

WHAT KILLED IRISH GAIETY?

Not the Rigorous Morality of the Irish Priest, but the Pinch of Hunger and Emigration.

An Irish priest in The Dublin Leader of Sept. 10, discusses a statement made by Sir Horace Plunkett, in his recent book—that the Irish priesthood are too rigorous with the people morally and by killing amusements make Irish rural life too dull.

Sir Plunkett says (page 115) that "in the inculcation of chastity the success of the Irish priesthood is, considering the conditions of present life and the fire of the Celtic temperament absolutely unique. No one can deny that almost the entire credit of this moral achievement belongs to the Roman Catholic clergy."

Irish Chastity.

I had the following words which Froude spoke in one of his lectures in New York, in 1872. They were spoken in a lecture directed against Catholic Ireland in general and against the priest in particular; those were the lectures to which Father Burke replied during his famous American tour:—"I do not question the enormous power for good which has been exercised in Ireland by the modern Catholic priest. Ireland is one of the poorest countries in Europe, yet there is less theft, less cheating, less housebreaking, less robbery of a kind than in any country of the same size in the civilized world. . . . In the last hundred years impurity has been almost unknown in Ireland. This absence of vulgar crime, and this exceptional delicacy and modesty of character are due, to their everlasting honor, to the influence of the Catholic clergy."

A Little Sarcasm.

Sir Horace thinks that chastity has become so much like second nature to Irish Catholics that "a gradual relaxation of the disciplinary measures by which it is insured might be safely allowed without any danger of lowering the high standard of continence which is general in Ireland, and which, of course, it is of supreme importance to maintain." I do not at all agree with Sir Horace's sliding-scale method of morals. Neither does St. Paul, who after all his heavenly visions, said that there was a "thorn in his flesh," and that there is a law in our members that wars against the law that is in our mind. But St. Paul was not aware that Irish Catholics are made of alabaster. I am living with a priest who has a total abstinence sodality of about 1,700 women, the great majority of whom have been very faithful to their pledge since it was started a dozen years ago. On this sliding scale principle might he loosen the discipline a little? Take away the system of sections and prefects through which the sodality is organized? In fact tell them that, as they are such confirmed abstainers they may now lean on their acquired virtue without a pledge or a sodality to sustain them?

He writes—"This kind of discipline unless when really necessary, is open to the objection that it eliminates the education of people, especially during the formative years, an essential of culture—the mutual understanding of the sexes." I have no fault to find with the views expressed in that passage. But, as it stands, it is only a thesis, which determines nothing for or against the discipline which he condemns. The practical question is, what and what is not necessary?

The non-Catholics of Ireland, England, Scotland, America and Australia, are not subjected to this mistaken discipline during their formative years? They learn what he calls "the pathology of the emotions," and are rightly educated into that "culture" of which he speaks. Well then, their formative years are passed and what is the result? I call himself to witness; I call Froude to witness; call to witness the statistics of illegitimacy, of what is known in New England as "fashionable murders," of matrimonial infidelities which overwhelm the divorce courts of those countries, of sexual unnaturalities which threatens to depopulate them.

What a Doctor Said.

A physician of long experience wrote in The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal for 1879—"I have never known an Irish mother, no matter how poor or how many little ragged children around her, that did not receive every newborn babe with emotions and expressions of gratitude as a 'blessed gift from God.' This sentiment, however crudely expressed has never failed to win my admiration, and I take pleasure in pointing it out as the finest trait of Irish female character."

Here is the Charge.

Now, then, of what precisely does he complain? Of the following:—"There are," he writes, "many parishes where in this matter the strictest discipline is vigorously enforced. Amusements, not necessarily or even often vicious, are objected to as being fraught with dangers which would never occur to any but the rigidly ascetic or the puritanical mind. In many parishes the Sunday cyclist will observe the strange phenomenon of a normally light-hearted peasantry marshalled in male and female groups along the road, eyeing one another in dull wonderment across the forbidden space through the long summer day."

I presume then that what Sir Horace is driving at is this latest war-cry raised by the secular Salvationists of Ireland against the priests. Oh you priests! you curse of our country! You obscurantists and despots of our beautiful peasantry! why do you rob our country life of its charm by killing cross-roads dancing? You have laid the "rigidly ascetic" hand of death upon that fine old pastime of the people, and your "puritanical mind" has cast a cloud over the sunshine of their lives. And then, "Oh! for the days of the Kerry dancing," is caught up as a Jeremiah by a chorus of fanged philanthropists who, till quite recently, have shown very little care for the people or their pastimes; nor do they really care a whit more now than they have ever cared. Cross Roads Dancing.

Now, it is a curious thing that before the "bad times" the dance stage was to be seen, and "the ring of the pipers tune" was to be heard more generally than ever since, on Sunday afternoons throughout Ireland. The people had their dance at the cross-roads or beside the bridge, or at their homes in the night time, without let or hindrance; and I have never heard that the parish priest even expected that under ordinary circumstances they should consult him or ask his permission.

Catholics Need Not Be Sad.

For the dominant note in the religion of Catholics is love, hope and joy; in contrast to the religion of non-Catholics, the dominant note of which is pietistic solemnity and fear. St. Frances de Sales writes that one of his books which was "approved by the most grave prelates and doctors of the Church did not escape the rude censure of some who did not merely blame me but bitterly attached me in public because I tell Philothea that dancing is an action indifferent in itself, and that for recreation's sake one may make quod libet." (The Love God—Preface, page 14). Gaiety naturally becomes an Irish Catholic; it sits sorrowfully on his neighbors, and somehow presents the appearance of awkward artificiality. How then has it happened that those dances have become so rare which were once so common? If persons tell me that it is because the priest objected to them they will also have to tell me how it happened that the priest did not object to them before the famine times, when the people danced as they listed, and when the priest's influence over the social relations of his parishioners was much more unquestioned than it is now; when they would have only to say the word, and dancing was dead in every parish in the country.

The Famine Killed Gaiety

The fact is, Cross-roads dancing began to fall away when the famine bent the spirit of the people; then came evictions when homes were broken up, and families were dispersed. Scattered like dust and leaves, when the mighty blasts of October seize them, and whirl them aloft, and sprinkle them far o'er the ocean. Then came a terrible struggle for life between those who remained, which warped or broke the old bonds of friendship that had bound families together as one, without formality or suspicion. I was not then born, but I will let the late A. M. Sullivan describe the social transformation which followed those events; he witnessed it all, and he knew the people well, much better than their present critics. "It is impossible for anyone who knew the country previous to that period, and who has thoughtfully studied it since, to avoid the conclusion that so much has been destroyed, or so greatly changed, that the Ireland of old times will be seen no more. A thousand kindly usages and neighborly courtesies were swept away. . . . The open-handed open-hearted ways of the rural population have been visibly affected by the 'Forty-seven' ordeal.

Their ancient sports and pastimes everywhere disappeared, and in many parts of Ireland have never returned. The out-door games, the hurling match, and the village dance are seen no more."

Now the People are Gone.

As the population became sparse, and the youth of the country were departing, Cross-roads dancing and other rural pastimes gradually disappeared. Then came the three waves of political agitation which have stirred the country since the great exodus began. A continued series of monster meetings drew the young men Sunday after Sunday, from year to year, to the political centres, and kept their thoughts turned from local amusements. Passing along the country during the past few years, I have seen a few dance platforms lying against the road-side fences, a sign that they are still used on Sundays. But, I have more than once asked persons living in the country why these dances are not so common as they used to be, and the answer has invariably been—"Oh! the people are all gone—There are no people in the country now." When Sir Horace and other critics tell me that Cross-roads dancing was stopped by the priest, I invite them to tell me also by whom was hurling, football, etc., stopped? There was surely no sexual danger in these amusements that could trouble the conscience of the most puritanical priest; yet they also had well nigh disappeared for many years.

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