

A Southhill Story

Up to the recent times, the district of Southhill was hardly known to most Limerick people. This suburb is, as its name denotes, situated on high ground on the south side of the city. Today the area is well known not only for its large housing estate but also for the partiality of wandering horses to the succulent lawn grasses planted so hopefully by an optimistic local authority.

Seventy years ago, this area was even better known for its horseflesh, though of quite a different variety. At that time William Wellington Bailey set up his famous stud-farm at nearby Rathbane. The progeny of this famous stallion "Bachelor's Double" won fame for their owners on both sides of the Atlantic. A stone commemorating the horse's achievements and his financial winnings was set into the wall of the stud farm after his death but was removed about a decade ago.

Bailey made a fortune as a rubber planter in Malay and returned to this country a relatively young millionaire. Besides Rathbane stud, he also purchased Plassey House, perhaps the most beautifully situated of all the Shannon side houses built by the Anglo-Irish ascendancy classes during the eighteenth century. This spacious mansion had been rebuilt in a grand style in 1863.

Plassey, in Bailey's time, was an idyllic fairyland, with its beautiful trees in full maturity, and its muted millrace flowing the whole length of the estate through luxuriant greenery.

Bailey was parted forever from his horses and his Plassey paradise around 1912. His widow, Blanche, remained on at Plassey until 1930, when she left for an estate in Clifden, accompanied by her companion, Annie Churchill. Blanche Bailey died in the early sixties.

Going back to the eighteen sixties we find Southhill very much in the news. This was not because of its famous racehorses, or the unavailing pleas of the horse-ridden residents, but because of the human frailty of a young Limerick girl and the connivance of her paramour.

Ellen Hinchey had been employed as nursery maid at Southhill House by the family of Peter Tait, the Shetland Islander, who proved himself one of Limerick's most enterprising entrepreneurs. The palatial home of this "rags-to-riches" businessman turned out to be the launching pad for the notorious Southhill scandal of the 1860s. According to a contemporary account, "Hinchey became rather in-

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timate with Tait's brother, which led to the birth of a child".

Working class girls such as Ellen Hinchey who became pregnant outside of marriage in those days usually ended up in the Union Workhouse, doing penance in worse than sackcloth and ashes under the gimlet eyes of the nuns. But this was not the case on this occasion. All possible steps were taken to shield the Tait household from disgrace by sending the mother and child as far as possible away from Southhill House. But the Tait's and their various accomplices did not reckon with the bold and determined Ellen Hinchey.

The affair obviously became a **cause celebre** in local political circles and was exploited by Peter Tait's political opponents to bring down the maximum amount of public embarrassment on his head.

The **Limerick Chronicle** took a sympathetic view of Peter Tait's treatment of Ellen Hinchey and placed all the blame for the scandal at the maid's door.

According to the newspaper, Peter Tait, then Mayor of Limerick, only became aware of the situation some eight months after the child was born. The **Chronicle** published a report on an investigation, held at the Limerick Lunatic Asylum on the 4th February 1868, and commented:

"The Mayor provided her with money and had the child sent to a convent to be brought up in the Roman Catholic faith. He gave the girl an allowance of £1 a week, at the same time placing her in a position in London, to enable her to have access to the child whenever she desired. But possessed of an ungovernable passion, she gave so much annoyance to the Rev. Mother Superior, at the convent of St. Vincent de Paul, where the child was placed, that the lady would not have the woman annoying her in the outrageous manner she did, and gave back the child to those from whom she received it".

The investigation showed Ellen Hinchey to be a hot handful who sorely tried the patience of all those with whom she came into contact, and went on to give a glowing account of Peter Tait's benevolence: The **Chronicle** added:

"Next she was sent to New York to her brother, through an arrangement with Dr. Butler, and the sum of £30

remitted to the Roman Catholic Bishop there. But the woman's conduct became so scandalously outrageous that the Archbishop in New York gave her up the money to get rid of her. The next thing was heard of the woman was her return to Limerick, and giving annoyance to the Mayor and his family, making him miserable and compelling him to have persons on the look-out for her, so as to guard against her wiles. Let it be remembered that the child had to be taken from the woman to prevent her from murdering it, which she attempted to do in London, as was proved at the investigation. What greater kindness could be done to any unfortunate female than was exhibited by the Mayor, who, throughout, sought to save her character before the world, and to veil her shame? In some unaccountable way the Mayor secured the enmity of some parties who had endeavoured to rob him of his peace of mind, and if possible to destroy his moral character and drive him from the city. Has anything so disgraceful occurred in the annals of Limerick as the hunting to death of the Mayor, to gratify a shockingly revengeful feeling? If the Mayor had taken the child from this and sent it adrift in the world, or placed the child in some Protestant institution to be brought up in the Established Church, there might be some excuse for the proceedings that had taken place; but he did the contrary. He did all he could to shield the wretched woman from the shame such conduct as hers naturally brings on the guilty members of her sex. While she had no claim whatsoever on him, his generosity appears to have been outstanding".

The article also records the "certification" of Ellen Hinchey by doctors Gelston and Fitzgerald. And so Ellen Hinchey was taken out of circulation without the condemnation of judge or jury, while her paramour, the leading actor in the piece, could breathe a sigh of relief and emerge from behind the protective facade of his famous brother.

All through the report of the investigation her "sin" is aggravated with all the power of eloquence, while no mention whatsoever is made of Tait's brother except the fleeting reference at the outset. If the girl's state of mind was such as to warrant locking her up in the Lunatic Asylum the degree of responsibility of the father of her child for her mental condition was not mentioned.

Though it is not easy to make a judgement on the affair without a complete study of all the facts, it could perhaps be said that Peter Tait treated Miss Hinchey as well as could be expected, given the social class attitudes of the day.