

Mr. Ford's Page

IT IS not with the distinction between reputation and character that this page deals today, although that distinction may well be kept in mind during its perusal. Reputation is what people think a man is; character is what he really is. Usually reputation and character go along hand in hand; what people think a man is, he is very likely to be; but not always. There are just a sufficient number of differences between men's reputations and characters, to make a sweeping statement impossible, except to emphasize the distinction.

One distinction not often thought of is this: the people make a man's reputation; the man himself makes his character. Reputation is repute. Repute is just what the people think over and over again; a repetition of thought, a multiplication of opinion. It is clear, then, that reputation is something the people give to a man. He himself, of course, must be sufficiently active or interesting or important to give the initial impulse to their thought; but, after all, it is their thought that paints his public portrait.

The public makes mistakes. It must have its devils and its angels, and its devils must be very bad, even as its angels must be very good. The hankering of the public after a good man to believe in is very pathetic. Being too wise to have anything to do with God, they set up a statesman, a philanthropist, a public benefactor of any kind, and then they begin to weave about him a romantic robe of dreams until he becomes a cross between Santa Claus and Gabriel.

No man is ever so good as the public wants its good idols to be; and no man is ever so bad as the public wants its bad idols to be. The reason is that the public gives repute, and not the man himself.

Reputation is, of course, an important point, but it is not of first importance. A man who is always careful of his reputation usually has not much to spare.

Reputations are such partial things anyway. Here is a man who has a reputation for ready wit. Another, during some retentive period of his mental life, stored up much knowledge of the sort which quickly turns to attic lumber—he has a reputation for learning. Another, because of some act performed in a moment of indignation, gets the reputation of being quick-tempered or courageous. Another, a normal man, not self-centered, but living free in mind and body, does for a friend, without thinking of it, an act involving danger to himself, but effecting the other's salvation. He awakes to find himself a hero. There is nothing funnier than finding oneself a hero. One has read of heroes, admired them, dreamed one's boyish dreams of emulating them, but we supposed that heroism was something very grand to feel. We thought the hero felt heroic, felt as heroic indeed as the hero looked upon the stage. But he doesn't. The hero discovers for himself the immense difference between reputation and the inner sense thereof.

It is only part of the man that is involved in the reputation, good or bad. G. K. C. has a reputation as a writer; but he is more than that. M. J. P. has the reputation of being a good mender of boots, professionally a cobbler; but he is more than that. Reputations are such partial things.

But it is only when reputations become something to trade upon that they begin to bind men.

There are some men who regard their reputations as assets, who ought to regard them as liabilities, and they are "good" reputations, too, in the moral sense. It is a mistake to think that it is the "bad" reputation that is always the liability. Not at all. Good reputations sometimes hang like millstones around a man's neck; they are, in reality, the millstones on which his epitaph is already carved. A man has a reputation for cautiousness. Well, cautiousness is only a partial virtue. Sometimes a man ought to be cautious, and

sometimes greatly daring. Sometimes he ought to walk across the street and sometimes he ought to run. To commit himself to follow either course all the time would be equal to a prison sentence.

Other men have a reputation for what is called "common sense." Common sense is, as the term implies, the common possession of common people. It is very valuable. The majority of people are actuated by common sense. They are conservative. The majority must be conservative. That is the majority's business—to have and to hold, to protect and conserve the good of the past. If it were not for the conservative we should have nothing at all. He is the brother who stays at home and keeps the family farm in shape while his other brother roams afield, sometimes as a prodigal. In the end, all radicals come home to the conservatives; that is where conservatives justify themselves.

But, see what a hindrance a reputation for common sense may become. A man says to himself, "I have always been known as a man of common sense. I have always done what most people do,

with an element of protective caution thrown in. People do business with me because they know I am 'safe and sane.' Yet, here I have a vision which I know is safe with a higher safety and sane with a higher sanity than any of my neighbors know, and I am moved to follow this vision—but if I do, bang goes my reputation for common sense!"

In such an instance, a reputation is the death warrant of a man's growth. He is not living up to his real self; he is living down to the self that he was twenty or thirty years ago. He is simply refusing to outgrow the features of the portrait called "reputation" which public opinion has sculptured in the gallery of public imagination. For that is all public opinion is, and that is all fame is, and that is all reputation is, just public imagination.

Too many men are afraid of being fools. It is granted, of course, that public opinion is a powerful police influence for those who need it. Perhaps it may be true that the majority of men need the restraint of public opinion. In this class of cases, public opinion keeps a man better than he would otherwise be—if not better morally, at least better as far as his social desirability is concerned. But doubtless there are cases, and many men feel the truth of it, where reputation keeps a man from being as good and as useful as he might be, because in service he would be led into the "unusual, don't you know."

Well, it is not a bad thing to be a fool for righteousness' sake. The best of

it is that such fools usually live long enough to prove that they were not fools, or the work they have begun lives long enough to prove they were not foolish; and so the fool for righteousness' sake is revenged on Reputation after all.

Heaven help the man who has been poisoned by regularity! Not that belonging to the regulars, and being regular in everything from agriculture to religion is an evil thing—not at all. If a man deliberately chooses and selects a place among the "regulars" for the good that he can do them, very good. The regulars need their servants and prophets too. Many men are justified in saying, "I cannot do that, because it would injure the influence which I now possess in this special channel of work." There are men who, for the sake of moral usefulness among men, must make deliberate sacrifice of certain otherwise desirable things, and to these rightfully belongs their meed of honor.

This is not the class of men to be warned. These are not victims of regularity; they are missionaries to it. Others, however, who believe that the present form of regularity is the eternal pattern, who are in nervous fear of being so regular that they succeed only in being stupid, to them there might be given a stimulus to forego the bugaboo Reputation, and let their native decent impulses expand to fill the pattern they were meant to fill.

THERE are both good and bad reputations. A bad reputation to have is one that is so good that you are afraid to lose it for another. It is a bad thing for a man to have a reputation which is like a plaster cast which he dare not break, and from which he cannot escape. Many men are trying to live within the repute they won 20 years ago, afraid to "lose a reputation" which probably fitted them then but which is a misfit now. No man ever "loses his reputation"; he simply gets another one. It ought to be a better one. In any case, Reputation is only the projection on the public imagination of a picture which may be true or false. The real likeness is found in Character.