

The Irrepressible Anstey

By JEAN SIBI

"ORDER! Order!" the Speaker demands.

The House is in an uproar. Everybody is vociferous but the short, stocky personage who was the original cause of the disturbance. He sits forward, beaming with a quaint impertinence, his eyes glinting with a mischief that is cold and merciless. As you watch him moving his head to catch voices in the clamor, you get a succession of determined profiles. The face seems to have been abandoned to heady passions and tumultuous griefs. The nose has the ominous distinction of a threat. The mouth might have been moulded of a sob and a sneer. Only the waving grey hair that tends to curl thickly about the ears and neck is a reproach to the rest of the countenance. It might belong to a poet or maestro, though somehow one associates it with ornate jewellery, loud neckties, and vulgarity. And there is just a faint suggestion of vulgarity about the man when he rises to resume his speech. His gestures denote the natural demagogue. His language reveals torrential feeling. He is no victim of the terrible tyranny of words. His independence is proclaimed by the moans of a mutilated syntax. His discourse is gruesome with the remains of slaughtered sentences. His audacious tongue, darting hither and thither, is seeking what aspirates it can devour. And he delivers ideas that somewhere between the thought and the utterance have lost their composure and probability. It is often red, revolutionary stuff he utters, packed with ugly generalities and poisonous personal onslaughts, but freely deprived of its venomous purpose by the anaesthetic of humor. And here let one say that he is exceedingly funny at times. The dignity of the greatest opponent has been ruined by the creations of his ironical fancy. Indeed his acrid sarcasms have shaken the very pillars in the Temple of Stodge. Still, after he has finished and resumed his seat, one has a clinging memory of the gibes and bilious laughter. The solid matter of his discourse is rarely a contributing factor to harmony and good feelings. Political enemies liken it to the Bosh that Lenin and Trotzky put into the Bolshevik religion.

That is an impression of Frank Anstey, M.H.R., and the most extraordinary character in the Federal Labor Party. He has been a sailor, a laborer, a caretaker, and a hundred other things, but he has latterly achieved the hauteur of calling himself a person of "no occupation." Anstey is a native of Devonshire, but the thought of its green lanes is obscured in his mind by slimy vistas of slums. There is no need to ask his opinion of the English wage system. He is an episode in its history, quite negligible among numbers equally arduous, but still poignant to him after

years of comparative prosperity. As a boy he starved in England and literally tramped from town to town trying to make two crusts of bread grow where one grew before. A man whose recollection is clouded by those experiences is an impatient philosopher to softly-nurtured opponents. The memory of having seen his mother inadequately fed lends a certain authority to his rant and gives him the tone of an irreconcilable. And Anstey is an irreconcilable as regards the economic position. As the member for Brunswick in the Victorian Assembly and later as representative for Bourke (Vic.) in the Commonwealth arena, he has never deviated from his Socialistic principles. He argues that Socialism is the only logical cure for a system that yearly compels thousands to die of insufficiency in the good things of life. Otherwise the only alternative is to save all those superfluous appetites the trouble of getting born. Anstey is not the first to feel crushed between the millstones of Marx and Malthus, so to speak, but he is nearly the first to perceive the irony of the situation. It is this irony that has entered his soul and rises periodically to sour his utterance.

Anstey can be chaotic, neurotic, and idiotic, but he has never been dull. His humor is surprising, and he is able to give it abundant exercise when considering the opinions and the people opposite. It must be admitted that there are views and men behind the Government that are gifts to any political satirist. A Liberalism that is mostly exultant in the power of law and order, is vulnerable to the bluntest shafts of wit. Men who have entered their second childhood or haven't emerged from their first can be made to look foolish by the crudest political tyro. But Anstey's success as a jester is wonderful because he hasn't the ordinary weapons of speech. As a speaker he could never achieve Deakin's effortless flow of silver and gold. He does not possess Bak-hap's vocabulary, Kelly's appositeness, or the late Roberts' penetrating fluency. Likewise he lacks the Scotch aloofness that distinguishes Fowler's invective. He is cubits short of Watt's oratorical stature. Brennan's polished flippancy has been denied to him. Considine's Irish readiness is not his metier. And he never could approach burly Jim Page's genial brutality. Yet in his seething messages to democracy there sometimes emerges a thought

that is wrenched hot and lurid from the brain and is moulded, ere it cools, into a transfiguring epigram. One remembers the night a few months ago when he reviewed the Government's burlesque resignation after the second Referendum. That evening he bubbled with sententious sarcasm and mentioned a propos the incident at Warwick: "Just as the oak sprang from the acorn, so out of a rotten egg they manufactured the Commonwealth police." It was not his best saying, but in the essence of its ridicule it deserved to be immortal. It is this faculty for pungent illustration that fills the House quicker than William Morris Hughes' asserted power of fascination. Indeed Hughes must envy Anstey's queer capacity for packing the public galleries and holding all tense and expectant until the end of his speech. But then Hughes rarely endeavors to say anything memorable. It is not unfair to remark that his frequent path as a speaker has been a sort of via dolorosa of neglected opportunities.

Of Anstey's future in politics it is safe to prophesy that he will be content to remain a tribune of the people. If Labor ever attains office again, he might be offered Cabinet rank on account of his personal integrity, his sound knowledge of banking and finance, and his profound freedom from most of the popular political illusions. But a Cabinet with Anstey in it would soon become a mixture of a dog fight, a temperamental prima donna, and a Sinn Fein meeting where someone had proposed "To Hell with the Irish." Anstey could never tolerate the steadying effect of Cabinet responsibility or the necessary stifling of personality and principle which smug office seekers find it easy to endure. As a matter of fact, he is too honest and independent for the cowardly compromises of the Cabinet room. Really the trouble with him is that he was born over a century too late. As Citizen Anstey he might have been a jeune premier in the great Parisian drama of 1789. Perhaps he might have been another Danton without quite his high purpose, of even a new Marat deprived of the wickedness and headache—but he would have been a man of the Mountain. Certainly he would have denounced Robespierre and died with the others in the sweet, warm sunset which Belloc describes in his "Life of Danton." The present era can offer him nothing so fine and finished as that conclusion. The only martyrdom that is left to him is to go on teaching a Democracy that will never learn—to continue advising the Man in the Street only to discover that he is Ever at Sea. That is the irony of ironies, and Anstey, connoisseur of irony, should appreciate it well.



HON. F. ANSTEY, M.H.R.

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