

The Ant.

"Go to the Ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways and be wise."—Solomon.



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Comments.

FREEDOM OF CONTRACT.

THE endeavors of the Royal Commission on Strikes at Sydney to get a definition of that beautiful delusive phrase, "Freedom of contract," have resulted in a chaos of ideas eminently calculated to unseat the average intellect, and make the plain person of no particular mental frills go out into the wilderness and howl. The witnesses on the pastoralist and capitalistic side all take their customary superficial view of their dearty beloved theory, and speak of it as a blow for personal liberty and the rights of man. None of the lordly squatters have shown themselves capable of understanding that in society as at present constituted no man who has only his labor to depend upon for the support of himself and of his wife and children can enjoy the glorious freedom the Masters' Association professes to be so religiously devoted to; the extent of his freedom is to take the work the masters offer him under any conditions they like to impose, or starve, and enjoy the additional advantage of seeing his wife and children do likewise. If he is a member of a trade's union, the strength of unity becomes a fair cut off against the advantages enjoyed by the master, and the man in his turn can withhold his labor, and make conditions, sure of the moral and substantial support of his fellow-workers should the capitalist strive to impose unfavorable restrictions or to get the

best of their bargain. In giving this support his brother laborers make sacrifices, and he in response must expect to make sacrifices on their behalf. In this matter one man is as good as another, and the predisposition in capitalistic quarters to look upon the worker as an inferior creature designed by providence to obey and bear himself humbly and meekly before the master, must be entirely wiped out before the question can be fairly considered. Few people are insane enough to believe that the freedom of contract notion is the outcome of a high and honorable appreciation of man's equality on the part of the pastoralists—it is simply a fine-sounding, catchy war whoop, and means exactly the opposite of what it expresses. The masters do not pretend to stand by their spurious idea, the Employer's Union and Pastoralists' Association being glaring evidences of their apathy, the members of these leagues agreeing to abandon their individual freedom of choice to a certain extent for the benefit of the body; just as the shearer does in standing by his union. The employers have won the battle of opposing unions so far, simply because the employer does not blackleg, not being dependent on immediate action for his bread and butter. The Shearers' Union have an immensely wider field to cover, and the worker does blackleg, because he is more reckless than the master, and because it is more harder to convince him of the direction in which his true interest lies. The monopolists boss the situation for these reasons, but to pretend a virtue which they have not, and prate of freedom whilst aiming to maintain the autocratic rule of the master in the domain of industry, is simply bald hypocrisy and won't wash worth a brass button.

SHIELDS AND SPEIGHT.

THE chief objection Mr. Speight's friends of the press have to Mr. Shields' oratorical castigation of our particular railway Tite Baracade in the House the other night appears to be that it was not dignified. Mr. Shields did not maintain the superb solemnity and gentle debility so dear to the owlish conservative party, and therefore it is thought in respectable circles where every man is fat and every second man disguises his intellectual barrenness by maintaining an inhuman dignity and a perennial air of cold reserve, that the Minister had better have sat perfectly still and said nothing whatever about the matter. The fact that the speech did not evidence a wholesome respect for Mr. Speight as a railway expert and deep-seated reverence for him as a man and a brother, is held to detract from whatever force the oration might have displayed, and the magnate of rolling stock is affectionately assured that he is a martyr to the abuse of Parliamentary privilege, and that the people will love him all the better for what he has been compelled to endure. The trouble is Mr. Speight was not let down lightly, he was dropped with a dull sickening thud that made him see rockets, and as this is contrary to the manners of polite society and in violation of the respectful consideration humbugs should have for each other Mr. Shields' remarks are felt to be *infra dig* by the best people. Of course the simple masses who do not believe in introducing the amenities of Toorak's gilded salons into our rough and ready politics are satisfied that in hitting straight and hard, and often, the Minister has just about filled the bill, and performed the duties they expect of him without any absurd or unnecessary frill. The people of Victoria are heartily sick of Speight, and as Mr. Speight recognises the fact, but, being highly satisfied with his situation and his screw, refuses to peek up his bed and remove his personality from the service of this country without being violently hurled off the edge into the deep, dark sea, some tempestuous language is

felt to be excusable in this connection, and if the Minister had made his anti-commissioner speech in a humbler frame of mind and in a tone of mild and respectful expostulation, the people would in all probability have moved a vote of want of confidence in him, and have dismissed him without a character. Says one of Speight's apologists in an evening paper: "A weak man, wincing under such unfair, ungenerous treatment, would resign his position; but Mr. Speight is made of too stern stuff to do anything so foolish." That's it: Mr. Speight is not so foolish, he has been gifted by nature with a durable hide that it is difficult to pierce, and on which ordinary criticism falls like snowflakes on the pelt of a rhinoceros, and to call him a humbug without several additional adjectives is simply a waste of energy—he will have to be remonstrated with by special Act of Parliament and removed with a steam crane.

LAW AND DISORDER.

IT is much to be hoped the people will not permit themselves to be diddled out of that much needed reform, the consolidation of the legal professions. Justice, which should be the freest institution of the body politic, and whilst it is not the cheapest it can never be the freest, is under existing circumstances, comparatively inaccessible to a majority of the people, and thousands are willing rather to submit to imposition than seek redress and perchance ruination in the mysteries of our courts of law. The amalgamation of the two professions can only be the precursor of a series of sweeping reforms, and this intelligent democracy should never be content until it has entirely revolutionized the legal system, even if compelled to lose sight entirely of the precedents which are the lawyer's creed, and take a road of its own, aiming only at equity and simplicity. There is no argument that is not purely selfish in favor of the existing process whereby the man who wants the protection of his country's laws is compelled to pay one man to do the work and a second to supply a certain amount of jaw power, which power is rarely exceptional. After all, when one contemplates the stupendous riddle which we call the law, and finds one's mind bewildered by its appalling intricacies, much the same as after an earnest endeavor to comprehend omnipotence and eternity, what a feeble concession this seems that the people are demanding, and one is moved to wonder that they do not insist upon demolishing the whole institution and making a fresh start with a fair field and no favor. With years and years of building, increasing, patching and improving, adding laws upon laws, statutes upon statutes, we have built our judicial system into a maze of hopeless windings and bewildering intricacies, and the people are now weighted with a fearful and incomprehensible incubus, the grasp of which they dread as sorely as the tentacles of an octopus, and which makes reason travel in grooves and drags Justice in its wake with a chain. The man who employs solicitor and barrister and goes to law with a grievance would have an equal chance for his rights if the system of dispensing justice were based on a new principle and his barrister had to be a trained pugilist, and had to meet the learned bruiser for the defence, and fight the matter out in a ring according to rules made and provided, the case to go to the victor on points. This would not be much behind the existing system, unless which too often the victory depends more on the staying powers of the lawyer than on mere equity, and which fosters legal pique renowned for their science, holding big records, and reserved exclusively for the rich litigant by reason of the excessive prices put upon their services. Under such a system John L. Sullivan or Frank Slatin might take the place of Purves say, but the change would not materially affect results.