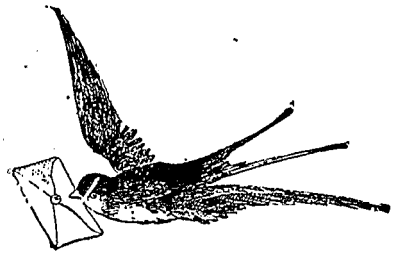
Letter from the Emerald Isle.

THE EVOLUTION OF A HOSPITAL.—II



This is the practical side of the idea. A doctor on either side of us, the one ten and the other something under twelve miles distant. The advantage of two metropolises —how about that ending? or is it metropoli? of country towns—the one 23 miles off, over a *coom*, or shoulder between two mountains, 1,500 feet odd from sea-level, and we at sea-level, mark you, and straight down to sea-level again on the other side; the other 26½, but the better road. Our stations lie in the metropolitan towns, and by spending enough time and care upon it you will be able to make one train in the day connect through to Cork or Dublin, but not back again. Certainly not! Why should it? Spare hours are "a plenty" with us; can they be passed more pleasantly than in the fireless wooden waiting-room of a country junction? By no manner of means. They can not! Then, hospitals! Each Union has its infirmary at the workhouse in each of the towns; I have not been inside to see, and our people, as a rule, flatly refuse to go unless driven by a stress of misery untold. There is no trained nurse there, and for the rest I refer you to the Report of the Irish Commission on Workhouses, which speaks with no uncertain voice on the head workhouses and their infirmaries. The last great factor in our lives, *à l'Anglaise*, for we take small account of these matters ourselves, accounting them as in the nature of things, to be hotly cavilled at by starts and overlooked the rest of the time, is the post. The letters come in at 4.30 p.m. and go out again an hour later. This is a *facon de parler*; we prefer variety in our hours, and duly get it. Take it, however, that the post leaves at 5.30. By diligent travelling it reaches the next sub-post office, four miles away, that evening. Next morning it gets up early, and at 8.30 a.m. is on the road for sub-post office No. 3. It is tired when it reaches port, having done 10 miles, and calls a halt until 2.30, I believe, but to speak truly, it is a mystery which I have not yet plumbed to the depths. Still, it extends itself sufficiently not to reach our metropolis except in time to miss the mail for Dublin, which it does with plenty of time to spare—very handsome of it, when you recollect that it has only spent 23 hours doing 24 miles, which is splendid travelling entirely. There is another sounding wanted before it reaches Dublin, but I am not good at heaving the line. The second morning after leaving here it starts for England, and, weather permitting, is distributed in town too late for houses of business. With the best of good fortune you may get your dear letter, which started away on Monday full of hopes, answered by Saturday. But if Sunday happens to intervene on the way, there is an end to all expectation. There is wonder on me at times whether the Kerry post does not depend upon which side of his bed the Postmaster-General gets out in the morning. There are surely days when, having dismissed his cook and kicked his dog, he telephones to the G.P.O., "Don't send Kerry mails to-day"—because it is the next most unpleasant thing he can think of just then. Our posts are quite unaccounted for otherwise, and unaccountable. Hurry no man's cattle. Well, we don't. Telegraph wires blow down with great regularity, "communication is interrupted" for days together by someone else's heavy snow, and they don't get repaired in haste either. Mails are delayed by storm and fog. Our parcels don't arrive because the walking postman is overloaded, and when it is summer, and they happen to be a box of preserving plums from Evesham, our anguish is complete. Still, we take it—after the first burst—philosophically, as inevitable. But I put it to you that, when all that is said and done, it is a little hard we should, in common with his much-to-be-commiserated cook and dog, be dependent for our daily post (Sundays excepted) upon the mistake in the Postmaster-General's first footstep in the early morning hours. Why doesn't somebody let him have his early cup of tea before he gets up?

I am busy, as you see, with the *mise en scéne* of the idea. I want you to know—in time—how we live, and why things that elsewhere go without saying are for us the subject of anxious care and calculation whenever a question of urgency is afoot.

And so we pass to the uninteresting concrete. The hospital is to be built on a plot of 15½ acres of land, including an island; and its name—the only part of it as yet in existence—is Ballincoona, which in the Irish language means "Home, or Abode of Help." It stands (yes, stands already, in my imagination) on a ridge of gravel, some 40 or 50 feet above the sea, facing south and north—a long, two-storied building, the little wards at either end, with sanitary annexes; the administrative part in the centre, with a line running north at right angles for surgery, dispensary, laundry, kitchen, etc. The little operating theatre is an adjunct to the main building. As to the plan of the building, it, like so many other things here, is governed by considerations of weather—the one thing in Ireland which even Cecil Rhodes must have excluded from his famous dictum, "Everything has its price." The weather cannot be got round, and if you make any mistakes about it, it is you who have to pay. That is why the hospital has to be built long. The west view is a joy with us, in moderation. But it needs taking into account. The westerly gales blow fast and furious. The westerly rains and the nor'-westerly sleet will push their way inside wherever crack or crevice or cranny, subtly concealed, is lurking. And so the fewer angles the better.

You have forgiven so many digressions already that if weather leads me into clothes you won't mind. Four skirts of the shortest, three pairs of

previous page next page