

CHAPTER VIII

The Famine

The years of 1858 and 1859 were disastrous ones for our colony at St. Anne. Two terrible frosts in the summer of 1858 and a real deluge of three weeks in 1859 had completely destroyed our crops, on the low lands.

In order not to perish, we were forced to mortgage our lands and borrow money from land sharks, who made us pay between 20 and 30 per cent. interest.

Of all the words of human language, the most terrible is *famine*.

The first Sabbath in May, 1859, a young woman had dropped dead, when on her way to church. In the afternoon, when in the midst of her desolated family, I learned from her husband that, for the last three months, he and his wife had not taken more than a meal a day in order to prevent their three children from starving!

It was evident that she had died from want of food. No words can tell my desolation in those dark days—the darkest days of my life.

In order to help my poor people as much as possible, I had not only sold my two horses and my buggy, but I had mortgaged my watch, my gold medal, everything I had, even my house and my dear chapel, to get food and clothing for the most destitute.

More than that, I had borrowed from several brokers about \$1,000 for which I had given what is called “Cutthroat mortgages,” relying on several sums of money due to me, to meet those notes when due. But when the day of payment had come, I had not been able to collect a single cent to pay them.

The priests of Rome foreseeing that, had bought my notes with the hope of ruining me and putting an end to what they called our scandalous schism.

At their demand, the sheriff came and seized everything which could fall into his hand in order to sell them at the door of the court-house of Kankakee city. My last cow was taken, my chairs and table, the piano, even my bed and my library were taken from me. I could see everything go with dry eyes and unmoved heart when I remembered for what cause I was losing them. But I could not retain my tears when I saw my dear and precious books go. Laying my hand on my big Bible, I said to the Sheriff: "I hope you will allow me to keep this Bible as the only thing which I possess to-day," and he granted me that favour.

That night, having no bedstead, not even a pillow to rest my head on, I lay down on the naked floor. But I am mistaken—I had a pillow! Yes, and the most precious pillow upon which a man has ever rested his head—my Bible! I never got such a sweet rest than during that never-to-be-forgotten night when my head rested on the Divine Book!

The next morning my knees were the only table I had to hold my dry and hard biscuits. But if I could not give a very rich food to my body, it was not so with my soul, for I fed it with the Bread of Life. I read in my Bible:

"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth where moth and rust doth corrupt and where thieves break through and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust corrupts and where thieves do not break through, nor steal."

After my frugal breakfast, I went to the postoffice. There was only one letter to my address, but, to my great surprise, it had the mark of Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, a place from which not a line had yet ever been addressed to me. When I opened it, a little piece of paper fell on the floor. I picked it up, and, to my great surprise and joy, that little piece of paper was a check for \$500.

Here are the contents of that short letter, signed by the Rev. George Sutherland: "We have heard of your heroic battle against our common foe—Rome. You must not be left alone when so bravely fighting in the gap. . . . A few Gospel friends in Charlottetown and vicinity, send you this small sum to strengthen your hands and cheer up your heart. Please accept it with the assurance of our sympathies and admiration. Truly yours, George Sutherland." Five hundred dollars was surely a big sum in itself, and I had to bless my merciful God for it. But what was it, when I was surrounded by at least 500 starving families? It hardly lasted two days!

When this Providential help was gone, and I felt I had nothing but my tears to give to my people, the thought came to my mind that my duty was to go to some place not visited by the calamities which had ruined us, and ask the Christian people to come to our help.

I proposed that plan to the Rev. Mr. Staples, pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Kankakee city. Having approved it, he gave me a letter of introduction to the Rev. John Leyburn, D. D., then editor of the *Presbyterian* of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and, without any delay, I started for that distant city.

Having secured a decent room in a respectable hotel, I went to the office of the *Presbyterian*, and presented my letter of introduction to its editor. He received me as politely as he could, but I felt him as cold as an iceberg.

It was the first time in my life I was begging. As a priest of Rome, I had always plenty, not only for myself, but for all those who were in need around me.

After reading my letter, he said: "It is a real misfortune that Mr. Staples has addressed you to me, and advised you to come to Philadelphia for help. Not a month ago, another priest of Rome, a fine looking man, came to me saying, that he was disgusted with the errors of Rome and desired to become a Protestant. I received him well, and, with many of

the ministers of the city, I gave him a helping hand. We even introduced him to our families, and did all in our power to make his new existence as comfortable as possible. But we soon found, at our cost, that he was the vilest of men, a beastly drunkard, a thief and the most impudent liar we ever met. Now, my dear sir, you understand that your coming to us so soon after that ex-priest, is a most unfortunate thing for you. However, I do not want to discourage or rebuff you, the dishonesty of that priest does not mean that you are also a dishonest man, but you are intelligent enough to understand that it puts a mountain of prejudices against you and your mission of charity towards your starving people. Then do not raise your expectations of success too high, but as you come to me to get my advice, I will give it.

“First. To-day, go to the noonday prayer-meeting, at Sansom Street Church, and introduce yourself to the great crowd of Christians you will meet there, giving your name, position, trials, as well as you can; but be as short as possible and throw yourself entirely into the hands of God for the result.”

Just at twelve, I was in one of the front pews of the vast and absolutely crowded church, and as soon as I could find my opportunity, I was on my feet to speak on the first six verses of the fifteenth chapter of John.

But I had not yet entered into my subject, when the president rang his bell to stop me, saying, “We are not allowed here to speak more than five minutes.”

Disappointed and confused, I had to sit down with the conviction that I had made a fool of myself before that refined English-speaking multitude. I could see on the faces of many the badly concealed expressions of pity for my poor broken English language. My conviction was that this, my first appearance before the Philadelphia people, was a complete failure. In the afternoon with a heavy heart, and confused mind, I went again to Rev. Dr. Leyburn's office. He seemed disappointed and displeased to see me again. But

when extending his hand to shake mine, he kindly said: "I was much vexed by the rudeness of our president at the noonday prayer-meeting in so abruptly silencing you before you had any reasonable time to present your subject. As you are a stranger, and a Frenchman, not yet quite familiar with our English language, he ought to have given you at least ten minutes to speak. But do not be discouraged. The Lord rules behind the darkest clouds. What do you propose to do now after your first trial has been such a sad disappointment?"

I answered: "My object in coming again to you, this afternoon, is to ask you to give me the addresses of your principal ministers, with a few kind words to each of them from you, asking them to allow me to present to them my case and the terrible distress of my people."

"Well, my dear sir, the only thing I can do is to give you the names and addresses of our principal ministers. But you must give me your word of honour not to say that I have done that. You must not even mention my name. How can I give you the letter you ask when you are a perfect stranger to me? Here is the letter of introduction sent to me by the Rev. Mr. Staples. Take that letter with you as an introduction to the ministers you want to visit. It is the only thing I can do for you just now. May God help you," and with these words, he dismissed me as abruptly as if I had the smallpox with me.

It was too late to begin my visits that afternoon. There were no street cars in those days, and I had only \$4 in my pocket to pay my hotel expenses; it was impossible to think of taking a carriage. The whole traveling from minister to minister was to be a walking affair. And in that immense city of Philadelphia, many of those ministers were at a great distance from each other. When alone in my room, I had plenty of time to consider the difficulties which were before me. At every part of the horizon towards which I turned my mind, I could see nothing but dark clouds, unsurmount-

able difficulties and obstacles of the most formidable nature. But the more I saw there was no hope of success from men, the more I felt the need of going to my merciful heavenly Father and putting my trust only in Him. I opened my dear Bible and, in the marvelous providence of God, my eyes fell on these words of God, addressed to Elijah, "Get thee hence and turn thee eastward, and hide thyself by the brook Cherith. . . . I have commanded the ravens to feed thee." (1 Kings 17: 3, 4.)

I fell on my knees, and, as much with my tears as with my lips, I asked my God to look upon me and my poor starving people in His compassion.

I could not shut my eyes a single minute in that awful night. It seemed that I was hearing the cries of desolation of my poor starving people when there was no one to help them. There was before my eyes an awful vision of thousands of starving children asking for food from their heart-broken parents who had nothing but their tears to give them!

Even to-day when I think of that awful night, I cannot understand how I did not die during its endless and dark hours. My heart was so broken! And though comforted for a moment by the words I had read, my faith was not strong enough to shake off the fear that my supplications and prayers for the next day's success were to be received by a cold and contemptuous rebuke.

At last the long and dark hours of night passed away, and one of the brightest suns I ever saw began to shine. But it could not bring rays of hope to my soul. I could hardly eat anything at breakfast. My throat was choked by the bread I tried to take when I was thinking that my poor people were starving. I was ashamed to sit at such a rich table when so many dear friends were shedding bitter tears in their desolated homes.

At last the hour of the awful trial had come. I had been told that I could not present myself to the doors of the ministers before eleven o'clock. As I had to walk two miles be-

fore reaching the first one on my list, I left the hotel at ten, after having given nearly all my money to the hotel keeper.

The day was oppressively warm, 90 in the shade, not a breath of a refreshing breeze through those streets, ten and fifteen miles long, bordered by houses from three to five stories high. I had not walked more than a mile in that fiery atmosphere when I came near fainting. I entered a house and asked for a glass of water, which was very kindly given me. This did me good, though the next mile seemed ten miles long.

At last I arrived at the door of the Reverend Mr. X, and I rang the bell. After waiting a long time, nobody coming, I rang again. Every minute of waiting seemed to me an eternity, for the burning sun was wrapping me with an atmosphere of 90 degrees. I was nearly fainting when a negro girl came at the third ringing.

"What do you want, sir?" she asked.

"I want to see Rev. Mr. X," I replied.

"Please give me your card," she said.

"I have no cards with me," I replied.

"Then please give me your name."

"Chiniquy is my name," I answered, and a moment later I heard the girl saying to her master—"Mr. Niquichiche wants to see you sir."

"Niquichiche! Niquichiche!" answered the minister. "What a strange name! It is some beggar again, I suppose. Go and tell him I am busy. Let him come to-morrow."

And the negro girl had hardly given me her message, when she abruptly shut the door and left me outside in the burning sun.

I had more than a mile to go to the next minister. Many times on the way, I came near fainting. I had to stop three or four times and ask a glass of fresh water at the grocery stores which were on my way.

It was half past one when I saw the name of Rev. Mr. Y on a silver plaque on the door. The servant girl came at the

first knock, but she seemed out of breath and very impatient. "What do you want?" she asked. "I want to see the Rev. Mr. Y." "You cannot see him before three o'clock. He is just at his dinner." "Please give him this card (for I had bought a few cards and had written my name on them on the way) and ask him if I cannot sit a moment and take some rest in the shade, inside the door in the corridor." The girl went with my message and soon came with a cold, "No, sir, you cannot sit here, but come back if you like at three o'clock," and she slammed the door and left me out as if I had been a mad dog.

I had again to turn my face towards the burning sun and walk another mile to meet the next minister. But I felt so completely disappointed, humiliated, and discouraged by the rebukes I had received at the doors of these two ministers, that I remained some time as paralyzed and unable to go one step further. I sat a few minutes on the stepping stones to rest. My head was aching under the burning rays of the sun and I think I would have been killed with a stroke of apoplexy had not a torrent of tears flowed from my eyes. . . . Let me confess it to my shame, in that awful moment, I came very near cursing the day I was born.

But thanks be to God, that terrible temptation was of a short duration. Suddenly the memory of my Saviour, forsaken and overloaded under the burden of my sins in the garden of Gethsemane, came to my mind. It seemed I was hearing His cries, when, in His agony, He said: "Father, if Thou be willing, remove this cup from Me: nevertheless, not My will, but Thine, be done." Strengthened by this solemn remembrance, I reached the house of the Rev. Dr. Y at about three P. M., but absolutely exhausted. To my other bodily and mental sufferings was then added one of which I had heard spoken but had never yet experienced — blisters to the feet. They who have never suffered those horrible pains will not understand me. Suffice it to say that it is simply horrible. Accustomed as I had been, seven years, to walk on

the soft grass of the prairies of Illinois, my feet were not prepared for the new trial in store for them. In several places the skin was gone and the blood was running in my boots. At every step I suffered a real torture. It was as if nails had pierced the flesh, or as if burning coals had been applied to them. It was with this new addition of pain that I reached the splendid parsonage of the Rev. Dr. Y. This time I was determined to walk into the corridor, and sit a moment in the shade, to breathe some fresh air and recuperate my strength, for I felt absolutely worn out.

As soon as the servant opened the door, without saying a word, I entered and sat, or rather fell, on a chair which was there. I presented my card, and said, "Please give this to the Rev. Dr. Y, and tell him that I have some important thing to communicate to him." The girl went and soon came back, saying, "Dr. Y is busy, he cannot see you to-day, he is to leave for the country this afternoon."

I answered: "Please tell Dr. Y that I want to see him only two or three minutes on a most important business. It will not delay him."

The servant took my message, but she did not come back.

I waited about five minutes, when the lady herself with her bonnet on her head and her shawl on her arm, presented herself to me suddenly from the parlour. Without saluting me she said, "Has not the servant told you that Dr. Y was busy and could not see you? If you were a gentleman, you would know that your business was to go. Well, sir, I come to tell you that Dr. Y cannot see you. We are just starting for the country; the carriage is there at the door. If you have any business with my husband, do it by letters; you cannot speak with him to-day. Please leave this chair when nobody has invited you to sit on it."

If I had not gone promptly, it was evident that she was prepared to push me out of the door herself, or call her servants to render her that service. I walked out at the double quick to prevent my being forcibly ejected by the servants,

whom I saw approaching evidently by the order of their mistress.

But I could not go far. The few minutes of rest rendered a hundred times more painful the blisters of my feet. Besides that, my moral as well as my physical strength was completely exhausted.

I was as a man who is drunk. The body was too heavy for the enfeebled legs.

After a sleepless night, I had not had a breakfast of any account, no dinner—and had been walking for the last five hours under a burning sun in an atmosphere of 90 degrees.

Suddenly, all the objects around me seemed to turn as spinning tops.

I walked a few rods, but soon my eyes could not see enough to guide me. My feet struck on a stone at the corner of a street, and I sank down on it unable to walk a step farther. With my head resting on my hands, I began to cry: "Oh my God! my God! what will become of my poor people! Thou knowest it, I cannot consent to go back to see their tears and hear their cries of desolation, if I cannot save them from their terrible distress. I am ignominiously turned out from every door of the so-called ministers, absolutely without a friend in this city, without a cent remaining to pay my lodging, unable to walk a step farther, the only favour I ask from Thee is to put an end to my miserable existence just now."

My hope was that God had granted my prayer, for I had hardly finished it when I lost consciousness. How long I remained unconscious I do not know.

When I came back to myself, and opened my eyes, I saw several people around me, and a tall lady dressed in black, who was shaking my head and saying: "What are you doing here, sir?"

I was, for some time, unable to answer or to understand my position. It seemed, at first, that I was dreaming.

The kind lady took my hand, and said again, "What are

you doing here, sir?" With a feeble voice, I answered: "I am sick, and unable to walk any farther."

Then the good lady, gazing at my face, exclaimed: "Are you not Father Chiniquy who addressed the noonday prayer-meeting of yesterday, at the Sansom Street Church?"

"Yes, madam, I am."

"And you say you are sick and cannot walk. Why is it so?"

"Because my feet are blistered, my boots are filled with blood, and I am exhausted from having walked in the burning sun since ten o'clock this morning."

"O my God!" exclaimed the good lady. And then, calling a cabman who was near by with his carriage, she told him: "Please take that gentleman to my hotel; I will pay you."

She helped me to stand on my feet, and the cabman helping me into his carriage, drove me to the hotel.

A few minutes after my arrival the kind lady, with a doctor she had taken with her, was by my side in that comfortable hotel. The name of that good Samaritan, of whom we will hear more in this book, was Miss Rebecca Snowdon.