

Irish News.

OUR IRISH LETTER.

(From our own correspondent.)

Dublin, October 3.

Of course you have read, until you are weary, of the proposed Bill for a new Irish Agricultural Board which shall prove almost as great a boon and a blessing to Irishmen as the Pickwick, the Owl and the Waverly Pens to humanity in general. I have myself read about the Bill and its untiring promotor, the Hon. Horace Plunkett, whose whole heart and soul are so wrapped up in the welfare of the Irish farmer that in speaking and writing about his beloved Agricultural Board he forgets to mention that he is to be at the head of it, with a salary of £2,000 per annum, and that every blessed project he and his Anglo-Irish co-Boarders have ever yet projected goes ten for the good of the promoters and (sometimes) one for that of the Irish farmer.

This may sound like very presumptuous laying down of the law, but I happen to know what I am talking about and to have drawn my convictions, not from Agricultural Experts, who generally draw their knowledge from encyclopedias, but from commonplace, yet practical workers in the North, South, East and West of Ireland, and from men of every rank who understand the real needs of the agriculturist and who have his good at heart. Mr. Horace Plunkett is in private life an amiable and a very gentlemanly man, so pleasing in manner that, as I have heard said of him, he could wheedle the birds off the bushes. He has, in fact, won over to his views some clever men, even a few amongst the Catholic clergy of Ireland, one of whom has placed his eloquence and a gifted pen at Mr. Plunkett's command, and has done him invaluable service. But, all the same, those who personally know Mr. Plunkett and his friends and their real motives and inclinations, augur but little good and much ill to the Irish farmer from the passing of the new Bill. It confers dangerous powers, it gives the control of large sums of Irish money to men not one in twenty of whom would care a fig if every Irishman in the land were Cromwellised to-morrow.

Take one item, to show the manner of working up and paying the way for what we are told is to be a State-aided Board, empowered to spend large sums in teaching and laying down laws for the improvement and development of our agriculture, Ireland being, for the most part, intended by nature for an agricultural country.

For the past two years or so, Mr. Horace Plunkett has run and subsidised a newspaper which professes to be a farmers' organ, teaching, enlightening and advising our benighted country folk, who, be it observed in passing, have for many generations succeeded not alone in knocking out of the land a more or less scanty living for themselves, but in supporting in luxury and unlimited extravagance their alien landlords, men who often vie with Royalty themselves in the magnificence of their surroundings, who toil not, neither do they spin, but, my word, they lash on the Irish farmers to be their Providence. It is also a fact, proved by recently published statistics, that these same unenlightened peasants produce far larger crops, acre for acre, than do the English farmers. Well, if these Irish farmers were so utterly ignorant as the Hon. Horace Plunkett and Co. would have the world believe, how could they have achieved these results? Let your New Zealand farmers who own rent-free farms in a comparatively new country, and who have no rack-renting landlord over them, yet find it hard enough to make both ends meet, solve the question, if they can. Now, to my certain knowledge, the new teachers who, through the columns of Mr. Plunkett's agricultural journal, are instructing our farmers how to grow their corn and to feed their cattle; our hen-wives how many eggs each hen must lay per year or — 'off with her head'; our boys and girls how not to walk in their father's footsteps; these teachers are, for the most part, city reared and university reared men, who know nothing whatever of country matters. They can talk and write glibly enough, but as for knowing heavy land from light, a bean field from a barley field, a hay-rick from a stook of oats, a plough from a harrow, a hawk from a hen—why, they could no more tell the difference between these than they could tell whether the white goose or the grey goose was the gander. Yet, in a fine Oxford-bred superior tone, they talk to the world of the crass ignorance of the Irish peasant.

Take another project, dear to the hearts of the coming Board of Agriculture and a danger ahead for the Irish farmer, if I am not mistaken.

Some years ago there were started in Germany agricultural self-supporting banks for the benefit of the peasantry in various localities. These banks are worked on very simple principles. There are no expensive buildings to be erected, no highly paid Board of Directors to be salaried; the peasants of the district are the shareholders and the local clergy and business men the bank managers; shares are issued at, say a pound, and each man, according as he has cash to invest, can take one, two, five, ten, fifty shares. This money is lent out in small sums in the neighbourhood at a reasonable interest; the small sums help on struggling farmers, or even larger landholders, who are often thus tided over the critical moment, re-payment by easy instalments do not press heavily on them, while the investors earn a fair percentage on their money, and thus the rural banks are a success.

This would be, perhaps, a good thing in Ireland, but under different circumstances from those contemplated by Mr. Horace Plunkett, one of whose pet schemes is to establish in every parish such a bank, not under exclusively local control, but under the auspices of the new Agricultural Board, which means, in plain English, under the control of Dublin Castle, which, again translated, means that all the loose cash of the Irish peasant should be put into the keeping of and held tight by Government officials who

could put the screw upon the Irish farmers whenever a political question made such action useful to the English Government in Ireland or to their friends. However, Irish farmers are very shrewd, and, so far, have not rushed at the co-operative banks, and so forth, as blindly as their new instructors hoped.

DESTITUTE CHILDREN—A CRYING GRIEVANCE.

Within the past year, Mr. Gerald Balfour has attempted a strange method of economy in Ireland, a method which will work much evil unless wilful woman can manage to have her way and checkmate the Chief Secretary.

Thirty years ago an Act was passed which was designed by its promoters for the suppression of juvenile crime in this country. The chief promotor of the Act was a Catholic gentleman still living, the O'Connor Don, who is the direct descendant of the last High King, or Monarch of all Ireland, a man of splendid appearance, an orator and a scholar, strangely enough a Unionist in politics, but genuinely interested in all that concerns the moral welfare of his native land.

The terrible workhouse system, forced upon this country against its will, so hated by O'Connell, and, indeed, by all high-minded men, proved in its working only too true a vindicator of the wisdom of its opponents. One of the cruelest regulations was the separation of families, the breaking up of respectable though temporarily poverty-stricken homes. Fathers and mothers are not only separated from each other, but children out of arms are taken from the parents and thrown into the company of young people raked together from the lowest city and vagrant classes. In very many cases, families forced by necessity to seek temporary shelter in the cruel 'Cold House' brought with them little children and young girls as innocently reared in their peasant homes as could be the highest in the land. This great innocence and purity are the pride and glory of the Irish, their fortune the world over. But rarely could the child that had to pass a time within the workhouse walls come out unsullied in mind and heart; it is easier to soil a white garment than any other. Thirty years ago, then, in the hard times that lasted so long after the famine years, juvenile crime reached a high percentage, thanks to the fostering care of the Government. The O'Connor Don and other thinkers like him set to work to counteract the evil, and with the happiest results. A Bill was passed through Parliament by which it became possible, with a little wise stretching of the powers entrusted to them, for magistrates to commit to industrial schools subsidised by Government all children found begging in public. The subjects for commitment were in all cases judiciously chosen; mostly orphans of respectable poor, young children whose lives were stainless. The stretching of the law consisted in sending out the little one to beg a penny of some policeman or other person, who charged the child with vagrancy, had it brought before a magistrate, who sent it to a Catholic or Protestant Industrial School to which the Government paid the not extravagant sum of £13 per head per year for board, lodging, clothing, education, and a trade. Cheap, you must admit. Of course, this being a Catholic country, almost all the children so committed were Catholics, and the Religious Orders, such as the Christian Brothers, the Sisters of Charity, the Sisters of Mercy, were chosen as guardians of the Catholic children. Needless to say, the small capitation grant from the Government would not do more than barely feed the inmates of the Industrial Schools. Catholic charity, which is well-nigh boundless in this country, built splendid schools and homes and provided the Religious with funds to carry on the work where any addition was needed to the earnings of the establishments, in which laundry work, training of domestic servants, needlework, various handicrafts, etc., were most successfully carried on, and such has been the happy result that juvenile crime almost disappeared from the country.

But funds are wanted for dum-dum bullets and all the rest of the humane paraphernalia of Christian warfare and territorial aggrandisement. Mr. Gerald Balfour decided to come to the rescue with even a little more money taken from the unfortunate people. A criminal disregard of British law was discovered in the means by which the orphans of the Irish poor were saved from crime and misery and taught to be useful members of society. The Bill, Mr. Gerald Balfour argued, had been passed for criminal children and for 'potential criminals,' and the act of sending an innocent child who was 'merely destitute' out to beg was against the law; such children must in future go to the workhouse, and none but criminals and 'potential criminals' be made inmates of industrial schools. In other words, the innocent, destitute children are no longer to be sent to safe homes provided for them by Irish charity; they are to be thrown into surroundings where they will very quickly become 'potential' or actual criminals, and the criminal children are, if Mr. Gerald Balfour's new rule be complied with to be sent into the Convent schools to corrupt the youth hitherto so carefully trained in honesty and purity.

In formulating their new regulations, the Government well know that they would thus effect a saving of almost all stipend in future (at least until the jails are full); the Irish would refuse to condemn the orphans of their poor to such degradation. But the news fell like a bomb-shell amongst those in charge of the training schools; Catholics and Protestants, lay and cleric, alike bore testimony to the enormous benefit the existing system has been to the country, and the clergy of all denominations join in urging the Government to re-consider an order which would not alone entail much misery, but the magnificent establishments built by Nuns and Brotherhoods throughout Ireland must fall into disuse, as the Religious have determined upon refusing to receive criminals (for whom there is already provision) into the houses founded for the protection of virtuous childhood. It now remains to be seen how a struggle which virtually lies between the Government and the Nuns will end. The Nuns own the fine establishments; that is one good card in their hands, and then—wilful woman!

M.B.