

SOGGARTH AROON.

Irish Affection for him of Pure and Tenderest Kind

When I served on the English mission, frequent house-to-house visits in my district formed, as I remember with mixed feelings, no unimportant part of my ordinary duties. This system of visitation is undoubtedly very useful, or rather a very necessary one for the interests of religion in the non-Catholic atmosphere of an English city. The streets which formed my district were inhabited by people of the poorer working class, who, it is almost needless to say, were predominantly Irish by birth or descent. They were whole streets as Irish and Catholic as any in Dublin or Cork; and one could hear there every variety of accent, from the hard, harsh pronunciation of Antrim to the soft, rich brogue of Kerry; and from the plausible, insinuating tongue of Dublin to the broad, Gaelic-flavored burr of Connaught.

To go amongst them was a source of pleasure to me in one sense, and of pain in another. It was a pleasure to receive their warm, friendly Irish welcome; and it was a saddening, painful thing to see how indifferent many of them had grown to the practice of their religious duties. They were poor, too—most of them wretchedly so. Poor they came over to Liverpool in the famine years; and poor, for the most part, they and their children remained ever since. I knew some who had come to England as return cargo at a nominal fare in coal boats, in "the bad times"; and after long years of toil and privation their material condition was little, if at all improved, from the day they were shot out as so much rubbish on the quays, friendless, starving, and, worse still, possibly already fever-stricken.

I confess it often brought a lump into my throat to see, in my rounds among them, an aged Irishwoman sitting by a cold, cheerless grate, or stove, in some miserable slum-house, with a sad, far-away look in her tear-dimmed, weary eyes, plainly bespeaking to my fancy that she was dreaming of a cottage in holy Ireland, situated, perhaps, on a pleasant green hillside or in a smiling valley, in which she spent her happy girlhood, but which she could never see again. I must return, however, to my theme, which is the Mountain Parish.

Some time after I was fairly settled down in the Mountain Parish, the bright thought struck me that, as I was not overburdened with work, I might, profitably to my people, and with agreeable variety to myself, introduce the English system of house-to-house visitation among them. In the excess, perhaps, of my zeal, and, as I afterwards thought, in the superabundant exuberance of my missionary enterprise, I accordingly started off one fine morning for a round of visits, taking the leading road, or rather "boreen," up the mountain side. I had a blackthorn in hand, and was armed with the census book which my predecessor had compiled.

I may say, in passing, that I considered this book defective and incomplete in many particulars; and it was my intention to bring out an improved and amended edition of it, with marginal notes regarding the different entries,—notes that might perhaps, prove useful to future curates. This, to my mind, was a further proof of the necessity of the course on which I was about to embark. I noticed, in looking over the book, that the compiler had been careless, at times, in registering the ages of the members of the various families, in cases more especially where they were all grown up. Thus, in the record of "Honoria Duffy, widow," whose family consisted of five girls and one boy, the youngest, the latter was registered as twenty-six years of age; and after the name of the oldest girl, Mary Brigid, there was, in the age column, a note of interrogation, with ditto down the column opposite the names of the other girls. In another place I saw this entry: "Sarah Moran, unmarried, age, 31—(moryagh)." I intended to remedy such defects as these.

In every house I visited, I received, needless to say, a kindly welcome, and invariably an invitation to "rest and take an air 'o' the fire," although the weather was then warm. I kept the object of my mission steadily in view, however; and made paternal inquiries in each household whether or not all went to Mass regularly, and attended to their religious duties. In some cases, at least, before replying to these interrogations, the people thus challenged looked at me in surprised astonish-

ment, or, as I imagined, in suppressed amusement, apparently uncertain whether or not I was serious. When they understood that I was in earnest, the answer generally was:

"Yes, your reverence, with the help of God. Sure, what other consolation have we but our mass and our religion, thanks be to God for every-thing!"

I noticed, after I had made some few visits, that my going around in this manner, book in hand, caused no small commotion among the people. They were not used to see their curate perambulating the parish in this systematic way, except when on his "outsquest"; and, as that was then over and past, it evidently puzzled them to know what could possibly be the object of this strange manoeuvre of mine. I think some of them came to the conclusion that I was engaged in making a collection,—introducing, maybe, some sort of newfangled and hitherto unheard-of parish "dues." As I forged my way steadily up the mountain from house to house, leaving none unvisited, this explanation of my movements seemed certainly a plausible and not improbable one.

Some houses were forewarned of my coming by lynx-eyed youngsters, who saw me from afar and scurried home from the meadows or cornfields to startle the household with the news: "The priest is comin'!" In such cases I found the kitchen "sweet and garnished," and the woman of the house and her daughters in immaculate aprons, and with hands and faces suspiciously clean and fresh-looking for a working-day. In other cases, however, my advent was not noticed in sufficient time for the womenfolk to make so elaborate a toilet. Then, if the man of the house happened to be within, he would come to the gate of the "bawri" and hold me in conversation, in order, as I judged, to give the women time "to put a face on the house," and perform a hasty ablution. In a few instances I was almost unheralded; a barefooted and draggled-skirted "slip of a girl" having, perhaps, just time to rush precipitately into the kitchen, say "Here's the priest!" and then make her escape.

The good woman of the house, however, generally held her ground and received me, all unpressured though she might be, in an apron made of cheap gingham. Although I waved the matter as utterly beneath my notice, she would insist on making profuse

apologies for having been "caught in the dirt," and bemoaning her want of foreknowledge of my coming; while at the same time she wiped a chair for me to "sit and rest"; and brushed a dog, cat or hen out of the way, in a strenuous effort to show me all the attentions possible in the circumstances. I charitably tried to make it appear that I did not notice the embarrassing situation, although I could not hold seeing many laughable things while seemingly absorbed in my census book. I think, anyway, that I observed more than the most suspicious of them would give me credit for; but it was with a sympathetic eye, not a cynical or unfriendly one.

As for the little children, they showed no disposition to evade me, no matter how utterly and unspicably unrepresentable they might happen to be. Despite frowns and mute warnings from the women to induce them to stay in the background, they crowded around in their scanty, well-ventilated garments, and regarded me in wide-eyed wonder; and the more irresponsible of them ventured so far as to finger my bran-new, silver-mounted umbrella—one of my Liverpool presents—with hands recently employed in kneading a mud-pie.

"It's very hard to keep a stitch of clothes on them at all, Father," one woman said by way of apology for the scarecrow, tattered appearance of a half dozen gossamers of hers. "The way they tear and tatter and flitter every-thing, they'd want clothes made of leather, so they would. Sure, I'm worn out tryin' to mend for them; for it isn't often poor people can buy new clothes for their children, the creatures, God help them!"

In this manner I continued my visitations for a few hours, correcting my predecessor's census book in many particulars, and adding copious annotations. When I inquired, however, about ages in order to supply omissions which I found here and there in the book, I got rather dubious information. The girls were not sure about their natal year; and their mothers, through "bad memory," and the "confusions" of life, had quite lost count of Mary's or Brigid's age. It dawned on me at last that, as the girls were unmarried, and had a seasoned look about them, to boot, there might possibly be good and sufficient reasons for withholding from me the desired information. In consequence of this suspicion, I made no further inquiry regarding the age of young women who seemed to me to be more than thirty. I let the blanks in the age column stand.

Moreover, after a few trials of this imported English system of visitation among my mountain folk, I concluded it was a work of supereroga-

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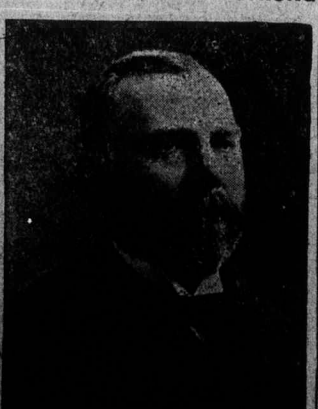
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tion. Fishing for souls was unnecessary here. I was struck, too, with the ludicrousness of having to play a game of hide-and-seek with my parishioners when I swooped down on them thus in all the unpreparedness, disorder and chaotic confusion of a small farmer's house on working days. In any case, there was no necessity for "Mahomet to go to the mountain," for the mountain came freely enough to Mahomet. Indeed, I was not long in the parish before my cottage became a sort of Mecca, so numerous were the visitors from among my flock who came seeking advice on all manner of questions, as if I were a Delphic Oracle, or an epitome of human wisdom. I could see that I was expected to be "guide, philosopher and friend" to my parishioners,—every man, woman and child of them.

All this, no doubt, was very flattering to weak human nature, and calculated to foster in me an overweening opinion of my own consummate wisdom and importance. But the corners had been pretty well rubbed off me by my English experience, a circumstance that made the chance of my being spoiled by kindness here more remote than might otherwise have been the case. Hence, although the Mountain Parish was my first curacy in my diocese, it found me a veteran missionary—in my own estimation at least. I must, however, indicate some few of the multifarious offices I was now called on to undertake as curate of this obscure Arcadian parish. I speak, of course, of offices and honors of a quasi-secular kind, thrust on me, willy-nilly, by my parishioners, and not immediately or directly concerned with my purely spiritual duties.

It was plain to me that these faithful, devoted people regarded me, their soggarth aroon, as every-thing to them: a distinguished adviser, a trusted, although unlearned, doctor and lawyer, and an unfailing friend in every need. "Who else have we to go to," they would say, "for comfort or assistance in our trials or difficulties but our good priests, God bless them, that always stood to us?"

I noticed, at the same time, that in speaking to me they seldom ventured on anything even approaching familiarity,—except, indeed, that an old man or woman might address me as "avie, machree," or give me an emphatic poke when telling me something, to drive home a point in an argument. The younger people, however, would invariably approach with an indefinite mixture of deference, respect and veneration that always touched me. They looked on me evi-

dently, as one altogether above, beyond and apart from themselves. In their eyes I dwelt "behind the veil," where they durst not enter, and lived and moved in a serene heaven all my own. Hence they would treat me with a reverence almost amounting to fear, as if I were another Moses fresh from familiar converse with God, and "horned" with rays of glory.

Ah, me! how the simple Irish peasantry treasure their soggarth aroon in their heart's core! Their affection for him is of the purest and tenderest kind, combining in itself the deep strong love of parent for child, and the trusting affection of child for parent, the constant love of sister for brother, and the chivalrous affection of brother for sister.—Ave Maria.

The Catholic Sweetheart and Spinster.

(Continued from Page 6.)

Beauty not yet past, she "still lives in hope," or is "setting her cap" for Mr. Anybody. If she flash into fame as a genius in any artistic direction, by what right does she sing of love or write of marriage or paint a lover or compose lullabies? In delicacy, she should ignore such subjects; and how does she know so much about them, anyway? The spiritual Pharisee and social Philistine grant no benefit of the doubt to the intuition of genius. An old maid's intuitions must not be sentimental or emotional; and genius is an impropriety on the part of the unmarried woman.

But meantime the spinster goes her way undaunted. Not un wounded—O, no, she is only a woman. But the hurts and the stabs are but her thorn crown and heart cross, and her strong spirit carries them gravely. If she has achieved her vocation through voluntary choice, be sure she has followed her heart and is recompensed for her loss of love; her genius or zeal, or whatever impulse she has obeyed, being her ruling passion. If the single state has been thrust upon her by any human mischance representing God's Providence, she has but to rise on the stepping stone of doubt self to reach heaven by the short-cut of resignation.

But sorrow is less commonly the fate of the spinster than of the wife and mother. She misses the trials as well as the joys of married life, and the world ignores her compensations when it pities her. There are women to whom absolute liberty is not a luxury but a necessity—who crave independence, who must live their own

lives in their own way, and who would suffer intolerably in the married relation. There is a virginal type of soul to which marriage would be impossible; a soul not less tender and loving for its votal chastity. It is an angelic spirit that cannot submit to human intimacy. Intrusion upon its privacy is its exquisite agony. It has the sensitiveness of a modesty which is no morbid sentiment, but a rare and beautiful spiritual grace. There is a type of intellect that demands perfect solitude and seclusion—whose fruition depends on its aloofness from the social atmosphere, and which is never less lonely than when alone. There is a temperament to which individuality is as the breath of life, and which cannot conform or affiliate itself, however docile the intention. Above all, there are many classes of women whose innate tastes and preferences are antagonistic to the domestic and social obligations of the married state. These would be both sorry and sorrowful failures as wives and housewives and mothers, while in the single life they achieve both content and success. All these types represent the incredible woman, who knows "how to be happy even though a spinster."

Seriously, can we look out intelligently upon the human world and doubt that there is a divinely-ordained place for the spinster, a specific field for her unfettered energies? There is a call for corporal and spiritual works of mercy from quarters that the active religious orders do not because they cannot reach; and to which the wife and mother whose charity begins at home, and whose first duty is to her husband and children, cannot, even when she would, respond. There are universal causes to be served by the life free from personal ties. There are movements of social reform for which exclusive devotion is necessary—there are intellectual labors which only the solitary life has liberty and leisure to pursue—there is a spiritual crusade which only virginity can carry to victory, repeating the history of Una and the Lion!

Unjustified, unrecompensed, vocationless, barren and wasted is it, then—the life of the Catholic spinster? Not in the sight of heaven, not in the eyes of the angels, not in the records of the Book of Judgment, even though the world and mankind retain eternally their narrow and vulgar conviction!

But, no! Let us accredit poor earth with its vaunted "progression," and anticipate the day when recognition of the true sisterhood of Catholic sweetheart and spinster will establish their just social equality!

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