

INFLUENCE.

A FEW weeks ago, a friend was sitting on the Ilkley Moors with a companion, in a somewhat desolate spot near to a waterfall. A man accosted them and asked for money. Being somewhat nervous they gave him some bread and a penny. When seeing that he was about to demand more, my friend suddenly said: "I am so glad you spoke to us and asked for help. I could trust your face, and I don't think you drink as others do." Instantly the man's face changed, and raising his hat, he said: "Thank you, ladies, I had a good mother; she was the best side of the house," and then walked quickly away.

This illustrates exactly what I mean by influence, and the lines I wish to take in this paper. I should like you all to have greater faith in the capacity for good in human nature.

If we could but hold fast to one principle in our dealings with our children—that they are very much what we believe them to be, and that it is more natural for all to be good than bad, we should soon find ourselves in a redeemed world. How is it with our own characters? Who are they who influence *us* the most, and bring out the best in us? Surely they who through good report and evil report alike believe in us; who, whatever horrible side of ourselves we turn to the light, give us credit for meaning well, and always take us for granted at our best.

Take the work of teachers. Who get the best work out of their pupils? Surely they who form a just estimate of what their pupils *can* do, and by showing confidence in them that they will do it, get them to put forth their best efforts. I need hardly quote the greatest of all schoolmasters, of whom a boy said: "It is a shame to tell Arnold a lie, he always believes one."

Now-a-days we hear a great deal about heredity, and a girl's temper or indolence or love of pleasure is excused by "Oh, she gets it from her mother, and she cannot help it." A mother once said to me about her children, "They have their father's spirit exactly, and *his* sister made a runaway marriage." But this reminds me of a reply made to a disheartened teacher of Sol-fa. She complained, "The worst of it is none of the class have a really good ear." The answer was, "All the more need for careful training." It is something worth doing to break down a long line of inheritance of bad temper, to make a strong character out of inherited

[p 7]
obstinacy. It is then that the faith of a friend can save, that *you* by believing in the ultimate victory of your child, and by letting her feel that *you know* that she will conquer herself, can so influence her that no one can realize the far-reaching effects. Remember that no human being can come into this world without increasing or diminishing the sum total of human happiness, not only of the present, but of every coming age.

There is no spot in the world where you can escape your relation to others—everywhere and everyday you must have companions who will be better or worse for your influence. It is an old saying, and one of fearful and fathomless import, that we are forming characters for eternity. Forming characters! Whose? our own or others? Both—and in that fact lies the peril and responsibility of our existence. Can you bear this thought? Thousands of my fellow-beings will enter eternity with characters differing from those they would have had, had I never lived. You remember that George Eliot sums this up at the end of *Middlemarch*: "The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs."

Think over your lives for the past week, and I think you will find you have been gentle or rude, idle or painstaking, according to the influences you have been under. We are truly fortunate if we have come under the influence of a friend who loves in us not an unreal character, but who, looking through all the rubbish of our imperfection, sees in us the divine ideal of our nature, and loves not the woman that we are but the angel that we may be. Let us determine to-night that we will be such a soul friend to others. Michael Angelo began to carve a rough block of marble with divine fervour declaring that an angel was imprisoned within it, and one of his most beautiful figures was given to the world. Often we can set the angel free in the heart of a friend or a child.

I am not going to write this month of the influence others have over us. What I wish to prove is, that if even indifferent people can influence *us* so much, *you* must have equal influence over the people you are with. We had better face the fact that we must needs influence other people's tempers, feelings, opinions, actions. Let us consider how. Let us go through the world in a happy making temper—there is nothing so infectious as a smile, unless it be a frown. Our children are dull and tired, our friends are cross,
[p 8]

and our work is trying—don't let us take these things as grievances, overwork and overworry is the cause. We begin to be sorry instead of cross, and one cordial kindly glance or word dispels the cloud.

“A merry heart goes all the way,
A sad one goes a mile, O.”

And the merry heart never goes alone, but carries a cheerful company along with it. May God keep our hearts sweet and merry for others' sake as much as of our own.

I have spoken of influence under two aspects.

I.—The conscious influence we exercise when we believe all things, hope all things, *expect* others to be and do their best, in fact believe in the capacity for good in human nature.

II.—The unconscious influence which flows out from what we are, whether we will or no. We cannot shirk the responsibility of influencing others, but do not let that thought depress us. We are not what we wish, but we, too, are open to influences stronger, purer, more powerful to transform us than any human influence. “Be filled with the Spirit,” says the Apostle, and they who are so filled must needs flow forth in healing and comfort and help.

Let us all rejoice that this mighty influence for good which we all possess does not depend on cleverness, or ability, or money, but on *love* and *faith*. It matters much more to our friends what we *are* than what we *do*.

True worth is in being, not seeming. In doing, each day that goes, by some little good—not in the dreaming of great things to do by-and-by. Remember that in every man there are two selves; seek for the higher in your child and help him to overcome the lower. We have each of us the mightiest weapon in the world, which if wielded aright must be an instrument of blessing to our brother men, and that is our *influence*.

Let us resolve to try to look for the best in our children and friends, to give them credit for good motives, in fact to believe in them; and, like the girl in the fairy tale, to let only pearls drop from our lips when we speak. If you are in sympathy with them, if they know it, and see

you to be single-minded, honest, and religious, you cannot lose your hold over them. You have all that is needed for success in your life's work. Only you must believe it. Believe in the power of your eye, your smile, your voice, and above all—your heart.

EMELINE STEINTHAL.