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The Land Question

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THE LAND QUESTION.

I am endeavouring to think out some plan of action for our landlords, but find a difficulty in arriving at a single strong leading idea that would apply a rallying point.

[Even if you did, dear L., the grand difficulty would remain, viz., how to wake them up to the pursuit of the single strong leading idea. One idea only is theirs, so far, viz., the annual piteous appeal to Lord Salisbury to lift them out of the gulf, an appeal which comes with the regularity of the crocus, and about the same time. When this annual appeal is a little louder than usual and attracts some attention on the other side of the water the English newspapers write articles about it under such captions as "Wail of the Irish landlords.—Ed.]

What do you think of a series of lectures to be delivered in England by competent lecturers to explain to the English people the nature of the injustice which is being done to us, and the loss to our tradesmen, artisans, labourers, and others, should Parliament, in pursuit of a short-sighted policy, by compulsory purchase virtually exterminate the landed gentry of Ireland?

L.

Dear L.—The same suggestion has been made to me by many both in correspondence and conversation.

I propose to answer all such in what here follows.

Your suggestion is in fact only the re-production of the ironical advice tendered in '99 by Lord Salisbury to that deputation of the L. C. which then waited on him, and craved his kind counsel. Lord S. then told them very frankly that they ought to agitate, and reminded them that interests which did not agitate usually "went to the wall." He meant thereby to convey to their minds a perception of the fact which nearly every one but Irish landlords knew, viz., that he was a mere indicator (he, and his Party) showing the force and the direction of the wind, and that if they wished to influence him they would have to get up a gale, the best way they could. Also he desired them to understand that the annual appeal to his justice, clemency, wisdom, and enlightened patriotism were lost breath and wasted energy. Lord Salisbury is, I believe, a very sensible and sagacious man, and one who feels acutely his ignominious position, nominal ruler of a mighty Empire, yet himself the mere figure-head of a ship, which is no ship, but a mere hulk driven by winds and waves. Do you remember how Thomas Carlyle fifty years ago advised the British aristocracy to clear out of public life altogether? You will find it at the end of "Shooting Niagara: and After."

Well, the landlords' deputation, profoundly impressed by Lord Salisbury's wisdom, hastened back to Ireland; the Convention met, and debated, with a full determination to agitate in some terrible and unexampled manner: but after long and earnest conference perceived that they were not in a position to agitate at all. Instead of taking to the platform, even in England, a very unlikely field of operations for Irish landlords, they wrote strenuous statistical articles for high-class English newspapers and periodicals.

In my County they met in the County town, behind locked doors, and agitated themselves round a fire, for the day was bitter, and drove home in the dusk.

Dear L., pardon my emphasis, but it can't be done, and it won't. The destruction of our resident gentry

certainly inflicts an injury on our artisans and labourers, but the proportion of rent spent in such direct employment of labour is really infinitesimal compared with the whole amount, nearly all of which crosses the Channel as interest on mortgages and to absentee landlords.

The considerations which you suggest are as nothing compared with the obvious and evident interests of the tenant-farmers, who have nearly the whole of the political power of the country in their hands, and the ear and sympathy of the British democracy. Then the British statesman, Conservative or Liberal, leans always in the direction of the strong, and towards that quarter in which votes and influence are seen to abound.

In short, compulsory purchase is coming, and our landlords can't and won't take the platform in the hope of keeping things as they are.

I have before me a letter from a very intelligent man in England who knows the middle class well. He writes: "When their attention is turned in this direction the English people will show your landlords no mercy."

You propose sending lecturers as in '95. No doubt that notion was then discussed by the Convention, and by them dismissed as impracticable: and for good reasons. Paid lecturers lecturing upon a mere Irish controversy between Irish orders concerning matters about which they know and care nothing would not be listened to by the English people. High-placed and known representatives of our landed interest, such as the Duke of Abercorn and the Marquis of Londonderry, might indeed draw audiences, but they and men like them have too much savoir faire to appear on British platforms with such a purpose. Neither will they, nor can they, appear before that democracy and tell them that compulsory purchase on the lines of Mr. T. W. Russell's plan would involve a grievous diminution of their incomes.

Indeed, dear L., it can't be done, and it won't. Man naturally sympathises with the tiller of the soil, he does not at all naturally sympathize with the person who alleges ownership of the soil so tilled, and in that capacity proposes to appropriate a third, or a fourth, or indeed any proposition at all of the crops so raised. The British working man, if his attention is ever seriously directed to the Irish land question will side with our peasant democracy, and to any extent that the latter desire.

Things can't be kept as they are; there must be a change. What change?—Ed.

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