

not, we say, a revival of just the same system as was at that time in vogue, but of a new system showing an increasing willingness on the part of the public to listen to instruction from scholarly and distinguished men, and showing, also, a widening of opportunities for the exercise of a high grade of ability in this direction. In the East and in the West courses of lectures are constantly being arranged, where one man will take up a theme and himself continue it to its completion. The historical lectures of Fiske and Freeman, the astronomical lectures of Langley, the literary-historical lectures of Gosse, the course on etching by Seymour Haden, are cases in illustration of the tendency we speak of.

The detached addresses in different parts of the

country by such men as Matthew Arnold and Canon Farrar may be said, indeed, to be rather in the line of the "star-lecture system," but the substance of these "star" lectures, nevertheless, was in each case the farthest from trifling or temporary.

We are not objecting in these remarks to the merely amusing "platformist," if his performance is thoroughly good of its kind. Men should have the opportunity of laughing,—but it is important that they should laugh not only well but wisely. The danger was, at one time, that nothing but syllabus would be wanted or offered—though it was in the nature of things that so debilitating a diet, even if entered upon, could not last forever.

## OPEN LETTERS.

### The Tinkering of Hymns.

IT is interesting to notice how public opinion, in cases of literary epidemic, splits in two directions at the same moment, and then the same old sentiments stand confronting each other, and the same old issues are banded to and fro in the familiar disputes. And Christian people, amiable and excellent as they are, are no exception to this observation. At the present moment, praise services having become popular in the various congregations, and so the criticism of hymns having grown to be in some degree necessary, the question is discussed rather sharply whether any one has the liberty to alter the compositions of a poet whose name has already been received into honor among the churches. Some writers and many speakers are declaiming against, and some others for, the practice, which at any rate is old and established.

The trouble is, that so many of the disputants are familiar with only the collections which they may have happened to use in their early life. What they learned as the true versions of hymns and psalms it is very natural they should suppose are the original work of the author, and what they find elsewhere they believe to be changes as unauthorized as they are unwelcome to themselves—unwelcome because they break up the old associations, if indeed they do not confuse the memory, while they are trying to sing with the heart and the understanding.

It might be well at some time to restate with wide illustration the general principle upon which the church at large has, through many years, proceeded in the shaping of hymns for use in worship. It is in some cases better to return to the author's own language; in other cases it is preferable to retain the changes which popular sentiment has accepted. Some one who has been patient enough to count has told us a startling tale; namely, that in one collection there are 697 changes in 345 versions of psalms; in another, there are 1336 in 774 most noted hymns. No wonder there is objection made to such wholesale work.

But is any one ready to insist that the compilers must reproduce Cowper's and Newton's, Watts's and Wesley's and Doddridge's hymns, with all the crudities and mistakes those composers made? Are the declaimers in earnest? Do they want to sing "On Jor-

dan's stormy banks I stand," now that some years of use has made them familiar with the alteration needed by the fact that Jordan's banks never were stormy? "On Jordan's rugged banks I stand"; do they really want this restored? Do they wish to have everybody taught to say "Thus the blind Bartimeus prayed," instead of "Thus blind Bartimeus prayed"? Do they decidedly prefer "fav'rites of the heavenly King" to singing "children of the heavenly King"? All these are alterations, however, and most tasteful Christians have thought them felicitous; shall they be repudiated?

Then there are some changes of a more extensive kind. How would a modern singer relish a return to the figure of Toplady, precisely as he used it, in one verse of our familiar "Rock of Ages, cleft for me"—

"Whilst I draw this fleeting breath,  
When my eye-strings break in death"?

After singing the grand alterations made by John Wesley years ago—

"Before Jehovah's awful throne,  
Ye nations, bow with sacred joy"—

does anybody actually desire to return to the weak lines of Isaac Watts—

"Nations, attend before his throne,  
With solemn fear, with sacred joy"?

The real fact is, almost all criticism of the critics is insincere. Public writers and speakers in conventions seem to be resisting vandalism in variations; what they are doing is witty and often wanton.

Now and then it happens that a criticism is urged which shows a misunderstanding of the whole point at issue. The critics complain of changes, where there is only adherence to the author; and grow violent over the "tinkering," when what they really want is to make it. Let a little story serve for illustration. Some years ago, when the artless compiler of one of the modern hymnals was sitting in his study, a good brother in the ministry entered, and seeing his occupation, namely, an orderly selection for the choir on the succeeding Sunday, immediately started a complimentary conversation on the merits of the book.

"I like your collection," he said, "because you have courage and taste enough to resist this tinkering practice; you give the hymns accurate and honest as their authors wrote them." The humble singer was per-

fectly aware how the dialogue would end, and mischievously inquired for some particular lyric as an illustration. With a becoming measure of confusion at the sudden demand, the critic specified the one beginning, "There is a fountain filled with blood." And he continued: "Everybody claims that as in the original; you got it right at the start; some of them spoil it—absolutely run it out at the end." On further inquiry, it appeared that what was wanted was that the final stanza in particular should remain untouched. "Now Cowper—he was a poet; would you ever find him closing with such an insignificant couplet as this—

"When this poor lisping, stammering tongue  
Lies silent in the grave?"

Turning to the hymn, the compiler caught glimpse of a fact which might be embarrassing. The last verse did end in just that criticised way; hence his collection was open to the grave objection. "Now," continued the triumphant critic, pressing his point without suspecting anything of the author's anguish, "some of them have changed the places of the first two and last two lines—actually changed them! It seems as if William Cowper would turn in his grave to read it. You know how he ended the hymn with a burst of confident hope and exhilaration." So, with a befitting shout and gesture, the enthusiast rendered the lines:

"Then in a nobler!—sweeter!—song,  
I'll sing thy power to save!"

There was nothing to do now but to hand the orator the book; and when he discovered that he had praised the taste and skill which stood uncorrupted and brave to do a righteous thing—which was not done, he looked unutterable things at the culprit. But all the apology the humiliated compiler had to offer was, that Cowper wrote it as he printed it, and "Cowper—he was a poet," as had been remarked. But now came the swift reversal of judgment, and the adroit relief. After one hesitating moment, the man exclaimed: "Well, I declare! so you have it in the other way after all! But my way is better, a great deal better in every respect; it is more poetic, as I am a living man!"

That is to say: first, he praised a book for having steadily resisted all temptation to tinker; then he gave an illustration of tinkering as a fine art, which proved not to be tinkering but fidelity; in the next place, he sturdily stood up for a decided instance of impertinent tinkering in a popular hymn; and at the end he made it perfectly clear that, if he should become a compiler, he would tinker to his heart's content; for what his own taste preferred was better, far better, "as he was a living man!"

Since which period of discipline, this compiler has been unable to divest his mind of the thought, that many critics who assume to be amiably exasperated by the tinkering of hymns would be unamiably exasperated if the hymns were not tinkered when they had a chance at them.

It is difficult to conduct such discussions with seriousness, so picturesque are the poses in logic, and so comical is the confusion of results. The whole question is outside of logic; for men are never argued out of what they were not argued into. These changes are matters of taste and sentiment; hymns are creations of art, and so are hymnals designed for real use by the people of God in their worship. It is to be under-

stood that such heavy objurgations as these quoted are not intended to do harm; they appear to be passionate because they are imagined to be impassioned. The only way to deal with them is to meet the facts with pleasantness of exhibition, and then all of us go on singing.

These stories will be incomplete without the mention of an interesting scene in the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, as it was reported in the journals. In the course of debate, one of the members took occasion to comment on a verse of the hymn beginning, "Nearer, my God, to thee." He became so droll that loud shouts rang out in the serene air which that calm and dignified body generally breathes; "Take the platform! take the platform!" So the bright brother stood, a master-critic confessed, before the gathered sobriety of the land. And now he tore things to pieces. "Look at this perversion! instead of an exquisite image, 'Though, like a wanderer, daylight all gone,' we have this absurdity, 'Though, like a wanderer, the sun gone down'! Who was the wanderer? Was it the sun, or the author, or was it perhaps Jacob? [Laughter—notes the reporter.] Where had this wanderer gone down to? Did the sun particularly like that wanderer? [Roars of laughter—says the reporter.] And this in the place of an original line, as one of nature's poets gave it to the church and the ages,—'Daylight all gone'!"

Ten feet away from the smart speaker sat one of the oldest hymnologists in the land, looking over at him with an expression of amusement and perhaps wonder, as he saw him, like a beetle, sticking himself on a pin without the help of a naturalist. For he knew that what such people criticise is almost inevitably the true reading, and what is offered in its place is the "tinker." So he understood from habitual observation, that when men talk spitefully against alterations, it means that they would have altered the lines if they had had the chance. It was not at all the author's reading they wanted, but their own. As the gifted authoress wrote the hymn, the line stood, "The sun gone down"; and that was what the platform orator was making such fun of.

*Charles S. Robinson.*

#### Shall the Federal Government give Aid to Popular Education?

I NOTICE with great satisfaction that the Senator from New Hampshire has again introduced into the Senate his bill to "extirpate illiteracy"; and that a similar bill, differing somewhat in the details, has been presented to the House of Representatives by the Honorable Mr. Willis of Kentucky.

So the grave question is again presented to the people and their representatives, whether traditional doctrinaire interpretation of the Federal Constitution shall be allowed to prevent the wisest appropriation of money ever asked from the Federal Treasury. I use the words carefully when I say the "wisest appropriation," for in my humble judgment *nothing* can do so much to bind the sections in loving fellowship, to cement a more perfect union, and to establish firmly our republican institutions to all generations, as the appropriation of money by the Federal Government to enlighten the people of those States which cannot do this necessary work for themselves. The