

## FORTY YEARS AGO.

Edwin L. Godkin's Newspaper Reminiscences—Greeley and the Tribune—The Bennett Innovation.

Edward L. Godkin, in a recent issue of the New York Evening Post, relates some very entertaining stories of the ante-bellum days. He arrived in America in the midst of the excitement of the presidential campaign of the fall of 1856.

"The excitement was tremendous," said Mr. Godkin, "greater than I could at first realize. The night of the day on which I landed, I attended a Fremont meeting in the old Academy of Music, at which the Hutchinson family sang songs about freedom, which were rapturously applauded in the intervals between speeches that astounded me by their heat and extravagance. But in a few days I became aware that themes were under popular discussion which had never before been discussed popularly—the rights and wrongs of slavery, the equality of man, the provisions of a written constitution, the position of leading public men on questions which were half moral and only half political or legal. Nothing else was talked of. I went one night to a thronged meeting at Tammany Hall, which was addressed by a southern senator, whose name I forget, but I was struck by the fact that he seemed to have no answer to the northern arguments except denunciation of the abolitionists, and he brought down the house by the assertion that every one of those present 'would be the better of a good nigger to wait upon him.' To my preconceived notions of senatorial dignity this was a good deal of a shock. I got more light from hearing Mr. Carl Schurz, who was then just beginning his political career, and I think, but am not sure, that I heard at the same time Abraham Lincoln. He was not as yet a sufficiently conspicuous person, at least in the eastern states, to make much impression on a foreigner.

## Greeley and Bryant.

"In the early spring of 1864 I was invited to a breakfast by the late Mr. John A. C. Gray. I found there Wendell Phillips, Bryant, the poet, and one or two other men. As I am now the sole survivor of the party, I may relate what occurred without indiscretion. Greeley entered a few minutes after me, and approached the host, who was standing near the fire-place conversing with Mr. Bryant; Bryant took no notice of him. The host asked in a whisper, but in my hearing: 'Don't you know Mr. Greeley?' The answer, in a still louder whisper, was: 'No, I don't; he's a blackguard—he's a blackguard.' This, I thought, was due to one of Greeley's striking peculiarities, his treating every opponent with a sort of ferocious contempt. A

not uncommon heading of his articles was 'Another Lie Nailed to the Counter,' and a not uncommon beginning to his discussions was a plaintive inquiry 'whether there was to be no end of lying,' and a not uncommon designation of an antagonist was that he was 'a liar, knowing himself to be a liar, and lying with naked intent to deceive.' I concluded that Mr. Bryant, who was a man of refinement and cultivation, had met with some of this mauling at Greeley's hands. But at the breakfast table Greeley revealed more serious defects in his character than addiction to rough language. The talk turned on the war, and more particularly on the defense of Washington. On this subject he poured forth opinions so comically absurd that they might have figured in the 'Grande Duchesse.' They were received by the rest of the company in a silence, which, I fear, was not respectful. Talking after breakfast, over our cigars, of the republican nomination of the successor to Lincoln, Greeley's one contribution to the discussion, frequently repeated, was: 'Anybody you please, but not Old Abe.' About this time his influence had begun to decline, until at last he finished it by accepting the democratic nomination for the presidency.

## Beginning of Yellow Journalism.

"Bennett found there was more journalistic money to be made in recording the gossip that interested bar-rooms, work-shops, race-courses, and tenement-houses than in consulting the tastes of drawing-rooms and libraries. He introduced, too, an absolutely new feature, which has had, perhaps, the greatest success of all. I mean the plan of treating everything and everybody as somewhat of a joke, and the knowledge of everything about him, including his family affairs, as something to which the public is entitled. This was immensely taking in the world in which he sought to make his way. It has since been adopted by other papers, and it always pays. It has indeed, given an air of flippancy to the American character, and a certain fondness for things that elsewhere are regarded as childish, which every foreign visitor now notices. Under its influence nearly all our public men are regarded as fair objects of ridicule by opponents. This is also true of most serious men, whether public men or not. Even crime and punishment have received a touch of the comic. I used to hear, at the time of which I write, that Bennett's editors all sat in stalls, in one large room, while he walked up and down in the morning distributing their parts for the day. To one he would say, 'Pitch into Greeley;' to another, 'Give Raymond hell;' and so on. The result probably was that the efforts of Greeley and Raymond for the elevation of mankind on that particular day were made futile. By adding to

his comic department wonderful enterprise in collecting news from all parts of the world, Bennett was able to realize a fortune in the first half of the century, besides making a deep impression on all ambitious young publishers.

## Return to Specie Payments.

"Considering the amount of delusion which was diffused by the legal-tender decision and by the fortunes that were made and the debts that were paid by the greenbacks, I think the return to gold was a masterpiece of statecraft. The way in which it was managed would not have been possible for a man who had not been brought up in a democracy.

"The credit for the return to specie payments, was of course, due to Mr. John Sherman, who displayed wonderful art in getting people to go the whole way, under pretense of only going part way, and he evidently understood finance thoroughly, under pretense of being a plain, blunt man, who knew no more about it than his neighbors. One man, however, who made no secret whatever of his views, with whom I had a good many talks on the subject, was Samuel J. Tilden. No man in any country understood finance, or could talk about it better than he. On this subject he had no *caveats* or subterfuges or unpleasant truths to be hidden. As a public financier he was not a bit like the Tilden of politics. He was absolutely straightforward and above board. On the subject of the democratic party, his meaning was a little too sublimated for my comprehension, and his memory went too far back. But he had clearly one of the acutest intellects I have ever met, and it would have achieved great results in any science to which it was applied. I used to think that it was a pity that so much of its vigor was flung away on politics.

## The Decline of the Press.

"The old arts of persuasion are already ceasing to be employed. Presidential elections are less and less carried by speeches and articles. The American people is a less instructed body than it used to be. The necessity for drilling, organizing, and guiding it, in order to extract the vote from it, is becoming plain, and out of this necessity has arisen the 'boss' system, which is now found in existence everywhere, is growing more powerful, and has thus far resisted all attempts to overthrow it. The old statesman is defunct, and the adroit manager of elections has taken his place. The press has ceased to exert much influence on public opinion, and the pulpit has become singularly and sadly demagogic. According to my observation, men of ability have largely ceased to enter either profession—something which may be either a cause or a consequence."