

MY CRAPULOUS CONTEMPORARIES

NO. V

THE BISMARCK OF BATTERSEA

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DANTE perhaps thought when he descended the fifth round of Hell that there was some consolation in the fact that he was getting near the bottom. To us, as we explore the glories of Edwardian literature, such consolation is denied. Abyss after abyss yawns beneath our feet; deep into the gloom we peer and our ears are poisoned with the fetid vapours of the ineffable slime—with the callow crapulosities of a Corelli, the slobbering senilities of a Sims, the unctuous snivellings of a Caine.

But we do not propose to descend so far—there is a limit. But stay! what is that glimmer on yonder ledge? That ledge where the Brown Dog of the Faddist fights its eternal battle with the Yellow Dog of Socialism. The ledge labelled "Battersea," supreme word of malignity in the tongue of the pit? Our laureled guide quickly lowers us thither.

What is that bloated and beery buffoon who stands upon his head to attract attention! we ask. Bismarck, it appears, is his name. Blood and iron is his motto. 'S death! but I suspect a paradox. Maybe that by blood he means beer, by iron ink.

"Maybe this Nonconformist plum-pudding has been dipped in whale oil—and why have they stuffed it with onions?" How shall I find the key to this mystery! So portentous a sentence—and its meaning? "Christianity is only tenable through Literalism and Ritualism." Not so I read it—and my own secret interpretation sends a guffaw through the black shining sides of the prison. With that I awoke; 'twas all a dream; I must begin again—that opening will never do.

Here, therefore, beginneth the third lesson. How shall we catch the great gray water-rat "That strikes the stars (*sublimi vertice*) on Campden Hill?"

Quoth the famous consort of a famous judge, on being advised to abate the rat nuisance by plugging their holes with a mixture of tallow, arsenic, and brown paper: "Yes, but you've got to catch them first." So we, accepting her wisdom, shall not attempt to suppress the News (plain or illustrated)—we shall rather cope with the stench at its source.

This pot-bellied Publicola must be not only scotched, but killed. This megalomaniac Menenius must be put through the medicinal mangle of criticism—a thing which he has hitherto escaped, for as from the porpoise hides of the portly Monitor the round shot of the Merrimac rebounded, so has the oily evasiveness of this literary porpoise served to protect him from his foes, and now he clumsily gambols through the sea, unaware of the pursuing sword-fish. But a greater than the sword-fish (or shall I say the Sword-of-Song-fish) is here.

Just as a balloon is difficult to crush but easy to prick, so shall it be in these days.

This fellow is simply a trimmer. This seeming porpoise is only a jelly-fish; and the great black curves we saw were but the inkiness of the creature.

We draw out this leviathan with an hook, and he goes conveniently into a beer-mug. We calculate the mass of this brilliant comet, and we find it is not to exceed that of a barrel of butter.

We are appalled by the bellowing of this Bull of Phalaris, and find that it is but an ingenious mechanism worked by the gaspings of an emasculate oyster.

Surely never in all the history of thought—and its imitations—has such a widow's curse supplied the world with such a deluge of oil. Croton oil.

As a man who orders roast beef and gets hash, so do we look for literature and get mixed dictionary. How do we do it? We stifle the groans of our armchair by continued session and open the Encyclopedia at random. Hullo! what's this? "Schopenhauer, famous pessimist philosopher." (To the stenographer): "The splendid optimism of Schopenhauer—" (Sotto voce) "Let's see what a philosopher is!" (turns it up after a vain search through letter F) "philosopher—lover of wisdom," etc.

(To stenographer) "manifests itself in a positive loathing of all wisdom." (Another turn.)

"Reprehensible—to be condemned."

(Dictating) "and is therefore to be condemned—no! no! please, miss—*not* to be condemned." (An-

other turn.)

"Catamaran"—a surf-boat used in Madras, hm!—(to stenographer)—"by all Hindoo speculative mystics."

(Speculative mystics—one of our best stock lines.)

We are now fairly started on our weekly causerie, the subject being probably Home Rule.

You see, nobody can get hurt. The invertebrate cannot maul the vertebrate—so we are safe from the chance of their fury. They pay us to defend the doctrine of original sin—so we escape by defending it upon the ground that it is "Jolly." They pay us to attack Free Thought, so we label it "narrow sectarianism," and please the Hard-Shell Baptists—with the purses—without annoying the Freethinker, who is naturally not hit.

The Romans crucified St. Peter head downwards; but it was reserved for this oleaginous clown to offer that last indignity to his Master. We are paid to shore up the rotting buttresses of Christianity, and we begin our article, "A causal carpenter"—

But, let us change the subject!

There was a man—a great man—who some years ago wrote a magnificent philosophical story called the "Napoleon of Notting Hill."

More lucid and a thousand times more entertaining than Bunyan, deeper than Berkeley, as full of ecstasy of laughter as Rabelais, and of mystic ecstasy as Malory, a book of the Chymical Marriage of Christian Rosencreutz with Voltaire.

I think those summits are not unattainable by the subject of our essay—for God's sake, man, forswear sack and live cleanly, and give us something like that!

A. QUILLER, JR.