

“FRUSTRATION”

A STUDY AND A STORY

CLERICUS

AT a luncheon meeting of the Rotary Club in one of the larger Canadian cities, of which I was then a member, the guest speaker of the day gave an address on what he called the “Science of Graphology”, which he explained as the study of handwriting. A knowledge of this particular branch, he said, would enable one through the examination of a person’s writing not only to tell with reasonable accuracy the general characteristics, but also to indicate something of his aptitudes, the special work or profession for which he was best fitted and in which he might be expected to attain a fair degree of satisfaction and success. At the close, specimens of some of the leading members were passed up, and it must be confessed that in each case the diagnosis was fairly accurate.

Mine was not among those submitted at the time. I was pretty well advanced in years, my habits and standing pretty well established, and so I was not particularly interested in the exhibition. A few weeks later, being in the office where this man was employed, I stopped at his desk to congratulate him on the interest which his subject had created. Somewhat to my surprise he said:

“I noticed that yours was not among those sent up.”

I admitted that this was so, and added jokingly that I thought my fortune was pretty well made.

“And yet yours was the one I wanted.”

I expressed a mild surprise. He took a piece of paper and, throwing it on the counter, said:

“Would you mind writing something now?”

“Not at all.” And I scribbled off a few words, I must say rather perfunctorily and carelessly. He examined them intently for quite a little time, and then to my surprise he said:

“Nature has been very kind to you. You could have made a good showing in almost any line you had chosen, and yet, strange to say, you got into the wrong pew at last.”

Then he added enquiringly: “Is that not so? Have you not felt the same thing yourself?”

I admitted that this was so. Then, continuing my bantering attitude, I said:

"Now that you have uncovered the skeleton in the closet, would you mind telling me in what particular way I could have done better?"

"You could have made a real success as a writer and dramatic critic. Your writing shows a very distinctive aptitude in that direction."

Naturally I was impressed. More impressed, perhaps, than I cared to admit, and more impressed than I cared to let him see. Was this the explanation of the increasing discontent, the restlessness and dissatisfaction which seemed to be getting worse with the growing years? Was it possible that the possession of unused powers, like the presence of unused muscles, created a subtle sense of need, a sort of hunger, that the unfulfilment or lack of adequate expression of any possibility might be expected to produce? It might still be there even if one had not reasoned it out, or become directly conscious of the cause.

There was no denying the fact that in my own heart I had to admit that thus far my life had been pretty much of a failure. It had been a disappointment to myself and, more trying still, it had been a disappointment to my more intimate associates and friends. They did not say so, but somehow I knew that that was their feeling, and in a way I resented their criticism. My beginning years had shown such promise that there had been great expectations. I, too, had had my own youthful ambitions and dreams.

Was this the basic cause for all these annoying and trying conditions? Very probably there were others. These weaknesses and difficulties very seldom come alone. The good fairy at my first coming into the world had given me two very valuable and yet very dangerous gifts. The first was an unusually keen, analytical type of mind. Always questioning, examining, dissecting, never satisfied unless it got to the very bottom, if possible, of everything. Reading, observation, experience, as the years went on, had developed this to an almost abnormal intensity. Naturally coupled with this was an almost equally uncanny insight into the workings of the human mind. The thoughts, purposes, motives, intentions, that lay behind and influenced human action and life.

As a logical outcome of this first, the second gift was a strong dislike, even more, a hatred of anything approaching

deception or concealment. Anything that suggested or savoured of falsity or camouflage of any kind. There would be times when, in the interest and for the sake of social relationships, one did not need to proclaim everything on the housetops; but for oneself, and to oneself, and in the secret places of one's own consciousness, anything like misrepresenting, or covering up, or deceiving was dishonourable, unpardonable, and cowardly. In this respect I was harder on myself than anyone else. No matter what the humiliation, what the condemnation, everything must be sun-clear and must be faced.

It may be very well imagined that with two such gifts, admitting that they were such, with a certain indifference as to the feeling of others, and with a vocabulary that from constant and extensive reading was almost deadly in its accuracy, I was not likely to be a general favourite, or likely to be able to form the associations and friendships necessary for the success as well as the satisfaction of life. But even this could not fully and satisfactorily account for the deep consciousness of disappointment and failure in my own heart, and the considered judgment of others.

With the necessary qualifications such as it was admitted I had, men have succeeded in spite of handicaps. There must be something else. Something striking at the very roots of life itself. Might it not be that my friend in his science of Graphology had touched on what psychologists call the possibility of "frustration"? And might not this in my case be the factor that would explain more reasonably and more satisfactorily than the others just why there had been apparently a result that seemed to have assumed almost the proportion of a tragedy? If it were so, it would, at least, soften the sharpness of my own self-reproaches. A candid and careful examination of the past showed very clearly that this was the case.

I was born in the North of Ireland. My father was the manager of a small, handloom linen-weaving factory, a form of industry very common there at that time. My education was under the Irish National School system, recognized by those competent to judge as particularly suitable and efficient. It was here that occurred the first of those fateful experiences that I am convinced now was the beginning of what eventually proved to be the working out of this tragedy of a real frustration.

The school was under the direction of a principal and an assistant, called a monitor. Based on personality, character and educational standing, the monitor was generally chosen

from among the senior pupils. During my concluding term there was a monitor to be appointed, and as I stood at the head of the school, naturally it was expected that I should be the one. This monitorship was generally looked upon as the first step on the ladder of teaching as a profession. Already there were indications that I had a decided flair for teaching, and would probably have been quite successful.

But it was not to be. The fates were not propitious. The patron of the school was an Anglican clergyman, proprietor of a large landed estate in that part of the country. The father of the boy who was also in nomination with me was manager of this estate. A very nice boy, but admittedly not nearly as well qualified. But, then, what of that? He had the necessary backing and influence. So as usual, the victory was again on the side of the big battalions. I am satisfied now that had justice been done, and my life started on what was its real bent, it would have meant for me both satisfaction and success. So much for a start in frustration.

After school, work. There was no such thing in those days as vocational guiding, and very little by way of advice or help. You took what you could get, or what the gods had laid out for you, and were correspondingly thankful. I had to go to work at an age when, in these days, boys are not much more than coming out of the kindergarten. The manufacturer and capitalist, for whom my father was working, had a large and influential commercial connection. He was interested in getting me started, and soon I was indentured as an apprentice with a prominent business firm in the linen business in a distant seaport city. The apprenticeship was for five years, with a small salary attached, increasing each year.

The linen business then as, I suppose, still consisted of two sections or branches. One was the technical or more mechanical side,—lapping, folding, ornamenting, packing, preparing for the various needs of the foreign and domestic trade. The other was the business or distinctively commercial end,—manufacture, grades, markets, prices, sales. In harmony with the older countries' ideas of classes and social distinctions, it made a great deal of difference in your standing which division you were in. In the one you were merely a workman, belonging to the working classes. In the other you were a business man, a prospective merchant on your own account, and of altogether different clay.

I was supposed to be entered and to belong to the business section. By some strange mismanagement or freak of fortune,

or whatever you would call it, when I came to understand the situation I found I was merely apprenticed to a trade. Naturally it took quite a time before I realized the full significance of the blunder, and its probable effect on my fortune and my future. By that time apparently not much could be done. Everyone recognized that I was just another apprentice lad, and when I insisted that there had been a mistake, I was laughed at and made fun of for my pains.

It must be remembered I was just a mere boy from the country, timid, sensitive, a stranger in a strange city, without anyone to whom I could turn for advice or assistance. It was a very trying and pitiable plight. My father, too far away to understand, in his easy-going way, said that if I only waited, everything would probably turn out all right. My sponsor was annoyed at being troubled about the matter. He said, I should be thankful he had got me in at all. And so the wheels of life ground on, in this impossible and tragic situation.

Of course, what might have been expected happened. I did not care, was not interested in the least in the career fate had thrust so unexpectedly and so unwillingly on me. There was nothing in the petty niceties of folding cloth or tying ribbons that appealed to me, and I must confess that I did not try very hard to make the best of a bad situation. There was little in it to appeal to the pride or the ambition of an aggressive and pushing youth. The years of apprenticeship, so far as I was concerned, were practically wasted. I came out with nothing at the end, not even the record of a good workman.

But that was not all. Away from home, with no one to remonstrate or restrain, with all the attractions and temptations of a large city, with no interest in my work and nothing to do, it was hardly possible, young as I was, not to fall into ways and companionships that were anything but helpful, either to my own character or to my future usefulness. In fact, perhaps, while not to be considered very bad from the standpoints of ordinary youth, I had turned out practically a useless member of society. It nearly broke my father's heart.

What was to be done? There was nothing for it but to try and start all over again. But that was easier said than done. In an older country with all its social prejudices and handicaps, and with this record, it would hardly be possible for me to do very much even if I got started at all. One may despise anything as weak or as cheap as pitying oneself, and yet it was hard not to feel that I was entitled to something of con-

sideration and sympathy. If there was to be any hope or any chance at all, it would have to be in a new environment and a new world.

It was not a very enviable position. Here I was, in a sense, a mere youth, scarcely out of my teens, already registered as at least a partial failure, alone and friendless, setting out on an uncharted sea to meet the dangers and dare the challenge of an unknown future. There was hardly any need to be ashamed of the tears that would come as I stood on the deck of the outward bound steamer, and watched the receding shores of my native land. I was leaving home, kindred, friends, most likely for ever. Even one braver than I was, and stronger in the consciousness of a parting blessing and a deliberately chosen career, might well have given way to emotion under such circumstances.

I landed in New York, and very soon got employment. Not being especially qualified naturally, I got work of the hardest and most laborious kind. But being young and strong and well developed athletically, I did not mind that. In fact, I felt a kind of secret satisfaction that in this way I was making something of an atonement for my past mistakes and weaknesses. I stayed there quite a time, but I was never really satisfied. For one thing, there did not seem much chance of a change to a more desirable or better position, and I did not care to work always as a mere laborer. There was another and perhaps still stronger and more unsettling influence. I suppose that these shadows of the past must still be more or less present with us, even although we are not directly conscious of their presence. A kind of intuitive sense exercising something of a deterrent and warning feeling.

The foreman of the department in which I was working seemed well disposed towards me, and as the tenure of my employment apparently rested very much with him, it was only the part of wisdom to maintain as friendly a relation as possible. He invited me over to spend Sunday afternoons in his apartment. I found that there were others of the younger men there also. To pass the time and make everyone feel more at home, refreshments were served and cards introduced. No very heavy stakes, and not too much drinking. "Just enough to make the game interesting and make everybody feel sociable," our host laughingly explained. But I noticed that after we went away, having got started, most of the men did not stop there.

I must confess that I was just a little afraid. There was nothing very threatening or very dangerous about it, and yet

it felt like the beginning again of something that had overcome and wrecked me before. And yet I could not very well do anything that would anger or antagonize the foreman. It happened that I had a friend who had gone to Canada some time before me and with whom I was in correspondence. He was doing very well, and was anxious that I should join him. Just at this time I received an especially pressing letter, with promise of a good position. That decided me, and I made up my mind to go. So here I was. Adrift again on an uncharted sea, sailing out into an unknown future, with something of this feeling of frustration still resting on me.

My entrance into Canada was an unexpected surprise. My friend's associates were a group of fine, self-respecting young people, who looked upon life as something more than merely a game of "beer and skittles". I was admitted freely into the group, and under its influence my attitude towards life and my outlook on life underwent a complete change. Thomas Hardy, quoting from Aeschylus, speaks of the President of the Immortals having finished his sport with Tess. Not quite so tragically I was wondering if he was through with me. I connected myself with the church, and soon became a recognized leader in young people's work.

One night, coming out of a meeting of the Official Board of which I was a member, the minister put a friendly, detaining hand on my shoulder and said, addressing me by name:

"Have you ever thought of entering the ministry?"

I confessed that sometimes the thought had crossed my mind, but had been immediately dismissed. I had not the gifts necessary for efficient and successful work in that calling. Besides, the religious and spiritual part of my experience and life were hardly such as would qualify me for undertaking it. I had a rather keen remembrance of my past. This man was one of the best I had ever met, one to whom I looked up in every way. He had exerted a great influence on my life; in fact, it was largely through him that the change had come about. I still remember him with reverence and with gratitude.

He had a peculiar and, to me, somewhat superstitious idea of this question of the ministry. It was no matter of ordinary choice. It was a direct impression from heaven itself, and the Church had some special spiritual insight by which it recognized and ratified the "call". This divine indication of selection could be neglected only at great risk. The one who dared to be disobedient to this heavenly vision could hard-

ly expect to have either satisfaction or success in any other calling. I must confess that I was just superstitious enough and easily enough impressed to believe him. The economic security and the opportunity and standing of the position may have had something to do with the decision. I was not conscious of anything like that at the time.

At any rate, I entered the ministry. Having always had a taste for books and study, and having a natural gift for public speaking, I soon found out that I was not quite so poorly equipped as my earlier self-depreciation had suggested. Judged from the ordinary standpoint, my work was appreciated and I was considered fairly successful. The only difficulty was that I was considered a little too independent and too daring in my thinking and preaching. I was too outspoken, and too radical in my attitude, to be looked upon as perfectly "safe" by the more cautious and conservative of my brethren. I was never admitted fully into their counsels.

If I had had the good fortune to confine my ministry to the West, and to the rural sections and working class, I would probably have got along all right. There was a freedom and independence of thought about the Western people, and I was too well known for any serious trouble. Among the workers and common people generally there is an open-mindedness and robustness of thought not usually recognized and credited to them. Much more so than with the so-called better classes whose lives, being more conventional and artificial, are more inclined to substitute correctness and conformity for the more desirable qualities of reality and sincerity. People who fight for a living are in too direct contact with the real experiences and problems of life to bother much with the merely superficial and speculative. I was always at home with them.

But in a moment of weakness, and perhaps of pride, I accepted an invitation to one of the larger churches in the East, and here my troubles began. My years of earlier training and experience in the West had given me not only a directness and abruptness of speech; there was also perhaps something of lack of polish, and of an unconventionality that did not fit in very well with Eastern ideas of the ministry. Apparently to most of them, social graces and social leadership were more important and desirable than anything like religious interpretation and help in the problems of life. Because of this "handicap", my "entering-in" was anything but gracious or auspicious.

When once the tides of fault-finding and criticism begin running, it does not take long to gather both momentum and

increase. This social lack was soon added to by other and more serious faults. I was not sound in the faith. What was worse still, the young people, with whom I was a strong favorite, were being seriously influenced and led astray. With the social and fundamental wing allied against me, and the church heavily in debt, there must be no division or disturbance; so there was no doubt about what would be the final outcome. In all this persecution and difficulty, it is a source of great satisfaction that I never lost my temper, never became angry or bitter, never said a word beyond the expression of my real conviction, to hinder or hurt the faith of the older people who differed with me and who, quite sincerely, thought I was wrong.

I was let out. At the end of the ecclesiastical year I was set out on the sidewalk, without any consideration, without any provision, without any prospect. So there I was. Coming to the close of a fairly lengthy and fairly faithful and useful service, admitted even by those who were opposed to me! With an understanding, and experience, and sympathy that would have made possible probably the ripest and richest contribution of my whole life. Willing, nay, even anxious to round out the remaining years in a way that would bring something of enjoyment and satisfaction in a life that had not always been either easy or peaceful. Nothing to do; nowhere to go; practically the whole career frustrated and blocked.

There were two things that added considerably to the tragedy of the situation, if one may use that much abused word. One was, that I had an invitation and an opportunity the previous year in a charge where I had been before. The officials of the church, fearing the results of a practically compulsory retirement, prevailed on me to stay and finish my term. By that time, since they knew I was going, differences would be healed and the church saved. I foolishly consented, thinking that my sacrifice would prompt equal consideration on the other side. The other thing was, that a deputation of the best people of the church waited on the Chairman of the District Council to ask him to call together the Council and see if something could not be done to remedy so grave an injustice. They were brusquely told that nothing would be done and no meeting called. "This man has caused us enough trouble already."

So ends the story. Not like all good stories, in the sound of wedding bells and living happily ever afterwards, but in the disappointment of what some people might call a real tragedy.

The prophecy of my Graphologist friend had ended even more fatefully than he had imagined. There was no question of the final frustration. He was probably right. It was just possible that, as Graphology said, I had got into the wrong pew. This, combined with a too free exercise of the two temperamental gifts of my fairy godmother, mentioned at the first, was probably responsible for my own inner dissatisfaction and discontent and my outer disaster. I did my best. From the ordinary standpoint, I was both efficient and successful. But there was always something that seemed to interfere with a perfect enjoyment, a perfect satisfaction.

With sincere admiration and appreciation for the innumerable company of good men and women that are in its ranks, and that unselfishly and earnestly carry on church work, there is something about church people, about their attitude towards life and towards others outside of themselves, that never really appealed to me. I never could really understand it, and because of this I always seemed to be on the outside of the charmed circle. There always seemed to be something of a cocksureness that they and they alone were in possession of the true secret of life, the magic formula that ensured everything. I can well understand how with perfect sincerity they burned people in the middle ages who did not agree with them. If they had scared them into agreeing with them, they were saved. If they still persisted and remained hardened and obdurate, they were lost anyhow.

So, though I did not mean in any way to sit in judgment, or to be unnecessarily uncharitable or offensive, there always seemed to me to be a complacency, a certain attitude and feeling of smugness, at least among the less lovely and less attractive of the rank and file. As if the religion they had, and that alone, were the only and absolute thing. Perhaps not really there among the better and more thoughtful class, at least not consciously so; but in listening to them, and in hearing them talk, or to sit under the ordinary type of preaching, one always felt a touch of this atmosphere. The gifts already referred to made it impossible for me either to acquire this confident conservatism or to appreciate its manifestation in others.

Cardinal Newman changed Churches in middle life. There were those who criticized him severely for making the change. He wrote a book to which he gave the title, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua—An Apology for my Life*. Sometimes I wonder if this mixture of frustration, temperamental ingredients, and ecclesiast-

ical narrowness and hindrance would constitute for me a sufficient and satisfactory *apologia pro vita sua*. And if they did, who was responsible? And how or where will be made up to me suffering and heartburning, the sense of disappointment and defeatism, and the broken relationships among my associates and friends? Will Emerson's *Essay on Compensation* be a sufficient philosophy? I am not claiming to be entirely free from blame. I am not asking or expecting complete exoneration. But was it my fault altogether, and am I to be so severely punished for getting into the wrong pew? Again I say, "I do not know." Who does?