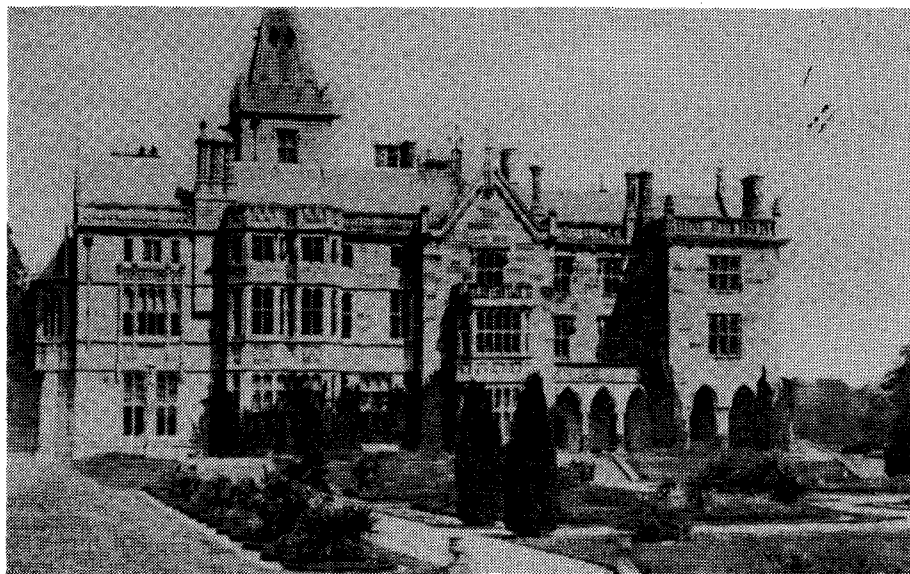


Christmas Holidays

by Aubrey de Vere

Our home life pursued the even tenor of its way. We, the three elder brothers, worked at our classics in the morning, and in the afternoon took a long walk or a long ride, for each of us boasted a horse, though we seldom rode together; and in the evening there was often music, especially when Lord Monteagle was with us, for he and his sister, my mother, had been used to play duets from Mozart in their youth, he on the flute, and she on the pianoforte, and they continued the habit in advanced life. At Christmas we used to visit at Adare Manor. It was a gay as well as a friendly and hospitable house; after dinner we had private theatricals, games of all sorts, dances, and, in the daytime, pleasant wanderings beside the beautiful Maigue, which mirrored, in waters that even when swiftest seldom lost their transparency, as stately a row of elms, ninety feet high, as England herself can boast, and the venerable ruins of a castle which belonged to the Kildares – though islanded, as it were, in a territory almost all the rest of which belonged to the Desmond branch of the same Geraldine race. Adare, then as now a singularly pretty village, had for centuries been a walled town. It had seen many battles, and had been more than once burned down; but it was famous chiefly for the number of its monastic institutions, still represented by the ruins of a Franciscan convent, as well as by one of the Trinitarian and one of the Augustinian order, the churches of which have been restored, and are now used, one for Catholic and the other for Protestant worship. The Knights Templars once possessed a house at Adare; but its site cannot now be discovered.

Among our Christmas holidays at Adare there is one which I am not likely ever to forget. About eight miles from the village rises a hill eight hundred feet in elevation, with a singularly graceful outline, named 'Knockfierna', or the 'Hill of the Fairies', because in popular belief it abounded in the 'Good People', then universally believed in by the Gaelic race in Ireland. We set off to climb it one day soon after breakfast *we*, meaning my two elder brothers and I, and the son of our host, Lord Adare, afterwards well known as Earl of Dunraven, the author of two valuable works, *Memorials of Adare* and an excellent book on Irish antiquities. Two other members of the exploring party were our tutor, and a friend of Adare's several years older than he. It was hard walking, especially after the ascent of the hill began, we had to climb many walls and ditches, and to force our way through



Adare Manor, at the turn of the century.

many a narrow lane. We had brought no luncheon with us, and before we reached the summit the winter sun had sunk considerably.

We walked about the hill top for some time admiring the view, a very fine one, though, like many Irish views, somewhat dreary, from the comparative absence of trees, the amount of moorland intersected by winding streams, and the number of ruins, many of them modern. All at once we discovered that we were faint with hunger, and so much fatigued without refreshment we could hardly make our way home. Halfway down the hill stood a farmhouse. The farmer was most courteous, but, alas! there was not a morsel of food in his house. What he had he gave, and that was cider, for which, like the Irish peasant of that day, he would take no payment. Each of us drank only one cider glass of it, and we took our departure, cheered, but by no means invigorated. After the lapse of some ten minutes one of us became so sleepy that he could hardly walk, and his nearest neighbour at once gave him an arm. A little later the same complaint was made by another of us, and the same friendly aid was forced upon him. But in a few minutes more not only were we unable to walk, but we were unable to stand, the only exceptions being the two among us who were no longer boys – our tutor and Adare's friend.

Never shall I forget their astonishment first, and afterwards their vexation. They were in some degree in charge of us, and the responsibility seemed to rest upon them. The Christmas evening was closing around us; there was no help near, and apparently no reason why our sleep should not last till sunrise. They argued, they expostulated, they pushed us, and they pulled us; but all would not do. I was

the last to give way, and my latest recollection was that my second brother had just succeeded in climbing to the top of a wooden gate, but could not lift his leg over it, and lay upon his face along it. Our tutor stamped up and down the road indulging largely in his favourite ejaculation 'Gracious patience! gracious patience!' to which my brother replied, with his last gleam of wakeful intelligence, 'There is one very amiable trait about you, Mr. Johnstone: you are never tired of toasting your absent friends'. The next moment he rolled over and slept beside us in the mud. The cider had affected our brains because our stomachs were empty. In about a quarter of an hour the trance was dissolved almost as suddenly as it fell on us; and we walked forward very mirthfully, reaching home just in time to hear the dressing bell ring. Only one light shone through the mullioned windows of the manor-house; and I remember Adare's remark as we drew near: 'Beside that light my little sister sits weeping. She is sure that I am dead'. At dinner we told the story of our adventures, and it excited much laughter. Lord Dunraven 'moralized the tale'. 'You see, young gentlemen, each of you undertook to support and guide his neighbour, though not one of you could take care of himself. That is the way of Ireland. You will help your neighbour best by taking care each of himself. His advice was like that of another old Irish gentleman, a relative of mine, whose 'good-night' to his grandchildren often ended with this counsel, 'Take good care of yourself, child; and your friends will love you all the better'.

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