

"FISCAL REFORM."

THE SUPERMAN AND THE MAN IN THE STREET. HOW IT STRIKES A CONTEMPORARY.

BY VERNON LEE.

It, in this case, is a whole, complex, and ill-defined state of things, of which the item "Fiscal Reform" is the outward and visible sign. And the contemporary who remarks upon it all is your humble servant.

That I, of all persons, should have an opinion to offer on this subject is due not to the possession of special lights, since elementary economics sufficient to know that you cannot sell to foreigners more than you buy from them ought scarcely to constitute a speciality. But I have had to come by an explanation of certain matters—e.g., this agitation for "Fiscal Reform"—because, living on the Continent, I have been called upon to explain to my Continental friends how it is possible that English people should be trying to make a fortune out of institutions which the Continent is trying slowly and laboriously to discard as mechanisms of class privilege, of national impoverishment, and of political corruption. And the following is the explanation which I have made out for the benefit of my Continental friends—French, German, and Italian Liberals who have hitherto looked at England as their model and their leader.

So far as "Fiscal Reform" is not in England, like "Protection" abroad, an affair of class enrichment through artificial monopoly, my explanation of the movement in its favour hinges upon the fact that we are passing through a moment of inevitable and necessary intellectual regression. The thinkers and statesmen of to-day, brought up on Darwin and Spencer, Mill and Cobden, and therefore treating them as foolish old persons—the intellectual generation at present in power is one whose

As the late Unionist member for West Perthshire, the historic noble family of Mar has now a representative in the House of Commons as well as supplying it with the Serjeant-at-Arms, Mr. Erskine of Cardross (county Perth), a different place from Cardross on the Clyde, where King Robert Bruce breathed his last while anxiously awaiting the removal of his excommunication by the Pope, whose messenger arrived just too late to allow of the great warrior dying in peace.

In the new House of Commons there will be two Samuels and two Strauses, all four belonging to the Government side and the Jewish religion. Mr. Herbert Samuel (Under-Secretary for the Home Department) and Mr. Stuart M. Samuel are, of course, brothers, and nephews of Sir Samuel Montagu, whose son, Mr. E. S. Montagu, has yet to poll in the Chesterton Division of Cambridge. Another Samuel (Mr. Samuel Samuel, brother of Sir Marcus Samuel, ex-Lord Mayor) was defeated as Unionist in Leeds, and likewise, besides the two successful Strauses—Mr. B. S. Straus in Mile End and Mr. E. A. Strauss in the Abingdon Division of Berks—another one, Mr. Arthur Strauss, was defeated as a Unionist in North Paddington.

Archdeacon Crossley, a recent importation from Yorkshire into Australia, is a humorist, and not afraid to crack a joke at the expense of his own cloth and caste. At a diocesan festival in Melbourne he propounded this conundrum: "Why is a parson like a camel?" Everybody giving it up, he supplied the answer himself: "Because he can go on and on and never know how dry he is."

function is that of automatic drag on progress. This function is indispensable and honourable ; and the generation set aside (in good teleological language) for it are saved any sense of its comparative humbleness by the exhilaration of correcting and crowing over their immediate predecessors. And now, having used the metaphor of the *automatic drag to progress* so far as it explains the usefulness of our retrograde contemporaries, let me get rid of this illustration when it implies misleading analogies. For I wish to explain at once that I do not, like some people, think of progress as a kind of motor-car, amusing to those inside, but hateful to drivers of safer, more venerable vehicles ; moreover, crushing old women and children and dogs, leaving dust and stench on its passage, and sooner or later landing its reckless passengers in the bottomless gulf. This is how progress appears, I believe, in the eyes of sundry eminent contemporaries now acting as drag—my old friend M. Paul Bourget, for instance. But that is not my view. I think motor-cars on the whole not more dangerous than drays and dog-carts, and a deal more convenient ; and I am not afraid that progress should go too fast, because I know that it cannot do so. For real progress means progress all along the line, and right through the cubic thickness of life and thought ; progress means not merely invention but integration ; not merely adding new things but using up old ones ; progress means the verification of all sides of a question, the reinstatement of all the activities and interests not merely within the Commonwealth but within the soul. Now, whenever progress in thought, or in feeling, or in institutions has jugged forward with extraordinary vigour, it is likely to have done so in a partial or superficial manner. Countries or classes will have been left out, as in the great civilisations of antiquity, with barbarians on the frontier and slaves underground ; or else instincts and tendencies will not have been given due importance in a system of morals or philosophy, as Christianity and Buddhism refused its due to egoism, as Rationalism and Materialistic Socialism have not given their due to imagination and sympathy. And whenever progress has in this manner left something behind, be it a race, a class, a human instinct however humble, or a fact however insignificant, progress is obliged to turn back and pick up that something, and, turning back, to lose in speed and seemingly change its direction. [Let the historically minded reader of the *Westminster* apply this theory and test it ; I do not think he will find it incorrect.] Now, progress has never perhaps been so sudden and rapid as in the last century and a half ; progress in institutions, in thought, in habits, and, I venture to add, in feeling and conduct, in the standards of what is right as well as in the tests of what is true. This rapid onward movement of civilisation implies that a great many things had been done hurriedly and imperfectly, a great many things omitted ; and that a work of criticism, of elimination and integration, of levelling up, had become necessary. Darwin and Spencer had to be corrected in the light of their own methods ; the "higher criticism" had to be criticised ; liberal institutions, liberal aspirations, liberal "shibboleths," had to be tested, rebuked, and even ridiculed ; even miracles, mediums, and haunted houses had to be given a chance ; a tremendous verifying of compass and charts had become necessary. Accordingly, in the departments at least of which I am able to judge, the most eminent thinkers of our day, from Tolstoy and Nietzsche to William James and Henri Bergson, have been fault-finders and destroyers rather than producers of new utilities. For the same reason also our contemporaries (our established teachers and leaders) have also been great reinstaters of exploded theories, apologists of obsolete beliefs and habits and institutions. And thus, precisely because

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contemporaries (our established teachers and leaders) have also been great reinstaters of exploded theories, apologists of obsolete beliefs and habits and institutions. And thus, precisely because the trend of civilisation is towards liberty, free thought, peace—towards greater lucidity, wider sympathies, and better manners—precisely because of this our inevitable and indispensable reaction has been in favour of autocracy and dogma, of race-hatred and national bunkum; our moralists and novelists have preached brutality and *slimness*; our philosophers have taught hopelessness and obscurantism; our statesmen— Well, all that I have been saying is in explanation of the movement for "Fiscal Reform." Our contemporary *Superman*, like his godfather Nietzsche, has given much time and energy to walking backwards, for fear of being mistaken for one of the heroes and sages, the gods, of the past, who happened to be walking forwards. And on his backward walk our sceptical obscurantist, our anarchical dogmatist, our advanced retrograde, has picked up on the refuse-heap, not yet, indeed, passports and the "Index Expurgatorius," but that more recently discarded piece of machinery called by the vulgar *Protection* and by the initiate *Retaliation*.

I have tried to show that, by what might be formulated as a law of history, the present generation of men of thought and action is bound to be more or less reactionary, because their predecessors had gone too fast, and too many ideas and interests required criticising or reinstating, at the expense, of course, of much waste of time and energy. But there has been another movement of reaction in our day, another of those regressions in the course of progress. The growth of democracy and the spread of intellectual "popularisation" have for the moment put us at the mercy of the immense half-educated majority. Let me explain myself; I do not mean at the mercy of the working-classes, who have, so far, too little voice in public matters. I mean by "half-educated majority" what is nowadays called "the Man in the Street." The "Man in the Street" is any man, woman, or child—is you or me, when not engaged upon real business, when not judging with real knowledge and attention; he is the average citizen in his hours of irresponsibility, and the spread of comfort and elementary education (particularly among the rich) has enormously increased of late these hours of irresponsibility. This "Man in the Street," who is an efficient enough person (soldier, sailor, tinker, tailor, and the rest) when he is *not* in the street, becomes, in his capacity of intellectual loafer, the natural audience of the various up-to-date *Supermen*, who offer their nostrums no longer, alas! from the tops of stage coaches, but from the dull "open platform" of cheap prints. The poor "Man in the Street," just because he *is* in that street and not in his own workshop or counting-house or study, is attracted by the Superman's trumpeting, listens to his eloquence, buys his pills (replaced next day by another brand of nostrum), and even occasionally sits down to have his teeth drawn in public; for surely taxation is of the nature of dentistry, if not of blood-letting. The "Man in the Street," moreover, is apt to get mixed up in processions with various banners, to be caught by extraordinary street panics (of which we English "Men in the Street" gave some fine examples within the last ten years), and, as a result, to forget his nice home and club manners in a bout of mafficking or in a little Judenhetze. Thus in all parts of the world where there are streets and men loitering and loafing, metaphorically, in them.

In England, at the present moment, the intellectual irresponsible or dilettantish loafer is being offered, with much drumming and trumpeting, the last brand-new obsolete nostrum revived by the retrograde and-contradictory Superman; to wit, that sovereign remedy for national anæmia, the Corn Law. And to-morrow he may be applauding the barber-surgeon with foreign diplomas, the modern phlebotomist who prescribes Comscription.

To-morrow? No; on the whole, I don't think there is much serious danger. To-morrow there will be fewer perambulating dentists, phlebotomists with drums, magnificent nostrum-sellers

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on platforms ; fewer processions with banners, fewer crowd-panics, fewer mafficking parties and parties hunting Semites. Moreover, the " Man in the Street " himself—— Well, he won't be in the street quite so much, or be attending to his business when he is. In plain English, things are already righting themselves. In proportion as democracy, leisure, and education increase, so also will the habit of understanding things properly or leaving them to the neighbour who does understand them. And meanwhile the regressive movement in thought and feeling is stopping, because it has no more work. We middle-aged folk, Supermen and Superwomen, and " Men-and-Women-in-the-Street," as the case may be, are very likely a reactionary lot. But our children, our nephews, our apprentices and pupils, are not. The younger generation requires no warning against the crudenesses and mistakes of Spencer or Mill or Renan ; Darwinism, by whatever name we call it, is for our youngers and betters not a doctrine but a habit of thought ; so with the " higher criticism " and all it stands for ; so, of course, with political economy. The new Supermen—whom we contemporaries of reaction do not even know by sight—will feel no necessity for walking backwards. The new generation will not care much about races and nationalities, about ghosts and mediums ; it will no longer crab the great sages and heroes of the *sixties*, but, without thinking much about them, complete, revise, enlarge their heritage. The new generation—the generation born in the *eighties*—will probably make short work of *phlebotomy up to date* and of *corn-tax as a cure for hunger*.

Such is the explanation of the present condition of the English mind, of the issue of the present elections, which I try to put before my puzzled Continental Liberals.