

## LABOUCHERE.

T. P. O'Connor Discusses the  
Modern Punchinello.

## A VERY COMPLICATED CHARACTER.

There are as many different pictures and estimates of Mr. Labouchere as of any living man. People are still entirely undecided as to which is the reality and which the fiction; and no assistance is to be got from the great humorist himself. At times you are startled in the deshabille of smoke-room conversation by some appalling revelation of Labby's cynical disregard of all things sacred and profane, and, above all things, of his own reputation. There is no doubt that some of these things have been said by Labby himself, but there has grown around his name a number of quite legendary and apocryphal sayings—as is the nature of things always in the case of well-known and much-quoted men. All the same a good deal comes from Labby's own wit. He cannot resist saying a good thing, whether at his own expense or that of others; and the world mainly consisting of dullards or Pharisees, he has been taken seriously in his wildest and most unguarded things; pious men have lifted their eyes to heaven; men who are not pious sigh that Labby has such small respect for the generally prevalent dullness and love of decorum which characterizes the race of politicians; and especially of Liberal politicians. The result of it all is that Labby lives in a nimbus of stories that tell against himself, that he constantly figures as a sayer of heartless things, and the doer of extraordinary things. To get at the real man is difficult amid all this cloud of stories and absurdities; and Labby has come to act the part he has been playing all his life so naturally as to defy the keenest observer to know when he is the real and when the legendary man.

And yet one must make the attempt. And the very first thing to do is to get rid of most of the preconceived ideas among the public as to the inner meaning of this mystery. First Labby is not a fribble, but a very serious man. He is, perhaps, a good deal more serious than he thinks himself. It is impossible else to account for his career. All kinds of men get the credit of being the most hard-worked members of the House of Commons, it is probable that Labby, after all, is the person who deserves the palm; for he is incessant in work. With most people Sunday is a day of rest; Labby nearly always spends half of it at his desk. He has a wondrous faculty and a wondrous power of sticking to it when once he gets to writing. He has beside him a huge bundle of stylographs in all shapes and forms—new and old, good and bad, dear and cheap. And you see the stylograph quietly moving along pages of the small note books in which he writes; there is no sign of effort—there is no pause—a word is rarely changed, it all comes out as freely as if it were just the ink which flows from the pen itself. People sometimes attribute to Labby a great deal that he doesn't write. He tells with much amusement of being many times out by ladies and gentlemen for some atrocity which he has never seen or heard of, although it had appeared in his own columns. But there is this justification for the legend, that there are few editors who contribute so persistently and so lengthily to the columns of their own newspapers as Mr. Labouchere.

Even when he is on vacation, whether it be in the depressing atmosphere of Carlsbad or under the sunny sky of the Italian lakes, while other men give themselves unresisting up to the absolute laziness of vacation, Labby is still busy; and he is never satisfied till he

has told the world his impression of the cure he is taking, of the air he is breathing, or of the latest movements in the political world he has left behind him at home. One can understand this amount of hard work in a journalist who has to write for bread, or who is paid by the line; Mr. Labouchere is notoriously a man of very great wealth; he could buy all the talent of London for his journal if necessary; and he must, therefore, work for the pure delight of the thing. I have a theory that no man who works hard can be really without seriousness as the foundation of his character.

If you follow the editor from his office to the House of Commons, you find the same thing. It is true that there is lacking there that tenacity which he shows over his desk; but the explanation is not that Labby's attention is not just as concentrated and sleepless in the one case as in the other; it is all due to a fact that Labby is the slave of one tyrant habit; he cannot live without smoking. At his desk he need never let a cigarette go out; if the easy manners which once are said to have prevailed in the Dutch Legislature were to be allowed in the House of Commons, and Labby could there smoke his cigarette, it is possible that he would never leave his seat. As it is, a half an hour is just enough to exhaust his power of remaining in his place. Whatever the subject, however entrancing the orator, however big with fate the crisis, Labby slowly gets up, saunters out of the House with that quiet, indolent walk of his, and makes his way to the smoke room. A few years ago he added to all these labors an immense quantity of platform speaking. Few weeks passed away which did not see him on some platform up and down the country. He would go incredible distances—pass from Glasgow to Brighton, and from Brighton to Hull within a few days, and do all this with a disregard for any of the precautions or comforts of a traveller, which were enough to make any cheek

blanch. For this Epicurean of popular imagination is more devoid, less conscious or tolerant of any sense of comfort than any human being in the House of Commons. It is hard for men who have been brought up in all the struggles and self denials or poverty to understand the indifference of those who have always been able to enjoy all the luxuries of wealth.

Labby is certainly a remarkable example of the absolute indifference to such things which wealth brings. He never touches wine except for six weeks every year. For some reason unintelligible to every body—perhaps even to himself—he falls in with the habits of the Italians when he is dwelling on their lakes so far as to take wine twice daily; except for this curious episodic interim, wine never passes his lips. He claims no merit for this; Labby is much more anxious to claim discredit for himself than merit, he declares he does not drink wine simply because he doesn't like its taste. He is equally indifferent to what he eats. One of the stories which he really does tell about himself is this. Coming home one evening to his house at Twickenham, he found that his cook had, after the not unknown fashion of her tribe, first got drunk and then disappeared, and that there was nothing to eat in the house. Labby treated a situation which appeared tragic to the alarmed and shocked butler, with calm philosophy, asked whether there was a ham and beef shop in that neighborhood, and finding there was, sent for his meal, and enjoyed it so hugely that he spoke of seriously contemplating doing away with the bother of keeping house altogether, and always sending to the ham and beef shop for its excellent food. Another story he tells is characteristic of the same trait. In the days of his wild platform oratory, he found himself



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in the house of an earnest, but somewhat humble Radical in a country village. The host was most anxious to do honor to his distinguished guest, and did so by presenting Labby with sandwiches made of ham and sponge cake. Labby's politeness and Labby's indifference proved equal even to that, and he munched the extraordinary combination with every appearance of appetite and enjoyment. Finally, when going to political meetings in the poorer quarters of London, he has often been delighted to escape from a carriage or even a cab into a penny tramcar.

Here, then, you have an extraordinary nature—devoid apparently of any of the common weaknesses of the flesh; averse to amusement, hostile to self-indulgence, and entirely independent of all things which help to make most people happy. It is an inevitable conclusion from these facts that this is a nature purely, supremely, and exclusively intellectual. And this brings me to the third fact about Labby which the world does not yet wholly understand; and this is the extraordinary robustness of his intelligence. It is not a profound intelligence, it is not a broad one, but it is wonderfully strong and clear and sure. Labby has become so much of a flaneur and a humorist in the public estimation, that this side of his character is entirely ignored. And yet there are few men in the House of Commons who bring to a policy or to a scheme an intelligence so deadly sure in its critical appreciation. Mr. Chamberlain is a great speaker and Labby is not; but as between the two men, and their power of producing an intelligible policy or scheme, there is not the smallest doubt as to which has the clearer and truer intellect. While the shore is strewn with the wrecks of Mr. Chamberlain's schemes on all and every kind of subject, no plan has ever yet emanated from that frigid and strong brain of Labby which has not stood the test of criticism.

## AN INDIVIDUALIST RADICAL.

Has Labby a heart? Ah! here one comes to a matter more debatable. This very supremacy of his intelligence makes it difficult to believe that he can have great warmth of heart. Affection nearly always requires a little blindness, and there is no blindness in the intellect of Labby. Hard sense is his characteristic, and it rules his feelings probably as much as his convictions. For this reason there is not to be found in his philosophy any sympathy or even profession of sympathy with the Socialistic leaning of some members of the Liberal party. He remains a staunch clear-headed, somewhat unsympathetic Radical of the old school. But if he be without intense affections, why is it that he works so hard for the popular cause? Is he insincere, or ambitious, greedy of power, of revenge or of distraction? No, there is a far more credible explanation of his zeal and tireless energy as a Radical. That indifference to all comfort and to all show

is the secret factor that lies at the root of his Radicalism. He is a plain man, of ascetically simple habits and tastes, and snobbery to him is the abomination of desolation. Titles, courts, display—all these things he honestly, cordially, persistently loathes; and therefore, when he is making war upon them, he is acting in obedience to the primordial instincts of his innermost nature. No, there is no affectation about Labby's Radicalism; it is underneath all its laughter and mockery a very grim thing; a very stern creed.

## A HATER OF SHAMS.

And Labby has a great and honest hatred of wrongs—and of shams. He has hunted down more villains and cheats than any man of his time; indeed, he has done more in this respect than any Home Ministers, or, perhaps, than any half dozen Home Ministers. It is part of the strength of his nature that he should pursue those miserable outcasts and adventurers fighting for dishonest bread in perchance the abysmal depth of poverty and despair—it is characteristic of the strength of his nature that he should pursue them so relentlessly. If he has been appointed to the Home Secretaryship, it is probable that during his years of office there would have been an almost complete exodus from our shores of the hosts—especially of religious impostors—who prey on the credulity and charity of man kind.

It is part of this same hardness and strength which are the basis of Labby's curious and contradictory personality that he rarely forgives; that he is a very bitter and a very formidable enemy. But here again there comes another contradiction. When once he has had his sling, the desire for vengeance gradually disappears; and he is now and then to be seen talking in the friendliest way to men with whom he has had fierce feuds in the past. There is no lasting gall in his nature which, with all its powers of ferocious combat, is facile, easy-going, and forgiving.

Finally, Labby is a bitter, sleepless foe to cruelty to women and children. The world knows some of the abuses he has corrected, but there are scores of others which have never come before the public eye, where children and women have been rescued from torture, vice and from deception. You would see the explanation of this side of his character; and perchance would be a little moved if you could see Labby patiently rowing a boat on the Thames at Twickenham and chatting easily and considerately with the little girl whose piercing black eyes and expression and even speech are such a startling reproduction of his own; and whose tiny face bears a positively weird resemblance to that of the portrait of Labby's handsome mother, which hangs in the drawing-room. The softest spot in Labby's heart—the most effective inspiration of most of his war on wrong and cruelty—is his frank, simple, pathetic affection for his little daughter.