

Vague and Meaningless Ideas.

Written for the "True Witness" by a Regular Contributor.

In the February number of the Contemporary Review, appears — In French—a most interesting and highly instructive contribution. It is signed M. Maeterlinck, and purports to be the reproductions of certain hitherto unpublished chapters of "La Sagesse et la Destinée"—Wisdom and Destiny. Needless to say that it is written in the purest of French, a little over-loaded with adjectives, perhaps, but possessing the special merit of exactness in each expression, and a harmony of language and reasoning that is rarely met with in ordinary magazine articles. The writer of the article is a man possessed of fine and delicate touch, a deep insight into human affairs, and a wonderful power of lucid expression. From first to last, whether viewed historically or morally, the chain of reasoning and the links of facts make it one of the most able papers that we have read this year.

In consequence of this marked excellence of the contribution we regret to say that it is proportionately more dangerous for all lovers of history and students of philosophy. Had it not been that the author starts out with false principles and, therefore, arrives at equally false conclusions, the work would be worthy of the heartiest approval and of universal circulation. But as it is, the writer has mistaken Providence for Fate (or Destiny), and has traced to "human justice" that which can only be attributed to "Divine Justice." Otherwise his arguments are perfect. Had he set out with a sound premise he would have reached a sound conclusion, and have done so

by means of a syllogism that could not be refuted. So the very perfection of his ratiocination—when starting from a false premise—could not but lead him to a false conclusion.

It is thus he opens: "The wildest days of the Revolution commenced after the flight of Varennes; they came to an end on the 18th Brumaire." The latter was the date of Napoleon's grand "coup de main," the day when he seized upon the sceptre of authority, the short period during which his fate, and that of France and Europe, depended upon the accidents of a couple of hours. He says:—"What is called fate, at this point in history, is the confessed will of a great people; that which the majority of the same people will, a few years later, call Fate, is the will of one great man." We might quote, with profit, a number of passages from the statement of the case; but they are so burdened with expressions of a qualifying nature, that we might lose sight of our own object in the maze of sparkling words and phrases. However, we will take the following as an explanation of the subject:—

On that menacing day of the 18th Brumaire, it was a matter of grasping a power that was weakened, incoherent, tired, divided, but in laying hands thereon it was necessary to also touch a species of idol, which in that mysterious hour, was very jealous and very terrible—the idol of Liberty. . . . Bonaparte had returned from Egypt, triumphant, acclaimed, but greatly suspected by the Directorate. A false step, a single hesitation, an indiscretion might have ruined him. It is difficult to imagine a more audacious stroke at a more dangerous moment. . . . Each in

turn, he had before him life or death, sovereign power or the scaffold, the frenzy of enthusiasm or of hatred."

In two graphic pages we have now a wonderful account of how Napoleon carried the day, swept the Directorate out of existence, constituted himself dictator of France, and turned to his advantage every adverse circumstance. It was audaciously carried to the limits of the sublime. "All that he did seemed inconceivably real, necessary, reasonable, if not as to his end at least as to the means he employed. Not for one moment did he consider himself as being the instrument of a God, of a truth, of an idea of higher justice, of love, of happiness. He asked but one thing: That France should be as great, as powerful as possible, in order that he and his might be as great and as powerful as he had dreamed they should be."

The writer then draws a splendid picture of Napoleon's lucid and exact comprehension of men, his great knowledge of all moral and social rights, his grasp of individual and national justice; and he concludes that in violating the law, in stooping to crime, in defying all authority and constituted rights, the great Napoleon became the greater criminal, on account of his almost superhuman intelligence. He did everything for a purpose, he foresaw consequences, and he ignored in practice every law that he admitted in theory; and that he forced others to accept and obey. Hence his terrible fall. So far nothing could be more logical than this lofty view, taken by the author, of the historical situation.

Then the writer proceeds to moral-

ize. He says, and rightly in a certain sense, that every action of man carries with it its proportionate reward or punishment. "I do not think," he says, "that there ever was a life in which the consequences of iniquity, of falsehood, of disloyalty, were more prompt, more unmerciful, more irreparable, than in that of Napoleon." He instances the barbarous deed that sent the Duke d'Enghien to an untimely death in the dungeons of Vincennes, and he indicates the terrible retribution that this murder—for it was nothing else—brought upon its author. He points out how Napoleon's inhuman and unjust treatment of the knightly Alexander of Russia, was punished amidst the icefields of Berezna, the snows of Poland and the fires of Moscow. He describes the avenging hand that presses upon the life of the criminal, be he a petty thief, or an unscrupulous monarch. Napoleon may have felt that his genius was capable of overcoming all obstacles, the successful issues of so many bold designs and questionable deeds, gave him a false courage to go on defying all order and all rights. But in the depths of such a nature there could be no real error as to the grim reality. "An act of injustice always shakes the confidence that a being has in himself." "To commit an injustice in order to obtain a little glory, or to retain that which has already been won, is to confess one's self unable to fulfil the part that has been played." "To be obliged to perform unjustifiable acts, that success may be obtained, is an admission that all is not what it seems, and that only by fraud, and wronging the man retain the name and fame which he

would lose were he to confine himself to honesty, justice and rectitude.

Here, then, we have historical facts that are clearly described and that are indisputable; here we have a reasoning that is not to be gainsaid here we have the philosophy of history carried into the domain of novels, and sustained by the strictest rules of logic. But, unfortunately, the author of all this well-balanced appreciation of men and events, has committed the one grave error of attributing to Fate—that blind Destiny of the infidel—that which obviously belongs to God, to Divine Providence, and of appealing to human justice—which is mutable, fallible, treacherous—instead of to that Divine Justice, which is unchangeable, unerring, and uncertain. In the beauty of his style, the rigidity of his reasoning, and the charm of his expression lies the great danger for the untrained reader. A young student of history, in perusing these pages, would naturally say to himself, "that is reasonable, the causes and effects represented are undeniable, the whole is based upon facts and upon the experience of individuals as well as of peoples; decidedly there is a guiding and visible hand constantly resting upon the shoulder of humanity, most certainly there is a justice, beyond our humble powers of comprehension, which is meted out in its punishments and its rewards. . . . Religion may teach that it is the Hand of Providence and the spirit of Divine Justice, that we perceive in their deeds, but M. Maeterlinck—this erudite writer, tells me that it is—the hand of Fate, and the spirit of human

justice that guide the destinies of mankind, and M. Maeterlinck was a genius and he must be right."

Behold the terrible danger into which the unsuspecting student of history is led! "Human justice springs fully armed—like Minerva of old—from the formidable and devious brow of Destiny." Such a phrase as but the offshoot of the vague and meaningless ideals of the infidel philosophers of the great revolution. It would be just as easy, and far more exact, to have written—"Divine Justice is eternally dispensed by the Hand of Providence." How very different the language of the famous orator Charles Phillips—"The Hand of God was visible in the rise, the triumph and the fall of Napoleon. Eternal justice could not be outraged with impunity. Providence was neither dead nor sleeping; it mattered not, that his impiety seemed to prosper, that victory parted after his misdeeds, guined banners, that the insatiable eagle, as he soared against the sun, seemed but to replume his strength and renew his vision; it was only for a moment, and, in the very banquet, of his triumph, the Almighty's vengeance blazed upon the wall, and the diadem fell from the brow of the abject."

Replace the word Fate and Human Justice with those of Providence and Divine Justice, and you have in that able article, on the 18th Brumaire, a masterpiece of historical analysis and of moral reasoning. What a pity that the brilliant mind, which is a gift of God, should be obscured by the vapors that rise from the fever-haunted swamps of infidelity!

THE BLACK FOX OF THE VATICAN.

In a recent issue of the "Missionary Record," an English publication devoted to the interests of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, we find the following very pleasant, and to Canadian Catholics very amusing as well as instructive contribution, from the pen of one of our best known missionary Bishops.

"Ha! Ha! Ho! Ho! Huh! Huh! So then you admit there is a Machiavelli in the Vatican! I have often heard about the Black Pope, and the Red Pope, and the White Pope. Of course you are going to tell us about these, or at least about one of them."

Most gentle reader, you are far too quick. Believe me there is only one Pope at a time in Rome, and he is vested in white, even as the redresser of human wrongs, the holder of Excalibur "clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful." And do not begin to be suspicious at the mention of Mr. Reynard, whatever may be the color of his coat. As far as I know, there is only one fox in the Vatican—a dead one! Indeed, the fox is not a fox at all, but only the soft and warm coat which once protected a black fox amid the snows of the Far North America. The precious fur was brought to Rome last October, to be laid at the feet of the Holy Father as a small token of veneration and love, by one of his missionary sons, coming literally from "the ends of the earth," by the "Bishop of the North Pole," Mgr. Grouard.

The Bishop reached Rome on October 7th. The next day he was amongst the many prelates who, along with ten Cardinals, escorted the Pope into St. Peter's to give audience to a large French pilgrimage, Bishop Grouard on that occasion told the Holy Father of his wish for a private audience. At last the appointed day came, and the Bishop reached the Vatican, accompanied by Fr. Durand and another young Oblate, and one of their professors. They were received in the Papal ante-chamber by the Monsignore on duty for the week, the amiable young Belgian Prince de Croy. He was interested in the specimen of peltry, so soft and fine, borne by Fr. Durand. "But is not the silver fox more precious?" he asked. "No," explained Mgr. Grouard, "the black comes first. In Siberia the Tsar reserves for himself, for the imperial mantle, the skin of any black fox that may be caught."

The Bishop had his audience of over half-an-hour, and then was allowed to introduce his companions to the Holy Father's presence. The following

letter was addressed by Mgr. Grouard to the missionaries of Athabaska-Mackenzie in order to make them sharers in the happiness which he felt in the presence of the venerated Pontiff.

To-day, 18th October, 1898, I have the privilege of a private audience with Leo XIII., and the cordial manner in which I was received by His Holiness, still lingers in my memory. No words can convey to you the kindness, the marked interest and attention shown me on this memorable occasion by the Pope, during the forty-five minutes I had the pleasure to be with him. I conversed with him about you all, about your devotedness to the Church and the Holy See, about your modus vivendi, and the rigorous climate in the field of our Apostolate, etc. I told the Father that I was an Oblate, and that my missionaries were all Oblates. The Pope expressed great satisfaction to hear that we were religious and children of Mary Immaculate. I then said that our Indians know and love and pray for the Pope, Leo XIII., whose face beamed with joy, replied with a smile, "Tell your Indians that I, too, love and bless them, and when you return to your distant mission, give them the Papal blessing in my name." I next proceeded to show His Holiness the map of the Vicariate of Athabaska-Mackenzie, and on my giving him the exact number of Fathers and Brothers working in the Vicariate, he inquired of me whether there were nuns in the mission, and whether they had much to suffer from the climate and otherwise. I assured him that they had many hardships and sufferings to bear, and that only recently one of them had died in the Mackenzie district. The Pope, who seemed visibly affected, raised his eyes to heaven and said feelingly: "God will surely reward them for their sacrifices."

I began then to relate in detail the manner of living of the Indians, who lead a nomadic life, and depend mainly for their subsistence on fish and game, and the extensive fur trade they carry on with the Hudson Bay Company. When I had enumerated the different species and variety of animals whose furs were of the most value, I informed His Holiness that I wished to make him a present of the skin of a black fox. I then laid before him the story of how Brother LeRoux had killed the fox, and how the Company's Agent (a Protestant), after having promised a fine gun and many other presents to Brother LeRoux for the acquisition of

the skin, at last gave way and renounced all further claim to the animal saying: "Since it is for the Pope, you will tell His Holiness that I waive all my rights in his favor." Leo XIII., who seemed very much moved at the story, said: "Tell the Agent that the Pope sends his blessing to him and his family and that the Pope's blessing will bring him happiness."

"Is that fox's skin here?" asked the Pope.—"Yes, Holy Father, and I should be very happy, if you would accept the present, for though it is only a trifle, yet it is the richest, and at the same time the rarest gift the cold denuded North can offer your Holiness."

"Oh, then!" said the Pontiff, "I shall be very glad to receive it."

"But, Holy Father, I should like first of all to finish the recital of our ways and doings in our far-off mission." I spoke then of our steamboat, of the Yukon district and the Klondyke miners, and the Fathers I have sent there.

"But is there really any gold at Klondyke?" asked Leo XIII.

"Holy Father, I have never myself been there, nor have I ever seen gold from that district, but I know for certain that gold is found there, and rest assured that the first nugget I get it will be for your Holiness."

The Pope smiled graciously, and I then went on to ask his special blessing for the missionaries, and Brothers and Sisters of my vicariate, and in particular for the Baroness de Gargan. It would be impossible to tell in words the kind manner with which the venerable Pontiff listened to my demands and gave the blessings asked for.

He then enquired of my intended projects—"I suppose you will now return to France, to rest a while."

"My intention, Holy Father, is to go the round of the Seminaries in France to enlist vocations for my Vicariate."

"Do you propose to take the Seminarians with you to your Mission?"

"Not just yet. I shall invite them to join the congregation of the Oblates."

"That's right," rejoined the Pope, "let them become Oblates first."

After inquiring again about the Holy Father gave orders for the introduction of the two young missionaries who accompanied me to the Vatican and who brought with them the gift intended for the Pope.

I forthwith placed the skin in the hands of the Holy Father, who seemed very much pleased with the gift. Whilst feeling and caressing the silky fur, which he said he would be sure to keep, he turned to the nearest of the young Fathers and inquired:—"Are you going with this good bishop to

such a cold climate? See how happy and contented he looks!" "How could I not be happy, Holy Father, in your presence, and so kindly received!" In a moment I began to give the Holy Father an account of the fox, detailing the extreme difficulty of catching the animal, and the manner of placing the trap, and then I went on to give a mimic performance of this little animal who scents a feast, but distrusts the bait, approaches, retreats, looks here and there, and then scrapes away the snow, etc. The Pope followed my every movement, and you could see, as he watched, how he playfully reproduced in his looks and in every line of his figure, the marks of distrust which the astute old fox evinces before allowing himself to be entrapped. Nothing could be more charming and delightful than to see the Holy Father thus making merry, as it were, with us, and forgetting for awhile the cares and responsibilities of his high charge, to allow his mind relaxation in listening to the story of a fox! So kind, so fatherly, so condescending did Leo XIII. prove to me in the interview, that I could not but exclaim, as I rose to leave:—"May God preserve your Holiness to the Church for many more years to come, and I hope I shall have the happiness of seeing you again."—"Ah! you will never see me again," replied the Pope. "I have ninety years weighing heavy on my shoulders."—"No matter," I rejoined: "I shall hope to see your Holiness again; you have many more years to live." The Pope, raising his eyes to Heaven, said, "Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven."

It were impossible for me to say how deeply touched, and how greatly rejoiced I was at the reception I met with from the Pope, on my visit to the Vatican. The prayer which sprang from my lips, as I left his presence, was, May Our Lord deign to receive me one day as his Vicar on earth has received me now!

E. GROUARD, O.M.I.
Bishop of Iborá.

Vicar Apostolic of Athabaska-Mackenzie.

A STORM IS BREWING.

Your old rheumatism tells you so. Better get rid of it and trust to the weather reports. Scott's Emulsion is the best remedy for chronic rheumatism. It often makes a complete cure.

Each British soldier costs his country £80 every year.

Envy disturbs and distracts government, clogs the wheel, and perplexes the administration; and nothing contributes more to the disorder than a partial distribution of rewards and punishments in the sovereign.

JEAN RACINE AND HIS WORK.

From an Occasional Contributor.

On April 22nd last, with great pomp and circumstance the city of France commemorated the two hundredth anniversary of the death of Jean Racine, the leading poet of the seventeenth century. "La Semaine Religieuse" gives a very interesting account of the event and of the magnificent and representative assembly in the Church of Saint-Etienne-du-Mont, the temple in which repose the ashes of that child of genius.

Racine was born at Ferme-Mulon, the 21st December, 1639. In his long and splendid career he had only one rival whose name deserves to be written on the same page of literary appreciation—that was Corneille. Even before he had attained his twenty-fifth year Racine had given the world some admirable dramas—amongst them "Alexandre"; but it was only after that period that he suddenly struck out on an entirely new track, one that had never even appeared practicable to Corneille. Hereafter Corneille had been the master of the French stage; he had astonished, overwhelmed, seized upon and swept away the great public by the force of his heroic conceptions and the master-hand with which he reduced them to immortal verse. Racine undertook to awaken the more tender emotions of the soul, to soften, to subdue, to caress, to play upon the finer chords of the heart. Piety and human pity seemed to him the best agents in securing the attention of the world, and he consequently invented a new style of tragedy—one that became the glory of French literature and that conducted its originator into the temple of undying fame. The first of his works that indicated this change was his "Andromaque," which was a grand illustration of his powers, and in which he so combined fear and hope, terror and pity, that the result was a masterpiece. Almost every year witnessed a fresh and always more perfect drama, "Britannicus," "Bajazet," "Mithridate," "Iphigenie," and "Theatre" succeeded each other with a rapidity that was only equalled by the astounding grandeur and perfection of the compositions.

Petty jealousies rendered his last years unhappy. In fact he never was aware of the great things he had accomplished. Even when his best productions appeared they were ridiculed, parodied, hissed. Disgusted with the public and with the stage, Racine withdrew, when only thirty-eight years of age, and in the fullness of

his mental and physical vigor, and for twelve years was as silent as a mummy. The loss to France, to literature, to the world, that was the consequence of the ill-treatment of the great master of verse, can never be repaired. When he was 50 years of age, Madame de Maintenon induced him to write a drama to be played privately at the Saint-Cyr house. Racine took up his pen; and when he again laid it down he had produced that marvel of religious tragedies—"Esther." The success of the piece was wonderful, it was prodigious. This was followed by his "Athalie" written also for private representation at Versailles. It was criticised most unmercifully by the light-brained scribblers of the day. But this sad truth merely serves to show the ignorance of Racine's contemporaries. "Athalie" has survived; it stands foremost in the front rank of the French drama; it is a masterpiece unsurpassed either in modern or in ancient times. In vain did Boileau say: "It is your greatest work it will be recognized eventually." Although posterity has unanimously endorsed Boileau's appreciation, yet Racine was allowed to die without ever knowing that he had added the rarest classic gem to the chapel of France's poetic literature. Even Voltaire called it,—"despite that 'Athalie' is intensely religious—the work which is the nearest to perfection that ever came from the hands of man."

But the fervor of his faith and depth of his devotion, the grandeur of his humility, and the miracle of his entire submission in all to the will of God, so shaped his course that he died thinking more about eternity and his immortality than about his own work and his worldly fame. Not only are his works models of Christian precept, but his life was a model of Christian virtue and practice. He died almost in obscurity; but in dying he bequeathed to humanity some of the most glorious productions that the centuries ever beheld. Two hundred years has Racine slept "the sleep that knows no waking," and to-day his "Athalie" is taught as a leading classic, wherever the French language is spoken, and, as the years roll onward, its perfections and beauties come out only the more powerfully. If ever man deserved immortality, it was Jean Racine!

We sometimes measure the favors we grant by the necessities of those who solicit, not from the intrinsic value of what is granted. Pitiiful advantage!