

# THE WEEK.

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## THE FISHERIES QUESTION AND THE CRISIS IN ENGLAND.

To add to the troubles of England and of the world in general, the Fisheries Question seems once more to have assumed an angry aspect. The strongest are apt to be the aggressors, and it is very likely that the Americans are the aggressors in the present case. A Canadian, at all events, is bound to assume, till he knows the contrary, that his own Government has right on its side. The only thing I have to say is that we must not be too exacting in our demands upon the support and protection of the Mother Country. She has enough upon her hands in Egypt, in Greece, in Afghanistan, in South Africa, in New Guinea, in all parts of the earth and in all diplomatic spheres, besides this Irish difficulty, which Mr. Blake and a certain party in Canada have been doing their best, for their own political purposes, to increase. At the same time, some of her great interests are depressed, her commerce is in a precarious state, and her finances are not prosperous. It would be hard then, and more than hard, to expect that she should be ready to go into a war with the United States, a power superior to her in population and probably equal in resources, for the sake of a right of fishing over far distant waters, in which the mass of her people have not the slightest interest. I know that her honour is pledged to us, and I hope she will redeem the pledge, but, I repeat, we must not be too exacting. In case of a war we could do little to help her by land or sea, for our half-drilled militia could not be of much use, and navy we have none. It is doubtful whether our people could even be persuaded to contribute money to the expenses of the war. We are bound then, at all events, to be moderate in our language, and not to aggravate the difficulty and danger of the Mother Country by violence and bluster. Cherishing as I do the moral tie between Great Britain and her Colonies, I have always regarded the political connection with misgiving because I have feared that out of it might arise some cause of complaint which would make Separation take the form of a rupture, and a rupture with the Mother Country would, as I believe, be about the greatest misfortune that could befall us.

As I write, the debate on the Irish Bill appears at last to be drawing to a close. But the Government will not let the division take place till all the resources of the Caucus, and every other engine which can be brought to bear on seceders or waverers, shall have been exhausted. Without this pressure and Mr. Gladstone's influence I do not believe that the measure would receive twenty votes exclusive of the Parnellites. The speech of Mr. Finlay has convinced everybody that the Bill abrogates the supremacy of Parliament and extinguishes the sovereign power; and that the Government should have put up the Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs to maintain the contrary only proves, once more, the haste with which the Bill has been concocted and the crudity of its provisions. Mr. Gladstone, however, seems bent upon forcing his measure through, and he closets himself with Mr. Schnadhorst of Birmingham, the Head Centre of all the Caucuses, to concert the means of getting up an incendiary agitation against the Union

which can hardly fail to develop into a revolutionary movement of a more general kind. He seems to be now dominated by an imperious egotism, the result of popular applause, of flattery, and perhaps of old age, which usually intensifies the ruling passion. At all events, he forgets things which a British Statesman ought to remember. His appeal to class passion against the more educated portion of the community, to which he belongs himself, excited universal disgust, and reveals the immensity of a self-esteem which can persuade him that, though he stands alone against all the intelligence of the country, his opinion must be right and anyone who differs from it must be influenced by bad motives. But worse still, as I cannot help thinking, is his treatment of the Irish Loyalists. He must know that these people are in peril because they are true to the country, and that the honour of the nation is deeply concerned in their protection. Yet he has for them no word of sympathy or even of common consideration; he treats them with contemptuous aversion as people who are guilty of standing in the way of his policy. The threat of confiscation which he throws out against the Irish landowners because they, to their great credit, refuse to take his bribe and support his measure of Disunion, is, I really believe, about the most flagitious thing ever penned by a British Minister. Nor does he show, as any patriotic Minister would undoubtedly show, in bringing forward such a scheme, a tender regard for the greatness of the country and an anxiety to prove that it will not be impaired by his policy. That Mr. Gladstone is designed by Providence to have the honour and glory of settling the Irish question appears to be the one engrossing thought of Mr. Gladstone.

I have expressed my belief that while the intelligence of the country is with unprecedented unanimity against the G.O.M., the masses are still with him. They do not understand the Irish question, much less have they studied the Bill. They are caught by vague and empty phrases such as "conciliation" and "autonomy," the latter of which has all the more effect upon their minds because it is Greek. But above all, their imaginations are filled with the imposing figure and the impressive oratory of the G.O.M., which there is nothing to balance, so that he reigns in the popular fancy alone. If among his opponents there were a Canning or even a Palmerston, the glamour which surrounds him would be at once dispelled, his despotic influence would cease, and his scheme of Disunion would be cast aside. Unhappily for the country, there is, at this perilous crisis, absolutely no one qualified to dispute his hold upon the popular mind. The only influence at all comparable in strength to his is that of the Sovereign, which has hitherto by constitutional rules been kept dormant. If the Queen were to intervene personally, I really believe she might even now checkmate him. But as he would certainly raise a great storm, there would be peril in such intervention, and who can give perilous counsel to a lady?

To escape certain and imminent defeat, Mr. Gladstone has stooped to take the strangest course, perhaps, ever taken by the head of a Government. He promises, if he is spared an overthrow on the second reading, not only to withdraw his Bill for the present, but to abandon its vital clause. Vital the clause excluding the Irish members from the Parliament at Westminster is; and dead, as I believe, the Bill will prove to be without it. It is plain that the Irish members cannot be allowed to sit in the British Parliament and vote on British subjects, when the British are not allowed to sit in the Irish Parliament and vote on Irish subjects. The only expedient left, therefore, if the Irish are still to sit at Westminster and at the same time to have a Parliament of their own at Dublin, will be to draw a distinction between Imperial and British questions, and to allow the Irish to vote on Imperial questions only. But I have shown before that such a distinction is in practice impossible. All the parts of the policy of a governing assembly are more or less interdependent, and play into each other; and you might as well attempt to divide into sections the active life of a man as that of a Parliament. Finance, especially, is a consideration which pervades every portion of a policy, foreign as well as domestic. Mr. Gladstone the other day asserted, and appealed to the political history of England for proof of his assertion, that only by means of Party could Parliamentary Government be carried on. Let him then show how the admission of an Irish representation on Imperial or reserved subjects only can be made compatible with the working of the Party system. Can the Irish members support or oppose a Party on the Imperial or reserved subjects without affecting its general strength? As I put it before, suppose want of confi-