

# BUDGET NIGHT IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS:

VIEWED FROM THE PRESS GALLERY.

BY JOHN RENDLE.

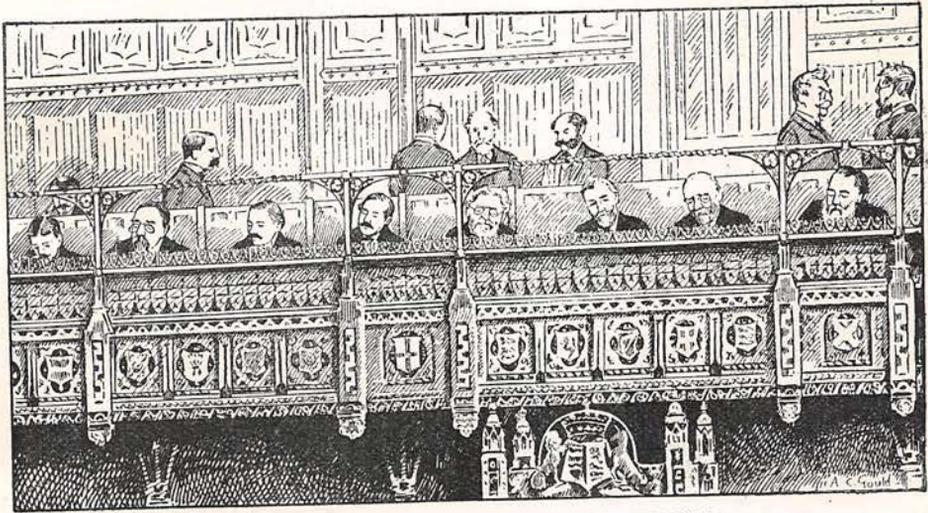
*Illustrated by A. CARRUTHERS GOULD.*



SMALL experience of the House of Commons will convince you that a mischievous indifference is, for the most part, displayed to a thorough examination of the country's finances. Sometimes on the Money Votes a few members, moved by the afflicting zeal, it may be, of new found dignity, manifest a

not wholly prompted by an ennobling desire to benefit the country or any portion of it. I should be the last person to pretend to champion all the tastes and inclinations of some 670 politicians who come to Westminster from all parts between the "Dan and Beersheba" of this estimable kingdom.

But Budget night assumes all the undefined glory of a full-dress debate. The throes



THE PRESS GALLERY IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS.

desire to engage in a search after truth, and for that purpose start a debate on some small subjects that may or may not be well within their personal knowledge. If these questions should happen to appeal to the sympathy of the constituencies they represent, the chances are offered them of appearing next day in the interested provincial newspapers in the full glory and effulgence of extended prominence. I need hardly say that an opportunity so golden is, unlike the diamond on bold Gollconda's shore, not neglected. But in respect to many Parliamentary adventures, by the "small men" of the House of Commons, into the abstruse realms of finance, where even angels should always fear to tread, the suspicion is sometimes present that they are

of heavy tribulation under which the commercial world labours weeks before this great Parliamentary event, and the too certain fact that the whole of the country pays taxes, either directly or indirectly, conscience occasionally smiting some and no conscience troubling others, naturally invests the Budget with quite national importance. The result is that in the House of Commons, no less than in every centre of intelligence in the land, an eager and feverish curiosity is displayed to know what the wit of man has devised in the Treasury Office for the happiness and comfort of the British pocket.

The House meets at three o'clock. First it prays privately, without the intrusion of strangers. Private business, such as bills

promoted by corporations or companies, is then dealt with, followed by questions to Ministers, the answers to which are framed, for the most part, in the strict spirit of diplomacy, which, as you know, is particularly highminded and informative, in some cases giving opportunity for secretarial smartness, which excites many members into expressions of fond admiration, others into interjections of deep disappointment, but generally sending the majority floundering in the dark depths of unadulterated obfuscation, without, strange to say, any loss of prestige to their own understanding. It is well to remember that, as plain answers to plain questions are somewhat outside the Parliamentary curriculum, you may as well ask for a slice of the Equator, or a piece of the North Pole, or the head of the Speaker on a charger, as to expect that the hoary traditions of Westminster should be broken through in order to satisfy a grossly impertinent modern inquisition. The preliminary business is soon over, the House, in anticipation of the great event, not being desirous of prolonging what, under ordinary conditions, sometimes takes several hours to dispose of, and generally the Chancellor of the Exchequer is enabled to commence his financial statement early, amid the encouraging applause of the House, which by this time is warm and wondering.

You now see the House of Commons in the fulness of her glowing glory—the Mother of Parliaments under the fierce light that beats upon her doings. The day is dark and the House is gloomy. The Speaker gives the signal and at once there steals through the glass roof a mellow gaslight which illuminates the richly-oaked chamber with a warm and grateful tint. The House is crammed. Your loyal instincts are gratified at the knowledge that royalty is near you over the clock. Peers, once distinguished ornaments of the Constitution, but now quite vanishing quantities, like fading bluebells, are as interested as you in the proceedings. The Ladies' Cage wafts symptoms of scent and displays the presence of beauty. The Strangers' Gallery is filled to repletion with a big array of the fortunate Public.

Down in the forum a restless mass of bubbling humanity supplies a picture that might well strike a reflective and imaginative intellect. To find seats for all is quite impossible. Chairs are brought in and are almost fought for. Some of the members prefer to sit on the steps of the gangway leading to the rows of seats, others crowd

round about the Speaker's chair—anywhere in fact and everywhere, wherever they can see or hear. With many there is no help for it but to press eagerly for the Members' Gallery.

Standing on privilege, the greater number are sitting hatted, but as the warmth becomes more than genial they bare their heads to meet the temperature, and in so packed an assembly you are likely to hear a sickening crunching noise, an exact resemblance of which you will find at home if you should wish to sit on your best silk hat. The fate, however, of this Parliamentary hat finds no sympathy, no compassion—only a laugh. It is too common an event in the House to excite surprise.

Observe the gentlemen who do us the honour of governing us. If you have never before seen the august personage who, in your estimation afar off, was always a political hero of the first magnitude, you may probably become disillusioned by closer acquaintance. It is generally the case that at a distance, which, the poet tells us, "lends enchantment to the view," he strikes you as somebody in its widest sense, and probably the newspaper which irradiates your portion of the hemisphere with effulgent rays of erudition and intelligence is largely responsible for helping you to this conclusion. But pray be careful from what fountain you water your understanding. Remember that Thackeray, on his way home from India when a boy, was taken by a black servant to see Bonaparte in his island prison. "There he is," said the servant. "That's Bonaparte; he eats three sheep every day and all the little children he can lay his hands on!"

Or perhaps your eyes may light upon the gentleman who once contested your constituency but failed to convince "the free and enlightened." You remember him well—the soreness he exhibited at his defeat and the heroics he discharged when wishing the borough good-bye; how he declared that his principles were founded on the rock of ages and would live as long as the sands of time, and, like the miserable inhabitants of Luggnagg, they would never die. Or you may notice, lolling on the front bench of her Majesty's Opposition, the titled being who, according to your local journal, has a *penchant* for pork chops in order to produce objectionable mental creations—such being the only explanation, after a study of the ancient Fuseli, offered for your enlightenment, why this illustrious consumer of prime English-fed consistently delivers himself of most

marvellous opinions on questions appertaining to the Foreign Office.

An ex-Secretary, troubled in the cold shades of Opposition, blessed with the voice of a bo's'n's mate and displaying the airs of a flag-lieutenant, may arrest your interested attention, or a promising occupant of the Treasury Bench, with fair pretensions to holding high office—if the office will hold him; or two old college chums as thick and sweet as sugar plums at a Roman carnival; or the Nationalist acid and the Orange alkali mixed together by Parliamentary exigencies and regarding each other with hesitating intentions. Or it may be the Member for Leather, which commodity is declared on reliable authority to be very much



MR. WILLIAM HENRY PAUL.  
(Who has been in the Press Gallery since 1852.)

better than many other things put together; or the politician from the North, solemn and grim—the soul of a gravity which even Paley's idea of a happy world with a jumping shrimp would revolt at; or a merry admiral, whose thoughts are always on the roaring main, the ever-rolling deep; or the "old Parliamentary hand" who still believes that his specialities exude with the virtues that exalteth a nation; or a venerable specimen of Early English, who revels in long tales at Westminster, and in Blue Books under the Jungfrau. While all around are limbs of the law, shoulder to shoulder in blessed array, with adjuncts of the Church and upholders of the Faith, not to forget the Nonconformist Conscience, and dots here and there of well-

known personalities clinging to politics, ancient enough for the carboniferous period.

In the meantime the Chancellor of the Exchequer is wading through a mass of figures with the help, perhaps, of a bottle of egg-fillip, thick as honey and the colour of hair-oil, or a glass of water containing a portion of the dew off Ben Nevis, in order to explain the state of the nation's finances, and to tell an eagerly expectant country whether they are to be relieved of taxes or fresh burdened with these interesting penalties of a marching civilisation.

It will not be profitless to watch him. From the first you do not like his voice. It is harsh and rasping, sometimes thick and husky, with a liability to vanish at the end of his sentences. You feel that if he did not make repeated calls upon his little bottle he and the Budget would go down together. You notice, too, that though he has copious notes before him his financial discourse is sadly out of hand. He talks of hundreds where he means thousands, and thousands where he means millions; and when some discerning member notices the discrepancy, and, with one eye on the Speaker and the other on the Press Gallery, is not slow to call attention to it, the Chancellor reveals a slight confusion, makes the fatal mistake of arguing the point, thereby creating a jumble and a distressing break in the thread of his statement which leaves everybody in doubt, and plays sad havoc with Budget dignity.

Then something is left out, or something is inserted in the wrong place, and what with the "ohs" and the "ahs," and the "Yes, I forgot," and the "I am glad you have called my attentions," and the "I thought I had mentioned its," or some such manifestations of a perturbed understanding, the financial statement becomes so marvellous a compound that you cast your eyes round to your neighbour in the attempt to discover whether he can help you with even a beam of intelligence. The probability is that, like yourself, he is as much puzzled as the Solomon of Britain was with the apple dumpling.

This is one view. Picture another with a Chancellor already a giant in the political universe. His reputation as a financier imparts an all-consuming zest to the prevailing curiosity. He is heralded with a desire to propose some bold fiscal policy. He is to place our finances on such a basis that no one shall henceforth question their soundness or doubt their usefulness.

Indeed it is considered dangerous to pit your opinions against the product of his unparalleled experience and unexampled skill for fear that your technical shortcomings among the subtleties of monetary science should be remorselessly exposed, your fiscal crudities held up to contumely, and your financial reputation published as a hollow mockery.

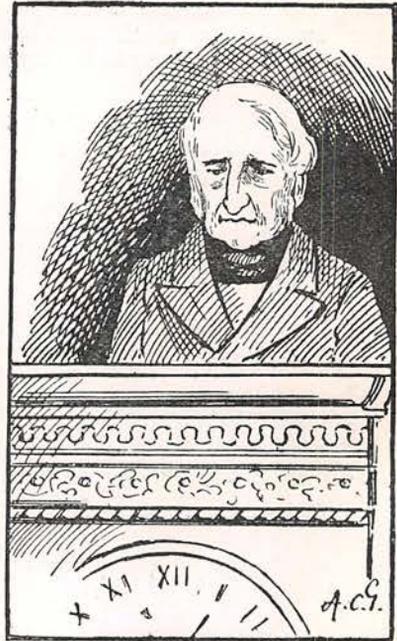
But in addition to an inherent genius for figures he is an orator, and with the hand of a master can clothe the Budget, not only with a rich vocabulary, but with all the elegant graces of diction. Clearly recognising that while it is necessary the House of Commons should understand his proposals, they need not be treated in a manner cold, dull, flavourless, insipid, or divested of literary polish; he seeks to combine the resources of high intellectual attainments with the sagacity of a shrewd financier, and so in this way contributes fresh laurels to a reputation as an orator and a Chancellor already great and commanding. Need I point out which of the two Chancellors here pictured excites most popular admiration?

If you ask the gentlemen in the Press Gallery their opinions of these two classes of Chancellors you will find that, though they deal with whatever happens in Parliament in a cheery and unobtrusive but confident manner, they have very strong convictions about Parliamentary oratory. Chancellors may "hum" and "ha," and "yes" and "no," get into polemical quagmires, stick in the fiscal mud, and indeed commit any Parliamentary atrocity of which a human being can be capable, yet our friends in the Gallery are never flurried or flustered or lose that quiet confidence so necessary for Press work in Parliament.

These big nights in the Press Gallery would never go smoothly if intellectual capacity were not commandingly superior to both the quality and the quantity of the raw material to be dealt with. To struggle with a mass of shorthand notes, full, it may be, of gaps through non-hearing, and wrong words through mis-hearing, figures muddled up, sentences that will not read, statements that are directly opposed to statements in another part of the Speech, in order that, when it is presented to the public, it shall read grammatically and intelligibly, and be understood by the ordinary newspaper reader, if he should wish to read it, is literary work, demanding skill and discretion, which is really the measure of the capacity of the Press representatives in Parliament to cope with

the great and important questions that necessarily arise.

On these big nights, when the various reporting corps are in their full strength, when leader-writers and summary-writers eagerly devour the Chancellor's proposals and the special points of the debate that follows; when each proposal, as it comes hot from the Minister's lips, is immediately put on the wires in the telegraph room and sent to all parts of the kingdom and the world for the use of newspapers and individuals; when the writing rooms, glowing



THE LATE LORD COTTESLOE.  
(Who heard fifty Budget speeches.)

under the electric light, are filled with busy Pressmen engaged in making their reports intelligible; when sketch writers are describing the scene in the House and "London Letter" writers are dealing with the latest tips from the Lobby; when messengers are here, there and everywhere, collecting "copy" for the London as well as for the Provincial Press; when the well-known click of the telegraph instruments is almost unceasingly heard the sitting through—here you find work being done quietly, but surely and effectively, requiring diligence, acuteness, knowledge and rapidity.

These attributes are all being pressed into this Budget Speech and the debate, and of the result the People, for whose service the

Newspaper Press has established itself in the Parliament House, are the best judges.

After the Budget statement is made and the high-strung curiosity is satisfied, the chamber rapidly empties. Most of the members make their way to the social quarter of the establishment, where they can eat and drink, smoke and talk, bathe and shave. The two last-named appurtenances of civilisation have quite recently been introduced. You could wash your face and comb your hair years ago, but you could not cleanse your corruptible body any more than you could boil the old Adam out of you, or get your hair cut if it had attained philosophic or musical, literary or Samsonian dimensions. Now that our legislators are able to keep their hair short in the Parliament House itself, observers of the human economy are persuaded that, like Samson, they become deprived of their normal strength, thus pointing a moral which no self-respecting barber would for a moment countenance.

Others go into the Lobby, where they talk over the Budget with interested outsiders. Many send telegrams to constituents whom it is desirable to propitiate, and thus contribute to a general show of fussiness. No private member who is worth a pinch of salt fails to recollect that, though he himself is a mere nobody in the House of Commons, many of his constituents are somebodies.

The Budget itself is in the meantime being bludgeoned by the leader of her Majesty's

Opposition, in the presence mostly of his own flock, who supply their shepherd now and again with a cheer or two by way of demonstrating their fidelity. But the interest now displayed is really fanciful, for everyone knows that it is of very little use expounding political ethics to any Government with a fair working majority, Providence being usually on the side of the biggest battalions.

For the remainder of the sitting the debate dulls to the points of lassitude and somnolency, and no one is sorry when that "tocsin of the soul"—the dinner bell—summons us "from labour to refreshment." It is past nine o'clock when the House resumes. The debate may become a bit enlivened after the dinner hour by the incursion of a member with a plethoric store of *jeux d'esprit*. He will very likely denounce, *ore rotundo*, the Budget proposals as foolish and impracticable. But alas! how Gargantuan is the capacity of the human mind. What he regards as "foolish" appears to another member to be firmly founded on the "eternal principles of truth and justice." What he characterises as "impracticable" is "really noble," if indeed it is not "superlatively statesmanlike."

Meandering on until midnight the debate is adjourned, and you go out into Palace Yard very likely with mixed feelings regarding the High Court of Parliament, and with police-calls for conveyances ringing in your ears—the certain signal that the big night has come to an end.

