

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS.

BY WALFORD D. GREEN, M.P.

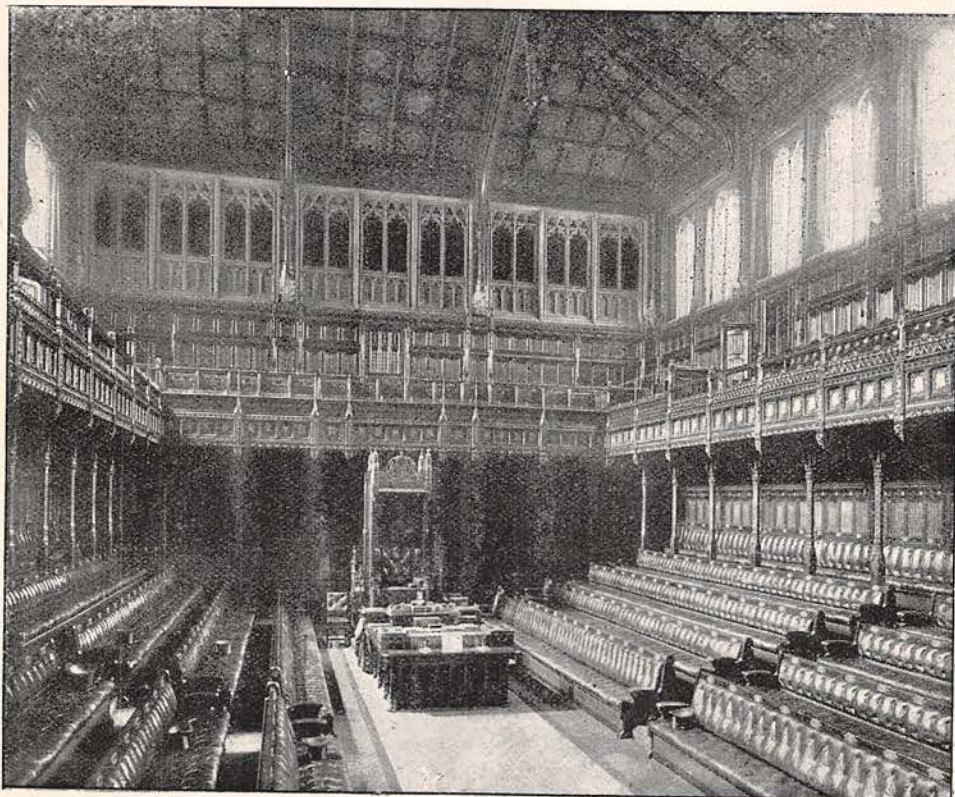
It is not easy to describe the impression which the House makes on the novice, especially after a session lasting only three weeks. There are so many types of parliamentary novices, and they walk across the yard for the first time with so many different expectations. For myself I prepared for my initiation in the afternoon by reading a great Whig's memoirs all the morning. After all it is as the central channel of the national life that the House is permanently interesting. The chamber where Pym and Eliot and Wentworth spoke ;



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MR. WALFORD D. GREEN, M.P.

where Walpole bribed and ruled ; where all the giants of a hundred years ago, when our parliamentary aristocracy came to its flower, fought and won and lost in their turn—that is the true House of Commons ; an assembly representative of a historic past as well as of the constituents of 1895.

All that however is out of sight. The House thinks of its past no more than a gay young aristocrat thinks of his ancestors. No assembly lives more in the moment. Its first concern is the next division, its ultimate horizon the next



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THE HOUSE OF COMMONS.

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election, when the members, as Canning said, will, like the giants of old, seek fresh strength by contact with their mother earth. The City diners who were told by Lord Rosebery that if he did not guard the empire Pitt (not the electorate!) would condemn him, were not more astonished than would be the House of Commons if called upon to seriously consider anything not of the moment. Probably no single member noticed the fact that the House completed its sixth centenary on November 21, 1895, until it was chronicled by some journalist with a brain for dates. The business acumen of Mr. Chamberlain is the quality universally approved, and the chilly commonsense of Lord Hartington was the basis of his influence. The young men must not dream dreams—only to Mr. Gladstone, with half a century of prestige at his back, was that permitted. An assembly of opportunists, it is yet stoutly traditional in forms and ceremonies. Woe to the unhappy new member who walks with his head covered, or passes between some orator and the chair.

The serious attraction of the House, felt to some extent even in the short summer session, is that there one can feel the actual combat of social forces. A political movement may seem very dead when read of, and yet very much alive when one is brought into contact with the men behind it. Even Home Rule, more dead than Queen Anne to the ordinary Tory, moves in its sleep when Mr. Timothy Healy is at his best. See Mr. Chamberlain watch the Irish members through his eye-glass—implacable, imperturbable, elate—and you will understand why Home Rule has been “put to bed.” There is comedy too, abundant comedy. Where else could be found so great a number of humorous types? The purple patriot, the informing bore, the local magnate (no longer local and therefore no longer a magnate), the dogmatic expert, the pompous minister—all these love the fierce light that beats upon the Commons, and flit about in it as a butterfly flits in the sun. It is curious that however forms of Government may vary the types among politicians remain pretty much the same. Cleon would be an M.P. to-day, and if Aristophanes could be one for a month he would write us his best comedy.

A remarkable feature is that the men who have spent time and money to enter this debating assembly are very impatient of debate. A brilliant passage of arms between leaders will be welcomed, but under

all ordinary speakers the majority of members are somnolent or restless. To the ordinary member indeed election to the House is very like marriage, “a picturesque gateway to a commonplace estate.” The satirist has compared him to the fly in amber—

“Neither rich nor rare :
One wonders how the devil he got there !”

But very often if he is not rare he is rich. He has, however, notwithstanding his opulence, become a slave of the whips, persons as authoritative as a prefect at school, if less mysterious than the Dean at college—so they seem to the young member.

Yet the ordinary member has his private revenge. However loyal a party may be they are very critical of their leaders, for a spirit of criticism is the master quality of the faithful Commons. In the lobbies, in the smoke-room, on the terrace many a man who will vote straight speaks his mind plainly enough. It is this critical spirit which makes the respect of the House so difficult and so honourable to win.

I have been told by old members that there are more young men in this Parliament than in any previous one, and most of them are on the Unionist side. Many of them belong to historic families and, however much Parliament may have been democratised, aristocratic connections are still of great value, especially upon the democratic side. They are no longer sufficient without ability, but with the ordinary equipment of brain, industry and ambition, a man of good birth stands to win when once he has entered the House. Probably it is a good thing to enter the House young, for the political trade (a “wild and dreamlike trade” Matthew Arnold called it) is a complicated one to learn. The Standing Orders of the House make up a stout volume, and familiarity with them puts many useful weapons into a man’s hands.

New members are probably over-critical and not sufficiently acquainted with the difficulties of reforming procedure, but most men coming fresh to the House agree with Sir Albert Rollit that the wheels of business move very slowly. The amount of time taken up by questions seems excessive. If the answers were printed instead of read to the House, and arrangements were made for the asking of supplemental questions when necessary, considerable time every day would be saved. The right to divide the House whenever you can find another member to tell with you is probably too sacred to be

touched, though it leads to many absurdities and great waste of time. Last session, for instance, only the hurried intervention of the whips of both parties prevented us from walking through twelve divisions in order to appoint the harmless, necessary Kitchen Committee.

In a competitive age there is no longer a "finest club in the world," but the social life of the House must always be interesting. In the library there is the oldest lore, in the smoke-room the newest story. The library is devoted to the building up of speeches, the smoke-room to their critical destruction. A member is said to have once left his manuscript of a speech in the library before he delivered it, and to have heard that speech delivered that same evening by another member. But speeches, like books, have their fate. Disraeli once copied for himself a passage from an oration of Thiers, and some years later, mistaking it for his

own composition, delivered it as a eulogy on Wellington. The intellectual productions which most interest members are political caricatures. When during last session some clever pictures, called "The Bowers of Bliss," by Mr. F. C. Gould, and representing the supposed flirtation between the Parnellites and the Unionists, appeared in the *Westminster Gazette*, it was noticed that the pictures were missing from all copies of the paper in the House. They had gone to Ireland, sent by the Anti-Parnellites. But the terrace is first of all the appendages of the House for chat or thought or quiet refuge. I remember one evening last session watching Mr. Balfour walk up and down at the quiet end, watched with amusement by a group of Irish members. Of what was he thinking? Of the stars, of music, of philosophy perhaps, but not of politics. The secret of a politician in our days is not to take politics too seriously.



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THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT.

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