

MISCELLANY.

[Prize Oration of H. P. Barrett; Chase & Wheeler Contest.]

ERASMUS.

The misery of the Dark Ages is unpleasant to contemplate. Such a maze of doubt, prejudice and passion fills the interval between then and now, that they seem to modern remembrance like an almost forgotten dream; and the characters which appear in the Reformation dawn, exposed to an unequal light, seem distorted and misshapen. Yet we turn repeatedly from today and the future to ask of those bygone centuries, why? whence? how? And it is right. Not alone for individuals, but for mankind, experience is a dear, but efficient, teacher.

Long before the Reformation there were mutterings; Wycliffe and Huss augured the coming morn of civil and religious freedom; but, though we study these almost unconscious movements with curious interest, that which most inspires our thought is the awakening time itself; with Luther and his contemporaries we most deeply sympathize. True to something almost an instinct, succeeding generations have grouped contemporary history about that character which personified the genius of the Reformation, and have rendered to Luther something akin to adoration. It is too much; and if to increase the meed of others' praise subtract from the glory of Luther, it is—just. The Reformation was not the creation of a man, a people, or a generation. Centuries had been pregnant with it; the throes of three generations hardly sufficed to give it birth.

Contemporary with Luther was Erasmus. Similar, yet unlike, they stood side by side, at times, face to face—the Reformer of Wittenberg, the Scholar of Rotterdam. In Luther's character the essential element was force; though narrow, he was intense. With him, to think was to believe; believing, he acted. By a process, as inevitable as his being, his faith became creed. To Erasmus, by nature diffuse, dogma was impossible. Though cosmopolitan, he had an element of weak and timid subservience that, until we study the man, makes us despise him. Luther's Bible, and his hymns, touched the German heart; have been thought not unworthy of other tongues. Erasmus, from circumstances of birth and education, could call no place home; he would learn no vernacular, and his Greek and Latin reached only the learned few.

If a reformer be one who creates, rather than leads, a reform, no one is worthy the name; but if it be he who so gathers in his thought the elements of the movement that he becomes its naturally accepted leader, Luther was a reformer. Some have thought to give Erasmus a like dignity and, by making him a reformer, to subtract from Luther's fame; and Erasmus did desire reform, and to a certain extent saw what needed reforming; but, although his name is the sign of a mediæval idea, Erasmus was not a reformer; he did not strike at the root of the evil. Monasticism was corrupt, he would reform it. Wickedness had so polluted the Papal Church that it was intolerable; civil and ecclesiastic tyranny had pushed the lower classes to the wall, till mere brute instinct would prompt to rebellion; but Erasmus would wait the slow effects of an uncertain education for that which required instant relief and would retain both monasticism and the Papacy, not perceiving that the former must be destroyed, the latter dethroned, ere reform could come, or education do its work.

Other requisites of a reformer Erasmus lacked. Juster with himself than are his admirers, he frankly confesses that he is not the stuff from which martyrs or reformers are made; that not even for the truth would he suffer. It is natural that Luther should stand before a Diet at Worms with the words,

"I cannot otherwise;" equally so that Erasmus should flee with timid fear from the plague, seek the society of a learned aristocracy and bow subserviently to the commands or threats of his superiors in power. Yet when safe he assailed corruption in unmeasured terms and showed a freedom of thought in civil and religious things that made him feared and hated; and through it all he pursued learning with a zeal that never flagged.

Erasmus was no reformer. What then was he? If he did not lead the reform, what did he do? He was first of all a scholar,—the scholar of his time. From his young years his passion had been for letters. Suffering, almost starving he still clung to what seemed a part of his existence, and death at last o'ertook him yet working with his books. His work, and that of the learned aristocracy at whose head he stood, was of no mean importance. By cultivating a spirit of literary criticism they struck at the infallibility of the Latin Vulgate and priestly interpretation; their repeated editions of the classic authors spread through the upper strata of society a generous humanism—a humanism whose warming, mellowing influence could be only beneficial on the frigid scholasticism of the age, and which was potent, though indirectly, with every class. Yet because the learned ones refused to probe the most crying evils of their time they forfeited their position as leaders of the reform, their work was preparatory and of secondary importance. But the subtle influence of a thought cannot be estimated as we count the slaughter and devastation of war; nor is it too much, to say that Luther would not have seen success had not Erasmus and his fellows done their part. If Erasmus does not take equal rank with Luther, if they did fail to understand each other, it is our privilege to appreciate both and hail them co-workers.

It is said by experienced heads that an oration which does not contain something about Luther, the Reformation, the French Revolution or some kindred subject is of no account. It cannot be said on the other hand that every oration which dwells upon these subjects is good. An example recently came to our notice and we deem it worthy of remark. The choice of "The French Revolution" as a subject is to be expected. Students find these subjects, which are trite to older heads, repeatedly new to them, and we consider nothing more foolish than the sneer which the higher class-man bestows on his less advanced colleague for choosing such themes. It is in the treatment that our friend shows his failing. He gives himself up to that tendency to flashy, high-sounding phrases which have little meaning. In glancing through the article in question such phrases as "seas of blood," "tragedy of the world's history," "refulgent with celestial light" appear at every turn of thought. It sometimes takes a long time for a young writer to learn that it is best to express his thought in plain and simple words, rather than to cover it with words whose meaning only the learned will understand. A "crown refulgent with celestial light" sounds well, but it means nothing. Farther, this craving for striking diction leads the writer into several inaccuracies. It is a favorite idea with some that the orator should aim to move, and that for this end any means are justifiable; that he may perpetrate an untruth provided his hearers are ignorant that it is such; an extravagant assertion may be made even though the hearers be aware of its character, provided that, outreaching their prejudice, it gains their sympathy. We take it that nothing can more effectually hinder oratory from subserving its true end than this laxity of statement. The orator should always have something to prove true; and, having that, an over-statement of the case will inevitably be detrimental in the long run.