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<BURNT FINGERS.>

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An old proverb says that a burnt child dreads the fire. If so, the

child must be uncommonly astute, and with a power of reasoning by

analogy in excess of impulsive desire rarely found either in children

or adults. As a matter of fact, experience goes a very little way

towards directing folks wisely. People often say how much they would

like to live their lives over again with their present experience.

That means, they would avoid certain specific mistakes of the past, of

which they have seen and suffered from the issue. But if they retained

the same nature as now, though they might avoid a few special

blunders, they would fall into the same class of errors quite as

readily as before, the gravitation of character towards circumstance

being always absolute in its direction.

Our blunders in life are not due to ignorance so much as to

temperament; and only the exceptionally wise among us learn to correct

the excesses of temperament by the lessons of experience. To the mass

of mankind these lessons are for the time only, and prophesy nothing

of the future. They hold them to have been mistakes of method, not of

principle, and they think that the same lines more carefully laid

would lead to a better superstructure in the future, not seeing that

the fault was organic and in those very initial lines themselves. No

impulsive nor wildly hopeful person, for instance, ever learns by

experience, so long as his physical condition remains the same. <reg orig=”No one”> No-one </reg>

with a large faculty of faith ~~ that is, credulous and easily imposed

on ~~ becomes suspicious or critical by mere experience. How much soever

people of this kind have been taken in, in times past, they are just

as ready to become the prey of the spoiler in times to come; and it

would be sad, if it were not so silly, to watch how inevitably one

half of the world gives itself up as food whereon the roguery of the

other half may wax fat.

The person of facile confidence, whose secrets have been blazed abroad

more than once by trusted friends, makes yet another and another safe

confidant ~~ quite safe this time; one of whose fidelity there is no

doubt ~~ and learns when too late that one <hi> panier percé </hi> is very like another <hi> panier percé </hi>. The speculating man, without business faculty or knowledge, who has burnt his fingers bare to the bone with handling scrip and stock, thrusts them into the fire again so soon as he has the chance. The gambler blows his fingers just cool enough to shuffle

the cards for this once only, sure that this time hope will tell no

flattering tale, that ravelled ends will knit themselves up into a

close and seemly garment, and heaven itself work a miracle in his

favour against the law of mathematical certainty. In fact we are all

gamblers in this way, and play our hazards for the stakes of faith and

hope. We all burn our fingers again and again at some fire or another;

but experience teaches us nothing; save perhaps a more hopeless,

helpless resignation towards that confounded ill-luck of ours, and a

weary feeling of having known it all before when things fall out amiss

and we are blistered in the old flames.

In great matters this persistency of endeavour is sublime, and gets a

wealth of laurel crowns and blue ribands; but in little things it is

obstinacy, want of ability to profit by experience, denseness of

perception as to what can and what cannot be done; and the apologue of

Bruce's spider gets tiresome if too often repeated. The most

hopelessly inapt people at learning why they burnt their fingers last

time, and how they will burn them again, are those who, whatever their

profession, are blessed or cursed with what is called the artistic

temperament. A man will ruin himself for love of a particular place;

for dislike of a certain kind of necessary work; for the prosecution

of a certain hobby. Is he not artistic? and must he not have all the

conditions of his life exactly square with his desires? else how can

he do good work? So he goes on burning his fingers through

self-indulgence, and persists in his unwisdom to the end of his life.

He will paint his unsaleable pictures or write his unreadable books;

his path is one in which the money-paying public will not follow; but

though his very existence depends on the following of that paying

public, he will not stir an inch to meet it, but keeps where he is

because he likes the particular run of his hedgerows; and spends his

days in thrusting his hand into the fire of what he chooses to call

the ideal, and his nights in abusing the Philistinism of the world

which lets him be burnt.

And what does any amount of experience do for us in the matter of

friendship or love? As the world goes round, and our credulous morning

darkens into a more sceptical twilight, we believe as a general

principle ~~ a mere abstraction ~~ that all new friends are just so much

gilt gingerbread; and that a very little close holding and hard

rubbing brings off the gilt, and leaves nothing but a slimy, sticky

mess of little worth as food and of none as ornament. And yet, if of

the kind to whom friendship is necessary for happiness, we rush as

eagerly into the new affection as if we had never philosophized on the

emptiness of the old, and believe as firmly in the solid gold of our

latest cake as if we had never smeared our hands with one of the same

pattern before. So with love. A man sees his comrades fluttering like

enchanted moths about some stately man-slayer, some fair and shining

light set like a false beacon on a dangerous cliff to lure men to

their destruction. He sees how they singe and burn in the flame of her

beauty, but he is not warned. If one's own experience teaches one

little or nothing, the experience of others goes for even less, and no

man yet was ever warned off the destructive fire of love because his

companions had burnt their fingers there before him and his own are

sure to follow.

It is the same with women; and in a greater degree. They know all

about Don Juan well enough. They are perfectly well aware how he

treated A. and B. and C. and D. But when it comes to their own turn,

they think that this time surely, and to them, things will be

different and he will be in earnest. So they slide down into the

alluring flame, and burn their fingers for life by playing with

forbidden fire. But have we not all the secret belief that we shall

escape the snares and pitfalls into which others have dropped and

among which we choose to walk? that fire will not burn our fingers, at

least so very badly, when we thrust them into it? and that, by some

legerdemain of Providence, we shall be delivered from the consequences

of our own folly, and that two and two may be made to count five in

our behalf? Who is taught by the experience of an unhappy marriage,

say? No sooner has a man got himself free from the pressure of one

chain and bullet, than he hastens to fasten on another, quite sure

that this chain will be no heavier than the daintiest little thread of

gold, and this bullet as light and sweet as a cowslip-ball. Everything

that had gone wrong before will come right this time; and the hot bars

of close association with an uncomfortable temper and unaccommodating

habits will be only like a juggling trick, and will burn no one's

heart or hands.

People too, who burn their fingers in giving good advice unasked,

seldom learn to hold them back. With an honest intention, and a strong

desire to see right done, it is difficult to avoid putting our hands

into fires with which we have no business. While we are young and

ardent, it seems to us as if we have distinct business with all fraud,

injustice, folly, wilfulness, which we believe a few honest words of

ours will control and annul; but nine times out of ten we only burn

our own hands, while we do not in the least strengthen those of the

right nor weaken those of the wrong. We may say the same of

good-natured people. There was never a row of chestnuts roasting at

the fire for which your good-natured oaf will not stretch out his hand

at the bidding and for the advantage of a friend. Experience teaches

the poor oaf nothing; not even that fire burns. To put his name at the

back of a bill, just as a mere form; to lend his money, just for a few

days; or to do any other sort of self-immolating folly, on the

faithful promise that the fire will not burn nor the knife cut ~~ it all

comes as easy to men of the good-natured sort as their alphabet.

Indeed it is their alphabet, out of which they spell their own ruin;

but so long as the impressionable temperament lasts ~~ so long as the

liking to do a good-natured action is greater than caution, suspicion,

or the power of analogical reasoning ~~ so long will the oaf make

himself the catspaw of the knave, till at last he has left himself no

fingers wherewith to pluck out the chestnuts for himself or another.

The first doubt of young people is always a source of intense

suffering. Hitherto they have believed what they saw and all they

heard; and they have not troubled themselves with motives nor facts

beyond those given to them and lying on the surface. But when they

find out for themselves that seeming is not necessarily being, and

that all people are not as good throughout as they thought them, then

they suffer a moral shock which often leads them into a state of

practical atheism and despair. Many young people give up altogether

when they first open the book of humanity and begin to read beyond the

title-page; and, because they have found specks in the cleanest parts,

they believe that nothing is left pure. They are as much bewildered as

horror-struck, and cannot understand how <reg orig=”any one”> anyone </reg> they have loved and

respected should have done this or that misdeed. Having done it, there

is nothing left to love nor respect further. It is only by degrees

that they learn to adjust and apportion, and to understand that the

whole creature is not necessarily corrupt because there are a few

unhealthy places here and there. But in the beginning this first

scorching by the fire of experience is very painful and bad to bear.

Then they begin to think the knowledge of the world, as got from

books, so wonderful, so profound; and they look on it as a science to

be learned by much studying of aphorisms. They little know that not

the most affluent amount of phrase knowledge can ever regulate that

class of action which springs from a man's inherent disposition; and

that it is not facts which teach but self-control which prevents.

After very early youth we all have enough theoretical knowledge to

keep us straight; but theoretical knowledge does nothing without

self-knowledge, or its corollary, self-control. The world has never

yet got beyond the wisdom of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes; and Solomon's

advice to the Israelitish youth lounging round the gates of the Temple

is quite as applicable to young Hopeful coming up to London chambers

as it was to them. Teaching of any kind, by books or events, is the

mere brute weapon; but self-control is the intelligent hand to wield

it. To burn one's fingers once in a lifetime tells nothing against a

man's common-sense nor dignity; but to go on burning them is the act

of a fool, and we cannot pity the wounds, however sore they may be.

The Arcadian virtues of unlimited trust and hope and love are very

sweet and lovely; but they are the graces of childhood, not the

qualities of manhood. They are charming little finalities, which do

not admit of modification nor of expansion; and in a naughty world, to

go about with one's heart on one's sleeve, believing <reg orig=”every one”> everyone </reg> and

accepting everything to be just as it presents itself, is offering

bowls of milk to tigers, and meeting armed men with a tin sword. Such

universal trust can only result in a perpetual burning of one's

fingers; and a life spent in pulling out hot chestnuts from the fire

for another's eating is by no means the most useful nor the most

dignified to which a man can devote himself.