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KILLALOE

Elizabeth Frances Hayes

Killaloe! The very name stirs my heart with its softness and strength! My father's birthplace and once the Royal Capital of Brian Boru, High King of Ireland, Killaloe is bordered on the north by the resort town of Lisdoonvarna, on the east by demure Tipperary, on the south by bustling Limerick and on the west by the Atlantic Ocean. This market town of 800 people remains today as it was in my father's boyhood seventy-five years ago. In late September, I spent a week in Killaloe and discovered a town of antiquity, serenity, Celtic charm and surprising sophistication, a place of sloping, lushly greened hills strewn with heather and yellow gorse, of valleys crisscrossed by living fences of Bayberry and melancholy mountains of black velvet.

My father's house, on St. John's street, lies in the northern part of town. It is joined, in Killaloe fashion, to the adjacent house. Each dwelling is painted a different color and with a touch of Irish whimsy, the colors meet in the middle to indicate the separation! Farther up the hilly street are three handsome buildings of glossy redwood which house Crowley's Hardware Store, a feed shop and a pub. Convent Hill, just east of St. Johns, trails its languorous way up and down side streets where perfectly square, tiny gardens display enormous crimson Dahlias, purple Clematis and trails of spicy roses. Here, yellow finches are often displayed and bartered on top of stone ledges by slouch-capped men. Dozing milk horses clop along pulling little open carts and from a blackened tin container, fresh milk is poured into wax cartons and set atop the ledges for customers. Small caravans of Irish gypsies, the Tinkers, often trail along Convent Hill, their hooped wagons covered over with bright rugs and cloth while within, ready for sale, are tightly stacked pots, pans and all manner of utensils and notions, with perhaps a jar or two of potheen kept on hand to be offered to browsing customers.



As I proceeded along the grey concreted streets, I arrived at an open “green” or “common” occupied by fifteen or so small cars. Sunday Mass was being said on this “soft mist” day, so-called because of the constant gentle spray of rain in the air. St. Lua’s Church, built of massive-stones and with a luminous Rose Window, dwarfs the adjoining churchyard in which stand three, huge, ancient Irish High Crosses. Within St. Lua’s at the main altar is the rosewood pulpit carved by my grandfather in 1875. It is deeply oiled and burns in the dim sacristy light like a spill of molten copper.

A mile or so to the east and running south through town is the Canal Bank, the retaining wall which confines the mighty River Shannon’s waters where they flow between Clare and Tipperary. Boreens, overgrown and twisted, lead away and up from the Bank to the top of Lookout Hill, with its panoramic overview of three counties and the wide, azure expanse of the Shannon. From here, toy sheep graze the slopes and red haysheds with long ladders beside them adjoin every house. Farther below in the musty bogs, workers dig out fresh peat to be dried into bricks for fuel and cooking (the friendly serving of “tea and biscuits” is usually done over a brick of peat glowing beneath a grill and giving off a hint of smoky incense). In the near distance, lying on the east bank of the Shannon, is the Lakeside Hotel, a stately dazzling vision of white, southern manse architecture. Over two hundred years old, the Lakeside is renowned for its classic accommodations, elegant cuisine and sparkling marina. At night, floodlights illuminate the building and on foggy evenings cast a ghostly golden glow.

I spent my last afternoon in Killaloe exploring St. Flannan’s Cathedral which lies at the top of Elizabeth Hill. Its flying turrets and castle facade reveal its ancient history while within, the 1,000 year-old Ogham stone dates to the Vikings. The small churchyard, its Irish crosses askew and covered with ivy and wild roses, holds within its cool clasp, many of my relatives. The dark, thick firs shadow the churchyard, casting patches of dappled light. As I left this holy place, I felt my father’s presence and knew I had been doubly blessed – both by Killaloe and him.