

Life and Death in Limerick, 1849

by Spencer T. Hall

HALL, *Spencer Timothy* (1812-1885), known as the 'Sherwood Forester', born on 16 December, 1812, in a cottage near the village of Sutton-in-Ashfield in Sherwood Forest, Nottinghamshire, was the son of Samuel Hall, a quaker cobbler, and Eleanor Spencer, a Derbyshire shepherdess and dairymaid. His father gave him a little education. At seven years of age he wound cotton for the stocking-makers, and at eleven began weaving stockings himself. A perusal of the life of Benjamin Franklin led to his resolve to become a printer. In January, 1829, he went to Nottingham and bound himself as an apprentice compositor at the *Mercury* newspaper office. At the end of a year, his master, well satisfied with his conduct, received him into his house, and subsequently made him his confidential assistant. About 1830, he helped to found a scientific institution in the town, at which he read essays. Two years later, he contributed verses to the *Mirror*, the *Metropolitan Magazine*, and other periodicals. In 1836, at the end of his apprenticeship, he started, with the assistance of friends, as a printer and bookseller on his own account at Sutton-in-Ashfield. He was appointed postmaster there, and printed a monthly periodical called the *Sherwood Magazine*. In May, 1839, he accepted the post of superintendent in the printing establishment of Messrs. Hargrove at York. In 1841, he published a volume of prose and verse descriptive of his birthplace, called *The Forester's Offering*, which he set up in type himself, the greater portion without manuscript. The book sold well and Hall was invited to Sheffield, where he became co-editor of the *Iris* newspaper and governor of the Hollis Hospital. A volume of prose sketches entitled *Rambles in the Country* was originally written for the *Iris*; it was re-issued in an enlarged form in 1853, under the title of *The Peak and the Plain*. He wrote and spoke publicly in defence of phrenology, and was the first honorary secretary of the Sheffield Phrenological Society, and afterwards an honorary member of the Phrenological Society of Glasgow. He lectured through the country on mesmerism. During 1843 he edited a short-lived periodical called *The Phreno-Magnet*. At Edinburgh in September, 1844, his lecture completely convinced his eminent audience. The result of his work he published in his *Mesmeric Experiences* (1845). He is said to have wrought numerous cures. As the result of a visit paid to Ireland during the famine, he published, in 1850, *Life and Death in Ireland as witnessed in 1849*, one of his best books. About 1852, he became a homoeopathic doctor, and published *Homoeopathy, a Testimony* (1852). Not being legally qualified, he never obtained much practice. He paid special attention to hydropathy, and was at one time head of an establishment at Windermere. The latter years of his life, owing to illness and the ill-success of his various speculations, were spent in poverty. A few months before his death he received a grant of 100l. from the government. He died at Blackpool on 26 April, 1885, and was buried in the cemetery there.

Hall was also the author of: *The Upland Hamlet and other Poems*, 1847; *Days in Derbyshire*, 1863; *Biographical Sketches of Remarkable People*, chiefly from personal recollection, with miscellaneous papers and poems, 1873 (originally published as *Morning Studies and Evening Pastimes*). Most of the biographies had previously appeared in the supplement of the *Manchester Weekly Times* and other periodicals; *Pendle Hill and its Surroundings, including Burnley*, 1877; *Lays from the Lakes, and other Poems*, 1878. He wrote besides various guide-books to Lytham in Lancashire, Malvern in Worcestershire, and Richmond in Yorkshire.

It started by a forenoon train for Limerick, and found the country for some distance hilly and sprinkled with snow. It was impossible to proceed far without becoming alive to the national peculiarities more thickly prevailing as we advanced; and long before the journey's end the feeling had taken possession of me that I was now really in Ireland, and that notwithstanding all I had heard and read of it, it was a country of which previously I had but an inadequate idea. The hills and fenced fields were in a short time left behind, and ruined towers and deserted mansions were becoming more common on every hand. The towns we passed were, of course, not all alike; but one or two of them were too much unlike any others I had ever seen to be soon forgotten - odd-looking, desolate, dirty-streeted, pie-bald sort of places, in which every object of consequence appeared in remarkable contrast with its neighbour. A dark and venerable abbey in ruins might be seen near to a large, new, white-washed Roman Catholic chapel, round which would

cluster a most incongruous assemblage of taverns, shops, and low thatched cabins, with, some distance apart perhaps, as though it had scarcely any connection with them, a comparatively insignificant chapel of the Episcopalian church, that in England so predominates over every other place of public assemblage. But there were towns of greater magnitude and pretension here and there - though even in these it was plain to see that the most important building, generally, was the jail. Such towns, however, were far apart; and extending from some of them over a space greater than the eye could cover, were tracts of bog, intersected by brown rivers, and in many respects, if not all, much like a Lincolnshire fen before the drainage.

Such was the accumulation of pictures (with the addition of men ragged as scarecrows gazing from the fields as we passed, and crowds of women and children, many of them nearly naked, climbing upon the pallisades to beg at several of the stations) that occupied my mind by the time we arrived at the junction of another line of rail, near the feet of the Galtee mountains, on the

confines of Tipperary and Limerick - from which point there was an agreeable change in the scene.

From the vicinity of Tipperary - for the junction is within two or three miles of that town - to the city of Limerick, the scenery, as before suggested, was of a different character, - dry and pastoral, and consisting sometimes of green knolls, mountains in miniature, but more frequently of the gentlest swells and slopes, with occasional level fields, every "holding" of from one to five or six acres having its cabin, perhaps of a better order than many I had hitherto passed, and enlivened now and then by the neighbourhood of a modern villa. The boundary to these prospects was a somewhat bold and dusky mountain outline; and lofty, grey, solitary ruined towers of the olden time were seldom absent from the eye, look wherever one might, scarcely a single estate, however small, being without one. ...

It was late in the afternoon that the train arrived in Limerick, in which at that moment I had few or no motives for stopping. The fact that its population was



Passengers waiting for a Shannon ferry.

being fast thinned by the cholera perhaps furnished a slight one to the contrary, and as my destination was several miles beyond, in the county of Clare, I proceeded at once by a common post car, being the first I had mounted. It was a beautiful evening for the time of year - early April, - and as the setting sun still lingered on the broad but winding estuary of the Shannon, and covered the pastures and woods of the cotted and castled uplands and plains with its softened effulgence, I was ready to exclaim, can *this* possibly be a land of starvation and murder! - just as the driver brought me to the close of my journey and the beginning of another chapter.

Limerick seems to me, on reflection, to be a place in which every extreme of Irish character is represented. The antique and the modern, the patrician and the plebeian, the mercantile and the mendicant, the gay and the squalid, the beautiful and the ugly, the generous and the wretched, - all in contrasts rendered the more striking by their close companionship. Seated at the head of the estuary of the Shannon, which among European rivers ranks next perhaps to the Rhine, it has a noble moorage of shipping alongside its quay; a large dock in the course of formation; with a commodious custom-house, a chamber of commerce, and stores and mercantile offices of corresponding magnitude and number, and one of the finest bridges in the British Isles. Besides these indications of its

character as a port, it has several shops almost equal to any in London, one or two superior clubs, and some good inns. In the neighbourhood are the residences of many families of rank, a few of which class have also houses in the city. Connected with that of Mr. Roche, an urbane gentleman who was formerly one of the city members, is a beautiful attic garden over the roofs of the government stores, extending, if I remember rightly, to nearly half an English acre, and which from its peculiar locality might be easily missed by the traveller, though by no means unworthy of his glance. A fair number of the merchants and successful shop-keepers have elegant suburban villas, some of the neatest belonging to members of the Society of Friends. The new part of the city is composed chiefly of broad and well paved streets, intersecting each other at right angles - George's street and one or two others being very handsome. The houses in general are four stories high, but being in most instances built of glaring red brick, they contrast strangely with the dark, grey, dirty, irregular mass of buildings about the cathedral, in the old town, as well as with the clean white villas dotting the landscape outside. This red uniformity is however relieved by a few elegant public buildings, and a square which, if finished, would be magnificent. From the centre of the area rises a tall column surmounted by a statue of Lord Monteagle; and in the space about it are shaded seats and walks, forming at once

an excellent retreat and promenade; but seemingly with little prospect of being speedily surrounded by the designed complement of houses. Not far from this is a large but somewhat abortive fabric, begun by a philosophical society which has ceased to exist, - the massive pediments of the columns, the unplastered walls, and strewn materials, making it appear more like some old dismantled building than one never finished; yet by no means inspiring that sentiment of veneration which is always in some degree awakened by the decay that results from antiquity. Places of worship belonging to several sects, as well as to the English and Romish churches, are sufficiently numerous and large to attract attention; a monastery and nunnery are at hand, strengthening considerably the papal influence; and the neighbourhood of extensive barracks supplies more than a sprinkling of military, that, blending with the fashionable, would make this part at times very gay, but for the contrast of filth and beggary thrown in on all occasions from the old town to which it is wedded, and to which we now turn.

The cathedral, seen for so many miles around as the most conspicuous object in that quarter of Limerick, was founded by King Donat O'Brien in the thirteenth century. It is on many accounts an interesting building, but so crowded about by several of the filthiest kennels as to make the approach to it from some points quite discouraging. Another interesting



The County Courthouse.

object is a very old bridge of thirteen small arches, sometimes called Baal's Bridge and sometimes O'Brien's; and not far from it are various remnants of ancient fortifications, mills, &c., forming altogether a very picturesque scene. Above the city the river is divided into two channels, which are united again below this point, thus forming an island - the streets, alleys, and courts which occupy it constituting what is called the English town; but instead of being inhabited by people of English habits and tastes, as the name would imply, it is now just the reverse, and pervaded by some of the most painful specimens of Irish wretchedness. Still, even in this quarter, the industry and enterprise of individuals, as well as public philanthropy, have rescued something from the general squalor and dinginess. A comfortable dwelling or an ample public building may now and then be distinguished; and of the latter class that noble institution, Barrington's Hospital for invalids, is not the least conspicuous. The link between this and the new town is formed chiefly of the market, (in which was often to be seen some of the most grotesque and motley life I ever beheld), and a few trading streets; but some of these again are backed by the dirtiest lanes and kennels imaginable. Something distinct from all this should however be mentioned of the little church of St. John, with its bowery yard, in which may be seen a few monuments of classical design, and overlooked by old mansions that have been of more importance in a day gone by.

Such in the main is the external character of the city of Limerick - formerly ranking the second, now the third or fourth in Ireland - its inhabitants as contrasted as its streets and buildings. Go wherever I may on the face of the wide world, I do not expect to meet people of either sex more nobly built, or in any respect more beautiful, than the higher and middle classes of that city; for amongst them an ill or even an indifferent looking person would be an exception to the general rule. But on the other hand, I can never expect to see human beings more miserable, denuded, or in all respects more deplorable, than may be found abounding among its poor. So far too as I am personally concerned, it would be unjust not to add that, wherever my lot may be cast, I cannot wish to be treated with warmer hospitality and friendship than, as a mere visitor, I met with there. But let me not forestal my subject. The foregoing impressions were not received in a day, and perhaps it may be better to describe the order in which they were made upon me.

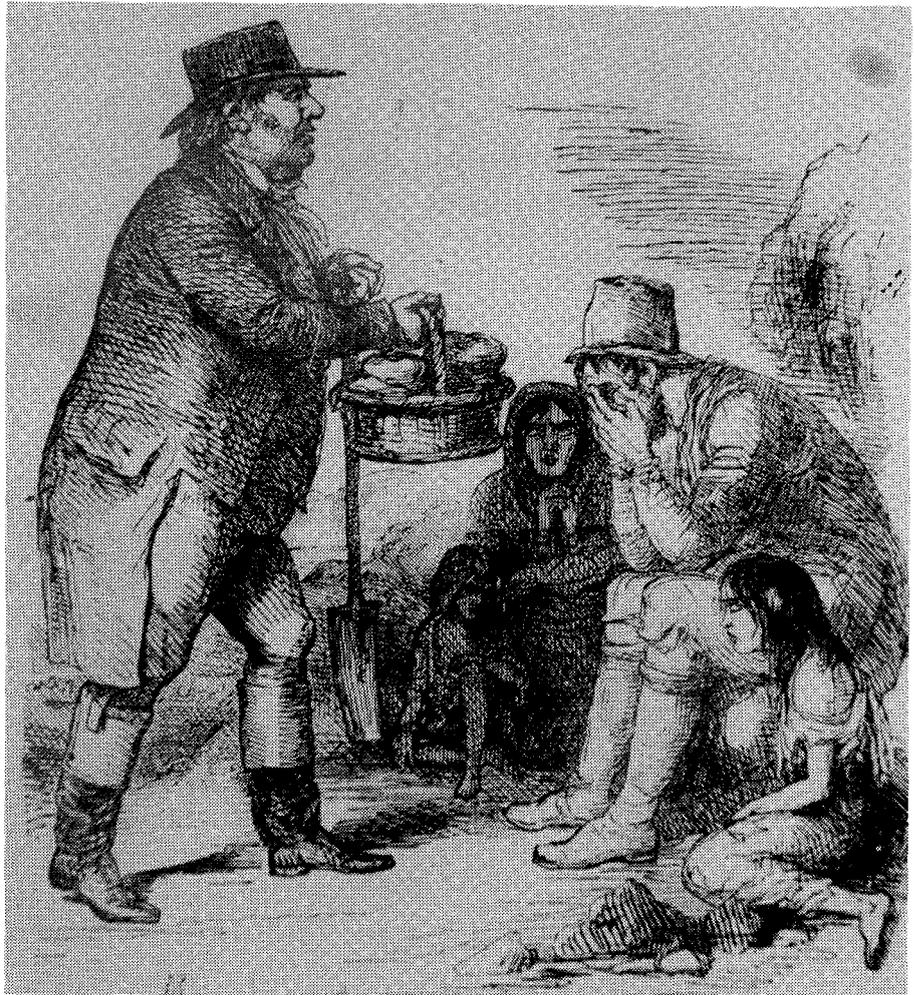
Besides riding in occasionally with the chieftain, it was my custom for several weeks to go on a Sunday to worship, between the morning and afternoon periods of which I had full three hours for refreshing myself and looking around me. On the first of these occasions - Palm Sunday (Let me here correct a mistake, before made, as to the time of my first arrival. Instead of being in April, I find, on reference, that it was on the 28th of March) - most of the men and boys I met

had small branches of palm in their hats or button-holes, which they said had been consecrated by the priest, and which many of them wore or renewed for nearly a fortnight afterwards. One of the sights that struck me as remarkable was the number of poor abject people kneeling during mass, in an attitude of the most intense devotion, upon the steps and pavement outside the Romish chapels - a habit evidently so common as to attract no attention whatever from ordinary passengers. Not less remarkable was the crowd of importunate beggars, besetting one at every step with the most pitiable and plausible stories. When any of them had prevailed in their solicitations, others would run to the same point from every part of the street, with all the eagerness of a flock of fowls towards a scattering of corn, to take advantage of the indicated benevolence. And as at that time there were about six thousand paupers within the walls of the workhouse and in some sheds and warehouses which had been fitted up in addition to it, with not less than seventeen thousand in the union receiving out-door relief; while it was quite common to see poor passengers dropping exhausted and sick on the road; knowing too, as I did, that many of those who had been evicted from their holdings in the country had been obliged to seek refuge, however hopelessly, in the city; it required no great credulity to believe that most of these applicants were quite as needy as they seemed, - though that was not the case with all, time proving to me that many of them were confirmed professional

mendicants. One custom I noticed which would certainly not have been tolerated in England - that of letting the poor hungry creatures come quite into the confectioners' shops, to beg a mouthful of food from any purchasers who might happen to be in; and though this was sometimes a great annoyance, it was impossible not to respect the humanity of the shopkeepers in allowing it. Another thing that struck me was, the way in which beggars who were successful would in turn aid with their utmost eloquence those who had been less so; - nay, sometimes half-a-dozen of them would plead together for one, in whose behalf on such occasions they urged some special reason. If effectual, they would be as lively with their united blessings on the giver as before they had been earnest and pathetic in appealing to him. I also observed that a kind word, when he had nothing more substantial at hand to bestow, would often win a similar benediction.

On two occasions I visited the union poorhouse, and on one of them went entirely through it. For a place so overcrowded it struck me as indicating pretty good management - with one exception. It was throughout exceedingly clean; the dietary scale, as compared with the chances of the still struggling destitute myriads about the country, was very fair; the appearance of attention and comfort in the sick wards, after what I had seen of people lying utterly neglected by the roadsides in the last stage of life, brought tears of thankfulness into my eyes; but to see in a vast hall, like one we passed through, a great crowd of able women, having nothing whatever to occupy their hands or their minds - nothing to do but gaze at each other and be silent - seemed to me most deplorable, and is I trust by this time remedied. If, as is said by one of our poets, "quiet to quick bosoms is a hell," what must this species of immurement be to the lightning-spirited Irish?

Many of them have no great objection to privation and filth in a hundred forms, so that they can but retain their personal liberty; and once I met with a remarkable illustration. Being out with the chieftain, on a walk through some fields and a green lane, we found sunning himself by the side of the latter a man named Connor M'Inherny, in a state of disease from which it seemed almost impossible he could recover. His body and legs were so much swollen and so inert, that at any point of pressure the indenture remained, almost as though it had been made in dead clay, and every thing about him betokened a near dissolution. How happened he to be there? was one of our first inquiries; when he informed us that he had crawled from the workhouse at Limerick. But why in that wretched state had he done so? Because, said he, his wife had died there already, and his two children would soon be gone too, and he had so longed once more to breathe the fresh air and to die, if he must die, near his home and among his people, that he had come away as well as he could, and had



John Bull presents his Irish 'brother' with food and a spade.
Caricature from *Punch*, 17 October, 1846.

thus far accomplished his object. The chieftain gave him money, and by some means he reached the poor cabin of his brother, which was just on the outside, and there in the course of a day or two I sought him. He had stolen out into the field, was basking in the sunshine, against a dyke, and told me that the fresh air and his liberty had already made him a little better. Finding that from some cause there actually was an improvement, I immediately reported his case at the chateau, from which a few comforts were speedily dispatched for him, and when I came away it did not seem unlikely that he would recover entirely. If ever a wild Irishman was seen in the world, sure enough he had his fellow in Connor. Yet, notwithstanding all his roughness, there was a touch of nature in his soul that pleased me. He loved the sunshine and flowers of his boyhood's home, and comfort according to law was half so precious to him. But we must return to Limerick.

In one of my perambulations of the old town, a little beyond the hour of noon, on a Sunday, I happened to pass through a dirty street in which various kinds of offal meat were exposed for sale. It was just after mass, and the street was swarming with vociferous buyers and longing lookers-on; but the character of the food and the way in which it was mauled almost made me sick. I thought of the cholera

and hastened forward. The cholera just before that time was so rife in the city, that out of a population of 50,000 not less than 500 cases occurred in a week; and I was soon afterwards shown *one vast grave*, in a field on the outside of the city, near the poorhouse, into which nearly two thousand bodies had been gathered in less than a month - having died of that and other diseases having their origin in dirt and destitution! The plan of this enormous grave was as follows:- A hole was first dug, large enough for six coffins, which after being placed together, without the slightest ceremony, were covered with the earth from another hole dug in turn by the side of the first. Thus the heap had gone on swelling till as large as one of the tumuli of the ancient inhabitants of these islands. Nor was such mortality confined to Limerick. In one of the neighbouring unions - I believe that of Newcastle - the contractor for coffins had at that time engaged to supply not less than 800 per week! It was at the same period that a child died of starvation on its mother's back, in the open streets of Limerick, having eaten nothing but a little water-cress for twenty-four hours.

If the place at such a time had any attractions of gaiety, he must have been a man very different from myself who could have sought or participated in them. Sorrow was the medium through which alone every feature could be viewed; and

this must be my excuse should the critical reader think I have not thrown into the picture sufficient light and liveliness.

The principal demonstrations of philanthropy that occurred, whilst I was in the neighbourhood, were a public meeting of the Protestant Orphan Society at the Theatre, and a bazaar, at the Philosophical Hall, instituted by the Roman Catholics, for the benefit of the Magdalen Asylum. I attended both. The first had little in its character to distinguish it from a meeting for the same purpose in England. The object was a useful one, and the speakers (principally clergymen) were eloquent in its praise - the poor children themselves occupying the pit, and heartily cheering the speeches. It was most gratifying to hear by the official report that the institution, although not very rich, had been instrumental in saving from want and in imparting much useful knowledge to a considerable number of poor orphans, who must otherwise have been thrown destitute and forlorn upon the world. The bazaar had, of course, greater novelty in it. The "Philosophical Buildings", however unfinished outside, had ample rooms within, smartly decorated for the occasion. A military band occupied the orchestra, and the most respectable catholic families of the place superintended the stalls, which had been supplied with tasteful *bijouterie* in great variety. It was a display at once elegant, animated, and full of character - as fine if not as large a mingling of benevolence, wit and beauty, as any city in the world need boast. There was one feature of the bazaar that distinguished it from any I had seen in England of the same rank, and with a similar purpose - namely, the number of lotteries or raffles constantly going on, and which jarred rather with my feelings, as being allied to gambling. On my suggesting this, however, to some of the fair solicitors for contributions, the idea was evidently set down or passed over as a crotchet not worth entertaining. Yet as gambling was often spoken of as something more than a mere amusement of a class of the citizens, it was natural to regret that an occasion like this should be turned into one of its elementary schools.

From all I could learn, there is one body in Limerick whose example cannot be without a considerable though silent influence - the Society of Friends or Quakers, with some of whom I became personally acquainted. There are many of them, too, about Clonmel, Cork, and other parts; and in so far as they are faithful to the principles of their loving, simple, but earnest and active founders, one can hardly imagine a more important sphere of usefulness for them than Ireland. Their industry, cleanliness, order, economy, and charity, - with their practical testimonies in favour of liberty of conscience in matters of religion, and especially of the sacredness of human life, cannot but be the credentials of a good mission, where many of those principles, are so little regarded by the majority. It is allowed on all hands that no class have been more liberal to the

poor around them - that in one way or other they have borne their full share of the public burden; yet there they are, living examples of comparative prosperity and peace; while the converse policy of many of their neighbours has brought nothing but ruin, vexation and sorrow on their heads. In a land where the episcopalian church is often sentinelled during service, like a barrack, by armed police; where servants go with loaded pistols in their pockets about their masters' mansions; where the protestants complain that even their most intimate domestics are Jesuits and spies upon them; where, in short, suspicion and counter-suspicion, jealousy, hatred, and revenge, are perpetually engendering each other in almost every section of society - this is a contrast so striking that one would think that none but the mentally and morally blind could miss observing it. Yet why is so little advantage taken of the example? I am not arguing here for the people becoming professors of quakerism or any other *ism*; sectarianism, as such, having no charm for me. But if those who have been so long sowing the wind and at last are reaping the whirlwind could only have condescended to read this lesson in time, they might just as well have profited by it as have the members of that body.

The one with whom I became most intimate once drove me a few miles into the country, to see his farm, which was now under the management of a man who had been a Terryalt captain, but who (though a most resolute and powerful fellow) had been reclaimed by kindness and firmness till regarded as in every respect a trustworthy person. It fell in my way to have a little discourse with him. So far from seeing any injustice or impropriety in his former career, he deplored the state of things which had first suggested it, and said that the chief desire he had ever felt in his illegal office was to make it a terror to evil doers. Here our conversation on the subject dropped; for I certainly could not honestly defend the policy he was condemning, however ill I might think of his own. The farm he was working on, arable and pasture, was in excellent condition, and well stocked. It was held by my friend on a "lease for ever", at £2 per Irish acre. Its situation was equal to its condition, being watered by a pleasant rivulet, sheltered from the north by a low mountain, and open to all the plain of the south, with the smoking city below, through the beyond which beautifully gleamed the Shannon on its far-winding track in the mellow light of sunset, - the dim peaks of distant mountains bounding all. I could hardly reconcile myself to the idea that it was with the ex-captain of a band of reputed midnight murderers I was there standing and feeling as safe as though he had been any other man in any other place. Nor should I have felt less so, perhaps, had it been in a gloomier place and hour; for it is said that every *stranger* who bears himself with kindness and propriety may rely on

passing unscathed through Ireland, whatever animosities may exist among her residents; and this I fully believe.

In such a country and state of society, it would be wonderful if the life even of the commonest people had not some touches of romance about it. What then must occasionally be that of particular individuals? On the morning of a day announced for the sailing of emigrant ships - and such days came very thickly about - far as eye could reach along the roads might be seen trains of cars coming in with passengers and their luggage, after travelling all night - often in the rain. The fare to New York being in some vessels less than £4 for adults, with bread and water rations, a great inducement was thus afforded to flee from starvation at home. But it would often happen that, through a miscalculation or a misrepresentation, one or two of a family would have to be left destitute behind, after arriving in the city with the full expectation of going, which would give occasion, in some cases, to the most aggravated weepings and wailings, in others, to the most heroic evidences of resolve and endurance. There was one case to know the end of which, even now, I would make a great sacrifice. An emigrant ship was about to be towed down the river by a steamer, but at starting, a woman, whose child was on board and who had been by some means too long delayed ashore by an errand, was unable to pass the gate upon the bridge for want of a halfpenny to pay the toll. The vessel was already departing, and the poor creature was wringing her hands in great agony and crying "My child! my child!" - but the tollman was inexorable, having probably been made so by previous experience. At this instant I happened to be coming by, paid the halfpenny for her, and saw her run down the river-side, still wringing her hands and crying "My child! my child!" Whether she reached the vessel in time or not I was never able to ascertain; though, as it had been for some minutes in the middle of the river and on the move, my impression is that she did not; nor did circumstances at the moment allow of my further facilitating her.

But it would fill a volume to describe all that engaged my attention in this way. The instances related will perhaps suffice as an indication of the general life and scenery of the neighbourhood. Had I the graphic pencil of a Mulcahy, (Limerick's native artist, who has well-embodied some of her fairest landscapes in his sketches), I might do the subject greater justice both in grouping and detail, by the addition of engravings. But to the extent that verbal painting would enable me, I have endeavoured to be as faithful as so brief a chapter permits. No doubt

"There's much exception, man and woman,

But such was Limerick life in common".

(Reprinted from *Life and Death in Ireland, as witnessed in 1849*, by Spencer T. Hall, London, 1849).