

:-: The Average Thought of the Average Mass of Men :-:

In a recent western magazine, a prominent member of the Oregon bar laid down and maintained the proposition that the controlling opinion among men is based, not upon the thought of so-called leaders, but upon the average thought of the average mass of men.

This idea so strongly appealed to investigation to determine its accuracy, that I have thought along several lines indicated by it, and to somewhat surprising conclusions. True, my deductions are particular applications of a proposition not laid down as a principle, and do not prove it, but I beg leave to submit some evidence sustaining the contention of the learned Oregon jurist. It is difficult to arrange this evidence, either with reference to sequential chronology, or in the logic of language to fit a climax as a conclusion without suggesting the dramatic, and certainly I were at sea in such an attempt.

That the leaders of men are not often those who think out the propositions that give occasion for leaderships, is not to the point, though here set down for the express purpose of putting it aside as having nothing to do with the question.

But a closely allied idea, having much to do with it, is, that those who are recognized leaders of thought are often not accredited such in their own time, and even though they be established, their full merit is deferred to future generations for appreciation and that then its force is spent. Thus they seldom benefit their people or country by either the greatness or independence of thought, in their own age and, wherefore, other thought is necessary to the accomplishment of such benefit.

The most notable exception of this fact that I have discovered is the late William E. Gladstone. It would seem that he did all his work and attained the full measure of reputed greatness of thought long before he died. To my mind, Mr. Gladstone possessed the greatest fund of knowledge ever attained by a human being. He was not the most learned man of his time in any one branch of learning, yet his quantity of knowledge covered so great an area of human wisdom, and, to a general extent, was so vast that he seemed to have traversed the entire field of human knowledge, in every direction, to its limits. Of course this is an exaggeration of his knowledge, but I can not otherwise give a proper idea of my humble judgment of the extent of his understanding as distinct from his specific knowledge of particular subjects.

And yet, possibly, everything he stood for, in one of the longest and most intimate public lives known to our civilization, has so adjusted itself to the affairs of men by virtue of the opinions of the mass of men, that he is unidentified as the one who thought out a single problem accepted by the controlling mass of thought. He led among the thinkers of his day, but the average mass of men dismembered and readjusted his great thoughts to suit themselves. Indeed, his greatest repute was gained in adapting his own thought to the moral force of the mass of thought which he had provoked by sincere and honest opposition, but that is nothing to the present purpose.

Cato led the thought and thinkers of Rome. Cato the shrewd and keenly observant, the politician, statesman, economist and philosopher; absolutely honest and truthful; whom Caesar feared and Pompey courted, and who was the often ungentle master of Cicero and whom Brutus emulated in private character. He led all Rome in thought, and yet, notwithstanding that upon every occasion of apprehension or distress all eyes were turned to him, as though he were the only one upon whose guidance and advice they could with security rely, when he could have saved Rome he had no following. Truly the fate of the prophet in his own land never had so patent an illustration of its truth. His thought was no part of that of the mass of men; he stood apart from men, mentally, so far that the superiority of his very wisdom left him alone, without support even to the purpose that all desired; and from the beginning at Pharsalia, with his death to the end of all at haphazard Philippi, that leadership of thought among the greatness of all Rome lacked the support of the men whose thought constituted the mass that furnished the average that led to ruin. Had it supported the thinker, Rome had been saved, as had the thinker as well.

The czar of all the Russias proposed the peace of nations resulting in The Hague conference of 1899, and yet his diplomacy, or

lack of it, precipitated him into a losing war with a nation without then accredited leadership among men. Further, he stands, in a sense, sponsor for the general proposition of peace among the nations of the world, whilst unable to influence his own dominions to even a disposition for peace under the conditions he is willing to grant or accept. He is the accredited leader in the thought, and yet, what does he lead? The proposition he advances meets with the approval of the majority of the leading thinkers of the world, and yet, never before in all human history were nations so heavily armed, both for offensive and defensive warfare; nor is there the slightest evidence of any physical effort towards disarmament.

On the contrary, the thought of many of the leaders is at this moment concentrated upon some contrivance that will make warfare so terrible and questionable a method of adjusting differences as may leave the possibilities of destruction so chaotic, that new schemes are earnestly being thought out to overcome it. This again leaves the thinkers at sea and the average opinion of the average mass of men must determine the outcome. And of a verity it will.

We, in America, are only now beginning to appreciate the statesmanship of Abraham Lincoln, whom E. M. Stanton refused to be associated with in an ordinary law suit, as humiliating to his professional dignity. Nor did the great ability of the latter much help the former in adjusting circumstances in consonance with the voice that expressed the opinion of the average mass; and without a statesmanship to appreciate which on Lincoln's part who can say what would have been the result? Indeed, it was Lincoln's full appreciation of the average opinion of the average mass of men that made him so truly great; and the lack of which has made us so tardy in appreciation of that greatness. His faith was absolute in the ability of the people to "wobble right." He thought greatly, but adjusted his thought to the controlling opinion of those who, in the end, must determine. Such greatness of thought has seldom been noted in man, and by that fact we may the better understand how great Lincoln was.

Tom Paine, on the other hand, led the people of Paris into an anti-Christian mass of thought, and the leaven of the mass worked out the French revolution. Today we have a Clemenceau working along somewhat similar lines, and we learn that the thought of the leaders of France tends towards a nihilism, the which lacks danger only in the absence of a sustaining average in the thought of the mass, and which, once centralized, may produce another upheaval, the character of which no man can determine.

Francis Bacon was esteemed a highly learned man in his time and Shakespeare but a vulgar player, and yet the wisdom of the one and the literary product of the other lead today in the world of thought and literature. The thought of Bacon lives in proper influence among the thinkers of the world today; and, possibly, no man has interpolated the philosophy of Aristotle with more pregnant meaning; and yet, in his day, the average thought of the mass of men controlled all human effort, to the all but total exclusion of this great thinker from participation in the solution of questions that his thought might have aided in solving.

The application of the thoughts of Bacon to men has been made by Shakespeare, and the wonderful accuracy with which he clothes them with virtues and vices, with weakness and with strength, with dispositions to respond to moral suasion as well as to resist its influence, places him also among the leaders of thought without a following. Destitute of all power to influence in his time, can it be truly said that his influence as a thinker is felt now?

Bearing in mind the natural susceptibility of great thinkers to the impress of the environment of their time, how may we estimate the worth of thought that depends, more often than not, upon succeeding ages, not controlled by similar influences, for an appreciation of its merit. And even then, how may we affix the great thought of a century or longer past to an adjustment of our affairs? And this necessitates the existence of a controlling thought as the necessary influence among men, and it gives virtue to the idea that not the thoughts of leading thinkers, except as they may be contributory, but the average thought of the average mass of mankind determines all human affairs, and necessarily such intervening ques-

tions as interweave themselves with such determination.

Napoleon, dealing with men and bending them as a sacrifice to his purpose, more suggestive of a vanity than the worker out of a great thought, accomplished all in drawing about him and centering in himself the unformed mass of thought that, lacking cohesion, was as clay in the hands of a moulder. Without that unthinking mass Napoleon was all but a nonentity. A great thinker, a man of great mind, or, even of great mental purpose, could not have lived six years at St. Helena and left not one single thought of benefit to the world. Neither his successes nor his defeats left him with thought great enough to teach the world the simplest lesson. Could it be that between 1792 and 1815 Napoleon Bonaparte had learned nothing? Is it possible that he alone, stripped of all opportunity to lead others, in the physical sense, was helpless to advise others how to avail themselves of one condition or to avoid another? And yet, so it seems. Without something to physically work out his thought, he apparently had no thought. This leaves to Alexander as great thought as Napoleon, for we have no evidence of any thought contributory to the benefit of mankind, to even the putting of one stone upon another, that we had not known the science of before. Thus the greatest and most successful military genius of modern times, dependent wholly upon himself, seems bereft of all thought, and we must deny fruit to a tree that will not yield.

Mohammed fled from Mecca with a handful of his faithful followers, and in the depression succeeding the loss of opportunity to work upon the Saracen mass and, possibly, the effect of his physical disability, contemplated suicide. But when his nephew Ali brought to his support those whose opinion gave strength to his purpose, though indifferent to his thought, the Koran became a possibility. And when the thought of the mass sustained the prophet's thought, through the reigns of Caled and Ali, and was made conformable to other characteristics of the Saracen, it was then that Mohammedanism became a fact. The prophet did not create that thought in the minds of the mass; but after a sufficiency of throat cutting among themselves, they enmassed under the accepted thought of the prophet as their thought; and for over seven hundred years, as a mass, held Christianity in check, whilst for nearly one-half of that time they battled with each other to determine which mass should be entitled to the credit of the thought, almost wholly ignoring the thinker.

Alexander filled the minds of his followers with the vanity of victory and he stood for not one single thought of either good or benefit to mankind. He was the champion military prize fighter of his age. As he sat upon the throne of Cyrus, at the height of his career of success, his whole army was controlled by but one impulse, the acquisition of gold and slaves, their previous supply having been dissipated that they might desire more, nor did their great leader resent such interpretation of purpose. His thoughts were idle, and, though schooled by Aristotle, he laughed him to scorn when his philosophy interfered with his lack of purpose and would give direction to his conduct of government and affairs. Thus the mass of thought controlled Alexander, and when it varied from his wishes he fell helpless before it and begged for favor.

Today the purest philosophy known to man is that which we identify in origin with Aristotle, over twenty-five centuries ago, and whilst Alexander threatened him with death because of arguments that reasoned against the warrior's lack of thought and purpose, we seek at that font for an understanding of the principles of human knowledge that were then ignored. Aristotle is the recognized leading thinker in all the world's wisdom, and yet it was the average mass of thought that led in his day.

Was it the dead Nelson who was the real victor at Trafalgar? Truly he was the figure around which was formed and which concentrated that quality of mass of thought that probably made the victory all it was. And yet who will dare say that the noble and generous Callingham had not been the victor had Nelson never left the bay of Gibraltar?

The army of Greece, in ignorance of their loss, sailed safely home under the leadership of the body of the dead Cimon, for thirty days; and yet, once arrived, and their loss was made known, there was none to whom they could look