

Touring Ireland 1884

Letters from the west of Ireland 1884

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I the less regret having missed the Clare coast that I fear, so far as writing for others is concerned, these descriptions of rock scenery must become sadly monotonous. There are the same dizzy precipices, the same vast expanse of sea, and the same rocky islands stretching along off the shore in the distances, which can much more easily be imagined than photographed by the pen. But I may give some reliable practical details at second hand, having conversed with many people who are familiar with the localities. Lisdoonvarna is now, perhaps, the most popular and fashionable watering-place in all the west. Though its chalybeate and ferruginous waters, and its magnesian springs, said to be sovereignly specific for many diseases, have been known for centuries, it has only sprung up into a favourite resort for visitors in the last sixteen years. Now there are five hotels, all fairly comfortable; but during the season they are so overcrowded that it is difficult for passing tourists to find rooms, which is to be regretted, as they are the best and most convenient quarters for awaiting favourable weather to visit the cliffs. The beginning of the cliff wall is some seven miles away. It runs for fully six miles along the coast southward to the Hag's Head : paths lead here and there up the rough landward slopes, covered with bent - grass, while parallel paths have been cut along the brink, protected on the sea side by parapets of slate slabs. The height is almost everywhere over 600 feet ; and though there are far loftier precipices in Donegal and on Achill, the feature of these bulwarks of Clare is their long wall-like regularity. Besides, nowhere do the rollers of the Atlantic burst with more tremendous force ; and the time to see Moher to advantage is in a storm or in the after groundswell. In calm weather the correct thing is to coast round them in one of the frail coracles of the local fishermen. But you may have to wait long at Lisdoonvama for a really favourable day. Not even in Galway does it rain so persistently; for Lisdoonvarna lies in a little valley high among the hills, and those hills attract the rain-clouds from the Atlantic. There are no trees, there is scarcely any vegetation, and with the exception of the springs and lively society, the only fascination is the fresh dry air—when you can get it. Society, as I am told, is exceedingly gay there. Picnic parties are being perpetually arranged for the few fine days when the weather permits of them. The hotels are more than sufficiently cheerful within doors in the wet ; and morose or misanthropic tourists might possibly object to the dances which are boisterously kept up to all hours of an evening.

Of a very different character is the district through which the railway passes from Galway to Ennis, and yet it is not without an interest of its own. There are fine views of Galway Bay, and afterwards of the Clare hills in the distance. But immediately on either side of the line is a dead flat, though, strange to say, there is scarcely a sign of a peat-bog : on the contrary, it is all limestone and rich soil. The general aspect is a wilderness of rough stone walls, enclosing an infinity of small irregular subdivisions. The walls seem to be built as much for the purpose of clearing off the stones as for separating the patches of different crofters. Stones are piled up in lofty cairns in the middle of the fields ; stones crop up everywhere above the surface, so that the hay nook or the tiny oats patch seems to be three-fourths a stone quarry ; the stone, as I am told, often lies within a few inches of the surface, though that scanty covering of soil may be nevertheless luxuriantly green. Nothing can show more conclusively the quality of

the land, or the excess of the moisture that makes such vegetation possible. Changing trains at Athenry for Ennis, we wait for a couple of hours ; we always seem to be waiting at junctions here for hours, more or less. I went for a walk about the little town, and was exceedingly struck by what I saw. There is a wealth of stone in a waste of ruins. In the first place, there is a really fine old castle, the square keep, of imposing proportions, standing up in its grim isolation among rambling and formidable outworks, thickly overgrown with ivy, which still resist the ravages of time. In the second place, there are the remains of a venerable abbey, which are blended not inartistically with a handsome new parish church, the ancient buttresses and arches of the one being built into the brand-new walls of the other. While finally, and most remarkable of all, is the immense extent of the former fortifications of the township. Shattered but solid stone walls, still 14 to 20 feet in height, enclose a space which, being no land surveyor, I should estimate roughly at from 60 to 80 acres And it must have been a strong and defensible fortification in its day, for there are still round towers with bartizans and loopholes at the angles, while a moat that encircles the whole *enceinte* could be easily flooded from the neighbouring river. The guide-books say little or nothing about Athenry, although it must evidently have had a history, and an eventful one. These comprehensive defences must have been meant to enclose pasture for the cattle in times of siege, and probably, as in our Border villages on the Tweed and under the Cheviots, a certain extent of arable “ in field.” And all along the way to Ennis the solitary keeps standing roofless in the fields tell of feuds and forays and constant hard fighting.

Ennis is a quaint little town and a thriving one, though it must depend mainly for its prosperity on the agricultural produce of the neighbourhood. It was market-day when I arrived, and a good many pigs and some firkins of butter were changing hands. Though Ennis stands in a plain, there is much that is picturesque about it : there are bridges over a rapid river, shaded by leafy avenues ; there is an old abbey, as at Athenry, mixed up with a modern church ; there is a huge meal mill gone out of work ; there is a staring new cathedral which must have cost a great deal of money—the magnificence of many of these modern ecclesiastical buildings may partly explain the poverty of the Irish peasantry ; and there are many beautiful gentlemen’s places in the vicinity. I walked out along a dull straight road over the level to one of the prettiest bits of lowland scenery I have seen in Ireland. The plain swelled gradually into soft low hills ; the soil seemed to get the better of the rugged grey limestone, though everywhere were striking conglomerations of rocks. Fat cattle, Durhams or shorthorns, were feeding or being milked on the rich sloping meadows ; luxuriant woods crowned the slopes and overhung the road. This very attractive place was not inappropriately named Edenvale, and were I not afraid of insulting this county, under cover of a compliment, I should say Edenvale was genuinely English. It reminded me much of some of the seats upon the moors in the most picturesque districts of the West Riding of Yorkshire.

I found on inquiry that my first impressions had not deceived me as to the fertility of that stony land. The county of Clare must be one of the most remarkable pastoral districts in the world—anywhere at least to the westward of Syria. Great part of it is occupied chiefly by graziers, and their flocks appear to fatten on the rocks. There is the country of Burrin, for example, in which are Lisdoonvarna and the Cliffs of Moher. The westward incline is towards the Atlantic, and looking upwards from the side of the sea nothing but grey rock is to be seen. It was of Burrin that the Dutchman De Ginkel satirically remarked that there was neither water enough to drown a man, nor wood enough to hang him, nor earth enough to bury him. Had William’s general surveyed it from the eastern heights, he would have looked down upon a vegetation as rich as anything in his native polders, and infinitely sweeter. The pasture in these parts of Burrin, with all the stones thrown in, lets for from £2. 10s. to £3 the Irish acre. On a beautiful estate of the Misses O’Brien, with a most unpronounceable name, the maiden-hair flourishes in clefts of the rocks that are actually splashed by the spray of the

ocean. Land elsewhere may be less valuable, but that blending of rocks and grass is the general character of the country. The best districts of Clare are populated by graziers, dairy farms being rather the exception. The cattle are left out of doors through the winter ; and according as grazings are more or less suited for “ winterage,” they fetch more or less rent. The innumerable stone fences in themselves offer a certain shelter; and besides, all sorts of trees and bushes are encouraged, to the leeward of which the storm-beaten beasts may take refuge. Here and there are high, thick, straggling hedgerows ; sometimes there is a clump of timber in the corner of a field ; and constantly among the loosely piled cairns I have described, stunted thorn-trees flourish in matted luxuriance. The cattle when fattened are sent to the October fair at Ballinasloe, where they are bought up by the Meath graziers ; or buyers come in quest of them to the spring fairs at Ennis. Generally they are sold as three-year-olds, when they may fetch from £15 to £18, having been bought as yearlings from £8 to £11 from the smaller dairy farmers in Limerick and elsewhere. It is obvious from these figures that the profits must be small ; and indeed I am assured on good authority that the profits are very nearly nothing. The people must turn their land to some use, and so they go on feeding in faith, hoping for a speedy turn in their favour. But they breed excellent sheep as well, and with the sheep at present they are doing far better. Feeding cattle as they do, their holdings are comparatively extensive. The larger men rent from 300 to 500 acres, while the smallest have seldom less than 40. Before the famine of 1848 this part of the county was overcrowded like so many others ; but after that time it was cleared by deaths, distress, emigration, and evictions, very much to the subsequent benefit both of tenants and landlords.

There have been no very considerable reductions of rent by the Land Court Commissioners ; and here, on these purely grazing estates, the question of improvements can hardly have been prominent. There have been no great reductions of rent, except near Kilrush on the north of the Shannon estuary, where are what are called the “ cut-away bogs.” These are bogs which have been made arable, or rather have become arable, on the converse of Mr Mitchell Henry’s system at Kylemore. In place of enriching peat, bottomed at a moderate depth, by sand or gravel, the pure peat has been removed by the natural process of turf-cutting, leaving good agricultural soil beneath. These cut-away bogs are said to produce about the best oats, potatoes, and roots in the county. As they were made available by the self-acting process of being laid bare, tenants had spent little or nothing on reclamation. They were never believed to be excessively rented ; and yet for some reason or another, the Land Commissioners have been reducing generously around Kilrush. Notwithstanding the unsatisfactory state of the cattle markets, the people generally are more than fairly well off. Until the land agitation, and while cattle were still selling well, they had been saving money, and accumulating in the banks. Even now, though they have rarely added to their deposits, they manage to pay their way and hold their own. It is a very significant trait of the Irish character, that rather than break in upon a deposit receipt they will draw a two or three months’ bill ; just as in the ignorant old times before 1848 they would pledge a £10 note for a few shillings in preference to changing it. And in drawing a bill they are always accommodated by neighbours, who look for similar accommodation in turn, so that if the tenants lose by their superstition, the banks are the gainers. Nowhere has there been more agitation than here, and Clare was the first county to return a Parnelite member. But here the rule holds good which I have remarked everywhere, that the agitation has only laid hold of the poorest. It was confined almost entirely to the smaller crofters who cannot afford to have grazings at all, and who were naturally jealous of the prosperity of their neighbours. And in Clare, as I am informed, men are straitened in their circumstances now who would have considered themselves wealthy thirty or forty years ago. Wages, where wages are paid, are far higher ; the crofters have larger holdings and make more by them. But it is the people themselves to a certain extent, and in the next place the shopkeepers, who profit. The landlords have as much trouble as before in collecting the smaller of their reduced rents. The people dress better and they feed

far better. In place of never tasting meat at all, many of the lesser graziers have it many days in the week. That better living may be so far a gain, but they are become extravagant according to their means and station. I had remarked myself, through the whole course of my tour, even in the wilds of Donegal and the mountains near Lough Mask, that the old caubeen—the tall battered hat—and the long ragged fly-away coat in which the Irishman is still depicted in our comic papers, have disappeared altogether. The women may be attired wretchedly enough, but the men, though sometimes tattered, wear the same style of clothes as you see on the English labourer or artisan. Yet, take it all in all, I repeat that the people here are prosperous, and might be more so were they more frugal, more intelligent, and more enterprising. They are careless and stupid from the agricultural point of view, and will stick in the old grooves. Thus, there is no reason why, where they take to dairy-farming, they should not send first-class butter to market ; as a rule, however, the butter is always inferior, so it is bought up cheap by speculators for Manchester and the Channel ports. And as the people are prosperous but rather wasteful, so the town of Ennis is flourishing. As I supposed, it makes its money directly or indirectly by agricultural or pastoral produce ; local dealers buy the butter for distribution ; cattle are freely sold in the spring, and pigs find a ready market with the agents of the Limerick buyers. But Ennis is also the centre of a number of small towns, all of which it supplies with goods of all kinds, which explains the show made by the competing shops and the brisk business they are evidently transacting.

LIMERICK, *September 13.*

AFTER passing through decaying or poverty-stricken towns, where the streets are either mean and bare, or where rather dilapidated houses seem to have been flung about anyhow, it is a pleasure making a cheerful entry into Limerick. Not that Limerick has not its miserable quarters, where rags, dirt, and vice are conspicuously displayed between the den-like dwellings and the filthy gutters ; but the main street, which touches on the Shannon at the eastern end, is among the best-built provincial thoroughfares in the kingdom ; while the Shannon itself is a noble stream, bordered on the southern bank by broad wharves and spanned by sundry handsome bridges. At the “ West end ” are other fairly good streets, with a prettily laid-out public garden. The Royal Hotel is tolerably comfortable, with a civil, intelligent, and bustling landlord, who, having lately taken it, will probably improve the attendance,—and it has several competitors of promising appearance. From the front windows of the “ Royal ” there is a delightful view up the river, shut in to the north-eastward by the round green hills of Clare. At the northern end of the bridge, which breaks the prospect, supported on a pedestal, is the rough block of stone on which the memorable “ Treaty of Limerick ” was signed *al fresco*. Close to that bridge are the Cathedral and the Castle. Thackeray in his ‘ Sketch Book ’ abuses the former and admires the latter. With all deference to the great novelist’s impressions, I can only say that the square grey cathedral tower is a most picturesque object from many points of the city, while the look-out from the garden and graveyard in the precincts opens a fine panorama down the course of the Shannon. As for the body of the cathedral, it is so blocked up by trees and houses that you can only criticise it from immediately beneath the windows, so that it counts for little in the general effects ; while the grey circular towers of the castle, rent and mended again with red new bricks, show like the roughly patched seat of an Irish gossoon’s ragged breeches, and embrace the hideous mass of the modern barracks, like a tattered baldrick of the olden time buckled round the cast tunic of a linesman. What is more striking to the stranger, perhaps, than this imposing leading thoroughfare, are the exceedingly handsome shops therein. So far as these shops are concerned, capital must have been liberally laid out. For example, just over the way from the hotel is the great upholstery and haberdashery magazine of Cannock & Co., with its many-storeyed façade, with its liveried attendant in waiting at the doors, with cars and open vehicles pulling up continually, and with its own gaily varnished covered carts to carry the parcels about among its custom-

ers. That is only one great shop among many : frontages being cheap, there is ample elbow-room, and the fitting up and the furnishing would often do credit to Regent Street. There are a couple of chemists, next door to each other, with sumptuous establishments that might apparently physic the whole of Munster ; and there are at least two or three enormous groceries and Italian warehouses, which, I am told, do an immense wholesale business among small shopkeepers in the province. In fact, Limerick, like Clare, is a distributing centre for the surrounding districts, though on a much more extensive scale.

But Limerick does something more than distribute, and has steady-going flourishing industries of its own. As at Galway, the most conspicuous of the public buildings are the enormous meal mills. One is rather a striking object in the neighbourhood of the castle and cathedral ; three others stand side by side, in great walled enclosures, facing the wharves and the docks ; and they have *succursales* standing in the suburbs or on the upper course of the Shannon. But while Galway millers have been gradually going to the wall, those of Limerick still manage to hold their own against American and Australian flour importers. The secret is that they have energy as well as capital. Small mill-owners who cling to their primitive appliances must close their doors sooner or later. But the Limerick men have taken to grinding by steam-power,—and some of them, like the Messrs Ballantyne, have just been introducing the latest improvements in machinery ; so that grain is still shipped to the Shannon, and there is little importation of foreign flour. The Spaightes, who do not grind, are said to be the largest of the consignees ; but the business of the Messrs Russell is perhaps the most noteworthy, for they not only grind the flour, but bake it into bread. They stick to a quiet, old-fashioned home-trade, they distribute bread to Limerick and the neighbourhood, and they have agents in many of the towns of the west who have subsidiary bakeries attached to their flour-stores. Next in importance to the grinding and baking comes the curing of hams and bacon. The houses of the Mathiesons, the Shaws, and the Dennys offer a ready market for pigs from the country, and nearly 7000 animals are slaughtered weekly. These houses carry on a large Irish trade, and the surplus hams or sides of bacon are consigned to London or Liverpool. It was at Limerick that Sir Peter Tait started his army clothing establishment, which in his time employed 600 workpeople. The undertaking, after changing hands more than once, is still carried on, though on a less extensive scale. As for the Limerick lace, it is now made in a very small way by a few hand-workers ; but the Limerick gloves, that once had a great reputation, are as much things of the past as mailed gauntlets.

The wharves are spacious enough, and there is a dock of considerable size ; but there are few signs of life or of business to be seen on the river-banks, except when the workmen are pouring out of the steam-mills. The Shannon is accessible to ships of heavy burden at high tides, when there are from 18 feet to 20 feet of water ; at spring-tides there are 22 feet. But the approach through winding channels would appear to be difficult and decidedly dangerous. At least yesterday I saw, only a quarter of a mile below the dock, a great full-rigged grain ship of something like 1800 tons, driven up high and dry on the right bank. She had swung round and run aground while being towed up the day before ; they said it was a Limerick pilot who was in fault, but there she will lie till the spring-tide floats her. And the ferryman who pulled me across the stream pointed to the boilers of a large steamer which had been wrecked a few months ago about fourteen miles further down the river. That was probably in the vicinity of the Cock Rock, an obstruction which it has been repeatedly proposed to remove, though I am informed that the rock is not so much dangerous in itself as on account of the mud banks which silt up behind it. The Shannon folk do not appear to care for a sea-faring life, and Limerick seems to have no vessels of its own. There is a weekly line of steamers to Glasgow, and a fortnightly line to Liverpool ; but they carry no passengers, because no travellers care to go by them. Emigration from Limerick and Tipperary counties is directed overland to Kingstown and other ports to the eastward. As usual, the Scotch steamers

bring coal, sugars, groceries, cottons, and woollens ; and, as usual, they must often go back in ballast. The whole of the grain is brought here in foreign bottoms. Strolling down the quays and round the docks, I saw ships from California, New England, and Nova Scotia, but none hailing from Irish ports, except one or two small coasting hookers.

But if the middle classes here are thriving, and though there are many considerable employers of labour at good wages, it is evident that there is a great deal of destitution. I have spoken of the sad sights to be seen in what is called the Irish quarter, and I was much struck by the number of deplorable objects to be met with in the main streets. In the great English cities rags and wretchedness generally slink away into the lanes and back slums ; here they have no hesitation in exposing their sores in the sunshine. There are no great number of professional beggars,—in fact regular mendicancy with the professional whine is the exception everywhere now, and is almost monopolised by a few old women in extreme decrepitude verging on idiocy. But in Limerick you come across old men and women and sickly weaklings at every corner, who can hardly hold body and soul together, and whose tatters are disgraceful if not indecent. Possibly these deplorable objects are the more remarked here, that the town in which they starve is exceptionally gay and handsome. And the town finds good and profitable customers in the farmers and peasants, who are generally prosperous, as they ought to be. Indeed the district around Limerick is one of the richest in Ireland. Coming southward from Ennis, the stones gradually disappear till they are seemingly no more than sufficient to build the fences. Driving out to-day to the charming suburban village of Corbally, situated about a mile away on the Upper Shannon, nothing could be finer than the belated hay-crops. Overloaded hay-carts blocked the narrow road that ran between the double walls of a succession of well-timbered and beautifully kept gentlemen's grounds. There were enormous hay-ricks in each neat little homesteading ; and in the fields, where the grass had been left for pasture, it was growing rank in the hedgerows, where the cattle had spared it. As in the country round Ennis, the chief occupation is dairy-farming and fattening ; but here the dairy-farming is decidedly in the ascendant. The people have taken to selling the milk to companies which make a business of preserving and consolidating it. That pays them better ; it saves trouble, and avoids the hazards from sudden fluctuations in prices, as the buyers contract for definite periods. What would only fetch £3 in the shape of a firkin of butter, sells for £4 to these large contractors. No doubt the butter firkin should command a higher price ; but here, as near Ennis, the system of buttermaking is bad. All that is produced is bought up by local Limerick dealers. The farmers' holdings average sixty acres ; and these sixty acres will carry sixteen milk cows, besides a score or so of sheep. And here the "winterage," to which I alluded in my last letter, is a regular source of profit to farmers favoured in situation. Their neighbours who have neither good shelter nor a sufficiency of winter fodder, board out the beasts for the four or five winter months. I said that near Ennis the times had been somewhat unfavourable for the last five years. Here, until the year before this, the seasons had been tolerably good and prices excellent, and the farmers had been saving money. Within the last twelve months, however, the prices of cattle have fallen considerably. The fall has been partly owing to causes operating generally, partly to local reaction from fancy prices. The land agitation a few years ago had depleted the grazings. Farmers who were persuaded to "hold the rents" had sold the herds that might be seized, or saw them sold up by the sheriff. The time came when they must re-stock the lands, and they all rushed into the markets. Landlords with boycotted farms, to be likewise replenished, were bidding against them, and prices rose extravagantly. Since then, with Government restrictions hampering the cattle trade, there has been a positive glut ; and at present, men who are forced to sell must submit to sacrifices. Besides, recalcitrant tenants have had their arrears to pay up, and to liquidate law expenses into the bargain. This autumn they have what they describe as a short but healthy harvest, and much depends on the coming winter. Should the winter be open and mild, their short stocks of fodder may see them through ; should the winter unhappily be severe, they must either buy

fodder or sacrifice their beasts. At this moment many of them are feeding at a loss, and all the men who can afford it are holding back in hope of better prices. Were there a forced stampede to sell, the consequences would be very serious. The district being generally prosperous—according to the theory which I have been satisfactorily working out, alike by inquiry and observation—there have been few or no disturbances. The reductions of rent, which have averaged about twenty per cent, have no doubt given substantial relief. The only part where there were serious troubles was on a property of Lord Cloncurry, where about thirty tenants were evicted a few years ago, and only two or three restored to their holdings. But I am assured that his lordship was hardly to be blamed, since his rents were no higher than those of his neighbours; and his tenants, who were badly advised, refused to meet his liberal advances. Land being so highly rented, there are no very great estates; and the condition of things is very different from that in Galway, since no property of any importance has changed hands for many years.

Naturally, on coming to Limerick, one's curiosity is excited as to the salmon-fisheries, and I am indebted to Mr Alton, of the Shannon Fisheries Company, for much interesting information. The Shannon Fisheries Company owns five miles of the water, from Corbally, above the town, down to Cratloekeil below it. These fishings belong to the Limerick Corporation, which let them twenty-five years ago on a ninety-nine years' lease to a Mr Pool Gabbet. Mr Gabbet sold his interest to Mr Malcolmson of Waterford, and subsequently it was resold in the bankruptcy court to the present proprietors for £11,000. Though the sum sounds a small one, they did not make a very good bargain. The original owners had claimed the Shannon fisheries down to the mouth; but subsequently, and after much litigation, their rights have been limited as I have stated. The value of the Shannon fisheries generally has been greatly increased by protection, &c; but, on the other hand, obstructions and indiscriminate fishing lower down have much diminished the takes of the upper proprietors. Below Cratloekeil there are now no less than forty-four stake-nets, belonging to various riparian landowners, and the drift-nets are much used in the estuary by fishermen. The drift-net is both cheap and very deadly. It costs only from £3 to £5—£3 more must be paid for a licence—and it is some 200 yards long by 12 feet deep. One end is attached to the boat, the other drifts with the tide. The net is weighted below, and buoyed with corks above. When a catch is made a cork is seen bobbing; the fishermen row up and take out the salmon. Some years ago, before these drift-nets came into common use, the Shannon Company sometimes took 1500 salmon in a day. One of the most interesting objects on the river is the Lax weir, which is the upper limit of their water at Corbally. Lax is the Scandinavian for salmon, as gourmands may know who are familiar with the smoked red flakes sent over in tins from "Norway"; and it was the Danes who built that venerable weir across the Shannon which is still overlooked by the ruins of its guardian castle, dating from the twelfth century. The Shannon Company send all their fish to London, to be disposed of by a salesman on commission. That is also the practice of some of the lower proprietors. But others of them, and all the small fishermen with the drift-nets, sell the fish as they land them to local buyers, who act as middlemen, forwarding their purchases to England, and having supplies of ice and boxes in readiness for packing. The great local salmon mart is the village of Glin, known in England as giving a title to the knight "of that ilk." Where the rod-fishing is good it is extremely valuable—so valuable that nothing worth trying is available to strangers. All is let at long prices—as much as £300 to £350 being given for 50 to 100 yards, where fish are to be taken in favourite pools through the season. This year the season, owing to the unusually dry weather, has not been a very successful one. Yet I am told by Captain Vansittart, a famous fisherman, that on his water at Castle Council, seven miles above Limerick, he had killed this spring, in seventy-six days, 104 salmon, of one ton weight. O'Shaughnessy, the once-renowned Limerick fly-maker, died many years ago, though a son-in-law carries on the business. But they tell me that O'Shaughnessy's wares were greatly overrated; that his hooks might do for former days,

when a fish weighing 20 lb. was a rarity, but that they would never have held the 40-pounders which are frequently gaffed at present. All the hooks come now from the needle-makers in England, though they are dressed on the shores of the Shannon, and many of the gentlemen are in the habit of tying their own. The flies used in the spring are large and gaudy, tied with top-knots of the golden pheasant and such gorgeous colours. In summer, when the peel are coming up, the flies are somewhat quieter and smaller. What shows, by-the-by, that after all the range of the best rod-water cannot be very great, is that there are only about sixteen boatmen in the service of the rod-fishers.

TRALEE, KERRY, *September 15.*

No one fortunate enough to have fine weather when at Limerick should neglect the excursion to Killaloe. The bright little town lies seventeen miles up the Shannon, and half a mile above it the Shannon flows out of Lough Derg. For myself, I had been favoured with one of those sudden changes of climate which seem peculiar to this country of contrasts and sharp transitions. I had left Connemara in cold and downpour. In Galway the dripping wet had been so warm as to be unpleasantly enervating. At Ennis the skies had cleared as by enchantment ; and there and at Limerick the heavens were cloudless, while the transparent atmosphere was so dry, though balmy, that the contents of my portmanteau began to feel more comfortable to the touch. Nothing could be more beautiful than the deep bright blue of the river, as I had seen it at Corbally under the noonday sun, and the thick shade of the trees in the Corbally Gardens was agreeable rather than otherwise. The railway drive to Killaloe along the Tipperary side of the river lies on the whole through a rich country, although here and there we have a half-reclaimed peat-bog, or rushy and swampy fields that would be all the better for draining. The people seem to devote themselves to breeding donkeys ; and it was a pretty sight to see the rough-coated colts frisking around their sober dams, or scrambling like overgrown kids about the grass banks. Nearly half-way to Killaloe we pass Castle Connell, surrounded by masses of wood, sheltering handsome country houses from the winds that must sweep down in the winter from the round green hills beyond. Castle Connell, like Killaloe, is a famous rod-fishing quarter ; and here are the great rapids of Doonass, where the river throws itself over the broad bed of rocks, sloping rapidly downwards for nearly half a mile. But, beautiful as is the situation of Castle Connell, that of Killaloe is more enchanting. Turning out of the little station, where the train runs into something like a *cul de sac* in the side of a mountain, the first object that strikes you is the long, low, narrow, hog-backed bridge, supported on thirteen irregular arches. The bridge connects the counties of Tipperary and Limerick ; and on the Limerick bank stands the little town, looking endways on to the river from a terraced slope, out of some old-fashioned gardens with their clipped yew hedges. To the left is the ivy-covered abbey church, with its quaint architecture within and its clamorous jackdaws without. There are trees everywhere hanging over high garden walls below the bridge, and almost the only blot on the landscape is a preternaturally ugly weir, while above is an extremely picturesque one. Nothing can be prettier than the walk up the narrow valley, following the river round a gentle sweep of half a mile or so towards the pass between the hills where it winds out of Lough Derg. The heights to the right are clothed with woods, till the woods give place to the green pastures, which shade away in their turn into round ridges of brown moor. A narrow strip of bright meadow-land borders the water, and a herd of red Durhams are standing belly deep in a side channel, switching the troublesome flies with their tails, behind the breakwater of a sedge-grown island. Strolling back by a path that leads up towards the town over the crest of a grassy eminence, when we turn we get a glimpse of the lower end of the lough, which is no less than twenty-two miles in length, averaging in breadth from two to three miles. The glassy sheet of water is shut in upon all sides by green spurs of the Limerick and Tipperary mountains, often skirted by black belts of timber. Altogether, with the boat in the current beneath, from which an angler is wielding a formid-

able rod, it is as graceful a scene—savage, pastoral, and piscatorial—as any aspirant to the Academy need care to paint.

Of a very different character is the scenery on the Lower Shannon, on the tideway between Limerick and Tarbert. The steamer, slipping her moorings, swings slowly round with the current ; then for several miles we thread the comparatively narrow channels, where the river twists slightly between mud-banks and sand-spits. On many of these banks and spits are cairns of stones supporting frameworks of iron carrying primitive beacon lights, the illumination of which can scarcely be costly. Now and then we steam past rocky reefs strewn with sea-weed, on which sea-fowl, strings of waders, and flocks of lapwings are busy picking up a living among the shell-fish. Till at last it fades out of sight in its smoke, the city of Limerick, with its mills, its cathedral tower, and the tall spires of its churches, is a picturesque object behind us. Then of a sudden the river expands into a wide lake-like estuary, and in fact, the Lower Shannon is a succession of sea-loughs, half closed in at not unfrequent intervals by low promontories or bold bluffs and headlands. The scenery is far from grand : it can hardly be called fine ; and certainly I should not recommend the voyage in wet or even in misty weather. But it has a great charm of its own, with an infinite variety of objects, on so glorious a day as that on which I saw it. Except for the occasional fine-weather haze in the distance, the lights were clear and vivid in the extreme, and there was scarcely a ripple on the surface of the water. Now we are in a great circular lough with low sandy shores ; now we had passed into another and a narrower one, with banks that were wellnigh precipitous ; while always on the Clare shore was the range of the mountains which breaks into bold headlands between Kilrush and the watering-place of Kilkee. As everywhere in Ireland, timber was scarce, which made one appreciate the more those respectable woods which embosom some of the few mansions along the banks. The residence I admired the most was on the northern shore, with soft shelving lawns and a full southern exposure, while it was protected from the more violent winds by its hills and its lofty trees. Were I to covet any man's seat on the Shannon, it would certainly be that of Colonel White. Another fine place, though with the disadvantage of a northern exposure, is Glin, the woods of the park coming up to the little town, and the park wall running along the brink of the Shannon, with only a road between. But what strikes the fancy more than the finest of the modern mansions are the venerable ruins, of which there are many, from castles once evidently of considerable pretensions, to the tall, square, lonely keeps which are common in all this country. By far the noblest of those ruins is that of Bunratty, near the mouth of the river of the same name, and once the stronghold of the chief of the O'Briens. Three miles below Glin the steamer stands in towards the little harbour of Tarbert, effectually protected against the Atlantic gales by the promontory at the back tipped by its lighthouse. But the idea of a port with a pier is delusive, and disembarkation is as awkward a business as can be conceived. With much manoeuvring the steamer is laid alongside of a lofty lighter moored out in the stream. It is easy enough passing on to the lighter, but much more difficult to leave it ; and elderly ladies or gouty gentlemen might have to stay there till a chair was rigged up in slings. For the only way of exit is by a ladder slightly sloping inwards from the perpendicular, and leading down to the boat rocking below. I helped to haul up one portly lady, and hard work it was. Yet, contrary to the Latin proverb, the ascent is less dangerous than the descent. The luggage being pitched down anyhow, the passengers must slip down somehow, with sundry abrasions of knees and ankles, to be pulled to the pier and hustled out on a stone staircase washed by the waves and slippery with sea-wrack.

On that voyage of thirty-seven miles to Tarbert, we passed one of her Majesty's gunboats lying at anchor ; we met a brig of about 200 tons ; and besides the clumsy boats that occasionally came off from the villages, we saw a single primitive craft, the stem being indistinguishable from the stern, laboriously paddled by a couple of men in a fashion still

more original than the build. That was the whole of the traffic on the great waterway to the drowsy port that lives by its retail trade and a few flour-mills and bacon factories. In short, the Shannon reminded me of the noble but grass-grown approach leading to a mansion built almost regardless of expense, but of which only a single wing is tenanted. Yet what a noble river this Shannon is, and how much must have been made of it in English or American hands ! It would have enriched the half of Ireland before now, turning the flow of its surplus prosperity on to the other half. It drains 4500 square miles ; it is the natural outlet for fifteen counties. At an expense absolutely insignificant compared to the certain results, it might be made navigable from the lake where it has its source to the sea. In fact, it is rather a chain of fresh and salt water lakes than a river running into an estuary. All that would be necessary would be some dredging, some blasting, some lighting and buoys, and now and again possibly a broad side-cut to turn such rapids as those at Castle Connell. But whatever the outlay might be, were the works carried out on a sufficiently extensive scale, the profits could hardly fail to be incalculable. But then energy and harmonious combination are wanted, at least as much as capital. Piers, for example, should be made at the towns and villages on the banks. Side roads should be opened up to bring remote valleys in the wilds into communication with markets. There are hundreds of thousands of acres that might be reclaimed and rendered arable, or drained to improve the hill grazings. The iron and coal mines on Lough Allen might be worked ; a small Middleborough or Barrow-in-Furness might be started somewhere ; the fleeces from the sheep upon a thousand hills might be woven in woollen mills at Limerick ; nor is there any reason why the city should not import raw American cotton and compete with the Manchester looms with cheaper home labour ; while with native coal and direct foreign importations, it might cut the ground from under the feet of Glasgow shippers. It may be said that all this is an idle dream ; but even were the coal and the iron of inferior quality, it is a dream that would certainly be speedily realised were the Shannon and its vast watershed “ settled up ” by English capitalists. Each sufficient holding reclaimed would convert the tenant to at least passive loyalty, as each labourer employed at good wages would be so far bound over to keep the peace.

Meanwhile landing at the little harbour of Tarbert, which is a long mile from the town, we are among the usual signs of semi-stagnation. There is a big flour-store, as usual, belonging to the Messrs Russell ; there is an iron-store next door to it, and nothing more. The chief industry of the straggling little place seems to be salmon-fishing, and the salmon almost drop into the fishermen’s mouths. You drive the stake-nets, and the fish entangle themselves ; you cast the drag-nets to drift with the tide, and the fish are taken out to be knocked on the head with the smallest possible expenditure of trouble. As many as seventy salmon are sometimes taken out of the stake-nets at a single tide ; and I was told by my intelligent car-driver of a haul last year which sounds miraculous if not fabulous. I only repeat the story as it was told me. Last year the owner of one of the stake-nets opposite Tarbert landed in a couple of nights £1000 worth of fish. By an odd coincidence it was on the nights of Saturday and Sunday, when the stake-nets, according to law, should be left open. Threatened with prosecution, the fortunate gentleman quietly replied that if the case was proved against him, having realised his £1000, he should have great pleasure in paying his fines. The case was never proved, and he pocketed the undiminished profits. According to the same authority, even gentlemen who retain their fishings in their own hands are exceedingly lax in their observance of the Act. The watch kept up cannot be very strict, since there is but a single boatful of water-bailiffs, with their headquarters at Tarbert, to look after eight miles of estuary. When these bailiffs find a net shut that should be open, they are supposed to cut it and then proceed to lodge information. Besides that, they are charged with overhauling the boats casting the drift-nets, to see that each crew is duly provided with a licence. The Shannon fish are steadily increasing in size, and the largest taken this year weighed 72 lb. Tarbert used to be a busier

and brisker place before the opening of the Kerry Railway. Then there was more than one steamer on the Shannon, and forty or fifty cars would be pulled up at the landing-place awaiting the arrival of tourists from Killarney. It is not difficult to picture the scramble and the hubbub of so many hungry competitors for custom, and one feels sincerely grateful to escape it nowadays nothing can well be duller than the drive to Listowel. At the head of Tarbert Bay was a great stretch of mud-flats, with pools and salt-water streams, left by the receding tide, said to afford excellent wild-fowl shooting in the winter. Then the road lies along a high bleak level, through peat-bogs, cultivated in patches, and swampy and rushy meadow-land. Most of the cottages were miserable enough, yet here and there was a comfortable small farm-steading, with its little oasis of land bearing heavy crops of oats and hay. Before one of these steadings was as fine a herd of shorthorn cows as one could wish to see milked. As all the land appears to be of much the same character, that shows what might be done by liberal expenditure on a system of thorough draining. Indeed nearly forty years ago the capabilities of these very properties were fully admitted in evidence before a Royal Commission. During these forty years little can have been done ; and most of the men were shamefully ragged. At a crossing of the roads a group had gathered, who, except that their figures were sufficiently muscular, showing no signs of low living, might have been so many scarecrows collected from their own potato fields. Fancying them a band of itinerant beggars, I inquired of the driver who they might be, and was informed they were merely farmers “ smoking and taking their diversion ” after the labours of the day.

After such a display of what must be destitution in any other country, it was somewhat of a surprise to find Listowel a well-built and apparently prosperous town. Immediately around it there is well-cultivated land, with some mansions standing in their well-wooded parks. The next day was Sunday, and there was a curious scene at the railway station after breakfast, when the mail tram for Tralee was expected. At least a dozen of cars on two wheels and four wheels were in waiting. On the platform was a mob of expectant spectators. The train drew up, doors were thrown open, and many second-class carriages disgorged their contents. There was a rush at the railway wicket and the cars. Then the passage was forced with a violent scattering, as of so many Congreve rockets ; the cars were charged, carried by storm, and over-crowded. The arrivals were pleasure-seekers from Limerick and the intermediate stations bound for the little watering-place of Ballybunnion, on the northern shore of the Shannon ; and for the sake of a happy afternoon by the river they were to be jolted over eighteen rough Irish miles thither and back. But if the middle classes here toil hard for their pleasure, the lower orders take it listlessly and frugally enough. Under the windows of the hotel at Tralee, but especially before and after divine service, was gathered a mob of loungers, who scarcely stirred from their stations throughout the day. Not a few of them, no doubt, might be town folk, but the most were evidently peasants, and many of them had brought their pitchforks, apparently for the convenience of leaning upon. It was a sort of agricultural *petite Bourse* upon the boulevards of Tralee, where the people talked pigs, oats, &c., and occasionally politics, judging from what I heard as I struggled through the crowd. Some were decently dressed, but the scarecrows were infinitely in the majority. There were short-waisted, buttonless evening coats that might have done duty two generations back at levees at the Castle or Dublin dinners. There were faded dressing-ropes, which were evidently heirlooms, and there were coats so ragged as to be unmistakable vouchers for the sobriety of their wearers, since no one not perfectly steady and self-possessed could possibly have slipped his arms into the sleeves. But though whisky shops with the shutters up had everywhere their doors open, I am bound to say there were few cases of drunkenness. It is true that these tattered pockets were hardly likely to be well lined ; but what struck me in the groups of loungers all along the long street was the odd mixing of classes. Fellows in smart though slangy attire, who might have passed for the old squireens, kept company with the lowest and least reputable of the ruffians, and were probably laid under contribution. As rags

and disreputability generally go together, the crowd, taking it as a whole, was far more sinister-looking than any I had yet seen. Even in the Maamtrasna country it required an effort of the imagination to believe that the men I met might be murderers or privy to murder. But with a third of these Kerry men, though appearances might play them false, the hang-dog countenances in cases of suspicion would be damning indirect evidence as to previous character. The Blennerhasset Arms at Tralee is perhaps the best inn of its class at which I have hitherto put up. The attendance, superintended by a friendly old waiter who has been twenty-eight years in the house, is excellent ; nor have I ever sat down to more comfortable plain meals. The inn is so good, indeed, that one is inclined to regret that the immediate neighbourhood of the town is not more attractive, though there are pretty private grounds hard by to which the public are admitted. I walked out to the port, which is a mile and a half away. I read in the guide-book that Tralee is the largest seaport in the south-west,—that it presents scenes of considerable bustle and animation. Seeing that there were only two or three small ships waiting apparently to load the timber which was stacked hard by, there could hardly be much bustle, even on a Monday. Two or three other vessels were lying under the lee of an island many miles away in the offing. The little river, which runs through a dreary stretch of mud-flats, is not navigable, and a canal of about a mile in length connects a little dock with the bay. But the seaward view is fine and really grand to the south-ward, where a range of hills of noble outline drops into the Shannon below one of the loftiest, the promontory at the base of it being Brandon Head.

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I shall wind up these letters with a subject as to which I can speak with much more confidence. As to touring in Ireland, I can only repeat that for healthy and active people it is thoroughly enjoyable. In this life one must take the rough with the smooth, and in the West one must reckon with the practice of patience through a certain number of wet days, and put up with a certain amount of roughing it in remote parts of the country. But there need be very little hardship to endure in Connemara or Killamey, and everywhere the traveller is rewarded by novel sights and by a variety of some of the grandest scenery in the kingdoms, Only take things good-naturedly and easily, and everywhere you will meet with extreme attention and civility, the good-natured people sparing no trouble about you in their leisurely happy-go-lucky sort of fashion. As for any danger, having very naturally overlooked that point all along, it has occurred to me opportunely before closing the letter; and Cockney tourists may be assured that they are safer in the West here than either in Epping Forest or on the Thames Embankment.

Letters from the west of Ireland 1884

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