

## Listen to the Bird-Man!

*Originally published in the August 1917  
edition of The International.*

Herbert Spencer pointed out that the fittest, who survived, were those who could get used to anything. How wonderfully fit we all are these days! Three years ago we could be surprised and upset by the mildest political crisis anywhere; today the greatest revolutions do not make us even yawn. The war will have been a good thing for the world if it teaches us all that great truth of Heraclitus that *Everything Flows*. The Buddhists have the same philosophy. Nothing truly IS: it is only a flux, a set of combinations constantly flowering in some new way, never crystallizing. To harden is to die; ask your arteries.

So it is delightful to find people seriously discussing "the inevitable Anglo-German rapprochement," in spite of the campaign of hate on both sides; Northcliffe coming out for Home Rule, and Socialists sickening of Socialism. The fact is that all the *"isms"* are doomed; common sense is beginning to assert itself under the stress of the terrible and beautiful facts of war. Sir Edward Grey perhaps never realized that his devotion to certain political principles would materialize in the bombardment of London. Time has shown us what high explosives ideas are, when there is a detonator handy. But it is more important to concentrate our attention on the fact that nothing matters that we used to think did matter.

For here is Lady Aberdeen, of all people, talking like a Sinn Feiner. There was applause, says the *New York Times*, when she said that she looked forward to the time when Ireland would take her place as "one of the sisterhood of free nations that make up the British Empire." This is just two years since Mr. Aleister Crowley said almost the same words facing the Statue of Liberty, to be hailed as a madman or a traitor, and but five quar-

ters of a year since the Irish Martyrs wrote similar remarks in blood in the streets of Dublin, and on the flagstones of the Tower of London.

It is time that we all took a new look at the world. Things are not what they were. In fact, they never were at all; our beliefs have been prejudice and illusion. Only canned brains should be incapable of the effort now required. We are, by definition, the fittest, since we survive; and if we are to continue this process, we must do so by accommodating ourselves to the changed conditions.

We have seen where national prejudice and the gospel of hate have led us. Any one who continues to preach hate is simply a snake. We are talking to the Irish who hate England as much as to the French who hate Germany. It simply will not do. We are in an impoverished world, and for the future we have got to pull together. It is absurd to repair "historical injustices;" no nation but her past is black with such. We must get off the plane of hate and envy together. We must recognize the plain truth that quarreling does not pay. Germany and England are both very silly to starve their best customers — each other. But we should like to put it on a little higher ground than this: it is inhuman to be inhumane. There is only one attitude possible to an enlightened man today. It is not original. It was worded rather epigrammatically quite a few years ago, as follows: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Heaven knows the idiots who brought about this thing don't know. But most nations trust their destinies to imbeciles.) In the Dhammapada, a classic of Buddhism, six hundred years before Christ, we find the same idea, though without any religious theory to clog the wheels:

*The state of hate doth not abate by hate in any time or clime;*

*But hate will cease if love increase; so soothly runs  
the ancient rime.*

The idea had whiskers, even then; but the idea is not proved false by the fact that Mr. Wilson is clean-shaved.

Here, then, is yet another reason for the vigorous prosecution of the war. To fight a man honorably is to win him to respect and love you; a course of mutual cheating, as in time of peace, has the precisely opposite effect.

The obstacle to mutual understanding has been, of course, ignorance. "Greek" means a thief; Johnny Cra-paud, as a term for a Frenchman, commemorates the legend that Frenchmen live entirely upon frogs; even the Bulgar has contributed in a similar way to the wealth of the English language. An idea has to be well fixed before it gets in to the language in this way. Moham-medan hill-men always refer to Bengalis as fish-eating bastards. The French think all Englishmen "perfidious." And so it goes, or rather went, for travel, and this war, in particular, is slowly driving the truth home, that we are all men. We must learn to tolerate each others' customs, and we must understand that LAW is only the concrete and organized expression of those customs.

America has a good point in this matter, and a bad one. The good is that we are accustomed to the most radical changes, not indeed, in ideas, but in the essential conditions of life. The average man of fifty may have been a bell-boy, horse-thief, bank messenger, minister of the gospel, cowboy, rag picker, and college professor before setting down to serious life as a yeggman. We live in a country where the economic conditions change overnight in the most amazing fashion. We are a live people, accustomed to catastrophe as others to a change of weather. Nothing can abate our elasticity. But we are cursed with the most dreadful of all plagues that can afflict a nation: variegated law.

In America no man knows whether he is a criminal or no, unless he is sure that he is one. And this conviction is very widespread. Laws being passed in Albany alone at the rate of 600 per annum, even the judges make no attempt to "keep up with the Joneses," as Judge Welles complains in his recent book. The general disrespect for law has become universal. It is impossible to go into a bar in New York without seeing men in uniform being surreptitiously supplied with alcohol. The decent man objects to being made into a criminal by a few faddists who slyly pass laws directed against his normal actions. He consequently ignores the law completely, and relies solely on his conscience. This is all very well for the good man, but it encourages the bad man. "One may as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb," says he, and finds murder more profitable than spitting on the sidewalk.

This business of having two sets of laws on top of police regulations is Gilbert and Sullivan. When a burden is greater than a man may bear, he simply dumps it. It is already a curse in Great Britain that Scotland should have a separate law. If you rent a shooting lodge, your lawyers get a letter couched in a corruption of mediaeval French of which they cannot understand one word. You have to compear as a panel and grant warrandice, and you are never quite sure how this is to be done. But you do understand how necessary it was to let a Scots jury return a verdict of "Not Proven"!

Much of the trouble in Ireland comes from this same business of multiplying sets of laws. That is one reason why Home Rule will never work. The Federal power will always be interfering; a separation as completely as Australia's is the only practical solution, since an assimilation as complete as that of Wales is out of the question.

Now America has this curse in forty-nine-fold measure. In one state you are an honest man; ten miles off you are liable to be boiled in oil. It is bad enough to mess

up the civil law; that confuses business and makes it possible for all sorts of shysters to graft by setting booby-traps for perfectly good citizens. But to play this joke in criminal law is to trifle inexcusably with the lives and liberties of the people. In prohibition states the first thought of every man is to offer his friends a drink. The minds of the inhabitants are completely obsessed by the Demon Rum. This applies to the men who themselves vote the Prohibition ticket. They drink themselves, but they think they are such fine fellows, and their neighbors such weak fools that they must have the law; oh, dear, yes!

Any European visiting the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave is practically compelled to form the most extraordinary conclusions. For example, let him read the new law in West Virginia, constraining every able-bodied man to work thirty-six hours in every week. "Why," he exclaims, "this is stark, crude slavery, naked and unashamed." Of course it is nothing of the sort; but we shall be glad of some line of explanation that will convince the average Englishman.

Take again the little matter of the censorship. Congress refused to pass several laws on this matter. "Tut," said Secretary Baker, "Tut." And gave orders to establish exactly what Congress denied. Nobody seems to have cared very much, except the aforesaid average Englishman, whose mind flew instantly to the scene in the House of Commons two hundred odd years ago, when Cromwell marched in with his musketeers, threw the Mace on the floor, and cleared the House with the simple remark: "Give place to honester men." To the English mind it seemed that the Administration had abolished the face of representative government with a stroke. To that mind the incident was highly encouraging; the Englishman is always glad to see the strong silent men take hold, and get rid of the gaping mob of busybodies. But what does the American think? He doesn't think. The political game has long ceased to

interest him, except so far as he can use it in his business.

It is because of this attitude that law after law is passed against the will of the majority, against common sense, against the most obvious principles of the constitution. Nobody cares. Nobody is going to take any notice of the law, anyhow. And the result is that we have a practical anarchy.

In East Saint Louis we hear that the sole regret of the white population is that their little ebullition of natural feeling should have attracted notice elsewhere. They meant the party to be quite private; no flowers. One hears the most appalling stories from private sources: One man stops flying negroes, promises them safety, takes them into a dark alley, and shoots them. A gang tosses them, men, women, and children, back into their burning homes. Young girls beat an old negress to death with her own shoes. The most conservative local estimate is 175 dead; many think 300 a nearer figure. Coming on top of the abominable torture and lynching in Memphis of a few weeks ago, this is a Sign. People are not acting according to law, but according to conscience. And the political term for this mode of government is Anarchy. The whole trouble lies with double legislation, complicated by crank legislation.

Where respect for law is inbred in a community, where the conscience of the solid elements of the community is expressed by the law, there is no trouble in the enforcement of the law. But where law grows rank and wild, where nobody cares about it, habitually, there may be grave trouble at just the moment when the most danger is. As things are in this country, an absolutely unpopular law may go through without notice; and if the authorities happen to be serious, for once, and attempt to enforce it, the spectres of Civil War may leap from the churchyard before any man is aware. Where the people are despised because of their longsuffering, ruthless repression of even mild and lawful protest is the first

thing that occurs to the police. We noticed the other day some beautiful and timely pictures of the new automobile machine guns supplied to the New York Police. We suppose these are wanted in case of an invasion by the Republic of Andorra.

It is a splendid sign of our national efficiency that Talk is never permitted to interfere with business, except, of course, the legitimized talk of Congressmen. The world must be kept safe for democracy, and the only way to do this is obviously by the exercise of autocracy. Otherwise, democracy degenerates into anarchy. One cannot find much sympathy for the people who, whatever their merits, had not the intelligence to come in when it rained. Lots of us thought that the war was a pity; we even thought that Eve made a mistake about eating that apple. But the mischief has been done. The only sensible word is Shakespeare's: "Beware the entrance to a quarrel; but, being in, Bear't that the opposed may beware of thee." If chased by a bull, it is unwise to occupy the mind with considerations as to whether the bull may not, after all, be in the right of it, or with reflections upon the bull tribe in general as useful to mankind. If a part of one's brain persists in such thoughts, it is, at that particular moment, a traitor to the whole organism, though very likely on any other occasion it may be the most valuable part of it.

It is hard to please some people. A dear friend writes to the *New York Times* to complain of the editorial attitude to the *International*, and to demand its suppression. The ground chosen is a delightful one; it is that that attitude is so scrupulously correct that it must conceal some nameless horror. If I say that So-and-so is a crook, that is a libel; if I say that he is an honest man, that is "obviously sarcastic." As a matter of fact, there is a case in which this argument is perfectly sound; it is when everybody is well aware of the fact that the man in question is crooked. Then whatever you may say about him simply reminds people of that fact.

A corollary of this proposition is that when a man knows himself to be a crook he becomes ultra-sensitive to any reference to himself whatever. He spies the cloven hoof even on the devil's good leg. He may even become suspicious of silence itself. This is the psychological penalty of the tyrant. Free Speech is, therefore, the very best proof of good government; it is like the coldness of a dog's nose. Men whose conscience is void of offense before God and man, and who are busy with their work, do not give a damn what fools and knaves are saying about them.

Once a nation starts to distrust its own people it enters upon a very slippery slope. Secret service men multiply. The "agent provocateur" appears. Presently you get a man like Azeff, who is trusted by police and revolutionaries alike; and no one knows, even after his death, on which side he really was. Every citizen looks upon his neighbor with suspicion; he may be either an anarchist or a spy; the production of bombs would prove nothing; the production of police authorities would prove nothing. The Reign of Terror begins where all evil begins: in the mind of man himself. And it does not take very long to translate that into action.

Spy-fever is one of the most dreadful mental diseases. Just as a nervous man with some trifling ailment may seek its diagnosis in a medical book, and conclude that he has Bright's disease, diabetes, tubercle, leprosy, and Herpes Zoster complicated with typhus fever and cancer, so the spy, amateur or professional, watching his neighbor, will soon find something sinister in the way he parts his hair. There is no rational way to refute such a proposition, unfortunately; a conspirator will naturally adopt the most innocent-looking symbol of his dread intent. Ergo, the more innocent a man appears, the more dark and deadly a villain is he likely to be. The only cure for this frame of mind is resolute conquest of it by the Will. Reason only makes bad worse. Of course, the original cause of the malady is just plain FUNK. If



the sick man does not want to live, he should worry whether he has cancer or not. It is his fear of death that causes his anxiety. In the body politic we should not be afraid to die well if we have lived well; our business is to go ahead with courage and good temper. If we take to seeing a robber behind every bush, and a ghost in every scarecrow, we are soon morally lost. A man who goes through life in the perfectly rational fear of "germs" cannot be said to live at all; at least, it is not a Man's life. It's much better to be shot from ambush now and then than to spend existence crawling on one's belly in the furrows. It is the difference between a man and a worm.

The "House of Windsor" is a very interesting joke. George V is a German of the Germans. His mother was Russian, but the Romanoffs are German too. "Albert the Good," the Prince consort, was of course the purest possible German. He was selected for being such a perfect specimen of German Germanity. He endeared himself to the English bourgeois by his priggishness and the correctness of his frock-coat and watch-chain. In fact, in these articles of adornment his name still lives. Now it occurs to us as something of a slur upon this Best of Men that his name should thus be contemptuously disowned. It is a blow to bad poetry, too, for Tennyson lackeyed himself into the peerage by adulation of this Prince. Obviously, we must now stop reading those pro-German propagandist tracts, *In Memoriam* and *The Idylls of the King*. We must also pull down the Albert Hall and the Albert Memorial. And if this is done, it will be a deathblow to the cowardly pacifists; for no one will ever be able to say again that war does not bring the greatest conceivable blessings to Humanity.