

Comment by the Editor

THE PAST

Those who look back can see the farthest ahead. This has a paradoxical sound but it is none the less true. Only by viewing the past can we tell what is ahead of us and the man of clearest vision is the one who knows well what has already happened. The present — if it can be said to exist at all — is but a knife edge between the uncertain and onrushing future and the irrevocable past. We stand upon that narrow divide and look both ways, and by what we see in the past we determine how we shall meet the future. Our fears and our hopes people the road ahead of us; then in a twinkling they have slipped by and are the regrets and the satisfied memories of an unchangeable yesterday.

It is unchangeable, but how illuminating! Into it slip all facts and all experiences in ordered array. Every color and movement and form that our eyes have noted, every sound that has stirred us as it went whistling or rumbling or singing by into the irrevocable, every smell that has delighted or somnified mankind is a part of the past. Every act or sequence of acts that we and our forebears have been guilty of or proud of, every manner and type of success and failure, and all the multifarious backgrounds of human experience lie ready for our enlightenment — a panorama of life, sordid and sub-

lime, with its interplay of motives and actions, of loves and hates, and envies and sacrifices.

THE HISTORIAN

We reach back for these experiences with faltering memory, sometimes with distorted vision, often with indifference. Here enters the historian. It is his function to refresh our memory, to clarify our vision, to prick us into a keener sense of the tremendous reality of the ages. We are too content to say: let the dead past bury its dead. It is not dead; it is alive and poignant and its personages are real. Why then should any historian, like a black-frosted undertaker, lay away in funereal winding sheets, the immortal figures of the past? Why should dust of the ages obscure the wilderness trails and habitations, and reduce the vivid colors of historic life to a drab monotone?

It is not easy to ascertain and state in orderly fashion the bare facts concerning past events; but it is much more difficult and requires infinitely more research to find the human details that clothe these facts with reality. It is somewhat of a task to unearth and list the articles hidden in an ancient ruin; but it requires long study to investigate those articles with the purpose of learning just how the ancients lived. A natural history museum years ago contained long rows of glass cases of individual animals, each standing beside his printed label and gazing across at another unrelated specimen. To-

day the animals are surrounded with the background they are accustomed to, and the visitor sees natural history in its reality. The recorder of the past may well take note, for the era of vital background in history is at hand, and though research must be more extended the result will be a live history.

J. C. P.