

## GARFIELD AND CONKLING.



It fell to my lot at one time to be one of a "Committee of Conciliation" which was the outcome of a memorable struggle. Much has been written concerning the origin and merits of the Garfield-Conkling controversy, and no one cares at this day to reopen or reargue it. But there were incidents and interesting features in it which, in the absence of any report of that committee, or of what it brought to light or accomplished, may contribute to a better understanding of the inside history of that most remarkable as well as most unfortunate controversy. It becomes necessary, however, for the better understanding of the part taken by that committee, to restate some things already familiar.

Garfield's nomination for President was due to the Blaine-Conkling quarrel, and many other serious consequences followed not in all respects so evident. There were those who believed that the assassination itself was indirectly due to that fight. Garfield stepped between the combatants in a fierce and bitter struggle for mastery, unremitting for years, and increasing in bitterness and intensity every hour of its continuance. He carried off the prize they fought for, but their weapons passed through his body.

General Grant was brought forward for a third term, to make sure the defeat of Mr. Blaine. Mr. Conkling was then the master spirit in New York politics. His State was entitled to seventy votes in the convention which was to nominate the candidate. They would all be necessary to effect the result upon which Mr. Conkling was bent. Through his influence the New York Republican Convention had instructed the entire delegation to vote as a unit, the choice to be determined by a majority. But nineteen of them, under the lead of William H. Robertson, refused to be bound by these instructions, and cast their votes for Mr. Blaine. This was sufficient to prevent the nomination of General Grant, but not enough to secure that of Mr. Blaine, for Mr. Sherman was receiving a considerable support. The balloting continued in the convention without any material change in relative strength until, after many ineffectual trials, the friends of Blaine and Sherman, under instructions from their leaders in Washington, joined forces and nominated Garfield. Both combatants had been beaten—Conkling had defeated Blaine, and Blaine had defeated Grant. The effect of this discomfiture upon the two

men was totally different in accordance with their different natures. Conkling sulked in his tent, while Blaine sent his congratulations to the successful candidate, and was early and ardent in his support. Before the canvass closed, however, Conkling was persuaded by General Grant himself to enter into the campaign, and did most important and effective work, especially in the State of New York, contributing largely to a result in that State, and thereby in the nation, favorable to Garfield. But he never forgave the nineteen, and swore especial vengeance upon Robertson, their leader.

During the winter preceding the inauguration, and while the excitement always attendant upon cabinet-making was at its height, the rumor got abroad that Mr. Blaine was to be Secretary of State. The mere rumor was enough to kindle anew into fresh flame all the fire of the old hate, and to summon the old foe to arms. This disturbance of that party harmony which is ever essential to administrative success was little heeded, if it was not welcomed; for hot blood begets hot blood, and the old Adam seldom confines his work to one side of an ancient feud. Neither of these men meant harm to the political party in which they were both great leaders, but neither of them could be made to see that their fight was reaching its very heart's blood. Each of them seemed to think that the great and acknowledged services he had rendered the party entitled him to call upon it to crush out his enemy. I do not think that either of them knew himself in this controversy, for each had come to believe that the surrender of the other was essential to the continuance of Republican supremacy.

I first heard of the purpose to call Mr. Blaine to the premiership from Mr. Blaine himself, who, taking me into his confidence, told me that it had been offered him, and proceeded to sound me upon the advisability of his acceptance. This information produced a shiver. Mr. Blaine never had a warmer friend than I had been from the day he entered Congress, nor Mr. Conkling one more true to him; but I had never felt called upon to pass judgment upon the merits of a controversy between these two friends of mine, which I had seen begin in empty trifles and grow by perpetual feeding till it had come to be a menace, and therefore I had refused many opportunities proffered on both sides to listen to or aid in redressing grievances that had arisen out of it. I could not, however, shut my eyes to the direct tendency and probable fatal consequences of its presence. I early saw that it must be buried, or it would itself

bury not only these two men, but also the political party to which they belonged. I warned Mr. Blaine that if he entered the cabinet with the intent or hope of circumventing his rival, it would be fatal to him and to the administration of Garfield, and I expressed the opinion that it would be impossible for him to keep the peace if he took the office. He replied with frankness and, I have no doubt, with entire sincerity that it would be his purpose if he accepted office to ignore all past differences, and so to deport himself in it as to force reconciliation. He said also that he could not agree with me, even if the effect should prove otherwise, that he should for that reason be debarred from the great opportunity, for which he felt himself qualified, to administer the Foreign Office on the broad and grand scale he did afterward undertake, but was not permitted to perfect. I foresaw the rocks all too plainly, and advised him to remain in the Senate. But he determined otherwise, and accepted the position.

After the report got abroad and before the official announcement, and while a change of policy was still possible, nothing was done to smooth the way for this important movement. On the contrary, bitterness of speech on both sides had free course, and the clans, ready for the fray, began to take their places under their respective leaders before Inauguration Day. Conkling refused to consider the proposed appointment of Blaine as other than a premeditated attempt to humiliate him, and those who had been with him in past controversies readily accepted his interpretation of it. Garfield, of whose great brain-power political sagacity formed no part, could not be made to see in the opposition anything but an attempt by dictation to trench upon his constitutional prerogatives in the free choice of his own counselors; and all "Blaine men" agreed with him. All was made worse, and the opposition was both intensified and confirmed in its belief, by the appointment to the cabinet of a Secretary of the Treasury from New York, not only without consultation with the Senator, but against his earnest recommendation of another. The administration was thus organized, not only without recognition of the Conkling "wing," but over it, and, as he and his friends insisted, in defiance of him. It is no part of my purpose to argue the question whether there might not have been right as well as wrong on both sides, nor on which was the preponderance. I am only putting on paper what I saw and heard (and, I might as well admit, part of which I was), and what I knew, of the political blindness which seemed to come over all who had to do with this affair.

After the inauguration and the selection of

the leading places in the cabinet in the manner I have indicated, the Senator made one more attempt to regain that influence in the conduct of affairs, especially in the appointments to office in the State of New York, to which he and his following claimed that he was entitled. It was his claim that such appointments should not only be exclusively from among his friends and those who were with him in the late movement to renominate Grant, but that he should have the naming of them. To this President Garfield would not submit. Politically he considered himself under obligation equally to those who under the lead of Robertson had made his nomination possible, and to Conkling and his following for the great service they had rendered in making his election sure. In short, he believed it to be his duty to keep out of sight the lines of division upon which Mr. Conkling insisted, and furthermore that it was his prerogative to make the selections himself. There is no doubt that in this position he was sustained by Mr. Blaine, and the evidence is equally clear to those who were on the ground and familiar with the different stages of this progressive fight, that in the selection of appointees afterward made, on which the administration foundered, the Secretary had no part. Frequent interviews between the President and Mr. Conkling before the nominations were finally made failed to move either from the position he had taken. Mr. Conkling would listen to no name having any connection with the faction led by Robertson in the ante-election struggle, and insisted upon naming the men, according to a usage then prevalent. The President declared his determination to treat all political friends in New York alike, but indicated his willingness, so far as the public good would in his opinion permit, to accede to the wishes of Mr. Conkling in the selection between individuals. But Mr. Conkling would listen to nothing short of the adoption by the administration of the warfare of extermination which he was waging in New York; and there they parted company, and thereafter during the life of Garfield the New York senator had no further intercourse with the White House. It did not matter that when the New York appointments were made, to Mr. Morton, the warm friend of Mr. Conkling, whom he had presented for the Treasury portfolio, was given the second diplomatic office,—that of minister to France,—so long as Robertson, like Mordecai, sat at the port of New York. Even Morton lost much of the friendship of Conkling by accepting the office thus offered to him.

A declaration of war, if not as formal and high-sounding, yet as positive and as unrelenting as ever opened actual hostilities between

belligerent nations, followed immediately upon the sending of the New York nominations to the Senate. A little preliminary skirmishing formed a prelude to the more serious trial of strength. Friends identified with each side, and those who were friends of both, took the matter up, and strove for peace. Both sides desired peace, but on their own terms or not at all. Each was confident that it could win in the fight—Garfield with the power of a four years' administration before him, and Conkling through his influence with the Senate and with the Republican party of New York, of which he was the acknowledged leader. It was at this stage of the controversy that the Committee of Conciliation already alluded to came into being. Five persons, representing as well as could be all sides of this controversy, were requested to act as that committee; and at the suggestion, I believe, of the Senator himself I acted as its chairman. Mr. Conkling appeared before that committee in behalf of himself and the party grievances he represented, and was heard in one of the committee-rooms of the Senate at great length in recounting wrongs, and insisting upon the drastic remedy of extermination of the hostile faction in New York as the only cure. On that occasion he surpassed himself in all those elements of oratorical power for which he was so distinguished. I had heard him in all his great efforts from the day he entered Congress, more than twenty years before, but I had never heard anything which equaled this effort for flights of oratorical power—genuine eloquence, bitter denunciation, ridicule of the despised faction in New York, and contempt for its leader. He continued for two hours and a half to play with consummate skill upon all the strings known to the orator, and through all the notes, from the lowest to the highest, which the great masters command, and concluded in a lofty apostrophe to the greatness and glory of the Republican party, and his own devotion to its highest welfare. "And," said he, "I trust that the exigency may never arise when I shall be compelled to choose between self-respect and personal honor on the one side, and a temporary discomfiture of that party on the other; but if that time shall ever come, I shall not hesitate in the choice, and I now say to you, and through you to those whom it most concerns, that I have in my pocket an autograph letter of this President who is now for the time being its official head, which I pray God I may never be compelled in self-defense to make public; but if that time shall ever come, I declare to you, his friends, he will bite the dust."

This closed the interview, and the committee was left in a great state of excitement, produced not alone by the remarkable character of the entire speech, but especially by the

concluding sentences, which seemed to imply that he held the life of the administration in his hand, and would not hesitate to take it if frustrated in his purposes in regard to New York politics. It was deemed absolutely necessary to get possession of this letter, or at least to learn the contents of a missive thus held over the head of the President. A time had been fixed to hear the President's side of the controversy, and it was arranged that I should in some way, without violating the confidences of the conference with Conkling, if there were any such, ascertain from the President himself the nature of this mysterious document. I accordingly went to the White House for that purpose a half hour in advance of the committee, and, without disclosing our interview with the Senator, sought to ascertain whether the President was aware of such a use of any such letter. Almost my first inquiry brought out this response: "Oh, you allude to a letter Conkling is saying that he has of mine, and which he represents to be a pretty bad one. I know what it is, and have a copy of it." He treated the whole matter lightly and as of no consequence; and remarking that he had heard of this before, took the letter from his pocket and handed it to me. Upon perusing it, I discovered that it was one of those indiscreet epistles, like the Jay Hubbell letters, which he had written during the Presidential campaign, aiding the efforts to collect from clerks and other government officials subscriptions to campaign expenses. Although by no means a good letter, I was satisfied that its chief harm to Garfield at that late date lay in the ability to create a mystery about its contents by keeping them from the public eye while still talking about it. I therefore advised its immediate publication, thereby doing away as early as possible with any bad impression which the scene before the committee might make when it came to be known, as it was sure to be—if indeed that had not been its design. I urged that he should not permit it to be held over his head as a menace for a single moment, and that whatever harm was possible from its publication would be less if it came from his friends promptly than if it waited on the opportunity of his enemies, after they had made whatever could be made by withholding its contents. I urged him to let me take it to the Associated Press that very night. As he was about to hand it to me for that purpose, Mr. Blaine entered the room. The President, turning to him, remarked: "Here, Blaine, is where I have been slopping over again. Here is a copy of one of my letters which Conkling has got hold of and is threatening to use against me. Dawes advises me to let the Associated Press have it to-night, and forestall him." Blaine read the letter, and shook his head, advising strongly against its publica-

tion. And so the letter never saw the light until such time as Mr. Conkling thought most opportune for his purpose. But he had waited too long, and its effect had been discounted before he used it.

The committee, arriving according to appointment, then proceeded to hear from the President, after the withdrawal of Mr. Blaine, the other side of the story, much of which has been already outlined. He stated his position to be that he could not ignore, much less taboo, either of the parties to this quarrel in New York, and for him to do so would be base ingratitude and the worst of politics. The one of them had been a potent factor in his nomination in spite of the other; while the other at the end of the canvass had caused the scale of popular favor to turn securely to his side. Both had the right to say that their claim to recognition could not be gainsaid in that forum where party fidelity and party service are the test. Equally clear was it to him that sound politics required him to take no share in party divisions which involved no political principle. He then recounted the pains he had taken in his attempt to apply these principles to the case in hand, and his failure to enlist coöperation; and said that, though compelled to take the course he had pursued unaided by those from whom he had hoped for assistance, he had been guided in it strictly by the principles here indicated. And to this course he must adhere. Thus nothing came of this effort at adjustment.

I had one more interview with Mr. Conkling after this, and before his resignation and his appeal from a Republican administration in Washington to the Republicans in New York. It was of his own seeking, and occurred only the Saturday afternoon before the resignation was made public. He hailed me from a carriage as I was turning a corner on the sidewalk, and, leaving his carriage, came to where I was standing "for a few minutes' talk." This interview on the corner of the street lasted nearly an hour. Both of us became very earnest, though with entire good feeling, he in rehearsing his grievances, and presenting them in new dress, and I in an attempt to point out to him a way not only of settlement but of triumph over his enemies—a view I thought most likely to prevail with him. I said to him: "Suppose all you say is true,"—I always believed that more was his due than he had credit for,— "nevertheless this is your opportunity, by a stroke of magnanimity, to win a victory over those who are thus arrayed against you. Go into the Senate on Monday morning, and present your indictment, if you choose—as strong

a case as facts will permit, the stronger the better for the conclusion. And let that conclusion be a declaration to the Senate and the country that there is something higher in the mission of the Republican party than the redress of personal grievances; that the cause must not be jeopardized by dissension, nor any one relieved from duty at his post, however grievous the wrongs and injustice he has encountered in its discharge: and then call on all friends and foes alike to put the past behind them, and close up the ranks with their faces to the future." I assured him of my belief that such a speech on Monday morning, made in sincerity and with his power, would send a thrill of joy through every Republican heart in the country, and that he would be hailed as the deliverer of the party from the perils which threatened its integrity. Such a course, I ventured to say, would, I believed, put him at once in popular favor a hundred miles ahead of those who were wronging him, and would lift the party out of the dangers which beset it.

He turned upon me with a discouraged and disgusted look, remarking: "Your medicine, Dawes, is much easier to prescribe than to take. Suppose I should say to you, 'Go home to Massachusetts, and in the spirit of meekness and peace embrace Ben Butler.' Why, you have no idea of the bitterness of the feeling in New York in condemnation of these men. If I should take the course you suggest, I should myself go under, and should be burned in effigy from Buffalo to Montauk Point, and could not be elected a delegate to a county convention in Oneida County."

And so we parted. On Monday he resigned, and appealed for indorsement to the Republican legislature of New York, then in session. They decided against him, and he went into retirement. But the struggle rent the party in twain, and the wounds have never healed. To it more than all else may be traced the present condition of Republican politics in New York. Bitterness and hate, born of this strife, outlived the actors themselves. Disappointed office-seekers turned in wrath upon the appointing power. In two short months from the retirement of Conkling, the President himself was shot by the madman Guiteau, possessed with the idea that in some way his own failure to get office grew out of this unfortunate and fatal quarrel.

And, as if to make a dramatic climax, it is said, with how much truth I do not know, that Mr. Conkling did afterward actually fail of an election to an Oneida County convention.

*Henry L. Dawes.*