

WANTED—A PUBLIC OPINION.

And wanted greatly, urgently, this same public opinion. Not private opinion, nor party opinion, nor denominational opinion. Of that we have more than enough. The country is young as to history, small as to population, great only as to acreage and hope. All the elements of immaturity may be found. Strong, even violent partizanship, a most pronounced sectionalism, a general dislike and shrinking for everything that savours of criticism, and a loudly proclaimed opinionatedness. But the youth is speeding on toward manhood. Growth is rapid, development is sure. Canadians do well to be proud of Canada, not so much as it is, but as it shall be. The process of amalgamation has begun, differing races and creeds have touched each other. The Anglo-Saxon circle has cut and overlapped all the others. British sentiment as to free, industrious, prosperous life, is permeating all classes of this mixed society. The foundations of a great nation are being laid, well as some think, and all hope. The English love England, the Scotch Scotland, the French France, the Irish Ireland; each is proud of its original home, and all are proud of Canada. What all should strive after now, is not a French, or English, or Irish, or Scotch opinion, but a public—that is to say, a Canadian opinion. This cannot be manufactured in committee, will not rise up in the beauty of blossom or glory of fruit at the bidding of some society, but must be rooted in the intelligence and love of the people, and grow with the growth of their national life.

What is opinion? Not a slice of infallibility let down into life, but a conviction which is open to argument, and from which springs a strong feeling. Because it is not an absolute and unalterable conviction it may change, and therefore is passionate, intense, tyrannical. When men have real and rooted convictions, reasonable or not, they are calm, confident, and little inclined to controversy. Half a doubt means a whole passion for argument. The men who argue their own side most, who are ever keen to discover and resent an attack are the men who have most doubt of their own position; just as the man who has only the opinion of himself that he is a gentleman, is the most on the watch for insult. Nearly all the conflicts that are human have had their origin in opinions, not in convictions. As a rule, the hatred and the malice that disturb life spring from opinions, not from principles. Rome forced conviction upon the people, and there was peace; the peace of stagnation—of death—Protestantism forces the people to have opinions, and there is strife. A war of opinions is not a bad thing—well conducted it is a good thing. The world over in all forms of life, there is war; death to the weakest and poorest, and the survival of the strongest and fittest. So in the conflict, weak and poor opinions will die, and the strong and the fit will live.

Public opinion is not always the infallible test of truth and of right, and so it is open to attack and defeat. It may be corrected by time and circumstance. It is based on three pillars, viz.: Numbers, Names, Antiquity, which pillars do not rest on the Immutables. No proof of that can be needed. The majority of one age is the minority of another. What was popular as science, theology, philosophy, a century ago, we hold in contempt to-day. "Our little systems have their day, they have their day and cease to be." Yet each system in its day commanded the attention and respect of the people. Great names fare no better at the hands of time. Napoleon the Great soon becomes Napoleon the Little, and stars of a generation ago have been blotted out of the heavens. That settles the question of antiquity. Tradition is the worst of friends, the most dangerous of foes, in particular to the man of Conservative instincts; it is good as a guide or a warning—it is bad as a motive for action. Because the world moves on, the lower passing into the higher. Great numbers, great names, great antiquity may all be wrong, and yet it is well to have a public opinion. It means variety, divergence, collision, but it means *life*, life that deepens, and broadens, and reaches up to perfection.

To have a true public opinion there must be freedom of inquiry, freedom of discussion, and freedom of expression. In Canada we have neither of these. Freedom of inquiry is condemned by common consent. Certain things are taken for granted and as settled. To speak of them as still unsolved problems is to give insult to the general public, or perhaps, to some particular friend. Freedom of discussion is met by the cry "let us alone." Freedom of expression is only tolerated within certain narrow and well-defined limits. That is to say, if it is humorous it must meet the general notion of humour; if it is solid, it must be according to some unregistered, but well known idea of *avoir du poais*. That is not freedom of expression which is allowed to speak behind a *nom de plume*; it is the very barbarism of criticism; it is the lowest form of public speech. It allows a fool to sign himself WISDOM, and a blind, chattering maniac to call himself ARGUS. Freedom of expression means not only speech, but a personality made articulate. It means that a man may speak out the thought of his mind, or feeling of his heart, and not be called upon to suffer in peace, or goods, or reputation for the words he has uttered, so long as they be within the limits of fair discussion. But nothing must be interdicted, nothing denied; the mind must not be held in bondage, the soul must not be put in chains—for the moment any subject becomes a forbidden thing, that moment it becomes

the centre of a tyranny boundless in its ramifications and results. The men who try to regulate language would rule thought if they had but the power. Thought cannot be chained or denied. Expression should be as free. If it be said that thoughts cannot pollute or harm others while language may, the answer is simple, cleanse the thoughts and the speech will be clean.

The forces which can alone create a healthy public opinion are SPEECH and the PRESS; and they can only create it when they are themselves healthy. Just what they are, poor and low in tone and sentiment, or exalted in form and spirit, will the consensus of opinions be. Public speakers are burdened with a grave responsibility. As politicians, they not only create and sway great passions, and make laws, for good or evil, but they give tone to political life. If they talk in low and violent fashion, then political life will be a low and violent and vulgar thing. If they take inspiration from a party, then they will work for a party and not for the people, and will work with fuss and fume and roughness. Politics in Canada must be an important factor in social culture, for there are many parliamentarians, and all of them paid; which pay is a great incentive, not to a lofty discharge of duty, perhaps, but to seek the ups and downs of political life. There are men among us ever on the move across the waste of politics in search of a constituency—like Noah's dove seeking some green thing to rest upon. The great number, the facility with which an ordinary man may acquire the right to put M. P. or M. P. P. after his name, make it the more needful that political speaking should be of a high and educational character. Still greater and graver is the responsibility of preachers. Theirs is the highest calling; they speak words that live and shine; they form character and give the basis of all culture; they are commissioned to exalt all thought, to ennoble all sentiment, to seat moral beauty on the throne of strength. And they of all men should be free in thought and bold in speech; firm in the might of integrity, tranquil in the majesty of reason, yet borne on by the glow of a deep enthusiasm; not narrow in view, not slaves to tradition, or custom, or an audience, but only servants of God and Truth. The preachers of a country may keep it down as to thoughts and rights and development—as did the priests of the Church of Rome, and for a time the clergy of the Anglican Church—or may inspire the people to think more broadly and deeply, and with the strong right hand to take their civil and religious liberty, as did the clergy of Scotland. Canada wants greatly a bold, brave, free ministry; a ministry with heart and head, affection and intelligence. It wants the storm of discussion to sweep across the ecclesiastical forest, that it may be known what limbs have rotted and where the roots are. After that would grow a healthier public opinion.

The Press just as much must make or mar the people. While the Press is violent in denunciation of political opponents; false as to facts and figures in its reports; puffing without conscience or damning without reason; the public sentiment will be low, and public opinion only public stupidity. The Press may be strong for parties, may have well defined political lines along which to run, may have ecclesiastical leaning in this direction or in that, and yet be fair in the estimate of an opponent's character, and just in giving the two sides of a question. Then an opinion would be created which is near to conviction, and from which would spring great principles of action.

Public opinion will act and re-act upon its makers; it will move toward Justice and Right; it may bow down to tyranny for awhile, be it king or priest, but not for long. In the majesty of the sovereign people it will rise and hurl oppression to the dust. The Stuarts went down before it in Britain; the line of them got blotted out. Napoleonism went down before it in France. Slavery was crushed by it in the United States. If in the mercy of Providence it shall arise in Canada, what may be expected to happen? The disestablishment and disendowment of the Roman Catholic Church in the Province of Quebec: The abolition of those petty provincial parliaments which waste money and time and temper: The abolition also of the parliamentarian's pay, thus giving honour to politics: A stream would be turned through the Press, washing away much rubbish,—here and there whole papers and their establishments: All property would be equitably taxed; that of the clergy as well as that of the laity. In fact, great changes would take place; many things being transformed, many more being abolished. And the world and Canada would go on, all the better for all the changes; finding at last that not in vulgarity but in virtue, not by party but by principle, the way to Heaven is found.

HERESY.—It is strange that men do not observe how the heresy of one age is the orthodoxy of the next; how both opinions and practices, not long since deemed false and dangerous, are now admitted to be true and harmless. There are doctrines which our fathers held to be of vital importance, and of which we make but little account; and many good Christians now do on the Lord's-day things which fifty years ago would have been pronounced really awful in their wickedness; and yet there is more religion and better religion among Christians now than there was in those more strait-laced times. At any rate, it is undeniable that many an opinion which was heresy yesterday is no longer heresy to-day, and what is heresy to-day may cease to be heresy to-morrow; and in the face of these changes in religious opinion it is wonderful that men should be so confident of the infallibility of their judgment, the very men who are so taught to tremble at, as filled with the utmost peril to their souls. But so the change moves on, ever becoming, as we rejoice to believe, more and more wise, more and more charitable, and more and more in harmony with the will of God and with the real teaching of His word.