

THE WEEK.

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AFFAIRS IN ENGLAND.

OXFORD, where I am staying, is no longer out of the world or in the Middle Ages: it is almost a suburb of London, from which it is reached by a run of one hour and a half over the best piece of railway in the world. The celibate and monkish Fellows of College are celibate and monkish no longer. There is a large, most intellectual, and most delightful society, which, at the same time, as it consists of people of moderate income, is free from the excessive luxury and expensiveness of the Metropolis. Science and a variety of other studies have broken the once exclusive reign of Classics and Theology. One who was a student here in the Tractarian times would hardly know the place again. Public men often come down to spend the Sunday in summer, and perhaps intercourse with them is more instructive here than it is when they are in the heat of the fray. Oxford feels all the movements of public opinion, and her ancient Toryism has given place, among the younger and the more active-minded of her denizens, to the very opposite tendency. Even Socialism finds itself quite at home in the University of Eldon. The broad facts of the political world and the great current of public thought may be studied just as well here as in London, though the personal movements and influences can only be well observed in the centre of action.

Moreover, I have been in London and in the middle of the political cyclone. A cyclone it may truly be called. Never within my recollection has there been such excitement since the battle between Free Trade and Protection. In the House of Commons, where I listened to a debate the other evening, the atmosphere was evidently electric. Sir Henry James, formerly Attorney-General, was delivering himself with the greatest gravity of a long argument on Constitutional Law, and his legal points seemed to draw forth from his audience stronger expressions of emotion than would be elicited by passionate eloquence in ordinary times. Then everybody hung upon the lips of Mr. Campbell-Bannerman, a singularly unrheterical speaker, to use the mildest expression, because it was supposed that he was going to announce some important concession on the part of the Government: an expectation which was not fulfilled. The House was crowded, the galleries being filled with members for whom there were no seats below. The first reform which the House ought to undertake, one would think, is to provide sufficient accommodation for its own members, some of whom, under the present arrangement, can be said, after all the expenditure and trouble of an election, to win a "seat" only in a metaphorical sense. Pending such reform members ought to be allowed to bring their camp-stools. From the place where I sat, I had a full view of the Irish members, a glance at whom is enough to show what a Nationalist Parliament is likely to be, and how far it is likely to represent the intelligence and legislative capacity of Ireland. Many of them were men whom you would have expected to see rather behind a bar than in a legislative assembly, and the sound, when they interrupted an adverse speaker with their ironical cheers, was brutish. Happy Ireland, if she is to be delivered into their hands! That there are some men of a better stamp and some genuine enthusiasts

among them I do not question, but Nature gives a false warning to the beholder if the most of them are fit for a high trust.

It is idle to attempt to send you either news or predictions. The cable will have anticipated the news, and the predictions will reach you after the event. This may be said with certainty, that if all or anything like all those who are opposed to Mr. Gladstone's scheme will vote against it, it is already dead and buried fathoms deep. Never was the intelligence of the country more unanimous than it is against the scheme of Separation, so suddenly sprung upon the nation. The criticisms of Sir James Stephen, Lord Selborne, Mr. Goschen, and Lord Hartington, have left of the hasty and ill-constructed fabric not one stone, or, I should rather say, one cloud upon another. No part of it indeed is any longer seriously defended by Mr. Gladstone and his friends. They avow their willingness to alter everything, provided only that they can be spared a defeat on the second reading. "Only accept the principle," they say, "and we are content." As though the principle of a scheme, and of a scheme professedly brought forward to meet a great practical emergency, could be accepted without the scheme itself. In place of attempting to defend by argument that which cannot by argument be defended, recourse is had to phrases such as "justice to Ireland," "impossibility of coercion" and "necessity of conciliation," which Government speakers and writers repeat on all platforms and in all journals, begging the question, of course, on each occasion, since nothing can be justice to Ireland which is not practically good for her, while "coercion," as applied to the mere prevention of outrage such as would disgrace savages, is a totally misleading phrase, and the special contention on the other side is that the institution of a vassal Parliament and a tributary Nationality instead of "conciliating" the Irish will only open a new era of discord. In private I have hardly heard a word said for the Bill, even by strong adherents of its author. If the vote in the House of Commons were to be taken by ballot, the majority against the Government would be immense. But party ties are strong; they are stronger than patriotism; and the Caucus is putting on the screw with all its might. The "Old Parliamentary hand" also is doing his best, and the ticklish position of the seceding Liberals, who are thrown for the moment into alliance with the enemies of the Party, affords great scope for his tactics. Mr. Labouchere is an ardent supporter of Mr. Gladstone and of Home Rule, but he cannot restrain his caustic wit. He says that he should not like to play poker with Mr. Gladstone, because the G. O. M. would have three aces up his sleeve and would firmly believe that Providence had put them there. No diplomacy is more astute or unscrupulous than that of the monk. People, however, are now pretty well awake to Mr. Gladstone's strategical tendencies, and few are misled by the assurance that in passing the Bill through its second reading they will only be agreeing to "a resolution." They know that as soon as the advantage had been gained it would, under highly moral and religious pretexts, be used to the uttermost, all apparent assurances to the contrary notwithstanding. There would be no verbal breach of promise, but, as *The Times* says, "Mr. Gladstone's peculiar dialect is exposed to incalculable developments."

I am prepared, then, for the defeat of the Bill, either on the second reading or on some vital point in Committee, by a small majority only, which will, in all probability, be followed by a dissolution and an appeal to the country. Nothing could be worse for the community at this moment than a general election, which in addition to the repetition, after so short an interval, of all the waste of money, of confusion and disturbance of commerce, would fill the nation with violence, precipitate the march of revolution, and render Ireland more ungovernable than ever. But Mr. Gladstone seems to have become utterly reckless of everything but victory: if I said that he was utterly reckless of everything but personal victory I believe I should do him no great injustice, though his belief in its Providential character would be sincere. His frame of mind is revealed, to the scandal and disgust even of his oldest and warmest friends, by his last Manifesto, in which he openly appeals to the passions of the masses against the intelligence of the more educated classes, including that of his own recent colleagues. He believes, and I suspect he is right in believing, that while the intelligence of the country is against him the populace is still with him. Not that the populace understands the Irish question, or cares much about the particular issue; but it still blindly follows Mr. Gladstone, who has become the fetish of its idolatry. In a sensational age any figure which has once caught the popular fancy is apt to be exalted