

H. G. WELLS

on

THE SIX GREATEST MEN IN HISTORY

*An Interview by
BRUCE BARTON*



Photo. Heresford.

MR. WELLS got up from his seat by the window and came forward pleasantly, a medium-sized man, rather stocky, with the clipped moustache that his photographs have made familiar to all of us.

"I received your letter," he said, cheerfully. "A very interesting letter, Mr. Barton, and in one or two points even amusing. Your second question, for example—now, that's an amusing one. You ask whether it is possible to name the half-dozen outstanding figures of history—which is quite harmless—and then you complicate the thing by adding, 'Would there be a woman among them?'" He laughed. "One's chivalrous instincts would make him want to say 'Yes' to that question," he continued, "but the honest historian must answer 'No.'"

I brought my chair up closer, for he speaks rapidly and in very low tones. He is probably a poor lecturer, and, recognizing that fact, cancelled his American lecture tour. That is one of the evidences of greatness, I imagine—to know your own limitations and stick to the thing you can do best.

"If you don't object, I should like to start with my first question," I said. "Now that you've taken a good look at all the folks who have played this game of life, which is the greatest of all? Which one, in character and influence, has left the most permanent impression on the world?"

There was no hesitation in his reply.

"THE DOMINANT FIGURE IN HISTORY."

"You probably expect me to answer, Jesus of Nazareth," he said. "There can be no other answer; His is easily the dominant figure in history. I am speaking of

Him, of course, as a man, for I conceive that the historian must treat Him as a man, just as the painter must paint Him as a man. We do not know as much about Him as we should like to know. The accounts of His life and work as set down in the four Gospels are sometimes obscure and contradictory; but all four of them agree in giving us a picture of a very definite personality; they carry a conviction of reality. To assume that He never lived, that the accounts of His life are inventions, is more difficult and raises more problems in the path of the historian than to accept the essential elements of the Gospel stories as fact.

"Of course, you and I live in countries where, to millions of men and women, Jesus is more than a man. But the historian must disregard that fact; he must adhere to the evidence which would pass unchallenged if his book were to be read in every nation under the sun. Now, it is interesting and significant—isn't it?—that an historian, setting forth in that spirit, without any theological bias whatever, should find that he simply cannot portray the progress of humanity honestly without giving a foremost place to a penniless teacher from Nazareth. The old-fashioned historians ignored Jesus entirely; they ignored the growth and spread of His teaching, regarding it as something apart from life, something, as it were, that happened only on Sundays. He left no impress on the historical records of His time. Yet, more than nineteen hundred years later, an historian like myself, who does not even call himself a Christian, finds the

picture centring irresistibly around the life and character of this simple, lovable man.

"All sorts of dogma and tradition have been imposed upon His personality, of course; it is the fate of all great religious leaders to be misinterpreted by their followers. But from underneath this mass of the miraculous and incredible, the man himself keeps breaking through. We feel the magnetism that induced men who had seen Him only once to leave their business and follow Him. He filled them with love and courage. Weak and ailing people were heartened by His presence. He spoke with a knowledge and authority that baffled the wise and subtle. But other teachers have done all this. These talents alone would not have given Him the permanent place of power which He occupies; that place is His by virtue of the new and simple and profound doctrine which He brought—the universal, loving Fatherhood of God and the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven.

"It is one of the most revolutionary doctrines that have ever stirred and changed human thought. His followers failed to grasp it; no age has even partially understood its tremendous challenge to the established institutions of mankind. But the world began to be a different world from the day that doctrine was preached; and every step toward wider understanding and tolerance and good will is a step in the direction of universal brotherhood, which He proclaimed.

THE HISTORIAN'S TEST OF GREATNESS

"So the historian, disregarding the theological significance of His life, writes the name of Jesus of Nazareth at the top of the list of the world's greatest characters. For the historian's test of greatness is not

'What did He accumulate for himself?' or

'What did He build up, to tumble down at

his death?' Not that at all, but this:

'Was the world different because He lived? Did He start men to thinking along fresh lines with a vigour and vitality that persisted after Him?' By this test Jesus stands

first; and if you ask for another name to write under his, there is Gautama Buddha.

"Here again it is difficult to disentangle the man himself from the mass of accumulated legend. To my mind, the most successful attempt to portray Gautama is that of Rhys Davids, the author whom I quote so fully in 'The Outline of History.' Any such portrayal lays itself open to the charge of representing one man's prejudice and judgment. But as with Jesus, so with Gautama Buddha, you sense the reality: you see clearly a man, simple, devout, lonely, battling for light—a vivid human personality, not a myth.

"He, too, brought a message universal in its character. It knows no limitations of time or of place; many of our best and most modern ideas are in closest harmony with it. All the miseries and discontents of life are due to insatiable selfishness, he taught. Selfishness takes three principal forms, and all are fraught with sorrow: The first is the desire to satisfy the senses, sensuousness; the second is the craving for personal immortality; and the third is the desire for prosperity, worldliness. All these must be overcome—that is to say, a man must be

no longer living for himself before he can be serene. And his reward is Nirvana; which is not oblivion, as we have wrongly assumed, but the extinction of futile personal aims, whose going lets serenity into the soul.

"Jesus said, 'Seek ye *first* the Kingdom of God,' and 'Whosoever will save his life shall lose it.' Gautama in different language had called men to self-forgetfulness five hundred years before. There comes to you from reading his life, as from the life of Jesus, the impression of a mind so powerful, so penetrating, that after him things make a fresh start. He stands on one of the corners of history; events hinge upon

him; his influence persists."

"Would you class Mohammed and Confucius with these two?" I asked Mr. Wells.

"They founded great religions also."

"We know too little about China to



Gautama Buddha.

include Confucius with our half-dozen greatest," he answered. "He was certainly a powerful intellect. As Hirth says, 'There can be no doubt that he had a greater influence on the development of Chinese national character than many emperors taken together.' But his teachings lack the universality of Jesus's teaching and Gautama's; he was great, but until we know China more intimately we cannot say that he was among the greatest. As for Mohammed, he seems to me to have been clearly surpassed by two of his associates: Abu-Bekr, his close friend and supporter, and the Caliph Omar, his successor.

"There is too much of the clay of human weakness mixed with the finer elements in Mohammed's character. He had too many wives and too much trouble with them. Allah was too often called upon to intervene with a special revelation designed to extricate the Prophet from domestic difficulties. He was vain, egotistical, and filled with hot desire. I do not place him among the greatest of human figures, nor am I one of those who find the Koran wholly inspiring and splendid. I own it in two translations and I have made diligent effort to like it, but I am unable to lash myself into a glow of admiration. Mohammed was the immediate cause of calling forth a power much greater than himself—the spirit of Islam. It grew out of the character of the Arab people. It was, and is, something vastly more significant than the man who made himself its spokesman.

"A GREAT NEW THING IN THE WORLD."

"No, I would leave out Mohammed. Instead of his name I would write the name of a wise old Greek, Aristotle. He began a great new thing in the world. Before his time, men had asked questions about themselves and their world; but he set them to classifying and analysing the information which their questions brought forth. He was the tutor of Alexander the Great, whose support and resources made it possible for Aristotle to carry on his studies on a scale never before attempted. At one time he had a thousand men at his disposal, scattered throughout Asia and Greece, collecting material for his natural history. It is reported that he sent assistants into far-away Egypt to study the Nile and to chart its habit of overflowing its banks. Political as well as natural science began with him. The students of the Lyceum under his direction made an analysis of one hundred and fifty-eight political constitutions.

"The death of Alexander and the breaking up of his empire put a too early stop to

Aristotle's work, and after him things lapsed for a long time. But the world had been given a taste of the scientific method and never wholly forgot it. Again and again men kept turning back to the great, clear, penetrating intelligence that had set the example. Plato and other philosophers had said: 'Let us take hold of life and remodel it.' Aristotle said: 'First of all, let's get the facts.' That insistence on facts and the rigid analysis of facts, that determination to look the truth in the face, to deal with the world as it is rather than as we might wish it to be, was a big new step in human progress. As a younger man I was a Platonist; the poetry and fine imaginative power of his philosophy captivated me. But as I began to dig into the cause of things in preparation for 'The Outline,' I became convinced that Aristotle's scientific beginnings were a far more significant thing in the processes of history. He was the founder of the scientific method; and when we stop to consider what humanity owes to the development and achievements of the scientific spirit, I think we must agree that the name of Aristotle must have a place on our honour roll."

"Aristotle the teacher goes on the roll," I suggested, "and Alexander the Great stays off. Is that correct?"

"Unquestionably."

"And that holds for Cæsar and Napoleon, too, doesn't it?"

THE CLAIMS OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT—

"I have gone to some pains to make my position clear on those three gentlemen in 'The Outline,'" he answered with a chuckle. "What were their permanent contributions to humanity—these three who have appropriated to themselves so many of the pages of our histories? Take Alexander first. Inheriting an effective military machine from his father, he conquered Persia and remained in undisputed possession of that vast empire for six years. What did he create? Historians have said that he Hellenized the East. But Babylonia and Egypt swarmed with Greeks before his time; he was not the cause but a part of the Hellenization. For a time the whole world from the Adriatic to the Indus was under one rule, and that unification had been his father's dream. But what did Alexander do to make the unification permanent? He built no roads, established no secure sea communications, gave no thought, apparently, to institutions of education.

"He did one thing that historians have held up as indicating a vision of a melting together of racial traditions. He held a

great marriage feast at which he and ninety of his generals were married to Persian brides; at the same time several thousand of his soldiers who had married the daughters of Asia were showered with gifts. This wholesale wedding may or may not have been part of a vague plan of world unity. If it was, it is about all the evidence of that plan that we know.

"As his power increased, his arrogance and violence grew with it. He drank hard and murdered ruthlessly. After a protracted drinking bout in Babylon a sudden fever came on him, and he died at the age of thirty-three. Almost immediately his empire began to break up. One custom remained to remind men of him. Previously most men had worn beards. But so great was Alexander's personal vanity that he would not let his face be covered. He shaved, and so set a fashion in Greece and Italy which lasted many centuries. A good fashion, perhaps, but not a very significant contribution to the race.

CÆSAR—

"As with Alexander, so with Cæsar. Here, again, historians have claimed to discover evidence of marvellous world policies. But what are the facts? There can be little doubt that he was a dissolute and extravagant young man. And in middle age, at the crest of his power, when he might have done so much for the world if he actually possessed the vision ascribed to him, he spent the better part of a year in Egypt feasting and entertaining himself with the lovely Cleopatra. He was fifty-four when the affair began. Surely that year in Egypt seems to reveal the elderly sensualist, or sentimentalist, rather than the master ruler of men."

AND NAPOLEON.

"And Napoleon——"

A copy of "The Outline" was on the table. Mr. Wells opened it and turned to that passage which is so magnificently at variance with the traditional histories that

it is worth quoting again. After relating how France had put herself completely in Bonaparte's hands, it continues:—

"Now surely here was opportunity such as never came to man before. Here was a position in which a man might well bow himself in fear of himself, and search his heart and serve God and man to the utmost. The old order of things was dead or dying; strange new forces drove through the world seeking form and direction; the promise of a world republic and enduring world peace whispered in a multitude of startled minds. Had this man any profundity of vision, and power of creative imagination, had he been accessible to any disinterested ambition, he might

have done work for mankind that would have made him the very sun of history. . . . There lacked nothing to the occasion but a noble imagination. And failing that, Napoleon could do no more than strut upon the crest of this great mountain of opportunity like a cockerel on a dung-hill. . . . Until, as Victor Hugo said in his tremendous way, 'God was bored by him . . . !'"

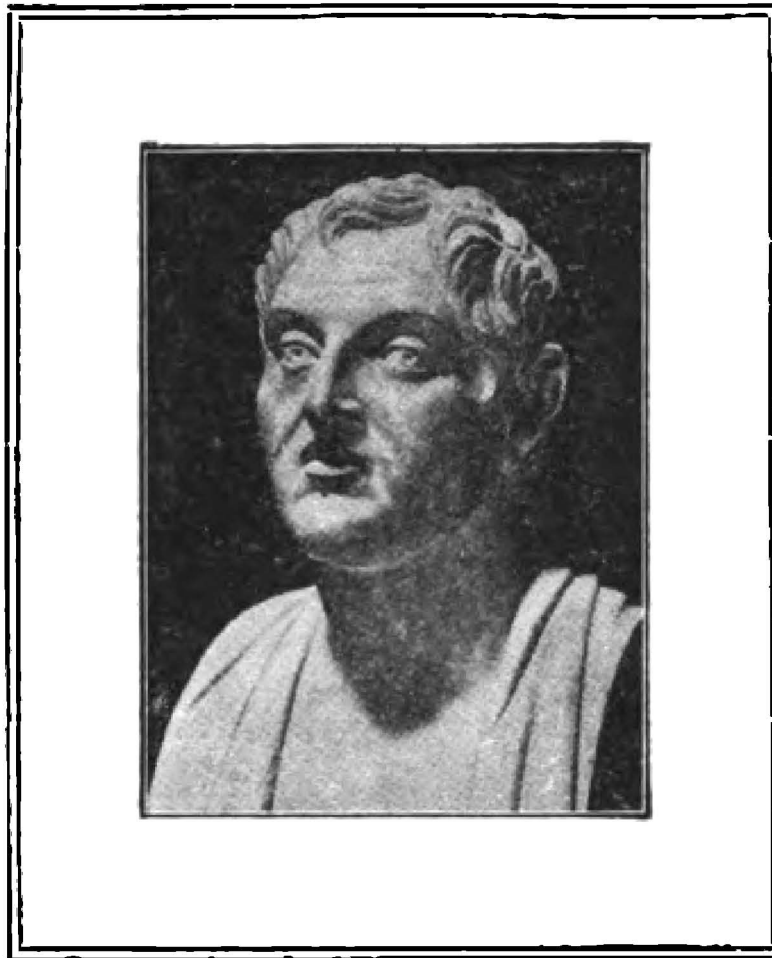
I read the passage and laid the book on the table.

"An American professor made a study of eminent men by measuring the amount of space given to each one in the biographical dictionaries," I suggested. "Napoleon's name led all the rest."

"That is easily explained," Mr. Wells replied. "A biographical dictionary is a record of activities, not a weighing of personalities. A London wine merchant with a list of all his customers and the clubs he had joined might conceivably occupy a very impressive space in a biographical dictionary. But that would not prove that the wine merchant was an impressive character. Neither the wine merchant nor Napoleon belongs to our list. One great monarch does deserve nomination, however; or so it seems to me at least."

"Charlemagne?" I asked.

"No, not Charlemagne. Charlemagne was one of the 'magnificent barbarians,' as I have termed them. Like a number of others, he pursued the futile ambition of



Aristotle.

restoring the Roman Empire. That proves that he lacked something," Mr. Wells added, with a smile. "For one of the tests of greatness is a man's capacity to recognize that when a thing is dead it's dead.

A MONARCH WHO "SHINES ALMOST ALONE, A STAR."

"The monarch I have in mind lived long before Charlemagne or even Cæsar. He ruled a vast empire which stretched from Afghanistan to Madras; and he is the only military monarch on record who abandoned warfare after victory. After a successful war — his one and only war — he announced that he would henceforth turn from battle and devote himself to the happiness of his people. He organized the digging of wells and the planting of trees for shade. He appointed officers to supervise charitable works. He planted gardens for growing medicinal herbs, and provided for the education of women. He sought to develop in his whole people an understanding of the teachings of Buddha as a guide to successful living. For twenty-eight years he worked sanely and unselfishly for the real needs of men. Among all the thousands of kings, emperors, and majesties, great and little, Asoka shines almost alone, a star. More living men cherish his memory to-day than have ever heard the name of Charlemagne."

I had never even heard of Asoka until

I read "The Outline," and I said so to Mr. Wells.

"It's a rather appalling thought that among so many monarchs who lorded it over men only one should get his name written on our list," I continued. "And is there no Prime Minister? No Richelieu, no Talleyrand, no Pitt?"

THE ONE ENGLISHMAN WHO DESERVES A PLACE.

"Oh, no; they were quite incidental," Mr. Wells replied. "But one Englishman does deserve a place, it seems to me. He was a man who lacked many of the elements of greatness, yet he was very cardinal in human progress; his name was Roger Bacon. We know very little about his life, but his books, hotly phrased and sometimes quite abusive, voiced a passionate insistence upon the need for experiment and of collecting knowledge. 'Experiment, experiment,' he cried again and again; and as a promise of the progress which experiment would make possible, when once men had thrown off the chains of ignorance and authority, he wrote this famous paragraph, which has been often quoted. Remember that it was written more than six hundred years ago, somewhere between 1210 and 1293:—

"Machines for navigating are possible without rowers, so that great ships suited to river or ocean, guided by one man, may



King Asoka.

From a Tibetan painted banner.

Reproduced by kind permission from Havell's "Indian Sculpture and Painting" (John Murray).



Roger Bacon.

be borne with greater speed than if they were full of men. Likewise, cars may be made so that without a draught animal they may be moved *cum impetu inestimabili*, as we deem the scythed chariots to have been from which antiquity fought. And flying machines are possible, so that a man may sit in the middle, turning some device by which artificial wings may beat the air in the manner of the flying bird.'

"Thus Roger Bacon, too, set men to thinking along new, fresh lines, and left an influence that has lived for the benefit of all generations. There will be those, of course, who will dispute his right to a place on our roll; some will have candidates whose claims can be urged in very convincing fashion. A man rises out of his age; it is always difficult to determine how much he owes to his contemporaries; how much of what he seemed to be was due to his own innate force, and how much to accident. But in my judgment these five names represent basic contributions to human thought and progress.

WASHINGTON OR LINCOLN?

"Now, when you come down nearer to our own times and ask for a sixth name to complete the list, the problem is difficult. There is one striking phenomenon in modern history, however. That phenomenon is America. It represents something so new, so tremendous, so full of promise for the future of the world, that it seems as if America ought surely to have the right to nominate at least one member to our list. Shall it be Washington or Lincoln? Without Washington, there would hardly have been a United States; and yet Washington is not the typical American. He was essentially an English gentleman. All

his tastes, all his traditions, and many of his associations and friendships ran back to the mother country.

"America might have imported her Washington, full grown, from the old world. She had to grow her own Lincoln.

"He, better than any other, seems to me to embody the essential characteristics of America. He stands for equality of opportunity, for the right and the chance of the child of the humblest home to reach the highest place. His simplicity, his humour,

his patience, his deep-abiding optimism, based on the conviction that right will prevail and that things *must* work themselves out—all these seem to typify the best that you have to give. And they are very rich gifts indeed.

"It is interesting and significant to the historian that the Lincoln legend has already grown to such proportions. He has been dead only half a century, yet already he has a secure and permanent place in the affections of men, not only in America, but everywhere. I think we are safe in including Abraham Lincoln in our list of permanently great figures; not merely because of his own greatness, but be-

cause of the greatness of the spirit of America, which he, better than any other American, embodies and exemplifies."

A LIST TO STIMULATE WONDER.

Mr. Wells folded up the paper on which my questions were written as if to intimate politely that he had talked long enough. I glanced at the list of six names—Jesus, Buddha, Aristotle, Asoka, Roger Bacon, Lincoln. Surely a list to stimulate wonder, to provoke questionings in a man's mind about the objects for which lives are lived;

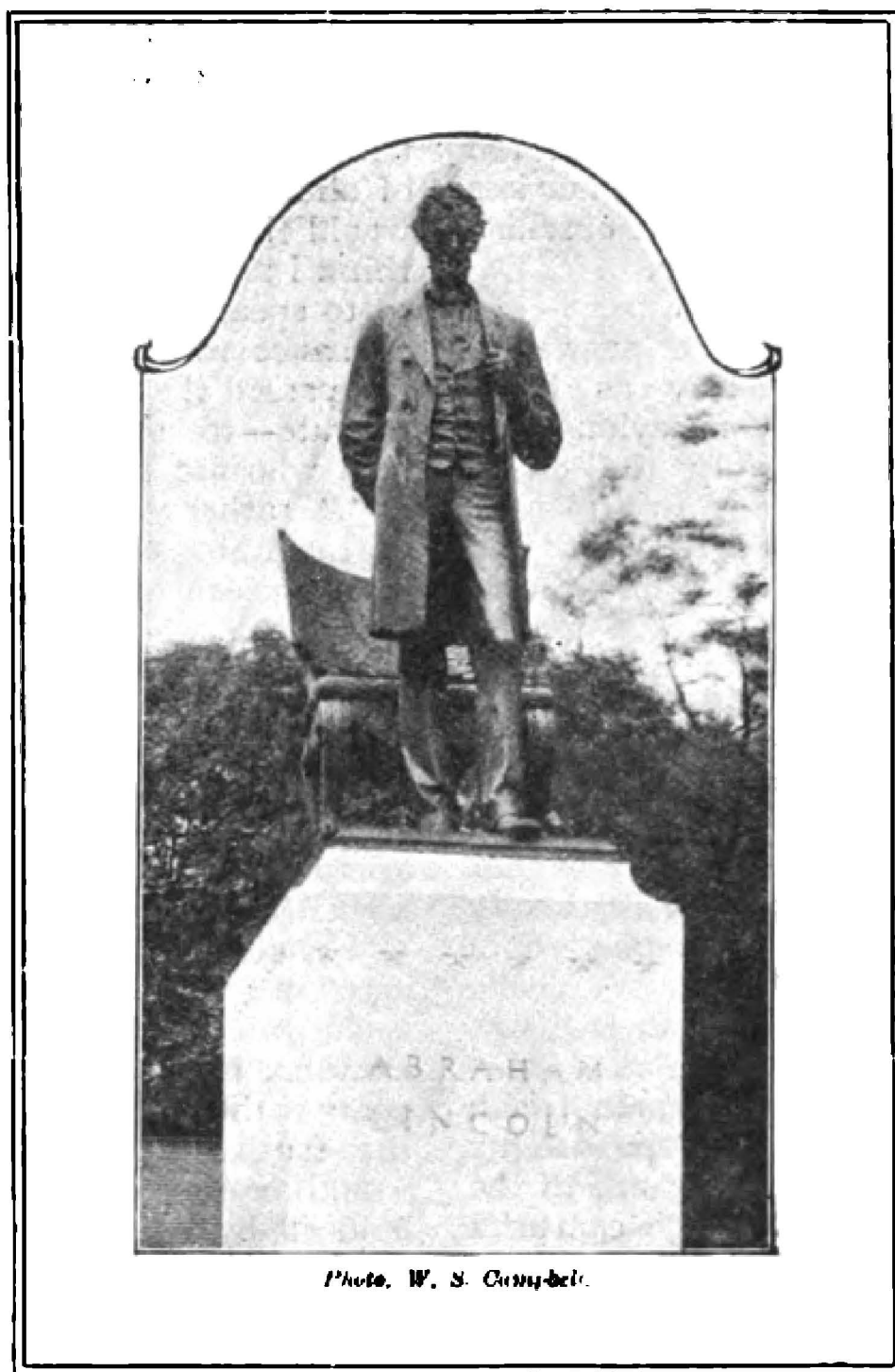


Photo. W. S. Campbell.

Abraham Lincoln.

yes, and questionings about himself. I thought of the thousands of kings who had erected temples and arches to bear their names—seeking by brick and stone to ensure remembrance; of the emperors who determined to lay hold on immortality while they still lived, by decreeing their own divinity. Not one of them is in the list. No millionaire is there, except perhaps Asoka, who is included not because of what he had but because of what he gave. It seemed a grim sort of joke that these men who *sought* fame with every ounce of their selfish energies should have failed utterly to be remembered, while six simple, very human men should achieve lasting eminence. I recalled Emerson's observation that the mass of men worry themselves into nameless graves, while here and there a great unselfish soul *forgets* itself into immortality.

I quoted the line to Mr. Wells.

"There is truth in that," he answered. "We think of human history as being very long; but it is not. In Ceylon there is a tree which is probably the oldest living thing in the world. It was planted from a cutting of the Bo Tree, the tree under which Buddha had his remarkable spiritual experience, and it has been tended with extraordinary care through the centuries. Its limbs are supported by pillars; and earth has been repeatedly terraced about it so that it could keep sending out fresh roots. How many more generations of men it may look down upon we cannot foretell, but we know how many it already has seen come and go. It was planted in 245 B.C.

"When Cæsar was born the old tree was already old. That is a startling thought—that almost all the years since men began to make dependable records are spanned by the life of a single tree. We are still in the beginnings of things; yet enough centuries have already passed to enable us to see what kind of lives and what sort of influence persist beyond the grave. In writing 'The Outline of History,' where everything had to be compressed, we could find no space for many of the Roman emperors, we could not mention even the names of many of the kings of France and Germany and Great Britain. But we gave a good many lines to a poor monk named Luther and to two other very humble, very simple beings, Loyola and St. Francis of Assisi. Why? Because the kings and emperors only *took*; these men *gave*; and by the spirit of their giving they wrought permanent changes

in the thought and lives of many millions after them.

WHAT CHARACTERISTICS MAKE FOR REAL HAPPINESS AND PERMANENT INFLUENCE?

"So with the six whose names we have placed in our highest honour list. If the readers of THE STRAND MAGAZINE want to discover what characteristics make for real happiness and permanent influence, they can hardly do better than read whatever they can find about the life and works of these six. The characteristics which they embody are the characteristics to which humanity is going to pay more and more tribute in the future. Napoleon had a run of almost twenty years. A Napoleon to-day would hardly run five years; indeed, I think I may say that a bad case of Napoleon, so to speak, would be nipped before he had a chance to get really started. The world has passed the place [where it will any longer tolerate—to say nothing of honouring—men who are merely 'getters.'

"A rather striking instance of the change that is taking place everywhere was furnished by a speech given before the head masters of English schools at Leeds some time ago. The late Mr. F. W. Sanderson, head master of the Oundle School, where the sons of some of England's proudest families are educated, was the speaker.

"'We have been training our boys for aristocracy,' he said. 'We shall have to train them now for service.'

"That was spoken only a few months ago, but it is merely an echo of what Jesus spoke nineteen hundred years back, and Buddha, in different language, five hundred years earlier. Our list of great names proves the truth of the injunction that he who would be greatest must win his place and hold it by rendering the best and largest service.

"Without such absorption of one's self in the service of the business the large rewards do not come. We shall see that truth more and more manifest. Therefore we are giving helpful advice, I take it, when we suggest to ambitious men that they make themselves familiar with the lives of the six men we have named. Such reading will give no promise of an easy road to wealth or position, but it will reveal something infinitely more valuable. It will furnish an inspiration to the sort of living that makes for permanent influence through real service. That is success."

Next month a number of eminent men will express their opinions on Mr. Wells's views, including:

G. K. CHESTERTON
EDWARD CLODD

MAURICE HEWLETT
SIR OLIVER LODGE
LORD RIDDELL

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW
ISRAEL ZANGWILL