

# **THE IFS OF HISTORY**

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The ifs of history by Joseph Edgar Chamberlin

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**JOSEPH EDGAR CHAMBERLIN**

**THE IFS  
OF HISTORY**



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# THE LIVES OF HISTORY

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BY

JOSEPH EDGAR CHAMBERLIN



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## PREFACE

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**W**HETHER or not we believe that events are consciously ordered before their occurrence, we are compelled to admit the importance of Contingency in human affairs.

If we believe in such an orderly and predetermined arrangement, the small circumstance upon which a great event may hinge becomes, in our view, but the instrumentality by means of which the great plan is operated. It by no means sets aside the vital influence of chance to assume that "all chance is but direction which we cannot see."

For instance, the believer in special providences regards as clearly provi-

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dential the flight of the flocks of birds which diverted the course of Columbus from our shores to those of the West Indies; but it is none the less true that this trivial circumstance caused the great navigator to turn his prow.

Those who, on the other hand, reject the idea of special providences, and treat history as a sequence of occurrences emerging mechanically from the relations of men with one another, must admit that causes forever contend with causes, and that the nice balance of action and reaction may sometimes be influenced radically by even so small a circumstance as the cackling of the geese of Rome. It is true that the evolutionist is apt to become a believer in necessity to an extent which appears unlikely to the mind of the other. Events, in his view, inhere in the nature and character of men, these in their turn being the result of the physical circumstances that differentiate the nations.

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This view seems at first to reduce the probability that accident will at any time sensibly alter the course of affairs.

But if we take historical action and reaction at their moments of equilibrium, we see that the tide of affairs may sometimes appear to follow the drift of a feather. Consider, for instance, the declaration of the Duke of Wellington that the issue of the battle of Waterloo turned upon the closing of the gates of Hugomont Castle by the hand of one man. Wellington was certainly in a position to know if this was true; and in the light of the tremendous events that depended upon the trifling act, does it not appear that accident for one moment outweighed in consequence any necessity that inhered in the character of the French people or that of the nations arrayed against them at Waterloo? It may be the function of Contingency to correct the overconfidence of the evolutionist.



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At all events, we cannot dismiss the "if"; there is, as Touchstone says, much virtue in it.

J. E. C.

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