LEITRIM GUARDIAN LITERARY AWARD WINNER

AFTER HOURS

Teresa Fallon

FEW PEOPLE OWNED motor cars in the nineteen twenties or thirties, so the newly-appointed District Justice was giving a lift to two friends who were heading, like himself, from Dublin to Sligo.

One was an insignificant-looking fellow whose uncle still farmed a few acres in County Sligo. A man whose hay-shed had, several years before, been used to conceal an armoured car captured by Sean MacEoin during an encounter with the black-and-tans. 'The Boys' had nick-named it 'The Ballinalee'.

His companion was a quiet, poker-faced individual, en route home after an interview for a job in the Civil Service. Those who had known him during 'the trouble' said he had nerves of steel. It was dark when they were leaving the city, but it would be a pleasant journey, and if they made good time they could have a brief break en route. About half-way to their destination one of the passengers suggested that maybe his companions might feel like 'a little drop of something' before it got too late.

The driver, however, explained that somewhere in these parts, a bit farther on, an old friend and former comrade had recently bought a public house. If they didn't mind, wouldn't it be grand to drop in on him and see how he was getting on since returning to civilian life. 'Mind!' Of course they wouldn't mind. The man in question was well known to them by repute. Wonderful character; brilliant raconteur; a thoroughly decent fellow. And so it was agreed, and about half an hour later the car slithered to a halt. The trio disembarked. It was rather late.

They were warmly welcomed by the publican and his wife, a former member of Cumann na mBan. Of course they would have been 'Bonafide', a legal term which, in common parlance meant that genuine travellers, who had come long distances of three miles or more, were entitled to be served alcoholic refreshment in a licensed premises up to midnight. Nevertheless, as a token of esteem, the three visitors were shown into a room separate from the bar, for privacy. There, the time passed swiftly. The company was good. One story followed another, and the craic was mighty. Later, much later than they would have liked to think, as the others were having 'one for the road', the District Justice excused himself and slipped out to go to the bathroom. Then they'd be on their way and let these decent people go to bed. Must call earlier next time.

A paraffin lamp rested on a hall-stand at the top of the stairs. The bathroom was located down a short corridor. The District Justice moved quietly so as not to waken any other occupants of the house, who might be sleeping. It was just as he was starting down the stairs again that there was a loud RAT-TAT-TAT on the hall-door. Instinctively, he darted back towards the bathroom. Now who on earth would be looking for a drink at this hour? He heard the voice of the proprietor calling out, 'who's there?' And loud and clear came the reply, ' Guards on duty'.

A man used to quick thinking, he realised that the bathroom would be the first place they would search if they came upstairs. His hand groped for the doorknob nearest him. Pray to God it wouldn't squeak. It didn't. Slowly he pushed the door open and slipped quickly inside. He found himself in a bedroom. In the dim light from the window he was able to make out a bed, a dressing-table and wardrobe. Moving swiftly now, he opened the door of the wardrobe and climbed in. He was just pulling the narrow door after him–holding it with his very finger-tips when he heard heavy footsteps on the stairs and voices. Doors were opening and closing. Through a chink in the door of his hiding-place he caught a glimpse of the beam of a torch sweeping the room. A voice called, 'no one here'. The door closed. The footsteps retreated. There was silence. He was sweating.

After an eternity of waiting, the District Justice carefully extricated himself from his uncomfortable position in the wardrobe. He manoeuvred his way silently to the door, slowly turned the handle, opened the door a few inches and listened. Still silence. Then step by slow step he tip-toed quietly down the stairs. He became aware of low-toned mutterings outside the hall-door. He caught the words, 'worse than the bloody tans' and

Ikkustration: Donal Sorahan

recognised the voices of his erstwhile passengers and the publican. All were now cold sober. We shall draw a veil over the remainder of the journey to Sligo. Suffice it to say that all three arrived at their destination safely.

And so, in the fullness of time, the two veterans found themselves, in response to an invitation issued on behalf of the new Free State, sitting on a hard wooden seat in a small, unheated courtroom in a quiet village on the banks of the Shannon.

Up on the Bench in front of them, being welcomed to the area most effusively, by a young bespectacled man with a briefcase, sat the newly-appointed District Justice. The welcome was echoed by a large uniformed Superintendent of the Civic Guards.

The Court List was longer than usual. Some unlicensed dogs, a few unlighted bicycles, which brought warnings from the Bench, and fines ranging from one shilling to one-and-sixpence. A complaint of hard words between neighbours concerning a fence brought an order that the parties put sixpence each in the Court poor-box, shake hands and promise to be of good behaviour in future.

The day wore on with a brief break for lunch, during which the new District Justice vanished through a side door without making any eye contact with either of his former passengers. It was raining outside. Some of those present remained in their seats, while others repaired to the nearest public house.

The Court resumed after lunch. By now the proceedings were becoming boring. Allegations in relation to a trespassing donkey, who, its owner claimed, had the knack of opening a gate, any gate, with its teeth. A man from another parish was called to account for having–committed a nuisance! And so it went on.

The nephew of the Sligo farmer wondered if he'd have time to slip outside to relieve himself. Better not. The civil servant was dying for a smoke. A cub reporter from the local newspaper sat, gnawing the end of his pencil. Then, suddenly almost, their turn came. The local sergeant was on his feet, stating his case. All eyes swivelled in the direction of the two well-dressed strangers.

Now it so happened that neither of the defendants had seen any need to employ a lawyer. When all was said and done this was no Lord Norbury. Wasn't the man on the Bench their comrade from the old days? A sound man. It would be grand meeting him again when all this tomfoolery was over.

But the face of the District Justice was stern. He asked, quite serious–like, if they had anything to say for

themselves. There was silence in the courtroom. The man with the nerves of steel rose to his feet. He cleared his throat. If some little spark of devilment urged him to offer some excuse about 'having fallen into bad company' we'll never know. The Justice was tapping his pen impatiently on the Bench in front of him.
'Yes, my good man?'

The defendant took a deep breath. Then caution and good sense prevailed. He uttered a crisp, 'No.. .....Sir, and resumed his seat.
And so the newly-appointed District Justice delivered a lengthy, serious lecture on the evils of after-hours drinking; and the harm that such reprehensible activity can do to a small, law-abiding rural community. These two gentlemen would have to be made an example of. He ordered the culprits to pay a fine of ten shillings each.

And what about the publican? Ah, yes, the publican!

Well, the Sergeant was rising to deliver the usual spiel about the licensed owner of the public house having been, 'open for sale, offering for sale, selling and allowing to be consumed on his premises...'
But another voice anticipated him. You see, the publican had the great good sense to engage the services of a solicitor, who turned out to be none other than the same up-and-coming young stalwart who had been so eloquent that morning in his welcome to the Court Area of the highly esteemed, newly-appointed District Justice.

He now appealed for the indulgence of the Court, the magnanimity of His Lordship, and in consideration of the inclemency of the weather and the lateness of the hour, he respectfully asked for an adjournment.

The Court acceded to his request.

THEATRE KING

Tony McLean outside the Colonial Theatre in Boston.

LIKE MANY young Leitrim people of her time, Rose Ann Mulvey emigrated from the townland of Tullynapurtlin, Ballinaglera to America in 1947 to seek out a more prosperous living and in 1951 married Dan McLean from Boston. As with many other Irish immigrants, the family have made their mark on their adopted societies. Their son, Tony, is presently the king of the theatre business in this largely Irish City of Boston. From humble beginnings as a choir boy in St Peter's parish church, Tony has climbed the ladder successfully and is now the new President of Broadway. He oversees four of Boston's theatrical stages-the 1,700 seat Colonial, the 1,200 seat Wilbur and two at Charles Playhouse and he will be the guiding hand in the restoration of the Opera House on Washington Street which will have a capacity of 2,500 seats. Tony is very experienced in the theatre business, having been company manager for 35 productions including being producer/general manager for Disney's 'Beauty and the Beast' on Broadway, Los Angeles, Toronto and on tour. The day after Tony was offered the prestigious job in August 2002, he flew with his two sisters, his mother and her four grandchildren to Ireland.

'I spent two weeks in Leitrim on the top of a mountain wondering what I was going to do with my life. I landed back two weeks later, got off the plane, got on my cell phone and said 'Hi'.' He says of his stay in Ireland 'It was a great place to think it out'. In his new position, Tony has quickly become involved with his roots and on his many visits to Ireland has taken in shows in the Abbey Theatre and he hopes to arrange a visit by the company to Boston during their 100th Anniversary next year. Maybe some of the excellent Leitrim drama groups who perform at the Corn Mill Theatre in Carrigallen will one day tread the boards in Boston. Tony's aunt, Molly Creamer, still lives in Ballinaglera and is very proud of her nephew's leading role in the theatre world.