

## Chapter Five

On the roadside there were the humble traces of two or three cabins, whose little hearths had been extinguished, and whose walls were levelled to the earth. The black fungus, the burdock, the nettle, and all those offensive weeds that follow in the train of oppression and ruin were here; and as the dreary wind stirred them into sluggish motion, and piped its melancholy wail through these desolate mounds, I could not help asking myself, if those who do these things ever think that there is a reckoning in after life, where power, insolence and wealth misapplied, and rapacity, and persecution, and revenge, and sensuality, and gluttony, will be placed face to face with those humble beings, on whose rights and privileges of simple existence they have trampled with such a selfish and exterminating tread.

—William Carleton,  
*The Black Prophet*

**I**NCREDIBLY, neither official reports nor published eyewitness accounts of conditions in Ireland did anything to stem or defer the eviction of tenants who failed to pay their rents on gale day. During the worst months of the famine, in the winter of 1846–47, tens of thousands of tenants fell in arrears of rent and were evicted from their homes. A nationwide system of ousting the peasantry began to set in, with absentee landlords, and some resident landlords as well, more determined than ever to rid Ireland of its “surplus” Irish. Potato cultivation having ended, at least for a time, because of the blight, tenant cultivators could pay no rents. Sheep and horned cattle could produce income, smart income at that, so the landlords de-

cided to give the land over to them and clear it of its human encumbrances. And they were permitted to do so under existing laws that Parliament did nothing to amend despite the unprecedented circumstances under which almost every Irish family was living. A tenant farmer, no matter what the famine had done or was doing to preclude his ability to pay the rent, was subject to eviction by reason of his failure to pay it.

Resident landlords could see the famine's ravages among their tenants and in some cases refused to execute the eviction rights at their disposal. The absentee landlords, on the other hand, who during the famine represented the majority, neither witnessed nor had any emotional involvement in the eviction; they merely signed the necessary legal orders and had their agents in Ireland carry on from there. One such agent had the following notice posted all over the town of Cahir: "The tenantry on the Earl of Glengall's estate, residing in the manor of Cahir, are requested to pay into my office on the 12th of May, all rent and arrears of rent due up to the 25th of May, otherwise the most summary steps will be taken to recover same. John Chaytor 1st April, 1846."<sup>1</sup>

Another absentee landlord, in Templemore, had no sooner departed Ireland after paying a short visit to his estate than notices were served on his tenantry to pay the November rent. The tenants asked for time, saying they had only a few black potatoes left.

"What the devil do we care about you or your black potatoes?" replied the bailiff. "It is not *us* that made them black. You will get two days to pay the rent, and if you don't you know the consequence."<sup>2</sup>

Once the eviction papers were verified and signed by a magistrate in charge of such matters, the landlord's agent enlisted the protection of the British constabulary in Ireland, along with the help of some Irish housewreckers, and proceeded with them to the eviction site. Because so many in the same district were in arrears, the agent usually had eviction notices to present to a whole neighborhood on the same day. This saved time and made disposing of the matter much easier

for both the sheriff, representing the law, and the stand-by constabulary, representing the power of the law. They needed each other, for the eviction process was an eradication not only of a family's dwelling but of its heritage—the family having lived there for so many generations that its very surname had come to identify the location itself. From one end of Ireland to another, with few exceptions, the eviction went this way in December of 1846, only a week or two before Christmas<sup>3</sup>:

The proper notices having been served on the parties concerned, the agent, on horseback, and his Irish housewreckers, in their bare feet, half of them armed with crowbars, arrive with sheriff and constabulary on schedule at the eviction site. There are perhaps eight dwellings situated in the same area close to a public road. Some are larger than others, but in appearance and structure they are much alike: two gables built of local stone connected by a thatched roof that overlaps each gable in a downward slant to some five or six feet from the ground.

The sheriff quickly goes through the form of putting the property in the possession of the landlord's agent, thereby giving the agent full power to turn out the people and pull down the dwellings. The relieving officer calls out the names of those to be evicted and, if he sees fit, offers them orders for admission to the workhouse. These orders are generally refused or, if accepted, not acted upon, on the mistaken assumption that there is still, even without shelter, more to be gained outside than inside the workhouse.

The impatient agent has by now given word to his "destructives"—the Irish housewreckers who have already been evicted from their homes and are now themselves desperately trying to survive—to begin tearing down the dwellings. The people inside, though, must first be dragged out, and with them, the bed, kettle, tub, spinning wheel, one or two stools, and perhaps an old chest. Because most of the furniture has already been sold to forestall starvation, few cabins have anything beyond this paucity of furniture, with the possible exception of the half-box, half-boat used as a baby's cradle, an item

no longer in demand in a country where the stillborn now far outnumber the born.

Finally, when the families and their belongings are out in the road, a loud chorus of lament and self-vindication begins from those being ejected. Prayers and blessings are intermingled with reproaches, entreaties, threats, weeping. And as the ejections continue, the women beat their breasts and keen, embrace the knees of the agent's horse, try to climb, as if from perdition itself, the steps of the sheriff's car. To obtain mercy, they supplicate with waning smiles and weakly upraised arms as if about to die; to invoke vengeance, they spit out curses from a store of hatred gathered over centuries of oppression. Not only are they gifted with the powers of eloquence, but they move their bodies and gesticulate in ways that add to and blend with every soft entreaty or harsh vilification they utter.

Not even the most jaded landlord's agent can ignore this wild ballet that his appearance has provoked, but he has seen it before and now arrives expecting it, waiting for it, armed against it. The praying, groaning, and groveling of the evicted, like the torn-down thatch of their roofs, have long since become integral parts of a common roadside scene in Ireland—a scene accepted by the agent, sheriff, and constabulary as one of the famine's many unavoidable evils. "House tumbling," it has come to be called, as though it were a game invented by some toy manufacturer.

"Get on with it, boys," the agent says to his Irish housewreckers.

Two of them jump up on the thatched roof and have no trouble finding the supporting beam that extends from one gable to another. They fasten a rope around it and pass the rope through the door of the house to their workers on the ground. After a little action from a saw to weaken the beam, then from a crowbar to dismantle the wall plates at the gables' angles, a pull at the rope breaks the back of the roof, tearing it from its bearing at the apex of the two opposite walls. Down comes the roof in a cloud of dust, into the walled-in area it was meant to shelter. Sometimes a part will cling by threads to

one gable, another part may rest with one end on the ground, the other leaning against a wall that is itself about to crumble. In every case the aim is the same and always accomplished: the cottage, cabin, or house is made uninhabitable.

So efficient have the Irish housewreckers become that all eight houses are destroyed in the course of three hours. The tenants, now homeless, are told that they may have the thatch and blackened wood of their fallen roofs but are warned not to linger long. The relieving officer advises them to get to the workhouse without delay, then takes his leave with the sheriff, agent, and constabulary—all British—and their Irish destructives. Left behind are the tenants, who sit beside their remaining furniture and contemplate their ruined homes. The moans and laments subside into silence; their despair becomes a kind of quietism now that it is only theirs to share.

The scene is at once wretched and picturesque, something to be captured by the brush of a Jean François Millet: the women with their long, dark hair, bare legs and feet, all wearing the emblem of Irish poverty, the tattered red petticoat, whose bodice is patched just enough to cover the bosom; the elderly, crouched together under a road bank or wall to escape the wind but also to watch, as if their survival hinges on it, the able-bodied dragging the smoke-blackened beams from beneath the thatch for use elsewhere; the younger children, half-naked, stumbling about the ruins, from which the bare gables point upward as if to reproach the powers above; the oddly precarious positions of the fallen roofs, as though the work of destruction had hesitated when it was already too late to put things right again.

Suddenly the silence is broken by the wailing of a child, who can be seen running round and round the flattened, fallen roof of one of the cabins. The child's cat is apparently trapped under the thatch of the roof and will die if not rescued. The women, believing the cat already dead, try to console her; for a moment her tragedy supersedes theirs. It comes almost like a gift from God, for by consoling her they are in effect consoling themselves as well. They are still trying to soothe the child



when a scream of delight from other children announces the rise of a dusty kitten from a corner of the ruins. With the decorum so unique to her species, she proceeds to her toilette, cleaning herself with paw and tongue until she appears much less perturbed by the events of the day than those ejected.

For the children, the mere sight of her, the knowledge that she has escaped unharmed, the delight they feel in her existence, overcome for a while their sense of being homeless. But before long, as night draws on and the wind brings with it those cold sweeps of Irish rain, their tears and moans join those of the adults' chorus.

All over Ireland these evictions became so commonplace, so methodical, so legally impossible to prevent, that tenants whose homes were marked for destruction often helped to tear them down themselves on the promise that they would receive some gratuity for their labors. In almost every case recorded, the promise was not kept; instead, the tenants received contemptuous laughter for the effort they put into tearing down the very shelters they needed to survive. In late 1846, after witnessing several evictions just before Christmas, the Reverend Osbourne wrote in his notebook: "I took a statement from a clergyman, of one case, in which an old woman, actually worked her own house down, *with her own hands*, on the belief she was to have 5 s. for doing so. She had not however got it."<sup>4</sup>

Visitors to Ireland, reporters, priests, and clergymen, all asked in effect the same question: How could a government in Europe allow evictions of this kind to take place at a time when an entire nation was in the grip of famine? Josephine Butler, a humane Englishwoman who was living in Ireland at the time and personally witnessed the ejections, wrote: "Sick and aged, little children, and women with child were alike thrust forth into the snows of winter. . . . And to prevent their return their cabins were levelled to the ground . . . the few remaining tenants were forbidden to receive the outcasts . . . the majority rendered penniless by the famine, wandered aim-

lessly about the roads or bogs till they found refuge in the workhouse or the grave."<sup>5</sup>

When asked what effect the famine had in his district, one eyewitness replied: "My district was by no means regarded as a poor one, but the famine swept away more than half its population. The census of 1841 gave the families residing in it as 2,200; the census of 1851 gave them at 1,000."

According to the same eyewitness, "Only one landlord in the whole locality . . . did anything to save the people. . . . He asked no rent for two years, and he never afterwards insisted on the rent for those two years; although I must say he was paid it by many of his tenants, of their own free will; but, for the rest, he cancelled those two years' rents and opened a new account for them, as with men owing him nothing."

When the same man was asked what were the feelings of the other landlords with regard to their tenants dying of starvation, he answered with solemn emphasis: "*Delighted to be rid of them.*"<sup>6</sup>

A very small portion of the English press sympathized with those being evicted to perish by the roadside. London's *Morning Chronicle* said in one of its leaders: "We shall here state at once our opinion, in plain terms, respecting this clearing system, by which a population, which for generations, lived and multiplied on the land, is, on the plea of legal rights, suddenly turned adrift, without a provision, to find a living where there is no living to be found. It is a thing which no pretence of private right or public utility ought to induce society to tolerate for a moment. No legitimate construction of any right of ownership in land, which it is for the interest of society to permit, will warrant it. We hold, at the same time, that to prevent the growth of a redundant population on an estate is not only not blamable, but is one of the chief duties of a landowner, having the power over his tenants which the Irish system gives. . . . He is to be commended for preventing overpopulation, but to be detested for tolerating first, and then exterminating it."<sup>7</sup>

After being evicted and seeing their homes tumbled, the

tenant farmers and their families still shunned the workhouse, where life with freedom ended and drudgery on schedule began. With the thatch from their roof and whatever beams and rafters they could salvage, they made their way to uninhabited areas on the same manor or estate and built what in Ireland is called a "scalpeen." In England and America it would be called a "lean-to." Beams were so placed that they rested on one end on the ground and on the other end against a roadside bank or a natural stone wall somewhere off the road. Short sticks from the ruins of the original home were then set across the beams and the old thatch roof dragged up upon the makeshift structure. Stones and more wood were laid on the thatch to anchor it against the wind, then one end was closed off with more stone, dirt, and extra wood, and the other end left open for the family members to enter and leave. Into this miserable structure, measuring roughly fifteen by ten feet, crowded a whole family, sometimes with a *lodger*, if the latter was able to beg or find enough food every day to share as his or her "rent."

Other evicted families lingered around their tumbled homes for days after the authorities had left. Their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents had lived and died there, were buried in consecrated ground not far away; leaving now would be like casting aside their identity. These people waited until finally, at night, they made crawl-in shelters within the same walls and between the same gables of their tumbled homes, keeping them low enough to avoid detection. They crept into these sites and tried to live, until desperation forced them out or they died of starvation and were discovered by some agent of the landlord's agent, who had their bodies carried out.<sup>8</sup>

Ireland's absentee landlords—about 70 percent of the total number—avoided these horrors, spending what money they had left in London and Paris and meanwhile putting their famine-encumbered estates up for sale to the highest bidder, who always turned out to be another Englishman. The difference now, with the ongoing famine, was that the new absentee



landlord, along with most resident landlords as well, wanted his land occupied by cattle rather than by the people who had been living on it for generations. The whole maneuver, like the government's response to the famine itself, represents the ugliest chapter in the history of Great Britain. Landlords who were not native of and had no attachment to the land on which they were speculating were allowed by their government in London to rob the indigenous Irish of their last dignity.

"It is common to hear all the evils of Ireland attributed to absenteeism," wrote a French visitor to Ireland only eight years earlier, "but this is to mistake a consequence of the evil for the evil itself. The aristocracy of Ireland is not bad because it is absentee; it is absentee because it is bad, because nothing attaches it to the country, because it is retained there by no sympathy. Why should it, loving neither the country nor the people, remain in Ireland, when it has England near, inviting it by the charms of more elegant and refined society, which attract it back to its original country?"<sup>9</sup>

What could Parliament do by way of legislation to bring together the rich and the poor of Ireland when religious antagonism so hopelessly separated them? Who or what was to unite the landlord and his tenant, the conquerer and the vanquished, the Englishman, who with Henry VIII became Protestant, and the Irishman, who remained Catholic? The laws were made by and for Protestants, enforced by a Protestant constabulary, and carried out by Protestants in Irish courts. The magistrates, the lawyers, and most of the jurors chosen were well-to-do Anglo-Saxon Protestants, while ninety-eight out of a hundred defendants were Irish Catholics.

No wonder the gallows in Ireland were familiar and ever-present features in front of every jailhouse—no higher from the ground than an ordinary second floor. Unlike England, where the gallows were brought out at the last moment before a scheduled execution and then immediately removed, they were in Ireland permanent fixtures—iron balconies with their fallen floors still hanging down from the last execution for all