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EDITORIAL

CONGRESSIONAL GLEANINGS— OLD STYLE BLACKMAIL.

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THE word blackmail has acquired a meaning not originally attached to it. Literally, “black” “mail” means “payment in kind,” instead of payment in money, “mail,” which, being bright, was contrasted with the goods, referred to as “black,” paid for services. Accordingly “black mail” in its early conception, implied barter. Usage presently turned the term into one word, and, with the change, blackmail acquired a technical sense—the sense of payment in cattle for the service of finding and returning to their owner cattle that had strayed from the fold, or herd, into the highland brakes of Scotland.

The first transition of the term led to a second. Anxious to be kept in jobs, or, rather, anxious for the returns that the job yielded, some highlandmen made it a practice themselves to distrain cattle, thereupon to “find” the same, and drive them back to their owners, who then paid the officious “finder” the blackmail customary for his legitimate services. In this second sense “blackmail” carried with it the implication of extortion. It was from this second and peculiar sense that the word passed into its present meaning, the criminal act of threatening injury unless bought off. The speech of the Illinois Representative Charles E. Fuller, delivered on May 14 when the Sundry Appropriation Bill was before the House, justifies the conclusion that an appreciable number of Congressmen are at the highlandmen stage of “blackmail”—engaged in the occupation of themselves furnishing jobs to themselves in order to give a color of earning their salaries.

Representative Fuller touchingly made the point that the charge of some people to the effect that “Members of Congress waste their time sitting around doing nothing” was unjust. They did work, hard work, valuable work. He who doubted that could convince himself of his error by footing up the number of bills before the

Congress. “During the present Congress there had been introduced in the House 25,897 bills and in the Senate 8,219, making a total of 34,116”: these bills, rarely short, were often voluminous: the very bill then under consideration “contained 189 printed pages”: these had to be read, studied, disposed of: who could justly claim Congressmen were paid for doing nothing?—So spake the cattle distraining highlandmen of Scotland when their services were impugned.

The most important statement, requisite to the vindication of the Congressmen, Representative Fuller failed to make;—the guilelessness of the bills, the purity of their origin, their necessity. Was the omission an oversight?

Strike-bills, for one thing, are no unknown things. Quite otherwise and to the contrary. Only this year the Allds case turned up and, soon as disposed of, the lid was let down tight, lest the Alldses be found too numerous for “safe handling.” For another thing, the trick of getting up voluminous bills, merely intended to convey an idea of activity on the part of the legislator, is known well enough to have become a subject of public satire. The trick is, on the legislative field, of a piece with the scheme of the industrious quack country doctor, who gave the children of his patients a drink that threw them into fits, whereupon he was called in to cure the kids of the fit he had thrown them into. On the “legal profession” field, the trick is one that John Ruskin brilliantly exposed in the account of the lawyer whom he employed to draw up a simple document and who filled reams of paper with useless verbiage, thus, a la capitalism, “making something out of nothing.”

Our legislative halls, Congress leading, are highland brakes for our political blackmailers to ply their trade in.

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