Penelope's Irish Experiences - Part 1. Leinster - Chapter 6. Dublin, Then And Now

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Part I. Leinster
Chapter VI. Dublin, then and now

'I found in Innisfail the fair,
In Ireland, while in exile there,
Women of worth, both grave and gay men,
Many clerics, and many laymen."

James Clarence Mangan.

Mrs. Delany, writing from Dublin in 1731, says: 'As for the generality of people that I meet with here, they are much the same as in England--a mixture of good and bad. All that I have met with behave themselves very decently according to their rank; now and then an oddity breaks out, but never so extraordinary but that I can match it in England. There is a heartiness among them that is more like Cornwall than any I have known, and great sociableness.' This picturesque figure in the life of her day gives charming pictures in her memoirs of the Irish society of the time, descriptions which are confirmed by contemporary writers. She was the wife of Dr. Delany, Dean of Down, the companion of duchesses and queens, and the friend of Swift. Hannah More, in a poem called 'Sensibility,' published in 1778, gives this quaint and stilted picture of her:--

'Delany shines, in worth serenely bright,
Wisdom's strong ray, and virtue's milder light.
And she who blessed the friend and graced the page of Swift, still lends her lustre to our age.
Long, long protract thy light, O star benign,
Whose setting beams with added brightness shine!' 

The Irish ladies of Delany's day, who scarcely ever appeared on foot in the streets, were famous for their grace in dancing, it seems, as the men were for their skill in swimming. The hospitality of the upper classes was profuse, and by no means lacking in brilliancy or in grace. The humorous and satirical poetry found in the fugitive literature of the period shows conclusively that there were plenty of bright spirits and keen wits at the banquets, routs, and balls. The curse of absenteeism was little felt in Dublin, where the Parliament secured the presence of most of the aristocracy and of much of the talent of the country, and during the residence of the viceroy there was the influence of the court to contribute to the sparkling character of Dublin society.
How they managed to sparkle when discussing some of the heavy dinner menus of the time I cannot think. Here is one of the Dean of Down's bills of fare:--

Turkeys endove  
Boyled leg of mutton  
Greens, etc.  
Soup  
Plum Pudding  
Roast loin of veal  
Venison pasty  
Partridge  
Sweetbreads  
Collared Pig  
Creamed apple tart  
Crabs  
Fricassee of eggs  
Pigeons  
No dessert to be had.

Although there is no mention of beverages we may be sure that this array of viands was not eaten dry, but was washed down with a plentiful variety of wines and liquors.

The hosts, either in Dublin or London, who numbered among their dinner guests such Irishmen as Sheridan or Lysaght, Mangan or Lever, Curran or Lover, Father Prout or Dean Swift, had as great a feast of wit and repartee as one will be apt soon to hear again; although it must have been Lever or Lover who furnished the cream of Irish humour, and Father Prout and Swift the curds.

If you are fortunate enough to be bidden to the right houses in Ireland to-day, you will have as much good talk as you are likely to listen to anywhere else in this degenerate age, which has mostly forgotten how to converse in learning to chat; and any one who goes to the Spring Show at Ball's Bridge, or to the Punchestown or Leopardstown races, or to the Dublin horse show, will have to confess that the Irishwomen can dispute the palm with any nation.

'Light on their feet now they passed me and sped,  
Give you me word, give you me word,  
Every girl wid a turn o' the head  
Just like a bird, just like a bird;  
And the lashes so thick round their beautiful eyes  
Shinin' to tell you it's fair time o' day wid them,  
Back in me heart wid a kind of surprise,  
I think how the Irish girls has the way wid them!'

Their charm is made up of beautiful eyes and lashes, lustre of hair, poise of head, shapeliness of form, vivacity and coquetry; and there is a matchless grace in the way they wear the 'whatever;' be it the chiffons of the fashionable dame, or the shawl of the country colleen, who can draw the two corners of that faded article of apparel shyly over her lips and look out from under it with a pair of luminous grey eyes in a manner that is fairly 'disthractin'.

Yesterday was a red-letter day, for I dined in the evening at Dublin Castle, and Francesca was bidden to the concert in the Throne Room afterwards. It was a brilliant scene when the assembled guests awaited their host and hostess, the shaded lights bringing out the satins and velvets, pearls and diamonds, uniforms, orders, and medals. Suddenly the hum
of voices ceased as one of the aides-de-camp who preceded the vice-regal party announced 'their Excellencies.' We made a sort of passage as these dignitaries advanced to shake hands with a few of those they knew best. The Lord Lieutenant then gave his arm to the lady of highest rank (alas, it was not I!); her Excellency chose her proper squire, and we passed through the beautifully decorated rooms to St. Patrick's Hall in a nicely graded procession, magnificence at the head, humility at the tail. A string band was discoursing sweet music the while, and I fitted to its measures certain well-known lines descriptive of the entrance of the beasts into the ark.

'The animals went in two by two,  
The elephant and the kangaroo.'

As my escort was a certain brilliant lord justice, and as the wittiest dean in Leinster was my other neighbour, I almost forgot to eat in my pleasure and excitement. I told the dean that we had chosen Scottish ancestors before going to our first great dinner in Edinburgh, feeling that we should be more in sympathy with the festivities and more acceptable to our hostess, but that I had forgotten to provide myself for this occasion, my first function in Dublin; whereupon the good dean promptly remembered that there was a Penelope O'Connor, daughter of the King of Connaught. I could not quite give up Tam o' the Cowgate (Thomas Hamilton) or Jenny Geddes of fauld-stule fame, also a Hamilton, but I added the King of Connaught to the list of my chosen forebears with much delight, in spite of the polite protests of the Rev. Father O'Hogan, who sat opposite, and who remarked that

'Man for his glory  
To ancestry flies,  
But woman's bright story  
Is told in her eyes.  
While the monarch but traces  
Through mortal his line,  
Beauty born of the Graces  
Ranks next to divine.'

I asked the Reverend Father if he were descended from Galloping O'Hogan, who helped Patrick Sarsfield to spike the guns of the Williamites at Limerick.

"By me sowl, ma'am, it's not discinded at all I am; I am one o' the common sort, just," he answered, broadening his brogue to make me smile. A delightful man he was, exactly such an one as might have sprung full grown from a Lever novel; one who could talk equally well with his flock about pigs or penances, purgatory or potatoes, and quote Tom Moore and Lover when occasion demanded.

Story after story fell from his genial lips, and at last he said apologetically, "One more, and I have done," when a pretty woman, sitting near him, interpolated slyly, "We might say to you, your reverence, what the old woman said to the eloquent priest who finished his sermon with 'One word, and I have done'".

"An' what is that, ma'am?" asked Father O'Hogan.

"Och! me darlin' pracher, may ye niver be done!"

We all agreed that we should like to reconstruct the scene for a moment and look at a drawing-room of two hundred years ago, when the Lady Lieutenant after the minuets at eleven o'clock went to her basset table, while her pages attended behind her chair, and when on ball nights the ladies scrambled for sweetmeats on the dancing-floor. As to their probable toilets, one could not give purer pleasure than by quoting Mrs. Delany's description of one of them:--

'The Duchess's dress was of white satin embroidered, the bottom of the petticoat brown hills covered with all sorts of
weeds, and every breadth had an old stump of a tree, that ran up almost to the top of the petticoat, broken and ragged, and worked with brown chenille, round which twined nasturtiums, ivy, honeysuckles, periwinkles, and all sorts of running flowers, which spread and covered the petticoat.... The robings and facings were little green banks covered with all sorts of weeds, and the sleeves and the rest of the gown loose twining branches of the same sort as those on the petticoat. Many of the leaves were finished with gold, and part of the stumps of the trees looked like the gilding of the sun. I never saw a piece of work so prettily fancied.'

She adds a few other details for the instruction of her sister Anne:--

'Heads are variously adorned; pompons with some accompaniment of feathers, ribbons, or flowers; lappets in all sorts of curli-murlis; long hoods are worn close under the chin; the ear-rings go round the neck(!), and tie with bows and ends behind. Night-gowns are worn without hoops.'

By Kate Douglas Wiggin