Double or Nothing at Limerick's Savoy

Limerickman, Criostóir O'Flynn relives happy memories of a profitable meeting with Eamonn Andrews in the Savoy Theatre

THE recent publication of a biography of Eamonn Andrews by Limerick author, Gus Smith, brought me back nostalgically to a day in my life when I met that talented Dublinman who became one of the best-known television personalities in Britain with his programme, This Is Your Life. On that day in 1948 the paths of his life and mine crossed briefly on the stage of the Savoy Cinema in Limerick, where Eamonn was compering the quiz show, *Double or Nothing*, which complemented the film programme, and I came before him as one of the four contestants.

The format of the contest is apparent from the title. The compere asked for four participants from the audience. Each contestant was then called to the microphone in turn and given four questions, increasing in difficulty. The correct answer to the first question earned half-a-crown; this doubled to five shillings for the second, then to ten bob for the third, and a whole pound was the prize for any contestant who passed all four questions; failure at any stage resulted in the loss of whatever amount had been won up to then. Finally, there was a jackpot question open to the panel, with a prize of a pound for the first correct answer; so, irrespective of one's performance in the individual quiz, each contestant still had a chance of winning the jackpot pound. And lest younger readers think that those were paltry prizes, it will put values in perspective if I tell you that the price of a ticket to the front stalls of the Savoy on that afternoon was one shilling.

At the night performance, when the genial compere called for contestants, the stampede used to be such that the more polite or timid volunteers were liable to be crushed to death or knocked into the organ pit where a talented musician named John A. Enright was waiting to contribute to the proceedings. At the matinée, the rush was more fierce. My own golden opportunity arrived by chance, by what the verbose philosophers would call "a strange concatentation of events."

I happened to be home for the Christmas holidays from the Teachers Training College in Drumcondra, Dublin, and I was moping about our house in O'Dwyer Villas (alias the Distillery) by the riverside in Thomondgate, on the day of gloomy drizzle with time hanging heavy on my hands. My mother took pity on me and suggested that I might like to go to the pictures — mothers have a sympathetic way of getting their idle children out from under their feet and the sweepng brush. Knowing that I had no means of support, visible or otherwise, she provided me with the necessary shilling from her lean purse.

I sauntered unenthusiastically along by the river, hardly seeing the too-familiar Treaty Stone and the picturesque Curragower Falls (shades of Drunken Thady), across Sarsfield Bridge and so to the Savoy Cinema for the matinée.

I remember that the film was a tale about the eternal triangle on safari in darkest Africa (I think it was called "The Macomber Affair") and that it did nothing to relieve the depression caused by the prospect of my imminent return to the semi-industrial school regime that was then the ambience of institutions like the Training Colleges. But the moment the stage lights came up and Eamonn Andrews launched into his professional patter, I suddenly realised the advantage of being a half-trained teacher sitting in the half-empty front stalls. In the dash for the stage, it helped immensely that I was a fully fit member of the Erin's Hope hurling team in St. Pat's, and had already survived hectic encounters with such formidable Dublin clubs as Faughs and St. Vincent's and Young Irelands and Fontenoys.

The third question, for ten bob, was so easy for me that I have forgotten it. Not so the fourth and last question, for a pound or nothing. Try it before you read on: "Who was the Dublin parish priest whow as famous for his wit?" Thinking back on it, I have often wonderd whether eamonn might not have got hiscards mixed up; he also did this Double or Nothing show inthe Theatre Royal in Dublin, and this was obviously a question for Dublin contestants, and even at that, a sticky one.

For a provincial unemployed youth, it was tantamount to no contest. The alternative explanation, that Eamonn deliberately picked this one from his bundle to give the audience the thrill of seeing failure at the last hurdle — an no, we have plenty of that kind of heartless calculating showmen in the media, butnobody would classify Eamonn Andrews among them.

Even if he had chosen that question deliberately, Eamonn would have been outsmarted by that unpredictable puller of strings, Fate. And my granny's maxim also proved its wisdom at this point. The genial compere did not know that the innocent face before him had recently been looking daily at the cantankerous countenance of a certain old Professor of Eduction, born and reared in Dublin, and that in the course of his lecutres, the said Professor had on more than one occasion alluded to a certain Father Healy of Bray, "renowned for his wit." I thought that Andrews' pugilistic jaw quivered as if hit with a slab of Cleeves toffee when I trotted out the correct reply.

The four contestants were then provided with pad and pencil and asked the jackpot question for a pound: "Name the two Irish writers who have won the Nobel Prize for Literature?" (Pendants! Note that Samuel Beckett had not yet made it a shamrock). Again, the daily grind in dismal study-halls in Eamonn's own city gave me a hidden advantage. As he handed me the second pound, hsi showman's eyes were scrutinising me more closely as if he were thinking that there was more to this unemployed Limerick youth than he had suspected.And as I gratefully accepted that jackpot pound (Yeats and Shaw, right!) my anonymous Soda Cake Public Relations manager gave tongue again, the same tune in a different tone: "Good boy, Flynn!"

Saint Munchin's Angelus bell was echoing from the winter-dark towers of King John's Castle as I sauntered in home. Mymother had the kettle boiled and was toasting slices of an Imperial Bakery long pan.

"Wasn't it a shilling yougave me when I was going out?", I asked her casually. Anyone who heard her being interviewed by Tom O'Donnell on local radio some years ago will know tha tthe metaphorical flies never got much chance to settle on Lily Connolly. But she knew that you couldn't get drunk on a shilling, even in those same "bad old days" of the post-war forties; anyway, I was a Pioneer at the time.

"Why are you asking me?," was her tit-for-tat retort.

I handed her the two pounds. "Here you are."

It was then that the toast nearly fell into the ashes. A forty to one return on the investment of one shilling in one of her children isnot necessarily a cause for rejoicing to a wise mother. She looked at the money, and she looked at me and said: "My God, Christy, is it backing horses you are?"

Reassured and enlightened, she split the takings with me and we settled in to enjoy the pot of tea and the mound of hot buttered toast (God, I can still taste that, even though I can't remember what I had for dinner last Sunday!) and we had a good story to tell to the rest of the family as they drifted in home to our cosy tinteán by the Shannon shore.

When Eamonn called me to the microphone I noticed first his boxer's jaw and was surprised by his pancake make-up — until I remembered Jack Savage and helpers, some years earlier in St. Michael's Temperance Hall, plastering the stuff on our schoolboy faces for the C.B.S. production of The Bohemian Girl (in which, to my chagrin, the autocratic Br. "Bosh" Murray saw fit to use my talents only as a gipsy girl member of the chorus, and my elder sister, Mary, unwittingly added to my adolescent resentment by artistically sewing tufts of red stuff from an old mattress onto my gipsy headscarf).

I had already decided, pursuant to one of the maxims of my Granny Connolly of Crosby Row ("What he don't know won't trouble him") not to burden the affable quizmaster with the information that, as a final-year student in the Teachers Training College in Drumcondra, I was involved in a high-powered course of cramming in a broad range of subjects; that, I realised — not having been born yesterday or come down in the last shower, as we say — might have prompted him to bring out a little bundle of the more stick questions, and could have resulted in my disgracing the noble profession of pedagogue to which I aspired for my meal ticket. Pragmatically, it could also channel my fortunes to the 'Nothing' rather than 'Double' of our little game. So, when having first asked my name, Eamonn inquired as to my occupation, I replied, truthfully, "Unemployed at the moment." Scholastic splitters of hairs, and Pontius ("What s Truth?") Pilate, might quibble at that; but the conscience of the impecunious student was at ease.

For my first and half-crown question, the decent Eamonn threw me what he obviously meant to be an easy one: "What do you call the annual payment of an insurance policy?" So easy that my brainbox, in which poetic and literary aspirations were daily clashing with solid blocks of categorical facts to be rememberd for do-or-die exams, could produce Nothing in reply. Apart from pounds, shillings and pence, I was totally ignorant of the terminology of the disciples of Mammon. In fact, the only insurance activity I had been aware of up to that point in my life was the weekly call of the Royal Liver man who collected some money from my mother, had a little chat, and marked her book.

Motivated by the milk of human kindness, or perhaps by the professional consideration that if the other contestants proved as blank as this stupid lump of Limerick ham named O'Flynn, the show would be over before it started, Eamonn generously gave me the answer, a *premium*, and allowed me to proceed to the five bob question. This was the point at which John A. Enright got the chance to earn his own few bob by playing the opening bars of a tune which the contestant had first to name and then to sing (did tone-deaf competitors all fail at this stage, does anybody remember?).

The musical five-bob should have been a sure thing for a garsún whose father, Richie, and uncle, Danny, (natives of now obliterated West Watergate) have been respectively solo piccolo and conductor of the Sarsfield Fife and Drum Band, Tailteann Games All-Ireland prizewinners (if you hurry, you can still see the curious façade of the Sarsfield bandroom in John Street before it falls down some story might. In any other country, it would be municipally preserved as a symbol of pre-television community culture). The Da was at this time leading saxophonist in Earl Connolly's renowned dance-band, *The Sylvians*, playing one-night stands in the ballrooms of romance up and down the country (except during Lent, when, in those jansenistic times, the Irish Hierarchy decreed that musicians and their dependents should not only fast, but starve) and a weekly hop for the Augustinians at the Catholic Institute in Sarsfield Street (or Henry Street, depending on which door you used). It will be seen that for me to fail the musical question would have been a more personal disgrace, warranting being beaten to death with the Sarsfield Band piccolo, than if I were merely to bring shame on the teaching profession by pure ignorance.

When John A. started tootling, I recognised the tune at once — you know the one about "There was I, waiting at the church," about some chap who was left in the lurch by some fickle woman. But I didn't know the words. I offered to sing another song instead, and Eamonn shrugged his shoulders and gave me *carte blanche*. I gave the title to my organic accompanist: "Where the Shannon River meets the Sea." No problem to John A. As I launched into it, a Soda Cake voice from the back of the stalls shouted: "Good boy, Flynn!" A solo encouragement more genuine than any claque that ever cliqued in Italian opera houses.