

The Deeper Life

Looking Back

By Dr. Salem Bland

Wistfully contrasting the clouded joy of men with the skylark's ecstasy in the present, Shelley says:

"We look before and after,
And sigh for what is not."

And never, perhaps, does the "after" draw our thoughts as at the close of the year; a season which, however often it may recur, never becomes commonplace.

Few mental attitudes may be more full of help than looking back; few more full of harm. Much of the most innocent happiness of life is found in looking back. Some one has said that the charm of foreign travel is three parts of it anticipation, two parts realization, four recollection, and that is true of other eagerly anticipated pleasures.

As age subdues the passions and energies, the soul finds a quiet but deep pleasure in recollections, especially those of childhood. That is one of many reasons why all children should be ensured, at least, a happy childhood. It is in childhood and youth, and perhaps only then, certainly at no other period so richly, that they store up what will be the chief solace of old age. A childhood of toil and hardship, bare of love and gladness and beauty means a dreary and cheerless old age. A child robbed of joy is deeply, doubly robbed. I well remember how often in the last five years of his life my father, drawing on to eighty, in his letters and conversation, would refer to the lovely Yorkshire Valley in which his earlier years had been passed as increasingly in his thoughts.

Looking back, too, is the supreme condition of wisdom and all improvement. "Experience teaches," but only if it be remembered. We must recall our failures, our mistakes, look them squarely in the face, even if we flinch; analyse them, understand them, or life will be a humiliating repetition of them. "Success," Josh Billings used to say, "doesn't consist in never making blunders, but in never making the same blunder twice." Our success, too, must be recalled and investigated, though this is a much more dangerous exercise than studying our failures.

If we will look back wisely, too, we shall find deliverance from many anxieties. We shall find how many of our fears have never been realized.

"Some of our ills we have cured,

And the sharpest we still have survived,

But what torments of grief we've endured

From evils that never arrived."

Looking back is the natural source of thankfulness and trust and hope. The great teachers of the Bible always called men to look back and consider the way in which God had led his people. Some of the noblest psalms are just historical summaries—records of past sins and the inexorable penalties, past dangers and deliverances. We should be less beset with doubts and fears in this hour of peril and strain if we only would consider the past a little more carefully. This is not the first time that the darkness has fallen and the storms have been loosed, not the first time that powerful forces have threatened and the most precious things of human life have been brought into jeopardy. Old Testament history and the supplementary history of Britain would, if we looked back with a discerning eye, greatly increase our confidence in the coming triumph of the right.

Especially is looking back an essential element in the Christian development of the old Hebrew faith. The chief inspiration of Christianity, its inexhaustible fountain of devotion and love and courage and hope will always lie in the look turned back to that great landmark which can never sink below the verge, the divine key to all the mysteries of life and death—the Cross of Calvary.

But there are grave perils in the backward gaze. St. Paul in one of the impul-

sive outbursts that are so characteristic and so attractive interdicts it altogether. "One thing I do," he says, "forgetting the things which are behind and stretching forward to the things that are before, I press on toward the goal." And a greater than St. Paul has warned us that "no man having put his hand to the plow and looking back is fit for the Kingdom of God." We are bidden remember Lot's wife and not look back,

though to remember her and her tragic fate is to look back. We must not look back to the thing that must be left. A man fleeing from a sheriff got on the state boundary just in time. Linger in conscious safety just on the other side of the line he hailed the baffled officer. The sheriff seemed to accept his failure philosophically. "Shake hands," he said; "we may as well part friends." The man stretched out his hand. The sheriff seized it and with a quick strong pull jerked the man across the line. "You are my prisoner," he said.

Looking back to vanished joys is ever deadly—it is like that fabled river that gradually stole away the strength of those who bathed in it.

No one, perhaps, has expressed that sad and yet seductive word of melancholy retrospect more vividly than Tennyson:

"Break, break, break,

On thy cold grey stones, O sea!

Break, break, break,

At the foot of thy crags, O sea!

But the tender grace of a day that is dead,

Will never come back to me."

The slow, heavy, sullen surges of grief fall smotheringly on the heart till it loses, like a drowning man, all power of resistance.

Even more poignant is the song from The Princess:

"Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,

Tears from the depth of some divine despair,

Rise in the heart and gather to the eyes,

In looking on the happy autumn-fields,

And thinking of the days that are no more.

Oh, sad and strange as in dark summer-dawns,

The earliest pipe of half-awakened birds

To dying ears, when into dying eyes

The casement slowly gives a glimmering square;

So sad, so strange, the days that are no more.

Dear as remembered kisses after death,

And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feigned

On lips that are for others; deep as love,

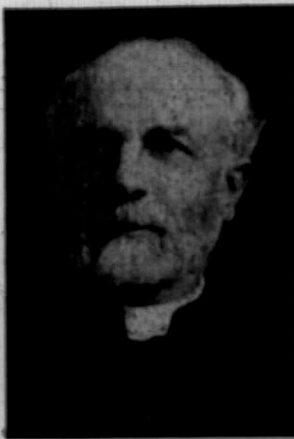
Deep as first love, and wild with all regret,

O death in life, the days that are no more."

It may be as clear a duty to wrench oneself away from a selfish sorrow as from a selfish joy and it may be much harder.

Looking back at past successes may be still more dangerous. It has a value as a stimulant, as strong drink may be lawfully given to him that is ready to perish. As a habit it is deadly. That is the kind of looking back probably that was in St. Paul's thought when he so sweepingly condemned the backward look. Our successes may be our greatest peril.

"Let the dead past bury its dead," Longfellow tells us. But the past does not die and ought not to die, much less be buried. It is not to be forgotten. It is the quarry out of which we build neither despair nor pride, but humility, thankfulness, courage, inspiration and unconquerable hope.



Dr. SALEM BLAND

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This book was reviewed in The Guide issue of December 19th

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