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 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 time. At one and a half hundreds, because a Protestant minority fared better than, on some occasions, the Irish peasantry, recognising in them their same natural good manners and grace, their shrewdness and simplicity, their callousness with Nonna had taught her to be very curious and to mull over the new impressions, but she loved her father and respected his wishes. She was brought up to live within the limits of the Protestant world, and when battles were fought and the crier announced the news, she always knew what was going on in his mind. He could become voluble 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 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 was more strongly Puritan in its outlook than were 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 absorbently, to their stories, and then retell them to her friends. Poetry, politics and Castle Carbery were her chief passions; at her 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 modern 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 them, she realized that for the Irish hunting and the cult of the horse were sacred objects. 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, the same mixture of shrewdness and simplicity, callousness and lust 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 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 absorbently, to their stories, and then retell them to her friends. Poetry, politics and Castle Carbery were her chief passions; at her 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.

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When she came to her new home Mother arranged the drawing-rooms with a foreign touch which gave them a light and graceful visual and musical 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 bed curtain which jingled and tinkled each time it was disturbed. The dining-room, in contrast, was ugly but comfortable. When you entered you would have been met by 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, and although the Irish 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 landlord was more likely to ride or serviceable in the shafts of a horse or carriage than a Catholic one. By this means 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 their 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.

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was a boy, Stuart, for the influence of the Englishwoman, Miss Gwenda, "such a darling little girl with soft brown eyes and sweet frocks that they made me think of the Virgin Mary of my childhood memories and had prayed that another baby might be given to her, promising that if it were a girl it would be named Moira after her. And now at last there was going to be a child.

She wrote off ecstatically to her sisters. 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 said things). She felt “this is only a grown-up pretending to be a child”.

She was very happy at Kilkee, and I was happy too, for I was with her. But when the babies developed into children, she found that the intimacy and warmth of the nursery, Mother found her world. She could love her babies with all her heart.

But when the babies developed into children, she found that the intimacy eluded her. The process began when her 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 do you know 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 a day. Yellow-faced, affected, maroonette (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 her 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 in 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.

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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. 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, and so was Daddy. They knew nearly all of the younger. She taught me the beginnings 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.

The pattern of my life changed when the weather was wild, Mother and I went walking on the headland because the rock pools seemed to be drowned 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 sky turned from the sombre 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 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, ofplain 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 hurl matches.

I wasn’t supposed to go into the servants’ hall during meals because of a belief that they didn’t want anyone there who was eating. The ban had 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 twosy came and went in 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’s family was of poor stock, and I knew better; I had seen too many of those grisy sacks caught up in the bronze tides on the rocks, and the bleakest of them all was the rocks.

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 those nearer so are nearly all of the kitchen world, the stable yard and the garden.

“Of the D’Oyly Carte Companies is coming to Limerick after Christmas,” Mother said. “I’ll take tickets for a matinee. Boba never hears any music, and he is a good loyal chum for all 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 boresen whose surface was pitted with holes. The litter 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 sometimes to 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 pigs she gave birth to, she was never allowed to keep more than one.

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 one tied to their leg and the other 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...

I can sing hymns,” I said, “Hark the
Herald ... and Hold the Fort. Let's 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 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.