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KNOCK: A RESURRECTED SHRINE  
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Although pilgrimages to the Holy Land, to the thresholds of the Apostles, or to places where our Blessed Lady is believed to have specially favoured her clients, have always been approved and indeed encouraged by the Church, it is also beyond question that such pilgrimages have at times proved a fertile source of abuses and even of notable scandals. Already in the fourth century St. Gregory of Nyssa expressed himself on this subject in terms so denunciatory that attempts have been vainly made to throw doubt on the authenticity of his letter entitled "On those who set out for Jerusalem." Similarly his contemporary, St. Paulinus of Nola, though entirely devoted to the glorification of the Presbyter St. Felix, allows us to see plainly enough that the concourse of pilgrims to the Saint's resting place might be productive of very serious evils. In those remote times it was the mixture of the sexes making a long journey together on foot, as well as the opportunities afforded by the nocturnal vigils before the shrine, which were the chief source of danger. In our own day we have rather to deplore the commercialism engendered among those who seek to exploit a new market, and the tendency to convert an austere devotional exercise into a free-and-easy picnic. Without presuming to condemn the practice of going on a pilgrimage as unhealthy or harmful, it would at any rate be well in all cases to make sure that the shrine to be visited has really been sanctified by some heavenly manifestation, and that we are not merely lending countenance to the illusions of a group of religious enthusiasts, however well-meaning.

Some few weeks ago a letter was printed in The Irish Times, signed by a very respected priest, Father C. W. Corbett, P.P. and V.F., of Mallow, County Cork. It deprecated in forcible terms the revival of the pilgrimages to Knock, of which much has lately been heard in the Free State. The writer, whose venerable standing may be inferred from the fact that he was ordained priest in 1881, is able to recall the impression created at Maynooth two years earlier when the alleged apparitions occurred, and his testimony is to the effect that the attitude of the corpus doctum at this centre of learning was extremely non-committal. Further, he is able to assert that in the course of a year or two the sensation at first created had entirely died down, and that when in 1893 or 1894 he spent a holiday in Connaught—Knock is in County Mayo—he heard hardly a mention of the matter even there. "The priests to whom I spoke," he says, "without exception professed utter unbelief in it. Specimens of the alleged miracles were mentioned and were such as a little religious excitement would give rise to."

There is more in the letter well worthy of consideration, but I must content myself with quoting its concluding words.

"No commission," writes Father Corbett, "has yet pronounced on the alleged apparitions at Knock, and yet there are pilgrimages, published and patronized by clerics of all ranks, with, of course, crowds of our Catholic people. I understand that a lucrative trade is done in pious objects brought from Knock. I know I am giving expression to the thoughts of many priests and people in asking the question : Whither does all this tend ? "

I am to this extent personally interested in Knock that I also, being then of the age of 23, remember something of what was said of it in England at the time. In spite of the sponsorship of a devout priest or two here and there—Father Gallwey, S.J., if I am not mistaken, was reported to be one of the believers—the attitude of the majority of the clergy was distinctly sceptical, and the one instance of a reputed miracle at Knock which I afterwards came across was certainly not satisfactory.

The story of the apparitions is briefly this. On the evening of August 21st, 1879, the priest's housekeeper at Knock, passing the blank wall (which other witnesses described as the "gable") of the church, saw three illuminated figures, believed to be Our Lady, St. Joseph and St. John, outlined upon the flat surface at the level of the ground. She fetched a friend ; the news spread, and a small crowd assembled who knelt down and watched these apparently motionless figures. The people remained there, saying the rosary and other prayers, for more than an hour, despite the heavy rain that was falling. In contrast to such alleged apparitions as those at Beauraing, Banneux, Pontmain, etc., as well as at Lourdes itself, the prodigy was visible to all, and was not in this case an experience confined to a few privileged children. A reporter of the Daily Telegraph subsequently visited the spot. He spoke with a number of the witnesses, men and women, as well as 'a bright intelligent lad of fourteen named Patrick Hill, whose story he transcribes in full.' The Daily Telegraph reporter declared himself entirely satisfied of the sincerity of those with whom he conversed. The possibility that some mauvais plaisant had used a magic lantern to work the portent seems to be disposed of by the circumstance of the falling rain. No one could have chosen such an evening for his purpose. It was this Daily Telegraph evidence which led me in my little book Beauraing and Other Apparitions to remark that I regarded Knock as "a much more satisfactory instance of this sort of phenomenon than any of those just described," i.e. Pontmain, Marpingen, Mettenbach, etc. ; but though I spoke of the incident as very puzzling, I added that I was "far from thinking that its supernatural character is in any way clearly established."

The alleged miracles, which thereupon began to be worked, were not impressive even as reported by ardent propagandists. Take, for example, the case of a Mr. Geoghegan, of New York, who gave the following testimony :— " I was a great sufferer from lumbago. I had such pains in my back that I could not sleep unless propped up by pillows. I was still suffering when I went to Knock. It was with difficulty, by the aid of a chair, that I could get on the seat of the car, with the help of Father Corbett.<sup>2</sup> I went into the chapel and said such prayers as Father Cavanagh had suggested. He gave me some of the cement off the wall and some wood from the window where the apparition of the Blessed Virgin appeared. I used both according to his directions, by mixing it with holy water and binding it on the diseased spot [sic]. When I came from the chapel, I felt like a new being, and was able to jump up to the seat of the car. Jam a cured man." What probably contributed not a little to discredit Knock as a place of pilgrimage was its close association in early days with the stormy career of "the Nun of Kenmare," Miss Cusack, in religion Sister Mary Francis Clare. She was at that time a great personage in the literary world of Catholic Ireland. Her books, published in 4to, *The History of the Irish Nation*, *The Liberator*, *St. Patrick*, etc., were honoured with many compliments from Cardinals and prelates. It was she who first announced to the world at large the surprising happenings at Knock, and she went to establish herself there shortly afterwards and to found a new convent. Among the miracles which made the shrine famous must be registered the following. In the first of her two autobiographies Miss Cusack describes her coming to Knock in these forms :— " Archdeacon Cavanagh was expecting us. . . . His loving welcome to myself I can never forget. . . . He took both my hands, clasped them warmly in his own and exclaimed : 'A hundred thousand welcomes. We have got you now, and will never let you go.' . . .

"I learned from Father Cavanagh to offer a prayer on the very spot where the apparition had taken place. Let it be remembered how delicate my health was, and that for four years I had been unable to kneel, even for a moment. I know not how, but I found myself on my knees in an instant and, I know not how, I found myself completely cured. It was certainly a cure of a very remarkable kind. I came to Knock that morning, or rather a few moments before, a helpless invalid, and in a moment I felt health and life and vigour."

The incident is not referred to in Miss Cusack's second autobiography, called *The Story of My Life*. By the time this was published (1891) she had left the Catholic Church and gone back to Protestantism. In the later book she tells us how "her eyes were opened to Father Cavanagh's real character," and, though this is no place to revive old gossip, it does appear from other evidence that the Archdeacon, as he was commonly called, was not the type of man whose judgment and stability could be relied on. It is unfortunate that he himself professed to have been favoured with apparitions at Knock on more than one occasion. Of course, the fact that Miss Cusack during the remainder of her life became a violent assailant of the Catholic Church and all the Roman clergy, has little bearing one way or the other upon the Knock manifestations, but it is not surprising that those who had formerly been impressed by her ardent championship of the cause should come to the conclusion that not only her testimony, but other similar testimony in the same sense, is of little value. If the Mayo shrine to be rehabilitated once more we have a right to look for something in the way of fresh evidence, or at least for a positive pronouncement from ecclesiastical authority that this is holy ground specially consecrated in honour of the Queen of Heaven. As the matter has apparently been referred to Rome, this would seem to indicate that the presence of members of the episcopate taking part in the pilgrimages does not in any way determine the main point at issue.