

MARTINEAU, Harriet. 1852. "The Famine Time".
Household Words 6 (138), 13 de noviembre: 214-216.

resolute attack of this kind in about six weeks. An ordinary language-master is little use unless you make a companion of him, and then he is generally insufferably tedious. Newspapers, novels, poetry, anything that you find interesting to your own peculiar tastes, will get you on faster in a language, than all the set studies that were ever bungled over by dunces.

For the rest, in your intercourse with foreigners, avoid the least pride or stiffness of manner. Do not expect them to give you dinners, or to lend you money if you get into a scrape, for they will do neither. They will laugh at you, whether you agree to it or not, therefore it is well to submit with a good grace. Foreigners do not all of them think England is the finest country in the world, and they will not be taught: neither can many of them ride, drive, hunt, shoot, fish, box, or play at cricket, nor do they find conversation on these subjects so entertaining as Christchurch men, and cornets of the cavalry. But they will sing with you, play the piano, dominoes, or even chess. They will dance, flirt, walk, talk, and make merry with you, and spout poetry and ethics by the yard. In a word, if you are good-natured, you must be very hard to please if you do not get on with them. Of one thing, however, I have gradually become quite certain, and the oldest traveller who ever worried his grandchildren with incredible stories, will certainly agree with me in his heart—a year of foreign travel may be good for any one. It enlarges the mind, and teaches a lesson never forgotten through life; a lesson of universal love, toleration, and doubt of our own exclusive merits. After this an Englishman is much better at home; and whatever we may think when it is over, travelling is a very troublesome business while it lasts.

THE FAMINE TIME.

I WAS looking, with some amusement, into a back-yard in a little Irish town, from the window of a house next to that to which the yard belonged, when my hostess explained to me that the beggarman whom I was watching was irremovable. He had been turned out by the shoulders again and again, and always came back, refusing to work, and preferring to lean against the corner of the wall, to beg. There was in the yard a more active beggar;—the pig. Two stout, merry girls, bare-legged and untidy, were sitting on the ground, before a great heap of potatoes and a mighty iron pot. They were sorting potatoes; the better sort for human eaters, the worse for the black pig. The pig was in a hurry, poked in his nose, and had to be driven away. There was a third girl sitting on some steps with her arms crossed, looking idle, and provoking the others—one of whom got into a passion, and

showed it, as Irish people do when they get angry.

“Ah!” said my hostess, “we see strange people and strange doings in that yard; and it is not the pleasantest place to overlook. But we are glad enough to see anything like those potatoes and that pig, and people who can laugh, after what we saw in the famine time. For months together that yard was crowded—so crowded, that you could not have thrust in a hand among them—with people groaning and wailing day and night; some dying, and others bringing their dead, till our hearts were almost broken.”

“I wonder how you lived through it,” said I.

“So do we. But we had to rouse ourselves, and do our duty. There were only my husband and Mr. Zachariah (the clergyman) to give out the relief by which the whole country side was kept alive. I was often at home, with that yard full of people before my eyes, while my husband was absent—gone to see to the landing of the meal—and I uneasy about him—the people grew so violent! There was always an escort of constabulary to guard the meal from the ship hither; but the people were ready to tear them to pieces to get at the meal. It was bad enough at first, when the Government insisted that the men should work on the roads, to earn their share. The poor fellows could no more work on the roads than my baby could; and they were dropping and fainting by the roadside as soon as they tried. We thought that the worst sight we had ever seen till we saw worse. We knew that the Government could not be aware of the real need, if they could make such a condition; and we were afraid to look forward. It was just then that Mr. Yarding—a gentleman of one of the most ancient families in Ireland—brought home his bride to his estate, close by the town. He drove her through the town in as pretty a turn-out as you could see; and a neighbour said to my husband, when he looked from the carriage to the people in the street, ‘Mr. Yarding will repent that pair of horses before six months are over.’ And so, no doubt, he did. The value of his land sank to nothing; he could not meet the calls upon him, nor pay his rates; and now he is shut up in his own place, the gates locked day and night (Sundays and all), and he dares not look through the bars into the road.”

“And how did you get food for yourselves?” I asked; “and how did you eat it, with that multitude of groaning people before your window?”

“We never enjoyed a meal during that year. There seemed to be a poison over everything. There was no flour to be had good enough for us to give the children; and the officers, and agents, and servants employed in the distribution, were forbidden to buy any of the meal that was sent. This was hard and unjust, and, in fact, it could not be carried out. They got it by sending their servants

and buying for one another; and, paying properly for it, they did not feel it was wrong. There were no vegetables to be had but the black, rotting potatoes. We could get a sheep for five shillings, because there was nothing to feed sheep with; and for that reason the mutton was hardly eatable. Nothing seemed to have its proper taste or to be real food at that time or for long after. You were laughing to-day at the flocks of geese along the road, spreading their wings and straddling away before the car. Well, among all those deserted villages that you passed through, there was not a goose in those days. There was not a pig, not a donkey in all the district, from sea to sea."

"What became of the donkeys? The people did not eat them, I suppose."

"Indeed but they did. My husband saw the meat hanging out of their pockets. And worse creatures than donkeys disappeared in the same way. There was, after a time, not a living creature but human beings to be seen from sea to sea, except the horses that brought the meal from the ships. The second time that we thought we had seen the worst was when the meal was sold at half-a-crown the stone. Think what a price that was! But it was paid as long as there was any money in the district. That yard was as crowded then as afterwards. My husband and his men could not get through the business of serving it, though, to save time, every buyer must tie up his half-crown in the corner of the bag he handed in. It was astonishing the number of bad half-crowns we took in the course of a few weeks: there was no time to look whether the money was good or bad; but my husband had to account for it, of course, as if it was all good. The men would begin at daylight (what a sight it was to open the shutters, and see the people who had been waiting all night!), and they went on kindly all day. Towards evening the men would grow silent, and sigh; and at eleven or twelve o'clock they would say, 'Sir, you can't get more out of me than is in me: I can't do it, sir. I have had no refreshment all this day, and I'm done up. I am willing to stand by the people as long as I can, but I can't do more than I am equal to.' Then my husband would say, 'Well, go to your supper, and my wife and I will turn to again for an hour, lest some of these people should die before morning. But we will shut up in an hour: by that time the worst will be served.' We did shut up in an hour, leaving, perhaps, sixty or seventy people outside. But when the men had sat down for awhile, and had had their supper and their pipe, they would cheer up; and then they agreed to what my husband said: 'There are only sixty or seventy. Let us send them away, and then we can perhaps go to sleep, having done our best.' So we opened again, and went on till two or three in the morning. But that, you see, was while people were still able to pay."

"How could things be worse when the money was gone?"

"Why, it was almost worse to know where hunger was, without being told, than to have it come before our eyes. We knew pretty well how matters were with some good many people who ceased to send for meal, and who were never to be seen in the daylight: people who lived in good houses, full of good furniture, which of course they could not sell. My husband mentioned this to the Friends' Relief Committee, and they immediately desired him to do what was necessary for such persons, in the way in which they could receive it. So, when the day's work was done, we used to put up bags of meal, and my husband would have the horse put into the cart, and he would go round and drop these bags at the proper doors in the dark. A difficulty came out of this, however. They supposed they owed these gifts to my husband; and it was not an easy matter to explain at the time. But—I don't know—perhaps some sights were worse than knowing things that we did not see. People would come to that window with two baskets, one before and one behind, and—and—a dead child in each."

After a pause she went on—

"My husband and I used to think that it was the people's way—they thought it right, of course—to sacrifice one child to give a chance to the rest. We used to observe that one child was particularly petted—always in its mother's arms—and *that* one was always excessively emaciated, and died presently; and we used to think its share was given to the others, and——"

"This is unbearable!" I exclaimed. But in a moment I considered what it must have been to see it, and was ashamed. I asked her to go on. She did. It was a relief to her.

"It was a terrible thing to have to go out at that time, and afterwards, when the fever and cholera followed the famine. The dead and dying used to lie in one's path. One lady, crossing a field through the long grass, found a child—a little girl—hidden there, alive but insensible. She was saved; and so was a little orphan creature of two years old, who had strayed away by himself to a dung-hill on the road, where a pig seized him, and would have destroyed him but for a car happening to come up at the moment. There were cases every day of little creatures being found among the nettles, or squatted under turf-stacks, or asleep at the door of a cabin where the last of their relations lay dead within. One of those saw the old roof tumbled in on his mother's corpse. Some neighbour who had just strength to do that did it, because there was nobody to bury her."

"Has not the lowest class of cabins disappeared since that time, or nearly so?" I inquired.

"Yes. The unroofed cottages, with their stone gables standing up bare—a sight which

you think so sad and forlorn—were houses of a better order than the mud cabins you have read so much about. These stone cottages were inhabited by tenants who have gone to America and elsewhere, as well as by people who died of fever and famine. The mud cabins have melted away. Some which you suppose to be dunghills or mud heaps, are plainly ruined cabins to our experienced eyes. No doubt many of them are graves of uncoffined corpses. The bones will be turned up by the plough or the spade some day; and then, when they are found, singly or in families, men will say, 'These are people who died in the famine.' There are many children now in the orphan school who, the last survivors of their families, know that one parent was just hidden in the ground in a bag, and the other without any covering at all, while the brothers and sisters lie under the ruins of the cabin. But, dreadful as is the reason and fearful the way, it is true that the lowest order of dwellings has nearly disappeared: and may they never be seen more."

"Never, indeed!" I replied. "Those that remain are wretched enough. And when you used to shut the shutters at night," said I, "were you able to think at all of other things—to sleep—to cheer one another?"

"Why," replied she, "I cannot say we were, during the worst—the latter—part of that dreadful year. There were reasons why, with our house full of good children, home was worst of all. There was a fine young man—an excellent fellow indeed he was, and very clever—an officer in the commissariat department, who had been for some time engaged to our eldest daughter. She was very young, to be sure—only eighteen that year: but they knew one another very well; and, in short, everything was ready, and we were getting the license—for we did not like to make them wait longer—when he took the fever. Nothing could keep her from him. He was in a lodging in the town, and lay in a close inner room. I did not know which way to turn myself; but her aunt went with her; and there she nursed him, very quietly, saying little to any body. One day Dr. A. came to my husband, and said, if she remained in that inner room with a fever patient, so closely as she nursed him, she would be down in it presently. So her father and I went, and brought her away home to dinner. She made no particular objection when we had once got her away, and we said no more about it, but kept on talking as cheerfully as we could; and she seemed reconciled, and ate some dinner. Soon after, she had disappeared; and we knew where she was. But, by that time, her aunt had taken the fever."

"And did the young man die?"

"O yes, he died. Her father and I were there; and we brought her away—she, in fact, not knowing at the moment that he was dead. She had to pass the bed, too; but we took her between us, and got her past without

her looking in. You would hardly think what happened afterwards."

I was in no condition for anything but receiving what I was told.

"At first, she seemed to take it quietly; whether because of her aunt being very bad in the fever, or what, I don't know. But, after a little while, she suddenly went mad—perfectly mad—for nine days. And there were we, with the people in the yard, as usual; and her aunt in the fever at one end of the house, and she mad at the other. That was a time to go through!"

"And did they die too?" I asked.

"They! O no! She is the daughter who was married, nearly two years ago, to the curate of X. She recovered by degrees, till she was quite well. And her aunt recovered too; but it was a great struggle."

"And how cheerful you look now!"

"O yes. You see, we have always so much to do; that is a great thing for people who have had to go through such a season. The poor creatures who had to die are out of their pain, and buried away; and those who had to emigrate are gone. You observed this morning how healthy the country-people look; and so they do. The women have careworn faces; some of them thinking of their dead children, perhaps; and if you were to see them in June, before the cropping begins, you would not think quite so well of their looks as you do now. And it is sad to see the grass-grown roads to depopulated villages; and to see brambles choking up the doors where neighbours used to go in and out; and nettles growing tall where many a woman that I knew used to sit and spin, with her children playing round her—half of them now dead, and the rest in the orphan school or the workhouse."

"I saw potatoes growing on the floor of one roofless house, and cabbages in another."

"Very likely. There is no want of heart among the Irish, as I am sure I need not tell you. But, if the hungry can get food out of a dead neighbour's hearthstone, they must do it, without too much refining. I dare say the cheerfulness of our house may grate a little on your feelings, after all I have told you: but—"

"Do not say a word about that," I exclaimed; "I am too glad to see it; I know too well how natural it is, to have one critical thought, to presume—"

"It is natural," replied she, in her sprightly tone. "Our children are going out into the world—marrying, or otherwise settling, very happily. And there is no very pressing misery about us now, though there is more distress than you see, and the prospects of the district are far from being even what they were before the famine. But it is harvest time now; and we are gay at harvest time. My husband and I say, however, now and then, that we hope there will be no more famines while we are here; for we do not think we could go through it again."