

SIGNS OF THE TIMES.

THE OPPORTUNITY OF LIBERALISM.*

This is a book which official Liberals would do well to circulate through their agents in every constituency, and which Land Reformers may confidently commend to their yet unconverted friends. Its author is evidently a practical, acute, and far-seeing politician, who studies social and economic tendencies in order to discover the most promising path of further social and economic progress. Hence it is that though he does not accept our philosophy, the logic of facts forces him to advocate our practical policy, which at the present crisis of affairs is of far greater importance. In truth, Mr. Brougham Villiers, its author, advocates the Taxation of Land Values in no half-hearted fashion, and in a manner which will help to commend our proposals to progressive as well as to the most unprogressive Liberal. The whole tone of this pamphlet—for despite its high price it is really little more—is moderate, practical, and convincing.

Willingly or unwillingly, Mr. Villiers find himself compelled to return again and again to the Land Question; and he thoroughly realises that no further social, economic or political progress is possible without some radical measure of Land Law Reform, which, as he repeatedly emphasises, can alone break down the overwhelming power and influence of those who are advantaged by existing social wrongs and the present prevailing class privileges. As he well expresses it:—

"The basis of all power is economic; and so long as the economic basis of class government exists, you cannot destroy its practical control of politics by any constitutional tinkering . . . Land Reform implies something more effective than electoral reform—it strikes at the political power through the economic basis of landlordism, and in so doing destroys the strongest prop of historic Toryism for ever. And this, be it observed, not by any elaborate code of law-making, which might take generations to fashion into shape, but by letting free those economic forces before which feudalism has already fallen in other countries. For, though vested interests may be too strong for any direct attack, they can be dissolved like ice in summer seas, by setting free the forces of society which are everywhere tending to build up the new democratic world."

Moreover, Mr. Villiers thoroughly realises, what we in our columns have repeatedly emphasised, that the key to the present position, "the beginning of all reform," is to be found in the Budget. As he expresses it:—

"We have seen that the prospects of passing any really important measure through either the Lords or the Commons, much more both, is at present very slight; but there is one Bill to which hardly any of our criticisms apply. If the annual Budget can command a majority in the House of Commons, it is certain to pass . . . Any opposition in a minority against the Budget is absolutely helpless. It cannot defeat the measure, it cannot even delay it. In the Lords, too, the position is here equally strong. The Lords cannot amend the Budget, and they dare not reject it; however unpalatable to themselves, they are bound to see it through. The Budget, in fact, is the key to the position; with it everything can be done; without it, nothing."

And in the following passage Mr. Villiers indicates what he thinks should be done:—

"Some new tax, then, is necessary, and consistently with Liberal and Labour principles, it can be found only in one thing—Land Values. This is a form of taxation to which all Progressive parties and groups in

the country are more or less committed, and even many Tories are prepared to support. A majority even of the present Parliament are in its favour, and in any progressive House of Commons it should easily pass. Such a tax seems to me the one really important reform the next Liberal Government can certainly carry . . . The next Liberal Government is therefore doubly bound to pass it at once. If they fail to do this, then the strongest criticism of Independent Labour has been amply justified. There is no excuse here, such as exists in most other important matters, on the score of the House of Lords; for in a matter of money the Lords are really weaker than the Commons, and on a Budget they are quite helpless. I contend that if, in its first session, the next Liberal Government removes the coal and sugar duties, and substitutes for them a tax upon Land Values, it will have done the chief thing at the moment actually practicable, and Liberalism will have justified its existence; while if it fails to do this, present-day Liberalism is a sham, and the sooner the Radicals and Socialists break up the new Government the better, even if the Tories get in again for a time."

A conclusion which we feel sure most of our readers will cordially endorse. L. H. B.

THE MYSTERY OF JUSTICE.

WE are far too eager to include under the title "Justice of the Universe" many a flagrant act that is exclusively human, and infinitely more common than disease, the hurricane, or fire. I do not allude to war; it might be urged that we attribute this rather to the will of the people or kings than to Nature. But poverty, for instance, which we still rank with irremediable ills such as shipwreck or plague; poverty, with all its crushing sorrows and transmitted degeneration—how often may this be ascribed to the injustice of the elements, and how often to the injustice of our social condition, which is the crowning injustice of man? Need we, at the sight of unmerited wretchedness, look to the skies for a reason, as though a flash of lightning had caused it? Need we seek an impenetrable, unfathomable judge? Is this region not our own; are we not here in the best explored, best known portion of our dominion; and is it not we who organise misery, we who spread it abroad, as arbitrarily, from the moral point of view, as fire and disease scatter destruction or suffering? Is it reasonable that we should wonder at the sea's indifference to the soul-state of its victims, when we who have a soul, the pre-eminent organ of justice, pay no heed whatever to the innocence of the countless thousands whom we ourselves sacrifice, who are our wretched victims? We choose to regard as beyond our control, as a force of fatality, a force that rests entirely within our own hands. But does this excuse us? Truly we are strange judges of an ideal justice, we are strange judges! A judicial error sends a thrill of horror from one end of the world to another; but the error which condemns three-fourths of mankind to misery, an error as purely human as that of any tribunal, is attributed by us to some inaccessible, implacable power. . . . Before we complain of Nature's indifference, or ask at her hands an equity she does not possess, let us attack the iniquity that dwells in the homes of men; and when this has been swept away, we shall find that the part we assign to the injustice of fate will be less by fully two-thirds. And the benefit to mankind would be far more considerable than if it lay in our power to guide the storm or govern the heat and the cold, to direct the course of disease or the avalanche, or contrive that the sea should display an intelligent regard to our virtues and secret intentions. For, indeed, the poor far exceed in number those who fall victims to shipwreck or material accident, just as far more disease is due to material wretchedness than to the caprice of our organism, or to the hostility of the elements.—From "The Buried Temple," by Maurice Maeterlinck; publisher, George Allen, London.

* "The Opportunity of Liberalism." By Brougham Villiers. Publisher, T. Fisher Unwin. Price 1/- net.