AUTobiography of Leigh Hunt.

CHAPTER IX.

THE EXAMINER.

Establishment of the Examiner. — Albany Fonblanque. — Author's mistakes in setting out in his editorial career. — Objects of the Examiner, and misrepresentations of them by the Tories. — Jeu-d'esprit of "Napoleon in his Cabinet." — "Breakfast Sympathies with the Miseries of War." — War dispassionately considered. — Anti-Republicanism of the Examiner, and its views in theology. — The Author for some time a clerk in the War Office. — His patron, Mr. Addington, afterwards Lord Sidmouth. — Poetry and Accounts.

At the beginning of the year 1808, my brother John and myself set up the weekly paper of the Examiner in joint partnership. It was named after the Examiner of Swift and his brother Tories. I did not think of their politics. I thought only of their wit and fine writing, which, in my youthful confidence, I proposed to myself to emulate; and I could find no previous political journal equally qualified to be
its godfather. Even Addison had called his opposition paper the *Whig Examiner*.

Some dozen years afterwards I had an editorial successor, Mr. Fonblanque, who had all the wit for which I toiled, without making any pretensions to it. He was, indeed, the genuine successor, not of me, but of the Swifts and Addisons themselves; profuse of wit even beyond them, and superior in political knowledge. Yet, if I laboured hard for what was so easy to Mr. Fonblanque, I will not pretend to think that I did not sometimes find it; and the study of Addison and Steele, of Goldsmith and Voltaire, enabled me, when I was pleased with my subject, to give it the appearance of ease. At other times, especially on serious occasions, I too often got into a declamatory vein, full of what I thought fine turns and Johnsonian antithesis. The new office of editor conspired with my success as a critic to turn my head. I wrote, though anonymously, in the first person, as if, in addition to my theatrical pretensions, I had suddenly become an oracle in politics; the words philosophy, poetry, criticism, statesmanship, nay, even ethics and theology, all took a final tone in my lips; and when I consider the virtue as well as knowledge which I demanded from everybody whom I had occasion to speak of, and of how much charity my own juvenile errors ought to have considered themselves in need
however they might have been warranted by conventional allowance), I will not say I was a hypocrite in the odious sense of the word, for it was all done out of a spirit of foppery and "fine writing," and I never affected any formal virtues in private; but when I consider all the nonsense and extravagance of those assumptions—all the harm they must have done me in discerning eyes, and all the reasonable amount of resentment which it was preparing for me with adversaries, I blush to think what a simpleton I was, and how much of the consequences I deserved. It is out of no "ostentation of candour" that I make this confession. It is extremely painful to me.

Suffering gradually worked me out of a good deal of this kind of egotism. I hope that even the present most involuntarily egotistical book affords evidence that I am pretty well rid of it; and I must add, in my behalf, that, in every other respect, never, at that time or at any after time, was I otherwise than an honest man. I overrated my claims to public attention; I greatly overdid the manner of addressing it; and I was not too abundant in either; but I set out perhaps with as good an editorial amount of qualification as most writers no older. I was fairly grounded in English history; I had carefully read De Lolme and Blackstone; I had no mercenary views whatsoever, though I was a proprietor of the
journal; and all the levity of my animal spirits, and the foppery of the graver part of my pretensions, had not destroyed in me that spirit of martyrdom which had been inculcated in me from the cradle. I denied myself political as well as theatrical acquaintances; I was the reverse of a speculator upon patronage or employment; and I was prepared, with my excellent brother, to suffer manfully, should the time for suffering arrive.

The spirit of the criticism on the theatres continued the same as it had been in the News. In politics, from old family associations, I soon got interested as a man, though I never could love them as a writer. It was against the grain that I was encouraged to begin them; and against the grain I ever afterwards sat down to write, except when the subject was of a very general description, and I could introduce philosophy and the belles lettres.

The main objects of the Examiner newspaper were to assist in producing Reform in Parliament, liberality of opinion in general (especially freedom from superstition), and a fusion of literary taste into all subjects whatsoever. It began with being of no party; but Reform soon gave it one. It disclaimed all knowledge of statistics; and the rest of its politics were rather a sentiment, and a matter of training, than founded on any particular political reflection. It possessed the benefit, however, of a good deal of
general reading. It never wanted examples out of history and biography, or a kind of adornment from the spirit of literature; and it gradually drew to its perusal many intelligent persons of both sexes, who would, perhaps, never have attended to politics under any other circumstances.

In the course of its warfare with the Tories, the Examiner was charged with Bonapartism, with republicanism, with disaffection to Church and State; with conspiracy at the tables of Burdett, and Cobbett, and Henry Hunt. Now Sir Francis, though he was for a long time our hero, we never exchanged a word with; and Cobbett and Henry Hunt (no relation of ours) we never beheld;—never so much as saw their faces. I was never even at a public dinner; nor do I believe my brother was. We had absolutely no views whatsoever, but those of a decent competence and of the public good; and we thought, I dare affirm, a great deal more of the latter than of the former. Our competence we allowed too much to shift for itself. Zeal for the public good was a family inheritance; and this we thought ourselves bound to increase. As to myself, what I thought of, more than either, was the making of verses. I did nothing for the greater part of the week but write verses and read books. I then made a rush at my editorial duties; took a world of superfluous pains in the writing; sat up late at night, and was a very trying
person to compositors and newsmen. I sometimes have before me the ghost of a pale and gouty printer whom I specially caused to suffer, and who never complained. I think of him and of some needy dramatist, and wish they had been worse men.

The *Examiner* commenced at the time when Bonaparte was at the height of his power. He had the continent at his feet; and three of his brothers were on thrones. The reader may judge of our Bonapartist tendencies by the following dramatic sketch, which appeared in the first number:——

**Napoleon in His Cabinet.**

_Scene,—A Cabinet at St. Cloud._

**Napoleon.** [*Ruminating before a fire and grasping a poker.*] Who waits there?

**Le M.** May it please your Majesty, your faithful soldier, Le Meurtrier.

**Nap.** Tell Sultan Mustapha that he is the last of the Sultans.

**Le M.** Yes, sire.

**Nap.** And, hark ye—desire the king of Holland to come to me directly.

**Le M.** Yes, sire.

**Nap.** And the king of Westphalia.—[*Aside*] I must tweak Jerome by the nose a little, to teach him dignity.

**Le M.** [*With hesitation.*] M. Champagny, sire, waits to know your Majesty's pleasure respecting the king of Sweden.
NAp. Oh—tell him, I'll let the boy alone for a month or two. And stay, Le Meurtrier; go to the editor of the Moniteur, and tell him to dethrone the queen of Portugal.—Spain's dethronement is put off to next year. Where's Bienseance?

[Exit Le Meurtrier, and enter Bienseance.

BIEN. May it please your august majesty, Bienseance is before you.

NAp. Fetch me General F.'s head, and a cup of coffee.

BIEN. [Smiling with devotion.] Every syllable uttered by the great Napoleon convinces Frenchmen that he is their father.

[Exit Bienseance.

NAp. [Meditating with ferocity.] After driving the Turks out of Europe [pokes the fire], I must annihilate England [gives a furious poke]; but first—I shall over-run India; then I shall request America and Africa to put themselves under my protection; and after making that great jackass, the Russian Emperor, one of my tributaries, crown myself emperor of the east—west—north—and south. Then I must have a balloon army, of which Garnerin shall be field-marshal; for I must positively take possession of the comet, because it makes a noise. That will assist me to conquer the solar system; and then I shall go with my army to the other systems; and then—I think—I shall go to the devil.—

I thought of Bonaparte at that time as I have thought ever since; to-wit, that he was a great soldier, and little else; that he was not a man of the highest order of intellect, much less a cosmopolite; that he was a retrospective rather than a prospect-
tive man, ambitious of old renown instead of new; and would advance the age as far, and no farther, as suited his views of personal aggrandizement. The *Examiner*, however much it differed with the military policy of Bonaparte’s antagonists, or however meanly it thought of their understandings, never overrated his own, or was one of his partizans. What it thought of war and conquest in general may be gathered from another *jeu-d’esprit,*—a jest, like many another jest, with laughter on its lips, and melancholy at heart. It was entitled, *Breakfast Sympathies with the Miseries of War.*

**Two Gentlemen and a Lady at Breakfast.**

A. [*Reading the newspaper, and eating at every two or three words.*] “The combat lasted twelve hours. . . .and the two armies separated at nine in the evening. . . .leaving 30,000 men literally cut to pieces!” (another piece of toast, if you please) “on the field of” . . . . . . Stop, 30,000 is it? [*looking at the paper closely.*] Egad, I believe, it’s 50,000. Tom, is that a three or a five?—Oh, a five. That paper’s horridly printed.

A. Very indeed.—Well, “leaving 50,000 men on the field of battle.”—50,000!—that’s a great number to be killed with the bayonet, eh! War’s a horrid [*sips*] thing.

**The Lady.** Oh, shocking! [*Takes a large bit of toast.*]

B. Oh, monstrous! [*Takes a larger.*]

A. [*Reading on.*] “One of the French generals of division riding up to the emperor with a sabre covered with blood, after a charge of cavalry, exclaimed,”—stick your fork into that slice of ham for me, Tom—thanky’e—“exclaimed,—There is not a
man in my regiment whose sword is not like this. The two
armi——"

B. What? What was that about the sword?
A. Why, his own sword, you know, was covered with blood. Didn't you hear me read it? And so he said, There is not a —

B. Ay, ay—whose sword is not like this. I understand you. Gad, what a fellow!
A. [Sips.] Oh, horrid!

The Lady. [Sips.] Oh, shocking! — Dash, get down: how can you be so?
A. The two armi—
B. By-the-bye, have you heard of Mrs. W.'s accident?
A. And the Lady. [Putting down their cups.] No! what can it be?
A. Poor thing! her husband's half mad, I suppose.
B. Why, she has broken her arm.

The Lady. Good God! I declare you've made me quite sick. Poor dear Mrs. W.! Why she'll be obliged to wear her arm in a sling! But she would go out this slippery weather, when the frost's enough to kill one.

B. Well, I must go and tell my father the news. Let's see—how many men killed, Charles?
A. 50,000.
B. Ah,—50,000. Good-morning. [Exit.]

The Lady. Poor dear Mrs. W., I can't help thinking about her. A broken arm! Why, it's quite a dreadful thing! I wonder whether Mrs. F. has heard the news.

B. She'll see it in this morning's paper, you know.

Lady. Oh, what it's in the paper, is it?
B. [Laughing.] Why, didn't you hear Charles read it just now?
Lady. Oh, that news. No, I mean poor Mrs. W. Poor dear! [meditating] I wonder whether she'll wear a black sling or a blue.* [Exeunt.]

I now look upon war as one of the fleeting necessities of things in the course of human progress; as an evil (like all other evils) to be regarded in relation to some other evil that would have been worse without it, but always to be considered as an indication of comparative barbarism—as a necessity, the perpetuity of which is not to be assumed or encouraged—or as a half reasoning mode of adjustment, whether of disputes, or of populations, which mankind, on arriving at years of discretion, and coming to a better understanding with one another, may, and must of necessity, do away. It would be as ridiculous to associate the idea of war with an earth covered with railroads and commerce, as a fight between Holborn and the Strand, or between people met in a drawing-room. Wars, like all other evils, have not been without their good. They have pioneered human intercourse; have thus prepared even for their own eventual abolition; and their follies, losses, and horrors have been made the best of by adornments and music, and consoled by the exhibition of many noble qualities. There is no evil unmixed with, or

* Examiner, vol. i. p. 748.
unproductive of good. It could not, in the nature of things, exist. Antagonism itself prevents it. But nature incites us to the diminution of evil; and while it is pious to make the best of what is inevitable, it is no less so to obey the impulse which she has given us towards thinking and making it otherwise.

With respect to the charge of republicanism against the *Examiner*, it was as ridiculous as the rest. Both Napoleon and the Allies did, indeed, so conduct themselves on the high roads of empire and royalty, and the British sceptre was at the same time so unfortunately wielded, that kings and princes were often treated with less respect in our pages than we desired. But we generally felt and often expressed a wish to treat them otherwise. The *Examiner* was always quoting against them the Alfreds and Antoninuses of old. The "Constitution," with its King, Lords, and Commons, was its incessant watchword. The greatest political change which it desired was Reform in Parliament; and it helped to obtain it, because it was in earnest. As to republics, the United States, notwithstanding our family relationship, were no favourites with us, owing to their love of money and their want of the imaginative and ornamental; and the excesses of the French Revolution we held in abhorrence.

With regard to Church and State, the connection
was of course duly recognised by admirers of the English constitution. We desired, it is true, reform in both, being far greater admirers of Christianity in its primitive than in any of its subsequent shapes, and hearty accorders with the dictum of the apostle, who said that the “letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.” Our version of religious faith was ever nearer to what M. Lamartine has called the “New Christianity,” than to that of Doctors Horsley and Philpotts. But we heartily advocated the mild spirit of religious government, as exercised by the Church of England, in opposition to the bigoted part of dissent; and in furtherance of this advocacy, the first volume of the Examiner contained a series of Essays on the Folly and Danger of Methodism, which were afterwards collected into a pamphlet. So “orthodox” were these essays, short of points from which common sense and humanity always appeared to us to revolt, and from which the deliverance of the Church itself is now, I believe, not far off, that in duty to our hope of that deliverance, I afterwards thought it necessary to guard against the conclusions which might have been drawn from them, as to the amount of our assent. A church appeared to me then, as it still does, an instinctive want in the human family. I never to this day pass one, even of a kind the most unreformed, without a wish to go into it, and join my fellow-creatures in their affecting
evidence of the necessity of an additional tie with Deity and Infinity, with this world and the next. But the wish is accompanied with an afflicting regret that I cannot recognise it, free from barbarisms derogatory to both; and I sigh for some good old country church, finally delivered from the corruptions of the Councils, and breathing nothing but the peace and love befitting the Sermon on the Mount. I believe that a time is coming, when such doctrine, and such only, will be preached; and my future grave, by some old ivied tower, seems quieter for the consummation. But I anticipate.

For a short period before and after the setting up of the Examiner, I was a clerk in the War Office. The situation was given me by Mr. Addington, then prime minister, afterwards Lord Sidmouth, who knew my father. My sorry stock of arithmetic, which I taught myself on purpose, was sufficient for the work which I had to do; but otherwise I made a bad clerk; wasting my time and that of others in perpetual jesting; going too late to office; and feeling conscious that if I did not quit the situation myself, nothing was more likely, or would have been more just, than a suggestion to that effect from others. The establishment of the Examiner, and the tone respecting the court and the ministry which I soon thought myself bound to adopt, increased the sense of the propriety of this measure; and, accordingly,
I sent in my resignation. Mr. Addington had fortunately ceased to be minister before the *Examiner* was set up; and though I had occasion afterwards to differ extremely with the measures approved of by him as Lord Sidmouth, I never forgot the personal respect which I owed him for his kindness to myself, to his own amiable manners, and to his undoubted, though not wise, conscientiousness. He had been Speaker of the House of Commons, a situation for which his figure and deportment at that time of life admirably fitted him. I think I hear his fine voice, in his house at Richmond Park, good-naturedly expressing to me his hope, in the words of the poet, that it might one day be said of me,—

"—Not in fancy’s maze he wander’d long,
But stoop’d to truth, and moraliz’d his song."

The sounding words, "moralized his song," came *toning* out of his dignified utterance like "sonorous metal." This was when I went to thank him for the clerkship. I afterwards sat on the grass in the park, feeling as if I was in a dream, and wondering how I should reconcile my propensity to verse-making with sums in addition. The minister, it was clear, thought them not incompatible: nor are they. Let nobody think otherwise, unless he is prepared to suffer for the mistake, and what is worse, to make others suffer. The body of the British Poets them-
selves shall confute him, with Chaucer at their head, who was a "comptroller of wool" and "clerk of works."

"Thou hearest neither that nor this,

(says the eagle to him in the House of Fame);—

For when thy labour all done is,
And hast made all thy reckonings,
Instead of rest and of new things,
Thou goest home to thine house anon,
And all so dumb as any stone
Thou sittest at another book,
Till fully dazèd is thy look."

Lamb, it is true, though he stuck to it, has complained of

"The dry drudgery of the desk’s dead wood;"

and how Chaucer contrived to settle his accounts in the month of May, when, as he tells us, he could not help passing whole days in the fields, looking at the daisies, his biographers do not inform us. The case, as in all other matters, can only be vindicated, or otherwise, by the consequences. But that is a perilous responsibility; and it involves assumptions which ought to be startling to the modesty of young rhyming gentlemen not in the receipt of an income.

I did not give up, however, a certainty for an uncertainty. The Examiner was fully established when I quitted the office. My friends thought that I
should be better able to attend to it; and it was felt, at any rate, that I could not with propriety remain. So I left my fellow-clerks to their better behaviour and quieter rooms; and set my face in the direction of stormy politics.