

AN AFTERNOON IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS.

A walk through Parliament street, from Charing Cross to St. Stephen's, puts one in a frame to appreciate the strange mingling of old and new which he is to find everywhere, upon his arrival. You pass the stately but begrimed front of Whitehall, and think of the scaffold which was run out in front of it, on which to behead a king. A blue-coat boy hurries by in mediæval costume, bareheaded, because while he must wear the yellow stockings and blue cloak, he may throw off the antiquated cap. Next perhaps comes, with slow pace, some dignitary of the church, in black short-clothes. Then a file of red-coats marches by, to relieve guard at one of the public buildings. At last the towers of Westminster Abbey come in view, overlooking Westminster Hall, now incorporated into the great Parliament House of St. Stephen's, and so well incorporated that the whole might well have been the design of a single architect.

Policemen guard every entrance to the building, and no one enters the curtilage of either House, when it is in session, without a special card of admission. Mine, on the afternoon of July 25, 1900, passed me up a narrow stone stairway behind the chamber of the House of Commons, leading to the rear gallery, and gave me a center seat in the second row. The middle of the first row is reserved for high dignitaries. Half of it is set apart for the Prince of Wales, and the rest for the foreign legations. Some one from that of Japan was present, and another whose complexion and appearance made me think him a Portuguese. He was furnished by the usher with one of the official calendars for the day, and as he soon went out and left it behind, I considered it abandoned property, and took possession as the first occupant. There were twelve pages of it, containing fifty-five orders of the day, of which twenty-one bore the asterisk, signifying that they were "Government Orders of the Day," and so entitled to precedence.

Notice had been given of a motion to amend the general appropriation bill which was the second on the list, by docking a hundred pounds from the salary of the Secretary of State for the Colonies.

The debate on this motion was opened by Mr. Buxton, who was one of the under-Secretaries for the Colonies in the last Gladstone administration. He attacked the main feature of the measure which Mr. Chamberlain, as Colonial Secretary, has endorsed, with respect to the punishment to be inflicted on the leading Boers, which is to disfranchise them for five years. It was, he said, vindictive; it was continuous; and it was political; three poor things to bring solid peace. He spoke too rapidly, and with no attempt at display of oratorical power. A long debate followed, in which Mr. Chamberlain made a strong defense of his position. Next came Mr. Cecil, who, when I entered the gallery, about four o'clock, was in the middle of a rather dry and pointless statement of the benefits Great Britain would derive from annexing the conquered republics, and would give to them, by opening the door to new and profitable commerce. He said, among other things, that there would be a good market for English bricks, at which there were derisive cries from several of the opposition, led by Smith McNeil, one of the Irish members. Mr. Cecil retorted that these clearly showed the ignorance of certain gentlemen as to South African affairs, whom he would take leave to inform that the buildings there now were mainly built of corrugated iron, a material very unfit for the climatic conditions.

The House at this time was quite thin. Perhaps fifty were scattered about on the long settees or benches on each side. These are arranged in three rows, and resemble very much those used in the lobbies of American hotels. It is hard to sit erect in them for any length of time, and most of the members gradually sink down into a sprawling condition, all the more awkward when a silk hat is worn. That sign of the independence of the English Commons was maintained on this occasion by not more than one in half a dozen, for the day was excessively hot.

The front benches nearest the Speaker's chair are reserved on each side for the party leaders. The amendment was being discussed in a committee of the whole, and the chairman occupied the right of the clerk's desk. There were two of these in black gowns and white horsehair wigs, but he wore plain clothes.

Henry Labouchere rose as Mr. Cecil sat down, and raised a general laugh by the remark that the position of the government, as he now understood it, was that the war had been a good thing, because it was going to make a market for brick

manufacturers instead of a market for iron manufacturers. He spoke easily, fluently, and forcibly. His hair and beard are now quite white, but his voice is as clear and pleasant as ever.

Several short speeches followed. The leading one on the Liberal side was by Sir R. Reid, formerly Attorney-General, who stated his intention to vote for the amendment, as he thought the whole policy of the Colonial Secretary had been wrong. Sir Henry Bannerman-Campbell, the leader of the opposition, then announced his position. He did not approve the policy which had brought on the war. He did approve fighting the war through to victory, after it had been forced upon the nation. The amendment seemed equivalent to a vote of general disapproval of the Secretary's course. So far as this he was not prepared to go. He remembered some years ago there was an interesting question up in the House as to which the vote of that right honorable gentleman was looked for with some eagerness of anticipation. The division came. Where was the honorable gentleman then? (Loud laughter.) He should, in the present instance, in that particular, follow the gentleman's example. He should not vote at all. He was unwilling to seem to approve everything; he was equally unwilling to seem to approve nothing.

Sir Henry spoke with ease and spirit. A large and high table, with deep drawers, parts the benches of the leaders on either side, on the broad top of which he had arranged the notes of his speech. By all odds it was the handsomest which had as yet been delivered, in its manner; but it was colorless and so necessarily ineffective.

When Mr. Balfour rose to sum up for the ministry, there were opposition cries of "No. No. Chamberlain," but the Secretary wisely left the field to his chief, who wields a heavier blade. The country, he said, was substantially unanimous in upholding the government in all that it had done. The right of the house, with perhaps a single exception, were of the same opinion. On the left of the house, they were to have, as he understood, far from a united opposition. So far as he could judge from the remarks of the leader of the opposition, they had nothing to fear from him. Did he speak for all his followers? All, perhaps, he might venture to surmise, except two gentlemen in the lower corner of the front bench.

This was a hit at Sir R. Reid and John Morley. He did not know, he continued, who was the leader of those gentlemen. The former at once rose and said with some emphasis that

the only leader of the opposition was Sir Henry Bannerman-Campbell. A cry here rang out from Smith McNeil, of "Poor Rosebery."

Balfour thanked his learned friend for his "passionate" disclaimer, and said he would next ask the gentlemen on the other side of the house what measure of punishment they proposed. Should there be none? Should it be capital? Should it be confiscation of property? If not, what was better, milder, fairer than that which the government had suggested?

Every point was put forcibly and sharply, but with no asperity. He was confident of his majority, and evidently desired to confine the discussion within as narrow ground as possible, in view of its possible effect on the Boers still in the field.

Mr. Courtenay, however, "the single exception" on the ministerial benches, was unwilling that the debate should close until he had announced why he was prepared to vote for the amendment. In his opinion, the whole business had been mismanaged from beginning to end, and mismanaged by the Colonial Secretary.

Sir E. Grey followed in support of the general resolution of the opposition to separate from their leader, on this question. Mr. Bryce spoke also to the same point, but the whips were now busy on each side in calling in their men and preparing for a division, so that the hubbub almost drowned his voice, and soon made him take his seat. Mr. Luttrell then rose, but Mr. Balfour interrupted by a demand for a vote of closure. This, under the present rules of the House, if carried, forces an immediate decision of the main question; and carried it was by a vote of 169 to 100. Divisions followed on the amendment and on the bill, the minority dwindling on the last to thirty-five, and at half-past seven the committee rose and the Speaker took the chair.

He was in a full-bottomed wig and black gown, and proceeded at once to call the list of the remaining Government Orders of the Day. Mr. Balfour responded to each with a word or two, such as "to-morrow," or "Monday," or some other day, as best suited his convenience, and the Speaker repeated his words as if they expressed the sense of the House. No one objected, and so, in two or three minutes, the orders of the day were re-assigned, and a motion to adjourn carried unanimously, after an unbroken session of seven hours and a half.

Sir Henry Bannerman-Campbell was not a little chagrined at the course of his party, on this occasion. While he declined to vote, most of them took part in the division. He threatened to resign at once his position as leader of the opposition, but was induced to continue in it by the entreaties of some of his associates, at a meeting held for consultation, the next day. The parliament was visibly nearing its close, and it would have been disastrous to the Liberal cause to change leaders on the eve of dissolution.

The House of Commons differs in general appearance from our national House of Representatives very widely.

While larger, it seldom looks as large, for part of the members are almost never present, and most of them spend a large part of their time, when in attendance, in the committee rooms or lobbies.

As only the leaders have anything in the nature of a desk, there is no opportunity to spend the time in writing letters, nor to one who is making a speech to surround himself with books and papers. Men therefore speak more briefly, and give better attention to what others say.

They are kept in discomfort every moment by the high-backed and broad-cushioned seats, fit only for the use of a giant, and a very straight-backed giant at that. Those in the galleries are a little worse, that of the Prince of Wales included.

The wearing of hats by a considerable part of the members gives the assembly a disorderly look, and the frequent interruptions of a speaker by derisive cries also detracts from the dignity of the House.

The sessions are often prolonged to an unreasonable hour. The regular hours are from noon to half-past five; but not infrequently the House sits into the evening or half through the night. Committee sessions are bulletined for the early part of the afternoon and thus often break in on the regular work of the House, as do luncheon and dinner, inevitably and daily.

Finally, the exclusion of the public, except so far as admission may be granted as a favor by particular members to particular individuals, gives a star-chamber aspect to the whole scene. The ancient reasons for this have ceased, and the practice should cease also. It is essentially unrepugnant that what has become a popular assembly, representing almost every man in England, should not allow every man in England, whom there is room for, to witness what is being done by those who are acting in his behalf.