

The World's Beautiful Failures

Lizzie M. Holmes

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THERE is no lack of praise for those who succeed. The whole world knows, applauds and points out as shining examples for coming generations to follow, those who have reached the object of their ambitions in any line. No one stops to consider what that success has cost—the success is the thing—the victor is the one important topic for consideration.

But I write of the failures of society, the beautiful failures who have died in obscurity and silence, leaving only a heart here and there the better and gladder for having known them. Dear, lovable, self-sacrificing failures, without whom even the successful would never have succeeded ! Foundation stones of great achievements to follow ! Living bridges upon whom happier beings cross to victory! How I love you and how my heart reaches out to you! I do not know your names, but I liken you to the few sweet, humble personalities who have come into my life, and names matter not. Perhaps you are among those who stepped down—myriads of you—into the river until your dead bodies formed a bridge over which more fortunate men and women passed to freedom. Perhaps, with your feet already upon the ladder, you stepped aside that a weaker brother might climb. Perhaps you counted the cost of success, and, rather than pay it, gave your soul its own and lived your own sweet, hidden life as you would. All honor to you, whoever and wherever you are!

In ancient times, when all laborers were simply slaves, there were here and there men who led revolts against the tyrants who oppressed them. They failed; for the idea of freedom was but a seedling then. But they paved the way for more effective revolts. Even Moses of inspired writings was a great failure. For though the work he undertook so ably secured him a place in that old wonderful conglomeration of history, fakism, poetry and mystery, he never did reach the promised land—he did not bring the Israelites safe into a country of their own, or establish them as a nation. Yet how the world remembers this marvelous failure! Socrates, although his name has lasted down to the present day, was a miserable failure in life. He never had a cent to his name, he made but a poor, shiftless husband, and his last drink was a cup of cold poison. Yet how his pupils loved him!

Even Jesus Christ failed of his mission, according to what is said of him by both friends and enemies. If he aspired, as the Jews declared, to become their earthly king, he failed utterly to realize his aspirations. If he came to save the world, his most devout worshippers must acknowledge that he made a dismal failure of it, since but a handful out of earth's millions are likely to accept him and thus get into heaven. If he hoped, as some scholars claim, to establish a beautiful,

brotherly, communal state of society here on earth, he failed again: since the brotherly element in his teachings died out before they were three centuries old. He succeeded, I think, as many another humble, nature-loving, unknown creature has done, in embodying a sweet, loving, simple, Christlike spirit, whose success consists simply in being. That quiet, non-resistant spirit of love, which he seemed to personify, has slowly grown and permeated the savage forces of society, until a foreshadowing of that future of freedom and universal solidarity is looming up before the world, and in this alone is that conception called Jesus Christ a success.

How many, many of the pioneers of political liberty have sorrowfully failed! Even where there have been short-lived victories, they have been drowned in seas of blood, and have been forgotten except by calumny. Only through their failures have they achieved a measure of success; they were cut off in their first enthusiasm for liberty, while yet sincere, uncorrupted, devoted and single-hearted, yet believing in the purity of their work. Had they lived and continued in their supremacy, they too would have become tyrannical, and other revolutionists would have been sacrificed to the cause of liberty against them.

Genius, it is conceded, seldom achieves success during the lifetime of its personality. How many great men have toiled in penury and want, through all their lives, striving to perfect some idea, or having perfected it, striving for recognition from the busy, unsympathetic world. For the greatest men, those endowed with the best brains, and highest gifts, are not usually best fitted to fight their way in the commercial field and “make money” out of their own abilities. So they have died, conscious only of failure, but upon the broken fragments of their efforts others have built and attained success. How many millions of failures there are among the common toilers of earth: “They who finger Death at their glove’s end” and who “feed him hungry behind their fires,” who never know anything of the sweetness of life because of toil, privation, danger, dreariness and monotony throughout the whole of their existence. Yet they have made the world rich in the goods that make the lives of “Mary’s sons” beautiful. [note]At this late date, Rudyard Kipling has remembered to recognize labor in a splendid poem called “Martha’s Sons.”[/note]

And among those who in later days have taken up the cause of human freedom, are many failures as far as riches, influence and high position go. But what beautiful failures, and how lovable! Look at our own Louise Michel! Poor, homely, shabby, never even comfortable, she spent her whole life working for others, and died without having really achieved a single task that she had set her heart upon, without a dollar laid up, without an honor paid her by the powers that be. She had seen all her hopes and dreams of a better state of society fall in a chaos of blood and vengeance, yet she never ceased to hope and dream and work. To-day thousands revere and bless her name, and no woman was ever more dearly loved by those who had the fortune to know her personally.

John Brown was a case of splendid failure. Who was ever more maligned, humiliated and persecuted? He was a rebel, a violent, seditious character, a breeder of disturbances, and they finally hanged him—the most ignominious death they could inflict.

He had loved his fellow beings too well, and he tried to free them from an intolerable slavery. He failed, and they killed him. And yet, “His soul goes marching on,” and there is no one now who would deny his self-sacrificing and lovable devotion.

And in the same sense were our martyrs of ’87 failures. They never acquired property—they had no time to make money—they had never attained high honors or influential friends, the beautiful things of life had been denied them because of poverty, the lack of success in business. They cherished the highest ideals for humanity, and—they failed in seeing them realized. Yet,

their lives were beautiful and their deaths sublime. The world leaped ahead several generations toward the final goal of liberty and justice, because of their “unsuccessful lives.”

And ah! the many, many, silent, unknown, unobtrusive failures that we have among us to-day! In the sense that the average writer speaks of success, they are the worst of failures. They are plain, plodding, hard-working people, they live poorly, but few know them, and they are not likely to achieve results of any kind important to the world. But they are sweet and lovable spirits, true to themselves and their ideals, and, as far as circumstances will permit, they are free.

Thirty years ago, in Chicago, the radicals were few, and poor and very devoted. They were persecuted, lied about and ridiculed. They preached to the people on the street corners, or on vacant lots, or in little back rooms behind saloons because they were cheap. They walked miles after their day’s work was done (to save carfare) to go to some meeting at which they spoke, and then put their hands in their pockets for the few cents they had there to pay the rent. At that time, none of them thought of trying to get rich. If they could “keep a job” and make a bare living it was as much as they hoped for. They failed in all that makes Rockefeller or Carnegie successful men, and they could see in those days no direct results from their work and devotion. But they were pioneers, and their labors prepared the ground for the seed afterward sown which has already resulted in the broad, radical, progressive thought which prevails in that city to-day.

After a while, many in that little group began to think it scarcely worth while to be so self-sacrificing and devoted. They began to think they could look out for their own interests and work for liberty too. Or, that they could “get rich,” and then be in a better position to help the cause along. Perhaps they were right, as it is generally conceded that a “poor devil,” one who has been a failure at everything else, can do little to advance the cause of human liberty, or any other cause. And so, to-day, out of that old group, one is a successful lawyer and real estate owner, another holds a political position which pays him well and gives him considerable influence, another is a popular and wealthy physician, and one is a successful journalist and writer. Some of them are dead, dead and nearly forgotten. But one or two of them forgot, in their enthusiasm for a cause, to look out for their own welfare, and all at once they looked around to find themselves almost alone, outstripped by even their old companions, old age creeping on and poverty and obscurity their portion. Yet they were brave and able and true; they have been industrious and upright; they have served their industrial bosses well, and according to Elbert Hubbard should have been received with open arms by capitalist employers as “angels of light.” Rather than that, they are likely to be displaced by younger and more sprightly men.

Yet, these old workers have every quality that wins love and sympathy from those who know them well. They have preserved the very characteristics which almost invariably are sacrificed by those who rise to the top and give the price which buys success. To obtain great wealth, one must kill all generous impulses, the sense of equity and justice, the deep human sympathy with one’s kind. To become famous, either in war or commerce, is to make one’s self heartless and cruel; to win honor by some great invention, is to take to one’s self the credit of what has been done by a thousand failures before. You may have one chance in a hundred to become successful and great by achievement in literary or artistic fields, without sacrificing your soul’s integrity and freedom—but, barely that.

By the world’s criterion, you are only successful if you accumulate great wealth, pile up the products of thousands of toilers under your own private control, or in some way win the approval of governments, of authority, of established institutions. To become thus successful, you must be unjust, tyrannical, narrow, or tricky, fawning, hypocritical, slavish. Is it worth while? Is it not

better to keep out of the struggle, be true to yourself, live your own free, simple life, to expand and develop all the sweet, social instincts of your being, even though it be in obscurity and poverty? Or even if it lead to ignominy, persecution and death? For the day will come when even the world will grow wise and cry aloud, "God bless our beautiful failures!"

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