

the great coat who rode Maura-nee-Ortha that day to victory at Ballyknock.'

## 'A Cake' in West Mayo

Down to the year of the great famine of 1846 a certain kind of social gathering in West Mayo was called 'A Cake'. Such events were of frequent occurrence throughout the various villages, and in a way they resembled patterns. They were something like the present-day raffles held to assist some worthy, struggling family, and were conducted with much decorum and politeness. Nor was there ever a row or a quarrel at such gatherings.

Supposing a poor family lost their only cow and had no earthly means of replacing her. The mother of the family went to some friendly publican and got from him on credit five or ten gallons of whiskey, some wine and cordials. She then went to a baker who baked her a great, ornamental cake about two or three stone in weight. Next she engaged the services of a musician; this was easily done, for the pipes in those days were as plentiful as blackberries in Autumn. The news was then spread abroad that 'A Cake' would be held in a certain village on the next Sunday or holy day.

All the people of the surrounding villages would gather there in hundreds, decked out in their best holiday attire. All the marriageable peasant girls appeared in cashmere shawls and fine lace dress caps, garnished with nosegays and decorated with many ribbons of various shades and colours. There they would sit demurely and bashfully with the eyes of their ever-watchful mothers intent upon them. Vigilant as the mothers were, the bashful, blushing maidens sent many a wireless telegraphic message from their dark eyes to

their favourite swains who sat in some distant corner.

The very last gathering of this kind was held in my native village on the Saint Patrick's day before the famine, and although I was then only about six years old, I have a clear and vivid recollection of it, for it was held quite near the cabin in which I was born. When I came on the scene all the people were gathered in a vast crowd, and the piper, a young man, sat on a chair in the open air playing 'Haste to the Wedding'. He was six feet four inches in height and admirably well-shaped, and was surely the most distinguished man I have ever seen, although he was blind.

This was Martin Moran, the son of a well-to-do farmer in the locality, considered to be the best player in Connacht in his day. It was a wonderful and glorious sight to see him seated and playing, sometimes sweeping the keys of his pipes with great, long fingers. In after years when I had grown up, this masterful sweeping of his pipes filled my mind with visions of Carolan and the great and grand old harpers of ancient Erin. Martin became a great favourite of John McHale, the lion of Tuam, who presented him with a set of pipes which cost thirty-five pounds, and in presenting them the Archbishop christened Martin 'the last of the Minstrels'.

In front of the house there was a little sloping lawn in the centre of which stood a churndash, its handle driven firmly into the ground. On the upturned boss of the churndash was spread a white, home-made linen towel, on which was laid the great ornamental cake. The custom was that whoever carried in the cake should call for a round of drinks for the whole gathering. A young blacksmith of the town who was also a young man of property, one William Jordan, took in the cake and called for two gallons of punch, and wine and cordials for the ladies. Then the spree began in real earnest, and when it was over the woman was able to pay her creditors and to clear the price of a little cow as well, for cows were quite cheap in those days.

Among all the vast assembly at 'the Cake' I noticed three old men who sat by themselves, and who in appearance and dress differed as much from those