

PAUL T. LAFLEUR ON "FRÉCHETTE."



IN the August number of the Atlantic Monthly appeared a lengthy article from the pen of one Paul T. Lafleur, entitled "A Poet of French Canada," the purpose of which is to usher Mr. Fréchette before the American reading public, as "the first landmark in the history of Canadian literature." The article fills twelve pages and gives a fairly correct estimate of the value of Fréchette's poetical achievements. This from a purely literary point of view. We infer from the merits of the paper—we have absolutely no other knowledge of the man—that Mr. Lafleur is a respectable authority in matters of taste and literary criticism; that, in fact, in the treatment of any subject with which he is well acquainted, he is likely to produce something readable and instructive. But unfortunately he is not satisfied to remain in the province of certain knowledge. He has excursive tendencies, and as might be expected, in his ramblings over unfamiliar ground he occasionally comes to grief.

Thus, in his study of Fréchette while he sticks to the main theme, the poet and his poetry, he appears at his best and proves himself well endowed with the qualifications of a good critic. But in tracing a genius for his poet through the past history of Quebec, he turns up another subject which, though thoroughly congenial to his pen is quite as thoroughly misconceived by his too fallible judgment.

An attempt to explain the relation of the Church to the French Canadian people, the nature, extent, and result of her influence over them, and the attitude of the people towards her and her ministers, is, or ought to be, serious enough work to merit a certain amount of preparation and conscientious investigation; but Mr. Lafleur has plainly despised these aids to success, and trusted entirely to the idle hearsay and tradition of ancient prejudice, or the resources of a lively imagination, for the trustworthiness of certain strange facts and statements which he unblushingly sets forth.

According to Mr. Lafleur the province of Quebec, which he emphatically describes as "almost the last stronghold" of the Church, is enjoying a Reign of Terror, of an unbloody nature, but otherwise, appalling in its results. Here are some of the evils under which he finds her groaning:

Throughout her length and breadth she is "priest-ridden" and controlled by an "unscrupulous hierarchy." The unfortunate Canadian has no alternative between the acknowledgment of "practical supremacy"—whatever that may be—and "a stern law of taboo which makes him an outcast among his own people who literally boycott him." The "grinding power of the Church" has impoverished the people. "Ecclesiastical tyranny of the most inflexible kind" prevails in the land. There is an "organized despotism" exercising "systematic oppression" and supporting "a policy of obscurantism." Finally, he tells us, and thereby adds insult to injury, that her great men, frightened at—the Lord knows what—all these big words possibly, "find their *safest* and *pleasanteest* activity (the italics are mine) in a region where the priest ceases to interfere."

Really when one comes to count up these horrors, it seems as if our friends in the neighboring province must be in a very bad way indeed.

But Mr. Lafleur's startling intelligence comes just a month too late. His monstrous charges against the Church in Canada were ably answered before they ever tasted printer's ink. In the July number of *The Catholic World*, a journal, by his own admission, not unknown to Mr. Lafleur, Rev. John Talbot Smith gave us "The Truth about the French-Canadians," and completely undermined the foothold of Mr. Lafleur and all who think as he does.

Fr. Smith understands what he writes about—a merit certain of his contemporaries would do well to emulate,—makes no attempt to pass off private opinions for infallible judgments, but furnishes a clear and concise statement of facts supported by tabulated statistics, which are simply unanswerable. We refrain from quoting him because any reader interested in the