



TOPICS OF THE TIME

Numbers.

IF Matthew Arnold had delayed his first visit to America, his preachment to us Americans on the subject of «Numbers» would have been less needed. As our country gets to be more and more numerous in its integral parts; as everything in it multiplies at such an astonishing ratio that in many directions the multiplicity has the menace of infinity, we less and less need the warning voice of the prophet to keep us from being inflated by either numbers or size. It was some time ago that Americans became less boastful concerning mere extent; and the orator who argues greatness from length of rivers, or spread of territory, or aggregations of population, is apt to awaken the sense of humor rather than the sentiment of sublimity. It seems long ago that it was oratorically demonstrable that, because the Mississippi and its affluents were so many thousand miles long, therefore the American republic was etc., etc., etc., as compared with such and such republics and empires, ancient or modern. Nowadays the orator, to be effective, must put forth an entirely different argument. One of the most telling after-dinner speeches listened to lately was that of a young Philadelphian who spoke at a public banquet in New York on the eve of its expansion into the so-called greater city, and who, amid hearty applause, deprecated the confounding of size with true «greatness», casually remarked upon the better appreciation of New York's tall buildings by the citizens of Philadelphia, who at that distance could see them in more favorable perspective, and openly hinted at a comparison between the so-called greatness of the metropolis with, as to size, the less «great» historical cities of Athens and Jerusalem.

As time goes on, and the directories and the censuses wax bigger and bigger, it is seen that an increase in numerosity produces changes not only in degree, but in kind. It is not only that the mails and the tenement-houses and the means of transit become congested, but there seems to be through this physical increase, at times, also a spiritual congestion; a change seems to be taking place in all sorts of things that one might think not necessarily affected. An increase in the number of Chinamen in China might not have the same effect as an increase in the number of Americans in America, because the Chinamen would maintain a certain monotony of thought and custom for centuries. But increase the number of Yankees, for instance, each one of whom goes to work to contrive and invent, to criticize, to make over—*i. e.*, re-form—all creation, and the change in physical, mental, and moral conditions will go on at an enormous ratio. Each Chinaman counts, say, one one-

thousandth as compared with one Yankee; for the latter sets to work at once to make a new world.

The consequence is that changes which might take hundreds or thousands of years to manifest themselves in other races and in other conditions proceed here before our very eyes, sometimes creating not only serious apprehension, but alarm, on the part of the thoughtful.

There are changes in the streets, and under the streets, and above the streets. Steel construction turns highways into cañons, and produces mountain-ranges along the line of greatest social pressure. The telephone reduces travel, and the trolley and the flying trains, again, increase it. Electricity is being developed to such an extent that even specialists can hardly keep up with the record of development and discovery. Mere numbers are affecting college life and the social life of cities in unexpected ways. The religious life of the people, as related to association, is affected by innumerable societies, local, national, and international. New social machinery is demanded by the new conditions relating to our amusements, our charities, and our government. Our politics are more complex, and require more attention for their understanding and practical manipulation. The rotary press and the cheap «process» produce a profusion in the literary and pictorial «output» which has a tendency to befog the intellect and lower the standards of taste.

The multitudinousness of modern life is increased by the facility of intercommunication and the universality of the newspaper. Any given community not only has to endure its own noise, but, to some extent, that of all the world. When any one wishes to be heard, for the sake of his message or of his business, he must not only make more noise than his neighbor, but more noise than his neighbor's neighbor. Even the peanut-stand nowadays is advertised by its own steam-whistle. Some Western town, by the way, lately tried to suppress the peanut-man's steam-whistle by local ordinance. This is a good sign, for objection to noise is an evidence of civilization.

In these times of many things, more and more is the need felt of a choice of a few things. The lesson for the day should be the lesson of discrimination. Though the outer ear be dinned upon, it is important that the inner ear should preserve its delicacy, so that the still, small voice may be heard. Longevity has increased, but not in proportion to the increase in the number of things human beings are asked nowadays to consider and to do. Never was there more need of the spirit of criticism and selection, when so many ideas, so much to read, so many causes, so many geniuses, so many prophets, so many and so much of everything, press upon the mind of man.

The «Mystery» of General Grant.

A READER who had followed with analytical interest General Horace Porter's revelation of the every-day thought and action of his commander, in «Campaigning with Grant,» on reaching the end, said with a tinge of disappointment: «While he brings us much nearer to the man, he does not solve the mystery of Grant's success as a soldier.»

Nor does any other writer solve the mystery; least of all General Grant himself, for the reason that his «Memoirs» are in themselves the most direct proof of honesty and simplicity of character, and of intellectual power, or, in other words, of those qualities which, in the line of human action, work wonders without theatrical effect, and leave no impress on the results differing from a logical situation produced by natural agencies. To the reader looking for a mystery, in giving unconscious proof of unusual abilities General Grant seems to evade a disclosure of the methods by which he organized victory. Like the cunning quack with a sovereign remedy, he seems to withhold the recipe.

During the progress of the Civil War no mystery was imputed to General Grant: he appeared to his comrades in arms, and to the people, as a resolute man of common abilities and impulses, and, as some thought, far too common. The mystery, then, so far as there was any, was divided between those who at least recognized his achievements, and those who saw in his generalship nothing but brute force, guided by careless luck. With the former the mystery was that other generals, with more impressive manners, did not have equal success; and with the latter it was a mystery why General Grant was allowed by the powers in Washington to keep on blundering into success, from Fort Donelson and the fierce struggle at Shiloh to the daredevil triumph at Vicksburg. Thereafter most of his detractors became resigned to his leadership, on the theory that he was being taken care of by his staff, and that he had the knack, peculiar to mediocrity, of winning from the supreme authority a coöperation which had been withheld from others on account of jealousy.

It was only after the war, when the recognition of heroic deeds produced a demand for a leading soldier-hero, that men began to pad General Grant's figure with mystery in order to make him appear, to their eyes, of the stature of a true Ulysses. That he was the logical candidate for the position no one could deny; and no opinion in support of his fitness was more conclusive than that of the most picturesque hero of the war, who was distinctly the alternative choice for the first place in the national pantheon. And when General Grant was formally installed, the imputed mystery reconciled to his fame even those who could not, or would not, see his natural greatness.

His fate in this regard has not been different from that of other men of action who have done great deeds without personal display, and in subordination to a higher authority. They have had to wait for time to dissolve their own envelop of reserve, and for history to vindicate their common humanity. Even then something of mystery will seem to encompass them, as the garment in which men prefer to dress their demigods. When, as in General Grant's case, there is no mystery about a man's acts, or the results they achieved, it is necessary

to go back beyond the line of possible demonstration, and impute a mystery to the personal agency. But when, as in Shakspeare's case, the acts are really a mystery, because unknown, and the resultant works a miracle of superiority, then there are minds so perverse as to reject the idea of mystery in the agency, and to seize upon a palpable prodigy like Bacon as the only possible solution of a work of genius.

But some other ground than human fancy must be found for General Sherman's espousal of the theory of mystery as to General Grant. In fact, he stated it so strongly as to make it quite possible that the vogue the theory has acquired is due, in some measure, to his authority. For it may be assumed that the views he expressed in a letter to a friend,¹ fourteen years after the war (dated November 18, 1879), were deliberate conclusions, after much speculation on a subject always near to his thoughts, and in line with what had been his usual attitude toward the character of his friend and chief. Speaking of General Grant's demeanor while being fêted in San Francisco, General Sherman says:

«He is a strange character. Nothing like it is portrayed by Plutarch or the many who have striven to portray the great men of ancient or modern times. I knew him as a cadet at West Point, as a lieutenant of the Fourth Infantry, as a citizen of St. Louis, and as a growing general all through a bloody civil war. Yet to me he is a mystery, and I believe he is a mystery to himself.»

The explanation of Sherman's estimate of Grant's character, as containing something inscrutable, we will venture to say may be found in contrast. Sherman was too great a man to have any illusions in regard to himself, and he knew from the comparisons of soldierly intercourse that in knowledge and self-reliance he was not inferior to the quiet man in whom the sense of danger was no bar to the boldest enterprise. Contrasts in their characters began there, and continued along the lines of intellectual habit and temperament. In yielding the full measure of confidence to Grant as his worthy and official chief, Sherman, with his dread of the political mind working in the dark, may well have marveled at Grant's easy mastery of the politicians, and, with his hotspur nature, have regarded as incomprehensible Grant's power of resolving the personal obstacles and disappointments of official life in his mighty reticence. In the crisis of battle and in the focus of honors, he had beheld in Grant the same modest, imperturbable spirit, and from him the ascription of mystery to his comrade's character was merely a graceful way of testifying to his own belief in Grant's superior authority.

General Schofield, in his book, which has just come from the press, entitled «Forty-six Years in the Army,» refers to Sherman's statement that he could not understand Grant, and doubted if Grant understood himself, and adds:

«A very distinguished statesman, whose name I need not mention, said to me that, in his opinion, there was nothing special in Grant to understand. Others have varied widely in their estimates of that extraordinary character. Yet I believe its most extraordinary quality was its extreme simplicity—so extreme that many have entirely overlooked it in their search for some deeply hidden secret to account for so great a character, unmindful of the general fact that simplicity is one of the most prominent attributes of greatness.»

¹ See THE CENTURY for April, 1897.