



SIR W. HARCOURT MEDITATES ON A POSSIBLE CHANGE IN THE TEA-DUTY.

IN that dim and distant future when both sexes shall have an equal right to pace the legislative floor of Westminster, the historian of the social and political revolution which has resulted in such a spectacle will assuredly regard the last decade of the nineteenth century with especial interest. For, broadly speaking, it has been within that period that there has been commenced an institution, the development of which has made St. Stephen's more familiar to the fair sex than since Parliament there first assembled; and that institution is what has

come so rapidly to be known as "Tea on the Terrace."

Simon de Montfort and his successors among the great Parliamentarians of the Middle Ages had no anticipation of this subtle change. The House of Commons had existed, very much in its present form,

for close upon four centuries before tea was heard of in England; the Terrace is a creation of the past fifty years; the combination now under notice was unknown even as lately as a decade ago. And in that very statement is contained the whole significance of an institution which has softened in an especial degree the attitude of Westminster towards women. In the days of the British Solomon, when a certain Dorothee Clayton presented a petition at the House of Commons, addressed to the Lords of the Council, it was roughly directed that "if she clamour upon Mr. Speaker, or prefer any more petitions, she is to go to Brydewell." To-day, if Mistress Clayton did the like, a member would soothe her with tea, and a visit to the Terrace would calm her every perturbation. During the turbulent stages of the great struggle between King and Parliament, Palace Yard was once and again filled with an angry crowd of women, who, in anticipation of their Parisian sisters of long later, added their share of shrieking to the revolutionary movement; how handy would the patriot have found tea on the Terrace then. And when the only chance for ladies to hear the debates in the old House of Commons, destroyed by fire in 1834, was to climb into the garret above the chamber—"one lantern with one farthing candle, in a tin candlestick, all the light," as Maria Edgeworth has recorded—and peep down through the ventilator, how grateful would have been a retirement to the Terrace and to tea!

It is, however, from the ventilator and its more dignified, but not much more comfortable, successor, the Ladies' Gallery, that our present institution is derived. In these times we are nothing if not evolutionary, and the



process can be applied with some strictness to this case. We start from the point that when the new House of Commons was designed, there was formally added, after much debate, a Ladies' Gallery. The next step was that a courteous attendant, recognising the feminine weakness for tea, procured it for such visitors as required the stimulant, and served it in an antechamber. But as the years wore on, and the attendance of ladies at the House increased, it was felt during the summer heats that tea in an anteroom had a suspicion of stuffiness not lightly to be borne. And as by this time the practice had largely grown of members inviting their lady friends to dine at Westminster, and of afterwards strolling up and down the Terrace, to the soothing accompaniment of the sound of the flowing stream and the smoke of a good cigar, the thought occurred to some adventurous legislator that the ante-dinner tea could be sipped by the river-side as well as the after-dinner coffee—and lo! a new world for fashionable enjoyment was discovered.

One might almost imagine that Jane

Taylor, with subtle premonition, had foreseen what was to come, for long ago she wrote

“ At last the tea came up; and so  
With that our tongues began to go.  
Now in that house you're sure of knowing  
The smallest scrap of news that's going.”

“That house” can assuredly be no other than the Commons, for the ladies who visit it have long since discovered that the old reputation of the Lobby, as being the most concentrated hotbed of scandal that London holds, is thoroughly deserved—a fact not lightly to be estimated when considering the rapid advance in popularity of the *five o'clocker* process on the Terrace.

When once it had been started, indeed, and this no more than four or five years ago, it increased by leaps and bounds, probably touching the height of its fame in the fashionable world during the historic session of 1893, when the second Home Rule Bill was under daily discussion by the Commons. Throughout that summer, members had to be in unremitting attendance, ready for divisions at any moment. The whips of the various sections guarded every portal, prepared to

pounce upon any one of their supporters who imagined he could escape; and such as sought to avoid the obligation by not coming were pitilessly “black-listed” by the party newspapers. In the midst of such constant stress our legislators keenly felt the need for comforting company, and they ministered unto it by filling the Terrace at tea-time with their lady friends. This sudden irruption staggered the old hands of the House in a fashion sorrowful to see. The misogynists, the cynics, and the bored bachelors stood it for a little while, and then revolted. They had borne much (and, according to their acquaintances, much had been borne from them); but when they found the Lobby filled with the *frou-frou* of silk and gossamer instead of the froth of gossip and scandal, when they could scarcely pass through the corridors because of the crowd of ladies sweeping hither and thither, calmly contemptuous of the mere members for whom the place had been designed, they arose in their wrath, and complained to the Speaker.

No record remains of what passed at that fateful interview; but those who remember with



THE BARONESS BURDETT-COUTTS AND HER PARTY.



how masterful a hand he who is now Viscount Peel was accustomed to rule the Commons, and who know how signally he failed when he endeavoured to measure his strength against the ladies, take from their shelves and read Thackeray's fine ballad of "King Canute" as the best realisation of the episode. Desirous to prevent the Lobby from being over-filled with ladies, who are enabled

"From the sacred seat I sit on, I command thee to retreat;  
Venture not, thou beauteous damsel, to approach the member's seat.  
Woman, be thou still! I bid thee come not nearer to my feet!"

Thus, slightly altering Thackeray for the occasion, did the misogynists speak; and, for their protection, two sign-boards, with



NOT A DISCUSSION ON THE EQUALISATION OF RATES BILL.

from that coign of vantage to see into the Legislative Chamber, the Speaker issued a ukase that they should not be admitted before half-past seven in the evening. He might as well have whistled to the wind, for his order lived a fortnight, and disappeared into oblivion—the only direct check he suffered during the long and honourable period of his tenure in the Chair. And yet something came of his interference. The misanthropic members who had objected to have their tea-time disturbed by the presence of brighter beings than themselves, were granted the privilege of being specially severed from the fascinating crowd.

the legend "For Members Only," and a sturdy constable, specially selected by Chief-Inspector Horsley for the delicate duty, are stationed at a portion of the Terrace, beyond which no lady, under penalty of death or excommunication, can pass. The story runs that no one of the sex has ever wanted to do so, for, unlike Blue Beard's chamber, all that is beyond the given line is visible, and the spectacle of the bored legislators on the other side does not tempt even the most curious woman to cross.

Even this incident, however, affords one more proof of a fact well known to every frequenter of the Palace of Westminster,



that, in the matter of dealing with ladies, the Lords are far more gallant than the Commons. The Terrace which runs along the shore of silver streaming Thames, as the courtly Spenser would have it, is the property of both Houses; and, if the Peers were only as suspiciously jealous of feminine interference as the Commons, a full half of it would be roped off, the Peers making it a desert and calling it peace. But, in the same pleasantly easy fashion in which, when occasion requires, they allow ladies to sit even on their own scarlet benches, the occupants of the Gilded Chamber permit their portion of the Terrace to be roamed over at will by the fair friends of the Commoners. It is not difficult to imagine, indeed, with what a snort of frenzied indignation the very legislators who secured the reservation of a section of the Terrace "For Members Only," would have witnessed the erection of a notice-board, "For Peers Only," at the other end.

Roughly speaking, therefore, the Terrace is divided into three sections. The smallest one, and that which is nearest to Westminster Bridge, is reserved for the party entertained by Mrs. Gully, the wife of the Speaker, and which had many a distinguished visitor in the days when Mrs.

Rochfort Maguire (still best known at Westminster as "Miss Peel") presided at the urn. Then comes the Desert of Sahara, "For Members Only;" and after this the large part which ladies may occupy, and which, though not extending to quite the whole remaining length of the Terrace, is

usually ample for all requirements. When first the institution was established, and when, with almost startling suddenness, it occasionally found some three hundred patrons in a single evening, the resources of the Refreshment Department of the House of Commons were somewhat severely taxed; and it was almost all that Mr. Crichton Saunders, its manager, could do to secure rapid service and effective waiting. Even now, and especially when strawberries are at their best and cream at its most delicious, from one hundred and fifty to two hundred visitors will make the afternoon a warm one for the score of waiters; though a re-arrangement of still-rooms has ensured an effective service, and no one on the Terrace needs to have his or her tea cold.

"But who does have tea on the Terrace?" may be asked by those to whom the ways of Westminster remain a mystery. "Some of our most eminent personages," is the reply. As yet, neither the Prince nor the Princess of Wales has placed by their presence the final seal of personal approval upon this function. But the Duchess of York and her mother, the Duchess of Teck, have enjoyed the opportunity; Princess Louise and the Marquis of Lorne have followed their example; and not merely once, but

several times during a session, is to be seen on the Terrace the Baroness Burdett-Coutts entertaining her friends. It has even been said that distinguished ladies, in half-imitation of a Shakespearian idea, occasionally pipe

"A merry note,  
While statesmen grave do pour the pot;"



A QUIET GROUP.



and certain it is that several among "the great, wise, and eminent," who fill the green benches, seem little loth to wash down the dust of debate with

"The grateful flavour of the Indian leaf,"

as Mrs. Barbauld, though in utter unconsciousness of the coming glories of Assam, was pleased to term it.

Occasionally, and just as the Terrace is at its best, the loud and continuous ringing of the electric bells, and the strenuous shoutings of "Division" by the attendant constables, summon the tea-drinking legislators to the lobbies reserved for "Ayes" and "Noes." And then it is that his mind flies back to an incident of the summer of 1893, which burnt itself upon his brain. At that time, as has above been indicated, the pressure upon members to be in constant attendance was at its height; but they were only wanted for divisions and not for debates, a condition too often forgotten by those of the British electorate who do not realise the absolute truth of Mr. Gilbert's lines—

"When in that House M.P.'s divide,  
If they've a brain and cerebellum, too,  
They've got to leave that brain outside,  
And vote just as their leaders tell 'em to."

It was at a moment when discussion was proceeding and the division bells were still, that the Terrace was thronged with legislators and ladies. A heavily-laden passenger steamer proceeded past them up the Thames, and, as it went, a stentorian voice from abaft the funnel rang forth the fateful question, "Why



A PARTY LEADER.

don't you fellows get to work?" Such contempt of the High Court of Parliament would at one time have ensured its perpetrator being laid by the heels in Little Ease: even in our own day, men for less offences have been sent to the Clock Tower: but members on this occasion were too staggered to reply. For how could they be expected to associate the very name of work with the enjoyment of tea on the Terrace?

ALFRED F. ROBBINS.

