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TOPICS OF THE TIME.

The "Century" War Series.

THE reception which has been accorded to the first papers of the series on the Civil War has more than confirmed our belief in the timeliness and expediency of non-political discussion of the leading events in the great conflict. We had anticipated a cordial interest in a subject of such immediate historic importance upon which there is little or no systematic popular education; but we were hardly prepared for the almost unbroken response of welcome which has greeted the enterprise, whether in the generous notice of the press, or in the large number of encouraging and helpful letters that have come to us from all sections of the country, or, last and most practical of all, in the extraordinary increase of the circulation of the magazine. For all this support, and especially for the courtesies and valuable suggestions received from officers of the War Department, and of the volunteer and regular armies, and others, it is a pleasure as well as a duty to make grateful acknowledgment here.

If the welcome has been somewhat greater than we expected, so also the series is increasing every week in resources of entertainment and instruction. Its announcement has brought to us unpublished original documents of marked significance, and contributions of both text and illustrations which will noticeably re-enforce our plans. As we proceed, there is a larger fund of pictorial material to be drawn upon, especially in the history of the Army of the Potomac. Moreover, as those who had the direction of military affairs awake to the fact that the enterprise has arrested the attention of the public, and that it is conducted without bias, they are increasingly willing to contribute to it.

It must be confessed there are thousands of intelligent people who would be ashamed to be ignorant of the outlines of the Napoleonic wars to whom probably the greatest conflict of ideas and arms of the nineteenth century appears like "men as trees walking." There is something perfunctory and sentimental about the belief in the heroism of past ages; we need to become familiar with the valor of our own times to realize of what mankind is capable. To many a reader of the younger generation who has begun these papers, the war was a sort of miracle concerning which he knew little; as his knowledge of it increases it will be, like nature herself, more and more of a miracle; and when he has reached the Grand Review of 1865 he will then be all the better prepared by inclination and temper for an examination of the real causes of the struggle, concerning which the last word has by no means yet been spoken.

We are aware that the present series is not all history, but even in its errors, its bias, its temper, and its personalities, it is the material of history — what the French call *mémoires pour servir*. It is not too much to claim that when completed it will probably constitute a more authoritative and final statement of the events of the war as seen through the eyes of commanders and participants than has before been made on a single plan. Collected, it will be an intimate and authentic record such as has never before been made of the war for the Union, or indeed of any military conflict.

To literary and historical clubs these papers offer a convenient adjunct and nucleus for a systematic study of the general subject. Various veteran associations are wisely engaged in making record of the personal experiences of their members, and to these a generation hence the historian will resort for the substance of his final judgments. Meanwhile, the civilian and the student have little or no benefit from these rich materials. In every town or city to which THE CENTURY goes a most interesting study of the war could be carried on by the aid of the reminiscences of officers and soldiers, and of the diaries and letters penned in camp and bivouac, to say nothing of the books and documents accessible in every library. Doubtless investigations conducted in a historical spirit would be the occasion of shedding important light on the character of the conflict, or (as recently in the case of a literary club of Cincinnati) the occasion of clearing up misapprehensions concerning its origin.

To the thousands of new readers who have been brought to the magazine by their interest in the war, as well as to those older constituents to whom the war papers are not an attraction,— if such there be,— we recommend special attention to the other contents of the magazine — to the fiction, the travel, the domestic papers, the public discussion, the art, the humor — for the most part drawn from American life. We are well aware that its permanent increase of prosperity will depend, not upon any special series or feature, but upon the general character of the magazine.

An Undesired Guest.

THE recent horrible continental outbreak of Asiatic cholera has stimulated medical investigators generally to make fresh attempts in the direction of penetrating the mysteries of its pathology. Dr. John Chapman, of England, the inventor of and strong believer in an ice-bag, advances in the "Westminster Review" a new theory, viz.: that cholera is essentially a nervous disease which is non-contagious, and owes its genesis to causes which reduce the vigor of the sympathetic nervous system. In riding his hobby, which he does in all sincerity, and in a graceful literary manner, the author puts out of the question to a great degree all the well-established climatic, topographical, and other facts that have been found to play so important an etiological part. The element of local filth seems to have no weight with him, and he regards Koch's microbe theory as of no moment whatever. This is indeed a bold way of accounting for the disease. Dr. Chapman's article is clever and suggestive, but he makes the same mistake that he would if he were to consider typhus and other zymotic diseases as essentially neurotic affections, because the nervous symptoms are dominant. In these diseases, as well as cholera, the great derangement of the cerebro-spinal and sympa-

thetic systems is undoubtedly due to the specific influence of some poison, which we agree with him is but imperfectly known; that it does exist, however, can hardly be gainsaid.

Dr. Chapman points out a fact which is and has been known for a long time, viz.: the serious influence of fright, exhaustion, and other depressing circumstances in their relation to the spread of epidemics. There can be no dispute about the fact that in time of epidemics the ravages of disease are greatly helped by panic and its belongings, and we are furnished with numerous historical instances. The sweating sickness of 1485 and 1506 was largely due to the superstition and ignorance of the soldiers of the army of Henry VII. Before the epidemic of 1506 the fears of the common people were aroused, and a state of superstitious horror was excited by the falling of a large golden eagle from the tower of St. Paul's, which crushed in its way to the ground a black eagle which ornamented a lower building. This with other enfeebling causes so demoralized the inhabitants of London that they fell ready victims to the pestilence.

The psychological interest attached to panic is worthy of close study. "Expectant attention," especially when of a depressive nature, is always likely to lower the energy of all nervous functions. We find isolated evidence of this every day, but there can be no doubt that it has been an important factor in the recent cholera epidemic, especially in Italy, where instances of fanaticism and wild superstitious fear were found among all classes.

The first outbreak of cholera in Moscow was attended by a display of popular insanity which was simply incredible, the mob breaking open the hospitals and killing or wounding the medical officers. From the history of other epidemics, it would appear that the mental disturbance may even amount to hallucinations which are shared by many persons of a community. The prostrating effects of fear are well illustrated in those medical cases where collapse follows the unfavorable dictum of the attending physician, and individuals with a reasonable hope of recovery sink and die. This is precisely what happens in time of epidemic disease. It therefore behooves the public, whenever a visitation of cholera is threatened, to keep cool, to allay the fears of the excitable and to prevent panic. The comparatively slight extent of the disease in America in 1849 was largely due to this self-possession; and one of the English medical writers then expressed himself as follows:

"The manner in which the epidemic that visited us in 1849 was met and submitted to is a decisive proof of this" (self-possession), "and shows that the mental capacity and docility of the masses of mankind are very materially exalted in the scale of moral beings. Our Transatlantic brethren, the Americans of the United States, surpassed us, we must own, in this respect. No superstitious propensities were evinced on either side of the ocean; no fatal delusions, instigating the populace to public outbreaks of a terrifying nature; no disabling panics, no shameless libertinism; nay, no profane outcry, or brutish infidelity. But everything was conducted with the most perfect self-possession—soberly, humanely, and discreetly. The best means, suggested by the best reason and knowledge, as far as they went, were listened to, adopted, and resolutely put into practice."

All this augurs well for the ordeal through which we in America may be obliged to pass next summer. Our present efforts, however, should be directed to the removal of existing nuisances, which may tend to favor the spread of the disease, should it come to us. New York, despite its admirable situation, washed as it is upon either side by rivers with rapid tideway, is badly drained, the space between the piers containing deposits of foul mud, organic matter, and sewerage sediment.* This is due to the fact that the sewer outlets end abruptly at the ends of streets. In no other great city in the world would such a state of things be permitted to exist. Another grave and alarming danger is that which must arise from the scarcity of water. For over two years the occupants of many houses below Thirty-fourth street have not had water above the first floor, and even the most carefully constructed hygienic plumbing must become a disease-breeding nuisance. Upon either side of the city are fat-boilers and "gut-scrapers," while thousands of tons of decaying manure upon the river front fill the air with noxious gases. These and many other evils must be abolished, and such overcrowding as the papers tell us existed not long ago in one house, where there were fifteen cases of typhus fever, should be prevented.

Bearing in mind the fact that cholera is in large measure a disease which begins with gastric derangement, the importance is apparent of a rigid system of food inspection, something much more rational than that now followed.

But New York is not alone in the necessity for prompt and continuous precautions. Every seaboard town should be alive to its particular needs, which in many cases are great indeed. Above all things, let there be pure air and plenty of good water and wholesome food. With these requisites, and with the vigilance of intelligent, systematic officials, cholera, if it should arrive at all, may be kept within bounds, and the danger of a general pestilence may be averted.

Freedom of Discussion.

THOUGHTFUL and unpartisan observers of the Southern situation have long been watching with interest the signs which show that the South is emerging from provincialism into a genuine spirit of nationality and of intellectual freedom. The great test of this advance is the growing liberty of opinion, as manifested in the press and on the platform, and in other quarters as well. Without this liberty of opinion there can be, of course, no genuine solution of any social or political question whatever—in the South or anywhere else.

No essay on the subject of the freedmen published for many years has attracted wider attention than Mr. Cable's "The Freedman's Case in Equity," in the January CENTURY. The reception of this essay in the Southern States (though not unaccompanied by some amusing reminders of the good old-fashioned bowie-knife and fire-eating days) would seem to be a new proof that the Southern people admit of the honest and free discussion of burning questions in a manner which has not always been characteristic of that section. Not only does the South admit the distasteful opinions of

*See Colonel Waring on "The Sanitary Condition of New York," in this magazine for May and June, 1881.