

Memories of Mrs. Baker

by Joe Malone

There was a saw hanging on the wall which aroused my curiosity. I knew that Mrs. Baker had played the cello when she was a schoolgirl. But I never saw a fiddle of any kind in any of the two big rooms, which were divided by a large sliding door, or in the little kitchen which looked out on to her neat little garden. On Sundays she would give me her large latch key so that I could practise. She would mark the piano keys with a pencil. Not being a reader of music at that time, I found this method a big help to me in my learning progress.

She went to church every Sunday. One Sunday she went to Adare to a garden fete and harvest thanksgiving. Knowing she would be late in coming home, I ventured upstairs in fear and anticipation. On the landing facing me was a charcoal drawing of a lion and behind was a drawing of a donkey. The two pictures were the work of her sisters; both of them won prizes at S.P.C.A. competition.

With the lion in front of me and the donkey behind, I felt a cold chill over my whole body, however I continued my journey of curiosity, placing my sweaty hand on the cold door knobs and wiping them almost as fast. All the rooms were locked. On my way back down the stairs I was met by her pet cat who gave me a reprimanding look. Mrs. Baker's two companions believed that the cat could communicate with Mrs. Baker. What will I do if she tells Mrs. B!

A feeling of remorse remained with

me all day on the Sunday. Monday was my day for a singing lesson. As I began the lesson I looked into the mirror. My eyes drifted on to the baby grand piano. There in front of my eyes was the bow and saw side by side. The bow had fresh resin on it and was not in its usual resting place. The saw had a bright sheen on it. My mind went numb for a few minutes. My mind reeled. Had I moved the saw?

The whole mystery was unfolded to me when Mrs Baker sat on the edge of the piano stool and picked up the saw. She ran the bow over it a few times. The first few bars sounded like the wail of the Banshee; then she fixed her eyes on the bow and began to play our favourite song, "In summer time on Breedon".

**And I would turn and answer
Among the springing thyme,
"Oh, peal upon our wedding,
And we will hear the chime,
And come to the church in time".**

**But when the snows at Christmas
On Breedon top were strown,
My love rose up so early
And stole out unbeknown
And went to church alone.**

Mrs. Baker used to saw wood for an hour before she played to tune up the saw.

She began teaching about 1932. Her pupils consisted mostly of friends, but later on she took on some private

pupils at very moderate fees - two guineas per term. Singers like Eddie Brown, Joe Dalton, Bidy McGrath and Stephen O'Shea sang their first shaky notes here and went on to become first-class singers.

One of Mrs. Baker's most successful pupils was George Walsh, a much sought after oratorio singer. He spent much of his singing life with the BBC. He always had time to sing in St. Mary's Cathedral. He had a most beautiful bass voice.

Another former pupil of Mrs. Baker is Suzanne Murphy and is now the leading soprano with the Welsh National Opera Company and has been compared with Maria Callas for her singing of the main role in *La Traviata* by the music critic of the **Daily Telegraph**.

Mrs. Baker was regarded as the finest singing teacher in the South of Ireland. Every gold medal that could be won in the Feis Cheoil came to 50 O'Connell Street.

She had many other qualities. She and her sister ran an employment agency, mostly for domestics for the County Limerick gentry. It was called Hawker's Employment Agency.

When I was a young boy on my way to the Confraternity I used to stop and gaze at the big brass plate. I thought it was the place where the street hawkers used to buy their licences. She was a supporter of women's rights long before it became fashionable. A strong supporter of votes for women, her sister was a suffragette and was a friend of the Pankhurst family.

She also loved animals. Every night she used to go about the city feeding stray dogs. The last few years of her life were spent in quiet reflection with her two loyal companions, Mrs. Ruttle and Mrs. O'Shaughnessy. Their only entertainment was a small radio, and their favourite programme was "The Archers". She greatly admired Doris Archer, the leading actress of the series.

The last time that I spoke to Mrs. Baker we sat on the windowsill, reflecting on the missing statues in O'Connell Street, the Chinaman over O'Grady's and the **Orpheus** and **Euridice** perched on their stands overhead Liston's Medical Hall. She passed away quietly in her sleep on November 9th, 1968.

A peaceful service was sung by four of her former pupils at St. Michael's Church, Pery Square.



"... reflecting on the missing statues in O'Connell Street".