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Who are Mr. Balfour's Criminals ?

Who are Mr. Balfour's Criminals in Ireland ?

Do they belong to the criminal classes ?

Of the twenty Members of Parliament, other men in representative positions, and the clergymen imprisoned under the Coercion Act, we shall not now speak. Their public position speaks for them, and gives the lie to the calumny that they are ordinary criminals, or criminals at all. But as to the rest, it is perfectly notorious that not one in a hundred of them has ever been even accused of crime, while most of them are well known to be most respectable persons.

Some striking evidence to this effect has been given by an authority which even the government and its partizans will not venture to ridicule or denounce. **The Recorder of Cork—an Ulster Protestant Tory**, the same who confirmed the sentence passed by the "Removables" on Mr. William O'Brien, M.P.—speaking on the 20th January, 1888, in reference to a case in which several persons from Kanturk were before him on appeal on a charge of having attended a meeting of the National League, said :—

"He agreed with Mr. Keller [the solicitor for the accused] when he said that his clients were respectable men—thousands of most respectable men in the country were members of the National League. These were cases most irksome to him, and it grieved him to have to deal in this matter with men in a respectable position—men of intelligence and position, and enjoying general respect."

A pretty law it is surely which makes such men "criminals" and treats them as such in jail.

On the occasion referred to, after the Recorder had confirmed the sentence of the "Removables," the following instructive conversation is reported to have occurred :—

"Mr. Keller said he felt thankful to his Worship for reducing the sentence, as he could not acquit the prisoners. He had been requested by the junior prisoners to apply that Mr. M'Cabe should be treated as first-class misdemeanant.

"His Worship.—If you get me a certificate from a doctor, *mentioning the extreme age and respectability of Mr. M'Cabe*. What age are you, Mr. M'Cabe ?

[Turn over.

"Mr. M'Cabe.—My age is seventy years. I am obliged to Mr. Keller; but I would rather he would withdraw the application he has made. I will sink or swim with my co-Nationalists. (Applause.) I was born a Nationalist and will die a Nationalist. (Applause.) The MacCabes of the battle-axe were Nationalists from the very first."

Mr. Balfour's Defences.

One or two stock defences are set up by Mr. Balfour and his friends for the prison atrocities inflicted on his political opponents. One is that the persons convicted under the Coercion Act are ordinary criminals, and should therefore be treated as ordinary criminals.

Is it not preposterous to assert that persons whose only offence is publishing or selling newspapers, or attending meetings, or making speeches, or refusing to deal with certain other persons, are really common criminals? Even Mr. Balfour himself has not always acted towards them as if he believed in the accuracy of his own description. He has not dared to strip the priests in prison of their own clothes, although no one doubts that he would have done so if they were in jail for any other than a political offence. Three times the shopkeepers of Miltown-Malbay, Co. Clare, who were in jail on a bogus charge of conspiracy to boycott, or rather to compel other people to boycott, were—in vain—offered their liberty, on condition of promising for the future to deal with persons generally regarded as obnoxious. Fancy three convicted pickpockets or burglars being offered their freedom on the terms that they should give their words of honour that they would not be pickpockets or burglars for the future, and fancy, if it be possible, the three pickpockets and burglars indignantly refusing, as a matter of principle, to accept release on such terms! Such a thing, of course, could never occur.

The Plain Truth is that Mr. Balfour has been sending to jail and punishing them as common criminals, men as respectable as himself. And by committing outrages on common sense and decency like this, he pretends that he is restoring the reign of law and order in Ireland!

Will not all honest men cry out and vote against a system of government under which such things are possible?

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