Mrs Mary Deignan and her four children were sitting around the fire in their cabin. They were very miserable. For the reason that the day was a cold one in the middle of February, and there was no food in the house. That morning they ate the last piece of oaten cake, and there was no more oats to make another cake. Their flour had given out a week before that. A dried fish that Coleman, the eldest child and the only son, had stolen off a wall where it was getting dried after being taken out of pickle, had lasted them three days for dinner. There was not a single scrap in the house. Not even a piece of potato.

‘Well,’ said the mother, ‘what are we doing here? We must do something. God is good, no doubt, but he is good only to those who forage for themselves. Now what’s to be done? Children, can none of you think of anything? Isn’t it well known that the angels put wisdom into the mouths of little ones. Though, God forgive me, the four little ones I have are bigger than myself, at least as far as their stomachs are concerned. So they are.’

The four children, in spite of their hunger and their misery, began to laugh. They were really a remarkable family. The mother was remarkable and the children were remarkable. Since the father, old Mick Deignan, that had the wart on his nose, and was always sick with the influenza, and always wore a white frieze trousers that somehow or other always had a yellow burnt spot on its leg one place or another, since he died ten years before that the family had been very, very poor. They had ten acres of land, but they had no stock to put on it, so they always rented it for a few pounds a year. The mother worked at any odd job that she could find, washing, thickening frieze, and scrubbing in people’s houses, and the daughters used to mend nets for the co-operative society, while the son, who was seventeen years of age, worked as a labourer. But, to tell the truth, as far as work was concerned, they were a lazy and indigent family. Maybe they would work well enough for a spell, and then for some reason or other the whole family took to idleness and sat in their cabin all day composing poems, cracking jokes, drinking tea, and having the time of their lives. So that the villagers, passing their cabin and hearing loud laughter, got mad with rage against these poor devils.
who were gifted by the good God who governs all things with the Divine
capacity for enjoying life and their good health. For in spite of their cabin
containing only one tiny bedroom where the mother and her three daughters
slept, and the little kitchen where the son slept on the settle, the children
were healthy. And the mother was healthy, except in cold weather when she
drank too much tea and suffered so terribly from flatulence and pains all
over her middle, that she was always on the point of death and moaned liked
a possessed one.

But that winter things had gone badly with them until now they were at
the end of their tether. Their credit was exhausted. Their solitary pig had
been taken from the sty in lieu of debt by Flanagan, the grocer from Kilmurrage,
‘the curse of God on his rotten Co. Mayo liver,’ as Mrs Deignan said. None
of them could find work anywhere. Until now they had bravely kept up
courage and laughed and sang and composed poems, satires on all their
enemies, but the hunger was telling on them that bitterly cold day as they sat
by the fire. Barbara, the eldest daughter, aged sixteen, was trying to toast her
short, fat legs at the turf fire.

She was sitting on a low stool in the corner, her short, thick black hair
woven in a plait that hung over her shoulders. Her soft, open red lips and
her big, black eyes were turned towards her legs that were bare to the knees,
and her short, stubby little hands were moving up and down the legs,
counting the ‘Rockfishes’ on them, that is the queer blue spots that came
into them from being constantly exposed in their nakedness to the turf blaze.
Mary, aged fifteen, a girl almost exactly similar in shape and face to Barbara,
except that she was slightly thinner, had her left leg in her lap and with her
two hands she was pulling at the big toe. She had an idea that if she pulled
at her toes long enough she could make them as long and slender as her fingers
and thus be a great lady. Little Margaret, the most serious of the family,
aged fourteen, the one who always discovered the correct phrase when the
rest of the family were in a difficulty over a poem, sat very seriously with
her little hands folded in her lap, looking at the fire, with her black curls
hanging about her little pale face. Coleman, a handsome boy of seventeen,
with large blue eyes and long lashes like a woman, lay stretched on the form
beside his mother, looking at the fire and brooding over something. He was
always thinking and breathing heavily through his nose, and then all of a
sudden he would slap his thigh and jump to his feet bursting with laughter,
and no matter how much people asked what he was laughing at and what
had come into his head, he would just shake his shoulders and say nothing.

The mother sat in the other corner opposite Barbara. She was about sixty