

MARRIAGE AND DEATH



or the young man digging in the fields the sight of a girl swaying past, with a pail of milk balanced on her head, must have been a pleasant one. But

living at subsistence level, as they did, the Parkmen could ill-afford the luxury of romance, even if they had the opportunity. Marriages were contracted strictly on an economic basis. Matches were made between the different families so that the little farms could be held and enlarged where possible. A taciturn Parkman, giving the reason for his intermarriage, summed it up by saying: "Only the Park people know their business". This meant that the system of intensive cultivation was developed so intricately over the centuries and was so dependent for its success on both parties in the marriage that partnership with an outsider could result in economic disaster.

It was common practice for sets of siblings to marry the sons and daughters of neighbouring families. Dr. George Butler, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Limerick from 1864 to 1886, fought a long but unsuccessful battle against the intermarriage of the Park people. He eventually gave up the struggle and is reported to have concluded in exasperation: "Build a wall around Park and marry them all inside in it!"

The inbreeding resulted in some congenital oddities and abnormalities amongst the community and gave the Park people a reputation for eccentricity and strangeness. A transgression of the laws of consanguinity resulted in an embarrassing experience for at least one couple about to get married. A Parkman told this story of his wedding to his cousin:

"I was to be married in St. Patrick's Church on the morning of the first day the 'New Time' came into effect. Because of this confusion I arrived at the church well over an hour before the wedding Mass was due to start. The parish priest was already in the church preparing the altar and, as I came near the church door, I was met by one of my neighbours who said, 'He'll kill you,' meaning that the priest was about to attack me. As I approached the altar, the priest turned on me and angrily shouted: 'I can't marry you; you'll have to see the Bishop!' I set off in the horse and cart for the Bishop's Palace in Corbally. I passed my future wife on the way to the church and waved to her across Clare Street. At the Palace the butler opened the door to me and he told my story to Bishop O'Dwyer. The Bishop remained inside but called out to me: 'Tell him to marry you. All Park people have a special dispensation



the park

by Patsy

PART FIVE

from the Pope to marry their cousins'. I rushed back to the church, told the priest, and got married."

Limerick people have often wondered about the special privilege of intermarriage conferred on the Park community. Did the Catholic Church wish to protect this loyal and pious en-

clave from being infiltrated by less devout 'outsiders'? Or perhaps there is a simpler reason for the Church's attitude. It seems likely that having failed to discourage the intermarriage, it quietly decided to turn a blind eye to the practice.

There was little time or money for



Parkman John Gallagher (right), with his cousin

Dames

old

leisure but a wedding was a cause for a grand celebration. The Park people dressed up in their Sunday best and set off for the gala occasion. After the customary feasting at the bride's home, a fleet of jarvey cars were hired and the whole party drove through the city to the good-humoured amusement

of the populace. The celebration went on right through the day. The guests crowded into the bride's house, the women taking their places in the kitchen and the men being confined to an outhouse. The men refreshed themselves from a barrel of porter and the more adventurous of the women sip-



ollins and a young companion.

ped 'a drop' of sherry. When a place became vacant in the kitchen the men would leave the outhouse to join the women.

But not all Park wedding ceremonies were harmonious. The old rigid rule about marrying within the community was strictly enforced up to recent times. For a young person to defy this convention by going outside the fold for a partner, the consequences could be drastic. The few feckless spirits who followed the lure of love outside the Park boundaries were invariably ostracised. Over fifty years ago, an Athlunkard Street boy got a grandstand view of the explosive tribal tensions generated by such a wedding. As the guests began to leave St. Mary's Church after the ceremony, the storm broke. This was to be a marriage celebration with a difference. The lad watched spellbound as the rival families clashed in a wild melee, with fists and boots working overtime. Later the bewildered boy's father explained to him that the ructions were caused by the Park girl 'marrying out'.

When death occurred, a wake lasting two days would be held. During the funeral the men walked behind the cortege, with each man wearing his ribbon and medal of the Confraternity. Strict rules were laid down governing the itinerary of the cortege. All funerals, starting off north of a long, narrow, winding boreen, known as the 'Funeral Road', which runs down to the Shannon through the water meadows of Lanahrone, had to proceed to St. Patrick's Church via Rosary Road, Corbally, Athlunkard Street and Clare Street.

The Funeral Road is still in use. In winter it is muddy and almost impassable, but a warm summer reveals a cobbled thoroughfare which once provided a vital link between Park and the river. All funerals setting off from the south of the road went to the church by the shorter route across the canal and through Pennywell Lane. Both customs were fervently preserved, much to the chagrin of the undertakers.

The people clung to an old-fashioned style of dress long after it had been discarded elsewhere. The women wore black shawls over long black dresses and aprons. The voluminous skirts, beloved of Queen Victoria, continued to be worn by Park women when their fellow townswomen had changed to the ankle-revealing tailored skirts which had become fashionable at the time of the Suffragette movement. The long dresses were edged with a black, velvet band and were romantic to view but totally unsuited to work in a vegetable garden or a cow-stall. The velvet edging quickly became mutilated as a result of trailing around through damp fields and muddy roads.