

In the Study.

Studies in Failure.

III.

The Failure of Success and the Success of Failure.

Mk 10³¹—'Many that are first shall be last, and the last first.' The other places in the Gospels in which this saying occurs are Mt 19³⁰ 20¹⁶, Lk 13³⁰. The best title for it is that given by Mozley in his *University Sermons*: 'The Reversal of Human Judgment.' And Mozley's sermon is one of the greatest that ever was preached on this great theme.

Mozley interprets the words as meaning simply that the judgments which we form in this world will be reversed in another; and he uses the text as an argument for the suspense of judgment. But the words carry a larger meaning than that. Even in this life we see men first at the beginning, last at the end. We see men first in the estimation of the multitude, last in the estimation of the discerning.

i.

Failure at the outset may be success in the end. Says Mr. Harry Quilter, 'An accomplished artist said to me once, "No picture is worth anything till it has been spoiled three times"; and it is true, I think, that what makes any given picture great is gathered from the very brink of failure.'¹ 'Throngs of witnesses,' says Bishop Lightfoot, 'might be produced to illustrate this same truth—great statesmen, great orators, great generals, great philanthropists, great mechanicians, have failed at first to succeed afterwards. The great Florentine reformer Savonarola commenced his mission. His first attempt was a total failure. He kindled no enthusiasm. His audiences dwindled away. He could not obtain a hearing. So a year passed away, and another, and another. It was failure still. But an unquenchable fire was burning within him, and he knew that it was not an earthly flame. Then at length "on a sudden," we are told, "he burst out; appalling, entrancing, shaking the souls of men, piercing to their heart of hearts, and drawing them in awestruck crowds before the foot of his pulpit." No preacher since the Apostolic days produced such striking effects as he produced.'

¹ W. L. Watkinson, *Studies in Christian Character*, i. 18.

The great English engineer George Stephenson furnishes a signal illustration of this lesson. He commenced life with the most serious disadvantages of education. He found all scientific men against him. He was confronted with the giant mass of popular *inertia* and distrust. But he was conscious of a great idea; he clung to it; and he persevered dauntlessly. 'I have fought for the locomotive single-handed,' he said, 'for nearly twenty years, having no engineer to help me. I put up with every rebuff, determined not to be put down.' At length the locomotive did triumph. And look at the consequences. Railways have revolutionized the conditions of society, not in England only, but throughout the world.²

But all such examples pale into nothing before the lesson of the life of Christ. History itself has reversed the judgment passed on Christ. It will reverse many of the judgments we are now forming on our fellow-men.

Speak, History! who *are* life's victors?

Unroll the long annals, and say—

Are they those whom the world *called* the victors—

Who won the success of a day?

The Martyrs or Nero? The Spartans

Who fell at Thermopylæ's tryst,

Or the Persians and Xerxes? His

Judges or Socrates? Pilate or Christ?

An old Greek philosopher—the wisest of his race—nearly four centuries before Christ, drew from his imagination a picture of the ideal righteous man. It was an essential feature in the portrait that he should be tested by the extreme of adversity, that he should be misrepresented and misunderstood; that, though righteous, he should be considered unrighteous; that he should meet with obloquy and persecution and shame; last of all—a strange, instinctive prophecy—he was to die on the gibbet. This old philosopher rightly divined. It was essential that the ideal man should fail, utterly fail, in life. Christ's perfection could only be manifested by entire failure. This failure is the most brilliant jewel in His heavenly crown; the richest portion of the inheritance which He has bequeathed to us.³

I. Such early failure may be a test of strength. Some men can carry on their work when paid with popular applause. They may even defy the larger circle without, if they have the approval of friends or party. But when friends look grave, when a gulf opens between principles and party, when the world misrepresents his motives and thwarts his endeavours, it is then that the strain on a man's

² J. B. Lightfoot, *Sermons in St. Paul's Cathedral*, p. 132.

³ J. B. Lightfoot, *ibid.* p. 130.

courage begins. But it is just then that a man should find his support in the pattern, the spirit, the life of Christ.

The Young Pretender, leader in the Scottish rebellion of 1745, kicked against defeat instead of quietly asking how he might turn it into victory. Says Mr. Froude, 'He was a man who carried failure written in his very demeanour.' 'When he doth hear anything contrarious to his pleasures,' Lord Surrey said, 'his manner is to take his bonnet off his head and throw it in the fire. My Lord Dacre doth affirm that at his being last in Scotland he did burn above a dozen bonnets in that manner.' This was not a temper to cope successfully with the ablest of living generals. 'If he be such a man,' Surrey wisely judged, 'with God's grace, we shall speed the better with him.'¹

2. Early failure may be also a test of faith. A man believes in himself as long as others believe in him. But when he finds himself on one side and the world on the other, he asks himself whether he alone can be right. He begins by questioning whether the voice he hears is indeed God's voice; and he ends by stifling the witness of the Spirit within him.

But the danger is not so much that we shall turn atheists or unbelievers, as that we shall be disheartened; not that we shall lose all faith, but that we shall find our faith weakened; not that we shall stake our life on winning something, at least, here in this world, but that we shall stake the keenness, the earnestness, the perseverance of our service. A man is kind to his poorer neighbours, and then waxes weary of being kind, because he does not find them so grateful as he expected. A man is diligent in his duty, and then relaxes his diligence, because another, with only half the exertion, runs past him. A tradesman is scrupulously honest, and then finds that others, who are not so strict, seem, as it were, to take the bread out of his mouth, while he gets no credit for his scrupulous honesty, and so he lets himself slip into little unfairnesses. A man in society is thoroughly unselfish, and finds that the only result is that he is unceremoniously thrust aside; or he is humble, and finds a vain man preferred to himself. In all such cases there is, of course, some danger that we should simply give up trying to do right; that we should say to ourselves, 'I have tried it, and it does not answer, and I mean to try it no more.' But that is not the only danger, nor the commonest danger, nor, I think, the greatest danger. The great danger is that we should

¹ W. J. Lacey, *Masters of To-Morrow*, p. 169.

relax the warmth and heartiness of our service, as if somehow we were pained at not being better appreciated.²

3. Emerson in his essay on 'Success'³ names three things as essential to success—

1. *Aptitude*. He gives many examples. Napoleon is one example. 'There is nothing in war,' said Napoleon, 'which I cannot do by my own hands. If there is nobody to make gunpowder, I can manufacture it. The gun-carriages I know how to construct. If it is necessary to make cannons at the forge, I can make them. The details of working them in battle, if it is necessary to teach, I shall teach them. In administration, it is I alone who have arranged the finances, as you know.'

Oliver Goldsmith, one of the sweetest of English writers, was trained for medicine. He presented himself at Surgeons' Hall to be examined. His purpose was to secure the unambitious post of hospital mate. But he was rejected, and the record in the college book runs, 'James Bernard, mate to an hospital; Oliver Goldsmith, found not qualified for ditto.' In about eight years *The Vicar of Wakefield* saw the light. The original failure had been complete, and momentarily disheartening; but genius had transmuted it into a golden service to English letters.⁴

2. *Self-trust*. 'There was a wise man,' says Emerson, 'an Italian artist, Michel Angelo, who writes thus of himself: "Meanwhile the Cardinal Ippolito, in whom all my best hopes were placed, being dead, I began to understand that the promises of this world are for the most part vain phantoms, and that to confide in one's self, and become something of worth and value, is the best and safest course." Now, though I am by no means sure that the reader will assent to all my propositions, yet I think we shall agree in my first rule for success;—that we shall drop the brag and the advertisement, and take Michel Angelo's course, "to confide in one's self, and be something of worth and value."⁵

3. *The Affirmative*. 'We must begin,' Emerson says, 'by affirming. Truth and goodness subsist for evermore. It is true there is evil and good, night and day; but these are not equal. The day is great and final. The night is for the day, but the day is not for the night. . . . The affirmative of affirmatives is love. The painter Giotto, Vasari

² F. Temple, *Rugby Sermons*, 2nd ser., p. 269.

³ *Society and Solitude*, p. 267.

⁴ W. J. Lacey, *Masters of To-Morrow*, p. 164.

⁵ Emerson, *Society and Solitude*, p. 274.

tells us, renewed art because he put more goodness into his heads.¹

4. But in estimating success and failure we must take into account the lack of opportunity. Though it is true that there are men, like Josiah Wedgwood, Lincoln, and Garfield, who make opportunity for themselves, yet for the most part men have to be judged not by what they are, but by what they are in relation to their opportunities. Canon H. D. Rawnsley has a volume of sermons on the 'Sayings of Jesus' discovered by Grenfell and Hunt at Oxyrhynchus. In one of these Sayings occur the words of our text; and the lesson which Canon Rawnsley finds in this particular 'Saying' is 'judge not.' He says:

'We clergy have our ideas of right and wrong; we are scandalized, for example, by the coarseness of speech, the want of external honour for religious observance say of the crew of an "ocean-tramp" steamer. When other folk are at church and chapel, they are found "running" corn or loading coal, and their language is not the language of polite society. We judge them, but we forget that their Sunday labour, and their exposure to tempests of the ocean and to the thieves and harlots of the home or foreign port, are the price at which we decent churchgoers get our corn and wine, our comforts of food and clothes and our home luxuries—we forget, as an able writer lately put it, that if vicarious sacrifice is the highest height, the deepest heart of morals, then these men who have sacrificed the interests of their bodies and souls for the rest of us are in their unchurched paganism actually a great deal higher than we. And when we have touched hands with these men and known their childlike simplicity, their quick response to what is higher when it is offered, their splendid courage and their devotion to duty, we shall more than ever incline to revise our estimate of them, from the church or chapel standard, and we shall seek for some new definition as to who is high and who is low in the kingdom of Heaven.'¹

ii.

Temporal failure may be eternal success. Dean Church, in his *Cathedral and University Sermons* (p. 236), has a sermon on 'Failures in Life.' His text is a quotation from St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians, written from a Roman prison—'For

¹ H. D. Rawnsley, 'Sayings of Jesus' and a *Lost Gospel Fragment*, p. 121.

I have no man like minded who will naturally care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's' (Ph 2^{20, 21}). St. Paul's life at this time, he says, must have seemed like what we call a failure. And later, when the old man was led out along the Ostian Way to die, it must have appeared to friend and foe alike that his career had ended in disaster. Not so to St. Paul himself. 'What to him was the wise world's sentence on his course, or the contrast between its earlier successes and its later baffling disappointments? What was it to him, who knew in whom he had believed—to whom it was a small matter to be judged by man's judgment, yea, who judged not his own self—who knew that everything that happened to him was but a passing incident in an eternal progress, which stretched far beyond the grave, and of which the end was certain?' Then Church says: 'Failure, when it meets us, is bitter and hard to bear, to us who are so ambitious and so weak, so sanguine and so shortsighted. But what is it, but the inevitable incident of that mingled greatness and littleness of human life, of which, if we will only attend, every passing hour reminds us? "Heaven is for those who have failed on earth," says the mocking proverb; and since the day of Calvary no Christian need be ashamed to accept it.'

The word *Finis* is not yet written in the book of human history. Our horizon cannot be bounded by the senses, nor our deepest instincts viewed as mere provincialisms of this planet destined to vanish when riper knowledge dawns upon us. Though we carry nothing else out of the world, we carry out ourselves. There is continuity in the thread of existence, and no suddenness about sequels. Life is intended to be a long *crescendo*, marked not only by gain in calmer and wiser thought, in the ability to solve more complex problems and to discharge more arduous tasks, but also by those growing desires that stimulate to spiritual ascension. It will take time to perfect man. Will it not take eternity?

And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence For the fullness of the days?²

I. Who are the last that shall be first? Spurgeon divides them into four classes:

1. Some that are last in pedigree. 'God will find His jewels in the dens and alleys and slums of London, and take up to His eternal throne those that were the sons of harlots and the children of the thief, that they may sing for ever of His amazing grace.'

² W. T. Herridge, *The Coign of Vantage*, p. 34.

2. Some that are last in education. 'If you should go into our ragged schools, especially some in the very lowest neighbourhoods, or if you would hear Mr. Gregory, the missionary in St. Giles's, tell his tale of all the sin he sees, and the education that our young men of St. Giles's get, O gentlemen of St. James's, it might well make you blush. But some who were trained for the gallows and tutored for the convict settlement shall nevertheless be taught of the Lord and inducted into the fellowship of the saints.'

3. Some that are last in morals. 'Could Sodom find sinners that would match with the sinners of London? You need not, to-night, go many steps when once the sun is down before you will see under every gaslight some that are last. Blessed be God, some of them shall be first. "There goes John Bradford, if it were not for the grace of God."'

While pæans to the conquerors are plentiful enough, it is not so often that we hear an *Io Victis!*

IO VICTIS.

The hymn of the low and the humble, the weary, the broken in heart,
 Who strove and who failed, acting bravely a silent and desperate part;
 Whose youth bore no flower in its branches, whose hopes burned in ashes away,
 From whose hand slipped the prize they had grasped at, who stood at the dying of day
 With the work of their life all around them, unpitied, unheeded, alone,
 With death swooping down on their failure, and all but their faith overthrown.¹

2. Low success may be high failure. In the world's 'success,' the acquisition of wealth is often accepted as the greatest test of what a man is worth. '*Rem, rem, quocunque modo rem!*' is the world's motto. And yet how often a man's success in this direction means deviation from uprightness and the destruction of the whole spirit of charity; we see—alas! how often—that the acquisition of wealth lowers and degrades a soul; that wealth is gained by those cruelties which we as a society are striving to exterminate. We recognize the confirmation of the truth, so awful for some, that '*where our treasure is there will our heart be also.*' To grovel in auriferous mire—is that success or failure? Again, success is a power, and yet how rarely can the ambitious man be unselfish? Generally, his ambition is not to promote the

¹ See W. T. Herridge, *The Coin of Vantage*, p. 33.

good of others but rather to attain his own ends at their expense; seldom can such as he be honest! As a rule, does he not rather sacrifice principle, character, convictions, truthfulness, even what the world deems honour; and shall such ambition, hereafter, when brought before the Judge of quick and dead, be proclaimed success or *failure*? Once more, is pleasure success? I mean that pleasure which intoxicates the soul, which prevents all serious recollection, which makes light of sin, which arrests obedience to Christ, which gratifies our love of ease, and our self-indulgence? I mean even the pleasure which leaves us, perhaps, not far from the kingdom of God, but nevertheless leaves us only there: is that success?²

3. And low failure may be high success. Twenty years ago a discouraged young doctor in one of our large cities was visited by his old father, who came up from a rural district to look after his boy.

'Well, son,' he said, 'how are you getting along?'

'I am not getting along at all,' was the disheartened answer. 'I'm not doing a thing.'

The old man's countenance fell, but he spoke of courage and patience and perseverance. Later in the day he went with his son to the 'Free Dispensary,' where the young doctor had an unsalaried position, and where he spent an hour or more every day.

The father sat by, a silent but intensely interested spectator, while twenty-five poor unfortunates received help. The doctor forgot his visitor while he bent his skilled energies to this task; but hardly had the door closed on the last patient when the old man burst out—

'I thought you told me you were not doing anything,' he thundered. 'Not doing anything! Why, if I had helped twenty-five people in a month as much as you have done in one morning, I would thank God that my life counted for something.'

'There isn't any money in it, though,' explained the son, somewhat abashed at his father's vehemence.

'Money!' the old man shouted, still scornfully. 'Money! What is money in comparison with being of use to your fellow-men? Never mind about money; you go right along at this work

² H. Montagu Villiers in *Sermons on Social Subjects*, p. 138.

every day. I'll go back to the farm and gladly earn money enough to support you as long as I live—yes, and sleep sound every night with the thought that I have helped you to help your fellow-men.¹

4. Are there any tests of final success? There are at least these two:

1. *Dissatisfaction* with present attainment. 'It is strange to say, but it is a truth which our own observation and experience will confirm, that when a man discerns in himself most sin and humbles himself most, when his comeliness seems to him to vanish away and all his graces to wither, when he feels disgust at himself and revolts at the thought of himself,—seems to himself all dust and ashes, all foulness and odiousness, then it is that he is really rising in the kingdom of God: as it is said of Daniel, "From the first day that thou didst set thine heart to understand and to chasten thyself before thy God, thy words were heard, and I am come for thy words" (Dn 10¹²).'²

In one of Landor's *Imaginary Conversations*, Newton says to Barrow, 'I am not quite satisfied.' To which Barrow answers, 'Those who are quite satisfied sit still and do nothing; those who are not quite satisfied are the sole benefactors of the world.'³

Lord Kelvin's estimate of his work irresistibly reminds us of Sir Isaac Newton's. 'One word,' he tells us, 'characterizes the most strenuous of the efforts for the advancement of science I have made perseveringly during fifty-five years; that word is "failure." I know no more of electric and magnetic force, or of the relation between ether, electricity, and ponderable matter, than I knew and tried to teach to my students of natural philosophy fifty years ago in my first session as professor.'⁴

¹ *Sermons by Unitarian Ministers*, p. 68.

² J. H. Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vi. p. 324.

³ W. T. Herridge, *The Coign of Vantage*, p. 25.

⁴ S. P. Thompson, *Life of Lord Kelvin*, 1910.

2. *Aspiration*. 'There is a heavenly contest,' says Jowett, 'of which God only and the angels are spectators. It begins here but does not end here; and it includes in itself all other careers of men. The prize which it offers is not exactly greatness or honour, but something of another kind which we can only conceive in part. The ideal which it holds out to us is moral rather than intellectual, the freedom from pride and prejudice and self, the absolute simplicity of truth, the resignation to the order of the world and to the divine will; and not resignation only, but active co-operation with them, according to our means and strength, in bringing good out of evil, truth out of falsehood. He whose mind is absorbed in these thoughts has already found life eternal. He may be a cripple, or blind, or deaf; "his home may be a straw-built shed"; but he has learnt to see and hear with another sense, and is already living in a house not made with hands or of man's building. And this perfect harmony with the divine will is the best image or likeness which we can form of that other kingdom of God in which we hope one day to be part-takers.'⁵

Then, welcome each rebuff
That turns earth's smoothness rough,
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand, but go!
Be our joys three-parts pain!
Strive, and hold cheap the strain;
Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never
grudge the throe!

For thence—a paradox
Which comforts while it mocks—
Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail:
What I aspired to be,
And was not, comforts me:
A brute I might have been, but would not sink
' the scale.⁶

⁵ B. Jowett, *College Sermons*, p. 261.

⁶ Browning, *Rabbi Ben Ezra*.