

CURRENT EVENTS AND OPINIONS.

WE have now before us Mr. Gladstone's speech upon the Franchise Bill. He is always at his best as a speaker when he is expounding and vindicating the details of a great and complex measure. This power and his impressiveness of manner are his great parliamentary gifts; for he does not vie with the renowned masters of what is more properly called eloquence in their own line, nor do the moral appeals and the perorations which are so thrilling in the House produce the same effect when read next morning in cold blood. He has an easier task on this occasion than he had seventeen years ago, when he was defending against the criticisms, at once philosophic and biting, of Mr. Lowe, the measure which disturbed the great settlement of 1831 and launched the nation on the slope down which it was sure to slide ultimately into universal suffrage. The issue was then the broad one between middle class and popular rule; but that question was settled in 1867 by the mad party spirit of the Tories, the unscrupulous ambition of their leaders, and Lord Beaconsfield's vulgar hatred of the commercial middle class. When the suffrage has been conceded to the populace of the cities, now largely composed in many cases of Irish immigrants who are avowed enemies of the nation, it cannot be consistently or reasonably withheld from the peasantry, who are, in the most essential respects, worthier and more trustworthy citizens. Mr. Gladstone's general principle, which is government not only for but by the people, has therefore been ratified beforehand by his opponents, who are now in the position of having to combat the less dangerous concession, after having themselves made the more dangerous; while shame forbids them to avow that their object in enfranchising the city populace was to subvert the ascendancy of the middle class, whereas the enfranchisement of the rural householder threatens to subvert their own. Their best argument, practically, is the peril attendant on the extension of the measure to Ireland. To leave out Ireland is felt to be morally impossible, and the hope is cherished that the Irish labourers may not always vote with the Land League, which is purely a conspiracy of tenant farmers for the spoliation of their landlords, the worst of whom can hardly excel in harshness the behaviour of many tenant farmers to the labourer. Perhaps wisdom might suggest the postponement of political change altogether till the country is in a more settled state, and the Union has been placed out of danger; nor is it unlikely that this consideration will decide the action of some who either welcome or accept as inevitable the extension of the franchise in itself. The Tories in the Lords, under the Marquis of Salisbury, will no doubt make a stand, and try to force a dissolution, by which they would probably gain if their leaders were less despised and mistrusted than they are. If they are beaten, the reform will unquestionably be extended, without mercy, to their own House. Privilege, if it throws down the gauge of battle, will be fighting no longer for its ascendancy, but for its existence. This deadly arbitrament Mr. Gladstone probably wishes to avert; many and fierce as his political collisions with the aristocracy of late have been, his social connection with it is intimate, a good deal more intimate, in fact, than ever was that of Lord Beaconsfield; his personal respect for it amounts even to a weakness; and it will by no means be surprising if, after carrying his Bill through the House of Commons, he should, by way of close to his long career, go up with it to the House of Lords and try by his personal influence in debate to counteract the violent counsels of Lord Salisbury, and avert the mortal shock. Much still hangs by the thread of a life which now numbers seventy-four years.

THE defect of Mr. Gladstone's speech on the Franchise Bill is the general defect of his mind. It lacks practical forecast. He fails to tell us, except in a vague and rhetorical way, what he expects the effect on the character of Government to be, and what sort of polity he supposes will be the result. In his peroration he commends his Bill as a measure which "will unite all classes of the community in one solid, compact mass round an ancient throne." A leading member of his Government, Mr. Chamberlain, is actually sounding, in anticipation of the extended franchise, the tocsin of social war. The mention of the throne shows that even Mr. Gladstone's intellect has not escaped the influence of the general illusion. He believes that the Crown is still the government, and that the House of Commons is, as it was in by-gone days, merely the representation of the people; so that the character of the House of Commons can be changed and the Government get left substantially as it is, with an authority and a stability of its own. This belief is only a survival of the monarchied past. There is now no government in England but the House of Commons, whose nominees and servants the members of the Executive are, though they are styled the servants of the Queen. There is no real power or authority remaining in any other hands. If in the constituencies by which the House of Commons

is elected passion and ignorance prevail, they will prevail in the government of the country, and there will be nothing to check or mitigate their influence. If the House of Commons becomes a mob, as a mob it is fast becoming, the new rules notwithstanding, anarchy is the inevitable result. Nor will it be possible to resume, otherwise than by a reactionary revolution, the concessions which have once been made. Two things, as the "Bystander" is convinced, have been proved by the experience of democracy on this continent. The first is the fatal tendency of the party system, which inevitably involves the progressive ascendancy of faction demagogism and corruption. The second is the inability of the people really to exercise the right of direct election to the central legislature. The popular suffrage always is and must be practically confiscated by the wire-puller, who will always get the nominations into his hands, and whose influence, his objects being what they are, will, in increasing measure, exclude integrity and independence. The one clear success of the American Constitution is the Senate, which is not elected by the people directly, but by the State Legislatures, and which, if party were out of the way, would be about as good a Federal government as could be desired. First to develop thoroughly the local institutions, and then to base the central institutions upon them, was the course to which experience pointed, and to which nations with elective governments will in the end come round, though not till they have tasted more thoroughly the bitter fruits of party government and direct popular election.

THE weakness of divided command has appeared not on the field of Cannæ alone, and it is natural that the English Conservatives, now on the eve of decisive battle, should think it time to put an end to the dual generalship and elect a single chief. It is natural also that they should prefer Lord Salisbury, as being at once the stronger Conservative and by far the stronger man. Sir Stafford Northcote is a relic of that residuum which remained with the late Lord Derby when the rupture had taken place on the subject of the Corn Laws, and the talent of the party had seceded with Peel. He humbly and assiduously served Lord Beaconsfield, who, unlike Peel, bequeathed to the country a rich legacy of political domestics, but no statesmen. Lord Salisbury is a man altogether of higher calibre, besides the advantages, never disregarded by Conservatives, of rank and fortune. Yet it may be doubted whether, by discarding Sir Stafford Northcote and giving the truncheon of command to Lord Salisbury, the party will improve its chances of victory. Sir Stafford's conservatism, though feeble, is national; it is the sentiment of the quiet and well-to-do classes generally, of all who look with dread upon the progress of socialism, collectivism, agrarianism, disunionism, atheism, and all the other spirits of revolution which at present ride the gale; and therefore it attracts as large a following as any conservatism can in an age of progress. Lord Salisbury's conservatism is that of a territorial aristocrat with no real interests or sympathies beyond the pale of a privileged order, and his eloquent unwisdom never fails to accentuate the untoward fact. A Government on such a basis as his would topple over in six months. Never was man more richly endowed by nature with every qualification for bringing ruin on his party and cause. A grain less of talent, and the compound would have been marred. Among the many misfortunes of England at this perilous juncture it is by no means the least, even in the eyes of rational Liberals, that the Conservative party, instead of being led by a Pitt, a Canning or a Peel, should be compelled to choose between Sir Stafford Northcote and Lord Salisbury, with the prospect, apparently, in case the choice falls upon Lord Salisbury, of having such a political scamp and mountebank as Lord Randolph Churchill for leader of the party in the House of Commons. Such is the effect of the party system upon the quality of statesmen. England, with all her faults and backslidings, is still full of integrity, patriotism and practical wisdom; as may be seen by anybody who goes among her leading men in the great professions, the great industries, and the other walks of private life. But these men do not come to the front. The men who come more and more to the front are the masters of that craft in which Lord Randolph Churchill is pre-eminent, and can give congenial expression to party passions and follies on the stump.

It is pretty clear that among the other storm-clouds lowering over England a regency now impends. That which has long been coming seems at last to have come. The Crown is politically faint; yet a great change in the social character of the Court might in the present frame of the public mind be attended with political effects. The Prince of Wales went into life with an excellent disposition; nor in becoming a voluptuary has he, like most voluptuaries, become heartless or forgotten old friends who are entirely outside his present circle. He had the misfortune to lose, at the critical moment, the three men who might have stayed his youthful