Memoir: Agnes Clements nee Kerin

This memoir of Aggie Clements nee Kerin has been passed onto us by her daughter Mary Stackhouse. It is a detailed account of life in Fanore in County Clare in the 1920s and 1930s. Aggie Clements was a great granddaughter of Michael Carrucan and Mary Droney.

I have always wanted to write my life story but never seemed to get the time to start. Now I am a grandmother, my husband has retired and there are just the two of us at home and I have plenty of time to write. The reason I would like to start with my childhood is because, when I see teenagers today with so many material things, earning good wages, buying expensive clothes, their radios, every kind of amusement and then I read in the newspapers and see on television that there is not enough done for the young ones, I am really glad that those growing up now have so much more compared to what the young folk of my generation had and I often wonder if they are as happy and content as we were.

I was born in America of Irish parents. My mother was the most wonderful woman and I will never know how she survived all the sorrow in her life. My father was a hard working man, very charming and good looking and popular with everyone. He had one terrible weakness; he liked to drink and when he drank too much he would fight anyone even his best friends with the result that he would repeatedly lose good jobs. When he would come to his senses, he would take the pledge and promise my mother that he would never touch another drink. But he was weak and the promises never lasted very long. He was born into a good home and his mother had great plans for her family. There were three children: Patrick the oldest, my father who was named Johnny and a young sister Kate. When they were in their teens, Patrick was very restless and wanted to get away from working the land. Against his mother's wishes, he left the farm for Australia. For six months be wrote regularly about the great job he had and how well he doing but then the letters stopped coming and he was never heard from again, which caused great sorrow to his family in Ireland. Soon after his father died and a few months later, Kate fell from a cart of hay breaking her ankle. She did not receive proper medical care and the ankle never healed properly leaving Kate partially crippled for the rest of her life. Meanwhile my father, Johnny, was drinking heavily and causing his mother a lot of worry so she decided to let him immigrate to America. In those days there was no work for the young people in Ireland. Some had relatives in America who would send the fare for a family member and have a job for them when they arrived. It was a very sad occasion when someone left for America, almost like a death in the family, as everyone knew they would never return to Ireland. Any extra money they earned abroad was sent back to help their families at home. I often think of the fine young men and women who left our village for America and never returned. There was always a farewell party called an "American Wake" which would go on all night until the car prepared to leave around 5:30a.m. The boy or girl who was leaving would go around saying their farewells and it

was heartbreaking to see the parents sobbing as they hugged their son or daughter for the last time.

So my father left for America and there he met my mother. They had never met before, although they lived only twenty miles apart in Ireland. They married and were very happy. Their firstborn son they named John after my father, but sadly, the baby died when he was six months old. My father started drinking again and, when my mother pleaded with him to give it up, he would make an effort for awhile then go back to the drink. A second child was born: a girl named Mary and again the drinking stopped then another spell of drinking and another job lost. My mother had her hands full looking after her little girl and now she was expecting another child and, when I was born, I was named Margaret. My father kept in touch with his mother and his sister in Ireland. His mother's health was failing and the work on the land was becoming too much for her and she wanted him to come home and take over the farm. It was good land and, with hard work, a good living could be made from it. My parents decided to return home and when I was about seven months old we set sail for Ireland. My grandmother told my father it was time for him to settle down and take care of his family, which he did for a few years. In Ireland it is believed to be unlucky to name two children in the family with the same name but when another son was born, he was named John after the baby who was buried in America. Shortly after John was born, my grandmother died. My father didn't have enough money to stock the land with cattle so he decided to lease it for grazing to a wealthy farmer, who had the reputation of being one of the meanest men who ever lived. My parents herded and watered the cattle and made sure none of them got sick. It was a lovely farm, one that any man would be proud to own. There were big troughs with a pump to fill them with water to make sure the cattle were never thirsty.

What 1 have written so far, I learned from listening to my mother and my relatives, but I can remember those days playing in the fields and crossing the road and running down to the sea to the most beautiful stretch of sand. Many a happy evening we spent there. I remember my first day at school and the teacher saying what beautiful hair you have. It was a mass of natural curls. I was a big girl now and had to do my share of chores when we got home from school. One of us had to bring water from the spring well for drinking and making tea, one had to carry in a load of turf and, if my mother needed anything, someone had to run to the only grocer's we had to get it for her. My brother John and I always got the heavy jobs as our sister Mary was very tall and thin and wasn't very strong. After all the chores were done then we could play. We loved Sundays as no work was done on that day and after mass a crowd would collect at what we called "Cuna Bawn" - the white stone. Young and old would gather and someone would have a fiddle or a flute and when the music began playing the dancing started on the road. When a tourist car would pass by, everyone would move into the field for a few minutes until the dust left in the wake of the car died down - otherwise your clothes would be ruined. I can still hear the peals of laughter on a beautiful Sunday evening coming from the 'Cuna Bawn". Afterwards, the men would go down to the sea and fish off the rocks and the children would

poke a stick under the rocks to catch small crabs for the men to use as bait. My father loved to fish.

The market town was twenty miles away and when garden tools, farm supplies or anything else was needed that couldn't be bought at the grocery store, the men would get together and make the journey to town. My mother dreaded those days, as my father would always come home drunk. I look back now and wonder how a man, who was deeply religious and, when sober, was a wonderful father who played games with his children, could not control his drinking. I can't remember a night being missed when we all knelt down and said the rosary together. He even built an altar in the bedroom with statues and decorated with fresh flowers when they were in bloom. The rosary was said in the big kitchen around the open fire; then before going to bed he would always kneel in front of his altar for a last prayer. In spite of a shortage of worldly goods, we were a very happy family.

We never went without food, although fresh meat was a rarity. On Sundays we would have a boiled chicken, boiled because it would be an old hen that had stopped laying eggs. There was never a shortage of potatoes and vegetables and, during the week, our main meal was often potatoes, fresh butter and a big mug of buttermilk. The potatoes were boiled in their jackets and my mother would say, "Look at them laughing!" because the skins would burst. Often we would have delicious meals of seafood. There was one I loved called "Slowcaun", a green leafy vegetable that clung to the rocks. It was picked, washed carefully then stewed for hours in a skillet beside the turf fire. The juice from it had a special taste, which I can't describe but we all loved it. There was also plenty of shellfish. None of us would ever dare say we didn't like anything my mother cooked for us. It was either, eat it or go without. Bread was all home made. The flour came in an eight stone sack, white in colour, with the maker's name in big blue letters. The letters were hard to remove and my mother would wash the sacks, boil them in paraffin oil and washing soda, then bleach them by spreading them out in the fields. She would say the dew was good for bleaching. When this was done she would make pillowcases or petticoats from the flour sacks. These she would trim with lace bought for a penny a yard, from gypsies who passed through the area about twice a year. My mother was never idle. Nighttime would find her knitting socks by the turf fire. Wool was very cheap in those days and most people spun their own wool on big spinning wheels. You could always tell when someone was spinning wool by the smell of sheep in the air.

Country-dances were a regular Sunday night feature in our big kitchen. The children loved the music and watching the dancers. Weeknights we would dance on our own and, if we were short of a partner, "Chep", our big sheep dog loved to join in. Chep would go right through the figures of a set dance, on his hind legs while we held his paws. If he was sleeping when we started to dance, he would jump up and start barking, until we included him in the dance. No one in the parish had a radio and only the wealthy were lucky enough to have a gramophone. Every household had one or more musical instrument and the family members who played

them were self-taught.

We now had another baby sister who was named Bridget. There was no such thing as a doctor or a nurse being called to deliver a baby. Two women in the parish with large families of their own served as midwives and came when needed. Our oldest sister Mary had gone to live with our Aunt Kate who spoiled her and, when they came to visit, Mary had lovely long ribbons in her hair. After Bridget was born there was a lot of whispering and talking between my mother and father. The rates were long overdue on the home farm and in order to clear the debts, my father sold several acres of open range land, which caused a lot of sorrow as no one liked to part with land. With the sale of the land, things were going to be different now and every effort made to keep the farm free of debt. My father worked really hard and built a new well which was a big improvement to the farm. He also started laying the foundation for a wall to divide some of the land. The foundation is still standing but the wall was never built.

A terrible curse bad arrived on the scene, "Poteen", a home made whiskey, which was distilled on the islands and shipped across. Agents would come along the roads, selling Poteen, and the men could not resist and were going mad for the home made whiskey. My father who had always had a weakness for the drink and now the Poteen made it worse than ever.

My brother John and I, though still very young, had a lot of work to do. During the spring, we were awakened at 5:00a.m to go down to the shore, while the tide was out, to gather seaweed and move it up on the rocks, so that when the tide came in, it wouldn't wash it out to sea. This was to be used as manure for the gardens. After hauling all we could, we'd go home, have a good wash, eat our breakfast and be off to school. After school, we'd get all our donkeys and baskets, go back to the shore, load the seaweed we had gathered that morning and take it to the gardens. We had other chores to do before our day was over and it was hard, tiring work for young children but I don't remember ever being tired.

My mother started taking in washing for a wealthy farmer's wife, a huge pile of dirty clothes, and they were washed and ironed before they were sent back. Her payment for this backbreaking work was a half-pound of tea and a half bar of soap, which cost very little in those days.

The only time my father left the drink alone was when the "Black and Tans" came. Although I was very young I can remember them well. During the night, young rebels would block the roads with huge boulders or push stone walls onto the road to prevent the Black and Tans' lorries from traveling through the area. Very early in the morning, a rebel would come to our door and warn my father to get away quickly, as the roads had been blocked. My father would dress hurriedly, grab some bread and a bottle of water and go way up in the hills to hide with the other men and boys who had been warned. Otherwise the Black and Tans would go door to door and at gun point would round up any men they found to clear the roads for them. One

time I remember seeing a Black and Tan coming in our gate and I was so afraid that I ran into the bedroom and jumped on the bed. The Tan came into the bedroom, grabbed my arm and wanted to know who I was hiding. He threw all the bedclothes on the floor and searched above and below the bed. My arm hurt where he grabbed me and turned black and blue. The Tans would not take my mother's word that my father was not home and searched all through the house and the long grass out in back. Another occasion I remember one Sunday, always a special day in our home, when the table was moved to the middle of the floor and set for dinner. My father always took his jacket off and rolled up his shirtsleeves. This Sunday there was no word that any roads had been blocked. Suddenly without any warning, a Tan walked into the kitchen and ordered my father to get his jacket and come with him. This Tan was well known and very much hated by everyone, as he was known to be cruel and had been nicknamed "Footy". My father asked for a chance to finish his dinner as a few minutes wouldn't matter and he would go with him. "Footy" took his gun, cocked it and pointed it at my father. All the children started screaming and I remember my mother, wringing her hands and saying, "For God's sake, Johnny, go with him!" When they left no one had any appetite for dinner and when my father came home, very late that night, my mother told him she was sure he bad been close to being shot. Another frightening experience came a few weeks after the incident with "Footy". Late one night, there was a very timid knock at our back door and when my mother opened the door, there stood three men wearing masks and each carrying a huge blackthorn stick. They came inside and spoke very quietly saying they meant no harm to any of us. In the light they examined the heads of the blackthorn sticks and they were covered with blood and hair. One of the men said, "Oh yes, we got the bastard!" My father told them that they should never have come into our home and frightened the children. They apologized and quietly left by the back door and went up the mountainside. I never knew who these men were or who had been attacked that night. We heard many stories, as we were growing up, about the cruelty of the Black and Tans and they are still fresh in my in my memory.

In those days, there was no electric light in our part of the country, only paraffin lamps and candles. We had no fancy dolls or toys and made our own rag dolls. We'd play house and decorate with leaves and pieces of broken dishes and pretend we were visiting one another. If we thought someone had a nicer decorated pretend house than ours, we'd go down to the shore looking for shells to make the house look better. On long summer evenings, when the tide was out, mothers and children would go down to the shore, with buckets and spades and dig up the sand, to catch small fish the size of sardines. After the buckets were filled, we'd clean the fish, take them home and fry them in butter. It was a lovely treat and it was only during the summer months that you would find these little fish. Chep our dog loved to come to the shore with us and he would run out to meet the gentle waves then run back out onto the sand.

I liked nothing more than to go up into the hills, sit on a rock and daydream. It was such a beautiful, peaceful place to live and I could look across the bay or up to the heather clad hills with the huge rocks jutting out of them. I'd walk across the fields, covered with all colours of

wild flowers stretching down to the beach with miles and miles of golden sand. From up in the hills you could see the homes of the wealthy farmers with their well-stocked farms and the homes of small farmers struggling to make a living with one or two cows, a few pigs and some poultry. Then there were the labourers in cottages with maybe an acre of land, growing their own vegetables and depending on making a few shillings at harvest time if they could get a few weeks work from the wealthy farmers. They could also get some work in the spring at the cutting of the peat. It was a hard way to make a living and it was no wonder that the young lads would try to go off to America for a chance at a better life. As I sat daydreaming, I imagined myself having to go away when I was old enough and the thought always filled me with sadness and I'd shed a few tears.

One thing I dreaded every year was when the time came to go to the bogs and save the peat for the winter's fire. My father cut the peat out of the bog and my brother John and I did the rest. First we would spread it out to dry, then leave it for a few weeks, according to the weather. When it was dry enough to be stacked, we'd set off early in the morning for the bog. We'd take some bread and whatever else there was to eat and when we got hungry we'd build a fire and make tea. Many an evening after a hard day's work we'd come home with our fingers nothing but raw flesh from handling the peat. My mother was always ready to bathe our aching fingers in hot water and I often cried with the pain. As much as he wanted to, John would never cry. Then mother would gently rub goose grease onto our hands. This was a cure for all ills used for sores, sprains and all types of aches and pains. It was used on both humans and animals and there wasn't a house that didn't have a jar of the wonder cure, goose grease. Some nights we'd have a surprise dinner of rabbit stew. Oh how wonderful it tasted after a long day of back breaking work, stacking peat in the bog. It took nearly a week to stack it and then it was left to get really dry. John and I then had to move the peat from the bog out to the main road using baskets slung over the backs of donkeys. Before it was time to cut the peat, my father would gather wild rushes, and pack them into any swampy spots he found that would be a danger to the donkeys. It sometimes happened that the donkeys would step into a swamp and sink down. John and I would have to call for help getting the donkeys out from men working in the nearby bogs. The peat could not be left too long in the bog because, if the weather broke, it would be impossible to get it out and the winter fire depended on the turf being brought home and reeked. It was brought down from the bog by horse and cart with a creel attached. After a day in the bog, the view coming down the mountain was unforgettable with the valley laying so peaceful below, the sea calm, boats out fishing and, from every chimney, smoke billowing up into the air. After a storm there was always plenty of wood washed up on the shore. It was amazing the things that would be found: huge lengths of bamboo, big slabs of tallow and bunches of lovely coloured glass balls, wrapped inside strong nets that had broken away from fishing boats. The tallow was used for making candles. The bamboo was hollow and cut in one-foot lengths. Then we would watch my father melt the tallow. A strong piece of string was placed in the bamboo and held firmly in place while the tallow was poured in. It didn't take long to set and then the bamboo was peeled off leaving a candle.

We were all very innocent in those days and I never remember hearing the word sex. If I had, I wouldn't have known what it meant. My sister Bridget and I went to visit an aunt who had just had a new baby. We said we wished that we could have a new baby in our family and she laughed and said we wouldn't have to wait too long. On the way home we wondered how our aunt could know this, and when we asked our mother, she just smiled and shook her head. Sure enough less than a week later we had a baby brother named Patrick and we all loved him very much. There was no pram or fancy crib - just a home made wooden rocker passed down from family to family.

My sisters and I had long curly hair and we dreaded Friday nights when my mother would soak our hair in paraffin, send us out to play for an hour then call us in one at a time to have the paraffin washed out. No such things as shampoo just good old carbolic soap and thoroughly rinsed in rainwater. Never did any of us have a problem with lice - the paraffin took care of that.

The first Saturday of the month was confession day and the priest came from the next town where he lived. What a tiring day it must have been for him, starting at eleven in the morning and seldom finishing before four in the afternoon. Perhaps it would be a lovely warm day, which was very precious to the farmers, especially if they had hay to save, but it never stopped them coming to confessions and some had to travel a great distance. Every Saturday night at six o'clock, my mother would light a candle in front of a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary and then she would kneel and thank the Blessed Virgin for taking care of us during the week. This practice was never missed all the years I was growing up. She had such wonderful faith. Once we had a mission in the parish that lasted two weeks. The last night, at the blessing of the rosaries and the statues, we felt sad, but being children were happy that the mission was over. We were first home and had the kettle on for mother coming home. She was crying because the mission had ended and would have liked it to last longer. Another Saturday night ritual was getting everything ready and left out for mass on Sunday: clean clothes from the skin out and shoes polished and left in a row. My mother would say, "Fair outside and foul within!", meaning you never put a clean dress on unless the underwear was clean also. People came to mass in jaunting cars, pony and traps, bicycles and some on horseback. Many had to walk long distances from the farthest points of the village and down from the top of the mountains. If someone was missing it was always noticed and questions asked, "What was the matter? Are they ill?"

Poteen was still the curse of the parish. Most homes were affected by it and the men were neglecting their farms by their craving for the Poteen. For the first time ever, police or guards as they were called, were brought in to patrol all along the shore to try to stop the boats from the islands landing with the Poteen. There was one sergeant and three guards and they lived in a cottage, that was empty at the time, until a barracks could be built for them. It was strange to

see them riding about on their bicycles when the worst crime that was committed was cows straying on the road. They were determined to stop the Poteen smuggling but they had their work cut out for them. I have seen my father act like a madman when drunk on Poteen and the terrible sadness in my mother's eyes. I wonder if the men who made and sold the Poteen knew the misery they caused in so many homes.

The time came for my father to go to town to meet the man who leased his land, to sign the papers for another year's lease. As usual, my father got drunk, and as evening came, and it got very late, there was no sign of him coming home. The rosary was said without him and we were all sent off to bed, but tired as we were we struggled to stay awake, listening for his steps coming up the path. It was after ten o'clock when he finally came home, very happy, singing and repeating, "1 have plenty of money to spend!" but wouldn't tell my mother what had happened in town. Next morning two of my father's uncles arrived at the house saying that they had heard a rumour in town and had come to find out if it was true. Sadly the rumour was true. Instead of leasing the land on a yearly basis, he had sold it outright, not only the land but also the house leaving his family homeless. I will never forget that day, my grand uncles so angry, my father with his head in his hands crying, unable to believe he had done such a terrible deed, and my poor mother brokenhearted. Friends and neighbours were shocked and came by the house to ask, "What were we going to do and where would we live?" From that day on my father was a broken man. The new owner called and gave us a month's notice to move, as he wanted the house for his son. The strange thing was, that neither his son or any member of his family ever lived in the house, and it remained unoccupied from that time until now, standing in ruins just an old abandoned house. Surely the man who bought our home and farm must have felt shame at what he had done to our family. Later, walking by that house and remembering the happy times we spent there, made me very sad. How hard it must have been for my mother.

There was a small vacant cottage, a few miles away, belonging to a very wealthy family who owned thousands of acres of land. They lived a great distance from us. My grandfather on my mother's side had been a coachman to this family and was greatly respected by them. Upon my grandfather's request, they agreed to let us live in the cottage. It was very small compared to our farm house and it was sad to see our furniture stacked outside, as there wasn't room in the little cottage for all of it. My mother was wonderful and would say, "Thank God we have a roof over our heads." A few small gardens went with the cottage and my father didn't waste any time getting vegetables planted. In the evening he would go fishing, but he had become very withdrawn. He had always been a wonderful dancer and we would beg him to teach us to dance but after a few minutes he would say he was tired and sit down and stare into the fire. When he had a few shillings, he would still drink, but the Poteen was scarce and there was a heavy fine if you were caught with it.

It was October: lovely sunny days and a keen frost at night. It was time to bring home the turf, now that the corn and hay had been saved. My father went every day to bring the turf home.

He had lost a lot of weight and everyone said it was because of the worry and the strain of what he had done. Before leaving in the morning for the bog, he would fill jars with milk and water to take with him as he had a terrible thirst. What he took from home wasn't enough and he would call in at houses along the way to refill the jars. My mother was concerned, as she knew this wasn't normal and begged him to see a doctor, but he laughed and said he was fine. You had to be very ill indeed before you saw a doctor. The fee was one guinea and had to be paid at the time of the visit. On a Friday evening my father went fishing, but came home early saying he felt ill. Next day he was much worse and when my mother heard that one of the local boys was going into town, she asked him to send the doctor out to see my father. The doctor came in the afternoon, a huge man who always wore a black hat and coat. After examining my father, he said there wasn't much wrong with him and a good rest would cure him. If anyone was going into town the next day, to call at his surgery and he would have some medicine ready, then he put on his gloves, received his guinea and left. The news spread quickly that the doctor had been to see my father, an unheard of thing, and we had many callers inquiring about his health. It was late when the last visitor left and we were very tired and fell asleep quickly. At two o'clock in the morning my mother came and shook my sister Mary and myself awake, whispered to us to get dressed quickly, and go as fast as we could to our grand-uncles house and tell him to go for the priest. She said, "I think your father is dying!" We didn't cry but did as we were told. When we got to our grand uncle's house we banged on his door until he was awake. When we gave him the message from our mother, he was furious and said "What a lot of nonsense!" He made us get the fire going and make him a cup of tea while he saddled his horse as it was almost ten miles to the priest's house. When we got back home we were sent to get another neighbour, a very saintly old lady, who came back with us and started saying prayers for the dying. No one cried, as we really couldn't believe this was happening to our father, a young man not yet forty years old. I remember going over to his bed and looking down at him. He was rubbing his chest and he looked up at me and said, "Oh I am so sick!" I am sure those were his last words as a few minutes later he died. May he rest in peace. Then the tears. came and we were still crying at dawn when the priest arrived. What a sad house that morning and I marvel at the strength of my mother, no sobbing or screaming just crying silently, and I wonder what was going through her head, a widow left with five children and no money coming in. At that time there was no widows' pension. She just said, "God will provide for us!" Word spread through the village that my father was dead and everyone was shocked. Everyone asked, "Didn't he just have the doctor examine him yesterday?" My grand uncle who had gone to get the priest was stunned and wasted no time in going into town to see the doctor. He admitted that my father must have been diabetic for a long time and it had gone too long without being treated for anything to be done for him. Everyone loved my father and people came from miles around to pay their respects. The chapel was packed to the door for the memorial mass and the funeral was one of the biggest ever in the parish. It was a habit of my mother's, to walk out to the gate and meet him coming home at night. He was a great whistler and you could hear him coming from a distance. Long after he died, my mother still walked to the gate at night but sadly there was no one coming along the road whistling. Her thoughts and her sorrow must

have been unbearable but she didn't let anyone know what she was going through.

My sister Mary was now fourteen and ready to leave school. A lady, who was a widow and had three grown sons, came to our house one day. She had heard about my father's death and asked my mother if she would let Mary go to work for her as a companion. Mary wouldn't have to do any hard work and the lady promised to be good to her. My mother agreed to let her go and that night after they left, when she was saying her private prayers after the family rosary, we could hear her crying. It was a sad home with my father dead and Mary gone within a matter of weeks. We grew our own vegetables and we had a good many hens and some ducks. The turf had also been saved for the following winter. A man we called "the Eggler", came around the village, once a week, in a horse drawn covered wagon. It was a traveling shop and he carried all the necessities: needles, thread, shoe polish, candles and groceries of all kinds. Any eggs you had for sale he would grade them and pack them in baskets. You got a few extra pence for the large eggs, less for the small and even less for duck eggs. Money seldom changed hands. The value of the eggs you sold him was traded for the groceries you needed. Sometimes my mother had a few extra shillings left after getting her groceries and this she would put carefully away, towards buying shoes for us. It was amazing how she managed to feed us. She often went to the shore to pick carrageen moss, which was good for your health. The rougher moss was spread out on the grass to bleach then dried and stored. Farmers liked to get this for their calves. Still no money was given for all this hard work, just a can of sour milk for bread making and occasionally a kind farmer would add a print of butter. No one ever wanted to part with money and a few shillings would have meant so much to her. Still the cottage was cozy and kept spotlessly clean. Every week there was a letter from Mary saying she was happy, that the family was good to her and the lady of the house was teaching her to knit and to sew.

I was tall for my age and looked older than my twelve years. There was a lovely little seaside town about nine miles from our village and, when my father was alive, he would sometimes take me with him to shop for supplies at the general store. The man who owned it was very kind and knew our family well. He came to our house one day and asked if I would like to go to work for him, helping his wife in the shop while he was out in his traveling shopping van. I'm sure he thought I was older and already left school. My mother didn't tell him, perhaps she thought I would be better off and it would be one less mouth to feed at home. I went off with him excited at the idea of working in a shop. I was very homesick the first night away from my family. The house was very large and there was an archway leading into the back yard. The lady showed me to my room, which was very cold and bleak and that night I cried myself to sleep. Next morning I told the lady that my room was cold. She got very angry and said it couldn't possibly be cold as it was above the kitchen and the heat from the stove warmed my room. I tried to look up from the yard to see where my room was, but the windows all looked alike. Next day I tucked my precious red hair ribbon against the window and went outside to see which room was mine. I was shocked to see my room was above the cold archway and not above the kitchen as the lady had told me. I had been there two weeks when the parish priest

called and said I would have to go home and back to school, as I was too young to be working. I got my few things together and as I was leaving the lady said it was too bad I had to go as I was doing so well at learning the shop duties. The boss drove me home that evening. I wasn't sorry to be going home and my mother's eyes filled with tears when she saw me. Before the boss left he gave me ten shillings, which was a fortune in those days. On Monday it was back to school.

The following Sunday at mass, I saw my mother talking to a lady who owned a very large farm. She had one daughter who was away at a private boarding school and several sons. The lady wanted me to come and live with her to help around the farm by feeding the calves, collecting eggs and to be company for her. I would-still go to school from her house even though it was a much longer distance to walk. I was up every morning bright and early, did a lot of chores then had a big breakfast before leaving for school. No such things as school dinners in those days, just a small bottle of milk and some bread carried from home. I couldn't tell you what a biscuit looked like. I was very happy in that house and treated like one of the family. I was never paid any money but the lady bought me some clothes and shoes, which was a blessing to my mother. When I went home for a visit there was always a little parcel with tea and butter to take with me. I was with this family until the oldest son got married and brought his wife into the house. Even though I moved back home I would go back once in a while to help around the house and farm and I always got a warm welcome.

The best part of village life is that everyone sticks together and is willing to give a helping hand when needed. The first spring after my father died, my mother was worried about how she could afford to pay someone to cut the turf, even though the pay for a day's work wasn't much. One night a young man came to our hose and said that he and five of his friends had arranged to spend a day cutting our turf. They came faithfully every spring until my brother John was old enough to cut the turf himself - God bless those young men. Three of them went off to America. I remember one of them very well. When my father was alive, he used to cut all the local men's hair and this young man would come for a haircut. I used to sit and watch him with the hair clippers. When the young man decided to go to America, he asked me to cut his hair before he had his passport picture taken. He told me to cut it real short and that's just what I did, running the hair clippers over his head, leaving him almost bald with a little fringe in front. My mother was angry at the job I had done but all he said was "Ah sure it's grand!" When we saw his passport photo, we all had a good laugh and said that all he needed was a number to look like a dangerous criminal. We were sad when he left for America.

Life went on and we all did our share of work, helping neighbours save hay, feed calves and other odd jobs around the farms. My brother John was growing into a fine strong lad and Bridget our young sister was a cheerful, happy go lucky girl always up to some tricks. She was the clever one of the family and the teacher encouraged my mother to try and keep her at school. Patrick the youngest was tall for his age and very thin. He also had a very pleasant

nature and, being the baby of the family, my mother spoiled him a little. By this time we were able to go to the bog and save our own turf for the winter fire. It was hard work and our fingers were raw and the flesh broken in places. I always loved coming down the mountain, seeing the smoke drifting up from the chimneys and knowing my mother would have the spuds on the boil. At dusk I would go outside to see the lights twinkling in the farmhouse windows, in the distance the lights flashing off and on in the lighthouses, the gentle lapping off the waves as the tide came in and a dog barking in the distance. How peaceful if was and how contented we were. Inside the house, beside the fire was a small pot with porridge, made with real oatmeal and my mother would stir it now and again, between the clicking of her knitting needles. After we had our bowls of porridge and milk, it was time to day the rosary and then off to bed. After we were settled, my mother would come around sprinkling holy water all over the house and asking God to protect us during the night.

I used to wonder about matchmaking, at that time a common practice in Ireland. If a man had a comfortable home and some land and needed a wife everyone was on the look out for a suitable match for him. She would have to have a certain amount of money so that the man could pass it on to his sister and then she could find a husband. Sometimes the bride would scarcely have seen the man she was to marry until she arrived at the church for the wedding ceremony. If a young man fell in love with a girl who had no money and he wanted to marry her, his parents would make him leave the family farm and find work somewhere else. Often a match would be made between a very young girl and a much older man just because he had a nice house and a well-stocked farm. The marriages always seemed to be happy enough.

Our school was one huge classroom, divided in two, not by a curtain or anything but a wide space. There were two teachers, the master and the lady who taught the younger children until they were about ten years old then they moved up to the master. The classroom was comfortable in summer but in winter it was very cold. There was a big fireplace at one end of the room and each child had to bring a cart load of turf to keep the fire going in winter. When it was your turn to bring the turf, you got the day off school and your name was marked off the attendance list. On bitter cold days, when you couldn't hold your pencil, you were allowed up to the fire to get warm then back to your seat. The schoolmaster was fond of a drink and, when my father was alive, they would go together to the only public house in the village. Perhaps because of that he trusted me and he would give me money, to stop at the public house and get him a glass of whiskey and a bottle of beer on my way to school. I would hide it for him up on a little shelf in the turf house. Sometimes I was late for roll call but he always marked me, "present", as he knew where I was. I would have liked to stay on at school and learn more but we had no choice but to leave school and find work. In those days there was no night school. My mother made us read at night and helped us with our lessons.

My grand uncle would come for me to help him pull "bent", a tall wiry grass that grew in the sandhills and was used for thatching. There is a certain way to pull it, catching it as near the

root as possible. It was painful on the hands and it took a lot of work to fill a cart full. My grand uncle always praised me on how well I could do this job. There was always work to be done and we did it willingly with no complaints.

My first job after I left school, was with farmers, my wages one pound a month. The farmer was kind but his wife was a slave driver, who hardly gave you time to finish a meal. One night I was so tired that I fell asleep sitting on the edge of my bed, and that was how she found me in the morning, fully clothed and frozen stiff. At five thirty in the morning, I was out milking cows and that was the start of a long hard day's work. Coursing day was one day in the year that everyone, young and old, looked forward to. There was greyhound racing, which the men enjoyed, and all kinds of sports and side shows. The day before we doubled up on all the chores, two loaves of bread baked instead of one, double the calf meal boiled, double pig food and up extra early to milk the cows. We would be home that night in time to do the evening chores. When I was paid at the end of the month she gave me seventeen shillings and sixpence and when I asked her why I hadn't been paid a pound she said, "You didn't expect to get paid for Coursing Day?" She kept two shillings and sixpence out of my pay and, if I had got paid that much per day, I would have been the highest paid farm worker in the county. I was afraid to go home and tell my mother what had happened but all she said was, "God forgive the old skinflint." A month later I caught the whooping cough and, when I had a bad attack of coughing, the farmer's wife would shout at me to go outside until it passed. One winter morning I was out spreading seed potatoes and there were showers of hailstone so heavy that they would cut right through you. I was in the middle of the field trying to pull my dress down to protect my legs, when my mother passed along the road and saw me. She went home crying and sent my brother John to bring me home. It was wonderful to be home and have a rest but I knew it wouldn't be for long as I would have to find another job.

There was always work to be done at home to help my mother. We had two pet goats called Tupsy and Jenny and they would come running to us when we called them. There were wild goats up in the hills and we were afraid of the big pucks with the huge horns. When our goats were in season, the pucks would come down from the hills and you could tell they were close to the house by their smell. In the spring, Tupsy always had two kids and Jenny never more than one. The kids were so playful and we always gave them names. Goat's milk is snow white and very rich. My sister Bridget would collect the cream and make a small print of butter. It was very white compared to butter made from cow's milk. We had a very severe winter with heavy falls of snow and our two goats were missing. We searched for days, going up in the hills and calling their names, but couldn't find them and we were certain that they were dead. As we roamed the crags I noticed a yellow stain in the snow and when we dug down through the drifts, we found our pet goats very weak after five days without food and water. When we got them home, we gave them the best care and they recovered well from their ordeal but poor Jenny lost an eye.

In spite of the hard times we still found time to laugh and every village had its comics. One fellow walking along the road one day and stopped to admire a plot of rhubarb in my cousin's garden. "Ah you have a nice crop of rhubarb to make some nice apple cakes!" he told her. One time my father was training a young horse and an old woman, who had been baking bread and was covered in flour, came out to the road to wish him luck. She started beating the flour off herself and it rose in clouds, spooking the horse and it took off, jumping over a wall taking my father with him. You can be sure the old woman didn't get any thanks from my father for her good wishes.

Another custom was the Sunday before Shrove Tuesday was called Chalk Sunday. The young folk would take a piece of chalk to mass and draw a chalk line down the backs of all the spinsters and bachelors. It made some of them so angry that they wouldn't come out on Chalk Sunday. Everyone looked forward to St. Stephen's day and the mummers as they were called. These were groups of young men with green, white and gold ribbons tied around them and two of them would be disguised. They would go from house to house collecting money - whatever you could afford to give them. All the young girls would run and hide as the two, who were disguised, would try to catch them and kiss them. As they approached a house one of the young men would blow a horn. There were always great dancers and musicians among them, usually a flute player, an accordionist and a fiddler. When the music started the dancers danced a jig and a reel and when they got their money they left with a blast of the horn. The louder the blast the more money they had collected. After the New Year, they used the money for a great dance and everyone looked forward to it and enjoyed it.

Then there were the straw boys, who showed up at all the weddings in different disguises and covered in straw. No one knew who they were and, when they arrived at a wedding, the floor was always cleared for them to have their dance. One would always dance with the bride and if anyone tried to peep beneath the straw to find out who they were, a man with a long stick would tap them on the knuckles. The best man would then give them a drink to toast the bride and groom and they would leave, shouting good wishes to the newlyweds.

I always knew the day would come when 1 would have to leave our village and I often wondered if I would ever go to America, the land of my birth. It didn't give me any joy because I knew that most young people who went to America never came back. Although they never returned, they never forgot their families back home and sent money to help out when they could.

My next job was with a very wealthy family who got the last ounce of work out of their staff. There were four of us, an elderly man, a young man, an older girl and myself We never got fresh cooked meat to eat, always leftovers from three or four days before. Fresh bread was locked up and stale bread left in the kitchen for the workers. At night I could hear the music and laughter from the fairgrounds, but the lady of the house said I was too young to go out, so

while everyone ease was out enjoying themselves, I would work until dark pulling weeds and picking up leaves in the hothouse This lady was a very dishonest woman. One day a goose flew into the yard and, even though she knew it belonged to a neighbour, she called the yard boy to kill it and pluck it right away. Another time when she was out walking, her Irish setter killed another neighbour's duck, and she told them she would give them one of hers, to replace it. That evening it was raining very hard and some ducks wandered into the yard. She sent me out to herd them round in back, selected the best one put it in a basket and sent me over to give it to the woman whose duck had been killed by the dog. When she saw another of the ducks was a laying duck, she kept it for herself. In those days you were afraid to say anything. Who would believe a lady who had everything would steal from her neighbours! One neighbour had a flock of turkeys that would wander up in the fields. My mistress told me to go up the hill, behind the turkeys and drive four or five of them into a shed in the yard. She could see the turkeys but couldn't see me and I gathered cow dung and pelted the turkeys with it, until they turned back towards their own yard. When I came down the hill she said I was a stupid girl for not being able to catch a few turkeys. My mother could not believe the stories I told about the family I worked for. The mistress was always so kind to her when she came to visit. One day my mother stopped to see me on her way home from buying groceries. The bag with the groceries was very heavy and my mother was grateful to sit down for a few minutes rest. Before setting off on the long walk home, the mistress went out to the meat safe, no refrigerators in those days, and gave my mother a large ham end with lots of meat on it. She said it would be nice for the children's tea. It was almost a seven mile walk, up hills and down dales, and the groceries and the ham was a lot of weight to carry. By the time my mother got home she was very tired and her feet hurt but the kettle was soon boiling and she had a nice treat for the children's tea. She started to slice the ham and found it was covered with maggots. All she could do was take it outside and throw it out in the field. What a cruel trick to let her carry the heavy ham all the way home and it was not fit to eat. From then on, she believed the stories I told her about how the staff was treated. One night 1 was feeling lonely and I crept out the back gate and went into town to visit my girlfriend. When I got back the mistress had discovered I was not in my room and she said some terrible things to me. I packed my clothes and in the morning I left, without my wages, or seeing any of them. When I explained to my mother what had happened, she told me not to worry that I would find another job. That afternoon the family came after me in their big car and apologized for shouting at me, but I refused to go back with them. They wouldn't give up and wrote to my mother asking her to send me back, saying I was a good honest worker and they were very fond of me. My mother thought that I should give them another chance so a few days later I went back to them, feeling very sad, as I knew there would be no change for the better.

I had a girlfriend who worked in a house on the outskirts of town. It was a friendly home and I could call to see her whenever I had some free time. My friend could not believe me when I told her I was returning to my job. She had been planning for a while, to go to England and train to become a nurse and I was keen to go with her, but my mother got very upset when I

suggested it and said she wouldn't hear of such a thing. She asked the teacher and his wife to talk me out of the idea of leaving home. Next time I called to see my friend, she told me she was leaving for England in a month and we were both sad that I couldn't go with her. While we were talking her mistress came in and was surprised to hear I was going back to my job. She then asked if I would be interested in taking my friend's job as they would have to find someone to replace her. Without hesitation, I said that I would. I stayed with my new family for six years and was there for the birth of their three sons whom I loved dearly. It was hard work but the master and mistress were kind and friendly and treated me like a family member. One time I went home for a week's holiday. On my second day at home, my mistress drove out to our cottage with the oldest boy who was four years old. He hadn't eaten or stopped crying since I left, as he thought I wasn't turning back. He clung to me when it was time for them to leave and begged to stay. I spent my holiday taking him to the beach every day, and he enjoyed it so much, and never once asked to go home to his mother and father. The mistress of the house was much younger than her husband and she liked to play tennis and spend time with the young set in town. I had a free hand in the house and she trusted me to take care of the children. One day I collected several pounds of fruit from the blackcurrant bushes in the garden and made ten jars of blackberry jam. It was perfect and I was proud thinking how much the family would all enjoy this special treat. My mistress came home before her husband, put her arms around me and promised to buy me a new dress if I would let her have the credit for making the jam. What could I do but say yes and stand by and watch as the master praised her for making the delicious jam. I got used to this sort of thing as it happened frequently after that. She would be out enjoying herself all afternoon and come home in time to put on an apron before her husband came home and say she had been busy cooking dinner. Then she would wink at me. I suspect the master knew what was going on, but as long as it made his young wife happy, he went along with her stories One evening I mentioned to the master that there was enough food wasted that would feed two pigs. We talked about it and the following week he went out and bought two young pigs. It was more work for me, but I enjoyed watching them grow fat. Then the day came when it was time for them to be killed. I made all the black puddings and a man came to cut the meat into lovely fletches and prepare the pickling barrels. The master was thrilled and told me to make up a parcel of meat to take to my mother. When I was finished my work for the day, I packed a bag with black pudding, pork steaks and some nice juicy ribs, knowing how welcome it would be at home. I set off for home riding a gent's bicycle crossbar, belonging to the master. It was a seven mile journey on a very lonely road, in complete darkness at night, but I never knew any fear. When it was time to start back to town, my mother would walk out to the crossroad and call after me, "God speed and safe home!" In winter, the nights were bleak and cold, but I always felt wonderful with the sea breezes blowing in my face.

I worked hard but I had my freedom and I was happy. My friends and I loved dancing and we'd travel miles to a dance and it would be the early hours of the morning before I got home. We'd never tire of dancing and on the way home we would dance a set at the crossroads before

saying goodbye. It wasn't worth going to bed for a few hours sleep and I would rest by the fire before starting my day's work. When the tourists came in summer the country dances ended and there were dances in the hotels with big bands coming from Dublin and often a gypsy band played in the village square.

My young sister, Bridget, the clever one in the family, was ready to leave school and the teacher was trying to persuade her to stay. She came into town to spend a few nights with me, and my mistress's sister, who was home on holiday from England, took a great liking to Bridget, and went to my mother for permission to take her back to England with her. She promised that Bridget would be treated like one of the family. My mother thought it would be a good opportunity for Bridget going to a good home and a family who would see that no harm came to her. The wages in Ireland were one pound per month and my sister was paid the same amount in England. She was treated more like a slave than one of the family, working from early morning until late at night and, when her mistress was in a bad mood, she would slap her for no reason. Poor Bridget hated it and cried herself to sleep at night. She had no day off. Her only outings were to the park with the two youngest children and collecting the papers and magazines from the shop at the end of the avenue. She was surprised when the shop owner told her he was cancelling the order, as there was a large unpaid bill. When she went home and told the mistress, she was slapped again. During her walks with the children in the park, Bridget had become friendly with another Irish girl, and during their conversations, she told Bridget that her employers gave her one full day and two evenings off, to visit her friends or to go dancing or see a film. They were very kind to her and they were very wealthy. Hearing all this made Bridget feel very bitter about the way she was treated but she didn't know what to do about it. Her friend told her that it was easy to find a new job if she had the courage to leave. Bridget finally decided to run away. She packed her suitcase, sneaked it out of the house and asked the man at the magazine shop if he would keep it for her until she found a new job. When she told him her plans, he said he wasn't surprised and didn't know how she had stayed with such a cruel family so long. She went to her friend's house and was made very welcome and the lady of the house advised Bridget to phone her mistress and let her know she was safe but would not be back. The mistress was furious and said, "What will your mother say when she hears you have run away?" Bridget was so happy to be free from such a cruel woman and in less than a week, she had a wonderful job, with a doctor and his family. Her pay went from one pound a month to one pound a week. When the news reached my mother, she was very worried, thinking of Bridget in London on her own and she wrote and begged her to come home. Bridget wrote back and assured my mother that she was happy well cared for. She was also writing to me and in every letter pleading with me to come and join her in London. When I told my master and mistress, they said that they and the boys would be very lonely after me and the house would never be the same if I decided to go. The thought of leaving made me very sad as I felt like part of the family and was trusted to take care of any problems that came up.

One time we had a cow that had a difficult time delivering her calf. A car had struck her and the

calf was positioned on one side. I say up all night with the cow in the barn, until it was time to call for help delivering the calf. When the calf was old enough it was my responsibility to hold out for the best price and to sell it.

I'd go bed at night and wonder what the future would hold for me if I went to England. Then I would hear an old fiddler, making his way with too much to drink in him. He'd stop for a rest and play some wonderful reels and, listening to him, I would cry myself to sleep. My mother still did not like the idea of my going to England, but she was worried that that something terrible would happen to Bridget and she agreed to let me go. It's hard to break away from family and friends that you love but I finally made up my mind to go and if I didn't like it I could always come back.

Things were a little better at home. The farmers were still the worst to work for making sure they got every ounce of work out of you and the pay was an insult. My youngest brother Patrick told me about one time the weather was very bad and some farmers had their hay cut, but couldn't get it saved. One farmer came through the village, looking for young fellows to help him and promised them ten cigarettes at the end of the day - no money just the cigarettes. Several young men volunteered, including Patrick. At midday, cans of tea and homemade bread was brought out to them in the meadow. My brother asked the farmer for a cigarette. At the end of the day as he was handing out the cigarettes to each worker, he took one cigarette from Patrick's packet and told him he had already given him one. My two brothers were now old enough and strong enough to cut and save the turf for the winter's fire and plant the potatoes and the vegetables. My mother could make a shilling do what others couldn't make a pound do. She stayed busy with her knitting, her sewing and making patchwork quilts. When I made up my mind to leave, she was broken hearted and then pleaded with me to bring Bridget home with me. Bridget was sending two pounds a month home but my mother was willing to give that up to have her home again. My friends laughed and wouldn't believe that I was serious about leaving. The day I left I worked up to the last minute. I sent the children off to school and broke my heart crying as I watched until they were out of sight. The hardest part was saying goodbye to my mother and my brothers but my mother insisted that it wouldn't be for long and Bridget and I would soon be back home.

I caught the nine thirty a.m. bus to Limerick then the train to Dublin. From there, I crossed over on the night ferry to Holyhead and took a train to Euston station where Bridget was waiting for me. It had been a long lonely journey on my own and it was great to see Bridget looking so well and happy. I stayed with friends of hers who ran a boarding house. Then I was to start a new job with friends of the family that Bridget worked for. Her friends who ran the boarding house made me very welcome and, after breakfast, I went to bed for a few hours. There were four lodgers in the house, two Scots and two Irish fellows. I told the landlady who was named Mary, not to introduce me to the two Scots, as I didn't like them. That night I went off to a dance with Bridget and the two Irish lads and enjoyed every minute of it. The following

Sunday I was writing a letter to my mother and I asked one of the Scots, what was the mailing address of the house. He told me, but because of his strong Scottish accent, I couldn't understand a word he said and had to go and ask Mary.

I started my new job on Monday. My employers were a young couple with two young sons. They lived in a large beautiful home and I had my own private bedroom, which to me was a palace, compared to what I was used to in Ireland. The lady was a great beauty and her husband…

Aggie subsequently married one of the two Scots, Joe Clements and had three children. She resided all her married life in Glasgow, Scotland.