

THE CORPSE ON THE DISSECTING TABLE.

By Charles Gavan Duffy.

From *The Nation*, 18 August, 1885, originally published under the title '*To The Independent Electors of New Ross.*'

MY FRIENDS,

I have determined to retire from the office to which your favour raised me, and, till better times arrive, from all share and responsibility in the public affairs of Ireland. The Irish party is reduced to a handful, the popular organization is deserted by those who created it, prelates of the Irish Church throned among the ranks of our opponents, priest is arrayed against priest, and parish against parish – shameless political profligacy is openly defended and applauded, the special opportunity sent by Heaven for our deliverance is bartered away to an English faction, and the ultimate aim for which alone I laboured – to give back to Ireland her national existence – is forgotten or repudiated. Till all this be changed, there seems to me no more hope for the Irish Cause than for the corpse on the dissecting table I have done my best to change it. For the last twelve months I have spared no pains, in public or private to rally the National party. But in vain. A preternatural apathy reigns over the country, disheartened by corruption and pampered by a false and temporary prosperity. When all external circumstances favour a National movement it is rejected at home. God knows I have done my best. One step alone remains. I promised, in such a fatal contingency, to throw up my seat in Parliament, in order that the truth might not be screened from the people, nor the crisis pass without some emphatic warning and protest. The time for this duty has come.

I have been urged on many sides to keep my post, because, though I cannot effect what I aimed at, I may still do some good. To me it seems I would do much more harm than good. I would hold out hopes where I believe there are no hopes. I would help to demoralize the people, by maintaining promises that cannot now be fulfilled. I

would raise the *bonus* on corruption, by increasing the apparent value of the services which deserters render to the English Government. And by screening our betrayal I would help to postpone the only chance of an effectual remedy. There is honest and useful work for some men in Parliament; and there always will be, while we are subject to its laws; but for me none that I went there to accomplish, or which, being there, I can accept as a substitute. I am far from blaming those who can and will – some of them are my most valued friends – but I must follow the light of my own judgment and conscience.

It may be thought I despair too soon of the present time. If there be any who honestly think so, let them try to do better and may God prosper them. For me I have tried. For seven years I have kept the green flag flying alone, or with but a handful of friends; for twice seven years I have thought, written, and acted to one sole end. In these years I have been five times prosecuted by the English Government – in '42, '44, '46, in '48, and '49, and wasted thirteen months of my life in English prisons. I have “spent and been spent” cheerfully, in fortune, health, peace, the duties of home, and the rights of my children; often with less aid than opposition from those who professed the same opinions, always in exhausting personal conflict with a hired press and all who lived or hoped to live by corruption. It may be, the result is small and I am an unprofitable servant, but I have done my best.

I have, assuredly, not taken up lightly or laid down lightly any projects for the interest of the country, permanent or temporary. In each of them many of the best years of my life lie buried. When I re-entered public life through the doors of Newgate, I found the people dying at the rate of a thousand a day. They were dissolving before the Exterminator; cowering under roofless cabins, fed on chance alms, rotting in workhouses, or stifled in emigrant ships and flung out of them on a foreign soil to mix with the polluted dregs of great cities, and forget the God who made them and the country that bore them; while the English Government looked on with scarcely concealed exultation at the ruin of its ancient and unconquerable Irish enemy. In the first number of the revived *Nation*, I proposed three measures to save the people and restore the certainty of daily bread and shelter, without which national courage or ambition was not to be hoped.

- I. A convention of North and South for Tenant Right. That is to say, an organised political power to stand between the naked people and their destroyers.
- II. An Irish company to purchase land in the Incumbered Estates' Court, and plant it with evicted tenants, who might become Peasant Proprietors on easy terms. That is to say, an immediate and practical remedy for the evil which was depopulating the country.
- III. An Irish party in the British Parliament, who would not accept places or favours, but negotiate public measures. That is to say, a weapon more powerful than an army in the field, to compel immediate concessions.

The six years that ensued have been spent in working out these convictions; always with the aid of better men; but, at least, with a persistence that did not tire or despair. A persistence that gave me the right, at a later period, to demand an organization of dimensions and resources fit for a national contest, or, failing that, my dismissal. Let me briefly review their history: -

- I. Before I was three months out of prison, I had personally visited Mr. LUCAS, in London, Doctor McKNIGHT in Derry, Mr. MAGUIRE in Cork, Doctor CANE and Father O'SHEA in Kilkenny, Mr. SHINE LALOR and Mr. SHEA LALOR, in Kerry, Mr. GODKIN, in England, Mr. T. DILLON, in Mayo, and other friends elsewhere, to debate the feasibility of a Tenant Right movement. Soon after the Tenant Societies sprung up, originating in the generous breast of Father O'SHEA; and next year, the Tenant League was formed and spread with unexampled rapidity over Ireland. The consummation for which the angry soul of SWIFT groaned in despair and the loving heart of DAVIS sighed and laboured, was at last accomplished – North and South were united. Within two months, thirty constituencies had pledged themselves to return only Tenant Right Representatives; the Moderator of the General Assembly and a large number of Presbyterian Ministers, several Bishops,

and the mass of the Catholic clergy, gave their adhesion to the new organisation. I have put into it the almost daily labour of five years of my life, and, in the end, I look around in vain for the men who thronged its ranks and accepted its principles. Not one Presbyterian Minister remains; not one Catholic Bishop is still an actual member; nor one in ten of the priests who aided in its formation. Some of the boldest, indeed, have been silenced by episcopal authority; but the majority have subsided into sullen despondency. A few have gone over to the enemy; in every election lost for the last two years, *quondam* members of the League led or co-operated with its opponents. There is still, undoubtedly, a remnant of unconquerable fidelity. I have never known, and never hope to know, in the world, truer Irishmen or finer human beings than some of the priests and laymen with whom it has been my good fortune to be associated in this moment; but, like the last Irish garrison of Limerick, they are isolated; and powerless, except to maintain their personal independence.

- II. For the creation of a Peasant Proprietary I proposed a plan which had the happiness to commend itself to the highest speculative and practical genius in these countries. MILL and CARLYLE pronounced it good; BRIGHT and COBDEN declared it would work successfully to the end designed. The Press received it with enthusiastic assent. Many of the clergy undertook to aid and promote it. By twelve months' daily toil and endless interviews and negotiations I contrived to assemble a committee of notabilities, who might launch it to the country, with that *eclat* without which one must not presume to serve the material interests of Ireland. But their co-operation proved fatally timid and lukewarm. The suggestion of an Orange Alderman, that it was a project to plant Popish colonies; the speculation of a Catholic Whig, that it might cover some treasonable design; the greed of a political attorney who conspired to make it a milch cow for his partnership, were sufficient to ruin it. I believe in my soul and conscience that, by this time, we would have planted in

every province of Ireland farmer proprietors who might have been models of enterprise, skill, and personal independence; and that the system would have spread like Teetotalism, till it enabled the Irish race at home and abroad to gradually purchase and repossess their country. But who can build upon sand? After I had spent my sweat and soil for fifty weeks piling, as I hoped, granite upon granite, a foul breath sufficed to blow it down like a house of cards.

- III. Of the Irish Party and my subordinate share in it I need scarcely speak. It was a wise and practical experiment which time has abundantly justified. It established as we foretold a POWER which the English minister was compelled to conciliate. It held the balance of parties and was proffered concessions by both. It advanced the cause of which it had charge in two months more than it was advanced in the previous twenty years. If its members were bought by *personal bribes* instead of *public measures* the fault lies not in any unwisdom of the plan but in the criminal folly of those who sheltered the first offenders. To prevent desertion you must flog deserters; but when they were exonerated – when Catholic bishops became their political sponsors – when, added to the wages of treason, there was popular immunity, what wonder that the desertion became universal. The Irish Party commenced with fifty adherents, to-day more than forty (I fear to compute how many more) have gone over bodily or in spirit to the enemy. Some of them sit on the Treasury benches to marshal our opponents and employ the knowledge learned in our ranks to divide and defeat us. And while we were thinned by desertion from within, what help came from without? For three years the country has not sent us a single recruit, from county, city or borough. The archbishop of Dublin who was foremost and loudest to pronounce for the principle of Independent Opposition lends all the weight of his authority to its opponents; a majority of the Irish hierarchy follow in his wake, and we have been disparaged from popular hustings, and in pastoral letters, for

no sin that I know of but because we will *not* sell ourselves to the enemies of our country.

Behold a picture of the Irish struggle for the last five years.

Still one element of power remained incorruptible, and, as it seemed, indestructible – the Irish priesthood. Through them we might hope to repair our losses, and reanimate public opinion. But can we count on them now? In any diocese ruled by a patriot Bishop, ‘yes’; elsewhere, I believe not. A deliberate attempt to fetter their public action has been privately made and openly resisted; and the result does not seem to me satisfactory or hopeful. The boldest of the patriot Priests who were banished from public life, remain banished. Many are panic-stricken by these arbitrary examples. Some who doubt the right and detest the policy of the new discipline lean, nevertheless, to passive obedience; and not a few despair of resistance. The remnant who are among the best priests in this island or in the universal church, with the sanction of a few patriot bishops (whom GOD preserve) will maintain the principle of an ‘unfettered priesthood;’ and I doubt not re-establish it, whenever the triumph of the SPOONERS and CHAMBERSES unites the Church in a common cause. But the bigots will be muzzled till England’s danger is past. An “unfettered priesthood” will only be regained by that agency, when Ireland’s opportunity has vanished, and we are projected into another cycle of helpless despair.

It was here I made my stand. “England’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity.” That point has arrived at which our hopes were to culminate; to shut our eyes upon it is national suicide. The emergency of the Empire is the old and proved epoch of Ireland’s success. With the victories of WASHINGTON came Free Trade and Independence; with the victories of DUMOURIEZ came the first instalment of Catholic liberty; with the victories of TODDLEBEN and LIPRANDI, might come an Irish nation if we stood on our rights like our fathers. If we do not claim and compel them *now*, when, in Heaven’s name, will the fit time come? If we permit this precious opportunity to be bartered away for College charters or sold a bargain for prompt payment by the rank and file of Castle Catholics, under what

conceivable circumstances will a better arrive? The time *is* for winning whatever we are able and determined to have. The Irish cause depends for success only on the Irish people, and that success is easier at this moment than it was for forty years past. If the Tenant League and the Irish Party were betrayed by secret intrigue, the more reason, if we are not to abandon the National contest, to invoke the whole people, and sweep cabals and factions out of their path. Through the long midnight of doubt and preparation, it is good for a hopeful few to keep watch; but, when the hour comes that was promised, it is a jest or a cheat for the few to do duty for the many. Then all is lost, unless in the language of RICHARD SHEIL, “the people stand in a solid square, and the tramp of six millions of men is heard afar off.”

I have not postponed to this hour the attempt to ascertain the disposition of the country. Before and since the opening of the present year, I visited the most important popular districts of Ireland with this view; the result was stated in *The Nation* four months ago.

“One who ought to know whereabouts lie the boldest spirits of Ireland, has long since gone from man to man, and demanded, if Ireland’s opportunity was not coming or come? Did he meet an eager assent, and cheerful offers to share the responsibility and the glory? No; he met apathy or hesitation among most – from some an emphatic negative; from the best disposed demands for indefinite postponement. The latent desire for independence was not wanting; but the destruction of our people had cowed many, the spread of corruption disheartened others; the alienation of the North, the emigration of our youth, the beastly medley of slave-driving and priest-quelling uttered in America in the name of Irish independence – all had produced their share of despair or disgust; but, above all, the fixed belief that England could now employ the powers of the Church to defeat the hopes of the people. Other impediments might be got over. This was the dead lock.”

This was my experience. If I was mistaken, no one was ever readier to be converted to a better belief. If not, my task is done.

It is on these grounds I restore the trust you committed to me. I will vacate my seat at the close of the present month, unless you require further time to select a new candidate; in this respect I await your instructions. I trust you will find one worthy of you, and that you will accept none other. For me I am ashamed to think in how small a measure I have been able to repay your generous kindness. Elected

without one shilling of personal expenditure, never asked for the smallest service outside my public duty, left not only in undisturbed independence of Governments, but without a solitary solicitation for patronage, no representative had ever better reason to be thankful and proud of his constituents.

My older and wider constituency, the readers of *The Nation*, must allow me to address this farewell to them also. Quitting public life, I will quit, at the same time my native country. I cannot look on in dumb inaction at her ruin. I cannot sit down under the *regime* of corruption and terrorism established among us. At eight-and-thirty the desire of being and doing is still too strong, to subside into that desponding lethargy which has been the latter end of almost every honest public man in Ireland since the Union. And I have “given hostages to fortune,” in wife and children, which will tax all my industry, in some region where peace of mind will be less impossible than here. It is not pleasant, indeed, to be torn in manhood from the soil where my affections are rooted and matted in the ashes of our race; and where I hoped to lay my own bones, not unremembered; but there is something still worse, and more intolerable.

I propose to visit Australia, with the intention of making it my home, if the climate promise me better health than I have enjoyed here for some time. At worst, I will see a country full of new and curious interest to me, as the home of a multitude of our own race; though perhaps I may have to seek some sky more genial and tempered. I will not sail till 5th October, in order that all persons having business with me, personal, political, or commercial, may have notice and leisure to transact the same.

My property in *The Nation* will pass into the hands of two young Irishmen, bred up in its doctrines – Messrs. SULLIVAN and CLERY – one of them associated with MAURICE LEYNE in his latest projects, and both eager to serve or suffer in the National cause. The Editorship will remain with my late partner – the comrade and colleague who, since *The Nation* was revived, has shared all my labours, and possessed my entire confidence, JOHN CASHEL HOEY. He has been substantially Editor for three years; and in his hands one of my dearest wishes, that its character may be unalterably

maintained, will be accomplished. May he be the herald of a generation destined to take up anew the hereditary task of our race, and *The Nation* a tripod to preserve the sacred fire. It will be a solace to me to believe that, in many a student's home, in many a workshop, in many a boudoir, and in the cottage of many a laborious priest, it will keep alive along with better memories, some recollection of an old friend, who would not willingly forget them or be wholly forgotten.

And now, farewell. We part, in sorrow, indeed, but not in anger. I have no cause of personal complaint. I have had far more confidence and sympathy from the Irish people than I had any just claim to; and the co-operation always of friends who made life useful and pleasant. In return, if my services were ineffective, at least they were given without fee or reward, not a shilling of the people's money having ever gone into my purse on any pretence; and I think I may add, that while I held a pen in my fingers, whoever put their interests in peril, whether Tribune of the people, Bishop of the church, or Government of the country, I was not a dumb or indifferent spectator.

C. GAVAN DUFFY.

Black Rock,
August 16th, 1855.