

JOHN FARRELL.

SOME RECOLLECTIONS.

(BY T. S. HEBBLEWHITE.)

III.

I have said that I was one of the earliest single-taxers in New South Wales. As one who had never for an instant wavered in his free trade beliefs it is certain that I saw before Farrell the full scope of the social revolution that would follow, as an economic consequence, on the application of the single-tax on the value of land and the abolition of all forms of taxation upon toil and the fruits of toil; because it was not until some time afterwards that Farrell entirely divested himself of the last rags of the specious quasi-philosophy, of protection. Amongst that early band of devoted friends was Mr. Joseph Cook, now leader of the Commonwealth Liberal Party. He was then a working miner in Lithgow, and known in the little Farrell office circle as the "opium-eater" because of a way he had of frequently falling into sudden fits of silent introspection.

When in this contemplative mood Mr. Cook was like a reposeful statue of Buddha, with eyes turned inwardly and hands reverentially crossed in his lap. Farrell said Cook "saw visions." I fancy my friend Cook did have secret premonitions from somewhere that someday, he would, for the last time, wipe the coal grime from hands and face, and enter upon a larger life. I, myself, had ideas in my student days of being this or that, but aimlessly drifted into journalism, as Farrell did, just as Cook drifted into politics, and others of that time similarly drifted into other waters.

How relatively few keep permanently to the road on which they first set out! It is certain, however, that if Farrell had not drifted into journalism he would never have had the opportunity of doing as much as he did towards popularising an economic doctrine that is overspreading the whole world, even to a reformed China -- the gradual concentration of taxation on land values. A compilation from Farrell's voluminous editorials in his Lithgow paper, and in the organ later established by the Single Tax League in Sydney, and which for years he edited without other recompense than a sense of duty discharged, would give us a complete handbook and guide to political economy as rendered simple, intelligent, absolutely just, and effectual by the great philosopher whom the late Duke of Argyll sarcastically referred to as "Tho Prophet of San Francisco." It is a pity, in times which stand so greatly in need of enlightenment, that such splendid work should be lost. Not wholly lost, however. Nothing that has in itself the element of eternal good ever is. There are many who still hold aloft the torch they first lit at the altar before which Farrell stood as high priest.

Farrell was chiefly responsible for "bringing out" Mr. Cook and giving him his start in the varied and stormy life of politics. The latter at that time was a Republican of the most crimson complexion. His first speech -- at Eskbank, I fancy -- was of the incandescent and consuming order.

Most of us pass through that violently iconoclastic stage, and some of us never emerge therefrom, but remain firebrands, of the Mrs. Pankhurst description, to the end. Mostly, however, this stage corresponds politically with the measles period of childhood. Farrell's verdict on the volcanic Eskbank outburst was to the effect that if Cook had a gun placed in his hands he would cheerfully blow off all the

crowned heads in the world and chant a triumphant Te Deum over the last of the royal corpses.

In those days in Lithgow there used on Saturday evenings to be an open-air market just in front of Farrell's newspaper office. Farrell never troubled to lock the door. Why should he? Nobody was likely to steal type or three em quods. One market evening it was dismally wet, and business was at a discount. Next morning a knot of friends -- Farrell, with, I think, George Donald (brother of William, of that ilk, in Goulburn), Mr. Sheldrick (whom I have completely lost sight of), and myself assembled in the office to discuss matters in general in a quite discursive and unconventional manner. Farrell, with his feet on the counter, and a formidable pipe in full blast, happened to cast an eye floorward and espied a small case of luscious grapes which somebody on the previous night had been unable to dispose of and had utilized the lower shelf of the office counter as a species of strong-room for safe custody. Without hesitation Farrell lifted the case to the counter. "Here's luck," said he; and the company surely ate the lot in the intervals of argument. On Monday the owner turned up to find a case containing pips and empty skins only; but he got full compensation.

One Sunday evening the present leader of the Federal Liberal Party, who was a lay preacher in, I think, the Primitive Methodist persuasion, was down for a sermon; and the Farrell office contingent decided by formal resolution to go in a body and hear him expound. But Farrell, with his feet on the office table, as usual, got embarked on some recondite economic theory; and when we reached the church the sermon was in full career. We had more regard for the decencies of church order and discipline than to interrupt a preacher, even though a layman only, and a Nonconformist at that, midway in his discourse by tramping noisily into the building, and so, the evening being sultry, and the windows open to their widest extent, we stood outside and listened until Cook had rounded off his "lastly." Though we didn't say so in as many words, I fancy we all felt proud of our introspective friend, who has since become so famous in quite another walk of life. If these words should come under the notice of Mr. Cook they will, I imagine, be the first intimation that he once preached to others than those immediately under his eyes, in far-off days, when he had no dreams of a united Australia or of himself as one of the foremost figures therein.

One of my daughters in her days of girlhood was a guest of Farrell's, then domiciled in Dulwich Hill. Farrell, with his intense and undying love of the sea beaches and of children, took her for a trip to Manly. The day was an exceptionally stormy one, and in crossing the Heads the easterly gale caused the waves to roll in formidably high. I come of a sea-faring race. Both my father and grandfather, on the same side of the family tree, were in a small and unimportant way master mariners, a nautical term to describe those captains who navigated their own ships. It was therefore the most natural thing in the world that when next I met Farrell I should inquire how my daughter had taken her first view of the sea. Instantly came the quaint reply -- "She 'took it as read!" How whimsical the expression; and yet how could it have been more forcibly put that she had not been particularly thrown off her mental balance by her new experience.

Farrell was inexhaustibly prolific in such whimsicalities, and that column in his Lithgow journal headed "Rum and Cloves" simply overflowed with them. But there was never anything either vindictive or nasty in them. Farrell hardly seemed to recognize any place, so far as he was concerned, for such words in the language he was too good tempered, too charitably minded, too magnanimous, to use his gifts as some

do. Otherwise, with his genius for saving the one thing applicable he could have flayed an opponent alive with stinging epigrams. He could have slain a career with pungent witticisms. Farrell died as he had lived -- the friend of everybody, the enemy of none.

He was singularly devoid of that form of ambition which has at the end the prospect of big bank balances. The standpoint of the Pierpont Morgans and the Carnegie lay entirely outside the circle of his life and thought. The modern craze for heaping together much treasure was wholly foreign to him, and, above all things, he was superior to ordinary conventionalities.

This latter trait was most amusingly displayed when he purchased the Lithgow journal. There was running at the time, by aggravatingly curtailed instalment, a story through its columns. Somehow, the book from which the weekly chapters were taken had become lost. Farrell knew nothing about the earlier course of this melting romance and cared less. But a finish had to be made, and Farrell made it. To the horror of Lithgow he promptly hanged the hero, and the heroine speedily succumbed to unforeseen disasters. Lithgow, or that section which subscribed to the journal, could scarcely have been more shaken to its grimy centre if the tragedy had been in real life.

On one steamingly sultry morning, after Farrell had taken up his final residence at Dulwich Hill, he was engaged removing the grease and dust stains from the collar of a well-worn coat by means of benzine and a small brush. Stopping for an impressive instant in his quest, and with a merry twinkle in his eyes, he hazarded the wise opinion that benzine was "the sheet anchor of the lower middle class;" and then, without further parley, went on assiduously brushing. I fancy Farrell was correct in the wider interpretation of the benzine question. Did not Bobby Burns speak reverently and approvingly of the careful housewife who, with deft needle, "gars auld clothes look almost as weel's the new?"

Farrell had the gift of intuition -- given to some women -- the faculty of jumping to an accurate conclusion without any intermediate processes of logic and reasoning. He possessed, however, a capacity for rapidity and accuracy of reasoning, coupled with a deftness and lucid clearness of literary expression, seldom met with. When running his own paper in Lithgow, Farrell's editorials, especially on questions of economics, were models of closely linked argument, with an exceptional beauty of style. He was capable of making even "the dismal science" a "thing of beauty." His poetic gifts could not be wholly excluded from even the columns of the prosaic press.

Of all his contemporary poets Farrell seemed to have most regard for the work of Victor J. Daley, mainly because of the delicacy of his verse. The last volume of Daley is for the selfsame reason prominent on my book shelf. Farrell and Daley first met under unique and even memorable circumstances in Queanbeyan. Daley had drifted thither, swag on back, and found employment in a local tannery, turning over hides in a pit. Farrell was using pick and shovel in the work of digging the ground for the foundations of the brewery he was subsequently to be a partner in.

Were ever two poets found in such incongruous circumstances? Can we imagine Swinburne and Tennyson so employed and so meeting? The Queanbeyan twain often foregathered at the local pub and voluminously discussed literature over their beer, while the yokels wondered at the obsession of these two strangers who could discuss anything but the beer that was always on tap or the last race meeting.

Books! what were books? The couple must be somewhat lacking mentally! Later the brewery had a well-educated manager, but he couldn't comprehend Farrell one whit.

"He isn't worth his salt" was his conclusion.

"I saw him scribbling on the head of a cask, and looking over his shoulder. I found he was writing poetry!"

Farrell wrote "Jenny," a Rabelasian, Don Juan poem, in that fashion.

Farrell lost the instalments of "Jenny" through loaning them to friends who had not enough of the primitive virtue of honesty to return them.