

A LIMERICK CHILDHOOD



My father brought his bride home to County Limerick in the south of Ireland. Their house had the grand-sounding name of Castle Troy

because of the castle which stood beside it on the banks of the Shannon. It was a pretty house and a beautiful castle - ruined and forlorn. The local parson, who was also the local poet, referred to it as "The lonely keep of Troy" in a romantic but rather bad poem.

The countryside had a grey-green beauty and great stillness - flat grazing-fields bordering the broad river, and in the distance the lavender outline of the Keeper mountain, the only hill of any size in that part of the Golden Vale district. In winter the river rose and flooded most of the fields surrounding the house, and at those times it was cut off from the outside world - tremendously romantic for me as a

By Moira Verschoyle

child, but not for my mother, to whom it meant increased isolation - and hers was not a nature for whom isolation held charm.

Castle Troy was a largish house with a view from the drawing-room windows that made people exclaim that they wished they could live there for ever. The house stood upon a rise of ground, one side overlooking the Shannon. Trees had been cleverly planted to frame the view of the river which curved towards us from a hazy background of willows and poplars in the far distance. Beneath the windows, on a lower level than the house, grew a double hedge which fascinated me as a child because it was said to have been used as a hiding-place in the past.

"Who was hiding? Who were they hiding from?" I asked.

"The rebels were hiding from the soldiers, of course".

"What soldiers?"

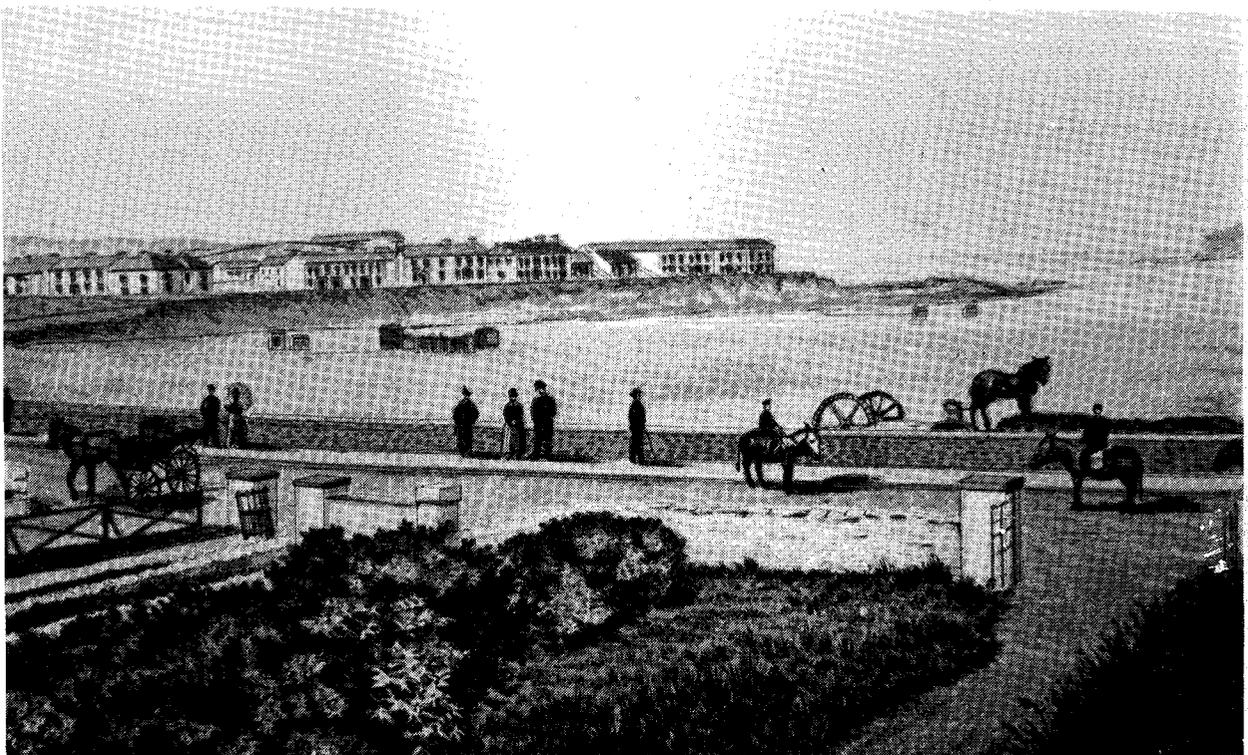
"Cromwell's men".

I should have known without asking.

It was always safe to attribute the ruining of castles, the burning and plundering, to Cromwell's men. As far as the Irish were concerned, these deeds had happened only yesterday, which made them deliciously real and horrid for a child.

"Up the Rebels", I would cry, as I banged about and prodded imaginary Roundheads with a pitchfork. "Down with dirty Cromwell!"

Inside, our house consisted of a hall which was sometimes used as a sitting-room by the hardy who dared to challenge the draughts, a double drawing-room, a dining-room and father's study, which was rarely used. There was a cold passage which ran to the kitchen quarters and which accounted for the fact that in winter the meat courses arrived in the dining-room coated with a glaze of congealed



The Kilkee Strand, 1880.

fat and the boiled puddings lost their comforting steam. Upstairs, the bedrooms and nurseries were draughty also, I suppose, but whether I didn't react to cold as a child or whether low wages and plentiful fire-wood kept them warm, I don't know - anyway, I don't remember shivering.

When she came to her new home Mother arranged the drawing-rooms with a foreign touch which gave them a lightness and grace unusual at that period. At one end she hung an enormous mirror flanked by statues of Apollo and Venus, hangings from Italy were draped as pelmets, and curtains were made of faded Roman satins which were more elegant than the fashionable chenille and plush of the day. The carpet might be shabby, but the holes were hidden under fur rugs. Across the entrance which led from the larger into the smaller room hung a bead curtain which jingled and tinkled each time it was disturbed. The dining-room, in contrast, was ugly but comfortable, with dark crimson walls, a hideous suite of chairs, and a top-heavy sideboard of really dreadful varnished wood.

When my mother first arrived in Ireland she found some difficulty in understanding and fitting in to her new surroundings. Like Italy, it was a Catholic country, but although Catholics constituted the majority of the population they had no power and few held much land, which was almost entirely in the hands of the Protestant minority. The reasons for this were historical. Grants of land had been made to the Protestants back in the sixteen hundreds, because a Protestant ascendancy could be expected to prove loyal to England, whereas there was always the fear that Catholics would incline towards their co-religionists in France. Some of the landed gentry, or the Ascendancy as they came to be known, were of Dutch origin: the Vershoyses, the Vansittarts, the Vanlerkistes amongst others. They had come from Holland round about 1648 to avoid Catholic persecution there, and now settled in southern Ireland, they felt themselves to have created a stronghold of Protestantism in a Papist world. In time, their religion became coloured with the Orange of Ulster, and they were more passionately loyal to England than, on some occasions, the English themselves desired.

They were also as a whole extremely low church. As the wife of a southern Irish Protestant, my mother found that she must accustom herself to the view that to turn to the east in the Creed was to turn to Rome, and she soon realised that it required a stiffer knee than hers to venture upon genuflection. It was a new, and for her, very curious outlook, but she loved her father and respected his wishes. She with Nonna had taught her to be

adaptable.

She had to understand the fervent political views of the Southern Irish Loyalists, views which could transform the pulpit of the tiny parish church into a soap box and the normally mild parson into a messenger of wrath. He would denounce those politicians past and present who had basely favoured Home Rule for Ireland, foretelling disaster for England should she lose her loyal Irish subjects and hinting darkly at the underhand methods of the Papists, who were, he had no doubt, using all their crafts and wiles to undermine the status of honest Protestants. Having outlined vividly the punishments that such people might expect on the Day of Judgement, and having pronounced a blessing upon his little flock of fourteen souls, he would descend from his pulpit and become once more his pleasant, diffident self.

He and Mother became great friends. Poetry, politics and Castle Troy were his chief passions; at his own expense he published a small volume of verse on the last two subjects, from which he used often to read aloud when he came to tea. I do not say that Mother listened - the poems were very bad - but she smiled and inclined her head sympathetically in a listening attitude, which really did just as well.

The ladies of the county called. I wonder what they thought of her? She was a bird of such different plumage from themselves, with a foreign accent, foreign ways and a totally different sense of values. She had a warm, effusive manner - too effusive perhaps by more reserved British standards - and a Latin touch to her humour which may not have struck the same note as theirs. She had no special prejudices either religious or political, but she would listen politely to the prejudices of other people, and although she did not share all their sporting tastes, she realised that for the Irish hunting and the cult of the horse were sacred subjects. For her, a horse was a useful, and at times beautiful animal, pleasant to ride or serviceable in the shafts of a carriage; but not a god.

I think that she was generally liked, but she did not become intimate with her Anglo-Irish neighbours. Country roads were bad, travelling by carriage took time, and without many common interests there was hardly enough inducement to make the effort of paying frequent visits to one's neighbours in the country.

She had a great feeling for the Irish peasantry, recognising in them their Italian counterparts. They had the same natural good manners and grace, there was the same mixture of shrewdness and simplicity, callousness and lush sentiment ... and the same volubility. How they talked! Listening, she was back again in Italy; the only

difference lay in the subjects discussed. In Italy there would have been less about politics, more about sexual jealousy, marital betrayals and crimes of passion. In Ireland there were few of those, for there the Church of Rome is more strongly Puritan in its outlook there than are the Puritans. Also, as a nation the Irish are not highly sexed. Their appetite for carnal knowledge in no way equalling their appetite for conversation, controversy and political argument. Mother would listen absorbedly to their stories of wrongs done, revenges scored (usually by word, not deed) and family feuds that were carried on more for the sake of the pleasurable arguments involved than for any other reason. She understood the complicated bartering that sometimes went on before a wedding could be arranged - so much livestock had to be exchanged between the bridegroom and the bride's parents that the couple were often middle-aged before they could be married. At other times a young bride would be sold, as it were, to an elderly man with a bit of land, and count herself lucky because she would know that the children she was to bear need not fear want, and that the piece of land would be there for them to work when they grew up. Mother understood the superstitions of the Irish peasants - her Italian upbringing had filled her with respect for all such things. She knew about dirt and appalling living conditions having seen so much of these in the poorer quarters of Naples. She threw herself wholeheartedly into her new life, and letters to her sisters were filled with scraps of news about calves being born "we had to give the poor cow half a bottle of whiskey before she picked up" and the litters of piglets "so pink and white and clean. I will fatten them for the Autumn". She discusses her plans for gardening, about which she has learnt remarkably quickly, and her battles with inexpert Irish labour, "the gardener said 'all them little plants yer gev me have died on me'. I was so furious, but he only grinned".

Her days were full, but still she was lonely. My father was not by nature articulate about his innermost feelings, and I do not think that in all her life she ever knew what was going on in his mind. He could become voluble about his two great interests, which were **Burkes Landed Gentry** and cricket, but neither of these were topics of burning interest to his wife.

"Is he in Burkes?" he would ask on hearing the name of a new acquaintance, and out would come the big red book. "Let me see ... would he be the son of So-and-So's cousin who inherited that property in Fermanagh? The brother married beneath him, I remember, but the sister's husband was related to the Such-and-Suchs ... a very good old family".

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He was agent for his brother Hamilton, who owned a lot of property in the South; after the passing of the Land Act, however, landowners were forced to break up their properties and sell to the tenants, so that Father found himself, through no fault of his own, left with nothing to do and with an income which had shrunk considerably. He pottered about, his heart and mind in the past, dwelling nostalgically on his days at Cambridge, the cricket weeks in England and the times when he had played for the Gentlemen of Kent. His feeling for the past was so strong that it swamped his interest in the present. It did not occur to him to consider his wife's thoughts, tastes or emotional needs. Hers was a responsive nature; she was easily wounded and equally easily comforted, but although he loved her, I do not think he ever realised how easy it would be to make her really happy. He was kind, even-tempered and, in a broad sense, a good husband, but he failed her in his refusal to probe beneath the surface of their lives and seek there for greater understanding and intimacy. In later years she would often say: "Your father is a **good** man," and I always wondered why she should feel it was necessary to lay emphasis on his goodness unless she felt that it made up for the other qualities he lacked.

A year after marriage a baby arrived, Gwenda, "such a darling little girl with really blue eyes". Then, after a further two years, there was a boy, Stuart, for whom my father planned a shining career in the Army and a series of successes in the cricket field. Mother's sisters were made godparents to the children, and for the next year or so correspondence going to and fro from Castle Troy was mainly concerned with baby matters. In the intimacy and warmth of the nursery, Mother found her world. She could love her babies without restraint.

But when the babies developed into children, she found that the intimacy eluded her. The process began when their nanny was replaced by a French nursery governess, who in turn gave way to an English governess. My mother instinctively resented the women whom she engaged to take charge of her children's minds and behaviour, although she knew that they were necessary.

In particular, she resented the influence of the Englishwoman, Miss Caws, feeling that she was in some way critical and hostile. "How I **do** hope that you will come and stay with me, dearest Fanny", she wrote. "I am so miserable sometimes. Miss Caws has such a dreadful, depressing effect on me. If it was not that she will get the children on I would not keep her for day. Yellow-faced, affected, marmosette (sic) monkey - for ever contradicting me. I long for another baby, a

bright, merry little thing to play with and a nursery to go to".

My sister was eleven years old and my brother nine when, to my father's dismay, Mother became pregnant again. Father was by then over fifty, and he wanted none of the disturbances in his house that a baby would bring. It was all a great nuisance. To Mother, at thirty-five, it was the answer to her prayers.

In spite of her outward respect for my father's Church she herself had always felt far closer to the Roman Catholic faith. She was familiar with the patron saints - more so, in fact, than with her own neighbours - and she knew which one to seek when she needed any special help or comfort in material as well as spiritual matters. Saint Anthony in particular was summoned almost daily when thimbles, gloves or other elusive things seemed to be unfindable, and he never failed to lead her to them. And latterly in her growing loneliness she had turned to the Virgin Mary of her childhood memories and had prayed that another baby might be given to her, promising that if it were a girl it would be named after her. And now at last there **was** going to be a child.

She wrote off ecstatically to her sisters, but it was not until the baby was four months on the way that she dared to let Nonna know about it. "Oh my goodness, what a rage Mama will be in when she knows!! (Mother's letters were always freely peppered with exclamation marks - it was the way she spoke). Please do pretend you knew nothing and **please** take my part when it is known. She will be so angry!! Tell her that Stuart is delicate and is going away to school. You are two darlings to say you are glad and not to feel it as a perfect disgrace at my age!! We will call it Robert if it is a boy (and oh **how** I hope it is not!) and Moira if it is a girl. Moira is the Irish for Mary". When the baby arrived it was a girl. My mother hugged it, talked baby-talk to it in Italian and English and spoil it in such a way as to make the other children heartily sick of it, I imagine. I was so fat that my eyes were like brown dots in my face, but she wrote that "Baba is so **so** sweet. She flirted so much with the clergyman at her christening that she didn't mind the water".

My first visual impression of my mother is that she diffused a sort of light, that her body was not quite solid as other people's were. The sound of her voice was light also and silky, like water rippling, with a great variety of tone. Later, when I noticed more details, it seemed to me that she was nearly always clothed in pale colours - but perhaps I registered those only because I liked them more than sober browns and blacks. As a little girl I liked to see her dressed in summer clothes, particularly those Edwardian blouses

with puffed sleeves and boned net insets at the neck, above which her head was so beautifully poised. She wore her fair hair in wings springing on either side of her temples and always the same loosely curled fringe that she had worn as a girl. She carried herself gracefully, and although in later years ill-health rendered her tired and listless so that she could no longer care how she looked for everyday life, she never lost the ability to rise to an occasion and to make, as her mother had, a "bella figura" in her party clothes.

When I was little she was my best companion. The slightest things could give her enjoyment, and her spirits were so infectious that one instantly fell in with her mood. "Let us make it a festa!" she would say of ordinary happenings, and at once they became special and alive with fun. A picnic by the river, a drive in the dogcart, tea in the hayfield, they were all treats to be enjoyed with the maximum zest. And although, childlike, I sometimes brushed aside her caresses, I never could have too much of her self. She was my best treat of all ...

When I was between four and five years old, father must have been extra hard-up, for he let Castle Troy and we went to live in a little place on the coast of the Atlantic, called Kilkee. We were there for about a year, and it was a glorious time for me. Kilkee was small, our house was small, and so my life had a closer, cosier feeling about it than I'd been used to before.

Mother was very happy at Kilkee, and I was happy too, for I was with her a lot more than I had been at Castle Troy. We shrimped, we bathed, we picnicked on the sands. And in everything we did she seemed to enjoy herself in the same kind of way as I did. I never felt "this is only a grown-up pretending to have fun" ... she **did** have fun and she threw herself into it with her whole being.

There was a long, rocky reef thrusting out into the sea on one side of the bay. When the tide was in the water covered it, and when it went out again the water drained away from the rocks, leaving myriads of creatures trapped in the pools. We spent hours on those rocks, fishing for pollock or shrimping - just looking down into the pools. Some were deep, some shallow, and there was a wonderful world in all of them. Fish, strangely coloured, darted across patches of sunlit water, jelly-like shapes heaved themselves slowly up out of the sand and then sank back again, sea anemones clung to the sides of the rocks, shooting out frightening bunches of tendrils and then closing up into a round knob; there was mauve and green seaweed as well as the brown kind with little bulges which were fun to squeeze and burst.

I suppose it must have been dark and

rainy sometimes, but I only remember those rock pools as magically transparent in the sun. I would hang my bare feet in the water, watching shoals of minnows swim up to my toes and then flash away again at the slightest movement. Sometimes tiny crabs scuttled across the bottom of the pool to give nips like midge bites to my feet. I was hypnotised, staring down in wonder at that other world. Every ripple, every shudder in the sand meant that some mysterious creature for some mysterious reason was acting in some mysterious way that I couldn't understand. They crept, they darted, they hurried here and there. Where were they going to, and why? They seemed at times to be so purposeful and busy, at other times so still. I stared and puzzled. Mother was puzzled too, for she had nearly as little knowledge of that marine life as I had, which was nice, because we could make guesses and try to work things out together. Often our invention failed.

When the weather was wild, Mother and I went walking on the headland beyond the bay. Just as the rocks and pools seem to be bathed in perpetual sunshine in my memory, so there is always a storm wind buffeting us on the headland, and a thunderous noise as the Atlantic rollers dash themselves against the great cliffs. When the gale blew in from the sea the spume rose and spread in a fine mist, soaking us as we fought our way along, I gripping Mother's arms in case I was blown off my stout legs. When the wind blew off the land it was dangerous to walk too near the edge. "You might be blown all the way to America, there's nothing between us and there".

In rough weather the seals came into the coves ...

The pattern of my life changed when we went back to Castle Troy. Instead of the close little family group that there had been at Kilkee, the household had now broken up into three.

There was the group which consisted of my parents and my brother and sister when they were at home, the "downstairs" as I thought of it. Georgette and I in the nursery were the "upstairs", and the third lot were the people in the servants' hall.

Perhaps I had grown to need Mother's company less at this time, or perhaps she was too busy for me now that she was back in the bigger house, but at all events I don't remember her as vividly in this period as I remember her at Kilkee, although then I was even younger. She taught me the beginnings of reading and set me pages of pot-hooks to do in my copy-book but it is my struggles with these and the cats who sat on mats that I remember chiefly, not Mother. My memories of that year or so are nearly all of the kitchen world, the stable yard and the garden.

The kitchen quarters were a series of large, bleak rooms with stone floors, and the bleakest of them all was the servants' hall, where the staff were supposed to eat and to relax in their off-moments. There were no regular off-moments as there are nowadays, so they did all their relaxing round the table during their meals. It was a big table, of plain scrubbed wood, and I don't think it ever had a cloth on it. Around it stood plain wooden chairs, and along one side of the room there was a plain wooden dresser; that was all the furniture. And there was no fire. The table was the social centre, and everyone sat round it for as long as they wished, talking and eating. They talked about the United States of America ... They discussed what the priest, Father Thomas, had said from the pulpit on Sunday; it was usually something to do with drink or immodesty. And the men argued a lot about hurley matches.

I wasn't supposed to go into the servants' hall during meals because of a belief that they didn't want anyone there while they were eating. The ban created a sort of mystique about this for me, and whenever Georgette was busy writing or reading her letters from France I would slip away and have a taste of whatever was going as well as a bit of life.

Mrs. Hanlon, the cook, sat at one end of the table with the tea-pot in front of her. Her husband, who was the coachman, sat at the other end. Along the sides were Kitty the parlourmaid, Johnny Deegan the gardener, Flanagan the odd man, and Tommy Madigan the boy-of-all-work. Sometimes a tweeny came and went during the holidays, but more often there were just the people I have mentioned. I don't think the Hanlons earned more than fifty pounds a year between the two of them, but it was a larger wage than the others, and it gave them a superior position. I know that Kitty earned sixteen pounds a year, because I'd heard Mother talking about raising her to eighteen "as she is such a smart girl". Flanagan got less than Johnny Deegan, which made him grumble, but Johnny lived out with his mother in her cottage, so his wage of twenty pounds was not worth much more than Flanagan's eighteen.

Surely I remember much more food being eaten in those days than is eaten now? There were pigs' heads with sinister shut eyes, and piles of cabbage and boiled potatoes ladled out of the saucepan on to the plate. There were huge legs of mutton, boiled grey, with swedes and turnips round them, and Irish stew simmering about in lots of fat.

Usually, tea was the only meal that I could manage to be present at in the servants' hall, but it was a gorgeous meal. There was the big enamel tea-pot which had stood all day on the side

of the range, so that the liquid inside was like black syrup, and big white cups with golden shamrocks on them. Not that we drank out of them, for we preferred to blow on our tea and cool it in the saucers. There were loaves of hot soda-bread which let out bursts of steam when broken open, barn bracks, and sometimes potato-cakes. I never tasted baker's bread except a thin buttered slice in the drawing-room when there were visitors, or with Mother's early morning tea, and it tasted to me like paper, and seemed deadly dull compared to lovely hot chunks of the other kind smothered in fresh butter.

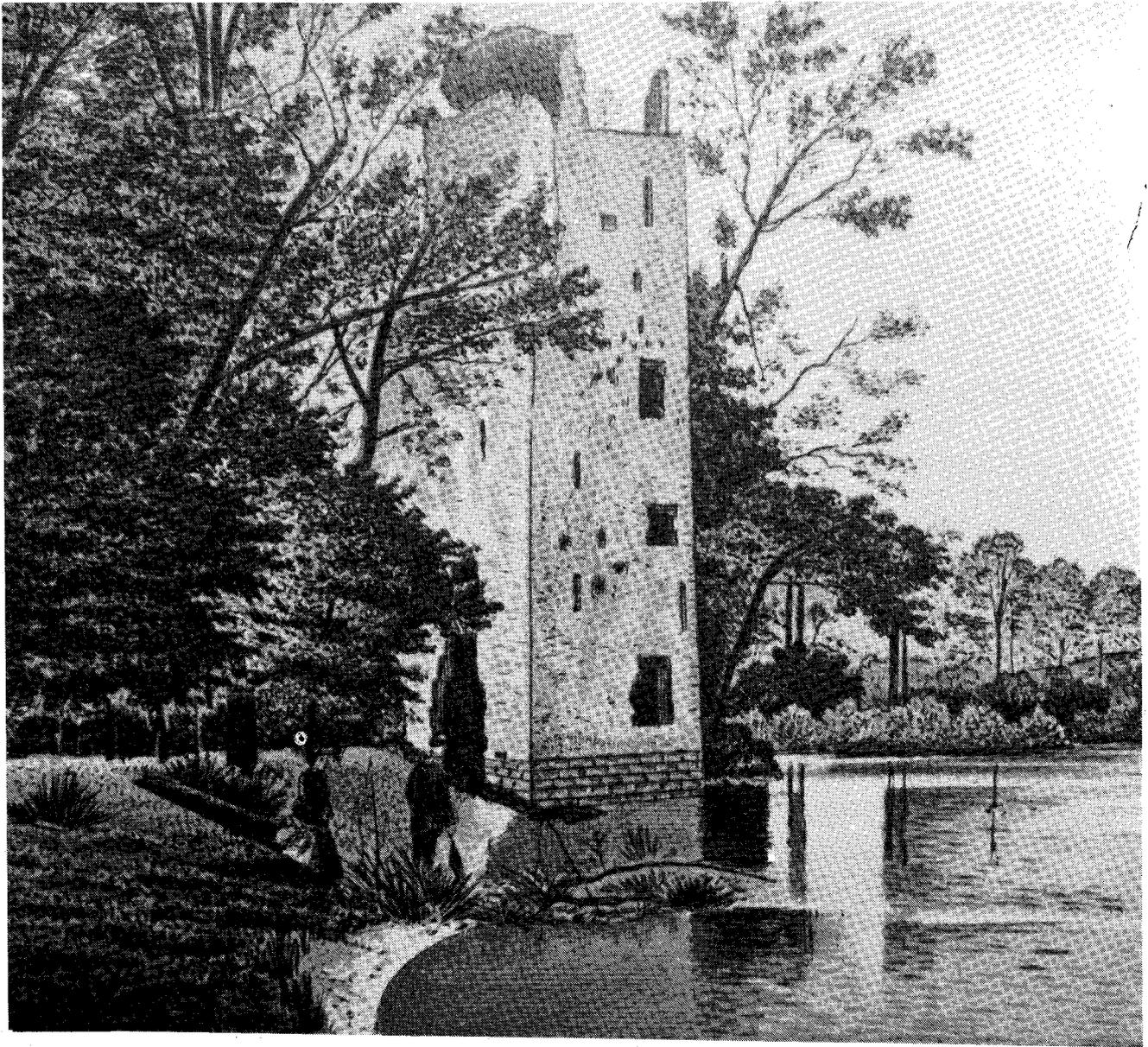
The avenue at Castle Troy ran for about half a mile. Beyond the outer gate there was a farm, and the farm traffic crossing and re-crossing the lane had turned it into a breen whose surface was pitted with holes and in winter churned up by the carts into a muddy morass. Relations between Father and Murphy, the farmer, were often strained on account of this.

Although I was not supposed to, I often managed to find my way to the farm buildings so as to see the litters of bonives or the puppies that were born at regular intervals to a mangy and rather unattractive bitch called Lily. Lily's puppies differed remarkably with each litter; sometimes she gave birth to little furry creatures with white coats, sometimes to shiny black ones with heads like baby seals and once she surprised everyone by producing five little things with hardly any legs at all they were so short, who's father no one was even able to guess at. But however many pups she gave birth to, she was never allowed to keep more than one. Where the others went I wasn't told, but I had once caught a horrifying glimpse of Mike, the farmer's son, bundling three of them into a sack. He said he was going to give them away, but I knew better; I had seen too many of those grisly sacks caught up in the branches of fallen trees in the river not to know what they held.

Every year, just before the licences were due to be paid, the country people who couldn't or didn't want to pay them settled the matter by drowning their dogs, flinging them into the river with a stone tied to their legs or else tied up in a sack. The carcasses would in time fill up with gases, and if the stone broke loose they would rise to the surface to float like monstrous balloons until they finally blew up with a bang. Children used to amuse themselves by throwing stones at them, hoping to cause the explosion, but they would run away before the sickening stench reached their nostrils ...

"One of the D'Oyly Carte Companies is coming to Limerick after Christmas," Mother said. "I'll take tickets for a matinee. Baba never hears any music, and it's good for a child".

"I can sing hymns," I said, "Hark the



Castle Troy, 1880.

Herald ... and Hold the Fort. Lots more too ..."

"Hymns are different. I want you to learn to like Gilbert and Sullivan. When you're a big girl you'll have singing lessons. It's a very useful talent".

I had never been to a theatre, and I wasn't sure what to expect, but Mother said that they'd act a story as well as singing it. That sounded all right to me, although I'd never seen acting either.

"We'll make a day of it", Mother said. "In the morning I'll take you to the dentist, and then we'll have lunch with Mrs. Vanderlind, and afterwards we'll go to the theatre".

We drove into Limerick, dropped Father at the Country Club, and then Mother took me on to the dentist's house. I wasn't nervous because I knew that she rather enjoyed having gas - she said that it made her drift off to sleep quite happily - and I thought I might enjoy it too. Besides, there was a shilling coming to me afterwards,

which meant twelve Buffalo Bills ...

... Although Limerick was not a centre of frivolity and fashion, there were occasional dances and Hunt Balls to be thought of as well as parties for the Horse Show and other similar County festivities.

During the haymaking season there were picnics in the fields, and young men (who must have been admirers of my sister's to do so) came and wielded pitchforks and played at helping. Gwenda looked neat and pretty wearing a sun-bonnet, and I remember thinking it was very dashing and gay of a tall youth in a Sandhurst blazer to chase her, trying to tickle her face with a wisp of hay. I wondered why she should look so pink and embarrassed, even a little cross. Flirtation must have been pleasantly artless then.

Most of the young men provided as partners for the daughters of the local gentry were subalterns drawn from the garrison in Limerick. Sons of Anglo-

Irish families were few and far between, most of them being in the Services or in the Colonies. Few went into the professions and almost none into trade, which was considered to be beyond the pale except for Quakers, who were excused on account of their traditions. I think this snobbish outlook accounted for the fact that many of the Ascendancy were reduced to near poverty, and it was perhaps because of that poverty that they clung, as my father did, so passionately to their family trees. There was a struggle to keep up appearances which resulted in many unnecessary worries, and a great sensitivity about admitting to hardship.

The young men home on leave or the subalterns from the garrison would bring with them new songs, new dances and talk of new "shows" in London. And I would sit upon the stairs watching couples shuffle round the hall to strains from the gramophone.