

## The charm of Iar Connaught

### *The Charm of Ireland*

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WE were ready to say good-bye to Galway and to fare westward into far Connaught, most primitive of Irish provinces ; but on Sunday there is only a single train each way, and the westbound one leaves Galway at six in the morning. We managed to catch it, somewhat to our surprise, crossed the Corrib River on a long bridge and viaduct, and were at once in Iar Connaught—West Connaught, the domain of the wild O'Flaherties, from whom the dwellers in Galway every Sunday besought the Lord to deliver them.

The train skirts the shore of Lough Corrib, and one has beautiful glimpses of the lake and the hills beyond ; and then it plunges into a wild and desolate country, strewn with great glacial boulders, some of them poised so precariously on hill-side and cliff-edge that it seems the rattle of every passing train would bring them crashing down.

And then we came out upon wide moors, crossed by innumerable little streams, and then ahead of us the great Connemara mountains began to loom against the sky—gigantic masses of grey granite, bare of vegetation, even of the skin of turf which can find foothold almost any-where, but which is powerless against these masses of solid rock. The Maamturk Mountains are the first to be seen, rugged giants two thousand feet high, and the road mounts toward them over a pass, and then dips rapidly to the station at Recess, which was our stopping-point.

It was still so early that there was nobody about, and when we got to the hotel we found it locked ; but the porter hastened to open the door in answer to our ring, and we found ourselves in one of the nicest hotels we had encountered anywhere in Ireland. We had already made up our minds to spend that Sunday climbing Lissoughter, a mountain just back of the hotel, famous for the view from its top ; and so, as soon as we had disposed of our luggage and eaten a most appetising breakfast, we inquired how to get to it. And Sheila was summoned to tell us—Sheila with a complexion like peach-bloom, and the brightest of blue eyes, and the fluffiest of brown hair, fit to pose as the prototype of Sweet Peggy, or Kathleen Bawn, or Kitty Neil, or any other of the lovely girls the Irish poets delighted to sing. Not the least of the attractions of this hotel at Recess are the girls who work there—as bright and blooming a lot of Irish lasses as one could wish to see and Sheila, I think, was the flower of them all. She told us how to go, and we set off happily through the soft, bright air of the morning.

Our road, at first, lay along the margin of a placid lake, then turned off sharply to the right, and the climb began. It was an easy climb, with beautiful views over bogs and lakes and mountains opening at every step. There was a wet bog on either side the road, and at a place

where the peat was being cut, we walked out to take a closer look at it. And as we stood there gazing down into the black excavation, we felt the ground trembling beneath our feet ; and when we looked up, there was a man striding upward toward us, two hundred feet away, but at every stride shaking the bog so that we could feel the tremor distinctly. The bog shook more and more as he approached and passed us ; and then the tremor grew fainter and fainter as he went on his way. Unless I had felt it, I would never have believed that the footsteps of a single man could have created so wide a disturbance, and I understood how serious were the difficulties the railways had to face in getting across the bogs of central Ireland.

Half a mile farther on, we came to a cluster of little cabins clinging to the hillside, and we paused to ask the way of a man who was pottering about them ; and, after a moment, we found that we were talking to Mr. Rafferty, who with his brother, both bachelors, own the only quarry in the world which produces Connemara marble ; and when he offered to show it to us, you may well believe we assented.

From the very first moment, I had perceived an air about Mr. Rafferty which puzzled me. He was undoubtedly Irish, and yet his manner of speaking was not precisely the Irish manner I had grown accustomed to ; his intonation was not precisely the Irish intonation, his choice of words and acquaintance with slang was surprisingly wide for a man born and reared in Connemara, and there was a certain alertness about him which was not Irish at all. And then, when he started to tell us his story, I understood, for he had been born in New York and spent the first fifteen or twenty years of his life there. Not until then did I realise in how many subtle, scarcely recognisable ways does the American Irishman differ from the Irish Irishman.

His father was a Connemara man who had gone to America in the decade following the great famine and settled in New York, where the son who was talking to us was born. The father had come back to Connemara, again, for some reason, and had settled at Recess, and, by mere accident, one day discovered the vein of marble high on the side of Lissoughter. There was no railroad in the valley then, and nobody supposed the vein would ever be of any value, so he managed to get control of it, and his sons came back from America to help him work it. Its development was very slow and difficult, for the only way of getting the marble to market was to haul it along the mountain roads to Galway, forty miles distant.

But since the coming of the railroad, all that is changed. Some primitive machinery has been installed, larger blocks can be handled, and already more than one office building in New York has its vestibule embellished with the beautiful green stone. Even the fragments are carefully saved and worked up into small ornaments and novelties to sell to tourists— round towers and Celtic crosses and such things.

We were at the entrance to the quarry by this time, and he took us through and explained its workings to us. It is a surface vein and no one knows its depth or its extent. Enough has been uncovered to last for many years, at the present rate of quarrying. Of course if it was in America, a great company would be formed to exploit it, and modern machinery installed, and it would be yanked out by the thousands of tons a day ; but since it is in Ireland, I doubt if the rate of production will ever be largely increased.

We bade Mr. Rafferty good-bye at last, and took up the climb again toward the summit of the mountain which loomed before us ; up and up, with the view opening more and more. Away at the bottom of the valley ran the white ribbon of a road, with a cluster of thatched roofs huddled near it, here and there; and beyond the valley towered the granite sides of the Twelve Pins of Bunnabeola, the loftiest and most picturesque mountains in these western highlands.

We came to a cabin, presently, away up there by itself on the mountain side, and we stopped long enough to leave the specimens of marble which Mr. Rafferty had given us, for they threatened to become embarrassingly heavy before the climb was ended. The family who lived there came out to show us the best way up the hill, and stood watching us as we climbed on. The path for a time lay along the bottom of a brook ; then we came out upon the bare hillside, with an outcrop of granite here and there and dripping bog between, and no living thing in sight except agile, black-faced sheep, who peered down at us curiously from every crag. The way grew steeper and steeper and the stretches of bog more wet and treacherous ; but always the view was more magnificent, especially to the west, where the Twelve Pins were, and to the south, where the plain stretched away, gleaming with innumerable little lakes. I never saw so many lakes at one time as I saw that day—there must have been two or three hundred of them between us and the far horizon, each of them gleaming in the sun like a polished mirror.

After an hour of this steep and slippery work, Betty declared that she had had enough ; but the last grey escarpment of the mountain loomed just over our heads, and I hated to give up with the goal so near. She said she would wait for me while I went up alone, so, leaving her cosily seated in a niche in the cliff, I scrambled on, along the granite wall, on hands and knees sometimes ; and at last I came out upon the very summit, with one of the most beautiful views in all Ireland at my feet.

Lissoughter stands exactly at the end of a great transverse valley, with the Maamturk Mountains on one side and the Twelve Pins on the other, and at the bottom of this valley gleam the waters of Inagh and Derryclare ; and the granite hills stretch away as far as the eye can see, one behind the other, rugged and bleak, without a sign of vegetation far more impressive than the green-clad hills about Killarney. The day was gloriously clear, and I sat there for a long time, gazing first this way and then that, and I can shut my eyes now and see again that glorious landscape. The top of Lissoughter is a ring of granite, with a bog in the depression in the centre ; and on the highest point of this ring some one had heaped up a little cairn of stones. Feeling something like Peary at the north pole, I tore a leaf from my notebook, wrote my name and address upon it, with greetings to the next comer, and placed it under the top-most stone of this cairn. I did not suppose that it would ever be discovered, but when I got home, I found a postal awaiting me from an Irish girl, who had climbed Lissoughter with a party a week later, and found my note where I had left it.

When we got down again to the cottage where we had left our marble, we found the man of the house out in front, and stopped for a chat with him. Yes, it was a fine day ; very wet it had been, but a few more such days as this would do the potatoes a world of good, and one could get into the bogs again to cut the winter fuel. As we talked, children gathered from various directions, until there were ten standing about staring at us, and Betty asked him if they were the neighbours' children.

“ They are not, miss,” he answered, grinning. “ They’re all mine.”

“ All yours !” echoed Betty, and counted them again.

The man turned to the eldest girl.

“ Mary Agnes, go bring the baby,” he said ; and Mary Agnes disappeared indoors, and came out presently with number eleven.

How they manage to live I don’t know ; but they do live, and, so far at least as the children are concerned, even grow fat. Their bright eyes and red cheeks spoke of anything but undernourishment, and it must take a large pot to hold enough to satisfy that family ! How the pot is filled is the mystery.

Their home was typical of Connaught—and of the poorer part of all Ireland, indeed : a low cabin, built of stones and whitewashed, with two rooms, a dirt floor, a few pieces of rude furniture, a pile of straw and rags for a bed, and hardly enough clothes to go around. In fact, below the age of ten or twelve, it was impossible to tell the boys from the girls, for they were all dressed alike in a single garment, a sort of shift made of homespun flannel, and usually, I judge, cut out of the mother’s old red petticoats ; and boys and girls alike have their hair cropped close. All through Connemara we saw this fashion—a single rudely-made garment of wool, worn by the children of both sexes all the year round, without undergarment of any kind, without shoes or stockings. The flannel the garments are made of is practically indestructible, and I fancy they are taken off only when outgrown and passed on to the next youngest member of the family. When a boy outgrows it and is privileged to put on trousers, it is a proud day for him, for he ceases to be a mere petticoated “ malrach” and becomes a “ gossure.”

Mary Agnes, the oldest member of this particular family, was a girl of sixteen, who was soon to leave for America to try her fortune ; I don’t know by what miracles of self-denial the money for her passage had been scraped together ! She was an ugly girl, with bad teeth and stupid expression, and I am afraid she will find life no bed of roses, even here in America. The rest of the children went to school ; and the nearest schoolhouse was five Irish miles away !

We went on at last, down past the other cabins, which are occupied by the men employed in the quarry. They were all faithful replicas of the one I have described, and they were all swarming with children. I never ceased to be astonished at these children, for though they were dirty and half-naked, they all seemed plump and healthy. Potatoes, I suppose, is the main article of their diet, for every cabin had its deep-trenched patch, won by back-breaking toil from the rocks of the hillside. That leisurely walk down into the green valley is unforgettable, the day was so bright, the air so fresh and sweet, the view so lovely.

We spent the remainder of the afternoon playing clock golf, and exploring the beautiful garden attached to the hotel ; and that night we sat in front of a great open fire-place where a wood fire crackled, and luxuriated in the pleasant fatigue of a well-spent day. If I had known as much then as I do now, we would have spent other evenings there, for Recess is as good a point as any from which to explore Connaught, and the hotel there is immeasurably superior to any other in that section of Ireland—clean and bright and comfortable and well-managed, with food that was a pleasant variant from the unimaginative dishes we had grown so weary of. It has been built by the railroad company to encourage tourist traffic, and I don't see how it can pay ; but, for the sake of travellers in that part of Ireland, I hope it will never be closed.

I said something of this, that evening, to the manager and to Sheila ; and added to the latter that if she would tell me the secret of her complexion, I would make a fortune for both of us.

“ 'Tis just the air,” she laughed. “ Send your lady friends out here to us, and we'll soon have them blooming like roses.”

So there is another reason for a stay at Recess.

I clambered back up to the quarry, next morning, for I wanted some pictures of it, and of the quaint cabins along the way. I found Mr. Rafferty there, and a gang of men busy loading some blocks of marble upon a cart, preparatory to taking them down the mountain. Just back of the quarry, two red-skirted women were digging in a potato patch, and they looked so picturesque and Millet-like that I asked them if I might take their picture. They held a quick consultation, and then said I might provided I paid them two shillings first !

But I *did* want a picture of one of those poor little mountain cabins, and on my way back, I saw a woman standing at the door of one of them, and she passed the time of day so amiably that I stopped to talk. The year had been very hard, she said as what year is not, in such a place! and her husband was even then at Oughterard, trying to find work. Meanwhile, she was left with the children, to do the best she could, and what they found to live on I don't know ; but she was glad for me to take a picture of her little place, with herself and the children and the dog standing in front of it, and I am sure the coin I slipped into the baby's fist was very welcome. That picture gives a better idea than any mere description could of these damp, dark, comfortless mountain homes, with their low walls, and tiny windows, and leaky, grass-grown thatch, tied on with ropes.

Farther on, I came upon a woman and her daughter, a girl of about sixteen, working in a potato patch ; and the girl was really pretty, although at the moment she was engaged in spreading manure with her hands about the roots of the plants. Her skirt was kilted high, revealing her graceful and rounded legs, and when she smiled her teeth were very white. That was the finishing touch, for teeth are bad in Ireland, and most pretty girls need only smile to disillusion one. So, after some talk about the weather, and about America, I asked the mother if I might not take the girl's picture ; and the girl was willing enough, for she hastily let down her skirt, blushing with pleasure ; but her mother shook her head.

“ You are not the first one to be askin' that,” she said ; “ but I have said no to all of them, for I would not have her growing vain.”

“ She has a right to be vain,” I pointed out, “ for she is very pretty ; and it wouldn't hurt her to have her picture taken.”

“ Handsome is as handsome does,” said her mother ; “ and she is not as good as she looks.”

No doubt with a little more blarney I could have won her consent ; but in my heart of hearts I knew she was right, and I didn't try to persuade her. It was not the first time I realised I was not cut out for a photographer ! She said the girl would be going to America before long, and I advised her to take care of her teeth, and bade them good-bye and went on my way. I have regretted since that I didn't try the blarney, for that picture would certainly have embellished the pages of this book !

I had thought that the fine weather would bring out the turf cutters in force, and I had hoped to get a picture of them at work ; but the cuttings were all empty, for some reason, and at last, after a final long look at the beautiful valley, I made my way back to the hotel, and an hour later we were faring westward toward Clifden.

The road ran for many miles with the granite masses of the Twelve Pins towering on the right, springing sheer two thousand feet from the bogs around them—great cones rising one behind the other, their summits gleaming so white in the sun that they seemed crowned with snow. We ran away from them, at last, across a dreary moor, down to the sea, and so to Clifden.

Clifden is a little modern town with a single wide street overlooking the bay ; but we had time for only a glance at it, for the motor-bus was waiting which was to take us to Leenane,—which is pronounced to rhyme with “ fan,” as though it had no final “ e”—and we were soon climbing out of the town, with a beautiful view of the bay to the left, and on a cliff close to the shore the great masts of the Marconi station, which is in touch with the coast of Newfoundland. No contrast could have been more complete—this latest and greatest of the achievements of science, set down in a country where nothing has altered for five centuries ; a country to which the description penned by Rory O'Flaherty, more than a century before our Revolution, applies as closely and completely as it did when it was written. Another contrast, just as great, is that between the handsome young Italian who set those masts here and the men who live in the little cottages along the sea under them. And yet Marconi himself is half Irish—for his mother was Irish, and he has married an Irish girl ; and I fancy he is glad that one of the greatest of his stations should be here on the Irish coast.

We mounted steadily along a winding road, and at every turn the scenery grew more superb—great sweeps of rugged landscape, of bog and rocky field and granite mountain, rousing the soul like a blare of martial music. Beyond Letterfrank, the road dips into the lovely Pass of Kylemore ; and again, as back at Glengarriff, it was bordered with fuchsia hedges, gay with scarlet flowers. And presently we were running close beside Kylemore Lake, with the white towers of the castle gleaming above the trees on the other side—a magnificent structure, now owned by the Duke of Manchester—financed by his Cincinnati father-in-law !

And, then we came out upon a wide moor, and the road climbed up and up—and all at once, we came to the top of the pass, and there, far below us lay Killary Bay, a narrow arm of the Atlantic running back into the very heart of the Connemara mountains, which press upon it so closely that there is barely room for the road between rock and water. We dropped down toward it, passed a tiny mountain village, came out upon the shore, and sped along at the very edge of the water, until, far ahead, we saw the cluster of houses which is Leenane ; and in another moment we had stopped before the rambling building which is Mc-Keown's Hotel.

McKeown himself is a bearded giant of a man, with bronzed face and the sunniest of smiles, and his hotel is a sort of paradise for fishermen. To others it is not so attractive ; but in surroundings it could hardly be surpassed. Right at its door stretches Killary Bay ; back of it tower the steep hills, and across the inlet grey and purple giants spring two thousand feet into the air, right up from the water's edge.

A few looms have been set up by Mr. McKeown in a building adjoining the hotel, and tweeds are woven there from yarn spun in the neighbourhood, forming a small industry which gives employment to a number of persons ; and a few yards farther down the road is a station of the constabulary, and it looked so bright and inviting that I stopped in for a chat with the men.

I have already spoken of the Royal Irish Constabulary—the force which polices the country ; slim, soldierly men, governed from Dublin Castle, and really constituting an army, eleven thousand strong, armed with carbines, sword bayonets and revolvers, and ready to be concentrated instantly wherever there is trouble. They are nearly all Irishmen, so it is not a foreign army, but they are seldom assigned to the districts where they were born and reared ; and the men who command them from Dublin Castle are English army officers, who are in no way responsible to the public. All, in fact, that Ireland has to do with the Royal Irish Constabulary is to foot the bills.

Because of this fact, because in the old days they were called out to assist at every eviction and at every political or religious arrest, because their services are still required at every trial and mass-meeting and fair and market, and finally because their demeanour is sometimes rather top-lofty, the Irish generally regard them with a suspicion and dislike which seem to me undeserved. So far as I came into contact with them, I found them courteous and kindly men, and apparently as good Irishmen as any one could desire. But there is one cause for complaint which has a real basis, and that is that, in a country which is as free of crime as Ireland now is, a police force should be maintained which averages one to every 394 of the population, and which costs annually about \$7,500,000. In the old days of evictions and coercion acts and political and religious strife, some such force may have been necessary ; but that need has passed. Crime is to-day much less frequent and serious in Ireland than in England, yet in Ireland the per capita cost of the police is \$1.64, while in England it is only fifty-six cents.

But the members of the constabulary are not to blame for this, and one grows accustomed to seeing them everywhere—at the Dublin crossings, at the street corners of every little village, walking briskly in pairs along the loneliest of mountain roads, stationed in the wilds of the hills or amid the desolation of the bogs, often with no house in sight except the barrack in which they live.

I certainly got a warm welcome, that day, from the sergeant in charge of the Leenane barrack, and from the one constable who happened to be on duty there. They showed me all through the place, clean and bare and Spartan-like, with their kits along the wall, ready to be caught up at a moment's notice, for a call to duty may come at any time, and there must be no delay. It was a real barrack, too, with heavy bars across the windows, and a door that would resist any mob.

And then they showed me their equipment. To the belt which they all wear a leather case is suspended for the baton, and a square leather pouch which contains a pair of handcuffs. At the back is the ammunition pouch, and on the side opposite the baton hangs the sword-bayonet, which can also be used as a knife or dagger. The small carbine they carry weighs only six and a half pounds, but is wonderfully compact and efficient, with a six-shot magazine, and a graduated sight up to two thousand yards. No man in this station had ever had occasion to use his rifle, and they all said earnestly that they hoped they never would.

They have a beat of twelve miles along the mountain roads, and they cover it twice every day and once every night. I asked them the reason for so much vigilance, for I could not imagine any serious crime back in these hills among this simple and kindly people ; and they said that there was really very little crime ; but a sheep would be missing now and then, or a bit of poaching would be done, or perhaps a quarrel would arise between some farmer and his labourers and a horse would be lamed—it was such things as those they had to be on the lookout for. The position of constable is a good one for Ireland ; and I imagine that most of those who enter the service stay in it till retired, for it carries an increase of pay every five years, with a pension after twenty-five years' service, or in case of disability.

We sat and talked for a long time about America and Ireland, and intelligent fellows I found them, though perhaps with a little of the soldier's contempt for the shiftless civilian. And then I walked on to the village which nestles at the head of the bay, a single street of slated houses. Everybody wanted to talk, and I remember one old granny, with face incredibly wrinkled, who sat in front of her door knitting a stocking without once glancing at it, and who told me she was eighty-five and had nine children in America. And I met the girl who, with her brother, teaches the village school, and she asked me if I wouldn't come in, before I left, and see the school, and I promised her I would.

Then I noticed that one of the little shops had the name " Gaynor" over the door, and I stopped in to ask the proprietor if he knew that was also the name of the mayor of New York. He did—indeed, he knew as much about Mayor Gaynor as I did. There were two other men sitting there, and they asked me to sit down. One of them was a mail carrier, and he told me something of his trips back up into the hills, and how almost all the letters he delivered were from America, each with a bit of money in it.

" When there is bad times in America," he went on, " and when men are out of work there, it pinches us here just as hard as it pinches them there—harder, maybe, for if the money don't come, there is nothing for it but the work-house. A man can't make a living on these poor hill farms, no matter how hard he tries, and there is no work to be had about here, save a little car driving and such like in the summer for visitors like yourself."

" Why do they stay here ?" I asked. " Why don't they go away ?"

" Where would they go ? There's no place for them to go in Ireland—America is the only place, and every one that can raise the money does go there, you may be sure. Them that's left behind are too poor or too old to cross the sea ; and then, however bad it is, there is some that will not leave the little home they was born in, so long as they can stay there and keep the soul in their body. There be some so wrongheaded that they won't even move down into the valley farms which they might be getting from the Congested Districts Board."

I have been fighting shy of the Congested Districts Board ever since I left Cork ; but here, in the very heart of the worst of the congested districts, I may as well explain what the words mean.

No one, travelling from Galway to Clifden and then on to Leenane, as we had done, would have thought of the district as “congested,” for, while the little huddles of thatched roofs which mark a village are fairly frequent, they are scarcely noticeable in the great stretches of hill and bog and rocky meadow among which they nestle. And, indeed, “congested,” in this sense, does not mean crowded with people ; it means exceptionally poor ; and there is no district of Ireland poorer than Connaught, that land of bog and granite, where every inch of ground must be either elaborately drained or wrested from the rock, and where, even after years of labour, the fields are still either so wet that a little extra rain ruins them, or so full of stones that the reaping must be done with the hook. In Connaught, even the poorest man has a right to be proud of his home, because, however small and mean it may be, it represents infinite toil.

But how does it come that any one lives in these hills, where life is such a constant and heartrending struggle ? The answer is that Connaught is the Irish pale. After Cromwell had subdued Ireland, the Puritan Parliament announced that it was “Not their intention to extirpate the whole nation,” as many people had been led, not unreasonably, to believe ; and a year later, they proved their humanitarian intentions by enacting that such Irish as survived should be permitted to live thereafter between the Atlantic and the Shannon, certain portions of which were set aside, as the Parliament said in unintentional rhyme,

“ For the habitation  
of the Irish nation.”

It was stipulated, however, that they should not settle within four miles of the sea, within four miles of a town, nor within two miles of the Shannon ; they were given until the first of May, 1654, to get into their new homes, after which date, any found outside of Connaught were to be treated as outlaws and killed out of hand. The misery and sufferings of the little bands of terror-stricken people, wandering in the depth of winter westward along unknown roads to an unknown, inhospitable country, will not bear thinking of—or, thinking of it, one can understand something of Irish hate for Cromwell’s memory. As a matter of fact, the edict sounds worse than it was, as such edicts usually do, for it was impossible for it to be literally carried out. All the Irish were *not* banished to Connaught, for many of them preferred to face death where they had always lived rather than among the Connemara hills ; and they were not murdered out of hand, but given work, for the new landlords were glad to employ them at menial labour, since no other labourers were to be had. But from that time on, it was usually the Protestant Englishman who lived in the mansion house, and the Irish Catholic whose home was roofed with thatch and floored with dirt.

Let us be careful not to grow sentimental over the wrongs of Ireland, nor to magnify them. They are not unique, for they have been paralleled many times in history. We should be careful, too, not to judge a seventeenth-century Parliament by twentieth-century ideals. There is this to be said for it : that its only hope of existence lay in stamping out rebellion, and the only way, apparently, to stamp out rebellion in Ireland was to kill the rebels. That the Parliament chose to banish them rather than kill them is so much to its credit, and I doubt not that, after the vote had been taken, many of those old Puritans went home with the feeling that they had done a merciful and Christian deed. Nor should we forget that the wars of religion were as bitter on one side as on the other : St. Bartholomew was far more bloody than Drogheda, and the removal of the Irish to Connaught was matched by the banishment of the Huguenots from France, thirty years later. It did not seem possible, in that day, that Protestant and Catholic could ever live side by side in peace and friendship, and that narrow

bigotry alone would strive to keep alive the memory of those mistaken, centuries-old feuds and persecutions.

The best portions of Connaught were already fully settled, as the fugitive Irish found when they got there ; furthermore, although the broad Shannon formed a natural moat which would hold safely the Irish who had crossed it, it was further strengthened by giving to Cromwell's soldiers all the broad belt of fertile land along the river, as well as the rich valleys running back into the hills. All that was left for the newcomers were the bleak moors and rocky mountain-sides, where no one else would live ; and since these, for the most part, were quite unfit to be cultivated, there was every reason to believe that the people condemned to live among them would soon cease from troubling.

But they didn't—at least, all of them didn't. They built rude shelters of rock for their families, and the cabins one sees to-day throughout Connemara are the direct descendants of those early ones, with scarcely an altered feature. They set to work to reclaim the hillsides, and though, every year, the spade turned up a new crop of stones, the fields slowly grew capable of producing a little food. Before that time, of course, many of the people had starved, but those that were left were all the better off, and it looked, for a while, as though they might some day be able to open the door without seeing the wolf there.

But the end was not yet. It should be remembered that these mountain farms did not belong to the people who had created them, and who laboured constantly to improve them, but were part of the “plantation” of some court favourite or adventurer, so that rent must be paid for them ; and as the farm improved the rent was raised, although the improvement resulted from the labour of the man who paid the rent, so that, in the end, it was not the tenant who was richer, but the landlord. If the rent was raised to a point where the tenant couldn't pay it, or if the landlord wanted the land, the tenant was evicted with absolutely no compensation for the improvements he had made. Then it was a question either of going to America, or, if there wasn't money enough for that, as was usually the case, of taking up some other stretch of rocky hillside, and beginning the weary struggle all over again. The craze for grazing, which started some forty or fifty years ago, resulted in the eviction of many thousands from farms their own industry had made, and to-day, as one drives through Connaught, one sees great stretches of land given over to sheep which were once part of such farms, and one can tell it is so by the faint ridges which mark the old tillage.

So evolution proceeded, but for the Irish peasantry it was devolution, for every step was a step downward ; and millions of them left the land in despair, and millions of those that remained were unable to make enough to live on ; and the workhouses kept getting bigger and bigger, and the people poorer and poorer ; until finally, a few English statesmen, with a somewhat broader outlook than the average, saw that something had to be done, and set about doing it. There is no need for me to enumerate the steps that were taken—some of them wise, many of them foolish ; but the greatest of all was the enactment of legislation permitting and assisting tenants to become the owners of the land on which they lived.

This was in 1891, when the Congested Districts Board was established, with wide powers, which have since been made wider still ; but the kernel of it all is this : in the west of Ireland, where the need is greatest, the board has power to condemn and purchase at a fair valuation the fertile land of the great land-owners, except the demesne, which is the park about the mansion house, and can then re-sell this land to small farmers, giving them about sixty years to pay for it, the payments being figured on the basis of the cost price, plus interest at the rate of four per cent. Such condemnation and re-selling is necessarily slow, but it is going steadily

forward, and must in the end, change the whole face of western Ireland. Indeed, there are some who think it has already done so.

The Congested Districts Board has done much more than buy and re-sell land ; it has aided and developed agriculture, improved the breeding of stock, encouraged the establishment of industries, developed the fisheries along the western coast, established technical schools—in short, it has assumed a sort of paternal oversight of the districts committed to its care.

All of the “congested districts” aren’t in the west of Ireland—there are districts in the east and south where the holdings are “uneconomic”—that is, where the income possible to be derived from them is not enough to support a family—sometimes not enough even to pay the rent. But conditions are worst in Connaught, and remain worst, in spite of the work of the board. It is here that life has sunk to its lowest terms, where the usual home is a hovel unfit for habitation, sheltering not only the family, but the chickens and the pigs and the donkey ; it is here that manure is piled habitually just outside the door, and where fearful epidemics sweep the countryside. At the time we were at Leenane, there was an outbreak of typhus a few miles back in the mountains. It had been announced with hysterical scare-heads by the Dublin papers, but the people of the neighbourhood thought little of it—they had seen typhus so often !

Which brings me back to Gaynor’s general store, and the mail-carrier who was telling me about the letters from America.

“Yes,” Gaynor put in, “and about the only letters that go out from here are for America—and well I know what is inside them ! There was a time when I sold stamps to the poor people, or gave credit to them when they couldn’t pay, and the only stamps I ever thought of buying was the tuppence-halfpenny ones, which we used to have to put on American letters. And many is the letter I have written for poor starving people praying for a little help from the son or daughter who had gone to the States, and who was maybe forgetting how hard life is back here in Connaught.”

“Not many of them do be forgetting,” said the mail-carrier, puffing his pipe slowly ; “I will say that for them. There be many away from here now,” he went on, “just for the summer—gone to England or Scotland to help with the harvest. It is a hard life, but they make eighteen shillings a week there, and the money they bring back with them will help many a family through the winter. There be thousands and thousands here in Connaught who could not live but for the money they make every year in this way.”

He stopped to watch Gaynor weigh out a shilling’s worth of flour—American flour !—for a girl who had come in with a dingy basket, into which the flour was dumped ; and then he went on to tell me something about his trips up over the hills for no house in Ireland is too poor or too remote for the mail-carrier to reach. Talk about rural delivery ! With us, a man must have his mail-box down by the highroad, where the carrier can reach it easily ; in Ireland, the carrier climbs to every man’s very door, and puts the letter into his hand—and I can imagine the joy that it brings. Irish mail-carriers play Santa Claus all the year round !

I tore myself away, at last, from this absorbing conversation, and started back to the hotel. The sun had not yet set ; but suddenly the thought came to me that it must be very late, and I snatched out my watch and looked at it. It was half-past eight an hour after the hotel’s dinner time ! However, in a fishing hotel, they are accustomed to the vagaries of their guests ; and I found that dinner had been kept hot for me.

An hour later, as we sat on the balcony in front of our room, gazing out across the moonlit water, we heard the tread of quick feet along the road, and, looking down, saw pass two constables, starting out upon their night patrol. And whenever I think of Leenane, I see those two slim, erect figures marching vigorously away into the darkness along the lonely road.

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