

# THE CANADIAN CLUB OF TORONTO.

(November 2, 1905.)

## The Colonial Conference.

BY JEROME K. JEROME.

Mr Jerome K. Jerome was the guest of the Club and spoke as follows:—

Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen,—I do not know whether they ever came over here,—the Gilbert and Sullivan operas,—but if they did some of you are perhaps old enough to remember one of them—"Patience"—and I think the poet in that opera—he is followed about by a bevy of young and beautiful girls—it is this meeting that has reminded me of that opera—(laughter)—and they asked him to read poetry and to go on talking poetry to them, and he reminded them that it was Saturday afternoon and getting on to two o'clock, and that he would like an afternoon off. (Laughter.) In the same way, gentlemen, I am going to ask you to let me have an afternoon off from what is supposed to be my usual business in life. What little ability I have to amuse I am just now **keeping carefully for the evening**—(laughter)—and the supply I feel is so very limited that I dare not give any of it away before, and besides that, gentlemen, it is a great relief for me occasionally to get away from what is supposed to be shop.

I have been told that you are quite willing to listen to anything at all, it does not matter what a man talks. (Laughter.) The great thing is that he talks. Now, we Englishmen have not many virtues, but one is that we are not fluent talkers. Now I propose to be serious, because I am told that you gentlemen are cheerfully prepared to hear both sides of a question, and that being so, and audiences of that kind being so rare to find in any country, it has occurred to me that you perhaps might allow me as an Englishman to speak on the other side of the question that is interesting we Englishmen and you Colonials at the present moment.

I refer, of course, to this question of protection which is coming up at the Colonial Conference next year in England, and merely as an outsider, as a man quite outside of politics, merely as an observer and one who knows something of the state of affairs and the state of life generally

in England, I would like to ask you gentlemen to consider the case very carefully, and when you are selecting delegates for that Conference I would like you to choose broad minded men, statesman-like men, who would be able to look at the thing from an Imperial point of view, and not merely from the Colonial point of view, because I do not think this point has been put to you Colonials at all, and I do not think you can grasp the state of things in England. I do not think you understand what poverty is as we understand it. I do not think you know that class of working men—it is a common class of working men in England—who have to live—if he is working and in receipt of wages he perhaps receives five dollars per week. The great mass do not make three dollars a week; they live on that, they pay heavy rent, and support families, and therefore it becomes a very serious question when they are asked on these poor wages to put their hands in their pockets and pay five or ten cents more per week for their living. There are two or three families living near me in a village in Oxfordshire of whom I made inquiries before I came away. Let me tell you this. I found that the average wages are three dollars a week—twelve shillings a week—and one man had six children and another five, and the other had thirteen. The man with thirteen children lived in a novel of four rooms, one of which was a kitchen and one was a sort of storehouse, a shed with the boards coming right down to the ground. No repairs had been done for him at all, and the whole thirteen slept in the two upper rooms. And they did this on twelve shillings a week.

That is not an exceptional case. There are tens and tens of thousands of these in England. And when you are going to ask them for the cause of the Empire to pay another shilling a week for their children's bread you are doing a dangerous thing, because this agitation has started a party in England, a party we don't want to listen to or hear from, but they are beginning to say, "If the Colonies are going to cost us something and make us pay more for what we buy, we would rather be without the Colonies." It is a dangerous party in England, it is a party dangerous to let talk to working men. And I want you to consider that, because all the thoughtful people in England are very keen and very anxious about this question of Empire, and to keep our Colonies close to us and to bind them closer is the great object of every thinking man in England. And therefore England would go to great length to meet any demand which you might express formally. If you went and said, "We really want this preference on food," I believe you would get it, but I believe it would be the beginning of the end of the Empire, because men would go among the working classes and say, "Your children are starving, although the farmers and laborers in Canada and Australia are already well off. You have to put your hands in your pockets and pay in order that their wages may be increased."

I do not like to say what the answer of the British working men would be in the long run. I have not seen it in your papers nor in the

English papers. And that is all I want to impress upon you, that when this question comes up to be considered you will send men to look at things for themselves, men who will not merely shut themselves up in their room with the advocates of protection and look for nothing else. Send over men who have initiative of their own, men of observation, men who can be trusted to find out the truth for themselves, and not take merely what they are told, men who go after the truth.

We Englishmen are not fluent talkers, and there is the end of that. (Applause.)

I thank you for the quiet courtesy with which you have listened to me, because you are not supposed to be friendly to this cause. Therefore I feel all the more grateful for your attention. I only have to thank you for your very cordial welcome to me. It is one of the joys of England that her people may go to almost any quarter of the globe and find Englishmen all around. It seems as if one could belt the globe and always find friends, Englishmen, and it is one thing that ought to make us proud of being Englishmen that we can always find our friends. I have certainly found a great many here to-day. It has given me great pleasure in talking to you about these things. Of course, one gets sentimental, and then one gets rambling and incoherent. But I think, as plain business men, as men of the world, you will understand these little feelings. It is really a great enjoyment to find Englishmen here and to find a welcome awaiting me, and, gentlemen, I thank you very much indeed for it. (Loud cheers.)

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