

This is your rock of strength. Go on, my brother, and prosper, till Ireland and the whole earth be converted to your holy principle of temperance. I am glad that I have a spark of the temperance fire that glows in your heart; and may I have your prayers and your blessing, and you shall continue to have that of, my dear sir,

Your faithful but unworthy  
Brother and fellow-labourer,  
HENRY GWYTHER,  
Vicar of Yardley

## CHAPTER XXVI.

The Famine—Its Effects and its Causes—Ireland before the Famine—The Blights of 1845 and 1846—Father Mathew's Correspondence with the Government—Timely Appeal—The Famine setting in.

TOO soon, alas! arose a state of things which, while materially influencing the Temperance movement, brought about a social revolution of the greatest magnitude, and the gravest results. The history of the Irish Famine is yet to be written; and no event of modern times more requires an able and impartial pen than that terrible calamity, which filled the land with horrors for which a parallel can only be found in the pages of Boccaccio or De Foe—which counted its victims by hundreds of thousands—which originated an emigration that has not yet exhausted the strength of its fatal current—which caused twenty-three millions' worth of property to change hands, called into existence a new race of proprietors, and swept into poverty, banishment, and oblivion, many a once opulent family, and erased from the bead-roll of the Irish gentry many a proud and distinguished name. That history is yet to be written, and will be best written when time shall have brought with it a more impartial spirit and a cooler judgement than exist at this moment, while the memory is still too vivid, and the sympathy too keen, for a task so grave and so important. Fortunately for the writer of this biography, his duty compels him to treat that terrible event merely as an episode in the history of Father Mathew's career, and as a means of exhibiting, in a more striking manner, a character which the misfortunes of

the country, and the sufferings of its people, developed into a still brighter and purer radiance.

To understand properly the condition of Ireland immediately preceding the famine, one has but to turn to the Report of the Devon Commission, which was appointed in December 1843, and prosecuted its enquiries in every part of the country during the subsequent year; and in its pages will be seen more than sufficient evidence to prove to what extent misery and wretchedness had prepared the way for the ravages of blight and plague. A single passage, descriptive of the condition of the labouring class, will suffice for the present purpose:—

A reference to the evidence of most of the witnesses, will show that the agricultural labourer of Ireland continues to suffer the greatest privations and hardships; that he continues to depend upon casual and precarious employment for subsistence; that he is still badly housed, badly fed, badly clothed, and badly paid for his labour. Our personal experience and observation, during our inquiry, has afforded us a melancholy confirmation of these statements; and we cannot forbear expressing our strong sense of the patient endurance which the labouring classes have generally exhibited, under sufferings greater, we believe, than the people of any other country in Europe have to sustain.

Upon the ill-paid labour of his hands, and the produce of a patch of potato ground, which he rented at a high rate, or for which he mortgaged a considerable portion of his working days, the Irish labourer exclusively existed. This patch of ground was either let to him manured and planted, by the farmer, at an enormous rent; or, out of the proceeds of his own labour, he prepared and planted it himself. If the crop turned out abundant, everything went well with the poor labourer: it fed himself and his family, and it fed his pig and his poultry; it freed him from debt and liability, and it enabled him to purchase, in the nearest town or village, those necessaries which were required by his condition in life. But if the crop—the one and only crop—failed him, then misery, and debt, and hunger, and sickness, were the lot of the Irish agricultural labourer.

The class above the labourer—namely, the small farmers, holding a few acres of land on a tenancy at will—were but little better off than those who were ‘badly housed, badly fed, and badly clothed.’ This class had no capital other than their own labour, or that of a miserable dependent, to whom they let out a patch of ground in con-acre, for a potato garden; and having neither lease, nor security of any kind, to protect the fruits of their industry, the small farmers were generally satisfied with raising a scanty crop from the soil, and content with the poorest fare, and the meanest dwelling—the principal result of their hard toil being absorbed in the rent, which was too often exorbitant in amount. A large proportion of this class of small farmers held, not directly from the landlord of the estate, but under middlemen, who, having obtained long leases at easy rents, lived as gentlemen upon the toil of the wretched serfs whom they called their tenants, and among whom the land was cut up into small holdings.

The landlords of Ireland were then—just preceding the famine—suffering as well for the sins of their predecessors as from their own extravagance. As a rule, the landed property of Ireland was crushed under an accumulated load of debt and encumbrance; and many of the finest estates in the country were well-nigh ruined, and almost laid waste, by the destructive litigation and still more destructive management of the Court of Chancery.

Thus there was an embarrassed gentry, a harassed or discouraged tenantry, and a labouring population whose very existence depended upon the chances of the seasons, and the success or failure of a delicate and susceptible tubor. Manufacturing industry was limited to a few counties, and a few large towns in these; and commerce did not extend its beneficial influence beyond the sea-board, principally that facing the western shores of England. No country, in fact, could be worse prepared to meet the coming danger, or ride out

the storm which so soon darkened the heavens. And when the storm broke forth in its fury, helplessly the poor ship laboured in the trough of the angry sea, no vigorous hand at the helm, and water entering at every yawning seam.

From 1817 to 1839, there had been repeated failures of the potato crop in Ireland, some partial, and some more general in their destruction; and each failure was attended with the invariable results—famine and pestilence. Those whom the hunger spared the typhus smote, and the red hue of the rural graveyard gave fatal evidence of the consequences of a potato blight. In 1822, an abundant harvest was gathered in and stored; but the potato rotted in the pits, on account of the wetness of the growing season, and it was not until an advanced period of the year that the unhappy people were conscious of the calamity that had befallen them. The most energetic efforts were made to mitigate the distress, which was felt in its worst form in the provinces of Munster and Connaught. Large subscriptions were raised, and local committees formed, throughout Ireland; and the people of England, whose liveliest sympathy was excited by the sufferings of their Irish brethren, raised a sum of nearly 200,000*l.* for their relief. Of the 44,000*l.* then raised in Ireland, 41,000*l.* were subscribed in the distressed provinces of Munster and Connaught, and but 3,000*l.* in Ulster and Leinster, which had escaped the calamity. The entire amount, either voted by Parliament, for public works or other modes of relief, or raised by individual subscription, was somewhat over 600,000*l.*

In 1832, severe distress was felt in Galway, Mayo, and Donegal, from a partial failure of the potato the year before, the result of violent storms and heavy rains. In this instance, private benevolence, partly assisted by government aid, was sufficient to meet the necessity; and a plentiful harvest soon obliterated the traces of local suffering. England contributed 74,410*l.* to the relief of Ireland on this occasion: and Ireland

raised, by voluntary effort, the sum of 30,000*l.* The Government advanced 40,000*l.*, which was partly expended in public works, and partly in the purchase and distribution of food.

On occasions subsequent to 1831, and previous to 1845, the potato partially failed, but not to any extent requiring notice.

The blight, which was the precursor, but not the actual cause, of the famine, first appeared in 1845, in the autumn of that year. It had appeared the previous year in North America, and again in 1845 and 1846—its second appearance being the most destructive to the plant. The disease manifested itself in Ireland in the late crop, the early crop having been comparatively untouched. Late in the autumn, it was found that the potato was rotting; and among the first to apprise the Government of the fact was Father Mathew, whose frequent journeys through all parts of the country rendered him thoroughly acquainted with its condition. Mr. Richard Pennefather, the then Under Secretary in Dublin Castle, gratefully thanked him for the information which he afforded, and the suggestions which he made. The announcement of this calamity excited considerable apprehension, and the Government appointed a Commission to enquire into and report upon the causes and extent of the disease. Dr. Playfair and Mr. Lindley specially reported, on the 15th of November 1845, 'on the present scarcity of the potato crop, and on the prospect of the approaching scarcity.' They say:—

We can come to no other conclusion than that *one half* of the actual potato crop of Ireland is either destroyed, or remains in a state unfit for the food of man. We moreover feel it our duty to apprise you, that we fear this to be a low estimate.

The Commissioners of Enquiry, in their Report, dated the 20th of January 1846, fully corroborate this statement.

It appears (they say), from undoubted authority, that of thirty-two counties, not one has escaped failure in the potato crop; of 130 Poor Law Unions, not one is exempt. . . .

The poor-houses will, without doubt, be found a most important means of relief, and we consider it a most providential circumstance, that such an extensive resource is available against a calamity more widely extended, and more serious in its nature, than any that has affected the Irish people since the year 1817.

In the end of November 1845, the ovens in the naval dock-yards were set at work, making biscuit for storing, to be used in case of necessity; and in the following month the Government arranged with Messrs. Baring for a supply of Indian corn and meal, to the extent of 100,000*l.*, to be shipped from the United States, and transmitted to Cork, there to be kept, as in a central depôt. The fact of this order having been given was kept secret from the trade as long as possible.

Father Mathew was met, in the course of his mission, by an officer of the Government, who obtained from him much valuable information, as the following extract from that official letter will show:—

COMMISSARY GENERAL HEWETSON TO MR. TREVELYAN.

Cork: Jan. 10, 1846

I have passed through several counties, and travelled with some intelligent men, both landlords and farmers, and with Father Mathew from Clonmel; they estimate the loss by disease as one-third of the potato crop. Father Mathew, who has been travelling through the country for the last four months, said he hoped the majority of the people would yet be able to hold a sufficient number of good potatoes for seed; but it is impossible to judge, at present, how far they will turn out in the pits. . . . Father Mathew, who is well acquainted with the country and the habits of the lower orders, gave me a good deal of interesting information, and among other things, touching the working of the Poor Law Unions. . . . The father looked upon me as a gentleman travelling on his own affairs, seeking, at the same time, information as a stranger.

Commissary Hewetson was stationed in Cork, and was thenceforward in frequent communication with Father Mathew. Writing on the 24th of February, 1846, he says:—

Father Mathew has been with me to-day. I gave him your letter to read; of course he felt gratified by your remarks. He fully agrees with me, that the meal, *once* ground, with the light corn sifted, according to a sample I sent you, is the proper meal for the classes who need it.

Fortunately, the grain crop of 1845 was unusually abundant; and though a considerable proportion of the potato crop was destroyed, there still remained enough to last the people for some time. So that, although the distress was severe in many localities, it in no instance assumed the dreadful features which were soon to be almost universal throughout the country. A blight, however partial in its character, was far from being a fortunate preparation for the entire destruction of the principal food of a nation.

The Irish are a sanguine and a devout people; and implicit trust in the mercy of Providence is one of the beautiful forms in which their piety is manifested. Not that they, in this instance, blindly relied upon Providence, without adopting every human means of endeavouring to secure success in their industry; for the partial failure of 1845 only incited the people of Ireland to make greater efforts to till, and sow, and plant, for the harvest of 1846. How terribly their hopes were disappointed, we may best describe in the affecting words of Father Mathew, who thus writes to the Secretary of the Treasury, Mr. (now Sir Charles) Trevelyan:—

REV. THEOBALD MATHEW TO MR. TREVELYAN.

Cork: August 7, 1846.

I am well aware of the deep solicitude you felt for our destitute people, and your arduous exertions to preserve them from the calamitous effects of the destruction of the potato crop last season. Complete success has crowned your efforts. Famine would have desolated the unhappy country were it not for your wise precautions.

Divine Providence, in its inscrutable ways, has again poured out upon us the vial of its wrath. A blast more destructive than the simoom of the desert, has passed over the land, and the hopes of the poor potato cultivators are totally blighted, and the food of a whole nation has perished. On the 27th of last month I passed from Cork

to Dublin, and this doomed plant bloomed in all the luxuriance of an abundant harvest. Returning on the 3rd instant, I beheld, with sorrow, one wide waste of putrefying vegetation. In many places the wretched people were seated on the fences of their decaying gardens, wringing their hands, and wailing bitterly the destruction that had left them foodless.

It is not to harrow your feelings, dear Mr. Trevelyan, I tell this tale of woe. No, but to excite your sympathy in behalf of our miserable peasantry. It is rumoured that the capitalists in the corn and flour trade are endeavouring to induce Government not to protect the people from famine, but to leave them at their mercy. I consider this a cruel and unjustifiable interference. The gentlemen of the trade have nothing to do with Indian corn; it is, I may say, a creation of the Government, a new article of food wisely introduced for the preservation and amelioration of the people of Ireland. Insidious efforts were even made to prejudice the people against this new food. Thank God, they were in vain, and it is now a favourite diet; and ten thousand blessings are hourly invoked on the heads of the benefactors who saved the miserable from perishing.

I am well aware of the vast expenditure incurred in providing Indian meal as a substitute for the potato, but I humbly suggest a cheaper and more simple plan. I have already laid it before Mr. Reddington, our excellent Under Secretary. If Government would purchase in America, and lay up in stores in the several sea-ports of Ireland, a supply of Indian corn, unground, and sell it at first cost to all who will purchase it, it would be soon bought up by the country millers and farmers, and the unholy hopes of the corn speculators and flour factors would be completely frustrated. . . . I am so unhappy at the prospect before us, and so horror-struck by the apprehension of our destitute people falling into the ruthless hands of the corn and flour traders, that I risk becoming troublesome rather than not lay my humble opinions before you.

I earnestly entreat of you to look with compassion on the poor of this country, and to exert your justly powerful influence to save them from unutterable wretchedness.

Not only was the potato crop utterly destroyed, but oats and barley were deficient, and wheat was a barely average crop.

In subsequent letters, during the same month, Father Mathew urged his views upon the Government, and pleaded

in moving accents for his myriad clients, who knew not that the good man who had devoted so many years of his life to rescue them from the evils of intemperance, was now employing his well-earned influence to try and save them from the horrors of impending famine. The letters, of which the following are extracts, were addressed to the same official:—

Cork: August 22, 1846.

. . . . I unqualifiedly assent to your opinions, and hope they will become the rule of action. In defiance of the sophistry with which it is attempted to lull the Government into a false security, I would not entrust our—soon to be foodless—millions to affected sympathy. Desperate cases demand desperate remedies. More than 2,000,000 acres of potatoes, valued on the average at 20*l.* the acre, are irrevocably lost; besides, the unhappy cultivators are all in debt to the small country usurers, the loan funds, or the cruel sellers on time of seed potatoes and seed corn, at a profit of cent. per cent. I hail with delight the humane, the admirable measures for relief announced by my Lord John Russell; they have given universal satisfaction. But of what avail will all this be, unless the wise precautions of Government will enable the toiling workman, after exhausting his vigour during a long day to earn a shilling, to purchase with that shilling a sufficiency of daily food for his generally large and helpless family? The bonds of blood and affinity, dissoluble by death alone, associate in the cabins of the Irish peasantry, not only the husband, wife, and children, but the aged parents of the married couple, and their destitute relatives, even to the third and fourth degree of kindred. God forbid that political economists should dissolve these ties! should violate these beautiful charities of nature and the Gospel. I have often found my heart throb with delight when I beheld three or four generations seated around the humble board and blazing hearth; and I offered a silent prayer to the great Father of all, that the gloomy gates of the workhouse should never separate those whom such tender social chains so fondly linked together.

Cork: August 25, 1846.

This country is in an awful position, and no one can tell what the result will be. For the sake of our common humanity, I anxiously hope that Her Most Gracious Majesty's Government will adopt the wise precaution of providing as large a supply as possible of Indian

corn, to protect the wretched people against famine and pestilence. With Indian meal at a penny per pound, we could, with the Divine blessing, set both the one and the other at defiance. At the present price of Indian corn, the Government loss would be trifling.

In a letter of the 30th of September, Father Mathew justly takes credit for the effect which the spread of temperance had in maintaining order and tranquillity under circumstances most likely to lead to disturbance and outrage :—

Cork : September 30, 1846.

The measures of Government to provide remunerative employment are above all praise, yet have not been accepted with gratitude. The treasury minute directing that the rate of wages should be lower than that paid by the farmers, has afforded a pretext for much discontent. But no rate of wages will save the people from extreme distress, unless the price of provisions be kept down. A shilling a day, or even one and sixpence, is nothing to a poor man with a large family, if he is obliged to pay twopence per pound for Indian meal. At present it nearly averages that price in the country districts. If I may presume to give an opinion, it appears to me to be of more importance to keep down the price of Indian or other meal, than to provide labour. There are so many opinions as to the amount of blighted potatoes, and consequently of the required quantity of corn as a substitute, it would be of advantage to ascertain the number of acres that were under that crop throughout Ireland. In one week the constabulary force could supply the most accurate information on that important subject.

It is a fact, and you are not to attribute my alluding to it to vanity, that the late provision riots have occurred in the districts in which the temperance movement has not been encouraged. Our people are as harmless in their meetings as flocks of sheep, unless when inflamed and maddened by intoxicating drink. If I were at liberty to exert myself, as heretofore, no part of Ireland would remain unvisited ; but the unavoidable expenses of such a mighty reformation are now an insurmountable obstacle. Were it not for the temperate habits of the greater portion of the people of Ireland, our unhappy country would be before now one wide scene of tumult and bloodshed. Thank God, temperance is now based on such a firm foundation, nothing can weaken its stability ! Intemperance, with the Divine assistance, will never again be the national sin of the Irish people.

If possible, dear Mr. Trevelyan, *have the markets kept down*, and thus save from woe unutterable our destitute population.

In the following timely appeal, Father Mathew appears more in his character of the temperance leader, interposing to protect the most helpless of his followers from a snare of the worst description :—

REV. THEOBALD MATHEW TO MR. TREVELYAN.

Cork : November 20, 1846.

Concluding that you now enjoy a little relaxation of your excessive labour, I presume to address you on a subject of, in my estimation, the highest importance. I am not called upon to give an opinion as to the utility of the public works now in progress ; necessity gave them birth, and they must be executed. But it afflicted me deeply to find the benevolent intentions of Government frustrated, and the money so abundantly distributed made a source of demoralisation and intemperance. Wherever these benevolent works are commenced, public-houses are immediately opened, the magistrates, with a culpable facility, granting licences.

The overseers and pay clerks generally hold their offices in these pestiferous erections ; even some of these officers have a pecuniary interest in those establishments.

It often happens that the entire body of labourers, after receiving payment, instead of buying provisions for their famishing families, consume the greater part in the purchase of intoxicating drink.

The same deplorable abuse takes place on the different railway lines.

As I have the honour to address you, I feel pleasure in stating that the non-interference of Government in the purchase of corn, though productive of much suffering, has eventuated in an abundant supply of grain. Prices are rapidly declining ; and I confidently hope that our population will enjoy a comfortable and a comparatively happy Christmas.

If Indian meal can be had by the poor for a penny a pound, all danger of famine would be at an end.

We still follow Father Mathew, whose letters, assuming darker colours as he proceeds, will afford the reader an idea of the deepening horrors of the famine, which had now really set in. In the next month he thus writes :—

THE REV. T. MATHEW TO MR. TREVELYAN.

Cork: December 16, 1846.

Since last I had the honour to address you, I have been in several parts of this wretched country, remote from and near to Cork. I am grieved to be obliged to inform you that the distress is universal, though the people are more destitute in some districts than in others. Where the rural population is dense, and was accustomed to emigrate during the harvest to other parts of the empire, to reap corn and dig potatoes, no understanding can conceive, no tongue express, the misery that prevails. The money earned during the autumn enabled these 'spalpeens,' as they are called, to pay the rent of their potato gardens, and supply themselves and families with clothes and other necessaries. This resource has utterly failed, as well as their own stock of provisions, and they are now wholly dependent for their means of existence on Public Works.

The amount of loss sustained by the peasant whose acre of potatoes has been blighted, has not been sufficiently estimated. Bread stuffs to the value of 30*l.* would not supply the loss. . . .

The present exorbitant price of bread stuffs, especially Indian corn, places sufficient food beyond the great bulk of the population. *Men, women, and children, are gradually wasting away. They fill their stomachs with cabbage leaves, turnip-tops, &c. &c., to appease the cravings of hunger.* There are at this moment more than five thousand half-starved wretched beings, from the country, begging in the streets of Cork. *When utterly exhausted, they crawl to the work-house to die.* The average of deaths in this Union is over a hundred a week. . . . I deeply regret the total abandonment of the people to corn and flour dealers. They charge 50 to 100 per cent. profit. Cargoes of maize are purchased before their arrival, and are sold like railway shares, passing through different hands before they are ground and sold to the poor.

We are establishing soup shops in all parts of the city, to supply the poor with nutritious and cheap cooked food. •

After this long and painful detail, allow me, honoured dear sir, to thank you for your successful interference with respect to the temptations held out to the labourers on the public works. When I assure you that the few lines you addressed to the Board of Works accomplished more good than if I had written volumes on the subject, you will pardon me for having added to your multitudinous and most laborious duties.

Towards the close of the year 1846, the condition of the

people throughout the country was becoming frightful, and no doubt could be any longer entertained, even by the most sceptical, that a calamity unparalleled in its magnitude had befallen the people. Death was already striking down its victims in every direction, and masses of the wretched peasantry were flinging themselves into the cities and large towns, in the desperate hope that there food was to be found. And as they fled from their desolate homes, they carried with them, in their miserable clothing, if such it might be called, the infection of disease and the seeds of death. A few instances of the state of things in the more remote districts of the county Cork, in the beginning of December 1846, will prepare the reader for the appalling horrors of 1847.

In the neighbourhood of Beerhaven, a gentleman visited several cabins, in which he saw their famishing and despairing occupants stretched on beds of damp and broken straw, abandoned by all hope, and bereft of all energy. Their eyes were closed, and their voices feeble and tremulous. He besought them to rise, offered them money, spoke to them cheerily, and endeavoured to rouse them to some exertion; but in vain. Theirs was a mental and bodily prostration beyond human aid, and they continued to lie still and apathetic, evidently welcoming the death whose shadows were fast closing around them.

In Crookhaven, the daily average of deaths was from ten to twelve; and as early as the first Sunday in December, a collection was made to purchase a public bier, on which to take the coffinless dead to the grave—the means to provide coffins having been utterly exhausted in that locality.

In Skibbereen numerous cases occurred, in November and December 1846, of the dead being kept for several days over ground, on account of the want of coffins; and even at so early a period, there were instances of the dead being consigned to the grave in the rags in which they died. Ere

long, the name of Skibbereen became the representative of the worst horrors of the Famine. That desolate district was one of the longest to suffer, and the slowest to recover, for in none other was there a greater destruction of human life. Throughout the entire west of the county Cork, it was a common occurrence to see from ten to a dozen funerals in the course of the day, during the close of 1846.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

The Society of Friends—Their Reports on the Condition of the Country and State of the People—Frightful Mortality.

THE Society of Friends in Ireland commenced their beneficent labours in December, 1846, and sought the cooperation of their brethren in Great Britain and throughout the United States. Their appeal was attended with the best results in both cases, but with extraordinary success in the United States. The account of their operations is recorded in a most interesting volume, published in 1852, the Report being from the able pen of Mr. Jonathan Pim. From the Appendix, which contains a number of highly valuable documents, I shall select some extracts, which will exhibit, in simple and unexaggerated language, the sad condition to which the mass of the population was reduced.

The Friends in London deputed certain members of their body to visit the distressed districts of Ireland, and to report upon the actual state of things in that country. Joseph Crosfield, writing from Roscommon on the 3rd of December, 1846, says:—

. . . The total number receiving pay from Government in the county of Roscommon is not less than 40,000. Many of these people rent land from one to five or six acres each; but from their crops of potatoes having failed, they are in no better condition than the common labourers. The price of provisions is extremely high in this part of the country, the poor paying 2s. 9d. per stone of 14 lbs. for meal, and, when they buy it in smaller quantities, 3s. 4d. per stone for it; so that a man who has a wife and family of five or six children to support out of 8d. per day, is scarcely removed from starvation.

From Boyle he writes on the 5th of the same month:—