

COERCION IN IRELAND AND ITS RESULTS.

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A Plea for Justice.

By ANNIE BESANT.

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ON the 24th of January, 1881, Mr. Forster, Chief Secretary for Ireland, asked leave to introduce a Bill entrusting the Irish Executive with power to arrest and keep imprisoned any person "suspected of treasonable practices," and any person "suspected of agrarian crime in any proclaimed district." Mr. Forster explained that the proposed Act was not directed against fair agitation for redressal of grievances, but was intended to strike only at those concerned in agrarian outrages. The classes against whom it was to be directed were three in number: 1st. Those who belonged to the old secret societies; 2nd. Those who belonged to new secret societies; 3rd. "Village ruffians." It was alleged that the actors in crimes were often known, but that such was the terror inspired by the outrages that it was impossible to obtain evidence sufficient to lead to their conviction. In the discussions which took place during the debates on the Bill, re-iterated assurances were given that these classes were those really aimed at, that the number of arrests would be small, and that the most scrupulous care should be taken to avoid abuse of the powers asked for. Mr. Bradlaugh spoke strongly against the Bill on its first reading; he said in the course of his speech:—

"No member of the House would, he thought, be found to deny the fact that all kinds of illegal proceedings should be strongly reprobated. The Government, through the right hon. gentleman, said they could make no terms with lawlessness (hear, hear); aye! but while in Ireland criminals were few, the sufferers were many. And they proposed to suspend the constitutional rights of all. Were they sure they were not about to make terms with fear and panic? Terms with the landlord influence and injustice, which had made the misery of the people, out of which

the crime spoken of had grown? It was not asserted that the ordinary law was insufficient for all purposes; what was asserted was that men injured would not prosecute, that evidence could not be obtained to support prosecutions, and that jurymen could not be found to convict. But what did that show? It showed that the national feeling was with the crime (hear, hear)—that is, with one kind of crime, not with all crime; for it was admitted that in respect of non-agrarian crime Ireland stood higher than England did. Why was it that there was one class of crime sheltered by the people of Ireland? It was because the people had come by experience to think that the Government gave them no protection, and that the law afforded them no remedy. They were now, however, instead of being subject to remedial legislation, to be subjected to eighteen months' imprisonment for any crime charged against them, not before a court of law, but before a magistrate, and which charge was sustained by the word of any petty constable. (Hear, hear.) He believed that the right hon. gentleman would take all the precautions in his power in applying this law, but what effectual precautions against wrong-doing could be taken when arbitrary power was brought to bear upon individual liberty? Neither the right hon. gentleman, nor the noble lord at the head of the Irish Government, could personally examine the details of every case. They must trust to others, and these in turn to others, until at last perhaps private malice might strike the one whom this House has stripped of his constitutional right."

Leave was given to introduce the Bill by 164 votes against 19, the minority being smaller than it ought to have been, in consequence of the vote being taken suddenly, while some English Radicals were away for a brief space of rest, after sitting sixteen hours continuously.

When the second reading of the Coercion Bill was moved, Mr. Bradlaugh moved its rejection; he urged:

"Many members of that House were old enough to remember the time when the landlords, encumbered with debt, encouraged resistance to civil law when it was set in motion against themselves. (Hear, hear.) These landlords, who to-day asked for extraordinary powers, had themselves left a bad example to the unfortunate and miserable men who to-day threatened and repeated the bad acts of their superiors. The right hon. gentleman had said that the effect of this terrorism was to prevent injured persons from prosecuting, witnesses from giving evidence, and juries from convicting; but the measure now brought forward would not ensure that persons should prosecute, that witnesses should testify, or juries convict. All it would do would be to give to the Government or to the unfortunate gentleman—and unfortunate indeed would be his position, charged with this duty—who had the right of arresting, to give to him the duty of superseding the conscience of the prosecutor and the

evidence of witnesses; to take the place of all juries, and, on suspicion, to have the power to imprison the person whom he arrested for eighteen months. . . . The right hon. gentleman had told them that the terror was occasioned by two classes—men from the old secret societies, and men belonging to the new ones. Would the House pardon him if he pointed out why the old secret societies existed? They existed because the landlords extorted unjust rents, and compelled their tenants to pay an enormous price for rooms—it was a shame to call them rooms, for he had seen hovels in which hon. members would not kennel their dogs nor stable their horses—rent which it was impossible for them to pay. These unfortunate people had no law to appeal to, nor could they appeal to Parliament, for Parliament was deaf to their appeals. This was not an evil created to-day or by the Land League; it was an evil to which years ago the right hon. gentleman at the head of the Government had directed his attention, and tried to grapple with, but which had baffled him, because his generous efforts had been crippled by the very landlord class now asking for protection by coercive law. What was the result? These men could not appeal to the law; for them the statute had no relief, so they made their own laws and, the courts being shut to them, established their own secret tribunals, secret because illegal. The Prime Minister had made several attempts to remedy this state of things, but the rights of land were valued in another place at a higher rate than the rights of life, and so those efforts had proved useless. . . . It was said that the Act was directed against treason. Was there treason now? From the words that had fallen from the right hon. gentleman there was ground to fear that he thought such to be the case. But, then, Parliament could not act upon what the right hon. gentleman thought. If such was really the case, the evidence ought to be there. He trusted the right hon. gentleman and the Government in every way that a representative could do, but no representative should entrust the constitutional liberties of his fellow-citizens to any Government, except the strongest evidence was placed before him. The Chief Secretary for Ireland had told them that there was matter which it was impossible he could explain—matter possibly of wanton malice, matter, it might be, of actual treason, but for all that matter certainly growing out of wrongs endured.”

Unhappily the Coercion Bill passed into law, and has been in action for the last twelve months. Under it, up to last week, no less than 918 persons have been deprived of their liberty, and 511 were still in custody on April 1. The “reasonable suspicions,” on the ground of which they are or have been detained, are of very various character; of the 511 still in jail 31 are detained on suspicion of having committed murder, most of them as principals. Now the charge of murder is not one which should be kept

hanging over a man's head; clearly, suspected murderers should be publicly tried, and either convicted or acquitted. Are these supposed murderers to be let loose on society in September next, never, if guilty, to be punished, and never, if innocent of the horrible crime, to have a chance of proving their innocence, and purging themselves of so fearful a suspicion? Reasonable suspicion of having attempted to murder, or to do grievous bodily harm, or of having committed assaults, is charged against fifty-seven persons, while several others are charged with firing into or attacking dwelling-houses. There are a few cases of arson, and two or three of maiming cattle. But the vast majority are detained on reasonable suspicion of having been concerned in intimidation, no less than 344 persons being kept in jail on this very vague charge. Mr. Parnell is one of this number, but he is also suspected of having "been guilty, as principal, of treasonable practices." Mr. O'Kelly is detained on the same ground, but Mr. Dillon is only charged with intimidation. If Mr. Parnell and Mr. O'Kelly have been guilty of treasonable practices, why are they not put on their trial? Putting on one side for the moment the people suspected of intimidation, the whole of the other prisoners have a right to demand that they shall at once be tried for the offences alleged against them. To imprison men on a vague charge of suspicion of intimidation is to commit a cruel injustice; if there is solid evidence that they have committed this offence, let them be tried. If there is none, let them be set free. Four hundred and seven persons have been arrested under this Act and have been liberated. Were they guilty or not of any crime? If yes, why are they set free untried? If no, why has a heavy punishment been inflicted on them? They have been torn from their homes, their farms have in many cases remained untilled, for to till the farm of a "suspect" was to incur suspicion; their businesses have in some cases been ruined by their absence. These heavy penalties should be inflicted on no one without open trial, without public judgment. Can Mr. Forster be sure that every one of the 918 persons arrested is a criminal? If one of them should be innocent, should be a victim of private malice, of false witness boldly given because secrecy ensured safety to the liar—if only one of these be wrongly suspected, is not a very terrible crime being committed in the punishment inflicted, and are not bad citizens being made by wrong committed under sanction of the law?

Do the men lying in jail come within the classes specified as those against which the Act was to be directed? Mr. Parnell, Mr. Dillon, Mr. O'Kelly, cannot fairly be described as "village ruffians," and if two of them have been guilty of treasonable practices no Coercion Act was needed for their arrest. If Englishmen read that in Russia, in Turkey, in Spain, 918 persons had been arrested during twelve months on suspicion, that the Government neither put them on their trial nor released them, a very torrent of righteous indignation would be poured on the head of the peccant rulers. Even in Russia they at least try their Nihilists; they do not punish them "on suspicion" without trial. However abandoned the criminal, he should have justice. If some foreign State shut up our citizens on some suspicion of crime, refusing to try them, refusing to release them, Englishmen would go mad with fury, and no minister would keep his place for a month who did not insist on justice being done. Unhappily, English people are very quick to see the wrongfulness of their neighbors' tyranny, but are remarkably dense as to the wickedness of their own.

Putting aside the bad nature of the Coercion Act, it may be well to note that it has been a most complete failure. Murder is far more frequent than it was; the most odious and revolting outrages are committed; neither man nor woman, rich nor poor, is safe from the blow of the assassin. The "village ruffians" appear to have multiplied, and the criminals, who are making the name of Ireland shameful in the eyes of the world, go on their way unscathed.

The Coercion Act is not the only coercive measure now being largely used in Ireland. By 34 Edw. III., c. 1, justices of the peace are empowered to "bind over to the good behavior" "all them that be not of good fame." This statute is being utilised in the most cruel way in Ireland, more especially against women. If the accused person is unable, or refuses to enter into recognisances, the justices can imprison. Now, it must be remembered that the justices belong to the landlord class, that the persons arraigned before them belong to the class now struggling to gain the right to live, and the "justice" meted out will be readily understood. Thus, the other day, they ordered a married woman, Mrs. Moore, to enter into recognisances, and committed her in default. A married woman is legally incapable of entering into recognisances, and Mrs. Moore was imprisoned because her legal incapacity made it impos-

sible for her to give the required sureties. Miss Reynolds was the first lady imprisoned under this most evil law, which, in Ireland, puts the liberty of the workers at the mercy of persecuting landlords. She was prosecuted for advising a man not to pay his rent. I am informed that the following are the facts of the case: Patrick Murphy lived in a cottage bought by his father from the man who built it; it stood on a plot of grass in the middle of cross-roads, and no rent and no taxes were paid for it during the more than twenty-one years since it came into the Murphys' hands. Rent for three years for this cottage was suddenly claimed by a landlord from whom Murphy held other land, and to whom he was in debt. Murphy was advised that if he paid it, he would lose the right acquired by his long and undisturbed possession. Miss Reynolds apparently counselled him not to pay under these circumstances; she was sent to jail, and Murphy was turned out of his house.

Miss O'Carroll and Miss Curtis were sent to prison for a month, charged with belonging to an illegal association, the Ladies' Land League. This conviction was quashed on an informality on the day that their sentence expired.

Miss McCormick was sentenced by Major Lloyd—on the evidence of a policeman that he believed she had been going about inciting the people to discontent—to three months imprisonment in default of bail. The judges, on application, held that Miss McCormick's admission that she was a member of the Ladies' Land League was a proof of the truth of the charges. My informant complains that "in Ireland the fact of her being a member of the Ladies' Land League was held to be a proof of her criminality, while in England, in the House of Commons, the Attorney-General cited the fact of her imprisonment as a proof of the criminality of the League."

Eugene Sullivan was accused by an "Emergency man" of putting pins in his potatoes; Sullivan was arrested, but there was no proof of the charge offered; the man then said he went in fear of his life, the only reason therefor being that when he met Sullivan the latter used to grin and say "Three cheers for Parnell." For this crime Sullivan was bound over in bail so heavy that he had to go to jail (for six months).

Miss O'Connor is now in prison at Mullingar. This young lady—the sister of Mr. T. P. O'Connor, M.P.—is only twenty years of age, and suffers from weakness of the lungs.

She is imprisoned on the evidence of a constable, who swore that he heard her tell the people to pay no rent until the suspects were released. On cross-examination, however, he swore that she told them to come to a settlement with the landlord if he would take what was a fair rent; that she had strongly denounced outrages, quoting O'Connell's words, that "he who commits a crime gives strength to the enemy." Surely this poor young delicate girl, so young, moved by the misery around her to protest, and trying to restrain the starving from desperate deeds, ought not to be left in jail. What sort of Government is it in Ireland that needs such acts as these to be done in its support?

Imprisonment under this vile statute of Edward III. is of a far more cruel character than under the Coercion Act. The prisoners spend twenty-two hours out of the twenty-four in their cells, and during the two hours' exercise are not allowed to speak to each other. Imprisonment can be avoided by entering into heavy recognisances, but the difficulty is that the same justices who condemn on suspicion, retreat the recognisances on suspicion.

I have spoken of one class of outrages committed in Ireland, but the outrages committed by the landlord order must also come in for condemnation. During the quarter ending March 31st, 7,020 persons have been evicted. Of these, 3,050 persons have been re-admitted as care-takers, that is, they can be turned out again at any moment, and seventy-eight have been re-admitted as tenants. Thus, during the last three months, the landlords have finally turned out from their homes, 3,892 persons. The number of evictions in comparatively peaceful Ulster is higher than in the other provinces. I never shrink from denouncing the horrible murders and mutilations committed in Ireland, but horror of crime should not deter us from seeking its cause. The evictions are the seeds which grow up into agrarian outrages, and justice will lay on the head of Irish landlords the heavier share of the guilt of Irish crimes.

Is it hopeless to appeal to the Government to return to the paths of constitutional liberty in Ireland? Let them try their prisoners, and deal out justice; Ireland asks no more. She does not desire that murders should go unpunished; bring to open trial the men now imprisoned on suspicion of having committed murder. She does not approve of midnight assault, brutal injury, atrocious wounding, malicious arson; bring out the men charged with these

wicked deeds; try them and condemn them to heaviest legal punishment if their guilt be proved. Set free the 344 charged with intimidation only; in such a struggle as that between the landlords and the tenants of Ireland, the intimidation is not all on one side, and unless the landlords are put on their trial for their share of it, those who took the tenants' side may well go free. The working of the Land Act has revealed some of the cruel wrongs done by the landlords, the exorbitant rents wrung by threat from the helpless and often starving tenants; surely some latitude should be allowed to men fighting before the Land Act against the wickedness which the Land Act is trying to prevent. For the "reasonable practices"—judgment is harder; I suppose every Government has the right of defending itself against treason, but the English are always very lenient in their judgment of foreign political offenders, nay, even honor them as heroes when stirred to their treason by tyranny. The misery of Ireland is the cause of her disaffection. Let England be generous, and let the remedial measure have fair play, by giving bill of indemnity for the past, and "starting clear." Mr. Parnell's reasonable practices cannot be so terribly dangerous to the State, when he is let out on parole for a fortnight to attend a funeral. But no chance is given for the healing measures to cure the sore of Irish disaffection, until not only are the prisoners in Ireland set at liberty, but until brave, unfortunate Michael Davitt stands once more a free man on Irish soil.

PRICE ONE PENNY.