

Letting bygones be bygones

She slipped upstairs to find a few more playthings. Her neighbor had just left her two little ones with her to mind and, with her own two, there wasn't enough to go round. They had started squabbling already. Rummaging in the toy-box, she came across an old photograph. She looked at it, daydreaming for a moment. Just long enough for one of her little charges to toddle out the front door which had been left slightly ajar. The little body was found later in the pond at the bottom of the garden. She went to pieces. While she was being treated in a psychiatric hospital, the mother of the dead child came to see her, the worst of her grief now over. Her forgiveness helped enormously to set her on the road -to recovery. But she was never the same again. She could never forgive herself for that moment's neglect.

There is a young couple in Paris, with whom I am friendly. They have two little children. Since they don't have a car, they occasionally call on my services to ferry them somewhere or other. I am always delighted to do so. Once the two little ones are firmly strapped in the back seat, I dangle the keys in front of the parents and ask: "Now, which of you is going to drive?" They are both excellent drivers. I just couldn't take responsibility for them. If anything were to happen, God forbid, I would never be able to forgive myself.

Forgiveness is a hard thing. "Forgive and forget", we are told. If only we could forget, forgiveness would come easy. But the scars of old hurts fester on, refusing to heal. And our resentment grows each time we remember the rejection, the insult, the injury. Our resentment wells up again, as if it was only yesterday. Bygones refuse to be bygones. The closer the friendship, the deeper the hurt. The only forgiveness we can muster, is usually reserved for strangers. Our lives are strewn with broken friendships. And all because we couldn't find it in ourselves to forgive. "Shake hands and makeup" we were told, when we fought as little boys in the school playground. That lesson seems to have disappeared with our schooldays.

"May God forgive him!" we mutter to ourselves, recalling for the umpteenth time some ancient hurt. We could spare ourselves that prayer. What God would like to know is will we forgive him. Jonathan Swift, with all his satire, was closer to the truth than we care to admit: "We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another." How else explain those murderous wars between those who claim allegiance to their God? Not long ago it was claimed that, of all the thirty wars going on in the world, none were simple defense against foreign aggressors. Most of the belligerents were compatriots, separated only by their religion. Such wars will last as long as we refuse to forgive.