

## EDUCATION OF CONSCIENCE.

### AN APPRECIATION OF C. M. MASON'S BOOK, *OURSELVES*.

By MRS. CLEMENT PARSONS.

THE book I am to have the privilege and difficult task of summarizing in half an hour consists of two parts, the first designed for the instruction of children under sixteen, the second for older young people. Writing in 1905, Miss Mason saw that in moral as in intellectual education the generality of teachers were working too entirely upon narrow, utilitarian lines. The aim was too external. "We want," she said, "the impulse of profounder conceptions." On this conviction her inherently philosophic mind selected for title the one word "Ourselves," but with a fly-leaf reference to the inclusiveness of that vow of personal dedication which occurs in the Church of England Communion Service, "Here we offer unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy and lively sacrifice unto thee." The idea of self-dedication is thus the book's keynote, as it is its continuous undercurrent. The writer had pondered the subject for years, and at last ripe judgment and ever undimmed sympathy with youth kindled into this work of creative imagination.

A thread of allegory runs through its earlier pages akin to the allegory of Bunyan's Town of Mansoul. It fitted her purpose, and she availed herself of a similar nomenclature of personification, such as esquires of the body, My Lord Intellect, Attorney-General Reason, Prime Minister the Will, Lord Chief Justice the Conscience, Desires the Lords of the Exchequer, Love's Lords in Waiting, and so forth, but chiefly as chapter headings and so as in no way to hinder the straight flight of the argument. The peculiarity of the Puritan Mansoul was that its walls could never be broken down or hurt by the outside enemy unless the townsmen consented; there was no way into Mansoul but through one of the five gates, Eargate, Eyegate, Mouthgate, Nosegate, Feelgate, and it

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clearly was this idea of a free will within, the element that makes ethics possible, which attracted Charlotte Mason to the Bunyanesque web of metaphor. As to its matter her book, *Ourselves*, is entirely original and modern. In it, as a commentator has said, she offers "not a treatise upon ethics, but a practice of ethics, she demonstrates 'the way of the Will,' the way of Reason, the behaviour of Conscience, instructed and uninstructed. She did not say of *Ourselves*, 'Here is a history of ethics, since man recognized limitations of behaviour,' but 'here is a way of life that we can enter upon this very minute. See how rich we are, let us call upon our forces, use them, beware of our dangers, recognize our vocation, and serve God and man.' She aimed at producing growth in the minds of her pupils. Plato offered a way of life with everyday illustrations. The Jewish Scriptures did likewise. So did Christ, and to that end his teaching was embodied in terms of the homely lives of those he taught." It is from within, says each one of these, that people grow, physically and morally. And, adds Miss Mason, everyone—by right of human personality—possesses a fund of strength and ability that only needs drawing on, that will strengthen by use and become a dependable monitor to kindle or restrain, the touch of divinity within that can respond to an Absolute without, spirit that is related to spirit. Charlotte Mason had a poet's faith in the thaumaturgy of spirit. Also, to her, purpose and aim were all-

important. Each person must know that he or she is in possession of natural talents, innate capability, which, developed, will become true service. The greatest service is rendered by those who are developed on all sides, and this is the goal of education according to her vision of it. Let me quote her words. "It is profanity to say of greed, sloth, depravity of any kind 'It's human nature,' for human nature is fitted for godlike uses and the Son of Man came to show us what we may be when we do not reject the indwelling of God. Therefore, let us take stock, not of what is peculiar to us as individuals, but what is proper to each of us as human beings, remembering that we have no true ownership of wealth of which we are ignorant. It is only a sense of the greatness of the poorest soul that will awaken in us the passionate brotherhood which should help each of us to do our little share of the saving of the world. The object of this book is to introduce to themselves any not yet acquainted with their own worth. In this sphere [p 369]

of self-knowledge, if we set things going, they go. We are so made that the ordering of ourselves becomes unconscious when we take it as a duty." Nothing morbidly introspective here, no room for inverted conceitedness, nor for satisfaction at being other than one's neighbours. Elsewhere in the book she wrote, "It is well to know for certain that we have Courage for everything that may come, not because we are more plucky than others, but because all persons are born with this Captain of the Heart."

Though Miss Mason could always fit into its own place in her teaching everything she had ever seen or experienced her mind was essentially synthetic, not a scrap-book mind, but one which worked to a constructive plan. If her whole-hearted desire and belief as to education was the gradual evolution of a person adequate to life—and that was a "practical" enough object—she was, equally, a convinced idealist, an idealist dyed in the wool, if I may use that American phrase. Constantly in this book she emphasizes her conviction that everything pertaining to humanity starts in the mind, in somebody's mind. With the kindly, wide-ranging touch characteristic of her, "Take care," she says, "of the thoughts and the acts will take care of themselves." All offences originate in thought. "Word and act are but the fruit of which the received and permitted thought is the seed. The battle of life for each of us lies in the continual repetition of what seems a trifling act—the rejection of certain thoughts at the very moment when they come." Guard the postern, examine the thoughts that present themselves, refuse some admittance and then turn away, and fill the next hour with other interests. Simple talk this, plain teaching, formative and fortifying to the adolescents to whom it is addressed. She loves to dwell on the wonderful capacity existing in every person to enter upon the world as a great inheritance. So devoted a lover of literature as she naturally saw books as a main item in that inheritance. Therefore, a leading idea of hers is the instruction of conscience by books, especially by fiction. She distinguishes between accidental truth, a correct report of happenings, and essential truth, the truth of art, the sane, just vision of a great novelist or poet. On the formation of opinion she has some golden remarks. I will quote one or two. Time obliges me to condense her sentences but with no alteration in their sense or spirit.

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"We must," she writes, "have thought about a subject and know something about it; it must be our own opinion; it must be disinterested, not influenced by our inclination." "We may not," she goes on, "be sluggish in this matter of opinion. We must learn—and this is truly difficult, a matter that takes us all our lives—to recognize a fallacy." Then, with that broad,

humorous smile I remember well, a side-smile here at the very book she herself is writing, she adds, concerning opinions on books, "The books which make us think, the poems, the biographies we ponder, are of more use to us than volumes of good counsel. These we may read, thinking how good they are, and how good we are to read them! But it all goes, because the writer has put things so plainly that we have not had to think for ourselves. That is why we are told of Our Lord that 'without a parable spake He not unto them.'" Elsewhere, talking again of books, she says, "There is no shade of conduct which is not described or exemplified in the vast treasure-house of literature. Dramas and novels are specially useful in the instruction of conscience because here authors bring their insight to bear in a way they would hesitate to employ if writing about actual persons. We are safest with books that have lived long enough to become classics. The fact that they have not been allowed to die proves that the world cannot do without them. Also the older novels deal with conduct, our chief concern in life. Modern fiction deals largely with emotions, a less wholesome subject of contemplation." She concludes, "Having found the book which has a message for us, let us not be guilty of saying we 'have read' it. We might as well say that, once for all, we have breakfasted! A book that helps us deserves many readings, for assimilation comes by degrees."

As might be expected, Miss Mason was an advocate of hardy temperance, not only in the concerns of mind but in those also of body. Everywhere she discourages concentration of mind on body. Amusingly applicable to these our days of elaborate dietetics and painstaking girth control, often too volubly described, are the following words, addressed, remember, to the youth of over twenty years ago. "Conscience is not in fact so much concerned with the manner of our intemperance as with the underlying principle which St. Paul sets forth when he condemns those who 'worship and serve the creature more than the Creator.'" "England," she adds, "is in danger of

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giving herself over to the worship of a deity we all honour as Hygeia. But never did men bow before so elusive a goddess, for the more pursued the more she flees. Well said Carlyle that whether you or I be in a state of well-being or not 'is not the central fact of the Universe.'" There is a brusquerie, a breeziness in her counsels as to all manner of physical things. Her view of a cut, a scratch, a sting—any small hurt or discomfort—is to make it a means of not letting oneself think too much about it. To meet worse pains and real emergencies we all possess, she says, a fund of fortitude if we'll only rely on it, and act "as such." The wholesome stroke of chaff, the glint of sarcasm were certainly at her command and I imagine a rather steely glance in her gray-blue eyes for the whining girl or boy. Also she recommended them to get absorbed in something else, something really interesting, and see what that would do. In her big nature, delighting in life and crammed with activities, there was literally no space for pettinesses and egoism. Turning from the House of Body, and carrying her students into the Mansion of Mind, she offers keen and subtle guidance. "We often," she says, "allow other people's opinions to pass without protest, because we believe they have been carefully thought out; but it is surprising how a gentle word of well-grounded conviction will arrest people who express some outrageous opinion. At any rate this form of courage is due from us."

Concerning habit, which she speaks of as the best of servants, she warns one against the indolence involved in routine. "The mistake is to keep always on a beaten track, without a thought of what it is all about. A mechanical round may be well enough in its way, but to

confine Intellect to it is harnessing a race-horse to a coster's barrow." Miss Mason never sustains us on shibboleths and never attends to small matters to the shelving of big ones. She allows no confusion as to which is which. This comes out strongly in the chapter where she condemns the scrupulosities of a fussy, finikin conscience, not sufficiently instructed by life and by "the copious detail of literature" to see things in proportion, and distinguish what really matters from that which is of no consequence.

An exuberant way of thinking which was her nature leads her instantaneously from reflections to apt, often amusing, illustrations, and from these to the next emergent sign in the zodiac of character. When she leaves off speaking of 'mind,'  
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and turns to 'heart,' she evinces the same grasp and delicacy of discrimination which she attributes to good novelists. Let me exemplify by this (before her) little touched on point as regards tact where she urges "an active interest of co-operation in the pursuits and hobbies of the people we live with," and goes on, "An attentive, deferential listener performs some of the highest offices of Sympathy; he raises and sustains the person to whom he listens." Again, how right she is where she says, "Large and warm thoughts of our relations with one another find place in the generous man. He is impatient of the cheap wit whose jokes are at the expense of the character of some whole class or nation, and equally impatient of the worldly wisdom which goes through life expecting to be defrauded. He finds that on the whole it is he who possesses the wisdom of this world, for by dint of his own trustful and fair dealing he may pass through a long life with hardly a record of cheating ways on the part of his fellow-creatures." That was autobiography, I feel sure. Charlotte Mason had amazing insight into the springs of conduct.

No reader of her books can fail to perceive her debt to Wordsworth. Quotations from him, in full or in solution, spring up spontaneously as she writes. When she holds before us as the standard to aim at a state where law is one with life, where duty has ceased to be self-denial and become the gratification of the soul's deepest passion we catch the very attar of Wordsworthianism. She lived in Wordsworth's country close by his beloved Rydal and Grasmere, she was steeped in his poetry, his cast of mind charmed her, but I am doubtful whether Coleridge's thought-out transcendentalism did not even more deeply minister to her image of the universe, I mean the side of Coleridge which we approach not so evidently in his poems as in *Aids to Reflection* and *Biographia Literaria*, that theorized Christianity which he in his turn derived from Kant and Schelling. Naturally, these deep imaginings, this Coleridgean metaphysic, would have made only the substratum of such a book as *Ourselves*; everything in that book is popularly put, it was written for the young, not for experienced thinkers. Please understand I in no way undervalue the intelligence of children. There is a touch of the mystic in almost every child, and if you tell a child that the universe lies in a grain of sand and eternity in an hour he is far more likely to leap to these ideas and rejoice in them than a leaden or trivial adult could.

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To estimate this book, *Ourselves*, rightly, to get at its intrinsic purpose, we seniors might do well, I think, to put our minds into a certain mood and fix our imaginations on an actual scene. Picture a long, sober-hued drawing-room, books forming one end, tall windows the other. In this room a company of people are seated. It is, let us say, a Whitsun afternoon.

Outside, spring rain, the rain that at once hushes nature and awakens her, falls gauze-like over a downward sweep of parkland. Beyond the trees lie the lakes and the fells with their blue ridges. Inside the drawing-room a woman is surrounded by an intimate circle of girl disciples. She is oldish, with bright eyes, for there is youth in her spirit and keen sympathy with youth. The girl listeners hang on her words; she is teaching them what later they will pass on to others. Everyday ethics, the behaviour of conscience, the way of the reason, the way of the will, these are the themes of her discourse. One's fancy willingly dwells on that expressive Lakeland room, hung with prints from Botticelli (for its owner was an early enthusiast for the Florentine painter of symbols, of emblems), filled also with clear spaces—she would allow no meaningless objects, she cared not for unnecessary possessions or for costliness, there was something Spartan, or perhaps Puritan—or—should one not rather say, ahead of her time? in her personal tastes. The book called *Ourselves* is a crystallization of Charlotte Mason's ethical class-teaching to Scale How students the visible setting of which I have been attempting to recall.

I confess I have occasionally indulged in fantastic regrets that Wordsworth and Dorothy Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Harriet Martineau, De Quincey, the Arnolds, as they would have been her near neighbours, were not, with their brilliant visitors, her contemporaries. How she would have delighted in their high converse, how ably borne her share in it, how richly-informed, luminous, and lovable those others would have found her! It is astonishing that a mind should have attained such power and originality as hers on comparatively so little nutriment outside itself. Books and thinking were the preparation for her manifold fulfillment as a great teacher, a writer, and the creator and administrator of three wide-reaching organizations, the Parents' Union School, the P.N.E.U. and the House of Education.

Hitherto, I have commented in the main on the earlier

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half of *Ourselves*. The second half is designed for more advanced students.

Thought is not "free"—that is one recurrent note. We may not dally with chance opinions. Reason affords an insufficient test of the value of an opinion because reason is so apt to argue on behalf of inclination, therefore we must labour to get knowledge as the foundation of opinions, we must also labour to arrive at principles whereby to try opinions. What Miss Mason terms the uninstructed conscience is open to every prompting of inclination, seconded, as it is sure to be, by plausible reasons. Think, for instance, of the difference to Macbeth had he refused entrance to the idea, "Thou shalt be king hereafter," instead of parleying with it, "Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more," and so swiftly letting it poison his mind that in that very same scene he begins to think of murder. Shakespeare called evil suggestions witches. It is because of the instability of reason that Miss Mason bids us "perceive and know with certainty"—so emphatically she puts it—that the function of reason is to bring us to the logical conclusion of any premises we choose to admit. In other words, we are capable of convincing ourselves of anything, however wrong or foolish, unless we can bring an instructed conscience to the instantaneous consideration of a tempting idea. For a man to be said to have acted up to his lights is, she points out, very faint praise unless he had first trimmed his lamp. Whole masses of people may be swept off their feet. Witness the mania of persecution set going by Titus Oates, or the brutal fury of the Gordon riots. "In political matters" (I quote Miss Mason again), "we trust to the newspaper which is the organ of our party, and do not look for the sidelights of other writings, or the illumination cast by history and literature. We get our

education in this kind out of compendiums and lectures; and these cannot afford the copious detail out of which conscience gathers instruction." She dwells on the deadening results of estimating a person or thing solely as whether serviceable for one's own purposes.

Once more, How is conscience instructed? By ardent study of the Bible, by vital interest in Christ, his acts and words. The Christian life, she says, "is altogether of the nature of a miracle." On the secular plane, instructors of conscience are history and literature, nature, science, art. "It is shameful ignorance to live in this rich and beautiful world and not [p 375]

know the things about us even by name. Appreciation is a debt we owe." Further, she exhorts her students to be helpful, to develop social conscience, and in this direction I feel convinced she would have expanded her teaching were she living to-day.

In *Ourselves* there is much more as to will, reason and conscience than I can even hint at in this summary. The will is guardian of the gate at which reason and the instructed conscience examine each idea that seeks admittance. Where these reject, immediate diversion of mind is the right course. Once a wrong idea gets inside, reason is only too apt to become a special pleader in its favour.

Here, finally, are a few scattered sentences as to the way of the will.

"The will is neither virtuous nor vicious, but a constant will must have an object outside self, whether good or bad."

"No part of us works alone in a watertight compartment. It takes the whole being to will, and people will wisely in proportion as all their powers are kept trained and instructed."

"The act of choice, the one possible act of the will, has always to be exercised between contending ideas."

"The will is the instrument by which we appropriate a good thought that comes our way; and it is as we seize upon such a thought with intention and act upon it with purpose that we attain to character and usefulness."

"Personality is the determination of the will."

"It is not self-ordering, but an object outside of ourselves, leading to self-forgetfulness, to which we must look for a cure for the maladies that vex us. Our Lord asks of us the self-denial of a disciple who follows his Master and denies himself in the sense that he has no self, only love that constrains him."

All through *Ourselves*, as I said early in this résumé, we feel, before we know explicitly, what are the ultimate main-springs, safeguards and sanctions it commends to the reader. Charlotte Mason saw reality as flushed and warmed by the thought of a Person, "existent behind all laws." To her our separate personalities seemed real only as rooted in and unified by that Transcendent Spirit. She—in her humble-minded, unarrogant way—would have called her book a primer for young students, but are any of us too old to find in it new light on our own experience?