

# THE COMMONWEAL

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## NOTES ON NEWS.

THE Tory Government, it is generally said, has made a great mistake about the Privilege episode; even their own papers have blamed them for their conduct, and the whole country will endorse that blame. That may be, and certainly such are the tight places into which *stupid* lying leads most commonly. Yet after all the Tory Government is very strong against any mere constitutional attacks. It has a well-grounded confidence in the strength of party feeling, and the very common wish of the flunkey of all classes to vote for "the Gentlemanly Interest," like the innkeeper in 'Martin Chuzzlewit.' And the Liberal Unionists who hold the balance for it, are prepared to wade through any amount of dirt in defence of their "principles." The division on Mr. Gladstone's amendment moving the appointment of a select committee, and that in the teeth of the *Standard's* disapproval, shows that the Government has some reason for its recklessness, and that we shall have a Tory Government in for some time to come—a matter of small importance, since the alternative is a Liberal Government.

To return to the matter of questions in the House. Honourable members are more easily satisfied with the answers given than a believer in the benefits of Parliament would be likely to expect. Take for example Sir H. Holland's answer on May 7 about the flogging in the Hong Kong prison. Considering that we all know how little a Chinaman can live on, and also that of all scoundrelly oppressors the English colonial or crown-colony one is the vilest, does it not seem as if "the reduction of the diet, the existing scale of which was considered excessive"—prison diet excessive—O Lord!—meant an attempt to starve the prisoners to death? Yet the answer was accepted apparently as satisfactory—probably because the same thing is done here at home both in prison and out of it, and no one is called to account for it—not yet.

It doesn't, perhaps, much matter what a bishop says nowadays: yet if a bishop could have any moral sense at all, he might consider the extreme unfairness of telling lies in the pulpit, where he cannot be contradicted, as he might be at a public meeting. A bishop preaching at the Chapel Royal, Whitehall (not a bad place for lies, by the way), the other day, "urged that the logical conclusion of Socialist views would be the practical carrying out of the motto, 'I squeeze all things flat'"—in short, Mr. Bradlaugh's dull level of mediocrity. Now, there is plenty of Socialist literature for the bishop to read, and if he has read it he lied in his statement; if he has not he is an imposter for preaching on a subject of which he is ignorant. Let him take his choice of either horn of the dilemma.

Some of our Socialist friends may have noticed the attempt, which has already partially succeeded, to force the older universities to set up a new "Honour school"—*i.e.*, a new school of competitive examination—in English literature, and may perhaps have wondered why it has been taken up so excitedly by part of the press. The reason is obvious to those who know something of the universities and the higher class of literary hacks: it means the pushing of a great new *job* for all the clan of the log-rollers in literature. The dishonest and conventional twaddle which has been poured on to the public on this subject is thus easily accounted for; as the professional and other hangers-on of capital have an innate sympathy for any one who is job-hunting. All the big-wigs who have written with such portentous solemnity on the neglect of English literature at the universities know perfectly well that English literature is a thing which can be *learned* but cannot be *taught*, as language and the sciences can be; but they will not interfere

with a poor job-hunter who wishes to feather his nest out of those institutions which our forefathers founded for the education of the *people*, but which, like all other expensive things, are now monopolised by the rich classes.

W. M.

## COERCION FOR LONDON.

It may be thought that the patriots who are so eager for the unity of the British empire that they want to use artificial means to make it more specially uncomfortable to live in one part of it than it is elsewhere, are taking unnecessary trouble; that the coercionists are such enthusiasts in the art of coercion that they are hunting it when they have already got it.

It is true that there is a pleasure in making a special and blatant demonstration of success, but it is a pleasure that has to be paid for by the opposition that the attempt to make it stirs up. The wise are contented with having the substance and letting the shadow take care of itself, especially if they have to fight for the shadow when they have got the substance peaceably and easily.

One is compelled by recent events to look on the subject from this point of view. Ireland is to have an extra dose of coercion, but London has already got enough for all practical purposes. A Bill is being put forward and opposed, with great fervour on each side, which, when it becomes law, will enable any *two* magistrates in Ireland to sentence any one who is brought before them and whose looks they don't like to six months' imprisonment. In London, any *one* magistrate has already got that power, and is on occasion not ashamed to exercise it.

It is perhaps worth while to tell over again a short story of the manner in which the coercion machine in London is set a-going, as it can be done in so much fewer words than the Langworthy case.

One Sunday there were, as usual, Socialist meetings going on in Hyde Park near the Marble Arch, during and after which various salesmen were proposing, as usual, to sell Socialist papers outside the park (selling inside being forbidden). The police had for some time past hustled and bullied, and even run in, these Socialist salesmen, although the sellers of other newspapers were not interfered with. On the occasion in question, after the Socialist meetings were over, the crowd, much increased by the news of the high-handed proceedings on former Sundays, poured out through the gate close by, being as a matter of course largely composed of mere Sunday strollers attracted to the Socialist platform—non-combatants, most of them, in the battle of opinion between Socialism and Bourgeoisdom. Well, these people, who would else have gone about their business quietly, were immediately set upon by the police *à la* Donnybrook, and a rough-and-tumble ensued, of the kind which the timid citizen of to-day looks at with pleasure—from a window, and in which you may find yourself half-throttled on the way to the police-station without being conscious of what has led you to that expedition, otherwise than that a policeman tried to knock you down and that you tried to stand upright: such an entertainment being obviously a good occasion for any one of an inventive turn to exercise his capacity for romance as a police-court witness.

The result of this police battue was a pretty good bag, although the police acted rather as the foreigner in Leech's woodcuts, who shoots the foxes and the owls instead of the pheasants, and got hold of more of the above-mentioned non-combatants than Socialists. These "rioters" being brought up before Mr. de Rutzen, were prosecuted by the Government jackal Mr. Poland, the farcical nature of whose opening speech no one, now Dickens is dead—more's the pity—need attempt to render.<sup>1</sup> The farce was continued by various policemen giving what is facetiously called "evidence," and more accurately "swearing the leg off an iron pot"; and Mr. Rutzen, in virtue of his position, wound up with the grand joke of the whole entertainment by saying that since Mr. Poland did not press the case as one of riot, he would treat it as a mere assault on the police, and would be so kind as not to send the accused for trial, but would—Fine them 10s. and caution them, thinks the unsuspecting "cultivated" person, rejoicing in the security of property and person in this civilised and "free" country. No—sentence them, two Socialists (one of whom had not been present in Hyde Park) and five non-Socialists, to six months' hard labour!

This was the end of the first act of the farce called "Justice" in this

<sup>1</sup> I don't know, though: the author of 'Cashel Byron,' though he wouldn't do it with the richness of Dickens, might deal with such a case—why doesn't he?