THE LONDON SCENE

V 'THIS IS THE HOUSE OF COMMONS'

Outside the House of Commons' stand the statues of great statesmen, black and sleek and shiny as sea lions that have just risen from the water. And inside the Houses of Parliament, in those windy, echoing halls, where people are forever passing and repassing, taking green cards from policemen, asking questions, staring, accosting members, trooping at the heels of schoolmasters, nodding and laughing and running messages and hurrying through swing doors with papers and attaché cases and all the other emblems of business and haste - here, too, are statues - Gladstone, Granville, Lord John Russell - white statues, gazing from white eyes at the old scenes of stir and bustle in which, not so very long ago, they played their part.

There is nothing venerable or timeworn, or musical, or ceremonious here. A raucous voice bawling 'The Speaker!' heralds the tramp of a plain democratic procession whose only pomp is provided by the mace and the Speaker's wig and gown and gold badges of the head waiters. The raucous voice bawls again, 'Hats off, Strangers!' upon which a number of dingy felt hats are flourished obediently and the head waiters bow from the middle downwards. That is all. And yet the bawling voice, the black gown, the tramp of feet on the stone, the mace and the dingy felt hats somehow suggest, better than scarlet and trumpets, that the Commons are taking their seats in their own House to proceed with the business of governing their own country. Vague though our history may be, we somehow feel that we common people won this right centuries ago, and have held it for centuries past, and the mace is our mace and the Speaker is our speaker and we have no need of trumpeters and gold and scarlet to usher our representative into our own House of Commons.

Certainly our own House of Commons from inside is not in the least noble or majestic or even dignified. It is as shiny and as ugly as any other moderate-sized public hall. The oak, of course, is grained yellow. The windows, of course, are painted with ugly coats of arms. The floor, of course, is laid with strips of red matting. The benches, of course, are covered with serviceable leather. Wherever one looks one says, 'of course.' It is an untidy, informal-looking assembly. Sheets of white paper seem to be always fluttering to the
floor. People are always coming in and out incessantly. Men are whispering and gossiping and cracking jokes over each other's shoulders. The swing doors are perpetually swinging. Even the central island of control and dignity where the Speaker sits under his canopy, is a perching-ground for casual members who seem to be taking a peep at the proceedings at their ease. Legs rest on the edge of the table where the mace lies suspended; and the secrets which repose in the two brass-bound chests on either side of the table are not immune from the prod of an occasional toe. Dipping and rising, moving and settling, the Commons remind one of a flock of birds settling on a stretch of ploughed land. They never alight for more than a few minutes; some are always flying off, others are always settling again. And from the flock rises the gabbling, the cawing, the croaking of a flock of birds, disputing merrily and with occasional vivacity over some seed, worm, or buried grain.

One has to say to oneself severely, 'But this is the House of Commons. Here the destinies of the world are altered. Here Gladstone fought, and Palmerston and Disraeli.' It is by these men that we are governed. We obey their orders every day of the year. Our purses are at their mercy. They decide how fast we shall drive our cars in Hyde Park; also whether we shall have war or peace.' But we have to remind ourselves; for to look at they do not differ much from other people. The standard of dress is perhaps rather high. We look down upon some of the glossiest top hats still to be seen in England. A magnificent scarlet button-hole blazes here and there. Everybody has been well fed and given a good education doubtless. But what with their chatter and laughter, their high spirits, and impatience and irreverence, they are not a whit more judicious, or more dignified, or more respectable-looking than any other assembly of citizens met to debate parish business or to give prizes for fat oxen. This is true; but after a time some curious difference makes itself suspected. We feel that the Commons is a body of a certain character; it has been in existence for a long time; it has its own laws and licences. It is irreverent in a way of its own; and so, presumably, reverent too in its own way. It has somehow a code of its own. People who disregard this code will be unmercifully chastened; those who are in accord with it will be easily condoned. But what it condemns and what it condones, only those who are in the secret of
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the House can say. All we can be sure of is that a secret there is. Perched up high as we are, under the rule of an official who follows the prevailing informality by crossing his legs and scribbling notes on his knee, we feel sure that nothing could be easier than to say the wrong thing, either with the wrong levity or the wrong seriousness, and that no assurance of virtue, genius, valour is here sure of success if something else—some indefinable quality—is omitted.

But how, one asks, remembering Parliament Square, are any of these competent, well-groomed gentlemen going to turn into statues? For Gladstone, for Pitt, or for Palmerston even, the transition was perfectly easy. But look at Mr Baldwin—he has all the look of a country gentleman poking pigs; how is he going to mount a plinth and wrap himself decorously in a towel of black marble? No statue that did not render the shine of Sir Austen’s top hat could do justice to him. Mr Henderson seems constitutionally opposed to the pallor and severity of marble. As he stands there answering questions his fair complexion flushes scarlet, and his yellow hair seems to have been sleeked down with a wet brush ten minutes ago. Sir William Jowitt, it is true, might, if one took off his spruce bow tie, sit to some sculptor for a bust made in the style of the Prince Consort. Ramsay MacDonald has ‘features,’ as the photographers say, and could fill a marble chair in a public square without looking conspicuously ridiculous. But for the rest, the transition into marble is unthinkable. Mobile, irreverent, commonplace, snub-nosed, red-jowled, squires, lawyers, men of business—their prime quality, their enormous virtue lies surely in the fact that no more normal, average, decent-looking set of human beings could be found in the four kingdoms. The flashing eye, the arched brow, the nervous, sensitive hand—these would be unseemly and out of place here. The abnormal man would be pecked to death by all these cheerful sparrows. Look how irreverently they treat the Prime Minister himself. He has to submit to being questioned and cross-examined by a youth who seems to have rolled out of a punt on the river; or again to be heckled by a stubby little man who, to judge by his accent, must have been shovelling sugar into little blue bags behind a counter before he came to Westminster. Neither shows the least trace of fear or reverence. If the Prime Minister should one of these days turn into a statue, this apotheosis will not be reached here among the irreverent Commons.
THE CROWDED DANCE OF MODERN LIFE

All this time the fire of question and answer had popped and cracked incessantly; at last it stopped. The Secretary for Foreign Affairs rose, raised some typewritten sheets and read, clearly and firmly, a statement about some difficulty with Germany. He had seen the German Ambassador at the Foreign Office on Friday; he had said this, he had said that. He had crossed to Paris and seen M. Briand on Monday. They had agreed to this, they had suggested that. A plainer, a graver, a more business-like pronouncement could not be imagined. And as he spoke so directly, so firmly, a block of rough stone seemed to erect itself there on the government benches. In other words, as one listened to the Secretary for Foreign Affairs endeavouring to guide our relations with Germany, it seemed clear that these ordinary-looking business-like men are responsible for acts which will remain when their red cheeks and top hats and check trousers are dust and ashes. Matters of great moment, which affect the happiness of people, the destinies of nations, are here at work chiselling and carving these very ordinary human beings. Down on this stuff of common humanity comes the stamp of a huge machine. And the machine itself and the man upon whom the stamp of the machine descends are both plain, featureless, impersonal.

Time was when the Foreign Secretary manipulated facts, toyed with them, elaborated them, and used all the resources of art and eloquence to make them appear as he chose that they should appear to the people who had to accept his will. He was no common hard-worked man of business, with a small car and a villa and a great longing to get an afternoon off and play golf with his sons and daughters on a Surrey common. The Minister was once dressed to fit his part. Fulminations, perorations shook the air. Men were persuaded, juggled with, played upon. Pitt thundered; Burke was sublime. Individuality was allowed to unfold itself. Now no single human being can withstand the pressure of human affairs. They sweep over him and obliterate him; they leave him featureless, anonymous, their instrument merely. The conduct of affairs has passed from the hands of individuals to the hands of committees. Even committees can only guide them and hasten them and sweep them on to other committees. The intricacies and elegancies of personality are trappings— that get in the way of business. The
supreme need is despatch. A thousand ships come to anchor in the docks every week; how many thousand causes do not come daily to be decided in the House of Commons? Thus if statues are to be raised, they will become more and more monolithic, plain and featureless. They will cease to record Gladstone’s collars, Dizzy’s curl and Palmerston’s wisp of straw. They will be like granite plinths set on the tops of moors to mark battles. The days of single men and personal power are over. Wit, invective, passion, are no longer called for. Mr MacDonald is addressing not the small separate ears of his audience in the House of Commons, but men and women in factories, in shops, in farms on the veldt, in Indian villages. He is speaking to all men everywhere, not to us sitting here. Hence the clarity, the gravity, the plain impersonality of his statement. But if the days of the small separate statue are over, why should not the age of architecture dawn? That question asks itself as we leave the House of Commons. Westminster Hall raises its immense dignity as we pass out. Little men and women are moving soundlessly about the floor. They appear minute, perhaps pitiable; but also venerable and beautiful under the curve of the vast dome, under the perspective of the huge columns. One would rather like to be a small nameless animal in a vast cathedral. Let us rebuild the world then as a splendid hall; let us give up making statues and inscribing them with impossible virtues.

Let us see whether democracy which makes halls cannot surpass the aristocracy which carved statues. But there are still innumerable policemen. A blue giant stands at every door to see that we do not hurry on with our democracy too fast. ‘Admission is on Saturdays only between the hours of ten and twelve.’ That is the kind of notice that checks our dreaming progress. And must we not admit a distinct tendency in our corrupt mind soaked with habit to stop and think: ‘Here stood King Charles when they sentenced him to death; here the Earl of Essex; and Guy Fawkes; and Sir Thomas More.’ The mind, it seems, likes to perch, in its flight through empty space, upon some remarkable nose, some trembling hand; it loves the flashing eye, the arched brow, the abnormal, the particular, the splendid human being. So let us hope that democracy will come, but only a hundred years hence; when we are beneath the grass; or
that by some stupendous stroke of genius both will be combined, the vast hall and the small, the particular, the individual human being.