

OUR IRISH LETTER.

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENCE OF THE CATHOLIC REGISTER.

DUBLIN Sept. 10th. If you look in the map of Ireland you will see that Liscannor bay makes a little inlet and way in the coast line of Clare. The fishing boats of Liscannor are the best of any harbour on the southern side of a low line of hills which stretches it on the north. It has for via a Moy bay a creek between sloping grassy headlands, where the current casts up much drift stones with the monies from the sea. Midway between Liscannor and Moy, commanding from its sea-wall an unobstructed view of the magnificent open bay, stands a wee watering place, Lalahine. Like the rest of the most picturesque country in Ireland, Liscannor has latter days. The village as it now exists, is little more than a remnant of what was once upon a time a famous health resort. The great expanse of ocean, the mighty tides which sweep in unbroken to its very threshold are the glory of this world of strife must be paid for one way or another, and the treacherous sea that lies shimmering like a breast plate of silver scales in the brilliance of a summer sun, is the cause of the death of all countering fury in the stress of winter storms, bursting all bounds and occasionally swallowing up houses and even whole streets. No one ventures to spend the winter in the lodges facing the beach. It is not an record how many sea-walls were swept away, but these sea-walls were built in the style of a stone fence between two meadows. About a dozen years ago an entire row of houses were engulfed in these wild waves, and their families cut off from the sea. After that the unfortunate inhabitants who depended almost solely on the influx of summer visitors for their livelihood, gave up all struggle against fate. The little village possessed no industry, and even to this day there is no much as one boat for hire on the beach. If it had not been for the exertions of a Mr. Ellis, a gentleman connected with the Local Government Board, it would have drifted into a "village." Three or four years ago, at a period of delicate health, Mr. Ellis found the bracing air, the briny untaunted breath of the mighty ocean, so invigorating that he bought a house on the cliff road, and went to live there permanently. Before his coming to Liscannor he had lived and travelled in a world of work and bustle, but at once set about arousing his own neighbours from the apathy with which they acquiesced in the destruction of their property. He exerted his influence to meet the erection of a new sea-wall, built on the most approved modern principles of coast fortification. The Esplanade is a solid mass of granite and concrete, which has successfully withstood the tides of winter—and last winter was exceptionally stormy. During her last tour through the west of Ireland Lady Aberdeen, at the invitation of the Improvement Committee, visited Lalahine and inaugurated the sea-wall, graciously consenting to have it called the Aberdeen Promenade. Her ladyship also consented to allow a new hotel to be called the Aberdeen Arms, and as a token of the warm interest which she took in its prosperity she presented the proprietor, Mr. Keran, with a handsome painting of her coat of arms as a sign-board.

Not content with starting public works, Mr. Ellis set about trying to improve the interior of the lodges. He is a most persevering—not to add courageous—man to venture on expounding the ethics of housekeeping in West Clare. I doubt if even he will ever get the present generation of landlords to understand that it would be to their own advantage to make the place attractive to visitors. "Man wants but little here below," sums up Lalahine philosophy. Life there is at such a dull, drowsy level, that the natives seem to have no ambition beyond the mere getting of a daily crust—and that often without butter. They are essentially a primitive race, all their ambition is narrowed to the one exigency—the providing of food, fuel and clothing for their children. With a fair and easy persistence they work from dusk till sunrise again, serving in their shops, looking after their farms—nearly everybody possesses a potato garden and a field for a cow—and, incidentally, attending to the lodges. Such a narrowing of ideas inevitably strangles social progress. When want, dirt, famishing, hovers persistently at a man's threshold it is not to be wondered at that he loses sight of the aphorism "Not by bread shall man live." The house beautiful is an unknown cult, and cookery has long lapsed among the forgotten arts. Forgotten, too, are the old traditions, the ancient folklores, and the waters of oblivion are fast closing over the soft rhythm of the Gaelic tongue. Time will, and not so very long ago, when Irish was spoken all long the west coast, but now-a-days it is only in the most isolated districts that one finds even the trace of our mother tongue. The local "pastor" is still observed, but has degenerated into a day's junketting in nowise connected with a patron saint.

When we were in Lalahine last July we heard a lot about the wonders of Ireland Sunday. In vain we asked what was the origin of the festival. All the information we could obtain was Lalahine "pattern" was celebrated every year on the last Sunday in July, it was called Garland Sunday, the whole country around poured into Lalahine to enjoy "themselves, and what more could anybody want to know about it? Of course it was possible that a saint might have had something to do with a "pattern"—but that must have been a long time ago. When on the eve of the festival, our little girl, a tall, thin, nervous young woman who was an autocrat in the kitchen, demanded if any of us were going to spend the night at the blessed well, it was borne in on me that St. Bridget, the King's daughter, the first Irish virgin to whom St. Patrick gave the veil, was in some way connected with Garland Sunday. St. Bridget's well is distant four miles from Lalahine and two from Liscannor. The eve of her "pattern" was so wild and

that instead of venturing for a drive, we strayed, one by one, into the thicket, attracted by the cheerful blaze of a turf fire piled high up the chimney. All the others belonged to Clare more or less, but I having come all the way from Dublin, ranked little short of a foreigner. Have you ever known two people to sit over a peat fire on a dark night, with the wind whistling past the window, without telling stories? You may begin with to date gossip about the times, but I will share with the spirit of recollection, which is the very essence of its clear glowing heart, seizes you, somebody suddenly rouses her the wonderful events of a day—oh, so long ago when the sun, moon and stars shone with a grandeur that has been wanting ever since, when his mother, God rest her, was the wisest and best of women, and his father held his own property as one of the strong men of the parish. Perhaps it was the flicking of a fly that threw some light on the story of St. Bridget's well; my love for the first and only time I succeeded in getting the legend related.

The story teller was the now-do well of the group, a long, lanky fellow with tossed fair hair and a cast in one eye, much given to speculation and expounding of words that he rarely finished a sentence. When St. Bridget was young, along the west coast the Clare hills were just as bare as they are to-day, perhaps a trifle more bleak, as at that time there were no farms, consequently no need for the mud fences which have been thrown up to mark the road way. The close of a long day's journey found the royal virgin, footsore and weary, far from any shelter. Commending herself to Providence, she lay down to rest on the short close grass which clings like fiction to the ground. When she awoke in the morning at sunrise, she found a beautiful tree had sprung up to shelter her, and beside it bubbled a cool, clear well, at which she refreshed herself and performed her morning devotions before resuming her journey. So miraculously this well was a famous shrine, people made pilgrimages to it from all parts of the country, and many and marvellous were the cures wrought; people went there still, just for a drink you know, and when the well was dried up, and to bring away a chip of St. Bridget's tree. Of course it is now only a bare, branchless stump. That one poor tree should have provided relief for countless generations of devout clients, may seem for centuries, are almost the only ones left in the world. When Irish Catholics visit St. Winifred's well, they throw their whole soul into their devotions, but when they drive to St. Bridget's Shrine—an excursion which generally originates in a desire to see the well—how quiet and close to it—they give an old woman sixpence to make a "round" for them.

In Lalahine one spends most of the long, languorous Summer afternoons on the flat rocks which skirt the green headlands, extending from the Esplanade to Moy bay. The Black Strand, as it is called, is a perfect paradise for children. When the tide is out, its clear pools, brilliant with sea-mosses, afford the most enticing of fishing grounds for the little ones; and the quiet nooks, the natural benches hewn out of the black stone, from which one may revel undisturbed in the cloud shadows, chasing one another across the bay to where Liscannor harbor makes a black fleck on the shining water, are infinitely more inviting than the iron seats and benches of the gleaming concrete of the esplanade. You generally turn your face towards the Black Strand under the delusion that you are going to have a quiet half hour with a paper or a book, but by and by the charm of the living page, the melody and the melody and the melody—not the less savage because unconscious of its victim's pain—the glad exuberance of robust health and irrepressible childish spirits, lays hold of you, and instead of being engaged by the late development of the general intelligence to the solution of the newest sociological problem, you find your sympathies wholly enlisted by the capture of a shrimp, and you join heartily in the excitement of the crab-hunt, even though your sensitiveness may shrink from seeing the unhappy captive's fore claws broken off as a preventive to his biting his tormentors. It is useless to preach humaneness to children, they are not in human nature to be too squeamish as to the cost of our little amusements. Watching these lively lads and lassies slipping in and out of the pools, and the occasional tumbler on the oily brown sea-wood, I grew interested in a little girl who sat for hours sometimes, bathing her delicate white feet in a sun-warmed pool while her only companion, a middle-aged countryman, made positions of the little white blobs to press on her knee. Day after day these two came hand-in-hand over the rocks. She with a clean white bib over her print frock and a cheap sun hat tied over her shining yellow hair. She looked up at her companion with the bloom of youth on her face, with eyes as blue as the heavens above us, shone with the perfect content of childhood nurtured amidst love and tenderness. Countrymen never vary their attire with the seasons, and she wore the rough flax boots and hard felt hat of her class. He had a shrewd, intelligent face, eyes something like his little daughter's and a short auburn beard. His devotion to her was pathetic in its tenderness, and he nervously gazed when he rendered her any little service. One day I ventured to ask him if she had met an accident. From his description I gathered she was suffering from white swelling, and that he lived with her. After many details of how the doctor had treated her, he mentioned that a kind lady had brought him a bottle of water from a place called "Holywell, in Scotland, I believe it is." "That done her a grand good surely," still the knot is not straight yet." It

did not matter a pin's point where Holywell was so long as it was "beyond the sea" and sufficiently "foreign" to make a point out of it interesting to the ladies and the ever-headed of St. Bridget's Well. He answered matter-of-factly, "Yes, I heard that a great price too. I must get a car and bring the little one there before we go home. But I have very good reason to believe that the little one will not come without straying further afield than the Black Strand, and as a far type of a woman's indifference which is rapidly extinguishing the cult of St. Bridget in Clare.

I have seen one example of what devotion to St. Bridget may have been like in the olden times. Neither priest nor parson, but a layman, he had come there every Sunday from Ennistymore. The Catholic church is a small, square building, situated in the centre of the upper row of houses on the cliff road. It is really only an oratory, as the lamp of the altar is lit before the altar. The sacristan, a delicate little woman, whose work is a labor of love, keeps the whole church spotlessly clean, and her simple altar decorations are very devotional. Now and again during the seasons when strange priests are amongst the visitors, morning Mass is celebrated. One evening, going in to make enquiries, I found her as usual sweeping up every scrap of dust that the devout people who attended the Rosary had left behind them. Kneeling to one side, with outstretched arms, his hands dangling from his right hand, his whole attitude expressive of an ecstasy of prayer, was an old man. He was a remarkable figure, one that you would not have looked for in a crowded street. His patched coat of dark home-spun flannel and whitish corduroy trousers were scrupulously neat. His head was thrown back, giving me a full view of a pale, ascetic face, with prominent features, deep-set eyes, bushy brows, a low, broad forehead, framed with a mass of stray dark hair, and his long upper lip, wide straight mouth, and square jaw, which are the birthmark of every Clare peasant. Seeing that he was a devout man, I paused in her sweeping to remark that he was a very holy old man. She would just as soon have his prayer as a nun's. "Oh, I should be no impostor. The other day when she slipped a penny into his hand he was after her and returned it, saying, "No, no, I cannot take it. You too are poor." I searched my pockets to find that I was possessed of only one copper. "Give him that," I said, "and tell him to pray for me." She took a moment at the railing which divides the wee sanctuary from the flagged aisle. The wind blew from the sea and filled the little church with the soft low murmur of the distant tide as with an evening hymn; from the great hillside, which it opens to within seven lengths of the chapel walls, sweet pink clover and yellow-hearted marguerites nodded through the open window, the setting sun threw the blue and amber shadows of colored glass athwart the empty benches, the spirit of worship slipping unobserved over the little wooden altar, and we felt for the nonce transported to some solitary shrine far, far from the haunts of strife and sin. A shuffling of bare feet, a flapping of heavy garments, and the man stood within the railing holding up his rosary between his hands and counting the white beads to make me understand how many Aves he had said for me. His keen gray eyes were fixed on me with the luminous gaze of a mystic, like after glow of the sunset shone full on his face, over the uncounted lines of his figure borrowed a princely grace from its glory, and his bare feet looked unnaturally white against the dark floor. He looked a weird, strange being, as much apart from the fin-de-siècle as if he were the wreath of one of those prophets of old who kept the spirit of faith alive in the midst of a luxury-loving, scoffing, scoffing, scoffing world. "O God, in my heart I said Amen many times. It is a prayer that most of us need. As I turned to leave the chapel he was back again in his old place under the gallery. Following the direction of his gaze I saw a picture of St. Bridget, a poor, clean print such as one finds in wayside cabins, hanging between two stations of the Cross. At least to this simple soul, illumined with the brilliance of perfect faith, but to love God and worship Him, a royal Irish Virgin was a luminous reality.

"To come back to her 'pattern.'" Garland Sunday brought us a blue sky and a lively breeze. Directly after Mass, crowds began to pour into the village, and every swinging stick of the loom sprang up in the main street. We had booths, swinging boats, "Aunt Sally." The whole scene reminded one of a country race course. Such a twanging of peripatetic minstrelsy, small boys tumbling in faded tights, and robust dancing girls making a great noise with their heels. Such a silent crowd! No one seemed to laugh. Little squads of men moved solidly from one attraction to another—the vendors did all the talking. What a difference there is between the hilarity with which a city artisan throws himself heart and soul into a day's junketting—the cost of which never troubles him until the morrow—and the listless, what's-the-good-of-it attitude of a countryman regarding all amusements. Plodding country folk seem to spend all their time turning over in their minds whether the show is worth enjoying, generally they go home again without being quite sure if they have enjoyed it all. Large crowds of police were sent to the well for one festival. What for—perhaps the authorities know themselves. The four constables who guard the peace there all the year round reckon hand and foot, but about the most anxious of their duties. They are on the most genial terms with everybody, and you always hear them spoken of as "real good fellows." The extra police themselves like sensible men rose to the occasion. They know about the people they were going to manage. So they just brought their wives and children along with them, and

a family outing fell in very nicely with extra duty. Supposing those placed faced men who took their diversion so seriously, did want to fight what would they fight with? There was not one stick in the whole concourse, and no stones nearer than the slung. No trees grow on that wind swept coast, the few stunted, dwarfed bushes that struggle for life in so-called sheltered low are beaten almost flat to the ground, their branches—air men and hooded together as if for mutual protection, hence there are no walking sticks. The men all walk with their hands tucked deep down in their pockets. The effect of four or five coming towards you with arms bare or less arduous is anything but graceful! The man who invented the light cane deserves well of society. The shrill voices of the women alone disturbed the day's serenity. For an gage that is choice combined for a Clare village. She is many points ahead of her sister in the slum. When evening came and the clouds that had been scurrying across the sun all day settled down into an amalgam of gray and gold behind Liscannor hills the crowd and the booths melted away as if by magic, and by the time that sea and sky had become mysterious one in the soft dove-colored twilight, the village had lapsed back to its normal drowsiness and very likely will not wake up again until Garland Sunday arouses it once more.

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