
Success and Failure

by Eugene V. Debs

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There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.

—Shakespeare ¹

Suppose I start out by naming some of the essentials to success? Is the response, name them? I comply and jot down the following: Education, industry, frugality, integrity, veracity, fidelity, vigilance, sobriety, and charity; these things I hold are essential to success in life. What about failure? I do not suppose there is anywhere to be found those who start out in life to achieve failure and yet, as certainly as the excellencies of character which I have named are essential to success, their opposites will bring failure and all the woes which failure entails.

The opposite of education is ignorance; of industry, slothfulness; of frugality, wastefulness; of integrity, dishonesty; of veracity, falsehood; of fidelity, treachery; of vigilance, carelessness; of sobriety, inebriety; and of charity, miserliness, heartlessness, and unforgivingness.

The question arises, what is success in life? The answer is likely to be, in a majority of cases, securing wealth, getting rich, and I am convinced that the thing we call "public opinion" renders the same verdict. I have named certain traits of character as essential to success in life. It may be well to scan them closely; this done, the reader might count over such millionaires as occur to his mind and ask, does the world credit them with the possession of the virtues named? With reference to some of the essentials the reply will doubtless be affirmative, as, for instance, education, industry, frugality, vigilance and so-

¹ From Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1599), Act 4, Scene 3.

briety will be accorded the man who has secured wealth; but what of integrity, veracity, fidelity, and charity? Can it be said that success in life has been achieved if the possessor of wealth, however vast and dazzling, is dishonest, false, treacherous, and venal? After all, is not such a life a failure?

It is just here that the lamentable fact appears that the possession of wealth to thousands, though knowing the methods, condone the dishonesty, leaving to the elect few the herculean task of championing those virtues without which, no matter what outward surroundings may be, the final verdict must be, when an appeal is taken to the higher court of eternal justice, that the mere possession of wealth does not constitute success in life; that life may be the saddest of failures though its possessor inhabits a palace as resplendent as if it were built of diamonds, though the luxuries of all climes supply his board and his robes for costliness rival those of earth's proudest potentates. Do such reflections satisfy the great majority? Scarcely. To say that is to arraign our Christian civilization and force into the shade all those excellencies of character which, when possessed, make life a success though the man is as poor in worldly goods as was Lazarus when only vagabond dogs constituted the charity commission in the city where he starved.

An incident transpired at Omaha during a session of the quadrennial conference of the Methodist Episcopal church which is worthy of note as illustrating popular views of what constitutes success in life.² In that great conference, made up largely of Christian ministers, there came up the question of "Capital and Labor," and a movement was made to determine where the church stood upon the question. A resolution was introduced by Rev. Thomas Hanlon³ demanding that the church in all matters concerning "Capital and Labor" should plant itself squarely on the side of labor, and in advocating the resolution said:

The laboring classes are drifting away from the church. Our church is made up of women, to a large extent. The men are drifting away from it. We must take a stand on this great question affecting labor and capital. The church has been too much inclined to lean toward the interests of capital.

² The convention was held in Omaha in May 1892.

³ **Thomas O. Hanlon, Sr.** (1832-1912) was the longtime president of the Pennington Seminary in Pennington, NJ.

In the foregoing the Rev. Mr. Hanlon arraigned the church for leaning toward the interests of "capital," aiding thereby the inculcation of the idea that the possession of wealth is the standard whereby to measure success in life. To what extent the church has lent its influence in the direction pointed out by Mr. Hanlon can not be estimated, but it may be asserted that the church, the school, and the press have been in alliance to make the mere possession of wealth the standard by which to ascertain the measure of success a man has secured. That this is the popular conviction and verdict it is folly, I am persuaded, to deny. But is it a rational conviction? Is it a verdict based upon principles that can stand the test of investigation? When the announcement is made, "he died poor," are survivors to conclude that necessarily the life of the dead man was a failure?

What's an Educated Man?

The phrase "an educated man" is taken to mean one who has obtained a collegiate education, a university education, but it so happens that comparatively few of the men who have laid the foundations of the present millionaire fortunes in the United States were graduates of such institutions of learning. John Jacob Astor, Commodore Vanderbilt, and Jay Gould may be cited as cases in point and the list could be extended indefinitely. It follows, therefore, that the term "educated" as one of the essentials of success in life, even in accumulation of wealth, need not mean that higher education to which I have referred. The younger generation of millionaires, the inheritors of wealth, need not be considered, since in so far as the possession of money demonstrates success in life, it matters not whether they were born blind, deaf and dumb, or idiots; and about all that can be said of some of them is that what little intellect they possess is distinguished by its prehensile quality enabling it to grasp and "hold on," though in numerous instances the feeble-minded progeny of millionaires are without this quality and once in possession of wealth, they sow it to the wind and in due time reap the whirlwind, and then failure becomes conspicuous.

Dismissing popular verdicts and public opinion, more frequently wrong than right, in estimating success in life, it will be profitable to note instances of splendid success in which money at no time played a conspicuous part; instances in which "higher education" was not a

factor, but in which industry, integrity, fidelity, and frugality were the prime essentials.

I am not required to occupy space to furnish an extended list of those sometimes called “self-made men,” nor do I deem it necessary to make reference to ancient history for examples. What is wanted is one colossal figure, one splendid specimen; the reader will readily recall others until the catalog bears down all opposition.

Abraham Lincoln answers my purpose. No land, no century, not nation, tribe, or kindred, since the tribes sought to build a tower to heaven in the plains of Shinar,⁴ has produced a man who, whether patrician or plebeian born, secured grander success than tell to the lot of Abraham Lincoln, whose early life was one of poverty and squalor, but who, nevertheless, expanded to such sublime proportions that the world is full of his fame. Compared with him, what of the Rothschilds, Vanderbilts, Astors, and Goulds? Our vocabulary is utterly bankrupt in words whereby comparison can be instituted. Mole hills to mountains will not answer the demand. Let the world reverse its conclusions — wealth and a collegiate education are not necessarily essentials to success in life, and the success achieved by Abraham Lincoln is conclusive on such points.

But why, it may be asked, go in search of exceptions for examples of success in life? The query is pertinent. It demands attention. I admit its commanding significance. The successes in life are found in richer abundance along the highways of endeavor where the world’s toilers pass to and fro from their tasks. In contemplating the subject the humble home expands to a palace. A few years ago a few humble workingmen laid the foundation of the great labor and industrial organizations which today are national, international, and continental. Without money, with limited education, without influential friends, like—

The men who rounded Peter’s dome
And groined the aisles of Christian Rome,

⁴ Reference is to the tower of Babel described in *Genesis*, chapter 11, verses 1-9. Shinar is the Old Testament name for Mesopotamia.

they builded better than they knew.⁵ They achieved success. It does not matter that their work has not secured monuments of granite or brass. It does not matter that their names are not themes for song and story. Not at all. I do not discuss such rewards. They fall to the lot of the few. I simply assert the fact that these apostles of social and industrial emancipation achieved success. I do not know whether they are living or dead. If living their possession of worldly goods may to some indicate a failure. Not so; their work was a triumph which forever makes Failure stand back.

Mordecai and Haman.

Who has not read the legend of Mordecai and Haman?⁶ The former poor, obscure, and unhonored sitting at the king's gate; the latter proud, powerful, jealous, and revengeful. The king, restless, sleep flying from his eyes, calls for the "Chronicles" and bids his attendant to read. Finally the name of Mordecai is reached in connection with some service he had performed for the king. Immediately the question, Has Mordecai been rewarded? The answer was No. His enemy, Haman, had prepared a gallows upon which to hang him. Presto! Mordecai, the Jew had achieved success. Haman was a failure. Mordecai was rewarded with honors and Haman was hung on the gallows he had erected for Mordecai. It was one incident in the life of Mordecai that achieved success and forever redeemed his life from failure. At long intervals kings and courts and rulers reward success in life, but in millions of instances no note is made of the victory.

There are in our country ten thousand humble homes where the father is industrious and temperate, the mother frugal and patient, and the children obedient. In such homes there is only a common school education, but there is integrity, frugality, and affection. Each

⁵ Adapted from a stanza of "The Problem" (1847) by **Ralph Waldo Emerson** (1803-1882). Debs slightly misquoted this poem several times in speeches and articles during the decade of the 1890s. The original reads:

*The hand that rounded Peter's dome,
And groined the aisles of Christian Rome,
Wrought in a sad sincerity,
Himself from God he could not free;
He builded better than he knew,
The conscious stone to beauty grew.*

⁶ The tale is told — in a very different way than Debs recounts the story — in the biblical book of *Esther*.

day brings its trials, its conflicts, its serious problems, and each day brings its victories, its successes. There is little money, just the wages of the toiling father and the ceaseless devotion of a mother who never grows weary. It is in such homes that labor organizations have their invincible devotees and which, in the fullness of time, are to demonstrate that organized labor is a success.

Of failure, who shall be the judge? Who knows? Once upon a time a poor widow, under a benevolent impulse, pushed her way through the moneyed throng and aided the fund to the extent of "two mites," about four mills of our currency.⁷ The contribution attracted the attention of Jesus Christ and then and there he gave the poor widow immortality.

Again, in securing success in life, an unknown tramp, plodding his way along a railroad track, discovered a broken rail. He immediately went back to flag an express train and prevented a disaster. His life, though his dead body fills a pauper's grave, was a splendid success. With W.W. Story, let us join him in his song:

I sing the hymn of the conquerer, who fell in the Battle of Life,—
The hymn of the wounded, the beaten, who died o'erwhelmed in the
strife;
Not the jubilant song of the victors, for whom the resounding acclaim
Of nations was lifted in chorus, whose brows was the chaplet of
fame,
But the hymn of the low and the humble, the weary, the broken in
heart,
Who strove and who failed, acting bravely a silent and desperate
part;
Whose youth bore no flower on its branches, whose hopes burned in
ashes away.
From whose hands slipped the prize they had grasped at, who stood
at the dying of day
With the wreck of their life all around them, unpitied, unheeded,
alone,
With Death swooping down o'er their failure, and all but their faith
overthrown.

While the voice of the world shouts its chorus,— its paeon for those
who have won;

⁷ The story of the widow's mites is told in *Mark*, chapter 12, verses 41-44 and *Luke*, chapter 21, verses 1-4. A mill is one-tenth of one cent.

While the trumpet is sounding triumphant, and high to the breeze
and the sun
Glad banners are waving, hands clapping, and hurrying feet
Thronging after the laurel-crowned victors, I stand on the field of de-
feat,
In the shadow, with those who are fallen, and wounded, and dying
and there
Chant a requiem low, place my hand on their pain-knotted brows,
breathe a prayer,
Hold the hand that is helpless and whisper, "They only the victory
win,
Who have fought the good fight, and have vanquished the demon
that tempts us within;
Who have held to their faith unsexed by the prize that world holds
on high;
Who have dared for a high cause to suffer, resist, fight, — if need be,
to die."

Speak, History! who are Life's victors? Unroll thy long annals and
say,
Are they those whom the world called the victors — who won the
success of the day?
The martyrs, or Nero? The Spartans, who fell at Thermopylae's tryst,
Or the Persians and Xerxes? His judges or Socrates? Pilate or
Christ? ⁸

Edited by Tim Davenport

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⁸ "Io Victis" (1883) by **William Wetmore Story** (1819-1895).