

# Cures and Charms

By FRANK WATTERS

Now-a-days, we often hear talk about 'alternative' medicine. Usually what is referred to are practices such as acupuncture or herbalism. There is, however, another 'alternative, medicine', the mysterious business of 'cures and charms'

While the word 'cure' is often used to cover both it is, perhaps initially important to define the terms 'cure' and 'charm'. I suppose that, strictly speaking, a 'cure' in this context would refer to a treatment where some substance is taken, or applied to the affected part. A 'charm', on the other hand, consists of a ritual of some sort, but there is nothing taken and no treatment as such. Often the two are combined.

Most adults, I suppose, have, at one time or another, administered a cure and charm to a child who has been stung by a nettle, saying something like, "Don't cry. This will make it better!" and rubbing the sting with a dock leaf saying,

*"Docken, docken in and out,  
Take the sting of the nettle out!"*

Now rubbing the sting with the docken leaf is a 'cure', while reciting the rhyme is a 'charm'.

Does it actually work? Does the juice of the dock leaf act as an antidote to the sting? Or is this an example of a situation where you don't just stand there, you do something?

In the era before modern medicine, people in general, and poor people in particular, were often left to their own devices and, in the absence of medical expertise, were forced to rely on all sorts of treatments. Apart from the use of home-made herbal remedies they made up various concoctions for their own use.

The following recipe for home-made medicine is recorded in manuscripts written by the Acton poet, John Quinn around 1850:

*"one fardins worth of sulphur and three fardins worth of cream a-tartar and half a pinte of new milk. Put the milk on the fire and make a crud then put the sulphur and the cream a-tartar in it. Skim the cruds and put them in a cup, rub it with the cruds at the fire and warm the whey. Take*

*three tablespoonfuls of the whey."* Unfortunately he doesn't record what it was meant to cure.

The following 'recipe' for a cough mixture also illustrates this. It was written out by Lizzie Cassidy of Aughtantarraghan around 1920. It was:

*"Squeeze 10 lemons. Add 1 oz. cod-liver oil and 1 oz. honey. Beat well together with a fork till thoroughly mixed. Bottle. One dose: a teaspoonful to be taken when cough is troublesome"*



Lizzie Cassidy

A paste for treating whitlow could be made as follows: "Venice turpentine 2d, castile soap 2d, honey 2d, 2oz flour, 2 egg-whites, flour to thicken. Mix to a paste and apply twice daily."

There are a number of categories of people who, either by birth or occupation or the circumstances of their lives, have, according to folklore, special powers. Among these are:

- \* Women who retain the same surname after marriage; e.g. a Miss Murphy married a Mr Murphy
- \* A child born after his / her father's death, that is a child, particularly a boy, "who never saw his father".
- \* Widows.

- \* Blacksmiths.
- \* Godparents.
- \* A child born in a cowl.
- \* The seventh son, or the seventh son of a seventh son.
- \* Members of certain families, e.g. McElroys
- \* People who have had a cure handed down or given to them.
- \* Royalty.

As well as people, certain animals, e.g. the pig or the donkey, are said to have special powers

Some researchers have arrived at the conclusion that many of the treatments are of great antiquity and pre-date the coming of Christianity to Ireland.

There are certain illnesses which conventional medicine has, so far, been unable to cure – prevent, perhaps, in some cases, but not cure. Mumps, measles and whooping cough are examples of this type of ailment, which occur predominantly in childhood, generally last for two or three weeks and usually clear up.

This type of ailment is often the subject of a cure or charm. Cynics would say that the ailment will only last for a limited period, in any case, and that the treatment has no bearing on the outcome, other than that it gives the impression that something is being done to alleviate the condition and that it helps to pass the time.

One cure for whooping cough is ‘*a change of air*’. This might involve breathing the ‘*air of a different county*’ and for those of us who live on the border of counties Armagh and Down, a very short walk would suffice. I was given this treatment when, at the age of 8 or 9, I developed whooping cough. The late Ernie Hanlon took me with him in his lorry when he went to Coalisland, Co Tyrone, for a load of sand. I presume the treatment worked for the whooping cough cleared up and, at any rate, I enjoyed the outing.

Another cure for whooping cough is to get something to eat from a woman whose surname didn’t change when she got married, e.g. a Miss Murphy married a Mr Murphy. You should get three things, traditionally bread, butter and sugar and you should not thank her.

A more bizarre charm for whooping cough is one where the patient, usually a child, is passed three times over and under a donkey. Donkeys,

perhaps because of their close association with Our Lord, are regarded as being specially blessed.

Felix McConville of Lenaderg, whose mother came from Tullydonnell, South Armagh, gave me a version of the charm she used. “*Take the child to a donkey. An adult should hold up the donkey’s tail and the child pass, or be passed, three times under the donkey’s belly and round under its tail, as the adult says three times, ‘A lagana hugana pugna, pugna hugana lagana.’*” Felix has no idea what the words signify and Irish scholars I have spoken to, can attach no meaning to them.

Another, less elaborate cure, for whooping cough is to ‘*whistle on the blade of a knife.*’

A charm for mumps also involves a donkey, in that the donkey’s blinkers are put on the sufferer and he or she is led to a well or to the pigsty. If to the latter you had to say, “*Pig, pig, here are your mumps!*”

A ‘*stye*’ of a different kind is a stye in the eye, a painful and unpleasant ailment. One cure for a stye is to touch it with a gold wedding ring or, better still, a widow’s wedding ring. Another cure involves the use of thorns from a gooseberry bush. You pick ten thorns from a gooseberry bush, then discard one. Point each of the remaining nine thorns at the stye in turn then throw it over your left shoulder. You may, or may not, touch the stye with the tip of each of the first eight thorns but you must touch it with the ninth.

I was told another version of the same cure: Pick three triple thorns from a gooseberry bush. Separate them into nine single thorns. Point each thorn at the stye. Touch it with the last thorn and say, “*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.*” Then throw the thorn over your left shoulder.

It is believed that a nose bleed can be cured by tying a piece of black thread tightly round the little finger or by holding a widow’s key to the back of the neck.

I remember being told when I was a youngster, and it was certainly widely accepted, that a cut in the webbing between the thumb and forefinger was extremely dangerous and could cause lockjaw or cause you to bleed to death. It is no doubt an old wives’ tale but was widely

believed.

Stopping bleeding can, indeed, be a problem in both humans and animals. In de-horning cattle sometimes an animal bleeds excessively and the same can happen to some people, for example, after tooth extraction. In the past, locally anyone with a problem with bleeding would have been advised to, "go to Attie Cairns," as Attie had the cure. He belonged to that group of people who have had a cure given to them by another, usually older, person.



Attie Cairns

According to Mrs Cairns, the late Attie Cairns was given the cure when he went to a man who lived near Armagh because he, himself, had a problem with bleeding. She doesn't recall the man's name but he gave the cure to Attie.

Mrs Cairns said, "*It worked for both people and animals. People often came who had cattle bleeding after de-horning or calving. People from all over looked the cure – from England, down South and all over Northern Ireland. They would just ring up and ask him for the cure. Sometimes he got cards thanking him. The cure didn't always work. I suppose some people didn't have the faith.*"

Attie passed the cure on to his son Adam. People still come, although not as many as before. Adam is less enthusiastic about it. It is somewhat unusual in that this type of cure is more often passed on from a man to a woman

and from a woman to a man. Another man, Lexie Crozier of Lisnadil near Armagh has also got this cure. Attie never refused anyone. Mrs Cairns did not know what the cure consisted of. Another treatment for a bleeding cut is to put a cobweb on it. This is an example of something that has been shown to have a scientific basis as a cobweb has been found to be a natural source of penicillin. It was believed that there was no better way of cleaning a cut or a scrape than to let a dog lick it.

Warts are unsightly and unpleasant and are the subject of a great many cures. Some of the cures for warts are:

- \* Cut a potato in half and rub it on the wart. As the potato decays the warts will disappear.
- \* Rub the wart with water from a blacksmith's trough
- \* Rub the wart with a snail then impale the snail on a thorn. As the snail decays the wart will disappear.
- \* Wet the wart with a fasting spit.
- \* Treat with water from a hollow stone.
- \* Some people will buy the wart from you. (The money you get for the warts should be put where you'll never see it again.)
- \* Rub the wart with a coin. Leave the coin on the road. The finder of the coin will also get the wart.
- \* Treat with the white juice, or milk, of a dandelion.

Water from a blacksmith's trough was also a cure for chilblains and soot from the chimney was used to clean teeth.

Toothache could be prevented by carrying a blacksmith's nail in your pocket,

The practice of carrying something in your pocket as protection against some ailment was apparently widely accepted. In the novel 'The Mill on the Floss' George Elliott records a practice, apparently commonplace in early Victorian England She writes, that at that time, "*... ladies in rich silk gowns wore large pockets in which they carried a mutton-bone to secure them from cramp. Mrs Glegg carried such a bone which she had inherited from her grandmother...*" Carrying a raw potato in your pocket is said to prevent rheumatism.

Another cure for toothache is to recite the following.

*As Peter sat on a marble stone,  
Jesus came up, all alone,  
Saying, "Peter, Peter what makes you weep?"  
"My Lord and Saviour, it is the toothache!"*

The late Fred Bryson had several cures including cures for toothache, earache, piles, jaundice and shingles. He passed them on to his daughter, Mrs Morton of Killylea Road, Armagh.

The poet Patrick Kavanagh recalled the following incident in his autobiographical novel, *'The Green Fool'*.

*"We were sitting round the fire one winter's evening when the latch of the door was lifted and a head all wrapped in bandages appeared in the lamplight.*

*"Come inside, we called, and a man came in.  
"I was looking for Harry McElroy's," he explained.*

*"I was just thinking as much," my mother said.  
"On yer head ye have it, God bless it."  
"On me head it is," he agreed.*

*The man had erysipelas, popularly known as 'the rose'. Any person named McElroy was supposed to be able to cure the disease by touching the afflicted part. Harry McElroy being the only one of the name willing to make the cure –it was considered unlucky – had a practice large enough to fill any doctor with envy. As his house lay along the Mucker Road we had many callers inquiring the way. Some of these people came twenty miles..."*

I don't know if any McElroys in this area or elsewhere carry on this cure. Another cure for erysipelas involved the use of nine stones

A person born after the death of his or her father is said to have the cure for thrush. The late Mrs Josie Carson of Church Street, Poyntzpass, had this cure and was occasionally asked to administer it. She also had a cure for mouth ulcers.

The numbers three and nine are regarded a being significant in cures and charms. Often a patient must visit the 'curer' three times for the cure to be effective. Nine, as in the gooseberry thorn cure for styes in the eye and several others, is also significant. It was, and perhaps it still is, widely believed that in the treatment of a serious illness, the ninth day very often saw a significant change, for better or worse. It was

also believed that, "a burn goes in for nine days." ('Nine' is also of great significance to the witches in *'Macbeth'*). According to authorities on the subject this emphasis on three and nine is certainly pre-Christian.

Anyone who got something in his eye would, in the Poyntzpass area, be advised to contact Mrs Molly Trainor. Mrs Trainor had a charm for removing dust etc. from the eye. Her father, Tommy Kennedy, was given the cure many years ago by an old lady called Mrs Cunningham who lived at the Eleven Lane Ends. One day Mrs Cunningham said to him, "I could give you a cure to take a mote out of your eye." He accepted (for it is thought unlucky to refuse). Tommy Kennedy passed the charm on to his daughter Molly. She has passed it on to her two nephews. The cure must be passed from man to woman, to man and so on. She had many callers, occasionally from England and in recent years a number phoning from the USA and Canada. Griffith Wylie told me the following:

*"One evening, a number of years ago, while I still had the grocer's shop in Railway Street, Poyntzpass, I had occasion to go up to Church Street just before closing time. Some renovations were going on at Billy Corbett's shop and men were working on the roof. As I was going round the corner I glanced up to see what they were doing. Just at that moment a gust of wind blew a shower of dust off the roof and, as luck would have it, some of it got into my eye. It was extremely painful. When I got back to the*



*Molly Trainor (left) with her sister Mena*

shop I was advised to ring Molly Trainor, as nobody in the shop could help me. So I lifted the phone, although, to tell you the truth, I had no great confidence in it, and asked Molly would she make the cure for me. She said she would to be sure. Anyway I closed up the shop and went out home in the van. I was hardly fit to drive my eye was so sore.

When I got home my tea was ready but I wasn't fit to eat it, such was the pain. Eventually I said to Betty my wife, 'I'm going to have to go to the hospital. I can't bear it any longer. You'll have to drive.' So we got ready to go. It was by then twenty to seven and suddenly the pain stopped and my eye was perfectly all right. I told Betty there was no need to go and that was the end of that.

However next morning shortly after opening time Molly, who was a regular customer, came in. She asked me how my eye was and I told her it was fine. She said, 'I owe you an apology. After you rang last night, before I could make the cure, a visitor came in. It was twenty to seven before I got doing it for you.' Perhaps it was coincidence but I'm convinced it worked for me."

To make the cure Molly needed to know the patient's Christian name and to be alone in order to concentrate.

Molly's sister, the late Mrs Lizzie Turley of Acton had a cure for eczema. This involved making a belt that the patient had to wear next the skin. The belt contained quicksilver (mercury) and it was essential that the sufferer abstained from alcohol while wearing the belt. A cure for ulcers on the leg was applying a poultice of cold boiled turnips.

A former neighbour of mine, the late Brigid Quinn of Aughan Park, had a cure for sprains and, like Harry McElroy in Patrick Kavanagh's story, she had a large and regular 'practice'. Brigid was given the cure by her employer Joe Monaghan and she in turn passed it on to the late Peter McCamley and to a relative who lives in Dromara. Many patients arrived at Brigid's door on crutches and, while it is true to say that nearly all left the same way, practically all of them would claim that the cure greatly helped them. For the treatment to be really effective three visits were necessary. Another local



Brigid Quinn

treatment for sprains was, possibly still is, to rub the sore joint with goose fat or 'goose-ame' as it was known. Many people kept a jar of goose-ame in their homes for emergency use.

I often thought that not only did the patient benefit from the visits but Brigid did, too, as it provided her with company, a bit of chat and also gave her a position of importance in the community. I suppose this also illustrates that only a certain type of person is suitable when passing on a cure. It would be essential, as Mrs Cairns put it, that such a person had "*the faith*." They also need to be prepared to put up with requests for assistance at all hours and have a stream of visitors, often strangers, coming to their door. Many people simply couldn't be bothered.

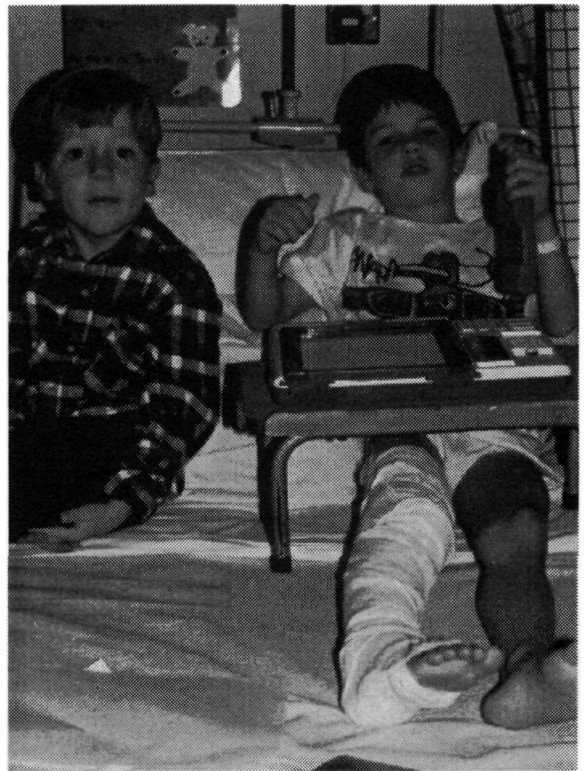
Molly Trainor told me that when offered the opportunity to receive a cure from another it was very unlucky to refuse to take it. If you do accept the cure you must never refuse to help anyone who requests you to make the cure for them and you should on no account receive any payment for your help. However not everyone with a cure keeps to Molly's standards. A friend of mine recently told me that she and her daughter travelled to Co. Meath to a man who supposedly had a cure for migraine. She, unfortunately, did not get any benefit from the visits, (they went three times), and each was charged £20 per visit, £120 in total.

I have no personal experience of a cure that worked for me, (other than the change of air!),

but I must say that I am always glad to hear of an instance where an old folk-remedy succeeded when modern medicine had failed. The following anecdote, to the veracity of which I can personally testify, is a good example.

Young Christopher Rooney, the son of a colleague of mine had a little accident in September 1994. Christopher, then aged six, bumped his knee getting over a fence while out walking with his grandfather - a very minor incident. However the knee swelled up, was very painful and the child was taken to the doctor. Despite the best efforts of Doctor Cupples the knee remained swollen and painful and the child, who was unable to attend school, was sent to Craigavon Hospital for x-ray etc. He eventually ended-up in the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast, where, after exhaustive tests, intensive courses of antibiotics, bone scans and having his leg in plaster from the ankle to the thigh for several weeks, the best medical opinion in the land concluded that he had septic arthritis in his knee. It was in the bone and could spread. He would have to learn to live with it as it is an incurable condition, and although he would be partially disabled, painkillers would help.

Christopher's mother had, from the beginning, considered putting a bread-poultice on the knee but felt that such a low-tech cure would be laughed at. However, when the child came



*Christopher Rooney in Royal Victoria Hospital*

home, in December, she applied the home-made poultice of bread and baking-soda. Three days later a blackthorn almost a half-inch long was drawn from the child's knee. Her son made an immediate recovery and was back to school the

Your next appointment is: - If you are unable to attend please 'phone 248503 Ext. 2151

Day	Date	Time	Department	Consultant
Friday	18.11.94	11.00	Ortho	Mr. Owen
"	16.12.94	12.00	"	"
"	6.1.95	11.00	"	"
"	10.3.95	11.45	"	"
Friday	13.10.95	11.45	"	"

*Christopher's appointment card with the thorn attached*

following day. I have been told that honey is also excellent for drawing out a thorn.

All over the country there are people with cures for practically every ailment. Hives could be cured with 'a fasting spit.' For indigestion one cure was to suck a lump of coal. Thomas McDermott of Lisdunwilly Road, Armagh, has a cure for ringworm. His treatment which he says was 'handed down to him', is described as 'a dry spit'.

As I have said, many cures involve 'nine'. A lady who lived in Irish Street, Armagh had an interesting cure for croup. She gave the sufferer a lock of hair from her head. This was put inside a tissue and then worn next the patient's skin for nine days. After that the hair had to be burned.

A Mrs Murphy of Pomeroy had a cure for asthma. She measured out nine egg-cupfuls of oatmeal which were placed on the patient's chest. The patient then took the measures of oatmeal home. They had to be eaten dry, three measures a day for three days.

Mrs Phyllis Turley of Chapel Lane, Armagh, has a cure for shingles, which involves the burning of nine sticks. A lady in Ardee, Co Louth has a cure for a verruca that also involves the use of nine burnt sticks, she uses nine burnt match-sticks.

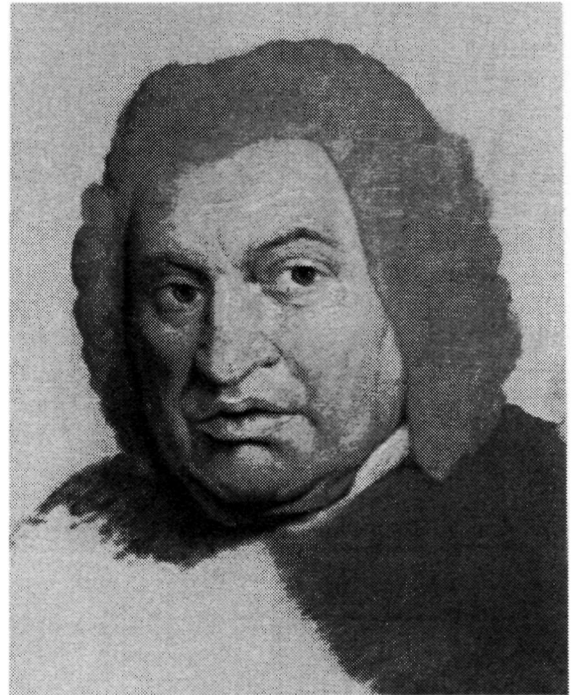
I was told the following cure for burns, by Molly Trainor. Blow on the burn and say, nine times, "*Before God and the sod under the foot, that this burn should no further spread.*"

While I have been told various treatments which individuals have found helpful, there doesn't appear to be anyone with a cure for the common cold. There is however the general advice that you should, "*Feed a cold and starve a fever.*"

Belief in cures of this kind was, and is, not confined to Ireland or, indeed, to ordinary folk, as an article in '*The Times*' on 11th November, 1999 shows. In his column, Magnus Linklater wrote:

*"If it hadn't been for the Act of Settlement in 1701 we might still have a king or queen with the power to heal. The Stuarts used to practise "touching for the king's evil" – curing scrofula, - a nasty skin disease, by laying on of hands; they thought it came with the divine right of kings. Queen Anne was the last British*

*Sovereign to try it. She used it on Doctor Johnson, and it didn't work; but thousands of her subjects still regularly queued up for the royal touch. One can imagine that in today's more credulous era, it might once again become popular, a great boost for a faltering monarchy"*



*Dr. Samuel Johnson*

This custom was, apparently introduced into England by Edward the Confessor but it had been practised in France long before that. Ceremonial touching was introduced by Henry VII and the sufferers were presented with a gold coin, although Charles I sometimes gave silver 'touch pieces' instead of gold. The practice reached its height under Charles II, who, according to Macaulay's '*History of England*', touched nearly 100,000 people and in 1682 alone, some 8,500. He states that in 1684, "*the throng was so great that six or seven of the sick were trampled to death.*" William III called it "*a silly superstition.*" It was last practised, as stated in '*The Times*' article, by Queen Anne in 1712.

Well into the twentieth century there was a widespread belief in the North of England that Irish people had a cure for snakebite and that if an Irish person drew a circle round a snake it



couldn't get out of the circle. This apparently arose from the legend of St Patrick banishing the snakes from Ireland.

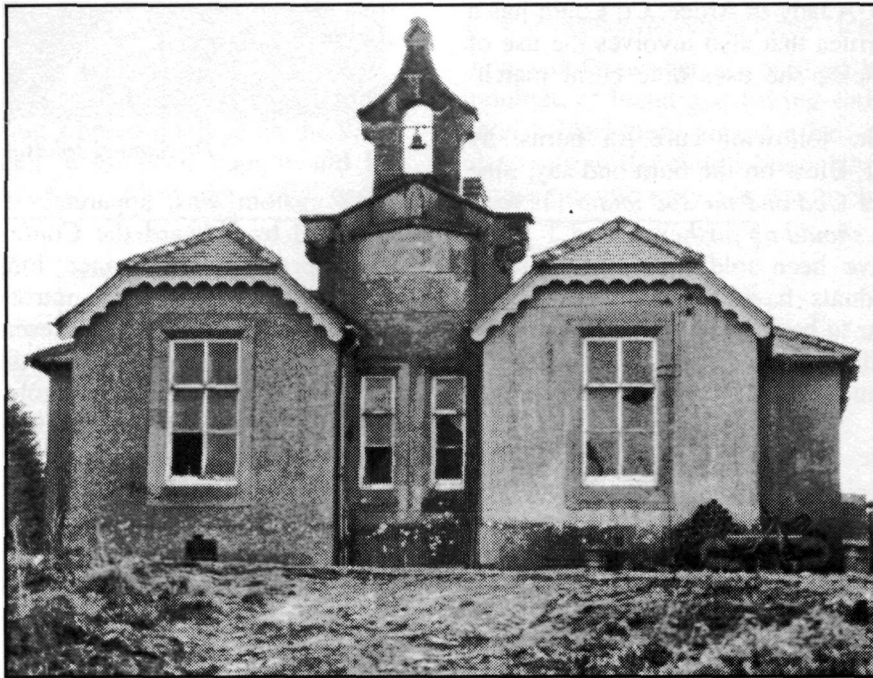
A child born in a cowl was sure never to be drowned. Charles Dickens was one such as he tells us in *'David Copperfield'*. Sailors at one time sought to buy a cowl because it was believed that possession of it would protect its owner from drowning. Charlie Johnson of Tandragee told me that he carried a cowl with him all through World War II when he served in the Royal Navy. His sister, a midwife in Bolton gave it to him.

Is there any basis for believing in these charms and cures, some of which appear totally ridiculous? How have they managed to survive,

and even thrive, in this era of scientific medicine? Many very sensible people, whose word I wouldn't doubt, have told me how they have been helped by cures, which seem impossible. There is a line in *'Hamlet'* which seems appropriate; *"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."* Put another way, I suppose that if Horatio had lived around Poyntzpass, and had dismissed the whole thing as superstitious nonsense, he might well have been told something like,

*"You might think you know a lot, Horatio, but smart and all as you are, you still don't know it all!"*

\* \* \* \* \*



*Poyntzpass No. 2 National School, Railway Street*