

### The Progress of Civilization.

An oration delivered before the Herder Lodge on the 19th inst. by Eli B. Felsenthal.

In the domain of nature nothing happens fortuitously, the motion of the heavenly bodies, the change of the seasons, the ebb and flow of the tide are governed by laws fixed and immutable. While the laws which govern events in the political, the literary, the scientific and the religious history of the world cannot be laid down with equal precision, a closer study of history will, nevertheless, disclose a regular law of development and progress. I believe that a general civilization pervades the human race, and that it augments at every epoch, that there is a course for humanity to run—a destiny for it to accomplish; and the nations which have passed away have transmitted from age to age, something to their successors which is never lost, but which grows and continues as a common stock, and will thus be carried to the end of all things. Each day finds us in advance of the day before. We are continually growing wiser and better, and those who speak of the good old times when this or that evil was not, forget in the maze of the present the imperfections of the past. Nay, these are the good times, and they are becoming better every day. Thanks to the efforts of the great men who to-day guide and sway our thought and actions—thanks to the bold, brave men who fling aside venerable notions and falsehoods and in their stead give us living truths.

I said we were continually advancing and growing better, but this progress is slow at times. Every generation is in advance of its predecessors, but there seems to be a limit for each generation, and as each generation has its sutlers and camp followers who are always at a safe distance to the rear, and who are rather a hindrance than an assistance, so too there is the picked guard in the van, the hardy pioneers of thought, while the majority are simple soldiers, in the battle of progress ready to follow if some one will only take the lead. Fortunately for the world, such leaders have always appeared with the necessity for them.

Though always influenced by the spirit of the time in which they lived and, as it were the result of that spirit, still they were generally, still splendidly in advance, and for this reason considered as crazy enthusiasts, eutopists, or if they were leaders in religious movements, stigmatized as heretics. They were men of undaunted courage and full of their personal power and their power over the destinies of others. And these are the true elements of greatness. You will find then by a study of history these three facts: first, the development and progress of the human race governed by a general law; second, the great movements which have occurred at certain periods as factors of this progress and as evidence of it, and third, the great men, the leaders in the great movements, likewise factors in this progress and evidence of it. These facts may not appear upon a casual glance, but search will reveal them.

I shall illustrate by a cursory reference to some of the great historical movements which have occurred since the beginning of the Christian era.

The first movement and one which has effected our modern civilization was the overrunning of Italy, France and Spain by the hordes of northern tribes and the overthrow of that mighty city upon the seven hills which had held the whole known world under her control. To one who lived at that time it must have seemed as though all the civilization of ages, which was preserved by the Romans and to whose store they had added, was to be thenceforth forever blotted out, and that the world must again return to its former state of ignorance and darkness. But this very chaos and confusion of elements proved to be most salutary for the future progress of civilization, for the foundation which supported that vast fabric called Rome had already been sapped and the eternal city would have perished by reason of her own weakness. But, as it was, when she did fall they swarmed about her ruined palaces, a hardy race of untutored barbarians, but these barbarians possessed an element entirely wanting in the Roman, the feeling of personal liberty and independence, which has united with Roman civilization to form the most progressive, active and energetic races in the world—the Anglo Saxon and the Teutonic. Rising out of this confusion of people and of ideas which followed the fall of Rome, and as a sure sign of the approaching improvement, appears Charlemagne. As a warrior, a statesman, and a law-giver, we find him actively engaged in an endeavor to build up a State. He appeared too soon upon the arena, and before the world was ready for his advent. His death left a vacancy which could not be filled, and the State fell for the want of a guiding hand. The influence of his reign, however, was not lost, and some of the seeds he cast fell upon good soil. Exactly what influence the feudal system that breaking up of races into petty kingdoms, had upon the progress of civilization, what influence the crusade exerted,

which in fool-hardy cause brought about the destruction of thousands, exactly what part the multitude of minor events played it would be difficult indeed to say, but each was necessary for the grand denouement, and the result was a step towards the emancipation of the mind, towards enlarged and liberal ideas. This spirit soon produces great men and great discoveries. A daring mariner opens up a new continent to Europe's astonished gaze. He dies poor and in prison. A Gutenberg discovers the art of printing—he is looked upon as possessing an evil spirit—he is unflinching. A monk discloses the compounds of gunpowder, and changes the mode of warfare. Paper made of linen is first used. The art of painting in oil is discovered, and soon an Angelo and Rubens immortalize their names and their art. The expansion of ideas to which everything up to that period has contributed makes itself felt as well in the religious world, and Martin Luther bids defiance to the Mother Church. We are able to discern in the light of the present, that the coming upon the scene of Luther was not only not phenomenal but to be expected. The great Reformation was a necessity, it was the result of the spirit of the age—and it began with Luther, it began a man who with all his failings, and they were great, was still a grand spectacle. He fought for the emancipation of the human soul, he contended that he had a right to think, a right which even in the nineteenth century is still denied in religious matters. Yes, even in matters of science—let us not forget it. The same expanding of the mind makes itself felt in the literary and scientific worlds, and soon a Shakespeare in literature, a Bacon in philosophy, a Galileo and Newton in astronomy and science give to the world from which they have drawn their stock of information, a sublime literature, a better system of philosophy, the one scans the starry vault with his telescope, while the last gives us the law of gravitation. The movement crosses the ocean in the next century and assumes a political aspect. A nation of free minds grow restless under the oppression of an imbecile monarch, and throw off its yoke. Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, and Thomas Paine were as much influenced by the age in which they lived, as they themselves influenced that age—they were historical necessities. They were rebels and daring adventurers in the eyes of the mother country; but they were bold patriotic men in America. Their success established a nation for the world, a name for them.

The French Revolution was the result of the same forces which brought about our own. The great inventions which have marked the present century, the subjects of so many declamations and commonplaces, are the result of this expansion of the mind. In the religious world again great changes are at hand, already the distant rumbling of cannon is heard which shall be brought to bear upon the religious ramparts. Already Voltaire and Paine, a host of German free-thinkers, an Ingersoll, Huxley, Tyndall and Darwin are laying the train which when ignited will undermine the bulwarks of religious systems. Already the fate of the Bible as an inspired book has been sealed. We are not yet ready to write the history of the present. Posterity will do that for us, and it will assign to each of the great men of to day his proper place. We call these men infidels, heretics, fanatics. Future historians will say of them they too contributed their quota to the advancement of the human race. It will say of them—They were the champions of forethought—No great movement has yet been brought about except under the cloak of fanaticism. It ill-becomes us in this century to use such a weapon of defence and thus to stigmatize those who advocate their honest opinions. Let us keep in mind the history of the past and never forget that reason will gain the day. All credit to him who stands boldly forth and strengthened by his convictions dares fight for her supremacy. The crown of thorns which an ungrateful generation places on his head, history will replace with a wreath of immortelles.

Chicago, Feb. 17th 1880.

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