

## TRUTH: A WORD TO POLITICIANS.

On the eve of the opening of the Parliament at Ottawa a talk about truth may not be untimely. Not, of course, about that quality in the abstract, such as was raised by jesting Pilate's question—"What is truth?" Men are too busy to indulge in speculations of that sort.

In England there has appeared a remarkable correspondence in which an inferior member of the Government has charged a great statesman with having taken certain unpatriotic steps—the charge having no support but cuttings from foreign journals—and then, when the statements were emphatically denied as untruths, having failed to offer any apology for the wrong done.

Upon the correspondence referred to I do not propose to comment. The facts are before the public, and an opportunity is afforded for forming a judgment upon them. But in a day when loose statements and unveracious allegations abound—when, as we have been told, "there is a lying spirit abroad"—it does seem most desirable to consider seriously the value to a nation of the quality of Truth. It is not going too far to say that Englishmen owe their greatness to being a nation of truth-speakers, and some of the greatest troubles which have happened, have come through want of truthfulness. This may not be clear at the first blush, but I hope to make it abundantly obvious.

I have said that the national characteristic is veracity. The highest praise we bestow on a man is that "his word is his bond." It has been well said, "The English Government strictly performs its engagements." The subjects do not understand trifling on its part. Private men keep their promises, ever so trivial. Down goes the flying word on the tablet, and it is as indelible as Domesday Book. Alfred, whom the affection of the nation makes the type of their race, was called by his people, "The Truth-Speaker." This is in harmony with the tradition that the Northman Guthrom said to King Olaf, "It is royal work to fulfil royal words." A thousand years later the nation had not lost its character for veracity. It was said, but a few years ago, at a public dinner in this city, that "wherever you meet an Englishman, you meet a man who would speak the truth."

A proud distinction this for a nation, but there is no rule without an exception, and England has had notorious liars. It has had, too, several royal ones, and has suffered through their want of veracity to an extent which makes the study of their reigns edifying, as pointing the moral of the infinite importance of truth-telling. King John was the champion liar of his time, and we all know what the creature who actually offered to yield up his kingdom to the Turks, and did give up his crown to the Pope,—who broke his oath to the Barons, and kept faith with no living creature,—brought the miserable nation to, Quite of a piece with John was the "long-faced promise-breaker," Charles I, who lost not only his crown but his head solely from the want of the prime English virtue,—solely because, as it seemed, he was constitutionally incapable of speaking the truth or keeping his word. Thus having assented to the Petition of Right, he broke his word and honour over and over again. He plotted with Scotland, he plotted with Ireland, he shuffled and prevaricated at every turn, so that no man would believe in him or trust him, and in the end the only security for the country lay in his death. "I believe," says a modern historian, "that if at almost any period of his life this king could have been trusted by any man not out of his senses, he might have saved himself and kept his throne." That expresses the simple fact of the case.

Unfortunately for the country, the Second Charles had very little more of the kingly virtue. The Merry Pensioner of the King of France dared not own the truth even in respect of his religion. But his mendacity was as nothing compared with that of his brother and successor, James II. Yet it was on his "truthfulness" that the supporters of this wretched creature relied for his popularity with the nation when he first came to the throne. This is shown by the following passage from Charles James Fox's historical fragment: "After the reproach, as well as alarm, which the notoriety of Charles's treacherous character must so often have caused them, the very circumstances of having at their head a Prince of whom they could with any colour hold out to their adherents that his word was to be depended upon, was in itself a matter of triumph and exultation. Accordingly, the watchword of the party (the Tories) was everywhere: 'We have the word of a king, and a word never yet broken!' Imagine the low ebb to which monarchy had fallen when the fact that the word of a monarch was to be depended upon was regarded as a royal virtue so supreme that it was relied on with exultation as the most popular "cry" with which a party could rally a truth-loving people! What a miserable sham it all was, how base and treacherous a scandal this Prince proved himself, and how the people he had cajoled rose in their indignation and drove him into exile are matters of history.

In these examples we see the calamities and the degradation brought upon a country by the departure from the rigid standard of veracity by those in power. These examples are naturally impressive to a people in whom veracity is an instinct. That instinct has asserted itself, happily, in every stage of England's history, and is still the guiding principle with the great masses of our countrymen. But it must be borne in mind, when we speak of national

characteristics, that they do not belong to every person in a nation. There are always plenty of individual exceptions to a general rule. Thus, while we say the French are vivacious, we tacitly admit that many Frenchmen have no vivacity. The Dutch, who are popularly held to be dull and lethargic, have among them the sprightliest of men. Italians are not all subtle, nor are Spaniards all vindictive and treacherous; and it is certain that we have among us many in whom our national virtue is utterly extinct. There are Englishmen who would stoop to any subterfuge, make any statement, or circulate any slander to serve their own interests. Men of this stamp embarking in trade, or devoting themselves to manufactures, have done all they could to lose their name for fair dealing and honest production. They have set up a theory that the plea of "business" justifies even a gentleman in playing the part of a scoundrel, and in its relations with foreign countries the nation suffers from their tergiversation and double-dealing.

But it is chiefly in politics that men of this stamp find a congenial sphere. Party-spirit, which has been aptly termed the dry-rot in the Constitution, eating into and destroying all that is of most worth and nobility, is pernicious in its effects even among the highest-minded politicians; but to the meaner sort it is absolutely degrading. They "to party give up" their manliness, their probity, their independence—everything which should make them honoured and respected. The influence exercised upon the baser natures is like that which Circe exercised on her lovers whom she converted into swine. One indication of this is their readiness to make any assertion, to resort to any falsehood, and to circulate any imputation which may serve their party ends or drag opponents down to their level so as to have "an equal baseness." Nor is this always done with a consciousness of its degradation. Party is blinding.

The historian to whom I have already referred, remarks that among the dreadful circumstances attending party conflicts, "perhaps there are few more revolting to a good mind than the wicked calumnies with which, in the heat of contention, men, *otherwise men of honour*, have in all ages and countries been permitted to load their adversaries."

Sometimes these calumnies take the form of open but baseless accusations; more often they are of the nature of "a lie which is half a truth," and which is ever "the blackest of lies," because "a lie which is all a lie may be met and fought with outright, but a lie which is part a truth is a harder matter to fight." Hence this half truth has always been a favourite weapon in low political scuffles, and is of course the most degrading to those who stoop to it. That so many do in these our days is to be regretted on many grounds, but on none more so than on that of the indelible stain it fixes on those who should be our foremost men, who should uphold the national character, and put in every fibre of their souls, the force of King Arthur's indignant utterance:—

"This is a shameful thing, that men should lie!"

*Quevedo Redivivus.*

## THE INSOLVENCY PUZZLE.

Business men err, and err greatly, when they cease to give their attention to political conduct. They err still more grievously when they omit to pour the light of their practical knowledge and experience upon questions of trade legislation before they are mooted in Parliament. It is well nigh hopeless to leave such matters to Parliamentary Committees. Such committees are too often inspired by the desire to make their reports sound well—to ring out, sharp, clear and incisive—and so satisfy constituencies that they have been struck by the people's needs. Full of that innate tendency to shirk personal responsibility which lurks peculiarly in the Canadian political character, these committees consult a few well-known names, summon a representation or two of prominent Boards of Trade, sift no facts, take no broad view of cause and effect, but act promptly in the direct line of advice received secure of safety from censure behind the opinion of so-called "experts."

It can hardly be too much insisted upon that trade is the genius—the inherited genius—of a large section of native Canadians and Canadians by adoption. Liberal and enlightened legislation, therefore, ought to permit the fullest possible freedom to trade, the least possible hindrance to enterprise, if it would further our national prosperity; and it behoves trade also to make its voice heard.

This Session a most important business issue is certain to come up for discussion—the Insolvent Act. The annulling of this Act will probably be again attempted, because a partial expression of opinion, of the kind already described, justifies our enlightened representatives in the hope that such a measure would, for a time at least, secure influential favour and afford high authority behind which to screen themselves and regain popularity should the wind blow adversely by shifting sail and running before the breeze towards a new Act. It is to be fervently hoped such principles do not actuate our representatives. That no one will dispute. But the question remains, Is this a true description or is it not?

To business men this perpetual tinkering with the Insolvent Act is a weariness of the spirit—a constant source of worry and loss. It is one cause,