

NEXT YEAR'S FAMINE.

By John Mitchel.

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One paragraph from a letter of Mr. FITZPATRICK, Parish Priest of Skibbereen, published in the *Freeman* of yesterday, includes within it the whole history of Ireland for the year 1847, and, by anticipation, of the two or three years following: -

“The ground continues unsown and uncultivated. *There is a mutual distrust between the landlord and the tenant.* The landlord is in dread, if he gives seed to his tenant, that the tenant will consume the crop and not pay him his rent; and the tenant is in dread that, if he himself sows seed, the landlord will pounce on the crop as soon as it is cut. Thus there is a mutual distrust; and, therefore, the ground *remains uncultivated.* The landlord would wish, if possible, *to get up his ground,* and the unfortunate tenant is anxious to stick to it as long as he can. A good many, however, are giving it up, and preparing for America; and these are the substantial farmers, who have still a little means left.”

We take this extract only because it states, in the most condensed form what is now occurring in every county in Ireland. A gentleman travelling, from Borris-in-Ossory to Kilkenny, on one of these glorious spring days, counts at both sides of the road, in a distance of twenty-four miles, “*nine men and four ploughs*” occupied in the fields; but sees multitude of wan labourers “beyond the power of computation by a mail-car passenger,” labouring to destroy the road he was travelling upon. (*Mail of Wednesday.*)

“The land,” says the *Mayo Constitution*, “is one vast waste; a soul is not to be seen working on the holdings of the poor farmers throughout the county; and those who have had the prudence to plough or dig the ground, are *in fear* of throwing in the seed.”

Into every seaport in Ireland are now thronging thousands of farmers, with their families, who have chosen to leave their lands untilled and unsown, to sell horses and stock, and turn all into money, *to go to America,* carrying off both the money and the industry that created it, and leaving a more helpless mass of misery and despair behind them.

And the doomed wretches, who can neither leave their country, nor live in it, - when grubbed up weeds will no longer sustain them, when the agonies of hunger are over, and all the bitterness of death is long past and gone, patiently make themselves at home with death – take their last look at the sun and the blasted earth, and then “build themselves up in their cabins, that they may die with their children, and not be seen by passers-by.” And thrice and four times blessed are they who have already perished thus, instead of being kept half alive, upon stinted rations and charity soup, to die more surely, more hideously, next year.

Consider what agencies are at work to ensure next year’s famine. First, a mutual distrust between landlord and tenant – the tenant afraid to put in seed lest the landlord pounce on the produce – the landlord afraid, lest the famishing tenant should devour it; and so between them they take care there shall be no produce at all. Then the landlord “wishing to get up his ground,” and the tenant “anxious to stick to it as long as he can,” and neither tilling it. Again, those who were both able and willing to put in a crop, leaving their farms desolate, and flying to a distant land, where they will not have to fight with bailiffs for the food their own hands have raised. – And, the month of March wearing fast away, bright and dry, giving promise of genial seed time and plenteous harvest, if *men* could but do their part. What can come of this but Famine, and Plague and Death?

Once the noble island of Sicily was the granary of Rome, and was administered as a province of the Roman empire, under a Praetor (so the Lord Lieutenant was called), whose duty was to see that Sicily sent her tribute of corn, and wine, and oil, punctually to her masters’ gates. For many generations this process went on; but the end came; the richest island in the world began to be desolated by a perennial famine; and at last the eyes of CICERO saw it thus: -

“Those very fields and hills, which I had once seen in all their verdant pride and beauty, look now squalid and forsaken, and appear as if mourning for the absence of the husbandman. The fields of Herbita, of Enna, of Marguntium, of Machara, of Assorium, of Agyra, are mostly deserted; and we looked in vain for the owners of so many fertile jugera of land. The vast fields around Aetna, - once the best cultivated, and those of Leontini, the pride of corn countries which,

when sown, seemed to defy scarcity, have become so degenerated and wasted, that we in vain looked for Sicily in the most fertile part of Sicily.”

So it fared with Sicily; but miserable Ireland has not only the steady drain of her produce to contend with; her own people are also glaring on one another with fear and suspicion, almost ready to tear one another to pieces for the beggarly crumbs that fall from her masters’ table. If Sicily became a wilderness, Ireland seems about to turn into a Golgotha.

The landlords are “wishing to get up the lands!” Let the landlords beware. Let them not press to a decision, sooner than they can help, the momentous questions that lie unsolved between them and the occupier – that might have lain unsolved for many a day if the Famine had not yet visited us. Men are on all sides beginning to ask to whom, after all, this land belongs; whether the “rights of property” appertain only to property *in rents*; whether a royal patent can confer the power of awarding life or death at the patentee’s pleasure; whether the tillers of the soil are to go on for ever borrowing or hiring land, instead of owning it. If these things be driven to an issue, there will be consequences and corollaries terrible enough.

The course taken by the landed gentry of Ireland, since their famous Rotunda meeting, has been watched anxiously, and by us, at least, in no unfriendly spirit. We hailed their “Irish Party” as the beginning (which it might and ought to have been) of a grand national movement. Its resolution calling for legislative compensation for tenants’ improvements, indicated, we did hope, that there were men amongst them who felt the exigencies of the time, and owned, at least, the instinct of self-preservation. And what has this Irish Party done? What is it doing *now*? Now, when the abyss is yawning for them and for their country? Oh, Heaven! moving clauses in Poor Law Bills, the omission of clauses in Drainage Bills – discussing whether “improvements” shall include tile-yards and flax-mills – stipulating for small rating divisions, for plenty of *ex-officio* guardians! Have they considered whether “improvements” include grave-yards? Have they satisfied themselves that there will be anybody left to *pay* the rates, in large divisions or in small? Are they deaf and blind to the fact that the

peasantry, the people, the masses, the great *rent*-paying machine itself, is falling fast into disorder and ruin?

Adder-deaf, we fear, and stone-blind, and, if so, then doomed to destruction irretrievable, signal, and unpitied. Social order, the gradations of society, the relations of class with class – these are not to be lightly disturbed; to preserve them unbroken any good man would make many a sacrifice. *But the existence of a Nation is more precious still.*