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dead, the old-fashioned High is perhaps better represented than any other. Perhaps this arises from the conservative disposition that I have already referred to. It must not be forgotten that the Americans received their Orders through the high and dry Episcopal Church of Scotland of a hundred years ago, and, I suppose, not only the Orders, but something of the spirit of the body through which they were obtained, remains to-day. But the hope for the American Church lies mainly in her moderate and comprehensive adherents both lay and clerical, and I rejoice to say they are many. Such men had much to do with bringing about the present Mission, and by the efforts of such mainly, I believe, will this sort of work be carried on. I do think, however, that amongst men of all parties there is a deep and earnest desire for an increase of spirituality, and far more of really vital godliness. It was this, more than the action of any party or of any individuals, that rendered possible that unique retreat at Garrisons, and that most remarkable Mission at New York.

In a subsequent paper, by the kind permission of the Editor, I hope to give some further impressions and experiences of my four months' tour.

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Art. VI.—PUBLIC OPINION.

"*WHEN we know that the opinions of even the greatest multitudes are the standards of rectitude, then*" (and not till then) "*I shall think myself obliged to make those opinions the masters of my conscience.*" These are the words of the greatest of English political writers, Edmund Burke. And it is my object in discussing public opinion to show that however useful it may be for many purposes, it is an unsafe guide for our own individual thoughts and conduct.

What is the analysis of public opinion? It is made up of the impressions and wishes of a multitude of men and women, very few of whom are better informed or have means of making a wiser judgment than ourselves. If all this immense series of units were perfectly independent, fair, unbiased, and impartial, public opinion would be a more trustworthy witness. But the great mass of mankind delight in having their opinions made for them, and in repeating them from mouth to mouth. Here is a fatal point. This tendency is the opportunity for those who are most determined, most selfish, most one-sided, most unscrupulous. Their voice is

heard most loudly and most repeatedly; and loudness and repetition go for much in obtaining credence, acceptance, and adherence. Statements frequently made with confidence and plausibility are generally believed. The majority of men have not time to examine them, or indeed have many of them the faculty or education for distinguishing the true from the false. And the other side, the advocates of truth, have not the wish to be so loud or to repeat so frequently. Thus the determined, the selfish, the one-sided, and the unscrupulous gather a knot of supporters round them; what they say obtains weight by every additional number; their bold statements become widely believed; and at last the majority of the community is imposed upon, deceived, and misled.

Take, for example, a recent great political change, which, happily, we may now discuss with calmness and impartiality. I mean the giving of the vote to the agricultural labourers. Apart from party politics, no sensible man can for a moment suppose that it was a wise thing to hand over the fate of India, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Newfoundland, the Dominion of Canada, the countless islands of the sea, the trade and commerce of Great Britain, and all our delicate relations with foreign countries, on which the peace and prosperity of the world depends, to a set of men who, whatever may be their domestic virtues, and their kindly human qualities, are sadly ignorant on all these great subjects, and indeed on every topic of political and imperial importance. Now, what was the course of public opinion on this immense question? I observed its birth and progress from the very beginning, and I had, I think, a fair opportunity of forming a judgment. It began on the outskirts of the towns. The boundaries of the Parliamentary boroughs were fixed, but the growth of population could take no notice of them. It happened in almost every borough that on one side of a street men were living who had the vote, and on the other side those who had not. Now, the natural and reasonable course to remedy this anomaly would have been to establish a standing judicial tribunal which should from time to time enlarge the Parliamentary boundaries so as to include the new accretions of the town population. The agricultural labourers were not pressing for the vote, and the question of giving it to them could well have waited until a generation had grown up who had been educated under better auspices than the last. But there was a certain set of politicians whom this did not suit. They had in view tremendous radical and social changes, and they knew that they could not carry these changes by means of the old electorate. They wanted a new instrument, which should owe its existence to them, and be their willing and

obedient tool. This view was openly and avowedly held up by them before crowded popular audiences when they were advocating this enormous change. It was with this object that they took hold of the grievance on the boundaries of the borough, and stirred up the question of the agricultural labourers' vote. They spoke very loudly and very often. At last people began to say that the thing was in the air, that the change must come, and that it could not be helped. Nobody particularly wished it, except those who were thirsting for a revolution to be worked out through this new instrument; but they began to believe that the thing was inevitable. Public opinion had been evoked by loudness and by repetition, and the majority of the community allowed themselves to be guided by it. "Opinion," says Horace Smith, the English humourist, "is a capricious tyrant, to which many a freeborn man willingly binds himself a slave."

Or take the case of the Claimant. That is a still more startling example of the uncertainty of public opinion as a guide, because there was absolutely no object in adopting the false opinion and rejecting the true. Here was a man who actually did not know the names of the venerable lady whom he claimed as his mother. Her initials were H. F., and he hazarded a guess in Court that these initials represented the names Hannah Frances. He had omitted to inform himself beforehand that the names were very unusual, in fact French—Henriette Félicité. Here was a man again, not knowing a single word of French, yet supposed to be identical with a youth who had been a skilful and accomplished French scholar. Yet at one time there is little doubt that if the whole kingdom had been polled he would have been declared by a very large majority to have made out his case. The fact is that the mass of the people recognised him as one of themselves, the butcher of Wapping; but by a curious confusion and inconsistency—which is a frequent characteristic of popular judgments—they wished, on this very account, to make him out to be the Baronet of Tichborne.

"While I am ready," says Niebuhr, "to adopt any well-grounded opinion, my inmost soul revolts against receiving the judgment of others respecting persons; and whenever I have done so I have bitterly repented of it." "Opinion," says Euripides, "O opinion! How many men of slightest worth hast thou uplifted high in life's proud ranks!" "In the mass of human affairs," writes Tacitus, "there is nothing so vain and transitory as the fancied pre-eminence which depends on popular opinion without a solid foundation to support it." How often some such reflection as this must

have occurred to the impostor as he worked in Portland Gaol, and remembered that his legal counsel had actually been returned to the House of Commons because he had supported his claims!

I have stated that the fosterers of public opinion are not always disinterested. I should like to call in a close observer of human nature, William Cowper, in evidence on the point. He is speaking of the perversity of the man who has fallen a victim to error:

> First appetite enlists him, truth-sworn foe;
> Then obstinate self-will confirms him so.
> Tell him he wanders; that his error leads
> To fatal ills; that, though the path he treads
> Be flowery, and he sees no cause of fear,
> Death and the pains of hell attend him there:
> In vain! the slave of arrogance and pride,
> He has no hearing on the prudent side,
> His still-refuted quirks he still repeats;
> New-raised objections with new quibbles meets,
> Till, sinking in the quicksand he defends,
> He dies disputing, and the contest ends,
> But not the mischiefs! They, still left behind,
> Like thistle-seeds are sown by every wind.
> Thus men go wrong with an ingenious skill,
> Bend the straight rule to their own crooked will;
> And, with a clear and shining lamp supplied,
> First put it out, then take it for a guide.
> Halting on crutches of unequal size,
> One leg by truth supported, one by lies;
> They sidle to the goal with awkward pace,
> Secure of nothing—but to lose the race.

Nor is public opinion at all more trustworthy as a leader in matters moral and religious. Who can forget, for instance, that but for the heroic courage and unswerving loyalty to Holy Scripture displayed by Athanasius, the Christian world might long have remained in the dry bewildering desert of Arianism? Here once more the wishes and impulses of the lower nature interfere. Listen to Cowper again:

> Pleasure admitted in undue degree
> Enslaves the will, nor leaves the judgment free.
> 'Tis not alone the grape's enticing juice,
> Unnerves the moral powers and mars their use;
> Ambition, avarice, and the lust of fame,
> And woman, lovely woman, does the same.
> The heart, surrendered to the ruling power
> Of some ungoverned passion every hour,
> Finds by degrees the truths that once bore sway,
> And all their deep impressions, wear away:
> So, coin grows smooth, in traffic current passed,
> Till Cæsar's image is effaced at last.
> The breach, though small at first, soon opening wide,
> In rushes folly with a full-moon tide,

Then, welcome errors, of whatever size,
To justify it by a thousand lies,
As creeping ivy clings to wood or stone,
And hides the ruin that it feeds upon;
So sophistry cleaves close to, and protects
Sin's rotten trunk, concealing its defects.
Mortals, whose pleasures are their only care,
First *wish* to be imposed on, and then are;
And, lest the fulsome artifice should fail,
Themselves will hide its coarseness with a veil.
Not more industrious are the just and true
To give to Virtue what is virtue's due,
The praise of wisdom, comeliness, and worth,
And call her charms to public notice forth,—
Than Vice's mean and disingenuous race
To hide the shocking features of her face.
Her form with dress and lotion they repair,
Then kiss their idol, and pronounce her fair.

You see that the first great weakness inherent in public opinion, its want of disinterestedness, clings to it and shows itself on whichever side it turns; whether towards politics, or social questions, or matters of fact, or things moral or religious. Nor is this dissection of public opinion at all new. It is so universally recognised among all wise men alike, that we cannot but wonder that any of us still continue to attach much importance to what is thought by men in the mass. One of the greatest of English thinkers, Bishop Butler, used constantly to remind himself that a whole nation might become insane on some particular point; that is, that it might lose the balance of its mind, and become the victim of some delusion. The wisest of French writers, Pascal, held public opinion in much the same estimation: "that queen of error, whom we call fancy and opinion," he wrote, "is the more deceitful because she does not deceive always; she would be the infallible rule of truth if she were the infallible rule of falsehood." "A statesman," says Julius Hare very acutely, "should follow public opinion, doubtless, but only as a coachman follows his horses—having firm hold on the reins and guiding them." "Public opinion," said the American statesman Seward, "is a capricious sea; whoever attempts to navigate it is liable to be tossed about by storms." "He who has no opinion of his own," wrote the German poet Klopstock, "but depends on the opinion and taste of others, is a slave."

But there is another point about public opinion which we should do well to keep in mind. And that is, that even those who are disinterested and unbiased seekers after truth have extreme difficulty in getting at the facts. Those of my readers who have read the charming and most interesting memoirs of Mr. Greville will remember what he says about history. "The

facts," he remarks, "are hardly ever known. What is accepted is some conventional version of the facts; this version becomes popular, and when, long afterwards, the real facts may chance to come out, the accepted version has become so deeply ingrained that it cannot be uprooted." Mr. Greville, in short, believes from his own inner experience, gathered in the very heart of councils and cabinets, that history hardly ever represents things as they actually happened. If all were known, the verdict would in most cases be very different. Some great men have been of precisely the same opinion. "All history is a lie," said Sir Robert Walpole, the Prime Minister. "There is no truth in history," said Frederick the Great. "What is history," asked Napoleon I., "but a fable agreed upon?" "History is a compendium of uncertainties," says an American writer, Edward Day. "What are our pretended histories?" asks Everett; "fables, jest-books, satires, apologies; anything but what they profess to be." "Most historians," said Voltaire, "take pleasure in putting into the mouths of princes what they have neither said nor ought to have said." "There is truth in poetry," says Prentice, another writer from the United States, "but history is generally a lie." "All history," says Dr. Croly, an English ecclesiastic, "is but a romance, unless it is studied as an example." "The prodigious lies," says the illustrious Nonconformist Richard Baxter, "which have been published in this age in matters of fact, with unblushing confidence, even where thousands or multitudes of eye and ear witnesses know all to be false, doth call men to take heed what history they believe, especially where power and violence affordeth that privilege to the reporter that no man dare answer him or detect his fraud."

And if this be the case in the calm and deliberate investigations of history, what can we expect from those hurried, hasty, midnight, irresponsible and nameless compilations which we read every morning in our newspapers? What reason have we for supposing them to be more worthy of implicit belief and obedience? It is not our present purpose to consider the many amazing obligations which we owe to the daily Press; all I wish to maintain is that we may rightly look to newspapers for the materials from which we may form our judgment, but to take our judgment or opinions ready-made from them without further investigation is in the highest degree unsafe and delusive. We might as well put our conscience into the keeping of a priest. The same step would be taken in each case; the original choice of a newspaper, the original choice of a priest. Yet how commonly, almost universally, is this done! A man takes in some particular journal, reads it at breakfast, and for the rest of the day enunciates and repeats

the opinions which he hastily gathered from what was in the beginning hastily written. The common people have almost a superstition in this matter; what they find written in a book or a newspaper they think must necessarily be true. This gives the owners of newspapers the most enormous power. I do not say the writers for the Press, for they write according to the opinions of the owner, their employer, and know well enough that other opinions would not be admitted. Greville describes the most arrogant man in England, at the date of 1847, the first Lord Durham, the great coal-owner, coming humbly to the editor of the *Times*, on behalf of King Leopold of Belgium, to beg them to put in a more favourable article after one which had been disparaging. He relates also how the *Morning Chronicle*, which had been the willing slave of Lord Palmerston in all the surprises of his foreign policy, was one day sold by its proprietor, Sir John Easthope, to the followers of Sir Robert Peel; and though Sir John Easthope tried to bargain for its continued support of Palmerston, this was flatly refused, and lo and behold the *Morning Chronicle* suddenly became the bitter opponent of the Ministry which it had been advocating. And in another place he writes of the very uncertain and incalculable influence and action of newspapers in the following words, which are no less true in 1886 than they were in 1848:

> It is a great evil, that while education is sufficiently diffused to enable most people to read, they get, either from inclination or convenience, nothing but the most mischievous publications, which only serve to poison their minds, to render them discontented, and teach them to look to all sorts of wild schemes as calculated to better their position. The best part of the Press (the *Times*, for instance) seldom finds its way to the cottages and reading-rooms of the lower classes, who are fed by the cheap Radicalism of the *Weekly Dispatch* and other journals, unknown almost to the higher classes of society, which are darkly working to undermine the productions of our social and political system. The lessons of experience which might be so well taught by the events now passing in France and elsewhere (in 1848, the celebrated year of revolutions), are not presented to the minds of the people in a manner suggestive of wholesome inferences; but, on the contrary, they are only used as stimulants and for purposes of misrepresentation and perversion.

The helplessness of even an intelligent mind which had been accustomed to derive its opinions wholly from a newspaper, when suddenly deprived of its accustomed guidance, is illustrated in an amusing way by a personal reminiscence. One of my family, in the early part of this century, married a landowner in a county of Scotland which was somewhat remote. The laird complained to my father one day, when my father was paying him a visit, that from reading only one newspaper he was afraid that he only saw one side of the question, and might be growing narrow-minded. My father

said that this might easily be remedied. He had only to tell his newsagent to send him a different daily paper every day in the week, and he would soon have plenty of opportunity of becoming more impartial. For a few weeks the laird tried the experiment, but at the end of that time, from having been accustomed implicitly to follow his leading article, and having now to follow a different leading article and a different view for each day, he found that his political faculty had fallen into such a state of confusion, that he hastily and gladly relinquished the scheme.

In this brief and slight essay I have touched upon these points: That public opinion is seldom disinterested; that it hardly ever has the real facts of the case before it; that even history is but a conventional representation of what is supposed to have taken place; that even the best part of the daily Press is written in advocacy of some particular view or line of policy.

The upshot is very simple. If we wish well to the commonwealth, we must none of us accept our opinions from sources tainted by party and faction. It is one of our plainest and most elementary duties to question every statement until it is proved. That is the only possible way of arriving at the truth amidst such clouds of habitual misrepresentation and hasty assertion. I am not now, of course, referring to religious truth, because that stands on a very different footing as the mature growth of centuries, testified by masses of every kind of evidence. I am referring to the daily events and occurrences of our time and nation, about which we as citizens are called upon to make up our minds. It is well, then, never to take anything at secondhand. Next, rigorously suspect everything which comes from an atmosphere of party. It is indispensable carefully to sift the facts. As intelligent men we must have fixed broad irrefragable principles of our own, by which everything may be tested. It is difficult, but it is necessary, to free ourselves from passion, prejudice, predilection and bias. And lastly, when we have formed our own opinions of daily events and contemporary movements, we must not be so conceited as to believe ourselves inspired; we must be open to reasonable criticism and correction. If we adhere loyally and manfully to some such system as this, I believe that the opinions of even the humblest of us will be valuable contributions towards the solution of even the most momentous questions.

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