

THE SATURDAY READER.

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"THE TWO WIVES OF THE KING."

TRANSLATED FOR THE "SATURDAY READER" FROM
THE FRENCH OF PAUL FEVAL.

FREE PUBLIC LIBRARIES.

ALL of us have heard of the "March of Intellect"—a phenomenon of mental pedestrianism which it is much more pleasant to believe than easy to witness. The phrase is one of those pieces of oratorical clap-trap which, by a lucky accident, passed into use as a fitting philosophical description of the diffusion of knowledge in our own times. At popular lectures, in educational publications, and at most literary entertainments, we are informed that at no other period in the world's history has the human mind possessed the same opportunities for expanding its faculties, and adding to its store of knowledge. And, to clinch the assertion, we are told to look at the vast number of books and periodicals that flow unceasingly from the press—to look at the immense circulation of cheap newspapers, the establishment of mechanics' institutes in almost every village, the multiplicity of schools, and the countless myriads of schoolmasters.

These facts may be said to be all comprised under the phrase, "The March of Intellect." Well, suppose we admit the appropriateness of the expression, we may be allowed to inquire, not in any spirit of cavil—whither is intellect marching? Is the march irresistible like that of the Roman legions—a march which shall hold its conquering way through the regions of ignorance and vice, until every citadel of inhumanity and injustice shall be overthrown, and temples of philanthropy and liberty be raised in the places they polluted? Or is the march like that of Attila, who, unlike the Romans, did not conquer that he might civilize and consolidate, but that he might reduce to barbarism, and utterly destroy.

The question we have raised is one which embraces much that may afford food for reflection. No one can doubt that the educational advantages of the present day are unparalleled; while, on the other hand, we are afraid it cannot be denied that the result is very disproportionate to what might reasonably be expected.

The aim after which most men strive, in our day, is to know a little of everything. The result in such a case invariably is, that they know nothing thoroughly. People of this stamp seem to forget the deep meaning conveyed in the old Latin maxim—"Beware of the man of one book." But it is not, perhaps, the fault of this age that our information is diffusive rather than concentrative. The number of periodicals that issue from the press; the necessity of keeping abreast with the current public topics of our own countries, and the events that transpire in others,

and above all, our utter absorption in the sublime science of money-making, prevent us from giving to one or more important studies that persistent attention which is requisite to fathom and comprehend them in all their details. And, further, if any one of us incline to devote ourselves to the study of any subject, we would require—so wide and interesting are such topics, as history and geography, political economy and statistics, etc.—a whole library of reference; and this is a something which men who live by their pen cannot obtain, and men of other professions care not to procure.

Why, then, should every city in British North America, every town and large village, remain without the possession of a free public library? This is a necessity of the times, and as a boon to every class of the population—the judge, the member of parliament, the professional man, the business man, and last but not least, the artizan, would be equally beneficial and acceptable.

It may be humiliating to a nation who can claim the greatest names in modern literature—but it is nevertheless true, that even in the British Islands, the number of public libraries falls scandalously short of those of the continent. Now for our proof.

From evidence laid before a committee of the Imperial Parliament some years ago, and the facts adduced as well as the figures, would bear, perhaps, the same relative proportions to-day—the position of the continental libraries was as follows:—

France contained 186 public libraries, 107 of which comprised 10,000 volumes or upwards, each. Belgium possessed 14; the Prussian States 53; or 44 possessing above 10,000 volumes; Austria, with Lombardy and Venice, 49; Saxony, 9; Bavaria, 18; Denmark, 5; Tuscany, 10; Hanover, 5; Naples and Sicily, 8; Papal States, 16; Portugal, 7; Spain 27, or 17 comprising 10,000 volumes; Switzerland, 13; Russian Empire, 12. Now at the time the above evidence was elicited, Great Britain and Ireland possessed only 34 such depositories of learning, the large majorities of which were accessible only to privileged individuals or corporations; while out of a total of 458 libraries in the Continental States, 53 were distinguished as Public Lending Libraries, and not one such institution was to be found in the United Kingdom. In the following table are given the number of libraries in some of the chief capitals and other distinguished places in Europe; the aggregate number of volumes in each town or city, and the proportion of volumes to every 100 of the inhabitants:

Name of town	No. of libraries.	Aggregate No. of vols.	No. of vols to every 100 persons.
Milan.....	2	250,000	146
Padua.....	3	177,000	393
Prague.....	3	198,000	184
Venice.....	4	137,000	141
Vienna.....	3	453,000	126
Heidelberg...	1	200,000	1500
Munich.....	2	800,000	751
Brussels.....	2	143,000	107
Copenhagen...	3	557,000	467
Montpellier...	3	100,000	295
Paris.....	9	1,474,000	160
Naples.....	4	290,000	82
Bologna.....	2	233,000	337
Rome.....	6	465,000	306
Berlin.....	2	460,000	158
Petersburg...	3	505,000	107
Dresden.....	4	340,500	490
Madrid.....	2	260,000	153
Upsal.....	1	150,000	3333
Florence.....	6	299,000	306

BRITISH.			
Aberdeen.....	2	46,000	71
Cambridge...	5	261,724	1046
Dublin.....	4	143,654	60
Edinburgh...	3	288,854	209
Glasgow.....	3	80,096	26
London.....	4	490,500	22
Manchester...	1	19,900	5½
Oxford.....	8	373,300	1547

By the above table it will be seen that, in comparison with the despotic States of the European continent, the United Kingdom falls far short in the intellectual resources supplied to its population. As to Oxford and Cambridge it is sufficient to say, that their libraries are in no respect "public," the books they contain being kept apart solely for the use of the literati and students connected with the universities. The following is a list of the principal national lending libraries of Europe, arranged as to the number of societies in each:

	Volumes.
Paris—National Library.....	824,000
Munich—Royal Library.....	600,000
Copenhagen—Royal Library.....	412,000
Berlin—Royal Library.....	410,000
Vienna—Imperial Library.....	313,000
Dresden—Royal Library.....	300,000
Milan—Brera Library.....	170,000
Paris—St. Geneviève Library.....	150,000
Darmstadt—Grand Ducal Library....	150,000
Naples—Royal Library.....	150,000
Paris—Mazarine Library.....	100,000
Parma—Ducal Library.....	100,000

If public libraries, such as the above, have no existence in Great Britain, it cannot be expected that Canada can lay claim to the possession of any such extensive depositories of information. The truth is, we in this Province have no library which can properly be called a public one. To be sure, we have the Parliamentary library, and a first-rate collection of books it contains; but it is not immediately available for reference, and it is not always convenient for a literary man in Quebec, Hamilton or Toronto, to proceed to Ottawa to consult a particular volume. This library of Parliament is open, while the House is in Session, to all who can procure a ticket of admission from the Speaker of either Chamber; and this favour is very seldom refused to persons of respectability. The library is under the management of Mr. Todd, and is admirably conducted by that gentleman. Still, this excellent Provincial collection is not open to the general public, for many reasons; and the same regulation characterizes the libraries of our Colleges and Mechanics' Institutes;—in the latter case, however, the payment of a small annual fee—necessary for the support of the institution—is all that is required to procure admittance, and the loan of books.

But Canada can show no city which possesses a free public library approximating, not in the number of books, but in principle, to the Astor in New York, and the free libraries of other United States cities. Is it not time that our large towns should set about making a beginning? An example once set, would be speedily followed, and the results would be found to be beneficial in the highest degree;—a desire for solid information would become more widely diffused; a taste for sterling literature would be developed; and, if a gymnasium were attached to such an institution, our youth would be weaned from pursuits which are too apt to work evil to their moral and physical, as well as their pecuniary well-being. The Canadian city that establishes the first free library, will lay the present and future generations of the Province under obligations that will be constantly and affectionately remembered, all time to come.