

MONTREAL LIFE.

18-19 Board of Trade . . . Montreal.
28 Front Street West . . . Toronto.
109 Fleet Street, E.C. . . London, Eng.

MONTREAL AND TORONTO, FEBRUARY 2, 1900.

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LIFE IN A LOOKING-GLASS.

DISGUISE the fact as they may, the result of the bye-elections in Sherbrooke, Winnipeg and Lotbiniere must have been about as pleasant for the Liberal leaders to swallow as a dose from a phial marked "Poison" to a person who can read. There are, doubtless, many Liberals who cannot read the portentous word on the bottle from which the party has just been forced to quaff. But the leaders are not so ignorant, and, although they may smile and say it was as pleasant a draft as a schooner of lager on a hot day, in their hearts they know that the dose means sure death, or, at least, a dangerous illness, unless an antidote be speedily obtained. When the Conservative party, disorganized and discredited as it has been since the elections of 1896, can administer such defeats to the party in power as those we have recently witnessed in both the Federal and Provincial arenas—notwithstanding the immense prosperity of the country—it is certain that the average elector must be far from satisfied with the manner in which the Liberals have been conducting themselves. Doubtless, the election of Mr. Ed. Martin in Winnipeg and Mr. Fortier in Lotbiniere was secretly even more disconcerting to Sir Wilfrid and his colleagues than the result in Sherbrooke. It is bad enough to have war outside the camp, but when war breaks out within, where will it end? Messrs. Martin and Fortier both go to Ottawa as nominal supporters of the Administration, but their attitude is really that of discontented brethren. They wish to reform the Reform Government. They will reinforce Mr. R. L. Richardson and other members who are disposed to make trouble, because the Liberal party has failed to do some things it promised to do, and has done some other things it promised not to do. They will increase the number of discordant elements within the party, and their adverse criticisms and votes will impress the popular mind as no amount of Opposition thunder and lightning could do.

OUTSIDE the circles of professional politicians, who either have no convictions or are too crafty to state them, there is a growing feeling that Sir Wilfrid Laurier is a poor apology for a leader and can only be a source of increasing weakness to the Liberal party. The sheen of his silk hat and the creases of his trousers are faultless; that stereotyped smile is a rather pleasant thing for deputations to run up against, at giving the glad hand to everybody and everything the man who despised knighthood, but accepted it, is an adept. But otherwise Sir Wilfrid is hardly a success. He has the lofty visions of a scholar and gentleman, but when he comes down to practical politics and the task of ruling a great party, his personality is about as impressive as a clam's. The other members of the Cabinet, in the parlance of the lacrosse field, "play rings around him." Is it any wonder that half the time the Premier is not sure of the policy of the party he is alleged to lead, and flounders about, forever trying to square what he expected would be the course of the Cabinet with what it has really been. Canada never before had such a weak-backed personage at the head of her affairs as Sir Wilfrid has time and again shown himself to be. Sir John A. Macdonald, with all his pleasantries, was always "it" in his party councils. Mackenzie, Abbott, Thompson and Bowell were none of them strong, all-round leaders, but their followers knew where they stood; and if there were rows in the camp in their time, these were due to the fact that the Premiers named had opinions of their own and were not blown to and fro every time a colleague whistled at them.

BUT weak as the Liberal party is becoming under the Premiership of an invertebrate figurehead, it is doubtful whether the country is really anxious for a change unless a radical improvement be made in the personnel of the Opposi-

tion front row. Many Conservatives do not care two straws for the self-constituted leaders of their party in Parliament. There is a feeling that the party which still carries Messrs. Montague and Haggart on top of the bandwagon is not worthy of confidence. These and other unpopular elements will have to be got rid of before the electors will seriously feel inclined to give the Conservatives another chance. People are sick and tired of the name and platform methods of Foster. He has never justified the hopes that were entertained about him; there is a feeling abroad that he is not a man of deep conviction or much sincerity; and he has a fashion of assuming in his speeches that his hearers are all little boys learning their lessons, that is extremely distasteful. Sir Charles Tupper is gaining ground in popular favor. People are commencing to realize that he was over-abused in the campaign of 1896, when The Globe cleverly worked up a hoghead of lather out of some very small pieces of soap. To some extent there has been a change of heart towards Sir Charles, Sr. As for Sir Charles, Jr., the worst charges that can be brought against him are rashness and pig-headedness—a very rare combination. There is no question of his ability and honesty.

BY far the most hopeful leader for the Conservative party would be Hugh John Macdonald, could he be prevailed upon to leave the narrow field of Manitoba politics in which he has proved his capacity and take charge of the party his father led with such great success. But it is doubtful that Hugh John would feel justified in deserting the plough to which he has set his hand. The future may bring about changes, but for some years the son of the Great Commoner will probably remain at the head of the Government he has just formed. In the meantime the Federal Conservatives will have to worry along with their present leaders, their only chance of success being in the blundering of the Government and the growing dissensions under the Premiership of a man who is too weak to say either "yes" or "no" until someone has given him the tip.

JUST after the outbreak of the war, Prof. Goldwin Smith remarked to me, in the course of a general conversation, that one of the immediate results of the struggle would almost certainly be a falling off in book reading and an increase in newspaper reading. Although there are no statistics available in support of Prof. Smith's prediction, it seems to be borne out by the avidity with which the weekly and monthly periodicals have seized upon war articles. These papers, in order to compete with the daily press, which is filled with nothing but the war, have been compelled to meet the latter on its own ground and give the public the only thing it cares to read about. The uncertainties of the campaign have produced a strange unrest in the popular mind. People cannot settle themselves to the enjoyment of serious reading. The war will flit across their consciousness like a fearful but fascinating spectre. The daily papers know what the public wants, and their columns are filled day after day with news and what passes for news, from the front, with gossip about generals and high officials, and with belated accounts of engagements. The more sober periodicals have been compelled, in self-preservation, to follow suit, and it may be inferred that the publishers of books, being unable to adjust themselves so readily to the popular fancy, have suffered the penalty of circumstances over which they had no control. "In time of war," said Prof. Smith, "the popular mind craves excitement, and the reading matter of most people becomes the newspapers and books that excite rather than instruct or elevate." It would be interesting to know whether the public libraries have experienced a falling off in patronage since the war began.

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