



1853-1912
JOHN LANG BLAIRIE

The Secret of a
Heartful Life

Wallace, William George, 1858-1949

Blairie, John Lang

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The Secret of a Peaceful Life

"After these things the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision, saying: Fear not, Abram; I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward."

—Genesis 15: 1.

SOMEWHAT over half a century ago a young man left his native land and crossed the Atlantic to enter upon a business career in the new world. In due time he landed in New York, and soon, in one of the primitive railway coaches of the day, was *en route* for his chosen home across the Border. After a tiresome journey he reached Toronto on a Saturday, and went at once to Sword's Hotel, which stood where the Queen's Hotel now stands. He was weary and homesick, his head ached and his heart was anxious, for he was a stranger in a strange land. One can imagine the thoughts that passed through his mind during the wakeful hours of that night. Had he blundered in leaving the old land? In this new world, where business methods were strange and many things as yet unsettled, would he make good? The future lay before him, all untried and unknown; and as the mimosa trembles before the approach of horsemen, his heart trembled before the onmarch of the coming years. He rose on the Sabbath morning, opened his Bible and his eye rested on the words of my text: "Fear not, Abram, I am thy shield and thy exceeding great reward." He had received the message he needed, his heart was comforted, and with hope and courage he faced the future.

This sermon was preached in Bloor Street Presbyterian Church, Toronto, on Sabbath morning, February 25th, 1912, by Rev. Dr. Wallace, the Minister, and is published by request.

That morning in old Knox Church, in the pew of the only people he knew in the strange land—friends with whom he was so soon to be very intimately related—he worshipped under the sure sense of God's overshadowing care. That young man was John L. Blaikie, whose body a day or two ago we carried forth to burial.

It was a vision that had come to him, a new experience, but it was not an unknown Person, who had appeared and spoken to him. Just as the unseen Guide and Protector in *his* varied experiences Abram had learned to know in the days beyond the River; so to this young Scotsman God had manifested Himself on the other side of the great Ocean. He had had the good fortune to breathe in his childhood's days the atmosphere of a Christian home, and to be reared among an industrious, independent and God-fearing people; and in his young mind had been early implanted that knowledge of the Bible, that sure sense of God's presence, which was to him in later times a heritage of priceless value. But there were incidents, too, that deepened in him the lesson of his childhood. One of these occurred when he was employed in Edinburgh. It was the Disruption, out of which sprang the Free Church of Scotland. On the 18th of May, 1843, he witnessed the procession of Churchmen moving from St. Andrew's Church down to Tanfield Hall because they could not any longer submit to the intrusion of the Civil Courts on the spiritual domain of the Church. Mr. Blaikie used to quote with much pride the words of Lord Jeffrey, who said, when he heard of the Disruption: "Thank God for such a thing! There is no other country where people could be found so to act for the sake of principle." There can be no doubt that this strong declaration of the "Headship of Christ" by men who were willing to give up their manse and their churches for Christ's sake impressed his young mind with the reality of God's concern in the affairs of men.

And there were incidents that made him sure, not that God was in the affairs of men generally, but that He was a factor in his own life particularly. Two of these will suffice:

On his first visit to Glasgow as a lad of 19, he and his two brothers, who were at the time working in Glasgow, decided on the evening before one of the big holidays that on the next day they would go by the Steamer "Telegraph" down the Clyde to Helensburgh. On the morning of the holiday, for some reason or other, they changed their minds and instead took a long walk together. The "Telegraph" that day was blown up, through the bursting of the boiler, as it lay at the Helensburgh pier, and many were burned, scalded, drowned. This narrow escape of the three brothers was always associated in Mr. Blaikie's mind with God's providence in his life; he could never doubt hereafter that "the Lord reigneth." One of the most telling incidents of his life was in connection with his later experiences in Glasgow. In 1857, a wealthy man, named Mr. Alexander A. Ferguson, who was about to establish a business in India, offered him an agency in Bombay. He consulted Mr. Thomas Wilson, by whom he was employed, who said to him: "John, this is the chance of a life, you ought to accept it." Whilst he was making preparations to go to India, the Indian Mutiny broke out, and the door, which seemed to stand so wide open, was closed in his face, and his plans were necessarily changed. A higher Power than his had shut-to the door. And so, when the next year in his room in the hotel in Toronto, he had that Sabbath morning the vision of One who bade him "fear not," it was the vision of One in whose watchful care he had already learned to believe and trust—One who had already proved Himself a real factor in the moulding of his life.

Perhaps the chief characteristic of Mr. Blaikie's life was his calm, his repose, his confidence.

A calm life is not an idle life. Idleness would have killed him long ago. Whatever task awaited him, he gave himself to it with uncommon earnestness. So diligent was he in business, so intelligent and reliable in the discharge of it, that in the early days of this city he did more than people appreciate to build up Canadian credit in the old-world centres, where he was known. And, with all his heavy responsibilities in the financial and commercial world, he yet found time to ally himself actively with several of our city's philanthropies and to devote his powers without reserve to the interests of the Church he loved. His long life is the record of "a fight well won, a race well run, a work well done," and even the natural waning of physical powers in his later days could scarcely curb his nimble mind and his eager spirit.

But in the midst of many activities he was always calm and peaceful, master of himself and always self-possessed and quiet.

The life of a business man is never free from troublesome problems and harsh alarms; he was unmoved in the midst of these things, fearless and unafraid. If he concentrated his powers on the solving of the problem and on the averting of the danger, he could detach himself at will from all his business concerns, and in the quiet restfulness of his best-loved authors, his favorite pastimes, or of childlike sleep, recreate his powers for the next day's task. The theatre and the newest novel made no appeal to him—he cultivated rather the simple things—he sought not the thrill of things exciting, with that sincere and beautiful spirit of his he sought rather the simple pleasures of life.* He loved the country and the things of nature—

*I have sometimes thought that this tendency was strengthened in him by his early acquaintance with some really great men, and especially by his friendship with Rev. Dr. Paterson, of Glasgow. Dr. Paterson had been the minister at Galashiels and there had a fine garden—"the Manse Garden"—which he had sedulously cultivated. His knowledge of botany and his love of flowers he had communicated to his young friend. They were often together on fishing excursions, and Mr. Blaikie could well remember occasions when the worthy doctor would forget his fishing and be found on his knees examining something he had discovered. "Oh, this is a rare plant; I've got it at last."

the song of the birds, the purling of the stream, the emerald green or the yellowing gold of the fields, the ways of little children—and thus he escaped much of the shallow and the artificial in life. Not once, but many times have I spent the night with him away from the city, and as the shades of evening fell there would almost invariably fall from his lips such words as these:

“Peace, perfect peace, with loved ones far away?
In Jesus’ keeping we are safe, and they.”

They were but the expression of the quiet, restful spirit within.

As he moved about amongst his fellows they saw upon his face no sign of dread or fear, but ever content and peace. As those, who knew him, think of

“That best portion of a good man’s life—
His little, nameless, unremembered acts
Of kindness and of love,”

they remember how serene and unassuming and simple he was. And even in his age it might be said of him, as was said of another: “The contagion of the world’s slow stain had not infected him.” His struggles and his cares “left all his innermost ideals constant and undimmed,” and he continued to the last to walk among his fellows with the spirit of his Master’s victory and peace.

Need we ask for the secret of such a quiet confidence? Was it not the deep conviction that “the Lord reigneth”? Those streams, which flowed so smoothly and strongly, can be traced back to one spring only—back to the God of his childhood, to whom he had committed himself in simple trust and who had so signally proved himself a factor in his life. Not a doubt ever seemed to enter his mind; his faith in God as his Redeemer and ever-present Friend was simply unquenchable. He knew whom he had believed and was persuaded that He was able to keep

that which he had committed to Him against that day. Something of the reality of that faith and the sweetness of that fellowship always remained with those who were fortunate enough to share with him the precious privilege of prayer. There was always present the aroma of the life that was hidden with Christ in God, and in those last days, when the strength was so quickly ebbing away, that God was uppermost in his mind was very evident to all who were in that sick room. Then did he pillow his head most restfully upon the promises—then was he quieted and comforted by the assurances of his Saviour's presence—then was it given to him to see the King in His beauty and the far-stretching land, and to be at rest. If his life in Toronto began with vision, so also did it end with vision. And all of us by that bedside felt most surely "around our restlessness His rest."

I have not intended to-day to utter a eulogy over the good man whom so many in this congregation knew and loved—rather have I intended to magnify the grace and keeping power of God, and to illustrate it by reference to a life that has been lived out in this community. If, "in quietness and in confidence" we are to find our "strength," then we must not miss the lesson of to-day—that the sure way into a calm and peaceful life is through faith in God and through fellowship with Jesus Christ, our Saviour. "He that believeth in Him shall not be put to shame." "If we believe in Him, we shall surely be established." "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, and ye shall find rest unto your souls."

DATA

1823. May 9—Born at Clarilawmoor Farm, Selkirkshire, Scotland.
1830. Family moved to Camieston, Roxburghshire.
1832. September 26—Witnessed funeral of Sir Walter Scott.
- 1832-1838—Attended school at St. Boswell's and afterwards at Melrose. (As a schoolboy, showed Charles Dickens through Melrose Abbey.)
1838. Apprenticed in drygoods to William Isaac, Melrose.
1842. Brief visit to Glasgow, where two of his brothers were employed.
1842. Entered employ of William Crease and Sons, Edinburgh. (While in Edinburgh witnessed the Disruption, when the Free Church of Scotland was formed, and took part in the welcome to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert on their first visit to the Northern Capital.)
1843. Went to London, and, after a short engagement with Swan & Edgar, accepted in 1844 a position in the office of Burden & Gray, and gained here his first intimate knowledge of banking and finance.
1843. Attached himself to Regent Square Church, under the ministry of Rev. Dr. Hamilton, and in 1845 was here ordained a Deacon.
1844. Became one of the early members of the Young Men's Christian Association, that year organized by Mr. (afterwards Sir) George Williams. (While in London saw Duke of Wellington review troops in Hyde Park, and heard Cobden Fox and Bright on the repeal of the Corn Laws.)
1847. Went to Glasgow. Secured situation with Archibald Alison & Co. in the iron business, and afterwards with Alexander Alison in connection with the *North British Daily Mail*. Had special duties on the Exchange, and became acquainted with many brokers—which stood him in good stead in after years. On the failure of Alexander Alison, accepted a position with T. & D. Wilson, manufacturers and ship owners, of whose banking he had charge. Partnership offered, but declined.
1849. Ordained to the eldership in Free St. Andrew's Church, Glasgow, of which Rev. Dr. Nathaniel Paterson was minister (whose wife had been bridesmaid at the marriage of his mother).

1858. Mr. William Alexander came from Toronto. Proposed partnership, which was accepted.
1858. May 9—Arrived in Toronto. Firm of "Blaikie and Alexander" at once formed.
1859. Became member of Knox Church Session, and from 1860 to 1873 Superintendent of its Sabbath School.
1861. February 9—Married in St. Andrews, Scotland.
1871. January—Became President Canada Landed Company.
1875. Withdrew from "Blaikie and Alexander."
1888. Identified himself with Bloor Street Church; on January 5th, 1890, inducted into eldership in it.
1892. May—Became President of North American Life Assurance Company.
1892. Became President of Boiler Inspection Co.
- 1901-1904. Chairman Board Toronto General Hospital.
1906. October—Became President of Consumers' Gas Company.
1911. February 12—Golden wedding.
1912. February 19—Died after three days' illness.
1912. February 21—Body interred in Mount Pleasant Cemetery.