

The Habit of Duty

BY ROBERT E. SPEER.

A RECENT newspaper article detailing the enormous sacrifices of life in the industrial progress of Pittsburgh bore the gruesome title, "Riches Soaked in Blood." In the first five months of 1907 the coroner recorded one thousand and ninety-five deaths, of which three hundred and forty-four came suddenly and violently in the mills and railroads of the city. One life, it was declared, was sacrificed for every fifty thousand tons of coal shipped, one life for every seven thousand tons of iron and steel. Why were these men where death met them prematurely? They were working for the support of their families or were simply busy with the necessary work of the world, and they died where duty placed them and doing what they thought they must. Somewhere along the line of the production of every fragment of the world's wealth is the blood of a man who fell in his duty with no cry to the world for its praise, but taking what came with his duty as a matter of course.

How did duty get the power to dominate men in this way, and what enables it to assert its power against home and life? Because it is the call of right, and what right bids us to do it is wrong not to do. And right draws its vital authority from God. God is the great personal, living right, and duty is simply His voice. That is the lofty metaphor of one of our greatest odes. Let each reader turn to his Wordsworth, and read all of the ode of which these lines are a part:

Stern Daughter of the Voice of God!
O Duty! If that name thou love
Who art a light to guide, a rod
To check the erring, and reprove;
Thou, who art victory and law
When empty terrors overawe;
From vain temptations dost set free;
And calm'st the weary strife of frail humanity!

Through no disturbance of my soul,
Or strong compunction in me wrought,
I supplicate for thy control;
But in the quietness of thought;
Me this unchartered freedom tires;
I feel the weight of chance desires:
My hopes no more must change their name,
I long for a repose that ever is the same.

Stern Lawgiver! yet thou dost wear
The Godhead's most benignant grace;
Nor know we anything so fair
As is the smile upon thy face:
Flowers laugh before time on their beds
And fragrance in thy footing treads;
Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong;
And the most ancient heavens, through thee,
Are fresh and strong.

Because duty is the right thing, the will of God for man, it is sufficient. For its own sake alone, it asks to be done. Itself is its own reward. It asks no other, and there is surely something pitiful about our practice in these days of rewarding and decorating men for doing their duty. Why should they not? Is duty something it is wonderful to find a man doing, so wonderful that he should get extra pay for it or be given a ribboned medal? Surely Fielding's words in "Tom Thumb the Great" are nobler:

When I'm not thank'd at all, I'm thank'd enough;
I've done my duty, and I've done no more.

It is simply our duty to do our duty. It is not the winning of a supererogatory merit with either God or man. It is not a matter of reward. And it is not a matter of comparison with other men's achievements. Mr. Maydole, the hammer-maker, was an expert. "I have made hammers," he told Doctor Gannett once, "for twenty-eight years." "You ought to be able to make a pretty good hammer, then, by this time," was the reply. "No, sir!" came the emphatic answer, "I never made a pretty

good hammer—I make the best hammer in the United States." This was high, all but the comparison. Duty is not to do better than another man, but to do it all and to the limit on one's own line, for the eye of God, not for the comparing eye of man. But we live now in a competitive day. In school and university and life the rewards are all for exceeding other men. Industry is organized on that principle. Our athletics rest on competition with others or with the record of others. It may be doubted whether the good old times were as good as our own times, but the spirit attributed to them ought to be the spirit of all times.

"O good old man, how well in thee appears
The constant service of the antique world,
When service sweat for duty, not for meed!
Thou art not for the fashion of these times,
When none will sweat but for promotion."

This high view of duty is our deep need. There is a place for all true sentiment, for temperament and inclination, but the place of control is for duty. We need to acquire the habit of doing the next thing as duty. Duty is ever with us and calling to us. It ought to be done by us simply because it is our duty until the thought of evading or shirking duty will never come to us and we do instinctively, as though nothing else were possible, that which is our duty. The habit of duty should become so fixed with us that we should see nothing but duty. There is a story of an archer who was teaching his art. The mark was a bird in a tree. "What do you see?" the archer asked the first man who came forward to shoot. "I see a bird in a tree," said he. "Stand aside," said the archer. "What do you see?" he said to the second man. "I see a bird," replied he. "Stand aside," the archer said. "And what do you see?" he asked the third. "I see the head of a bird," said he. "Shoot," the archer cried. We should be blind to all that diverts or obscures. The things that deaden the sense of duty must have no place with us. The "Stern Daughter of the Voice of God" will endure no indulgences which stifle her word in our hearts.

All duty can be done. What we ought to do is the only thing we can do, if we are what we ought to be. No right is impossible. "Let us have faith that right makes might," said Lincoln in his speech in New York in 1859, "and in that faith let us dare to do our duty." It can be done, however impossible, just because it is our duty to do it. We must believe this if we have any ear for God at all, for, as Emerson wrote in lines inscribed on the wall of the schoolroom of the most efficient school for boys in America:

So nigh is grandeur to our dust,
So near is God to man,
When Duty whispers low, Thou must,
The youth replies, I can!

"When I was a boy," said a man recently speaking to boys, "my father gave me a diary on Christmas, at the close of a year in which I made changes in my life plans which were at the time a great shock and disappointment to him. He was a reticent man, so that when he did speak we heard. He said little about the matter, but in the diary he had written on the fly leaf, 'March on to duty.' If it led away from his desires, well and good; it was duty which was to be followed wheresoever it led." A new day will break in the church and the world, in college and home, in public and private life, when men "march on to duty," unfrightened, unseduced, obedient, when they will say and live by their word, "It is my duty to be about my Father's business and to finish the work which he gave me to do." Those men will vanquish death and hell, and, after Christ, will build the walls of the kingdom which is righteousness and duty.—Forward.