THE LOAFING-PLACE

By BERTON ROBINSON

AMONG the ancient and venerable institutions that have disappeared since the internal combustion engine and the vacuum tube began to crowd the stage of our society, by no means the least is the loafing-place.

This cultural and educational institution, it may be noted at the very beginning, was peculiar in our social organization to small towns and villages. The hurry and scurry of the modern city is not now, and never was, conducive to reflective thought and leisurely debate; and probably the best substitute the city ever could offer for the loafing-place was the corner saloon; but that was a very poor substitute indeed. The city, the achievement of man nearest to perpetual motion, had no time for the loafing-place.

The country, however, had plenty of time for it. Once there was the day when every town and village had at least one spot in which men who had nothing to do for a few minutes could gather and talk through a pleasant haze of tobacco smoke. In many villages, as in the one which I know best, it was the barber shop.

Few places I have seen stand out as clearly in my mind as does that barber shop. Along one wall, in front of a white enamel barber's chair, ran a long shelf, beneath an equally long mirror, on which the barber arrayed the implements of his trade—gleaming scissors and clippers, a glass razor case, a hone, and a row of bottles of lotions and hair tonics, running in color through the whole spectrum from red to violet. At one end of the shelf was a tall, compartmented rack which held the shaving-mugs of special customers. These mugs gleamed white against the dull brown finish of the rack; and each one bore in fancy gilded letters the name of its owner.

This was the utilitarian, or business half of the shop. The other half, running along the opposite wall, consisted of a row of painted wooden chairs. In strategic locations in front of the row were three big, gleaming brass spitoons, any one of which the barber, until the day came when he lost his teeth, could hit from distances up to eight feet.

The chairs, of course, were ostensibly for waiting customers, and, indeed, waiting customers, among them small boys, did use

them at times; but even more they were used by those who frequented the barber shop as a loafing-place.

In other villages—sometimes in the same village—there were other places at which the man with a few minutes to spare was welcome; perhaps the harness shop, with its pungent odor of leather dressing; or the shoemaker's shop; or perhaps more frequently the grocer's store, where possessors of a little time sat not on chairs, but on barrels, or crates, or an unused section of counter.

Whatever the location, however, in the days before the internal combustion engine and the vacuum tube, every town and village had its loafing-place.

Designation of these spots as loafing-places is not to brand all who frequented them as idle, worthless fellows. There were such, of course; but there were others, too—men whose years relieved them of the burden of work, but whose energies and interests were still too alive to permit them to stay entirely out of the stream of life of which they had so long been a part; farmers from the nearby hinterland, in town on business, with an hour to kill; business and professional men of the village, the doctor, the postmaster, shopkeepers who left the shop for a few minutes in charge of a junior. In short, nearly every man in the village spent some part of his day in the loafing-place; and although it was not always the same group, a group was always there.

In the loafing-place was the village parlement, the triple-distilled essence of democracy, for there men could talk without being expected to do anything about the matters on which they talked; there every man, no matter what his degree, could say what he thought and be sure of a reasonably attentive audience, provided he was not too long-winded in voicing his thoughts; there men aired their opinions on all matters respecting life.

To touch off a debate on public works needed only one farmer to come in and express his opinion of the condition of the back road. Announcement that the opening of a new room in the school would add two points to the school rates next year was the starter for a discussion of all phases of education. Installation of indoor toilets in the county jail led naturally to a discussion of prison reform, and thence, by logical sequence, to consideration of social reform generally.

Almost any remark at all, especially around election times, could set off a red-hot political argument. It is practically certain that none of these discussions changed the minds of the

participants; but at least the arguments crystallized in the minds of the debaters the reasons for the cause and the course which they advocated.

Many topics indeed led to debates on the general progress of mankind. For example, in the barber shop which I remember, the question of replacing the old kerosene street lamps (lit by a lamplighter during the periods when the moon was dark) with modern electric lights started debates that lasted for weeks, and came to take in the whole scope of human progress from the cave man to Edison.

More than that, the group in the barber shop served as an unofficial but puissant court of public opinion from whose decisions there was no appeal. No man could for long drop in at the loafing-place without discovering what the villagers thought of him and of what he was doing. Indeed, a five-minute visit by one who was well acquainted with the group was enough to tell him when the group disapproved of his actions. This was expressed, not so much in what was said, as be the way in which it was said; and subtle as the means may have been, they were most effective. It is a matter of record that the group of my memory induced two men who had become overwell acquainted with John Barleycorn to join the church and to sober up for as long as six months. This, in the considered judgment of all who knew the men concerned, was an achievement of the first order, but, unhappily, the group had at last to give the men up as a bad job, and resort finally to a sort of spiritual ostracism of doubtful effect.

Yet other accomplishments of the loafing-place group could be mentioned. In the village with which I am most familiar, organized charity was unknown, but hardship and want were well-known indeed. On countless occasions, help that was much needed reached a family because of a remark somebody made in the barber shop; and more than one man in need of work found a job because his plight was mentioned with elaborate casualness to the group. The loafing-place was the village's social welfare agency, and to some extent its employment agency.

Thus, behind a facade of doing nothing, the group of the loafing-place did a great deal. There were many practical achievements, such as those which have been mentioned; but perhaps the most important activity of the group was its incessant debate. However poorly equipped the individual member might have been for thinking, however erroneous his thought

processes and the opinions he reached, he at least had to do some thinking if he was to have his say in the group. And not everybody was wrong; men had perforce by times to listen to an opinion that was both disinterested and right. Too, men had not infrequently to listen to other men who disagreed with them, often on parochial subjects on which both parties to the argument were thoroughly informed. These are experiences that do men good.

They are, however, experiences that most men can undergo only in some such informal group as that which used to gather in the loafing-place. But the loafing-place is gone. The rough-and-tumble forum is not encouraged today in the barber's shop or the grocer's store. The encouragement is of exactly the opposite tenor; in keeping with the haste engendered by the internal combustion engine, the customer is deftly but firmly prodded into doing his business and being on his way.

With the disappearance of the loafing-place has gone the mind which accompanied it. Even if the grocer or the barber should be prepared to permit a discussion, there are few who would be willing to carry it on. The open highway beckons us, and the internal combustion engine urges us to respond to the invitation without taking time to talk. The garish poster of the cinema seeks to lure us into its shadowy never-never land, not to formulate and express our opinions, but to listen to spectres who talk through the vacuum tube. Or, if we must have discussions, behind the lighted dials of our radios the vacuum tube can give us ready-made, if not entirely disinterested, discussions.

So both the loafing-place and its discussions are gone. A great democratic and educational institution, actually as old as the ancient Greek market-places in which Diogenes sought his honest man, has been engulfed and lost beneath the wave of progress.

Emerson, who is definitely not fashionable today, but who, nevertheless had a good deal to say and said it well, has a sentence that tells us what has happened to the loafing-place. "For everything you have missed, you have gained something else; and for everything you gain, you lose something," he said.

The loafing-place has been one of the losses as we gained the internal combustion engine and the vacuum tube.

What, one cannot but wonder, will we lose when the atom is tamed at last?

WANTED—A PEACEMAKER

By DANIEL G. DUFFY,

IT must be a tedious thing, one cannot help feeling sometimes, for the world at large to be pestered with Irish difficulties, and one wonders when the sympathy of the nations will be exhausted by our importunity. We seem to be for ever pleading our cause—this time, partition—at the bar of world opinion. *Delenda est Carthago.* But perhaps it is the presentation of our plea and the tone of our expostulation rather than the merits of the case which men are getting weary of. For it is regrettable, especially in these uncertain times when harmony is so desirable, to have the cause of Irish unity reverberating around the market place with so much sound and fury.

It is idle to pretend that the existing set-up in Ireland is a permanent solution, as one party to the dispute would like to believe; nor would it be a solution simply to sweep away the boundary between North and South and let the prejudices of both sides look after themselves, as some leaders, shortsighted as it seems to me, are complacent enough to envisage. The problem is not as simple as that. Neither is the solution. Any civilized attempt to untie this Gordian knot must take account of the prejudices of both sides and work towards a solution which will demand some sacrifice from each in the interests of total harmony. It will not appeal to every single mind—that much is certain—but it should commend itself not merely to every man of good faith in Ireland, north and south, but to lovers of Ireland and lovers of peace all over the world.

It is an easy and popular pastime in Ireland to revile John Bull for his clumsiness in imposing partition and his bland assumption ever since that, as far as he was concerned, the matter was closed. Like Pilate, he washed his hands before the people, full of innocence. But, we must remember, he was under pressure, and still is, from an influential and resolute group who were faced with a complete reversal of position, or so they persuaded themselves, if the republican or even the home-rule policies were to prevail. Cold reason may not be able to justify the course adopted in 1922, when partition was imposed, but strong prejudice and the possession of power, as history abundantly attests, can arrive at strange conclusions. This is not to be understood as an approval of *force majeure.* It is merely an explanation of a fact.

To argue, as some do, that imperial defence demanded a strategic bridgehead in Ireland is a doubtful form of argument and implies a dangerous principle of action. Moreover it seems to suggest that no other method could be found to meet the legitimate claims of empire defence, a wholly unmerited reflection on British statesmanship and Irish good sense. Oddly enough, the imperial argument, as it might be called, is seldom pressed into service for public debate, as if it belonged to that hush-hush sphere of power politics where action comes first and explanations follow. Anyhow we should like to believe that British power nowadays, like Gibbon's Rome, 'raised above the temptation of conquest was actuated only by love of order and justice'. Even the most radical Irishman will acknowledge the magnificent self-restraint of Britain during the recent war when Irish ports were almost vital to British survival.

The most curious and lamentable factor in the Irish cleavage is the ardent piety of the opposing groups, manifesting itself, alas, in a seemingly implacable bigotry. It is a stumbling block to unbelievers and a travesty of the two Great Commandments. A great Christian and a great lover of Ireland once remarked how preposterous it was for men to be hating one another for the love of God! Now whatever be the psychology of this phenomenon, and it is a fit subject for a profound psychological study, it must be affirmed that it is an outrage against right reason and religion, and those who deliberately foster it, whether for private gain or political advantage are flying in the face of heaven. For it is a prostitution of the divine. The net result of this strange and sinister and unchristian thing is an oil-and-water complex, a mind-set against political and social fusion as if a Catholic and Protestant in Ireland were incapable of agreeing to differ on certain things and coalescing to form a stable and healthy policy like their counterparts in Switzerland and the even the more diverse elements in the great Dominion of Canada. It is, moreover, unjust and mischievous to invoke racial differences—an argument that seems to lose all its potency outside Ireland—and say that one section is Irish and the other is British. Racial arguments, as Canadians will appreciate, could become extremely awkward.

On the other hand, it must be frankly recognized, there is a deep and vigorous prejudice in the Northern Unionist against separatism in any shape or form. It is part of his make-up, a kind of inherited passion or phobia which no amount of reasoning or coaxing or badgering (all have been tried) will alter. It

has, as we have seen, a religious basis even though it is hard to see what it has in common with the love of God. The fear of Rome was a very real thing in the old home-rule days, and served a very useful and understandable political purpose; but it is not clear how it can have reasonably survived the fair and generous treatment of Protestants under the Dublin government since 1922. Prejudices die hard. But they die—if they are let.

There is another article in the Unionist's *credo*, a sentimental thing perhaps, but none the less sacred and substantial (and which, let it be said, many Catholics even in S. Ireland would be eager to share) and that is the cult of the Royal Family. Unfortunately, it has been associated with blood and tears in Irish history and to the republican of strict observance it is anathema. But for the loyalist it is a symbol of honour and prestige, colourful and romantic, and a most salutary principle of cohesion. It is thus indefensible for one side to deride as reactionary and outmoded a robust sentimental attachment to the Royal Family and for the other to dismiss the republican ideal as a form of hooligansm under papal auspices! With such a gross mental cleavage a physical border was inevitable. Minds must be opened to let in the light of common sense, and hearts must be expanded to make room for good will if this immoral cleavage is to be made disappear.

Present exchanges on both sides of the border do not seem to be bringing the weary problem any nearer solution. Rather the net result is exasperation. Is there no device for harmony, no plan which will take account of opposing loyalties and provide for a union of diverse sections living and working together in mutual forbearance? The purpose of this article is to suggest, diffidently and yet not without hope, that there is. The key to the problem is the new constitutional position of the Republic of India in the Commonwealth of Nations. The epoch-making decision of the London Conference in April 1949, as the London TIMES put it, gave a new and broader shape to the Constitution of the British Commonwealth, and introduced a novel conception of international relationship. Here is the declaration:

> The government of India have informed the other Governments of the Commonwealth of the intention of the Indian people that under the new Constitution which is about to be adopted India shall become a sovereign independent Republic. The Government of India have, however, declared and affirmed India's desire to continue her full membership of the Commonwealth of Nations and her acceptance of the King as symbol of the free

association of its independent member nations and as such the head of the Commonwealth.

Have we not here a formula, clear and unambiguous, by which the Irish people, North and South, Catholic and Protestant, could compose their irksome difficulties? Let the North persuade itself to coalesce with the rest of the country and agree to a republican constitution for the whole of Ireland. On the other hand, let Ireland, free and independent seek readmission to the Commonwealth of Nations. By this means the aspirations of an ancient people, aiming at sovereign independent status, would be at last realised, and a new and wholesome contract of friendship and collaboration with Britain and the Dominions would be brought about. Moreover, it would legitimise the warm attachment of many Irish citizens to the British Crown and sanctify the many ties of blood and fellowship with British and the other countries of the Commonwealth. It may go hard with men of deep feeling to retreat from positions they have held so stubbornly for so long. But, by all dispassionate tests, it is not a surrender of principle, it is a curtailment of egoism and an admission of incompleteness such as any voluntary union implies. The readjustment may be a little painful, but the total result must be beneficial. The Northern unionist should bear in mind that it is not the age to decry republican forms of government and the ardent disciple of Wolfe Tone might reflect that the example of India, a great and resurrected people, is worthy to be followed with dignity and self-esteem.

It may be protested that such a settlement was proposed in vain by the Irish delegation in their negotiations with Britain in 1921. While this is so—and it is a high tribute to Ireland's political sagacity—it must be admitted that the circumstances of 1921 were very different from those of 1949. The comparative positions in terms of power were far from the same, and above all, the constitutional framework of the British Commonwealth had undergone in the meantime some radical modification. What was possible but unacceptable in 1921 has become feasible and, we trust, acceptable in 1951.

Who will be the peacemaker in this final quarrel between Britain and Ireland? For it seems a peacemaker is needed. The reiteration of arguments, echoing and reechoing within the same walls—for each side listens only to its own—has led to a state of exacerbation where emotion and prejudice befog the issue and leave the rest of the world wondering what the argu-

ment is all about. Neither side will ease off in case it should seem to be weakening in its conviction, or, what is infinitely less worthy, lest party interests should suffer if the dominant factions did not keep up the protestation. The tension is great. Someone must intervene before it snaps.

Chesterton, I think, once said that the full potentialities of human fury were never realised until a third party intervened! There is a most valuable counsel hidden in this whimsical remark, and far from deprecating the role of go-between, which as a good Christian he would not do, he is calling attention, in his own provocative way, to the extreme delicacy of the task. It is no place for fools to rush in, where angels might fear to tread. For there is this basic supposition, and it is the reason wise people are slow to mediate: it implies that the parties themselves are incapable of settling their differences. Which, we may suppose, is liable to put a strain on feelings already overwrought. But surely, after a quarter century of bickering and unfriendliness (to say nothing of the previous centuries) it must be conceded even by the parties themselves that the issue is not as clear-cut as they both proclaim it to be. Honesty must compel them to acknowledge their failure to agree where agreement is possible and disagreement is dangerous. Once the admission is made, and it need not be proclaimed from the house-tops, the door is opened and the mediator may venture in with hope.

Who will it be? What mutual friend will come forward, 'treading gently, lest he prejudice the issue', and earn for himself the eternal gratitude of both and the commendation of the Master, Who said: Blessed are the peacemakers? There is need for sweet reasonableness and give-and-take, (the Celtic mind abhors the term, compromise) and the time is opportune for such a delicate and holy mission. The world could do with more reason and less blood-shed, and would hail with joy and relief any high-minded and deep-probing effort to solve the Irish tangle. The formula for a solution seems ready to hand, as this brief article has attempted to outline, and while there may be difficulty over details, and hard and skilful debate in shaping the final agreement, there is good reason to hope that friendly mediation and peaceful intentions will succeed in bringing about a happy reunion.