

FOR THE YOUNG MEN

(CONTRIBUTED)

SELF-CONQUEST

How a Young Man May Overcome His One Deadly Foe.

"The government of one's self is the only true freedom for the individual."—Frederick Perthes.

Self-control is at the root of all the virtues. Let a young man give the reins to his impulses and passions, and from that moment he yields up his moral freedom. He is carried along the current of life, and becomes the slave of his strongest desire for the time being.

Self-control is only courage under another form. It may almost be regarded as the primary essence of character. It is in virtue of this quality that Shakespeare defines man as a being "looking before and after." It forms the chief distinction between man and the mere animal; and, indeed, there can be no true manhood without it. Another great thinker has defined man as "A being who makes his flesh obey his spirit, and his spirit obey God."

To be morally free—to be more than an animal—man must be able to resist instinctive impulse, and this can only be done by the exercise of self-control. Thus it is this power which constitutes the real distinction between a physical and a moral life, and that forms the primary basis of individual character.

In the Bible, praise is given, not to the man who "taketh a city, but to the stronger man who "ruleth his own spirit." This stronger man is he who, by discipline exercises a constant control over his thoughts, his speech and his acts. Nine-tenths of the vicious desires that degrade society, and which, when indulged, swell into the crimes which disgrace it would shrink into insignificance before the advance of valiant self-discipline, self-respect and self-control. By the watchful exercise of these virtues, purity of heart and mind become habitual, and the character is built up in chastity, virtue and temperance.

The best support of character will always be found in habit, which, according as the will is directed rightly or wrongly, as the case may be, will prove either a benignant ruler or a cruel despot. We may be its willing subject on the one hand, its servile slave on the other. It may help us on the road to good, or it may hurry us on the road to ruin.

Habit is formed by careful training, and it is astonishing how much can be accomplished by systematic discipline and drill. See how, for instance, out of the most unpromising materials—such as roughs picked up in the streets, or raw unkempt country lads taken from the plough—steady discipline and drill will bring out the unsuspected qualities of courage, endurance, and self-sacrifice; and how, in the field of battle, or even on the more trying occasions of perils by sea—such as the burning of the *Sarah Sands*, or the wreck of the *Birkenhead*—such men, carefully disciplined, will exhibit the unmistakable characteristics of true bravery and heroism!

Now is moral discipline and drill less influential in the formation of character. Without it, there will be no proper system and order in the regulation of the life. Upon it depends the cultivation of the sense of self-respect, the education of the habit of obedience, the development of the idea of duty. The most self-reliant, self-governing man is always under discipline; and the more perfect the discipline, the higher will be his moral condition. He has to drill his

desires, and keep them in subjection to the higher powers of his nature. They must obey the word of command of the internal monitor, the conscience—otherwise they will be but the mere slaves of their inclinations, the sport of feeling and impulse.

"In the supremacy of self-control," says Herbert Spencer, "consists one of the perfections of the ideal man. Not to be impulsive—not to be spurred hither and thither by each desire that in turn comes uppermost—but to be self-restrained, self-balanced, governed by the joint decision of the feelings in council assembled, before whom every action shall have been fully debated and calmly determined—that it is which education, moral education, at least, strives to produce."

The first seminary of moral discipline and the best is the home; next comes the school, and after that the world, the great school of practical life. Each is preparatory to the other, and what the man or woman becomes, depends for the most part on what has gone before. If they have enjoyed the advantage of neither the home nor the school, but have been allowed to grow up untrained, untaught and undisciplined, then woe to themselves—woe to the society of which they form a part!

The best regulated home is always that in which the discipline is the most perfect, and yet where it is the least felt. Moral discipline acts with the force of a law of nature. Those subject to it yield themselves to it unconsciously, and though it shapes and forms the whole character, until the life becomes crystallized in habit, the influence thus exercised is for the most part unseen and almost unfelt.

Although the moral character depends in a great degree on temperament and on physical health, as well as on domestic and early training and the example of companions, it is also in the power of each individual to regulate, to restrain, and to discipline it by watchful and perserving self-control. A competent teacher has said of the propensities and habits, that they are as teachable as Latin and Greek, while they are much more essential to happiness.

Dr. Johnson, though himself constitutionally prone to melancholy, and afflicted by it as few have been from his earliest years, said that "a man's being in a good or bad humor very much depends upon his will." We may train ourselves in a habit of contentment and patience on the one hand, or of grumbling and discontent on the other. We may accustom ourselves to exaggerate small evils, and to under-estimate great blessings. We may even become the victim of petty miseries by giving way to them. Thus, we may educate ourselves in a happy disposition, as well as in a morbid one. Indeed, the habit of viewing things cheerfully and of thinking about life hopefully, may be made to grow up in us like any other habit. It was not an exaggerated estimate of Dr. Johnson to say, that the habit of looking at the best side of any event, is worth far more than a thousand pounds a year to any man.

The religious man's life is pervaded by rigid self-discipline and self-restraint. He is to be sober and vigilant, to eschew evil and do good, to walk in the spirit, to be obedient unto death, to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand; to wrestle against spiritual wickedness,

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