

# CHRISTIAN MIRROR.

DEVOTED TO THE INTERESTS OF RELIGION AND GENERAL LITERATURE.

"MANY SHALL RUN TO AND FRO, AND KNOWLEDGE SHALL BE INCREASED."—DANIEL xii. 4.

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## GENERAL LITERATURE.

### RELIGION IN ADVERSITY.

#### THE STARVING FAMILY.

AN IRISH SCENE.

At the period when I took possession of my new residence, the results of the late disastrous season were beginning to develop themselves in varied forms of horror. Who that remembers the summer of the year 1817, will say that the scenes of distress and suffering which marked its progress, have yet been effaced from his mind? The unparalleled inclemency of the weather during many months, had produced sickness and famine among the lower orders, beyond all former example. In particular, the deficiency of peat fuel had been so extensive, that the supply of the peasantry fell short by fully three-fourths of the quantity which in common years had been thought essential to their health and comfort. The oat crop had been scanty and defective; and the potatoes, the staple food of the most indigent, were bad in quality, unwholesome, and totally insufficient for the wants of the population. The inevitable consequences, or concomitants, of this combination of calamities, were famine and disease: the latter being greatly aggravated by the close, unventilated cabins in which the poor live. The labouring man, ill clad, ill housed, ill fed, returning to his wretched hovel, weary, hungry, and dripping from the cold rains, found neither food to nourish, nor fire to warm him. Sometimes he crept into a cheerless bed, and sought to forget in sleep the miseries of his situation; more frequently he sat before the delusive phantom of the once bright hearth, chilled, and musing, till sickness fastened upon his frame, and death itself sowed its not unwelcome seed.

The twin scourges, famine and pestilence, began to afflict our peasantry about the latter end of March, and continued to grow in fearful intensity till August. About the former period, typhus fever manifested itself very generally, and was of an extremely malignant character. At first it was confined almost exclusively to the lower orders; but anon it soared amidst the clergy, gentry, and nobles of the land. The people, unused to such a plague, and therefore ignorant of its infectious nature, took no precautions to prevent the spread of contagion, and fell victims to its ravages in great numbers. Presently their fears became so extravagant, that they ran into the opposite extreme, shunning the houses of their dearest friends and nearest relatives, with whom they had at first associated too incautiously.—The national character seemed in abeyance, such was the panic which the desolating pestilence inspired. I have known many instances of whole families abandoned to all the horrors of the disease, no one venturing into the dwellings wherein they lay, until I had alternately bribed, or shamed, their kindred to discharge the duties of consanguinity and Christian love.

Happily the Lord raised up a few individuals in every parish, who, either through benevolent sympathy or constitutional fearlessness,

offered their aid to the sick at this trying juncture. Taking advantage of this supply, we were generally enabled to relieve the very distressed in their utmost need. Still some melancholy occurrences marked the prevailing terror in characters not to be effaced. I suspend the narrative to which these observations are preliminary, to relate one of them.

Returning from an absence of three days, I learned that a family composed of four persons, whom I had left in the last stage of typhus fever, had all died (as was supposed) the morning after my departure. They had no very near relatives around them, being recent settlers; and of their neighbours, not one had the hardihood or the kindness to enter the abode of death. The bodies had lain unattended to during the two days already mentioned; and it was only early on the third that I became acquainted with the circumstance, so strange in a civilized country. My first step on going to the spot, was to cause holes to be made in the walls of the mud cabin, at the opposite ends to admit a free current of air. This done, and the door having been open for some days, I led the way into the house. The dead bodies lay, a father and son, in one bed, two grown up girls, his daughters, in another—a melancholy sight. They had all perished, if the people spoke the truth, within a few hours of each other. It was, probably, as asserted; for though the house had been little visited, yet one of their neighbours, an old woman, who subsequently undertook the charge of washing, and dressing in funeral attire, these poor victims of the destroyer, had brought them some jugs of cold water, for which alone they expressed the smallest desire, and by this means ascertained pretty accurately the period of their decease. I was afterwards obliged to assist personally in the manual labour of carrying them out of doors to their coffins, having at one time serious apprehensions that the old woman would have been my sole fellow-porter. All were consigned to one grave.

It was while these scenes were enacting, that, on a beautiful evening in July, I had walked to visit a family living about a mile distant from my residence, every one of whom, eight in number, had been attacked by the scourge of the time—typhus fever. Three of them had passed into "the land where all things are forgotten." The remaining five were in various stages of convalescence, but still avoided by the great majority of their neighbours, and so feeble, as to be entirely incapable of providing for their livelihood. As I proceeded slowly through the picturesque lanes which led to their humble habitation, I met several of the rustic population, whose pale and emaciated countenances betokened, in lines not to be mistaken, the silent ravages of famine and disease. Some were anxiously surveying the early potatoe crop, as if they hoped, by looking on it, to accelerate the growth. All seemed weak and dispirited, and replied to the language of kindness or friendship with which I addressed them, in tones of profound melancholy. My own mind caught the contagious sadness of the hour; so that when I

reached the object of my excursion, I felt a species of inert despondency quite foreign to my general habit.

In this frame of mind I commenced my instructions at the door of the cottage of the sick family, who sat or stood around me. We had scarcely begun our devotions, when they were disturbed by the approach of a female, followed by three children between the ages of eight and four; she herself appeared somewhat under thirty, and was remarkably handsome. Without regarding my occupation, she hastily, and with a wild vigour of importunity, asked alms; the children lifting up their voices in concert, and seemingly bent on forcing their way into the house. Whether the interruption offended me, or that the eager stare and inexplicable smile of this very comely young woman inspired me with opinions prejudicial to her character, I could not accurately define to myself; but certain it is, that her presence disturbed the train of thought I most desired to cherish; and I therefore ordered her to withdraw, with some rather severe remarks upon the interruption she had been guilty of. She retired without uttering a word of remonstrance or apology, merely repeating the strange smile which had so struck me when she first solicited charity. She was not yet out of sight when the stings of conscience began to work painfully within me. I ceased to pray, and asked my sick friends if they thought the woman was an impostor. They answered with one consent, that they were firmly persuaded of the contrary; that they thought she appeared in a state of faintness from absolute starvation—was no practised beggar or vagrant, and a stranger they had never seen before. It was besides evident, though they did not say so, that they disapproved of my conduct in dismissing my afflicted sister so abruptly. I therefore bid an instant goodnight to the cottagers, and followed the poor wanderer.

The winding nature of the path, enclosed on either side by a high hedge of hawthorn, enabled me to pursue my way unperceived; and from the same cause, the little band of mendicants was concealed from my view. I knew, however, that I was on the track they had taken, and proceeded confidently for about four hundred yards without coming in sight of the object of my chase. At that moment a sudden exclamation of distress struck upon my ear. The shriek—oh! how loud and shrill it sounded!—was undoubtedly from the mother; and the mingled wail of young sorrow revealed the companions of her disaster. I hastened to the spot, fearing that they might be attacked by some dog, of which many in a half famished state prowled through the country in quest of food. Arriving quickly at a low stile, which led from the lane by a field path to a group of cabins, and a scene presented itself so surpassingly affecting, that, as God's will ordained that my eyes should behold it, so I pray that His grace may preserve it for ever uneffaced, undimmed, uncharged, in my heart.

In the field, at a few paces beyond the stile I have spoken of, knelt and prayed, with streaming eyes and uplifted hands, the young mo-