THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

HOUSEHOLD WORDS

NON-FICTION BY WILKIE COLLINS

STRIKE!

HIGHLY PROPER!

A BREACH OF BRITISH PRIVILEGE

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APRIL 2006

Household Words
Non-fiction by Wilkie Collins

Introduction

Although Wilkie Collins is best known for his novels and stories, early in his career he wrote a great deal of non-fiction. An analysis of the 59 items he wrote for Dickens's *Household Words* between 1852 and its closure in 1859 shows that only 19 were fiction. The 41 others – one was a mix of fiction and non-fiction – ranged from art reviews to social satire, from re-told historical tales to attacks on contemporary attitudes.

He first contributed to Dickens's weekly *Household Words* on 24 April 1852 with 'A Terribly Strange Bed', which has become one of his most reproduced short stories. And in the early days he wrote mainly fiction for Dickens including three novellas *The Yellow Mask*, *Sister Rose* and *A Rogue's Life* and fifteen short stories

In 1855 he wrote his first non-fiction piece for *Household Words*. 'The Cruise of the Tom-Tit' was an account of a voyage to the Scilly Isles which Dickens found "a charming paper…pleasant, easy, gay, and unaffected. Full of plain story-telling merit." (Charles Dickens to Edward Pigott 12 December 1855, Pilgrim VII 763).

In October 1856 he was taken on to the *Household Words* staff at five guineas a week to write and assist with ideas. Collins negotiated the right to "try the experiment" of a long story over six months (which became *The Dead Secret*) and to be acknowledged as its author. He also retained the copyright in everything he wrote (Dickens to Wills 16 and 18 September 1856, Pilgrim VIII 188 and 189). In 1857 he and Dickens wrote 'The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices' – a fictionalised account of their own trip to Cumberland which contained Collins's story 'The Dead Hand', another of his perennially popular tales. And from 1856 non-fiction came to dominate his work for the periodical.

Almost all Collins's fiction has been republished and much of it is well known. But barely half of the non-fiction he wrote for *Household Words* has ever been republished. 'The Lazy Tour' – with non-fiction and fiction elements – was republished in book form in 1890. 'The Cruise of the Tom-Tit' was reprinted in 1861 as an appendix to the first one-volume edition of *Rambles Beyond Railways*. Twenty other pieces were included in *My Miscellanies* (London 1863), a book of previously published essays designed to fill a gap when Collins was ill and could not embark on his next planned novel which was finally published as *Armadale* in 1866. But few of those have appeared anywhere since and the remaining nineteen have never been reprinted, apart from the odd pirate version in the USA in the 19th century.

Although we could infer that these nineteen were in the bottom half of Collins's list of favourites, many were liked enough by Dickens to be published as the first article in the weekly issue of *Household Words*. Three of those are republished here. All three are comments in different styles on 19th century society.

Social comment

Strike! is a call to the middle classes to withhold their buying power to bring about change just as workers withheld their labour to get higher pay or improved work conditions. It is probably the first call for consumer boycotts to improve services. Collins picks on dangerous trains, overcrowded omnibuses, expensive schools, and uncomfortable theatres as four social ills where the middle classes could stop buying to force owners to improve their product.

In *Highly Proper!* Collins lambasts the private schools again, this time for refusing entry to the children of actors. The item was suggested to him by Dickens who had received a letter from one of the actors affected (to Collins 6 September 1858, Pilgrim VIII 649). Collins's piece was followed up by *The Theatrical Journal*.

Six months later *A Breach of British Privilege* returns to the discomfort of theatres with a satirical letter from John Bull who berates the newly opened Adelphi Theatre for the very un-British comfort of its seats and the shocking fairness of its manager, Benjamin Webster.

Note on the text

The text is taken from *Household Words* and retains the original spelling, punctuation, and arrangement even where these seem awkward or wrong to modern eyes. We know that Dickens and Collins took enormous care with the text that was published and therefore assume that the text we have is precisely what was intended.

Household Words was a plain, un-illustrated weekly of 24 pages in two columns which cost 2d. Each issue was dated Saturday but was in fact available from the previous Wednesday and normally contained six or seven pieces. Collins's non-fiction frequently led the issue and had an average position of 1.7, higher than the 3.6 for his short stories.

Contributions to *Household Words* were not signed or by-lined. Only Dickens's name appeared in it at the head of every other page. But we know what Collins wrote for the periodical from the Office Book, compiled by its sub-editor W H Wills, which listed every piece published together with the author and the payment made. It is in the Morris L Parrish Collection at Princeton University and formed the basis for *Household Words…table of contents, list of contributors and their contributions* by Anne Lohrli, (Toronto 1973). Lohrli is relied on here for attribution.

Paul Lewis
April 2006

STRIKE!

SOME years ago, the inhabitants of a small English country town were astonished by a very extraordinary circumstance. A new fishmonger from London suddenly plunged into the calm waters of the local trade, set up a magnificent shop, and sold his delicate goods at amazingly reasonable prices. The town, being by no means populous enough to support any two tradespeople who dealt in the same article, and the patronage of the fickle public being soon almost exclusively bestowed upon the new fishmonger, the old-established shop, which did business in the old-established way, was soon shut up; and the proprietor was reported to have left the place in disgust, with the intention of trying his luck in any other district of England, in which he could hope for the common justice of meeting with fair play.

No sooner had the new fishmonger got the public all to himself, than a gradual, steady, unintermitting rise began to take place in his prices. He was a very intelligent man, and he explained this alarming phenomenon clearly and fluently, on the soundest commercial principles. Nobody who objected to his bills, ever got the better of him in argument. Week after week his prices grew higher, and his train of reasoning in support of them more and more brilliantly convincing and conclusive. At last, the charges rose to such an exorbitant rate, and the monopoly enjoyed by the new fishmonger asserted itself so unendurably, as well as so logically, over the purses of his helpless customers, that the public spirit of the townspeople rose in resistance. A private meeting of the respectable classes was summoned at the house of the daring patriot who led the local struggle for the twin-blessings of freedom and cheap fish. Resolutions were proposed and passed, binding all the persons present, representing the rank, the respectability and the fish-consumption of the town, to make the sacrifice of at once abstaining from eating fish, on any pretence whatever, until absolute want of custom should have had the effect of starving the rogue who had impudently cheated the whole community, out of the town.

It is gratifying to be able to report that no member of the League thus formed, proved unfaithful to the common cause; that the exorbitant fishmonger, after desperately resisting the combination against him for two whole months, and after vainly proposing a compromise with his outraged customers, fairly evacuated the town under stress of circumstances; that the old-established tradesman was sought for, was recalled, and was set up in his former business; and that the inhabitants have eaten their fish at reasonable prices, from that eventful period to the present day.

The anecdote which I have just related is not only true, but is also, as I have every reason to think, unique. Trifling as it may appear, it affords, I believe, the only instance on record, in which the middle classes of England have been found capable of combining together for the sake of promoting their own social advantage. If this conclusion be the true one — and I shall presently offer a few striking proofs in support of it — some rather serious considerations arise, in reference to the share which, little as we may think it, we ourselves have, in perpetuating some of the most vexatious and unpopular abuses of our own time.

Englishmen of the middle classes have combined together, and will probably again combine together, for the promotion of religious and of political reforms. Some very great victories in both these directions, have been won already by the influence of that united self-denial and united perseverance which is described by the word League. We, the respectable people, when we have a religious want or a political want, thoroughly understand the necessity of carrying out the desired object by sacrificing our own individual convenience to the first great consideration of the general benefit. When we have a social want, however, do we recognise the same principle? I rather think that we become, in this case, suddenly incapable of seeing it at all. The principle of a Strike, as understood and practised by the artisan, when he feels (whether rightly or wrongly, it is not my present business to inquire) that he is suffering under an abuse which nothing but self-devotion can help to remedy, seems to be, as to all social difficulties, a complete mystery to the gentleman who stands above him in rank and education. It is a notorious fact, that various bodies and individuals make large fortunes by professing to minister to the necessities, the conveniences, and the amusement of the respectable classes; and it is equally indisputable that the promises which these professions imply, are, in the great majority of cases, not fairly performed. When we are impudently cheated of our fair demands in religious or in political matters, what do we do in the last resort? We right I ourselves by a combination — or, in plainer English, we strike. On the other hand, when we are cheated in social matters, what do we do? We grumble, and submit. For the sake of our faith, or for the sake of our freedom (to borrow an illustration from the anecdote at the head of this paper), we are bravely ready to do without our fish. For the sake of our every-day necessities, comforts, and conveniences, we are none of us individually ready to sacrifice to the common cause so much as a single shrimp.

Let me make my meaning clearer by a few examples. Take an example, first, of an abuse, in the rectifying of which the interests of all our lives and limbs are concerned — take the case of the obstinate refusal of Railway Directors to give us a

means of communication, in case of accidents, between the passengers and the engine-driver. Does any man, in his senses, believe that the granting of this just demand will be procured by any of the means which have hitherto been tried for enforcing it? A few months since, a railway carriage full of people was on fire. Everyone of the passengers would have been burnt alive, if a few labourers had not happened to be working, on that particular day, at a particular part of the line. This frightfully narrow escape from the most horrible of deaths, was published in letters to the Times. The vital necessity of a communication between the passengers and the guard was urged by the very men who had been all but killed for want of it. The same safeguard has been petitioned for to Parliament. And what good has come of taking this course? What good ever does come of shifting responsibilities, with which each man of us is individually concerned, on the shoulders of others? Have our letters to the Times — has our Imperial Parliament — got us what we so urgently want? On this very day, thousands and thousands of people will be travelling, with nothing but a screen of wood and cloth between them and a fire which is rushing through the air at the rate of from five-and-twenty to sixty miles an hour.

What, then, in this case, is to get us our fair demand? I answer, quite seriously, nothing will get it, at once, but a Strike on the part of the travelling public. Let us combine to ruin the passenger-traffic; and, in three months' time, the Directors will be forced to give us what we want. You, who read this, and laugh at it, tell me how many times, in the course of the year, you travel on business which it is absolutely impossible to put off, and how many times you travel for your own convenience and amusement, which a temporary self sacrifice might well enable you to postpone? If you want fair protection for your life, will you put off attending to your own interests — for three months — to get it? You are the obstacle — not the difficulties of organising the Strike. We are already subdivided, by our professions, into distinct classes. Let us have our consulting representatives of each class; our delegates acting under them, with a certain round of streets to visit; our public meeting, when the delegates have made us acquainted with the matter in hand; our signed engagement which it is a point of honour not to break — and the thing is done. For three months we all engage to sacrifice our individual convenience and pleasure, to serve the common object of securing our own safety; and to travel only in cases in which the most serious interests are concerned. Is this such a very Utopian idea? Is it so absolutely impossible to organise ourselves in the manner just suggested? The taxgatherer successfully subdivides us, reckons us up, disciplines us, holds us, by thousands and thousands at a time, in the hollow of his hand, opens our multitudinous pockets, as if they were the pockets of one man. Does anybody tell me that what the tax-gatherer can do for us, we cannot, at a pinch, do for

ourselves? If I wear a fustian jacket I can knock off work, by previous arrangement and combination, in three or four counties at once, on one given day, at one given hour. But if I am a clergyman, a doctor, a barrister, I cannot knock off travelling in the same way — no, not although the interests of my life depend on it. In the one case — with Poverty and Hunger against me — I can sacrifice myself at the word of command. In the other case, with nothing to dread but the temporary loss of some country pleasure, or a temporary delay in seeing the sights of London, I become utterly incapable of making my individual sacrifice for the public benefit; I let men, whose pockets I am filling, endanger my life with impunity; and, when I escape being roasted alive, I think I have done my duty if I pester the Editor of the Times with letters, helplessly entreating him to save me the trouble of redressing my own grievances and protecting my own life.

Take another case. The other day, I met my friend Smoulder. He was grumbling, just as tens of thousands of other Englishmen of his class grumble; the subject, this time, being the disgracefully uncomfortable condition of the metropolitan omnibuses.

“Here is a great Company,” says Smoulder, “which buys up all the London omnibuses; which starts with the most magnificent promises relative to the reformation of those detestable vehicles; and which even invites every ingenious man in the country to forward the reform, by sending in models of a new kind of omnibus. What has become of all the promises, and all the models? Here we are still with the same old omnibuses, and the same old grievances to complain of. There is no more room for me on my seat, now, than there was before the great Company was heard of. I am squeezed on getting in, and crushed on sitting down, just as I used to be, — squeezed, sir, and crushed, sir, and by an infernal Monopoly, sir, that promised me a new omnibus to ride in. You are a literary man. Why don’t you sit down, and write a letter about it to the Times?”

No, my friend, I will not write to the editor of the Times, to ask him to do for you, what you ought to do, and can do, for yourself. You live in a large suburb of London, and you are one of a large class of business-men, who return a regular daily revenue to the omnibus Company. You and your fellows, in the morning and the evening, and your wives, sisters, and daughters, when they go out shopping, in the course of the day, are the principal customers who keep certain lines of omnibuses running. Call a meeting in the City, and propose that the whole class of the business-men shall give up using omnibuses for the next six weeks, and direct their female relatives to do the same. Make up your minds, and make up their minds, to walk for that time only. Or, if this cannot be done, spend a little extra

money — for not more than six weeks, remember — in cab-hire. Only sacrifice yourselves individually, for this short time, and in this easy manner; and you will promote the general interest of your class, by forcing the London Omnibus Company to do it justice. How long do you think that monopoly would hold out against the sudden withdrawal of tens of thousands of omnibus passengers, representing tens of thousands of fourpences, and sixpences, and not to be reduced to submission by hunger, as the poor men are reduced when they combine against the rich master. Strike, Smoulder! Strike for six weeks, and ride in comfort for the rest of your days.

Smoulder stares at me, — shakes his head, — says irritably: "You turn everything into a joke. Who's to do all that, I should like to know?"— prefers passive grumbling, to which he is accustomed, to active resistance, of which he has no idea;— hails the omnibus, not being able to look an inch beyond his own convenience, the next morning as usual, — aimlessly grumbles over the discomfort of it, all the way to the Bank, with his friend Snorter; who aimlessly grumbles also, to the same tune, in a lower key;—meets Gruffer and Grumper on 'Change, and grumbles to them; goes home (in the omnibus again) and grumbles to his wife and children; — finally, writes a letter to the Times, and actually thinks, when he sees it in print, that he has done a public duty.

Once more, there are the theatres. There is hardly a person in this country, possessing an ordinary sense of comfort, who does not dread going, even to the most attractive performances, on account of the miserably defective accommodation which the managers offer to the public in return for their money. If we sit in the dress-circle, have we room for our legs? Can we move without jostling our neighbours on both sides? Can we even see comfortably unless we are in the front row? If we go down-stairs into the stalls, are we not jammed together on high seats, with no foot-stools and no carpet, on the principle of getting as many of us into the place as possible — that place never having been originally intended for stalls at all? I know two theatres in London — and two only — in which it is possible to sit in the stalls with moderate comfort, and to see below the knees of the actors. As for the pit — with its rows of narrow wooden planks, half of them without backs, and all of them twice as close together as they ought to be — what words can describe the wretchedness of it? Where, in the rest of the habitable world, out of doors or in, is the cruel discomfort of the so-called sitting accommodation of a British pit to be equalled? It is really inconceivable that the public should now have submitted, for years and years, to be packed together, for the sake of putting certain additional pounds per night into the manager's pockets, like pigs on board an Irish steam-boat. And yet, they have submitted, when the

remedy lay all the time, in their own hands. No miserable sinner in this country more thoroughly enjoys good acting than I do. And yet, if I thought the inhabitants of my parish would follow my example, and would try to rouse other parishes to the same sensible course of action, I would, from this moment, cheerfully engage to abstain from entering a theatre for a whole year's time, if need be, for the sake of ultimately starving the managers into giving us decent accommodation for our money. How comfortably we might sit and see a play, if we could only combine to send round a circular letter of this sort to the proprietors of the London theatres!

Sir, — I am desired to inform you, on the part of the theatrically-disposed inhabitants of this parish, that our bones have ached in your pit, our necks stiffened in your stalls, and our legs caught the cramp in your boxes, long enough. Your audience, sir, in this district, has struck for better seats, to a man, to a woman, to a child. Put what you like in your bill, not one of us will enter your theatre till our good money has wrung out of you the common justice, in return, of a comfortable seat.

What palaces of luxury our theatres would become in a few months, if the managers received such a letter as that, next week, from every parish in London!

There is the question of school education again. The public, fast asleep as usual, has been woke up about that subject, lately, by the Times. The case has been mentioned of a gentleman whose bill for the half-year's schooling and boarding of two little boys amounted to seventy-five pounds. This extortion was commented on publicly by an eminent novelist, was further exposed by an excellent article in the Times, which article was applauded with the usual unnecessary servility by the usual letter-writers who appear in that journal. What result has followed? One impudent letter, so far as I know, from one impudent schoolmaster. What other results are to be expected? Tell me plainly, will the comments of the eminent novelist, will the excellent article in the Times, will the fawning approval of the public letters, lower our school-bills — say, in a year's time? Judging by past experience in other matters, and by the representative letter of the impudent schoolmaster, I should say not. What, then, will lower them? Emptying the expensive schools next half-year — or, in other words, a strike of parents. My house would be dreadfully noisy, my boys would break the windows and play tricks with gunpowder, and I should have to suffer the shocking hardship of teaching them myself, unless I looked about and hired a tutor for the half-year. All serious inconveniences, I admit — but which alternative is the worse? To be uncomfortable for six months, or to submit to be fleeced regularly every half-year until my boys are grown up?

Here I rest my case; not because I am getting to the end of my examples, but because I am getting to the end of my space. Many readers may differ with my opinions, and may laugh at my remedy. It is easy to do so. But it is equally easy to obey the injunction which heads this paper. We travel every day in peril of being burnt to death; we ride in uncomfortable omnibuses; we sit in theatres with aching necks and bones, and are fleeced in them by box-opening harpies after we have paid our admission money; we pay bi-annually for the teaching and boarding of two of our small children a sum which equals a year's income for a clerk and his family — whose fault is it, really and truly, that these grievances, and dozens of others which might be mentioned, are not speedily and completely redressed? Has it actually come to this, that the English public has a capacity of common suffering, and a capacity of common grumbling, but no capacity of common action for the promotion of social reforms? Our system of civilisation relieves us of the performance of many irksome duties, by supplying us with deputies whose business it is to take them off our hands. This system has many obvious advantages, which no reasonable man can question. But, if it be pushed beyond its legitimate purpose of saving the useless waste of valuably employed time, then it leads to serious disadvantages — even, as I am inclined to think, to serious deterioration of the national character. Public opinion, in these latter days, is apathetically satisfied with much talking and much writing: it shifts all doing to the shoulders of any chance deputy who may, or may not, turn up to accept practical responsibilities. It was not always so in England. When HAMPDEN'S blood rose under the extortionate tyranny of Charles the First, he was not satisfied with expressing his opinion that his taxes were unjust; he struck,, and taught his countrymen to strike; he buttoned up his pockets like a man, and said, in plain, fearless words, "I will not pay the King his unjust demand." What does Hampden now, when every species of audacious social imposition is practised on him? He pays — and writes to the Times.

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HIGHLY PROPER!

IT is often remarked by our neighbours on the Continent, and it is seldom denied among ourselves, that we are a nation of grumblers. Grumbling letters to the editor, for example, and grumbling articles in support of those letters, form two of the characteristics which are peculiar to English newspapers. Grumbling speeches, again, in virtue of their steady burden of complaint, secure a favourable reception for those patriots at our public meetings who have no oratorical recommendations of any sort to give them a personal claim on the attention of an audience. And a grumbling conversation is well known to everybody as the safe neutral ground on which two Englishmen, strangers to each other, can generally contrive to meet with the completest sense of ease and comfort. Unquestionably we are a race of grumblers; and grumbling is one of the very few national defects which we happen to be clever enough to discover for ourselves.

To do us justice, however, there are some few subjects of public importance to the discussion of which we are always ready to apply ourselves in a spirit of the most unquestioning contentment and approval. The great and general improvement in the condition of society; in its principles and practice; in its stores of knowledge, its habits, manners, and modes of thinking, is one of these subjects. There is hardly any public means of loudly congratulating ourselves on our own progress which we have not tried; and it may fairly be added, that our exultation in this matter is not without its solid foundation on reason and on truth. We have, in many most important respects, advanced resolutely, industriously, and honourably from a state of past darkness to a state of present light. No thoughtful man can look back, even through no longer a period than the last fifty years, without thankfully acknowledging that the English nation has been, up to this moment, both politically and socially, a notable gainer.

But, while we freely assert our right to take some credit to ourselves for the progress that we have indisputably made, we must by no means be disposed to deny that many — far too many — more victories still remain to be won over the barbarous forces led by those three rampant commanders, General Ignorance, General Prejudice, and General Folly. Probably, the most dangerous national fault, of the moral sort, which we can now commit is to look too complacently at what we have done, and thereby to fall into the error of forgetting too readily all that we have still left to do. Strong as it has become, the new life of the nation, in this age,

is still beset by base infirmities and lamentable weaknesses which its constitutional vigour has yet to throw off. Hardly a week passes without some event happening which, for the moment, staggers the belief of Englishmen in their own progress, and warns them that they have not gained ground enough, even now, to warrant any slackening of their pace on the forward march. An occurrence of this kind — private in its nature, but leading with the strictest directness to certain useful conclusions which may fairly be claimed as public property — has recently come within our own knowledge. We propose to give it general notoriety in these pages, because we believe, on the grounds just stated, that its exposure can hardly fail to be productive of some public good.

Some little time since, a gentleman, well and widely-known to the public as an excellent manager of a theatre and an actor standing deservedly in the foremost rank of his profession; equally well known among a large circle of friends and acquaintances, as an honourable man, in the strictest and the highest meaning of those words — Mr. Alfred Wigan — sent his son, aged eight years, to be educated at a certain private school. The boy was happy and comfortable, and was getting on with his learning to his father's satisfaction, when, one day, the master of the school called upon Mr. Wigan, to say that he had just found out the nature of that gentleman's profession, and that, as a necessary consequence of the discovery, he could no longer consent to number among his scholars Mr. Wigan's son. No shadow of objection was advanced against the boy. On the contrary, the schoolmaster admitted that he was as good and as gentlemanly a boy as he had ever met with. But the school was a genteel school; the connection was a genteel connection; and a fatal injury might be done to the character of the establishment if the fact became generally known that its walls contained the son of an actor. Further questioning elicited that the schoolmaster, in his alarm for his own reputation, had taken Time by the forelock, and had not waited until any actual objections had emerged from the genteel connection. He was not, however, on that account the less certain that the objections would in course of time arise. His conclusions in this respect were shared, and his course of conduct approved, by his brother-in-law, who also kept a private school; and he had, therefore, only to reiterate his request, that one of his best pupils should be removed from his school, on this one ground only — that the boy was an actor's son.

We are not disposed, in noticing this business, to waste too many words on the schoolmaster. If he felt for himself, when he was in Mr. Wigan's presence, one-fiftieth part of the contempt which we feel for him, his sense of self-degradation must have been complete. Compare the conditions on which this obedient servant of the genteel classes gets his bread with the conditions on which a sweeper of

crossings gets *his* bread — and see how immensely the balance of creditable independence turns against the man with the birch, and in favour of the man with the broom! It is no doubt hard, in the first heat of indignation, to abstain from assigning to the schoolmaster rather more than his own insignificant share in the outrage. But a little calm reflection soon sets him in his proper place, and even suggests a reasonable doubt whether it is strictly right to speak of him as a schoolmaster at all. Looking to the motive which produced his visit to Mr. Wigan, is it not fitter to consider him as a small tradesman who keeps, not a school, but a little knowledge-shop, and who is horribly afraid of offending, not his connection, but his customers? Surely anger is too large an emotion to be stirred up by such a very small man. Surely it is a waste of attention to bestow much notice upon such an extremely trifling smear on the garments of civilised humanity as this.

But the aspect of the matter, as it regards the connection (or the customers) of whose inexpressibly mean prejudices the schoolmaster (or small tradesman) is only the unsavoury mouthpiece, suggests considerations of a more serious kind. It would give us pleasure, if we could fairly persuade ourselves that this was an isolated case, and that the brother-in-law, who would have acted like him under similar circumstances, were two exceptional proprietors of private schools. Unfortunately we happen to know that the instance of Mr. Wigan's son is not a solitary instance. The little daughter of Mr. Phelps — whose management of Sadler's Wells Theatre has entitled him to the gratitude and respect of every decent man in this country — was outlawed by another private school under precisely similar circumstances.

These examples have come to us. We have not sought them out. If we chose to make inquiries, we have no doubt that many more, equally disgraceful to the age we live in, might be easily produced. But there is no need to heap instances on instances. It is sufficiently disheartening without seeking further, to have discovered even three private schools only, in three different parts of England, the genteel patrons of which impose on the proprietor, who exists by their custom, a species of treatment of the children of actors which would be inexcusable if applied to the children of felons. We hope, and believe, for the credit of our country, and our civilisation, that such people as these so shamefully ignorant of the first Christian duty which each man owes to his neighbour — are comparatively few in number. But, even assuming this, how lamentable a capacity for doing harm lies lurking in that mean minority! how vilely the little, little reptile can sting! how widely the taint that tells of its existence reeks up from the ground, and spreads through the atmosphere! What amount of moral and intellectual progress have some of our countrymen, our well-dressed, well-connected countrymen, made, since the bad bye-gone time when actors were refused the rites of Christian burial?

Here is the wicked spirit of that wicked old social prejudice alive still among some of us, in the latter half of the nineteenth century. There is something portentous in the bare discovery that such people exist. How far behind the age they live in are they in other matters? In what rocky fastnesses do they lie hid? Is the ducking of witches one of their favourite amusements? Would they fly with shrieks if they saw a steam-engine? Where is Doctor Livingstone? Where are all the other missionary travellers? Here are the heathen about us, somewhere or other in this country, and no Society for the Propagation of the Gospel At Home, to find them out.

It will not be amiss to turn, for a moment, from these private schools and their customers, and to note the wholesome contrast which the practice of our public schools presents, in this very matter of the education of the sons of actors. Here are two examples which will strike everybody — Mr. Macready and Mr. Charles Kean. Mr. Macready was the son of an actor, and was educated at Rugby. Mr. Charles Kean was the son of an actor, and was educated at Eton. All the advantages which those two admirable schools could offer, were as fully, freely, and fairly bestowed on these two actors' sons, as on the sons of any other men, peers or commoners, who were educated with them. A public school can afford to be independent of the prejudices of individuals. A public school does not appeal for a reputation to this parent or to that parent: it appeals to the nation. Its masters hold a public trust, and not a private speculation. Take your son away, or leave him here — which you please. Every boy in this school has his free, fair, equal chance among his fellows. We have the right hand of welcome just as ready for the son of an actor, as for the son of an archbishop. No small social animosities of yours, or of any man's, shall worm their way into this place. In school or out of school, we have one rule here to which all parents and all boys must conform, or leave us — the rule of Fair Play. That is the language which a public schoolmaster could hold to-morrow to any parent in England, who raised a cruel, and senseless objection against the reception of any well-conducted boy as a pupil of the school. Where is "the proprietor of a select establishment for young gentlemen," who can take the same resolute ground? It is in the very nature of his speculation, that it places him at the mercy of the parents. If there were no other objection to private schools than the objection which this fact implies, surely the case against them, even thus far, rests unmistakably on a practical foundation.

A prejudice against the stage merely, is a prejudice which we can pity and pass by. But a prejudice against the stage which asserts its ignorant distrust of actors by cruelly fastening itself on innocent children, by meanly grudging them their education, and by pitilessly endeavouring to deprive them of a place in society at the very outset of life, is a prejudice for which we have no mercy. Bigots of this

class are past reproof and past argument. It would indeed be monstrous to suppose that the question wanted any arguing at all. To say that Mr. Wigan's son and Mr. Phelps's daughter are the children of gentlemen, and have a right and claim to be educated along with the children of any other gentlemen in this empire, let them be whom they may, is about equivalent to saying that two and two make four.

Our hope of ever seeing the scandal abolished which is cast upon our social system by such proceedings as are here disclosed, does not depend upon any such desperate prospect as the possible letting in of light upon minds which have no capacity for receiving illumination. Mean class prejudices of all kinds are only finally scattered and disposed of when they come into collision with the sense of the nation at large. This sense is represented, in the question of education, by the system of our public schools; and a general extension of that sound, liberal, and thoroughly independent system, in the future, seems to us to offer the only hopeful prospect of effectually reforming the gross abuse which is here exposed — to say nothing of other abuses into the discussion of which we need not enter at present. A growing distrust has arisen of late years in the popular mind towards private schools. No very long time has elapsed since their shameless charges were publicly commented on, in the strongest terms and in all directions. At this moment, their system of education is being subjected to a public test, and is not answering that test to the national satisfaction. The facts disclosed in these pages will certainly not tend to improve their character in the estimation of any fair-minded judges. Upon the whole, the chance does not seem hopelessly remote that the next move in education may be a move towards the extension of public schools, and towards the consequent extinction of prejudices which, exceptional as we trust they may be, are nevertheless, so long as they exist at all, a disgrace to our country and our time.

We are not putting this matter forward as Mr. Wigan's private grievance or as Mr. Phelps's private grievance. The names of those gentlemen have been frankly mentioned, because their appearance here runs no risk of being misunderstood, and because the sympathy which we offer to them, and which we believe our readers will offer to them also, is such sympathy as men of high character may honourably accept. We bring this matter forward, not as the grievance of two individuals, but as the grievance of every man among us who has an interest in seeing the reputation of his countrymen for common intelligence, and common decency of feeling, properly maintained.

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A BREACH OF BRITISH PRIVILEGE

SIR, — I occasionally see your journal at the houses of my friends, and I am told that it occupies a highly influential and prominent position among the periodicals of the present time. For my own part, I carefully abstained from subscribing to you, when you started. I didn't like the look of you, then; and I don't like the look of you, now. You are not English to the back-bone. You have more than once set up the foreigners — the jabbering, unwashed, unshaved foreigners, who live on kickshaws and sour wine — as examples to US. I doubt whether you really believe that one Englishman is equal to two Frenchmen, and six of any other nation. I doubt whether you know your Rule Britannia as you ought, and whether you sincerely feel that we are the "dread and envy" of every foreign community on the face of the earth. No, sir, you won't do for me — it may be disagreeable to you to know it — but you won't.

Why do I write to you, then? For three reasons. First, and foremost, to see whether you can be fair enough to both sides to print something which is not written by one of your own set. Secondly, to perform an entirely new literary feat, in the character of correspondent to a journal, by writing a letter to an Editor which doesn't begin by flattering him. Thirdly, and lastly, to show you the results to which your precious modern principles have led, and will continue to lead, by quoting the last new example of the invasion of the execrable foreign element, as now exhibited every night, not far from you, at the West End of the Strand. There are my reasons; and here is my letter. Listen to the first, if you can. Print the last, if you dare.

I have been, for some time, prepared for a great deal in the way of desertion of national principle. When beards (which you recommended) began to grow on British faces — when shoeblacks (whom you encouraged) began to ply in British streets — when the word "entrée" appeared among the chops and steaks of British taverns; and when foreign opera companies could sing at playhouse prices on the British stage, and not be hooted off it — I was proof, as I fondly imagined, against any additional feeling of surprise at any additional foreign innovation. But, I was mistaken; and I don't mind acknowledging it. Much as I was prepared for, I was *not* prepared, sir, for MR. BENJAMIN WEBSTER'S NEW ADELPHI THEATRE.

I shall probably be very severe in the course of this letter; but I will endeavour to be reasonable and just at the same time. In writing of Mr. Webster's Innovation (for in the good old English sense of the word it is not a Theatre at all), I will bear lightly on the architect, Mr. T. H. Wyatt. I will assume that when he received his commission, it was saddled with certain conditions, which he was bound to fulfil, and did fulfil, as an honest man. I will even endeavour to write of Mr. Webster himself more in sorrow than in anger, when I come to the personal part of the subject, so far as he is concerned. First of all, however, I must take care to be general, before I become particular (there are people out of your literary set, sir, who understand the art of writing, though they seldom care to practise it) — I must establish my principle and state my case; using a new paragraph for the purpose, and making it a short one. You see I know all about it, although, I thank Heaven, I am not a literary man.

My principle is, That the English public does not want to be made comfortable when it goes to the Theatre; That this peculiarity marks the great distinction between a British audience and a French audience; And that a manager who gives to the modest Englishman, who has not asked for it, the comfortable seat which the arrogant Frenchman has insisted on having long since, is a manager who gratuitously breaks down a grand social distinction between France and Great Britain.

My case is, That Mr. Benjamin Webster has committed this grave patriotic offence at The New Adelphi Theatre.

Now let us be moderate — let us be philosophic — let us have this out logically by all manner of means. The English public does not want to be made comfortable when it goes to the Theatre. Is there any man in his senses who doubts this? Let him, in that case, remember the Old — yes, the fine, old, genuine, British Adelphi Theatre, now pulled down — and let him put his hand on his heart (as they did in the good old sterling comedies), and say whether he remembers a single comfortable place in the whole of that eminently national edifice, ranging all over it from the floor to the ceiling? Let him say whether he remembers that Theatre as a scene of public protests and riots in consequence of the exquisite uneasiness of every seat in it, or as a scene of happy, crowded, cramped, perspiring placidity, in which a British pit perched itself upon its native knife-boards, with its sides squeezed, its knees jammed, and its back unsupported, a spectacle of national discomfort and national contentment, such as no other civilised city could show in any part of Europe? No! no! If an English audience wanted to be made comfortable, the old Adelphi Theatre could never have kept its doors open through

a single season; and certain other national — that is to say, universally uncomfortable — theatres still in existence, would be shut up. Are they shut up? Are they not, on the contrary, crowded every night? Is a murmur ever heard from the contentedly-cramped audience? I promised you logic, just now; and here you have it, I think, with a vengeance!

Having established my principle, and proved it by facts which no man can deny, I may now come down to details, and have it out personally with Mr. Webster.

My first complaint is, that I am bewildered by this innovating management, in two ways even before I take my seat inside the New Adelphi at all. In the first place, I am not fined a shilling at the Box Office, for the offence of wanting to engage a seat at the Theatre. Why not, when other theatres continue to fine me with perfect impunity? If I really resented such treatment, I should bring those other theatres to their senses by not going near them till they had removed their shilling tax. But I do nothing of the sort; I pay it uncomplainingly when I am asked for it. And here is Mr. Webster losing money in the vain attempt to teach me, as a true-born Englishman, not to let myself be taken in. And there are the other managers who know the public better, laughing at him in their sleeves, and profiting daily by the good old system. Speaking as a man of business I don't mind acknowledging that this bewilders me to begin with.

Then again, when I go into the theatre, and pass the money-takers, and enter the lobbies, what do I see? Women — on my word of honour — quiet, civil, quick, neatly-dressed, attentive women, who give me my playbill gratuitously, and show me to my place, and expect nothing for it. Here is a pretty innovation! Women made useful in England, in an occupation which they are especially well fitted to follow! Women removed from those famous hearths and homes of ours, which I always score with an approving line in pencil, when my favourite authors present them to me in my favourite capital letters! What next, I should like to know? An inoffensive Englishman, well acquainted with the national customs, enters a theatre, after paying to go in, keeping an extra shilling between his finger and thumb, to pay again as usual — expects to meet a scowling male extortioner in frowsy black who takes his bribe, as a matter of course, before he opens the door — and confronts instead a pleasant little woman, who never so much as looks in the direction of the visitor's waistcoat-pocket, and waits on him as civilly as if she were his own servant. Upon my life, you might have knocked me into my seat with a feather, when I first took it at the New Adelphi Theatre.

Wait, though — I retract the word seat, as applied to Mr. Webster's Orchestra Stalls. My idea — my national English idea of a stall-seat at a London theatre, implies something which is too narrow and too high — something which slopes the wrong way, and lets me slide down till my knees fit nicely into the edge of the bench before me — something entirely unconnected with carpets below and footstools in front — something, in short, which, in respect of its intense discomfort and wretchedness, is the exact reverse of my seat at home. Do I meet with this at the New Adelphi? I can hardly write it for laughing; but I actually sit, in this deplorably un-English building, in a real arm-chair, a luxurious private arm-chair — I can see the stage without craning my head till I get a stiff neck — my neighbours have room to pass, without squeezing me against my seat; and, to crown all, instead of paying more for these foreign luxuries than I pay for my national discomforts at my favourite national theatre, not a hundred miles off, I am actually charged a shilling less! Most ridiculous, is it not?

I stand up, and look about me. Why, here is an English Theatre, from every part of which everybody can see the stage. I remark a dress-circle with as much room in it as there is in the stalls; with seats which can be raised for the convenience of passing and repassing; with special arrangements for hats, cloaks, and opera-glasses; with an open balcony in front, to show the bright colours of the ladies' dresses — and, as I live, with a row of private boxes rising behind it. Private boxes in England, with a front view of the stage — private boxes from which four people can see without two of them standing up — private boxes, price one pound — private boxes price ten shillings, even, if there are only two of us who want to go into them! I think of my one-eleven-six, or my two pound two, and my angular peep behind the scenes, and my bird's-eye view of the actors' heads, at my favourite national establishment; and look down at my play-bill to collect my thoughts and to try and remember that I am still in a place of public amusement. What do I see on the bill? Odds frogs and capers! (as my favourite Acres would say) here is a Frenchified notion of attending to the comforts of the common people! Here are stalls again, with elbows and cushions, in the Gallery — yes! Stalls, in the gallery of a British Theatre! Fancy the gods, the common people who can only pay a shilling a-piece, sitting in their stalls! Once show the lower orders as much attention as you show their betters, and they will be behaving like their betters, and there will be no hootings nor howlings, nor stampings, nor cat-calls, and the character of the gallery will be lost for ever. What next, Mr. Webster — I wonder what next?

I ask this question, but there is no need to do so. My eyes are hardly withdrawn from a transmogrified gallery, before they fall on a transmogrified pit. Where are

the benches, the good old dingy greasy rows of knife-boards? Gone — and in their places more stalls with elbows and cushions. Any increase in the price? Not a halfpenny. Two shillings, in the old times, for sitting on a pit-plank, with your neighbour's elbow in your stomach. Two shillings, in the new times, for sitting in a pit-stall, with your neighbour's elbow where it ought to be. My clerk — my overpaid clerk, who has only nine children and gets a hundred and twenty pounds a-year — can take his wife and daughters to this anti-national theatre, without making their backs ache: can put them in their places without any preliminary rushing and pushing; can seat them next to the fattest man in England, and can make sure that they won't be squeezed. Squeezed, did I say? What has become of a certain time-honoured female figure, peculiar to an English pit? Where is our unparalleled insular female nuisance, the fruit-woman, whom I saw the other night, at my favourite old-fashioned theatre, charging longitudinally through the happy occupants of the pit-planks, using her basket as a battering-ram, and opening her ginger-pop over the shoulders of the public? Gone, sir! No such person known at the New Adelphi. No such person inquired after, by the audience; no, not even in the driest part of the evening. There the English public sat, sir, in their Frenchified pit, with their refreshment-room to go to if they pleased, as calmly, as comfortably, and as uncomplainingly as if they had been used to it all their lives.

I felt my temper going. Mine is a very fair temper under ordinary circumstances; but it is not quite proof against the provocation of the New Adelphi. I say, I lost my temper, and I half rose to leave my unendurably easy seat — when a new line in the play-bill caught my eye. "No Second Price!" I sat down again, incapable, even after all that I had seen, of realising this climax of innovation. If there is an English institution left in this country (which I sometimes doubt), it is, Half Price, Don't we all know what a blessing it is for the audience who have been fools enough to pay whole price, to be invaded at nine o'clock by another audience, who have been wise enough to pay half price? Don't we all know how it improves the closing scenes of an interesting play, and how it encourages the actors who happen to be on the stage at the time, to hear the silence in the theatre suddenly interrupted by a rushing and scraping of feet and a rapid opening and shutting of box-doors? No Second Price! I protest I could not believe it — I thought it was a hoax — and I waited, to make sure, till nine o'clock came. Dead silence; the play and the actors entirely uninterrupted; not a footfall in the pit, not a bang at the box-doors. That was quite enough for me — I felt my own individuality slipping from under me, as it were — and I left the theatre, on patriotic grounds, never — no, never — to enter it again.

You may call this prejudice, and you may ask what it all means besides grumbling. It means, sir, that Mr. Webster's foreign freak is likely to alter other places of public amusement besides his own. Before long, this gentleman's mischievous experiment in building will be teaching the once contented English public to exact comfortable seats, sensible arrangements, and architectural fitness and beauty from managers generally, as well as stage entertainments; and the necessary consequence will be, the transmogrification of most of our other theatres, as well as of the new theatre in the Strand. We have risen to be a great people under our existing theatrical system; we were going on remarkably well on our characteristic bare benches — and, on pure conservative grounds, I protest against Mr. Webster's conspiracy to slip cushions under us, to support our backs, to give room for our legs, to please our eyes, to coddle our hardy lower orders, and to save all our pockets. Let this rashest of existing managers beware. He has entered on a career of which no man can see the end. He has spoilt the public with good accommodation already — the next outrageous luxuries they will learn to clamour for will be good plays.

I remain, sir (in an epistolary sense, but in no other), yours,

J. BULL

P.S.— I forgot to mention, as a last instance of the absurd manner in which the public is petted at the New Adelphi, that the management looks carefully after anything they may leave behind them in their seats — publishes a register of the articles so found, in the play-bill — and keeps them to be applied for at the stage-door. Here is a premium on carelessness, and a mischievous discouragement of trade. A lady who leaves her fan behind her, gets it back again now. In the good old times she would have had to buy another.

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