

9.45 (*at the Queen's Pavilion*).

CHARACTER TRAINING.

By MARY HARDCASTLE, H.O.E. (Secretary, House of Education).

Do you know what the English know about themselves? I expect you do, because you have read Theodore Benson's and Betty Askwith's book 'Foreigners.' May I remind you of one of the things we know about ourselves?

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'The English know that they are not particularly clever. Not that they don't often have great brains, and creative ability, and real organising power, but they just aren't "clever" in that rather suspect, surface, foreign, jabber jabber kind of way. On the other hand they have CHARACTER, and guts and grit and all that sort of thing, but especially character. No one goes so far as to distinguish whether it is a nice or nasty character: there is just plenty of it.' Those sentences go pretty deep, as humour so often does.

Peter has his father's strong character. You can't break his will. If he wants to do a thing, he will do it—and he mustn't be repressed because he must express himself. But he is a little devil—there is no other suitable word for him.

Character is still a masked word. Why are we so afraid of unmasking it? Because we know in our heart of hearts that character is related to conduct, and, immediately, such tiresome words as duty, morality, conscience, rise to the surface. Most of us remember our childish dislike of 'being good.' 'Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever,' doesn't inspire as it should.

Morality is not a liked word nowadays, even by the orthodox. The unorthodox boldly snap their fingers at it. But the word morality had its votaries in Victorian times, and no one will dispute the force of character of the great Victorians. Why did the tremendous reaction set in? Everyone will produce a different answer, but surely there is some cause akin to that which produces the childish reaction against 'being good.' It isn't only the old Adam, it is also the new Adam, which is keenly aware of the least trace of the Pharisee. In the presence of priggishness, snobbery (of some form of which we are none of us entirely free), we smell sulphur at once. And rightly so—we have the Authority of our Lord for this. But unfortunately the devil has many disguises, and the recognition of only one has side-tracked many people ... It is curious to me that this generation, which is so aware of some forms of Pharisaicism, should not smell an unmistakable odour of sulphur when SELF-EXPRESSION is advocated as an aim in life ... But we shall come back to this point later.

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I will now assume that we are all honest people who are prepared to face the fact that character is intimately related to conduct, that it does matter whether we are nice or nasty characters.

At this point there is another sharp division. There are people, some of the best in the world, who are convinced that conduct is based on faith and prayer alone. Divine Grace is sufficient. If anyone was a believer in Divine Grace, Charlotte Mason was. But in her writings she frequently quotes the sentence, 'God helps those who help themselves.' That was her

conviction. Some of you may have read that wonderful book, 'The Spirit of the Hills,' by F. S. Smythe, one of the members of the Everest Expedition. In this, he speaks of the highest hills and says, 'With gasping lungs and failing strength a man may one day tread the highest point of earth, but he will tread it in no spirit of a conqueror, but humbly and thankfully, knowing that a power has been given to him capable of animating him not only to the full extent of his natural strength, but far beyond that strength.' He then speaks sadly, although generously giving him his due, of young Maurice Wilson, who with practically no experience or knowledge of mountaineering and with no knowledge of the special conditions of Everest, attempted to climb it alone, believing that faith, and faith only, would enable him to achieve his aim.

We do not know the fruition of that aim, but it was not on earth.

There is, however, a much larger body of people who realise that some knowledge of mountaineering—of the technique of life—is necessary for the scaling of the heights.

The English public schools are often criticised, but few will dispute the fact that schoolmasters and schoolmistresses are in the main splendid people, who recognise the force of character based on right conduct. 'It is character that counts every time, nothing else matters; intellectual work is entirely secondary.' How often have I heard that said by schoolmasters. That games are a means towards this end is clearly seen. Arithmetic and Latin are excellent disciplines. History? perhaps, gives a knowledge of the character of nations. Science? encourages accuracy

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and a love of truth. Besides, it is a preparation for a career. Homer? Virgil? The sixth form boy who reads the classics with ease has earned the reward of work well done. What about English poetry? Oh well, that is largely a matter of taste; it is very nice if boys and girls do care for poetry. They must read some, of course, to realise their English heritage. As far as character is concerned, there are a few poems which are an inspiration to conduct, such as Wordsworth's 'Ode to Duty,' but it would be far-fetched indeed to suggest that poetry as a whole could have any effect on character. But Charlotte Mason was a person of vision, and she saw that great poetry, great paintings, music, the wonders of nature—in fact everything that is apparently far removed from the moral sphere (the further removed from morals the better) has its direct and most important share in character training. She even goes so far as to call it THE BASIS OF NATIONAL STRENGTH. She says, in the pamphlet of that name, 'Thought, we know, breeds thought; it is as vital thought touches our mind that our ideas are vitalised, and out of our ideas comes our conduct of life.'

Miss Mason goes every step of the way with the earnest schoolmasters and schoolmistresses I have been referring to, but she goes a step further, which alters the whole outlook.

I can hear you say: This is all so vague, why can't we get down to brass tacks? We are down really—on our knees, on the carpet—with the brass tacks in our hands ...

Miss Mason defines character as the result of conduct regulated by the will. Elsewhere she says: 'It is out of many acts of willing that our character comes forth.'

But what has this to do with poetry or music or art? Wait one moment—I am not really getting away from the point. But I must first remind you very simply of Miss Mason's conception of the will.

It is time to go back to Peter, who is such a little devil and yet who has his father's

strong character—if he wants to do a thing, he will do it. Quite so; he has no will, he is will-less. Very possibly he has his father's character, but it is not a strong one, because he cannot distinguish between 'I want' and 'I will.' There is an armed strength about determination [p 436]

and desire which is very misleading. The person of determination looks as if she were going to carry everything before her—in actual fact she is being carried away before everything. No. Will is the controller of the passions and emotions, the director of the desires, the ruler of the appetites. How grand and noble this sounds, and how remote! Don't despair, the brass tacks are here. In practical reality, the function of the will is to choose—choose what? To choose between ideas. Peter wants another ice. He has had two already. He has to choose between the ideas of immediate pleasure and postponed pain. The boy, who has been told that his bad eyesight will prevent him joining the navy, must choose between the ideas of courage, and defeat by circumstances. It is a fine day, but you or I have an absorbing novel on hand—we have to choose. Great decisions and small decisions must be made. We cannot escape them if we are to live at all. But decision is costly, choice is the hardest thing we have to do ... In theory, we rather like cost and sacrifice and hardness. It is all so heroic. We brace ourselves to make the hard choice, the decision which costs. We arm ourselves for the fight. And we are right, up to a point. These methods would be comparatively simple and effective if the issue was a clear one. But how often is it clear? The devil is not a particularly clean fighter. Our poor little rifles and bayonets and even our biggest guns, what power have they against the mustard gas of jealousy, the bombs of temper, the floods of despair let loose? 'Divine Grace,' we hear our friends murmur again. Yes, but Grace does not come to those who wait; it comes to those who look for it, and more often than not it is found through simple and humble means.

The way of the Will is simple and humble. When we are beset with fire, flood, storm or tempest, Miss Mason says: 'Change your thoughts.' Are you cross? Change your thoughts. Are you spiteful? Change your thoughts. Are you desirous of that which you cannot have? Change your thoughts. To many of us those words have the force of a humorous slogan, but they are the very core of character training. At the dictate of conscience, the Will deliberately chooses another idea and forces the mind into a new channel. Rather a come-down from our [p 437]

heroic stand! Surely that's just evasion, running away from the issue? Will must imply effort. Have you ever tried to think of something else when there is an unsolved problem in your mind? when a fit of jealousy is upon you? when you are burning with curiosity to know something which doesn't concern you? It is not easy—*but it is the way of salvation*, whether you mean salvation in the eternal sense, or salvation from insanity—not only the insanity which is locked up in an asylum, but also that milder insanity which is sometimes called a lack of proportion.

Salvation and sanity imply an object outside of self. The Will steadily pursues this object. From its very nature it cannot pursue any object which has self for its centre. It is our duty and privilege to bring up children well, to give them a good start in life by forming good habits in them, by teaching them good manners, thus preparing them for freedom, but they will not keep on the road to salvation or sanity unless we teach them this way of the Will. They may never otherwise learn how to get away from self. The well brought up person with ordered habits of mind and body—on the surface, perfectly controlled and disciplined, may be smug

with self-satisfaction, and so wrapped up in self, that she cannot recognise the jealousy, prejudice and all uncharitableness, which are filling her heart. The real person is a prisoner in the castle of self. Isaiah knew it: 'all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags'—yes, until we allow them to be transfigured. I don't think it is irreverent to say that changing thoughts can transfigure our righteousnesses.

Do you see that we have come back to the poetry which we left high and dry a few minutes ago? If willing, the power to change thoughts, is to be such a vital part of our life, there must be the channels into which our thoughts can be turned. The more channels there are, the deeper those channels are, the more possibility there will be for escape into freedom from self. Poetry is only one channel, but it is a deep and wide one carrying swift, running water to the ocean (if only so many of our countrymen wouldn't suspect it as a jabber-jabber kind of cleverness!). There are the channels of science, the channels of mountains and hills, of trees and flowers, history, literature and art. Channels for streams which have their sources in the highest

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hills and remotest recesses of the human spirit—and little channels for the trivial, homely things of life. It is no good being highbrow about change of thought; anything sufficiently absorbing at the critical moment must be used, whether it be a detective novel or plans for the summer holiday, but knowing the power of ideas we can't send children out into life with only small change to draw upon. Keeness, enthusiasm, generosity, all the large virtues spring from the highest and widest contacts with other minds and with things. This is the *basis of national strength*.

When one looks round and sees apathy slowly settling down on some millions of the inhabitants of our island, one wonders where will be the national strength in the next generation. It is not only in the homes of the unemployed that apathy is to be found, but in the homes of all people who live to be comfortable, who like to have things done for them, to be amused, to be informed and entertained without any effort on their part. Oh, it is time to conduct a crusade against the cult of comfort and make this country again the home of adventure and enterprise! We don't want to become a nation of softies, but that is what will happen if we forget the basis of national strength. 'Knowledge is the sole lever by which character is elevated.' Miss Mason couldn't have said anything stronger than that.

'Knowledge is the sole lever by which character is elevated.' We have just seen the connection between that statement and that other one I have quoted: 'It is out of many acts of willing that character comes forth' ... It is out of many acts of changing thoughts that character comes forth. I need hardly say that this does not mean that there are no straightforward decisions in life. If I find it difficult to decide between two hats, I don't know that it would help much if I spent five minutes in rapt meditation on Shelley's *Skylark*. There are major decisions and minor decisions to be made. Some of the latter are made by force of habit. But in the stress and strain of life there are so many issues which are not clear, and then the will seems to do its work in two stages. The first stage is to direct the thoughts swiftly elsewhere, and then when the person is rested and refreshed he is ready to go back to the decision. More often than

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not he finds it already made. Clearly, there is only one thing which *can* be done. As this power of turning the mind into other channels is increased by constant practice, so it also becomes

possible to bring the wandering thoughts back to the subject in hand, however disagreeable it may be.

How can we teach children the Way of the Will? A baby is born with strong wants, emotions, passions, but not with will-power. We have to act as regents first of all. Everyone knows from personal experience the dodge of changing a screaming child's thoughts. It is not always successful, but it is in nine cases out of ten if a sufficiently interesting alternative can be found. We must constantly use this lever for the child until gradually he can take over the control of his own life. Then, when he is old enough, let him into the secret. Let him know that he can make himself think what he likes. That cuts both ways, of course, but then Will is not the last word; there is Conscience behind. The training of the Conscience is a whole sphere of moral education which I cannot touch on here. A child should know that if his thoughts are right his acts will be right, and it is this self-compelling power which is going to make him into a man.

But there is more to it than that. The power to turn one's thoughts into new channels implies the habit of attention, to be able to fix the mind on one thing for more than a moment at a time. 'Knowledge is the sole lever by which character is elevated,' but character is not going to remain elevated without the aid of *habit*. But that I know Mrs. Shelley is going to speak to us about.

But how is all this going to help the child to express himself? asks the ardent devotee of self-expression. I don't know—Is it our business? If we put the child into the way of life, and help him to discover the secret of the discipline which will give him freedom, isn't that sufficient?

Self-expression is only a term, which many people use without realising its drift—but it does seem almost to demand fullness of life, to want scope and exactly the right circumstances for self to be expressed in. It doesn't face the fact that for the vast majority of people scope *is* limited, circumstances *are*

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limited and they become *more* limited as life goes on. So in the end it becomes a question of push, and that is the state Europe is in now.

That is not the way of life. We want our children to have fullness of life, we must put them into the way of all that brings life, and if, when grown up, they have the leisure for reading and thinking and creating, the opportunities for travelling and getting into contact with brilliant minds, so much the better. But ninety per cent. of us will have very little scope and very few opportunities afforded by circumstances. We must look deeper than circumstance for the bread of life. We shall find it in what an inspired mind has called the sacrament of the present moment. Each moment has its outward visible sign and inward spiritual grace, but it is only as we have eyes to see, ears to hear and minds turned away from self, that we are able to receive and use what that moment has to give. Then shall we be truly free. 'It is out of many acts of willing that character comes forth.'

CHARACTER TRAINING.

By MRS. SHELLEY (H.O.E.) (Headmistress of Manor House School, Milford, Armagh, Ireland).

THE FORMATION OF HABITS.

I propose to touch on the vast subject of Habit and its importance in education, and on some of the practical difficulties in the formation of good habits.

Miss Mason has made clear to us the value of Habit and the wonderful instrument it is in the hands of those who are trying to help children to grow to their full stature. It is an instrument as dangerous as it is powerful, for the wrong habit is more readily formed and more difficult to alter than the good, the wrong habit is mostly the result of a lack of self-discipline. Therefore let us keep in view this aim—we wish to help our children to form habits which will increase their self-control and their independent vigour of body, mind and spirit.

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As Miss Mason points out to us, the formation of good habits saves wear and tear. Some of the extreme modern schools of thought would leave the child free to acquire what habits she may, leaving her at the mercy of her own inexperience. This seems to lay on her a most unfair burden. A child has of necessity to learn to deal with a bewildering host of new experience within and without herself. If we can give her some stability and steadiness upon which to fall back we are giving her a greater chance to win through to real independence and poise. At one time the child with weak ankles had those ankles supported by boots, and the ankles remained weak. Now the ankles are given remedial exercises and become strong, the child and adult working together for that recognised purpose. The same principle applies throughout the whole being. The formation of good habits helps the child to develop as she is meant to develop.

The physical habits of alertness and quietness of movement, of good carriage, of control of the limbs, all react, not only on the health and well-being of the child, but on her character as a whole. If I go into a room and see a child lolling over her lessons, I know that child's brain is also lolling, and the bracing of the muscles to an erect position braces the brain to attention as well. Physical habits of control and vigour help character more than most of us realise, and if the movements of the body give us a key to the inner mind of its owner they very certainly, in their turn, affect the mind.

In the daily round what are the habits we seek to form in our children? Punctuality, neatness, courtesy, prompt obedience occur to me. We all know only too intimately the difficulty of achieving the formation of these habits in our children. Why do we fail so grievously? Frankly, I feel we have to look very straightly at ourselves for the answer. Do we not fail to help the children in just those points in which we are ourselves lacking? It requires the ordered and serene mind to help the children to form habits of order. We are fitful, uncertain of ourselves, our inner lives are not 'ordered lives confessing the beauty of His peace.' Where our principles are clear and we pursue them steadfastly and single-eyed we are not afraid of failure and we do not fail. The sense of deputed Authority is

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behind us and in that strength we go forward. The children recognise that we and they are under that great Authority working together to a common goal.

Why do we wish our children to form habits of punctuality, tidiness and prompt obedience? To save ourselves trouble? Yes—and we will have earned the repose when we reach it! But our real reasons lie deeper. Those habits once formed save the child from all the

exhaustion of the hustled last-minute search while the family fumes in the car at the door. They save those delays in obedience which so often make the obedience worthless, and all concerned tired and irritable. The child's energies are not dissipated in futile struggles but the nervous system is fresh and free for the day's legitimate occupations. Again, those habits fit the child to live in a community, an independent and considerate member thereof.

How are we to help the child to form those habits? We 'help' children so much that we often really hinder them. Take the question of punctuality. It is not achieved by repeated reminders which begin at half-past twelve and end in a hustled assistance at three to one in order to be ready in time for one o'clock lunch. It can only be achieved by first gaining the child's co-operation and understanding of our mutual aim, by a warning to the younger child at a reasonable time before the meal and a reminder of what has to be done within that time. To the older child, possessor of a watch, no reminder should be required. She should learn to plan her time and watch the hour and to feel her own sense of responsibility towards the matter. She wishes to have some play far from the house. 'You have your watch? Well, lunch is at one o'clock,' should be enough, and, eventually, it is enough. Unpunctuality should be punished by its own result: 'I am sorry; you were late for lunch yesterday and it inconvenienced the whole house: to-day I am afraid you must be within calling distance.' The habit of punctuality may take very long of achievement and each time we fail in our attitude we lose much of what has already been gained. But it will be our fault if the child does not grow into the adult who has the habit of regarding time and instinctively considering other people's convenience and of being able to plan what can

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be done and what must be left undone in a stated number of hours.

Tidiness means untiring vigilance on our part. As Miss Mason stresses, each time the child 'gets away with it' in some slackness over orderliness she has taken a step in the direction of making the reverse habit. I think a great deal depends in training the children's eyes. There are people who never see untidiness. Let the child be responsible that her room looks nice, teach her to glance round and see if it does look nice, and she will slowly but surely form the habit of disliking the ugliness of disorder and of instinctively rectifying it.

When the older girl sees the result of these habits she begins to realise that through them she has won for herself freedom and independence. She is mistress of herself because of the good habits formed by her own effort; she is independent because reliable by habit; she is a valued member of the community, contributing to its life and its efficiency, aware of and glad of her responsibility.

Whether we can be sure that one good habit is more important than another I doubt, but if some are to be specially stressed the habit of attention would be among them. So many of us dissipate our energy, our time, and our opportunities through lack of concentration, because we have not formed the habit of doing the next thing next and the thing of the moment with our united being. To give our whole self to each thing as it comes is the key to days spent serenely and efficiently and ended with self-respect. The training in this habit must begin at birth when the babe is trained in regular physical habits; the toddler is allowed to find out his own way of doing things uninterrupted by the hurried adult; the child beginning lessons has short periods in which to concentrate on each subject and so is able to tackle the next with a mind still untired. But what do we do when, through some cause, the child has lost the power

of concentration and has the mind that flits from one thing to another? First we need to discover the cause of the lack of attention. Is it because the eager mind has been inadequately fed and so has acquired the habit of wandering in search of other food? Is it because she has been starved of

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love and has been thrown in on herself until outside things have lost their hold and interest? Is it because she has been spoilt and not allowed to make effort for herself and so has lost the capacity to do so? Is it because too much has been demanded of her, so she has lost heart and is seeking shelter behind indifference and a scatter-brained attitude to life? All these and other things cause a slackening off of happy concentration, and to cure the disease we need to know the cause. We can then supply the child's need to the best of our ability and win her co-operation by a frank discussion of the necessity for concentration and a claim that she should help herself if we, on our side, do our best to help her. Lessons must be interesting and hold the attention because of that, and where a dull bit of work comes—a Latin vocabulary to learn, or a French verb—the teacher's unwavering firmness that it must be learnt within a given time will gradually win the day.

It takes careful observation to know a child's full capacity; she must work up to that capacity but not have any task laid upon her that is beyond it. Out of lesson hours vigilance is needed that she does not undertake some ploy which is likely to prove boring before carried through, but if boredom does set in help should be given to finish the ploy so that it is not left undone. It is often a help if messages given are repeated by the child. The sense of responsibility to carry through what is undertaken for others can be gradually aroused.

A most important habit to cultivate is that of perfect execution. The secret of this is twofold—never give a child a task entirely beyond her—never accept as satisfactory what is clearly not her best. 'Be ye perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect' we are told, which I suppose to mean, 'be as perfect as it is possible for you, at your stage of development, to be.' That ideal should be put before the children and they will learn the habit of dissatisfaction when they fall below it. Children learn quickly to have respect for themselves and to be ashamed at what deprives them of this. I feel very strongly that we often greatly wrong the children in that we are slack in our demands from ourselves and from them and so we unconsciously lower their whole moral outlook. Let the children know that we too

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hope to grow, that we, as well as they, are striving to reach our standard of perfection.

I have not spoken of the habit of obedience. A paper could be written on this subject alone. The child who has the habit of prompt and happy obedience has, with that habit, acquired an attitude to life that will make its discipline in future years infinitely easier to accept than many of us find it. She will acquire it if she is blessed with parents who own a higher authority and claim the child's obedience because they are themselves obedient, and who know how to see their child's reasonable point of view and take it into consideration, combining with this a quiet, unwavering authority based on justice.

There is a definite habit of infinite importance of which I would like to say something—the habit of prayer. This too can be caught rather than taught. But it is of supreme importance that the child should, from the earliest days, form an unbreakable habit of a morning Quiet Time. Whatever different opinions are held by men and women of varying faiths, over one

thing—be he saint or be he only saint in the making—all are agreed, we need a period for communion with God before we start our day.

To end with—I come back to my original thought—it is within ourselves that we must look for our children's bad habits, not because of inheritance, but because we cannot teach what we are not at least striving to attain. It is an impertinence if we try to do so. It is useless to look for quick results. We must be content to go on from day to day having ourselves, as Miss Mason says, formed the habit of training children in habits. I will end with a quotation from *Home Education*: 'Let me say that the education of habit is successful in so far as it enables the mother to let her children alone; not teasing them with perpetual commands and directions—a running fire of do and don't; but letting them go their own way and grow, having first secured that they will go the right way and grow to fruitful purpose. The gardener, it is true, digs about and dungs, prunes and trains, his peach tree; but that occupies a small fraction of the tree's life; all the rest of the time the sweet airs and sunshine, the rains and
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dews, play about it and breathe upon it, get into its substance, and the result is—peaches. But let the gardener neglect his part, and the peaches will be no better than sloes.'