

ALUMNI ESSAY

Read by Francis C. Clarkin

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CHARACTER

The different races and people that inhabit this world combine within themselves various customs and manners, typical of the race or nation to which they belong. We ourselves, though perhaps not having the opportunity to obtain an insight into customs and manners by travelling in foreign lands, have observed this more or less by our associations with foreigners.

We find that not only their mode of living but their personal characteristics are different from those of our own countrymen. Yet, if we had made it our business, as some men have to study the thoughts, moods, actions, or in sum, the character of mankind, we would find a still greater distinction. We would observe that no two persons in the universe have exactly the same characteristics; that no matter how close they may approach each other in thoughts and manners, there is always some trait, some feeling or some inclination in which they differ. These traits or differences in personality combine to form character.

Thus character is the sum of the qualities which distinguishes one person from another. It is strength of will—the poor man's capital. In the words of Dr. Hawes, "Character is power—is influence; it makes friends, creates funds, draws patronage and supports and opens a sure and easy way to wealth, honour and happiness."

We have all experienced some time or other, keen admiration for a dominating personality. It may have been a good person, who, by his exemplary life, earned our respect and reverence; or it may have been a criminal who, by his firmness and daring in the face of danger, won our reluctant admiration. It may have been a brave general

or a fearless statesman who, whether good or bad, had by some outstanding characteristic or heroic action, won the respect of nations.

Character may be good or bad. A person of good character will possess, in some degree, the virtue and gentlemanly qualities of mankind; and a person of bad character, tho possessing unusual qualities, will use them for evil ends, forgetting that

“The purest treasure mortal times afford
Is—spotless reputation: that away
Men are but gilded loam or painted clay.”

Seeing, therefore, that on the character of men depends the stability and safety of nations, we will realize the great need there is for noble manhood. Too many there are in the world today who lack that most essential attribute, and who, like broken-down derelicts, float over the ocean of life tossed here and there by every wave of time and fortune.

In order to produce sturdy people character must be cultivated and fostered within them from early childhood: then there will be ingrained in their youthful minds that love of righteousness, that integrity and honesty which even till death will not desert them.

“Did you ever watch a sculptor slowly fashioning a human countenance?” asked a modern teacher. “It is not moulded at once. It is not struck out at a single blow. It is painfully and laboriously wrought. It is a work of time; but at last the full likeness comes out and stands fixed and unchanging in the solid marble. So does a man carve out his own moral likeness. Every day he adds something to the work.”

We will now consider, under its various heads, the different ways and means, the different mediums through or by which character is instilled and safe-guarded.

First and most important is Home. How sweet that word sounds to our ears. What memories cling around it!

In fancy we return to other years and live again our happiest days. True, we had our trials and discouragements then as now, but they seem to be lost in gladder memories. Visions of our boyhood days float back to us, hours of play and laughter; and the school days with their seeming endless tasks, and deeply anticipated leisure. Like a delightful dream they return to refresh us. We are held, prisoners of love, by the indissoluble ties of home; ties that bind us all, unless in youth they have been torn asunder.

It is within the youthful soul that the seeds must be sown which are to bear fruit in after years. In childhood the mind is flexible and easily influenced or, to quote an old adage, "As the stock is bent so shall the tree incline."

Webster says: "If we work upon marble it will perish; if upon brass time will efface it: if we rear temples they will crumble to dust: but if we work upon mortal minds,—if we imbue them with principles, with the just fear of God and love of our fellow-men,—we engrave on those tablets something which will brighten through all Eternity."

Kind and loving treatment, good example, just reproof of faults, the care and solicitude of parents, are things that a child will always remember. For in future life, each memory chain that links us with the past will be carefully guarded; and the recollections of happy, contented days around the family fireside will serve as a stimulus onward.

We do not require the examples of the lives of great men, almost all of whom received a careful training in their youth, to prove the truth of these words. Socrates, Plato, Demosthenes, Aristotle, all the great men of ancient Greece; Cicero, Livy, Sallust Hortensius and other Romans whose names will live forever in the literature of the world, all these men were carefully nurtured and instructed from youth by the most learned teachers. Coming down through History's pages we find them in ever increasing numbers, down through the middle ages, which produced

such men as Roger Bacon, Albertus Magnus, and St. Thomas Aquinas; even to our own day where we find that the men who have made the greatest success in life are those who have been carefully trained in childhood.

There was a time in the dim ages of the past when learning was not appreciated; when fame was attained by force of arms and not by intellectual ability; when the scholar unless he were a monk or a priest, was scorned or suspected by the great majority who, being mostly ignorant, considered his pursuit as unmanly. But as time advanced this feeling passed away and, with the development of civilization, the light of culture and refinement shed its rays upon the minds of men until, at last, they came to regard learning as one of the noblest of pursuits. Then as time progressed it became more and more indispensable so that, at the present day, education is a necessity for one and all.

But there are always a few who cling to the thoughts and ideals of ages long dead, who not only despise education themselves, but endeavor to implant their antiquated ideas in youthful minds. Whoever they are, whether parents or guardians, they are a menace to all that tends to the enlightenment of humanity, and a menace to the present age of civilization and advancement.

But let us eliminate the fact of its importance at the present day, and consider education in its true light, as the means of developing character and all manly virtues.

In simple language education means the cultivation of the mind; it is the medium through which the mind is nurtured and enlightened. It extends gracious help to all ranks and ages; the son of a miner may stand beside the son of a king and drink from the fountain of knowledge; childhood, youth and age share the same privilege.

There is nothing more conducive to the formation of character than education. An education that, by linking us with the past, shows us the customs and institutions, the thoughts, interests, and ideals of the past; an educa-

tion that, by studying the needs of the present, fit us, not only to take our places in life, but to stand therein as men of power; an education that, by combining spiritual and temporal studies, teaches us to live our lives virtuously, and in conformance with that of the Great Master.

Education has two separate offices, each more or less dependent on the other. As we have already considered the advantage of secular education on the formation character, we shall now discuss the unlimited possibilities for character-building, afforded by moral education.

The world does not often acknowledge the fact which is every day becoming more apparent, that the greatest characters are those whose lives have been the holiest. The saints of God stand forth as shining witnesses to this truth; yet, without selecting proof from the glorious haloed ranks, or from the many others whose lives illumine the history of the human race, we have to use our reason to conclude that discipline *makes* men; that spiritual training is the strongest factor in character-building,

Another strong factor is Environment. Even the youngest of us have, no doubt, some idea of the force which it exerts on the formation of character, but only the experienced—the old in years, have a true understanding of its importance. Looking back they may see how often their surroundings—their environment—influenced their decisions, and changed their thoughts, hopes and aspirations. External things are continually shifting the current of our lives for better or for worse.

Since environment therefore has such important bearing on our lives, we see the necessity for discrimination between good and evil surroundings; and this discerning sense should be cultivated in youth before the character has been formed for good or bad.

Regrets come to us all in future life when we recall our past years, and remember the many companions and places that have had an unfortunate influence on

our lives. Lack of discernment is the great handicap of youth, and luckily at least in some cases, is offset by vigilant parents.

We have all heard of men who, forced by necessity and the whip of circumstances, have achieved noble deeds and won to high places, simply because they were obliged to do so.

Our papers often record stories of successful men who, homeless waifs at the beginning of their lives, won to wealth and comfort through the habits of industry acquired during the years they had been driven by necessity, to earn their bread or perish. Again we learn of criminals being reclaimed when necessity made crime impossible. Therefore Necessity must be considered as a mighty factor in character-development—one that cannot be overlooked.

If, in this age of materialism and worldly ambition, we would sometimes traverse, in thought, the centuries that are passed; if we might return to the medieval times when chivalry flourished, and "Knighthood was in flower," we would find many examples of that almost extinct attribute—beautiful Courtesy. We might profit by reading the tales and romances of that courtly age, when men considered the rights of others and died sometimes, defending a neighbor's honor.

How seldom, now, we meet with men who admit to being "their brother's keeper!" We rarely find a truly unselfish person—a character fine enough to consider the rights and efforts of another, when that other stands in the way of his advancement. There are few who "rise on stepping stones of their dead selves to higher things." There are many who aim entirely at the achievement of their own interests, utterly forgetful of the interests of a brother man.

Courtesy springs from charity and has its place in the golden chain of virtues that bind us to God. Ha-

laire Belloc has fittingly defined it in these beautiful words:—

“Of Courtesy it is much less
Than courage of heart or Holiness,
Yet in my walks it seems to me
That the Grace of God is in Courtesy.”

Among the most attractive results of character is the ability to remain cheerful in the most dejecting circumstances. A man of character is nearly always cheerful; he has about him a certain infectious buoyancy and hopefulness of manner, which carries him through trials and discouragements, and guides him through the darkness and storms of life.

This cheerfulness is the result of his overflowing happiness; for, strange though it may seem, the happiest people living are those who pamper themselves the least,—who place the right valuation on superficial things, and are above the petty irritations of everyday life.

A man of character is keen of vision; he looks upon his fellow-man with kindly tolerant eyes,—upon the beautiful world that God has given him to enjoy, with deep appreciation of its loveliness; and he hears, with quickened sense, the melodies of nature.

Moreover, who will deny that the man who possesses the strength of will to obey the laws of God, and to live a good pure life, will not be happy? He who struggles on the battlefield, who has fought well and bravely, and returns a victor, shall he not rejoice? So it is with the man of character; he has fought and won where so many have failed; he has overcome all obstacles and pushed forward, surely then he deserves a victor's spoils—the right of laughter. Happiness is the result of a contented mind, and only through stress of war we attain to peace; in the words of Thomas

A'Kempis—"After winter comes summer; after night the day; and after tempest a great calm."

In order to understand something of the power of character, let us glance through the pages of History here we will find the great deeds that men of character have performed. In the lives of Alexander, Caesar, Charles Martel, Charlemagne, and coming to our own time, Napoleon and Foch, we will find achievements that will live forever in the story of the world.

Everywhere around us we see examples of its power. In every office or responsible position we find men who have risen by sheer force of will, until they have attained the goal of their ambition. Others may sink by the wayside, discouraged by the opposition of the world, but the man of character continues to struggle onward and upward. Some are admired, others hated, and many live and die among their fellow-men unappreciated and unknown. Sometimes, when they have passed beyond "Mortal ken," the world gives them the recognition that it denied them while living. One author believes that—"Everyone, however humble, is daily and hourly altering and moulding the character of all with whom he mingles, and exerting a power that will reproduce itself through countless generations."

Is character necessary? We need not seek an answer to this question in the learned works and treatises of erudite men, all of whom indicate the affirmative; we need only review our own experience, limited though it may be, to find our answer.

As our bodies cannot have life without the soul, neither can our everyday actions have that life and vitality which is so essential for accomplishment, without the force and power of character to dominate them. Man is but a weakling without it, and with it he may become a power before which nations tremble and empires totter; he may sway the strong and strengthen

the weak; there are no heights he may not scale, and alas, no wrong he may not accomplish.

We cannot develop character and follow the way of least resistance. As someone has expressed it:

“It is easy to run with the crowd and to follow the example of that French revolutionary who, hearing the noise and roar of the street cried out, ‘There go the people; I must follow them, for I am their leader.’ But to stand with patience and self-control in a post of high responsibility when a strong current of public opinion goes sweeping by, careless of consequence and unrestrained in *its* expression of feeling, is the mark of a *real* man.”

We who are men in the making should recall once in a while, the story of Columbus; his tireless appeals for recognition; his fearless determination, and his un-failing courage.

“Before him not the ghost of shores,
Before him only shoreless seas.
The good mate said, ‘Now must we pray,
For Lo! the very stars are gone.
Brave Admir’l, speak, what shall I say?’
‘Why say, Sail on, sail on! and on!’ ”

