PRESENT ASPECT OF INVENTION.

A correspondent has written to us asking whether the realm of invention is not exhausted—whether there is still any chance for one of an inventive mind to devise improvements on existing devices or machines. The doubt implied in the above question seems very natural in view of the record of the patent offices of different countries. Every year sees an increase of patents. Besides these there are numberless inventions that are unregistered and that do not find a place on the records. Notwithstanding all this, the field is so large, and is so imperfectly cultivated, that the work has only commenced. Man's energies now, after so many years of waiting, are bent on the subjugation of the material world. More than half a million patents are the written history of what has been done, but the unwritten portion is the largest. Yet the conquest is far from complete.

If we consider the great inventions that are waited for, perhaps the subject of a prime motor would be the first occurring to the mind. From every point of view the steam engine is unsatisfactory. It is hampered by the condition of a narrow range of temperature, so that with steam of any manageable degree of heat, not more than fifteen or twenty per cent. of the heat of the fuel can possibly be utilized. There is only one way in a heat engine to avoid this restriction. It is to use a very high temperature in the motor. If steam is greatly superheated, it attacks the metal of which a machine is built, it destroys lubricators and packings, and is quite impracticable. Steam cannot overcome the ill effects of the second law of thermodynamics. In the gas engine, in which the combustion of gas is directly used, a higher temperature is obtained, and an engine far more economical in the calorific sense is obtained. But its fuel is expensive, and has to be first manufactured. The cylinder becomes heated, and, to prevent this from going too far, water is caused to circulate around it. This is a concession to the practical, for theoretically the use of water in this place is wrong. Neither the steam engine nor gas engine fills the bill. A prime motor that will convert eighty or ninety per cent. of the heat energy of coal into mechanical energy has yet to be invented.

Another conversion of energy should be the subject of invention. Mechanical energy can be converted into electrical energy with little loss; the problem of a successful conversion of heat energy into the electric form has yet to be solved. The ordinary thermo-electric battery is exceedingly economical, on account of the small difference of temperatures that it can utilize, and, in all of its present forms, must have a low coefficient of restitution. Of all the heat energy which it absorbs, it cannot restore as much even as the steam engine does. A prime motor and a direct converter of heat into electricity, with efficiencies of eighty per cent. or more, and using common fuel, have yet to be invented. In the ordinary cycle, coal is burned under a boiler, and the steam thus generated actuates an engine, in its turn driving a dynamo. In the second conversion of mechanical into electric energy, there is a loss of not over ten or fifteen per cent. But in the first stop eighty-five to ninety per cent. of heat energy is lost. In overcoming this loss, by going directly from heat to electricity, without the wasteful intermediation of steam, there is ample room for invention.

A primary battery that would be economically available for heavy work has yet to be invented. Almost all are characterized by high resistance, expensive depolarizer or a negative plate of high initial cost. In the Upward battery there was a genuinely new departure, but it has not been extensively introduced. The use of zinc for the positive element is a weak point, owing to the expense of such fuel. The storage battery has met with success, in great measure, on account of its low resistance. In the approved arrrangement of primary batteries, one-half the energy is expended uselessly in overcoming the resistance of the battery itself. Several attempts have been made in the direction of advance in primary generator construction, in some cases carbon or some of its compounds being utilized as positive element. In a primary battery of cheap construction, of low resistance, comparable to that of a storage cell, and consuming a cheap positive element, there is a chance for invention of the highest order and economic value.

Even the storage battery is defective. The spurious voltage represents a loss of ten per cent., and its excessive weight and deterioration tell heavily against its more extensive introduction. No one can pretend to say that the climax has been reached in it. The future must have a battery in reserve whose active portions shall bear a more favorable ratio to the weight of the inactive portions.

The field of greater achievements could be gone over and many other wants suggested. The sun's radiant heat should be utilized; tidal force and the movements of the wind should be harnessed and made to do their part in the labors of the world. In considering the great advance of natural science as regards definition only, remembering how accnrately the extent of achievement is stated, it is impossible to resist the conclusion that the world is on the verge of the revealment of some of the greatest inventions. To know just what we have done and what are the limits of our power in any given direction, is half the battle, and that half has been won.

In inventions of minor or less fundamental character the field is widening rather than narrowing. Since the days of Faust and Gutenberg, all books have been set up, letter by letter, in the most laborious and primitive way. At last a fairly successful type moulding machine that replaces the compositor has appeared. But no one can pretend to say that it marks the limit of achievement in this particular art. In the most numerous classes of inventions, such as car couplers or lock nuts, there is evidently ample region for work, as certainly the perfect coupler or nut has not yet been invented.

About 1812 Robert Fulton is said to have invented means for bringing the double-ended ferryboats which he had designed to their pontoon docks without a jar. As the ferryboat of the present day reaches her pier, the end of two cables brought from the dock are hooked to eyebolts on her deck, and the cables are then tightened by a species of windlass so as to hold the boat in place. The whole operation is executed by hand, while several hundred people patiently await its completion. In this exceedingly crude contrivance it would seem that a relic of Robert Fulton's invention has been preserved. The ingenuity of the constructors of steamships and railways ought to be adequate to the production of an automatic coupling that would hold the boat in place as she touches the dock.

A good instance of a genuine improvement in a field apparently barren has been afforded during the last few months. The channel eye was one of the first improvements in the needle. By placing the eye near its point, the sewing machine became a possibility. Except for these changes, the latter for a specific purpose, the little pointed piece of steel has remained the same for many generations, and has served as a trial of patience to many of the weaker-sighted mortals who have attempted to thread it. It seemed a hopeless thing to expend ingenuity on. Needle threaders were invented, but proved of little use, and it is within a few months only that a self-threading needle has been placed upon the market.

We think it is evident that the horizon of the inventor's world is widening. Every great change or invention opens a