

Daily Alta California
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Letter From London

The First Election Under the Ballot Act—Fine Opening for a Good Chancellor—A Cabinet Minister Loosely Dissected—Our Diogenes Finds Some Honest Men and Isn't Permitted to Growl at Them—Lord Russell—Hanging, Starving, and Stomach-Pumping—Church Unpleasantness—Miscellaneous Chat of no Possible Interest

About the only political news of the week relates to the first election under the Ballot Act. It occurred at Pontefract, and was for a member of Parliament. The candidates were Lord Pollington, Conservative, and Mr. Childers, Liberal. The latter was elected, though the interest of the contest in no way depended upon the possible result. The vote by ballot was upon its trial, and England was looking on! The lesson of the event has been as variously interpreted as it is possible to imagine. The Conservative journals are quite clear that the contest furnished triumphant evidence of their sagacity in opposing the measure—the said sagacity having consisted merely in unwavering and indiscriminate opposition to all the measures of the Ministry. The Liberal sheets, on the other hand, consider the ballot justified of its works, and themselves entitled to the peculiar glory of having predicted success for a plan which their political interest required them to support. The truth appears to lie about half way between the two. So far from pleasing either party, the first working of the ballot has a little dashed the anticipations of both—and that is the very best thing that could have occurred. Viewed in this light, the Act is a good one.

It is certain that the Pontefract election has disclosed no unsoundness in the principle of compulsory secrecy in voting; though how much intimidation and bribery it prevented in merely conjectural. About the only particular in which the event differed in external character from the ordinary English election, was the entirely nose-bloodless respectability of the proceedings.

Thumbs and Mud Pies

By the way, this Mr. Childers is again in the Cabinet; he has recently been appointed to the vacant Chancellorship of the Duchy of Lancaster, a most arduous position, the duties of which consist in sucking one's thumb or making mud pies, just as the incumbent may prefer. The post becomes vacant through the appointment of Lord Dufferin to the Governor Generalship of the Dominion of Canada. The Chancellorship, I hear, was first offered to John Bright, whose ill-health—although he is slowly recovering—would not permit him to fabricate mud pies, and whose vitality would not endure the drain upon the thumb. Besides, John Bright in health is the hardest working man in the world, and it is possible he did not hanker after the sinecure.

Mr. Childers, you will remember, was formerly in the Cabinet, at the head of the Admiralty; but, like Mr. Bright, was compelled to withdraw on account of ill-health. While he held the portfolio, he did more good square damage to the Royal Navy than any other single cause with, perhaps, the exception of the American war of 1812. He was always to be

seen very dimly through a cloud of the official dust he had kicked up about him; and seen only to be roundly sworn at. Not that Mr. Childers is by any means an incapable; he is the exact reverse—too distressingly capable to get along with! To a remarkable physical and intellectual energy—an activity and zeal which are simply irrepressible—he merely adds a violent disbelief in the existence of such a thing as human nature. In other respects he is not so bad.

Partisan Stupidity

To the American student of British politics there is one real privation: he misses the dear, familiar old charges of personal dishonesty always associated in his mind with a political canvass, and without which none seem to him genuine. He misses them also in the public journals, which certainly ought by this time to have learned the trick of making them. I offered, the other day, out of pure goodness of heart, to do a slashing attack upon Mr. Gladstone (whom I very much admire) for the standard—which hates him as hard as it can. The article was to consist of a series of specific charges, the mildest of which, I pledged my honor, should be swindling or its equivalent. I regret to say the offer was declined, the editor shielding himself behind the paltry subterfuge that the charges would not be true. I did not intend that they should be true; I merely wanted to introduce the American system of political argument; these London journals are so beastly dull!

British Honesty

As to the matter of mere truth, I am afraid it will have to be confessed that charges of official corruption against the average British office holder could hardly be justified. The English have the best civil service in the world. Their system is open to a number of grave objections, but the encouragement of fraud is not one of them. It would be extremely difficult for a British official to enact the rascal, though a very few isolated instances have shown that it is not impossible. As for a member of Parliament using his vote or influence for direct, or immediate indirect, gain, the idea is almost preposterous. Moreover, I am convinced that, as compared with our own, the more general and pronounced rectitude of British official service is due to the essential honesty of the British nature. Furthermore, I mean this judgement as a reflection upon the American character. If I, as a tax-payer, wished, as my dearest desire, to feel that the public money was being expended, not for the best purposes, but honestly for the purpose publicly designated, I should without hesitation become a British subject. I should not perhaps approve of Parliament voting a few thousand pounds every now and then for a memorial statue to some titled consumer lately deceased; but it would be some consolation to feel that every penny so appropriated would go into that statue, and the disbursing committee would get nothing for their services. The statue would probably be an exceedingly ill-favored and misshapen one, very badly placed; but it would commemorate the virtues which would have been desirable in the deceased booby, and not the vices conspicuously present in the living official—as would be the case in our country.

Lord Russell—His Idea

My Lord Russell has set the press a-chattering by a letter in the *Times* in which, for an old man, he makes a tolerably radical proposal. It is only to reorganize the whole system of government, and reconstruct the Constitution. Considering the frantic eagerness with which John Bull grasps at every innovation—for the purpose of choking it—it is extremely probable that his lordship's little proposal will be acted upon—somehow. His lordship

proposes, among other things, to give “Home Rule” to Ireland by permitting her to have, not the one Parliament which she asks for but four which she doesn’t want. Scotland also is to have Parliaments—a Highland and a Lowland one. Poor England will have to worry along with their single legislation, as at present. The object of this excellent plan is to secure more intelligent local legislation, as well as to relieve the Lords and Commons of their present onerous duties, leaving them to pass only upon such measures as have a wide and grave significance. The plan may or may not be a good one in itself; the absurdity is in suggesting so sweeping a change. It is a good deal as if Mr. Seward should gravely propose the abolition of the franchise, or the merging of the State governments into one constitutional monarchy.

Capital Punishment

During the last session of Parliament there was the regular annual attempt to abolish capital punishment, and straightway there came forth the carefully preserved annual arguments pro and con, nicely warmed over. In consequence, there was no end of talk about “the deterrent effect of the death penalty.” Now it must be admitted by all that every man standing under his beam with a knot of hemp under the left ear of him is a rather stubborn evidence that the death penalty is not “deterrent.” If it were he wouldn’t be there. Last Monday was, therefore, a bad day for the lovers of this excellent phrase. On that day (they don’t hang people on Friday in England) four separate and independent assassins passed under the hands of the gentle Calcraft and his subordinates; and, as the San Francisco reporter would say, “were launched into eternity.” There was to have been another gentleman turned off at about the same time, but he had a preference for starvation. His preference was not respected, however, and the prison surgeon, assisted by a small pump, broke his fast. They broke his neck instead—at least they tore a hole in his throat, which came near finishing him. So their zeal defeated its own purpose; for after this the man couldn’t eat if he had wanted to. But so far was he from wanting to, that he threw up what they did get into him. It was not thought advisable to use instruments any more, so they contented themselves with the merely inhuman device of setting savory victuals before him, and tempting him with limpid waters. It took the poor fellow about two weeks to die, and during most of that period he suffered—well if you were ever starved to death with your eyes full of soups and puddings you know how it goes.

I know of nothing more disgraceful than the occurrence of that scene with the stomach pump in a civilized country and age! The fact that such treatment of a condemned and dying criminal is not illegal, and that it has entailed no reproach upon the parties to it is the worst thing about the pitiful business. It has of course excited some comment, but most of this seems to take the shape of speculations regarding the best means to prevent future “escapes from justice” by voluntary starvation. It appears to me that every truly humane should must feel gratified at “escapes” which answer every decent purpose of the punishment escaped; and, at the same time, relieve society from the saddest necessity it knows. If “the deterrent effect” of hanging is due to the simple example of a life forfeited, it is difficult to see how the effect is impaired by the suicide of the condemned criminal. If it is due to our cruel and degrading manner of killing him, the sooner we substitute something less deterrent and more humane, the better for our good name.

Trouble in the Sanctuary

I don’t know if your readers are aware that there is serious trouble in the Church of England. Doubtless, however, it has extended in some small measure to the daughter organization upon your side of the water. Here the fight—I beg pardon; I mean the

argument—about the “damnatory clauses” of the Athanasian Creed is exceedingly bitter—I should say interesting. It is a triangular debate, the parties at the corners being those who favour totally expunging the clauses in question, those who advocate making their use optional, and those who threaten to leave the Church if anybody meddles with the creed as it is. The first class is a small minority, composed of people who dislike cursing their neighbors; the second comprises the great bulk of the middle classes, headed by the Earl of Shaftesbury and abetted by the Archbishop of York; the third embraces the ritualists, marshalled by the redoubtable Dr. Pusey. Every one takes sides; some take two sides each. For example, I know one man who thinks the reading of the damnatory clauses should be optional with the Pastor, but intends leaving the Church, whether he reads them or not. For my part, being a man of rather slow sympathies, I shall take no decided stand upon the question, until I see how it is going to affect food problems, and the price of meat.

Divers Matters

Another nice murder occurred the other evening at Islington. A mother sharpened a carving knife on the fire-poker, and cut the throat of her little girl as it lay asleep. I don't know but the stomach-pump might be used upon her with considerable propriety.

Mr. Stanley went down to Brighton the other day to the meeting of the British Association, and spoke his Livingstone piece to the savants in their stronghold. The Emperor Napoleon was there, with the Empress and Prince Imperial, who all solicited the honor of an introduction to the hero of the day. Mr. Stanley, I am happy to say, did not disgrace his country and detract from the merit of his great achievement by exhibiting any hauteur. He greeted his ex-Majesty's request with graceful condescension and easy good humor, treating him in all respects as an equal!

When the Brighton Aquarium was opened, last week, with great scientific éclat, Mr. Frank Buckland, the great naturalist, who was at the head of the scheme, received a letter from certain well-known gentlemen, stating that they had obtained a live alligator, which they would forward by a special train. A huge tank was prepared for its reception, and Mr. Buckland was promptly on hand when the train arrived, with a stout pair of horses, a furniture truck and a corps of stout assistants to transport the monster to his new quarters. The monster came to hand in a cigar box!

The Dissenting Clergy are exceeding wroth. Whereas their fat and prosperous brother of the Established Church is allowed by law—after having received his fee—to marry whom he will without official supervision, the Dissenting minister is not permitted to turn an honest penny in this way without the attendance of a Registrar to see that the knot is properly tied. A temperate, thoughtful and impartial review of the whole question convinces me that the Dissenting Clergy have some ground for disgust.

The Autumn Manoeuvres of the military arm are about to set in, and that part of the “upper public” not otherwise engaged is moving upon Wimborne to be at “the meet.” The Autumn Manoeuvres may be briefly described as a large drill—a gigantic bore! The army meets and marches sidewise and endwise across the country, starting from nowhere and bringing up anywhere. It camps on the farms and worries the domestic animals. It fights sham battles, in which as poor old Charley Lever related, the cavalry is posted in the woods, and the artillery occupies the hollows. Of course no one can be hurt in these terrible engagements, and so the fate of the contending hosts is determined by an umpire, who decides according to his light which party has out-threatened the other, and made the more noise about it. There is never any injustice done, for the beaten party in the first engagement is sure to be declared victorious in the second. The knowledge that they have a sure thing of it the second time makes them very careless, and it generally happens that they are declared triumphant just at

the time when, if ball and sabre were employed, they wouldn't have the ghost of a show for their lives. If I decided to study the art of war at Wimborne the *Alta* shall have the advantage of my acquirements.

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