

## The Municipal League Convention

### Southern Cities Described ; Municipal Monopolies Discussed

From a Staff Correspondent



THE National Municipal League is now a National organization in the full sense of the term. Secretary Woodruff's report at the opening of the Baltimore Convention last week showed that nearly one hundred local leagues had been organized during the last year ; bringing the total number to more than two hundred and fifty. Every section of the country and nearly every considerable city is now represented. In several large cities the reform candidates had this year been elected, while in others they had been defeated by majorities so narrow as to promise the speedy recognition of the League's fundamental principle that National politics should be separated from municipal elections. Baltimore was one of the cities in which the League won an important victory. Here it did not obtain from its victory everything for which it hoped, but it secured from the State Legislature an election law which will make impossible the repetition of the disgraceful scenes of last November. No "machine" will again dare to fill the streets of Baltimore on election day with gangs of repeaters, many of them so unfamiliar with the city as to be unable to find their way around the streets. In New Orleans the reform victory has proven greater than the reformers expected or even desired. One of the most interesting incidents of the Convention was the reading of a private letter to Mr. Woodruff from the Secretary of the New Orleans Municipal League describing the embarrassment of power now possessed by the League. The young men of New Orleans, wrote Mr. Spencer, who a few months ago were ridiculed as "callow visionaries," are now treated with the most profound deference, not to say subservency, by the managers of both the old political parties. The Municipal League candidates for the Legislature hold the balance of power in that body, which decides who has been elected Governor and who shall be elected United States Senator. Each party is ready to grant the League any legislation it asks, if the League's representatives will support its candidates.

The subjects considered at the Baltimore Convention which have not been discussed at any length at the previous meetings of the League were municipal conditions of the South and public ownership of municipal franchises. As regards the South, not only Baltimore and New Orleans, but Richmond, Memphis, Nashville, and Atlanta, were represented in the papers read. In the main these papers described municipal conditions common throughout the country, but many features peculiar to the South were brought out. In Richmond, for example, the new League for Good Government, which has already enrolled 6,000 citizens, is entirely within the Democratic party. This limitation, said the writer of the Richmond paper, was essential to the life of the League. In two or three of these Southern cities the councilmen are elected on a general ticket instead of being chosen by wards. In this way negro councilmen are effectually shut out ; and, it was urged, a more capable body of men are elected than by the district system. This feature of these Southern charters is likely to be accepted in the North if, as some members of the Convention urged, proportional representation is to be adopted. Men from the smaller cities, where the wards are small and the councilman is personally known to all his constituents, believe that there is a great disadvantage in abandoning the ward system. The interests of certain wards, they point out, would be likely to be ignored were all the councilmen elected on a general ticket. But to people in large cities, where no one has a wide acquaintance in his own block, to say nothing of his own ward, the loss from the abandonment of the ward system seems less important. With the abandonment of ward lines and under propo-

tional representation, it was contended, each group of independent voters could get representation according to its numbers, and would not find its campaign deadened at the outset by the knowledge that it must gain everything or nothing.

Some of the representatives of Southern cities were inclined to boast of ideal conditions already obtained. According to the Atlanta paper that city was so overwhelmingly Democratic that people had become accustomed to ignoring National party lines in municipal contests. Many Republicans had been elected to the Council, and at least one had been elected Mayor. The representatives of Memphis and Nashville, however, were not inclined to picture the situation in their cities as idyllic. Mr. Lindsay, of Nashville, in describing the situation there, narrated the division that had taken place in the Board of Fire Commissioners when the Chief of the Department was tried for drunkenness. One of the Commissioners belonged to the reform faction, and he was determined that the Chief should be dismissed, no matter how little intoxicated he had been ; another belonged to the same faction as the Chief, and he was determined that the Chief should not be dismissed, no matter how much intoxicated he was. The doubtful member, after hearing the arguments on both sides, took the delicately balanced position that "while the man had been too drunk to be a Chief, he did not think he was sufficiently intoxicated to bar him from the position of Assistant Chief." This position was accepted, and the half-drunken Chief disposed of accordingly. The paper from Memphis described the exceedingly trying conditions through which that city had passed since the war. In the manner so customary under carpetbag government, the city was saddled with a debt for which it received only about one-half as much cash as the bonds issued by its public officers called for, and taxation rose to a point which threatened the abandonment of the place by many of the taxpayers. The Legislature came to its relief, by revoking its charter as a city and making it a taxing district—the Legislature levying the taxes by which public expenses were met. While in this condition, the city—or rather place—compromised with the bondholders upon a basis of about fifty cents on a dollar, and was finally restored to the condition of a city again. At the present time, singularly enough, it finds its most serious grievance in the extent to which it is still governed by the Legislature. Two-thirds of the time of that body, said the Memphis speaker, was devoted to questions of city government. The demand for home rule was as strong in Memphis as in any city in the North.

Altogether the best paper from the South was that of Mr. Arthur Dasher, of Macon, on "Municipal Reform in Georgia." It was full of moral earnestness, and showed how Southern men of finer fiber feel concerning the compromises with morality accepted by their party upon the plea of necessity. Carpetbag rule, said Mr. Dasher, was almost as disastrous for the South as the war. "To overthrow it the white people banded together, and where fair means failed they tricked the negro or openly bribed him." "Under the sophistry that the end justifies the means, they committed acts that before the war would have disgraced them. This lowered public sentiment to the point where it would tolerate fraud and trickery, and it is small wonder that gradually our best statesmen were supplanted by the creeping in of rascals. From tricking the negro they began tricking each other, until, as a natural sequence, disreputable methods begot disreputable candidates, who, after getting into office, sought to intrench themselves by forming rings. These rings, by the law of affinity, combined the liquor element, the ignorant foreigner, and the negro, and managed to nullify the vote of the decent

element." The hope of the South, said Mr. Dasher, lies in either an educational qualification to the suffrage or an Australian ballot law to prevent the bribing of the negro. "Registration as a prerequisite to voting has recently been adopted in most of our cities, but it does not go far enough. The politician has learned how to avoid it, although he does so at the expense of both time and money." In illustration of this statement Mr. Dasher told how in one of their cities three hundred negro laborers had been imported into the State to do contract work. The politicians instructed them how they could register, and fully ninety-five per cent. of them did so successfully. All of them sold their certificates to a certain barkeeper for one dollar and a drink each. The only strong demand for reform, said Mr. Dasher, came from members of the Protestant churches who are spurred by their religion to protest against the abuses.

The discussion of public ownership of municipal franchises was especially noteworthy for the further evidence it afforded of the tendency among municipal reformers to regard the protection of citizens against extortion as an essential part of the business government of cities. Even the speaker who most strongly opposed the public ownership of public franchises vigorously condemned the present system of allowing municipal monopolies to charge what they pleased, subject only to the occasional interference of a legislature most of whose constituents were not affected by the evils complained of. This speaker demanded that the people of every community should have the right to control the charges for gas, water, transportation, and telephones, subject only to revision by the court in case they went too far in reducing charges. Where this was the most conservative position taken, it may be imagined that the drift of the discussion was strongly in favor of direct public ownership. Mr. Charles Richardson, of Philadelphia, the founder of the National Municipal League, read the paper in favor of municipal ownership. He dealt especially with the street-car problem. It has become a frequent occurrence, he urged, for streetway companies to pay dividends of sixty per cent. upon the capital actually invested in them. One-tenth of these dividends represents the property the investors have lent to the public. The remainder represents the property the public has lent to these investors. Competition affords no remedy; and public control affords but an inadequate one, because the private corporation is kept constantly in politics, corrupting councils, and in other ways defeating the public interests. The city cannot secure the revenue which belongs to it from the value of the franchise, or the low fares to which its citizens are entitled, unless it directly owns the plant. Two features of public ownership which Mr. Richardson brought out strongly are worthy of special attention. In Philadelphia, he said, it is estimated that possibly 70,000 persons are pecuniarily interested in protecting the street railway companies against the reduction of fares justly demanded by the public. These people, especially the larger stockholders, are given an interest diametrically opposed to the public interests, and good citizenship on their part is thus deadened. With public ownership this incentive to indifference on the part of the well-to-do classes will be removed, while the poorer classes will be given the direct interest in good city government essential to a thoroughgoing municipal reform. Mr. Richardson urged that the extension of the power to the city government would not extend the patronage of the spoilsmen. The people submitted to the evil of patronage only when it was a minor grievance, just as men will put up with an inefficient workman in a subordinate position when they would not consent to placing such a workman in charge of their business. The enlargement of the city's activities will make the systematic reform of the civil service not only necessary, but it will make it of vital importance to the poorer classes, which are especially interested in the conduct of municipal enterprises by and for the public. The real source of bad city government, urged Mr. Richardson, is public indifference, and measures which arouse the interest of all classes in the faithful conduct of the government are those which promise an enduring reform.

## Unconscious Revolutions

By Thomas Wentworth Higginson

Perhaps the most striking social formula contributed to our times was that incidentally uttered half a century ago by the veteran English reformer, George Jacob Holyoake, when he said in his newspaper, "The Reasoner," that the unconscious progress of fifty years was equivalent to a revolution. It is one of the pleasures of advancing years that this thought grows more and more impressed upon us. Another English reformer, on a higher social plane, the late Hon. Mrs. William Grey—to whom was largely due, with Lady Stanley, of Alderley, the establishment of Girton College—told me, in 1872, that when she looked back on her youth and counted over the reforms for which she and her friends had then labored, and saw how large a part of them were already achieved, it almost seemed as if there were nothing left to be done. It is the same with many Americans who suddenly have the thought come over them afresh that, no matter what happens, negro slavery is abolished on our soil. In the larger movements that affect whole nations, we hardly appreciate the changes that have come until we look back and wonder what brought them about. To reflect that Pope Alexander VI. once divided the unexplored portions of the globe between the Spaniards and Portuguese, as the two masterful nations of the earth; that Lord Bacon spoke of the Turks and Spaniards as the only nations of Europe which possessed real military greatness; that the Dutch Admiral Van Tromp once cruised with a broom at his masthead, to show that he had swept the British fleets from the seas—all this impresses us as being something almost as remote as the days of the plesiosaurus or the mylodon. Yet we have seen before our eyes a transformation more astounding than any of these in the utter vanishing of the French military prestige. Probably one reason of the revived interest in the Napoleonic tradition is in the restored wonder of that period when merely to be French was to be formidable. It lasted really unbroken down to the Crimean War, during which the French still seemed, compared with the English, like trained men beside honest but clumsy school-boys. In 1859 Matthew Arnold wrote from Strasburg, then still French: "He [Lord Cowley] entirely shared my conviction as to the French always besting any number of Germans who came into the field against them. They will never be beaten by any other nation but the English." A few years later this whole illusion suddenly broke and subsided almost instantly, like a wave on the beach. When our Civil War began, every tradition of our army, every text-book, every evolution, was French. The very words were often of that language—*échelon*, *glacis*, *barbette*. There sprung up everywhere Zouave companies, with gaiters. Since the Civil War our whole system of tactics is modified and simplified, our young officers are sent to Germany to study the maneuvers, and our militiamen are trained by the *Kriegspiel*. In short, there has passed before our eyes a change of position as astonishing as that under which Turkey, Spain, and Holland became insignificant powers.

It is to be further noticed that our eyes are kept veiled up to the very moment when the thing occurs. At the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war, a deluge of war-maps suddenly appeared, both in London and Paris. They were invariably, however, maps of North Germany and the Rhine provinces, and were of course utterly useless. There is no race, on the whole, more blind than statesmen. Lord Shelburne predicted that with the loss of the American colonies "the sun of England would set and her glories be eclipsed forever." Burke, whom Macaulay ranks above all others in foresight, pronounced France to be in 1790 "not politically existing" and "expunged out of the map of Europe." Mr. Gladstone thought that Jefferson Davis had created not merely an army but a nation. Other similar instances are collected in the opening chapter of that very remarkable book, Mr. Charles H. Pearson's "National Life and Character," which is, in spite of its needlessly dreary conclusion, more suggestive and interesting than Nordau and Kidd and Balfour all rolled into one, and yet has not, like them, been received with any attention.