

## THE LESSON OF HISTORY

*January 5, 1931*

WHAT shall I write to you, my dear? Where shall I begin? When I think of the past, vast numbers of pictures rush through my mind. Some of the pictures stay longer than others. They are my favourites and I begin to muse about them, and, unconsciously almost, I compare past happenings with what is taking place to-day, and try to find a lesson in them for my guidance. But what a strange jumble is one's mind, full of disconnected thoughts and ill-arranged images, like a gallery with no order in the arrangement of pictures. And yet perhaps the fault is not entirely ours. Most of us could certainly arrange the order of events in our minds better. But sometimes the events themselves are strange and difficult to fit into any scheme of things.

I think I wrote to you once that a study of history should teach us how the world has slowly but surely progressed, how the first simple animals gave place to more complicated and advanced animals, how last of all came the master animal-Man, and how by force of his intellect he triumphed over the others. Man's growth from barbarism to civilization is supposed to be the theme of history. In some of my letters I have tried to show you how the idea of co-operation or working together has grown, and how our ideal should be to work together for the common good. But sometimes, looking at great stretches of history, it is difficult to believe that this ideal has made much progress or that we are very much civilized or advanced. There is enough of want of co-operation to-day, of one country or people selfishly attacking or oppressing another, of one man exploiting another. If after millions of years of progress we are still so backward and imperfect, how much longer will it take us to learn to behave as sensible and reasonable persons? Sometimes we read about past periods of history which seem to be better than ours, more cultured and civilized even, and this makes us doubt if our world is going forward or backward. Our own country has surely had brilliant periods in the past, far better in every way than our present.

It is true that there have been brilliant periods in the past in many countries - in India, Egypt, China, Greece, and elsewhere - and that many of these countries have relapsed and gone back. But even this should not make us lose heart. The world is a big place and the rise and fall of any country for a while may not make much difference to the world at large.

Many people nowadays are apt to boast of our great civilization and of the wonders of science. Science has indeed done wonders, and the great men of science are worthy of all respect. But those who boast are seldom the great. And it is well to remember that in many ways man has not made very great progress from the other animals. It may be that in certain ways some animals are superior to him still. This may sound a foolish statement, and people who do not know better may laugh at it. But you have just read Maeterlinck's *Life of the Bee*, of the *White Ant*, and the *Ant*, and you must have wondered at the social organization of these insects. We look down upon the insects as almost the lowest of living things, and yet these tiny things have learnt the art of co-operation and of sacrifice for the common good far better than man. Ever since I read of the *White Ant* and of its sacrifices for its comrades, I have developed a soft corner in my heart for it. If mutual co-operation and sacrifice for the good of society are the tests of civilization, we may say that the *White Ant* and the *Ant* are in this respect superior to man.

In one of our old Sanskrit books there is a verse which can be translated as follows : " For the family sacrifice the individual, for the community the family, for the country the community, and for the Soul the whole world ". What the Soul is few of us can know or tell, and each one of us can interpret it in a different way. But the lesson this Sanskrit verse teaches us is the same lesson of co-operation and sacrifice for the larger good. We in India had forgotten this sovereign path to real greatness for many a day, and so we had fallen. But again we seem to have glimpses of it, and all the country is astir. How wonderful it is to see men and women, and boys and girls, smilingly going ahead in India's cause and not caring about any pain or suffering! Well may they smile and be glad, for the joy of serving in a great cause is theirs; and to those who are fortunate comes the joy of sacrifice also. To-day we are trying to free India. That is a great thing. But an even greater is the cause of humanity itself. And because we feel that our struggle is a part of the great human struggle to end suffering and misery, we can rejoice that we are doing our little bit to help the progress of the world.

Meanwhile, you sit in Anand Bhawan, and Mummie sits in Malacca Gaol, and I here in Naini Prison-and we miss each other sometimes, rather badly, do we not? But think of the day when we shall all three meet again ! I shall look forward to it, and the thought of it will lighten and cheer up my heart.