

LANDLORDISM :

IN A KERRY VILLAGE.

In the seventies our village was almost unknown, at least unnoticed even in Ireland. Ten years later it gained throughout the United Kingdom an unenviable notoriety. Looking down from Sleave Mish on one of the finest valleys in Munster, one would have then thought that here surely peace and plenty reigned supreme; that the conditions for a happy existence were at one's feet; that the busy toilers below reaped an ample reward for their hard but wholesome labour; that rural comfort in abundance was the lot of its lucky inhabitants. Crime there was practically none. The people seemed contented and happy. They thronged the public roads and *bohereens* on Sundays to mass. In the afternoon the young men and women came out to the cross-roads and danced till sundown. Here was a knot of young fellows jumping and throwing the weight; there, over yonder in the big meadow, an excited crowd kicked the football—not merely looked on, the whole lot took sides, fought and tumbled good humouredly. Away opposite you can see a group of sportsmen with greyhounds crossing Cael-na-Spridah, and down underneath a few of the boys are fowling across the bog. A sad outlook for your strict Sabbatarian. There is the little parson, with his military gait, walking along the Killarney road. He is only a curate, with a congregation all told of half-a-dozen; but he is loved and respected by the people, for they know that he is a gentleman, a scholar, and a convinced Home Ruler. There are fishermen along the banks of the river. There is Tom, old James, and Martin casting their lines leisurely along. Patsy—most cunning of anglers and a master-craftsman at fly-making—is going home with a full bag. The kiddies are diving into Big Malachy. The cows, with bursting udders, are lowing on the hill-sides. In the village the mothers sit at the doorsteps and look approvingly on the "flowers of May" swinging round and round to a merry glee.

Appearances notwithstanding, there was no solid peace or comfort in that valley. Over it lay the heavy hand of a merciless landlordism, which ground exceeding fine the lives of the people; brought poverty where there should have been plenty, a mean and

desperate struggle for a living where there should be room and abundance for all, and which was undoubtedly the root-cause of all the crime and demoralisation that followed in the succeeding decade. Where are the boys and girls that grew up with me in that far-off Kerry village? Most of them are in America, some here in Australia, a few at rest on the banks of the Tugela, the remnant still struggling at home. Sleave Mish still listens to the heart-rending parting cries at the railway stations—more harrowing to a home-loving race than the *ullagoane* of the wake.

Why this continual drain of the bone and muscle of our half-depopulated country—this most remarkable exodus of the nineteenth century? The heel of a barbarian past—of the planter, the Cromwellian, the Norman—is still on the neck of our people. The common herd have to pamper with rich foods, clothe in fine linen, and supply hunters, mistresses, and German spas to an idle and pleasure-loving landlord class. Some of us even yet, from the Mississippi Valley, from Cape Nome, from the Argentine, from South Africa, from the Australian bush, have to send our remittances to the dear landlord in Ireland. These landlords should never forget their indebtedness to that beautiful Christian belief in a life of future reward in heaven, which has prevented their unholy, but not uncursed, system from being kicked into the Atlantic centuries ago. "The everlasting pains of hell" has been the landlords best bailiff. That great Protestant Irishman, John Mitchell—whose memory is cherished by his countrymen—looking down on that peaceful scene, said that "it was a valley worth fighting for." Of course it is; but what is the use of talking of fighting to an unarmed peasantry?

Look at the green farms climbing up the surrounding hills. A generation ago this land was waste and barren, covered with heath and furze. Our hardy grandfathers and their sons, with herculean toil, made the land to grow oats, potatoes, flax, and grasses. The landlord—in his grand demesne, in the county club, in London or Homburg—draws £2 an acre annually for this tenant-made land, which his grandfather could not rent at five shillings. This is, in Biblical language, the sign and seal of the beast which devoureth. Here, in Queensland, where I sit on my verandah writing this, I am looking out on a magnificent wheat-growing valley. Less than a generation ago it was the primeval bush, unknown to civilised man; now the forest and scrub have disappeared, and waving fields of Indian corn, big white stubble paddocks which yielded eight bags of wheat to the acre, patches of lucerne and barley, have taken the place of the gigantic gum, iron-bark, and pine trees. The farmers take off this virgin soil two crops a year. The homes dotted over the countryside look more like suburban villas surrounded by shade, ornamental and fruit-trees, than the usual pioneering farmers'

homesteads. Here again, as in those Kerry hillside farms, we had at first great hardships, hard living, heavy toil and sweat; but no idle landlord steps in to annex the fruits of the worker's lifetime. All are freeholders. Let me make a circle of the farms, from where I sit as centre within a mile radius. We have O'Dempsey, Kavanagh, Leahy, Owens, Canavan, Browne, McMahon, Angland, Ryan, Burke, and King—all exiles from Erin, and with no love for Irish landlordism and English rule in their hearts. They landed here practically penniless and alone; their health, strength, and pluck their only capital. They have blazed the track for succeeding generations, and, after years of heroic toil, are leaving to their children free and unencumbered land, selected at half-a-crown, which now would fetch sixteen pounds an acre. This little Irish colony is but a small fraction on the outer rim of the great circle of a Greater Ireland beyond the seas. Now is the goodwill and loyal support of this Greater Ireland in the States and British colonies, together with the content, loyalty, and strength of a prosperous Ireland at her back, worth to the predominant partner the expense and statesmanship necessary for carrying out at once, what ultimately is so certain, a generous measure which will transfer the land of Ireland from its present idle owners to those who are working it and who have practically created most of its present value?

In the eighties our village had the name of being the greatest moonlighting centre in the south of Ireland. The first moonlighters, however misguided and ignorant of the terrible chain of evils which followed in their train, were undoubtedly the finest fellows in the place. They wanted to put down landgrabbing, to give a backbone to the farmers' union against landlord injustice.

They put what they considered a wholesome fear into the hearts of those who coveted their neighbour's farm. They did this without outrage or bloodshed, and hated the very thought of shooting from behind a hedge or maiming a defenceless man. To those who know nothing about the first moonlighters, and with the black record of a later day before them, this statement will no doubt seem absurdly incredible. But it is a fact nevertheless. After a time a set of unprincipled blackguards, the scum of the district, mostly servant boys, got possession of the moonlighting outfit and dominated the whole district. Then a diabolical campaign of outrage began. A reign of terror for many a hitherto peaceful home prevailed. A gang of thieving rascals, led by two murderous desperadoes, who would shoot a man for a five-pound note, and who afterwards actually murdered a most industrious farmer for money—for which murder two innocent peasants were hung—defied the police, blackmailed the inhabitants, and brought bloodshed, demoralisation, and

overwhelming shame to a poor but honest and peace-loving people. With this gang petty larceny became patriotism, and cow-stealing a profession; and, in a country famous for the chastity of its women, a few well authenticated cases of rape has to be credited to these cowardly ruffians. Were not these fine fellows—the originators of moonlighting—responsible for the crimes which followed in their wake? They stirred up the dregs with a vengeance. How is it that they stood by and saw their birthplace stained by the crimes of this evil gang? Mr. Forster's Coercion Act imprisoned or exiled the very men who had the will and the power—for the police seemed powerless—to put down outrage; and it left the "village ruffians" at large to terrorise the inhabitants; to maim, to murder, to rob, and to defy all authority. The originators of moonlighting, at least in our district, were not, I maintain, bent on outrage and murder. In fact they were Fenians who, if the country could only get the armament, were ready to fight England fairly and openly at the first opportunity. Where was the influence of the clergy? Unfortunately, we had, what is a rare phenomenon in Ireland, "a landlord's man" as parish priest. Not that he had not the interests of his parishioners at heart; but the people thought him too familiar with the gentry. He certainly coveted the honour of dining with a lord, and kept aloof from, in fact was hostile to, the perfectly legitimate and open agitation for the redress of admitted grievances. He was a lovable old man, but his influence among the people at that time was nil. His exhortations, his appeals—God knows earnest enough—were resented and openly flouted.

A terrible responsibility now rests on the leaders of the United Irish League (which in its endeavour to wipe out landlordism has my hearty approval) to keep the movement free from all secret outrage-mongering. If they would listen to an humble Irish voice from the Australian bush they will sternly stamp out moonlighting tendencies in our young and ardent countrymen. I heard Michael Davitt, who has won the deep love of the Irish race at home and abroad, in my own village denounce, in words that ought to have burned, the evil gang that was disgracing our country. I saw them listening; they fingered their revolvers, but he told them to their teeth that they ought to be scourged at the cart's tail. Material prosperity alone will never make a country great or happy. In their commendable eagerness to uplift the peasantry and stop emigration, the leaders should not excuse anything that would in any way impair that fine moral rectitude and love of honest labour, which, at bottom, is the distinguishing trait in the character of our simple, industrious people. These were wild times during the land war of the eighties. Alas! many a fearful tragedy blotted the fair name of our hitherto peaceful valley. But we must not forget the heartlessness of the evicting landlord. Old and young thrown out on the roadside, cabins razed

to the ground. Who can forget the horror of the Glenbeigh evictions in West Kerry, where the crow-bar brigade and the fire-stick yeomanry burnt down the houses of a whole countryside? The crops had failed, and the half-starved peasants were being decimated by fever, famine's scavenger. This, of course, was landlordism at its worst; but, resting on injustice and oppression, its spirit cannot be anything but evil. No wonder that in its workings the savage comes to the surface. Scratch a highly civilised English lord and you will find the barbarian at bottom.

Lord W. Lennox tells us, in his "Reminiscences," p. 141, that, following the hounds one day, he jumped his horse over a market gardener's hedge. The gardener strongly objected to the trespass with a hay-fork, and the aristocrat remarks: "The affair soon died away, as it would have done if the entire buildings of this market gardener had been burnt to the ground and himself smothered in the ruins." This was written calmly years after in his closet, and published in free and independent England!

This brings us to the root-cause of English misgovernment in Ireland and Irish disloyalty and dormant rebellion against England. There is no quarrel at bottom between the workers of England and Ireland; the enemy is common to both, as they say in Euclid. If the English democracy were masters in their own household, there would have been long ago peace and contentment in Ireland; and England would have the strong arm of a fighting race at her back, together with the solid support of a far greater Ireland overseas.

Imagine for a moment a thoroughly loyal Ireland fighting *con amore* for the empire. England prefers the 500 landlord yeomanry that were captured at Lindley! But landlordism—certainly of a far milder type—and capitalism reign supreme in Britain. We Irish had a hope that, after the political education of the masses during the later Gladstonian period, the British democracy had finally pronounced sentence of death against Irish landlordism. Many sad political events have since intervened, and I am afraid that now the Irish land question does not to any extent occupy the thoughts of the British elector. It is, unfortunately, at present, of little use to appeal to English Radicals to help to bury landlordism, when they themselves are under the heel of capitalistic tyranny in their own country. Listen to our old enemy, the *Times*, on Irish landlordism: "More misery is crowded into a single province in Ireland than can be found in all the rest of Europe put together. To this pass have things come, in order to benefit a small knot of haughty, unfeeling, rapacious landlords the well-being of millions is discarded. Famine and misery stalk through the land, and all good government of Ireland is rendered impossible and government of any kind impracticable except through the medium of military force." Again, in February, 1847, the *Times* says: "The people of England have most

unjustly connived at a national iniquity (in Ireland). Property ruled with a savage and tyrannical sway. It exercised its rights with a hand of iron, and renounced its duties with a front of brass. The fat of the land, the flour of its wheat, its milk and its honey, flowed from its shores in tribute to the ruthless absentee. It is all drain and no return." Irish landlordism is the same yesterday and to-day. It remains with the people of Ireland themselves, acting through their now united parliamentary party, and backed up by the sympathy and support of democrats throughout the English speaking world, to, once and for ever, put an end to this thrice accursed system. Buy the landlords out at once if it is the only practicable way. Personally, I would prefer to see the Government buying out the life interest of the present owners and nationalising the land; but that I fear is at present impossible.

War, especially civil war, is the greatest misfortune that could befall the present generation in Ireland; but when I read my *Lecky*, think over the famines, persecutions, and depopulations of the nineteenth century; when I think of the petty tyranny of Castle janissaries, the brutal bigotry of religious factions, the over taxation of an impoverished country, the degradation of what God meant to be a manly race—my grandfather made one of those hill-side farms in Kerry for present-day landlordism—I would be only too delighted, here from Queensland, to drive a nail in its coffin.

My old, hardworking mother is still living in that Kerry village. Her four children are in foreign parts. She is alone; because not one of the four could get a decent living at home.

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