

THE KEYS OF THE CHEST

The little valley of Letterglas is a very green and very lonesome place almost always, for snow seldom lies on it, and the few people who come into it depart again even sooner and as tracelessly, so that its much grass spreads from month to month uncovered and untrodden. It runs westward—that is, towards the ocean—but never reaches the shore, because a great grassy curtain intervenes, curved round the end of it, and prolonged in the lower hill-ranges that bound it to north and south. They are just swarded embankments of most simple construction, with scarcely a fold to complicate the sweep of their smooth green slopes, and the outline of their ridge against the sky undulates as softly as young corn in a drowsy breeze. Only at one point—about midway on the right hand looking westward—it is suddenly broken by a sharp dip down and up again, making a gap like

an inverted Gothic arch. And this is called
by everybody *the Nick of Time*. I once asked the reason of a gossoon who
was guiding me over the opposite hills, but he replied: "Sure,
what else would they be callin' it?" Nor
have I ever yet lighted upon a more satisfactory explanation.

The effect of Letterglas's solitude and verdure somehow seems to be
heightened if
one notices its single visible sign of human
handiwork. This is a road-track, now all but
quite grassed over, leading into the valley
from its open end, where the Clonmoragh
highway passes, and stopping aimlessly at the slope immediately below the
Nick, having first flung two or three zig-zag loops up the hillside.
A rust-eaten, handleless shovel, and the
wreck of an overturned wheelbarrow, still mark the point where the work
was abandoned on
a misty morning in April, more than fifty
springs ago; but the track itself is now
merely a most faint difference of shade in the sward, which has crept back
again indefatigably, even where the austere road-metal had
been thrown clattering down.

A day before that misty morning, if anybody had climbed up and had
passed through

the Nick of Time, in at which the new road
was to go, he would have found himself on
a long level of fine-bladed turf, stretching like a lofty causeway laid down
atop of the hill-embankment Everything else up there looked
so softly smooth and flecklessly green that
the eye was at once caught by a big block
of stone, which stood just opposite the gap,
at a few yards' distance. It was an oblong
mass of blackish limestone, perhaps seven
feet by four, with a shape curiously symmetrical for a piece of Nature's
rough-hewing;
plumb-and-rule guided chisel could scarcely
have made its lines truer. That, and its
solitariness, unaccompanied as far as could be seen by so much as a single
pebble, gave its
aspect an incongruity which prompted the
question how it had come there; for whose
answer we must revert through unimaginable
wastes of years to the time when our last
huge ice-sheet was scoring and grinding all
the country's face on its slithering way to the western ocean. Then it was
that this big

boulder dropped fortuitously through a small
rent in the isle-wide coverlid, and so being
left behind did not share in the final weltering plunge a few miles farther
on, where the
stark folds slipped over the sea-cliffs like the counterpane off a restless
sleeper's bed. Ever since that catastrophe it had sat there looking rather like
a rude unwieldy coffer or chest, a
portion—as in fact it had been—of the impedimenta carried and lost by
some Titanic
traveller. The resemblance was increased by
a clean-cut horizontal crack, no doubt sustained when the mass came
sogging heavily to earth, which ran all round it, a few inches from the top,
counterfeiting a lid. All the
old ages that had passed over it afterwards
had wrought only slight changes in its aspect.
As the years went on, the dark peaty mould
deepened a little about its base, and dull
golden and silvery lichen-circlets crept out
here and there like wraiths of the sun and
moon beams that had touched it. Otherwise
it was unaltered, and for many a long century so were its surroundings.

But at last a new feature appeared among them; a very inobtrusive one.
Fifty years

ago, anybody approaching the big stone from the Nick of Time might have observed that a little footpath led up to it from the contrary direction, and went no farther. A more inartificial path could not well be: a simple product of steps going to and fro. You might have supposed a sheep-walk, only that there were no fleeces nibbling over Letterglas. Indeed, its most frequent passers-by being such promiscuous wayfarers as the shadows of wings and clouds, it was not easy to conjecture any plausible *raison d'être* for this track, which ran distinctly defined, though faintly, merely a crease in the flowing sward mantle, not a seam worn threadbare, so to speak, through to the brown earth. Certainly the rather gloomy-looking block had no apparent attractions wherewith to invite resort, not even a view, as it stood at the bottom of a very shallow dent in the green. Yet there the path ended; and if you took a dozen steps to the brow of the hill, you could trace the course of that pale thin line far down the slopes; through the fenceless “mountainy land” first, and then into two or three steep, dyke-girdled fields, before it was lost among the

round-topped trees which gathered about a
rambling old mansion-house. Whoever visited
the big stone evidently thought it worth
while to come a long way.

Such an humble and artless path has always a certain element of romance
about

it, lacking in more pretentious thoroughfares contracted for at so much a
mile. They

differ as does a brook from a canal. Like the brook, which has wrought
itself as it

went along, with and by its own purpose,
the little footpath has some special meaning
and object, albeit perhaps a less obvious one.

It is the visible trail of a want or wish,
though of what kind we may be unaware,
and with want or wish it will cease to exist, or soon after. For the living
green things

will creep back and efface it speedily. But
meanwhile it seems half to keep and half to
betray a secret: you can only guess what
has brought feet thither day by day to tread
it out.

Fifty years ago or more, you would have been likely enough any fine morning to catch

the chief maker of this particular path in the act. If the years were, say, ten more, it

would have proved to be a very little little-girl, whose brown hair held both sunshine and

shadow, and whose hazel-green eyes were

softly lit, and who in those early days of

hers always wore an ugly reddish checked

pelisse, and a broad-brimmed straw hat with

velvet rosettes to match. This was little

Eileen Fitzmaurice, six or seven years old, who, ever since she could recollect anything,

and maybe some twelve months longer, had

lived with her mother and aunt at the Big

House in Glendoula. As you would, no doubt,

never guess her errand up the side of Slieve

Ardgreine, I will at once explain that she was seeing after the safety of her family plate.

Although Eileen had herself no recollection of anywhere else than this Glendoula, a valley much resembling its neighbour Letterglas, but with its green dotted and chequered by a few