New Lamps for Old – II

But after all my present business is not with negative criticism. I want rather to ascertain what the Congress has really done, and whether it is so much as to condemn all patriots to an Eleusinian silence about its faults. My own genuine opinion was expressed, perhaps with too much exuberance of diction,—but then the ghost of ancient enthusiasm was nudging my elbow—when I described the Congress as a well of living water, a standard in the battle, and a holy temple of concord. It is a well of living water in the sense that we drink from it assurance of a living political energy in the country, and without that assurance perhaps the most advanced among us might not have been so advanced: for it is only one or two strong and individual minds, who can flourish without a sympathetic environment. I am therefore justified in describing the Congress as a well of living water; but I have also described it as the standard under which we have fought; and by that I mean a living emblem of our cause the tired and war-worn soldier in the mellay can look up to and draw from time to time fresh funds of hope and vigour. Such, and such only, is the purpose of a banner. One does not like to say that what must surely be apparent even to a rude intelligence, has been beyond the reach of intellects trained at our Universities and in the liberal professions. Yet it is a fact that we have entirely ignored what a casual inspection ought at once to have told us, that the Congress is altogether too unwieldy a body for any sort of executive work, and must solely be regarded as a convenient alembic, in which the formulae of our aspirations may be refined into clear and accurate expression. Not content with using a banner as a banner, we have actually caught up the staff of it with a view to breaking our enemy’s heads. So blind a misuse must take away at least a third part of its virtue from the Congress, and if we are at all to recover the loss, we must recognize the
The Congress has been, then, a well of living water and a standard in the battle of liberty; but besides these it has been something which is very much better than either of them, good as they too undoubtedly are; it has been to our divergent races and creeds a temple, or perhaps I should be more correct in saying a school of concord. In other words the necessities of the political movement initiated by the Congress have brought into one place and for a common purpose all sorts and conditions of men, and so by smoothing away the harsher discrepancies between them has created a certain modicum of sympathy between classes that were more or less at variance. Here, and not in its political action, must we look for any direct and really important achievement; and even here the actual advance has as a rule been absurdly exaggerated. Popular orators like Mr. Pherozshah Mehta, who carry the methods of the bar into politics, are very fond of telling people that the Congress has habituated us to act together. Well, that is not quite correct: there is not the slightest evidence to show that we have at all learned to act together; the one lesson we have learned is to talk together, and that is a rather different thing. Here then we have in my opinion the sum of all these capacities, in which the Congress has to any appreciable extent promoted the really high and intimate interests of the country. Can it then be said that in these lines the Congress has had such entirely beneficial effects as to put the gag on all harsher criticism? I do not think that it can be properly so said. I admit that the Congress has promoted a certain modicum of concord among us; but I am not prepared to admit that on this line of action its outcome has been at all complete and satisfying. Not only has the concord it tends to create been very partial, but the sort of people who have been included in its beneficent action, do not extend beyond certain fixed and narrow limits. The great mass of the people have not been appreciably touched by that healing principle, which to do the Congress justice has very widely permeated the middle class. All this would still leave us without sufficient grounds to censure the Congress at all severely, if only it were clear that its present line of action was
tending to increase the force and scope of its beneficence: but in fact the very contrary appears. We need no soothsayer to augur that, unless its entire policy be remodelled, its power for good, even in the narrow circle of its present influence, will prove to have been already exploited. One sphere still remains to it; it is still our only grand assurance of a living political energy in the country: but even this well of living water must in the end be poisoned or dried up, if the inner political energy of which it is the outward assurance remains as poor and bounded as we now find it to be. If then it is true that the action of the Congress has only been of really high import on one or two lines, that even on those lines the actual result has been petty and imperfect, and that in all its other aspects we can pronounce no verdict on it but failure, then it is quite clear that we shall get no good by big talk about the splendid unanimity at the back of the Congress. A splendid unanimity in failure may be a very magnificent thing in its way, but in our present exigencies it is an unanimity really not worth having. But perhaps the Congress enthusiast will take refuge in stinging reproaches about my readiness to publish our weakness to the enemy. Well, even if he does I can assure him that however stinging his reproaches may be, I shall not feel at all stung by them. I leave that for those honest people who imagine that, when they have got the Civil Service and other lucrative posts for themselves, the Indian question will be satisfactorily settled. Our actual enemy is not any force exterior to ourselves, but our own crying weaknesses, our cowardice, our selfishness, our hypocrisy, our purblind sentimentalism. I really cannot see why we should rage so furiously against the Anglo-Indians and call them by all manner of opprobrious epithets. I grant that they are rude and arrogant, that they govern badly, that they are devoid of any great or generous emotion, that their conduct is that of a small coterie of masters surrounded by a nation of Helots. But to say all this is simply to say that they are very commonplace men put into a quite unique position. Certainly it would be very grand and noble, if they were to smother all thought of their own peculiar interests, and aim henceforth, not at their own promotion, not at their own enrichment, but at the
sole good of the Indian people. But such conduct is what we have no right to expect save from men of the most exalted and chivalrous character; and the sort of people England sends out to us are not as a rule exalted and chivalrous, but are usually the very reverse of that. They are really very ordinary men,—and not only ordinary men, but ordinary Englishmen—types of the middle class or Philistines, in the graphic English phrase, with the narrow hearts and commercial habit of mind peculiar to that sort of people. It is something very like folly to quarrel with them for not transgressing the law of their own nature. If we were not so dazzled by the artificial glare of English prestige, we should at once acknowledge that these men are really not worth being angry with: and if it is idle to be angry with them, it is still more unprofitable to rate their opinion of us at more than a straw's value. Our appeal, the appeal of every high-souled and self-respecting nation, ought not to be to the opinion of the Anglo-Indians, no, nor yet to the British sense of justice, but to our own reviving sense of manhood, to our own sincere fellow-feeling—or so far as it can be called sincere—with the silent and suffering people of India. I am sure that eventually the nobler part of us will prevail,—that when we no longer obey the dictates of a veiled self-interest, but return to the profession of a large and genuine patriotism, when we cease to hanker after the soiled crumbs which England may cast to us from her table, then it will be to that sense of manhood, to that sincere fellow-feeling that we shall finally and forcibly appeal. All this, it will be said, may be very true or very plausible, but it is after all made up of unsupported assertions. I quite admit that it is more or less so, nor did I at all intend that it should be otherwise; the proof and support of those assertions is a matter for patient development and wholly beside my present purpose. I have been thus elaborate with one sole end in view. I wish even the blindest enthusiast to recognise that I have not ventured to speak without carefully weighing those important considerations that might have induced me to remain silent. I trust that after this laboured preface even those most hostile to my views will not accuse me of having undertaken anything lightly or rashly. In my own opinion
I should not have been to blame even if I had spoken without this painful hesitation. If the Congress cannot really face the light of a free and serious criticism, then the sooner it hides its face the better. For nine years it has been exempt from the ordeal; we have been content to worship it with that implicit trust which all religions demand, but which sooner or later leads them to disaster and defeat. Certainly we had this excuse that the stress of battle is not the time when a soldier can stop to criticize his weapon: he has simply to turn it to the best use of which it is capable. So long as India rang with turbulent voices of complaint and agitation, so long as the air was filled with the turmoil of an angry controversy between governors and governed, so long we could have little leisure or quiet thought and reflection. But now all is different; the necessity for conflict is no longer so urgent and has even given place to a noticeable languor and passivity, varied only by perfunctory public meetings. Now therefore, while the great agitation that once filled this vast peninsula with rumours of change, is content to occupy an obscure corner of English politics it will be well for all of us who are capable of reflection, to sit down for a moment and think. The hour seems to have come when the Congress must encounter that searching criticism which sooner or later arrives to all mortal things; and if it is so, to keep our eyes shut will be worse than idle. The only good we shall get by it is to point with a fresh example the aphorism with which I set out. “If the blind lead the blind, shall they not both fall into a ditch?”