

A JOURNEY TO A POLITICAL CONVENTION.

It was on the afternoon of a Saturday in June that I started from Jersey City with a dozen of my acquaintances, to see a convention which was to be held at Cincinnati. We had a neat and commodious sleeping-car, which was all our own, and we were not so many but that each man might have a window and two or three seats to himself. Cincinnati would be reached by the evening of the next day. The company numbered some of my best friends. For a good part of the way to Philadelphia the colors of sunset remained in the west. A beautiful light lingered on the rich and level meadows of New Jersey. When one is setting out for any distant place, the senses are apt to be awake. After leaving Philadelphia the beds were soon put up. I got into mine and lay awake waiting for Harrisburg, thinking that I might there catch sight of the Susquehanna, which is nowhere more beautiful than just before that town. I suppose I must have been on the lookout for Harrisburg before we had come within sixty miles of it. The moonlight without was almost like day. Every shadow which fell upon the window I supposed was Harrisburg. I often put aside the curtain, and only to see a ridiculous white shed, which stared at me a moment, and vanished. The splendor of the night gave to the shabby houses so common by the side of railroads in this country, a look of helpless absurdity, like that of sleep-walkers in dishabille. But those noble barns, which slept on the knolls in the deep pastures of Lancaster County, were not absurd, nor the villages, half a mile off, with a dozen red cottages, twice as many apple-trees, and a single rustic turret. I had been long asleep, when I was awakened by the creaking and slow turning of the wheels of the train, and I knew that we had passed Harrisburg and were crossing the Susquehanna just where the Juniata meets it. I looked out, and there lay the river, spreading its broad mirror to the moon. It lay as I had seen it ten years before, as it had lain through all these years, in which my eyes had been occupied with meaner objects.

The stream had come down from a region which had been at one time very well known to me. Sweeping the tall grasses of its bottom, it had flowed downward from the harvest fields of Lycoming and perhaps had

passed that day by sun-down the rose-embowered porches of Northumberland. The Susquehanna is a peculiar river. It is very wide and yet so shallow as to be of little use for navigation. But it is a great stream for flat-bottomed boats, and for long, dark and sounding bridges. These bridges are of wood and are usually black from the rains and the weather. They are very long and are nearly all closed in. Sometimes they are in the form of a bow, the rude stone piers upon which they rest emerging much farther from the surface in the middle of the river than near the shore. These bridges climb along the summits of the piles on which they rest in an often broken curve, or I should rather say, in a polygonal line. They look as if they had been jammed upward by the rising of the middle piers; and this gives them a rickety tenuity which is extremely graceful. Other bridges are straight. I say that they are all closed, and so indeed they appear from the outside, but once within them and they often seem to be very open. The planks gape, giving glimpses of the green water and the dripping rocks underneath. It is from this cause perhaps that the horses as they stumble through them wander from side to side, their hoofs making an unsteady yet deliberate thunder. The cobwebbed roofs are sprinkled with spaces of the blue sky. Through a plank on the upper side, half torn away, you look out into the light-hearted ether and upon the mottled bosom of the stream and see a morning solitude in which no step of man frightens yonder eagle from the dead branch of that tree by the river-side.

I say that the stream is mottled; this is because the stream is so shallow and the surface takes color from its many depths. It is, I suppose, because of the spots upon the water that the river, to one standing on the bank, appears to wheel; it seems to be revolving about your feet as a center with a radius of its own width. I believe that all streams appear to wheel in this way, but I have never seen the illusion so strong as on the Susquehanna; as the waters swing under the bridges, the bridges appear always to be either moving or just on the point of moving.

The upper Susquehanna is a region which I have not traversed in many years.

But I never, in going southward, cross the river at its mouth, where you look out upon the wide Chesapeake, without remembering that it flows from a land and a people which I once knew and loved. I remember a certain window upon a hill behind a village. I could not from this window see the river, because the village intervened between it and the Susquehanna, but in May I looked over a bower of apple-blossoms straight into the vernal bosom of the mountain opposite. I remember Northumberland, which is one of the most beautiful spots in the world. Here the two branches of the Susquehanna join, the one flowing from the fertile plains at the foot of Bald Eagle Range, the other from the far-famed region of Wyoming. At Northumberland there are islands in the middle of both the north and west branches, and these are joined to the banks by bridges. The walk from bank to bank is not a long one. I remember once walking the distance from bank to bank, late on a peaceful afternoon in June. The sun did not set in the west that day, but all over the land. The air was filled with an ample and brilliant light, and the sky sprinkled with wreaths of roseate clouds. I took that walk amid a bower of color. I followed the road along one of the islands, which seemed to me wonderfully wide, passing a gate-keeper's cottage, and stopping upon the bridge to look down where the water lay under rosy and ethereal vapors and clouds of sunset. I saw this Eden but a single time. It was a scene of light, beauty, and peace, which I can but faintly recall.

But I forget that I am on my way to Cincinnati. I passed that night the country of the Juniata, but on my return saw that verdant and undulating region refreshed by recent rains, the streams all full and the land lying deep-green under a darkened sky. When I rose the next morning the train was already descending the western declivities of the Alleghany Mountains. It proved to be a very hot day. All day long we journeyed through a vast mass of hot and sultry atmosphere. The pores of the cars, it seemed, must ooze under the weather. The train had gone but a few miles of our journey across the valley, when a little stream started up by the side of us and dogged our footsteps nearly the whole of the day. It ran not a dozen paces distant under my window, and was always there. Now and then taking for a moment a reluctant circle about the feet of the wooded

hills, it was soon back again, glittering steadily under my eyes, racing the faster the faster we rushed, and, the more insupportable the hour, spreading the cooler and shallower its web of waters among the stones.

The scenery of southern Ohio was very peculiar and to me very interesting. A forest without underbrush is almost unknown in New England. But as one passes the skirts of these Ohio woods there are no shrubs or bushes to conceal the trunks of the trees. The eye sees far in among their straight and clean ranks until the curious gaze is baffled by the uncertain and ever-vanishing images of the densely peopled interiors. This absence of underbrush gives to the forests a park-like appearance. I have never known any scenery so classical as the glades which border the forests of Ohio and Indiana. Here are scattered great trees with tall trunks. Here the May-apples line the blue-grass. The young Hoosier, in some hour of noonday *ennui*, when the fruit of the papaw has failed to afford pleasure and occupation, walking among the May-apples, has found on the green stem of one of these weeds a ripe apple, which, on tasting he discovers to be the most paradisiac surprise which he has ever taken in his mouth. He carries on his palate and in his fancy the memory of this elysian refreshment for a whole year. The next spring he sees in the same spot a thousand May-apple blossoms and he thinks that in the summer there will be a thousand May-apples. But when summer comes he finds that in a whole field of plants there is not a single apple. These glades in which the blue-grass is strewn with the May-apples, are, I say, the only spots known to me which my fancy has been able to people with the figures of the old mythology. The young men and women in the many colleges and seminaries of this region write poems and compositions upon the gods and goddesses of Greece, and when, on holidays, they go nutting and picnicing, perhaps carry with them into the woods these ancient stories. The glades are filled with deep shadows and abundant sunlight; the blue-grass sown not too thickly with the trunks of mighty trees might indeed have offered a tender carpet to the foot of Diana.

It was Sunday and the bells were ringing as we went along. Everywhere we saw the evidences of thrift and comfort. Great factories and the immense chimneys of furnaces lined the road. Many a cottage

with red roses before the door and white palings, it was easy to think to be the home of virtue and refinement. Here and there a new and smart dwelling with a fountain and a graven image or two in the garden bespoke the advancing fortunes of some energetic artisan. The farm-houses seemed to be larger and neater than those in the east. During the afternoon we fell in with the Little Miami, which we had on one side or another for the rest of our journey. We passed canoes steered by a girl and paddled by a young man in the bow. In other boats a man and wife and two or three children, out for an afternoon's pleasure, sat watching us until we were whirled beyond their horizon. In the midst of a clear and brilliant sunset we passed a pretty village which is on this river. The people were sitting out in the gardens before their porches or had left their Sunday evening tea-tables to run to the windows to look at us. The sight of such a fine people as we passed all along the road was most consoling to a man bound upon a patriotic mission. I looked eagerly at every face asking: "Are you a competent democrat?" There was hardly one which did not seem to me that of a man who might be a worthy member of a great progressive democracy. I have often thought that everything in this country seems to wear a vulgar air except the people. The boys who sold pop-corn, the men who stood on the platforms as we passed, all appeared to me to be promising and worthy democrats. On the other hand the varieties of the people on the train, being mostly politicians bound to Cincinnati, did not seem to me to be so nice-looking; these persons appeared to my prejudiced eyes to have very impudently mistaken their vocation. I listened to one of them who talked in a very loud and boastful strain. When asked if he thought that that result of the convention which he wished for would really happen, he said: "I don't think anything about it; I know it." This way of speaking I have observed to be very common among American politicians. An energetic prophecy is thought to assist its own fulfillment. Of course, the result which this politician prophesied did not happen.

Political conventions in this country are often held in very hot weather. They crowd to their utmost the towns in which they assemble. The rooms of the hotels have each three beds. The stranger who goes to look on and who is not likely to have ordered his room many weeks before

must usually be content with a top room on the inside. The air is stifling, so that it would be hard to sleep if he were alone; but as the other occupants, in the choice of whom he will not be likely to have a voice, have their own hours, even such sleep as the heat and the close air will leave him will be much broken in upon. The guests, as the phrase is (though in what sense a man is a guest who pays for his entertainment it would be hard to find out), dine almost by platoons. The food is, of course, bad. But were the discomforts infinitely greater than they are,—and the only serious one is that of having to get on with very little sleep,—a great political convention, even to the man who has seen it many times, is a sight which makes it well worth while to put up with them. One sees in the throngs which fill the towns many of the virtues and talents of a successful democracy. One sees also very clearly those peculiarities of our society by which a small minority of the people, totally unfit for the business of governing, are able to have their own way in the face of the public will. If the public attention were always very much awake and greatly in earnest, no doubt the people who rule these conventions would be compelled to obey it. But the public attention is rarely awake, while the persons who control these conventions are sleepless. We talk a great deal of the apathy of our people with regard to political matters; but the public attention has been awake several times within the last few years, or, what would be esteemed awake in some countries. But it is necessary here to feed the public attention upon ozone to bring it to any such condition of vitality as will impress the politicians. Before starting for Cincinnati, we had thought, the country being surely our way of thinking, that the ideas to which we were attached were of some consequence. But the journey taught us our mistake. Even before reaching the town, in our conversations on the way with various persons, we came upon indications which were like the weeds and floating branches seen by Columbus before he sighted the continent. But we were no sooner in Cincinnati than we discovered that our patriotic ideas were of no account at all. The members of the convention had come to make such a president as suited themselves, not to confer as to that one who should be the best or with whom the country would be best satisfied. When any one of them was spoken to concerning the need of better government and better

men in office, the reply was either an impassive stare or a nod of the head which showed that your remarks had not made much impression. There really appeared to be a feeling among them that it was an impertinence on the part of the country and of the press to have an opinion on a subject which was entirely their matter. What was still more singular was the indifference with which they listened to fears concerning the success before the people of the candidates whom they most favored. It was not because they doubted the truth of your vaticinations that they were indifferent, but because they were reckless concerning the matter and did not appear to care whether they were true or not. Their affections and their interests were on the side of one candidate and they were very willing that their party might run its chance of defeat, if at the same time their candidate might have his chance of success. The selfishness of the persons to whom such a grave task had been assigned was perfectly evident; there was no thought of disguising it and no pretense to any higher intentions. I heard "hifalutin" and demagogical talk only in the convention. But the halls and parlors of the hotel were full of people in a perfectly cool frame of mind. Most of them were in such complete ignorance as to what the result of the raffle would be that they hardly thought worth while to hazard a guess. They stood about under a great deal of red and white bunting adorned with the portraits of candidates and the coats-of-arms of the various states; drank lemonade supplied by the committees and continually mopped their brows. Our American politicians are always being introduced to one another. These people were very profuse in their introductions. "Governor, let me introduce to you Colonel —," and similar expressions were constantly heard. Some of them were "very happy" and "delighted," but the greater part did not seem to know one another after the ceremony any better than before. Particular halls and parlors were taken by certain states. The names of the states were over the doors. Alabama was just opposite Minnesota. Men carrying in their minds and recollections widely separate climes and landscapes, jostled one another and conversed in the same language. The looks of all these people were very much the same. A historical writer in describing some great gathering of ancient times can write in this fashion: "There was the rude

Acarnanian, his tunic scarce reaching to his knees; thither came the swart Lydian, his belt," etc. But the constantly increasing homogeneity of the country permits here very little diversity of speech, manners or dress. Here and there was a man from New York or Boston whose frock coat had caught a reflection of the latest rays of Poole. But most of the people wore the "ordinary dress" of an American citizen. There was the rich farmer's shiny broad-cloth; there was the gray coat, of a peculiar wooden cut, of the young master of the village store, who last week had retailed eggs and dry goods over the counter of his most familiar bazaar, and who next week would recount in the same place the news of the convention to his customers. The traveler in this country, however, must expect small amusement from picturesque diversity of attire among our people.

Still there was something very interesting to the imagination in the diversities of home and landscape which this crowd represented. But it was when they were gathered together into the great hall of the convention that they looked most like a mirror, a distorted mirror, of our vast land. I obtained one of the stage tickets, and from an elevation behind the platform, in company with some six hundred "distinguished persons," was able to look over the whole assemblage. On the morning of the opening of the convention, I came in from the stage entrance, and at the first sight of the hall felt that pleasurable surprise and elation with which one suddenly sees a vast building filled with a moving throng. The festooned flags and the other highly colored devices about the platform were very agreeable to the eye. The cheap and flimsy character of the decorations was most expressive of the short-lived uses for which they had been put up. You perceived that long before the bunting would be soiled or the evergreens faded, the public act for which the throng had been brought together would have been performed. The event concerning which we wondered and conversed so much, and scrutinized so intently every indication of the oracles, would be an old and stale story in every part of the land before these flags could be put away, this platform pulled down, and these wreaths thrown into the street. The crowd in the body of the hall were standing when I came in. There was a loud murmur of conversation and an incessant moving of fans. When the chairman's gavel had been

long going on the desk, they began to compose themselves leisurely, almost tardily, into their seats; yet they were soon seated. This steady confidence in its capacity to perform that for which it had been convened was one of the most interesting and imposing traits of the great body. There was no need to be in a hurry. Each hour had its special business. To-day a few well-understood steps would be taken, to-morrow a few more. A vote might be reached by to-morrow night, perhaps not till Friday, perhaps not even till Saturday. In due time, a candidate for president would be nominated, and then everybody would go home. But the convention was never so imposing as when the throng sat, black and silent, not a seat unfilled in all the countless and crowded rows, watchful and studiously attentive. In the midst of each group of delegates a staff had been set up, to the top of which was attached a placard bearing the name of their state. This array of pasteboard set on sticks gave one a sense of the great area which the assembly covered, and produced a strong effect upon the imagination and the sympathy. But the convention exhibited the homogeneity of the people of this country,—the “solidarity,” as the learned express it, rather than their diversity. It is true one or two of the orators proclaimed their localities in a decided and original manner. A little fellow from North Carolina who had mounted a chair and wildly waved a paper at the president, on being recognized ascended the platform and in a piercing voice announced to the convention that he was from “the tar-heeled state.” He had black trowsers and the long-tailed broadcloth coat, which, in old days in the South, was considered the most elegant and correct dress possible for a young man. He had also, I think, a green necktie. Another delegate from the far South nominated Mr. Stewart L. Woodford for vice-president, in the name of “the land of the magnolia and the mocking-bird.” But the aspect of the convention demonstrated that one race had filled and subdued the entire country. It was plain that the Yankee could whittle the palm quite as well as the pine. As I looked over the assembly I compared the predictions of Hamilton concerning the relations of the states to the country at large with the spectacle before me. Hamilton expected that the state governments would intercept and take to themselves the regard of the people; that they would shut out

from the view of the people the government at the Capital; that the idea of the central power would be remote and vague, and the idea of the state near and distinct. How plainly do these prognostications bring up before us the changes of ninety years! How like the composition of a school girl do the theories, concerning the future condition of society, of the most intelligent statesmen appear when compared with that subsequent spectacle which progress, necessity and accident have prepared. Hamilton could not foresee the time when a message could be made to travel the distance to the Pacific Ocean faster than the sun; when Cincinnati and St. Louis would be chosen as places for conventions because of their being in the center of population; when the distance from New York to Cincinnati would be twenty-four hours; when everybody would travel, and pretty much everybody would emigrate. Could Hamilton have seen the Centennial, we can imagine him seeking in the mind of each of the millions who visited the Vienna Bakery that clear sentiment of allegiance to his native or adopted state which he predicted must exist. Looking over the heads of the convention it was plain that though the members of that assembly were seated by states and voted by states, the states were to them mere governments on paper or instruments of utility. It was plain that the feeling toward the state among these people was at the most nothing more than that toward the region which afforded them a home; it was merely the inevitable preference of men for their own place. Such a sentiment as Hamilton had anticipated did not at all exist; the solidarity of the people had been accomplished. There was in this crowd a sense of one country, and a sense, not equally strong, it is true, but still sufficiently strong, of one government. In order not to be misunderstood, I should here say that there never was a time when the necessity of local self-government and the necessity of leaving to the states the control of their own internal affairs, were plainer than now. The states, though no longer the objects of a sentiment of patriotic regard, are still, and must continue to be, necessary instruments of utility and convenience.

I have said that you heard very little demagogical talk among the groups around the hotels, nor was there much to be heard in the convention. The convention evidently had such a poor opinion of the notions regarding the need of greater purity and

intelligence in government and such an accurate appreciation of their present weakness that they did not think it worth while to simulate them. The members of the convention who really favored these ideas were but a handful. The great mass had come there with no other intention but to push the fortunes of this or that leader, or to secure for themselves the best possible terms in case a failure should make a compromise necessary. What was the good of pretending to sentiments which were not respected and would certainly not win? I heard one despicable speech delivered by a man not a member of the convention, who had been called out to entertain the assemblage while the committees were preparing the resolutions. He was a dark, full-blooded person, with a powerful voice. At intervals during this man's speech his face would become a deep blue, his limbs would tremble violently and his obese form would quiver as if galvanized. His speech made me think of what sportsmen say of the song of the black-cock. This bird has three distinct notes in the song which he utters as a challenge to his rivals. He constantly repeats these, standing in the early morning, among his hens, under a fir-tree on an Alpine height. It is while he delivers the last of these notes that the hunter must take aim, for during its utterance his rage and passion are so great that he hears or sees nothing. His body trembles violently; froth issues from his beak; his eyes are covered with the nictitating and glittering membrane. I thought of this bird while this orator was speaking. But the black-cock is a noble creature, which, the hour before sunrise, sings its song of love and defiance, in a dark and snowy field among the highest Alps. At an hour and place when there was so much opportunity for wise counsel and patriotic eloquence, this demagogue shouted his false and empty words over the heads of the convention. An upright and cultivated citizen spoke immediately after. There was such evident purity of purpose, generosity and love of country in what he said, his address showed such an amiable contrast with the low views of certain other persons, that the eyes of many of the audience rested on him with peculiar kindness.

This convention was much like other political conventions held in this country. It may be well, therefore, to sum up the truth with regard to it, in a paragraph. It might, perhaps, seem rash so to treat an institution of such influence. But these conventions

are none the more respectable, their manner of proceeding none the less unreasonable and unscrupulous because they control the country. It was plain that most of the members of this convention should have had no place in it. It was plain that the convention performed foolish and unreasonable acts, and that its manner of conducting business was, in various respects, foolish and unreasonable. Office-holders should have had no place in it. In any well-arranged government, no office-holder is permitted to take part in political movements. An office-holder of course desires to keep the office which he has, or to get a better one. When permitted to be a politician, he works for that candidate from whom he has the greatest expectations. The success of his candidate being to him a matter of bread and butter, he works with greater assiduity, and at a greater advantage than any man whose intentions are merely those of a lover of his country, and a friend of progress. Office-holders thus find it easy to thwart the people in the primary meetings, and to send office-holders to the state conventions, who in their turn send office-holders to the national conventions. Were the office-holders kept from meddling with the business of politics, there would be none to thwart the wishes or inclinations of the public in primary meetings and conventions, unless it would be the office-seekers, and a stable civil service would take away from these the hope of reward which makes the motive of their interference. When a reasonable and decent civil service shall have been long enough established, the country will, no doubt, have got control of the conventions, or will have put in the place of them better means of bringing its aid to bear upon the administration of public affairs.

There were, besides, many other persons in this convention who should have had no part in it, because they were too ignorant and were possessed of too limited abilities to assist in the deliberations of a body having such important duties to perform. Do we think every man able to build a bridge? Why, then, should every man be able to govern a country? Many of these people would have been well enough if they had kept to such work as nature had intended them for. They became mischievous when, without any authority except that which accident and the inattention and helplessness of the country had given them, they assumed a part beyond their knowledge and abilities. The convention did very foolish and unrea-

sonable things. The gravest question of the time—one which affected seriously the moral welfare of forty millions of people, the honor of the nation before the world, the future of the country and the future of democracy—was settled scarcely more reasonably than if half a dozen paper slips had been put into a hat and shaken. It was a return to the foolish processes which made Presidents of Polk and Pierce. This plan indeed gave us Lincoln, and events have proved that the choice made at Cincinnati was a fortunate one, but fortune, and not the convention, is entitled to the credit of it. The convention's general manner of conducting business was unreasonable. It was certainly unreasonable if they considered themselves the responsible agents of the country. It was, perhaps, not so unreasonable if they were there merely to hurry through the job which would best suit themselves. A convention is supposed to be a deliberative body. There was indeed some deliberation, but it was altogether concerning unimportant matters. Not the least

deliberation was permitted with regard to the great act for which the convention had been called together. There was not the least opportunity for an interchange of "views," in case any one present had any. Had any speaker wished to give his reasons why it would be more difficult than at any previous time for the party to carry the election, and therefore why a certain course of action should be pursued, there would have been no opportunity to give them. Had there been such an opportunity, I doubt if any one would have dared to say such things. He would have made the convention angry, and the minority to which he belonged would have considered him a marplot and a busybody. No one seemed to represent himself. The convention was, of course, a very powerful body; it could well afford to smile in contempt upon opinions such as these, but these opinions are nevertheless true, and he can have little hope of his country who does not expect them to prevail.

JOHN ERICSSON.

By the roadside in a mountain hamlet near the iron-works of Langbanshyttan, Central Sweden, stands a pyramid of iron cast from ore dug from the adjacent mines and set upon a base of granite quarried from the hills which overlook the valley. Upon the face of this monument appears this legend:

IN A MINER'S HUT AT LANGBANSHYTTAN WERE
BORN THE TWO BROTHERS

NILS ERICSSON, JANUARY 31ST, 1802,

AND

JOHN ERICSSON, JULY 31ST, 1803,

BOTH OF WHOM HAVE SERVED AND HONORED
THEIR NATIVE LAND.

THEIR WAY THROUGH WORK TO KNOWLEDGE
AND LASTING FAME IS OPEN FOR EVERY
SWEDISH YOUTH.

The monument is placed at the turn of the road which leads to the village school-house, and, as if to point the "Swedish youth" to the first step in his progress toward "knowledge and lasting fame," it bears upon its reverse side this inscription:

THE WAY TO THE SCHOOL-HOUSE OF
LANGBANSHYTTAN.

Nils Ericsson was a man of unusual ability, and deservedly held high position in

Sweden as engineer of the canals and railroads of the kingdom, but his reputation is a local one; the name of his brother is familiar to all who have any knowledge of the progress of engineering science during the past half century. The two brothers were sons of Olof Ericsson, a Swedish miner. What is known of him and his wife, the mother of Nils and John, shows that the Ericssons come of no ordinary stock. The father-in-law of Olof was a man of property, but the transmitted property went no further, disappearing in unfortunate investments in silver mines. Thus it happened that to the grandsons fell the fortunate inheritance of poverty, and among John's earliest recollections is that of the seizure of the household effects by the remorseless hands of the sheriff. This occurred when he was five years of age. The wife of Olof was a woman of intelligence and refined tastes, and was intimately acquainted with the light literature of the time.

The early years of John Ericsson were spent among the hardy and industrious people who bring forth from the mines of Nordmark, Taberg, Persberg, and Langban more than one-fifth of the iron ore mined in Sweden. These iron mines are situated in