

THE BLIGHT OF PRECEDENT

Failing Prize Oration by Antoinette Burdick.

Each individual has on inherent power distinctly his own. Of this power Ruskin says, "Degrees infinite of luster there must always be, but the weakest among us has a gift, however, seemingly trivial, which is peculiar to him, and which, worthily used, will have a gift also to his race forever." Yet many persons fail to use their gift because they follow so closely prescribed methods of thinking, prescribed codes of action, decreed dogmas of belief. They are ever guided and controlled by precedent.

Precedent is something which comes to us from the past with the sanction of usage and common consent; something handed down with the approval of experience or authority. The persons following precedent are from two classes. To the one belonging those who are taught, guided, and inspired by it to nobler and better efforts, while in the other class are those who are blighted, those who become mere automations, because, day after day, they blindly follow the dictations of the past.

Those who are thus bound by hooks of steel to precedent are influential by three forces: conservatism, lack of self-appreciation and fear of public opinion.

The early history of the South affords an example of conservatism. It was so "entrenched in its traditions and chivalry, so self-centered in its semi-feudal and Old-World picturesqueness that "while outside its limits new industries were springing up the South holding tenaciously to its old ways fell farther and farther behind the other sections of the country in the rapid march of national prosperity."

The failure of advance was caused, not by lack of gifts among the people, but by the idea that they must conform to the precedents made by their ancestors. They did not realize as did Wendell Phillips that "to be as good as their fathers they must be better." But they found their mistake.

Within the last few years they have thrown off this spirit of conservatism and relying upon their own strength they are developing an activity that is destined to make the South prominent in commerce and manufacture. But until the people of the South learned "the lesson of devotion of life to duty" conservatism gradually sapped their

power. And so will conservatism sap the power of any man who follows it to the exclusion of his own individuality. He will lose the ability to think for himself, he will bury his gift.

There are men who through lack of confidence in their own ability follow precedent. They may have excellent ideas and may even dream of what they might accomplish, but still they keep locked within their minds those ideas which if developed might cause a needed reform in thought and action. What if Columbus had under-valued his thoughts because they were his own and differed so greatly from prevailing opinions? Though scoffed at by his friends and forgotten by those who promised to aid him he clung to his convictions until he proved them.

In the sixteenth century a poor monk fighting against the precedents established by church and state started the greatest reform the world has ever known. What caused the voice of Martin Luther to pierce the doors of the convents nailed as they were with rules and observances? What changed him from a poor youth begging on the street to the hero of his age and all the ages to follow? It was not alone the truth he had found by persistent effort, but it was his fidelity to this truth, his courage and determination to stand by it even when death at the stake seemed inevitable.

One does not need to be widely known to have a message for the world. Some of the most influential men in all the history of the past and present are men who like our own Lincoln have battled against circumstances until they have succeeded in emerging from the obscurity which enveloped them and have won glory for themselves and their country. But one does need to find and use his gift and should believe with Francis Bacon that "it is as well to create good precedents as to follow them."

Then there is a class of men who conform to precedent through fear of public opinion. That is the standard by which they govern their lives. Public opinion is the consensus of the majority. It is formed either by wholesome and clear thinking and just criticism, or by prejudice, ignorance and narrowness of thought. This servile public opinion causes the one who follows it to lower his ideals in the hope of obtaining popularity. Among such mere followers are often found men who are holding or seeking to hold public office. They put their own convictions in the background in order

to comply with the views, yes, sometimes with the whims of those from whom they expect support.

In direct contrast to such individuals are two men who are attracting world-wide attention. Through opposition and abuse they are standing for principle and are pointing out the solution to some of the vital problems that are puzzling our government. Theodore Roosevelt and William Jennings Bryan have not bowed down to public opinion, they have created it.

The man who craves the approval of public opinion should by loyalty to right and persistent effort seek to raise it to the standard of rationalism and equity.

According to Lew Wallace "In every scheme involving human action, there are three elements to be taken into consideration—time, place, and agency." How futile then to try to make certain actions of today conform to those of other times, other places, and other agencies!

The principle of life is growth. But can there be growth for those who follow precedent to the exclusion of their own personality? No. For them precedent becomes the ideal and when the ideal is reached progress ceases. Ruskin says of the artist, and what he says applies equally to anyone, "All artists who have attempted to assume, or in their weakness have been influenced by the national peculiarities of other times and countries, have instantly, whatever their original power, fallen to third rate rank or fallen altogether, have lost their blessing and birthright, lost their power over the human heart, lost all capability of teaching or benefiting others." Precedent then when undiscerningly followed not only hinders development but causes degeneration.

To every man should come a sense of his responsibility to himself and his fellow men. He is under obligations to be either a good leader or an intelligent follower. The world does not want mechanical copyists; it does not want men who are chained by fear. But it does want men who can distinguish between good and bad precedents; men who will search out the new truths that must be proclaimed to the world; men who are ready for each new crisis, for,

"New occasions teach new duties;
Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still and onward
Who would keep abreast of Truth.
Lo! before us gleam her campfires,

(Continued on page 7)