

# THE COMMONWEALTH

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WEEKLY; ONE PENNY.

## NOTES ON NEWS.

PARLIAMENT has met once more, and to all appearance the coming session will be as hopelessly barren of any performance as the most sturdy Tory or the most constitutional Whig could desire. The overwhelming majority in favour of "resolute government" is still there, of course, and is not likely to be altered by the results of the bye-elections. But that is not all: the minority, if it had any cohesion or sincerity, might doubtless "keep the dull times off" their enemies in one way or other; but here is the rub, that they are *not* their enemies. By far the greater part of them are only awaiting a decent opportunity to declare themselves against the one measure before Parliament which tends towards the popular side, and which the chapter of accidents has forced them to put forward as a party test—Home Rule, to wit.

That is the reason why the leaders have passed the word to fight soft; but after all it is a futile expedient, now that the subject has had every word said about it that can be said. What will happen? Much what happened when Mr. Gladstone brought in his Home Rule Bill. He will come into office again sooner or later, and will be obliged to put forward his Home Rule measure, no doubt as strenuously as he knows how, since the rest of his life is pledged to carrying the matter through. Well, then up will jump a new section of the Great Liberal Party, men who are all Home Rulers now, and will cry out, "Oh, but we didn't mean this by Home Rule; this is disintegration of the empire, Socialism, Communism, and the devil knows what!" And they will turn Liberal Unionists, or whatever the name may then be for newly-declared reactionists, and the G. O. M. will be on his back in the road once more as a result of "strictly constitutional" opposition—otherwise fighting soft.

What is the alternative? Why, fighting hard. Mr. Gladstone is, without knowing it, engaged in rebellion—that is the plain truth; and his chance of success lies in his rallying to him all the elements of discontent and revolution throughout the country. These are growing on the one hand, just as the reactionary elements, the instincts towards absolutism, are growing on the other, and between them they make Mr. Gladstone's constitutional position an impossible one.

What could he do this session? it may be said. Well, two courses were open to the minority if they had (as they have not) any heart in them. In any case they could have said, How can this be a parliament when its very members are lying in gaol and are liable to be arrested on the threshold of the House for asserting their elementary rights as citizens? We do not acknowledge the authority of such a parliament. Then they might have proceeded to systematic obstruction, and prevented any business being done as long as the executive upheld its present tyranny.

Or, which would have been better, they might, after making an emphatic protest, have all marched out of the House in a body, leaving behind as traitors any of their party who had a mind to stop, never to return till coercion (in England as in Ireland) was at end, and invited the majority to make any new little laws they chose; they in the meantime meeting as a committee of freedom and giving advice and help to their constituencies.

Both these courses are, it seems, impossible, the first no less so than the last. Therefore the parliamentary opposition is worthless. Nay worse, it is actively harmful, because it prevents people from stirring who might otherwise be driven to do so; since they depend on the action of their precious "representatives."

One disappointment there has been already for those who were sanguine enough to hope for even a good wrangle in Parliament over Trafalgar Square. In spite of the brave words of Messrs. Russell, Pickersgill, Stuart and Bradlaugh, it has gone down the wind. For I suppose few can be found so—well, green—as to imagine that the appointment by the Government of a day when a substantive motion on the subject can be put, means anything else than the *shoff*.

After all something may come of all this; because though we are used to this miserable shuffling and thrusting aside of the people's needs and aspirations at the hands of all parties in Parliament, we are not so used to the assertion of the power (and therefore the right) of the Executive to treat us all like puppets, and our "constitutional

safeguards" as pretty pictures. In order to understand what real freedom is it was necessary for us to learn what middle-class democracy means by freedom, and to feel the full weight of the tyranny of a parliamentary majority, and to learn by bitter experience that it may be as tyrannous as the rule of any despotism of the earlier days. We are likely to grow wise in this knowledge before the end of this year.

Mr. Shaw-Lefevre has held *his* meeting without interference: can it be really true that this is because he is an ex-Cabinet Minister? One scarcely likes to accuse even Mr. Balfour of such mingled shabbiness and stupidity.

Bismark's new Socialist-Coercion Bill has missed fire, and our friends in Germany are not to be subjected to any more stringent repression than they are used to,—which is stringent enough in all conscience. There can be no question but that Singer's and Bebel's speeches in the Reichstag, mentioned in our columns last week, and their showing up of the interior working of Bismark's police, have been in the main the cause of what under the circumstances is a Socialist victory.

The Bermondsey Board of Guardians have been making a good thing out of the "relief" of the poor men employed in their stone-yards,—buying cheap and selling dear to them, as the way of the world is. The chairman thinks that the question was who should reap the benefit of a fall in prices—the ratepayers or the men? He was more of a man of the world than another member of the Board, a Mr. Bedding, who cried out, "Then we are actually making a profit out of our own poor on our own goods. I call it a robbery on these poor people."

It is creditable to Mr. Bedding that he could not take the matter coolly, and that this piece of shabby extortion startled him; but pray how do all capitalists live, except by "making a profit out of their own poor on their own goods"? May we not call it, like Mr. Bedding, "a robbery on those poor people"?

The jury find Arthur Gough guilty of "assaulting" the police (according to the story of the police), but think he did it "in a moment of excitement,"—i.e., "Guilty, but we don't think he did it." W. M.

An instructive example of the way in which bourgeois law regards woman is furnished by the action which Lord Howard de Walden brought against Major Burrowes on the 4th inst. The "noble" lord's wife was lying at death's door with peritonitis. The least excitement might have been fatal to her. Lord Howard de Walden is given to drink, and when intoxicated insists on entering his wife's room. As this might cost her life, her brother, Major Burrowes, finding other means of argument of no avail to induce the inebriated peer to remain outside his wife's door, knocked him down. Hence the prosecution.

The magistrate thought the assault justified it would appear. But the husband was not bound over to refrain from molesting his wife. It is apparently one of the privileges of matrimony that the husband, no matter how drunken, has a right to force himself upon his "property," even if he knows that fatal consequences may result. "May not a man do what he likes with his own?"

Last week also was raised the question whether a husband can rob his wife? Baron Huddleston on the 9th inst. answered this by saying (1) he cannot rob her at all under the common law, which regards all the wife's property as the husband's; and (2) theft is only robbery under the Married Women's Property Act when the wife is living apart from her husband or when he is preparing to desert her.

Whereupon the *Pall Mall* comments: "It is really quite amazing how many advantages a mistress has over a wife in all matters relating to property and to person. It almost seems as if the object of the law was to inflict such disabilities on wives in order to induce the fair sex to prefer concubinage to matrimony." But even the *Pall Mall*, brave as it is, would shrink from facing the *reason* of it all and carrying the question to its logical conclusion.

These anomalies and worse must last as long as private property exists in the means of life and therefore in those that live on them.

British pride has just received a severe shock from a curious dispute between a Japanese railway company and a German firm which contracted to supply rails. The company contracted for German rails as

"not only cheaper, but superior in quality to English rails." On their arrival it was discovered that the rails were all of British manufacture and the company accordingly refused to take delivery. Ultimately the matter was compromised, but "German credit has been brought into great disrepute on account of the transaction." "How have the mighty fallen!" S.

## THE NEW ETHIC.

(Continued from p 43.)

A FURTHER point of importance is, that the theological or mystical morality, while recognising the incompatibility of form to content in the individual—in other words, the incompleteness of the individual *per se*—as the crucial fact in the moral and religious consciousness, seeks to obviate this incompatibility, to resolve this contradiction, *per saltum*. The individual as individual cannot be an end or *telos* to himself, it rightly concludes; but his end it seeks to realise by a magic key which eliminates the concrete world altogether from the calculation. This done, the rest follows with the greatest possible ease and logicity. The ethical consciousness having disposed of the real world of concrete relations, proceeds to create an ideal world of abstract relations, in which it seeks satisfaction. And it must not be supposed there is anything arbitrary in this proceeding. The social medium in which morality first arose has changed; the individual has supplanted the community economically, socially, and politically; hence the ethical consciousness can by no possibility find satisfaction in the real world. The most that reason can do for it is to seek to explain it away by Epicurean or Benthamite theories of enlightened self-interest and the like. These, however, for the most part, only touch the man of learned leisure, and exercise but little real influence on the world at large. So that it is what we have termed the mystical or theological morality which alone really holds the field. And the apparent satisfaction which the latter carries with it only exhausts itself and passes away with the conditions which have given it birth. It was more or less in abeyance during the Middle Ages, when the social ethics of the German races asserted themselves concurrently with the remains of their primitive communism, which entered into the composition of the feudal system. But it existed nevertheless, and under Protestantism sprang up into rank luxuriance. It is the only moral theory the modern middle-class man can appreciate, with the exception of the empirical Benthamite theory, which in some cases is even more to his taste. But the Individualist ethics, whether mystical and introspective, or empirical and practical, is to-day rapidly evolving its own contradiction as its economic basis is dissolving. While the middle classes can conceive of no morality, of no goodness, that is not centered in the individual—be it in his soul or pocket—the working classes find their individuality merged in the collective existence of the group of producers to which they belong. Their whole life is, under the conditions of the Great Industry, a collective one, in so far as the labour of the individual is merged in the labour of the group, the group again in that of other groups, and so on throughout the entire industrial and commercial system. The workman of the Great Industry has never, as a rule, paid much regard to his soul, to the *good*, the *beautiful*, the *true*, as embodied in his character. "Personal holiness" has never been his ethical aim, as it has been the professed (and in some cases doubtless sincerely professed) aim of the moral man, and still more woman, among the middle classes. The idea of a "holy" working man is, so to say, comic. The virtues which the working classes recognise are rather those of integrity, generosity, comradeship, rather than those of "purity," "meekness," "piety," "self-abnegation," and the like—in other words, the *social* and objective virtues, those immediately referable to the social environment in which he moves, rather than the *individual* and subjective ones—those referable to his own personality as such. The working man has no time to think about his "soul," he will commonly tell you; he leaves that for the man of leisure. The decline of the introspective morality is of course largely connected with the dissolution by modern thought of its old theologic and ideologic basis. While the working classes have for the most part, in so far as they think at all about the matter, frankly renounced the old theology, the middle classes have occupied themselves with the endeavour to find out every conceivable compromise by which they might evade overtly breaking with the speculative tradition. But that it is possible for the introspective morality to survive its speculative basis is evidenced by the Positivists, who, while repudiating this basis, nevertheless retain the introspective ethics of Individualism in the most accentuated form, even to the extent of erecting into a devotional breviary the 'Imitatio Christi.'

As for the other form of the Individualist ethics, the latter-day counterpart of Epicureanism—namely, "enlightened self-interest"—that, like its forerunner in the classical world, is essentially the formulated ethic of the full belly and the full pocket. "Self-interest," from the workman's point of view, might lead him, should a safe opportunity offer itself, to plunder his employer's till, or at least husband his labour-power by doing the minimum of work possible, to the detriment of his master; but this, according to the advocates of the theory, would not be "enlightened." On the other hand, "enlightenment," in the bourgeois sense, would lead the workman (see Professor Huxley, 'Lay Sermons') "to starve rather than to steal"; but this, again, would not be "self-interest" from the workman's point of view, however "enlightened" it might be. So that, altogether, the workman seems rather "out of it" in so far as the gospel of "enlightened self-interest" is concerned.

This objective social morality, of which we see the germs even in the working classes of to-day, where they are not, as to a great degree, in this country, completely brutalised by the conditions of their life, becomes when translated into a higher plane the basis of the religion of Socialism, which consists in a sense of oneness with the social body—in its most immediate form, of oneness with the oppressed class which is struggling to emancipate itself. In the supreme aim and endeavour to aid the economic new-birth of Society, the Revolutionist has no time, and cares not to be continuously looking within, either to admire the beauty of his individual character or to measure its imperfections. He does not think about it. His highest instincts are directed not within but without, not on himself but on the social cause he has in view—the cause which means as its final issue the abolition of classes and the brotherhood of man.

Most of us are familiar with the well-known story of the workman National Guard who, when asked during the last days of the Commune what he was fighting for, replied *Pour la solidarité humaine*. It is quite possible that this poor workman understood but little if anything of "Scientific Socialism," or of the full meaning of the Human Solidarity for which he fought; yet his instincts and that of his fellows were true; they had the religion of Socialism at heart; they knew they were fighting for the emancipation of their class and that in this emancipation human solidarity was involved. The Ethics and the Religion of Socialism seeks not the ideal society through the ideal individual, but the ideal individual through the ideal society. It finds in an adequate and harmonious social life the end and completion of individuality, and at the same time it finds therein its primary condition.

But, says the empirical moral philosopher—and here we come to an important point—all I do is simply done to please myself; my apparently most disinterested actions are really at bottom selfish; I should not do them if it did not please me to do them,—I cannot transcend myself. Now this sound like common sense—irrefutable common sense. But in reality, like all the saws of the Empirical and eighteenth century philosophy, which sounds so plausible, it is but one of those half-truths which, when diligently investigated, evince themselves the most insidious of fallacies. It is quite true that externally and *formally* every motive actuating the individual has the stamp of his individuality upon it. This is a very harmless and at the same time a very obvious proposition; but it does not by a long way carry with it the implication which the empiricist would put upon it. Though the form of the motive may be individualistic, the content of the motive *may* transcend its form—*i.e.*, it may have for its end something wholly apart from and even antagonistic to individual interest as such. A man is said to have a high moral character precisely when the material of his motives does predominantly *not* coincide with their mere superficial form. He has a low moral character when this material does predominantly coincide with its form; and he has no moral character at all—*i.e.*, his character is criminal—when the form and the matter—*i.e.*, individual interest and motive-material—absolutely balance one another.

Now, the introspectionist, recognising the fact that morality implies motivation which breaks through its mere form of individual interest, and which may even contradict it, mistakes this merely negative element in the moral consciousness for its salient feature, and thinks the highest morality to consist in a continual mortification of self—in Asceticism. But as we before pointed out, while it seeks to kill off one self, it only does so in the interest of another, and, if anything, still more exacting self. Its object is only the individual in another form. Its great bogey is pleasure; its great end the annihilation of pleasure. Now the new ethic of Socialism has no part nor lot with asceticism. In the first place, it grudges the amount of energy expended by the individual in the effort to acquire the "self-discipline" so-called, which is only another name for moral tight-rope dancing which the ethics of inwardness postulates as its end. It despises the Introspectionist love of "striking an ethical attitude." The mere discomfort, or the sacrifice of the individual *per se*, is for it no virtue, but a folly, unless it be a part of the means to a *clearly defined* social end. I italicise the words *clearly defined*, as of course it is possible to smuggle in (*pace* the Positivists) under some vague phrase such as "social order" the whole of the theologic ethics, asceticism included. For it must be remembered that the habit of mind proper to the introspective ethics (sometimes broadly expressed by the word Puritanism) has the ascetic tendency so strongly developed that the possessor of it is never happy unless he is finding out that something or other which pleases his fellow-men is wrong. It is aptly illustrated by *Punch's* joke of the little girl who directs her brother to "go and see what baby's doing, and tell him he mustn't." *Refrain, refrain* is the dreary dirge which alone delights the soul of the being in question. Now the effects of the ascetic poison, as before said, outlives its cause. The introspective ethics of which it is part survive their theoretical basis. Thus even where this basis is no longer present, the mind cast in this mould will endeavour to find a possible evil in everything that conduces to pleasure or relaxation. The taint of introspection will not permit it to view life naturally. It must seek by sophistry to poison it for itself and others. Thus in the cases supposed where the divine fiat, or the inherent evil of matter, can no longer be appealed to, and where direct socially evil results cannot be proved, it will have recourse to vague and lofty phrases such as "Human Dignity" and the like. It is therefore necessary to emphasise the fact that for conduct to be justly condemned under the new ethic it must be proved to be *necessarily and directly* anti-social. The Ascetic and Puritan may lose his egoistic sense of smug self-satisfaction at being better than other men,