VI.

"THE COLLECTIVE WISDOM."

[FROM THE READER FOR APRIL 16, 1865.]
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A test of senatorial capacity is a desideratum. We rarely learn how near the mark or how wide of the mark the calculations of statesmen are; the slowness and complexity of social changes, hindering, as they do, the definite comparison of results with anticipations. Occasionally, however, parliamentary decisions admit of being definitely valued. One which was arrived at a few weeks ago furnished a measure of legislative judgment too significant to be passed by.

On the edge of the Cotswolds, overhanging the valley of the Severn, occur certain springs, which, as they happen to be at the end of the longest of the hundred streams which join to form the Thames, have been called by a poetical fiction "the sources of the Thames." Names, even when poetical fictions, suggest conclusions; and conclusions drawn from words instead of facts are equally apt to influence conduct. Thus it happened that, when, recently, there was formed a company for supplying Cheltenham and some other places from these springs, great opposition arose. The Times published a paragraph, headed, "Threatened Absorption of the Thames," stating that the application of this company to Parliament had "caused
some little consternation in the city of Oxford, and will, doubtless, throughout the valley of the Thames;” and that “such a measure, if carried out, will diminish the water of that noble river a million of gallons per day.” A million is an alarming word—suggests something necessarily vast. Translating words into thoughts, however would have calmed the fears of the *Times* paragraphist. Considering that a million gallons would be contained by a room fifty-six feet cube, the nobility of the Thames would not be much endangered by the deduction. The simple fact is, that the current of the Thames, above the point at which the tides influence it, discharges in twenty-four hours eight hundred times this amount.

When the bill of this proposed water company was brought before the House of Commons for second reading, it became manifest that the imaginations of members were affected by such expressions as the “sources of the Thames,” and “a million gallons daily,” in much the same way as the imaginations of the ignorant. Though the quantity of water proposed to be taken bears to the quantity which runs over Teddington weir, about the same ratio that a yard bears to half a mile, it was thought by many members that its loss would be a serious evil. No method of measurement would be accurate enough to detect the difference between the Thames as it now is, and the Thames minus the Cerney springs; and yet it was gravely stated in the House that, were the Thames diminished in the proposed way, “the proportion of sewage to pure water would be seriously increased.” Taking a minute out of twelve hours, would be taking as large a proportion as the Cheltenham people wish to take from the Thames. Nevertheless, it was contended that to let Cheltenham have this quantity would be “to rob the towns along the banks of the Thames of their rights.” Though, of the Thames flow-
ing by each of these towns, some 999 parts out of 1,000 pass by unused, it was held that a great injustice would be committed were one or two of these 999 parts appropriated by the inhabitants of a town who can now obtain daily but four gallons of foul water per head.

But the apparent inability thus shown to think of causes and effects in something like their true quantitative relations, was still more conspicuously shown. It was stated by several members that the Thames Navigation Commissioners would have opposed the bill if the commission had not been bankrupt; and this hypothetical opposition appeared to have weight. If we may trust the reports, the House of Commons listened with gravity to the assertion of one of its members, that, if the Cerney springs were diverted, "shoals and flats would be created." Not a laugh, nor a cry of "Oh! oh," appears to have been produced by the prophecy, that the volume and scouring power of the Thames would be seriously affected by taking away from it twelve gallons per second! The whole quantity which these springs supply would be delivered by a current moving through a pipe one foot in diameter at the rate of less than two miles per hour. Yet, when it was said that the navigability of the Thames would be injuriously affected by this deduction, there were no shouts of derision. On the contrary, the House rejected the Cheltenham Water Bill by a majority of one hundred and eighteen to eighty-eight. It is true that the data were not presented in the above shape. But the remarkable fact is, that, even in the absence of a specific comparison, it should not have been at once seen that the water of springs, which drain but a few square miles at most, can be but an inappreciable part of the water which runs out of the Thames basin, extending over several thousand square miles. In itself, this is a matter of small moment. It interests us here simply as
an example of legislative judgment. The decision is one of those small holes through which a wide prospect may be seen, and a disheartening prospect it is. In a very simple case there is here displayed a scarcely credible inability to see how much effect will follow so much cause; and yet the business of the assembly exhibiting this inability is that of dealing with causes and effects of an extremely involved kind. All the processes going on in society arise from the concurrences and conflicts of human actions, which are determined in their nature and amounts by the human constitution as it now is—are as much results of natural causation as any other results, and equally imply definite quantitative relations between causes and effects. Every legislative act presupposes a diagnosis and a prognosis; both of them involving estimations of social forces and the work done by them. Before it can be remedied, an evil must be traced to its source in the motives and ideas of men as they are, living under the social conditions which exist—a problem requiring that the actions tending toward the result shall be identified, and that there shall be something like a true idea of the quantities of their effects as well as the qualities. A further estimation has then to be made of the kinds and degrees of influence that will be exerted by the additional factors which the proposed law will set in motion: what will be the resultants produced by the new forces cooperating with pre-existing forces—a problem still more complicated than the other.

We are quite prepared to hear the unhesitating reply, that men incapable of forming an approximately true judgment on a matter of simple physical causation may yet be very good law-makers. So obvious will this be thought by most, that a tacit implication to the contrary will seem to them absurd; and that it will seem to them absurd is one of the many indications of the profound ignorance that
prevails. It is true that mere empirical generalizations which men draw from their dealings with their fellows suffice to give them some ideas of the proximate effects which new enactments will work: and, seeing these, they think they see as far as needful. Discipline in physical science, however, would help to show them the utter inadequacy of calculating consequences based on simple data. And if there needs proof that calculations of consequences so based are inadequate, we have it in the enormous labor annually entailed on the Legislature in trying to undo the mischiefs it has previously done.

Should any say that it is useless to dwell on this incompetency, seeing that the House of Commons contains the select of the nation, than whose judgments no better are to be had, we reply, that there may be drawn two inferences which have important practical bearings. In the first place, we are shown how completely the boasted intellectual discipline of our upper classes fails to give them the power of following out in thought, with any correctness, the sequences of even simple phenomena, much less those of complex phenomena. And, in the second place, we may draw the corollary, that if the sequences of those complex phenomena which societies display, difficult beyond all others to deal with, are so unlikely to be understood by them, they may advantageously be restricted in their interferences with them.

In one direction, especially, shall we see reason to resist the extension of legislative action. There has of late been urged the proposal that the class contemptuously described as dividing its energies between business and bethels shall have its education regulated by the class which might, with equal justice, be described as dividing its energies between club-rooms and game preserves. This scheme does not seem to us a hopeful one. Considering
that during the last half century our society has been remodelled by ideas that have come from the proposed pupil, and have had to overcome the dogged resistance of the proposed teacher, the propriety of the arrangement is not obvious. And if the propriety of the arrangement is not obvious on the face of it, still less obvious does it become when the competency of the proposed teacher comes to be measured. British intelligence, as distilled through the universities and redistilled into the House of Commons, is a product admitting of such great improvement in quality, that we should be sorry to see the present method of manufacture extended and permanently established.