

THE WEEK.

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CONTENTS OF CURRENT NUMBER.

CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES—	PAGE
The Crisis in England.....	Goldwin Smith. 475
Our Paris Letter.....	L. L. 476
At the Farm (Poem).....	Selected. 477
Literary Notes from Paris.....	Zero. 477
In the Cloisters, Winchester College (Poem).....	Selected. 478
Goethe's Faust.....	Selected. 478
An Ode of Horace, Book II., Ode 14.....	F. Blake Crofton. 479
CORRESPONDENCE.....	479
TOPICS OF THE WEEK—	
The Musical Festival.....	480
The Nova Scotia Elections.....	480
No Secession.....	480
The Anarchists and the Knights of Labour.....	480
The Liberal Manifestoes.....	480
The Liberal Party and Home Rule.....	480
Mr. Gladstone's Shibboleth.....	481
Election Cries.....	481
Government and Coercion.....	481
The Question before the Country.....	481
Foreign Support to Mr. Gladstone.....	481
NOTES.....	481
POETRY—	
My Lady June.....	Frances Smith. 482
TWO NIGHTS—Continued.....	Ren. 482
MUSIC.....	483
HOURS WITH GERMAN CLASSICS.....	Jeanette Duncan. 484
THE WIND OF DESTINY.....	Ferrars. 484
THE WEALTH OF HOUSEHOLDS.....	Jeanette Duncan. 484
OUR LIBRARY TABLE.....	485

THE CRISIS IN ENGLAND.

IN my first letter I said that I was prepared for the defeat of the Irish Government Bill by a small majority. But since that time victory has been trembling in the scale, and the balance has inclined different ways from hour to hour. Though I have been in correspondence with some of those who were best qualified to judge, I have remained in the utmost uncertainty almost up to the hour of the division. After Mr. Gladstone's speech at the Foreign Office, it seemed likely that Mr. Chamberlain and his friends would abstain from voting, in which case the Government could have won. At that moment, I have reason to know, the leaders of the Unionist Liberals expected to be beaten, and contented themselves with the conviction that they could carry with them a large majority of the English and Scotch members. When it appeared that Mr. Chamberlain and his friends were, after all, determined to vote, a Unionist victory seemed pretty well assured; but even then the leaders of the Unionist Liberals were by no means confident of the result. Bright's letter produced a great effect.

The majority against the Government is larger than any one with whom I have been in communication expected. It may fairly be called decisive. Yet it is no measure of the number of members of the House of Commons who are really opposed to the Bill. I said that I did not believe that if the voting were by ballot and perfectly free, the Bill would receive twenty votes outside the Parnellite party. Mr. Bright has since said exactly the same thing. He ascribes the conduct of members in supporting the Bill against their own convictions to the personal authority of Mr. Gladstone. I suspect that even the personal authority of Mr. Gladstone, great as it is with many people, would not have been sufficient to produce the effect without the impersonal authority of the Caucus, which has been exerted without mercy and without shame. Some members, no doubt, have yielded to the screw; but in others, I am happy to say, the dogged British dislike of yielding to pressure has been aroused. If anything can beat the Caucus it is the Bulldog. The breed has its unamiable features; but I am happy to see that it is not extinct. Another influence which acted on many was the fear of breaking up the Liberal Party. With this feeling I sympathise myself, though I hold that above all parties in the country, as the organ of constitutional progress for two centuries the Liberal Party has a glorious record, and has rendered the highest services—not only to England, but to humanity. It might have continued to render similar services for some time to come, had it only been in wiser and less arbitrary hands. If it is now shattered past the possibility of reunion, the blame rests on the chief, who, instead of taking the Party and its other leaders into his confidence, chose, in order that he might engross the whole credit of settling the Irish question, to prepare a scheme of his own in secret, and by a dictatorial exercise of his authority to force it on the Party. Lord Palmerston's prediction that Mr. Gladstone's want of wisdom would wreck the great majority bequeathed to him, though its fulfilment has been long deferred, is at length fulfilled.

The threat of dissolution also had its effect on Members who had just gone through the trouble and expense of an election, especially if their seats were unsafe. I cannot help thinking that the employment of this mode of

coercion by a Minister, though now familiar, is an abuse of the prerogative of the Crown. I should have been glad if the Queen had been at liberty, and could have been advised, to announce that, in order to secure to the House perfect freedom of deliberation on a question concerning the very life of the nation, whatever the result might be, no dissolution would follow.

The "old Parliamentary hand" has exhausted all the resources of his strategy, and, considering the palpable defects, or rather the utterly impracticable character of his measure, I think it must be owned that he has proved his tact and skill by holding together so large a body of supporters. His shifting series of explanations, however, which the *Times* says became at last so complex as to defy any but algebraical expression, produced an impression of trickiness which did him mischief. His reputation for straightforwardness has unquestionably suffered from his recent conduct in the eyes of impartial men. Nothing could be more explicit than his declaration that the Purchase Bill, which was to save the landowners from confiscation, was "inseparable" from the Home Rule Bill. Out of that pledge he has now slipped by saying that he only meant that the two Bills were to be laid together before the House, intimating at the same time pretty broadly that he is ready to leave the Purchase Bill to its fate, if by so doing he can gain any votes. One of his friends in the Press asked us indignantly the other day, whether it was possible to believe that such a man as Mr. Gladstone would do anything that his conscience did not approve. Certainly not; but the unfortunate part of it is that Mr. Gladstone's conscience seems to approve everything that conduces to the glory of Heaven and Mr. Gladstone. Sir Robert Peel, when he changed his opinion on the subject of the Corn Laws, paid a signal and noble tribute to public morality. Not only did he avow his conversion in the frankest manner, but he at once resigned office, and did not resume it till the Whigs, having had the fairest opportunity which he could give them, had failed to form a Government. Mr. Gladstone one day denounces Mr. Parnell as marching through rapine to the disintegration of the Empire, and berates a Conservative Government for forming an alliance with him: next day, without a word of explanation or apology, he flings himself into Mr. Parnell's arms, accepts office at his hands, and proceeds to give legislative effect to his designs. He appeals to the constituencies to give him a majority such as will make him independent of Mr. Parnell, and he then places himself, and all that remains to him of his party, in a position of complete dependence on Mr. Parnell's will. Nor does he say a word to reassure the consciences of his friends, or to relieve them from their equivocal position. All he thinks of is persuading them personally to follow him, and, if they hang back, coercing them through the Caucus or by threats of a dissolution. He now flings himself into the arms, not only of the Disunionist Mr. Parnell, but of the Jacobin Mr. Labouchere, whom he has chiefly employed in his attempts to bring over by negotiation the seceding Liberals. A strange close for the career of one who set out in public life as the hope of Conservatives and High Churchmen, the pre-eminently cultured and Christian statesman!

The struggle has been one of extraordinary intensity, as well it might be, considering that the stake was nothing less than the integrity of the nation. I think there is a growing conviction that disintegration will not stop at Ireland, but that, if Ireland goes, India will follow, while with India will go the Indian market. The resolute firmness with which the Unionist Liberals have withstood the screw is, as I said before, a very redeeming feature in a generally ominous situation, and leads one to hope that in that quarter a man may be found who will try to control events instead of abandoning himself with fatalistic helplessness to the current of headlong change. Unless such a man appears, depend upon it, disaster is at hand. Mr. Chamberlain has shown a very remarkable force of character. He is of course savagely baited by the Parnellites. But I believe it will turn out that he has done what was best not only for the country but for himself. For Dismemberment, when its consequences were felt, would certainly have been followed by a strong recoil. The spirit of the British nation, though it has been brought low, is not yet dead.

Fears are naturally felt as to the effect which the rejection of the Bill may produce in Ireland. But Canada has seen something of the Nationalists under their former name of Fenians, and she can tell England that while they are never appeased by concession they are sometimes appeased by defeat. Riots are unfortunately going on in Belfast, their frequent scene. They give us an inkling of what an Irish Parliament will be. The