

## On the Decay of Humour in the House of Commons.

BY HENRY W. LUCY ("TOBY, M.P.").



HERE is no doubt—it is not feigned by tired fancy—that the present House of Commons is a less entertaining assembly than it was wont to be. This is partly due to the lack of heaven-born comedians and largely to the curtailment of opportunity. The alteration of the rules of time under which the House sits for work was fatal to redundancy of humour. The House of Commons is, after all, human, and it is an indisputable fact that mankind is more disposed to mirth after dinner than before. If the record be searched it will be found that ninety per cent. of the famous scenes that have established its reputation as a place of public entertainment have happened after dinner.

Under the new rules, which practically close debate at midnight, there is no "after dinner." Mechanically, apparently involuntarily, the old arrangement of debate has shifted. Time was, within the memory of many sitting in the present House, when the climax of debate was found in its closing hours. The Leader of the House rose at eleven or half-past, and before a crowded and excited assembly cheered on his followers to an impending division. When he sat down, amid thundering cheers from his supporters, the Leader of the Opposition sprang to his feet, was hailed with a wild cheer from his friends, struck ringing blows across the table, and then, at one o'clock, or two o'clock, or whatever hour of the morning it might chance to be, members poured forth in tumultuous tide, parting at the division lobby.

This was the period of the evening when chartered libertines of debate appeared on the scene and the fun grew fast and furious. It was Mr. O'Donnell's pleasing habit to rise when the duel between the Leaders was concluded, and the crowded House roared for the division like caged lions whose feed-

ing-time is overstepped. Pausing to recapture his errant eyeglass, Mr. O'Donnell was accustomed to gaze round the seething mass of senators with admirably-feigned surprise at their impatience. When the uproar lulled he began his speech; when it rose again he stopped; but the speech was inevitable, and members presently recognising the position, sat in sullen silence till he had said his say.

This was comedy, not highly conceived it is true, but worked out with great skill, the enraged House chiefly contributing to its success. It was varied by the tragedy of the desperate English or Scotch member who, striving vainly night after night to catch the Speaker's eye, made a mad plunge at his last chance, and was literally howled down. It was a favourite hour for the late Mr. Biggar's manifestations, and the lamented and immortal Major

O'Gorman never failed to put in an appearance at eleven o'clock, ready for any fun that might be going or might be made.

Now, when members slowly fill the House after dinner, dropping in between ten and eleven o'clock, they know there is no time for anything but business. If a division is imminent the debate must necessarily stop before midnight for the question to be put. If it is to be continued, it must be adjourned sharp on the stroke of midnight. As the House rarely refills much before eleven o'clock, there

is not opportunity after dinner for more than one set speech from a favourite orator. The consequence is that the plums of debate are in these days all pulled out before dinner; and though at this period, the withers of the House being unwrung it is ready for a brisk fight, it is not in the mellow mood that invites and encourages the humorous.

Whilst the opportunities of the Parliamentary Yorick are thus peremptorily curtailed, he is at a further disadvantage in



"ADMIRABLY-FEIGNED SURPRISE."

view of the personality of the Leadership. It is impossible that a House led by Mr. W. H. Smith can be as prone to merriment as was one which found its head in Mr. Disraeli. When, in the Parliament of 1868, Mr. Gladstone was Premier and Mr. Disraeli Leader of the Opposition, or in the succeeding Parliament, when these positions were reversed, the House of Commons enjoyed a unique incentive to conditions of humour. Mr. Gladstone, with his gravity of mien, his sonorous sustained eloquence, and his seriousness about trifles, was a superb foil for the gay, but always mordant humour of Mr. Disraeli.

From the outset of his career that great Parliamentarian enjoyed extraordinary advantage by reason of the accident of the personality against which, first and last, he was pitted. Having had Sir Robert Peel to gird against through the space of a dozen years, it was too much to hope that for fully a quarter of a century he should have enjoyed the crowning mercy of being opposed to and contrasted with Mr. Gladstone. Yet such was his good fortune. How little he did with Lord Hartington in the interregnum of 1874-7, and how little mark he made against Lord Granville when he met him in the Lords, brings into strong light the advantage fortune had secured for him through the longer period of his life.

Whilst the tone and habit of the House

of Commons in matters of humour are to a considerable extent conformable with the idiosyncrasy of its leaders, it will sometimes, in despair of prevailing dulness, assume a joke if it has it not. There is nothing more delightful in the happiest

efforts of Mr. Disraeli than the peculiar relations which subsist between the present House of Commons and Mr. W. H. Smith. On one side we have a good, amiable, somewhat pedagogic gentleman, unexpectedly thrust into the seat haunted by the shades of Palmerston and Disraeli. On the other side is the House of Commons, a little doubtful of the result, but personally liking the new Leader, and constitutionally prone to recognise authority.

At first Mr. Smith was voted unbearably dull. His hesitating manner, his painful self-consciousness, his

moral reflections, and his all-pervading sense of "duty to his Queen and country" bored the House. In the first few months of his succession to Lord Randolph Churchill, there was seen the unwonted spectacle of members getting up and leaving the House when the Leader presented himself at the table. But Mr. Smith plodded on, patiently, pathetically, trolling out his moral reflections, and tremulously preserving what with full consciousness of the contradiction of words may be described as an air of submissive authority. Members began to perceive, or perhaps to invent, the fun of the thing. Mr. Smith realised their boyhood's idea of Mr. Barlow conversing with his pupils; only he was always benevolent, and though he frequently shook his ferule with threatening gesture, Sandford and Merton felt that the palms of their hands were safe.

Mr. Smith is, however, peculiarly a House of Commons' possession. No one out of the House can quite understand how precious he is, how inimitable, how indescribable. To the outsider he makes poor amends for the Irish Members of the Parliament of 1874, or the Fourth Party that played so prominent a rôle in the House that met in 1880. The Fourth Party, like the Major, Mr. Biggar, Mr. Delahunty, Mr. McCarthy Downing, and the famous Lord Mayor of



"ELOQUENCE."



"HAUNTED."

Dublin—who warned Mr. Forster what would happen in the event of an (absolutely un contemplated) attempt on the part of the Chief Secretary to drag his lordship's spouse out of her bed in the dead of the night—are with us no more. Gone too,



"THREE-FOURTHS OF A PARTY."

faded into dreamland, are the characters who made up the Fourth Party. Happily three of them remain with us, though in strangely altered circumstances. Two sit on the Treasury Bench, and one watches it from behind with friendly concern that adds a new terror to Ministerial office.

Each in his way brilliantly sustains the reputation of the famous school in which he was trained. There is in the House only one possibly superior combination of debaters to Lord Randolph Churchill, Mr. Arthur Balfour, and Sir John Gorst. In the quality of humour especially under consideration, this combination carries away the palm from the other. I think it is untrue to say, as is commonly accepted, that Mr. Gladstone is devoid of the sense of humour, though it must be admitted that it does not predominate in his House of Commons speeches. Mr. Chamberlain is even more conspicuously lacking in this commanding quality. On the other hand, Mr. Balfour in his House of Commons addresses does not shine as a humorist. He is in his public character (in strange contrast, by the way, with his personal habitude) not sufficiently genial. But he has a pretty wit of the sarcastic, poisoned-dagger style, which, differing from the effects of humour, makes everybody laugh, save the object of the attack. *He writhes.*

Mr. Balfour's Parliamentary style, doubtless unconsciously, perhaps for reasons connected with heredity, is shaped upon his distinguished uncle's. He lacks the grave ponderosity which gives the finishing touch to Lord Salisbury's occasional trifling with public questions. But he is still young, and his style inchoate.

The Minister who answers for India in the House of Commons cannot fairly be expected to contribute to the hilarity of its proceedings. Yet occasionally Sir John Gorst, more particularly at question-time, standing at the table with almost funereal aspect, drops a parenthetical remark that convulses the House with laughter. Lord Randolph Churchill, since he has taken to racing, has assumed a gravity of manner which militates against repetition of his old successes in setting the table in a roar.

But the gloom under which he has enveloped himself is, like that which just now obscures the sunlight of laughter over the House generally, only a temporary condition. The present House has accidentally run into a groove of gloom, which will probably outlast its existence. But there is no reason to believe that the decay of humour noted will be permanent. There is no assembly in the world so pathetically eager to be amused as is the House of Commons. It sits and listens entranced to bursts of sustained argument. It follows with keen intellectual delight the course of subtle



"HE WRITHES."

argument. It burns with fierce indignation at a story of wrong-doing. It flashes with generous impulse at an invitation to do right. But it likes, above all things, to be made to laugh. In its despair of worthier efforts, almost anything will do. An agitated orator rounding off his peroration by sitting down on his hat; a glass of water upset; or, primest joke of all, an impassioned oratorical fist brought down with resonant thud on the hat of a listener sitting attentive on the bench below—these are trivial, familiar accidents that never fail to bring down the House.

So persistently eager is the House to be amused that, failing the gift of beneficent nature, it will, as in the case of Mr. W. H. Smith, invent a humorous aspect of a man, and laugh at its own creation. There are many cases where a man has commenced his Parliamentary career amidst evidences not only of personal disfavour, but of almost malignant animosity, and has finished by finding his interposition in debate hailed by hilarious cheering. Such a case was that of the late Mr. Biggar, who for fully ten years of his Parliamentary career was an object of unbridled execration. He lived to find himself almost a prime favourite in the House, a man who, when he had not got further in his speech than to ejaculate "Mr. Speaker, sir," found himself the focus of a circle of beaming faces,



"AN IMPASSIONED ORATORICAL FIST."

keenly anticipatory of fun. Mr. Biggar in the sessions of 1886-9 was the same member for Cavan who, in the Parliament of 1874, was a constant mark of contumely, and even of personal hatred. The House had grown used to him, and had gradually built up round his name and personality an ideal of eccentric humour. But the creative power was with the audience—a priceless quality that remains with it even in these dull times, and though temporarily subdued, will presently have its day again.



"A PRIME FAVOURITE."