

Herds and the Individual

By Ethel M. Chapman

"Not unto the forest, O my lover,
O my lover, do not lead me to the forest.
Joy is where the temples are, lines of
dancers swinging far
Drums and lyres and viols in the town,
And the flapping leaves would blind me
and the clinging vines would bind me
And the thorny rose-boughs tear my
saffron gown.
I will love you by the light, and the
beat of drums at night,
And the echoing of laughter in my ears,
But I fear the forest."

—Greek Folk Song.

It is as old as civilization, this fear of the lonely road. The warmth and light and laughter of the crowd and the swinging doors of the full house are alluring, so we have few pioneers in new or forbidden places; the spirit is not lacking but the stamina is weak. The very day that the idealist begins to live out his dreams, subtle forces set to work to make him one of the herd instead of an individual. Sometimes, even, the levelling process begins right where he goes to get his training for living. The broadness that should come through college life, may prove to be nothing more than a certain smoothness, a by-product which the student gets by rubbing against the walls of college buildings. We flatter ourselves that we have gained a breadth of vision, or at least that we can take a broad view of things right around us. The danger is that our estimate of things may have broadened as a spider's web, stretched by the tossings of a thousand little winds until it is ready to lose its grip with the first real gale. We have just lost our identity in the crowd.

Long rows of street lights stretched after one another, and under the lights people swarmed. Moths also do that, and lizards. Whole squads of lizards will clamber up from the cool waters of the pond and crawl, grinning, right into a brush fire. They love the dazzle. And a young man stood at the edge of the crowd and wondered—the lizard in him wanted company. Then an old man rode up in a limousine, a shifting-eyed, red-faced old man whom Time had brought so near the gates that he should almost have been listening for the music, but he still revelled in the flesh-pots. At an opportune moment he had fallen in with the herd and rushed for the common object, and he got it. It had given him the flesh-pots but it had given him nothing else. At the time when the effort of his whole life had about reached the sum total of its accomplishment, his name was known only by a certain wavering market value, just like coal or mutton. When he might have been guiding public opinion, he was merely guiding a party of fur-and-jewel-and-flower-decked women into an expensive show. The young man thought, "Fifty years from now will I be like that?" He was just fighting through the crisis that every individual has to face sometime—the choice between commercialism and achievement—literally the choice of a job.

And he went off by himself to fight it out. He worked with the crowd all day, but in the evening he wandered out from the city to a meadow where the air was cooler and the stars a little nearer, and strangely enough, while the problem of a career was