Book Review of The Great Metropolis

Lucian Minor
THE GREAT METROPOLIS:

By the author of "Random Recollections of the House of Commons."

This amusing book is presented to the American public in the cheap form of less than five weekly numbers of Mr. Theodore Foster's "Cabinet Miscellany"—at 192 cents a number: thus reducing to little more than 30 cents, a work of which the English price, we believe, is about two dollars.

"The Great Metropolis," every body knows, can be no other than London; and most minutely diversified are the particulars; in which Mr. Grant has ministered to the craving curiosity of all who speak and read the English language, with regard to that great heart of English life, manners, fashions, and literature. His descriptions, however, are not topographical: it is with the moral aspects and attributes—not the physical—of London, that he has to do. He does not give the dimensions of streets or buildings; or describe the gorgeousness, or the relative positions, of palaces, or churches, or Tower, or Monument, or squares. But, after a rapid and graphic view of those visible circumstances which would soonest catch an observant and philosophic eye upon a general survey of the city from some aereal station above it—were such a stand attainable—he carries his reader to the Theatres; introduces him (without danger of his being black-balled) into the Clubs; plunges with him into the Gaming Houses, and shows him the funds who tenant those "Hells" chaperones him then, through the three classes of Metropolis Society—the Higher, Middle, and Lower; and hastily, details (too minutely perhaps, but very entertainingly) the condition and statistics of the newspaper and periodical Press.

It is in this last one of his walks, that we (from professional sympathy, perhaps) accompany him with most pleasure: and we shall give, in a condensed form, a few of the many particulars which have so interested us.

The whole number of periodical publications in London, from quarterly Reviews down to daily newspapers, is fifty nine; every one of which, Mr. Grant mentions by name,—describing its moral, intellectual, and political (or religious) character, its age, price, editor, chief contributors, and extent of circulation. The daily papers are eleven; weekly papers thirty,—viz. five literary, and twenty five political or religious; quarterly reviews, five; monthly Reviews or Magazines, thirteen.

The Observer obtains its items of intelligence, on the whole, weekly, which make American newspapers. Besides keeping in regular pay, a strong corps of newspaper-reporters, it pays other persons three pence a line, for all they furnish, worthy of publication. The usual rate, with other papers, is but half that sum.

The Examiner's original articles are always full of wit and argument. You never read one of them without being struck with the brilliancy of some of the writer's ideas or illustrations. There is, too, a vein of quiet subtilty and profoundness pervading the whole of Mr. Vonhauzen's articles, which possess the rare good fortune of being equally perceived and admired by the most intellectual and the least informed readers of newspapers. Hence there is, perhaps, no weekly journal whose readers are in such equal proportions among the higher and lower classes. The Examiner never indulges in declamation. This is somewhat surprising, when you consider that Mr. Vonhauzen's attachments to his principles is not exceeded by that of any man. He feels strongly on all great questions; he never betrays the least warmth or violence of manner. "The Globe," when twitted some time ago by "The Times," on an alleged loss of credit to itself for being "as cool as a cucumber," if ever one journalist was entitled more than another to claim this credit for himself, that journalist is Mr. Albany Fonhauzen. How he would behave—whether he would take matters so coolly, were his house on fire, I know not; but amidst the sound of trumpets and the clashing of arms, in the political conflict, he retains the most perfect composure. Many persons, when looking at the agitation and excitement and surges of feeling, evinced by all his contemporaries on both sides of the question, have felt "The Examiner's" contentment to be provoking; how much more amusing must Mr. Vonhauzen's quietude of manner prove to his brother journalists, when they see themselves tossed up and down, in dealing with an opponent, which is the usual accompaniment of undue haste of feeling, his wit and irony are felt more sensibly by a delicate ear, than would be the most abusive language which it were possible to employ.

One great beauty of "The Examiner's" articles is, the singular ease with which they are manifestly written. There is no appearance of effort about them such as seems to proceed naturally from the writer's pen; as easily, indeed, as if he were unconscious at the time his most ingenious arguments and happy illustrations are following each other in rapid succession, that he was giving expression to any thoughts at all.

This sketch really exhibits our friend's ideal of a newspaper—an assemblage of all that is admirable and praiseworthy.

The following will remind the reader of many a "splendid failure" among the newspaper enterprises of the United States:

"It is amusing to contrast the bold pretensions and prodigious promises made in the prospectuses or first numbers of some papers, with the fate to which they are doomed. Not long since a weekly paper started on Conservative principles. Never was journalism ushered into the world with a greater number of subscribers. It was started for the purpose of rescuing the Constitution from the clutches of the Radicals, and of saving the Church from the destruction with which it was threatened by infidels. It was not the worst part of the joke, that the two editors engaged to conduct it actually, in their private opinions, both Radicals and infidels. The crisis to the country which this Conservative "Weekly" was designed to meet, was the loss of the number sold—a good many copies were given away gratis—but did not amount to thirty." After comparing, or rather contrasting, the newspapers of France with those of England; assigning to the English an immeasurable superiority both in the quantity, and in the character, of their contents;—Mr. Grant says—"It is curious to compare an English newspaper of the present day, with what it was at the commencement of the last century. Then, it only consisted of one leaf, or two pages, of the quarto size, each page divided into two columns. There was then not anything in the abash of papers of the proceedings in Parliament, in the course of law, or at public meetings. All the intelligence the newspapers of that day contained, was given in a few general paragraphs. Anything in the shape of original remarks or disquisitions, there was none. Indeed it was not until 1790, that the practice of making original observations in a paper, was resorted to. Even then it was rather in the shape of an essay on some literary or moral topic, than a discussion of any political question. The first original article that ever appeared in any newspaper, was an essay by Dr. Johnson in "The Universal Chronicle and Weekly Gazette," published by Mr. John Newbery, of St. Paul's Churchyard. This was in the year 1744. The "Universal Chronicle," was a paper of four folio pages, printed with a large type; and Mr. Newbery, the proprietor, in order to add a novel feature to his journal, engaged Dr. Johnson to furnish original articles for it, in consideration of which the great lexicographer was to have a share in the profits of the paper. The essays by Dr. Johnson furnished in "The Universal Chronicle," were afterwards republished in "The Idler.""

We have heard some eminent men speak contemptuously of the practice of "scribbling for newspapers," as a practice which they deemed far beneath them; and some of these, too, were men not unable to shine in a political essay,—had they been so disposed. Such has not been the opinion of many Minds in this country, whose talents and virtues would go far to sanctify almost any use. W. Pitt, Turnbull, (William) Livingston, Ames, Giles, Jay, Hamilton, Madison, and Franklin,—not to mention great living names,—were volun­

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deed, yet not far inferior to them in power,—furnishing articles to Reviews, magazines, and newspapers. Mr. Grant says:

"The character of the newspaper press of the metropolis, has been greatly raised within the last quarter of a century. Before that time no man of any standing either in the political or literary world, would condescend to write in a newspaper; or if he did, he took special care to keep the communications as great a secret as he had committed some public offence of the first magnitude. Now, the most distinguished persons in the country, not only often contribute to newspapers, but are ready to allow it, except where there may be accidental reasons for concealment. Many of our Peers, and still more of our representatives in the House of Commons, write for the London newspaper press. In speaking of the daily papers, I have mentioned some of the distinguished persons in the habit of writing for the London journals. Mr. Canning and Sir James Mackintosh, were both connected with the newspaper press, for a considerable time."

From the enthusiasm with which our author asserts the superiority of newspapers over other periodicals, we incline to suspect that he was himself once editor of one. Yet we do not know that we should differ with him in his preference; especially, if newspapers were always conducted in the spirit which he attributes to The Examiner and Observer.

"The newspaper," says he, "is incomparably the noblest and most useful purpose to which the invention of printing has been turned, for the making of the most glorious of the triumphs which typography, in all probability, is destined to achieve. The newspaper profusely comes home to the business and homes of men, and conveys the varied information and utility of the cyclo-pedina and almanacks! Why, these publications are not to be mentioned in the same breath with the newspaper; it addresses itself to our immediate wants; affords you that information, without which you could not spend even the day on which you have entered, with a degree of comfort. Deny us of our newspapers, and it is a calamity.

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his conceit as bright a thing as ever. Meaners, whatever share of understanding or feeling has been allowed him by nature, never wholly ailantificated: and the licentious of his mind are last and sunk in their kind, brute wish to line every thing levelled before his self-love."

In all this, we fear, there is much truth; not as respects the Edinburgh Review in particular—for that is not less impious, and certainly far older, than the Quarterly or any other existing Review—but as respects all criticism, which is not actuated exclusively by the desire to present, candidly and fully, the true character and a faithful summary of the works criticized. Some of the objections which we have already or borrowed, are perhaps successfully answered by Mr. Grant, in a passage which, though rather long, will so amply repay the trouble of personal, that we quote it entire:

"It has been objected to the prevalence of periodical literature among us, that it has generated a taste for light or superficial reading, to the neglect of works containing solid information and of established reputation. The assumption that standard works are neglected at the present day, is altogether groundless. They are, on the contrary, purchased and read in a much greater extent than ever. Ask a bookseller—the best possible station in life, possessed of literary talents of an order or other, he will have produced, would never have been known to public fame, 2. If a particular individual, is not essentially a precedent, he can almost at the present day. I pass, "conch, is the central case is (I have the circulation of our magazines and reviews, They are open to him, without the least, for the improvement of his abilities, and gratifying the world, by displaying his abilities in the pages of our magazines and reviews. They are seen to him, without any assistance, by any possible or expensive. Nor is this all. Should he feel that difference, which is usually the accompaniment of genius, and personally shrink from the public gaze, he can publish his articles anonymously, and thus ascertain what the public opinion is regarding his writings, without any one knowing whose these writings are.

"But such are some of the advantages of periodical literature."

(However just these remarks may be (and we concur in most of them), there are three cases which would impress upon us all readers of reviews; and with these cautions duly observed, we believe that the union of Mr. G.'s encomium upon that sort of reading, is true:"

1. Never rely implicitly on the reviewer's judgment upon the merits of the book reviewed, if it relates to any very important topic, or if the author, or his subject, be one likely to excite any bias whatever in the reviewer's mind: but appeal to the book itself, or to some review of a different party-complexion on that.

2. Be in like manner guarded against taking the reviewer's summary of what the book contains, as a satisfaction in full of your curiosity respecting it; if it be evidently a profound and solid work, not wholly foreign to your pre-determined course of study.

3. Do not let reviews (and far less, the lighter parts of periodical literature), which, after all, are for the most part comparatively truth and ephemeral, present you from deviating your chief attention to the established, standard authors of the language; Shakespeare, Bacon, Locke, Milton, Swift, Pope, Addison, Goldsmith, Hume, Robertson, Gibbon, Johnson, Cooper, Burke, Stewart, &c. These are the mines of thought, the classic models of taste, to be most deeply and curiously scanned. These

"exemplaria Gratiar"

Nec tenua versae sonum, veroe diurna."

Mr. Grant states a most serious accusation against Sir Walter Scott—lately, before he was known as the author of the Waverley Novels, he furnished a favorable Review of one of them ("Tales of My Landlord") to 'The Quarterly Review.' Sir Walter, however, is

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vindicated by the American Editor, who affirms that his article, carefully avoiding the utterance of any opinion upon the work, merely illustrated it; and that some obviously misplaced censures, which Mr. Grant alleges to have been designed as a stratagem, to attract the public sympathy and favor, were in reality meant but to keep up the author's whimsical incognito. We gladly embrace this latter construction, as most in keeping with the high integrity, which belongs to the consciousness of exalted talents; and which compassionately characterized the favorite writer of the present age. Mr. G. offers the following refutation of a common suspicion allen against authors:

"I know there is an impression abroad that it is quite a common thing for authors to review their own works. I may be pardoned for digressing for a moment while I state that the impression is altogether unfounded. My acquaintance with periodical literature generally, and especially with that of London, enables me to speak on this point in the most positive terms. Authors as a body, and the great majority of the editors of our periodicals, are men too high a sense of honor to be guilty of such conduct. Two instances only of an author reviewing his own works have come to my knowledge, out of nearly a thousand reviews which I have known to be published in the London press."

There is much that we wished to quote from Mr. G.'s book, respecting the thirteen monthly, and the five weekly, literary periodicals—the Gentleman's Magazine, which has now attained the venerable age of 104 years (having been established in 1733), and for which Johnson used to write; the Monthly Review, established in 1749, and numbering among its contributors, Smollett, Goldsmith, Johnson, Hume, Sterne, and HAwkesworth; the Monthly Magazine, begun in 1786; and others, less ancient but at present more ably conducted. But we have filled out our allotted space; and with one more extract, displaying in a lively manner the fallibility of human judgments, we shall end, for the present, our pleasant sojourn in "The Great Metropolis."

"On going through 'The Monthly Review' (says Mr. Grant) I have been often amazed with the erroneous estimates which the writers formed, of the merits of the works they noticed. Many authors, whose names are as unknown to us as to the inhabitants of Timbuctoo, were represented in that Review 50 or 70 years ago, as geniuses of the first magnitude; and a popularity wide as the civilized world, and lasting as time itself, was evidently predicted to them. Others, again, who were uncourteously and at once consigned to everlasting oblivion, are now, and will continue to be for generations to come, popular in no ordinary degree."

In one form or another, the same truth, so mortifying to those who entertain a divinity worthy to have health, peace, and life sacrificed at her shrine, has been reiterated times immeasurable: but by none so impressively, as Byron,* with whose exquisite lines we seize the pretext of a timely occasion, to beautify our page:

"Yet what avail the mainline poet's hope?
To conquer ages, and with Time to cope?
New era spread their wings, new nations rise,
And other victors fill the thrilling skies.
A few brief generations fleet along,
Whose sons forget the poet and his song:
Even now, what once revered Minervals scarce may claim
The transcendent mention of a dubious name?
When Fame's loud trumpet bath blown its noblist blast,
Though long the sound, the echo sleeps as last;
And glory, like the Phoebus mild her brace,
Exhales her odors, blazes, and expires."

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* English Bards and Scotch Reviewers.
† In allusion to Virgil:

"Tant ad ea via est, qua me quaeque passis
Tollere hunc, nictantium virum votisque per aera."

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