climbed down to explore, and the horror of realising that getting back up was far more difficult than getting down. 'Say your prayers', said seven year old Niall, 'We will never get out of here', 'Shut-up', I shouted, 'Let me stand on your shoulders, then they can pull me out'. Someone heard my screams and came to the rescue. Perhaps it was an omen of things to come. I heard Niall become a bishop somewhere in Africa. I'm still trying to push myself up.

There were three schools for girls in Limerick and I sampled all of them, whether due to a lack of aptitude on my part or a lack of decision on my parents' part I never knew. My first school was a small private establishment opened by a French lady called Madame du Prin; the ambience was peaceful and inefficent, and we were left more or less to our own devices. I came out as ignorant as I went in.

Then I went to the Presentation Convent, where the good nun motto was 'Spare the rod and spoil the child'. After the calm of Madame's establishment, this school was a nerve-wracking experience. A wild-looking red-head took me under her wing. I liked her - even then I could see she had personality. But Sister Canice disappeared. She pointed out that Annie was rough and common. It would be far better to sit beside Statia, a pale, slender child, who went by the appropriate name of 'The Suck Statia'.

It was with much relief that I heard yet another school was to be tried out. My parents had heard of the excellence of the E.C.J.'s as they were called, so I was enrolled in 'St Philomena's', a primary school attached to Laurel Hill, a school run by the order of the Faithful Companions of Jesus. For the first time I learned something. Sister Mercedes really tried. 'You'll get the key yet', she said. She was one of the key of knowledge, of course. But I did learn to read, and that key opened the door of the world of books that has been my greatest source of pleasure through the years.

Limerick, in the year 1929, was a city of great religious fervour and stark poverty. For the poor were very poor, even to my uncaring eyes. Outside the boundaries of the park were a maze of narrow lanes, where the 'shawlies', as we called them, lived. The women were always draped in their black shawls, Black was the colour that stayed in my mind, that and the stench from the Gambling, that ran down each side of the narrow alleys. The members of the local Society of St. Vincent de Paul visited the cottages once a week and, on that particular day, a large picture of the Sacred Heart was on display over the fire-place, but a few days later, when the Church of Ireland and his good lady appeared with their offerings, the picture was reversed and the stark message 'God's eye watches all you do' took pride of place. Perhaps it was their way of getting back at both sides.

Two days in the week were very special to me. Saturday was the day we children went to the pictures. Limerick had a variety of cinemas and, for the sum of four old pence, we could sample the delights of the Coliseum, the Athenaeum or the Lyric Picture Palace. And then there was Sunday. While some hard working Mary or Kate prepared the mid-day meal, my parents met up with their friends for their Sunday morning walk.

After Mass in the little church in Pery Square, we set off along the banks of the Shannon, over Sarsfield Bridge, and past the large well kept houses of the wealthy city merchants. At other times, our stroll would take us out through the old city, past King John's Castle, where the homes were small and shabby children played; pretty children in their bare feet on the dusty road side, skipping, dancing on the pavements. The city would mould them to the worn-out poverty of their mothers, in its own good time. Sometimes on those Sunday walks, we were brought to visit the Convent of the Good Shepherd where my Aunt Edith ruled as Mother Superior; we were given lemonade and cake, then taken on a tour. Here I saw the women who shovelled coal into the huge furnaces, while others stood tripping on the mocked over the stiffly starched linen; some more bent their backs over steaming tubs. Constantly they prayed in unison, Joyful Mysteries, Sorrowful Mysteries, cleansing their souls in their luckier sisters dirty washing. For this was the laundry run by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd.

The refuge of girls who as my mother genteelly put it 'had got into trouble'.

This was Limerick, my first home. A city that portrayed life, poor and ignorant, rich and generous, religious and pagan. A city in an era that has gone forever. My place remembered.