



A GALLOWAY LANDSCAPE.

THE CHEESE INDUSTRY OF THE LOWLANDS.

By S. R. LEWISON.

WHERE Wigtonshire pierces the Mull of Galloway, a deep silence and sense of repose are upon the land. No railroad brings a freight of busy visitors from all parts of Scotland and Northern England; the terminus of the line is at Strauraer, some miles to the north. The cultivation of the fields bespeaks a very long-sustained period of successful farming, but the prosperous farmhouses, with their busy steddings, are few and far between. Here and there a stone cottage fringes the high road, empty from dawn to dusk unless the cottar's "weans" are too young to take some small share of work in the byre, or the cottar has some ancient relative whose day of active pursuits is past. From hill-tops on a clear day the sea may be seen shining on either side, the fields are full of plovers, besides gulls and other sea-birds, particularly when the ploughman is at work, and worms or grubs are making their brief and dangerous acquaintance with the light.

The invigorating air, the smiling fields and prosperous farms suggest Arcadia, and,

indeed, this region is one wherein "the labouring swain" is cheered by good health, pleasant occupation, and a fair wage. For the willing man there is abundant work; indeed, labour is not found readily. Nearly a century ago, the old wives of Wigtonshire tell me, there was an Irish invasion of Galloway. The sons of the "disthressful country" came over in large numbers, thinking they had found a Canaan overflowing with work and whisky. The landowners appointed men to collect these unwelcome immigrants together and return them, carriage paid, to the land of their birth. Some few, having means of support, survived the process of collection and stayed on unmolested, to intermarry with the Lowland women, without noticeable benefit to themselves or Galloway. To-day the traveller sees many a cottage whose tenants seem more Irish than Scotch. The bare-footed, bright-eyed, impudent children have more in common with the Emerald Isle than the Land o' Cakes. I have been told they inherit the vices of both parents without the

virtues of either, but this is likely to be mere prejudice.

It is easy to recognise the chief industry of the district. Comparatively little grain is raised, and the preference is for oats rather than wheat. In every direction large herds of cows are feeding, Alderneys and Ayrshires being the predominant breeds. In smaller fields, hedged with stone dykes, the bulls graze by themselves at certain

premises. In the depths of the winter, when milk is comparatively scarce, and cheesemaking could hardly be carried on at a profit, the farmers send their milk in carts to the nearest town that boasts a creamery. The finest cheese is, of course, the home-made. On the farms, machinery is sufficient without being too much in evidence; an individual attention is bestowed upon each process that is an effective guarantee of

good result. Moreover, competition is keen though it is never bitter: every farmer seeks to excel his neighbour, but more on account of pride than necessity, and a really clever cheesemaker can be sure of a good and permanent position. The distance between the farms and the nearest railway-stations keeps prices down by limiting the markets, and yet good profits are to be made. It is not unlikely that with the advent of a light railway—and it may be mentioned that the district has long sought to obtain one—prices will rise and quality will deteriorate; suffice it that at present the cheeses made are the finest of their kind, and the simple method of their manufacture, while full of



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seasons of the year, and the stroller is well advised to give these fields a wide berth. If he meet one, let him stay no longer than is necessary, for in this case the value of discretion is not easily overestimated, and few of the farmers would care to face their own bulls.

Dairy farming goes on all the year round in this district, and cheesemaking is carried on from March to November on many farm

interest, is yet so simple that the most casual observer may follow the process without any difficulty.

To study the method satisfactorily from start to finish, let us come out into the meadows in late afternoon and see the cows driven to the byres. The word "driven" is not used fairly in this connection, for so soon as the cows see their keepers they cease from their pleasant labours and turn



"The road to the byre is so full of the cattle that nothing can pass."

readily towards home. From most distant fields they come. Some of the big farms extend over thousands of acres, and the way is long from home to meadow. At length the road to the byre is so full of the cattle that nothing can pass. They reach their appointed places, and the milking commences. One milker can attend to ten cows, and some of the herds number three hundred or more. When the pails are filled, they are taken from the stalls to the range of low outbuildings and emptied into one of the huge zinc vats in the middle room. On the one side of this room is the engine-house, on the other the pressing-room; above are the stores where a cheese matures. The zinc bath or vat is heated by a hot-water tank beneath it served directly by the engine, and can be moved from side to side by means of a graduated lever. When the evening milk is in, work is over for the night.

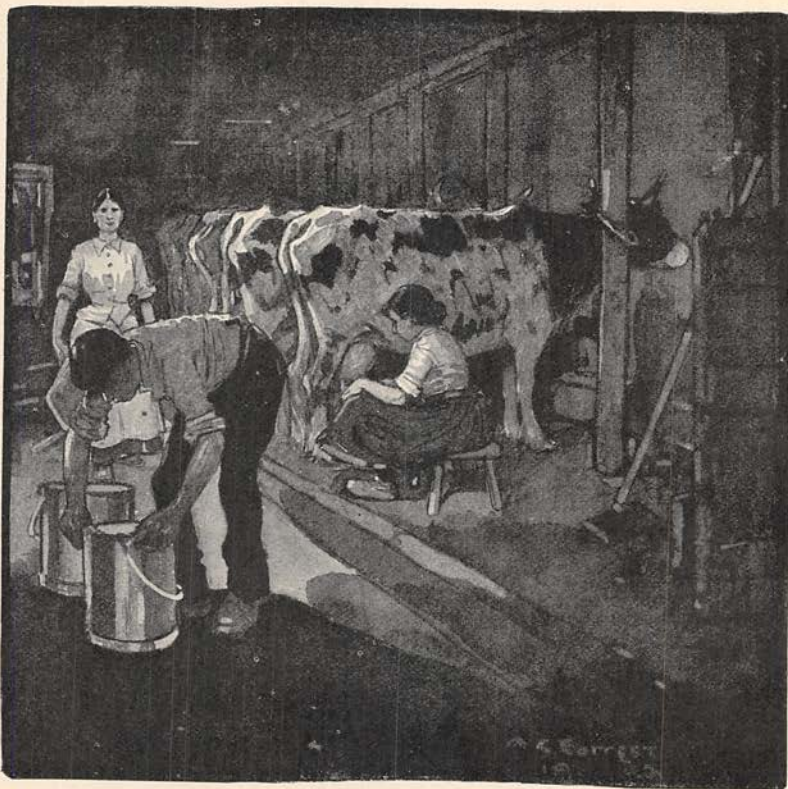
At half-past five, or even earlier, on the following morning tasks are resumed, the boiler's stove is lighted, the place is washed from end to end, and then, before the morning's milk is put in, the cream is taken from the night's supply. So soon as the dairy workers have brought in their well-filled pails, and the contents of the vats have been doubled, the night's cream, which has been heated that it may offer no resistance to the

action of the rennet, is restored, and the hot-water tanks beneath the milk heat the whole bulk to the temperature required for the addition of rennet and colouring matter. Let me say a word about colouring cheese. "It is poisonous stuff," said one of the largest manufacturers in the district when I asked him to tell me all he knew and thought about the subject. "Good cheese is almost white; if consumers will insist upon having a buttercup yellow, we oblige them." In the small quantity used, the colouring matter can do no harm to anybody, and yet the man who makes a fine Cheddar is very sorry to put anything into it that savours of adulteration, particularly since it is not even a healthy addition. I was reminded of some statements made to me in the summer by a miller in the South of England. "People will have white bread," he said, "and so I have to take what is best in the grain and throw it away." Pure Cheddar cheese should be white, and pure bread should be brown; unhappily, the *fiat* of the man in the street has gone forth—he will have his cheese yellow and his bread white. He pays his money and has the right to choose his goods; it is a pity that this choice is not a wiser one. When the cheesemaker is preparing Cheddar for his home consumption or for friends, be sure he does not introduce any colouring matter.

We left the rennet in the warm milk, and while we have been discussing adulteration, the chemical action has separated it into curds and whey. After a time the curd is cut with an instrument that would pass in a crowd for a garden rake's first cousin. The handle is short and the teeth are close together. The cutting is done very regularly and completely through the length and breadth of the curd, which is now reduced to pieces the size of a split pea. While the curd is cut up in the whey, and the even temperature is maintained by the hot-water tank, chemical action is deciding the fate of the cheese. At a certain moment it will be ready for treatment, and when the moment comes round,

there must be no delay. Anticipate it by five minutes, and your cheese is not worth moulding; pass the moment by even a short time, and you have another case of labour lost. There are a few mechanical ways of finding out, but the finest Cheddar cheeses are made by the men who have an instinct for the right moment and do not err in their judgment once in a score of times. One of the devices of the unskilled is rather curious. A poker or piece of iron is heated in the stove until it has all the heat that can come without change of colour. A piece of the cheese curd is taken from the vat, squeezed nearly dry, then put lightly upon the iron and quickly yet carefully withdrawn. If it leaves on the iron tiny downy threads like very fine wool, the curd is ready; if, on the other hand, it leaves comparatively thick threads, the time for further development has not arrived.

Between the addition of the rennet, the raking of the curd, and its removal, some hours must elapse, and from time to time the contents of the vat are vigorously



MILKING.

stirred. The curd has a faint odour, which is not altogether attractive, at this period of the proceedings.

At last the master gives the word, a tap is turned by the side of the vat, and the whey runs down through a strainer into long pipes that reach to a big trough at the far end of the byre. Beyond this trough is the piggery, a long lane with low, rain-proof sheds on either side. Within these sheds the pigs lie at their ease, enjoying themselves after the manner of their kind. Theirs is a warm house, and on the whey and barley-meal they thrive, very princes among their people. When they were first brought in from the fields, much exercise and a moderate diet had made them spare and thin. Now all this is changed. In the lotus land of the piggery they are "resting weary limbs at last on beds of" — well, not asphodel, but clean straw;

in imagination one hears them adapting Tennyson somewhat in this strain—

“Surely, surely, slumber is more sweet than toil, the
straw
Than rooting in the rootless fields that stretch along
the shore,
O rest ye, rasher spirits, we will not wander more.”

And they do not wander. By the time the cheesemaking is over for the year, they are incapable of wandering; their weight runs round about three hundred pounds, they are worth £5 apiece when they are taken in carts to the bourn from which a pig only returns in the form of pork. So that their end be brief, though painful, they have small reason to grieve. So happy is their lot that when a stranger passes their sties, they look



A CORNER OF A DAIRY.

up with kindly contempt, as though to say: “Why had he not the sense to be born a pig?”

Leaving the pigs literally shining with contentment and good living, let us return

to where the thick white or yellow curd lies at the bottom of the vat. The last of the whey has run off, and the curd is now lifted out on to a perforated table covered with cloths. Once in place and thoroughly enveloped in the cloth, heavy weights are put upon the curd, which yields more whey and quickly becomes a solid cake. No more concessions in the matter of whey being possible, in spite of pressure, the powers that be do not disturb it for some few hours, though the poor curd has soon to atone for its brief and well-earned period of repose. A pitiless machine of the coffee-grinder family has been requisitioned for active service, the power of steam diverted from the tank sets the teeth of the new instrument in rotation.

When all is ready, a slab of the curd is cut and put into the machine, to be broken and twisted out of shape and reduced to fragments. Slab follows slab until all the curd is broken up, dry at last. This is the milling process, and the philologist may decide at his leisure whether the term by which old-time prize-fights were known has anything to do with this word. Certainly the “mill” patronised by our grandparents and their fathers meted out a very similar treatment to the heroes of the ring who took part in it.

Having assaulted and battered the curd, the machine is withdrawn and its victim is treated with salt, possibly as a restorative, more probably for flavouring purposes. By this time the curd is cheese, and under this name undergoes the last great torment. It is taken fragment by fragment and pressed into a mould. The size of the moulds varies; some are for ten-pound cheeses, others will turn out a giant capable of turning the scale at more than a hundredweight. When the hands have exhausted their persuasion, another machine with a strong lever is called

into action, and then the poor cheese has the experience vouchsafed to mortals who sought the gallery of the Opera on a Patti night, when the great singer was in her prime. The pressure being removed at last, the

cheese is taken from the mould wrapped in bandages and raised by machinery to the store-rooms on the upper floor, put on a ledge, and left there to ripen. Twice a day it is turned, and the turning is a delicate operation, accomplished with ease by a man of moderate strength who understands the trick, and quickly tiring the novice who relies upon brute force. Some farms have reversible stands for the cheeses, and the workers have but to turn a lever.

In a very few weeks the young cheese is fit to be eaten, and the country dwellers, who understand the quality and value of the food, eat it in quantities that would surprise the man from the South. In about three months a cheese is ready for the market, though many people prefer a Cheddar that has enjoyed one, two, or even three years' repose in the storage-lofts. There is a long journey, often ten miles or more in length, before the cheeses reach the railroad, and, once arrived there, they are no more than units in the vast sum of British produce that travels up or down the highways of commerce. By the time their destination is reached, the interest is over. The making of Cheddar cheeses in this wild quarter of Galloway derives its attraction from the surroundings and associations. The life is almost an ideal one for the farmer who owns the cheese and the landowners to whom the farms belong, as well as to the humblest of the assistants whose duty is to tend the cows or scrub the dairy utensils. The air is strong and invigorating, the great extent of the farm lands makes exercise universal, the necessities of life are not dear, the work is thoroughly healthy.

In one of his Oxford Lectures, delivered thirty years ago, John Ruskin observed, with the complete assurance that marks most of his utterances, that no race of men bred in the country, far from cities, ever enjoys landscape, and that a peasant cannot see the beauty of cattle. If he is right—I cannot recall the proof of the statement—the people of Wigtonshire are to be pitied, for the charm of their landscapes is exquisite, and the cattle are very beautiful. Some refutation of Mr. Ruskin's statement is to be

found in the delight that the natives take in their surroundings and their reluctance to go into the towns, even when residence in the country is a matter of choice rather than necessity.

It is likely that the finest of all Cheddar cheeses come from Galloway, but the publication of the fact can have no effect upon production, which has reached the highest point of development possible while no railway is at hand to aid. The value of the stock-in-trade at some few of the farms must run into five figures, and the industry gives employment to all the population of the district, with the exception of the few who prefer loafing or poaching. It is unlikely that many of the people are loafers, for the traditions of hard work are strong in the land; on the other hand, it may be supposed that poaching supplements the staple industry of the district, for the land abounds in fur and feather, and is the centre of two or three sporting estates. The farmers pay considerable rents, for if the land is not so highly priced as that of Haddingtonshire and the Lowthians, it fetches several times as much as arable land in Essex and some few parts of our remaining Eastern Counties. Wages, too, are higher than in the South, and farm labourers in Wigtonshire would laugh to scorn the weekly sum that is accepted in our Home Counties. Pure milk costs no more than fivepence a gallon, but the cheesemaker gets little more for his goods than half the sum the retail purchaser pays on purchasing a few pounds, so the cheapness of the milk is rather discounted. If a man makes good cheeses and cannot sell them, they decrease in weight but improve in quality; and this happy circumstance adds largely to the independence of the farmer who has a respectable deposit at his bank. Finally, it may be worthy of note that no mystery exists concerning the methods of manufacture; a stranger interested in the process would be permitted to see it, the only keen competition being apparent on the occasion of the annual agricultural show, when the Cheddar-makers assemble in their might and offer the finest fruits of their skill for the consideration of the judges.