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Comment

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Comment by the Editor

MOST PEOPLE BELIEVE

When Justice John F. Dillon, writing the opinion of the Supreme Court of Iowa, expressed the view that Charles B. Thompson's method of acquiring property "illustrates the extent of credulity which forms so curious a phase in certain portions of the race", he touched upon a very human trait. He might have mentioned other examples; but, being a jurist, he proceeded to consider the facts of the case before the court instead of dwelling upon the metaphysical implications of the situation. The financial transactions involved were "almost as marvelous as the pretended revelation of Thompson would have been if true."

Yet Thompson's Mormon Presbytery of Zion was no unusual phenomenon. The world has always been full of adroit schemers seeking personal gain by posing as public benefactors. With a winning personality, supreme self-confidence, and a plausible motive, almost any one can secure a following. John Adams used to say that a leader is one who on account of birth, wealth, drunkenness, or any other distinguishing characteristic is able to win other votes than his own. P. T. Barnum founded his whole career on the fact that people are sus-

ceptible to humbug; and citizens of Chicago reëlect William Hale Thompson because his appeal is vivid, though as a showman he appears to be a clown.

Vendors of patent medicine, nature fakirs, and salesmen of stock in the broad blue sky are no less numerous or successful than religious impostors who take advantage of the universality of religious faith. No doubt certain transcendentalists will accept F. Milton Willis's assertions that Emerson was the reincarnation of Epictetus; that Cicero reappeared as Gladstone and Virgil as Tennyson; that Alfred the Great reigned again as Queen Victoria; and that Hypatia of Alexandria now flourishes in the form of Mrs. Annie Besant. Who can prove that he is mistaken? Even a few men of science were misled by the rather obvious hoax of the Cardiff Giant. And there are people who firmly believe that the moon has something to do with the potato crop, who hope to avoid misfortune by carrying a rabbit's foot, and who still assert that the earth is flat.

People are inherently credulous: belief is more natural than doubt. We are inclined to invert the Golden Rule and assume that others will do unto us what we would have them do. Men are expected to be honest. The anonymous expression, "they say", implies acceptance of some vagrant rumor, while published writing carries so much conviction that readers must be continually cautioned to believe only part of what they see in print.

Perhaps one reason for human gullibility lies in

the equally innate thirst for knowledge. Grandmother's exclamation, "I want to know!" or "Do tell!", while indicating a disposition to believe, was doubtless originally prompted by the very urgent and natural impulse to learn. This insatiable quest for information connotes a tendency to construe the news as truth. Skepticism is an attitude of mind that requires cultivation.

J. E. B.