

The Press and General Review

From the Wesleyan Times.

THE CONFERENCE DREAM—THE PEOPLE'S POSITION

A few weeks will make manifest what is the course which our ecclesiastical rulers have resolved to adopt. As yet, nothing has occurred on their part to induce the hope, that, instructed by the increasing and deepened hold which Reform principles have taken in the Connexion, the dominant party will assemble at Conference with the olive-branch of peace in their hand.—On the contrary, if the opinion of such men as Dr. Bunting and Mr. Atherton are to be considered as indicating the policy of the clique, the ensuing Conference will meet, deliberate, and close, holding as tight a hand over the people as if nothing was to be apprehended as the result of this agitation.

A general opinion appears to prevail in the Conference circles, that, if the preachers maintain their resolution to concede nothing to the People, that those members of the societies who are dissatisfied with "Methodism as it is" will, as a matter of course, secede, and then the Conference proceeding in its usual line of policy will have another and long period of repose.—The probable loss of some tens of thousands of members will not disturb their quiet. Willing enough will the clique be to part with fifty thousand souls, if thereby the dominant party shall retain unmolested hold of their ill-gotten and worse-used power. That gain would far more than counterbalance any loss. A secession of many thousands is by no means to be so dreaded by priests as their loss of spiritual power. This latter must be preserved at all hazards. Hecatomb upon hecatomb of the flocks must be immolated on the altar of priestly arrogance. Rather than give up one atom of their usurped dominion over Christ's heritage, the despots would make sad havoc of the flock. Looking forward to the ensuing Conference, the leading preachers seem intent on entrenched themselves in their present position of power, and appear ready to reconcile themselves to a numerical loss, which, in their estimation, all circumstances considered, will be an actual and satisfactory gain.

The preachers appear to have come to the conclusion that if they withstand all concession at Conference, the Reformers, after Conference, will secede in a body. More than this: the preachers wish this secession to take place, as, thereby, they will get rid of the men who render the position of the clique so disagreeable, and they will be left in possession of a power and domination which they will exercise over an unsuspecting and unresisting serfdom. Visions of future quiet are thus floating before their fancy. A new era of enthroned ease dawns upon their imagination. They are looking forward to a period of rule, when their power will be vastly consolidated, their assailants wholly withdrawn, and the people who remain under their ecclesiastical authority deterred, in a few instances, from attempting, and delighted, in the many, at the hopelessness of attempting any reform, when so organized and combined an effort during the past year, has failed to shake the power of the preachers.

It is not an uncommon thing for men to indulge in day-dreams. Castle-building in the air is not confined to any age, nor to any class. The seniors, as well as the juniors, exhibit this folly. Ecclesiastics, not less than seculars, perpetrate this vanity. Who will disturb the dreamer?

Though there be no concession on the part of the preachers next Conference, there will be no secession on the part of the people. It is a day-dream, and nothing else, on the part of the preachers, to conclude that the agitation will subside after conference, if they only put on a bold face in August. The thousands who have aroused themselves against Conference, tyranny, have taken up the question of Wesleyan Reform in earnest. Their aim is not to escape the tyranny. No. Their resolve is to destroy the tyranny. Had they merely desired to be free from the despotism of the Conference, by retiring from the body they had gained their object. A higher object is theirs. A nobler principle animates them. They are resolved to put down a priestism that exalts itself above Christ, and that is riding rough-shod over His inheritance. Their resistance to Conferential tyranny is as determined and invincible as was the spirit of the Protestants when they proclaimed, as their motto and watchword, "No peace with Rome."

The agitation, so far from ceasing at Conference, if that body separate without arranging terms of reconciliation with the people, will be fearfully fomented. The Reformers, conscious of their strength, and knowing that every week adds to their ranks, will not retire from a contest, to which allegiance to Christ, deference to the authority of inspiration, public opinion, and the liberties of the people, invite them. The Reformers will remain in the body another year, depend on it, asserting their privileges, appealing to their brother Wesleyans, and taking combined action to accelerate what, sooner or later, must come—Wesleyan Reform. The Conference is but dreaming—the dream will soon be broken up—when laying the flatteringunction to the soul, that, if the preachers hold out, till after Conference, the agitation will

then cease, the disaffected will then draw off. Draw off? Not they. The disaffected will increase in number. More energy and decision will characterize their counsels and their action. They will remain in the body, as goats and as thorns to the tyrants, who will find, to their dismay and horror, that they have reckoned too largely on the religious dislike of the people to agitation.

The deep dislike which our people have of agitation, is, in fact, much more than the rich man's purse, the Conference's stronghold. But the Conference will now find out, that, much as the people dislike agitation, they have a still deeper detestation of tyranny; and that, resolved on asserting their New Testament privileges, they are not about to retire from the field because, at the close of their first campaign, their standard is not wreathed with the laurels of victory. A second campaign will be opened.—The rights sought are worth a struggle. Pious men are finding out that they can be Reformers and yet retain their piety, as well as Wesley, Luther, or Paul. The Conference party must yield to the People their just rights, or prepare for a year of unexampled agitation. Woe to the Conference men that are depending on the purses of a few rich members! Those reservoirs are not perennial streams. Wealth is not the Church's strength. The affluent are not fond of long continued agitation, and especially when, in addition to their loss of ease, repose, and respect, they have to provide "the sinews of war." The Conference is resting on a foundation of sand in reposing upon the wealth of the Connexion. A thousand hearts are a surer defence than a thousand pounds. A thousand hearts are set against its despotism, for every one that opens a large purse in its support; and, while the resources of the wealthy will be draining, the resolution and decision of the many, intent on reform, will be growing in firmness and in power. The activity of a resolute people will put an end to the Conference dream, that the dissatisfied, draughting off, will leave the preachers in undisturbed possession of their ill-gotten and badly used power and absolutism.

THE FOURTH ESTATE.

Contributions towards a History of Newspapers and of the Liberty of the Press. By F. K. Hunt.

THE FOURTH ESTATE! It is a taking title, and worth a bookseller's two hundred pounds any day, provided always that the writer who undertakes to elucidate and apply that mystic phrase shall studiously abstain from exciting the disgust of the popular reader by teaching him aught that he does not already know, or fancy he knows. New knowledge, if it be really new knowledge, and other than the statement of new facts, which are little more than the means of new knowledge, requires thought and the exercise of discernment, than which there is nothing more abhorrent to the popular reader, unless it be the call which is occasionally made upon him by some obscure writer or other for a revision of his supposed knowledge, against such a proposition the popular reader utterly revolts, and pronounces the proposer of it to be a quack and a transcendentalist,—terms which he holds to be well yoked, if indeed they are not synonymous. Now Mr. Hunt, as we infer from the introductory chapter of his book, is a journalist, and, as such, must be fully aware of these curious truths in natural history, nor has he neglected to use his cogizance of them in the volumes before us. He has collected all the facts of English newspaper history which are required to constitute a general acquaintance with the subject; he has shown tact in giving the greatest prominence to those which, whether justly or unjustly, have attained the greatest notoriety, he has not forgotten that the readers to whom he chiefly addresses himself will consider a fact or a remark witty or noteworthy in proportion to the number of times they have met with it before. But when he has ventured beyond the transcription of facts and into the region of principles, it has been with cautious exclusions of novelty and of hinted doubt of the infallibility of the commonplaces concerning the might and worth of the newspaper.

We shall deviate somewhat from this method, and before presenting our readers with a summary of the useful and entertaining contents of "The Fourth Estate," we beg to enter a few queries as to the validity of certain widely diffused notions concerning the press generally, and the newspaper press in particular.

If, in the course of these remarks, the true worth and moral power of the press shall seem to be less insisted upon than those qualities which appear to us to render it in some respects the most deleterious ingredient of modern civilization, our readers must remember that the praises of this engine have been repeatedly proclaimed to all men by the press itself, which seldom misses an opportunity of sounding its own trumpet. But before we proceed to take, for the nonce, the unpopular side of the question, let us hear what sort of affirmations are commonly made by the defendant's counsel, who are chargeable, as we believe, not so much with direct misstatement of facts as with egregious special pleading. "The newspaper," says Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, "is the chronicle of civilization, the common reservoir into which every stream pours its living waters" (an unpleasant idea is here suggested, but let it pass), and at which every man may come and drink.

It is the newspaper which gives to liberty practical life, its perpetual vigilance, its unwearied activity; the newspaper is a daily and sleepless watchman, which reports to you every danger which menaces the institutions of your country, and its interests at home and abroad. The newspaper informs legislation of the public opinion, and it informs the people of the acts of legislature; and thus keeping up that constant sympathy and good understanding between people and legislators, which conduces to the maintenance of order, and prevents the stern necessity for revolution. The newspaper is a law-book for the indolent, a sermon for the thoughtless, a library for the poor." Another famous English novelist declares that "Newspapers are a link in the great chain of miracles which prove the greatness of England." The English opium-eater, with more depth and definiteness of meaning, writes,—"Much already has been accomplished, (by newspapers) more than people are aware, so gradual and silent has been the advance. How voiceless is the growth of corn! Watch it night and day for a week, and you will never see it growing; but return after two months, and you will find it all whitening for the harvest. Such, and so imperceptible in the stages of their motion are the victories of the press." Very eloquent, though we hope a little hyperbolic, are the anticipations of M. Lamartine:—"Before this century shall have run out, journalism will be the whole press, the whole human thought. Since that prodigious multiplication art has given to speech, to be multiplied a thousand fold yet, mankind will write their book day by day, hour by hour, page by page. Thoughts will spread abroad in the world with the rapidity of light—instantly conceived, instantly written, instantly understood at the extremities of the earth, it will spread from pole to pole. Sudden, instant, burning with the fervours of soul which made it burst forth, it will be the reign of the human word in all its plenitude, it will not have time to ripen, to accumulate into a book—the book will arrive too late; the only book possible from day to day is a newspaper." May we be kept from a consummation so devoutly to be dreaded! Finally, and with as much eloquence as, and certainly with more reason, than most of the eulogists of the newspaper, Mr. Hunt writes.—"The journal gives us day by day the experience of the world as it exists round about us, ready to avouch the truth of the journalist—gives us day by day and week by week the experience of the whole world's doing for the guidance of each individual living man. It is a great mental camera, which throws a picture of the whole world upon a single sheet of paper. But though a great teacher and an all-powerful instrument of modern civilization, there is no affectation of greatness about it. The newspaper is the familiar of all men, of all degrees, of all occupations. If it teaches, it teaches imperceptibly. It has no pompous gown or scholastic rod to abash or to control, but prepares itself, and is admitted freely and at once, to a world wide intimacy with all kinds and conditions of people. For the idle it is a friendly gossip; to the busy it shows what business is on hand; for the politician, it reflects the feelings of the party, for the holiday-maker, it talks about new plays, new music, and the last exhibition. Its ample page is full of the romance of real life equally with the facts of real life. The types that to-day tell how a king abdicated or a good man died, tell to-morrow the price of logwood or of tallow. As they stand side by side, those tall columns of words show us the hopes of the sanguine and the sufferings of the unfortunate; they hang out the lure of the trader who would sell his wares, and of the manager who would fill his theatre; shoulder by shoulder are the reports of regal and noble festivities, and lists of bankrupts and insolvents; and in as many paragraphs we find linked the three great steps of a generation—the births, marriages, and deaths. No wonder, then, that whilst the world grows tired of orators, and weary of the mimic stage, it should be more and more faithful in its reference to the intellectual familiar that drops, as De Tocqueville says, the same thought into ten thousand minds at the same minute; or more attached to the friendly broad-sheet, that reflects truly and promptly the changing, but ever-exciting scenes of the great drama of real life." Mr. Hunt, we see, wisely rests the chief value of the journal upon its capacity as a chronicler of outward facts; it is in this capacity that we are least inclined to quarrel with it. And yet the injury which has been done, and is now being done, to the immediate interests of society, by the avidity wherewith this chronicle, considered merely as a chronicle, is received; and the consequent distaste for sources of sound and permanently worthy information, is scarcely calculable. The newspaper is become "something to all men, and to some men all," and the fact of the prodigious majority of those to whom it is all, is one which we may rather lament than question. Who can doubt that the present ominous oblivion, among the people, of truths which are the very alphabet whereby we read the mystery of life, is chargeable, in connexion with deficient means of public education, upon that "haste to be rich" which shall not be without its guilt, whether the wealth be that of lucre or of idle knowledge? What are the characteristics of the newspaper reader, he to whom the newspaper is not only something but all?

Let the ungracious portraiture be executed with as little expense of our own spleen as possible. "You must have observed," says the Spectator, "that men who frequent coffee-houses and delight in news, are pleased with everything that is matter of fact, so it be what they have not heard before. A victory, a defeat, are equally agreeable to them. The shutting of a cardinal's mouth pleases them at one post, the opening of it at another. They are glad to hear that the French Court is removed to Marli, and are afterwards delighted with its return to Versailles. They read the advertisements with the same curiosity as the articles of public news; and are as pleased to hear of a piebald horse that is strayed out of a field near Islington, as of a whole troop that have been slain in any foreign adventure. In short, they have a relish for everything that is news, let the matter of it be what it will; or, to speak more properly, they are men of a voracious appetite, but no taste." Had the writer lived in our day, when the characteristics of the class in question have been developed by an additional century of a vigorous life, the sketch would have borne a more bitter air. Indeed, we find a far more serious estimate of the particular evil in point in a number of the Freeholder, at a time when the sources of the infection were as yet almost limited to the English metropolis. "There is scarce any man in England, of what denomination soever, that is not a free thinker in politics, and hath not some particular notions of his own by which he distinguishes himself from the rest of the community. Our island, which was formerly called a nation of saints, may now be called a nation of statesmen. Almost every age, profession, and sex among us has its favourite set of ministers and scheme of government. Our children are initiated into factions before they know their right hand from their left. They no sooner begin to speak but Whig and Tory are the first words they learn. They are taught in their infancy to hate one-half of the nation; and contract all the violence and passion of party before they come to the use of their reason."

Of all the ways and means by which this political humor hath been propagated among the people of Great Britain, I cannot single out any so prevalent or universal as the late constant application of the press to the publishing of state matters. Nor do we lack witnesses of a yet remoter date to prove that we are raising no new alarm. When Dr. John North, whose life we quote from, "was at Jesus College, coffee was not of such common use as afterwards, and coffee-houses were but young. At that time, and long after, there was but one kept by one Kirk. The trade of news also was scarcely set up; for they had only the public Gazette, till Kirk got a written New-Letter, circulated by one Muddiman. But now the case is much altered; for it is become a custom, after chapel, to repair to one or other of the coffee houses, (for there are divers), where hours are spent in talking, and less profitable reading of newspapers, of which swarms are continually applied from London. And the scholars are so greedy after news (which is none of their business) that they neglect all for it; and it is become very rare for any of them to go directly to his chamber after prayers, without doing his suit at the coffee-house, which is a vast loss of time." The strong and sober muso of Crabbe, dedicated an entire poem to this most unpoetical of subjects, the Sunday paper occupying a conspicuous figure in his general censure—

"No changing reason makes their number less,
Nor Sunday shines a sabbath for the press!
Then lo! the sainted monitor is born,
Whose pious face some sacred text adorn:
As artful sinners cloak the secret sin,
To veil with seeming grace the guile within;
So moral essays on his front appear,
But all his carnal business in the rear;
The fresh-coin'd lie, the secret whisper'd last,
And all the gleanings of the six days past.
With these retired, through half the Sabbath-day,
The London loungeer yawns his hours away.
To you all readers turn, and they can look
Pleased on a paper who abhor a book;
Those who ne'er designed their Bible to pursue,
Would think it hard to be denied their news,
Sinners and saints, the wisest with the weak,
Here mingle tastes, and one amusement seek."

We should not have to search far in order to discover other censures as strong and as much to the purpose as these are; but they suffice to shew that the broaching no here, in the foregoing and the following remarks.

Newspaper reading in excess is so common a form of mental debauchery that sober people have almost forgotten to regard it as an evil.—Let us beg the attention of such persons to an enumeration of a few of the most startling moral symptoms of the present day, and leave it for them to judge whether we are far wrong in attributing those symptoms mainly to the inevitably tremendous national influence (whether for immediate good or ill) of the newspaper press.

Into a man of an impatient stomach, we are divinely assured, that wisdom shall not enter.—Is there any more widely apparent evil on the face of the existing generation than this of an impatient stomach?—a mental digestion that rejects all wholesome nutriment, and perpetually craves excitements which do but hasten its utter destruction. Compared with the feverish glow which attends the continual indulgence of impertinent curiosity, the gentler warmth accompanying the reception of noble knowledge seems tri-