

**'SKELETONS AT THE
FEAST'. OR, THE
RADICAL PROGRAMME**

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'Skeletons at the feast'. Or, The radical programme by Alfred Austin

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ALFRED AUSTIN

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BY

ALFRED AUSTIN.

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“SKELETONS AT THE FEAST.”

THOUGH not one of those who covet Parliamentary honours, because with every day that passes more and more deeply impressed by the deleterious effect upon public interests wrought by our Party system, and because bound, moreover, not to be divorced by politics from that higher vocation of Letters to which, when it is a man's first love, he invariably reverts, and, indeed, from which he never seriously strays; nevertheless, I think a person might justly be reproached with selfishness who manifested no interest in the fierce electoral struggle shortly to be decided. I, therefore, venture to offer this brief contribution to the momentous if distasteful controversy in which so many citizens, capable and incapable, are at present engaged.

Notwithstanding Mr. Gladstone's sportsmanlike Manifesto, that double-barrelled weapon, so admirably adapted for bringing down his birds right and left; notwithstanding Mr. Goschen's painful contortions, reminding one of the writhings of the Trojan priest* in the folds of the fatal serpent; and notwithstanding Lord Hartington's

* See note at the end.

customary composure; the most striking and important facts of the political situation at this moment are the conspicuous position occupied by Mr. Chamberlain, the sweeping nature of his proposals, and the uncompromising tenor of his language. Till within the last year or so it would have seemed almost inconceivable that Mr. Chamberlain could become the Leader of one of the two great Parties in the State. He lacks the wide culture, the fine breeding, the tact, the breadth of view, the instinctive sympathy with all classes and all occupations in the community, in a word, the delicate and comprehensive patriotism, we have hitherto looked for, and assumed as a matter of course, in the men designated by public opinion as possible candidates for the chief place in our councils. The other day, as I was talking with my friend M. Tricoupis, the well-known Hellenic statesman, he asked me if it was really true, as others had assured him, that it is possible Mr. Chamberlain will become Prime Minister of England. "Yes," I said, "it is more than possible: it seems not improbable." He appeared unutterably shocked. "If we Hellenes," he said, "are not Liberals, what are we? I certainly have called myself a Liberal all my life, and call myself one still. But I hold no opinion in common with Mr. Chamberlain, and I tell you frankly I regard him as the enemy of liberty and the advocate of political and social despotism."

To me it has always seemed that for any political Party to arrogate to itself the exclusive designation of "Liberal," is a little presumptuous, and no one would dream of applying it to Mr. Chamberlain and his followers who was not willing to call black white, and to allow round to be spoken of as square. Moreover, Mr. Chamberlain is content to be described as a Radical;

and that description may be conceded to him. But what, then, are we to call those politicians who, refusing to enter the Conservative ranks, nevertheless employ most of their time in explaining that they do not share Mr. Chamberlain's opinions? Mr. Chamberlain has solved the difficulty for us. He has called them Skeletons at the Feast.

The description is singularly appropriate, though it may be doubted whether Mr. Chamberlain is altogether aware of its felicitousness. In order for there to be skeletons at a feast, a feast there must obviously be. Had he spoken of it as a banquet, or even as an orgy, it would scarcely have been possible to quarrel with him. The entertainment he has promised, and which he is busily preparing, is on a truly liberal scale; and Mr. Chamberlain himself is pleased to be the Head Carver. Here is the Menu, not a very refined one, perhaps, but one in which all the good orthodox English dishes of soup, fish, joint, game, and sweets, may be considered to be set out in their regular order.

I.

The creation of Peasant Proprietors, through the compulsory expropriation of the present owners of land, by Local Boards, at a price lower than that which the owners could get in the open market.

II.

A Graduated Income Tax.

III.

The Gratuitous Education of the children of a portion of the community, at the expense of another portion of the community.

IV.

The Disestablishment and Disendowment of the Church, and the Appropriation of its Funds to other objects than those for which they were bestowed.

V.

The Abolition of the House of Lords, and the Creation of a single Legislative Assembly.

If anyone feels tempted to interrupt me here, for the purpose of observing that these projects are not to be found in Mr. Gladstone's Manifesto, he must excuse me for asking him not to waste his time, or mine, by an objection so frivolous. They are the projects of Mr. Chamberlain, Sir Charles Dilke, Mr. Morley, Mr. Jesse Collins, and the remainder-men of the Leadership of which Mr. Gladstone avowedly holds an all but expired lease; and Mr. Chamberlain has declared that he will enter no Cabinet that excludes from consideration the first three of them. He has since paid a visit to Mr. Gladstone at Hawarden; and though Mr. Gladstone, no doubt, is capable of brilliant legerdemain concerning the difference between "including" a thing and "not excluding" it, the ordinary lay intellect knows nothing of such subtleties; and if Mr. Chamberlain does not mean his project to be included in the programme of any Cabinet in which he is himself included, he uses words for the purpose of misleading his audience; and I do not think any such intention can fairly be ascribed to him.

It is more to the purpose to examine carefully, and with as much dispassionateness as possible, these various proposals, ingredients in the Feast at which, according to the provider of it, Mr. Goschen, the Marquis of Har-

tington, *c tutti quanti*, attend as skeletons, as well they may, without any appetite. Cannibals, no doubt, there are; but men who devour themselves have yet to be discovered.

PEASANT PROPRIETORSHIP.

It is an undisputed fact that during the last thirty years there has been an exodus from the rural parts of England to its urban centres; that the population of the country has diminished, and the population of the towns greatly increased. Apart from the growing passion for society, in the accurate sense of that word, for excitement, and for what is called amusement, a motive that has operated in all countries, since the making of railways, to seduce country-folk of all classes into cities, the principal cause of this migration has been that change in our economic policy, decreed forty years ago, which, whether wise or the reverse, people are beginning to discern is most inaccurately described as Free Trade. There were two prophecies made at the time of its introduction. Its advocates prophesied that, before a generation had passed away, foreign nations would throw open their ports to our goods as freely as we were going to throw open our ports to theirs, and thus what would then have been properly called Free Trade would be established throughout the world. Its opponents prophesied that it would have no such effect, and that it would grievously depress, if it did not end by ruining, the trade of English agriculture.*

* It is curious to observe how cunningly politicians avail themselves of the well-known readiness of the multitude to be governed by words. I have already pointed out the fallacy involved in the word "Liberal," and the term "Free Trade." Similarly the Corn Law Abolitionists took good care always to speak of the "agricultural interest," never of the "trade of