

LONDON LETTER.

(From our own correspondent.)

London, February 17th.

The ravages of influenza give no tokens of mercy. If Vienna or Berlin or Dresden are looking for sympathy they should be able to find it here, and especially in the House of Commons. Three or four Treasury seats (I am not quite sure of the number) are vacant, and the latest victim is Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman himself. Among the rank and file there are more members *hors de combat* than can conveniently be counted on a single pair of hands, but then the rank and file are not so important. The illness of the Premier, however, must tend to accentuate the gravity of that political situation which his recent continuous indisposition has in a measure created. Just as too many cooks, in the not unfamiliar proverb, spoil the cooking, so in politics two Premiers, combined with an unruly following, lead up to a Cabinet crisis. Is Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, everybody is asking, or Mr. Asquith to play first fiddle? This morning comes the suggestion of the *Times* that the Premier should withdraw to the serene atmosphere of the House of Lords in order to direct affairs from the background, rather than hover like a cloud behind the actions of Mr. Asquith in the House of Commons. The article, written with studied consideration, yet with a touch of the dignified petulance of Dr. Middleton, has the air of a *ballon d'essai*. While it might be rash to foretell changes, interesting developments should not take us by surprise. And, after all, there is as much reason as there is petulance behind the arguments of the *Times*.

Bluntly to advocate the retirement of the Premier would be both boorish and unjust. Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman has shewn himself the one man able to hold together a very heterogeneous Cabinet, and it is only because of the very obvious difficulties in the way of a Premier who cannot lead the House in person that the suggestion was at all possible. But those difficulties are really immense. There are, as the article points out, innumerable little matters making up the knowledge and authority of a Premier, and if he is out of personal touch with these matters his control over the House becomes undermined. But that the Premier should elect to go to the House against which the full strength of his batteries has been directed for some time will create more than "a broad and general smile": it can be received only with incredulous silence. For such a cause there are no good arguments, and in this case the *Times* is not at pains to disguise their poorness. The fact is that Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman cannot, with any grace at all, direct the Government from the Upper Chamber; nor can he with success, or even with propriety, remain at the head of a House in whose debates he is unable to participate. Such is the dilemma; but I can only repeat that it would be rash to predict too much, and better not to predict at all.

"The taxi-four-wheeler", writes one of my most inquisitive correspondents, "has arrived on the top of the taxi-hansom, though I suppose they both belong to the genus taxi-cab. I saw the first one last night at Victoria. I must tell you that I never scruple to make enquiries when I consider the issue interesting enough (and when isn't a thing one looks at for more than a second interesting enough to whet one's curiosity?) The cab was waiting at the platform; there was a lady sitting inside, a trunk lying outside, and the driver standing two feet away from me. When I saw that the cab was no ordinary one, but had a brand new taximeter, lacquered into a high state of ebony lustre and flaunting a flag of painted tin with a jaunty, cocksure air, I stood still and looked sympathetic. Now cabmen, and more especially Cockney cabmen, understand psychology better than most University Professors. Certainly, this one did not wait longer than a few seconds before accepting my mute invitation to become discursive. His information was cumulative: one had to get accustomed to it. I am sure that, for my part, I could not have swallowed his latter facts until I had swallowed his preliminary ones. *Hors d'oeuvres*: the cab was the first taxi-four-wheeler. *Soup*: so far it was the only one. *Entrée*: he (cabby) had always advocated the introduction of taxi-cabs at diminished fares with his employers. *Pièce de résistance*: he had given those views to the House of Commons Commission two years ago. At this interesting juncture a friend, who was accompanying me, dragged me away unceremoniously, but as I disappeared behind a mountain of luggage I could not help glancing towards the lady who was the occupant of the cab. And now I cannot forgive myself for not asking about her before giving the fellow a chance to vaunt his taximeter. A lady waiting alone in this vast London, with a trunk, in the only taxi-four-wheeler in England, on a dim Sunday evening—such mysteries are not given to me every day. If only I had a more lucky star, as had Sterne or Stevenson, no doubt a hand, exquisitely gloved, would have beckoned out of the window. As it is, my friend

gripped my arm like a hungry cannibal; an old gentleman trod on my toe, apologized, and then trod on the other one, taking me to task meanwhile for pushing him; a bewildered woman with a child appealed to me to save her luggage; and a porter battered the small of my back with the rail of his importunate barrow. That is how I pay for my romantic musings and my thirst for information.

"Nevertheless," continues my correspondent, "I could not help noticing the people who arrived. The train was the Continental train from Calais and was longer and fuller than any I remember. There is nothing quite so nice as speculating about people you have never seen before and are never likely to see again: the process is so perfectly self-respecting and unobtrusive. A man stares at me and I stare at him; our look neither disparages nor compliments; it is stony, amazed, arrested, but never interested. As soon as you look interested you are ill-bred, but if you cease looking altogether you are foolish. I have become so reconciled to both alternatives that I often succeed in combining them by an ingenious compromise. Unjustly enough, the result is that my subject ceases to stare at me (a proceeding which is perfectly adapted to my comfort) while I am free to penetrate into his paraphernalia, metaphorically speaking, at leisure. Last night there were a lot of people coming from India, and they interested me a great deal. People from India are so intensely English (I suppose it must be because they are always agog for the home-coming) even to the extent of giving one the impression of coming from England to a strange country, instead of the reverse. I singled out my types and found it true of all of them—a muscular parson, with his grim wife and vociferous offspring; a patient young woman, the wife, as I thought, of a struggling officer or civil servant; a brown-faced, lean-chapped, fever-dried officer in a coat with an astrachan collar; a young, snub-nosed, red-cheeked subaltern, carrying a pith helmet under one arm and a rush mat under the other. To me the interesting part was not what they were coming to at home (for I could see what sort of people met them and how) but what they had left behind—what debts, disappointments, scrapes, intrigues, misfortunes. These things I can never know, and it is ever so tantalizing to know that I never can."

AN AMERICAN BANKER POET.

The literary executors of the late Mr. Edmund Clarence Stedman, the banker poet of New York, appeal to his English correspondents for any letters of interest. The biography which they have in hand should prove of considerable interest. Mr. Stedman belonged to a special type. He went into business in order that he might be literary. It is interesting to learn that as a student he took first prize in a Yale literature competition with a poem on Westminster Abbey. After leaving college he embarked on journalism, but in consequence of some financial reverses took up banking, with the professed intention of acquiring a competency that would make it possible for him to devote his entire time to literary work.

A writer in the New York *Evening Post* pitches on Stedman's poem, "Pan in Wall Street", as an epitome of the man. The poet describes the duties of Greece marching through Wall-street, and Pan sitting

Just where the Treasury's marble front
Looks over Wall Street's mingled nations;
Where Jews and Gentiles most are wont
To throng for trade and last quotations.

Finally the poet comments:

O heart of Nature, beating still,
With throbs her vernal passion taught her—
Even here, as on the vine-clad hill
Or by the Arethusan water!
New forms may fold the speech, new lands
Arise within these ocean portals,
But Music waves eternal wands—
Enchantress of the souls of mortals!

For half a century Mr. Stedman was the Poet Laureate of New York.

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