

STUDYING LIGHT ON THE PATH

IN OUR Branch we had not read *Light on the Path* together for a great many years. Of course we studied it individually, but some of us had had experiences with its uncompromising revelations and demands which made us wary of any united effort to probe into its teachings. Here is a typical case. Several of us were reading and discussing the book; we were all new students, all trying to orient ourselves, and not in the least confident, at any moment, whether we were standing in the shoals of the "ocean of Theosophy," or rapidly being carried out to sea by its unseen currents, of which, if the truth were told, we were all secretly much afraid.

With all those conflicting notions shut up, out of sight, in some very stupid, commonplace looking exteriors, a few of us took up *Light on the Path*, because of the promise held out by its title. The text itself seemed to us an odd way of stating the facts of life, as we had come to know them—we wished, some of us, that we could invite the author of the book to attend one of our little gatherings; his point of view was so original that we should have liked to hear his phrasing of the more modern problems with which we each had to deal.

Suddenly one day, the most interesting and constructive member of our coterie announced that he did not care to go on with the reading, but that he would be delighted to join us later when we took up some other book, especially if it were some modern treatise on philosophy. There was consternation, because this man's reading of our text had been so discriminating, had shown such insight, that we were all greatly indebted to him; we felt that we could not afford to lose his contributions to our discussions. Pressed for some account of his sudden loss of interest, he first fenced, and then said, bluntly,—“This is all for me; I have had enough. The teaching is plain—do this and that, and you will get access to more light. It is, I am convinced, the light for which I have been looking, but the fact is that I am not willing to pay the price indicated; there are other things that I want to enjoy. I find that I cannot reconcile myself to doing without them, just yet. Later, I hope I shall strike this road again, but as long as I want what lies in the fields beside it there is no use in continuing to think about what is down the road, for I am not going there.” The rest of us either thought he was giving a clever description of how it feels to be bored, or else envied his vision of what was demanded in order to get light. To us it was by no means clear what the price might be; we wanted to find out. Yet somehow that episode broke up our impromptu gatherings; and later some of us began to wonder whether he who had rejected the truth had not understood it better, had not really paid it higher tribute, than the rest of us who went blundering on, working at it now and then, trying half-heartedly to understand what it was all about.

It was years later—one dislikes to count up their number—that we again felt an inner urging to get below the surface of the same little book. Our friend had not yet exhausted the allurements of the worldly life to which he had given himself, but it had become “dust and ashes,” and we were beginning to look for his return. Where would he find us? What had we learned? We decided to find out. We read three or four pages, slowly, taking a number of evenings for it, and we had a good time together,—bringing to the common store what we could from our reading and living. At the close of the evening we were often left with a very pleasant sense of having listened, and perhaps made some slight contribution to, interpretations of the text that went far below its surface and made connections with our everyday problems which we had not before suspected. Really we seemed to be making progress in finding out what the author meant us to learn from it.

Imagine our surprise when, in response to a kindly question from our Branch President about the progress of our studies, we heard one of our number say: “We are having such interesting meetings but I come away from them with a heavy heart.” [A strange report to make, but we registered the intention to pay more heed to this member’s comments or questions, and so to be more helpful in the future.] “Heavy with so much learning?” was our President’s chaffing response. “Do they,” glancing at the rest of us, “give you *no* chance to unload any of it?” “Yes, every chance,” our comrade replied, “and a great deal is said that I should never have dug out for myself;—still, my heart is heavy. I suppose I had expected to get more than I was prepared to try to give. There is hardly a phrase in section one that I have not stood before, asked its meaning, and turned away with little more than the assurance that there was something very definite and practical for me behind it, something that I ought to be doing about it. Yes, there was more; the conviction that I should find the key that would unlock that treasure. And now we have gone past scores of those treasure carriers, and, grateful as I am for all the others have helped me to understand, I am in worse case than before—I have not found a single one of those desired keys, that is, I have not recognized them. My complaint is of my own stupidity, not of lack of help, which my fellows have always so generously given. Why, even the four unnumbered rules on page one—I might as well be wholly frank—are as much of a puzzle to me as they were the day I first read them. I do not yet know what the author, He from whose dictation they were ‘written down,’ meant me to take from them!”

That had been a long speech for this usually silent member, called out by a real desire. A plea for help was its undertone, and a response to it began to rise in our hearts, also. Yes, after all, what *did* those rules mean? A question from one or another of us started the President to thinking, then to an occasional provocative counter question—we were off! there was evidently going to be some real talk. That hope became a certainty when some of our other officers, who had been occupied with

special duties, felt the pull of the desire which was being expressed and joined in the conversation.

There was no one there to make such an accounting as the Recorder gives in "The Screen," of live conversations about real topics. Most of the things that were said will have their one and only chance for life and for creative potency in the hearts of the very small handful of students on whose ears, all too dull of hearing, they fell. Strange the prodigality in the spiritual world which far outdoes the so-called prodigality of nature—the profusion of seed sown, lavishly, upon the miry clay of minds too absorbed in self even to welcome the seed, and to try, as the responsive earth always does, to give it a chance to grow. Much was explained, much suggested, as the result of long and devoted study of *Light on the Path*. It was given in brilliant conversation, not in didactic monologue, but that is the only form in which it seems possible to attempt even a partial transcription of what one of the students carried away from that memorable "chance" conversation:

You are wondering about the "real meaning" of the first unnumbered rule—"Before the eyes can see they must be incapable of tears." Do you not think it is always better, especially when reading a book that deals with real things, to make it one's first object to pay due heed to what the author says, to follow the unfoldment of his thought with as much attention and understanding as one can command? Too often when we read books we simply use what the writer has said to confirm our own views or misconceptions, paying him the scant courtesy of passing over what he has wished to communicate, and fastening our thought only on the support that some statements of his, often quite incidental to his main theme, may appear to give to theories of our own. So we come away from the reading of him poorer than before, not richer,—because we took nothing except chaff with which to feed our vanity and our opinionatedness.

This is not a book to be read in that way. The older members of the T.S. had one great advantage. In the beginning there were few books and magazines to read, and we had to dig deep into those given us. We studied, we worked over them desperately, determined to extract their truth; for there was upon us the constant sense that we must get our clues, must find the way and traverse it steadily, or we should certainly be left behind, stranded. In those days we could not afford to read a sentence several times, wishing we knew what it meant, and then pass on to the next and the next. Some of us found it helpful to memorize the text, word for word, so that we had it at hand for constant reference and brooding. When our minds were thus filled with its phrases, in their setting, it often happened that one phrase of it would rush into view, throwing a flood of illumination upon the particular sentence over which we might be working at that time. Our anxiety to get to the heart of it was so great that we had to go at it steadily, wringing each phrase dry before passing on to the next—for who knew in which one our own special clue might not be lurking?

A friend who wished to take no chances of missing the way, gave months to the study of each rule—not a few hours every month to wondering what it meant or wishing for a revelation about it, but practical, experimental study, putting to the test of everyday life conclusions as to the meaning of the sentence selected; in other words, conducting life by that particular rule. It was applied, so far as understood, to the first incidents that occurred in the day. Perhaps they did not work out as was apparently intended. Why? What was faulty in the application of the maxim? What other meaning had it in this case, which should have been recognized? Maybe one was even in doubt as to whether a particular rule pointed in one direction or in the exact opposite—though that could seldom happen to one who was genuinely searching for guidance, since the spirit of the book is so clear that it could not frequently come to one to lose completely the sense of direction. However, even such perplexity would not long baffle a student who was earnestly pursuing the experimental method; his motto was—Try it out. Of course that student made mistakes; if he was very energetic he might have numberless mishaps and minor explosions; but he learned by each one. After each he performed a quick calculation as to where his reading of instructions had been wrong, made the evident corrections, and started again, not in the least disheartened by the fact that he had at last learned something, and not too much impressed by the resultant bruises.

You ask for an application of this principle of study to the first unnumbered rule. But we should have to go back of that, for it is not fair to assume that the first sentence of the text has been taken to heart,—“These rules are written for all disciples. Attend you to them.” As Cavé recently* made so clear for us, one use of these rules is to teach us what discipleship means, what the life of a disciple is like. Let us apply that clue to the first unnumbered rule. Evidently we may assume that the disciple sees things which are not seen by the ordinary man. What are those things? Surely not spooks and shadowy half-beings that as yet have no foothold in either world. No, for we know that the closer the approach to the things of the inner world the more real they become. We are then *going away from* the world of illusion, of dense shadow, toward the concrete, toward a world where the acme of what we usually call common-sense is demanded; the furthest possible remove from sentimental vapourizing over interpretations of cloud effects.

Let us take as a working hypothesis the supposition that the disciple sees life as it really is, or to put that in other terms, sees it, so far as his rank permits, in the light of the Lodge. Do we see things that way? If we did, should we be in such constant perplexity as to what we ought to do in this or that case, even when we cannot discover within us any unwillingness to take whatever course of action would further the interests of that Brotherhood to which we are pledged? Why is our sleep so broken with the sickening fear that we shall have to give up something

* July, 1919 QUARTERLY, pages 78-80.

we prize, in order to take the next step forward on our road? Is that the way the Lodge sees life? And if we really wish to exchange such astigmatic vision as we now have for the clear sight of the disciple, we are told that our eyes must become incapable of tears. We hardly need to pause to ask whether this term "tears" is to be taken literally; experience has taught us that physical tears, like laughter, often only mask instead of expressing the inner state. The friend who most readily weeps over your misfortune has sometimes proved in the end the most unfeeling toward you. Evidently tears should be taken figuratively; let us see whether one meaning may not apply to the whole set of emotions that centre around self; that brood which includes self-will; self-love; self-pity; self-depreciation; self-reference. Take an everyday occurrence, and we shall see how this interpretation might be worked out.

It comes at the end of a trying day, when a man has been dealing with many perplexing problems, some of them baffling in themselves, some made so by the constant strife of the human elements involved. He has been struggling to keep hold on his own centre, and in spite of this maelstrom, to realize himself as an immortal soul standing in spiritual being. He has not been able to stand firm, but he has made a determined effort, looking anxiously toward the end of the day when he could get a cool draught of inspiration from his source of power and light. That time has come, but with it comes one of his fellows who, absorbed in the interests of his own day, pounces upon the weary one with some question or comment that serves to provoke the explosion which had been held off all day long. Cutting and perhaps unkind things are said. What happens then?

Would you be amazed if I were to say that the other man usually dissolves in a flood of tears? And yet, in the sense in which the term is used in our rule, is not that what we should all expect to see happen? The particular brand of tears which flow will depend largely upon the man's temperament. Perhaps he gets exasperated, but, while giving no outer sign of his feeling, tells himself that this is outrageous conduct on the other man's part; there he was, trying to share with him the fruit of the day's experience, speaking to him with complete courtesy, wishing him well in his heart—and now, how like a boor that man behaves! If there is to be any calling of names, this and this ought by rights to be said to him,—and the chances are that those things are soon and bitterly said. Clearly the one who was so betrayed by exasperation had first been blinded by the tears of personal feeling, so that for the time being he lost hold on the clear sight of his day. At the moment he is as blind as if he had never seen any of the realities of life, never gauged the relative values of personal feeling and unchanging truth.

Or we may suppose that the tears are of another kind. The one who happened to set off the gunpowder, gives way to hurt feelings under the other man's outburst; he thinks how many times he has tried to help that fellow in work that was pressing; how often he has supported his plans when others were not inclined to pay any attention to them; how

generous he has been in letting the other take all the credit for their common efforts; how much he has endured from this person in all the years past, recalling with the swiftness of the dream state every occasion when there had been the least friction between them, no matter how thoroughly cleared up at the time.

Or perhaps his tears flow in still another way. Maybe he has a little scrap of detachment and so recognized at the start that he had the misfortune to throw a lighted match onto the other's unguarded powder train; and naturally he would want to help the other man to make as quiet and honourable an exit as possible from the mess that explosion was making. So far, he is on good ground; then out gush the tears—he is not exasperated, his feelings are not hurt, but he says to himself,—This is too big a job for me; if only so and so were here to see what is the best way of handling this poor tired man! If I speak, it will simply give him further material for this outburst which he already is regretting more deeply than I feel my real sins; I want so to help him out; what shall I do? . . . By this time there are two people hopelessly blinded by the emotions which they have allowed to sweep them off their feet, and the powers that make for true vision and right human relations have no representative at that meeting place.

You ask what the disciple would do if the tired man exploded at him. Perhaps it would be only fair to say that such an explosion would not be as likely to occur in the presence of one who was really a disciple. O not in the least because that other would feel some sort of holy awe in his presence and manage to hold in the rising wrath. But because the disciple would be constantly watchful to weed out from his surroundings those feelings, thoughts, and attitudes of mind that necessarily jar upon others,—that is, his atmosphere would not be such as to provoke petty friction. He would also be constantly on guard. The appearance of another person instantly leads him to ask for what purpose that other was sent; he pays attention, almost automatically, to the state of mind and heart in which that other comes—he knows that he is held responsible for the effect that is produced upon that other, even in five minutes' casual conversation. In like manner, those of lesser degree might do well to ask themselves certain questions when they become innocent participators in such an episode as the one we have been using for illustration. These questions would not be in the line of trying to discover what is wrong with the offender—for the moment that is unimportant—but would involve a quick survey of one's own condition, the desire being to discover at once what there is *in me* that is causing my brother to offend; and the probe would go deeper than externals of manner, attitude, form of expression; would involve my condition of mind and heart, the centre from which I am viewing the misery of the man who is in the midst of his explosion.

What, you ask, is the disciple going to do with the exploder? How is he going to regard the situation? What will he see, having

attained the stage at which the eyes are incapable of tears? Is he therefore indifferent, far removed from the scene of the conflict, as we might be from participation in the struggles of an ant which was trying to carry a load much too cumbersome for it to manage? Certainly not; if that were his feeling he could not be a disciple. He sees (and this is only one way of stating it) that the better part of this man has temporarily lost control and is struggling to regain it, while the particular form taken by the outbreak has significance for him only as indicative of the point at which he might hope to be of some help. From long experience with himself and with others, he may form a quick and intuitive judgment as to the treatment which will best reinforce the efforts of the man's better nature. Dispassionately, but with burning desire to help one of his Master's struggling children, he would decide what line to take. It might be that he would not appear to notice the commotion but would speak with quiet confidence of some new phase in the work in which they were both interested. Or he might feel that overstrained nerves needed to be soothed by a friendly recognition of the condition, by the sense that the disciple, too, had known the need for such emotional relief. Or he might think the man needed to be brought sharply to his senses, needed the help of a direct demand upon his flagging will,—and so might tell him in a few short words how disagreeable he was making himself, emphasizing the simple statement by leaving him.

You say that you have not the wisdom to deal with another in this fashion, and you are right. The practical point, however, seems to be that you want to learn to use, in service, all the understanding that has been given you; want to see as truly as your imperfect vision will permit. Then you must look to the tears, first recognizing them for what they are, and then learning how to get them under control. You already know how often, as onlooker at a conference in which you had no interests or desires at stake, you have seen clearly the right course of action, to which the participants in the difficulty may have been wholly blind. For that moment tears were not blurring your vision. The next step is to learn to use your present vision as clearly, when all that you hold dear seems to be at stake. Yes, impartiality describes one angle of the attitude we must acquire; but a partisan desire that the will of Masters shall be done, that their cause shall be advanced through every incident of life, would be a form of statement more sympathetic to my own point of view.

This is only the beginning of what is suggested by that first unnumbered rule; you will discover far more about it as you work with it. One thing you may learn, as I have, is to be especially alert to the possible significance of the suggestions that do not at first appeal to you. We pass by so much that would give us the clues for which we are looking; it does not exactly accord with our mood of the moment, with our expectation of the form in which truth must appear. In other words, our ears are so sensitive to what accords with our own desires and wishes that they miss most of the teaching which they are meant to hear.