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THE
YALE LITERARY MAGAZINE.

VOL. XXX.

FEBRUARY, 1865.

No. IV.

EDITORS FOR THE CLASS OF '65,

TUZAR BULELEY,

ALLEN McLEAN,

TOLIVER S. CASKEY,

CHAS. E. SMITH,

WM. STOCKING.

Public Opinion.

It would be difficult to overestimate the force of public opinion. In every established community, that system of laws and principles which has gradually come into general acceptance, is the real controlling Power, the Law, and in many cases, the Bible and Conscience of the individual. Even the fundamental principles of politics and religion can not be enforced or applied, except as they are approved and required by the prevailing tone of the public mind. In Spain, the good Christian can lie and steal; in South Carolina, compel his servants to adultery; in Indiana, vote half a dozen times; in Yale College, sign his name to a bogus church-paper; and in neither case does the noonday act seem to disturb the sincerity or quietude of the morning and evening devotions. This is not, in some cases at least, because the individual is dishonest, but because he takes the prevailing sentiment as his standard.

Public opinion, therefore, when rightly directed, becomes a source of the highest good; misdirected, the producing cause of every evil. Rightly directed—in a Monarchy it is a potent check on rapacity, immorality and wrong in court, and upon violence and crime in the people;—in a Republic it fences in rulers with restraints which they dare not overleap, and guards at once the liberties and morals of the people;—in the Community it conserves all the best interests of religion, morality and philanthropy, guaranteeing to families their rights,

and giving to individuals their due. Wrongly directed, it gives to rulers, license; permits in the people, violence; suffers immorality and irreligion to lift their heads in communities, and drops the seeds of discord and confusion in families. In war, if public opinion demands of every officer and soldier the full performance of his duty, and covers with contempt and disgrace those who fail in this performance, it gives to every man an incitement to duty which not fatigue, nor suffering, nor fear of bullet, bayonet, saber-stroke, or shrieking shell, can overbalance; if, on the other hand, an indulgent public opinion excuses the cowardly soldier, and accepts the resignation of every officer who may weary of the service, it takes away the strongest inducement to bravery, and renders doubly formidable the forces of the foe. And so in temptation and danger everywhere, the man who is subjected to one, or confronting the other, is likely to be bold and decided, or weak and irresolute, according as he expects to find public opinion stern or indulgent.

This force, in driving men to heroic actions, was perhaps never better illustrated than in the career of Gen. Wolfe at Quebec. A short time before he left England, a general of good reputation had been sent into the Mediterranean, on an expedition, of the success of which the English people entertained the most sanguine expectations. The expedition, after meeting with some disasters and a few partial advantages, signally failed, by reason of certain events over which the commander had apparently no control. The people were sadly disappointed, and with their usual inconsiderate haste, vented upon the unfortunate commander that rage which the failure of the expedition had aroused. He was deprived of his command, and hissed and hooted in the streets, though no Court of Inquiry ever succeeded in fastening upon him the blame of the failure in which the expedition terminated. With the memory of these events still fresh in his mind, Wolfe set out on his expedition. His first attempt against Quebec failed, and at the Falls of Montmorenci he met with a disaster which threatened the success of his whole plan. This disaster, with the fears it aroused, sensibly affected the mind of Wolfe. Knowing as he did the impatience of the English people, who always visited upon their generals a heavy penalty for failure, and despairing of finding any opportunity of retrieving by success a reputation which was now in imminent hazard, his anxiety became such as to seriously impair his health, both of body and mind. In his dreams he was heard frequently to mutter in a despairing tone, and in his waking hours to

assert that he would never return without success, to be exposed, as other unfortunate commanders had been, to the censure and reproach of an ignorant and ungrateful populace. This disturbance of mind, joined to the fatigues of body which he had endured, caused a fever and dysentery, by which he was for some time rendered incapable of any action. When just beginning to recover his strength, he called a council of war, and urged on by a keen sense of the wrongs he must suffer, unless he should in some way achieve a victory, he planned and executed that brilliant and daring, but seemingly desperate assault, which no man, except one driven to the choice between death and disgrace, would ever have dreamed of attempting. This incident is an illustration of the point in question. It was a public opinion which always discovered fault in failure, that in this case urged on the man and the army, from an almost hopeless position, through a deed of rarely equaled daring, to this most brilliant achievement, which gave to England, Quebec—and to History, a Hero.

But further illustration is needless. The force of public opinion over the acts, over the thoughts even, is a seen and acknowledged force. If then it can be directed or controlled, it becomes a source of power to the man or set of men who wield it.

Public opinion, in its broader sense, and in regard to fundamental principles, is the growth of ages. It is made up of the gradual accretions of knowledge and experience which communities have gained through successive generations. And in this sense it is firm, not to be changed in a day, nor wielded by any momentary power. For example, that deeply seated opinion which is the basis of English liberty, is the result of all those experiments and trials, through which the English nation has passed for three centuries. It has grown away from a belief in Feudalism and Royal Prerogative, until now it holds as firmly established, certain inalienable rights of the people, which can neither be gainsayed nor opposed by King nor Lords. In like manner, the freedom of the individual conscience, and the independence of Church upon State, came by slow growth, but once established can never be overthrown. In regard to these fundamental principles, public opinion yields to the influence of no man.

But in minor points and in special applications, the public sentiment of any body or neighborhood is easily molded. He who can cause the people of a neighborhood or assembly to think together on any question of policy, or feel together on any question of morality, or excite in them common emotions, controls for the time their public sentiment, and wields its power.

That one man could exercise any great uniting or disposing influence upon the opinions of a community, seems at first sight improbable; yet it is often done. Generally speaking, it is easy or difficult, according as the superiority of the individual over the mass is marked or slight. People of ordinary capacity and culture are not much given to close thought. They drift along with few settled opinions, and those all upon fundamentals. Suppose a community of such men with some question of policy before them. They approach the subject with diffidence and caution, and venture, each for himself, on a doubtful, half fixed opinion. But they feel that they have not investigated the subject fully, and may be incorrect. Now let there appear among them some educated man, whose position they regard, and whose talents they respect, and let him give a decided opinion on the subject, and support that opinion by a fair show of argument. Many instinctively gather about him, and grasp at his opinion as something tangible, something having at least a show of strength. Before there was no public opinion upon that question. Now there is one, and it has been formed mainly by the influence of one man, and its whole force goes in the direction which he gave it. If the question, instead of being one of policy, is one of morality, the dictum of the superior is still more readily assented to by the mass, particularly, if in support of his opinion, he can urge some considerations which agree with their own underlying convictions of what is right, and give a reason for what they felt but could not explain. Where the emotions of a people may be played upon, the skillful man finds the work still easier. In war, for instance, let a great battle be lost by a general, in whom the people had confidence. If no fault of his own manifestly appears, and if they do not jump at once at an opinion, the tongue of an orator can either excite them to rage against their general, as incompetent, or cause them to extend a kindly sympathy toward him as unfortunate.

This is, in general, true, where the community or assembly acknowledges the superiority of the individual. The same thing holds good, to a certain extent, among equals in culture and position. Here the one who forms his opinion first, and takes his stand with a show of confidence and positiveness of assertion, is the one who leads. The sentiment of a body of men has been determined more than once by the mere matter of priority or confidence in the expression of one of two opinions. This may not speak well for the honesty or insight of assemblies in general. Yet a little examination will convince us that even in the best educated and most thoughtful assemblies this is often

true. There is always a strong tendency to accede to that which is asserted promptly and with confidence, supposing, of course, that the subject is not one which has been long before the public mind, and on which every one's opinion is already formed. His power is doubled, when the one who seeks to speak for the whole can play upon some of the established principles of the public mind. The fundamentals are acknowledged, and if they can be made to apply to the minor point in question, of course that also is settled. He who makes such an application, unless opposed at once, carries the whole. We have before now seen a body of intelligent men swayed by a little clamor about courtesy and abstract rights, simply because no one came forward to show the inapplicability of the abstractions to the case in question.

Herein lies the strength of him who knows how to use it. The educated man is frequently placed in a community where he is looked up to as superior to all others, and in all communities he may hope to be above the common level. His actions will have an effect on public sentiment; his opinions, even if hastily formed and faintly expressed, will make their impression; while if he is careful in taking his positions, and bold and outspoken in proclaiming them, he may hope in some communities to form, and in others to partially direct that public opinion, which, in turn, guides the actions and sways the fortunes of men.

Sheridan.

WEDNESDAY morning, at Winchester,
The valley hero stood,
Looking away to the westward,
In silent, thoughtful mood;
For to-day he would meet his army,
Now camped on the distant field,
And to-morrow lead them in conflict
To a destiny unrevealed.

He thought of winning new triumphs,—
Then a something caught his eye,
Far off on the road to the army,
A form he could just descry:

Yes! a horseman was dashing forward,
Nearing at fearful speed;
A Courier from the army,
Urging his flying steed.

Then a cry of dark disaster
Rang out on the tranquil air,
"The army is routed! O, General!
Would God that you were there!"
"Ready my horse," cried the General.
'Twas by him without delay;
He sprang at a bound to the saddle,
Dashed in his spurs and away.

Away like a flash of lightning,
That dazzles and then is gone;
Away, away to the army,
While his staff behind pressed on.
Trees, houses and neighboring landscape
Whirled by unnoticed, unseen,
Naught but the nearing distance
And the army it lay between.

Foaming and bleeding and panting,
Their steeds flew gallantly on,
While the road seemed to stretch on forever,
Each mile a hundred in one,
Each moment an hour in passing,
The hour an eternity;
For a nation's weal hung trembling
In the scale of destiny.

Till afar on their weary vision
The army rose in sight,
Routed, scattered and hurrying
Back in disorganized flight.
Then the spurs in the flanks sunk deeper,
And lightlier hung the reins,
Till they darted through the masses
And adown the broken line.

While a shout like that of triumph
Rolled up from the staying rout,
For they knew their leader would save them,
As he ordered them "face about,"
E'en the dying hailed his coming,
And joy lit their glassy eyes,
While a "thank God," inaudibly murmured,
Passed up with their souls to the skies.