

THE ENGLISH EARLY CLOSING CONGRESS.

A VERY representative body of merchants and shopkeepers met in congress in the Exchange Hall at Nottingham last week, says 'The Drapers' Record. Delegates were gathered together from all over the Kingdom. Their object was to confer as to the best means of obtaining the great boon of shorter hours for the male and female assistants whose work is behind shop counters all over the land. We are struck, first of all, by the quiet and moderate tone of those who took part in the long and interesting debate, by the humane spirit which evoked the gathering, and by the soundness of the arguments which were brought forward.

For fifty years the Early Closing Association has been pursuing its beneficent course; its directors are able to point to a vast improvement in the condition of shop assistants, not only as to the hours in which they work, but to the greater facilities which they have for recreation, the increased comfort of their surroundings, and the greater consideration which they receive at the hands of employer and customer alike. But this improvement is not absolute. It exists only in the wealthier and more fashionable districts of the metropolis, and of the great cities and towns of the provinces. Wherever the masses congregate for shopping purposes, there late hours and long hours are the rule and not the exception. Indeed, Mr. J. A. Stacey stated, in a paper read by him at the Congress, that in many of the suburban districts of London the hours of the shop assistants were as long now as they were five and twenty years ago. The statement of the House of Commons Committee, "The hours of shop assistants range as high as from 84 to 85 per week," is still true of all the poorer parts of great cities. An average day of fourteen hours in an atmosphere heavily charged with the products of burning gas, especially at the end of the day, cannot be conducive to the health of either employer or employed. On the contrary, it is the proper atmosphere to impel consumption, that terrible disease which creeps upon so many of our people almost unawares; and no class is, perhaps, more subject to it than drapers' assistants, especially the young women.

Sir John Lubbock pleaded hard at the Congress for the cause which he has long championed. Whatever the kindly baronet has to say on this subject is deserving of attention. Millions of the toiling classes owe him thanks, and they best pay the debt by their cricket, football, cycling, tennis, boating, and other recreations which are regularly delighted in as the holidays and the seasons come round. But to return to the Congress. Sir John stated that early closing could not become universal unless by legislative enactment. Other speakers gave the following illustrations of the failure of the voluntary system: The majority of the shopkeepers in a given district would agree to close their shops at a reasonably early hour. The plan would be adopted for a short time, until a new and "smart" competitor would locate himself in their midst, keep his shutters down and his gas up, and so compel the older tradesmen to revert to his own inhuman and unnecessary practice. Or, again, a majority of shopkeepers in a district would be quite willing to shut up shop, but a few of their neighbors, more selfish, or, perhaps, less far sighted, would refuse to join the reforming band, with the lamentable result that those who would be just to their servants and themselves were not permitted to be so.

Now the principle which Sir John Lubbock advocated, and which the Conference supported, was what may be called compulsory closing by local option. The doctrine is set forth in the

following terms—we quote the hon. baronet's words:—"We ask that when two-thirds of the shopkeepers in any trade desire it, the Town Council or the County Council shall have power to close the shops earlier in the evening, and to arrange for a weekly half-holiday on the day which may be most convenient." We think that opinion in the drapery trade is as yet divided as to the wisdom of this course. In fact, a certain number of old supporters seceded from the Early Closing Association when its managers threw over the voluntary principle. It is evident, however, from the tone of the Nottingham Congress, that the supporters of the Local Option Closing Bill are hopeful as to the future.

DRY GOODS AND THE LONG CREDIT SYSTEM.

FOR years past, says the Trade Bulletin, we have persistently advocated a curtailment of the long credit system which obtains in the wholesale dry goods trade, and as long as this abuse of legitimate trading is practised will we denounce it. In order to reduce the six months credit which is given by English and Canadian manufacturers, agreements have been repeatedly entered into, only to eventuate in signal failures, as there were always to be found parties who would appear to observe them by giving credit at the shorter date agreed upon, but would virtually break them by granting renewals that would simply amount to the old long time credits it was sought to abolish. Consequently, these agreements were found to be nothing else than dishonest compacts, entered into on the part of some for the express purpose of taking advantage of the honest members of the combination. If Canadian manufacturers, however, would take the matter in hand and agree to sell their staples at 30 days, they could by that means compel the wholesale dealers to adopt a shorter system of credit, and thus force upon the trade one of the greatest reforms ever inaugurated, and one which has been admitted for years to be essentially necessary for placing business upon a more solid basis. If our home manufacturers were to take this matter up in earnest, they would soon effect the much needed curtailment of long credits, which the wholesale trade has repeatedly tried in vain to accomplish. Nor would the wholesale and retail trade derive exclusive benefits therefrom, as the manufacturers themselves would be relieved of the necessity of carrying the large stocks they are now obliged to have on hand, and besides, they would be rid of the annoyance of seeing their own money used for the payment of duties on English goods. The granting of the too easy credits that have prevailed in Canada has no doubt had the pernicious effect of encouraging that loose and indiscriminate distribution of goods which has caused so much financial trouble in the past. There is no reason why the short credit system observed in the wholesale grocery trade should not be put in force in the dry goods business; but it will never be brought into practice by the signing of round robins among members of the wholesale trade, agreeing to shorten credits, when some of them at once do their utmost to contravene it in order to take undue advantage of their unsuspecting confreres, by agreeing to give the long terms they had promised to abstain from giving. The fact of this duplicity being practised through the medium of renewals made it all the more contemptible, and proved the impossibility of bringing about the desired reform through such means. Canadian manufacturers, however, have it in their power to effectually curtail the long credits, which it is admitted on all hands have been the source of most of the disastrous reverses that have befallen the dry goods trade for many years past.