

IX.—*Some Economic Objections against the custom of "Fortuning" Daughters, that prevails amongst the Farming Classes in Munster.* By S. P. Preston, Esq., of Cork.

[Read, 20th May, 1879.]

He who carefully studies the social condition of our agricultural population cannot fail to see many things capable of improvement, in which, if there is to be any improvement at all, it must be initiated within the social fabric—customs that ought to be honoured in the breach, not in the observance—habits and traditions that only handicap us as a people, and prejudice our chances of taking a place amongst progressive nations.

When looking to the legislature for remedial measures—we ought not to forget that we are taxed with a repugnance to self-improvement, and a disinclination to enquire whether our method of working that part of the social machine which is under our own control is not open to a good deal of objection. For instance, it is well known that the great want of this country is capital devoted to reproductive uses. Every art and handicraft suffers, enterprise is starved out, owing to the lack of capital; and to agriculture in particular, inasmuch as it is our greatest—indeed almost our only industry—does the remark apply. None but those that have an intimate knowledge of the farming classes can appreciate the economic disadvantages entailed on the farmer, and through him on the community in general, by an insufficiency of capital. The farmer who labours under this disadvantage cannot afford to procure proper farming appliances, and there is a waste of labour. He cannot spare labour to make and keep in repair the approaches to his premises, and the passages around and through his holding, and there is loss of time and wear and tear of draught animals, carts, and other appliances. He must obtain his seeds and other requirements on credit, paying higher prices in consequence. Fencing, draining, and other works of reclamation or utility would cost money that he cannot command. The land is not half farmed; the productive powers of the soil, instead of being developed, are allowed to go to waste or to lie dormant.

The picture is not a pleasant one to contemplate; nor is any more hopeful impression produced (but quite the contrary) when we come to consider that by the operation of a custom which has universal acceptance amongst our farming classes, the principal part of the little capital that the farmer *can* command—capital wrung from the soil—is locked up and rendered inoperative to its owner for any present reproductive employment.

On looking over the returns that show the amount of money standing to the credit of farmers in the savings and other banks of this country, a person with insufficient knowledge of concurrent circumstances would be puzzled to reconcile the figures there set forth with the want of capital, not to say poverty, that is evident on all sides. "Want of capital!" might such a person exclaim; "why here is capital lying idle! why not devote this money to reproductive uses on the farm?" etc. No doubt you have seen and heard various

reasons, more or less cogent, given in explanation of the action of the farmers in this matter; but there is one reason that is seldom put forward—one that I desire to bring particularly under the consideration of this learned society, because I have never seen it accorded the position which its relationship to actual fact entitle it to, and because it is a reason that would remain in operation even though all others were removed. It is this—that the great bulk of the monies lodged in banks by farmers has been placed there for a specific purpose—viz., to provide marriage portions for their children, and is sacredly devoted to that object, and must not be touched for any other purpose no matter how pressing.

It is well known that the Irish peasant has a rooted repugnance to withdrawing a single penny of any money he has once "banked;" that he will endure an incredible number of inconveniences and even hardships sooner than reduce the balance standing at his credit; that he will, while getting some two-and-a-half per cent., or even less on his deposit, borrow money at ten per cent., or even at higher rates, to meet current liabilities. The motives that prompt this eccentric style of doing things are partly a relic of the "hoarding" practices of former days, when the instability of the farmer's position and prospects, and of society in general, made it of the utmost importance that he should have something to fall back upon in the *dernier ressort*; and when we add to this shadowy yet potential recollection, the substantial obligation that custom imposes on the farmer to provide marriage portions for his children—"to fortune them off," as the phrase goes—we begin to understand how it comes that the great bulk of the farmers' savings is left in banks unavailable for those legitimate purposes which economic science (or for that matter, the common sense of any thoughtful man) would recommend.

On various occasions the writer has attempted, when opportunity offered, to point out the very apparent impolicy of undergoing a ruinous interest, and at same time leaving money lying unfruitful in banks while wanted for a dozen pressing purposes at home, and invariably has he received the same reply—that if the money, or any part of it, was taken out, it might never find its way back again, and—"Wid'out the girleens had the few ha'apence, where 'ud they find husbands?" Amongst our peasantry the position of a family in the social scale is regulated to a large extent by the sums which the head of the house can give, or is reputed to be able to give, the children as "fortunes;" and again, the estimation in which a marriageable girl is held is in the same manner influenced by the amount of her "fortune." It is surprising what an accurate knowledge of each individual's affairs the rest of the community possess in country districts. The market value of every marriageable person is approximated, canvassed, and proportioned. For a girl without a "fortune" to marry a good match, or a man to get the hand of a girl with a "fortune" unless he can show "pound for pound," as the saying is, are events so rare as to be almost unknown. Under those conditions, it is easy to understand that the placing of his children in a position to make good matches is an object for the accomplishment of which every nerve of the farmer is strained; for this he toils and

saves (commendable actions in themselves) and for this he sometimes half starves himself, and almost invariably starves the land, neither of which proceedings will, I fancy, find many apologists.

If, on further examination, we find one of the effects of this custom is to discourage industry, independence, and self help in the rising generation, we have an additional reason for pronouncing it objectionable from an economic stand-point. I think it can be plainly demonstrated that by the operation of this custom the young farmer is deprived almost entirely of incentive to exertion, and that the precious years of his early manhood which should be utilized in establishing for himself an independent self-supporting occupation or position, are wasted in "waiting for his turn." It will be found that he is dependant on his father for a start—say a piece of land and some stock—and on making a good match for the means of working along. He can have but little influence over his own fate; and as abstinence and toil, when there is no specific desirable object to be gained, possess but little attractions for human nature in comparison with lounging, hunting, and the frequenting of fairs and races, it is easy to foresee that the young man will take naturally to the latter-mentioned pursuits with a result that can be easily guessed at. He becomes a "waster," a non producer, a drag on the rest of the community.

The time comes, however, when a marriage is arranged for him—a farm is taken and a wife is provided; but a question suggests itself—is it natural to suppose that under such a system the man can take the same earnest interest in farm or household, that he would if he owed his position and belongings to his own exertions? Were there no "fortune" to be looked forward to, the farmers son who now spends the interval between the day he leaves school and the day he gets married in idleness of either a positive or comparative character, would turn his time and talents to very different account. If he knew that the making or marring of his career was in his own hands, he would be impelled (or compelled) to seek an occupation—would become self-supporting—instead of subtracting anything from the general stock, he would probably be adding something to it, and possibly would in the end attain a position by his own efforts as sound as, and more independent than, that of the man for whom everything had been done.

Again, it is plain to me that this system of "fortuning" is in a certain degree to blame for maintaining the ruinous imposts that are demanded and submitted to under the name of rent in this country. In the absence of commercial and manufacturing industries, it is a choice between farming, emigration, or the workhouse, for the great bulk of our peasantry. The competition for farms is therefore so keen, that applicants are forced to offer rents the payment of which necessitates a struggle in which very often the spirit of the farmer is broken, the land impoverished, and a condition of affairs brought about of which decay and stagnation are the principal features. I think I am justified in coming to the conclusion that if the system of "fortuning" was not in existence, the number of applicants for farms would be considerably reduced. A large number of young farmers take land who have no prospects of being able to farm it or to pay the rent except by the aid of the funds they can make available through a

matrimonial contract; and instances are not infrequent where the accumulated savings of years of toil, endurance, and abstinence are handed over as a "fortune" only to be eaten out in the effort to postpone the inevitable failure involved in the effort to pay an impossible rent. I think the position of the remainder would be very much improved if a change of any sort rendered impossible those farmers, who must bolster up their finances by matrimonial speculations, who live for the most part on credit, and who are absorbed in one continual struggle to meet the landlord's demands. Those are the men who undertake to pay "rack rents," and who are ever ready to take up farms that other men have been ruined in. In the absence of their competition, men who would be qualified to make the most of the land would have a chance of getting it on terms that would induce them to use every effort to develop the latent resources of the soil. Every one that cherishes a wish to see our people advancing in prosperity and happiness should forward any change of system that would influence the rising generation of farmers of the struggling class to turn their backs on the unrewarded slavery involved in the attempt to wring a scanty living from the poor worn-out soils that are within their reach. Why should they voluntarily adopt a mode of life that offers no prospect beyond a bare subsistence? There are other fields of industry, there are other countries, where the same persevering labour, allied to the natural intelligence of our race, would be sure to command a legitimate reward, and to show results of a far more satisfactory character. I have no sympathy with the feeling that influences a man to tamely submit to a life of hopeless struggle in any particular spot, locality, or country, just because he happens to have been born there.

If we imagine a decline in this custom of "fortuning," one effect, and not an unimportant one, would result—*fewer and more prudent marriages amongst the peasantry*. The Irish is a prolific race, and remembering this, and that we have only one industry—viz; agriculture, we must come to the conclusion that a redundant agricultural population is not advisable. The larger the agricultural population, the greater the demand for land and the more likelihood of its being kept up at a famine price.

On the other hand, sentimentalists will quote for us the lines of the poet who prophesied evil things for the country

"Where wealth accumulates and men decay"—

but poets are but poor sociologists, preferring sound to sense very often, and epigrammatic smartness to logical deduction. The worst about this question, however, as about many others, is the admixture of sentiment that one continually finds complicating every problem that is offered to the consideration of the student of sociological science.

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