

THE DEBACLE OF ENGLISH LIBERALISM.

BY SYDNEY BROOKS.

CARDINAL MANNING once declared that to write the history of modern France was like writing the history of a kaleidoscope. But a kaleidoscope, either as an instrument or as a figure of speech, seems a poor, immobile, positively spiritless invention by the side of the breathless changes, the hourly "crises," the melodramatic alternations that have been the lot of the British Government since the General Election came to an end. In London, and in the thick of events, it is difficult to assess with any precision the effect that must have been produced on the outside world by so rapid, so seemingly aimless and humiliating a succession of transformation scenes. But it can hardly have been other than an effect of sheer bewilderment. Here was a Ministry returned to power with a majority of 124 and a plurality in votes of over 400,000. Yet for many days it was doubtful whether it would live even long enough to face the new Parliament. Though numbers count even more in politics than in war, the first problem that the Cabinet considered was whether it should not immediately resign. It decided to continue in office, and on the whole, I think, wisely. But the mere fact that resignation could have been contemplated for a single moment is proof enough that the numerical strength of the Government far exceeded its true, effective strength. For a week and more before Parliament opened the Government lived in an atmosphere of ultimatums, intrigues and factional opposition and threats such as have never, to my knowledge, assailed any previous Cabinet. When the terms of the King's Speech outlining the programme of the session became known disunion passed into rebellion. One deputation after another of his nominal followers waited upon Mr. Asquith with remonstrances and hints of mutiny. Every

other speech in Parliament seemed to produce a fresh schism. The lobbies were a cauldron of rumors, disputes, plots and counter-plots. Hasty negotiations took place between Cabinet Ministers and the leaders of the various groups. First in one item of its programme and then in another the Government had to yield to the pressure of its supporters. It looked for a while as though no dexterity would save it, as though it would be beaten on the Address, and as though another General Election would follow at once. But the crowning mercy or the crowning disaster of a sudden death was denied to it. The immediate crisis was staved off, and instead of a General Election in March we shall have one in May or June. Such is the bare record of a series of events that must have amazed the outer world hardly less than they confounded England.

To explain why it is that a Government so strong on paper is so weak in fact, I must briefly analyze the nature of its majority, must make clear the conflicting policies of the groups that compose it, and must also examine the various complications and necessities, not altogether of his own making, that influenced Mr. Asquith's action. The Government majority of 124 is made up of two Liberals, forty Labor men, seventy-one Nationalists and eleven Independent Nationalists. But these groups are agreed on only one single plank of the official programme—the plank limiting the veto of the House of Lords on matters of ordinary legislation and depriving the Second Chamber of the power of rejecting any Bill that has passed the House of Commons a certain number of times. On this question, the Government, to the best of my belief, can count on rallying all the Liberals, all the Labor men and all the Nationalists. But the destruction of the Lords' veto on finance and the limitation of their veto on ordinary measures are by no means the whole of the general problem of the House of Lords. They do not, for instance, affect the vital question of its composition, of whether it should or should not be reformed from within, of whether the hereditary principle should be retained, modified or abandoned. On all these points the cleavage in the Ministerial ranks is real and deep. The Moderate Liberals are in favor of reforming the Upper House by making it wholly or partly elective. The Radicals, believing, and I think with justice, that any reform of the House of Lords could only strengthen it and make it more

assertive, are for leaving it as it is after they have deprived it of the few legislative powers it still possesses. The Labor men, as a matter of principle, wish to abolish the Lords altogether and are wholly out of sympathy with the idea of reforming them. The Nationalists are indifferent to the whole question. In their eyes the vital thing is to whittle down the veto of the Lords so that any measure which has passed the House of Commons may become law within the limits of a single Parliament. The accomplishment of that object they look upon, as Mr. Redmond frankly declared in the House of Commons, as tantamount to granting Home Rule to Ireland. Everything else connected with the Lords they treat as a purely British affair in which they have no concern. The Ministerialists, therefore, while at one on the question of destroying the Lords' veto on finance and limiting it on everything else, are not at one on the question of reforming the composition of the Upper House.

Still less are they at one on the question of Mr. Lloyd George's Budget. The Liberals, Radicals and Labor men are heartily in favor of it, but the Nationalists are not less ardently opposed to it. In the last Parliament they voted against it on the second reading and abstained from voting for it on the third. Since then the feeling against its provisions among all parties and classes in Ireland has risen to fever-heat. One of the chief causes that brought about the rise of the Independent Nationalists under Mr. O'Brien and Mr. Healy was that these gentlemen promised to do all that was possible to prevent the Budget from becoming law. The Irish people assert that the Budget with its increased tax on whiskey, its high licensing duties and its land taxes lays an extra burden upon them of ten million dollars per annum. It is impossible to ascertain whether this reckoning is correct, nor for the purposes of my argument does it much matter. The important fact is that all Ireland is in revolt against the Budget and that the revolt placed both Mr. Redmond and the Government in an extremely awkward position. The Government had given up practically the whole of 1909 to the Budget; of all their enterprises it was the most bitterly contested and by far the most audacious; its rejection by the Lords had precipitated the General Election; and Mr. Asquith had pledged himself, if returned to power, to reintroduce the Budget at once and pass it with all its clauses and provisions intact. It had been one of the leading

issues of the campaign and nothing but its triumphant resurrection and its passage through both Houses would round off the Liberal victory and convince the world that the Lords' attempt to snatch the power of the purse from the Commons had failed. To place Mr. Lloyd George's Bill on the Statute-Book was and is and must remain a matter of supreme importance to the Government. Yet when the elections were over it was seen at once that if the Irish Nationalists, who compose two-thirds of the Government majority, were to vote against it, the Budget could not possibly become law. I do not know which was the most to be sympathized with in this predicament, Mr. Asquith or Mr. Redmond. If the latter either voted for the Budget or abstained from voting against it, he ran the certainty of being assailed in every corner of Ireland as a traitor to Irish interests; he would be playing directly into the hands of the O'Brienites; such a passion of resentment and revulsion would be evoked as might ruin the Nationalist party and commit its fortunes and future absolutely to the care of Mr. O'Brien and Mr. Healy. On the other hand, if he voted against the Budget and threw it out another General Election would be inevitable; the Nationalist exchequer is in no position to stand a further drain upon its funds; the O'Brienites would claim his action as a victory for their policy; and Mr. Redmond, having appealed to America for funds to smash the veto of the Lords, would be convicted of having used the money to throw out a Government that had made the abolition of the veto of the Lords the first item on its programme.

His dilemma, therefore, was very serious. But was there no alternative? If Mr. Redmond could pin the Government down to an immediate and effective campaign against the Lords, would it not be worth his while to facilitate the passage of the Budget? After all, Mr. Lloyd George's Budget is not for all time; its provisions can be revised when the next Finance Bill is submitted to Parliament; many of its taxes have been levied ever since its introduction and there is no way in which the money can be refunded; most of the harm, in short, had been done already. Supposing that Mr. Redmond procured a pledge from the Government that in the next Budget concessions would be made to the Irish taxpayer, supposing also he was successful in removing the last and greatest obstacle to Home Rule—the veto, namely, of the House of Lords—would he not then be able to prefer a fair

claim to the continued support of the Irish people? But to enable him to do this it was vital that the veto of the Lords should be earnestly, vigorously and whole-heartedly attacked. And here he was befriended by one of the most amazing complications I can recall in English politics, and one, moreover, for which the Liberal leaders have only themselves to blame.

In the House of Lords debate on the Budget last November the Lord Chancellor, who is, of course, a Cabinet Minister, made the following statement, the gravity of which was emphasized by the fact that he read it out from manuscript: "It is, in my opinion, impossible that any Liberal Government should ever again bear the heavy burden of office unless it is secured against a repetition of the treatment such as our measures have had to undergo for the last four years." A few days later, when the Budget had been thrown out by the Lords, Mr. Lloyd George, speaking at the National Liberal Club, declared: "For my part, I would not remain a member of a Liberal Cabinet one hour unless I knew that that Cabinet had determined not to hold office after the next General Election, unless full powers are accorded to it, which will enable it to place on the Statute-Book of the realm a measure which will insure that the House of Commons in future can carry, not merely Tory Bills as it does, no, but Liberal and progressive measures in the course of a single Parliament, either with or without the sanction of the House of Lords." That was on December 3rd. On December 6th Mr. Churchill, speaking at Manchester, said: "Effective restriction of the Lords' veto not only upon finance, but upon legislation, has become the dominant issue, and, whatever may be the result of the election, be sure of this, that no Liberal Government will at any future time bear the burden of office without securing guarantees that the reform should be carried out." Then on December 10th came the great speech in which the Prime Minister laid down the issues of the campaign and formulated the Liberal programme. "I tell you quite plainly," he said, "and I tell my fellow countrymen outside that neither I nor any other Liberal Minister, supported by a majority of the House of Commons, is going to submit again to the rebuffs and humiliations of the last four years. We shall not assume office, and we shall not hold office, unless we can secure the safeguards which experience shows us to be necessary for the legislative utility and honor of

the party of progress." On the following day Mr. Churchill referred to the Prime Minister's declaration in these terms: "The Prime Minister, in his speech last night, said with a clearness none can mistake and with a solemnity all should appreciate, that no Liberal Government will ever again take or hold office under the conditions which have obtained in the Parliament which is drawing to its close. That is a statement which is binding upon every Liberal, official or unofficial, and if you support us the consequence of this declaration cannot fail to emerge in action after the election is concluded."

Now, the universal interpretation put upon these statements was that Mr. Asquith, if returned to power, would decline to take office unless and until he had received from the Crown guarantees that the resistance of the Lords would be overcome as it was overcome in 1832—by the creation, or the threat to create, a sufficient number of Peers to carry the Liberal programme. Liberal candidates all over the kingdom, and in particular the leaders of the Labor and the Nationalist parties, put this and no other construction upon the declarations I have quoted. Their reading of them was well known, was trumpeted from nearly every Liberal platform and was never contradicted by the Prime Minister. The difficulty, the absurdity even, of asking the Sovereign to furnish guarantees of safe-conduct on behalf of Bills yet undrafted in a Session not yet begun, hardly seemed to occur to any one. Personally I cannot doubt that the Liberal Ministers harbored the wild intention of approaching the King with a request for assurances that in case of need he would stand by them as William IV stood by Lord Grey; nor can I doubt that if they had been returned with anything like the majority they won in 1906 the intention would have been acted upon. But having lost over a hundred seats, and being in a state of quasi-dependence upon the Irish vote—and a Liberal Government in that position starts its career fatally discredited, for there is nothing Englishmen dislike so much as seeing their politics controlled by the Irish Nationalists—it was clear that the Government had none of the necessary weight and authority to prosecute a policy that only the direst of national emergencies could possibly justify. All talk of guarantees ceased when the results of the election were known. The Government proceeded to rearrange the Cabinet portfolios and to make appointments as though the

very idea of preliminary conditions had vanished from their minds. But suddenly Mr. Redmond made it abundantly clear that matters were not developing to his satisfaction. In a speech delivered on February 10th he declared that "what decided the Irish to support the Liberal party was the Prime Minister's pledge that neither he nor his colleagues would ever assume or retain office again unless they were given assurances that they would be able to curb and limit the veto of the Lords." He had always regarded Mr. Asquith as a man of his word. "I say it is inconceivable that in this matter he should now waver in his purpose. To palter with his pledges would, in my judgment, be to wreck the Liberal party and to drive them for the next twenty years into the wilderness, and I won't insult him by suggesting he has any such intention." Mr. Redmond emphatically protested against the idea of passing the Budget and adjourning the veto to a more convenient season. Such action, he declared, would disgust every real democrat in Great Britain, besides breaking "openly and unashamedly the clear and explicit pledge on the faith of which, at any rate, Ireland gave her support to the Government. If Mr. Asquith is not in a position to say that he has such guarantees as are necessary to enable him to pass a Veto Bill this year and proposes to pass the Budget and to adjourn the Veto question, I say that is a policy Ireland cannot and will not approve."

The stir caused by this speech was prodigious, and for a whole week there was a state of little less than anarchy in the world of politics. The Radicals and the Labor men ranged themselves on Mr. Redmond's side and it almost seemed for a while that the first division taken in the new Parliament would overthrow the Government. Against any such catastrophe, however, there was the sure safeguard that nobody in the House or out of it looked upon the prospect of another General Election with anything but loathing. There was this further safeguard that before either the Budget or the House of Lords could be dealt with it was absolutely essential to vote Supply before the close of the financial year on March 31st. The War Loan contracted in 1900 had to be redeemed; the deficit of \$125,000,000 caused by the action of the Lords in throwing out the Budget had to be made good; Treasury Bills issued during the last few months to furnish ways and means had to be renewed; and unless Supply were voted

there would be no money on and after April 1st for the Army, the Navy, the Civil Service or old-age pensions. Cooler heads, therefore, were well aware that the real issue would be joined after and not before Easter. Nevertheless, the King's Speech was read amid every sign of a crisis, a crisis which its terms immediately heightened. "Proposals," announced His Majesty, "will be laid before you, with all convenient speed, to define the relations between the Houses of Parliament so as to secure the undivided authority of the House of Commons over finance and its predominance in legislation. These measures, in the opinion of my advisers, should provide that this House (*i. e.*, the House of Lords) should be so constituted and empowered as to exercise impartially, in regard to proposed legislation, the functions of initiation, revision and, subject to proper safeguards, of delay." The words in these sentences that added to the perplexities of the situation were the words "so constituted." They meant that the Liberals were not merely going to limit the veto of the House of Lords, but to reform its composition; and to any reform of the House of Lords the Radicals and Labor men, as I have before explained, are totally opposed. The procession of deputations to Mr. Asquith was at once renewed; the "Revolt of the Radicals" took the place for the moment of the "Revolt of the Irish"; and the result of insistent pressure is that all Liberal schemes for reforming the Lords have been indefinitely postponed.

But if in that matter the Radicals bent the Government to their wishes, the Nationalists, Radicals and Labor men—but particularly the Nationalists—were equally successful in forcing the Ministry to adopt their policy in regard to the House of Lords. They have secured precedence for the veto over the Budget and they have obliged Mr. Asquith to bring matters to an issue sooner than he intended. The programme finally evolved out of the clash of factions and policies, and now being carried out as I write, devotes every moment of Parliamentary time up to Easter to the necessary business of voting Supply. After the briefest of Easter recesses the House will then proceed at once to debate the Resolutions which the Government are to propose as a basis for their Bills destroying the Lords' veto on finance and limiting it on legislation. These Resolutions as soon as they are adopted by the Commons will be sent up to the Lords, who will probably

either reject them or postpone their consideration until they are embodied in a Bill. Meanwhile the Budget will be reintroduced, but whether in the form in which it was originally drafted or as part of the Budget for 1910-11 is not yet known. Nor is it known what will happen if the Lords reject or hold up the Resolutions. Will Mr. Asquith at once resign? Will he approach the Crown and ask for the much-talked-of guarantees? And if he does, will he get them? These are vital questions because Mr. Redmond has made it abundantly clear that he will only allow the Budget to pass if the guarantees are sought for and obtained. The general opinion is that the Budget is hopelessly dead and that the Liberal campaign against the Lords will lead direct to an electoral disaster. I am myself inclined to subscribe to this opinion. What the country wants is a House of Lords, reformed in its composition, brought more directly in touch with public opinion, but otherwise maintaining all its present prerogatives intact, except its veto over finance. Under Lord Rosebery's inspiration the Peers have seriously settled down to the task of producing a scheme for their own reform. If it is a drastic scheme, so much the better. But in any case a battle fought out between the Conservatives who advocate the internal reform of the House of Lords and the Liberals who advocate its legislative emasculation can only end in a victory for the former. Liberalism is approaching its *débâcle*. In six months we may easily have a Tariff Reform Government in power; and the fortunes of Mr. Asquith and his followers will only begin to revive when that Government lays on the table of the House of Commons its first Tariff Reform Budget.

SYDNEY BROOKS.

NEW BOOKS REVIEWED.

MUSIC.

"HANDEL was a good old pagan at heart, and until he had to yield to the fashionable piety of England stuck to the opera and cantatas, where he could revel and plunge and frolic without being tied down to orthodoxy." This excerpt from the letters of Edward Fitzgerald sounds the key-note of this new and wholly delightful life of Handel.* "It is as a poet, a sympathizer with and renderer of all estates and conditions, whether of men or things, rather than as a mere musician, that Handel reigns supreme," the author quotes further from Samuel Butler.

Yes; this biography is not so much a volume of musical criticism, though that is not lacking, as it is a delightful picture of the times and the record of the gigantic struggles, the many failures and final victory of that brave, great-hearted human giant Handel. The author throughout relates his subject to the world in which he lived and what a lively, moving, multicolored world that was—the London of the first half of the eighteenth century. What a mass of records there are to draw from, the memoirs and correspondence of Arbuthnot, Gay, Prior, Pope, Walpole; the letters of the Duchess of Marlborough, Lady Cowper, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Fannie Burney and Mrs. Delany. Dodding-ton's Diary and Fielding's novels (see *Amelia* Bk., IV, chap. VII) also furnish descriptions and data of the operatic feuds in which Handel took so lively a part and held his own in so stout and Teutonic a way.

The very method of composing which the author conscientiously lays bare for us shows us the stout old pagan's light-hearted attitude toward creeds and forms. Good music, he contended, was always good, no matter where you used it, and he used a lament

* "Handel." By R. A. Streatfield. New York: John Lane Company, 1909.