

DUTY.*

A German philosopher has said "the two most beautiful things in the universe are the starry heavens above and the sentiment of duty in the human soul;" and could he have chosen from the universe a more fitting creation to place side by side in the scales with this divinely given guiding power than the starry heavens in their beauty, grandeur, sublimity and incomprehensibility. To many this word "duty" appears harsh and pictures to their minds unpleasant associations; to these, instead of being a soul inspiring word encouraging them to press on in its pathway to reach the bright goal at its farther end, and coloring their daily life with all that is good and noble, it is a hard task master whose demands they justify themselves in neglecting and ignoring as did the unprofitable servant in the parable. They regard it as a whip to keep the coward in track, whose lash they are determined to escape, rather than as an ennobling principle to guide and regulate their daily life. They forget that it is the solid and beaten road on which one may travel safely, and in straying from its straight course they are entering unknown and uncertain paths which will sooner or later lead them into wildernesses of trouble and sin. Of some of these pleasure is the watchword substituted for duty—not that duty forbids pleasure; on the contrary, pleasure is never so sweet as when enjoyed in accordance with the dictates of this monitor. If they limited their pleasures and enjoyments to those that would not interfere with the performance of their duties, they would find that their capabilities for enjoyment would be increased ten-fold. Others neglect duty from indolence; rather than exert themselves they let golden opportunities pass, and turn out of the true way to escape difficulties they ought to overcome. But whatever be the excuses with which they seek to hide their shortcomings, the fact that they are surrounded by obligations to themselves, others, and their Creator remains unchanged. Man is born into the world to perform an allotted work—he will either leave the world better or worse—from the cradle to the grave his one straight path, following and struggling manfully in which he will finally stand at the close of his life's toil a conqueror worthy to receive the reward of victory which awaits him. No matter whether destiny has elevated him to a throne, placed him in the archbishop's chair, or led him along the more obscure paths of life—on board the man of war, in the mechanics' workshop or behind the plough, his path of duty is mapped out and a life's work waits a stout heart and willing hand. All are needed to fill their role in the grand onward march and progress of humanity, and indeed the noblest and truest men have often walked quietly along the humblest paths, fulfilling the duties of their station from purer motives than many of our greatest heroes, whose faltering foot-steps are often steadied and quickened by the consciousness that the eyes of a world are upon them. Truly in the daily routine of life, its trivial duties seem to us small items and we would fain neglect the little things because of this insignificance, but should we reflect that the little word "duty" hallows each act and throws a halo around the monotonous round, the thought would inspire us to renewed effort to perform the smallest offices faithfully. But its pathway is not strewn with pebbles only, nor all its walks lined with flowers; there are difficulties like huge boulders in the way, and these must be overcome, and trials mingle like thistles with its roses and these must be endured. If the minor details require constant watchfulness and perseverance, the great acts call forth moral courage and steady determination, which will perfect and beautify the character of the happy possessor. Duty often means a decision between right and wrong: in these

cases pause, and having clearly decided what is right—that do independent of difficulties or obstacles. Duty comes home to us in manifold forms—duties lie on every hand but all may be embraced under two grand heads, social and religious—our duties to ourselves and others, and our duty to the Creator and Preserver of all mankind, or as the catechism has so admirably put it, our duty to God and to our neighbor. In the ten commandments we have a divine code of law which clearly defines these duties. Social duties are numerous and we can only regulate them by references to our sphere in life. We must not live for self. The very fact that God has planted in our hearts such reverence and loyalty to family ties establishes this clearly. All the world abhors a thoroughly selfish man. Why is the word "miser" pronounced with so much pity and shrinking contempt. With pity we reflect what a vast wealth of happiness he loses by hoarding all for himself, and with contempt when the dark side of the picture of what his nature, bound up in himself, must reveal passes through our minds. Again with what a shudder we fancy ourselves shut out from society as the lonely hermit. We would not change places with him for worlds—no social advantages are too vividly real to us, and, if we really feel this, we ought to contribute all in our power to make these privileges and pleasures more valuable. These several duties beginning at personal obligations as the centre, form an ever widening spiral. Our habits, culture, and conversation not only influence and color our actions but they affect the tone of society in which we move. God has given us talents and abilities. We are required to cultivate these and render an account of our stewardship according as we have used them to improve ourselves and benefit those around us. Next after self come the family ties and relations, and duties, like charity, should begin at home. Around the family groups, our friends and acquaintances, and among these we are called to fulfil the requirements the world expects from us in that circle known as society. The hand of brotherhood between man and man inspires him to acts of self-sacrifice, and writes among the daily news, items of heroism which touch our hearts and thrill our souls with reverence and admiration. The courageous mortal who rushes into the burning building and saves the life of his perishing brothers, or launches his boat upon the raging sea, and in the face of the frowning tempest rescues his drowning fellow creatures, acts from this inspiring motive. His duty to his fellow man came home to him and as a mainspring animated the act. He did not, as Cain, stop to answer to the voice, "Am I my brother's keeper?"—no, he knew his duty and hesitated not to perform it. This universal tie appeals to our inner natures where lies this hidden spark to be ever ready as then to offer up ourselves for our brother's need—be it physical, moral, or spiritual. Will we, like cowards, drown the voice of this monitor and dull the finest sense in our natures rather than overcome difficulties, and sacrifice our paltry pleasures for our neighbor's temporal or eternal welfare. Forming an outside ring as a guard and boundary lies our duty to our country, its liberties and laws. Heroes in their country's cause have lighted the pages of history since the world began. Hear that noble Roman, after he has sacrificed his best friend for his country, exclaim "I have the same dagger for myself when it shall please my country to need my death." Watch Oliver Cromwell struggling with difficulties at home and abroad and meeting the exigencies of his trying position with calm fortitude, buoyed up with a consciousness of his duty. Coming nearer our own day see that brave lad leave the shelter of his home and devote his life and energies to his country. View Washington's life from the time he bade farewell to his aged mother and entered the battlefield, till an orphan nation laid him sorrowing in the grave. What has kept its well filled pages so unsullied, prompted the noble acts and inspired the brave deeds?—

*An essay read before the West Bruce Teachers' Association by Miss E. I. Cretia Powell, and published at their request.