

# The Catholic Register.

"Truth is Catholic; proclaim it ever, and God will effect the rest."—BALMEZ.

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JOHN MORLEY.

An Interesting Character Sketch  
by T. P. O'Connor.

## A BUNDLE OF CONTRADICTIONS.

By education a Tory, by temperament a Whig, by conviction a Radical—such is the description of himself I remember Mr. Morley gave on one occasion. It is a rough-and-ready summing up, and one has to enlarge upon it a good deal in order to understand a singularly complex character; but it is a useful key to the solution of the mystery. In this curious and interesting figure in our political life, you see an internal struggle going forward constantly, and as openly as though his breast were of glass; and thus you find that people of narrow or unsympathetic understandings are constantly passing entirely diverse estimates of him; they see only the one side of the character, and the side which for the moment is predominant.

If Mr. Morley be a bundle of contradictions it is not only due to the diversity of elements that are in every nature except the simplest and most primitive. It is due also to the contradictions of his life and career. Son of a hard working professional man in the grimy town of Blackburn, he doubtless knew early the hard struggle which every worker of that type knows in England. There is a sad French story which tells how a literary man, when he was at the end of his tether, suddenly made a compact with the evil one by which he was able to turn a bit of his brain into gold, and the story proceeds to tell how he took bit after bit until in the end there was nothing left but disease, despair, and death. Very often one sees tragedies of this kind in a country where most professional men have to work till the power of work is gone; where life is expensive and manners uneconomical; where children of promise have to receive costly University education, and where daughters are helpless and expensive. I do not know that Mr. Morley saw much of this in his early days, but if he did not see it in his own home he has known some of the hardships and the carking cares of the writer for bread.

## HARDSHIP OF THE LITERARY LIFE.

Picture a man of vivid imagination, of lofty and sternly inflexible purpose, of cast iron and unpopular convictions on fundamental questions of human life—picture all such a man must have passed through in the life of the professional writer! For there is no profession in England which has so much of heart-burning—of disappointed hopes—of apparently never ending struggles, and, even when success comes, of such miserably inadequate rewards. There is only one person I pity more than the litterateur whose bread depends on his continual freshness of brain; and that is the vocalist whom a cold, an accident, a change in health or physique may suddenly reduce from popularity and wealth to poverty and obscurity.

In this harsh school of literature it was that Mr. Morley was raised. And he would be more than human if he did not retain some scars. What of meanness, disillusion, and harshness he learned of the world in that period you can now and then understand when the usually genial smile relaxes, and there comes from the thin lips some words of concentrated sarcasm on human life. But it is remarkable that his nature has been strong and fine enough to retain, after all, the freshness of a strong social faith, and the inflexible honesty of a nature that can do nothing common or mean. And geniality is still so much the dominant note of his character that no man is so universally popular in London society. He has paid no court to London society, and if the truth were known, though he has too broad and catholic a nature for squalid class prejudices, he turns with some impatience now and then from its sentimentalities and false idols to the costermonger, who wonders whether he is going to dispose of fruit, or the cabman that longs to bring home the price of a good supper to his wife and child in his garret. A proof of his popularity is given in a story which a few years ago was well known. Twelve men agreed to write down the name of the man whom they would choose as a companion on a desert island; the overwhelming majority were found to have struck on the name of John Morley.

## ENTRY INTO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

It was another paradox of Mr. Morley's life that he entered the House of Commons when he had passed the first flush of manhood. In his study in remote Putney or gazing at the matchless sunset of Brighton, he had written for years on all the great questions of politics and ethics which the world was engaged in debating. Hotly—vehemently—sometimes in a certain rasping irreconcilability of tone, he had written. There are pages on the incidents and figures of the French Revolution, which seem to glow with some of the passion of the men who might at any hour pass from the tribune to the tembril. But the passion and the figures of the study are very different from those of workaday life, and especially from those of the workaday world of the House of Commons. Mr. Morley was, I daresay, for some time, one of the unhappiest new members that even that great assemblage of vaulting ambitions and soured hopes has ever seen. I remember him when he made his first speech of any import-

ance. It was on the subject of Egypt; and he spoke from the second bench below the gangway—from that quarter where the Radical of uncertain allegiance to a composite Ministry used to sit. It was a curious proof of the difference between a fine and sensitive nature and a coarse and common one, to watch the condition of nervousness into which this really great master of written and spoken English appeared at that moment. His lips were so parched that he was scarcely able to articulate, his thin face with its heavy lines, was drawn; and he spoke with painful hesitation. And yet it was a very notable speech; it came from a man who had studied and thought out the question; it was a real contribution to the knowledge and judgment of the House of Commons. Some chattering creature, fresh from the hall of some provincial municipality, would have regarded all these tremors with contempt and amazement.

## RELATION TO MR. CHAMBERLAIN.

It was not long till Mr. Morley learned to see underneath the surface, and to understand the workings of all the mean ambitions, jealousies, and squalid struggles which belong to every representative assembly; and his nature was too straight, too lofty, and too inexperienced not to resent the discovery. And finally came the greatest, perhaps, of all his disillusionments. For years he had been a friend and admirer, and a most active and effective pusher of Mr. Chamberlain. With that curious partnership in friendship which belongs to the literary temperament, he had seen only one side of Mr. Chamberlain—the energy and the resolve to set the wheel of Radicalism going rapidly. Mr. Morley, too, up to this time remote from anything like the world of faction, and conscious of his own defects in readiness and self-confidence, probably exaggerated the intellectual and political capacities of this other man. But the split on Home Rule came. Then Mr. Chamberlain revealed his real self to Mr. Morley for the first time. I think it took Mr. Morley years to get over the discovery.

## A PARTICULAR PARLIAMENTARIAN.

But men after awhile get inured to any atmosphere. Mr. Morley has settled down to a very good House of Commons temper and toleration. If he cannot be said yet to have a very enthusiastic love for the House of Commons, he no longer sees only its squalor and its meanness. And he has the best of all reasons for liking the House of Commons—the House of Commons likes him. Some of the very faults that make him less efficient as a fighting man than some of his opponents, make him the more acceptable to the general sense of the House. He carries into political warfare some of the old and incurable ingenuousness and fairness in argument of the literary man. The result is that few men in the House of Commons are so excellent in the work of proposing a legislative measure. It may be a measure which is strongly antagonistic to the sense of the political party opposite. But Mr. Morley, as he unfolds its provisions, simply, candidly, and gently, is never interrupted, is never taunted, is always treated with that consideration and respect which the House of Commons extends to

very few men who are in the front rank of fighting politicians.

## ORATORICAL POWERS.

Time and practice have enormously changed Mr. Morley since that day long ago when I saw him make his first speech. Orifices has been in particular useful to him. He is one of the men who require the strong hand of necessity at their back to enable them to do justice to their powers. If a man hold a Ministerial position, he is no longer given any freedom of choice as to whether he shall or shall not speak; any such freedom would have been fatal to Mr. Morley, who probably always sees a great many reasons why he should not speak, and few why he should. But as representative in the Government of the foremost item in their policy, he has had for some years to take an active part in the work of the House of Commons, with the result that he has acquired what is in many respects an excellent House of Commons manner. He is not good for an immediate retort and a slashing speech; his nature is not combative enough for that; the conflict of ideas in which he was engaged most of his life, as well as natural temperament, give him a distaste for what is mere personal encounter. But he states a case and a policy with admirable lucidity—with great force; and above all things, in excellent temper.

His speeches on the platform are in curious contrast with these in the House of Commons. Those, indeed, who have never heard him from a platform, can have little idea of his immense hold over an audience—of the passion and enthusiasm he can produce. In that arena all hesitation disappears; there is complete self-confidence; and the voice, clear, far-reaching, and laden with passion, has a power you never feel in it in the House of Commons. And his speeches, wherever delivered, are wonderful things to read. No speaker of his time has a finer imagination—a more copious command of striking, memorable and eloquent phrases. There is no Englishman, for instance, whose words have produced the effect and the awakening on the Irish question which were produced by the speeches of Mr. Morley in the early days of the great struggle. They had a grasp of current facts, which was wanting in the speeches of Mr. Gladstone; a passion and sincerity which were not to be found in the speeches, brilliant though they were, of Sir William Harcourt—a glow that is lacking to even the very eloquent speeches of Mr. Asquith.

## GUIDE TO CONTENTS.

	PAGE.
John Morley .....	1
The Popes in history.....	2
The Abp. of Dublin on Union...	2
The New Land Bill .....	3
The Church and Labor.....	4
Society and Local News.....	5
St. Anne's in Winter .....	6
Letters from Bermuda.....	7
Editorial.....	8
Belles Demoiselles Plantations	10
The Rambler .....	12
The Popes and the Jews .....	13
Irish News Summary.....	14
Manufacturers' Life .....	15
A Wonderful Machine .....	16