Mrs Whitten's Letters

Jo Holmwood

ON A CRISP day, I sometimes think of her standing at the front door, a bucket of hot soapy water in hand. As she heaves the bucket forward the water leaps over the stone pavement, the light glimmering in the soap bubbles as they gather in the grooves and troughs of its irregular surface. Then she swiftly—(because everything she does is swift and brisk in my mind)—gathers the stiff brush and launches onto it with a sharp motion that jerks the water out towards the road. My great-grandmother. A formidable woman, industrious and resourceful by all accounts. But not forbidding.

On fair days she serves teas in the parlour, to farmers who have travelled a long way with their cattle, and ladies who like an occasion. "Don't worry about the floor," she says. Tommy will wash it later. The front door stands open on those days and there is sometimes a scene when a bullock breaks through the barrier and makes for the cool interior of the house. On those occasions, Tommy delights in being useful and he yelps and shoos until the creature backs clumsily out again. Mrs Whitten also takes paying guests, who stay over when they are on their way to Donegal for some business, or who wish to take a few days by the sea. Many of them write her letters from Dublin to thank her for her hospitality. Mr Costelloe writes to her about the matter of a horse.

"His height is given as 16 hands high. I would be grateful if you let me know his in fact height and if he has any white mark, the exact selling price, and your nearest rail or bus station. If your horse suits I will buy you straight out for him and take him away." It is Mrs Whitten who engages in these dealings, not her husband, Arthur. She puts eggs on the train to Dublin and manages the income for the milk and the groceries.

As she scrubs the potatoes in the lean-to in the yard, Tommy brings her Mrs McGloin's milk money before returning to the dairy where he is filling up the villagers' jugs and leaving them out. The note from Mrs McGloin says "Cash for Milk for 2 weeks up to Sat 12th. 3/6 with thanks, K. McGloin, Melvin Hotel." She puts it in her apron pocket. There she has another letter, which she has left unopened until she has the bread in the oven and various other tasks done for the day. She wants to read it without distraction.
It is from Willie. He is a good boy, she thinks, for writing so often. Every day she glances at his postcard on the dresser, of the Canadian Pacific Liner, the "Duchess of Bedford" which took him across the Atlantic not two months ago. Eventually, it will be tucked into her bible along with other notes and letters, receipts and small photographs. She has recipes too, scribbled onto scrap

WHITTEN'S CURRAGH
(For Tommy Whitten)
Jo Holmwood
Over pints of Smithwicks
they meet with memories
eyes glazing
as they turn glasses in their hands.

They see you as clear,
herding cattle on the back street
(hey-a, hey-a, they repeat);
riding out with Arthur and the stud;
bailing in Morrisey's field,
on the banks of the Drowes.

They all recall
passing Whitten's Curragh
on the Creamery Road
and seeing you
in the meadow
flattening weeds,
sliced with a scythe,
and meeting their end
under the hard heel
of a hobnail boot.

'Like a bowling lawn'
they say.

I sometimes take the Creamery Road,
to look for you
delivering pails of milk,
leading the cattle back to the field,
or bent over the rushes
in your jacket and shirt.

Sara Whitten

pieces of paper:
Mrs McClean's Cake:
¼ w sultanas
¼ w currants
2 oz peel
½ sugar
½ butter
4 eggs
¾ lb flour
1 teaspoonful of Baking Soda
Cherry & almond
Vanilla essence
Dec 1926

She is not making cake today, though. Christmas is a full six months away and she thanks the Lord for that. She will bake the loaf and then sit down to Willie's letter. As she comes back into the house, she hears Arthur's heavy steps echoing in the lane as he goes back round to the byre. Tommy is sweeping out the stable and Terry is up in the fields. Lily is out for the day in Bundoran with her cousins. She has been allowed to go on account of finishing her apprenticeship at the milliners and to cheer her spirits as she has been down ever since the boys left.

But she herself will be leaving shortly for the nursing college in Dublin. Sara Whitten sighs as she mixes the dough. Three are gone and another soon to leave, but at least Lily will be closer to home. It is far better for them to leave, she thinks, as there are little prospects for them here in Leitrim. And she still has Tommy. He is only fourteen, but he shows a keenness for the farming and she thinks he will stay.

There are spots of rain. Thank goodness the hay was saved early, she thinks. But she prays the rain will hold off till they get the turf saved as well. The bread is baking in the oven. She will cross the yard to the dairy to see if there is butter. Mrs Patterson arrives on her bicycle to mend and darn. She gathers the garments for Mrs Patterson to mend, and sorts them in order of urgency. Arthur's shirts first, then the sheets, then Tommy's and Terry's socks. Lily's gansey can wait. She has plenty of clothes for a girl her age.

She thinks of Noel, her eldest daughter, who is working in a house in America. Her sister-in-law Sue wrote to say, "It takes a good strong healthy girl to do what she is doing. If they pay 45 or 50 dollars a month you earn it." But she knows that Noel's health is poor and it is two months since she had word. Later, she decides, she will write to Sue.

When Mrs Patterson leaves, she sits to read Willie's letter:

16.6.30
Dear Mother,
Just a few lines to let you know that I am getting on all right and I would have rote you a letter before now but I was sure I would have a letter from you or Lily and that was the reason I did not right but I am sure before you get dis letter I will have a letter from you.

Eddie is working on the farm beside Willie Johnston and Erney More and I had no word from him since he went out but I am sure he has sent a letter home.

I am working from 6.00 in the morning until 6 in the evening and they do not think that very early in dis country and I am getting 65 dollars a month but must give twenty for my board and that is as low and you could get it in dis country. I am sure father has all the work done at home and is busy in the bog working at the turf getting them saved before the harvest starts. We have not start the harvest out here yet but it will no be long.

Write me a good long letter and tell me how ye are getting on since I left Kinlough and tell all the people that I was asking for them.

I think this is all I have to say this time. Asking this finds all at home well as it leaves me a"/" and not forgetting Terry. I remain, dear mother, your fond son, William Whitten.

She wipes her face and puts the letter back in her apron pocket.

Jo Holmwood lives in the Whitten homestead on the main street, Kinlough, north Co Leitrim. Lily (Sarah Elizabeth) was her grandmother and married an Englishman, Patrick Denis Holmwood.