

EDITORIAL

## BEN BUTLER'S MIGHTY JOKE.

By DANIEL DE LEON

“**T**HE whole idea of vested interests,” said Vice-President Marshall, “can be summed up by the story of the young lawyer who appealed to Ben Butler to have him admitted to the bar. ‘What are your qualifications?’ asked Butler. ‘I know all the statutes of the State of Massachusetts,’ said the young man. ‘Well, then,’ said Butler, ‘I’m afraid you won’t do. The Massachusetts Legislature might repeal all you know in twenty-four hours.’”

A deal more than “the whole idea of vested interests” is summed up by the story. It sums up the tremendous difference there is between Study and Cramming, between Thinking and Memorizing, between Knowledge and a Scrap-book, between Science and Ignorance.

The sight was seen during the days of Populism of men who could tell you the exact hour of the day when the “Bank of Venice demonetized silver in the Middle Ages”; the exact number of galleons of gold that were shipped to Spain from Peru; they could tell you to a tittle the mintage of England, of Germany, or of Holland; as to the United States, these people could recite, off-hand, to the minutest detail, what the average per capita of coin was in the land for the last fifty years—and yet these folks understood no more the economic principles of the Monetary Question than a baying poodle understands the astronomic principles according to which the moon crosses the sky.

In our own days we see similar sights going about in High Tariff and in Low Tariff human anatomies. What these anatomies do not know about the Dutch standard of sugar, or about the ad valorem duties on worsted goods, or about the differentials on alcohol, or about rebates on tobacco,—what they do not know about these minute details is not worth knowing; and yet any fly that riots on Dutch standard

sugar, any tick that hides its insect head in wool, every bacterium that swims in alcohol, every moth that crawls in the creases of the dried tobacco leaf—all and each of these have as much a conception of the economic laws that underlie tariffs as the High and the Low Tariff human anatomies above exhibited.

The point is admirably illustrated by Ben Butler's joke. Statutes stand to one another in the relation of figures. How disconnected figures are from one another is the experience of every proof reader. If the galley-proof read "nad" the proof-reader knows that the "a" and the "n" have been transposed, and the word is "and." If however the galley-proof reads "176," and the correct figure is "761," there is, in the error itself, nothing to indicate the typographical slip. So with statutes. Lord Chief Justice Coke said he would be ashamed of himself if he could not off-hand answer a question on the Common Law, and that he would be equally ashamed of himself were he to answer a question on the statutes without first reading the statute itself. The statutes enacted by Legislatures may be repealed by Legislatures. The lawyer who has stuffed his mind with statutes only has no "Knowledge" worth the name. The "Knowledge" he has is repealable any time. Otherwise would be his case if he had studied jurisprudence.

Ben Butler's joke is a mighty warning against confusing details, with principle. Details are valuable for practical work, principle is indispensable. He who knows naught of principle, be his brain ever so loaded with details, belongs to the category of the man of whom Voltaire remarked scathingly that "he has learned everything, except to think."

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official website of the Socialist Labor Party of America.  
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