

BIBLIOTECA "RODRIGO DE LLANO"
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CHARACTER.

CHAPTER I.

INFLUENCE OF CHARACTER.

"Unless above himself he can
Erect himself, how poor a thing is man!"—DANIEL.

"Character is moral order seen through the medium of an individual nature. . . . Men of character are the conscience of the society to which they belong."—EMERSON.

"The prosperity of a country depends, not on the abundance of its revenues, nor on the strength of its fortifications, nor on the beauty of its public buildings; but it consists in the number of its cultivated citizens, in its men of education, enlightenment, and character; here are to be found its true interest, its chief strength, its real power."—MARTIN LUTHER.

CHARACTER is one of the greatest motive powers in the world. In its noblest embodiments, it exemplifies human nature in its highest forms, for it exhibits man at his best.

Men of genuine excellence in every station of life—men of industry, of integrity, of high principle, of sterling honesty of purpose—command the spontaneous homage of mankind. It is natural to believe in such men, to have confidence in them, and to imitate them. All that is good in the world

is upheld by them, and without their presence in it the world would not be worth living in.

Although genius always commands admiration, character most secures respect. The former is more the product of brain-power, the latter of heart-power; and in the long run it is the heart that rules in life. Men of genius stand to society in the relation of its intellect as men of character of its conscience; and while the former are admired, the latter are followed.

Great men are always exceptional men; and greatness itself is but comparative. Indeed, the range of most men in life is so limited, that very few have the opportunity of being great. But each man can act his part honestly and honorably, and to the best of his ability. He can use his gifts, and not abuse them. He can strive to make the best of life. He can be true, just, honest, and faithful, even in small things. In a word, he can do his duty in that sphere in which Providence has placed him.

Commonplace though it may appear, this doing of one's duty embodies the highest ideal of life and character. There may be nothing heroic about it; but the common lot of men is not heroic. And though the abiding sense of duty upholds man in his highest attitudes, it also equally sustains him in the transaction of the ordinary affairs of every-day existence. Man's life is "centered in the sphere of common duties." The most influential of all the virtues are those which are the most in request for daily use. They wear the best, and last the longest. Superfine virtues, which are above the standard of common men, may only be sources of temptation and danger. Burke has truly said that "the human system which rests for its basis on the heroic virtues is sure to have a superstructure of weakness or of profligacy."

When Dr. Abbot, afterwards Archbishop of Canterbury, drew the character of his deceased friend Thomas Sackville,* he did not dwell upon his merits as a statesman or his genius as a poet, but upon his virtues as a man in relation to the ordinary duties of life. "How many rare things were in him!" said he. "Who more loving unto his wife?—Who more kind unto his children?—Who more fast unto his friend?—Who more moderate unto his enemy?—Who more true to his word?" Indeed, we can always better understand and appreciate a man's real character by the manner in which he conducts himself towards those who are the most nearly related to him, and by his transaction of the seemingly commonplace details of daily duty, than by his public exhibition of himself as an author, an orator, or a statesman.

At the same time, while duty, for the most part, applies to the conduct of affairs in common life by the average of common men, it is also a sustaining power to men of the very highest standard of character. They may not have either money, or property, or learning, or power; and yet they may be strong in heart and rich in spirit—honest, truthful, dutiful. And whoever strives to do his duty faithfully is fulfilling the purpose for which he was created, and building up in himself the principles of a manly character. There are many persons of whom it may be said that they have no other possession in the world but their character, and yet they stand as firmly upon it as any crowned king.

Intellectual culture has no necessary relation to purity or excellence of character. In the New Testament, appeals

* Sackville, Lord Buckhurst, lord high treasurer under Elizabeth and James I.

are constantly made to the heart of man and to "the spirit we are of," while allusions to the intellect are of very rare occurrence. "A handful of good life," says George Herbert, "is worth a bushel of learning." Not that learning is to be despised, but that it must be allied to goodness. Intellectual capacity is sometimes found associated with the meanest moral character—with abject servility to those in high places, and arrogance to those of low estate. A man may be accomplished in art, literature, and science, and yet, in honesty, virtue, truthfulness, and the spirit of duty, be entitled to take rank after many a poor and illiterate peasant.

"You insist," wrote Perthes to a friend, "on respect for learned men. I say, Amen! But at the same time, don't forget that largeness of mind, depth of thought, appreciation of the lofty, experience of the world, delicacy of manner, tact and energy in action, love of truth, honesty, and amiability—that all these may be wanting in a man who may yet be very learned."*

When some one, in Sir Walter Scott's hearing, made a remark as to the value of literary talents and accomplishments, as if they were above all things to be esteemed and honored, he observed, "God help us! what a poor world this would be if that were the true doctrine! I have read books enough, and observed and conversed with enough of eminent and splendidly-cultured minds, too, in my time; but I assure you, I have heard higher sentiments from the lips of the poor *uneducated* men and women, when exerting the spirit of severe yet gentle heroism under difficulties and afflictions, or speaking their simple thoughts as to cir-

* "Life of Perthes," ii., 217.

cumstances in the lot of friends and neighbors, than I ever yet met with out of the Bible. We shall never learn to feel and respect our real calling and destiny, unless we have taught ourselves to consider everything as moonshine, compared with the education of the heart."*

Still less has wealth any necessary connection with elevation of Character. On the contrary, it is much more frequently the cause of its corruption and degradation. Wealth and corruption, luxury and vice, have very close affinities to each other. Wealth in the hands of men of weak purpose, or deficient self-control, or of ill-regulated passions, is only a temptation and a snare—the source, it may be, of infinite mischief to themselves, and often to others.

On the contrary, a condition of comparative poverty is compatible with character in its highest form. A man may possess only his industry, his frugality, his integrity, and yet stand high in the rank of true manhood. The advice which Burns's father gave him was the best:

"He bade me act a manly part, though I had ne'er a farthing,
For without an honest manly heart no man was worth regarding."

One of the purest and noblest characters the writer ever knew was a laboring-man in a northern county, who brought up his family respectably on an income never amounting to more than ten shillings a week. Though possessed of only the rudiments of common education, obtained at an ordinary parish school, he was a man full of wisdom and thoughtfulness. His library consisted of the Bible, "Flavel," and "Boston"—books which, excepting the first, probably few readers have ever heard of. This good man might have sat for the portrait of Wordsworth's well-known "Wanderer."

* Lockhart's "Life of Scott."

When he had lived his modest life of work and worship, and finally went to his rest, he left behind him a reputation for practical wisdom, for genuine goodness, and for helpfulness in every good work, which greater and richer men might have envied.

When Luther died, he left behind him, as set forth in his will, "no ready money, no treasure of coin of any description." He was so poor at one part of his life, that he was under the necessity of earning his bread by turning, gardening, and clock-making. Yet, at the very time when he was thus working with his hands, he was moulding the character of his country; and he was morally stronger, and vastly more honored and followed, than all the princes of Germany.

Character is property. It is the noblest of possessions. It is an estate in the general good-will and respect of men; and they who invest in it—though they may not become rich in this world's goods—will find their reward in esteem and reputation fairly and honorably won. And it is right that in life good qualities should tell—that industry, virtue, and goodness should rank the highest—and that the really best men should be foremost.

Simple honesty of purpose in a man goes a long way in life, if founded on a just estimate of himself and a steady obedience to the rule he knows and feels to be right. It holds a man straight, gives him strength and sustenance, and forms a mainspring of vigorous action. "No man," once said Sir Benjamin Rudyard, "is bound to be rich or great—no, nor to be wise; but every man is bound to be honest."*

* Debate on the Petition of Right, A.D. 1628.

But the purpose, besides being honest, must be inspired by sound principles, and pursued with undeviating adherence to truth, integrity, and uprightness. Without principles, a man is like a ship without rudder or compass, left to drift hither and thither with every wind that blows. He is as one without law, or rule, or order, or government. "Moral principles," says Hume, "are social and universal. They form, in a manner, the *party* of humankind against vice and disorder, its common enemy."

Epictetus once received a visit from a certain magnificent orator going to Rome on a lawsuit, who wished to learn from the Stoic something of his philosophy. Epictetus received his visitor coolly, not believing in his sincerity. "You will only criticise my style," said he; "not really wishing to learn principles."—"Well, but," said the orator, "if I attend to that sort of thing, I shall be a mere pauper, like you, with no plate, nor equipage, nor land."—"I don't *want* such things," replied Epictetus; "and besides you are poorer than I am, after all. Patron or no patron, what care I? You *do* care. I am richer than you. I don't care what Cæsar thinks of me. I flatter no one. This is what I have, instead of your gold and silver plate. You have silver vessels, but earthenware reasons, principles, appetites. My mind to me a kingdom is, and it furnishes me with abundant and happy occupation in lieu of your restless idleness. All your possessions seem small to you; mine seem great to me. Your desire is insatiate—mine is satisfied."*

Talent is by no means rare in the world; nor is even genius. But can the talent be trusted?—can the genius? Not unless based on truthfulness—on veracity. It is this

* The Rev. F. W. Farrer's "Seekers after God," p. 241.

quality more than any other that commands the esteem and respect, and secures the confidence of others. Truthfulness is at the foundation of all personal excellence. It exhibits itself in conduct. It is rectitude—truth in action, and shines through every word and deed. It means reliableness, and convinces other men that it can be trusted. And a man is already of consequence in the world when it is known that he can be relied on—that when he says he knows a thing, he does know it—that when he says he will do a thing, he can do, and does it. Thus reliableness becomes a passport to the general esteem and confidence of mankind.

In the affairs of life or of business, it is not intellect that tells so much as character—not brains so much as heart—not genius so much as self-control, patience, and discipline, regulated by judgment. Hence there is no better provision for the uses of either private or public life, than a fair share of ordinary good sense guided by rectitude. Good sense, disciplined by experience and inspired by goodness, issues in practical wisdom. Indeed, goodness in a measure implies wisdom—the highest wisdom—the union of the worldly with the spiritual. “The correspondences of wisdom and goodness,” says Sir Henry Taylor, “are manifold; and that they will accompany each other is to be inferred, not only because men’s wisdom makes them good, but because their goodness makes them wise.”*

It is because of this controlling power of character in life that we often see men exercise an amount of influence apparently out of all proportion to their intellectual endowments. They appear to act by means of some latent power, some reserved force, which acts secretly, by mere presence. As

*“The Statesman,” p. 30.

Burke said of a powerful nobleman of the last century, “his virtues were his means.” The secret is, that the aims of such men are felt to be pure and noble, and they act upon others with a constraining power.

Though the reputation of men of genuine character may be of slow growth, their true qualities can not be wholly concealed. They may be misrepresented by some, and misunderstood by others; misfortune and adversity may, for a time overtake them; but with patience and endurance, they will eventually inspire the respect and command the confidence which they really deserve.

It has been said of Sheridan that, had he possessed reliableness of character, he might have ruled the world; whereas, for want of it, his splendid gifts were comparatively useless. He dazzled and amused, but was without weight or influence in life or politics. Even the poor pantomimist of Drury Lane felt himself his superior. Thus, when Delpini one day pressed the manager for arrears of salary, Sheridan sharply reprovved him, telling him he had forgotten his station. “No, indeed, Monsieur Sheridan, I have not,” retorted Delpini; “I know the difference between us perfectly well. In birth, parentage, and education, you are superior to me; but in life, character, and behavior, I am superior to you.”

Unlike Sheridan, Burke, his countryman, was a great man of character. He was thirty-five before he gained a seat in Parliament, yet he found time to carve his name deep in the political history of England. He was a man of great gifts and of transcendent force of character. Yet he had a weakness, which proved a serious defect—it was his want of temper; his genius was sacrificed to his irritability. And without this apparently minor gift of temper, the

most splendid endowments may be comparatively valueless to their possessor.

Character is formed by a variety of minute circumstances, more or less under the regulation and control of the individual. Not a day passes without its discipline, whether for good or for evil. There is no act, however trivial, but has its train of consequences, as there is no hair so small but casts its shadow. It was a wise saying of Mrs. Schimmelpenninck's mother, never to give way to what is little; or by that little, however you may despise it, you will be practically governed.

Every action, every thought, every feeling, contributes to the education of the temper, the habits, and understanding, and exercises an inevitable influence upon all the acts of our future life. Thus character is undergoing constant change, for better or for worse—either being elevated on the one hand, or degraded on the other. "There is no fault nor folly of my life," says Mr. Ruskin, "that does not rise up against me, and take away my joy, and shorten my power of possession, of sight, of understanding. And every past effort of my life, every gleam of rightness or good in it, is with me now, to help me in my grasp of this art and its vision.*

The mechanical law, that action and reaction are equal, holds true also in morals. Good deeds act and react on the doers of them; and so do evil. Not only so: they produce like effects, by the influence of example, on those who are the subjects of them. But man is not the creature, so much as he is the creator, of circumstances;† and, by the exercise

* "Queen of the Air," p. 127.

† Instead of saying that man is the creature of circumstance, it would be nearer the mark to say that man is the architect of circum-

of his free-will, he can direct his actions so that they shall be productive of good rather than evil. "Nothing can work me damage but myself," said St. Bernard; "the harm that I sustain I carry about with me; and I am never a real sufferer but by my own fault."

The best sort of character, however, can not be formed without effort. There needs the exercise of constant self-watchfulness, self-discipline, and self-control. There may be much faltering, stumbling, and temporary defeat; difficulties and temptations manifold to be battled with and overcome; but if the spirit be strong and the heart be upright, no one need despair of ultimate success. The very effort to advance—to arrive at a higher standard of character than we have reached—is inspiring and invigorating; and even though we may fall short of it, we can not fail to be improved by every honest effort made in an upward direction.

And with the light of great examples to guide us—representatives of humanity in its best forms—every one is not only justified, but bound in duty, to aim at reaching the highest standard of character; not to become the richest in means, but in spirit; not the greatest in worldly position, but in true honor; not the most intellectual, but the most

stance. It is character which builds an existence out of circumstance. Our strength is measured by our plastic power. From the same materials one man builds palaces, another hovels: one warehouses, another villas. Bricks and mortar are mortar and bricks, until the architect can make them something else. Thus it is that in the same family, in the same circumstances, one man rears a stately edifice, while his brother, vacillating and incompetent, lives forever amid ruins; the block of granite which was an obstacle on the pathway of the weak, becomes a stepping-stone on the pathway of the strong."—G. H. LEWES, *Life of Goethe*.

virtuous; not the most powerful and influential, but the most truthful, upright, and honest.

It was very characteristic of the late prince consort—a man himself of the purest mind, who powerfully impressed and influenced others by the sheer force of his own benevolent nature—when drawing up the conditions of the annual prize to be given by her majesty at Wellington College, to determine that it should be awarded, not to the cleverest boy, nor to the most bookish boy, nor to the most precise, diligent, and prudent boy, but to the noblest boy, to the boy who should show the most promise of becoming a large-hearted, high-motivated man.*

Character exhibits itself in conduct, guided and inspired by principle, integrity, and practical wisdom. In its highest form, it is the individual will acting energetically under the influence of religion, morality, and reason. It chooses its way considerately, and pursues it steadfastly; esteeming duty above reputation, and the approval of conscience more than the world's praise. While respecting the personality of others, it preserves its own individuality and independence; and has the courage to be morally honest, though it may be unpopular, trusting tranquilly to time and experience for recognition.

Although the force of example will always exercise great influence upon the formation of character, the self-originating and sustaining force of one's own spirit must be the main-stay. This alone can hold up the life, and give individual independence and energy. "Unless man can erect himself above himself," said Daniel, a poet of the Eliza-

* Introduction to "The Principal Speeches and Addresses of H.R.H. the Prince Consort" (1862), pp. 39, 40.

bethan era, "how poor a thing is man!" Without a certain degree of practical efficient force—compounded of will, which is the root, and wisdom, which is the stem of character—life will be indefinite and purposeless—like a body of stagnant water, instead of a running stream doing useful work and keeping the machinery of a district in motion.

When the elements of character are brought into action by determinate will, and, influenced by high purpose, man enters upon and courageously perseveres in the path of duty, at whatever cost of worldly interest, he may be said to approach the summit of his being. He then exhibits character in its most intrepid form, and embodies the highest idea of manliness. The acts of such a man become repeated in the life and action of others. His very words live and become actions. Thus every word of Luther's rang through Germany like a trumpet. As Richter said of him, "His words were half-battles." And thus Luther's life became transfused into the life of his country, and still lives in the character of modern Germany.

On the other hand, energy, without integrity and a soul of goodness, may only represent the embodied principle of evil. It is observed by Novalis, in his "Thoughts on Morals," that the ideal of moral perfection has no more dangerous rival to contend with than the ideal of the highest strength and the most energetic life, the maximum of the barbarian—which needs only a due admixture of pride, ambition, and selfishness, to be a perfect ideal of the devil. Among men of such stamp are found the greatest scourges and devastators of the world—those elect scoundrels whom Providence, in its inscrutable designs, permits to fulfill their mission of destruction upon earth.*

* Among the latest of these was Napoleon "the Great," a man of