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## SOME LESSONS FROM HISTORY.

BY E. H. BLAKENEY, M.A.

"History is the drama in which God Himself is the protagonist, vindicating His justice and moral government on the stage of the visible world."

S. H. BUTCHER.

WE are accustomed to divide history into periods: thus we speak of ancient, medieval, modern history, as the case may be. Yet this is but a convention; these divisions have little real meaning, because all history is one. History began when man first appeared; it will close when human society is at an end. We may, if we choose, picture history as past politics, and present politics as history in the making. And rightly, for politics are the record of men in their active relations to one another as members of the *πόλις*—the city or community; and it is this that makes politics at once so important and instructive. Man, said Aristotle, is "a political animal." Yet politics are vulgar unless liberated by history, and history passes into mere literature if divorced from practice.

Why should we study history? What good does it achieve? These questions demand an answer. If, by the study of history, we mean committing to memory isolated happenings, or such scanty information, in regard to those happenings, as we find in popular text-books, such a study is of small value. These manuals do not enrich the mind, nor touch the heart, nor evoke imagination. Isolated facts are often misleading. They need to be correlated, and their implications drawn out, if they are to teach. And this is no easy task. The wealth of history, its inexhaustible subject-matter, are apt to overwhelm and to discourage the learner. Yet if we consider history as a unity in itself—the record in marble, or parchment, or paper, of the age-long travail of the human spirit—and try to grasp it in its unity, something will have been achieved. We shall witness the slow progress of human life, never in a straight line but ever in a spiral formation. Progress; yes: but only in so far as the spirit of man, wrestling with its environment, discovers by painful steps and slow the laws of Nature and of man's own being, and also learns to control those laws by obedience to them. We shall mark how the Moral Law, like a silver thread in a cord, holds good throughout the whole secular process, men disregarding it at their peril. Sometimes it appears as if disregard of ethical sanctions left things unaffected; but it is not so. The story of the nations proves, with terrible distinctness, that we must take long views.

"The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small." Such was the dictum of a wise Greek; and the Roman poet Horace pointed the same moral, basing his words on the experience of his own countrymen. If it be true that, as St. Paul avers, "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he reap," then it

will be not less true of the nation, which is but the individual man writ large. The truth is that History is nothing if not full of moral lessons. Bolingbroke spoke of it as "philosophy teaching by examples," but it is more than that: it is Morality teaching by Experience. History demonstrates that there are such things as eternal truths, independent of the age in which we live, independent of the State where we find ourselves, independent of our private prejudices and thoughts; truths inherent in the order of the world, immovable as the truths of mathematics. They cannot be trifled with, any more than you can flout the laws of gravitation. And these same varieties (that lie at the throbbing heart of the whole historic record) exist but to illumine—a light to lighten the Gentiles and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Such is the meaning (or one of the meanings) of "History"; and we do well to study it, that we may draw from the past some lesson of significance for the present, and to gather, from the follies and furies of mankind in epochs long since vanished, some sure guidance for the problems of our own time, that we may face the future with reasoned confidence. If History cannot do this, better close our text-books and cultivate our gardens.

If History be indeed a Unity, we shall expect to find in it a plan, a pattern. Events are not the work of chance; each is linked on—sometimes manifestly, sometimes obscurely—to some preceding event that has helped to mould its character. The American poet, Lowell, has a noble dictum which is justly to be held in honour: "the furrow which Time is even now turning runs through the Everlasting, and in that must we plant." The pagan doctrine of a blind fortuity has no place in the Annals of God.

Let us take a few examples (at haphazard, so to speak) from the book of Time, and see what lesson we may educe from the past, and then conjecture what hints those examples give for our conduct in the present and in the future. We will cast our thoughts back more than two thousand years, to days when Assyria was supreme in the East. What did Assyria do in her generation? She rose emergent from the mists, as it were, and by her power, the genius of her kings, and her ruthless efficiency, held half the world in fee. The Assyrians were alike first-rate warriors and competent administrators; they set themselves to weld into one the separated peoples of the East. They extended commerce; they carried their specialised civilisation far and wide. Nevertheless, the Great Empire of Assyria fell suddenly, never to rise again. Fate had hung out no warning light at the cross-roads of the nation's career. Assyria was cruel to an almost unexampled degree; she cared nothing for the liberties or well-being of her subject states; no appeal to mercy or justice deflected her from her path; moral sense she had none. And the Unseen Power that overrules the destinies of mankind waited—waited with a strange patience, and watched within the shadows. When at last the cup of the nation's iniquity was full the blow fell. So complete was the destruction of that once-proud Empire, with its imperial City, that it disappeared from the gaze

of men, only to be discovered by the investigations of archæologists less than a century ago.

I may, perhaps, pass over the record of Israel, as we find it given in the Old Testament, merely reminding you of the great lesson conveyed there—that national sin is certain, soon or late, to be followed by national undoing; that righteousness alone can exalt a state; and that unfaithfulness to the abiding principles of the Moral Law<sup>1</sup> brings the appropriate penalty in its train. Such is the teaching of the Old Testament, and it is given for our learning.

We may pass on to that momentous clash between East and West in the fifth century B.C., when the huge empire of Persia attempted to ride roughshod over the little country of Greece. It may be that, to-day, Marathon and Salamis seem trivial; yet at those two places the destinies of Europe were decided. Persia, an absolute monarchy, where freedom (as we know it) was non-existent, was matched in conflict with Greece where freedom was both known and cherished. The imperial armies might well have appeared invincible, at that epoch, against the insignificant forces arrayed in defence of the mother country; but those forces, riveted together by a noble patriotism, was more than equal to the loosely knit, undisciplined ranks of the Persian monarchy. And the example of Greece has not yet exhausted its meaning, if we take pains to understand it. Yet, within a century of those exploits by sea and land, the Athenian empire—established owing to the signal success which Athens, as the spear-head of resistance to Persian insolence and tyranny—fell. And why? Because, haughty in success, she herself had become tyrannical over her subject states, and lost their good-will; because, in the pride of power, she wantonly attacked Sicily, in the lust for wealth and military glory. Hence she, too, had to learn the bitterness of defeat. Once again had the moral forces that rule the destinies of nations triumphed over the machinations of political unrighteousness.<sup>2</sup>

Two centuries pass, and the pages of Polybius and Livy invite us to witness the fierce struggle between those two Mediterranean powers—Carthage and Rome. It was a conflict between a land and a sea power, with universal domination as the victor's prize. Semitic Carthage, despite her wealth and her culture, was, like ancient Mexico, cursed by a religion so cruel and a polity so corrupt that her triumph might well have proved a world disaster: readers of Flaubert's wonderful but terrible story *Salammô* will need no reminder of this. Rome, with all her faults (and they were many), had great qualities; her patriotic fervour rang true; she was not yet corrupted by excessive riches, nor her life contaminated by the presence of Oriental religious cults. Slow to move, but, when she did move, irresistible in the strength of her citizen soldiery, Rome never swerved from her appointed path, and finally destroyed her

<sup>1</sup> Whose "seat is the bosom of God, her voice the harmony of the world" (Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity*).

<sup>2</sup> See some apt remarks in chap. viii of the late Professor S. H. Butcher's monograph on Demosthenes.

menacing rival. But, like the Assyrians of old, she exceeded her mandate: she showed no mercy, she discounted the justice that exalteth a nation; so she too had to pass, ultimately, through the fire. By a policy of repression she did, in fact, achieve world-power—but at the cost of her own soul. The wealth of the East poured into her lap; a declension in morals swiftly set in; the old-time patriotism began to buckle; civil war broke out in her own borders, for she had alienated her subjects beyond forgiveness. And that Civil war lasted until, finally, her Senate and her People lost their old republican liberties, and a new order began. The Republic might, indeed, have survived but for the growing weakness of that democracy which had been its bulwark. Selfish, incompetent, scorning reform (despite the splendid efforts of the Gracchi), the Roman Republic was to receive its death-blow. To the old and well-tried democracy succeeded Dictatorship; and the liberties of the many were lost in what ended as a soulless officialism. Such is the lesson we learn from ancient Rome; we should be wise to heed it now. Like causes produce like effects. For a while, indeed, the balance between opposing interests was rectified: the age of the Antonines was, thought Gibbon, one of the happiest periods in all history; but it was not to be so for long. Under the pressure of a despotic government, freedom ebbed, and justice was little more than a name. True, the prestige of the imperial city seemed invincible; but visible and invisible forces were at work, sapping the structure of Roman power, till, after four long centuries, it was overthrown. Then was Europe plunged into the night of those Dark Ages when civilisation itself appeared to have been destroyed from off the earth.

The causes which led to the decline and fall of the greatest of all World Empires are many, and some are obscure; but a few may be instanced. First, the decay of free labour, supplanted by slavery—that cancer at the heart of things; second, the ruin of the farmer class, which during the best days of the Republic had proved the backbone of the State; third, the colossal extravagance of the idle rich, and the increasing poverty of the landless and the poor; fourth, multiplied taxation and iniquitous tariffs; fifth, the disappearance of the simpler manlier forms of religious observance, along with the rise of strange disquieting cults which tended to sap the moral and spiritual vitality of the people generally; sixth, the condition of the governing city, its inhabitants debased by the bloody shows, and demoralized by the doles granted by the State to keep the mob quiet; finally, the loss of that political freedom apart from which no nation can truly prosper. Is there no lesson in all this for the distracted world in which we find ourselves to-day? Moral standards, too, had been destroyed, or at least degraded; the sanctity of family life was little regarded; luxury, idleness, and self-indulgence had taken the place of the old Roman “*gravitas*,” that high seriousness which characterised an earlier, happier generation. It was not for nothing that these agonising words were wrung from the lips of Jerome when, early in the fifth century, he

wrote as follows: "the world sinks unto ruin; all things are perishing—except our sins: these alone flourish." It was from the execution ground of Calvary, and from its darkness, that there came, at length, a message of new hope for Mankind: *I am the Resurrection and the Life.*

Let us pass over two centuries more, and what do we witness? Surely a strange and unprecedented event, the coming of Islâm. In the year 622 of our era, a dreamer of the desert, in danger of his life through the machinations of his orthodox foes, fled from Mecca to Medina, where he was welcomed by a few disciples who, having listened to his message, were prepared to offer him a refuge. That flight is known as the Hejra, and has registered itself as one of the memorable dates in world annals. The story of Mohammed during the succeeding decade is universally known. Romance, war, politics, religion—all are exhibited there. At the close of this formative period the famous prophet was dead, but not the simple yet tremendous message which (so he believed) he had been divinely commissioned to preach. Within a century, or less, all Arabia had answered to the *muezzin's* cry, and the armies of Islâm were victorious in Egypt, Asia Minor, Syria, Persia, and along the whole littoral of North Africa. They threatened even the stability of the Byzantine empire itself. Nor does the formidable list of conquests end here. Spain itself had become, in great part, a Muslim fief, and the Cross had sunk before the triumphant Crescent. What is the meaning of it all? No doubt many explanations might be given; but this can hardly be gainsaid, that a nation strong in the armour of a faith that gripped the hearts and wills of men was strong enough to challenge and overthrow peoples and tribes whose religious beliefs had grown flaccid; whose faith, ceasing to be an ardent conviction, had degenerated into a facile orthodoxy or a stereotyped routine. True, the original force of Islâm, as a creed, soon lost its primitive fervour, just as the evangel of the early Church was destined to become impoverished, its original powers diminishing through neglect of the moral factor. To-day we may watch the slow dissipation of spiritual energy in the creed of Mohammed, for the moral element has never been strong, except among the mystic sects of Islâm. But in mysticism, which knows no spiritual frontiers, an ecumenical light ever burns.

There is a mighty gap between the Hejra and the day when Luther, another lonely figure, challenged the embattled might of the Medieval Church. But the movement which (in a sense) he inaugurated had long been hoped for, and in many places. Indeed, it was bound to come. Men devoted to their creed, and pathetically anxious to lay no rude hands on that majestic Church which, for a millennium, had held captive the Western world, could no longer endure the caricature which had usurped the place of the Galilean gospel. Had the wise men and Scribes of Christendom been listened to sympathetically; had the necessary changes and adjustments been made which Time and the re-orientation of men's thoughts required; had the new knowledge, advancing to claim the allegiance

of truth-lovers, been welcomed instead of excommunicated, Christendom might have remained united until now. But it was not to be. Ecclesiastics and their followers, entrenched behind the barricades of established dogma, could not—would not—recognise the truth of Lowell's words: "new Time makes ancient Good uncouth." Timely and liberal concessions to growing needs might have averted the cataclysm which we call the Reformation. When the storm broke, it destroyed much that later generations would gladly have preserved, the loss of which has permanently injured Christendom. Truth had never been the supreme ideal of the Medieval Church; what she required was orthodoxy. Falsehood was, admittedly, an Evil, but heresy a worse evil; truth was a Good, but orthodoxy a greater Good. Upon this hypothesis had been erected a whole theological system, and it was to impugn that system that the Reformation fathers fought—and suffered. The Reformers were not always faithful to the principles they believed in; but believe in them they did: those principles lay at the root of reform. When the Medieval Church was offered (as she was) the opportunity of effecting a reformation, in faith and morals, from within, she made "the grand refusal." She sealed her doom at the Council of Trent.

A great storm is sometimes followed by a treacherous calm. So it seemed after the upheaval in the sixteenth century, followed though it was by one of the most devastating wars ever known, the thirty years' War of Religion. But nothing happened comparable to what took place at the end of the eighteenth century. It is the French Revolution that marks the "great divide": this astonishing outburst is the pivotal event in modern history. We are still living in the backwash of that movement; the Revolution is still operative, however we regard it. There are those, like Burke himself, to whom it is a portent and a menace; there are others who deem it a blessing (even though a disguised one). It is no business of the historian to take sides, but to ascertain the truth as far as may be; to state the facts and relate them to their proper causes; to observe the bearing of those facts on human life; and to find, in the events of so momentous an epoch, some guiding principle of action. The commonplace text-books which profess to tell the story of the seven lurid and eventful years from 1789-96 may frequently be disregarded. They give us some of the facts, but not all; the causes which brought about the Revolution are often seriously misrepresented. But it might be desirable to insist on these words of Disraeli: "You see, my dear Coningsby, that the world is governed by very different personages from what is imagined by those who are not behind the scenes." That is profoundly true. We hear plenty about the actors that strutted their brief hour on the Revolutionary stage, but what of the hidden figures that lurked in the shadows? What about the groups of *Illuminati*, the literary and philosophical séances, the strategic work of secret doctrinaires who prepared the way for the revolt, though they took but small practical part in it? A study

of the life of d'Holbach, or of men like d'Alembert, Voltaire, Helvétius and others, who were busy flooding pre-revolutionary France with teachings and theories subversive of the society in which they lived, might open the eyes of man. When I study what these men wrote, and propagated with relentless industry, I cease to be surprised at the coming of the Terror. Are we not tempted sometimes to forget the incisive words of St. Just, who said plainly "the Revolution is merely the surface of a *volcano of conspiracies*"? That great historian, Lord Acton, wrote this memorable sentence: "The appalling thing about the French Revolution is not the tumult but the *design*. Through all the fire and smoke we can discern the evidence of calculating organisation. The managers remain studiously concealed and masked, but there is no doubt whatever about their presence from the first." Debating-clubs, lodges of Orient Freemasonry, *Illuminati* circles; and, above all, the Jacobins' Club: here we get close to the secret. The mark of such societies—and their successors are alive in Europe at this moment—is that they build on formulas, and to these formulas men become enslaved. Half the mischief in Europe to-day, so far as communistic and similar destructive agencies are concerned, is hatched in secret by men bound under oath to carry out orders unhesitatingly. The snake is sometimes scotched; it is never killed. This truth emerges from history: when all else fails, treachery succeeds.

The agents of the Terror did but put into act the implied teaching of their intellectual masters, just as the agents of the Russian Revolution put into practice the theories of the Jew, Karl Marx. Hence it is our wisdom "to keep a weather eye lifting" when dangerous or subversive doctrines are being instilled into the minds of the growing generation. The young are often highly susceptible to such teaching. The seeds of revolt may lie, for a long time, apparently inoperative; but the moment comes when the intellectual theory may turn into an armed doctrine, with the usual results. There are some who would suppress such teaching by force; but no new idea—true or false—can thus be countered. Ideas can be driven out only by ideas. The positive of error (if error it be) cannot be destroyed by anything less than the positive of knowledge (if it be knowledge). Violent deterrents are of little permanent avail. Persuasion, based on understanding and controlled by reason, should be the chief weapon of our armoury. And, above all, we should seek truth, for truth is (as Locke told us) the best part of human perfection and the seed-plot of all other virtues. It is doubtless hard to see both sides of a question; but the historian should aim at no less, seeing that all intellectual improvement consists in bringing opinion into closer agreement with facts. With this comes a certain abrogation of prejudices, which may at times be wholesome, but may also, unless carefully guarded, be found in sharp collision with the truth of things.

I have given a few examples from history of the Nemesis that lies in wait for any nation that deliberately outrages the Moral



Law ; the penalty is sure, though slow. One more instance may be given. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Spain touched her meridian glory. She was powerful in the Old World ; the New World lay at her feet. How did she deal with her responsibilities ? The answer is not uncertain. The establishment of the Spanish Inquisition, dreadful and dreaded as it was in the Peninsula, was effective for untold evil in the Americas ; the number of its victims there is probably beyond count. And this in the name of Christianity ! Is it to be wondered at that the final blow to Spain's old-time domination in the New World was actually aimed at her from the very quarter of the globe where once her cruelty and rapacity were most evident ? Less than forty years ago, the wheel came full circle. And it is a lesson for all time.

In the chaos of contemporary politics, are there no lessons from the past that should give guidance for the present ? For fifty centuries and more the world has been subject, from time to time, to the monstrous arbitrament of war. Yet history has proved that war rarely solves our deepest problems. On the other hand, where some "sweet reasonableness" has governed the will of nations, have not the most durable results been achieved, to confound the imaginations of them that delight in war ? Probably war will always be with us ; but at least it should be entered upon only in defence of righteous liberties, or to thrust cruelty and injustice into the pit whence they emerged. "Peace, but adequate defence" were the words of the United States President last autumn. Not, indeed, peace "at any price." Definitely, no. That is the ideal of those that put material comfort before anything else—even honour.<sup>1</sup> Has not history also shown that cruelty, corruption, lust, and dishonesty never fail, in the long run, to debase and even to extinguish nations ? That where religion is scorned, or abused, or made the vehicle of oppression, no sound polity can ever flourish permanently ? For, in truth, religion (whatever may be asserted to the contrary) is a primary datum of the human consciousness. As de Goncourt once said : "When incredulity becomes an article of faith, it is far more unreasonable than any religion." Take away the supernatural, and what remains over is the unnatural. That, at least, is my conviction ; and if only we read history to extract its lessons, and to apply them to our necessities, we may hope that, after the long labour and sorrow of ages, some sure vantage-ground may be reached where peace and happiness, truth and justice, religion and righteousness, may be established among us for all generations.

<sup>1</sup> "There is a limit at which forbearance ceases to be a virtue" (Burke).