

**A JOURNAL  
OF A  
VISIT OF THREE DAYS  
TO  
SKIBBEREEN,  
AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD.**

**BY ELIHU BURRITT.**

LONDON:

CHARLES GILPIN, 5, BISHOPGATE-STREET WITHOUT.

BIRMINGHAM:

JOHN WHITEHOUSE SHOWELL, 26, UPPER TEMPLE-STREET.

1847.

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Elihu Burritt, well known on both sides of the Atlantic by his devoted labours for the good of mankind, especially in the promotion of peace and universal brotherhood, has recently paid a visit to some of the distressed parts of Ireland, principally with a view of sending a statement of facts, from his own observation, to his native country, together with an appeal on behalf of the sufferers under the awful pressure of famine and disease.

In this appeal, which was sent to the United States by the last steam packet, Elihu Burritt, speaking of the locality he had visited, says:—"I have come to this indescribable scene of destitution, desolation, and death, that I might get the nearer to your sympathies; that I might bring these terrible realities of human misery more vividly within your comprehension. I have witnessed scenes that no language of mine can portray. I have seen how much beings, made in the image of God, can suffer on this side the grave, and that too in a civilized land."

The reader will judge for himself, when he has perused the following record of only three days of this journey, whether the foregoing language is too strong. Although the fearful facts Elihu Burritt relates may have found a parallel in the statements of others, it is thought desirable to publish them in this country, as he recently witnessed them in the very district to which the sympathies of the English have been, for several months past, particularly directed, and for which locality large subscriptions have been specially contributed. A single individual is reported to have given £1000 for Skibbereen. Yet, notwithstanding all that has been subscribed, up to the period when this journal was written, no effectual means had been adopted for the decent interment of the dead, or even for their timely removal from the hovels of the living, and the great expenditure of the British Government, appears to have effected, at least in this district, but little mitigation of the fearful calamity.

There are many noble instances of individual sacrifices by personal attention to the sufferers, and other efforts for their relief, but nothing short of a law to give the poor of Ireland the right

to claim support from the owners of the soil, before they are reduced to starvation, will effectually meet the evil, or be any security against its recurrence.

The Poor Law of England admits the claim of the people for support from the land and other fixed property; and, until this is given, neither landlord or mortgagee is entitled to rent or interest.

This should be fully applied to Irish legislation, and partial and unjust laws removed, including those of primogeniture and entail. To the neglect of these measures and that of giving the cultivators of the soil a proper security for the labour and expense which they bestow upon it, is mainly to be attributed the fact that a country possessing some of the finest natural advantages in the world, and which could be rendered capable of supporting in comfort at least three times its present population, is now overspread with such extreme human misery that the awful scenes portrayed in the following pages cease to excite a thrill of horror.

JOSEPH STURGE.

*Birmingham,  
3rd Month, 15th, 1847.*

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## **THREE DAYS AT SKIBBEREEN, AND ITS VICINITY.**

Skibbereen, Saturday, February 20.—Rev. Mr. F—— called with several gentlemen of the town, and in their company I took my first walk through this Potter's Field of destitution and death. As soon as we opened the door, a crowd of haggard creatures pressed upon us, and, with agonizing prayers for bread, followed us to the soup-house. One poor woman, whose entreaties became irresistibly importunate, had watched all night in the grave-yard, lest the body of her husband should be stolen from his resting place, to which he had been consigned yesterday. She had left five children sick with the famine fever in her hovel, and she raised an exceedingly bitter cry for help. A man with swollen feet pressed closely upon us, and begged for bread most piteously. He had pawned his shoes for food, which he had already consumed. The soup-house was surrounded by a cloud of these famine spectres, half naked, and standing or sitting in the mud, beneath a cold, drizzling rain. The narrow defile to the dispensary bar was choked with young and old of both sexes, struggling forward with their rusty tin and iron vessels for soup, some of them upon all fours, like famished beasts. There was a cheap bread dispensary opened in one end of the building, and the principal pressure was at the door of this. Among the attenuated apparitions of humanity that thronged this gate of stinted charity, one poor man presented himself under circumstances that even distinguished his case from the rest. He lived several miles from the centre of the town, in one of the rural districts, where he found himself on the eve of perishing with his family of seven small children. Life was worth the last struggle of nature, and the miserable skeleton of a father had fastened his youngest child to his back, and with four more by his side, had staggered up to the door, just as we entered the bread department of the establishment. The hair upon his face was nearly as

long as that upon his head. His cheeks were fallen in, and his jaws so distended that he could scarcely articulate a word. His four little children were sitting upon the ground by his feet, nestling together, and trying to hide their naked limbs under their dripping rags. How these poor things could stand upon their feet and walk, and walk five miles, as they had done, I could not conceive. Their appearance, though common to thousands of the same age in this region of the shadow of death, was indescribable. Their paleness was not that of common sickness. There was no sallow tinge in it. They did not look as if newly raised from the grave and to life before the blood had begun to fill their veins anew; but as if they had just been thawed out of the ice, in which they had been imbedded until their blood had turned to water.

Leaving this battle field of life, I accompanied the Rev. Mr. F——, the Catholic minister, into one of the hovel lanes of the town. We found in every tenement we entered enough to sicken the stoutest heart. In one, we found a shoe-maker who was at work before a hole in the mud wall of his hut about as large as a small pane of glass. There were five in his family, and he said, when he could get any work, he could earn about three shillings a week. In another cabin we discovered a nailer by the dull light of his fire, working in a space not three feet square. He, too, had a large family, half of whom were down with the fever, and he could earn but two shillings a week. About the middle of this filthy lane, we came to the ruins of a hovel, which had fallen down during the night, and killed a man, who had taken shelter in it with his wife and child. He had come in from the country, and ready to perish with cold and hunger, had entered this falling house of clay. He was warned of his danger, but answered that die he must, unless he found a shelter before morning. He had kindled a small fire with some straw and bits of turf, and was crouching over it, when the whole roof or gable end of earth and stones came down upon him and his child, and crushed him to death over the slow fire. The child had been pulled out alive, and carried to the workhouse, but the father was still lying upon the dung heap of the fallen roof, slightly covered with a piece of canvass. On lifting this, a humiliating spectacle presented itself. What rags the poor man had upon him when buried beneath the falling roof, were mostly torn from his body in the last faint struggle for life. His neck, and shoulder, and right arm were burnt to a cinder. There he lay in the rain, like the carcase of a brute beast thrown upon a dung heap. As we continued our walk along this filthy lane, half-naked women and children would come out of their cabins, apparently in the last stage of the fever, to beg for food, "for the honour of God." As they stood upon the wet ground, one could almost see it smoke beneath their bare feet, burning with the fever. We entered the grave-yard, in the midst of which was a small watch-house. This miserable shed had served as a grave where the dying could bury themselves. It was seven feet long, and six in breadth. It was already walled round on the outside with an embankment of graves, half way to the eaves. The aperture of this horrible den of death would scarcely admit of the entrance of a common sized person. And into this noisome sepulchre living men, women, and children went down to die; to pillow upon the rotten straw, the grave clothes vacated by preceding victims and festering with their fever. Here they lay as closely to each other as if crowded side by side on the bottom of one grave. Six persons had been found in this fetid sepulchre at one time, and with one only able to crawl to the door to ask for water. Removing a board from the entrance of this black hole of pestilence, we found it crammed with wan victims of famine, ready and willing to perish. A quiet listless despair broods over the population, and cradles men for the grave.

Sunday, February 21.—Dr. D—— called at two o'clock, and we proceeded together to visit a lane of hovels on the opposite side of the village. The wretchedness of this little mud city of the dead and dying was of a deeper stamp than the one I saw yesterday. Here human beings and their clayey habitations seemed to be melting down together into the earth. I can find no

language nor illustration sufficiently impressive to portray the spectacle to an American reader. A cold drizzling rain was deepening the pools of black filth, into which it fell like ink drops from the clouds. Few of the young or old have not read of the scene exhibited on the field of battle after the action, when visited by the surgeon. The cries of the wounded and dying for help, have been described by many graphic pens. The agonising entreaty for "Water! water! help, help!" has been conveyed to our minds with painful distinctness. I can liken the scene we witnessed in the low lane of famine and pestilence, to nothing of greater family resemblance, than that of the battle field, when the hostile armies have retired, leaving one-third of their number bleeding upon the ground. As soon as Dr. D—— appeared at the head of the lane, it was filled with miserable beings, haggard, famine-stricken men, women, and children, some far gone in the consumption of the famine fever, and all imploring him "for the honour of God" to go in and see "my mother," "my father," "my boy," "who is very bad, your honour." And then, interspersed with these earnest entreaties, others louder still would be raised for bread. In every hovel we entered, we found the dying or the dead. In one of these straw-roofed burrows, eight persons had died in the last fortnight, and five more were lying upon the fetid, pestiferous straw, upon which their predecessors to the grave had been consumed by the wasting fever of famine. In scarcely a single one of these most inhuman habitations was there the slightest indication of food of any kind to be found, nor fuel to cook food, nor anything resembling a bed, unless it were a thin layer of filthy straw in one corner, upon which the sick person lay, partly covered with some ragged garment. There being no window, nor aperture to admit the light, in these wretched cabins, except the door, we found ourselves often in almost total darkness for the first moment of our entrance. But a faint glimmering of a handful of burning straw in one end would soon reveal to us the indistinct images of wan-faced children grouped together, with their large, plaintive, still eyes looking out at us, like the sick young of wild beasts in their dens. Then the groans, and the choked, incoherent entreaties for help of some man or woman wasting away with the sickness in some corner of the cabin, would apprise us of the number and condition of the family. The wife, mother, or child would frequently light a wisp of straw, and hold it over the face of the sick person, discovering to us the sooty features of some emaciated creature in the last stage of the fever. In one of these places we found an old woman stretched upon a pallet of straw, with her head within a foot of a handful of fire, upon which something was steaming in a small iron vessel. The Doctor removed the cover, and we found it was filled with a kind of slimy sea-weed, which, I believe, is used for manure in the sea-board. This was all the nourishment that the daughter could serve to her sick mother. But the last cabin we visited in this painful walk, presented to our eyes a lower deep of misery. It was the residence of two families, both of which had been thinned down to half their original number by the sickness. The first sight that met my eyes, on entering, was the body of a dead woman, extended on one side of the fire-place. On the other, an old man was lying on some straw, so far gone as to be unable to articulate distinctly. He might have been ninety or fifty years of age. It was difficult to determine, for this wasting consumption of want brings out the extremest indices of old age in the features of even the young.

But there was another apparition which sickened all the flesh and blood in my nature. It has haunted me during the past night, like Banquo's ghost. I have lain awake for hours, struggling for some graphic and truthful similes or new elements of description, by which I might convey to the distant reader some tangible image of this object. A dropsical affection among the young and old is very common to all the sufferers by famine. I had seen men at work on the public roads with their limbs swollen almost to twice their usual size. But when the woman of this cabin lifted from the straw, from behind the dying man, a boy about twelve years of age, and held him up before us upon his feet, the most horrifying spectacle met our

eyes. The cold, watery-faced child was entirely naked in front, from his neck down to his feet. His body was swollen to nearly three times its usual size, and had burst the ragged garment that covered him, and now dangled in shreds behind him. The woman of the other family, who was sitting at her end of the hovel, brought forward her little infant, a thin-faced baby of two years, with clear, sharp eyes that did not wink, but stared stock still at vacancy, as if a glimpse of another existence had eclipsed its vision. Its cold, naked arms were not much larger than pipe stems, while its body was swollen to the size of a full-grown person. Let the reader group these apparitions of death and disease into the spectacle of ten feet square, and then multiply it into three-fourths of the hovels in this region of Ireland, and he will arrive at a fair estimate of the extent or degree of its misery. Were it not for giving them pain, I should have been glad if the well-dressed children in America could have entered these hovels with us, and looked upon the young creatures wasting away uncomplainingly by slow consuming destitution. I am sure they would have been touched to the liveliest compassion at the spectacle, and have been ready to divide their wardrobe with the sufferers.

Monday, February 22.—Dr. H—— called to take me into the Castle-haven parish, which comes within his circuit. This district borders upon the sea, whose rocky indented shores are covered with cabins of a worse description than those in Skibbereen. On our way, we passed several companies of men, women, and children at work, all enfeebled and emaciated by destitution. Women with their red, swollen feet partially swathed in old rags, some in men's coats, with their arms or skirts torn off, were sitting by the road-side, breaking stone. It was painful to see human labour and life struggling among the lowest interests of society. Men, once athletic labourers, were trying to eke out a few miserable days to their existence, by toiling upon these works. Poor creatures! Many of them are already famine-stricken. They have reached a point from which they cannot be recovered. Dr. D—— informs me that he can tell at a glance whether a person has reached this point. And I am assured by several experienced observers, that there are thousands of men who rise in the morning and go forth to labour with their picks and shovels in their hands, who are irrecoverably doomed to death. No human aid can save them. The plague spot of famine is on their foreheads; the worm of want has eaten in two their heart strings. Still they go forth uncomplaining to their labour and toil, cold, and half naked upon the roads, and divide their eight or ten pence worth of food at night among a sick family of five or eight persons. Someone is often kept at home, and prevented from earning this pittance, by the fear that some one of their family will die before their return. The first habitation we entered in the Castle-haven district was literally a hole in the wall, occupied by what might be called in America, a squatter, or a man who had burrowed a place for himself and family in the acute angle of two dilapidated walls by the road-side, where he lived rent free. We entered this stunted den by an aperture about three feet high, and found one or two children lying asleep with their eyes open in the straw. Such, at least, was their appearance, for they scarcely winked while we were before them. The father came in and told his pitiful story of want, saying that not a morsel of food had they tasted for twenty-four hours. He lighted a wisp of straw and showed us one or two more children lying in another nook of the cave. Their mother had died, and he was obliged to leave them alone during most of the day, in order to glean something for their subsistence. We were soon among the most wretched habitations that I had yet seen; far worse than those in Skibbereen. Many of them were flat-roofed hovels, half buried in the earth, or built up against the rocks, and covered with rotten straw, sea-weed, or turf. In one which was scarcely seven foot square, we found five persons prostrate with the fever, and apparently near their end. A girl about sixteen, the very picture of despair, was the only one left who could administer any relief; and all she could do was to bring water in a broken pitcher to slaken their parched lips. As we proceeded up a rocky hill overlooking the sea, we encountered new sights of

wretchedness. Seeing a cabin standing somewhat by itself in a hollow, and surrounded by a moat of green filth, we entered it with some difficulty, and found a single child about three years old lying on a kind of shelf, with its little face resting upon the edge of the board and looking steadfastly out at the door, as if for its mother. It never moved its eyes as we entered, but kept them fixed toward the entrance. It is doubtful whether the poor thing had a mother or father left to her; but it is more doubtful still, whether those eyes would have relaxed their vacant gaze if both of them had entered at once with anything that could tempt the palate in their hands. No words can describe this peculiar appearance of the famished children. Never have I seen such bright, blue, clear eyes looking so steadfastly at nothing. I could almost fancy that the angels of God had been sent to unseal the vision of these little patient, perishing creatures, to the beatitudes of another world; and that they were listening to the whispers of unseen spirits bidding them to "wait a little longer." Leaving this, we entered another cabin in which we found seven or eight attenuated young creatures, with a mother who had pawned her cloak and could not venture out to beg for bread because she was not fit to be seen in the streets. Hearing the voice of wailing from a cluster of huts further up the hill, we proceeded to them, and entered one, and found several persons weeping over the dead body of a woman lying by the wall near the door. Stretched upon the ground here and there lay several sick persons, and the place seemed a den of pestilence. The filthy straw was rank with the festering fever. Leaving this habitation of death, we were met by a young woman in an agony of despair because no one would give her a coffin to bury her father in. She pointed to a cart at some distance, upon which his body lay, and she was about to follow it to the grave, and he was such a good father, she could not bear to lay him like a beast in the ground, and she begged a coffin "for the honour of God." While she was wailing and weeping for this boon, I cast my eye towards the cabin we had just left, and a sight met my view which made me shudder with horror. The husband of the dead woman came staggering out with her body upon his shoulder, slightly covered with a piece of rotten canvass. I will not dwell upon the details of this spectacle. Painfully and slowly he bore the remains of the late companion of his misery to the cart. We followed him a little way off and saw him deposit his burden along side of the father of the young woman, and by her assistance. As the two started for the grave-yard to bury their own dead, we pursued our walk still further on, and entered another cabin where we encountered the climax of human misery. Surely thought I, while regarding this new phenomenon of suffering, there can be no lower deep than this between us and the bottom of the grave. On asking after the condition of the inmates, the woman to whom we addressed the question answered by taking out of the straw three breathing skeletons, ranging from two to three feet in height and *entirely naked*. And these human beings were alive! If they had been dead, they could not have been such frightful spectacles, they were alive, and, *mirabile dictu*, they could stand upon their feet and even walk; but it was awful to see them do it. Had their bones been divested of the skin that held them together, and been covered with a veil of thin muslin, they would not have been more visible, especially when one of them clung to the door, while a sister was urging it forward, it assumed an appearance, which can have been seldom paralleled this side of the grave. The effort which it made to cling to the door disclosed every joint in its frame, while the deepest lines of old age furrowed its face. The enduring of ninety years of sorrow seemed to chronicle its record of woe upon the poor child's countenance. I could bear no more; and we returned to Skibbereen, after having been all the afternoon among these abodes of misery. On our way we overtook the cart with the two uncoffined bodies. The man and young woman were all that attended them to the grave. Last year the funeral of either would have called out hundreds of mourners from those hills. But now the husband drove his uncoffined wife to the grave without a tear in his eye, without a word of sorrow. About half way to Skibbereen, Dr. H—— proposed that we should diverge to another road to visit a cabin in which we should find two little girls living alone,

with their dead mother, who had lain unburied seven days. He gave an affecting history of this poor woman; and we turned from the road to visit this new scene of desolation; but as it was growing quite dark, and the distance was considerable, we concluded to resume our way back to the village. In fact I had witnessed as much as my heart could bear. In the evening I met several gentlemen at the house of Mr. S——, among whom was Dr. D——. He had just returned from a neighbouring parish, where he visited a cabin which had been deserted by the poor people around, although it was known that some of its inmates were still alive, though dying in the midst of the dead. He knocked at the door; and hearing no voice within, burst it open, with his foot; and was, in a moment almost overpowered by the horrid stench. Seeing a man's legs protruding from the straw, he moved them slightly with his foot; when a husky voice asked for water. In another part of the cabin, on removing a piece of canvas, he discovered three dead bodies, which had lain there *unburied for the fortnight*; and hard against one of these, and almost embraced in the arms of death, lay a young person far gone with fever. He related other cases too horrible to be published.

ELIHU BURRITT.